

PLAGUE YEAR

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Chapter One

They ate Jorgensen first. He'd twisted his leg bad – his long white leg. The man hadn't been much more than a stranger, but Cam remembered five hundred things about him.

It was a weakness.

Cam remembered someone who never cursed, who kept his credit cards and driver's license for some reason. He remembered a hard worker who exhausted himself the day that he fell.

Later there were others Cam had actually talked with, where they were from, what kind of jobs they'd had. Talking made the days easier, except that ghosts seemed very real after you'd sucked the marrow out of someone's finger bones, and Cam got extra portions because he volunteered for wood detail even when the snow drifted up over the roof.

Each night stretched longer than his memory. Erin refused to have sex more than it took to get warm, and then there was nothing to do but pick at his blister rash and listen to the nightmares and slow whispers that filled the hut.

He was glad when Manny banged on the wall and yelled.

Erin shifted but didn't wake. She could stay down for twelve, thirteen hours at a stretch. Others pushed up on one elbow or raised their heads, mumbling, groaning – screaming when Manny pushed through the door and let in a river of cold air. Fresh air. It washed Cam's ghosts away.

The kid was short for fifteen, barely five-three, but still had to duck the ceiling. They were lucky they hadn't scavenged enough material for anything better. They probably would have built high out of habit. This low space was quick to heat and they planned to drop the roof another twelve inches before winter rolled around again, use the extra boards for insulation.

Manny said, "There's someone in the valley."

"What?"

"Price wants to light a bonfire."

"What are you talking about?"

"Someone's in the valley. Coming toward us."

Cam reached over Erin to shake Sawyer, but Sawyer was already awake. His arm tensed under Cam's palm. The fire, down to coals, threw just enough light into their corner that the profile of Sawyer's newly shaved scalp looked like a bullet.

"In the valley," Sawyer repeated. "That's impossible."

Manny shook his head. "We can see a flashlight."

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The high California Sierra, east of whatever remained of Sacramento, consisted of surprisingly straight lines. Ravines and drainages formed slashing V shapes. Every mountaintop grew to a pyramid or slumped away as flat as a parking lot. Painted by the sweet glow of the stars, the sight gave Cam hope—that it was beautiful, that he could still recognize beauty.

Even better, it must be April or even May and would finally get warm enough that he could escape the stinking hut and sleep outside.

The toes Manny had lost didn't prevent the kid from setting a quick pace, weaving around the fields of snow they hadn't yet carried to their crude reservoir. Cam and Sawyer kept close on his heels. This peak was no bigger than the back of God's hand and they knew every barren inch of it, hunting day and night for the few rodents and birds that lived along the treeline, scouring it clean of plantlife.

They'd been up here now for most of a year, maybe longer. It was definitely spring again, they knew that much, no matter how confused their best calendar might be.

They'd been up here too long.

Jim Price had everyone from the other cabin hauling firewood to a low ridge, even his woman, Lorraine, who'd miscarried just three weeks ago. Cam couldn't recall whether Lorraine had limped before or not. So many of them moved awkwardly now.

Price himself stayed by the woodpile, pointing, hollering, marching alongside one man briefly before hustling back to help another guy load up. "Here you go, let's go!" Unfortunately some of these people needed cheerleading. In Cam's opinion, at least half of Price's supporters were fractured, beaten souls who had latched on to the only available father figure. At forty-six, Price was twelve years older than anyone else on the mountain.

Sawyer plunged into the busy line, leading with his stubble-dark head. Talking louder than Price, he grabbed at people's sleeves and blocked their way as Cam strode out to where they were making three piles. Big piles.

Manny followed, pointing with his entire arm. The kid's voice was unmistakably eager. "Down there."

Cam stared out across the valley instead. The people on the next peak had built three bonfires, just flickering orange sparks from here but an obvious signal.

"See him?" Manny asked, then yelled, "Heyyyyyy!"

Some of the human shadows around them also cheered. There was little chance this sound would penetrate the vast, black valley, but a sense of hope and wonder welled up in Cam again.

