

Oklahoma, USA

#26

# AMERICAN CHILLERS

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THERE IS NO CURE!



#25: Oklahoma  
Outbreak

BY JONATHAN RAND

# 1

Monday at school was just like any other day in Tulsa, Oklahoma. The bell rang at exactly eight-thirty. I had exactly two minutes to get to my classroom.

But in those two minutes, something happened that would set the stage for an unbelievable series of events . . . turning an otherwise normal day into what could only be described as a horrifying roller coaster ride of terror.

“Tricia! Hey, Tricia! Wait up!”

When I heard my name being called, I turned. Of course, I'd already recognized the voice. It was Carlos Marcos, a friend I've known since first grade.

The hall was packed with dozens of other chattering, laughing students, scurrying like ants to their classrooms. Carlos was weaving through the hoard, snaking around kids as he made his way toward me. I took a few steps to the side so I wouldn't be standing in the middle of the hallway and leaned against a locker.

Carlos came up to me. He had his backpack slung over his shoulder, and his shoes were untied, like usual. Like usual, I had to remind him to tie them. One of these days he was going to trip, fall, and land square on his face.

"Hey," Carlos said.

"Hey, yourself," I replied, and I pointed to his shoes.

"Oh, yeah," he said, and he knelt down to tie them. While he worked with the laces, he looked up at me and spoke. "Did you read chapter seven?" he asked. His eyes were wide with excitement.

I nodded. "I'm way past that," I said. "In fact, I'm all the way up to chapter fifteen. The book is really

freaky.”

“I can’t wait for book club tonight,” Carlos said, getting to his feet.

“Me, too,” I replied. “I can’t wait to finish the book. Last night, I read beneath the covers with a flashlight, and my mom and dad never knew it.”

Carlos and I are in a book club with ten other students. All of us love to read, and with the help of Mrs. Candor, the school media specialist, we formed an after school book club. Every month, we choose a book for all of us to read, on our own, and we get together every Monday after school to discuss it. It’s a blast. Not only do we read some really cool books, but it’s fun to get together with friends to talk about the story we’re reading. Mrs. Candor usually brings snacks like cookies or cupcakes, which is cool.

Just then, Tommy Gersky, carrying his blue folder with homework, emerged from the throng of hustling students. He’s in our book club, too.

“Hey, guys,” he said.

“Hi, Tommy,” I replied.

“How’s it going?” Carlos asked.

“Cool as butter,” Tommy replied with a wink. That’s a phrase he always says, and he always winks

when he says it. When things were going well, he always said everything was as 'cool as butter.' Which is a little strange, being that butter isn't always cool.

Regardless, things might have been as 'cool as butter' at that moment, but in less than five seconds, 'cool as butter' was going to turn into icy terror . . . and it all started when a girl accidentally bumped into Tommy.

# 2

Tommy was just about to say something, when he was suddenly knocked forward. He dropped his folder, and papers spilled out all over the floor. He snapped around angrily to see Brianna Carson. She's also part of our book club.

She had a shocked look on her face. "I'm so sorry," she said. "I wasn't looking."

"Watch where you're going," Tommy snapped. He rubbed his arms and shoulders like he was brushing something off. "That's how cooties are spread," he said. "I've probably got cooties all over me, now."

"I don't have cooties!" Brianna said. She

sounded hurt.

“That’s because you gave them all to me,” Tommy taunted, still brushing the imaginary cooties from his arms and shoulders.

“I said I was sorry,” Brianna said. She stormed off, vanishing into a sea of other students.

“That wasn’t very nice,” I said to Tommy.

“Yeah,” Carlos agreed.

“Hey, she ran into me,” Tommy replied as he knelt down to gather up his papers and folder. “Besides . . . I was only kidding.”

“Still, it wasn’t very nice,” I said.

Tommy was indifferent. “She’ll get over it,” he replied. “It’s not like I punched her, or anything.”

Now, Tommy isn’t a bad kid, but sometimes, he says things without thinking. I think everyone does, once in a while. But he doesn’t realize little comments like that can hurt people’s feelings.

Regardless, the matter was dropped. Tommy headed to his classroom, Carlos went to his, and I went to mine. We’re all in sixth grade, but we all have different classrooms. It would have been fun if all three of us had the same teacher, but we didn’t. I had Mr. Billings. He was really nice, but he always gave us way

too much homework . . . especially on the weekends.

The day passed like any other. I had lunch with Tommy and Carlos in the cafeteria, and I went to gym class and the library. When the bell rang and classes got out, I was relieved that Mr. Billings hadn't given us any homework at all. It would have been hard, being that I had book club to go to, which usually lasts a couple of hours.

It was three o'clock. Book club started in thirty minutes. Usually, I meet Tommy and Carlos in the hall next to my locker, which is where I found Tommy waiting for me.

"I forgot my book at home," he said, "and they don't have any extra copies in the library."

I shrugged. "It doesn't matter. We won't be doing any reading. We'll just be talking about the book. And Mrs. Candor told me earlier that she brought us chocolate chip cookies!"

"Cool as butter," Tommy said.

Carlos arrived a couple minutes later. His shoes were untied again, and he looked puzzled. Worried, even.

"Something's wrong," he said as he walked up to us.



“Of course something’s wrong,” Tommy said.  
“Your shoes are untied again.”

