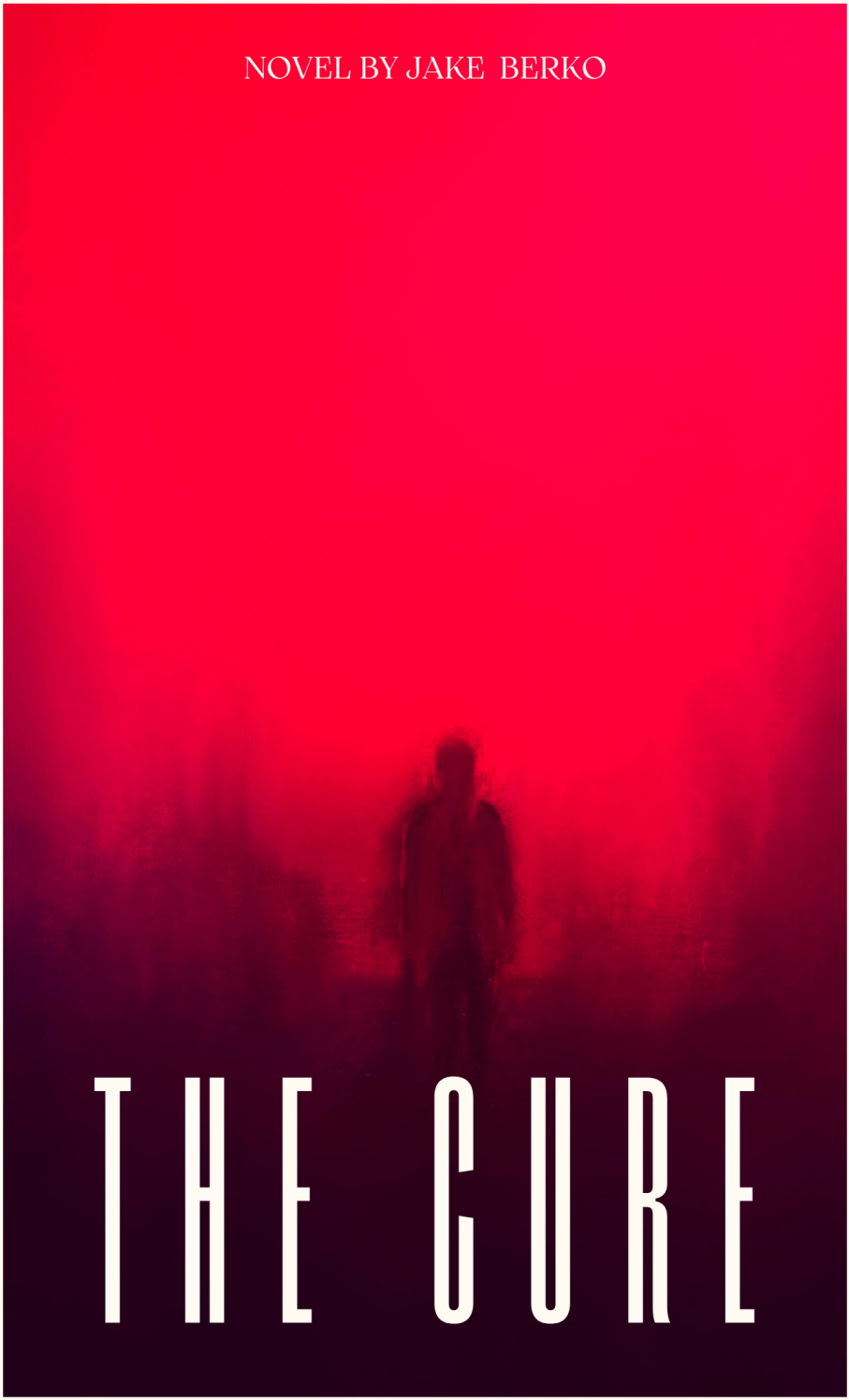
NOVEL BY JAKE BERKO



THE CURE

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Dedicated to my parents

PROLOGUE

The streets of Bellevue had never seemed so empty. Once a bustling, vibrant hub, the city now echoed with silence, punctuated only by distant sirens and the occasional crackle of public announcements urging residents to remain indoors unless absolutely necessary. Stores are shuttered, windows boarded, and graffiti adorned abandoned buildings, each scrawl a desperate plea or angry lament.

Riley Hartfield stepped out cautiously from her apartment building, pulling her surgical mask close to her face. She squinted against the morning sun, eerily bright and clear, as if nature itself mocked humanity's collapse. Adjusting her gloves, she moved swiftly down the sidewalk, her footsteps muffled by scattered newspaper proclaiming doom in bold headlines

She stopped abruptly at a makeshift memorial, candles burned down to stubs, surrounded by faded photographs and handwritten notes. Her eyes traced one particular message: "Why couldn't you save us?"

Across town, in a high-security research facility, hidden beneath layers of steel and secrecy, Dr. Julian Mercer adjusted his lab coat, studying the latest test results projected on massive screens surrounding him. His expression was unreadable as it usually was, yet his posture radiated a quiet confidence. "Dr. Mercer", an assistant

approached nervously. “The president is on the line. They need to know how close we are.”

Mercer glanced at the screen again, then back at the assistant. A faint smile curled his lips.

“Tell them we have it,” he said, his voice smooth and assured. “We’ve found the cure.”

