
Quarantined
by Joe McKinney

Suspense/Thriller/Mystery/Crime

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by

Joe McKinney

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any person or persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Dedication

To Kristina, Elena and Brenna.

You are my world.

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Quarantined

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Chapter 1

I remember how hot it was that day. It was like trying to breathe with your head inside an oven. San Antonio in August is stifling. The heat grinds down everything it touches.

My skin was pruned from the sweat, and my eyes burned because I couldn't touch my face to wipe the sweat away. The air stank of rotten flesh, even after passing through the new set of filters in the gas mask of my biohazard suit. Between the heat and the stink, I was feeling lightheaded and a little sick.

But beyond the heat and the smell I have a crystal clear picture in my mind of the events of that day. I remember Isaac Hernandez driving his death wagon into our stall at the Scar. I remember walking around the flatbed trailer, looking at the shoeless feet of the dead, clipboard in my hand, while Chunk, my partner, went over the manifest with Hernandez.

That was when I saw the caked on dirt on the bottom of the dead girl's feet. She was one of the bodies up near the front of the trailer, her feet just barely poking out from beneath the tarpaulin. Nothing unusual about dirty feet, except that the gray toe tag she was wearing meant the Medical

Examiner's Office had done an autopsy on her, and they rinse the bodies down after they do an autopsy.

Strange.

I pulled back the tarp, and then the white sheet from the dead girl's body. No hastily stitched Y across her chest and belly, no trace of an autopsy.

Very strange.

I looked a little closer, scanned her face. There was no sign of heliotrope cyanosis, the blueberry stain around the mouth that is the tell tale indication of death from the flu.

I looked at the rest of her. There was a bullet hole on the left side of her chest, near her armpit, hidden by the well-toned muscle of her arm.

Definitely not right.

“Let me see your paperwork,” I said to Hernandez, interrupting his conversation with Chunk.

Chunk gave me a look. What's wrong, Lily?

“Grab that paperwork and step on out,” I said. “There's one up here I gotta take a look at.”

Chunk gave me another look. You're kidding? We've got trucks waiting.

The sun was reflecting off the face plate of my mop suit, so Chunk couldn't see my face, but we'd been partners for a long time, and he recognized the tone of my voice and my stance.

“You heard the lady,” he said to Hernandez. “Come on out.”

The girl was a Jane Doe.

Nothing unusual in that. By that August, H2N2, the San Antonio Flu, was killing about twenty-five thousand people a month, and a lot of bodies showed up at the Scar without a name. The trouble was, most of the Does we got were homeless, or poor, so poor that they hadn't been far from homeless when they died, and the girl we had didn't look like she was either of those.

She was young, white, attractive. She looked to be maybe thirty-two or thirty-three. Dynamite figure. Height about 5ft 6 in, weight 115 lbs. Hair was milk chocolate brown, cute cut. Nice manicure. Bikini wax.

Definitely not homeless.

“Somebody's probably missing that,” Chunk said.

“Yeah,” I said. “I was thinking the same thing.”

We started with Isaac Hernandez, the death wagon driver. He was 58. He had a dark complexion and pocked cheeks, a big gut, and powerful arms. He told us he'd lost his wife, all four of his kids, and two of his granddaughters to the flu. “They're buried out there somewhere,” he said, and pointed at the mass graveyard we'd come to call the Scar.

“I'm sorry to hear that,” I said. “But this girl didn't die of the flu.”

“Uh huh,” he said, and stood there, like he was waiting for me to come to the point.

“She was murdered,” I said.

He looked at Chunk, then at me. “I don't know,” he said.

“You don't know what?”

“I don't ... I don't know what you mean.”

“You're kidding me? The girl's on the back of your truck. She's got a bullet in her. You don't know why this is your problem? Is that what you're trying to tell me?”

He blinked at me.

“Well?” I said.

“I didn't kill her,” he said.

I asked him to retrace his route that morning.

“All these bodies came from the Arsenal,” he said, meaning the Bexar County Medical Examiner's temporary morgue facility on Arsenal Street in the city's Tenth District. The shallow west side.

“The Arsenal's mostly poor, mostly Hispanic,” Chunk said. “This girl ain't either one of those.”

Hernandez shrugged inside the one-size-fits-all plastic biohazard suit the Metropolitan Health District provided for their death wagon drivers. It fit tightly around his meaty shoulders and round, protruding belly.

“I don't know nothing about that. I was in the truck the whole time they were loading it.”

“You didn't see anybody suspicious near your truck?” I asked. “Somebody that looked like they didn't belong?”

“Lady, when I'm waiting at the morgue, I ain't watching who goes near the truck. That ain't my job. They got cops out there.”

That much sounded believable enough. Most of the morgue facilities inside the wall are run pretty much like a zoo where the animals are told they're on the honor system when it comes to staying in their cages.

“Well, what are you doing if you're not watching the truck?”

“Sleeping.”

“You were sleeping?”

“That's right. Look lady, they got me working sixteen hour days. Sometimes more than that. I'm dead on my feet most times. I sleep in the truck whenever I can.”

“Anybody approach you today?” Chunk asked, meaning did anybody offer him a bribe to put something on the truck. It's pretty much common knowledge that the death wagon drivers can be bought. It's pretty much common knowledge most people can be bought, actually, inside the wall or out. But here, inside the wall, the black market is everywhere. It's a way of life.

Hernandez didn't answer Chunk's question right away. He had a worried look on his face, probably because it was just starting to dawn on him that he might very well lose his job over this. Jobs inside the wall are a lot like golden eggs—if you've got one, you want to hold on to it.

“Off the record,” Chunk said.

“I've taken bribes,” he said, looking at the dead girl. “But not for something like that. No way. Never for that.”

“Take any bribes today?”

“No.” Stated emphatically, no hesitation.

A long silence followed and Chunk and I let it sit with him, just to see if it would prompt him into saying something else.

It did.

“Sometimes people come to me,” he said. “People who've got family on my truck. Maybe a wife or a kid. They want their husband to have his wedding ring, or their kid her favorite teddy bear. They give me a couple of bucks, or cigarettes, or whatever they've got, and I let it happen. It may be against the rules, but it ain't wrong. It's the decent thing to do.”

“And that's it?” I said. “No wedding rings? No teddy bears today?”

“No.” He gave the word a note of finality and shot me a hard glare to go with it.

“So you do take bribes,” Chunk said. “But only when it's the decent thing to do?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Just then.”

After we took custody of the dead girl and had her packaged up for a real autopsy, we sent Hernandez on his way to finish his route.

Chunk and I walked along the perimeter of the Scar, toward the decontamination showers, passing under a big white sign with bold-faced red letters printed on it that read: SAN ANTONIO POLICE DEPARTMENT PERSONNEL ONLY—ALL OTHERS EXIT GENERAL DECON AT FRONT GATE.

On the way, Chunk said: “We've still got some time left on our shift. You want to follow our girl out to the Arsenal Morgue and see if anybody there knows her?”

“Might as well.”

Off to our right, the Scar dappled like a river delta in the sunset. Back before the outbreak, before anybody in San Antonio had ever heard of H2N2, and when we believed the news when they said the next killer flu would come out of rural China, or the chicken markets of Vietnam, the Scar was slated to be a fancy hillside community called Scarborough Terrace. It was seven hundred acres of high dollar property nestled into the bowl formed by three hills, one of the jewels of the Texas Hill Country.

When it became obvious we were going to have more bodies than graveyards, the city councilman who owned this land got the bright idea to sell it to FEMA for an extravagant profit, blocking bids from cheaper sites in the process. It was a classic example of the San Antonio Shuffle, local graft at its finest, corruption elevated to an art form.

Now, instead of high dollar homes, the Scar has been stripped of every single scrap of vegetation and terraced up the hillsides in giant stair steps. Big reticulated earth movers and trenching equipment and death wagons crisscross it continuously, and the caramel-colored ground is always wet from the disinfectant trucks that spray jets of foamy blue liquid onto the fresh grave troughs.

At night, the process continues under the glare of truck-mounted floodlights. If you're of such a mind, you can lean against the sheds where the locker rooms are and listen to the sound of heavy, diesel-powered machinery coughing and belching and ripping into the earth to make room for the dead and almost convince yourself that you're used to it.

I've done that.

“You okay?” Chunk asked, as we waited our turn to be sprayed down with disinfectant.

“Fine,” I said. “Just feeling a little worn thin.”

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Chapter 2

Chunk's real name is Reginald Dempsey.

He was my partner on Homicide for a little over three years, but we had been friends for a lot longer than that. We were classmates back in the Academy, and we both worked deep nights, the dog watch shift, on North Patrol back when we were patrol officers. He was the first officer out with me the night I had to shoot a schizophrenic man who tried to slice his mother's belly open with a ten inch butcher's knife, even though he had to come from four districts away to do it, and he stood as one of my husband's groomsmen on my wedding day. I loved Chunk. At 6 ft 4 in and about 280 lbs, he was my jolly black giant, my overprotective big brother.

When I came out of the women's locker room and went outside to the front of the Scar's administrative building, Chunk was waiting for me. He was dressed in a shiny gray shirt that made his shoulders look like the front end of a Buick. His white gauze face mask covered his face below the eyes, but I could still tell he was wearing a cat-with-the-canary grin. When he smiles like that, his whole face lights up.

He was reading one of my Vogue magazines.

When I got close enough to him, I could smell cigarette smoke.

“You've been smoking,” I said.

He gave me an innocent look. Who, me?

Cigarettes are one of those things you can't get anymore unless you trade for them on the black market, and I'd made my opinions about the black market clear to him many times before that.

He started to tell me about it, but I stopped him. “Don't bother,” I said. “I don't want to hear it.”

“Don't ask, don't tell, eh?”

“Something like that.”

He smiled.

“That's my magazine,” I said.

He showed me the page he was looking at. It was an article called “How to Feel Good About Yourself Naked.” The girl in the picture was wearing a low rise black thong and a smile. She'd obviously never had a baby.

“This thing's better than Playboy,” he said. “Got more pictures of naked women in it, anyway.”

“Give me that.” I snatched it from him. He laughed as I stuck it back in my purse.

“I can't believe a woman's really got to worry about stuff like that. I mean, look at that gal in the picture. She ain't got as much of a trunk as a brother likes to see, but she ain't got nothing to be ashamed of neither.”

“It's a confidence thing,” I told him. “You wouldn't understand.”

“You mean, on account of me being such a suave devil?”

My laugh sounded like a derisive snort, which was intentional.

“I'll tell you what I don't understand,” he said. “I don't understand why women got to torture themselves with articles that are supposed to make them feel good, but show pictures of some skinny lingerie model who obviously doesn't look like any of the women who are gonna be reading the damn magazine. It shouldn't be that hard, you know? I guarantee you, you give me some candlelight and a little Luther Vandross on the CD player and I can make any woman feel good about herself naked.”

“Sure, Chunk,” I said, turning and walking for my car. “I'm sure you can.”

“Hey,” he said, suddenly concerned. The protective big brother bit he'd given me since we were cadets at the Academy together colored his voice. “Are you okay? You been acting a little off all day.”

“Sure,” I said. “I'm fine.”

He stopped me, a hand the size of a dinner plate on my shoulder. “Really,” he said. “You okay?”

“I'm fine,” I said, and tried to make my smile reassuring, though I'm sure it didn't counter the agitation in my voice. “Really. It's just—I've got a lot on my mind. Connie, mostly.”

Connie's my little girl, five years old going on 30. She was going to turn six in less than a week, but her life wasn't that of a regular six year old. She was growing up in a city under quarantine, the specter of the most dangerous influenza virus ever recorded looming over her life like the very shadow of Death himself. She used to have friends, playmates, but some of them died, and the ones that are still alive she is prohibited from playing with. She wore a brave face to the world, but she was always scared, just old enough to understand that things were bad, but not old enough to understand why. And her mother, the person who should have been there to protect

her, to chase away the fears, spent nearly fourteen hours a day burying corpses in the Scar, counting their toe tags for posterity.

Chunk didn't bother with the predictable garbage about how one day Connie would understand, about how one day all of this death would be a bad dream. He had more substance than that.

“Come on,” he said gently, putting his arm around my shoulders. “Let's get this done.”

We drove from the Scar to the Arsenal Street Morgue on empty roads. Fuel shortages had made it so that you could only get around if you had access to city gas or the limited amount that found its way onto the black market. In the first few months of the quarantine, seeing the streets lined with car after car that had been abandoned wherever they ran out of gas was surreal. Now, they were just part of the scenery.

We left the wealthy neighborhoods that surrounded the Scar, palatial homes built into the sides of low-domed, heavily-wooded hills, and entered a land of run down streets, vacant businesses, and hollowed out warehouses. Maintenance was one of those things that had fallen by the wayside inside the quarantine walls. Even in the nicer parts of the city, the streets were cracking and blistering from the summer heat, potholes turning into craters because there were no resources to fix them.

But in the poorer parts of town, the view was far worse. There were crowds of frustrated people everywhere, sick of waiting in lines for food, for second hand clothes, for medical care. The Metropolitan Health District had put out orders against public gatherings and large crowds, but the angry faces we passed didn't look like they cared about that. They seemed to feel that the powers that be had turned their backs on them. You could see it in their eyes. They had been abandoned, and they resented it. They resented us as symbols of the government that had failed them, and as we drove by, they watched us the way animals in a zoo watch their keepers. It made me sad.

I saw a group of men staring at me. Behind them, a dog ate from a trash can.

“God, they really hate us, don't they?” I said.

Chunk stared out the windshield at a man fixing the burglar bars on the windows of his house and said: “It's not us they hate. It's the feeling of being helpless.”

“I heard they rioted at the District Three food distribution center last week.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I heard that too. I wouldn't worry about these folks though. Long as there's beer, they won't do nothing but complain.”

I was relieved when we entered the gates that surround the Arsenal Street Morgue. It was a huge complex, what used to be a cold storage facility for the Merchant Brothers Trucking Line. The main building was a blockish, three story red brick building that took up most of the fourteen hundred block of Arsenal Street. The whole east side was dedicated to truck bays, where the

Metropolitan Health District guys brought the bodies to be catalogued by doctors from the Bexar County Medical Examiner's Office, the Center for Infectious Diseases, and the World Health Organization.

Later, after the doctors finished with the bodies, the same death wagons that dropped the bodies off picked them up again and took them to the Scar, where they were pitched into mass graves with all the ceremony of flushing a goldfish down the toilet.

The process was every bit as confusing as it sounds, and mix ups were common. Everybody involved worked unbelievably long hours, and most of the mistakes went unnoticed because people were either too tired, or too lazy, or both, to care anymore.

We parked in the sally port and changed into our mop suits. Then we went to the loading docks.

A lot of guys in the cheap, one-size-fits-all bio suits of the Metropolitan Health District milled around without talking to each other. They worked helter skelter, in teams of twos and threes, moving bodies wrapped in white sheets from the building to the waiting trailers. A voice over the loud speaker reminded them constantly to be careful when handling the dead, as they might still be infectious.

Everywhere we turned we saw the familiar orange warning posters of the Metropolitan Health District. Always wear your face mask. Practice good hygiene. Avoid crowds. Cover your mouth when coughing or sneezing. Avoid suspicious smelling objects or places.

The stenciling on the backs of our white mop suits identified us as SAPD Homicide. We showed the Jane Doe's picture around and got a few grunts and shrugs and a lot of glazed, uninterested expressions.

We went inside, onto the main floor of the morgue. It was filled with row after endless row of bodies under sheets, their belongings in small brown paper bags at their feet.

A few of the bodies were uncovered, and on those we saw the obvious signs of death from H2N2, that sleeper strain of the flu that had returned to haunt and hunt the streets of San Antonio more than sixty years after it caused the 1957 pandemic.

Some of the faces were streaked with dark rivulets of dried blood. The hemorrhaging was disgusting, and it never got easier to look at, despite being so common. When the quarantine was still something new, and there was still room for the sick in the hospitals, you'd walk down the halls, pushing your way through crowds, stepping over the sick dying on their backs in the hallway because there weren't enough beds, and all you heard was hacking coughs. You'd hear people bringing stuff up, but it wasn't phlegm. It was blood. By the time they were brought to the morgues, their clothes would be splattered with it. Blood would be coming out their noses, out their mouths. Sometimes even their ears.

You'd also see the cyanosis. That was the worst. Blue splotching all over their faces because their lungs couldn't put any oxygen into their blood. Most of the time, the blue was just around

their mouths and ears, like they'd just stuck their faces into a blueberry pie. But other times it was everywhere and they'd turn so dark blue you couldn't tell who was white, or black, or Hispanic. They were all just blue, and dead.

We went around asking for Dr. Manuel Herrera, the guy whose signature was stamped on the autopsy tag. We found him out on the floor, a team of two assistants following him down the rows of corpses.

He'd stop at a body, pull the sheet back, if there was one, glance at the body for a few seconds, then say something over his shoulder to the assistants, who jotted it down on their clipboards. Then he'd put the sheet back and go on to the next one.

Their mop suits were just like ours, only theirs had Bexar County Medical Examiner stenciled on the back and not SAPD Homicide.

“Did you do an autopsy on this woman?” I said, holding up Jane Doe's picture so he could see it.

Through the face plate of his suit I saw him squint at the picture. His eyes blinked in recognition. Then they flew open wide.

“What—” he said, stammering, words failing him.

“You know her?” I asked.

“That's Dr. Emma Bradley,” he said. He blinked at me, then looked at Chunk. His face was an open-ended question mark. What the hell is going on here? “She's one of the doctors with the World Health Organization.”

A doctor. Perfect.

“She showed up on a truck at the Scar a few hours ago,” I explained. “She was wearing a gray toe tag with your stamp on it.”

“Me?” He cocked his head to one side inside the suit, like a dog who's just been asked to do an algebra equation. Then he caught on. “Oh.”

“I take it you didn't do an autopsy on her?”

“No.”

“Any idea how your stamp got on her tag?”

“Detective,” he said, and I could see his shoulders slump inside his suit, “I've got three or four of those things lying around.”

“You just leave them lying around?” Chunk asked. “Isn't there some kind of document control policy around here?”

Chunk's voice is like a deep bass drum, and it startled Herrera a little. Chunk had that effect on a lot of men.

“They're in my office,” Herrera said.

“And you don't keep track of them?”

“My staff needs access to them. They handle my paperwork for me. Supply requisitions, memos, that kind of thing.”

“So, how many people on your staff?” I asked.

“Six.”

“We'll need their names.”

“Sure,” he said.

I changed tack on him. “How did you know Dr. Bradley?”

Some air seemed to go out of the man, like he was immensely tired but only just realizing it. “She was well-liked around here,” he said. “A bright young woman.”

Chunk and I traded glances. She worked out of here and was well-liked. Why was it that well-liked people always seemed to end up dead?

“That's all you can tell us?” I asked.

“I'm sorry,” he said. “You've kind of blindsided me with this.”

“Anything would help, Doctor.”

He shook his head inside his suit. “How did she die? Can you tell me that?” His tone wasn't demanding. It was gentle, respectful.

“She was murdered.”

“Murdered?”

I nodded.

“But that doesn't make any sense. I mean, who would want to hurt Emma. She was the friendliest person in this hellhole. Everybody liked her.”

Apparently not everybody.

“What about boyfriends?” Chunk asked. “She date anybody around here?”

He shook his head again.

“I wouldn't know. I mean, I've seen her around at the lounge of course, drinking with the others, but ... No, I've never seen her with anybody. She had an effervescent personality, you know? The kind of woman who makes everybody in the room smile when she walks in.” He said, “My God, I can't believe somebody would want to kill her. That just doesn't make sense.”

“You said she was with the World Health Organization? Is that who you mean when you say the others?” I asked.

He nodded.

“Their office is through that door over there,” he said, and pointed to a green metal door on the opposite side of the morgue. “You'll have to go out the south exit and then you'll see their trailers right up against the building.”

“We'll come back for that list of your staff,” I said.

“I'll be here,” he said, and shrugged his shoulders at the bodies out on the floor.

“We'll probably have some more questions too.”

“Like I said, Detective, I'll be here.”

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Chapter 3

The World Health Organization's office was a mobile home they'd parked about fifty feet from the rear of the morgue's main building. A couple of used U-haul vans were parked next to it. They'd been painted white and decorated with the WHO logo on the side panels, but you could still tell they were just old battered moving vans under the paint.

After we went through the decon showers, we stripped out of our mop suits and donned regular gauze face masks.

Inside the trailer, the first thing I noticed was how packed-in everything was. They'd stuffed computers, laboratory glassware, office supplies, field gear, lap tops, cameras, radios, TV screens, and machines doing God knows what into every available cubby hole and overhead bin in the place. The staff moved through the clutter like bees in a hive.

We stood there for half a minute before anybody noticed us. But finally, a skinny, dopey-looking guy about my age, maybe thirty, thirty-one, came over with a questioning, but friendly enough expression on his face. He walked like a duck, feet pointing outwards, and he had a black eye. The left one. It looked like somebody had hit him pretty hard, and recently.

His eyes were smiling at first. Then he saw our SAPD badges, and he stopped smiling.

“Yes?” he said, a noticeable chill entering his voice.

I asked him, “Who's in charge?”

“Dr. Madeline Laurent. Back there.” He hooked his thumb over his shoulder.

It looked like he didn't want to get out of the way though, like maybe he wanted to challenge why we were there, or maybe just tell us to go spend some quality time with our thumbs up our butts. But it also looked like he didn't want to get into it with Chunk.

What the hell's wrong with this guy?

Then, suddenly, he said, “Is there something I can help you with?”

“We'll want to speak to the entire staff,” I told him. “Later. But now we want to talk to Dr. Laurent. Do you mind?”

I looked him square in the eye, and he looked away almost immediately.

He stepped aside.

Chunk and I followed a short hallway back to Dr. Madeline Laurent's office. She was there, her back to us, hunched over a lap top computer that was running some kind of bar graph program. The bars flickered up and down busily, and she watched them intently, like they were telling her something in plain English.

I was shocked at how fat she was. And short, too. She couldn't have been more than five feet tall, but she probably weighed more than Chunk. She was practically ball-shaped.

Chunk whistled quietly.

“You still got that magazine?” he asked. “How to feel good about yourself naked?”

I elbowed him in the ribs.

Dr. Laurent didn't notice us, though we were standing right behind her. She was lost in thought. I watched her make a few key strokes. Watched the bars flicker. Watched her shake her head. She typed some more, waited, watched, then shook her head again.

“Dr. Laurent?” I said to her back.

Her fat hand slapped onto the desk angrily. Even though her back was to us, and her face was covered by a mask, I could tell what kind of look she was wearing on her face. Why the hell are you bothering me?

She turned around. Looked at both of us in turn. She saw our badges, and her eyes narrowed.

What is it with these people? What'd we do to piss them off?

“What do you want?”

Right away I heard the French accent. Very thick.

“I'm Detective Lily Harris,” I said. “This is my partner, Reginald Dempsey. We're with the San Antonio Police Department's Homicide Unit.”

Her eyes remained fierce little slits. She said nothing. Crossed her arms impatiently.

“Do you know this woman, doctor?”

I handed her Emma Bradley's picture—a 3 x 5 taken postmortem. The 8 x 10 we had earlier had to be trashed when we went through decon.

She snatched the picture from me and looked at it. Her eyes widened.

“What is going on here?” she asked. “Yes, I know this woman. Of course I know her.”

I told her about finding the body at the Scar. I saw shock, and then denial, cloud her face. Then anger.

“I suppose you have not yet caught the man who hurt her?”

“No ma'am,” I said. “We've only just now found out who she is.”

“Will you look for him?” The tone in her voice made it sound like she didn't believe we would.

“Now that we know who she is, yes, we will look for the person responsible,” I said to her, nice and polite. Getting into a pissing contest with her wasn't going to solve anything. “You asked if we had caught the man who did this to her. Do you have any idea who might have wanted to hurt her?”

She gave us an indignant laugh. More of a snort. “I have an idea, yes.”

“Can you give us a name?”

“Of course I can. He's one of your officers.”

“One of ours?” Chunk and I traded looks. No way.

She snorted again, evidently looking at a picture of the man in her mind. “His name is Kenneth Wade. He is assigned to our so called Protection Detail.”

She smirked at us both. “What is the expression you Americans use? He is like the fox watching the chicken house?”

“The hen house,” I said under my breath. I knew Kenneth Wade. He was a patrolman, a member of the VIP and Executive Protection Detail before the outbreak changed everything. The name still surprised me though.

“What makes you think Officer Wade's got something to do with this?” Chunk asked.

Laurent glared at him. Her contempt was plain to see. Chunk used to intimidate just about everyone he met when he was on-duty, but not Laurent.

“That's a serious accusation, Dr. Laurent,” I said. “Can you tell me why you think he has something to do with Dr. Bradley's murder?”

She uncrossed her arms and put her palms flat down on the desk. It was a tired gesture, the movements of a woman who has worked for far too long on a knot that just gets more intricately tied for all her efforts to untangle it.

But for all her tiredness, I couldn't help but notice the anger. It was still there, like the molten rock under the thin black skin that hardens on lava flows.

“There was an incident last night.”

“What kind of incident?”

“There was a fight. Here in the staff lounge. Officer Wade and several members of my staff were at a party last night. There was much drinking. Your Officer Wade, he became very intoxicated.”

“Did Officer Wade and Dr. Bradley see each other off-duty?” I asked.

“I do not understand your question.”

“Were they an item? Romantically involved?”

“I should say not,” Laurent said. “I do not make it a point to intrude upon the personal affairs of my staff, but I do not believe that Dr. Emma Bradley would become romantically involved with a man such as Officer Wade. The idea is, well...” She waved her hand in the air like she meant to chase the image out of her head, like it was a fly buzzing her food.

“What started the fight?” Chunk asked.

Again, the glare. Okay, rude to me, but hateful to him. Maybe she just doesn't like men. Or maybe it's just male police officers. Or maybe it's giant black male police officers.

Chunk picked up on it at the same time I did and backed off. I had always respected him for the professional detachment that allowed him to do that. As a woman trying to do what most people considered to be a man's job, I had some idea how he felt, how hard it was to hold one's tongue when somebody bad mouthed you for how you looked before they even bothered to decide if you knew what you were talking about.

“Your Officer Wade apparently thinks himself quite the lady's man,” Laurent said derisively. “I was not present last night, but I have heard that he has what my mother used to refer to as Roman hands. I can only imagine that he tried to impose himself upon her and Dr. Bradley objected to the behavior. Another doctor stepped in and asked Officer Wade to leave and Officer Wade brutalized him.”

Dopey guy. The one with the black eye.

“This doctor,” I asked her, “he's up front?”

She nodded. “Dr. John Myers. A fine researcher.”

“The one with the black eye?”

She nodded.

“We'd like to speak with him, too.”

“Of course.”

“Did you tell Officer Wade's supervisor about the incident?” I asked. “About the fight?”

Her eyes looked like polished coal, hard and black and intense. There was a hatred there that went beyond the bad news we'd brought her and the resentment she clearly felt for Officer Wade.

She fixed her hard gaze on me and said, “I called Lt. Treanor and voiced my displeasure. He promised to address the situation.”

“You don't sound convinced.”

“I am not. He sent the man to us again this morning. When Officer Wade arrived here, he offered no apologies. He simply marched in here, helped Dr. Bradley carry her field gear to one of the vans, and then drove her out to collect specimens. That was the last I saw of either of them. Now you come, telling me this, and you ask me who I think would want to hurt her.”

Chunk and I traded glances. Doesn't sound like Dr. Bradley was too pissed about his Roman hands if she went out alone with him.

“She went out with Officer Wade this morning? After the fight last night?”

Laurent leaned back in her chair and it creaked painfully under her weight. She regarded me for a moment before she answered.

“As I say, detective. I do not intrude upon the personal affairs of my staff. I look only at their abilities in the field and in the laboratory. Dr. Bradley has been on my staff since she graduated from Johns Hopkins Medical School. She has helped me research the influenza virus in Rwanda and Thailand and China, and I have come to rely upon her as a competent professional in the field and a careful researcher. I have voiced to her in the past my concerns about her extracurricular activities, but she is young and pretty. Men like her, and I think she likes the attention. But as I say, it never interferes with her work.”

The present tense, I noticed. It still doesn't seem real for her that Bradley's dead.

“When did you see them last?” I asked. “What time this morning?”

“Perhaps six o'clock. Sometime around dawn. Perhaps a few minutes after that.”

“Where were they going?”

“She did not say exactly. Though she has been doing much research around the Produce Terminal area east of here.”

Not good, I thought. The five square miles that made up the Produce Terminal area were considered a no-fly zone by both the SAPD and the Metropolitan Health District. The outbreak started there, and from what I knew at the time, they still hadn't removed all the corpses from the street. In the language of the plague city, the Produce Terminal area was ground zero, or the GZ.

“What was she doing in the GZ?” I asked.

“Our work is on genetic typing. We are trying to identify the most virulent genes in the H2N2 virus, modify them, and hopefully develop a live virus vaccine. Dr. Bradley's work is part of that effort.”

“You said she took one of your vans this morning?”

“That's right.”

“Do you have any idea where that van is now? Are they equipped with GPS trackers maybe?”

Laurent shook her head. “It is not here. That's all I know.”

Okay, I told myself, dead girl, missing van, and a cop is my best suspect. What a miserable day this is turning out to be.

“I think we ought to speak to Dr. Myers next,” I said.

“Fine,” she said. “I’ll call him back.”

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Chapter 4

Dr. John Myers was so shocked at the news of Emma Bradley's death that I was worried he was going to have an asthma attack.

We had taken him into a little office just barely big enough for the three of us to sit down. It was hot, and the little window-mounted AC unit made a lot of noise without giving off much in the way of cool air.

He had demanded to know what we wanted and refused to sit down, but after we told him about Emma Bradley, he started to sway on his feet, like the heat was already too much for him.

“Would you please sit down, Dr. Myers,” I said.

I put my hand on his shoulder and tried to guide him to a chair, but he wouldn't let me.

“I'm fine,” he said. “Thank you.”

After a moment he sat down and took a few deep breaths until the color started to return to his face.

He was 33, English, effeminate to the point of being prissy, with a black mop of curly hair that spilled over the top of his collar. His uninjured eye was wide open all the time. His other eye was a slit between two bruised and puffy lids, the skin around them the color of damaged fruit. The lab coat and surgical mask he was wearing didn't hide his weak build, and I tried to imagine him standing up to Kenneth Wade, who was about as SWAT team tough as they get. It figured it probably wasn't much of a fight.

“We understand there was some trouble last night,” I said. “You mind telling me about it?”

“Trouble,” he said, and made a disgusted noise. “Do you see this?” He pointed at his eye.

“Yes,” I said.

“Yes, I'd call this trouble. This is Officer Wade's handiwork.”

“I’ve heard that,” I said. “Why?”

“Because he’s a psychopath.”

I waited.

He looked at me, then at Chunk, and made a harumph sound. “Your Officer Wade has been trying to get into Emma’s knickers from the very first day he was assigned here. Fortunately, Emma’s a smart woman and she recognized what kind of man he was from the very beginning. When he tried to get her to leave our little party with him last night, she told him no. There was an argument, and she appealed to me for help. Luckily, I was there to tell him to stop behaving like an ass. You see, Emma and I have always been rather close. Officer Wade knew that of course. Everyone around here does. My only guess is he felt threatened. He did this, and then he left.”

