

**BLACK DEATH  
IN A NEW AGE:**

**A Novel**

*Kathy T. Kale*

Black Death in a New Age: a novel

First published April 22, 2003

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Second Edition Published by  
Pollux Press,  
Fort Pierce, Florida

ISBN 9780983686651

## DISCLAIMER

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to those who helped in this endeavor. This book was made possible by the support of my husband. Joan Baxter's guidance was also instrumental. I am grateful to my parents for their endless enthusiasm for my projects. I am especially appreciative of my children, Will and Luc, who inspire hope for a better future and a world that will know peace. Thanks to Mark Springle, Ray Farrell, and Jan Dawson for editing the manuscript, Also many thanks to my proof readers: Ann Marie Montgomery, Mary Ferguson, Claudette Wingell, Ann Viljoen, Penny Baehr and Ron Griffin. Thanks also to Mimi Alonso of Arista Graphics for the cover design. To vaccine developers, my apologies for making complex research look easy. This is truly fiction. The cover photo is from CDC/ Science Source, and shows plague bacteria, *Yersinia pestis*, illuminated by direct fluorescent antibodies in a light micrograph at 40X magnification. In memory of those affected by the August 1998 bombing of the American Embassy in Nairobi, Kenya.



For Bill





Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars...

—Martin Luther King Jr.



APRIL 24<sup>TH</sup>



## CHAPTER ONE

On the Friday before embarking on the grandest adventure of his life, Dudley Shaw woke up sick. He watched the morning news on CNN and felt worse. During the night, the United States had bombed Mogadishu and bodies lay like driftwood in the sand. The dawn skies were smoking. Dudley read a warning that the pictures were graphic and could be disturbing. He turned off the TV and patted his dog. “Ready to go, boy?”

On Monday, Dudley and Bingo were taking a road trip. They were going off the grid, checking out. He smiled in anticipation, despite the rhythmic pounding inside his skull. His skin felt tight and clammy and he guessed he was running a fever. He didn’t want to know. He checked his to-do list. The first item was to wash the car. He glanced through the living room window and saw the ‘57 Thunderbird gleaming in the sunlight. He took Ladybird to the car wash last week to get her ready for the road, but since then it had rained and she was splattered with mud. He had to wash her before it got too hot.

Dudley stood up. He felt dizzy and put a hand to the wall to steady himself. He was weak and his vision was blurred. He hauled himself to the kitchen, swallowed three aspirin with orange juice fortified with added vitamin C, and hoped that would take care of the problem. He called Bingo and went outside.

He stood for a moment on the porch to acclimatize to the heat. It must have been eighty degrees already, though it was not yet nine, not yet May. Summer had come early to Texas. The weather was changing. The winter was too hot and the spring had too much rain. Already

the fleas were bad. Beside him, Bingo propelled a hind leg, scratching his ear.

“Come on boy.” Dudley grabbed a bucket, turned on the faucet, and Bingo headed for the woods. He hated water, hated to be bathed. “Not you, Ladybird,” Dudley called out, but Bingo didn’t look back.

When the bucket was full, Dudley lugged it across the mucky lawn. The long arms of the sun stretched across the field and strangled him. The bucket was heavy and his breathing was hard. The day was just getting started and already he felt exhausted and worn out.

He reached the car and dropped the bucket. Water slopped over the side. He ran his hand across Ladybird’s sleek back fin and felt better. She was lemon yellow and gleaming with chrome. He rested his cheek on the sun-warmed roof. Her surface was smooth and hot and she felt solid and strong beneath his weight; a beauty aging well. He loved his car. Something that exacerbated his ex-wife to no end. You’ve got more feeling for that car than me, she used to say, and he guessed it was so.

He set to work, swabbing Ladybird down. There was a lump under his arm and it ached. He laid down the sponge and gingerly felt the swelling in his left armpit that was the size of an egg. It had grown larger and harder overnight. Whatever it was, was growing fast—a high rate of growth. That was what the doctors told his father when he had lung cancer. He had been sixty-five, the same age Dudley was now. Three months later he was dead. His father refused to go to the doctor and Dudley was just like him. It was best not to know.

