

# **And Then You Die . . . Short Guide**

## **And Then You Die . . . by Iris Johansen**

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# Characters

Though Johansens's story is driven more by solving a mystery and discovering information than it is by character development, her characters are more than just plot devices. The protagonist, Bess Grady, is a compassionate, caring young woman who has seen a great deal of the horrors the world has to offer. She is beginning to think she may need a change in her profession or in her place in the world. She is upset by the killings at the orphanage, but it is a personal horror, since she was considering adopting a young child killed there. Her desire to bring the events she witnesses to the public eye is frustrated when her film is confiscated during her stay in the hospital in Croatia, recovering from what she believes to be a bout of the flu. When she finds that the killings in the orphanage and the mass death she witnesses in Mexico are related, she becomes driven by a need to take revenge on the person who is responsible. Her need for revenge is offset by her need to protect the baby girl, Josie, the sole survivor from Tenajo, Mexico. Bess's feelings for Josie help her to maintain her hold on her humanity. Bess is headstrong and wants to make her own decisions, decisions which are not always in her best interest but are governed by what she sees as right and wrong. The people around her discover that she will not submit to their decisions when those decisions are contrary to what she sees as her duty to the people who matter to her. When she is told that she is immune to the anthrax virus, that her blood may be the key to the development of an antidote, she does not hesitate to use this information to manipulate the government employees to fulfill her goals.

Emily is a pediatric surgeon and a wife and mother. Her husband and daughter are on a trip to Canada, so she coerces Bess into allowing her to accompany her to Mexico.

Emily is determined to make Bess relax and rest. She wants to spend the time they are there trying to convince Bess that she should consider a change in profession and life style. Her death is a rallying point for Bess, helping her to do what she feels she must to revenge Emily's death.

The CIA agent Kaldak has managed to retain some sense of his humanity in spite of having to perform acts that are inhuman and illegal. He is driven by his need to save the United States from the virus he knows will cause much death if allowed to spread among the population. He also realizes that the government will be faced with a threat of blackmail that will not cancel the threat of biological warfare used as terrorism. He realizes that the unique delivery system for the virus—twenty-dollar bills—will make it irresistible to the general public. Kaldak is the predictable hard-bitten, do-what-must-be-done character, the one who will eventually give in to his better instincts and save the country.

Colonel Rafael Esteban, the primary villain, is a psychopath who thinks he is completely evil but cannot always make the decisions that would prove this. A minor army officer, he dreams of becoming rich and powerful. Driven by greed himself, he believes that greed drives the human race.



He experiments with various forms of a deadly anthrax virus, delivering it in a form calculated to be irresistible to anyone above the age of two years—money.

The baby, Josie, is a focus for Bess, giving her a reason to continue her life as the death of Emily gives her a reason to continue the hunt for Esteban. She is the symbol of life, the symbol of hope that people can eventually work for one another's good.

# Social Concerns

The outbreak of an epidemic or a plague that cannot be stopped has been a national concern since the mid-1970s.

Biotechnology is a new and growing field.

Plants and animals that have been genetically engineered make headlines in the early twenty-first century. The fear of terrorism has replaced the fear of a nuclear attack in the eyes of many Americans. Evil and greed seem to pervade the world. The United States, as a world power and one of the wealthiest countries ever to exist, becomes a target for terrorism from other countries and from within all too frequently. The government organizations responsible for stemming this terrorism seem at times to believe that any means, whether morally or legally correct, is justifiable if the end result is a safer America. These concerns are all at issue in *And Then You Die . . .* by Iris Johansen.

*And Then You Die . . .* is a story about the possibility of a virus being used against the population of various cities in the United States as a form of terrorism and blackmail.

The American people find random terrorism to be incomprehensible. Why would any group or individual attack people at random, simply because those people live in the United States? The American philosophy of live and let live is not a part of the belief system prevalent in some other societies. It is often interpreted as a general weakness in the American people, leaving the population and government ripe for exploitation. The organizations in the government responsible for maintaining the safety of the general public work under such a blanket of secrecy that at times the leaders and operatives can appear to disregard the laws and ideals that define America. In this story, the CIA is aware of the threat and is working to contain the danger, using as one way of reducing the risk the production of an antitoxin. Enough antitoxin available on short notice would negate the threat of attack.

Bess Grady is the key to the production of the antitoxin, since she has a natural immunity to the virus. Undercover agent Kaldak and the CIA are aware of her importance to the research to find the antitoxin being done by the Center for Disease Control, using samples of her blood. Kaldak is required to "treat Bess as if she were a lab animal. To hell with what she felt or thought.

To hell with individual freedom, think of the public good. Use her." Ramsey, Kaldak's CIA boss, is willing to make decisions that infringe upon Bess's individual rights until he must account for them to people higher in the government, namely the president.

He is concerned that if he tells the president that the country is in danger from contaminated money without proof of when and where the terrorists plan to strike that he will lose his credibility and his job. Without that proof, he must also consider Bess's wishes.



Bess is a photojournalist who has photographed trouble spots all over the world.

