

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

talking, still trying to devise a plan.

"Look," she said, breaking in, "I'm the only one that can go. It's no use arguing, we all know that I have to be the one. If you can figure out how to cover that distance between one court session and the next without alerting anyone, you let me know. Until then, you're just going to have to accept that I'm the one that has to do this."

"No way," said Sevita, "the area is still crawling with Infected. And Looters. None of us should go alone."

"It's time to call the military government Nella. We can't do this by ourselves anymore," said Frank.

"No," said Nella, "we can't tell anyone until we're sure this thing has been destroyed. What if the military government wanted to keep it as a weapon? Or some hot shot who didn't know how to handle it correctly found out about it and went after it without informing his superiors? Or just some greedy Looter who wanted to cash in by holding the world hostage? The more people that know about this, the closer we are to the disease being released."

"We can't do anything until after court on Monday, regardless of what we decide. We all have to be there for the first session. We'll just have to think of an alternate plan before then." Sevita looked at Frank with some significance. Nella was too distracted to pay much attention. Frank smiled and squeezed Nella's knee.

"We said we weren't going to discuss it until then," he said, "I think that's a good plan."

"Okay," said Sevita, standing up from her seat, "I'm just glad you didn't take off without telling me."

Nella didn't promise anything, though she knew that's what both Sevita and Frank wanted.

"It's not that I think you aren't capable or that I'll be any better at this. I just care about you, and I think we should go together." Sevita smiled and Nella hugged her.

"I know. I just don't see a way around it."

"Just think about it until after court. I will too. We'll figure something out."

Frank was strangely silent and it made Nella nervous. What was he waiting to say?

"Well," said Sevita, "I guess I'd better go then. Before Chris thinks I ran off after you. I'll see you both on Monday morning."

After Sevita had gone, Nella expected Frank to continue trying to persuade her to get the military involved, but he didn't. He just started putting groceries away.

"Is this your way of fighting with me?" she asked after a moment. Frank laughed.

"Why would I fight with you? You're right, we have to find Dr. Schneider no matter what. And if we start a panic by letting the authorities know, or worse, as you've said, nothing good will happen. So it's up to us. Us, Nella, not you. You think you'll wear me down, but you won't. I said you weren't going to go by yourself and I meant it. Even more now. I just have to figure out how to go with you." Frank shrugged his shoulders, "So what's the use of fighting about it?"

"Am I the only one who thinks this whole thing is some kind of set up? How is it that the only people who know about the bacterium are conveniently locked up or otherwise distracted, not for a few days, but for years- think about it, *years* Frank. Yet when the scavenging teams finally reach that sector, only a few months ago, the only thing missing out of a very resource rich lab is that one strain? Not only that, but we happen to find out about the disease only weeks before the military is scheduled to start Cure sweeps of that area. How long has Dr. Pazzo sat on this information? Why did he only tell us now, right before his trial?"

"I'm sure he wanted to find people he could trust. What else could he possibly gain from waiting?"

"Maybe he was hoping to trade for leniency. Or maybe he just wants Dr. Schneider to get what he thinks she deserves. And now the trial will proceed without any prosecution of her, unless we find her, and fast. Or maybe, he's just making a desperate play for time and he thought saving it until the last minute would get you killed, causing a postponement until they could replace you." Nella saw something open up in Frank's face, like an idea flickering over his skin. She didn't like it. "It's a trap, Frank. I just don't know for sure who set it." She crossed her arms over her chest as if they were a shield.

"Maybe," he said, and curled his arms around her, "If it is, I'll have you to protect me."

"I was being serious."

"So was I. Even scavengers don't go into Infected areas alone, and they are trained for this. It would be foolish if either of us tried to."

They were quiet, standing in her tiny, sunny kitchen, wrapped in each other. She wished the day would stretch out, longer and longer, hold its breath. She wished they could freeze like a photograph because she couldn't see a brighter moment coming down the line. But Frank stepped back and let her go.

"I have to go get my opening statement notes," he said, "I need to make some changes before Monday."

"Are you coming back?" she asked, not certain what exactly she meant.

Frank looked surprised. “I’d like to, Nella, but I’ve a lot to finish by tomorrow. Maybe it’s better if I just pick you up in the morning,” he looked nervous as he picked up his bag, “will you be angry?”

Nella laughed and shook her head. He kissed her again in the doorway, the warm afternoon sliding down around them. “Next time I’m not sleeping on the couch,” he said smiling. She closed the door slowly behind him, still floating like a dust mote in the golden sun.

Court

Nella sat on the cold cement steps in her best suit. The gauze on her hand had been replaced by a single bandaid. She tried not to scratch it. She had spent the night rereading her notes on Robert Pazzo and Ann Connelly while trying not to worry about what would happen after court. She had a nervous headache and the raucous calls of returning birds made it worse. After the human population of the City had plummeted, the bird population exploded. They filled the silent world almost the same way that television and radio had filled it before. Nella tried to block it out, but it occasionally poked through, drowning her thoughts in competing songs. She was too restless to wait for Frank inside and too nervous to contemplate being late. She jumped up as his car rounded the corner and pulled up in front of the building. He got out, not realizing she was already waiting for him. His suit was perfect and Nella wondered for a moment how he managed to find it, as gaunt and tall as he was. But then he was next to her, his face cheerful and relaxed. How did she ever think he was ugly? Perhaps it wasn't his face, but the covering of guilt he threw over himself every time he was self conscious that did it. The thought flitted through her brain so quickly she only understood a part of it.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"Yes, let's go," she picked up the heavy hiking pack next to her, trying not to wrinkle her jacket. She was surprised that he didn't say anything about it, but just opened the large trunk for her. Then she saw a similar pack already lying on one side.

"Frank," she said turning toward him, "You can't—"

He pulled the pack gently from her shoulder and laid it in the trunk and looked at her. "It'll be alright," was all that he said and then closed the trunk and walked back toward the driver's seat.

"Are you nervous?" he asked in a bright tone.

"Aren't you?" She slid into the passenger side and smoothed her suit so that her fingers wouldn't tap and dance along her knee.

"Yes, but I'm ready for this whole thing to move forward."

They rode the few minutes to the courthouse in comfortable silence. Nella was relieved to see her car already in the lot next to Sevita's camera van. It meant both Christine and Sevita were already there. She brushed her skirt down as she stood next to Frank's car and straightened her cuffs.

"You look fine," Frank said without her asking. He curled one hand around hers and she looked up at him. "It's going to be alright Nella, just trust me." Then he let her go and they walked separately toward the courthouse steps as if they didn't know one another.

Nella drew a quick whistling breath through her teeth when she saw the number

of people in the auditorium. They had expected many spectators, converting an old concert hall into a courtroom, but Nella wondered who was left outside, making what was left of the world run. Not only was every seat filled, but people were packed into the aisles as well. *If someone really wanted to*, she thought, *they could take out the rest of humanity right now. With, say, another bacteria.* She felt her heart thud as if it were being dropped down a flight of stairs. She scanned the hall as well as she could, not even knowing what she was looking for. Eventually the bailiff, a cranky looking older woman, came to find her.

“Are you Dr. Rider?” the bailiff asked.

“Yes, I'm sorry, were you looking for me?”

“I've got a seat set aside for you away from the mob up here. It will make it easier when you need to testify. Follow me.”

Nella followed the willowy woman who knifed her way through the crowd. Nella struggled to squeeze through gently. She was pleased to see that she was close to Sevita and only a little way in front of Christine and the large black cameras. It made her less nervous to know that her friends were nearby. *If something is going to happen*, the bitter part of her brain added, *at least we'll all go together*. Nella tried to shut the thought out, looking for Frank at the defense table below her. She could see Mr. Grant looking sleek and wearing a self-satisfied smile. She wished Frank didn't have to sit next to him. Ann was already sitting next to Grant, obviously unsedated, but Wells and Johnson were both behind her and they kept her from harming herself and seemed to be consoling her. Dr. Pazzo was crouching in his seat, a grim gargoyle surveying everything around him. Nella felt the skin on her neck prickle again and she looked quickly away from him. Frank's seat was empty. He wasn't near the Judges' bench either. Nella looked over toward the prosecution. A few aides were sitting there, already taking notes on nothing. But Ms. Jacobsen, the lead prosecutor, was nowhere to be seen. Nella leaned over toward Sevita.

“Has the prosecutor arrived yet?” she whispered.

“Yes, everyone is here.”

“Where are they?”

Sevita shrugged, “It looked like Frank and Ms. Jacobsen were taken to the judges' chambers before you sat down.”

“Why not Mr. Grant?”

Sevita shook her head. “I've no idea. No one has made any announcements.”

Frustrated and anxious Nella sat back in her seat. She started to scan the court again fretfully, but then she zeroed in on Pazzo. For some reason her gut told her he knew more about what had happened, what might happen, than anyone else in the court did. She paid attention to who he looked at, his expressions, even his

reactions to Ann and Mr. Grant beside him. The crowd was a wave of warmth behind her. It was so foreign to hear so many voices at once that Nella had a hard time concentrating. She followed threads of talk until they disappeared into the tangle of noise again and then she'd refocus on Pazzo and the empty chair beside him.

At last there was a snowy pop as the microphones were switched on and the crowd sat down immediately. They leaned forward, craning and silent, a flock of starving birds hovering over the killing floor. Nella felt mildly sick. Judge Hawkins, the head justice, walked up to the central microphone. "I would like to request that Dr. Rider and Ms. Das come to the judges' chambers please," he said without sitting down. He held up his hands as the crowd rustled and sighed in a great wave. "Folks, we'll be starting as soon as possible." Judge Hawkins turned around and left the court room, his robe trailing rumour and panic behind him. Nella got up and shot Sevita a nervous glance. Sevita just shrugged. They followed the slim, cranky bailiff back into the hallway and down the stairs to the auditorium basement. She rapped briskly on a wooden door and then opened it for Nella and Sevita. Ms. Jacobsen was arguing loudly with one of the other justices as the door opened.

"-don't even know if it's true. This is just another ploy by Mr. Courtlen or his client to delay this trial-"

"Ms. Jacobsen," interrupted Judge Hawkins, "that's hardly fair. Mr. Courtlen has not asked for any postponements before now, unlike yourself and Mr. Grant," he held up his hand to stop Ms. Jacobsen's interruption, "Not that I'm ready to grant it. Ah, Dr. Rider, Ms. Das, I understand you may be able to help us verify Mr. Courtlen's story."

Sevita tried to catch Nella's eye, but Nella was too shocked to pay attention.

"Your Honor," she stuttered, "I'm not sure what you mean."

"Dr. Rider," Judge Hawkins replied, "I understand you and Mr. Courtlen very recently uncovered the possible existence of a more powerful strain of the Plague, but are still trying to discover its whereabouts."

Nella stared at Frank, who didn't look toward her. She didn't dare deny it. "We agreed that in the interest of keeping all of us safe, that we would keep it secret. We can't risk it falling into the wrong hands if it hasn't already."

The other justices and Ms. Jacobsen gasped as Nella spoke. Judge Hawkins alone, did not seem shocked. "I know, Dr. Rider, and I agree with you. Which is why the people in this room are the only ones who will hear of it until the threat is contained. Is that understood?" He looked at each of the others.

"But surely the military should be notified," said Ms. Jacobsen.

"Believe me," Sevita said, "We've discussed that at length. I'd give my left arm

to take that route rather than what Nel- Dr. Rider has planned. But if we notify the military it will have to go through several people before any action at all is taken, and every person it goes through is a potential leak to the outside world. Someone out there knows where this thing is. The only hope we have of stopping it is making sure whoever has it doesn't realize that we know about it.” Ms. Jacobsen crossed her arms. “So far, I've heard no evidence that this bacteria is anything more than a stalling attempt by Dr. Pazzo.”

“Ah,” said Frank, “I think Ms. Das and I can help with that.” He pulled a video disc from his briefcase and Sevita rummaged around in her camera back and brought out another.

Frank tapped his disc on his open palm. “Your Honors,” he said, “the disc in my hand contains evidence pertinent to the trial. In the interest of safety I am turning it over now, but I trust you will view it without prejudice and allow me to properly introduce and screen it in court when the time comes. The disc Sevita has contains an interview with Dr. Carton- one that you may find shocking that also pertains to Dr. Schneider's trial when and if she is ever found.”

The justices turned to one another and talked in hushed voices. While they waited, Ms Jacobsen walked over to Nella and Sevita. “Look,” she said in a low voice, “I like Frank, but if I were him I would do everything I could to delay the trial too. But you have no vested interest in either defendant, correct?”

Nella shook her head. “No, we were both appointed because we were meant to be neutral parties.”

“Then if you tell me this super bacteria is out there, I'll withdraw my objection to postponement,” she looked distraught, “look, I'm begging you to tell me this is just a ploy. I've got kids- everything is just getting put back together.”

Nella placed a warm hand on the prosecutor's shoulder. “I'm sorry,” she said, “I wish I could say it wasn't true, but everything seems to verify that this bacteria is not only real, but is also missing from where it's supposed to be. We have to find it. Or find Dr. Schneider. Or both.”

Ms. Jacobsen nodded, visibly paling. She stepped back and cleared her throat. “Your honors,” she said, interrupting their discussion, “I withdraw my objection. You don't need to rule on watching the videos, they can be shown in their proper place.”

Judge Hawkins looked surprised. “Very well,” he said, “all that's left is to decide what should be done and how long to keep the world in the dark about it.”

“We have a plan for that,” Frank said quickly, before Nella could speak up. “The best place to start is by looking for Dr. Schneider.”

“We've been looking for her for years,” Ms. Jacobsen said.

“I know, but Dr. Carton gave us new information. We think she is headed back to

his old laboratory to destroy the sample. But someone else got there first and the sample is gone. Dr. Schneider is the only one who knows if someone else could have discovered what it was or wanted to use it. We have to find her to find the sample.”

Nella watched one of the justices sink down into a chair as if he were suddenly twenty years older. The others looked just as grim.

“Since myself, Dr. Rider and Ms. Das were the only people to know about it, we had planned on going after her ourselves. But we can't be here and there at the same time.”

“What about Dr. Carton?” Judge Hawkins asked, “You said he was the one who told you about Dr. Schneider. What if he warns her? Someone has to watch him while you are gone.” He turned to Sevita. “Mr. Courtlen said it was your surveillance of his house that got you an interview. Could you do it again without being seen?”

“Sure,” said Sevita, “but not by myself. While we were there we found an underground entrance that Dr. Schneider has been using to pass in and out of the house unnoticed.”

“I've suddenly found myself with some free time,” Ms. Jacobsen said dryly, “I can help you watch the other entrance.”

“The only other people to know are the defendants, correct?” asked Judge Hawkins.

“As far as we know,” Frank replied.

“Then the other judges and I are probably the best people to keep an eye on them. We'll make an extensive inspection of the prison in order to make sure they are being treated as they ought and we'll keep our ears open,” Judge Hawkins sighed and shook his head, “If this were a decade ago I'd have to arrest all three of you for withholding evidence and then call in the CDC. But I guess things change. I don't like it. Especially sending two people alone into a heavily Infected zone. But I don't see any real alternative without causing a panic, does anyone else?”

The other justices shook their heads.

“Then I guess we are agreed. I'm going to allow a postponement. I want you to leave those videos with the bailiff to keep. If either of you is not back in ten days, I'm going to use them to find out where you've gone and I'll be sending in the military. Please get back here by then whether or not you've found anything. I'm going to tell the court that this recess is due to illness.” He turned toward one of the older judges, “Richard, will you stay here and be our flu victim?” The older judge nodded and remained in his chair looking drained.

Judge Hawkins looked sternly around at each of them. “I hardly need to tell you

all that this is secret. If anyone breathes a word of it before Mr. Courtlen and Dr. Rider get back- well, the panic you create will be worse than anything that I can do to you, but I *will* throw the book at you as hard as I can.” He straightened his collar, “Okay then, let's go.”

Nella and Sevita walked back to their seats, pressing themselves through the roar of the impatient mob. Frank and Ms. Jacobsen walked back to their seats. Ms. Jacobsen looked a little pale, but nothing else was visibly different. Frank didn't look at Dr. Pazzo and his face was impassive and quiet. Nella watched Dr. Pazzo almost exclusively. The crowd went silent and stood as two of the three judges walked to the bench. There was a traveling rustle as everyone sat again. Judge Hawkins tilted the microphone. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, “This court is in recess for one week as Judge Crag has taken seriously ill. We will reconvene after he is well. Thank you.” The judges got up and walked out of the courtroom as the crowd exhaled in a deep, expanding rumble. Nella saw the slow grin she had been waiting for unfold on Dr. Pazzo's face. Her throat clenched with sudden fear. Frank didn't look at his client or Mr. Grant. He just packed his case files and turned to glance up at her. Nella rose from her seat as his gaze hit her, and they both left the courtroom through opposite doors.

Nella found Christine on the edge of the sluggish clot of people in the auditorium lobby. She pulled her friend past Sevita, who was pretending to interrogate Frank for her camera and the crowd. Nella walked with her hand in the crook of Christine's elbow until they got to the relative quiet of her car.

“I know Sevita has told you,” said Nella, and she pressed a key into Christine's hand, “You already have the car key and the apartment key. I want you to use them if you need them. If we don't come back, or if something else gets back before us, this is the key to the gun chest in the bedroom closet. Chris, if it starts again, don't hesitate. It's not going to get cured next time. They're not going to come back anymore.”

Christine's hand closed around the key. “What about you?” she asked, “Won't you need them?”

Nella shook her head. “I've got Cure darts for getting there. I don't want to hurt someone who can be helped. I'll take a pistol, just in case, but if this thing is loose- well, I'd rather not see what happens if it's too late. If you hear *anything*, if Sevita starts talking about hearing rumors or the scavenging teams come back with weird stories- anything like that Chris, find somewhere airtight and hole up as best you can for as long as you can.”

Christine hugged her tightly. “Good luck, Nella.”

Nella gently patted Christine's stomach. “See you soon baby. Be safe Chris, and make Sevita be safe too,” she said and walked over to Frank's car. He was

already waiting for her. She wished she could say goodbye to Sevita, but the crowd was still thick around her and her camera crew.

“Ready?” asked Frank.

“Let’s go,” she said grimly and slid into the car.

The Road to the Infected Zone

Frank started the car and glanced at her as he pulled out of the auditorium lot. “Don’t be angry. You said yourself that we didn’t have time to wait until a break in the trial. And you couldn’t have gone alone. Not just because of us. We have to find and destroy that bacteria. If you disappeared how would anyone have known if it were still loose out there somewhere? This was the only way.”

“You could have been fired. Or jailed.”

“We all could have, but what else could I do?”

Nella sighed. “I’m not upset. Just worried.” She looked out the window as they turned onto the desolate highway. It was like the blank page at the end of a book. Empty, with nowhere left worth going. “We aren’t going to be able to take the car past the Barrier,” she said to break through the overwhelming feeling of loneliness.

“I know, but I don’t want to leave it at the house. If I do, neighbors will start asking questions about why I’m always home.”

“Your neighbors care whether you are home or not?”

Frank looked confused. “Well, I don’t know if they necessarily *care*, I hope they do, in a good way. But they’d definitely gossip. Wouldn’t yours?”

Nella shrugged. “I don’t know,” she said, “I’ve never even met mine. Anyway, what’s your plan?”

“We’re going to the wrecking yard where they dumped all the abandoned vehicles. I have a friend that works there pulling parts and siphoning gas. He’ll watch it for me without asking why. It’s only a few miles to the Barrier. But I don’t know how we’re going to get through without attracting attention.”

“I have my old medical badge. I was planning on telling the gate guards that I was due to rendezvous with the last Cure team but got delayed. I wasn’t expecting you to be with me though. I think we’ll be okay if we talk and move fast. They’re trying to keep Infected out after all, not keep anyone in.”

Frank shook his head. “That might have been true a few days ago, but you and I have had our faces broadcast all over the news by now. Most of the population may have been in the auditorium, but I guarantee anyone who wasn’t able to be there is watching it live. Even in the guardhouse. I’m not worried

about being stopped, I'm worried about being noticed.”

“There's the smuggler's entrance,” Nella said hesitantly.

They turned off the highway and onto a pitted gray road. The tar looked like dirty ice pack slowly evaporating from the dust underneath. “What's the smuggler's entrance?” Frank asked.

“It's where the scavenger teams dump extra things that were special requests. You know, booze, contraceptives, that sort of thing.”

“You mean anything the DHRS has deemed illegal. You're lucky I'm a public defender Nella.”

“Hey, I didn't say I'd ever used them. I just know where the entrance is. Christine told me a while ago.”

The car stumbled to a stop in front of a wide metal gate. Frank rolled the window down and pressed a buzzer. “How does Christine know where it is? No, nevermind. Why did she tell you where it was?” He gave her a wicked look.

Nella laughed. “It was nothing bad. I needed a sedative for a patient who was having very bad nightmares. I could have requisitioned some from the military stockpile, but those are becoming scarce and were more powerful than my patient needed. So I asked Christine to find out if there were any over the counter sleeping pills available from the scavenging teams. She said they'd been forbidden in case of suicide or accidental overdose. But she said if this man really needed some that I should go to the smuggler's entrance and talk to her friend. The time I went, it was completely unguarded. No one knows where it is except the people that are supposed to know, and things move out of there so quickly that they don't even bother trying to defend it. And even if someone is there this time, they aren't going to want to blab about seeing us.”

A little man covered in sweat and grease walked up to the gate and started opening it. He grinned when he saw Frank.

The car rolled slowly through the blinding glitter of glass and chrome that lay snarled around them. The little man who had opened the gate jogged beside them. “Pull it around the shed Frank, I've got a tarp you can use.”

Frank waved a slender hand at him to show he understood. They rolled past a rusting corrugated metal shack with dusty windows. The only part of the wrecking yard that wasn't littered with shattered glass or twisted strands of rubber was the green patch of grass behind the shack. Frank carefully parked the car on it and got out, followed by Nella.

The sun was unbearably bright, reflected like empty mirrors from the broken metal around them, but it was still cold and distant and the grass still crunched softly under Nella's feet from the frost. She pulled their packs from the trunk as Frank talked to his friend. She wished they'd had a chance to change at

the courthouse. At least she could ditch her heels. She left them in the trunk and pulled on her heavy boots. She wanted to rummage around and find her warm clothes but she didn't want to draw more suspicion than they were already risking. They'd have to wait until they found somewhere that had been left empty. She patted the side pocket and felt the reassuring shape of the dart gun without opening the pocket.

Frank's friend was eyeing the large packs as Frank handed him the keys. "Where'd you say you were going Frank?" he asked.

"This is Dr. Rider. She's taking me out with her to the Cure team while the court is in recess. I wanted to get in contact with a witness on the team and she knew where they were. Unfortunately, as you know, no cars outside the barrier. So we're walking."

The little man's face rippled into a gap-toothed smile. "Oh, well hey, it's kind of cold, you guys have jackets?"

"Sure do Jim, thanks for asking. Just watch after my car for me until we get back, will you? Don't strip it for parts or put sugar in the tank."

Jim laughed, "No problem Frank, it'll be here and in good order when you get back. I'll see you next week." Jim waved and walked back around the corner into the piles of wreckage. Frank picked up his pack.

"Sorry," he said, "I don't like to lie to a friend, but I thought it was the easiest way."

Nella nodded, heaving the pack onto her shoulders. They headed casually toward the metal gate which still stood open. The road split and stuttered into gravel as they walked toward the Barrier. The land around them had been scraped and flattened by the Barrier in great arcs as it pushed outward, farther and farther retaking the Infected zones. Left behind were artificial plains that were slowly clothing themselves in short grasses and brush. Unlike the City, where it was easy to find shelter and food among the few humans that remained, the birds here did not flock in great numbers. The early spring wind blew without stopping, chilling Nella's legs and pinching her eyes. She looked back toward the wrecking yard almost regretfully. The empty plain that already stretched between her and the big metal gate made the glittering junk yard seem like a far away reflection of water, a mirage, a memory of humanity in the great barren world. Nella sighed and turned back toward the road. Frank walked ahead of her, seeming to glide on his long legs above the dirt and wind. She struggled to keep up.

Frank turned to check on her and waited when he saw her lagging behind. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Sure, just cold. Aren't you? Your head must be freezing." She pulled the

pack down and searched through it, finding her wool hat. She handed it to him. He looked a little awkward in a suit and tie with an old winter hat, but she stopped shivering when she looked at him.

“Thanks,” he said, “We’re going to have to find somewhere to change into warmer clothes or we’re going to freeze.”

“When we turn north to get to the smuggler’s entrance I’ll be able to find some old shacks where the first camps were. I think the medical huts for the doctors were left behind. It shouldn’t be much farther.”

Frank matched her pace and walked beside her, blocking the gusts of wind that rolled across the road like massive waves. Nella was instantly warmer. She slipped a cool hand into his as they walked. It was only half an hour until they caught sight of the Barrier.

“It’s gotten much farther out than I thought,” said Nella, “we should turn here so we aren’t seen by the guards. We can get closer to the Barrier after we turn north, away from the gate.”

They left the road and cut across the rocky scrub. The world was gray, as if the wind had swallowed it up. The sky was colorless metal with a hole cut into it for the sun to poke through with a cold glow. The grass and brush were dead and silver, rustling and twisting and spitting themselves in pieces into Nella’s face. The Barrier was a looming black mountain on her right side and there was only bare pale dirt in its shadow. Nella was glad that the snow was gone. As it was, her eyes started to muddle the earth and sky after only a short time and she looked for anything that would provide a break in the horizon. She pulled them closer and closer to the Barrier, hoping it would provide some sort of windbreak, but it was facing the wrong direction. Even Frank was becoming tired, holding his arm across his face to protect himself from the wind and slowing his pace even below hers.