As I listened to the lilt of his English accent—upper class English by the sound of it—I thought to myself that this was the kind of man my husband Billy referred to as Nancy boy, meaning a wimp. Personally, I could never be attracted to a pansy man like Myers, and I couldn’t imagine Emma Bradley finding anything in him either.

“Was this the first time Wade ever tried to horn in on your friendship with Dr. Bradley?” I asked.

“Horn in?” he said, chin in the air. I could tell he was thinking about all the ways he hated that phrase, how low class he thought it was. “Yes, if I understand your meaning correctly, last night was the first occasion. She told me he has made several inappropriate overtures to her in the past few weeks, but each time she told him she was not interested and the matter was dropped.”

“She told you that? That the matter was dropped?”

“Those are my words, detective. Not hers. Emma Bradley, for all her many wonderful qualities, was still an American woman. Born and raised in Seattle, Washington. Her words for it were a bit rangier. She told him to”—there was a pause while he obviously savored the bittersweet humor of the memory—“to keep it in his pants.”

I tried not to smile.

“Do you know why she chose to go with him, this morning?”

“I don’t pretend to know her mind completely, Detective. I can only tell you that Emma was very self-assured. I am sure that she felt Mr. Kenneth Wade was someone she could handle easily enough.” He looked away for a second, and I thought, Oh Jesus, wimp boy is gonna cry. The tears didn’t come, but when he went on, there was a hitch in his voice. “My God, but if I had only known he would prove to be a killer.”

“We don’t know that he is Dr. Bradley’s killer yet,” I pointed out.

His face wrinkled into an expression somewhere between indignation and surprise. “Not her killer?” he said. “You must be joking. I would have thought that was patently obvious. Or is this going to be yet another example of the San Antonio corruption we've already seen so much of?”

I ignored that. “We haven't spoken to Officer Wade yet,” I said. “We'll know more when we do, but for now, we're gonna concern ourselves with the 24 hours prior to her death. The most critical points for our investigation will have happened during that time.”

Myers rolled his eyes, passive-aggressive style. He didn't believe a word I was saying.

A printer in a little cubby on the wall to my left started spitting out papers and a lab tech came into the door without knocking. She looked at Dr. Myers, then at Chunk and me and her eyes got very big.

“I'm sorry,” she said.

“It's fine, Angie,” he said. He rose from his chair and took her document off the printer and handed it to her. “Give us a moment, love,” he said.

She nodded and he closed the door behind her.

“We have small quarters here,” he said by way of apology, and went back to his chair.

“We could use some help generating that timeline, Dr. Myers.”

He nodded.

I said, “We know about the fight. What time did that happen?”

“You mean when I was assaulted by one of your officers?”

“Yes sir. What time was that?”

“Two o'clock. Maybe two-thirty.”

“And what time did this party get started?” I asked.

“Ten-thirty. We left from here at perhaps ten-fifteen, after we shut down the lab.”

“The lounge is in the main building, correct?”

“Yes,” he said, and crossed his arms over his chest. In the interviewing schools they sent us to when Chunk and I became detectives we learned little things like crossing your arms across your chest or where you point your eyes are indications of defensiveness or lying, but with Myers I got the feeling he was simply holding himself, trying to keep his composure. “Second floor, east side of the building.”

“Was Officer Wade with you when you left here for the party?”

“He showed up later. Maybe twenty to eleven.”

“And afterwards? After Officer Wade hit you? What happened then?”

“After he mauled me he stood in the middle of the room, yelling obscenities at everyone there. He was a beast. He dared us to fight him. When no one did, he stormed out. We didn't see him again until this morning.”

“We didn't?”

“I didn't.”

“And after the fight?” I asked. “Where did you go?”

“I walked Dr. Bradley back to her trailer. When she was safely inside, I returned to my trailer.”

“Do you know if maybe Officer Wade tried to contact her again last night?”

“I don't know if he did or not. Her lights went out at three-fifty or so. As did my own.”

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Chunk rocking back and forth in his chair and I could tell we were thinking the same thing. Little Mr. Lonelyhearts sure keeps close tabs on his girlfriend. Things to make you go hmmm.

“How about this morning?” I asked. “Where did you go after Dr. Bradley and Officer Wade left here?”

He cocked his head at an odd angle, like I'd just started speaking Hebrew or something. And then he said, “Oh. Detective, are you suggesting that I...”

“I'm asking a question, Dr. Myers. Nothing more. I'm going to ask the same question to every member of the staff.”

“Oh. Well, I was here. Till around ten-thirty. From here, I went down on the loading docks, where I collected lung tissue specimens for our experiments.”

“Okay,” I told him. “And there are others who can vouch for you?”

“For someone who is just asking questions, Detective, you are doing a very good job of making me feel like a suspect.”

“Yes or no, doctor. Did anybody else see you on the loading docks, collecting lung tissue specimens?”

I had insulted him, and it flustered him. His one good eye took on a pouty look and he turned slightly toward a row of files along one wall. Outside I could hear a truck backing up, and a man yelling orders at somebody.

“Almost certainly,” he said. “I met Dr. Herrera on the floor of the main building. We had a conversation with Dr. Laurent, and Dr. Walter Cole from the Metropolitan Health District, and probably four or five members of Dr. Herrera's staff. One of his nurses, in fact, a Ms. Susan Hinton, helped us take tissue specimens.”

“Okay. How about other members of the WHO staff? Were any of them out in the field today?”

“I'm sure they were,” he said, and then waved his hand in the air like he wanted to put me back on the right track. “Listen, Detective, if you want to know Emma Bradley's mind, you should really read her research journal.”

“Her journal?”

“Yes. A red hardcover book. She wrote in it constantly. Emma always took exacting notes on her field research. It would contain a minute by minute diary of her work.”

“That might be very helpful, Dr. Myers. Do you happen to know where she kept her journal?”

“She would have had it with her,” he said. “She always had it with her.”

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Chapter 5

Chunk and I spent another hour interviewing members of the WHO staff, then, after getting a list of Dr. Herrera's staff, finally made it back to our car. We left Arsenal and drove to the Research Protection Unit's office, hoping to contact Officer Wade.

I was driving. Chunk was on the phone with Tom Treanor, the lieutenant in charge of the Research Protection Unit and Officer Wade's direct supervisor. I heard Chunk say, “Yes, sir. Okay. Ten minutes maybe. Okay, sir. See you then.”

He hung up.

“Well?”

“Treanor said he hasn't heard from Wade since this morning. Said he hasn't checked in all day.”

“That doesn't sound good.”

“Treanor didn't seem concerned about it. He sounded more upset that the folks at WHO were bad-mouthing one of his boys than anything else.”

Outside, on the curb, I saw small groups of men standing around, talking, glaring at us. They watched us drive by.

“What do you think?” I asked Chunk.

“About Wade?”

“Yeah.”

“It doesn't look good for him, that's for sure.”

“Yeah, but how likely is that?” I said. “I mean, really. The guy's a cop. Why feed the body back into the system, knowing how easy it would be to trace back to him?”

“He might've just lost his mind,” Chunk said. “It happens. Even to cops. And I'd believe it of Wade before most.”

“Really? Why?”

“Because I've seen him lose it before.”

“When?” I asked.

“When he was a cadet. Back when I was helping out the PT staff with baton training at the Academy.”

Back before we got promoted, Chunk used to teach tactics to the cadets. They used him on account of his size and reputation. They put him in this red padded suit of armor and let him attack the cadets while they fought him off with their batons, only the batons they were given were padded too, so they were practically useless.

“When it was Wade's turn,” Chunk said, “I went after him. He stroked my legs a couple of times, like he's supposed to, but I could tell he had something the others didn't, and I wanted to see what that was. You know how some people are. You can tell just by looking in their eyes that they're fighters. So I slapped him in the ear a couple of times.”

“You provoked him.”

“Sure. Anyway, he got pissed. He threw the baton down and charged me. Laid me out with the best damn tackle I've ever seen.”

“He laid you out?”

“It gets better,” Chunk said. “I’ve got all that padding on, so when he knocked me on my back, I couldn’t get up. He got on top of me and started throwing punches. Landed a couple of good shots to my jaw before the PT staff managed to pull him off me. I was wearing one of those catcher’s mask things, too. He was bare-fisted, and he still did more damage to my face than my mask did to his hand.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah, he’s a nut.”

“Still, I can’t believe he laid you out.”

“Well, it ain’t the size of the dog in the fight.”

“It’s the size of the fight in the dog,” I said. “Yeah, I know. But still...”

It was getting dark beyond our headlights. We took Bandera Road south to Culebra, then Culebra over to 24th Street, where we entered some rough neighborhoods. Most of the houses and businesses we passed looked deserted, though I could see candlelight in a few windows. Power shortages had made it necessary to black out the power grid to most parts of the city after dark.

All through that August, when Chunk and I drove through town, we saw more and more people in the streets. The expressions on their faces were unsettling. Desperation, frustration, and the terrible, aimless need to smash something all rolled into one. It made me afraid, even with my Glock on my hip.

“Is that smoke?” Chunk said.

He was looking off to our right, past a stand of pecan trees, where wisps of curling smoke coiled through the trees and drifted between the houses.

It smelled like burning rubber, foul and noxious.

“Can you tell where it’s coming from?” I asked.

“No,” he said.

But we didn’t have far to go before we found the source. We turned the corner onto Dartmouth and I skidded the car to a stop.

There, in front of us, blocking the street, was a wall of burning tires.

“What the...”

I looked where Chunk was looking and saw a group of men in their early twenties dancing like Indians on the far side of the bonfire.

“What are they doing?” he asked.

“Beats me. Looks like—”

There was an explosion of breaking glass in my left ear as a rock hit my window. The window shattered, but the tint kept it from exploding all over me. I was stunned for a moment, the explosion echoing in my head. I looked at the busted window, but couldn't see anything. It was an opaque spider web of cracks.

I glanced out the windshield and saw a huge group of men running at us. They were shouting, waving their fists in the air. Some carried sticks, others rocks.

More rocks beat against the car.

“Go!” Chunk shouted. “Go, go, go!”

I put the car in reverse and mashed down on the gas. The tires barked against the pavement, stuttering as they tried to grab the road.

We glanced off a parked car with a sickening grind of warping metal but didn't slow down. Chunk wouldn't let me stop. He was hollering the whole time, “Go, go, go!” and somewhere in the confusion of it all my training kicked in.

Without letting up on the gas I spun the wheel hard one half turn with my left hand while with my right I dropped the gear selector into Drive. No brakes, all gas.

The car spun one hundred and eighty degrees, rocking violently over to the passenger side as it landed facing back the way we'd come. The back tires fishtailed, but held the road under constant acceleration, and then we were speeding down the road.

I looked over at Chunk. He was breathing hard. He turned and looked over his shoulder at a group of at least fifty men chasing after us on foot, some of them still launching rocks.

“Don't slow down,” he said.

I didn't.

A moment later Chunk slid down into the seat and let out a long breath. “That was some good driving, Lily.”

“Thanks,” I said, but I was still holding the wheel so tightly my knuckles had turned bone white.

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Chapter 6

“Okay,” I said to Chunk. “How about this? A hang glider. It's quiet, and it can travel a long distance. You could get over the wall and well beyond it without drawing any attention from the ground troops.”

“Maybe,” he said. “But you'd still have to deal with the helicopters. They've got heat sensing equipment on those things. They'd pick you off in the air before you ever got anywhere near the wall.”

I thought about that for a second. I imagined getting shot out of the sky by a U.S. Army attack helicopter.

“Yeah, I guess you're right.”

“Besides, where are you gonna find a hang glider?”

“True,” I said. “Okay, how about this? We dig a tunnel under the wall...”

Lieutenant Tom Treanor had short blond hair that was going gray at the temples, but he still looked young for a lieutenant. He was 36, and at 5 ft 8 in was not a tall man, but he was built solidly. There was a picture on the wall behind his desk of him as a younger man, wearing a Marine officer's uniform, and I got the feeling not much had changed since those days. Not much except the uniform. He still had the same hard look in his eyes.

And he didn't waste time on small talk, either. He hadn't even finished shaking our hands before he started firing off questions. We filled him in on where we were at, the dead girl, the doctors on the WHO staff, the fight in the doctor's lounge.

“And you're buying that shit?” Treanor said. “You really think Ken Wade has gone off and done something as stupid as kill the person he was assigned to protect?”

Chunk handled it with Treanor. “We're following down the leads as we get them, Lieutenant. We're not saying nothing against Wade. All we want to do is talk to him about it.”

“Yeah, well, he hasn't come back yet.”

“Don't you think that's a pretty good indicator something's wrong?” I said. “We already know Dr. Bradley's dead. If Wade didn't kill her, then it's probably pretty likely that something's happened to him too. Wouldn't you agree with that?”

He just stared at me. Even before H2N2 started dropping people like flies, the Department was small enough you got to know just about everybody after being on the job a few years. I first met Treanor back when he was a junior Homicide detective. I'd gotten a call for a man barricaded in his room with his father's vintage World War I rifle. When I got there, the front door was open

and the father was crying against his son's locked door, slapping it over and over again with the flat of his palm, begging his boy to open it.

“I heard a shot,” the man said to me, his cheeks shining with tears.

“Stand back,” I said, and hit the door with my shoulder. When it didn't give I hit it again, and that time it flew open.

There, sitting on the floor, his back against the side of the bed, the antique rifle across his thighs, was the man's twenty-two year old son, his lifelong battle with psychosis and suicidal tendencies ending in defeat.

The father wasn't all that sane himself, and he flew into a screaming, hair-pulling fit that rattled me badly enough that all my training went right out the window. Rather than pull the man out of the room and secure the scene, like I should have done, I reached down, took the rifle from under the dead man's hand, and walked out to the front porch with it, where I proceeded to work the action back and forth until I'd jacked all the rounds out of the magazine and spread them all over the chinaberry shrubs growing along the front of the house.

When Treanor got there and saw what I had done to his crime scene, he went into a rage that rattled me worse than the father's had. He grabbed me by the shoulder and pushed me out the front door and down into the front yard. Neighbors had come down to the street to see what all the police cars were there for, and they all watched in slack-jawed disbelief as Treanor screamed at me, telling me what a fucking idiot I was.

I was mortified, but we both formed opinions of each other that day that stuck with us over the years.

Chunk asked, “Is it normal for the guys not to check in after their shift?”

Treanor gave Chunk a patronizing stare. “It's the way things are done around here,” he said. “These research teams start out early in the day and come back at unpredictable hours. My guys are with them the whole time. Sometimes they're back early. Sometimes late. When they come in late, they don't check in. I trust them.”

“You said you couldn't raise him on the radio?”

“That's right.”

“And that didn't raise any red flags with you?” Chunk asked.

“It's the way things are. These radios they give us aren't worth shit. Sometimes they work. Sometimes they don't. And we don't have any spare batteries, either. The chargers in our cars are all busted, too. About the only place my guys can charge them up is in the office, and so, when their radios run out juice, well, you know.”

“Yes sir,” Chunk said. “I know.” We had the same problem in Homicide. Everybody had the same problem.

Treanor rocked back in his chair and regarded the two of us like we were amateurs. “Look,” he said, “I got to tell you. You guys are barking up the wrong tree here. Ken Wade didn't kill that girl.”

“You're probably right, sir,” Chunk said. “All we want to do is talk with him.”

“I'd tell you where to find him if I knew where he was,” Treanor said.

“I know that, sir,” Chunk said. “But I think it's pretty obvious we've got something to worry about here. You don't have any idea where he and Dr. Bradley were doing their research?”

Treanor shrugged. “Somewhere in the GZ, last I heard.”

“Do you think any of the other guys would know?”

“I doubt it. We cover all the research teams in the city, and Wade was the only one working out at Arsenal.”

“He didn't mention anything over the past week or so?”

“Have you been listening to me, Reggie?”

“Yes sir,” Chunk said.

“Why don't you go ask those people over in the WHO? They should know where she was working.”

“We did, sir.”

“And they said they didn't know?”

“They said in the GZ, but they didn't know where exactly.”

He swiveled in his chair a little and looked out the window of his second story office. From his desk, he had a view of the front of the Bandera Food Distribution Center, where long lines of ragged looking people had already started to gather for the next morning's delivery. It was a pathetic sight, but Treanor's face remained as impassive as a Latin American dictator's.

Chunk said, “Thank you for your time, sir.”

Treanor regarded us icily. “There's one more thing. About that fight. I'm pretty sure you're not getting the full story.”

Chunk and I waited for more.

“That girl. Dr. Bradley? She's the one who called here this morning, wanting to get Ken Wade for her escort.”

“She did?” Chunk said, and he looked at me. “We didn't know that.”

“Yeah. If you ask me, I think that Dr. Bradley saw the kind of man she likes in Ken Wade. Probably tired of hanging around with that Brit faggot. What's his name, Myers? I bet she wanted a man she could really wrap her legs around, if you know what I mean.”

He gave me a quick glance. “No offense, Lily.”

I smiled. You bastard. “None taken,” I said.

“You think there was really something going on between them?” Chunk said.

“I'd bet two week's pay on it,” Treanor said.

Chunk adjusted himself in his seat, like he had hemorrhoids or something. Treanor had that kind of effect on people. “Well, you know sir, if there was something going on between them, that's not gonna look real good.”

I couldn't see the part of Treanor's face that was covered by his surgical mask, but I could tell the smile had run off it.

“Ken Wade did not kill that girl, Reggie. I'm telling you that now. For the last time.”

There was an or else tone to it that I didn't like, as if it was an order. But Chunk didn't whither under Treanor's pressure. He held his ground.

“Sir,” he said, “you were a detective once yourself.”

“That's right,” Treanor said, and he gave me a look I thought best not to return in kind.

“Okay. Then you know we got to play this lead. We got a dead girl with a known relationship with Wade, Wade's missing, and he's got a known pattern of violent behavior. Put that together, and it starts to look like a damn good suspect profile.”

“The dead girl and her relationship with Wade are circumstantial,” Treanor countered, rather weakly. “As for the violent behavior, I don't hire pussies on this shift.” He looked to me. “No offense, Lily.”

Asshole. “None taken, sir.”

“Look,” Treanor said, “the whole reason this unit is necessary is because those research teams go out to some pretty fucked up places. I'm talking fighting in the streets, robbers, you name it. They need protection. That's why they call guys like Ken Wade. Guys they know can take care of business.”

I couldn't resist. “Of course, that doesn't explain why Dr. Bradley ended up dead. Doesn't seem Wade was taking care of business there.” I waited a beat. “No offense, sir.”

Treanor was not amused. He gave me a hard look and said, “He'll explain himself to me tomorrow morning. After that, I'll order him to contact you. Now, if you don't mind?”

He pointed to the door.

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Chapter 7

We went back to the Scar.

There were endless reports to write. There was the initial offense report on Emma Bradley's murder, the chain of custody reports for the body, and a whole slew of forms that would follow Emma Bradley's body to the autopsy. Then we had to transcribe the witness statements we'd taken with our audio recorders. After that, we had to create a file on the Department's Case Management system, where we summarized all the initial leads we'd worked. Finally, we had to write a report explaining the damage to the car we'd been driving.

“Where do you want to pick up tomorrow?” Chunk asked me, after the last of the paperwork was done and we were walking out to the parking lot. It was almost nine o'clock, and night had settled over the Texas Hill Country. A hot breeze rustled the crowns of the nearby oaks and cedars, and the freeway that ran next to the Scar was silent, a dark ribbon stretching off into the hills.

“First thing we need to do is talk to Ken Wade. We'll call the office. Maybe go by his house if he doesn't show. If we can't find him...” I shrugged. I didn't need to say the rest.

“Yeah,” Chunk agreed. “I don't want to think about where that would lead us.”

We reached my car, a five year old Chevy Malibu with a ding in the driver's side door. The hinges creaked when I opened it. A short ways off, at the edge of the parking lot, a cactus wren shook its head and hopped along the top wire of a barbed wire fence. They don't usually come out at night.

“I don't care what Treanor says, Chunk. I got a bad feeling about Wade.”

He rubbed a massive palm across the back of his neck. He was as tired as I was.

I said, "Maybe after we check on Wade, we can try to find that van they were in."

"You mean go into the GZ?"

"Yeah."

"You're just full of great ideas, aren't you?"

"Chunk, don't you think it's the only way to follow up on the leads we've got. We might even get lucky and find that journal Myers was telling us about."

"I gave up on luck a long time ago, Lily."

I made it home, finally.

Billy, my husband, and I lived with our daughter Connie on two acres north of town, about a mile from the containment wall that circled San Antonio and insured we obeyed the quarantine.

It was good land, quiet, densely wooded with oaks and pecans. In the mornings we'd see white tail deer running across the lawn and fog rising up from Vespers Creek, which ran deep and slow along the eastern edge of our property. As I pulled into our driveway, I could just see the dark outline of the cypress trees along its banks.

Inside, the house was dark and quiet. Connie's toys were all over the living room floor, and Billy had left a sweaty shirt and dirty socks on the arm of the couch again.

"Billy? Connie?" I called out, picking up the shirt and socks and throwing them in the hamper.

"Billy?"

I went to the back door and looked out towards Billy's work shed, trying hard not to notice the coffins, most of which were only half-finished and unpainted. Billy had been a contractor before H2N2 hit San Antonio, but like everybody else, he'd been forced to adjust to the new circumstances. He started bringing in a pretty good chunk of change making coffins for those who could afford to bury their dead in private graveyards. It disturbed me when he first started doing it, and it still did as I looked out over the backyard, calling out their names.

The battery-powered light in Billy's shed was on. The batteries were a costly item down at the distribution center, but necessary to run his woodworking tools.

I opened the screen door and stepped out to the porch. I could hear Connie laughing and it hitched me up inside. It had become a rare sound by the end of that summer.

"Connie?" I yelled out. "Billy?"

The laughing stopped. A moment went by.

“Mommy!” Connie yelled from inside the wood shed, and then she was sprinting out of it, bounding over the coffins, her delighted shrieks of “Mommy! Mommy!” the most wonderful sound I'd ever heard.

She was running for me. Her soft brown hair billowed out behind her. It was getting long now that we'd finally relented and let her grow it out like her best friend Emily. Her complexion was light, her facial features delicate, a girly girl. I loved her eyes, wide open and intelligent. Seeing her run and laugh filled me with a profound sadness that things couldn't be this way all the time.

Only then did I realize that she wasn't wearing her surgical mask. My face went hard. I could feel it set. A switch turned on in my head and the next minute I was yelling, screaming at her to put her mask back on. “God damn it! Put it back on now!” I couldn't stop myself from yelling. It wasn't anger. It was a black cloud of frustration and fear and sadness building behind my eyes.

She stopped in the yard. She looked up at me from the foot of the steps that led up to the porch.

She didn't answer me.

Her face melted into sadness and her eyes clouded over with disappointment. Not anger, or defiance, or even dismissive nonchalance, but simple, gut-wrenching disappointment that tore my heart in two.

I closed my eyes. When I opened them again, my heart was beating fast, and I felt sick.

“Connie, please. Put on your mask.”

She sighed, hung her head. She mounted the stairs and walked past me without a word.

“Connie?” I said, my voice shaking. I watched her as she opened the screen door and went inside.

She let the door slam behind her.

“Honey?” I said, but she couldn't, wouldn't, hear me.

When I turned back to the yard Billy was standing there. Billy, at 6 ft 3 in, was a big man. His shoulders were wide, though his powerful arms hung limply at his sides. His brown hair was short, but full and shiny, the same as Connie's. His face was round and sad.

He wasn't wearing his mask either.

“What was that all about?” he asked.

“She's not wearing her mask, Billy. And neither are you.”

“Yeah,” he said defensively. “So, what's the big deal? We're not in public. It's just us.”

My mouth fell open into an O. “How can you ask me that? How can you stand there and tell me it's no big deal when you know what I look at all damn day? How can you be that thick-headed, Billy?”

He started to argue, but evidently thought better of it. Instead he said nothing at all.

“Please, Billy. I count on you. I wish things weren't the way they are, but I need you to promise me you'll make her wear her mask when I'm not around. I need that reassurance. Please.”

He nodded. Our eyes met. I loved those eyes. My whole world was in those eyes.

“Okay,” he said.

I felt like my life was a ship running aground, like I was unconsciously destroying the relationships that I needed to sustain me.

“Thank you,” I told him, and went back inside.

Connie was wearing her favorite pair of pajamas—a purple silken shirt and pants with little birds all over them. Thanks to Connie, I knew the birds were starlings. Connie knew the name of every bird she saw.

From the hallway, I watched her climb into bed and pull the covers up to her chin. I couldn't believe how much she'd grown. My baby.

Her favorite book was a collection of Frog and Toad stories. It was on the table next to her bed. I went into her room and picked up the book.

“Would you like Mommy to read you a story?” I asked her, getting down on my knees next to her bed.

“No,” she said, her voice barely more than a whisper.

“Are you sure?”

“I want Daddy to do it,” she said.

“Connie, honey, Daddy's cleaning the kitchen.”

She raised her voice, each word a stab in my heart. “I want Daddy to do it!”

“Connie,” I said, an edge creeping into my voice.

But she wasn't listening. She turned her face to the wall and at that moment I ceased to exist.

The living room was lit by candlelight.

I'd got my yoga mat out. The copy of Vogue that Chunk was making fun of earlier and an issue of In Shape magazine were both open on the floor in front of me. Every night I did a mix of the yoga routines in those two magazines to clear my head, but after the mess I made of putting Connie to bed, I could tell it wasn't going to work for me that night.

I tried anyway. I spread my legs and bent forward at the waist, putting my hands on the floor as far out in front of me as I could. Then I slowly moved my hands towards my feet in a sweeping arc motion.

Between my legs as I stretched down, I could see Billy in the kitchen, scrounging for something to eat. I noticed he was getting a little pudgy. It was from the MREs (Meals Ready to Eat), I figured, that he always bought at the food distribution center. Those things have got 3000 calories per package, and he'd eat two, sometimes three a day. His favorite was the chicken alfredo. He said it tasted good hot or cold, but I couldn't eat it. Too salty for my tastes.

He came out to the living room, eating a granola bar.

“Looking good from here,” he said.

“Thanks,” I said, but without enthusiasm.

I got down on my back, right knee bent, left leg pointed out straight, about 6 in off the carpet. I raised and lowered my left leg for 25 reps, then switched to my right leg.

The magazine said it would make my thighs and abs look the girl in the picture.

When I was finished, breathing hard, Billy asked, “Have you given any more thought to her party?”

He meant Connie's party. Her sixth birthday was coming up in five days, and it was scaring the ever loving crap out of me.

Little girls should have birthday parties. It's only fair. I wanted Connie to have one. I really did. But everyday I went back to that damn mud pit, the Scar, and when I saw the bodies tumbling in on top of each other, and the horrible smell hovering over the grave pits like some beast out of the Book of Revelations, I felt like I had to tell her no.

“I'm scared, Billy. I'm so damned scared of what could happen.”

He smiled. “I know you are, babe. I know. But I honestly think it'll be okay. We can do this.”

“Are you sure? Billy, are you really? I need you to tell me you believe that.”

“I do,” he said. His eyes were filled with light. “I do.”

“Okay,” I said. “Okay.”

Then a thought shamed me. We didn't have any gifts to give her. Even though we were doing better than most, we had very little. Just enough to buy staple groceries and run the air conditioner during the 105 degree days. I was spending so much time away from home during those days that I didn't even know what my daughter was into anymore. She used to be all about birds, every kind of bird, and even though she still wore the pajamas, I didn't know if birds were still cool.

“Is it still birds?” I asked.

Billy smiled and nodded.

“I wish we could get her something bird-related. I don't know. A book maybe?”

“I've got something to show you,” Billy said, and crossed the room to the bookshelf, where he took down a few books and carefully removed what looked like a cigar box he'd hidden back there.

“What is it?” I whispered.

“Something I've been working on,” he said, “out in the shed, while Connie's in here reading.”

He pulled out a bird and handed it to me. It was hand carved from oak wood, polished smooth, painted with exacting and loving detail. It was a blue jay, a perfect likeness, right down to the wrinkles on its claws.

I took it in my hands delicately, like it was made of glass.

I could feel a tear threatening to break loose.

“Her favorite right now is the gray barn owl. I've already got one of those made too, but it's too big to put in the box. I have it out in the shed. I'm gonna start on a nest for it tomorrow.”

I looked up at him, and the tear fell.

“Hey,” he said, kneeling next to me, taking my face in his hands. “Hey, it's all right. We're all right.”

I closed my eyes and lost myself in his hands. Such wonderful hands.

“I love you so much, Billy. God, so much.”

“I love you too, Lily. Always.”

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Chapter 8

I kept a journal of the flu. It wasn't anything as organized as a diary, more a collection of random thoughts and feelings, and sometimes news clippings. But peppered throughout the entries were little flashes of inspiration, things I thought were as powerful as a wildfire, and just as temporary. I felt I had to put them down on paper, else they'd become ashes, flavorless and without meaning, only the echo of something that had once burned hot within me.

In looking over it now, I saw a lot of those flashes, all of them written in an urgent, slashing hand, like I was trying to carve them into the paper. Yet it pained me to realize that nothing of the desperate need that prompted me to write them down survived.

One passage read:

This morning, through the fog and the clean, brisk smell of the Vespers Creek, two deer. A mother and her baby. Must tell Connie about this, when she's older. Nature can be kind and beautiful, too. Death is not all there is.

I could only guess at the emotions that prompted me to write that, for I no longer had them readily on tap. Like the memory of the scene, the words were no longer vivid and vibrant in my mind. Only gray survived.

H2N2.

My journal was filled with my thoughts and observations about this killer version of the influenza virus. I realized, as I read the journal over again, that I've studied it, taken in details of its killing spree, in the same way that a condemned man might read about the mechanical operation of the gallows. It is both good and horrible to talk with Death when you know he's sitting at your table.

The bird flu is not something that just happened one day in rural China. Every version of the influenza virus, and there are literally millions, regardless of its particular arrangement of hemagglutinin and neuraminidase, finds its natural home in the intestinal track of wild aquatic birds. Very rarely does a mutated strain make the jump to the human respiratory system.

Several years back, it was the H5N1 version of the flu that the news told us to fear. We were told rural China, with its millions of chickens interacting with wild migratory birds in abominable conditions, would be ground zero for the worst influenza plague the world had ever seen. Bigger even than the pandemic that wrote the year 1918 on fifty million tombstones the world over.

Few thought of H2N2, for it had already had its time on the world stage back in 1957, and had been eradicated, or so, to our folly, we believed, by the 1968 influenza bug.

Few thought that H2N2, with only the smallest change in its genetic material, could open the door to hell.

We were wrong. My God, we were so very wrong.

A man from the Center for Disease Control had the unfortunate task of addressing my unit at roll call, and anybody who has ever had the misfortune to address a room full of cops on any topic knows what a miserable time of it that poor man had. The containment walls had already been put up around the city, and many of us had lost friends and family to H2N2. It was that poor man's unenviable job to explain to us why, and how, it all happened.

He told us that, like many things that seem to happen overnight, the epidemic decimating our lives was actually a long time in the making.

