

1

A cry woke him from his sleep.

A young cry.

A girl's cry.

Daniel Ash pushed himself up on his elbow. "Josie?"

It was more a question for himself than anything. His daughter's room was down the hall, making it hard for her to hear his sleep-filled voice in the best of circumstances. And if she was crying, not a chance.

He glanced at the other side of the bed, thinking his wife might already be up checking on their daughter. But Ellen was still asleep, her back to him. He'd all but forgotten about the headache she'd had, and the two sleeping pills she'd taken before turning in. Chances were, she wouldn't even open her eyes until after the kids left for school.

Ash rubbed a hand across his face then slipped out of bed.

The old hardwood floor was cool on his feet but not unbearable. He grabbed his T-shirt off the chair in the corner and pulled it on as he walked into the hallway.

A cry again. Definitely coming from his daughter's room.

"Josie, it's okay. I'm coming." This time he raised his voice to make sure she would hear him.

As he passed his son's room, he pulled the door closed so Brandon wouldn't wake, too.

Josie's room was at the other end of the hall, closest to the living room. She was the oldest, so she got to pick which room she wanted when they'd moved in. It wasn't any bigger than her brother's but Ash knew she liked the fact that she was as far away from Mom and Dad as possible. Made her feel independent.

Her door was covered with pictures of boy bands and cartoons. She was in that transitional stage between kid and teenager that was both cute and annoying. As he pushed the door open, he expected to find her sitting on her bed, upset about some nightmare she'd had. It wouldn't have been the first time.

“Josie, what’s—”

His words caught in his mouth.

She wasn’t lying in the bed. She was on the floor, the bedspread hanging down just enough to touch her back. Ash rushed over, thinking that she’d fallen and hurt herself. But the moment his hand touched her he knew he was wrong.

She was so hot. Burning up.

He had no idea a person could get that hot.

The most scared he’d ever been before had been when he’d taken Brandon to a boat show in Texas and the boy had wandered off. It took Ash less than a minute to find him again, but he thought nothing would ever top the panic and fear he’d felt then.

Seeing his daughter like that, feeling her skin burning, he realized he’d been wrong.

He scooped Josie off the floor and ran into the hallway.

“Ellen!” he yelled. “Ellen, I need you!”

He knew his voice was probably going to wake Brandon but, at this point, he didn’t care. Josie was sick. Very sick. He needed Ellen to call an ambulance while he tried to bring their daughter’s temperature down.

“Ellen!” he yelled again as he ducked into the bathroom.

Using an elbow, he flipped on the light then laid Josie in the tub. He wasted several seconds searching for the rubber plug, then jammed it into the drain and turned on the water, full cold. To help speed up the process, he pulled the shower knob and aimed the showerhead so that it would stream down on her and cool her faster.

Where the hell was Ellen?

He put the back of his hand on Josie’s forehead. She was still on fire.

“Ellen!”

He was torn. He wanted to stay with Josie, but the pills Ellen had taken must have really knocked her out, so that meant it was up to him to get help.

“Hang on, baby,” he said. “I’ll be right back.”

He raced into the hall and back to the master bedroom. The nearest phone was on Ellen’s nightstand, next to their bed.

“Ellen. Wake up.”

He shook her once, then picked up the phone and dialed 911. As he waited for it to ring, he

glanced back at the bed.

Ellen hadn't moved.

"Nine one one. What is your emergency?" a female voice said.

He reached down and rolled Ellen onto her back, thinking that might jar her awake. But her eyes were already open, staring blankly at nothing.

He flipped on the light. The skin around her mouth and eyes was turning black, and there were dark drying streaks running across her face from her eye sockets where blood had flowed.

"Nine one one. What is your emergency?"

"Oh, God. Help," he managed to say.

"Are you hurt, sir?"

He touched Ellen's face. It was as cold as Josie's had been hot, and instantly he knew no breath would ever pass her lips again.

"Send help! Send help, please!"

He dropped the phone, not bothering to hang it up. It didn't even dawn on him that he hadn't given the operator an address. He was barely holding on to his sanity.

Back in the hallway, he tried to shove the image of Ellen's cold and lifeless body into the back of his mind. He looked into the bathroom. Josie was still propped up in the tub, the water now several inches deep. He knew he should go see if she was cooling off, but he had to check Brandon first.

