

A photograph of a dilapidated stone building with a wooden door. A red biohazard symbol is painted on the wall above the door. Below the symbol, the words "QUARANTINED BY ORDER US MILITARY" are written in red, block letters. The scene is dark and appears to be from a horror or thriller movie.

QUARANTINED
BY ORDER
US
MILITARY

JOE MCKINNEY

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CONTENTS

[Dedication](#)

[Quarantined](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[About the Author](#)

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QUARANTINED

by

Joe McKinney

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any person or persons, living or dead, or to any events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Dedication

To Kristina, Elena and Brenna.
You are my world.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Quarantined

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 1

I remember how hot it was that day. It was like trying to breathe with your head inside an oven. San Antonio in August is stifling. The heat grinds down everything it touches.

My skin was pruned from the sweat, and my eyes burned because I couldn't touch my face to wipe the sweat away. The air stank of rotten flesh, even after passing through the new set of filters in the gas mask of my biohazard suit. Between the heat and the stink, I was feeling lightheaded and a little sick.

But beyond the heat and the smell I have a crystal clear picture in my mind of the events of that day. I remember Isaac Hernandez driving his death wagon into our stall at the Scar. I remember walking around the flatbed trailer, looking at the shoeless feet of the dead, clipboard in my hand, while Chunk, my partner, went over the manifest with Hernandez.

That was when I saw the caked on dirt on the bottom of the dead girl's feet. She was one of the bodies up near the front of the trailer, her feet just barely poking out from beneath the tarpaulin. Nothing unusual about dirty feet, except that the gray toe tag she was wearing meant the Medical Examiner's Office had done an autopsy on her, and they rinse the bodies down after they do an autopsy.

Strange.

I pulled back the tarp, and then the white sheet from the dead girl's body. No hastily stitched Y across her chest and belly, no trace of an autopsy.

Very strange.

I looked a little closer, scanned her face. There was no sign of heliotrope cyanosis, the blueberry stain around the mouth that is the tell tale indication of death from the flu.

I looked at the rest of her. There was a bullet hole on the left side of her chest, near her armpit, hidden by the well-toned muscle of her arm.

Definitely not right.

"Let me see your paperwork," I said to Hernandez, interrupting his conversation with Chunk.

Chunk gave me a look. *What's wrong, Lily?*

"Grab that paperwork and step on out," I said. "There's one up here I gotta take a look at."

Chunk gave me another look. *You're kidding? We've got trucks waiting.*

The sun was reflecting off the face plate of my mop suit, so Chunk couldn't see my face, but we'd been partners for a long time, and he recognized the tone of my voice and my stance.

"You heard the lady," he said to Hernandez. "Come on out."

The girl was a Jane Doe.

Nothing unusual in that. By that August, H2N2, the San Antonio Flu, was killing about twenty-five thousand people a month, and a lot of bodies showed up at the Scar without a name. The trouble was most of the Does we got were homeless, or poor, so poor that they hadn't been far from homeless when they died, and the girl we had didn't look like she was either of those.

She was young, white, attractive. She looked to be maybe thirty-two or thirty-three. Dynamite figure. Height about 5ft 6 in, weight 115 lbs. Hair was milk chocolate brown, cute cut. Nice manicure. Biked wax.

Definitely not homeless.

"Somebody's probably missing that," Chunk said.

"Yeah," I said. "I was thinking the same thing."

We started with Isaac Hernandez, the death wagon driver. He was 58. He had a dark complexion and pocked cheeks, a big gut, and powerful arms. He told us he'd lost his wife, all four of his kids, and two of his granddaughters to the flu. "They're buried out there somewhere," he said, and pointed at the mass graveyard we'd come to call the Scar.

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said. "But this girl didn't die of the flu."

"Uh huh," he said, and stood there, like he was waiting for me to come to the point.

"She was murdered," I said.

He looked at Chunk, then at me. "I don't know," he said.

"You don't know what?"

"I don't ... I don't know what you mean."

"You're kidding me? The girl's on the back of your truck. She's got a bullet in her. You don't know why this is your problem? Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

He blinked at me.

"Well?" I said.

"I didn't kill her," he said.

I asked him to retrace his route that morning.

"All these bodies came from the Arsenal," he said, meaning the Bexar County Medical Examiner's temporary morgue facility on Arsenal Street in the city's Tenth District. The shallow west side.

