

CHAPTER ONE

It's been a long time since it all began. It started slow, a few people sick with some unknown disease back in China. The news would show the citizens there walking around in their makeshift or painters masks. You felt for them, but we couldn't help breathing a sigh of relief that it was them and not us.

Eventually, as the illness spread ripping through their country, governments all over the globe began taking action in an effort to keep it from their borders. Here at home the effort was small at first. It was only recommended that if you were experiencing any ill symptoms you wore a mask.

Signs at stores and clinics began popping up asking about travel history that nobody paid any attention to. Eventually screening at the borders and airports came in. The news only reported a few potential cases that never panned into anything, so you felt pretty safe; but we weren't safe. As cases began popping up in Europe, Australia, and a few in the U.S it became clear that whatever it was had broken free.

Eventually, it was announced that there would be no more travel in or out of the country. Planes just stopped flying. If you were here and you wanted to go home it wasn't going to happen anytime soon. If you were out there and you wanted to come home it wasn't going to happen for you either. Everyone was just plain stuck where they were, so we thought, but people are rarely ever stuck. When we want something badly enough we figure out a way to get it. People began boating, swimming, driving, running, whatever it took.

The people that smuggled themselves out or those that smuggled themselves in didn't have to make their destination in order to spread the virus. When the first case showed up in Canada that's when it seemed real for us. That's when we really started talking about it. It wasn't "*Oh those unfortunate people in China*", or "*Oh that poor child that lost her mother and father in Europe*" we heard about on the news anymore. Now it was "What the hell are they going to do to keep us safe?"

Suddenly it was a whole new kind of real, and we were scared. People began buying extra food, can goods, toiletries, batteries became near impossible to find; but even through our fear we believed they would somehow stop this. We began convincing ourselves that the prepping wasn't necessary. It was just a silly precaution. You did it only on the *off* chance that things didn't get better. Like most things in life that turn bad they usually get worse before they improve, so we knew it would, and we braced for it. I mean when does something bad not turn around to something good again? It always gets better... Right? It was coming for us, we were just too stupid to believe it.

I'm trying to recall that first sign. You know, the one where you say there it is. That's the one. That's the thing telling us something is off here. The one that says everything is going to be different from here on, but I can't think of what it

was; what it could have been. The world was always changing, and changing fast. We just missed it I guess. It could have been any number of things. Like maybe the inoculation for the flu, or maybe the H1N1. Maybe the bird flu started it all, or mad cow, or something in the making way back to the black plague. Who knows, it could have just been something in the air, or a simple bug bite that changed everything.

I will tell you one thing for sure though. The T.V. ...The movies...they don't tell it like it really is. The way they glorify the world ending or something so dramatic happening that it changes the world in a way we no longer recognize it. Oh no. It is far different in real life.

When the illness started popping up the top dogs in healthcare joined forces in an effort to learn what we were facing, and how to eradicate it. The illness was like... like Ebola meets rabies only on crack. You start off with a fever, nausea. Eventually you start hemorrhaging out your eyes, your nose. You can see the blood oozing through the surface of your skin.

For some they are fortunate to not live past this stage, but for most the fever breaks, the hemorrhaging ends and the patient is alert and well again. Initially we thought that was it, they made it through as we watched this on the news in other parts of the world. We thought "*huh...that's not so bad; low death rate...Not such a big deal*" but nope. We eventually learned that that was just the second phase of the virus.

Turned out there was a third and final phase. The phase they tried to hide from us at first - what we now call the '*dead phase*'. The patient begins to hallucinate. They become agitated, confused and hyperactive. Now take all that and add sleep deprived. Yep, to make things that much prettier, they can't sleep. A normal person gets cranky when they don't sleep. These people, well...you have never seen pissed off before them.

The health officials in the very beginning referred to it simply as the Rabid Virus. We knew it wasn't that simple, but no big deal we thought. The infected will get shots. If it was too late for them it would be unfortunate but the rest of us will get inoculated, and this will all be over, but that didn't happen.

Eventually they changed its name saying that it wasn't rabies related, calling it something no one could pronounce. The name didn't matter though. What mattered was how to avoid catching it. Turned out it had to do with the saliva. Who cared if they sneezed? Inhale it all you want. It needed to get through the skin and into the bloodstream, and sadly they bite, and they won't stop. If you got bit you got this kind of rabies infection if you weren't fortunate enough to die. If bitten, with your heart pumping rapidly from your panic the virus is circulated through your body landing in every organ. It multiplies so rapidly that it only takes hours to start showing outward symptoms.

