

# FATAL HARVEST

Surviving the next pandemic



A novel by  
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## Description

Imagine a world without electricity, transportation, supermarkets, telephones or any of the other amenities we are accustomed to in the early twenty-first century. After the world-wide epidemics of 2019 and 2020, this is what life is like in the Pacific northwest. There are no hospitals, governments or emergency services of any kind. Civilization has broken down and the survivors are on their own. Celeste Colbert is thirteen at the time of the first outbreak, living with her family in Vancouver. She experiences the loss of family members and friends, schools

closing and orderly life in the city descending into anarchy and chaos. With a close-knit group of family and friends, Celeste leaves the city for a remote village in the hope they will be safe there to continue their struggle for survival. The story follows Celeste through thirteen years, as she grows to maturity in a much different world.

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## Part One - The City

### Chapter 1

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I was doing my homework while Mom and Dad watched a drama on the video-net when the program suddenly went off and was replaced by one of the news announcers. "We interrupt this program to bring you a special bulletin."

I turned from the computer to watch the video screen. Whenever they broke into a regular program—as had been happening a lot in those days—it usually meant trouble.

"What now?" My father shifted in his chair.

"Shhh! Listen," Mother said.

". . . an outbreak of plague. We take you now to Valerie Cope at St. Paul's Hospital. Valerie, what can you tell us?"

The scene changed to the inside of the hospital. In the corridor behind the reporter, hospital personnel could be seen going about their work.

"Thank you, Pamela." The reporter turned to face the camera. "Doctors have confirmed that the young man who was brought in this afternoon, and who passed away half an hour ago, was a victim of plague. I have with me Dr. Amrik Mohajer, an epidemiologist. Dr. Mohajer, what can you tell us about the man who died this evening?" She turned to a dark-skinned man with glossy black hair and beard.

"Well, his name was Kevin Free. He was found lying on a pile of cardboard in an alley near the docks. He was obviously very ill, so someone called the emergency services and he was brought here."

“How long was it before you discovered he had the plague?”

“Naturally, as soon as he arrived in Emergency, they knew he was suffering from something unusual, so they began to take precautions immediately to isolate him.”

I don’t remember exactly what was said, but they went on to explain what caused the plague—how the forest fires of the previous three years had driven rodents that carried the plague bacteria, *Yersinia pestis*, into populated areas, and how the situation was exacerbated by the strike of sanitation workers and the unusually hot weather.

I saw Mom take Dad’s hand and shivered in spite of the heat.

That’s how the epidemics started. I was thirteen years old at the time. It has taken me almost twenty years to reach a point where I can write about it, or even think about it with a degree of detachment. The things that happened during the next few years were so horrifying that after a while, we became numb. It might seem as if we stopped feeling things but as everyone knows who lived through that time, there is only so much horror a person can endure before the only way to survive is to suppress the feelings altogether. Even writing about it now has brought to the surface many painful emotions, but I feel the story should be recorded so that our children will know about the mistakes made by their ancestors, the actions or lack of action that led to current conditions.

It was the first time since the worldwide influenza epidemic of 1918 that an epidemic had resulted in such a high death toll in this country. We were used to hearing about alarming outbreaks of diseases like cholera, plague, dengue fever and Ebola in other countries—in Asia or Latin America or Africa—but we never expected it to happen here. Once started, it spread rapidly all over the continent, and in spite of quarantines, bans on travel, and the closing of ports, it was soon out of control. We began to hear horror stories from Europe, Japan, Russia, and Australia, all of which suffered similar outbreaks.

## Chapter 2

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Kate, come and see this!"

I dashed downstairs and followed my mother into the living room where my father was sitting in his chair, leaning forward towards the video screen.

". . . in several parts of the city." The announcer was standing across the street from a burning building. Behind him, police were struggling to force back an angry

crowd of demonstrators while firefighters battled to douse the flames with streams of water and foam.

The scene changed to a studio set. "Thank you, Chris." The announcer somehow managed to smile and look grave at the same time. "That was Chris Andreyev at the scene of the latest drugstore attack. We now take you to police headquarters for a word from police spokesman, Constable Jackie Wing." The scene changed once more to the exterior of the Police building. Constable Wing was a hefty-looking Chinese officer. He cleared his throat and looked down at a sheet of paper in his hand. "Chief of Police Harper has issued the following statement. . ."

