

both there, in her home, relaxed.

“So when did you want to do this?” Sevita asked.

Frank looked up from the cutting board. “As soon as possible,” he said. Nella laid her keys on the counter and walked over to the table.

“Shouldn’t we wait until dark if we are going to be sneaking in?”

Sevita shook her head. “It won’t matter, that place is lit up like a pre-plague Times Square at all hours. If there is any actual security, they’ll be less likely to expect someone during the day anyway.” She pointed to the diagram. “As far as I know, the only entrances are the front door and the side door here. But I’ve recorded hundreds of hours of video and never seen anyone go in. So I either have really bad luck, or there’s another entrance somewhere.”

“Where?” asked Frank.

“Maybe underground,” suggested Nella, “If he has a lab in there it’d be easier to control the climate if it were built underground.”

“But that means the entrance could be anywhere. How are we going to monitor it if we don’t know where it is?”

“I don’t like it either, Frank, but I think we’re going to have to take some chances. If we can sneak in somehow, then maybe we can locate the lab when we are inside without being caught. What we are looking for will be there anyhow.”

Sevita gave Nella a sharp, worried look, but she didn’t say anything.

“We should probably go through the side door then,” said Frank, “but how are we going to get through the gate without being spotted.”

“That I can help with,” Sevita said. “A while ago, I tried to get close enough to the house to peek in the windows.” She blushed. “I just wanted to see if I could Nella, don’t look at me like that. Anyway, in the back here, this is all hedge. He must not have a very industrious gardener because the deer ate a patch back there and left a gap. It was wide enough to slide through when I was there last time, but I don’t know if it’s grown in since then. The hedge is about neck high- er, maybe chest high to Frank. So we can come right up to it without being seen. It’s only crossing the yard to the door that we might get caught. But like you said Nella, we’re going to have to take a few chances to do this.”

Nella walked toward her bedroom. “Where are you going?” Sevita asked.

“For supplies,” she replied grimly. She could hear Frank and Sevita still talking quietly over the diagram as she moved the trunk that was sitting in her closet. Even Sevita didn’t know that Nella had kept them. While not exactly illegal, Nella had a feeling that still having a gun in a Cured area would make her a person of intense interest to the military police. She also had a feeling that she wasn’t the only one who had them. She looked at the long wooden case and

felt guilt smashing down on her. How many people had she killed with these? At the time she hadn't thought of them as people. At the time she believed they were monsters. After the first few, there hadn't even been any hesitation. As if they were all just paper targets that could run. She hadn't hunted them, like some of the Immunes had. She only killed when she thought she had to. But Nella wasn't in denial any longer about what she'd done. She knew better now. She knew, and she felt the weight of each bullet that she'd shot. But she'd kept the guns. How could she have kept them? Why was she thinking about the need to use them again? This time, though, it wouldn't be to escape. And it wouldn't be against sick people. A doubt about whether she could handle using the guns again flitted through her mind for an instant and then was gone. She was sure. She pulled the box out of the closet. She walked out to the kitchen and set it silently on the table. Sevita looked at her and then opened the box.

"I can't Nella," Frank said quietly. She looked at him and was startled to see how sad his face became.

Sevita just looked at her. "It's okay," said Nella, "I can. If I have to. If you can't, then don't take one with you. It will just make things worse. I hope it's unnecessary. But we both know what's at stake. Sevita, you'll just have to trust me when I say it's better to be prepared."

Sevita picked up one of the guns without comment. She zipped it carefully into her camera bag and then added a small box of ammunition. Nella quietly did the same, putting both in the oversized pockets of her spring jacket. Then she closed the box and placed it carefully back in the closet. Frank went back to making lunch without any further observations, but Nella could see the sweat spring out on his head like tiny glass beads.

They finalized their plans as they ate, but Sevita tried her best to lighten the mood and Frank played along, though Nella could see they were both as nervous as she felt. In the end, it was almost dusk by the time they were ready to go. Sevita had decided she needed another camera and to see Christine. Frank said he would drive her so that he could grab some less conspicuous clothing. All Nella could do was wait. At first she tried to use the time to untangle whatever it was she had forgotten at the prison. She soon concluded that whatever it was, wasn't coming back just yet. She ended up trying to memorize Sevita's crude diagram of the house and pacing the apartment floor. Sevita and Christine startled her when they came in.

"Chris, what are you doing here? And where is Frank?"

Sevita and Christine shared a look. "Told you," Sevita said.

"I came so you don't have to walk," said Christine, "Or were you going to park out front? Besides, there's no way I'm letting Sevita go somewhere that

requires a gun, Nella, without knowing where she is and having medical supplies nearby. Besides, your friend thought it was a good idea.”

Nella blushed. “You’re right, I’m sorry. I’m glad someone else is thinking of these details.”

Christine hugged her. “Nella, I don’t know what you have got yourself into, but maybe you should wait and call the police. You don’t have to do this, whatever this is.”

The panic she’d been struggling with for the past two days threatened to burst out of her and infect the room in sharp, yellow shards. Nella fought it. “I wish that were true Chris, I really do. But I can’t. The police will only make things worse.”

Sevita smiled as she set her camera bag on the floor. “And Frank is on the way. We just beat him here is all. He seems very nice by the way.”

Nella was confused. “Yes he’s very pleasant,” she replied at last.

“And I won’t even ask why he didn’t ask for directions here in the car.”

“Oh! We just wanted a drink and I—”

“I said I wouldn’t ask,” Sevita winked. Nella felt her throat dry up in embarrassment.

Christine grabbed Nella’s hand and scowled at Sevita. “What happened to your hand?”

She was still busily disinfecting Nella’s wound when Frank knocked on the door.

Nella tried to calm down as they drove toward Dr. Carton’s house. Sevita put a sympathetic hand on her arm as they sat together in the back seat. “I’ve never seen you this scared,” she whispered, “It’s going to be okay you know.”

Nella shut her eyes to keep herself from crying. “You don’t understand, Sevita, I’m not worried about getting caught.”

“Obviously. I’m not naïve Nel. I’ve known you long enough to know you don’t just commit felonies for the heck of it.”

“I don’t think there’s such a thing as felonies anymore.”

Sevita grinned. “You know what I mean. Look, you don’t have to tell me or even confirm my suspicions, but I figure this has something to do with the trial, otherwise why would Frank Courtlen be involved? And if it has to do with the trial, it has to do with the Plague. And the only thing I can think that would make you this upset would be if you knew something very, very bad about it. Like maybe it’s not over.”

Nella rubbed her eyes dry. Sevita hugged her awkwardly. “It’s going to be okay Nella. The world’s going to go on spinning, the trees will go on growing, and the rain will keep on falling.”

"What if we're not here to see it?" whispered Nella.

Sevita sighed. "I'm not entirely sure that would be such a bad thing. Look how badly we screwed up. And we still treat each other like crap. Even with only a few of us left. Some days it feels like we'll never learn anything."

The car rolled to a stop. The gun was so heavy that Nella's hip felt bruised. Her chest ached as if she'd been holding her breath for too long. She opened the door and slid out into the chilly evening air. They were on a side street a little way past the mansion. The streetlamps were still off and the sun was just setting, giving the sky an illusion of warmth that Nella could not feel. She rounded the front of the car with her hands in her pockets, her good hand touching the warm metal of the gun. She stood near Frank as Sevita kissed Christine goodbye and grabbed the camera bag.

"What if she isn't in there?" Frank asked.

"At least someone may know where she's gone. Remember, as far as we know, she escaped in order to destroy the bacteria. She may already have done so. We just have to find out for sure."

He looked at her, his face serious. "Why bring the gun then?"

Nella was grim, but she didn't apologize. "There is a reason no one has seen Dr. Carton, even though he's humanity's savior. There is also a reason no one has seen Dr. Schneider since her escape. Maybe Dr. Carton is just shy and retiring. And maybe Dr. Schneider just wants to have a little love nest with the guy. Or maybe she is desperate to avoid prosecution for her role in the Plague. Or maybe they are still delusional, thinking they can perfect their bacteria so that it doesn't have these terrible side effects. Maybe they are already infected. The gun is for the maybes."

Sevita walked up to them. Christine was still wiping tears away and smiling encouragingly. "Ready?" Sevita asked in a low voice.

The three of them slipped into the empty overgrown lot across the street.

