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Prologue

“Friendship is unnecessary, like philosophy, like art...It has no survival value, rather it is one of those things which give value to survival.”

-C. S. Lewis

March 15, 1 AE (from the journal of Danielle O'Connor)

If someone had told me three months ago that 90 percent of the people in the world were about to die, I would've laughed. If someone had told me the survivors would develop unbelievable Abilities, I would've called them crazy. If someone had told me I'd find love with the least likely person, I would've rolled my eyes. And if someone had told me that, after everything, the people I cared about most would be torn from my grasp, I would've walked away.

I wish I could walk away now.

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Chapter One

Dani

Cringing, I glared at the stinging, red paper cut on the tip of my index finger and muttered, “Damn hand sanitizer.” I’d always been a fan of good old-fashioned soap and water, and I was irked that my dissertation advisor had forced the slimy, astringent goop into my hands when I’d left his office.

Unfortunately, the compulsory germ-killing reminded me of Callie, my pathetically sick roommate. I’d driven her to the campus clinic first thing that morning. She’d been sitting on our couch in pajama bottoms and a purple pea coat, mumbling, “I’m going to the doctor right now...just give me a second...,” and staring at the floor. I’d immediately hustled her out to the car and zipped her to the doctor.

“It’s just a bad case of the flu, I’m sure,” the doctor had claimed, barely perceptible worry tightening her eyes.

Callie’s ashen coloring had been troubling, but not as much as the doctor’s instruction to take her to the hospital if her condition worsened...like the other sick students...dozens of them. I couldn’t believe a flu outbreak was forcing so many healthy people into the hospital. It wasn’t like we lived in a third world country or something.

The handful of students missing from my morning study group only intensified my concern—a handful is a lot when there are only eleven students to begin with. As I cleared the last crosswalk on the way back home, being careful to avoid the puddles left by the morning rain, I wondered if the outbreak would end up being as deadly as the Spanish flu was nearly a century ago.

I shook my head, dispelling my unusually grim thoughts. *It’s just the flu*, I told myself for the hundredth time. *She’ll be fine. They all will.*

As I entered my turn-of-the-century brick apartment building, I distracted myself with thoughts of how incongruous the classy exterior was with the 1980s-remodeled interior. The décor was tragic—pastel and gold foil abstract art hung on the walls, and the carpet was a tacky combination of mauve, coral pink, and faded turquoise...and that was just the beginning. The apartments themselves included worn blue carpet—no doubt covering handsome hardwood—stained linoleum, and appliances with chipped plastic. *Such a waste...this place could be exquisite. But, at least the rent’s low...*

I walked to my ground floor apartment, unlocked the door, and shifted my computer bag to brace myself for the impending “happy Jack attack.” Except when I opened the door, it didn’t come.

“Jack?” I called out, curious.

Following his whimpered response, I found the 120-pound, adolescent German Shepherd staring forlornly at Callie’s closed bedroom door.

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“Hey, Sweet Boy,” I said, crouching down to scratch his shoulders and to let him sniffle my neck. “She probably just wants to sleep. Want a *treat*?”

Jack wagged his way into the kitchen while I quickly peeked into my roommate’s bedroom. Inside, Callie snored softly as she slept. *She’s fine.*

After rewarding Jack’s amazing abilities to sit (“sit”), shake hands (“nice to meet you”), and play dead (“bang”), I plopped down on my bed and opened my laptop. Jack hopped up and settled in next to me, causing a bed-quake.

Cam, my adorable boyfriend, wouldn’t get home from work for another half hour. Rubbing Jack’s velvety ear, I decided to write a nice long email to my best friend, Zoe—she had neither answered when I’d called during my walk home nor responded to my texts. The woman worked like crazy, and we hadn’t chatted in days. Besides, writing to her would kill time *and* help me avoid doing anything productive on my birthday. *Genius.*

Date: December 4, 4:30 PM

From: Danielle O’Connor

To: Zoe Cartwright

Subject: Birthday Heresy

Zo! I can’t believe we’re apart on a birthday. It’s practically heretical! Thank you SO much for the amazing drawing...it’s totally perfect. I can’t believe how many details you remembered from that night. Cam was super impressed too.

