

1

A LIGHT CRUNCH of gravel.

Footsteps, slow and steady, as if uncertain they should be there.

No surprise in their arrival, though. Matt Hamilton had been expecting to hear them since the moment he'd sneaked out of the Bunker and hiked to the ridge overlooking the Lodge. Time alone was not something he experienced much anymore.

He folded the piece of paper he was holding and slipped it into his jacket pocket.

"Matt?" Chloe's voice.

Again, not a surprise.

He waited until she was only a few feet behind him, and said, "It was always too big."

In the open meadow below was a pile of burnt rubble that had once been the Lodge. The massive building had not only been the Resistance's headquarters but also home to most of its members.

His home.

"I don't know," Chloe said, stopping next to him. "Seemed the right size to me. I liked that I could always find someplace to hide."

"It was good for that, wasn't it?"

Together they stared silently at the wreckage for a few seconds before Chloe turned to him. "I thought you'd like to know the others will be leaving soon."

"Is it time already?"

She nodded.

When Project Eden had attacked the Ranch on Implementation Day, less than a week earlier, the members of the Resistance had retreated into the Bunker deep below the Lodge, where they had ridden out the fight, and where they'd continued to live in the days since. But Matt knew the threat of another strike grew exponentially each additional day they remained there, and the next time they might not be as lucky. When he saw the weather projections showing a series of storms heading their way in the coming week, storms that would likely fill their valley with snow and trap them there for months, he

knew he had no other choice but to order the evacuation to Ward Mountain, their base in Nevada. It wasn't as sophisticated as the Bunker, but it would be safer.

He hoped, at least.

Leaving the Ranch, though, was a complicated process. They may have lost the battle of keeping the Sage Flu outbreak from ever happening, but they were still in the fight to keep alive those who had survived. To that end, there could be no break in communications with those involved in the worldwide rescue operation the Resistance had initiated. If there were, it very likely would mean the additional deaths of survivors and the Resistance's field team members trying to help them.

An additional day was lost while trailers on the back of three semi trucks were converted into mobile communication hubs that could be manned throughout the trip. While this was going on, the other vehicles were packed with all the supplies and weapons they could carry.

But continuous communications wasn't the only problem with leaving.

There was Captain Ash, too.

The captain had been severely injured in an explosion during the early part of the outbreak. And while Dr. Gardiner was encouraged by Ash's recovery, he insisted the captain should not travel for at least several more days. It had finally been decided that a small group would stay behind until Dr. Gardiner gave his okay, or, more likely, until the weather forced their hand. Chloe had volunteered, of course, and Brandon and Josie—the captain's children—refused to go anywhere without their father, so they had stayed, too. Matt had assigned an additional dozen trained men and women to act as escorts in case this second group ran into any problems.

He had always planned on staying with them, something his sister Rachel was not happy about. He kind of felt it was like being the captain of a ship, and thought it only proper to be the last one to leave. But when he received the message that was now tucked in his pocket, his reason for staying changed completely.

"Are you coming?" Chloe asked.

"I'll be right behind you," he said. "I promise."

"All right," Chloe said. "I'm going to go see if they need any more help."

Once the sound of her steps faded into the woods, he double-checked to make sure

she was really gone, and then retrieved the piece of paper from his pocket.

At the top was the message as it had originally been received—a string of letters and numbers and symbols that were unreadable unless you had the key to the code, which Matt did. Below this, scrawled in his own handwriting, was the translation. The only thing consistent between the coded and decoded message was the first line:

To: MH

The translated portion then read:

Have been transferred to NB219 as part of new principal director Perez's support staff. He has decided that through the end of this phase of the operation, Las Cruces will serve as his base. I in no way believe this will remain true once we move to rebuilding phase. This is an opportunity, my friend. If you wish me to act, please give the order.

C8

It was indeed an opportunity. One that could mean everything.
Matt had already sent a reply.

I will come to you.