Nella felt a soft bang as something smacked into her shin. She leaned down and picked it up. It was a bandage wrapper. She looked up. Off in the distance was an uneven smudge of darkness holding still against the wind.

“Everything okay?” Frank asked.

“Yeah, I just found a piece of trash from the camp, we must be getting close. I think it’s that black line over there,” she pointed.

“Good,” he said, “This is rough. I can’t imagine how cold your legs must be.”

“I should have changed in the car. I wasn’t thinking, I was too startled at the change of plans.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be, I’m not.” She smiled at him and he grinned back. They trudged

on toward the camp, too cold and uncomfortable to stand still and talk.

Scars

The debris from the camp grew as they walked. Farthest out were just a few fluttering scraps of paper caught in the brush by the wind. As they approached the perimeter of where the tents had been, the trash became heavier. Plastic bottles gleamed and flashed as they rolled ceaselessly in the wind. Nella squinted against the added light. A few broken cot springs and lost gurney wheels were piled against the corner of the abandoned medical hut. Nella shoved them aside as she pulled on the flimsy plywood door.

It was dark and still inside except for an occasional stray gust that made it through the gaps in the door frame. Nella sighed with relief and pushed further in to make room for Frank. She pulled her pack down and felt around for the battery powered lantern. It had been an expensive trade but she'd never regretted it. The doctor in her occasionally tried to force her to conquer the basic fear of the dark, but after what she'd seen during the Plague, she doubted if she would ever be able to walk into a dark place without a bristling pang of adrenaline rippling up her back.

The lantern lit up the small hut completely. It was empty except for a jumble of cots in the corner.

"Didn't anyone clean these sites up before they moved on?" Frank asked.

Nella struggled to pull a cot free of the tangled mess. She dropped her pack onto the cot and began hunting for warmer clothes. "This was one of the first camps I think. As soon as we knew the Cure worked, there was a mad frenzy to push outward and retake areas as quickly as possible. We were routinely given a day to pack after the patients had recovered. The Barrier was moved outward on that day, and then we hiked to the next site," she said as he dropped his pack beside hers. She shrugged. "I *did* always think someone came behind us to break everything down that was left. I guess I was wrong."

Frank took off his suit coat and began unbuttoning his shirt with one hand while the other searched his open pack. Nella turned toward her own pile of clothes with a blush. She pulled off her boots and jacket, trying to think of a way to change without him looking at her.

"Is it far from here to the smuggler's entrance?" he asked, startling her.

"No—" she said and turned around. She sucked in a shocked breath. He was half turned away from her and small shattered moons glowed dark against his skin. She had felt the edges of the rough craters in his skin before and had seen them briefly from across a room, but the livid twists of purple along his arm

were different, more real this close.

"What?" he asked, turning his head to see why she had stopped. His face blanched and he smiled, embarrassed as she reached out and touched one of the scars gently, as if it would burst open. "I know, it's not attractive. But you should have seen them when they were new," he turned to face her and rubbed one of the broken crescents stamped into his arm. "They were far, far worse. Trust me. It's taken years for them to fade this much."

She stepped in closer to him, tracing the edge of the teethmarks with a feather light finger. The arch was so small. She could see that the boy must have twisted his head at the last second, trying to take the flesh with him because the scar was pulled and stretched, elongated.

"I can't imagine how much that must have hurt," she said. She looked up at his face. "Sorry," she said suddenly, "I didn't mean to make you self conscious. I just didn't realize he'd bit you so many times and that hard."

She moved her hand from the curved punctures on his long arm to the shattered starburst on his shoulder. He was still, as if he didn't want to frighten her. But she felt a ripple start deep under his skin as her fingertips slid over his shoulder. She felt the pattern of his breath change, like wave racing in front of a storm.

He had been beautiful once, she could guess that. He carried himself differently when he was around her, as if he had forgotten his ugliness. As if it were a mask he could simply slip out of. As if he were falling back to an older self.

Nella had stopped thinking of him as ugly, but if she were honest, she knew he was not beautiful. It wasn't the scars, not really. It was the mark that severe *want* had left on him, in him. He was still so thin, even six years after surviving starvation. She could see the twisting cable of muscle in his arms too clearly. With no fat to soften them, it was as if his skin were peeled back and all the secret life within him exposed upon the air. Each bone in his chest was a cathedral arch pushing painfully through a thin canvas of flesh. Almost without realizing it, she kissed the jutting ridge of rib, half in sorrow, half in longing.

She felt his hands shake as they closed around her waist. Hunger wasn't the only want he'd held for too long. He baked under her hands, a frustrated flame consuming itself even in the chilled early spring air. The way he spoke- or didn't speak to people who abused him, as if he were no longer their equal because he was not one of them, because he had lost- something. Nella's eyes blurred as she thought of all the somethings, all the beautiful somethings, the world had lost, and she closed her eyes so he wouldn't see.

"Nella," he said, his voice thick and rough. He pulled her slowly into him.

She could feel his heart under her palm. Every beat was thunderous with *yearning*. If she could just take away some of the *want*, fill it for a little while, maybe he would get some of himself back. She slid her hands around the back of his neck and felt a sigh travel from his chest to his throat and then warm in her ear as she pressed against him. She kissed the jagged scar on his cheek with soft lips.

The tight control he had maintained over himself for so long was gone. He turned his head and caught her mouth with his. For a second, he kissed her with so much force that she would have fallen backward if he had not been holding her so tightly.

But she sank into him, like water over dry earth, melted and curved around him and he quickly grew gentle again. He still held her with one arm. He tried to unbutton her blouse with the other hand, but he was shaking so badly that he only managed the top two before she took pity on them both and began to help.

Frank untucked the bottom of her shirt and slipped his large hand underneath the fabric, kissing the base of her throat as his fingers glided over the skin of her stomach and rested between her breasts. A ripple of joy started beneath his warm hand and spread like an echo bouncing over her skin. She became frantic to undo the last buttons as he pressed into her mouth again and his hand slid over her breast. She shrugged the shirt off at last and gasped as the cold air hit her back. She reached between them and unzipped her skirt. It fell onto the dirt floor with a soft puff of air.

He lifted her from the floor, both of his long arms wrapped around her. She locked her legs around his hips. Frank's breath was warm and wet through the thin silk of her bra and again on the overcharged skin of her stomach.

A small explosion bloomed in the center of her chest and spread outward. "Oh God," she whispered.

Frank stopped for a moment. He lifted his face to look at her. His breath was rapid and thin, as if he were drowning in her. He reached behind her with one hand and she tensed, waiting for the crash of the hiking packs being shoved from the cot. But it didn't happen. He pulled his arm back and began wrapping her shoulders in the warm fabric of her sweater.

"It's too cold Nella," he said softly. He relaxed his hold on her and gently let her stand on the ground. He traced her jaw line and her lips with his thumb and bent his head so that their foreheads touched. She could feel the pull of their breath between them, a whirlpool of warm air sucking her towards him more and more. His heart thudded against her hand, a rapid chant of "I want, I want, I want."

Frank let a ragged sigh wobble its way out of him before he lifted his head.

He let his fingers trail down her neck and over her breast before dropping way from her. “I’ve never wanted anything so badly in all my life,” he said quietly, “Not even Sarah. But not here, not in this place.” She looked up and was surprised to see his eyes were red. He smiled nervously. “Besides,” he said, “it’s too cold, we’ll freeze to death.”

Nella warmed his wind-chapped face with her hands. “We have a long way to go, and not much time,” she said, “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have- shouldn’t have interrupted our preparations.”

She let him go and pulled the sweater over her shoulders. Frank slowly buttoned the front, his fingers briefly traveling up her center like tiny solar flares as he pulled the fabric closed between them. He kissed the corner of her jaw and whispered into her ear, “If you knew how much I’ve wanted to touch you since I shook your hand the first time we met, you wouldn’t apologize.”

Then he drew away and turned back to finish dressing. Nella drew on her jeans and tried not to feel as if she’d trampled something.

Beyond the Barrier

The shadow of the Barrier was creeping long and seeping into the plain when they reached the little break that made the smuggler’s entrance. The Barrier had stopped there a few years before as the City’s manpower reached its limits. There were simply no more people to guard the Barrier so it stopped expanding. Cure teams and scavenging missions still extended beyond the Barrier, but as fewer and fewer Infected were found and old resources grew ever more scarce, it looked as if the Barrier was now a permanent fixture instead of a mobile one. Someone had utilized a small gap between sections of the hollow cement wall that made up the Barrier and widened it into a tunnel with a rickety, squealing metal door at either end.

After checking the area to make sure that they weren’t watched, Frank opened the door, wincing at the sound of metal scraping against concrete.

“Wait,” said Nella, putting a hand on the door, “Have you been outside since the Cure?”

“Not since I walked to the City.”

She put her pack down and knelt beside it, opening the side pockets. She pulled out a dart gun and the box of Cure darts Dr. Carton had given her. She silently loaded it. She hesitated for a moment and then drew out a pistol from the other side pocket. Frank crouched beside her.

“Nella, I don’t think I can. No matter how bad it is out there.”

“I know you think that, but until you see you aren’t going to know what

you're capable of."

She handed him the dart gun. "This has a long lasting sedative in it along with the Cure. But it won't be instantaneous. If an Infected person is chasing you- us, we will have to outrun it long enough for it to take effect. That's a long time Frank. The best thing to do is dart them from a hiding place." Nella passed him the box of darts. "You need to know that this isn't an easy out," she met his eyes and held them, "This is a slow release sedative. It takes the average person a few days to recover. When we did this before, we hooked people up to IVs to keep them hydrated and fed while the Cure worked. You and I don't have that. Administering the Cure on people that are malnourished or dehydrated may kill them before they wake up again. In addition, the sedative is dosed for a normal adult. Smaller people and children may die from the sedative if we dart them. Larger people may not be sedated enough and it will still take three days for their brain activity to return to normal as the antibiotic works. Not that I expect anyone is overweight anymore," Nella sighed, "That's not even mentioning the psychological danger of darting someone and leaving them behind without explanation if they do wake up. But time is a luxury we don't have. The best we can do is hope that we'll return the same way and get back to them before they wake up." She ran a hand through her hair and looked up at him. "Do you understand?"

Frank's hand closed over the box of darts. "I understand," he said, "and if it were me in their position again, I'd want to take the chance of dying from the Cure than spend another day as a monster."

Nella nodded. She began loading the pistol with bullets. "Why do we need *that* one?" Frank asked. She didn't look up.

"The Infected aren't the monsters out there Frank. The Immunes are." She strapped an empty holster around her waist and handed Frank a larger one for the dart gun. Shoving the pistol into its holder and closing her pack, she stood up.

"I'm not trying to scare you Frank," she said, her voice softening, "We'll probably not see a soul for miles. The military has done a good job of clearing out both the Infected and the Looters for a long way. If scavenger teams have already been to the lab, it must be safe pretty much for the whole way. I just want to be ready, in case." *And I don't want to be raped and killed in a Looter's camp while you watch or are shot for the fun of it*, she thought, but held her tongue. He looked nervous, the lines around his mouth drawing closer. She wanted to kiss them away, but she touched his hand instead. "It's going to be all right you know," she said and he smiled.

"Yeah, of course," he said. She wasn't so sure he wasn't thinking the same thing she had been. He opened the metal door again and they ducked inside the

dimly lit tunnel. There was no one inside, though an electric bulb sat in the middle of the ten foot space. Each side of the tunnel had been made into storage for contraband inside the hollow Barrier wall. Frank was surprised that they had left it unguarded. But then, who was crazy enough to steal from scavengers or to come all the way out here? Nella pushed open the far door slowly, peeking out to make sure no one was around. A small shack nearby bustled with people and its lights were beginning to burn brightly in the dusk. The scavengers were having a party and everyone seemed too drunk to pay much attention to the tunnel. Nella waited a few seconds until a small knot of people on the porch headed into the warm building and then she and Frank slipped out and down the dirt road.

It was as if they had stepped into another world. Trees clustered close to the Barrier, cleared only far enough away that no one would be able to climb over. There were trees in the City, of course, even parks that had been allowed to turn wild, but those trees were smaller, still marked by their years growing under human rules. These were already large when the Plague hit and eight years had seen them grow still larger. Their dead had fallen and were half buried in bracken and dead leaves, undisturbed, erasing the road, rotting or burning as they would, unchecked. It had been a long time, even for Nella, since she had been outside the Barrier and she nervously wondered what had happened to the packs of feral dogs and cats that had wandered behind the Infected, scavenging. Nothing bunched here, not like in the City. What humans were crazy enough to live out here stayed separate and spread out for the most part, not cooperating or even meeting very often. The birds didn't congregate like they did near Nella's apartment because there were no easy pickings here. Even sound seemed spread out, thin and fragile. She suddenly felt small and alone. She looked back for Frank. He crept up next to her, soundless and quick as if he'd been doing this for years. He slipped his hand around her shoulder and squeezed it gently without saying anything. She felt better and they kept walking.

Though the wind had died down rather than battle its way through the thick trees, it was still too cold for them to risk sleeping outside and the dark was quickly swelling around them, welling up from the shadows of the trees, choking the light out of the dirt path. She kept hold of his hand. She told herself it was so they wouldn't lose each other, but she knew it was her fear of the dark. For a while she was in agony, both longing to light the lantern so that nothing could creep up on them and terrified to finally see what may be hiding in the dark. If they could just find the main road before night swallowed up her sight completely.

Frank stumbled over something beside her. "I can't see anything. Do you know where we're going?" he asked, rubbing his ankle, a slim ghost of gray and

black beside her.

"I'm trying to get back to the road. But if we use the lantern something-someone, I mean, might see us."

"At least we could see them coming if someone was trying to hurt us," he said, echoing her own thoughts, "I don't think we have a choice. If we get lost out here we'll die of exposure. We have to find some sort of shelter and I don't think we'll find it in these woods."

Nella pulled the lantern out of her bag, silently relieved that he had insisted on it. She stood up to light it, but an overhanging branch snagged the end of her hair. She jumped, dropping the lantern in her surprise. Frank caught it before it could smash onto the road. He turned it on and the pale light shot up, leaping over his face. It highlighted his thin, shell-like skin and the sharp edges of his eyesockets and nose. For an instant Nella saw only a spindly, hungering creature that was all claw and tooth, something wholly inhuman.

"What's wrong?" he asked, quickly standing. He was himself again, solid and kind and *with* her, even in the dark at the end of the world.

She laughed at herself. "Nothing, just nervous I think." She picked up her pack and felt its weight dragging at her. "I just want this day to be over," she said and struggled not to burst into tears.

"I know what you mean," said Frank. He held up the lantern and said, "Look, I think that's the road."

The moon was starting to rise by the time they reached the street, a still gray vein stretched tight across the silent world. Nella looked back toward the Barrier that was now miles behind them. A soft glow, like a lone coal buried in ash, rose from behind it, where all that was left of civilization waited to be saved. She turned back toward her destination. "No lights," she said softly, "No fires or headlights, street lamps or porch lights to call us home." She felt a hot tear slip past her and down her chilled skin.

Frank turned off the lantern and set it and his pack onto the cold tar. He turned her toward him and drew her into him. She closed her eyes and smelled the crisp fresh linen smell of him, let the heat of him sink through her stiff clothes and seep into her skin.

"Look," he whispered and stretched a long hand up toward the sky. She tilted her face up. "Look at all those lights. They'll never turn off or run down. They'll never stop calling us home."

She wiped her face, but felt great tears building behind her eyes again. She was exhausted. Frank let her go, sliding hesitantly away from her. He lifted his pack and turned on the lantern.

"Come on," he said with a small smile, "it's too cold to hang around here."

The Tire Pit

They passed by several dark houses without stopping, not wanting to be surprised by intruders while they slept in a strange place. Finally they settled on an empty gas station that fronted the road. Nella cautiously opened the glass door with a hand on her pistol. It was silent and nothing moved in the dull moonlight. She walked a few paces in and Frank followed, holding up the lantern. The store had been picked clean, even the empty shelves were all pushed against one wall. At least it wouldn't be a target for Looters.

"We're too exposed in front of this window. Anyone walking by would be able to see us and our equipment."

"There must be a stockroom," said Frank and moved toward the far wall. Nella turned back to the glass door. She flipped the small metal lock. It wouldn't really stop anyone, but at least they'd have to break a window to get in and Nella would have some warning.

The light disappeared for a moment and Nella turned around.

"Found it," Frank called.

She made her way over to him. The stock room was small, but empty. More important, it was windowless and relatively warm. She closed the door, shutting out the motionless, moonlit world. She dropped her pack with a sigh of relief. Frank grinned. He knelt on the floor and unrolled his sleeping bag and then hers. She sat down beside him and pried her boots off. The floor was hard but she didn't care. Frank lay back and stretched his long frame. Nella laughed as his fingers touched one wall of the small space and his toes the other.

"Not much room," she said. He folded his hands underneath his head and lay down looking at her.

"It is cozy. At least it will be warm."

Nella grabbed her pack and started searching its depths. After a few seconds she got fed up and dumped it into her lap.

"What are you doing?" Frank asked.

"Looking for the food. I'm starving, aren't you?" She dropped a wrapped package on his chest.

He sat up and opened it. "Yes, I forgot we hadn't eaten today. It seems to happen often. I just never feel as hungry as I did after waking up from the Cure."

Nella was stuffing a sweater in the door crack to keep in the heat. She heard him and stopped.

"Frank," she said, turning slowly around to face him, "do you mind if I ask

you something very personal? I wouldn't- but I have this hunch that it's really important. Not about you- about something else."

"Sure," he said, picking pieces of sandwich off of the wrapper.

"On second thought," she said, "I'll wait until you're finished."

He set aside the food. "Sorry, I wasn't trying to be rude."

"No, it's not that, you weren't. It's just, not a great topic to discuss over dinner. Although it did make me think of it."

Frank looked at her, bemused. "Okay," he said, picking up the sandwich again. They ate in the bright lantern light, their limbs quickly thawing in the warmth of the small room. Nella was quiet, concentrating. Frank repacked her bag.

"All set?" he asked, "I'm going to turn off the light to save the battery if you are ready."

"Yes, okay," she said, noting that he was still dressed. She felt depressed thinking she had made him self conscious. He switched off the lamp and she heard the soft rustle of him sliding into the sleeping bag next to her. She slipped out of her dusty clothes. She curled herself into her own blankets, trying not to bump into Frank in the dark.

"What did you want to ask me?" his voice floated beside her in a half yawn.

"Please don't get upset. I'm not asking out of curiosity."

"It's okay, you can ask me whatever you want."

"When you were- when you were sick, you said there was plenty of food around you in the bunker."

"Yes, there was enough for about a year for my wife and I. So about a year and a half for one person by the time I became sick."

"But you didn't eat it. I know one of the symptoms is pica- strange cravings, this time for- for human. But, you said you were starving by the time the Cure team found you right?"

"Yes, I'd lost over a hundred pounds. I don't think I would have survived much longer."

"Did you not realize you were surrounded by food after- after you ran out of immediate stuff? Or did you choose not to eat it?"

"I don't remember being aware of it at all. In fact I probably would have died of dehydration if the toilet bowl hadn't kept filling, but there were gallons and gallons of water around me. Where is all this going Nella?"

"One more question, I'm sorry. If someone had somehow opened the package of food for you and given it to you would you have eaten it?"

Frank was silent for a moment. "I think so. It was like I was smelling

things. And people- my wife, smelled good. And the food didn't smell like anything because it was wrapped up I think."

Nella raised herself on one hand toward his voice. "Remember the video Dr. Pazzo made of his preparations before locking himself in? He made a point of showing the food distribution thing he rigged up for each room."

"I remember."

"So, do you think that food and water was sent down loose like in a pig trough or neatly wrapped like a vending machine?"

"It would have to be wrapped, it wouldn't have slid all the way through the tubes otherwise. It would have caught and clogged-" Frank sat up and reached for her abruptly. She could feel the tension in his hand as it closed around her arm, like a wire suddenly cut loose or frayed free. "How did Robert and Ann survive for almost two years with nothing to eat or drink?"

Nella felt the hair on her arms rise as she heard him say it. "That's where this was going," she said.

"Someone must have been feeding them, but who? Dr. Schneider?"

"I don't know. We'll have to wait to ask her. But I doubt it. She was supposed to be with Dr. Carton for most of that time. How would she be able to travel repeatedly through the Infected zones to feed them and then return to Dr. Carton?"

"I don't like this." He let her arm go and fell back in the dark.

"Me either. Sorry, I didn't mean to worry you. I wasn't sure who else I could ask that kind of question though."

"I guess it won't do anyone any good to worry about it much until we find Dr. Schneider," he said, a yawn overtaking his last words, "I'll try to stay awake if you want to talk about it though."

"No," she said, "I'm exhausted. I only wanted to ask so I wouldn't forget to do it again." She was asleep almost as soon as she stopped speaking. She woke up a few hours later because Frank was shaking beside her. She turned on the lantern and saw he was shivering in his sleep. She didn't know how he could be cold, the stock room had become like a sauna. She could only assume it was a nightmare and felt guilty about asking about the Infection. She lay down, leaving the lantern on, her mind wandering to Dr. Pazzo and Ann. Ann could have survived for some of the time on the monkeys, Nella thought, but not long. Frank had only made it a few months and he had- she shuddered and tried not to gag. Shutting Dr. Pazzo and cannibalism out of her brain for a while, she turned toward Frank. He looked exhausted even asleep. She stroked his face, trying to wake him without startling him. He was warm, as usual, and his face became more drawn, sadder as she touched it.

"Frank," she whispered, "Frank, wake up, it's okay."

He gasped and opened his eyes. "You were having a bad dream, it's okay."

"Is it time to go?" he asked.

"I don't know. There's no window. I don't think so. Are you all right?"

"Yeah. Sure," he said, but his hands were still shaking.

"I'm leaving the lantern on. I have another battery." It wasn't an offer. She wanted it on too. The dark felt overwhelming. She closed her eyes. "I've made a mess of everything today," she said sleepily, "I'm sorry. I'll try to do better tomorrow."

The sound of the sleeping bag zipper was so loud it almost echoed in the small space. Nella's eyes popped open as Frank unzipped hers too.

"I'm not dr—" she started.

"I know. I don't care," he said quickly and slid in beside her. "You didn't do anything wrong." She felt the tension drain out of him, like air from an old balloon as he held her, already becoming heavy with exhaustion again. He traced a pattern on her hip and her bare back with one hand until she was asleep.

When she woke, the room was cold and the lantern was dark. She could see a length of daylight spilling over her pack because the stock room door was partially open. Frank was gone.

Nella scrambled for her clothes. "Frank?" she hissed but there was no answer. She grabbed the pistol and slowly pushed the door open farther, peering around the frame. The storefront was empty. The plate glass windows seemed to expand, to focus on her and lay her bare to the world. She crouched and crept beneath them heading for the door. She realized how bad this trip would have been to make alone. She choked down the thought that something had happened to Frank. She made it to the door and gently pressed it. It opened easily. Frank must have unlocked it. She felt a little better. She looked outside, but nothing moved. Nella opened the door and stood up slowly. She slid out of the gas station and slowly walked around to the back. Frank was sitting on the edge of a pit the station had used for old tires. The air still burned with the heavy smell of rubber.

"Frank, what's going on?" she asked. He looked up at her and she could see he was distraught.

"They were just left here," he said looking into the pit.

Nella sat down beside him to look. If they hadn't still had shreds of cloth around them, Nella would have thought they were just three small logs scattered among the tires. Even their thin fingers curled like twigs in the dust.

"I think this store was stripped clean a long time ago. And I don't think the Cure teams would have missed them. We were ordered out in grids, the areas we

would have missed would be minuscule. People locked away, like you, would have been missed if not. I don't think anyone left them here Frank. Maybe they wandered in looking for food or water and couldn't get back out. It wouldn't take much, a broken leg or arm and they wouldn't be able to climb up again."

"Why would they come here?"

"I don't know, maybe they were attracted by the light of the City? Or the debris left by the scavengers and military teams." She put a hand on his knee. "I know you've heard stories about Immunes shooting the Infected for sport. I'm not going to lie and tell you it isn't true. And after the way you've been treated since the Cure, I don't blame you for being suspicious and sad. But I worked with the Cure teams, and they were *good* people, almost without exception. They wanted to find and help people. If anyone had known these three were here they would have brought them in for the Cure." She stopped for a moment and watched him. "It would make me feel better if we stopped to bury them," she said, "as best we can."

Frank nodded. "Me too," he said, "at least someone will remember they were human once."

They had no tools and there wasn't much to be had in the tire pit. The bodies had been there for a long while, not much more than dried corn husks dressed in rags. There was no smell and Nella was far less disturbed by it than she thought she would be. Less disturbed, but deeply sad. They were all broken, somehow. Slashed or bit or snapped as if they really were old wood. She tried not to think of how drawn out their last days must have been. In the end, they covered them with old tires, working silently, each wondering what kind of life the three had before the world got sick. At last, when the sun was already almost overhead, they were done.

"We should light it," Frank said bitterly, "let it burn forever so the City knows what happens out here. So they can't pretend the world is just going to go back to what it was. A permanent bad taste that lingers long after they've scrubbed all the blood from the corners of their mouths."

Nella was glad that there was no gas left at the station. She believed he meant to do it. She was quiet for a moment, watching his face harden like cooling wax. She squeezed his hand.