About a mile below them, a wand of light strobed wildly over the rough terrain – electric light like a star.

Cam said, "He must have started across this morning."

"You think someone could make it that far in a day?"

"Longer than that would kill him."

Price bustled over with a tin soup bowl of embers, hugging it against his chest with one hand and waving his other arm grandly at each of the few stragglers he passed.

Jim Price had a compact, barrel-shaped torso that in daylight sometimes gave him the illusion of plumpness. In the dim shine of the embers, his face was all hollows and cheekbone. Across his chin, a prominent hourglass pattern disrupted his beard, scarring from the last time he'd gone below 10,000 feet with a scavenging party. His grin was unbelievable, even frightening, but Cam must not have looked any better because Price lowered his eyes when Cam stepped in front of him.

Cameron Luis Najarro had been below the barrier four times as often and his brown skin was mottled with burn blisters. His eyebrow and left nostril. Both hands. Both feet. He kept his coarse black hair at shoulder length to cover a badly disfigured ear.

"One fire," Cam said. "One fire's plenty, and make it smaller. Where the hell are we going to get more wood?"

"He must have a way to protect us!" Price glanced at his hut mates, chopping his hand through the air again, and some of them nodded and mumbled. Some of them had been listening to his pompous crap all winter.

"Don't be stupid. If he did, he'd camp for the night instead of risking a broken leg. Remember what Colorado said."

"That was five months ago!"

Sawyer moved closer, both arms tight by his sides, his chin tucked down into his chest. "We can't afford the wood," he said.

Price didn't even look at him. He had never understood Sawyer's body language, so much more subtle than his own. Facing Cam, Price made a wagging, dismissive gesture and said, "You tell your little bed buddy –"

Sawyer decked him, one jab sideways across that big mouth. Price fell in a heap and fumbled his soup bowl, throwing orange meteors over his head. He scabbled and kicked in the dirt as Sawyer paced forward, stiff, deliberate. Then Lorraine lurched between them, keening deep in her throat, spreading her arms wide in a very Price-like gesture.

"One fire," Cam said. "Please."

A few of them went back into their cabin. Everyone else pressed tight around the bonfire, roasting themselves, blocking the light. Sawyer was obvious about staring at Price over the yellow flames, and Cam almost said something but didn't want to embarrass his friend. He and Sawyer hardly talked to each other anymore outside their hut unless Erin was with them – and he was sick of playing peacemaker.

Across the valley, the other fires were put out.

"They don't have forests to burn either," Sawyer announced with mean satisfaction, but Cam felt a spike of disappointment, misplaced fear. It was as if the dark of the valley lunged up like a wave and smothered those people.

After the last of their batteries had died, after they'd lost the calm, redundant, twenty-four-hour military broadcasts out of Colorado and the underground shelters near Los Angeles, there had been two suicides. Almost 10 percent of their population. Both women, of which there were only six left.

Cam had no idea how many people survived across the valley or how bad winter had hit them—nothing except that they were there. Cam's group had never possessed binoculars or a real radio, just a glossy red CD boom box. He'd tried faking Morse code with a pocket mirror and reflected sunlight, thinking they could teach each other, but even if communication had been possible there was nothing the other survivors could do for them except say hello. Nothing except keep them sane.

Isolation cinched tighter around their hearts every hour, and they had become as much of a threat to themselves as their environment, contorted by despair, strain, and mistrust. Ferocious hunger and guilt.

Maybe they were all poisoned by the same thought. Sawyer said, "I wonder what they've been eating."

~ ~ ~

Jorgensen was easy. That gimp leg made him totally useless. He'd crashed down a stairwell while they were scavenging insulation and more nails from the ski resort lodge, clumsy with exhaustion. They'd been rushing nonstop for days because the first snow came early. They could have just left him there but chose to be heroes, dropping most of what they'd collected and hauling him back instead. Cam didn't remember even discussing it, which was strange and awful and hilarious, considering what they did to him six weeks later.