December 31st

World Population
1,122,463,297

2

MADISON, WISCONSIN
FROM THE JOURNAL OF BELINDA RAMSEY
ENTRY DATE—DECEMBER 31, 5:45 AM CENTRAL STANDARD TIME (CST)

IT'S SNOWING AGAIN. So I guess that means the university's New Year's Eve party will probably be canceled.

That sounded a lot funnier in my head before I typed it down. I wonder how many people even realize that it is New Year's Eve. If anyone does, I doubt they care. I know I don't. What is today but one more day I'm alive? Perhaps the old calendar isn't even viable anymore. Maybe the day the virus hit should be day one of year one. Or would it be year zero?

What does it matter?

I'm not sleeping well. I keep thinking I'm hearing things in the building—someone coming up the stairs, breaking through the barrier I put up, stumbling into my dorm room. In my mind, whoever it is oozes sickness. But so far, if others have come into the building, none have made it this far up. Still, knowing this doesn't keep me from getting up six or seven times a night just to check.

By 5 a.m., I'm usually done, and pull myself out of bed. I'm careful with lights, though. I'm afraid of drawing anyone's attention, so when it's still dark outside, I never turn anything on in a room with a window. As I write this, I'm sitting on a pillow in the corridor, wrapped in a blanket, and using a desk lamp from one of my floormate's rooms that I brought out here with me.

I know at some point I'm going to have to leave. I don't have enough food to last more than a couple more weeks. What I really need to do is get to the survival station the UN has set up in Chicago. It's the closest one to me. When I get there, I can get vaccinated. Maybe that'll relax me enough to get a good night's sleep. Wouldn't that be a miracle?

The snow's the problem right now. First off, I don't want to leave during a storm, but the bigger problem is the roads. Those that I can see from my room are completely covered. No one's clearing them. I have to think it'll be the same problem on the highway. I mean, even if someone who isn't sick has a plow, why would they leave their home? So I either wait until the snow melts off the roads, or I hike out.

I can hear the television down in the common room. It's still playing the message from the UN secretary general. I've pretty much memorized it at this point. I have to say, his voice is comforting. There are TVs on in the other wings of the dorm. I can

see them when I look out any of the windows, so I figure leaving mine on shouldn't draw undue attention. I've tried calling the numbers at the end of the message, but even though my phone shows I have a signal, I can't connect to anything.

I hope the snow stops soon. I hope we have a few days of warm weather to melt it away.

I started to write that I hope I don't die here, but I deleted it because dying here of starvation or exposure has to be better than dying of the Sage Flu, right?

ISABELLA ISLAND, COSTA RICA
5:54 AM CST

THERE WAS THE Before and the After.

In the Before, when Robert had been the head bartender for the Isabella Island Resort, and routinely worked until three or four in the morning, the only time he would have seen the sunrise was after a particularly late night as he headed off to bed.

In the After, when Robert no longer poured the drinks, but was the de facto leader of the employees and guests who made up the group of survivors occupying the island, he seldom slept more than four hours a night, and found himself for the fourth day in a row on the beach staring at the horizon as the sun crested the sea.

Like he'd done every morning of the After, he allowed himself a few minutes to wish there was a way to go back to before Christmas Eve, to the time when the world as he knew it had yet to go insane. In this waking dream, the containers that had been secretly placed around the globe failed to open and spread their deadly cargo of Sage Flu, and his friend Dominic and all the others who had fallen victim to the pandemic would still be alive.

He had no idea how many were dead. Millions, surely. The horror he and the other Isabella survivors had seen on TV before the news channels stopped broadcasting made it clear the disease was not contained in only a handful of locations, but was everywhere. Worse, there had been no reports of recoveries.

Isolation is what had saved Robert and his people. Apparently the island had been too small to merit one of the deadly containers. Or, perhaps, it'd just been overlooked. Whatever the case, it was a blessing, but it wasn't even close to a guarantee that those on the island would all remain safe from the flu. He'd been the first to realize it, to know

their survival depended on not letting anyone from elsewhere on shore. It'd taken some convincing, but Dominic soon saw the logic in it, too.

