

Chapter 1

Day 1: Friday, November 3, 2034
Quadrant OP-439
9:10 am

Careen Catecher was just feet from the front door of the history building when a wave of panicked students flooded out, driving her back into the quad. Someone's backpack knocked her coffee mug out of her hand. A guy she didn't know grabbed her roughly by the elbow and spun her around. "Come on! We're supposed to go to the Student Center."

"Why? What's happening?" The first wail of the disaster siren drowned out his answer, and she cringed as she fled across campus in the growing stampede, thinking in a detached way that she'd picked the wrong day to be late for class.

A panicked crowd had gathered outside the university's student center, pressing toward the doors and shouting over the siren. Careen fought to keep her balance in the undulating mob. The shrieking siren cut off abruptly, and in the unnerving silence, phones all around her pinged with incoming messages. She dug hers out of her back pocket.

"Campus alert. Shut up--it's a campus alert." The murmurs spread and seemed to calm the crowd. Hundreds of phones played the voice message in near-unison, magnifying the audio so it was easily heard:

"The Office of Civilian Safety and Defense confirmed moments ago that a chemical weapons attack against the United States is imminent. Terrorists have

released a cocktail of poisons into the atmosphere, where it can remain, inert, until such time as they choose to detonate it. You are asked to report to a designated distribution center in your area to receive an antidote that will protect you. Weekly allotments will be given free of charge for as long as the threat persists. The OCSD expects the terrorists to mount repeated attacks, so it is essential to take the recommended daily dosage. Compliance is a small price to pay for your safety.”

Every face turned toward the cloudless, blue sky. Someone’s sobs cut through the silence.

9:47 a.m.

Careen fidgeted as she stood in the slow-moving queue. She'd been anxious to get inside the building away from the danger that lurked above her, but the informational video playing in the vestibule did nothing to quell her fears. According to the video, an attack could occur at any time. When it did, there would be no flash, no warning, no odor...and no place to hide. But taking the Counteractive System of Defense antidote would render the poison ineffectual. According to the video, the OCSD had the situation under control, and there was no reason to worry.

But Careen could think of plenty to worry about. For starters, she worried that most of the people in line around her seemed to dismiss the danger after they watched the video message. A group of girls behind her chattered like they were at a party, and she could hear people all around her telling each other not to worry, it's just another attack. It's no big deal. We hear about them all the time. *They wouldn't say that if they'd ever been involved in one. They honestly don't believe anything bad can happen to them.*

The workers distributed the antidote so slowly that Careen feared the attack would be long over before everyone made it through the line. Careen hoped she'd be done in time for her afternoon classes, but knew she had no choice but to wait. Denying the threat wouldn't help, and a 4.0 wouldn't save her.

"Our protest might even get coverage on PeopleCam! My mom has a friend whose daughter knows a guy that works there. They're probably sending a crew over."

Careen looked around in amazement. "What are you protesting? Are you against taking the antidote?"

The girl wrinkled her nose. “No! We’re protesting against *terrorism*. Terrorism should stop. Right. Now. So once we take our antidote we’re going to stand outside and sing songs and show those terrorists that we’re not afraid. Like the flower children in Vietnam a hundred years ago.”

“Umm...wow. Some of the pertinent details aside, Vietnam was still a totally different situation.” *Idiot.*

“We can make a difference if we ask all the terrorists to give peace and understanding a chance.”

“Oh my gosh! I bet none of our leaders ever thought to try that. You ought to call the president.” The girl looked smug, and Careen, already on edge, exploded. “Has your whole life been some kind of reality-free zone? What do you know about protesting or terrorism—or anything, for that matter? You all might as well be sheep.”

The girl turned away and spoke loudly to her friends. “Did you hear what she just said? *She’s* an authority on terrorism.” Several people were staring in their direction, and one of the distribution workers patrolling the lines looked Careen up and down and noted something on her clipboard. Defiantly, Careen got out her own notebook and scribbled a few lines, mimicking the woman’s actions. Soon the woman dropped her gaze and moved away, leaving only the buzz of quiet conversation to fill the void.

