

## PROLOGUE

---

---

“Suicide Help Line. This is D.”

The operator leaned back in her chair and waited, squeezing absent-mindedly at a small, white bump on her upper arm. Most of her calls came in one of two ways, either the caller was crying, or suddenly went mute when D answered. The criers took longer, struggling to get it together, but the mutes were tricky. Sometimes they’d hang up before uttering the first word. She had a mute on the line. Patience was key.

“I’m right here. Take your time.” D peeked beyond the beige partition of her cubicle. Four seats over, J nodded his head, listening to a caller. The operators used letters for names at the center. The anonymity gave them some added distance from their callers, and from each other. J turned in D’s direction and faked a yawn. He must have a crier.

Her caller’s data blipped onto the monitor. Some place on Central Park West. The only calls they received now came from trusters — rich conservatives who still believed that somehow someone was going to make it all better. They stayed behind in their million dollar homes, with their security systems and private generators and stock-piled supplies, waiting.

“My husband . . .” a woman’s voice spoke barely above a whisper. She took a deep breath and sighed. “My husband took one of those Nexinol tablets.”

“I see.” D nodded into her headset. “And he’s dead.” Callers had a tough time dealing with death, so D liked to put it out there for them. Usually just hearing the word helped them put things in perspective.

“Yes.”

“Are you alone now?”

“Yes.” The woman’s staccato answer almost hid her fear. “The doorman isn’t even answering my page.”

“Is he the one who gave your husband the Nexinol?”

“He delivered them to all the residents.” The woman snorted with disgust. “Said the military passed them out. I don’t believe for one minute that President Birch authorized—”

“Maybe the doorman took one of those tablets.”

The woman fell silent. Mulling over the possibility?

D kept things moving, following an informal protocol. Don't allow the caller to become defensive. Don't give them time to rationalize. Above all, don't get into what D referred to as the "shoulda-coulda-woulda" argument.

"Do you have your own generator in the apartment?" she asked her caller.

"No. There's a large unit in the basement."

"But if the doorman is gone, I'd have to think there's no maintenance staff either," D reasoned. "The generator will eventually stop. That means no lights, no refrigeration, no air, not even enough power to recharge a cell phone."

The woman got the gist of D's observation. "Dear God."

Brutal. D used to agonize over shoving reality into a caller's face, but she needed this job and her employment hinged on the successful culmination of each call. Even though she didn't receive a salary, the government provided room and board, a safe haven from the madness outside.

"Sounds like you could use a drink. Do you keep any liquor in the house?"

The question jerked her caller in a new direction. "I believe there may be some Courvoisier in the cabinet."

"Great. Why don't you pour yourself a glass, just to steady your nerves." D wanted her caller to take one last look at her opulent surroundings, and understand that her lifestyle was at an end. Futility was D's biggest ally. "In fact, why don't you bring the bottle?"

When the caller came back on the line, D encouraged the woman to take a nice big drink before asking, "When is the last time you saw a newscast?"

"I can't remember," the woman said. "Once Wall Street stopped reporting—"

Stopped reporting? Wall Street was dead. That bastion of legalized gambling imploded months ago when the last few players gathered up their worthless chips. There was no cashing in.

"It was always news bulletins about this Korean flu, how far it had spread, how many were sick or already dead."

D slipped into a rant. "I'm not even convinced it is influenza. The CDC has issued so many conflicting reports. Who ever heard of millions of people dying from the flu? Personally, I think we've been hit with some kind of biological weapon and they're covering it up." She crossed her arms, her fingers massaging the skin in search of another bump.

At first, Americans had taken it personally, thinking they'd been targeted. But the whole friggin' world was being wiped out. The big question was why?

D heard the clink of expensive crystal as the woman banged her goblet on a table. "That's what my husband said. But how could that happen? Why would anyone intentionally do something like this? Have you seen the people outside roaming around?"

“Yeah. I didn’t know you could be that sick and still be alive. It’s been weeks since I’ve left the building. What about you?”

“Heavens, no. With all the looting and burning?”

“How have you been getting food?”

The woman’s uncertainty turned to arrogance. “We have the money and the connections. People will do anything if the price is right.”

For the past few weeks, rumors had been circulating through the call center about profiteers who were venturing out. These guys scoured warehouses and abandoned trucks, selling what they pillaged to the highest bidder. She’d heard about a couple fools who drove all the way to Florida. With most of the working class dead, the oranges were just waiting to be picked. Supposedly, the guys made a killing on the sales, but D wondered what they thought they were going to do with the money. How much more did this woman think her fortune would do for her?