H2N2 never completely went away when the 1968 version of influenza took over. It survived for nearly seventy years in the colons of a common San Antonio pest, the Mexican grackle. Every November, millions of the birds descend on San Antonio, blanketing the city in bird shit so white and plentiful that you might've actually believed it was snow—that is, if it weren't still 90 degrees outside.

This bird snow was loaded with a virus bomb, brought to us the November before the plague actually hit.

A few people got sick that winter. There were, maybe, 500 cases. All of them minor. None of them even a blip on the radar of those who track coming plagues.

And then, six months later, ground zero exploded. A woman named Reina Villarreal owned a large, weather-beaten home near the Produce Terminal on San Antonio's shallow west side. Ms. Villarreal rented out her spare rooms to ten illegal immigrants from Coahuila, Mexico. These men worked hard, and made little. They spent their days in the Produce Terminal, where almost all of the commercial farms in South Texas sent their harvest for national distribution. They spent their nights at Cattleman's Square, the Tejano music capitol of the world.

These men also ate freely of the chickens Ms. Villarreal kept in her backyard. These chickens ate their feed off the ground, the same ground that the winter before had been blanketed with grackle snow.

Beginning in May, things started happening quickly. On May 3, Southwest Baptist Hospital reported 23 cases of SARS-like symptoms, including scorched lungs, rampant secondary pneumonia, and even the horrible blue footprints of cyanosis.

On May 4, there were five hundred and thirty-three cases reported to the CDC.

On May 7, a state of emergency was declared in San Antonio and the surrounding regions.

On May 13, every one of San Antonio's forty-three hospitals had exceeded their maximum capacity and started turning people away at the door.

On the night of May 17, the military put up the containment walls around the city.

Death was everywhere, and we were locked in with it.

All schools, public and private, were closed by order of the Metropolitan Health District, as were most businesses. FEMA promised to keep the flow of supplies coming into San Antonio, even though most everyone was out of work by that point and couldn't afford to buy anything.

The closing of the schools wasn't a bad thing for Connie. For weeks before the start of her first year, Billy and I had been trying to ease her fears of the big change.

"It'll be just like going to daycare," I told her, though that didn't convince her. She grabbed me around the waist and told me she wouldn't go.

Then, three weeks after that messy scene, I told her she wouldn't be going to school after all. "Mommy and Daddy will be teaching you," I told her. "How do you feel about that?"

"That's fine," she said, and shrugged, like it was no big deal and why was I making such a fuss about it anyway.

But as she walked away, I saw her reflection in the glass door of the oven, and she was smiling.

The little devil.

It was Thursday, May 18, around eleven o'clock at night, less than a day after the military had begun installing walls around the city, effectively locking us into a prison.

Officers of every rank, from every unit on the Department, had been mobilized to help maintain order. I had been teamed up with two Traffic officers. The three of us were working a road block on Highway 90 West, turning back cars that were packed with scared and angry people.

Military helicopters, like giant angry hornets, sprinted up and down the length of the wall, still under construction in some places.

A man's voice, recorded, for the same words were repeated over and over again in the same threatening monotone, warned the scattered crowds not to approach the holes in the wall. The voice warned that deadly force would be used. The message played in both English and Spanish.

The two Traffic officers argued back and forth with each other as to whether or not the military would actually do such a thing. One of them was in the Reserves and he said no way. You'd never get a U.S. soldier to fire on Americans. It would never happen.

In the bluish glow of the floodlights mounted on top of the wall, I could see four young men, teenagers really, being ignorantly defiant the way teenagers feel they have to be, sprinting across an open field to my right. They ducked behind cactus and stands of cedar, but they were constantly making their way toward a gap in the wall.

A nearby helicopter dipped its nose to the ground and raced to the patch of sky above the boys.

A spotlight hit the ground, lighting them up.

The boys kept running.

An amplified voice from the helicopter ordered them to turn around. They didn't.

They were almost to the wall, not stopping, and everyone in the assembled crowds held their breaths.

The helicopter rotated, turning its flank to the boys. The scene was frozen for the thinnest of moments, and then four quick bursts from the helicopter's guns dropped the boys.

The assembled crowds drew in a collective breath. They were quietly horrified. Then, like a wave, a tumultuous roar of protest erupted from their ranks. Angry shouting filled the night. Volleys of rocks were thrown at the helicopter.

I realized then that I was still holding my breath.

A few words about the wall.

If you've ever wondered just how badly the Government can fuck with you if it wants to, look at the wall around San Antonio.

The wall is made up of interlocking plastic blocks, most of which are red, though some are white for no particular reason that I can figure out, and a few, bleached of their color by the ferocious South Texas sun, have faded to a pink the same color as a mountain laurel blossom. In the first few days of the quarantine, the wall was nothing more than hurricane fencing laced with razor wire. In some places, there wasn't even that. But then, and it was done with shocking speed and efficiency, they brought in the interlocking plastic blocks.

Now that it's complete, the wall forms a giant circle around San Antonio. This circle is one 190 miles in circumference. The total area inside the wall is 2830 miles.

Each block is 20 ft high. They are 12 ft wide at the base, 7 ft at the top. Each block weighs 7525 lbs. Each block is 40 ft long.

There are, on average, 132 blocks per mile. The total number of blocks is 25,080.

Reportedly, each block cost \$3000.00 to make. The total cost of the wall was therefore \$75, 240, 000.00 and change.

Rumor has it that the government started building the pieces to the wall years before the epidemic in San Antonio—not as a means to quarantine a city, but to keep the Mexicans from jumping the border.

“Mommy, what's Mr. Wilkerson doing?”

Connie was on her belly, face pressed against the living room window, looking at the house across the street.

I got down on my belly next to her and nudged her playfully in the ribs. Even in late June, I'd still been able to manage a smile.

Looking through the window, I saw Bob Wilkerson hanging black bunting on his front door. Further down the street, two other doors had bunting on them, but Connie hadn't seen them yet.

I watched Bob Wilkerson. His shoulders were stooped, his walk slow. Even from across the street I could tell his eyes looked swollen and dead.

I wondered if it was his wife Susan or one of his two sons.

“What's he doing, Mommy?”

How could I explain that to her? My God, how?

“Honey, that black ribbon means he's lost somebody he loves very much.”

“Who?”

“I don't know. Maybe Mrs. Wilkerson. Or maybe Bobby or Anthony.”

“How did they get lost?”

I drew in a breath through clenched teeth. “They died, honey. That's what the ribbon means.”

She thought about that. Turned it over in her mind the way bright children do when they discover something strange about the world. I wanted her to be free of that knowledge. I wanted her to be five years old, untouched by the horrors of the world. But at the same time I knew that was both unpractical and unwise.

“He looks sad, Mommy,” she said.

“He is, honey. Very sad.”

“Does the ribbon make him feel better, Mommy?”

“I don't know, honey.”

Connie watched Mr. Wilkerson. Watched him watching the bunting.

She turned to me suddenly, and in a conspiratorially quiet voice, she said, “Mommy, I don't think it does.”

Somebody sent me a forwarded email a few months after the wall went up. It showed a picture of one of those bumper sticker ribbons, like the ones that say SUPPORT OUR TROOPS, only this one said REMEMBER SAN ANTONIO.

I thought about my job at the Scar, thought about all those bodies crammed into unmarked mass graves, and I thought, Ain't that a great notion. Remember San Antonio. How quaint.

Chunk was raised by his maternal grandmother, a woman about one-third his size, but twice as tough. She took a big black boy who was destined to become yet another east side gangsta thug and whooped his ass daily until he'd finally had enough and joined the police department.

On a brutally hot morning in early June, we were called away from the Scar to the Medina Health Clinic on the east side. Chunk's grandmother was there, dying by slow strangulation. The inside of her lungs had been scorched by acute respiratory distress syndrome, and her body was being eaten alive by its own immune system. Her skin was covered in blisters, and as she moved, feebly, upon the floor of the hallway, for every inch of that small clinic had been packed with the dead and the dying and the grieving, the blisters popped. She made a crackling, popping sound as she rolled over to say goodbye, and the sound reminded me of a child playing with bubble wrap.

That woman, that great, good soul, had become yet another canvas upon which H2N2 had painted death.

Later, we stood on the white brick steps of the clinic, not speaking, for there were no words up to the task.

Chunk couldn't afford a grave site, or even a coffin. He dreaded taking that beautiful woman to a mass grave at the Scar.

Billy made a coffin, his first.

That evening, as a warm breeze blew through the oaks near the back of our property, Billy and Chunk hacked into the ground with picks and shovels.

Chunk's voice faltered during the prayer. Billy finished it for him.

At that moment I thought of the deer I wrote about in my journal, and the rather cryptic message that death is not all there is, and I remembered what it was that I had to tell Connie.

It is not so horrible that we die. The horror is when we allow the fact that we must die to rob our lives of meaning, for they do mean something.

Even in the quietest moments, they mean something.

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Chapter 9

I got to the Scar early the next morning, but Chunk was already there. He was on the phone, muttering and grunting.

When he hung up, he wasn't happy.

“What's wrong?”

“I spoke with the sergeant in charge of security at Arsenal Station. Kenneth Wade's truck hasn't moved since yesterday when he arrived to escort Dr. Bradley.”

“Oh.” That is bad news. “What about Treanor?”

“That was him on the phone.”

“And?”

“Nothing. He hasn't heard from Wade, either.”

That really was bad news. Chunk had the same sinking feeling in his gut that I had in mine, I could tell. We'd investigated a cop once before, a 20 year veteran who got drunk and ran over his neighbor with his truck, then dumped the truck and tried to call it in stolen. Making that arrest had been one the worst assignments of our careers, almost as bad as the Scar.

“So, what do you want to do now?” I asked him.

“Let's go to Arsenal first. Then we can go into the GZ and try to find that van.”

“Okay,” I agreed. “But today, you drive.”

On the way to Arsenal Station, Chunk had to steer with one hand and wrestle with his surgical mask with the other. They never made the tie straps long enough for big guys like Chunk, and the thing was always threatening to pop off his face.

Finally, when he got it to where it was comfortable, he said, “Okay, Kenneth Wade.”

It was the opening move in an old game between us, but one that we hadn't gotten to play much since we started working at the Scar.

“Kenneth Wade and Emma Bradley are lovers,” I said. “But they have to keep it under wraps.”

“Why?”

“Maybe it's bad for her at work if their relationship gets out. Them being lovers would explain why Bradley called and requested him yesterday morning. Even after the fight.”

“Maybe. But why the fight?”

“Wade doesn't care if the others know. He's drunk. He's horny. He wants to go back to her place for some fun.”

“Why wouldn't she go? Because she's not happy with the way she looks naked?”

“Ha ha. She doesn't go because she thinks that's going to give them away.”

“So after the fight, Wade storms out.”

“Yeah. When she's had some time to think it over, Bradley calls him. Says, let's make up.”

“So they have sex?”

“Chunk, you've got a one track mind, you know that?”

He laughed. “I'm being serious, Lily. They've got to have sex. Or at least be headed in that general direction.”

“Why?”

“The dirt on the bottom of her feet, remember? How else is she gonna get dirt on the bottom of her feet unless she's naked?”

I frowned. That was a hard one.

“Maybe,” I concede. “But what's she doing naked in the middle of ground zero? She would know better than that.”

It was Chunk's turn to frown. “Danger sex?” he offered.

“Yeah, right.”

“Okay, so they had sex in the WHO van they took out.”

“How? There's no room in those things.”

“Oh come on,” he said. “You're a married woman. You ought to know there's more than one way to have sex.”

I punched him in the shoulder, hard. “That still doesn't explain the dirt. Somehow, she's got to be naked outside the van.”

“Hmmm.” Chunk wrapped his fingers around the steering wheel, deep in thought. It looked like a toy in his huge hands.

“Okay,” I said, sensing we'd stalled out. “Doctor John Myers.”

“Mr. Lonelyhearts?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay,” Chunk said. “Same set up. Wade and Bradley are getting it on. Only, they don't want the rest of the WHO staff to know.”

“Why?”

“Because if hippo woman finds out, she'll throw her off the team. Or, if she doesn't throw her off the team, she'll demand that Wade be sent to another station for his duty assignment. Either way, she'll bust them up for the good of her whole staff.”

“Wait a minute, Hippo woman?”

“Yeah, you know. Dr. Laurent.”

“I know who you mean. I just can't believe you called her hippo woman. Now I'm not going to be able to get that out of my head.” It was a spot on description of her.

He laughed, but it didn't last long. We were entering the hard scrabble parts of town. We passed a long line of people waiting in line for their weekly rations of groceries. Two women started to fight. No one jumped in to break it up, and when one of the women got thrown out of line, no one bothered to listen to her pleas for help.

Chunk let out a heavy sigh, more out of frustration than tiredness, even though he was feeling the strain of the long hours same as me.

“Myers,” he said, “has some small idea that maybe something's going on between Wade and Bradley. He wants Bradley for himself, though, so he provokes Wade into a fight.”

“Why?”

“Maybe he's drunk enough he thinks he can win,” Chunk said.

“I doubt it.”

“Maybe he thinks it will earn him sympathy from Bradley when he gets his ass kicked.”

“Pathetic, but maybe. They did walk back to their trailers together.”

“Yeah,” he said. “So they get back to the trailers. He makes a move. Gets turned down.”

“Okay, that works. So the next morning he sees Wade coming to pick up Bradley?”

“And he gets pissed. He follows them out to the GZ.”

“Doesn't work,” I said. “He's got an alibi till ten thirty, eleven o'clock.”

“He does it before they leave,” Chunk counters.

“To do that, he has to go past the security desk, get rid of the van, and then come back, on foot, to put Bradley's body onto Hernandez' truck. And we haven't accounted for Wade's body. Did he dump it somewhere? Did he put it on another truck that somehow slipped through at the Scar? And you've still got to put dirt on Bradley's feet.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he said, and sighed again. “What about Isaac Hernandez?”

“Opportunity, but no motive,” I pointed out.

“What about revenge?”

“For what?”

“His family. He's lost most of them to H2N2. Maybe he's out in the GZ, sees the WHO van, and loses it. He overpowers Wade and kills Bradley.”

I looked at Chunk seriously for a moment. It occurred to me that only someone who has actually lost a family member in this damn quarantine can understand the frustration that would drive somebody to commit a completely illogical crime like the one he described.

“What's wrong?” he said, looking at me curiously. It seemed to me a very long time since I'd seen his face, that bent-toothed grin of his. By that August, all you ever saw of anybody were their eyes above that damn white surgical mask.

“Nothing,” I said after an uncomfortably long pause. “Just thinking.”

I watched more angry faces staring at us from the curbs and the porches we passed, and said, “So he blames the WHO? Why?”

“A convenient scapegoat maybe. Or maybe he sees them as a symbol of the medical establishment that failed his family.”

“Maybe.”

“You like that one?”

I looked at him and smiled. My head started to clear a little, at least after I'd stopped thinking about his grandmother.

“Two problems,” I told him.

“Okay,” he said. “Shoot.”

“He kills Wade and Bradley. Why only take Bradley's body back?”

“Hmmm,” he said, thumping his thumbs on the steering wheel. “What's the second problem?”

“He kills Wade. Bradley, maybe. But Wade? I don't think so. If Wade managed to knock you on your butt, I doubt seriously an over the hill, beer-bellied slouch like Hernandez could have gotten the better of him.”

“Maybe,” Chunk said, except there was a serious, strained edge in his voice when he said it. “Still, don't ever sell a man short who's got that kind of anger in him. After all, it's not the size of the dog in the fight—”

“Yeah, yeah,” I said. “I know. It's the size of the fight in the dog.”

When we got to the Arsenal Station Morgue we started filling in some holes.

We checked with the security detail and found that Kenneth Wade entered the lot at five-fifteen. Under the ‘reason for access’ section of the log the gate officer had written ‘escort research personnel.’ Dr. Bradley checked out a WHO van at five-twenty. She didn't list a destination, which according to the security guys wasn't all that uncommon. The security detail checked them out of the gates at five-forty. Their destination was listed only as ‘field research.’

“Twenty minutes between the time they check out a van and the time they leave,” Chunk observed. “Not enough time to have sex.”

“That depends on who you ask?” I said.

Chunk chose to ignore that one.

“Well,” he said, “at least we know that whatever happened, happened while they were out.”

“That's true,” I agreed. “But we still have to explain how Emma Bradley got naked in the GZ and then made her way back here.”

Chunk flipped the security log forward to the next page.

“Well, it doesn't look like she came in on Hernandez' truck. The gate officer shows him coming in with an empty truck at ten after ten. Leaving with a full truck at eleven-twenty.”

“What about his first run of the day? We had him at the Scar the first time at ten after eight.”

He flipped through the log, stopped on a page towards the front, and nodded. “In at six fifty-eight, out at seven-forty. That fits.”

“Okay,” I said. “So whatever happened to her happened between five-forty at the earliest, and eleven-twenty at the latest?”

“Right.”

“And Myers has an alibi for that time?”

“Right.”

“And it doesn't look like Hernandez could have done it?”

“Right.”

“So that leaves Wade?”

“Yeah.”

“Damn.”

“Yeah.”

I shook my head sadly. “While we're here, you want to check on the autopsy?”

“Sure,” he said.

“That's not exactly what we were expecting to hear,” I told Dr. Herrera.

He looked at us curiously. He'd thrown us a curve, and he apparently didn't understand why. A bullet hole in the chest must have seemed perfectly obvious to him.

“You said you found pieces of fabric inside the wound?” I asked.

“That's right.”

Chunk grumbled under his breath. Herrera looked confused.

“We had sort of assumed that she was naked when she was killed,” I explained.

His eyebrows arched expressively. “Why in the world would you think that?”

I rubbed a hand across the back of my neck. I was beginning to feel just as much the amateur as Lt. Treanor believed me to be.

“We thought there was a possible sexual relationship between Dr. Bradley and Officer Wade of the SAPD Research Protection Detail.”

He shrugged. “Well, that's possible, I guess. It's also possible that she was shot with his gun.”

“How's that?”

“The bullet passed cleanly between the ribs. No real deformation upon entry. I was able to identify it pretty easily as a Speer Gold Dot .40 S&W, one hundred and fifty-five grain hollow point. That's an expensive bullet. SAPD and the Bexar County Sheriff's Office are the only ones inside the wall who still have access to them.”

“Great,” said Chunk. “Thanks, Doc.”

“Sure,” said Herrera, but without a trace of irony. “No problem.”

“So somebody shot her while she was wearing her spacesuit, and then stripped her?”

“Looks that way,” Chunk said.

“Why?”

“Who knows,” he said. “Doc didn't find any bruising around the vagina. And there was no semen in her, so I guess we can rule out any freaky postmortem stuff.”

“Thank God.”

“Yeah.”

Chunk drove us across the Arsenal Station parking lot and through the security desk. Two baby-faced patrolmen with machine guns waved us through.

“But why strip her? Why bring her back here? Why not just dispose of the body out in the field somewhere?”

“I don't know,” Chunk said. “Maybe it's somebody who works out of Arsenal and can't be away too long, somebody whose absence would be noticed. They stripped her so that she could blend in with all the other bodies coming out of there.”

“That would make sense,” I agreed. “After all, the killer would have to have access to toe tags, and only authorized people are allowed on the floor.”

“True,” he said. “It narrows the field at least.”

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Chapter 10

Ground zero, the GZ.

All the homes in the GZ were vacant and scrawled with graffiti. The yards were overgrown with barnyard grass and sunflowers. Hardly a window anywhere was left unbroken. Morning sunlight lanced through the oak trees. Startled pigeons erupted from a hole in a nearby roof.

Those streets felt haunted. Death seemed to leer out at us from the shadows.

Chunk and I felt like infidels, drifting through the quiet streets where some terrible, flesh-consuming religion was born.

The Metropolitan Health District required all personnel entering the GZ to wear protective clothing. Chunk and I wore gray hooded plastic jumpsuits that crinkled when we walked and trapped heat close to our bodies. Even before we stepped out of the car, sweat soaked through our clothes. Our breathing sounded labored and difficult through the gas masks, even though it really wasn't. I learned to get used to the gas mask early on.

Outside the car, the MHD had posted orange warning handbills on every light pole and abandoned car in sight, many of the bills so sun-bleached they appeared almost white.

We had no plan other than to systematically explore every street in the five square miles around the Produce Terminal.

It turned out to be a more difficult task than we'd thought. Long ago, perhaps in the twenties or thirties, judging by some of the houses we saw, the area around the Produce Terminal had been quite nice. We saw quite a few large, two story Queen Anne-style homes that had fallen into tragic disrepair and had since been carved up into multiple apartments, and an equal number of one story bungalow and Craftsman-style homes. And in between those—stuffed in, really—were an unbelievably large number of leaning shacks and add on sheds that made the place look like a hive. Overgrown alleys crisscrossed every street, and in some places the vegetation was so thick you could barely tell there were homes hiding behind it.

We went slowly, and wound through street after street, looking for anything unusual.

“Look at that,” Chunk said, and pointed at a street sign swaying gently in the breeze from an overhead stop light cable.

The fifteen hundred block of Matamoras Street, I read, and a knot formed in my throat.

That was the real GZ, the very street upon which H2N2 found its first victims. Somewhere down that street was the home of Mrs. Villarreal, whose chickens were San Antonio's equivalent of Mrs. O'Leary's cow.

Chunk slowed the car to a crawl and we turned down Matamoras, both of us tense, alert, and more than a little frightened.

Suddenly Chunk stopped the car—harder than he needed to. I almost went into the windshield.

I lurched forward, my hand on the dashboard to stop my momentum.

“You see that?” he asked.

Ahead of us, parked in the grass in the shade of two large oak trees, was an old EMS wagon. The Fire Department's decals had been peeled off, though their outline remained. Converted, by the looks of it.

“Do you think it might have been left here?” I asked him. It wouldn't be the only costly piece of City equipment abandoned by the roadside in the early days of the war against H2N2.

“I don't think so,” he said. “Let's go take a look.”

We parked and approached the ambulance on foot. Chunk checked the cab while I checked the side and back doors.

“Locked,” he said.

“Yeah. Back here, too.”

“Can you see in the windows?”

I tried to look through the vent windows in the back door, but my gas mask made it hard for me to get a good angle.

Chunk was trying to look through the side windows. I turned around to tell him I couldn't see anything, when I saw a man walking towards us from between two houses. He was dressed in the same kind of suit and mask we wore, though his fit better. He carried two dead chickens in his left hand, holding the dead birds by the feet. There was a pistol in a clamshell holster on his right hip.

“Chunk.”

Chunk turned to me, saw me looking somewhere else, and followed my gaze to the man.

Neither of us had our weapons. They were secured in the trunk.

The man saw us and stopped. We looked at each other for a moment before he held up the chickens and motioned for us to step away from the ambulance.

We both stepped back toward our car.

When we were far enough back, the man went to the ambulance, removed two red biohazard bags from a side compartment, and dropped a dead chicken into each bag. Once they were secured, he unlocked the side door, stepped inside, and disappeared for a moment.

Chunk and I glanced at each other. What in the hell's he doing?

Chunk shrugged.

The man was inside the ambulance for almost a minute. When he finally came out, he rinsed his gloved hands in blue disinfectant liquid he poured from a cooler on the side of the ambulance, shook off the excess, and then approached us.

He didn't even give us a chance to speak. “This is a restricted area,” he said, his voice bristling, like he'd just caught us watching TV on his couch in the middle of the night. “What are you doing here?”

I could see the top half of his face through the goggles of his gas mask. He was an older man, late sixties, maybe, with liver spots on his forehead and deep rutted crow's feet at the corners of his eyes, which even through the mask I can tell were intensely focused.

He stepped right up to Chunk and stood chest to chest with him, not two feet between them. There was almost a foot of difference in their height, and maybe a hundred pounds, both in Chunk's favor, but the smaller man didn't seem to notice the disadvantage. He just stood there, gloved hands on his hips, waiting for a reply.

“Well?”

Chunk was taken aback by the old man showing him attitude, but he recovered quickly.

“I was about to ask you the same question,” he said. “I'm Detective Reginald Dempsey with the SAPD's Homicide Unit. This is my partner, Lily Harris.”

“Homicide?” The man looked at both of us in turn.

“Homicide,” Chunk said. “Who are you?”

“I’m Dr. Walter Cole,” the man said, regaining a little of his superior edge. “I’m with the Metropolitan Health District.”

That explains the ambulance, I thought. He’s using it as a rolling laboratory.

The man stared at Chunk. “What in the world is SAPD Homicide doing in the GZ, Detective?”

“How about you telling me what you’re doing with a gun, Doc,” Chunk countered.

Cole glanced at the weapon on his hip. He reached for it, but stopped with his hand on the grip when Chunk raised a fist to knock him out if he drew it. He continued to pull it out, but more slowly, and made an obvious show of handing it to Chunk, butt first.

Chunk took it from him.

“I use it on the chickens,” Cole said. “I have to collect a lot of specimens, and this way is quicker than the traps.”

Chunk looked the weapon over, holding it so that I could see it. “Browning Hi Power,” Chunk said. “.22 caliber bull-nosed target pistol. Walnut grips. Blued barrel. That’s an expensive weapon, Doc.”

Chunk ejected the magazine and cleared the chamber, then handed it back to Cole. Cole took the weapon back and slid it into the clamshell. He put the magazine and the ejected round into his pocket. “It pays to use the best,” he said.

“Why are you killing chickens, Doc?” The way it sounded, Chunk was teasing him, though I know him well enough to know that that’s just Chunk’s way. It was an honest question.

Cole didn’t seem to realize that. To him, Chunk was a big dumb cop insulting him.

“It’s complicated,” he said, with obvious sarcasm.

“Try me.”

Cole sighed, like we were a big waste of his precious time.

“I am mapping the antigenic shift of the original strain of H2N2 in order to prove that not one, but three, highly virulent strains of the virus are at work here. First I find and kill chickens from various parts of the GZ. Then I perform a test on them to determine whether or not they are infected with the influenza virus. If I detect the virus, then I compare my new sample with the genetic fingerprint of archived samples and attempt to extrapolate the direction of the antigenic shift.”

All of that was said in a matter of fact tone, but it was obvious that he was trying to talk over our heads, just to prove the point, I guess.

Chunk cocked his head to one side doubtfully. “I see,” he said.

“Yes,” Cole said, sneering. “Of course you do.”

I stepped in at that point so that Chunk wouldn't squash the poor man.

“Dr. Cole, we're here investigating the murder of Dr. Emma Bradley. What we're looking for—”

“Who did you say?”

“Dr. Emma Bradley. Do you know her? She was with the World Health—”

“Yes, yes,” he said impatiently. “Yes, I know. The World Health Organization. She works with Dr. Myers and that fat, disgusting French woman at the Arsenal Morgue.”

“That's right. How well did you know her, Dr. Cole?”

“Well, I,” he began, but faltered. “Not well, I guess. By reputation, mostly. Whenever I go to Arsenal, it's Myers I prefer to deal with. He's a bit of an eager pup, but at least he's not as full of himself as the rest of those people.”

“You said you know her by reputation, doctor. What exactly does that mean?”

“Excuse me?”

“What was her reputation? Do you mean her professional reputation, or was there something else?”

“She's Laurent's trained pit bull,” he said. “From what I hear, she was supposed to be the bright light of the bunch.”

“You don't sound impressed,” I pointed out.

He shrugged. “Dr. Laurent and I have fundamentally different views on the nature of this epidemic. She believes that her people need to focus on developing a live virus vaccine for the primary strain of H2N2. And there's a chance—a chance, mind you—that in six months they'll have a vaccine that will minimize the impact of the disease among the local population. But I believe they're ignoring the real danger.”

“Really? What's the real danger?”

I could hear him breathing through his gas mask, sudden, deep inhalations, like he was hunting for the right words. Finally, he said, “Did you know we lose 36, 000 Americans a year to influenza? I mean, not counting what's going on here in San Antonio.”

I shook my head.

“We do. It's a staggering number. And the really scary thing is most of those deaths are to mildly virulent strains of the flu. Pedestrian stuff, at least compared to H2N2. What we've experienced here in San Antonio over the last few months is the most virulent strain of the flu ever seen. That's the strain Dr. Laurent and her staff are trying to produce a vaccine for. But I have found evidence here, in the chickens wandering these yards, of two newly reassorted strains of H2N2 that make what we've seen so far look like the common cold.”

“You reported your findings?”

“Yes,” he said. “I've reported my findings.”

“And?”

“And the problem is simple prejudice.”

He said it like it explained everything, which of course it didn't.

“I don't understand, Dr. Cole,” I said.

He let out a frustrated sigh. This was an old argument for him, something he'd explained and complained about more times than he cared to remember. He pointed over our shoulders. “You see that orange warning notice on that light pole over there?”

“Yeah,” I said. The MHD warnings were everywhere. You couldn't turn around without seeing one.

“If you read the last warning, it says ‘Stay away from strange and foul smelling areas.’ That was added at the insistence of our fearless leader, Mr. Martin Klauser. The man's not even a doctor, for Christ's sake. He heads up the public health agency of the seventh largest city in America, and the man has no medical knowledge whatsoever. He's a homeopathic adviser, if you can believe that. He got his job because some city councilman owed him a favor. And now that idiot is overseeing this crisis. He put that warning on that notice because he still believes that diseases are caused by miasmatic vapors and not viruses. He's made the MHD a laughingstock in the medical community. Dr. Laurent and her staff see that kind of corruption and stupidity, and they think it must automatically extend to me as well. They don't even listen to what I have to say.”

“But if you have proof?”

“Yes, I have proof. But they won't even look at it. And meanwhile, the chickens in the GZ are shitting out little virus bombs all over the place. When the grackles come back to San Antonio in November, they're going to eat that shit from the ground and absorb one or even both new strains of the H2N2 virus. When that happens, the walls around this city won't do a bit of good. The grackles will take those new strains into rural northern Mexico, where there are no doctors, no hospitals, no resources to implement a quarantine.

“There's nobody but about 10 million poor as dirt Mexicans down there. They won't even have the resources to report the pandemic until it spreads so far out of control we'll never be able to deal with it. We're not going to be talking deaths in the thousands either. Not even in the tens of thousands. When those grackles hit northern Mexico, we're going to see deaths in the millions.

“And that vaccine that Dr. Laurent and her staff have worked so hard on? It won't do a damn bit of good against those new strains. I'm trying to stop a global pandemic, here, and all that disgusting fat woman can do is sit in her trailer and ignore me.”

One of the first things they teach you about interviewing people is to let them talk. Let the thread spool itself out. The challenge is to keep them on focus. Keep them talking about what you need.

I was about to redirect our conversation when Dr. Cole did it for me.

“Detective,” he said, “if you don't mind me asking, what exactly are you doing out here? You never told me that.”

“We're looking for the van Dr. Bradley and her police escort were driving the morning she was killed.”

“Yeah? Why are you looking out here?”

I noticed the tone of his voice changing. First confused, then suspicious.

“We were told that Dr. Bradley had been doing work here in the GZ for the last few days.”

I couldn't see Cole's mouth, but from what I could see of his expression I figured it must have been hanging open in the shape of an O.

“That surprises you?” I asked.

“Yes. Very much, actually.”

“Why?”

“That's what I've been trying to tell you. Dr. Laurent and her staff are lab technicians. That's what they do. That's all they do. I've been trying to get them to come out here for weeks, and now you tell me they've been coming out here secretly.”

I heard him let out a hot, frustrated sigh. “That figures. It's prejudice. Stinking prejudice.”