I don't recall his exact words, but the statement, like many others we were to hear in the coming days, asked people to remain calm, the government had everything under control. Any further terrorist attacks on pharmacies and clinics would be severely dealt with.

Every day, there were stories of demonstrations outside government buildings and hospitals, frightened, angry people demanding something be done to stop the epidemic. Pharmacists, terrorized by hold-ups for medicines and just plain vandalism, started barricading their stores and closing down. The big chain stores like London Drugs built barricades of sandbags around their stores and hired platoons of armed guards to protect them. Soon, signs appeared in the windows of many stores declaring that they did not stock antibiotics.

More and more deaths were reported every day, but after the first few weeks of the plague epidemic, they stopped reporting the death toll. It only made things worse.

People were scared, and angry. Why was this happening to us? Why isn't someone helping us?

Mobs of irate people roamed the streets at night, drinking and screaming slogans. When they started breaking shop windows and looting, the city council declared a curfew, but it was hard to enforce because of the shortage of police personnel. They asked for help from the RCMP, but it had more than they could handle dealing with similar problems in those suburban communities that had no police forces of their own.

Finally, Premier Chin announced that an emergency meeting of the legislature in Victoria had voted to declare martial law.

There was a look of profound sadness on her face as she made the announcement. "We have no other alternative if we are to maintain civil order. I have consulted with the Department of National Defense and have been assured that we will receive their complete cooperation in this matter. As of tomorrow,

October 29, members of the armed forces will be patrolling all major communities. You will be required to stay indoors from six p.m. until six a.m. unless you are part of the emergency services. Employers will issue official passes to those who need to be out because of their occupation."

There were more details, but what it boiled down to was that a rigorous curfew was going to be enforced to stop the rioting and mayhem. What we didn't expect was the amount of force that would be used to quell infractions. They shot to kill.

I'll never forget the look on Premier Chin's face as she said good night. Tears glistened in her eyes. I wonder if she had a premonition that she would be the last premier for many years. I didn't hear until later that both her parents had already succumbed to the plague.

Even as they were putting into effect those drastic measures, the worst of the civil disturbances were over. People seemed to be starting to accept the inevitable and no amount of shouting and tantrums would make any difference. A feeling of depression and apathy settled over everyone.

## Chapter 3

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I heard the I-Com chime in my parents' bedroom as I was getting ready for school one morning near the end of November. Everyone else had left, so I answered it.

"Celeste?" It was Gran speaking in her precise English accent. "Is your mother there?"

"No, she's gone to school already. What is it, Gran? Is something wrong?"

"It's your grandpa. He's not feeling well." Her voice sounded shaky, as if she were trying to keep herself under control.

"He's not . . . it's not, you know. . .?"

"Plague? I don't think so. This is different." She hesitated. "Can you get a message to your mother to call me as soon as possible?"

"All right. I'll see her at school; I'm just about to leave. How are you, Gran? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. How are you and Paul?"

"Fine. I'll tell Mom. I hope Grandpa feels better soon."

I put the receiver down with a hollow feeling in my stomach, a sickening premonition of catastrophe. My beloved Grandpa. Tears welled in my eyes. *So it's*

*come at last*, I thought, *we aren't going to escape after all*. I tried to convince myself I was exaggerating and he'd probably caught a flu virus. All the way to school the thought kept running in my mind, *my Grandpa's sick, my Grandpa's sick* . . . I was so distracted by the thought that I reached school without even realizing I'd walked there from my house.

I had a few minutes to spare before my first class started, so I went to look for Mom in her lab. I caught her attention through the glass door panel and beckoned to her. She said something to the students and came to the door.

"Hi, Celeste. What's wrong?" She looked frightened. "It's not Paul, is it?"

"No, Mom," I wiped my eyes with the back of my fingers. "Gran just called. She says Grandpa's sick. She wants you to call her."

"What's wrong with him? Did she tell you?" She gripped my arm. Her face had gone white.

