

They said it was extremely hard to get.
They said it wasn't airborne.
They said we had nothing to fear.
They were wrong.

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Her name was Mary. When all was said and done, Mary Mallon, known more often as Typhoid Mary, infected 53 people, killing three of them.

His name was Mark. In the first week, Mark Dayton infected 900 people directly; eventually, 896 of them would die. It's not all said and done. The virus Mark spread unknowingly is still ravaging the population and is still without a cure.

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Chapter 1

Elaan stopped short, just outside the bedroom door. She heard a female voice in her father's bedroom, but he was supposed to be alone. She leaned in closer and heard the grainy microphone feedback followed by the call letters of a news station, and realized it was a recording. She froze, not sure if she should enter and tell him to stop or just wait and let it finish.

She heard the woman's voice say, "This is Monica Maverick, and I'm here today talking to infectious disease specialist James Woodson about the deadly Hantoan virus."

Her father was watching one of his early interviews, which meant he felt guilty. There was no way he couldn't feel guilty, but feeling guilty wasn't going to help their situation. She had to get him to turn it off. She took a deep breath, steeling herself to be more confident than a 17-year-old girl should have to be, then opened the door. She walked in the room right as Monica Maverick said, "So you're saying people here in the U.S. are safe? We don't have to worry about the Hantoan virus that's killing so many in South America right now?"

"Turn it off," Elaan said to her father, who was sitting on the bed with his laptop perched on his thighs. He didn't move or look up. Elaan heard his recorded answer begin: "Those people out there demanding quarantine for doctors, demanding locking people away for trying to heal the sick are just alarmists. Our greatest danger is failing to stop this virus in South America, not allowing our doctors to treat patients and be welcomed home."

Her father looked up from the computer screen, but didn't smile. He used to always smile at her when she came in, even if she was interrupting his work. Now he looked lost, uncertain, when he stared at her. He didn't even turn off the recording. It kept playing, the last words of his chastisement of the alarmists crackling over the laptop's speaker.

"I said, 'Turn it off,'" she said louder, eyeing him coldly. He tapped a key on the computer, and the sound stopped. He closed the screen and slid the machine from his lap.

"She died about six weeks after this interview," he said, looking Elaan in the eye. "Monica Maverick was only 26." He kept Elaan's gaze, an attempt to not back down, she supposed. Her father was stubborn, but he'd raised her, and she was stubborn, too.

Elaan stared into her father's green eyes and tried to look assured and confident when she said, "Lots of people died six weeks later. You can't focus on that. You have to focus on the cure. People need your help finding a cure."

James Woodson stood up. With his white hair swirling messily on his head and his wide eyes, he looked a bit like a madman. “There. Is. No. Cure,” he said, punctuating each word by jabbing a finger at the heavens.

“Not until you make one,” she shot back. “You can’t do this today, Dad. You can’t have a pity party. There are too few people left. You have to help. We’re in the scientist protection complex so people like you can find a cure without getting sick. Dr. Wells can’t do it alone. He needs your help. That’s why I’m here. He wants you upstairs in the lab.”

Her father rubbed his chin, stared at her a moment as if wondering if she were real or an illusion. Finally, he nodded and said, “Fine, I’ll go.”

Relief surged through Elaan, but she tried not to show it. She wasn’t sure what she would’ve done if he’d refused to come out.

Her father walked up to her and motioned his hand forward, as if to say, “Ladies first,” so Elaan turned and walked out of the bedroom. Her father followed, closed his room door and locked it.

She wanted to sigh, or express some indignation, but the truth was, it was a wise move. Dr. Wells was considering confiscating her father’s computer or, at the very least, erasing those media files he liked to watch.

She walked with her father from the hallway outside his room, through the small living area they shared, and out the front door of their unit. She watched as her father locked the apartment’s front door. Satisfied he was out and planned to go the lab, Elaan turned right to head to the dining hall.

“You’re not going to escort me?” her father called to her.

She turned to face him and saw that the sarcasm in his tone was also on his face. “I trust you, Dad,” she said, with a wink. “Besides, Dr. Wells will send one of the military officers if you don’t show up. Sending me was just him being nice. I’m sure you don’t want to see him being mean.”

