

MILLS & BOON



**Vintage** INTRIGUE

**Her Last  
Defense**

**VICKIE TAYLOR**

# **Vickie Taylor**

## **Her Last Defense**

### **Аннотация**

Ever since the plane crashed into the Sabine national forest, my life hasn't been the same. I, Dr. Macy Attois, am racing against time to contain the deadliest virus known to man, along with a handful of locals who have no blasted idea what they're up against. And the only person who can really help me is one very stubborn Ranger. Clint Hayes causes my pulse to race about as much as this global crisis does. Think my life can't get any more complicated? Guess again. Because my ex-fiancé was supposedly killed in this crash. And I'm already more attracted to Clint than I've ever been to any man. Nothing like stepping from the hot zone into the fire!

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## **“Stress and naked bodies don’t mix well.”**

“Afraid I’m going to seduce you, Clint?” Macy asked softly. The sun was setting outside, lighting the tower room in a dim peach glow like candlelight.

“I’m afraid you won’t have to,” he answered honestly.

His life was coming apart at the seams. How easy it would be to forget his troubles in her.

She deserved better.

Clint faced her and couldn’t resist tucking a strand of dark, wavy hair behind her ear while she studied him with luminous eyes.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he breathed.

“I don’t want to be hurt. But I would like to be held.”

She let him decide. He liked that about her. It wouldn’t have taken much to push him over the edge. A kiss. A touch. But she stood back and let him decide.

In the end, she didn’t have to push him over the edge.

He leaped willingly.

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# VICKIE TAYLOR

has always loved books—the way they look, the way they feel and most especially the way the stories inside them bring whole new worlds to life. She views her recent transition from reading to writing books as a natural extension of this longtime love. Vickie lives in Aubrey, Texas, a small town dubbed “The Heart of Horse Country,” where, in addition to writing romance novels, she raises American Quarter Horses and volunteers her time to help homeless and abandoned animals. Vickie loves to hear from readers. Write to her at: P.O. Box 633, Aubrey, TX 76227.

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# Chapter 1

It was a perfect night in hell.

Autumn leaves flickered silver and gold under a harvest moon. The surface of Lake Farrell, the best fishing hole in southeast Texas, rippled like black velvet. And the air, sharp with the scent of pine, was clean enough to scrub a month's worth of city smog out of a man's lungs with each breath.

Once, Texas Ranger Sergeant Clint Hayes had thought the old fishing cabin his Grandpop Charlie had left him was the closest place to heaven on earth. But not any longer. Not since a pair of beady eyes and a sallow smile had begun their nightly torment from the pier where Grandpop's old dinghy still bobbed on the swells.

Sitting in a weathered grapevine chair on the stoop of the cabin, his bare feet propped on the porch rail, Clint narrowed his eyes and stared into the darkness, the soul of the night. "All right, you son of a bitch. This is it."

Only the silence answered. His gut cramped. The Glock .9-millimeter weighed heavily in his right hand. He took a moment to dry his fingers on his jeans, then jerked up the pistol and squeezed off three rounds.

The pale, yellow eyes of his personal demon never wavered. Jaw clenched and a growl emanating from between his teeth, Clint emptied the clip in one long burst, then threw the gun at

the hellish eyes, howling hopelessly because he knew it didn't matter that his bullets hadn't connected. The real monster wasn't out there.

It was inside him.

Breathing hard, he stared at his right hand. Even as he watched, his fingers betrayed him, trembling beyond his control. Finally, he clenched his shaking fist, swallowed hard and accepted the inevitable.

He couldn't hold a gun steady any longer, and a cop who couldn't hit what he aimed at didn't belong on the street.

His career was over.

The deep quiet of the night pressed in on him. Even the nocturnal critters that usually scuttled around the cabin in the wee hours were still, scared off by the gunfire.

An ache so deep it vibrated in his marrow pushed him to his feet and off the porch, over the carpet of pine needles toward the lake, where the yellow smiley face he'd painted on a beer bottle and set on a piling as a target goaded him in the waning moonlight.

"You win, damn it!" he yelled as he swiped at the bottle with his foot. "Are you happy now?"

Pain exploded up his leg as flesh and bone connected with glass and sent the bottle arcing over the water. He hopped and cursed, rubbing the sore spot.

Well, at least some of his nerves still worked right.

Hobbling back ashore, he allowed himself a single sardonic

laugh. ‘Cool-hand Clint’ people called him. Wasn’t so cool now, was he?

Fresh out of good curses, he turned his eyes to the black canopy overhead. He wasn’t a Ranger anymore. Couldn’t be. And without the job to ground him, he felt like a spacewalking astronaut who’d come untethered from his ship. Weightless. Rudderless. Drifting in the vast vacuum of space.

And very, very alone.

Searching for answers in the sky, he tried to focus on the points of light, the stars, not the boundless black void between them. Sailors used to navigate by the stars, he knew, but no matter how long he stared at them, how hard he concentrated, the chips of cold light charted no course for him.

Sighing, he turned to head back to the cabin when a flash over his right shoulder stopped him. The light flared blue for a moment, then flamed into an orange streak. A shooting star, he thought at first, then realized it couldn’t be. It was too bright and too close, moving too slowly.

An airplane, he realized a second later. And in trouble, by the sound of it. Its engine sputtered and whined as it passed overhead so low that Clint ducked reflexively. He just made out the shape of a small jet—blinking wing lights, oval windows in the fuselage, a flash of the white tail—before he lost sight of the aircraft behind the trees.

His breath stalled in his chest as he waited, listening.

The crash, when it came, wasn’t the booming explosion he

expected. It sounded more like a distant car wreck. Metal screeched. Wood groaned and splintered. The air seemed to shudder around him. By the time silence had reclaimed the night, a pale glow, like a false sunrise, lit the treetops where the plane had gone down. Clint studied the fire, gauging its distance and how long it would take him to get there.

Tomorrow he would have to call the Ranger office and tell them the truth. Tell them he could no longer be the only thing he'd ever wanted to be.

But tonight, he was still a Texas Ranger.

From Macy Attois's vantage point in a helicopter hovering above the wreckage, the tail of the aircraft jutting out of the east Texas thicket looked like the rear fin of a whale about to plunge beneath the ocean's surface. But the scorched earth and shattered tree limbs around the crash site left no doubt that airplanes were not supposed to plunge. Or that when they did, it usually ended badly.

One white wing weighed down the boughs of a thick spruce. Bits of plastic and cloth, chunks of smoldering metal freckled the brambles along a trail of devastation hundreds of yards long. Emergency workers in reflective vests and hard hats picked through the debris, one spreading a white sheet over a hunk of fuselage that looked as though it might once have been a cockpit.

Tears filled Macy's eyes as a firefighter stabbed a red flag—the indicator for the location of human remains—into the ground at one corner of the sheet. A thin plume of smoke curled upward

from the spot as if to mark the trail of a soul leaving its earthly existence. Overhead a half dozen buzzards circled, hoping for a chance at the body left behind.

Grief rolled heavily in Macy's chest. God, how many dead? Two in the cockpit. Then there was Jeffries, the man who'd been hired to tend the cargo. Cory Holcomb, the lab tech. Timlen Zufria, the Malaysian doctor working with them.

And David.

A strand of long, brown hair broke free from Macy's braid to lash against her cheek. She turned her head away from the open door of the chopper as it banked low over the remnants of the once-sleek aircraft, scattering the buzzards.

Oh, David.

Closing her eyes, she choked back tears. She would not cry. Not in front of the others. Not when there was work to do.

How many times had David told her there was no room for emotion in medical research?

She'd never become as astute as him at separating her feelings from the job. Those feelings were the reason she'd become a doctor. She cared about people.

She'd cared about David.

"This is as close as I can get you," the pilot's voice crackled in her headset.

She opened her eyes, noting thankfully that they'd passed over the broken ruins of the jet. Below them now lay only a patchy gray-brown blanket of scrub mesquite west of the debris field.

To the east the midmorning sun broke free of a cloud and flared brightly enough to burn Macy's already-stinging eyes.