He threw open his son's door and flipped on the light. Brandon had one of those beds that were raised in the air like a bunk, but instead of a second mattress underneath there was a desk.

Ash rushed over to the bed. His son was a long lump covered by a Spider-Man comforter. As was the boy's habit, even his head was buried beneath the blanket.

Ash could feel the muscles around his heart tightening. With the yelling and the running and now the light on in the room, he was sure his son should have woken, but Brandon hadn't moved at all.

He grabbed the comforter and pulled it back.

His son was lying on his side, his back to him.

Just like Ellen. Oh, God. Please, no.

Holding his breath, he put a hand on Brandon's shoulder and pulled him onto his back.

His son's eyes fluttered. "Dad?"

For the first time since Josie's cries had awakened him, Ash was unable to move.

"Dad, are you okay?"

Maybe this was the dream part. Maybe this was the final blow. Maybe in a few seconds he'd realize that Brandon's voice was only in his head, and his son was as cold and dead as his wife.

He touched Brandon's forehead.

Warm.

Normal warm.

"Brandon?"

"You're scaring me, Dad," his son said, inching back a little. "What's going on?"

Ash quickly pulled Brandon off the bed and held him tight against his chest as he ran out of the room.

"What's going on?" Brandon asked again.

"No questions right now, okay, buddy?" Ash told him, trying to keep his voice calm.

"You're going to be fine."

It was a lie, of course. How would either of them ever be fine again?

He carried his son into the bathroom and sat him on the closed toilet lid.

"What's Josie doing in the tub?" Brandon asked.

"Not now."

The water was nearing the halfway point and was covering Josie's waist and legs. Ash touched the side of her face, hoping her temperature had come down a few degrees.

Not only had it come down, it had plummeted.

No! No, no, no!

He yanked her out of the tub without turning off the water, and began stripping off her drenched nightgown.

"Brandon, get some towels!" he yelled.

"Dad, what's going on? What's wrong with her?"

"Just get the towels!"

By the time Ash had her clothes off, Brandon had retrieved three towels from the cupboard under the sink. Ash used the first to quickly wipe off what water he could, then wrapped the other two around her. Though she was dangerously cold, unlike her mother she was still breathing.

“Get behind her,” he told his son as he laid her on the floor. “Hug your body to hers. We need to help her get warm.”

Brandon surprised him by not arguing. He stretched out behind his sister and hugged her tight. Ash did the same in front, creating a cocoon of warmth with Josie in the middle. It was the only thing he could think of doing.

“She’s so cold,” Brandon said.

“I know.”

“What’s wrong with her?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Where’s Mom? Does she know?”

“I let her sleep.” Brandon would find out the truth soon enough, but at the moment Ash needed him to focus on helping his sister.

Though Josie’s breathing was shallow, he could still feel her chest move up and down.

“It’s okay, baby,” he whispered over and over. “It’s okay.”

“She’s not getting any warmer,” Brandon said after a few minutes.

“Just keep hugging her.”

They were still holding her like that when the front door of their house smashed open. Ash could hear people running into their living room.

“Who is it?” Brandon asked, fear in his voice.

“I called the paramedics before I woke you,” his father said. “Let’s just hold on to your sister until they tell us to move. Okay?”

“Okay, Dad.”

Ash expected the EMT crew to come into the bathroom at any moment. But when no one appeared, he yelled out, “We’re back here! In the bathroom! We need help!”

Footsteps pounded in the hallway, but still no one came.

“We need help! We have a sick girl here!”

Finally, he could hear them approaching the bathroom door. He tilted his head back so he could see into the hallway.

First one person appeared, then two.

But the relief he should have felt was overshadowed by confusion. The people moving into the bathroom weren’t dressed in EMT uniforms. They were wearing biohazard suits.

What happened after that was a blur of images.

His daughter rolling out of the house on a gurney under a plastic tent.

Ellen leaving, too, only the plastic that covered her was a black bag.

And people, dozens of them, all dressed in the same biohazard outfits.

He didn't know how long he and Brandon had sat on the couch while all this was going on, but it seemed like hours.

Three things he did clearly remember from after that point.