"It's time to go Frank. Let them lie in peace. God knows they're in need of it." She walked away from him without looking to see if he was coming and scrambled up the dirt side of the pit. She walked back to the stock room and began packing up, waiting for him to cry it out if he needed. She felt dusty and tired and the day wasn't half over yet. She badly wanted to wash her hands, but she didn't dare to use what little water they had. She'd have to wait until they

found a stream or ditch. She lifted her pack and checked the map. Frank returned to the store. He lifted his pack.

"It's okay if you want to go back," she said, "I'll understand." But her mind panicked at the thought of continuing alone.

He shook his head. "No, of course not. I'm angry with the way the City has treated the Infected, but I don't want it to be destroyed. And definitely not the way this bacteria will destroy it."

He started heading for the door. "You *do* realize this is crazy though, don't you?" he said over his shoulder, "I'm a lawyer. You're a psychiatrist. We're supposed to be in dark, air conditioned offices charging exorbitant fees to rich clients. Not saving the world. Not chasing bad guys."

Nella shrugged. "If the world could predict who the villains and heroes were going to be, the crisis wouldn't exist in the first place."

They headed out the door and walked quickly, trying to cover the empty space between them and the lab as quickly as they could.

Who was Feeding Them?

After a few miles, the road broke off in several directions. The Looters had mostly stopped using cars, preferring atvs when they could find the gas or bicycles when they could not. They no longer depended on the old roads. The military only maintained those it currently needed, so most roads had eroded into a mosaic of tar and gravel or had collapsed with their culverts into gaping ditches. Frank and Nella turned onto one that had almost completely been eaten away and swallowed by brush. There were times when the only indication that there had been a road once were the houses on either side that slumped themselves ever closer to the ground. The spring insects sprang up in misty gold clouds whenever Nella or Frank brushed by. The sun, which had been so distant the day before now glared and sank into their clothes and made them even wearier.

"I thought this lab was in a large town," said Frank.

"No, not from the map. Looks like they tried to hide it as much as possible. It looks like it's pretty far into farm country. Must be why it took so long for the scavenger teams to find it."

"Are we going to reach it in time?"

"We should get there tomorrow, but I don't know if we'll find Dr. Schneider there." Nella sighed and rubbed her forehead. "You're right. This whole thing is insane. We aren't even looking for the right thing. We're looking for someone who *maybe* can tell us where the bacteria is. And we don't even

know if we'll find her." She slapped at a fly, disgusted.

"What else was there to do? She's the only one who knows for sure who had access to it and would know what it was."

"I'm becoming convinced that is not the case. Someone was feeding Dr. Pazzo and Ann. Someone knew they were there and had access to all their data and those videos."

"Maybe I was just different from others. Maybe I had a worse infection or something and my reasoning was even more impaired than others'. Maybe Dr. Pazzo and Ann figured out that food and water came out of that hose thing and I just didn't."

"We saw lots of people as malnourished as you Frank. Not all of them could have been completely out of food. I wouldn't have asked you last night if I thought you were the one stupid zombie in existence."

Frank laughed and pretended to be shocked at her language.

"Well, even if that is the case," he continued, "what would anyone stand to gain if they got there hands on this bacteria? Knowing what it could do, why would anyone not want to destroy it?"

"That's the question of the year. If we can answer that, we will know who has the bacteria."

"Why keep Dr. Pazzo and Ann alive if they were just going to destroy the world?" asked Frank.

Nella sat down on a stone porch in the shadow of a rotting house and rubbed her ankles. Frank pulled out a water bottle.

"Maybe they didn't have all the information that they thought they needed from Dr. Pazzo and Ann. Maybe they kept them alive hoping- or expecting- a Cure."

Frank squinted at her, "You think it was Dr. Carton? But he warned us away from using it, he seemed to want it destroyed."

"I don't know who it was, I don't know what to think. Maybe that's not even the reason. Maybe it was someone that just cared about Ann or Dr. Pazzo. Or someone who couldn't face committing murder on a personal level but has some vendetta against the world and didn't have as much of a problem wiping out humanity as a whole." Nella shrugged.

"But Nella, the governments are all gone. The churches are all gone. Poverty is a thing of the past. Pretty much. I mean, no one is living large, but no one is really starving any more either. The three biggest sources of conflict in the world are gone."

"Maybe it's someone who lost their family to this plague. Maybe it's someone who believes this is the God's vengeance and wants to finish the job.

Just because most of us are gone, doesn't mean the rest of us won't find reasons to hate each other."

"Are you going to tell me it's some primal territorial drive in our brain, to fight each other? That this was the inevitable conclusion?"

Nella stood up and stretched. "I hope not. If it *is* a basic urge then as a whole, we've done a remarkable job thwarting it for centuries. I'm a psychiatrist, not an anthropologist. But I think we're basically social animals, we're meant to live together. But when you have eight billion people living together, a few of them are bound to be wired wrong. And maybe one or two are going to have the opportunity to act on that bad wiring once in a while."

They walked slowly back onto the grass lane where the road had once been.

"So we're looking for someone with a revenge fantasy against the whole world. It's been eight years. What is he- or she- waiting for?"

Nella stopped and stared at Frank's face, troubled. He stopped too. "I think whoever it is, is waiting to see what punishment the world thinks is justice. I think he is waiting for the end of this trial."

Nella felt filled with lead as she said it. She walked on, barely noticing as the suburbs changed into shrinking fields and spreading forest. Frank, too, seemed somber. Neither of them saw the first bleached cow skeletons erupting from the long grass like unfinished barrels. But they came more and more often, on each side of the road, tangled in the wire fencing, as if it were a trail into an Ogre's den. Nella finally tripped over a leg bone that had made its way into the middle of the lane. She froze and looked around. There were clusters of bones almost everywhere she looked.

"Frank," she whispered, "Frank, stop." He turned around to look at her and finally saw the bones as well. He crouched, almost instinctively.

"Is it Looters?"

"I don't think so. They wouldn't have wasted any meat. They would have herded the cows into their camp before killing them."

"Infected then?"

"I think so, the skeletons are whole where they died."

"These are old though," Frank said, visibly relaxing, "They must have been eaten a while ago. Whatever ate this has got to be dead by now. Are they even finding Infected any more?"

"Not many," Nella said, "and those they do find report having eaten stray cats or dogs to survive."

"Could a person even kill a cow?"

"Not one person," said Nella, "but if several people cornered one, I guess

they could do it eventually.” She felt the hair on her arms prickle and her stomach slid lower inside her.

“But you’re talking about Infected working together. Do they do that?”

“It was probably more like a feeding frenzy than cooperation. The initial wave of Infected must have wandered out of the City looking for food. Look, Frank, you’re probably right. I don’t see how people could survive for years on stray cows and dogs, and these bones look like they’ve been here for a while, but let’s be careful.”

It was another mile before the reek of decomposition hit Nella like a broken brick.

The Infected

It floated over everything, like grease on water. Choking and sour and coppery. Nella could feel it sticking to her, coating her skin and throat, and Frank bent over the ditch on the side of the road and vomited. It couldn’t have died that long ago, maybe in the winter, thawing in the warm spring sun as the snow pulled back and uncovered it, or in the early spring where it cooked in its own gas. Nella didn’t want to look for it, but she knew she was going to anyway.

“Go back,” she whispered to Frank, “I have to find it and see if there are Infected around. You go back and find some fresh air.”

Frank was shaking and ashy. “No way,” he hissed, “You aren’t going closer alone.” He spat and tried to wipe his mouth with a handkerchief. “Besides,” he said, creeping toward her, “I think that was all of it. I feel a little better now.”

They moved together, trying not to smell the terrible hot-slaughterhouse air and trying to find its source simultaneously. It was surprisingly far, hundreds of yards off the road near a dour, unpainted barn. Nella exhaled in relief to see that it was far too large to be a person. She tried not to taste it as she drew in another shallow breath.

“Horse or cow,” she whispered to Frank, “It hasn’t been dead very long.”

“How do you know?” he asked, holding an arm over his face. Both of their eyes were watering. The thing on the ground was black and swollen, it’s belly a cave slithering with maggots. For some reason the sight of it bothered Nella far more than the smell. Maybe because it wasn’t slashed or torn open, the way a knife or even a claw would do. It was gnawed open, ragged rounded hunks taken away, a grotesque reverse puzzle.

“The plants around it are cropped. It was foraging here. Whatever was here before must have kept reseeding and growing after the Plague.”

“I’ll bet that’s how most of the animals that survived made it.”

"Yeah, until the Infected got them. Or some other wild thing."

"Do you think it was dogs?"

"I hope so. But you'd think the bones we found earlier would be scattered if it were dogs."

Nella carefully stood up to look around, but the field was silent and motionless. The long grass of several summers was matted and gray around them and she could see up to the tree line.

"Come on," Frank said softly, "there may be nothing here now, but I don't want to be around if something comes back. And the more distance we can put between us and this smell, the happier I'll be."

Nella looked back at the bubbling mass of maggots once more despite herself as she walked away, obsessively brushing her pant legs, paranoid of taking any of them with her. It was like carrying a tiny piece of death. Nella told herself to stop being a basketcase and think logically. As the smell diminished she became more successful at it.

The road was just more field at this point and Nella used the fenceposts and treeline to help her stay on it. It was cool and the shadows were shattered where the long, gold afternoon sun came through. The young frogs in the ditches spoke high and sweet to their neighbors and Nella became almost relaxed. They were less than five miles from where the lab ought to be. She wondered if they could make it that evening, but the way Frank's shoulders drooped and her own feet swelled inside her boots made her doubt it.

It was warm, and if they had to, they could sleep in a barn or outbuilding, it was even mild enough to stay outside if nothing presented itself- but even as she thought it, she heard a restless shuffling behind her, something dragging itself out of the ditch.

Nella turned around as Frank yelled at her to look out. She pulled the pistol out of its holster but the thing was on top of her and its momentum sent them both back into the ground. The pistol flew from her hand and lay glittering black and foreign in the grass.

The Infected's face was barely recognizable as one, more leather sack than head. It was streaked with dried blood and rotting meat. Gray pus oozed out of the myriad wounds around its eyes and scalp and it was bald in patches where scars boiled up in great tarry snakes. Its smell was even more powerful than the horse had been, but only Frank noticed. Nella's world had plunged down to focus on the matted, filthy beard and its yellow, broken teeth. Its tongue was black and swollen and it made wheezing whistles in its throat as its face lunged closer and closer.

All Nella could hear was Ann in her head, screaming: "THE TEETH

MUST GNASH!"

Please don't let it hurt too badly, she thought, even as she realized it was going to be an excruciating death.

Her hand fluttered and flexed, looking for the gun somewhere beside her. The Infected's black and yellow talons, they could be called nails no longer, pierced the side of her shirt and left a scarlet, sizzling runner along Nella's side.

She yelled and heard it echoed from over the Infected's back. Frank was trying to pry it off of her, but the Infected had desperate hunger on its side and Frank still saw it as a sick human. He didn't want to hurt it if he didn't have to.

Nella kicked up with her tired legs, and the Infected's weight shifted so she could roll away while Frank pulled. But it was too late. The Infected's teeth snapped closed around her shoulder. It ground and pulled with it's jagged, sharded teeth and Nella screamed and kicked again.

Frank let go of the Infected's back and slid down next to her in the grass. The world shrunk and became too bright. Nella fought it, knowing if she lost consciousness, she was dead. She sucked in a deep breath as the Infected still scrabbled and chewed. Her eyes watered, but she focused on the thing's shattered leg. She aimed and gave it one last great kick in the seeping black wound on its shin. It released her with a half wheeze, half howl.

Nella forced herself to roll away before she fainted. She saw Frank raise a gun and the thought slid by in a blur, *I hope he's using the pistol or we're both dead.*

The sound of the shot shattered the veil that was dropping in great folds over her. Her eyes rolled back to center and she saw Frank steady his shaking hand with the other as he shot again.

Frank bent over her and she could see he was crying. She wasn't sure whether it was because she was hurt or because he'd killed someone. The world fell away in little puzzle pieces of light and sound before she could find out.

It flared back with a sizzle as Frank pressed her bitten shoulder with his shirt. The sound came back with a great thudding, like a slow fan.

"Nella, wake up. Wake up, we have to go. Please wake up."

Frank's eyes darted from her to the woods nearby and back, then to the field behind them.

"Are there more of them?" She tried to sit up but her vision blurred again and he pressed her back.

"Yes," he said, "but they haven't noticed us yet. They heard me- the gun, and are looking for us."

"Are there any buildings nearby? Can you see anything?"

"There's a farmhouse across the field but it's pretty far."

“We’ll make it. Help me up.”

“Can you walk?”

“If I get up slowly I’ll be able to run as fast as you. I just have to stay conscious.”

He lifted her onto her feet. It felt as if the ground were sand sinking away from her every second. She fought the dizziness. The pack’s wide strap dug hard into her chewed shoulder and the pain was a dark blanket over everything, even her fear.

“Where is the farmhouse?” she asked, trying not to panic as she watched the half dozen Infected slowly closing in on their location.

“Are you ready?” asked Frank. Nella nodded. He held her around the waist and they began to run. Frank’s fingers pressed on the slice in her side and each step jarred her shoulder. The farmhouse looked very far. Nella stopped looking at it, looking instead at the long grass in front of her and trying to resist the urge to look behind her at the people who were undoubtedly chasing them now. They would have seen the movement as Frank and Nella began running. She hoped they had enough of a head start. Frank began to outpace her and she struggled to match him, stumbling forward.

The thud of bare feet began to grow behind them. Nella felt a jolt of adrenaline burst into her legs. They were almost there, but Nella’s chest still cramped in terror as she looked up to see where the farmhouse was.

She could hear an Infected behind her, wheezing and growling, like a tired dog. She tried to brace herself for the taloned grab she knew was coming.

But then Frank was pulling her up the rotted steps and across the porch. The screen opened with a screech and the wooden door with a bang. They were inside, in the dark and Frank was slamming the door and turning the lock. Nella collapsed onto the nearby staircase, a puff of dust pluming into the air as she sat down.

“I need to check if there’s another door,” said Frank and darted away. Nella eased off the pack and closed her eyes as the Infected slammed themselves against the front door. Frank was back after only a few seconds.

“We need to dart them before they break the window,” Nella said, “Can you help me upstairs, I can do it from one of the upper windows.”

“You’re hurt, you need to stop moving. We have to stop the bleeding. I’ll take care of the Infected.”

“Are you sure, Frank?”

He brushed her face with his hand. “For you, I can,” he said, his face grim. He slipped past her up the stairs. She heard the window slide open with a shuddering squeal. The dart gun was designed to be noiseless.

She pressed the thin fabric of Frank's shirt against her shoulder, hissing with pain. She had to clean it with something or it was going to be severely infected. She would probably need to stitch it too. She wondered if the house had been picked clean or if it had been missed by the scavenge teams. The presence of the Infected gave her some hope that the house was untouched. Maybe she could find medicine or alcohol to clean it out.

Frank glided back down the stairs. He peeked out of the curtain, watching the Infected as they slowly stopped banging. "How did they survive this long?" he asked.

"It must have been the cattle. How many were left?"

"Including the one that bit you- seven so far."

"They probably wandered out of the City and began eating the herds of cows, one by one. I doubt there are any more. The one that got me was filled with gangrene. He was dying."

Frank peered out of the curtain. "None of the rest seem to be in very good shape either. They are all cut up and bitten. They must have fought each other between cows- or whatever."

Nella heard a thud. Then something slowly slid down the front door.

"That's two asleep," said Frank, "Come on, we don't need to watch the rest of them pass out. We need to fix your arm before it gets worse."

"Can you check the bathroom for, well, for anything really, but peroxide mostly. I'll see if I can pull out the first aid kit."

"Are you sure? I can carry you upstairs so you can lie down."

"Have you ever stitched a wound?"

Frank looked pale. "No, but I can do it."

"I know you can, you'll have to, but I need to show you how first, so it doesn't get infected."

"Okay, I'll be right back, I think there are two bathrooms." He went into the hallway.

"Frank," she called, "Check under the sink too."

She heard two more thumps from the porch and closed her own eyes, waiting for Frank.

"Get it out."

The bathrooms had been better than expected. Nella was not surprised given the remote location and continued presence of the Infected. The team that had scouted Dr. Carton's lab wouldn't have bothered with a smaller target like this if there were a big safety risk. They would wait until the Cure team got

around to the area and then clean out the smaller houses.

Frank had found some prescription ibuprofen along with the peroxide and bandages. Nella wondered if it was still potent. She would have traded it for a tab of penicillin in a heartbeat, but they weren't that lucky. Her arm was soaked by the time he had returned and she felt a light buzzing begin behind her nasal cavity.

"I have to lie down somewhere, or I'm not going to be much help," she said, noticeably slurring.

He picked her up and carried her up the dusty stairs. She hoped the bedrooms were cleaner. She yanked the blankets down with her good hand as Frank put her down on the clean sheet. Dust swirled at the foot of the bed and Nella lost herself a moment in watching it.

"We're going to need water," Frank said, "Can you hold on a minute? I saw a duck pond behind the house. I have purification tabs."

"I'm okay for now," she said.

"I wouldn't go if I didn't have to. I'll be right back," he said, as if she had argued with him.

"Be careful," she said, "Just because we only saw those doesn't mean there aren't more."

"I'll take the dart gun," he said and squeezed her good hand gently. Nella tilted her head back against the flattened pillow as he left. The room was bright, the thin curtain sunbleached in the window. She tried to concentrate on what was around her so that the pain only crunched at the corners of her mind rather than devouring it whole. She wondered where the people were. They weren't the Infected that had chased them- the house had been left in perfect shape. The bed had been made and she could see the clothes folded neatly in the closet. There was no disorder, no signs of scuffle or panic. Maybe they had come in to the City before things got bad. Maybe they had weathered it out in a shelter like Frank.

Nella heard footsteps on the stairs and her chest cramped in fear. But it was Frank, carrying an armload of supplies. He dropped them beside the bed and began fumbling with the envelope of water purification tablets. Nella could see him swearing under his breath at his shaking fingers.

"You have to calm down," she said, "It's okay. We're okay."

He got the envelope open and swished the tabs into the bucket of water. Nella hoped nothing dead had been lying in the pond.

"It's supposed to take half an hour, but I don't know if we have that much time. What should we do?"

"We have to clean the wounds. We can't wait, we'll just have to hope the tabs continue working while we do it."

Nella was still holding his shirt against her shoulder. It was sopping and warm. She was trying not to look at it, but the wet heat was spreading across her own shirt and over her chest. The adrenaline had worn off for both of them. Nella was exhausted. Frank gently unbuttoned her blouse and she felt nauseous when his fingertips came away red and dripping.

“Do you have any towels? I think I saw a linen closet at the top of the stairs.”

He looked doubtfully at the neat pile near his feet.

“I think I have enough,” he said. She inched her way out of the shirt and clamped her hand back over her shoulder.

“Soak two of them in the water and hand one of them to me.”

The towel he handed to her was frigid and heavy. It smelled like algae. Nella dropped Frank’s soaked shirt beside her on the bed. She yelped as she squeezed the towel into a chilled bandage around her shoulder. She took a deep breath and calmed herself down.

He stroked her hair as he pressed still harder on the towel. “Can I give you the painkiller?”

Nella smiled. “I wish you could but not until we’re done. I have a bad scratch on my side, I think it’s already infected. Can you start there?”

She could see Frank tearing up, but he just nodded and began wiping away the blood from her chest and stomach. She flinched when he hit the groove the Infected’s nails had made.

Frank sucked in a hissing breath in sympathy. “Sorry,” he said.

“No, don’t be. You can’t be gentle. It has to be clean or it’s going to get very bad, very quickly.”

He took a deep breath, which she unconsciously mirrored. “Okay, are you ready?”

Nella clenched her teeth and shut her eyes as he scrubbed the long trench in her side. He sat up and she let her breath drain out of her in relief.

“Peroxide now?”

“Is there any dirt or sand left?”

“No, but it’s very puffy and I’d say it’s definitely infected. Was this from that guy’s filthy nails? God knows what he had growing under there.”

“Peroxide won’t kill the infection. Did you find any antibiotic or burn cream?”

Frank held up a tiny tube of ointment. “Sorry, this is all I could find.”

Nella was having trouble concentrating. “That’s not going to be enough. I need you to find the kitchen. See if you can find any honey anywhere.”

She closed her eyes as she listened to metal pots ringing as they fell. She

tried to squeeze her shoulder tighter but she was becoming progressively more numb and exhausted. Frank came back, looking dejected. He held up a small jug.

“It’s mostly crystallized,” he said.

“That’s okay, just try to mix the crystals in with whatever liquid honey is left and spread it on the scratch. We’ll save the ointment for my shoulder.” She felt the world swirling around her head. “Frank, we need to go fast now.” Her voice sounded thick and fuzzy in her ears.

He was a little rough in his panic and the tiny shards of sugar crystals pricked her back into clarity before they melted in the heat of her skin. He pressed bandages along the scratch and then gently took her hand from her shoulder. She tried not to look at the wound as he washed it. Every swipe seared and crunched, no matter how gentle he was. Nella couldn’t help the small sounds of misery that leaked from her chest and she was slippery with cold sweat within seconds.

“I’m so sorry,” Frank said, wincing.

She shrieked as he hit something jagged and he stumbled backward in surprise.

“There’s something in there. Something is in me,” she gasped.

Frank squeezed the wet towel over her shoulder, dousing in cool water. He cautiously lifted a flap of torn skin. He was grim as he reached for the first aid kit.

“What is it? Can you see it?” she asked.

“I see it,” he said, “I’ll try to be gentle, but this is really going to hurt. You have to hold still. Can you?”

“What is it?”

“I’m not sure yet. I have to take it out first.” But Nella could see from his face that he had an idea.

“Get it out.” Her voice was panicked and shrill.

“You have to hold still.”

Nella clenched her uninjured hand. “I’ll hold still. Just get it out.”

Frank wiped the tweezers with alcohol. He gingerly lifted the loose slab of skin on her shoulder. The tweezers bit the sore, ragged skin twice without finding the object. They burned on her exposed nerves like an electric shock but she didn’t flinch. The third time they caught it and Frank pulled the object out. The relief was immediate, as if he had pried a large splinter out. He tried to hide it in the towel quickly, but Nella saw it anyway, gleaming white and wicked in the afternoon light. A shard of tooth had broken off inside her shoulder. She leaned over the far side of the bed and vomited. Frank stroked her head and waited until she was done and calm again. He gave her a bottle of clean water

from their pack and washed her face.

“I think that was the worst of it,” he said.

Nella nodded. “Okay, this time you’ll have to use the hydrogen peroxide. Try not to use too much or it will make it harder to close the wound. You’ll have to lift the loose skin again,” she said gagging.

Her arm fizzed and bubbled as the dirt and grass particles streamed out of it. Frank pulled out a pill bottle. Nella shook her head, “Not yet.”

“Nella, this is going to be long and painful. If these knock you out, then why not skip this part?”

“Because I need to tell you what to do.”

“I know what I have to do. I need to sew the big chew mark closed. Then I need to put antibiotic on all the smaller wounds and bandage you up.”

“But—”

Frank put his hand up. “You have to trust me. I’m not going to let you die and I know how to sterilize a needle and sew. It’s not going to be pretty whether you are awake to watch me or not. Besides, these probably aren’t powerful enough to knock you out for several minutes. But if you flinch with every stitch, it’s going to hurt worse and take longer.”

Nella held out her hand for the pills. By the time he was three stitches in, her head felt full of sand and she shut her eyes. He hadn’t even finished the fourth stitch and she was fast asleep.

The Farmhouse

The metal screech of the front door invaded Nella’s dreams and she swam unwillingly back into consciousness. For a few seconds she just lay in the dark, feeling the hot throb of her shoulder like the breath of a panting dog, coming and going, but never gone. She squinted, trying to see Frank in the strange, darkened room, but she couldn’t see him. The front door snapped shut below her, reminding her of what had woken her up. She sat up too quickly, fearing the Infected had entered the house. The world fell like shifting sand around her. Nella quickly bent over, wanting to vomit. After a breath or two, she lifted her head again. She swung her feet over the edge of the bed as a pair of thuds rose up from the stairway. She stood up and winced at the touch of the cold wood on her bare feet. Frank had taken off her shoes and bloody clothes and cleaned up the room. She shivered in just her underwear and tottered toward the bedroom door, which hung open like a broken jaw. A board betrayed her with a snapping creak, and Nella’s heart froze solid in her chest as footsteps came bounding up the stairs. She fell the rest of the way into the hallway and pulled herself up on

the doorknob. She scrambled backward, slamming the door as a figure darker than the night around it, reached the top of the stairs.

“Nella? Nella are you okay?” Frank’s voice seeped through the wooden door like sunshine, like warm water. Nella slid down it in relief.

“I thought the Infected got in,” she called. She crawled away from the door and he opened it. “Why don’t you have a flashlight?” she asked.

“I was- it’s cold and starting to rain. I couldn’t leave them out there like that. I brought the people on the porch inside. They are still asleep and I couldn’t carry them and the light at the same time. I should have grabbed one when I heard you, but I was worried you would fall- which you did. Sorry.”

“I’m okay. Are they all inside now?”

“Yes, I just pulled the last one into the living room. There’s a fireplace there and the woodbox is full.”

“Have you slept at all?”

“It’s early still. The sun only went down about an hour ago.” He groped in the dark and found her, lifting her to her feet. “Do you think you can get down the stairs if I help? You need to eat and you must be freezing. A fire will make you feel better.”

“You need to sleep too Frank.”

“I will, when you are taken care of.”

She slid her good arm around his back and tried not to wince as his fingers curled around her waist, brushing the streaking comet that ran down her side. “It’s not your fault,” she said as they moved slowly toward the stairs, “If he hadn’t jumped me, it would have been you.”