I thought about telling him we were talking about somebody's life, and not his pride, but I didn't. Instead, I said, “You have no idea where Dr. Bradley was working while she was out here?”

“None.”

I looked at Chunk, who had more or less disconnected himself from the conversation, for some sign of what he wanted to do.

He nodded towards the car.

“Okay, Dr. Cole, thanks for your time. Would you mind if we called on you again? Familiar as you are with the GZ, you might be a big help.”

He bowed his head, a strange looking gesture with his gas mask.

“Listen,” I said, “if you do happen to see that van, could you give us a call? SAPD Homicide in the City directory.”

“Sure,” he said. And then he turned and walked back to his ambulance without another word.

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Chapter 11

There is an ugly truth about wearing personal protective equipment, or PPE, as we call it in the business: What is difficult to put on is also difficult to take off. The biohazard space suits we'd been issued were gray, one-piece outfits with built-in booties and a hood. That went on first. Next you had to slip on the gloves, and those had to be sealed to the suit at the seam with duct tape. The last item you had to put on was the gas mask, which had to be properly seated and sealed so that no skin or hair was exposed.

The first rule of wearing PPE is: DO NOT LET ANY SKIN SHOW.

When all three parts—body suit, gloves, and gas mask—were properly worn, the wearer would theoretically be encased in a plastic cocoon that no germ or gas or liquid could penetrate. Inside, you were insulated.

Of course, this also meant anything that happened inside the suit stayed inside the suit.

At the end of the day, after going through decontamination, the whole outfit had to come off. When doing that, the rule was last on, first off, and the process was every bit as involved as getting into the stuff. You very quickly learned that once the entire outfit was on, you didn't take it off until you knew you wouldn't need it again that day.

That was why there was a giant sign above the entrance to the locker rooms at the Scar that read:

PLEASE PEE BEFORE YOU PPE

LET'S KEEP THE GEAR CLEAN

Unfortunately, very few people can make it through a 14 hour day without relieving themselves, and, well, sometimes...

I sat in the passenger seat next to Chunk and crossed my legs. Uncrossed them. Shifted around a little. Thought to myself, Master it, master it. You don't have to pee. You don't have to pee.

I had to pee.

Finally I couldn't take it anymore and tried to look casual, like I wasn't really doing what I was really doing.

I thought to myself, I'm glad I obeyed the second rule of PPE: NEVER WEAR NICE CLOTHES UNDER PPE.

Chunk and I were playing a hunch. We figured that anybody going into the GZ was going to focus on the area around Mrs. Villarreal's house for the simple reason that it was such a significant landmark.

We idled through those streets at five miles per hour or so, looking carefully at everything we passed. The streets were lined with oak trees, large and unmanaged, and beautiful in their own way. But the homes behind them were also old and in disrepair. They looked shabby. We saw a few rickety two-stories, but most of the homes were small gray shacks, fronted by yards littered with old cars, busted furniture, and every kind of accumulated garbage.

“Looks like a good place to dump a vehicle,” Chunk said.

“Yeah. I was thinking the same thing.”

We drove on, still looking, and I was surprised at how many of the houses didn't have doors. Strange, I thought. Why take the front doors? What could you possibly want with somebody's front door?

“I think your friend back there was kind of an asshole,” Chunk said.

“He certainly was a man with a mission.”

“Why do suppose hippo woman didn't tell us about Dr. Strangelove back there when we asked her what Bradley was doing out here.”

“I wish you would stop calling her that.”

“What?”

“You know what. Hippo woman.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m gonna end up calling her that by mistake the next time we see her.”

Chunk laughed. It sounded like a cough behind the mask.

“Seriously, though. What do you think the deal is there?”

I thought about that for a second, wondering if it was me, or if there really was someone watching us from the houses out there.

“Maybe Cole’s right about the prejudice part. I mean, I don’t hang around with doctors or anything, but I’ve seen the way they treat people from the MHD. It’s like they’re second class citizens.”

“So you think maybe Cole’s on to something and Laurent thinks there’s a chance he may be right?”

“Maybe.”

“So what? She sends her star player out to check it out?”

“Possible,” he said. “But it sounds like a bunch of unnecessary politics to me.”

I didn’t answer him right away. One of the houses on my side of the street was missing a door, and I was pretty sure I saw a guy standing inside, watching us from the shadows.

But when I looked again, the doorway was empty.

“Yeah, well,” I said, “things are the same all over I guess. Tribes within tribes. That kind of nonsense. Remember when the lieutenant had us take the Resendez case away from the Stranger Rapes guys over at Sex Crimes? It’s the same thing here. It’s a high profile deal and everybody wants to be able to put it on their resume.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

I saw a flash of movement. A man ran between two houses off to my right.

“Chunk,” I said.

He heard the tone in my voice and slammed on the brakes. “What?”

“Look there,” I said.

The man was gone.

“What?”

“Somebody just ran between those houses over there.”

Chunk leaned over me, trying to see. “Where?”

“Chunk!”

Ahead of us, a young Hispanic guy in his early twenties, dressed in a blue t-shirt and jeans and no protective gear of any kind was running into the street, coming at the front of our car, waving his hands over his head like he was trying to flag us down.

He was shouting something.

“Chunk?”

“Not good,” he said, and glanced into the rearview mirror. We both felt it. Like it was a trap.

Chunk put the car in reverse.

The man was still coming at us, still waving, when we heard the pop of gunfire. A moment later, we heard the zing of a shot glancing off metal. Off the hood of our car. More pops came from off to our right. The windows shattered. Chunk stomped on the gas and we lurched backwards down the street.

Suddenly gunfire erupted all over my side of the street. I could feel the bullets thudding into the side panels, rocking it with the force of all those impacts. As I ducked my head down, I saw the white spurts from the muzzle flashes.

I screamed.

The car rocked to Chunk's side of the street, both of the tires on my side shot out. The man who had tried to wave us down was firing at us then, and bullets slapped into the hood of the car.

Over the rolling bark of the guns, I heard something snap and then slap the inside of the engine compartment, and the car rolled uselessly to a stop.

Chunk opened his door and spilled out, keeping his head low.

“Come on,” he yelled at me, his hands ready to grasp mine and pull me out of his side of the car if necessary.

I didn't need the help. I scrambled across the seats and poured out of the car on my hands and knees. We both crawled to the grass, got to a crouch, and ran for the cover of some oak trees and the corner of a nearby house.

Bullets whistled all around us, slicing through the limbs of trees and foliage and smacking into the sides of the house. Behind us I heard angry shouting, crazy voices, like madmen on the war path.

Chunk and I ducked behind a small flight of concrete stairs and listened to the shouting, trying to figure a way out.

“Who are those guys?” I asked Chunk. My breathing was so fast my lungs felt like they were on fire.

“Looters,” he said. He looked me over. “You're not hurt?”

“No. You?”

“No.” He glanced over the top of the stairs and quickly dropped back down. “Damn!” he said. “I wish we had our guns.” The guns were back in our car, in the trunk. Pistols don't do well in the decontamination chambers.

We heard more voices. Not just the ones behind us, but more from the back of the house, coming closer.

“Chunk?”

“We can't stay here.”

In front of us was a busted chain link fence. On the other side of that, a low line of tanglehead grass. Not high enough or thick enough to hide behind, but high enough to wrap around our feet and tie us down if we tried to run for it. Beyond that was the side of a weather-beaten house, a busted window midway down its length. In the backyard, I saw a small metal tool shed and a few trees.

The shooting stopped. Then, laughing. They cackled like witches, taunting us, calling us out. I saw movement in the backyard and a man shouted. “Over here! Over here! They're over here.”

He fired at us. The bullet hit the concrete next to my head, powdering me with dust. Chunk jumped up and cleared the chain link fence in a single stride. I was right behind him. I grabbed the top of the fence and swung my legs over. Another shot rang out. It hit something beneath my hand. The fence collapsed, and I hit the ground face first. I saw a flash of purple as my mask smashed into my nose.

When I looked up, men with rifles were running from the street into the front yard and Chunk was disappearing into the cover of the trees along the front of the house, running away from them.

I heard more shouting from behind me, and in an instant I realized I was cut off. I couldn't go forward after Chunk, and I couldn't go to the backyard. I jumped into the broken window of the

house in front of me and tumbled to the floor. The wood was rotten, spongy beneath my weight. The house was dark, musty. No furniture that I could see. Dust was everywhere.

“Go that way,” the voices shouted from outside. “Get that one!”

“The other's in the house.”

“Which one?”

“That one. You get that one.”

Heavy footsteps pounded on the front porch. Men yelled at each other. They kicked debris out of the doorway, forcing their way inside. I got to my feet and ran out of the room, toward the back of the house. The men coming in from the front of the house saw me as I slipped around the corner. They fired a shot. Through a window, I saw more men in the backyard. They turned toward the shot and charged the house.

The yelling erupted again. The clapboard house felt like it was going to rattle to pieces in the stampede of so many intruders. I ran through shadows and hallways to the far side of the house, the sound of heavy boots running on the rotten floor coming from all around me.

I ducked into an empty room and spied a window on the opposite wall. I heard voices in the hallway where I'd just come from, and I knew I had to make a move then or die in that house.

Running at the window, I dove through it without bothering to look at what was on the other side. I landed hard on a wood pile, shot through and overgrown with weeds, my ribs on my left side hitting the pile before the rest of me.

My vision blurred from a piercing bright light of pain, and moaning sickly, I rolled off the wood pile, onto my uninjured right side. It took a second before I could make myself move. There was a thick stand of bushes ahead of me, and I pulled myself along on my belly towards it.

Just as I got behind cover I heard the voices behind me.

“Anything?”

“Not back here.”

I heard them trashing the house, and I used the noise to cover my movements as I crawled along the bushes to the back of the house. Somewhere in the back of my mind I thought that Chunk must be around the next corner. That he'd realize we got separated and was waiting for me. But when I rounded the corner to the backyard, I didn't see him.

But what I did see stunned me.

It was the top of a U-Haul-style moving van, dented and worn-looking, but the right size and shape as what Chunk and I were looking for. A fence and some chest-high bushes separated the van from me, hiding the bottom half of it, but my hopes were up, and I ran for it.

“There!” one of the men shouted from inside. “There! In the yard.”

I jumped the fence as a shot rang out and I hit the ground. As I landed, through the panic, I saw the lower half of the van, and my heart sank. It wasn't the van we were looking for. The back axle was up on cinder blocks and the van was ringed on all sides by scraggly hackberry bushes.

A bullet whizzed past my ear.

I hit the ground and crawled for the van and squeezed under it, inching my way forward, where the hackberry was thickest. I was even with the front tires when I stopped crawling, for a new, but much older fear had gripped me. On the ground in front of me, slowly uncoiling, was a dusty, caramel-colored rattlesnake. Its head looked as big as a slice of pumpkin pie, and its body was as big around as my thigh. The muscles along its flank rippled as it glided through the dirt, its tongue licking the air, sensing a living presence, but smelling only rubber and plastic.

I was on my belly, eyes wide open, every muscle in my body frozen with fear. The snake inched closer to me. Its head rose off the ground slightly, and then we were so close we were almost touching, nose to nose. I could see every speck of color in its slitted eyes.

We were motionless, eyes locked together for what seemed like forever, though it couldn't have been more than four or five seconds at the most. And then, as suddenly as it had appeared, the snake broke eye contact and glided forward. It crawled right past my ear, over my shoulder and onto my back, its body impossibly long and heavy, disappearing with exaggerated and terrible slowness into the shadows at my feet.

I didn't even breathe.

“Check there,” somebody shouted. “Yeah, there! Under that van.”

A fresh wave of panic took me. I heard the men running across the yard, coming closer. I turned and looked at the back axle over my shoulder. The snake was there, moving towards the daylight.

Voices at the hackberry. Hands pushing the greenery apart.

The snake reared back, its tail alive with the fury of its rattle. A shadow fell over the snake, and a man's face and body appeared above it. The snake lunged for the man's face and he pulled back just in time.

I heard him yell, “Whoa!” and then, a moment later, “Fucking rattlesnake man!”

The others laughed.

“Shut the fuck up,” the man yelled back.

They kept teasing him, but to my amazement, their voices retreated. They were going off to hunt for me in other places.

I watched, thunderstruck, as the snake slithered out into the hackberry, out into the sunlight, leaving me alone. I closed my eyes and let my face mask drop to the ground.

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Chapter 12

I stayed as still as possible, listening for more voices. The only sound was the muffled whistling of my breath as it exited through the filters of my gas mask. The looters were gone, I was pretty sure of it. I hadn't heard anything for over a minute, and the cave-like hollow beneath the van where I was hiding was becoming more and more oppressive.

I decided to chance a run for better cover.

I crawled out from under the van, but stayed in a low crouch. As quietly as I could I made my way back to the houses where Chunk and I had been hiding when we separated. I crossed between the houses to the front, where I stayed low behind some bushes, hoping to get a view of our car. Our weapons were still in the trunk, and I figured if I could get to them I could level the playing field a little.

But my heart sank when I saw the car. It had been shot to pieces. There were huge, gaping holes all over it. All the windows were broken, glass everywhere. A thin column of steam rose up from the radiator. Worse, the trunk was wide open, jimmied open sloppily, with a crowbar from the looks of it.

Moving through the bushes once again I headed along the front of the houses in the same direction Chunk and I were going when I lost him. I made it to the end of the block before I heard more voices. Men's voices. They were shouting at each other, slapping their way through an overgrown alley behind the house I was using for cover.

I ran across the street quickly and ducked into a small white house without a front door. Immediately the world around me was thrown into darkness. There was very little furniture to clutter the wood floors, a few chairs, a ragged sofa, a cabinet. Dusty sunlight pierced through the holes in the wall and the roof and the broken windows, making bright white patches on the floor.

I was painfully aware of my own breathing. How loud it was. How much my chest hurt where I had fallen onto the wood pile. The voices were gone, lost somewhere behind me. I desperately wanted to find Chunk, but I didn't want to go back outside. I couldn't risk another encounter with those looters. Not alone, anyway.

I wandered through the entryway, the kitchen, with its piles of unwashed pots and pans and spider webs in the sink, and then into the living room.

There I stopped. In front of me, so still that at first I believed she must have been a mummified corpse, was an old Mexican woman in a rocking chair.

She beckoned to me. “Come closer. You're safe here. Those men won't bother you here.”

“Who are you?”

“You come into my home and you ask me that? Who are you?”

I crossed the room and stood before her. My space suit and face mask didn't seem to scare her at all.

She looked amused. Her thin, wasted smile had only a few yellowed teeth left in it, and though she looked so frail she seemed ready to blow away with the dust, her voice was strong and didn't shake.

“My name is Lily Harris. I'm a police detective. Do you live here?”

“I do.”

“I thought all the homes in this area were evacuated back in May.”

“I'm still here.”

“What's your name?”

“Carmenita Jaramillo.”

“Ms. Jaramillo, you—”

“Carmenita. Please.”

“Carmenita. Okay. You said those men won't come in here? How do you know they won't?”

The rocking chair moved so slightly I thought maybe it was my imagination. Great stillness surrounded her, and even the tiniest twitch rippled through her like an earthquake.

“They need to be healed sometimes, the men. I heal them when I can.”

Heal them? How?

I took a quick glance around the room and saw odd things—dried herbs hanging above the back door. Dried chicken bones were laid out deliberately on the window sill. There was a basket of brown eggs on the floor next to her chair. I looked at the items, and a thought came to me.

“You're a curandera,” I said. A Mexican faith-healer, a tradition brought to South Texas from the Indian mountains of Northern Mexico.

She smiled.

“I didn't think there were any more curanderos left,” I said.

My dad was a cop on the south side of San Antonio for 36 years, and I remembered him telling me stories of curanderos. Stories of their strange rituals and their followers so fanatically devoted to them that in some parts of South Texas and Mexico, local Catholic priests were forced to acknowledge their gifts, their don de Dios, in order to appease their congregations.

“Not many,” she said, but not sadly. Her eyes were bright, happy.

I remembered a story my Dad told me. He was driving through his district on the south side one afternoon when an old woman ran out into the street ahead of him, waving her arms wildly and speaking very fast in Spanish.

Dad realized the woman wanted him to follow her inside her house, and he did. Inside, on the couch, on her back, was the woman's very pregnant daughter-in-law, covered in sweat, deep in labor. Dad was calm, because he'd already delivered three babies during his career. He washed his hands, sat on the couch between the girl's legs, and got ready to deliver the baby. Dad's Spanish was okay, but not great. He spoke it with a slow, East Texas drawl. The women were telling the girl to wait, don't let the baby come yet, but Dad didn't understand why.

Then another woman came in through the back door, and everybody seemed relieved. The woman knelt next to the pregnant girl, took a chicken egg from a pocket of her apron, and with the flat of her palm rolled the egg across the girl's belly, all the while muttering a prayer in Spanish.

When she was finished, Dad delivered the baby. He went to the sink and washed the blood and amniotic fluid from his hands, dried them, and then as calmly as if he were ordering a cheeseburger, got on his police radio and requested a case for Assist the Public, checked on the status of the ambulance, and got a time check for the birth of the baby. Dad was a veteran street cop at that point in his career and very little rattled him.

He returned to the living room just as the woman, the curandera, he soon learned, was cracking the egg into a bowl.

She looked up at my Dad and said, “For protection against the mal de ojo. The evil eye.”

She emptied the egg into the bowl. The yolk was the burning copper yellow of the sunset, and it was streaked through with blood.

“That rattled me,” Dad said. “It's hard to explain, but looking at that egg, I knew something had happened, something strange. There was a sort of charge in the air.”

I remember him shaking his head, unable to explain further.

I asked Carmenita Jaramillo, “Do you do that thing with the egg?”

She smiled.

“The people who come to me are simple people. For them, I offer the pouches of barley and crushed sage. I roll the chicken egg over their skin and crack it open for them to see the mal puesto, the bad magic. But it is no magic that I do. It is peace of mind I give them. Nothing but that.”

Her smile shifted to one corner of her mouth and I could tell she was studying me.

When she spoke again, it was like her voice had joined her thoughts mid stream.

“But not that for you,” she said. “You I can tell, you need something else.”

I was fascinated with her, and even though I thought her folk cures were, well, silly, the woman herself still intrigued me.

She put a gnarled finger up to her nose and said, “You are looking for the shiny people.”

“The shiny people?”

“Yes. A man and a woman. Dressed like you. Their clothes shine in the sun. And their troca too, yes?”

“Troca?” I said. Unlike my dad, I was never able to pick up Spanish. At one point, I got good enough at it I could ask for somebody's driver's license and their insurance, but when I promoted to detective, I lost even that. But then I clicked. I remembered the word, and I got excited. “You mean a van? Yes. I am. Have you seen it?”

“Yes, I see them. Yesterday morning. I hear the man yelling. The woman screaming. There was a fight in the street.”

“You saw them fighting? The man and the woman?”

“I hear them fighting. Voices. Like today, when they were chasing you.”

“You mean it wasn't the man and woman fighting with each other? They were fighting someone else?”

“The man was fighting with another man, yes. There was much yelling. Four or maybe five gunshots.”

“Could you see who the other man was?”

“No.” She shook her head. “But after the shooting, I see their troca going into that garage over there.” She pointed out the window to a battered gray wooden garage across the alley from her backyard. “Inside there.”

Beyond the garage was a two story house with a rickety, unpainted wooden staircase and balcony along the length of the second floor. It looked quiet. No one else around.

“Carmenita, this is important. I have to go there. Are there any more of those men around here?”

“They wander everywhere. You must be careful. Do not let them find a pretty young woman alone. I can not protect you from what they would do.”

“Understood.”

“Detective, may I—”

“Call me Lily. Please.”

She smiled. “Lily. You do not believe in the curandero, do you?”

“They're not really part of the culture I grew up in,” I said, conscious of the thin evasion.

“The only magic we do is to know what the people who come to us need. We are listeners only.”

“What is it that I need?”

“You are sick.” She touched her chest. “Here.”

At first I thought she meant with H2N2, and I said, “No, I'm fine. I get check ups every other day.”

“No. In here.” She pointed to her chest again, the heart. “Susto.”

I shook my head. “I don't understand. Susto?”

“Loss of spirit.”

I could have laughed it off, I told myself. I could have smiled and said that's nice and thank you and left. But I didn't. I stayed. Like my Dad on the day he stood in that woman's living room, staring at that bloody egg yolk, I had a feeling I couldn't explain, but at the same time one that I couldn't deny.

“We live in a bad time,” she said. “This is a bad place. The living and the dead are not so different.”

I frowned at her. She couldn't see that behind my gas mask. I wondered how she could see anything at all about me behind my mask.

“What do you suggest I do?” I asked.

“Chocolate,” she said, her voice suddenly and strangely like that of a little girl, happy.

“Excuse me?” I wondered if she was teasing me. She must have known there was no chocolate to be had anywhere in San Antonio, at least none that didn't come out of the black market.

“Don't ever pass up the chance for chocolate,” she said. “It is a simple cure, but good for a woman. A woman needs chocolate to make her soul glad.”

“Uh, thanks,” I said. I wondered if she could tell I was between a smile and a frown, my mouth twitching in indecision.

“I'm going to...” I trailed off. I hooked my thumb and pointed out the back door.

She smiled. Nodded.

“Thank you,” I said, and slipped out the back.

The van was inside the garage, just like she said.

I opened the garage door and a wave of dust poured out onto the gravel driveway. A murder of crows took noisily to the air from the roof. The van looked undamaged. I walked around it, nodding to myself as I headed for the cab.

There, I stopped.

Inside the cab, in the passenger seat, was Kenneth Wade, face bloody and bruised, as dead as dead can be.

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I looked down at the dead cop. His gas mask had been ripped off his face and his head was leaning back against the seat, mouth open slightly, eyes milked over. He had a day or two worth of blond stubble on his chin. He'd been beaten badly. There were dark, livid bruises on his face, around his eyes, and at the corners of his mouth, where a thin stream of blood had dried and turned to black crust. His gun was missing.

Wade's radio was as dead as he was. It had been left in the ON position, the battery drained.

His cell phone was on the floorboard, next to his left bootie, and I tried that. It worked. With a lot of difficulty, I manipulated the tiny phone around the contours of my gas mask so I could talk with the dispatcher's office and tell them where I was and what I needed.

As I put the phone back as closely as I could to where I picked it up from, it occurred to me how many of the cardinal rules of crime scene management I had just violated. I probably shouldn't have opened the garage door. I definitely shouldn't have opened the van's door. And any respectable defense attorney would have a field day with me using the dead man's cell phone. I saw myself, several hours in the future, writing a very long report in which I would use the phrase "necessary due to exigent circumstances" over and over again.

Shaking my head, I closed everything up the way I'd found it and walked around to the other side of the garage, where I figured I could wait for the cavalry to show up.

It seemed to be my day for corpses.

Just around the corner, thrown with apparent haste and swarming with black, iridescent flies, were two more bodies. Looters, from the looks of them. I got close enough to see the bullet holes in their chests. "Lovely," I said, dreading the extra work their misfortune was going to cause me.

I was staring at the corpses, thinking about how the scene got to look the way it looked, when I heard a twig snap. My gaze darted into the alley behind the garage, into the overgrown tangle of tall grass and weeds and shrubs there. Through the green and brown mess of vegetation I saw a man, a looter, with a shotgun, inching his way towards the garage.

I jumped back behind the corner of the garage, and looked around for a way out. I couldn't risk going back into the street, and I couldn't cross the alley again without giving away my position.

You're screwed.

The man tried to approach quietly, but didn't do a very good job of it. I slipped around to the other side of the garage and picked up a long, skinny piece of metal pipe leaning against the garage. I gripped it, holding it straight up, like a walking stick. The pole was about the size of a broom handle, awkward to swing, but it was all I had to work with.

I pressed my back against the corner of the garage nearest the alley, listened to the crunching vegetation, and got my mind ready for what I was about to do.

Instead of swinging it, I jabbed the pole into the man's shocked face as he came around the corner. I heard his nose crack. Blood went everywhere. He went down to his knees, losing his grip on the shotgun at the same time, and held his face with both hands.

“Shit,” he said. It sounded muffled through the broken bones and web of his fingers.

I took a step back, grabbed one end of the pole with both hands and swung it down over my head, onto the back of his.

It laid him out. He collapsed to the ground, not dead but not moving, either.

I tossed the pole away and grabbed the shotgun. As I looked around, trying to figure out what direction to go in, I heard shouting. Looters. They were in the street, pointing and yelling in my direction. They ran at me, still shouting. One took a wild shot at me with a pistol and I heard the bullet whiz by me, striking the vegetation in the alleyway with the crack of breaking wood.

I ran along the fence line, parallel to the alley. The suit was light, but bulky, and it sounded like I was crumpling up wax paper as my legs scissored back and forth. By the time I reached the far back corner of the yard, they were already coming around the corner of the house. Another shot went by my head and I jumped the fence, ducking into the cover of the overgrown alley. The shrubs pulled on my suit, but I pushed through to the other side. I came out right on top of a group of chickens that squawked in protest as I ran through them. I didn't stop. Kept on running. This time, I headed for the house next door to Carmenita Jaramillo's.

I turned and saw three of them entering the yard. Before they could get a shot off I fired the shotgun at them. They were far enough away that there was little danger of the shot doing anything but peppering their skin, but the noise was enough to cause them to duck for cover. I used the opportunity to duck into the gap between the house and the garage. My plan was to run around the front and try to double back on them, maybe come at them from the opposite corner of the house. But as soon as I entered the gap, I realized that wasn't going to happen. There was a 12 ft high brick wall in front of me, sealing me into a dead end.

I was frantic. I went down on one knee, hugging the wall of the house, shotgun up and ready, waiting for the end. I heard the looters laughing in the backyard, calling out to me. They'd figured out I was a woman. I got the sense of what they were saying, and it didn't sound like they wanted to kill me. At least that wasn't the first thing they were going to do.

But then, suddenly, their laughing turned to surprised, angry shouts, and one of them even let out a girlish squeak of a scream before the sound was cut off by a sickening crunch.

I held my position for at least a minute, waiting to see who came around the corner. When no one did, I inched forward.

I stopped at the corner and took a deep breath, then edged around the corner with the shotgun ready to go.

My mouth fell open inside my gas mask. I lowered the shotgun.

There, standing in the middle of three kneeling looters, their hands clasped over their heads, was Chunk, a rather serious looking shotgun in his hands. One of the looters was down. He looked dead.

“How you doing?” he asked.

The cavalry was a SWAT team divided up into four two-man units, all of them in full biohazard gear. A police helicopter hovered overhead. Once the scene was locked down, the evidence technicians, the SAPD's version of CSI, was brought in. Things happened smoothly after that, more or less by the book.

By the time Chunk and I made it back to the Scar and started writing our reports, the afternoon sky had begun to color with an approaching storm. Towering purple and black thunderheads loomed on the horizon, shouldering up against the low, rounded hills of the Hill Country. The air had a charged, electric smell.

It was drizzling by the time the sun disappeared.

Later, from the report writing room, I could hear rain pounding on the building's metal roof.

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Chapter 14

A hard rain. Silver sheets of water danced in the air across the parking lot. The rain was so loud Chunk and I had to nearly yell to hear each other over it. We were standing under the awning of the Scar's administrative building, waiting to make the mad dash to our cars.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“You sure? You had a hard one today.”

“We both did.”

He shrugged. “Yeah.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I mean it. Thanks.”

“Any time,” he said. “You take care now.”

And then we were off, running for our cars. By the time I reached mine I was soaked to the bone. Ordinarily, it took me fifteen minutes to drive home from the Scar, but that night it took me almost two hours the rain was so bad.

Billy was asleep on the couch, so I went to check on Connie. I opened her door quietly and poked my head in. She looked like she was sleeping, face mashed into her pillow, arm thrown heavily over her stuffed animals, but almost as soon as I looked in on her, she poked her head up, wide awake.

“Mommy?”

“Hey baby. What are you doing awake?”

She rubbed her eyes as she sat up on the edge of the bed. I knelt down in front of her.

“I heard your car.”

All I heard was the rain pounding on the roof. “You did?”

She nodded.

“What's wrong? Can't sleep?”

She shook her head. Poor thing was so exhausted she could barely hold her head up, and I knew that she'd been waiting up for me.

“Are you okay, Connie?”

“I wore my mask all day today, Mommy.”

“Oh baby.” I brushed the hair out of her face. “I'm sorry I yelled at you yesterday.”

Connie yawned. “I miss you, Mommy.”

“I miss you too, baby. I miss you very much.”

“Are you going to be here for my birthday?”

“You bet I am. We're going to have a party for you and everything.”

“Is June going to come?”

June was her friend, one of the only ones left. “You betcha,” I said. “Her mommy said it was okay, so she's coming.”

“Who else?”

“Well, it's going to be kind of small. Mr. and Mrs. Avery from next door will be there, and June and her mommy, and me and Daddy, and your Uncle Chunk, too.”

“Uncle Chunk's funny,” she said.

“Yeah, he's a character. Is there anything you want for your birthday?”

The words were out of me before I could stop them. I was talking like everything was normal, like if she wanted something I could actually go out and buy it.

She looked at me with sudden seriousness and nodded.

“What is it, baby?”

“I want a chocolate cake, Mommy. Can you make me one? Please.”

I didn't answer for a long moment because I was too stunned, thinking about what Carmenita Jaramillo had told me, that smiling mummy in her rocking chair. Finally, weakly, distantly, I mumbled, “Chocolate cake?”

She climbed up to her knees, hands churched together in front of her like she was praying, only her face was one huge hopeful smile.

I couldn't say no. I wasn't that strong.

She threw her arm around me and squeezed me, right on the bruise on my ribs. I winced in pain, but I didn't try to peel her off. I wouldn't have done that for the world because it felt so good. My baby felt so good in my arms.

Billy was awake. He leaned against the wall in the dark hallway, with his arms over his chest.

“Hey,” I whispered.

He kissed me. “Welcome home.”

“Good to be home.”

We walked out to the living room. I went to the kitchen for a glass of water and, when I came back, we went out to the back porch and sat in a pair of green lawn chairs—a wedding gift from Billy's mom and his step dad. We watched the storm thrash the tops of the trees down by the creek.

“We needed this rain,” he said. There was a long pause before he said, “Connie and I went down by the creek today.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. It's down a couple of feet. Grass is looking dry, too.”

“Mmm.”

I closed my eyes and listened to the wind, to the pounding rush of the rain. I smelled the air around me. It had come alive with the storm. When I opened them, lightning flashed. In the sudden burst of light I saw the whole of our lower property sloping down from the house.

“It's beautiful, Billy.”

“Yeah.”

We hadn't had a quiet moment like that in a long while. A moment where we both knew how lucky we were, all things considered.

He brushed his hand against mine. I took it, and we held hands.

“Are you gonna do your yoga tonight?”

“No. Too tired. I think I bruised my side pretty bad today.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.”

He asked me how, and I told him. “Let me see,” he asked.

I leaned forward and pulled up the left side of my t-shirt, past my bra. “Can you see it?”

He frowned. Reached out and touched it with a finger. “It looks bad.”

“Feels bad, too.” I tried to make it a joke, but he didn't laugh. He got up and went to the back door. “Where are you going?” I asked.

“Back in a sec.”

When he returned, he had some ice cubes wrapped in a towel.