He recalled being led with Brandon out to a truck that had some sort of isolation container on the back. As they crossed the front yard, he heard another cry, this one not of pain or fear, but anguish. Loud and uninhibited. Looking up, he realized theirs wasn't the only house with an isolation truck out front. There was one parked in front of every home on their block.

The second thing he remembered came several hours later, after he and Brandon had been separated and he'd been put in some kind of cell.

"Captain Ash." The voice came out of a speaker in the ceiling.

"Where are my children?" Ash asked. "They need me!"

"I'm sorry to inform you, Captain," the voice said, still calm, "but your daughter died three minutes ago."

"Josie?" he whispered. "Take me to her! Please, let me see her."

There was no response.

"I have to see my daughter!"

When the voice next spoke several hours later, it was to inform him that Brandon had also died.

That was the third thing he remembered.

2

Dr. Nathaniel Karp stood with his arms crossed, watching the center monitor. There were three other people in the room with him: two technicians and a guard, all of whom had the highest-level clearances within the project.

The feed in the monitor came from cell number 57. Inside the cell, Captain Daniel Ash continued to pace back and forth, his temper seeming to swing from angry to desperate to devastated and back again with each crossing.

Overlaid across the bottom third of the monitor were Captain Ash's vital signs. Dr. Karp noted that the captain's heart rate was elevated, and that his temperature had risen half a degree, but that was understandable given the circumstances. What interested the doctor more was that the captain seemed to be showing no signs of the illness.

The doctor glanced at the other video screens. Seventeen additional cells were currently occupied by neighbors of the Ash family. When they'd first been brought in, they were all like the captain—agitated, but healthy. Now, though, every single one of them was displaying symptoms of infection.

Dr. Karp looked back at Ash's monitor.

So what makes your family different, Captain?

Ash had been as exposed as anyone else when the spray was released on the three streets that made up the Barker Flats Research Center housing area. But it had not affected him at all. Just like it had not affected his son.

Brandon, was it?

The immunity had obviously been passed down through Ash's ancestors, and not his wife's. Preliminary results indicated she was one of the first to succumb. Unfortunately, whatever gene was in play within the Ash family, there was an apparent gender component to it. The fact that Captain Ash and his son had remained immune, while the captain's daughter had not, was definitely something that needed to be investigated.

In many ways, the girl, Josie Ash, was the most interesting. By all accounts, she had gone

through the same stages of the infection as the other victims, but not long after she'd been brought in, she had started to show improvement. And now, seven hours later, her temperature was almost normal.

Still, it bothered Dr. Karp. If the immunity affected the sexes differently, any vaccine they might be able to develop from the Ash family could potentially have the same drawbacks. He was sure the female population of the project would be far from excited if they had to go through the same hell the Ash girl had. There was also the very real possibility that, though the girl was now getting better, she might have suffered some internal damage to her organs while the disease had a hold of her. That would be unacceptable.

No, the gender component would have to be identified and eliminated. If that turned out to be impossible, then KV-27a would not be the answer and further testing would have to take place.

“Dr. Karp,” one of the technicians said.

The doctor acknowledged the man with a look.

“We've lost the patients in cells 18 and 31. Five other cells are trending toward termination in the next thirty minutes, and the remaining ten sometime over the following two hours.”

Dr. Karp nodded once, then looked back at Captain Ash. He was sitting on his bunk now, his head in his hands. His heart rate had come down a bit, and despite the fact they had been pumping the virus directly into his cell since he arrived, there was still no sign he was getting sick.

“Call me if anything changes,” the doctor said.

“Yes, sir.”

Dr. Karp walked out the door and down the hallway toward the rooms where the children were being held.

As soon as the girl was stable enough, they would move the two Ash kids to a facility outside San Francisco, where observations could continue and the doctor's team could do more extensive testing to determine the source of the immunity. A day, maybe two at most.

Their father, on the other hand, would not be making the trip. A team would continue to keep him under observation there at Barker Flats, waiting to see if the virus broke through and compromised his system. Dr. Karp was convinced it wouldn't, but they had to do their due diligence. If in a week, maybe ten days tops, Ash was still healthy, he would be terminated and

his body thoroughly examined

Dr. Karp reached the boy's room first. The guard at the door opened it without being asked, then stood aside.

Brandon Ash was sitting at a small table, an untouched bowl of cereal in front of him.