“But if I was ready, like you are, I could have acted faster. Maybe you wouldn’t be hurt. Maybe I wouldn’t have had to kill him.”

Nella’s knees felt shaky as they walked down the dark stairway. The rain made a harsh hiss on the porch in front of them. “I wasn’t ready Frank, or I could have thrown him off easily. He was clumsy and weak, if I’d been ready neither of us would have been hurt. It isn’t your fault.”

Nella felt with her foot for the edge of the stair, and at last realized they had reached the bottom. Frank held a hand in front of him, looking for the hallway. The light from Frank’s lantern hit her as she found the living room doorway. The Infected lay in a long row across the floor. Frank had covered them with blankets.

“I should probably try to clean them up,” he said, noticing her watching the sleeping figures.

“They are going to need food and water more than a bath,” she said. “I’ll help you in the morning. We can leave them supplies and a letter so they know

what has happened.”

He lowered Nella gently onto the couch. “They will already know what happened,” he said grimly, wrapping her in a quilt, “but at least we can tell them where to go next.”

He slid the grate from the front of the fireplace. In a few moments they were sitting in front of a blazing orange fire. “The curtains!” said Nella suddenly.

Frank held up a hand, “It’s okay, I already thought of that.” He grabbed his pack and sat next to her, sighing with relief. He closed his eyes for a second in the pulsing gold heat. She thought he looked ten years older than he had that morning and realized with a pang how tired he must be.

She brushed the side of his face lightly with one hand, surprised to feel the bristle of stubble. He smiled and laid a hand over hers without opening his eyes. “You need to sleep,” she said.

“Soon,” he said, “but we both need food. You especially. And I want to check your cuts. We have to keep them clean.” He opened the pack.

“Let’s eat first,” she said, “I don’t want to look at the raw hamburger my shoulder’s become and then try to eat after that.”

Nella felt odd and criminal eating even a simple meal in the midst of the sleeping skeletons that surrounded them, and promised herself that they would either find ample supplies in the house or leave their own for the Cured before they woke up. Her wounds were clean and the puffiness had subsided from the scratch on her side. The fire made her drowsy, but something felt distinctly creepy about falling asleep in the living room, something that just wasn’t the same as falling asleep in a Cure tent surrounded by lights and soldiers along with the Infected. She felt exposed, unprotected, as if the sleeping man beside the couch would suddenly reach up out of the dark and claw at her throat.

“Frank,” she said, gently shaking him from a comfortable doze.

“Hmm?”

“I’m really sorry, but I can’t- I won’t be able to sleep here. Can you help me get back upstairs?”

He sat up rubbing his eyes. “Oh sure, of course. Just let me add a few more pieces of wood so everyone will stay warm.”

They took the lantern with them up to the dark bedroom. Nella was exhausted and shaky by the time they made it back. Frank closed the bedroom door tightly and shoved the dresser in front of it without comment. He placed the lantern on top and collapsed like a wooden doll into the chair next to the bed.

“I thought you were going to sleep Frank,” she said gently, stretching flat on the bed.

“I a-” his yawn cut off the rest of the word.

“Come to bed.”

“I don’t want to hit your cuts and hurt you.”

She gently pulled on his arm. “It’s okay, you won’t hurt me. You need to sleep.” He tugged his shoes off and began to get undressed. “We’ll never get anywhere tomorrow if you are exhausted,” she continued and he stopped, startled.

“Tomorrow? We can’t go tomorrow, the lab is still four or five miles. You can’t travel that far, you lost a lot of blood today.”

“We have to. We don’t have that much time.”

“Then I’ll go. You stay and rest.” He yawned again and crawled into the bed next to her.

“No way,” she said, “what if something happens? I can’t let you go alone.”

He scrubbed his stubbly cheeks with both hands. “Nella, what are you going to be able to do if something does happen? I don’t think you are going to be able to run. Or shoot the gun without causing more damage to your shoulder.”

“I could if I had to,” she knew it was a weak argument. “Besides,” she continued, finding his sore point, “what if something happens while you are gone?”

“What’s going to happen? This place is remote and safe from Looters. It’s well stocked with food and water and medicine. All you need to do is rest until I come back.”

“What if the Infected wake up before they are Cured? What if I get a fever and can’t take care of myself?”

Frank groaned and rubbed his hand over his smooth skull. He rolled onto his side and looked at her. “I don’t want to fight now. Let’s fight in the morning when I can think.”

She laughed gently. “Okay, we’ll fight in the morning.”

He leaned over and kissed her. They fell asleep as the rain made the swelling joints of the house creak around them.

The Bullet or the Cure

It was still raining, cold and misty when she woke in the morning. Nella had slept only lightly, afraid Frank was stubborn enough to slip away in the middle of the night. Still, she felt much stronger than she had the evening before.

Still clothed only in her underwear, she looked around for her pack before remembering it was sitting at the bottom of the stairs where she had dropped it. But the dresser was wedged against the door and too heavy for her to move with one arm. Nella stifled a frustrated sigh.

She stood shivering in front of the dusty dresser. She hesitated, feeling slightly cannibalistic, as if she meant to wear someone else's skin instead of their clothes, but the chill won out. She wiggled the swollen drawers open, ready to leap backward if a rat scuttered out. But the clothes were undisturbed. They were neatly folded as if they had just come down from the clothesline yesterday. They were men's clothes, far too large, but perfect for her wounded arm and side. She pulled out a sweater that still breathed a faint trace of the wood fire it had dried over. She eased it over the bandages on her arm, holding her breath expecting pain as the thick cloth brushed over the aching flesh of her shoulder. She got it on without too much wincing and then rolled up the cuffs of an old pair of jeans. They were patched and faded and all the stiffness already worn out of them. She got an eerie feeling again, as the fabric bunched and pooled around her waist, as if she had stepped into someone else's memories. A half-formed hope bloomed in her chest that these people were alive somewhere, not Infected. She grabbed a thick belt from the top of the dresser and threaded it with difficulty through the large pants. Her mind wandered to the Infected sleeping below.

Nella raked her hand over her snarled hair in frustration. She would be able to find supplies, the house seemed well stocked, and even if it wasn't, she and Frank had more than enough to spare for the people downstairs.

But they couldn't wait for the Infected to wake up. There wasn't enough time left before Judge Hawkins sent the military after them. How would the people downstairs react with no one to counsel them when they woke up? A note was no substitute, no matter how eloquent. Nella knew the prospects even for those who underwent years of therapy through Cure programs wasn't very good. The current suicide statistics were something like thirty percent for the Cured, and not very much less for the Immunes.

They would remember the Plague, everything that had happened and what they had done after their infection. But they would only understand the events of the past eight years as they had happened for themselves. Without someone to explain, they could have no real idea what had happened to the rest of the world. Nella had seen it before, even after the Cured had been shown news footage, had seen communities of survivors, even after they had found some remaining family members- some of them refused to believe it. They would blame themselves, convince themselves that they were inherently evil somehow, instead of just ill. Nella picked up the pistol that Frank had laid on top of the dresser. *They will probably all be suicides*, she thought, *isn't it kinder to spare them the agony of realizing what they've done?* She looked at Frank, his skin outlined in silver rain-light. He kept going. Some of them did. *Some of us do*, she thought. She put the pistol down and walked slowly to the window. The City was invisible in the fog.

All she could see was the pale young grass pushing up through the old silver corpse of last year's field and the dark, still pond and the rotting carcass of the Infected's latest kill, a cow maybe or a horse. Nella sighed. *The bullet or the Cure. Either way it's murder.* She placed her forehead against the cold pane and closed her eyes. Frank stirred behind her and she turned around.

He stretched and scratched at the stubble that was thickening on his cheeks. He sat up and smiled at her.

"Feeling better?" he asked.

"Much better," she lied.

"Sorry about your clothes, I didn't want anything dirty getting into your cuts."

She sat down next to him on the bed. "Liar. You were just trying to get into my pants."

He laughed.

"Come on," she said, "we need to get moving. I want to leave these people with plenty of supplies in case they wake up before we get back, and we still have a few miles to go."

She expected him to argue with her, but he just shook his head and pushed the dresser away from the door. He was right, though he never said so. Nella was almost useless, she couldn't even carry her own pack without opening the wound on her shoulder again. So Frank rearranged their gear and gathered supplies for the sleeping Infected while Nella struggled to write a note that could explain the world they were about to wake up in.

It took less time than either of them expected. By midmorning, the sleeping people were warmly covered and a pile of provisions sat in front of the fireplace. Nella attached her letter to the mantle.

"I wish I could be here to tell you this instead of leaving a letter," it began. Nella stopped herself from rereading it. She tried not to flinch as Frank tightened the sling he had made for her. She didn't want him to change his mind and insist that she stay behind.

It was still gray and cool when they left the old farmhouse at noon. The fields were heavy with old, wet grass and Nella tried to lead them back to the road. It was broken and patchy, but the land around them was weedy and quickly filling with thorn bushes and small trees. The road at least, was still mostly flat and at least halfway clear of bracken. At first, when her energy was still high, Nella felt guilty that Frank was carrying everything. But she soon became winded and drained and she was grateful when he requested frequent rests. She suspected some stops he was adding for her benefit rather than his, but each time they sat on the cold, damp ground she sighed with relief. The trip to Dr. Carton's

lab should only have taken a few hours. Instead it lasted for the rest of the day. The dull pearl of the sun sank behind its clouds as they reached the lab.

The Lab

The building was larger than Nella had expected and seemed a giant cube of black glass planted in a large clearing. It was surrounded by old forest that seemed to be spreading its fingers toward the building. Even the gravel parking lot was almost invisible, covered by early grass and unopened dandelion heads. Nella had been outside of the City many times with the Cure team, and she had seen the roads and buildings begin to decay, to be drawn back into the ground, swallowed by grass and trees. But this place felt almost surreal. It looked so untouched. No windows were broken that she could see. The roof looked whole and wasn't sagging. There was no paint to peel, because it was all glass and she couldn't see if there were any disorder within because the windows were reflective. It was intimidating, this thing that stood impervious to the devastation that had spread around it, from it even, if Dr. Pazzo was to be believed.

"What if she isn't here?" asked Frank as they reached the dark, smooth rotating door.

"She left Dr. Carton's lab seven weeks ago now. Unless she's living here I doubt that she *will* be here."

"Then why are we here?"

"I want to make sure the vial isn't in the vault. And maybe Dr. Schneider left some clue where she went. She wouldn't have been very careful, she had no idea she'd be followed."

Frank began to push on the door and Nella stopped him. "Be careful," she said softly, "we can't see inside. We have no idea if anyone else is in there."

He pulled the pistol out of the pack and gripped it tight. They turned the door together, entering the building at a slow, careful crawl. It was still inside and completely spotless. As if it were all waiting for the light switches to be turned on and it would all start up again.

"The scavenge scouts were right. No one's touched this place in all these years," Nella said.

"I doubt anyone even knew this place existed, except for the people who worked here."

"And we know what happened to them. But why is the lobby so immaculate?"

"I'm sure Carton sent them home at the first signs of Infection. He was better equipped to recognize them than others," Frank said, his voice a dry, bitter

rind between them.

“But he said he watched them from the lab for a week before fleeing.”

“I imagine there were great crowds of people both sick and well moving on the road past here. Some of them were bound to wander by here. Some probably knocked on this door for help. And he just watched them get killed.” Frank’s mouth had tightened and she could see the edge of his jaw pulse as he ground his teeth. “Come on, Nella, let’s get this over with, this place gives me the creeps.”

He stepped behind the reception desk and finding an empty shelf, stowed the pack. He kept the pistol and handed the lantern to Nella.

“Is it okay if you carry that?” he asked.

“Yes, I’m fine.” She held up the pale light and it made a pitifully small circle in the large lobby. “Frank, maybe we should find someplace to sleep and go over the whole place in the morning. We could miss something in the dark. And I didn’t see anywhere else since we left the farmhouse.”

Frank frowned. “I know it’s not ideal,” she said, “and I don’t want to stay overnight anymore than you do, but I don’t really see any alternative. And I’m exhausted.”

“Okay,” he agreed, “but first we take precautions.” He picked up a lobby chair and wedged it in the rotating door so that it couldn’t move at all. “Let’s see if we can find a first aid station and change your bandages. Maybe we’ll even find antibiotics.”

They made their way across the dark lobby and down a glassed in hallway. Nella tried nervously to block the lantern on one side with her body until she remembered that the glass was one way. Still, when they reached the first floor offices she felt somewhat more secure. The silence made Nella want to hold her breath. They tried each door along the hall, finding only desk after empty desk.

“There may not be a first aid station on this level,” Nella whispered, “They may be on the lab floors.”

“In a place this big you’d think there would be something on each level—surely a security office or something. They wouldn’t have left something like this unguarded. Even my tiny law firm had a security office.”

They had almost reached the end of the corridor, where it branched off to the right and Nella caught a flicker of blue out of the corner of her eye. She froze and switched the lantern off with one finger.

“Nella, what—” started Frank. She shook her head and he was quiet. There was another flicker, like the flashing reflection of water. Nella looked down the side hallway. It was a slim tube of night, blank, unmoving, dead. Every door was closed except the last. Blue and gray light burst and receded across that corner of the hallway. There was no sound, just the moving flashes. Frank gently pushed

past her, one long arm pulling her protectively behind his slim frame, the other holding the pistol. They were slow, as if it were a dream, a nightmare of endless swimming. Nella held the lantern in her aching right arm and let the fingers of her left hand brush one wall so she wouldn't fall if she tripped on something unseen.

The flashes made the darkness worse. Her eyes couldn't adjust. She felt sweat pool in the inside of her elbow and at her neck.

There was a loud screech and Nella's knees locked, cramping almost instantly. She saw Frank straighten and freeze for a few seconds. *It's an office chair*, she realized, *someone stretching in an old swivel office chair*.

Frank started forward again and she tried not to stumble as she took an extra few steps to catch up with him. They were only halfway down the hall.

She had time to wonder what he was going to do if it was someone dangerous. Was he really ready to fire the gun? He hadn't been last time. She felt a twisting thread of pain spiral down her arm, as if it were being bitten all over again. She wished it were she carrying the weapon. But a wave of shame burnt away the oily fear that clung to her. He was trying to protect her. He had protected her yesterday, even if it was a little late.

They neared the door and Frank pressed her gently against the wall and out of sight. He swung the door open and stood in the frame. Nella shut her eyes, bracing herself for the gunshot. At the same time she made a fervent wish that he wouldn't be forced to use it.

"Dr. Schneider?" he asked, his voice panicked and unbelieving.

"Who are you? How do you know me? Are you here from the government?" The woman's voice sounded tired and there was another screech as she stood up from the office chair.

"No- well, yes, but we're not here for the reason you think," said Frank, lowering the gun.

"We?"

Nella stepped into the fluttering blue light. "Dr. Schneider, you have no idea how relieved we are to find you here."

Dr. Schneider

Gerta Schneider was far more worn and disheveled than the image Nella remembered from Dr. Pazzo's video. The light from the television screen only added extra shadows to her eye sockets and cheeks. She was surprised Frank had recognized the woman at all. Nella wasn't sure she would have.

"If you're here to bring me in for the trial, you'll have to wait. I'm doing

something far more important. I promise I won't try to flee, and I'll come without giving you trouble if you just let me have a little more time." Dr. Schneider glanced first at Nella and then Frank. Her shoulders hunched like a cornered animal ready to spring away.

Nella and Frank exchanged a look and Nella took a step forward. "We know why you're here Dr. Schneider. Dr. Carton told us you came back to find the more powerful strain of the Recharge bacteria. We just want to make sure it was destroyed."

Dr. Schneider sank back into the squealing office chair. "So the world knows then. Are you military? No- no you're Robert's attorney aren't you?"

"Frank Courtlen, yes I'm Robert Pazzo's lawyer. But besides the three of us, very few people know about the bacteria. We came to make sure it's destroyed before it can be released or cause a panic. We don't have much time before the military shows up though."

"And who are you?" she said, turning toward Nella.

"Nella Rider, the court psychologist."

"How did you get caught up in all this?"

"Dr. Pazzo gave us some recordings from your lab."

Dr. Schneider smiled grimly. "I ought to have guessed. Well, Dr. Rider, Mr. Courtlen, it would seem we are all far too late. Someone, or several someones have already been through here. Whoever it was broke into the lab vault. The *only* thing they took was the Recharge vial." She waved her hand toward the security monitors, "I've been looking for a clue in the security camera footage. Unfortunately, some time ago the solar panels for the generator were obstructed by leaves and dirt from storms, so the coverage is intermittent at best. I cleaned them off over a month ago, but if you are thinking of turning on the lights, I'd reconsider. There is still at least one herd of Infected wandering nearby, not to mention the Looters."

"We know," Nella said grimly.

"How far have you watched?" asked Frank.

"I've gone back four years now. So far only a scavenging team and a few herds of Infected have even shown up on the screen. Only the scavenging team entered, it might have been them, but they left with medical supplies over six months ago. If they had the bacteria, why hasn't it hit yet? Besides, the other samples in the vault are beginning to denature. Some of it would have died within months, but the freeze dried samples should be good for years. I think the vault has been open for a very long time."

"Was the Recharge bacteria freeze dried? Could it still be infectious?" Nella almost choked on the question.

“The samples we were working with were frozen but we had two backup vials freeze dried. They are all missing. The freeze dried vials could be good for a decade or more.” Dr. Schneider rubbed her eyes with the heel of one hand. “What’s worse is that the vials are small and require no special equipment. They could be anywhere, with anyone. Except here, where they are supposed to be.” She sighed.

“We’ll help you,” said Nella, “we’ll figure out who has them, we have to. But I’m badly hurt and need rest. Frank does too, and you look like you haven’t slept in months. Is there an infirmary here or a first aid station? Can we sleep tonight and go over everything in the morning?”

Dr. Schneider shrugged. “Why not? It’s been eight years, what’s one more day? I can’t look at this anymore today any way. Come on, I made one of the executive offices pretty comfortable when I came back. We can at least turn on the lights up there.”

Dr. Schneider flipped off the monitor and the room was clotted darkness.

“Nella, the lamp,” Frank’s voice was low but anger writhed beneath it. Nella turned the lantern back on. Frank had raised the pistol toward Dr. Schneider again. Nella was startled but Dr. Schneider just looked exhausted, worn through like an old shoe.

“Let me make something clear Dr. Schneider,” Frank’s words were bitten off and Nella was frightened to see that his hands no longer shook around the gun grip.

“We know you were the one who persuaded Ann Connelly to infect herself and then let her wander out into the public carrying the germ. We know you stole a sample from your own partner in order to develop a bacteria completely impervious to any antibiotic, before you even finished testing the weaker version and against the strenuous objection of Robert Pazzo. You may not be *solely* responsible for what happened, but you bear the lion’s share.

“We are not your friends. You *are* going to be returned to the City for trial in a few days, whether or not we find the stolen sample. Nothing good has ever come from you. Your entire existence has caused nothing but misery and death. Even the Cure did more harm than good in most cases. I don’t believe anything good *can* come from you. But this is a chance to prevent more devastation from clinging to you.”

Dr. Schneider’s exhausted expression didn’t change. “I’m not going to try escaping Mr. Courtlen. I know Robert probably painted me as a villain, but none of what I did before the Plague, or since, was ever motivated by any evil intent.”

“Just greed,” Frank sneered.

“Please,” interrupted Nella gently, “can we find somewhere to rest instead

of arguing?" She wasn't really as exhausted as she let on, but she thought it was the best way to defuse the situation before someone got shot.

It had the desired effect, Frank immediately lowered the gun and came to her aid. Dr. Schneider moved toward the hallway. "This way," she said, "Try not to hold the lantern too high. The windows may be tinted but even the smallest light shining through will look like a lighthouse beacon these days."

Nella leaned on Frank to prevent him from becoming agitated again and they started down the hallway. "What made you come here now, Dr. Schneider?" she asked, "After all these years, why now?"

Dr. Schneider's voice floated coolly over her. "I thought the bacteria was safe here. Dr. Carton used his position to keep tabs on where the scavenging teams were going and this place was untouched. I always meant to get back here to destroy it, but something always prevented me. After a few years I just let it go and didn't think about it very often. No one was going to dig up this place or any like it. It's just an office building to anyone who didn't know what it was. Not exactly a high value looting target. And if they did come here, why would they take anything from the vault? The warning signs alone would scare the pants off the average Looter. But then I got a report that the scavenging scouts had been here and that the vault was lying open when they arrived.

"Only someone that wanted to destroy what was left of humanity would let the most dangerous diseases in the world thaw out of deep freeze to infect the next unlucky person to walk by. Thankfully, the frozen ones denatured long ago, before anyone could be infected. And the freeze dried ones are in a stable state, they won't infect anyone without being properly prepared. But I came anyway, to see if the Recharge Bacteria was safe, to destroy all the remaining viable samples of anything left in the vault. And when I found the Recharge samples missing, I decided to stay and try to figure out who took them."

Dr. Schneider pressed an elevator button. Nella had a strange sense of disorientation when the doors slid smoothly open to a brightly lit interior. They took the elevator to the executive floor.

"You said freeze dried samples need to be properly prepared- what would a person need to do that?" Frank was calm, but Nella could feel goosebumps rise on his arms and he tensed as he asked the question.

Dr. Schneider looked suspiciously at them for a few seconds. The elevator doors slid open with an alarming chime. The next hallway was just as dark. "Whoever has the bacteria would have to know what they are doing. Ideally, you'd open a freeze dried vial in a sterile environment and then basically drop the sample into a nutrient rich broth and let it incubate for a few hours or days. But it wouldn't really take that much to recreate those conditions. Someone with

access to bleach, alcohol or even vinegar can sterilize both the vial and an area to work. A good beef broth and some plain gelatin would do the rest. As long as the sample wasn't exposed to the elements, it would be viable even in a cool area within a few days. We aren't talking major surgery here."

Dr. Schneider opened a smooth wooden door and flicked on a light switch. Nella and Frank hurried in and shut the door. The windows in the large room were all covered with black garbage bags and a giant executive's desk was shoved against one wall. The rest of the room was relatively bare.

Something Frank Knows

"There's an executive bathroom attached. I brought up all the first aid kits I could find, just in case. You are welcome to use them. Do you mind if I take a look?" Dr. Schneider approached Nella and lifted the edge of her shirt without waiting for an answer.

"Uh- sure," said Nella, beginning to ease her way out of the sling and her sweater with Frank's help. She didn't want to look at the wound, afraid it would be worse than what she imagined, but she couldn't ignore Dr. Schneider's sharp intake of breath when the bandages were removed. Nella looked at Frank instead of Dr. Schneider. Instead of smiling reassuringly at her, he had gone very pale and tightened his arm around her waist.

"Let's put her down on the sleeping bags," Dr. Schneider said, "I've got some tetracycline from the labs. It should work if she has a staph infection, which is the most probable. It was a bite wasn't it?"

"Yes," said Frank as he eased Nella down onto the pile of sleeping bags in the center of the room, "But the guy was- well he was basically rotting from the inside out."

Frank followed Dr. Schneider toward the bathroom. "Did you sterilize the needle?" Dr. Schneider was asking as they walked out of earshot. Nella pictured Frank rolling his eyes and smiled in spite of her worry. At least they were working together. She sank back into the blankets, wishing for dose of aspirin. *Who knew it would take more than the end of the world to turn me into a drug addict, she thought with a wry smile, or that aspirin would be my drug of choice? Just as the bite on my hand gets better . . .* She tried to turn her thoughts away from her wounds as she waited for Frank and Dr. Schneider to return.

Dr. Schneider seemed to think it would be easy to revive the bacteria, but Nella realized very few people would still have access to beef. Bleach or vinegar, maybe, alcohol was practically it's own currency these days. Who

would have access to cows though? The military still raised and butchered them, the Farm raised a few, mostly for milk products though. When a bull was killed it was like a festival in the City though. Everyone got some, but it was barely a scrap. But Dr. Schneider had said just broth. And gelatin. Gelatin was from the bones wasn't it? Those would be less in demand, but someone would still have to wait around for the cow to be killed. And then know the right person to ask. Nella didn't know very many people that were able to keep cows. She'd seen a lot of chicken coops in the City, but those were easy. In fact Chris and Sevita had a few and Nella contributed her table scraps to keep them going. A cow required a lot more land. Those that lived on the outskirts maybe? Nella shook her head. This was the wrong way to go about it. She'd never expected to have to think like a detective and she kept starting at the wrong spots.

The real key would finding out who knew about the Recharge bacteria. Who knew about it and who would want to use it? Or did anyone want to use it? Maybe someone knew about it and wanted it destroyed. Why wouldn't they have simply stepped forward and said so? Well, Nella admitted, they hadn't exactly been shouting from the rooftops about the Recharge bacteria. Maybe whoever it was didn't know anyone had found out. Maybe they were involved with creating it. Nella sighed. It all came back to who knew about the bacteria in the first place. Until she answered that, nothing else was certain. Frank came back from the bathroom and Nella saw Dr. Schneider setting several supplies on the large desk.

"What are you going to do to me?" she asked Frank with a nervous laugh. He didn't return her smile but looked grim.

"Do you think you can manage a shower if I help?" he asked.

"Of course. There's a shower here?"

Frank helped her up. "Executive bathroom with all the bells and whistles."

"I would have killed for an office like this back in the day," Nella said. Frank finally grinned.

"Back in the day when you were still a lowly student intern?" he said. Nella laughed. They walked to the bathroom.

"I can probably do this myself," she said softly so that Dr. Schneider wouldn't overhear. Frank hesitated. "Don't be disappointed," she laughed, "this is not going to be attractive."

