

Chapter 1

The first known case of the disease struck at 6:43 PM on April 30th. The sickness was named habiti, and it spread like wildfire across the earth. The only catch to the illness is that people can't catch it from family members—but who knows how long even that will last.

At first, they thought it was three separate diseases. But eventually they realized that it was only one sickness that was slowly taking control of the whole world.

And the people who became sick—oh, they were never the same. Some snarled like wild animals and attacked everyone with a thirst for blood that no one had ever seen before. Others acted tame, purring and walking on all fours, barking and meowing.

But that wasn't the worst part.

Some of them... some of them stared at you with blank, unknowing eyes. They ate and drank when they needed to, but when they spoke, it was just gibberish. And when they smiled, it was a mad smile, as if something inside them was shattered beyond repair.

I am Alexis Thret. I am thirteen years old. My two-year-old brother is sick.

I wake up to feel something heavy on my chest. Half-asleep, I assume it's my cat, Mindy. I hear purring, and I feel the vibrations thrumming through my chest. It's oddly comfortable—until I open my eyes and see who's on top of me.

It's Kaden.

He thinks he's a cat, and there *is* something oddly catlike about the way he has wrapped himself up into a tiny ball. I sit up, and from my experience with Mindy, I assume my brother will wake up and get off me in an instant. Instead, he falls onto my lap like a ragdoll, limbs splayed out. If it weren't for his light breathing, I'd think he was dead.

And in the dark, gloomy parts of my mind, Kaden *is* dead, replaced by this imposter.

But I'm determined to hold out for him, waiting for a cure to habiti. I am determined to cure Kaden, no matter the cost.

I'm determined to cure a boy I've known for two years, for whom I did everything and expected nothing in return.

And now I'm curing his incurable disease.

No matter what I think, however, I feel affection when I look at Kaden. And an unrelenting wave of guilt, as if there was anything I could've done.

I wince, thinking of George, Kaden's best friend. They were thick as thieves, so when George caught the disease, I knew it wouldn't be long before Kaden followed suit.

And the fact that I could've said something, that *I knew* still gnaws at me. But I know I could've told anyone and everyone about it and it wouldn't have made a difference. No difference at all, nothing.

Guilt, as I am quickly learning, is illogical. No matter what I tell myself, it is stubborn and strong.

I gently push Kaden off me and get dressed as fast as I can, shoving my phone into my pocket before returning to my bed. My stomach emits a faint growl but I ignore it. I need to do something about Kaden.

And my little brother does not move. That replaces the guilt with panic. Panic not for myself, but for this small, helpless creature spread-eagle on my bed.

I roll Kaden into his back, carefully, as if he's a statue made of glass. I unconsciously expect his skin to be cold and clammy like a corpse's, but it is soft and warm. I silently reprimand myself for daring to compare Kaden to anything dead. He is still alive, and there is still hope.

I hear a door creak open and look over just in time to see a dark gray paw reach in the gap between my bedroom door and the wall. The door is pushed open, revealing a Siamese cat with startling blue eyes. Mindy struts in like she's on a catwalk and jumps onto my bed. She turns to stare at Kaden then freezes.

The two have been close since Kaden turned, and I'm grateful. But this is odd.

For a moment, there is silence. I don't dare move. The intensity of Mindy's stare is almost human.

Then she begins hissing. Claws unsheathed, she raises a paw, flinching back from Kaden. Yet there's something about her that makes me realize that Mindy isn't angry.

She's afraid.

I put a tentative hand to Kaden's eyelid. I take a deep breath and push it up, for just a moment.

What I see is not the blue of Kaden's irises or even white.

Kaden's eyes have turned a piercing yellow.

Chapter 2

I scramble back like I was burned. Even in my panic, I'm careful not to hit my brother in my panic.

Is this a side effect of habiti? Is Kaden going to transform into a four-legged, fur-covered creature?

Or worse.

The endless possibilities rampage through my head. Monsters. With goat horns or fangs like saber-tooth tigers, some still Kaden's size, others bigger than any human, but all have one thing in common: their eyes. As yellow as a cartoon sun, with black slits for pupils.

Mindy is clawing at the door. It must've closed after she came in, and I rush to it, turning the handle as fast as I can. I need to escape. There is a primal urge for me to run. I feel almost childish, but that doesn't stop me.