Time to shake the caller’s confidence again. “Did you hear someone blew up nuclear power plants in Texas and California?” D asked. Technically, no one was really sure what happened. D’s supervisor insisted the plants blew because they weren’t properly staffed. He compared it to leaving a pot on the stove and going to bed. But J and some of the others were convinced the plants had been attacked.

“When!?”

“About a week ago.”

The woman gulped cognac, then answered in a raspy whisper. “So there will be fallout.”

People always feared radiation. They imagined huge clouds of destruction circling the globe, wiping out everything in its path. In reality, the fallout from the blast in Texas hadn’t traveled much more than ten miles. The true destruction was the loss of power. But fear was a great hot button. All the operators were using it.

D made her move. “Tell me, do you still have your Nexinol tablet?”

“Yes. It’s in my pocket.”

“Drop it in the cognac. And tell me about your husband. Did he do much traveling in his business?” The old dual-assignment. The caller got so caught up in answering part two, they didn’t pay much attention to part one.

“Of course he did. Jonathan was CEO of Parker and Southington. He flew exclusively in their private jet.”

“Wow! If you had access to a jet, why didn’t you leave the country?”

“Where would we go?” the woman screeched. “Mexico and Latin American are full of rotting corpses, the Canadians have made it quite clear we aren’t welcome. Even Europe is in a shambles.”

“Fiji?”

The woman blurted a laugh. “And do what? Live in a little grass hut and eat coconuts?”

Of course not. She and her husband were too good to scabble in the soil to grow food, too proud to sweat in the hot sun.

“He sounds honorable.” D laid on the bullshit. “Let’s drink a toast to Jonathan, a good man, proud and true.” She waited patiently.

The woman finally answered with a whispered, “I did it.”

“Wonderful. I’ll just stay on the line until you feel drowsy, okay?”

“Are a lot of people doing this?”

“They sure are. I answer calls all day long, helping folks.”

“What will happen when everyone’s gone?”

Damn. D knew what was coming. “I’m not really sure.”

“Are you going to take a Nexinol?”

Why did callers always ask that? D leaned back in her chair to check on J. He gave her a thumbs-up as he finished his call and punched the next line. Once he identified himself, he leaned out into the aisle, wagged his finger between him and her, sign language for “me and you”, tapped his watch, “after work”, then grabbed his crotch and rolled his eyes back into his head. Why not? She could think of a lot worse ways to spend her final days. Hell, she could be working at the Medical Center with the dregs of the city, or driving one of those buses loaded with the living dead.

The sound of shattering glass brought her back. “Say hello to Jonathan for me.” She clicked the next button on her console. “Suicide Help Line, this is D.”

## CHAPTER ONE

---

From her second story office window, Taeya Sanchez watched the burning apartment building across the street. At first, all she'd seen was smoke wafting up out of the roof, but she knew what was happening inside—flames were gobbling up curtains and chairs, favorite jeans and photo albums. Once the fire gathered up enough strength, a fist of flames would punch through a window, sucking in air and growing.

Who had started this particular blaze? A survivor cooking on a barbecue grill or a camp stove? Without power, the few remaining residents still holed up in their apartments were getting creative. One man who came into the Medical Center had burns on his legs and feet from one of those ten-gallon turkey fryers filled with boiling oil. She shuddered to think what he might have been cooking. It wasn't a Butterball. He'd barely escaped before the spilled oil ignited the propane tank, blowing out a wall, and setting yet another building on fire.

The recently homeless who'd been burned out of their own flats, moved into abandoned buildings and started the process again. And it wasn't just cooking accidents. A kerosene lantern got kicked over. A candle was left burning all night. She was sure pyros and looters intentionally set some of the blazes.

At least it was summer. Taeya couldn't imagine what people might do in order to stay warm this winter.

Down on the streets, no fire trucks screamed for the right-of-way. No cars swerved or honked. There were no curious pedestrians clogging the sidewalks to hamper firemen. Manhattan was dead. Wiped out by a virus that Taeya still did not fully comprehend.

As an epidemiologist, she had spent the last ten years chasing outbreaks. Who carried the disease, was it bacterial or viral, where were the outbreaks occurring? She tracked host, agent, and environment like a board game. Mrs. Peacock, with a candlestick, in the observatory.

When the Army Medical Corps commandeered Bellevue as a safe zone, the top brass had requested Taeya from CDC. She never set foot on Manhattan pavement, never saw a show or dined

in one of those cute sidewalk cafes. She came in from JFK, so she never even got a glimpse of Times Square. Just climbed out of the limo in the hospital's parking garage and stepped into an elevator. As she lurched upward, a queasy lump twisted in her stomach. Even back then, she knew she was heading into a no-win situation. Just like Williamsport.