Carlos looked at his feet and knelt down to tie them.

“No,” he said, looking up as his fingers worked the laces. “I mean, with Brianna. I just saw her on my way here. She was in the library, and she looked sick.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “Like, she caught a cold or something?”

Carlos finished tying his shoes and stood. He shook his head. “It’s worse than that,” he said. “I only saw her for a moment. She looked really pale, and there were dark circles around her eyes. And another kid in our book club—Wayne—he looked sick, too. I think they might have the flu. I hope it’s not going around.”

Carlos was right about one thing: Brianna and Wayne were sick, all right.

But it wasn’t the flu.

It wasn’t a cold or anything like it. In fact, the illness was caused by something that, up until then, I thought had been made-up.

A joke.

But it wasn’t.

The illness was real, and so was the cause of it.

*Cooties.*

We didn't know it at the time, but the dangerous cootie infection had already spread to other students in our school, and there was no stopping it.

The Oklahoma Outbreak had begun.

# 3

We chatted in the hall for a moment, listening to the sounds of the school emptying: slamming lockers, laughter, talking, shoes scuffing the tile floor, friends calling out to friends. There was an announcement on the school public address system, saying that the Monday afternoon book club would begin in twenty five minutes in the library.

“If Brianna and Wayne are sick,” I said, “they’ll miss book club.”

“That means more chocolate chip cookies for us,” Tommy replied, rubbing his belly. “I love chocolate chip cookies.”

“But what if they’re *really* sick?” I wondered aloud. “What if they have to go to the hospital? That would be awful.”

“I don’t know where they went,” Carlos said, “but I’m sure they won’t be at book club. I’ll bet they went home. They looked like they crawled out of their own coffins.”

“Come on,” I said. “Let’s head for the library. It’s early, but the rest of the group is probably waiting. If the rest of the group is there, maybe we can start early.”

“And start packing in the cookies,” Tommy said, rubbing his belly again. He sniffed the air. “I can almost smell them from here.”

We walked down the hall. Carlos carried his backpack, and I carried my books. Tommy’s folder was tucked beneath his arm.

“It’s weird to be here after school has let out,” I said. “It’s so quiet.”

The halls were empty, and the lights had been turned out. A few teachers had gone home for the day, but a few remained in their classrooms. A few pieces of paper were on the floor, but the custodian, Mr. Jones, would have the place cleaned up soon.

And the only sound we heard was the scuffing of our shoes on the tile floor.

“It’s almost spooky,” Carlos said. “The school is completely different when no one else is around.”

“Hey, that would make a good book,” Tommy said. “Someone could write a story about a haunted school.”

“Why don’t you write it?” I asked.

“Maybe I will,” Tommy replied. “I’ll write a book about the three of us being in our school with ghosts. I’ll make it super-scary, just like the book we’re reading right now for book club. I’ll make it the scariest book anyone’s ever read.”

Which, of course, was unlikely. There wasn’t a single book written that could be as scary as what was about to happen to us in the library.

# 4

There were a couple of things that should have alerted us to the fact that something was wrong.

First, the lights were off in the library. Usually, they're left on for book club. Our library is really cool, too. There are paintings on the walls, featuring characters from popular books. A bunch of stuffed animals sit on the bookshelves. It's not cold and stale, like some libraries. It's colorful and lively.

Today, however, the library was dark. We could make out the silhouettes and shadows of tables and bookshelves, but the entire library was gloomy and cheerless.

Second, there wasn't anyone else around. Usually, there are at least one or two members of our book club waiting for the rest of us to arrive. Today, no one was in sight. Not even Mrs. Candor.

"This is strange," I said, trying the library door. I thought it might be locked, but it wasn't. I pulled it open and stepped inside. Carlos and Tommy followed.

"Hello?" I called out. "Anyone here?"

"Even Mrs. Candor's office is dark," Carlos said.

"Great," Tommy said, rubbing his hands together. "Let's find those chocolate chip cookies and dig in."

"We're not eating any cookies until everyone gets here," I said. "Besides . . . I don't even smell any cookies. Maybe Mrs. Candor isn't even here, yet."

I reached out and turned the lights on. Shadows scattered and vanished, and the characters and creatures painted on the walls came to life in a sea of bright, happy colors and wide smiles. On the far wall, an enormous red dog sat, grinning at a small girl no bigger than his paw. On the wall to my right, a happy monkey rode a bicycle, while wild things paraded about, dancing and prancing and creating a rumpus. On the left wall, there was a painting of a plump

yellow bear with his head in a honey jar. Next to him was a family of mice in a leaf, floating in a river. There was also a painting of a small boy standing atop an enormous peach. I don't know who created the art work, but it sure made the library look cool.

"It's odd that no one is here, yet," Carlos said, looking around.

"Maybe they changed the meeting place and didn't tell us," Tommy said.

I shook my head and pulled a lock of hair away from my face. "No," I replied. "The announcement just a few minutes ago said that book club was meeting here in the library in twenty five minutes."

I looked at the clock on the wall. It was almost ten minutes after three. Mrs. Candor should still be in her office.

*This is really strange, I thought. This place is completely empty.*

We heard a noise and turned around. The library door was opening . . . but it wasn't Mrs. Candor. It wasn't one of the kids in our book club.

*It was a zombie!*



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