

**H5N1**

**Code Name: GREED**



**Jacqueline Druga-Johnston**







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## **DEDICATION**

To my husband and children for all your love and support



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**Jacqueline Druga-Johnston**







**1.**

***Hello***

The silence was the worst.

The dead, thickening silence that filled the air like a mental bomb waiting to detonate and explode my sanity.

It had a ring to it at times. Growing louder and louder, until I'd shout inside for it to 'stop'.

Just stop.

I'd combat the silence with my own creation of noise. Mini speakers blast movies, the news, old videos of my family. Recording of my own voice was another female talking back to me. Anything to give me noise. What I wouldn't have given to hear the annoying teenager drive down the street with the bass speakers 'thumping'. But that's gone. It's all gone.

Creating airwaves of something was part of my daily routine. One has to have a daily routine in that situation. Also a plan. I had a plan. To implement I had to wait, wait for the weather to break until nationally the weather was semi universally mild. Safety was an issue. The longer I waited, the safer I knew it would be. I had all kinds of excuses for not forging ahead.

I wish I could say I was content where I was, but I wasn't. Too timid to go forward. Maybe.

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I also had much to get ready ...

Who was I kidding; I had been getting ready for the journey since I devised the plan.

To be honest, venturing out scared me. It scared the hell out of me. More than ... *they* ever could scare me.

Even though I held hopes that being by myself would not be forever, I still would have to go out into a world alone. Completely alone. Leaving all the conveniences of the palace, I'd truck almost barbarically, on limited resources, picking up what I needed as I went along.

Although to call my vehicular means 'barbaric' was a stretch. Each day I added something new to it, making it more and more like a mini-mobile version of the palace. Perhaps that's why I gave it the lame name Palace Two.

Palace Two was part of my daily routine, as well.

Of course, the longer I worked on Palace Two, the better she became. But the longer I took, the harder it was to leave.

More on the journey later, right now, back to the noise. Or rather silence.

Admittedly, it was the last thing I noticed. Probably, because it disappeared slowly, ticking away. Simple footsteps went from louder than usual, to echoing.

The every day noises dissipated into the wind. There were times in the beginning I swore I heard a plane, or a car, something. But nothing was there.

No children laughing, no talking, no birds. All of the sounds you take for granted, the background droplets of human life ... gone. Vanished.

How many times did I repeatedly yell out, 'hello' just to have the only response be the echoing and bounce of my very own voice?

The wide open streets surrounded by tall buildings

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became modern day caverns of what used to be.

You see, the world ended. It faded away. Life as I knew it faded away painfully, and almost slowly, until it was completely gone. Until all that was left was a world void of everything I ever loved and hated.

I envision some time in the future visitors from a far off place will find this lush and fertile planet and wonder what had happened here. Hopefully, there will be some answers. I have them, but I'll be long gone by then. I have the answers in my heart, mind and on the pages of a diary I suppose will disintegrate with time.

The silence and the dissolution of this world beckon my constant battle with insanity. It is a daily war that rages against me. One I haven't figured out whether I want to win or lose. It never mattered, I guess. Especially in the beginning. When I realized what my role would eventually be, I figured who would care if I were crazy, if I lived or died. Who would know? To the best of my knowledge, after it was all said and done, I was the only one left. I ... was the last woman standing on the face of the earth.

### 2.

#### *All in a Day*

“Lisa.”

I swore I heard the call of my name. The male voice woke me.

Eerie, dragged out, deep, and long.

“Lisa.”

But I didn't. I didn't hear anything but the ringing of my wind up alarm clock. I always set the alarm, I sleep in intervals. I have to. My hand slammed it down, I was particularly tired that day. It was about seven months after the complete and utter finish. Still partly winter, but it had warmed, the sun blasted through the slight opening in my curtains. I hated the thought of getting out of bed. It was going to be cold, I knew it. The fire in the fireplace had long burned out. I knew it would, even sleeping only three hours. I needed to get more wood. I underestimated my need. After all, it was March.

Staying under the mounds of blankets, I twisted my body, turned, and sat up in bed. I slipped on my shoes, and grabbed the giant robe I wore around the palace.

The palace.

I called it such because that was what David Hyde called it when he built it. An addition to his small home, a huge room with a kitchen, own entrance, and obnoxious

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fireplace. Plus, David was a survivalist. He had a generator in the basement of his home. I fired that up only once a day. It was a pain in the ass to keep it filled with gasoline.

I knew David from my previous life. The life I led before all went to shit. Moving into David's house was my best option. My own home held too many painful memories, and was actually too far away from easily obtaining what I needed. David's house set on a small bit of property just outside the city limits. Close but not too far. Not as far as my house was from the city. His paranoia of being so near the crime of the city made him build a small wall surrounding the property. That worked in my favor. The property and the wall. Secure.

First thing was first after I got out of bed ...

Coffee, a hot shower.

Water still ran. Not a problem with that. I wouldn't drink it, though.

The generator fired up with ease, a simple pull of a switch, rumble of a motor, and I was off. My one and only time a day I fired it up. Sometimes I'd use it more, like when I needed to charge the batteries on things.

I prepared the coffee, filling the huge pot with bottled water.

I'd need more.

My stock was low. I placed that on my list as I switched the pot on, and grabbed the huge insulated urn that would keep my brew warm for hours.

It would be easier to have electricity. I did. Even after it shut down, I managed to get it up and running again. But *they* kept on reversing everything I did. Each time I went to the power station, within days, they'd shut down what I turned on.

So I gave up. Mad as they were, it baffled me as to why

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they wouldn't want electricity. Who 'they' are will come later. I promise. How they came to be is just as important as the 'who'.

The shower felt good. It was a quick one. Even though the lengthy time it took to rinse my hair told me I needed to cut it. After dressing, I peeked out the main window. Once and a while one or two of them would be hanging about around the wall. Those were the daring ones, or rather stupid ones. Laughable ... waiting for me. I'd say watching for me, but their impaired vision became almost blindness in the sun. It was comical watching them try to find direction when there was too bright of light. Plus, the ultra violet rays of the sun, even minimum, reeked havoc on their sensitive skin.

They were about during the day, just not always out and about.

I grabbed a handful of dried cereal, it was getting stale. I knew before long the boxed items would be useless. Chomping, I grabbed my handheld computer and booted it up. The power light indicated I was good. I had some time left. I made a notation to get gasoline. It was fast approaching when I'd have to recharge all of my battery operated electronics, and I usually did that in one evening with the generator.

Gas. Water. Flour ... yes, I'd make a pan cake, I thought. Something sweet. Darrin's birthday was coming up. Placing the stylus back in the unit, I glanced once more out the window.

"Sector 52 today," I spoke out loud, turning my view to the stuffed moose head that hung on the wall by the window. "Oh, sorry. That's the area near the lake. I know. I know. I'll be careful."

Grabbing the gun holster, I strapped it over my



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shoulder as I stood before the window. The sight made me pause and step closer to the pane of glass. "I knew it. See?"

One of them.

Dead, I suppose. Certainly not napping in the bright sun. It wasn't moving.

Yep. Dead. Not an unusual occurrence to see them dead here and there.

I gave a nod of arrogance to the moose.

How many times did I take it off the wall at first? Four? Five? Finally after the bare spot wore on my nerves more than the head, I put it back up. It was David's trophy. It was wrong to remove it; after all, I did steal his house.

The moose head had those wide open eyes that seemed to follow me around the room. It was the eyes that made me start talking to it. Not always. Just every once and a while.

My coffee was good, I enjoyed that with a cigarette and an old newspaper, one I must have read at least twenty times. I was ready to go.

I placed on my leather jacket, expecting it to be cold, and grabbed my rifle which perched by the door. Living in one room had its perks, that addition David built was my living room, bedroom, kitchen ... world.

The rest of the house was shut down and the addition had its own entrance. I left. Securing the locks behind me.

Down the stairs and to the outer door which wasn't secure at all, and I stepped outside.

My car was right there, and by it, three empty gas cans. I tossed the gas cans in my car, and grasped a moment to take in the early spring air. It was just as chilled outside as it was in the palace. Odd.

Time to head out.

I drove down the driveway, not very long, fifty feet

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maybe, and stopped to unlock that gate on the concrete wall. The wall was high, and I was able to add barbwire on top. I really didn't worry about them climbing over, even without the barbwire. As I mentioned before, semi blindness was their downfall. I worried more about their wayward aim, and reckless behavior.

After securing the fortress wall around the palace, I stopped to look at the other side of the wall. Was there anything new? Yes. I knew they were there the night before. I sensed them.

The new spray-paint was very visible, runny. A new phrase, 'Die Beast', was added to that graffiti on the wall. Probably about the tenth time that was written. I had to laugh. Couldn't they be original? Plus, their limited sight inhibited them from truly taking advantage of all the empty wall space, and a lot of the spray painted phrases overlapped.

Funny.

The brave ones. The more insane ones, finding their way to the palace, thinking they could get me. I have to give them credit.

My car waited and so did my day. I had things to do. The wall was my daily reminder of another kind of war I raged. My war against them. The entourage of words was partly their retaliation.

In the beginning I left them alone. For a short time. Actually, we all left each other alone. But then they broke free of the chains that bound them, and in doing so, inadvertently began a war with me.

One they really weren't ready for. Informing them of what they did to initiate, did no good. They lack comprehension, so therefore they didn't comprehend at all why I brought on the battle.

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They took the first step and I carried on the push. An outside observer would say this war is mine, in part I would agree. My war. One I intended to finish, die trying, or until I moved on.

A cold front moved across the city of Cleveland, brought on by the lake. It made for a bitter winter, and too cold to hit during the winter months.

The snow piled up on the streets making it virtually impossible to get about. I used a snow plow to get things I needed. I thought I was going to die that first winter. I believed mother's nature's flurry fury would also clean house of them.

No way could they survive the winter.

Some of them did. A lot of them did.

From a tall building I could see smoke emerging from fires they made to stay warm.

During the winter, when weather was bad, I worked on my map. Dividing the city into sectors. I would spend my days searching each sector of the city. Looking for items I would need for my plan, for survivors, for ... them.

It was during one of my earliest searches that I got the idea for it. It was the graffiti on the survival wall.

Words written on a wall, 'Mary Ellen Doyle is Alive and went to Aunt Martha's.' I found it one day, and added my name to it, while I took down the addresses of all the destinations people were going.

Some of them had to have been alive after it all went down. They had to. And like me, they were out there, holding on to hope that they weren't alone.

Looking for others. Avoiding ... them.

The graffiti also triggered another thought. At that point I was diligently writing in my diary, pages after pages. I had

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always journaled but more so historically once everything began.

Being a realist, I knew that time, weather, and everything else would erase my words and degrade the paper. I also knew that if it was a future generation to find my words, or a distant world civilization, even if my words remained, there was a chance that my thoughts and historical notes would all be in vain. It could be a language they didn't know or understand.

If I ended up being the last one. When I died, I couldn't let what happen to this world die with me.

How?

How to keep it intact, get the facts out.

That was when it dawned on me. I was staring at a hand drawn picture of Jesus Christ, one done on the side wall of a bank. I had seen it before, and it obviously wasn't a new addition to the post dead world.

The picture.

I would do it in pictures. Simple pictures, hieroglyphics, like the cavemen, or Egyptians.

My God. What if civilization was modern before? What if it, too, died out? What if the cave men weren't as barbaric as we pictured them? Just the ones that remained were the survivors, like me, and left to start all over in a world that had blown up. Start from scratch. They told their story in pictures. So that those in the future who found the message would understand and no language barrier would hold the knowledge back.

Creating hieroglyphics weren't as easy as one would think.

They had to read. Be easy. Simple. And put on an object that wouldn't easily deteriorate.

Along with my notes, I created hieroglyphics. It took

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time to create each section of the picture, and I added many chapters to the whole story. A story that was far from over when I started to chisel the etching into pieces of granite.

I wrote, chiseled, and then I buried them.

The sector was empty, not like I didn't expect that. A few bodies huddled together, I guess to keep warm during the worst months. It was difficult to tell if the bodies were actually 'them' or not. Just laying there. They weren't decomposed much, so they weren't dead for long.

It wasn't the ice age, for crying out loud. It was cold but not impossible to survive. Burn something. Or maybe, they just didn't want to live.

I made it through the list of items I needed. The gas cans were filled and so was my tank. I carried with me a generator pump that helped me pull gasoline from reserves. All around the city, I had the equipment to do so. Twice 'they' burned down a gas station.

Idiots.

After the second fire got out of control, they never did it again. They couldn't see well enough to know what they were doing.

Another vain attempt at retaliation.

I returned home to the palace, just before four PM. Short day. I worked some on my most recent hieroglyphics pictures, read a little of Stephen King, and took a nap.

The sun was down when I woke. I wasn't sleeping long, an hour maybe. The coffee started to get cold. I could reheat it on the stove, but I wanted to eat. I was hungry. I hadn't really eaten all day.

Man, did I miss the days of takeout food. How often did I live off of takeout?

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I grabbed a can of beef stew and decided what I wanted to do that evening. I decided to splurge, fire up the computer, use some generator power and play a game of chess. That always ate up a lot of time.

While my dinner heated, I poured a short glass of bourbon. The crash of thunder and flash of lightening caught my attention.

A storm?

The skies hadn't predicted such.

Walking to the window, I peered out. Lightening flashed again.

It was nature's fireworks that not only reminded me that I forgot to turn on the outdoor spotlights, but the reason for which I do so.

"Assholes," I murmured.

Two of 'them' were climbing over the back wall. Both entangled and stuck in the barbwire.

The bright spotlight caused them both to raise their heads. They still tried with diligence to get through. I guess they were so used to their skin burning; they didn't pay attention to the cuts.

Setting down my drink, I lifted my rifle. The scope was already attached, so I saved myself from having to get that. I snatched up the binoculars and moved to the deck doors.

The cold air blasted me when I stepped outside.

First I scoped for more of them back there. I didn't see any other than the two caught up. After I was secure that they were my only two visitors, I raised my rifle.

My marksmanship was second to none, after all I had plenty of enough time to practice, and the scope made it especially easy.

The first shot fired, nailed the one in the side of the head. And the second one, well, he raised his head as if to

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give me a better target.

One shot there.

Center forehead.

They both laid limp, twisted in the wire mesh.

I'd clear them in the morning.

One more look told me my property was secure, and just to make sure, I walked outside to check out the front gate.

"Two of you are dead," I shouted. "Anyone else?"

There was no answer.

"I'm waiting."

I gave it some time. No one responded at all. I was hoping they would. I stood there thinking, 'come on, show yourself'.

I felt them, I always felt them around. But I couldn't see them.

The spotlights worked well, and I headed back to the palace.

My dinner was bubbling, almost burning, and that irritated me. I remarked they were assholes again, and shut off the stove.

I went back to the window and just stared out.

I hate them.

I hate them all.

They are not who I am, or those who have died. They are somewhere in between. I can recall being scared of the fact that I could become one of them. When I knew that wasn't going to happen, my entire attitude changed. From fear to contempt. From tolerance to loathing.

I could care less if they all died, or if I killed them.

The reaper of destruction chased them down, but they escaped its clutches only slightly. Now, it seems they run from *my* clutches.

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Life as I knew it ended over the course of a summer. We are what's left, and that's a shame.

I fear they will be the next generation. A tomorrow, filled with 'them'.

The world had a future once. A path it was going to take. But that path changed. I believe the world still has a future, but God forgive me, I will do my best to make sure it is a future without ... them.



3.

*Infinity*

June 4<sup>th</sup>

Going back.

As vital as the aftermath, how the end came to be is just as important. It tells what occurred, how I evolved, the world and them.

I chose this particular day, this particular starting point because I believe that day defined who I was as a person. Plus, that was the day, the clues settled in. I recall the clues, but I brushed them off. Everyone did.

It was a particularly warm June day.

The television played. A newscaster or something. I heard it. I didn't look up. I was too busy sitting on that bench tying my shoes. *'Authorities in Indonesia are investigating another suspected chicken flu outbreak. Poultry workers are being tested for the H5N1 strain...'*

Mid tying my shoes, I raised the remote and flipped the channel.

*"And the Pirates are in the lead, four to one."*

"Yes." I smiled.

Snap. The lace broke.

"Fuck," I grimaced. "I just bought these."

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"You don't realize your strength," Joan, a friend, and employee at Saint Mark's stood above me with crossed arms.

"I go through laces. I don't know why." I made the best of the short lace and stood up.

"I was surprised to see you come in this time of the evening."

"Sometimes I make exceptions." With a smile, I walked to the locker room mirror, and adjusted my hair. I needed my roots done. My lighter brown hair looked black against the growing line of highlights. "I'm already late, too. I have to meet my mother in law she wants to start planning Suzie's baby shower."

From behind in the mirror, Joan looked at me inquisitively. "Baby shower? Already? I thought she wasn't due until September."

"She isn't. We want to have the shower in August. But you know my mother in law when it comes to her daughter. Plus, she says she knows me. I'm a last minute Nelly. Procrastinator."

"True."

"And Darrin doesn't help. He keeps telling his mom that she has to stay on me."

"Your husband is an instigator. In a funny way."

"Yeah." I smiled. But that smile quickly dropped.

"Dr. Marshall. Paging Lisa Marshall. Please report to the ER nurses' station."

"Shit," I winced.

"Darrin?"

"No, he'd page my phone. I know who it is."

"How?" Joan asked.

"When I was coming out of Mrs. Macey's room, I spotted the Lowenstein's. She is constantly coming to the

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ER with chest pains. I couldn't tell you how many times the service calls me about it. I tried to duck away, didn't say anything, but had a feeling they saw me, and knew when they saw I was here, they'd take advantage."

"Maybe it's not them."

Again the receptionist called over the hospital intercom. "Paging Dr. Lisa Marshall."

I said, "One way to find out."

"Good luck."

"Thanks." I gave a pacifying smile to Joan, grabbed my bag, and left the locker room.

On my way to the nurse's station, I hoped that it was just Darrin trying to reach me. Perhaps my phone wasn't working, or the service failed him. They were possibilities. I wasn't your typical, best of everything doctor. I opened and ran a clinic on the outskirts of the city. I would have loved to be in the city, but taxes were too high. We treat low income families, and a lot of senior citizens on Medicare.

We survive on a very minimal staff, and get our money from donations and the government. I have a few doctors who come in to volunteer once and a while, I also am blessed with interns. Funny. The interns always act moved by the 'free' care and help they give, vow to return, but only two have.

Most of what I make financially goes to the malpractice insurance, and what is left, my salary is laughable. I know the nurses at the hospital make more than I do, mostly everyone clears more than I do.

It's OK. I honestly do get a feeling of being rewarded from what I do.

I suppose I could get a job at a real hospital, or start my own practice, but I highly doubt the paycheck could replace the satisfaction I got.

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I loved being a doctor. I didn't get in it for the money, and my daily life proved that.

Figuring if I presented myself as if I were ready to run out the hospital door, than maybe the nurses would handle the situation for me.

They liked me. I wasn't arrogant and demanding like a lot of doctors. At least I didn't think I was.

Making my approach, the sound of it made me pause. It was something I heard many times before. The barking cough of a child. It grew louder and steady. I slowed my pace down and peeked in the room. A mother held the hand of a small child. A child maybe three or four. I moved on to the nurse's desk.

The coughing continued.

Lynn was working at the nurse's desk. She seemed distracted, busy, but the ER wasn't any busier than I usually had seen it.

Continuous. Why was that continuous cough drawing me?

"You paged?" I asked Lynn.

"Oh, hey, Lisa, yeah. We did. I ..."

"Lynn, about the kid in room ten."

"That's not why we paged you."

"No." I shook my head. "Has anyone been in there?"

"Not yet. We have about four breathing cases. Short staffed. Asthma season has kicked in."

"When will someone be in there. Because that's not really sounding good."

"Wilkins is the resident on duty."

"Get him in there or tell him to order a pulmonary team stat. You got an o2 reading yet on the monitor?"

"I just checked a few minutes ago it was at 80, low but good."

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I made a face. I guess the look said to Lynn that I was second guessing hospital procedure. OK. All right. I do that a lot. I can't help it. Not so much that I second guess, but I just don't understand how they prioritize their emergencies.

"Lisa?" Lynn said my name with a bit of annoyance. "Wilkins will get to him. Right now, he's doing stitches."

"No one else on call?"

"Don't you wanna know why you were paged?" Lynn asked.

"Lowenstein."

"Yep."

I exhaled. "What ..." my head turned. The cough didn't sound right. I was focused on it when I heard that all too familiar voice call me.

"Dr. Marshall." It was Mr. Lowenstein.

"Oh, hey, Mr. Lowenstein." I gave him my attention. "I was just getting my page. What's going on? Your wife having chest pains again?" Admittedly, I was torn between him and the new deeper, cracking sound of that cough.

"Actually," he said. "We have just got back from vacation and ..."

"Can you ..." I held up my finger when I heard the oximeter alarm sound off. "Can you excuse me one second?"

"Dr. Marshall," he called my name.

I raced into room ten. My stethoscope was out of my pocket and my eyes were on the oxygen level of the kid.

Forty-four.

Shit. Too low.

My rush of movements must have alarmed the mother, she scooted out of my way.

"What's going on?" she asked.

I raised the child, his face filled with blood and he

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turned deep red.

“Oh my God,” she hurried to the bed again.

“Hold him up,” I instructed and pressed the nurses call button. “Lynn, get me a team in here stat.”

“What’s going on?” the mother asked again.

Whipping forth my stethoscope, I put it on my ears and placed it to the child’s chest. “This isn’t asthma.”

“It ... it isn’t?”

I shifted the stethoscope. No breath sounds emerged from the left lung. That told me it had deflated. Another move of the scope, and cough from the child gave me more information. I extend out a hand to the nurse’s call button. “Lynn we have a pneumothorax of the left lung, and a bronchial obstruction. I need a suction catheter stat.”

I didn’t have time to worry about the fact that I wasn’t a staff doctor; the child’s welfare was at stake.

While waiting the seconds for the catheter, which seemed like an eternity, the mother and I lifted the boy.

“What’s his name?” I asked.

“Jeff,” she answered.

“Jeff.” I softly patted his back, hoping that whatever it was he was trying to cough up would loosen. “Jeff, you are being such a good boy.”

A break. I heard a break emanate from his chest. Not like a bone, but rather a break in his struggles. As if that one cough was productive for a split second.

“One more minute, honey,” I pleaded. “Pretty soon the ...”

Then it happened. With a hard arch of his chest, Jeff heaved a cough that jolted his head forward and from his open mouth, to the back of my hand ejected his obstruction.

Jeff stopped coughing. He hyperventilated some to

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catch his breath. I murmured out another ‘good boy’, but my focused stay on the substance that rested on the back of my hand.

His mother asked, “What is it?”

“Phlegm,” I said.

“It’s bloody.”

“Uh ...” I stuttered for the words. “He probably broke some capillaries trying to get it free. But we’ll run some tests.” I wasn’t sure at all about what I said. Slowly, I turned from the bed and walked to the counter. The phlegm did not budge. Not at all. It was more than just blood laced; it looked as if blood had mixed with the phlegm to create a new color. And it was thick. Too thick. No wonder the child was struggling.

Carefully, I removed the glove. The motions didn’t disturb the sample at all. I grabbed a specimen container and placed the glove inside. As I reached for the lid, I heard Lynn.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

I turned. “Obstruction is out. But he needs a chest x-ray, and more than likely a chest tube for the pneumothorax. Have Wilkins order them.”

“Got it.”

At that instant, Wilkins walked in. A young kid, maybe not even thirty. He was good, but still ill equipped to handle multiple emergencies at once.

“Thanks, Lisa,” he said. “How is he?”

“Collapsed left lung. I think we’re looking at sixty percent, but an x-ray will tell more. He had a bronchial obstruction which he coughed out. But can you ...” I waved him over as I inched to the counter.

Before he acknowledged my beckoning, he gave medical orders to Lynn regarding an intravenous and test, and then

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joined me at the counter.

“What’s up?” Wilkins asked.

“Order a test on this,” I whispered as I handed him the cup. “This was his obstruction.”

Wilkins peered at the specimen. “What is it?”

“Sputum.”

“Sputum?” he asked with surprised. “It looks like Jell-O.”

“It doesn’t move. It’s thicker than Jell-O.”

“OK, well.” He capped the lid. “This will get tested. If his body produced this once, he can produce this again.”

I nodded. I wanted to add to it that he also needed to find out why the boy was producing such a foul, thick sputum. But that would have been insulting to the doctor, so I refrained. Instead, I wished the mother well and luck, taking stock in the fact that the boy was stabilized. After receiving more words of gratitude from the mother, I grazed my hand over the child’s leg, and departed the room in search of Mrs. Lowenstein.

Following my hospital obligations, I wasn’t too late to meet up with May, my mother in law. I was agreeable to everything she suggested, and that got me out of there rather quickly. Although my marriage to Darrin wasn’t conventional, and we cohabitated out of convenience and habit, I still treated his mom as my own. Perhaps his family was one of the reasons I never really ended it with Darrin.

Darrin. Don’t get me wrong, we loved each other. We never fought, just as the years went by, we never got the spark we thought we would.

We had talked about divorce many times, so that both of us could move on with our lives. But he was consumed with his writing, me with my career and it didn’t make sense



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to be apart.

Not when financially it worked together. Plus, as I said we got a long.

I arrived home. Our front door had a mini entrance way that led directly to the living room. My normal routine was to walk to the couch, drop my purse and find my husband. I was surprised to see him sitting on the couch, watching the news.

"Everything Ok?" I asked as I walked in.

"Yeah, why."

"I thought you'd be working on the edits."

"Check this out, Lisa. I finished three chapters. My publisher will be proud."

"I'm proud." I leaned over the back of the couch, resting my arms, leaning forward. "Where's the baby?" I asked of Amber, my daughter who was actually five.

"Sleeping. It's nine o'clock."

I looked at my watch. "Shit. It is. Did you eat?"

"Pizza. There's some left. My mom said you were late."