She turned and walked in the opposite direction as her father. She passed several apartments, found a stairwell, climbed two flights and exited to the floor of the subterranean complex that held the common areas. There was an exercise room, a dining hall, restrooms and a social area.

She headed straight toward the dining hall, glancing at her watch to see it was 9:12. Shit. She wished her father had just gone to do his job. She might have missed Josh. And breakfast,

too. She wasn't super hungry, so she figured she could last until lunchtime if the cafeteria had closed. She slipped the elastic scrunchy off her wrist and used it to pull her shoulder-length curly black hair into a ponytail.

She arrived and scanned the room, which was empty, except for Josh sitting by himself in the corner. He had brown hair and blue-green eyes, and was slightly pale down here with little sun. He was handsome, too, looking like a kid out of an Abercrombie and Fitch ad. Josh was sitting with a single-serve box of cereal in front of him, along with a plain bagel and packet of jam.

Josh gave her a harsh stare when she sat down across from him. "Elaan," he said, his voice strained. "You need to get here before they close for meals." He slid the bagel, cereal, and jam over to her. "Dave just barely gave me your rations. He trusts me, but the rations are to go to each person. Otherwise it looks like there's hoarding."

Elaan nodded. She felt bad that she'd missed breakfast and Josh had to sweet talk the person on kitchen duty. Apparently Dave was on duty today. Dave worked in the lab with her father, so he'd been willing to break the rules. Anyone else would have let Elaan go hungry, which she was willing to do. But, it did worry her that they'd gotten so tight with the rations. It worried her that communication with the uptop seemed to have ceased. Along with it the weekly food deliveries of perishables like milk. She looked down at the bagel, probably one of the last ones, a perishable item they wanted to get rid of before it simply went bad.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to be so late. It couldn't be helped. I had to talk to my dad."

Josh pursed his lips, raised an eyebrow. "Because of my dad?"

Elaan shrugged. Dr. Kingston Wells was Josh's father, and while it was the senior Wells who had asked for her help, she didn't want to say it. Josh's implication was that his dad was being a jerk. His dad was generally viewed as an asshole. Only Elaan didn't feel the need to affirm that belief right now. Josh pretended like he didn't care what people thought. But she could tell it bothered him that his father was so disliked, especially when Josh was the exact opposite of his father in every way: kind, thoughtful and sweet.

Elaan shook her head. "No, it wasn't your dad's fault," she lied. "It's...." She was trying to think of what to say that didn't involve his father. Finally, she settled on a partial version of the truth. "It's my mom's birthday, and it's just hard for my dad on days like this."

Josh's face turned to complete pity, and she wished she'd picked anything else to say. She didn't want his pity. "I'm sorry," he said.

"It's OK," she said. "Everyone down here has lost someone. I can't pretend like I'm special because a virus that's killed half of humanity happened to kill my mother."

Josh reached out and place his hand on Elaan's, which rested on the table. She looked down at his hand on top of hers, and it reminded her a little of the way her parents' hands used to look holding each other: one light, one dark.

"Still, it's hard," Josh said, pulling her from her thought. "On days like this, I mean."

Elaan nodded and looked down at the cereal box. She didn't want to talk about her mother, whom she missed terribly. A mother she never got to say goodbye to. A mother she saw one day and then never saw again. That was probably the hardest part. Or maybe that was easiest part. She wasn't sure.

She'd only been to two funerals in her life. One had been for her grandfather. Her father's dad, Arthur Woodson, was 80 when he died suddenly of a heart attack. She'd watched her father go up to the casket to look, to say a final goodbye. She remembered her father reaching in and touching the body, as if to confirm that it really was his father and that he really was dead. She'd gone to look at her grandfather, but she'd only been 10 at the time and the thought of touching a dead body, scared her. The other funeral she'd gone to had been of someone she hadn't known. It was two years ago, when she was 15. Alyssa, a girl on her swim team, had an older sister who'd died of an asthma attack. Elaan hadn't met the sister, but the coach asked the entire team to attend the funeral and pay condolences. Elaan remembered people looking at the body, resting a hand on the chest, the mother stroking the girl's cheek. It had all been poignant and sad, watching grief so close. But now Elaan realized it had also been important. That mother, that father, that sister, those other family members all needed a chance to see for themselves that the person was really gone, to imprint it in their memory, to say a final goodbye.

