

## PROLOGUE

### Year 2005

The light rain fell, and the moon wasn't visible because of the heavy cloud cover. The weather was one of the many reasons why they'd picked tonight for this mission. A long row of streetlights illuminated the sidewalk, and the usually busy road had minimal traffic at this time of night. The bright sign by the building read *North East Regional Hospital*. About a hundred yards south of the sign was a narrow paved drive. There, a smaller unlit sign read *Authorized Traffic Only*. This drive led to a dark alcove between the original hospital and an addition that was added on in the late '70s. This area was restricted and unlit because no one wanted to see where the hospital kept the dumpsters. There were several hedges and a few ornamental trees in place to help partially obscure the drive.

Without warning, deep in the alcove, a neon blue light began to form between two dumpsters. It started about three feet off the ground and quickly grew to about six-feet high and two-and-a-half-feet wide. As soon as it reached full size, a medium height woman with an athletic build stepped out of the portal and into the alcove. The light disappeared. During the six seconds the portal existed, there was a connection between our time period and another, which wouldn't exist again for almost a hundred years.

The woman stumbled, grabbed hold of the dumpster, and used it to balance herself. She took several deep breaths to help her focus, and then withdrew a small device from the pocket of the light blue hospital scrubs she wore and pressed it to her neck. She grimaced because of the brief moment of pain she felt where the device had touched her neck. Then she relaxed as a

warm feeling passed through her body. She returned the advanced auto-injector to her pocket and waited for a few seconds as the four medications took effect. She could already feel the analgesic and powerful stimulant were working, and she started walking toward the sidewalk. The anti-nausea drug seemed to be helping, but not nearly as well. The fourth medication she couldn't detect, but she was told it would slow down the lethal cellular collapse that was destroying her body.

She knew she had to get moving. The auto-injector held only two more doses and she needed to accomplish her mission before the final one wore off. She exited the alcove and moved to the sidewalk. Turning right, she strode toward the main hospital entrance with growing concern as she advanced. Her nausea seemed to be getting worse with each step and she could already feel her strength fading. Fortunately, she knew the layout of the hospital, having studied it well before her mission. The main entrance was just ahead and only a few other people were heading in the same direction she was.

The woman passed through the glass sliding door, and a security guard sat at a desk just inside. She turned the ID tag that hung from her scrubs so the guard could see the North East Region logo, and kept walking. The ID bore the name Abby Russell. That had been a joke by those who'd fabricated the card. Abby Russell was the name of the last person to ever serve as President of the United States.

"Thanks. Have a good shift," the guard said.

The dying woman continued to walk, thinking how easy it had been. She knew the minimal levels of security were a primary reason for using this time period for the mission. She made her way to the bank of elevators, double checking her knowledge against the sign, which said Maternity was on the fourth floor. Once the elevator door closed, she leaned back against

the wall as the car started to move. She closed her eyes, resting, and thankful she was alone. The pain continued to increase. Her head hurt the worst, but her gut and extremities also ached and the pain was getting worse rapidly.

The elevator doors opened, and with considerable effort, she forced herself to walk out of the elevator car and down the hall. She knew she wasn't walking straight and even felt herself stumbling, but she needed to keep going. She hoped no one would see her and think she was intoxicated. Per the plan, it was still too early for another injection. If she took them too soon, she wouldn't be able to make it back to the portal and home.

Casually she passed the nurse's station, noting one man seated working on a computer. She smiled, relieved to see the research had been correct and her scrubs matched his. At least her clothing wouldn't draw attention.

Next, down the hall was the infant room. Inside were twelve bassinets, only six of which had babies in them. A female nurse was in there, changing the diaper on one of the infants. Neither of the staff had paid any attention to the stranger, who purposefully traversed the corridor. At the end of the hall, she turned left and found what she was looking for—a door marked *Utility*. She struggled but managed to open the door, her dexterity failing, then stepped inside and let it close behind her. After removing the auto-injector from her pocket, she again pressed it to the side of her neck. The warm feeling returned, and so did her strength and alertness. The pain was somewhat diminished but still significant.