This hard stance resulted in some tense encounters, but everyone on the island was still breathing and disease free. Everyone except Dominic. His death had been an act of self-sacrifice after he'd unintentionally come in contact with the disease from a body that had drifted ashore in a small boat.

Even if he couldn't resurrect everyone, Robert wished he could at least have his friend back. He would have even been willing to change places and be the one who died so that Dominic would still be here. Robert had no business calling the shots. He didn't have Dominic's patience. He was much better in the role of first lieutenant, not leader.

But Dominic was gone, and Robert was here.

"Good morning." The words were almost a whisper, as if the speaker feared talking any louder would wake the rest of the island.

Robert glanced over his shoulder. Estella, one of the resort guests, had walked up quietly behind him, a timid smile on her face. "Morning," he said.

He thought she was from Spain, but couldn't remember for sure. What he did recall was that she'd been on the island for only a day before everything went haywire, and was supposed to have been joined by a couple friends on Christmas Eve. They, of course, had never shown up.

She moved next to him, and looked out at the sea. "It's beautiful."

"Yeah," he said, though the truth was he was having a hard time seeing beauty in anything anymore.

"I guess this is why we all came here, yes?" She finished with a laugh, nervous, almost forced.

He smiled politely and nodded, but said nothing.

As she brushed a strand of hair off her face, Robert noticed her hand was shaking.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yes. Of course. I am fine."

He smiled as if to say he was glad to hear it, but he knew none of them were fine. How could they be?

Estella looked out at the water again. "Have you been able to reach anyone yet?" He

could tell she was trying to sound casual, but she wasn't pulling it off.

"Not yet," he said.

"But the message," she said. "I thought we would have reached them by now."

"We're still trying. I'm sure we'll get through to someone soon."

The message was from the UN and had been playing in a loop on TV for four days now. A day earlier, a list of several ways in which the organization could be contacted had been added at the end of the secretary general's speech. Robert had immediately used the resort's satellite phone to try calling the provided phone number. That's when he discovered that while the phone seemed to be working fine, it no longer had a signal. He then tried the two-way radio. Unfortunately, the resort's owners had invested in a transmitter only powerful enough to reach the Costa Rican mainland. Either Robert or Renee kept at it every few hours, but so far no one had answered them.

"Do you think...I mean, how many people?" Estella said.

"I don't know, but it didn't look—"

He stopped himself. There was an object in the sky just north of the newly risen sun. A dot. Probably a bird, he thought, but...

Estella followed his gaze. "What is it?"

"I'm not sure."

He narrowed his eyes to a squint to cut down on the sun's glare. The dot was growing larger.

It's gotta be a bird.

But even as the thought passed through his mind, he knew he was wrong. There was no flapping of wings, no subtle dips and rises of a bird riding the wind. The object was moving in a straight line, its speed constant.

Estella was the first to voice what they'd both realized. "A plane. It is a plane!"

The dot was no longer a dot, but a central tube with what could only be fixed wings sticking out on either side.

"It is a plane!" she said. "It is!" She started jumping up and down, waving her arms, and yelling as if her voice could reach across the sea to those aboard the aircraft.

It was her shouts that finally snapped Robert out of his trance. He turned from the water and ran toward the resort. If Estella knew he was gone, she made no indication. He

could hear her continued attempts to get the plane's attention as he left the beach.

A few of the early risers were in the open-air bar as he crested the steps and jogged onto the deck.

"Is something wrong?" a man named Jussi from Finland asked.

"Is that someone yelling?" Monica, an American from the Midwest, asked.

Ignoring the questions and stares, Robert raced around the back of the bar to the room where the radio was. He found Renee inside. She had been the resort's assistant manager under Dominic, but had been more than happy to allow Robert to take charge after Dominic was gone.

"Are they transmitting?" he asked.