Squinting as she swept her gaze over the clearing, to the seemingly endless woods all around it, Macy gave the pilot a shaky thumbs-up. "It'll do."

At least the plane hadn't crashed in a populated area. The souls aboard the chartered jet were gone, but there was still a chance a larger disaster could be averted.

As the Bell 429 descended, she hung her headset on the peg behind her seat and put on her helmet, careful to seal the double cuff between it and the neck of her environmental suit securely. The four other members of the team took her cue and donned their gear. She checked the airtight closure on each person's wrists and ankles before they climbed out of the helicopter.

"Remember." Her respirator muffled the words. She raised her voice to make sure no one missed her point. "These suits may be the only thing standing between life and death out there. Your life and your death. Make sure you take care of them."

Maybe Macy was being overly cautious, but at least worrying about her people distracted her from thinking about what lay ahead. Twisted metal. Twisted bodies. Her and David's research—work that might have saved so many lives—gone up in smoke. Or maybe down in flames was a better analogy.

The research was inconsequential now. There would be no laboratory-controlled experiments. No computer-modeled projections.

No containment, if her worst fears proved true.

Curtis Leahy, the logistics officer with surfer-dude good looks and the shaggy blond hair to match, nodded. "We all know the risks."

Sweat trickled into Macy's eye. Texas was still warm in early October, and her anxiety wasn't helping. Unable to wipe the perspiration away because of her face shield, she blinked the droplets out of her eyes. "Then let's none of us become statistics, okay?"

Noting that Susan and Christian Fargier, the twin brother and sister lab techs who'd brought excellent references to the CDC from the Mayo clinic in Minnesota, wore properly concerned expressions, Macy led her people toward the wreckage and prayed they weren't too late to stop a tragedy from becoming a catastrophe.

One by one, the firefighters, sheriff's deputies and forestry-service employees working around the wreck turned toward Macy and her team. They leaned on rakes and shovels, their faces smudged with ash, eyes watery and red. Sweat plastered their clothes to their bodies, rolled from beneath the headbands of their hard hats. They stared at the crew walking toward them as if Macy and her team were Martians emerging from a flying saucer.

Which is exactly what they looked like, Macy supposed, with their orange biohazard suits and respirator packs, carrying medical supplies in dimpled silver suitcases that caught the sunlight in bright flashes.

Macy fumbled with the pouch at her waist, pulled out her ID and held it up in a gloved hand. "I'm Dr. Macy Attois with the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta."

The workers' eyes turned wary. Several dropped the tools they'd been carrying. A few began to back away.

Macy's heart rate kicked up a notch. She worked to keep her voice steady. Her panic would only feed theirs.

"This site is a biohazard," she continued as unemotionally as she could manage. Some of them looked so young....

"Biohazard?" a Boy-Scout-faced young man in a brown forestry service shirt asked, the whites of his eyes standing out against flushed cheeks.

The crowd rumbled behind him. "What the—?"

"Did she say bio—"

"Hellfire—"

Macy raised her voice to an officious tone. "For your own safety, it's important that you move away from the wreckage. My team will set up a triage area and check everyone out." She heard the latches on the portable suitcases snick open as Susan and Christian set up behind her.

"Triage, hell." A wild-eyed young sheriff's deputy with a mustache that looked like a horseshoe hung upside down on his upper lip edged away from the others. His hand gripped the butt of the pistol on his hip. "I'm getting out of here."

"That's the worst thing you could do," Macy said. She didn't add that the state troopers already setting up roadblocks outside



the Sabine National Forest, where the jet had crashed, had been ordered to turn back anyone who tried to leave the area—with lethal force, if necessary. “If you’ve been exposed, you need specialized treatment.”

The deputy swayed as if unsure whether or not to make a run for it. A man in a sooty, blue-flannel shirt caught him by the epaulet.

“Exposed to what?” the man asked.

Macy’s first impression of him was rugged. He wore a tan that couldn’t be bought in a salon. His body was long and lean, not overly muscled, and yet exuding a sense of sinewy strength, like a high-tension steel cable. When he moved through the crowd, pulling the deputy with him, the workers parted like the waters before Moses to give him room.

Whoever he was, he commanded the respect of the locals.

She waited until he’d almost reached her before answering his question with one of her own. “Who am I speaking to?”

His hair was brown, tempered by shades of gray that might have been natural or might have been a dusting of ash from the fire. His cheeks were thin, not an ounce of extra flesh on them. His nose looked as if it might have been broken a time or two and his mouth slashed across his face in a stiff line that said he didn’t smile much. But most notable were his eyes, deep-set, with rims bloodshot from the smoke around irises so gray they appeared metallic. And completely unreadable.

And calm as the Dead Sea.

She shook herself mentally, ignoring the shiver his stare sent crawling down her spine. She would not be intimidated by dead-calm eyes. Calm was good. They could all use a little calm right now.

“You’d be speaking to Sergeant Clint Hayes, ma’am,” he answered. “Texas Rangers.”

Macy’s eyes widened. No wonder he commanded the respect of the locals. The Texas Rangers walked on water in this part of the country.

Hope made her heartbeat flutter. Hope, and those unearthly eyes he had fixed on her. Surely with his help, she could get this crowd to cooperate. How did the old saying go? One riot, one ranger?

“Sergeant, why don’t you gather your crew,” she said softly, calling on his leadership. “Help me get them lined up over by my assistants. Then I’ll explain everything to you.”

He glanced over his shoulder at the assembly murmuring behind him, then turned to her, his straight lips pressed thin. “Why don’t you explain everything right here. To all of us.”

She tried to warn him off with a look, but his steely gaze knocked hers away as easily as a master swords-man parrying the thrust of an inferior opponent. A flush she couldn’t blame on the confinement of the bio suit heated her cheeks, but she lifted her chin, nonetheless. She had a job to do. Lives depended on her doing it.

“This plane was bound for the CDC research facility in

Atlanta.” Her heart thundered with an urgency she hoped didn’t carry into her voice. “It was carrying a contagion.”

“What kind of contagion?”

She hesitated. “The flight originated in Malaysia.”

“ARFIS,” one of the workers behind him said, fear riding high in his voice.

She nodded, grateful for the protective shield on her helmet that would hide her reaction to the statement. “Acute Respiratory Failure Infectious Syndrome. If containment has been breached...”

Tears welled up as the image of the mass graves required simply to keep up with burial needs in Malaysia, where the disease had originated, sprang to mind unbidden.

Among the workers, only the Ranger looked unaffected.

“Then we’re all dead,” he said, his voice as unmoved as his eyes.

## Chapter 2

Outrage swirled in Clint's chest like a cyclone, circling ever tighter and faster until it spun itself into a hard knot that sat on the floor of his stomach where it could be kicked aside like a pebble on a sidewalk. Nothing of what he felt showed on his face—he made sure of it.

After six-and-a-half hours of shoveling dirt over the smoldering remains of the airplane, suppressing a wild-fire that could have consumed thousands of acres of trees and wildlife, Clint's bad arm ached like a son of a bitch. The smoke had burned his nose and throat raw. His eyes were watering like he'd been hit square in the face with a shot of Mace. But they'd saved the Sabine National Forest, him and the others who had worked through the dark and then dawn, so they weren't complaining.

Until Typhoid Mary showed up and told them they might have traded their lives for it.

“ARFIS?” Clint nearly spat the word. “What in God’s name were you thinking, bringing that bug here?”

The woman squared her shoulders. At least he thought she squared her shoulders. It was hard to tell with her wearing that astronaut suit.

“I was thinking I might develop a vaccine.”

He narrowed his eyes. Oh, yeah. She'd squared off, all right. She took a step forward, a chess piece moved to block his

advance. Her respirator rasped with each breath, making her sound like some kind of neon Darth Vader. “I was thinking I might save a few million lives.”

“Playing God.”

“Playing doctor,” the woman spat right back at him. She took another step forward. The glare on her face shield dimmed and Clint got his first real look at her—and that pebble he’d discounted so easily a moment ago slammed back into his gut like a boulder tumbling downhill. She might not be too big, or too smart, playing with bugs like ARFIS, but she had a face that would inspire a horde of Huns to sing like angels.