Meat

The mansion sat in an empty section of the City. It, like almost every other existing building, was left over from Before. Nella seemed to remember it as a large bank in its former life. It was one of very few large buildings still maintained and in use. The military government was beginning to demolish empty buildings that were in danger of collapse, but for now, most of them sat slumped and shuddering in the wind. They smelled green and rotting and the pavement in front of most of them had been eaten away by rain. Wild silver grass grew long and tangled in the cracks. The clamor of birds coming home to roost in the crooked roofs and rusting cars made Nella feel even lonelier than normal. At least they would be unnoticed in this part of town. Sevita led the way and the three of them reached the hedge in a few short minutes. It shocked the eye, a wall of bright, almost supernatural green against the wild golds and silvers of the dead trees and grass around them. Something thriving in the winter land where everything else just survived until spring.

They were silent now, not knowing if someone patrolled inside the hedge. The sun had set and left a haze of pale blue in the evening sky. Sevita found the gap by feel and ducked into it, holding Nella's hand. Nella reached out for Frank and pulled him through the thick, scratching branches. They stood on the lawn in an odd twilight as the natural sun faded and the floodlights of the house tried in vain to take over. "Look," hissed Sevita, "There aren't any lights inside."

"Maybe the curtains are closed," whispered Frank. They didn't waste time arguing. Leaving the shadow of the hedge they sprinted across the small backyard to the side door. No one stopped them. Sevita fumbled with a small pouch from her camera bag. It was a tiny toolbox. Frank shook his head and held up his hand. Sevita froze as Frank tried to slowly turn the doorknob. The latch clicked and the door opened a crack. The air hit them as if they had just opened a tomb. It was rancid and smelled like raw excrement. Frank quickly closed the door and held the other hand over his mouth, trying not to retch.

"Someone is dead in there Nella," whispered Sevita.

Frank shook his head. "No," he whispered, his face pale and shining with sweat, "that's not death. Someone's been eating meat."

"What?"

"That's someone that's been eating a lot of meat. You just aren't used to it because no one can afford it anymore. Trust me, I'd know that smell anywhere. I never wanted to smell it again." He had to stop again trying not to retch.

"Well," said Sevita, "I guess if anyone ought to be able to afford the last few tins of canned meat it ought to be him."

Nella shook her head. "He'd have to be eating a lot of meat to make the whole house smell like that. I don't think even he could afford that many cans."

"You think he's got a cow in there?" said Sevita.

"I don't know. I don't want to think about it," whispered Nella. She put her hand over Frank's on the knob. "I'll do it," she said. She took a deep breath of clean air, then pushed the door open halfway. The smell hit them again and Nella could taste rotted egg on the back of her throat. She took a few shallow breaths to try to get used to the smell and stepped quietly inside. It was dark, not lit by artificial light at all, only the leftover glow of the sky coming through the windows. At least the curtains were open. Nella waited for her eyes to adjust as Frank and Sevita came in beside her. They were in a small, uncarpeted hallway. The smell had made Nella think the house would be filthy and unkempt but the hallway was clear of any debris or furniture and the floor shone even in the weak light. Nella walked to the left down the hall and through a doorway at the back of the house. She found herself in a small, immaculate kitchen. A light in the oven hood was turned on casting a dull gold light over the countertops. As Nella passed through toward the opposite door, she noticed a slab of meat defrosting in the sink, white and red, but odorless.

"Nella," Frank whispered. She looked back and he pointed to the oven. It was set to preheat. "Someone is coming back."

Nella felt panic clutch at her arm muscles making her ache, but she just nodded firmly and passed out of the door into a darkened formal dining room. She needed to let her eyes adjust again but she didn't want to wait, so she kept creeping forward, hoping she wouldn't bang into one of the massive wooden chairs. Where was the damned lab entrance? Even the outer light was failing fast and Nella knew they were going to have to risk turning on artificial lights soon or be caught in complete darkness, something she was desperate to avoid.

Between avoiding heavy furniture and worrying about the light, Nella didn't notice the towering grandfather clock until she was standing underneath it. Then the tick, tick, tick was like a hammer pounding nails into her heart. She let out a shaky breath and looked up to see the pale, stern face of the clock and relaxed, her flesh feeling like abruptly dumped water. The far end of the dining room opened into another hallway. Nella opened a side door to find a tiny bathroom and she quickly shut it again, before the rancid sulfur smell could overwhelm her.

"Sevita," she whispered realizing she could no longer see if Frank or Sevita were behind her.

"I'm here," the answer floated back toward her.

"Do you have a light on your camera?"

"Sure, but it's pretty bright."

Nella hesitated. Frank's voice was a low thrum behind her. "It's either that or we

start flipping switches.”

Sevita gingerly slid past Nella and turned the camera light on. It was almost blinding after the natural dark. “I don't think anyone else can see down here without lights either, so there is probably no one on this floor right now,” she said.

“What about the oven?” Nella asked.

Sevita shrugged in the harsh light. “I didn't say the place was empty, just that there wasn't anyone on this floor at the moment. If we start seeing lights turn on I'll turn off the camera light.”

They walked slowly toward the front of the house. Nella began to relax in the bright light of Sevita's camera. She began to notice that the house was extremely quiet. Except for the ticking of the clock she had almost run into, there was no other sound. No dripping faucets, no humming electricity, no natural creaks. And as they passed through the second of two large living rooms, Nella noticed there was nothing out of place either. No books lying open or chairs pushed invitingly out from desks. It wasn't just tidy, the house felt completely unlivéd in. The oven and meat in the kitchen had been the only sign that someone existed between the walls. At last they came to the large entry hall. It was cold and bare. Nella wasn't sure if it was just because of the rapidity with which they had moved or their limited scope of vision but she didn't recall seeing a single picture or mirror on any of the walls. She was tempted to run back to the small bathroom and check there, but recognized it as foolish impulse. Frank caught her hand and squeezed. She looked at him and realised she could partially see his face though Sevita was facing another direction. He pointed up the large staircase and Nella saw a light at the far end of a long hallway. Sevita turned around. “I think I found it,” she whispered. They turned toward where she shone the light. A sleek silver elevator door waited just across from the completely unguarded front door. Nella was no longer relaxed.

“Where is everyone? Where are the guards? The owner? The cook?” Frank's hand was shaking slightly around hers. She squeezed it to calm him down.

“Should we go up or down?” whispered Sevita.

“I think the lab will be downstairs,” said Nella, “and whoever is upstairs doesn't know we're here yet, so they won't run or alert anyone.”

“But shouldn't we check first?” asked Frank, “We may be able to find Dr. Schneider and she'd be away—” he looked hesitantly at Sevita, “she'd be away from any sort of weapon.”

Nella considered for a moment. But while they stood there, the silver door slid open with a smooth woosh of air. And the decision was made for them.

The man in the elevator was startled and immediately reached for the button, but

Sevita sprang forward and held the door from sliding shut. “You’re Dr. Carton aren’t you?” she asked.

The man was in a wheelchair and his skin hung in loose folds and wrinkles as if it were slowly melting from him. This man couldn’t be Dr. Carton. He had to be at least thirty years older than the pictures Nella had seen of him on the news. “What do you want?” the man asked.

Frank stepped into the elevator next to him. “We aren’t going to hurt you. We just need to find Dr. Carton and Dr. Schneider as soon as possible.”

The man sighed. “I knew this day was coming. I’m Dr. Carton. And I haven’t seen Dr. Schneider in weeks.”

The man oozed the raw sewage smell from every pore. Nella forced herself onto the elevator with him. Sevita stepped in too and trained the camera on Dr. Carton.

“We know there is a lab here Dr. Carton. And we know about the incurable strain of the Recharge bacteria.” Nella said it calmly but it fell in the elevator like a steel bat across the old man’s face.

He raised a shaky hand to his face. “Jesus,” was all he said. Sevita stared at her as if she too, had been struck.

“Why don’t we go down to the lab, Dr. Carton? Maybe you can tell us where Dr. Schneider has gone.”

“Jesus, don’t kill me. I don’t know who told you about the Recharge bacteria but it isn’t what you think. I beg you not to try to find it, it won’t solve your problems. All it will do is make things worse.”

“We know,” said Nella grimly. Frank pressed the basement button on the elevator.

Nella wheeled Dr. Carton into a brightly lit room with lined with steel tables and unmarked silver doors that looked like refrigerators. Frank and Sevita hurried past her, moving swiftly and quietly down the lab.

“Why are you doing this?” Dr. Carton asked, “Don’t you know it will destroy the world if you release it?”