The smoke from the apartment building was a charred gray now. Thick clouds billowed into a putrid sky the color of canned peas. The hue seemed to change with the fires. When Canal Street burned, Chinatown burst into flames like a paper dragon, leaving the sky pinkish. Last month, when the garment district caught fire, bolts of burning fabrics had turned the sky purple.

A few times Taeya had slipped up to the top floor for a better view of the crippled city. When she'd first arrived, a nurse pointed out landmarks—the scorched hull of Madison Square Garden, the crumbled remains of the Empire State Building. Taeya had imagined charred buildings in other cities. Buckingham Palace, the Kremlin, Vatican City. Thousands of homes and apartments, millions of people—all gone.

She was certain her apartment in Atlanta had burned, and she regretted not bringing more of her personal belongings with her to New York. It never occurred to her that her stack of photo discs might melt into a plastic puddle; that the files of digital pictures on her computer could suddenly vanish. The older photo albums from her earlier years were much too fragile to schlep with her everywhere. All she had brought were a few framed pictures, and Abuela's shell.

One of the route buses collecting survivors chugged up First Avenue toward the hospital. At the old wrought-iron fence out front, the bus door opened and a handful of passengers staggered out.

The queue of people already waiting to get into the hospital stretched beyond the building to her left. Newcomers shuffled in uncertainty, stepping to the curb to see if the line was moving; or they glanced at their neighbors without making eye contact. People who had been in line for hours sat languishing in the sweltering summer heat.

A man splotched with oozing sores on his face leaned against the fence, waving away flies with a bony finger. Another man lay sprawled on the sidewalk, his arms spread to his sides, as though offering himself to death. Farther up the queue, a woman sat cross-legged, her arms gripped to her belly as she rocked. Hunger? Diarrhea from the influenza? Dysentery from drinking unsafe water?

When the line moved, those who could not walk, crawled. An old man wobbled from a coughing bout before cacking out a blob of mucus and blood; it splatted on the sidewalk next to a body buzzing with flies. People stepped over the corpse as they shuffled toward the door.

A mini-bulldozer chugged out of the alleyway. The driver in the airtight cab was dressed in a contamination suit and helmet. As he aimed for the corpse on the sidewalk, the walking dead parted like pigeons. With one smooth motion, the driver scooped up the body then aimed a hose at a brown spot on the sidewalk and blasted the stain with disinfectant.

Taeya knew he'd take the specimen to the back dock of the hospital, dump the remains into a molded plastic container and tamp the lid shut with the dozer's scoop. Within minutes, the sealed container would be on its way to Tom Johnson in pathology.

Was there a point any more? They'd picked and probed enough bodies to fill Johnson's hard-drive. Maybe someday he'd sort it all out and write a book: a cautionary tale to future generations about how an organism had once again brought the Earth to near extinction.

Taeya's own mission had changed over the months. She no longer battled the disease that consumed everything in its path. Now she was obsessed with finding the few *uninfected* and keeping them alive.

The hospital had become a way station. The people down in the queue would eventually get into the lobby, where computer stations had been set up. Data clerks in a safe control room would interview these patients. Unfortunately, the majority of applicants were already infected. A handful were given a Code Yellow status, admitted to the hospital, and observed to see if they pulled through. But the majority were Code Reds. They'd be given a bed, a sparse meal, and a dose of Nexinol to put them out of their misery.

The few healthy ones received the coveted Code Green status, and were immediately shuttled out to the far end of Long Island—the colony in Brookhaven. FEMA called it Orderly Redistribution, but the goal was really to get the dying out of buildings and off the streets.

The telephone on her desk rang, and she turned away from the window, switching on her Bluetooth. The instant the caller identified himself, Taeya pounced.

“What's going on over there? You tell Markham if he can't get that incinerator at ninety percent we're shutting it down. His emissions are drifting right toward Long Island.”

While buses brought the sick to the Center, flatbed trucks hauled the dead to makeshift crematoriums. Both the CDC and World Health Organization had urged other countries not to

resort to mass graves. This pathogen was way too virulent to be buried in the ground. Taeya wasn't even confident that incineration was a hundred percent effective.

Darryl from security skidded to a halt at her door, dancing impatiently from foot to foot. She waved him in and pointed to a chair. He stood as Taeya continued her telephone conversation.

“Then tell Markham to reduce his hourly body count.”

She watched Darryl drift around her office, feigning interest in the pictures hanging on the wall: the snapshot of her brother and parents dwarfed by a giant redwood in Muir Woods, Mai standing outside a Red Cross tent near Calang in Sumatra. Darryl hovered at the photograph of Taeya and her husband Randall, standing in front of a pagoda in Fukutsu. She was wearing a tank top in the picture, and she was sure Darryl was checking out her breasts.