Her assignment in Croatia is worse than usual, however, since it involves an orphanage and many dead children. The children appear to have been hacked to death.

Blood is everywhere. Bess is determined to take photographs of the carnage, hoping the pictures will influence world opinion and help stop the violence done to children in many parts of the world. When she becomes ill while still in Croatia and has her film confiscated, she decides she needs a change in her life. She does not know her survival is because of her immunity to the virus being tested on the people in a village in Croatia. After returning to the United States, she accepts an assignment for a travel magazine to photograph a small village in Mexico.

Colonel Rafael Esteban thinks that he has found the perfect weapon to use against any group of people, counting on greed to do the work. He is correct when he chooses paper money as the most irresistible delivery system imaginable. By permeating money with a deadly anthrax virus and threatening to release the money into the population, Esteban feels he can hold any nation hostage. If the people are told of the threat, the economic system will collapse. If they are not told, he can destroy the population in any city of his choosing. He thinks he can blackmail the world, beginning with the United States. Bess's immunity to the disease could be his undoing.

Terrorism and blackmail seem to Esteban to be the combination that would be to his benefit. His greed overrides all other considerations, except the thrill of winning over his comrades and his enemies. He cannot resist taunting Bess when he talks with her on the telephone after he has lured her to New Orleans. He is thrilled when he blows up the helicopter with Habin, his Near East confederate, in it. He must have the sense that he is in control, that he wields the power, first over individuals and then governments.

## Techniques

Johansen uses "a leaner, faster-paced prose . . . to enhance the thriller-like atmosphere," according to Jo Ann Vicarel, writing for *Library Journal*. From the first chapter, short, clipped sentences, often only one word, move the reader quickly down the page. The momentum generated by the ability to read each page rapidly adds to the action of the story. The characters move across several countries, beginning in Europe, going across Mexico, and ending in the United States. By not giving any of these places much local color, Johansen leaves the impression of rapid movement from place to place, with her protagonist uninterested in the local scenery. Perhaps Bess is so focused on her goals and problems she does not notice the changes of scene. The danger of a terrorist attack overrides other considerations. Even in New Orleans, where Bess is trying to appear unconcerned by continuing her usual daily routine of taking pictures, the local color is missing. The urgency to apprehend the villain before he can kill more people, using Bess as bait, is allowed to overshadow a sense of place.

Throughout the story, Johansen has used what a reviewer in *Publishers Weekly* called "tidbits from the last few years' headlines (the latest HIV research, the Ebola virus, Saddam Hussein, the Balkan war) in a suspenseful, if preposterous, plot full of murders, narrow escapes, chases and explosions." These ground the story in time and place, adding credibility. Bess and Kaldak are saving a United States familiar to the reader.

# Themes

The dangers of terrorism come in many forms. Random acts of violence have become a way of life in many places around the world. America has had a number of terrorist attacks since the late 1970s—some from groups from other countries, some from within. Random violence is always met with feelings of outrage and sympathy from the general public. The government entities responsible for the safety of the nation do all they can to minimize these attacks, recognizing that one form the attack might take is biological. Called bioterrorism, the use of a disease-producing virus or germ is well within the spectrum of terrorist acts.

Control of biological warfare, one form of which has become bioterrorism, has been studied and discussed among many nations since the 1960s. A formal treaty was signed in 1972, prohibiting the production of biological weapons of mass destruction.

Concern has been ongoing since that time, with a number of studies documenting the opinions of many experts and others about the readiness of the United States to deal with such a crisis.

The Journal of Environmental Health reports that in May 2000, an exercise called Top Off was conducted in the Denver area to measure the reaction of various government agencies to the threat of a bioterrorist attack on a public event. Supposedly, an airborne virus causing flu-like or pneumonia symptoms is released, with actors reporting to various hospital emergency rooms.

The response time of government bodies who would deal with such an event were evaluated, "including communication among agencies, response time, crowd and riot control, efficiency, organization, emergency preparedness and law enforcement." An analysis of the data collected is not yet available, but the study underlines concern for the problem. The Journal of the American Medical Association, JAMA, reports that Congress has given "a green light to the National Guard's first 10 Civil Support Teams. All are staffed, trained, and equipped. They should be on call sometime this summer [2000] to help local authorities respond to possible terrorist use of weapons of mass destruction." Biological weapons fall under this category.

Ali S. Kahn, Stephen Morse, and Scott Lillibridge, writing for *The Lancet*, report that the Center for Disease Control is initiating a number of programs to enhance the preparedness of the United States to deal with an attack of this nature. Part of the plan is to stockpile enough antibiotics to treat ten million people for an outbreak of anthrax and sufficient vaccine to immunize one fourth of the population against smallpox. Training personnel at all levels of the public health system to deal with specific agents is in progress. The Center has made a list, called the Critical Agents List, which will help if it becomes necessary to identify a suspected agent.

