***Thursday May 26***

Alex walked down from his home to 42nd Street Thursday morning around the time he would have left for school, far earlier than he needed to, but he couldn’t risk missing the bus.

He hadn’t told Bri or Julie, pretending instead that he was going to school. If he found Mami, then he’d tell them. He wasn’t sure what he’d say if she wasn’t there. They could keep on hoping then, but he hadn’t figured out whether that was a good thing or not.

New York was no longer a ghost town, but there were few signs of life. The busses, police cars, fire engines, and ambulances drove swiftly, no trucks, cars, or mobs of pedestrians to slow them down.

Most of the stores were still closed, their steel gates locked and protecting whatever had survived the days and nights of looting. The further downtown he got, the more police officers he saw. They looked aimless and bored, as if they were uncertain what they were protecting.

It was a pleasant day, but no one smiled as they walked by. Alex realized he heard almost no conversation. People walked because there was no other way to get to their destination. Eyes were downcast, as though no one wanted to acknowledge what other people might be feeling.

He could see the Empire State Building in the distance, and it reassured him to know it was still there. The Statue Of Liberty apparently was gone. He’d been there once on a class trip. Never gone to the Empire State Building though. He was glad he’d still have the chance.

He hadn’t felt like eating breakfast, and although there was still plenty of food left, he’d started to get nervous about when it would run out and what they’d do when it did. But the walk made him hungry, and it was then he realized there weren’t any street vendors selling pretzels or hot dogs, roasted nuts or souvlaki. Strange to see a New York where you couldn’t get a complete meal on the street.

When he got to the Port Authority building, he saw a vendor on the street corner, selling bags of nuts. The line had to be fifty people long. Not worth it, he decided. He’d find something after he got back.

The vendor’s line only added to the chaos. It seemed like all the people left in Manhattan were fighting to get into the bus terminal. They dragged small children with them, or dogs, or cats in carriers. They carried suitcases, backpacks, duffel bags, all crammed to the point of bursting. Maybe some of them were going to friends or families that lived more inland. Maybe some of them were simply going wherever a bus might take them.

There were plenty of cops there, and Alex went to one, to ask where the busses to Yankee Stadium left from.

“Around the corner,” the cop said. “You got a reservation?”

Alex nodded.

“You ready for it?” the cop asked. “It’s hell up there.”“I don’t know,” Alex admitted. “I’m looking for my mother. We haven’t heard from her since it happened.”“Good luck kid,” the cop said. “Hey, you over there! Watch it!”

Alex walked around the corner. There were several cops there, telling people where to stand and giving them handouts. Alex walked over to one and said he had reservations for the 11:30 bus.

“That line over there,” the cop said, and gave him a handout.

Even though Alex was early, the line for his bus was already thirty people long. People stood there, shuffling their feet, reading the handout, going through their bags. A few had something to eat. Most look terrified, or angry, or simply miserable.

Alex looked down at the sheet of paper he’d been handed.

**YOU MUST FOLLOW THESE RULES**

***1.*** *Do not attempt to get on any bus other than the one you have a reservation for. Note its number when you board.*

***2.*** *At no time may you leave to go off by yourself.*

***3.*** *You will be given a numbered ticket when you board the bus. You must show that ticket to be admitted to Yankee Stadium.*

***4.*** *Once inside the stadium, you will walk in single file up the first row. At the end of the row, you will make a right turn and walk down the next row. You will make a left turn and walk up the next row. You must walk up and down every row in the exact position you entered.*

***5.*** *Look carefully at every body. Pay particular attention to jewelry, as that may be the best way to identify the person you’re searching for.*

***6.*** *If you find the person you are looking for, or if you recognize another person, do not stand by the body. Keep walking until you see a Police Identification Booth. Go there and inform the officer of the approximate location of the identified body. You may only return to the body you’ve identified if you are accompanied by an official. Any attempt to return on your own will result in your ejection from Yankee Stadium.*

***7.*** *If you are searching for more than one person, and you identify one of the people you are looking for, make a note of where that body is, and keep your place in line. You will not be allowed to return to the line once you leave it. Only when you have completed your search, should you leave the line to go to a Police Identification Booth.*

***8.*** *If you see a person in need of physical assistance, keep your place in line, but notify a police officer at the first opportunity. Do not stop to help the person in need of assistance.*

***9.*** *No food or drink is allowed in Yankee Stadium. All bags must be left on the bus. Anyone carrying anything into Yankee Stadium will be ejected.*

***10.*** *If you find the person you are looking for, you will remain at Yankee Stadium to fill out the appropriate paperwork. If you do not, you must leave on the bus you took to get there. You will not be allowed on any other bus.*

**THESE RULES ARE FOR YOUR OWN SAFETY.**

**THEY MUST BE OBEYED.**

Alex thought the rules were stringent, but they made sense, and he was relieved that what was called for was so carefully spelled out. He liked rules. Carlos was always trying to get away with something, or at least he used to be like that before enlisting, but Alex found that rules imposed a structure, and he preferred that. He always did better when he knew exactly what was expected of him.