“We had ice cubes? Where did you get ice cubes?”

“This may sting a little,” he said, and put the ice pack up to my ribs. I flinched. The fingertips of his freehand glided slowly up and down my arm, making me shiver. “I heard you talking to Connie.”

I flinched again as he touched another tender spot.

“Sorry.” Then, a moment later, he said, “You promised her a chocolate cake.” There was no judgment in his voice. “That's gonna be kind of hard to put together, don't you think?”

“Maybe.” I pulled away from the ice and pulled my shirt down.

He looked at me.

“Sorry. That's starting to sting.”

“You need to keep ice on it.”

“I will. Later.”

He put the ice pack down on the floor between us. “So how are you gonna get the stuff for a chocolate cake?”

“I don't have much of a choice, do I?”

“Yeah, but Lily...”

“I know. But it'll be all right.”

Billy turned his chair so that he was facing me. Then he put his hands on my shoulders and began to massage them. Slowly. Gently. I closed my eyes, and my head began to rock with the rhythm of his hands. God, those hands.

“You know it's probably gonna be expensive.”

“I know.” Actually, I had no idea how much it would cost. The black market was unpredictable, but I didn't care about that. I was so tired.

“Is that helping?” he asked, his hands spreading warmth against my skin.

Lightning lit up the property again.

“Yes,” I whispered. “Oh, yes.”

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Chapter 15

The next morning, Chunk and I went over the inventory of property found in the van. Most of it was routine stuff, like you'd see in a doctor's office or college chem lab. Other items were unique to field work, but still routine considering the circumstances, like one hundred and thirty seven

glass vials, two laptop computers, a centrifuge machine, a gas chromatograph, extra fillers for a gas mask, extra biohazard gear, an unopened box of surgical face masks, goggles, and on and on for two typed pages.

The only item that really interested me was Emma Bradley's handwritten journal, which was found under the passenger seat.

“Anything on that list gonna help us?” Chunk asked. He meant other than the journal.

“Probably not. I want to show it to Myers though. See what he says. Plus I'd like to see what he knows about Bradley being out in the GZ before we talk to hippo woman again.”

“Why wouldn't he know she was working out there?”

“No, that's not what I mean. I mean he's probably gonna tell us more than hippo woman will.”

“Okay.” He went and checked out a car for us. I was betting that Wessler, the retired sergeant who ran the fleet division at the Scar, was cussing us for losing two of his cars in as many days, but I knew he wouldn't give Chunk a hard time about it. He was scared to death of Chunk.

When he came back Chunk jangled the keys in front of me. “Wessler's not happy,” he said, and laughed.

“You didn't scare him again, did you?”

“No, of course not.” He winked, and within ten minutes, we were on the way to see Myers again.

Chunk drove. I sat in the passenger seat and read Bradley's journal for about the twentieth time. Most of it was just a desert of math and chemical equations. But there were other parts, small notes to herself and longer sections where she recorded her observations, that gave me a sense of what a contradiction Emma Bradley must have been. Turning through page after page of numbers and tables showing the numbers of dead from the various districts all across the city, I was struck not by the gut-wrenching loss of life her journal described, but by the girly-girl handwriting in which that carnage had been recorded. She wrote in a big, loopy script, the same kind I expect to find on notes about boys in Connie's pockets when she gets to the seventh grade. I half expected to see little hearts instead of dots over her lower case letters. Maybe an “I love Kenneth Wade” in the margin.

I also found a small bundle of ten photographs, secured with a green rubber band and sandwiched between the pages. There were a few of her with other members of the WHO staff. There was one of the inside of her trailer, which was a mess in the photograph, but hadn't been when we searched it after we found out who she was. I found a picture of her sitting in Kenneth Wade's lap. She had her hands together, between her thighs, a big, drunken smile on her face. Wade had his arms around her waist.

The last picture showed her in her bra—a cute pink, lacy pushup—and a long black gypsy skirt. She was drunk in that one too, and it kind of looked like she was belly-dancing. I wondered who took the picture.

“Work hard, play hard,” Chunk said.

“I guess.”

I put the pictures up and flipped through the journal again.

“What do you think about a timeline?” he asked.

“We might be able to use some of this.” We'd been trying to map out the time up to her death from what Bradley described in her journal, and there was enough English between the numbers to get a fairly good breakdown of her last week. “Wish there was more on the last day, though.”

The standard procedure when investigating a homicide is to start with the twenty-four hour rule. You want as much information as possible about the victim's movements during the twenty-four hours prior to her death. This is your best chance to identify the killer. When you turn your attention to prosecuting the killer, you focus on the twenty-four hours after the victim's death. This shows you state of mind.

Ordinarily, we would have had to piece together that timeline through any number of interviews with family and friends. Rarely—actually, never—does a victim leave behind as detailed a picture of their last hours alive as Emma Bradley left for us in her journal. Girly-girl as she may have been, party girl as she certainly was, she was also a scientist, and her journal entries carefully laid out dates and times and locations, as well as what was done and by whom. The only trouble was her shorthand. She seemed to have had her own language when she wrote in her journal, and it made it difficult to understand what she was talking about some times.

The last day, the most important day, was loaded with shorthand. She recorded checking out the van at five-twenty, which we knew already, and entering the GZ at six o'clock. Next to the time of arrival at the GZ she wrote, “400 Iowa.” That was obviously the four hundred block of Iowa Street, which crosses at Piedmont Street, where I found the van. In the same entry she wrote, “Coll spec cages 440 Iowa. 6 li specs.” Below that, “All pos. Add'l test for typing.”

The next time entry was eight forty-five, and what I read there gave me chills. Bradley wrote, “Unbelievable. Must get them all.” Below that, in huge letters that took up the whole bottom third of the page, she wrote, “WE ARE ALL GONERS!”

From that Chunk and I came up with what we thought was a reasonable enough translation. Bradley and Wade arrived in the GZ at about dawn and stopped at the four hundred block of Iowa. They collected six live specimens, most likely chickens, from cages at 440 Iowa, and tested them. Evidently, the results of those tests scared Bradley to death, and I couldn't help but think of Dr. Cole's theory that there may be two other strains of the flu infecting the chickens in the GZ that are even more dangerous than H2N2.

I said, "If she did confirm Cole's theory, you think she radioed back to the WHO office about it?"

"Maybe," Chunk said.

"Something else to ask Myers about, don't you think?"

"And Hippo woman."

"Yeah. And Hippo woman."

We drove on in silence after that. I stared out the window, at the ragged gray sky, at the debris blown all over the street from the previous night's storm. We passed yet another long line of desperate looking people waiting their turn to cash in their coupons for meager rations, which seemed to be getting fewer, and of lower quality, everyday. The people we passed all looked so sad, so angry, like they'd been beat with a stick and not even told why.

A kid, no more than 12 or 13, threw a rock at our car and missed. His mother was standing next to him. She watched the rock fly, then looked back to her feet without bothering to scold the boy.

The city seemed to be pulling itself apart. It had only been a few months since the military sealed us up behind the containment walls, but already our institutions had started to collapse. There was a crazy something in the air, like an electrical charge, like everything was primed to explode in our faces, and it occurred to me then just how many things are held up by human will alone. Buildings, streets, the economy, the government, even our families, stay together simply because we want them to. Without that will, that desire to maintain, things fall apart.

I closed Bradley's journal with a sigh.

"You okay?"

"Mmm hmm."

"You sure?"

"I got a lot on my mind," I said.

"More than Bradley, you mean?"

"Yeah. More than that."

"Like what?"

"Connie mostly."

"How's she doing?"

“She's fine,” I said. “It's me, actually. I made her a promise last night and I'm wondering how I'm going to keep it.”

“What kind of promise?”

“The chocolate cake kind.”

He gave me a sideways glance that said, You know what that's gonna take, don't you?

But he didn't have to ask the question out loud. “I know what it means.”

He turned left and drifted down Hamilton. Massive oak trees hung over the street, making it look like a green tunnel. Patches of white sunlight danced over the hood.

“What do you need?” he asked. Just like that. No preamble, no judgment.

“Billy and I have scraped together two hundred dollars. We've also got about sixty ration coupons. Do you think that'll be enough?”

“Don't worry about it,” he said. “You guys keep the money.”

“No, Chunk. I don't want that.”

“It's all right. Besides, I owe you and Billy a debt I can't ever pay back.”

I turned and looked him. It was the first time in weeks we'd talked about his grandmother. “You don't owe us a thing for that, Chunk. You know that.”

“I know you believe that, Lily. That's why it matters to me.” He said, “Now what do you need?”

I pressed my lips together, hard.

“You're a good man, Chunk. A real good man.”

He smiled. “And I feel good about myself naked, too.”

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Chapter 16

A large, angry crowd had clustered around the front gate of the Arsenal Station Morgue. Two young patrolmen, neither of them more than 25, watched the crowd apprehensively from inside the gate.

The crowd surrounded our car and banged on the windows and the hood with their fists. The car rocked. A woman with spit clinging to her lips pressed her face against the passenger side window and screamed something at me that I couldn't understand, though the hate-filled expression in her eyes was plain enough.

One of the patrolmen swung the gate open, while the other stood to one side, clutching an AR-15 in his hands and looking green around the gills. As we drove by him, he glanced at me, and I could see the fear in his eyes.

I didn't envy him for his job.

We found Myers on the main floor of the morgue, cutting a tissue specimen from the lungs of a man about my age. We waited off to one side while he worked. When he was done, we followed him to a hallway where we could talk in private.

He'd already heard the news about Ken Wade, and I could tell he was glad Wade was dead, but also a little upset that he was wrong about him.

"You got that inventory I faxed over to you?" I asked him.

"Yes," he said, very stiffly, very British. "I received it this morning."

"Have you gone over it?"

"Yes."

"Did you notice anything unusual about it? Anything that didn't look right?"

"Unusual? You mean the very fact that we are standing here at all isn't unusual enough for you?"

"Doctor," I said. "Please."

He smirked at me from behind his goggles. "Not as such, no. One or two of the items did seem to me a bit curious, but nothing I would call suspicious."

"Like what?"

"I don't have the list in front of me at the moment," he said. The way he said it made it sound like I was a dumbass for asking.

I handed him an extra copy I'd brought along. He took it, and gave me another look. This one hard to read, but still unpleasant.

He had to hold the list up at eye level to read it in his space suit.

“Here you list one hundred and thirty-seven glass vials, assuming you were able to count them correctly. That is a smaller number than I would expect. Our field vans normally carry about two hundred vials.”

“What would she have stored in those vials, doc?”

“They would have been used and reused several times. Of course, some of the tubes break, and some develop a film on the inside that the sterilizers can't clean. In that case, the vial would be destroyed. That's why I said it was curious. Not unusual.”

“Anything else?”

That look again. He held the paper up and ran his finger down the list.

“You don't have any specimen cages listed here. There should have been at least six on board.”

Chunk and I traded a glance, both of us thinking about Bradley's journal. They should have been in the vehicle.

“What do these cages look like, doc?” Chunk asked.

“They are simple, white plastic boxes with a perforated clear plastic gate on the front that slides up and down as needed.”

There was nothing like that in the inventory.

“What's the standard procedure for storing the cages after they've been used,” I asked.

“They are stacked in a vertical steam sterilizer near the back door of the van.”

Then they definitely weren't in the van. Somebody had to have removed them.

I said, “Dr. Myers, why don't you tell me a little more about what Dr. Bradley was doing out in the GZ.”

The way he looked at me made me think of this homosexual accountant I'd once questioned, about his relationship with the man he'd just shot in the face nine times. I kept asking the man the same question over and over, but in subtly different ways, and he'd finally blurted out, “We were lovers, all right! God damn it, is that what you want to hear?” I told him “No, I already know you're a queer. I want to know why in the world that guy would sleep around behind your back. I mean, look at you, you have a good job, you dress nice, you even smell nice. Why would somebody blow it with a good catch like you?” The man blinked at me, and then out came his confession.

It went the same way with Myers. He said, “Detective, I have already gone over this with you several times. She was doing field work on genetic mutations within the virus.”

“No, no,” I said. “I know that. What I want to know is why she didn't have you with her. I mean, everybody I've talked to says you're sharp as a tack in the laboratory. Why go out there with Wade and not you?”

He blinked at me, same as the queer accountant. Then I heard him sniffle. “I was told to remain here,” he said. “At Arsenal.”

“Told? You mean by Dr. Laurent?”

“Yes.”

“What for?”

“I was told Emma was working on a special project for Dr. Laurent.”

Chunk glanced over at me and I could tell he was smiling, a way-to-go-little-sister look.

“I see,” I said. I talked to him gently, like I could really appreciate how hurt he was, like I understood. “But you are a smart fellow, Dr. Myers. Surely you had some idea what she was working on?”

He nodded, a barely perceptible gesture inside his space suit.

“She was gathering specimens for part of the genetic typing study. The influenza virus is RNA based, and so it reproduces very fast and with a high degree of mutation. The longer the virus is in a given environment, the more opportunity it has to mutate. Her working hypothesis was that the specimens in the GZ would show the most mutation, because the GZ is where the virus was first identified. Origin gene populations generally show greater differentiation than cast off populations.”

“And so what advantage would those specimens be to you guys?”

“It might indicate that this outbreak is nearing the end,” he said. “You see, as the virus mutates, so does its virulence. A virus may start out as merely a nuisance, like H2N2 was last year here in San Antonio, and then suddenly mutate into a highly dangerous form. But the process is just as likely to work in reverse. More likely to work in reverse, in fact. That's what ended the 1918 influenza pandemic, and that's what we're hoping will end this outbreak.”

“So what you're saying is that virus mutation is basically a crap shoot.”

I saw a flash of disdain in his eyes. “Yes. You Americans have such lovely ways of phrasing things, but I suppose that describes the process accurately enough.”

“So, if it's just a crap shoot, isn't it possible that one, or even two, additional strains of the virus could form that are just as deadly, if not more so, than the original strain?”

It took him a second to jump through the mental hoops, but once he did, he saw plainly enough that I'd boxed him in to a discussion of Dr. Cole and his theory.

But his answer surprised me.

“I see you've been talking with John the Baptist.”

“Excuse me?”

“John the Baptist? The madman in the wilderness talking about what's to come? That's our nickname for Dr. Cole around here.”

Chunk and I trade another glance. “You know his theory then?”

“Of course I know it. He tells everybody he meets his theory.”

“And you what? You think he's nuts?”

“I didn't say that. Some of his ideas are rather far out there. Did you know he actually wants there to be a law making it a felony not to get a flu shot each year?”

“No, I didn't.”

“He does. He told me about his theory of multiple influenza strains two weeks ago.”

“And what do you think of that theory, doc?”

“I thought it was intriguing enough that I went to Dr. Laurent with it.”

“And what did—” I stopped myself before the words ‘Hippo woman’ came out. “What did Dr. Laurent say?”

His eyes smiled. “She thinks, to borrow one of your colorful American phrases, that he is full of shit.”

I nodded, but didn't answer him. Let him think he wasn't finished explaining it to me.

He looked away and sighed. Then he said, “Dr. Laurent believes that Dr. Cole's theory is unnecessarily inflammatory. There are two objectives, here. The first is to develop a vaccine to mitigate the damage of H2N2. The other is to reduce the level of fear among the populace. Dr. Cole's theory, if not properly refuted with the highest caliber of research and testing, could start a chain reaction of fear that will be unstoppable.”

I thought back to Dr. Bradley's journal, and the final entry: WE ARE ALL GONERS!

“But what if he's right, Dr. Myers?”

Myers scoffed at that. "He isn't."

"But you will be looking through Dr. Bradley's research, won't you?"

"Of course," he said. "Sometime later this morning either myself or another member of the staff will transfer the information from the van's computers to the computers in our lab. I assure you, it will be analyzed in exhaustive detail."

"Will there be some kind of preliminary analysis done of that material?"

"Of course. Right after we download it."

"Okay," I said. "Doctor, I wonder if you would do me a favor and call me when that's done? I'd like to know what those results are."

"Fine," he said. Then he cocked his head inside his space suit, like a strange thought had just occurred to him. "Are those results important to your investigation?"

"Maybe," I said, though a strong personal interest would have been a better description of my motives.

He said, "I'll call you this afternoon."

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Chapter 17

We went through decontamination and changed into street clothes. Chunk was in a blue t-shirt and jeans. The t-shirt, skin tight, looked like it was about to split open across his biceps and at the huge wads of muscle packed onto his shoulders. I was in jeans, a ratty old red blouse, and white tennis shoes. By the end of that summer, Homicide detectives had stopped dressing for success.

We waited around for Dr. Laurent. Myers told us she was in a meeting with her counterpart at the Lockhill Station Morgue and wouldn't be back till at least eleven-thirty.

That was still an hour away.

"Okay," Chunk said while we waited, "what about Cole?"

"Cole, eh?" I thought about him for a second. He had a lot of easy fits in our equation. "Okay," I said, trying to get myself started, "Cole is upset because the WHO people won't take him seriously."

“Right.”

“And then he comes across Bradley in the GZ, working on the same thing he's working on.”

“But that by itself wouldn't make him mad enough to kill her,” Chunk pointed out. “Wouldn't he feel vindicated they were looking into his theory?”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“And wouldn't Bradley have mentioned him in her journal if she saw him?”

“Yeah.”

Chunk drummed his fingers on the steering wheel, thinking. “Okay, Cole comes across Bradley the morning she's killed, which we know is some time around eight forty-five. From that bit she wrote, we know she felt like she was on to something bad. Maybe she tells Cole about it, and he gets upset because he thinks she's going to steal his big discovery.”

I paused before I answered, adding it up in my head. “Okay.”

“And then he kills her.”

“No,” I said. “That doesn't work. She was shot with Wade's gun, remember? Cole carries that twenty-two.”

“So he kills Wade first, then Bradley.”

“That's the trouble, though. Wade was beat to death. How's a seventy year old man going to beat a thirty year old cop to death? A cop who nearly tore you up. And on top of that, why would Bradley talk to Cole about what she'd found in the first place? From everything Myers told us, it doesn't sound like anybody at WHO thinks very highly of him.”

Chunk's mouth worked under his mask. He looked like he was chewing on a big wad of gum, though I knew he was thinking about that fight with Wade all those years ago. Chunk doesn't let stuff like that go easily.

“I don't know,” Chunk said. “But let's say he does somehow. The rest of it fits, doesn't it?”

Most of it does fit. Though it doesn't make sense.

I said, “Let me see. There's a fight between Cole and Bradley. Wade jumps in. Cole kills Wade. Then Cole takes Wade's gun and shoots Bradley.”

“Right.”

“And then Cole does what?”

“He hides the van, strips Bradley naked, and dumps her onto Isaac Hernandez’ truck at the morgue while he’s there to pick up more specimen samples from Myers.”

I mulled that over, not liking it.

“Why not?” Chunk asked.

“Why does he only strip Bradley? Why take only her back to the morgue? If he wanted to dispose of the bodies, why risk bringing even one of them onto the loading docks at Arsenal where any number of people could have seen him? An old man carrying a naked pretty girl is going to cause some eyebrows to go up, even in this place.”

Chunk frowned under his mask. “I don’t know.”

“And how does he get her onto Isaac Hernandez’ truck without Hernandez knowing it?”

“Well, Hernandez is sleeping, right? So he doesn’t notice.”

“Maybe.”

Chunk checked his watch. Still forty minutes till Laurent’s due back.

“What about this one?” I asked. “Wade and Bradley are jumped by those looters in the GZ.”

“Maybe,” he said. I could tell he liked that one. A light switch turned on behind his eyes.

“A small group of them surprise Wade, and he shoots them,” I said. “Or at least two of them.”

“The two you found next to the garage?”

“Right.”

“And then there are more of them? Enough to beat up Wade and take his gun?”

“Right,” I said.

“Then they kill Bradley?”

“That would explain why she’s naked.”

He frowned, doesn’t get it. He looked at me. What are you talking about?

I said, “When they were chasing me they knew I was a woman. They said things. What they wanted to do when they caught me.”

“Oh,” he said. And then, as it hit him, “Oh. Lily, I’m sorry.”

“It didn't happen, Chunk. Thanks to you.”

“Yeah, but...”

“Of course the ME told us there was no sign of forced sexual activity, post-mortem or otherwise. And remember, she was shot while she was wearing her space suit. I think that kind of clouds up the looter theory.”

“True,” he said.

“And that still doesn't explain how Bradley's body ended up at the morgue. Those looters wouldn't have brought her here.”

“True.” Chunk leaned back in the seat and crossed his arms. I could see the muscles shifting beneath his shirt. “So where does that leave us?” he asked.

“I don't know,” I admitted. “Stuck, I guess.”

A few minutes later, Chunk's cell phone rang. He flipped it open, looked at the caller ID, and frowned.

“Treanor,” he said to me, and accepted the call.

Chunk didn't get to do a lot of talking. Most of what he said was “Yes, sir. Twenty minutes, maybe. Ten? Okay, well we're ... Yes, sir. Ten minutes. Yes, sir.”

He hung up and dropped the car in gear.

“What's up?” I asked as he wheeled us toward the gates, mashing down on the gas hard enough to throw me back in the seat.

“The shit's hit the fan,” he said.

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Chapter 18

News of the shortage spread fast.

By the time Chunk and I made it to the Bandera Road Food Distribution Center, a large, anxious crowd had already gathered in the parking lot outside the center, and more were pouring in every minute. I saw a thousand desperate faces, maybe more, and I imagined rumors and misinformation spreading through the crowd like a lit torch dragged over dry grass.

Treanor was there. He ordered us into riot gear.

“What happened?” I asked him. “Is it true the drop didn't come?”

“It came,” he growled. “It's just short. That's all. There's not enough for these people.”

I said, “What are we supposed to tell them? Is there another drop coming?”

“Get in your riot gear, Harris. They ask you anything, you tell them to get back to their homes. They don't like it, give them the stick if you have to.”

“Nice,” I said, the sarcasm in my voice obvious.

“You have a problem with that, Harris?”

“No, sir.”

He stared at me. “You need to watch your tone with me, Harris. You're pretty damn close to being insubordinate.”

“I'm not being insubordinate, Lieutenant. I just don't think you have anything to say worth listening to.”

His eyes went wide inside his black riot helmet, then narrowed to little slits.

“Get into your riot gear right now.” His voice was amazingly subdued considering he probably would have liked nothing better than to rip the windpipe out of my throat with his bare hands. “Do it now and report to me in five minutes.”

With that he stormed off, barking orders at anybody unlucky enough to cross his path.

There goes a major asshole.

“Why you gotta do that?” Chunk said.

“The man's an asshole.”

“I know that. Why do you have to throw it back in his face like that?”

“I'm sorry,” I said, though only for making things hard on Chunk and not for what I said to Treanor.

“Yeah, well, if he gives us a crappy post because you can't keep your smart assed remarks to—”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Riot gear.

We changed into black BDUs with reinforced knees and elbows, black jackboots, black padded gloves, and a black riot helmet made to fit over a gas mask, plus a clear plastic shield that the manufacturer guaranteed was bulletproof and a thirty-six inch black riot baton made of hickory wood.

With practice, it takes about three minutes to get dressed.

While I was putting myself together, I heard Sergeant Jennifer Langley talking to a patrol officer I didn't recognize. Langley's duty assignment was the food distribution network, so I figured she knew what she was talking about.

“We only got six boxes on the last drop,” Langley said, referring to the intermodal containers that the city's food stocks came in.

The containers are basically railroad boxcars flown in by helicopters that never land inside the walls, and once they're unloaded, they're placed on the backs of trucks or on trains and hauled off to someplace.

Six boxes was a pretty light shipment. My own food distribution center, which served a much smaller area than the Bandera Road Center, got thirty-five boxes each week. The usual drop for a station Bandera's size should have been something like sixty boxes per week.

I was lacing up my boots when the other officer asked, “What are they going to do? Are they bringing in more?”

“I don't know,” Langley said. “We've been emailing them all morning and haven't gotten a response yet.”

“Jesus,” the officer said. I was thinking the same thing.

Langley said, “We can't even bring in stuff from other centers. Everybody got shorted.”

That sent a chill through me. I went outside and made my way to the front of the center. There I saw the mass confusion of an angry crowd of at least fifteen hundred people. Streams of people were coming into the lot from the street. Chants were starting up here and there. They were feeding off each other's anger, bearing down on our position at the gates to the Food Distribution Center. The noise was deafening.

The Bandera Road Center was in the shell of an abandoned HEB, San Antonio's dominant grocery store chain before the quarantine. Most of the HEBs were gutted by looters in the first few weeks of the quarantine, and this one, with its boarded up windows and ring of concrete barriers around the front doors, looked nothing like the proud red and white store it had once been.

The parking lot was huge, though it didn't seem so right then with all those people crowding it. And more were coming in from every side even as I stood there. I shook my head in disbelief.

Earlier, when Chunk and I drove into the lot, most of those people were still in line, though that system quickly broke down, the crowd pressing inward on the half circle of concrete barriers that separated us from them.

“Chunk,” I said.

“Stay close,” he said.

A dozen SWAT officers stepped up to the concrete barriers, the rest of us in a line behind them, shoulder to shoulder with our batons in both hands. The SWAT guys were armed with a tommy gun-looking contraption called a pepper ball gun. The pepper balls looked like gumballs, only each one was loaded with oleocapsicum resin—pepper spray. Mean stuff. Police departments all over the world used it to disperse large crowds like this one. But the only time I had ever seen it used first hand was on gang fights. I couldn't believe they were about to use it on regular civilians.

A man in khaki slacks and a gray polo shirt carried a bull horn up to a platform in front of the crowd.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, though even with the bullhorn's amplification it was hard to hear him over the noise of the crowd. “Ladies and gentlemen, please,” he said. “My name is Bob Prentice with the Metropolitan Health District.”

Maybe he thought telling them he was with the MHD would buy him some credibility with the crowd, but he was wrong. Rather than quiet down, the people in the front started shouting questions up at him, and the urgency of their demands seemed to completely derail him.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please,” he said. “More food is on the way.”

A sea of voices shouted him down. “When? How much?”

“You all need to return to your homes,” he said. “Another drop will come later this evening. Please return to your homes and wait there.”

That didn't even come close to mollifying the crowd, and as I remembered what I'd overheard Jennifer Langley saying in the women's locker room, I couldn't say I blamed them for being so upset. They were being lied to, and they knew it.

A panic erupted somewhere in the crowd and spread. It was like somebody had dropped a stone into a pool of water and I was watching the ripples spread from that. The energy of that panic shot outwards and I saw people pushing each other, some running for the edges of the crowd and the exits, others violent out of desperation. They all pushed toward the concrete barriers.

I drew a breath in between my teeth.

“Easy,” Chunk said.

The crowd broke on the barriers like a wave.

Prentice yelled into his bullhorn for calm, but no one listened.

Only Treanor seemed to keep his composure. He marched down the line, barking orders at the SWAT officers, all of them raising their pepper ball guns to their hips.

“Fire.”

The SWAT guys started firing, the thump thump thump of the pepper ball guns reminding me of those deposit capsules being sucked through the overhead tubes at the drive-thru of a bank.

Orange splotches the size of dinner plates appeared on the chests and shoulders and backs of the people closest to the barriers, and then people started falling. Smoke filled the air, and even with the protection of my gas mask I could feel a slight burn in my sinuses from the pepper spray.

Earlier, there had been anger and desperation, but now there was fear and panic and pain. People ran every which way trying to escape the burning in their lungs, and I'm sure a few of them were trampled in the exodus.

Treanor ordered the SWAT officers over the wall, and they immediately jumped the barrier, directing their fire into wide arcs over the crowd.

At first it didn't look to me like they were aiming their shots, but then I realized what they were doing. They were directing their fire at areas away from the exits, and when the people ran from the smoking corners of the lot where the shots landed, they found themselves at the exits, where they could flee to the streets and the neighborhoods beyond.

Treanor stood on top of the wall and yelled for the rest of us to come over.

We did. We formed a skirmish line, and with our shields and our sticks we forced the few remaining stragglers to run for the gates.

My eyes watered, as much from the pepper spray smoke in the air as from pure, blinding fear. My head was soaked with sweat. It ran down my face and the back of my neck. My stomach had turned into knots.

Treanor was still yelling—hadn't stopped yelling since all this began—and I wondered if the man wasn't secretly enjoying this. He was like some little brass general, sending the troops in to beat some ass.

“This is us,” Chunk said as Treanor's shouts drew closer to us.

Treanor read off a list of ten names that included mine and Chunk's. "Those names I just called will secure the west entrance to the lot," he said, the west entrance being the main one off Bandera Road. "Establish your perimeter and lock it down tight."

We advanced on the west entrance and set up a defensive line across the driveway. I looked down the row, but I couldn't tell who anybody was behind their riot gear. I did get the sense that most of them were as scared as I was, which didn't make me feel any better about the situation.

A long white wall stretched along the roadway to my right, and I could see Chunk eyeing it suspiciously, like it might prove to be a problem later on. Across the street was an abandoned building that had once been a pawn shop, now without any front windows, its cinder block walls pocked with old bullet holes. Beyond that was a long row of store fronts and a strip mall. All the shops were closed now, and damaged by looters.

Behind the store fronts was a tall stand of oaks, and through the occasional gap in the foliage I could see the roof of a house or two.

People walked through the scene, though they gave us a wide berth, for which I was grateful. I could still feel the tension in the air. Those people, all of them, were on the edge of something, their patience stretched too far.

Not for the first time I wondered what the outside world must think of us. Did we still seem like Americans to them, fighting in the streets, eating the nation's charity, our buildings crumbling, our streets still littered with corpses in places? It didn't look like America to me.

We stood there in the glare of the midday sun, the temperature mounting beyond the ninety degree mark and everyone's nerves becoming more and more frayed as the day marched on. People yelled at us, raised their fists and shook them in defiance. A few threw stones.

I was soaked through with sweat, every part of me sticky, my underarms and my crotch feeling like a swamp, and I was continually shutting my eyes, hard, to clear them of runoff sweat.

I was wondering how long I'd have to stand there when an explosion nearly knocked me off my feet.

The building across the street had been hit with some kind of homemade bomb. It was a sloppy job, but powerful. Dust and bits of rock crowded the air, and soon flames and smoke roiled upward.

The crowd, which had never really stabilized after we ejected them from the parking lot, panicked. Everyone was shouting at once, running without any idea in their heads except to move.

I watched a terrified mass of people running right at our line like they were refugees fleeing some African war on TV. The ground beneath my feet shook, and the smoke in the air turned my

world to a blur. Some of the people running at us looked back over their shoulders, others were blind with terror, but all of them came down on us at once.

When the first few members of the crowd reached us we hit them with our shields and pushed them back. A rock glanced off my shield, and then a fist. Through the clear plastic I saw the face of a man, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, teeth barred in an expression too primal for me to name.

I punched his face with the shield. He grabbed the top of it and pulled it down. I stroked him in the leg with my baton, but he was too far gone for the pain to register. A weird stuttering growl came out of him, and then he was clutching at my knees, trying to pull me down, his hands grasping at my gas mask.

I screamed for Chunk, still trying to smack the guy in the legs with my riot baton.

Chunk was on him in a second. He grabbed the guy with one hand and threw him back into the crowd. Then, with the same hand, he grabbed me and shoved me behind his massive bulk.

The crowd broke apart under a hail of rocks thrown by young men across the street. The rocks hit our shields with enough force to shake my whole body.