She looked over, confused. "Is who transmitting?"

"The plane."

"Plane? What plane?"

He hurriedly sat in the chair next to hers, and reached over to the radio's controls. As he started a frequency scan, he said, "There's a plane out there. In the east, heading toward the mainland."

"What kind of plane?" Her tone was cautious.

"I don't know. It was too far away to tell."

"Small? Big? What?"

"I don't know. Smaller than a commercial jet, bigger than a Cessna. Why?"

Instead of answering, she shook her head, and pushed his hands from the radio. "Let me." She pulled the microphone in front of her, adjusted the broadcast frequency, and pushed the transmit button. "This is Isabella Island calling unidentified aircraft. Come in, please." She waited a moment and repeated the message.

The fourth try was the charm.

"Isabella Island, this is UN 132. Do you read me?"

"UN?" Renee said to Robert. "It's the UN."

For the first time since news of the pandemic broke, Robert felt the barest sense of hope.

"We read you, UN 132," Renee said, smiling. "We read you loud and clear."

"Isabella Island, good to hear your voice. Are you alone or are there others with

you?”

“There are one hundred and twenty-nine of us here,” Renee reported.

There was a slight pause, then, “Can you repeat that?”

Renee did.

“How many sick?”

“No one’s sick.”

“No outbreaks?”

“No,” she said, sharing a look with Robert. They both knew that wasn’t completely true. Dominic had caught the flu, but it had stopped with him.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Positive.”

Robert leaned over and said into the mic. “We isolated ourselves as soon as we knew there was a problem. We haven’t allowed anyone on the island since the outbreak occurred.”

“That’s great to hear,” the voice said. “Do you have a landing strip?”

“No,” Renee said. “The only way to reach us is by boat or seaplane.”

“Hold for a moment, Isabella Island.”

During the static that followed, neither Robert nor Renee said anything. They just stared at the radio as if worried the voice would not return.

A minute later, it did. “Isabella Island, are you still there?”

“We’re here,” Renee said.

“How is your food and water supply?”

“Good,” she said. “Not an issue.”

“Good to hear. We’re out on a scouting mission right now, trying to locate survivors like yourself.” A pause. “Our people will be bringing you enough vaccine for everyone there. But because of your isolated situation, it may be a few days while we tend to those in more precarious situations. Do you understand?”

Renee frowned and looked at Robert, clearly disappointed.

“Let me,” Robert said.

She slid the mic over to him.

“We understand,” he said. “Just knowing you’re coming back is great news.”

“Good news for us, too, finding you,” the man said. “You just keep doing what you’ve been doing, and don’t go to the mainland. You’ll be fine. We’ll be seeing you soon, Isabella Island. Take care, and stay safe. UN 132, out.”

“You, too. Isabella Island, out.”

That scant bit of hope Robert had been feeling morphed into full-on relief as he leaned back. They were going to be all right. They were all going to be vaccinated. The extreme stance they’d taken to keep others away had been justified. But most importantly, Dominic’s sacrifice was not in vain.

“A few days?” Renee said, frowning.

He looked over at her, an eyebrow raised. After a moment, he started to smile, and then he began to laugh.

It was only a few more seconds before she was laughing, too.

**FIFTEEN THOUSAND FEET ABOVE THE CARIBBEAN SEA
NEAR ISABELLA ISLAND, COSTA RICA
6:23 AM CST**

“WE’LL BE SEEING you soon, Isabella Island. Take care, and stay safe. UN 132, out.”

“You, too. Isabella Island, out.”

The man operating the radio on the aircraft that was neither associated with the now nonexistent United Nations nor on a mission to help save survivors clicked the tab on his computer screen that ended the recording of the conversation. He attached the voice file to an e-mail, typed in the exact coordinates of the island, and sent the message.

Those on Isabella Island represented the largest single, unexposed group his team had come across so far. It would be interesting to learn what the higher-ups back at Project Eden headquarters decided to do—send actual vaccine or dose them with Sage Flu. But chances were the man and his colleagues would be busy elsewhere by then, having forgotten all about the island.

