

COUNTERACT

By Tracy Lawson

Chapter 1

9:10 AM

Day 1: Friday, October 27, 2034

Quadrant OP-439 (formerly suburban Columbus, Ohio)

Careen Catecher was just a few steps from the front door of the history building when a wave of panicked students poured out, driving her back into the quad. Someone's backpack knocked her coffee mug out of her hand, and a guy she didn't know grabbed her roughly by the elbow and spun her around without breaking stride, dragging her with him as he ran. "Come on! Didn't you hear? We're supposed to go to the Student Center."

"Why? What's happening?"

The first wail of the disaster siren drowned out his answer, and she cringed as they fled across campus in the growing stampede, thinking in a detached way that she'd picked the wrong day to be late for class.

A frightened crowd gathered outside the university's student center, pressing toward the doors and shouting over the siren. Careen fought to keep her balance in the undulating mob. The shrieking siren cut off abruptly, and in the unnerving silence, phones all around her pinged with incoming messages. She dug hers out of her back pocket.

“Campus alert. Shut up--it’s a campus alert.” The murmurs spread and seemed to calm the crowd. Hundreds of phones played the voice message in near-unison, magnifying the audio so it was easily heard:

“The Office of Civilian Safety and Defense confirmed that a chemical weapons attack against the United States is imminent. Terrorists have released a latent cocktail of poisons into the atmosphere, where it can remain, inert, until such time as they choose to detonate it. You are directed to report to a designated distribution center in your area to receive an antidote that will protect you. Weekly allotments of this antidote will be provided free of charge for as long as the threat persists. The OCSD expects the terrorists to mount repeated attacks, so it is essential that you take the recommended daily dosage. Compliance is a small price to pay for your safety.”

Every face turned toward the cloudless, blue sky as someone’s sobs cut through the silence.

9:47 AM

Careen fidgeted as she stood in the slow-moving queue. She’d been anxious to get inside the building and away from the danger that lurked overhead, but the informational video playing in the vestibule did nothing to quell her fears. According to the video, an attack could occur at any time; when it did, there would be no flash, no warning, no odor...and no place to hide. But taking the Counteractive System of Defense antidote would render the poison ineffectual. According to the video, the OCSD had the situation under control, and there was no reason to worry.

But Careen could think of plenty to worry about. For starters, she worried that, unlike her, most of the people in line seemed to dismiss the danger after they watched the video message. A group of girls behind her were chattering like they were at a party. She

could hear people all around her telling each other not to worry, it's just another attack. It's no big deal. We hear about them all the time. *They wouldn't say that if they'd ever been in real danger. They honestly don't believe anything bad can happen to them.*

The workers distributed the antidote so slowly that Careen feared the attack would be long over before she made it through the line, and though she hoped she'd be done in time for her afternoon classes, she knew she had no choice but to wait. Denying the threat wouldn't help, and a 4.0 GPA wouldn't save her.

“Our protest might even get coverage on PeopleCam! My mom has a friend whose daughter knows a guy that works there. They're probably sending a crew over.”

Careen looked around in amazement. “What are you protesting? Are you against taking the antidote?”

The girl wrinkled her nose. “No! We're protesting against *terrorism*. Terrorism should stop. Right. Now. So once we take our antidote we're going to stand outside and sing songs and show those terrorists that we're not afraid. Like the flower children in Vietnam a hundred years ago.”

“Umm...wow. Some of the pertinent details aside, Vietnam was still a totally different situation.” *Idiot.*

“We can make a difference if we ask all the terrorists to give peace and understanding a chance.”

“Oh my gosh! I bet none of our leaders ever thought to try that. You ought to call the president.” The girl looked smug, and Careen, already on edge, exploded. “Have you been living in some kind of reality-free zone? What do you know about protesting or terrorism—or anything, for that matter? You might as well be a herd of sheep.”

The girl turned away and spoke loudly to her friends. “Did you hear what she just said? *She’s* an authority on terrorism.” Several people were staring in their direction, and one of the distribution workers patrolling the lines looked Careen up and down and noted something on her clipboard. Defiantly, Careen got out her own notebook and scribbled a few lines, mimicking the woman’s actions. Soon the woman dropped her gaze and moved away, leaving only the buzz of quiet conversation to fill the void.

