

Sleepless Cities

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Introduction

Cities are supposed to sleep. That is the myth we comfort ourselves with when the last bus sighs into the depot and the storefront gates rattle down. We pretend that night draws a curtain, that what happens after dark is quieter, slower, contained. But anyone who has worked a graveyard shift, biked a delivery route at midnight, or watched the blue cast of an emergency room at four a.m. knows the truth: the city never stops. It hums. It bargains. It breaks and repairs itself in secret. This book takes

place in that hum, over one long night when routine collides with the unthinkable.

Sleepless Cities is an anthology of a single crisis as felt at street level, told through twenty-five chapters across seven neighborhoods. Each chapter stands on its own and also threads into the larger pattern, moving almost hour by hour from the first uneasy reports to the moment the sun should rise and doesn't deliver the relief anyone expects. We stay with paramedics who learned long ago to measure hope in minutes, graffiti artists who map belonging in paint and stolen time, and night-shift workers whose labor keeps the city upright while most residents dream. Their routes cross and recross—on platforms, in stairwells, at intersections where rumor outruns sirens—because that is how a city tells its stories: not in a straight line, but in echoes.

This is a horror book, yes, and it is also a practical study. Outbreaks—of fear, of violence, of contagion—reveal the skeleton of a place. You will see where the grid is brittle, how a single substation blackout turns one neighborhood into a rumor about another. You will watch a bodega become a commons, an elevator become a trap, a painted wall become a bulletin board and a memorial. Infrastructure is not neutral; it privileges some bodies, delays others, and in crisis it decides who has the seconds to get clear.

But cities are more than concrete and code. They are agreements. They are favors owed and favors extended, circuits of trust that carry people farther than any bus line ever could. The social ties in these pages—co-workers pulling double, crews who've watched each other's backs for years, strangers who find themselves side by side under failing lights—matter as much as any barricade or escape plan. Some characters survive the night because a phone number is memorized, a door is left unlatched, a signal is understood without words. Others falter where pride or old grudges keep people apart.

The undead in this book do not debate, scheme, or forgive. They are a pressure, a clock, a shadow that turns habit into hazard. They arrive without moral, only consequence, and in their relentless advance they shrink the city to a series of choices: turn left or right, shout or stay quiet, wait for help or make your own. Horror, here, isn't only in the teeth; it's in the way an entire system can be overwhelmed, in the realization that the map in your head is out of date by the time you look up.

You will not find a single hero to lead you through this night. You will find many, some who wear uniforms and some who wear paint-stained hoodies, some who clock in on time and some who work outside the clock altogether. You will meet them in riverfront towers and basement boiler rooms, on empty overpasses and crowded emergency bays. The city they traverse has names for its districts and unofficial names for its corners; both sets of names matter, because both tell you who feels claimed and who is kept out.

If you have ever stood at a window at 3 a.m. and watched the dim world move—one light flicker on, one car pause at a red that no one else could see—then you know the particular intimacy of the nocturnal city. That is where this book lives. It asks what happens when the fragile contracts of urban life are tested, when every shortcut has a cost, when help is a person and not a policy. It is a mosaic of small decisions made under pressure, and of the bond between strangers that, for a night, becomes the strongest architecture we have.

CHAPTER ONE: Sirens at Shift Change

The handoff happened at 1900 hours, give or take the time it took Martinez to finish her coffee and Ortiz to stop pretending he wasn't watching her do it. That was the ritual. Old shift hands off to the new shift in the bay of Station 9, which sat wedged between a tire shop and a laundromat on Garfield Avenue like an afterthought the city planners had shoved into the gap and forgotten. The rig idled outside, engine ticking as it cooled, and the fluorescent light inside buzzed at a frequency that had driven three dispatchers to request transfers in the last two years.

Martinez was five-foot-four with a runner's build and the kind of calm that made people either trust her instantly or find her unsettling. She had been a paramedic for eleven years, and her hands still moved with efficiency that couldn't be faked. Ortiz was six months from his retirement date and told anyone who would listen that he planned to open a bait shop in Ponce. He told almost everyone.