"She didn't say, but she doesn't think it's plague."

The bell rang for change of classes, startling us.

"All right. I'll call her right away." She looked at her watch.

"I gotta go, Mom. See you at lunchtime—I want to know what she says. I hope Grandpa's okay."

At noon, I went to wait for her outside the staff room "Are you waiting for your mother?" asked the school secretary who was just coming out of the office next door.

"Yes, I was supposed to meet her here."

"She's left. She asked me to give you the message."

"Did she say where she was going?"

"She said her father's sick and she was going over there to see if she could help."

"Thanks."

I turned to leave, feeling a shiver of fear. What was wrong with Grandpa? Was he going to die? He always seemed so healthy and full of energy. Sometimes he spent up to ten hours a day in his printing shop. I couldn't imagine him being ill. Maybe he'd been overdoing it and needed a rest. But Gran wouldn't have called Mom if that were all it was. I couldn't stand the anxiety of not knowing, so I left the school grounds to find a pay phone where I could call my grandparents' house. Mother answered.

"Mom? Is Grandpa all right?"

“It looks pretty bad, Celeste.” Her voice was huskier than normal.

“What’s wrong with him?”

“I don’t know; I think it’s something new.”

“Does he have to go to the hospital?”

“No. Gran called the doctor—Grandpa’s too sick to go to the office—the doctor said it sounds like a virus that’s going around and he should stay home and get plenty of rest.”

“Why doesn’t he go to the hospital?”

“There’s no room, Celeste. The hospitals are all full. There’s not much they could do for him that we can’t do at home, anyway.”

“Are you coming back soon?”

“I’m going to stay and help your gran, she’s been up all night. What time does your last class finish?”

“We have phys-ed at two-thirty so I should be out by about three-fifteen. Why?”

“I want you to go straight home afterwards and look after Paul until I get there. I have to go now.”

“All right, if I have to. Bye, Mom.” I loved my little brother, but sometimes he could be a pest, getting into my belongings and always needing baby-sitting, keeping me from doing things with my friends.

My mother still hadn’t come home when Dad returned from work, so we ate our dinner without her. We were just clearing the table when the I-Com chimed. Dad answered it.

“Kate? What’s the matter?—Oh, no!—that’s unbelievable . . . so fast. What was it, do you know?” He sat down on a kitchen chair. I watched him, hanging onto every word, an icy feeling going through me.

“I know. Are you coming home?—All right, I’ll see you in the morning . . . Of course we can.” Dad put down the receiver.

“Dad. What happened?”

“Your Grandpa died a few minutes ago. I’m sorry, Celeste.” He put his arm around me. “I can’t believe it happened so fast. He was at work yesterday and now he’s gone.”

“Where’s Grandpa gone?” Paul asked, looking up from his construction set with big tears in his eyes.

I pulled away from my father and ran up to my room. I threw myself face down on the bed, grasped the covers in my fists, and cried into the pillow. I couldn't believe I would never see him again, never feel the tickle of his mustache when he kissed me or hear his loving, "Here's my princess," whenever I came to visit. I realized mother had lost her father and Gran her husband, but I couldn't imagine they felt worse than I did. I was angry too. What the hell was happening to us? Why were so many people dying? You heard people saying it was a judgment from God because we had become so wicked. Sometimes I was tempted to believe it, except when good people like Grandpa died.

The day after Grandpa died, a girl collapsed in the washroom at school. She shook uncontrollably and blood trickled from her nose and mouth. She gasped for breath.

"Ugh! Gross," someone said.

"What's wrong with her?"

"Somebody call the nurse."

"Let's get out of here," another girl shouted, leading a rush for the door.

The sick girl was taken away in an ambulance and we never saw her again.

With the onset of cooler weather, a new virus had appeared on the scene. It had the medical profession baffled, although initially they'd thought it was a particularly lethal mutation of the influenza virus. Whatever it was, it was deadly—far more deadly than the plague. It attacked the mucus membranes and peripheral blood vessels, rapidly breaking down the tissues, causing hemorrhages and the destruction of lung tissue, leaving the victims coughing up blood and fighting for breath. Purple-red patches appeared all over their bodies from broken capillaries. In some cases it attacked the digestive tract, and others—rarer, but much more painful—the membranes covering the brain and spinal cord. There was very little that could be done once a person was infected. The victim would have a raging fever, often bleeding from the mouth, nose, and anus. They were unable to swallow food, and within forty-eight hours, would probably be dead. It appeared to be an air-borne virus, which made it even more lethal. The few people who did survive an attack were usually healthy young adults whose immune systems were strong enough to fight it.