He activated the plane’s internal comm system. “Back to our previous course,” he told the pilot.

“Yes, sir.”

The plane banked to the west, and within no time Isabella Island was behind them.

3

MUMBAI, INDIA
11:04 PM INDIA STANDARD TIME (IST)

WHILE SOME OF the streetlights in Mumbai had stopped coming on at night, many still worked, providing Sanjay more than enough illumination to see Kusum peering down at him from the rooftop above.

She put a finger to her lip, reminding him to stay quiet. It was completely unnecessary. He knew the importance of silence as much as she did. She then extended her hands over the edge, showing five fingers on one and four on the other.

Nine men. That was a lot. Probably best if they made a wide arc around the building instead of passing so close to it. He started to mime the suggestion to her, but she quickly waved him off, and motioned for him to come up and join her.

He didn't want to waste the time it would take, but she had ducked out of sight before he could tell her no. With a sigh, he ducked inside and headed quietly up the stairs.

When the UN message had played over the radio, in the old headmaster's house at the boarding school that Sanjay, Kusum, and the others had turned into their temporary home, the initial shock everyone felt soon turned into excitement that there might still be order in the world. They had waited three days before the broadcast began including the location for the nearest survival station to them.

The delay hadn't worried them. Unlike pretty much everyone else who was still clinging to life, their particular band of survivors had already been inoculated against the Sage Flu, thanks to the vaccine Sanjay had stolen.

When the survival station's address was finally revealed, the fact that it was located in Mumbai made sense. What didn't—to Sanjay, anyway—was that the address was the very same one belonging to the facility he'd stolen the vaccine from, the facility run by his former employers, Pishon Chem. They were the ones who had hired hundreds of local boys and men to spray Mumbai with what they had claimed was a malaria eradication solution but was really Sage Flu virus.

When Sanjay explained to the others the connection, the elation they'd all been

feeling quickly dissolved.

“But does this mean the UN is spreading the disease?” Kusum’s father had asked. “I cannot believe that.”

None of them could.

“Maybe they are not the UN at all,” Sanjay suggested. “Maybe they are just using the name to gain people’s trust.”

“If that is the case, then...” Kusum’s mother didn’t need to finish her thought.

If these were the same people who’d released the virus, then they could be luring in those who had escaped infection so they could finish the job they had started.

Some at the school thought they should keep their heads low and everything would blow over, while others—Sanjay and Kusum among them—thought if it were true, they needed to do what they could to warn the living.

The first step was finding out for sure.

Because Sanjay knew the Pishon Chem facility from when he had worked there, it was his job to find out what was going on. Kusum was not about to let him go alone, however. She and three others had accompanied him into the city, where they had set up camp in a small furniture factory a few kilometers from the survival station. Leaving the other three there, he and Kusum headed in for a closer look.

When Sanjay reached the top of the stairs, he carefully opened the roof door and slipped outside. Kusum was lying at the western edge. As he neared her, he lowered himself to his hands and knees and crawled forward, finally dropping to his chest and snaking his way up beside her.

“What is it?” he whispered.

“Look,” she said. “But be careful.”

He eased forward until he could see beyond the lip of the roof. Below and to the left, in the middle of the road that ran past their building, two police cars were parked front bumper to front bumper, perpendicular to what would have been the normal flow of traffic. There was just enough of a gap between the two front ends for one person to pass through.

He knew this couldn’t have been what caught Kusum attention. They had seen the vehicles from the road. That was the reason Kusum had come up for a look in the first

place.

He scanned the area around the cars. Standing nearby were three people wearing surgical masks—the same three they had seen when they'd spotted the vehicles—each with rifles slung over their shoulders.

“Behind the police cars,” Kusum whispered impatiently.