In spite of the preparation being undertaken by various government agencies, some feel the nation is not prepared. In *Family Practice News*, Michael T. Osterholm raises





questions about how the medical community would cope with thousands of people flooding into hospitals and doctors' offices, some sick and some afraid they are sick. His concern is not only for an epidemic outbreak caused by a terrorist attack, but also for an outbreak of other diseases, such as the West Nile virus or a food borne illness.

He also points out that there is reason to suspect at least seventeen nations of developing biologic weapons.

John F. Lewis Jr., writing for The FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, defends the FBI's plans to combat terrorism: The FBI combats terrorism through its participation in 16 formalized Joint Terrorism Task Forces (JTTFs) around the country. The JTTFs, composed of federal, state, and local law enforcement personnel, strive to increase the effectiveness and productivity of limited personnel and logistical resources. They avoid duplication of investigative effort and expand cooperation and liaison among federal, state, and local law enforcement.

JTTFs have been highly successful in several critical operations around the country. The FBI-New York City Police Department Joint Terrorism Task Force, for example, has worked on many critical cases, including the massive World Trade Center bombing investigation, the plot to bomb major New York City landmarks, and the crash of TWA Flight 800.

Greed is a prime mover of mankind, a common ingredient in the make up of the human race. Esteban knows that using money as the distributive agent for the anthrax virus will insure that a maximum number of people are exposed. Who can resist money? Who would believe that paper money poses a threat? When the United States is threatened, a dilemma faced by the government is how to alert the public to the threat that paper money could be to the general public without creating a panic. As with all terrorist attacks, the government must remain firm in its belief that it cannot give in to blackmail in the face of threatened terrorism.

## Key Questions

The idea that an act of terrorism could happen anywhere, anytime, to anyone is frightening. The American ideal of living a safe life, one where each citizen is free to make choices so long as those choices do not harm others, is the opposite of terrorism. Although the world considers itself to be civilized, many areas are far from what Americans would consider civilized. Violence rules many parts of the globe. Hatred and jealousy are rampant among many people in countries less wealthy than America.

1. Find out about the effect an epidemic would have on your community. How do you think the doctors, hospitals, emergency medical people, and the police would react? Find out if your community has a disaster plan.
2. Find out about ways that disease can be spread. How susceptible to each possibility is your community?
3. Why do the differences in religions sometimes generate terrorism?
4. Do research to discover methods used by the Center for Disease Control to protect the American public from epidemics.
5. Choose a disease that is a mystery to us now and find out what is being done to learn about it. An example is ebola.
6. Find out what diseases in the past have been controlled and what methods are used to maintain control.
7. Discuss the meaning of fanaticism, how to recognize it in yourself and others, and what methods could be used to change the thinking of a fanatic.
8. Find out how the government controls its agencies such as the CIA and the FBI to protect the rights of the citizens of our country. Do you think the rights of a criminal are protected too much or too little?
9. Consider the position of the victim in a crime. Who protects the rights of the victim?
10. Why is it important for us to consider a possible terrorist attack? Is there anything a private citizen can do to help prevent such an attack?

## Literary Precedents

*Andromeda Strain* (1969) by Michael Crichton, is an early example of fiction based on the theme of saving the nation and world from a deadly virus. While this virus comes from outer space, an antidote or vaccine is needed here, quickly, before the virus can take its toll on the general population. The two survivors, an old man and a baby, are deprived of their personal rights and freedoms when they are taken to a government installation for study. The good of all is put ahead of the rights of the individual. Using a team of scientists to search for the organism and a way to stop its mutation, Crichton builds the drama and suspense to the last three minutes before the virus is spread into the atmosphere. Unless the virus can be stopped, humankind could become extinct. Written before computers and computer printouts were commonplace, the novel's use of this data and fictional government documents adds to its atmosphere and believability.

Another novel about the effects of terrorism is *The White Plague* by Frank Herbert. In this story, a terrorist bomb kills the family of a biologist, who then decides to retaliate against the population of the world by creating a virus that will kill all female embryos. The virus becomes a global problem.

## Related Titles

Other suspense novels by Johansen include *The Search* (2000); *The Killing Game* (1999); *The Face of Deception* (1998); and *The Ugly Duckling* (1996). *The Ugly Duckling* is the story of Nell Palmer, whose husband and daughter are killed by a drug cartel.

Her goal in life becomes revenge when she meets Nicholas Tanek who trains her to be a guerrilla. *The Face of Deception* introduces Eve Duncan, a forensic sculptor whose mission is to identify remains of lost children so they can be returned to their parents. She has lost a child, eight-year-old Bonnie, whose body is missing. *The Killing Game* continues Eve's work with forensic sculpture and a body that could be her daughter's. *The Search* utilizes characters from *The Killing Game*, with Sarah Patrick, a supporting character who is now the protagonist.

*Wind Dancer* (1991), *Storm Winds* (1991), and *Reap the Wind* (1991) comprise a trilogy that follows a family from early sixteenthcentury Italy to the South of France in the present time. Elements of adventure and suspense are incorporated into these stories, including the theft of artworks and acts of terrorism. There is even a KGB/CIA double agent.



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