Frank blushed and smiled. "It's not that," he said, his tone turned serious, "Dr. Schneider thinks you have a fever and with the blood you've already lost, you might faint if you get in the hot water."

"There's hot water?" Nella said, distracted from her embarrassment for a moment.

"Yeah, the solar cells were meant for the whole building to run on. One tank of hot water isn't going to touch it." Frank shut the door. "I can sit with my back to the shower if you want."

Nella shook her head. "No, that's okay. I'm not entirely sure how well I can clean it out by myself anyway." She forced herself to look at her shoulder. It had formed a soft, dark scab, but the skin around the wound glowed and baked. It wasn't as horrific as she'd been expecting. She looked in the mirror, gingerly touching the deep red gouge that ran from the bottom of her breast to her hip. She was relieved that it was only slightly sore and not crawling with heat like her shoulder.

"You'll forget it's there after a while," Frank said from behind her, "and at least it's not on your face so casual observers won't remind you constantly."

A pang of shame struck Nella. "I wasn't thinking of the scar. I'm just glad that scrape is clean."

He lifted the hair from her shoulder and away from her wound. He kissed the base of her neck just outside the hot puffy ring of her wound. "Nella, I'm so sorry. I should have—"

She turned around to face him and held his bristly chin in her hands. "There wasn't anything you could do. We both knew what might happen. I got off pretty lightly considering. You didn't do this to me."

"I should have made you stay at the farm. You were so weak. And now I've made you even sicker."

"I'll be okay. You got everything out," she shuddered, "and if we clean it now, I should start to get better." She let him go and he stepped slightly back. He laid the gun beside her on the counter. He turned and locked the door. She watched him in the mirror as he stopped and stared at the doorknob.

"What is it?"

He shook his head but kept staring at the knob.

"What's wrong Frank?"

He looked at her, his face stricken with shock. "I can't tell you."

"What? Why?"

"I just can't. I'm sorry. Ask me later, when- when everything is over. Ask me anything then Nella, but I can't tell you now."

Frank collapsed onto the toilet lid, limbs folding like a marionette that had been cast away. He squeezed his head in his hands. "This is insane. What are we doing here?" He looked up at her as if she had some kind of answer for him.

"Trying to save what's left of the world."

"Right. A psychiatrist and a lawyer. The stuff of legends."

"Hey," she said crossing the room toward him, "We made it this far, didn't

we?” She stopped in front of him and touched his shoulder. He pressed a hand on her stomach, touching the edge of the scratch gently.

“Yes. We got here. But I ruined you. And what did we come all this way for after all anyway?” Frank stared past her at the door again. Nella laughed to cover her confusion.

“I’m not ruined.” She turned his face away from the door and back toward her, “And you didn’t cause any of this.”

What had he noticed? She glanced at the doorknob but didn’t dare to stare. She scraped the backs of her nails against his stubble. “This must be itchy,” she smiled trying to refocus him. His smile was automatic and it never reached wherever his eyes had gone. Nella sighed and stepped back. She turned on the shower. The hiss of the water snapped him free of his thoughts. Nella fumbled with her bra for an achy, frustrating moment and then felt his long fingers brushing her hair from her neck and unsnapping the clasps.

“You never will ask for help, will you?”

She didn’t answer, but stepped out of the large jeans and then her underwear without looking behind her. She stood quietly so that she could hear the thud of his heavy shoes, first one and then another hitting the floor. His belt clicked and jangled and then the soft ripple of clothes falling away. She looked at the shower and tried not to feel the ache in her shoulder.

“Well?” he said, “Are you going to get in?”

Nella took a deep breath. “This is really going to hurt.”

“Dr. Schneider said she had a little bit of morphine if you needed-”

Nella whirled around in alarm. “Frank, promise you won’t let her inject me with *anything*. I don’t know her. I don’t trust her.”

“That’s what I thought you would say.”

“I can’t believe you are leaving her out there unguarded after that speech downstairs.”

Frank’s smile vanished. “Where is she going to go? It’s pitch black and there are Infected and Looters in every direction. Besides, I don’t really much care whether she really goes back for trial or not.”

“You don’t? Why not?”

“No, I don’t. The way I see it, she’s never going to live happily ever after. Even if she escaped, she would be living out here, in constant fear and danger, without allies, without a safe haven. A lifetime of that is enough punishment even for my worst enemy.”

“Then why tell her we are taking her back?”

“Because the world needs her to go on trial. They need some sort of justice for the people involved in this.”

Nella frowned. "You mean the world needs vengeance. Not justice."

"If you like that word better. I guess, yeah, the world needs some kind of revenge for what it has lost. Because there isn't justice enough for what's been done to us. By us. It always seems to go that way, after bad times."

"But this was an accident at worst, not a planned attempt to wipe out the world. Why her and not Dr. Pazzo? Why her and not Ann? After all Ann was a willing patient zero. Who gets to decide?"

He put a hand on her hip. "Nella, I'm no longer sure that it *was* an accident. I'm not so sure that whatever happens next wasn't planned before either of us got involved."

"What are you talking about?"

"Never mind, get in before the water turns cold, you're covered in goosebumps."

Nella realized she was looking at him without meaning to. She blushed and stepped into the shower. The water was too heavy, like thousands of flaming hail stones smashing into her bruised skin. The pain was so intense for a moment that she thought she would vomit, but then Frank was standing in front of her, holding her against his still-cool skin. "It's okay," he kept saying in a voice she felt, rather than heard, rattle in his chest. She didn't know why he kept saying it until the wave of nausea passed and she heard her own voice sobbing and felt her legs shaking underneath her. Her skin gradually stopped screaming as if she'd been peeled down to the raw nerves and the water started to feel softer and more natural.

"I'm sorry," she said at last, "You must think I'm such a coward. I can't handle even one bite and you had a dozen. I can't imagine dying this way, devoured alive." She shut her eyes and shuddered.

"I don't think you're a coward. It was excruciating and I was only bitten by a small boy. You had a piece torn off by a full grown man." She felt him catch a sob and hold it back, but his voice was thick, clotted, when he began again. "I try not to think about what it must be like to die that way either. I can't forget how sad and frightened Sarah looked as I leapt at her. I think of it every day."

She pulled back from him and looked up at him. "Frank, I'm so sorry. I should have thought before I opened my mouth."

Frank shook his head and pushed a strand of wet hair off of her face. "Don't be sorry. I'm glad you can forget that detail about me, even if it's only for a moment. It's more than I deserve and I'm grateful there is someone in the world who doesn't immediately and perpetually think of me as a monster." He reached past her for the soap, quietly clearing his throat. "Real soap. Are you ready?"

It wasn't as bad as she had expected, now that the initial shock of the water had worn off. She was sore, but clean, feeling hollowed out and left to dry in the sun. The heat of the water soon made her dizzy and another wave of nausea passed over her, forcing them out of the warm bathroom. The cool, dry air of the exterior office was a relief, though Frank still had to help her sit beside the large desk. Dr. Schneider looked grim, but she was relatively gentle.

"You know," she said as she inspected the stitches in Nella's shoulder, "The Recharge bacteria was never meant to harm anyone. I don't know if Dr. Pazzo ever told you that. It was meant to help. It was supposed to change everything for the better."

"But you didn't follow normal procedures. Ones that were set up to avoid disaster like this," Nella said gently.

"It wasn't stubbornness or greed that made me speed up testing," Dr. Schneider snapped. "All the primary tests were exactly, *exactly* as predicted. Robert assured me there was nothing abnormal at all. This method was supposed to help people. It was supposed to help police and medical aid workers and firemen make it safely through crises. No more injuries due to fatigue or slow thinking. No more lives lost because of careless mistakes due to overworked specialists. It was supposed to help lift depression and alleviate all the ills stemming from exhaustion, stress and trauma. All without drugs. No risk of abuse or addiction. Very low cost, much lower than other treatments. Can you imagine the changes in society when everyone, down to the poorest could be treated for mental illness? Can you imagine the happier, healthier, perhaps even less violent place it could have been? This was something we needed *immediately*. The world was tearing itself apart and this bacteria faced years, decades even, of further testing and verification. It would have been lunacy *not* to test a more powerful strain at the same time."

Nella drew in a hissing breath as Dr. Schneider became more vigorous in applying antibiotic cream onto her shoulder. Frank grabbed Dr. Schneider's wrist to stop her and the doctor looked up. "Sorry," she said, "surely you can see why I'd want to move the testing along? People needed this technology as soon as we could produce it. Not ten years later. You must understand how beneficial it was supposed to be. It was going to change medicine forever."

"It did, Dr. Schneider. Here we all are, almost a decade later, and I'm in danger of dying from an infection which would have meant a simple trip to the pharmacy before. Medicine *has* changed. It's been set back by a century. Maybe forever."

"Not just medicine," Frank broke in, "Civilization, in fact. Our grandparents had easier lives than our children will. Than our grandchildren

will.”

Dr. Schneider unrolled a gauze bandage around Nella’s arm. “I hardly think that’s a fair judgment,” she said quietly, “I *did* do my best to fix it.”

Nella sighed. “It’s not us you have to convince, though I can’t say you are even doing that. Help us find the lost samples and maybe the world will find you more persuasive.”

Frank’s color rose and he glanced toward the bathroom door again. It was so quick that Nella barely saw it. Dr. Schneider taped the end of the bandage down and cleared away the first aid kit, walking away from them. Frank leaned against the large desk and watched Dr. Schneider. Nella watched him.

“You know where it is.” Nella was shocked to realize it.

Frank looked shaken and she could see small points of sweat glittering on his head. “No!” he said loudly and then lowered his voice to a whisper, bending toward her. “I swear Nella, if I did then I’d tell you. I’d tell everyone, consequences be damned.”

“Then you guess.”

“Not even that.” He glanced at Dr. Schneider to be sure she wasn’t watching them. “I promise, the moment I know something, *anything* for sure, then I *will* tell you. My hunches though, would only do harm.”

He leaned back as Dr. Schneider returned. She handed Nella a pill bottle. “These will help with the pain. No more than two at a time.”

“That’s my cue,” said Frank grabbing the lantern, “I’ll be right back with the pack.”

Dr. Schneider looked nervous as Frank left the room. Nella was too exhausted to wonder why. She dry swallowed a pill and winced at the bitter powder it left on her tongue. She thought about slipping the sling back over her neck so that she wouldn’t move her shoulder in her sleep. But then her elbow creaked and cramped in protest and she decided against it. Dr. Schneider had already slipped into her sleeping bag and was facing the empty wall. Assured that no one would interrupt her thoughts for a moment, Nella looked back at the bathroom door. What was so important about it? It was just a door. It wasn’t special in any way, and she racked her brain trying to think if they had seen an identical one anywhere. No memories were triggered. It was just a *door*. But that wasn’t right. He hadn’t been looking at the door. He had been staring at the doorknob. Nella stood up. She took a few steps toward the bathroom when she heard the elevator chime down the quiet hall. Her limbs tensed as a painful jolt of adrenaline shot through her. *It’s only Frank, of course*, she thought, but she retreated to the seat by the desk again, still puzzled.

“Fresh clothes,” Frank said with a grin as he walked through the door.

"Bed," Nella said with a smile. Her limbs felt like giant kelp floating in a current and there was a buzzing tingle behind her eyes. She wasn't sure if it was fatigue or the drugs. She let Frank help her dress in something clean and then crawled under the sleeping bag. She managed to wait until he was lying beside her, his hand curled around hers, before she fell down the smooth grey well in her mind.

The Vault

The windows were blocked, so Nella had no idea whether it was day or night when she woke, but she sat up with only one idea in her head. It wasn't the door Frank had been fascinated with. It wasn't the doorknob either. *It was the lock.* But why? Nella looked around her. Both Frank and Dr. Schneider were still asleep. She thought about taking another painkiller to stop the gnawing grind in her shoulder, but the idea that Frank was bothered by the lock had grown enormous in her mind. Something important hovered just beyond her groggy thoughts. If she could concentrate, she knew she could find out what it was. She had the overwhelming feeling it was something she *ought* to know.

Nella fumbled in the dark for the lantern. She switched it on, blocking the light with her body and slipped out of the quiet office. The hall and the world outside were pale gray with early morning light. She switched off the lantern and left it just outside the door. For a moment she was at a loss. What was she doing? She decided to go to the vault. If anything in this place had to do with a lock, it must be there. She was no detective, but she had an undeniable urge to see it for herself, to see if there were any clues about who had been there before her. She walked down the hallway toward the elevator. When she got to the smooth little panel with the call button, she began to feel distinctly creepy. What if she called the elevator and it arrived with someone already inside? She told herself not to be ridiculous, but once she had imagined it, there was no shaking the idea. She became more and more certain that if she called it, there would *definitely* be someone inside. Would it be a decomposing corpse simply jumbled like an abandoned marionette against the back wall? Or a Looter armed to the teeth and ready to grab whatever, whomever he wanted? Or just an Infected, mad and starving, stretched hide over the empty drum of its ribs, all jaw and talon? Nella backed away from the elevator doors almost without realizing it. She decided to look for the stairs instead.

The stairs were almost worse. With a slim window every other floor, the weak morning light was barely a glow against the concrete floor. Every step Nella took was echoed three times in the small stairwell so that it sounded like

there were a crowd running after her. She forced herself to keep climbing, more from shame at letting the idea of the elevator defeat her, than in any real desire to get to the vault alone. Nella was grateful that it was only one floor. She had to rest at the top, sitting on the last step in front of the stairwell door. Her shoulder pounded and her breath was harsh and loud in the stairwell. She worried briefly at her body's weakness, wondering if the infection in her arm might truly kill her. She'd been exaggerating the night before, trying to drive a point home with Dr. Schneider, but now it hit her as true. The drugs to help her were simple. Simple enough that they were still being reproduced in a rudimentary way, but not for public consumption. Not for an affordable price, anyway. Nella sighed, startling herself with the echoes. Her body was just going to have to shake off the infection by itself. And climbing stairs when it was unnecessary wasn't going to help her do that. She stood up and opened the staircase door.

She felt tiny ants of unease creep over her skin as she faced a rounded silver door surrounded by contamination instructions and biohazard warnings in bright yellow and black, like hornets descending upon her. The door, which was supposed to be failsafe, airtight, unbreachable, was propped open with what looked like an old shoe. Nella felt a dryness creep from a patch in the back of her throat until it filled her chest with desert sand. *Don't be stupid*, she told herself, *those doors haven't been necessary for years. Dr. Schneider, the scavenger scouts and whoever took the sample have all been inside and they are fine.* Still, she couldn't argue the instinctual dread she had of entering. It was so palpable that Nella could imagine the smell of infection, could almost convince herself that she smelled a slight sourness, like fruit turning or like the clinging scent where roadkill once died, years before. She knew infection didn't have a smell, but she almost smelled it anyway. She thought if she moved her head just right, she'd catch a whiff in the breeze her movement made. She reminded herself again not to be ridiculous and walked through the airlock door.

She was in a dark, tiny passageway. She found the light switch and powerful overheads clicked on. The small room was lined with benches and white plastic suits. At the far end was a sink and another airlock door, again held open with a shoe. The first one's mate. Nella wondered why there were no alarms. Wasn't there supposed to be an alarm when the airlocks weren't working correctly? She passed through the door and turned on the next light. The overheads competed with a small star of purple light sitting in the center of the room. She tried not to look at it, afraid it would somehow harm her and passed through the next open door, this one held open by a silver instrument cart. The drains in this room hinted that it was for decontamination showers, but nothing happened as Nella passed through, and she again wondered why none of the

decontamination systems were working as intended. Was it because the samples were all dead? Or had they been disabled? And if they were disabled, who had enough knowledge of lab procedure to know how to do that? The airlock at the end of the shower room gaped open into a dark void. She held her breath without even realizing it and stepped inside, fumbling for the light switch, but it did nothing when flipped. She waited until her eyes adjusted to the dim, milky light seeping in through the high, dirty windows.

Nella immediately realized why no alarms were activated with the airlocks forced open. Whoever had opened the vault had attempted to incinerate it. She wondered how the rest of the floor, the rest of the building, actually, had avoided catching fire. All of the surfaces were covered with soot. The scavenger team and Dr. Schneider had left footprints in the thin layer of ash on the floor. Beakers had melted into coin sized puddles of glass, now dark medallions fused with the lab tables. Along the edges of the room were round vats, all hanging open like hell's buried treasure chests dug up. Nothing else was recognizable. Nella walked carefully over to one of the vats. They had no soot inside and the glass vials seemed intact, which meant they must have been opened after the fire rather than before. Except one. She could see it in the gray light, its lid cracked and blackened. She walked over to it. She could only see into the top part of the cylinder, but it was enough. The vials had melted in place, their rack holders surrounding a thin stem of collapsed glass. Three empty slots were all that was left of the Recharge bacteria.

“I found it like this, except the other storage containers were closed.”

Nella whirled around, startled by Dr. Schneider’s voice. She was relieved to see Frank standing by the door behind the doctor.

“I tried to find out if it had been misclassified, or if the vials had been moved to another container.” Dr. Schneider peered into the closest container. “I went through the records and surviving vials for all ten thousand samples. One by one. But the Recharge bacteria was gone. That’s when I started on the security tapes,” she looked up at Nella, “which I recommend we get back to. We only have a few days.”

“Wait, Dr. Schneider. You never said anything about a fire. Aren’t these labs designed to initiate a burn when there is a containment leak?”

“It’s not automatic. You wouldn’t want someone burned alive in here. There is a panel outside the next door and one in the security office downstairs in case of an accident. The burn can be initiated from either place.”

“But the power would have to be on, right?”

“Well, yes. But the lab also has a back up generator. Besides, the entire building also has emergency power from the solar cells.”

Nella walked toward the lab door. She noticed Frank looked nervous and shot him a confused glance. “How long was the backup generator designed to run?”

“Seventy two hours. But right now it’s on the solar energy.”

“But those panels were not functioning when you got here, right?”

“Yes, they were luckily unbroken, but they were covered with leaves and sticks that had blown over them through the years. Where is this all going?”

“When the main power went off, how long would it take to switch to the solar panels?”

“Dr. Carton said the solar panels were already working when he left the lab after the outbreak. In fact, he said he had planned to stay here, but the solar panels couldn’t handle the whole building’s power and he was worried about lack of heat and running out of food. That’s why he left.”

Frank stared intently at Nella. At last he said, “I think we should watch the first security recordings. Not work our way backwards.”

“What?” asked Dr. Schneider, “Why?”

Nella turned to look at Dr. Schneider. “When I was in medical school, we were required to learn biosafety procedures, regardless of our final professions. Level four labs, which, I assume this is, are required to have the capability for a controlled burn of several hours in case of an accident. That means a steady stream of fuel. Which also means a steady source of power to control it. The solar panels just aren’t reliable enough. Dr. Carton would already have drained the battery significantly after the main lines went out. It had to be when the backup generators were triggered.”

“Well, that wouldn’t have been until the solar panels weren’t creating enough power to sustain this lab.”

“Right,” said Frank, “the outbreak was in December, remember? That’s why it was so bad, because travel and public interaction was so much heavier than normal.”

“I remember quite clearly, Mr. Courtlen. As I said, Dr. Carton was worried about the heat-”

“Exactly,” interrupted Frank, “And how much less would the solar panels have produced when they were covered with snow? The backup generators must have kicked on within weeks, maybe days. Certainly within the first year.”

“Whoever did this covered their tracks with the fire. And knew the control procedures were still in place and available for use.” Nella said it slowly, thinking it aloud rather than announcing it. Frank looked downright ashen and seemed to sway like a tall tree in wind as she said it. Dr. Schneider turned and ran from the lab. Frank sprang after her. Nella felt exhausted, the pain from her

shoulder leaking into her side as well. She thought about the stairs she'd have to take if she avoided the elevator again.

She stumbled out to the changing room and sat on the bench. She disliked waiting for help, but she knew that Frank would be back soon, disappointed that the crucial footage was missing. Nella already knew that a person didn't break into a level four lab, set a fire to cover their tracks and then smile at the camera.

She gently rubbed her sore shoulder, looking at the dead electrical panel near the airlock. Whoever did this had to have both the entry code and know how to activate the emergency purge. A lab employee? Or maybe someone that was able to get into the security office? It wouldn't have been hard with the building abandoned in the panic. Nella closed her eyes, half dozing as she tried to think through who would have known about and wanted access to the Recharge bacteria.

Dr. Carton and Dr. Schneider were both obvious choices. They both knew the building procedures for the lab. They both knew about the bacteria, and they, more than anyone else except Dr. Pazzo, perhaps, would want to keep it secret. Without the samples and documentation, no one would ever be able to prove that they had caused the epidemic. That, in essence, was what Dr. Schneider was doing here now. But someone else had beaten both Schneider and Carton to it. And that person hadn't destroyed the samples, just taken them away. What were they planning on doing with them? Why do nothing for almost a decade?

The only other people that knew about the existence of the resistant strain were Dr. Pazzo and Ann Connelly, at least, as far as Nella knew. If the samples had been taken in order to blackmail one of the scientists, then the thief would have had to ensure that Ann and Dr. Pazzo survived in order to be witnesses. Nella opened her eyes. Whoever had taken care of Dr. Pazzo and Ann also stole the Recharge samples. She shook her head. What were they waiting for? The trial had already started without Dr. Carton and without Dr. Schneider. The time to come forward or to get what they wanted had already come. Maybe it wasn't blackmail.

Revenge? That seemed more likely to Nella. She had met many, many people who wanted revenge for what had happened. For what each person had faced, for what they had to do, even now, to survive. She had even met people so miserable and full of anger that they'd take the rest of the world with them by releasing the bacteria if it meant vengeance. She sighed as she realized that maybe even Frank had been that angry once. That maybe even *she* had been that angry once.

But then why keep Ann and Dr. Pazzo alive? They were readily available scapegoats. Nella looked back toward the seared lab. This had happened quickly.

Too quickly after the outbreak for some elaborate plot of revenge. It was too fast. Who would have known that these particular people were responsible? It took the military years to figure it out. No one could know that fast. Unless Dr. Carton were lying about where he was after the outbreak. Or someone else was.

Nella was too tired to keep wearing out the circular path in her brain. She felt a buzzing behind her eyes and the heat from her shoulder was overwhelming. She closed her eyes.

Nella woke with a gasp as cool water hit her...

Nella woke with a gasp as cool water hit her face. "Wake up Nella, please wake up." Frank was hovering over her.

"Is it the Infected? I don't think I can get to the farm house." It sounded wrong in her ears. As if she'd already said it.

"No Infected, we're safe. In the lab, remember?"

Nella tried to turn her head to see but she became dizzy and she shut her eyes again. The cool water splashed her again. She shivered.

"You have to do something!" She heard Frank yelling at someone. He was so angry.

"There's nothing I can do. She's got a massive dose of antibiotics already." The woman's voice was nasty and cold.

Nella opened her eyes again. "What do you want me to do, Frank?" Her voice was dry and her throat felt as if it held the sun. He bent over her again. "You don't need to do anything. Just rest." He passed a wet cloth over her face. She felt her shirt being unbuttoned and he pressed the cold cloth against her chest. She shivered again.

"It's too cold," the woman's voice floated over them again. Nella tried to remember whose it was but she couldn't. "If you make her shiver her temperature will only go up more. You need to put her in a warm bath."

"Is there a bath here somewhere?"

"Down on the clinical floors. There are a few patient rooms. I don't know if the water runs anymore."

The world tilted as Frank lifted her. "Let's go." Nella looked up at his face. It was pinched and menacing.

"Don't be mad, Frank," she said.

He looked down at her and brushed the sweaty hair from her forehead. "I'm not mad at you Nella." The world lurched as he walked toward the elevator. Nella tried not to vomit. She heard the elevator chime.

"Not there," she whispered, "not there, the dead people will get you." She

drifted off again into a thick drowze.

Water crawled under her legs and Nella woke up again in a dusty tub.

"We have to turn the lights off," hissed the woman's voice. Nella forced herself to focus. Dr. Schneider looked even more wild and angry than yesterday. "The Infected or the Looters will see."

"Shut up. If you're that worried go find some blankets to cover the windows. Otherwise stay out of my way. You already told me there's nothing else you can do." Nella tilted her head back and saw Frank kneeling by her shoulder. Dr. Schneider slammed the door on her way out. Frank looked down and saw she was awake. He smiled and held up a white cup. "Can you drink something for me?" He tilted the cup toward her before she could answer. It was cool and soft on her throat. The bath water was warm and pooling around her lower back. She vomited up the mouthful of water he'd just given her.

"Sorry," she said.

He wiped her mouth with the cool cloth. "It's okay. We'll try again in a minute."

"Why are we here?"

Frank stroked her hair and she let her cheek cool on the dusty porcelain. "I have to cool you down. Your shoulder is infected very badly and you have a bad fever."

"Is there a tooth in there?" she asked and immediately knew that was wrong.

She saw a tear roll down Frank's long cheek. "No, the tooth is gone. I took it out, remember?"

"Don't cry. I'll try to drink again."

He held the cup for her. She swallowed a little and it stayed. Frank shut the water off. He splashed her stomach and chest with the warm water.

She closed her eyes for what seemed like a moment. When she opened them, she was back on the sleeping bag and Frank was pacing the room. She didn't see Dr. Schneider. She was half lucid and sweating through the fabric underneath her.

"Did you find it?" she said, still not understanding why Frank was so worried.

He sat down beside her and pressed the damp cloth to her neck. "Find what?" he said.

"The lock. No the key. Dr. Pazzo's key. Or was it Dr. Schneider's? No. She broke out."

Frank went pale. "Nella, are you really awake?"

"Yes, I think so. I'm still confused."

He held up a cup and she swallowed some water. “Tell me what to do. I’m not a doctor and Schneider won’t help. What do I do?”