A hint of wild, dark hair framed her heart-shaped face. Her mouth pursed into a perfect bow, her lips naturally rosy. Her skin tone was olive and her nose turned up just enough at the end to give the face personality. She was alluring, exotic and his body tightened against his will.

He tried to stop the physical reaction without success, then tried to ignore it and failed almost as miserably.

What was wrong with him? Women did not affect him this way. Ever.

“It’s what I do,” she finished, though he hardly heard her past his clamoring pulse.

She stepped past him to face the gathered workers. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” she told them. The raspy respirator only made her French-Cajun accent sultrier. Sexier. “We don’t know that the virus has escaped the containers it was packed in, yet,

much less whether any of you have been exposed to it. There's no reason to panic."

She was good, Clint gave her that. Had a nice soothing way about her that sounded like she really cared. But the workers were beyond soothing. As his hormones cooled, Clint could feel the tension mounting behind him, fear rising.

"If it's so safe here," someone called out. "Then why are y'all wearing them spacesuits?"

"The suits are just a precaution. I'm sure you can understand —"

"I understand that we ain't got no suits."

A wave of murmured "Yeahs" rippled through the crowd. Their growing restlessness had the hairs prick-ling on the back of Clint's neck. Trouble was brewing. The lady was in over her head. She didn't know these people. Didn't understand that they weren't city folk, conditioned to expect the unexpected. They lived a quiet, routine life. The possibility of being at the epicenter of an epidemic was going to scare the hell out of them. And fear could make people do crazy things.

"I seen those people on TV," Deputy Sheriff Slick Burgess spoke up, finger-combing his long mustache anxiously. "The sick ones in Malaysia. They drowned in their own blood."

"Those were extreme cases—"

"Then you admit it could happen!" someone shouted.

"People, please. Even if the virus did escape, it can only live in the air for three, maybe four minutes. Once it settles from the

air it can only survive if it lands in some sort of moisture, oil- or water-based. You'd have to touch it—"

"Lady we've been climbing over this wreck since before dawn putting out fires. There's hydraulic oil and fuel and water all over the place, and we done touched every bit of it," Cal Jenkins, an EMT from Hempaxe, the closest town, admitted. His voice rose, shook. "I got a wife. Kids."

"The best thing you can do for them is allow my team to examine you."

"Screw that. I'm gettin' out of here." He threw his shovel down.

"Me, too."

"I'm with you. She can't stop us."

"That's the worst thing you can do," the woman cried.

Out of the corner of his eye, Clint saw some of the workers edge away. The fear in the air was palpable, and ready to combust.

Damn.

He didn't like the way she'd sauntered in here, safe behind her protective face shield and airtight suit, and told two-dozen men they might have contracted a fatal illness. He didn't like that she asked them to line up to be poked and prodded before they'd had time to absorb the information and he especially didn't like the way his heart dropped between his legs just from looking at her.

Stiffly, careful to keep his gaze on the crowd and not her, he clenched his free hand into a fist in an uncharacteristic display

of frustration and turned to stand shoulder to shoulder with her, dragging the deputy along with him. He didn't like taking her side against his own folk, but until he actually turned in his gun and badge, he was still a Texas Ranger. He had an obligation.

"She's right." Clint met each worker's gaze, one by one. He stopped the deserters in their tracks with a hard look.

"You standin' against us, Hayes?" a gray-haired firefighter in threadbare turnout gear asked.

"I'm not standing against anybody," he answered carefully, setting his face in the mask of composure that had served him well in situations even more volatile than this one.

Skip Hollister, the pot-bellied mechanic and captain of the volunteer fire department, spat and wiped his face with his arm, leaving a black smear across his pudgy cheek. "If you're not standing with us, then you're against us."

"I'm just saying maybe you ought to think a minute before you go rushing off." And just to make it clear that wasn't a request, he moved his hand to his hip, purposely drawing attention to the bulge of his gun under the untucked tail of his shirt. Habit had made him clip the holster to his belt when he'd rushed out of the cabin before dawn, even though the weapon was useless to him now.

"What are you going to do, shoot me?" Hollister inched away from the crowd. His fingers tightened around the shovel he carried until his knuckles went white.

"I hope I don't have to." Especially since he doubted he could



hit the broad side of a barn at more than ten paces.

"I was friends with your grandpop for fifty years, known you all your life. I remember the first time he brought you out fishin' with us. You were just knee-high to a tadpole."

Clint set his mouth in a grim line. "I've grown some since then."

Skip's jaw gaped. "Charlie would roll over in his grave if he saw this. You standing with her agint' your own people."

"Lemme go. I'm gettin' out of here." The deputy still in Clint's grasp squirmed.

Clint turned his attention to him. "Where you going to go, Slick? Home to that wife and kid you're so worried about so you can get them sick, too?"

Slick's gaze fell to his feet.

"What about you, Vern? You got family?" he asked a heavysset paramedic who looked like a rabbit looking for a bolt-hole.

"Mom," the man mumbled. "And a sister."

"You plannin' to carry this disease home to them?"

Vern raised his chin. Resolve mingled with the fear in his eyes. "No, sir!"

"What about the rest of you? You going to march into town, shake hands with your neighbors, pinch their babies' cheeks? You going to be the one to wipe out Hempaxe and a hundred more small towns just like it?"

Clint picked on the deputy because he knew he'd get the answer he wanted. He fisted his hand in the front of the young

man's shirt, forcing him to raise his gaze to Clint's. "You going to be the one to start the epidemic, Slick?"

"No, sir!" The deputy's lip curled on the emphatic sir.

Clint released his hold on the man's shirt and looked to the man next to him. "What about you, Skip?"

Skip kicked up a clod of dirt with his toe. "Hell, no."

He swept his gaze over the others. "Right now, if this thing is out, at least it's contained. There's two thousand acres of forest between civilization and the virus. Are we gonna make sure it stays that way?"

The rumble of yeses and yessirs started slow and quiet, but gained momentum quickly. One by one the workers' chins came up. Their sooty faces were somber, their eyes still scared, but tempered with resignation.

"All right, then. Why don't we all listen to what the lady has to say?" He turned to Dr. Attois. His stomach flipped as their gazes sparked like jumper cables when they touched briefly. The little furrow between her perfectly arched eyebrows drew far too much of his attention. Never mind her tongue flicking out to moisten her lips before she spoke.

Damn. He tightened the screws down on his libido, his expression unmoving. Whatever he saw in her, it wouldn't reach his face. He hoped.

She cleared her throat and looked away. "Symptoms of the virus usually begin to appear within twenty-four hours of exposure, but we can confirm or deny the presence of the virus

in your systems after twelve with a simple blood test. We'll move away from the crash site. The first step is for my team to set up the portable decontamination showers and get everyone disinfected. We have choppers coming in from Houston with everything we'll need after that—tents, cots, tables, food. You think of something you need, let me know. I'll get it.”

A thin, black-haired young man in turnout gear raised his hand. “Only one thing I need, lady. That’s a pencil and some paper.”

Heads turned in question toward the man.

“Wife’s been after me for years to write out a will,” he said. “Guess it’s ’bout time I obliged.”

At least the workers had settled, thanks to the Ranger. Macy felt sorry for them, knowing the anxiety and the ordeal they faced if ARFIS had indeed escaped, but she had to put that out of her mind. She had a job to do.

A virus to hunt.

She left the men, including Ranger Hayes-with-the-disturbing-eyes, in the competent hands of her team. Susan already had them lining up for interviews and baseline health screenings while Christian and Curtis erected the decon showers that had arrived on the first supply chopper.

“Who was first on scene? Are they still here?” Susan asked. In spite of the rising pitch of her voice, nothing in her tone belied the urgency of finding out if anyone had been near the crash scene other than the workers present. “Were there police here?”

Civilians?” If there had been, they would have to be tracked down and quarantined quickly. Susan knew that. She and Christian and Curtis made a good team. They knew their jobs as Macy knew hers.

While her team kept the workers occupied, she had to find the virus.

