

ONE

AARON VRICELLA REGARDED THE YOUNGER man sitting opposite him with a combination of awe and outrage.

He took a sip of Chianti before speaking. "You know, Matthew, I *did* warn you when I recruited you that this was an endeavor that might claim your sanity. I must confess, however, that I did not expect the fall to happen so soon." He set the wine glass down on one of the few clear spots on his massive oak desk. The Tuscan vintage went down a bit too smoothly. Aaron preferred the harsher red wines from northern Italy—the type of wine you need to punch a hole through the wall to get down.

In the guest chair, Matthew Addison sat staring down at the desk. An overburdened wire-frame inbox took up

one corner, Aaron's flatscreen monitor and keyboard, both products of the Umbrella Corporation, another. The irony of his equipment being of Umbrella manufacture was not lost on Aaron, given that a goodly portion of the machine's computing power was given over to trying to expose that corporation's illegal activities.

The rest of the desk's wooden surface was laden with random assortments of books, CDs, Zip disks, floppy disks, Post-its, printouts, spiral-bound reports, envelopes, folders, and quite possibly the corpse of Jimmy Hoffa. Aaron had been meaning to clean the desk in his office since the Carter administration.

Once you got past the desk, the office—located in the western corner of Aaron's large suburban home—was quite orderly. Bookshelves lined one wall, contents arranged neatly. A wet bar—from whence he had taken the Chianti—and several landscape paintings adorned the opposite wall, and behind him was the picture window looking out on his acres of property. A cleaning service came in twice a week to vacuum, dust, and make sure everything was in order, but the cleaners were not allowed to touch Aaron's desk. Any attempt to disturb his chaotic jumble would, he was sure, destroy the consulting business that paid for the house and the cleaning service. The sloppiness worked for him.

Matt finally looked up at Aaron and stared at him. "It's the only way this'll work."

"It's insane. Matthew, we cannot involve a civilian in this."

"*Civilian?* Listen to yourself, Aaron. We're *all* civilians. The whole point of this organization was that it was as outside the system as Umbrella is above it."

Aaron grabbed his glass of wine. "Yes, but at least we all know the risks. And yes, we're all civilians *now*, but most of us at least have the experience necessary for this kind of work. Your sister—"

"Can *do* this." Matt leaned back in his chair. Only then did Aaron notice that he was fiddling with a paperweight that Aaron had been trying to find for the last two months. "Look, if we try to send anyone else in undercover, it won't work."

"That's ridiculous."

"No, it isn't. If I go in, or Marcus, or Dora, or Zara, or Ripley, they'll make us. And you know why?"

Sighing, Aaron said, "No, but I assume you'll tell me."

"Because we'll all have cover stories."

"Of course you will." Aaron finished his wine in one gulp. It was definitely too smooth. "That's what the 'cover' in undercover *means*."

"And that's why it won't work. Umbrella's got their fingers in everything—no matter how good a cover we come up with, they'll find some way to plow through it, and we'll not only be back where we started, we run the risk of exposing the whole operation. That's why we need Lisa."

"So you're saying that the only person who can possibly successfully infiltrate the Umbrella Corporation in order to obtain the information we need to bring them

down is someone who has absolutely no experience in infiltration or information retrieval."

"Yes and no."

Aaron rubbed the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger in a futile attempt to stave off a headache. "Matthew—"

"Yes, she has no experience in infiltration, except what she may have picked from me by osmosis."

Chuckling, Aaron said, "Talked about your work in the Federal Marshal's office around the dinner table, did you?"

"Well, no, but—"

"Matthew, this is ridiculous. It's too dangerous—"

To Aaron's surprise, Matt slammed his hand on the oak desk, sending several pieces of paper, two CDs, and a Post-it with Aaron's daughter's cell phone number onto the floor.

"This whole fucking thing is dangerous, Aaron! If it wasn't dangerous, it wouldn't need to get done! But the longer we sit on our asses worrying about what risks we might want to take, Umbrella keeps getting closer and closer to doing something they *can't* cover up without getting a lot of people killed! Now either we do this, or I'm out."

At that, Aaron laughed. "An action which will have repercussions from one end of your head to the other. Honestly, Matthew, do you truly think yourself so mighty a cog in our wheel that we will do something insanely stupid just to appease you?" He leaned forward. "I helped found this organization, and I've been one of

its primary financiers. Believe me, *no one* wants to bring Umbrella down more than me. One of the reasons why Umbrella doesn't know about us is because we're well spread out, well organized, and because we haven't taken stupid risks."

"Yeah, and Umbrella's still going strong without any sign of being actually brought down by this organization dedicated to doing so because you're not taking *any* risks, stupid or otherwise."

Aaron got up. "I need another drink. You want anything?"

Ignoring the question as Aaron went over to the wet bar, Matt instead sat bolt upright in the guest chair. "Besides, if I quit, it just means I'll go off on my own. One nice, big loose cannon asshole of an ex-Marshall who'll stumble around like an idiot trying to expose Umbrella, and probably get captured along the way. That wouldn't bode too well for your precious fucking organization."

Rolling his eyes, Aaron said, "Really, Matthew, if you were the sort to do something like that, I never would have recruited you in the first place."

Matt deflated, now slumping. "Yeah, I know, but it was the only card I had." He looked up at Aaron. "Can you pour me one of those?"

Smiling, Aaron removed another wine glass from the cabinet, pouring the last of the too-smooth Chianti into it.

As he poured, Matt said, "Look, Lisa's got something none of the rest of us have."

"Besides a lack of experience?" Aaron handed the glass to Matt.

"Actually, yes. You assumed that she had no experience retrieving information. But in fact, what she does for a living is work in computer and internet security. She's one of the top people in that field. Before she went freelance, she put in some good years at a lot of [the top firms—KPMG, Bear Stearns, Citibank. She's got a killer rEsumE. Not only that, but Umbrella headhunted her a few years back."

Aaron blinked. "She turned them down?"

Matt nodded as he sipped his wine. Aaron was stunned. If Umbrella set their sights on a potential employee, they rarely stopped until that person was an actual employee.

"Why?"

"She was living in New York at the time, and didn't want to relocate to Raccoon. Couldn't, really. She and Nick were still married, and that was when Nick's mother was getting sick. No way they were gonna leave town with all the care her mother-in-law needed"

"Umbrella has an office in New York."

"Yeah, but they wanted someone for the home office."

Snorting at the euphemism, Aaron said, "You mean the Hive?"

Matt nodded. Most of Umbrella's private sector work was done at their various locations around the globe: technology and equipment relating to computers and health care. The Hive was the underground complex under Raccoon City where the company conducted business relating to its government contracts. Officially,

The Hive existed in order to preserve the classified nature of some of those contracts. Unofficially, that was an excuse to do work—both for the government and the private sector—that was not necessarily legal or ethical. "But she's divorced now, yes?" Aaron retook his seat.

Matt nodded again. "And even if she wasn't, the mother-in-law in question is dead. Lisa went freelance a couple years back, right after she and Nick split. With the economy in the shape it's in, though, I don't think she'll have any trouble convincing the recruiters at Umbrella that she'd like something more secure—if they're still interested. And, given the premium they place on security, I'm willing to bet real money they'll still be interested in taking her on, especially since she's got much more varied experience now."

Aaron snorted. "You're living on a Federal Marshal's pension, and quite a meagre iteration of same, at *that*, *Matthew—yon don't have any real money to bet*" He sighed. "But what if they find out who she is?"

"They'll *know* who she is—a top-notch computer geek, who'll be working directly with the company's security people. You've met her, she can charm the socks off anyone. She'll be able to get us the info we need." "What happens when they run the background check and find out that her brother is a retired Federal Marshal?"

Matt shrugged his deceptively small shoulders. "We've lived on opposite sides of the country for most of our adult lives; we don't see each other that often. If/

tried to get a job with Umbrella, they'd probably dig deep enough to find out what kinds of things I've been doing since I retired, but as the brother of a prospective employee, my"—he grinned—"veneer of respectability should hold up."

Swiveling his chair slightly so he could glance out the picture window, Aaron took a thoughtful sip of his wine. It could work. His reservations notwithstanding, it was actually a better plan than anything else they had attempted.

Well, no, it was a *bolder* plan. That didn't necessarily make it better, simply one with greater rewards if they were successful.

"There's one more advantage," Matt said quietly.

Aaron swiveled the chair back toward Matt. "Oh?"

"If she's caught, she can't be traced back to us."

It was all Aaron could do to keep from laughing. "What are you going to tell her, Matthew, that the secretary will disavow all knowledge of her mission?"

Matt did smile at that, but the smile didn't reach his eyes. Matthew Addison had blue eyes that were at once soulful and intense, and right now those eyes were boring into Aaron Vricella.

"We have to get *something*, Aaron. The new legislation they got through Congress makes it even harder to prosecute them, *and* gives them tax breaks up the ass. If the rumors we're hearing are right and they're developing biological weapons ..."

He trailed off. He certainly didn't need to elaborate. They lived in a world where people blew up vehicles

filled with children, sent deadly poisons to total strangers, and flew airplanes into skyscrapers. Any kind of bio-terrorism weapon that could be produced by a company with Umbrella's resources would be eagerly embraced by any number of governments, and Aaron wasn't at all sanguine about the world's prospects if *any* of them got their hands on such weapons.

"All right." Aaron stood up. "We'll give it a try, Matthew. But we can't support her if things go wrong. People who go to work for the Hive sign five-year contracts, and NDAs that are binding in ways that only the most expensive lawyers in the world can make them. She's making a massive commitment here, and she'll be on her own."

"Not if she succeeds, she won't be." Matt spoke with a confidence that Aaron didn't share. "Prosecuting busted non-disclosure agreements will be the least of Umbrella's problems if this works."

"Your faith is touching." He took another sip of his wine. "I know what she's getting herself into, and obviously you do. The question is, does she?"

"Yes."

Matt spoke without a moment's hesitation, which made Aaron all the more suspicious. "Really?"

"Yes, really." The intense blue eyes bored into Aaron a second time. "Trust me, she has her reasons for wanting to do this."

"Very well." Aaron sighed. "I'll put the wheels in motion on our end. And God help all of us."

TWO

IN HER MIND'S EYE, LISA BROWARD-NEE Lisa Addison—still saw the hollow look on Fadwa's face the day of Mahmoud's funeral.

It had been four years, and that look simply refused to dislodge from her brain.

"I gotta ask, Ms. Broward, why the chancee?"
"Hm?"

Lisa banished the image of Fadwa's eyes dripping with unattended-to tears, and forced herself to focus on the round face of Casey Acker, the human resources drone who was conducting her latest in a series of interviews with the Umbrella Corporation. Acker was a jovial, overweight man in his forties who was sweating more than he should in the air-conditioned office. His thick, plastic glasses kept slipping down his nose, and

he constantly tried to get a glance between the buttons of the placket of Lisa's white shirt, as if he'd win some sort of prize if he actually spied the white lace of her bra. She found herself wishing she'd worn a pullover blouse—or at least buttoned her suit jacket.

"Why the new attitude, Ms. Broward? Six years ago, we offered you a similar job, and you turned it down. I gotta know what's changed in the last six years, y'know?"

Acker was the fourth person to ask her that question, and only wasn't the fifth because he was just the fourth person to interview her. With the ease of long practice, she repeated the answer she'd given the other three. "I had a steady job with Citibank at the time, and I wasn't prepared to leave New York. My husband and I were caring for his sick mother."

"And now?"

"She died—and my husband and I have since divorced."

"Really?" Acker said the word in such an eager voice that Lisa felt the sudden need to take a long, hot, cleansing shower. Of course, that image was probably one that would turn Acker on ...

"Yes. Since the divorce, I've been working freelance, but steady work is getting harder to find." She sighed, brushing a lock of blond hair behind her ear. "With the economy the way it is, I'd like something steady. And I wouldn't mind starting over in a new city." Favoring Acker with a false smile, she added, "Even if it is half a mile underground."

Acker grinned, showing yellowed teeth. "Well, it don't get much steadier than Umbrella, Ms. Broward. You'll be thrilled to know that your background check went through just fine—you passed with flying colors."

She forced herself to smile. "I didn't realize it was a test."

The smile caused Acker to beam proudly, reminding Lisa of a cat she and Matt had as a kid. Mittens always had that expression when he brought a dead mouse to the bedroom door. "Sort of. You have to understand that the kind of work we do—and the kind of work you'll be doing—is very sensitive. We gotta be real careful about who we hire, y'know? Now, I know Mr. DellaMonica explained all about the five-year contract and the fact that you'd be living in the Hive, but I'm afraid I gotta go over it all again."

Lisa tuned out Acker's droning as he went through the litany—she knew all this even before she went on the first interview. She and Matt had discussed it thoroughly. Umbrella's most sensitive work was done in the Hive, their name for the underground complex that served as Umbrella's primary corporate headquarters. From what Matt had told her, the corporate carelessness—and lack of accountability—that led to Mahmoud's death was only the tip of Umbrella's iceberg of unethical, illegal, and immoral activity. Contract or no, she had no intention of working for this company for five years. Because she had no intention of allowing it to remain in business that long. Unbidden, the image of Fadwa came back. Walking

her back to the car after Mahmoud's funeral service. Visiting her when she got the settlement check, wondering how anyone could put a price on her husband's life.

Mahmoud al-Rashan was one of Lisa's coworkers at Citibank. He had also been a close friend, always lending a sympathetic ear when she and Nick were having their problems. When Nick started neglecting her after his mother died, Mahmoud was there for her to talk to. When she decided to leave him, Mahmoud and Fadwa offered their couch until she could get her own place, and both helped navigate the real-estate minefield that was apartment-hunting in New York City. And Mahmoud had been great about recommending her for contract work after she went freelance.

In turn, Lisa had been there to help comfort him when what should have been a simple surgical procedure on an ulcer in his stomach turned into something worse, and the drugs prescribed to alleviate the post-surgical complications served only to exacerbate the problems.

Mahmoud's lawyer had urged him to sue, a decision Lisa had supported. However, the hospital was not the only target of the suit. The surgeon who had operated on Mahmoud was employed by a service called RPC—the Reserve Physician Corps—which provided supplemental medical staff for overburdened hospitals. The equipment used in the surgery—which was, according to the expert hired by Mahmoud's lawyer, substandard—was supplied by Caduceus Medical Supplies, and the bad

drugs they prescribed were supplied by Armbruster Pharmaceuticals.

RPC, Caduceus, and Armbruster were all subsidiaries of the Umbrella Corporation.

Three things happened between Mahmoud filing the suit and the arrival of the first settlement check:

First, the al-Rashans found themselves the subject of a brutal IRS tax audit. They came through with a clean financial bill of health from the government—both Mahmoud and Fadwa had always been meticulous with their finances—but the process itself was excruciating, and did nothing to aid Mahmoud's failing health.

Then Mahmoud's gung-ho lawyer abruptly switched from wanting to roast Umbrella on a litigational spit to urging Mahmoud to settle. He never explained the reasons for his change of heart, but they all had their suspicions, especially after all was said and done and he took a very long vacation to Europe.

Finally, Mahmoud died from post-operative complications.

The Umbrella Corporation had, for all intents and purposes, murdered Lisa Broward's friend, and gotten away with it by writing a check to his widow.

Fadwa was bound by a gag order that was part and parcel of the terms of the settlement. Strictly speaking, Lisa wasn't bound by it, but all the details she knew were hearsay, and any attempt to reveal the truth would only give Umbrella the excuse they needed to ruin what was left of Fadwa's life.

So when Matt came to her with an opportunity to

pay the bastards back, she took it. It didn't matter if it meant a commitment of time that might number in years. It didn't matter if she risked her life. It didn't matter that she risked provoking the ire of a corporation for whom forcing an IRS audit was the mildest of weapons in the arsenal they could call to bear on the average citizen.

With the divorce final, and Nick off contemplating his navel or whatever it was he decided to do with his life now that his mother was dead, Lisa had no family to concern herself with. They had never had kids—for which she was now eternally grateful, as the divorce had been ugly enough without that factored in.

She was free and clear to exact her revenge on the sons of bitches who murdered her friend.

Any time she had any doubts, she thought about Fadwa.

After that, it was easy.

Let them move her into an underground complex a thousand feet beneath Raccoon City. Let them only allow her occasional trips to the surface. Let them force her to spend ninety percent of her life in a hole providing maintenance and upgrades on their computers' security systems, allowing them to keep their precious secrets from an inquisitive world.

Let them give her access. Because with that access would come her revenge.

"All right, then," Acker said, clapping his pudgy hands together. It sounded like someone playing a percussion riff on a ham. "I guess that just leaves us to fill

out all the paperwork. I gotta tell you, though, there's a *lot* of it NDAs, employee contracts, the whole nine yards, y'know?"

Once again plastering a smile onto her face, Lisa said, "Bring it on, Mr. Acker. I'm ready to join the Umbrella family."

Acker returned the smile. "Glad to hear you say that, Ms. Broward. Trust me, you won't regret this decision."

She didn't, but not for the reasons Casey Acker thought...

THREE

WHEN ALICE ABERNATHY WAS A LITTLE GIRL growing up in Columbus, she had imagined that getting her wedding picture taken would be a glorious moment of joy. She'd be surrounded by friends and family, a band playing her favorite music, and tons of food and drink. Dressed in a beautiful white dress, her prospective husband in a tuxedo (it had to be a tuxedo—she'd *never* marry a man who wouldn't get married in a tuxedo), they'd stand as close to each other as they could, reveling in the feel of their embrace, while the photographer said something ridiculous like, "Say cheese!"

The moment of pure happiness would be frozen forever in that photograph.

The mansion on the outskirts of Raccoon City was a

long way from Ohio, both physically and metaphorically. Two-and-a-half decades removed from that childhood fantasy, Alice found herself in the white dress

embracing a man she barely knew as a photographer employed by the Umbrella Corporation muttered something noncommittal and snapped another photograph. At least her "husband" was wearing a tuxedo. It was all part of their cover. Alice had taken over as the head of security for the Hive, the semi-secret underground facility owned and operated by the Umbrella Corporation. However, the promotion came with a new assignment. The person who ran security for the Hive had to spend the first three months of the job with what was considered either the best or worst assignment in Umbrella's Security Division: mansion duty.

The mansion—a massive estate that felt to Alice like it belonged in a museum or a Jane Austen movie rather than a suburb of a small American city—was located in the neighborhood of Foxwood Heights, two miles outside the Raccoon City limits.

Raccoon itself only had an official population of approximately 853,000, including the five hundred employed by Umbrella who lived and worked in the Hive. The existence of the Hive was not kept a secret—it was impossible to sequester away five hundred employees, many of whom were in the upper echelons of their respective fields, without someone noticing they were missing—though it was not widely advertised either. Umbrella kept its public headquarters in downtown Raccoon where everyone could see it: the public face of the

company that provided the best computer technology and health-care products and services in the country.

Part of Alice's job—and that of her Active husband—was to keep the public from knowing any more than that.

Mansion duty meant posing as the couple who lived in that weird old mansion that all the guides to Raccoon cautioned against tourists visiting. Although an architectural marvel—built by an eccentric old millionaire in the 1960s—and rumored to be filled with trap doors, secret corridors, and other reflections of the millionaire's obsession with spy thrillers, it was currently occupied by a reclusive couple who did not appreciate strangers knocking on their door and asking to see their house. More than one nosy visitor had found themselves escorted out of the area by the Foxwood Heights Police Department—or even sometimes the Raccoon City P.D.—for trespassing.

That couple's reclusive tendencies were a direct result of their not being a true couple, but the latest two members of Umbrella's Security Division who had drawn mansion duty. For, unbeknownst to the people who wrote those tourist brochures, the mansion was, in truth, a secret access point to the Hive. Given the nature of the work Umbrella did in the Hive, the mansion was the first line of defense against everything from reporters to industrial sabotage to outright thievery.

In theory, that made their work of critical import to Umbrella's security.

In reality, their work was boring as shit.

Within a day of the picture being taken, mansion duty had begun for Alice and her new partner, whom she learned was named Percival S. Parks. For obvious reasons, he did not go by his first name. The middle initial stood for Spence, and he said that everyone just called him "Spence."

Unlike Alice, who had been with the company for five years, following her distinguished but frustrating stint in the Treasury Department, Spence was new to Umbrella.

The two of them would spend the next three months in a facsimile of wedded bliss. They had each been given plain gold wedding bands with the oh-so-romantic inscription PROPERTY OF UMBRELLA CORPORATION on the inside. Pictures of the pair of them had been placed at strategic spots throughout the massive expanse of the mansion's interior.

When she explored the library, she found that all the books that had been there when she and Spence took their "wedding photos" had been replaced. She recognized about half the titles as either her favorite books or ones she had intended to read someday, and assumed that the other half were on a similar list of Spence's.

An entire sitting room was given over to an entertainment center that included state-of-the-art CD and DVD players (all from Perrymyk Sounds, a subsidiary of the Umbrella Corporation), shelves full of CDs and DVDs, half of which were of her favorite music and movies, a plasma widescreen television (also from Perrymyk), and two very comfortable chairs.

Next to the sitting room was a corner room with beautiful exposure, full of what looked to Alice like sculpting equipment: a kiln, clay, a small firing oven, and several small tables. She guessed that Spence was an amateur potter in his spare time.

Off the studio were two small rooms with much smaller windows providing the same view as the picture window in the studio. Each room had a desk, computer station, fax machine, phone, PDA (mounted to the computer), and an incredibly comfortable-looking leather chair from which to operate all of that machinery. These would be their offices.

The bathroom was a lavish affair, all marble, with a clawfoot bathtub and a tub-sized shower stall. Her favorite soaps and shampoos were stocked in the cabinet.

The closets were filled with clothes that, Alice assumed, fit her perfectly. Some of them were even aesthetically pleasing. The wardrobe was filled with perfectly pressed underclothes—aside from the bottom drawer, where their emergency cache of weapons was kept under code lock.

They were told only to use the weapons in case of a real threat. That meant no using them on innocent civilians.

(Alice had been sorely tempted to ask where Jehovah's Witnesses fell on the scale. She relished the idea of greeting one of them at the door with a fully-armed MP5K.)

As usual, her bosses had been thorough.

"Looks like we get the fun job," Spence said, enter-

ing the bedroom and taking a seat in the massive easy chair.

"Fun. Right."

"What, you don't like lounging around the nicest mansion in the state doing nothing for three months?"

"Not really. I didn't take this job to sit on my ass."

Spence leaned back. The chair unfolded, the bottom springing upward to prop his feet. "Too bad, it's a nice ass."

Turning toward him, she gave him a glare.

He grinned. "Sorry, couldn't help but notice. Besides, with any luck, this'll be a stepping stone—maybe working for the big bosses or the commandoes."

Alice snorted. "The thug squad? No thanks."

"They're not thugs, Alice." Spence actually sounded outraged at her characterization.

"Maybe not, but they've got delusions of grandeur. I mean, c'mon, the head thug calls himself 'One.' This isn't the fucking CIA—we're a private corporation. We don't need to go around with stupid James Bond code-names. Why can't he just use a real name?"

"Shot in the dark here, but—maybe for security?"

"Hardy har har." She walked over to the makeup table. All her favorite brands were represented. "Then he can call himself 'Fred' or 'Bill.' " She smiled. "Or 'Percival.'"

This time he glared at her. "Hardy har har."

The smile became a full grin. She decided that, if she was stuck with mansion duty, at least it was with someone she was starting to like. Security Division was well-

stocked with assholes—including the self-styled "One"—so she was grateful for this, at least.

"Anyhow, I can't stand that kind of pretentious bullshit. I got enough of that crap in Treasury."

He blinked. "You were in Treasury? Secret Service?"

"No. I should've been, but I was missing a vital qualification."

"Oh?"

Giving Spence a smirk, she said, "A penis."

"Come on, in this day and age?"

Alice barked a laugh. "All being in this day and age means is that they need to come up with better excuses to keep us out. I passed every damn test they threw at me, I outfought, outshot, and outsmarted all the men at my level. The women they *did* promote were all less qualified than me, but they also—" She hesitated.

"They also what?" Spence prompted.

Trying not to sound too catty, Alice said, "Well, let's just say you wouldn't be complimenting any of *them* on what a nice ass they had."

"Ah. Woof woof."

"Something like that," Alice said, thinking that men were all crude at heart no matter what. "They kept me investigating counterfeiters while the guys I came up with got to go to the White House."

"So you came here?"

"Yeah." She sighed and sat down on the large bed. The mattress was firm, but giving, and felt like one of those fancy Swedish ones that didn't have coil springs

but some kind of foam thing. "The work isn't much of an improvement—especially this little bullshit assignment—but at least I'm paid better."

"Got that right." Spence grinned. "Well, for what it's worth, I've heard a lot of good things about you."

"From who?" Alice asked with a frown.

"Everybody I asked. 'Ass-Kicking Alice,' they called you."

She rolled her eyes, having hoped that that particular nickname would have died out by now. It had, after all, been five years since the training exercise when she had put their training officer—One's predecessor, a man named Martinez—in the hospital with a single well-placed kick to the shin. But it seemed they were just limiting themselves to saying it behind her back.

Turning her gaze at her new partner, she asked, "So what's your story?"

"What makes you think I have a story?"

"I've been here five years, Spence. *Everyone* in Security has a story. For one thing, someone who works here but also sculpts *has* to have a story."

At that, Spence frowned. "Sculpts?"

Alice returned the look. "You don't sculpt?"

"Uh, no."

"Then who's the kiln for?"

Suddenly, Spence leaned his head back and laughed. "Oh, Jesus. I know what it is. Back when I filled out my application here, they asked me for hobbies. I don't *have* any hobbies—at least not any that aren't work-related. I mean, yeah, I run and work out, but that's all

for the job. So I said I like making pottery. I just pulled it out of my ass."

Laughing, Alice said, "Too bad; it's a nice ass."

Spence grinned.

"Fine," Alice said, "whatever. That still doesn't answer my question."

"What question?"

"What's your story? The place is littered with ex-law-enforcement types who wound up here because it sucks everywhere else. There's got to be a story there."

"Actually, that's not the reason I came to Umbrella."

"Oh?"

Spence re-folded the easy chair, got up, and joined her on the bed. He bounced on it a few times as he sat, like a little kid playing trampoline with his butt. "Nice. Firm." He was, she noticed, looking at her body rather than her face.

"It's definitely a good mattress."

"Who says I was talking about the mattress?"

"Slow down, Percival," she said with a grin.

"Hey, you're the one who said I have a nice ass."

"You *still* haven't answered my question."

"You already answered it for me. I was doing just fine as a cop in Chicago, but Umbrella has one thing that no police department in this country has."

She gave him a questioning look when he didn't elaborate right away.

"Massive amounts of cash. I'm doing the same work I was doing with the CPD, but for about five times the salary." He leaned back on the bed, propping himself on

his elbows. "Better pension, too. Not to mention getting to live in a big mansion with a beautiful woman for three months."

Alice got up from the bed and laughed. "You don't give up, do you?"

"I'm persistent. I don't give up until I get what I want. It's what makes me good at my job."

"Good thing, 'cause you certainly won't get by on your looks."

"Hey! What about my nice ass?"

"Why do you think I was looking at your ass instead of your face?"

Spence mimicked being wounded in the chest. "Ouch! Shot to the heart."

"Don't worry, Spence—if I ever *really* shoot you, it'll be between the eyes."

"That isn't very romantic."

Her voice grew serious. "This job isn't romantic. It's mostly boring, mindless, and irritating, right up until they need you to perform, at which point it's exciting, nerve-racking, and requires you to be either absolutely perfect or really really dead." She looked away. "Romance doesn't enter into it."

Even as she spoke the words, she thought about living with Spence for three months, babysitting the secret door in the mirror, checking people as they came in and out, filling out daily reports that she could, after five years, do in her sleep, and otherwise just sitting around going through the books in that library or the DVDs in the sitting room.

A breating sound echoed through the high-ceilinged mansion. Alice tensed, then realized that it was the cordless phone on the nightstand next to the bed.

She walked over, picked it up, and hit the TALK button. "Yes?"

"Janus," said the voice on the other side.

That, Alice knew, was the code word indicating that this was a security call. She immediately hung up the phone and moved into the living room. Spence got up and followed her.

Next to the Louis XIV couch—which Alice had been afraid to sit in when she first arrived for fear that a museum guard would yell at her not to touch the exhibits—sat a beautiful wooden end table that looked to be as much an antique as the couch. It doubled as a cabinet, probably originally intended to store drinks or table linens or some such. This one housed a red phone that was attached to a phone line installed under the end table via a hole drilled into the bottom that probably cut the piece's value by eighty percent. The receiver was attached to the hook via a good old-fashioned spiral phone cord. As good as telephonic security could be, a hardwired line was infinitely easier to secure and harder to penetrate.

Alice picked up the red phone. "Prospero."

The voice on the other side was the same androgynous voice that had called on the main phone. "Verify position."

At that, Alice let out a breath she hadn't realized she had been holding. It was just a simple check-in call,

making sure that she and Spence were safely ensconced.
"We're in the house. All's well."

"Verified. Out."

The line went dead.

"And you have a nice evening, too." She sighed, hung up the phone, and closed the end table cabinet door.

Spence smiled. He had, she decided, a charming smile. And he really did have a nice ass.

"So, ten o'clock and all's well?"

"Something like that," she said. "So, want to show me how to make an ashtray?"

He laughed. She liked his laugh, too.

Maybe this assignment wouldn't be quite so boring after all...

FOUR

OVER THE LAST TWO MONTHS, LISA BROWARD had learned to well and truly despise the Hive's computer system.

Since it first came into existence, Umbrella had always had state-of-the-art computer technology, always first with the newest innovations in both hardware and software.

What they put on the market was usually about five years behind what they had for themselves. The head programmer for the most recent upgrade to the Hive was a British man named Dr. Simon Barr.

Lisa had first encountered Barr at MIT when she was an undergraduate, and he was teaching a class in applied artificial intelligence. He opened the semester with a variation on Lewis Carroll that had fooled most

of the students, including Lisa, into thinking he would be one of those charming, daffy old Brits.

"The time has come, the walrus said, to speak of many things," he had said. "Of bits and bytes and decision trees, of compilers and fMRIs, and if the software's well designed, and whether they're truly living machines."

After lulling the students into a false sense of security, he dropped the bombshell: nobody in the class would receive any higher than a B, and most would receive a C or D grade. His theories, he explained, were *far* too sophisticated for any undergraduate to possibly *begin* to comprehend. He only taught the class because the powers-that-be had convinced him that he might find one or two great programmers there, and it behooved him—and those potential great students—to benefit from Barr's own vast stores of knowledge.

However, he had said, ninety-nine-point-nine percent of his students would not be great programmers, and probably that last point-one percent wouldn't be either, and this was truly an appalling waste of his time, but he supposed they had better get on with it and get it over with.

That speech alone prompted half the class to drop it.

Barr announced the second day of class that—now that he had weeded out the stragglers and the ones who wouldn't amount to anything except some job as a corporate drone writing drab code for unappreciative middle-management types—"you are going to work your brains to the very nub."

He also reiterated his position: nobody would get higher than a B. "But you will learn more from me than from any other professor you will ever have in your life."

Half the remainder dropped the class after that.

Lisa decided two things at that point: that she would stick with the class no matter what, and that she would get an A.

She spent the next three months being subjected to an amazing amount of abuse, vitriol, condescension—and also the most brilliant theories on AI she had ever heard before or since. Barr came by his arrogance honestly: he truly was an absolute master of the field.

He also made no effort to talk down to the students, leaving most of them scrambling to try to decipher what he was talking about.

Except Lisa, who lost a great deal of sleep, dropped ten pounds off an already rather skinny frame, got sick regularly, and came dangerously close to a nervous breakdown more than once. But dammit, she followed every single word Barr spoke in that arrogant tone that was peculiar to Brits.

On her final exam, he wrote the following on the back:

"Miss Addison, I commend you. You have tremendous drive and a willingness to apply yourself to the task at hand. You also have a stick-to-it-iveness that one does not see in the younger generation much anymore. One might admire you for your perseverance in pursuit of understanding of this subject.

"However, you will not number me among those admirers. All you have proven is that you are able to parrot back the works of greater intellects. The fact that you had to work so hard to comprehend this class merely proves that you lack the creative spark yourself. You are, in fact, precisely the sort who will become the type of corporate drone that I despise. The only difference is that you will be much much better at it than most, though to my mind that is akin to being the best muck-raker in the cow farm.

"Nevertheless, you have performed the tasks you were given in the class, and I would be dishonest if I did not give you fitting reward for that accomplishment, even if it is less of an accomplishment than I might desire.

"A."

In later years, Lisa would admire Dr. Barr's ability to fulfill her every wish and destroy them all at the same time. Back then, however, she was up most of the night crying.

Now here she was, ten years later, having fulfilled his prognostications by spending her career as a corporate drone—even excelling at it, as he had also predicted—only to find herself providing security for his latest and greatest system.

The Red Queen.

Barr was currently working in Umbrella's London office, working on some new system that would be even better than the Red Queen, but for now, this AI—which was about a decade ahead of any other computer system

available on the open market—was the best possible.

This was a computer system that was in many ways the holy grail of AI: it was adaptable, flexible, and even had a personality.

For some inexplicable reason, the personality he gave to the Red Queen was that of a ten-year-old girl. Specifically that of Angela Ashford, the young daughter of one of the muckitymucks in Research & Development. Lisa couldn't imagine that Barr came up with that himself, as it required a level of sentimentality the old man simply did not possess. No doubt it was required by Ashford or one of his supporters on the Board of Directors.

Never having met Angie Ashford, Lisa had no idea if the personality Barr had programmed in matched that of the young child. She suspected it didn't, that Barr had made the girl as unpleasant as possible in revenge for the political sop to Ashford that modeling the computer after his daughter likely was.

If, on the other hand, the personality *did* match that of the real Angie Ashford, Lisa had the utmost sympathy for Dr. Ashford's pain and suffering.

Lisa's job description was to make sure that the Red Queen's systems remained secure. In reality, this meant spending all her days dealing with a ten-year-old girl who had inherited her creator's attitude problem.

"*It isn't working*," the Red Queen said in her prissy little schoolgirl voice. The voice came crisply from the Perrymyk speakers sitting on either side of Lisa's flatscreen monitor. The upper-right-hand corner of said

monitor was taken up with the image of a prissy little schoolgirl face, whose lip movements matched the sounds.

Sighing, Lisa wondered why anyone would find this preferable to a simple error message. As it was, that face was a daily reminder of why she was eternally grateful that she and Nick had decided not to have kids.

"All right," she said, typing in a sequence of commands, "let's compile it again, see where the error crops up."

"We don't need to do that. The error is in the patch you wrote. Don't worry about it, I can rewrite it for you."

"No you can't, either," Lisa said. "Show me where the error is. *I'll* fix it."