Over the screams of the people caught in the crossfire, and through the clouds of smoke drifting across the street, I heard the echoing crackle of gunfire.

A bullet struck the white wall to our right. Our line at that end fell back automatically, shields up to provide as much cover as possible. Somebody shouted for all of us to fall back, and the line moved quickly after that, breaking apart and reforming in the parking lot behind the relative protection of the white stone wall at the edge of the pavement.

Everybody moved but me. Through the crowd I saw a child, a girl, Connie's age by the looks of her, five or six maybe, standing next to a crumpled body in the grass. The girl was screaming for help.

I ran to her. Chunk, who only just then realized I wasn't part of the reformed skirmish line, yelled at my back. I kept running. When I reached her I put my shield up to ward off the barrage of rocks raining down on top of us. The girl said something in Spanish, and I was pretty sure she was telling me her mama was hurt. Her face was smudged black with dirt and grime, warped by fear.

I looked down at the woman in the grass. Her forehead had been busted open by a rock or a fist, and she was groaning painfully. I tried to lift her, but I couldn't get a grip under her shoulders and still keep the shield up to protect us.

“What the hell are you doing?” Chunk said. He was standing beside me, his chest heaving.

“Help me,” I said.

More rifle fire, this time kicking up dirt and bits of grass next to us.

Chunk put his shield toward the gunfire while I got on the radio and called for cover. I heard a bullet whistle over my head, and I pulled the little girl against my chest.

Another shot rang out and a little patch of ground next to Chunk's feet exploded. Chunk dropped his baton and picked up my shield, holding both of them side by side in front of us.

“The shooter's on the roof,” he said, pointing at the line of shops across the street with the chin of his gas mask.

“I can't move her,” I said.

The little girl squirmed in my arms, trying to touch her mother.

The shooter's aim was better on the next shot. It struck one of the shields Chunk was holding and shattered it. The blow knocked him backwards, and he almost landed on top of me. At the same time I heard the screeching wail of a police car's tires sliding on the pavement as a SWAT unit pulled up on us. The driver slid the car to a stop between us and the shooter.

Two SWAT officers belly crawled out the driver's door and knelt down beside us, the intention to hustle us into the car.

Chunk said, “Shooter's on the roof, over there,” just as a bullet zinged off the hood of the police car.

One of the SWAT guys turned to the other one and said, “Light that mother fucker up!”

He ran in a crouch to the police car and pulled a fully automatic AR-15 from between the front seats. He set up over the trunk of the car, rifle pointed at the roofline. I watched him work his gas mask into position against the stock of the gun, and then he fired a quick burst of seven or eight shots into the shooter's position. I watched the roofline, and saw dust settling onto the sidewalk from the roof. I couldn't see the shooter.

And then time dilated on me as hands pulled the girl from my arms and lead us to the police car. All of us were huddled inside, the injured woman still groaning, the little girl crying. Chunk had pressed a towel onto the woman's bleeding forehead. He was saying something to me, but I couldn't hear the words.

Movement—I felt the car racing across the parking lot, back to the command post. I felt everything, saw every detail, but it was like it was happening to somebody else.

Treanor, that puny brass general, had his hands on his hips, his feet spread in a go-ahead-and-try-to-fuck-with-me stance.

Somebody opened the door and pulled me out. I heard Treanor say, "Harris, what the fuck is wrong with your head?"

But he quieted when he saw the little girl and the injured woman.

"Get them to the infirmary," he said to somebody behind me. And then to Chunk he said, "Dempsey, you and your partner get back on the line."

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Chapter 19

A SWAT officer drove us back to the west entrance where the rest of the skirmish line was waiting. In the short time we were gone, most of the crowd that had so frantically swarmed our position had dispersed. I could see them melting back into the neighborhoods on either side of the store fronts across the street.

For the next hour or so, only a few stragglers came near our position. None of them looked at us, and they left the area as soon as they could, heads bent, eyes fixed on their shoes.

Soon, there weren't even any stragglers. An eerie calm settled over the street, and it was like looking at a ghost town. It had become oppressively hot, and clouds of dust drifted sluggishly down the street. Signs dangling over the sidewalk to my left creaked and moaned in the hot breeze. Crumpled sheets of newspaper took the place of tumbleweeds.

We stood there in the eye of that terrible calm for most of the afternoon. Sometime around dusk, Treanor started touring the various entrances and quietly ordered us to return to our normal assignments.

"No," I overheard him say to a nearby sergeant. "We don't know if they're gonna do another drop or not. Nobody's picking up the damn phone."

I imagined the same thing I'd just experienced going on at the Springvale Station where Billy went to get our family's food. I hurried back to the command post after we were dismissed and asked Jennifer Langley if there had been a riot there.

Thankfully, there hadn't.

Chunk hadn't been so lucky. He lived on the east side of town and the MLK Station where he went to get his rations had apparently been completely overrun.

"Not enough SWAT to go around is what they told me," he said. "Looters broke into the Station, took what they could carry, and tried to burn the place down."

“Why burn it? I mean, you always see that, don't you? There's a riot, and people start trying to burn the place down.”

“That's true.”

“It just seems like such a waste, you know? You'd think the people doing the burning would realize they've got to live there after the riot, so why burn your own neighborhood?”

“Why break into somebody's house and take a crap on the rug?” he countered. “Why strap a bomb to yourself and blow up a bunch of Israeli teenagers in a disco? Why hijack a plane and fly it into the World Trade Centers? Who knows why people do the stupid shit they do.”

We drove back to the Scar and parked our fleet car, undamaged this time, and went into our respective locker rooms to change. I was ready before Chunk, and I waited for him at the exit to the parking lot.

“What's up?” he asked. He didn't say it casually, like a greeting. There was genuine concern in his tone.

“You see right through me, don't you?”

“Nah girl. You just wear your troubles where they're easy to see.”

I nodded.

“So, what is it?”

“What we talked about earlier. I don't really know how this is supposed to work. I've never, you know...”

“Just call a spade a spade, girl. You're having second thoughts about buying off the black market, aren't you?”

“I made a promise, Chunk. I feel bad about doing that.”

“Well, first off, you ain't got to whisper about it. Ain't nobody around here gonna hear us. Or care. Ain't like it's illegal or nothing.”

“Yeah, but—”

“Look, here's the deal. The way they got the system set up, you can't win. Look what happened today, if you don't believe it. You play their way, you'll never be able to provide for your family. And I ain't talking about chocolate cake neither. I'm talking about the basics. Springvale ain't been shorted too bad yet, but it'll happen. I promise you that. If you don't start buying off the black market, there may come a day when you can't feed your family.”

He was right, of course. There wasn't a law against the black market. The Metropolitan Health District had come out and openly condemned the practice, citing unsanitary conditions and the need for fair distribution of resources, but nothing had been formally done to close it down.

The black market was everywhere anyway, which was probably why nobody bothered to try to shut it down. There was no one location where things were bought and sold, no one person who controlled it. It was like a giant underground river of goods and services that you accessed through friends and family. One person might know where to get gasoline. Another might know a guy whose cousin was married to a woman who could get you booze, or soap, or aspirin, toys for your kid, whatever.

“So what do I do?”

“You mean, how do I get the stuff to you?”

“Yeah.”

“Let me take care of it,” he said. “I'll come by your place tomorrow.”

Connie was in her bed, sleeping soundly. I listened to the slow, gentle sounds of her breathing in the dark and tried to remember what things were like before this damn quarantine.

I went back to the living room, turned out the lights, poured myself a glass of water from the sink in the kitchen, then headed back to the bedroom, where Billy was waiting, head propped up on a stack of pillows, no shirt, an old pair of boxers, and a goofy, but very cute, smile on his face.

“I finished the white-breasted nuthatch today,” he said.

I smiled. “You're a good man, Billy. The best.”

His smile wavered a little. “That doesn't make you happy?”

“It does,” I said. “It's just ... today was really hard.”

I had already told him all about it when I came home, and he had told me how he and Connie had spent the entire day waiting in a line that never seemed to move.

“You guys were lucky you didn't run into a riot.”

“Sounds like it.”

He sat there, smiling at me, and it made me do a double take.

“What?”

His smile grew wider.

“What?” I said. A bit of a chuckle had crept into my voice. I couldn't help it, looking at the goofy grin on his face.

“Got a couple of surprises for you.”

“Mmm hmmm,” I said. “What kind of surprise?”

“Three of them actually.”

“Three surprises? Wow, I'm a lucky girl.”

“You are,” he said. “And you don't even know it.”

He got out of bed and walked past me to the bathroom, pulled the shower curtain back, and waved his hand toward it like a magician revealing a trick.

All I saw was the empty bathtub.

“What is it?”

“This,” he said, and pointed at the tub. “Not only did I save a little extra fuel to run the hot water heater, but Connie and I didn't get a chance to use any water today. So...”

“You mean?” I looked from the tub to Billy, but didn't dare say the words.

“That's right,” he said. “There's enough for you to take a long, hot bath.”

I ran to him and hugged him. He hugged me back, which made me wince and break contact.

“Ow,” I said. “Ribs.”

“Sorry.”

“Oh, Billy. How did I get you? What could I have possibly done to deserve you?”

“You deserve the moon,” he said, and bent down over me to kiss me once more. “You're a fantastic woman, Lily Harris.”

I undressed quickly, down to my bra and panties. I grabbed a towel from the closet then made a beeline for the tub, stopping at the entrance to the bathroom to glance at myself in the mirror.

My whole left flank was discolored from the bruise, but I looked past that. All the yoga I had been doing seemed to be paying off. I'd had a little poochy roll right beneath my belly button ever since Connie was born, and I didn't think it would ever go away, but by God if my belly wasn't finally starting to look flat again. I turned a little to the left, then to the right, and smiled.

Damn, I haven't had a tummy like this since Billy and I were dating. Nice.

“Lily.”

I turned back to the bedroom and saw Billy bringing me my city-issued cell phone.

“It's some guy named Myers.”

I frowned at the phone, took it.

“Hello?”

“Detective Harris,” said Myers, his icy British reserve stretched thin to cover something that was evidently pretty serious, “I apologize for calling at such a late hour. I didn't realize you were already at home.”

“It's okay, Doc. Whatcha got?”

“I've just spent the last few hours going over the mobile laboratory you recovered in the GZ this morning.”

“Yes? Something wrong?”

“Yes, Detective, something is most certainly wrong. Several important items are missing.”

“Missing?” I didn't like his tone, like there was an accusation behind it. “Like what?”

“The hard drives to all three of the on-board lap top computers are gone. All of Dr. Bradley's research was on those drives, Detective Harris. Without them, we have no way of knowing the results of her research.”

Billy was watching me. He gave me a ‘what's wrong’ look and I nodded back at him. “I see,” I said. “Did you call the SAPD Evidence Unit? Maybe they confiscated the drives for further testing.”

“They did not. I was told by a rather curt sergeant that the vehicle was returned to us in exactly the same condition as it was when it was delivered to them yesterday morning.”

Billy put his hand out and I took it. He folded his massive palm over the back of my hand and I closed my eyes, letting his warmth move into me.

“Okay. Anything else missing?”

“I should think that was enough, don't you?”

“Doc, spare me the drama. Was anything else missing, yes or no?”

“Only the traps. But I've already made you aware of that.”

“Okay,” I said. “When I get back to the office I'll start looking into that first thing.”

“Detective, I don't have to remind you that this is very serious. The fate of a great many people might rely upon the information contained in those drives.”

“I know what's at stake, doc.”

“Very well, then. I'll ring off.”

“Okay, Dr. Myers. Goodbye.”

I hung up the phone and handed it back to Billy.

“Problems?” he asked.

“That,” I said, sighing heavily, “is one strange little man.”

“He sounded British.”

“He is. He's one of the WHO doctors over at the Arsenal Morgue.”

“Ah,” he said, then, “Oh, I almost forgot. Your other two presents.”

He handed me a small, badly rumpled brown paper bag, which I took with a what-have-you-done-now smile.

“Go on,” he said. “Open it.”

I did, and squealed. I couldn't stop it from coming out. Inside was a replacement blade for my Venus Divine razor and a small container of sensitive skin shaving cream. Not my brand, but...

I took it, threw my arms around him, and kissed him as hard as I could.

“Billy, how?”

“They had them today. I couldn't believe it either. I figured you were tired of using those cheap plastic ones.”

The ones that cut my legs to shreds? You bet, you sexy, beautiful man.

“Thank you, Billy. Thank you.”

“You earned it, Lily. Go have a good bath.”

“Okay,” I said, bouncing and turning on my toes for the bathtub. He gave me a playful pat on the butt and I gave him an impish flick of my eyebrows.

Then I turned the water to as hot as it could get, turned on the 10,000 Maniacs CD that I had played down to the nub my junior year in college, and let Natalie Merchant's voice, the sound of the gurgling water, and the steam filling the air clear my head.

When the tub was full, I slipped out of my bra and panties and inched into the tub. I got settled, closed my eyes, and let the thoughts and thousand little worries that had crowded my last few days melt away.

One of my guilty pleasures is a long, hot soak, followed by shaving my legs. Once I had taken in the hot water, let it warm me all the way through to the bone, I loaded in the Venus Divine razor blade that Billy had stood in line all day to get for me, and proceeded to shave my legs till they were smoother than any baby's butt ever was. It was absolutely heavenly.

Later, I got out of the tub, steam still clinging to my breasts, and wrapped myself in a big blue plushy towel. I walked from the bathroom to the bedroom, where I stood in front of the mirror over our dresser and dried my hair.

Billy came up behind me and stroked my shoulders lightly with the tips of his fingers.

“Good bath?”

“Mmm hmm,” I said, leaning my face toward his hand and caressing his fingers with my cheek. “Very nice.”

Billy wrapped his arm around me and bent to kiss my shoulder. I almost balked. It was always so nice to feel his hands on my skin—God, the miracle of those hands—and yet I didn't feel like I wanted to be close at that moment. The day had been so hard, and though the bath had cleared a lot of the raw edge off it, my subconscious was still throwing horrific images across my mind.

I longed for Billy's touch, and yet at the same time I wanted to retreat inward, to pull the covers over my head and let sleep take me.

Billy's lips grazed my skin, and I started to say no, but couldn't quite bring myself to stop him. I did want him. I wanted him badly.

“Are you okay?”

“Mmm hmm.” I took his hand and guided it up the seam of the towel. He opened it slowly, pulling it back from my body with mouth-watering slowness, and then let it fall to the floor.

I turned, naked in his arms, and let him lead me by the hand to the bed.

I climbed into bed and reclined across the sheets, watching him as he slid out of his boxers and climbed onto the bed next to me. We kissed, slowly and deeply, his tongue pushing at mine, his hands on my breasts, on my thighs, my hips moving up to meet his fingers.

My breath quickened with his touch, and my heart thudded against my ribs. I dug my fingers into his shoulders, wanting to pull him close to me, but wanting also to linger there, at the edge, savoring the leap ahead of us.

He swung his body on top of mine, his hands on the bed on either side of me, the two of us chest to chest.

I winced, and he saw it.

“Something wrong?”

“Ribs,” I said.

He moved his arms apart, but it still wasn't enough. I like to move with him, and I could still feel the awful pressure against my ribs, cutting off my air.

I guided him over to his back and climbed on top of him, cowgirl fashion. His chest and shoulders were beautifully powerful, and I put my hands there, stroking my palms against his skin.

I could feel his breaths coming faster, and when he closed his eyes I knew we were moving together, ready to fall in on one another.

I moved my hips against his and he groaned.

“Like that,” he said.

“Yes,” I answered, the word leaving my lips like steam escaping a valve. “Yes. Like this.”

Later, as we lay on our backs, Billy running his fingertips lightly over my thighs, he said, “I took Connie down to the creek today.”

“Oh yeah?” I said.

He turned on his side and put an arm over my stomach. “Yeah,” he said, “and there's something I want to ask you.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. See, we found something down there.”

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Chapter 20

While Billy worked on his coffins, I sat in a lawn chair nearby, drinking an iced tea and watching Connie play beneath the oaks at the edge of our backyard. Beyond her, our property stretched down to Vespers Creek, which was still running high from the fierce rain storm of two nights ago.

A blue jay, Connie's favorite, was dive-bombing a squirrel not far from Connie. The bird would swoop down on the squirrel and nip it just above the tail, making it jump and spin in midair in a useless attempt to defend itself. Finally, it was forced to scamper off, leaving the blue jay to whatever it was protecting. A pecan, probably.

Connie watched the whole show, laughing every time the squirrel jumped, and she turned a few times to make sure I was watching too. I waved to her and smiled.

Lord, what a kid.

Billy stopped hammering and checked the fit of the boards, making sure they were flush.

“You're not having second thoughts, are you?” he asked.

“About the party?”

“Yeah.”

“It's a bit late if I was, don't you think?”

“It's never too late,” he said. “If you're not sure about it, then it's probably something we need to talk about.”

“I'm okay, Billy. Really, I'm fine.”

He looked me in the eye, then nodded. He went back to work.

I sat there with my eyes closed, letting the sun warm my face and my arms until I heard a car pull up.

“Looks like Chunk's here,” Billy said.

“Yeah.” To Connie, I said, “Honey, Uncle Reggie's here.”

She jumped to her feet and sprinted across the spread of purple horsemint flowers that had grown up in the yard.

Chunk rounded the side of the house just as Connie ran up to me.

“Hi, Uncle Reggie,” she said.

Chunk was carrying a medium-sized white cardboard box, and Connie went for it immediately.

“Did you bring me something for my birthday?” she asked.

“No,” he said, smiling down at her. “This is for your Mom. I’m bringing you something special tomorrow, though.”

Chunk handed me the box, shook hands with Billy. I glanced into the box and saw everything I needed for Connie’s cake.

I nodded a thank you to him. He just smiled.

I took the box into the kitchen, put up the stuff that had to be refrigerated, and then went back out to the yard with glasses for everyone and the pitcher of iced tea.

Billy said, “You want a slice of lime with that?”

“With my tea?”

“Yeah, last time I was at the center, they had these huge five pound bags of them for sale. I bought two.”

“Yeah, but in my tea?”

“Okay,” said Billy. “Suit yourself. It’s good though.”

He cut up a lime with his pocket knife and handed me a wedge. Billy and I both took our tea with lime.

Next came the awkward ritual of drinking while wearing a surgical mask. The way we all kind of learned to do it was by turning our heads a little to one side while we lifted our masks and took quick sips. It was all kind of silly when you stopped to think about it, though none of us did. It was just one of those things that had become part of the invisible constructs of our lives in the plague city.

“I got a call from Myers last night,” I said.

“Oh yeah? What’d he want?”

“To tell me that someone had taken the hard drives from Bradley’s three laptops. The way he sounded, I think he thinks we did it.”

“Us?”

I shrugged. “Who knows? Paranoia seems to be going around.”

“I guess.” He sipped at his tea. We all did.

“Still,” I said, “it's strange about the hard drives. Why would somebody take them? If whoever did it knew enough to take the hard drives out, why not take the whole computer?”

“Are you talking about looters?” Billy asked.

“I'm not sure,” I said. “It doesn't sound like something they'd do, you know? Their style would be to steal everything.”

“Or maybe just trash it,” Chunk said. “Smash it just to hear it shatter.”

“Yeah, that's true.”

“You said some specimen traps were taken too?” Billy asked.

“All of them.”

“Why?”

“I don't know,” I said. “Maybe they weren't stolen. Maybe Bradley put them back out after she took the first batch of specimens out for testing.”

“She'd have mentioned that in her journal,” Chunk said.

He was right about that, of course. Despite the enigmatic “WE ARE ALL GONERS!” Bradley was very organized in her journal. She would have included something as basic as putting out fresh traps.

“So, who would want to steal the hard drives to three laptop computers and six specimen cages?” Billy asked. “Why those things and nothing else?”

“It has to be because of what she was working on,” Chunk said. “That has to be it.”

“So, where does that leave us?” I asked.

“It's either somebody she was working with or against.”

“Against? You mean like Cole?”

“I like him for this,” Chunk said.

I liked him too, only I was still troubled by the idea of a 70 year old man beating Kenneth Wade to death with his bare hands. That part just didn't make sense, and I said so.

Chunk didn't have an answer for me.

“But speaking of Wade,” he said after a moment, “on the way over here I got a call from Treanor. He wants us in his office on Monday morning.”

“Great. There isn't any way that's gonna be good.”

“Treanor's that lieutenant you told me about?” Billy asked.

“That's him.” To Chunk, I said, “Did he say what he wanted?”

“I doubt it's to play canasta,” Chunk said. “I think you really pissed him off this time.” Chunk turned to Billy and said, “You really ought to tell your wife to stop pissing off the brass.”

“I wish I could,” Billy said. “But you know how women are. They're not happy unless they're complaining about something.”

I threw my wedge of lime at him.

Connie got bored fast listening to the adults talk and started to fidget.

“Honey,” I said, “why don't you take your binoculars and try to find me an oriole.”

She liked that, I could tell, but then got a real serious look on her face and said, “Mommy, the orioles like to nest in the cypress down by the river, and Daddy told me not to go down there alone.”

Billy smiled at me.

“That's right, hon,” I said. “How about that blue jay from earlier? Can you find him again?”

“Okay,” she said, brightening. The next instant she was off, running through the backyard, leaping over Billy's coffins. Billy and I both watched her go, then gave each other a glance. Go ahead, my look said to him. Now's as good a time as any.

Billy nodded, wet his lips with his iced tea. He said, “Connie and I went down to the creek yesterday with her binoculars.”

I looked into my tea. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Chunk look at Billy, then at me. This was leading into something, he just couldn't tell what.

Chunk said, “Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Billy said. “You know, once you get down to the creek, it's only about a third of a mile to the wall.”

“Really?” Chunk said. “I didn't know it was that close.”

“Oh yeah. With a pair of good binoculars you can see just about every little detail in the wall. Of course, you can't go much closer than that or the motion sensors will activate and the helicopters will blast your ass to a mud puddle, but you can see the wall plain as day.”

Chunk shifted in his chair somewhat. He glanced at me, but I was still watching my tea swirl around in my glass.

“We went down there yesterday to try to see the orioles,” Billy said. “The kid's crazy about those birds.”

“I knew that,” Chunk said.

“Yeah. So you know it rained pretty hard on us the night before, and we wanted to see if their nests were okay. The water had run over the banks pretty good.”

Chunk nodded. Patient, letting the conversation develop.

“I took Connie's binoculars, and while I was looking through them I happened to turn towards the wall. Where the creek goes under. The Army put a heavy grill there when they set the thing up, you know? No way to cut it or anything like that.”

Chunk said, “The grill's still there?”

“Yeah, it's still there. Only I was kind of surprised to see that a small section of the bank next to it had been washed out, gone.”

Chunk shifted around in his chair again. Nobody said anything for a long time after that. We sat there, sipping our iced teas, the air so thick between us I could barely breathe.

Finally, Chunk said, “It must have been some storm.”

“A lot of rain,” Billy said. “And you want to know something else funny about it?”

“What's that?”

“While I was looking at that hole under the wall, I couldn't help thinking that somebody could make a boat—a long one that might look like a brush-covered log from the air—and float right underneath the wall.”

I sucked in a breath and held it. There it was. Out in the open.

“The hole's big enough,” Billy said, “that if somebody wanted to do that they could probably make a raft big enough for three adults and a child. They could just float on the current all the way out to the Guadalupe River. From there...” Billy shrugged.

Chunk put his tea between his legs and stared out at the yard, looking over the coffins there.

“The trouble with doing that,” Chunk said, and the way he said it was still that we're-just-having-a-hypothetical-conversation-here tone, “is that the helicopters are equipped with thermal imaging cameras. If three adults and a child were to slip under the wall, they'd be shot on the spot.”

“They might,” I said. “Of course, if they were to borrow one of those SWAT sniper blankets, that would make them invisible to thermal cameras. Stick some shrubs on top of the blanket, and if anybody saw them they'd just look like debris floating down the river.”

Chunk took a long sip of his iced tea. “You know, if Cole is right about there being three killer strains of H2N2 out there, three adults and a child could hardly be blamed for wanting to get out.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” I said.

Billy said: “It is something to think about.”

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Chapter 21

The party started around five-thirty. We set it up in the dining room because that room opened up directly onto the back patio, where most of our parties ended up anyway. The dining room faced to the northeast, so it avoided the direct heat of the evening sun, yet still had plenty of natural light, which, as it turned out, we needed, because the power went out about an hour before anybody got there.

Chunk showed up first, bearing a beautifully wrapped yellow box that Connie promptly took from him and put on the table in the kitchen.

“You did a good job wrapping that,” I said.

“I think she's really gonna like that one.”

Connie was busy looking the box over, bouncing on her toes, barely able to contain herself.

“Looks like she's having a good time with it already.”

Chunk smiled at her. “Yeah, this was a good idea, Lily. I can tell Connie needed it. I bet you did too.”

“I don't know,” I said. “I'm a nervous wreck.”

“It's not gonna be that big of a crowd,” he said. “Just a few friends.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Just then Connie turned around and said, “Mommy, can I open it please? Pleeeeease?”

“No, honey. You'll have to wait till the party starts.”

“Mommy, please?”

“No, Connie. Put it down.”

“You could let her open it now,” Chunk said. “It might actually be better if she did.”

I gave him a crossways look. Why? What did you get her?

“It's okay,” he said, reading the look, but ignoring it. “Really, it's okay.”

I turned back to Connie, who seemed to know what was going on, for she was poised over the yellow wrapping paper like a hawk about to fall on a dove. She looked at me expectantly.

“Go ahead,” I said.

She started ripping paper before the words had completely left my mouth. She got down to the box inside, popped that open, and looked inside, her face glowing with the light of childish wonder.

Her mouth turned to the shape of an O, and a long “Ahhh” sound came out.

“What did you get her?” I asked Chunk. But all he would do was smile.

Connie reached into the box and pulled out three yellow porcelain combs—fancy ones, very old, very expensive looking. Each one had a finely etched bird pattern on the edge. I recognized them from Chunk's grandmother's collection. They could be used as a regular comb, or folded over and used as a clip. Perfect for Connie now that her hair was getting so much longer.

“Mommy, they're so pretty,” Connie said. Then she ran over and hugged Chunk. “Thank you, Uncle Reggie. I love them.”

She was bubbling over with excitement, trying to figure out how the set worked.

Chunk mussed her hair. “You're welcome, squirt. You'll have to get your Mom to teach you how to use them, okay?”

“Okay,” Connie said, never taking her eyes off the combs.

My mouth was hanging open the whole time. As soon as Connie was out of ear shot, I turned to Chunk.

“That's too much.”

“Nah,” he said.

“Yes,” I said, “it is. Those things are priceless antiques. And you already did more than enough getting me the stuff for the cake.”

“Please,” he said, waving me off. “It's nothing. Besides, it's not like I'm ever gonna use them. Gram would have wanted them to go to a little girl anyway.”

Before I could argue with him though, there was a knock on the door and Billy let in our next door neighbors, Avery and Lynn Cameron. Billy brought them inside and introduced them to Chunk.

Avery Cameron was a sickly thin cadaverous man with absolutely no chin. He wore obscenely huge eyeglasses, had a pale and waxy complexion, and when he shook your hand made you feel like you were squeezing an almost frozen fish.

Avery was a photographer by trade and a staunch liberal in politics. He also affected a flamboyant style in his clothes that I guess he thought made him look more artsy, but in my opinion only made him look silly. For the party he wore vibrantly green pants and a matching jacket, a white, silk shirt, and a bright green cravat with gold flecks worked into the fabric. The cravat matched his face mask.

His clothes were so bright that I didn't notice until a moment later that he had a dollop of shaving cream on his cheek, like it had dried in the process of dripping off his face. The entire party I had to force myself not to reach out and flick it off.

Avery's wife Lynn was just as flamboyant, and the poor thing was blind as a bat. She wore a canary yellow pantsuit with a matching surgical mask and Elton John-style oversized glasses and white shoes. She had a beautiful head of flame-red hair, and her complexion, though very light, was free of the freckles that redheads usually have.

They were quite a pair, but for all the jokes that Billy and I told at their expense, you'd never catch me saying anything bad about them. Or at least anything that I intended seriously. When we first met them, they were both in their late 50s. They had never had children of their own, but it was obvious from the first time they saw Connie that a great injustice had been done there. The two of them loved children, and would have made wonderful parents. In all the time we'd known

them, argued with them about politics, laughed about their ridiculous clothes, they had never been anything less than guardian angels to our daughter, and for Billy and me, that qualified them for sainthood.

Of course, Chunk lacked that point of view. He stared at the two of them during the introductions like they had just stepped off a space ship and asked him if he were interested in an anal probe.

Avery shook Chunk's hand so delicately he almost looked like he expected Chunk to kiss the back of it.

Lynn, however, grabbed Chunk's hand and pumped it fiercely. She did everything that way, in an urgent, overly friendly kind of way.

“My, but you are a big one, aren't you?” she said to Chunk. “Have you ever modeled for a photographer? My Avery is a photographer you know. He does landscapes mostly, but I think you would make a lovely subject for his camera. So many muscles.” Lynn turned to Avery and said, “What do you think, dear? Would Mr. Dempsey here do well as a model?”

Avery considered Chunk head to toe. “Maybe so,” he said. “He's very dark. I'd like to use some hard lighting to bring out the texture of his skin, but all in all a very impressively built man.”

Lynn put a confidential hand on Chunk's massive bicep. “Avery is actually very good with live models. We've been married for forty years, and in that time he's photographed me exactly three hundred and eight-one times.” Then she flashed her mischievous eyes at Chunk and said, without lowering her voice a bit, “Eight of those times were in the nude.”

Poor Chunk. It looked like his face was about to crack. He gave me a look. For God's sake, save me from this crazy lady, it said.

But I didn't have to, for just then, there was another knock on the door and Connie exploded through the room to answer it.

“That's her friend June,” I said. “She hasn't gotten a chance to play with anybody her own age since, well, you know.”

Everybody nodded, suddenly a little sad as they remembered that children weren't supposed to play together in the plague city.

I followed Connie to the door, my hands instinctively close to her as she opened the door. “Not too close, honey,” I said.

“Mommy.” She gave me a look of her own. God, Mom. Would you relax, please?

Six years old going on 30.

Connie opened the door and let in Gloria Webb and her daughter June. June held a used soccer ball with a red ribbon tied around it. June handed it to Connie.

“Cool,” Connie said. “Come on.”

Before either Gloria or I could stop them, the two girls ran for the living room. June was a year older than Connie and a true tomboy. She wore jeans and a red t-shirt with a standard white face mask. She ran naturally, her short, bobbed hair cut barely moving.

She made quite a contrast to Connie, who in her white and pink party dress and long, curly brown hair, was the very image of a girly girl. Still, it was good to hear her laugh, and June did that for her, made her laugh.

Gloria and I followed them into the living room, each of us gently guiding our girls away from the other just a little. It was pathetically transparent, and there was an uncomfortable moment between Gloria and me, neither wanting to give the impression we thought the other's daughter was dirty somehow, contaminated, but neither of us willing to take the chance either.

I tried to cover my embarrassment with a compliment. Gloria had highlighted her hair, a purely amateur home job that made her look like a can of blonde paint had dripped onto her chestnut hair, but I told her I liked it.