No one else understands that we’re in danger. Careen tried to shut out the memories that replayed in her head. She remembered the shards of glass and other debris that had rained down on the café table that sheltered her. How her ears rang from the blast and her eyes watered from the cloud of smoke and dust that lingered. Most of all she remembered the blinding flash of light and her father’s hands on her

back as he shoved her to the floor, hard. She hadn't seen that attack coming. She'd been a kid. Now she had to take care of herself. She was startled out of her unpleasant meditation by an exasperated voice nearby.

"But what's in it? Is it safe? Can you at least tell me if it's been tested?" A young couple was at the head of the line. The man leaned toward the distribution worker, palms planted on the table. "My wife is pregnant. We're not taking *anything* unless we know it's safe for her and the baby. Let me talk to whoever's in charge here!"

The people around Careen began to shift and crane their necks to get a better view. She stood on tiptoe, hoping to hear the answer to his question, and watched with growing horror as a security officer grabbed the man from behind and forced his right arm back into a painful hold. His wife burst into tears as the guard dragged him through the crowd. He tried to twist free, but more guards surrounded them. Careen heard the thwack of a nightstick—once, twice, three times. Two guards dragged him toward the exit, while another took his sobbing wife by the arm and forced her to follow.

The door banged shut behind them, and the remaining guards returned to their positions along the wall. No one in line made a sound. Careen clutched her notebook to her chest and bowed her head.

9:59 a.m.

Tommy Bailey lay tangled in his blankets, one arm hanging off the side of the bed. He usually slept soundly, thanks to his pain meds, but not today. He opened his eyes, blinking back the bright sunshine that filled the room. *What the hell was that noise?* He glanced at his bedside clock. Ten a.m. He'd have slept much later if not for

that siren howling outside. Curious, he slid out of bed and hobbled downstairs. The television in the living room was on, which was no surprise since it started automatically any time there was an important announcement or mandatory programming. He lowered himself onto the sofa.

“...OCSD expects repeated large-scale attacks. The National Weather Service, in cooperation with the OCSD, will monitor the atmosphere for discernible toxin levels. The Emergency Broadcast System will be used for practice drills and to notify the public in the event of an actual chemical attack. Remember, the antidote will counteract the effects of hazardous toxins if taken each day. The Emergency Broadcast System will issue morning reminders to help everyone acclimate to the dosage schedule. Take action to protect yourself and your family. Your safety is our greatest concern. Go directly to the distribution center in your quadrant.”

The address of the OCSD website and an information hotline number flashed on the screen.

Tommy shook the cobwebs from his head. *Do I want to live or die? Shit. Not again.*

10:48 a.m.

Tommy hobbled down the porch steps, crutches in hand. It was almost a mile to the nearest distribution center. He hadn't been that far from home on his own since before the accident.

The mailman came up the walk with a pile of catalogs, and Tommy knew without looking that they'd be addressed to Lara Bailey. The mailman glanced at Tommy uncomfortably, and stepped around him to put the mail in the box.

"Thanks."

"Sure. You doing okay?"

"Yeah." Tommy busied himself with his crutches.

"If you wanna stop getting all them catalogs, you just gotta message the companies, ya know?"

"Yeah. I'll get around to it."

The mailman nodded and continued on his way.

Tommy swung onto his crutches and headed toward the university campus, surprised that he actually wanted the antidote. *I guess I still have some fight left in me, even after everything that's happened.*

He'd spent two weeks in the hospital, most of it a mixed-up haze of pain and whatever it was that dripped numbingly into his veins from an IV line. After four surgeries, the shattered bones in his right leg were held together with metal plates and screws. His visible scars were beginning to heal, but the doctors offered no guarantees that he'd ever walk normally, let alone make a full recovery. To Tommy, a full recovery seemed impossible.

He'd turned eighteen while he was in the hospital.

He had not been present at his parents' funeral.