"So what've we got tonight?" asked Davi, stepping into the bay with a lanyard of keys around his neck and a stretcher's worth of tension in his shoulders. Davi was the newest member of the crew, though "newest" was relative. He had been out of the academy for eight months and had yet to lose the particular stiffness that came from trying to prove you belonged in a job that chewed people up. He was twenty-six and looked fifteen, which meant patients sometimes didn't take him seriously, which meant Martinez and Ortiz had to do a lot of smiling and nodding on his behalf.

"You'll see," said Martinez. She took the clipboard from the hook by the door and scrolled through the log. Night shift always started slow. The city exhaled after five, and the calls came in a trickle at first—falls, chest pains, the usual census of small disasters that kept the ambulances turning their wheels. "Tuesday's not going to kill us. Probably."

Ortiz snorted. He had heard that line before, usually right before something went sideways. "You say that every night."

"I say it because it's usually true."

"That's what you said the night we rolled up on that guy who'd been stabbed with a fire poker."

"That was a Wednesday."

Davi set his bag down and pulled on a pair of gloves, stretching the latex over each finger with unnecessary care. He was still one of those. Still careful about things that the rest of them had stopped noticing. "So how does the pairing work? I just ride along?"

"You ride along, you carry the bags, you don't touch anything I haven't told you to touch, and you keep your phone on vibrate because dispatch will call you directly if Martinez and I are both on calls." Ortiz pointed at him with a pen. "And for the love of God, don't eat anything out of the cooler unless you want to find out what happens when two-hundred-pound Ortiz has to do compressions on a guy who's having an allergic reaction to mystery meat."

Davi nodded. He was writing things down. Ortiz noticed and felt a small, involuntary surge of pride.

The first call came at 1942. Dispatch code 51-Charlie, which meant unconscious person, non-traumatic, on private property. The address was on Delancey Street, three blocks from the station, in a part of the neighborhood where the apartment buildings had that particular look—brick facades with crumbling mortar, fire escapes bolted on like afterthoughts, windows sealed with plastic and newspaper. The kind of buildings that had been holding on since the seventies and had no intention of stopping now.

They found the man on the fourth floor landing. He was elderly, maybe seventy, sitting against the wall with his legs extended and his eyes closed. His breathing was slow and wet, and there was a smell that Ortiz recognized from too many calls—urine, alcohol, and the particular sourness of someone who had been lying in one place too long.

"Hey, hey, can you hear me?" Martinez crouched beside him and tilted his head toward the light. She checked his pupils, felt for a pulse at the wrist, noted the cold clammy skin. Standard checks, done a thousand times.

The man's eyes opened. They were glassy, unfocused, and for a moment they seemed to look through Martinez rather than at her. She had seen that look before, usually with patients who were deep in some kind of metabolic crisis—diabetic emergencies, liver failure, the body slowly poisoning itself. But something about the way he stared

made her pause.

"He's on metformin," said Davi quietly, reading the medical alert bracelet without being asked. Martinez nodded.

"Blood sugar?"

Ortiz was already pulling the glucometer from the case. He pricked the man's finger with the practiced ease of someone who had done it so many times the gesture was almost reflexive. The reading came back: 38. Dangerously low. That explained the unconsciousness, the cold skin, the slow breathing. Hypoglycemia.

"Get the dextrose," Martinez said.

Davi moved quickly for a rookie. He prepped the syringe while Ortiz started an IV. Martinez stayed close, one hand on the man's shoulder, talking to him even though he didn't seem to register what she was saying. They always talked. It was policy, but it was also something more than policy. Even if the patient couldn't hear, it kept the crew steady. It kept the moment from slipping into something clinical and cold.

The dextrose pushed. They waited. The old man's breathing changed first—quicker now, a little ragged—and then his fingers twitched, and then his eyes opened again, this time with something behind them. Confusion, mostly, and the slow dawning awareness that he was somewhere he didn't remember being.

"What—" He looked at the three of them clustered around him. "What happened?"

"You had a low blood sugar," Martinez said. "You're going to be fine. We're going to take you to County General, and they'll get you sorted out."

