

The Dolos Conspiracy

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In Greek mythology, Dolos is the spirit of fraud and deceit

The Curse of the Disease

Hemorrhagic fever is the most deadly virus on earth. Ebola outbreaks in West Africa have threatened, on more than one occasion, to spread around the world. There is no effective inoculation against the disease. The virus mutates and is seldom the same strain twice.

A small biotech company in the U.S. has provided new medicines that have stopped the last two outbreaks. The Global Hemorrhagic Institute, GHI, has invented a process for predicting the metamorphosis with amazing accuracy. With this knowledge, they have had the cures ready when needed. This ability has excited medical communities around the world and the wealth of the GHI founders is growing exponentially with each success.

A young technician has made a discovery inside GHI showing another side to their successes. It's diabolical. A conspiracy is so well hidden under scientific veils that nothing can be proven to law enforcement, yet it has been responsible for killing hundreds, or even thousands, of people. Only scientists cleared for access to the secure laboratories and data, and the training to understand it, can bring it into the open. This discovery can mean life or death to countless people and threatens the welfare of anyone becoming aware of it.

2012

The death toll was over 4000 and rising by more than fifty per day. The rate had been starting to drop but not fast enough. Medical teams from around the world, like the World Health Organization and the CDC, were spread all over western Africa desperately trying to stop the spread of the disease. Dr. Abagael Van Acker was in the middle of the hot zone in Sierra Leone fighting a losing battle against the virus. Some days, the numbers of dead dropped, but other days they soared.

Her eyes burned, sweat dripping from her forehead. „Dammit.“ Working inside the Tyvek EVD suit was impossible! Her body temperature was nearing one hundred four degrees Fahrenheit. But, there was no alternative. Every part of her body, every pore, had to be protected. Any contact with fluids from patients could be deadly and these patients were secreting from every orifice. Blood, vomit, saliva, sweat, urine, feces... it was endless and all lethal.

She yelled. „Salia, get here, I need you now!“ It was difficult to know if anyone heard her in the crowded isolation tent. The young mother lying on the cot in front of her had been healthy less than twenty-four hours earlier, but was now dying. Her face grimaced between spasms from fear and pain. She pleaded silently for help. Blood ran from her ears, mouth and nose. Her clothing was soaked in disgusting colors. It was only a matter of time. All Van Acker could do was hold the terrified woman's hand and speak reassuring words; words that were false and probably not heard at all. The girl would die in a few minutes. There was nothing that could be done. Even with the vaccine that had finally arrived from Global

Hemorrhagic Institute (GHI) in America, it was too late for this girl. Abagael had seen too much death over the past weeks. It had hardened her to the point that it no longer bothered her sleep. She slept fine, even knowing half of the affected people were doomed.

She had held countless hands over past weeks, sensing the passing of life in those last moments. She was the last person these people would see above them. None of their relatives would ever see them again, once they had been moved into the isolation tent. She was their last human contact, if contact through all the protective clothing was the right term. A burial team was standing ready and seldom idle. The clear plastic visor covering her eyes was blurred with her own sweat and she could barely see the pleading eyes from of the patient lying on the cot below, seeking a miracle, knowing her life was over. Abagael could not feel a pulse through triple layers of latex gloves, so would only know the moment of death by feeling the girl's grip release. „Salia, I need you!“

„I am here, Madam Doctor.“ The native assistant was dressed identically. „I am apologizing. We are very busy with the bagging.“ Each body was sprayed with chlorine as soon as death was confirmed by a physician then placed inside two body bags for quick burial in a shallow mass grave, breaking all native customs and rituals. The dirt floor of the tent was saturated with foul fluids.

„Here, take this girl.“ She gently traded hands with Salia. „She no longer will know who is with her.“ Salia nodded, understanding that the chief physician was going to alert the burial detail, then going to the decontamination area for a break. It was normal protocol to stay dressed in the suits for no more than one hour. Otherwise, the medical teams could suffer heat stroke in the punishing climate. It wasn't an efficient use of protective supplies, but there was no other choice.

The decon area was just a plot of ground outside the tents where automatic sprinklers sprayed chlorine solution in powerful jets. Like the isolation tent, the ground was saturated. Removing the protective gear was difficult, but the searing heat felt refreshingly cool to her uncovered face. She stepped out of the coveralls and took a deep breath, tilting her head to escape as much of the smell as possible. The resting tent was beside the decon area.

The „rest and recovery“ tent for the staff was air conditioned, sort of. It wasn't really cool, but it allowed the medical personnel to hydrate and recover away from view. Dr. Phillippe Willoughby sat inside at a long bench drinking ice water. „Hello, Abagael, it is another depressing day in my country. The gods are against us.“

She finished filling a paper cup with water from the dispenser and sat across from the local physician, one of the country's most capable doctors, trained in the UK. He was about her age, middle fifties, tall with short greying curly hair on top of a large head and even larger body. „I could agree with you today, Phillippe. I wish we could save some of them.“

By contrast, she was a full head shorter, of average weight for her age, although she'd gained some before leaving Holland, having recently quit smoking once again. This was her eighth trip to West Africa with the WHO, and she had begun smoking again after prior trips. The stress of the work had gotten to her each time after returning home. The reality of the strife here didn't sink in while immersed in it, but the traumatic shock had affected her after returning. Since beginning to volunteer for WHO, her hair had grown thinner and almost all white.

Phillipe smiled gently, seeing her look more exhausted each day, „It is quite a different world here compared to the Netherlands, I imagine. Whether or not you believe it, you are making a tremendous difference. I can assure you of that.“ He had a marvelous smile that was infectious; bright white teeth contrasted against ebony skin.

She smiled weakly. „I just wish there was more we could do. I’ve been coming here since the 1980’s, starting in the Congo, and we haven’t made any progress in curing the disease.“ He just nodded in agreement. „I mean, doesn’t the world know what’s going on here? Hundreds of thousands have perished. Only ten percent can survive once they get the Ebola virus. It’s more deadly than your civil war.“

His smile dimmed. „We are a poor nation... a poor continent! We have no wealth, no oil, nothing to cause the *civilized* governments of the world to care. They make a movie about our mass killings for blood diamonds, but not about the disease that could kill more than half the world population if it ever escapes. Our job is only to keep the disease away from your modern countries: it is not about curing anything.“

She couldn’t disagree; his cynicism wasn’t misplaced. She’d argued in front of her county’s parliament, in front of both chambers, yet nothing substantial had ever been done. She was paid a small salary by the WHO and shipped away with hundreds of other UN medical volunteers to please the minds of bureaucrats, nothing more. She looked down at her small paper cup of water, aware that she was needed back in the triage tent, fully covered in her bio-resistant suit, in less than one hour. „Over eight hundred medical workers have died here. Some days it seems like it is all for nothing.“ At least there was some hope that the sick entering triage can leave again if the disease did not develop. She looked at him, then at the tent door. „What is that?“ A loud mob was approaching.

They stood and rushed to the tent entrance as a crowd of native villagers charged at the isolation tent with large knives hacking the side walls to shreds. Abagael ran out yelling. „No! ... Stop, you cannot go near...” She was pushed to the ground from behind by a young thin black man wearing tattered jeans and a faded short sleeve shirt. He started to raise his machete before another villager pushed him away yelling something she couldn’t understand. Stunned, Phillipe lifted her off the ground and carried her back into the rest tent. He probably saved her life. She looked back out the door in shocked disbelief, „What’s going on, Phillipe; what’s happening?“

More villagers ran past the opening and he didn’t respond immediately, listening to their yells. „It is bad.“

„What... what is bad?“

He listened more. „They have come to take the young mother, the girl you were with. She is pregnant and they think we are doing something terrible to her. They say nobody ever comes out of this tent. They say we are cutting up their people and doing things with their organs.“

„That’s insane! We’re trying to help. We must stop them, they will all be infected!“ Phillipe didn’t say anything but grabbed her hand and ran out the other side of the tent. She protested, obviously scared. „What are you doing?“

„Run Abagael—run!“ He didn't have time to explain. They ran together to the dormitory, an old school building which was further inside their makeshift compound, away from the villagers.

Moments later, inside the dorm lobby, both physicians were breathing hard. She was shaking with fear and stared back toward the clinical tents. „What just happened, Phillippe... what were those men doing? Why are they so upset?“ She didn't need to understand the language to understand their actions.

He bent over with his hands on his knees then straightened. „It is hard to explain, Abagael. You see, this is an illiterate country. The villagers believe in spirits; they have their gods. Sometimes we, as doctors, are defiling their beliefs. It is why so many of them do not come to us. They fear us. We only see them when it is hopeless.“

„You cannot mean that, so many have died here for more than two decades. Surely, they know we can help.“

„What have they seen? They only know that when they bring someone sick to us, once they are inside our tent, they will never be seen again. They come here and die with no family allowed to be with them. The bodies are disposed in some sacrilegious way, sacrilegious by their beliefs.“

„Not all have died, we have saved some. If they are strong and have strong immune systems, they can survive.“

„Yes, but the numbers are small. You know very well that all we do is sedate them and let nature take its course. Almost all die.“ The uproar of the mob at the isolation tent was abating and some of the villagers could be seen walking more slowly away, some struggling to carry dying patients, but it was impossible to see inside the remains of the isolation tent from their position. „The young girl you were tending, she was pregnant according to what I was hearing from the mob.“

„Oh, I didn't notice, it's difficult sometimes to see them clearly, and she could not talk. What a shame that two should die in one body.“

He continued. „That is not the point. In our culture, when a woman dies, and she is pregnant, the baby must be removed from the body and buried separately. Otherwise, their souls will not pass into the village of the dead. The bodies should also be buried next to their homes to show respect to the dead. Otherwise, the family will be haunted. It is a very serious belief.“

She slumped onto a chair despairing. „When will it be safe for us to return? There are patients over there who need our help, even if it is just easing their pain and fear a bit.“

He looked briefly. „It won't be long. They will just remove the body and hopefully do little more damage. Of course they will not act kindly to any interference.“

They stood together looking out from the doorway. „How can we get through to them, Phillippe? How can they be made to understand that they are spreading the disease? Many of the cases we see now are from mishandled corpses. The virus is most deadly in bodies for several days. Many people can die from one corpse then each of their bodies spreads even more death. It is a never-ending and expanding cycle. How can we end it?“ Her face was buried in hands for a moment, then she pushed back her sweaty hair. „Maybe I should take a shower and read a book.“

He smiled kindly. „You will never leave your patients. You can rest in three weeks when we all go back to our homes.“ The new group from *Doctors Without*

Borders and other world organizations would be arriving and this group could forget the horrors for a time.

„I want to go back to the tent, now.“ She was beyond scared and just angry that ignorance had disrupted their mission. „Come, Phillippe, we must go back.“ He followed dutifully behind the Chief Medical Officer as she rushed back toward the clinic. They arrived at the isolation tent, to a horrific scene. All the dead and dying patients were missing. Some of the medical staff was on the ground, bleeding but moving; some were not. Salia was slumped over the cot where the young mother had been; the hood of her protective suit was split nearly in half. She had died instantly.

Neither Abagael nor Phillippe had dressed in protective suits. She yelled, „Check the other tents, then get to the decon station fast. I’ll help these people.“ Medical staff from the rest of the clinic rushed in to help when they saw their comrades risking their lives without protective suits in the isolation area. Together, a dozen people helped the wounded toward the decon area. The space was not designed for so many at once, but they all managed to disrobe in a foggy mist of chlorine spray. It would be three weeks before they could know for sure if any of them had been infected. It would take less time to reconstruct the clinic and continue their work. If more patients died at their homes or under the care of a witchdoctor, the death rate would skyrocket. There was no stopping the disease without outside help or total population annihilation. Abagael had been planning to instruct all the staff on the protocol for a new vaccine received only the day before. Her associates at GHI had sent it with the hope that it would stop the current outbreak. She needed something to place hope in.

Flight

He felt it coming. The little plane was bouncing around like lint in a vacuum cleaner, flying low over the ocean at only three thousand feet, more or less, according to the pilot. The outside view through the small rear window was just shades of grey; lightest above, darkness all around and black below. It was late afternoon, but it could have been the middle of the night with no hint of sunshine anywhere. The Atlantic was foaming in all directions from storm swells and high winds, colliding with the tidal surge, causing peaks of whitish puffs and frigid spray ripped from wave tops. He grabbed his midsection, closing his eyes, as the pilot pitched and turned around rain squalls. Normally, the flight from Portland to the coastal islands off the Maine coast would be smooth, flying at ten thousand feet, and the air service planes didn’t fly in bad weather. This was as poor as it ever got before they would be grounded. By flying low this evening, under the cloud ceiling, the island was vaguely visible to the pilot, who knew where to look, but nowhere in sight of John. If they flew higher, the clouds would obscure it all and the island had neither instrument landing aides nor runway lights.

Matinicus Island lies twenty-three miles from the Maine coast. If he hadn’t been desperate to leave in a hurry, he would have found a cheap hotel and hidden until the weather cleared. He hated small planes, but the boat service to the islands

only ran four days a week, and he didn't want to wait for the next boat. Even if this had been the right day for the boats, the ocean was too rough on this late October day, and they would have stayed in port. John had no choice. He had to fly. Combining his fear of small planes along with the poor weather, he was sick almost as soon as the engine started. He groaned, throwing his head back, feeling the bile rising, seeking relief that could only come after emptying his stomach... *damn, this thing doesn't have any windows that open...* stifling a purge, he yelled from the back, above the engine noise, „Pilot! I need a bar...“ It came up without further warning. All John could do was lean forward and try to concentrate the mess in one area on the floor.

The pilot's response was hardly discernable, „Oh, shit!“ The plane bucked a little harder as he momentarily looked rearward. „Hey pal, you gonna clean up that mess?“ It was a rhetorical question. Sick passengers never cleaned a thing. It was just another duty of the pilot. In this case, he was also the owner of the plane and sensitive to any abuse. *If the guy had only asked earlier, he'd find plastic bags stuffed under the seat! Thank God there aren't any other passengers to follow his lead.*

John was mortified. He hadn't puked in years and then hadn't wrecked someone's airplane doing it. For the hundred bucks it took to buy the ticket, the air service would regret this day. The pilot was speaking into his headset microphone in a familiar syntax when the engine slowed noticeably. John felt relieved, but was careful placing his feet in front of his miniscule seat. The pilot shouted toward the front window without turning his head rearward, „Make sure your seat belt is tight. It's gonna be rough near the ground.“

Great, rougher than this! The plane tipped forward, and the edge of the island was sometimes in view through both sides as it jostled left and right. It buffeted badly in the stormy air, but John didn't have any more to offer the vomit gods. He was good to go for landing, as good as he was going to be. As the pilot wrestled with the controls, it was hard to tell if the constant heaving of the cabin was caused by maneuvering or by the extreme turbulence. The flying weather wasn't too bad if he'd been in a Boeing 777, but this plane was like a kite by comparison.

They were still over the ocean as the pilot banked left into a sliding turn to align with the runway on final approach. There wasn't any air traffic controller to give clearance to land; there wasn't a tower on the island. Landings were done by pilot's visual inspection of the runway before entering the landing pattern. John couldn't see the airstrip from the back of the plane and sat stiffly in his seat with his eyes closed. He could sense the pilot fighting to keep the plane aligned with the narrow grass strip, which was barely two thousand feet long. It was cut into the highest plateau on the island and could be approached from the northeast or southwest, depending on the wind direction; but the wind was swirling based on the sea spray that seemed to blow in all directions at once. John braced for a hard landing. He glanced out the window and could only see the jagged white-capped waves below as the wind fought the current, offering a frothy grave if the plane got much lower. They descended like a stone closer and closer to the ocean. *Where's the damn runway!*

The plane rocked violently to the right then leveled as the pilot compensated for wind gusts. John hoped that the guy up front had enough sense to fly around if

they were blown off line for the runway. Then the engine seemed to die completely and the plane floated above the ground. *The ground!* The runway was now below them. The plane seemed to hang suspended, then drifted to the right just as the landing gear sent shockwaves through the fuselage. They were finally down. The wind was strong, so the pilot increased power to control his landing rollout, heading toward the little shack at the end. The plane did a slight jog to the right as it cleared the runway for any other unlucky souls who might be landing, but never changed course completely as it slowed and finally stopped. After shutting the engine down and pausing momentarily, the pilot said, „We’re here sir. I hope you’re feeling better.“

John felt relief, just being alive. It took him a moment to move, guilty about the mess he was stepping around as he bent over to exit through the single forward door, held by the pilot. He had a hard time looking at the pilot, realizing that the only cleaning crew on the island was now holding the door for him and was likely going to return home through the storm. With practiced courtesy, the pilot said, „Please watch your step, sir.“

John looked at him, „Look, I’m sorry about the mess.“

„Not a problem, sir. The weather today was as bad as it ever gets when we fly. Any worse and we’d have been grounded. You did fine.“

John didn’t have anything to say. They walked together to the small luggage door on the side where John recovered his sports bag and computer. As he said goodbye, it occurred to him how desperate he really was to come out here, away from some unknown threat.

Honored

Dr. Jules Redinger sat on the dais just to the right of the podium as Dr. Miriam Stein recounted his vast achievements, vaguely hinting that a Nobel Prize wouldn’t be too much to expect in the future. Dr. Redinger was there to be honored. He looked around the audience and felt immense pride and something akin to humbleness facing some of the leading physicians and scientists of the *World Health Organization* and *Centers for Disease Control*. These people had undoubtedly read most or all of his publications and knew more about him than Dr. Stein needed to expound. But that was the process, the ritual, of being honored by this group. She continued, „Dr. Redinger and his fellows at the GHI have saved the world from possible extinction.“ Raising a hand, she looked around the auditorium for any doubtful faces then continued, „It’s not too strong an assertion to say this, because it is true. Filoviridae have ravaged whole populations, and each outbreak has only been contained in the past by isolating the area’s citizenry and, essentially, allowing the plague to die out—literally killing off the population within the contained areas. In many cases, this has resulted in mortality rates approaching eighty percent. Who can forget the recent Ebola virus catastrophe in Liberia? As I look across this body, I know ... you know ... I know you know that the only reason the threat of these diseases hasn’t received greater attention in the developed world is because it can be contained in poor African

villages and kept from spreading outward. Our collective governments have the ability to isolate, by force, whole regions on the continent.

