

Chapter 1

Terrible Knowledge

No one is so brave that he is not disturbed by something unexpected.~ Julius Ceasar

The zombie apocalypse occurred right on schedule. Some of the dead walked, but most of them drove, all trying to feed their incessant hunger. These zombies weren't trying to eat brains, though. No one ran in fear, and, much to my personal disappointment, no one started shooting the shambling hordes en masse. People just called it Monday and joined their ranks. This was normal, and I walked among them.

For me, the beginning of my Monday came at a more reasonable time: noon. My shift at Provident-American Bank's credit card customer service call center started at one-thirty in the afternoon. And, of course, I was running late. With my car in the shop, my girlfriend Mara was giving me a ride to work. My reflection in the passenger side rearview mirror showed a slightly disheveled man with shoulder length brown hair and dark stubble on his slightly pointed chin. I wasn't exactly model material, not with hazel eyes that were a little too close together and deep set, but Mara thought I was hot. I tucked my green Polo shirt into the waistband of my black cargo pants as the big gray building loomed into sight ahead of us. Mara drove up to the entry gate as fast as she could safely, and I handed her my ID badge to wave at the little sensor box. It beeped, and she handed it back to me as she gunned the engine on her little Cavalier and sent the vehicle under the rising bar. The roadway up to the rear entrance rolled past, and she braked to a hard stop in front of the doors as the blue numbers on her dashboard clock changed to read "1:29". I leaned across and gave her a kiss before grabbing my backpack and sliding out of the passenger seat.

"I love you, baby," I said as I closed the door.

"Love you, too. Have a good day. I'll see you tonight!" she smiled at me through the open passenger side window before she drove off. No matter how late I was, I always made time for that. My

loafers slapped against the concrete as I bounded to the glass doors and pulled the middle set open to get into the vestibule. It took me three steps to cross to the inner doors and swipe my ID badge against the little black box on the wall, then I was inside the massive lobby and jogging past the pair of blank eyed security guards. Instead of waiting for the elevator, I took the stairs to the second floor and headed through cubicle country to my own personal slice of drudgery. Already the murmur of voices was threatening to lull me into a trance. For the moment, my primary goal was to make it to my cubicle without being seen by a manager. As I slid into my chair and dropped my backpack next to the cubicle wall, I thought I'd made it.

“Hi, Dave. I noticed you were running a little late. Is everything alright?” a cheerful voice came from over my right shoulder as I was logging myself into my station. I gave a silent plea to whatever cubicle gods there might be for patience and stopped entering my password, then turned to face my tormentor. Carol Naismith wasn't even my manager, but she still had the power to make my life difficult. In the rigid environment at P-A Bank, ignoring a manager was considered insubordination, which could mean disciplinary action. Carol was one of that special breed that delighted in using the rules to disadvantage those she felt had an attitude problem. For some reason, the more I tried to toe the line with her, the more certain she was that I had an attitude and needed to be reminded of the error of my ways.

“Everything is fine, Carol. I need to finish logging in so I'm not late.” I turned back to my keyboard and waited for her to move on, but she stayed planted where she was. Until she stopped shoulder surfing, I couldn't enter any passwords, which left me stuck between security protocols, which I took seriously, and Carol, who I didn't take seriously enough. If I ignored her, she'd write me up for a security violation. If I waited for her to go away, I would end up being late, reinforcing her need to lecture me on the importance of time management even as she prevented me from doing what she was telling me I wasn't doing. Insanity in action.

“I just noticed that you've arrived after your shift starts twice this quarter. What can I do to help you make it to work on time?” Her voice dripped with solicitous concern, every word straight from the

manager's playbook. My lips pressed together in a thin line as I fought back the biting remark that was fighting to escape. After a couple of years of corporate double-talk, I was fluent in bullshit, but speaking it still left a bad taste in my mouth. Still, it was the *lingua franca*, as it were, and I had to use it to keep my job.

"As long as I'm logged on within five minutes after my shift starts, I'm on time, Carol. But as long as you're standing behind me, I'm not supposed to enter my password. So, the biggest thing you can do to help me be on time is to let me finish logging in."

"My job is to help you improve," Carol started. She stopped as I stood up and faced her.

"Carol if we're going to have this conversation right now, I need to either let Sue know so she can code me out for the time, or have you do it and you tell her why you're keeping me off the phone." I said it all with a smile that promised she wasn't going to like either option. Dropping my manager's name into the conversation changed the tone completely. I didn't always like how my boss did things, and she was as demanding as they came, but when it came to other people interfering with her team getting the job done, she and I saw eye to eye. Carol's smile didn't falter a bit, but she shook her head slightly and took a step back.

"I'll see if I can schedule you some OTP time a little later on and we can have a one-to-one meeting. Go ahead and get on the phone. Our customers need you," she finished with a smile that wouldn't have melted butter. It only took me a couple of minutes to finish logging on to my workstation.