Slipping away from the group, Macy made her way toward the wreckage. The Learjet looked like a toy that had been smashed by an angry child. Wires snaked out of jagged tears in the plane’s skin. Sheets of metal, crumpled like accordions, littered the ground.

She pushed aside the charred skeleton of a seat propped upright in a tangle of shrub, stepped over a man’s empty tennis shoe, refusing to wonder what had happened to the foot that had once been inside it. The trickles of sweat slipping down between her breasts became rivers. Her breath sounded huge inside the helmet, roaring through the filter like a hurricane wind, yet outside, there wasn’t even enough of a breeze to lift the little red flags marking the locations of human remains.

A lump formed in her throat as she pictured David Brinker beneath one of the white sheets, torn and bloody. David who was so fussy about his appearance.

Who couldn’t stand a little dirt under his nails, much less...

Anguish pulled her over to the draped body, but fear wouldn’t let her touch it. She bit her lip until she tasted blood. She had to know, she told herself. It was natural to need closure. Besides,

she owed it to David, didn't she? To face him one last time.

He wouldn't have been on that plane it hadn't been for her.

Heart racing, she inched closer to the white sheet, the flag at the corner, and glanced around as if she expected David's ghost to materialize. To haunt her for what she'd done.

She told herself she was just being overly emotional. Letting her feelings run away with her again. Still, she couldn't help whispering, "I'm sorry" before reaching for the corner of the covering.

"Sorry for what?" A hand landed on her shoulder.

Macy gasped, straightened and spun with one hand raised to fend off her attacker, even if he was already dead.

The Ranger caught her wrist halfway to his face.

"Whaa—?" She stumbled backward, barely righting herself before she landed on her keester. Blood buzzed in her ears. Her heart raced. She clutched her fist over her chest. "Are you crazy? What are you doing out here?"

"Following you."

"You can't be here. You don't have a suit on." But he had helped himself to a pair of latex gloves from the CDC supplies, she saw.

"I was all over this wreck this morning. If the bug is out here, I've already got it."

"Then you should be in decon." She glanced at the portable showers, now in working order, and the line of workers snaking around them.

“I’ll scrub down.” His voice was deep and seemed to vibrate deep inside her. It was as almost as unsettling as his eyes. “When it’s my turn.

She’d bet a month’s pay it wouldn’t be his turn until everyone else had finished.

Had he said he’d been following her?

She shook her head as if that would straighten out her jumbled thoughts. “What do you want?”

“The same thing you do.”

“Huh?” Brilliant. That implacable stare of his stole her ability to think.

“You’re looking for the bug, aren’t you?”

No sense in lying. The truth would be written on her face. She’d never been good at deception.

“I want to know what you find.” He jerked his head toward the camp. “They’re all going to want to know.”

He was right. They deserved to know. But what if she found the containment had been breached? How would she tell them?

She pulled in a shuddery breath. “I haven’t located the virus yet.”

His gray eyes went hard—harder than usual. “Did you think you’d find it under there?” He nodded toward the white sheet.

Heat crawled up Macy’s neck to her cheeks. “No. I—” She blew out her breath. “I knew these people. They were my coworkers. My friends.” More.

“They’re dead. Nothing you can do for them now. Those over

there—” He nodded toward the camp. “They’re the ones that need your help now.”

A wave of guilt hit her—how selfish to be mourning her loss when so many more people—the Ranger included—faced their own mortality. David and his ghost would have to wait.

“The virus was in a steel cylinder about the size of a dormitory refrigerator, shiny and kind of dimpled on the outside, with two combination locks on top. It would have been inside a wooden crate with packing material, but that might have broken away or burned in the crash. Have you seen anything like that around?”

He shook his head, wiping the sheen of sweat off his forehead with the sleeve of his flannel shirt. He didn’t seem to mind that the sleeve was as grimy as his face. Again she thought of David and his sterile white shirts. Her stomach plunged.

“Most of the back end of the plane is over there, though.” He pointed west. He didn’t have to add that a container the size she was looking for would have been stowed in the rear of the aircraft. Didn’t have to. The front half was built out with passenger seats, the remains of one of which she was standing on.

She turned and started picking her way in the direction he’d indicated. She heard footsteps behind her, and turned to find him following. “You don’t have to come.”

“Yes. I do,” he said, and she didn’t bother to argue. She had a feeling it would be a waste of time.

Since she was wearing what was, for all intents and purposes, a spacesuit, she guessed it was appropriate that she felt as though

she was walking on the face of the moon as she picked through the wreckage. She stared at a perfectly pressed pair of trousers hanging in a tree as if left there by a butler. She stepped over a half-completed crossword puzzle as if it were some alien life form. Each bit of debris made her wonder who it had belonged to. What it had meant to them.

Out of the corner of her eye, she watched the Ranger. He walked through the wreckage in a precise criss-cross pattern, his head sweeping left, then right. How did he do it? How did he walk through the remnants of the last moments of five peoples' lives and look so unaffected?

His foot thudded against something metallic. He stopped, rooted in place like a man mired in quicksand. "Doctor?" His head turned, one eyebrow lifted. Then he reached down.

"For God's sake, don't touch it!" She hurried to his side.

"That's it?" he asked when she crouched down next to him.

She nodded, running her gloved hand around the sealed edge. "Looks like it's intact."

"Hallelujah," he said, but without the emotion that should have been attached.

She looked up at him and grinned, feeling like an eight-year-old who'd just caught her first crawfish. "It is intact!"

He didn't return her grin. His mouth stayed set in the same firm line. She felt a blush creep up her neck. Of course he wasn't grinning. The unit could still have leaked. The seal would have to be checked microscopically.



He nodded. "Then let's get the hell out of here."

"Fine by me. We'll send a team in to remove it." She marked the sight with orange flagging tape and pushed herself up. He reached out to steady her elbow. The touch sent an electric shock up her arm, even through the cumbersome suit. She took a step back, out of his grasp before she embarrassed herself, and froze.

There, behind the Ranger, a Plexiglas habitat lay cock-eyed in the scrub brush, one of the rubber handling gloves sealed into the hole in its side torn, the other missing altogether. The bolts on one end of the container had been sheared off, and the base ripped away.

The habitat was empty.

"Oh, God," she said, feeling her flush fade as blood drained to her toes.

The Ranger's grip on her arm tightened. "What?"

"The monkey..." She had assumed the animal had been killed in the crash with everyone else aboard.

His gaze swept over the broken habitat. "Animals?"

"One. A rhesus macaque. A research animal."

"Does it pose a danger?"

"It was infected with ARFIS before we left Malaysia." She lifted her gaze to his, then had to turn away from the flat intensity of his stare. From the power swirling in the metallic gray. Dread settled in her chest with the finality of a casket being lowered into a grave. "It's highly contagious."

And now it was loose in Texas. The Sabine National Forest

was officially a hot zone.

## Chapter 3

Clint's skin was already red from scrubbing off three layers of epidermis in the decontamination shower. As he faced down the smug CDC security guard all dressed up to play soldier in camouflage fatigues, combat boots and a gas mask, even more blood flooded the capillaries just beneath the surface. The fact that Clint was wearing a navy-blue jumpsuit that was two sizes too small and had been told his own clothes were about to be burned, along with everything else he'd had on him this morning, didn't help his disposition any. Neither did the gas mask he held in his left hand, a reminder of the seriousness of the situation here.

"I don't think you understand, son. A Ranger never surrenders his gun and badge. Not while he's still breathing."

"Then you better hope somebody around here knows CPR, 'cause I've already got yours."

"Correction. You've been holding mine while I showered. Now you're going to give them back."

"Correction," Cammo Boy mocked. "Now I'm going to put your badge in the incinerator with the other personal effects. Your weapon—" He turned the plastic bag holding Clint's Glock over in his gloved hands, studying it with a look of admiration. Clint noticed Cammo Boy didn't carry a sidearm, which was a good thing. He didn't look old enough to drive, much less shoot

anyone.

Or maybe Clint was just feeling old these days. Old and broken.

“We’ll just have to find some other way to dispose of your gun,” Guard Boy finished.