He went back to work, trying to keep his mind on the job. He squeezed out the sponge and rubbed the windshield. Tracks of mud streaked down the glass. Bright sunlight bounced off the chrome and hurt his eyes. It was too hot. No gulf wind blew. His head hammered and his underarm burned.

Dudley dropped the sponge and shrugged off his shirt. Perspiration soaked his skin. He pressed his palms to his forehead to counteract the building pressure. Bingo reappeared with the fur on his back raised. He growled a low growl.

“What is it boy?”

Bingo turned and stared at the woods.

Dudley shivered. There were no clouds, but the sun seemed dim and far away. He was too sick to finish the job. He would do it later. He

bent down to grab his shirt and his head screamed. When he stood, the ground tilted under his feet. His body shook with cold and his teeth chattered. Ahead the house shimmered. The pecan tree was a hundred feet from the house, but the distance seemed like miles. He took a step, then a rest, then another step, and minute by minute he inched his way to the house.

Bingo was waiting by the door and they went inside. Past the kitchen, the hallway leading to his bedroom looked endless. Dudley tottered to the couch, flopped down, and gasped for breath. He felt a choking heat on his face and tried to pry open his eyes. The room was turning. From far away he heard a dog's mournful howl.





## CHAPTER TWO

Three hours later, three miles away in the veterinary building at Duane University, Dana Sparks was finishing a paper for the Journal of Immunology when the telephone rang. Her new boss needed to see her immediately. It was an order, not a request. Of course TJ McCoy couldn't send her an email or say what he wanted over the phone; he had to waste her time in person.

The military man was new to the Department of Infectious Disease and used to getting his way. In the month since he arrived, he'd been busy making unnecessary changes and issuing new regulations that inconvenienced everyone. He was getting harder to take by the day and Dana's patience was wearing thin. She put up with him because she needed tenure.

She left her lab and went down the hall to the main office. It was lunchtime and the secretary was gone, but the new chairman was waiting. He stood in the doorway of his office, dressed as usual in military attire, minus his many medals.

"Dr. Sparks, I'm glad you could make it." TJ McCoy was a gray man, with gray eyes, gray skin, and a gray crew cut. He was Dana's height, five-ten, and their eyes were level. He was sixty years old and looked every day of it. He'd suffered a heart attack in the fall and was forced from the Pentagon where he spent forty years planning wars. "Come in. Sit down." Always the imperative. Commands Dana hated to follow even as she did so.

In the room it was winter, dark and cold. The curtains were drawn, a floor fan blew, and a window air conditioning unit hummed. She sat

down and they faced one another across his clean and polished desk. "I'm reassigning parking spaces," he said.

Of course he was. He liked to throw his weight around, abuse his position.

"I wanted to tell you in person. So there would be no misunderstanding." He tapped his fingers on his desk. His nails were meticulously filed. A silver bracelet engraved with the misspelled word 'Dady' slipped down his thick wrist. His wedding ring was the size and color of a thimble.

"I have a new parking space. What is there to misunderstand?"

"It's a ways away."

"Okay."

"On the other side of the building."

She raised her eyebrows.

"Near the farm."

That was a half mile away, a space as far from the building as possible. He was letting her know how difficult he could make her life. "Perfect," she said, refusing to show any ire. "I can leave my car at home and walk."

"Up to you. Parking is tight. We need to make more room for clients at the veterinary clinic. Everyone has to move. Well, not tenured staff of course."

He spoke without making eye contact. He was staring over her shoulder, past her, as if her chair was empty and she was already gone. She needed tenure by the end of the year, or she was out.

Was he trying to tell her something? Could he let her go after tenure had already been promised? Though, as he liked to remind her, not by him, but his predecessor, Brian Boswell, who died suddenly on Christmas Eve. McCoy had been dragged out of retirement to take his place.