The room contained bins for dirty linens, and partially full trash cans, as well as cleaning supplies. She moved to the utility sink and inserted the stopper, took two sealed packets out of her pocket, ripped them open, and dumped the powdered contents into the sink. She raised the top to her scrubs and took from her belt two small bottles that she'd attached on either side. Each

was about eight ounces. She unscrewed the caps, took a deep breath, and poured the green liquid over the powder. The effect was immediate. Harmless white chemical smoke began filling the utility closet. She turned and left the room, making sure to leave the door ajar to allow the pungent chemical smoke to fill the hall. She headed back toward the room with the newborns. Just before getting there, she stepped into an unoccupied patient room. She moved into the shadows and waited. After two full minutes, her anxiety started to grow. The waiting was taking much too long. The pain was back, almost as bad as right before her last dosage, and her thinking was getting fuzzy.

Eventually, she could smell the smoke as it worked up the hall. She heard concerned voices approaching and watched the woman and then the man hurried past her hiding spot, heading for the source of the smoke. As soon as it seemed safe, she stepped out of the room, looking left and right, then crossed over to the nursery, where she removed from her belt a device the size of a deck of playing cards and held it at the card reader. The door buzzed open. Defeating the primitive electronic security had been one of the simplest parts of the mission.

She stepped in and read the names on the bassinets, looking for Devin Baker. The first name she saw belonged to a cute infant girl named Tasha Doller. She recognized this name. Tasha had been the subject of an earlier mission. Unfortunately, Tasha died in a drowning accident in her early teens, before she could ever be of use. Devin was next to Tasha and he was sleeping peacefully. The trespasser quickly unwrapped him, removed a new single dose auto-injector from her other pocket, and pressed it to his leg. As rapidly as her shaking hands would allow, she re-wrapped the now-crying infant and left the room. She stepped out and strode to the elevator, slipping the expended auto-injector into her pocket. The elevator arrived and she got in and injected herself for the third and final time. With this injection, the improvement was

minimal.

As she exited the elevator, she removed two slips of paper from her pocket. One said *succeeded*, and the other read *failed*. She crumpled up the one that indicated failure and threw it in a trash can she passed and returned the other to her pocket. The planners knew she wouldn't be in any condition to write a note at this point in the suicide mission.

She approached the exit with almost no strength left and was close to vomiting. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the guard watching her as she walked. No doubt he could tell she wasn't feeling well.

"Going home already?"

She gave him a weak smile. "I'm not sure what I came down with, but it hit me fast."

"Well, I hope you're feeling better."

Rather than answer, she gave him a slight wave. She exited, the crisp night air feeling good. She made it to the sidewalk before she vomited. She could see and taste the blood. Her stomach felt a little better and she tried to increase her pace, but her coordination was failing and she tripped and landed face down on the sidewalk. With extreme effort, she used a light pole for balance and managed to make it back to her feet and continued toward the drive that led to the dumpsters.

Feeling something like a tear on her cheek, she wiped it away and noticed it was blood. Bleeding from the eyes and nose were possibilities she knew about. She entered the alcove, keeping one hand on the wall of the old building to help steady her balance, and struggled along. After making it to the dumpster, she leaned her back against it and took out of her pocket the last item she was carrying. It was shaped similar to an egg, but smaller. Dropping it would be a big problem because she didn't think she could pick it up and make it back to a standing position.

The device looked solid but was actually two pieces. She twisted the top of the egg-shaped device, ninety degrees clockwise, and it lit up. It was yellow for about five seconds and then turned green. As soon as she saw green, she squeezed it with all the remaining strength she had and felt a click from inside it. The neon blue light reappeared and grew to the size of a door.

As her final act, she stumbled through the portal.

The blue light disappeared.