Nella was startled and looked down into the choppy sea of frightened flesh that was Dr. Carton’s face. “We don’t want to release it Dr. Carton. We want to destroy it. Dr. Schneider was the last person to know where it is. We just want to find her.”

“What? Then why did you break in? How do you even know about it?”

“We were reviewing the evidence for the Plague Trial.” Nella held out her hand, “I’m Dr. Rider. I’m the court appointed psychiatrist for the trial.” Dr. Carton took her hand with some reluctance. She noticed his hand was still shaking and wondered if it was actually palsy and not terror.

"So Dr. Pazzo told you then."

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

"He didn't know the whole story," Dr. Carton hesitated and squinted at Nella. He slowly added, "Or if he does, he didn't tell it to you."

Frank and Sevita joined them. "She isn't here," Sevita said, "but there is an exit. Its overgrown with weeds, I don't think anyone has used it in weeks."

Nella looked at Dr. Carton. "Would you care to tell us what you think is the whole story?" she asked.

Dr. Carton sighed and wheeled his chair around so that he was facing all three of them.

Dr. Carton

"I don't know what Robert Pazzo has told you or how much you believe to be true. He probably told you that Dr. Schneider and I stole his version of the Recharge bacterium. I won't lie. Dr. Schneider and I did obtain a sample without permission. He also obviously told you that he and Dr. Schneider argued at length about how durable the strain ought to be. The idea was to make it resistant to most or all treatments administered to treat harmful diseases or used as prophylactics. Robert was afraid of making it too strong. He was afraid to lose control. But then, Robert Pazzo was always spineless and short sighted." Dr. Carton shifted uncomfortably in his chair, his drooping jaw growing dark red with anger and resentment. "He couldn't see how much more efficient it would be to test the most durable strain immediately."

"That's probably why some of us survived," interrupted Sevita.

Dr. Carton nodded and his smile was jovial as if she had told a good joke.

"Ah, you would think that. But my company offered to not only fund his research for the duration of the trials, but also to loan him state of the art laboratory space for as long as he needed, provided he test our version first. In our facility there wouldn't have been a leak. Not only would the sniffers have caught any infection present in the lab and isolated it, but untrained personnel like Miss Connelly would never have been allowed into dangerous areas in the first place. If Dr. Pazzo had listened eight years ago, all this wretched misery might have been avoided. But he is stubborn."

Nella crossed her arms over her chest. "Ann told me it was Dr. Schneider who persuaded her to infect herself after depriving both Ann and Dr. Pazzo of sleep for days."

Dr. Carton sighed. "Gerta can be overly impatient and has foregone

protocol in the past in order to prove a point. Again, my lab wouldn't have allowed her to sidestep the process or overwork her staff.

"Regardless of what might have been, it's over now. Yes. We stole a sample of the weaker strain in order to develop a bacterial delivery system that was usable even in patients that required high doses of antibiotics. Their small experiment was only a stepping stone in what was to be a revolution in medicine."

Frank smacked his open hand on a steel table hard enough to leave a ringing echo. "Enough with the damn posturing. Did you make an incurable bacteria or not?"

Dr. Carton shook as if the chill in Frank's voice cut to his bone. "Yes," said the old man quietly.

"Has it been destroyed?"

"No. The lab was set to begin trials on it when the outbreaks began. By the time Gerta escaped from her lab to warn us, the social fabric was already failing. Everything changed so fast. You have to remember that people were infected within days, hours maybe, by Ann, and those people infected others. For weeks the Plague was incubating without anybody knowing. When it hit—"

"We remember. There was a massive tide of mob violence and then— and then the world was different." Nella's stomach clenched. She had woken up to it as the Plague overtook her apartment building. At first, she had opened her door to see her two neighbors fighting. They clawed and bit and bashed without slowing. They didn't seem to register that they were injured. They weren't even swearing at each other, just roaring endlessly from the pit of the throat. Other neighbors came to their doors within seconds. One young man ran at the two brawlers with a yell. Nella thought he was going to try to stop them, to break up the fight. It shocked her to see him simply join in, making fresh wounds on each combatant with his teeth. More people ran from their doors and the apartments around Nella quickly emptied. They were a swirling, jerking mass of cracking bone and splashing blood, snapping teeth and crushing pistons made of limbs. Nella had simply stood, completely uncomprehending for a few long minutes. Then she realized she was the only one left to stop the brawl.

She yelled at the top of her voice trying to cut through the strange, creaking growl that they made at each other. "Hey! Cut it out! What the FUCK?"

The mob stopped and was ominously still for a second. Each member turned toward Nella, untangling the twisted knot into a crowd of people again. Their breathing was a ragged, uneven ocean of sound and the copper smell of blood. She had time to pick out details. Like 4A's girlfriend was missing an eye and didn't seem to notice at all. And 7B's arm hung the wrong way as he reached

toward her. And everywhere faces were slick and shiny with dark blood but teeth shone through the crowd like a recurring nightmare of peppermint, maroon and white. They began to run toward Nella. She slammed the door and locked it even as it shivered in its frame. Within seconds the people had turned their attention back toward each other and continued to tear each other apart.

Nella had tried the police several times that day and in the week following but no one ever answered. The brawl had eventually either burnt itself out or moved to another floor leaving a wake of blood and dead flesh behind. Nella spent the week curled in a ball on the floor in front of the television. She didn't start crying until the news anchor turned feral on camera, his voice going from slurry but rational to a low, meaningless groan within seconds. She turned off the television before he could attack the cameraman. The power had gone out later that day. She still tried to call someone, anyone she knew over and over. She got only voice mail until her phone had died for good.

Within a few days, the building began to reek. The hallway buzzed with flies caught in the tacky, rotting mash on the rug. Nella knew that she would have to leave, have to see for herself what was left of the world.

"What? You've never heard of a phone before?" Sevita's voice broke through the haze of Nella's memory and she shook herself back to the present.

"By that time the lines were either jammed with panicked people or maybe Dr. Schneider's phone was dead. I know mine was," said Dr. Carton, his voice gone whiny and waspish.

Frank leaned into Nella. "Are you all right?" he whispered, and his breath was warm and alive in the well of her ear. Nella nodded.

"Look," Sevita was saying, "I don't even know why we're arguing about this. At some point Dr. Schneider found you right? And she told you how dangerous this bacteria was and you went back to the lab. That's what happened right?" Nella could hear a bitter edge of panic in Sevita's voice. Dr. Carton rubbed his temple as if agitated. Nella noticed his palsy was more pronounced. She leaned forward to look at him more closely.

"No," said Dr. Carton, "I mean- yes, she found me. But, I wasn't- I wasn't quite myself when she found me."

"What do you mean you 'weren't yourself'?"

"He means he was infected," said Nella, realizing what the shakes in his muscles and confinement to a wheelchair resulted from.

"You were infected? But how is that possible? You cured the Plague." Frank ran a hand over his smooth head in confusion and frustration.

Dr. Carton began to slowly wring his hands and his voice shifted from petulant to teary. "Actually, neither of those statements is correct."

Nella felt her throat tighten and lift and her chin ached with pressure. "Oh God," she managed and ran to the nearest sink. Dr. Carton frantically wheeled after her trailing a bewildered Frank and Sevita.

"Dr. Rider, please understand, I didn't know what caused the Plague until much later, not until Gerta told me. I didn't know how it worked on the Infected, I was only trying to sur-"

Nella retched so violently that the world went a hazy noiseless ash color and she missed the end of the word. She tilted her head sideways so that she could get a breath of air. Sevita was trying to keep Dr. Carton in her shot, still unsure what was happening but knowing it was important to catch on film. Nella reached up and turned the tap handle. She wiped her face with the cool water, but she could still feel her disgust as burning acid at the base of her throat. She turned back to Dr. Carton.

"You were a scientist. A doctor. How could you do-"

"I never killed anyone," Dr. Carton interrupted, speaking quickly, "Not then. I thought if I smelled like them, if I acted and looked like them, if even my sweat blended in, then I wouldn't be attacked. I only ever-" he paused and began again in a low voice as if he did not want the world to overhear, "I only ever ate the leftovers."

Nella retched again, but this time it caught in her gut, a spiky ball of horror stretching painfully against her innards.