But with the Hantoan virus, there were no goodbyes. Once people got sick, they were gone. The disease was so contagious, the sick were quarantined so their family didn't see them again unless they were one of the three percent who survived. Those who didn't survive were never seen by their families again, alive or dead. The bodies of the dead were bloated with disease. There could be no viewings or other contact with the body, for risk of contagion from bodily fluids. The bodies were hermetically sealed and cremated. You had the knowledge that your

loved one was dead, but no proof. You couldn't look at that unmoving body to know that the person was gone forever. If you wanted to, you could just pretend the person was on an extended vacation. Sometimes that's what Elaan did. Sometimes she pretended that maybe, one day, she'd see her mother again.

Only, in her heart, she knew that wasn't true. Shonda Woodson was gone. Elaan would never again see her mother, a beautiful woman with mocha skin, a smile that lit up a room, and eyes that connected with you so you felt like you were the most important person in the world. But now Shonda was dead and buried. Well, if not buried, scattered somewhere. She wasn't sure what they did with all the ashes of the deceased. Part of her didn't want to know.

She felt Josh's hand rubbing her own. She looked up. He was speaking. She hadn't realized it until she saw his lips moving. "Are you sure you're alright, Elaan?"

She smiled, slid her hand out from under his and opened the cereal container. "Yeah, I'm fine." She ate her cereal quickly, munching the flakes straight from the box. She missed milk, but that wasn't available under the recent rationing system. After she finished, she picked up the bagel and spread the jam. She knew Joshua was watching her, but she wasn't ready to talk yet. She just wanted her breakfast.

That was the nice thing about Josh. He never pushed. He was there to sit with you, to listen, but never to force you. She liked people like Josh, those who knew how to be your friend, how to be a friend to each person they met. It was as if they had some secret answer key that she didn't possess that told them just what to do in every possible social situation. Perhaps that was why Josh was so liked. He'd inherited the key. One of those traits that had apparently skipped his father's generation, but had landed squarely upon Josh's shoulders.

"Dude," she heard her brother's voice call out. "I'm going to start thinking you have ill intentions if every time I turn around, I find you with my sister."

She stopped chewing the bagel, and felt heat rush to her cheeks. She was going to kill him. If she didn't die of embarrassment first, she was going to kill Elijah Jacob Woodson. She looked up at her brother, giving him a death stare.

"Dude," Josh said. "We're just having breakfast. Nothing shady here. You're paranoid."

Lijah, tall with broad shoulders and skin the same warm caramel color as Elaan's, sat down next to his sister and smiled.

Elaan smiled back. “Actually, Lijah,” she said. “I think you should worry about you, not me.”

Lijah looked at Josh curiously and then pointed at his sister, swirling his pointer finger near his head. “On second thought, maybe I should thank you for babysitting my nutso little sister.”

“I’m not nuts,” Elaan said, poking her brother in the shoulder, and then biting her lower lip. She normally wouldn’t mention this in front of Josh, but she was really irritated that he kept telling Josh to stay away from her. She didn’t understand why he was so against them getting closer. Everyone else seemed to think it was inevitable. She’d asked Elijah about it, but he’d just said Josh wasn’t a good match for her. She glared at her brother. “Where were you this morning?”

Lijah stared at her. “Umm, sleeping in my bed.”

Elaan shook her head. “I woke up at 4 am. Couldn’t sleep, so I just thought I’d get up and stretch my legs a bit. Your door was open, but your bed was empty. I looked in the entire apartment. You weren’t there.”

“I had trouble sleeping, too, so I went for a walk.”

That was a lie, and everyone at the table knew it. People were not allowed to walk the compound in the overnight hours. Everything was off limits from 11 pm to 5 am. They were in a quarantined environment. Scientists, select military officials, family members and a few people who had genetic immunity to the virus were being housed in this underground military compound. They were supposed to get supplies regularly from the uptop, supplies that had not been in contact with contaminated people. The supplies were helpful, but a few of the scientists had taken to trying to grow a few plants down below. They’d been here three months. Elaan and Elijah’s father was the leader of the project, and Josh’s father was second in charge. Only, her father had fallen apart, and Wells was doing everything now.