„But what about the African villagers dying because it's more practical than funding the research necessary to find a cure? It is curable. We cured polio! It's simply a matter of priority. Now, we've all heard the feared rumors that certain radicals are attempting to weaponize a Hemorrhagic virus. This is a real scare! But, will our governments take this threat seriously; will they act in time? One man, with the assistance of his small cadre of colleagues at GHI, hasn't waited, he's acted. How often in our professions have we seen personal initiative to this degree? Dr. Redinger and his team has acted selflessly using their personal time and resources to attack the threat of the latest global hemorrhagic outbreak, often facing direct exposure in the villages ravaged in Western Africa. They alone have found a cure for the most virulent form of the genome yet to threaten humanity. I dare say: they stopped it in its tracks! This is nothing short of a global war won by one man and his team.“

The Intern

Kelly Egan wasn't really thinking about anything except work ahead. Some of it was time-sensitive. Preparations for her shift inside the BSL-4A lab were complete, and she wouldn't be able to eat or even pee now. It had taken over three months of indoctrination before she was certified to enter the containment unit, housing the most deadly viruses known to mankind. She had been referred to a colleague of Dr. Redinger by her advisor at Johns Hopkins in her final year of a post-doctoral fellowship in microbiology, specializing in Filovirus. She wanted to help find cures for the world's deadliest diseases.

Kelly had spent most of her graduate years in college working in cleanrooms designed specifically to protect against the dangerous diseases, especially, Hemorrhagic Fevers. Yet when she came to GHI, she began indoctrination all over again. It had taken three months, working up from the BSL-1 level to the highest protective environment. She hadn't minded and understood the drill, but had nevertheless been anxious to start meaningful work. The universities did important research, but it only went so far. The real benefits to society began at the private research laboratories and drug companies that actually commercialized cures available to everyone.

She was fully dressed in her positive-pressure suit, feeling like an astronaut going on a spacewalk, as a technician did a final safety inspection, walking around her, checking on the respirator connection and feeling all quadrants of the suit to be sure she was completely sealed inside. It would have been awkward with the male tech feeling her all over if there weren't layers of stiff material and air shields surrounding her entire body. She would be working in the suit for almost four hours, in artificially controlled conditions as in space, except she would have gravity to aid her. The sealed containment door opened, and she stepped into the pressure lock leading to the next door; all personal thoughts were temporarily forgotten, especially thoughts about him.

The Island

John hadn't been on the island for what, fifteen years? *Could it be that long ago?* He stood near the little shack beside the runway with his jacket collar turned up against the frigid wind. He remembered as a child that it was never warm when his father brought him out during the summer for their fishing trips. It didn't look like the place he remembered when seen through a child's eyes. But he'd never flown there with his father, they'd always come by boat, docking at the harbor. John's dad would schedule a few days away from work to coincide with the boat schedule. Their trips were always 5 days long with the last day spent riding back to the mainland. They didn't have the luxury of changing schedules, so bad weather or not, if the boat went, so did they. A nostalgic moment hit him, remembering the times spent here with his father. He couldn't recall exactly how many trips he made with his dad, but they had been special times that could never be duplicated now.

His father had passed away a few years earlier. He'd been semi-retired at seventy-two and had pursued his dream of building a racing plane. That plane had killed him—flying too low in rough terrain. John always felt his father was a natural craftsman, but also an adventurer. He'd been a helicopter pilot in Vietnam and been shot down, walking away without serious injury. After the Army, he'd gone to college and raced motocross cycles. After marriage and raising John, his dad had tried other risky adventures. He'd climbed mountains, used mixed-gas scuba diving to extreme depths; he even tried sky diving. Taking chances was something his father always seemed to be doing, probably because he enjoyed defeating the odds. John speculated that in the end his father had gotten into a situation with an untested plane that he couldn't control. There were no regrets; his father died testing fate one last time, living life on his terms.

John never related much with his mother. She was kind, but passive in his childhood. His father was dominating. His father and mother had a loving relationship; it was obvious to anyone that knew them, but his dad was always involved in John's life and his mom was in the background. She'd developed early onset Alzheimer dementia which was most apparent after John went away. She'd probably suffered for years, but he just wasn't aware, and his father never said anything. His father cut back on his work schedule and began substitute teaching to care for her. She had passed away before John finished his final combat tour in Afghanistan, leaving him with regrets that hadn't gone away. That had been only a few months before his father died, and John tried to discount any rumors among his father's cronies that he had crashed purposely. They all knew he was a good pilot, but, in all other respects, he was lost without his wife. John hadn't been there for either of them. Without any other siblings, he couldn't shed the burden of guilt for having joined the Navy and being away through all the difficult times. He had regrets about that time in his life, sometimes overpowering regrets, but he had been moving on. He now had a girl; at least he hoped he still had a girl, someone really special who was able to displace the darkness he could feel when he was

alone. Now, he was alone again on the island, alone with only the memory of his father and all that it conjured in his mind. He was cold and getting wet from the mist.

It was getting dark on the airfield, and could rain at any moment. He was at the highest point of land with a clear treeless perimeter where the native spruce was cut back along the airstrip. Although it was only late afternoon, the distant sky was black wherever he looked. If he didn't find shelter soon, he'd probably freeze, so he started walking toward the town down the island's single gravel road. The „town“ was about a quarter mile away at the harbor.

The smell; he remembered the smell of the harbor. It was exactly like he remembered the smell of the ocean, laced with diesel, boats and decaying sea life. The only really commercial enterprises were the lobster processing building that was silent at this time of the evening, a fuel dock, and a general store that also served as the post office and deli. There wasn't even a bar or a hotel. He ducked his head against the cold mist and ground fog, and focused on putting one foot in front of the other. As he got closer to the harbor, it looked as if there were about twenty boats moored inside the seawall, but he didn't stop to count them. Lobster fishing was the only industry on the island. Town meetings were held in the basement of the non-denominational church, the only church on the island. If people wanted to socialize over a beer or something stronger, they could buy it at the store, then drink on someone's boat or on the dock. It was a simple lifestyle, unique to the outer islands. It was perfect if he could be part of it for a while.

Matinicus Island has only about sixty houses: half occupied year round. Children can attend a small school house until eighth grade then go to boarding school on the mainland for high school. In past years there had been as many as six students across all grades, but the numbers were dropping. There were no street lights, no police station, and one old fire truck manned by volunteers. Most people were descendants of the original settlers from the seventeenth century. It has a unique closed society of distantly related residents. Nowadays though, most of the children moved away to the mainland after finishing high school or joined the military, never intending to live there again. Even some of the original fishing families were gone, returning by day with fast boats from the mainland and setting lobster traps in the island's fertile waters, but no longer living in its isolation. It has a quaintness that appeals to visitors, but it's quite different for those living their entire lives in the confines of a small pinnacle, rising out of the ocean. The community survived and perpetuated itself through a small number of kids who stayed or returned to replace their parents when they retired or died. A few vacationers had moved out to the island for a different life style, a much simpler life. But they would find it difficult to join the community without family roots going back decades, at least. Most of these interlopers moved back to the mainland after a few years.

Disputes did happen among residents, usually involving fishing grounds or personal matters that were handled between people according to local customs, sometimes violently. In this small encapsulated society, grudges didn't last long; they couldn't. If something persisted long, it would involve entire families, which, in turn, would divide the town. Social norms had evolved to protect this unique lifestyle and disagreements were usually resolved quickly out of necessity.

Technically, the island falls under the State of Maine for law enforcement, but historically, this didn't mean much. There were no cops on the island. The few old cars and trucks weren't registered or licensed. By and large, families went back generations in the confines of the two-square-mile island. It was rare that major conflicts erupted unless a stranger from the mainland decided to fish in the waters surrounding the island. When this happened, the outsiders quickly learned about local justice, sometimes with lethal results. John had learned, even as a kid, how to behave within this closed community.

He cringed from cold approaching the harbor. The general store was the only building with any sign of life. Most lobstermen went to sea in the predawn fog and returned by noon, exhausted, before the seas became too rough to work safely. Many had died over the years when the weather turned bad, which could happen fast this far from the coast. This time of year, with its frequent storms and angry skies, the boats often stayed in port, some retired until spring. Those that did venture out returned early. Activities on the docks involved off-loading the catch and then cleaning the boats and making repairs.

John held his gloved hand beside his face to shield against the biting wind. A quick glance at the harbor showed signs of life on only a couple of boats with lights glowing, probably to make repairs to engines or equipment vital to operate again in the morning. The only other light around the town was at the general store. One or two people could be seen inside through the windows as he stepped onto the covered porch.

The ancient door creaked and a rough-looking middle-aged man turned to face him, wearing a faded plaid shirt and patched bib overalls. An elderly man behind the counter was also wearing plaid, faded jeans, and a discolored white apron. Looking around the store, it was as John remembered it from years before. Both men stared at him as he entered without speaking. Most of the inhabitants came from three or four original settlers from centuries past and all knew each other; John was a stranger. Tourism supported a small part of the economy, but it wasn't the season and there were no rentals open. The lobsterman looked away and said something to the storekeeper then excused himself, passing John with an appraising look but no welcome. John just smiled and walked toward the old wooden counter, trying to avoid knocking anything over from the overstuffed wooden shelves.

„Can I help you?“ The man behind the counter seemed genuinely friendly, and was certainly curious as to why a lone stranger dressed in mainlander clothes and carrying a computer along with luggage would come to the island at this time of year. He, obviously, wasn't there to watch birds or to fish.

John replied, „Ah, I hope so.“ Ever since boarding the plane in Portland, he'd been having second thoughts. As a kid, they'd stayed in rental cottages and it hadn't occurred to him that there wasn't a hotel. He approached closer to the counter, trying to fashion his next statements. „I used to come here with my dad a long time ago and kinda came here now on impulse. I need a place to stay and would like to find work to pay my way.“

The man looked puzzled, „Well... I'm not hiring, and we ain't exactly got any jobs that I know of. Son, this is really a small place, and everyone kinda works for hisself. You got any skills?“

After the other man had departed, there were no other people in the store except the clerk, who John guessed was also the owner. He seemed suspicious, probably disbelieving anything John would say. „I’m a writer and just want to be in a quiet place to finish a novel I’m working on. Honestly, I’d be content for room and board in exchange for work.“

The old man smiled. „You know, kid, we only got one kinda work here: it’s workin’ on the boats. Don’t know anyone needs a sternman or someone to be fillin’ bait bags or banding claws. If you’s to stand on the dock there at the early mornin’ there’s a chance that someone might use you, but not many’s goin’ out in this kinda weather. I ain’t sayin’ don’t try, I’m just tellin’ ya true. We’re a poor island, and it’s trouble enough keepin’ our own people workin’.“

John pursed his lips momentarily before responding. „Yeah, I understand, but I need to try anyway. I don’t need much, and I’ll work hard.“

The store man looked John over, „Ya look fit enough. You can give it a go and see what happens. Maybe you should plan to stand down there several days and give yourself more of a chance.“ The storekeeper motioned toward the dock. „You know, get to know some of the boats. Ain’t that many fishin’ this late in the season.“

„Well, thanks, I’m not completely destitute; I’ve got a little cash and could spend a week or so, paying my own way.“

The door opened and John saw the reflection of a female in heavy clothes and a knit hat wave at the counterman who looked briefly in her direction saying, „Hi, Mary.“

John didn’t glance away and the conversation resumed. The Storekeeper said, „Well, son, there’s only one inn here. It’s more of a two-room bed & breakfast during the tourist season. If you want, I can check if they got any rooms? Actually, I can ask directly.“ He glanced away. „Mary, could you come up here?“

She emerged from behind a row of shelves, carrying some cans and package of tortillas. „Hi, Ben, I just need a couple a things.“ She gave John a long look as she approached, „Hi, I’m Mary.“

John could see that she was young, probably still a teenager judging by her fresh appearance without makeup. „Hi, I’m John, John Smith.“ His recital wasn’t quite synchronized, causing Mary and Ben to glance at each other.

Ben interjected, „Mary, Mr. Smith here’s lookin’ for work and a place to stay for a time. He says he’s willin’ to work for his keep. Is there anything goin’ on with your old man that John here could help? He looks pretty strong.“

John was over six feet and weighed around two hundred pounds. He’d stayed in shape after military service, although he was out of condition by their standards. He was clean shaven and wore his brown hair short, barely able to keep a part and comb it over.

She turned slightly toward him and gave an assessing look, top to bottom. „I don’t know. If daddy does, he ain’t told me, but that doesn’t mean nothin’. He never seems to need people, but then, again, he brings ‘em aboard now and again, kinda on a whim, I guess. You want me to ask him, Mr. Smith?“

He smiled at her, „Yeah that would be nice, Miss...?“

She held out her mittened hand and they shook. „I’m Mary Swensen. My daddy owns the lobster plant on the docks. He takes in the lobsters off the boats and

packs 'em in ice and takes them in his boat to Portland to be sold. He's the only one on the island that's doin' it."

John smiled, "I'd appreciate it, Miss Swensen. Do you work there also?"

"Me? No! I'm at school on the mainland, just home for the weekend. I get home about one time a month, lessin' there's a holiday or break or something. I came home this mornin' and am jus' helpin' my mom get dinner goin'."

She seemed to be smiling slightly, or just had a natural up-curved mouth that would always look pleasant, maybe even inviting. John could see that she was pretty and guessed that she was probably physically trim under layers of clothing. Other than her oval face and green eyes, he could only see the edge of her medium brown hair pulled back under a knit hat.

As the two younger people looked at each other, Ben asked, "Mary, you got any rooms at the Inn? Mr. Smith here needs a place to stay. He can even pay some for a bit 'til he gets some work. He's here for some quiet time to write a book. He's a author."

She became more animated, "An author? What have you written? I like romance novels. You write any of them?"

He flushed, "No ma'am, I'm a kind of biologist, and I'm writing a story based a little on my lab experience along with some intrigue." He was thinking fast, since he'd never written anything in his life other than term papers and scientific log notes. If anyone really questioned his story, he wouldn't be able to support it.

She shrieked, "A biologist! Ben, did you hear it, we got us a genuine scientist who's also a famous author. Wait 'till I tell my folks."

Ben had both hands on the counter, "Well, hells bells, what do you think, Mary? We should be happy to have Mr. Smith with us."

The sarcasm was thick. Mary's interest seemed genuine enough. But her interest might have been something else. John couldn't tell if she was really interested in his author story. Clearing his throat, he said, "Yeah, ah, I could really use a place to stay tonight."

She smiled, "Well, you wouldn't a'bin the first guy to sleep over at the church in the pews, but I gotta warn you, it's cold in there at night, cuz they don't keep the heat on except for services."

He must have had a forlorn expression when Ben said, "Now, Mary, that ain't no way to treat a new fellow. You just ask your folks and get Mr. Smith here set up for the night. Tomorrow, he can work on gettin' a job."

She looked at Ben, saying, "Okay, Ben, no more funnin' Mr. Smith. Can I use your phone?"

"Sure, come on around."

She went to the desk just behind Ben, and quickly dialed four numbers. "Momma, hi, can I speak to Daddy? ... Ahuh, I got ever' thing... Daddy, there's a visitor to town and he needs a place to sleep and work, and I'm thinkin' he could stay at the cottage; he can pay... Ahuh, yeah, I understand. He's young and strong and a author of books... Yeah, okay. I'll do that. Thanks, Love you."

Both men looked at her as she turned around, saying, "The cottage, which we call a B&B for the tourists, ain't heated right now and closed until the season, startin' in May."

John's expectations dropped as he thought about lying on a cold church pew all night, then going to look for a job on the dock without bathing or shaving. Before he could say anything, Mary added, „Daddy wants you to come to the house. He wants to meet the author and probably check you out.“

Ben, scolded, „Now, Mary, Your daddy isn't that kinda man, what's the real deal?“

„Okay, well, Daddy says Mr. Smith here, John, he can stay in Buddy's room if he's clean an' honest, which he already knows he is cuz he knows I wouldn't have asked the way I did.“

John looked pleased and glanced at Ben for advice, skeptical of anything Mary might say. Ben said, „Well, there you have it. You got a place for tonight and maybe even a chance to inquire about work at Swensen's. His son, Mary's older brother, joined the Marines after high school, so Gort's got no one to help him at the factory. Not that there's much to do there since the fishin' fleet is mostly workin' on a winter schedule now.“

John was elated, he shifted his look to Mary, „Well, great! I like this idea.“ In the background of his consciousness, he also liked the idea of being under the same roof as this young girl. She was at least twelve years younger, but there was something appealing about her. She was an imp. He had to control his primal urges. Right now, he had arranged a place to stay, and it could have been a lot worse—he thought about the church.

Mary smiled, looking at Ben, „I got to get daddy some stuff, then Mr. Smith and me can take a walk.“ She went to the back of the store to get a quart of Jim Beam and a carton of Kent cigarettes. Placing this on the counter to be bagged with the rest, she gave John a quick smile. She was amused, watching his reaction to a seeing a young girl unhesitant about openly buying things that were clearly illegal for a minor. It reinforced his understanding of local law. It felt like he had entered a foreign country. She signed the bill on credit and they left together.

They walked side by side in the dark dampness along the wharf toward a cluster of houses on the far edge of the small harbor. John offered to carry the heavy bag. His teeth started chattering until he clenched his jaw. She glanced sideways and asked, „Well, Mr. Smith, where're you from?“

„Please, call me John... I grew up in Massachusetts until I was twelve, then we moved to California. My dad worked for a defense contractor most of the time and then as a math teacher and we kinda had to follow the big projects. We moved again during my high school years to Texas. My father and I came here a few times before moving west, and I've always thought of it as a quiet place, particularly this time of year.“

She giggled, „Yeah, quiet all right. It's downright boring. Nothin' happens here. I have more excitement and friends at a all-girl boarding school on the coast. Until I went to high school, I used to think about suicide—this place will do that to someone like me.“

She looked half-serious, but it gave him an opening for continuing the dialogue, „Suicide! Really? Was it that serious?“

„I don't know, I never did nothin'. I think everyone thinks about it sometimes, and this place gives you nothing but time to think. Thinking is about the only thing to do.“

„So, when did you move away?“

„A couple years ago. There’s only a eighth-grade class here, so you either end it there or ship away. My brother went first then I followed. I only come home because my folks, my mom mostly, gets lonely. It’s not permanent coming here now; I’ll never move back here permanent.“

„So how long have you been away?“

„I’m a junior in high school. I’m sixteen if that’s what you’re asking.“

His suspicions were confirmed, she was too young for him and he didn’t need more to worry about. He could get into serious trouble around someone her age. For all he knew they didn’t have a jail on Matinicus Island; so... *how do they deal with pedophiles here?* He didn’t want to find out. He didn’t have any immediate comeback as she steered them toward a large antique colonial house; yellow with green shutters.