Anyway, how was your date with Mr. 58 (or was it Mr. 85)? You promised to give me juicy details, but alas, I’ve heard nothing from my wayward Zo. It was the blond guy, right? Or was that the last one? Gab...I can’t keep up. Give me an ooey-gooney, nitty-gritty description of EVERYTHING. Please.

On a totally different note, the flu is getting pretty bad over here. Is it bad in Salem too? This morning I took Callie to the doctor, and Zo, I’m really worried about her. She’s so pale and weak. Actually, she looks just like you did when you had that H1N1 virus a few years ago. Cam’s been making soup for her...he’s so sweet. Besides, his cooking is a gazillion times better than whatever I’d conjure up. My food might make her feel worse...

So...I’m sure you want to know about tonight’s birthday plans. Cam (sigh, drool) is taking me to his restaurant and then to that Irish pub—you know, the one where you had too many Long Islands and danced on the table... Anyway, Cam said he invited “everyone we know” to the pub. But, considering that over half of Seattle seems to be sick, I’m guessing less than a dozen people will show. Whatever...I’m just excited to get out and have some fun.

Oh...gotta go...Cam just got home and is harping on me to get changed for dinner. I guess soggy jeans aren’t classy enough. I’ll give you a recap tomorrow, assuming I’m not too hungover to open my eyes.

Dani

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We'd been at the pub for several hours when Jamie's pink, designer stiletto jabbed my shin. "Did you hear about that student who *died* today?" she asked.

My food and alcohol-induced semi coma receded momentarily, allowing me to process her eager words. Always the drama queen, that Jamie. She never knew when to keep her mouth shut, so we constantly butted heads.

Sighing, I grumbled, "What are you talking about?"

"Ohhhh...so you *don't* know." Jamie's eyes narrowed with vindictive pleasure.

Not for the first time that night, I mentally cursed Cam for inviting her. "Evidently not," I replied dryly.

"Yeah." Her chest heaved with delight as she explained, "some undergrad died of the *flu*. You know, the one that *everyone* has right now. You do at least know about *that*, right? So now people are dying from it. Doesn't Callie have it too?"

Hateful bitch, I thought viciously. I'd never really liked Jamie, and my concern about Callie clouded my judgment, along with the three vodka tonics and the glass of Champagne. "You're a hateful bitch," I retorted.

The statement earned shocked stares from several of the young Seattleites sitting around the corner booth, including Cam. But I wasn't done. For days I'd been worrying about Callie, and stupid Jamie had just implied the worst. *She'll be okay. It's just the flu.*

With a sickly sweet smile I cooed, "Callie's doing much better, thanks for asking. But *you*, Jamie...you're looking quite pale. Are *you* sick? Or, have you just had too much to drink? You *do* at least know about your reputation as a lush, right?"

A growing silence encompassed our table. As I opened my mouth to continue, Cam interceded. "Let's get a drink, D," he said through gritted teeth.

I was quickly ushered out of the booth by his firm grasp. His unusual forcefulness was more than a small turn-on, and suddenly, I was really looking forward to returning home with him.

By the time Cam and I left the pub, the confrontation with Jamie was nearly forgotten. We entered our apartment, eager to reach our bedroom, and noticed that Callie's bathroom light was on. When I went to turn it off, much to my shock, I found my roommate curled up on the linoleum floor. The air was thick with the rank smell of vomit. *Oh my God...*

I fell to my knees beside Callie and turned her onto her back. She was burning hot and coated in sweat. Jack, curled up next to her, kept nuzzling her cheek and watching her face for a response. There was none.

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While we'd been out eating, drinking, and being generally merry, Callie had vomited what looked like all of her insides into the toilet. I stared at my friend's non-responsive form, unable to move for several long seconds. And then I started panicking.

"Callie! Callie, wake up!" I implored, nudging her gently. She didn't respond. I shook her harder, watching her sway like a rag doll. She looked so pale, so young. "Cam! We have to take her to the hospital!" I screamed.

When I looked behind me for Cam's unfailing support, I found him on the phone. He was repeating our address. *Ob...9-1-1...I should've thought of that.*

"Thanks," he said, ending the call. "They'll be here in fifteen or twenty minutes," he told me.

"But, she's....," I began but didn't know how to finish. *Sick? Comatose? Dying?*

"I know, D, but they said it's an unusually busy night," Cam told me, filling two glasses with water from the kitchen tap. "They'll get here as fast as they can."