"You mean you ate the dead?" Frank asked. He was pale as chalk. Nella could hear a sudden rattling of plastic as the camera shook in Sevita's hands. Frank tried to calm himself. "You mean you were infected," he said, "like everyone else. It's okay, it wasn't you, it was the disease-"

"No, Mr. Courtlen. I wasn't ill. At least not ill with the Plague. I felt no compulsion to eat humans. It was- it is abhorrent to me both in theory and fact. I couldn't keep it down the first few times. I didn't slur or stumble or have any tics like the Infected. I had to adopt those. I hid in the lab for about a week, watching what they did. I felt it was necessary for me to blend in as much as possible if I was to survive."

"But you must have seen them attack each other too," said Sevita.

"Only when they were hungry. I followed a group of them after I left the lab. As long as I was careful to stay in places with- with rich pickings and didn't move quickly, they ignored both me and each other. They only went into a frenzy when the pica returned. It worked, here I am, eight years later."

Frank held his own face in his hands and Nella thought he might be crying. Nella cleared her throat, her breath scraping against the raw spots where her stomach acid had lain. They were all silent for a moment, the dripping sink

echoing with a metallic ping and the florescent bulbs buzzing like mad flies trying to escape.

Nella folded herself onto the cold floor. She brushed her sweaty hair off of her forehead and felt as if she were wearing away, eroding under the weight of the world. “So Dr. Schneider eventually found you in this- condition?” she asked wearily.

“Yes, Dr. Rider. It took almost a year. You can imagine I wasn’t completely in my right mind by then. I was ill with something and despite my best efforts, I’d been attacked and bitten several times. I was close to starving when Gerta found me. We made it to what was left of military headquarters. Gerta didn’t tell anyone what we’d done and as soon as I was well enough, we left and set up a lab in secret to work on the Cure. Gerta didn’t want to waste time with testing procedures.” Dr. Carton paused, rubbing his temple again. “She said she had to fix it, that it was all her fault and she had to fix it. It was my job to pull in Infected to test on. The first tests- they didn’t go very well.” Dr. Carton swiped at his eyes and sniffed, and his voice was wheedling and teary again. “Gerta told me to get rid of the bodies. She said we had to emerge from this thing with a clean image. And we couldn’t do that with dead patients. So, I did what I knew how to do. And Gerta promised not to tell anyone, as long as I did what I was told, she wouldn’t tell anyone what I was.”

“You mean you continued to cannibalize the dead?” Sevita asked, her voice dry and papery.

“Yes. Once I was used to it, it was easy.”

“If you did all of these terrible things to keep your secret, why are you telling us now?”

Dr. Carton closed his eyes and sighed. “Because you already know the worst secret and you know it’s still out there, waiting to kill everything. Because I’ve become convinced that one more old villain like me will just fade into the woodwork in this beat up corpse of a world. Because I’m tired of pretending to be the savior of mankind. At best Dr. Schneider postponed our deaths with the Cure. I was nothing more than a lab assistant. But Gerta threatened to tell the world what I had become if I didn’t claim the Cure for my own. She didn’t want to be found. She still doesn’t.”

“But she knows where the incurable strain is?” asked Frank.

“She said she was going after it. She was going to return to the lab if she could and destroy it before anyone else could. That’s what she said when she left a few weeks ago. She said it’d been weighing on her. I told her not to worry about it. It’s still far into the Infected zones. It’s not like the Infected will find it. And I highly doubt there are scavengers out that far. But she was insistent. She

packed up a carload of all the survival gear I could still wrangle from the military and a stock of Cure darts and took off.”

“We need to know where the laboratory is.” Frank's voice was low and threatening and Nella felt her skin curdle at the violence in it.

“Didn't you hear me? I said it was overrun. There's no way you'll even get close. It was a suicide mission for her and it will be for anyone that follows her.”

“You survived.”

“I had to act like the Infected. And I was fleeing toward what was left of civilization.”

“Someone is eventually going to reach that lab Dr. Carton. It may not be soon, but someday, somebody will. If we go now maybe we can stop the next plague before it begins.”

Dr. Carton sighed and shook his head. “Very well. It's your neck you're risking, not mine. Come upstairs with me and I'll draw you a map and get you some Cure darts from the safe.”

The thought of getting into the elevator with Dr. Carton again made Nella nauseated all over again. She pressed herself into the corner as far from his stench as she could and tried to think of anything except what she'd heard in the past hour.

They made a quick exit after that, especially when it became clear that he was about to prepare his dinner. None of them wanted to think about the slab of defrosting meat in the stainless steel kitchen sink. They slunk out of the side door again and through the hedge, not wanting any passers by to question them. Christine was waiting for them in the car, her face like an angel of sanity. In six years Nella had never seen Sevita cry, but she did when she got in the car and Chris kissed her.

“Let's get out of here Chris,” she said, “I never want to see this house again.”

Christine took the long way to Nella's apartment so they wouldn't have to pass by the mansion again. Christine didn't ask any questions and they were silent until they parked. They sat in the car for a long moment without moving.

“Chris, why don't you take the car tonight. You don't need to ride your bikes in the dark. I'll walk over Monday morning,” Nella said at last.

“Are you sure?” Christine asked, “That's an early morning for you.”

“I'll pick you up before court Nella, we can pick up your car after the session on Monday,” Frank offered.

Nella smiled. “There, it's all set then.” She slid out of the car. Frank followed her.

Sevita rolled down the window. “Nella,” she called. Nella leaned down to

talk to her. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to forget it tonight, maybe forget it until Monday. Then I'm going to go to court for the first day of trial, just like you. Just like Frank. Then I'll think about what I need to do. I'm the only one who only has to make occasional appearances in court."

"You can't go alone," said Sevita.

"Let's not talk about it today. Just say goodnight Sevita."

"Goodnight. See you on Monday."

Nella waved as the car pulled away. Frank was a solid shadow in the dark beside her. "Do you want me to say 'goodnight' too?" he asked.

She thought he might be smiling but she couldn't see. She hoped that he wasn't. "No," she said, and she wasn't smiling. She took his hand and led him through the dark parking lot and up the silent, lifeless stairs.

FLOTSAM

She felt a sigh of relief travel from her throat to the base of her foot as she stepped through her doorway. She immediately felt guilty. "I'm sorry Frank, you probably want to be home in your own space relaxing."

Frank grinned for the first time in what seemed like days. "Are you serious? Neither of us would be relaxing if I was at home. I'd be pacing the floor worrying about what you were planning. And you'd be- well, you'd be planning."

Nella laughed. "I'm too tired to plan."

Frank's grin faded. "You aren't going alone."

"Let's not worry about it just yet. I'm sick of being scared."

He gently grabbed her chin and turned her face toward him. "We don't have to talk about it right now Nella, but you aren't going alone. I may seem like an amiable pushover sometimes, but I mean it."

Nella dropped her eyes for a second and then looked steadily at him. "We don't need to argue about it now."

"Or ever," he said. She shook her head and smiled. She walked away from him toward the bathroom.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"To brush my teeth. I can still taste that house in my throat."

"I'm going to get a change of clothes from the car then."

Nella turned around. "Do you want me to come with you?" she asked.

Frank looked confused. "No, I know right where my bag is. Are you okay?"

Nella smiled but it wavered like a false reflection. "Yeah, just nervous I

guess.”

“I'll be right back, I promise.”

“I know,” she said and went to clean off the stench of Dr. Carton.

She was in the closet carefully packing away the guns when he came back. She jumped when he said in a low voice from behind her, “I'm glad we didn't have to use those.”

“Me too,” she said and shoved the trunk back against the closet wall. It hit with a bang she hadn't intended and she tensed again.

“Nella, you have to calm down. What is it you are scared of? That old man?” She could see a ripple of revulsion pass up Frank's frame. “He's sick, there's no doubt about that, but surely this isn't so far afield from things you've had patients dealing with during the Cure, is it?”

Nella waved a hand dismissively as she backed out of the closet and shut the door. “No,” she said, “it's not Dr. Carton. I've just had this overwhelming feeling of dread since we left the prison today. I don't know why, but I keep thinking I'm overlooking something important. As if everything depends on me figuring it out and as if something or someone is going to stop me before I can.”

Nella shrugged. “I don't know,” she sighed, “it's probably nothing. I think the pressure is just making me jumpy.”

Frank's face was tight and anxious. Nella laughed and patted his arm. “Don't worry. I'm not quite cracked yet. A little paranoia is healthy.” He didn't relax. She looked at him for a moment. “I'm glad you're here,” she said.