Eight weeks, and the damn machine still was treating her as if she were an idiot. Like programmer, like program.

"Very well, if you insist, but it's wholly unnecessary. I can do this myself. The whole point of having an artificial intelligence is to give me the opportunity to be intelligent."

Barr had said the same thing ten years ago at MIT, word for word. No surprise he programmed it into his greatest achievement.

Luckily, Umbrella's higher-ups were a bit more far-sighted—or, at the very least, had seen *2001*. No matter what happened, there was always to be some human oversight to anything the Red Queen did.

In the last two months, Lisa had learned that Barr

had not been thrilled with this, and had tried to have Lisa's position eliminated after her predecessor transferred to another department.

Instead, they took the job out of Barr's purview. Although she worked with the computer system, she was *not* part of the Computer Services staff—she reported to Security Division.

Though most of their work involved the physical security of Umbrella's various corporate headquarters and their employees, Umbrella's bosses decided to include electronic security. That meant that she reported directly to the head of Security Division, a taciturn man who went solely by the unlikely codename of "One."

They still put her in with the other teenies, though, giving her a sleek metal desk indistinguishable from all the other sleek metal desks. On the far wall was a large window, covered in blinds, that gave a spectacular view of the Raccoon City skyline.

All the more spectacular by virtue of its being fake. They even piped muffled street noises in. It was Umbrella's way of making them feel like they weren't a thousand feet underground. After all, despite the size of the Hive, it could still get damn claustrophobic, knowing you were spending all your time in a big hole in the ground, surrounded on all sides by earth, rocks, mud, or whatever the hell made up the underside of Raccoon City. Lisa had no idea, nor did she care to. She just tried, like everyone else did, to pretend that the view out the window was real, that the sounds she heard were genuine.

Sometimes she even believed it.

She often wondered how anyone stood this for five years, and was grateful that—one way or another—she was not going to find out for herself.

Even as she found the error in her patch—which was a simple typographical error, one she would have caught five minutes ago if the Red Queen hadn't insisted on getting huffy about it—the phone rang.

Wanting to keep her hands free to type, she plugged the headset into the appropriate jack in the phone, hooked it around her ear, adjusting the mic so it was near her mouth, then hit the SPEAKER button. The phone routed the sound, which would normally go out on the phone's speaker, to the headset. "Broward."

"Lisa, it's Alice."

Smiling at the familiar voice, Lisa said, "How's life among the rich and famous?"

Dryly, Alice said, "Oh, thrill-a-minute, like usual."

Unlike One, who was at HQ in Raccoon City proper, Alice—currently in charge of security for the Hive, stationed along with Spence Parks at the lavish mansion that served as one of the main entry points into the Hive—was approachable and easy to work with. Like One, she didn't take any shit. Unlike One, she didn't give any, either. As long as there wasn't a crisis, she could actually talk to you like a real person.

Although Lisa's desk was in the same general area as the other Tech folks, they viewed her with disdain, as she wasn't really one of them. Unfortunately, she didn't really have much in common with the gaggle of ex-

cops and ex-cons that made up the Security Division, either.

Alice, though, was different. She didn't treat Lisa like some kind of weird other being who didn't belong in the club because she couldn't field-strip an M16, or whatever kind of fancy weapon the thugs in Security hauled around.

Not that it mattered all that much whether or not Lisa made friends. Not given her long-term goal.

Still, in the short term, it was nice to have someone to talk to.

Especially when that someone also had the potential to help out with the long-term plans.

"So what's the problem?" Lisa asked.

"I can't get into my account."

Again, Lisa sighed. "I know, I know, there's a problem with the protocols. I should have it fixed in a few minutes, assuming Her Royal Highness doesn't throw a fit."

"I heard that"

Making a face at her monitor, Lisa said, "You were meant to."

Lisa heard Alice Abernathy laugh.

After rewriting a few more lines of code, Lisa said, "Okay, try it now."

There was a pause, though Lisa could hear the clickity-clack of Alice's fingers moving quickly over her keyboard.

"Fuck! I still can't get in."

Lisa frowned. "You sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. It says 'access denied' in big letters on top of my monitor."

"That's a pretty good indicator, yeah. Hold on a sec." She entered a few more commands. All the computers in the Hive—including the two in the mansion—were hardwired to the overall Red Queen network, and it was a simple matter for her to provide a more direct link between her and Alice. When she was finished, it was as if they were a single workstation that just happened to have two keyboards.

Her monitor lit up with a window taking up the right-hand side of her flatscreen display. It showed her what Alice was seeing on her monitor, complete with ACCESS DENIED in big letters along the top. In the center of the screen were two fields, currently empty, asking for username and password.

Lisa hit F11, then entered her own username and password at another prompt. The latter was a series of numbers she had literally picked at random. Lisa had always had a good memory for numbers—she never had to write down phone numbers, nor use a speed-dial for them—so she was always able to pick wholly random passwords, always the most secure. Her username was standard, of course: LBROWARD. All the usernames were keyed to last name preceded by first initial—the latter a necessity, especially since there was a guy down in Medical named Phillip Broward. In fact, just in the Hive alone there were fourteen people named Smith, ten named Jones, six named Clark (plus one named Clarke), three named Martinez, two named West, and, oddly,

three named Milewski (all three unrelated to each other).

Entering that username and password rewarded her with a series of commands and codes in another window on the left-hand side, right under the faux adorable face of a ten-year-old child that Lisa had never met yet desperately wanted to drown.

She then Alt-Tabbed over to the other window, used the trackpad located between the main keyboard and the number pad to place the cursor in the username field, and entered "AABERNATHY."

"Okay," she said to Alice, "enter your password."

This time, the clickety-clack that Lisa heard over her headset was matched by the appearance of several asterisks in the password field.

"Done," Alice said after fourteen asterisks appeared.

"That's some password."

"It's my birthday," Alice deadpanned.

"Right—when you're reincarnated in the year one billion." Lisa followed the streams of code that flew past the window on the left-hand side of her monitor, even as the right-hand side once again declared access to be denied and cleared the username and password fields.

"Fuck," Alice said again. "What's wrong?"

"You're gonna need a new birthday," Lisa said with a smirk.

"Hm?"

"Don't you always complain that you're bored shitless up in the mansion?"

"Yeah—mainly because I *am* always bored shitless up in the mansion."

"Then you should have plenty of time to read my memos."

"What memo?"

"The one I wrote six weeks ago that says you have to change your password every week, and anyone who goes eight days without changing it will be locked out."

"Oh, *that* memo. You *do* know that there are seven days in a week, right?"

Lisa laughed. "Yeah, but I thought I'd be generous and give everyone an extra day in case they forgot. Pretty pointless, as it turns out, since anyone who doesn't remember for seven days isn't likely to get a sudden burst of memory given another twenty-four hours, but I like to live the life of a cockeyed optimist."

"No, you just like to be an even bigger pain in the ass by pointing out that we're all too stupid to remember to change our password even when given an extra day."

"That, too." Lisa's tone grew more serious. "All kidding aside, it's a necessary concern. Most of the security problems on networks like this are because people don't bother to take the simplest precautions. And changing your password every eight days is pretty damn simple, don't you think?"

Alice sighed. "Apparently not, since I haven't changed mine in eight days."

Peering at her monitor and noticing a date on a particular line, Lisa said, "Nine, actually. Didn't you log on yesterday?"

"No. Spence and I had—other things to deal with yesterday."

"All day long?" Lisa grinned mischievously. "I didn't know he had that kind of stamina."

"Very funny."

Lisa noticed that Alice didn't exactly deny her lascivious interpretation of what Alice and Spence had been doing all day. After all, they were both in that decadent mansion, most of their days were spent doing jackshit, and Spence was *very* easy on the eyes. Not her type, really, but she could see how someone in close proximity to him every day—especially one sharing the pretense of matrimonial bliss—might want to see if his body looked as good out of the tight jeans as it did in them.

She shook off the thoughts quickly. Ever since she and Nick split, she'd had an unhealthy preoccupation with other people's sex lives, which she mostly attributed to a lack of occupation with one of her own. Not that she'd had a shortage of offers, starting with Casey Acker shortly after her first day's human-resources orientation session, and proceeding to potential dating partners who didn't make her want to actually projectile-vomit, but she'd rebuffed all of them.

After all, she had a job to do. Forming attachments would not be a good idea. That would make it harder to do what needed to be done.

Whenever she felt herself weakening, she thought of Fadwa.

After that, it was easy.

Moving back to the left-hand window, she typed in another series of commands. The random character generator created a new password for the AABERNATHY account. Lisa Alt-Tabbed over, typed the username and then D84GTKVB8.

Then she hesitated.

Taking a deep breath and blinking twice, she hit

ENTER.

A wealth of information appeared on the right-hand side of her screen for about a second. Lisa had a phenomenal memory, and she tried to take in as much as possible.

After that second, the screen went blank, replaced with two familiar words: ACCESS DENIED.

As expected.

But at last, after a month, her brilliant idea had paid off.

Everything Lisa had told Alice was absolutely true. Forcing people to change their passwords on a weekly basis did wonders for keeping the Red Queen secure. The more one had to change one's password, the more creative those passwords became, and creative passwords were much harder to hack into.

However, that was not why she insisted on the policy.

Because it wasn't so much that people were stupid, as they were lazy. Too lazy to read memos, too lazy to follow the instructions in them—especially when most of them had other concerns relating to the high-intensity work they were doing here in the Hive. When you were

trying to come up with the next great medical marvel or to fulfill a government contract while being harassed by your supervisor—herself being harassed by some four-star general in the Pentagon—remembering to change your password generally was pretty low on your to-do list.

Which was exactly what Lisa was counting on.

What she had just gone through with Alice, she had gone through with half the employees of the Hive. Each time, Lisa had to reset the password and test it.

And each time, she'd been able to see the information that the person in question was trying to access.

Most of the time, that information was harmless, personal, uninteresting, or all three. Occasionally, it would be something she wasn't allowed to see, although still uninteresting and or harmless.

On the latter occasions, she would still catch a glimpse of it before security kicked in. Even the Red Queen was only so fast, and it took her a second to recognize that there were two linked terminals, but only one was attached to a user authorized to view the information on the monitor. At that point, Lisa would get the ACCESS DENIED message.

This time, though, she had something.

"Thanks a lot, Lisa," Alice said. "Hey, listen, you want to have lunch on Thursday? You're up for your next city trip then, right?"

Lisa frowned. Umbrella knew better than to think that they could keep people holed in the ground indefinitely. Even the false images in the windows could only

go so far. Every employee was allowed to go topside once every two weeks, be outdoors, see the sun, breathe air that wasn't recycled.

Lisa had heard through the grapevine that there had been a fight over that interval among the powers-that-be of Umbrella. Some hardliners didn't want to let anyone out at all, citing the delicate nature of the work they did as reason not to risk any kind of security breach. Others pointed out that the people they were doing that delicate work for would probably not be terrifically appreciative if the people doing that work went stark raving mad, which they would if they were forbidden from leaving the Hive for five years running—or even one month running.

Two weeks had apparently been a compromise. Lisa's two weeks were indeed coming up on Thursday, but she was surprised to hear that Alice knew that.

Then again, Alice *was* the head of security for the Hive, and one of the top brass in Security Division generally.

"Sure," Lisa said. Maybe then she could get the truth about her and Spence's "day-long project" out of her.

"Great. We'll meet at the train station at eleven on Thursday."

"Okay," Lisa said.

The "train station" was the terminus of the train that went from the secret entrance under the mansion to the Hive's topmost floor. That was the access point to the Hive for most people, as well as the tube that went straight up to the basement of Umbrella's corporate

headquarters in Raccoon City. The latter, however, was only for emergencies and for the higher-ups in the company. Lesser mortals like Lisa had to take the train to the mansion, get cleared by the "happy couple" in the mansion—at present, Alice and Spence—and then depart. On the off-chance that they were seen, they would simply be friends visiting the reclusive couple in the mansion, but that rarely happened. The mansion's reputation—and very real threat of the law being called on trespassers—generally kept prying eyes away.

Sometimes reputation was the best security.

Lisa removed the headset and hit the END button on her phone. Then she stared at the monitor for several seconds.

"Is something wrong?"

"No," Lisa lied to the AI. "I think we've nailed this down."

"Agreed. Let's hope it doesn't happen again."

With that, the face of a ten-year-old-child-cum-Frankenstein-monster winked out from the upper-left-hand corner of Lisa's flatscreen.

Lisa had to resist the urge to stick out her tongue at the faded image.

Instead, she sat back in her vinyl chair—a product of PosturePerfect, a subsidiary of the Umbrella Corporation, designed to be ergonomically correct and damned comfortable—and thought about what she had seen on Alice's monitor.

It had contained two graphics and a huge block of text. She hadn't caught all the text, but several words

jumped out at her: "T-virus," "anti-virus," and "fatalities." All three words showed up several times, in fact.

The graphics, however, were of more immediate concern. One showed a white rabbit being injected with some kind of blue substance.

As for the other one ...

The more Lisa thought about it, the more ridiculous it seemed, and the more she thought that perhaps she had been imagining things.

But that, she feared, was wishful thinking. The graphic had taken up about a third of the available space in the window.

It was like something out of a nightmare. Or one of those old monster comic books Matt had collected when they were kids.

Nominally, it had a human shape: two arms, two legs, though its spine was bent in such a way that it could move on all fours—which it appeared to be doing in the graphic. It had skin like a rhinoceros's, plated and faceted, only it was more brown and red than the gray of a rhino. Lisa wasn't sure, but it looked like there were bones sticking out amidst the corded skin. The thing's fingers and toes ended in huge claws that looked like they could rend steel.

What Lisa remembered most clearly from her brief glimpse, however, was the head.

It had a huge, squared-off mouth, filled with jagged teeth and a tongue that looked like a snake had taken up residence in the thing's mouth.

Scariest of all were the creature's eyes.

It didn't have any.

At once, Lisa Broward was thrilled and scared.

Thrilled because she had finally stumbled onto something big, something that Matt and his friends could use to expose Umbrella for the scum-sucking weasels they were. Creating fatal viruses was not part of Umbrella's corporate mission statement as far as she knew, and she was pretty sure it wasn't particularly legal either. Not to mention whatever that—that *thing* was.

Scared because anything that could create a fatal virus and a monster out of every child's nightmare may not have been someone she wanted to go up against.

Then she thought of Fadwa.

After that, everything was easy.

FIVE

LISA BROWARD HAD KNOWN SHE WAS GOING to have to make sacrifices when she moved from New York to Raccoon City, but the one she had least expected to have an impact was the one that wound up hitting her the hardest: the lack of decent restaurants.

For all that non-New Yorkers complained about the price of a dinner at the average Big Apple eatery, the fact *of the matter was, at least* as far as Lisa was concerned, you got what you paid for. In terms of sheer variety and quality, *nothing beat* New York City restaurants for high-caliber cuisine. The only exceptions she had ever been willing to make were for Mexican food—that was better in Southern California and Texas—and barbecue—superior in the midwest, especially Kansas—but that was it.

So she knew that transplanting to Raccoon City

would mean a serious downturn in the quality of food, even more so given that she'd be spending most of her time in the Hive. True, its dining facilities were infinitely superior to those of other office cafeterias where she'd choked down fare during her career, but those offices were all in midtown Manhattan. All it took was a phone call, and the nearest gourmet eatery would deliver victuals of almost any kind right to the front desk of the building. Or, time permitting, she could go out for a sit-down meal at a superior Greek, Italian, French, Indian, or Japanese restaurant. For a time, she worked close to a magnificent Sri Lankan place. Sometimes, in her dreams, she could still smell the spices...

Even on those occasions when she was able to go out for food, however, Raccoon City proved to be a wasteland. The "fine Italian dining" served a tomato sauce that would be deemed unacceptable at a neighborhood pizza joint in New York, the one and only time she ventured into a sushi place she left with an upset stomach gained after eating the most doleful looking fish she'd ever seen, and the grape-leaf salad she'd had at an "authentic" Greek eatery wasn't fit for Umbrella's guard Dobermans. It had gotten to the point where she would gravitate toward fast food and family restaurants, if for no other reason than her expectations were considerably lower and therefore she wouldn't be disappointed. And those places, at least, didn't charge exorbitant amounts for their relentlessly average foodstuffs.

It was, therefore, with a due sense of ennui that she approached her Thursday meal with Alice Abernathy. Her main reason for wanting to go along was the company, not the food. Plus a desire to get out of the hole for a day.

Since employees who worked in the Hive had no particular reason to follow the traditions of the Monday-through-Friday workweek, they worked in staggered and rotating schedules. Everyone was scheduled for only five eight-hour workdays per week, though overtime was a near-universal constant, especially when project deadlines and the end of the fiscal year loomed.

But which two days a week one got off varied, thus allowing there to be work going on within the Hive seven days a week. At present, Lisa's schedule called for her to work Saturdays through Wednesdays, with Thursday and Friday constituting her weekend. On some of those weekends, she had to work, of course, but for some, she was permitted to go topside and actually see the sun. This was one of those weekends, and she was grateful to Alice for giving her a reason to get out into the world for a little bit.

Especially after seeing that—that *creature*.

She'd thought of little else since seeing it, and was no closer to figuring out what it was, nor what it had to do with a T-virus or an anti-virus. Linking the image to that of "fatalities" was less of a stretch, though—she couldn't imagine that thing leaving anything in its wake *but* fatalities.

The question foremost in her mind was: what was it?

Genetically engineered monster? Mutated animal? Mutated *human*? *Alien* borrowed from Roswell? What?

She shoved those thoughts—and thoughts of Fadwa, which never stayed shoved for long—to the back of her mind as she disembarked from the train that ferried her from the Hive to the mansion. The train was a one-car affair, mostly one big cargo space that could ferry equipment in bulk as well as up to a hundred people—if they crammed rush-hour close to each other—back and forth from the mansion to the Hive. The train didn't come equipped with seats, but given the short duration of the trip, that wasn't much of a hardship.

Alice was waiting, a smile on her face. She wore an elegant light-brown, ankle-length leather coat with a high collar made of some kind of fleece. Late fall in Raccoon City meant temperatures in the forties. Lisa herself was wearing her battered old winter coat over a turtleneck sweater. She had gotten it at a street fair for only twenty bucks the weekend after she left Nick. With her salary she could have easily afforded a coat as nice as Alice's, if not more so. But the coat gave her comfort in more ways than just the physical.

"Ready for the meal of a lifetime?" Alice asked as Lisa stepped off the train along with a few other employees looking forward to a day breathing air that hadn't gone through the Hive's filtration system.

"In this town?" Lisa couldn't help but laugh. "The only thing that qualifies as the meal of a lifetime around here is the last meal they give to people on death row."

Alice smiled. "That's *what you* think." Then she led

Lisa through the lavishly appointed halls of the mansion to the front door.

Not for the first time, Lisa marveled at the beauty of the place, particularly after being stuck in the sterile confines of the Hive for so long. Umbrella didn't encourage personalization of the workplace, nor did Lisa's own tiny working environment provide much opportunity for it in any event. As for her apartment, she worked enough overtime that she spent most of her time in it either decompressing from work, worrying over what she was truly doing there, or sleeping.

The latter, the last few days, had not been much fun. Nightmares full of images of that creature mixed in with Fadwa crying ...

Waiting for them at the front door was a Lincoln Town Car owned by the car service Umbrella used. The driver, an old man with pronounced jowls and bright blue eyes, held the door open for them both.

Once the driver got into his own seat, he asked, "Where to, ladies?"

"Che Buono."

The old man grinned.

Lisa frowned. "I've never heard of that place."

"Good. If too many people hear about it, it might become famous, and then we'd never get a seat at lunch hour."

As expected, the drive to Raccoon from the remote mansion took an hour, even though the distance as the crow flew was the same as that of the twenty-minute train ride Lisa had just taken. However, the train didn't

have to deal with red lights, winding roads, and, once they reached the city limits, traffic. Not to mention a driver who actually came to a full stop at stop signs. To Lisa, weaned on New York cab drivers, the latter was especially befuddling.

Still and all, they finally arrived at an out-of-the-way street not too far from the middle of downtown Raccoon. The building they pulled/in front of had a ten-step stoop that led to a single entayway with three doors. Two led to storefronts that took up the ground floor—a newsstand and a flooring place. The third led to an apartment-building lobby.

It took Lisa a moment to realize that their destination was in the basement. Another staircase lay adjacent to the stoop, leading down to a door with a modest sign: CHE BUONO.

"That's it?" Lisa asked.

"Don't judge a book by its cover." Alice's smile had turned mischievous. "First rule of Security Division."

The first thing she noticed when Alice opened the door was the smell: olive oil, garlic, tomato sauce, fish. It reminded her of Da Vittorio's or Carmine's in New York. Then she realized it was better than that: it reminded her of the trip to Venice she and Nick had taken—the last vacation they'd take together before his mother got sick.

The last vacation they'd take together, period.

"Alice! So good to see you!"

Lisa had to look down to see the round face on the tiny body that had greeted them. The woman stood at

only five feet tall—if that—and her face was covered in wrinkles, none more pronounced than the smile lines around her mouth. She looked up at them with the happiest brown eyes Lisa had ever seen.

"And who is this?"

"This is my coworker Lisa," Alice said. "She's from New York."

"*Bene, bene.* Welcome to Che Buono, Lisa. Come, come, sit, sit," the old woman said, waving her hand as she led the way into the small restaurant.

There were only about half a dozen tables, covered in red-and-white checked tablecloths straight out of every pizza joint in the world.

The little old lady seated them at one of the tables, Lisa taking the side with her back to the wall, Alice facing her. Lisa noticed pictures of Italy all around the place—Milan, Venice, Rome, all looking fairly recent—as well as one large painting over the door to the kitchen of the Ponte Vecchio in Florence.

"This is lovely," Lisa said, a broad grin on her face. "Where'd you find this place?"

"By accident, honestly. I was walking around downtown one Valentine's Day feeling sorry for myself because I was alone. I got hungry, but there wasn't room anywhere—if you didn't have a reservation, you were out of luck."

"Except this place?"

Alice nodded. "They don't take reservations, and only about three-quarters of the tables were filled. I wound up having the best meal of my life. It's run by a

single family, and it's like eating at your aunt's house."

Lisa fixed her companion with a dubious look. "Your last name is Abernathy."

"My mother's maiden name is Ferrara."

"Ah."

A young woman with black hair, and a face that was a younger version of the old woman who led them in, came over and handed them menus. "Can I get you anything to drink?" she asked.

Before Lisa could say anything, Alice said, "A bottle of the Chianti Classico." Then she looked at Lisa with those penetrating pale eyes of hers. "You *do* like Chianti, yes?"

"It's been so long since I had a decent glass of wine, I honestly don't remember what I like."

The server nodded, and went off.

Lisa glanced at the menu. "So are you still alone? Or is married life treating you well?"

Half-smirking while looking at her menu, Alice said, "Hardly a marriage."

"Yes, but you're both living in that huge house—"

"Which makes it very easy for us to avoid each other."

"And you're working together."

Alice's half smirk spread into a full smirk. "Among other things."

Lisa hit her hand on the table. "I *knew* it! I want details!"

"Forget it."

Fixing her with a look, Lisa asked, "So why tell me in the first place, except to torture me?"

"Maybe I think you've earned a little torture."

"For what?"

"I'll tell you later."

That brought Lisa up short. Up until now they had engaged in harmless girl talk. But there was something in Alice's tone, a seriousness that had been wholly absent from their conversation since the train first pulled in.

Before she could pursue it, however, the young woman with the black hair came back with a bottle of wine. She poured a bit of it into Alice's glass. After Alice sipped it and gave her approval, she poured full glasses for both of them, then listed the specials.

Lisa, however, had made up her mind as soon as she spied one particular item on the menu.

"So, can I take your order or do you need a few minutes?"

Alice closed her menu. "That mushroom risotto special sounds wonderful."

"I want the veal parmigiano."

The server nodded, not bothering to write either order down. Lisa hoped that didn't mean she'd wind up with lasagne or something.

After the server took the menus and moved off, Alice gave Lisa a dubious look. "Veal parmigiano? This is a restaurant run by an Italian family. They came over here from Italy and opened this place. The food is cooked by a husband-and-wife team that made food for their family every Sunday back in Chieti. They've got salmon in mustard sauce. They've got risotto to die for. The penne in vodka sauce melts in your mouth. And

you're ordering veal parmigiano? You can get that anywhere!"

Letting out a long sigh, Lisa said, "You don't understand."

"No, I don't." She fixed her with another look. "So explain it to me."

"When I was a kid growing up, we used to go to this place in the Bronx. I don't even remember the name of it—it closed down when I was nine or ten or so. They had the absolute best veal parmigiano I've ever had. We'd go there every Friday night and I'd always have it. I haven't had a decent veal parmigiano since. I keep trying, and I never ever find it. But you said that this place was really good, so I'm going to try it." She grinned. "I guess I'm trying to recapture my youth."

"We should all be so lucky."

Again, Lisa heard it—the odd tone. Something was up with Alice, but she wasn't sure what it was.

She didn't get any clues about it for the rest of the meal. They talked about everything and nothing. Alice, a midwestern native, had a ton of questions about living in New York, which Lisa answered as best she could. She even went so far as to talk about her marriage to Nick and its disastrous end.

The one subject she did not broach was Fadwa.

The initial bite of the veal parmigiano when it arrived exploded magnificently in Lisa's mouth. The breeding had just the right blend of spice and dovetailed perfectly with the tenderness of the meat and the heat of the sauce.

For a brief moment, Lisa was nine years old again.

Matt was punching her in the arm for whatever arcane reasons brothers hit their sisters. Mom and Dad would talk about their day at work, interrupting periodically to unenthusiastically tell their children to stop fighting, fully aware that nothing would stop the endless dance between siblings.

Even as she swallowed, Matt suddenly got older. He was telling her all about the Umbrella Corporation and the things they did.

And she thought about Fadwa.

The rest of the veal didn't taste as good.

"Something wrong?" Alice asked.

"No," Lisa lied. More truthfully, she said, "This is *great*. Best I've had—"

"Since the Bronx?"

"Yes, since the Bronx. Something wrong with that, Ohio girl?"

"Not at all."

By the time they got to dessert—Lisa ordered tiramisu, Alice ordered tartufo—Lisa knew something was going on. This wasn't just a social visit. It had taken Lisa until dessert to realize that she had been sharing all kinds of stories about her life with Alice, but she hadn't learned a damn thing about Alice that she didn't already know.

Hell, Alice hadn't even confirmed whether or not she and Spence were sleeping together.

This, Lisa knew, was an interrogation.

Now she was getting nervous. Did Alice know what she was doing?

No, that was ridiculous. If she knew, she'd do something a bit more demonstrative than take her out to lunch.

But maybe she suspected. Suspicions wouldn't be enough for her to act on.

Or would it? Alice didn't work for the cops, after all, she just worked for the corporation that gleefully let Mahmoud die. Cops would need things like probable cause. Alice Abernathy didn't need anything. If Matt's suspicions were right—and what Lisa had seen over the past two months made her think those suspicions were dead on—they would find a way to get rid of her if they thought she was any kind of risk.

When they were done, Alice paid for the meal with her corporate credit card. The old woman at the front asked how the meal was.

"It's the best I've ever had." Lisa was only slightly exaggerating.

"*Bene, bene*. You should come back."

"I hope I have the chance to," she said with a look at Alice.

Alice, tellingly, said nothing.

The same Lincoln Town Car with the same jowled driver was parked in front of the restaurant, parked right under a NO STANDING sign. Lisa wondered if it had been there all along, and whether or not anyone from the Raccoon Police Department had come by.

Probably the driver looked at the cop with his bright blue eyes and said that he worked for Umbrella, and then the cop moved along.

Lisa pulled her battered old coat tightly around her-

self. She suddenly felt much colder than warranted even by the fall temperatures.

The ride back to the mansion was unusually quiet. Although the lunch had been full of gossip, the tension level had risen steadily as it progressed. Lisa knew that something was going on, but she for damn sure didn't know what, and this sudden silent treatment from Alice wasn't helping matters.

As the Town Car pulled onto the road that led to the mansion, Alice suddenly leaned forward. "This is fine, we'll walk the rest of the way."

"We will?"

Alice nodded, opening the door. "Charge it to my account."

"Sure," the driver said nonchalantly.

For the first time since she paid the check, Alice smiled. It was that odd half-smile of hers again.

The wind chose the moment that Lisa exited the Town Car to whip up, sending the autumn leaves whirling around her feet. The driver closed the door after holding it open for both of them, favored each woman with a smile, then got back into the vehicle and departed, leaving more whirling leaves in his wake, making a noise like paper being crumpled.

They stood in a wooded area with the giant mansion in sight, maybe twenty minutes' walk. Without preamble, Alice started walking toward it, not bothering to look to see if Lisa would follow.

Still wondering what the other woman was playing at, Lisa followed.

"I know what you're doing," Alice said. "It took a while, but it wasn't too hard to figure out once I knew what I was looking for."

"Huh?" Lisa said, a hand of ice closing around her heart. She hoped that her genuine confusion about what was suddenly happening was enough to make it sound like she really didn't know what Alice was talking about.

As the pair of them passed by a winged statue, Alice said, "I didn't forget to change my password, Lisa."

Lisa stopped walking. In addition to the statue, which looked like it belonged in a museum's Ancient Greece section, they were surrounded by broken Doric columns, giving the area a Hellenic feel. The wind blew more strongly, and she pulled her coat tightly around her, the chill from more than the weather.

"What's going on, Alice?"

"I actually didn't put it together until last week. Something about you has bugged me since you started, but you'd already been checked out, and there wasn't anything amiss in your file. Your story as to why you turned us down six years ago but came to us looking for work now checked out, too. It certainly tracked with the ups and downs of the job market in your field. But something was nagging me."

Alice's blue eyes grew as cold as the wind that continued to keep the brown leaves swirling.

"I got where I am now by paying attention to things that nag me. So I just kept an eye on you. Then I noticed something."

She reached into her pocket and pulled out a small, silver device. About the size of a PDA, Lisa recognized it as something Umbrella's techs had been working on: a mini-DVD player that their employer would introduce onto the market as soon as the mini-DVDs they'd pioneered—about a third of the size of the common disc—became commonplace.

Alice activated the device, and the screen lit up first with the stylized logo of the corporation: a rotating U with an umbrella resting atop it, the umbrella's handle between the two prongs of the letter. Then the image switched to that of Lisa sitting at her desk.

Lisa closed her eyes and sighed. The ubiquitous security cameras. She herself performed regular checks of the cameras to make sure they were functioning properly.

The recording from the camera played out: Lisa on the phone, talking with someone. Alice had left the volume turned down, so it wasn't until Lisa was able to make out the image on her monitor that she remembered that she had been talking to Dr. Rosamonte down in Pharmaceuticals about a month or two earlier. She recognized the code that applied to the doctor's account. As she had with Alice the other day, Lisa had walked Rosamonte through the process of trying the password again, realizing that she hadn't updated it in the requisite eight days, and so she reset it.

As with Alice, for a brief instant, she saw what Rosamonte had on her monitor before the security kicked in.

And only then did Lisa realize her mistake: she peered intently at the monitor. Anybody watching her on the security camera would know just from the expression on her face that she was studying every pixel on that monitor during that all-too-fleeting moment.

She remembered a disparaging comment Matt had made once about her lack of a poker face—m fact, it was right after he cleaned her out during a friendly family game Christmas night when they were both nomet from college.

"Once I realized that your little password-change rule had an ulterior motive, I looked at your file again." Again that odd smile. "I have to give you credit for that—it's the perfect cover. It's a good security procedure, well within your job description. Hell, it shows initiative and brains. But you were also using it to try to find something. Once I knew you were looking for something, I knew what to look for in your file."

Alice leaned against the winged statue. Lisa asked hoarsely, "What'd you find?"

"Your brother, for one. A former Federal Marshal, but one who retired under odd circumstances a few years ago. But that wasn't what really got my attention. After all, that was in your initial background check, and if there was anything weird about your brother, it probably would've come up then. But then there was Mahmoud al-Rashan."

The hand of ice became a tightly clenched fist.

Alice's odd smile became a full-fledged grin. She

straightened up and walked toward Lisa, putting an encouraging hand on her shoulder.

"Don't panic too much, I only found the connection between you and al-Rashan after a month of computer searches that I did in my spare time. It gets *very* boring on mansion duty some days, and even Spence has his endurance limits."

Despite herself, Lisa actually returned the grin.

But it didn't last. She couldn't stop thinking about who this woman was, and what she could do Lisa—and to Matt.

And to Mart's organization.

"Once I realized that you and al-Rashan were coworkers and friends, it all came together. Pursuing a job with the same corporation that was all but responsible for your friend's death, to the point where you relocated from the city you'd lived in all your life, a relocation you'd rejected six years earlier. Sure, there were circumstances to explain all of that—but not why you were so aggressively trying to get peeks at stuff you aren't cleared for."

Lisa's breaths started coming more shallowly. As Alice reached into her pocket, Lisa feared that a gun with a silencer would come out of it. Or would she even bother with a silencer? They were in the middle of nowhere, and the only person likely to hear the gunshot was Spence, and he was on Alice's side.

But all Alice did was put the mini-DVD player away.

"What did you think of what you saw?"

Lisa blinked. "What?"

On my monitor. What did you think of it?"

Honesdy, Lisa said, "I don't know what to think. That creature was—it was a nightmare. And that virus—it looked like something we were developing, not studying. Not something natural. And certainly that—that *thing* wasn't natural."

"It's a T-virus, and you're right, it's not at all natural. Believe it or not, it came about from a study into/Some-thing that would retard the aging process=atfointment that would keep the skin cells from aging."

"A glorified wrinkle cream, you mean?"

Alice raised an eyebrow. "A bit more than that, but yes. However, the virus does mores—a lot more. Inhaling it is fatal. It has a one hundred percent kill rate—"

Again, Lisa shivered.

"—and it keeps the body animated after death."

"What?" Lisa asked incredulously. They had just veered into bad science fiction territory. Or maybe back to those godawful monster comics of Matt's.

But the creature with no eyes on Alice's computer screen wasn't the flight of fancy of a 1950s-era comic-book artist. That was real.

"The body still generates electrical impulses for some time after it dies," Alice said. "The T-virus works by stimulating cells."

"So they've created a killer that turns you into a zombie?"

Alice nodded. "It could be a brutal biological weapon," she said, understating the case somewhat, "and there are certain people in the U.S. government—"

and other governments—who'd pay top dollar for it. Developing it is in violation of half a dozen domestic laws and half a dozen more international ones."

"Why—why are you telling me this?" Lisa swallowed. "Are you just telling me because you're going to kill me?"

The weird smile came back. "I may look like a Bond girl, Lisa, but I'm not a Bond villain. I didn't bring you here to kill you. I brought you here to talk to you."