This new disease terrified people even more than the plague had and, in spite of warnings from the government, they started flocking from the city. Whole families packed whatever they could carry in their cars and vans and rushed away to what they imagined would be safety, leaving their homes and most of their belongings behind. Even the soldiers, who had until now kept some order,

disappeared. Every night, the video-net carried reports and pictures of the traffic jams on the highways out of town. We saw hundreds of the abandoned cars along the roadsides that had run out of fuel or broken down. If people thought they would be safer in the countryside, they were in for a nasty shock. The residents of the farms and the small rural towns and villages were heavily armed. They put up manned roadblocks to prevent city-dwellers overrunning them. And to show they meant business, demonstrated no reluctance to shoot strangers. In spite of seeing reports of the chaos and danger that awaited them in the countryside, people still kept leaving the city. I suppose it was the human tendency to be doing something, anything, even something dangerous, rather than sit around waiting for fate to overtake them.

Early on, some people thought they might find safety in the offshore islands that crowd the coast, but they were ruthlessly discouraged by the islanders when they tried to put ashore. Several small craft had been sunk before outsiders were convinced that they would find no safe harbor there.

## Chapter 4

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Mom and I got up early so that we could get to the gas station, before the rush started, to fill up Dad's gas-powered car. He'd taken mom's electric *Duet* to work.

"Hurry up, Celeste."

"I'm ready." I wound a scarf around my neck and followed Mother to the car. "Let's go!" I said, pulling on my mittens

It was nearly seven o'clock in the morning and the sky was just getting light. The air was so cold, our breath made small clouds. Mom unlocked the car doors and we slid inside, flinching at the coldness of the seats. The windows immediately steamed up. She pressed the starter and the ignition responded with an abortive click.

"Damn! Don't tell me it's going to give me trouble."

"Maybe it's just cold," I suggested uselessly. "Try it again."

She put her foot down on the gas pedal and pressed the button again, this time there was a brief sputter. After several tries, the engine started to vibrate roughly, shaking the whole car then it died again. "I don't want to run down the battery," Mother said as she gave it another try. The engine caught this time and kept running, shakily at first, but gradually becoming smoother.

“Phew! That’s a relief.”

The streetlights were out and the sky had lightened considerably by the time we reached Hastings Street. We turned towards the city center and started to look for a gas station that didn’t have too long a lineup. The traffic was noticeably lighter than it had been a few months earlier.

“We might as well try this one.” She turned into a service station that only had about forty cars lined up waiting for their turn at one of the six pumps.

A large hand-lettered sign informed customers that they were limited to twenty liters per vehicle. The price had gone through the ceiling since deliveries of fuel had stopped. The pipelines to the refineries were still operating and the refineries were running, albeit at a slower pace, but distribution was severely curtailed due to the ban on inter-regional transport and a shortage of drivers.

This was our weekly trip to refuel the car so that we could go shopping. By now, we were used to the wait and brought a thermos of tea with us and books to read while we waited.

We heard car doors slam loudly up ahead, then men’s enraged voices. Two angry men stood face to face near the pump while an attendant watched helplessly. Such confrontations were not uncommon. We rolled down the windows to hear what it was about.

“You pushed in front of me, fucker.”

“It was my turn, you jerk. Get that heap of junk out of my way, asshole, before I . . .”

“What? Come on, try something—I dare you . . .” The speaker was a beefy, red-faced man in work clothes.

“Come on guys, you’re holding up the line.” The young woman attendant looked nervously from one to the other.

People in the lineup started honking their horns and yelling at them to get on with it. A tall, heavysset man came out of the service bay wiping his hands on a dirty rag. A handgun poked conspicuously from his overall pocket. Seeing him, the two combatants got into their cars and slammed the doors.