“Me too,” he said with an immediate smile. Nella felt her interior gravity shift. It startled her and she walked into the kitchen before he could say or do anything else.

“Come on,” she called back to him, “You must be starving. I am.”

“Really? After hearing all that, you're still hungry?”

Nella paused for a moment. “Surprisingly, yes.”

“All right. Let me change first. Besides I made lunch, it's your turn to cook,” he said and disappeared into the bathroom.

Nella watched the steam curl out of the bottom of the bathroom door as she cooked. She had always been comfortable in her apartment. She didn't go looking for things to add to it, they just sort of found her. Gifts from friends or things she'd saved from empty, abandoned places. Like her cookbooks. Her life was like a net gathering bits of flotsam after the storm. She didn't go looking for people to add to her life either. She didn't push people away, at least, she didn't think she did. But sometimes people seemed to swirl around her and stick when she was least prepared for it. Less and less lately. She watched the warm, clean mist creeping out of the bathroom and wondered if Frank was one of those

people. She realized she was lonely. Nella sighed. What was she thinking? She was a psychiatrist hired to be an impartial observer for the most important trial in history. Even having the defense counsel over for dinner was seriously questionable. And now they were both privy to something that could change not only the outcome of the trial but the fate of civilization as well. She tried to be rational. *I'm a logical person, not some weak-willed woman who runs after other people for affection or protection.* Nella immediately felt ashamed of the thought. Why was she feeling so judgmental? Was it what others would think? Or what she thought of herself? She rapped her wooden spoon on the side of the pot in an angry burst. Why did she even like him? She knew very little about him. He was pleasant, but she had met many pleasant men over the years and never thought twice about it. Perhaps it was simply the pressure of the trial. But she rejected that as well. She had survived far worse without turning to intimacy for comfort. He was not pretty. Even now, she could admit that. Too thin and angular, dark scars twisting his face and arms, and still visibly fragile and pallid from long illness. No one would think that he was handsome. But it had been a while since Nella had found him ugly, despite all that. She was having a terrible time trying to convince herself that he wasn't attractive. Because, of course, he was. She didn't know if it was something physical, like the grace with which he moved his ridiculously long limbs when she expected him to constantly be tripping over himself, or if it was something deeper and less defined. Nella had noticed Frank's patience with people even when he was unfairly treated and she didn't ignore his kindness to everyone around him and most especially toward herself. Nella was modest, but she wasn't blind. Frank had been sending clear signals. She knew he was just waiting to find out if she felt the same way about him. She felt a pang of sympathy when she realized he had reasons to be less confident than she. She wondered if he'd been rejected many times since the Cure or if he'd ever been able to move past the death of his wife. Nella felt ridiculous and self conscious. She scolded herself into concentrating on what she was doing. The constant, quiet splash of the shower ended and Nella could feel panic set in. *That's enough, she thought, stop being silly Nella. I can't do anything until after the trial. Otherwise we'll both lose our jobs.* She thought she had convinced herself into rationality by the time Frank walked quietly out of the bathroom.

“That smells great,” he said, coming into the kitchen. He rummaged around the cabinets looking for silverware. He was humming something without knowing it. Nella watched him as he set the table. *How the hell did I ever think he was ugly?* She wondered. He turned around and saw her watching him. He stopped humming and smiled self consciously. “What?” he asked.

Nella blushed and returned his smile. "Nothing. What were you humming?"

Frank thought for a second. "I have no idea. Sorry, does it bother you?"

"No, not at all. I was just curious." She turned back to the stove and filled their plates so she could blush in private. *We should have dinner and then I should send him home. Not should. Will send him home.*

But her resolve weakened as the evening wore itself away. He seemed comfortable with her, unwound even, as if he had been screwed together too tightly for far too long. When she met him, she had thought he was too introverted to be a lawyer. He had been friendly but it had seemed rehearsed, like something he often got wrong. But now she wondered if the world had made him that way after the Cure. He had been so subdued with both Dr. Pazzo and Mr. Grant. It was easy to believe Frank was so ashamed of what the infection had done to him that he became deferential to anyone who treated him poorly, that he really thought he deserved it. She was hesitant to shatter what comfort he had found with her by sending him away.

He looked at her intensely for a moment, but Nella's mind was so far away she barely noticed.

"Stop psychoanalyzing me," he said, "I told you I didn't want you to think about me that way."

"I wasn't—"

Frank laughed. "You're a terrible liar. But I guess that's good in a doctor."

"Well how do you want me to think about you then?"

Frank got up and picked up his plate. He leaned over her and paused as he picked hers up too. "Now you're changing the subject," he said gently and then walked to the sink. Nella's ribs felt too tight. She tried to ignore it.

"What makes you think I was psychoanalyzing you?"

Frank turned the water on and spoke over the splashing, but didn't turn his face toward her. "Because you were staring at me for a while. And I think you've gotten over your revulsion of my scars by now, so it wasn't that—"

"I was never revolted by you—" Nella tried to interrupt.

"You were," Frank laughed and it was dry and brittle like an old leaf hanging between them. "You tried very hard not to show it, I know. Maybe you even tried very hard not to feel it, but I could see you flinch every time I came near you—"

Nella sprang from her seat and across the kitchen. "I'm not revolted by you," she said when she reached him. He turned off the faucet and calmly began wiping the clean dishes. Frank looked at her.

"I know. Not any more, anyway. So I know you weren't watching me

because you were frightened or disgusted.” He handed her the dry plate and she stared dumbly at it because his fingers had touched hers as he passed it to her and the sizzling it left in her mind made her too dizzy to put the plate in the cabinet.

“But you weren’t staring into space, Nella, you were staring at *me*.” Frank smiled, “All I can think is that you were either analyzing me or you were trying to figure out a way to toss me out for the night without feeling guilty.”

Nella blushed. “I wasn’t psychoanalyzing you.”

He handed her the other plate. “If you want me to go,” he said quietly, “All you have to do is say so. Nothing will be different tomorrow. We’ll still be friends.”

“I don’t want you to go,” she said and then rushed to put the plates away so that she wouldn’t see his face.

“Good,” he said, “because I’d like to stay. Your couch is comfortable.”

She laughed despite her anxiety and turned back toward him. “How did you know what I was thinking about?”

“Because I’ve thought about it too. I’m an adult, Nella, I know how the world works. I’m not supposed to like you. And you are supposed to be impartial and everyone is supposed to play by the rules. If anyone found out that we weren’t strangers to each other, the world would riot. And that’s just the trial.”

“What do you mean, ‘that’s just the trial?’ Is there something else?”

“You’re an Immune. You’re supposed to be registering with DHRS and marrying another Immune so you can have lots of little Immune children. And I’m an Infected—” he held up his hand to stop her protest, “whether I’ve been Cured or not, I’ll always be an Infected. I don’t have the genetic resistance to pass on to the next generation. I’m supposed to die out, wither out of the gene pool.”

“I don’t care about that—”

“You might not. Your friends might not even care. But the rest of the world will. People like Mr. Grant will. Maybe we’d lose our jobs or be shunned or cheated at the market. Maybe we would have to live in more dangerous places than this.” Frank sighed. “I know you aren’t naïve Nella. I realize you’ve thought about this already. That’s what you were thinking about before I interrupted you. I just don’t know what you decided.”

“What did you decide?”

Frank leaned against the counter and crossed his arms as if he were preparing for a blow from her. “That I gave up caring what the world thought of me a long time ago. That I already took the bitter leavings the world tossed at me every day, why shouldn’t I accept the beautiful things it put in my path too?”

Frank reached out to touch her face, but stopped short and pulled back. He stopped looking at her and looked toward the door, expecting to be walking through it. "But I still care about what the world thinks about you and what it would do to you if I were involved with you. This life is hard enough as it is. We both know that. I don't want to make it any harder."

The sink plinked a sorry tune between them as Nella thought about what she wanted to tell him. "Frank," she said at last, "the world isn't just nasty people like Mr. Grant and his cronies. It's also people like Sevita and Wells and Johnson. The world has always had bigots in it. I think it always will. If the Plague proved anything, it proved that. Even when we're on the point of extinction we still waste energy on hating each other. Living according to the standards of the Mr. Grants of the world isn't going to make them go away. And it will only make you- *us* miserable." Nella reached up and touched the scar on Frank's cheek with the fingertips of her bandaged hand. "How could I ever be revolted by you? If I ever did, I'm sorry for it now. You've shown nothing but kindness and patience, even to people who treated you badly. Even to people that I couldn't bring myself to be patient with or kind to. How could you make my life anything but better? If the judge wants me to recuse myself I will. If the Mr. Grants of the world want me to stop practicing, I'll do that too. But I don't want you to go."