She was smiling widely at his dismay. „So, how do you feel about spending the night in the same house with jail bait?“ He didn’t have anything quick to say. „Age doesn’t count for much out here. I’ve been around enough mainland girls to know the kind of trouble you could be in if you was to do something sexual with me, but it ain’t the same here. Here, if you violate me, my daddy would probably just shoot you and drop your body in the ocean, and the town meeting would just consider it local justice if anyone noticed.“

He stopped short of the door, „That’s comforting.“

They were both smiling until the door opened, and Gort Swensen stood looming. He addressed his daughter first without immediately acknowledging John. „So, daughter, you brought home a stray?“

She started to answer but quit when her father turned to John, „Mr. Smith, is it?“ He continued before John could answer, „You are welcome in our home for tonight as long as you behave yourself.“ John supposed her father knew Mary well.

John and Mary were standing side-by-side outside the doorway in the cold. He chose his words carefully, „Ah, Mr. Swensen, I assure you that I am here with the most honorable intentions and just want to be alone, working on my book.“

Swensen studied the younger man momentarily before stepping aside. The pair entered, and John did a quick comparison. He was above average height and physically trim. Swensen was about the same height, but with a much larger frame and must have weighed seventy pounds more. The man was probably around fifty, but had worked in a tough industry in rough weather long enough to look older.

When the door closed behind them, Mary continued toward the kitchen in the back, and John looked at her father, „Thank you for having me here, Mr. Swensen. I don’t mean to impose and will leave if you wish.“

The man’s rough features softened slightly, „Everyone here calls me Gort. First of all, you ain’t got nowhere’s else to go out here, and anyways, you’re a guest and not an imposer. You surely understand my feelings about protecting my daughter in a place like this. Hell, there’re probably fifty lonely men for every woman, and there ain’t really any young ones like Mary here anymore.“

„I assure you sir, Gort; I just want to write my book in peace.“

„All right then, Mr. Smith, in the morning we’ll talk about a job.“

„Great. Please call me John. What time in the morning?“

„We start selling bait at 4:30...“

Speech

„Thank you, Miriam, for the kind introduction. I only hope that I can measure up to all the praise you've bestowed.“ Dr. Redinger looked around the audience with practiced hesitation and controlled his delivery like a skilled politician. He was well aware that some top investment firms were also in attendance. „As you all know, my Institute, the Global Hemorrhagic Institute, GHI, was on the ground in Guinea with the WHO in 2013, ahead of the Ebola outbreak that killed so many a year earlier. We were there because GHI is committed to defeating Hemorrhagic viruses in all its forms. These diseases threaten the very existence of the human race. It's one of the natural scourges that do not discriminate on any basis. Everyone is fair game.

„I would like to claim all the credit for our success in combatting the last outbreak in Western Africa, before it got off the ground six months ago, but, I can't. At GHI we have assembled the most dedicated scientists and doctors in the world to combat these diseases. It is these people, of which I am only one, who deserve the credit.“ He waited for the applause to stop.

„Our field research, along with the WHO is designed to help predict the next mutation of the family Filoviridae. At GHI, we have been developing algorithms and simulations aimed at predicting the next strains that will emerge. We do this through painstaking modeling of factors such as weather patterns, related disease outbreaks, famine and water tables, as well as former mutations and add to the mix empirical testing of ground water, animal analysis, especially fruit bats and other known carriers.

„The measure of success, *where the rubber meets the road*, so to speak, can be quantified with our success in Liberia last year, where the mortality rate dropped below ten percent of affected patients and virtually zero percent of the people inoculated at the beginning of the outbreak. In all prior cases, mortality exceeded fifty percent, sometimes as high as eighty-five percent. Our vaccine, GHI 409 was predictably successful. We knew it would work before we volunteered it as a test. Regrettably, there was not enough, but it was proven to be hugely successful in both preventing the disease and lessening the effects as a treatment to those already afflicted.

„By correctly anticipating the next mutation, we were able to provide the vaccine and antidote. Never before in medical science has this occurred in such dramatic fashion. And the real clincher for all of us who've dedicated our lives to this science is that GHI is already working to protect against the next outbreak anywhere in the world.“

With that, the crowd came to its feet. Dr. Redinger gave a magnanimous bow, raising his hands to point and wave to imaginary colleagues somewhere unseen. He'd accomplished his mission beautifully, gaining the recognition and publicity they wanted at GHI. Media cameras from every major news circuit around the

world were there. He could imagine the money that would now be theirs, the founders of GHI. Every employee was an owner, a stockholder, from the date of hire. In total, the employees controlled seven percent of the Institute's net worth. The rest of the equity existed equally between the founders; Charlie Ritter as President and COO, Lorne Bridge, Chief Scientist, and himself as the CTO and Chairman. There were a few small minority shareholdings in their lenders, but this amounted to only a few percent. Ninety percent went to three men who had, together, founded GHI almost twenty years earlier. As he waved, he felt a sense of overwhelming euphoria, knowing how wealthy they were about to become.

Inquiry

Work in the lab had been tedious. Kelly had been performing antigen measurements on several test cells. It was hard working with all the safety constraints, but there was no other way to extract the data. Most of it would be analyzed at her desk outside the containment chamber once the data, including electron microscopic images, were downloaded from their server. Her job today had been to open the test cells and take the pictures. It was awkward working with robotic arms without tactile feel. Accidents were relatively common handling the glass petri dishes. Every molecule stayed inside the chambers; nothing could be allowed to escape. Oddly, this was one of the job aspects she enjoyed the most. Call it an adrenaline rush, working in close proximity to something so deadly with no known antidote at this stage. Any mistake on her part could kill her and probably others. Few others outside the scientific community would understand the excitement she felt. And, she couldn't tell anyone. All of her work was covered by a Proprietary Protection Agreement she'd signed as a condition of her employment. Her excitement couldn't be shared with anyone, not her parents, not her friends, and not her spouse, if she were to get married. Her satisfaction was all internal without external feedback.

Four hours went by quickly, but she felt fatigued nevertheless. It was time to exit the lab. The protocol for leaving first required entering an isolation chamber for a chemical shower to decontaminate the surface of the pressure suit. She pressed the airlock switch and moved into the chamber, roughly the size of steam shower. After the door closed behind her, the chamber filled with a foggy mist that surrounded her for a programmed amount of time. She stood still, watching as the cloud enveloped her, then slowly dissipate. Everything happened automatically. When it was over, she could hear the hum of exhaust motors for several seconds before the outlet door opened into another chamber where she removed the positive pressure suit and hung it on a special hanger system for further decontamination. She'd learned to dress leisurely on days when she was to work inside the lab chamber. She then removed all of her clothing, placing everything in a basket for decon. She would be wearing lab scrubs when she exited. She tried not to think about the fact that every inch of the lab was under video surveillance. One of the aspects of working in this environment was total lack of privacy. The video was recorded, and people outside were not supposed to be watching, as a

courtesy, unless there was an emergency, but she knew otherwise. There she stood completely naked when the door to the next chamber opened, and she entered to shower, using disinfectant soap. At this stage of the process, there was no automation and she'd had to learn how to shower, according to prescribed rules. After showering, an air dryer went to work, similar to the final stage of most carwashes. She stood in the down draft, chilled at first until the air warmed sufficiently. Her hair took the longest, which is why she wore it short.

When finished, she stood by the exit door, leading to the dressing chamber, where fresh scrubs and booties were waiting. She had learned to pre-stage some personal clothing articles in her locker. Overall, the decontamination process took almost twenty minutes. In five more minutes she was in the outer lab wearing a white lab coat over fresh scrubs, with no makeup and slicked-back damp hair. The working environment wasn't about appearances.

Her lab assistant and partner was Fred Cooper, who was about twice her age. Fred had a bachelor's degree in biology, but didn't have any ambition for graduate work. He'd been a lab technician for almost three decades. He was working at a laminar-flow bench and didn't look up at Kelly as she exited the final chamber door. She figured he'd been watching the *security* monitor to be sure she was showering safely. After three months working together, they'd barely talked, and she was pretty sure he had a personality disorder and probably perversions. He was creepy. She just worked around him in the lab, in silence, and tried to avoid him otherwise. He'd never mentioned a family but didn't seem to have mass-murder tendencies. Other than that, his data analysis was good, and she could depend on him to control environmental changes in the test cells. He was not permitted inside the BSL chambers.

She ignored him and left the outer lab for the cafeteria. Working in the pressure suit for hours meant breathing extremely dry purified air, leaving an incredible thirst. GHI kept abundant supplies of free refreshments available for this reason. Kelly normally drank two bottles of spring water to quench her thirst.

Dr. Charlie Ritter was sitting at one of the lunch tables, reading a report and waved when Kelly entered. He only looked up briefly then went back to reading. She grabbed two bottles from the large commercial refrigerator then walked over to Charlie's table saying, „Hi ya Charlie, anything interesting?“

The older man, and partial owner, removed his reading glasses and looked across at her, „Hi, Kelly. Nah, it's just a lot of OSHA jargon about some supposed lab deficiencies.“

„Anything serious?“

With a mocking grin, he responded, „These people always seem to need to justify their own existence. They don't even understand what we do here or what precautions are taken. We've never had a serious accident in twenty years of operations, but when something small goes wrong, they come down on us like it would make some kind of massive safety improvement.“ He tossed the pages on the table. „Four pages of gobbledygook that means shit, but I've now got to write our corrective actions or they'll seek an injunction to shut us down until we comply! They don't even recognize the importance of the work we do here... it's all bureaucratic crap.“

She tried to be comforting, „What kind of violations are they talking about?“

„Well look here.“ He turned the first page toward her. „It says that we didn't have the CDC Laboratory Biosafety Level Criteria instructions posted on each door of the BSL Chambers. Can you believe it? We have the most stringent training and qualification program in the country for our people before they're allowed anywhere near an actual lab. You went through it. Hell! Our examinations require that you virtually recite the CDC guidelines. These idiots think that a piece of paper taped to a door provides any protection... unbelievable.“

She took the pages and scanned them. „You know, Charlie; we had the same kind of critiques at Johns Hopkins. Nothing on here looks difficult.“

„I know, Kelly, but it's pure nonsense to spend the time with these people going through the Institute, knowing full well that they're gonna come back with this garbage; then waste more of our time answering stupid shit.“

She patted his hand, „I know, but it kinda comes with the territory, doesn't it?“

Charlie Ritter was an MD, who had been one of the founders of GHI along with Drs. Jules Redinger and Lorne Bridger. Charlie was as down-to-earth as anyone could be with his credentials. He, Jules and Lorne had all begun their careers at the Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases (USAMRIID) in Frederick, Maryland. After a decade of working to find cures for the worst possible diseases, mostly feared as possible biological weapons, they left together to form the Global Hemorrhagic Institute. Their plan was to develop antidotes and immunizations that could be commercialized and available to the world population. For twenty years, they had grown GHI to its present state using funds from federal grants and some minor equity partnerships. Initially, their plans had been altruistic, but had also developed with an aim toward personal wealth. There had been various inquiries over the years about acquiring the Institute, but the team of owners had resisted the temptation, as confidence grew in their work. In the past two years alone, some estimates figured the Institute value had quadrupled with the world acclaim associated with publicity over their successes in West Africa.

Charlie, as the Chief Operating Officer of the Institute, was spending most of his days with financial analysts and other „money people“, offering various strategies for cashing in on their success. Options included merger or acquisition by a major drug Institute, to leveraged investment within their group, or going public. All had certain attractions and benefits. All would make them rich. But the circumstances were spiraling upward so rapidly that he and the other two partners never seemed to have time to agree on anything. There was no hurry, since their net worth just continued to grow, but it had become incredibly tedious to Charlie, particularly. Jules was more interested in continuing to gain publicity, and Lorne had succumbed to a tragic exposure to an Ebola outbreak in Zaire just a couple days before. His demise couldn't have resulted from a breach of protocol at GHI, it had to be caused by bad luck in the field, which was a hazard they all faced occasionally, Lorne most frequently.

Charlie's expression hardened as he began thinking about the meeting with a large drug Institute that Jules had arranged later that afternoon. „You know, Kelly, I'm tired, I'm really tired after thirty years at this; the work just keeps piling on. I really hate to waste time with things like this, anymore.“ He gestured toward

the OSHA report. „I lost a good friend in Lorne, and you lost a mentor, but this is not a fair outcome!“

She reflected back on her first days at the GHI, when Lorne made a special point of managing her training. She'd been recommended by a professor at Johns Hopkins then vetted by the three partners, but Lorne had been special. Her mind drifted momentarily until Charlie asked, „When will John be back from his family emergency? I hope he's not planning to be gone long.“

„Charlie, honestly, he hasn't communicated with me since he left, and I don't really know any more than you.“

Sleeping

It was difficult sleeping in a strange bedroom, especially one preserved for a son that the family hoped would return some day. The house was warm enough, but the night rain spattering on the window seemed to chill the air. John didn't feel comfortable in the bed. The walls were covered with mementos of a boy's youth, and the closet still had his clothes. He didn't dare touch anything for fear that his hosts would go berserk. He was having second thoughts about coming to the island. Gort Swensen had been hospitable enough, but it was an imposition, despite the hospitality extended to him. He was there because good people wouldn't allow a vagrant to sleep in the church, pure and simple. Additionally, there was a young girl home for the weekend in the bedroom beside him. She was probably the only young single woman anywhere near his age, and she was right next door. His mind whirled with different images and random thoughts, preventing him from resting. He lay staring at the ceiling, wondering how things got so messed up in his life. The one peaceful thought he had was remembering Kelly. Someday, if it wasn't too late, he would explain things to her. Would she still care about him when the time came?

The storm had gained intensity. Wind and rain buffeted the window in his room. The old house wasn't well insulated, and the wood stove down stairs didn't provide enough heat to compensate for the cold air leaking around the window sash. He pulled the comforter up to his ear and rolled onto his side. He was warm enough, and, sometime later, he fell asleep. Wind noise acted as a kind of sedative. In the morning, he would know if Gort was serious about giving him work. He had eaten with the family and had a drink with Gort afterward. He'd never had lobster casadia, but guessed it was normal fare at the Swensen home. They'd been most gracious, but his circumstances were certainly raising questions. He didn't believe his own lie, so how could he convince them?

He was sleeping soundly, dreaming about sleeping with Kelly. She was warm next to him as they cuddled together. They slept closely in his single bed. Her delicate dark hair tickled his nose. He could smell her freshness after an evening shower. It gave him peace. On impulse, he wrapped his arm across her naked waist and nestled his lips against her forehead. Then something elevated his consciousness. Kelly's proportions had changed. Instead of the tall thin girl of his dream, she seemed shorter with more curves. He stroked her breast and could feel

a fullness that he'd never recognized before. Slowly, his consciousness rose further as she leaned into his face, parting her lips and inserting her tongue. His excitement grew, but something was wrong. Mary!

She giggled and nestled against his body, touching from lips to toe. He pushed back. „What... are you crazy? Gort will kill us; he'll kill me!“

She smiled and pushed into him at the edge of the mattress. „Then keep your voice down, and let's enjoy this.“

He was becoming aroused as primal urges overcame logic, „Wait... no... this is wrong. You shouldn't be here.“ He was trying to muffle his voice, fearful that, at any moment, Gort would burst into the room with a shotgun.

„You want to know something?“ She whispered. „I'm not wearing a thing.“ She reached for his hand. „Wanna feel what I mean.“ He recoiled, and she reached into his crotch. „See, I knew you wanted me.“

He couldn't help being aroused but fought the urge. „Mary, no! You gotta get out of here. I'm a guest and I made your dad a promise.“

Her smile was barely detectable in the darkness as she continued stroking him. The wind and rain noise obscured the commotion in the bed. He tried to pull her off, but she gripped even harder. „Come on, John, I brought you here. Nobody's awake now, no one will hear.“

Finally, he fell off the edge and stood up, embarrassed by his erection, now protruding from his whitey-tighties. He bent forward, trying to conceal himself, and also to increase vital distance from her groping hands. She sat up on her knees without speaking, saying nothing and just staring at him. The dim light from some unseen outside source refracted in the rain piercing the shadows with a thousand shards of light and he felt himself losing control of the situation. Here, inches away, was a young girl, completely uninhibited, completely naked—wanting him.

He pleaded, „Mary, Mary, you're truly a beautiful girl, and I would like nothing more than to do this, but not tonight, not now. Please... another time.“

At last, she also recognized the jeopardizing situation she'd created for the mysterious houseguest. She'd always been impetuous and knew that her parents also knew it. They might lie awake all night expecting exactly this circumstance to unfold. She pouted, „You promise? Tomorrow night?“

„Look, no, I can't promise when, just let's see what happens tomorrow.“ He stepped closer to her to rub her hair reassuringly. It was a mistake as she grabbed him again and dove down with her mouth. „Stop! Stop! I think I hear your father.“

Finally, she sat up, slid off the bed and re-covered herself with an oversized tee-shirt she'd dropped nearby. „Okay, I get it, I'll leave.“ She backed away and stood for a moment before turning to the door. „But, I'll be back.“

John didn't sleep the rest of the night, fearing her return. All he could think about was how any normal red-blooded boy would fantasize about the chance he had just had, a chance he'd wasted!

John and Kelly

They began dating casually enough; just two co-workers spending a day at Rehoboth Beach on a hot August day. John had been working as a lab assistant at GHI for a year, fresh out of the University of Maryland, Annapolis, with his new BS degree in biology. It was a good place to start for someone with a science undergrad degree, working in his field, which was rare without a couple graduate degrees. His position wasn't necessarily high level by GHI standards, but exceptional at his academic level. He'd graduated Summa Cum Laude, which got the attention of the GHI Personnel Director when they needed an entry-level Lab Technician. Also, John had served in the Navy for four years as a corpsman which gave him a maturity edge over other candidates. He'd felt lucky, but never so much so as when Kelly was hired.

John had made female friends in the military and again in college; but in both cases, he wanted to get started toward a career before committing to anyone seriously. He'd always liked the life sciences in school, and his father was an engineer, so technical subjects were natural. The corpsman rating in the Navy was appealing and a good stepping stone into medicine at a higher level when he went back to college on the GI Bill. After training at a Navy hospital at Great Lakes, Illinois, he soon learned that Navy corpsmen didn't always work in a clinical setting or on ships and found himself training and then backpacking with Marines, carrying a weapon in Afghanistan. He gained experience treating wounds that helped crystalize his thoughts about medicine and he saved ample money for college through tax-free combat pay with no significant expenses when deployed. After his second overseas tour, his enlistment ended, and he was accepted into every college applied for. He chose the University of Maryland, Annapolis, with its local naval heritage. He could have gone back to California, but his parents had both passed away and there was nothing else tying him to the state. If anything, his best memories were from his early years in New England; his saddest memories were from the west coast.

Kelly caught his eye on her first day at GHI. She attracted everyone's attention, although he was the only single guy close to her age. Others admired her academic qualifications, which John understood, but she was appealing to him on a more basic level. She wasn't beautiful in the conventional sense, but her mannerisms, quick smile, and intellect had a magical effect on him. She was pretty in a plain sort of way, slender, with simple long brown hair and green eyes. Her hair changed to boyishly short within a few weeks.