"Way to shut Carol down," Porsche said quietly from her cubicle across the aisle. She had one of those voices that reminded me of smoky rooms and slow jazz. Barely past drinking age, she was more willowy than skinny, and just fashionable enough to avoid being trendy. I turned my head to give her a lopsided grin. Brown hair and bangs that she could have stolen from Bettie Page framed her face as she leaned out in her chair to flash her infectious smile at me. Today, she wore a long sort of tunic in blue

with a wide belt around her waist and thin stretch pants in gray. She wore a pair of flat-soled ankle boots that zipped up the side.

“Yeah, I wish I could take the credit for that,” I said. A cough broke the gentle chatter of other reps. “How’s our call volume today?”

“Pretty slow,” she said. She sounded a little surprised, and for good reason. A lot of people thought we were closed during the weekend, so if they had a problem, they waited until Monday to swamp us with calls about how we’d ruined their weekend instead of letting us fix the problem right then. It was a pet peeve of mine, and one of the reasons I disliked Mondays. I finished getting myself set up to take calls and plugged my headset into the phone. It was time to make the donuts.

The first couple of hours were filled with a combination of mind-numbing boredom broken up by inane idiocy. Most of our calls were pretty basic stuff, people calling in with questions about charges they didn’t recognize on their bill, disputes with merchants and the occasional plea for us to take a fee off their bill. Most times, we could help them and all was right with their world. Then, there were the idiots. People who didn’t think they should pay for the ton of perks their cards gave them, or who thought we were ripping them off because they couldn’t grasp how compound interest worked. And as if my day weren’t filled with enough Monday goodness, I ended up my first two hours with a call from a guy who threatened to have me fired if I didn’t get him a card design in gray instead of blue so it matched all the other cards in his wallet. It was the kind of first world whining that made me sympathize with homicidal maniacs and serial killers sometimes.

When break time rolled around, I grabbed my phone and headed for one of the unused conference rooms in the middle of the building. It gave me the dual advantage of being away from the mass of cubicles and in one of the few quiet places where I had a view of the outside world. I had two texts waiting. The first one was from a phone number with a 307 area code, the sole area code for the entire state of Wyoming. I only knew of one person who lived there voluntarily: Nate Reid. He was a former Delta Force operator, and the man scared me the way reading HP Lovecraft’s stories alone on a dark and

stormy night did. Talking to him was like listening to the audio version of the Necronomicon: something that came out of his mouth was bound to fall into the category of “things mortal men were not meant to know.” A year ago, he’d opened my eyes to some of the scariest shit I’d ever heard, and ever since then I’d felt like I was one of those bit players in a spy novel the dashing lead characters consults for important bits of information but who’s never in any danger of doing something cool. His text was short and to the point: [Call me. Re: Zoroaster.] I shivered for a second at the code word at the end and checked the next message. It was from Mara.

[Going to Mother Murphy’s. Want anything?] it read. I thought for a moment before sending my response. Mother Murphy’s was our favorite natural foods store, and I was jealous that she was going without me.

[LaraBars, the usual, cashews & jerky spices,] I texted her back. With my metaphorical feet as firmly planted in the arid mental soil of normal as I could manage, I went back to Nate’s text and called the number.

“This is Nate,” he answered cheerfully on the third ring.

“Hey Nate, it’s Dave Stewart,” I said. “I got your message. What’s up?”

“Have you checked the news today?” he asked.

“No, I haven’t had time yet.”

“Take a look at what’s happening on the east and west coasts today. Go as far in either direction as you can.”

“Okay,” I said dubiously. “Anything I need to be looking for? Is it something for the book?”

“You know how they say no news is good news? Not today. I gotta go. Remember our deal.” He hung up. I was left with a lot of questions and very little time to answer them before I was supposed to start dealing with first world problems of the affluent and clueless. There wasn’t a line straight enough to

get back to my desk. Porsche came back as I pulled up an internet browser and started looking for news on the coasts. CNN was my first choice, since it posted links to local news outlets. I followed a link about a missing girl in Lake Tahoe being found safe, and it came up with the previous day's date.

"Researching your next book?" Porsche asked as I started sifting through the website for something more recent.

"Not exactly," I said. After I hit another link, I turned to her while the page loaded. "Working on a ghost writing project," I said after a few moments.

"I so don't get that," she said as she tucked her cell phone into her purse. "You've got two books published and this ghost writing thing. Why are you still working here?"

"Don't let the writing career fool you. On my best day, I'm barely a midlist author. P-A pays the bills so I can keep trying to make it as a writer. Okay, this is officially weird," I said as the page popped up. She came across the aisle and looked over my shoulder at the screen.

"What am I looking at?"

"Notice anything odd?" She shook her head. "Look at the dates. Notice anything out of the ordinary?"

"Everything looks like it's from yesterday," she said after she looked at the list. "What is the page?"

"Breaking news for Channel Nine in Lake Tahoe." She stared at me as I switched to the screen I'd had up before. "And this is for Channel Seven in San Diego. Nothing fresher than Friday. And then for L.A., I got this," I said as I pulled the last page up. The screen showed the news station's logo and banners, but the content showed "Sorry, this page no longer exists."

