

©2013 Forrest Carr

All rights reserved. Not to be copied or re-distributed without the express written permission of the author.

The following excerpts from the novel *A Journal of the Crazy Year* are offered for reader and critic review only. Potential spoilers have been edited out. More info:

[www.forrestcarr.com](http://www.forrestcarr.com)

*Expletives have been masked, but even so, this content is intended for mature audiences 17+.*

A blazing star or comet appeared for several months before the plague, as there did the year after, another, a little before the fire. The comet before the pestilence was of a faint, dull, languid color, and its motion very heavy, solemn and slow. But comet before the fire was bright and sparkling, or, as others said, flaming. Accordingly, one foretold a heavy judgment, slow but severe, terrible and frightful, as was the plague; but the other foretold a stroke, sudden, swift and fiery, as the conflagration.

Many died raving mad with the torment. Some broke out into the streets, perhaps naked, and would run directly down to the river if they were not stopped by the watchman or other officers. It is scarce credible what dreadful cases happened. People in the rage of distemper, raving and distracted, and oftentimes laying violent hands upon themselves, throwing themselves out at their windows, shooting themselves, etc.; mothers murdering their own children in their lunacy; some dying of mere grief as a passion, some of mere fright and surprise without any infection at all; others frightened into idiotism and foolish distractions, some into despair and lunacy, others into melancholy madness.

A dreadful plague in London was in the year 1665, which swept a hundred thousand souls away. Yet, I, alive!

-- Adapted from *A Journal of the Plague Year*, by Daniel Defoe, 1722

## PROLOGUE

The temperature rose, to be sure. The ice melted, and the snow turned to sleet and then to rain. But in 1916, springtime never arrived for Verdun, France. It was not the sweet fragrances of the season, but rather the smell of cordite, mustard gas, and rotting flesh that drifted over the fields. The hammer of God fell on Verdun, in the form of ten million artillery shells. At times the explosive projectiles rained down continually in a solid curtain of metal, like rocks and boulders from a cataclysmic and never ending Krakatoa. The hellish barrage shattered earth, embattlements, and men alike, pulverizing the soil, stone, and wood, and blending it with shredded human tissue, teeth, and bone to form a ghastly ooze that covered everything. As the apocalyptic pounding transformed front-line soldiers into gory heaps, bloody lumps, and grisly chunks not recognizable as human, the battlefield commanders in the rear shoved more hapless victims forward to take their places. The mission of this uniformed fodder was simply to soak up the shells, in a race to see which warring side would run out of men and ammunition first. Not thousands, not even tens of thousands, but hundreds of thousands of men were conveyed forward and thrust into the red, ravenous maw of a war machine gone completely berserk, a howling monster whose appetite for human flesh could not be satisfied. Warfare was nothing new to the human race, but this form of it was.

To this day, historians consider the months-long siege of Verdun, with its estimated one million casualties, to be the deadliest single battle in the long, weary history of human affairs.

The precise mechanism of what happened next is not known to science. But as the battle dragged on and spring turned into summer and then into fall, something entirely new appears to have emerged from the roiling reek, the sickening spew, and the ghoulish goulash of this man-made hell on Earth.

The first scientist to notice was a bald, bearded pathologist in Paris named Jean René Cruchet. Like most physicians asked to treat soldiers evacuated from the front, Cruchet had become inured to living horrors of war. But then he encountered something he'd never seen before, something that shook him more than the daily ghastly parade of human wreckage to which he'd grown accustomed. He came across an infantryman whose case had little in common with the soldier's mangled, mutilated, and burned comrades-in-arms now filling the hospital's beds. Missing limbs and eyeballs, scorched lungs, and perforated organs were not this man's complaint. Instead, he simply sat in a stupor, staring blankly ahead with a masklike expression. And he slept long hours. Very long hours. Soon, other soldiers like him began to appear. Physical complaints varied – some had headaches, some did not. Some had fevers. Others didn't. Many experienced nausea. But above all, they slept. And slept. Soon Cruchet found himself staring at a ward filled with row after row of sleeping soldiers who could not be awakened.

Within months, the same symptoms began to appear on the other side of the lines, in Vienna – and this time, the victims were civilians. A handsome young neurologist with swept-back hair, a neatly trimmed mustache, and a piercing gaze named Constantin von Economo encountered a patient whose chief complaint was that he could not stay awake. Even when on his feet, the man was limp, his head lolled, and his tongue hung out like a dog's. His loved ones found him impossible to fully arouse. More patients like him began filing in. People were failing to wake up from a night's sleep. Or they were falling asleep at odd times and in odd places. Some lapsed into a deep slumber at the workplace. Others nodded off at the dinner table, their cheeks stuffed with unchewed food. A few even fell asleep standing up. When first stricken, most such patients could be reawakened. But as the condition progressed, they became harder to rouse. Von Economo's clinic began filling up with patients who couldn't stay awake – and finally, who couldn't be awakened at all. Many died, having never regained consciousness.

And then new and even more frightening symptoms began to emerge. Patients came in who were awake, but suffering from strange tics, jerky movements, and hiccoughs that would not stop. An attack of the latter killed one patient. But it didn't end there. As the disorder continued to evolve, new victims became acutely psychotic, displaying symptoms most often associated with schizophrenia or catatonia. Many were completely demented. The bodies of some froze in strange, twisted positions. The common denominator for all of them was an initial bout of unusual and pervasive sleepiness.