Physically attractive men alone didn't work with her. She was smart and wasn't interested in men of lesser intellect. In that respect, John was a mixed commodity. He was smart and well mannered, even if not employed as a scientist. He was more grounded than other men his age. He had all the right personality characteristics for her. On top of that, he was good looking and kept in great shape compared to the men she'd been around for years. The men she'd known while training focused on science and tended to let everything else go; certainly physically, but most also had poorly developed social skills. They just didn't care about those things. As a result, she had never connected with anyone that she could get serious about. In some ways, she lacked the same social skills.

They worked in different labs. He supported Lorne and Jules in BSL-4B. He couldn't work inside the chambers, directly with the germs, but performed

secondary analysis of the results, just as Fred Cooper did for Kelly in BSL-4A. She was higher up the totem pole, but it didn't bother him. He was still exploring career options and hadn't given up on medical school. At GHI, finally out of college, if only temporarily, he had some freedom to pursue other aspects of life. Kelly stood out like a bright star in the night. She intrigued him, although she barely acknowledged him at first. She wasn't a prima donna; she just hadn't ever formed personal relationships.

Joining GHI, for Kelly, was a new experience... her first professional job. She was twenty-six years old, starting a career. It was exciting but also frightening as a journey into the new world outside of school. She had numerous academic friends, but none she'd ever considered as a boyfriend.

Kelly spent the first week at GHI inside her lab, never seeming to come out. By the second week, she was feeling more acclimated and started a morning break ritual, which gave John an opportunity. He'd ambushed her in the cafeteria, the only gathering place in the building. Most of the lab walls were glass, which are easier to clean and sanitize than other materials. Her lab was separated from his by several clear partitions, so he had seen her leave for a break one morning and followed her, arriving while she finished filling her cup with hot water for tea.

He was anxious to meet her but didn't want to be too abrupt. The Institute was still small, and it would be hard to hide his embarrassment if he misjudged the new girl. Approaching her, he extended his hand, „Hi, welcome aboard. I'm John Hollis, the lab rat over in BSL-4B.“

She had a pleasantly firm grip that came out without hesitation, „Kelly Egan, new girl.“

He smiled, „I saw you here last week and wanted to say hello.“

„Great. I saw you also and hoped we'd get acquainted.“ She smiled. She was a direct, confident, woman.

He demurred, „I should tell you that I'm just an assistant here, so not on your level.“

„What level is that? We're all professionals here and all have important jobs. What are you working on?“

He gestured toward one of the round Formica tables, and she followed. Their discussion lasted ten minutes, then, finished with her tea, she stood to leave. „Nice meeting you, John.“

He nodded the same. This soon became a routine. She was very structured and started taking a break at the exact same time each day, hoping he noticed. He did. It took him a couple weeks of this morning ritual, building his courage before suggesting a trip to the beach during the oppressive Baltimore summer. To his delight, she accepted.

Getting to know Kelly was an enriching experience. John had never related well with women on a professional level. He'd dated a few while in the military, but they were always stilted or on guard, always fearful of the male Marines—understandable given their surroundings, and he never got attached to any of them. This time was different. Kelly was technically his superior, but it didn't make any difference. She seemed totally unaware of her position and ignored it outside of work. That first day together on the beach started a bonding process; they both knew it, and didn't rush it.

After graduation from college, John still had most of the money from his parent's property and purchased a 2014 Mustang convertible. He bought it from an Naval Academy instructor who was transferring overseas to a new assignment. It was in exceptional condition. It cost more than most econo-boxes but was tons more fun to drive. He'd promised himself a cool car someday if he survived the military. This was that car. On their first date, they drove most of the way to the Delaware coast with top down, closing it for only the last few miles.

Kelly wasn't a girl to sit roasting in the sun. She had an unexplainable attraction to John compared to other women on the beach. She was careful to use sunblock and an umbrella for shade. She was not an egotist. Every moment, she was actively seeking knowledge or exploring curiosities. They'd played in the surf to cool off, but most of that first date was spent along the Rehoboth boardwalk, walking under the awnings. When the day finished, they drove south along the coast to a restaurant with al fresco dining for Maryland crab cakes, then on toward home. He dropped Kelly at her new apartment, near GHI in Glen Burnie. She kissed his cheek and they both knew there would be more dates in the future. John drove home with the top down again, savoring the warm night air around Baltimore harbor. They only lived two miles apart.

Kelly had been sheltered at home as a girl but learned that she could have a social life as well as an academic life when she went away to college. She had never transitioned to „social butterfly“ and avoided many events, preferring studies to frat parties. She had never joined a sorority and probably would not have pledged anyway; she even rejected Phi Beta Kappa honors, claiming she didn't need validation of her achievements. But she'd slowly begun developing friendships as her focus in science increased. In graduate school, and particularly as a doctoral candidate, she'd formed professional associations with peer students and professors, including some males who were interested in more than a platonic relationship. She'd never „gone all the way,“ but there had been opportunities.

With John, she had feelings that had only occurred once or twice before. It was awkward, for sure, working at the same location, but John made it easier for her. He wasn't overt on their breaks together. Outside of work, he wasn't possessive or demanding. He didn't pursue her like some adolescent male. He was gentle and kind, and completely genuine in everything involving her. There was no doubt that they meshed well.

Like Kelly, John never had a serious girlfriend before meeting her. In his case, it had little to do with academic distraction; he had experienced all of the normal male urges and was popular in high school, but his desire to leave home overpowered serious relationships. He was not school-oriented as a kid, and he needed the maturing that military service forced. After servicing, he was more mature than most other college undergraduates, both chronologically and emotionally, finishing a five-year curriculum in three. He'd gotten some credit for his Navy schools, but he also took heavy course loads and spent long hours in the labs. It didn't allow much time for a social life. So, when he and Kelly met at GHI, timing was right for both of them.

Their weekends together continued through the summer, becoming another routine. They grew intimate at a moderate pace, progressing steadily until one Saturday night when they left a movie and John invited Kelly to his apartment,

not entirely sure of himself. She didn't accept. Instead, she invited him to her place. Their relationship moved to a higher level that night. It wasn't casual any longer; their affection had been growing for both for weeks and this had been the right time. This wasn't a one-night excursion for them, it was a conscious elevation in their relationship that both wanted. For sure, it was something like love, although neither of them had any prior experience with it. More than that, they had both processed their relationship logically and arrived at the same point.

Lorne

„Kelly, I'd like to talk to you in my office.“ It was all he said, no „good morning,“ just a summons. Jules had entered the lab, said his piece and left, not leaving any opportunity for Kelly to respond. She didn't know if she should be alarmed; Jules was visibly upset about something. She quickly did a mental checklist of her responsibilities and even her relationship with John. *What could he be mad about?* She left her lab coat lying across her chair and hurried out, glancing toward John's lab, but he wasn't in sight. She remained composed by walked briskly through the double doors, into the luxurious executive office wing, straight to Jules's office. Nothing made sense. Why would he be mad at her?

The executive office manager didn't look up as Kelly approached the office marked „CTO.“ Technically, Charlie Ritter had higher general management duties as the COO, Chief of Operations, and nobody actually had the title of CEO, which was a shared responsibility between the three founders. But everyone knew that Jules was the de facto boss.

She stood in his doorway for less than a second when he signaled with a hand, saying, „Come in, Kelly, and close the door.“ *What could be the matter?!!*

„Ah, Dr. Redinger, what's the matter? Have I done something wrong?“

He shook his head and looked down at the desk. It was disconcerting and somewhat embarrassing to see the big man, head in hands, looking on the verge of tears. „This is terrible, unbelievable...“ he glanced up at her, „I just don't know what we'll do.“

She felt alarmed that some great disaster had happened, *was the Institute in peril?* „Jules, what is it?“

He looked at her through reddened eyes, „Lorne. It's Lorne?“

„Dr. Bridger? What do you mean, what's happened?“

„He's dead.“

„What! I knew he was in West Africa with the WHO trip. What happened?“

He was gaining composure. He and Lorne Bridger had been friends for thirty years. As partners at GHI, their relationship grew even closer through shared corporate responsibilities. Their work required frequent field work, travel to high-risk areas of the world, usually with public health agencies to survey and predict hot zones. As GHI stature grew in the medical community, so did their involvement with feet-on-the-ground. These responsibilities were shared between Lorne and Jules, mostly, since Charlie Ritter kept things running inside the Institute. Lorne and Jules sometimes travelled together, but as they got older and

travel demands became more frequent, they were often alone. He looked up at her, „They were on a fast moving mission across several countries where we go frequently. I don't think we can know exactly where he contracted the disease, but he started showing symptoms in Guinea. That was only two days ago, and it didn't look that serious at first. The different weather, air pollution, jet lag and other factors often cause symptoms. It just spiraled out of control, and he died this morning, our time. I just got a text message from an associate who was with him a few minutes ago.“

Kelly was shocked. Suddenly the implications of their work became more vivid. „Do you know... has anyone determined how he died?“

Jules shook his head, „No, but the team suspects VHF (viral hemorrhagic fever) based on the severity and rapid glandular failure. We won't know until there's a post-mortem. He's being returned under quarantine. It may be weeks before we know.“

„I'm sorry, Jules. I didn't know Lorne too well, but it's been apparent that you all were very close.“

„Yeah, now I've got to tell Carol, his wife.“ He leaned his head back as though studying the ceiling. „Carol, my wife Nancy and Charlie's wife were all close. If Nancy were alive now, she'd be heartbroken for Carol. I'm going to drive over to see her in a few minutes to tell her. It's not something I could do over the phone. She's a special friend. She's also, now, an active partner in the Institute.“

Kelly didn't have anything more to say as Jules continued, „That's why I asked you in here. I want you to move over to BSL-4B, Lorne's lab. The work over there is different, and I will be working with you to get familiar. For a time, you'll still have BSL-4A also until we can find someone.“ He waited for her response.

She didn't know what to say initially. Few people knew what was in BSL-4B; it was the private domain of Lorne and Jules. John might know something, but they had never discussed it in detail. *John! Would she be able to work directly with John as his principal scientist?* That would be awkward at the least. „Jules, I'm surprised, obviously, but do you really think I'm the right choice. I mean, I've got a full load now and wouldn't want to get into a situation where neither lab was managed correctly. I...“

He interrupted, „Kelly, don't you think I know what it will be for you? I'll be spending a lot more of my time with you. I don't expect you to manage 4B alone, just give me an assist until we get another person on board. Until then, we're all going to put in some extra hours. Our research is important and time-sensitive, so it must be managed. Bottom line: we don't have any other options now.“

„Jules, I don't want you to think I'm ungrateful; I just don't want to let you down.“

A quick smile came and went, „You won't. In some ways, 4B is simpler than 4A. We're more engaged in producing antidotes and vaccines, based on the exploratory work done in 4A. The parameters are actually a lot narrower, since all the predictive work is done before we go into production. In the future, when GHI becomes the foremost supplier of cures for VHF's, you'll be part of a major expansion of the lab. Don't you want to be part of that?“

„Yes, of course I do, Jules.“ She wasn't going to say more. Her head was spinning. He was handing her a huge career move, and she didn't want to blow it.

„Good. I might also add that your stock options will be doubled.“ He stood, offering his hand. „Charlie and I are both happy that you joined us, Kelly... you're the future of GHI. I know this was suddenly thrust upon you, but you're the right person for this, I'm willing to bet the future of GHI on it.“

The meeting was over; he led her toward the door while gathering his sport coat for the trip to tell Lorne's wife the tragic news. Kelly left ahead of him, walking quickly back to 4A. She wished she could talk to John.

Irina Petronova

Sometime during her second week at GHI, Kelly met Dr. Irina Petronova. They met in the cafeteria when Kelly was taking her morning break, before she'd met John. She had heard of the mysterious math genius who had preceded her at 4A. The meeting could have been the end of any chance for a cordial relationship. Petronova was illusive. Kelly had actually gone looking for her on her second day, but her office never seemed to be in use. She would later learn the mid-forties woman liked to spend her days circulating in the executive wing.

Irina was short and stocky with frizzy dirty-blond hair speckled with grey that didn't have any style at all. If she cared about her appearance, there was no evidence. She may have been an attractive graduate student, but twenty years of sitting at computer workstations and squinting through coke-bottle-thick glasses had taken a toll.

The first encounter between the women scientists didn't go well. Kelly was finishing preparing her tea at the counter, when she felt a hand brush along her hair and down her neck. „What...!“ She turned abruptly, startled, half expecting to see a man smiling at her. She couldn't have been more surprised and shocked.

„Good day, Dr. Miss Kelly Egan. I am Dr. Irina Petronova, perhaps you have heard of me.“ The woman with a strong Eastern European accent had a sardonic smile. She stood uncomfortably close, apparently unaware or not caring that she'd done anything wrong. Kelly would learn later that Petronova was compelled to make dramatic entrances and keep people off balance. She was almost slapped this time.

„I... Hello, Dr. Petronova, (extending her hand), I've heard of you.“

The shorter woman smiled. „Of course you have. All complimentary, I presume?“ She didn't lack confidence.

Kelly wasn't sure how to relate to the woman. She'd heard of her, but the vision didn't match the reputation. About the only thing Petronova exhibited was a rude demeanor that Kelly had encountered so many times among her academic peers. „I heard that you run the modeling and simulation department.“

The Russian accent didn't help the woman's sociability. „You may call it that, but it is much more. In fact, the GHI would not exist as it does today without me. I am the individual whom developed algorithms for predicting Hemorrhagic virus mutations. Already twice I have been ahead of it and made GHI famous.“

Petronova was sizing up the young scientist that replaced her in the labs. She had struggled for almost twenty years to gain acceptance from the males that ran GHI. She had finally received the respect that she had earned.

Life had not been easy for her as an immigrant. Nobody really knew her true background. She was rumored to be from the long-deposed White Russian nobility who fled to South America toward the end of the First World War. That was the story she preferred and did nothing to refute it. Another story had her as the granddaughter of a Soviet war criminal, which was closer to the truth. She didn't actually know or care about the source of family wealth. She was raised in Argentina as a young girl. Her unique accent arose from both her upbringing in South America and Russian which was spoken at home. The family lived well and neither her father nor grandfather had any specific occupation. She'd heard whispered stories from other expatriates that her grandfather had looted Jewish estates during Stalin's reign of terror, but she just ignored them and enjoyed an privileged lifestyle.

As a teenager, she'd been sent to boarding school in Connecticut and later attended UConn, majoring in life science and mathematics. Everything was paid for by her grandfather, including a comfortable allowance. She didn't socialize but made a few casual friends. She did not welcome attention from either sex and never dated. Her lack of social connections followed her into the Institute after graduation, and she enjoyed seclusion inside the laboratories, progressing to the most secure of them all. It was her math skills that got her special recognition; her ability to prove conclusively how the viruses would change in predictable ways under different environmental conditions.

Her first predictions over many years of math-modeling were always wrong. Then it happened, she had been correct and had even gone so far as to begin developing antidotes for predicted outbreaks. Her success could have been discounted as coincidence until she was able to repeat it a second time.

Jules, Lorne, and Charlie had practically adopted her, although she was certainly no longer a child. She was able to ask for and receive whatever she wanted from them. In the months before Kelly was hired, Irina left the labs and was promoted to Director of Modelling and Simulations, a position created specifically for her, and she received a suite of computer equipment along with full executive perks. She was envied by everyone, at least in her own mind.

This did not entitle her to harass Kelly.

The Docks

It was dark when the door opened. Gort didn't knock, he just walked in, „Time to get up and earn your keep. Downstairs in ten minutes.“ He left as abruptly as he entered. John couldn't focus in the dark. His head ached and muscles didn't want to work so early in the morning. He didn't know if he'd slept, he wasn't rested. Mary had frightened him.

Nevertheless, he rolled to the edge of the bed and sat up, wondering if he had any clothes for working on the dock before dawn. He put his travel bag on the bed

after turning on the light. It hurt his eyes momentarily before he settled on a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt. He'd only brought his best sneakers, which would have to work. His light jacket was nearly new. At least it wasn't raining any more. After dressing and brushing his teeth, he pulled the bed sheets up and went downstairs.

To his relief, Mary wasn't around. She was a school girl visiting for a short break with no reason to be up early. The kitchen smelled of freshly cooked bacon and Gort's wife was finishing a stack of pancakes for the two men, ready on the breakfast table. *Why do fishermen always get up before dawn!* He smiled at the lady of the house as Gort stood over the table with his first cup of coffee. John smiled at his wife, „Good morning Mrs. Swensen.“

She smiled back, „Hello, young man, (she didn't remember his name), I hope you slept well.“

He almost choked on the first gulp of black coffee, „Oh, yes, ma'am, I really appreciate you taking me in last night.“ *Did she know about Mary?* She gave no signals, which was fine with him. He didn't want Gort using him for lobster bait.

The clock read 4:25 when Gort swung on his heavy foul weather coat over his high bibs and rubber boots. John couldn't have looked more out of place, but Gort didn't mention it. As they walked in the dark toward the dock on the other side of the bay, Gort said, „The storm passed last night so the boats'll be all goin' out early. We got a lot'a bags to fill.“

What's a bag? John just hoped he wasn't in one of them.

The Swensen „plant“ was a large one-room shed with three garage-type doors in the middle of the short pier, extending into the harbor. The pier had just enough dock space for two or three boats to tie up. „In half an hour, the boats will be fightin' for dock space to get goin' out. We gotta get 'em loaded and out as fast as lightnin'.“ Behind the shack, which was built along the edge of the dock, Gort's large commercial boat was tied up with several covered crates on deck. „Okay boy, you jump down on the deck there and fix the winch cables to each o' them crates so I can lift 'em.“

John did as instructed, slipping on the slimy steps of the wood ramp leading down to the boat. It was nearly low tide, and the walkway was steep. On deck, he found the cables hanging directly over the first crate as Gort controlled the rusty winch boom from above. He yelled over the winch engine noise, „Just hook the cleats there at the corners.“

All three crates were on the dock by the shack when the first boats arrived. John followed Gort's example, removing the tarps from each crate. They were filled to the top with rock salt and herring. Gort then lifted the overhead door of the first stall, revealing an old counter top and a massive number of boxes of mesh bags. „Okay, Son, these here cardboard boxes all have a dozen bait bags. You give the skipper whatever number'a bags he wants, and you record the name of his boat on this ledger.“

The sound of diesels began filling the placid harbor a few minutes later and lights began appearing on board some of the earliest boats, maneuvering toward Swensen's. One by one the crewmen got their bags, and Gort scooped out enough herring to fill them with practiced precision using an old net. The boat crew would fill the bags as they went out into the ocean in darkness. Some of the crew had

their own bags, but John recorded their number anyway to pay for the bait. The sky was barely crimson when the last boat departed. One of the large crates was empty and the other two would be ready for use tomorrow. They had worked for almost two hours selling bait. John's hands felt crusted from the constant exposure to damp salt and his feet hurt from the same thing in his sneakers. A white briny stain covered his jacket and pants. Gort looked at him, „Okay, that's it for now. Let's go back up to the house and get us a cup; then we'll get the tanks ready.“

Once again, John was happy that Mary wasn't around the kitchen yet. They sat for a while drinking coffee then walked back down to the shack. It was the first time John saw the small harbor in the early light of day. It smelled and sounded like a fishing harbor with rocks uncovered from the tide and gulls picking away at tidal creatures. Gort lifted all three garage doors along the front of the shack, exposing large holding tanks filled with salt water being circulated from the ocean below the dock. „We got four tanks here that we sort the catch by. This one's for chix and the rest is for heavier ones. You'll get the hang of it when the boats start returnin'. Right now, I gotta check the mainland for pricing.“ Gort used his mobile phone and punched a single number. He listened for less than a minute, writing some notes on a pad. „Okay, we sort the catch by size and weight. Chix, standards and mediums and premiums all got different prices. I'll do all the sorting and tallying; you'll just help the crews get 'em in the right tanks where I tell you.“

„Yes, sir. I can do that.“

„Good, since any idiot can do it, I'd expect a smart college scientist to figure it out.“ Gort smiled at his own jibe.