He wasn't sure how to live without everything he'd lost, but he hadn't given up.
Not yet.

12:02 p.m.

When Careen reached the head of the line, she put her notes away and got out her ID. The middle-aged woman at the folding table peered through her reading glasses, found Careen's name on the distribution list, weighed her and took a DNA swab. The employee with the clipboard approached the table and whispered something in her ear. The woman studied Careen through narrowed eyes for a moment and applied a red sticker next to Careen's name on the list. Then she held out a small, white, cardboard box.

"What does that mean?"

"What, dear?"

"The sticker next to my name. What does it mean?" She pointed at the list.

There was only one other red sticker on the page.

"Oh, nothing. Just a discretionary dot, is all."

"A discretionary *what?* Whose discretion?"

"Mine." The woman pushed the box into her hand then looked to the girl in line behind her. "Next!"

Careen clutched the box and glanced around as she stepped away from the table. Most people were taking their doses immediately. Some of the girls were crying. *Can this stuff really keep me safe?* She tore open the box, pulled out her bottle, and quickly read the label. 'Three drops daily. Mild side effects may include headache, dizziness, unusually vivid dreams...' *Okay, great, whatever. I have to protect myself.*

Careen tossed the bottle in her bag as she strolled past the guards, the tiny orange drops leaving a bitter taste on her tongue.

As she headed out, she noticed a guy on crutches struggling to squeeze his way through the heavy entryway doors. In her hurry to help, Careen's leg became entangled with the young man's crutches, creating a near-catastrophic pile-up.

He shook his blond hair out of his eyes and focused on righting himself, his narrow, angry gaze fixed over her head.

"Ohmygosh! I'm so sorry." *Am I slurring my words? How embarrassing.*

"Don't worry about it." He shifted his weight and took a step.

"No! I mean it. Just trying to help." Even though he was obviously trying to get away from her, she kept her hand pressed to his chest as her own pulse thudded in her ears.

What is going on?

"Look, can you maybe get out of the way?"

"Ummyeah. Sure." She swayed as she let him pass and when he was out of sight, she stepped out of the student center into a blinding pink light. She could see herself in full color, unaffected, as everything else receded, and she felt calm. *I must be okay.* The light warmed her face, and she breathed in the sweet smell of cotton candy.

She wandered slowly across campus, smiling blithely. At first she felt alone, like she was in a spotlight. But other people were out walking, too, and it was fun to watch them grow closer and materialize out of the bright cherry fog. Her messenger bag was getting heavy, so she took out a thick notebook and tossed it in a trash bin. That was when she saw a guy who was in one of her classes, and it was like she was really seeing him for the first time. She noticed his broad shoulders and how his dark hair

curled out from under the edges of his baseball cap. She stared at him, acutely aware of the nerve endings in her spine. The tingling rush of energy spreading through her body had to be coming from...him. She caught his eye.

He walked straight up to her, grabbed a handful of hair at the base of her neck, tilted back her head, and kissed her. When the kiss ended he smiled, and she followed him into the fog.

12:28 a.m.

The line was long and inched forward almost imperceptibly. Tommy felt faint from exerting himself on the long walk, and was pretty sure he'd collapse to the floor without his crutches to hold him up. Someone jostled him from behind, and he turned around, irritated.

"Sorry, dude. Oh...hey, Tommy." It was one of his teammates from school. The boy extended his hand uncomfortably, and when Tommy didn't respond, he settled for a half-hearted fake punch on Tommy's shoulder.

"Hey."

"I heard about...what happened. Sorry about your folks. I mean, I meant to stop by, you know, a bunch of us were going to come see how you were doing but things got so busy...what with starting university and all. Umm...so how you been? I mean...oh God, sorry. That was stupid." He avoided Tommy's eye.

"I'm great. You?"

"Yeah, really great, except for this whole thing today. Everyone's freaked out, you know? They even cancelled the party at my frat house tonight. Some crazy shit, huh?"

“Yeah. Some crazy shit.”

“Well, take care of yourself, right? See you around?”