"Yeah, the Lowenstein's got me at the ER."

"Mrs. Lowenstein again?" he asked. "Chest pains?"

"Actually, no."

He turned some, finally looking at me. "No? Really?"

"Yeah. They just got back from vacation. She caught a cold. I told them it was climate changes. They took a European cruise. Here, to salt air, to damp air, to here."

Darrin chuckled. "If they can afford a cruise, why do they go to your clinic?"

"They're still on government health care. Plus, they like me."

"Europe, huh?" Darrin pointed the remote to the TV. "Maybe it's the chicken flu."

I playfully smacked him. "It's not the chicken flu."

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Besides, they were in Europe, not Indonesia.”

“Too bad they weren’t in China then. Or they’d have that new flu.”

“What new flu?” I asked.

“Look at the ticker tape.” He indicated to the bottom portion of the TV and started to read. “Two new cases this week have been reported, bringing a total of twelve so far for the month. Doctors are still unable to identify the strain.”

I rolled my eyes. “They will eventually. There’s thousands upon thousands of strains of flu.”

“I think it’s a biological weapon. They played around and it got loose.”

I laughed. “You said the same thing about SARS.”

“I still believe it. And once they identify which weapon it is, they deliver an antidote, and you never hear about it again. Like SARS.”

“It’s the writer in you talking. Every year it’s something. I’m gonna go change my clothes and get some pizza.”

“Lisa,” he had a joking tone to his voice. “As a doctor, you should pay more attention to these mystery viruses. Twelve people so far.”

“OK. Point taken. But I’ll wait until we see triple digits, then I may show concern about. Until then, I’m not gonna think about it.” I kissed him and then mussed his hair as I passed him in my exit. And I kept true to my word; I didn’t think about it.

4.

*Brevity*

June 13<sup>th</sup>

Friday the thirteenth was weird enough to me, but never have I had that feeling of superstition reiterated by attending a funeral.

Mrs. Lowenstein passed away.

Her death left me bewildered and even questioning my doctor abilities. Being in the clinic environment that I am, working with the elderly, I really was accustomed to death. I didn't like it, but I was adjusted in the fact that the elderly eventually die. Sometimes for no reason, just out of old age, loneliness, or underlying illness never found.

I didn't go to every funeral, but I tried. Thank God there weren't many or a daily routine.

As I said, Mrs. Lowenstein's death baffled me. There were no clinic hours Friday afternoon, and by the time I returned to the clinic after the funeral, things were calming, and the fill-in doctor had taken care of all.

I pulled Mrs. Lowenstein's chart.

Daily I visited her on my morning rounds. Even once stopping in to see her in the evening.

Noted.

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That was on the eighth. Two visits. Morning and evening. She had viral pneumonia and was progressing nicely, better than expected.

On the ninth, I saw her in the morning. Seven AM. I told her it looked as if I would be releasing her soon, and went on my way.

Three hours.

Three hours later I was summoned to the hospital.

What had happened?

Not only had her fever spiked, her glands had swollen to the point that they began to look bruised.

The mumps?

No.

Testing again came up viral pneumonia.

Her lungs didn't sound filled, but yet she had a hard time breathing.

By six she was moved to the intensive care unit. By midnight she was on life support

Exactly twenty four hours later. Almost to the minute of my morning rounds, I was there when she passed away.

Struggling to breathe. Heart rate fading. Fever raging.

Gone.

I turned to my notes again. Her chart.

What had I missed? What had I missed?

Admitted June fourth ...

I scanned the chart.

X-rays, blood work, breathing treatment, and obstruction removed ...

Stop.

Obstruction removed.

June 6<sup>th</sup>, bronchial obstruction removed. Clinical test of sputum showed viral pneumonia.

I recalled them phoning me about it, and requesting

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testing. The Doctor on call didn't think much of it, actually, he found it normal with a woman her age, who had smoked for that many years and who had pneumonia.

He didn't worry. I didn't worry.

Bronchial obstruction...

Damn it. It dawned on me. I picked up the phone and dialed.

"Hi, this is Dr. Lisa Marshall from South Point clinic, would Dr. Wilkins be on duty." They told me he was, and they would see if he could take my call. It didn't take long.

"Lisa, hey. What's going on?" Dr. Wilkins asked.

"Not much," I replied. "I have a question. Do you remember about ten days ago, maybe less, I was in the ER and I helped out with a little boy?"

"Bronchial obstruction. Viral pneumonia."

"Was that confirmed?" I asked.

"I couldn't tell you. It was suspected. His family doctor would know more."

"Any chance you giving me his family doctor's name."

"Hold on, let me see if I can pull him up. I don't even know if I recall his last name. Do you even remember the date?"

"No, I ..." I paused. How stupid. Mrs. Lowenstein's chart was right in front of me. She was admitted the same day. "I do. It was June fourth."

"Let me pull up admissions for that day."

"Thanks."

I sat back and waited, I could hear the clicks of his fingers on the keyboard.

"Wow," he commented.

"Wow? What?"

"Lots of admissions that day, looking ... looking. Got it. Jeffrey Graves. Four years old."

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"That would have to be him."

"I'll pull him up," Wilkins said. "Yep. Him. Admitted on June fourth for breathing ..."

Silence.

"What's the matter?"

"Lisa, he ... he died," Wilkins said sadly.

My heart sunk. It literally sunk. "He died? When?"

"Here at the hospital. June eighth."

"Viral pneumonia?" I asked.

"That's what it says."

"Was an autopsy done?"

"No, no need since the specimen was confirmed at viral pneumonia it was linked to the cause of death."

"Oh, my God," I whispered. "It's June."

"OK."

"It's not a common time for pneumonia, so why do we have two cases, two deaths in ..."

"Lisa. Who was the other death?"

"A patient of mine."

"Elderly?"

I hated answering him, but I did. I knew where he was going. He was going to comment on the fact that elderly and young succumb to pneumonia easiest. Asthma, established breathing problems, those patients were breeding grounds for pneumonia.

By reviewing the emergency room admissions records, Dr. Wilkins informed me that Jeffrey had a history of severe asthma attacks and pneumonia.

So did Mrs. Lowenstein.

What was I looking for, he queried. Nothing was there.

Maybe he was right. Maybe I was overreacting. After all, why would I even look for a link? It was absurd.

I thanked him for his information, help, and advice and

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ended it. However, despite the fact that I told him I'd let it go, I still couldn't get Jeffrey or Mrs. Lowenstein off my mind.

I was to meet Darrin for coffee and maybe lunch if both of us felt hungry. That was after he went to the post office. He always made a huge ordeal about the post office. I thought that obsession would change once he became a published writer and stopped sending out submissions and samples of his book as if trying to hit the lottery.

Just about the point I convinced him to self publish, he got that long awaited for letter.

I thought ... finally. The stamps, envelopes, the neuroticism when there was no mail, I thought it would all stop.

It didn't.

Darrin was the epitome of the eccentric writer. When I met him in college, OK, I was in college; he was working as a host at the Skate-a-Rama. He had ambitions to be a writer always. He ended up working for his dad in security, writing while he did that, while I went to school. I vowed, that when I became a doctor, he could be that stay at home partner and concentrate on his writing.

He did. It was even more convenient after the baby was born. I just wished at times I made more money.

Mr. Eccentricity was late. I arrived at the coffee shop first, and tried to anticipate what far fetched story he would conjure up as a reason for his tardiness. Darrin always had a story. He insisted they were true, but there was no way. He would never own up to the fact that he got caught up talking.

At least that's what I thought he was doing. I mean, I

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went to the post office with him before. He knew everyone there and everyone's business.

'Hi George. How's the wife?'

'Hey, Mary, did you get that new car?'

'Helga, how's the toe?'

Everything about everybody.

I grabbed a latte and proceeded to find a table. He'd be there soon. A read-through newspaper, badly refolded was on the table. The newspaper was flipped and the inner stories showed instead of the headline. Shuffling the paper aside, the small, page four column caught my attention.

The headline 'Too Early to Tell' didn't grab me as much as the sub headline, *'Last Hurrah, Could be Frightening New Beginning'*

The first line said it all.

*Health officials are investigating whether the recent rash of influenza cases is a late hurrah of the flu season, or something completely different.*

*Many are speculating that the timing is odd, and there could be a connection to the recent outbreak of avian flu in Asian.*

*Avian flu is not easily transmitted from birds to human, and in the rare cases of human avian flu there is no evidence to support it is passed from human to human.*

Some epidemiologist said.

*Besides, there are no known cases of avian flu in Europe, where there's been a very recent surge of flu cases. Where's the connection?'*

Travel, I thought the answer to the newspaper question. But, if avian flu is not transmitted from human to human then ...

Next line.

*Pigs to human.*

*Avian flu to pigs ...*

I murmured out the word, "Swine."



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"Now is that any type of word to call your husband," Darrin caused me to jump with his invading words and quick kiss to my cheek. "Man, are you deep in thought." He sat down at the table. "Sorry, I'm late. I was in the store and some old lady got her foot caught in the line of carts. She ..."

"Have you been following the avian flu stories?"

"Huh?"

I turned the newspaper to him.

"Oh," he said nonchalantly. "Yeah, but ... there's bird flu cases every year. This article has to do with the summer flu they have in England."

"You heard about it."

"Hasn't everyone?" He looked at me, studying my face and seeing that I hadn't heard. "I guess not."

"When did the news of this pop up?" I asked.

"Only a couple days ago," Darrin answered. "But if you trace the flu map ..."

"Flu map?"

"Oh, sure they're all over the net," he said. "You'll see that flu cases were in China first."

"The article suggests that they are connected."

"Some experts say they aren't."

"Boy, you really are up on this," I said. "I read where the experts said that. But what if it jumped to pigs and the pig version mutated ..."

"Ahh .. hence why you called me a swine." Darrin nodded. "You think it went from Avian to pigs, and mutated into a variant of the Swine flu."

"Could be."

"Yeah, could be. But ..."

"You don't think?" I asked. "No connection."

"No. Like I said, we get avian flu reports every year."

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Then he stated matter of fact, "I think it's a biological weapon."

Had I been sipping my latte, I probably would have choked when I laughed. "Darrin, you think everything is a biological weapon. You thought SARS ..."

"Still do." He held up his finger. "China, North Korea, whoever, they work on that sort of stuff. We do, too. Only, I think China plays with it. They have so many people over there; they test on a small village, see the results and hope it doesn't get out of control."

"Darrin, that's horrible."

He shrugged. "Or it could have been an accident. Either way. Bio weapon. One virologist said she tried to break it down, and it wasn't natural. Like with SARS, it was a soup of a bunch of illnesses."

Quickly, I grabbed the paper and tried to find that.

"Oh, it won't be there. I read it on the net. They won't print that stuff in the newspapers they are afraid of scaring people."

"Was this one of those conspiracies sites?"

"Well, yeah but ..."

I sighed and pushed the paper out of the way. "That's not tangible proof."

"Thirty deaths aren't?"

I looked at him quizzically.

"Yeah, that's what's died in Europe."

"Still thirty people of the flu," I said. "The US has over thirty five thousand deaths a year."

"This time of year?"

I hesitated, but answered. "Not usually. Darrin are they saying if this has any symptoms?"

"Just flu symptoms."

"Nothing weird?" I asked. "Not even on your

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conspiracies site?”

He chuckled. “I thought you said that wouldn’t be tangible.”

“I’m ... I’m curious. Anything weird.”

He paused in obvious thought. “Not really, just normal ... oh.” He shook his head.

“What?”

“You’ll laugh. Even I found it hard to believe.”

“What?” I pushed.

He waved out his hand. “They just said that the chest fills up with such a thick fluid that ...”

“Oh, my God,” I whispered.

Darrin must have thought my reaction was funny. He chuckled my name. “Lisa. Look at you being the worry wart. Gees. Look at the bright side. I’m not worried. Wanna know why? My wife is a cool doctor at a clinic. If this was something of concern, you’d get one of those nifty health alert bulletins. Which you didn’t. It’s over there.” He grabbed my hand. “There aren’t any cases in the US.”

Slowly I looked from our joined hands, lifted my head and locked my worried eyes with his. “That they know of.”

<><><>

Darrin was not only convinced, he got that nervous twitch in his stomach over it. The Lowenstein’s were easy. They had been to Europe, so it wasn’t hard to figure out where it came from. But what about Jeffery. Could he have been out of the country? I placed a call to hi mother and left a message for her to call me.

Most of the rest of the afternoon was spent researching. There was so much to learn about the virus. I had called the Centers for Decease Control, and they referred me to their

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website, which bred nothing.

As a physician I asked to speak to someone with whom I could make a report. They connected me to some doctor who took my information, thanked me and said they'd look into it. Then she assured me that the recent outbreak in Europe was being grossly exaggerated for media purposes.

I tried to take comfort in that, but it was difficult.

My biggest concern was how contagious was the virus. Was it as contagious as the normal flu? If so, and the new strain was virulent then the world was in trouble.

"What about the Health Protection agency?" Darrin suggested.

"Never heard of it," I replied.

"Well, that's because it is in the UK. It's like our Centers for Disease Control. It's their CDC. Only it just started in 2003. Around the SARS thing."

"You think we should call them?"

"Well, they are the ones dealing with it over there. They may have more information."

"Or they may clam up."

"Can't hurt to try."

He was right. We looked up the information and number and called overseas. Fortunately it was just at the end of the day and we were able to reach someone. It took a few call transfers and finally I was connected to an epidemiologist. Not a report taker, or assistant or investigator.

"And you're a physician in America?" he asked.

"Yes, I am. Lisa Marshall. I run a clinic here. I'm looking for information about this flu you are fighting over there."

"What type of information?"

"Is it like the normal flu? What is the communicability

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rate, incubation period, so forth?”

“Can I ask why?”

I hesitated. “I have a feeling a patient of mine contracted it on a recent trip to Europe.”

“I see. Did you contact your own health ministry?”

“I did. They said they’d look into it,” I replied. “They didn’t seem too concerned.”

“Why *are* you concerned?” he questioned. “What makes you sure that this isn’t normal flu?”

“My patient had the every day sniffles. We admitted her for high fever and she was in turn diagnosed with viral pneumonia. All this didn’t strike me as odd, but the obstruction did. See, she and another patient I saw had a bronchial obstruction that was unlike any I’ve ever seen.”

“Describe it.”

“Thick, like jell-o. Brown as if mixed with blood.”

“You said two patients?”

“The one was a boy,” I said. “I can’t confirm if he left the country.”

“How are they now?”

“Dead.” I answered. “I don’t know about the boy, but in the case of my patient. She was making a full recovery then bam, within a day she deteriorated and died.”

“Do you know why I am asking these questions?”

“To establish that I know the unique characteristics of this flu.”

“Exactly,” he said. “And since you know about this flu, you might as well know other things that aren’t being let out.”

“By your government.”

“By the urging of the World Health Organization.”

“It must be panic causing information.”

He didn’t respond to that statement, he merely said,

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“Do you have an email address?”

The audible signal that I had mail brought the information from my UK associate.

A few whispering, “Oh my God’s,” and Darrin couldn’t take it.

I clicked on ‘print’, and allowed the document to print up.

“What’s going on?” he asked. “What?”

I stood and walked to the printer. “You told me thirty deaths in Europe, right?”

“That’s what the paper said.”

I lifted the print out. “That was last week. We’re up to three thousand now.”

Darrin immediately sat back in shock. “Infected?”

I shuffled to the next sheet. “Estimated 12,000 with about 40K not symptomatic yet. This isn’t including any deaths from Asia. He made a note that they aren’t releasing official numbers, but the rumor is it’s triple this.”

“That can’t be right. You would think we’d hear about it on the news.”

“The information is frightening,” I said. “If it gets on the news people will panic.”

“Better to be scared and prepared,” Darrin said.

“Yes, but how do you prepare for this.”

“Face masks. Gloves. Isolation.”

I fluttered my lips. “If it is airborne that’s useless. If this thing gets out of control and doesn’t get contained. It’s useless.”

“Come on,” Darrin ridiculed.

I sat back down. “Darrin, this thing is ...” I paused.

“What?”

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"This can't be right."

"What?" he badgered.

"The communicability rate. It's ..." I looked at him. "100%. Meaning anyone who is exposed to the flu, gets the flu. I never heard of that."

"What is the fatality? Does it give that?"

I read on, and when I found that information I swallowed and looked up. "They can only predict fatalities."

"It's a hundred percent."

"More like 99.99."

Darrin tossed out his hands. "Well, that helps. Why is it predicted?"

"Because it's early," I said. "Incubation is seven to ten days. And the victims die with in seven to ten days of contracting it."

"So most people are in the full blown flu stage."

I nodded.

"OK, wait." Darrin held up his hand and took on a tone of reason. "You said they are claiming everyone exposed to the flu, gets the flu. But ... how easy or hard is it to really be exposed."

I looked over the sheets for my answer. "It's not here."

"So, we don't know if it is passed through blood, spit, whatever. It doesn't mean it's in the air."

"That's true."

"I guess waiting, and time will tell," Darrin said.

"Or ..." I stood up. "Come on." I folded the sheets.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"To see how communicable it really is. I didn't think about it today. I am now. I shoved the paper in my purse, and hurried to the door with urgency for Darrin to follow. "Seven to ten days to show symptoms. If it's easy to catch, there's one way to find out."

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When we arrived at the Lowenstein's there were still cars in the driveway. Perhaps left over from the funeral, visitors and such. I hated to intrude, but I need to speak to Mr. Lowenstein. I didn't get too much of a chance to at the funeral. He was surrounded by family and friends, in their embrace ...

I remember when I thought that. Terror struck me at the thought of all those who embraced him, kissed him.

But I had to get that out of my mind. I didn't know anything.

We stood on the stoop and rang the bell.

A younger woman answered, maybe in her twenties. She seemed pleasant enough. "Can I help .... Oh, Dr. Marshall?"

I looked inquisitively at her.

"You don't remember me, do you? I'm Linda Lowenstein."

"Meg's daughter. Yes. I am so sorry about your loss. I did see you at the service." I shook her hand.

"Come in." She widened the door.

"This is my husband, Darrin." I introduced as we stepped in.

"What can I help you with?" Linda asked.

"I was wondering if we could speak with your father for a moment."

Linda drew an apologetic voice. "I'm sorry. He's lying down."

"Tired from the long day," I suggested.

"Actually, no. He's not feeling well."

Darrin jumped in. "He's sick? What's wrong?"

Linda waved out a nonchalant hand. "Nothing much. Nothing to worry about," she said. "He just has a touch of the flu."



5.

*Music of the Past*

The flu.

I don't think a day went by when I didn't think about illnesses. The fire in the fireplace 'popped and cracked' startling me from my thoughts. The record had played through. The palace was silent.

I walked to the fireplace and adjusted the fire, adding another log. The hardware store still had plenty of logs and I thought I had picked up enough. 'One more batch' I kept on telling myself, then the weather would get warm.

The record hissed as the arm of the old Victrola stayed in one place. I thought it was a great idea on my part to find one. Never would I need batteries, I could just wind it up. An old antique store on Fifth Avenue had one on display. I scooped up that bad boy right away. However, my selection of music was limited. Actually, the selection of music was where the idea came from.

In the first floor storage room of David's house he had two cartons of old vinyl records.

So ... when I listened to music, I listened to David's collection.

Simon and Garfunkel were my selection for the night. They had a few songs that seemed as if they were theme

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music to my life. Music saddened me. Not so much the lyrics or sound, but the thought that I would never hear a new song again ... that saddened me.

No new music. No new books, TV, movies ... nothing. Gone.

It started to snow, not hard, but wet flakes, it seemed. Standing close to the window fogged it up.

I couldn't believe it was snowing again. When was it going to stop? Had I not been 'waiting' I would had left long before winter set in. But once it did, I vowed to settle until the end.

Until I was ready to move on with the plan.

I originally planned to go south. But, like I said, things happened.

The idea of spending another cold Cleveland winter gave me chills-no pun intended. Funny thing was, every year, without fail, I caught a cold in October and in January.

It was first time ever I had not gotten a cold or the flu. No massive amounts of people, no germs, I suppose.

Have you ever thought twice about a common cold? Ever gave it an in-depth thought? Most individuals never did. They'd simply sniff, sneeze, cough and say, "Oh, I got a cold." Or "Damn allergies."

Only when a person felt 'really' bad for too long did they seek medical treatment. Unless of course, it whacked them right away.

Darrin was the exception to that rule ... always. Anytime more than one person got ill, that he knew, he was always saying, "Well, it's the plague. We're overdue."

Whereas a normal person would just be surprised at how many people came down with the same thing at the same time, and think no more about. Never would the average person entertain the thought of plague. It was too

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morbid.

Unless of course, like I said, it was Darrin. Then again, Darrin wasn't normal. He tried to write a plague book once and scared himself so badly he started to develop symptoms of his plague.

He stopped writing the book.

I found it after it was all said and done. I treasure everything he wrote.

The norm.

If it seemed normal, why worry?

Mrs. Lowenstein was my first patient victim of the new flu. Had she been normal she would have never come into the Emergency room. She went to the emergency room for everything.

Greed was the name given to the virus/flu/new strain. The name wasn't given when it started to circulate; actually it was given to the strain in the seventies when it was developed. That way, foreign countries could pass over the airwaves that The United States has Greed. Or the US now has its share of Greed.

The onset symptoms of Greed were no more severe than the average cold or allergy attack. Actually, in some cases less severe.

But there was one symptom that was unique, never seen in the common cold. It was the tell tale sign I looked for in patients. It was the one thing that told me more than any blood test.

At first I overlooked that symptom on that email the kind epidemiologist sent me. The one with all the facts and symptoms that weren't being released.

But upon deeper reading and studying, I saw it.

That list. That email. I kept it, and still have it in my possession.

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The Simon and Garfunkel album had reached the half way point. Again, that evening I had drifted back into my thoughts, losing all track of time.

But it didn't matter. Time didn't matter. Not at that point.

In a box on the kitchen counter, I kept the three page email. The list was folded and hid there, like I had to hide it nine months prior. Yes, I actually had to hide it. Being in possession of that list made me a criminal, as I had later learned.

Snow falling, making a rain dance sound against the window, I grabbed that list and pulled it out. Aside from the printed material, I had handwritten notes as well, my own discovery. Thought I often liked to reflect back on.

I thought I heard a noise outside, from the paper, my head cocked and I glanced to the window. I cleared the fog with my hand. Nothing. They wouldn't be there. It was too cold. They'd die.

Then again, that was a good thing.

Moving the lantern I placed it on the sill for easier reading. If they were outside, staring up, I suppose I was a well lit vigil. Encased in an orange, foggy glow as I read the list.

More than likely, they failed to see the light around me. They saw dark. All dark. To them I was a beacon of sorts, a beacon of death. In more ways than one, that was true.

6.

*Arresting*

June 16<sup>th</sup>

My clinic wasn't big by no means, or elaborate. We were two end shops combined at the end of a strip mall. Located right next door was one of those new age places. There they did psychic readings, yoga classes, and amongst other things, belly dance instructions. Often while seeing patients we could hear the tambourine music seeping through the walls.

Once they had a tension release session and people were yelling left and right.

All part of sharing space.

Clinic hours started at nine AM on Mondays. I'd do my rounds at the hospital and head on in. I liked to get to the clinic at least a half an hour before appointments, but that day I was running late, and it was nearing nine.

The parking lot was crowded, and that didn't strike me as odd. Often the new age store would hold early morning events that would bring in a lot of people. I found a parking spot six stores down from the clinic and hurried there.

The second I opened the door I was pelted with the orchestration sounds of coughs and sniffles. The waiting room was packed. I actually slowed down when I walked in.

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A few patients called my name, but when I saw Maryann stand up from behind the reception counter, I walked her way.

“What’s going on? Did we overbook?” I asked.

Maryann was frazzled. “The phones been ringing off the hook since I got here,” she said. “Joan called off, she broke her wrist last night. I didn’t overbook, people are just walking in. They were here when I got here.”

“All these people?”

“And I am getting more and more phone calls.” Maryann pointed to the phone.

“We can’t see all these people. I’m the only one here. Tell them if they don’t have an appointment and they feel bad, go to St. Mark’s.”

“Will St. Mark’s take them?”

I chuckled airy. “They’re gonna have to.”

“But, they’re all claiming they have the flu.”

I froze. My God, it all had slipped my mind. I eased my worries when I spoke to Mr. Lowenstein and he was feeling a hundred percent better. Yes, his wife started making a recovery too, but that was after a bad bout with the bronchial obstruction. Mr. Lowenstein experienced none of that. Chalking his illness up to the common cold and my paranoia, I put all European Flu concerns away .. until then.

“Dr. Marshall?” Maryann called my name. “What ...” She paused. “Excuse me,” she said and grabbed the phone.

I heard her address the call as my eyes scanned the waiting room. The faces. The multitudes of pale faces. Coughing. Sniffing, moaning.

From the people in the packed waiting room, I shifted my eyes to my carry case.

“Dr. Marshall?” Maryann tried for my attention.

As I looked up, she said something. I didn’t hear her; I

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was focused on the bad sounding cough. Who was doing that? Which patient? I turned my eyes to the waiting room.

“Dr. Marshall, did you hear me?”

Could it be? No. No, it couldn't be that European flu. How?

I suppose she knew I wasn't listening, because it took the firm call of my name again to get my attention.

“What?” I murmured.

“That was St. Mark's, Mr. Lowenstein was just admitted. They said they need to talk to you he's not ...”

A thick thump hit my chest just before my heart fell to my stomach, clutching my belongings, I turned for my office.

“Doing well.” I heard her say as I closed the door.

“No. No.” I leaned against the hard surface catching my breath. It's something else. It has to be something else.

Get my bearings. Get my bearings, I kept repeating to myself. After a few calming breaths, I walked to my desk, laid my case down, and picked up the phone. “Maryann, give me two minutes. OK?”

A test, a test, there has to be a test. My computer was booted up and I retrieved my email program. I prepared to email Dr. Fredericks in London when I realized I didn't want to wait for an email response. I opened my case. On top of everything was the email list of facts he had sent. Scribbled on top was his direct number and I dialed.