The first boats began returning around noon and continued throughout the afternoon. Gort's wife brought them lunch around eleven o'clock to sustain them for the hours ahead. As the boats continued arriving throughout the afternoon, it was apparent that Swensen's would stay open until the last boat off-loaded around sundown. Somehow, Gort seemed to know when the last one had arrived. The tanks were filled nicely after a few stormy days had prevented fishing. John was feeling the effects of constant hard lifting while Gort didn't seem tired at all as the last door was closed and locked, „Tomorrow or the next day, dependin' on when the bait's gone, we'll pack 'em up and cruise to the coast to deliver.“

On delivery days, John figured they would get almost no sleep. John couldn't imagine Gort doing this alone. „So, Gort, am I good to go here for a while?“

„You got any better offers?“

John smiled to himself, „No, of course not, I just need to know if I'm sleeping in the church tonight?“

„For now, let's see how it goes. You know the house rules, and I can sure use the help, but I can't pay you nothin' except for bed and keep.“

„How about some better duds?“

Gort looked at him askance, „What, you don't like the schoolboy preppy look?“ He didn't wait for an answer. „Go see Ben tonight and get fixed up, put it on my tab.“

„Thanks, Gort.“

Regrets

Jules had a lump in his throat while stopping in front of Lorne's house. He and Nancy had been there often before she died but he hadn't been back there since. Somehow, driving his new Mercedes onto the driveway seemed out of place under the circumstances. He walked slowly and thoughtfully along the walk to the door. He'd known Carol Bridger for over thirty years. She'd comforted him when his wife died and had spent several weeks visiting her toward the end. Now, he was unsure what to say; how could he tell her this news? He had no idea what to say. He didn't have to know. When she answered the door, Carol saw immediately that something was wrong, something awful. It must have shown on Jules' face. He stuttered without entering, „Carol... I...“

„Jules, what happened? It's Lorne isn't it! What happened?“

It was easier with her opening, „Carol, Lorne died this morning. I just got the message... I...“

She nearly collapsed and Jules stepped closer, letting her rest her hands on his forearms. „Oh my God! Jules, this can't be true. I just talked to him last night.“ The expected tears began flowing. She shuddered and stepped into his arms, resting her head on his chest, then backed away, brushing his lapel with her hand, then using it to brush her cheeks.

He shook his head while staring into her eyes, „No, Carol, it's true, I wish it weren't, but it's true. I don't have many more details and arrangements need to be made to get him home. I will get you more information when it becomes available, but you need to start making... arrangements.“ He hated the expression.

She stepped closer to him again and cried on his shoulder. It comforted him to know that she didn't throw the blame on the Institute, at least not yet. He would talk to her about her new role at a future time.

Race Against Time

In Guinea, the makeshift morgue was sealed off. In a few minutes, a crew of men wearing hazmat gear would arrive to spray the entire facility, including the corpse, with diluted chlorine. Outside, members of the WHO team and local authorities were discussing protocols for treating everyone exposed to Lorne Bridger during treatment and now dealing with his remains. Containment of the disease was vital at this point.

Dr. Abagael Van Acker was on her satellite phone to GHI near Baltimore. She was standing with a mob of locals and other members of the World Health Organization. She had been near Dr. Bridger when his symptoms appeared. She had diagnosed his condition quickly and worked with the hospital staff to isolate him and tried to protect as many people as possible from exposure to his ailment. It was only a matter of hours before her suspicions were proven; she'd seen this too many times. As a compassionate professional, she had dedicated her life to helping people in underdeveloped circumstances, even at the expense of a private

life. Her greatest joy was the knowledge that she had saved lives. Now, one of her closest friends in this quest was dead. She hadn't had time to mourn yet; that would come later. For now she had to protect everyone in the region. It wasn't just the people that had contact with Lorne; she needed to isolate the source of his virus and try to get treatment there as fast as possible. VHF's were occurring more frequently and threatening the entire continent. GHI had had the most recent success in controlling the disease, and she was pleading now.

It was before eight in the morning as Jules listened on his mobile phone in his car, before having a chance to go inside the office, „Abagael, please calm down... yes, of course, we are all upset here... what can I do? Do you have a definitive diagnosis yet?“

It was dusty, hot and noisy as she moved to find an awning or tree and to get away from the heat and crowds of people. „Jules, of course, we have nothing, yet. We will not have anything until Lorne's body is tested in the states. But you know my experience. It is definitely VHF, I would stake my credentials on it.“

„Abagael, I'm not questioning you, but if you're asking for my help, I will need something from you, from the WHO.“

„Tell me... what?“

„You know exactly. For starters, we need Lorne's body for testing. After that, I'll need government support to get treatments on scene. It's expensive; it's always expensive; you know it's expensive. It also will take a lot of personnel and transportation equipment. You already have a lot of it there, but the world community will need to ante up to stop this. I'm sure the US will pay the most, but it always takes time for the Government here to commit. You can help. Get the WHO on top of the UN and put the right pressure on the right buttons. You know how to do that.“

„They won't move until the diagnosis is confirmed.“ She was frustrated but had been through this process before and knew every aspect. It would be weeks before any relief was coming, but the authorizations and commitments needed to start now for anything to happen.

He continued, „As soon as we confirm the specific VHF, I can get supplies coming at you. There's a better than 50% chance that we already have the right vaccines and antidotes in production right now.“ They both knew an exact match was needed. With hundreds of strains identified over the decades, no general cure was possible, even at GHI.

She knew all of this, of course. The call to Jules, she knew, would start things in motion at GHI. He would be ready as fast as the wheels of government could turn. He'd saved whole villages in the past; he could stop this plague before it took off. She would get the remains en route back to the US as quickly as humanly possible. It would all depend on proper transportation equipment and a receiving hospital. The in-country paperwork would move quickly when she mentioned Ebola.

After ending the call, Jules went to see Charlie Ritter. Jules was the only person in the Institute that would just open Charlie's door and walk into his office. Charlie looked strained as he ended the call, „Carol, our thoughts are with you. Please, let me know if there is anything we can help with... yes, never fear, we will be seeing a lot of you soon... take care.“

Charlie looked at Jules, as he spoke, „We have another plague developing the West Africa.“

Charlie just shook his head, „I imagine that’s so; another chance for us to save the world.“ He wasn’t being boastful, it was just his nature to seek irony whenever things went badly, and this was worse than anything in their past. Lorne had died!

Jules brushed it aside, „Right... look Charlie, start pushing some of those congressional buttons you know so well.“ GHI contributed to the reelection of several key people in Congress; who, in turn, wrote appropriations language, funding research projects for GHI. „We need to ramp up production ASAP.“

„Whatever it takes, Jules. But, don’t we need more information first? We don’t even know it’s Ebola yet, much less the specific pathogen.“

„I don’t really care. Call it an educated guess. I’m betting we already have it nailed. We just need to stockpile, which means more of our facility in operation.“

Charlie, more than anybody at GHI, marveled at Jules’ uncanny ability to win these high-stakes guessing games. Twice before, he’d been right about the bug, could he be right three times? None of the exact viruses had existed in the past, prior to GHI’s experimentation. It took months of research and testing against synthesized conditions to grow the virus samples, and then pick the ones to kill off before the plagues exploded. It was an enormous investment risk, choosing the right ones to build products against. Any wrong course could drive them to bankruptcy. He really didn’t know all the complexities of their modelling efforts, except they had proven accurate. Jules was the master; he could see into the future and predict the right antidotes and vaccines to produce in quantity, using Irina Petronova’s analysis. No major drug companies, even spending billions in research, could come close to their success. When outbreaks had occurred in the past few years, GHI had been on scene twice with the correct drugs. There had been other outbreaks, but none was ever defeated before there was huge loss of life. When GHI was involved, the success rate was unbelievable, and the statistics proved it.

Where’s John

He still hadn’t figured out in his own mind exactly what he was doing. He didn’t really have an explainable reason for leaving his job. He had a good reason, but nothing he could share with anyone at work. This included Kelly. He was conflicted. She wasn’t just another co-worker. He could take personal time off under Institute policy for many different reasons; it could mean anything, but Kelly deserved an explanation. But he couldn’t tell her without jeopardizing her career. She loved her work, and he would only scare her. He didn’t care about the bosses or personnel department; they might ultimately figure he had quit the Institute without notice, but he really didn’t want to leave her wondering. He pondered this while sitting with Gort’s family at the dinner table. Gort had left his coveralls and weather boots on the entry porch but didn’t otherwise change his wintery Maine clothing. John had changed in the bedroom, but was running thin on clothing. He would need to ask Gort’s wife to use the washing machine, or ask

Mary, who had joined them for supper. She was perky, „Okay, John. How was the first day on the docks?“

Everyone listened as he swallowed, „Oh, fine. I learned a lot and your dad’s a good teacher. It’s kind of amazing how everyone depends on Swensen’s.“

Gort chimed, „It’s a business started by my father almost fifty years ago. We was a fisher family, just like everyone, but they needed someone to carry the catch to the mainland and bring back bait. It didn’t make sense for every boat to make the trip when only one could do it, so’s everyone else could fish each day. So, my dad volunteered to handle everyone’s catch and transport it and handle the money. After a time, he started buying direct from the fishing boats and selling the catch for himself. As long as the fishermen got paid close to the market price, it was easier to get paid up front, so’s my dad got a little profit for paying them directly ... been that way ever since. At first, he almost went crazy with all the work all day plus cruisin’ overnight to the coast and then dealing with the dealers there. But after a while, probably a coupla years, things settled down and a routine started. Hasn’t really changed much over the years.“

They were eating lobster pie as John said, „I don’t know how it could be improved. You’ve got it running pretty well, supporting the whole fleet.“

Gort snickered, „Yeah, the whole fleet.“ He thought for a minute. „It’s kinda a sore point around here. There’s only about half as many boats here now. There’s a lot coming to our grounds from the mainland. They don’t stop for fuel or bait or to offload their catch. The boats are faster now days, and they don’t live here anymore. Hell, lotsa the houses is empty around town. That’s why all the businesses closed. Ya can’t even buy groceries much here, just Ben’s place, and he don’t carry much. Now’days, we pay some boat captain to buy our food stuff whenever one of them goes to the mainland. It’s getting harder to live here.“ After a pause, he continued, „You know John, honestly, I can’t keep doin’ this indefinite. I’m getting’ older and some nights I don’t get back from the coast ‘til morning, just to start it all over again. The only days off are when it’s too stormy. Hell, me and the missus ain’t ever had a vacation. The only one here enjoyin’ life is Mary, and maybe Buddy, just bein’ away and all.“ Mary gave her father a sideways glance. If school was a vacation, then she wasn’t having the kind of fun her father imagined. It was a way off the island, an escape route. She never wanted to return to life on the island and was using the time in Portland to get an education and, hopefully, find an alternative way of life for herself. If she didn’t make a clean break at the completion of high school, and get a job on the mainland, or possibly go to college, she’d be forced to return home and never be able to leave it again. She felt trapped and needed the time away to make an escape... *yeah, some vacation.*

Mary paused, using her fork for emphasis, „Daddy, you can complain all you want, but it doesn’t make me feel bad. You always talk like it’s a duty or something for Buddy and me to take over your business and support you. I’m not coming back here to live ... never. As soon as school’s over, I’ll get a job and stay there. I don’t mind coming to visit, but this is no life for me.“ She looked away as the last words trailed off. She focused on her dinner; she hated this recurring dialogue with her parents. Why couldn’t they understand? They’d never experienced anything other than the island and just didn’t get it; this wasn’t a life for her.

John noted that Mary had the ability to speak using better English when she chose to, mostly when being emphatic.

Gort sounded apologetic, „Child, I know this isn't a life for everyone, and I do wish I had something more to give you, but this is the life your mother and I chose, and it ain't a bad life.“

„Daddy, look around. I want a husband and a family and nice things. There's not one boy on this Island that qualifies, and there aren't any good ones that would move here.“ She almost said „excepting John.“ „It's a big country out there, and you've never seen any of it. I don't want that, and I'm not going to debate it with you again and again.“ Shiny droplets began forming in her eyes. Mary had a sensitive side that contrasted with the playful persona he'd met just yesterday. He could tell that she loved her parents and was conflicted at a deeply personal level between disappointing them and trying to realize her own happiness. She stayed at the table for the rest of the meal but remained silent and unhappy. She loved her parents, but why couldn't they see things from her perspective?

John was tired and ached from physical work that he was not accustomed to but needed to buy some proper working gear. After dinner, he excused himself and started to leave when Mary rushed to join him. He didn't bother looking at Gort, suspecting that he wouldn't be happy about it. Gort knew his daughter better than she understood.

John stepped out of the porch and down the steps quickly with Mary behind, trying to keep some distance for Gort's benefit. She called, „Hey, slow down, what's the hurry?“

He turned too abruptly. „Mary, you're going to get us both in trouble. Look, I like what's going on with your dad's business, and I don't want to blow it. I don't know what else I'd do here.“ She didn't look away, and he immediately felt bad. He wasn't naturally a harsh person, and she'd done him an immense favor bringing him into her home.

She countered, „You're not here to write a book, and you sure aren't starting a career in lobster bait. If you wanted peace and quiet to concentrate, you wouldn't want to spend all day every day working on the dock. You're running or hiding from something. Do you think I'm stupid? Do you think my folks haven't figured it out too?“

He knew his charade was miserably transparent. „Look, I don't want to talk about it. I've got some things to work out; that's all.“

The night air was cold, but the stars were clear. It was one of the middle-fall nights that caused people to sit under the stars, almost squinting at their brightness, while bundled in heavy clothing and sipping something warm. There were harbor noises from the moving currents: bells clanging, moorings rubbing on chocks and even some small waves lapping on the rocks. She didn't pry further as they walked in silence the rest of the way to the store.

She wanted someone, him, to talk to; before John appeared mysteriously, there was nobody. „I'm sorry you got to see the Swensen's recurring family argument.“ She stiffened in the cold night air, and he slowed to walk beside her. „It's just that ... well, Gort and my mom, they just don't want to see my side. They're so afraid of growing old alone out here that they can't see anything else. It's not fair, John. I deserve a life, too, and they keep trying to control me.“

He slowed and looked at her, genuinely feeling her pain. She was conflicted and shouldn't be. She was right; her parents should give her wings. „I know, Kiddo. I've never had to deal with your kind of situation so can't really give good advice. About all I can see is that your folks really do love you. Deep down, they want you to be happy, too. I'd place your odds of finding someone to spend your life here with at almost zero. You're right about that. I think that they'll understand it over time, maybe not before you graduate, but they'll get it eventually. Hell, I could see Gort and your mom moving to Portland when he retires.“

She shook her head. „Yeah... retire. The only thing they have is the house and the business, and I don't think either of them is worth much. I guess I worry about them. They're trapped, and I don't know what they'd do for money if dad can't work the business any more. It's nice to think that they would follow me instead of vice versa, but I don't see it happening.“

He just nodded as they reached the store. They would have this discussion again; he was certain.

She helped him select the right bib pants and work jacket, rubber gloves and boots, looking approvingly at him all dressed in brand new gear, which would soon look like old gear working on the dock. „These'll be good for the winter. It gets miserably cold here—and you need some insulation, or your fingers'll be numb in minutes.“

He looked like an Eskimo with everything on. She couldn't help laughing, and Ben just looked away. John grinned, „Are you sure this is the right stuff, most of the fishermen weren't so bundled.“

Mary was still smirking, „You don't have to wear the jacket and gloves all the time, but the bibs and boots are mandatory.“

They left the store with everything bundled under his right arm. She held on to his free arm, and he didn't resist. He knew the limits of acceptable behavior, and there wasn't any reason to make her feel worse just walking together. In general, he felt that she was a nice girl with an odd living situation. She actually seemed to have her head on right. She probably wouldn't go on to college after high school and would work for minimal wages, and then marry some mainland tradesman and live happily ever after with a dozen kids. He could imagine it.

She snuggled tighter to his arm, „John, I'm sorry if I scared you by saying you were running. I didn't mean to upset you.“

He stopped and turned away, toward the harbor, and she rotated beside him, still holding his arm. „You were right, Mary. I can't tell you more, but I needed some time away to think things through.“

„It's about a girl, isn't it? You got a girlfriend, or a wife you left behind?“

He just stared out over the boats. „It's not about her; well, maybe it is a little.“

„So, you do gotta girl!“ She still held on. Her rational mind already knew this obvious conclusion, but she hoped it wasn't true on another level.

„Maybe. I left without talking to her. I can't believe I did that.“

„Musta been serious. Did you have a fight?“

„No, it wasn't anything to do with her. I just found out something that ... it's related to my job, I just don't know what to do.“

„Wanna talk about it?“

He turned and kept walking with her latched onto his arm. He couldn't help thinking that for a teenager, Mary had amazing insight and empathy. He had the fleeting urge to confide in her. „No, not now.“

She pulled his arm closer as they walked. „Okay then, some other time, I'm a good listener.“

All he could think about was how little this girl knew of the real world, and certainly not his world. What could he tell her? He really wanted to talk to someone.

As he reached for the front door, she released his arm. „See you later tonight!“

The nymph was back! He started to stammer but didn't have time to object as she opened the door.

Bedtime came early at the Swensen house and all was quiet. Gort and Mrs. Swensen would be up around four in the morning. They had turned in right after cleaning the dishes at supper and watching the evening news on TV at the same time. It didn't seem to serve any other function; except, maybe when the kids were home.

