

Charlotte Ambrose has suffered from an terrible disease since childhood. A famous geneticist takes her case, but even worse things happen to Charlotte, and finally there is a horrible, unexplainable death in the medical team.

They Called It Zebra

By Emma Aragon

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BOOK 5

THEY CALLED IT ZEBRA

A St. John's Hospital Mystery

EMMA ARAGON

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Chapter 1

Charlotte lay curled in her favorite, deeply comfortable easy chair, hoping the pain would ease up. She pulled a warm blanket around her shoulders...the bright-blue blanket knitted years ago by her dear, deceased sister. She had a fantasy that MaryBeth's love would envelop her like the blanket, but the pain blasted unrelentingly against the bones of her face. It had a sort of rhythm, so sharp she could taste it. Bitter, sometimes acid. Even with her eyes closed, there were lightning flashes in the corners of her eyes, and when she opened them, she could only see dimly through the dark-blue mist that swarmed across her corneas.

Whenever she had a migraine like this, she glimpsed a dark corridor with a black door at the end of it. It led to Death, and there was where she wanted to go. She knew it wasn't healthy thinking like this, and she forced herself to focus on her wristwatch. It was 4:30 a.m. Dr. Kang had told her to call anytime. She hesitated for an instant before touching his number on her phone.

"Can you wait fifteen minutes?" she heard him say softly.

"Yes," she answered just as softly, her fingernails biting bloodily into her arm. "So sorry. I probably can handle this by myself."

"I can meet you at my office," he said.

Oddly, although the pain continued knifing through her head, she felt better, just hearing his voice. “I think I can handle this by myself. I saw the black door and just got really scared for a moment.”

“Okay. Good luck. Remember, I’m here.”

“Thanks, Dr. Kang.” She ended the call thinking, he can’t do a thing for me. No one can do a thing for me. It’s all a huge unknown. She suspected that was why she often thought of the “dark door.” The final escape. It was because nobody knew what was the matter with her...nobody. Sometimes she felt entrapped in a giant ice-cube, barely visible and never heard or understood.

As she made her way down the carpeted hall to the downstairs bathroom, her ankles giving that strange, uncomfortable “pop” with every step, she thought about these weird symptoms...when they had begun. She remembered seeing a photo of herself as a one-year-old, lying on the bed with her legs up flat on each side beside her, as if her toes were gleefully reaching past her ears for the top of her head. On the photo, no pain was evident on her laughing, baby face. But these migraines...they had started when she was ten years old.

As she grew older, she stopped crying and complaining so much about the pain. It just made her mother cry, too, and her dad would squeeze his eyes shut and leave the room. And the doctors, one after another, would pat her gently, stick needles in her arms, run her through noisy machines and then pat her gently again. She could see the sorrow and puzzles in their eyes. They felt sorry for her, but they couldn’t figure out what

was wrong with her, and they didn't know what to do. She almost felt bad for them. As the image of the dark door flickered in front of her again, she thought that maybe the image was caused not by the pain but by the futility of finding out what was affecting her.

Now here she was, so many years later, with the immediate symptoms of a migraine slamming behind her eyes, pushing against the bones of her face. But she could forge through this one. She was sure of it. How could she have a life at all if she didn't clench her teeth, her toes, her mind, and somehow force herself forward? She worked at a financial company where she had a lovely office with a window overlooking the depths of a forest. The swaying green patterns on the wall from the sunlight through the trees always made her feel a bit better. She'd make it today, too.

The curving stairs to the bedroom with their beautifully patterned carpet were a challenge, but she made it. She walked into the still-dark bedroom and laid her hand on her husband's shoulder.

"I'm getting ready for work," she said softly, and he rolled over.

"Oh no," he said drowsily. "I can tell...you have one of those damned headaches again."

"I'll make it through today," she reassured him. "They've been worse."

She washed herself carefully at the sink. The bathroom was one of the rooms they'd remodeled in the house, and it was

small but charming, with a sexy walk-in shower for two in gray limestone and with two benches. She had loved showering in here with Gerald, but then she'd developed dizziness and nausea when standing under the running water, so now she took what she called a "French Bath."