In the very beginning the news about the growth of the disease was buried in with the weather and sports. Eventually it became a bigger portion of the news beating out who made what play off or the hurricane building along some coast. It flowed night after night. It crept into the afternoon news, and it was

even the cause for some emergency broadcasts. Of course they hid from us what they didn't want us to know. You know the part that said we were doomed. Instead they gave us news that offered fictitious hope, promising they were closer to a vaccine. They told us that for some the body fought back developing a hyper coagulation condition. They said it was a physiological adaptive mechanism that took place. They said those individuals were receiving coagulation therapy and were doing fine. They even tried to tell us that the number of infected had been on the decline. All of that might have flown if we didn't see their eyes on the big screen. Eyes can't lie.

As people figured out they were only telling us what we wanted to hear, the looting began. I expected, as many of us did, to find military making their way into our streets declaring martial law, but it never came.

My Dad and Brad took it very seriously from the start. They began loading our garages with gasoline and food. I am sure Dad was the one personally responsible for the battery shortage. We had more flashlights and wind up radios than anyone would ever need, or be able to carry if it came down to lights out, but I knew when they started buying guns and ammo off the street that it was getting beyond serious. Still, I have to admit a part of me thought they were going a little overboard. At least I'd hoped they were.

They started prepping the house putting boards by the windows ready to be hammered up to keep people out. They had us fill pillowcases with sand, stacking them at the base of the stairs in our home so if the front door flew open we had something to hide behind, on what I figured would be an off chance that they would be armed and shooting.

Dad started filling every bottle he could get his hands on with water, loading them into the van, on the trailer parked in our garage, and in our pre-packed bags of personal necessities. Those necessities were mainly packages of dried food. We had two shirts, three pairs of underwear, three pairs of socks, a bottle of tablets to purify any water, and one thin jacket he bought at a Mountain Co-op that promised to be light, waterproof and warm. He bought us each one when he loaded up on that dried airtight food that hikers and mountain climbers take with them. I remember rolling my eyes at the thought of eating one, not to mention how ridiculous I thought he was being. I even went so far as to tell him that I thought he was being melodramatic, but the day came when I ate my words as I sat starving, grateful to have one of those packages to eat.

CHAPTER TWO

One of the last moments before the news began to flow I was outside in my backyard. It was morning, I was eighteen, and my biggest dilemma in life was what university I was going to attend in the fall.

I woke to birds chirping outside my window. In the winter the birds were quiet, but in the spring their singing was new again, easily stirring me from my slumber. It was a sound I loved most days and cursed on others. Today, the sun shining I could feel spring making them a welcomed sound.

Rising, I slid on a pair of gray track pants, black tank top and a long sleeve purple plaid shirt I didn't bother to button up. Sliding my feet into a pair of fluffy boot slippers I pulled my long dark hair into a messy ponytail as I exited my room.

The house was bright as mom had opened every curtain we had in the house. She loved the natural light pouring in. I often gave her a hard time about it being too bright, but truth was I enjoyed it; It made me feel alive... energized.

Except for the birds, the house was quiet.

I made my way to the kitchen pouring a mug of coffee mom or Dad had brewed. Wrapping my fingers through the handle, and as far around the warm mug as they would go I picked it up heading for our living room toward the patio door.

Leaving the kitchen I started to walk the off white carpet of the large family room feeling guilty for leaving footprints in its freshly vacuumed tracks.

"Mom has been busy this morning," I thought scanning the room, noting the blanket on the cream-colored sectional was folded. The wood coffee table that mom and I had left cluttered, too exhausted to clean at the end of our movie night was now spotless, and every shelf and glass surface was reflecting the sun from the dusting she had done.

Standing at the edge of the off white carpet I peered through the patio door to the garden outside spying my mom on her knees. Her long dark hair hung loosely under her round floppy white hat hiding her face. Her long pale linen dress was tucked under her knees. She was working on some weeds with the trays of geraniums beside her that she bought the previous day from Home Depot, a large store for all your building and renovation needs.

When I was little it only took up a small piece of the yard allowing me plenty of room to play. As I grew, so did her garden. Year after year she added another flower bed. As each spring approached she started prepping me for the new addition. If you are a glass half full kind of person you could say she was prepping me for the space I was losing. She would say it like it was something I should get excited about. I remember the first time. We stood at the patio door

looking outside. I was five, the snow was almost gone, the sun was bright, and through the glass you could feel its heat. She looked down at me with a gasp like something amazing had just occurred to her.