He wished they hadn’t kept referring to bodies though. He couldn’t stand the idea of Mami being nothing more than an anonymous body.

He pictured Mami then, sitting at the table, working on her homework, while her children worked on theirs. How proud they all were when she got her GED. He thought of her at the stove, cooking their dinner. He remembered once when he’d been sick with fever, and Mami had pressed a cold wash cloth against his forehead and held his hand until he’d fallen asleep. He envisioned her in church, shushing them, while Father Franco gave his sermon.

For a week he’d refused to think of her, and now he was overwhelmed by a thousand different images. What if he found Mami at Yankee Stadium? What if he didn’t?

He realized then that everybody in line for the 11:30 bus, everybody waiting for whatever bus, was as overwhelmed with thoughts and memories of the people gone from their lives as he was. No wonder no one was talking. The only protection from grief was silence and rules.

Eventually they began boarding their bus. Number 22, he noted. He gave his name to the bus driver and was handed a card that said 33. He took an aisle seat, next to a heavy set woman who kept squeezing a packet of tissues.

“You all have your tickets?” the bus driver asked before they began the journey.

Everyone said yes.

“And you have the list of rules?”

Yes, they all responded.

“Be sure to follow the instructions,” the bus driver cautioned them. “Stay in place once you get there. God go with you.”

Alex looked around the bus. He was the youngest person there, but a few seemed to be in their early twenties. Since only one person from a family was allowed to go, the passengers on the bus were all strangers to each other. Several of them were praying. Others stared straight ahead, or looked out the window. A few had their eyes closed, and a handful were crying.

Alex stared out the window at the apartments on Riverside Drive, as the bus whizzed up the West Side Highway. The buildings looked substantial, unlikely ever to erode. As they drove past 88th Street, he resisted the temptation to demand to be let off. He knew what he had to do, what rules he had to follow.

The bus pulled into its parking space and the people were told to get off the bus in an orderly fashion, making sure to have their tickets in hand and to remember where their bus was located and that its number was 22. Alex got off and displayed his ticket to the officer standing there. From the outside, Yankee Stadium seemed much as it always had. He remembered the half dozen or so times he’d gone to a game with Papi and Carlos, sitting in the bleachers, worrying, shouting, eating, thrilled to be there with his father and big brother. One game, he was nine or ten, the score was tied in the bottom of the 11th and one of the Yankees hit a walk off grand slam. He’d felt like he’d witnessed history, he’d been so excited.

“Stay in line. Don’t wander off,” the officer said. “Stand in line. Don’t wander off. If you leave your place, you will not be allowed in. Stand in line. Don’t wander off.”

Alex stood at attention, as though his posture proved he wasn’t the sort who would ever wander off.

The line inched its way closer to the entrance. Two women walked from the head of the line to the foot, one holding a pot of menthol scented gel, the other face masks and sickness bags.

“Rub the gel under your nose,” the woman instructed them. “It will help with the odors.”

“Wear your face mask at all times,” the other woman said. “Put it on now. Only take it off if you feel the need to vomit. Use the bag, and put the mask back on. Do not leave the bag on the ground, but carry it with you until you leave.”

The menthol smell was strong. People looked strange wearing face masks, like a convention of surgeons had accidentally assembled in front of the ballpark. Alex thought of when Mami had shown them a face mask and told them she’d be expected to wear one as an operating room technician. If she hadn’t been ambitious to improve her family’s lot, she wouldn’t have gotten the training and the hospital in Queens wouldn’t have called for her to come in because of an emergency and she wouldn’t have taken the 7 train to Queens and Alex wouldn’t be standing in front of Yankee Stadium with menthol scented gel rubbed beneath his nose.

