

## CHAPTER 1

### CARLOS

The Hotel Majestic was still empty, as Rachel had hoped it would be. It was too far from supermarkets, suburbs, parks, and from Gate, and too close to the canal with its deathfence to be attractive as a living place, even for lost ones. But it had been nearly six months since she'd been in this part of LA; she had to be sure. The Majestic had ten floors. The top five were inaccessible now, the elevators but gaping shafts and the stairways destroyed either at the end or in one of the shattering earthquakes which had come thereafter. Painstakingly and as silently as possible, Rachel had checked each room on each of the five remaining floors, each tuck of space or shadow in which some lost one or ganger might hide.

People had been here at various times, of course. Some of the rooms were fouled; much of the glass was broken, many of the towels and blankets missing. Some of the rooms were nauseating with a gray ooze of pigeon manure, while a few others smelt faintly of rats—only faintly. It had been ten years since the end and the closing off of greater LA from the Outside; and the Majestic had not been a food place. Rats had found better dwellings long since.

On the fifth floor, Rachel did an aerial recon from the windows on all four sides of the hotel. It was late afternoon and the wind was bitter. Over gutted LA the sky clamped like a lead bowl, and a tang of coming snow stung her nostrils. It would be dark in two hours, black. No moon, no streetlamps, no lights in windows.

Rachel was exhausted from a long day of stealthy travel, but she must make certain that the Majestic was safe before she dared sleep. The very fact that she had been there before was a danger. Standing well back from the window, partially hidden by tattered drapes, she scanned the street, making a systematic effort to look for movement behind each window in each building visible to her across the narrow way. The filthy gray wig she wore made her scalp itch with prickly heat even as her fingers numbed with cold, but she didn't yet remove it. An old woman with running sores on her face and arms was more likely to be shunned than raped and beaten. Rachel had discovered that only days after the End, and after ten years of wearing them her face sometimes felt naked and lopsided without the cosmetic sores. Of course, the crazies and the druggies didn't care if you were old and sick and contagious. But the disguise had surprise value—even a druggie wouldn't expect a dying seventy-year-old to be as strong and fleet as a healthy woman of thirty-eight. The deception had saved her more than once. She had survived this long only by taking every precaution.

Outside the hotel nothing moved, but still she watched. This had once been a fine avenue with potted flowering trees paired along the sidewalks and scalloped awnings gay as flags marking the elegant doorways of hotels and restaurants and bars and delicatessens and flower shops and apartment buildings and jewelers' shops and bookstores. Rachel

Brown had never been able to live on a street like this before the end. It wouldn't have been within her reach, not on a nurse's salary.

But now the bright awnings were down, all of them. In faded strips and tatters they sprawled across the sidewalks. Only a few of the fluted cement tubs still contained the stubs of little trees. Most of the trees had been gnawed down into the dirt by the first brave rats.

Twilight gathered in doorways and alleys, feeling its way toward the avenue. Rachel moved up to the window and sank to the floor, resting her chin on the cracked white enamel of the windowsill. The lower half of the windowpane was gone, as though someone had scored it across with a precision tool and snatched that half away intact. Wet with recent rain, the sill dug into her chin and neck. Her head felt too heavy. She'd watch until dark and go down to a room on the ground floor to sleep. She'd seen people die trapped on upper floors when gangers moved in on the ground and blocked the stairways. At least on the ground floor you could get out if you heard them coming in time.

Rachel stiffened. Something moved down there, in an indigo doorway. The dusk made the image vague and blurred, but finally Rachel was sure. It was a cat, a black cat with no tail, which had come out to drink at a gutter puddle. Finally it moved on, disappearing from view under her very window. Perhaps she would meet it on the ground floor. She must remember to listen for it when she went down.

Cats were all right, but she had never felt any special fondness for them. What had happened to Taffy, her Collie, left at the boarding kennel in Tucson ten years ago, when

she'd flown to LA to watch her mother die in the hospital? She dismissed thoughts of Taffy; over the years she had tried very hard never to think of her, of what could have happened to her. Usually she succeeded. If it hadn't been for that car-bus accident, if it hadn't been for her mother's appointment at the hairdresser, Rachel and Taffy would have been in Tucson, together, when the end came, and it might have been all right. Or somewhat right.

