

CHAPTER ONE

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Michael Harrison dreamed of death.

How long he'd lain there, he couldn't remember. In fact, for hours he wasn't even sure where he was. He floated between the waking world and that of dreaming, between the world of the living and the abyss of the dead. His memories merged with the present, and it was only the overwhelming smell of sickness and decay crawling into his nose and mind that forced him fully awake, retching. He felt terrible. His body ached, and he was damp from fever sweat. He groped for the water bottle he knew would be next to the bed, but it bounded away from him, bouncing across the floor with a hollow thud and clatter.

Dull grey light, storm-light, filtered in through the curtains over the bedroom window. He could see the dim shapes of other people in the room with him. Forcing himself up on one elbow, he surveyed the room, willing his stomach to settle, his head to stop spinning.

There were at least six bodies in the room, swollen, grotesque parodies of people he had known as friends, their features twisted in paroxysms of suffering. It was warm in the house – he could hear the furnace – and the bodies were beginning dissolution, which suggested they had been dead for a couple of days.

He remembered feeling ill and coming into the room to lie down; that had been Christmas Eve. At the time, he'd attributed it to jetlag and too much spiked eggnog with dinner. Obviously it had been something else. He must have lain in the bed, feverish

and unconscious, while the others succumbed to the same illness that had struck him down. Why he had survived when the others died, he didn't know. Considering the symptoms, and looking at the bodies, he couldn't think of what illness could do this. It was unlike anything he'd ever heard of.

Part of him wondered how he could be so clinical about it all, but he knew this was just his military training taking over while the rest of his mind gibbered in a corner. It was always that way, in the end. It took only a single bullet to turn a friend into steaming meat, and this wasn't the first time he'd survived when others had died around him. The loss of friends would build until he couldn't take it anymore, and he'd eat that special bullet, but not yet. First, he needed to discover if anyone else was still alive.

Harrison fumbled on the bedside table for his phone. The bright light of the display hurt his eyes. The phone still had power, but no signal.

"Figures," he muttered through cracked lips.

Suddenly the dimness of the room, the foul air, and the rotting corpses were too much for him. He found his boots and left the room as quickly as he could manage, careful not to step in the islands of putrefaction that had formed around each of the bodies. He closed the door behind him to cut off the sight and smell.

He'd mourn later.

The curtains in the living room were open. Snow was falling outside. The thick, grey clouds told him little about the time, and the clocks in the house were lying. They were all blinking the same message to him. The power had to have been out at some point. His watch and phone told him it was 6:57 p.m., three hours' difference from the clocks. What that meant, he didn't know.

He checked the other rooms, but everyone in the house was

dead.

There had been twelve people at the party, including him. There were eleven bodies in the house, so no one had left the party alive. Harrison picked up the receiver on the house phone, but the line was dead, hissing with a menace he couldn't quite convince himself wasn't real.

He suddenly wondered if everyone in the whole town was dead. It seemed too quiet for early evening on the Sunday after Christmas. There should have been people making their farewells in neighbors' driveways. There should have been cars in the streets.

But all was quiet.

*Must have been a flu. A damned nasty one.*

*Too nasty,* another part of his mind prompted. *A flu that kills everyone in a town that rapidly has to be engineered. Well, not everyone in town. I'm still alive,* he thought, quickly followed by, *You're losing it, man, talking to yourself like this.*

He drank a bottle of water and thought about his options.

His coat was by the door, keys in his pocket.

*I can't leave. I might be a carrier.*

He couldn't leave the town, but he had to notify somebody: his commanding officer, the Center for Disease Control, somebody. He shrugged into his coat and left the house. His rented Jeep Wrangler hardtop was still parked in the driveway, covered with snow. He rushed through the cold and damp to the Jeep, climbed in, and checked again for cell reception.

"Negative," he muttered.

He started the Jeep and turned on the wipers.

The cell tower was missing.

He remembered seeing it as he had pulled into the drive on Christmas Eve. It stood half a klick to the west of Richards' house, visible over the rooftops. It wasn't there now. He wasn't mistaken; a big, ugly tower like that one wasn't something you

forgot. It wasn't something that blew down in a storm, either. Those towers were made to stand up to tornadoes.

His friend Thomas Richards had gotten married that fall, much to everyone's amusement. They'd been sure old Thomas was going to hang on to bachelorhood longer than anyone. But he hadn't; he'd gotten married, bought a nice house, and settled down in his small hometown in Indiana. Thomas invited his few friends and relatives over for the holidays, friends who didn't have any other family, like Harrison. Richards' wife Judy was – *had been*, he corrected himself – pregnant, and they were celebrating the new-life-to-be.

Harrison got leave at the last minute and flew into Indianapolis. He rented the Jeep for the short drive south to Brownsville. Richards was ecstatic that Harrison was able to make it. It had been years since they had spent any time together. The other members of the old team, Gottlieb and Collins, had arrived the day before. That meant only Delling was missing; he was a Deputy US Marshall, working some case up in Seattle that he couldn't get away from. Delling never had been fond of Christmas anyway.

Richards and Harrison went back further than any of the others. They'd served together in the first Gulf War, 101st Airborne, and then in the 1st Special Forces Operational Detachment. They'd had a party when, against the odds, they had both made it through the selection process. Together they hopped all around the globe, dodging bullets. Richards retired, and Harrison moved on to training counter-terrorist units, but the team kept in touch.

Now Richards and the others were dead.

Someone was going to pay for that.

Someone was going to *die* for that.