He tried to sit up, winced, and let Ortiz help him. As they lifted him onto the stretcher, Martinez caught a glimpse of the apartment behind him. The door was open—ajar, not wide—and inside she saw a kitchen cluttered with takeout containers and a television flickering with no sound. On the floor near the stove, she noticed a pair of shoes, neatly placed side by side, as if their owner had stepped out of them and forgotten to come back.

It was nothing. It was the kind of detail she would have filed away in her head and never thought about again. But later, much later, she would remember those shoes.

The night kept rolling. They cleared Delancey at 2015 and ran a psych eval on a woman in Elmhurst who said she could hear someone scratching inside her walls. The walls were hollow, Ortiz concluded, and the building was old. The woman insisted the scratching had started after sunset, as if something behind the plaster woke up when

the light went away.

Then a fall call in Rego Park—a woman in her sixties who'd tripped on her own carpet, fractured her hip clean through. Davi helped carry her down the stairs while Martinez drove. The woman kept apologizing, which was a thing they saw all the time. People apologized for needing help, as if asking for it was the real injury and the broken hip was just the excuse.

Between calls, Ortiz drove with the windows cracked, letting the night air into the cab. The neighborhoods shifted as they crossed borough lines, the blocks changing texture like chapters in a book—brownstones giving way to low cinder-block storefronts, then to the wide boulevards where the restaurants stayed open late and the bodegas cast rectangles of yellow light onto the sidewalk. Every block had its own rules, its own rhythm, and part of being a paramedic was learning to read those rhythms fast.

"You doing okay back there?" Ortiz asked over his shoulder.

Davi was scrolling through something on his phone. "Just reviewing the protocol for hypoglycemic episodes. You said to push dextrose at 25 grams for adults, right?"

"That's right."

"And if they're unresponsive and there's no IV access?"

"Intramuscular glucagon. Then you get IV access on the way to the hospital."

Davi nodded to himself. Ortiz couldn't tell if the kid was genuinely studying or just nervous. Might have been both. Before he could say anything else, the radio crackled.

"Station Nine, you have a 10-45 at 218th and Roosevelt. Reports of an unresponsive male. Bystander says the subject fell outside a convenience store and hasn't gotten up. Over."

Martinez grabbed the clipboard and started scribbling. "Copy, dispatch. We're en route."

Ortiz turned onto Roosevelt Avenue, and the lights of the strip came into view—nail salons, check-cashing places, a Caribbean restaurant with hand-painted specials on the window, a bodega whose owner sat outside on a folding chair with a dog on a leash that was too short. The unresponsive male was lying on the sidewalk about ten feet from the bodega's entrance. A woman in a housecoat stood over him, holding a bag of ice.

"I was just coming out for my milk," she said to Martinez, by way of explanation. "He

was just lying there. I thought he was drunk at first."

The man was on his back, arms at his sides, eyes open. His skin had a grayish cast to it, but that wasn't unusual for street patients—people who lived outside or couldn't afford to turn the heat on. Martinez checked the pulse. Weak and fast. She checked his pupils. Dilated but reactive.

"He's breathing," she said to Ortiz. "But he's cold. Core temp's got to be low. How long has he been out here?"

The woman with the ice shrugged. "I came out maybe twenty minutes ago for the first time. Could be longer."

Ortiz worked quietly, starting a warm IV line and running a quick panel. "Glucose is normal," he said, frowning. "Not diabetic then. BP's borderline. No obvious trauma. No meds on him that I can find."

"He doesn't have a wallet?" Davi asked, checking the man's pockets.

"No wallet, no phone, no ID." Davi looked up. "No shoes, either."

That got everyone's attention. The man was barefoot, and the night was not the kind of night that encouraged going barefoot. The sidewalk was cold. The air was cold. His feet were not just cold—they had the waxy pallor of someone who had been exposed to the elements for a long time, maybe days.

"Could he be homeless?" Davi asked.

"Could be," Martinez said.

"But his glucose is normal and he's not hypothermic enough to explain this." Ortiz looked at Martinez. "What else could it be?"