“Thanks,” she said, trying to look like she wasn't clamping her hands down on her squirming daughter. “Do you like it? Really? It's gotten so hard to find enough to do the job in one shopping trip. I usually have to buy a little each week until I have enough.”

“It looks great,” I said.

Connie was slipping out of my grip. “Honey,” I said, “why don't you and June go out back and kick the soccer ball back and forth?”

“That's a good idea, June,” said Gloria. “You two could stand on opposite sides of the yard there and really kick it hard.”

June gave Gloria a look, and I realized that they must teach all six through eight year olds that look.

Gloria and I let go of our daughters at the same time, and it was like watching two greyhounds bolt out of the lists. I never knew Connie could run that fast. We watched them go nervously, both of us making furtive little grabbing motions at the window that looked out over the backyard every time the girls got too close.

“Hey,” said Billy, “you guys coming in with the rest of us or not?”

“Coming,” I said. Then, to Gloria, “Shall we?”

“Okay. I can't wait to tell you about the tomatoes I'm growing. You know I've killed so many since all this dreariness started, but I think I've finally found the knack. I have three great big green ones. I can't wait to bring you some.”

“Fantastic,” I said, and led her into the kitchen.

Back when I first met Gloria, she had been a product marketing specialist for one of the big department stores in the Rivercenter Mall downtown. She was an impressively driven and well-organized woman, the kind who excelled as team mother for a girl's soccer team or Girl Scout den mother and still managed to look fabulously put together.

Then, in late May, shortly after the first cases of H2N2 were reported, she lost her husband Steve to the flu. She managed to keep her youthful face and figure, and her smile that makes every man in the room focus on her, but the rest of her fell apart. It was like the driven, purposeful part of her mind just stopped working. She lost all trace of seriousness, and became hopelessly flighty, vain, and distracted. She was, in a way, a living train wreck, the saddest kind of memorial to the way things used to be.

I introduced her to Chunk, who was eager to have someone to talk to who didn't want him to pose nude with a white bear skin rug draped over his manly parts.

Gloria giggled as she shook Chunk's hand.

“Wow,” she said. “Oh wow.”

“Hi,” Chunk said, smiling uncomfortably, probably thinking, Christ, out of the frying pan and into the fire.

“You're a police detective, aren't you?” Gloria asked him. “Lily, this is your partner, right?”

“That's right,” I said.

Gloria's eyes walked all over Chunk's biceps and shoulders. “Wow.”

Chunk was trying to get his hand back from Gloria, but not succeeding.

“So tell me,” Gloria said, “do you really investigate murders? That sounds so dangerous to me.”

“Well,” Chunk said, but didn't get a chance to say anything more about it.

“I just couldn't do that. And I bet you see so many frightening things, don't you?”

“Well, most of the time—”

“Look,” Gloria said, suddenly breaking contact with Chunk's hand and sticking her hand into the middle of our little huddle, “I broke a nail today.”

We all looked at her broken nail.

“I couldn't believe it. There's so much to do around the house, you know? And you just can't call somebody like you used to.” She put her hands on Chunk's bicep. “And with no man around the house ... well, you know how it is.”

She batted her overly done eyelashes at Chunk. Chunk smiled awkwardly, then gave me a look that screamed: For God's sake, Lily, save me from your friends.

We moved from the kitchen to the living room and set Connie up at the head of the table, the chocolate cake in front of her. I lit all six candles and everybody else gathered around to sing “Happy Birthday.”

I tried to ignore the fact that we were all wearing surgical masks, but I couldn't quite shake the idea that we looked like doctors about to operate.

With sheer will I pushed the image out of my head, because that was the only way to keep from crying. Little girls' birthday parties shouldn't feel like a scene out of a horror movie.

When the song was over, Connie leaned forward to blow out the candles. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the others taking an unconscious step back. I couldn't really blame them. Paranoia was, after all, the order of the day. Still, my heart broke a little more.

Connie didn't notice, or if she did she didn't make a big deal of it. She was too focused on the candles. She blew four of them out on the first huff before she ran out of breath and went after the other two. I wondered if she would remember this as the birthday she couldn't blow out all her candles because her face mask got in the way.

After the cake, Connie and June went out on the patio to play. Connie was showing June her binoculars, and the two of them were scanning the line of oak trees between our house and the creek. Looking for birds, I guessed.

I didn't like how close they were standing. While Avery and Lynn were hounding Chunk with all things liberal I slipped away to separate them. Gloria had the same idea, for we reached our daughters at the same time and gently nudged them apart, so there was a few feet of space between them.

Gloria's eyes met mine and we both flushed with embarrassment.

“Mommy,” Connie said. “Stop it.”

“Oh, look, honey,” I said, pointing over the tree line. “Is that a hawk?”

“No, Mommy. That's a buzzard.”

“Oh,” I said.

Gloria and I tried not to look at each other.

The power came back on just before it got dark and the party really started to pick up. Coke had been plentiful the last time Billy went shopping and he had bought two cases. When the lights came back on, Billy and Chunk went into the kitchen to cut limes. I went to the closet and pulled out two bottles of sugar cane rum we'd had left over from our Superbowl party earlier in the year. We brought the Cokes, the limes, and the Bacardi together in the dining room and made Cuba Libres.

Midway through our third round of drinks, the party drifted out to the patio where we could enjoy the evening breezes carrying the scent of cedar down from the hills. It was turning into a beautiful night, not too hot, no clouds, and lots of bright stars over the uneven line of dark hills to the west.

The dollop of shaving cream was still hanging from Avery Cameron's nonexistent chin when he got up on his soapbox.

"It's Republican sponsored racism, if you ask me," he said, his voice slurred. The rest of us groaned.

He waved his drink around negligently as he spoke. "Seriously, remember when all this started? Remember then? The President on the TV saying how boxing us in here was for the good of the nation? How he'd do everything he could to preserve our dignity?"

Avery stared around the room, looking for someone to challenge him. No one did. Only Lynn spoke, and that was just a grunt of support.

"Dignity," he said, nearly spitting the word out. "Crap is what we got, not dignity. Just crap. And you know why?" He leered at us, swaying badly, the dollop of shaving cream holding on tight. "I'll tell you why. It's because San Antonio has got so many Hispanics. You think if this happened someplace else where the population was all white the Republicans would be sitting on their butts like they are? No, of course they wouldn't. It's racism, that's what it is. Republican sponsored racism."

Billy laughed at that. "That's bullshit, Avery."

"Billy," I said, and pointed at the girls with my chin. "Little pitchers, remember? You put bad stuff in, you get bad stuff out."

"Sorry, Lily." Then, to Avery, he said, "There's no such thing as Republican sponsored racism. You do know that, right?"

"You're blind, Billy. You've bought the crap they sold you. It's like New Orleans all over again. Nobody gives a crap so long as the people getting the mean end of the stick are poor and brown."

“Oh come on, Avery. You can't possibly compare what's going on here to New Orleans. That's the biggest load of—”

“Can one of you nice fellas get a girl a refill?” Gloria said, cutting right between Avery and Billy and handing her glass out to Chunk. I saw her eyelashes beat up and down shamelessly.

Chunk groaned, but took the glass and got up.

The party ran late. Connie and June fell asleep on the living room floor, and Billy and Avery argued politics, making less and less sense the more they drank. Finally, I couldn't listen to them anymore. I went in to the kitchen to save Chunk from Gloria and Lynn. Both women seemed determined to get him to take off his clothes. Chunk had hated it when he was sober, but now that he had plenty of rum in him, I think he was starting to enjoy the attention. My new mission became saving Chunk from himself.

When I went into the kitchen, Gloria was running a finger down Chunk's chest and staring up at him with doe eyes that were supposed to make him melt. It looked like they were doing their job fairly well.

“So do they really call you Chunk?” Gloria said, and giggled. Neither of them had their masks on.

“They sure do.”

“Why is that?”

“Well,” Chunk said.

Gloria bit her bottom lip coyly.

Chunk said something to her that I didn't hear and she giggled again. She put a hand over her lips when she laughed, the way some women do.

“Don't cover your mouth like that,” Chunk said. “You're pretty when you laugh.”

Gloria beamed. “I like you,” she said. “You're so interesting. We never meet interesting people around here anymore. Everybody's so damned worried all the time. I just hate to worry, don't you?”

That, I thought, from the woman who spent all night chasing her daughter around the yard.

“I sure do. You know, I read just a couple of days ago that 60 percent of all women worry about the way they look naked. Can you believe that?”

Gloria batted her eyes and summoned up a believable school girl blush. “60 percent, really? Well, it is a hard world to be a woman in, you know.”

“I believe it,” Chunk said.

I could swear his voice was getting deeper by the minute, Chunk trying to sound like Barry White.

Chunk said, “Seems to me it's got to be a confidence thing. Like a woman needs to feel right with herself, but also with her man. You know what I'm saying? She's got to be shown she's beautiful, and not just because she put her hair up fancy or put on makeup. The man's got to step up there and validate her.”

Gloria nodded with every word. “You are so right,” she said, and I imagined her as a fish with the hook firmly caught in her mouth. “You know women so well, Mr. Dempsey.”

“Call me Chunk.”

He put a hand on her hip and she giggled again.

I had heard enough. I cleared my throat and the two of them straightened up like a pair of kids whose parents had just walked in on them. They both slipped their masks back into place.

“What did you guys do with Lynn?” I said.

“She went to the ladies’ room,” Gloria said. “Mr. Dempsey and I were just having the sweetest conversation. Did you know, Lily, what a charmer your partner is?”

“Oh yeah, he's a charmer all right.”

I looked around the kitchen. There were about a hundred wrecked limes all over the place and the linoleum floor was sticky.

I said, “Are you guys going to be okay in here? I'm going to check on Lynn.”

“We'll be fine,” Gloria said, then bit her lip and moved her shoulders back and forth as she looked up into Chunk's face.

“Great,” I said, and left them to it.

I found Lynn in the hall bathroom, passed out in the corner between the bathtub and the toilet. I helped her to her feet.

“You feeling okay, sweetie?” I said.

“Oh yes,” she said.

“Why don't we go check on your husband?”

“Good idea,” she said, then hiccupped. “Let's go see the boys.”

With Lynn's left arm around my shoulder and my right arm around her waist, I carried her down the hall, through the living room, through the kitchen, and into the dining room.

Billy was there, a bleary-eyed look of victory in his eyes.

Avery sat in the chair next to him, passed out. His hands were in his lap and his head was tilted all the way back so that the little dollop of shaving cream pointed out at us like some kind of bony finger.

“Billy,” I said, “I think it's time we helped the Camerons home. What do you think?”

Billy slapped his thighs with his palms and smiled. “Yep, I reckon so.”

“Fantastic, cowboy.”

He winked at me, then stood up to help Avery to his feet.

“Wait,” said Chunk. He was behind me, coming into the room. “One second. This has been bugging me all night.”

He went over to Avery and flicked the hardened shaving cream off of Avery's chin with a snap of his fingers.

Gloria slapped Chunk's bicep when he went back to stand by her. “Bad boy,” she said. “So bad.”

We got the Camerons to their feet, out the door, and pointed them toward their house. Meanwhile, Gloria picked up June and carried her outside.

“I should be getting home too,” she said.

“Are you sure?” Chunk asked.

“Yes,” she said. “Unfortunately, yes.” She shrugged with June in her hands. “Got to get her to bed. You got my number though, right?”

“I could walk you home,” he said.

“Another night,” she said, and worked her eyelashes up and down to let him know she meant it. “Call me, okay?”

“Okay. I'll call you.”

“Cool.”

Just like that, the party was over.

I put Connie to bed while Chunk and Billy cleaned up the piles of limes in the kitchen.

“She get to bed okay?” Billy asked.

“Yeah,” I said, and kissed him.

“It was a good party,” Chunk said. “Lots of interesting people.”

I threw a wad of paper towel's into the bag he was holding and said, “Mmm hmmm.”

After most of the mess was cleaned up, Chunk said, “So when do you think it'll be ready?”

Billy said, “Soon. Tomorrow, maybe the day after. It'll have to be soon. Before the patrols discover the hole.”

“So, day after tomorrow then? Around sunset?”

We all looked at each other, the air around us thick with the mood of conspiracy.

“Sounds good,” Billy said.

He looked at me. I nodded.

“Okay then,” Billy said. “Day after tomorrow. We meet here right after nightfall.”

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Chapter 22

The next morning, shortly after dawn, Chunk and I checked out a light green Chevy Malibu with a banged up front right fender from the Scar's fleet yard and headed to the shallow west side to see Treanor. We were both hung over and glassy-eyed, neither of us prepared for the lingering chaos that still shrouded the area where the riot had been at its worst.

At the corner of Bandera and Woodlawn, a pair of baby-faced patrolmen waved us down and checked our IDs.

“We're only passing people who live in the area or who are part of emergency agencies,” one of the patrolmen said. It sounded like he was apologizing.

“It's okay,” I said.

“Yes, ma'am,” he said, and waved us through.

We passed the checkpoint and were greeted by the sounds of still crackling fires, the slapping of high-pressure hoses spraying water onto smoldering buildings, and shouting policemen and fire fighters.

Behind us, morning broke over downtown, backlighting the skyline with a vague glowing line of pink and green and gold. It was beautiful, not anything like the streets ahead of us. My first thought was it looked like a hurricane had rolled through.

Demolished police cars had been abandoned in the street, and everywhere columns of gray and black smoke rose into the air. Not a single window anywhere had been left intact. Broken glass glinted like coins on the sidewalks and in the street. The weapons of choice of most of the rioters had been stones and bricks, and great heaps of both were everywhere. As we crept down the street, never getting faster than ten or fifteen miles per hour because of all the obstructions, glass crunched beneath our tires.

In the end it had taken a little more than three hundred officers to contain the riot, and now an eerie calm had prevailed over a roughly twenty block area. Every street, every alley, was blocked by orange and white-striped sawhorse barricades and watched by officers still wearing parts of their riot gear.

Strangely, the only things that remained untouched were the hundreds of orange warning notices that the Metropolitan Health District people had posted on walls and poles and fences. Here and there they rustled in the warm, sluggish morning breeze.

Many of the officers we passed looked tired and bored. They leaned against their cars, most of which were damaged by rocks, while others leaned against barricades. They eyed our Malibu closely as we drove through the debris.

The line of stores in the one-storey building in front of Treanor's office was a gutted and charred mess. Fire from gas cocktails and pipe bombs had torn it open from the inside out, like a body on the autopsy table. Still smoldering pieces of the frame poked up from the debris like blackened ribs. Already, at the end of the block, Public Works off-loaded bobcats and earth movers to clear away the mess. Chunk gave the building a sideways glance and said, “Your friend was nice.”

“Which one? The one that wanted to take naked pictures of you or the one who just wanted to take you naked?”

Chunk grunted. “Your next door neighbors are nuts, you know that?”

“They're good to Connie. And they're sweet in their own way.”

He grunted again.

Treanor's office, nestled behind the row of burned stores, had managed to escape being damaged. I figured that was probably because it didn't look like what it really was. If you didn't know any better, you'd think it was an abandoned adult bookstore. There were no windows on the bottom floor, no signs saying what was inside. Just a single faded green metal door in a pinkish-white granite-walled building.

We parked along the north side of the building.

“You know he's gonna chew our asses off, don't you?” Chunk said.

“Probably.” But I didn't really care. In my mind, I was already gone, floating down the river, out of plague town.

“Okay, just so as you know.”

I patted his shoulder and we went inside.

Little Hitler was at his desk, writing up duty rosters for all the posts that had to be manned on a twenty-four hour basis until further notice.

He barely glanced up at us when we came in.

“Sit down,” he said, motioning to the empty chairs across from his desk.

He went on writing names down on his rosters, occasionally consulting a map, then quickly wrote down more names. After about two minutes of that he put his pen down, cracked his knuckles, and leaned back in his chair so he could look down his nose at us.

I got ready for the yelling, but to my surprise, he didn't yell. When he spoke, his voice was calm and even cheery.

“I thought you might want to know that the woman and the little girl you two saved are both doing fine. They were, anyway, as of yesterday. They were released after being treated for minor scrapes and bruises. The woman took a good sap on the head, but she should be fine.”

Chunk and I tried to avoid looking at each other in shock. I was wondering if I was in the right office.

“That's good to know, sir,” I said.

If you can imagine what a cat must feel like walking through a yard full of sleeping pit bulls, that's what I felt like just then, waiting for all hell to break loose.

“Look,” he said, and he was looking straight at me, “I know we got off to a rough start. Things were said. Tempers flared. I just want you to know I'm willing to forget about that.”

Had I not been so bowled over by surprise, I would have told him to sit on his thumb. I wasn't the one, after all, who had made me look like an idiot in front of the whole damn neighborhood in that suicide's front yard so many years ago.

As it was, I just sat there with my mouth hanging open a little. I said, "Um, that would be, um, okay."

"Good," he said.

He leaned back more in his chair and folded his hands together over his chest.

"So, tell me, how's the case going?"

"We're closing in on it, sir," Chunk said.

"That's not an answer. Tell me where you're at now that your number one suspect is off the hook."

I almost said: "I thought we were going to forget about that," but didn't. There was something about knowing that I wouldn't have to listen to his shit much longer that made me more tolerant.

Instead, I told him about our trip into the GZ, about meeting Dr. Cole and fighting with the looters and about the missing equipment from Bradley's van. I also ran down the short list of suspects, Cole, Hernandez, and the looters.

The only thing I didn't tell him about was the old woman. I hadn't even told Chunk about her. As far as I was concerned, that was a private thing, for me only.

"You've stopped looking at Myers and Laurent?" he asked.

"No, sir," I said. "They're still on the list."

"You haven't figured out why they lied to you about not knowing where Bradley was working?"

"No, sir," I said. "That's why they're still on the list."

"And Bradley's journal wasn't any help?"

"Not really. It actually confused things more than it helped."

"What do you think she meant by that bit about us all being goners?"

"You want to know what I think? I think she found proof to support Dr. Cole's theory."

He turned in his chair and watched an orange cat run along a burned out section of fence below his window. Then it climbed into a trashcan.

“You're suggesting a conspiracy,” he said.

“If that's what she meant by that bit about us being goners, then yeah, I think a conspiracy pretty well covers it.”

“I don't buy that. Why would Laurent send her star player out into the GZ to spy on Cole, then try to cover it up when something happens to her? Seems to me that would be the perfect opportunity to turn the situation against Cole. Discredit him by making him seem crazy. That woman is a noisy, annoying bitch, but she's not stupid. She wouldn't miss an opportunity like that. And for that matter, why go to all the trouble to spy on him anyway? Why not just bring Cole into the mix, share the research?”

“Pride, I guess. I don't think Laurent and her people think very highly of the MHD.”

“No, probably not.”

He drummed his fingers on his chest and thought.

He said, “Well, it definitely sounds like Cole is the front runner.”

“Yes, sir. Trouble is, we can't put him and Bradley together, and we can't get around the fact that Wade's killer beat him to death. Cole wouldn't have been able to do that, not at his age.”

Treanor frowned. “How do you figure?”

“Cole is seventy-two. And Wade was, well, in pretty good condition. Plus he knew how to fight. There's no way Cole could have—”

Treanor waved his hand impatiently. “Not that,” he said. “I know all that. What do you mean you can't put Cole and Bradley together? They were working on the same theory, in the same little corner of the GZ, and Wade himself even called in a meeting with Cole.”

Chunk and I glanced at each other. “He did what now, sir?”

Treanor looked at both of us and said, “Ah shit, tell me this isn't news to you guys.”

He looked at both of us again and shook his head.

“When did this happen, sir?”

“About a week ago. He got me on the radio and said they'd just run into Cole in the GZ. He wanted to know if Cole had authorization from the MHD to be out in the GZ. I told him he was on the level. His clearance checked out.”

I took a second to absorb that.

“How in the hell did you guys miss that?” he said.

“We interviewed Cole,” I said, “and he told us he didn't know Bradley was working in the GZ. He said he hadn't seen her outside of Arsenal.”

Treanor said, “That sounds like a man who needs to be looked at again.”

“Yes, sir,” I said. “I think you're right.”

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Chapter 23

Security around the Arsenal Morgue had been beefed up after the riot, but inside it was still business as usual. The bodies came in, the bodies went out, in a relentless tide of death that never stopped, day or night.

We found Myers and Laurent inside the WHO office and went into Laurent's office to talk, closing the door behind us.

Chunk and I sat in the chairs across the desk from Laurent. Myers stood at Laurent's elbow. The two of them looked at us over their face masks with narrow, angry eyes. They disliked us being there, but tolerated us, I think, as some kind of necessary evil.

“I don't suppose you found the hard drives from Dr. Bradley's computers?” Myers said, his English accent haughty and sarcastic.

“Not yet,” I said. “We're still working on that.”

“I see.”

Laurent, a.k.a. Hippo Woman, wheezed as she said, “What about Dr. Bradley's killer? Are you any closer to finding out who is responsible for her death?”

“We're closing in on that, actually. In fact, that's why we came to speak with you?”

“Oh?” Laurent's eyes narrowed further.

“Yeah. We're going to be conducting an interview this afternoon with our top suspect. But before we do that, we need some information.”

Laurent put both hands on the desk, all ten fat little sausage fingers splayed out like she was steadying herself.

“May I ask who your top suspect is?”

“You may ask,” I said, “but I can't tell you right now. It wouldn't be helpful for us to share that information before an arrest is made, and right now that's my most important consideration.”

Laurent said, “What information do you need?”

“I want to know what you and Dr. Myers here think about the last entry in Dr. Bradley's journal. Is there anything in the data she recorded to indicate that she found proof of there being multiple strains of H2N2 in the local bird population?”

Laurent didn't even hesitate. “You've been talking with Dr. Cole.”

“True,” I said.

“The man's theory is fundamentally flawed. His theory is baseless.”

“So,” I said, holding up Bradley's journal, “there's nothing in here to support the multiple strain theory?”

“No,” she said. “Nothing of the kind.”

I opened the journal to the last page. “What about this last line, where she says ‘We are all goners?’ What do you think she was referring to there?”

“I'm sure I do not know. It is troubling, certainly. I can only say that she perhaps was frustrated with her lack of progress. Gifted researchers such as Dr. Bradley can often take failure personally.”

“Perhaps,” I said.

“I don't think that's very likely, Dr. Laurent,” said Chunk. My man, Chunk, had all the grace of a two-ton bull in a very expensive china shop. “What I think is that you either believe this multiple strain theory, or you are so afraid that it might be true that you sent Dr. Bradley out to confirm it.”

Laurent's expression gave away nothing.

“You're mistaken, Detective.”

“No, I don't think so. I think you're playing games with us, Dr. Laurent, and I got to ask myself: Why? Why don't you want to help us find Dr. Bradley's killer? I think you're hoping to make the discovery first so that you get all the credit. Now, ordinarily I wouldn't have a problem with that kind of thing, except that while you guys are arguing over bragging rights, a lot of innocent people are dying.”

Laurent remained motionless, practically a stone stature, but not Myers.

“How dare you accuse her of that?” Myers said. His voice quivered with suppressed rage. “Every member of this organization has voluntarily put themselves in harm's way to help the people of this city. I for one do not think you are at all—”

Laurent said: “Dr. Myers, please. That will not help the situation. Detectives, I think you have overstayed your welcome here. We have answered your questions and cooperated in every way. Now please, find Dr. Bradley's killer, and if possible, return our property to us. Good day to you both.”

Chunk and I traded a look. Time to go the GZ.

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Chapter 24

It was after ten o'clock in the morning when we entered the GZ and started patrolling the streets where we'd found Dr. Cole, and then Dr. Bradley's van. The morning was cloudless, warm and bright. The rain from two nights earlier had brought out the pink blossoms of the crepe myrtle trees and the overgrown lawns were a deep, emerald green.

Chunk said, “You know, there's a question we forgot to ask.”

“What's that?”

“How come every time we've been in the GZ, we've been attacked by looters, but Dr. Cole and Dr. Bradley haven't?”

“That's a good point,” I said. I didn't have a good answer to it either. Dr. Bradley, of course, had had Kenneth Wade to protect her, but Dr. Cole worked alone. How had he managed to escape them for so long?

“We'll have to ask him when we find him,” Chunk said.

“Yeah.”

I watched the houses, so many of them without doors, their windows all broken or boarded over, and thought how calm everything was. It wasn't the same sensation at all as the calm that hung over the Bandera Road food distribution center. That was the eye of the storm, a momentary lull in the dying spasms of a population driven mad by fear and paranoia. But here in the GZ, the calm was different. Here sunlight lanced through the canopies of oak trees, birds flew out of second story windows, and everything seemed soft-edged, dulled by a sunny haze. It was the calm of graveyards, the promise of a long sleep.

I was thinking about that, lost in my own little world, imagining the GZ as some kind of romantic, almost living landscape, when we turned onto Iowa Street and saw Dr. Cole's converted EMS wagon parked under an ancient oak tree.

I pointed it out.

“See it,” Chunk said. He accelerated down to the end of the block and parked along the curb.

We got out of the car, our plastic spacesuits awkward now that we each wore a gun belt around our waists, and looked around.

“What do you think?” Chunk said.

“Try the van first. If we don't find him there, go door to door.”

Chunk and I both headed toward the EMS wagon, then stopped. We heard coughing, violent, painful coughing. The calling card of H2N2. Chunk pulled his gun. I did too.

“Don't shoot, detectives,” said Cole. He came around the passenger side of the wagon, walked toward us, through the grass, and stopped at the curb. “Don't shoot,” he said again, and coughed violently. It nearly put him on the ground he coughed so hard. When he was done he said, “I'm not armed.”

I could see that. In fact, he wasn't even wearing a spacesuit. He was dressed in a collared white shirt tucked into a faded, loose-fitting pair of blue jeans with no belt, and no tie.

He wasn't wearing a face mask either, and for the first time I saw his face clearly. He was much thinner in street clothes than he had appeared in his spacesuit. His thinness gave his face an angry, impatient set that wasn't totally erased by the weak smile at the corners of his mouth.

Chunk and I inched forward, weapons still at the ready. As we got closer to Cole I could see little blackish specks all over the front of his shirt. Cole began to cough again, and the skin around his mouth actually began to pale to a sickly blue. Cyanosis, I realized. He was close to the end.

“How did you get sick?” I said.

“Intentionally,” he said, coughing and laughing at the same time.

I glanced at Chunk, then back at Cole. “You did that to yourself?”

“Of course.”

“Why?”

He laughed again, and I got the feeling that only part of the conversation was between us. Most of it, the iceberg beneath the tip, was happening in his head.

“Because of you,” he said.

“Us?” I looked at Chunk and he shrugged. “What do you mean, Dr. Cole? Why because of us?”

“There's not much time,” he said. “I injected myself with Strain Two late last night. I'll be dead very soon.”

“Doc,” I said, “why don't you let us take you downtown. We can talk and you can get some help.”

He shook his head violently because he could not talk through the coughing.

“Can't,” he finally said. “Muscles aching, raspy, unproductive cough. Chills. Nausea. God, even diarrhea. So cold. I can't believe how fast this strain works through the body. My lungs are burning.”

“Why, Dr. Cole?”

“I knew you'd come back. I knew I didn't have much time. I need you to contact Dr. Herrera at Arsenal. Tell him to make sure he does an autopsy on my body. Give him my research in the van. Make sure he knows about Strains Two and Three. Make sure...”

The rest trailed off in a string of coughing.

“How did you know we'd come back?” Chunk said.

Cole smiled at him. “Dr. Bradley and her policeman bodyguard. I knew you'd figure that out sooner or later, though I confess I thought it would be sooner than this.”

I holstered my weapon. “Dr. Cole, you know you're not under arrest. We didn't come here to arrest you. You don't have to talk to us if you don't want to.”

The words came out of me automatically, a force of habit. Tell the suspect they're free to leave at any time, that you have no intention of arresting them, whatever they might say. It's the legal way to bypass the Miranda Rights and still get a suspect to confess.

“Please,” he said. “I'm dying here. I don't care about being arrested.”

Chunk said, “Dr. Cole, did you kill Dr. Bradley?”

“Of course I did.”

“And Kenneth Wade? The policeman?”

“Him, too.”

“And the looters near the garage?” I said.

He smiled, coughed into his hands, then nodded. “You must think me a regular serial killer.”

“I don't understand why, Dr. Cole,” I said. “Explain that to me.”

He coughed so hard that it rocked him off balance. He swayed drunkenly, teetered at the edge of the curb, and fell back onto his butt.

Chunk and I both ran forward, but he held up a hand to stop us.

“I'm okay,” he said. “It'll pass.”

“Tell us what happened, Dr. Cole.”

He put his face in his hands, then dragged his fingers through his cap of uncombed white hair.

“I told those fools at WHO about Strains Two and Three, and they laughed me out of their office. Then I'm out here, and I find that Bradley woman doing the same tests I'm doing.”

“Did you speak to her about it?”

He nodded. “I wanted to know what she was doing. That policeman told me to beat it.”

“But you didn't?” I said.

“How could I?” Cole said. “There are millions of lives at stake.”

“So you saw her again? You argued?”

“Yes.”

“She'd found evidence to support your claim of the two additional strains?” I said.

“Yes.”

“So, what happened then?”

“She was an idiot.”

“Who?” I said. “Bradley?”

“Yes, Bradley. She wanted to exterminate every bird in the area. Can you imagine that? She wanted to poison everything, kill all the chickens and the Mexican doves and the blue jays. All of them.”

“That wouldn't work?” I said.

“Of course not. You might be able to kill a lot of birds, but there's no way to get them all. And doing that also ignores the real threat. When the grackles come back in November ... when that happens, all the poison in the world won't stop the spread of the disease to the world outside of San Antonio.”

“But why kill her, Dr. Cole? I don't understand. Why not just report what she was doing?”

Cole didn't even bother to laugh at that.

“No good,” he said. “WHO intended to suppress the evidence in order to keep the public from going mad. And the local organizations are too corrupt or mismanaged by fools to make good on my research.”

“But you think Dr. Herrera will be able to do something with the information?”

“I hope so. He's the only one I trust. And now he'll have a human victim to report. That should give him the ammunition he needs.”

Cole suddenly seemed very frightening to me, talking about his own death like it was just a means to a higher end.

“Tell me about killing Dr. Bradley,” Chunk said, putting him back on track.

Cole just shook his head. “A small matter. Not like this,” he said, coughing and pointing at his chest.

“Humor me,” Chunk said.

“We argued,” Cole said. “Bradley and I. It got ugly. I was frustrated, so I went back to my van and got behind the wheel. That's when that policeman started yelling at me.” Cole nodded his head, in his mind back at that morning, seeing it all over again. “That smug bastard. He was yelling at me to leave. Saying he would arrest me if I didn't go. I got angry. He was maybe fifteen feet in front of the van. I put it in gear and stepped on the gas. I hit him with the front of the van and knocked him down. I think he hit his head on the curb.”

“What happened then?” I said.

“I was still so angry. I got out, took his hood and gas mask off, and started punching him in the face. I don't know how many times I hit him, but when I stopped he was dead.”

“Bradley was there?” I said.

He nodded. "I took that policeman's gun. Bradley was standing a little ways off, watching the whole thing, screaming like some bimbo in a horror movie. I walked over to her and shot her once."

"Where?" I said, meaning where on her body.