They said that the End was a mistake and retaliation for the mistake and no way to shut down the programs, but it might not have been a mistake. What mattered were only a few things: that greater LA had suffered more from fire and fallout than from direct hits, and that not long after the dying started, the remaining military on the Outside had electrified the dead fences along the great catchment-transport canals, those cement-banked rivers created by lining San Gabriel and other canyons with concrete to generate water for LA when the old supplies became inadequate. The canals had encircled dozens of square miles of factory, warehouse, downtown, and suburb.

It hadn't taken a week for the Outsiders to blast away the bridges and only another week to electrify the deathfence on the far banks using the nuclear generators. Only no one was called an Outsider then and there weren't Insiders, not until the deathfences were electrified. Insiders were the ones that were burned and dying and killing each other in their panic and Outsiders were the ones who were organized and powerful and frightened of Insiders out of their minds. The Outsiders hadn't even built Gate for three years after the end, until there were only a few hundred Insiders left. The Gate was the way Outside—the way, ultimately, to Tucson and the Catalina Mountains and the Sonoita

streams and hills—things Rachel knew, loved. Taffy? But she wouldn't think of Taffy or Gate, not now. From here she couldn't even hear Gatevoice, the great solar compuchronometer, booming the hours. She was too exhausted tonight to worry about Gate and about getting Out. Surely that would come sometime. The only things that mattered now were safe sleep and getting to the cache tomorrow.

The street below was blue as though filled with water from an abyss. It was nearly dark, nearly time to grope down the stairs and find a room on the ground floor. Room 5 would be good. It was clean, just a bit dusty, and still had bedding, window glass, towels, and drapes.

"No!" The shout was faint, but the footsteps were growing louder. Rachel hadn't been startled into moving, but she was shocked into full awareness. "No!" Now she could see little figures pelting up the street, half a dozen or so, running flat out, their shoe slaps echoing along the faces of the dead hotels.

"Give it to us, give it to us, you filthy bastard, or we'll rip out your guts." They were boys and young men—streeters—and one was in front, a slight figure in a black jacket, sprinting toward the Majestic and drawing them after him. "No!" cried black jacket again.

It happened very rapidly then, in the blue dusk under her window. One of the pursuers sent a short board ahead, spinning along the asphalt. Black jacket caught it in the legs and went down, skidding into the curb on his stomach. The others were on him, scrabbling and tearing. "No. Carlos. Carlos!" said the black-jacket voice.

She couldn't see him now, buried as he was under the others. Suddenly they fell back a little, and he lay prone, ringed by them, one black arm stretched out to a gutter drain. The largest of them snatched the piece of wood and hit at him halfheartedly.

"Come on, Jojo," came a very distinct falsetto. "Don't make a mess. I killed him with his own knife. Where's the rat?" They slapped and ferreted at the body, tugging off the jacket. Something fell from a pocket; Rachel heard the faint ring as it dropped to the asphalt. A long arm hooked out and down. "Another knife!" said someone. "You can't take both, Al."

"Watch me!" cried the falsetto. "Try me!" His arms, sweeping in the classic swift arcs of the knife-fighter, held his companions at bay for a few moments. Suddenly falsetto turned and ran down the boulevard the way they had come, followed closely by the others.

Rachel watched them out of sight. When they had gone, deep twilight poured into the street canyon, filled it. She could barely see the body now, but that was good. In ten minutes no one else who might have watched the fight from a similar perch would be able to see the body. One hand was all she could see now. The back of the head was dark and the clothes were dark, blending into the charcoal blue of the early night. Only the pale hand was clearly visible against the dirty street. For a moment a fragment of darkness seemed to move, to slide from the hand up the arm, but it was nothing. The hand lay still.

A last time Rachel scanned the street and the faceless buildings that fronted the Majestic across it. The leaden clouds were close; it was dark. The cold wind hissed

through the teeth of the broken windows and masked all the old-building small sounds. It was time to go down.

With great care, Rachel groped her way along the central hall and found the stairway. She knew better than to walk down the unlit stairs; here it was so dark that she could have kept her eyes tightly shut. Interior stairwells hadn't sported windows. Why should they have, before the End?

She sat her way down, bumping from step to step, her backpack making each stair a double bump. Seven stairs and landing, turn; seven stairs and landing, turn; four wide stairs, space. She was in the lobby. Earlier she had counted steps from these stairs to room 5 on the right down the hall, so she began counting with her hand trailing along the wall. Twenty-three. She felt rather than saw the lobby narrow to a hall. Forty-seven steps and a door that was almost but not quite shut. The triangular scrap of cardboard was still balanced on the doorknob, but she stopped for a few moments to listen.