Mindy is fast. *Extremely* fast. Certainly faster than a thirteen-year-old, even if her veins are filled with adrenaline, her muscles fueled by pure fear.

So Mindy is downstairs in a flash, but I'm still running fast, so fast it's like the world is almost trying to bend around me. But I just want to get away.

Away from my room.

Away from the horror inside.

I run down the spiral staircase, the wooden steps freezing my feet, a familiar sensation that almost calms me. And then what greets me downstairs is a scene so *normal* that I freeze for a second, watching Mindy knead the couch, calmly.

My dad and mom are both watching the television intently. After habiti started, the news had become more and more important. Especially after school closed. Especially after, barely a day ago, my parents told me it was too dangerous to go outside unless necessary.

They're watching the television intently. I can see the flickering lights reflected in their eyes.

I sometimes wondered how long it would be until the whole world went full apocalypse mode. How long until the world went crazy? How long until no one was left?

How would I know? I haven't gone outside the house in almost a week.

Although at first people made efforts to stay in touch, for online classes, they'd slowly stopped. I was completely cut off from the outside world except for the news. For all I knew all the world had died.

The thought made me feel odd. Hollow.

I quickly rush to the couch, sitting next to Mindy. She lowers herself to the couch with the dignity of a queen. I scratch her under her chin, earning a purr.

"Hi," my mother says quietly. She glances at me, smiling for a second, then she's focused on the news.

I debate whether to tell my parents what happened, but I can't quite force the words out of my throat—and I want to hear what's happening.

The news anchor, Charles (who hasn't aged a bit in the ten years I can remember watching him—the only difference is the amount of makeup caked on his face) is talking about habiti. *Of course*. That's all anyone's interested in. It's odd, listening to the man who had talked about politics and global warming suddenly telling you that habiti's spreading, you could catch it, and no one really knows what it does to you. Of course, he's not saying any of that outright, but he's laying out the facts and letting you see the conclusion yourself.

The screen cuts to a woman in a hospital. This is where the sick go when there's no family to take care of them. There's a room behind her with three of the sick, separated by curtains. They're all fast asleep.

Just like Kaden, just like Kaden, my mind sings.

A newswoman is standing calmly in front of all of this. Her dark features are relaxed, despite the chaos behind her. I can just barely make out a glass window, separating her from the infected. She's holding a microphone, and I swear her hand is shaking.

"Doctors fear that this is the final stage of habiti," she says in a voice that's a little *too* calm. "We don't know if the disease kills its victims yet, but the sick here are still alive. This sleeping spell has also affected all of them, even though they caught habiti at various times"

Then Charles is back. I notice his throat bob momentarily before he says, "As Starr explained, the doctors are doing all they can to wake up the sick, but unfortunately—"

Suddenly the screen cuts to the reporter (Starr, was that her name?) Through the glass I can see the hospital room again, and the three patients are waking up. The

patient on the right sits up in the bed, and I realize she's my age, maybe a little younger. She bares her teeth, and my heart sinks. An orderly who I hadn't noticed before—they had been sitting in a chair just out of the camera's view—rushes to her. And... hugs her?

But my attention is ripped away from the screen.

"Kaden," my mom gasps. She stands up immediately but I grab her arm.

"Mom," I say, and she turns to look at me. "There are sunglasses in my nightstand drawer. If his eyes. Are, you know..." I can't even finish my sentence.

My mother looks at me, and although I can't read minds I know she understands me.

Then I wait, hoping that Kaden is safe.

Chapter 3

I feel something wet tickling my eyes. I brush the tears away and focus on the TV.

Starr keeps talking, While the woman talks something slams into her. She's knocked down and out of frame, and a dark blur obscures the camera for a moment. I hear the camera man yelling and the screen goes black, but I can still hear.

It's like all of the movies I've watched, but this is real. It couldn't be staged; the screaming sounds so real.

Then we're back to Charles, who looks nervous, an emotion that I just now realize he never expressed before habiti.