But they needed to be heroes.

Every person on this mountain had left family and friends behind in the first mad scramble to get above the invisible sea of nanotech.

~ ~ ~

The flashlight vanished into thatches of whitebark pine, too small to be considered forest, then soon reemerged. Plantlife thinned dramatically well below their peak, reduced in clearly visible bands from trees to brush to hardy little flowering weeds. Not enough air, water, or soil. The few pines and firs scattered above the timberline were nearly indistinguishable, all of them bent, pretzeled, abused by wind and snow.

The jouncing beam of light disappeared again behind a rise in the land. A minute passed. Five. Cam had hiked through there repeatedly and tried to picture it in his head. No sheer drainages, no slides, nothing to delay the man.

Sawyer said, "He's slowing down."

"Come on." Cam moved into the night with his friend, and Jim Price muttered something. A few people laughed. Sawyer stopped, looked back. But Cam slapped at Sawyer's shoulder and Manny had left the fire to tag along, and that seemed enough to get Sawyer walking again.

The three of them ventured down a wide, shallow ravine that formed a natural funnel to their peak and was the easiest access through a series of granite ledges and crumbling ridgelines of old basaltic lava. Picking confidently through the rocks and packed earth, Cam felt as if he'd physically *evolved*. Sweeping his eyes left and right to make the most of his peripheral vision, he smashed his toes only once.

A chipmunk piped and they all froze, listening. The rare sound wasn't repeated.

The grasshoppers sang and sang and sang.

They found seats at the base of a ragged pinnacle of lava they thought they'd identified on their best topo map, marked at 10,200 feet. Normal fluctuations in atmospheric pressure meant the barrier shifted daily, hourly, and it was only smart to minimize their exposure.

Cam said, "Maybe he does have some way to stop it."

"You don't make nano keys out of dirt." Sawyer rarely spoke of who he had been, who and what he'd lost, but he'd argued like an engineer when they were building their huts, pointing out drainage and foundation problems. "Even if there was someone over there who knew what they were doing, I seriously doubt they have any real equipment."

"Maybe they brought it up in the beginning."

"If he had a defensive nano that worked like antibodies in individual people, he would've stopped for the night like you said. And the only other option is to go on offense, build a hunter-killer that'd go out in the world and eat all of the little fuckers that have been eating us."

Cam turned from the dark slope downhill to look at him.

Sawyer was staring at the ground instead of searching below. He said, "This crazy son of a bitch wouldn't have to carry a weapon like that over here, he'd just release it."

Manny stood up. "There he is."

A ray of light burst over round boulders and skeletal brush no more than two hundred yards away.

"Heyyy!" Manny screamed. "Heyyyyyyy!"

The grasshoppers quit for one instant, then started up again in full chorus. *Ree ree ree ree*. The mindless noise seemed to synchronize with Cam's heartbeat and interrupted his thoughts. The bugs were like a sea of their own, rising higher every day, triumphant, unstoppable.

Manny danced, all his weight on his good foot. "Hey! Hey!" The kid windmilled his arms as if to break apart the darkness.

"Here *over here!*" Cam hadn't intended to start yelling himself, but his breath went out of him in a rush. Blinking back tears made his eyes sting and he half choked as he whirled on Sawyer. "You said SCUBA gear might protect somebody."

"Right." The long shadow of Sawyer's face split with a grin. "There's lots of dive shops on mountains."

"I just meant..." Cam turned downslope again to hide his face as one fat drop squeezed free,

streaking his skin with cold before sifting into his beard. "Maybe they have bottled air like medical supplies, that could work."

"Right. Except for your eyes. Open wounds. Bug bites."

Cam involuntarily touched the still-healing burn blisters on his nose. His body itched with a hundred minor scratches, especially his hands.

Every cut, every breath, was a doorway.

"It doesn't matter," Sawyer said. "Even if he was driving a limousine up here with enough air for everyone, that wouldn't solve anything."