I had to wait for him. Not long.

“Is there a test?” I asked him. “If I find another patient, is there something I can send you? Blood test, comparison, anything to confirm?”

“We do have a test,” Dr. Fredericks said. “Unfortunately, you aren't going to be able to send it here.”

“What the CDC?” I asked.

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“That’s risky?”

“Why?”

“There’s another way.”

“Why is it risky?” I repeated the question.

“Because it’s not supposed to be known. The rash.”

“Huh?” My head spun. “What are you talking about?”

“It’s listed under symptoms on that page I sent you.”

As he spoke I shuffled through.

He continued, “There is a tell tale physical sign that every single patient infected has.”

“A rash?”

“Sort of.”

Found it, my mind said as I looked down. It was there. I had missed it. ‘Predominant on every patient, is a light pink rash, small, sometimes hard to see. The rash could be mistaken for an irritation, or rub mark. It will be present at the site of the patient’s route of infection.’

Dr. Fredrick’s said, “If they inhaled it, the rash will be around the nostril. If it went through the eye, they’ll have it just under the tear duct. Check for that. It is a surefire confirmation.”

“Thank you,” I said. “Dr. Fredrick’s, is it possible ... my waiting room ...” I fumbled for the words. I didn’t want to say it. “I think I may be in trouble.”

“My dear, American colleague, we may all be in trouble now.”

My heart sank for the second time. “Cure?”

“How can a world wide call be made for a cure if it is kept under wraps?” he replied. “Good luck to you. Call me if you find ...”

“Dr. Fredrick’s ...” The call ended. It just ended. Abruptly. Mid sentence. Like a fool, as if it would suddenly bring him back, I clicked the phone a few times calling his



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name. Nothing. Dead air.

A single knock on my door startled me.

“Dr. Marshall.” Maryann walked in. “Really, we need you.”

I nodded. “I’ll be right there.”

When my door closed, I stood up and grabbed my lab coat from the back of my chair. Placing it on I saw the fact sheet sent to me by Dr. Fredrick’s. I grabbed it, folded it, and placed it in my pocket. Although it would be difficult to do, I tried to mentally prepare to face my morning.

There wasn’t a doctor in the world that would need a stethoscope to hear my heart beat that afternoon. My heart pounded, thumped, beating against my ribcage as if my chest were hollow, and echoing in my head.

Thump-thump. Thump-thump.

All as I opened the door to the examining room of my first patient.

Dena sat on the table. Her shoulders arched. Her face drawn and pale, eyes dark, neck red. The woman around thirty years of age looked absolutely haggard. She coughed once when I walked in.

“Hey, Doc.” Cough.

“Dena, not feeling well today?” I asked. No shit. Of course she wasn’t feeling well; she wouldn’t be at my clinic.

“My chest, Doc, I think I have pneumonia.”

“What does it feel like?”

“Hard to breathe, heavy,” she replied.

I opened the chart to see the notes that Maryann had taken. Fever was slight. Heartbeat rapid. I washed my hands, placed on my gloves. Badly I wanted to put on a face mask. But how could I do that? I had never examined a

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patent before with facial protection.

I was nervous about going near her. If she had it, she was deadly. The communicability rate was high. God, how I wanted to pull out the notes. When was a person most contagious. Before symptoms, early. During. Always?

I inched my way to her. Did she sense my nervousness?

“When did it start?” I asked.

“I got a tickle in my throat yesterday afternoon. Last night I wasn’t feeling my best, today, I woke up feeling like death.”

Death.

God.

Maybe. Maybe she didn’t have it. Maybe she was just sick with the flu, or pneumonia.

Pulling the stethoscope from my pocket, I placed it to my ears. My hands literally trembled as I brought it to her chest. Just as I laid the metal to her, to listen to her breath sounds, my shifting eyes caught sight of it. The rash. But it wasn’t a rash. Like the report said it appeared to be an abrasion, tiny barely noticeable. It could have been from her wiping her nose with the tissue.

It could have been. It was absent the flakey skin, deep red that normal ‘wiping’ marks around the nostrils caused. This rash was tiny and located just under the air way opening of the left nostril.

I didn’t want to get closer, nor did I want to bring attention by magnifying it. I tried to ignore the rash; after all, to me it wasn’t conclusive. Had it been anywhere else, the eye, ear, mouth, I would have thought more. But the nose ... too hard to tell.

I listened to her breath sounds, thick and gurgling. It sounded like slush and she sounded like a three pack a day cigarette smoker.

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Rattling, wheezing.

I could hear it building in her. Thick, boiling phlegm that slowed off in sound and snapped. When I heard that, I stepped back.

She released a huge cough, one that kept going. I walked around and moved to her back, placing the scope there.

It was safer behind her. She wasn't coughing on me.

God, what was wrong with me at that point? She was my patient.

I had to tell myself to stop. To get a grip. But that was easier said than done.

"I'm dying with pneumonia, huh?" she asked.

"No." I put the scope away and went to the sink. "You have a good old case of bronchitis. I have a lot of patients, I'll tell Maryann to get you some antibiotics, and antihistamine."

"Everyone seems sick out there."

"Actually, there's a big last hurrah going on with the flu," I explained. "Flu season was mild this year, we were expecting it."

Dena actually seemed relieved by my words.

I took a valium right after fourth patient. My heart was beating so fast during my exams, I could barely think or breathe. Enough really was enough. The fourth patient was a knee injury ... thank God. But I suppose, after sitting in that waiting room, he would be a flu patient before long. He made a comment about that, then chuckled when he sneezed upon leaving.

He really didn't realize how un-funny that was.

There were six examining rooms in the clinic and they might as well have had a revolving door. We were pushing patients through the examining left and right. It was not

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even half passed nine.

Maryann was doing her best, although the patients I had seen already were forming a line in the hallway, waiting to check out, waiting on medication and Maryann. She and I usually handled everything well. Not that morning.

"This is scary," Maryann said. "St Marks said not to send any flu patients. A bus crashed on the freeway and they have their fill"

I tried not to reply as I went through the chart of patient number five after a quick exam.

"You don't think this is scary?"

I kept working.

"I know you do," she said. "I saw The Stand."

I looked up.

"You do." Maryann nodded.

"I figured as much when you told me to just start packing up packets of 14 pills of antibiotics."

"We got to move them through."

"Antibiotics don't work on the flu."

"I know this. But, we can't rule out infection," I explained. "So we give them antibiotics."

"I would question why we are doing it to all of them, but since they all have the same symptoms."

"Just move them through as fast as we can."

"I'm trying." She shrugged. "But I can't process the ones leaving and the ones coming in. So the ones already seen can wait."

I looked at the line.

"Sorry," she said.

"That's OK." I closed the chart. "Do what works for you. Are we back at room one again?"

Maryann shook her head. "You still have Mr. Chester in room six."

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“Ok. Chart?”

“Door.”

“Thanks.”

“Lisa,” Maryann softly called my name. “What’s going on? Is there a health bulletin out? One issued by the CDC?”

“No.” I said, and then dropped my voice. “But I’m starting to think there should be. And if this starts happening everywhere in the city, I don’t think it’ll be long before one will be.” Seeing the lost, yet agreeing look on her face, I pushed the chart forward and headed down the long hall to the patient in room six. The coughs and sneezes carried tot hallway from all the rooms.

The Valium kicked in pretty fast; in fact I felt an instant wave of calm hit me just before I hit that last door. I saw that Maryann had implemented a ‘tagging system’. I noticed it as I walked down the hall. Any room that contained a patient with flu symptoms, she had placed a yellow ‘Post It’ on the door.

Room six was no exception. The yellow self sticking tag flapped in my approach, I lifted it and the chart, knocked once and walked in.

Dennis Chester was a mess. The fifty-nine years old, an avid jogger, exercise freak that took ball room dancing with his third wife, and bragged he’d never need Viagra was a mess.

Of course, everyone in the waiting room was a mess. With the exception of the knee injury, but I suppose he would be a mess in time.

“Mr. Chester,” I said his name politely.

He coughed before answering, a string of coughs, then I saw as he tried to hold them in. Mucus, thick and yellow, welled at the end of his nose.

I wanted to say it was useless to examine, I didn’t even

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need to put a stethoscope to him. But I had to go through the motions.

He tried to hold in his cough, face turning red, eyes watering, shoulders bouncing. But every few second, he blast out with a wet, thick sounding cough. I wrote in his chart, trying to stay on task and refrain from writing sarcasm.

“Don’t know how this thing kicked me so hard,” he said. “I take vitamins.”

“I should have moved to Lodi,” I murmured.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“Oh, just a thought.” I turned to face him. “You used to live in Lodi?”

“Yes,” he answered confused.

“I always wanted to live there.” I shrugged. “Just thinking of it when I saw marked down there. When did the symptoms start?”

“Two days ago,” he replied. “I thought I was just worn down from the funeral and all.”

“Funeral?” I asked.

“Mrs. Lowenstein.”

I nodded. “You were there?”

“Got to know her from ....” He stopped to cough. “From here. We shared Tuesday Blood Pressure days.”

“That’s right.” I lifted my stethoscope. “I’m gonna take a listen to your chest.”

“Is there’s something going around?” he asked then coughed.

“Flu is making its last hurrah,” I replied my new stock answer. Just as I stepped to him, the intercom buzzed and Maryann’s voice came through.

“Dr. Marshal?”

She called me Dr. Marshal. She always did that when

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there were patients. I reached over to the button, pressed, and spoke, "Just a minute."

Another step to Dennis.

Maryann called again, "Dr. Marshal, we have a situation."

I ignored her and put the scope to my ears.

"Dr. Marshal. It's important."

I met eyes with Dennis, trying to convey that he was getting my attention, not Maryann.

Laying the scope on his chest, all effects of the valium went out the window when Chester coughed. A hard, hacking cough, out of control. The first part of which sent a spray of saliva on my face.

I wanted to scream. It felt as if I were hit with emotional acid. I felt the droplets on my cheek, nose, and upper lip.

He said he was sorry.

I didn't hear.

"Dr. Marshal," Maryann called again. "Please respond."

I couldn't respond. I was just hit with death, but she didn't know that. That was the first time in all my exams, even with Mrs. Lowenstein that anything touched me of the illness. The first time bodily fluids came in contact with my skin.

How to explain my immediate panicked behavior was last on my mind as I raced to the sink. And I did panic. That was evident the way I dropped the scope. I know I huffed out little sounds of my fright as I scrubbed my face.

Dennis probably would have apologized again had he not spilled into another coughing fit.

Scrub. Scrub.

A two knock bang startled me as I ran paper towels across my face.

The door burst open.

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I saw the edges of the rifles first, the green of the camouflage pants, then Maryann squeezed through in a rush.

"I tried to call you. Stop them," she said, then was ushered back when a tall gentleman in goggles, respirator, gloves, and a clipboard, stepped in. He brought with him two soldiers.

"Dr. Marshal?" he questioned.

Dennis was confused and scared, he asked through his coughs. "What's going on?"

"Yes," I replied the shifted my eyes to Dennis.

Again Mr. Clipboard asked, "Dr. Lisa Marshall?"

"Yes." I nodded.

He motioned to the soldier with a swing of his arm. They stepped to me.

"What? What's going on?" I asked as one soldier took hold of my arm, and the other moved me along with the weight of his rifle. I struggled some, not much, that was useless. What was I going to do? How was I going to fight them?

Dennis called out something, but me, the soldiers, and Mr. Clipboard were out in the hall, door closed.

I locked eyes with Maryann. "Call my husband."

Maryann nodded. But I knew that wasn't going to happen, because another soldier moved by me, and as I looked back they were restraining Maryann.

My first patients were still in the hall along with about six soldiers.

"Can you tell me what's going on?" I beckoned, but received no answer.

As we emerged into the waiting room, there were only a few more soldiers there. All wearing gasmasks. I knew what that meant. I wasn't stupid. Although I have to admit, I had



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some strange thoughts. I recall quickly thinking that, with Mrs. Lowenstein dead of it, that little boy, what if they thought I was responsible.

A soldier in authority, obviously a sergeant, brushed by me. In the momentary pause before they lead me out, cries of my patients in confusion and fright, I twisted my head to see the sergeant speaking to Mr. Clipboard.

Mr. Clipboard ordered. "Take her. Only her. Anyone in the parking lot, bring them in. Then seal it."

Escorted by both arms, I was hurried through the waiting room and out the door. I kept looking back, I know I kept asking, too, about what was happening, but I didn't get an answer.

I expected a big Army convoy outside, lots of military trucks. But there weren't. A single Humvee and a couple trucks parked in the middle of the lot. That was all. I was placed in the back of the Humvee where another masked soldier waited for me.

I watched.

Watched as they pulled people from the cars, and brought them in the clinic.

The street in front of the strip mall was dead. Not a car drove by. No traffic. A big natural gas company utility truck and a 'road closed' sign assured that. The road was all ours. For a long time, too. With certainty they were isolating my clinic and mall. I didn't need to ask why. The activity around my clinic increased. I kept looking back, watching as we pulled further way. Watching until the clinic was far from my view, and all that was behind us was a long empty road.

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They didn't take me far. Even with the best Cleveland

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traffic, the ride wasn't a long one, we had to be still close to Cleveland, at the very least in Ohio. But we were definitely not inner city. We took back roads for a while. I would estimate we headed somewhere around Lodi.

That made me chuckle.

Lodi. I was just talking about that.

I didn't ask questions, mainly because I knew they would go unanswered. My surroundings passed me without paying much attention to those at all. At least not until we drew close. Then in the silence of the automobile I started to be more aware.

Alas, after getting out of the limits of Cleveland—so I guessed—we hit the highway. Not for long, a quick exit brought us to a secondary road, which took us to another. There, I thought we were going to a farm. But we weren't. We paused at a gate, one uniformed guard, not US military was posted there. We drove for about a mile, again, another guess, down a cornstalk lined dirt road, until we emerged at what I knew was our final stop.

Maybe even my final stop.

Our destination was an abandoned airport perhaps? It looked like three hangers erected on a concrete field. One main building, cream colored and stone perched to the left of the hangers.

There was an Army truck, jeep and a single car parked by the hanger. A few were by the building. We sort of just zipped up into an empty space.

Parked.

The soldiers in gas masks armed themselves as they took me from the vehicle. Like I was a criminal or was harmful.

Maybe I was, but harmful in a different way. A very deadly way.

I felt the openness as I stepped onto the pavement, the

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soldiers didn't grasp me anymore. I guess they figured where was I going to run.

Out of the hanger a black man walked towards us. He was wearing a green bio hazard suit, one like I'd not seen before, he spoke muffled through the gasmask.

"She's going to stay here for the time being."

One of the soldiers nodded, and they turned leading me toward the cream colored building.

Inside the building it was very clinical. They didn't ask me for any information, I didn't think they would. After all, they had to be the government; they knew all they could about me.

Once inside, they made me remove my clothing. It wasn't like prison; no one watched or searched me. I was made to stand in this steam shower for about ten minutes. It was a comforting mist that engulfed me. While waiting I thought of all that transpired, what was going to happen next.

A real showered followed, then another disinfectant steam treatment—as I learned they were. I smelled weird. Very clinical. They gave me a sealed bag with fresh garments. A tee shirt, socks, pants, and jacket. All Army, all green and brown.

I must have been out of it, because I recall asking the one woman, whom I assumed was a nurse, if I could get personal effects. I didn't need to ask her why I was there, that was evident when she took four tubes of blood. So I just asked for personal effects.

"Like?" she asked.

"Toothbrush, some make up."

She looked oddly at me when I said 'makeup'. But I

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explained that I'd just feel more comfortable having items that made me feel good.

I suppose make up was shallow.

"How long am I going to be here?" I asked.

"I don't know. And that's the honest truth."

I believed her. She told me that my purse was being disinfected, and that and the items would be returned. Along with my clothes.

I felt better about that. I did have my make up bag in there. Maybe it was vanity, yes, it was vanity. But I hated the thought of all the strangers gawking at me, and thinking I looked haggard. It was bad enough that I felt it.

Did I want lunch?

I was hungry, and I told her, 'yes'. After walking through an air tight door, a short corridor, I stepped through another air tight door, emerging into what looked like a recreation room.

"Someone will be in shortly with your lunch," a female voice came through a speaker.

I looked up and around. "Is someone going to talk to me?"

"Soon."

"Thank you."

Thank you? I said thank you? I was being very congenial, I hoped they appreciated it. Probably because I was scared not to. Taken by armed soldiers, whisked away, could have made me angry and hostile, fighting. But what good would that have done me. It wouldn't have gotten me any further; it may have hindered any answers I had gotten.

In the empty hollow room, there were five or six round tables, a ping pong table, juke box, a television, and bookshelf.

I knew I was there for the long run.

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I just hoped they called my husband.

After taking a seat at the first round table, I did all I could do.

I waited.

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Amazingly enough, the food wasn't bad. A toasted turkey sandwich, a good cup of coffee and a small salad. But I was worried. Worried about Darrin, my daughter, my patients. I was clueless as to anything that was going on.

Finally, after sifting through month old tabloids and watching a little bit of *An Affair to Remember*, the air tight door opened with a hiss. It startled me, and I turned around, standing up.

"Dr. Marshal." It was clipboard man, who then identified himself as Ralph Pongracz. He extended his gloved hand to me, and spoke speaker like through the respirator. "Thank you for your patience."

"Call me, Lisa. Please."

"I'm sure you figured out by now why you are here."

I nodded. "But, please, I had nothing to do with this."

"Oh, we know. Why would you think that?"

I shrugged. "But it is the European Flu, isn't it?"

"If that's what you're calling it."

"I'm here because I'm infected."

"We don't believe so."

"But, you can't tell that," I said. "I mean, my patient today coughed right on me. And the incubation period is ..."

"No longer seven to ten days. It's thicker. It could range from one hour to one week. Depending on the age of the patient. It's mutated, not the virus itself as much as the

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strength and rate of acceleration from infection to symptom to ...” He cleared his throat.

“But you still can’t tell if I have it.”

“Oh, if you were infected, it would show in your blood. The virus takes hold right away.”

Admittedly, I sighed out in relief. I wasn’t infected. “What now?”

“Now ... I ask for a bit more patience, and a few more tests. Nothing painful, a few more tubes of blood. Breathing into an air convector. Simple. Then tomorrow everything will be explained to you.”

All I could do was nod.

“You’ll be housed in this building.”

“For how long?”

“That remains to be seen,” he replied. “I ask again for your patience and continued cooperation. Twenty-four hours and we’ll have some answers for you.”

Answers? I wasn’t even sure I knew what questions I had, so many swarmed around my head.

“Twenty-four hours.”

“Then I’ll be able to leave?”

He just looked at me.

“No idea?”

“Not yet. No. Patience?”

I nodded again.

“One day. It’s a lot of alone time, feel free to read, a television is in your room.” He stood with his things.

“Dr. Pongracz.”

He paused.

“I have a family. A daughter, husband ...”

“We know.”

“They are gonna be awfully worried. Can I call them?”

“I’m sorry.” He lowered his head. “We ...”

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“No,” I held up my hand. “I understand. I figured as much. I figured this has to be top secret.”

“It is.”

“Can you notify them somehow? Let them know what happened to me?”

“Absolutely.”

“Thank you.”

Ralph walked to the door. He stopped before pressing the button to leave. “Rest assured, Lisa. It’s been taken care of. They are aware.”

Ralph left.

I was grateful for his reassurance. I didn’t want Darrin to be worried; he tended to go overboard with his over active imagination. Less tense, I waited for whatever they needed me for. I could do that with a lot more ease knowing that my family was aware of what happened to me.

7.

***Memory***

*'Thirty-two Dead as Natural Gas Explosion Wipe Out Strip Mall – Local Clinic Falls Victim'*

The headlines.

It blasted across the Cleveland paper, with pictures of the strip mall blown to bits. My picture was in the paper, as well.

Dead.

I held that newspaper clipping in my hand as I poured myself another drink and watched the snow fall down.

I knew why I was thinking back. Darrin's birthday was the next day. I dreaded it. The first birthday without him. How was I going to handle that? How was I going to handle Amber's birthday when it came around in May?

They told them I was dead. Blown up.

For days the paper followed the story, tracing the final moments of our tragic lives. Pongracz brought me the paper clippings as well, blacking out the backs.

A mental tease. I was outraged when I found out what he had done. And he told me about it right away. Anger was an understatement. But it was short lived. I kept all the articles, all of them.

In a wooden, hand carved box, were a bunch of things from that time. I wanted to read the piece about Chester. I



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hadn't a clue how many things he had done for charity. I hadn't a clue he was the mystery donor to the clinic.

Walking to get that article out of the box, I heard the break of glass.

I jolted.

Glass breaking? That had never happened.

I set down my drink and article, swept up my rifle, and flipped on the spot lights.

Droplets of blood trailed across the white snow. They led from the back wall, toward the house.

Where were they? They made it through the barbwire. How? Better yet, how did they see to break a window? Was the snow giving the perfect darkness? That perfect amount of dark and light that enabled them to see better.

I slid open the deck doors and stepped outside.

"Where are you?" I shouted.

Not like I expected them to answer. Imagine my surprise when I got a response.

"He who is from hell shall return to the fire brim," the man shouted.

"What?" I chuckled.

"You shall burn in the fire you create."

Fuckin' great, I thought. Where was he? He was close. Getting my rifle prepped to aim, I leaned over the deck to peek. Had the spotlights not been so bright and reflective off the snow, I wouldn't have caught the cast of his shadow.

Great, just great, he was under the deck. I knew there was no way he could reach me, I had dismantled the steps long before. But I had to get him. There were only two ways down.

One through the house, the other ....

Exclaiming vulgarity I tossed the roped ladder off the edge of the deck, and threw the rifle over my shoulder.

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It wasn't the first time one of them had trapped themselves under my deck. They get there, I guessed, so they could see.

I climbed down the roped ladder, half way, and grabbed my rifle. As soon as I cleared the deck floor I could see him.

A spear?

He held a homemade spear.

A first he screamed when he saw me, then he lunged back. "The dragon shall die."

I was quick. He threw it. But I wasn't quick enough, turning my body, swinging out of the way; the spear flew by me, but not without catching my leg.

"Son of a bitch." I swung out my rifle and fired for a second. It was on automatic, I didn't mean for it to be, and his body jolted and danced with every hit he took until he dropped.

Adjusting my rifle again, I dropped the rest of the way to the snow. Irritated beyond belief that I not only had to be out in the snow, but I had to also drag a body away from the house.

He wasn't heavy. None of them are. They are frail and thin and live off of minimal food. Some of them don't even eat. They just stop or think they were eating, either way they set themselves on many roads to death.

That one took the road to me.

Taking hold under his arm I dragged the body. He couldn't have been any older than twenty-one. Young male. He stunk badly. Like urine, feces, vomit, sour blood, death. You name it. I had to hold my breath.

My leg ached and it hurt even more as I made it across the yard creating a path in the snow all the way to the wall. The injury probably needed a stitch or two. I'd take care of it.

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After I got him close enough to the wall, I moved quickly back to the house. I knew as soon as I warmed up, I'd feel the burning of the slice.

I made my way back to the Palace and removed my jeans. I'd throw them out; getting new ones was never a problem.

The gash in my leg was about three inches, not bad, but deep and seeping blood.

Grabbing a bottle of bourbon, and the medical kit, I hobbled to the bathroom, sat on the edge of the tub and rinsed off my leg. I blotted with a towel then dumped some bourbon on the injury. I winced at the pain and took a swig.

I prepared the sutures to repair the gape.

I was careful, and knew what I was doing; I was able to forgo the stinging. With each pull of the sutures, blood seeped.

It ran down the side of my thigh and plopped into the tub in droplets.

Three drops.

Red against white.

I thought of the thing that hit me, and I looked at the blood. There was a time when I actually believed they were normal and fine. When I almost gave up my war against them all, and thought it was a select few.

Short lived.

It was about a month, maybe more after the complete finish. I was walking through the park when I saw the drops of blood. I bent down, touched it ... fresh.

Fresh blood, I had thought.

I peered around. I was still in the phase where they frightened me as much as angered me.

So I didn't call out.

I followed the blood. Maybe it was someone, anyone

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who wasn't one of them.

I had to find out. The blood formed a path and I followed it. It zigzagged down the pathway and into the grass where there was a small pool of blood.

Whomever it was, was injured badly, but not to the point where they weren't mobile. Because the pool of blood was there and then another trail. Obviously they stopped, sat down and continued on.

The pathway winded, and as I turned the bend I saw him.

He was perched on a park bench.

At that point I had no idea he was one of them. You see, upon first glance you can't tell. With the exception of how unkempt they were, you would never know by looking at them.

Behavior gave it away.

He was an old man. A warm day and he wore a brown trench coat, and hat. I was cautious in my approach.

He held his coat closed, and as I neared I could see the blood dripping steadily down to the ground under the bench.

"Sir?" I softly called out.

His head cocked. "Who is it? Who's there?"

That's how I knew. He shifted his head left to right, looking.

I stepped back. In the sun he couldn't see, but if I had moved closer, there was a chance.

"Who's there?" he asked.

"I am."

"Who are you? What are you?"

"That's ... that's not important."

He chuckled madly. "You don't think. You never think. No one thinks. The world has gone mad."

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He made sense. At least some. Was he one of those rare cases where he was barely one of them.

“Are you alone?” I asked. “Do you live with anyone?”

“Did.” He breathed heavily. “Had to get away from them. They were crazy.”

“Where are they now? Are they following you?” I asked.

“No. Where do you think they are?” he snapped. “Probably in the lake. They need fresh water.”

I looked upon him curiously.

“Damn goldfish.”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re a guppy.”

I wanted to laugh.

“How the hell are you surviving out of water?”

“I’m special,” I replied. “So you lived with goldfish.”

“Well, yeah, they usually harmless.”

“Yes,” I nodded a nod he couldn’t see. “They usually are.”

“But this batch, well, I think they thought I was dinner,” he said. “What do you think?”