"The Arsenal's mostly poor, mostly Hispanic," Chunk said. "This girl ain't either one of those."

Hernandez shrugged inside the one-size-fits-all plastic biohazard suit the Metropolitan Health District provided for their death wagon drivers. It fit tightly around his meaty shoulders and round, protruding belly.

"I don't know nothing about that. I was in the truck the whole time they were loading it."

"You didn't see anybody suspicious near your truck?" I asked. "Somebody that looked like they didn't belong?"

"Lady, when I'm waiting at the morgue, I ain't watching who goes near the truck. That ain't my job. They got cops out there."

That much sounded believable enough. Most of the morgue facilities inside the wall are run pretty much like a zoo where the animals are told they're on the honor system when it comes to staying in their cages.

"Well, what are you doing if you're not watching the truck?"

"Sleeping."

"You were sleeping?"

"That's right. Look lady, they got me working sixteen hour days. Sometimes more than that. I'm dead on my feet most times. I sleep in the truck whenever I can."

"Anybody approach you today?" Chunk asked, meaning did anybody offer him a bribe to pass something on the truck. It's pretty much common knowledge that the death wagon drivers can be bought. It's pretty much common knowledge most people can be bought, actually, inside the wall and out. But here, inside the wall, the black market is everywhere. It's a way of life.

Hernandez didn't answer Chunk's question right away. He had a worried look on his face, probably because it was just starting to dawn on him that he might very well lose his job over this. Jobs inside the wall are a lot like golden eggs—if you've got one, you want to hold on to it.

"Off the record," Chunk said.

"I've taken bribes," he said, looking at the dead girl. "But not for something like that. No way. Never for that."

"Take any bribes today?"

"No." Stated emphatically, no hesitation.

A long silence followed and Chunk and I let it sit with him, just to see if it would prompt him into saying something else.

It did.

"Sometimes people come to me," he said. "People who've got family on my truck. Maybe a wife or

kid. They want their husband to have his wedding ring, or their kid her favorite teddy bear. They give me a couple of bucks, or cigarettes, or whatever they've got, and I let it happen. It may be against the rules, but it ain't wrong. It's the decent thing to do."

"And that's it?" I said. "No wedding rings? No teddy bears today?"

"No." He gave the word a note of finality and shot me a hard glare to go with it.

"So you do take bribes," Chunk said. "But only when it's the decent thing to do?"

"Yeah," he said. "Just then."

After we took custody of the dead girl and had her packaged up for a real autopsy, we sent Hernandez on his way to finish his route.

Chunk and I walked along the perimeter of the Scar, toward the decontamination showers, passing under a big white sign with bold-faced red letters printed on it that read: SAN ANTONIO POLICE DEPARTMENT PERSONNEL ONLY—ALL OTHERS EXIT GENERAL DECON AT FRONT GATE

On the way, Chunk said: "We've still got some time left on our shift. You want to follow our girl out to the Arsenal Morgue and see if anybody there knows her?"

"Might as well."

Off to our right, the Scar dappled like a river delta in the sunset. Back before the outbreak, before anybody in San Antonio had ever heard of H2N2, and when we believed the news when they said the next killer flu would come out of rural China, or the chicken markets of Vietnam, the Scar was slated to be a fancy hillside community called Scarborough Terrace. It was seven hundred acres of high-dollar property nestled into the bowl formed by three hills, one of the jewels of the Texas Hill Country.

When it became obvious we were going to have more bodies than graveyards, the city councilman who owned this land got the bright idea to sell it to FEMA for an extravagant profit, blocking bids from cheaper sites in the process. It was a classic example of the San Antonio Shuffle, local graft at its finest, corruption elevated to an art form.

Now, instead of high dollar homes, the Scar has been stripped of every single scrap of vegetation and terraced up the hillsides in giant stair steps. Big reticulated earth movers and trenching equipment and death wagons crisscross it continuously, and the caramel-colored ground is always wet from the disinfectant trucks that spray jets of foamy blue liquid onto the fresh grave troughs.

At night, the process continues under the glare of truck-mounted floodlights. If you're of such a mind you can lean against the sheds where the locker rooms are and listen to the sound of heavy, diesel-powered machinery coughing and belching and ripping into the earth to make room for the dead and almost convince yourself that you're used to it.

I've done that.

"You okay?" Chunk asked, as we waited our turn to be sprayed down with disinfectant.