Nella was a little amazed to realize how much she really meant it. She smiled and looked up at Frank. But his face was grim and still. He hadn't moved, even when she'd touched him. Nella's smile withered away. "What's wrong?" she asked before her throat could snap shut with panic.

"I'm not what you believe. I'm not patient and I can be cruel, Nella. I can't do this." He gently moved her aside and walked toward the door.

"Frank wait." The lamp sparkled on his face like frost. The rest of him in shadow, slipping away, his hand already turning the door knob.

"Wait," she said again, but she was calm, not pleading. He waited, turning toward her, but didn't move from the door. The light behind him made his face a dark room she couldn't see into.

"It's not for you to decide," she said, "You may think you are protecting me from some mistake by leaving, but it's my mistake to make," she smiled, but her eyes felt pinched and there was a rough stone in the base of her throat. "And it's already been made."

Frank's shoulders sagged. He shook his head. "You don't know me. You don't know what I've done."

She wanted to tell him she didn't care, that whatever it was, it couldn't be that bad. But in the world that remained after humans had slaughtered each other

with their bare hands and sick people had been executed not only to insure safety, but also for sport even after the Cure, in *this* world, that wasn't true anymore. The little voice in the hollow still place of her chest said that, yes, it could be that bad. So she was calm, too rational to tell him what she really meant, when she said, "How will I know if you never tell me?" She took a step toward him. "You can stay the man you've made yourself into, and I'll never know what you were before. No one's going to betray you, no one's going to tell your secrets." Nella paused and crossed the remaining space between them so she could see his face in the dim light. "Or you can tell me what it is you think you've done. You can spill it out in the most wretched language you like and be free of it. And let me decide."

He was silent. She desperately wanted to watch his hand on the knob, as if it, alone, decided what happened next. Her hand ached to take his away from the door. She forced herself to focus on his face. He shifted his weight and she shut her eyes so she wouldn't see the door open. "It isn't a kindness, this way Frank. It isn't sparing me anything to just leave with things half said."

She felt his sigh like a slide of warm sand shifting against her side. She opened her eyes and he had let go of the doorknob.

"There was a kid, Nella. That's why we were Infected." he sat wearily on the couch.

“You had a child?”

“You had a child?”

Frank shook his head. “No, this was after the Plague started. We had this bomb shelter. It'd come with the house when we bought it. I just kept it stocked because it seemed like a good idea and a safe place to store emergency supplies. You know, in case of a bad storm or something. But then, the Plague began spreading. It hadn't reached our area yet, in fact, I think we were one of the last places to become infected. But we heard on the news that the incubation period was very, very long. We didn't wait to see if we'd get sick. We closed ourselves in the bomb shelter and just tried to wait until it could burn itself out. It had its own air filter, we had enough water and food for years. We were safe, my wife and I. All we had to do is stay sane and keep the door closed and we would've been fine. *We were safe.*”

Nella sank down onto the couch next to him but she didn't try to touch him.

“But then, a few weeks later, there was this pounding on the door. Sarah, my wife, begged me not to open the door. We had already discussed it, we'd

agreed that no one, not family, not neighbors, nobody was going to come in. But I heard this little voice." He put one long hand on his head. "This small voice that was so scared. It just kept saying, 'Let me in, please let me in! They'll eat me! I'm not sick, let me in!' And on the other side was Sarah, pleading for me to come away from the door, for heaven's sake not to listen. She kept saying, 'It's a trick. They'll rob us or throw us out.' But I had to. I had to open the door. It was someone's baby. Someone's whole reason for being. And he was begging for anyone to help him. Nella, how could I not open the door?"

He looked at her as if she had some answer, but she was silent.

"I let him in. Sarah, bless her, never said another word about it, just acted as if it was the plan the whole time. As soon as the door opened she acted like she was the boy's own mother."

His chest hitched and he choked back a sob. His hands kept moving, sliding over his face, rubbing his knees, flying in front of him like startled birds.

"But he was sick?"

"Yes, he was sick. It took us a few weeks to realize it. He was slower and slower. He stopped talking. But we just kept pretending like it was okay. We kept telling him we were just going to wait a few days for him to feel better, and then we'd all go find his parents. We never had our own, we were so young. We didn't know what the hell we were doing, but we did the best we could for him. There were no doctors to call, no medicine we could give him or even anyone to ask advice from. There was only us in that tiny metal tube, watching the time run away from us so slowly. And then about a month after we let him in, he bit me. I yelled for him to stop, just to *calm down* and stop, but he wouldn't. He just kept clawing and screaming and there was blood everywhere. I kept trying to hold him back but he was so wild. I didn't want to hurt him. He was just a little boy, maybe eight. Maybe younger. And Sarah shot him." Frank stopped a small groan with his hand over his own mouth. "Sarah shot him because I couldn't do it. She wanted to shoot me too. I begged her not to. I told her we could be immune, we weren't sick. And the bites weren't how it spread. She listened. I should've let her shoot me then." He put his head in his hands and his whole body shook. "I should've let her shoot me."

Nella didn't know what to do. She'd seen dozens of people cry in the past several years and she always knew what to do. But not now. Her skin ached to touch him, to glide her fingertips over his back in soothing strokes. But she sat motionless beside him instead.

"Was she Immune?" her voice was low and thick around the lump of sympathy in her throat.

"I'm not sure," he said, trying to wipe his eyes. Nella resisted the urge to

hand him a tissue. "She said she felt very slow over the next few weeks but she never seemed to show symptoms other than that. But maybe that's why she waited too long. Maybe she was thinking so slowly she missed my symptoms."

"Maybe she thought you'd get better."

Frank nodded. "Yeah, she would have hoped that." He rubbed his shoulder. "Some days, I think she missed on purpose. But I didn't get better. And if she was sick, then she held on longer than I did. We were arguing about the boy again. We had wrapped him in a blanket and some old plastic sheeting I had stored in the bunker. I thought he ought to be buried. And I meant to do it. But every time I got close to the door, Sarah would panic. She'd beg me to wait just one more day, not to leave her alone with those things waiting for her outside the door. I tried to tell her that anything that was out there would've moved on, but she was convinced that if I opened the door again we'd both be dead. We were both sure we were Immune. But the infection was already inside. It was already too late. But I kept putting off burying the boy to appease her. We argued about it every day for weeks. In the back of my mind, I knew he was rotting, that we were breathing him in. I couldn't smell it- maybe because we never opened the door for fresh air, so it kind of just crept up gradually. We never smelled him, but in the back of my head it drove me crazy to think about him in there with us, slowly falling apart, liquefying. I used to lie awake thinking about it." Nella felt Frank's shudder pass through his body and into hers as he spoke.

"So this last day, I could barely get the words out. I was trying to climb up the ladder to the hatch and hold his body at the same time. He kept slipping inside the plastic and I could feel the bones shifting and wiggling in there. And I just wanted it done. My feet didn't work right, but only sometimes, so I would get a few steps up and the bag would slip, so I would yank it up again and lift my foot up to take another step and instead, slide backwards. It took a long time and I was getting angry. I had started while Sarah was asleep, because I didn't want her to stop me again. This time I *had* to bury him, or I'd go mad. I knew it. I only had three steps left to reach the hatch when she woke up. I knew it would take me another fifteen minutes or so just to manage those steps, but I thought if I could just get the door open, she'd stop being upset about it and I could take my time with the rest. I was covered in sweat and so tired. The boy couldn't have been more than fifty pounds. Something I wouldn't normally struggle with. But that day- I don't think I've ever been that tired before or since. I felt like all the water and air had been squeezed out of me and I was just this paper thing, just a husk being thrown around in a strong wind. I managed another step and I could almost reach the door handle with one hand. Almost. If I hadn't been carrying the boy I could have reached it." Frank stretched his arm in front of him as if the

hatch were before him now, always just farther than he could manage. Nella wondered how many nightmares had featured that hatch over the years in Frank's mind.

"But if I reached as far as I could have, the boy would have slipped out of my other arm and fallen. Sarah was just stretching but she saw me pretty quickly up on the ladder and she sprang out of bed.

'Frank,' she said, and she was already crying, 'Don't go today. Please, just one more day I promise.'