"You know..." she excitedly exclaimed. Realizing the startle she gave me she slouched deflated "Sorry beautiful. I didn't mean to scare you." then her smile returned "I just got so excited with this great idea I just had."

Her enthusiasm was contagious. I had no idea what I was excited about, but I was. "What mommy? What is the great idea?" I asked practically bouncing.

"Well...since you don't require *quite* as much space this year, I was thinking it would be so nice to add a flower bed along the patio." she said with the biggest smile.

She was truly fired up at the thought.

"It would give the patio some added color and comfort when we curl up in the chairs to read, or when we entertain. Not to mention the smell," she said, closing her eyes, taking a deep breath in through her nose.

It looked to me like she could really smell them. I couldn't help but follow suit taking a deep breath through my nose. When I couldn't smell them my excitement started to dwindle. I looked out at the yard, visions of me and my friends playing ball and mom sweetly yelling twice as often as she already did out the patio door at us.

"Watch you don't let the ball go in the gardens rodent! You'll wreck our pretty flowers."

Yes you heard right...she called me rodent. She had sweet nicknames for me too, but rodent was the main one. I didn't love it, but I didn't hate it either. It added character and I think it helped develop my sense of humor.

Anyway, my vision came true. She did yell that out to us like it was my garden too. I resented them a little more each year. At least until I got big enough that I could freely run the neighborhood. Then I just didn't care where she put them. Now I love to watch her work in her garden. It seems to give her added peace.

With my warm mug wrapped in my hands I smiled to myself as I stared out to her through the patio screen listening to her hum while she worked.

Sliding the door open I was greeted by a gentle spring breeze. The warmth of the sun on my face it invited me outside.

"Hey mom"

"Morning rodent." she said smiling up at me before turning her attention back to the weeds "How did you sleep?"

"Good" I shrugged, placing my mug on the long glass table.

I reached over to adjust the big black umbrella to shade my seat. Falling into the red cushioned patio chair I lifted my feet out into the sun resting them on the cushioned seat across from me. I loved the gardens, and appreciated the time and energy she put into them. I remember sitting in that comfy patio seat watching her, taking in all the beautiful flowers and plants around me as I drank my coffee.

Needing a little noise I looked to the battery operated radio that sat in off position in the middle of the table. Flicking it on I played with the dials and the antenna. Landing on a station I liked, I tinkered a little longer until I was content with the reception before I made my way to kneel beside her. Picking up a small garden shovel I silently counted the seconds.

"So have you given it any more thought?" she asked, leaning forward digging a hole for a flower she held in her gloved hand.

"*Wow, 30 whole seconds*" I thought, tilting my head to look at her while trying to hide my smirk.

I knew she tried incredibly hard to act like the idea of my moving out didn't bother her, but we couldn't be in the same room without her finding a way to wiggle the question in, or just directly asking me.

See, I had been accepted to two universities. One was Carleton University right there in town. Meaning I would be home a little longer. The other was Queen's University in Kingston - An easy commute home on weekends, but too far to commute to and from school from home. Meant I was moving out. I knew in the fall I would be attending one of them. Up until that very moment kneeling beside her I hadn't made up my mind.

"Yes mom." I said digging my hole a little deeper as I glanced at her through the strands of hair that fell over my eyes.

Without looking at me she placed the flower in the dirt "Oh?" she said.

She tried to act natural, like it was not a big deal, but I could see her bracing herself for the worst.

I turned my attention back to the hole I was digging in the loose soil grinning "I've decided that Kingston is a great school."

"It is." she said, her voice cracking just slightly.

"But the program at Carleton is good too."

"True." I saw her nod as she buried the flower's roots.

"If I go there" I said still grinning as I shifted my eyes to her "I get to see my friends all the time."

Before I knew it I was flat on my back, mom landing a countless amount of kisses to my face.

"So I was thinking Kingston is much better for me."

"Oh shut up." she laughed, tickling me.

Squirming to get away from her tickling fingers and through my belly giggles I couldn't control the volume of my voice as I choked out "I was just thinking less distraction is better."

We interrupt this broadcast to bring you breaking news...A new flu strain is causing widespread panic in China...

Mom's tickling stilled and my giggling fell silent...

Mom pushed herself off of me causing me to grunt at her weight. Shushing me with a wave she moved closer to the radio.