It was safer to wash herself at one of the two sinks using her favorite soap, something pink and fragrant, although many times she couldn't smell it, or it smelled like something totally strange...like sawdust, for instance, or ashes. Screaming her way silently through the crackling pain in her head, which was slowly increasing, she quietly got dressed...the compression stockings whose shining white fabric looked great with her silver flats (they gave her feet room to swell if they needed to swell), her wrist braces, and other braces she felt she might need this morning.... and then her silver thumb splint, which kept her thumb from tipping back against her arm and looked quite nice, like a piece of jewelry. She loved the splint because Gerald had bought it for her for Christmas. How many women got silver thumb splints as a gift? she wondered with grim humor.

By the time she pulled into her parking place at Tanner's Finances, she knew she wouldn't make it through the day. It had been a mistake to try. She was lucky she had gotten this far, she thought dimly. she could hardly see through the sparks and odd colors in her eyes. She tried to keep from staggering from the elevator to her office, using the back door off the hall. As she entered the back lobby of the firm, there stood Janelle, her business partner.

“My God, Charlotte, you look ghastly,” Janelle said, easing Charlotte into the wing chair. “I really don’t think you should try to push through today. In fact, I think you should go to the hospital.”

“Oh no. Please.” Charlotte tried to keep the tears safely inside. “All they do is try to figure out what’s the matter with me, testing me and testing me, and they’re wrong. They’re *always* wrong.”

“Yes, but at least they can give you something to ease your pain,” Janelle pleaded.

“They try, but it’s hardly ever possible. I just have to live through this.”

“No, you don’t,” Janelle said firmly. “Come on. I’ll help you down to my car. We’re going to St. John’s.”

It wasn’t far to St. John’s. She’d been here before, and the only thing that they gave her that sometimes helped the shattering pain in her head was morphine or Dilaudid...and even that didn’t always relieve her nausea. The nurse who admitted her in the emergency room already knew her; that’s how many times Charlotte had been to this hospital.

“Come, dear,” the nurse said, carefully settling her into a wheelchair. “We’ll get you a room. I’ve already called Dr. Garrison.”

She was discouraged to have him on her case again, even though he was the hospital’s top neurologist. Charlotte hazily wondered if he sometimes felt discouraged because he couldn’t help her. Frankly, she was surprised that she was admitted.

Usually when she showed up in the ER with one pain or another, she was just given something that would temporarily make her feel better and then sent home until the next emergency. She probably was admitted today because the nurse, Andrea, knew her by now. But she already knew what Dr. Garrison was going to be able to do for her: nothing.

Bill Garrison walked down the broad, shining hall to the elevators and punched “up.” So, he was going to see Charlotte Ambrose again. This time she was admitted. He definitely had to talk to Andrea. She was an excellent nurse but too much at the mercy of a patient. She was too soft-hearted, he decided... a good quality in a nurse, but it could mess up everyone else’s entire schedule for the day. There were rules in the emergency room that had to be followed unless a patient was dying right in front of your eyes. As for Charlotte, nobody could figure out what she suffered from or what caused it. She had so many symptoms and histories of symptoms that sometimes he threw himself into his office chair and held his head in his hands. He wanted to help that poor woman, but he simply couldn’t, and it made him feel discouraged and a little angry. He knew he was a good doctor. Why couldn’t he figure this out? The elevator pinged and he entered it, punching number four.

The clean, bright hall stretched quiet and normal to the far window. He entered Room 435 and saw Charlotte on the bed, her face pale and tense around the mouth and eyes...signs of pain, he knew.

“Hey, how are you doing?” he asked her, laying his hand lightly on her shoulder. The monitor showed an elevated heartbeat and a higher-than-normal blood pressure. All signs of pain and stress. “This is a bad one, huh?” he asked, checking the bag of fluid that was running into her IV.

“I’ll make it,” she said through pulled, tense lips. “I just have to get through it.”

“We’ll give you some more of this magic stuff to help you,” Dr. Garrison said, preparing a syringe of morphine for the IV bag. “You’ll be ready to go home soon.”

But to what? she thought hopelessly. Just wait a few days and something else will creep up on her body: dislocate her shoulder so that she could scarcely breathe or begin stinging in her bladder like smoldering embers...another urinary tract infection...or a rib would be out of place, like the morning when it almost thrust through her skin.

Before Dr. Garrison left the room she pulled herself together to speak. “Have you...have you found another doctor who might be able to diagnose whatever I have?” she managed to say.

Dr. Garrison turned around, pulled up a chair and sat down beside her. “Actually, I have. We have a new neurologist in the hospital who might be interested in your case. There is also a rather famous geneticist I met at a conference last week who would like to take a look at you. She’s working at the National

Clinic for Rare Diseases right now, but she would like to study you, if you permit. So, you're not alone in this."