"Fine," I said. "Just feeling a little worn thin."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 2

Chunk's real name is Reginald Dempsey.

He was my partner on Homicide for a little over three years, but we had been friends for a lot longer than that. We were classmates back in the Academy, and we both worked deep nights, the dog watch shift, on North Patrol back when we were patrol officers. He was the first officer out with me the night I had to shoot a schizophrenic man who tried to slice his mother's belly open with a ten inch butcher knife, even though he had to come from four districts away to do it, and he stood as one of my husband's groomsmen on my wedding day. I loved Chunk. At 6 ft 4 in and about 280 lbs, he was my jolly black giant, my overprotective big brother.

When I came out of the women's locker room and went outside to the front of the Scar administrative building, Chunk was waiting for me. He was dressed in a shiny gray shirt that made his shoulders look like the front end of a Buick. His white gauze face mask covered his face below the eyes, but I could still tell he was wearing a cat-with-the-canary grin. When he smiles like that, his whole face lights up.

He was reading one of my *Vogue* magazines.

When I got close enough to him, I could smell cigarette smoke.

"You've been smoking," I said.

He gave me an innocent look. *Who, me?*

Cigarettes are one of those things you can't get anymore unless you trade for them on the black market, and I'd made my opinions about the black market clear to him many times before that.

He started to tell me about it, but I stopped him. "Don't bother," I said. "I don't want to hear it."

"Don't ask, don't tell, eh?"

"Something like that."

He smiled.

"That's my magazine," I said.

He showed me the page he was looking at. It was an article called "How to Feel Good About Yourself Naked." The girl in the picture was wearing a low rise black thong and a smile. She'd obviously never had a baby.

"This thing's better than *Playboy*," he said. "Got more pictures of naked women in it, anyway."

"Give me that." I snatched it from him. He laughed as I stuck it back in my purse.

"I can't believe a woman's really got to worry about stuff like that. I mean, look at that gal in the picture. She ain't got as much of a trunk as a brother likes to see, but she ain't got nothing to be ashamed of neither."

"It's a confidence thing," I told him. "You wouldn't understand."

"You mean, on account of me being such a suave devil?"

My laugh sounded like a derisive snort, which was intentional.

"I'll tell you what I don't understand," he said. "I don't understand why women got to torture themselves with articles that are supposed to make them feel good, but show pictures of some skinny lingerie model who obviously doesn't look like any of the women who are gonna be reading the damn magazine. It shouldn't be that hard, you know? I guarantee you, you give me some candlelight and little Luther Vandross on the CD player and I can make any woman feel good about herself naked."

"Sure, Chunk," I said, turning and walking for my car. "I'm sure you can."

"Hey," he said, suddenly concerned. The protective big brother bit he'd given me since we were caded at the Academy together colored his voice. "Are you okay? You been acting a little off all day."

"Sure," I said. "I'm fine."

He stopped me, a hand the size of a dinner plate on my shoulder. "Really," he said. "You okay?"

"I'm fine," I said, and tried to make my smile reassuring, though I'm sure it didn't counter the agitation in my voice. "Really. It's just—I've got a lot on my mind. Connie, mostly."

Connie's my little girl, five years old going on 30. She was going to turn six in less than a week, but her life wasn't that of a regular six year old. She was growing up in a city under quarantine, the specter of the most dangerous influenza virus ever recorded looming over her life like the very shadow of Death himself. She used to have friends, playmates, but some of them died, and the ones that are still alive she is prohibited from playing with. She wore a brave face to the world, but she was always scared, just old enough to understand that things were bad, but not old enough to understand why. And her mother, the person who should have been there to protect her, to chase away the fears, spent nearly fourteen hours a day burying corpses in the Scar, counting their toe tags for posterity.

Chunk didn't bother with the predictable garbage about how one day Connie would understand, about how one day all of this death would be a bad dream. He had more substance than that.

"Come on," he said gently, putting his arm around my shoulders. "Let's get this done."

We drove from the Scar to the Arsenal Street Morgue on empty roads. Fuel shortages had made it so that you could only get around if you had access to city gas or the limited amount that found its way onto the black market. In the first few months of the quarantine, seeing the streets lined with car after car that had been abandoned wherever they ran out of gas was surreal. Now, they were just part of the scenery.