A few minutes after returning and hanging his new gear on the porch, John was lying awake in Buddy's room, still pondering how stupid he'd been to leave Kelly in the lurch, without even saying goodbye. She would be worried. He'd been an idiot—an insensitive jerk—by not confiding in her. Would she really be in danger at work if he told her why he was leaving? His walk with Mary along the bay started bringing it into perspective. Instead of sleeping, he put on a jacket and walked as quietly as possible down the stairs and out the front door. There was no worry of it locking behind him; nobody locked doors on the island. The cold damp air chilled him as he walked farther away from the house, out of earshot. He pulled the smartphone from his jacket pocket and hesitated before pressing the speed-dial number. *What would he say to her?*

It was past eight o'clock, and the call went to voicemail; he quickly disconnected. He wasn't going to leave her a message after the way he'd behaved. There was a park bench along the waterfront halfway around the edge of the harbor between the store and Swensen's. He sat thinking about what he would say. No matter how he framed it in his mind, it never seemed to come out right. After a quarter hour, the cold had saturated his clothes, and he shivered. He stood to head back to the Swensen home when his phone began buzzing. The display said „Kelly.“ He answered apprehensively, „Hello.“

There was a brief pause before she spoke. „Hi, I saw on my phone that you called. I've got a lot of new work and was still finishing some entries when you called.“ There was no warmth in her tone ... not that he expected or deserved it.

„Ah, can you talk?“

„I just walked out to my car, heading home. So, what do you want?“

He rubbed his head, thinking fast. The cold wasn't affecting him any longer. „I just... I just wanted to talk to you and maybe explain some things.“

„You mean why you disappeared without any word? You mean why you left me alone for two days, pondering what I did wrong?“

„You didn't do anything wrong.“

„Yeah, I know.“ Her voice was louder and tense. „I need to go now, goodbye.“

„WAIT! Please, just give me a chance to explain.“

She didn't answer immediately. He stood, unsure of what to do or say next. She'd only known John for three months and thought their foundation was established, and then he disappeared! How can he treat me like this? Then her analytically-trained mind took over. „Okay, let me hear your story, but let me warn you that I'm not in a good mood right now. You're alive, obviously, so there isn't much of an excuse that will make me understand.“

„Kell, I know how this looks, and how you must feel. I feel the same way. I've been in a tailspin and don't have a parachute. I reacted irrationally and ... well, I know that now. I just want to let you know what went on.“

„So, why did you disappear?“

„I don't think I really know.“

She exploded. „You don't know? How could you not know? My God, John, you're not ignorant. You're a veteran. You saw men killed in combat, and, for all I know, you killed a few yourself. What? Are you suddenly a mental case?“

He didn't feel very self-assured. „No, none of that.“

„Okay, let's hear it.“ He heard her car engine start and the phone switched to Bluetooth operation.

„I've got to tell you the whole story.“

„Go ahead. I'm driving alone toward home, and you have my undivided attention.“

„Okay, but I hope this makes sense.“ He went on to describe a normal day in BSL-4B. „I finished entering data and did some checks, but it's all gotten routine, so I wanted to go further into the database, into things that I wasn't supposed to be seeing. Lorne was gone overseas, and Jules is spending most of his time on the road in hush-hush business meetings, so I decided to play a little. You know, *inquisitive minds*. Anyway, the files were password protected, so I did some exploring where I shouldn't have. Lorne's a pretty straightforward guy so I did some simple experimenting; you know, dog names, kid names, wife, birthdays, etc. Actually, I've tried several things on and off over the months, as kind of a game. I couldn't understand why some of the lab files were concealed.“

She interrupted, „Wait, you hacked your own boss?“

„Yeah, yes, I did.“ He wasn't proud of it, which showed in his voice. He stood and walked along the edge of the harbor, continuing to talk. „Anyway, I thought about that boat he loved: BUGKILL'R. I tried it along with a couple numbers, a couple dates. All of a sudden, I was in!“

„Are you sure you want to tell me this? It sounds like a breach of security, or at least a breach of protocol. I've still got a job here.“

He got the implication in her words. He'd done everything wrong, departing the way he did with no notice to the Institute. „No one needs to know this part.“ Before she could respond, he continued. „So, anyway, some large files jumped out, lots of them, all coded from what I could see. Honestly, Kelly, I don't know what any of them said, except they were way different than the normal lab format.“

„I hate to ask; but, what was in them?“

„That's just it. I don't know. I played around trying to break the codes. I knew both Lorne and Jules were gone, so I had the time to play without any fear.“

„Look, John, I'm almost home. Is there a point to this? What's the bottom line? Why did you abandon me, your job, everything?“

„Kelly, here’s the mystery: I don’t know.“ He could hear her gasp in exasperation, „That’s not the point. I was experimenting with the data files when I got a priority IM telling me to stop immediately! Lorne; he was half way around the world and working remotely in the data at the same time. He could see my login information.“

She parked outside her apartment, „So, you got caught and decided to run.“

„No! That’s the point. Lorne has been my closest friend, my mentor at GHI. He treats me like a son. His message was short, *Shut down, get out—fast! Explanation to follow.* You’d have to know Lorne to understand the urgent undertones. Anyway, I did just that and left the building. Shortly after that, he sent me a text message. It just said, *get lost, kid, get really lost, more to follow.* Later, when I was at my apartment, thinking about calling you at work, I got another message: *Go somewhere that no one can find you, tell no one; don’t tell Kelly.* I was going to call you anyway when he sent me a last message: *life or death issues; it’s not all what it seems. Get lost and I’ll give more in a day or so.* I didn’t hear from him yet, so I’m in the dark, Kelly. I probably shouldn’t even be calling you, but I couldn’t go any longer without letting you know what happened.“

Her demeanor had shifted. „You’re scaring me, John. Do you think you’re in danger? What could have been in Lorne’s data files?“

„I don’t know. I don’t know anything until he contacts me again.“

She was silent for several moments. „Lorne’s dead.“

Lab Indoctrination

That night, in her apartment, she stayed awake for hours trying to piece together what John was saying. It seemed so simple, yet it didn’t make any sense. *How could some encrypted files be so important that John had to fear for his life? Is that what Lorne was telling him? Life or death could mean anything.* There were questions but no answers. In the meantime, John was hiding out. He certainly took Lorne’s warning seriously. She didn’t know Lorne, or Jules, the way that John did. He’d been Lorne’s right hand for a year, working alone together in the lab most of the time. Jules rarely appeared anymore, certainly not since she’d started at the lab. John and Lorne had a special bond, and John was able to interpret Lorne’s messages. He was definitely scared.

She went to work early the next morning after a sleepless night. John didn’t tell her where he was located, so she didn’t have to lie if anyone asked. She was basically to act as though they barely knew each other. Lorne may have known that they’d dated, but it wasn’t general knowledge at the Institute. Her head was still swimming. So much had changed in a short time. John disappeared, Lorne died, she got moved to another lab, and now a rumor was circulating that another VHF breakout was possible. She sat at her BSL-4A outer desk doing nothing and thinking about priorities. John’s situation confounded her. Everything else was linked together, but not John. She was getting madder by the minute thinking about it. She should have been thinking about managing two level 4 bio-safety labs. The stuff inside could kill her and others. John was personal.

Kelly was socially awkward. From the time she was a little girl she'd excelled in sciences. This intimidated the boys. As she moved through high school and college, her laboratory work became her main focus. While other girls were concerned about attracting boys, and, vice versa, Kelly didn't pay too much attention. She was aware when prom dances and campus parties were happening but she wasn't interested; she didn't care—she really didn't care.

Her parents had both been engineering professors, consulting at Ft. Meade for the NSA and always encouraged her to use her mind. They also told her she was pretty and would someday meet a smart man who would respect her, support her career, and be a true partner in life. Children were optional and neither of her parents showed any interest in having grandchildren. She'd grown up under the presumption that she was heterosexual which was accurate, and her parents just believed that some great guy would materialize in her life.

After meeting John, something happened to her. Repressed adolescent cravings began to affect her; maybe even some maternal instinct. She wasn't sure how it all felt, but she enjoyed it. She never remembered her parents holding hands or kissing each other. They never kissed her either. But with John, she felt emotions that were foreign to her, things she wasn't prepared for. Whatever it was, she had liked it.

Right now, she was waiting for Jules to escort her into BSL-4B and start showing her around. She knew this was more than doubling her workload with Lorne gone. Jules was technically the lead scientist in the lab, but he rarely showed up and probably wasn't even familiar with everything being processed anymore.

She went for a second cup of coffee a little after nine o'clock when Jules rushed in for bottled water. „Oh, hi, Kelly. Look, I'm going to be late and maybe won't make it to the lab today; some investor stuff. Get together with the lab assistant, his name is John, I think, and he can brief you on what's hot right now.“

So, Jules doesn't know John is gone. She finished a hot sip, „Okay Jules, I'll do my best.“ He'd probably find out about John soon enough. Upon return to BSL-4A, she told her lab assistant Fred that she needed to go out to her car and would be going to 4B after that.

She walked calmly out the front door in case anyone, particularly Jules, was watching. Inside her car, she called John.

He was relaxing between baiting the boats and processing the catch which would begin in a few hours. He felt comfortable enough around Gort to take the call, indicating it was personal. He walked off of the dock, along the breakwater. „Hi, Kell, I can't talk long.“

„Good, neither can I. Look John, Jules hasn't noticed you're gone.“

„I think he'll figure it out soon enough. Someone will.“

„I'm supposed to work in 4B alone today and supposed to have you fill me in.“

„Okay, wow, 4B, it's completely different than 4A. We're producing products in there, supposedly to stop the next outbreak. It's not research.“

„Yeah, well, what am I gonna do?“

He let out a breath and paused to think. „Okay, for the first day, you should be okay. When you get into the growth chamber, just go to each work cell and notice the touch screen with all the templates and parameters. All you need to do is enter

the values in all the blocks. The data goes to my terminal outside, where it's analyzed. There's usually no issue, and we're not *canning* this week, so you don't need to do anything but monitor it. If you get really stuck, I can probably help you after explaining things to you, just call me." He didn't figure she'd have any problems, he knew she was competent and the production processes were a lot simpler than the research she had been doing in 4A with so many changing parameters. In production, all the variables were fixed to yield a consistent batch. „I'll call you later tonight, and we can talk more. You'll do fine, but let's reconnect later.“

She hung up, not sure if she felt more confident, but she really didn't have a choice; she needed to go into the 4B chamber.

Outbreak

„This is Dr. Abagael Van Acker, who am I speaking to?“ She cupped her hand over the phone to hear well. She was still standing on the dirt street in front of the clinic where Lorne Bridger's body lay on a slab inside a sealed room with no refrigeration. The local health authorities didn't know anything at all about proper precautions with the virus like this. They'd seen hundreds or thousands of dead victims in the past but had no real training or equipment to handle a quarantine of this level. Dr. Van Acker was the best qualified person on scene, yet they weren't going to let her dictate protocol. She, on the other hand, wanted the body preserved and moved to a proper lab in the states for examination. Every day that it laid at room temperature threatened to compromise any tests.

She tried to speak clearly, using simple English. „Look Dr. Mecheba, I know this is your country, and we respect your laws, but something has to happen soon... Yes, we've been through this with everyone here; I just need you to take the lead as the country's Health Minister and help us get Dr. Bridger's remains to a proper laboratory for examination. This might mean the difference between life and death for thousands of your people.“

She listened, wiping dust and sweat from her forehead, then responded, „Look, Kerfalla, we've known each other a long time, and I'm here to help you. I'm not telling you how to do your job. I'm just telling you, as a friend, that you can stop a lot of negative publicity if we can define the pathogen and stop it before it makes world news. You must see this.“

She listened. *Finally, a breakthrough.* „Okay, Kerfalla, I will wait for the ambulance. Tell them that they must use full hazmat restrictions for everyone's safety. Have them bring two bio-hazard material bags big enough for the body along with as much dry ice as they can find. I've contacted WHO headquarters and expect a medivac plane at Conakry International in a few hours... Okay, thank you.“

She put the phone back into its case in one of her cargo pockets. Her pulse rate was returning to normal. Now, she wished for some shade and a drink before they arrived. *Third world bureaucracy!*

M&A Meeting

„I’m telling you, Charlie. We finally made it. We’re sitting on a gold mine; it’s just a matter of how deep we want to dig.“ Jules was in Charlie Ritter’s office with the door closed and feet on the desk. If it wasn’t still mid-morning, they’d be sharing a bottle of Scotch.

Charlie’s expression remained serious. „Look, Jules. With all the money flying around, I’d be happy to grab the first bluebird and retire on some tropical island and fish all day and drink on the boat all night.“

„You gotta be patient, Charlie. Trust me. We’re about to make headlines whichever way we go. This thing’s got a momentum of its own with all the publicity.“

„That’s your area, Jules. I hate dealing with all those financial morons. None of them ever invented anything or invested their lives to save people. I’ve never met a one that I’d hire to clean floors at GHI. When I went to school, most of my friends went the business route so they could party and avoid hard subjects. I worked my ass off, studying science and math for eight friggin’ years. So, what did the business guys do? They went to some fat job at an investment bank and think they know something about the value of this place. They don’t have a clue. Laziest bunch of overpaid dummies in the world. Hell, what they do isn’t even honest by my standards.“

„Stay calm, Charlie. Like you said, I’ll handle them. When it’s all over, you’ll thank me for grabbing the gold ring. Hell, I don’t think there’s an offer on the table we would take now. Think about it. GHI solved two world health catastrophes since 2012. No one else on earth can claim even one.“

Charlie remained serious and leaned forward for emphasis. Making tons of money didn’t shake his demeanor after all the years working in labs. „I don’t like the odds, Jules. We could screw the pooch next time.“

Jules just smiled, „Trust me partner... ain’t gonna happen.“

Across the building, Kelly was suiting up. Fred came over to 4B to help. He took full advantage of any chance to brush against her female parts accidentally while assisting. She didn’t like him touching her but needed his help for some of the more awkward parts of the suit and didn’t know how to scold him at the same time. Once inside the inner lab, she was amazed at the sheer scope of things. It was huge. For a bio safety level-4 lab, the place was immense. It wasn’t a research lab at all; it was a production facility divided into four different areas behind floor-to-ceiling glass walls. *What’s this all about? We’re a research Institute, but this is something else.*

On the island, John excused himself, leaving the house after a lobster bisque and fried cod dinner to call Kelly. He hoped that Mary would be asleep when he returned—in her own room. He hadn’t slept well the night before, afraid that Mary would creep into his bed. She hadn’t. He let the phone ring until it went to voice mail, then hung up and waited before trying again. She called him back. „Hey, John, I was just getting in the car.“ It was after seven in the evening. „I had a lot to do, and it’s been a long day.“

„Did you get into 4B?“

„Yeah. Yes I did. That place is immense. How come you never told me about it before?“

„You never asked. I’m just a basic lab rat, barely able to talk to you *real* scientists. Besides, I was told from the beginning that talking to anyone, which includes you, would violate my proprietary protection agreement. You never asked, anyway, so I didn’t need to lie.“

„Okay, I’m asking now, and I hope you’re not lying.“

He sat up on the back of the bench with his feet on the seat. There didn’t appear to be anyone else out in the cold night air or anyone working on boats within hearing distance. „Wouldn’t be much of a breach now would it, since you’re now the lab boss, and I’m the outsider.“

„I’m not the boss; I work for the three musketeers, just like always. Besides, I don’t think anyone has even noticed you were gone.“

„What do you mean?“

„I don’t think Jules has been there mentally for weeks. He’s off doing stuff outside of GHI. There’s speculation that the Institute’s being sold, and Jules is gone a lot, sometimes with the finance people.“

He rubbed his temples, „Okay, I don’t know what to do. Lorne warned me to leave quick. Now, I don’t know what else to do.“

„I can’t do this alone, John. You know all the work going on, and I’m like a lost deer in a forest of headlights. Jules said he’d work with me, but I think he’s really relying on you.“

His headache worsened. *Had he made a mistake? Did he misunderstand Lorne? Worse, was there some diabolic plan to lure him back by using Kelly as bait?* Anything was possible. But, he was also sick of the idea of hiding out. If Kelly were in some kind of jeopardizing position, he couldn’t be sitting idling on an obscure dock five hundred miles away filling bait bags. „Alright, look, I don’t believe that nobody has missed me for three days, but I’m coming back. In the meantime, be watchful and stay away from the outer lab workstation. I’m sure they can track who’s been accessing files, and I don’t want you getting on their hit list. They may already know we’re an item—at least I hope we are—and that could put you in some kind of danger. I don’t know what it is, but Lorne was serious.“ *Who was “they?”*

„You’re scaring me.“

He softened his tone. „Sweetheart (he’d never used the term before), you’ll be safe if you don’t do any detective work. It may get a little precarious when I get there.“

„When will you be here, John?“

„I’ll let you know as soon as possible, tomorrow if I can get there.“ Island transportation to the mainland was the main issue.

With that, he heard Gort leaving through the front door, walking in his direction. John finished. „Hey, I gotta go, call you soon. I love you!“

Gort called to him. „Get your ocean gear, boy, we’re heading to the mainland.“

He needed to be completely honest with the man that had taken him in, „Gort, I have a problem.“

Gort kept walking toward the dock. „Get your gear, and we got a couple ‘a hours to talk. It’s gonna be rough tonight, so bring all your foul weather stuff.“

John ran to the house, directly to the bedroom, stuffing his personal clothes into his travel bag and grabbing his computer bag. Mary was standing near the foot of the stairs when he came down. He could hardly look at her when she spoke. She said softly, „You leavin’?“

He could see the tears forming as he began to speak. „I... I’ve got to, Mary. Something came up, and I can’t stay here any longer.“

„You in danger here?“

„No, not me. Someone close to me; someone I love.“

She’d known he had someone, somewhere. „Will you come back? Will I ever see you again?“

Without thinking, he pulled out his wallet and gave her his GHI card. „I’d like to keep in touch, but it’ll never be the way you might want. You helped me at a tough time, Mary and, well, I’ll always owe you.“

She looked at the card for a long time then looked up. „Does Daddy know you’re leaving?“

„Not yet, he’s waiting on the docks to haul lobsters to the mainland, I’m going with him, and, hopefully, he won’t throw me overboard half way.“

Impulsively, she kissed his cheek. „I’ll see you again, John. Think about me next time you’re alone in bed wondering who might sneak through the door.“ She tried to smile.

He grabbed the boat gear as he passed out the front door. With everything bundled under both arms, he couldn’t walk fast. He was dreading telling Gort.