How odd, Charlotte thought. I *feel* alone. I feel discarded and invisible. Doctors draw blood, run me through an MRI or different CT scans, and all the tests come back "normal."

How many times had she heard, "I wouldn't worry too much. Here is something for your pain...or here is something for that infection. You'll be fine." But she wasn't fine, and she knew it. She felt it. How could a body that had endured twenty-three surgeries be called "fine?" Sometimes she felt a dark, hot wave of anger sweep through her, and she simply wanted to scream at the person who was calmly pulling a vial of blood out of her arm.

"Please," she wanted to beg. "Please figure out what's wrong with me." But it wasn't anybody's fault. Until medical science could understand this disease, meanwhile, she would just have to clench her teeth, accept what the doctors said and offered, and endure.

A few hours went by, with nurses treading in and out on their soft-soled shoes, checking her monitors, checking her medication. Finally, she was able to dig out her cellphone and call Gerald.

"Hey, baby," he said. "How's it going?"

"Pretty bad," she said. "They admitted me at St. John's, but I'll be coming home when the shift changes, I'm pretty sure."

“I’ll pick you up. Just hang tight.” There was a silence, and then he asked, “Did they figure out anything about what ails you?”

“No. Of course not.” She heard the edge in her voice. By now, after all these years, he ought to stop asking if they could figure out what she had.

“Sorry, honey. I know this is frustrating. Just call me when you’re ready to come home.”

“Bye,” she said, but he’d already hung up. It was hard to stay bright and happy, she told herself, when you hurt every living minute of every living day. As she lay back and tried to let the morphine relax her, she remembered when she was in eighth grade...how popular she was because in gymnastic class she could do amazing things, like incredible backbends and other snaky things with her body that almost frightened her gym teacher.

“Doesn’t that hurt?” her teacher would ask anxiously.

“No, it’s great!” she’d say because she knew her school was going to win the gymnastic prize.

But actually, it was beginning to hurt, just a bit at first, especially in her shoulders, but she told herself, doesn’t everything hurt a little, when you’re doing such unbelievable movements? And they won prize after prize, scheduling her to do her amazing feats at the very last of every competition, when the gasps from the packed bleachers were audible. She was proud and happy, and everyone treated her like someone

special. No one thought she was freakish until a few years later when she realized that she was, at least, sort of “different.”

One thing that she couldn’t hide from her friends was the trouble she had simply being outside in the sun. She could never figure it out: like all her friends, including her, she wanted a deep walnut suntan, but as soon as sunlight struck her, she would redden with a mysterious rash. It embarrassed her; her friends thought it was something she had to pay for the incredible talent she had.

“It’s okay,” she would tell everyone. “I just have some kind of allergy, darn it! Just go on without me.” Judy, her best friend, offered her all sorts of sunscreens, but they never helped. “Please go to the beach with everyone else,” she said to Judy. “I’m just weird.”

Little did she know at that time just how weird she really was.

Oh God, how her head hurt! Janelle had once told her that when she couldn’t relax and go to sleep, she named every guy she’d slept with. Charlotte found that funny and a little shocking, but her own method consisted of counting all the surgeries she’d had, starting with the removal of a wisdom tooth at age nineteen. That was pretty normal. A lot of people had surgery to remove wisdom teeth. But how many people had nasal valve repair or cervix removal, or even a “horseshoe kidney,” to name a few? Why her? Why *her*? She felt that beginning prickle of anger that she tried daily to overcome. Maybe counting surgeries wasn’t such a good idea, she thought as she fell into a light doze.

Dr. Marka Hasheem had one eye busy on a microscope in the Genetics Lab when her phone rang its little chime.

“Yes?” she answered, a crease deepening between her eyes. She hated being bothered while doing research.

“Marka, it’s Bill Garrison. Remember that woman with the never-ending list of symptoms that you were interested in? She’s on the fourth floor of St. John’s right now with a raging migraine, and I thought, if you could get away, you might like to poke around over here and see what you can learn about her problems.”

“Hmm. Well.” Marka paused, thinking. “Is there any chance we could keep her overnight? I’m pretty busy right now, and I’d like to do a thorough workup on her.”

“Sure. Now that the pandemic is pretty much over, we have a few more beds.”

“Okay. Just see if you can get her the room for tonight, because I don’t want to leave this project right now. I’m making real progress.”