Von Economo cracked open his scientific texts and went searching for clues to the malady. None were to be had. The disorder was new to medical science. The academic literature contained no trace of it, no mention of anything remotely like it. But Von Economo recalled that a type of sleeping sickness had struck northern Italy and parts of Europe during his childhood. He was able to find old newspaper accounts of the disease. The strange affliction had appeared in 1890 and quickly claimed scores of victims, many of whom never regained consciousness and subsequently died. Now, apparently, the disease was back, and with a vengeance.

In 1918, the disorder crossed the channel and made its first appearance in England. The symptoms had continued to evolve. Half of those who fell asleep died. Of those who did awaken, a handful recovered fully. But most did not. These survivors began to exhibit physical and psychotic symptoms worse than what von Economo had documented. Much worse. As before, many patients exhibited

strange Parkinson's-like tremors and tics, and the bodies of some froze for long periods of time into bizarre, contorted shapes. In a new and particularly cruel twist of fate, some of those who finally did wake up couldn't get back to sleep again. For them, a pervasive lack of sleep led to insanity. Patients rolled incessantly from side to side in bed. Others couldn't stop talking, going on and on, stringing seemingly random phrases together into run-on sentences that made no sense. These victims entered a dark realm of deep psychosis from which they would never emerge.

But even that wasn't the worst of it. As the disease continued to morph, it moved in an even more sinister direction. A small minority of patients became a mortal danger to themselves and others. They jumped off buildings, ran in front of cars and buses, and hurled themselves into bodies of water. They mutilated themselves in strange and utterly horrifying ways. They ran amok, savagely attacking or trying to rape loved ones or even strangers on the street in broad daylight. Most troubling of all is that those who were most likely to turn into such homicidal or sex-crazed maniacs were children.

Later in 1918, the disorder appeared in New York City. Within months, it had spread to every country on every continent.

Scientists drew blood, stained slides, and peered into their microscopes. They ran their lab tests, conducted filtration studies, and carried out vector analyses. And they found – nothing. No bacteria. No brain-eating amoebas. No viruses. No fungi. No parasites. No toxins. No tumors. Nothing. Nor could epidemiologists determine how the affliction was transmitted. Logically, it had to be communicated in some fashion. But by what means? By water? By air? By food? By blood? Why were relatives of the victims, and their doctors, not affected? Scientists were stumped.

And then came another surprise, presenting a new mystery equal to the first. The disease simply vanished. The influx of new cases peaked, then slowed, and then stopped. With no human intervention whatsoever, the malady disappeared from the face of the planet. If it weren't for the wrecked and wasted human beings left in its wake, many of whom would continue to populate psychiatric wards for decades to come, there would have been nothing to show the disease had ever existed at all.

The affliction's enigmatic exodus left puzzled physicians, perplexed epidemiologists, and baffled scientists to wonder what awesome and mysterious force of nature had wrought such wanton destruction on the human species. Stymied in their efforts to look forward, researchers delved into the historical records. They discovered that the sickness had made its mark on the human race many times before, with recorded appearances on smaller scales dating as far back as the 16th century. Each time, the disease would disappear, only to return decades later in a more virulent form. The 1890 occurrence, which had been the most virulent to that date, ultimately claimed hundreds of victims. The 1916 recurrence claimed hundreds of thousands. Obvious and pressing questions remained. Would the pandemic return yet again? When? And perhaps most importantly: would the reach and severity of the disease continue the same exponential progression it had demonstrated thus far? What new and even more nightmarish symptoms might lie ahead?

Among those asking these questions was Constantin von Economo. He found no answers, but he built a reputation for himself trying. Because the disease was new to the medical literature, it needed a scientific name, and it was von Economo who gave it one: encephalitis lethargica – which, roughly translated, means an inflammation of the brain causing drowsiness. But years before von Economo thought to pull his Latin dictionary down from the shelf and dust it off, villagers in northern Italy had given the malady a different name. They called the horrifying affliction *la nona*, and referred to its victims as *The Living Dead*.

## Excerpt from CHAPTER SIX: The Ninth Circle

John wondered how Otis was taking all this. He looked around for the cat, but didn't see him.

"9 o'clock!" Nicole shouted as he finished securing the final tie. He looked up – a crazy was rounding the right end of the house, at his left. The Henry lay across the front seat. He reached around for the Glock, pulled it from his waist band – and promptly dropped the gun.

The crazy had gone for Nicole and was nearly on her. Nicole was facing it, holding the gun out in front of her as John had instructed. "Nicole, shoot!" John shouted. The gun went off with a loud bang, and then the crazy was on her.

John scrambled to retrieve his dropped Glock, and then ran over to her with gun in hand. Nicole was down on the ground, flat on her back. The crazy, a woman with long dark hair, lay on top of her. "Get it off, get it off!" Nicole screamed.

Grabbing the figure by its shoulders, John pulled it off. The crazy rolled onto the ground, its eyes wide, staring, and lifeless. John instantly recognized the face. It was Leticia. Her cheeks and chin were smeared with blood and bits of entrails. What had been a white blouse was thoroughly soaked with gore.

Reaching down, he helped Nicole up. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." Her eyes fixed on something over John's shoulder. "Behind you!"