I rolled my eyes at being hushed as I got up and moved to join her at the table; both of us falling into cushioned chairs resting our elbows on the table to

listen.

Public Health in China reported early this morning that four patients have died in hospital with severe flu-like symptoms in the last week, while approximately one hundred more have presented with similar symptoms.

A blurb from an earlier interview came through and a man with a very thick Asian accent spoke.

As we know the flu virus can change each year. That's why we get the flu shot. For those that are old or those that are very young it can be very dangerous; even life threatening. This strain is nothing like we have ever seen and the symptoms so severe we have decided to quarantine all ninety seven patients. We have also asked citizens here to keep their distance from each other to help stop the spread.

I hadn't asked where Dad was, so I have no idea where it was he was returning from.

"Oh...you heard, did you?" he said, stepping out onto the patio.

"Shush!" Mom and I said waving at him to be quiet as the reporter spoke again.

Health Officials say there isn't reason at this time to believe it will spread beyond their borders, but are warning all citizens to get their flu vaccine. Though they don't recommend traveling to China at this time they ask all vacationers that plan to go to be cautious...

Mom reached out, flicking the radio off "Poor souls." she breathed as a monarch butterfly landed on my perched hand.

I slouched back in my seat propping my feet up on the chair my mother had just vacated. As she turned lifting herself up onto her tiptoes to kiss my father good morning I stared at the butterfly. It appeared to be watching me as I watched it. Slowly twisting my hand at eye level I looked at it, seeing its beauty from every possible angle. It appeared so fragile I couldn't help but wonder how it survived the elements.

"*You are beautiful and fearless*" I silently told it as it fluttered its delicate wings without taking flight. "*I could crush you*" but it clearly didn't believe I would.

Moments later it took flight around the yard. I watched as it fluttered where it wanted to. It flew into the shrubs, around the gardens and up over the fence only to come right back. I found myself envious of its freedom. Free to fly where it wanted; free from daily grind, the repetition, the dreaded routine. I couldn't help but wish for that kind of liberty.

CHAPTER THREE

Here I sit in a black high back desk chair in front of an antique typewriter, since gone are the days of powered word processors and Internet. A candle flickers in the darkness to light the mahogany desk I am pulled up to. I can only assume the battered state of the desk is from the days of looting and ransacking. A battery operated two way radio hisses on and off beside me as I listen for any trace of people trying to reach out to anyone that may be paying attention.

In our travels I came across a very large stack of paper that I insisted on loading up and bring back with us. I must have one hundred packs stacked on the floor beside me. In order to put the paper to good use I added a typewriter to my list of things to find. I have to say that I was shocked at how quickly Mr. Clay found one. I actually thought it was an impossible task...But here I am.

I am trying to document the journey I took to get to where I am; the journey we all took to get to where we are. I know I will never fill every page piled on the floor, so instead I opened my home to anyone that wanted to write about something...anything. With no television to watch or mobile phone to play on keeping people busy this typewriter has become a source of entertainment for some. I often wake or fall asleep to the ticking sounds of the letters hitting the platen.

As much as we managed to put a grain of sand, if looking at the globe as a whole back to some semblance of what it once was before the virus, I still find myself in need of a stroll down memory lane every now and then. I want to go back to the beginning. You know? Start all over again. I want to pretend none of this happened and everything is how it was many moons ago. I want to go back to being in love, where my biggest disappointment was not being able to see my boyfriend on Friday night. I want to go back to the days of rolling my eyes at some ridiculous thing my folks found hilarious; the days when I didn't realize how much I appreciated and needed them.

The story goes when mom was pregnant with me, Dad wished for a son. He told me when he was blessed with a daughter he refused to sit idly by while my mom raised a prissy little girl. He said he was going to have his son regardless of the gender I was born as...And he did. He insisted I be enrolled in kick-boxing and football. I wasn't very good at either, but there was some really great bonding to be had for us in those two sports. Mom on the other hand insisted that I at least be allowed to entertain the fact that I was a girl, introducing me to glitter, nail painting and shopping.

Dad was never excited when I showed him my messy painted nails or batted my blue eye shadowed eyes, and mom was as equally uninterested when

I came home boasting over-zealously about a touchdown at a football game I had just had. Thinking about it, between being called rodent, and the lack of enthusiasm they had about things that worked me into a hyper frenzy, it's amazing how they still managed to make me feel so loved.