It was safe. She crossed to the window and drew back the drapes enough for a look with one eye. The street was silent, deserted except for the body, a smear of deeper darkness there across the street.

Quickly Rachel shucked her pack and peeled off the gray wig. She risked a brief scan of the room with her tiny paqlight—hideous purple carpeting, huge bed, useless ugly lamps. Safe. And it seemed safe to investigate. She must investigate if it seemed safe.

Out in the black hall. Forty-seven and the stairs, sixty-eight and the street doors of gold-lettered glass. One door was missing, so that made it easy. She was out in the street.

The street after dark. Never a place to be in a city where everyone was well holed up before sundown except a few crazies, a few desperate runout druggies, gangers on a raid, a dead body.

Rachel bent over the prone body and reached for the neck. Her knife was ready in her other hand but after a moment she sheathed it. This one wasn't shamming. His neck was slick with blood. Under the blood, however, the warm carotids beat. He was alive. Her hand followed the blood down the neck, under the right side of the chest, touched stab wounds there in the pectorals but no lower. His pulse, the sound of his breathing, and the chill of his face told her he was in shock and wouldn't wake screaming if she moved him.

With the ease of long practice, Rachel turned him on his back and felt for the mouth to see if the airway was clear. Very quickly she put a foot under each arm and began dragging him from the street.

The scraping of his shoulders over the asphalt sounded louder than the gusting wind. A new coldness touched her chin and ear. Snow was beginning to fall. This was the danger, right now, this the time of vulnerability. His head bumped a little when she dragged him up onto the near sidewalk, but she hadn't time to be gentle. Her very speed was a charity. If only the street were as deserted as it seemed and the night as forbidding to others as it seemed to her. It was indeed very, very dark now.

It was easier dragging him when she got to the carpeting but more difficult now to count steps. Thank god the boy wasn't very heavy. She couldn't hear him breathing any more; perhaps he had died. How Dr. Gilmore had cursed her years ago when she had



reopened a wound while turning a patient in bed to change the linens. She had taken every care. *Ha*, she thought, tugging at the stiff heels of the body as the boy's arm caught briefly in an open doorway, *nurse drags stabbing victim into abandoned tenement.*

Room 5 was dark as the inside of a heart. With a final effort, she pulled the body in and closed the door, locking it. Now Rachel was a nurse, pulling open the thin plaid shirt even as she snapped on the tiny paclight. With a hotel towel she swabbed away the shining blood from his neck and chest to see what wounds she'd have to deal with. Most of the blood had come from a long superficial gash down the right side of the neck, a cut that had not involved the carotid or jugular.

The chest wounds had stopped bleeding and were quite small. There were three of them, neat stiletto- punches in the upper right pectorals. The lips of the wounds were gray pale, but each winked a tiny bright eye of unclotted blood at the paclight: a triangle of stars. Deep puncture wounds. She thought they might be too high to have reached the lung, but couldn't be sure.

"Infection," she said aloud, barely audibly. "They are so certain to be infected. They've already sealed." She pulled down the loose skin under the eye and looked at the red-threaded membrane. One finger lifted the upper lip, revealing vivid pink gums. ". . . not lost too much blood yet," she muttered, "turn him to one side and see if those stab wounds will drain a little more." Expertly she positioned him with blanket props and set about cleaning and binding the flesh wound in the neck. Her canteens were nearly full—what luck for him. This wound could leave a scar, but she would decide about that later. Now the ectoplast would seal it and protect it.

The stab wounds refused to bleed. Their glitter was drying, but the three mouths puffed a little and reddened. Rachel looked at her pack, but it was no use tearing apart the kit. She had no antibiotics left: no orals, no topicals, no injectables. The very last injection she had given to the old lostwoman four days ago; and the woman had died anyway, within the hour, a heap of rags in a freezing basement. If only this had happened tomorrow, she would have been to the cache, and all her exhausted supplies would have been replenished. She'd have had plenty of antibiotics to give this kid.

Rachel began a general examination, feeling the skull carefully through the springy brown hair. A knot bulged above one ear, but the bones were intact. There were bruises coming out along the arms and back, and another hard swelling halfway between the right knee and the ankle, in front along the bone, but nothing broken. He didn't even smell much, and he seemed free of parasites. He was maybe seventeen, eighteen—one of those scrawny, wiry youths who ran the streets and survived by speed, stealth, cunning, numbers, and sheer good luck.