"About what?"

"I thought that was obvious. After all, Mahmoud al-Rashan was your friend—and I can't imagine that the settlement Umbrella gave his wife did much to alleviate her grief. It took a lot of guts to do what you did." Alice took a long breath. "You want the virus?"

Lisa didn't let herself say anything for several seconds. This was the dangerous part. She had no idea if she could trust Alice or not. But then, she *could* very easily have killed Lisa by now, and without ever telling her why.

On the other hand, if this was legitimate, it was the ticket she and Matt needed.

Alice knew about Mahmoud. But there was no indication that she knew about Mart's organization. There was no need to let her know that she wasn't working entirely on her own.

Struggling to keep her voice neutral, she said, "I might."

"I can help you *get* the virus. I have access to security plans, surveillance codes, the works."

Alice hesitated.

"But—?" Lisa prompted.

"But there's going to be a price."

That, to Lisa's mind, was a given. "Name it."

Speaking very slowly, Alice said, "You have to guarantee me that you'll bring this corporation down."

Lisa came within a hairsbreadth of laughing in Alice's face. That wasn't a price, that was a gift.

But she didn't. Instead, she forced herself to keep focused on the mission, and most importantly not to expose Matt and his people.

"What makes you think I want to bring anyone down? Maybe I just want to use the virus to kill the people who killed Mahmoud."

Again, that damned smile of hers. At this point, Lisa just wanted to smack it off the other woman's face.

"You're not that type, Lisa. Trust me, I know killers. I've spent all my adult life surrounded by them, on both sides of the law. You don't have it in you. What you do have is outrage, and that's what I need."

Something else occurred to Lisa. "Why can't you do this yourself?"

"I'm too far inside. There are ways they can shut me down. You're still pretty clean, though. You've only been here a couple of months; they haven't been able to sink their claws all the way into you yet." Alice's voice had taken on an almost melancholy tone. "If I try it won't work. To be honest, it may not work for you, either. These people are good."

Lisa took in a deep breath through her nose and let it

out through her mouth. "And if I screw it up, you're still clear."

Alice smiled. "You're not nearly as stupid as Spence looks." The smile fell. "This is a dangerous game, Lisa. You sure you want to play it?"

"Completely sure." Lisa had already had this conversation with Matt a dozen times and herself about a million times. And in the end, it always came down to the same thing.

She thought about Fadwa.

After that, it was easy.

SIX

THE ONLY THING THE RED QUEEN'S SECURITY cameras picked up was the human figure in the Hazmat suit.

Somehow, someone had found a way to get into the suit without the ubiquitous cameras recording the action.

However, the Red Queen, despite her artificial intelligence, was still at heart a literal-minded machine. The person in the Hazmat suit entered the proper security codes to get through the titanium-reinforced door to the temperature-regulated room that housed the T-virus. Therefore, the computer did not question the identity of the individual, even though the suit's reflective faceplate sufficiently hid the person's identity from the cameras.

The first thing the figure did was walk over to one of

the utility closets and remove a hypo-gun and a metal case. While not as well reinforced as the door—that was impossible to achieve without sacrificing portability—the case was impenetrable by most standards when sealed. As for the gun, it fit neatly into one of the case's slots. All the other slots were intended to house small cylindrical tubes.

The figure walked over to the far wall. That wall included a window of PlastiGlas, a stronger version of Plexiglas that Umbrella had patented the year before. Under the window sat a horizontal slot, which the figure opened by activating a control. It slid downward, allowing the case to be placed into the small chamber on the other side of the window and slot.

Smoky condensation puffed out through the slot, as the temperature inside the chamber was quite low, and only the Hazmat suit kept the figure from feeling the overwhelming cold that issued forth.

The slot closed once the case was ensconced within. The activating of several other controls brought about two more actions: two waldoes unfurled from sides of the PlastiGlas window and the bottom of the chamber slid open to reveal fourteen vials. The latter action was only possible when the slot below the window was shut. Manipulating the waldoes, the figure systematically placed each of the vials into the slots. Each vial contained corkscrew-shaped tubes that looked like a cross between a DNA double helix and a Silly Straw. Half were filled with a deep blue liquid, the other half with a liquid in a kind of sick green.

""The T-virus and the anti-virus.

Worth millions to Pharmaceuticals as the basis of a revolutionary product that would allow vain middle-aged people to look more like vain younger people.

Worth billions on the open market in its raw form as a biological weapon.

Behind the reflective faceplate, the figure smiled. This was a weapon of mass destruction beyond any world leader's wildest dreams—or nightmares.

Once all fourteen vials were in place, the case shut automatically, and sealed itself. Four circular dials on the four corners of the case lid rotated ninety degrees, indicating that the case was sealed tighter than a proverbial drum. Only someone with the key code could open it now.

With the tray cleared of the vials and the case sealed, the computer—literal-minded as ever—would allow the slot to open once again. When it did, the figure grabbed the case and brought it out of the temperature-controlled room and into the adjacent laboratory.

Like all the office spaces in the Hive, the lab was utilitarian, favoring cold metal and hard plastics, not only in the furnishings, but everything from the moulding to the computer desktops. It had no warmth to it at all. Like a tomb.

Soon enough, it would be a tomb in reality as well as imagery.

The figure removed the Hazmat suit, put on a pair of rubber gloves, and entered the keycode. The case obligingly opened, an action that served two functions: to

verify that the keycode worked and to allow the figure access to one of the vials containing the blue liquid.

Pulling out the vial with a protected hand, the figure sealed the case once again, placed it in a duffel bag, zipped the bag up, and hoisted it onto one shoulder.

Before departing the lab, the figure tossed the vial toward the center of the room, then turned, exited, and closed and locked the door.

The vial tumbled end over end through the air in a graceful arc until it collided with the edge of one of the metal desks.

Glass shattered. Interior tubing broke. Shards splayed out onto the cold metal floor, blue liquid pooling around it.

A miasma emitted from the blue liquid into the air.

It headed toward the air-conditioning vents.

Maintaining as complex an underground system as the Hive required tremendous feats of engineering. It also required a beyond-top-of-the-line air-conditioning system that regulated the constant flow of oxygen and carbon dioxide in proper amounts to keep the five hundred people living and working there alive and comfortable—not to mention the assorted lab animals and guard dogs.

It was an efficient system—it had to be, or the Hive would not be viable.

So it didn't take long at all for the T-virus to make its deadly way through the complex.

The Red Queen, still literal-minded, had not blinked when the figure removed all the samples of the deadliest

virus ever created by the human race, because the figure had entered all the right security codes.

But when that same virus was detected in the air of the Hive, there was only one thing she could do.

Evacuating the Hive would not be practical. It was physically impossible to remove all five hundred and twenty-three human beings from the underground complex without risking the virus spreading.

Which meant that the those human beings were as good as dead, as was any other living creature within the Hive that breathed the air provided by the beyond-top-of-the-line air-conditioning system.

The Red Queen's first directive was self-preservation, which meant preservation of the Hive.

She began the process of sealing off the Hive. That would take about fifteen minutes.

Then she'd do the rest.

SEVEN

MARK TORVALDSEN LOVED HIS JOB.

He'd just started working for the Umbrella Corporation, and today was his first day in the Hive, Umbrella's state-of-the-art underground facility. True, he had to live in a big hole in the ground. On the other hand, he had a five-year guaranteed contract and was working in his dream job. The research and development he'd be doing in Pharmaceuticals put him on the cutting edge of his field.

The best part, though, was the five-year contract.

Through high school and college, Mark had formed several close friendships, primary among them being Vince Markinson, Jack Annichiarico, and Eleanor Wu. The "awesome foursome" they called themselves, and they'd been inseparable throughout their teen years, at-

tended each others' major life events—including Vince's wedding to his on-again-off-again girlfriend, and Jack's and Eleanor's wedding to each other—and still got together once a month for their Bad Movie Night.

Unfortunately, Bad Movie Night had been getting to be somewhat depressing of late. After making big bucks during the dot-com boom doing Quality Assurance for companies who thought that acquiring a cool-sounding URL was the ticket to fame and fortune, Vince soon lost first his job, then his wife. Two years later, he was struggling to find freelance work, and seriously considering taking a job driving a cab. Jack, after moving from computer programming to management, found himself out of work, and his programming skills too out of date to make him employable in a depressed economy. Just last week, Eleanor was downsized when the accounting firm she worked for decided to cut costs.

Meanwhile, Mark was riving in fear of his own employment prospects by the growing instability of his own company. Profits were down, and it looked very likely that the company was going to go under.

Instead, the company was bought by its primary competitor: the Umbrella Corporation.

Shortly thereafter, they dissolved the company and laid off all of the employees. But some were offered new positions within Umbrella. Mark was flattered to be one of them, especially since they offered more security, more money, and more interesting work.

Given what his closest friends were going through, having to live in a hole in the ground seemed a small price to pay.

He wasn't sure if he'd be able to attend Bad Movie Night for a while, but that was looking more and more like it was a good thing. Vince was getting increasingly depressed, and Eleanor's ability to stay employed was the only thing keeping her and Jack going. Much as he loved the idea of viewing *Evil Brain from Outer Space* or *The Incredibly Strange Creatures Who Stopped Living and Became Mixed-Up Zombies* with his oldest and dearest friends, Mark had the feeling that the Bad Movie Nights weren't going to be any fun for some time.

Least of all for the one person in the group still gainfully employed.

Not that his new job would give him much time for fun.

But that was okay. At least he *had* a job ...

The residence they provided for him in the Hive was actually nicer than his apartment in downtown Raccoon City had been, and the cafeteria was well stocked. Mark could barely boil water, and the idea of living somewhere where the food was provided appealed to him greatly.

On this, his first morning at the new job, he had only a cup of coffee. Never much of a breakfast eater, Mark really only needed his morning caffeine to get himself started, and that did him until he took lunch at around one or so. The cafeteria had a nice French roast, and he had served himself a cup with some milk and Equal. He

didn't bother with a lid—he preferred his coffee luke-warm, and leaving the top exposed cooled it down faster.

He headed toward the elevator that would take him from the cafeteria level to his office in Pharmaceuticals. Coffee securely in his right hand, the gray jacket of his brand-new suit slung over his right arm.

Someone collided with his back, sending him stumbling forward, and jostling his right arm.

A sharp stab of heat seeped into his chest right over his heart where the still-hot coffee spilled on his new white shirt, and a great deal of the liquid splattered onto the jacket he had over his right arm as well.

Mark looked up to see the retreating form of the person who had bumped him, moving purposefully down the hall, not having even broken stride after the collision.

"Thank you!" Mark cried out in annoyance, but whoever it was didn't even turn around.

Finishing his approach to the elevator bank, Mark inspected the damage. His ID badge, clipped to his shirt pocket, was dripping coffee, and the stain had gone through both his white shirt and his undershirt. He'd paid hundreds of dollars for this suit.

Next time, Mark promised himself, he was going to grab a lid.

A pretty young woman with curly hair looked at Mark with sympathy.

"Some people," she said sympathetically.

"Yeah," Mark muttered. He looked up from his

stained clothing to see that the woman had big, beautiful eyes. He ventured a smile. "It's a brand-new shirt."

"New suit too?" she asked.

Mark wondered if his first-day jitters were that obvious. "Yeah. First day."

The woman nodded. "Men don't usually get that worked up over a stain like that unless the suit's new."

Chuckling, Mark said, "Yeah, well, I've hardly gotten to use it."

He looked down at her ID badge, which gave her name as Ella Fontaine. Mark wondered idly if she was single. Not that there was good reason to wonder this, since he knew damn well that he'd never work up the courage to actually ask her out if she was. The only dates he'd gone on since college were those train-wreck blind dates Jack and Eleanor had set him up with over the last couple of years which, if anything, made his fear of talking to women even more pronounced.

With a low chime, the elevator announced its arrival. A man in a gray suit exited, and Mark, Ella, a woman in the white shirt, pants, and coat indicating someone who worked in one of the labs, and a few others got on. A wretched Muzak rendition of Simon & Garfunkers "Sound of Silence" wafted over the speakers.

About two seconds after the elevator started moving, it lurched to a halt again. The display had just flipped *from 11 to 10*. A shrill tone sounded, catching Mark off guard.

"What is that?"

"Fire drill," Ella said matter-of-factly. "Looks like we'll be taking the stairs."

"Taking them where?" Mark asked. "We're underground."

"Up." She spoke with the tone of someone who had been through the process dozens of times. "There's a section on the top level that has another staircase that leads to the main office in downtown Raccoon. We usually don't have to go that far, though, just to the section up top. Then when the drill's over, we head back to our offices."

Mark supposed that, all things considered, fire safety was something they had to be especially concerned with in the Hive.

After an interminable time—Mark's watch said it was fifteen seconds, though it had felt like an hour—he pushed his way toward the display.

"Shouldn't the doors *open* or something?"

He tapped the DOOR OPEN button repeatedly, but nothing happened.

The alarm kept going, though.

"It's supposed to stop at the nearest floor," Ella said.

Mark turned around to see that she, too, had moved forward.

Then the lights in the elevator went out.

Emergency lights came on a moment later, but now the tiny space of the elevator felt even tinier in the much dimmer illumination.

The fire alarm had also stopped. As annoying as it was, Mark found he preferred it to the deathly quiet that ensued in its wake.

Mark felt panic well up inside him. Sweat started to bead on his brow and elsewhere.

A small part of his brain registered that his chest was getting sweaty too, which meant it was going to mix with the coffee. That small part wanted to giggle hysterically at the idea of salty coffee.

Mark had never considered himself especially claustrophobic before. In fact, he'd happily hid in closets as a kid, particularly when he was playing hide-and-seek with his two brothers, and he certainly would never have agreed to work in the Hive if he had any problem with enclosed spaces.

But then, he had never been trapped in an unmoving, dimly lit elevator before, either. He was starting to get nostalgic for the Muzak "Sound of Silence."

Ella, meanwhile, had the presence of mind to grab the emergency phone. Mark admired her good sense, and thought maybe he would have the courage to ask this one out.

"Hello?" she said into the phone.

A moment of silence passed.

"Hello?" she said again, more forcefully this time.

The sweat on Mark's brow intensified proportionately to the increased urgency in Ella's tone.

When she started pushing buttons next to the phone, seemingly at random, Mark feared the worst.

"The line's dead."

Now Mark knew that the sweat and the spilled coffee were intermingled and it was even odds as to whether or not his perspiration would stain the new shirt more than

the coffee. He could feel his heart pounding against his rib cage.

He clutched his coffee cup so tightly in his right hand that the cardboard started to dent. WitiVhisJeftrne hit the ALARM button, which did nothing, then started punching buttons at random.

"What's going on? Has this ever happened before? We have to get *out* of here! We *have* to get *out* of here!"

He started pounding the door.

One of the other men in the elevator said, "Take it easy."

Mark turned angrily on the man. "*You* take it easy!" Now his heart felt like it was about to burst out of his chest, his breaths coming more rapidly.

"Quiet!" Ella cried.

Blinking, Mark looked over at Ella, who was holding up a hand. He tried desperately to get his breathing, at least, under control.

"Quiet," she said again, now speaking in a whisper.

Ella was looking up and squinting as if trying to hear something.

Mark couldn't hear anything, except for the pounding of his heart.

Then he caught it. A low buzz, increasing in intensity.

Another alarm?

Then as it got louder, he realized what it was.

Screams.

People screaming.

There was something else, too. A low rumbling that was just under the screaming sounds.

At its loudest, Mark was able to place the screaming: it was just to his left.

Now the sweat that seemed to cover every inch of Mark's body went cold as he started to realize what it was he was hearing.

Both the screaming and the rumbling started to diminish.

That, Mark knew, would happen as the next elevator over plunged downward.

The screams faded once again into a low buzz. The rumbling went away completely.

Mark closed his eyes and tried again to get his breathing under control and failed miserably—mainly because he knew what was next. He waited for the inevitable subsequent sound.

A crunching, explosive noise mixed with wrenched metal and the springing sound of metal cables whipping around. The elevator had hit bottom.

"Oh my God." Ella's voice sounded hollow and lifeless.

A description that, Mark feared, would soon apply to this elevator.

This sort of thing wasn't supposed to happen. This was the Umbrella Corporation. They made the best computer equipment and health-care products in the country. They had the wherewithal to build the most amazing underground complex in the history of humanity.

This was not a company that built elevators that plunged to their doom during fire drills.

Mark heard a lot of screams. That elevator was full. People were dead.

This wasn't supposed to happen. He was supposed to be starting his new dream job, one that would keep him gainfully employed for at least five years.

People were *dead*.

Sure, people died, but not like this. They died in car accidents or plane crashes, like Mark's Uncle Victor, or of old age or disease like Grandma and Grandpa. They didn't die during fire drills on their first day at work. That just didn't happen. Mark refused to believe it.

Then, all of a sudden, his stomach felt like it was slamming up into his chest as the elevator started plummeting to its doom.

When he was a kid, Mark always used to love roller coasters. Even as his brothers screamed in joyous panic at the twists and turns the coaster took them on, and yelled in thrilling fear at the feel of the air as it slammed into their faces, Mark would always sit next to them with a big grin on his face. He loved being tossed around like that.

This panic, however, was nothing like joyous and the fear was quite real.

So this time, Mark screamed.

Dimly, he registered that the other occupants of the elevator were also screaming, but that wasn't as important to Mark as the stunning realization that he was going to die.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. He was starting a new job. He'd have the job for at least five years. He'd

be gainfully employed. He wouldn't be living in the misery that his friends were toiling in.

A screeching sound penetrated the wall of screams, and Mark realized that the emergency brakes were (finally!) kicking in. Moments later, the elevator slammed to a halt, and Mark collapsed to the ground, both his jacket and what was left of his coffee spilling to the floor.

He clambered quickly to his feet, reveling in the feeling of being alive.

Peculiarly, the most overwhelming feeling he had was elation that he'd be alive to attend the next Bad Movie Night. In fact, he was determined to go no matter what kind of hoops he had to jump through. The prospect of being able to see *Bride of the Monster* with his closest friends was suddenly the happiest thought he could have.

Ella had already risen, and she was now walking to the doors.

Mark looked up to see that the elevator had apparently stopped on the third floor.

He then looked over to see that Ella had removed a Swiss Army knife from somewhere on her person, and was using its blade to try to pry open the elevator doors. He was about to offer assistance—Ella was tiny, and couldn't have had much upper-arm strength—when the doors, with a screeching noise that was eerily similar to the emergency brakes, started to separate.

She then methodically stuck her fingers between the doors and started to pry them apart. One of the other men got up to give her a hand.

"I can't get a good grip," Ella muttered.

Noticing that there was a blank wall on the other side of the door, Mark said, "We're not on a floor."

"Yeah, we are." One of the men pointed to the floor.

Only then did Mark notice the small shaft of light poking through.

From the looks of it, the elevator had finally come to a halt just as it was about to pass the third floor. The bottom of the elevator was currently about two feet down from the top of the third-floor elevator doors.

Ella let the doors close on the blade of the knife, then got down on her knees, moving the knife blade with her toward the floor. Mark winced as the blade scraped against the door, giving him shivers up and down his spine.

All things considered, though, he didn't really mind it.

Especially given the alternatives.

Again, Ella squeezed her fingers between the doors, trying to get them to part. Being able to stick her fingers farther out through the gap between the top of the outer doors and the bottom of the elevator's inner doors, she was able to get them open at least a little bit.

Enough, at least, to see the third floor, get someone's attention, and ask for help.

Maybe ask what in God's name was going on, while they were at it.

"My God."

Mark looked up. Ella's voice sounded, if it were possible, even more hollow and lifeless.

His breaths started going shallow again. He wasn't sure how much more of this he could take.

A fervent desire to go hide in a corner warred in Mark's mind with a desperate need to see what Ella saw. Against his better judgment, the latter prevailed.

Blinking a fresh influx of sweat out of his eye, he practically pushed Ella to the side. "Let me see."

Bodies.

Mark saw at least seven or eight people lying on the floor. They seemed to have just fallen down in a random pattern. Some wore suits, others the all-white lab outfits. Not surprisingly, given that it was his first day, Mark didn't recognize any of them. Some, he couldn't even see their faces.

He was no doctor. The view he had was obstructed.

But he knew the instant he looked at them that all those people were dead.

They weren't moving. They weren't *breathing*. And they weren't going to.

"We have to get out of here." Mark tore his gaze from the bodies and stood up. "We have to get out of this building!"

One of the other men gave him a *you're damn right* look, and the two of them knelt down and tried to pry the doors farther apart.

"Here, give me a hand."

Mark curled his fingers around one door while the other guy did likewise for the opposite door. With all his might, fueled by fear and desperation, he pulled.

The doors didn't move any farther apart.

"That's as far as they'll go."

The other man nodded. "They're caught on something."

A voice from behind Mark said, * QiatV wide enough."

Mark turned to see Ella shrugging her jacket off.

"I think I can squeeze through," she said. "I'll get help."

Looking over the slim woman, Mark had to agree that, if nothing else, she was the only person in the elevator who even had a chance of getting through the tiny gap-

He also promised himself that, if they did somehow get out of this, he was *definitely* asking this woman out.

Ella got down on her stomach, snaked her right arm through the gap, then started to worm her head in.

After a moment, her forward motion stopped.

"I'm stuck. You're going to have to push."

Mark immediately grabbed her back and started guiding it forward.

"That's it. A bit more."

Just as her head got all the way through, Mark heard a sharp metallic sound.

"What is *that*?" he asked, even though, in his gut, he knew what it was.

"Oh Christ," said the other guy, "it's the brakes!"

Another crack. This time the elevator lurched slightly.

"Get out! We've got to get out!" He started to push Ella forward.

Ella screamed, "I can't move!"

Mark noticed that her neck was stuck in the gap—the doors had closed slightly, and now it was too narrow for either her head or her shoulders. Undaunted, he kept pushing, but her shoulders simply were not going to get through.

A third crack.

Then a fourth.

This time, Mark's stomach slammed into his throat. The elevator free-fell downward.

But this time, he didn't scream.

He couldn't.

But he did hear Ella scream.

And that was why Mark could not scream, because he realized that Ella's head and arm were still jutting out into the third floor even as the elevator was about to plunge past that floor.

Then it stopped.

Again, Mark was knocked to the floor, but the fall wasn't as bad, as he had already been kneeling down. He quickly looked over to see that Ella was still lying on the floor. The elevator was now fully on the third floor, the bottom of the elevator even with the third-floor elevator bay.

A wave of relief washed over Mark at the sound of Ella's voice. It was barely above a whisper, but at least she still had a head with which to form the words.

"Pull me back."

The words were barely audible, but it was enough to spur both Mark and the other man to action. They pulled

on her legs, trying to get her back within the comparatively safe confines of the elevator.

"Comparatively" being the operative word. Was any place in the Hive truly safe? Dead bodies in the next elevator over. Dead bodies in the elevator bay TWiio knew how many other dead bodies?

This was just a fire drill.

Wasn't it?

Suddenly, Mark found it hard to breathe. And there was an odd smell in the air.

"Push her out of the way," the other guy said. "We've gotta get out!"

But Mark was having trouble breathing—and it had nothing to do with his state of fear. This was more than that. He had a tightness in his chest.

"Pull me back inside!"

Ella was screaming now. Mark looked down to see that her head was still wedged between the doors. The other guy was making a half-hearted effort to pull the doors apart, but he was overcome by a coughing fit.

Mark tried to move over to the doors to help, but he couldn't make his limbs work properly.

Then his stomach lurched downward. The elevator was moving *upward*.

Again, Ella screamed.

Mark Torvaldsen would spend the rest of his life hearing the squelching sound of flesh and bone being crushed as the floor of the elevator and the upper portion of the third-floor elevator doorframe passed each other,

severing Ella's head from the rest of her body in as grisly a manner as possible.

Luckily for Mark, the rest of his life was only a few more seconds. He could now taste the gas in the air, even as breathing became more and more impossible.

His last thoughts were regret that he wouldn't be able to invite Ella to Bad Movie Night.

EIGHT

"SORRY ABOUT LAST NIGHT," DR. MARIANO Rodriguez said, as if that made everything better.

Dr. Anna Bolt scowled at him as she entered the elevator that would take them down to the viral lab where they both worked. He was standing there waiting in the car, holding a cup of coffee in his hand, just as she was. They both took their coffee with cream and Sweet 'N Low—not Equal or sugar—which was something she once found endearing. Next to him stood their lab tech, Johnny-Wayne Carlson, who was holding a plate containing food for the rabbits they were experimenting on.

Mariano—or "Mo," as she called him whenever she wanted to annoy him, like, say, right now—had that mischievous smile on his face. It was the most adorable

sight in all creation when they first started working together. Now, after three straight broken dates, it mostly made her want to punch him. Repeatedly.

Johnny-Wayne, on the other hand, was just smiling like a normal person. Once, Anna had asked Johnny-Wayne why he was smiling all the time in the lab, and he said, " 'Cause I usually gotta pay good money for theater like what you two give me for free every day."

Anna was glad that *somebody* was getting entertainment out of it. Mariano was a brilliant biologist, a damn good-looking man, and fabulous in bed. He also had the emotional maturity of a particularly troubled nine-year-old, only with less couth.

Their first date wasn't really a date as such. He came to her apartment, they ripped each others' clothes off, and had several hours of the best sex Anna had had since that amazing fling during finals week at Johns Hopkins.

Their second date, which actually involved non-work-related conversation and being out in public, was a disaster.

Every attempt at a third date had met with failure, as Mariano had managed to not show up for some lame reason or other. She was getting tired of it.

Last night had been the most recent attempt at that third date. She was left waiting at the train station half the night before she finally gave up and went back to her apartment.

As she entered the elevator, she said, "Whatever." She faced the front of the car, her back to him.

"I'm really sorry, Anna, I just fell asleep. You know how long we've been working on the T-viraV-and I haven't been getting enough sleep, and—"

"I *said*, 'Whatever,' Mo." She didn't bother to turn around to address him.

He winced. "Do you have to call me that?"

Johnny-Wayne tried and failed to suppress a giggle.

"Show up for a date some time, and I'll think about it," she said matter-of-factly.

"Look, you know how hard I've been working, and—"

Now she did turn around, and fixed him with as withering a gaze as she could manage first thing in the morning. "Yeah, I know how hard you've been working, Mo. You know how I know that? I've been working *just as hard*. The same bosses that are crawling up your ass have taken up residence in mine. And yet, somehow, some way, I was able to haul myself to the train station for our date."

"Yeah, but you're a girl. You don't need as much sleep."

Anna blinked. "What?"

"They did a study. Women don't need as much sleep as men do. It has to do with the different biological needs and differences in REM sleep. Plus there's the estrogen factor." Mariano spoke with the same tone of authority that he used when he was presenting a paper in his field. Of course, his field had nothing to do with the study of circadian rhythms, sleep patterns, or the effects of gender on the same.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me." Anna stared at Mariano in open-mouthed stupefaction.

Johnny-Wayne was having a much harder time keeping his laughter to himself now.

Mariano broke into that stupid smile of his again. "Yeah, I *am* kidding. But you almost bought it, didn't you?"

She turned back around so she didn't have to look at him. "No."

"Oh, come on, you bought it a *little*."

"No, I really didn't."

"You're no fun at all when you're angry, you know that?"

She rolled her eyes. "That's kind of the idea."

The elevator stopped at their floor, and she went out ahead of him.

"Look," he said, "I'll make it up to you."

"Really?" she asked dubiously.

"Yeah, really. Why don't we meet in the cafeteria tonight for dinner?"

She sighed, brushing one of her long locks of blond hair behind her ear. "I suppose it's a possibility."

"Good. Ten o'clock?"

She opened the door to their lab. The late hour was necessary, given the amount of overtime they were going to need to put in. "All right, ten. But maybe won't show this time."

"Why not?" Mariano asked petulantly.

"Because I'm busy."

At that, Mariano hit her with that mischievous

smile. Anna sighed, realizing that he was not going to take this seriously in the least.

But then, was there any reason to? As colleagues, they had a great deal in common. They were both bright young biologists leapfrogging their way toward the top of the field of viral research. Thanks to Umbrella's resources, they were doing work light-years ahead of anyone else's. In particular, they'd been taking Dr. Ashford's work, and bringing it to a whole new level.

Unfortunately, while they were more than able to work together, and had made some fantastic breakthroughs, once you got past the shop talk, they had nothing in common. She loved chamber music; he thought Britney Spears was deep. She loved to read American Civil War histories, Toni Morrison novels, and Agatha Christie mysteries; he found the sports pages of the *Raccoon City limes* to be taxing. Her definition of art was Monet; his was a Velvet Elvis.

But damn, was he good in bed.

Maybe she should just leave it at that.

Johnny-Wayne closed and sealed the door behind him, then went to feed Daffy, one of the rabbits. (Johnny-Wayne had suggested the name, saying it'd be after the cartoon character. When reminded that Daffy was the duck, and Bugs the rabbit, Johnny-Wayne shook his shaved head and said, "Damn—always get them two mixed up." However, they stuck with the appellation.) He knelt down by Daffy's cage—one of several along one wall—put the dish down into the slot, and watched as the white rabbit happily chowed down.

Anna and Mariano moved down the three stairs to the table in the middle of the room to get started on the day's work.

Before she could even set her coffee down, the fire alarm went off.

"Oh, Christ," Johnny-Wayne said, getting up from watching Daffy eat. "Not another fucking drill."

"Great," Anna muttered. "We're already two days behind, now they pull this shit."

Mariano grinned. "Hey, at least now we have an excuse. Our work's being disrupted." "I'd rather just get the work done." She gazed almost wistfully at the slides sitting on the desk in the middle of the lab, waiting to be put under the microscope for study. After the frustrations of the previous night—waiting around for Mariano to never show up, then a restless night of very little sleep—she wanted nothing more than to throw herself into her work.

Instead, she trudged back up the three stairs that led to the door.

With a sudden clunk, the sprinkler system activated. Water—ice-cold water—burst forth from the nozzles in the ceiling.

Cold, fear-filled panic gripped Anna, as she thought there was actually a fire in the lab.

However, a quick glance around the room revealed that thought to be absurd. Hell, most of the room and the equipment in the room was made of not-remotely-flammable plastic or metal or both. Obviously that stupid little-kid computer had a glitch.

"Shit!" she exclaimed.

"What the hell's going on?" Mariano asked.

Resisting an urge to ask her partner how she could possibly know what the hell was going on, she instead Darked orders. "Get the computers covered! Move it!"

"I'm trying!" Johnny-Wayne said even as he did as she said.

"Get the experiments—move them!" Even as the panic left, replaced by anger and a desire to protect their work, Anna still found herself gripped in cold, and she wondered whose bright idea it was to use water that was apparently brought straight in from the Arctic for the sprinkler system.

By the time she, Johnny-Wayne, and Mariano got the cages, computers, and slides covered in plastic, the water was up to her ankles, her long blond hair was now plastered to her forehead and back, and her white lab outfit would have made her a dandy entrant in a wet T-shirt contest.

She prayed that Mariano wouldn't notice and make a joke about it. As it was, she was suddenly very grateful that she had chosen to wear a nondescript white bra this morning, since her shirt was so wet, an observer would've been able to make out, say, a lace pattern. That, she didn't need.

Last night, as she sat in the train station, trying to come up with imaginative ways to fillet Mariano, she had thought she was at a low point in her life. Twenty-eight years old, living in a high-priced cave, with her only prospects for a relationship being a Britney Spears-

loving twit with a cute smile who nonetheless couldn't be relied upon to show up for a date.

Which wouldn't have been so bad if they weren't in a mostly isolated community of five hundred people. If she couldn't even do a relationship right under these circumstances...

And now this.

A totally fucked-up fire drill flooding her lab. If this kept up, they wouldn't just be two days behind. The clean-up of the water-logged lab would set them back a week or more.

Looking up, Anna saw the omnipresent security camera—the Red Queen's eyes and ears. Wading over to stand in front of the thing she yelled over the sound of the water that was still rushing into the lab through several nozzles, "There's no fire here! No fire!"

"The code doesn't work."

Ignoring Mariano, Anna instead repeated, "There's no fire here! No fire! What's wrong with you?"

"The door won't open." Mariano came back down the stairs and walked over to Anna. "This water isn't going anywhere."

Anna blinked. "What?"

"It's a sealed room."

"No shit, Sherlock. And here I thought the water was up to my knees because this room doubled as a fucking wading pool." She walked away from Mariano before he could make some kind of cute reply. She turned to Johnny-Wayne. "Help me with the doors."

"Oh, fuck the doors!" Johnny-Wayne went over to the far wall, opened the emergency door, and pulled out the axe that was standard issue in every room in the building, thus acquiescing to the Raccoon City fire code. As if an axe would do any good in a room like this.

Before Anna could stop him, Johnny-Wayne splashed across the room, building up as much speed as ! he could in knee-high water, and slammed the axe into

the window. He used the back end of the axe, since it was more of a sharp point.

Johnny-Wayne Carlson was a fairly big man, who worked out regularly, and could put a good amount of force behind an axe thrust. Based on how loudly he grunted, he used all his considerable strength when he hit the window with the axe.

One small pebble-sized piece of PlastiGlas popped out the other side.

"Great," Anna said. "Keep that up for another three hours or so, and we'll be home free."

"You got a better idea?"

Anna said nothing in response to that. She had nothing to say.

"Fine." Johnny-Wayne turned and tried the axe again.

Another pea-sized bit of PlastiGlas was dislodged by the action.

She looked over to see that Mariano was continuing to enter the code into the door, in the futile hope that maybe *this* time it would release the door.

The water crept up to her waist. She couldn't even feel her feet anymore.

Oddly enough, her primary thought was that she really regretted not getting another night in bed with Mariano.

That, she thought as the water continued to creep up her chest, would make the shittiest possible epitaph...

NINE

USA BROWARD WAS AS GIDDY AS SOMEONE about to go out on a first date with her dream boy, and as nervous as someone facing a firing squad.

The latter was the far more likely prospect.

Her stomach felt like it had been tied into half a dozen slipknots. She hadn't been able to hold down a single meal since her and Alice's lunch at Che Buono.

She and Alice had had several more illicit meetings, arranging to get her hands on the T-virus. Today was the day she would get it.

After the last meeting, she had set things up with Matt. That was more of a challenge, since she couldn't just call him on the phone—at least at first. She set up an e-mail account on a free service that was not likely to be traced to her. If somehow the e-mail was traced back

to the Hive, the person Umbrella would assign to find it would be her, and even if someone else in the company realized it was specifically her, she could chalk it up to her account being hacked. It might cause her some embarrassment, but she could live with that.

Once the account was set up, she sent out a mass e-mail to thousands of addresses with a text-only attachment that ninety percent of the e-mail programs in the country would interpret as spam and block. The remaining ten percent would get through and be deleted unread by the receiver. Anyone stupid enough to open an unsolicited attachment would find only a text file full of gibberish.