Careen tried to shut out the memories that replayed in her head, but she’d never forget the way shards of glass and other debris had rained down on the café table that sheltered her. How her ears rang from the blast and her eyes watered from the cloud of smoke and dust that lingered. Most of all she remembered the blinding flash of light and her father’s hands on her back as he shoved her to the floor, hard. She hadn’t seen that attack coming. She’d been a kid. Now that she was on her own, she had to take care of herself.

She was startled out of her unpleasant meditation by an exasperated voice nearby.

“But what’s in it? Is it safe? Can you at least tell me if it’s been tested?”

A young couple was at the front of the line. The man leaned toward the distribution worker, palms planted on the table. “My wife is pregnant. She’s not taking *anything* unless we know it’s safe for her and the baby. Let me talk to whoever’s in charge here!”

The people around Careen began to shift and crane their necks to get a better view. She stood on tiptoe, hoping to hear the answer to his question, and watched with growing horror as a security officer grabbed the man and forced his arm back into a painful hold. His wife burst into tears as the guard shoved him through the crowd. He tried to twist free, but more guards surrounded them. Careen

heard the thwack of a nightstick—once, twice, three times. Two guards dragged him toward the exit, while another took his sobbing wife by the arm and forced her to follow.

The door banged shut behind them, and the remaining guards returned to their positions along the wall. No one in line made a sound. Careen clutched her notebook to her chest and bowed her head.

9:59 AM

Tommy Bailey lay tangled in his blankets, one arm hanging off the side of the bed. He usually slept soundly, thanks to his pain meds, but not today. He opened his eyes, blinking back the bright sunshine that filled the room. *What the hell was that noise?* He glanced at his bedside clock. Only 10 AM? He'd have slept much later if not for that siren howling outside, but now that he was awake, he was curious enough to roll out of bed and hobble downstairs. The television in the living room was on, which was no surprise since it powered up automatically any time there was an important announcement or mandatory programming. He lowered himself onto the sofa to find out what was going on.

“OCSD expects repeated large-scale attacks. The National Weather Service, in cooperation with the OCSD, will monitor the atmosphere and report discernible toxin levels. The Emergency Broadcast System will conduct practice drills and notify the public in the event of an actual chemical attack. Remember, the antidote will counteract the effects of hazardous toxins if taken every day, so for the next three weeks, the Emergency Broadcast System will issue morning reminders to help everyone acclimate to the dosage schedule. Take action to protect yourself and your family. Your safety is our greatest concern. Go directly to the distribution center in your quadrant.”

The OCSD's PeopleNet address and an information hotline

number flashed on the screen.

Tommy shook the cobwebs from his head. *Do I want to live or die? Shit. Not again.*

10:48 AM

Tommy limped down the porch steps, crutches in hand. It was almost a mile to the nearest distribution center, and in his current state, traveling there and back on foot was going to take hours. He hadn't been that far from home on his own since before the accident.

Just then the mailman came up the walk with a pile of catalogs. Tommy knew without looking that they'd be addressed to Lara Bailey. The mailman glanced at him uncomfortably, and stepped around him to put the mail in the box.

"Thanks."

"Sure. You doing okay?"

"Yeah." Tommy busied himself with his crutches.

"If you wanna stop getting all them catalogs, you just gotta message the companies, ya know?"

"Yeah. I'll get around to it." The mailman nodded and continued on his way.

Tommy swung onto his crutches and headed toward the university campus, a little surprised that he wanted to live badly enough to go get the antidote. *I guess I still have some fight left in me, even after everything that's happened in the last four months.*

After the accident, he'd spent two weeks in the hospital, most of it a hazy memory distorted by pain and whatever it was that dripped

numbingly into his veins from an IV line. Four surgeries later, the shattered bones in his right leg were held together with metal plates and screws. His visible scars were healing, but the doctors offered no guarantees that he'd ever walk normally, let alone make a full recovery. To Tommy, a full recovery seemed impossible.

He'd turned eighteen while he was in the hospital. He hadn't been able to attend his parents' funeral. He wasn't sure how to live without everything he'd lost, but he guessed he hadn't given up. Not yet.