Nella tried to think. She was so hot. “About the fever?” she guessed.

“Yes, what do I do? You have antibiotics already. We gave you another dose.”

She tried to sit up but couldn’t force herself up. Her shoulder blazed with pain. Frank caught her and held her up. She took the cup from him and swallowed another mouthful. Everything hurt, even her teeth. She looked at his worried face. “Nothing to do Frank. It’s old medicine, no good any more.”

Frank shook his head. “She said it should still work.”

Nella shrugged and then winced in pain. “Maybe it’s not the right medicine. The fever means my body is working. It has to get the teeth out.” Nella shook her head. “No, that’s not right. Take me to the shower. It’s too hot. I have to cool down.”

He looked doubtful but he lifted her up. “Not the elevator. There’s Infected in the elevator,” she said, fading.

She woke up in the shower. He was holding her and the water was cool on her skin. “Don’t die Nella,” he was saying.

“Everything dies Frank.” Her eyelids felt heavy and sore but she was truly aware this time. “It’s okay. The world will keep going.”

“Mine won’t.”

She lifted her face with an immense effort. “I love you,” she said.

She felt a soft rumble in his chest as he laughed. “Tell me again when you’re better and I’ll believe you.”

She heard the water turn off and he wrapped her in a towel. He carried her to the sleeping bag and she fell into a deep sleep where nothing chased her.

She woke up in the electric light of the office. Frank was sleeping beside her. She shifted to see if Dr. Schneider was there and Frank woke up. “How are you feeling?” he asked.

“How many days has it been?”

“Only two. Don’t worry. We have time. I should have made you stay at the farm house. You need to rest.”

She reached an aching, heavy arm to touch his face. “So do you. Go back to sleep.”

He turned and kissed her palm. “No,” he said, shaking his head, “Schneider said you need to eat if we’re going to move you in the next few days. Do you think you can?”

“I think so. Will you go to sleep if I do?”

He sat up and rummaged through the pack. “Only if you’ll sleep some

more too.” He found a can of beans. Nella made a face. “You need the protein,” he said.

She smiled at him. “Thank you for taking care of me,” she said.

Frank blushed and cranked the can opener.

Medical Revolution

It was almost laughably predictable. Nella watched Frank and Dr. Schneider comb through the first tapes for the third time without comment. She had tried to tell them that whoever set the fire in the vault must have had the security codes and it was unlikely that they’d left video footage of themselves behind. But Dr. Schneider was convinced that whoever it was would have missed *something*. There were so many power outages, that they couldn’t tell when the cameras had been deliberately stopped and when the solar cells had been depleted.

Nella tried to use the time more wisely, attempting to engage Dr. Schneider in conversation, but the videos engrossed the doctor’s attention. Nella had to wait until late afternoon, when they were all exhausted, to get Dr. Schneider to concentrate.

Dr. Schneider sat slumped in her chair not bothering to watch the video feed that never changed, where only the light moved. Frank had left, going back to the executive office to pack their gear in frustration. Nella sat, quite forgotten by both, and she watched Dr. Schneider.

“Who knew about the Recharge bacteria?”

“Huh?” Dr. Schneider looked wearily around at Nella.

“I know you and Dr. Carton knew, as well as Ann and Dr. Pazzo, but who else knew?”

Dr. Schneider pinched the bridge of her nose as she thought. “Well, if you mean the original version, the university administration had a vague overview of the project. Our funding partners had a few more details, but the in depth lab work was solely up to Dr. Pazzo, Ann and myself. I brought Dr. Carton in later. If you mean who knew about the more powerful strain, then it was only the four of us. Dr. Carton and myself didn’t want any extra attention until the trials were done. We were due to brief a team here on lab testing, but the outbreak happened first.”

Nella watched her intently, allowing the reason for her secrecy to pass by unspoken. “Do you think Dr. Carton was telling the truth about where he’s been since the outbreak?”

Dr. Schneider looked up with a sudden twitch of her head. Her eyes

narrowed and her lips twisted into a nasty, secretive grin. “What has Michael told you about where he’s been and what he’s done? Not the real truth, surely?”

The question prowled between them. Nella began to revise her opinion of Dr. Schneider almost without realizing it. “He told me that he was in such fear for his life that he resorted to aping the Infected. He told me he wandered for months that way until you found him and brought him back to the City.” She watched Dr. Schneider’s grin sour slightly. “He also told me that you made him-eliminate the evidence of your experimentation with the Cure until you got it right.” Nella felt her gorge rise, a painful stone scraping along her throat.

The nasty grin was back. Dr. Schneider leaned back in her seat. “Well, Dr. Rider, food was scarce. Waste not, want not, am I right?”

Nella kept her face neutral with some effort. “I thought you cared for Dr. Carton,” she said in a casual tone.

“What does my relationship with Dr. Carton have to do with anything?”

“I think your relationships with all of your business associates are at the root of why we’re here now. After all, it was your suggestion that Ann expose herself during your testing phase was it not? And your persuasion that convinced Dr. Carton to bypass procedure and steal a sample of the Recharge bacteria in order to work on a more powerful strain- against the express opinion of Dr. Pazzo. And your extended absences from the lab was a brilliant use of passive-aggression. After all, the sleep deprivation of both Ann and Dr. Pazzo caused them to miss not only symptoms they might have caught earlier, but also your activities with Dr. Carton’s lab.”

“I thought you were supposed to be impartial. I see Dr. Pazzo has persuaded you that I am the villain here. Let me remind you that he and Ann were free to leave at any point, they weren’t my slaves or captives. I’ve explained to you that Dr. Pazzo assured me that the strain was *safe*, that all the experimental results were normal. What does it matter if I persuaded Ann to progress the experiment at a slightly accelerated level? What happened would have happened anyway.”

“That argument may work in court with lay people, Dr. Schneider, but you and I both know that isn’t true. If the testing went as it ought to have gone, the human testers would have been isolated and observed. The chances of an epidemic resulting from a controlled experiment would have been minuscule.”

Dr. Schneider waved her hand dismissively. “Why are we even arguing? You’ve already decided that I’m guilty. Let me remind you that I was the one that cured the disease. What did Dr. Pazzo do? Nothing. He and Ann sat drooling in their monkey cages for months while I worked. Dr. Carton was demented, little more than a garbage disposal system. It was *me*. I cured all those people,

without me, what's left of civilization wouldn't be here. We'd all be dead or bestial. It's because of *me* that society continues."

Nella laughed bitterly, her professional mask flaking off in the heat of her anger. "Without you? Without you the world would be just as it was a decade ago. Without you, billions of people that are now dead would be living out their lives with their families. No one would be haunted by what they had to do to survive or what they'd done when they weren't themselves. You may have stopped the disease but you can't ever clean up the harm that you've done."

Dr. Schneider stood up, her dark eyes were empty holes in the pallor of her face. "Does this conversation have a point? You aren't my judge, I'm not here to justify myself to you."

"I was inclined to feel sorry for you before I met you. I was convinced that you were simply a victim of circumstance. I see now that I was wrong. You created the circumstance for yourself. I still might be sympathetic, except you, alone of all the people I've met Immune or Infected, you show no remorse at all. The point of this conversation was to find out if Dr. Carton was telling the truth about where he'd been. You've confirmed it rather callously, so I'll waste no more time on it. What we're looking for isn't here and I don't think you know any more about it than you've already said. The sooner we get back to the City and turn you over to the authorities, the better."

Nella began to get up and saw Frank watching them from the doorway. "I couldn't agree more," he said grimly. "Unfortunately, the sun is going down. I don't want to risk walking at night in the open. And Nella needs more sleep. We'll have to stay one more night."

Dr. Schneider sneered at Frank. "You *walked* here? The court must not want me that badly after all. We can take my car and get this over with. I don't want to be around you people any longer than necessary."

Nella looked surprised and Dr. Schneider whirled around toward her. "You underestimate me. You may be able to dismiss the Cure, but I assure you, most of the world will not. I've already retained the best attorney. When I find the stolen samples, and I *will*, I'll be heralded as a savior."

Frank's voice was quiet but menacing. "No one is ever going to believe you're a savior. I'll make sure of that."

"You're both officers of the court. You can't testify against me. It's a breach of confidence for Dr. Rider and a conflict of interest for you."

"Dr. Carton can testify," said Nella quietly. She stood up, ignoring Dr. Schneider's contempt for that suggestion. She and Frank headed back to the executive office, leaving Dr. Schneider to fume by herself.

"Sorry," Nella said into the silent elevator.

Frank smiled at her for the first time in what felt like days. “What for?”

“I didn’t want to create more tension, but I needed to find out if she or Dr. Carton were lying about where the samples are.”

“They aren’t here. I don’t think Dr. Schneider has any clue where they are.”

The elevator doors opened and they walked slowly into the artificial dark of the boarded up office. Frank flipped the light switch as the door closed behind them. The smile had faded from his face and he looked as if he had swallowed something bitter. “This was such a waste of a trip.” He turned toward her and gently untied the sling on her wounded arm. She sighed with relief as her arm relaxed.

“At least Dr. Schneider is going to be brought to trial,” Nella said as he checked her bandages. He scowled.

“Her karma would have gotten her in the end. It still will. She isn’t worth you getting injured like this.”

“What do we do now?”

Frank shook his head. “I don’t know. What I don’t get is why whoever has it has waited so long. What are they waiting for? Maybe the samples were destroyed after all.”

“Frank, you don’t know who has them do you?”

He sat down on the carpeted floor, hugging his long legs and staring off into space. “I don’t. I realize you think I’m hiding something from you, and-well, I guess I am. But I don’t think it is very important and I don’t think it has to do with the samples. I’ve just got a hunch that something is off. I’m not even sure what it is exactly.”

“Then I guess we’re back to figuring out what to do next.”

“We need to tell Judge Hawkins that we haven’t found anything. I’m afraid that whoever has it has been waiting for this trial, or the verdict. If that’s the case we need to prepare everyone somehow.” He glanced up at her, “And you need to get some medical attention. That’s going to cause questions as it is.”

“But if we warn people, then whoever has it may forget their plan and release the bacteria immediately.”

“What choice do we have?”

Nella sat down in front of him. “Give me a few more days. I know I’ve almost got it figured out. I can feel it, just beyond the edge of my thoughts. We can turn Dr. Schneider in to the prison and delay our conversation with Judge Hawkins until Sunday. That will give me tomorrow and the next day to work on it.”

“If that’s what you think would be best, that’s what we’ll do.”

They heard the elevator bell and exchanged a glance but stopped talking. Frank helped her into the sleeping bag and they went to bed without saying anything further to each other or Dr. Schneider.

The Warden

The sun was shining as if it were midsummer when they left Dr. Carton's lab. It made Nella feel more cheerful in spite of what she knew was to come. When the car emerged from the dark underground parking lot and onto the gravel, the exhaustion dropped away from her and she felt a snag in her breath, as if she were skimming over the world rather than in it. Frank was driving and Dr. Schneider had taken the passenger seat, so Nella couldn't catch his eye. She wished she could. In that minute, just for that minute, she felt as if everything was going to be all right. She didn't know where the Recharge bacteria samples were, or if they would be released, but for that minute, it didn't matter so much. The world would keep on going, the sun would be as bright and the spring would be as green with or without the last tiny anthills of remaining humans. Things would go on without her, too, and that was something that gave her great comfort.

Frank felt little need for secrecy on the return trip, and the only trouble they ran into was losing the road in the high grass a few times. He drove carefully and they were able to return to the military maintained road by late afternoon. Nella was fascinated in looking behind the car. She expected it to leave a heavy trail of tracks, but the grass was so thick from years of growth, that it mostly sprang up behind them, as if they had never passed there.

They stopped at the farmhouse around midmorning, wanting to see if the people they had cured remained. Frank got out of the car without saying anything, though Dr. Schneider kept asking why they had stopped. Nella waited in the car, afraid of what he would find. She heard him calling, "Hello!" several times in the still warm air. He walked quickly back to the car and leaned down to her open window with a grin. "All gone," he said, "the supplies too. No casualties."

Nella leaned back, relieved. They made it back to the junkyard in a matter of a few hours. They abandoned the extra car to the cheerful junkyard manager over the strenuous objections of Dr. Schneider. Nella had little sympathy for her, and Frank predicted that she would need it no longer. The afternoon cast long cool shadows across the road as they drove to the prison in silence. The car, like Frank, smelled like clean linen and Nella relaxed as she felt sleep pulling at her, a thrumming tide that echoed the tires. Returned to familiar surroundings and the

welcome sight of people walking in the warm evening, she slipped into a healing doze.

The slam of the door rocked the car and she woke, startled to find she had been sleeping so deeply. Frank was leading Dr. Schneider into the low gray lump of the prison. Nella straightened up, her arm stiff and painful in the sling. She tried to smooth the tangles out of her filthy hair with one hand and got out. She was mildly embarrassed to appear so disheveled, simply because she had striven to be professional since the beginning of the process. But if Frank could do it, so could she. She caught up to them just outside the heavy glass door. Frank held it open for her. His face was grim, but she knew it wasn't because of her. Dr. Schneider was almost scowling. Frank spoke briefly to a guard and then sat in an angular plastic chair as if at ease. Nella slipped into a chair next to him.

"We need to wait for the Warden Dr. Schneider," Frank said with a cold smile, "this may take a while, you may want to take a seat." Dr. Schneider just glared at him and continued standing. It was a good half hour before the Warden arrived from his office, with several guards in tow. Nella wondered if it were for show or part of procedure. Some things just clung on like that, even after all that had happened.

She thought the Warden looked more like an elderly priest than a hardened prison guard. "Mr. Courtlen, Dr. Rider, to what do I owe the pleasure?" he smiled jovially and shook each of their hands in turn, the florescent light bouncing off his glasses like a secret chuckle.

"We're here to turn Gerta Schneider over to your custody. She is wanted in connection with the December Plague case. She has been cooperative and accompanied us willingly. If there is any reason to note that, please do so."

The Warden looked startled. "Mr. Courtlen, this is highly unusual. There are procedures that must be followed, even these days—"

Dr. Schneider spoke up in a calm, smooth voice. "I trust you to make the arrangements then, Warden. If it makes the paperwork easier you can claim I turned myself in. I want my day in court. The world will see I'm not the villain I've been painted as," She glared at Nella, "So have your guards read me my rights or whatever you've got to do, and let's get this over with."

The Warden shrugged and told the guards to take Dr. Schneider to his office. He turned back to Frank and Nella. "You look like you've been drug down a gravel road on a dry day. Where have you been?"

Frank shook his head, "Sorry Warden, if I was allowed to say, then I would."

The Warden threw up his pudgy brown hands. "Okay, not trying to poke my nose where it isn't wanted. But I see Dr. Rider is injured. Perhaps we can

have the infirmary look at that while I pick her brain about our new inmate.”

Frank thanked the Warden so effusively and looked so relieved at the prospect of proper medical care for her, that Nella felt another wave of panic about her shoulder slam into her. After letting the Warden know that she didn’t believe Dr. Schneider needed a suicide watch, she was handed over to the uniformed medical staff. She felt grungy next to them in their clean rooms with the bright lights and cold beds. Frank disappeared with the Warden, but she was too worried about what the doctor would find to notice. But the doctor’s eyes crinkled behind his mask and he told her not to worry. She didn’t even protest as the nurse injected her with a powerful sedative.

The Cured

She woke up in the passenger seat of Frank's car, with no memory of how she got there. They were rolling slowly through the long spring dusk toward Frank's house. Nella hadn't seen the other side of town since she was a poor graduate student. Since things like poor and wealthy had mattered. Now, she guessed, it was immunity that separated people. She had felt slightly depressed when she had been forced to choose a row house during school. All those people around her, she always felt so claustrophobic and unable to concentrate. Nella had felt like one tiny insect among many then and it had irritated her. Now, as row house after row house unrolled before the car, like an unending snake skin long shed, Nella was overwhelmed with loneliness. She kept expecting to see a mother on each porch yelling to their kids to come in for dinner. Or a couple of old men leaning on the metal fencing around their yards impassively watching the car pass by. But no one appeared. The houses were dark and the paint on the brick and doors were chipping, but it was the lawns that gave Nella an odd feeling of panic. People had been proud of their yards here, small as they were. Saturday mowing had been a ritual more likely to be kept than Sunday worship. It had been miles of smooth green squares without variation. Now the weeds had overrun the concrete sidewalks, pushed and tumbled the front stairs of homes, become long whorls matted by frost. Nella saw the faded pink plastic of a small child's tricycle reaching out of a silver tangle of old grass as if it were gasping for breath before being swallowed forever. She turned away from the window, tired of the emptiness outside.

Frank glanced over at her and smiled. "Are you awake?"

"Sort of. How long have I been out?"

"Just long enough to look at your shoulder and put in a few more stitches. The doctor said you should be fine, the infection is passing."

Nella sighed. "That's a relief. Where are we going?"

"I needed to pick up some of the case files to work on. We can stay at my house or go back to your apartment if you like."

"Do you live near here?" she asked, mostly so she wouldn't have to think of the house windows like opening eyes as their curtains rotted into dust.

"Just one more street up," Frank said, "they opened this part of the City after the rest filled up. Maybe I wouldn't have chosen the house for myself before, but it's reassuring that there are enough people left to fill up the rest of the City. And my neighbors are nice."

"You know your neighbors?"

Frank laughed and glanced at her surprised. "You don't know yours?"

Nella shook her head. "I honestly wouldn't even know I had any except for the occasional thump on the wall or the ceiling."

Frank shook his head. “Don't you miss people? I mean, I know you talk with people every day for work, but don't you just miss having normal conversations about things that don't matter? Things like the weather and people's jobs and what their kids have done lately?”

“More than you know,” she replied, “But no one talks about those things anymore. Unless it's to worry about them. And if you get friendly with your neighbors, they might want something that you can't afford to give them.”

“Ah, I see now. You're still in the bunker.”

“What?”

“Your side of town are mostly Immunes, right? You, the people around you, had to survive through their neighbors becoming monsters, the government breaking down and looters taking what few supplies were left.”

“So did you.”

Frank slowed to a stop in front of a well kept block of row houses. “Not exactly. I mean, I was technically one of the last people infected, so yes, I was aware that things were bad, but I was already in my shelter when things started to fall apart. Most of these people,” he said, waving his hand around toward the houses, “never saw that. Once the infection took over, a person didn't think about how dangerous things were or how scarce things had become. They would have walked right by a fully stocked grocery store without even looking at it. They didn't notice that the government had failed everyone or that the streets were dangerous. The worst thing that could happen had already happened. The Infected didn't have the brain processes it takes to worry while they were sick. Now that we are the Cured, nothing can be worse than what we've been and what we've done, so there is really nothing worth worrying about anymore.”

He turned toward her. “We're all the same here. There's no reason to fear each other, because we know, in some sense and with a little variation, what each person living here has done. People that were Immune- they had to do all sorts of things to get by. Things maybe they aren't proud of, because those things are as bad as anything the Infected did, except the Immunes don't have a brain altering disease that will explain what they've done.”

Frank slipped a hand around hers before she could interrupt. “I love you, Nella. I don't care what you did to survive this long. I'll never ask and you don't ever need to say. Whatever it was, I don't think it could be as bad as what I've done, what the Infected did. But not everyone could say the same. The people around you avoid each other, not only because they may be ashamed of what they have done in the past or frightened of what they will find out their neighbors have done in the past, but also because they are still afraid of what they may have to do in the future. They're still in the bunker. Like Mr. Grant. They think

somebody is going to come along and fix the world any day now, and they can forget this nasty spell and move on. No one is coming. We're the ones who have to fix the world. You know that right?"

"Of course. What else have we been trying to do all this time?" she asked. Frank smiled and touched her cheek. "We can't always be running after rogue diseases and conducting trials. I know it feels like those things will take forever, but soon this trial will be over and we'll find the bacterium and the world will be safe. But it won't be fixed. Sometimes you have to do really brave things, like make friends with your neighbors. That's how the world gets fixed. Little bit by little bit." Frank sighed. "Listen to me, going on and on. Must be the lawyer part of my brain gearing up. Sorry about that." He let go of her hand and opened his door. Nella took a few seconds to look at the house they had stopped in front of before getting out of the car. The bricks had been whitewashed, like the others on that block, and recently. The fence had been uprooted, not just around his house, but around all of them on the block. Frank's yard was a little weedy, speckled with the old brown husks of naked dandelions, but most of the other lawns had been tilled, their dark innards thawing in the warm spring night, waiting.

"People are growing gardens out here?"

"Yes, the block has decided to grow herbs and aromatics for medicine or soaps, luxuries. The Farm just doesn't have enough space for things like that, but the old stuff is almost completely gone, even the furthest ranging scavengers are having trouble finding some things."

"Are you going to grow them too?"

Frank sighed. "I wish I could, I've just been so busy with the trial. I haven't even cared for the grass that was already here. But Mrs. Nichols- she's one of the neighbors, asked if she could try a pair of fruit trees in my yard. It's still too cold, but in a month we'll plant some apple seedlings we traded the Farm for. That way we won't have to go all the way there for fresh fruit." Frank laughed. "She wanted to find a citrus tree, she's afraid we're all going to die of scurvy. I told her it was too cold, we'll have to take our chances with other produce."

Nella smiled faintly. "We'll send her crates of oranges when we move to New Guinea."

A metal door clanged shut a few doors down and a teenage boy ran across the street and started knocking on another door. The pretty girl who came out to talk with him was on crutches because she was missing a leg.

"Gangrene," Frank said seeing that Nella had noticed. "Bites from other humans are unsanitary and they festered, sometimes for months on the Infected before they received medical care after the Cure. Sometimes amputation was the only

option. You'll see it a lot here."

"I know. I was part of the medical team that went first administered the Cure, remember?"

"Of course," Frank shook his head, "sorry, I'm just used to people staring."

"I guess that I *was* staring, but that wasn't why. I'm just not used to seeing anyone between six and twenty anymore."

Frank nodded. "There aren't many of them are there? It must be really tough."

"They would have been, what? Eight or so when the Plague hit?" Nella shuddered, thinking of how frightened they must have been before they were infected and how vulnerable even afterward. She looked at Frank for a long minute.

"You must really believe he didn't mean to do this," she said, "I don't know how you could do it otherwise."

Frank's brow wrinkled and he was grim for a moment. "I know that he developed something that escaped everyone's control. We've both seen the evidence of that. But he followed protocol until the end and tried to keep the Plague contained after he found out that Ann had been infected. I think Dr. Pazzo was as much an innocent bystander as the rest of us. If anyone can be said to be at fault, it has to be Dr. Schneider and even Ann. Don't you think?"

Nella hesitated. "Yes," she said at last in a low voice, "but I don't know if the same will be true if the incurable strain isn't destroyed." She didn't add that she thought Dr. Pazzo was still hiding something. If it helped him get through the day, who was she to disturb Frank's peace of mind with something she only suspected?

Frank walked slowly up the steps to his door. He stopped with his hand on the latch. "It's not like your apartment, Nella. They didn't clear out the old owner's things before they assigned it to me. I've done some cleaning but—"

"I'm sure it's fine," Nella smiled. Frank opened the door and stepped inside, his hand automatically finding the light switch. The smell of a long departed cat and old newspapers flung itself at Nella. She half smiled to herself, remembering her old rental. It had smelled the same, though she'd never had a pet. She thought all old houses must be steeped in the vaguely yellow smell. The hall was very dark and the house seemed smaller than she expected, but it was hard for her to tell because the thick curtains were all drawn. Frank glided around her in the dark reaching for lights.

"I've got to grab my notes from the upstairs office. Just make yourself at home. I'll be right back, okay?"

Nella nodded and looked around her as the steady creak of his feet on the stairs faded. She was standing in a living room that looked decades older than Frank.

The wallpaper must once have been a vibrant maroon or red and white stripe, but now it was a pale blend of peach and gold, like a peppermint sucked too long and then put back in the package for years. The furniture was heavy and covered with lace cloth. She wondered if Frank had ever even sat in one of the chairs. The lamps and overhead were weak and missing bulbs, so that they just glowed with yellow light, not even illuminating themselves fully. But everything was immaculately clean. There was no dust anywhere, no papers or books set down where they didn't belong, not even a mug ring on the coffee table. Nella ached to see his office. She wondered if he were like this everywhere or if the office was where he really lived. Nella walked over to a nearby lamp and pulled the shade off for some more light. A familiar bag near the door caught her eye. It was the duffel bag that the Cured were given when they left the Cure camps. It usually had a scavenged set of clothes and some basic toiletries. It also had all the personal effects that the person had been found with. Most of the Cured hadn't wanted to take the bag. They hadn't wanted the charity or the memories. And Nella couldn't blame them. She wondered what was in Frank's. She didn't look but she did notice it was still zipped and tagged with his name and the camp's label. He'd never even opened it.

Nella wandered into the kitchen and groped around for the light switch. She was oddly relieved when the bright lamp flooded over the sink and she saw a coffee cup sitting in it catching a drip. She didn't know if she felt better seeing the cup out of its place in the cabinet or hearing the drip of the imperfectly sealed tap. Either way, it was a sign that the house wasn't completely empty. She emptied the overflowing cup and placed it back under the tap, resisting the urge to tighten the handle and stop the drip. She was searching for another cup in the cabinets when Frank came down the stairs with a series of creaks as the arthritic boards rubbed together.

"I'm afraid I don't have much here right now- it was time for me to make a trip to the Farm too."

"That's okay, I was just going to get a glass of water."

Frank looked alarmed. "Oh! You didn't drink any yet did you?"

"No, why?"