He opened his coat, I nearly fell over. A huge gapping hold was center of his torso. It was obvious the flesh was torn, and his insides hung out. He didn’t act in pain, nor seem in pain. In fact, he seemed indifferent to it.

“When I run my hand over it,” he said. “Feels it. Don’t hurt. I can’t see. What do you think?”

I didn’t verbally answer him. I couldn’t. The guts and blood oozing out. He was oblivious to it all. I pulled my pistol from my waist and aimed.

“Still there?” he asked.

“Still here,” I responded and aimed.

“Am I injured?”

“No,” I whispered as I slowly pulled back the hammer.

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“Actually ... dead.”

“What?”

Bang.

Like a dog, I put him out of his misery that day. Although it was a misery he didn't feel.

Of course, as I sat on the edge of the tub coming out of the thought of the old man. I was in misery.

8.

*The Request*

June 17<sup>th</sup>

Before the newspaper article, before being told about that and anything, I saw them. Not ‘them’ but rather Lucas, Jack, and Helen.

All at different times. I was the first one that arrived at the complex, of that I was certain.

Lucas was the first one I saw. I was giving a half of pint of blood, and I saw through the plastic wall as they examined him.

He looked healthy. Lucas was twenty-two, and thin. His hair was brown and flowing. I could picture young girls just flocking over him. My first reaction was he was a musician. He was congenial in the testing, quiet, and looking scared. He never looked toward me. Maybe he didn’t see me.

Helen did. She glanced over. I saw her when I was doing a breathing convector test. A black woman whose age I never found out at the time. She looked young but mature. She was smug, and looked as if she tolerated the testing. Wincing when they took her blood, turning her head, almost as if they offended her with every needle they poked her with.

Yes, Helen and Lucas cooperated.

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Now ... Jack he was a totally different story.

They sedated him. If I'm not mistaken it was with one of those dart tranquilizer guns they used on animals. Or maybe they just didn't want to get close enough. Jack was a big guy. Tall, maybe six three, thick. He had a crew cut, or buzzed, and his hair was speckled with gray. I guessed prematurely, because he didn't look that old.

In any case, they hit him with a dart. That was after he saw me when they drew my blood. In his struggles with the soldiers, he broke free of their grip and shouted at the plastic curtain. "Do you know what's going on?"

I looked at him.

"Do you know what the fuck is going on?"

I didn't get to answer him, he toppled and swayed, crashing down to the floor and exposing the dart gun holder. Even with the mask on I could see the shooter was pleased.

I didn't speak to Lucas, Helen, or Jack at all. Nor, did I see them until the next day.

Of course my state of mind wasn't very good. It was just after Ralph presented me with the newspaper article.

How does one react? Surely, no one ever expects to be in a position where an unemotional answer is given of, "Yes, we've notified your family"; and then they present you with a newspaper article about your death.

At first I couldn't react. I was in shock. It wasn't true. Then I read.

"You ... you told my family I was dead?"

Ralph lowered his head with a solemn 'yes'.

I gasped outward with a turn of my head. I envisioned Darrin telling our child that Mommy wouldn't be coming home. My daughter, my poor baby girl. My entire family. They were home mourning me, going through hell, when



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there was no need.

Slamming down the paper, I jumped from the chair and raced to the door. I tried to bolt, but was grabbed by two guards.

“Let me go!” I cried out. “I have to call them. I have to call them.”

They moved me back.

Ralph stepped to me. “I know you’re upset.”

I heaved out, “Upset?”

“Please,” he said calmly, and motioned the guards to let me alone. “You will understand shortly. I promise. When this is all explained to you, you will understand why. Give me one hour. One hour... please.”

I said nothing. Like a coward, I just stumbled back, and plopped in defeat into the chair. I watched Ralph walk to the door. “One hour?” I questioned out loud, causing him to pause. “One hour you want now. Yesterday it was twenty-four. What’s next, my life?”

Ralph didn’t answer, he just left the room.

I wasn’t in the mood to be brought into yet, another room. They came and got me out of my one, bed, one dresser, hospital style room. As if I had anywhere else to go.

I followed the soldier, who oddly enough wasn’t wearing a gasmask. I didn’t notice it until we got to the second hallway. I did a double take.

Two suited men, again, no gas masks were by the door. I would have sworn they were CIA. The soldier opened the door, motioned his head for me to go inside.

I did.

It was weird when I stepped in. The three of them looked at me as the door closed.

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They were together in that room, but not together. A long meeting style table was there, along with a table with water and coffee. Helen sat by the coffee, by herself. She looked lonely. At one end of the table, Lucas was seated. He clasped his folded hands, the weight of the world looked heavy on his shoulders, and his face was solemn. Jack looked irritated. At the other end of the table, he leaned more on one arm of the chair, rocking some as he bit into his nails with fury and aggravation.

No one said a word. Did they not want to? Were they told to be silent? No one said anything to me.

I reached for a chair, on the side of the table as Lucas, as I did, he scooted further away.

Helen gasped.

They reacted as if I were highly contagious.

Maybe they thought I was.

Jack spoke. Not like the day before when he blasted a loud mouth. His voice was graveled, and husky, yet polite, as he stood some. "This is ridiculous." He extended his hand. "Jack Gavin."

I clasped his hand, rough, large, and rugged. "Lisa Marshal."

He nodded and sat back down.

So as not to alarm young Lucas, I took a chair further away from him. When I did the door opened.

Ralph walked in. "Glad to see you're all here."

Jack chuckled. "We really don't have a choice."

"No, you don't," Ralph said. "Do any of you understand why?"

Jack lifted his hands. "I thought it was because we had some deadly virus, or at least carriers, but that thought went out the window. No one is wearing respirators anymore."

"Let me explain why. But before I do, let me tell you the

connection between the three of you.” Ralph set down a folder. “With the increased numbers of the H5N1, Avian Flu, human to human transmission, scientists began working on a detour. A way to beat or spearhead a pandemic. They mutated it with another germ, a synthetic germ. HV5694, code name Greed. Greed was developed in the 70’s. It is a highly lethal biological weapon with a near 100 percent communicability rate and fatality rate. An old weapon, however, it had an effective cure and vaccine. But ... unfortunately, it didn’t work on the hybrid, so the project was dismissed. On May 18<sup>th</sup> of this year, in a small village near the Chinese border called, Laung Nam Tha. Chinese scientists were disposing of the hybrid, disposition was thought safe, but ...an accident occurred. A two second window. Scientists thought they contained it and it went unreported. In five hours nearly everyone in that town was dead. Within a 1000 mile radius, people were unknowingly infected. By the time this was reported, twelve hours had passed. The government thought they had successfully quarantined the infected areas. No one gets in or out. After all, it was only twelve hours. That wasn’t the case.”

Ralph went on to explain that a doctor named Peter Wells and his wife left and headed to Singapore. Non-symptomatic, they stayed there a few days before heading back home to England.

Once in England, the Wells heard their niece and great nephew were in town briefly while in port on a cruise.

The cruise.

The Lowenstein’s.

After visiting and having lunch with Marybeth and Jeffrey Graves ...

When I heard the names, my stomach dropped.

I didn’t hear anymore about them. He mentioned that

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the Wells were symptomatic within a day.

Jeff Graves was the little boy I helped in the emergency room. Ralph pointed that out, that it was my connection to the virus. Mrs. Lowenstein was on the on the cruise. I was exposed that day to both her and Jeffrey. Ralph pointed out everyone's connection to a virus that landed on American Soil June 2<sup>nd</sup>.

Like me, Lucas wasn't on the cruise. His connection was with Marybeth and Jeffrey. His mother and brother.

Helen was on the cruise. Waves of Fun, a Cleveland travel agency had purchased a 'lot' of cruise packages and sold them cheaply, hence a good number of Cleveland residents including Helen were on that cruise.

The cruise was halted mid ocean. The public didn't know about that. A steward found a suspicious looking package. The cruise line called it in, and authorities sent a boat with ten men to investigate. Jack was one of those ten men.

After hearing about our connection to the virus, we drew silent.

"Ill or dead," Ralph said. "Every person on that cruise, employees, are sick or dying. The buck stopped with Helen, she infected no one in her family. Which was good. But it wasn't in the case of the Lowenstein's and Graves. See, we did a surface trace. Only doing initial contact and infection survey. That night in the Emergency room The Lowenstein's and Graves' infected every person they came in contact with."

I sighed out when I heard that, when Ralph nodded his head at me, I said, "It was very busy that night."

"I know. We heard." Ralph replied. "Initial survey indicates such with the numbers that are sick now. Lucas' family ... ill."

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I watched Lucas lower his head.

Ralph continued, "Lowenstein family and those at the funeral ... well, need I say more. Sgt. Gavin's ten man crew ...they all returned to their ship after the cruise inspection. Four of those men have died, and five are at death's door. We won't even mention the men on the ship." Ralph ingested the silence for a moment, and then said. "Which brings us to why you four are here. Why we had to remove you from society."

Helen breathed heavily. "Removed us is an understanding. You told my family I was dead."

"Mine too," Lucas said.

"Me as well," said Jack.

They looked at me to see if I was effected, if my family was told I was dead. I nodded.

"I know. I know." Ralph held up his hand. "It was severe. I realize it. But if things work out as we hope, then you'll be able to return to your families, and we'll give a full explanation."

Jack chuckled. "I don't believe that."

"Why?" asked Ralph.

"You went to great pains to cover up our removal. To make us look dead. You aren't gonna set us free so easily."

"Yes, we are, if this works we will. Why keep you?" Ralph asked. "See ...you four have to be non entities. You have to be. If you aren't, then you will be nothing but targets."

It was obvious that none of us were clear as to why he said that and our expressions showed it.

Ralph went on, "Sgt. Gavin, you mentioned the fact that none of us wear gasmasks anymore. Not around you four, we don't. You not only aren't infected, you aren't carriers or contagious. No virus is embedded in you. You don't carry it.

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You are safe to be around. We need to worry about your safety.”

“Why is that?” I asked.

“You’re special,” Ralph replied. “You’d be marked targets. This thing kills everyone it infects. Everyone. If those infected found out about you, their envy could cause them to harm you. Which brings us to the main reason why you are here. See, you four are completely immune. And to further explain our request, there’s someone that wants to meet you.” He walked to the door and opened it.

John Fitzgerald, President of the United States, walked through the door.

I know I gasped.

Jack stood up fast with a snap to attention that I swore I heard. “President Fitzgerald, Sir.”

With a slight southern accent, John spoke, “At ease Sergeant.”

Jack relaxed.

“Have a seat,” the president said.

After a nod of gratitude, Jack sat down.

The president looked tired. His gray hair seemed a bit grayer. Then again I had never seen him in person. His face was drawn, somewhat pale. Was he sick? We didn’t know.

“Thank you all for being here,” he said as he pulled out a chair and relaxed. “On behalf of the United States of America, I want to extend my gratitude to you for doing this. You don’t have to, we hope you will. This is my fifth stop for today, so forgive me if I am a little hoarse.” He smiled. “It’s not the flu. There are others, like you, around the country, the world, that are immune. Not many. Well, let me rephrase that ... not many that we know about. We’ve pulled the ones, like you, that we were certain may be immune. It isn’t us, it’s everywhere doing this. This is a

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world wide effort. It may comfort you to know that, Dr. Pongracz here is immune, just found out this morning. He'll be joining you."

Actually, that was a comfort to me. Ralph was in the same ball game as us.

The president continued, "You are immune as you've been told. We've injected the blood sample with the virus and you just repel it. We've extracted antibodies from your blood, and injected that into infected blood, your antibodies are tough. What we've learned is, if you are immune you are ..." he whistled. "Really immune." He nodded to Ralph.

Ralph took over and explained, "Scientists are working around the clock, and have been. The last twenty four hours, every mind in the world has been on this. Hence all the samples. We think we know what to do. No... we do know what to do."

The president spoke, "What we ask of you may be tiring, and even drain you slightly. We'll try not to. A scientist in Sweden, Dr. Renwurst, has discovered a way to extract the antibodies from an immune individual and create a serum."

My mouth dropped open. "We're the antidote."

The president nodded. "Correct. We have to wait until a person is infected before we give it to them. Dr. Renwurst tested this on a patient four days ago, actually, with blood, you, Sgt. Gavin donated ten days ago. The patient made a full recovery."

Ralph interjected. "Almost."

We all looked at him.

Ralph explained. "He doesn't have the flu anymore, that's for sure. We don't know why or how long it will last, but the remnants of the beaten virus cause skin and sight sensitivity to the light. We think it will be a short lived side

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effect, because those effects are dwindling now. But what is the option? Death? You get this virus, you die. Period. You get the antidote, you live we estimate in 80 percent of the cases.”

The president took over. “We’re obviously not gonna be able to create a lot of antidote. Not enough for all those infected.”

Jack asked, “How much?”

Ralph answered. “With the immune we have, we estimate 70 percent. The more immune we find, the more we can produce.”

“Seventy percent is not bad,” Jack said. “But they got to get it.”

The president nodded. “Correct. We thought of a lottery, but that could cause problems, so were just going to ... silently pass it out to health institutions and people will get it on a first come, first serve basis. Word will get out that it’s there, we expect riots and so forth. We’ll instill martial law at that point.”

Lucas, who had been silent, spoke, “A lot of people are gonna get too sick before they get this, aren’t they?”

“Yes,” answered the President. “Realistically, a lot of people won’t get the antidote. Roughly twenty percent will die anyhow, even if they get it. But if we have to do something. This is drastic. In 1918, the surgeon general said of the Spanish flu, that if it continued on its current path we faced extinction. Well, right now, that hold true with our flu. This is about as close to the apocalypse as you’re gonna get people. It’s real. It’s scary. It’s here. In the end, an unthinkable amount of people will have died of this flu. But if we do this, we can save millions. If we do nothing, and let it ride out. We face... no you face a barren world when it’s all said and done. I know you want to return home to your



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families, but they need you here. We need you here, one hundred percent, and undivided. We ask you to remain hidden, to be silent heroes, to give up your lives for two weeks. That's all. Two weeks. Help us do this." He paused. "What do you say?"

We were silent. We could we say? The president of the United States just asked us to help save the world. How do you say 'no' to something like that? You don't.

### 9.

### *Acquaintance*

The strange test had ceased. It had become that we would give a small amount of blood per day. The scientists were the vampires, sucking our blood, hopefully not until we expired. But that was always something to keep in mind.

They would drain us until we ceased to exist.

Ralph mentioned that they could extract enough antibodies from a single tube of blood to help make a synthetic antidote that would save 100 people. I had to look at it is saving six hundred people per day. Between the four of us, in one week that was close to seventeen thousand people. And there was just four of us, the president mentioned there were more scattered about the country. Each of us placed in a location that would deliver our blood fresh and locally to be processed.

They needed us at the compound to keep us healthy, safe, and pumping blood. They couldn't take a chance on anything happening to us. I did question the synthetic though. The Swiss doctor didn't use a synthetic on his test patients. But Ralph assured me that the Swiss doctor did eventually use the synthetic and it was working.

After the meeting with the president, I drew solemn and questioned inwardly to myself why my family couldn't know I was alive. It didn't make sense. Unless, Jack was right and

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they weren't going to stay true to their word about letting us live.

Ralph promised that we would be able to get the news and newspaper. The television was only a monitor for movies. If we couldn't live in the outside world, I wanted to know what was going on. I wanted to keep tabs on the virus.

He agreed to help me out.

The television in my sterile room was blank. I made a request for a book, and strangely enough, one of the nurses was glad to loan me her copy.

Around seven PM my stomach started to rumble from hunger. It had been hours since we had lunch. I finally had found out where the food came from. It wasn't from some restaurant. In the compound main building, where we lived, a kitchen was constructed and a food service staff brought in. Of course, I was told not to get too used to the delicacies. The hangers were going to be used as test hospitals. In another day's time, they estimated close to five hundred ill people would be housed in the hangers, given the antiserum first before any was distributed to the populous.

That gave me the creeps, that many flu victims.

They did a projection. Within ten days they predicted the entire city of Cleveland would have been hit with Greed. Within two weeks not a place on earth would be free of it.

Without the creation and use of the antidote, there would have been a dead world, they said, in a month.

But was nearly a month since the initial outbreak. How did China make it through?

They didn't.

Funny what can be covered up by the news? It had to be out. It had to be. Somewhere, somehow, the news had to

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leak.

I settled on my bed with the book, waiting to catch the aroma of dinner or get the intercom call that a tray was left for me in the dining room. I still had a good hour. I could have gone down there and waited, but opted to read.

It captured me, and engrossed me, even though I had read it a half dozen times. So much so, I jumped at the knock on my door. Setting down the book, open faced on my bed, I swung my legs to the floor and walked to the door, fully expecting that my dinner was brought to me.

Instead, I found Jack.

"Found it," he said with a slight smile.

"Excuse me?" I asked.

"Your room. I knocked on six doors."

"All to locate me?" I asked. "I'm impressed. Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did you want to find me?"

"To talk. The kid is in a state of mourning and won't speak right now. The lady, well, she keeps her distance, sacred, I think. Yeah. She's scared. Scared to talk to anyone. Aside from the nurses and doctors poking me and asking me how I feel, I haven't spoken to a soul in three days."

"You don't strike me as a talker."

"I'm not usually." Jack sighed out. "But to get my mind off of all this shit, I'd like to talk."

I opened the door wider. "Come on in, I'm just waiting for the dinner bell."

"Hungry?" Jack asked.

"Yeah, very."

He looked at his watch. "Shouldn't be much longer."

"I know." Heading to my bed, I pointed to the chair in the room. "Pull up a seat."

Jack grabbed it, "Unless everyone who cooks for us

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died.”

I paused as I went to sit on my bed. “That’s not funny.”

“Sorry.”

“So ...” I settled on the covers Indian style as Jack brought the chair close to the bed. “Three days? I didn’t think you were here before me.”

“I wasn’t. I got here about the same time as that box of clothes arrived for you.”

“Ah, yes.” I nodded. “Army.”

“They work.” Jack shrugged. “Yeah, you were here first. They grabbed me on Saturday night, and kept me in a holding tank in Kentucky until this place was finished.” He reached into his tee shirt pocket. “Mind if I smoke?”

“No. Go ahead. There are worse things that will kill you now.”

Placing the cigarette in his mouth, he cracked a smile and spoke through the butt. “That was funny.”

I returned the smile.

After pouring some water into a paper cup to use as an ashtray, Jack lit his cigarette and noticed my book. “The Stand?”

“Yeah,” I chuckled. “You can say I have been feeling inspired lately.” I picked up the book. “Have you read it?”

“Many times.”

“Have you thought about it?” I asked.

“Lately? Absolutely. Let me ask you a question.”

“Sure.”

“Have you ... have you been having any weird dreams lately.”

It took me a second, at first taking him seriously, then I realized his joke, and I laughed. We talked for a little bit more until the call was made for dinner. We both retrieved our trays together and ate in the dining area.

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There we watched a movie, and were eventually joined by Helen and Lucas.

I got to know Jack Gavin that night rather well. A strong man with strong opinions. He didn't talk as much as I expected, seeing he was looking for someone to talk to, but he talked more than he claimed he did.

He had been married once and swore he'd never do it again, even though that marriage ended while he was still in his twenties. The best thing to come out of his marriage he claimed, and I could understand, was his daughter.

I asked if he knew how they told of his death, and he said it his family was informed he was lost at sea. That pissed him off, having been in the Army all of his life, most of which on vessels; Jack claimed he didn't just get lost at sea.

Helen's death, as I learned from Jack, was categorized with mine. She lived close by to the strip mall, and was killed like me, in that gas explosion.

There was no need to explain anything about Lucas' death, since most of his family was ill or dying.

Poor kid.

I really felt bad for him that night.

He tried talking, but didn't have much to say. Jack offered to play a game of chess with him, but Lucas declined, stating he'd rather listen to us talk.

That night Helen finally opened up. She saved her dessert for later, and brought it to the recreation room while we were watching an old movie. She complained about the dessert, telling us she was an exceptional baker.

Then we learned a little about Helen. Just a little. We knew she had six children, all of which with different areas scattered about the country. She vowed once it was done she was going to look for them, and find each of them.

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Jack wasn't so certain that there'd be much of a country left.

"Even when we beat the flu?" Helen asked him.

"The news about China has to get out," he said. "Sooner or later, some reporter is going to leak it if it hasn't already been leaked on the net. Within a week, those rumors will be confirmed, and grip on this bug or not, pandemonium is going to ensue. Plus, we're still talking how many dead?"

Lucas whispered out, "I did some math."

We all looked at him.

Lucas explained. "Fifty percent or less will survive this, if it is as bad as they say. I bet seventy five percent of those in populated areas are infected if not symptomatic, and the rest will be. This isn't going to work."

Helen was offended when she heard it, but tried to be motherly and comforting. "No, son, we can't think that way."

"What other way is there to think? I don't want to do this," Lucas said.

"Then why did you stay?" Helen asked him.

Lucas shrugged. "I have no where else to go."

I watched as the young man rested his head back. His whole entire being drowned with his despair. I didn't speak it out loud, but I thought it. I'm pretty sure Jack did, too. A part of me agreed with Lucas. A part of me didn't think it was going to work. Not with the flu being of its magnitude. But I couldn't dwell on those thoughts. I had to place them aside and believe in what we were doing, and believe that it would work. I had to.

Even slightly contemplating it would be a failure, brought vivid visions of heartache, I didn't want to face.

### **10.**

### ***Dreams***

How long had I slept? The combination of the booze and injury must have made me a lot more tired than I anticipate. I looked at my clock. I knew it was past ten AM, the sun that came into the palace told me that. It was bright and warm, and I didn't feel quite as chilled as I usually did when I woke.

The weather and snow of the night before may had been the last hurrah.

I lay in bed for longer than normal. I had dreamt of Jack. Actually, I dreamt a lot about Jack, Lucas, Helen, and Ralph. Maybe perhaps because I spent so much time with them all at the end.

But I dreamt of Jack more than anyone else.

His strength. His determination. The passion he exuded when he spoke about his daughter. He carried a picture of the college aged girl in his wallet. She was gorgeous, and a genius, Jack said.

I felt like a heel. I didn't carry any pictures.. I had one of those photo buttons once, but it fell off my purse and I never found it nor replaced it.

In the dream, Jack and I were walking along the shore near the museums. I stopped to show him the survival wall, and even pointed to my name which was huge with



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fluorescent orange paint.

But in the dream we stopped walking because my leg hurt.

My leg.

That's when it dawned on me. My pain was seeping into my dreams.

Lowering the covers, I moved my legs, and the pain shot through me.

My thigh burned and ached and I couldn't figure out why. It wasn't that bad. Maybe just the stitches had tightened up, I thought.

Drawing the strength and nerve, I swung my legs over the bed, the bandage had seepage.

Was I that drunk and preoccupied that I repaired it poorly?

I slowly lifted the bandage. My heart sunk in disgust.

Infected. My leg was showing signs of infection. Why it surprised me, I didn't know. They certainly weren't going to sterilize their weapons before impaling someone with them. And Lord knew if they had previously used that spear on a person, or animal.

It was something that couldn't be ignored. The entire area around the thigh was beat red and a small amount of puss had formed.

To fight that infection, I needed more than just a bottle of penicillin. I'd need antibiotic cream, and an intravenous drip.

Antibiotics were something I hadn't needed at all since it all finished. I went to the drug store and stocked up on what I needed, but that was it.

For the leg, and for more, I had to go to the hospital. I dreaded the thought. It was one place I avoided, and a place I hadn't been at since Greed encompassed the world.

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I took four ibuprofens before even starting my day. I was dragging, and felt sluggish. By the time I got half way through the drive to the hospital, my leg had started to swell, and I limped badly.

It was not a day to run into one of them.

The snow began to melt, and reflected the sun, that worked in my favor. A deadly combination for them.

Getting near the hospital was a chore; in fact I couldn't get closer than a block. It seemed every car congregated near there, and in the close proximity a military blockade was set up around the hospital with a fence.

A big sign read 'Full – return to your homes or find a nearest Aid station'

Placed in a plastic covering and nailed to the sign was a list of aid stations. The plastic was worn, but the list intact. How many of those had I seen? I knew that list off by heart. They hung everywhere.

The fence wasn't locked, bodies spewed about. Soldiers wore their gasmasks, and exhibited signs of violence not Greed.

Bullet tattered, and even burned bodies protected the monster of death ... the hospital.

Although it was hard to tell, only the clothes gave way that they were shot or burned. The bodies outside were already mere skeletons.

Inside was more of the same. If the bodies weren't completely bones, they were near it. The closing of the hospital doors inhibited air flow and animals from getting in.

Animals were not immune to Greed. Those who fed on

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the flesh of the deceased, soon became deceased themselves.

I limped my way into the hospital emergency ward, trying to stay focused on where I needed to go.

Cots and bodies were everywhere. Piles upon piles of people that were sick huddled together, waiting on medical attention that would never come.

Waiting on death. Painfully and horribly.

I was able to find the items I needed. A few bags of antibiotics in different strengths, IV shunts, saline solution, pain medication, and fresh bandages.

I stole an IV pole from a patient. It was still hooked up, the needle resting on the bone.

By the time I had returned to the car, my leg was throbbing. The temperature was rising, the snow was melting at a fast rate, but I felt chilled, even when I turned up the heat in the car.

I made sure I stopped for gasoline and more wood for the fireplace.

Just in case.

Home was a godsend. I organized my things, refilled the generated, secured the palace, and lit a fire. I made some tea and brought it to my bed where I propped up pillows. It wasn't an easy task to insert the IV into my arm; I ended up placing it in my leg. Taping the shunt to me so if I thrashed or moved in my sleep I wouldn't knock it out.

I could feel the medication entering my blood stream, doing its work ... I hoped.

The trip out of the house took its toll. The minimal tasks and chores I had done exhausted me.

Feeling poorly, and knowing I'd be better later, I rested on my bed, propped up to a near sitting position, and closed my eyes.