When the paramedics finally arrived, Cam had to pry me from my prostrate position beside my unconscious friend to give the emergency crew enough room to help her. We followed the ambulance to the hospital and watched as Callie was rushed through the emergency room and into a restricted area. *FAMILY ONLY*, read the sign taped to the door. All we could do was sit...wait.

As I looked around, my mind returned to a mostly-sober state. I wasn't in an emergency room waiting area but a stifling, body-packed cage. People crowded in on all sides, milling, mumbling, mourning. They all looked sick. Hundreds of them. *Shouldn't the hospital be taking care of these people? What if they infect me? Infect us?*

Cam was sitting beside me, holding my hand. He looked just as ill as everyone else in the crowded room. *What if he is sick? Like Callie...oh God...like the guy who died...*

The air grew perceptibly hotter and viscous. Clammy chills consumed my body. *Stay calm...stay calm...stay calm...*

Hours passed, and then I saw her. I recognized the silky blonde hair and pink stilettos. Jamie. *You're a hateful bitch*, my words replayed in my head.

I watched as they wheeled her through the stuffy room, unconscious. Just like Callie. I'd been honest in my earlier assessment of her; she really had looked ill. *You're a hateful bitch.*

Jamie disappeared through the same metal doors as Callie had. *FAMILY ONLY*. Medical staff and unconscious patients were the only people who'd passed through them. So far, only the medical staff had returned.

Desperately, I looked at Cam, hoping he could somehow give me the air my lungs couldn't seem to capture. But he appeared ready to pass out, completely unaware of my emotional flailing.

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Zoe, I thought, I need you!

2 SENT TEXT MESSAGES:

TO: Zo

Callie's in the ER. She's in a coma. Cam and I came in with her a little after 2AM. Been here for hours, but the docs still haven't told us anything. Wish you were here.

December 5, 6:00 AM

TO: Zo

BTW, I'll call Grams in a bit to check on everyone back home. How are YOU feeling? Me? I'm freaking out...

December 5, 6:04 AM

[Type text]

Chapter Two

Zoe

Rushing into the small, outdated bungalow, I threw my messenger bag on the russet suede couch with excessive force. I was instantly irritated that Sarah, my roommate's closest friend, was there...again. Eating *my* food. *Why am I not charging her rent?*

"Where's Jordan?" I snipped, unwinding my black cashmere scarf and charcoal knee-length pea coat, and tossing them over the back of the couch.

"She's in the shower. You hungry?" The curly-haired freeloader twirled noodles on her fork, utterly oblivious to my annoyance.

I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself before speaking. "Thanks, but I'm rushing off to the bar for my night shift." I eyed the plate of spaghetti in front of her. "Someone's gotta buy the food around here," I added.

Hurrying down the hallway to my bedroom, I slammed the door behind me. I barely had time to remove my sweater before my cell phone vibrated in my pocket. Sighing, I answered, "Hey Dad."

"Hi honey, how are you?" He muffled a cough on the other end of the line.

"Getting ready for work. Other than that, I'm fine." I unzipped my knee-high, black calfskin boots and flung them into the corner. The brisk air was a reprieve, cooling my legs, which had been fermenting in their leather confines.

"I thought you just got *off* work?"

"Yeah, well, I'm *always* working. That's the joy of having two jobs."

"Oh yeah. I forgot." He cleared his throat.

"How could you forget? I've been working at the gallery *and* Earl's for like...ever."

"Well, that's the joy of getting old," he teased, but he sounded exhausted.

"You sound horrible, Dad." I pulled off my brown pencil skirt and laid it across the bed.

"Gee, thanks. You sure know how to make your old man feel good," he bantered.

"Yeah, well, someone's gotta worry about you." Trying to lighten the conversation, I asked, "What kind of mischief have you gotten into lately, anyway? I haven't talked to you in a while, so don't tell me 'nothing,' 'cause we both know *that's* not true."

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He chuckled and sighed, “Nothing, I promise... Well, there was—”

I laughed, interrupting his admission with feigned exasperation. “I knew it! What’d you do now, Dad?”

“I *tried* to re-landscape the backyard—” He was cut short by a coughing fit.