12:02 PM

Careen sighed with relief when she reached the head of the line, put her notes away, and fished out her ID. The middle-aged woman at the folding table peered through her reading glasses, found Careen's name on the distribution list, then weighed her and took a DNA swab. The employee with the clipboard approached the table and bent close to whisper something in her ear. The woman who was helping Careen studied her through narrowed eyes for a moment, seemed to reach a conclusion about her, and applied a red sticker next to her name on the list. Then she held out a small, white, cardboard box.

“What does that mean?”

“What, dear?”

“The sticker next to my name. What does it mean?” She pointed at the list. There was only one other red sticker on the page.

“Oh, nothing. Just a discretionary dot, is all.”

“A discretionary *what*? Whose discretion?”

“Mine.” The woman pushed the box into her hand then looked to the girl in line behind her. “Next!” Careen clutched the box and glanced around as she stepped away from the table. Most people

were taking their doses immediately. Some of the girls were crying. *Can this stuff really keep me safe?* She tore open the box, pulled out her bottle, and quickly read the label. ‘Three drops daily. Mild side effects may include headache, dizziness, unusually vivid dreams...’ *Great, whatever. It doesn’t really matter. I have to protect myself.*

Careen dropped the bottle in her bag as she strolled past the guards, the tiny orange drops leaving a bitter taste on her tongue.

As she crossed the lobby, she noticed a guy on crutches struggling to squeeze his way through the heavy doors. In her hurry to help, Careen’s leg became entangled with the young man’s crutches, creating a near-catastrophic pile-up.

He shook his blond hair out of his eyes and focused on righting himself, his narrow, angry gaze fixed somewhere over her head as she steadied him.

“Oh my gosh, I’m so sorry.” Her brain felt fuzzy, and she was lightheaded all of a sudden. *Am I slurring my words? So embarrassing.*

“Don’t worry about it.” He shifted his weight and took a step.

“No, I mean it. Just trying to help.” Even though he was obviously trying to get away from her, she kept her hand pressed to his chest as her own pulse thudded in her ears. *What is going on?*

“Look, can you maybe get out of my way?”

“Umm, yeah. Sure.” She swayed in his wake as she let him pass, and when he was out of sight, she walked out of the student center into a blinding pink light. She could see herself in full color, unaffected, and as everything else receded into a pink fog, a sense of calm and well-being washed over her. The light warmed her face, and she breathed in the sweet smell of cotton candy.

She wandered across campus, smiling blithely. At first she felt alone, as if she were in a spotlight, but soon she noticed other people out walking, too, and it was fun to watch them grow closer and materialize out of the bright cherry haze. Her messenger bag was getting heavy, so she took out one of her thick notebooks and tossed it in a trash bin. That was when she recognized a guy who was in one of her classes; and as she noticed his broad shoulders and how his dark hair curled out from under the edges of his baseball cap, it was like she was really seeing him for the first time. She stared at him, acutely aware of the nerve endings in her spine, sure that the tingling rush of energy spreading through her body had to be coming from him. She boldly caught his eye.

He walked straight up to her, grabbed a handful of hair at the base of her neck, tilted back her head, and kissed her. When the kiss ended he smiled, and she followed him into the fog.

2:28 PM

The distribution center's line was long and inched forward almost imperceptibly. Tommy wished he'd brought something to eat. He felt faint from exerting himself on the long walk, and was pretty sure he'd collapse to the floor without his crutches to hold him up. Someone jostled him from behind, and he turned around, irritated.

"Sorry, dude. Oh...hey, Tommy." It was one of his teammates from high school. The boy extended his hand uncomfortably, and when Tommy didn't respond, he settled for a halfhearted fake punch on Tommy's shoulder.

"Hey."

"I heard about...what happened. Sorry about your folks. I mean, I meant to stop by, you know; a bunch of us were going to come see how you were doing but things got so busy...what with starting university and all. Umm...so how you been? I mean...oh God, sorry. That was stupid." He avoided Tommy's eyes.

“I’m great. You?”

“Yeah, really great, except for this whole thing today. Everyone’s freaked out, you know? They even canceled the party at my frat house tonight. Some crazy shit, huh?”

“Yeah. Some crazy shit.”