We left the wealthy neighborhoods that surrounded the Scar, palatial homes built into the sides of

low-domed, heavily-wooded hills, and entered a land of run down streets, vacant businesses, and hollowed out warehouses. Maintenance was one of those things that had fallen by the wayside inside the quarantine walls. Even in the nicer parts of the city, the streets were cracking and blistering from the summer heat, potholes turning into craters because there were no resources to fix them.

But in the poorer parts of town, the view was far worse. There were crowds of frustrated people everywhere, sick of waiting in lines for food, for second hand clothes, for medical care. The Metropolitan Health District had put out orders against public gatherings and large crowds, but the angry faces we passed didn't look like they cared about that. They seemed to feel that the powers that be had turned their backs on them. You could see it in their eyes. They had been abandoned, and they resented it. They resented us as symbols of the government that had failed them, and as we drove by they watched us the way animals in a zoo watch their keepers. It made me sad.

I saw a group of men staring at me. Behind them, a dog ate from a trash can.

"God, they really hate us, don't they?" I said.

Chunk stared out the windshield at a man fixing the burglar bars on the windows of his house and said, "It's not us they hate. It's the feeling of being helpless."

"I heard they rioted at the District Three food distribution center last week."

"Yeah," he said. "I heard that too. I wouldn't worry about these folks though. Long as there's beer, they won't do nothing but complain."

I was relieved when we entered the gates that surround the Arsenal Street Morgue. It was a huge complex, what used to be a cold storage facility for the Merchant Brothers Trucking Line. The main building was a blockish, three story red brick building that took up most of the fourteen hundred block of Arsenal Street. The whole east side was dedicated to truck bays, where the Metropolitan Health District guys brought the bodies to be catalogued by doctors from the Bexar County Medical Examiner's Office, the Center for Infectious Diseases, and the World Health Organization.

Later, after the doctors finished with the bodies, the same death wagons that dropped the bodies off picked them up again and took them to the Scar, where they were pitched into mass graves with all the ceremony of flushing a goldfish down the toilet.

The process was every bit as confusing as it sounds, and mix ups were common. Everybody involved worked unbelievably long hours, and most of the mistakes went unnoticed because people were either too tired, or too lazy, or both, to care anymore.

We parked in the sally port and changed into our mop suits. Then we went to the loading docks.

A lot of guys in the cheap, one-size-fits-all bio suits of the Metropolitan Health District milled around without talking to each other. They worked helter skelter, in teams of twos and threes, moving bodies wrapped in white sheets from the building to the waiting trailers. A voice over the loud speaker reminded them constantly to be careful when handling the dead, as they might still be infectious.

Everywhere we turned we saw the familiar orange warning posters of the Metropolitan Health District

Always wear your face mask. Practice good hygiene. Avoid crowds. Cover your mouth when coughing or sneezing. Avoid suspicious smelling objects or places.

The stenciling on the backs of our white mop suits identified us as SAPD Homicide. We showed the Jane Doe's picture around and got a few grunts and shrugs and a lot of glazed, uninterested expressions.

We went inside, onto the main floor of the morgue. It was filled with row after endless row of bodies under sheets, their belongings in small brown paper bags at their feet.

A few of the bodies were uncovered, and on those we saw the obvious signs of death from H2N2, the sleeper strain of the flu that had returned to haunt and hunt the streets of San Antonio more than six years after it caused the 1957 pandemic.

Some of the faces were streaked with dark rivulets of dried blood. The hemorrhaging was disgusting and it never got easier to look at, despite being so common. When the quarantine was still something new, and there was still room for the sick in the hospitals, you'd walk down the halls, pushing your way through crowds, stepping over the sick dying on their backs in the hallway because there weren't enough beds, and all you heard was hacking coughs. You'd hear people bringing stuff up, but it wasn't phlegm. It was blood. By the time they were brought to the morgues, their clothes would be splattered with it. Blood would be coming out their noses, out their mouths. Sometimes even their ears.

You'd also see the cyanosis. That was the worst. Blue splotching all over their faces because their lungs couldn't put any oxygen into their blood. Most of the time, the blue was just around their mouths and ears, like they'd just stuck their faces into a blueberry pie. But other times it was everywhere and they'd turn so dark blue you couldn't tell who was white, or black, or Hispanic. They were all just blue and dead.

We went around asking for Dr. Manuel Herrera, the guy whose signature was stamped on the autopsy tag. We found him out on the floor, a team of two assistants following him down the rows of corpses.