“Sure.”

3:16 p.m.

Tommy tottered through the front door, using a crutch to slam it closed behind him. He was sweating from head toe, and it felt like his recently-healed incision had pulled apart somewhere along the fifteen-inch scar. He wasn't used to being around people, and he'd felt conspicuous and defective. *Why is it that every interaction I have with anyone focuses on my...shortcomings? I couldn't even open the stupid door by myself.*

Was it his fault that he felt so alone? Art and Beth Severson, his parents' best friends, had encouraged him to stay with them after he was discharged from the hospital, and he'd taken them up on the offer for a couple weeks. They infiltrated his drug-induced fog with good intentions and regular mealtimes. Beth hovered over him with a cheery efficiency that he found annoying, and Art asked so many questions about the accident that Tommy had finally gotten tired of saying “I don't remember” and clammed up. Every evening Art watched the sports channel on TV, which only served to remind Tommy of his limitations. Maybe Art had felt obligated to be there for his dead best friend's son, but Tommy wished he didn't. He'd found the whole situation intolerable, and as soon as he was able to get around on his own, he'd gone home.

He pulled a white box from the pocket of his hoodie and removed the amber bottle inside. Three drops daily. Not just for him...for everyone. Everyone was in danger; everyone was scared. He wasn't alone in this fight.

Tommy limped into the kitchen for a glass of water and a pain pill. With three tiny drops of the antidote swirling in his glass, he washed down the pill with a single gulp. Back in the living room, he flopped on the sofa and closed his eyes. Soon he could hear the sofa breathing softly, and he was somewhere else, his body rising and falling with each breath, like waves on the lake he frequented with his parents years before. He was afloat on sunlit water, the bright light sparkling and changing in kaleidoscopic patterns as he drifted aimlessly. In the distance, a pretty brunette walked alone on the shore.

4:12 p.m.

Wes Carraway turned the sign on the diner's window to Closed, locked the front door, and drew the blinds. He crossed the room and slapped the counter to get his older brother's attention. Mitch came out of the kitchen, wiping his hands on his apron, and pulled a little amber bottle out of his pocket.

"This is the one, Wes. The one he warned me about. This chemical weapons attack is all over the news! Of course there's nothing to report so they're all saying stuff like "up next, a live report from so-and-so at blah-blah-blah." But if you ask me, the whole thing feels staged."

"Just so you know, you sound like the true disciple of a conspiracy theorist."

“Yeah? Well, if this is such a huge threat, why are the alleged terrorists holding off until we’ve all had time to take the antidote? Whatever happened to a good old-fashioned sneak attack? Shoot, that’s what I’d do.”

“You’d make a great terrorist.”

“Hell, I’d make a great world leader ’cause I understand peer pressure and threats. If you tell people they’re being attacked, they’ll stand in line for hours to let you take away their freedoms. All you need is a rallying point like—”

“It’s a small price to pay for your safety.”

“Or something like that. Good insight, Mr. Quadrant Marshal.”

“Ha ha.” *Like I’d dare say anything else in his presence.* “So since I came all the way out here to see you, how about you make me some pancakes before I go? Tomorrow’s a new assignment. I’m babysitting the little darlings over at the university quadrant.”

“Yeah? Well, babysit all you like. You’re no older than they are, so have some fun with all those spoiled rich girls—but don’t forget why you’re really there. Get us back in the loop so we can get to work.”

Wes spun the antidote bottle on the countertop. It stopped with the cap pointing between them. “You figure we’re safe when we take this stuff?”

Mitch laughed. “I figure I’m safer when I *don’t* take it.”

“You’re not going to?”

“Aw, come on, little brother. We’re so far behind the times in this corner of West By-God that if the world ends tomorrow, we won’t even hear about it for a couple years.”

“What if they come in after you?”

“They who? The government or the terrorists? Either way, let 'em try. I can hide out back in the hills if I need to.”

Wes rolled his eyes but grinned in spite of himself. “Yeah, I know you can. So how about those pancakes?”