~ ~ ~

Of the few known facts, it was certain that the machine plague first got loose in northern California—San Jose, Cal Berkeley, someone's garage—and there hadn't been time for much warning. Otherwise their desolate peak might have been very, very crowded.

Last they'd heard, Colorado was dealing with 14 million refugees, food riots, and a rogue element of Air Force recruits carrying automatic weapons.

Colorado should pull through. The Rocky Mountains offered hundreds of square miles at safe altitude, a few towns, ranches, ski villages, National Park structures. Several areas still had power jury-rigged from hydroelectric plants, and just below the barrier were dozens of towns and even small cities for easy scavenging. Similar high country like the Alps and Andes would keep the human race alive.

A future existed. Cam just hadn't believed he would be part of it. Unless their group had incredible luck hunting throughout the summer and fall, he and Sawyer had calculated that the only way they'd survive another winter would be to dismantle the other hut for fuel and kill and freeze most of the others immediately after the first snow.

Chapter Two

Cam heard the newcomer breathing about the same time that his crunching footsteps reached them. The man sounded like a tortured wolf. They huddled together like children. Not even Manny shouted, and Cam realized that the grasshoppers had fallen silent again.

The newcomer almost marched through them.

His light stabbed into Cam's eyes, diamond hard— Then he stopped, panting, sinking to one knee. He clawed at his face, at the bandanna and ski goggles over his mouth and eyes.

"Please water," he gasped.

They swarmed him, babbling, helping him to his feet, hauling him up toward the fire. Cam got the flashlight, a smooth weighty rod, the metal hot where the newcomer's hand had been. It

felt like magic, like strength. Cam noticed that the man wore a ludicrous pink parka lined with fur and a little fanny pack, like he was some rich old lady out for a stroll. Had he chosen it for its visibility or were the people across the valley short on decent winter gear?

"Water," he said again, but they'd brought none. Stupid.

Spasms hit the man before they reached the fire and he fought them, moaning, trying to get at his pants. They didn't understand and he shit himself bloody.

Manny cried out – "Aaah!" – a sharp noise like a bird in a net. Cam met Sawyer's glinting eyes in the dark. Until the man exhibited symptoms, it had been possible to hope that he really was bringing them doses of a new-generation nano that would serve as a vaccine, protecting their bodies from within, despite his crude armor of goggles and mask. But he was infected.

They knew only what they'd heard from Colorado and what they'd experienced themselves. Sawyer theorized that the nanotech had been a prototype of a medical nature, so obviously made to work inside a body, while others insisted it must be a weapon.

It didn't matter.

The important thing was that the nanos burned out at high altitude, because of a design error or an intentionally engineered hypobaric fuse.

It didn't matter.

The microscopic machines were carbon-based and disassembled warm-blooded tissue to make more of themselves.

Like a super virus, they spread both by bodily fluids and through the air. Like spores, they seemed capable of hibernating outside a host anywhere except in thin atmosphere. And this machine plague had multiplied exponentially until most of the planet was barren of mammals and birds.

Inhaled by a human or animal, inert nanos passed into the bloodstream before reawakening and tended to cluster in the extremities. If they gained entry to a body through breaks in the skin, such infections usually remained localized – but only at first. Even the tiniest contamination multiplied and spread and multiplied again. Again and again. The body would heal if it didn't sustain too much damage, which meant they'd been able to dip into the invisible sea and raid the nearby resort as well as a village of cabins and condos farther down the valley. But if you got too weak, you couldn't make it back up.

Almost as bad, the transition to safe altitude shocked an already-exhausted body with cramps, nausea, migraines, even hemorrhaging and diarrhea, as hundreds of thousands or millions of dead nanos clogged the bloodstream. Cam had seen one woman drop stone dead of a stroke; three cardiac arrests; an exploded retina; and he had never known anyone to stay below the barrier longer than six hours.

The newcomer must have been beneath 10,000 feet for most of a day, running, climbing. He seemed now almost to lose consciousness, his boots dragging as they carried him.