### **11.**

#### ***Closer***

June 19<sup>th</sup>

Had it really been two weeks? Actually, one day more than that since Greed entered my world silently and unknowingly. It was my day four in 'The Tank'. A term I learned from Jack. That's what he referred to the place he was kept in Kentucky. A tank. Sealed in, doors locked. There were no windows in the bedrooms, nor bathrooms. They undid the blackout shield on the recreational/dining room window. It was a normal size window which had been shielded by a metal hatch on the outside. I saw my first glimpse of sun when they removed that. We had to wait until they placed a smoke window on the outside so others couldn't see in.

Triple thick bullet proof glass separated us from that smoke screen of a window. We could see out.

In the late afternoon of the third day they removed it. Jack and I spent hours by the window watching. You could see the three hangers and airfield. Trucks moved things in and out from the evening on.

"Soon," Jack said. "We'll be watching them move sick here. They're gonna experiment here first."

"Before sending it to the general populous?"

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Jack nodded. "That's what I think."

"It might be too late by then."

"Who knows."

"This thing's already has been on our soil for two weeks."

"Longer."

Lucas must have been listening that night, perhaps he slipped in, and stood there to eavesdrop. Who knows. But he added his two cents. "It's already too late. Did they say anything to you about giving the antidote to your families?"

Jack turned from the window. "I asked."

"And?" Lucas questioned. "Did they say they would?"

"They said they would, yes." Jack replied.

"I don't think they will." Lucas walked to the window to join us.

"Man," Jack gave a twitch to his head. "You're a pessimist."

"My entire family died of some plague. How should I be? Grateful to be alive? Would you if you lost your entire family?"

Solemn, Jack answered. "No."

"So ... uh ..." Lucas leaned into the pane of glass. "What are they doing out there?"

I answered, "Making a hospital."

"Sad," Lucas said. "Won't smell pretty out there if they all die."

I saw it. Jack rolled his eyes.

From across the room, Helen called out. "Is something going on out there?"

I faced her. "No, we're just watching them sent up a hospital."

"Out there?" she asked shocked and walked to them. "I know Ralph had said something about that. But I didn't

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think ....Is that where they are gonna test it?"

Jack shrugged. "We think."

Lucas added, "It's where they'll test it and fail."

Jack had edge to his voice, perhaps a bit of being perturbed as he turned to Lucas and gently snapped. "Don't you have family anywhere but Cleveland? None?"

Lucas stuttered. "Why?"

"Cause if you do, you'd think you'd want this to work so you can find them."

"I ... I do. I have a father."

Jack tossed out his hand. "Then you have someone to focus on."

"He's in prison in West Texas."

"Still ... you have someone to focus on. Focus on that."

Jack gave him a swat to his back.

Helen added, "My children are all over this country."

"Then you're bound to be near one of them if they ship you out," said Lucas. "My luck they'll ship me to Alaska making it impossible to get to Texas. I read the Silent Victor. That was about a virus, and the one guy was separated from his family, still hadn't found them in seven years."

Lucas had rambled, yet he rambled about something we were clueless to. All three of us looked at him.

I asked what he meant.

He explained, "You guys don't know. Maybe your nurse is just close lipped. Nurse Meg who does my daily blood said something about shipping us out to different places. That's what she says; then again she may be delusional because she's getting sick. I think. Maybe. If not, she will be when they move the sick people in. She isn't immune."

"Will you ..." Jack bit his lip. "Stop with the pessimist shit. Please. Did you ask any questions?"

Helen raised her concern. "I ... I want to be close to my children, but I don't want them to ship us out. Will it be together, separate, sweet Lord I hope it's not separate."

"Me either," I said. My voice wavered with worry. "If Lucas ends up being right, if this thing wipes out everyone, the last thing I want to do is be separated from the few that I know will still be standing when it's all said and done."

Jack raised a hand and spoke strongly, "Stop. OK? It's a rumor. It can't possibly be correct. There's no way they'd ship us out."

"That's ..." Ralph's voice entered into the conversation. "Not necessarily one hundred percent true."

"See I told you," Lucas commented.

"What?" I asked with shock. "You brought the four of us here."

"Yes, we did." Ralph nodded. "Strategically, groups of four to six are set up all over the country. But there's not a lot of you that we've found. God willing this thing won't take a grip, but if it does maybe we'll be able to find more. I don't know. But if the northern West Coast Serum Center is lacking in production, we could ship one of you there."

It was laughable, and Helen scoffed at that. "You act as if you can't take from somewhere else. You mentioned some places have six immune. Surely you can take a person from there without separating us."

I urged to him. "You guys can't separate us. My heart is packed with worry as it is over my daughter and family getting this. If God forbid this thing wipes everyone out, I don't want to be alone."

"You'll know where each of you is shipped."

I let out an airy gasping breath as I folded my arms. "A lot of good that will do us in a big country."

Lucas commented, "Impossible to find each other."

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"You never answered me.," Helen said. "You could take from another Serum center."

"We could," Ralph replied. "But Cleveland is designated first to move out. Because Cleveland is the first hard hit. If there's no more use for you here ... they'll definitely ship you out."

I asked, "You mean in the event we cure Cleveland, and then we ship out."

"And then some," Ralph answered nervously.

"And then some? What's that mean?" I asked.

Jack answered for Ralph, "It means ... if there's no more use for us here. Which means, they'll ship us out ..." he turned to the window and stared out. "If Cleveland becomes a dead horse."

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That was our day three. Blood test, news, shipped out, dead horse.

Cleveland a dead horse. Meaning if they can't save it, if the sick over run, they weren't going to waste their efforts of possible saving antibodies anymore on Cleveland.

To me that was too depressing. But I had to come to grips with the reality of it.

The four of us spent that night talking about our families. Jack and I shared the same deep fears and hurt over the thought of our children getting ill. I had to stop myself from tearing up each time I thought of my precious little girl. I was racked with anxiety, and visions of her. Missing her. What if she got it? I wasn't going to be there, was I?

Jack conveyed the same.

But, Helen, she had a different outlook. Maybe because



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her children were older. Who knows. But I head what she said, and it forever stayed with me.

“If this grips our God’s green world, then ... then I am glad I am sheltered in here,” she said in her wise manner, sewing something, I think a bib. “If the Lord decides to take my children, I will mourn. Hearing about it will somehow never make it real, so in a sense it will never stick with me one hundred percent. Yep,” she sighed out. “I’d rather hear about my child dying then watch him or her die.”

She’d rather hear that they died than watch them die.

In way, she made a tragic sense.

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Early on the nineteenth, right after breakfast, we donated our blood, being told that it was imperative they hit us twice and to eat, relax, and wait.

Jack and I had taken to reading, *The Stand*. It passed the time, and opened up discussion for us. Helen was a news addict. Since the cable was turned on, she had the news channel playing every time she was in there. Waiting, she claimed, to hear news of the bug. One would think after two weeks, and most of China affected, somehow it would be news.

Did the reporters die or were killed covering it? We often wondered.

“How long?” I asked Jack, as we hung out in my room.

“Four weeks. Maybe five,” he replied.

“Was it that long? I thought it was faster.”

“No.”

“What are you basing it on?” I questioned. “It’s not in the book.”

“The movie, because I remember thinking, ‘wow it was

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four weeks’.”

“Hmm,” I kicked back. “I don’t think it was that long.”

“It was that long.”

I gave him a look that all but said I didn’t buy it.

Lucas spoke up, “You’re thinking of The Silent Victor. The plague killed everyone in four days.”

I snapped my finger. “Yeah, you’re right.”

Jack tossed the book my way. “Your turn.”

“I like when you read better,” I said. “You do voices.”

“And I like when you read better. I can listen and smoke.”

Lucas said, “I like when Jack reads.”

I handed the book Lucas’ way. “How about Lucas reads?”

“How about not,” Lucas said. “I’d rather listen.”

“Fine, I’ll read.” I turned to where Jack had the book marked, and inhaled my preparatory breath. Before I could speak, three quick knocks were at my door, and Helen burst in.

She looked frazzled, panicked. “It’s out.”

We all rose to her feet knowing what she meant, but needed clarification.

She said, “The news is out. Out big time. It’s not good. Come.” She turned from the room.

We followed.

Before turning in and turning our attention to the newscast, Helen filled us in.

Everyone is playing dumb, she informed us. The president, World Health Organization, Centers for Disease Control. They were acting as if the ‘flu’ bug was new news. To the masses they reported that China kept secret the magnitude of the damage, and it gotten so out of control that China couldn’t hide it any longer. Same thing as with

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SARS. They waited weeks to let that out.

There was more of an international outrage over the fact that it was a loose weapon.

Although unofficially suspended five days prior, using international tension as the reason, China officially suspended all air traffic in and out of the country.

Borders closed.

All Asian countries.

Borders closed.

Russia, to protect itself ... borders closed. They were reporting signs of the flu.

At that point in time to cross the ocean was impossible.

The world came to a halt.

The United States and other countries were optimistic about the flu.

“What about the rumors that four American cities already have been exhibiting signs of the flu,” a reporter asked. John Daniels, Director of the Centers for Disease Control, in a news conference. “Surely if there are four there are more.”

John replied, “We are looking into this. We are working closely with health care providers and trust they will report findings ASAP. Meanwhile, as a precaution, we are setting up military perimeters around Louisville, Daytona Beach, Harrisburg, and Cleveland. This is not to say the flu has arrived in these cities, just that rumors are strong and we are investigating. In the case of infection, the blockades are to stop any exodus that may occur to stop further spread of infection.”

They downplayed it.

There was no reason to worry. Since the bug was primarily synthetic an antidote was available and the

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government was manufacturing it as they spoke—just to be on the safe side.

If there was an epidemic, officials reported, people would get sick, but they wouldn't die.

"What about the infected in China? Any numbers?" asked a reporter.

"Not yet."

"I saw on the internet that this thing kills nearly everyone it infects, that Asia is nearly barren."

John chuckled, "China barren. Meaning it's a ghost. Nonsense. Do you know how many people there are in Asia? Impossible, you can't believe everything you read on the net."

"Are the infected Asians dying?"

Pause.

"Yes," he answered. "But I believe they, too, were manufacturing the antidote."

His arm pointed as he picked reporters, answering each question as if he were talking about a chicken pox epidemic.

But protecting the US soil and creating the antidote wasn't the big issue for the day.

How it got out and kept spreading .. was.

Russia demanded action, and called for an emergency convening of the United Nations.

It had been discovered that where the accidental release had occurred, that it wasn't sealed as originally thought. Because it was a weapon, those in the area died so quickly, the leak couldn't be contained.

Therefore a 'hot zone' was created, visible by enhanced satellite photos that showed a deep red growing ring.

The news showed those images.

The ring was seeping the virus at a steady rate. Although the 'hot zone' was red, like a cloud it continuously moved

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and there would be no stopping the infection until the hot zone was shut down.

The United Nations were meeting to decide how to shut it down.

China was screaming, "Travesty"

I saw Jack; he stepped away from the television, and ran his hand slowly down his face.

"What is it?" I asked.

"You know what this means, don't you?" he stated. "It means the UN is convening to decide how they burn out the virus in China."

"Ok," I nodded.

"They're gonna burn it out. If China doesn't, someone else will."

Lucas seeped out a youthful, "Whoa. Some one will nuke them, and we'll nuke them, they'll nuke us. World War III all over this flu."

Jack grimaced facially. "Such a pessimist ... but yes, in a nut shell, yes. He's got it."

Helen gasped so dramatically, one would have thought she was starring in some old fifties horror film. "As if things aren't bad enough."

"Jack?" I questioned. "That won't happen, will it?"

He shrugged. "Don't know. Let's just hope that China is congenial about getting rid of the spot. Cause if they're not, let's face it, what do they have to loose? According to Ralph they're a dying country. A dying place with four hundred tactical long range nuclear weapons just sitting there waiting to go off. If someone invades their soil, I don't think at this point in their game ..." Jack paused. "They'll hesitate to use them."

12.

*The Cold Window*

What was it that woke me? Cold. Yes, that was it. I was cold, shaking, shivering. I looked at the fire and it only glowed. I had to add more logs. I fell asleep in a sitting position, which helped, but my leg felt like it weighed a ton when I tried to move. Plus, pains shot right through me.

I looked, the bag was empty, the IV had dripped its last drop. I'd have to change it. The Palace was dark, not a good thing, not at all. If they were watching they'd know, those with reason, that something was wrong. I had to get up. I had to.

I was grateful that the moon lit the room enough for me to see the IV and my way around. It took all my strength to get up and do the things I needed to do. A lantern, set the alarm, get a new IV ready. Take medicine ... eat.

I had to eat. My hands were shaking. It was hunger or fever. I had taken my temperature, my fever reached 102.

After ensuring the spotlights were on and none of them were around, I hobbled my way to the kitchen area. I really didn't have the energy to even heat the soup, but I had to try.

Pot on the stove, I grabbed some soup. A jar. There was a little mom and pop grocer down the street from David's house, and the woman who owned it canned her own soup.

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Fresh chicken noodle in mason jars.

I poured it in the pan and gave it a fast heat.

Just a little. Only a little, that's all I needed.

Pouring my soup into a mug, I carried it to the night stand, I was going to sit on bed and eat it, but heard a noise outside. I set down the soup and looked out the window.

"Fuckin' assholes."

Two of them were trying to climb the wall. They only make it so far, before they'd fall backwards. I should have shot them, but the truth was, I didn't have it in me.

Instead, I kept watch. Rifle by me, soup in hand, I perched before the window in a chair.

My eyes were heavy, my heart, too, I was doing a lot of thinking, but at that moment, I had to concentrate on what was going on in the backyard.

I had every intention of hooking up another bag, getting some water, but I didn't. At least I managed to set that alarm, that was a good thing, because before I could get the medicine flowing into my veins, and water to keep me strong, I passed out in that chair, in front of the window.

**13.**

***Shut Down***

June 23<sup>rd</sup>

It began at dawn; Lucas woke us all to make us aware. A huge military truck with people rolled into the airfield and makeshift hospital. After that, every two hours another truck load moved in.

We had two forms of entertainment. One was watching the hoards of sick people arrive through the window, or watching the news. We had no choice watching the news, that's all that was on.

The China situation had been resolved. At least for the time being. A small thermo nuclear weapon was detonated over the hot zone, by China. Of course, communication with China had dwindled to nearly nothing.

Some speculated that Asia was dead. Others claimed the government cut communications to ease chaos within its own boundaries.

Russia was reporting minimal cases of the flu—which everyone believed as a lie. England refused to comment, with their prime minister only stating, "That each country should worry about its own"

It was strange how the focus went from world wide to nationwide.



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Seven US cities confirmed the flu. Cleveland was one of them. All seven were shut down, barricaded, and traffic was prohibited in and out.

Television footage showed mobs at the barricades trying to get through, as reporters in gasmasks stood not far away filming it all.

The news had become one debate after another. Each saying the same thing in different ways.

The printed name on the screen read, 'Ret. General Edwin Kern, of the United States Army Biological studies. He was being interviewed by Allyson Winters, and the other guest was Bill something or other, an epidemiologist.

"I think the government is being just about as honest as they can be," Edwin said. "If they were trying to hide anything, they certainly wouldn't allow the barricade riots to be shown, now would they."

Allyson questioned, "What about the rumors that Hybrid Greed isn't localized to these seven cities."

"Our records show, Allyson, that Greed is not that easily transmitted from person to person. I worked with Greed, I studied it. I know it. The tracked it to the carriers in these cities."

"But it's not Greed, it's a hybrid."

"With the same makeup," Edwin said.

"I have a doctor in Baltimore he states he lost seven hundred patients," Allyson said, "Bill?"

"That low?" Bill chuckled. "People are dying left and right. I know that sounds cold, but it's the truth."

"Horse cocky," Edwin interrupted. "You have seen the interviews with patients who were coming out of it. The antidote is working. It just takes time. I've personally read the files on this. Serum is being produced daily."

"But is it enough?" Allyson asked.

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“Not enough to save the entire infected population. But if we get a grip on those infected, it will stop itself. I believe that. Greed will burn out. Its leak is sealed now. Two weeks and it will burn out. With the help of the antidote, we’ll beat this. Yes, we’ll lose lives, but Project Omega will be a success.”

“Kind of ominous, don’t you think?” Allyson asked. “Omega meaning the end. Bill? Your thoughts.”

Bill replied. “I think it’s insane. We’re about as close to Armageddon as you can get. People need to start preparing for a complete and utter break down of society. Forty percent. If we lose forty percent of the populous, this country is gonna go to shit. I also studied Greed. We’re not getting the truth here.”

From his window lookout spot, Lucas spoke to the television, “No, we’re not Bill. No we’re not.”

Jack grumbled and concentrated on moving his chess piece.

“Ignore him,” I said, trying to anticipate his move.

Lucas continued, “Helen what do you think?”

“I think our government is doing all they can. We’re proof of that.”

“Locked in a tank. I think we’re preservation,” Lucas said. “I think this blood taking stuff is bull shit, and they are isolating the well ones to ensure nothing happens to us.”

Jack mumbled, “Lucas.”

“Seriously, dude. We’re the future. Let the flu wipe out the world, let people kill people, then when it all burns out, and all is quiet, the door will open. Or ... maybe not. It might not open if everyone dies and forgets about us.”

I looked at Jack. “Could that happen?”

“I won’t let it,” Jack whispered then shot a glare at Lucas who snickered. “What? What is funny?”

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“Like you’ll stop it. Just like the government will stop it. Forty percent Bill says. Optimistic, Bill, optimistic guess. More like, ninety-nine point nine, nine, nine, nine ...”

“Lucas!” Jack snapped. “Go back to watching out your window.”

Jack and I continued to try and play chess. Helen sewed. Time was ticking away slowly. When all you had was time on your hands it dragged.

One nurse took all of our samples in the morning. Which was odd. We got into a conversation about that. Until Lucas chimed in.

“Everyone else is sick,” Lucas said about that. “Bet me.”

“Shut .. up,” Jack ordered him. “Stare out the window.”

“Oh, man another truck just arrived,” Lucas announced. “This batch doesn’t look too bad. Five hundred mark. Oh, wow. Some guy just puked everywhere.” He turned from the window. “It’s ten o’clock, why haven’t they fed us.”

No sooner did Lucas make that comment, and Ralph entered through the air tight door. He carried a box. “It’s been very hectic,” he announced. “I’m sorry, this will have to do.”

The box contained a few packs of those tiny cereal boxes and milk which Ralph promptly put in the refrigerator.

“Chef’s dead,” Lucas stated. “Or sick.”

Ralph shot a look at him. “You’re by the window. Have you seen it out there.”

“Yep. And there.” Lucas pointed to the television.

On the screen, at that moment, was an Army barricade. Ralph walked over and turned off the television. “There’s something I need to say.”

We gave him our attention.

“We believe we found a few more immune people.

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Right now they are being screened for immunity and it will take a few days. Until then ...until then we need one of you to volunteer to leave."

Admittedly I was excited. Leave? I really believed he meant home.

"Are you done with us?" I asked. "You don't need us all anymore. If that's the case then ..."

"No." Ralph held up his hand. "We do. We just need to move one of you to another location to start processing antibodies."

Helen quizzed. "You said you found other immune. Why not use them?"

"We want to get started right away. We can't wait," Ralph answered. "I'll be honest, I would prefer Helen or Sgt. Gavin. You both are bigger and can produce more."

"Where?" Helen asked. "Can you say where?"

"I don't know the exact location. I do know it's in Oklahoma."

Oklahoma. It wasn't showing infection on the US map, at least not the one the news showed.

I was curious. "Why don't you know?"

"They tell me they need someone, I send them," Ralph answered. "Granted this is the seedling base. Alpha of the Omega. Pure findings here reflect what will happen elsewhere. Just because I am in charge of the Omega project, doesn't mean I control how it is used. Understand?"

We didn't, nor did we pretend to. I believe Ralph was being quiet on purpose.

"Which one?" Ralph asked. "They are waiting."

I looked at Jack. I saw it, He was getting ready. But then Helen stood.

"I'll go. My son lives in Oklahoma City. I'd ... I'd like to go."

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Ralph nodded a thank you, and told us to buzz when she was ready.

Helen left to get a bag.

She didn't take much with her. She didn't have much. Her goodbye to us was short, and warm.

"I'm gonna find my son when this is done." She laid her hand on my cheek. "It's probably just early out there and we can beat it. I know we can."

Lucas called out a question, "Where does you son live?"

"Oklahoma City."

"That's awfully big," Lucas said. "I mean what part and street?"

"He lives on Armstrong street in Moore"

Did Lucas write that down? He did.

Helen noticed and smiled. "Lucas, why did you write that down?"

"Because, I wanna find you when its done, OK? Cause if this thing doesn't work, I don't want to be alone. So stay put. OK."

"It'll work Lucas," she said.

"Can you stay put if it don't?" he asked.

Helen gave a gentle smile of agreement, more passive than anything, brushed her hand over us in one more goodbye, and rang the buzzer.

I would say it went quiet after she left. Solemn. At least Jack and I were. Lucas went from window watching to news watching.

Jack and I returned to our game, but admittedly, I lost all concentration.

"They're talking about the side effects of the antidote," Lucas announced.

"Keep us posted," Jack said, then looked at me. "What

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is it?”

At first I did that typical female thing where I shook my head, said, ‘nothing’ then drew quiet. It didn’t take any prodding, just a look, and I sighed out. “They moved her, Jack. Do you really think they’re gonna bring in more immune replacements?”

Lucas answered, “No.”

Jack bit his lip. “I don’t know.”

“I think it’s worse. I think they don’t need us.” I said.

“Me either,” said Lucas.

“Fuckin’ kid.” Jack breathed heavily. “I wish I could assure you. I can’t. All I can tell you is they are showing people on the news that have gotten the antidote.”

Lucas interjected. “They have bad eyes. And they’re test subjects, they aren’t real people.”

“What are you talking about?” Jack asked. “Of course they are real people.”

“No, they’re not. They haven’t given it to the general population yet,” Lucas said. “They just talked about it. They are pulling groups of people at a time and testing. They haven’t tried on a large scale. Of course they said they are testing right now on a larger scale...” He pointed to the window. “They said they’ll move cases to the public in the next five days or so. That’s what they said. But you can’t ...”

“All right. All right.” Jack stopped him.

“Jack,” I whispered his name with concern. “Five days. Do you know how much damage can be done in five days with this?”

“We can’t think like that,” Jack said.

“I can’t help it. They moved Helen. What if they don’t need us. What if it’s too far gone here, or they think it will be? What if Lucas is right and everyone forgets about us in

here.”

“Never happen,” Jack spoke assuredly. “We’ll never be stuck in here.”

“We just read that scene in *The Stand*.”

“Yeah, but we aren’t locked in a cage. Trust me, there’s a way in here, I’ll find us a way out.” He winked.

Lucas mumbled, “Yeah, he was the big bad Army guy.”

Jack twitched his head. “I’m killing that kid.”

That made me smile, but the smile was short lived.

“Lisa, come on.” Jack reached across the table for my hand.

“They moved her west. West, Jack. That’s got to concern you.”

Jack nodded. “It does. My daughter is in LA. But I can’t dwell about something in which I have no control. Neither should you.”

“I can’t help it.” With a heavy sigh, I stood up and stretch my bones. I wandered slowly to the window. “I am worried. I’m worried about my family. My daughter especially. What if she’s sick? I want to be there. I should be there.”

Jack approached me. “Didn’t the nurse say this morning someone checked up on your family? They did that to help alleviate your fears. They’re fine, Lisa. They said they’re not sick. You have to believe that. You have to try not to worry.”

“How?” I asked with passion. I indicated to the television. “With all that, and all this ...” I turned to the window and stared out. Another truck arrived. People were being escorted from the back. I faced Jack again, this time with look of desperation and uncertainty. “With all I am seeing, how can I believe them. How can I truly not worry that my family is anything but fine.”

**14.**

***Alpha***

Shrill. Shriek. Loud. Long.

A baby's wail startled me ... or at least I thought I heard a baby's cry. I sat up in the chair causing a sharp pain from my thigh to my stomach. I sat up and cocked an ear to listen. I didn't hear it anymore. The only thing I heard was the sizzling of the fire which still burned, low, but burned, I wasn't sleeping long.

Why hadn't the room warmed up? I still had to be fevered, I figured, and knew I had to fight to kick its ass; it was gripping me instead of me gripping the infection.

Damn idiots.

Why did I hear a baby crying? It probably was a dream, or a subconscious memory slipping through in audible form.

They can reproduce ... I think. They can have sex. I busted one of the males having sex with a female. Right on the floor, like an animal. The man taking the woman like a dog would take a dog. I probably would have let him finish had the woman not been dead. Her lifeless body propped against the mannequin stand while he pounded away.

I shot him, then moved on.

So they can copulate. At that time it hadn't been long enough to find out if they actually could make a child. It



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wouldn't be hard to hide. Noises travel far in a dead city. A baby's cry can be heard for miles. I know this to be true, it was November, and fall had set in, the weather chilled, but no snow.

I was getting supplies at the Wal-Mart when I heard the cry. At first, you know, I thought it was my imagination. Until it continued. I followed the sound. God, how far it traveled, and how long that baby cried.

The wind was picking up and a couple times I lost my direction. The cry wasn't normal. It was weak, young, how young was the baby?

Three blocks up the road, in a nearby strip mall I heard the cry grow louder. It was as I approached that I saw the trail of blood coming from a store. The trail was droplets that formed a path.

Follow the droplets or go to the origin?

I went in the hardware store, and saw the bloody footprints. They grew darker the further I followed them, as if whoever it was stepped in the blood and ran, rubbing off the blood with each step they took.

I thought, 'Oh God,' what did they do this the baby, until I turned a bend and saw a huge puddle of blood, urine and feces mixed within. There in the middle, a naked baby. Newborn. It was still attached to the umbilical chord and placenta.

I searched the store quickly, found a tarp and gloves, and using the gloves, I lifted the child, wrapping him in the tarp.