Yeah. Like stowing it in his own duffle, Clint imagined. He lifted his hand, fisted it in green camouflage. Before the young guard could so much as blink, the steel toes of the young man’s boots were dangling an inch off the ground.

Yancy, the kid’s nametag read. He looked like a Yancy. Fancy Yancy. His boots were too clean ever to have seen field duty, and his fatigues actually bore creases. Clint was about to launch young Fancy Yancy into orbit when a voice that sounded as if it came right off an Old South plantation stopped him cold.

“Is there a problem here?” Dr. Attois studied Clint and the security guard, who both spoke at once.

“No.”

“Yes.”

“Put the corporal down, Ranger Hayes.” Behind the plastic face shield, one of the lady doctor’s fine eyebrows lifted. “Please.”

Grudgingly, Clint set the man on his feet. But he didn’t let go of the shirt.

“Uh. Ma’am,” Cammo Boy said. “Ranger Hayes is reluctant to proceed to the detainees’ waiting area.”

“They’re not being detained, corporal. They’re being

quarantined.”

“Yes, ma’am. I get that, ma’am. But I’m not sure quarantine is a word, ma’am.”

Clint resisted the urge to roll his eyes. “Your rent-a-cop has my weapon, my badge, my boots and my cell phone. I want them back. In that order.”

Two bright-red spots colored the man’s baby cheeks. “I was ordered to collect all personal effects, ma’am.”

“That gun and badge are not personal effects. They belong to the state of Texas. You have no authority—”

“I’m here by order of the federal government. I have more authority than—”

“Gentlemen, please!” The doctor humphed. “We really don’t have time for this. Give me his things, Corporal.”

“But, ma’am—”

She held out one rubber-gloved hand, planted the other on her neon-orange hip. “Don’t make me lose my temper.”

If Clint had been much of a smiler—and if he hadn’t been so damned aggravated—he might have smiled then. He almost hoped the guard refused to hand over his belongings. It might be kind of fun to find out if the old sayings about hot Cajun blood were true or just another stereotype.

Then again, there were other, more interesting ways to find out how hot the dark-haired, curvy little doctor’s blood ran.

Much more interesting ways.

With a discontented sigh and a glare at Clint, the corporal

plunked the plastic bags containing his Glock and the silver star and circle that formed the Ranger badge in her outstretched hand.

“Boots?” Clint grunted, mentally chastising himself for letting his mind wander into off-limits territory again—and the doctor’s blood, hot or otherwise, was definitely off-limits. He had enough problems at the moment without adding a woman to the mix.

“That’s really not a good idea,” the woman in question said, the sympathy in her voice as thick as her accent. “Leather holds moisture down in the grain and pores. The virus—”

“I get the picture. Cell phone?”

There was a heavy pause, and then the doctor said, “Walk with me,” over her shoulder as she turned, leaving him little choice but to follow, his feet slipping and sliding in the navy-blue rubber galoshes he’d been issued to replace the four-hundred-dollar custom Luccheses that were about to be incinerated. “And put that mask on.”

Clint followed, the mask swinging at his side.

“How long have you been in law enforcement, Ranger Hayes?”

She was taking long strides for a woman with short legs. Like she had a train to catch. The movement had her hips swaying, giving him a picture of the shape inside the bulky orange suit. And quite a shape it was.

He jammed his fingers into the pockets of his jumpsuit. “All total? Sixteen years, I guess.”

He wouldn’t make seventeen. Either the virus would get him, or he’d have to face his captain, his team, and tell them he

wouldn't be coming back from medical leave. At this point, he wasn't sure which outcome he preferred.

"...someone with your experience must understand the need to control the information the public gets about this situation."

He'd missed the first part of what she'd said, but he got her point. "In other words, you're not giving anyone's cell phone back. And it has nothing to do with the virus. Just out of curiosity, what are you telling the public?"

"The truth. That a plane carrying hazardous materials crashed in the Sabine National Forest, and that local emergency workers who arrived on scene first are now helping state and federal agencies with the cleanup."

"Helping?" He glanced at the men—mostly farmers and store clerks, mechanics and game wardens. The biggest disaster most of them ever faced was a wreck on the county highway. They weren't prepared for an epidemic. They were sitting around folding metal tables, heads bowed and silent as they listened to a lecture on safety procedures—how to take off latex gloves without cross-contaminating them, leaving their rubber boots outside and stepping into paper booties before they entered their tents, etc. Skip Hollister reached between his feet and plucked a stem of grass, lifted it, then caught himself before he put it in his mouth, tossed it away and ground it under his heel.

"I only need twelve hours before I run the blood tests," the doctor said, following his gaze. Had her eyes teared up? It was hard to tell behind her face shield. "Twenty-four before I can

release them back to their families.”

“You hope.”

She kept walking, marching really, across the compound, but her hands, swinging at her sides, began to clench and unclench rhythmically with each stride. “I have some field-sterilization kits in my tent. They use gas pellets. It’ll take a few hours. I’ll need you to take your gun apart for me first, and then you’ll probably need to clean it to get the residue off before you put it back together, but you’d know better about that than me.”

“Not a problem.” Not as much of one as being without his gun, anyway. It wouldn’t be his much longer, but he didn’t want to give it up a second earlier than he had to.

“I’m in the first tent. Come by later and we’ll set it up.”

She stopped in front of a tent on the far-south end of camp, the opposite direction where she’d said she was quartered. Clint frowned at the two guards posted out front. These two were definitely armed. With automatic weapons and full environmental suits like the doctor’s. “How much later?”

The doctor turned to him. Her dark complexion had blanched white except for two red spots on her cheeks that gave her a feverish look. A scary proposition in a camp on the verge of an epidemic.

“Give me an hour or two,” she said. Her voice shook, adding to Clint’s misgiving. “I have something else to take care of first.”

He studied the grim-faced guards behind her. Older, these two. More experienced. They’d seen some things, he was sure.



Things they didn't talk about. He could see it in their eyes.

"What else?" he asked.

"It's...not your concern."

"If you're messing with that bug again, out here where there's still innocent people who could be exposed—"

"It's not the virus."

"Then what is this place?"

A wave of torment washed over her expression. "It's the morgue. I have to identify the bodies."

Macy stood frozen inside the flap to the tent housing the temporary morgue. She felt as if her respirator had suddenly quit working. She couldn't draw a breath. Her chest burned, but it wasn't enough to melt the icy shock that encapsulated her, held her immobile as a statue.

There were only three bodies.

She heard a swish of the tent flap behind her, a quiet step, and knew the Ranger had followed her inside. His hand on her shoulder was like an electric shock. It restarted her heart, jolted her lungs. She gulped in a noisy breath.

"What are you doing here?"

"Earlier, you said the people on the plane were your friends." His voice was low, rumbling and hoarse through the gas mask he'd finally donned. "You shouldn't have to do this alone."

Compassion from the Ranger? It didn't seem to fit. But then, maybe there was more to the man than a stony countenance and flat eyes. But she wouldn't bet on it.

“I shouldn’t have to do this at all,” she said, drawing her mind back to the black bags laid in a neat row. “They shouldn’t be here. This shouldn’t have happened.”

“If man were meant to fly we’d all be born with boarding passes stamped on our foreheads.”

Ah, there was the hard-assed Ranger she knew.

“Guard?” she called. When he poked his head inside, she asked, “Where are the others?”

“Other what, ma’am?”

“The other...remains.” She couldn’t quite think of them as bodies. Bodies belonged to people. What was in those bags belonged to God.

The burly guard frowned. “That’s all they found.”

Ranger Hayes stepped up beside her. “How many are there supposed to be?”

“Six.” Her heart fluttered like a flock of startled sparrows. “You don’t think—”

“We searched all around that wreck. There were no survivors,” Hayes said, guessing what she was thinking. “Are you sure all six people got on the flight?”

The possibility that it had been a mistake, that David hadn’t been on board flared in a ball of bright hope for a moment, then sputtered out.

“I verified it with authorities in Malaysia right after I was notified of the crash.” Her eyes grew warm, full. “They’re still out there. Somewhere.”