He'd have been a little boy at the End: TV, video games, hamburgers, baseball, school, Mom and Dad, green grass in the yard, a room with books and a playstation, a place that was safe every night. Now he was a streeter, a survivor until tonight, something unwise within him making him vulnerable to that attack. He had a face; he was not one of the radiation or fire burnies. The face was ordinary, just somebody's face. Close-set eyes, level brows and a slightly oversized nose, very straight, but a little slanted to one side. It was a rather long, lean face, pale and slack with gaping lips and an abrasion marring one

high cheekbone. Just a person, like all others, who was not to be trusted. *Shock*, Rachel thought. *Probably concussion. It will be safe enough here with him tonight.*

Her knees ached when she stood up, and she rubbed her arms. She'd forgotten for a time to think of the cold, but it had been there. The air was silent with that dead-cotton feeling and she remembered that it had begun to snow.

Clicking off the paclight, she opened the heavy drapes the smallest possible slit and looked out. The street was whitening. If the snow stayed, in the morning she would be able to see tracks but no one could track her here. Suddenly she realized that if the snow stayed she could not get to the cache tomorrow, for she could not make a trail, however ephemeral, to it—and it would make her journey there even more dangerous. *Tracks*, she thought.

It took a quarter of an hour to smooth the nap of the carpet, blot away two blood smears, and thus erase the drag trail through the lobby and down the hall to room 5. Rooms 7 and 9 yielded more sheets, blankets, pillows, and towels.

As Rachel entered room 5, a skittering danced across the floor in the darkness. Dropping the bedding, she snapped on the paclight. A rat shot under the bed; it had been at the body. She played her thin beam upon the unconscious boy, but he was untouched. "You've got a gift for timing," she said. She covered him carefully with bedding, stretching blankets between pillow props above the wounds and leaving a place for herself beside him. She'd be his heat source and he hers. And he might live; you never knew. The body looked tough enough.

It was cold. Rachel sat crosslegged on the floor beside the boy and wound herself up in a sumptuous purple blanket with the feel and sheen of heavy velvet. She yanked the belt chain of her can opener, reached in her pack for some food. She had no idea what was in the can; it had no ring-pull. The can was labelless but bright and clean and symmetrical, a good one. Outsider trade goods it was, a gift for services rendered. The lid came free and she laughed delightedly as she plucked it off. It was as good as it could possibly be. The rich smell floated out into the room and she remembered what the stuff used to be called: beanie weenies.

Rachel felt as safe as she had felt for many days. No one would walk tonight, not and leave a set of revealing tracks. The hotel was empty. The bedding was clean, and the boy was well out of it. An interval of security.

Rachel sloshed canteen water over a fresh towel and removed her cosmetic sores, a chilly but heartening act. Next, she shook out and combed back her cap of wavy auburn hair. She had a small mirror, but wouldn't use tonight, knowing only too well her own narrow face. Finally she spread herself a snowy counterpane—another towel—and got out the spoon. The spoon was her only beautiful possession. It had been lifted from one of those hill mansions, from a tangle of bent silver dumped years before her advent there. Small, it was heavy and ornate, glowing with the patina of long use, satiny with age, and obviously of the solid precious metal. She would always have one; in one of the medicaches she had placed the other spoons from the found service.

The beans tasted as fresh as if the can had been bought in a supermarket that afternoon. Rachel allowed herself the unusual luxury of eating with the light on. It was a good moment, a rare one.

Something twitched at the corner of the bed, a tiny quiver and sparkle of black beads. The rat. In the glow from the paclight she could see the long vibrissae tremble as it tasted the air, smelling the beans. *I'd better kill it*, Rachel thought, remembering how it had been nosing about the unconscious boy. When she was asleep . . . She lifted and poised a shoe, taking aim. Motionless, she waited for the rat to come out from the shelter of the bed.

At last it began edging out into the circle of paclight, but it was very wary. As soon as she tensed for the throw, the rat whirled and rushed back. Something white had flashed in the light, something around the dark short neck. A collar.

Rachel put down the shoe. She was beginning to feel the cold quite sharply.