However, one of the addresses that received the spam was one she set up for her brother. Matt checked that address once a day, and waited for an e-mail from this particular address. The gibberish was in a code that Matt had given her from his days as a Federal Marshal. Any halfway decent cryptographer could probably crack it in about five minutes, but the circumstances under which a cryptographer would even know of the file's existence were extremely unlikely.

Sure enough, two days after she sent the e-mail, Lisa got a phone call.

"Hey Lisa, it's Matt."

Putting on a surprised face for the benefit of any coworkers that might be looking on—not to mention the Red Queen's surveillance—she said, "Matt? What's the matter? Are Mom and Dad all right?"

Matt laughed. "They're fine, really. What, I'm only

allowed to call my baby sister when there's a family crisis?"

"Allowed, no, but it's usually the only time you do call me. Besides, ever since you quit the marshals you've been penny-pinching. You wouldn't make a long-distance call unless it was an emergency."

"Well, it's not a long-distance call, actually, I'm in Raccoon."

Lisa blinked in mock-surprise. "What brings you out here?"

"Oh, just a visit. Got restless in San Francisco, so I thought I'd come up and visit my favorite sister."

"I'm your only sister, Matt."

"Okay, so it was easy to rank you first. Doesn't change the fact that I came up to see you. Can you get away? I can be there in two hours."

That was the important part. She had arranged to meet with Alice this morning in the mansion. Matt just informed her that he, too, could be at the mansion this morning—specifically two hours from now. That was perfect.

However, she still had a role to play. After all, she'd taken her leave for the month when she and Alice had lunch. "Damn, I can't today. I'd have to run it by my boss. Maybe tomorrow?"

"Maybe? Geez, Lisa, what're you doing down there, the Manhattan Project Part 2?"

Lisa swallowed. In a way, Matt's joke hit closer to home than she was entirely comfortable with. The T-virus was as deadly as the atomic bomb. Maybe deadlier.

Before she could reply to that, a high-pitched buzzing started.

"What's that noise?" Matt asked suddenly.

Sighing, Lisa said, "It's nothing. Fire drill."

"You're in a hole in the ground; what do they need with fire drills?"

"So we don't die a horrible death when something catches fire here in our hole in the ground. Look, call me back tomorrow morning, okay? I've got to go do the drill."

"Yeah, fine. Bye, sis."

Hanging up, Lisa got up and grabbed her gray suit jacket off the back of her chair. In some ways, this worked in her favor. The mild chaos of a fire drill would make it that much easier for her to sneak off and meet with Alice.

Along with everyone else, she headed toward the fire exit. The space that held her desk had two ways out, one toward the elevator bay, with fire stairs between the elevators and the fake windows; the other in the back leading to another set of stairs. The one by the elevator bay was wider and better lit, so everyone headed there.

Before she got to the bay, however, she saw a crowd congregating in the hall. Why weren't they moving forward?

"What's the problem?" she asked as she put on her jacket, flipping her dirty-blond hair out from under the jacket's collar.

"The doors won't open."

Lisa blinked. She peered through the crowd to see

that the PlastiGlas doors had shut, blocking access to the elevator bay. That wasn't supposed to happen until after the room was evacuated, unless there was an actual fire that necessitated sealing the room to prevent a spread.

"What about the ones at the back?" Lisa asked.

One of the new Technical Support guys said, "Locked as well."

This was going in a direction Lisa didn't like in the least. She was as familiar with the fire-suppression systems as anyone, and she ran through it in her head: the room was evacuated, sealed, and then flooded with halon gas until the fire went out. The halon would suck the oxygen out of the room, thus starving the fire.

The problem, of course, was that the gas would also starve any animal life of oxygen, which was why the system was designed not to seal the room until *after* the evacuation was complete. The sole exception to this was if the fire was so out of control that the lives of anyone inside would be just as forfeit if they weren't sealed in the room.

But there was no fire. And Lisa knew for a fact that the systems were working just fine.

Something was horribly wrong.

Several nightmare scenarios went through Lisa's head at once.

One was that they had traced her, and had sealed off this section, not because of a fire drill, but in order to make sure she herself didn't go anywhere.

Another was that the Red Queen was malfunctioning in some way, which would be even more of a problem,

since five hundred people's lives depended on the brat being in perfect working order. That shouldn't have been the case, though, since Lisa herself was as familiar with the computer's workings as anyone in the Hive, and she'd found nothing wrong.

But then, she'd been so distracted the last few days...

A third possibility was that Alice herself had betrayed Lisa.

Before a fourth possibility could even occur to her, she heard a nasty hissing sound. Within seconds, the air around her seemed to shimmer.

"Halon!" she cried, even as the gas started to burn her throat.

With each passing second, it became more impossible to breathe. Her fellow workers banged at the Plasti-Glas door in a futile effort to get out.

Lisa herself screamed, "Stop it!" at the Red Queen's security camera—the same one that Alice had shown her a recording from in the park days ago. The hypothesis that the brat had gone nuts was now foremost in what was left of her thoughts, and she wondered if indeed it had been her fault. Her mind hadn't really been on her job lately.

Right now, her mind was only on trying and failing to take another breath. "Stop it!" she cried again, more hoarsely, even as she collapsed to the floor, her legs suddenly unable to support her own weight.

The gas permeated the room, making it impossible to see.

All week, she'd been thinking about ways for the plan to go wrong, but this hadn't even made the list.

From the beginning, she knew that this endeavor might result in her death, but not this way. Not dying from a goddamn computer malfunction.

She tried to yell, "Stop it!" one last time, but she couldn't draw enough breath to formulate the scream.

She did manage to say, "I'm sorry," though. Whether it was to her coworkers, Matt, Alice, Fadwa, or Mahmoud, she couldn't say for certain. Maybe it was to all of them.

Unable to hold her eyes open, unable to stand, unable to breathe, she collapsed.

She thought about Fadwa.

After that, nothing.

TEN

MAJOR TIMOTHY CAIN DIDN'T TAKE ANY SHIT. He was born with a different name in Berlin back when the city was separated by a large wall. The third of four children, and the youngest boy, he had the misfortune to be on the wrong side of it. Shortly after Mother died, when he was sixteen, Father managed to secure a way for them to emigrate to the United States. Upon arrival, Father declared their name to be Cain—an Anglicization of their name in German—and gave all his children new names. They were now Michael, Anthony, Timothy, and Mary, because those, Father said, sounded like American names. Any time they used their old German names, Father would hit them until they stopped. Not being fools, all the children learned quickly to think of themselves with their new identities.

In gratitude to his new home, Timothy enlisted in the Army on his eighteenth birthday. Shortly thereafter, he was sent overseas to fight in the Gulf War. Father was happy that his son did so. Michael, who was three years older than Timothy, had moved to Chicago and become a police officer, Anthony had moved to San Francisco and lost touch with the rest of the family. As for Mary, though women could serve, she had no interest in doing so, preferring a career in business.

Timothy Cain became alive for the first time in the desert. He had always succeeded academically, but mostly by rote. He was a fast learner, but he never had much enthusiasm for it. The two years of school he'd attended since immigrating were difficult, as Timothy spoke with a thick German accent, which made him the target of teasing by his peers, and made it difficult to derive any kind of enjoyment from the learning experience.

Combat, though, he took joy in that, especially when that combat was against the enemies of the United States of America. And in the desert, nobody cared about his accent, except for a few idiots, and they all shut up once they saw Timothy Cain in action.

It didn't take long for him to distinguish himself, work his way up the ranks. He was leading his fellow soldiers into combat after only a few weeks, and his men would follow him anywhere. He had a natural charisma, an aptitude for tactics, and an especially fine ability to kill Saddam's footsoldiers. Showing the usual armed forces proclivity for obvious nicknames, he

quickly became known as "Able" Cain, because no matter how bad the mission, no matter how ridiculous the plan, no matter what it was you needed to get done, if you put Sergeant Timothy Cain in charge, it was going to get done. Period.

Cain learned many things in the desert, but the most important thing was that, contrary to what Father had always taught him, life was neither precious nor sacred.

Life was, in fact, cheap.

If life was such a glorious, magnificent, wonderful thing, then it wouldn't be so easy to take it away.

If life was a great gift, then he wouldn't be able to kill a fellow human being with one hand, as he did often in the Persian Gulf.

When his tour ended, he went to OCS to get his commission.

After several more years as an officer, he realized another important truth: there was more to life than the military.

That truth didn't so much come from plowing through the desert and blowing up the enemy, something at which he had frankly excelled. No, this truth came from the gentlemen in suits who worked for the Umbrella Corporation and recruited him to run their Security Division. "Able" Cain had served his country. In a sense, he still would be, for Umbrella had many government contracts, and provided services for Americans everywhere.

The main difference was that now he'd be recompensed with an obscene amount of money.

Having achieved the rank of major, Cain said yes, though he insisted that he still be referred to by his rank. He was also able to buy Father a house in Florida. When Michael was shot in the line of duty, and was going slowly insane at a desk job, Timothy made him the head of security for Umbrella's Chicago office. He tracked Anthony down in a crackhouse in Berkeley and got him cleaned up, paying for his detox. (That he later jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge was hardly Cain's fault.)

When Mary learned her husband was cheating on her, Cain paid for her divorce lawyer. Then, after the divorce was finalized, and Mary had taken the bastard for all he was worth and then some, Cain tracked the ex-husband down—living in a shitty little studio apartment in South Bend, Indiana—and shot him in the head.

Life was, after all, easy to take. But it was so much more satisfying to destroy someone first.

Timothy "Able" Cain brought a military efficiency to Umbrella. When Edgardo Martinez retired as head of Umbrella's "sanitation" strike team, Cain recommended an old friend that he'd met during his days in Special Forces to take his place. The man had spent his career to mat point in a variety of covert operations positions. His given name was lost to obscurity and dozens of clandestine missions. When he took the job, he went with the codename "One." It simplified things, he said.

One did his job superbly. He had a team of commandos that he'd hand-picked and hand-trained. He had pulled them from a variety of sources—police depart-

ments, the armed forces, jailhouses—and molded them into an enviable fighting force.

The yellow phone on Cain's desk was a direct line from One. It only rang when there was trouble.

It rang now.

Cain felt no trepidation as he picked it up, because Cain hadn't felt trepidation since he enlisted in the Army. As a teenager, sure, he felt trepidation all the time—he was in a new country, his skin was breaking out, he struggled with homework, he had difficulty with the language—but once he reached the desert, he never feared anything again.

Because he knew the secret.

Life was cheap.

"What's happening?" he asked as he picked up the phone.

One's deep, steady voice sounded on the other end. "The Hive's shut down."

Cain leaned forward in his comfortable leather chair, leaning his elbows on his oak desk. "What do you mean it's shut down?"

"Just what I said. Security measures have taken effect. No heat signatures. We're cut off from the entire complex. It's been locked down, and we can't reach Abernathy or Parks at the mansion."

That wasn't good. The only way the pair at the mansion would be incommunicado is if the security lockdown extended to the mansion. And that would only happen if things were totally disastrous.

No heat signatures meant probably nobody alive.

Five hundred dead employees definitely qualified as a disaster.

It was also possible that something had taken the ersatz married couple out. Cain had recruited Alice himself out of the Treasury Department, so he knew exactly what she was capable of. If someone or something had subdued her—well, that was disastrous, too.

"When did this happen?" he asked.

"Kaplan picked it up about fifteen minutes ago."

Knowing it was a stupid question—if One wasn't capable of thinking of this for himself, Cain wouldn't have hired him—he had to ask anyhow: "Can we get into the Red Queen to shut her down?"

"Kaplan's been trying, but she's also cut off from all externals. We can't get at her systems, processors—not even the surveillance cameras. Nothing. Only way to find out what's happening is to go in."

"The mansion's still open?"

"Yes."

"Not for much longer." Cain leaned back in his chair. This wasn't good. There was a lot of very important research going on in the Hive, but if any of it got out, there'd be hell to pay. The licker, the T-virus, the Nemesis Program, Project: Open Book—any one of them getting loose would be very bad for the corporation.

He immediately tapped some keys on the Umbrella laptop that sat to the right of the yellow phone on his desk, calling up the dossiers of who from One's staff was on duty today.

It was his primary team: the aforementioned Bart

Kaplan, a former FBI agent, One's second, and the resident computer expert; Olga Danilova, their field medic, formerly with the Russian Army; and four soldiers, Vance Drew, J.D. Hawkins, Rain Melendez, and Alfonso Warner, recruited out of, respectively, the NYPD, the CIA by way of the Navy SEALs, the LAPD, and the federal penitentiary located just outside Raccoon City. If anyone could find out what happened down there, it was them.

"You have a go," Cain said. "Procedure Three. You know the drill."

"Understood," One said without even a moment's hesitation. "We'll be airborne in ten."

That was one of the reasons why Cain liked One. He understood chain of command.

"Godspeed, One."

Cain hung up the yellow phone.

ELEVEN

HIS HANDS RAN GENTLY UP AND DOWN HER naked flesh, his callused fingers playing over her skin, feeling both rough and smooth at the same time.

His lips hungrily attacked hers, as if they were trying to consume each other. Their tongues explored—teasing, tasting, dancing.

He pulled her slim athletic form tight against his muscular body.

Nothing mattered right now but him as they rolled around the oh-so-comfortable mattress. Their bodies were intertwined, his arms wrapped around her torso, her legs wrapped around his waist.

She moaned in utmost ecstasy, as for the first time in years, she felt something. That's what had been missing for so long.

*She never wanted it to end.
Eventually it did...*

When she woke up, it was raining and her jaw hurt. The images from her dream—was it a dream?—faded slowly. Something about a man and a bed, but she couldn't bring it into focus. Or much of anything else.

The ground was cold against her sore jaw. She tried to prop herself up, only to feel a stabbing pain in her right shoulder.

She forced herself to focus, to take in her surroundings.

The first thing she realized was that the ground was cold because it wasn't ground. It was marble.

The rain was only coming down on her feet. It was the steady rhythm of a shower.

Gently rubbing her right shoulder with her left hand, she looked down. Aside from a crumpled shower curtain—which, based on the bent metal hooks along one end of it, had been ripped off the rod—she was naked.

Obviously something had happened in the shower. But what?

Her need to figure out what was going on led her to another stunning revelation. She had no idea who she was. Taking a deep breath, she tried to recall—anything. She knew that she was a woman lying naked in a marble shower. It was more like a big shower stall—the size of a bathtub, but with only a small lip all around, and just the one faucet.

That didn't make sense—she could identify marble, a faucet, a shower, tell the difference between a tub and a stall, yet she hadn't the first clue who or where she was. Gingerly, she got up. Her right shoulder and the right side of her face both still ached, but the ache was already receding. Just residual pain from falling down. Assuming she had fallen down. The evidence, at least, supported that. The way she was sprawled on the shower floor, the way the curtain had been ripped down with her—all of that pointed to her falling down, probably grabbing the curtain for support as she fell.

This only served to confuse her more. For whatever reason, she was having no trouble analyzing her situation, even drawing conclusions.

Yet she couldn't recall her name, her favorite color, what she liked to eat, how old she was, what her mother's maiden name was.

No, wait. Her mother's maiden name was Ferrara.

Why the hell did she remember that?

She turned the water off, which draped the bathroom in an eerie quiet. The dripping from the showerhead echoed throughout the massive bathroom, and only then did she appreciate just how *big* the place was.

From the looks of it, whoever lived here—her?—was quite well off. Top-of-the-line furnishings made of brass and marble, expensive toiletries, and the room was spotless. Either she was a neat freak, or had a good cleaning service. Or both. And the bath products were not the kind you found at your local CVS.

(More confusion: she remembered a national drug-store chain, but nothing about herself.)

The mirror was covered in condensation from the hot water. She walked up to it and wiped it away with her right hand.

A very attractive woman with neck-length straight dirty-blond hair, light blue eyes, and pale unblemished skin stared back at her.

Almost unblemished. Her right shoulder was bruised, probably from falling in the shower, and there was a scar along her left shoulder. That didn't come from the fall, though. As best she could tell, the scar was several years old.

She wondered what caused it. On a hook on the wall to her right sat a white piece of cloth. It looked like some kind of jacket, with a rope-like belt at the waist. She grabbed it and put it on. It felt like silk. Or maybe satin. She wasn't sure what the difference between them was. And she couldn't remember what this article of clothing was called, but she knew it had a name. Slowly, she padded out into the next room. Any doubts she had that she was loaded evaporated as she stepped into the bedroom. She imagined that several inner-city apartments could fit into this one bedroom. Everything in it was in the most pristine shape, yet there was a sense of *age*—that everything in this room was older than she was.

Of course, she had no idea how old she was. She wasn't even sure how old she looked even after looking at herself in the mirror.

Tying the belt—no, *sash*—of the whatever-it-was-she-was-wearing, she walked through the bedroom. A dark red dress lay neatly on the bed. She guessed that it was something she was supposed to wear when she got out of the shower.

It was a double bed with two sets of pillows. Did she live here alone?

Only then did she acknowledge the extra weight on her left hand. Aside from the white thing, she did wear one other item: a gold ring. The ring symbolized—something. It didn't appear to have any kind of design, just a flat ribbon of gold wrapped around her third finger. It meant *something*, though, she knew that much, and it had something to do with whether or not she lived alone. But she couldn't put the pieces together. Yet.

She walked over to the window. Pushing aside the thick curtains with the odd patterns on them, she saw a forest. Most of the trees were bereft of leaves, and those that were still intact were yellow, red, or brown. That meant it was autumn.

Thrilled to add another item to the list of Things She Could Recall, she took a moment to marvel at the sunset. Or maybe it was a sunrise. She had no idea what time of the day it actually was, but the sun was low, painting the sky glorious shades of purple and yellow.

Next to the window was a writing desk. A pad of paper sat in the center of it, with the words TODAY ALL YOUR DREAMS COME TRUE written in ink on the top sheet.

She frowned. What the hell was *that* supposed to mean?

There was an ornately designed pen next to the pad. She grabbed it with her left hand—thus confirming that she was left-handed, for what that was worth—and started writing.

By the time she got as far as TODAY ALL YOUR she stopped. The handwriting wasn't remotely similar. Did she share that bed with someone else? Or did the person who was responsible for rendering her unconscious in the shower leave this note? It didn't make sense. But then, nothing made sense right now. She walked over to the dresser drawer, grateful that she knew what that, at least, was.

The two top drawers revealed linens and underwear, all neatly folded and arranged and lending more credence to her earlier neat-freak hypothesis. When she opened the third drawer, she gasped. A sheet of glass sat on top of this drawer, blocking simple access to its contents. Etched in the glass was a numeric pad over two words: LOCKED and UNLOCKED. The former word was blinking in green. That wasn't nearly so scary as what was under the glass. Guns.

Several of them.

And, for some reason, she knew for sure that these were among the finest and most up-to-date weaponry that money could buy.

Part of her wished she could remember the key code to unlock the glass barrier, assuming she ever did know it. Another part of her was grateful that she didn't.

What did this say about her? Were the guns hers? The person she shared the house with? Both? Did they belong to whoever wrote the note? Maybe she was the intruder and the person who wrote the note owned the guns.

Too many questions. Not enough answers.

Bathrobe! That's what the white silk or satin thing was called.

She chuckled to herself. That was one answer, anyhow.

But it didn't help her with the guns. Or the cut on her shoulder. Or the identity of—well, anyone.

Now that she knew what it was, she also realized she might as well take the bathrobe off. She had found underwear, as well as the dress. Something weird was going on, and while the dress didn't look one hundred percent practical, it was more so than the bathrobe.

The dress—which had an odd cut, extending down practically to her ankle on the outer part of her right leg, but cut in a U-shape, leaving her legs free. On the left side, the dress only came to her hips. It gave her a sexy look that also permitted her legs a certain freedom of movement.

After retrieving a pair of biker shorts—why had she known that was what they were called?—and a pair of thigh-high boots, she put the dress on over them. There was something she thought might be the right thing to

wear over her chest, but she couldn't remember what the damn thing would be called. Anyhow, the dress had small straps that didn't seem conducive to wearing anything *under it at the chest area*.

Somehow, putting on normal clothes made her feel *better*.

She stepped out into the next room. It seemed to be—well, she didn't know what it seemed to be. It was another big room, full of old furniture, wood paneling, and high ceilings. At the (very) far end of the room was a statue of a woman with wings, covered in plastic. Looking at it, she thought it should have been outside, for some reason.

A framed picture caught her eye on one of the wooden tables.

Picking it up, she saw that it portrayed her and a man, both dressed in funny outfits.

In a flash, she realized not only what the picture represented, but why she wore a gold ring.

She and the man in the picture were married.

This, in turn, raised more questions. Was the money that paid for this mansion hers or his? Or both? Did he write the note on the table? Did he attack her in the shower? Where was he?

There was certainly something familiar about the man in the picture. She knew him, though whether that familiarity was a good one or not, she couldn't tell.

Right now, she was just grateful for *any* feeling of familiarity. She certainly wasn't getting it from this house. The more she walked through it, the less she

believed that this place was hers. It didn't *feel* right.

A heavy thud startled her. She set the picture down, and turned toward the statue. When she first entered the room, she had thought it to be in an alcove, but she realized now that it was a doorway to a vestibule or hallway or something—and there was a door or a window that had just been opened. Wind was now rustling the plastic that covered the winged-woman statue.

"Hello?"

Nobody replied.

She moved toward the doorway, all the while wondering at the absurdity of instinctively knowing the word *vestibule*, yet taking five minutes to remember what a wedding ring and a bathrobe were.

Cautiously, she walked closer to the statue, now really wishing she had the codes that would allow her access to those guns. She had no idea whether or not she knew how to use them, but she had the feeling that just holding one in her hand would put her in a better position right now.

Sure enough, there was a door here—an old wooden one with a brass pull handle that was, for some inexplicable reason, up around her neck level. The door was so big, she wondered if it had been built with giraffes in mind.

It was only slightly ajar. Based on the breeze that was still fluttering the plastic on the statue, it was quite possible the wind had knocked the door open.

She started to step outside, then stopped. It was growing darker. That beautiful sky signified sunset.

Looking around, she quickly spied several switches next to the door. Instinctively, she turned them on.

This was the right move. Where it had been dim on the other side of the door, it was now lit up like daylight. Whoever built this place wanted people to be able to get around outside at night if they had to. A reasonable precaution since, based on that forest outside the bedroom window, they were in the middle of *nowhere*. Any significant illumination there was to be had around here *was going to come from the house*.

Opening the door all the way, she stepped outside. A *blast of cold air caused goosebumps to rise on her exposed arms and legs*, making her wonder if stepping outside without seeing if the house came equipped with a coat was such a hot idea.

The doorway led to a sheltered walkway that bordered the house—house, hell, it was a mansion—the shelter supported on the outside by columns with ridges in them.

She found she couldn't remember what kind of columns they were, though she was pretty sure it had something to do with being greasy. Maybe.

The walkway was covered with brown leaves that crinkled under her booted feet. The sound was pleasant, almost soothing in its harshness. It reminded her of—*something*. Another familiar feeling that ultimately meant nothing without context.

As much to hear the sound of her own voice again, she said, "Hello?"

Another sudden noise made her jump, but this time

it was a huge flock of birds, who took her voicing as a prompt to all fly off into the evening air at once.

Shaking her head, she turned to go back inside. If nothing else, it was freezing out here.

Then the breeze started.

No, this wasn't a breeze. This was wind.

And it was getting closer.

The dead brown leaves rustled and started flying up into the air and along the ground toward the mansion, as if being pushed by a mental force.

Or by a helicopter.

She had no idea where that thought came from, but it was one she didn't like very much, and thought she'd have an easier time dealing with inside. Besides which, the wind was getting stronger.

Running toward the door, she almost stumbled. The thigh-high boots may have looked good with the dress, but they weren't much more practical than the bathrobe had been.

She reached the doorway and took another quick look around to see if she could see anything that would explain the sudden wind—like helicopters. Why she was so sure that they were causing this—especially since she couldn't *hear* anything besides the leaves rustling, and didn't helicopters usually make lots of noise?—she couldn't say.

But the wind had gotten worse; leaves and the grit of the ground were being buffeted about the air now, and was in danger of getting in her eyes. She made a grab for the door—

Hily to be grabbed around the stomach and pulled inside.

She struggled initially as the man—for it was a man, but not the man in the wedding photo—dragged her inside, but she didn't put up much of a fight, mainly because of the bright lights that now shone through the window.

Something was happening.

"Don't touch me)" she screamed at the man. "Get away from me!"

He let go, but not through asvy impetus from her. glass shattered as something that looked like a hockey puck came crashing into the room. One second after it landed on the wooden floor, it let loose with a blast of cordite that sent her and her would-be abductor sprawling to the floor.

Her head swam, the cordite in the air making her vaguely nauseous and leaving a bitter taste in her mouth. She wondered how they could make a hockey puck do that—and what a hockey puck really was, since she associated the round, flat black disc with that phrase, but had no idea what the individual words actually meant.

Or, for that matter, why she knew what cordite was.

She shook her head, trying to clear it, hoping to stave off a headache that was starting to build.

Then more shattered glass, an endless stream of it.

Looking up, she saw five people dressed in all black and wearing face-covering masks. They came in feet first, apparently swinging in on cables. She couldn't

imagine anyone moving like that, yet the maneuvers had an odd feeling of familiarity, like she'd done them herself.

The five people were loaded for bear. Each of them carried at least two guns that she could see, and a variety of other pieces of equipment she couldn't quite make out—it was all black on black, and the hockey puck's blast still had her blinking spots from in front of her eyes.

The man who'd grabbed her was a tall man with very short brown hair, wearing a dress jacket over a light blue shirt. His pants were also dark, but didn't match the jacket. As soon as the five people burst in through the windows, he pulled out a gun from a shoulder holster.

In an instant, she realized that the man was a police officer, and his weapon was a standard RCPD-issue Beretta.

If only she could recall what the "RC" in RCPD stood for.

As soon as the cop had his Beretta out, one of the black-clad intruders grabbed his right wrist and, in one fluid motion, pulled his arm behind his back, knocked him face-down onto the floor, and forced him to drop the pistol.

"What're you doing? I'm a *cop*!"

One of the other intruders pulled his jacket and shoulder holster off.

"I told you, I'm a *cop*!"

The first intruder removed the cop's own handcuffs

from his back belt loop while the second one rooted through his jacket to pull out his wallet.

"You're breaking my arm," the cop said as the intruder handcuffed his arms behind his back.

She watched all this with a combination of confusion and dispassion. No one seemed to be paying any attention to her. Another one of the black-clad people ran over to the mirror on the far end of the room. He opened a panel with two knob switches, which revealed a socket of some kind.

This particular member of the invasion team had some kind of minicomputer on his left forearm. It flapped open to reveal a small monitor on the upper portion and a keyboard on the part still parallel to his arm. He took a wire that was attached to the minicomputer on one end and plugged it into the socket.

Two more figures walked into the room through the now-shattered windows. One of them headed straight for her. She sat up. One of the straps of her red dress had fallen off her shoulder, and she pulled it up.

Looking up at the figure, she couldn't make out any features behind what she now remembered was a gas mask.

"Report." The man—it was definitely a man—had a deep, rich voice, only slightly muffled by the gas mask.

She had no idea how to respond to his request.

No, not a request. This was an order. Whoever she was, she must have been this man's subordinate.

He grabbed her by the shoulder and yanked her to her feet. She thought about resisting, but he grabbed her

right on the sore part of her right shoulder, and she winced in pain.

"Report *now*."

"I—" What could she possibly tell him? That she woke up in the shower with no memory of who she was, what she was doing here, or what a bathrobe was? The entire situation was insane.

Then again, maybe this was normal for her. If this man, whoever he was, was part of her daily life, maybe commandoes crashing through windows was a normal day for her.

But memory loss wasn't, so she said nothing.

The man was undaunted. He grabbed her again, pushing her against the wall. Again, she winced, as pain sliced through her shoulder.

"I want your report, soldier," he said. His voice never raised, and that made it scarier. Even with the mask muffling his words, the quiet, professional calm he exuded was frightening as hell.

She might've been inclined to think of it as the most frightening thing she'd ever heard, but since she could only recall what she heard for the last ten minutes, that wasn't much of an accomplishment.

Instead, she gave the only "report" that she could under the circumstances: "I don't know what you're talking about."

Before the man could reply, the man by the mirror with the computer on his arm spoke up. "Sir, the house's primary defenses have been activated. She's probably still suffering the side effects."

Side effects? What the hell did *that* mean?

It seemed to satisfy the leader, though, as he turned his attention to the pair that had subdued the blue-eyed man who claimed to be an officer of the law.

"What about the cop?" he asked.

The one who had removed the jacket had a forearm minicomputer of his own. Right now he was holding the cop's badge while entering something into the keypad.

"Matthew Addison. I'm not getting a match."

She was relieved to find that *someone* in the room had a name.

The other one, the one who'd handcuffed Addison, pointed a weapon at the cop's head. "Who are you?"

"I just transferred. They probably don't even have me on file yet."

The one holding the badge said, "The locals are inefficient—it's possible."

"Should I secure him here?" asked the one with the gun on Addison.

The leader removed the gas mask to reveal the face of a handsome black man.

No, *handsome* wasn't the right word. That implied softness, and there was precisely nothing about this man that suggested even a hint of softness.

The leader said, "No, we take him with us."

"You can't do this!" Addison yelled.

The one holding the gun on him pulled off her own mask. "Blow me," she said. It was a woman, with black hair pulled back in a braided ponytail. The woman was

of an ethnicity the name of which she could not remember for the life of her.

The ponytailed woman yanked Addison to his feet.

"Hey!" he cried in modest protest.

The leader looked around at the others.

"Prep for entry to the Hive."

TWELVE

AS RAIN MELENDEZ PUSHED THE ALLEGED cop toward the mirror door, she spared a thought for the assholes back at LAPD. Especially the one asshole who kept her from joining S.W.A.T.

If only Captain Fischer could see her now.

The only regret that Rain had in her entire life was that Fischer died of a heart attack last year, before she had the chance to properly rub the motherfucker's nose in her success working for the Umbrella Corporation's elite Security Division.

Shit, she didn't even think the old bastard *had* a heart.

For years, she'd been building the cred to get put on S.W.A.T. She had the chops, she had the skills, she had the best fucking marksmanship in her class, the class in

front of her, the class behind her, and every class going back to whenever there was a class. She could hit the broad side of a fucking fly.

But that was the goddamn problem: marksmanship.

Lieutenant D'Addario had warned her. He said that you have to have a dick to be in S.W.A.T. and you have to be a dick to run it. "And Karl Fischer," D'Addario had said, "he's the biggest dick with the smallest dick, and he won't let you anywhere near S.W.A.T, even if you wear a strap-on."

Rain didn't listen to D'Addario. She tried anyhow. She did everything right.

They still didn't let her on. She was too much of a risk, Fischer said. Young, attractive Latina chick, the guys'd be too busy asking her out and playing Sir Fucking Galahad and not focusing on the job.

Fischer looked her in the eye and said, "Only way you get on S.W.A.T. is if the whole unit gets taken over by queers, and that shit ain't happenin' on *my* watch."

She went back to her precinct, back to her patrol car. D'Addario made her a training officer, gave her a second stripe, and had her take the rookies under her wing. It was the best he could offer her, and it was jackshit as far as she was concerned.

The only reason she'd even gone to the fucking academy was so that she could join S.W.A.T. She promised herself that she'd be the first woman to make it.

Captain Fischer nailed that dream to the wall.

Unable to face another day getting into that god-

damn patrol car with some green-ass rookie, she quit.

Two weeks later, a hot-looking black guy with a deep voice said he wanted to hire her. She'd get to do everything S.W.A.T. did, except she'd get paid about eight billion times what the LAPD would cough up. The only catch was moving to Raccoon City.

What the fuck—she wanted to get out of California anyhow.

Sticking her Colt at the temple of Detective Matthew Addison of the RCPD, she forced him forward. Maybe he was a legit cop. In L.A., she would've pegged his ass for a fake—he looked more like the kind of guy they cast as detectives in crappy action movies—but some of the gold shields in Raccoon looked like this motherfucker, so maybe he *was* for real.

He still didn't have any business in the mansion. This was Umbrella's turf. The locals usually knew better than to fuck around with the big company.

Kaplan had opened the door that was disguised as a mirror. They filed in, Warner taking point, Vance and J.D. right behind him. Then One and the Abernathy woman, followed by Danilova the medic, then Rain and Addison, with Kaplan bringing up the rear.

They proceeded down the wide concrete staircase even as the mirror doors closed behind them. Within seconds, they arrived at the train station. Piles of trunks, crates, and boxes, most labelled with Umbrella's funky logo, were all over the place, but there was a clear path to the single-car train that went back and forth to the Hive.

When they got to the bottom of the stairs, Alice asked, "What is this place?"

Rain shook her head. Alice had always come across to Rain as a stuck-up bitch. Now she was being a *stupid* stuck-up bitch.

"It's a train station," J.D. said, as if she was an idiot. "You lose your eyesight as well as your memory?"

Then again, it was hardly the bitch's fault that the stupid-ass computer gassed her. Rain had no idea what the fuck the little-kid computer was thinking. Then again, if they'd known that, One wouldn't have needed to bring the team in in the first place.

Addison stopped walking. Rain shoved him forward. "Move it!"

"Enough, Rambette, I get the picture."

"Real fuckin' original, *Detective*." Rain got enough stupid Rambo jokes from L.A. cops—and those were the ones who *liked* her. "Mouth off again and I'll blow your fucking head off."

Before Addison could give her an excuse, Alice spoke up again. She was standing with her arms folded. Rain actually saw a glimmer of the intimidating woman that Rain knew Alice was capable of being, though the effect was pretty much wiped out by that froofy dress she was wearing.

"Somebody tell me what's going on here or we're not taking another step."

One walked up to her and looked her right in the eye. The first time Rain was on the receiving end of that don't-fuck-with-me look was also the last—mainly be-

cause, even after seven years of dealing with the scum of the earth that populated the parts of L.A. she patrolled as a uniform, nothing scared her more than One's don't-fuck-with-me look.

"You'll get your briefing, soldier, when I'm ready to give it to you."

To her credit, Alice didn't back down. Rain had to admit, the bitch had balls.

Amazingly, One broke the stare first, turning to the others. "Warner, Vance, load the train. J.D., set the timer. Kaplan, get the engine going."

By this time, everyone had removed their gas masks. If Alice and this Addison asshole were up and about, there was nothing to worry about on that score. Yet. Besides, those things really fucked up your peripheral vision.

J.D. reached into one of the pouches in his uniform and pulled out a metal bar, which he attached to the wall. It gave a digital reading that matched the one on Rain's wrist, and on everyone else's wrist: 2:48:42. A second later, it was 2:48:41.