“Lot of scavengers out in woods like these. Wouldn’t take them long to tear apart a fresh kill, carry off the pieces,” the burly guard said.

While images of wolves ripping raw meat off a carcass played in Macy’s mind, the Ranger rolled a heavy gaze to the guard. “Thank you, that was very helpful,” he said dryly. “That will be all.”

The guard ducked out, and Macy walked toward the three black bags. “I need to know who—I need to know.”

But her hands stalled on the zipper. The Ranger’s hands brushed them away. His eyes were the color of a full moon, his expression just as distant. How did he do it? How did he stand in front of the dead and not so much as blink? A chill ran down her spine as the image of Robocop popped into her head. The half-man, half-machine enforcer had nothing on Clint Hayes.

“I’ll open them up,” he said. “You just call out the names. I’ll take care of the rest.”

She wheeled, hating having her weakness on display for a man like the Ranger. This was her responsibility. She wouldn’t shirk it. “No!”

He was already pulling at the zipper tab. She pushed him away. “It’s my responsibility.”

He turned toward her, his brows drawn.

She drew herself up to her full height, diminutive as it was next to his towering frame. “Like I said, they were my friends. I owe it to them.”

After a moment's pause, he stepped back, watching her speculatively. Macy reached for the bag again. Her hands shook as she pulled on the zipper tab.

The smell hit her first, even filtered through her respirator, the pungent odor of death that seemed to pull the bile up from her gut like a vacuum pump. She clamped her mouth shut and held her breath, her eyes watering and her chest aching as she edged the bag open another inch. She saw the tattered sleeve of a blue polo shirt caked with coagulated blood and dirt. A dark-skinned hand, abraded and charred, slipped out.

Her breath whooshed out and the zipper whooshed shut at the same time. "It's Cory Holcomb, one of our lab technicians." And the only African-American on-board. At least she hadn't had to look at his face, into his dead eyes, to identify him.

Facing away, gasping for cleaner air she gulped in a few breaths before turning back to the next bag.

"You sure you want to go on with this?" the Ranger asked.  
"I have to."

Her heart pounded. Sweat pooled on her palms beneath her rubber gloves. The second zipper eased down though she had no conscious thought of opening it. A shock of blond hair greeted her. A freckled face and a mouth that had once always seemed to be laughing. Now he seemed to be screaming. She could only imagine the terror of his last moments...

Tremors wracking her whole body, Macy reached out and gently pulled his eyelids down over his blue eyes...

"It's Bob Turner, our copilot."

She moved on to the next. "Timlen Zufria, a Malaysian doctor who was working with us."

She zipped the last bag closed and turned, pressing her palm into her stomach to try to calm the churning. The burning. She needed to leave. To run. But the Ranger stood in her way.

"Who else was on board?"

"The pilot, Michael Cain." A tear brushed her cheek. She'd flown with this crew many times. "He has two kids. A girl and a boy."

She wrapped her arms around herself and hugged, mentally shaking herself. The Ranger didn't want to hear her sentimental rambling.

"Ty Jeffries, the man who managed the cargo," she added. "And David Brinker." Her stomach twisted brutally. Unable to stop the rising tide of bile, she pushed Hayes out of her way and ran out of the tent to the edge of the encampment, where she hunkered down behind a scrub mesquite, yanked off her helmet and lost what little food she'd been able to swallow this morning.

Unable to touch her face for fear of contamination, she had no choice but to let the tears flow unabated down her cheeks. As the sobs diminished to hiccups, she heard footsteps crunch through the dry grass behind her. A long shadow fell over her, chilling her clammy skin.

Ranger Hayes squatted down beside her. His gray eyes swirled, unreadable as ever. "Who is David?"

“My fiancé.” Misery permeated her every cell. “At least he used to be.”

## Chapter 4

Clint would rather have stuck his arm in a rattlesnake nest than deal with Dr. Attois now. In his years as a Texas State Trooper, and later as a Ranger, he'd seen a lot of victims, with their wide, shocked pupils and pale faces. He'd learned that doling out sympathy wasn't the way to help them—at least it wasn't his way. He could call in victims' advocates and social workers and counselors for that. The best thing he could do for them was give them justice.

But in an accident, there was no justice to be given, no righteous punishment to be meted, and out here, there were no counselors to call. Whatever had to be done was up to him to do.

She sat on the trunk of a fallen cottonwood, her head bowed. The wet trails scrolling down her cheeks made his breath hitch, his throat close. It made him want to reach out and dry her tears, but he couldn't touch her, not without risking spreading the virus.

Maybe it was for the best. The last thing he needed was to touch her. No, that wasn't true. The last thing he needed was to know whether her skin felt as warm and soft and smooth as it looked or not.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry." She rocked back and forth, her arms hugging her middle. "It's just—I have a hard time with...the dead."

"Understandable. You said they were your friends."

She shook her head, still rocking herself. “No, I have a hard time with all dead people.”

Frowning, Clint squatted down next to her. He spoke as gently as he could manage, but wasn’t sure he pulled it off. It had been a long time since he’d tried to be gentle. “Must have made medical school a bitch.”

Her laugh came out as a hiccup. “I never would have made it through Advanced Pathology if it hadn’t been for the pint of Jack Daniels I kept under my bed. It was the only way I could sleep after...after class.”

Full of surprises, the lady doctor was.

She pulled her lips between her teeth then exhaled slowly. “I haven’t been able to drink whiskey since I graduated.” Her smile trembled then fell. “It tastes like death to me.”

Clint felt the meltdown coming a long second before it happened. The sight of tears clumped in her thick lashes twisted through him like a blade. It took all the grit he could muster to keep his own expression impassive.

A moment later, the tide of grief overwhelmed her. Tears tumbled out, rained to the ground. “I killed David,” she cried. “It’s my fault.”

He shoved his hands, gloves and all, into his pockets to keep them from reaching for her. “You didn’t cause the plane to crash.”

“I caused him to be on it. He was supposed to come home on the commercial flight, with me, the day before. But I broke



off the engagement. I gave him his ring back. He decided to ride back on the charter so he wouldn't have to be around me."

Clint had once served a warrant on a drug house that had turned out to be booby-trapped. The doors were wired with explosives, the windows, the cupboards, even the floorboards were rigged, all in an attempt to kill a few cops. Walking through that house hadn't been nearly as frightening as stumbling through this conversation. He didn't know what to say. He wasn't good at making people feel better.

"By definition, accidents are random events," he said, treading carefully and watching her face for some sign of whether he was helping or making matters worse. "You couldn't have known the plane would go down. Or it could have just as easily been the commercial jet that crashed, and you could have saved his life."

"At least then it would have just been a plane crash. We wouldn't be worrying about an ARFIS epidemic."

"Maybe. Or maybe the plane would have crashed into a school, killed a kid who would have otherwise been president some day. You can't tear yourself up wondering 'what if.' No one knows what the results of their actions will be ahead of time. No one."

If they could—if he could—he sure wouldn't have stepped out of his truck in that parking garage six weeks ago and walked right into two gunmen coming off the elevator. He wouldn't have taken the .38-caliber round in the shoulder that was soon going to change his life forever.

Maybe he wouldn't have stepped up to the front of the crowd when the CDC team had shown up at the crash site, gotten a close-up look at the wild mane of hair, the warm complexion.

Maybe.

Dr. Attois angled her head to the side, a frown tipping her full lips downward as she studied him curiously. Her eyes were the color of chicory coffee, dark and rich. And they were looking at him as if she was seeing a different man than she'd seen the moment before.

Or as if she'd seen more of him than before. The shield he wore over his emotions was slipping. He stood before it came crashing down.

She blinked as if his movement had woken her. The color came back to her cheeks. "I have to find him."

He watched as she stood and pulled on her helmet. "What? Now?"

"I can't leave him out there."

"There's nothing you can do for him."

"I can bring him home! Give him a decent burial, while there's still enough to bury. Before the scavengers..." Her face twisted.

"What about the monkey?"

"Most likely he was killed in the crash. My team is searching the wreckage again for his remains."

