

No Man is an island entire of itself,
Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main...

—*John Donne*

Chapter 1

Sometimes something happens that lifts my heart and gives me hope all could still be well. That's what it's like when the plane flies over. I'm on playground duty when I see it glinting in the sunlight and hear the familiar drone. All the children stop what they are doing and turn their faces up to the hot blue sky. The plane slowly descends toward the South Zone, where the airport lies. It's the first in a week, and I feel as thrilled as if rain has fallen. It's a good sign. It means supplies are still getting through. For a little longer, we are safe.

It's so hot again today. I hate to think what it must be like on the other side of the wall. Their power went off two weeks ago. Without electricity, people in the South Zone have no air-conditioning or fans. Even on our side everyone is grumbling about the heat. Roberta thinks we shouldn't have to do playground duty when it's so hot. Better to stay inside and continue classes. But the children don't seem to mind. In spite of the heat they are eager for recess and disappointed when it ends. To see them on the playground, shouting, running, jumping rope, and playing ball, you wouldn't know their world has fallen apart. They might be children anywhere, anytime. Or at least most of them might be. There are always a few hanging back on the fringes, orphans feeling strange in their new surroundings, still mourning the loss of fathers and mothers, like Mary, the little Havasupai girl who stands by the chain-link fence watching the other children but making no effort to join in their games. She has been in my class for one week. We don't know her last name. Her file says she speaks English, but so far she hasn't uttered more than a few words. I don't push her. When she's ready, she'll talk.

As the plane disappears, a scuffle breaks out on the playground between Juan and Eric, two second graders. As soon as I see them, I start running. Juan has his fists raised, ready to fight. Eric is down on his knees, teeth bared, snapping at Juan like a dog. The other children are shouting and screaming. Eric is a biter, and I'm afraid he might sink his teeth into Juan before I can stop him. I charge into the circle of children, grab Juan by the shoulder, and push him behind me. I face Eric, who is still on his knees with his teeth bared. For a horrifying second I realize he could bite me. As easy as that, I could be infected with the virus. But of course he isn't infected. They have all been tested. Yes, they have been tested, says a little voice in my brain, yet you can never be sure who has it. I force myself to reach for him in spite of my fear, to grip his thin shoulder and pull him to his feet. He's one of my students and I'm responsible for him.

"Stop this right now," I tell him. "You know the rules. No fighting on the playground."

He pulls sullenly away from my hand. "He started it."

"I don't care who started it. There's to be no fighting."

He glares at Juan, and Juan glares back at him. Then the bell rings. The other children immediately lose interest in the fight and surge toward the door. Juan and Eric are gone before I can stop them. I glance at the windows of Strickland's office, and sure enough, he's there. I can see the gleam of his glasses. He must have seen the playground fight. Just my luck. He has a knack for being around when anything goes wrong, like a sort of sixth sense. I think he gets some kind of perverse pleasure from catching one of us at a disadvantage. Well, unfortunately for me he has caught me and that gives him an excuse to call me in. I bet that made his day.

Sure enough, I have hardly stepped into the building when Mrs. Stevenson scurries up to say I'm wanted in the office. She gives me a look of sympathy. I don't blame her. It isn't her fault she has to act as his messenger. I like Mrs. Stevenson. She always has a kind word for everybody. I don't know how she can stand working under a tyrant like Strickland. I suppose, like the rest of us, she needs a paycheck and so she puts up with the crap that goes with it.

It's my second time in a week to be summoned to the office. As usual, Strickland is sitting behind his desk and pretends to be so wrapped up in his work that he lets me stand there a few minutes before he deigns to notice me. I glance at the security monitors mounted on the wall facing his desk. They display all of the classrooms, the cafeteria with its long tables, Mrs. Stevenson at her desk in the outer office, the auditorium, the library, the corridor, the sunbaked grounds. Every trip to his office reminds us that he's watching us like Big Brother, waiting for us to make a mistake. His beady eyes behind his glasses remind me of a rattlesnake I saw when I first came to the Southwest seven years ago. The city wasn't yet closed then and my college science class took a hiking trip into the desert. Our guide, a young Navajo, pointed out a rattlesnake coiled and ready to strike. We all looked at it, keeping a safe distance between us and the snake while the guide stood by with a stick. That's what Strickland reminds me of, a rattlesnake sitting behind his desk looking as if he's about to strike. You can almost hear the rattle.

While I wait, he runs one hand over his bald head, as if smoothing the hair that isn't there.

"I saw what happened on the playground," he says, not looking up.

"It won't happen again," I assure him.

"Those were your students, weren't they?"

Yes, they were my students. He knows that.

Now he looks up. "You have to control the children, Miss Davis. You understand that, don't you? That kind of behavior can't be tolerated."

"Children their age sometimes don't stop to think," I tell him, for all the good it will do.

"They must think," he says coldly, beady eyes fixed on me. "We're here to teach them to think." He taps an index finger against his temple. "The survival of the human race may depend on their ability to think. If they fight, someone may bleed. It's a matter of life and death."

"I know that."

I also know it would be pointless to argue with him. Better to say as little as possible and get this interview over with faster. I don't really see how I can stop Juan and Eric from fighting, but I know I'll have to talk to them, especially Eric, who has already bitten one student. If he bites another, Strickland may decide he's too much of a risk, and if he gets expelled, where will he go?

"These are difficult times for us all." Strickland shifts his gaze from me to the windows that look out on the dusty playground. "I've often wondered what it's like, growing up in times like these. It's so different from when I was young."

Different from when any of us were young, I could say but don't.

“Miss Davis, do you have a boyfriend?” he asks abruptly, his eyes swiveling to me again.

I want to tell him it’s none of his business, but of course I can’t, not if I want to keep my job. No, I don’t have a boyfriend.

“It must be hard—a pretty young woman like you.”

I clench my teeth, determined not to let him get to me.

“May I go now?” Without waiting for an answer, I turn and head for the door. A rattlesnake can’t hurt you if you are out of range. That’s what the guide told us that day.

“It’s a shame,” Strickland says behind me. “No one is safe from the virus, not even pretty young women.”

I pretend I haven’t heard and keep going. Someday he’s going to go too far, and I’ll tell him what I think of him, but this isn’t that day. What a jerk! As if I need him to tell me I’m not safe from the virus. No one is safe from the virus. It’s everywhere around us. You can’t watch TV without seeing it in the news, on commercials, in the sit-coms and the dramas. You can’t pick up a newspaper without reading about it. You can’t have a conversation without someone mentioning it. But I’m not going to let him goad me into saying something I’ll regret later. I don’t want to lose my job at the school. My students need me, and I need them. They are my family, the only family I have now. A bully like Strickland is not going to take that away from me.

I have already lost so much. At night I dream about people who are gone. I dream about friends who have died. I dream about my family. In my dreams they are still alive. My dreams are crowded with people, and then I wake to a world which every day seems a little emptier and lonelier.