He'd stop at a body, pull the sheet back, if there was one, glance at the body for a few seconds, then say something over his shoulder to the assistants, who jotted it down on their clipboards. Then he'd pull the sheet back and go on to the next one.

Their mop suits were just like ours, only theirs had Bexar County Medical Examiner stenciled on the back and not SAPD Homicide.

"Did you do an autopsy on this woman?" I said, holding up Jane Doe's picture so he could see it.

Through the face plate of his suit I saw him squint at the picture. His eyes blinked in recognition. Then they flew open wide.

"What—" he said, stammering, words failing him.

"You know her?" I asked.

"That's Dr. Emma Bradley," he said. He blinked at me, then looked at Chunk. His face was an open-ended question mark. *What the hell is going on here?* "She's one of the doctors with the World Health

Organization."

A doctor. Perfect.

"She showed up on a truck at the Scar a few hours ago," I explained. "She was wearing a gray toe tag with your stamp on it."

"Me?" He cocked his head to one side inside the suit, like a dog who's just been asked to do an algebra equation. Then he caught on. "Oh."

"I take it you didn't do an autopsy on her?"

"No."

"Any idea how your stamp got on her tag?"

"Detective," he said, and I could see his shoulders slump inside his suit, "I've got three or four of those things lying around."

"You just leave them lying around?" Chunk asked. "Isn't there some kind of document control policy around here?"

Chunk's voice is like a deep bass drum, and it startled Herrera a little. Chunk had that effect on a lot of men.

"They're in my office," Herrera said.

"And you don't keep track of them?"

"My staff needs access to them. They handle my paperwork for me. Supply requisitions, memos, that kind of thing."

"So, how many people on your staff?" I asked.

"Six."

"We'll need their names."

"Sure," he said.

I changed tack on him. "How did you know Dr. Bradley?"

Some air seemed to go out of the man, like he was immensely tired but only just realizing it. "She was well-liked around here," he said. "A bright young woman."

Chunk and I traded glances. She worked out of here and was well-liked. Why was it that well-liked people always seemed to end up dead?

"That's all you can tell us?" I asked.

"I'm sorry," he said. "You've kind of blindsided me with this."

"Anything would help, Doctor."

He shook his head inside his suit. "How did she die? Can you tell me that?" His tone was demanding. It was gentle, respectful.

"She was murdered."

"Murdered?"

I nodded.

"But that doesn't make any sense. I mean, who would want to hurt Emma. She was the friendliest person in this hellhole. Everybody liked her."

Apparently not everybody.

"What about boyfriends?" Chunk asked. "She date anybody around here?"

He shook his head again.

"I wouldn't know. I mean, I've seen her around at the lounge of course, drinking with the others, but No, I've never seen her with anybody. She had an effervescent personality, you know? The kind of woman who makes everybody in the room smile when she walks in." He said, "My God, I can't believe somebody would want to kill her. That just doesn't make sense."

"You said she was with the World Health Organization? Is that who you mean when you say the others?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Their office is through that door over there," he said, and pointed to a green metal door on the opposite side of the morgue. "You'll have to go out the south exit and then you'll see their trailers right up against the building."

"We'll come back for that list of your staff," I said.

"I'll be here," he said, and shrugged his shoulders at the bodies out on the floor.

"We'll probably have some more questions too."

"Like I said, Detective, I'll be here."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 3

The World Health Organization's office was a mobile home they'd parked about fifty feet from the rear of the morgue's main building. A couple of used U-haul vans were parked next to it. They'd been painted white and decorated with the WHO logo on the side panels, but you could still tell they were just old battered moving vans under the paint.

After we went through the decon showers, we stripped out of our mop suits and donned regular gauze face masks.

Inside the trailer, the first thing I noticed was how packed-in everything was. They'd stuffed computers, laboratory glassware, office supplies, field gear, lap tops, cameras, radios, TV screens, and machines doing God knows what into every available cubby hole and overhead bin in the place. The staff moved through the clutter like bees in a hive.

We stood there for half a minute before anybody noticed us. But finally, a skinny, dopey-looking guy about my age, maybe thirty, thirty-one, came over with a questioning, but friendly enough expression on his face. He walked like a duck, feet pointing outwards, and he had a black eye. The left one. It looked like somebody had hit him pretty hard, and recently.