That was how long they had to find out what the fuck was up in the Hive.

Kaplan ran to the train, which sat parked on the tracks, with no lights coming from it. One went in next, followed by Rain, pushing Addison ahead of her. J.D. and Alice came in behind them. The train was mostly one big space, with two trapdoors in the floor for access to the undercarriage. One of those trapdoors was open. Aside from some metal tubes tied up and

hanging from the ceiling in one corner, the train was empty.

The first thing Kaplan did was go to the tiny engineer's alcove up front. He pushed a few buttons, then turned around. "Power's down."

One turned to Rain. "So fix it."

She smiled. "I'm on it."

Rain nodded to J.D., who nodded right back, unholstered his Smith & Wesson pistol, and pointed it at Addison's head.

Only then did Rain holster her own pistol and remove a small flashlight. Placing it between her teeth, she jumped down the open trapdoor. The rails themselves were raised about two feet over the ground, making it a shitload easier to do under-train maintenance.

Removing the flashlight from her teeth, she flicked it on and shone it at the bottom of the train.

It didn't take long to dope out why the power was down. Four of the giant plug junctions were hanging uselessly from the bottom of the train, and the main circuit to the third rail was disconnected.

Rain frowned. Some asshole had deliberately jumped under the train and cut the power. Didn't even bother to shut the trapdoor. Was the train in for maintenance, or did someone want the train out of commission?

However, she didn't give it much thought. That was why she never tried for detective—thinking wasn't her thing, kicking ass and taking names was. Or just kicking ass and let them keep their own fucking names.

Putting the flashlight back in her mouth and shining it on the plugs, she reattached the male plugs to the female plugs.

Then she heard the noise.

At first she thought it was something slithering. Or maybe it was water dripping.

She squatted down so she could see under the rails, shining the flashlight in front of her.

All she saw was a dead end. At that dead end was an old wireframe vent that had what looked like a rat-chewed hole in it.

She shook her head. Multimillion-dollar multinational fucking corporation, but their basements are just as shitty as a housing development in Watts.

The noise was still there, but it was faint. Probably the damn rats. She stood up, not giving it another thought. "You done yet?"

Rain whirled around, her right hand moving to her gun holster, and almost pulling it out before her brain registered that the voice belonged to J.D., who was hanging upside down from the train.

He hit her with that dumbass grin of his. "Jumpy." She hit him right back with as close an approximation of One's don't-fuck-with-me look as she could manage.

Then she reattached the train to the third rail, sending sparks out through the undercarriage.

"Whoa!" J.D. cried, and high-tailed it back to the inside of the car.

Rain grinned. She and J.D. came to the company to-

gether, but he was a Navy SEAL who'd been doing wet-work for the CIA when One made him an offer he couldn't refuse. He had pegged her as some kind of charity hire, something to give the team a PC look for the stockholders' benefit.

She disabused him of that crazy-ass idea soon enough. Rain Melendez was no politically correct poster girl, and she put her badass skills against his badass skills any day of the week.

So did One—he assigned them to be partners. J.D. bitched and moaned for a week, but One said it was that or lose the job. He said it with the don't-fuck-with-me look.

J.D. went along. He gave her shit at every opportunity, but he went along. They trained together, and she kept up with his government-trained ass every step of the way.

Eventually, he admitted she had the shit. Within two weeks, they were a lean, mean fighting machine.

But he still gave her shit every chance he got.

As she clambered back up into the car, Warner and Drew were bringing a big-ass trunk on board. Probably that thing Kaplan needed to shut down the little-kid computer. Rain didn't know the details, and didn't give a rat's ass. That geek crap was Kaplan's thing.

Speaking of Kaplan, he stood by a red button. "Stand clear!" he yelled, then pushed it. The trapdoor closed.

One looked at Alice and Addison. "Sit on the floor. Stay out of the way."

They both hesitated, but eventually sat on the floor.

Kaplan got back into the engineer's cubbyhole. Seconds later, with a mild lurch, the train started moving.

Rain looked around, noticed that there was one other compartment besides the main one and the engineer's space. It was blocked off by a door.

When she tried to open it, it wouldn't budge. It had a handle knob, but the handle seemed to be stuck. She tried to move it several times, but nothing happened.

She stopped for a moment to catch her breath before trying again, only to notice that Addison and Alice were both staring at her. It almost looked like they were accusing her of something. Or maybe they were just fucked in the head.

Correction: Alice *was* fucked in the head, and the jury was out on the other asshole.

"You got a problem?" she asked angrily.

"How's that door?" One asked.

Tearing her gaze away from the pair, she said, "Sealed shut."

J.D. volunteered himself. "Let me."

Rain indicated the door with an exaggerated flourish. Let the macho asshole flex his muscle.

He gave her a wink. When they first started training together, she used that wink to goad herself to do better, in the hopes of wiping it off his fucking face. Now, she was pretty much used to it, and chalked it up to part of J.D.'s overall assholiness.

She took great satisfaction out of watching him struggle just as hard as she did with the door.

Then the son of a bitch yanked it open.

His head was down when he did it, so he didn't see the limp body inside the compartment until it fell on him.

"Damn!" J.D. cried as he pushed the form off him and whipped out his Smith & Wesson.

Next to Rain, One pointed his MP5K assault rifle at the man.

For her part, Rain just smiled at J.D. "Jumpy?"

J.D. gave her a fuck-you look. She just kept smiling. Bastard.

Rain recognized the guy after a minute—it was Alice's partner on mansion duty, that new asshole, Parks. Insisted everyone call him "Spence," since his first name was "Percival." Spent his first two weeks on the job hitting on Rain, and wouldn't take "fuck you" for an answer. He and Alice had to pretend to be married as part of their cover at the mansion, and she'd heard rumors. Most of them came from Warner, who said they were "maintaining the cover under the covers."

All Rain could think was, better Alice than her. Spence made her want to throw up.

She looked over at Alice, still sitting on the floor next to the cop. As Rain watched, Alice stared at Spence's left hand, then at her own.

The wedding ring.

Rain chuckled to herself as Alice took the ring off and read the inscription. If Rain remembered right, it said PROPERTY OF UMBRELLA CORPORATION inside the

ring. Real fucking romantic. If Alice was still memory-loss-girl, reading that was gonna be a comedown.

Danilova walked over and knelt down next to Spence. She snapped a vial under his nose, which revived him pretty damn quick.

"Wha—?"

"Lie still," the medic said.

Spence started squirming, like he was having a bad dream or something.

"Lie *still*" The Russian woman held Spence down with one hand while taking out a penlight with the other. First she pried his eyes open and shined the light in each eye. The pupils dilated, as expected. Then she moved the light around. "Watch this light. Follow it."

Spence stopped squirming and did so.

The medic held up three fingers. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Three."

"Good. Now tell me your name."

"I—" Spence hesitated, then looked confused. "I don't know."

Danilova looked up at One. "He's fine." She spoke in a no-nonsense tone. "Memory loss, just like the other one."

One nodded, as if he expected that answer. And who knew, maybe he did?

Spence, meanwhile, sat up, holding his head as if it hurt.

He stared at Alice, who was staring right back.

Again, Rain chuckled to herself. The two of them

had been living together in that mansion for months, and neither of them had the first fucking clue who the other one was. Pathetic.

The noise of the train started to drop. One turned to address the entire train. "Everyone ready to move out."

Rain moved to one of the many open entry ways to the train as it pulled into the Hive end of the station. As the train rumbled in, lights went on in succession, illuminating the platform. Like the one on the mansion side, it was full of crates labeled with Umbrella's logo.

From here on in, it was routine. Rain had these maneuvers down when she was doing her own private training for S.W.A.T., and she fell into it easily here. She, J.D., and Warner took point, rotating cover, each with their rifles out and ready. Both clips in her MP5K were fully loaded, laser sight ready to go.

That was the other nice thing about working for Umbrella. They had all the latest and finest toys. LAPD probably wouldn't have had assault rifles this hot even for S.W.A.T., and if they did, they sure as shit wouldn't have the double clip. No way that'd be in the budget.

The private sector* Rain had learned, didn't skimp on the important shit.

Soon, they arrived at another big concrete staircase, not having seen a single sign of life.

Rain was in the lead when they hit the bottom of the staircase. She put up a fist, signalling a temporary stop.

Behind her, both J.D. and Warner came to a halt. Be-

hind them, One did likewise, passing on the halt signal to the others.

The door was shut. And, from the looks of it, sealed. Fuck.

She signalled a go-ahead.

One put down his rifle. "Let's get that door."

Rain nodded. She moved up the stairs with J.D. and Warner alongside. Kaplan and Drew followed a minute later, bearing their trunk full of stuff. Besides the toys Kaplan needed to deal with the computer, they also had a laser drill that would get the door open.

At least, that was the plan.

Drew opened the trunk and tossed the welder's helmet at Rain. "You'll need this."

She smiled as she unerringly caught the dark helmet. "It's even in my color."

"Yeah, it's how she likes her coffee and her men." J.D. gave her his wink as he said it.

Warner chuckled. "Don't let the boss hear you say that."

"Please." Rain shook her head. Yeah, if you just went by the face, One was a fucking attractive dude, but she viewed him as pretty much asexual. She'd no more consider fucking him than fucking a stone wall. Shit, she'd sooner do *Kaplan*.

"Listen to me."

Rain glanced down the staircase at the voice. It was Alice, standing next to One.

"I want to know who you people are, and I want to know what's going on here."

For his part, One didn't even spare her a glance. He was looking around, taking in his surroundings. Rain had no doubt that he was coming up with about seventy-six different ways to secure the area.

"Now."

That got One's attention—and Rain's as well. Even without her memory, it looked like the bitch still had the same brass *cojones*. There weren't too many people with the balls to talk to One in that tone of voice—at least not twice.

But then, just because she didn't have her memory didn't mean she wasn't her, and they didn't make just any old asshole the head of security for the Hive.

One spoke in a mostly straight-up tone of voice. "You and I have the same employer—we all work for the Umbrella Corporation. The mansion is an entrance to the Hive. You are security operatives placed there to protect that entrance."

Alice removed her wedding ring. "What about this?"

One came as close to a smile as Rain had ever seen. "Your marriage is a fake. Just part of your cover to protect the secrecy of the Hive."

"And what is the Hive?" Spence asked.

One looked at Kaplan. "Show them."

Rain turned to see that Drew and J.D. had set up the laser cutter. Rain put the helmet on, fired up the cutter, and went to work. Her best bet was trying to slice out the panel in the middle of the door—that would cut the circuit as well as provide a handy little hole in the door.

The cutter was loud enough to drown out Kaplan

and One explaining the Hive to the two people responsible for its security.

No, this wasn't a totally fucked-up scenario. The computer going all run-silent-run-deep, the security unconscious and losing their memory, some cop wandering around, and they still didn't know jackshit about what was going on.

When she'd sliced out a rectangle, it fell to the floor with a satisfying clang. Rain switched the cutter off and raised the helmet.

From down the stairs, she could hear Spence asking, "Why can't I remember anything?"

"The Hive has its own defense mechanisms," One was explaining, "all computer controlled. A nerve gas was released into the house. Primary effect of the gas is complete unconsciousness, lasting anywhere up to four hours. Secondary effects are varied, but can include acute memory loss."

"For how long?" Spence asked.

"Subjective. An hour—day—week."

Addison chose this moment to speak up. "So you're saying this place was attacked?"

"I'm afraid things are a little more—complicated than that."

Before One could explain, Rain said, "Sir—we've breached the Hive."

One nodded, and the rest of them fell into formation.

Rain was half-convinced that one of the three newbies was gonna shoot their mouth off, but they didn't. Maybe they'd asked their share of questions.

Kaplan got the door open, then stepped back. Rain, Warner, and Drew covered One and J.D. as they took point. J.D. had put his night-vision gear on his head.

One simply said, "J.D."

Nodding, J.D. put the night-vision cylinder over his eye. He looked like some kinda fucking Borg. He entered the dark room.

Rain held her MP5K at the ready and waited.

Suddenly, the lights went on. Not just that, but there was noise—sounded like street noise. The room was an elevator bay, but the windows showed some kind of city scape.

One gave the signal and they moved in, keeping in formation, covering each other.

Except Olga, anyhow. She had that doodad of hers out and was looking at it. Then she looked up. "Halon content has dissipated."

Rain thought it was a damn good thing they took off the fucking gas masks.

Alice and the Addison guy walked over to the window, looked at the "view."

"Makes it easier to work underground," Addison said, "thinking that there's a view."

Rain gave him a suspicious look.

Then a noise got her attention. She turned, but it was just One, J.D., and Warner prying the elevator door open—but there wasn't a car on the other side.

J.D. tossed a flare down the shaft.

Rain walked up behind him and peered over his shoulder. The green light of the flare lit up the shaft,

and a lot of loose cables, scraps of metal, and pieces of plastic.

Somebody had taken the express to the basement. J.D. looked at One. "Looks like we're taking the stairs."

One nodded, and gave a signal to move out.

Rain, J.D., and Warner did rotating cover at point as they headed down the metal staircase. It took them to the working levels. The plan was to take them to the Red Queen's chamber and shut her down.

One looked at Kaplan as they headed down right behind the three leading the way. "Status."

"Red Queen has locked onto us. She knows that we're here."

Alice frowned. "Who's the Red Queen?"

"State-of-the-art artificial intelligence," One said. "She's the computer that controls the Hive."

Rain wondered when the stupid bitch was gonna get her memory back. She was tired of listening to people who should know better having to have their hands held.

"So this isn't a military base," Alice said.

One almost smiled. "Umbrella could buy and sell the military twice over."

"Yeah," Addison muttered, "I bet the pay's a lot better, too."

Just as Rain was ready to give Addison a good punch, they entered a hallway that was sealed off. There were three or four entryways, all of which were covered by Umbrella-brand PlastiGlas.

Which was a good thing, seeing as how the lab

spaces they were covering were flooded. Water spouted out through some pinholes in one of the labs, but still, it looked like someone sealed the rooms and then activated the sprinkler.

Jesus.

Doing his usual stating-the-fucking-obvious thing, Kaplan said, "This is gonna slow us down." He showed One the schematic on his wrist-top. "Our route to the Queen takes us straight through these labs."

"Rain, J.D., see how bad the flooding is. Kaplan, find us an alternate route."

Grateful for the chance to go off with J.D. and leave the assholes behind, Rain went ahead, stepping through the spouts.

"This is messed up," she said as they went forward.

J.D. shrugged. "What-the-fuck-ever. Just another job. In, out, beers at Barre's Bar when we're done."

"Fuck, I'm sick of that place. They got shit tequila."

Grinning, J.D. said, "You oughta try a real drink some time."

Rain didn't even look at him. "You drink fuckin' Budweiser, J.D., I ain't takin' no lecture on booze from *your*

J.D. laughed. After a minute, Rain returned it. Yeah, that was it. In and out, and hope those two assholes get their memory back soon.

THIRTEEN

KNOWING HER NAME WAS ALICE ABERNATHY should've made her feel better.

It didn't especially.

According to the head of the commando team—who just went by "One" for some odd reason—Alice was head of security for the Hive, which was a neat trick, considering she'd never heard of it, or the Umbrella Corporation. On the other hand, the corridors had an oddly familiar feeling as she walked through them. Maybe it was the truth.

Frustratingly, she had no way of verifying anything. Her memory was still Swiss cheese—she knew, for example, that the World Series was a baseball game, and she remembered who won it last year, but

she could not picture the sport or remember how it was played.

She just hoped this damn nerve gas wore off quickly.

The man she was pretending to be married to was named Spence Parks. The cop, according to his ID, was named Matt Addison. He still hadn't explained why he was here.

Then again, no one had asked him, either.

"What happened here?" Spence asked.

Alice noticed that Matt moved closer, and One gave him a suspicious look.

"Five hours ago, Red Queen went homicidal. Sealed the Hive and killed everyone down here."

"Jesus."

"You can't be sure of that," Matt said. "There must be hundreds of people working here."

"Five hundred and twenty-three," One said coldly. He went on: "When we realized what was happening, my team was dispatched to shut her down."

"Why did she do it?" Alice asked.

"That we don't know. But outside interference is a possibility." That last sentence was spoken while looking directly at Matt.

Matt was about to say something, but then he suddenly jumped.

"Jesus!"

His sudden movement startled Alice. She stepped back, and saw what Matt saw.

A body.

It was a woman, blond hair from the looks of it,

floating in the water on the other side of the glass. She wore all white, and her skin had gone pale enough to match the outfit.

According to the ID badge still pinned to her lab coat, her name was Anna Bolt.

Spence looked at Alice with concern. "Hey—you okay?"

Alice grunted in reply.

Removing his leather jacket, Spence said, "Here."

"No, it's okay." Even as she spoke, though, she realized that she was cold. Her arms had unconsciously folded so she could warm herself, and her exposed flesh—which there was a lot of in this stupid dress—was covered in goosebumps.

"C'mon, it's cold in here." He held up the jacket.

With a small smile, she gave in and took it.

As her fingers brushed his, she suddenly remembered something...

His hands ran gently up and down her naked flesh, his callused fingers playing over her skin, feeling both rough and smooth at the same time.

His lips hungrily attacked hers, as if they were trying to consume each other. Their tongues explored—teasing, tasting, dancing.

He pulled her slim athletic form tight against his muscular body.

It seemed their marriage wasn't quite the sham One thought it was.

She decided to venture a question. "Are you—do you remember anything? Before—this?"

Spence shook his head. "No—no. Nothing before the train. You?"

"No," she lied. "Nothing."

Why did she lie?

For some reason, with the memory flash came a feeling.

Don't trust Spence.

No, it was more general than that. It was not wanting to trust *anyone*.

Dammit, what the hell was going on with her head?

"Got it."

Alice looked up to see the computer geek—what was his name? Kaplan?—showing One something on that wrist-top computer of his. "We double back, cut through Dining Hall B, then we're back on track."

Even as he spoke, the other two—whom One had identified as Rain Melendez and J.D. Hawkins—returned.

"Sir—no go," Rain said. "The whole level's flooded."

"All right, we're behind schedule," One said, "so let's move it!"

Another of the commandoes—Alfonso Warner—walked up to Spence and Alice and gave them a "move-it" head nod. Without waiting for any kind of acknowledgment, he went ahead.

Alice looked at Spence. They each solemnly mimicked Warner's head-nod.

Then they both laughed.

Maybe she should trust him.

"Come on," Spence said.

As they started walking behind Warner and the others, Alice said, "Strange that over five hundred people work in this place. So far, we've only seen one."

"You think they're lying?"

"I don't know." She shook her head. "Seems like a lot of firepower just to shut down a computer."

Spence shrugged. "Maybe whoever briefed them didn't tell them the whole truth. Or maybe they didn't tell us the whole truth yet."

Behind them, Rain took a quick look at the body of Anna Bolt.

"Poor bastards."

Alice couldn't argue with the sentiment.

After a few minutes, they got to another sealed entrance. Kaplan entered a code into the pad, and it slid open.

Warner, J.D., and Vance Drew went in first, in a standard rotating cover flank.

How the hell did she know that was standard?

That question was superseded by another one: what the hell kind of dining hall was this?

The space they entered was huge. It was also dark and dank and filled with boxes that were about eight feet tall with large tubes leading in and out of them.

No sign of any of the accoutrements one would expect in a dining hall.

Or much of anywhere else, if it came right down to it.

"Kaplan?" One asked.

"Dining Hall B." Kaplan shrugged helplessly. "It's what it says on the map."

One walked over to take a look at Kaplan's display. "Maybe you're reading it wrong."

Matt gave One a hard look. "Maybe the corporation's keeping a few secrets down here. Something you're not supposed to see."

Kaplan actually looked worried about that, but One remained unaffected. "J.D., you and Rain keep the prisoner here and secure the exit."

The medic took another air sample.

"Sir, halon levels are *nonexistent* in this room. Could be the system malfunctioned."

Alice wondered what that meant, exactly. Then again, there was no reason for anything to start making sense now.

One studied the medic's readout, then looked up.

"All right, listen up. There may be survivors, so give me a search line—but keep it *tight*."

Rain shoved Matt toward one of the smaller crates for him to sit on.

"Move it."

They moved out in different directions. Alice and Spence were left alone, with only Rain and J.D. staying back to guard Matt. Apparently, amnesia notwithstanding, they were well placed enough not to need babysitters.

So she wandered around the room. If she was supposed to be the head of security for this place, she probably knew what this room was really for. Maybe walking around would give her some kind of clue as to who she really was.

As she navigated among the crates, she noticed that they all had two readouts. On top was some kind of pattern that looked like a stereo sound system oscillation. It was steady, but she had no clue what it was actually measuring, since there was no bass beat to be heard.

On the bottom were one of two words lit up: STABLE and UNSTABLE.

To her relief, STABLE was the one lit on all the crates she could see.

She approached one of them. Each of the crates had a small window in it.

Peering inside, she saw—something. It was living, that was for sure, though it didn't look like anything she recognized.

But then, would she recognize it, even if it was something commonplace? It was fifteen minutes before she remembered what a bathrobe was, for Christ's sake.

Then again, this thing couldn't have been normal. It didn't have any eyes, for one thing, its skin was all scaly, and it had tubes running all in and out of its body.

Even if it was normal, it was pretty damn gross.

Then she remembered something else.

As the new password was entered into her monitor remotely by Lisa Broward, the Licker came onscreen. Alice knew that for a split second, it could be seen on Lisa's monitor, too, before the Red Queen shut her out.

One then scared the shit out of her by appearing next to her. She hadn't heard him approach—one moment he was just *there*.

He was peering into the window. "I said, keep it tight." He didn't even look at her.

"Sorry. I'm not sure I want to remember what went on down here."

Now he did look at her. In a softer voice than he'd used all day, he said, "I don't blame you."

It was the closest One had come to being human since she met him.

Or, she supposed, re-met him.

Whatever.

As she and One went back to the center of the room, not having found anyone or anything save the crates, Alice overheard J.D. and Rain talking, staring at one of the crates while they guarded Matt.

"What the hell do they keep in these things?" J.D. asked.

Rain shot him a look. "How do I know?"

Warner, Kaplan, Drew, Spence, and the medic all re-joined them in the room's center. "Anything?" One asked.

"No, sir," Kaplan said. The others just shook their heads.

"All right, we're proceeding to the Red Queen's chamber. Rain, J.D., stay here with the prisoner. Let's move."

Alice was grateful. Soon they'd be at the computer core, then they could shut her down and get the hell out of this madhouse.

Soon, it'd all be over...

FOURTEEN

ALICE WAS A LITTLE DISAPPOINTED—THE RED Queen's chamber was just another metal, sterile room. That seemed to be all they had in the Hive—metal, sterile rooms. No decorations, no color variations, just metallic sterility.

The room had one table in the center with three computer workstations, three huge metal doors, and little else.

Everyone seemed focused on the door in front of the workstations. Unlike the other two doors, this one had a window right at Alice's eye level. For lack of anything better to do, she wandered up to the door and stared in.

She saw another sterile corridor, but this one appeared to have glass walls. It was a narrow space that led to—surprise!—a big metal door.

Alice woke up in a house that was almost entirely well-polished old wood. Then she took a train that took her to a place that was almost entirely metal, glass, and plastic. Did Umbrella only work in extremes?

Meanwhile, Kaplan sat at the workstations, jumping back and forth from keyboard to keyboard like some kind of piano virtuoso.

That immediately rang an alarm bell in Alice's head. Piano virtuoso. She knew what that was.

So what the hell was a piano?

She stared through the window some more. The corridor was just as boring.

"What's taking so long?"

Alice turned around to see the medic standing over Kaplan, looking impatient.

"Red Queen's defenses are in place. She's making it difficult."

The medic looked cranky. Kaplan ignored her, and kept his virtuoso thing going.

At the sound of cloth rustling, Alice turned again, this time to look at Spence. He had decided to take advantage of this little bit of downtime to rummage through his pockets.

He found a gum wrapper, an ID card with his picture on it, and some loose change.

Everything else went back in his pocket, but he kept out a quarter. Alice was proud of the fact that she not only recognized the kind of coin, but that it was worth twenty-five cents and was one of the new state ones.

Then he started twirling the quarter in his fingers, flipping the coin with one knuckle over the adjacent finger, then repeating it across his hand and back again.

Alice was impressed.

Based on the look on his face, so was Spence.

He smiled. "Didn't know I had it in me."

Then the big door opened up. Alice looked over to see a self-satisfied look on Kaplan's face.

One nodded. "Let's pack it up."

Warner and Drew pulled a huge metal cylinder out of the trunk and put it in a duffel bag.

Alice looked at One, then turned to Kaplan. "He's a cool customer."

"Kept us all alive a long time."

Given their apparent line of work, this was no small thing.

One moved to the door, rifle at the ready.

Alice started to move behind him, which prompted him to stop and stare at her. "You stay *here*."

He spoke with finality. A retort of, "No I won't, either," died on her lips. Instead, she nodded and backed off, going to stand next to Kaplan at the computers.

One continued into the glass-lined corridor slowly. His rifle was out, he was bent over slightly, and looked ready to take on anything.

Halfway down, a series of lights behind the glass walls came on. Alice had to avert her eyes from the sudden brightness, which reflected off the ceiling and the other parts of the glass.

One shot Kaplan an irritated look, and the latter checked his monitors.

Then Kaplan spoke into the walkie-talkie on his left shoulder. "The lights are automated—nothing to worry about."

One nodded, and continued down the corridor. As Alice watched, One made his way to a door that looked like—something.

A bank vault. That was it. It was certainly thick enough.

Reaching into one of the dozens of pouches on his all-black outfit, One pulled out some kind of transmitter. At least Alice assumed that was what it was, based in part on the small plastic antenna that he pulled out before affixing it to the big vault door.

Then he spoke into his own walkie-talkie—the abbreviation PRC popped into her head all of a sudden—and she heard his words over the like devices on everyone else's shoulder:

"Transmitter in position."

"Roger. Running the bypass." Kaplan's fingers started flying across three keyboards. The left-most workstation had a stream of code flying by. The monitor in the middle blinked with the words LOCKING SYSTEM OVERRIDE, and the one on the right was running a passcode search, running all the mathematical possibilities for the five-digit code that would allow them to gain ingress.

Alice found herself engrossed by the right-most screen, watching the numbers change rapidly until settling on one each:

X X 1 X X
X X 1 X 7
X 2 1 X 7
1 2 1 X 7
1 2 1 7 7

"Checkmate." Kaplan smiled.

As he spoke, the vault door opened. One looked inside, rifle pointing right inside, but there didn't appear to be anything there.

"Move up," he said with a come-here gesture.

From this distance, Alice couldn't make anything out, but she doubted that One would call up the rest of the team if there was any serious problem.

Warner and Drew picked up the duffel, and headed in, the medic right behind them.

Alice indicated the bag with her head and asked Kaplan, "What is that?"

"That's what's going to shut the Queen down. It delivers a massive electrical charge, scrambles the main-frame, and forces it to reboot."

Alice nodded. Simple, straightforward, yet productive. She admired the simplicity.

Then the vault door closed ...

FIFTEEN

SO FAR SO GOOD.

Days like this, One felt proud of the work he'd done here. Most of the time, providing security for Umbrella felt like a waste of his considerable talents. He'd survived the jungles of South America, the killing fields of Eastern Europe, and the deserts of the Middle East. He'd done and seen things that would make most people either suicidal or homicidal—or both. Or, at the very least, sick to their stomachs.

The fact that he did all of these things in the service of his country was one of the reasons why he took Major Cain up on his offer to join the private sector. Not so much that he didn't like the work, but he needed a change. He'd done the work for half a dozen different presidential administrations, all with theoretically differ-

ent ideologies, but all in need of people like One who could get things done without anybody knowing about it. It wasn't a boast for One to say that he'd kept the world safe for democracy—hell, safe for *humanity*—on more than one occasion, but he also knew that the very people he'd saved would never know what he did.

That got tiresome.

Besides, Umbrella paid better than the government. Not that money was of great concern—he did the work because he was good at it, and really only took the money because that was how the world worked. He had no real use for the money. Still, better to have it than not, he supposed.

Now, he and his team were in precisely the kind of situation he reveled in: unpredictable, unknown parameters, x-factors like Parks's and Aberaathy's amnesia and that cop, and curve balls like the dining hall that wasn't a dining hall.

Throughout, his team remained calm, cool, professional, competent.

He expected no less, but that didn't mean he wasn't glad when it happened. The situation had been anything but textbook, but his team's response had been perfectly by the book.

That was the only way to accomplish anything.

Warner, Drew, and Danilova came in, the former two carrying the duffel with the EMP. They'd shut the Queen down, pull out the motherboard, and then they could go home.

Then the vault door closed.

One turned around to see that the outer door had also closed and locked.

The four of them were locked in the corridor.

Warner and Drew dropped the duffel and pulled out their rifles even as One called into his PRC, "Kaplan!"

Kaplan's voice came over the tiny speaker. "Some kind of dormant defense mechanism." One could have worked that one out on his own. "We must have tripped it when we opened the door."

"Put it back to sleep."

"Working on it."

Kaplan sounded panicky. One gritted his teeth. Kaplan was a good soldier, but he had a blind spot when technical problems didn't go his way.

One backed up slowly, joining up with Warner, Drew, and Danilova, figuring they were safer bunched together than spread out.

"Hold your positions." More for Kaplan's benefit than the others', he added, "Everyone stay calm."

"What's that?"

At Warner's words, One turned to see a thin white beam of light that extended horizontally across the length of the corridor right in front of the door to the Queen's chamber.

A laser.

Then it started moving toward them.

"Down!" One cried, pushing Drew, who was closest, down with him. To his credit, Warner ducked on his own. One couldn't see how Danilova reacted, and there wasn't time to check.

Instinctively trying to keep his balance, Drew thrust his right arm up as One knocked him over. That turned out to be a nasty mistake: the laser sliced right through the fingers of his gun hand, causing his rifle and the tips of his fingers to fall to the floor.

Drew grabbed his right wrist with his left hand and started screaming in agony.

To One's initial surprise, Drew's finger stumps weren't bleeding. Then, after only half a second, he realized that they wouldn't be. The laser was not only hot enough to cleanly slice through whatever it encountered, but also enough to cauterize any wound. "Medic!" One cried.

He looked up to see why Danilova hadn't responded. To his utter amazement, she was just *standing* there like some kind of statue.

What in the hell was wrong with the woman? She'd never been anything but efficient and competent before, why was she just standing there now with that strange look of confusion frozen on her face?

Then One saw the trickle of blood that ringed her neck.

Olga Danilova's head started to slide forward on her neck, then tumble to the floor. As with Drew's fingers, the laser had cut through skin, muscle, and bone cleanly.

A moment later, the headless body fell to the floor as well.

In a lifetime of fighting, the man who now went by the *nom de guerre* of "One" had seen pretty much every type of death imaginable—and several that he couldn't

imagine, even having seen them. He'd seen much grislier, more painful, far, far more brutal deaths than what he just witnessed.

And yet the simple decapitation of Olga Danilova was done with such mechanical, ruthless, unthinking efficiency that One found it to be in its own way the most repugnant death he'd ever seen.

He forced his attention back to Drew, who was shaking, his eyes starting to flutter shut.

"Stay conscious—you're going into shock."

This admonition appeared to have no effect on the commando.

So One tried a more direct approach. "Stay *awake!*" he barked as loud as he could.

"Sir! It's coming back—it's coming back!"

Not happy that Warner was also panicking, One stood up, as did Warner. This time, the laser ran along the floor.

At once really impressed with and seriously pissed off by the efficiency of the security program that ran this room, One got ready to jump.

The laser sliced through Drew.

Warner jumped up to avoid it, but even as he did so, the laser shifted upward and sliced through his torso. His feet and legs landed on the floor; half a second later, his head, arms, and torso landed on top of his legs with a squelching sound.

Having only another half a second to mull, One looked up, saw the ceiling light fixture, jumped, grabbed hold of the fixture, then pulled his body horizontal so it would be over the beam.

Feeling the heat of the beam as it passed under his legs, ass, and back, he heard a metallic clanking sound as it went by.

He landed, ready for anything. Taking a quick look down, he saw that the laser had sliced through his titanium knife and its holder.

The laser launched a third time.

One was ready for anything.

Or so he thought.

This time it spread into a diagonal grid that took up the entire breadth and height of the corridor. He could feel the heat of the massive deathtrap on his face as it neared him, ready to cut him into distressingly small pieces.

Nowhere to jump, nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. One's last word before he was literally cubed was: "Shit."

SIXTEEN

BARTHOLOMEW JOSEPH KAPLAN HAD BEEN having a really good day.

Then again, any day that had One saying "Let's move out" was a good day as far as Bart Kaplan was concerned. After years of frustration, he was at last living his dream life at his dream job.

When he was a teenager, Kaplan had found his vocation: to be an agent working for the Federal Bureau of Investigation. It was the only thing he ever truly wanted.

Also when he was a teenager, he discovered that he had a tremendous aptitude for computers. Actually, he had a tremendous aptitude for most academic subjects; he finished Columbia High School in Maplewood, New Jersey, in three years, then blew through NYU's undergraduate program in two with a BS in computer science.

While his peers were still finishing their sophomore years and trying to determine what to do with their lives, Kaplan was being recruited by dozens of large companies.

He turned them all down, because dammit, he was going to work for the FBI.

As it happened, the FBI was happy to have him—as a computer expert. His skills as a computer geek were of tremendous use to the feds, and they were thrilled to have him as a resource.

There was only one problem: Kaplan didn't want that. He wanted to be *afield* agent. He explained that to his superiors.

Most of them didn't laugh, though it was an effort for them.

Kaplan was a good shot, he had good instincts, and he kept in excellent shape. There was no good reason for them to keep him out of the field, save one: computer guys didn't go out in the field.

Besides which, good shots with good instincts who kept in excellent shape were a dime a dozen. The Bureau had people like that banging down their doors. They had fewer with Kaplan's skill set actually willing to work for a government salary.

But Kaplan didn't care about the money. He wanted to do field work.

That was when Umbrella came calling, with an offer to work for their Security Division.

It meant relocating to Raccoon City, but Kaplan considered it a small price to pay. Hell, he didn't have to

pay anything—they quoted him a salary that was, frankly, obscene. Just because he didn't care about the money didn't mean he wouldn't take it, either.

What mattered, though, was that his computer skills were put to good use *and* he got to go into the field.

It wasn't quite the ideal situation he'd hoped for. The other guys in the squad treated him like some kind of technogeek who didn't know one end of his MP5K rifle from the other. J.D. and Rain in particular rode him like a prize pony.

But when the shit hit the fan, they relied on him for all the techie know-how. They counted on him to have their backs, just as he counted on them to have his.