"The virus?"

She held out her arms. "I'm protected, remember?"

"That suit'll be shredded about thirty seconds after you leave

this clearing. You ever heard of saw briar? Mesquite thorns? Spear grass? These woods are full of them.”

She dropped her arms to her sides, took a deep rasping breath through her respirator. “Even if the macaque did survive the crash, which I doubt, it was infected nearly twenty-four hours ago. With its smaller body mass, ARFIS would overwhelm its system much more quickly than it would a human. One way or another, the monkey is dead or soon will be. The virus won’t be a threat.”

Biting her lower lip, she checked the seals on her wrists and ankles.

He took in her woman-on-a-mission expression and sighed. “At least wait until tomorrow morning. Once the blood tests are done and we’re sure no one’s sick, we can send the men out in search teams. They may not be big-city doctors, but they know these woods and they’re good people. They’ll want to help.”

“That’s a good idea. If I haven’t found David and the others by then, we’ll do that.”

He could tell from her tone that she was only half listening to him. She turned to walk away.

“Damn it,” he called to her back, “it’s a big forest out there. You can’t just go traipsing around it alone.”

She laughed, but there was nothing joyous in the sound. “I was raised in the bayou. My sisters and I played so far out in the bogs even the gators couldn’t find us. You think I’m afraid of a little walk in the woods?”

As she spoke, she hit the edge of the tree line—and immediately stumbled over a vine that caught her ankle. She caught herself on the trunk of a pine tree just in time to keep from falling on her face, righted herself and disappeared into the foliage.

Cursing his luck and stubborn women under his breath, Clint counted to ten to give his temper a few seconds to cool. Then he counted to ten again.

Finally under control, he yanked the straps on his face mask tight and clomped after her in his rubber booties. The infected monkey might be dead, but the twenty-two men Clint had helped convince to accept the quarantine in the camp behind him weren't. Not yet. If they got sick, they were going to need her.

He'd be damned if he'd let anything happen to her before he knew they were okay.

Either there was a rogue elephant stampeding through the woods behind her, or the Ranger had caught up to her. An awkward moment passed between them when he reached her side. Macy tried to say something, but her throat closed around a knot in her esophagus and she couldn't speak. She flicked him a cautious smile instead.

He must have expected her to be angry at his intrusion, because his eyes rounded in surprise for a moment before the steel curtain he hid behind so often slammed down.

The truth was, she was glad for his company. Under the canopy of trees, the forest felt like a morgue. The temperature

was several degrees cooler. Leaves muffled their footsteps. The critters that should have been scuttling around were quiet, as if in deference to the dead.

She didn't want to be alone with the dead again.

The going was rough, as Ranger Hayes had said it would be. At times the underbrush grew in impenetrable walls. The saw-grass vines seemed alive, reaching out to snag her arms and ankles. Three-inch mesquite thorns sharp enough to puncture the sole of a boot and thick enough to impale a girl to the bone made every step over a broken limb an adventure.

They walked wordlessly until, after nearly an hour, she sat on a mossy boulder near a thin stream to catch her breath.

The Ranger loomed over her, swiveled his head. Sunlight angled through the boughs overhead in sharp beams.

"Gonna be dark before long," he said.

Out of habit she checked the seals between her suit and gloves. "Couple of hours."

"We should head back."

"In a while."

His forehead furrowed over his face mask. "You do know which way is back, don't you?"

"Approximately six-tenths of a mile on a heading of ninety-four degrees."

His scowl deepened. "What're you, a Girl Scout leader wannabe?"

He looked so perplexed that when she smiled this time, it

almost felt genuine. She opened her fanny pack, pulled out her Garmin, checked the heading to the waypoint she'd made at base, and pointed. "That way."

He leaned over her. "GPS?"

"Part of the standard CDC field pack." She patted the zippered pouch sewn into the waist of her suit. "GPS, satellite phone, two-way text pager. Just because I'm not from the big city doesn't mean I don't appreciate modern technology."

"All right, Techno-Girl. You know where we came from. But do you have any idea where you're going?"

She stood, walked about fifteen feet to her left where there was a break in the trees and pointed up and to the right. "There?"

He followed her outstretched hand with his gaze. Some distance away, six large, black birds glided above the trees. Her stomach plummeted with each heavy swoop of their wings. "Buzzards? You're chasing buzzards?"

"They're feeding," she said, trying not to picture what lay below them.

"It could be anything. A possum, the remains of a deer some hunter left behind."

"Or one of the men from the plane."

He took her arm in his hand. "Look, we have to get back. We'll call the state. They've got dogs that can search these woods in a fraction of the time it will take us, and do a hell of a better job at it."

"We're almost there."

When she pulled away from him, he made a sound somewhere between a growl and groan and stepped in front of her, this time holding her in place more firmly. “You don’t have to do this yourself. Do you hear me? You do not need to be the one to find your friends.”

But his words faded in her mind. Her ears were tuned to another sound. A chirping, trilling chatter. A sound that didn’t belong in the quiet woods.

“Shh,” she said.

“What?”

“Listen,” she whispered, and let her eyes fall partway closed to hone in on the direction of the sound. When she opened them again, she pointed over the Ranger’s shoulder. “There.”

He turned, and the color blanched from his skin. His hand gripped her arm with bruising force.

In a tree twenty feet away, a black-and-white ball of fur scampered out a limb and plucked a nut from a twig, gnawed on it, chattered some more and threw its prize to the ground.

“I’m no doc, doc,” the Ranger said in the most un-emotional tone she’d heard from him yet. “But that monkey doesn’t look dead to me.”

No. Not dead.

Not even close.

## Chapter 5

Clint's right hand reached for the weapon he always carried on his hip and came up empty.

"Impossible." Dr. Attois's words were barely audible. She crouched and held out one hand toward the cat-size ball of fur with the pink nose on the tree limb. The monkey mimicked her gesture, holding out its paw. "Here, little monkey, monkey. Here, José."

"What are you doing?" Clint tried to watch the animal, but all he could see was the puncture on the thigh of the doctor's biohazard suit. The tear near her elbow. She'd have been better off with a simple gas-mask-type of device such as Clint wore—wasn't wearing, actually, he realized, and yanked the device over his face, tightening the straps until they cut into the back of his head.

Wouldn't matter if her clothes were torn to shreds if she had a mask like his that sealed airtight around her face so the virus couldn't get in her lungs, or the mucous membranes of her eyes or nose.

"Come here, José. Come on, little guy."

"José?"

"The monkey."

An Hispanic monkey from Malaysia. Carrying the most lethal virus of this decade.



Jesus.

Clint checked the straps around his face, tightened them another fraction of an inch. A rivulet of sweat ran down his temple and lodged against the rubber seal at his jaw. "What are you going to do with it if you catch it? You've got holes all over your suit."

"It's all right. We're upwind of him. The virus will be drifting the other way. I just need to get close enough for him to see the food." She dug gently in the zippered pouch at her waist. Paper crinkled, and out came a granola bar. She eased the wrapper off and set the bar on the ground in front of her. "If he finds food here, he's more likely to stay in the area."

"Fine. Great." The trickle of sweat from his forehead was becoming a river. He was going to drown in his face mask if they didn't get out of here soon. "Let's go."

The monkey scampered down the tree trunk and took a tentative step toward Dr. Attois, then another. She rose and backed away slowly, stopping to dig in her pouch again, this time pulling out her GPS.

"What are you doing?" Clint hissed.

"Marking a waypoint so we can give the exact coordinates to a recovery team."

"You're calling in a recovery team?"

"I have to. We need to know why he's not dead, or at least seriously ill."

"Terrific." Of course he'd known that. Someone would have

to come back for the monkey. Many someones, most likely, in order to find one tiny monkey in a wilderness this size. And every one of them would be risking their lives with each breath they took, regardless of how much protective gear they wore.

“Any more bad news?”

“Yeah.” She studied the leaves twirling on brittle branches. “The wind is changing direction.”