I put my forehead on the ladder rung in front of me, trying to focus on the cool touch of the metal. I wanted to cry. I couldn't turn back. Not now. This small trip up a ladder, a trip that would have taken all of thirty seconds when I was well, had taken over an hour. I think some part of me knew I was really sick. I don't think I would've come back to the shelter if I'd left that day. Sarah would have been safe.

"The ladder wasn't that long, maybe twenty rungs in all. I could stand at the bottom and reach halfway up to the hatch. I didn't have the greatest grip on the boy by now, I just kept readjusting as he slipped, so part of him was dangling below me. It was low enough that Sarah could reach it if she stood up on her toes.

'Sarah,' I said, 'It has to be today.' and that was all I could manage to say without forgetting which word I wanted to say next. I just kept repeating, 'It has to be today' over and over. I lifted my foot to put it on the next rung.

Sarah was yelling at me, begging me not to do it, but all of my concentration was on that one foot. I just had to get that one foot onto the next rung without slipping. She didn't wait for that though. She started pulling on the plastic around the boy. She wasn't just gently tugging either. Sarah was desperate to stop me. She yanked as hard as she could. The boy slipped away from me and landed with a greasy pop next to her. But the sudden shift in weight threw what little balance I had completely off. I fell too, landing on my back on the cement floor. I think I blacked out for a second and the wind was knocked out of me. I could see Sarah leaning over me as I lay gasping there. She was crying and her hair brushed my face. The bunker light made a halo around her head, sparked and shone on her skin. And I had my last charitable thought then. I thought, she's just scared. She didn't mean to hurt me, she's just scared.

And then it was as if someone came along and blew the little candle that was my soul out and left an empty, cold place behind. All I could think of was how much pain I was in from the fall, from the disease, how hard I had worked to get the boy up the ladder and Sarah had smashed me back into the ground. That she was always holding me back from doing what I knew needed to be

done. That I had to get rid of her, so I could be free. And while she was still leaning over me, trying to see if I was all right, trying to *help* me, I grabbed her hair and wrapped it around and around my hand, pulling her down toward me.”

Frank looked at Nella and his face was like a cracked mirror that could only show grief. His voice wavered. “She must have been so scared. I'd never even raised my voice with her before that. She must have been terrified and heartbroken. Her whole face was almost blank with shock. And I knew, even then, that she was frightened. I knew and I was *glad*. It was a fierce, hot joy, as if I was filled with vengeance. But for what? She hadn't done anything. And I did the most painful thing I could think to do. I bit her behind the ear. I bit her so hard that her skin and scalp started to come away from her skull.”

Nella felt her stomach boiling away even as she tried not to shudder. Her teeth ached in protest at the image.

“I bit her where I used to love kissing her the most. And I still felt nothing but visceral delight in doing it. I let her hair go though, when she screamed and she leapt back. It took me a few seconds to get up off the floor, because it really had given me a blow to land that hard. Sarah didn't waste those seconds. She found the gun and had it pointed at me. She was crying, begging me to stop. She said I was just sick, if I could calm down, she'd get me to a hospital and everything would be okay. I stood there, this hulk of a thing, my mouth dripping with her blood and I could feel the grin splitting my lips. She was trying to save me, and all I could think of was how good it had felt to bite her. Like it filled some part of me I'd never known was empty before. I could see the end of the gun shaking and I knew she wouldn't be able to do it before I reached her. And I didn't care that I was going to kill her and I didn't care that I was going to die too. All I wanted was that feeling back. There was nothing left in me but this growl, this grunt that grew and grew until I leapt at her and I couldn't even hear her screaming over the growl coming from my chest.

“If there had been any mercy at all left in me, I would have tried for her neck and ended it quickly. Instead I scratched and hit her face. She had lost control of the gun, I was far too close for her to raise it again. She reached behind her and found a glass bottle and smashed it across my face. That's how I got this.” Frank rubbed the purple jag on his cheek. Nella's eyes were too blurry with crying to see his face very well. She wasn't sure she wanted to see it at that moment anyhow.

“The shock of it pushed me back about a foot and Sarah managed to raise the gun. She was still crying. She wasn't angry with me, she wasn't trying to hurt me. She was just crying. And she shot me in the shoulder as I sprang again for her. I wasn't glad anymore. I was angry. Hideously, blindly angry. I snapped her

neck with my hands. And she was gone. And I was alone with my rage and that never ending hunger. How could you possibly love somebody like that?"

Nella swept the tears from her face. Frank was looking grimly at her, but Nella didn't think he was really seeing her.

"Dr. Pazzo wasn't lying when he said they found me just a few months later surrounded by the bones of my wife and the boy. I didn't bury them. I didn't even leave them in peace in the silent bunker. I was surrounded by bottles of water and over a year's worth of food. But I ate the bodies as they rotted around me. After the Cure, when I could think rationally again, I realized what I'd done. I wished that they'd left me in the bunker to starve. I didn't want to live, but I believed it was a just punishment, that killing myself would be worse than everything that I'd done before. Every following breath was hell, until I met you. I could feel them inside me, I could remember their taste, the texture of their skin and organs. I could taste it all the time, no matter how many times I scoured my teeth. I could smell the rot on my skin no matter how much I scrubbed. How could you kiss someone like that?"

Frank sat motionless as Nella got up to stand in front of him. She warmed his scarred cheek with the palm of her hand. "I wish I could tell you that Sarah would forgive you. I think she would, but I didn't know her." Nella watched his eyes fill again. "I don't even know if there is anything to be forgiven. You were ill. The whole world was sick. It still is. Infected and Immune alike. I don't have to love the person that did those things. He's not real. He never was."

Nella threaded her fingers through one of his long hands. "I know these hands did those things. And I forgive them." She brought his hand to her lips.

She traced his mouth with one finger. "I know this mouth did those things. And I forgive it."

She watched his eyes for a long moment. "But your heart didn't do those things. I don't have to forgive it for anything."

She leaned down and kissed him. She felt Frank sob and he held her around the waist as if he was drowning. She bent her head and whispered, "Please stay." But she never knew if he heard her.

News from the Lab

Nella woke to the phone ringing. The couch had made her stiff and sore. She still hadn't showered and she felt grimy and scratchy. She sat up slowly. Frank was not next to her. The phone was still ringing, but she ignored it. She checked the bathroom, but it was dark and silent. "Frank?" she called, walking into the bedroom. But the bed was made just the way she'd left it. The phone stopped ringing and Nella panicked, thinking maybe it had been him. She stopped on the way to the kitchen when she saw a flutter of white wave to her from the door.

Her heart sank. It was a note. She tore it from the door.

"Gone to the Farm. You needed groceries. Be back soon."

Nella relaxed. On her way to the shower the phone rang again. Everything itched to be cleaned, but she stopped to pick it up with a sigh.

"Where have you been?" said Sevita.

"Sorry, I just woke up. What's up?"

"I told Christine."

"Sevita, how could that have helped?"

"I know, I know. But how could I not tell her? Especially since she's ready to have a baby. The only thing that's keeping me from telling everyone is that you think it's important to keep it secret for now. I think they have a right to know."

"It's not that people don't have the right to know Sevita, it's that there's a dangerous weapon free for anyone to pick up lying out there in the wasteland. If we tell the wrong people—"

"Okay, okay, I understand. The thing is, one of her scav buddies did a preliminary sweep of that lab months ago. They were looking for medicine and equipment for the hospital and they couldn't wait for the military to clear that zone. Nella, the guy said the place was ransacked, but not in a Looter kind of way."

"What do you mean, 'not in a Looter kind of way'?"

"I mean there were top of the line drugs scattered over the floors, portable equipment and first aid kits were left behind, even narcotics were lying neatly in drawers. But in the upper labs, the ones even these guys refused to go into- you know, the kind you have to walk through an airlock to get in or out of? They were trashed Nella. Tables overturned, papers in messy piles like someone had gone through them one by one only to drop them, even some floor tiles were pulled up."

"Maybe the Infected went on a rampage before they abandoned the building."

"That's what the scavengers thought at first too. But the vault where they keep all the frozen samples- the door was standing open and the generator had failed. Of course the samples must all be dead by now, they said they thought the generator had been sabotaged years ago, otherwise it should still be running, the

lab had enough oil reserve to run it for a decade.”

Nella was silent.

“Well, aren't you going to say anything?”