So seeing the words LEVEL 5 WEAPON SYSTEM ACTIVATED on the right-most of the three flatscreen monitors in front of him disturbed him greatly. The doors should never have shut, and no weapon system should be activating at any level. He was sure he'd bypassed *everything*, dammit!

"Will you open that door now, please?" Spence asked with a certain urgency.

Kaplan spoke through clenched teeth. "I'm trying."

Alice then said, "Kaplan, quick, something's happening in there."

That Kaplan knew, since the left-most monitor showed the security camera's view of what was happening in the corridor.

Shit. The laser. Kaplan didn't even think that was operational yet. It had only been recently installed, meant as a last-ditch security device only to be used in

the direst of emergencies. Apparently, this qualified, and it had its own level of security. That was how Kaplan missed it.

"Kaplan, you've got to hurry, you've got to *help* them!"

Alice yelling at him from her vantage point at the door was *not* helping. Neither was Spence hovering over him.

And neither was watching the laser cut through the room. Drew's gun hand was sliced off at the fingers.

Then Olga...

Christ.

The laser just went right through her neck like it was nothing. It seemed as if the beam just passed harmlessly through the medic. At first, Kaplan allowed himself to believe that the security measure died down before it reached Olga.

That belief lasted right up until Olga's head fell off.

"My God, Kaplan, there's something *killing* them in there!"

"Open the door!"

Jesus Christ, couldn't these two shut the fuck *up*?
"Yeah, I am *trying*!"

"Kaplan!"

"I'm almost there," he said, as much to convince himself. Just a few more protocols to go through.

"Kaplan, open the door!"

"I am *trying*," he said for the third time.

"Well try *harder*" Spence said, as if that would help.

The laser came through a second time, finishing off Warner and Drew, and almost taking out One.

"Oh God."

"Do it!"

He almost had it shut down. "I'm almost there!"

"Come on!"

"Got it!" Kaplan cried—

—just as the laser grid had finished slicing and dicing One.

The laser winked out.

The door opened.

Somehow, Kaplan made himself stand up.

Jesus.

One head. One decapitated body. One body sliced in twain. One pair of legs. One torso with head and arms attached. A bag containing an EMP delivery system.

And a pile of human meat that used to be One.

Kaplan was probably the only person in the team who knew One's real name. He'd managed to pull it from an NSA database he wasn't supposed to have access to. He never revealed it because One had been the guy that came to him at the Bureau, made him the offer the Bureau refused to provide.

Gave him his life.

And this was how Kaplan repaid that favor.

If he had just been one second faster, One would still be alive.

Instead, his boss was in dozens of cleanly sliced cubic pieces on the floor of a metal corridor a thousand feet underground.

Jesus Christ.

"All right." Kaplan's voice sounded weak and hoarse, even to himself. He didn't care. He needed to focus. "Let's do it."

"Do *what*?" Spence looked at him like he was crazy. Kaplan wasn't sure he'd be wrong in that assessment.

"We have to complete the mission."

"There's no way I'm going down there."

Kaplan wanted very much to agree with Spence. He didn't want to go in there, either. That room had already killed four of his comrades, including One. *One*, for God's sake. Kaplan didn't think anything could kill him this side of a thermonuclear detonation, and even then, Kaplan would've laid even money on him making it through that.

Weakly, he said, "Her defenses are down."

"*D4jd, vu*, anyone?" Spence said snidery.

Kaplan ignored him.

This was what field agents did. This was what he wanted.

Well, not what he *wanted*. In fact, this was exactly what he hated: sitting uselessly typing code into a keyboard while everyone else risked their lives. It was precisely to avoid this sort of thing that he had left the Bureau.

Gingerly, he entered the corridor.

Trying very hard not to look at the remains—trying even harder not to pay attention to the smell of burning meat that permeated the corridor—he bent down and picked up the duffel bag with the EMP.

A hand on his shoulder scared the shit out of him. For one brief, insane moment, he thought it was One, telling him the exercise was over.

But it wasn't. It was Alice. Good old Ass-Kicking Alice, though she herself probably didn't remember that yet.

One was still just as dead.

She gave him a look of understanding.

Maybe she wasn't all back yet, but at least some of the instincts were there.

They entered the Red Queen's chamber. A dark room with a circular trapdoor in the floor, the rest of the room was decorated in the same boring metallic decor as the rest of the Hive. Kaplan couldn't imagine how people lived and worked down there all the time without going nuts.

Of course, maybe they did. Maybe that was what happened.

The door shut behind them, but Kaplan didn't panic. It was *supposed* to happen this time.

Opening the zipper, he hauled the device out of the duffel bag, placed it on the floor, then flipped open his wrist-top and tapped some commands in.

A second later, the trapdoor opened, and the Red Queen's massive CPU rose up into the room.

"Give me a hand with this," he said to Alice.

The pair of them picked up the EMP device from the floor and screwed it into the top of the CPU.

As they worked, Kaplan heard the whirring of the projectors that he knew were hidden throughout the

chamber. Seconds later, a red-tinged hologram appeared in the middle of the room.

"Get out! Get out, you can't be in here!"

"Don't listen to anything she says," he said quickly to Alice. Normally he wouldn't need to bother, but in her current state, Alice wouldn't be expecting this. "She's a holographic representation of the Red Queen."
"You have to get out!"

"The head programmer modeled her after the daughter of some bigwig in the corporation. She'll try and deceive us, confuse us—"

"I wouldn't advise this. Disabling me will result in loss of primary power"

"—she'll say anything to stop us from shutting her down."

They finished setting up the EMP. Kaplan pulled out the transmitter that would activate the surge. *"I implore you"*

Kaplan had never liked the idea of artificial intelligence. Computers were inherently stupid, only doing what they were told. The idea of AI was one he found contradictory, and potentially quite dangerous. It was like handing an atomic bomb to an autistic child. "Implore away."

"Please—please!"

At Kaplan's urging, he and Alice both moved to the far reaches of the room. His thumb hovered over the button on the remote that would shut the Queen down. *"You're all going to die down here."* Kaplan pushed the button.

The lights all went out, plunging the room into total darkness.

A second later, the emergency lights came on.

Squatting down, Kaplan started opening up the CPU access to the motherboard.

Sounding confused, Alice said, "I thought you were here to shut her down."

"So I can retrieve her operating systems. The corporation has to find out what went on down here. They wouldn't want her destroyed."

"I'm sure. Must be quite an investment."

Kaplan said nothing. Right now he'd be the first to pull the plug—or take a really big hammer—to the computer that killed not only the five hundred people down here, but his entire team. On the other hand, they *did* need to know what happened.

So, rather than answer the question directly, he took his usual tack of plunging into technobabble. "That pulse forces the circuit breaker to shut down her mainframe for thirty seconds. After that, if I don't have her motherboard, she can reboot."

He eased the motherboard out.

"But since I have the board, this won't be a problem."

Forcing a smile, he stood up, dropping the motherboard into the duffel.

"Come on, let's get back."

SEVENTEEN

RAIN WAS BORED.

When One told her and J.D. to keep an eye on the dumb cop while they went to shut down the little-kid computer, she didn't say anything, 'cause she didn't do that. One was the boss. Shit, One was the guy who got her the job. She'd take point heading into the gates of hell if that was the order he gave.

But that didn't make this babysitting shit any less boring.

"So what the fuck you doing here?" she asked Addison, who was sitting on one of the crates.

The asshole tried to shrug while wearing cuffs, then winced in pain. J.D. grinned when he did that.

"We got a call—some kind of disturbance at the big

mansion in Foxwood Heights. My sergeant told me that I had to check it out."

Rain laughed.

"What's so funny?" Addison sounded all defensive.

"Fuckin' rookie." Rain shook her head. "You believe this? RCPD pulls this shit all the time."

"What do you mean, 'fuckin' rookie'?"

J.D. pulled out his Smith & Wesson and checked the clip. "You said you just transferred, right?"

"Yeah, so? I've been a cop for ten years."

"I was a cop, too, asswipe," Rain said, "and I know that new in town means rookie. Don't matter how far into your pension you are from some other burg."

Putting the clip back into his pistol, J.D. said, "You, my friend, got hazed. Nobody's supposed to go to the mansion. They don't get calls. All the locals know that."

Rain grinned. " 'Cept you."

Then the lights went out. The only thing Rain could see were the display lights on the crates.

J.D.'s voice sounded in the darkness. "Guess Kaplan found the off button."

The emergency lights came on. "Yeah, well, sun shines on a dog's ass every once in a while." Kaplan wasn't that bad a guy, really, but he was a geek who didn't really belong in the field. Sure, he could hold his own in a firelight, but he was about the last person Rain wanted covering her ass. She trained a kid just like Kaplan when she was a cop, all eager-fucking-beaver with lots of brains but no sense.

For this kind of work, you needed *cojones* of steel. Kaplan's were made of tin.

Rain noticed that the indicators on the crates went from ENVIRONMENT STABLE in green to ENVIRONMENT UNSTABLE in red.

Pulling out her knife, she started to scrape dirt out from her thumbnail. She was bored again.

"They're late," J.D. said.

Rain checked her watch—they had one hour, twenty-seven minutes left before the Hive'd be sealed off.

Then she heard a noise, like metal clanging on the floor.

She put away the knife and pulled out her MP5K.

"I'm on it."

Of all the weapons she'd wielded both as a cop and as Umbrella security, nothing felt more comfortable in Rain's hands than the MP5K.

Stepping over the thick tubes that went from the crates into the floor or to other crates, Rain moved around, trying to find out where the noise came from.

She heard it again, and turned right, moving toward it.

The third time she heard the noise, she saw the metal cylinder rolling on the floor. Holding the rifle up, ready to blow holes into whatever got in her way, she walked forward.

Turning around one of the crates, she saw a woman leaning against one of the smaller crates, head down. She wore a lab coat and an all-white outfit, just like the

corpse in the flooded lab. This one was brunette, though—and she was alive!

Lowering the rifle, Rain called back, "J.D., we got a survivor!" Then she turned back to the woman and began to slowly approach her. "It's okay, we're here to help."

The woman almost fell into Rain's arms. She caught the woman, guided her up by gripping her on either side of the head. Damn, but her skin was cold and clammy, and she was paler than Warner, and white folks didn't get any paler than Warner.

Keeping her best you'll-be-okay voice on, honed from years dealing with the public for LAPD, she said, "Don't worry, you seem to be in some sort of—aaaaaah-hhh!"

She screamed when the bitch bit her on the right hand, smack between her thumb and index finger.

Bit her! Rain couldn't fucking believe it!

Rain tried to knock her down, but the crazy lady had some kind of iron grip on her, and they both fell to the floor, rolling around like some kind of mud-wrestling match.

"Get off!"

As they struggled, Rain noticed that the crazy lady's eyes were all watery and fucked up, her teeth looked like something had died in her mouth, and she wasn't just pale, she was fucking ghostlike.

"Get off of me!"

She heard someone running up to them. Taking a quick glance up, she saw that it was J.D.

"J.D., get her offa me before I stab her ass!"

Grabbing her by the lab coat, J.D. tossed the crazy lady off to the side.

Then he looked down at Rain. "You okay?"

Rain quickly got to her feet. "She bit me, man! She took a chunk clean right outta me!"

The crazy lady rolled over. J.D. took out his S&W, pointing it right at her.

"Stay down."

The bitch didn't listen, but started to get to her feet.

"I'm warning you," J.D. said, "stay *down*!"

Rain shook her head. "She's crazy."

"Come any closer and I'll fire," J.D. said as she started walking toward him.

No, she wasn't walking. Nobody walked like that. She was—she was *shuffling*, like some kind of late-night-movie zombie monster shit.

This was getting too fucking weird for Rain.

"I mean it!"

J.D. spoke those words as if it mattered, but Rain knew he shouldn't have bothered. This woman was fucking nuts.

She moved closer and closer. J.D. shook his head, aimed his pistol downward, and fired.

The shot went clean through her knee.

Normal people would react to a .357 Magnum bullet tearing through their knee by stumbling, falling to the floor, and screaming in deep pain. It was a cripple shot, and it usually meant the victim would never walk again.

This bitch just stumbled for a second, snarled, show-

ing teeth stained with Rain's own fucking blood, and then kept moving forward.

Shit.

J.D. mouthed the words "What the—." Rain couldn't blame him for not being able to say anything. This was *beyond* fucking nuts.

After her second step, J.D. shot her in the other knee.

This time it didn't even slow her down.

J.D. took three more shots at her, this time in the chest.

Fuck this. Rain was tired of pussyng around.

She hefted her MP5K, paused just long enough to make sure it was on automatic, and then squeezed the trigger.

Dozens of bullets slammed into the crazy lady's chest, blowing her back about ten feet and sending her sprawling into the tubing that was all over the floor of this fucking "dining hall."

She looked over at J.D. with a triumphant look, but the sonofabitch barely noticed.

"I shot her five times. How was she still standing?"

Rain reached into one of her arm pouches and pulled out a bandage.

"Bitch isn't standing now."

More footsteps. It was Addison. She was about to ask him what the fuck he was doing, when Alice, Kaplan, and Spence ran up behind him. Rain wondered where the rest of the team was.

"What was all the shooting?" Kaplan asked.

"We found a survivor."

Kaplan looked at her like she was nuts. "And you shot him?"

"She was crazed. She *bit* me."

"She's gone."

Rain looked over at J.D. when he spoke. He had just walked over to where the crazy lady had fallen.

"She's gone!" he said again.

"That's bullshit!" You didn't shoot someone three dozen times just to have them get up and walk off. That shit didn't play.

"She fell right here and now she's *gone*."

"Look at this," Alice said. "It's blood—but not much."

The cop squatted down to take a closer look. "Looks like it's coagulated. But that's not possible."

J.D. sounded pissed off when he asked, "Why not?"

Rain already knew the answer, but let Matt the Wonder Detective take it.

"Because blood doesn't do that till after you're dead."

Spence looked bored. "Can we *go* now?"

"We ain't going anywhere till the rest of the team get here." As Rain spoke, she loaded another clip into the MP5K. She was for damn sure not getting caught without a full load.

Then she saw the look on Kaplan's face. He looked like someone strangled his favorite pet.

For that matter, Alice and Spence looked all uncomfortable now, too.

Finally, Kaplan said, "There's no one else coming."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Wait." J.D. grabbed her shoulder. "Quiet."

Then Rain heard it, too. Metal scraping against metal.

Raising her rifle, she turned and saw it: a tall bald guy dragging a fire axe on the floor behind him. He was wearing a white lab coat and white outfit under it, too, though his was all wet and filthy. The guy's shoulder was all fucked up, and his right foot was perpendicular to his leg—like he'd broken his ankle. But he didn't seem to feel it.

Behind him, she saw more. Just like the crazy lady, they all kinda shuffled, they all had milky eyes, and they all had fucked-up teeth.

And some of them were injured.

Fatally injured.

This was in the next county after fucking nuts.

One guy had half his head carved out, another was missing his right eye and his entire nose.

Nobody was bleeding, though. Any blood she'd seen was coagulated.

"Fuck," J.D. muttered.

"Don't come any closer." Kaplan sounded like a total moron.

"They're behind us!" Spence pointed out.

"Jesus," Kaplan muttered.

"They're everywhere," Alice added, stating the fucking obvious like it was some kind of revelation. "Guys, they're everywhere, they're all around us!"

Then the crazy lady, lab coat and white outfit full of bullet holes, jumped Rain.

This time Rain grabbed her by the head and twisted until she heard the snap of her neck bone.

Bitch didn't get up this time.

Then she flipped the MP5K to semi-automatic—she was gonna need to conserve ammo with this many people—and fired on the big bald guy right in the chest.

He fell to the floor.

Then he got back up.

Fuckity fuck fuck *fuck*.

Kaplan, still in total moron mode, yelled, "I said stay back!" Then he took a few shots with his Beretta.

"Watch the tanks!" Alice cried.

Rain didn't give a rat's ass about the fucking tanks, she just wanted these whatever-the-fuck-they-were dead.

Or deader.

Damn, this was fucked up.

These things kept getting back up. She and J.D. exchanged a look. Without even having to speak, they knew what to do: can't kill 'em, at least clear a path.

So they switched their rifles to automatic and concentrated their fire on one area, plowing down these shuffling bastards one by one.

"Let's go!" J.D. yelled even as Rain cried, "Hurry up!"

Then one of the tanks exploded...

EIGHTEEN

MATT ADDISON HAD BEEN TRYING TO UN-lock himself when the tank exploded.

At some point during her struggle with the woman who bit her, Rain's keys had fallen off her person. Matt noticed the keys lying there on the floor as soon as he, Kaplan, Alice, and Spence joined J.D. and Rain.

His opportunity came when Alice pointed out the blood. On the pretense of squatting down to take a closer look at it—and to show off his knowledge as a "detective" by imparting his brilliant bit of wisdom about coagulated blood, even though that was something he remembered from high-school biology—he palmed the keys and had been working to free himself ever since.

At least he'd convinced the security goons that he

was a legit cop. The hazing story worked like a charm, and he hadn't even had to supply the details. Rain and J.D. knew the RCPD well enough to fill in the blanks. Sending a neophyte detective on a fake call to the infamous Mansion You Stayed Away From was a run-of-the-mill prank, and Matt knew there were enough ex-cops in Security Division's employ for that to be common knowledge.

Now, though, things were just getting too weird. He knew that Umbrella was into some hardcore shit, but this...

As the numbers of people stumbling toward them grew, Matt came to several realizations. The first was that these people were all wearing suits or lab coats over all-white jumpsuits. He knew from Lisa that Umbrella had a dress code—unusual in the post-dot-com world of Business Casual, but not unheard of—matching that of these people's clothing.

The other was that they were already dead.

When he was a kid, one of Matt Addison's favorite words was "zuvembie." He came across it in a lot of the comic books he read when he was a child, and it referred to reanimated dead bodies. In later years, he would learn of the word "zombie"—mostly from horror movies—and later still discovered that the comics called them "zuvembies" only because they weren't allowed to use the word "zombie." The Comics Code Authority established in the 1950s that kept comics G-rated forbade that word, and some bright mind at one of the comics companies made up a synonym that was

similar enough to convey the meaning without actually violating the code.

Twelve-year-old Matt, picking up some monster comic or other, just thought it was a really, really cool word.

Now, decades later, he found himself confronted with real-life zuvembies.

More than ever, he needed to get out of these damn cuffs and ditch these gonzos so he could find Lisa's desk and get to the bottom of this. Umbrella's fingers were in shit much worse than anything he, Aaron, and the rest of them could possibly have dreamed of if *this* was the kind of thing coming out of the Hive.

He was pretty close to finally getting the cuffs off—no mean feat when you have basically no leverage whatsoever—when one of the tanks blew up. Alice—who seemed to be the only person in the group with anything like a brain, even with the drag effect of her amnesia—warned them to beware of the tanks, but nobody listened, and one of them exploded, sending Matt onto his back.

Glancing around quickly, he caught sight of the keys and crabwalked his way back to where they were: under a table.

A zombie followed him, and tried to reach in under the table and pull him out. Said zombie was wholly undeterred by the fact that he was on fire.

Matt kicked at the zombie and tried to grab the keys, but succeeded only in knocking the latter into a vent.

Splitting his focus, he reached into the vent for the keys while continuing to kick the zombie.

Eventually he succeeded in both endeavors. The zombie's neck broke from one of the kicks, which stopped it coming after him, and he managed to grab the keys.

The bad news was, now his leg was on fire.

He couldn't do a damn thing about it while bound, so he fumbled agitatedly with the keys, hoping the fire didn't spread past his right shin, knowing that it was a pretty slim hope.

But he for damn sure wasn't dying down here. Not until he found out what happened to Lisa.

It was one thing to be prepared for something to go wrong—that was almost a given. His boss at the Federal Marshal's office always used to say, "Plan A *never* works." This, however, was several orders of magnitude beyond something going wrong. Arriving at the mansion to find some woman dressed like she was going to a cocktail party or something, then being attacked by the Security Goons from Hell, and finally reliving *Day of the Dead* wasn't even on the contingency plan list.

He got the cuffs unlocked.

Then he tamped down the fire on the leg of his pants before it could spread to even less comfortable regions of his body.

Pausing to take a breath, he saw that three more zombies had decided to take a shot at him.

Then another arm grabbed his shoulder and pulled him out.

Alice,

"Come on."

Nodding, he let her lead the way away from the zombies. He couldn't see any of the rest of the Goon Squad.

"Where is everybody?"

"I lost track of Rain, J.D., Kaplan, and Spence."

Matt nodded. "What about the rest of them?" The team leader, the medic, and the other two goons were still unaccounted for.

"They're dead."

That got Matt's attention. All they were doing was shutting down the damn computer! Did the zombies get them, too?

No, that wasn't possible—the zombie attack was a surprise to everyone.

So how the fuck had those four gotten themselves killed?

Matt's urgency increased a hundredfold. Umbrella hadn't just built an underground headquarters in order to hide their research, they'd built a fucking deathtrap. Five hundred employees, and now four of their security people.

With six of them left and in serious danger of joining them.

He and Alice made their way out into a corridor. As soon as the opportunity presented itself, he slipped away. Alice didn't follow him, so he definitely gave her the slip.

Right now, his priority was Lisa's desk.

She had described her office space to him in her encrypted e-mail, including the route there from the elevator bay. Finding that was only the work of a few minutes—it came complete with another fake window and fake cityscape—then he traced the route she had provided.

He found himself in an area full of boring metal desks, with papers, 'file folders, staplers, phones, cords, inboxes, disks, and various other items strewn haphazardly about the floor. With no idea which one was Lisa's, he investigated the desks themselves. Most of them had some kind of personal object to indicate the personality of the user, and Matt knew that Lisa's own desk had a picture of her, Matt, Mom, and Dad from a cruise they'd taken when she and Matt were teenagers.

Matt tried not to think about what he was doing as he looked at pictures of a man with his dog, a woman with her children, Beanie Babies, a pennant from the minor-league baseball team that played in Raccoon City, and all the other personal items of people who were not only dead, but still up and walking around, biting people or getting shot at by the likes of Rain and J.D.

He got to one desk, which had a computer with a broken monitor on it. No sign of a picture, but he found the next best thing: Lisa's ID badge.

Squatting down at the file cabinet next to her desk, he started going through her files, hoping to be able to salvage *something* from this nightmare.

A thud scared him out of what few years of life he still had left. One of Lisa's "zuvembie" coworkers was banging on the window next to her desk.

However, the zombie was cut off from Matt by the window, and seemed content to simply bang on it rather than try to find an alternate route.

So Matt let him. He had more important things to deal with.

Or so he thought. Lisa's files were all meaningless to him. They probably related to her actual job. Nothing about a T-virus or anything like that.

Of course, she wouldn't keep anything like that at her desk. She wasn't that stupid.

Unfortunately, that meant he had nothing that he could take back to Aaron.

This was not shaping up to be a good day at all.

Hearing movement behind him, he whirled around, ready to face another zombie, hoping he could fend it off with a stapler or a keyboard or something, since J.D. had disarmed him back at the mansion.

Then he saw who it was.

"Lisa?"

She stood in the middle of the space amidst the office supplies festooned about the floor, looking completely normal. A little distressed, but that was to be expected.

Had she actually survived this? Had one fucking thing actually gone right today?

Matt got up.

Then Lisa jumped him and tried to bite him with decaying teeth...

NINETEEN

BEFORE TODAY, BART KAPLAN'S WORLD made sense.

Before today, computers didn't go on homicidal rampages, killing five hundred people for no good reason. Before today, he and his team were top pros, always achieving their mission objectives. Before today, the team always came home alive.

Before today, dead people didn't get up and walk around.

He wasn't sure how it got so bad so fast. One second he was standing with J.D., Rain, Alice, Spence, and that Addison guy, the next they were surrounded. After the tank exploded, he was knocked to the floor, but he got up quickly and started unloading his Beretta into the

walking corpses that simply would not stop for anything. His ears were ringing.

Somehow he and J.D. wound up back to back. They were just around the corner from the door that would take them back to the hallway where the offices and labs were. "We lost the others."

"Keep moving!" J.D. said as he fired his rifle into the crowd.

They inched closer, finally reaching the door. Kaplan thought his head was going to explode from the noise of the gunfire, the explosion, and the screaming.

Not to mention the image of his four comrades being killed while he was helpless to do anything about it.

Spence was standing there as Kaplan holstered his pistol and approached the keypad.

Surprised, Kaplan asked, "You waited?" Leaving aside the fact that he was unarmed, this particular iteration of Spence Parks didn't strike Kaplan as the gung-ho, take-one-for-the-team type. More like the run-away-and-save-his-own-ass type.

"Didn't know the code."

Run-away-and-save-his-own-ass it was, then. Luckily, Kaplan did know the code. All he had to do was summon it from the recesses of his brain. The problem was doing it through the pounding headache.

He entered 0431961.

Nothing happened.

"Shit!"

"Come on," Spence said.

He entered the code again.

Again, nothing.
"Shit!"

He didn't get it. That was the code, he was sure of it. If only the noise would stop ... Spence, still being his usual useful self, said, "Hurry up."

As if it would make a difference, he entered 0431961 more slowly.

Yet again, nothing.
"Shit!"

J.D. ran up to the door, grabbed Kaplan and shoved him out of the way. "Move! What's the code?"

Under other circumstances, Kaplan would have objected to this course of action. But maybe there was something wrong with the way he was entering it. Not that there was any trick to it, really, you just entered the eight numbers.

"Move!" J.D. said. "What's the code?"

"Hurry up!" Rain called from a few feet off. "I'm runnin' out of ammo!"

Pulling out his Beretta and shooting into the ever-nearer crowd, Kaplan yelled out, "Zero, four, three—"

Then it hit him. *Eight numbers*. He'd left out a digit "No, fuck!"

Spence walked up to Kaplan and got right in his face. Kaplan was tempted to turn his pistol on the arrogant prick. "What is the code?"

Kaplan took a breath. "Zero, four, zero, three, one, nine, six, one."

"Got it." J.D. entered the code. Then he turned to look

at Kaplan as the door slid open. "See how easy that was?"

Behind the door was a sea of former Hive workers.

Kaplan didn't know what the look on his own face was, but he imagined it was very similar to the look of abject shock on J.D.'s as dozens of hands grabbed him and pulled him into the hallway. A second later, and Kaplan couldn't even see J.D. anymore.

"J.D.!"

Rain came out of nowhere and dove in after him. Was she out of her fucking mind?

Kaplan ran up to her and grabbed her arm. To his shock, Spence helped. No sense in losing both of them.

One of them bit Rain in the neck even as Kaplan and Spence yanked her out. Kaplan quickly slammed his hand on the switch that would shut the door after shooting one in the face.

Again, Rain screamed, "J.D.!"

"Forget it," Spence said. "He's gone."

Pounding her fist on the door, Rain screamed, "God-dammit!"

The sweat beaded on Kaplan's brow. This wasn't supposed to be happening.

One. Warner. Drew. Olga. And now J.D.

They weren't supposed to die. Shit, J.D. and Rain were the toughest badasses on two legs—all you had to do to know that was to watch them for five minutes.

And One, well, One was just *the* best.

If even *J.D.* couldn't survive this, if even *One* couldn't survive this, what the fuck chance did some computer geek like Kaplan have?

"Come on," Spence said, pointing across the hall. "There's a clear path back to that computer room."

Kaplan nodded. He turned to Rain. "C'mon, Rain."

"They fuckin' killed J.D., man. That's *bulshit!*"

Spence grabbed her arm. "They're gonna fuckin' kill *us* if we don't move our asses!"

Shrugging off Spence's hand without looking at him, Rain turned and moved for the door. Kaplan followed, as did Spence.

As they ran, Rain asked, "So what the fuck *did* happen to the rest of the team? They zombie food, too?"

"No, the Red Queen's defenses got them."

Rain stopped and grabbed Kaplan by the shoulder. "Say the fuck *what?* I thought *you* were supposed to bring down—"

Spence pushed them both forward, one with each hand. "Can you two kill each other later?"

Throwing his head back, he indicated the hordes of people shuffling toward them.

Kaplan ran ahead. He opened the door to the Red Queen's chamber, waited for Spence and Rain to come in, then shut the door behind them.

It was his fault.

All of it.

He'd tried not to think about it, but Rain was right. It was his responsibility.

Dead people all over the place. And the people best qualified to stop them were cut to ribbons before his eyes. Because he missed something, because he fucked up, over half the team was dead.

"Whatever they are, there's too many of them out there," Rain said.

"Whatever they are?" Kaplan repeated, trying and failing not to sound hysterical. "It's pretty obvious what they are. Lab coats, badges—those people used to *work* here!"

"All the people working here are dead."

"Well," Spence said philosophically, "that isn't stopping them from walking around."

"Where did they come from? Why didn't we see them on the way in?" Kaplan couldn't stop moving—if he stopped moving, he feared he'd die, and if he died, he'd become one of them.

Rain spoke in a deliberate voice. "When you cut the power, you unlocked the doors. *You* let them out."

Something else that was on him. No, it wasn't enough that he got One and the others killed, but he was responsible for letting all the dead people out to kill J.D.—and, for all he knew, Alice and Addison, too.

The panic took over completely.

"We're never gonna make it to the surface."

Rain shook her head, then kicked the clip out of her rifle. "I've got one in the breech, and one spare mag."

Spence shook his head. "We are so fucked."

TWENTY

THE ENCOURAGING THING FOR ALICE WAS that this was all starting to look familiar.

Unfortunately, each memory that was triggered had an unpleasant connotation.

She walked through the abandoned corridors of the Hive, dimly illuminated by the emergency lighting. Matt had wandered off, and Alice had lost track of Rain, J.D., Kaplan, and Spence.

At the very least, the corridor through which she walked was empty, and so bereft of the undead horrors.

Some areas she walked through meant nothing to her, but others triggered flashes. Here, the office belonging to the person in charge of Project: Open Book. There, the lab where they did some of the preliminary work on the Nemesis Program. Over that way were the

cubicles where the support staff for Pharmaceuticals worked, answering phones, processing invoices, making photocopies...

She turned another corner, and the name Clarence fell into her head as she spied a wall lined with eight animal cages: two horizontal rows of four. Each cage had wire mesh on the door—mesh that was currently covered in blood and ripped open from the *inside*.

Was Clarence one of the animals? She couldn't remember.

With each memory that came back also came the mounting frustration of what she *didn't* recall.

She heard a noise and whirled around, but saw nothing.

Typical.

Again, she looked at the cages. She could not for the life of her recall what kind of animal was housed in those cages, but the evidence suggested that they had broken out on their own, and they were probably in the same condition as the Hive employees they'd been spending the last half-hour shooting, punching, and hitting.

Then she heard the footsteps.

No—not feet.

The scratchy sound of clawed feet on metal floor.

Tap tap tap tap tap...

She turned to face the doorway through which she heard the noise just as a large doberman came into view.

The doberman was covered in blood. Large chunks of flesh were missing, and Alice could see its rib cage,

not to mention several internal organs, none of which seemed to be doing much of anything. The dog's eyes were watery and white.

Dead dog walking.

Despite its deceased state, the dog was somewhat more agile than its human counterparts, and started running down the hall toward Alice.

Somehow intuiting that offering to pet it and saying, "Good dog," wouldn't really cut it, Alice turned and ran to the door on the far end of the corridor. Miraculously, she remembered that it was one of the chemistry labs, and it had a door that latched shut.

Running as fast as she could go in the maddeningly impractical boots she'd been stupid enough to put on back at the mansion, Alice barely made it into the lab ahead of the dog.

Staring through the round window in the door, she watched in horror as the doberman leapt up and scratched at the door, trying to gain ingress, blood dripping from its teeth.

Letting out a long breath, Alice turned around—
—and found herself face to face with the blood-covered, very dead face of Clarence White.

At once, Alice finally remembered that Clarence was the person assigned to care for the fleet of dobermans, though Alice still couldn't for the life of her recall *why* they had a fleet of dobermans down here. Animal experimentation, maybe? Certainly not beyond the realm of possibility for Umbrella.

That went through her head in one millisecond.

In the next, she hit Clarence with a series of well-placed punches to the chest, then executed a perfect spin-kick that sent the guard flying into a glass shelf full of beakers and chemicals.

Alice blinked.

Holy shit.

One's words came back to her: *"You and I have the same employer—we all work for the Umbrella Corporation. The mansion is an entrance to the Hive. You are security operatives placed there to protect that entrance."*

Until now, she hadn't given much thought to what that really *meant*. One had asked her for a report, as if she was his subordinate—and apparently she was more than that. She was, if not part of his actual team, part of the same division of the company.

And that meant she knew how to kick some serious ass.

Amid the sound of shattering glass, Alice heard the sound of bone snapping. She hoped that meant that Clarence would stay dead.

She looked down at the corpse. It didn't move, which made it unusual for corpses around here.

It also had a nine-millimeter pistol sitting in a holster.

If she knew how to spin-kick, maybe she knew how to shoot a gun, too. After all, she wouldn't have had a full armory in her dresser drawer if she didn't know how to use its contents, right? She certainly had nothing to lose by taking the pistol—Clarence sure as hell didn't need it anymore.

Gingerly, she undid the buckle on the holster, slowly

pulling the pistol out, hoping Clarence wouldn't choose this moment to come back to unlife.

Then the dog crashed through a window Alice hadn't even realized was there and came at her.

Fingers tightening around the grip of the nine-millimeter, she ran for the door, and again ran through it and closed it on the dog in the nick of time.

This was getting tiresome.

She clicked off the safety of the nine-millimeter. It was only a matter of time before the pooch from hell jumped back out through the same window.

Turning around, she found herself confronted by seven more dobermans.

One was missing an ear.

Another was missing its throat.

Two had broken limbs.

One had a massive gash in its side.

All seven of them leapt for her at once.

Gripping the nine-millimeter with both hands, she aimed straight for the lead doberman's head and fired.

Seconds later, she'd emptied all sixteen rounds in the clip. Seven of the sixteen were perfect head shots that took the dogs down.

That took her out of immediate danger, but the only potential source of fresh ammo was Clarence's body in the lab, and Alice was *not* going back in as long as the other dog was there.

Then she heard growling.

Suddenly, the other dog being in the lab was less of an issue.

The doberman leapt out at her, and it was between her and the lab door, so that trick was not going to work a third time. And the nine-millimeter was now a useless piece of metal.

Alice saw some crates piled against a wall, and then her legs moved almost of their own volition. She ran to the crates, stepped up onto one, then up to another more highly piled one, then along the wall, building up momentum.

Pushing herself off the wall, she delivered a powerful kick to the doberman's head, breaking the neckbone with a resounding snap.

She landed elegantly on her feet, wishing she'd remembered she could do stuff like that earlier.

There had been eight cages, so she felt confident that the danger from undead pooches had passed.

However, she was still unarmed.

Sort of. Turned out her body was a lethal weapon.