Elaan whispered. “You could get in major trouble for what you did. I won’t tell Dad, but if someone saw you, he’ll find out. And worse, it might be the straw that breaks the camel’s back. At least mentally for him.”

Lijah looked over at Josh. “Hey, man, can we get a minute?”

Josh nodded affably and left the table.

Lijah and Elaan watched Josh leave the room. Once Josh was out of sight, Lijah leaned in and whispered, “I had permission.” Elaan raised an eyebrow, but Lijah ignored this and

continued. “Dr. Wells needed help. He’s doing some testing that isn’t authorized under the program, and he needed a competent assistant. Something Dad isn’t right now.”

“You’re not a scientist,” Elaan said.

“I’ve been a summer intern in Dad’s lab ever since I was 14. Plus, I’d come in and help him out with things, too. Beyond the stuff they were legally supposed to let students do. I know how to do basic lab assistance, and that’s all Kingston needed.”

Elaan scowled. So now he was calling Dr. Wells by his first name. She hated it. She didn’t like Dr. Wells, even though she sometimes acted as his messenger. She knew he was helping cover for her Dad, who was becoming unhinged. She didn’t want the government to take her father out of the scientist protection program. She didn’t want him put in the general population. So many people were dying up there. Martial Law was in place. And government officials were promising the population they were going to find a cure.

Elaan sighed. “You know what?” she said, folding her arms across her chest. “I don’t want to know about it. Don’t tell me anything else, OK? Just stop harassing me and Josh, OK?”

“There is no you and Josh,” he said.

“What the Hell is with you?” she asked. “Why do you do that? Why do you care if Josh and I are together?”

“I don’t care because you’re not together,” Lijah said, his voice filled with a deep timbre that made it sound like his word was final. “If you were to get together, he would hurt you. And I don’t want that for my little sister.”

She wanted to slap him. That made no sense. “Lijah, he’s not going to hurt me. He’s the nicest guy, ever.”

Lijah stared at her harshly. “What were you two talking about when I came in?”

“None of your business,” she replied, probably based on some little sister instinct. He was being mean so she had no intention of giving him anything, even useless info, until he quit.

Lijah shook his head and laughed. “I’ll ask Josh later.”

Shit. Josh would tell him, because Josh was his friend. Lijah and Josh were friends first, from the second they moved in. But Josh, Elijah and Elaan were the only teens in the complex, so in the last three months, she and Josh had become closer. Most recently, Josh had looked at Elaan differently. He’d looked at her longingly, like he wanted her. At least that’s what she thought, but he never did anything when they were alone. Well, not until yesterday. Yesterday,

he'd kissed her. And it was the best, sweetest, most wonderful kiss ever. But then, he said he was wrong, that he shouldn't have done that and left. This morning, she'd hoped to do their usual routine: breakfast, the exercise room, and then maybe go someplace private to talk. But he'd been mad that she was late, and everything turned depressing after that. She looked at her brother, venom in her eyes. She fingered the chain around her neck, the one that held her mother's engagement ring. Her father had given it to them after they'd gotten down here, and she'd hoped wearing it on a day like this would give her comfort. Only, Lijah was sucking what little comfort she had away.

"Mom," she said, taking her hand away from the chain, and answering Lijah's question about what she and Josh had been talking about. "It's your mother's birthday, in case you forgot."

He ignored the venom in her voice. "I remember," he said coarsely. Then he softened his tone. "I'm sorry if this day is hard for you."

She stood up, feeling a familiar anger rising in her. She didn't understand why her brother seemed to hate their mother after she died. It was as if he thought she got sick on purpose, or died on purpose, just to leave them. His attitude was selfish, and there was something perverse about it. While Elaan loved her brother dearly, this hatred of their mom was something about him she didn't understand. Uptop, before the world started to crumble, they had been close. But being down here seemed to have put distance between them. She didn't understand why he hated the idea of her and Josh or why he hated their mother. She looked at Lijah, unable to hide her disgust. "This day is hard for me, it's hard for Dad, and it should be hard for you, too. But, it's not. So, I'd rather not talk about it with you."

Lijah opened his mouth to speak. "Elaan," he said.

She turned away from him. "I don't want to hear it," she said, storming out of the room.