He'd been a nightmare from the start. He ran the department as if it were the army. McCoy had some nebulous doctorate, but had been an administrator for most of his life. His specialty was war and fiscal efficiency. His post was supposed to be temporary, but he didn't act as a place-holder; a fleeting replacement for someone more qualified. For a figurehead, he answered to no one and did as he pleased.

She knew it was pointless to argue with him. "Okay fine, I have a new parking space. If that's all, I have work to do." She glanced at his

clean and empty desktop. “I know you’re busy, but have you signed off on the grant proposal?” She had written a proposal for a three year, one million dollar army grant to research an active plague vaccine. Brian had signed off on the proposal, but McCoy was dragging his feet.

“I have a problem with it,” he said.

“Excuse me?”

“I’m not sure the research is necessary.”

“You’re not sure.” Who was he to decide? She sat forward in her chair. “A resurgence of the plague could present enormous problems. There—”

He cut her off. “There are antibiotics against the plague.”

“The plague bacteria are becoming resistant. Last year a sixteen year old boy in Madagascar nearly died because the antibiotics didn’t work.”

“You have your monoclonal vaccine. That should work.”

“It’s a passive vaccine. With a little more research, we can get an active vaccine. Something that endures. One shot, that’s it.”

“There are more relevant health concerns. The money could be better spent elsewhere.”

“Dr. McCoy, the research was already approved.”

He tapped his fingers. “Not by me.”

“The army requested the research. I’ve already found a promising antigen.”

“I’ll talk to them. Perhaps it’s time to move on.”

Another threat. She stood up. He was so obtuse he didn’t get the distinction between an active and passive vaccine. There was no point explaining it again. She would have to find a way around him. If she got the grant, he couldn’t deny her tenure.

McCoy stood too, at ease, hands slung around his back, straining the shiny brass buttons on his blazer. “By the way,” he said, as he eyed her with a sweeping glance. “Where is your lab coat?”

It was the last day of the semester and she was dressed casually in beige jeans, a button-down shirt, and cowboy boots. “My lab coat’s in the lab.”

“According to the compendium, Section 16, lab coats are mandatory whilst at work.” McCoy reached down, opened a desk drawer, and retrieved his heavy compendium that outlined his new rules in

excruciating detail. He flipped through the pages, stopped near the end, and jabbed a line with his finger. "A lab coat must be worn in the lab at all times by all faculty."

"I'm not in a lab," Dana said, as she walked to the door.

"Dismissed," McCoy called out.

She closed his door way too loud, betraying her indignation. She strode to her lab, internally raging. He had too much power. He could get rid of her. At the moment, he was the chair of the tenure committee that decided her future. Grant or not, he could shake his head and she'd be gone. It was too unfair.

She reached the end of the hallway and entered her lab. Maybe it was a sign. Perhaps it was time to leave. Go somewhere new, start over, shut the door on the past.

She went to her office and sat down at her desk. No, this was her place. She was an assistant professor and had been in the department seven years. She'd been in Duane eighteen years, half of her life, and she belonged here. He didn't. He was the one that should leave.

She wouldn't go easily. She would make it as difficult for him as she could. She stared up at the Van Gogh print on the wall that served in the place of a window. *Starry Night* was the painter's view from an asylum window. Even locked up, going crazy, losing his mind, he had hope. He saw a bright night, invisible force fields, order in chaos. She liked the print because it was unscientific. There was more going on than the eye could see; invisible connections linking disparate things together.

She leaned back and stared at the stars. McCoy didn't get to decide her future. He might not realize it, but if she found the active vaccine, it would be a huge deal and would not go unnoticed. It would draw attention; in her dreams, re-catch an eye that was caught long ago. She jumped up, went to the fridge, and grabbed a small ampule containing clear amber fluid. She held her future in her hand.