She needed to find the others. The only chance they stood was together.

If they stood any kind of chance at all. Who knew what else was lurking down here. Killer bunnies? Monster cockroaches? Zombie rats?

Something worse?

Continuing through the corridors, she found a huge room full of cubicles—and movement!

Dashing into the room, she saw Matt being attacked by one of the undead. Looking around, she spied a paperweight that had a picture of a white rabbit, a girl in a blue dress, and a man with a big head

wearing a large hat, as well as the inscription ALICE IN WONDERLAND.

Alice thought that was more irony than she really needed as she grabbed the paperweight and slammed it into the undead woman's head.

She fell to the floor, unmoving, allowing Matt to get up.

However, Alice didn't spare Matt a second glance, because Alice realized that she knew who this woman was.

Lisa Broward.

They were standing in a park. There was a statue—the same one that was wrapped in plastic in the hallway right before One and his team came in. Alice and Lisa were talking amidst the fallen leaves of autumn.

"I can help you get the virus. I have access to security plans, surveillance codes, the works."

Alice hesitated.

"But—?" Lisa prompted.

"But there's going to be a price."

"Name it"

Matt knelt down beside Lisa, breaking the spell. Alice blinked, unable to remember the rest of the conversation.

What did it mean, "get the virus"?

And why was Matt now cradling Lisa's head?

"Who is she?" Alice asked.

"My sister."

Alice's response died on her lips. She hadn't been expecting that. After a second, she said, "I'm sorry."

Something wasn't right here. Correction, something *else* wasn't right here.

"You're not a cop, are you?"

His silence spoke volumes.

"If there's something you're not telling me, something she was involved with . . ." She trailed off. She really wasn't in a position to be making threats, given how little of her own memory she retained.

Still, though this entire situation down here was utterly insane, most of it made a certain amount of sense. Her and Spence, the Red Queen going mad, One's team, even the undead employees, given what little she could remember of the types of experiments that went on down here.

But then there was Matt Addison. He'd been an x-factor all along, and it was about time he came clean.

Apparently, Matt himself felt the same way. He set his sister's head down and sat up straight.

"Corporations like Umbrella think they're above the law. They're not. I'm part of an alliance of people who think the same. There are hundreds of us all over the world. Most of us will never meet, but we all share the same goals. Some of us give information, some give support, some take more direct action."

"Like you," she prompted after Matt paused.

He nodded. "If your friends had been a little more thorough, they would have seen straight through that false ID. Then all the red flags would've gone off: Quantico, VICAP, NSA, all the rest. I could *never* have infiltrated the Hive."

Alice understood the logic—up to a point. "So you sent your *sister*?"

"We needed something concrete. Anything to expose Umbrella to the press. Proof of the research they were doing down here."

"What kind of research?" There were bits and pieces in her head of what went on down here, but none of it would come into focus.

"The illegal kind. Genetic—viral. My sister was going to smuggle out a sample of the virus they were developing. I was meeting her today."

"I can help you get the virus"

Suddenly things got much much more complicated.

Swallowing, Alice asked, "How was she going to get out of here?"

"She had a contact within the Hive, someone I never met. They had access to security codes, surveillance, everything she'd need."

"I have access to security plans, surveillance codes, the works."

Thinking she needed to be very careful, she slowly asked, "So then why didn't she make it?"

Matt shrugged. "Maybe it was bad luck. Maybe she trusted the wrong person. Maybe they set her up, kept the virus for themselves." He seemed to visibly shudder. "Do you have any idea what something like this T-virus would be worth on the open market?"

Alice was stunned. She looked around at the devastation, thought about the creatures, both human and canine, that were stumbling around down here.

"Worth all this?"

"To someone."

Alice wasn't sure what scared her more: that there was someone out there who believed there was someone like that out there—

—or that she herself might be that person.

TWENTY-ONE

KAPLAN THOUGHT HIS HEART WAS GOING TO stop when the door opened. How the hell had the beneath-the-earth road show of *Night of the Living Dead* managed to enter the right codes?

Rain whipped out her Colt, but then Kaplan saw that it was Alice and Matt. Kaplan guessed that Alice finally remembered the security code for the door.

"Don't shoot, don't shoot!" she cried as she and Matt entered.

"Close that door!" Spence yelled, running for the door to force it shut again.

"They're right behind us!" Alice added, as if that was some kind of surprise.

No, to Kaplan the surprise was that they made it here alive.

One of the zombies grabbed Spence's arms even as he tried to shut the door. Matt and Alice managed to pry the thing's death-grip off him.

Spence backed off quickly, rubbing the spot the zombie had snagged. "Son of a bitch!"

"You okay?" Rain asked Alice.

"They're right behind us," Alice muttered. Then she moved toward the other door. "What about that one?"

Kaplan ran after her. "They're waiting out there, too."

She stopped, turned, and moved toward the glass-walled corridor where four people had met their grisly deaths thanks to Kaplan's own incompetence.

"That way?"

"It's a dead end." Kaplan winced at his choice of phrasing. "There's no way out of the Queen's chamber."

"So we wait," Spence said. "Someone doesn't hear from you, they'll send backup or something. Right?"

Kaplan and Rain exchanged glances. It looked like they didn't remember Procedure Three.

"What?" Spence asked. "What's wrong?"

"We don't have much time," Kaplan said evasively.

Rain was more direct. "You know those blast doors we passed on the way in from the mansion? They seal shut in just under an hour. If we're not out of here by then, we're not getting out."

"What are you talking about?" Spence, who had been Mr. Unflappable up until now, suddenly started sounding as panicky as Kaplan felt. "They can't just bury us alive down here."

Sitting down on the desk, Rain started to massage her bandaged hand. "Containing the incident is the only fail-safe plan they had against possible contamination."

Spence looked at her incredulously. "You're only telling us this *now*? When we're trapped half a fucking mile underground?"

"We have to find a way out of this room." Alice spoke with finality. Then she grabbed Kaplan's duffel from the desk.

"What're you doing?" Rain asked as she shouldered the bag and went into the corridor to the Queen's chamber.

"Where are you taking those?" Kaplan asked, though the answer was obvious.

"I'm turning her back on."

Following her down the corridor, Kaplan said, "That's *not* a good idea."

"She'll know a way out of here."

Alice set down the duffel and pulled out the motherboard.

Rain and Spence had also followed her and Kaplan in. "That homicidal bitch killed my team," Rain said angrily.

As calm as Rain was furious, Alice said, "That homicidal bitch may be our only way out of here."

Spence's voice dripped with sarcasm. "Considering the way she's been treated, I'm sure she's gonna be *real* happy to help us out."

Alice ignored him and slid the motherboard into its slot. Without looking at him, she asked Kaplan, "That

circuit breaker you were talking about—can you bypass it?"

"Yeah," Kaplan said, sounding confused.

"So do it."

As Alice finished off her work, Kaplan went over to one of the other parts of the CPU and entered some codes, then pulled out a remote control.

"All right, circuit breaker's disabled. This time, if I hit the switch, she won't be able to shut down." He looked around at everyone. "She's gonna fry."

Rain actually gave him something resembling a comradely nod at that. Considering Kaplan was half expecting her to put a bullet into his brain for getting One and the rest of them killed, he considered this a good sign.

Maybe she, like Kaplan, was realizing that this whole fucking situation was way beyond the pale.

As soon as Alice slid the motherboard into place, the computer rebooted, the lights came on, and the red-tinged hologram of a ten-year-old girl appeared.

Then the hologram futzed out.

"Kaplan?" Alice asked, glaring at him.

Blinking twice, Kaplan said, "The initial charge must have damaged her board."

"Good," Spence muttered.

"*Ah, there you are.*"

Kaplan looked around, then noticed the speaker in one corner of the room. The voice was the same as before, but without the visual of the ten-year-old girl.

All things considered, Kaplan was just as happy with

that. He'd met Angie Ashford once, and seeing her as the template for the Red Queen's AI had always given him the creeps.

"Things, I gather, have gone out of control."

Rain lunged for Kaplan. "Give me that fucking switch, I'm gonna fry her ass."

Mice and Matt both grabbed her arms, and pulled her away, for which Kaplan was grateful.

"I did warn you, didn't I?"

"Tell us what the hell is going on down here," Rain said, moving away from Alice and Matt, but not menacing Kaplan anymore, either.

"Research and development."

Kaplan almost smiled. It may have sounded like a little girl, it may have been the best AI since HAL 9000, but it was still a literal-minded computer. Garbage in, garbage out. Ask a direct question, get a direct answer.

"What about the T-virus?" Matt asked.

Now Kaplan shot the cop a look. What the hell was he talking about?

"The T-virus was a major medical breakthrough, although it clearly possessed highly profitable military applications."

Suddenly, things were starting to make a sick sort of sense. If there was some kind of virus, maybe that was what responsible for the Zombie Jamboree out there. Kaplan wondered what Matt Addison knew about it.

And if he was really a cop.

But that could wait. First, he wanted to know what

was happening. So he asked another literal-minded question. "How does it explain those things out there?"

"Even in death, the human body still remains active. Hair and fingernails continue to grow, new cells are produced, and the brain itself holds a small electrical charge that takes months to dissipate. The T-virus provides a massive jolt both to cellular growth and to those trace electrical impulses. Put quite simply, it reanimates the body."

Rain frowned. "It brings the dead back to life?"

"Not fully. The subjects have the simplest of motor junctions. Perhaps a little memory, virtually no intelligence. They are driven by the basest of impulses, the most basic of needs."

"Which is?" Kaplan asked, even though he suspected what the answer was, and didn't entirely think that he wanted it confirmed.

"The need to feed"

"And this was being developed on purpose?" Alice sounded aghast, which indicated to Kaplan that she hadn't gotten all her memory back. This was pretty much par for Umbrella's course, though even Kaplan had to admit that this was right on the edge of par . . .

"Originally its function was to combat insufficient cellular growth, as this is what ultimately leads to aging and death."

Rain was still massaging her wounded hand. "This was all for a fucking wrinkle cream?"

"One application, perhaps. But a far more ambitious goal would be the eradication of cellular-based

wasting diseases. As I said, the T-virus was a major medical breakthrough."

"And also a mass murderer," Matt said. "Or would that be you?"

"I was trying to keep them isolated, but I'm afraid you've changed all that."

"How do you kill them?" Rain asked.

Kaplan sighed. Rain, as usual, cut to the chase.

"Severing the top of the spinal column or massive trauma to the brain are the most effective methods."

Now Rain smiled. It wasn't a particularly pleasant one. "You mean shoot them in the head."

"We are so rucked," Spence muttered.

"You said that already," Kaplan snapped.

"Yeah, well, am I wrong?"

Kaplan couldn't argue with that.

Matt looked up at the speaker. Kaplan noticed that he looked pained. "Why did you kill everybody down here?"

"The T-virus escaped into the air-conditioning system and an uncontrolled pattern of infection began. The virus is protean, changing from liquid to airborne to blood transmission, depending on its environment. It is almost impossible to kill. I couldn't allow it to escape from the Hive, so I took steps."

Shaking his head, Matt repeated the word: "Steps."

"If I might make a suggestion: you have sufficient ammunition. One bullet apiece to the spinal column should suffice."

Rain moved closer to the speaker, as if challenging the computer. "What are you saying?"

"Merely that I think suicide would be preferable to what awaits you."

"You're a computer," Kaplan said defensively. "I don't care if you're an artificial intelligence, you don't really think."

Undaunted, the computer said, *"This facility housed five hundred technicians and support staff. Five hundred against five are odds of a hundred to one."*

Alice snapped, "We can do the math."

"Logic dictates that you won't leave here alive."

"Fuck logic."

Rain spoke for them all.

At least Kaplan hoped she did.

"You must understand—those of you who become infected—I can't allow you to leave."

"Whoa," Spence said, "we're not infected."

"Just one bite, one scratch from these creatures is sufficient. After that, it takes from fifteen minutes to several hours, depending on the severity of the infection and the strength of the individual's immune system, and then you become one of them."

Kaplan couldn't help but give Rain a look.

Rain stared right back. "What're you looking at?" *"A check of my systems indicates my main drive circuit breaker has been disabled. May I ask why?"*

"Insurance," Alice said. "We need a way out of here. If you refuse to help at any time, we flip the switch—understand?"

"Very well. If you insist on this ridiculous course of action, your most likely avenue of escape is through the

utility tunnels. There is a trapdoor in the northwest corner. Proceed to Tunnel SB, then go right at Tunnel 9E. At the end of that tunnel, there will be another trapdoor at the terminus for the train to the mansion."

Kaplan flipped up his wrist-top and called up the map of the utility tunnels. Then he looked at the others and tried to keep his voice from breaking when he said, "She's right, that'll work."

Alice and Rain were both standing by the northwest corner, and looked down to see the trapdoor in question.

It also had a codepad. Kaplan did a search on his wrist-top for the code for that door.

He found nothing.

"We need the code."

"One, five, nine, six, eight."

Rain crouched down and entered those five numbers. A clicking sound indicated the lock releasing, and she opened it, Alice standing next to her.

The door opened to a ladder.

Rain looked at Alice and gave her another one of those scary smiles of hers. "After you."

Forcing himself to focus, Kaplan climbed down the ladder.

He and Rain were the only ones left now.

Warner would never hustle Kaplan at hearts again. ("Look, we don't even *have* to play for money—well, okay, not a *lot* of money.")

Drew would never try to fix Kaplan up with his sister. ("Really, Kaplan, she's a babe. Honest. Don't pay any attention to what J.D. says")

J.D. would never give Kaplan a hard time. ("Man, did girls even *talk* to you in high school?")

Olga would never complain to him again. ("What's taking so long?")

And One ...

For all his life, the only person who ever truly took Kaplan's desire to be a field agent seriously was One. The only person who expressed any kind of confidence in his ability.

The only one who didn't just dismiss him as another computer geek.

Hilariously enough, he never actually encouraged Kaplan. Hell, in his own way he gave him as much shit as Rain and J.D. did. But he never dismissed Kaplan either, and always took him seriously.

"What the hell *is* this place?" Spence asked as they entered the tunnels. In stark contrast to the clean, metallic corridors and offices above, this place was dark, dank, and dripping. Puddles collected under their feet, all sorts of things that smelled like a cesspool stained the walls, and liquid streamed from the ceiling.

Kaplan tried to keep his temper reined in. It wasn't Spence's fault, after all, but he *was* a Security Division operative, just like the rest of them—except Matt, anyhow—and he knew the answers to all the stupid questions he was asking. Hell, he should've known about the fail-safe and the lack of backup. But that damn nerve gas ...

"Utility tunnels," he explained. "They run beneath the Hive for water, gas, power lines." He smiled. "And, uh, waste."

"Great."

They proceeded down 3B. Every once in a while they came across an adjacent tunnel, blocked off by wire mesh that would allow water through, but not people.

Then again, aside from maintenance personnel, people generally didn't come down here. Given the smell, Kaplan could understand why.

When they turned at 9E, Spence said, "We've been in here before."

"Keep moving," Rain said.

"We're going round in circles!"

Kaplan was seriously getting tired of Spence's shit. Actually, thinking it over, he was grateful for it. The more Kaplan focused on how pissed off he was at Spence, the less he focused on his own panic and guilt. "No—this is the route the computer gave us. Through the utility tunnels to—"

Spence brushed past Kaplan. "I don't know why we're listening to her."

Rain suddenly whirled around and pushed Spence against one of the wire-mesh-covered passageways. "Enough already!"

She didn't actually point her pistol at Spence, but its muzzle, Kaplan noticed, was close to his heart.

"We have to keep moving 'cause those things are right behind us. You got that?"

At that moment, Kaplan didn't care how pissed Rain was at him. Right now, Spence needed to be taken down a peg, and nobody was better at that than Rain Melen-

dez. Kaplan had certainly been on the receiving end enough times in his life.

Before Spence could reply, arms reached through the mesh.

Jumping back in shock, Kaplan watched as Rain, with Matt's help, pulled the arms off him. That's when he saw that there were dozens of the damn zombies pushing against the mesh.

It would keep people out, yeah, but not this many ...

Alice had the same thought. "That mesh isn't going to hold. Let's move b—"

She cut herself off. Kaplan followed her gaze.

Oh, fuck.

The panic came back full bore as he saw dozens more zombies shuffling down Tunnel 9B toward them.

Alice was wrong about one thing: the mesh did keep the zombies back. Unfortunately, the frame holding the mesh in place had eroded sufficiently that it could not hold the literally dead weight of dozens of people pushing against it.

All thinking as one, Kaplan as well as Rain, Matt, and Spence grabbed the mesh before it could fall and used it as a battering ram to keep the zombies back.

But it was a temporary measure at best.

The Red Queen's final words before Kaplan shut her down the first time came back to Kaplan: *"You're all going to die down here."*

Kaplan glanced over to see why Alice wasn't helping them.

It turned out she was.

She may not have remembered everything, but her famous moves had apparently risen to the fore. Ass-Kicking Alice knocked one zombie down with a neck-shattering chop. Then she jumped up to the ceiling, grabbed one of the heating pipes that ran parallel to the floor, wrapped her legs around the neck of the next zombie, and then twisted with her thighs, killing it.

A nice move, to be sure, but somehow Kaplan didn't think she'd be able to do it five hundred more times.

Neither did she, for her next words were: "Up on the pipes—up on the pipes! Quickly, everyone, *up on the pipes!*"

Kaplan looked up. There was no way in hell those pipes were going to support the weight of five people.

Then the zombies surged against the mesh, and Kaplan realized they weren't exactly overburdened with choices. Besides, these things weren't agile—they probably weren't capable of climbing up after them. Hell, they could barely *walk*. So far, it was the only real advantage they *had*.

"It's a way out!"

"Move it!"

They let go of the mesh. Kaplan unholstered his Beretta and started shooting. Next to him, Rain did likewise with her Colt, while Alice kept up her end with hand-to-hand.

Unbidden, the image of an "Ass-Kicking Alice" action figure in her likeness popped into Kaplan's head. "With zombie neck-snapping action!"

Focus, Kaplan. He shot another one in the face.

Spence, of course, was the first one to scurry up the pipes.

"Get over here!" Matt cried to Alice. "There's too many of them!"

"Go, go, go!" Rain cried as Matt helped Alice up, then climbed up himself.

That just left him and Rain to hold off the hordes.

"You're all going to die down here."

Fuck you, bitch. He shot another one.

It fell down and then bit him in the leg.

Kaplan screamed.

TWENTY-TWO

THE ONLY GOOD THING TO RAIN ABOUT HOW much the utility tunnels stank was that they knocked out how bad the zombies smelled.

Their breath was especially bad—which was weird, 'cause they didn't seem to be *breathing*, but damn if they didn't all have halitosis fucking overload.

She turned around when Kaplan screamed, saw the thing biting him, then shot it.

Kaplan, the fucking wuss, kept screaming.

Addison reached down and yelled, "Grab my hand!"

That shook Kaplan out of it. He grabbed Addison's hand and let himself be pulled up.

That just left Rain.

Another zombie jumped her, and she dropped her Colt into the piss-wet gunk on the floor.

She grabbed the zombie by the head, twisted, then dropped the zombie to the floor. Bending over, she picked up her Colt, and pointed it right at the next zombie.

Just as she prepared to pull the trigger, she realized who it was standing in front of her.

"J.D.?"

His face was covered in blood. Scars lined his face. His shirt had been ripped open, and there were cuts and dried blood on his chest.

The first day Rain and J.D. went to the firing range, J.D. couldn't stop talking shit about what a crack shot he was. That was why the CIA stole him from the SEALs, because they valued his skills as a sniper.

"You know why I think Oswald acted alone?" he had asked then. " 'Cause one guy could make the shot from the book depository window—('he's got the shit. Me, I got the shit."

To prove it, he put on his goggles and earmuffs, grabbed the six-shot revolver the firing range had provided, and fired it into the target, which was thirty feet away.

When he pulled it in, all six shots were to the head.

Kaplan had been impressed. Warner's eyes had gone wide. Drew kept saying, "Fuck me," over and over again.

But Rain just said, "Not bad."

That drove J.D. nuts. "Not bad? Not fucking bad? What, *chica*, you can match that?"

"No, I can't match that." Then she grinned. "Unless I

fire left-handed or something. Otherwise, no, I couldn't shoot that badly."

Warner laughed. "I think she's calling you out, my friend."

"Fuck you, Warner. And fuck you too, Melendez. Put your money where your foot is."

Rain took the space next to J.D., put on the goggles and earmuffs, moved her target back fifty feet, and grabbed another revolver. "Only place my foot's going is up your ass, J.D."

She threw all six shots, then pulled it in.

J.D. laughed when it came back with only one hole in it. That one hole was between the eyes.

"One lucky shot. Big fuckin' deal."

"Look again, asshole," Rain said.

When J.D. didn't get it, Drew said, "The hole's too big for one bullet."

It wasn't until Kaplan played back the video log, slowed down, that J.D. believed it.

All six of Rain's shots were to the exact same between-the-eyes spot.

After watching the video log, he turned to Rain with his mouth hanging open.

Rain just grinned. "Oswald was a fucking wuss."

J.D. didn't speak for the rest of the day.

But after that day, he finally started taking her seriously.

Now he was dead. She had resigned herself to that the minute those zomboid motherfuckers went all *Dawn of the Dead* on him.

But she should've known that wasn't the end of it. Not the way this day had been going.

She stood there, holding the gun on him, but unable to pull the trigger.

He was already dead; she shouldn't have to do this again!

Then his mouth fell open like it was some kind of fucking dump truck and he bit her on the neck.

"Aaaaahhh!" She grabbed J.D.'s head and yanked him off, his blackening teeth tearing out big chunks of skin off her shoulder.

Fuck this. J.D. was already dead. This was just some fucking nightmare.

She raised the Colt and shot J.D. right between the eyes.

Just like the target.

"Guess I still got the shit," she muttered.

J.D. fell back on two more zombies, and that gave Rain the chance to climb up the pipe. It was only when she almost lost her grip that she realized that her hands were now covered in her own blood.

The five of them were now up on the pipe while the zombies shuffled around. She held out her hand to check it out. A drop of blood fell from her thumb, and three of the zombies lunged after it.

Great. They drink blood. That just fucking figured.

"Rain?"

Their motor functions weren't juiced up enough by the stupid virus to let them climb—shit, they could barely *walk*—so they were safe for now.

"Rain!"

She finally turned to acknowledge Alice.

"We have to do something about your wounds."

"I'm fine."

Alice tried to grab her collar to expose her neck wound. Rain smacked the pushy bitch's hand aside.

"I *said* I'm fine!" She held her hand out, watching more blood drip. "You like that, don't you? Huh? *Huh?* You like the way it tastes, don't you? You like the taste of that?"

"She was right."

Rain looked over at Kaplan. He was holding his own wound. He also looked about as lifeless as those mindless motherfuckers below them.

"We're all gonna die down here."

"No," Alice said. "We're getting out. All of us."

Rain shook her head. This was Ass-Kicking Alice, back in fucking business.

Not that it mattered.

J.D. was dead.

She watched him die.

Twice.

Shit.

"There's a vent over this way." Rain looked up to see that it was Addison talking. Looked like he was scoping out the pipes to find a way out. Bully for him.

Maybe he really was a cop.

Maybe someday she'd give a shit.

Addison led the way across the pipes. They had to crawl, since the space to the ceiling was only a few feet.

The smell got worse. And was there something in the air? Everything was getting all blurry and shit.

Maybe it was tears. Rain wasn't a cryer, but dammit, J.D. was dead. So was One and Warner and Drew and Olga. The whole fucking team.

Well, except for Kaplan, but that weenie boy barely counted.

Addison came to another one of those wire-mesh things and kicked it in. He crawled in, then Spence, then Rain. Alice and Kaplan were right behind her.

"Kaplan, you okay?" Alice asked

Kaplan didn't say shit, the fucking little wimp.

WHAM!

Rain turned around. Everything was all blurry, still, but she saw that the pipe finally collapsed. Not really a big shock, since the thing wasn't designed to have five people crawling all over it.

Kaplan fell into the sea of hungry dead.

Shit.

Alice almost fell in, but Addison and Spence managed to catch her and pull her in.

Rain thought she'd be glad to see Kaplan go. His fuck-up got One and the others killed, and if he'd remembered the fucking code, then *he'd* have been the one taken at the door instead of J.D. He deserved what was coming to him.

But seeing him mobbed by the zombie hordes of fucking hell, watching him kick and scream and struggle to stay alive, she realized that, goddammit, Kaplan was part of the team, too, and she was *not* going to let these freakazoids take anyone else.

Not even Kaplan.

So she took aim.

And couldn't make a fucking thing out.

It wasn't tears, it was the fucking virus. She had it.

She couldn't see.

"Help him!" Alice yelled.

The words were painful to say: "I can't."

"What're you waiting for?"

"I can't *focus*! I can't *see*!"

She couldn't believe it. Six between-the-eyes shots in a target fifty feet away, but now, less than half that distance away, she couldn't tell where Kaplan ended and the zombies began.

If she missed, she'd hit Kaplan.

If she missed.

Words she'd never had to think before.

Suddenly, the Colt was ripped from her hands. What the fuck?

It was Alice. She shot two of the zombies in the head, which gave Kaplan the freedom to run up the fallen pipe.

Unfortunately, it put him about ten feet away, with no direct access to the vent.

"Kaplan—hold on!" Alice urged. "We're gonna come get you. We need to cut this wire, then we can throw it to him. Then we can go get him. Hold on!"

Rain thought Alice was out of her fucking mind.

Kaplan emptied that stupid revolver he carried as a backup. She missed the part where he emptied the Beretta. Or maybe he lost it in the crowd down there.

He had one bullet left.

"That's lucky," he muttered. Then he looked at the rest of them. "I want you to go."

"No," Alice said. "We're not leaving you, Kaplan."

"Yes, you are."

"No!"

"You can't kill all of them! I'm not goin' anywhere. I want you to go, *now*! Please, just *do* it! Just do it now! Please—*go*!"

For the first time since she joined One's team, Rain respected Kaplan.

She never would've given him the credit to take one for the team. Shit, she doubted any of them would.

Then again, they'd never come across anything like this. Nobody had.

Either Addison or Spence started guiding her down the vent. Normally she'd have told him to go fuck himself, but her vision was getting worse. She didn't trust that she wouldn't bump into a wall or some shit like that.

She heard a single gunshot.

Braver sonofabitch than she thought.

Now she was the only one left.

TWENTY-THREE

ALICE FORCED HERSELF NOT TO THINK ABOUT the gunshot she'd just heard.

As she crawled along the vent shaft, she tried desperately to banish the last image of Bart Kaplan she had: him putting the barrel of the gun in his mouth.

Part of her was angry at him for taking such a coward's way out. On the other hand, he had been bitten by those things, and they were coming after him.

At least by shooting himself in the head, he guaranteed he wouldn't be resurrected by the virus.

But she forced herself not to think about it.

The shaft dead-ended under a grate. She looked at Matt and Spence, who were right behind her.

No words were exchanged, nor had they been since they left Kaplan behind.

Getting into a squatting position, Alice slowly stood upright, pushing the grate slowly upward.

It opened into one of the corridors.

One thankfully short on undead employees of the Umbrella Corporation.

She came out first, holding Rain's gun at the ready. Spence was right behind her.

"Come on," Spence called down to Matt and Rain.

Matt climbed out first, then reached down to Rain.

"Give me your arm."

A limp, sweat-and-blood-covered arm reached up. He grabbed it and pulled. Rain managed to stumble out.

"Now up over my shoulder."

Even as she did what he said, she fell forward and threw up.

To his credit, Matt didn't bat an eyelash. He just waited for her to stop.

"Thanks." Rain's voice was even more ragged. It was amazing that she was still holding on. "Sorry I slapped you around back at the mansion."

Matt smiled. "It's all right. I probably had it coming. Just hold on."

Alice shivered. She wondered if Rain would be so accommodating if she knew the truth about Matt.

Right now, though, none of that mattered. All that was relevant right now was that no one else was going to die. Not if she had anything to say about it.

There was something.

Something she was starting to remember.

It was about the colors blue and green, of all things. It

had been niggling her in the back of the head, but she'd dismissed it as another bit of trivial information that wouldn't come to her, like what a bathrobe was called.

Now, though, she was sure that those two colors were critically important.

Spence, meanwhile, went over to help Matt with Rain, even as Alice continued to scout ahead.

So far, the corridor was clear.

She wondered how long that would last.

From behind her, she heard Rain's voice.

"When I get outta here—I think I'm gonna get laid."

Spence chuckled.

"Yeah," Matt said dryly. "You might want to clean up a bit first."

Alice was about to laugh, too, but then it caught in her throat.

She knew this corridor.

And she knew the lab she was standing next to, looking into the window of.

"You okay?" Matt asked. She turned to see that Matt had left Rain with Spence to check up on her. She must have gone vacant for a second.

Blue. Green. Blue and green.

And rabbits.

Then it all came back. In her mind's eye she could clearly see Mariano Rodriguez and Anna Bolt injecting a white rabbit with a hypo-gun. The rabbit was named Daffy for some reason Alice couldn't remember. The hypo was loaded with a corkscrew-shaped tube containing two different color liquids.

One blue. One green.

"Blue for virus, green for the anti-virus."

Matt gave her a funny look.

"There's a cure," she said.

"What're you talking about?" Matt asked, sounding confused.

"There's a *cure*. The process can be reversed." She turned and looked at Rain, still held up by Spence down the corridor. "There's a cure! You're going to be okay."

Rain actually smiled. "I was beginning to worry."

Alice ran into the lab. The entrance was at the top of a raised entryway, with a short staircase leading down to the main part of the lab. The unsealing of the doors when Kaplan powered the Red Queen down had reduced the flooding down to the level of the raised entryway, so the room was still knee-deep in water.

This was where Mariano and Anna had worked, along with their lab assistant, a big bald guy whose name Alice couldn't remember.

They were the ones working on the T-virus.

With a start, Alice realized that she'd seen all of them. Anna was the corpse whose presence floating in this very lab had scared Matt when they first arrived. The bald lab assistant had been one of the ones who first attacked them in the so-called dining hall. And Mariano had been one of the ones trying to kill Kaplan in the tunnel.

Jesus.

"This is where they kept the T-virus."

"How do you know all this?" Matt asked.

She decided to go for broke. Besides, Matt deserved to know.

"Because I was going to steal it." She turned to look at him. "I was your sister's contact."

Matt's eyes went wide. "You betrayed her."

"I don't know."

"You caused all this."

"I can't remember."

She started to move down the staircase, but Matt grabbed her arm.

"The truth."

"I *don't remember* the truth," she said honestly.

But she found she couldn't look Matt in the eyes, either.

Instead, she turned and proceeded down the stairs.

She remembered it now. The door on the far end of the room had the vault that held the T-virus.

Wading through the sprinkler-system water, she was, for the first time since the mansion, eternally grateful for the thigh-high boots, as they kept her mostly protected from the frigidly cold knee-high water.

The door leading to the vault required both hands to get open, so—since the dress had no pockets, nor did she have a holster—she set Rain's gun down on a table that was above the water line.

Behind her, Matt guided Rain down to sit down on the dry entryway, legs hanging over into the main lab.

Spence, meanwhile, waded down the stairs.

Alice yanked the door open.

She saw the far wall, and the PlastiGlas window that

gave a view into the containment unit. Over it were the levers to manipulate the waldoes that manipulated the vials inside. Underneath the window was the slot that allowed one access to the contents.

The slot was open.

Inside, the container for the T-virus was empty.

All fourteen slots were empty.

Slamming her hands on the open containment unit, Alice cried, "I don't *understand*."

She waded back outside and looked at Rain. "It's gone. It's gone, it's not there."

Rain seemed to deflate before Alice's very eyes. "I can't. I just can't."

Alice had been *so sure*, dammit.

Was it somewhere else? In the mansion somewhere, maybe? Could they get back there in time?

As she walked over to comfort Rain, she wondered what they would do next.

TWENTY-FOUR

SPENCE PARKS LOOKED AT THE OPEN DOOR,
saw the empty vault—
—and remembered.

He'd been biding his time for weeks, getting the plan together. From the minute he heard about the T-virus from one of the other guys in Security, he started his inquiries. Naturally, he kept it all subtle. It didn't do to arouse suspicions, and the people at Umbrella were damned suspicious.

So he took his time. First he got the security codes. Then he got a buyer lined up.

The question was whether or not to involve Alice.

There was a lot to like about Alice. She was tough, strong, single-minded, brilliant—and the best lay he'd

ever had. God, she was like an acrobat in combat, and she was like an acrobat in bed.

Spence had had many women in his life—it was why he became a cop, initially. His uncle was a cop, and he always said, "Spence, it's the best fuckin' job in the world. You get to sit in a car all day and you get all the pussy you could ever want." In that, he was prophetic, but his dear old uncle neglected to mention that the sexual perks only partly made up for the severe lack of monetary ones.

But greed beget greed, and even the huge sums Umbrella paid him didn't satisfy him.

The quality of the pussy increased tremendously, though. Hell, living in a big mansion for free, getting to have sex with Alice pretty much any time he wanted—this was the life.

It wasn't enough, though. Not when he knew what he could get for the T-virus.

He thought dozens of times about letting Alice in on his little plan. They could split the money, run off to some tropical island without an extradition treaty, and have sex under the sun for the rest of their lives.

Or, more realistically, until they got tired of each other and moved on. But whatever—the plan was sound.

However, she was also good enough that he had to be careful.

So he kept an eye on her.

Out of the blue, Alice asked some woman from the Hive out to lunch, which aroused Spence's suspicions.

Those suspicions had orgasms when Spence learned that the woman was Lisa Broward, the person who handled the security for the Red Queen.

By the time the lunch rolled around and Alice had the Town Car drop them off a fair distance from the mansion, the suspicions were already smoking their post-coital cigarettes.

Luckily, the mansion was well appointed with top surveillance equipment. Spence pointed a distance microphone at the area where Alice and the Broward woman were talking, put on the headset, and started recording.

It took a while before they were in range of the microphone. He caught bits and pieces here and there.

Alice: *"It took a while, but it wasn't too hard to figure out once I knew what I was looking for."*

Broward: *"What's going on, Alice?"*

Alice: *"It's a T-virus, and you're right, it's not at all natural."*

Broward: *"So they've created a killer that turns you into a zombie?"*

Then nothing for a bit. Spence listened to static until he heard Alice's voice again.

"I may look like a Bond girl, Lisa, but I'm not a Bond villain. I didn't bring you here to kill you. I brought you here to talk to you."

"About what?"

"I thought that was obvious. After all, Mahmoud al-Rashan was your friend—and I can't imagine that the settlement Umbrella gave his wife did much to alleviate

her grief. It took a lot of guts to do what you did. You want the virus?"

"I might."

"I can help you get the virus. I have access to security plans, surveillance codes, the works."