"Here," he said, and pointed to the correct part of his chest. "She knew I was going to shoot her at that point. She turned away from me, trying to run away."

"What about the two looters? How do they come into it?"

Cole was still looking inward and back in time. He chuckled.

"I thought of taking Bradley and the policeman to the morgue. From there, I thought there was a good chance they'd get lost in the system. I started with Bradley. I took off her clothes and dragged her back to my van."

"Let me guess," I said. "You were behind her, your arms under her arms, her feet dragging through the dirt?"

"That's right," he said. He looked genuinely surprised that I knew that.

"The bottoms of her feet were dirty," I said. "She had a gray toe tag—an autopsy tag. They rinse down the bodies after an autopsy."

"Ah," he said. He coughed, tried to smile. "That's good," he said. "It's like Jimmy Stewart said in that movie *Rope*. There's no such thing as a perfect crime."

"That's right," I said. I remembered the picture. Billy and I had watched it years earlier, the two of us on the couch with popcorn and beer, while Jimmy Stewart outsmarted two effeminate literati types. "All crime is by definition flawed."

He chuckled again. "I put her in the back of my van," he said. "Then I went back for the policeman. But before I could strip him, those looters showed up. Usually they're scared of the van, because they have a vague idea of the work I do, but these two gave me trouble. They wanted the cop's gun. I gave them each a bullet instead."

"Why didn't you take them all to the morgue?" I said.

"Too much time," he said. "And besides, those looters are like fleas. There's never just one or two."

"So you put Wade in the passenger seat of the van, hid it in the garage, and stashed the bodies of the looters in the weeds?"

He nodded.

“And you took the hard drives from the computers inside the van?”

“And the traps too. I didn't want WHO to have partial information. I wanted it to all go public at once. The equipment is in my van.”

I nodded to Chunk, who got on the radio and called in the Crime Scene Unit to process the van and an EMS unit for Cole.

“There's one part I don't understand, Dr. Cole,” I said.

He looked at me with pained, yellow eyes.

“How did you get Dr. Bradley's body onto the death wagon without anybody noticing?”

He looked away. “I won't tell you that.”

“Why not?”

“I had help. Someone who's not involved otherwise.”

I thought about that. I thought: I'm out of here tonight. What does it matter, other than to soothe my own curiosity?

“What if I told you that part was off the record? Just between you and me.”

He turned those yellow eyes on me again, and it was like he saw right through me, like he knew why I wanted to know, and why he could believe me.

“A man named Isaac Hernandez,” he said, and I drew a sharp breath through my teeth. I could taste the rubber smell of the inside of the gas mask I was wearing.

“He lost his entire family to H2N2,” Cole said. “I told him, if I found a cure for the other two strains, I would make sure his two remaining grandchildren got the first dose.”

“You lied to him,” I said. “You're not working on the cure. Just proving the strains exist.”

“True,” he said. “One more crime among many.”

“Is that remorse I hear, Dr. Cole?”

“If I were to feel remorse for anything I've done,” he said, “it would be for that, lying to him like that.”

He let his head fall between his knees and the coughing overtook him once more.

I stood up and looked around, at the trees swaying in the breeze and the birds flying overhead and the motes of light lancing down to the grass, and I felt sick to my stomach. So many lives wasted, and the living have all gone mad.

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Chapter 25

We left Cole where he was, sitting on the curb, neither of us wanting to go near him, even in our spacesuits.

His symptoms were that terrifying.

It took an hour for EMS to arrive. All that time we stood there, a short ways off, listening to him cough, watching him turn blue from the cyanosis, watching blood leak out from his nose, his eyes, even his ears. We stood there and watched that, a slow motion train wreck unfolding before our eyes.

I had seen thousands of people die from the mother strain of H2N2. In the early days of the outbreak, when the hospitals were still trying to care for everybody who knocked on their door, the horror was still fresh. My nerves were still raw then. But that had been a long time ago. Or at least it felt like a long time ago. I hadn't felt that way since Chunk's grandmother died. After her, I turned off a switch somewhere in my soul.

I believed that without really articulating it. I believed that until I saw Cole dying from Strain 2. He was going through the ravages of the disease so much faster than the folks who died of Strain 1. They took twenty-four hours or more to die, but Cole was being torn apart right in front of my eyes. All I could think of was that he was a single serving horror show, the best reason yet for wanting to leave San Antonio.

At one point he looked up at me, eyes yellow as egg yolks, and said, "What do you see?"

"What do you mean?" I said, trying to be cool, but still thinking he was terrifying, so willing to die such a horrible death. Put a turban on his head and I'd have believed him capable of blowing himself up in a nightclub in Tel Aviv, or driving a horseshit bomb of fertilizer and ammonia into a Federal building.

"Me," he said. "What do you see? Other than a pathetic old man."

"Are you asking me to say I understand why you did this? Why you killed four people?"

The corners of his mouth slumped, like he was disappointed, like I hadn't measured up to the image he had of me in his mind.

“No,” he said, “I don't care what you think about what I did. Even if you could understand my reasons. I'm asking you what you see. What does this look like to you?”

Cole ran his hands down his flanks, like he was modeling some kind of new fashion.

I looked into his eyes and shook my head.

“This is what's coming,” he said. “What you're looking at. Just a taste. Imagine this getting outside the walls.”

He hung his head between his knees and stayed that way for a long time.

“H2N2 scared the crap out of everybody because its numbers were off the charts. Sixty-five percent of the population infected. Eighteen percent mortality rates. That scared people. Eighteen percent. That's nothing compared to what's coming. Strain 2, we're looking at forty percent mortality rates. Add in Strain Three in the same population group, we're all goners.”

“Is that a medical term?”

“What? Goners?”

“Yeah.”

“Fits, doesn't it?” He smiled at something, a memory maybe, and said, “I told Bradley that same thing the first time I saw her out here. She told me I was a doomsayer. That's when I told her we are all goners.”

I studied him, looked deep into his yellow, sick eyes. He studied me back.

“You're thinking about leaving, aren't you?”

“I can't leave here,” I said. “You're under arrest. I'm required to maintain custody of you until you're brought before a magistrate.”

He smiled a creepy, knowing smile. “I don't mean that. I mean you're thinking about leaving this.” He opened his arms wide to include everything around us. “I mean all of this.”

“You mean, leave the city?” I said.

He nodded.

“Can't be done.”

“Of course not,” he said. “Can't be done.”

Cole rattled me. Not much rattles me, but Cole was something else. He had my number.

When Chunk came back from the car I asked him to watch Cole for a while.

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I just need a moment.”

I went back to the car, leaned against it, and listened to the silence. It amazed me the difference a few hours made. When we'd driven into the GZ earlier that morning, I was feeling like those streets were a retreat from the rage that kept the threat of riot right there in front of me, like a spring ready to explode. But now, after seeing Cole and the effects of Strain Two, I realized that there could never be any peace in this place, not in this city.

I heard the beating of wings. A flock of birds had set down on a fence across the street, one house to the left of the house where I'd found Bradley's van.

I watched that flock, and their black eyes stared back at me.

A feeling came over me, a need to see Carmenita Jaramillo again. There was something I needed to ask her.

I motioned to Chunk. He came over to me and said, “What's up?”

“There's someone I need to talk to.” I motioned towards Carmenita's house. “Over there. You mind babysitting him for a few minutes?”

Chunk looked at where I pointed, then back at me. He thought it was a bad idea. I could see it in his eyes.

“I'll be okay,” I said.

“You got your radio with you?”

I nodded.

“You holler first hint of trouble, you hear?”

“Thanks, Chunk.”

“For what?”

“For knowing me well enough not to ask any questions.”

I could tell he was frowning behind his gas mask. “Five minutes,” he said. “You're not back by then, I come looking for you.”

“I'll be careful,” I said.

I crossed the alley with its scrub brush growing wild and came up in Carmenita's backyard. A haze of dust hung about the yard.

As I stepped onto the porch I heard a cooing sound. The plank boards of the sagging porch creaked beneath my feet. It must have echoed through the house, for there was a fierce, panicked rustling, and then a wall of Mexican doves took wing and rushed out the doorway and windows in front of me. For a moment, my world was a terror of flapping gray wings and yellow, glassy eyes and angry squawks. I threw my arms over my face and turned away, and when the last of the birds had gone, I stood there on the porch, breathing hard and in a state of shock.

I didn't know what to do, and so I did nothing. I stood there, letting the silence wash back over me, until a weak, far away sounding voice called out my name.

“Carmenita?” I said.

“Yes,” she said, her voice coming from somewhere back in the shadows of the empty house.
“Yes, yes. Come in, sweetie.”

I put my hand on the doorjamb and peered inside, past the patches of sunlight on the warped, wooden floor and the hanging bouquets of dried herbs, to the ancient, mummy-skinned woman in the rocking chair in the far corner.

“Come in, Lily. You're letting the air-conditioning out.”

I felt like a penitent, and I didn't know why. I walked across the room, stood before her, her in her gray rags and tattered shawl draped over her shoulders and me in full biohazard containment gear, sounding like Darth Vader as I breathed, and then dropped to my knees.

We were eye level now, but I sensed she saw much more than I did. Or at least saw what was there much more clearly.

“You found something,” she said.

“Yes. Thanks to you. We found the man responsible.”

Her gentle smile never wavered.

“How did you know?” I said, meaning the chocolate cake, not the crime we'd just solved. “How did you know what I needed?”

“It's not magic. Far from it. What I do, it's read the things you tell me in your eyes.”

“I don't understand that,” I said.

“Some people are easy to read,” she said. “Especially honest people. You, you are easy to read.”

I shook my head, still not understanding.

“Sometimes you won't get an answer. Not one you like.”

“Carmenita, I...” I didn't know how to finish what I'd started to say. The words stuck in my throat thick and hard as a walnut and wouldn't come loose.

“You are still looking for something?”

“Yes.”

“Something bigger than over there.” She waved a gnarled, yellowed hand in the direction of her backyard.

“Yes.”

“Why haven't you made your mind up yet?” she said.

“Excuse me?”

“You know what I'm asking you. That, over there, there was a time when that was all you wanted. When that was enough. But now finding answers to questions like that doesn't satisfy you. Now there's something bigger in front of you, and you can't make up your mind about it.”

I coughed a little, choking back a tear that came without my knowing it. Hadn't I made up my mind? I knew what was really important. My family. They mattered more to me than my career, my reputation, even my oath. Why then the confusion? Why the nagging self-doubt?

“You ask hard questions of yourself,” Carmenita said. “The questions are harder than they need to be.”

“What questions do I ask?” I was trying to be tough now, defensive for no reason. Hadn't I come to her for a reading?

“You are leaving.”

The words came out of her quietly, but they rolled over me like a sand storm.

“How did you know?” I asked. “Is it written over my head or something?”

“Hard decisions are like shouts into a canyon,” Carmenita said. “They leave echoes behind. What troubles you is not how hard the choice is, but how easy it is. You wonder if you are right when the decision to do something so big is so easy to make.”

I hung my head a little. “Yes,” I said.

“You wonder why your conscience isn't at ease.”

“Yes.”

She was silent for so long that I raised my eyes to hers. Her black eyes sparkled like obsidian in the sunlight.

“This is a wasteland,” she said. “This is no place for a child. Leave here, and if you ever doubt that you have done the right thing, look into your child's eyes and be at peace.”

My mouth opened, but I didn't speak. I couldn't.

“Go,” she said. “They are calling you.”

I rose to my feet, still looking into her eyes, and from somewhere out in the backyard, heard Chunk yelling my name.

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Chapter 26

Cole died in the ambulance.

We had his body taken to Arsenal, with a hold placed on it for Dr. Herrera. Chunk and I then went looking for Dr. Herrera himself, the idea being that we would tell him personally what to expect. But that never happened. We were met on the main floor of the morgue by Lt. Treanor and Dr. Laurent. Both, it seemed, already knew about Cole.

“You did good work,” said Treanor, shaking our hands. All of us wore gloves. “I understand you got a full confession?”

“That's right,” I said.

There were two SWAT officers standing a short distance away, both of them armed with MP5s, nasty little machine guns. There was something about the way they were watching our conversation with Treanor that made me think something was very wrong.

“You'll send me a copy of the Prosecution Guide, I trust?” Treanor said.

“Yes, sir.”

Laurent stood a short distance behind Treanor, her eyes little green pinpoints of hate in her fat, round face.

“Lieutenant,” she said. The impatience in her voice was palpable.

He glanced over his shoulder at her without turning all the way around, looked back at us, and sighed.

“Do you have the property from the crime scene?” he said. “The hard drives and Dr. Bradley's journal?”

“Yes, sir,” I said. “They're out in the trunk of our car.”

He nodded. Then he turned to one of the SWAT officers and waved him over.

I watched the officer approach.

“What's going on, sir?”

The officer stood next to Treanor. “I need the keys to your car,” he said.

“Sir?”

“Your keys,” he said, his voice icing over. His expression made it look like he'd just tasted something unexpectedly bitter.

I looked at Chunk, but his face was unreadable behind his surgical mask. Only his eyes flashed, and those only for the briefest moment.

“Detective Harris,” said Treanor, his hand open, palm up in front of me.

I reached into the pockets of my sweatpants and pulled out the car keys and dropped them in his open palm.

He handed the keys to the SWAT officer, who left without a word.

“Lieutenant,” said Laurent, only this time her voice was softer, a note of satisfaction in it that made my blood boil.

Treanor stared at me, then at Chunk, then back at me.

“I've already been in contact with the District Attorney's Office,” he said. “The two of you are under a gag order as of right now. You are to go back to your office, write your Prosecution Guide and your Charge and Disposition Report, and submit them directly to Assistant DA Carnahan. She'll be standing by.

“Once you've turned in your report, you are prohibited from discussing the matter with anyone. Is that clear?”

He kept looking right at me, waiting for me to open my big mouth. Ordinarily, that would have been a sure bet, but this time it didn't pay off. I could read the writing on the wall, as plain as I could see the contempt in Laurent's face. I knew right then that Herrera would never perform an autopsy on Walter Cole's body. I knew that his sacrifice, as insane as it was, had been for nothing. All of it was for nothing. Three people were dead—five if you counted the looters—and not one of their deaths would matter.

I imagined turning over my report to the DA, who would promptly take it to the deepest well she could find and dump it in. It would be like that scene from the end of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, where the ark is unceremoniously stuffed in a plain wooden box and filed among thousands and thousands of other unknown secrets. My report would be like that, a secret kept by fools, too proud to realize that's what they were.

Treanor was still looking at me, waiting to shut me down when I objected.

“I understand, sir,” was all I said.

He frowned with his eyes. “Well, okay then. Carry on.”

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Chapter 27

When everything was reduced to paper and turned over to Assistant DA Carnahan, Chunk and I walked across the Scar's parking lot in silence to our cars. We could have said something about what was obviously going on, but we didn't. We could have talked about the injustice of it all, of the thousands, even millions of lives that Laurent's pride was putting under the hatchet's blade, but we didn't.

As I drove home, my fingers wrapped so tight around the steering wheel you'd have thought I was hanging from it, Chunk's headlights bobbing like corks in a stream in my rearview mirror, I thought about that quote by Edmund Burke, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”

I read it in one of my back issues of *Vogue*, though in *Vogue* they'd added and women after good men.

I left the crowded buildings of the city and entered the rolling, unlit blackness of the foothills north of town, all the while asking myself if I was doing the right thing. I had knowledge, after all, knowledge of evil things in the making, and isn't knowledge supposed to be power? Was I doing the right thing by turning my back on millions of lives, just so my family and I could go free?

I thought about that hard enough and long enough to give myself a migraine. It worried me that maybe I was on some kind of slippery slope. I used to pride myself on staying away from the black market, and then I bought from it. I had never lied, either expressly or by omission, on any police report I'd ever written, yet I intentionally neglected to mention Isaac Hernandez' involvement in Dr. Bradley's murder. And now I was planning the ultimate betrayal of my official trust. I was about to turn my back on my oath to maintain the peace and dignity of the City of San Antonio in much the same way as I would snub an ex-boyfriend I'd caught cheating on me. There were good reasons to back me up on all those little sins I'd committed, but I wouldn't be me if I didn't stop to really beat the issue to death.

I had to ask, was I really doing the right thing?

When I pulled into the driveway of my house and turned off my car, I was still torturing myself, wondering about right and wrong.

Chunk pulled in behind me. He got out of his car and popped his trunk. He took out a small black duffle bag and two heavy, stiff blankets that he'd lifted from the SWAT office.

I was still gripping the steering wheel when he walked by my door.

“You okay?”

I nodded, but didn't let go of the wheel.

A sharp square of buttery light appeared at the front door, and then Chunk and Billy were shaking hands.

“Lily?” Billy said.

The car door was open, though I don't remember opening it, or if maybe Billy had opened it.

He held out his hand to me.

“Lily?”

I took it and stepped out of the car.

“Connie?”

“She's asleep,” he said. “She doesn't know anything yet.”

“Good,” I said. That was as we'd planned it. We didn't want her to get any more scared than she needed to be.

At least I could save her from that.

Billy and I already had our bags packed. Connie's too. We'd kept them under our bed since the day Billy had found out about the hole under the wall. Now, as I looked at the three small duffle bags and realized that they contained everything with which we were to start a new life, I balked.

Carmenita's words came back to me. I had made a huge decision with unprecedented ease, and the smallness of the bags, and the scope of the job they were to perform, made me question the sense of what we were about to do.

And then it hit me. It wasn't the moral quagmire of oaths and betrayals and black markets that was bothering me. It was the prospect of starting all over again that scared me. When I looked deep inside, that was the skeletal fear that stared back up at me.

I went to the kitchen and met up with Billy and Chunk. The three of us spoke in hushed tones, like burglars in the night.

"We need to go soon," Billy said. "We need to use as much of the night as we can."

"We're ready, aren't we?" I said. I looked from Billy to Chunk and back to Billy, my eyes questioning theirs.

"Everything's set," Billy said.

"But?"

"But I was telling Billy I need to do something first," Chunk said.

"What?"

I looked back and forth between them again. Billy looked at his feet. Chunk stammered.

"What is it?" I said.

"Gram," Chunk said, suddenly looking much smaller than his six-four, two hundred and sixty pounds. "I want to see her again."

"Oh," I said. "Hmmm. Okay. Okay. We've got time for that."

"Thanks," Chunk said, unnecessarily, and then went out the backdoor and out across the lower end of the property where his grandmother was buried. It was a clear night with a thick sliver of yellow moon high in the sky, and I could see his large form in silhouette clearly until he entered the shadows of the trees.

When he disappeared into the shadows, Billy took my hand and squeezed it gently. His hand felt so warm, so comfortable.

"What are you thinking?" he said.

“I’m scared,” I said. “Really terrified.”

He nodded.

“You know, it’s not even the getting out of the city part that scares me. Not the helicopters or the troops on the ground. It’s the starting over part that scares me. We’re going to have to make a whole new life.”

He was quiet for a while, quiet enough I could hear him breathing.

“No,” he said finally. “It’s not a whole new life.”

I turned to look him in the eye, a question hanging there between us.

He reached up with one hand and pulled my mask down. I started to protest, to hold it in place, but then stopped and let him do it.

He pulled the mask down under my chin and stared at my face.

I reached up and pulled down his mask. The two of us stood there, lost in each other’s faces, seen whole for the first time in a long time. A very long time.

“It’s not a whole new life,” he said. “It’s new circumstances, a new place. But you and I are still here together, and we still have Connie. We’re whole. Only the place names change.”

He touched his fingertips to my cheek and brushed away a tear.

“I love you,” he said. “I’m with you every step of the way, and that won’t ever change.”

Billy and I stood on the back porch, watching Chunk trudge back to us, head bent down, heart heavy. I knew something was wrong even before he stopped on the bottom step and looked up at us.

“What is it?” I said.

He had been crying, his face still wet. It was something I hadn’t seen since his grandmother died.

“I’m not going,” he said.

I felt Billy’s body stiffen against my arm.

“No,” I said.

But he wouldn’t let me finish. He held up his hands and stared at us with eyes so full of sorrow that everything I would have said just evaporated away.

“Please don't,” he said. “You need to go. You have a reason. I don't. Everything I've ever had is here. Everything I'm ever going to have is here. Let's not talk it to death. You guys need to go. Just you guys.”

I swallowed hard, then nodded.

Billy squeezed me close. He said, “Go wake up Connie. It's time.”

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Chapter 28

I held Connie in my arms. Billy carried our bags. Together we ran down to the creek and cleared the brush away from the raft Billy had made of coffin pine. It looked like a surfboard to me. I sucked in a breath, realizing how slim our chances really were. Billy pushed it into the water and waded in so that he was waist deep in the inky, muddy water of the creek. He stood next to the raft, steadying it, so that Connie and I could climb on board. Once we were in place, Billy pushed himself onto the raft and we all settled into our places. I spooned Connie and Billy spooned me. Chunk, on the shore, spread the SWAT sniper blankets over us and covered the blankets with brush. The idea was that we were a piece of scrub brush that had broken off a nearby tree during the last storm and was now floating harmlessly down the water. That was what we hoped the helicopter patrols would see, anyway.

I lifted a flap of the blanket so that a little sliver of the shore showed. Chunk was there, our house behind him in the distance. He raised his right hand and showed his palm. Not a wave, just an open hand, a forever goodbye. We floated down the creek, the world around us graveyard quiet, and I watched Chunk. His hand was raised the whole time, and he was going, going, and finally gone. We were alone, the three of us, lulled into the quiet by the gentle lapping of the water against the raft. I felt Connie breathing in my arms, and I reached over the back of her head and kissed her cheek. In the dark, I imagined her smiling bravely.

“Mommy?” she said.

“Yes, honey.”

“What's going to happen?”

“We're going to leave here, honey. We're going someplace safe.”

“Why?”

Not where, why. The hard question.

“Something bad is coming, Connie. We can't be here when it gets here.”

“What about Uncle Reggie?”

I cupped her hands in mine. She was holding the blue jay Billy had made her tightly in her fist. I thought about how a single blue jay will attack a pack of wild dogs to protect its nest before I answered her.

“Uncle Reggie will be okay,” I said, and prayed that wasn't a lie. “Quiet now. Shhh.”

We'd planned it out without really getting too specifics. There hadn't been time, and we hadn't really known how. Neither of us had ever escaped from hell before. Billy had gone down to the creek the morning before with Connie's binoculars and a can of orange paint. He'd poured some of the paint into the water and watched the cloud as it drifted down stream with the intention of timing it—to see how long it would take us to drift the third of a mile from our house to the wall.

The only trouble was, the cloud of paint either sank, or became so diluted it became invisible. He tried the same thing with a Coke can, but it kept getting caught up in the brush along the banks of the creek. In the end, he had to give up the experiment and settle for a big unknown. And so we drifted for the better part of an hour, coming closer all the while to the horror of freedom.

It was a warm, clear night, not unusual for late August in San Antonio, and we had been in short sleeves before we got in the water. But afterward, after we'd spent all that time curled up together, feeling scared and claustrophobic and blind and wet from the water that constantly lapped over the sides of the raft, we began to shiver. Connie especially was feeling the cold, and she shook in my arms like an epileptic.

I spoke to her in hushed, easy tones, telling her it was going to be okay, that it was almost over, but still she shivered.

She said she wanted to go home.

When we heard the first helicopter pass overhead, she began to mew like a kitten and my quiet reassurances changed to harsher “Shhhs” and “Stop that.”

I was scared too, and I tend to bark when I'm scared.

It didn't help.

The helicopter passed overhead then backtracked. Their routine patrols were never the same, or, if they followed a pattern, it wasn't one that I could ever figure out. The pilot's whim seemed to be the only deciding factor, and the pilot of the helicopter above us seemed happy to spend his night flying over the same patch of ground time and time again. Just our luck.

The blankets over us made us invisible to the helicopter's night vision equipment, just as it kept us from seeing the world beyond the banks of the creek. But I could see enough to know what the crew of the gunship was doing. They were in random patrol mode, not actively searching for anything, their spotlights groping the ground like a blind man's fingers. Several times they flew

low over us, so low that the wash from the rotors beat on the blanket as if it were a cleaning woman beating the dust out of an old rug on a wash line.

Connie began to scream and writhe in my arms. Billy and I both pleaded with her to be quiet, but she couldn't, the poor thing. She was way too scared. The sound of the helicopter drowned out her screams. The ground on either side of the creek flickered in the spotlight.

I grabbed Connie and pulled her tight. "Stop it," I said. "Look at me."

She screamed again, her eyes closed tightly.

"Look at me," I said. "Look at me."

She opened her eyes, her face still twisted by the scream.

"Connie," I said, my voice quiet. "It's Mommy, honey. Look at me. We are going to make it. We are going to get out of here. Stop moving."

Suddenly she went limp in my arms. Her legs stopped kicking mine.

"I'm scared, Mommy."

"Me too, honey."

I squeezed her tightly.

Everybody reacts to extreme fear and stress in different ways, and most of those ways are bad, counterproductive. But children Connie's age seem to have the gift of being able to shut down. That's what Connie did. After fighting in my arms like a feral tomcat about to get its first bath, she went to sleep. She just went limp, groaned, and fell asleep. I envied her. We drifted the rest of the way to the wall in relative quiet. Connie slept, and the gunship meandered off farther down the length of the wall.

The front of our raft bounced off the heavy, weed-choked grating that allowed Vespers Creek to pass through the containment wall. Billy slid into the water and held the boat steady while I woke Connie. This part of our escape was going to be tricky. The storm had washed out enough of the bank just to the left of the grate that we could slip through, but we would have to get out of the water and push the boat through the hole. It wasn't as easy as floating to safety.

Once I had Connie safely on the bank, on her belly and covered by a sniper blanket, I examined the hole. It looked like it was going to be a tight fit to get the raft through it. Billy hadn't been able to get close enough to measure it, after all, and he had been forced to guess how wide the hole was.

I put my hand on the wall and was shocked at how cold it was against my palm. Only then did it occur to me that I was actually touching the walls that for so many months had dominated my life. I was touching the outer limits of my prison.

“Help me push it up there,” Billy said.

I grabbed the front and pulled. Together we got it right up to the hole and pushed.

It was too big. By less than an inch. We tried it every which way, but it wouldn't go through. We tried to dig the hole wider, but the soft dirt was just a thin skin over solid rock. We tried to bend the grate and gave that up almost immediately. Under the sniper blanket, Billy and I looked at each other, not knowing what to do.

“Should we leave it here?” I said.

“Somebody may spot it.”

“What about putting some brush over it?”

He looked at the hole again, at the baggage and the food and the supplies we'd stowed on the raft and said, “Damn it.”

“We'll carry it,” I said.

“Yeah, we're gonna have to.”

We off-loaded our stuff, then stashed the boat in the weeds next to the bank. As Billy was covering the raft and I was helping Connie stash our bags into the hole, I heard the sound of the helicopter again. Our pilot friend was coming by for another pass.

“Billy,” I said. “The helicopter.”

“Shit,” he said, and frantically piled twigs and grass and anything else he could find on top of the raft.

“Hurry,” I said. I know from experience that the equipment on those helicopters can pick you up long before they're close enough for you to see or even hear them, and Billy was standing in the open, without the protection of the sniper blanket.

“Hurry,” I said.

“Got it.” He hit the ground and rolled toward the hole where I tossed half the blanket over him just as the spotlight legs of the helicopter walked over us.

From under the wall, under the blankets, we listened as the helicopter continued on with its patrol. The sound retreated into the distance until it was only a bad memory.

“That was close,” I said.

Billy's face was covered with mud. When he smiled at me, his teeth looked white as clean cotton.

“We're still going,” he said, and kissed me on the mouth with his muddy lips.

We slid through the hole, crawling on our bellies, and slipped into the water on the other side of the wall. Once we were through, I had a moment when I felt like Lot's wife. I just had to look back.

I don't know. Maybe I expected my first breath of air on the other side to taste sweeter. Maybe I expected the containment walls to look different from the other side. But none of that happened. The air still smelled like water and hummus, and the walls looked just as ominous, a tall, dark sheet against the sky.

“Mommy,” Connie said, tugging on my t-shirt. “What are we gonna do now?”

A good question.

“We're gonna wade through the creek till we get to the Guadalupe River,” I said. “From there, we'll drift down to Culver Falls. We can get on a bus there in the morning and it'll take us far away from here.”

“Where, Mommy?”

“Some place safe, honey.”

We put our arms around each other, squared the blankets over our heads, and together, as a family, made our solitary way out of hell.

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Chapter 29

On October 1, less than two months after we escaped San Antonio, Billy pulled the beat up 1984 Chevy pickup we'd bought from a used car lot in Billings for seven hundred dollars to the curb on the main street of a small town called Morgan's Creek, Montana.

A slushy, wet snow fell, as I got out and ran to a mailbox that stood in front of a tiny drugstore.

I smiled at the gray sky, at the brisk, cold wind on my cheeks, turning them apple red. I hadn't seen snow since I was a little girl, since the same year our beat up Chevy was made. In fact, when San Antonio got buried beneath a freak desert snowstorm of 14 inches, and the whole city ground to a halt for three days, was the last time I'd seen snow.

Even in the grayness of it all, I could look down the street and see the snow-covered mountains rising up into the sky. It felt good, and I felt good, stronger.

Morgan's Creek had a population of twenty-eight hundred people, fewer than the number of cops in San Antonio, and they were good people. They welcomed us, the young couple and their daughter who told everyone they were from Houston and were looking to escape the grind of the big city, and as I looked to the truck and saw Billy and Connie smiling back at me, I prayed that things might really be getting better for us. Maybe here, in the mountains, we could escape the coming storm.

It was with that hope in mind that I dropped my package into the mailbox. The package contained a one hundred and seventy page manuscript, describing everything that had happened to me and my family during our stay under quarantine. I asked only that my family's new location be kept a secret.

I told about Bradley's murder, about Cole's theory, and about Laurent's reckless pride. I told about the cover up, and the truth about the anarchy that constantly threatened to boil over in San Antonio's streets.

My prosecution guide was included. So was a pirated copy of all the evidence Laurent had prevented me from giving to Dr. Herrera, the copy I had made on the equipment in Cole's van while we waited for EMS and the others to arrive. I even tossed in a copy of Bradley's journal.

I sealed it all up and addressed it to Samuel Clayton Walder, a science writer whose work I'd first read in National Geographic, but who was now working for the New York Times.

I ended my one hundred and seventy page manuscript with an urgent plea for him not to ignore the importance of the information in his hands.

“Millions of lives are risk,” I wrote. “Don't drag your feet on this. Tell the world. Make sure they're ready. In less than a month, the first wave of grackles will pass through San Antonio on their way to Northern Mexico. If the world isn't ready by then, WE ARE ALL GONERS.”

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About the Author

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Joe McKinney is a homicide detective for the San Antonio Police Department and a full time writer. He has also served on the SAPD's Critical Incident Management Team, where he helped coordinate San Antonio's responses to large scale flooding, hazardous materials spills, and the mass evacuations of New Orleans and Houston following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. He has a Master's degree in Medieval Literature from the University of Texas at San Antonio, and currently writes in a wide range of genres, including horror, mystery, and science fiction. Author of the novels *Dead City* and *Peacekeepers*, he has been nominated for the Horror Writers Association's Bram Stoker Award.

He has also published nonfiction articles on Texas history and his various culinary interests. It is rumored he makes the best batch of chili in Texas.

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