"I forgot to tell you, we aren't on the same reservoir as the rest of the City. We have to use purification tabs or boil it first. Here, I have some in the refrigerator I think." He pulled open the fridge as Nella stared, confused at him.

"You mean there was a spill or something?"

"No, we just don't have access to the sealed reservoir. This part of the City drew water from somewhere else- the river maybe? I don't know, I was never interested in that stuff before. But when they moved us here, they told us we

would have to purify our water until the pollutants were all gone or they could find a way to get us access to the reservoir. But there aren't many experts left and even their apprentices are busy with irrigation at the Farm and managing the reservoir the rest of the City relies on."

"Frank, did they force you to move here?"

He looked confused. "Do you mean this house? We were assigned space as it became cleared of Infected and all the dead were removed. It's not such a bad place."

"No, I know that, I was assigned my apartment too when I reached the populated zone. I mean, could you have stayed in your own home if you wanted to? Since the Cure had reached it?"

Frank hesitated and bent down to pick up the filtered water. He closed the refrigerator and brushed past her to grab a cup. He started to pour the water for her before he answered. "Yes, I could have stayed. They weren't ready to clear the dead, but I buried my wife and the boy after I was Cured anyway. I could have stayed or taken more of my things if I wanted. Most people had wandered pretty far from their homes since becoming sick and their homes were still in Infected areas, so they didn't really have the option. But I did. I didn't want to go back. I knew I couldn't live with what I'd done if I tried to live in the middle of Sarah's things. I was assigned this house, but when I left the camp, I went back once, to bury them. When I was done, I went back into the house to get some clean clothes because it was muddy and I was filthy and sad and tired. I thought I was also going to pick up our wedding pictures and some small things that I really wanted to keep." Frank handed her the cup without looking at her and sat shakily down at the scarred wooden table. He rubbed one long finger along the splintered grooves and looked down at the wood as he spoke.

"But when I walked in the door, everything smelled like her, like she had just walked by. And her last case file was spread over the dining room table as if she just got up to make herself a cup of coffee. I didn't want to see that, and I didn't want to clean it up either. I just wanted it to stay there, just that way, but not where I could see it. I didn't even stay to get my clothes. I just walked out and headed here. It took a week in muddy clothes, but I didn't care." He looked around the small kitchen.

"This place is far enough that I won't be tempted to go back again. If I'm lucky, it's burnt down or blown over by a storm or there are complete strangers living in it and all the memories of us are gone." He looked up at her, his hand pausing in its endless track on the table. The scar on his cheek stuttered and shone in the bright kitchen light as he spoke and his face was so drawn and tired that Nella worried that she'd somehow made him ill.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I shouldn't be talking about this with you."

Although there was a chair next to him, she sat in the one across from him instead. "Because you don't want me to analyze you? Or because you wanted to make a clean break and don't want anyone to know who you were before?"

"No, nothing like that. I don't want you to think I've idolized or worship my wife. Or that I'm still in mourning. I've had six years to learn to let her go. I don't want you to think I'm not ready or that I want to somehow replace her. It's not that I haven't come to terms with her death. I haven't come to terms with myself for causing it."

She wanted to reach across the wooden table and curl her hand inside of his, but she drank a mouthful of cold water instead.

"Frank, how much did they tell you about me before I met you at the prison?"

The worry on his forehead deepened and creased. "Not much. Just that you had been working on a team during the first days of the Cure. And that you had a good track record helping people who were recovering from long term Infection. That you were able to repair what seemed like permanent brain damage to other doctors. Why?"

Nella leaned back in the hard kitchen chair. "So no one told you why I left the Cure team?"

Frank shook his head.

"I know telling you that you were ill and that killing your wife was more of an animal instinct than anything you had control over won't make you feel better. And you live among people who have similar stories, so you know your experience is not unique or even rare. But you seem to carry around this idea that you're somehow not worth as much as other people. That you deserve to be treated badly. I can't fix the water or make people stop staring or being nasty. But you don't need to think that way about me. I'm not any different than you or anyone here. I'm not a pure, fragile doll whose been locked safely away since before the Plague." Frank started to interrupt her, but she shook her head and put her cup down with a hollow ringing.

"You think the only terrible things I've done were in the name of survival but that's not true." Nella took a deep breath and Frank leaned forward in his chair.

In the Cure Camps

"I assume you've seen Sevita's footage of the first people who were rounded up and Cured- everybody has. It was awful, all those people waking up to the world around them, to what had happened to their families and their friends- to what they remembered doing themselves. Everyone remembers Isaac Green's suicide

because his was the first one and it was broadcast on television with the first reports. What most people don't realize is that he was just the first of many. Hundreds Frank, hundreds every day. We took all the precautions that we could, administering the Cure in smaller batches so we could watch them, eliminating weapons in the Cure tents once the Infected were sedated, even keeping people in the camp longer than they really needed to be there so we could make sure they were stable. It didn't matter. They found ways or they waited weeks until they left the camp and then did it on the road. They used the camp bedsheets to hang themselves or broke into the medical waste bins and injected themselves with needles full of air. Some of them drank cleaning supplies. A few even waited for hours underneath military vehicles for the one soldier who wasn't paying attention to run them over. Every day, over and over and over. My overseer, Dr. Taylor, kept telling us that it wasn't our fault, that the normal human mind wasn't equipped to function correctly after trauma like these people had seen. But I started to think maybe we shouldn't Cure them. Maybe it was better if they just stayed Infected, because at least they weren't destroying themselves with grief then. I told Dr. Taylor we should consider lifelong institutionalization instead. He told me I was not being realistic, that there weren't enough healthy humans left to sustain our own survival, let alone police, care for and feed thousands of Infected." Nella rubbed a few tears off her cheek with a rough hand and continued.

"But at last, Dr. Taylor couldn't take any more either. We had just administered the Cure to a new batch of people and they were sleeping off the sedative while the antibiotic did its job. I woke up and it was still dark, but someone was shooting a gun. The soldiers had orders to only dart any Infected that got too close to the camp, so that they would get the Cure. It was a big switch for many of them, they were used to thinking of the Infected as something to be eliminated, not as human beings with minds that could recover and lives that could be useful and normal. Sometimes a soldier disobeyed, but he was usually stopped by a superior before he could actually kill anyone. Not this time though. "I got out of bed, confused, because the sound was coming from the patient tent, not the perimeter. Which was probably why no soldiers stopped him. I ran to the tent and before I even lifted the flap I could smell the gunpowder hanging in the air. And I knew they must all be dead. I lifted the flap and there was Dr. Taylor, moving from bed to bed on the last row of over one hundred people. He aimed his gun at the sleeping patient's head and pulled the trigger. I yelled for him to stop, and I ran toward him, pushing carts and beds out of the way. I tripped once and heard the gun go off again. He only stopped to reload and that's when I reached him and tried to grab the gun. He just coolly pointed it at me instead.

'Nella,' he said, 'you're a good person and a damn fine doctor in a world that desperately needs you. I don't want to kill you, but I will if you stop me.'

"He said it as if he were listing the symptoms of a disease to a group of interns. As if it were something he had said every day of his life. 'Why are you doing this?' I asked him. Dr. Taylor turned and shot the next patient before he answered me. 'We can't institutionalize them. We can't let them roam around the way they are and expect any sort of security in our lives.' He shot another. There was only one left and by this time I was sobbing, but he kept pointing the gun back toward me between patients, so I wouldn't come closer. 'The Cure makes them remember everything and I can't keep them from killing themselves. The last one couldn't be bothered to find anything to do it properly. So he sat in the sun in front of my tent for three days and refused water and food. He tore out every intravenous line we put in. He just died. I'm tired Nella. The only people that seem to survive are the people that would have been murderous pricks without the Infection.' Dr. Taylor shot the last patient, a child. He turned back. 'I might as well do the good ones a favor and put them out of their misery. And the world a favor by eliminating the ones that would just be criminal anyway.'

'That's not true!' I kept saying, but he wasn't listening. He cleared his throat and raised the gun to his own head. He shrugged.

'Don't feel bad Nella. I would have been a murderous prick either way.' And he shot himself."

Frank swore under his breath. "It wasn't your fault," he said.

Nella shook her head and wiped her face with her hands. "No," she said, "it wasn't. But it stayed with me. It crept up on me every time I was talking with a survivor or waiting for a Cure to work or receiving news about another suicide. We routinely interviewed our patients every day from the time they woke up to the time they left the camp. But it was very disorganized, especially after Dr. Taylor died. So you could be assigned five or ten patients one day and see a completely new set the other day, depending on who had left the camp or died the night before. One morning, I was making my rounds and I met someone that I recognized. It was nothing I expected, we were miles from anywhere I'd lived or worked. We were overworked and exhausted. I'd been with the medical team for almost two years at that point and we didn't have breaks or days off or even full night's rests most of the time. I must have helped to treat thousands of people by then and after a while, their faces and their stories just seemed to blur together. Like one long streak of bad luck wrapped around each day. I stopped looking at faces. I stopped listening to stories. Because they were all the same. I just started reading charts and the notes the other doctors left instead. That day, I had been specifically assigned to one particular case because I seemed to do

better with people that weren't responding to the Cure the way they ought to. "Sometimes, they had just been infected for so long that their brains had suffered permanent damage from the swelling. I think that's what happened to Ann. We didn't see too many, because most Infected killed each other, suffered accidental deaths or succumbed to secondary infections and starvation. But there were a few that survived that long. Most of these were kept at the camp until a family member could come and care for them or until the military developed an institution for their care.

Sometimes, they had a bad reaction to the antibiotic. Those were the easiest to treat. It was the same as other allergic reactions and we knew how to deal with it. This particular case though, fell into the unknown pile. And that's why I was assigned. I had worked in a hospital during school as part of my training. Most of the time I saw a patient for a day, maybe two before they were released. A few though, barely made it out for a week before returning. One of them, a man named Martin, had a severe case of paranoid schizophrenia. He couldn't afford his medication, so every week the local beat cop would write him up on a minor infraction so that he could bring Martin in to the hospital for treatment. We'd give him his medication along with the few days' supply that we could get away with and then release him again for another week. It wasn't ideal and the entire staff knew it wasn't going to work forever, because he was getting worse even when we managed to keep him medicated. One day, maybe only a month or two before the Plague was at its worst, something finally snapped for good inside Martin. He found a crow bar somewhere and beat the cop that came to pick him up with it. The officer was so badly beaten that he was in intensive care- I guess until he was infected or died, I'm not sure. But Martin was taken to a permanent facility immediately. Everything happened so fast after that, I had never really considered what happened to him or to the officer. I'm still not entirely sure whether Martin escaped the facility somehow or whether an orderly decided to let the inmates out when things got bad.

However it happened, Martin was free, and he was Infected. He must have wandered for miles during the year and a half until he was Cured. I didn't realize it was him until I got to the side of his cot. He was sleeping when I got there. He was so filthy I didn't recognize him for a while. That's how the other doctors knew something was off. The first thing that most of the Cured wanted to do, once the initial shock wore off, was scrub themselves clean. In fact, we had to have nurses watch many of them so that they didn't physically rub their skin off or damage their teeth in order to believe themselves completely clean. I'm sure you understand what that urge was like."

Frank nodded. "The first thing I did was brush my teeth. Someone stopped me

after a tube of toothpaste and twenty minutes were gone. But I could still- I could still *taste them* on my tongue. I would have kept going if I could."

"But this guy, he didn't care. He didn't want to shower or brush his teeth or have his haircut- nothing. He had blood and matter clotting in his beard and around his lips, he had sores from bites that were festering and stank like rotting meat. His nails were long and sharp, like brown, brittle claws and he didn't care. And when the nurses tried to wash him anyway, thinking maybe he was catatonic with shock, he attacked them, accusing them of trying to kill him. He was so vicious with his teeth smashing together and his long, sharp nails raking everything he could reach, that they thought the Cure had failed. The only way they were able to be certain that it hadn't was that they heard him speak.

When he did speak though, he claimed that we were trying to trick him. He said that the world was finally clear to him, that he could only survive and grow stronger by killing and eating his enemies. He was convinced we had drugged him and we were trying to lull him with false security. He swore he'd kill all of us so that he could be strongest. Of course, we kept him in restraints. And they passed him on to me. It was a very hot day in the middle of summer when I finally met him again. I sat by his cot although he stank more and more with the heat. He had been sedated, so even after he woke up he wasn't really sure what was happening. He recognized me before I recognized him. He was convinced I was a hallucination.

'I know you,' he said, 'but you aren't really here. You're back at the old hospital. Back before the world showed its true self. That was a nice dream.'

'Do you know what happened after you left the hospital?' I asked him, 'What happened when the world showed it's true self?'

He leaned in closer to me, but was pulled up short by the restraints. Still, his breath was so foul with old gore, that I thought I might pass out between it and the heat.

'Everyone took off their masks,' he whispered, 'and the last supper finally began. I won though, I ate them all. I'm the strongest. I was filled with righteous wrath. I ate so many I became God."

Frank shuddered with his whole body and Nella paused. The soft drip of tap water into the ceramic mug filled the room. She twisted her own cup back and forth on the wooden table.

"I didn't even try to convince him that he was delusional. I listened to him for a while as he went on about how the other doctors were trying to weaken him or hurt him. But he went on for hours, becoming more and more angry as the sedative wore off. And I eventually tuned him out, even though I stayed seated near his cot. I was thinking about how hard it was going to be to find medication

for him in this dead, broken, stand-still world. About how little it had helped him before. And I wondered if he were ever really Infected at all, or if he just became absorbed in the way the world had become. I thought about how many people he must already have killed and how many he would continue on to kill if he were ever to be released or escape military custody. Dr. Taylor's words kept coming back to me over and over.

Eventually, Martin burnt himself out, like a small child after a tantrum. When he was asleep, I got up. I very clearly remember filling the syringe with too much sedative. It was so still in the plunger, no bubbles at all, no droplets left on the needle. I went back to Martin and didn't even hesitate, not even to clean the site of the injection. I just pushed through the layer of grime on his arm. It was so smooth that he didn't even feel it. I sat next to his cot for twenty minutes or so, until he stopped breathing. I was calm and rational and entirely without remorse. And then I got up and reported myself to the captain in charge of my medical unit.

I was never arrested, never tried, for Martin or anyone else that I'd killed during the Plague. They just rotated me out of the Cure unit and I never bothered to go back. The military found excuses for me, sending me hard to treat patients at my own clinic, one at a time and then, eventually assigning me to this trial.

It wasn't Martin's fault. I could have found him a bed somewhere they could have kept an eye on him. Eventually someone will start making the right medications again. I didn't dislike him. I'm not even sure that I really felt sympathy for him. I've asked myself for years whether I did it for his sake or the world's sake or just my own. I still don't know the answer for sure.

Don't let the world convince you that you are somehow inferior to the people that were immune, Frank. The things you did were out of your conscious control, like breathing. The people that never got infected- we can't say that. Every life we took was because we chose to take it. Sure, we can say it was for survival, and I think that's mostly true. But it wasn't involuntary, and we'll have to wake up realizing that every day forever. That's the price of free will I guess." Nella was finally quiet, drawing in a slow breath as if she were reversing a sigh. Frank was silent leaning forward in his chair, but his face was drawn and tight, a hundred angles of worried. Nella smiled at him but her mouth tasted bitter and dry, as if she'd swallowed all the ocean.

"Ah. You thought I was someone else, someone different. I did too. Once. But all around this little shard of the world people are having the same revelations. We can barely stand to interact with each other. It's no wonder there has to be a government agency on human reproduction."

Frank looked up at her, his face breaking into living curves again. "No," he said,

"I think you did what you thought was right. Whatever your doubts now, I can't believe that you weren't convinced then. And that's what I would expect, that you do what you believe is right. That's who I think you are." He stood up and gently pulled her out of the chair. "You *are* different. You're the one thing that didn't get broken after all that mess." He kissed the bitter taste out of her mouth.

Frank's House

They decided to stay at Frank's house. Nella didn't yet know how to tell Sevita that the bacterial samples were still lost, and it depressed her to think about facing her failure. She scolded herself for being a coward, but it didn't make her feel differently. She was hesitant to leave Frank as well, and she wasn't sure he'd go with her to her apartment. He had been absorbed in case notes since he'd brought her up to the office.

He apologized, but Nella could see he was itching to look back at something in the case. She was more convinced than ever that he knew more than he was telling her. That frightened her. It meant that he would either try to find the samples himself because he thought it was too dangerous for her, or that it had something to do with his client. Both ideas were equally opaque and unsettling to Nella. She had let him read his notes in peace, claiming to have medical reports on Ann to go over. She did have the reports, they had been delivered to her at the prison, but she only made a show of reading them, watching Frank's body language instead.

Whatever he was looking for, he hadn't found it even after an hour of frantic reading had passed. Nella could tell by the way his hand smoothed against the back of his head over and over, and the way his legs waited to leap from the chair when he found it. The evening slid on and Nella grew impatient. At last, she couldn't take the way cold panic was crawling over her with a million sharp legs and filling the shadowy space between them with visions of plague and death and loss. "Why don't you ask me about what you are looking for?" she asked, "Maybe I can remember. I have a good memory."

Frank turned and smiled at her, as if realizing she were there for the first time. "I'm sorry, you must be exhausted. You still need lots of rest. Why don't you get some sleep, I'll be done in a bit."

Nella laughed at the obvious dodge. "Okay, you don't have to tell me, I just want to help."

"I know you do. I wish you could, but I'm not even sure I remember it correctly. I need the tapes of the lab."

“Did you give the only copy to the Judge?”

“No, but I don’t keep evidence here. It’s at the prison, in the Warden’s vault, for safekeeping.”

Nella looked confused. “Is that normal?”

Frank shook his head. “This case was so large that no one wants to be accused of tampering. The Warden agreed to keep the defense’s documents and the Military Governor is keeping the prosecution’s items in his office.” Frank sighed. “Well, I don’t think worrying about it is going to help tonight.” He stood up and stretched, his palms almost grazing the ceiling. Nella put down the unread report on Ann Connelly. He led her into the cool, dark bedroom. Before he even flipped the light on she knew the bed would be perfectly made, the floor would be bare and there would be little to no extra furniture in the room. She felt particularly gritty and sweaty after their trip. She knew she wouldn’t be able to sleep there. When the light snapped on, Nella laughed in surprise.

“What is it?” Frank asked.

“I just wasn’t expecting this. It doesn’t look like the rest of the house.”

Frank shrugged and blushed. “This is where I spend most of my time. Do you like it?”

A massive bookshelf stood on the far wall. It was filled with books on shipbuilding, with a giant atlas and novels of exploration and shipwreck and discovery. The ceiling glowed blue with nautical maps that covered every inch of it. There was a desk with a half finished model sailboat sitting on it. She looked back at Frank. “You weren’t kidding when you said you wanted to sail to a tropical island when this was over, were you?”

Frank’s face relaxed and dropped a decade, even with the thick beard shadowing the bottom half. For a moment Nella thought she saw him as he was before, wholly beautiful, happy, in love. It shocked her for a moment to realize she was the one that he was in love with this time.

“Can you imagine how wonderful it would be? To rediscover a place?” he waved a hand toward the map, “these places are all lost, as if they never were found in the first place. There’s been no communication with them for almost a decade. Chances are, most of them haven’t found a cure. Chances are, few, if any people have survived. The people that have, well they must have their own ways of doing things by now. New laws, new rituals, new ideas. We could visit them, you and me. We could be the next explorers.”

“Aren’t you afraid? Other people could have turned to piracy or slave holders or people who worship dead computers. We don’t know what’s out there.”

“That’s exactly the point. It’s exciting, not frightening. Well, of course

we'd be careful, but aren't you dying to know what's out there? Aren't you tired of the same old gated City, the same sad people day after day?"

"Well, yes," she admitted, though she felt a serious gash in her heart when she thought of leaving Sevita and Christine behind. But his excitement swept the thought away like a stray leaf in a gale. He pointed to the map directly over the head of the bed.

"There's New Guinea. I've been thinking it would take us about three months if we sailed straight, but of course we would want to stop everywhere on the way . . ." Frank talked cheerfully about routes and boat building and supplies until Nella was dizzy. She didn't stop him, the conversation was as bright as their earlier ones had been dark. She wondered if that particular map had ended up where it was after their lunch at the prison. She suspected that it had, and hoped it had been a source of several bright dreams for him. At last, he wound down and sat on the end of the bed, patting the spot next to him. She recoiled and immediately regretted it when she saw the nervous hurt return to his face, wrinkling away the ease that she had just seen.

"Oh Nella, I'm sorry, I didn't mean- I have a spare bedroom I can sleep in-"

"No, no," she said quickly, "it isn't that. It's just that-" her voice dropped to an embarrassed whisper as if the neighbors might hear, "I'm *filthy*. I can't mess up your nice clean sheets."

Frank laughed and the worry scattered. He scratched his thickening beard. "Yeah," he said, "I don't think I could stand this thing for one more minute either. I can practically feel it crawling." He pointed to a dark wooden door. "The bathroom is adjoining, I'll get some towels for you."

She blushed and hesitated for a moment. Discomfort won out over pride. "Frank, I can't- would you help me wash my hair? I can do everything else, but," she half raised her wounded arm.

"Of course," he said, before she could finish.

He opened the door to a small bathroom and then left her to find towels. The room was badly lit and the mirror was spotty with age. But it smelled sweet and strong, like warm soap and shaving cream. She felt less grimy just walking into it. "You can get in, if you want," said Frank from behind her, "I just want to shave first. I'll be quick. Look what I've found." He handed Nella a slim bottle of real shampoo and rubbed his own head with a grin. "I won't be needing it."

Nella smiled, but she sat on the edge of the tub and made no move to get undressed. She watched him mix shaving cream and draw out a slim razor, like a shining bone and set it on the lip of the sink. He scrubbed his face with water and then realized she was watching him as he straightened up.

"What?" he asked, dabbing foam on the stiff hairs.

She shrugged. "It's just that you're one of very few men whom I've met that still shaves every day."

"Ah. That's because shaving cream is hard to come by these days. And I can't imagine trying to shave without it. I had to carry buckets of water for the barber's wife, Mrs. Avoncetti, every day for a month before the water was turned on in this sector. After that he finally agreed to teach me how to make my own." Frank stopped talking as he picked up the flashing rib of a blade. She watched the scarred side of his face emerge as if the razor were erasing shadow and care with each long, slow stroke. It was impossible for her to watch the smooth, graceful flick of his hand on the razor and not think of him touching her.

She shouldn't be here. He'd already rejected her once, hadn't he? Why torture herself? But he had said that he loved her. He'd shown her only kindness and care. More than that, he'd *wanted* her. She had felt it. But he seemed to want nothing to happen until after the trial. And though she felt stronger than she had during her fever, she knew she ought to take it easy for a while.

She was jarred out of her thoughts when Frank groaned lightly and she realized she'd still been staring at him.

"Nella, please don't tell me you *like* the mountain man look. I don't think I could stand it."

She laughed. "No, I like seeing your whole face."

He squinted at her as if trying to decide if she were teasing him. He bent over to wash his face again. He sighed with relief as he ran a hand over his smooth chin. Nella looked at her feet and tried not to feel the gentle ache on the surface of her lips, longing to kiss the line of his jaw. She tried to bully herself into being rational, but it was too difficult, surrounded, steeped in the clean smell of him, sitting so near to him, in his own space.

"Well? Did I miss a spot?" he asked, leaning over her to turn on the shower. Nella smiled and reached up to stroke his smooth cheek. He caught her hand and kissed her palm. His lips were so much softer than she remembered, though she had kissed them just a few hours before. Tiny echoes skipped across her skin, as if he had kissed a hundred places at once.

"It's perfect," she said at last, remembering he had asked her a question. She stood up, feeling the steam creep up her back in warm puffs. He untied her sling and she straightened her arm cautiously.

"I think we're going to have to burn these clothes," he said as he peeled off his shirt, "They're never going to be the same after this week."

Nella had started to unbutton her shirt. She clutched it closed. "Frank, I just realized I have no extra clothes here. We left them with the other pack."

He grinned wickedly at her. "Oh no," he said, gently moving her hand and continuing to unbutton her shirt, "whatever shall we do?"

She laughed and blushed. "I'm serious!"

"Relax, I'll go to your apartment tomorrow and pick up some things." He drew the fabric gently from her wounded arm.

"Until then?"

He shrugged and unzipped her pants, tugging them over her hips. "I'll turn up the heat."

"I thought you wanted to wait- until after the trial."

His brows drew together in confusion and he stepped back from her, "What gave you that idea? I mean, I'm okay with waiting if that's what you want-"

Nella shook her head but couldn't speak past the boulder in her throat.

"Is this about what happened at the Cure camp?" The space between them evaporated and his fingertips grazed the side of her face. They were like tiny rocks in a pool, the feeling rippling and bouncing over her in larger and larger rings. "That place was filled with misery. The very air was tainted." He leaned forward and whispered into her ear, "You're sacred Nella, a bright dream at the end of the world. I don't want to remember you in that dark place. I don't want to think about that sad time any more."

She closed her eyes but they leaked anyway. "But I was in a place like that. For a long time. It's part of my life. It's part of your life." Her voice creaked at the end, though she tried to control it.

His arms slid around her, his skin warm and damp from the shower steam. "I know. I know it was. But it doesn't have to part of *our* life. Not any more." He let her go and cleared his throat. His eyes were red, but he smiled at her and continued undressing.

"Come on," he said cheerfully as he picked up the bottle of shampoo, "the water heater in this place isn't that big. I'll be washing your hair in the dead cold before long."