“Right. We’ll keep her here overnight, and we’ll see you in the morning. Any equipment needed?”

“No. If I need anything, I’ll bring my own.”

“Excellent.” Bill Garrison ended the call, and Marka finished her examination, making list after list of notes on her laptop. After studying genes most of her educated life, she’d decided never to have children. Who knew what was hiding in

her body, waiting to harm another human being? She didn't think she could bear it. She would much rather study genetics.

She could hear the heightened sound of footsteps in the hospital...the sound of some of the staff and doctors leaving for home. It was time to end the day. It was hard to stop with so much to learn, so much to do. She looked around the lab, its tables crowded with microscopes, vials, jars of special fluids, the walls covered with white boards that had old and new knowledge scribbled on them, the old-fashioned fluorescent lighting on the ceiling. She loved working here. At forty-six years of age, she was glad that, with good luck, she had many years ahead of her to study. She'd already come far, even with the unfair competition from the male students. Despite more women joining the ranks of science, she was still reminded often enough that she was female. She closed her laptop, gathered up her papers, and happened to catch her reflection in the night-glazed window, looking tired and disheveled. She shook out her straight, shining black hair, clipping it neatly at her neck.

On the way to her car, she called Bill Garrison. "Did you get a bed for your patient with the strange symptoms?"

"I did. I also informed her husband that she is staying overnight. He seemed relieved. It must be tough to live with someone who hurts all the time and whose bones practically become unhinged at the slightest pressure."

"There are several diseases that cause that, but this poor woman seems to have every bodily problem there ever was. That's what piques my interest. I'm sure it's a genetic problem,

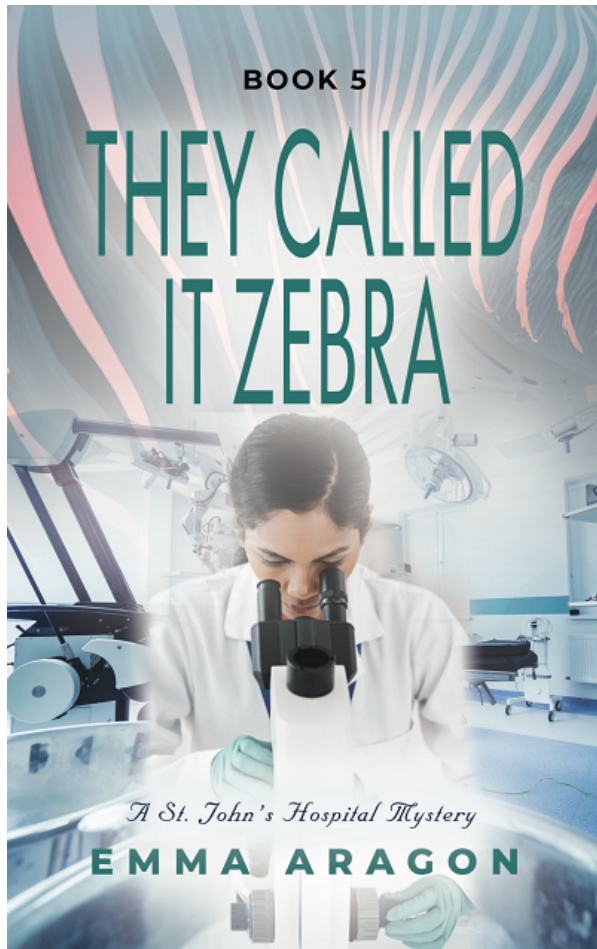
but I, myself, have never run across it, and that's why I want to learn more about it...on a live person who is suffering from this."

The elevator arrived. "You'll have plenty to study," Garrison said. "I hope you have a tough heart."

"Do you?" she asked him.

"Have a tough heart? Well, yes, it's necessary. Otherwise, I'd go nuts...or need a therapist, for sure."

"Therapists aren't so bad," Marka murmured as she stepped off into the garage. Dr. Garrison was renowned for his neurological skill and knowledge, but sometimes she wondered if he really *saw* his patient...saw the pain and fear. Well, now *she* would be there, studying a case that interested her greatly...even excited her. She felt that, with some luck, perhaps she'd be the first one to identify this disease...or at least the first one to identify it in this woman, who probably had been suffering for years. This would be a big step for the people who might be suffering from this disease. At least they'd know what they had. The adrenaline of having a chance to work on a strange new case kept her up until almost 1:00 a.m.



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