In one swift motion, he whirled and fired. A rushing figure flopped to the ground face down at his feet. He had an idea who it might be. Rolling the body over with his foot, he saw that he was right. It was Costanza. The affair had now turned into a Rodriguez family reunion.

He did not waste time thinking about it. "We've got to go. Now. Come on."

Rushing over to the Ford, John pulled the Henry off the front seat, and then held the door open wide for Nicole. Without waiting for her, he ran over to the driver's side.

Motion caught his eye. Down the street to the left, a group of five or more crazies was running in his direction.

John jumped into the front seat just as Nicole did. They slammed their doors shut. "Here," he said, handing her the Henry. "Put the butt on the front left side of floorboard. Put the barrel between your knees, resting on the inside of your right thigh, lying across toward the door. Got it?"

She nodded.

John looked up and peered through the windshield. The crazies running down the street were just seconds away.

He glanced at the back seat. Maria was rocking back and forth in the small amount of play allowed by her restraints, while staring dully ahead.

It now dawned on him that Otis was nowhere to be seen. "Otis?" he called. "Otis!"

"Who's Otis?" Nicole asked.

"Our damned cat."

He heard a plaintive meow. It was coming from outside the car.

"God *damn* it!" he barked. "Hand me that rifle."

Nicole passed him the gun. He jumped out of the car and stepped past the cargo gate just as the first of the crazies entered the yard. The Henry went to his shoulder. *Bang!* Pump. *Bang!* Pump. *Bang!* Pump. *Bang!* Pump. One crazy after another went down – one, two, three, four. One more was coming; he fired again. The fifth attacker skidded to a halt face down on the gravel at his feet. He looked around. Another two were vaulting the iron fence across the street. *Bang!* Pump. *Bang!* Pump. Two more down. And now there were only three shots left in the Henry.

"Meow," he heard. Following the sound with his eyes, he spotted Otis sitting on a branch of the large cottonwood that grew near the sidewalk. He ran over to him. Otis was about eight feet up, well out of reach. "Otis, come on down," John said urgently. He scanned the street. Crazies were running at him from both ends, and would be on him in seconds.

"Meow," Otis said, looking down at him unblinkingly.

John snapped his fingers. "Now!" he said urgently, trying not to sound angry. He slapped his thigh. "Come to Daddy."

Otis didn't budge.

"Otis, I do not have time to argue with you. I will leave you here. Get down. *Now.*"

"A-ow," Otis said, looking unhappy, and not moving.

The crazies were now closer.

Time was up. "*Now*, Otis!" John yelled.

Otis didn't budge.

"Good luck to you, then," John said, and he turned and ran for the car.

Nicole had her door open. "Here, kitty, kitty, kitty," she called, looking toward the tree and slapping her thigh. "Here, kitty, kitty!"

John jumped inside. "Here," he said, handing her the rifle. "Take this."

Nicole took the rifle, holding it between her legs. "Here, kitty, kitty!" she called, again slapping her thigh.

"It's hopeless. Shut the door."

Behind them, Maria gave out a loud but muffled growl.

The crazies were now just feet away from the driveway. Otis looked at them, hesitated, and then leaped from the branch. He hit the ground running flat-out with his ears laid back, making for the car, with the crazies right behind him.

"Come on, Otis!" John yelled. "Haul it!" Simultaneously, Nicole was still calling, "Here, kitty, kitty!"

Otis crossed the remaining distance, covering the last four feet with a flying leap, and landing in Nicole's lap. The moment he was inside, Nicole slammed the door shut. Just as she did, the crazies hit the car, rocking it hard with a solid jolt.

"Jesus *Christ!*" John swore as he put the Ford into gear. With a roar of tires spinning on gravel, he floored it. The Explorer shot forward, curved over the small gravel-covered front yard, and bounced over the curb and out onto the street. John looked through the rear view mirror; the crazies had chased the car into the road, but were now falling rapidly behind.

He glanced into the back seat. Maria was still rocking back and forth in the restraints, gazing blankly ahead. Otis had taken up station on the rear seat at the opposite door. He stared at Maria, looking very unhappy. "Rowwwwwwww," he growled. "Rooooowwwwwwww."

"I don't like it any more than you do, buddy," John said. "But we'll both just have to deal with it."

Otis continued wailing. After a moment, John reached back and snapped his fingers at the cat. "Otis! Cut that out. I can't hear myself think."

"Ow ma now ma," the cat said grumpily. "Amma namma," he added, and then fell silent.

He turned to Nicole, and nodded at the rifle. "Do you know to reload one of those?"

"No," she said.

He glanced down at the receiver, and noticed that in the confusion, he had neglected to move the hammer to the "safe" position. There was no other form of safety on the rifle.

"Well, never, mind," he said. "Make sure you keep your hands, and anything else, away from that trigger."

"Okay."

"Do you know if the interstate is clear?"

She shook her head. "I haven't heard a thing since the power went out."

Reaching forward, he flipped on the radio. But the station he'd been listening to before was silent, transmitting nothing but a low hum. He searched around the dial, but as before, nothing was on the air except recorded programming and EAS warning messages.

He sighed. "Well, I think I may risk it. If it's too bad, we'll get off." He noticed that Nicole's neck and arms were still bleeding. In the rush, he had not had a chance to offer to bandage her. "We need to get those wounds dressed," he said. "If I find a clear spot, we'll pull over."