The boy's breathing seemed to be a little easier. She slipped a hand down to the uninjured side of his neck, feeling the pulse beat of the carotid; it was fast but steady. The nest of blankets around him looked warm, comfortable. The rat was watching. The black beads looked into her eyes over the bump in the blankets that covered the boy's feet. But the contact broke immediately, for the rat was staring at the boy's face. In that passing glance, Rachel felt that she had read some message in the rodent eyes. Hunger, but rat eyes always projected hunger. Wariness, too. Even human eyes had that now. *Wanting to be there, that was it. Wanting to.*

The rat stood on its haunches, an upright statue in sleek midnight brown. Rachel had seen rats—before the end, ruby-eyed laboratory rats, white-coated as doctors—and after the end, many such as this. This was a young rat, nearly grown, very healthy and well-nourished. Rachel shifted in the blanket.

The rat dropped and spun around, but did not flee. It regarded her over its shoulder and there, clearly, was the collar. It was an ordinary white plastic flea collar, probably the kitten-size, and on it were letters in black: A R L. A pet rat. What had the boy been saying when he fell in the street? "Carlos?"

"Carlos," said Rachel experimentally. Outside she could hear the wind rising, sighing through the broken windows up and down the street.

The rat sat up. "Carlos," Rachel repeated. "No fleas, no plague," she continued. "Come here, Carlos." The rat came. In five minutes' time, with several abortive rushes to the sanctuary under the bed, it had come to her feet, drawn partly, no doubt, by the smell of the beans. There were beans left in the can. Rachel offered a few on the can lid. With trembling eagerness the rat ate them all.

CARLOS, said the collar in marker-black. When no more beans were offered, Carlos washed his face with very clean pink paws and stretched his muzzle up toward Rachel, peering at her and sniffing at her scent. She offered him a bean in her fingers and he took it with only the smallest click of his teeth against one of her fingernails. He ate it down, sitting on her knees like a paunchy squirrel, but with smaller, sharper eyes.

"All right, Carlos," she said. "Let's feed you away from the bed." She poured the last spoonful of beans onto the can lid and carried it into the bathroom. Carlos followed, at the food as soon as she set it on the white-tiled floor. Carefully she crawled into the blankets and nestled into the warmth of the boy's uninjured side. Carlos had finished the beans. Purposefully he trotted to the most distant corner of the bathroom and presently left there a bright amber puddle and some black pellets. More slowly he approached the heap of blankets, finally curling into a deep fold near the boy's ankles.

Rachel switched off the paclight. Her knife was at hand, the snub-nosed lighter beside the pillow. The rat had eaten; crazy not to kill it, but the creature had no fleas and was full and sleepy. *I'll wake if it touches me*, she thought. The boy would live until morning, she was certain.

Outside the wind was loud, screaming down the canyons of the streets, sawing through fingers of shattered glass, slicing around crumbling corners. Rachel edged closer to the boy's warmth, felt at a bare foot with her toe. It was cold, but it would do. To be with another human being, about to fall asleep and unafraid. She could savor that a little, even though he was gravely wounded. Once he woke up, she wouldn't be able to trust him.

She might pretend that he was Phil, but that wouldn't work any more. She had done this occasionally with patients like this, but three years ago it had stopped being believable, even in the last few seconds before sleep would come. Phil had been dead six years, nearly seven. His death had taught her to be a survivor, so for that reason there had been no other for Rachel since his death. Phil had been one of the last doctors in the city.

Tonight there was the warmth of this person snatched from the street and the intrigue of a collared rat named Carlos. The utter darkness and the howling wind made the night safe. It was a wonderful night for sleep. Rachel settled herself; she was beginning to feel quite warm. Her hand under the pillow encountered a bit of folded paper. One didn't survive by sleeping on unanswered questions.

She clicked on the paflight. The paper was small, dirty gray, and much folded. The folds were fuzzed with wear, but it unfolded easily enough. The paper was not her own. It must have fallen from the boy's clothing while she had arranged the bedding, since she was certain that no folded paper had been on the ugly purple carpet before she had brought him in.

There was a sentence written on the paper, one only, black ink and neat block capitals like those on the flea collar. "I AM TEDDY RIRIE." She chuckled, but Carlos didn't stir in his blanket nest. "Good night, Teddy," she said, clicking off the light. She liked the paper. A bit of spirit, that. An assertion. *Even though you've killed me, this is who I am.*

It was cold. The wind whirled down the canyons, keeping the life out of them, making sure that not even gangers would be abroad in this late-winter night. It tore off bits of civilization and sucked them away down the deserted avenues, but the world there was now beautiful, white, and unstained.

Rachel felt safe. She slept. The snow would stay.