I found a good pair of shears still in a package. I took them and the baby and headed back to my car which was still at Wal-Mart. I don't believe I ever ran so fast and gingerly in all my life as I did carrying that child. I hurried into Wal-Mart, grabbed a bottle, a can of formula, and

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darted out, driving quickly all the way back to the palace.

I cut the chord, cleaned the child, and fed him.

He seemed fine, and I was a doctor, I was able to tell these things. I was also able to tell, despite the fact he was conceived after Greed, he was one of them. His skin was fine, and he wailed a painful scream in water that wasn't all that hot. It reddened him, and I had to be careful. But, still he was a baby, maybe his skin was the only thing that was similar to them.

I named the boy, Thomas. I believed he was a Godsend. I had him for about a week. Within two days he came down with a horrible respiratory infection, and despite all of my attempts to make him healthy, the child died.

It broke my heart.

A child born into an ugly world, birthed in ugly way.

He didn't have a chance, no matter what I did.

He was condemned to death the moment he entered the world. I just delayed it some.

There was no baby cry that night, only my memories reminding me of a once futile fight. I was in my own battle that night. My leg hurt, my fever raged, and I was weak.

At that moment I felt more like baby Thomas. Fighting and sick. I feared that like Thomas, perhaps I was condemned to death, and just delaying the inevitable.

I prayed that wasn't the case.

**15.**

***Turning Point***

June 26<sup>th</sup>

The moans, coughing, screams, shouting, and trucks, all combined created a symphony of noise that seeped through the exterior walls of the tank.

Sounded like a zombie movie. So much so, I jumped from bed, snuck to the door, opened it slowly, and peeked.

Jack was approaching.

I shrieked.

“Are you hearing this shit?” he asked.

It wasn’t as early as I thought; just hard to tell when I was in my room.

He and I went into the main room to peer out the window and investigate.

The sun brought on a reality of what was going on outside. How many more had come in? There were so many people, the tents were spread across the airfield like a river. We couldn’t distinguish any one ill person, there were so many cots.

A small office style tent was setup on the edge; we figured that was where Ralph stayed. Of course we didn’t know that was only our observation and guess. Outside looking in sort of thing.

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We opted to watch some of the news. Turning on the television, we were greeted with news of violence, rioting, chaos.

*In Miami, an apartment building was burned to the ground when it was discovered that a family with the flu resided ...*

*Rioting in Atlanta reached astronomical proportions ...*

*Military units were brought in when a Chicago clinic announced it only had five hundred doses of the antidote. Rioting entailed and several who were given ten doses were killed in spite ...*

*Experts are trying to confirm at this moment if indeed a low yield nuclear weapon detonated over Moscow. Moscow officials had moved all the infected into one section of the town, quarantining to inhibit the spread of infection. It is believed this is the section of town where the explosion took place. Reports have yet to be confirmed or denied. Experts are also questioning whether it was intentional on the part of the government ...*

*In East Texas, A catholic priest has been arrested for administering what he called 'holy killing', putting those infected out of their ...*

"Turn this shit off." Jack reached and stopped the television. "I can't take it. It's all bad. The whole country has gone to shit."

"I know."

We were going to discuss it further, but Ralph came in and took our blood.

Ralph came in.

We questioned him on why that was, and he said nothing.

Maybe Lucas was right. Maybe the health care workers had fallen ill.

We started to suspect that the chef more than likely did. An hour passed breakfast and no food was brought in at all.

We had coffee that was left for us to make, and Jack

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brewed a pot. Whether he wanted to admit it or not, aggravated by all that was happening, he was a news junkie, and his putting the television back on, proved that.

We were greeted with talk about the bomb in Moscow, and mid report ... static.

Absolute static.

For only a minute. A long beep precluded old sitcom reruns.

We went from gloom and doom to old sitcoms. The news was gone. On every single channel, the news was gone.

It never returned.

Just sitcoms.

"It makes sense," Jack said.

"What does?"

"They took the news off. They did it on purpose. Showing cheerful stuff."

I was confused. "Why? Why would the government want to hide the truth?"

"Because the truth is making people crazy. It's making them riot. Chaos. If people don't know what's going on, they can't get up in arms about some clinic only having five hundred doses. They won't get upset, because they won't know. It's a way to halt the rioting, or at least minimize it."

I shook my head. "I disagree. I think it'll make matters worse."

"Nah, it can't be any worse." Jack, who had been pacing, finally sat down. "Think about it. The only news is bad news. There is no other news but this flu. Remove it; people may not dwell on it so much. They'll worry about themselves and those they care about. The sitcoms, though twisted, were a way to take people's minds off things. Why else would the same sitcom play on every channel?"

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I started at him for a moment. "Do you really think the government sat down and thought about it as deeply as you just did?"

"Absolutely. I thought of it that fast, so did they."

"You believe that."

"Sure, why not," Jack said. "Then again, I could be delusional from being hungry."

"Speaking of hungry," I ran my hand across my stomach.

"Lisa, in all seriousness. Don't be surprised if no one brings food in here at all today."

My eyes closed at that thought.

"With all that's going on in that airfield. Ralph took the blood. That means no one is around. He can't be concerned with food."

"So we starve while we're stuck in here."

"We aren't stuck in here. And ... we won't starve."

"You just said they won't ..."

"I know what I said," Jack interrupted. "I'm saying I thought ahead. I worried about this. I stashed food. The extra boxes of cereal, crackers, wrapped cakes, they're in my room."

"Thank you." I didn't know what else to say. I gave him a smile. "Thanks for looking out for us. Now ..." I sighed. "You thought ahead on food, what about being stuck."

He winked. "I'm working on it." With a slap of his hands to his thighs he stood up. "Now, how about something to eat?"

I nodded.

Jack started to leave.

"Oh, Jack," I called. "Can you wake Lucas? He's sleeping awfully late."

"Will do."

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When he left, I sat back. I thought about his stashing food. He had taken it from the food trays without our knowledge. I wondered what happened to my coffee cake the other day. It was probably hidden in Jack's room. The thought of it made me chuckle, until Jack returned.

The look on his face said it all. He was drawn, shocked. My heart dropped to my stomach as I instinctively jumped to my feet.

"What is it?" I asked panicked. "What's wrong?"

"Lucas. He's gone," he said, stunned.

"What do you mean gone?" A sickness engulfed me, gone as in dead? I thought I would instantly vomit.

"Bed is empty. Gone," Jack's voice cracked. "I think they took him."

<><><><>

We weren't able to confirm how they took Lucas or when, the reason being, no one came in the rest of the day. At all.

Ralph was the last one and that was in the morning. We saw him through the window, moving about frazzled, but it was as if we weren't even there.

Hunger wasn't a problem. Jack had stashed food, and we had plenty of water and coffee. We were good. But for how long?

See, we were imprisoned in an air tight tank, windows and doors air locked tight. The building seemed to be on some sort of auto run with lights and air conditioning. Although we could turn the units up in our rooms.

The news still hadn't returned, and just about dinner time, after we had our peanut butter and crackers, Jack told me he had something to do.

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That amused me, what could he possibly have to do? Something to do? He asked, for my sake, to stay in my room, just in case they had monitoring cameras, which he was pretty certain they did.

They said we had a choice to stay, we never bought that. I did, however, buy that they would be good to us if we helped us and eventually let us go. Jack believed we would never be let go, insisted that they'd find away to kill us. Make us permanent non-entities.

Sealed in the tank, no food, if they cut off the air, they would prove Jack right. About two hours after he went on his mission, shortly after eleven PM, Jack returned.

"Where have you been?" I asked.

"Come with me." He gave a twitch of his head, and led me from the room.

We walked down the corridor where the sleeping rooms were located, to the very end. It was the furthest end of the tank. 'Do not enter' was posted on the door.

Jack opened it.

"Wasn't that locked?" I questioned.

"Was." He pushed it open only slightly and slipped inside, bringing me with him. The room wasn't much bigger than a pantry. A heating unit, or so I assumed set center of the room. It looked like a furnace. I learned it was a filter system. Jack indicated to the ceiling and the three foot vents that fed in and out of it.

"The unit stops our air from getting out and vise versa." He pointed to the wall. "See where that connects to the wall?"

I nodded.

"That leads to ventilation shaft that crosses over the entire length of our living area here. It leads to the other side of the air tight door in the little hall that separates us



from the rest of the building. Getting to the shaft will be easy. The screws are already loose; you just need to remove it. The other vent will require a simple kick and it will drop.”

“How do you know this?”

Jack raised his eyebrows a few times then smiled. “I was there.”

“You crawled through.”

“Yep. I prepared our escape hatch. We won’t be stuck here, I promise.”

I breathed out a huge sigh of relief and embraced him. “Thank you. Let’s go.”

“No.”

“No? Why?”

“Because neither of us have weapons. Look at the airfield, it’s insane. The last we heard on the news rioting was everywhere. We escape. where we gonna go? How far do you think we get. No. We use this as a last resort.”

“How do we know when it’s a last resort?”

“I think we will. If after two days no one comes in, not even Ralph, if things stop moving outside, then I think to say, they left us here to die. That’s when it’s a last resort.”

“So the clock is ticking.”

“Very much so.”

We slipped from that closet or vent room, and headed back to mine. There we laid out a plan of action, what we would do. How we would go to my house and find my family, and once he knew I was safe he was going to go and try to find his daughter. If God forbid something happened with my family, I was to go with him.

It sounded good to me. I didn’t want to be alone. I certainly didn’t want us to separate once we got out of the tank. A part of me feared going out in the world again. It

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had gone mad.

We called it a night about two-thirty in the morning, both tired, and figuring we could always finish the next day. What else was there to do?

I had barely laid down on top of the cover, my head resting on the pillow when a heavy knock on my door, just one, startled me. I jumped to a sitting position and Jack barged in.

“Lisa.”

“Jack? What’s going on?”

Just as he was about to tell me, three soldiers barged in.

“They’re taking me.”

“What!” I jumped off the bed, as the three soldiers grabbed hold of Jack. He struggled and fought.

Ralph walked in. “Get him out.”

“No!” I shouted. “No.”

“I’m sorry,” Ralph said. “He is needed elsewhere.”

Jack spun hard to face Ralph. “This is bullshit. Take me and leave her? If I’m going then there’s no need for us here anymore.”

“That’s not true. We need one of you to remain,” Ralph said.

“No, you don’t,” Jack argued. “Let her go. Either go home, or she comes with me.”

Ralph shook his head. “Wouldn’t be wise once we let her go altogether, now would it?” He twitched his heads to the guard. “You’re going all the way to LA.”

The guards literally dragged a fighting Jack. It took all of their strength to do so.

I screamed ‘no’ as I followed them out and down the hall.

“Can you stop?” Jack snapped. “Let me say goodbye to

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her. Just let me say goodbye.”

Finally, just as they brought him to the air tight door, Ralph gave a go ahead nod to the guards. They released Jack and he charged to me.

He embraced me. God, did he embrace me tight. I felt it come from him, a part of him was fearful. Scared.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“It’s not your fault.” I shook my head.

“I’ll find you,” he said with passion.

“Let’s go,” Ralph ordered.

The guards took hold of Jack and separated us.

“Stay where I can find you. Please.” Despite them taking him, Jack kept looking at me. “I promise you. I will come back for you. Someway. Some how.” The door hissed as it opened. “Lisa, I’ll be back for you.”

He was through the door with the guards and Ralph, and before I, too, could slip through, the door closed.

I could still hear him. His voice muffled as he charged out instructions for me to stay safe, and somewhere he could find me. I didn’t know what that meant, but I understood why he said it.

My soul dropped with the silence that followed. I pounded my fist once against the door, and then with a turn slid my back down against it as I dropped to the floor.

I was alone, feeling lost, and I didn’t have a clue what would happen next.

**16.**

***The Last Resort***

June 29<sup>th</sup>

It was the third morning that no one came in and the fourth day where food wasn't brought to me. In the middle of the night, two days prior, Jack was taken. That was the last time I saw another human being, with the exception of looking out the window.

*'Look at the airfield, it's insane,'* Jack had said.

I reflected on his words when I decided to make my decision.

*'If after two days no one comes in, not even Ralph, if things stop moving outside, then I think to say, they left us here to die.'*

I knew the time had come.

I had started sleeping in the main room, grabbing on to the outside noises for sanity and hope. It was the silence that awoke me. Complete silence. No moans, shouting, trucks, nothing. It was the day after Jack was gone.

I got up, looked, and saw a completely different scene than when I went to bed. The once buzzing aid station was still. Did they move them all out while I slept? I knew there was some sort of commotion the night before, but when I peered out I couldn't make out what it was. The television stopped playing that morning as well. Actually, there were

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no working stations. What a thing to wake up to. Silence. A non communicating world.

The next morning brought no change.

I made the last little bit of coffee. Maybe a cup's worth, my nourishment had dwindled. They had taken the stash of food from his room. I hadn't realized it at all until I went in there to get some crackers.

Stash gone.

I was left with a few cookies, and one can of soup. At least I had water.

The last morning when my stomach growled loudly with hunger and pinched in pain. The last morning before I declared it was time to use the last resort.

As I munched on the half of a cookie, I confirmed my decision by looking outside.

There still was no movement at all. Twenty-four hours has passed, and still nothing. Just the flapping of the tents in the breeze. A jeep was there, but I couldn't see if there was a driver. Unlike two days before when there had been soldiers. Maybe not many, but a few.

It was my sign. Enough time had gone by.

Remembering what Jack had said about not having weapons, I grabbed the only thing I could find in the tank. A butter knife. It wasn't sharp but it would have to do. I held on to the hope that maybe a soldier left a rifle out there, or maybe there was some sort of weapon in the building.

Jack was going to return for me, so he said. I figured if he was going to find me, I would have to leave hint on where I went.

Knowing that he'd come through the airtight door, with black indelible ink, I wrote on the wall, bug and thick, 'went home', and I noted my address underneath.

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I had no need for belongings, I didn't even know if I had to strength to carry anything heavy. I was weak from lack of food. I took only a tiny purse, which contained my identification. That slung over my shoulder.

Jack had the escape route ready. After discovering they took the stash, I double checked that.

I had to bring a chair into the little room to reach the vent. After uncovering it, using a lot of my strength, I hoisted myself into the vent. The metal was cold against my bare knees. I could have changed my clothes, but I just had to get out.

I crawled for what seemed an eternity, estimating my distance and knowing that at anytime I would reach the end. I wondered how Jack fit through, I barely did on my hands in knees. Finally, I saw a light. Just a little one. Enthusiasm pumped my adrenaline, and I crawled even faster.

The vent.

I could see through and I checked to see if there was a guard, there wasn't. The little office with one security desk appeared empty.

Admittedly, I was a little scared. Scared that I'd pop out that vent, climb down only to be faced with the barrel of a ruffle.

But I had to take my chance.

Using the bigger end of the butter knife, I hit the vent hard. The gate of it fell to the floor with an echoing bang.

I gave it a second, and, although a tight squeeze, I managed to turn my body, so as to let my feet through the vent first.

I had no idea how far of a fall it was, Jack left that detail out. He just said it was a bit of a jump.

Edge of the vent scraping against my belly, I cautiously lowered myself until I could see below.

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The vent covering lay about six feet below me.

I mumbled a curse, and edged down until my fingertips gave way of my grip in my hang jump, and I fell to the floor.

I handled the landing well. It sent a shock to my feet, my legs wobble and I lost balance. But I quickly regained myself and peered around as I stood.

No one was there.

I raced to the desk and started to check drawers for a gun or something. Nothing was there. Damn it. Just as I gave up, I saw a set of keys. They actually looked like someone's personal keys because the chain contained one of this tiny discount cards.

I snatched them up and turned. As I did, I noticed the open interior door and the vending machine in there screamed my name.

Food. I ran in the vending room. A candy machine, coffee, and sandwich machine were there. Without money, my only recourse was to grab a chair. I did. I turned the other way as I hoisted the chair and used the legs to bust the glass on the sandwich machine. I did the same for the candy.

I stuffed a few bags of candies in the big pockets of the ACU's I had made into shorts, then snatched a sandwich., Bologna I think. It was cold, and semi fresh. I gobbled it quickly, hoping I wouldn't get sick.

A knot formed in my stomach from eating too fast. I took a second, let it settle, and decided it was time to go. I was going to find the car that matched the keys.

Tummy semi full, pockets stuffed, I walked through the office to the door.

The door didn't lead outside, it led down a long corridor. I remembered that. For the first day of testing,

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before being sealed in the tank, I had taken that exact route to go through testing.

But on that day, thirteen days earlier, people moved about and buzzed in the hallway.

Thirteen days? Had it been that long? Opening a bag of candy, I headed down that corridor. Where was everyone? Not a soul was seen. Then it hit me. It was Sunday. Maybe no one was working on a Sunday. If that was true, then I had just destroyed a vending machine and the people returning to work the next day would be pissed.

The thought of that, for some reason, made me chuckle. Then I saw a beam of light at the end of the hall way. It came from the right. When I reached that point I turned. Another hall, but this one held salvation. I could see the glass double doors. In fact, I could also see a small blue car parked right out front.

I looked at the car and to the keys in my hand. Maybe they were a match. The closer I drew to the door, the more I could see the edges of tents. Had the aid station spread out that far?

One way to find out. I finished off my candy, tossed away the package and reached with both hands for the double doors.

I should have been better prepared. I was a doctor for crying out loud. What was I expecting? What did I think was happening outside those doors. Certainly, I entertained the thought, but never let it register into the reality portion of my brain. Had I done so, I would have been more prepared.

I pushed up the doors with both hands and the second I merged with the outdoor air I was blasted back by a horrendous, sour sulfuric smell, hot and pungent. It hit me like a wave, carried in the late June air.



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It burned my nostrils, made my eyes water and my jaws tightened as I fought of the gags that made my glands over salivate.

I quickly retreated back into the building. Through my panicked breaths, I muttered, "Oh my God, Oh my God." My heart raced, I immediately knew what that smell was, and for it to be that strong, that pronounced, that far away from the tents ...

Oh, God.

I paced in front of that door, absolutely terrified to go back out. My entire being shook. I was without a doubt, at a momentary loss at what to do.

Stop.

I had to get it together. I had to get home. I had to venture out there.

I also had to find out what happened. I was a professional for crying out loud. Gain strength, I told myself.

After a few minutes of thinking, and getting courage, I knew I couldn't go back out there, without some sort of protection. Yes, I was immune to Greed, but I certainly wasn't immune from Cholera or any other diseases that floated out there with the death.

Protection.

Was I stupid? I was in a containment tank. Finally getting my wits about me, I sought out the labs.

As I approached the one blood work lab, it seeped to me. Not as strong, but it was there.

The smell of death.

This time I was prepared. The smell carried from the slight opening in the lab door. Breathing through my mouth, I peeked in the window.

Meg.

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Lucas' nurse, sat at her desk. The same desk she charted things that first day in that room divided by a plastic wall.

In her chair, her cheek rested on the desk, one arm slumped down, the other above her head, still holding a piece of paper. It appeared as if she just dropped over. Needing those supplies, I got ready to walk in there when I noticed them. Five lockers against the wall.

I checked them one by one.

Empty.

Empty.

Bingo. A backpack was in the third locker. I would need that. I took it, opened it and dumped the contents on the floor. A book, wallet, extra shirt ... yep, would need that, I grabbed that to place over my mouth when I walked into the lab.

My purse fit inside the knapsack and I tossed that over my shoulder, shirt on my nose, I went in the lab. The air was cold and clinical. I tried not to look at her, but I couldn't help it. The cool air-conditioned air stopped her from decomposing too much. Her cheek pressed against the desk, was black from settled blood, her face puffy with splotches, eyes gray, and open.

I was no expert on dead bodies, but if I were to venture a guess, under the atmospheric conditions, she was dead about two days, maybe less.

Under the counter, I found a box of face masks, and rubber gloves. Perfect. I took a pair of gloves and one mask, put the boxes in the knapsack, and placed on the gloves, holding my breath as I did.

I need a scent. Something I could coat on the inside of the mask to inhibit some of the smell I would face outside. Sure, I'd breath through my mouth, but some odor would eventually crawl up my nostrils.

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Meg's purse set on the edge of her desk. Perfume. Maybe she had perfume. My sinuses would hate me for that, but it was better than the alternative.

I opened her bag and dumped it on the desk. A tube of lipstick rolled off and on to the floor. Then I saw it. Bingo.

She had the flu, and at that second I was glad. I know that was horrible to think. The white tube caught my attention. It was one of those breathing sticks. I took off the outer cap then unscrewed the inner nostril tube, hoping the entire time she wasn't a drug addict hiding her cocaine in there. She wasn't. I was greeted by a nearly full chunk of menthol vapor rub in stick form. Using it like a glue stick, I coated the inside of the mask then recapped it with the outer cover.

It was better with the mask on. I reached to Meg, closed her eyes, zipped up the knapsack, and moved on.

Despite my best efforts, the smell still was there. It was hindered some by the menthol, and my attempts to not breathe through my nose.

It was hot and humid. Of course it was nearly July. I fetched the keys, hoping they would work on that blue car.

The door was open, no one inside and I slipped in there. Using the obvious car key, I nervously aimed for the ignition.

It fit.

Yes!

A turn of the key brought the turn of the engine. With excitement, I hit my fist against the wheel, nodded approvingly at the full gas gauge, and lifted my head to the rearview mirror as I started to close the door.

Pause.

In the reflection I saw the tents. Multitudes of them.

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Could I really leave without knowing what happened there? My answer to myself was 'no', and I shut off the car.

If anything, maybe I'd find a weapon of sorts.

Leaving the knapsack with the car, I withdrew from the automobile.

I faced the aid camp.

Was I frightened? Hell yeah. But I walked there.

The silence out there was eerie. Flapping tents, the heavy buzz of flies. No movement of people, soldiers. One tent. All I had to do was look in one tent.

The first one would work.

Making my approach, through the flapping entrance I could see the lines and lines of cots.

It took opening the flap, a single step, and one good look. I first I was encompassed by what I saw, then it hit me, and my stomach roared like a volcano. I whipped off my mask, spun my body and violently thrust forward the little contents of my stomach and then some.

Salvia poured from my mouth like a waterfall with every twist and painful churn of my stomach. I tied to stop. I did. But I couldn't. Every time I felt a reprieve, my mind flashed the visions of those bodies.

Each cot was full, some even contained more than one person. Bodies lined the floors, overlapping each other, intertwined with blankets. There had to be hundreds. IV poles were toppled. There was no way they were dead longer than two and a half days, but the hot weather threw them into the putrefaction stage of decomposing. Where the body fills with gasses and fluids, expanding the skin like balloons. Each body was swollen, rich with the colors of red and black. All of them seeping yellow and green body fluids onto one another. Flies were everywhere and the maggots so plentiful, they formed pools over the mouths and faces

of the corpse.

The heaving finally subsided. I spit out the last remnants of spit and vomit from my mouth, and swiped the back of my hand across my lips. Lifting my head I saw the jeep.

It was in the distance by the smaller tent I always assumed was Ralph's. I wasn't even going to investigate until I saw there was a person sitting in that jeep, their head turned to the rearview mirror. They were watching me. They sat there and watched me vomit everywhere.

"Hey!" I called out. "Don't go anywhere."

Were they dangerous? Probably not. They were just watching. Probably in shock like me.

I placed on my face mask as I trotted the short distance to the jeep. The closer I drew the more I recognized the back of the head.

Ralph.

Chuckling with relief, I charged to the jeep and caught my breath upon arrival. "Ralph, thank God you ..."

It sent me back. Actually, I slammed into the rear view mirror.

I didn't see it at first, of course I didn't. I think I screamed, I'm not sure now.

Ralph was dead and it was obvious it wasn't the flu that killed him. He had been dead as long as the others, his body, too, in the putrefaction stage. A pipe, probably three feet long, was embedded in his chest. He had been impaled and killed so quickly, that he literally froze and died in the midst of what he was doing.

He was pulling away.

One hand on the steering wheel, one on the ignition as he checked the rearview mirror. Only now flies danced around his agape mouth.

He was making an escape, a fast one at that, and with

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something important. I noticed the briefcase on the seat next to him. I wouldn't have thought much about it had the briefcase not been linked with a small chain and handcuffed to Ralph.

What was so important that Ralph entrusted no one with it?

Knowing Ralph's high esteem position, the briefcase had to contain information about the project. Perhaps, I thought, it had more information about Greed. Or better yet, I was hopeful that something in that case was about Jack, Helen, or Lucas.

I had to get that case.

I walked around to the passenger's side of the jeep and opened the door.

A revolver protruded from a holster on Ralph's shoulder. I grabbed it. To be honest, I didn't have a clue if it was loaded, or even how to use it. But I took it anyhow, and then concentrated on the case.

Before I sought out something to cut it with, I figured maybe if I played with the hand cuff, I could get it loose.

Again, my medical knowledge or at least medical common sense should have kicked in. A body is delicate after it sets and rots in the hot sun. I barely tugged that handcuff and it sliced through Ralph's wrist and flesh like it was a Ginsu knife. Fluids and insects seeped to the floor. The wrist was still stuck in the cuff and I shook it loose, until that fell, as well.

With a briefcase in my possession, a revolver I didn't know how to use, and a green knapsack attached to my back, I left the aid camp, and Ralph.

The blue car awaited me. My destination was simple.

It was time to go home.

17.

*Desolation*

I didn't think about much, only to get off that airfield and on a main road. That was my first goal. I found the driveway that led through the corn stock lined road and to the entrance gate which was open. From there, I guessed a right on the smaller road which I hoped would take me to a bigger one or main one.

Meg's cell phone was charging in the car. I turned it on and saw I had a signal. First thing first, I dialed.

I tried to call home.

The weirdest thing occurred; it rang once then went into a rapid busy signal. I tried my sister's house, it was the same thing.

The radio.

I believe the entire time I drove down that road, I played with the radio. The scanner just kept going. Not a single signal was picked up.

What was going on?

Soon I saw signs for the highway. I took the exit. Yes, I knew which way to go. It wasn't until I was making my entrance onto the major interstate that I noticed. I hadn't seen a moving vehicle.