"The hell you will," Nicole said. "Do it and I'll shoot you myself."

He chuckled. "Okay. We'll let it ride."

They were now approaching the I-40 on-ramp at Coors. It seemed clear. He bore to the right and proceeded up the ramp.

Abandoned vehicles – some of them wrecked – littered the shoulders and median, but all three travel lanes were clear. Traffic was light.

As they approached the I-25/I-40 interchange – known to the locals as "malfunction junction" – brake lights appeared ahead of them. John found himself slowing. Impatiently, he pulled into the left lane, and quickly ran into a line of stopped cars. A dozen or so car lengths ahead stood two men wearing helmets and camouflage fatigues. One of them was holding an assault rifle at the ready. The other had a similar rifle slung over his shoulders, and was waving a red flag, directing traffic to merge into a single lane on the right.

"Oh, s\*!t," John said. Frantically, he looked into the rear view mirror. A car had already pulled in behind him. "S\*!t, s\*!t, s\*!t!"

On this section of the interstate, concrete barriers lined the travel lanes on either side. His choices were to keep going and hope to bluff his way through the checkpoint, or abandon the car and try to run on foot.

But really, there was no choice. He couldn't leave Maria. She was the entire point of trying to leave town in the first place. Whatever was about to happen, he would have to see it through with her.

He turned to Nicole. "If you want to bail, now's the time."

"And have one of those guys take me for a crazy, and shoot me in the ass? No, thanks." She flashed him a grim smile. "Whatever happens, we're in this together."

Slowly, they moved ahead. Traffic narrowed to a single lane. Ahead, a group of soldiers was checking every car. So far, after the check, they had motioned every car to proceed.

Within moments, John was face to face with one of the soldiers – a pimply-faced young man who couldn't have been more than 19. "Where you going?" the soldier demanded.

"Chama," John answered.

The man glanced into the back seat, and his eyes narrowed. The soldier stepped back. "Sir, please put the transmission in park and turn off the engine."

John did so.

"I need the two of you to exit the vehicle with your hands on your head," he said. The soldier motioned to two other uniformed men standing nearby. Both came running over, their guns at the ready.

"She's not contagious," John objected.

"The governor sees it differently," the soldier said. "Please exit the vehicle."

"Look," John said, his voice rising, "I promise you, she's no threat to anybody."

The soldier flicked a switch by the trigger guard, and leveled the rifle at him. "I'm not going to ask you again. I've shot five people today already, I've got a side bet going that I can make it an even half dozen by noon."

John raised his hands. "Okay, okay. We're coming out." He and Nicole stepped out of the car with their hands clasped atop their heads.

"Step to the front of the vehicle," the soldier ordered. As John and Nicole complied, the other two soldiers took positions on either side of the Ford, and then opened the rear passenger doors. One of them bent forward over Maria, and then stepped back. "Nice job," he said, glancing at John. Withdrawing a knife from his belt, he bent forward and began sawing at the zip ties holding Maria in place. Within moments, he'd freed her and had dragged her from the car, bucking and thrashing. The other man joined him. The two dragged her off in the direction of covered military truck waiting just down the road.

"What are you going to do with her?" John asked, tears of rage, sorrow, and frustration filling his eyes.

"They'll take her to one of the holding areas. Probably Albuquerque High." The soldier lowered his rifle, and nodded to the two men holding John. "You're free to go. But if I were you, I'd go home and forget about her."

"Why are you doing this?" John demanded as he lowered his hands.

"You'd be surprised how many people are trying to pull just what you were trying to do – carrying crazed grandma or grandpa or baby Jane out to the country, helping to spread this thing."

"But they're not contagious!" John yelled.

"Yeah. That's what the so-called experts say. But this thing is transmitted somehow. And I get the sense that the governor has lost faith in scientists and their opinions." The soldier shrugged. "Anyway, I do what they tell me to do. You'd best do the same."

The soldier now turned his head to focus on something that had caught his eye down the road past John's shoulder. John turned to follow his gaze. A blood-smeared crazy was vaulting the concrete wall separating the travel lanes, about 25 feet away. The soldier brought the M16 to his shoulder and fired two quick shots. The crazy fell. Another one vaulted the barrier behind it, and got the same treatment.

"That's seven," the soldier said, lowering his rifle. "Looks like I win my bet." He turned to John. "You need to get in your car, and –" His eyes now narrowed. He looked at John's bandaged head, and then down at John's arm. "Wait a minute. Where you *bitten*?" He turned to Nicole, now noticing her wounds. The soldier raised his rifle.

"Wait a minute," John said, holding up hand.

A clattering noise sounded from the right. They whirled around. The two men who'd taken Maria to the truck had returned, and were now standing about 15 feet away. They had dropped their rifles, and were now staring blankly ahead.

"Oh, s\*!t!" the pimply faced soldier yelled. He turned and raised his rifle just as the other two soldiers growled and broke into a run. His rifle spoke four times; the two charging men tumbled face first onto the pavement.

The young soldier turned back to John and Nicole. A tear was coursing down one cheek. "Get out of here," he said through clenched teeth. "Get some place safe. And don't come out."

At this point John was not disposed to argue. He and Nicole jumped back into the car. John started the Ford, threw it into gear and then roared off down the interstate.