She didn't answer right away. She was looking at his face again. She had thought the old man on Delancey Street had been staring through him earlier, but this man's eyes were different. They weren't glassy or unfocused. They were open and alert in a way that didn't match the rest of him—a body that looked like it had been down for hours with a mind that looked like it had just woken up.

"Help me turn him," she said.

They did a quick log roll. No wallet, as Davi had said, but also no signs of injury, no injection marks, no unusual bruising. Just a man in a threadbare coat with bare feet and a pulse that was too fast for how still he was.

"He needs to go to County," Ortiz said. "Let's get him on the stretcher."

As they lifted him, the man's head lolled to one side. Then, just before they cleared his head, he said something. His voice was hoarse, almost a whisper, but distinct.

"They're coming."

Martinez stopped. "What?"

The man's eyes moved across the sky, tracking something neither Martinez nor Davi nor Ortiz could see. "They're coming," he repeated. "They're all coming."

"Sir, can you tell me your name?"

He didn't answer. His pulse thinned out, became harder to find under Ortiz's fingers. By the time they loaded him into the rig, the monitor was showing a rhythm that was barely a rhythm—one long wobbling line that could mean anything or nothing.

County General was twelve minutes away. Ortiz drove with the siren on, a rising wail that sliced through the night. Martinez sat in the back, doing compressions—not the hard, fast compressions of a code, but the steady, rhythmic kind that kept blood moving through a heart that wasn't quite sure it wanted to keep beating. Davi held the IV bag and watched the monitor and tried not to look as scared as he probably looked.

They arrived at 2047. The ER bay was hot and bright and full of its own controlled chaos. Ortiz backed the stretcher to the doors, and three nurses appeared, rolling a bed out before they had even stopped moving. They transferred the man quickly, efficiently, and a doctor with reading glasses perched on the end of his nose listened to Martinez's report while scribbling on a chart.

"Unknown etiology, possible sepsis, possible exposure," Martinez said. She gave the man's vitals, the glucose reading, the odd dilation of the pupils, the thing he had said about people coming. The doctor nodded, but his eyes had already moved to the next patient.

"He'll get a workup," he said.

Martinez wrote her name and badge number on the transfer sheet, and they stepped out into the ambulance bay, where the night air hit them like a wall after the warmth of the hospital.

"Think he'll be okay?" Davi asked. He was still holding the clipboard, turning it over in his hands.

"He'll probably be fine," Martinez said. "They'll warm him up, run some labs, and he'll wake up tomorrow wondering why he's in a gown."

Ortiz was looking at his phone. He had a text from his daughter—a photo of her cat wearing a paper crown she'd made for a school project. He smiled at it and tucked the phone away.

"Thirty-minute debrief," Ortiz said. "Then we get back on the road."

They debriefed at a diner two blocks from the station, a place with vinyl booths and coffee that tasted like it had been on the burner since the morning shift. Ortiz ordered chili. Martinez had a salad she barely touched. Davi got eggs, which was fine because it was almost ten and eggs were still on the breakfast menu by some technicality that kept the place in business.

"Here's something I don't get," Davi said, cutting into his eggs. "The guy said 'they're coming.' Like, who?"

"Voices," Ortiz said, in a tone that meant he had heard this kind of thing before. "People who've been out in the cold too long, or half-delirious, they say stuff. It doesn't mean anything."

"He wasn't hypothermic, though," Martinez said. She was quiet about it, in the way she got quiet when something was sitting wrong in her mind. "His glucose was normal, his vitals were stable. He wasn't drunk. He wasn't on anything I could find. But his body was shutting down like he'd been—" She stopped.

"Like he'd been what?"

"Nothing." She picked at her salad. "Probably nothing. It was a long night, we're all tired."

Ortiz put down his fork. He looked at Martinez with the expression he reserved for moments when he thought she was holding something back and he wanted her to stop. "You were going to say something."

She looked at him. Then she looked at Davi. The diner was nearly empty—just a cook behind the counter, a truck driver nursing a cup of coffee in the corner, and a woman at the table by the window who was staring at her phone with an intensity that seemed personal.

"Like he'd been dead," Martinez said. "Not dying. Dead. And then something brought him back."