Not one car.

A few were pulled over on the highway, but other than

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that, I was it.

The highway would take me directly to Cleveland. At a steady, safe pace, I drove there. I used the travel time to mentally prepare myself for anything, for worst case, even for normalcy. What laid ahead, what I would find, was a mystery. But that didn't matter. It was where I had to go and needed to be.

It was open highway. I was on Interstate 71, which told me I was off some in my calculations of where I was taken. I wasn't directly south, I was more south west. Which meant I had to cross through the city to get to my home on the north east portion of town.

As I cruised along, picking up speed, I stopped expecting to see cars. Even as I neared major intersections that would lead east or to Akron.

Nothing.

Just as I passed the connection to Interstate 271, I saw it in the distance. It had to be a mistake. My eyes had to be deceiving me. There was no way a road block spread that far and wide.

The quarantine. No wonder I didn't see any cars.

Damn it. That was right. The quarantine was in effect for Cleveland. There was no way I was getting passed. Maybe if I explained I was a doctor, they'd let me through. If not, I went through different ways. I could walk; sneak my way into the city.

I prepared to stop. I slowed down enough to unzip the knapsack, lift my purse and blindly feel for my driver's license. Certainly they'd want to see that.

The road block was wide. It didn't just consist of military trucks, fencing of wire and wood spread across. I could see the yellow tap waving. What I didn't see were any



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soldiers. But that didn't mean anything; they could have been on the other side of the roadblock

Or not.

Within fifty feet I stopped the car.

No. No, no, no! My mind screamed as I beat the steering wheel. Wanting to just cry out, I rested my head against the wheel, took a moment and continued on until I met the limit off the road block.

Quarantine signs were hung every six feet as if they were needed.

I opened the car door and stepped out.

There were no soldiers, or people, no movement at all.

It was an awesome and frightening sight. There was no way I was getting through, at least not in the car.

On my side of the road block was nothing but open space, on the Cleveland side were the remnants of the failed Cleveland Exodus.

Filling both sides of the road, all six lanes, the center portion and any flat land on either side of the highway were vehicles. It went from the blockade and back as far as the eye could see.

Cars, trucks, vans, space between them was impossible. Lined up irrational, each vehicle trying to squeeze in somewhere. It was evident that once they arrived, they were driving no where. If they wanted to leave the barricade they had to walk.

It was a sea of cars that had no end. At least I couldn't see where it ended. Right there I had two choices. I could back up, and try another route, or I could just start walking.

I made my decision. Gathering my belongings from the car, I moved forward on foot.

There was very little walking room and I had to zig zag

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between vehicles. So many cars, so many people. A lot of cars were abandoned, but the ones occupied outnumbered those empty.

Where did they think they were going? With the quarantine in effect, did they really think they could get through a government lockdown?

The hot sun baked the bodies in the cars.

Men, women, children, even dogs. Families gathered together only to have the final resting place be the family car.

I tried not to look at anyone, even thought their faces screamed to me. It was a reality I wasn't ready to face. The silence, the lack of movement, the dead bodies claimed from the flu.

A nightmare scenario portrayed in movies, not in real life. At any time I thought I would wake up from the nightmare. But I strolled on.

What would I have done if I wasn't in the tank? If I was stuck in the city. I was a doctor, so more than likely I would have been pulled to work on sick. I don't think I would have tried to leave. When a germ is communicable, the worst thing people could do was be around other people. Stay clear, stay hidden, and stay away.

I kept a slow steady pace in the heat. The massive traffic jam of dead extended for miles, literally.

I walked a good forty-five minutes before I reached the end, to where I could find not only an empty car, but one I could move out of traffic and take home. An empty car meant it probably would still run. Taking a body from a car was not an option. Physically it was not.

The body, once in the putrefaction stage oozed liquids, and kept doing so until it seeped all it could. The body fluids contained so much acid they could eat through a

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surface. Chances are, if I pulled a body from a car, remnants and liquid would be left behind.

I was fortunate enough to find a car with keys in the ignition. Lord knew I wasn't savvy enough to hotwire one. Before I got in, I turned and took one last look at the sea of automobiles. It was the end of the road for so many.

I feared what was ahead.

Did it go through my mind? Absolutely. Was I ready? Absolutely ... not. How does one prepare for the gloomy fate of their family.

The harsh reality was, unless Darrin and Ashley were immune, my family may not have survived Greed. I thought about that all the time, and hated it. Even though my optimistic fantasies included me finding Darrin in the bomb shelter he built. Holed up and safe. That was a possibility. There was also the possibility that he left home, was in a hospital, or even one of those cars on the highway.

There was a chance I'd never find out what happened to my family.

I wasn't convinced that not knowing was a bad thing.

I didn't want to believe it, any of it. Locked away in the air tight tank made everything that occurred on the news more or less fiction.

Until I saw the bodies in the tents, then the bodies in the car.

My God, had the world succumbed to a manmade weapon? That fast?

My soul beckoned to cry, but the tears wouldn't flow. It was surreal in a sense.

I had to drive through a corner portion of the city to get home. What a staunch vision. Papers spewed, some

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buildings were burned, some vandalized.

Still ... I saw no one.

Thirsty, and getting dehydrated, I had to stop. I pulled over in the parking lot of a convenience store. The glass door has been busted through, and it appeared empty.

Taking a moment, I examined the revolver, praying it wouldn't go off and I'd end up shooting myself. The safety was easy to spot and it was on. With further examination, I found out how to releases the clip, and in doing so, saw the gun was loaded.

Switching the safety to 'off', I went into the store.

It was dark and abandoned, shelves were overturned, items spewed across the floor. I just needed something to drink. I went to the beverage section, the aisle was bare. The coolers appeared half empty. No bottled water, but I found a bottle of tea. Knowing that would be fine, even if warm, I opened it, taking small drinks so I wouldn't make myself sick.

Shuffling through the mess, I was heading out when I saw the newspapers and headlines.

'Is this the End?'

The one paper read.

Another: 'Flu Grips World.'

Newsweek's last cover stated, "Is there any hope?"

Upon glancing at the one article, I saw how they reported millions were fleeing to nowhere. That it didn't matter where they went, the flu was everywhere.

The date was June 25<sup>th</sup>. Was that the last day the newspapers printed?

I realized I knew very little about what happened and the flu, even though I was in the middle of it. I grabbed a Newsweek magazine, and headed out.

The newspapers did little to shed light on any hope; in

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fact, I was armed with discouraging news. But I still hung on. Praying. I wasn't going to give up.

I faced the battle to get free, the horror of the aid station, the nightmare of the highway, and the chill of an eerily empty city; however it paled in comparison to the terror and uncertainty I faced about going to my very own home.

<><><><>

After miles of deserted roads, I finally arrived in my neighborhood, and consequently, my street.

Sunday afternoon, a summer day, no children were outside. No one mowed their lawn, or barbequed.

Dead.

Desolate.

My house was at the end of the street, and as I approached it just looked so dark. More dark than any other house. I knew that was my imagination, it had to be.

I don't know why but I actually slowed down more than I should have to pull into my driveway.

"Ok," I said aloud, releasing a deep breath. "I can do this." I reached for the door handle. "They're fine. They're fine. They're ...."

Closed.

My eyes closed and my heart dropped to my stomach.

No.

The driveway was located on the side of the house, and the backyard was in full view.

I always loved that about the driveway. Coming home in the summer, seeing Darrin cooking out, or playing with Ashley on the swing set. Always a welcoming sight.

The swing set that she adored.

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Ashley swinging.

Only then, as I prepared to leave the car, I not only saw the swing set I saw something else.

By the slide was a mound of fresh dirt, flowers, rested on top, along with a homemade wooden cross.

No.

An ache seeped from my soul and I charged from the car.

I leapt the short wall and ran to the yard.

“No.” Immediately, the tears that never came, the ones I wanted to shed, well they released. As if someone pulled a switch, they cascade from me in sobs, like a waterfall. I dropped to my knees by that mound of dirt, pounding my closed fists to the earth when I saw the name burnt into the wood ... Ashley.

My child. My poor, poor child. The date on the cross stated she had passed away three days earlier. Which infuriated me because I was told my family was fine. Why did I believe them? Why didn't I once ever try to make an escape. I don't think I ever felt so much sadness in all of my life as I did right there and then.

I wanted to bury myself along with my daughter. I never got to say goodbye. Never got to hold her one last time, kiss her. Tell her I loved her. I did. Loved her more than life itself.

I stayed by her makeshift grave crying until it hit me. Where was Darrin? Slowly, I picked myself from the grass and headed toward the house.

More prepared, I opened the back door. Immediately I knew. The smell of death was there. Sour, pungent, but it wasn't as strong. I knew the reason. The house was freezing. Bitter cold. The electricity was still running, and the air conditioner was pumped on high. It had to be fifty degrees

in the house.

“Darrin,” I called out apprehensively. Rubbing the chill from my arms, I didn’t expect an answer. The house was bitter, which told me, Darrin knew he was dying, and planned for it. Slowing down the decomposition some. It was so like him to think ahead like that.

I made it into the living room and jolted. At first, admittedly, I was filled with enthusiasm. The computer was on, and Darrin sat in his writing chair. An empty wine glass right by the mouse. From behind he looked as if he were engrossed in one of his scenes. Staring at the screen waiting for the right words to come.

I started to call his name again, but realized that would be in vain. I stepped closer.

Darrin had passed away.

He sat up peacefully in his writing chair. An empty syringe was on the desk by his keyboard. He really did look peaceful. Sleeping, eyes closed, or if in heavy thought. I knelt down by the chair and that was when I saw it. A folder rested on his lap, his hand held it in place. Across the front were the handwritten words, ‘Darrin’s Legacy’.

I knew what it was, but looked any how. Lifting his cold, hard hand, I slid the folder from his lap. The folder contained printed pages with words. A simple glance at the first sentence told me what he had done.

Darrin took the time to write everything down. It was a view of the flu I didn’t know, one I would have to learn. Darrin’s view. Hopefully, it would tell me what become of my family, of Darrin. Did my daughter suffer? Did he?

More than anyone would ever know, the writer in him did exactly what I expected. I probably would have been disappointed had he not done so.

I wanted to divulge right then and there, but I didn’t. I

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had to take a moment with Darrin, to absorb it in, and figure a way to bury him. He deserved a resting place, even though he himself would have chosen his favorite writing chair.

I would read his legacy when it would get my complete and undivided attention. To me, it would be my farewell. My goodbye. Those final moments I missed. Or so I hoped.



**18.**

***Living Legacy***

I buried Darrin in a shallow grave next to Ashley by that swing set. I didn't have the means to make a cross, so I left the shovel there and marked the grave with a stone. One I wrote upon with indelible ink.

I stayed outside with my family until the sun started to go down. It had taken me that long to bury him.

I couldn't stay in the house. It was too cold. I did go back in, open all windows, lower the air conditioning and cleaned up.

Our back patio was always a favorite place of mine, and after grabbing a drink, I took Darrin's words and sat at the table out there. The sun was still bright enough to read and I thanked Darrin for writing it as I opened that folder to read:

Darrin's Legacy.

It was dated June 27<sup>th</sup>, two days early, one day after Ashley's passing.

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### *Darrin's Legacy*

I thought I'd be a survivor. I really did. In all my apocalyptic fantasies and I had them, you know, I thought I'd be a survivor. Obviously, if you are reading this. I am not. Actually, I don't want to be. My child, my family, my life ... gone. I'm not far behind them either. I apologize in advance if the writing and thoughts are scattered. There isn't time to make an outline, to sit and think this one through. I have to write it from the heart. It's the contents that matter more than how the contents are laid out.

I suppose it would be helpful to start at the beginning and tell why I am writing this.

First, I am writing this, because someone has to know what happened. Whether it is a friend, relative, person from the future, someone should know. I want me to know. I guess, that's why I called it my legacy, because I want someone to know not just what happened to this world, but what happened to me and my world. That someone is my wife, Lisa.

This whole mess didn't start a week ago like the news said; it started a while before that. I believe my Lisa was involved in probably the first cases. She came home from work talking about patients that were sick. Didn't think much about that, until a few days had passed and the patient died, and so did another. Some investigating and we found out about some strain of flu in Europe. It engulfed every conversation her and I had.

The strange part about it all was, she was talking to a big wig epidemiologist in the UK, and a couple days later, I get a call that my wife had died.

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A gas explosion at her clinic was stated as the cause of taking her life. To be honest, I never bought it. Sure, the clinic exploded, the entire strip mall did. But no one witnessed it. My wife's body was the only body not found at all in that whole mess.

I believed then and I believe now that Lisa never died. I just didn't feel it, you know. My soul didn't feel as if she were lost. Dead. Had she not been involved in this flu that they tried to cover up, then I may have believed it.

To me they took her, the government, to keep her mouth shut. Hid her away somewhere so she wouldn't say anything about the flu. I think the governments, and I use plural didn't want this to get out. It was too powerful and there was no way to beat it anyhow.

That was just my guess. I ended up being right.

Five days ago, right before the phone lines went down, I got an anonymous call. It came at a really bad time for me, as I'll explain later. It came on my cell phone while I was at the hospital.

The man didn't give a name, he simply said, 'Lisa wasn't killed. She is in a preservation system because she is immune, and God willing, she will be free when this thing is over.'

Click.

There was no rebuttal, or chance to ask questions, nor did I scream about it being a sick joke.

It was merely a confirmation of what my gut told me all along.

Lisa was alive.

Lisa was immune, which meant, she would live. To me a preservation tank was a place they kept all those immune, to ensure civilization would go on.

So, Lisa, this note is mainly for you. I pray to God she is

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alive and reading this. That she came home and found me

A week ago, after we had the memorial service for Lisa, the city was shut down, and my mother got sick. While she passed it off as a cold, I suspecting otherwise. Especially when, within a day, everyone in my family was sick. I avoided them, which is horrible, I did, until my own daughter got sick.

The flu wasn't kind to her at all. It hit her fast and I rushed her to the hospital. We waited for four hours, and still were never seen. They said they were full.

There was news of an antidote. I tried the entire next day to get it, I couldn't. In the meantime, Ashley couldn't breathe, she struggled. I felt so helpless because there was nothing I could do. Nothing.

I got sick, but I couldn't let it get me down. I had to worry about Ashley. My sister called to tell me that my parents died and she needed to borrow my truck to take them to the grave.

The grave. Mass graves were located around the city, and people were told to bring the bodies of the deceased there. Were they nuts? We were instructed not to bury them ourselves. Fuck that. I knew, even though it pained me, I knew Ashley wasn't going to make it.

I watched everyone in the neighborhood slowly disappear. Then with the final radio broadcast came the news that the antiserum didn't work. That it had severe side effects and they were not distributing it. They were, however, distributing something lese.

Peace in a syringe.

If you had the flu, and wanted to end it, you had to go to an aid station and they would give you a syringe of death or pills.

The day my daughter passed away in my arms, I buried

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her in the yard by her swing set. No way was she going into a mass grave. I made a cross for her, and then headed down to the aid station.

I could barely walk to the car I was so ill. I received the medicine.

It took me an hour to get up the nerve to take it. But a coughing spell where I couldn't breathe for fifteen minutes, confirmed that it was what I had to do.

I just stopped to take that shot.

I know I won't be around to see how this all plays out. How the world survives. I at least go to my rest knowing in peace, that Lisa and my nephew Joshie will be there to make this a better place.

Make it better this time. My hope is with humanity and life. My love and heart are with the both of you. God be with you, Darrin.'

"Joshie?" his final line brought a halt to my being; I put down the legacy, grabbed my keys and flew to the front door. Flinging it open I saw it. Darrin had attached a note to the front door. I was so consumed by the backyard, I never saw the note.

It read: Joshie Marshal, four years old, is alive and not sick. He is with Mary Stewart, also well, 4235 West Morris Street.

Before anyone found *him*, Darrin wanted his nephew found.

Morris Street wasn't far. I didn't know Mary Stewart, but I was grateful that she had my nephew. Actually, I was grateful for Mary as well. She was alive, too. I had to find them.

**19.**

***Life?***

I always claimed Joshie was the cutest little boy I had ever seen. His tiny frame made him look like a toddler. He had a huge, wide smile, and big brown eyes. He spoke with a high pitched voice, slightly raspy from all the loud taking he did to be heard over others. But he was smart as a whip, a little old man in attitude.

West Morris was about a mile from my house and arrived there in about five minutes. I had to slow down to find the house. A wooden frame home, actually a double. Mary's house was on the left.

Toys were in the front yard. The front window was open and I could see the shadow of the curtains as the flapped in the breeze.

I parked the car, and stepped out. In a quiet world, noise travels, and I heard the sound of voices. Television maybe, a movie. It had to be, there were no TV stations.

I picked up the pace, not allowing my hopes to get up. The porch was old and so was the wooden screen door.

I raised my hand to knock just as a breeze blew by. It went into the house and back out, sucking the curtains against the screen; bring out that smell ... Death.

My head lowered.

Deciding to check anyhow, I opened up the screen

door, and then the front one.

There sitting in his own world, surrounded by the spilled contents of a box of cereal was Joshie.

He spun from his TV view. "Aunt Lisa!"

My God, he was alive. He was alive and ... he leapt into my arms and I lifted him high, embracing him.

He was well. Not a single sign of illness.

Joshie had to be immune. I plastered that child with a million kisses, touching him, feeling him. My eyes watered in gratefulness.

"Why you crying, Aunt Lisa?"

I shook my head. "I missed you."

"I miss everyone."

"I bet."

"I'm watching Batman."

I chuckled. "I see that. Joshie. Where's Mary?" I asked as I set him down.

"She's sleeping. She didn't get up yet. I was hungry. I cooked. Want some cereal, Aunt Lisa?" He raced to the box of cereal stepping on it first before lifting it.

"Maybe later. Where ... Where is she sleeping, Joshie?"

"Upstairs. Want me to take you?"

"No. No. Stay here." I told him. "I'll go check."

Leaving Joshie in the living room, I took the stairs to the second floor. The smell of death was fresher, if that makes any sense. It told me the scent hadn't been there long.

In the last bedroom, door closed, I found what I suspected. Mary had passed away. A box of tissues were on her nightstand. An elderly woman who clutched a family photograph, as she lay on her side, appearing as if she slept.

It wasn't Darrin, it was Joshie's mother who knew her. Mary was the sitter, and I later learned through Joshie that when his mom had to go to the hospital, she took him to

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Mary; because she was the only person they knew who wasn't sick. She obviously hid it well, or came down with it late.

She was gone.

I gathered Joshie and his little knapsack of clothes. What we would do next remained to be seen. I took him to my home. That was the first step, and from that moment on, it had to be one step at a time.

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My home seemed the best choice. After burying Darrin, I had left the windows open to air out the house. It wasn't a mess, but needed tended to. I propped Joshie in the living room with movie while I cleaned the house. I washed clothes and sheets and took advantage of the electricity. We didn't know how long it would be on.

By the time we had gotten settled, I was absolutely starving. I made us dinner and got myself glass of wine, while I sat on the deck, Joshie on my lap.

I ate too much and early I had to vomit. I didn't think I'd sleep at all that night. In fact, I was certain I wouldn't sleep. Not after the day I had. Things were winding down, and in the silence of the cool evening, reality grew bright.

"Aren't you gonna open it, Aunt Lisa?" Joshie asked me.

Ever since he had seen the briefcase in the car, he had become obsessed with it.

"I will," I told him.

"When?"

"I don't know."

"What's in it?"

"I don't know that either."

They were questions I didn't expect. Actually, I was



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preparing for questions about his mother, Darrin, Ashley. The family. What happened. But they never came. Then it dawned on me he probably went through all those questions with Mary.

Joshie fell asleep pretty early, soundly, too.

The deck was adjacent to the family room, and I carried him in there, laid him on the couch, and left the screen open should he need me.

I returned to the deck, and began to sip my third glass of wine. My evening was spent staring out. Staring out into the quiet darkness.

Somewhere in there, thinking about everything, I dozed off.

The strangest sound jolted me awake.

A scream, in the distance, agonizing.

I sat up, then stood.

Nothing.

I listened and heard nothing further. Not even the crickets chirped. I waited to see if it happened again, it didn't. My neck was stiff and I stretched it. The dream or real sound frightened me, made my heart race, pumped my adrenaline, and extinguished any possibility of falling back to sleep.

There was a good gulp left in the wine glass and I finished it. I debated on what to do, watch a movie, read ...

Then it dawned on me .. read.

Perhaps then it was time to open the case. I retrieved it, setting it on the pool table in the family room. It took fifteen minutes of playing, prying, and jamming, before I got the case open. Inside a cell phone, and a stack of folders greeted me.

I didn't understand the cell phone, had he locked it in the case and forgot it was there when he handcuffed himself

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to it?

The first manila folder, with the label, Project Omega. Inside that folder were medical breakdowns of the virus, pictures, and so forth. I expected it to be regarding the antidote, until I saw another folder marked 'Project Alpha'

Alpha Omega – The beginning and end.

What was going on?

Since I was pretty certain what Project Omega was, I went to the Alpha folder out of curiosity.

I shouldn't have.

I found out the truth.

Project Alpha was the virus, Greed 2. It was a statistical break down of the efficiency in which it worked. A biological weapon designed by the Chinese in 1974 then hybrid with the avian flu. The accident was no accident. Originally it was believed that Greed carried a communicability rate of 75 percent and a fatality of 35%. The Chinese government, after leaving the filtering system open for continuous exposure, deliberately released Greed in fifty three areas of Asia within one week as an attempt to control population.

It got out of control.

Too late to get pissed. I suppose that was how the other governments of the world felt. Time was much better spent on finding a solution instead of a punishment.

Introducing Project Omega.

It took me a moment to sort things through. One act of population control went out of control and suddenly population numbers weren't an issue.

What were they thinking?

After hashing it in my mind, fueled with anger over the stupidly, I calmed down.

Moving onward to the Project Omega file wasn't any

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better.

In a different sense, it was just as bad.

I was able to piece together through various correspondences the route of feelings everyone had over Omega. Skeptical, to hopeful, to doubtful.

The initial results were astounding, but once they started to synthesize the serum using our antibodies, that's when things went array.

Project Omega - Terminated.

Dr. Pongraz wrote: 'We are starting to see a common behavioral pattern in those who have received the antiserum, Omega. Aside from the obvious physical side effects, these seem to be just as inhibiting to normal livelihood. We will know more as days increase.'

The president responded in a note, 'It has only been two days. We know for a fact that the first cases in Switzerland experienced the same and recovered.'

In another letter, Ralph wrote: 'After five days, the behavior seems to be worsening, unlike the first recipients who had returned to normal. I fear that we may have begun a second epidemic for which there is no cure. It is my recommendation to ceases and desist Project Omega'

That pretty much summed up the faxes and emails. That was the last one. The president never responded. Ralph had gone on to hand write notes.

He scribbled across one file 'terminated'

I read and learned.

Those who had received the serum, not only gained light sensitivity and optical deficiency, they also seemed to have lost a sense of reality.

Ralph stated they suffered from grand hallucination that made them 'witness things that weren't there,' and 'See individuals as threatening objects and creatures, such as

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dragons, bugs, bears, ect.’

He noted that those at the airfield testing ground started to become violent with one another and the staff. They felt threatened by what they saw, and lost the comprehension to understand it wasn’t real.

The antiserum was a bad acid that forever altered their state of reality, making them dangerous.

*‘They could potential destroy not only each other, but civilization as we know it. There are too many of them.’* Ralph wrote. *‘Those who are fortunate enough to be immune and carry on, need not have to share a world with those of their kind, nor do they need to fight for their lives when the right to live was rightfully theirs in the first place.’*

In an essence, we the immune were suppose to live. Those injected were not.

When he terminated Project Omega, Ralph ordered the termination of the 1700 ill at the airfield.

They were all put to their death via gas.

He also sent the recommendation that those who were treated with Omega in controlled environments should also be terminated. Unfortunately he also noted that perhaps too many of them had already entered into the populous, and it would be virtually impossible to revert Omega completely.

“God willing, Nature will rectify this mess in time.”

That was the last note he jotted down.

So, then where was he going? Why did he have the cell phone in the briefcase? Wondering if that phone had anything to do with al the contents in the case, or where Ralph was headed, I turned on the phone. Hence it went through its power cycle; I went to the list of outgoing and incoming calls.

Only one number was listed. It simply read, ‘lifeline’

The phone book held no other numbers, except life line. I dialed it. It rang.

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It two rings it answered, "Dr. Pongrazc, thank God. We were worried. Are you all right?"

I didn't say anything at first.

"Hello?" the male voice called out.

"It's ... it's not Dr. Pongrazc," I said.

"Who is this?" he asked with edge.

"I'd rather not say."

"How did you get this number?"

"I got hits from Ralph's briefcase. I ... I was one of the immune he was working with."

"Where are you at?"

"I'd rather not say."

"Where is Dr. Pongracz?" he questioned.

"Murdered."

"Are you alone?"

"No, my nephew is with me. We are both well."

"I'm not asking for your whereabouts to hurt you. I am going to assume you are in Ohio."

I didn't respond.

"Look. Give it time for the craziness and this flu to finish off. Stay put, and then join us. But be very careful of them. Understand. They are every ..."

Static.

Buzz.

That was it. The signal was lost and never returned. I didn't know who they were where they were and if they'd even be there in a short span of time. All I knew was there was a man out there somewhere and he cautioned me about 'them'.

The thought of them frightened me beyond belief. I hadn't a clue if there were any of them in Cleveland, and if I'd even run into them.

If I had to stay put for a spell before leaving the city, I

## Code Name Greed

had to think about mine and Joshie's survival. I had to plan a way for us to live and eat, and also, if they were that dangerous, I had to work on protecting ourselves from them.

20.

*Inside Out*

Sometimes it takes a little bit more than you care to admit. My health was failing fast, the last temperature taken was 102, and I had begun to cough.

I had dreamt again of Jack, only in that dream Helen was crying in the background and Jack didn't know why.

I had many dreams like that. But that one was so vivid.