“All right. *You*,” he pointed at one of the drivers, pull back. And you, get your gas and go. No more trouble, you hear?”

“But I . . .” The driver who had been asked to wait made a feeble effort to assert himself.

“I don’t want to hear it,” the big man interrupted. “Just do as I say or leave now.” He watched for a moment to make sure they’d taken him seriously returned to the service bay.

About fifteen minutes later, we got our weekly ration of fuel and went back onto the street.

“Where are we going today?” I asked.

“*Celebrity Foods*. It’s a big warehouse where they sell bulk foods. I want to stock up on rice and flour and stuff like that. But first I need to go to the bank and get some money.”

There was a lineup at the bank as well. Banks had started to cut back on their hours of operation until they were only open three hours a day, four days a week. This forced people to use the banks’ ATM machines, and led to longer waits every time we tried to draw out some cash. Either Dad or Mother made a habit of going every night to draw out their daily limit of four hundred dollars. They had already used the I-com to transfer their savings into their operating account. I think they were afraid the bank would run out of money and wanted to make sure we had enough to live on during the crisis.

“Shit, the damn things closed down,” a woman ahead of us complained. “Come on, Tasha, it’s no good waiting. There’s nobody in there to get it going again.” She grabbed the hand of her little girl and left the line-up.

“Must have run out of money again.” Another woman turned away in disgust. “I suppose we’ll have to come back later after the bank opens.”

The other people in the line went to the window to verify that it really was closed, then with sighs and curses, turned and left.

“Not to worry,” Mom said, “I’ve brought *some* money with me. I hope it’s enough.”

There was such a large crowd at the food warehouse that they had opened the loading bay doors at the back for people to enter, and had them exiting through the front doors by the cash registers. There was a chain across the doorway, which was lowered every five minutes or so to allow a few more people in. Most of the customers were women, and all were wearing facemasks. There was very little conversation as we waited. People glanced around suspiciously, avoiding meeting one another’s eyes. If it hadn’t been necessary to buy food, I’m sure they would rather have stayed safely at home. A few of them had brought children with them, taking on the added burden of trying to soothe their whining and keeping them from getting too close to other children.

When we got inside, we found large signs on the shelves saying, *Limit - one bag per customer* or *Two cans per customer*. The shelves were beginning to look decidedly empty as well and, as with gas, the prices had soared. We came away with two ten-kilo bags of flour, ten kilos of rice, ten of salt, some dried beans and a large pail of honey. There was no sugar left and very few spices or dried fruit. We also got a large bag of rolled oats, a four-liter can of cooking oil, and some baking soda.

“It’s looking bad,” Mom said as we stowed the purchases in the back of the car. “We’re going to have to make this last. I don’t know when they’ll have any more supplies delivered.”

“What are we going to do, Mom? I mean, if we can’t buy?”

“We’ll find a way to manage somehow. People lived for thousands of years before they had supermarkets. They grew their own food and traded with one another.”

“But—you know—we can’t grow wheat and stuff like that. How can we live on just vegetables?”

“We’ll have to make some major adjustments in our eating habits. We rely on so much stuff that’s imported from other countries; coffee, oranges and bananas, tea and rice. We won’t be able to get those things any more. We’ll have to get used to eating the things that are produced right here. We’re lucky in one respect—there’s plenty of fish and game in this region, and it’s a good climate for growing things, even with the changes in the weather.”

“But it won’t go on like this forever, will it? I mean, everybody is always talking about when things get back to normal.”

“It may take a while, Celeste. The way things are going; so many people getting sick and dying, things could get even worse.”

For the next few weeks, Mom and I kept busy shopping. We concentrated on canned and dried foods, durable clothing, camping equipment, basic medical supplies, tools, seeds, and batteries. We also bought some old-fashioned oil lamps and paraffin to fuel them. Everything was stowed away in an empty room in the basement with a strong lock on the door. This latter precaution filled me with apprehension, suggesting intruders and other dangers.

Mother was sick for a while with a fever around Christmas, scaring us all, but she pulled through with antibiotics and rest at home. By some miracle, the rest of the family stayed healthy.