Interview

Jules was working late. He was at an age and seniority that he should be able to assign work to subordinates, but this was private. The Chief Financial Officer came into Jules’ office. „Look, Jules, these are the latest figures. The P&L hasn’t changed since the meeting with Hawk.“ Hawk, Goodwin and Manchzec was the investment company managing the latest opportunity with a Saudi Arabian government agency. He laid a summary sheet on the desk.

Jules didn’t look at it. „That’s fine Matt. That CBS reporter will be here tomorrow, and I just want to be up to speed. I don’t expect to get into this, but you never know.“

„Okay then, Jules. I’m headed out if you don’t need anything else. I had Marie (their shared Executive Assistant) set up the charts in the board room.“

Jules waived him off. „Okay, Matt. Thanks for staying late.“

Matt Hanson was one of only three people, including Jules and Charlie, who knew the plan to sell the Institute. Even if they decided to merge with another firm or to go public, his shares, amounting to four percent of the Institute, would be worth enough for him to retire well at forty. He’d really lucked into the job. Eight years before, he was an Audit Manager at a big-four public accounting firm, tired of working extraordinary hours for steady pay. He wanted more. He wanted to be

CFO or at least Comptroller at a private company, offering an equity position. GHI had given him that chance. When he joined, he filled all financial roles with a junior accountant for support. Back then, the three principal owners and he shared a common office suite with used desks and second-hand office equipment. Since then, with a healthy influx of debt and equity money, they were living high; higher than any small companies that he knew about. Because of the leverage and outside investors, they had semi-annual audits by a mid-sized CPA firm, and Matt's prior background proved invaluable, keeping the burden off the scientists running the Institute.

Jules was as prepared as he could be. The meeting in the morning would not be aimed at investors directly. A national TV network wanted to do a story on the Institute that had cured the last Ebola outbreak in Zaire, almost before it started. He shut off the light and walked past the security station. „Goodnight, Israel.“ The uniformed guard smiled and buzzed the door, which had locked automatically at seven o'clock.

His reserved parking spot was the closest of any to the lobby door. He sat in his car for a moment without starting the engine, thinking about how nice it would have been if Nancy had lived longer, and they could share retirement together. Being wealthy had always been his dream, a dream they shared, but cancer intervened. He sat sullenly, reflecting, as he had every day for two years, on how things might have been different if he had pursued a cure to that cursed disease. The answer was always the same: billions were being spent already and progress was being made by dozens of institutions; maybe hundreds. *What could he have done?*

Anyway, it was all history at this point, a dark history for him. She'd died only six months after the diagnosis. There was never a favorable prognosis. They'd shared as much time as possible in her last months, travelling and enjoying life as much as he could get away. It wasn't enough, he knew, because it was the same time as their reputation at GHI started growing exponentially, and he couldn't get home often. Hell, he was out of the country for weeks at a time or away at prospective investor meetings. He'd only made it back in the morning on the day that she died, at home. The home health aide met him outside of the den, which had been converted to be her hospital room. She told him that Nancy probably wouldn't respond any more, but might know he was there. *Might know I was there?*

Nancy had looked wilted and shrunken, yet he could still see the vibrant young woman he'd married more than forty years earlier. He sat alongside her bed and gently reached for her hand. It was cold, but the monitor still showed a pulse, and the respirator cycled with a familiar rhythm, pumping life into her lungs. Her eyes were closed, and she no longer moved. The IV gave a steady morphine drip. He had cried with his head on the edge of her bed until falling asleep after twenty four hours of anxious travel to be with her.

Sometime during the night, the nurse put her hand on his shoulder, and he awoke to silence. The machines were all off. He willed it to be different, but there was nothing to say, nothing the nurse could do, nothing anyone could do. Nancy had passed that night two years ago. He only reflected on it for a moment, then started the car and drove to their empty home. Since she had passed, the house

had grown sterile, lifeless. It was Nancy's home. They built it together, but it had always been hers. The furnishings, the décor, the textures, her casual flinging of little projects scattered about, the smell of dinner when he arrived home... this had been her house, and now it was lifeless. Their home life had gone with her. He dreaded being there alone now. At the same time, he couldn't ever move away. It was so much of her, and he couldn't imagine ever leaving it or changing a thing from the day she died. The hospital equipment was gone now, and the house was otherwise exactly as she had lived in it. It always would be. His drive home was always filled with dread. He should have appreciated the surroundings that were so much of her in life, but it had the opposite effect. He hadn't been there enough for her in life, and now he never would be. The house was a constant reminder of his neglect.

The guilt surrounded him. It dominated every private moment. He was driven for success at the Institute. She probably understood that he loved her, but did she? He'd never really shown it overtly. No kids, no extended vacations. Hell, she'd never been outside the country with him despite loving to read and dream about visiting Europe, the orient, the tropics. She sometimes talked about getting away for a long vacation, maybe a river cruise in Europe, whenever they had a quiet moment together. There hadn't been many such moments, not enough. He was always rushing away to the labs or to Washington, never giving her the attention she deserved. There had always been „next year.“ They'd never even had a honeymoon when he was in medical school. They'd been married over forty years when the sickness overtook her. He could never replay their life and be the husband she deserved, that chance could not happen. He would never sleep soundly again in their house.

The following morning, he was in the office early, making final preparations for the TV crew. It wasn't really necessary. When they arrived, technicians began carrying boxes of lighting and sound equipment into the conference room, rearranging things. It quickly looked like a black and yellow spaghetti explosion all over the floor. Jules handled all of the dialogue with the producer and the reporter. He didn't know when, or even if, Charlie would arrive. He assumed he was in his office or in one of the labs and didn't want to disturb him. Charlie hated this kind of thing. Jules thrived in it.

Within twenty minutes of arrival, one cameraman was being escorted around the Institute by Marie for „color“ video, and four fixed cameras were positioned in the conference room: two on the interviewer and two on Jules from different angles. A girl politely asked to apply some light power to his face to mute reflections and glare. A sound technician placed a small hidden microphone under his lapel and set the volume levels, using a portable recorder control board. All in all, it was amazingly efficient with the interview beginning less than half an hour after the crew had arrived.

After positioning everything and adjusting the lighting, the reporter began a series of questions that she had reviewed with Jules before the cameras were recording. „Dr. Redinger, you are the Chief Technology Officer for the Global Hemorrhagic Institute, is that right?“

„Yes, Kathy, I share executive responsibilities at GHI with two partners.“

„Dr. Redinger, I understand that one of your partners recently died in Africa while working with the World Health Organization to prevent the next Ebola outbreak.“

„That’s right. Dr. Lorne Bridger, is, was, my friend, my colleague, and a brilliant doctor. We founded GHI about twenty-five years ago; he, Dr. Charles Ritter and myself; we all came together as a team. Not only GHI, but the whole world lost an amazing humanitarian when Lorne died; someone who saved thousands of lives.“

„Do you know what happened to him in Africa?“

„We suspect some sort of Hemorrhagic pathogen, but that has not yet been confirmed.“

„Does that mean there could be another Ebola outbreak occurring?“

„It might. We just don’t know yet.“

She glanced quickly at her list of questions. „Okay, tell me about your Institute. Why are you so much at the leading edge of fighting this virus?“

He smiled, savoring the answer that would be seen on world news later tonight. „Three of us, all scientists, Lorne, Charlie and myself began together, working for the Army, developing vaccines and cures against biologic weapons, things like Anthrax. It was shortly after starting there, almost thirty-five years ago, that we began working with VHF, viral hemorrhagic fevers. Back then, nobody felt it was a weapon threat, but that’s been changing over the years. Today, Ebola and similar pathogens are the most deadly known to mankind.“

„So, tell me about GHI. How did it start?“

„After eight or nine years with the Government, my partners and I began thinking that the work we were doing should be expanded and accelerated for the general world population, rather than our more limited objective with the military.“ He paused momentarily to collect his thoughts. „Our plan didn’t take long to put together. We were all well-paid civil servants, so we just pooled some money and started buying used lab equipment. It was amazingly cheap, probably ten cents on the dollar to buy used versus new, yet most of it look brand new. This stuff doesn’t wear out. It gets outmoded, but doesn’t wear much. Anyway, we got a small rented space and set up a lab.“

She smiled. „It seems so simple, yet there’s nothing simple about working with killer viruses, is there?“

„You’re quite right. If our early landlord knew what we were doing, he would never have let us set up shop. We had to fib a little back then; otherwise, GHI might not have happened.“

„You have an impressive facility now, and it hasn’t taken long to get here by business standards. Now, I’d like to ask you the question everyone wants to know. How is it that GHI had the cure ready before the last outbreak in Liberia? I mean, it usually takes months to develop the right drugs to cure the sick and prevent it from spreading, doesn’t it?“

He smiled easily, growing more comfortable with her approach. „That’s one of the reasons we wanted to start GHI. The VHFs have evolved from fairly simple or similar strains. It seemed, based on our experience with the Army, that these particular viruses mutated according to somewhat predictable outside influences. Things like a drought one year, or excessive rain fall, or climactic shifts, and many other factors can cause a mutation from a current strain in a predictable way. I

can't go into sufficient detail, but we wanted to see if we could develop predictive models based on observed environmental phenomena that would somehow act as roadmaps to the next form of the virus. We did not believe that mutation was a random event."

"So, you proved it!"

Smiling broadly at her naiveté, he said, "Not at first. It took years to develop models that actually worked. It's kind of like weather modelling; no two mutations are exactly the same. We had a lot of trial and error. It took years. We build incredibly complex simulations looking backward at circumstances from prior outbreaks that occurred, trying to replicate known changes in the viruses. In a way, you could say we were lucky when they, ultimately, seemed to be working. We could have spent a lifetime trying to predict the next bug and never gotten it right. But about ten years ago, we started seeing promising results. These tests, back then, were what got us the money to continue working on our theories. We employ over twenty research scientists and far more math modelers and support staff. It's expensive, and we nearly went broke several times. None of us owners made a dime for almost ten years. Then the models finally started working; we nailed it."

She followed his lead, "So, you used your method to predict the next outbreak and had the medicines ready?"

He smiled again, "No, it's not that simple. Actually, we needed to plan ahead more than a year; sometimes it's beyond the next outbreak. It takes time and facilities to prepare the antidotes and vaccines. That's when the real creditability tests began. We needed money to expand into production for futuristic drugs that would be needed long before any FDA approvals would be granted, all based on proprietary processes that no one could validate. You can imagine what a battle it was. In fact, our first test was virtually self-funded using precious R&D dollars to produce enough inventories to use as an actual field proof test. You see, we actually started curing more than three cycles back, before the last two that got so much publicity. There was a small outbreak in Liberia that killed a few hundred villagers and didn't make the news here in the states. We had predicted it correctly and went there when it happened and saved several dozen people. It was enough to get WHO attention, which led to the funding we needed to grow. Since then, the WHO has been our biggest advocate."

"So, you're able to predict the outbreak and be ready when it happens?"

"Not quite. Sometimes the outbreaks we predict don't happen, and we have to start over for the next cycle. It's expensive to waste the drugs, but we've made a commitment to be ready when needed. Sometimes that need never materializes."

"But, you've been ready for the two largest outbreaks since 2012?"

"That's right! We saved thousands when no other treatments were available."

"Wow, how do you continue to be owned by only three people? You three control a very valuable enterprise."

"It's getting harder by the minute, as you can imagine. Everyone wants a piece of GHI now."

She concluded. "Well, I guess that's a good problem to have."

Kathy Dittami signed off, and the recording stopped. There was some light follow-on discussion, but she and her crew needed to rush back to the studio for the night's broadcast.

Night Cruise

Gort didn't say much when John showed up at the boat with his luggage. He knew he was letting the big man down and possibly his hopes for the future of Swensen's along with it. John had only been there a few days, but the business ran well with two bodies, and it was a mystery how Gort ever got things done alone. He needed help. The answer, John knew, was that the boatmen all helped in the morning and off-loading when they returned. The biggest challenge for Gort was winching the big crates from the boat and spending whole nights cruising to Portland every three or four days. That was heavy dangerous work and he was alone. *How did he do it all himself?*

John wasn't altogether sure that Gort didn't plan to throw him overboard. The forty-foot round-bottom boat seemed to wallow in the choppy swells in darkness. The frigid wind whipped the ocean, throwing spray across the open deck and sometimes brought the diesel exhaust down on them. John's legs weren't accustomed to the constant rocking and crashing. It was often jolting on the constantly moving deck; he gripped parts of the boat. He was wet, cold and smelled like a mixture of everything, including the lobster tanks and empty bait crates.

About half way to the mainland, there were no lights anywhere, no references. It felt incredibly lonely as they jolted forward, seeing only the dark shadow of water walls ahead of them. It was eerie and a bit frightening to John. Gort might not need to throw him overboard; the ocean might do it for him. John also felt the onset of motion sickness again. Gort just stood behind the wheel and steered without saying a word. John knew better than to say anything. He'd said enough when Gort asked where he was going. At that moment, John figured Gort would tell him to get lost and find another way back to the coast. Instead, he just told him to throw his personal gear into the wheel house and to help load the bins of lobsters from the dock onto the boat. The silence after that was deadly.

John was hanging from one of the rigging ropes along the side of the deck, breathing deeply, when Gort yelled above the engine and wind noise, „I hope she's worth it, boy.“

The look on John's face in the dim light must have confirmed suspicions. Gort continued, „If she was worth running away from, she sure seems to have control of your leash.“

„It's not exactly like that, Gort.“

„Oh no, then what is it like? Seems like you could give me a little explanation.“

John didn't take offense. „Gort, you and Mrs. Swensen and Mary have been wonderful and I hope I can pay you back some day. The thing... the thing is that it's a really complex situation. Yeah, there's a girl involved, but she's not the reason I came here. Some serious shit was happening, and my boss told me that I

was in danger, serious danger that could get me killed. I learned last night that he died, and I think he could have been murdered. I'm going back now because I think my girl might be in danger. At first, I figured she was safe, but things have changed now in a way that she could be in danger. I ran, yes, but that was just me; now it's something more important, someone more important than just me." He looked back over the side, realizing he'd said more than was required or even smart.

"Boy, you sure got some stories. Fact is, I believe you. No one would make up something that weird. Who's tryin' to kill you?"

John looked at Gort. "Gort, I wish I knew. All I know is that I looked at some computer files, which started this whole mess. I work for some geniuses that... I don't know, except that, that's just it; I don't know anything for sure. They're too smart for me to know much."

Gort had a neutral expression. "When I hear about files and people getting killed, I figure it's got something to do that's illegal. What's in the files?"

"Honestly, I don't have a single idea. My Institute has a lot of secrets: formulas, computer programs, germs and cures, lots of stuff that could be worth a lot of money. I have no idea what I was looking at. It was all in code, but it got my boss really nervous and maybe killed when I found it. It got me here with you... something I'll never forget or regret." John felt a little patronizing; but, at that moment, it felt right to say it.

The cruise in darkness on the rough ocean seemed to take forever. They needed to stay alert for other boats or merchant ships, or even floating debris. The boat jerked up and then plummeted down into deep caverns of angry black water that would be a certain grave if they fell in. Hours of pounding and constant vigilance were exhausting. It had been scary for the first hour for John, and then it just became a tedious routine, straining his muscles, clutching the boat as it pounded onward. He continued reflecting on the life this boat captain had been living for all these years, doing this same trek more than once every week, fifty-two weeks per year for decades. After three hours of cruising that felt like ten, the mainland lights shown as a dim yellow ribbon on the horizon. But cruising at ten knots against wind, waves and current meant that it was another two and a half hours until they pulled up to a dock next to "Walt's Wholesale", which looked like a larger version of Swensen's back on the island. The roar of the diesel engine began changing, and they lurched fore and aft as Gort skillfully maneuvered the heavy wooden boat beside the pilings while John jumped off to tie the mooring lines around cleats on the dock above. It would be hours before his inner ear adjusted to the firmness on land, and he would be walking like a drunk for some time.

Gort scurried up the ladder like a fresh athlete and disappeared inside the building. John would have preferred a nap. After a few minutes, one of the large overhead doors opened and lights shown as Gort came out alone to manage the crane that would lift the lobster holding tanks from the boat onto the huge wheeled carts that would be pulled into the warehouse for processing. Inside the building, bait boxes had been prepared for the return trip to Matinicus Island. The owner of "Walt's" must have trusted Gort, because no employees were there to help or oversee the work.

Working together, it took only fifteen minutes to offload the lobster crates and lift the bait crates back on deck. When it was done and the crates secured on deck, John imagined for a moment that he should return with Gort, but he now had to worry about Kelly. It would be a long lonely trip back for Gort and lack of sleep made the trip more dangerous. John felt like admonishing his host to spend a little time resting on the boat before venturing out to sea again in the dark, but a suggestion like that would only serve to amplify feelings about his departure. Instead, without saying anything, he removed his gear in the wheelhouse and laid them on the dock. Gort waited by the rail, „John, I know you meant well coming to the island, and I hope we did you some good.“ He held out his hand, which John shook gratefully. He felt kinship with the older man despite only knowing him for a few days.

„Gort, I'll always be grateful and would like to see you again if it would be alright.“

Gort reached into his pocket and brought out some folded bills. „Here's some travelin' money, and I want you to feel like you could come back here any time.“

„Gort, I don't need this. You've paid me in kindness that I'm already indebted for.“

Gort refused. „John, I ain't taken it back. You earned this; now have a careful trip and be safe.“

They parted after John untied the lines securing the boat while Gort started the engine. Gort remained focused on the water behind the boat as he backed away, and John's wave remained unseen. He began walking down the pier, near where he'd first parked when he arranged to fly to the island, looking back once again to see Gort turning toward the darkness of the open sea. He would never forget the Swensen's kindness. *Where did I park my car?*

Lorne

Lorne made the trip to West Africa for two purposes. One reason, the official reason, was to meet with Abagael and visit some villages with the WHO. The other reason was to meet some mysterious „doctor“ who had been talking to Lorne and the other partners over the past several months. The man claimed to be Nigerian and work for the Ministry of Health. He did not want to use his name until they met because he was investigating some matter outside of his jurisdiction.

The „doctor“ had claimed to be interested in the work GHI had done saving lives in West Africa; at least that was his claim. He was offering to pay a large sum of money to be able to set up a laboratory on the continent that could synthesize the vaccines made at GHI. He also did not want to work with the American national laboratories because bureaucratic restrictions on export technologies would prolong the process.