Nella stepped carefully into the warm cavern of the shower after him. The shower didn't hurt her shoulder as badly as it had done before and she took that as a good sign. She stepped into the stream of water, turning her back to him so the water soaked through her filthy hair. She closed her eyes. Her breath caught as one of his hands wrapped around her stomach and his fingers grazed the bottom of her breast. The other hand tangled itself in her wet hair. She could feel the strands of grass from the fight with the Infected hit her shin as they washed away, and the clots of blood that had caught in the ends from her wound dissolved as he carefully slid his fingers through the tangles. Her head felt heavy from the extra weight of the water, but the rest of her felt lighter, younger as the

week's dirt sloughed away. His hands slipped away from her and she smelled the sharp sweetness of chemical citrus as he opened the shampoo bottle. She smiled to herself. It had been years since she'd even seen real shampoo, but she recognized the smell immediately. She felt the weight of her hair disappear from her neck as he gathered it up and the rough pressure of his hands on her scalp. He tilted her head gently to one side and kissed the base of her neck with his soft lips. The lobe of her ear vibrated with his breath. "You didn't think that I didn't want you, did you?" his voice was heavy in her ear as the feathery foam of the shampoo slid down the small of her back, tracing slow rivers into her skin. She shivered. The soft weight of her hair slipped back onto her neck as both of Frank's long arms wrapped around her waist and good arm. He kissed the top of her good shoulder and she felt the hard bone of his cheek brush her ear. She leaned back into him and he tightened his arms. The last of the shampoo dissolved and streaked away and she felt as if she could follow it. "You can go to your grave eighty years from now knowing that a day didn't pass since we met that I did not want you."

She turned to face him, his arms loosening to let her. The thin stream of water began to grow cool between them. She leaned through it and tilted her face up toward his. She kissed him as the water wicked the heat and soap out of her hair and down over his arms and her legs in a last warm gush. The water turned frigid and he let her go to turn it off. She stepped out on shaky legs. She began to wrap a towel around her, but he stopped her, tossing it aside and pulling her into him. His skin was sun-baked stone, a tumbledown ruin left to the wind, all the jagged edges smoothed away. He kissed her too roughly, almost biting and his hand clamped shut just below her wound and she yelped as a jolt of pain sizzled up her arm and into her neck and breast. He dropped away from her as if she'd shoved him. "Oh, God, Nella, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." He gently lifted away the soaked bandages with fingers light as leaves. The wound was unbroken, but he was shaken and reluctant to touch her. She turned his face away from the red scar that laced her skin until their eyes met. She smiled and felt his frame immediately loosen. The shower plinked like a metronome in the quiet. She stretched as tall as she could. Her lips brushed the ragged scar on his cheek.

"It's too cold in here," she whispered. Her hand slid gently down his arm and her fingers tangled in his. She led him out into the bedroom. She kissed him, her cool hand making a slow current down his chest as she gently backed him to the edge of the bed. He sat down, his hands spread over her hips in long streaks of warmth. She eased him back and hovered over him, her thighs touching the outside of his, her wet hair like cool grasses passing over his baking skin. He closed his eyes. Nella paused to look at his face. She traced the gentle ridge on

his temple, feeling the fragile bone beneath, the frail globe that held everything she cared about. She leaned in closer, her breasts grazing his chest. She closed her eyes. Her breastbone ached as if it were too small to hold everything in. Her cheek rested lightly against his.

“I love you Frank,” she said softly and with one small movement, enveloped him, like a still lake closing over a stone. He cried out and his eyes flew open to meet hers. She kissed him, her hips were like the currents in the maps above them, moving endlessly over the same hidden rocks and trenches, without pause. He twisted one arm around her back, needing her ever closer, as if he could dissolve into her. His other hand smoothed her hair from her face as she kissed him. He arced up toward her, a stone bridge that shattered and then collapsed into something new. He pulled her down with him and turned sideways so that she lay beside him, their faces level with each other. She watched the great breaths pulsing in his chest. He pulled her chin up gently with one hand. She glanced at his face and burst into tears. She pressed a sob into the back of her hand.

Frank pushed himself up one arm. “Nella, what is it? Are you hurt? Is it your shoulder?”

She shook her head and slipped a hand into his. “I can’t help thinking about the missing samples. Even now. It hangs over everything. Maybe this is the last day. Maybe this is the last time I get to touch you. For a while I could pretend we were going to find them. That everything would turn out all right. But now, when it matters most of all,” she brought his hand to her cheek, warming her face, “now I doubt. Now it seems impossible and everything seems closer to an end.”

He curled himself over her, his too thin chest, his patchwork of scars suddenly beautiful to her. His thumbs smoothed the tears from her face. “Nella, we *are* going to find them. *I* will find them. This isn’t an end.” A broad smile spilled across his face, “Trust me, we’re going to be making love hundreds of times. Thousands.”

She laughed in spite of herself. He touched her forehead with his own. “The whole world had to die before I found you. I’ve been through hell. I even became the devil himself for a while. I can’t lose you now. The universe can’t be that unjust.”

He made love to her again, slow and powerful, until she forgot the samples, forgot the trial and the loneliness of the empty world. Until she was lost in the sharp, clean smell of him, the rough, sandy feel of his hands on her skin. Until every touch was a splash, a little ripple growing inward and colliding with each other, colliding and merging and smoothing again into stillness.

Nella Knows

Nella woke up in the early morning hours and slipped quietly out of the bed. She padded to the bathroom to relieve herself and soak in the shower. She pressed the small tab in the center of the knob without even glancing at it. More second nature than modesty, she didn't even think about it. Twenty minutes later, she changed the bandage on her wound gingerly and then turned the doorknob. The automatic click of the lock releasing was minuscule, but in her brain it was as loud as a gunshot. She looked down at the knob half turned in her hand. She realized that Frank was already days ahead of her and she cursed her slow thought process. How could she have missed it? It must have been on the video- how had she not seen it? Even if not, common sense should have told her. Even her fevered unconscious had made the connection. *Closets don't lock with a key from the inside. They lock with a button or a knob. The key only opens it from the outside.*

Nella flung the door open and paced naked from the bathroom to the bed and back, wondering if she should wake Frank. Threads of questions shuttled by her so quickly she couldn't grasp any of them for long. *Was it an odd lock? Had she seen it? Would he have had the mental capacity to open the door if it didn't need the key?* Yes. She could answer that one with certainty. The Infected could turn doorhandles, could probably even remember to turn the lock knob. Nothing more complicated. In fact, the revolving door at Dr. Carton's lab would probably, had probably, defeated them unless they stopped pushing at the right spot by mere chance. Keys were definitely out. The thought of Dr. Carton brought the next thought crashing down on her like ice water on her shoulders. *Had Dr. Pazzo even been sick at all? Was there a person keeping him and Anne alive or had it just been him the entire time?*

Nella sat on the foot of the bed and bit her nails without realizing it. She jumped up and shook Frank awake, rather more roughly than she intended. He sat up, but he rubbed his eyes and looked ready to slump back. "What's going on?" he asked.

"The lock wasn't a key lock was it?"

"Huh?"

"The lock on Dr. Pazzo's side of the closet. It was a push button wasn't it?"

Frank's eyes snapped open and he stared at her. "You know? Did I-"

"No, you didn't talk in your sleep or anything. I realized it just now, in the bathroom."

Frank sagged with relief. "I wanted to tell you, but I have to protect my

client-”

“Never mind that,” interrupted Nella, “I know why you didn’t tell me. It’s not important now. What *is* important is whether or not that door lock was weird and locked from the inside with a key. That’s what you were looking for in your notes wasn’t it?”

“Yes, but I need the video. It’s not in the notes, I never thought it was important. I’m still not entirely sure that it is. He was ill when he finally found out about the resistant strain. We saw the infection take over. There’s no way he could have gone to steal the samples at that point. Besides, they found him and Ann locked in the lab still.”

Nella raked a hand through her hair. She was shaking and her lungs threatened to close in the thick panic of the room. “Frank, he wasn’t sick.”

“What are you talking about? We *saw* it happen.”

“No Frank,” her voice was razor thin and insistent, “*he wasn’t sick*. He was pretending. Just like Dr. Carton. Except he didn’t need to go as far.”

“Nella, calm down. You can’t possibly know that.” He pulled her onto the bed and wrapped the warm blanket around her shoulders.

“Remember the food system of his? We agreed that an Infected wouldn’t think to open packaged food, even if they were starving. And it couldn’t slide through the ramshackle tubes he made without clogging somewhere else- you said that.”

“I remember.”

“So either someone was feeding him and Ann, or he was. He wasn’t sick.”

Frank rubbed his forehead and Nella knew he was convinced despite himself. “Why would he do all that though? Why the elaborate set up, the tube system, the key sliding underneath the door? Why the complete breakdown *on camera*? Why lock Dr. Schneider up? What could he possibly have hoped would happen?”

Nella was silent for a moment, torn between panic and confusion. She felt stupid and slow, as if she were in a bad dream where she could never reach her destination no matter how long she walked.

“He knew. He knew before they locked themselves in. He knew about the samples, he knew about the severity and communicability of the original, he knew that millions were going to be infected. We just assumed he didn’t know until the day Dr. Schneider broke out because that’s what he showed us. But Ann said he watched all the tapes. He had to have seen Dr. Carton. He had to know. We just took it for granted that he found out at the end. Just the way we assumed he was safely sealed away because he made a point of showing us the key to the door and how he put it beyond his reach. He distracted us just enough.”

“Why film it in the first place?”

“For exactly this sort of situation. What is it they used to call it? Plausible deniability.”

“There’s no way he could have known what would happen. Assuming he knew about the incurable strain and the severity of the original Plague, the way that you say, he would have believed the world would be destroyed completely. That there would be no one left who cared how it started or no one left with the technical know how to discover how it started. He’s just not that smart. No one is.”

“Yes, he is, Frank. Maybe he didn’t know he’d be facing a world tribunal, but he had to know that in the end, someone’s head was going to roll, and he was going to make damn sure it wasn’t his. He might not have believed that anyone would survive after seeing the violence and lack of self care that Ann showed and that probably came through the news reports in the lab, but he probably would have *hoped* that someone would stop it, that something would be left. I would have, if it were me. I believe him, still, when he says that he never meant the original strain to harm anyone. I believe that it really was an accident. But he knew he had to get Dr. Schneider to admit she was responsible and to tell him the location of the resistant strain. So he locked her up and recorded her. It was all a setup.” She rubbed her sore shoulder gently and her face twisted as if she had tasted something sour and sad. “He knew the samples were missing, because he was the one that took them. He let us see the video because he knew we would run after Dr. Schneider. We played right into his hands. This whole thing was about holding her responsible.”

Frank’s face relaxed and he even looked cheerful. “Then maybe he’s already destroyed the samples. Maybe they aren’t even a threat.”

“No,” Nella said, as grim as before, “He wouldn’t have destroyed them. He needed them as evidence. And as leverage against Dr. Schneider. In fact, he’d probably want them as close by as possible. In *his* control.”

“How would he have gotten them in? Prisoners are searched when they are booked. Everything is taken from them.”

“Everything?”

“As far as I know.”

“Maybe he got someone else to bring it to him. Or send it to him.”

“He doesn’t have anyone, Nella. No matter what else he may have lied about, I believe him when he says *we* are the closest things to friends that he has. Besides, all packages- *anything* delivered to prisoners would be checked.”

“Checked how? We’re only talking about small vials here.”

“I’m not sure.” Frank ran his hands slowly over his head in frustration. He

looked up at her suddenly. “But I bet Stan Kembrey would be able to tell us. I need to get the video from the Warden’s office anyway, and I want to talk to Dr. Pazzo about all this—”

“No! No Frank, he can’t know that we’ve found him out.” She gripped his arm so hard that he winced.

“Ow. Why not? We’ve done what he wanted, we brought Dr. Schneider back for trial. Why would he bother trying to hide it now?”

“If he doesn’t want to hide it, he’ll turn over the samples when you tell him we didn’t find them. It will help his defense. You don’t have to tell him you know that he has them.”

“I *don’t* know that he has them. This is all guesswork. And you still haven’t answered my question, why is it important to act as if I don’t think it’s him? I’m angry that he used me. Especially that he used you. You’ve been hurt because of him. He needs to answer for that.”

She put a gentle hand on either side of his face. “Because I’m not entirely certain that’s all that he wanted. What if there is something else? Something we are both missing? If he intends to *use* the samples, then telling him we know he has them would force his hand, he’d release them immediately. I need time to find them before he finds out we know, and before whatever deadline he’s set has passed. If he turns them over of his own free will, then wonderful, we can all relax. But if you go to your next meeting with him and he says nothing when you tell him the samples have been stolen, then we’ll know he’s not done with them yet.”

“Nella, this is assuming way more than I’m comfortable with.”

“This is how I work. This is what I get paid for, what I do every day. You need evidence because of what you do every day. I’m not asking you to do anything, except to go on acting the same way, treating him the same way as you have all this time. I can do the rest, probably with less suspicion than you can. Please trust me. Let me do my job.”

He closed a warm hand around hers. “I *do* trust you. Just tell me what you need me to do. If I can do it without compromising the case, I will.”

“Judge Hawkins is holding a copy of the video right? We need to tell him the result of our search. We also need to ask him to keep it quiet for a little while longer. You can pick up that copy and we can check it without anyone knowing we accessed the evidence cache at the prison. When is your next meeting with Dr. Pazzo?”

“Normally, it would be any time between now and court on Monday.”

“Would it be odd or out of the ordinary to schedule a meeting with him this afternoon?”

“A meeting with you too?”

“No, just the two of you, to discuss court strategy.”

“Then it wouldn’t seem odd, that would be pretty normal.”

“Did you tell him where we were going before we left?”

“No, but given Dr. Schneider’s presence in the prison last night, he’s going to know.”

“Good. When he asks, tell him everything about the trip. Give him a chance to turn over the samples or give him enough rope to hang himself. Either way, we’ll know.”

“Nella, you are ignoring the possibility that someone else took them.”

“Because the possibility is so small. Look, Frank, I’ve thought about this nonstop for days. There were only four people who knew about the resistant strain. I’m convinced we’ve eliminated three of them either through motive or capacity. Dr. Pazzo is the only one that’s left.”

Frank sighed. “What are you going to be doing?”

“I need to find out if anything was delivered or returned to Dr. Pazzo. I guess I’ll start with Officer Kembrey. Do you think he can keep his mouth shut?”

“Stan? I’d trust him with my life.”

“Okay then. I need some clothes.”

Frank grinned for the first time that day. Nella laughed. Frank swung his legs out of bed to begin the day.

“Frank, one more thing.” Frank turned toward her.

“What’s that?”

“He can’t know about this- about us. Don’t give him any more power than he already has.”

No Good News

Nella let the cold flickering light of the screen strobe over her without registering what she was seeing. It had taken Frank almost an hour to convince Judge Hawkins to give them more time before publishing a warning to the City about the missing Recharge samples. They had agreed that she wouldn’t meet the Judge, so that the sight of her injury wouldn’t cause an immediate and irreversible call to the military governor. She didn’t know what he had said to finally persuade Judge Hawkins to give them more time, but she didn’t envy Frank. He’d had to walk a fine line in the narrow space between the truth and implicating his client. His nature was too open to enjoy any aspect of it. Nella shook her head. How had he become a lawyer in the first place?

They sat in her living room combing through the images on Dr. Pazzo’s

videos, looking for a shot of the closet door. Frank kept on, frame by frame, pausing and playing, rewinding and pausing. Nella had stopped paying attention. She didn't need any more proof. She'd been convinced as soon as she heard the lock click in Frank's bathroom. Her thoughts instead, stuttered and sparked and prickled. She bounced between wondering what Dr. Pazzo was waiting for and how he planned to release the bacteria. It never occurred to her to wonder *whether* he would release it.

"I can't believe it," Frank said, shattering the vague haze that surrounded Nella's thoughts. He was leaning forward, almost tilting himself off the chair in his excitement.

A still image of the closet door sat on the screen in brooding green. A single frame as Dr. Pazzo smashed the camera against the wall in his staged frenzy. He had been so careful, showing only the walls or his face, even the panel of the door at times, but never the knob. But he'd lost track of it. He wanted to be convincing in his fury, to appear truly infected, that he'd forgotten to hide the lock. It was a push button, just as Nella had thought. She watched Frank sink back into the cushions beside her, almost felt his certainty and confidence drain away.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"What do I do?"

"Stick with the plan. Maybe he'll admit to having the samples when you tell him we didn't find them. But if he doesn't- we've only got one shot to find them. Once he knows that we suspect him, he'll push up any plans he might have for the bacteria. You have to play dumb, Frank. Let him think he's got the power."

"You were right all along. You told me he was trying to establish himself as the dominant one, but I didn't believe you. How did I fall for his story?"

"It was a good story. He said it himself. We hate it when the bad guy gets away. I think he's mostly telling the truth actually. His version of events seems to be verified by the others. I *don't* think he was involved in releasing the original disease. I think he *did* argue against using a more resistant strain. The question is, why did he fake his infection? Why did he wait to recover the resistant samples? And what's he planning on using them for? Why hold onto them for all these years?"

Frank stood up. "I guess we'll find out. I've got a meeting scheduled with him in twenty minutes. Are you going to come too?"

"I'll come to the prison with you, but the meeting should just between you two. He's more likely to make a mistake with you. I seem to put him on edge. I want to talk to Officer Kembrey. Dr. Pazzo had to get the samples into the prison

somehow in order to keep them safe or start to revive them. I could ask the Warden, but I have a feeling that Kembrey knows everything that goes in and out of that place.”

“Stan will keep his mouth shut too. Isn’t it going to look weird if you just go to talk to him though?”

Nella waved Ann Connelly’s medical record. “I can use Ann’s test results as an excuse.”

Frank looked grim. “Is there anything you can do? Is she going to get better?”

She sighed and shook her head. “No. In some cases, there is just residual swelling in the brain and we can treat that. Even with medieval methods. But Ann’s brain- the bacteria was active for too long. People that were infected early and treated late have holes in their brain, where the bacteria has actually eaten away at it over time. I can’t put back what’s not there any more. She won’t get worse and we might be able to build different pathways in her brain for some things, but she’ll never be even close to what she once was.”

“There just doesn’t seem to be any good news these days, does there?”

Nella stood up and slid the medical record into her briefcase. She looked up with a small smile. “There’s us,” she said.

Frank immediately brightened up. He pulled her into a quick hug.

“Come on,” she said gently, “we’re going to be late.”

Stan Kembrey

They were both too nervous to talk on the drive to the prison. The tension seemed to wind tighter around Nella with every turn of the tires, though she strove to keep herself calm, more for Frank’s sake than hers. They got out of the parked car without speaking and entered the prison. Both of them wore calm, polite masks. Nella walked behind Frank to the metal detector. She was momentarily shocked at the ease of Frank’s greeting with Stan Kembrey. His smile was the same as the day he’d met her. At first it unnerved Nella that he could be so casual. She realized if she couldn’t tell how anxious he was, then Dr. Pazzo certainly wouldn’t, and Nella breathed easier.

“Hey Stan, I’ve got a few minutes before my meeting, how about a cup of coffee with me and Dr. Rider. She hasn’t had a real cup of coffee in years and I told her you had the last can in the City.”

Officer Kembrey simultaneously laughed and scowled. “That’s supposed to be a secret Frank. But now that you’ve spilled the beans, I guess Terry can take over for a while.”

Frank groaned at the obvious pun while Terry, still looking as nervous as on Nella's first visit, cleared them. Nella followed Frank and Officer Kembrey into a small office hardly bigger than a closet and crammed with various lockers. Officer Kembrey sat behind his desk, just freeing enough space for Frank and Nella to stand side by side. Frank closed the door without comment and the smile fell off his face.

"All right Frank, what's this really about?"

"Look, I don't have time to explain all of it, and I honestly think you'll sleep better at night if you never find out. But Nell- Dr. Rider can tell you if you insist. She really does need some information and I know you can keep your mouth shut if you need to. I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important Stan."

"This is a good, steady job Frank. After the trial I've been guaranteed a similar post if this one is no longer needed. I don't want to jeopardize that, even for you."

"It isn't information that's illegal or even questionable," Nella broke in quickly, "it's just that we can't afford for anyone else to know that we're asking."

Officer Kembrey leaned forward, "I don't understand."

Nella glanced at Frank. "You better tell him," he said, "I have to go or Dr. Pazzo will get suspicious." Frank opened the door and slid his thin frame out of it before closing it again.

Officer Kembrey turned to Nella. "You better sit down," he said indicating a stool jammed into the corner, "I can tell this is going to take a while."

"How much do you want to know?" asked Nella, trying to arrange herself without knocking her injured arm against the wall.

"I suppose you'd better tell me it all, otherwise I'll be up all night imagining the worst."

Nella blew out a sigh.

"That bad, huh?" Officer Kembrey asked.

"I'm sorry to be blunt, but I don't think we have a lot of time. Dr. Schneider and Dr. Carton developed a very dangerous bacteria before the outbreak of the Plague. When Mr. Courtlen and I interviewed Dr. Pazzo, it turned out that he knew about it. Frank and I went to destroy the existing samples at Dr. Carton's old lab based on Dr. Pazzo's information. Instead of finding the samples, we found Dr. Schneider. The samples had been stolen some time ago. I think by Dr. Pazzo himself."

"How dangerous is this dangerous bacteria?"

"It's the incurable version of the Plague and those that were immune the first time probably won't be as lucky this time."

"Incurable?" Officer Kembrey shook his head, "And you think Dr. Pazzo has it?"

"That's what I want to ask you about. But if he *does* have it and finds out we're asking, whatever his plans are, could change."

Officer Kembrey rocked back in his seat and scratched the back of his head. "He was brought in with what was on him when he was Cured. But he didn't get to keep much of it."

"What did he come in with?"

Officer Kembrey opened a desk drawer with a rusty squeal. He rummaged around for a second and then pulled out a thin, plain folder. He opened it on the desk and then fumbled around the cluttered desk for reading glasses. At last he said, "It looks like a set of clothing provided by the Cure personnel, a wallet, a dead cell phone and three fountain pens. Uh, it looks like the wallet had thirteen dollars, a state ID and a university ID in it and . . . Nothing else. That's weird."

"What's weird?" Nella asked, leaning quickly forward.

"Well, I've been an intake officer for years, since before the Plague even. Nobody walks into prison with just an ID. It just doesn't happen. Okay, I've seen people without credit cards or identification. I've even seen people come in without keys to their car or house. That happens. But I've never seen anyone, even a homeless person, come in without some of the normal stuff in their wallets. This guy had no bank card, no grocery card, no video club card, not even a library card- and he was a university professor. No metro ticket, no pictures, not even an old condom wrapper. Nothing. It would be written here if he had. Combined with the fact that he didn't have any keys at all, not even to the lab he was found in. . . It's like all he wanted us to know about him was his name. Like he *knew* what we'd be looking for-"

Nella stood up and banged her wounded shoulder on an overhanging locker. Officer Kembrey winced in sympathy but Nella hardly noticed. "Like he knew what you'd be looking for so you wouldn't look any farther. So you wouldn't look at any of the other things he came in with, because they'd be normal, easy, nothing to remark at, nothing to remember. What else did you say he came in with?"

Officer Kembrey glanced at the paper. "His clothes, a dead cell phone and three fountain pens."

"What would he have been allowed to keep?"

He shook his head. "Well, none of it. At least at first. He would have been given his wallet back without the cash. There's a note from the Warden saying he requested the fountain pens back and some paper after a few days. It looks like he was given those. Nothing else, not that there was much anyway."

Nella was confused. What good were fountain pens and an empty wallet? “Has he received any mail? Or had any visitors who could give him anything?”

He flipped through the few pages in the folder. “He’s had a few letters from Frank of course. And the books that you brought in for him just a little bit ago, but no, he hasn’t had any deliveries. As for visitors . . . Just Frank, you and- oh yeah, I remember this guy. Ned Glist. He was a jeweler that Dr. Pazzo commissioned. He wanted to get something nice for the defense attorneys. The Warden approved it, as long as Mr. Glist didn’t bring any tools with him. The guy came in empty handed, we checked him thoroughly.”

“Do you know what type of jewelry he was supposed to make?”

“No, we didn’t ask. It would have to be checked back through here anyway when it was done and sent to the Warden’s office for safekeeping.”

Nella felt panic claw its way up her throat. “Did the guy leave with anything?”

“Sorry Dr. Rider, we don’t really check what people leave with, just what they come in with. You and Frank could talk to him though.”

“Not without him talking to Dr. Pazzo.”

“I bet you could if you were clever. You and Frank go talk to this guy, tell him that Dr. Pazzo recommended him, because jewelers are scarce now. In fact I think he’s actually a wire wrapper down at the electric plant these days. I have no idea how Dr. Pazzo found him or what he’s intending to pay him with. Anyway, tell him you two are shopping for a ring and hint at Dr. Pazzo’s order and see if he’ll gab. Tell him he has to keep the ring a secret though, because there’d be trouble at court if anyone found out you two were seeing each other.”

Nella blushed and looked confused. Officer Kembrey smiled. “Yeah, I didn’t think that was too far off the mark. But no one’ll hear it from me. Anyway, what exactly am I looking for, in case these samples haven’t got here yet?”

Nella collected herself and sat carefully back onto the stool. “The samples were in small glass test tubes. As long as they are still sealed in those vials they are okay. Once they are exposed to the air though, the bacteria will either die or start spreading.”

“How long do they have to be open before the bacteria spreads?”

Nella shrugged. “Depending on the ease of transmission, a few hours to a few days? This is a more potent version of the Plague, so I’d bet on sooner rather than later.”

He ran a shaky hand through his spiky, graying hair. “Well,” he said brightly, “I guess that’s good news in a way. We’re either already sick or it hasn’t happened yet, because nothing like that has come through in the past few days.