Sanjay looked farther down the road. Parked almost a block away were three white vans. Painted in black on their sides were the letters UN. If there was no deception going on, the vans were probably used to transport new arrivals from the checkpoint to the survival station.

He pulled back until he was hidden from view again. “I do not understand what it is you want me to see.”

“The men by the vans,” Kusum said as if it should be obvious.

“What men?”

She scowled, and took a look herself. When she scooted away from the edge again, she looked more confused than upset. “They were there a moment ago.”

“*Who* was there?”

“A whole group of soldiers. I counted at least forty.”

“Forty? Why would they need so many soldiers?” he asked.

“Why would they need any?” she countered.

He thought for a moment. “I guess they could be worried that someone might try to steal the vaccine.”

The scowl again, only a bit more playful this time. “You mean like you did?”

He shrugged. “Perhaps.”

“But the vaccine is not out *here*,” she argued. “It is at the survival station. Would it not be better if that was where the soldiers were?”

“Maybe they have more there, too,” he said, playing devil’s advocate.

“Then I ask you the same question you asked me. Why do they need so many?”

They fell into silence, both thinking the same thing—this wasn’t what the radio broadcast was saying it was.

“We are wasting time here,” Sanjay finally said. “Come on.”

They worked their way out of the building and back onto the street. They knew they

had to be extra careful now. The soldiers Kusum had seen could be anywhere.

“This way,” Sanjay said, starting off to his right.

He barely put a foot down before Kusum grabbed his arm. “You told me the Pishon Chem facility was closer to the ocean. That would be the *other* way.”

“We will have a better chance of not being seen in this direction. At most, we will go a kilometer then cut through the middle of the city.”

She thought about his plan for a second, then said, “Okay. That makes sense to me.”

“I am glad to receive your blessing,” he said with a dramatic bow.

She slapped him playfully on the arm. “It is only temporary.”

LIVING AT THE remote boarding school for the last week, had, at times, created the illusion the world was still as it had been. But any trace of that false impression ended the moment they reentered Mumbai.

It had been a city of nearly twenty million, its streets never empty or silent.

Until now.

No running cars. No motorbikes. No pedestrians. No hawkers.

The only ones there were lifeless bodies of the homeless tucked in corners, lying against the side of a building, and stretched out in the gutters. Their stench wafted through the streets, increasing and decreasing in strength depending on the number of bodies and the direction of the breeze. Sanjay and Kusum had to cover their faces to breathe without gagging.

What made things even eerier were the lights. Not just the automatic street lamps, but the interior lights of stores and restaurants, and the illuminated signs mounted on their facades. It was as if all the establishments had opened for business, but no one had come, not even those who worked there.

On several occasions, Sanjay and Kusum came across vehicles that had crashed in the road, not unlike the accident Kusum had pulled the baby Nipa from as Kusum and her family fled the city. Most of these cars were empty—their occupants no doubt surviving at least long enough to get off the road—but a few were not.

“Go right,” Sanjay said as they reached the next intersection.

They were only two kilometers from the Pishon Chem facility now, and while there

were faster ways to get there, Sanjay felt it safer to stick to a more circuitous route along smaller streets and alleys.

As they turned, Kusum brushed a hand across her shoulder.

“What is it?” Sanjay asked.

“Nothing. I...” She took a deep breath. “I just feel like something is crawling all over my skin.”

He knew what she meant. He felt it, too, an uncomfortable tingling all over his body. It didn’t help that the narrow road they were now on only intensified the creepy factor. He would almost welcome some kind of monster roaring out of the shadows to chase them. At least that would give them something to focus on.

They were seven blocks from the facility when they heard feet clomping on asphalt. It sounded like at least a dozen people, jogging in unison down the road they were about to turn onto.

Sanjay threw his arm in front of Kusum. “Back, back,” he whispered.

As they headed in the other direction, Sanjay began trying every door they passed, but all were locked. Then they came to one set back in an alcove. If nothing else, it might hide them from view.

“Here,” he said, nudging Kusum off the sidewalk.