I grimaced. “Are you sure you’re okay? You really *do* sound bad.” I grabbed some jeans out of the closet and shook them out.

His cough persisted, and I grew increasingly worried. “Dad...”

“I’m fine. It’s just a lingering cold. Charlene’s sick too. I probably caught it from her when I was helping weatherproof her windows last week.”

I was immediately sidetracked by the knowledge that he was spending time with his beautiful, *single* neighbor. I wished, more than believed, he might be coming out of his shell. My dad hadn’t dated much since my mom’s death. According to my older brother, my dad had never really been the same in general. However, his scatterbrained lack of focus was all I’d ever known, and even at the age of fifty-seven, he still needed me to look out for him.

“At Charlene’s, huh? How...interesting.”

“Oh, stop it. You know we’re just friends.” Joking aside, his voice was agitated, as it normally was when I tried to encourage him to date.

“She’s been after you for how many years now? I think it’s time you gave her a break, Pops,” I said, switching to speakerphone and tossing my cell onto the bed.

“I was just helping her out.”

“Oh, trust me, *I know*.” I hopped around, tugging on my faded jeans and almost falling over.

“Knock it off, Zoe.” His fatherly voice always emerged when I goaded him in the areas of love and affection.

“You’re right. She wouldn’t know what to do with herself. Probably not a good idea,” I said bitterly. He continued scolding me, and I tuned him out as I pulled a green Earl’s t-shirt over my head and gazed into the mirror.

Envisioning my usual gallery attire paired with the conservative hairstyle I still wore, I wasn’t surprised I was habitually single. *I look like an uptight school marm*, I observed regretfully.

Pulling my dark hair from its bun, I watched it cascade past my shoulders and settle just above my waist, uncreased despite the twisted knot it had been in all day. I tried to imagine what I

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would look like with Dani's wild curls and rolled my eyes. Wondering was pointless. My hair was boring and straight, but at least it contrasted nicely with my light skin and blue-green eyes.

My dad had blue eyes, but not quite the same color as mine. They were paler, and his hair was so much lighter. *I must look more like Mom...*

"Zo? You still there?"

"Yeah, I'm here."

"Anyway, it's nothing," my dad said.

"It's been over twenty years, Dad. Are you gonna be alone the rest of your life?"

His voice softened the way it always did when he was attempting to reassure me. "Don't worry about me, hon. I've got you kids." He cleared his throat. I couldn't help but scoff at the idea of having us "kids" as suitable companions. He and Jason were still trying to rebuild their relationship, and I was on the other side of the country.

"Speaking of you kids..." My dad's voice brightened. "Jason called me yesterday. He's doing well and likes Washington more than Colorado. Said he's moving up in rank real quick." He paused for a second, and when I didn't say anything, he continued, "Eleven years as a Green Beret and he's finally getting where he wants to be."

"I didn't know he'd left Colorado," I said quietly. I couldn't believe my brother hadn't told me he was being reassigned...or whatever.

"Oh...I'm sure he's been busy and doesn't have much time to talk. He probably assumed I'd fill you in." My dad prattled on, but I was more focused on the realization that Jason and I had drifted even further apart.

Sarah's sudden coughing fit in the living room pulled me from my thoughts. Upon hearing one gag after another, I promised myself I'd make time to get a flu shot soon.

1 SENT TEXT MESSAGE:

TO: D

Tried calling you, but got your voicemail. Is Callie doing better? Dad's sick too. Can you ask Grams to check on him? I'll call you after work.

December 5, 5:15 PM

Date: December 5, 2:24 AM

From: Zoe Cartwright

[Type text]

To: Danielle O'Connor

Subject: :(

D,

I tried calling you again, but you're probably asleep. I hope Callie's doing better. I'm sorry it took so long to get back to you. I've been super busy covering shifts at the gallery AND at Earl's. I hadn't realized how many people were sick until last night...one of my co-workers died. Can you believe it?! Maxine was so healthy and young...it's all so scary. It feels like I was just joking around with her yesterday, and now she's gone.

Speaking of gone, you should probably know Jason's apparently stationed over in Washington now. Of course, he didn't tell me himself; I had to find out from my dad. I bet Jason doesn't even know you're in Seattle.