His eyes were smiling at first. Then he saw our SAPD badges, and he stopped smiling.

"Yes?" he said, a noticeable chill entering his voice.

I asked him, "Who's in charge?"

"Dr. Madeline Laurent. Back there." He hooked his thumb over his shoulder.

It looked like he didn't want to get out of the way though, like maybe he wanted to challenge why we were there, or maybe just tell us to go spend some quality time with our thumbs up our butts. But it also looked like he didn't want to get into it with Chunk.

What the hell's wrong with this guy?

Then, suddenly, he said, "Is there something I can help you with?"

"We'll want to speak to the entire staff," I told him. "Later. But now we want to talk to Dr. Laurent. Do you mind?"

I looked him square in the eye, and he looked away almost immediately.

He stepped aside.

Chunk and I followed a short hallway back to Dr. Madeline Laurent's office. She was there, her back to us, hunched over a lap top computer that was running some kind of bar graph program. The bars flickered up and down busily, and she watched them intently, like they were telling her something in plain English.

I was shocked at how fat she was. And short, too. She couldn't have been more than five feet tall, but she probably weighed more than Chunk. She was practically ball-shaped.

Chunk whistled quietly.

"You still got that magazine?" he asked. "How to feel good about yourself naked?"

I elbowed him in the ribs.

Dr. Laurent didn't notice us, though we were standing right behind her. She was lost in thought. I watched her make a few key strokes. Watched the bars flicker. Watched her shake her head. She typed some more, waited, watched, then shook her head again.

"Dr. Laurent?" I said to her back.

Her fat hand slapped onto the desk angrily. Even though her back was to us, and her face was covered by a mask, I could tell what kind of look she was wearing on her face. *Why the hell are you bothering me?*

She turned around. Looked at both of us in turn. She saw our badges, and her eyes narrowed.

What is it with these people? What'd we do to piss them off?

"What do you want?"

Right away I heard the French accent. Very thick.

"I'm Detective Lily Harris," I said. "This is my partner, Reginald Dempsey. We're with the San Antonio Police Department's Homicide Unit."

Her eyes remained fierce little slits. She said nothing. Crossed her arms impatiently.

"Do you know this woman, doctor?"

I handed her Emma Bradley's picture—a 3 x 5 taken postmortem. The 8 x 10 we had earlier had to be trashed when we went through decon.

She snatched the picture from me and looked at it. Her eyes widened.

"What is going on here?" she asked. "Yes, I know this woman. Of course I know her."

I told her about finding the body at the Scar. I saw shock, and then denial, cloud her face. Then anger.

"I suppose you have not yet caught the man who hurt her?"

"No ma'am," I said. "We've only just now found out who she is."

"Will you look for him?" The tone in her voice made it sound like she didn't believe we would.

"Now that we know who she is, yes, we will look for the person responsible," I said to her, nice and

polite. Getting into a pissing contest with her wasn't going to solve anything. "You asked if we had caught the *man* who did this to her. Do you have any idea who might have wanted to hurt her?"

She gave us an indignant laugh. More of a snort. "I have an idea, yes."

"Can you give us a name?"

"Of course I can. He's one of your officers."

"One of ours?" Chunk and I traded looks. No way.

She snorted again, evidently looking at a picture of the man in her mind. "His name is Kenneth Wade. He is assigned to our so called Protection Detail."

She smirked at us both. "What is the expression you Americans use? He is like the fox watching the chicken house?"

"The hen house," I said under my breath. I knew Kenneth Wade. He was a patrolman, a member of the VIP and Executive Protection Detail before the outbreak changed everything. The name still surprised me though.

"What makes you think Officer Wade's got something to do with this?" Chunk asked.

Laurent glared at him. Her contempt was plain to see. Chunk used to intimidate just about everyone I met when he was on-duty, but not Laurent.

"That's a serious accusation, Dr. Laurent," I said. "Can you tell me why you think he has something to do with Dr. Bradley's murder?"

She uncrossed her arms and put her palms flat down on the desk. It was a tired gesture, the movement of a woman who has worked for far too long on a knot that just gets more intricately tied for all her efforts to untangle it.

But for all her tiredness, I couldn't help but notice the anger. It was still there, like the molten rock under the thin black skin that hardens on lava flows.

"There was an incident last night."

"What kind of incident?"