She reached the door first, and tried it. The handle stuck for a moment, then turned all the way and opened. Any elation, though, was squelched by the bell at the top of the frame that rang with the door’s movement.

“Go,” Sanjay said, pushing her.

The second they were inside, he grabbed the bell and moved it out of the way as he pushed the door closed.

He motioned to a rickety counter along the side. “Hide behind that.”

As she ducked behind it, she gasped. Sanjay wanted to ask what was wrong, but his attention had been drawn back outside. The running feet were not passing through the intersection, but turning onto the road Sanjay and Kusum were on.

He hurried over to the counter, intending to duck down next to Kusum, but she had stopped very close to his end, and had left hardly any space.

“Move down,” he whispered.

She shook her head. He looked around her to see what the problem was, and discovered why she had gasped. There was the body of a woman on the floor. She must have been one of the early ones to die, he thought, for her smell was nowhere near as strong as some of the others they'd come across.

"We can switch places," he said.

"No. I will be okay," Kusum told him.

Thoughts of the dead woman immediately vanished as the sounds of the pounding feet slowed to a stop not ten meters outside the front of the store. Sanjay scrunched down as best he could.

A male voice. "It was down here. I'm sure of it. Something rang."

Another voice, also male. "It could have been anything."

"I still want to check. Everyone, spread out," the first voice said.

Sanjay pulled in tighter to Kusum.

Outside, they could hear those in the street splitting up and moving in different directions. One of them went up to the door of the clothing shop next door and tried the handle. Next, steps moving down the sidewalk and nearing their store.

The bell, Sanjay thought. He should have pulled it down. The moment the door opened, it would ring and they would know that had made the noise.

Not allowing himself to think about it a second time, he whipped out from behind the counter.

"What are you doing?" Kusum whispered.

"Stay there," he told her as he moved in a crouch back to the doorway.

Out the window on his right, he could see the shadow of a man, dressed in a soldier's uniform, heading toward the entrance. There was no time to grab the bell, so Sanjay twisted the lock closed, hoping it would hold, and dove behind a set of shelves.

Sure he'd been seen, he waited for the soldier to yell to the rest of his squad, but the only sound was that of the man walking into the alcove and grabbing the door.

A rattle of glass, and then nothing. Not even footsteps.

What was he doing? Peering inside?

Leave us alone, Sanjay thought as the silence grew. *Just go away*.

It took a few more seconds, but the soldier finally complied as he moved out of the

alcove and back into the street.

Voices, stating they'd found nothing. Orders were barked, the men gathered, and then as one they jogged off down the street.

Once the sound of their steps had faded away, Kusum said, "Sanjay? Sanjay, are you all right?"

"I'm fine," he said, slowly rising to his feet. He looked out the window to make sure the street was truly empty before moving back over to the counter. "Come on. We need to keep going."

"You scared me to death," she said as she uncoiled from her crouch.

"I'm sorry. But I had to—"

"I know," she said, her face softening. "Thank you."

He was sorely tempted to pull her into his arms and kiss her, but that would have to wait. "Let see if there's a back way out."

The alley behind the store led to a warren of thrown-together shacks. Here the smell of death was even stronger than in the streets, as most had chosen to live their final hours in the place they had called home.

As difficult as it was to make their way through the slum, when Sanjay and Kusum exited the other side, they found themselves only two blocks from their destination. They hustled across a darkened part of the street, and up into a building Sanjay hoped would give them a view into the Pishon Chem compound. His plan, however, hadn't taken into consideration that the door to the roof at the top of the stairwell would be chained closed.

"Let's try one of the apartments," Kusum suggested. "The view should be nearly as good from there, yes?"

"I hope so."

They went down one landing and entered the top floor of the building. The apartments to the left were the ones they were interested in. There were fourteen doors on that side. One by one they began trying them. Number eight was unlocked.