## CHAPTER THREE

McCoy was recovering from the most disagreeable encounter when his telephone rang. He picked up and heard the frantic voice of the manager of the Lone Star Heritage Hotel. “Did you hear about the bombing of Mogadishu?” the manager asked.

“Of course,” McCoy said. He got up early to watch the story on the morning news. It pained him greatly that he was not a part of the response, for he knew the four-star general who briefed the press. On TV, McCoy caught a glimpse of his old life that was gone forever.

“There’s talk of retaliation,” the manager said. “Some Islamic factions have issued a decree. What if they bomb my hotel? I’m expecting two hundred guests.”

Including the United States Vice President, Rich Rutherford, who was coming in less than a week to deliver the convocation address. Rutherford was an old friend from West Point and McCoy was head of the team planning his visit. Though he wasn’t personally in charge of security, it was never far from McCoy’s mind. “Did the hotel receive a specific threat against the VP?”

“Threats have been made,” the manager said, in a high whine. “It’s no secret the VP will be here. What if they hit the hotel?”

*What if.* Hysterical words in McCoy’s view. “Look, we’ll get together with the FBI and discuss security. I’ll set it up.” Already an advance team from Virginia was in town and McCoy was working closely with Barry Ackerman, the FBI agent in charge. Ackerman was too young in McCoy’s view to handle the responsibility, and McCoy was holding his hand. If there was a credible threat, they’d get more agents. If Ackerman

didn't have the clout to authorize it, McCoy would make some calls and it would be done. He hung up the phone, called Ackerman, and set up a two o'clock meeting.

Only now there was a conflict. At two o'clock McCoy was scheduled to deliver a lecture on biological warfare to seniors in Molecular Biology. McCoy wanted new blood in his department and was seeking promising graduate students. He wanted anyone interested in war.

McCoy tapped his fingers on his desk, wondering who would give the lecture. The problem was, no one in the department was capable of it. The Department of Infectious Disease dealt primarily with infectious diseases, and his expertise was war. He'd been promised his own department. As soon as the university's finances improved, Infectious Disease would merge with Microbiology, and McCoy would build the Department of Human Health—that would specialize in biological and chemical warfare. It was the carrot that dragged him from retirement. When McCoy left the Veterinary College he would take with him those researchers who could contribute to his vision.

In the meantime, McCoy's personal mandate was to restore discipline to a department run amuck. He would turn the department around, get rid of 'dead wood' as he saw fit. The department was in economic ruin. The former chairman might have been a pleasant, happy-go-lucky guy, but the department had suffered under his tutelage. Brian Boswell spent money he did not have. He lived off grants not yet approved. He allowed his staff to run wild.

Dana Sparks was a case in point. She could be good. She had a strong publishing record and a demonstrated ability to secure funding. By most accounts, she was hard working and well liked. Yet her attitude was insufferable. She refused to recognize his authority. McCoy had dealt with people like her before. It was like breaking a horse. The beast had to know who was boss. You had to hit hard, over and over, until the spirit broke, and submitted to outside direction. If that didn't work, you had to shoot the horse.

He reached for the phone. Dr. Sparks would give the lecture on his behalf. He called her office and got no answer. After scrawling a short note explaining his directive, he carried it down to her lab. He was in a full sweat by the time he reached the end of the hallway. Cutting down on air conditioning was a cost-cutting measure McCoy was forced to

take that he did not like. He had endured the treeless swamps of Quang Tri, the steaming deserts of Kuwait, and now this. He mopped the back of his neck. Texas was too damn hot.

He entered Spark's lab and was taken aback when he saw her in her office, eating an apple, though consumption of food in laboratories was strictly forbidden. "Dr. Sparks, did you not hear your phone?"

"I heard it."

He entered her office and walked around her cluttered desk. She had a picture on her wall McCoy could only describe as disturbing. Weird buildings, weirder clouds. Margaret, his youngest daughter, could paint better pictures than that. He averted his eyes and looked down. Sparks seemed to be working out a dose. For an animal that weighed sixty kilograms! "What are you doing?"