"There was a fight. Here in the staff lounge. Officer Wade and several members of my staff were at a party last night. There was much drinking. Your Officer Wade, he became very intoxicated."

"Did Officer Wade and Dr. Bradley see each other off-duty?" I asked.

"I do not understand your question."

"Were they an item? Romantically involved?"

"I should say not," Laurent said. "I do not make it a point to intrude upon the personal affairs of my staff, but I do not believe that Dr. Emma Bradley would become romantically involved with a man such as Officer Wade. The idea is, well..." She waved her hand in the air like she meant to chase the image out of her head, like it was a fly buzzing her food.

"What started the fight?" Chunk asked.

Again, the glare. *Okay, rude to me, but hateful to him. Maybe she just doesn't like men. Or maybe it's just male police officers. Or maybe it's giant black male police officers.*

Chunk picked up on it at the same time I did and backed off. I had always respected him for the professional detachment that allowed him to do that. As a woman trying to do what most people considered to be a man's job, I had some idea how he felt, how hard it was to hold one's tongue when somebody bad mouthed you for how you looked before they even bothered to decide if you knew who you were talking about.

"Your Officer Wade apparently thinks himself quite the lady's man," Laurent said derisively. "I was not present last night, but I have heard that he has what my mother used to refer to as Roman hands. I can only imagine that he tried to impose himself upon her and Dr. Bradley objected to the behavior. Another doctor stepped in and asked Officer Wade to leave and Officer Wade brutalized him."

Dopey guy. The one with the black eye.

"This doctor," I asked her, "he's up front?"

She nodded. "Dr. John Myers. A fine researcher."

"The one with the black eye?"

She nodded.

"We'd like to speak with him, too."

"Of course."

"Did you tell Officer Wade's supervisor about the incident?" I asked. "About the fight?"

Her eyes looked like polished coal, hard and black and intense. There was a hatred there that went beyond the bad news we'd brought her and the resentment she clearly felt for Officer Wade.

She fixed her hard gaze on me and said, "I called Lt. Treanor and voiced my displeasure. He promised to address the situation."

"You don't sound convinced."

"I am not. He sent the man to us again this morning. When Officer Wade arrived here, he offered me apologies. He simply marched in here, helped Dr. Bradley carry her field gear to one of the vans, and then drove her out to collect specimens. That was the last I saw of either of them. Now you come telling me this, and you ask me who I think would want to hurt her."

Chunk and I traded glances. *Doesn't sound like Dr. Bradley was too pissed about his Roman hands she went out alone with him.*

"She went out with Officer Wade this morning? After the fight last night?"

Laurent leaned back in her chair and it creaked painfully under her weight. She regarded me for a moment before she answered.

"As I say, detective. I do not intrude upon the personal affairs of my staff. I look only at their abilities in the field and in the laboratory. Dr. Bradley has been on my staff since she graduated from Johns Hopkins Medical School. She has helped me research the influenza virus in Rwanda and Thailand and China, and I have come to rely upon her as a competent professional in the field and a careful researcher. I have voiced to her in the past my concerns about her extracurricular activities, but she is young and pretty. Men like her, and I think she likes the attention. But as I say, it never interferes with her work."

The present tense, I noticed. It still doesn't seem real for her that Bradley's dead.

"When did you see them last?" I asked. "What time this morning?"

"Perhaps six o'clock. Sometime around dawn. Perhaps a few minutes after that."

"Where were they going?"

"She did not say exactly. Though she has been doing much research around the Produce Terminal area east of here."

Not good, I thought. The five square miles that made up the Produce Terminal area were considered a no-fly zone by both the SAPD and the Metropolitan Health District. The outbreak started there, and from what I knew at the time, they still hadn't removed all the corpses from the street. In the language of the plague city, the Produce Terminal area was ground zero, or the GZ.

"What was she doing in the GZ?" I asked.

"Our work is on genetic typing. We are trying to identify the most virulent genes in the H2N2 virus and modify them, and hopefully develop a live virus vaccine. Dr. Bradley's work is part of that effort."

"You said she took one of your vans this morning?"

"That's right."

"Do you have any idea where that van is now? Are they equipped with GPS trackers maybe?"

Laurent shook her head. "It is not here. That's all I know."

Okay, I told myself, dead girl, missing van, and a cop is my best suspect. What a miserable day this is turning out to be.

"I think we ought to speak to Dr. Myers next," I said.

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