“Well, take care of yourself, right? See you around?”

“Sure.”

4:16 PM

Tommy tottered through the front door, using a crutch to slam it shut behind him. He was sweating from head toe, and his recently healed incision hurt so much he feared it had pulled apart somewhere along the fifteen-inch scar. It was definitely past time for a pain pill. Too bad there wasn’t a pill to help him be around other people without feeling conspicuous and defective. *Why is it that every interaction I have with anyone focuses on my shortcomings? I couldn’t even open the stupid door by myself.*

He knew it was partly his fault that he was alone. Art and Beth Severson, his parents’ best friends, had encouraged him to stay with them after he was discharged from the hospital, and he’d taken them up on the offer for a couple weeks. They’d infiltrated his drug-induced fog with good intentions and regular mealtimes. Beth hovered over him with a cheery efficiency that he found annoying, and Art asked so many questions about the accident that Tommy had finally gotten tired of saying “I don’t remember” and clammed up. Every evening Art watched the SportsCam channel on TV, which only served to remind Tommy, the former athlete, of his new physical limitations. Maybe Art had felt obligated to be there for his dead best friend’s son, but Tommy wished he didn’t. He’d found the whole situation intolerable, and as soon as he was able to get around on his own, he’d gone home.

He pulled the little white box from the pocket of his hoodie and removed the amber bottle inside. Three drops daily. Not just for him...for everyone. Everyone was in danger; everyone was scared. He wasn't alone in this fight.

He limped into the kitchen for a glass of water and a pain pill. With three tiny drops of the antidote swirling in his glass, he washed down the pill with a single gulp. Back in the living room, he flopped on the sofa and closed his eyes, and soon the sofa was breathing softly, and he was somewhere else, his body rising and falling in time with the sofa, like waves on the lake he'd frequented with his parents. He was afloat on sunlit water, the bright light sparkling and changing in kaleidoscopic patterns as he drifted aimlessly. In the distance, a pretty brunette walked alone on the shore.

5:12 PM

Quadrant BG-098 (formerly Knox County, Kentucky)

Wes Carraway flipped over the sign on the diner's window to CLOSED, locked the front door, and drew the blinds. He crossed the room and slapped the counter to get his older brother's attention. Mitch came out of the kitchen, wiping his hands on his apron, and pulled a little amber bottle out of his pocket.

“This is the one, Wes. The one he warned me about. This chemical- weapons attack is all over the news! Of course there's nothing to report so they're all saying stuff like “up next, a live report from so-and-so at blah-blah-blah.” But if you ask me, the whole thing feels staged.”

“Just so you know, you sound like the true disciple of a conspiracy theorist.”

“Yeah? Well, if this is such a huge threat, why are the alleged terrorists holding off until we've all had time to take the antidote?”

Whatever happened to a good old-fashioned sneak attack? Shoot, that's what I'd do."

"You'd make a great terrorist."

"Hell, I'd make a great world leader, 'cause I understand peer pressure and threats. If you tell people they're being attacked, they'll stand in line for hours to let you take away their freedoms. All you need is a rallying point like—"

"How about, 'it's a small price to pay for your safety'?"

"Or something like that. Nice observation, Mr. Quadrant Marshal."

"Ha, ha." *Like I'd dare say anything else in his presence.* "So since I came all the way out here to see you, how about you make me some pancakes before I go? I'm starting a new assignment tomorrow: babysitting the little darlings over in the university quadrant. OP-439."

"Yeah? Going uptown, huh? Well, babysit all you like. You're no older than they are, so have some fun with a debutante or two, but don't forget why you're really there. Get us back in the loop so we can get to work."

Wes spun the antidote bottle on the countertop. It stopped with the cap pointing between them. "You figure we're safe when we take this stuff?"

Mitch laughed. "I figure I'm safer when I *don't* take it." "You're not going to?" "Aw, come on, little brother. We're so far behind the times in this corner of West By-God that if the world ends tomorrow, we won't even hear about it for a couple years."

"What if they come in after you?"

"They who? The OCSD or the terrorists? Either way, let 'em try. I can hide out back in the hills if I need to."

Wes rolled his eyes but grinned in spite of himself. “Yeah, I know you can. So how about those pancakes?”