A few hundred yards down the road, he slowed and pulled into the breakdown lane. After rolling down both windows, he turned off the engine.

"What are you doing?" Nicole asked.

"We're going to wait for that truck," he said, looking his rear view mirror. "And when it passes us, we're going to follow it." He turned to her. "Pass me that rifle."

She did so, and then looked at him with interest as he moved the hammer forward to the "safe" position. John then pulled the magazine tube.

"At this point," John said, "you're probably wondering if I'm about to do something stupid."

"The question had crossed my mind."

John shrugged. "Well, if I do, it won't be the first time."

"But it could be the last. What do you plan to do?"

"I plan to take advantage of whatever opportunity presents itself."

Otis jumped over the back seat from the cargo area. "Mrrow," he said. "Mrow." He sat down on the back seat, looking at John expectantly.

"What do you think he's saying?" Nicole asked.

"Unless I miss my guess," John said, dropping bullets into the magazine, "he's saying, 'You hit 'em high, and I'll hit 'em low.'"

"Mmrow," Otis agreed.

"If you want to get out now," John said, turning to Nicole, "I'd understand. You wouldn't hurt my feelings."

She shrugged. "Everyone else I know is dead or crazy. Or both."

"What makes you think I'm not crazy?"

She gave him an appraising look. "You may well be crazy. But you're not one of them."

John reinserted the tube, twisted it tight, and handed the gun to Nicole. "So what's your story?" he asked. "It occurs to me that we haven't had time to talk."

She shrugged. "Pretty simple, really. Mom attacked dad. My sister Lupe attacked mom. I waded into it." She motioned to her neck and shoulders. "You can see the result. My kid brother Dante ran in and joined the pileup. Mom ripped his throat out with her bare teeth. When I saw that, I lost my appetite for combat."

John studied her face; her eyes were dry and her expression was neutral. Either she was holding up well, he thought, or she was as cold as they come.

"I managed to wiggle free," Nicole continued, "and I headed out the back door. I ran down the street as fast as I could, and did not look back. The first open door I saw, I bolted through it. And that's when you came in."

John nodded. Her voice had remained steady, but he now noticed that a tear had fallen down her left cheek.

"I'm really sorry, Nicole," John said softly. "I don't know what to say."

"There's nothing to be said." She sighed. "Do you mind if I put my head back for a minute? I'm about to give out." She closed her eyes.

Keeping an eye on her and also on the rear view mirror, John pulled out the Glock, removed the clip, and then quietly reloaded it from the spare box in the center console. Then he waited. The sun beat down on the car, and not a breath of wind was stirring. Soon he was soaked with sweat.

After about an hour, the army truck starting rolling. Cranking the Ford, he rolled up the windows and turned on the air conditioning. Nicole opened her eyes and looked at him. The truck passed them. John put the Explorer into gear and pulled in behind it. Nicole remained silent.

The truck exited at the next ramp, with John following. But instead of proceeding on to Broadway in the direction of Albuquerque High School, the truck turned left on Second, and doubled back onto the interstate, heading west. John followed closely behind.

"Where do you think he's going?" Nicole asked.

"I don't know. My guess is, they've got a full house at Albuquerque High, and he's going someplace else, someplace nearby."

Looking out his window, John glanced in the direction of the downtown area. Thick columns of smoke rose into the sky. "Would you look at that," he said.

Nicole looked past him through the window. "What do you think's going on?"

John shook his head grimly. "We were listening to this guy on the radio, who said a building downtown was burning. Apparently it's spread."

They continued following the truck. Just down the road, it took the Coors exit.

"I think he's going to West Mesa," John said.

He was right. A few minutes later, they were turning into the parking lot. It was mostly empty, except for a few military trucks and civilian cars parked near the front. John pulled into a slot a discreet distance away from the truck. Shutting off the Ford's engine, he watched as two soldiers jumped down from the cab, and two others hopped down from the covered area in back.

"What now?" Nicole asked.

John shook his head. "I don't know. I'll admit I was thinking about an ambush, but I don't think I can get the drop on four armed soldiers. Let's see what develops."

They watched as the soldiers began unloading the truck, half carrying, half dragging the thrashing, snarling crazies to the school one at a time. John was hoping they might leave the truck unguarded while they moved the first pair inside, but other soldiers came running out of the school to assist. He watched as two of the reinforcements pulled Maria off the truck and hustled her inside.

"Well, hell," John said. "There's only one option left now."

"What's that?"

"Diplomacy."

Nicole looked at him with surprise. "What, you're going to try to sweet-talk them into letting her go?"

He shrugged. "With people, there's always the 'X' factor. That soldier on the interstate should have detained us, but he didn't. Maybe we'll get lucky again."

Nicole shook her head. "No offense, John, but you don't look like the lucky type to me."

John chuckled. "You've been reading my journal." He turned to her. "You haven't asked me the obvious question."

"What's that?"

"Why I am doing this?"

"I don't have to."

"Why not?"

She looked at him with an expression that he couldn't quite read. "Because, John," she said in a soft voice, "I see how you look at her."

He nodded.

"My dad used to look at my mother that way, back when I was a little kid," she continued. She looked off into the distance. "At least, that's the way I remember it." She turned back to him. "No one has looked at me that way in a long, long time. Maria is a very lucky woman."

"Let's see if we can go get her."