She covered the paper with her hand. "A calculation."

"I see that. Is it a dose? For what?"

"A big rat." She scrunched up the paper and tossed it at the garbage can. She missed, but left the wadded paper where it fell.

Her office was a mess. Papers everywhere, binders stacked haphazardly on the floor, and reprints towering in a corner. Her screen saver was enough to induce an epileptic fit—rolling dice tumbling over and over. McCoy was mystified by her success. She was emotional and reactive, qualities unbecoming a scientist. She lacked the sober, plodding, reasonable, rational temperament he equated with scientific accomplishment. He picked a vial up off her desk. "What's this? There's no label."

She stood up and took the vial from him. "I know what's inside. Can I help you with something?"

She deliberately kept him in the dark about her activities. "You will deliver a lecture for me."

"A lecture? School's finished."

"Not quite. The fourth year Molecular Biology students expect instruction this afternoon."

"This afternoon? Today?" Her tone was querulous. She shook her head, blond hair flying in her face. Her eyes were too blue and her gaze too direct. She was too pretty and it made him uncomfortable. She did not fit his image of a scientific researcher. She favored blue jeans and pointy-toed cowboy boots that turned heads when she clomped down

the hall. She was thirty-six, never married, and McCoy had heard rumors about her personal life that he refused to consider and did his best to ignore. She would have to ship up if she didn't want to ship out.

He stared her down. "The lecture is today, that is correct. In the biology building, in the main lecture hall, fourteen to seventeen hundred hours."

"Two till five? Three hours?" She put down her apple.

"The subject is biological warfare. Make it interesting."

She frowned and objected. "I don't know anything about warfare."

"Talk about the plague and your vaccine work. How it was developed to save millions in the event of a biological war."

"There are natural infections," she said. "At the moment prairie dogs are the biggest culprits in spreading the plague."

What was this talk of prairie dogs? Sparks' military grant would not be used to cure sick prairie dogs, that was for sure. McCoy held out an envelope. "When you're finished there will be a teacher evaluation. Betty will collect the forms at five."

She stared at the envelope. "On the last day of the semester?" She folded her arms. "You're joking."

"I don't joke," McCoy dropped the envelope on the desk. "We need these evaluations for your file, for the consideration of your tenure."

"My teaching has already been evaluated."

"Not by me. We'll repeat the exercise." McCoy had been puzzled by her previous evaluations. Her overall rating was too good to believe. Did she discard the negative replies while the previous chairman winked and looked the other way? "Today's process will be strictly supervised."

"As it was the last time."

"This is not open for discussion." He wanted to add, it was a goddamn order and like it or not, she'd do as he said, but he held himself back.

She clucked her teeth with displeasure, tapped the toe of her boot, and then glanced at her watch.

McCoy would not be hurried. "By the way, I neglected to mention, next week we have a visitor."

She raised her eyes to the ceiling. "Yes, I know, your friend, the Vice President of the United States."



McCoy realized his mistake. "I'm talking about Michael Smith."

"Who?"

There was a bite to her tone and an angry look in her eyes. She was easily provoked.

"Dr. Smith is a bacteriologist," McCoy said. "His specialty is anthrax. He is a West Point graduate like myself."

"Why is he coming?" Dana asked.

She questioned everything he said; it was most unpleasant. "Because I invited him."

"Great." She picked up the apple.

"There is no eating in the laboratory."

"This is an office."

"Where is your lab coat?"

"I'm not in the lab."

They could go around and around in circles like this indefinitely. If she was deliberately trying to drive him crazy, she was succeeding. He returned to his office wondering about the wisdom of taking the job. Perhaps he was too old. His vigor and love of the fight seemed to have ebbed. He found the civilian setting bewildering and the lack of respect for superiors, infuriating. If his aim to head the specialized unit was to come to pass, his authority had to be recognized. He was the commanding officer. It was him. He was in charge. Either get the message or get out. McCoy was fully aware that some horses could never be broken.