“I don't know *what* to say Sevita. I don't know if this is good because it means Dr. Schneider destroyed the bacteria long ago or if it's bad because it means someone knew it was there and got to it before she could.”

“Who would have known it was there?”

“I think only Schneider, Carton, Ann Connelly and Dr. Pazzo. But I'm not entirely certain. It would make sense that they would be the only ones who knew exactly what it was, Dr. Carton said it wasn't due to be tested until the week after the world went to pot.”

“But Dr. Carton was busy playing sick, if we believe his story. And I don't really think he has a motive to make up something like what he told us yesterday. There are less elaborate lies and more attractive ones too, don't you think?”

“Yes, I believe Dr. Carton was telling us the truth.”

“And you watched Dr. Pazzo lock Ann, Dr. Schneider and himself in right?”

“Ye-es,” Nella said slowly, but something in her brain sent up a little flare. She couldn't figure out why though.

“And Dr. Schneider later escaped, after telling Dr. Pazzo she was going after the incurable strain to destroy it. And Dr. Pazzo and Ann were found almost a year later, still locked in. So the only person it could be was Dr. Schneider.”

That little flare kept digging at Nella's brain. “Something isn't right,” she said, “when did the scavengers reach the lab?”

“Christine said it was something like six months ago, while the hospital was overrun by flu.”

“But Dr. Carton said that he had seen Dr. Schneider about a month and a half ago. And she said she was going back to the lab to destroy it. That they hadn't been able to reach the lab before then because of all the Infected in the way.”

“Then who?” asked Sevita, “Looters wouldn't have bothered with a biohazard vault. Even stupid ones. And why would they leave highly valuable drugs and equipment lying around? It doesn't make any sense.”

“No, it doesn't. I've got a bad feeling about this. I think I'm going to have to get to the lab as soon as possible to see for myself. I'll have to go after court on Monday- I'll give my findings on the mental state of the defendants and I'll leave immediately-”

“Woah, hang on Nella. I think we should talk about this. You can't go alone.”

“We can't tell anyone else about this Sevita, and you and Frank have to be in court for every session, otherwise everyone will know something is wrong. I'm the only one that *can* go.”

“What does Frank say about all this?”

“It doesn't matter, the facts are the same.”

“Bullshit. Put him on the phone, I want to talk to him.”

“He's not here.”

“Oh Nella, you didn't blow it with him did you? I'll never forgive you if you did. He's a far more decent person than you've ever been with since I've known you.”

“Sevita, be rational. How could a defense attorney be caught dating the supposedly neutral psychiatric counsel?”

“I don't think the world cares about that stuff anymore. In case you didn't notice, we've run out of lives as a species. If that's what's holding you back Nella- just don't be an idiot. Call me when he gets there.”

Sevita hung up and Nella sighed and walked into the bathroom. She had just finished dressing and was sitting on the edge of the bed lost in thought when Frank returned. She was concentrating in the quiet, trying to puzzle out what was eating away the corners of her conscious thought. It was something to do with Dr. Pazzo, something about his videos.

She was so absorbed in the memory, she didn't hear Frank come in until he knocked on the open bedroom door. She started and then brightened to see him leaning against the frame.

“Are you okay?” he said.

“I'm sorry, I didn't hear you come in.” She blushed as if he'd somehow seen more of her than she had intended simply by catching her daydreaming. He hadn't touched her, hadn't even returned her kiss. Nella felt exposed and awkward and not exactly sure what he wanted from her.

“Do you need help with the groceries?” She asked so she'd have a reason to divert his attention from her. She stood to go into the kitchen, but he didn't move, his tall figure still blocking the doorway.

“No,” he said, “It's all fine where it is.”

Nella nodded and felt her face warm. She stood there, awkwardly, as he stared at her, unmoving. All of her adult life she had been still and waited for her patients to begin speaking. She never felt the need to interrupt or prod or fill the silence. Now it was unbearable. *He's changed his mind*, she thought, *He's decided I'm not what he wanted after all*. And her interior gravity shifted again, this time crushing her ribs inward. She focused on remaining calm, trying not to let her shrinking lungs make her breath ragged.

Frank was still just watching her. “I'm sorry about last night,” he finally said in a calm voice, “I shouldn't have done that to you. It wasn't right.”

Nella felt tears spill from her before she could stop them and her voice was stricken even to her own ears. “You didn't mean it then? You aren't staying?” she

asked, convinced that he had decided she was a mistake.

Frank looked as if he'd been slapped. But it was only for a second. He moved so quickly that Nella flinched and threw up a hand to protect herself. Then his arm was threaded around her waist and he was brushing her cheek dry with his other hand. And he kissed her. He kissed her as if he were drawing his breath directly from her lungs. The scar on his shoulder pushed through his shirt and into Nella's hand, a warm, thick starburst. She wished it would burn itself into her hand, a jagged brand that she could hold even if he left. He lifted her feet from the floor and she felt the soft give of the bed behind her. She pushed him, just an inch, and tried to catch her breath.

"Don't cry. Don't cry. I meant it." Frank was whispering so quickly that she wondered if he'd already been saying it when they had kissed. He blew the words gently over her eyes, her brow, her cheek, evaporating her doubt with his warm, living breath.

Nella brushed her fingers over the back of his head, feeling the rapid heartbeat in his skin and the sudden goosebumps her fingers made, like ripples in a pond. The perfect, fragile bone of his skull pressed against the thin bandage on her palm.

"I meant it. I meant it," he whispered into her neck. She twisted the fabric of his shirt in her hand and gently turned his face toward her. She stopped his mouth with her own.

His hands that hadn't been lawyer's hands in a long time, warm and weathered like driftwood, scraped lightly on her skin as her shirt bunched underneath her and left a corner of her hip exposed. She gasped, startled as he slid his hand farther up onto her stomach and sent echoes of heat bouncing against all the places he hadn't touched yet.

The phone was as sharp as breaking glass and Nella stiffened with the first ring. She hissed a swear and tried to slide away from Frank. He laughed. "No way," he said, pulling her in. She realized she hadn't told him about Sevita's call. The ring came again.

"Frank, I have to—"

"Why?" he mumbled, his lips already brushing her neck, "It's not the judge, not on Saturday."

"No, it's Sevita," she sighed and gently tried to push him off. He pulled back and looked at her, his face still half laughing but a little hurt too.

"You don't have to answer it, you can call her back."

"No, I'm not going to answer it, but I have to tell you something."

He rolled onto his side next to her and propped his head on his arm. "This is like every dream I've had since I met you," he sighed, but the sting had gone from his

smile. She half sat up and leaned over him.

“I promise it's important. And I promise I'll still be right here afterwards.”

The Plan

Nella didn't get very far in explaining the break in at Dr. Carton's lab before Sevita knocked on her door.

“Thank God,” she said, when Nella answered the door, “I was afraid you'd panicked and left without me. Have you told Frank yet?”

“I was just doing that,” Nella replied, “But maybe you'd better finish, you can answer his questions better than I can.”

Nella tuned most of what Sevita said out, having heard it before. Something about the whole mess seemed off, almost predictable, like a trap. What Nella couldn't decide was who the trap was for. To know that, she thought, she'd have to know who set it in the first place. She had to find Dr. Schneider and she had to do it without filling the trap.

There were people that would want Sevita silenced, that was easy to see. The reporter practically ran the news channel, and was given free rein to air the stories when and how she wanted. She was dangerous and powerful.

Frank was the only defender and voice of the man most people blamed for the Plague. Dr. Pazzo was the supreme architect behind the annihilation of the human race, according to popular opinion. And Frank was trying to keep him safe from the people's vengeance. Even the man representing the co-defendant had publicly humiliated him. Nella shivered, wondering how he managed to get home every night without being shot. Then she remembered that the trial hadn't even started yet and most of the population didn't know who he was. Yes, there were people that would like Frank out of the way.

That left herself. As far as she knew, she hadn't made any personal enemies- at least, not ones that would really want her gone. Most of the public didn't know who she was, wouldn't know who she was even after the trial. And the occasional person that did, wouldn't have cared. She was just the court appointed psychiatrist. No more partial or important than the bailiff or stenographer. She was just part of the machinery. And not even working machinery. She was a prop to make the court look as if it ran with some degree of fairness and impartiality. She was a tiny part of the fairy tale that the world told itself while sharpening its knives. No one would miss her if she was suddenly not a part of it anymore. So it had to be her that went. She had to spring the trap before Frank or Sevita could. She decided this while they were still