The silence that followed was the kind that settles over a table when people aren't sure whether to laugh or get up and leave.

Davi spoke first. "That's not a thing."

"Not in any protocol I've ever read," Ortiz said, and for a moment his voice carried the faintest edge of something that sounded almost like wonder.

Martinez stared at her coffee. "He said they're coming. I looked at the sky. I didn't see anything, but—"

"But the way he said it," she finished. "Like he was reporting the weather."

Outside the diner, a siren passed—someone else's siren, another crew, another call. The sound rose and fell and was gone. In the silence that followed, Davi looked at the window and, for just a second, the woman at the table by the glass had turned her head and was looking at them. Her eyes were wide and her mouth was open, and she was holding her phone in both hands like it was the only thing keeping her upright.

Then she looked back at her screen, and the moment broke.

They finished their food. They paid. They walked back to the station past a row of shuttered storefronts, their boots echoing on the sidewalk, the night settling around them like something with weight and patience. Above them, the streetlights hummed—just barely, at a frequency that sat right on the edge of hearing. If you weren't paying attention, you'd miss it. If you were, it was enough to make your teeth ache and your thoughts go strange at the edges.

The next call came at 2214. A welfare check in Corona—someone hadn't opened their curtains in two days, and the neighbor's dog wouldn't stop barking. It was the kind of call that could be nothing, and usually was, but Martinez felt the weight of it in her chest as Ortiz turned the corner and the block came into view.

She looked at the curtains. They were still closed. The dog next door was barking, yes, but not with the frantic energy she expected. It was a low, steady sound, almost rhythmic, as if the dog had found a frequency in the dark and was keeping time with it.

"Let's go," Martinez said.

They knocked on the door. No answer. Ortiz tried the handle, and to his surprise, it turned.

The apartment was dim, lit only by the thin line of light bleeding in from the hallway behind them. The air inside was warm and close and smelled faintly of something organic—not rot, not exactly, but the suggestion of rot, the way a bruise suggests violence. Martinez flipped the light switch. Nothing happened.

"Power could be out in this part of the building," Ortiz said, pulling his flashlight from his belt.

The beam cut through the dark and revealed a small studio: a futon, a desk covered in unopened mail, a kitchen with a single bowl in the sink. Everything was in order. Everything was neat. Everything was exactly as you'd expect a single person's apartment to look if that person had gone to sleep and simply never woken up.

Except the bed.

The sheets on the futon were pulled to one side, indented with the shape of a body. The impression was still there, still holding, as if the person had just stepped away for a moment and might be back any second.

There was a moment—a brief, held-breath moment—when all three of them stood in the doorway and looked at that empty shape in the bed, that outline of a person who had been here and was not here anymore.

"Check the rest of the apartment," Martinez said.

Ortiz moved through the kitchen. Davi checked the bathroom. Martinez approached the bed, and as she got closer, she noticed something on the nightstand that made her stop in her tracks. There was a phone, face down, and next to it, a glass of water, still full.

The phone was charged. The screen lit up when she flipped it over, and on the lock screen was a reminder, set for three days ago:

Buy milk. Call Mom. Don't forget.

Don't forget what, Martinez wondered. Don't forget what?

From the hallway, she heard Ortiz clear his throat. From the bathroom, Davi said something under his breath—something that didn't sound like English, or at least not any version of English she recognized.

She walked to the bathroom doorway and looked in. Davi was standing over the toilet with his flashlight aimed down, and he was trembling, and she didn't need to see what he was looking at to know that whatever it was had pulled the ground out from under

him.

"Ortiz," she called. "Ortiz, get in here."

Ortiz appeared behind her, and when he looked into the bathroom, the expression on his face was the one she had never seen before—not fear, exactly, but something adjacent to it. The look of a man who has just realized that the rules he's been operating under are no longer in effect.

The toilet was full of blood. Not fresh blood—old blood, dark and almost black, the kind that had been sitting for days. But the water around it was still, undisturbed. And at the bottom of the bowl, something was moving.

It was small. Fingers, maybe. Or roots. Or something that didn't have a name yet.

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