"But—?"

"But there's going to be a price."

"Name it."

"You have to guarantee me that you'll bring this corporation down."

"What makes you think I want to bring anyone down? Maybe I just want to use the virus to kill the people who killed Mahmoud."

"You're not that type, Lisa. Trust me, I know killers. I've spent all my adult life surrounded by them, on both sides of the law. You don't have it in you. What you do have is outrage, and that's what I need."

"Why can't you do this yourself?"

"I'm too far inside. There are ways they can shut me down. You're still pretty clean, though. You've only been here a couple of months, they haven't been able to sink their claws all the way into you yet. If I try it won't work. To be honest, it may not work for you, either. These people are good."

"And if I screw it up, you're still clear." "You're not nearly as stupid as Spence looks. This is a dangerous game, Lisa. You sure you want to play it?" "Completely sure." Spence heard enough. He turned off the recorder.

So much for the tropical island.

Spence kept a low profile for the next few days. Eventually, his buyer alerted him that he was ready.

He and Alice had particularly good sex that morning. Maybe the best ever.

Ironic, really.

She slept while he got dressed, her glorious naked body sprawled out on the incredibly comfortable mattress.

He was definitely going to miss the sex.

On a whim, he wrote TODAY ALL YOUR DREAMS COME TRUE on the pad of paper on the desk in the bedroom.

Then he proceeded into the Hive.

He entered the proper security codes to get in, he put on the Hazmat suit, then went through the titanium-reinforced door to the temperature-regulated room that housed the T-virus, again entering the proper security code. The little-kid computer was none the wiser.

Walking over to one of the utility closets, Spence removed a hypo-gun and a metal case. The gun fit neatly into one of the case's slots. All the other slots were intended to house small cylindrical tubes.

He walked over to the far wall, which included a PlastiGlas window, and a horizontal slot under it. Spence opened the slot by activating a control. It slid downward, allowing him to slide the case into the small chamber.

Smoky condensation puffed out through the slot, as the temperature inside the chamber was quite low, and

only the Hazmat suit kept him from feeling the overwhelming cold that issued forth.

The slot closed once the case was ensconced within. Spence activated several other controls, one of which unfurled the two waldoes from sides of the window, another of which caused the bottom of the chamber to slide open to reveal fourteen vials.

Manipulating the waldoes, Spence placed each of the vials into the slots—half the T-virus, half the anti-virus.

Once all fourteen vials were in place, the case shut automatically, and sealed itself. With the tray cleared of the vials and the case sealed, the computer would allow the slot to open once again. When it did, Spence grabbed the case and brought it out of the temperature-controlled room and into the adjacent laboratory.

He removed the Hazmat suit, put on a pair of rubber gloves, and entered the keycode. The case obligingly opened, an action that served two functions: to verify that the keycode worked and to allow Spence access to one of the vials containing the blue liquid.

Pulling out the vial with a protected hand, he sealed the case once again, placed it in a duffel bag, zipped the bag up, and hoisted it onto one shoulder.

Before departing the lab, he tossed the vial toward the center of the room, then turned, exited, and closed and locked the door.

He had to move quickly now—he had maybe five minutes before the Queen would lock down the place. It took two minutes to make it to the train station level.

Moving so fast, he collided with one of the corporate twits—resulting in spilled coffee and a sarcastic "Thank you!" from the victim, but Spence didn't bother to even acknowledge him—he made his way to the train.

As one of the two people from Security assigned to the mansion, it was easy enough to commandeer the train from the engineer on duty. After placing the case in the storage closet, he drove the train up to the mansion, then opened the trapdoor to the undercarriage. He unplugged the connections and disconnected the train from the third rail, then went into the storage compartment to retrieve his prize.

The next thing he knew, he woke up on the train, surrounded by Alice, One, One's goons, and some other guy he didn't know, heading *back* to the Hive—only he didn't remember who he was.

Fucking computer, she moved too quickly. And why did she gas the house and the train station, anyhow?

But it didn't matter.

Spence remembered everything now.

"Spence?"

He turned to look at Alice.

Then he looked over at the table where she'd left Melendez's Colt.

Did Alice remember everything?

Did it matter?

They both went for the pistol at the same time.

Spence was just a bit faster.

"Tsk tsk tsk," he said, pointing the weapon at Alice

as she got up from the flooded floor, having fallen in her abortive attempt to retrieve the Colt. Spence was now holding. Then he pointed the gun at Addison to make sure he didn't try anything, then back at Alice. He didn't bother pointing it at Melendez. She wasn't a factor anymore.

"We can still make it out of here," he said. "Come with me. We can have everything we ever wanted. The money's just out there waiting—you wouldn't believe how much."

Alice gave him a look that he knew all too well. Even if she didn't have all her memory yet, her personality was *definitely* coming back to the fore.

Under other circumstances, Spence might've found it arousing.

"Was that how you thought all my dreams were gonna come true?"

Spence would have laughed, except Addison chose that moment to run down the stairs trying to make some kind of stupid hero play. That lasted right up until Spence shoved the Colt into his face.

"Please—I wouldn't want to shoot you." Spence smiled. "I might need the bullets." The smile fell. "Back off."

Addison backed off.

In a quiet voice, Alice said, "I won't take any part of this."

Spence had expected as much. "Okay. But you can't just wash your hands of everything. We work for the same company."

"I was trying to stop them."

So she *did* remember. Bully for her. "You really think people like him," he indicated Addison with the pistol, "will ever change anything? You're wrong. Nothing *ever* changes."

Her voice ragged, Melendez asked, "Where's the anti-virus?" Spence had to give her credit—she should've been long gone by now, but she was holding on for dear life. Literally.

Her question provoked another chuckle. More irony. "It's on the train, where you found me. You couldn't have been standing more than three feet from it. I so nearly made it out. Didn't realize that bitch of a computer had defense systems outside the Hive." He turned to Alice. "In or out?"

She said nothing.

He repeated the query. "In or out?"

"I don't know what we had," she finally said, "but it's over."

All they had was great sex. And, great as great sex was, it was easy enough to find elsewhere.

Then he felt a body on his back and pain slicing into his left shoulder.

Pointing the gun behind him, he took three shots at the zombie in the gut. That knocked the figure off. Turning around, splashing water as he did so, he then shot the zombie—whom he recognized as Dr. Bolt, one of the people developing the virus—in the head.

Addison, being just that kind of asshole, decided to try to take advantage. He jumped Spence from behind,

but Spence elbowed him in the head, and he fell down into the water.

Before Alice could try something similar, he raised the Colt again.

"Back! Back the fuck off."

He moved slowly backwards up the stairs. Alice moved right with him, staring at him with those fucking blue eyes of hers.

Those same eyes that he looked into when they took their "wedding picture," and thought that she'd be fantastic in bed.

Those same eyes that gazed longingly up at him—or down at him, depending—when he finally did get her in the sack.

Now, those eyes only held a promise that, given half a chance, she'd kick his ass instead of compliment him on it.

Well, her tough shit. He had the gun. "I'm missin' you already." He moved back through the door and shut it. Then he shot out the locking mechanism. With any luck, Melendez would die and eat the other two alive. Then it'd all be cleaned up. No witnesses, no trace of what happened to the virus.

And Spence home free to sell his newfound acquisition.

First, though, he needed to inject some of the green stuff into his own bloodstream, now that he was infected. But that would be a simple matter—and he could spare it. After all, because he broke one of the virus

vials when he infected the Hive, he had an uneven number, so using the anti-virus on himself wasn't much of a big deal.

For the second time that day, he ran toward the upper levels of the Hive to make his escape.

TWENTY-FIVE

MATT SUPPOSED HE SHOULD'VE BEEN RELIEVED that Alice wasn't the bad guy here, that Lisa's instincts had been correct to trust her, but finding out that it was Spence who was singlehandedly responsible for this entire nightmare made him sick to his stomach.

Or, rather, sicker.

Alice threw off her jacket. Matt remembered that it was actually Spence's jacket, given to her outside this very lab to keep her warm.

He went over to the door and tried to pull the handle so it would open. It didn't work.

"Your boyfriend's a real asshole," Rain muttered.

"He shot the locking mechanism out." Matt gave up on the door and turned to face the two women. "I can't believe that son of a bitch is gonna get away with this."

"I don't think so."

All three of them turned to look at the monitor that was now lit up with the Umbrella logo. A speaker near the monitor sounded with the child voice of the Red Queen.

"I've been a bad bad girl."

Matt watched as the monitor provided a view of Spence running up the stairs to the train station.

The view switched to that of an overhead security camera located right by the train itself, which was right where they'd left it several lifetimes ago. Spence went to the train, opened the outer door to the same closet J.D. had found him in. He pulled out a duffel bag, unzipped it, then removed a shiny metal case that had four circles in the four corners and a keypad.

Entering a code into the pad, the four circles all turned, and then the top slid open.

A smile of relief spread over Spence's face. Matt wished he could say the same for himself. That was the case Alice had been planning to steal and give to Lisa—and which Lisa was going to give to him.

The T-virus.

The motherlode.

The means through which Matt and Aaron and the rest of them *were finally* going to expose Umbrella.

Matt ground his teeth. He had to get out of here somehow and get that fucking case!

Spence wrapped a strap around his biceps, tapped his arms to bring up a vein, then prepared the hypo-gun for an injection.

Before he finished, though, he stopped and looked up. It appeared as if he'd heard something.

Then some—*thing* fell from the ceiling and ate Spence alive.

Matt had a vivid imagination, fueled by reading too many comic books when he was a kid, not to mention some of the vile and depraved acts he saw while working the Federal Marshal's office.

But this—this was so far beyond the pale as to be in another hemisphere. In his wildest dreams, he couldn't imagine anything as revolting as this.

Whatever the thing was, it looked like a cross between a rhino and a human. The skin was corded and plated, with horns sticking out of various spots. It had opposable thumbs, but huge claws sticking out of its fingers and toes.

It had a tongue as long as a snake, and it had more teeth than a piranha.

Those teeth were chowing down on Spence right now.

Then it turned its head up toward the camera.

Whatever that thing was, it didn't have any eyes.

Matt's determination to bring down Umbrella prior to today was a votive candle compared to the inferno it was now. There was no way in *hell* he was letting this company stay in business.

Eventually, he found his voice. "What—*the fuck*—is that?"

"One of the Hive's early experiments, produced by injecting the T-virus directly into living tissue. The re-

suits were unstable. It was being held in stasis until you cut the power to its storage unit. Now that it has fed on fresh DNA, it will mutate, becoming a stronger, faster hunter."

As the Red Queen spoke, Matt watched as the eyeless thing's flesh—if you could call it flesh—rippled and expanded. The head altered, becoming more angular. The claws expanded, and the torso lengthened.

"Great," Rain muttered.

"If you knew it was loose, why didn't you warn us?" Matt asked the computer.

Alice, however, was the one who provided the answer. "Because she was saving it for us— isn't that right?"

The computer spoke matter-of-factly. *"I didn't think any of you would make it this far—not without infection."*

Rain turned her sweat-drenched head and looked at the monitor. "Why *didn't* you tell us about the anti-virus?"

"This long after infection, there's no guarantee it would work."

"But there's a chance, right?"

"I don't deal in chance."

Matt looked around the room. He saw the other door, the one with the number pad.

What the hell.

He went over to the door and started entering numbers at random. At this point, they didn't have a damn thing to lose.

Rain had gotten up, grabbed the fire axe, and looked at the large window.

"Fuck it."

Then she collapsed onto a chair.

"No pressure, guys."

"You require the four-digit access code."

Matt resisted the urge to shout, "No shit!" Instead, he just tried more numbers at random. Maybe he'd get lucky.

Right, lucky. Hey, there was a first time for everything, and after thirty years of life, he was due to have good luck with *something*.

"I can give you the code, but first you must do something for me."

Matt stopped entering numbers and looked up. The computer was dealing?

"What do you want?" Alice asked.

"One of your group is infected. I require her life for the code."

Matt recalled Rain's earlier characterization of the Red Queen as a "homicidal bitch." That seemed a lot less hyperbolic now.

Alice was livid. She pointed at the monitor, which still showed what was left of Spence's body next to the metal case he'd stolen from this very room. "The anti-virus is *right there* on the platform—it's *right there!*"

"I'm sorry, but it's a risk I cannot take."

Before Alice could yell again, Rain spoke.

"She's right."

She tossed the axe she was holding at Alice, who caught it unerringly.

"It's the only way. You're gonna have to kill me."

Matt shook his head. First Kaplan, now Rain. Did Umbrella train these idiots to all be suicidal?

"No." Alice spoke with finality.

"Otherwise we all die down here."

No, not suicidal, pragmatic. To a fault.

A sudden noise grabbed Matt's attention. He looked up to see the thing that killed Spence throwing itself against the window.

Matt had no idea what the window was made of—it obviously was some kind of Plexiglas or some other extra-tough substance—but it may not have been tough enough. The monster's first attack left a hairline crack.

It was only a matter of time before it got through.

"The PlastiGlas won't hold forever"

Rain got down on her knees and leaned forward, like she was a French Revolutionary waiting for King Louis to take her head.

Or maybe a samurai warrior about to commit *seppuku*.

"Do it," she said.

Alice looked as aghast as Matt felt. "Don't. Get up."

"Do it."

"Rain, please, get up."

"You don't have long to decide."

"Do it."

"Kill her."

"No."

"Do it now!"

The creature smashed into the window.

"Kill her."

"Do it!"

"Rain—"

"Do it!" *"Kill*

her." "No!"

Alice screamed, hefted the axe— —and smashed the Red Queen's monitor. A second later, all the lights went out, and what few systems were working powered down.

Emergency lights came on a moment later. "That's some axe you got there," Matt said. Alice shook her head. "The axe didn't do this." A clicking sound came from the door. Matt whirled around to see the door start to open ...

TWENTY-SIX

BART KAPLAN WATCHED ALICE, RAIN, AND the others go off into the vent even as he stuck the barrel of the revolver into his mouth.

This was it.

He'd fucked up enough. His stupidity got One, Warner, Drew, and Olga killed. His panic indirectly got J.D. killed. Hell, his shutting down the Red Queen was what let these zombies loose.

He should pay for what he did.

Even as a zombie that used to be one of the doctors clambered up the pipe toward him, he prepared himself to pull the trigger.

At the last second he pulled the gun out of his mouth and shot Dr. Zombie in the head instead.

Then he threw the gun at the one behind the doctor. "You're gonna have to work for your meal!"

Suicide was for quitters. Kaplan was many things, but he was *not* a quitter. Yeah, he fucked up, but dammit, he was doing his job. He followed orders, he did what he was told. Sometimes, mistakes were made, but he was *not* gonna let himself take the fall.

Kaplan didn't release the T-virus into the Hive. Whoever did *that* was responsible.

Not Kaplan.

Pain slicing through his leg where it had been bitten, Kaplan clambered into the crawl space behind him. It led to a vent. If he was lucky, even with his wound, he could keep ahead of the zombie hordes—especially since they seemed to be temporarily fixated on the corpse of the doctor.

He didn't think, didn't obsess, didn't panic, didn't do anything except focus on putting one hand in front of the other as he crawled through the vent.

That worked right up until he reached the dead end.

Fuck.

He turned around. His leg was bleeding profusely, and he could hear the march of the zombies as they came after him.

Looking up, he saw a grate.

It took about a minute for him to climb up into the hallway. The agony in his leg was white hot, but he did everything he could to ignore it and not to scream.

At that last, he wasn't entirely successful, but there wasn't anyone else around to see or hear him.

Favoring his injured leg, he limped down the corridor. Opening his wrist-top, he tapped into the Red Queen, trying to get a heat-signature scan. It wouldn't pick up any of the zombies, but he could at least find the others.

Some of the others, anyhow. Three heat signatures were in one of the labs. The lowest of the three body temperatures was probably Rain. Kaplan couldn't tell who the other two were.

He wondered which of them died.

Was it uncharitable to hope that it was Spence?

Probably. But right then, Kaplan didn't care.

When he got to the door of the lab, Kaplan collapsed against it. He was beyond exhausted, the pain in his leg was now an inferno, and he couldn't move another step.

Then he saw that the locking mechanism had been shot out.

Great.

Drawing on reserves that J.D. and Rain would never have given him credit for having, Kaplan dragged himself to the other door and entered the code to get it open.

He could see inside the window. Alice, Rain, and Matt were inside.

Looked like Spence was the dead one. Good.

Then he looked up and saw the monitor.

How did Spence get to the train station? And what the hell could've done *that* to him?

Shaking his head, he entered the code again.

Nothing happened.

He looked it up on his wrist-top. The code he entered was the right one.

Unless...

"You changed the code, didn't you?"

"It needed to be done"

Kaplan blinked. He hadn't expected the Red Queen to reply.

"I need to get the door open."

"I'm sorry, but I can't."

Reaching into one of the pouches in his chest, Kaplan pulled out the remote control.

"Yeah? Well, I'm not at all sorry about this."

He pushed a button.

For the second time that day, he powered down the Red Queen. Only this time, she was permanently fried.

The door, obligingly, opened.

Alice was holding an axe, looking like she was ready to take someone's head off. Matt was just standing there looking stupid.

Rain was kneeling in the center of the floor, hip-deep in water, looking like hammered shit. But she was the one who spoke.

"Kaplan?"

He managed a smile. "Bitch wouldn't open the door. Had to fry her."

That was when something smashed against the PlastiGlas window. Alice raised her axe instinctively, just as the thing smashed *through* the window.

They all ran past Kaplan into the hallway. Just as

Kaplan shut and bolted the door, the whatever-the-hell-it-was crashed into the door, denting it.

That should not have been possible.

"What *ihejuck* was that?"

"It's a long story," Alice said as she ran off.

Matt, who was now carrying Rain, filled Kaplan in on what had happened, telling him about the T-virus, the anti-virus, the strange monster that killed Spence—and the fact that all of this was Spence's doing.

Grateful to have someone to fob his guilt off on, Kaplan hobbled behind Alice and the Rain-carrying Matt to the train station. Alice was armed only with the fire axe. Kaplan was out of ammo for his Beretta and his revolver, and he'd thrown the latter away in any case. Matt and Rain were unarmed—hell, Rain was three-quarters dead.

Kaplan tried not to think about how pathetic they were. If that thing caught up to them, they were the deadest of dead meat.

Then again, they made it this far. Over five hundred people had died, but not them.

Alice pointed at the train. "Start it up—I'll get the virus."

Kaplan nodded and limped into the train. The pain at this point had gone down to just a dull throb—or maybe he just had gotten used to it.

Whatever. Right now, he was just grateful to be one of the living and not one of the dead.

Or undead.

Or whatever the hell they were.

While he started the train up, he looked out the win-

dow to see Alice going for the metal case. She closed it—just as Spence lunged at her.

Alice dodged out of the way with little difficulty. The damage to Spence's corpse was such that his legs were completely shot to shit, so he was reduced to pulling himself along the floor with his arms. He made Kaplan's own struggles through the vent shaft look positively elegant.

Alice gave her "husband" a look. Kaplan swore that, if looks could kill, Spence would be a pile of ashes.

Ass-Kicking Alice, it seemed, was really and truly back.

"I'm missing you already," she said as she hefted the axe.

Then she cut his head off.

Kaplan tried not to think about the fact that that was the second decapitation he'd witnessed today. Instead, he focused on starting up the train.

"Okay," he said when the telldates all indicated that the train was ready to head back up to the mansion, "we're in business. Full power." He turned to the cab. "We're leaving!"

Alice, he noticed, paused only long enough to remove her wedding ring and drop it next to Spence's blood-soaked body, then retrieve both the case and Rain's Colt before boarding.

Matt came into the engineer's cubbyhole a minute later with a hypo-gun and some improvised bandages. He was also only wearing a white T-shirt. After staring at the blue bandages for a second, Kaplan figured it out—he'd cannibalized his shirt for the bandages.

Silently, the cop—or whoever the hell he was—injects Kaplan with the anti-virus, then started binding his wounds.

Kaplan tried not to think about the blood that felt like it covered as much of his body as Spence had on his. Instead, he focused on the report he planned to write when this was all over.

And was it going to be quite a report. Knowing that Spence was responsible for all of this emboldened him. It had freed him of the guilt in many ways. Kaplan knew that Umbrella did things their own way, but Jesus Christ. A computer that slices people who try to get at it to ribbons? A big scaly thing with no eyes and teeth the size of Rhode Island running around loose? One of your top security guys turning your supposedly secure underground facility into a horror movie? And then the kicker, a virus that kills you *and* animates your corpse?

In the past, Bart Kaplan had been willing to turn a blind eye to the less ethical areas of Umbrella, mostly because that eye was focused instead on the high number of zeros on his paycheck stub.

But this—this was too much.

He had no idea what he, a mere grunt in Security Division, could do, but whatever it was, he intended to find out what it was, and do it.

Matt put a hand on his shoulder when he was done. Kaplan gave him a nod in return. He had no idea who this guy really was, and right now he didn't give a shit. The four of them had been through all nine circles of

hell today, and lived to tell the tale. Right now, that was all Kaplan cared about.

"I don't want to be one of those things."

Kaplan turned to look at Rain when she said those words. Alice was treating her, same as Matt had been doing for Kaplan.

"Walking around without a soul," Rain continued. "When the time comes, you'll take care of it."

It wasn't a question.

Alice just said, "Hey—no one else is gonna die."

Rain removed the watch from her wrist and handed it to Alice.

Then her head slumped forward.

Any other time, Kaplan might have figured she was just lapsing into a coma or something. But he'd seen way too much death today.

Rain Melendez was dead.

Shit.

"Rain?" Alice spoke in a soft voice.

Nothing.

Kaplan shook his head. He never even liked Rain all that much—she and J.D. spent way too much time giving Kaplan a hard time—but they were still comrades, still teammates, and when it mattered, they looked out for each other, depended on each other.

Now Kaplan was the only one left.

The hilarious thing was that J.D. had always said that if they ever took on casualties, that Kaplan would probably be the first one to go.

Instead, he was the last survivor.

Alice reached for Rain's Colt.

Her entire face quivering in a way Kaplan never would've expected from Ass-Kicking Alice, she held the gun to Rain's head.

Clicked off the safety.

Then Rain reached up and grabbed Alice's wrist.

"I'm not dead yet," Rain said.

Kaplan couldn't help but grin to go with his sigh of relief. Suddenly, he found himself looking forward to getting more shit from Rain in the future.

Rain, meanwhile, took the Colt from Alice's hands. "Maybe I'd better have that back."

Alice laughed. "I could kiss you, you bitch."

Kaplan was then startled by the wrenching of metal, which echoed through the train, piercing through the noise of the train's engine. He turned to see a massive claw slice *through* the train's wall and leave three scratches on Matt's left shoulder.

"Get us the fuck outta here!" Matt cried to Kaplan.

"Any faster and we're gonna come off the rails."

He turned back to face the front, right when the wall to his left was ripped away.

An elongated face with no eyes, and teeth that were now the size of Pennsylvania looked back at Kaplan.

After the day he'd had, Kaplan had thought he'd seen everything.

He was wrong.

His last thought as the creature ripped into him with its claws and teeth was anger that he'd never get to write that fucking report...

TWENTY-SEVEN

IT TOOK MATT A SECOND TO RECOVER FROM the shock of seeing Kaplan torn to pieces by the monster.

Then he shut the engineer's cabin door.

He'd already mourned Kaplan once. Hell, he had mourned all of them. The black guy and the others who died in the Red Queen's chamber. Kaplan. J.D. The employees of the Hive. Even Spence, the fuckhead.

And Lisa.

Umbrella had done this. They created the virus, they let Spence into the top of their Security Division, and they created this thing, which was now running along the top of the train. It killed Spence, it killed Kaplan, it wounded Matt, and now it was well on its way to killing the remaining three of them.

Then Matt noticed that the door on the opposite end of the train was unlatched.

Alice had recovered Rain's Colt and was in a crouch in the center of the train, ready for anything. As time had gone by, Matt was seeing more and more of the formidable presence that Alice was, and was really grateful she was on his side—in more ways than one. Lisa had picked her contact well.

Running across the cab, Matt latched the other door, just as the monster tried to smash through it.

This held it back only temporarily. On its second punch, it knocked the door inward, hitting Matt full on and knocking him to the floor. He managed to get his hands up to keep the door from damaging his face, but it still hurt both when the door hit him and he hit the floor.

Alice shot it three times in the head, which, if nothing else, distracted it from Matt. Taking advantage, Matt clambered out from under the door and ran back to the other side of the cab where the bundled metal tubes hung.

Matt had noticed the tubes when they first rode down into the Hive. He wasn't in a position to ask what they were doing there then, and he didn't give a tinker's damn what they were doing there now.

What did matter was that they could be used as a weapon.

The creature's impossibly long tongue came shooting out of its mouth and wrapped itself around Alice's left leg.

Then it pulled.

Alice fell on her back, dropping the Colt. She tried to hang onto the gridwork of the trapdoors to keep from being pulled in even as Matt undid the cable that kept the tubes secured in the corner.

He then charged forward, using the tubes as a battering ram to slam into the monster's head.

The creature stumbled backward, not nearly as hurt as Matt hoped it would be, but, at least, it released its tongue's grip on Alice's leg. She quickly scrambled over toward the gun, but before she could, the tongue flew out again and literally slapped Alice down.

Oddly, she gave up on the gun, and instead grabbed two of the tubes, which had come out of the bundle.

With the first, she slammed it down horizontally onto the end of the monster's tongue, holding it secured to the floor.

With the second, she drove it down vertically like a spear, through both the tongue and the gridwork of the trapdoor, skewering it.

She had, in essence, nailed it to the floor.

"Open the door!" she yelled at Matt.

Matt turned to push the red button that would open the trapdoor the monster was standing on—and couldn't move from, now that Alice had secured it—but there was someone standing between him and the button.

Rain.

Her eyes were watery.

Her movements were sluggish.

Her mouth opened wide, showing blackening teeth.

She moved to bite him, just as Lisa had.

This time, Matt was ready, and he pushed her off. Reaching down, he picked up the Colt.

"Open the door *now!*" Alice screamed.

With his sister, Matt hesitated. When Alice thought Rain was dead a few minutes ago, she hesitated.

Now, Matt unhesitatingly shot Rain in the head.

She fell backward, right onto the red button.

The monster fell right into the undercarriage, slamming against the tracks while travelling at some sixty miles an hour or so.

The friction caused a huge conflagration that Matt could feel and smell even more than he could see. The heat was like an inferno, and the stench of burning flesh seared his nostrils, even as the fire climbed into the cab.

It wasn't pretty.

It was, however, deserved.

Matt then pushed the red button again. It shut the door, slicing off the thing's tongue, and leaving it behind to burn on the tracks.

He and Alice exchanged glances. Matt felt more tired than he'd ever been in his life.

Alice looked more alive than she had since he first met her a couple of hours ago.

What a fucking day.

He opened the door to the engineer's cubbyhole. It didn't take too long to figure out how to slow the thing down—they made it fairly idiot-proof. He did so as the train pulled into the other terminus.

Terminus. What a fucking appropriate word.

In silence, they disembarked. Matt still carried Rain

Melendez's Colt. Alice held the case with both virus and anti-virus.

They walked quickly amongst the crates and boxes, heading toward the giant staircase that would take them back to the lavish mansion.

At one point, they passed the metal bar J.D. had placed by the blast doors. Its countdown was at less than ten seconds.

As they went up the staircase, the blast doors closed behind them.

Lisa and Matt's parents had raised their kids to be Catholic, but both of them had lapsed pretty thoroughly by the time they hit their teen years.

Nevertheless, Matt found himself praying for Lisa, for Kaplan, for Rain, and for all the others who died down there.

As they walked through the dining hall toward the front door, Matt noticed that Alice was starting to stumble.

By the time they reached the vestibule outside the door, she collapsed in a heap, dropping the case next to her.

Matt knelt down next to her, seeing that sobs were now wracking her body.

"I failed," she said, her voice catching. "All of them. I failed them."

Survivor's guilt. Matt knew way too much about that—hell, he was experiencing it himself. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw his sister, face twisted, trying to bite his neck. You want to talk failure ...

But that way lay madness.

"Listen," he said firmly, "there was nothing you could have done. The corporation is to blame here, not you." He indicated the case. "And we finally have the proof. That means Umbrella can't get away—"

He cut himself off as a throb of pain shot through his left arm.

Shaking his head, he went on. "Get away with this. We can—"

The pain returned, much more than a throb this time, and focused on the three wounds the eyeless monster had given him on the train. At the same time, he lost all feeling in his arm below those wounds.

"What is it?" Alice asked.

A scream suddenly ripped from his mouth as the pain coursed throughout his body, and he fell onto his back.

"You're infected. You'll be okay—I'm *not* losing you."

Matt barely heard Alice's words. He lay on the floor, twitching, writhing from the agony that flared through every joint, every muscle, every *cell*, and he screamed and screamed and screamed...

Then everything went white ...

TWENTY-EIGHT

JUST AS ALICE WAS ABOUT TO MINISTER TO Matt, the door opened.

Shielding her eyes from the blinding white light, she saw at least half-a-dozen people in Hazmat suits.

"What's happening? What're you doing?"

One of them reached for her, while two others knelt down beside Matt.

"Stop!"

She fought off the one by her with a few well-placed punches. Then three more tried to grab her, even as others picked Matt up and carried him out into the hall.

It took her all of four seconds to subdue the three trying to hold her. Hell, after what she'd just faced, three bozos in Hazmat suits were *not* going to be a challenge for her.

"Matt!"

The hall had been converted into a sterile zone of some kind, with some stuff that looked like hospital equipment, and a single examination table.

Several of the Hazmat-suited people were laying Matt on that table.

Small tentacles started to grow out of the three wounds on Mart's arm.

One of the Hazmats spoke. "He's mutating. I want him in the Nemesis Program."

Alice ran to grab Matt, but two more Hazmats grabbed her first, even as they strapped down Matt and started to wheel him outside.

Shattering the faceplate of one Hazmat with a single punch, and kicking another in the nuts, she again screamed, "Matt!"

For every two Hazmats she knocked down, though, three more seemed to take their place.

And she honestly was exhausted, mentally and physically. Even she had her limits, and she had finally reached them.

She felt a needle puncturing her thigh. Kicking with that leg, she cracked another faceplate, but even as she did so, her limbs stopped responding to her brain's commands.

Falling to the floor, a gray haze coming over her vision, she heard a voice that was maddeningly familiar.

"I want her quarantined. Close observation, and a full series of blood tests. Let's see if she's infected. Take her to the Raccoon City facility, then assemble a team.

We're reopening the Hive. I want to know what went on down there."

As she faded into oblivion, Alice finally recognized who it was talking.

Major Timothy "Able" Cain. Vice

President in Charge of Operations. Her boss. "Just do it."

Then everything went white. For a while.

When Alice woke up, she was, once again, naked. This time, though, instead of a shower curtain, she was dressed in a hospital gown that barely covered her. And instead of a running shower, she was being pelted with something else. No, not pelted. Attached.

Wires. They'd put wires into her. They were in her legs and her torso and her arms and her head. She sat up.

PAIN!

Awful horrible mind-numbing excruciating searing boiling *pain* that ravaged every fibre of her being. She ripped one of the wires out of her left arm. The process of ripping out the wire made the pain infinitely, impossibly worse. But then it subsided. That emboldened her to tear out the ones in her right arm.

Same thing: worse pain at first, then subsiding to something almost resembling tolerable.

She saved the two attached to the side of her head for last.

As horrendously wretchedly bad as the pain was when she first woke up, the pain she felt when she tore the wires out of her head was several thousand quantum leaps worse.

By the time the white-hot agony had dimmed to a throbbing deep pain, she tried to take stock of her surroundings.

When she had woken up, she had been on an examination bed. Half a dozen lights shone down on it. Now, though, she was on the floor in front of it.

She couldn't make her legs move.

Looking around, she saw that each of the wires she rended from her flesh led to the ceiling.

Aside from the lights, the one door, the wires, and the exam table, the room was white and empty, save also for a mirror.

Alice was pretty sure it was a one-way window.

Somehow, she managed to get to her feet. Her legs seemed not to remember how to function properly.

Stumbling over to the mirror/window, she slammed a fist into it. Calling for help.

If anyone heard her, they gave no indication of it.

She wondered how long she'd been unconscious on that bed.

She wondered where Matt was.

She wondered if she had heard Cain properly, and if he was truly insane enough to reopen the Hive after so many had died down there.

Alice Abernathy remembered everything now. She remembered reading about the T-virus. She remembered thinking something needed to be done about it. She remembered meeting with Lisa Broward. She remembered sex with Spence, then waking up to find him gone. She remembered getting into the shower, then being hit with the nerve gas.

Hell, she even remembered how baseball was played.

And she remembered something else, too. A memo she'd written to "Able" Cain pointing out a design flaw in the card-swipe mechanisms that unlocked the secure doors throughout Umbrella: a well-placed sharp point could disrupt the circuits and cause the doors to open. Cain never acknowledged the memo. Alice was willing to bet that he hadn't bothered to fix the problem. Cain was an arrogant ass.

Alice grabbed one of the blood-soaked wires that had until recently been attached to her arm. She slid it into the card-swipe mechanism, and poked around until the door unlocked.

Nope, he never fixed the problem.

Asshole.

She walked the hallways of what she now recognized as the Raccoon City Hospital; the wing she was in had been donated by Umbrella, and they used it for their own purposes fairly regularly.

The hallway was utterly deserted.

No doctors, no nurses, no patients.

Nothing. And no one.

The quiet was deafening. Not only was there no sign of human activity, there was no sign of the possibility of human activity.

Passing a closet, she grabbed a doctor's lab coat and put it on over the flimsy gown.

Eventually she found the front door and walked out.

What she saw made the Hive look like a day at the park.

Abandoned, smashed vehicles: buses, cars, bicycles, motorcycles, news vans.

Broken pavement, overturned garbage cans, damaged buildings, broken glass, cracked facades, garbage strewn about, streetlamps knocked over, smoke, bonfires.

Blood *everywhere*.

But no bodies.

Slowly, walking gingerly on bare feet, trying to avoid the worst of the shattered pavement, rocks, and broken glass, she proceeded down the street.

A nearby newsstand displayed several copies of the *Raccoon City Times*. The front-page headline read, THE DEAD WALK!

The fuckers had reopened the Hive and let the infected workers loose.

Assholes.

Still, Alice saw no people—living or dead.

Or undead.

She knew, however, that that wouldn't last.

Two of the dozens of abandoned, shattered vehicles near her were RCPD patrol cars. She checked in one,

then the other—the second gave her what she wanted.

A shotgun.

She checked to see that it was fully loaded. It was.

Alice pumped the shotgun. And then she waited.

**TO BE CONTINUED... IN
*RESIDENT EVIL: APOCALYPSE***