Reaching for the buttons, John rolled down the windows. He turned to Otis. "It's gonna get hot in here. But I need you to guard the car."

"Ow," Otis said.

Reaching under the seat, he pulled out the Glock. Nicole placed a hand on his arm. He turned to look at her. She was slowly shaking her head. He hesitated, and then returned the Glock to its place beneath the seat. "Okay. Diplomacy. Let's go."

Ten minutes later, they found themselves being hustled through a large entrance hall toward a set of double doors, with their hands zip tied behind their backs. Diplomacy had not worked out so well. The young lieutenant overseeing operations at the school had taken one look at their wounds, and had ordered them detained. But it could have been worse. John at least had been able to talk a mean-looking medic out of giving him and Nicole a shot of Thorazine. They must have been running low, John decided. But the medic let them through without it.

"Don't bother anyone," the guard said as two armed sentries opened the doors, "and we'll get along fine." The guard escorted them inside, and then turned and left.

John and Nicole surveyed the room. Before them was a gloomy, windowless basketball court, illuminated only by two stands of emergency work lights set up at the door and an adjacent wall. The court was filled with cots. Only about half of them were occupied. John stepped over to the closest one. A middle-aged man wearing a hospital gown man stared up at him with dull eyes. Froth foamed at his lips. His hands and bare feet had been zip tied to the frame of the cot. "They've got him drugged out of his mind," John observed.

"And a good thing, too," Nicole said. "Based on what I've seen these things do, if the drugs wear off, he'll pound that little cot to s\*!t, and then shove the pieces up somebody's ass."

"He doesn't have an ID bracelet, or any kind of name tag." John looked up at Nicole. "Come to think of it, they didn't even ask us for Maria's name. Or ours, either, for that matter." His face darkened. "They don't care about these people. They're just warehousing them."

"There's no plan to it, John," Nicole said. "Things are breaking down."

"Come on. Let's look for Maria."

They found her a few rows over. Like the others, she lay there with dull, staring eyes. Someone had removed the duct tape from her face; light foam bubbled at her lips. "Jesus," John said, squatting down beside her. "What have they done to you?"

She turned her head, and her throat made a noise that could have been an attempt at a growl.

He looked Maria over. Like the others, she was barefoot, and wearing a hospital gown. He noticed that an adult diaper had been pulled up over her hips.

Nicole noticed the same thing. "I hope we get potty breaks," she said. "Or things are gonna get ugly."

"You would have to mention that. I should have gone two hours ago." John looked around the room. No nurses or orderlies were in sight.

Sighing, he sat down on the colorfully marked gym floor.

"What's the plan now?" Nicole asked, sinking down beside him.

"We wait," he said, "and look for opportunities."

And there they sat, watching the SOPS patients pant in their restraints and occasionally thrash lightly and moan, and listening to the sound of small arms fire, which could be heard sporadically popping in the distance in all directions. Underneath it all was the low purr of a generator running somewhere outside the building.

About an hour and a half later soldiers brought in another group of 25 or so SOPS cases. When John approached, one of the soldiers raised his gun and told John to stay the hell back. John shouted that he and Nicole could use a pit stop and some water, but the soldiers ignored them. They quickly strapped down their patients, and they left.

A short time later, they heard a burst of gunfire, close by. A few seconds after that, there was another burst, followed by what sounded like a table going over in the lobby, some shouting, and another few shots.

Thirty minutes later, a group of orderlies came in, and began making the rounds, giving out shots of Thorazine and checking diapers. "Hey," John said, approaching one of them, "if we don't hit the head soon, it's gonna hit the floor."

The orderly, a young woman in fatigues with her hair pulled back, frowned at him. "Okay," she said, sighing. "Come with me...."

The sound of gunfire close by jolted him awake. The first thing he noticed was that the interior of the gym was almost completely black; the lights were off, and the generator that had been running somewhere outside had fallen silent. Judging by the dim light that trickled in at the doors, it appeared the sun was going down.

There was a long burst of gunfire from an automatic weapon, followed by several more scattered shots, and two more long bursts. This didn't sound like someone shooting crazies. It sounded more like a gunfight, and it was happening right outside the gym. He heard engine noises, the sound of brakes, and more firing. There was a crashing of glass, followed by a loud explosion that might have been a grenade. Two more shots, and then silence.

The doors to gym burst open. A squad of helmeted soldiers entered, carrying flashlights and covering the room with their rifles. Seeing no threats, one of them turned to the others. "Okay. We're secure in here. Branson, take the men, and check for wounded, then set up out front in case of counter attack."

"Yes, sir!" The soldiers turned and rushed back outside.

The soldier who'd been giving orders walked into the gym. Approaching the cots, he began to play his flashlight beam over them, searching them one by one.

Nicole turned to John. "Should we –"

"Hang on," John said. "Let's see what develops."

The soldier continued searching the cots. Finally he stopped at one just a few feet away from where John was lying. "Oh, God," the soldier moaned, and then dropped to his knees. "Oh, my sweet Lord."

John could see that he was kneeling beside the cot of what had been an attractive young woman with shoulder-length reddish brown hair, which the soldier now reached forward to stroke. Bending down, he placed his head on her chest, and began sobbing.

Nicole and John exchanged glances. "What now?" she mouthed.

"Hang on," John whispered.