The sun rose with a vengeance that morning, blasting into the window and warming me. I had some strength, not a lot. I would need strength because I needed medication I didn't have at the palace.

But did I have what it took to venture out.

I wondered, as I sat before the window if I had given up, but not realized it. I looked at David Hyde's survival watch, which I some times wore. The date was March 4<sup>th</sup>. My, God, it had been eight months exactly since the day Mrs. Lowenstein stepped into the Cleveland Clinic and infected everyone.

But really, she was just a pawn in a big Chinese gamble. One they lost, one the whole world paid the debt.

I actually believed for the longest time, after using Ralph's secret phone, I believed that maybe Ohio was the only state empty.

Not that the thought disappeared, it just faded from the

## Code Name Greed

reality portion of my mind.

I summoned enough strength to change my bandage, toss on clothes and make my way to the car. My wound looked slightly better, but not much. It was no longer the infection of the leg I worried about, it was my chest. I feared pneumonia had really set in.

Lightheadedness made me leery of driving, and I hated the thought of having to get out of the car to unlock, and then relock the gate. But I couldn't take a chance.

Thank God the weather was warming.

I thought once of setting a ton of explosives across the city, all on a timer, all to go off when I finally left.

A fleeting thought that was still with me.

It took twenty minutes to get to the car, to the gate and on to the road. A typical pharmacy would have what I needed and I drove to the nearest one.

The lights were out, but the sun helped. Inside, with the aid of a flashlight I made my way to the pharmacy area.

It was there, ironically after grabbing some expectorant that I flew into a coughing fit. I would have sworn I had Greed had it not been for my head not being stuffy.

I lifted my head after smacking myself in the chest and heard the scuffling. Someone was in the store.

One of them.

My sight wasn't the best, it was blurred and things spun if I moved too fast. I didn't have time to deal with one of them, so I got what I needed quickly. As I turned to leave the pharmacy area, I smelled it first.

A male was there. He laughed a sinister laugh before saying. "The beast weakens with illness."

I reached behind me for my revolver.

Fuck!

How was I so stupid as to forget my weapon? I barely



had strength, didn't I think about protection?

No. I didn't. Perhaps because I didn't expect to see any of them there.

We stared at each other. My eyes shifted to a bottle of alcohol on the counter. Quick, I lifted it and hailed it at him. It beamed him in the face, and knocked him off his balance. I charged as best as I could for my escape, but he lunged at me. I tried to shake him off, but it was useless. Suddenly I felt a searing pain as he sunk his teeth into my forearm, and I dropped my bag. I felt as if I were in a zombie flick, praying to God he didn't begin to tear the flesh from me. He didn't, he just latched on.

My free arm extended and I grabbed a brochure holder. I slammed it down repeatedly into his head. I kept hitting him, and hitting him, producing blood, but not freedom. It wasn't until the plastic holder broke, and I jammed the cracked end into his temple, that he released me. I swept up my bang, rode the rush of adrenaline, and bolted from the store.

There were four more out on the parking lot.

Managing to escape them and get to my car, I drove away. I felt relieved once I put distance between us. My arm ached as did my still healing leg. The feeling of 'better' and 'relief' only lasted until I noticed the bag had ripped and the expectorant for my congested chest was not in the bag.

I didn't have it in me to go back, or to stop again. I at least had the new antibiotics and that was what counted. I just need to get back to the palace, wash off my arm, and get myself back to bed.

**21.**

***True Omega***

July 19<sup>th</sup>

To back track some ...After about the third extended trip into an area where we could find a store, I confirmed that Joshie and I had to move from my house. I packed only what I knew I would need, and we sought out David Hyde's.

The place that became the palace.

Joshie loved the palace. We went out daily to treasure hunt as I called it. Actually it was for things we needed to build palace two.

The first week after everything ended, I concentrated on our survival. I picked up guns, ammunition, and other types of weapons and taught myself how to use them. By the end of the first week, I was getting decent. I knew that within time I'd actually be a marksman.

I never went anywhere without a revolver. Even though we hadn't seen any of 'them' at first, I didn't want to take any chances.

See that first week, we mourned. To be honest I was at a loss, and it took me that week to get my head together. Once I did, I knew I had to think ahead and stop thinking about the past.

## Druga-Johnston

“Are we gonna stay here, Aunt Lisa?” Joshie asked the day we found the motor home. Well, perhaps saying motor home was downplaying it. It wasn’t long, by no means but it was a good size. It had everything we need. And was decked out inside. I had plans for it. To arm it, to add a rack for spare gasoline, and an extra generator. To add metal shutters. All sorts of things.

We searched out the RV about ten days post Greed finale.

Getting things to prepare Place Two was a daily chore. After the first week we spent time getting things ready. I figured if I didn’t have it and needed it, nothing really would stop us from getting it. It was my project.

Joshie asked when we were going. He asked that all the time. I told him ‘soon’, I didn’t know how to explain to him that I was waiting to see if a man named Jack showed up.

Our days consisted of getting up and getting clean, having breakfast and venturing out. Our adventures were searches. We looked for people, things we’d eventually need. It was better than just sitting around the palace.

The weather grew hot, really hot, and the heat began to take its toll on all the bodies. I figured it wouldn’t be much longer before the common stench would eventually dissipate.

I remember the first time Joshie and I saw one of them. The first run-in was the only one needed to tell us they weren’t normal and we couldn’t just approach them.

Somewhere in the depths of my science fiction mind, I envision ‘them’ to be white and pasty, almost zombie like. Light sensitive vision made me think of old movies where the pupils were white as well.

So when we saw him we hadn’t a clue at first who he was. We both filled with hope. Joshie called out, “Aunt Lisa

## Code Name Greed

a man!”

I turned. We had been walking in the park.

So was he.

He wore a pair of shorts and a long white tee shirt.

“Hello!” I called out. “Stop.”

Normal. He looked normal.

The man stopped.

Excitedly, I grasped Joshie’s hand and we ran to him as if he were the ice cream man.

He was watching us. I thought at first he was shocked. Out of breath, I approached him. “Thank God, thank God. My name is Lisa.”

He moaned out, opened his mouth, extended his hands and lunged for my throat.

Joshie screamed as the man wrestled me to the ground, hands tight to my throat. I coughed and choked. Joshie kicked him, screaming. “Get off my aunt. Help!”

I stopped fighting with his hands and reached for the revolver. I prayed that it would fire and pressed the barrel of it to his gut and shot twice.

He went limp, hands freed from me, and I pushed him off.

I was whimpering in fright and pain. Grabbing on to Joshie for an embrace, I saw five more of them heading our way. What worked in our favor was they couldn’t see us and moved almost aimlessly.

We hurried away, vowing that we would avoid them and be quiet when out.

That was when they frightened me. I never left without a revolver in my pants and a rifle on my shoulder.

They stopped frightening me, and became the object of my hatred the day we found that wall.

The survivor wall.

## Druga-Johnston

Joshie and I were in a business district just a bit from the shore. We had just gone to the rock and roll hall of fame when Joshie spotted it. His little arm extended out, asking what it was.

It looked like a wall with random words spray painted on it. A concrete wall, the side of a building. It was the few fliers there that got my attention. Holding his hand we walked there.

The wall was long, almost a block and the entire thing was filled with messages to people.

They were alive, all those people were alive. Some of them even put dates near their names. The messages said where they went. I turned to Joshie with such hope.

“What is it, Aunt Lisa?”

“All these names. They are people that are alive and left the city or went somewhere.”

“Why did they write their names down?”

“So maybe family who lived, or people like us can find them. We have to write down the ones with addresses,” I told him.

“Why?” Joshie asked.

“So, when we do leave we can look for these people.”

“What if someone looks for us? Are our names there?”

Jack’s name whispered in response from my mouth. Joshie didn’t have a clue what I was talking about.

“No, they’re not. But let’s put them there in case.” I took hold of his hand and we found a store.

We returned to the wall about an hour later. I found the spot I wanted to write my message, but before I did, I copied into a notebook, all the addresses written in that area. Most people didn’t leave an address. Which when thinking about it, made sense. If people knew about ‘them’ and ‘they’ could read and understand, then ‘they’ could find

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the survivors.

So I thought carefully about what I would write.

I had found fluorescent spray paint.

“Can I write, too?” Joshie asked.

“Sure,” I told him and gave him his own can. I watched as Joshie found a spot at the far end of the wall. He squatted down so close to a blank spot, no one really bothered to fill.

I chuckled and began my own task.

Trying to spray paint words in a readable manner was a lot easier said than done. It took time and care. I had to do it slow.

‘Lisa Marshal is Alive and Living at David Hyde’s – Campton Rd. Phone Book.’

I left the name of the road without saying. Figuring if I were to see that, I would know to look in the phone book and find Morris. If Ralph was right, ‘they’ didn’t have the retention of attention span to look for a phone book.

Sighing out pleased at my big bright lettering, I prepared to leave a Joshie message. But wanted Joshie to help. He’d like that. I turned.

I expected to see Joshie still on task.

He wasn’t.

He was gone.

Joshie? I stood up. “Joshie!” I called

No answer.

I raced to the wall’s end thinking he had turned the corner. His paint was toppled over.

My God, was I that engrossed.

I didn’t see him. At my loudest I called out, “Joshie!”

About to call again, I heard a whimper and my head jolted. “Josh!”

A scream. Joshie screamed.

## Druga-Johnston

Muttering an ‘Oh my God,’ I tried to find direction. “Joshie!”

“Aunt Lisa! Help!”

Found it. To my right. What happened? Where was he? Frantic, I ran. Joshie kept on screaming. It was muffled, but I was getting closer.

“Keep screaming Josh!” I called out. “Keep screaming.”

I must have ran three blocks, back tracking several times until I got to the area where I figured he was. There was no way he could have wandered there, or would have wandered there. Someone grabbed him. They had to. Was it them?

“Aunt Lisa!” Joshie yelled, and then screamed.

No longer was it muffled.

Then long and drawn out, almost taunting my name was called by a man, “Lisa.”

Close. They were close.

“Joshie!”

Another shriek.

Where? Where? I turned. Spun, looked and looked until another scream gave me the final direction to search.

Up.

A half of a block away, I saw. My heart skipped a beat before it hit the floor. My gut wrenched in anger and fear and I charged, hand reaching back for a grip on my rifle.

“Are you there!” the one yelled out. “We hear you!”

My jaw clenched, and I breathed heavily. There was a group of them. They had Joshie, only they had him on the roof of a four story building.

What would I do? I hadn’t a clue on how to handle the situation. I could just shoot them, but the problem laid in what caused my stomach to churn. Not only did they have my nephew on the roof of the building. Two of them held him high and lingering over the edge.

## Code Name Greed

"Aunt Lisa, help me!" Joshie cried out and screamed, squirming his body.

"Joshie, don't move. Don't fight. Please." I beckoned. Fearing he would wiggle his way from the grip and fall to the ground so far below him.

One of them laughed.

"He's a boy!" I yelled. "Please."

"And you are an abomination of what was!" One called. "Both of you."

Ralph's notes said they were insane. That remark made me even more fearful.

"I may be an abomination but he is just a child!" I pleaded as I plotted what course of action I would, could take. "Please don't hurt him. Let me come up for him."

"He must be destroyed," he said.

"He's done nothing to you." I begged, "Please just let him go."

I learned that day, not only were they insane, but there was no reasoning, there would never be any reasoning with them ... ever.

He snickered, and then said, "As you wish."

They did as I asked.

They let him go.

Blood rushed to my ears, my being shook; I raced forward as if in slow motion.

Joshie's scream.

My scream.

Gut wrenching and painful.

Thud.



22.

*Closing in*

March 5<sup>th</sup>

Thud.

I blinked hard in that memory, not only still seeing it, but feeling it. It was a sound that forever would haunt me. The sight of my tiny nephew hurled over that roof, his scream. The sickening knot and wrench in my gut never went away.

Many a nightmares were graced with that image.

I raced to his falling body, arms extended as if I could beat the odds. I swore over and over I was mere inches away from grabbing him. If only I were faster, if only I had him next to me... if only.

The tremendous guilt I carry will never go away. No one but us, he was placed in my care, and I failed him.

I failed him.

He died instantly on the sidewalk. No saving him. There was no surgery I could perform to save his skull, which was fractured beyond belief.

He fell with a thud and a slight bounce. There was a delay, and then the blood came. Pouring from him and I knew, looking at his wide open eyes, scared expression, it was over.

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They laughed.

The bastards laughed and cheered. I guess they didn't expect me to bother with them in my grief. My grief was coupled with fury, and I opened fire on them. Four toppled from the roof like rain, and three others died as well up there. A couple managed to make their escape.

I cradled my nephew that day, and then finally when I could summon the strength, I took him to my home and buried him.

Buried him next to Darrin and Ashley.

Where did I go wrong?

That day was the day my vengeance began. No longer was my daily routine consisting of getting supplies, it consisted of finding them and destroying them.

I looked very single day for them. I never gave one a chance, I shot them on sight.

Once they came to my wall, calling out my name, calling out their own plan of retaliation.

"One day when you are weakened, like us, we will find you and end your suffering!" they shouted. "You make us suffer. You kill us for sport."

"Do you know why I kill you?"

"Your mind is demented."

I laughed that night. "Mine? Yours. You killed my last family member."

"We do not kill unless we are endangered."

"He was a child."

"A beast is a beast. You are damned," he said.

"Yeah, well, so are you." And I shot him.

The thud.

I thought I heard it again. Was my memory being so vivid that I was outwardly hearing things? Was it the fever?

My arm, leg, head, you name it, ached and hurt. I was

## Druga-Johnston

sick.

It was on the next noises that I realized my physical state wasn't causing me to hear things.

Trying to rise from the chair took all of my strength, I made it to the window. The sun was setting, dusk was settling in, and eerily I realized that the war I declared, the one that had raged for six months, was entering into what could be the final battle.

Had they been watching me, even with tainted vision?

Was the drugstore episode the red flag and starter's gun?

They had to wait until dusk, wait until the light was perfect. Wait ... until *I* was perfect. Ill, weak, and unable to fight my best.

How many of them were there? It wasn't a massive riot, but enough of them were at the back wall. They had sledgehammers, to pound away. Climbing, some had already begun to get tangled in the barbwire.

I had to gain some strength. I had to see what was going on out front. My section of the palace was sealed off from the rest of the house. It was easier to go through my door, down the steps, and outside.

As hard as it was, I did so.

Going down the stairs wasn't difficult. I peeked through the small class window of the bottom door. It looked clear.

I opened it to peek.

Out front was the same scene. Many of them trying to get on the property.

Both entrance doors were weak points. The bottom one locked and so did the top, but both door left a lot to be desired.

Until I was well and able to fight I was vulnerable.

It was taking a lot out of me. I climbed the stairs as the racket grew louder outside. They began to shout. Throw

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things at the house. Upstairs I locked both locks on the door and pushed a cedar trunk in front.

I saw that day coming, long before hand. I knew one day, they would band together, possible plot and plan and make their way in.

It wasn't going to be long before those who got trapped on the barbwire became mere stepping stones for the others.

My biggest vulnerability was the sliding glass doors to the deck. But thank God, David Hyde was a worrisome survivalist.

He had sliding wooden doors that sealed off the glass.

I pulled them closed. I couldn't protect both front and back, so I planted myself at my best point.

The small window near the bed. I gathered up ammunition, grenades and prepared myself. No way was I going to let them come to my home and beat me without a fight.

I was ever grateful that my adrenaline pumped or else I would have had the strength to get things ready.

But that strength wasn't lasting long, I felt it fade by the second.

<><><><>

By midnight I had been fighting them constantly. It never got out of control, but I couldn't take a break. By that point they were starting to make it over the wall. I could only cover the back, I could only guess by what I heard, what was going on out front.

Simply put, they were getting on to the property.

How many did I take out? Twenty? Thirty? I wanted so badly to toss out a grenade, blow the sons of bitches to bits,

## Druga-Johnston

but in doing that I risked hitting the wall. My strength wasn't there to throw a grenade over the wall. It was too far away.

One of the fears I had was fire. I saw some of them had torches. Those were the ones I tried to pick off first.

Problem was, my head pounded and my eyes grew blurry. It didn't take long before I was missing shots, and the rifle grew too heavy to hold.

My coughing was erratic and bothered my already burning chest.

Four more had made it over the wall. I took them out. But after that, my body caved in. The rifle completely toppled from my hand. My body shook, eyes went blurry, and I couldn't breathe.

A bottle of water sat by me, and I drank some. It didn't help. Mustering up all I could, I dropped to the floor, and reached under the bed.

Bertha.

That's what I called it. A M240 Machine gun. I kept her under the bed, with the bipod and only box of ammo I had.

To be used in special circumstances.

I was facing that circumstance.

It weighed about twenty-five pounds and it could have weighed a hundred that's how heavy it felt.

I had learned to use it a while before, but my problem was, I was never able to find anymore ammunition then I found at the military check points.

One box left.

I hooked up the machine gun, and faced it to the door of the palace. If they were getting in, they were coming that way. They'd face Bertha.

On the floor, by the M240, I leaned against the bed. The room spun. I prayed for the strength to use the gun when

## Code Name Greed

needed. Not if.

My eyes fought to stay open as I took in the sounds around me. Shouting, screaming, it sounded like a riot right outside my home.

There I was. Soaking in my destiny. It was ironic. The ones I believed my blood saved were the ones that would eventually cause my death. Whether they stormed my home, or the infection finished its job, they would win.

The noise didn't bother me. In fact, it grew faint. I closed my eyes to sleep, and instead I thought.

For all I did, all I prepared, the work for my future to leave.

I was at the end.

Why didn't I leave earlier? Why didn't I leave when Joshie died?

My vengeance kept me in Cleveland.

The result of my vengeance would leave me there forever.

It didn't matter though.

Not at that moment. I had nothing left, no one left. I wasn't afraid.

I was ready.

23.

*Found*

March 6<sup>th</sup>

Maybe it was the illness, or the exhaustion, who knew. But the dream I had on the floor was vividly beautiful.

Perhaps it was a premonition of what would be.

My home, my real home. Darrin was cooking on the grill; Ashley was swinging while Joshie ran about the backyard.

Lily, Darrin's sister, kept stealing pickles and I joked about her being pregnant. Members from both our families were there. It was the picnic we planned to have before it all went away.

Or it was another picnic on another year. Didn't matter, when we got together we had a great time. Lots of love and laughter.

A late day breeze kicked in, and in the dream I knew Darrin was making round three of the burgers. Eventually, I thought, everyone would be stuffed.

"Grab that other plate," Darrin hollered to me.

"More burgers? Gees." I stepped into the backyard and to the grill. "Here," I said to Darrin. "Cook away. We're almost out."

"Nah, always plenty."

## Code Name Greed

“Look at Joshie.” I nodded my head upward. “He’s swinging really high.”

“Better tell my sister to make sure he doesn’t fall.”

“He’ll get hurt bad if he falls.” The smile dropped from my face.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing.” My head cocked to the sound and I smiled again. “Happy Fourth of July.”

Darrin looked up. “Yeah, people are setting off firecrackers already.”

They cracked and banged. Bang-bang-bang. Everyone stood up. I watched Lily light a pack of firecrackers and they went off as well. We laughed.

I said to Darrin, “I can hear the fireworks. Should we look to see if we spot them?”

Darrin chuckled at me. “Those aren’t fireworks. M80’s I think. People are celebrating. Skies too light.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” I folded my arms watching Lily enjoying the cracks, booms, and bangs. It went on for a spell, but was silenced by breaking glass.

I jolted Darrin’s way. “Did something break?”

Darrin put down the hamburger flipper. “I think someone broke a window. Should I check?”

Crash!

I nodded. “Yes, please, there it was again.”

Darrin shook his head. “That wasn’t in the house, Lisa. Better wake up.”

“Huh?”

The bang caused me to snap from that dream. My eyes opened. It was morning at least. I made it through the night. The sun shined through the little window. It would have caused me to breathe a sigh of relief, had there not been a banging at the door.



## Druga-Johnston

I looked.

It shook on its hinges. Someone was banging against it.

I turned to Bertha, as I reached, I must not had put her firm on the bipod, because she toppled.

A hard bang against the door ... I heard the 'crack' of the hinges.

Not enough time, I extended a reach for my rifle, switched it to automatic, and used the bed to help me to my feet.

Another 'crack' loud that time, opened the door, and shoved the cedar chest some.

As soon as I gained a firm stand and half heartedly raised my rifle, the door opened enough for a person to squeeze through.

He did.

I never fired. Merely a whimpering and exasperated, 'Jack' seeped from my mouth in relief, before I collapsed to the floor.

24.

*Onward*

March 12<sup>th</sup>

“I will find you,” Jack said right before him and I were separated. “I promise.”

And he didn’t break his promise.

It took several days, and I was told, one hell of a fight for my infection to clear and fever to break. But I beat it.

My body went into ‘shut down’ mode when Jack walked through my door. I woke only a few times over the next couple days. My subconscious went at ease, and allowed for my body to relax.

They returned to the hospital to find more antibiotics, and using the shunt already in my arm, hooked me up.

They, meaning, Jack and Lucas.

For as hard as he searched, and as long as he searched, he was never able to find Helen.

Jack was in California, which ended up shutting down about two weeks after the east coast. After failing to find his daughter, and taking months to look. He trekked across the country. His first stop was Oklahoma. He went to the address Helen spewed out and nothing. Backtracking, he started where they held her and moved forward.

## Druga-Johnston

Helen was missing.

Lucas on the other hand was almost easy to find, Jack said. He was able to ascertain that Lucas was actually moved to Louisiana. He hit city after city with no luck, until finally Jack tried a military base on the edge of the state. It was there that Lucas found him.

I was next.

They were in Cleveland three days before they discovered the survivor wall and saw my name written on it.

My home bred no clues to my whereabouts, but a body in a drugstore let them know someone was around. The body was too fresh.

Nearly a week had past since they arrived, and my body gained enough strength to do what I had been waiting to do.

Leave.

We hadn't given up on Helen. Well, Jack hadn't. Helen was our first stop. He figured with three of us, we could search for clues. Like, Lucas, I was not as optimistic as Jack. But what else did we have to do?

Where would we go next?

"San Diego, I told you," Jack said as we lifted the final items from the palace. He responded to Lucas who had asked at least four times.

"And you're sure they are people there?" Lucas questioned.

"Last I checked there was a survivor complex there. That's how I was able to find out where they took you. They were linked into the military database."

"Cool." Lucas paused as I did when we were taking our last step from the Palace. "Man, Lisa, this place, it's like a dump. Why'd ya' only live in one room?"

"Why need more?" I responded with a question. "I had

## Code Name Greed

to also protect myself from them.”

“Almost didn’t work,” Lucas said. “I didn’t think they existed.”

I stopped at the bottom door. “What do you mean?”

“Jack told me about them on the way here. Said he ran into a ton. I never saw one of them.”

“Not one?” I asked, moving forward to where Palace two was parked.

“Not until we got here and the place was overrun. Jack was like Rambo, taking them out. Didn’t you hear the shots?”

I smiled. “I did. But I thought I was dreaming.”

“I thought you died,” Lucas said.

With a grunt, Jack pulled the strap on the top of Palace Two. “Still negative.”

“Dude, I did. The way she dropped when you walked in. Is that strap gonna hold that generator?” Lucas looked up.

“Who knows? We’ll find out.” Jack dusted his hands and turned around. He smiled at me. “You look better.”

“I feel better. Thank you both. I mean it. I would have died had you not arrived when you did.”

“Nah,” Jack shook his head. “You’re tough and smart. I mean, look at this thing. You did very well on this.”

I was about to say ‘thanks’ when Lucas interjected.

“It’s small,” Lucas commented. “Why’s it so small?”

“I don’t think we need more than this to travel,” I said.

“But, dude, a world full of free deluxe RV’s, and you get a one room camper.”

Jack opened the side door for Lucas. “You’re riding in the one room camper, too. Step up pal.”

Lucas examined the large leap he had to take. “You’re not lowering the steps.”

After a grumble, Jack placed his hand on the thin young

## Druga-Johnston

man's waist, lifted him and set him inside the doorway. "Better?" He started to close the door.

Lucas stopped him. "Just one more thing. I'm not sleeping in that bed above the driver part. I'll bang my head, and I know how you two talk. I'll never sleep."

"In," Jack ordered, and tried to close the door.

"Wait." Lucas stopped it from closing.

"What?" Jack asked with annoyance.

A grin, wide a genuine, and like one I never had seen, graced Lucas' face. "Lisa, I'm glad we found you."

My mouth opened to respond, but Jack slammed the door on him. "Jack."

"Please," Jack scoffed and laid a hand on my back leading me to the passenger's door. "Not like we won't hear that mouth all the time, and right away." He opened my door for me. "For what it's worth, I'm glad we found you, too."

"It's worth a lot."

We stared at each other. Perhaps it was out of gratefulness, I don't know, but we locked into a gaze for a few moments. Jack broke the connection, by leaning forward and gently kissing me on the forehead. He stepped back with an exhale and a look to the sky. "Weather's clear."

My mouth raised in a partial smile. "Yeah, finally."

"Ready?"

I took a look around. "Ready." I replied, and then climbed inside.

The door closed and I watched Jack walk around the front of the RV and then get inside.

There was something about that moment. Watching Jack settle into the driver's seat, Lucas sitting between us on the floor. It felt good ... right.

Jack started the engine, and prepared for Palace Two to

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roll down the driveway and through the open gates of the palace.

I was leaving, moving onward, out of Cleveland, to a new life, away from the pain in a modified RV I named Palace Two, just like I had planned. But unlike what I had always thought, I wasn't doing it alone.

I may have been the last woman right then and there, but I wasn't the last person.

After a graze of my fingers over Lucas' head, I grabbed on to Jack's hand as we moved forward.

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Druga-Johnston

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### About the Author



Jacqueline Druga-Johnston is a native of Pittsburgh. She is founder and Editor in Chief of LBF Books. She is a prolific writer, and currently resides in Pittsburgh with her husband, Chuck, and their abundance of children.