He had been eating well. He was soft in places that they were only hip bones or ribs.

In the sharp white beam of the flashlight, Cam saw blisters peppered over the man's neck and hands, oozing blood and worse. A sudden phantom of ash sloughed off into Cam's face. Maybe he imagined it. Unfortunately their level of medical ability was pathetic. They no

longer possessed even basics like disinfectant or aspirin. Cam had full EMT training, a requirement for all ski patrol, and during the slow winter he'd taught everyone interested—but none of them were up to cutting somebody open to stop internal hemorrhaging. If the newcomer was that bad off, his survival would be a roll of the dice.

Cam hoped the man would live long enough to say why he'd come. He deserved at least to fulfill his mission.

Near the fire the others got in the way, crowding around, Price shouting a formal greeting that he'd obviously rehearsed. "All this time we've been alone! All this time we've waited!" The noisy idiot had been a real estate developer with several rental properties in the area, and if he excelled at anything, it was making presentations.

"Let the man rest," Cam said, and Price immediately took the newcomer's elbow and pulled on him.

"Yes," Price said. "Yes, you can have my bed!"

It made sense, their hut was nearest, but Cam didn't trust Price not to use the situation to his advantage. To make it political. Manny had clearly come to alert Sawyer and Cam on his own rather than being told to do so. They might still be asleep if the kid hadn't had to move out of their hut after bickering with his bedmates all winter—and not for the first time, Cam was glad to have a spy in Price's camp.

He followed everyone to the low door, and Sawyer growled, "Want to crowd in with them?"

"No. That guy's going to sleep forever."

Sawyer bobbed his head once and Cam was struck again by his friend's resemblance to a bullet. Even Manny had more of a beard now that Sawyer had grown obsessive about shaving, nicking his long cheeks with blunt old razors and a knife honed on granite, scraping his prematurely receding hair down to black sandpaper. Cam thought this was wildly fatalistic behavior for someone so intelligent about the ways that nanos got into the body.

He tried to smile. "Let's go warm up, okay?"

Sawyer stared at him, maybe angry, then glanced left and right to see if anyone else had heard.

~ ~ ~

He didn't try to catch up with Sawyer in the cold moonscape between the huts. Dumb way to break an ankle.

There was nothing he could say to change things anyway.

~ ~ ~

Sawyer paused at the door, his face turned up, and Cam spotted the pale dot of a satellite cruising across the rash of stars. He looked away.

The walls of their hut were thick patchwork, like a boys' fort. They'd had only hammers and two heavy-duty Forest Service chain saws to work with. Yet it had withstood the weight of the snow, the force of the wind. The raised cover they'd designed for the hole in the roof

functioned well, keeping their fire dry while allowing at least some of the smoke to escape. Cam had regarded their accomplishment with fierce pride for all of one week before claustrophobia eroded that good feeling.

Half a dozen voices protested as he and Sawyer pushed into the reeking gloom. Barely twenty feet by ten, most of the space was occupied by four wide beds: flat wood frames softened with blankets. Crammed into the remaining area were two holes in the ground used for food storage, a rock fire pit, a woodpile, a pee pot, water containers, backpacks, and half-built box traps and other gear – and eight more unwashed people.

Erin was awake and murmured, "I'm freezing," but Sawyer stamped over to the fire and left her to Cam.

He reveled in the distraction.

They feasted on their own pungent body heat, moving slow to keep the thin, filthy covers airtight, teasing each other into a well-practiced frenzy. Her first. His rough fingers. Her bottom lifted off the hard bed as she rocked her pelvis up, up. Then she drank him, wanting whatever nourishment it was worth. She let him hold her ears and thrust.

They were smarter about pregnancy than most – hands and mouths only. Always only hands and mouths, except for eight times after Sawyer found a partly used box of condoms in a ski locker. They still whispered about those couplings, three heads together, eager, wistful, Erin stretching slick and limber between them.