“This is urgent. Starr, our reporter at the hospital, has been attacked by a loose infected patient. Luckily, all other sick people displaying violent tendencies—” I cringe at how he phrases it. *Sick people displaying violent tendencies*. It seems so tame, yet they are not tame at all. “—are still restrained. But if you do see anyone who may be infected outside of a hospital or home, *run and call the police*.”

Then it cuts to commercials.

“Alexis.”

It’s my mom. I turn to my right, to see that she’s holding Kaden, his eyes a beautiful, wonderful blue.

I run to them, scooping my little brother into my arms. I grunt at the weight, but I smile at him. He stares at me, his mouth just slightly opened.

Then Kaden lets out a small meow and my smile freezes before disappearing. He’s not cured, but...

“At least you’re alright,” I say to him. “For now, that’s all we need.”

Chapter 4

When I wake up, I feel a sense of intense déjà vu. I look down at my feet, where there’s a heavy weight on my chest. But it’s Mindy, fast asleep. Until I try to sit up.

I immediately feel a small but sharp pain—and the Siamese’s eyes are now open.

She holds up her paw, claws unsheathed.

“Ah, my lady,” I say, a bit of humor in a dark world. “How many of my shirts must you kill?”

Mindy rises, slowly and regally, then jumps off me.

I suddenly realize something is wrong. But what?

Confused, I prop myself up on my elbows. Then I realize what it is. All I can hear is Mindy walking on the wood floor. My parents are *always* up by now.

I look at my phone’s clock. 11 AM on Sunday?

I feel like a little kid who can’t find her parents, but there’s no crowd here. I’m alone. With my cat.

“Oh my god *Kaden*,” I gasp. I start running toward my parents’ room, then throw the door open.

No one’s there.

“Mom? Dad?” I call.

Silence.

“*Mom! Dad!*”

Nothing.

I run out of the room, my feet slapping desperately against the wood. I run down the stairs. Now the *déjà vu* is overwhelming. This already happened.

But yesterday I had found something normal downstairs. Now there was nothing.

Then I hear a growl. Coming from the kitchen.

And I know that little Kaden could’ve never made a sound like that.

Through a hallway, turn left—

“Mom...?” I say.

In response my mother jumps off the counter and onto a chair then descends to the floor, cocking her head at me.

My dad is crouching in front of a stool, staring at me through narrowed eyes.

Eyes.

Their eyes—

My dad's eyes are a solid brown that's so dark it's almost black. My mom has giant pupils with a brown dusting over the whites of her eyes. It's beautiful but freaky.

If you see a bear, I think, hold up your arms. Make yourself look bigger. Make yourself look like you're too much of a bother to attack.

It feels ridiculous, but I raise both my arms, making claws out of my hands, and growl. It's like a silly game of pretend, but my parents both back away.

Then I notice it: the blank white door on the opposite side of the room.

Okay, I tell myself. I can edge over there slowly. Or...

I take a step toward the door, making sure my foot comes down *hard*. The sole of my foot immediately burns but I continue the heavy footfalls, rotating my body so I can always see my parents. Neither one of them dares move, and I grasp the handle. It is *so* hard not to bolt through the door. Instead, I slowly open the door, step in, and close it without looking behind me.

There's Kaden, curled up on a cat bed. He looks so small and delicate, but I feel an irrational fear for my life.

And his eyes... I already know what his eyes will look like.

"Kaden," I say quietly.

But nothing could prepare me for when he opens his eyes. I've seen cats with yellow eyes, but these are so much more vibrant than those; they're an intense yellow with just the slightest hint of amber around the pupils. They're breathtaking.

I hate them.

I want to tear Kaden's eyes out and demand his old ones back.

It takes me a moment to realize my hands are trembling. No, not trembling; that implies something caused by fear. *Shaking* would be more appropriate, as if there's a monster inside of them, trying to escape.

Then he closes his eyes and the fight goes out of me. I force myself to breathe deeply for a few seconds.

I have to get out of here.

I can't stay with my parents.

Okay, I think. If I'm leaving I need to bring Kaden.

A flash of guilt goes through me. I'm going to have to leave Mindy behind. Between my little brother and my cat, my brother wins.

"Sleep tight, Kaden," I whisper. "We've got a lot to do."

Chapter 5

Habiti turns humans into animals. And sometimes they become violent--or still stay so close to human, but still lack the power of speech.

What if it can work the other way?