Chapter 1

Riley remembered when the first cases hit New York. She had been teaching high school biology, explaining RNA replication to yawning students, never imagining that soon, those same mechanisms would destroy so much of what she loved. One student had asked, “so viruses can’t be cured, right?” She’d paused, unsure then how to answer. She hadn’t known that question would haunt her.

She hadn’t known it would follow her into dreams, echo in hospital corridors, or scrawl itself into the margins of her notebooks long after classrooms had emptied.

Riley had always believed in order. In the rules of biology, in the structures of science, in the certainty of cause and effect. She wasn’t naive—just grounded. As a child, she’d ask questions few had the patience to answer, and as a teenager, she’d read microbiology textbooks for fun. Teaching was her second love. Science had come first. She believed that knowledge, given freely, could shield people. Could save them.

But nothing she knew had prepared her for the collapse.

The virus, HRSV-30, had a terrifyingly efficient nature. Dubbed “Red Death” by the media for the hemorrhagic symptoms it produced, it first manifested as an innocuous fever and headache, rapidly escalating into severe internal bleeding and organ failure. Within days, victims

succumbed, their bodies reduced to frail shells of their former selves.

Its spread was devastatingly swift, aided by globalization and dense populations. By 2030, the global population had increased to 10 billion, and cities were becoming overrun. Hospitals had collapsed under the weight of the infected. Doctors and nurses worked themselves into exhaustion, only to fall victim themselves. Refrigerated trucks lined alleyways, now serving as mobile morgues. Even governments, usually fortified by bureaucracy and contingency, buckled under the virus's pressure. Borders were meaningless; no wall or visa could stop the microscopic killer.

The Red Death spread through microscopic droplets expelled by ought, sneezing, or even speaking, making every breath a potential threat. Its airborne nature meant that no place was truly safe; the virus lingered in the air of enclosed spaces, clinging to particles and drifting through ventilation systems with terrifying persistence. Masks and social distancing offered only limited protection, and by the time symptoms appeared, most carriers had already unknowingly infected dozens. Public transportation, offices, schools—once the lifeblood of urban life—became breeding grounds for transmission. Fear settled into the lungs of every survivor, just as the virus had, invisible and inescapable.

When the Red Death arrived, it didn't feel real. The first week was filled with news clips, maps dotted red, and public officials assuring everyone that the situation was "under control". They spoke of a two week "social distancing" period, in which everyone stayed home to help limit the spread, but it was vastly unsuccessful. They let people back into the school thinking that the disease had

been eradicated. Then one student didn't show up. Then three. Then a teacher collapsed during second period, coughing blood into a paper towel.

They closed the doors for good the next day.

In the following weeks, Riley's world shrank rapidly. First to her apartment, then to her block, and finally to the four walls of her mind. She rationed food, checked in on elderly neighbors, and watched livestreams of press briefings that became more erratic and frantic. One day, the mayor wept on camera. The next, he was gone. Rumors swirled. Quarantine zones. Martial law. Bodies buried in city parks.

But the virus didn't just attack the body. It unstitched the very last seams of society. That's when the looting began. Police vanished. Drones replaced ambulances. The sick were too many to count. The healthy were too afraid to leave.

By month three, the city was silent except for sirens, military convoys, and the sound of crows.

Riley spent all her time in her apartment. She learned to live with grief, like a second skin. Her bookshelves became supply shelves. She would collect her monthly allowance of canned goods delivered to her door via drone. She would neatly make her bed each morning upon waking up. She stopped watching the news when it became a stream of obituaries. Her only connection to the outside world was a shortwave radio she'd salvaged from a neighbor's apartment.

But amid the loss, she held fast to small rituals.

Every Sunday, she walked to the corner where a flower stand used to be and laid down a note. Sometimes it was just a memory. Sometimes it was a message to a former student she hadn't seen in months. Sometimes, it was just a

name. She never stayed long. The area had become a kind of impromptu memorial, cluttered with photos, melted candles, and rain-warped letters. She'd stand in silence, press her hand to her chest, and then leave before the silence felt too loud.

And yet, despite it all, there was a quiet resistance in her survival.

She continued to teach—if only to herself. She practiced lectures aloud, turning empty walls into classrooms. She wrote lessons in her journal, pretending her students were still listening. One day, she wrote an entire syllabus on virology, wondering what she would have done differently had she known. She wanted to believe that knowledge still mattered. That science wasn't too late.

One morning, she discovered a cat mewing outside her building, thin and dirty, but alive. She named him Leo, and he became her shadow, curling beside her when the nights grew too cold. Leo reminded her of something she couldn't quite name—of warmth, perhaps, or defiance.

That night, Riley lit her usual candle and set it in the window. It flickered against the glass, a quiet signal in the darkness—proof that she was still here. She sat on the floor beside Leo, absentmindedly running her fingers through his fur while staring at the pages of her journal. Most of the ink now blurred into itself, a mosaic of grief, memory, and facts she refused to forget. Outside, the city lay still, blanketed by silence and dust.

She was used to silence now. The kind that rang in your ears and made your own heartbeat feel intrusive. There were no more traffic horns, no children yelling from fire escapes, no arguments from the upstairs couple who used to fight about rent. Just the wind, sometimes a siren, and her own breathing.

She sat on the floor with her legs folded beneath her, Riley curled at her side, and opened her journal to a fresh page. The pen hovered between her fingers as she tried to find something new to say—something that didn't sound like yesterday or the day before.

She lowered the tip to the paper and had just begun to write when, without warning, she heard a knock.