They truly were a confusing pair. They both wanted so much of my time. They were forever in my business, always telling me how much they loved me, how beautiful I was, and how proud of me they were. Yet, I couldn't get mom on board with anything Dad and I loved, and I couldn't get Dad on board with anything mom and I loved. I guess that kind of made the things we did *ours*. And when something is just for you and the one you share it with, it is just that much more special.

Anyway, together they decided on calling me Holly, and get this, our last name is Wood. They said since their favorite vacation was in Hollywood, and that is where I was conceived, it was perfect. I personally don't believe they ever went to Hollywood. There wasn't a shred of proof of that vacation anywhere. I think that story was a cover. They just didn't want to tell me that they thought it would be downright hilarious to call me that. I am pretty sure in their twisted minds it was a joke that they thought was just too funny not to do; Even if it was at the expense of their beloved daughter.

Holly Wood didn't open the door to teasing like the name Anna. *Anna...Anna Banana...* It didn't open the door to teasing like the poor child named Ronald when they're last name is McDonald. In my head I can hear the kids tormenting that child right now... There was a kid I knew James, his last name was Bond. Right now all I hear is *Bond...James Bond...* Not as amusing as Ronald McDonald, but you get the point.

Whenever I told someone my name they would look at me in that tone that said, *I want to laugh, but I am going to make sure you aren't pulling my leg first.*

I would press my lips and nod, shoulders and all as I rolled my eyes "*Yep. Holly Wood.*" and they would roar in laughter. On a rare occasion I received that look of empathy instead of laughter saying something along the lines of "*Awe...man...your parents are just mean...*"

As a kid I didn't get the hilarity, but as an adult I realized that even though the name really wasn't all that funny, it showed the twisted sense of humor my folks had. A sense of humor they passed down to me.

I had such a great bond with both my folks. With mom the bond was gardening, fashion and all that glittered. We talked boys, trashed fake two faced girly girls. Something I learned early in life was girlfriends were overrated. They weren't loyal. They had no problem talking you up to your face and trashing you behind your back. Girlfriends were more along the lines of a *keep your friends close and your enemies' closer* kind of thing.

Like any rule there is always the exception, and my mother was that exception. She was more than just my mom, she was my friend. She told it as it was. She offered advice when I needed it. Sometimes the girlfriend in her would sit off to the side while my mother would talk, but more often than not mom sat

off to the side while the friend in her offered unbiased advice. She had no problem telling me how unfair I was to my boyfriend, or if my butt was getting a little wider. We could fight like sisters sometimes, but more than anything she was my best friend.

With Dad the bond was father and son like. We talked sports, we went to games, and we did renovations on the house together. The picture I am painting you might think I am quite the tomboy, but I'm not. I am very much a girl, and Dad, he never did forget that. If he saw that I was sad about something he got me to open up. He didn't shut down the boy problems either. In fact he would give me the male perspective, almost always being fair to the boy. When we worked, if something was too heavy, as it often was, he lifted it. If there was a possibility I could get hurt he took over. He just wanted me to be able to do things for myself.

He always said "There's nothing sexier than a girl that can use a drill. When I met your mother she was slinging one in the parking lot of this diner. When I heard it power up I turned my head to see."

Then his expression would turn dreamy as he stared off imagining it.

"And there she was; this young hot thing winking at me as she hit the power bringing the drill to life. I knew right then I had to marry her."

I heard that every time we worked at some point. If mom was close by she would roll her eyes.

"Jim. Why do you tell her such ridiculous stories? Don't listen to him rodent. I was the cute little thing in a short form fitted waitressing uniform bring him his dinner. It was food and a tight body. There was no drill involved."

With a wide grin he would bop his brow "Oh Georgie...there was a drill involved."

Mom would roll her eyes again "How can you take a power tool and make that sexual?" she would ask not actually wanting or expecting an answer.

It amazes me looking back how after all their years together he still chased after her. He worshiped her, and she adored him as much as he drove her crazy. I miss their banter and the laughter that would filter out to me from whatever room they were in.

You never realize how much you will miss someone until they are no longer there. Just like you never realize how easy something is until the thing that makes it simple is removed. I didn't realize, none of us realized all the things we took for granted like the people in our lives, housing, healthcare, getting clothing, buying food, turning on a tap for a glass of water until those people and those luxuries were gone.

Before all this, the days of power, the Internet, and television we were happy being disconnected from one another. Why? Because we always assumed when we closed our eyes at night, everything would be just as it was when we woke in the morning. The day I stared at that butterfly; the day I made the decision to attend Carleton University, I had no idea how dramatically the world was changing.