Yes, sometimes there had been six hands together. A few times. Six hands and nothing more. It was their only escape. Cam's father wouldn't have spoken to him for a thousand years if he found out, but his father was dead. The world was dead. Why should anyone care now?

During the eternity that blizzard winds had forced them inside, however, some of their hut mates hadn't kept their eyes to themselves, the same dumb assholes who'd been unable to fashion a marriage of their own. Jealousy fueled nasty rumors despite everything that Cam and Sawyer had done for them –

"You're hurting me," Erin said. And smiled.

~ ~ ~

Once upon a time Erin D. Shifflet-Coombs must have been gorgeous. Her eyes were the color of gems, Anglo sapphires, and Cam fantasized often of what her rear and long thighs had looked like in tennis shorts, expensive skirts, soft ruffled sweats. If the two of them had gone to his parents' home for dinner, his father would have puffed up like a bullfrog and pressed Cam for details all night with hard, manly nudges.

Arturo Najarro had named his sons Charlie – not Carlos – and Tony, Cameron, and Greg. The boys were sixth-generation American and only Mom spoke more Spanish than *mas cervasa*.

Erin had been a college girl, a junior, majoring in business communications at UC Davis and up with five friends for a little weekday snowboarding. Now she refused to cut her hair, insisting that it helped keep her warm, and her face was permanently lost in a sandy blond tangle. Sleeping beside this mane had probably started Sawyer's new shaving habit.

There was no question that the changes in Erin's appearance had contributed to the change in

her heart. Her jawline was a ripple of old blisters and her thighs were melted, anorexic. Worse, the smile came at the wrong times.

Over breakfast she actually laughed. "But why?"

Cam had brought her to his favorite cliff, favorite because no one else ever came here; they couldn't stand the view; the town nestled along the creek far below looked too much like their past, a square-cornered grid of color amidst the panorama of dusky forest, black lava formations, and dull granite. Typically the two of them ate with Sawyer but he had never come to bed last night and was gone when they woke.

She said, "If this guy doesn't have some kind of antidote – why would he hike over?" The corner of her mouth curled up. "Do you think they threw him out?"

Cam shook his head. "They wouldn't have used all that wood setting so many fires."

Four ravens circled less than a mile to the south, riding a thermal. He watched to see if they'd dip into the valley or come toward his peak, though they never had much meat on them. The last catch had been scabby, molting, no doubt lured below 10,000 feet on a regular basis by swarms of insects.

What remained of the ecosystem was badly out of whack, with only lizards, snakes, frogs, and fish left to whittle down the surging insect populations. On his most recent trip below the barrier, Cam had glimpsed what looked like threads of smog farther down the valley. Bugs. So far the high altitude had kept biting species away, except fleas, and until recently their scavenging parties down the mountainside had been protected by winter cold. No more.

There wasn't any wind today and the morning sun felt strong enough to bare his skin. The sensation was so clean, so erotic, that goose bumps broke out over Cam's entire chest, which Erin mistook as a reaction to cold. He had to tickle her before she'd even roll back her sleeves. Then she pulled off her shirt without looking to see if anyone else was around, which sent a thin chill through him. The huts offered zero privacy, and she had been having sex with two men for most of a year, but Erin Coombs was never an exhibitionist. In fact, she used to brave the elements she hated so desperately just to avoid peeing in the common pot. *The tinkle*, she said. *Everyone looks.*

It upset him that suddenly she seemed uncaring. Too many of them were less than they had been, numbed by experience. Cam felt more attuned to his surroundings and to himself than ever before. He felt raw and aware.

He had grown as pale as a Latino could get, but Erin was pure ivory, except the purplish scars. Cam snuck glances at her body and small breasts as they shared a sticky mush of bone meal, bitter lichen, and gritty specks of the rock from which the orange fungus had been scraped.

When he jammed his bad tooth she kissed him and kissed him, skin on warm skin. It was as good a moment as they'd ever had.

He kept one arm tight around her shoulders as he studied the opposite peak. She watched his face. Finally she gestured across the valley and said, "Take me with you."