"You should eat," the doctor said.

"I'm not hungry," Brandon mumbled.

The doctor approached the table. "I have good news."

Instantly, the boy brightened. "My father?"

"Your sister, Josie."

"Oh," the boy said, unable to keep his disappointment completely out of his voice.

"She's getting better. You'll be able to see her soon."

"Good. I'm...I'm glad. But..." He hesitated. "What about my dad?"

Though the doctor was often short and gruff with those who worked for him, he knew how to turn on the bedside manner when needed. He knelt down next to Brandon and put a hand on the boy's shoulder. "I'm not going to lie to you, Brandon, he's not doing well at the moment. But we're hopeful that he'll be better soon, just like Josie."

"Can I see him?"

"That wouldn't be a good idea right now. There are a lot of doctors and nurses working on him, and I'm sure you don't want to get in their way."

Brandon looked down at the table and shook his head. "No. I don't want to do that."

"As soon as you *can* see him, I'll let you know. Okay?"

Brandon tried to smile. "Thank you."

Dr. Karp patted him on the shoulder again then stood up. "Now, eat your breakfast. We don't want you getting sick, too."

3

That night would be burned forever in Ash's mind. He knew there would be no escaping it. His wife, his daughter, his son—all dead. But as utterly painful as that realization was, it was actually the good memories that made him want to curl into a ball in the corner.

Wrestling with Brandon in the backyard.

Reading to Josie as she leaned against him, hanging on his every word.

Kissing Ellen. Holding Ellen. Loving Ellen.

There was a trip they had all taken once that started out badly, but it turned out to be the best vacation they'd ever had. He'd been stationed at Fort Irwin then, outside Barstow, California—ironically only about a hundred miles south of Barker Flats. They'd meant to go to the Grand Canyon but only made it as far as Needles, California, when the van they'd borrowed from a neighbor broke down. Repairs would take several days, which pretty much ruled out sticking to their plan.

The owner of the auto shop was a former Marine. When he found out Ash was in the service, he made a few calls and was soon driving the Ash family the forty or so miles to a vacation house on Lake Havasu his brother-in-law owned.

They spent the days swimming in the lake, the evenings barbecuing, and the nights playing games. Ash became the king of Chinese checkers that trip, while Josie was crowned Miss Monopoly.

One day they even rented a Jet Ski, and Ash took turns taking the kids out on the water. Ellen was a nervous wreck every time she watched them head away from shore, but by the end, even she was smiling and laughing. Ash never did get her on that Jet Ski, though. She'd claimed someone had to stay on shore in case something went wrong, but he knew that wasn't the real reason. She had a fear of water, something she'd had since she was a kid.

He missed that about her.

He missed everything.

Over a week he had been in his cell, a week of talking with no one but the voice from the

speaker, and not actually seeing anyone at all. When he woke each morning, he found a day's worth of food sitting against the wall. He tried pretending to sleep a few times so he could catch whoever was bringing it in, but he could never keep his eyes open long enough. He suspected they were giving him some sort of sleeping drug, either through his food or, more likely, through the air.

The cell that was his world consisted of a cot, a toilet, a sink, and four thick cement walls. The only door was opposite the toilet, but there was no handle on the inside, just a smooth metal surface.

He figured he'd been put in the cell on the chance he'd been infected. It was probably the nearest isolation room available. After all, he'd held his daughter in his arms. Brandon had, too. He'd been healthy when Ash last saw him, but he'd apparently contracted whatever it was before they were taken from the house. So, logically, Ash should be next.

Only, despite the fact that everyone he loved was dead, here he was still breathing.

He felt despair and guilt and loss, but none was as strong as the hatred he felt toward whoever had done this to his family, his friends, his country. There was no way he would ever believe this was not a planned attack. Someone had targeted American soldiers and their families. *Families, for God's sake!* Whoever it was needed to pay.

Perhaps they already had. But if that were the case, no one had told him. In fact, no one had told him much of anything.

Each day, the man on the speaker would ask him questions like: "How are you feeling?" "Do you have any pain?" "Headaches?" Or the voice would give him instructions such as: "Stand with your arms out, then raise them above your head," or "Walk heel to toe across the room in a straight line." He felt like a drunk.