Just out of his second decontamination shower of the day, Clint strode across the compound toward Dr. Attois’s tent in a stride meant to chew up gravel and spit out dust. Once they’d called in the coordinates on Macy’s satellite phone, they’d run like hell all the way back to camp. With Macy’s ripped suit, they’d have been crazy to stick around and wait for the recovery team—a fancy name, Clint had learned for a group of sharpshooters with tranquilizer guns.

Already, news that the infected monkey was alive and well in the woods of southeast Texas had the clearing housing the quarantined workers and their CDC captors buzzing with activity. The news that the recovery team sent after José hadn’t found hide nor hair of the animal at the coordinates Macy had given them had everyone’s nerves jumping.

Three more helicopters had arrived, dropping off additional equipment and troops. The evening sun had set, and generators droned like overgrown yellow jackets, powering the monstrous lights that had been set up to keep the night at bay. Motion sensors were in place to detect even the smallest breach—

inbound or outbound—of the camp's perimeter, and in case those failed, the uniformed guards with rifles surrounding the little circle of tents were sure to do the trick.

Two more of the army that had invaded the once-quiet forest stood sentry outside Dr. Attois's tent. There was no mistaking these guys for CDC office drones or scientists, or even young hotheads like Cammo Boy. They were professional security. Thick-necked grunts with guns on their hips and chips on their shoulders.

Clint marched right up to them, stopping a little too close, invading their personal space to see if they'd take a step back.

They didn't. He hadn't really thought it would be that easy to establish himself as alpha dog, but it was worth a try.

"I need to see Dr. Attois," he announced, hating the nasal sound the breathing filter added to his voice.

"She's not available."

"She'll see me."

A guard with three stripes on his shoulder, apparently the senior officer of the two, gave him a condescending smile. "We'll tell her you'd like to speak with her. When she's available. Ranger Hayes."

So, they'd already been briefed on him, and this was how they wanted to play it. Get into a pissing contest over who had the bigger badge.

That was all right. He could piss pretty damned far.

He leaned around the big guy's shoulder and called, "Dr.

Attois, you in there?"

"You'll have to leave now," the junior guard ordered. "Civilians are not to leave their tents for the duration."

"I'm not a civilian."

"You can either return to your tent on your own, or we'll escort you there."

The senior guard's tone left no doubt in Clint's mind that "escort" meant "drag." The young guy latched a rubber-gloved hand on Clint's shoulder.

Clint knocked his arm away with a chop to the inside of the elbow. "Back off."

"Go back to your assigned tent."

Both guards advanced on Clint. Holding his ground, he looked the bigger of the two, the leader, in the eye and balanced on the balls of his feet, fists clenched. "Dr. Attois! I need to speak to you. Now!" he yelled without taking his eyes off the guards.

The junior man grabbed Clint's arm, tried to leverage it behind his back. Clint twisted in an escape maneuver, but before he got away, the senior guard leaned on his back, doubling him over, and smashed a knee into Clint's face. Warm blood gushed from his nose. "Aw, now look what you've done," he whined, still bent over, trying to plug his nose and hoping to baffle them just long enough to get the jump on them. "Gone and ruined my pretty blue jumpsuit."

The distraction worked. The guards rocked back on their heels, thinking the fight was over. Rage thundering in his chest,

Clint bulled forward with his head down, knocking the junior guard to the ground. He shoved the other one behind him and aimed a backward kick at his groin, missing by inches when the man slid aside.

“Stop it. Stop it now!”

The voice was feminine, but there was no doubting the authority in its tone. The guard behind Clint took a step back. The guard on the ground staggered to his feet.

Clint straightened and turned his attention to Dr. Attois, wiping his bloody nose with his sleeve. “I need a word with you.”

“You’re hurt.” She threw a challenging look at the guards.

“I’ll live,” Clint mumbled into his sleeve.

“He refused to return to his quarters, ma’am.”

Clint tipped his head back to stem the flow of blood. “All due respect, doctor, this is a quarantine camp, not a penitentiary.”

She’d taken off her rubber suit and wore Keds, faded jeans and a soft, fuzzy lavender sweater that made his body hum in purely male appreciation. He wondered how blood could still be running from his nose when it felt as though all of it had shot to his groin.

Watching him with curious eyes, she stepped back from the tent flap. “Come inside.”

“Ma’am—” the senior guard complained.

“Enough, Carter,” she said simply as Clint took a step forward.

She stopped him with a hand on his chest. “Take off the booties and gloves and put them in the biohazard container

outside. Then step into the pan of disinfectant so you don't track anything in on the bottom of your feet and clean your hands, all the way up past the elbow, with the solution on the table."

He'd just left decon, but he followed orders without comment. Inside, a cool breeze chilled the sweat on Clint's forehead. He rolled his eyes down until he could see something besides the ceiling and sighed appreciatively. The tents were more like big balloons than traditional camping equipment. They were mushroom shaped, sealed up tight, and each had its own air-filtration system. They reminded Clint of an old movie about a boy with no immune system who couldn't ever leave his hermetic environment for fear of infection.

Dr. Attois pulled a chair out from a folding table and motioned him toward it. He stood, surveying the neat cot and blanket, table and laptop computer. "Nice place. If you don't mind living like the boy in the plastic bubble."

"Beats dying." She dug through a footlocker and came up with a hand towel and a bottle of hydrogen peroxide. "Now are you going to sit down or do I have to do this standing on my tiptoes?"

She held the bottle of peroxide up. He reached for it. "I can do it myself."

She pulled the disinfectant out of his reach and nodded to the chair again. "I'm sure you can. But I'm the doctor, remember. Now sit."

Reluctantly, he sat. Arguing with her wasn't going to get him anywhere.

She clucked over him as she cleaned around his mouth. “Now what’s so important that you’d risk bodily harm just to talk to me?”

For a moment he couldn’t remember. She leaned over him, and all he could see was the milky column of her throat. She smelled like Ivory soap and her fingers were soft and gentle as they worked. It had been a long time since anyone had touched him so personally. Since a woman had touched him at all.

He couldn’t help but notice every detail about her as she worked over him. The way the light caught her eyes when she smiled. The way she touched the tip of her tongue to her upper lip when she was concentrating. His heartbeat thrummed heavily in his veins, as if his blood had turned to mercury.

The unexpected reaction to her chafed him. This after only a few hours in her company? By the time the quarantine was lifted—if it was lifted—he’d be lucky if he was capable of speech.

He cleared his throat. Telephone.

“I need to use your satellite phone.”

She pulled back from him. The scent of Ivory wafted away, just out of reach. He caught himself just before he leaned forward to capture it again. “I’m afraid that’s not possible. Tilt your head back.”

When he didn’t comply, she eased his forehead backward with the heel of her hand and dabbed at his nostrils with a gauze pad. He grabbed her wrist. Was it his imagination, or did her pulse leap under his fingers?

Their gazes met. Her pupils widened. No, it hadn't been imagination.

He let her go, easing her back slightly in the same motion. "Look, I need to call my office. Let them know where I am."

She yanked her gaze away and turned her back to him to put her supplies away. A warning buzz replaced the drumbeat in Clint's veins.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I can't let you use the phone. There's a media blackout. It's against—"

"I'm not going to call the media. I'm going to call the Rangers. The search for your damn monkey is going to be huge. There are dozens of little towns surrounding the national forest. The evacuation alone is going to eat up nearly every law-enforcement resource in the state. I have to make sure there're enough cops ready to back us—"

She wheeled. They stood so close that the top of her head was practically under his chin. Her mouth was just inches below his. It opened to speak, paused. He felt the warm rush of her breath. Smelled her mint toothpaste.

"There isn't going to be an evacuation," she said. Worry lines fanned out from the corners of her chicory-coffee eyes and her mouth.

"What do mean, no evacuation?"

With one last, suffering look, she ducked away. Her hands shook as she screwed the cap on the peroxide bottle and shoved the bloody gauze into a plastic bag.



“They—” She cut herself off, stumbling over her words. “It’s safer if everyone just stays in their homes,” she claimed, sounding as though she was reading a prepared statement. Or propaganda. She kept her eyes carefully averted and her hands busy, closing the first aid kit and stowing it in her trunk.

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