Oh, and of course...HAPPY BELATED BIRTHDAY! Did you even get to celebrate? Sorry I couldn't be there, but we'll make up for it when we see each other for Christmas. I promise. I'm gonna get some sleep before I have to wake up and head to the gallery...again. Happy late 26th!

Hasta la vista,

Zo

After putting it off for a day and getting no sleep thanks to Jordan's fitful night of coughing and vomiting, I finally took the time to go to the doctor for a flu shot.

Walking into the clinic, I felt like I was entering a prison. The walls were white and sterile, and fluorescent lighting illuminated the bland space. Glass barriers separated the sick from the healthy. Patients stood in zigzagged lines throughout the waiting room like inmates, their medical paperwork in hand instead of eating trays and handcuffs.

Near the door, a security guard handed out surgical masks. Eyeing the mass of people, I groaned and grabbed a mask before getting in line. My attention was immediately captured by the two women in front of me; they were talking about the Center for Disease Control.

"Well last night the CDC *finally* addressed the issue nationally," said the red-haired woman. She clearly thought their involvement was overdue.

"It's about time." Her brunette friend sounded relieved.

"They aren't even sure if the vaccine works yet. The Virus is spreading so quickly...it's like they can't keep up with it."

"I heard they think it's airborne—not that it's surprising."

The redhead nodded. "I know. And they want us all to stay indoors. Real practical." Her face soured in disgust as she surveyed the crowded room.

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I followed her eyes, taking in the number of people with pallid skin and runny noses. My skin crawled as I thought about the orgy of germs I'd walked into. The idea of being in a room swarming with the ill, breathing the same recycled air as the rest of the throng, made my stomach curdle. *Great.*

Just as I was debating the quickest exit out to the open air, a platinum blonde shuffled through the door. Her skin was unnaturally tanned, her face caked with makeup, and she had bubblegum-pink fingernails. Taking a second look, I noticed the heavy make-up was a desperate attempt to cover the cold sores around her mouth and the dark half-moons under her eyes.

Blondie stopped dead in her tracks. She took one look at the line drawn out before her and started complaining. "This is ridiculous," she spat and marched her way to the front of the line.

"Hey! You have to wait in line like the rest of us!" a waiting patient called out.

"Miss, you need to get to the back of the line. There's no cutting." My eyes zeroed in on the guard touching the girl's shoulder. *Shouldn't he be wearing gloves or something?*

His eyes widened as he listened to an announcement in his ear piece, then he started speaking again. "If you've had H1N1 before, form a line over here please!" He pointed to the far left wall. "If you're showing any flu symptoms, please stay in the original line."

I found myself smiling at his words. *Thank God, I thought as I moved to the shorter line. Maybe I'll get to work on time after all.*

"Oh, that's me," Blondie simpered and smiled at the guard. He eyed her closely as she hurried to my line. The exertion proved too strenuous, and she began wheezing almost immediately.

My phone vibrated, distracting me from the commotion. It was Sarah.

"Hello?"

"Where are you?" she whimpered.

"At the clinic attempting to get a flu shot. Why?" I waited for a moment. The phone was silent, and then I realized Sarah was crying. "What happened?" My heart was racing, and I tasted blood on my tongue as I chewed the inside of my cheek.

"Jordan's dead," she sobbed. "I didn't know if you knew."

I didn't know...I hadn't even realized she was so sick. I'd never been close with Jordan. We'd worked together at Earl's and had been roommates for two years, but we'd always been too different to be good friends.

"Did you hear me, Zoe? It's so loud there—"

[Type text]

“Yeah, I heard you.” I stared blankly at the floor. “Where are you?”

“I’m at your house. I took Jordan’s key. Is that okay?” she asked timidly and sneezed into the phone. The question was trivial, but it was sweet that she’d asked all the same.

“Zoe Cartwright?” called a nurse.

When I didn’t respond to Sarah’s question, she choked out, “Zoe? I’ll leave if you want me to.”

“No, no, it’s fine. I’ll be home soon.”

I hung up and followed the nurse into the doctor’s office. I had to wipe away a stray tear as I remembered the time one of the many douchebags I’d dated left me stranded at some dive bar at two o’clock in the morning. Jordan had come to my rescue, and we’d grabbed a late night coffee before heading home.

1 SENT TEXT MESSAGE:

TO: D

Jordan’s dead...

Date: December 6, 8:45 PM