Sanjay pulled the top of his shirt over his mouth and nose, sure that once he pushed the door open, they'd be greeted by the familiar putrid smell. When Kusum was ready, he gave the handle a shove.

"I don't think anyone is here," he said as he lowered his shirt. While the air inside

was stuffy and stale, it was thankfully free of death.

Together they made a quick search of the apartment. Not only was it unoccupied, there was no sign that whoever had lived in the flat had made a run for safety. Everything was neat and in its place. It was as if the person had been out when the plague started and never come home.

With the place secure, Sanjay stepped over to the window of the main living area. Kusum followed right behind him. She had been right. The apartment was high enough to see over the buildings on the next street and into the compound.

The place was lit up with the same bright white floodlights that had been used when Sanjay and the others had worked there. What was different was the United Nations flag flying high above the administration building, and the white-helmeted, blue-uniformed soldiers stationed at various points in the compound.

The staging area Pishon Chem had used to distribute the spray tanks full of the virus had been clear of the former equipment and turned into two areas, each surrounded by double fences, separated by a gap large enough to drive a couple of trucks through side by side. Both areas contained a long building at the far end. While the zone on the left appeared empty, two people were standing outside the building in the zone on the right.

“Those look like prisons to me,” Kusum said. “Are they locking people up?”

Sanjay traced the fences with his eyes until he found the gates. He couldn't tell from here if they were locked, but they were definitely closed. “I'm not sure what they are doing,” he said.

He turned his attention to a group of men standing near the administration building. Unlike the others walking around outside the fenced areas, these men were not in uniform.

Studying them, he was drawn to the way one of the men was standing. It seemed familiar. Unfortunately, he was too far away to get a fix on the man's face so couldn't make the connection.

He scanned around, moving his gaze away from the compound to the street that ran just outside it.

After a moment, he said to Kusum, “Stay here. I will be back.”

“Where do you think you are going?”

“I need to get a closer look.”

“Then I am coming with you.”

“No. You are staying here. If you are with me, it will be easier for us to be spotted.”

“If you get into trouble, you may need my help,” she countered.

“Kusum, I am not trying to argue with you. But I can make the trip faster and react quicker if I am alone. Please tell me you understand.”

From her expression, he wasn't sure if she did, but she said, “If you are not back in fifteen minutes, I will come look for you.”

“Make it twenty.”

“Fifteen.”

He blew out an exasperated breath. “Fine. Fifteen. But it does not start until I leave this building.”

When it was finally agreed, he gave her that kiss he'd wanted to give her earlier, and headed out the door.

Back on the street, he threaded his way over to the rear of a structure directly across the road from the compound's administration building. Instead of trying to find a way in, he climbed a drainpipe affixed to the outer wall, all the way to the roof.

His new position was not as high as the apartment where he'd left Kusum, so he only had a partial view of the men he'd spotted. But he was close enough now that he could make out their faces.

He had hoped his doubts would be unfounded, that he'd find this was indeed a UN operation. But instead, Sanjay's fear turned out to be true.

The man with the familiar stance was Mr. Dettling, one of the Pishon Chem managers Sanjay had worked with, and most decidedly *not* a member of the UN. Dettling's wasn't the only familiar face, either. Gathered with him were several other Pishon managers.

When he'd seen enough, he climbed off the building and returned to Kusum.

“Could you see anything?” she asked.

“They are not the UN,” he told her.

She stared at him for a moment. “Are you sure?”

As concisely as possible, he described what he'd seen. “There is no question. They

are the same people who had us distribute the flu.”

“Why are they doing this, then? Why are they saying they are the UN?”

“Whatever the reason, it can’t be good.”

She glanced at the window. “The people inside those fences. Do you...do you think maybe they’re ones who came here for help?”

He paused, then nodded. “I think very likely.”

“What are they going to do to them?”

“That, I do not know.”

Kusum put a hand on her husband’s arm. “Sanjay. Are they going to kill them?”

He said nothing.

“If they are, we can’t let that happen,” she said.

“No, we can’t.”