"That is weird," she admitted. "Wonder what's going on?" I shrugged and gave her a noncommittal sound. She went back to her desk and we both logged back in to take calls. Now that I

knew something odd was going on, I started checking peoples' addresses when they called in. The first three were in Iowa, Colorado and Oklahoma. Then I hit paydirt. The address that came up on the account was for Los Angeles, right in the middle of the 90210 zip code.

"How's the weather in L.A. today?" I asked while I was looking through his statement for a set of golf clubs he'd purchased back in July.

"No clue!" he said enthusiastically. "I'm on Seven Mile Beach on Grand Cayman, enjoying rum and reggae. The only reason I'm calling you is because I was supposed to have these damn clubs sent to me here, and now the dealer's saying he never got paid for the god damn things. I need you to help me find out which one of us screwed up!" I assured him we'd paid the golf club dealer back in July while a feeling of dread crept down my spine. I had no idea why the exception seemed to be proving the theory in my head, but now I was certain that no info was coming out of Los Angeles, San Diego or Lake Tahoe. Between calls I went back to checking local TV stations and newspapers, and kept hitting old news or error pages as far west as Wichita, where the latest update had been posted nearly six hours before. On the one hand, I had to grant that it *was* Wichita. I figured nothing of interest had happened there since Prohibition. But realistically, almost no station or newspaper would go six hours during the day without posting something, even if it wasn't local news. Seeing Wichita going silent worried me more than any major city could. It was only two hundred and fifty miles away from Springfield.

As I sat there and let my brain run through possibility after gruesome possibility, I slowly realized that it had been almost five minutes since I'd taken a call. Heads were starting to pop up over the cubicle walls as people prairie dogged to see if they were the only ones who didn't have calls coming in. Another head popped up and a woman from another team pulled her headset off and headed for the bathrooms. Halfway there, a coughing fit almost doubled her over. Another girl went to help her out as questions flew back and forth about why the calls had slowed down. Of all the people in the room, I was the only one who even had a clue to the answer, and I didn't dare open my mouth about it. No one would believe me. Hell, I barely believed me.

I bet Cassandra had days like this all the time, I thought as I repeated my news search going east. The results in that direction were just as chilling. New York had been silent since Saturday morning, and Washington, D.C. had been off the news radar since Sunday afternoon. So why wasn't anyone else noticing the local news silence? CNN's main feed answered that for me. It was still updating. To my eye, though, the stories it was putting up only reinforced my belief that something was very wrong. All of them were follow up stories that covered things that had happened days ago. There was no breaking news, just recaps and opinions on stories that were days old. On any other day, I wouldn't have caught that, but today I was hyper-aware of the lack of breaking stories.

If the actual news outlets were off the radar, I was left with one other possibility. Conspiracy websites. I checked the ones I could remember the websites for off the top of my head first. Beyond Top Secret was down, and so was Shadownet. The sites weren't just down; it was as if they had never existed. If anyone else would have spotted the gaps in the news, or even been able to tell the rest of the world what was going on, it would have been the deliberately shadowy figures who ran those sites.

I stood up and looked out the plate glass window and felt my gut clench at what I saw. Cars were starting to back up on Highway 60.

No news is not good news, I remembered Nate's vague warning as I pulled my cell phone out of my drawer. Texting at our desks was frowned upon by the management at Provident, but I figured that pissing off a suit in Maryland wasn't going to be a real serious concern for much longer. Still, I kept the phone under the edge of the desk as I tapped the keys as fast as I could,

[No calls incoming. No news from Wich KS & Nash KY, tinfoil hat sites completely off grid.] I sent. Noise from the far side of the cubicle farm caught my attention. A Greene County deputy in a gray uniform and one of the security guards in a black blazer flanked the site's on-duty nurse. The deputy looked like he was barely old enough to buy the gun on his belt, much less wear the badge on his chest. I half expected the nurse to introduce him as her son and tell us it was bring your kids to work day.

“I need anyone who’s traveled to the following states in the past month to come with me,” he said. “Nevada, Arizona, California, Washington, Oregon, New York, Massachusetts or Florida. Anyone who’s been to any of those states, come up here now.” His voice was just a little too high to take seriously, even when he put his hand on the butt of his pistol. Across the aisle from me, Porsche sank into her chair with a smirk on her face. I dropped back into my chair as a couple of people left their desks. The deputy’s face went slack with terror as they got close. It wasn’t until the nurse stepped forward to talk to them that he got some of his swagger back.

“I know that guy. He’s a total dick,” Porsche said. I chuckled at the comment, but my fingers went back to my phone’s keypad.

[Police just asked for people who traveled to E or W coast,] I sent. Seconds later, my phone buzzed in my hand.

[NE1 sick?] Nate’s message read.

[A few]

[Get out. Avoid crowds. Bravo Oscar.] My heart nearly stopped when I read the words. I’d been expecting them, but not today. Somehow, I thought I’d have more warning.