“Remember to stay in line at all times,” a voice over a bullhorn called out. “If you see someone in need of physical assistance, inform the next available officer. Do not leave the line. Leaving the line will result in your ejection. Keep walking. Only leave the line if you can identify the body of the person you’re looking for. Look at the person ahead of you in line and the person behind you. Don’t ever stray from those people.”

Alex did as he was told and looked at the man ahead of him and the woman behind him. The woman behind him wore sunglasses. The man ahead of him was balding.

The door opened. “Stay in line! Stay in line!” the officer shouted. Everyone shuffled forward, staying in line. They walked through the entrance, down the corridor, and finally down the flights of stairs that led to the playing field.

The noise was what accosted him first, a cacophony of screams and sobs. He could make out some cursing, some praying, but mostly it was just the sound of agony.

Then came the smells, unlike anything he’d ever known, a sickening combination of vomit, body odor, and rotting meat. The menthol covered the stench slightly, but still he gagged, and he was relieved that he hadn’t eaten all morning. He could taste the smell as he inhaled the decomposing flesh.

It was a scene unlike any Alex could have imagined. If he looked up, it was Yankee Stadium, filled with empty seats. But if he looked at eye level, it was hell.

Alex made the sign of the cross and prayed for strength. All around the playing field were corpses, lying head to toe in neat rows with just space enough for one person to walk between them. How many bodies were there? Hundreds? Thousands?

Some of the bodies had clothes on, others were nude. The naked ones were covered with sheets. All their arms were out, their hands prominently displayed, their rings gleaming in the sunlight. Their faces were swollen, many to the point of unrecognizability. They were covered with flies, millions of flies, their buzzing providing a white noise background to the screams and the wails. His hell was a fly’s heaven, he thought.

“Stay in line! Stay in line! Leaving the line will result in your ejection!”

Alex longed to be ejected, to be bodily lifted from Yankee Stadium, from the Bronx, from New York, from Earth itself, to be slingshotted into the soothing void of space. He focused instead on looking for the Police Identification Booths. There were dozens of them, with police officers and medical personnel stationed there. He saw priests also, and people he assumed were ministers and rabbis and Muslim clergy.

Staying firmly in place, Alex began the death stroll. Most of the bodies couldn’t possibly be Mami. They were black or white or Asian. They were too young or too old, too fat or too thin. Their hair was gray or white or blonde, too short or too long. One woman, hardly more than a girl, had green and purple hair. One was chemotherapy bald. Another was pregnant. Their eyes were open, and they stared up at the moon that had killed them.

Sometimes the line stopped short, when someone ahead of them needed to check a face, a body, a piece of jewelry. A scream would pierce the air as a loved one was found. A woman several people behind Alex cried, “Holy Mother Of God!” and he assumed she’d found who she’d come to look for, but she stayed in line until they made the next turn when she went off to the nearest Police Identification Booth.

Alex felt a sharp sting he was stunned to identify as envy. He hated himself for feeling that way. No matter what, it would be better not to find Mami there. As long as she was only gone, there was a chance their prayers for her return would be answered. But if she were lying there…

“Stay in line! Stay in line!” Twice Alex saw women he thought might be his mother. Something about the shape of their faces, the tone of their skin, stopped him short. But one woman had a diamond engagement ring, and the other wore a Jewish star pendant. When he looked more carefully at them, he realized they looked nothing like Mami, not really. Mami would laugh if she knew Alex had mistaken a woman with a Jewish star for her. He tried to remember the sound of her laughter, but it was impossible. He told himself he’d hear her laughing again, that it was all right not to be able to remember what the sound of her laughter was like just then.

By the time he’d finished the march around Yankee Stadium, two other people from his bus had left the line to go to the Police Identification Booths. The rest walked out in the same order they’d come in. They tossed their sickness bags and face masks into the appropriately labeled bins. No one spoke as they showed their tickets and boarded Bus 22. Eventually the bus pulled out. One woman had left her Bible on her seat, and she picked it up and began reading it, her lips moving silently. A dozen or more people wept. A man mumbled something Alex assumed was Hebrew. One woman laughed hysterically. The woman sitting next to Alex pulled tissue after tissue out of its packet, tearing each one methodically to shreds.

God save their souls, Alex prayed. God save ours. It was the only prayer he could think of, no matter how inadequate it might be. It offered him no comfort, but he repeated it unceasingly. As long as he prayed he didn’t have to think. He didn’t have to remember. He didn’t have to decide. He didn’t have to acknowledge he was entering a world where no one had laid out the rules for him to follow, a world where there might not be any rules left for any of them to follow.