The soldier continued sobbing for a moment, then lifted his head up. "I am so sorry, baby," he said, stroking the woman's face. At the touch, she moaned and rolled away from him. "I'll fix this." Reaching down, he snapped open his holster and withdrew his side arm.

"Hey!" John shouted.

The soldier whipped his head around.

"Over here," John said. "Can you cut us loose?"

"Who the hell are you?" the man demanded, pointing his flashlight at them.

"I'm John. This is Nicole. My wife is on one of those cots. We came in to visit her, and some hotheaded lieutenant grabbed us. We don't belong here."

The man nodded, and returned his pistol to its holster. "Fog of war," he said. "Everything's confused right now." Standing, he pulled his knife, and then walked over and cut their straps.

"Thank you," John said, rubbing his wrists. "I can't tell you how good that feels."

"Amen to that," Nicole agreed.

The door to the gym opened, and a soldier walked in. "The perimeter is secure. No sign of a counter-attack. We've got two prisoners, both wounded. You sure were right, sir. They don't look like Koreans at all, and they speak English as good as me and you."

Maria and John exchanged glances.

The lieutenant pointed his flashlight at John and Nicole. "These two civilians got caught in the cross fire. They'll be taking his wife and leaving. Go get them a weapon, and a couple of clips. There should be plenty of both lying around."

"Yes, sir." The man turned and trotted off toward the front of the gym.

John looked at the lieutenant. "You mind if I ask what that was about?"

The lieutenant regarded him with sad eyes. "I can't let my wife lie here like this. I had to come help her. So I cooked up a story about the gym having been captured by troops from North Korea."

"Wow," John said. "And they believed it?"

"They trust me," the lieutenant said. "And besides, they're about to turn. One of the things I've noticed over the past few days is that just before someone becomes one of those – things – they go through a couple of blackouts. Most eventually black out completely, and don't wake up. They just lie there, sleeping. Or they freeze in position. We've already lost most of the unit that way. But some of those who come out of the first blackout are very susceptible to suggestion for a short while. So I made some suggestions." He sighed. "We may only have a few minutes. Where's your wife?"

John led him to her. By the time he had cut the final strap, the other soldier had returned. He handed John an M16 and two clips. "Do you know how to use one of these?"

"Yes," John said. "I used to sell the AR-15."

"Good. Be careful. It's locked and loaded. The safety is on."

John slung the weapon over his shoulder.

"Did you come here by car?" the lieutenant asked.

"Yeah. It's in the parking lot."

The lieutenant turned to the soldier, and motioned to Maria. "Help them get her to their car. Then come back, and man the perimeter. We may be here a couple of hours before reinforcements arrive."

*Either that was a clumsy lie, John thought, or the lieutenant knows that in two hours, he won't care what happens.* He suspected the latter.

The soldier, a bulked up young African American who looked as if he ate nothing but steroids, hoisted Maria to his shoulders like a sack of potatoes. "Let's go."

As they ran toward the doors, John looked back. The lieutenant was walking slowly back to his wife's cot. He had once again drawn his pistol....

The sergeant turned and butted open one of the doors with his hip. As they burst outdoors into the fading twilight, John saw that two humvees were arranged end to end on the narrow concrete plaza a few feet away from the gym entrance, parked about three feet apart. Soldiers were on station at the front and back ends of each vehicle, while a two more hovered in the rear.

"I'm heading out to the parking lot with these three civilians," the sergeant said to the men as he stepped outside. "Keep your eyes peeled."

With that, he trotted out onto the asphalt, with John and Nicole hard on his heels. Within seconds, they had reached the Explorer. John pulled open the left rear door.

"Roow!" Otis said.

"I know. Sorry about that, buddy." He stepped back. The sergeant deposited Maria gently onto the back seat.

From the direction of the gym came the sound of a single gunshot, quickly followed by another. Whipping his head around, the sergeant unslung his rifle.

"We've got it from here," John said. "Thanks, sergeant."

The man nodded. "Good luck." With that, he turned and trotted off in the direction of the gym.

John put his M16 on the floorboards next to Maria, propping it against the far door. Then he dashed around to the back of the Explorer, popped the gate, and lifted it open. Grabbing a set of ties, he ran back around to Maria.

He heard a clattering sound in the direction of the gym. Looking up, he saw that the sergeant, now just ten feet from the humvees in front of the gym, was standing stock still. His rifle lay on the ground in front of him.

"Oh, s\*!t." He turned to Nicole. "Quick. Get inside. We've got to get the hell out of here."

They could hear the sergeant let out an animal roar. As John and Nicole jumped inside the Explorer, John saw the soldier charging the humvees. He expected to hear gunfire, but there was none.

John fired up the engine, threw it into reverse and pulled out of the parking spot. As he swung around, he could see that the sergeant had a man down on the far side of the humvees. There was a flash; the sergeant continued attacking the man beneath him. More flashes. John did not wait to see what would happen next. He put the vehicle in gear and roared out of the parking lot....

The twilight gloom was deepening as they headed up Coors. They saw few other cars, but every now and then one or more people darted across the roadway in front or behind of them. The strange "human trees" still popped up with regularity along the roadway, their contorted faces glowing a garish chalky shade of white as the headlights caught them.

"Welcome to the Ninth Circle," Nicole said softly.

"Ninth Circle?" John asked. "What's that?"