He was supposedly head of security, but from what she observed, he spent most of his time hiding out in the old neonatal wing. He wore his uniform too tight, accentuating his bulging biceps, preening in front of the younger nurses.

“Look!” she barked into her headset. The outburst startled Darryl and he stepped away from the picture. “This isn't a race with New Jersey to see who can dispose of the most corpses. You tell him this is my last warning.” She disconnected without waiting for a reply.

What were they thinking? The whole purpose of incineration was to destroy. If they didn't reduce the contaminated tissue to ash, the possibility for mutation occurred. Then they'd have still another viral strain on their hands. Taeya had argued, futilely, that they continue picking up corpses reported by the suicide centers, but Doctor Sherman insisted they didn't have the manpower for such a monumental task. In the end, he decided that at the rate Manhattan was burning, all the corpses would eventually be obliterated. Had she actually called him a moron?

Darryl laid his hands on her desk and leaned forward, going for the dramatics. “Doctor Sanchez, we've got a problem in pathology.”

“I saw.” Most likely, he was referring to the corpse she'd seen out on the sidewalk. Johnson hadn't wasted any time dissecting this latest casualty. “Maybe it was a drive-by dump.”

“No. There's nothing on our cameras. Plus, we got a guy who says he was there when this dude collapsed. Johnson's sure we've got a new one.”

“I'll bet. He's probably already named it.” She looked at her watch. “Okay, I've got a meeting in ten minutes. Tell him I'll be down in an hour.”

She tried herding Darryl toward the door, but he had more news.



“We had a real nasty one down in the lobby this morning. This woman had three different scarves tied around her face. And she was wearing this insulated parka like the Eskimos wear. Can you imagine? In that heat?” Darryl puffed out his cheeks and blew. “When the data clerk gave her the green light for Long Island, she refused. She was afraid Brookhaven was contaminated, too. Said she wanted in here, where it’s safe.” Darryl waved an arm at Taeya’s office. “She offered to sweep floors. Anything. When the data clerk said we weren’t hiring, she slashed the computer’s plasma screen.”

“Where is she now?” Taeya asked.

“I had a couple of the boys toss her into a red-code ward.”

“What?”

“Believe me, Doctor Sanchez, you don’t want a psycho like her in your Brookhaven colony.”

Taeya pressed her fingers into her forehead and rubbed. Who wouldn’t be hysterical in a situation like this? If Darryl suddenly found himself out in that madness, what would he do?

But there was no point in trying to coax some humanity from Darryl. Chances were, that trait didn’t exist. As she ushered him out, she spotted a man in low-slung blue jeans and a dingy tee shirt saunter past her door.

“How did that man get in here?” she demanded.

Darryl raised a hand to keep her from charging after the intruder. “That’s Rick DeAngelo, one of our new drivers. He’s the one who found the wavelength filters for our Hb readers.”

Unclenching her fists, Taeya took a deep breath to slow her pulse. She’d heard stories about this driver. Someone could show him an illustration of what they needed and he’d come back with it. But his talent had gotten so exaggerated, she’d begun to think he was an urban legend.

“Why isn’t he wearing a hospital-issued uniform?”

“Take it easy, Doc,” Darryl said. “He’s also the one who tracked down those Fentanyl patches after we tapped out our morphine supply. Sherman figures he can bend the rules with this guy.”

“Of course he does.”

“Come on. I’ll introduce you. He was telling me some strange stuff about the D.C. facility this morning. Maybe you should check it out.” Darryl launched down the hallway after the slob.

“Hey, Rick!”

After the two slapped hands in some juvenile greeting, Darryl asked him how things were going.

“They’re gone, man.”

Rick’s eyes drifted past Darryl. For an instant, he met Taeya’s gaze, but then his eyes scanned slowly down and up again. Was this bozo checking her out?

Darryl was oblivious to the leer. “Rick, this is Doctor Sanchez. Tell her what you were telling us this morning. You know, about D.C.”

“Doctor Sanchez.” Rick’s voice had the sleazy cadence of a barfly. “My pleasure.” He held out his hand.

Taeya hesitated, making sure he caught her own slow scan of his slovenly appearance. His hair was longer than hers, but board-straight and pulled back in a ponytail. Evidently, he did not feel the need to shave on a regular basis. His ratty tee shirt was frayed at the neck, and had a tear above an illustration of a wrench. She looked away when she realized the drawing was supposed to symbolize a man’s genitalia. What a creep.