But when Ash asked questions back, they were ignored, and the anger he felt toward the terrorist who'd perpetrated this disaster started to leak a little toward the voice in the ceiling. He just wanted to get out and bury his family. He wanted to sit by their graves and grieve. It was his right.

"Good morning, Captain," the voice on the speaker said.

Ash opened his eyes. It was the beginning of his eighth day in the cell.

"Are you feeling anything unusual? Aches? Pains?" the voice asked.

Ash looked up at the speaker. To him it had become the face of the voice. He could almost

see eyes now, and a nose. And, of course, the big round mouth.

The speaker had become his own version of Wilson the volleyball from that Tom Hanks movie, *Cast Away*. Only Wilson had been Hanks's friend. Ash wasn't so sure the speaker was his.

He gritted his teeth. "How much longer?"

"Please answer the question."

"Answer mine first. How much longer until I can get out and deal with my family?"

For more than a minute the cell was silent.

"Are you feeling anything unusual? Aches? Pains?" the voice asked again.

"Go to hell."

"Captain, you are not at liberty to choose whether you will answer the questions or not. It's your duty."

Ash rolled onto his side, as if turning away from the speaker would make it disappear.

As he lay there, he could smell eggs and bacon, and knew a tray with his breakfast was waiting for him by the door. It was the only hot meal he got each day. Lunch and dinner would be in boxes next to it. Sandwiches, most days.

"Are you feeling anything unusual? Aches? Pains?"

The captain let out a snorting you've-got-to-be-kidding-me laugh. "Unusual? Yeah, I'm feeling something unusual."

"Please explain." There was a note of concern in the voice.

Ash just shook his head. If the voice couldn't figure out there was something unusual about his situation, he wasn't going to enlighten him.

"What are you feeling?" the voice asked.

No response.

"Captain, please answer the question."

Ash sat up, suddenly having the urge to eat. He retrieved the tray then returned to his bunk. In addition to the bacon and eggs, there was also a container of orange juice and a cup of coffee. He opened the OJ and downed the contents.

"Captain, if there's a change in your condition, you need to tell us."

Ash lifted the plastic top that covered his plate and picked up his fork. He was just about to scoop up some egg when he noticed a small, folded piece of paper tucked under the bacon. He

hesitated for a moment, then placed the lid back down as if he'd decided he wasn't ready to eat yet, and turned his attention to the coffee.

“Captain, are you going to cooperate?”

Ash took a sip of the coffee and made no indication he had even heard the question.

“Captain?”

It was another five minutes before the voice finally fell silent. Still, Ash waited, knowing that after a while their interest in him would wane, and those watching him through the surveillance cameras would no longer be paying as close attention as they had been.

Finally, he lifted the lid off the plate again. This time he grabbed both the piece of paper and a strip of cold bacon. He tucked the paper against his palm, then raised the bacon to his mouth and took a bite. While he chewed, he casually slipped the paper under the blanket.

He ate everything on the plate, even though the eggs had gone rubbery and the bacon had lost much of its flavor. When he was done, he set the tray by the door as he always did, and commenced his daily exercise program.

This consisted of push-ups, sit-ups and running in place, the perfect exercises for the confined man. Outwardly, he maintained an aura of blank detachment, but on the inside he could think of little else but the scrap of paper waiting for him in his bed.

After sixty minutes, he'd worked up quite a sweat. He removed his clothes, then used the cup the coffee had come in to give himself a sink bath. Still sticking to his routine, he toweled off with his shirt and pulled the flimsy cloth pants they'd given him back on.

For the next twenty minutes, he paced the room. This was his cool down, also part of his new daily habit.

As he walked back and forth he began to wonder if he was making a big deal out of nothing. Maybe the paper was just trash, something accidentally dropped there when his food had been prepared. If so, he was getting himself worked up over nothing.

Once his palm touched the concrete wall at the end of his last lap, he returned to his cot and lay down. After a few minutes he closed his eyes, then twisted around so his back was to the vent where he assumed the camera was. As he turned, he slipped his hand under the blanket and grabbed the paper.

Though he kept telling himself that it was nothing, he could feel his heart race as he silently unfolded it. Keeping it close to his chest, he held it out at an angle, lowered his head and opened

his eyes.

In the center of the paper, written in pencil, was a single word:

TONIGHT