Nicole turned to him. "Did you ever read Dante's *Inferno*?"

He laughed. "I was supposed to, in high school. I read the Cliff Notes version."

"Well, then, you may remember that Dante was a 14th century poet – early 14th century. He wrote this book – I guess it was more like a poem – about a trip through Hell."

"I seem to recall that. He wasn't condemned there. He got treated to some kind of backstage VIP tour, right?"

She nodded. "That's one way of putting it. The innermost circle was the Ninth. It was reserved for the worst of the worst."

"How do you know we're in the Ninth Circle?"

"Those," she said, pointing out the window to a man they were passing. The figure, wearing a shirt, tie, and nothing else, was frozen with his arms and hands arranged in bizarre, asymmetrical positions; his face was contorted into a horrific wide-eyed, bare-toothed mask.

"I don't follow," John said.

"See, this is what you get for not reading your class assignments." She paused. "I've done lots of reading over the years. God knows, I've had plenty of free time. I'm not good for much else, but I have a great memory for words. In the Fourth Ring of the Ninth Circle, just outside the center of Hell itself, sinners were encapsulated in ice, their bodies frozen and contorted into every conceivable bizarre posture."

John watched silently as they passed another unfortunate victim, frozen with its hips, torso and limbs twisted in random directions. In the harsh white glare of the headlight, he could well imagine the pitiful creature as a poor, tortured soul trapped in a block of ice.

"'There where the shades were wholly covered up'," she said, "'and glimmered through like unto straws in glass'."

"What?"

She laughed. "I was quoting a line I happened to remember. 'Shades' is an archaic word meaning 'spirit.' Dante is describing tormented souls trapped in clear ice, like dragonflies preserved in amber. Of course, Dante wrote in Italian. The English translation I read comes to us from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow."

"I wouldn't be surprised if you could quote the original Italian."

She laughed. "Not quite. But I will admit a fondness for Dante." She sighed, gazing out the window. "He speaks to me. Particularly now."

They were passing a figure, garishly blue-white in the headlights, whose frozen body was lying face up on the ground, with its legs, back, head, and arms raised and curved out in such a way as to resemble the shape of an archer's bow.

"See that?" she asked, pointing at the figure. "By strange coincidence, Dante describes that exact posture in the Fourth Ring. So we must be getting close to the center." She turned to him, gazing at him with a serious expression. "So who did you betray?"

"What? What do you mean?"

"The Ninth Circle was reserved for the treacherous. Dante considered them to be the worse of the worst – people who betrayed their families, their guests, their country, their benefactors, or their God. Which of those applies to you?"

He hesitated. "Well. I guess I betrayed God, then."

Nicole frowned. "That's not good. Why do you say that?"

John told her the story of how he'd met Maria, and the fliers he'd passed out making fun of her church group.

Nicole nodded. "That could do it."

Behind them, Maria moaned. Nicole glanced back at her with concern. "How long do you think it'll be before the Thorazine wears off?"

"I'm hoping we have another half hour, at least. Enough time to get out of town. Then we'll pull over. I don't want to do any more driving at night than we have to."

She nodded. "So – after your little 'Just say no to Jesus' stunt, did you ask for forgiveness?"

"Oh, yeah. On hand and knees. She forgave me. She *married* me."

"Marriage doesn't necessarily indicate a state of forgiveness," Nicole observed drily. "But that wasn't my question. Did you ask *God* for forgiveness?"

He frowned. "I don't think I did. I didn't really believe in him at the time. I do now, although I can't say our relationship is so great." He paused. "I guess I could ask him now."

"Oh, no," she said, shaking her head. "Once you're in Hell, it's too late."

"You really think we're in Hell?"

"Don't you?"

John gazed unhappily at another passing frozen human. "I guess we could be." He turned to her. "But you're here with me. Who did *you* betray?"

She sighed, looking pensive. "A boy."

"Anyone I know?"

"Justin King."

He threw her a sharp look. "Oh, yeah. I remember Justin. He jumped off a bridge or something, right?"

She nodded. "Yep. Right after I promised to run away with him."

"I hadn't heard that part of the story. I didn't know you were involved." He paused. "But I don't get how promising to run away with someone could lead to suicide."

"We were supposed to meet at the mall," she said sadly. "But I got cold feet. And I didn't show."

"Oh. Wow."

"Yeah. Wow. We lost our virginity together. He was crazy about me. I was just crazy." She turned to him. "Remember I said earlier that no one has looked at me in years the way you look at Maria?"

"Yeah."

"He was the guy." She shook her head. "But he made a bad choice. He picked me." She paused, looking thoughtful. "I was hoping for the *Second Circle*, which is reserved for what Dante called 'carnal malefactors' – people who let their lust overcome reason. They only get battered in the dark by hurricane winds for all eternity. But I betrayed someone who was my husband in the eyes of God. And here we are. Definitely the *Ninth Circle*."

They rode in silence for several miles.

"So you really think that's our fate?" John said as they passed another contorted human statue.

"It's mine," she said. "Actually, I only get it up to my chin. I betrayed family. To get the full-body treatment, you have to betray a lord or benefactor." She turned to him. "But you betrayed God. Your fate is the worst of all. You go to the center of Hell."

He swallowed. "What happens there?"

She fixed him with a cold stare. "Satan eats you."