All three GHI partners were skeptical. A thin layer of legitimacy could have been concealing different intentions. But the dialogue had continued for weeks during often-abbreviated phone calls because the man kept talking about substantial money, although it was never quantified. As a private Institute, GHI was still

functioning on its own revenues until it could be sold, and everyone would become rich. Jules had insisted that they continue to talk; „no harm in just talking.“

Lorne and Charlie were both negative; but, when Lorne scheduled his trip, Jules insisted that he try to meet with the mystery man. Ultimately, the conversation involved Charlie as well in Lorne's office. Jules said, „Lorne, what's the risk? So, you tell the guy you'll be at such-and-such location on so-and-so date and can meet with him at a specific hour. If he shows up, then there's a chance that he's for real. See what he really wants then we can make a decision. Nigeria exports oil, and I figure a license deal could be worth at least a million.“

Charlie sat silently as Lorne looked to him for support. „Jules, this could be a serious mistake. We don't know what this guy wants. Hell, he could be a terrorist, looking for a bio weapon. We can't take the risk.“

Charlie added, „You know, Jules, ever since Nancy died—I'm sorry to bring it up—you've developed a new personality. You spend all of your time working on getting rich when we sell the Institute. Have you lost sight of our original purpose in founding it? Look, I want to retire wealthy just like you, and so does Lorne, even if he doesn't show it.“ Lorne didn't say anything, which signaled his agreement. Charlie continued. „We don't need to get involved with this guy over there and risk it. If he's a terrorist, we could lose everything and maybe go to jail. Plain and simple, we stop talking to him and get back to business as usual.“

Lorne nodded in agreement, but Jules kept at it. „You know, guys, I'm the one busting his balls to find us an angel. I may be enthusiastic, but that's just my nature. When I get involved in something, there are no half measures. Frankly, I don't understand the problem here. We might make a million easy dollars for practically nothing. That kind of money could add ten million to our net worth if we spend it right. Matt tells me our multipliers on equity are at least an order of magnitude. It would be like putting another three plus million in each of our pockets.“

Lorne had heard enough. „Wait, Jules. Just cool this. No one has mentioned a million dollars, and this guy has been really secretive. I don't buy his story about working outside the ministry. He's probably not even Nigerian. How would we ever know?“

Jules was exasperated. „Look, you guys, I don't know what more to say. I'm busting my ass and might as well go fishing if I don't have your support.“

„Jules, you're not listening. This isn't a personal decision. We're all equal owners here, and we're only interested in keeping our reputation intact. Something negative happens with this guy, we could lose everything.“ Charlie was shaking after saying it.

Lorne threw up his hands. „Okay, look, I'll meet the guy and listen. After that we all make the decision about what to do with him.“

Jules nodded his agreement and left the office hurriedly to stifle any further discussion that might go against him. He got his way. He was satisfied.

Lorne flew out of Baltimore the following week in what turned out to be his last trip... ever. Of the three partners, he was in the best physical shape, working out often. He had no health problems or family history, until he died. If he even met with the Nigerian, no one, including Abagael, knew about it.

When Lorne suggested meeting at his hotel in Guinea, the man they had codenamed Abdulah was momentarily against it but changed his tone almost immediately. They agreed to meet at the Mariador Palace Hotel in Conakry at seven PM on the day that Lorne arrived. He had been tired and needed rest but showered and went down to the bar at the appropriate hour. He carried a GHI portfolio prominently while sitting at the bar.

Two hours later, Abagael met him there, and no mention was made of an earlier meeting. She knew nothing about it. He'd felt sick when she joined him and she insisted on taking him to the local health clinic. There were no hospitals nearby. He died about ten hours later after the flu-like symptoms multiplied in intensity, and he began bleeding internally. There was nothing at the clinic that Abagael, an experienced physician, could use to slow or stop the onslaught. She tried, but, in the end, she lost a good friend. It affected her emotionally, despite all the plagues she'd witnessed with the WHO; Lorne had been special, and she wasn't going to abandon him until his body was safely en route back to the States.

Two days later, a US military C17 medivac plane from Germany arrived at the Guinea capital airport and took charge of the remains. The body would fly in a special container module to a medical facility in the States equipped to isolate and examine it. Abagael couldn't have accompanied him home, even if she had wanted. Her immediate concern was to locate the source of his infection before another major catastrophe developed.

She called Jules once the plane had departed. „He's being taken to Ramstein, Germany, then they will take him somewhere, possibly on the east coast, but I don't think they know yet. I gave them your information to keep you informed.“

„Thank you Abagael. I need to keep his wife informed, so I hope the government lets me know soon.“

Return

Kelly was dressed, but was not looking forward to going to the Institute. Too many questions were evolving. John was scared off, and then Lorne died. She couldn't believe he was actually gone. Like John, she had a special working relationship with Lorne; but oddly, she thought most about their breaks in the cafeteria where he spent extra time bringing her into the culture at GHI. He was extraordinarily nice to her and probably knew she and John were an item, although he never said anything. He was a supreme gentleman. Jules was sort of the opposite, driven by ambitions that everyone could see. He wore it like a uniform. He would crush anyone who didn't agree with him. It amazed her that the three partners were even friends. *How had they ever gone into a partnership after working together for years at the government lab?*

She knew Charlie. He knew everyone. He was a solid guy with excellent medical knowledge and good management skills, but he was also a wonderful human being and not confrontational. Together, Charlie and Lorne were a good moderating force to Jules. Now, with Lorne gone, she couldn't imagine a more imbalanced team with Jules making all the strategic decisions and Charlie

following along. At least Lorne had been able to push back. *Why didn't Jules go to West Africa instead of Lorne?*

John was about two hours away from Baltimore on I-95. The sun was rising, when he pushed #1 on his phone. „Kelly, what's going on? Do you think I should shower and come in to work? I can probably get there almost at normal time.“

„John, I want you there with me. I want to come into work with you. If there's any danger, then it's best to have everyone know we're together. I'm paranoid; Lorne's death has shaken me.“

„Wait for me at your place. I've got some clean clothes but need to take a shower after working through the last twenty-four hours. Lorne's death scares me too, but now I'm just pissed off that he died... really pissed. It doesn't make sense, and I want to know what's in those files. It could all be a bunch of bad timing and coincidence, but something's not right. I don't know what, but something bad is going on.“

„Maybe we should both just quit and find other jobs.“

„I don't think it's a good idea, especially for your career. It's too small a community. You'd be blamed for all kinds of shit if 4B starts to fail. Hell, you don't think Jules or Charlie would go back to working inside the labs, do you? I'm not so worried for me 'cuz I'm not at your level. All your peers would know you left the Institute in a lurch. With Lorne gone, the lab is your responsibility. You'd never be able to find work in another lab. They'd poison our reputations if anyone asked for a reference. We need to find out what's in the files.“

She was less afraid. „You said they were encrypted.“

„Yeah, there must be a way to break in. I'm guessing it's just a password or something. Just wait there; I'll be there in less than two hours.“

He drove faster, even beating most of the morning rush hour traffic around Baltimore. When he arrived at his apartment, it only took ten minutes to shower, shave and get dressed, another benefit of military training. He then drove to Kelly's place where she met him at the door with a short kiss and a much longer bear hug. They talked all the way to the Institute, mostly about John's stay on Matinicus Island, omitting the bedroom encounter with Mary.

They were a few minutes late, hurriedly signing in together. It was a little after nine-thirty in the morning, certainly late, but not grossly behind some of the people coming in at nine. It was the first time they had been together openly at work. Time on the job wasn't how performance was measured at GHI, it was based on results. The lab people worked very long hours because the processes demanded it. No one really was concerned about in-and-out time. But, by coincidence, Charlie was in the lobby when they arrived.

They might have looked guilty of something. Charlie took on a harsh demeanor that could have been faked. „Well, you two, what's this, a car pool?“

Kelly wasn't going to play his game. „Hello to you, too, Charlie. Are you the hall monitor today?“

He looked more seriously at John. „Where have you been? I haven't seen you in the lab since Monday.“

John was surprised that Charlie was that vigilant. „Hi, Charlie, I got in late last night. I had a hard time getting going this morning. Kelly kept calling me to

hurry.“ Charlie’s inferring eyes moved to her momentarily, but John continued. „I had to go away on some personal business. Lorne must have told you.“

„No, actually, he didn’t.“ John couldn’t tell if Charlie thought he was lying before he continued; „But, things got pretty frantic here a few days ago when Lorne was leaving.“ He looked between them momentarily then downward, „I guess you know that he’s gone?“

John was genuinely sorrowful, „Yes, Kelly told me. I thought of him as my friend, not just my boss, Charlie. He taught me so much. I just... I just can’t believe he’s gone. He knew what he was doing, going to Africa. Heck, any of us that have been in dangerous situations know how to take precautions. Lorne was a pro doc and shouldn’t have gotten sick. It’s not like he went into a hot zone. What happened?“

Charlie shrugged, „We don’t know. Like you said, he knew how to protect himself. But, something got him. We don’t know for sure, but it could be another Ebola-type outbreak. We just don’t know yet.“

John responded, „Sorry, Charlie. I know you were friends for a long time. I knew him for a year, so I only know a little about how you feel. He was a great guy, a mentor and friend.“ Kelly nodded in agreement.

They couldn’t tell as Charlie turned away, maybe he was crying, saying kindly, „Okay, you two, get to work!“

They walked away glancing briefly at each other. *Okay, that lie seemed to work.*

Inside the lab, they didn’t speak much. John, on the way to the Institute, told Kelly about his fear that they might be recording audio and video, so all discussions inside the lab were kept on lab functions. He didn’t know why he felt that way except Lorne had known that John hacked the files almost immediately. At least some sort of surveillance was being used. It could have just been Lorne, or maybe it was bigger and broader, involving the entire Institute. They had a very strict proprietary protection program and it wouldn’t surprise anyone if there was covert surveillance. All employees had to sign an agreement as a condition of working there. The Institute policies included the right to search anything carried out of the building, and someone might also be tracking emails. In theory, they were not allowed to bring cameras or any kind of computer recording devices into the Institute.

In the lab, John helped Kelly suit up and ran through the data from her first day, giving her some specific things to check today. Overall, it went off as a normal work day. He didn’t go near the secure database as before, just in case someone was watching remotely via computer or video. They would be careful from now on.

Suspicion

„We both know the kid was in the files and then disappeared. She’s in it, too, since she supports his flimsy story and they’re living together. She’s got to know whatever he’s up to.“ Jules waited for Charlie to process then continued. „We need to stop this before it gets out of control.“ He’d come into Charlie’s office and slammed the door after seeing John and Kelly come in together.

Charlie couldn't resist the sarcasm. „You want me to fire them?“

„No... yeah, fire them both. That kid is up to something. He's got access to all our production information. Hell, he could be selling it to our competitors.“

„Jules, are you nuts! You're over-reacting. You want to fire our top lab tech and our new research scientist. What do you plan to do? You and me back inside? This is insane. Just talk to him and tell him to remember our policies and that we'll sue his ass into oblivion if you think he's stealing information. Hell, I don't care, just tell him to keep away from the data files and he'll do it. I don't know why he left. Do you? You're acting like a paranoid maniac. You don't know why he was gone. I don't know either, but I believe him... it was personal, nothing to do with GHI.“

Jules didn't buy it. „You think he was gone when Lorne died, and it was just a coincidence? I don't think so. This is serious, Charlie. He could be stealing information, and Lorne caught him.“

Charlie pondered a moment. „Why would he do that, Jules? Is there something that I should know about? You're acting nuts. There's no reason to think any of this.“

„No. You think about it. We're producing more vaccine than we're allowed.“

„So, you're worried an audit could hurt us? Come on, Jules. We'd get a hand-slap. That's all.“

Jules was incredulous. „A hand-slap! Are you serious? This would stop the investors cold in their tracks. We can't risk it.“

„Why? Why not? So, we explain that we're gearing up for the next outbreak. Hell, how do they think we were able to respond the last time, and the time before? We should get a medal.“

„Charlie; I want them gone. Simple; just get rid of them.“

Charlie didn't like being ordered around like some rookie. „Now, wait a minute! You can't order me to do anything here. If you want them fired, then do it yourself. Oh, and by the way, you can run 4B and 4A on your own. You'll have one lab tech for both level-4s, assuming that Fred sticks around after firing his boss. And good luck if we get a surprise security audit.“ The lab certifications for certain lethal germs received tight Government oversight. Insufficient manpower would be cause to shut them down.

Jules glared back. „I'll bring in some people from the other labs; they can do double duty until we get some new ones.“

„Brilliant! Think, will you? It would take weeks before anyone is certified at the 4 level. You want to be talking to investors between running the lab and training people? Or worse, do you want a government shutdown? I'm not doing it. Frankly, I'm tired of your tyrannical behavior. Ever since Nancy died, you've been on fire. I don't get it, Jules. What's changed?“ Charlie was having a rare moment of outrage.

Jules didn't back down, looking harder at his partner. „I'll tell you what changed. We're at the top of every acquisition list in the world. Everybody wants GHI. That's what changed. We have a chance to make more money than we ever dreamed. Hell, we could be billionaires, Charlie. That's with a B.“

„Great! So, let's do it. Let's get out now, Jules. Why are we waiting? There's only so much you or I can spend for the rest of our lives. Let's do it, but let's not take some knee-jerk action that could set us back. Don't forget that Lorne is dead!“

Jules' exasperation was showing. „You really don't get it do you? We've got more than a thousand units of the most deadly virus known to mankind incubating in our lab right now. Our license wouldn't allow one percent of that.“

„We all discussed this and agreed. With our reputation and estimating tools, no one would blame us for a little excess. You can't make a vaccine without cultivating the pathogen. Everyone knows that. They know we've done it before. I don't get the big deal.“

Both stared at each other without speaking for several seconds. Jules recognized the stone wall. He'd seen it before in Charlie. He wasn't going to do anything. Nothing would convince him. Jules would have to take action against John and Kelly himself. Charlie would be powerless to stop him. But first, Charlie was right; Jules would need to figure out how to operate all of their labs and how to get new people trained for BSL-4 work.

In the lab, the day went by routinely for Kelly and John; almost too routinely. When Kelly emerged from the last airlock, she asked, „John, have you seen Jules?“

He shook his head, „No,“ then he went back to formatting the data she had entered from the interior keypads.

She wondered if something had changed. „He said that he would come in and help me understand the work in process. I've been in here for three days and he's never been back.“

John understood her concern, but didn't want to alarm her or say anything that would raise further speculation. „I don't know, Kelly. He's pretty busy with investors, I think. Is there anything I can help with?“

„Yeah, well, you tell me what's going on in all the cells? There are hundreds of them, and I'm just entering data from instruments. I don't even know what's inside there.“ She gestured toward the chamber.

He only had a vague idea but wasn't going to cause more concern in case they were being recorded. He'd worked with Lorne for a year and heard enough and seen enough to have a good idea, but he wasn't going to say anything to her at work. „I don't know, Kelly. Jules will need to fill you in.“ He went back to entering the data, but his mind was working overtime. There was something about being back at the Institute that raised his level of consciousness. He'd had questions during his getaway to the Island, but there were no clear answers, just the reverberating warning from Lorne. *What was it? What's right in front of us and we can't see it?*

They left at the end of a normal shift without talking further. They had been left alone. Jules hadn't come in to see how she was doing. His absence may have been reason for concern. John couldn't put a finger on it, but the bland routine nature of the day was, by itself, worrying him. Someone, Charlie or Jules, should have been around their lab at least once, but they hadn't come.

They were driving to Kelly's apartment. His anxiety had been building for several days, ever since Lorne's warning. His first day back at the Institute hadn't provided any clarity. His mustang had been modified with 385 horses on tap and John was having trouble keeping the speed down, as his mind whirled with mixed signals. His thoughts were drifting, and this car needed his full attention in the slippery conditions. It was a cold dark late-Fall night with misty rain falling almost horizontally in the stiff wind. Wet leaves swirled in wind vortexes forming between

in hills and trees, depositing circular patches on the glossy black surface. All in all, it was an ugly night in the Mid-Atlantic coastal area. The outside temperature was above freezing, but the wind made it seem like the roads could turn to ice at any moment. Kelly was getting nervous, realizing John's mind was somewhere else. „John, slow down.“

His foot left the gas pedal immediately. „Sorry, babe, I wasn't paying attention.“

She had never been called „babe“ before by John or anyone else. She'd grown up in a stilted household and developed a detached persona like her parents. *Maybe being someone's „babe“ was a good thing.* „You're worried again, aren't you? You're scaring me. I don't understand any of this.“

He relaxed, not wanting to upset her. „I don't know what it is, Kelly. We showed up together this morning like nothing had changed. Everyone saw us together. I was gone for three days, and my boss died mysteriously. No one came in to help you run 4B. I, at least, expected someone, Jules maybe, to say something to me or to both of us. The silence there was deafening today.“

She agreed. „Why do you think that was?“ It was rhetorical. „I had kinda the same feeling. Jules promised to work with me, and he's been avoiding me ever since, I'm sure of it. What should we do, John?“

He gave a quick sideways glance then returned his full attention to the road. „Kelly, I don't know. I don't have any idea what this is all about, but we need to find out.“

Coming Home

The plane carrying Lorne's body touched down at Dallas's Love Field at three o'clock in the morning and taxied to a holding area away from the passenger terminal. A specially-prepared ambulance was waiting. Normally, a hearse would transport a body, but this case was potentially lethal to anyone exposed without proper protection.

Jules was awake at his home, aware of the plane's schedule and awaiting the phone call that the body had arrived. He'd been informed of the departure from Germany and approximate flight time to Texas. His friend was coming home, except that his next stop would be atop a large stainless table to be cut open. It pained Jules almost as much as if he was on the slab. Lorne had died prematurely; and, in a few hours, they would know why.

Jules hadn't slept and returned to the Institute around midnight to start the next step in refining the VHF cultures that were growing in the lab. Dr. Egan didn't need to know that he was working in the lab during off hours. No one needed to know exactly how certain processes were done. If they didn't know, they couldn't steal technology or, if taken to court, reveal anything during testimony. It hadn't taken long. In fact, it took him longer to suit up and decontaminate on the way out than was actually required in the containment chamber. He'd gotten very good at this work. The junior lab scientists could spend hours doing what he could accomplish in a few minutes inside the chamber.

When the call came from the airport, he was already back home in bed. He was tired and needed to sleep, but there was one more call he needed to make. „Hello, Abagael... Yes, the body has arrived... They should have the test results in about a week... I agree with you, we may want to begin transferring vaccine bottles... Of course, all precautions are being taken, but the largest precaution is to have the vaccine in country as soon as it's confirmed... Will do... Bye for now.

He went back to bed around five in the morning but still couldn't sleep. Too many things were coinciding. The vaccines required special containers and export documentation. They needed to be prepared to ship some of it tomorrow. Then there was the meeting with the Saudis to prepare for. He would need to fly to New York in the afternoon. Then, he still needed to deal with the 4B personnel problem.

His mind was buzzing and he couldn't rest, so he was back in the office at six o'clock. There really wasn't anything to do until other people arrived, so he went to 4B and logged into the secure database. By six-thirty, everything was arranged. It would take most of the day for the staff to prepare and ship the vials of serum. The description on the shipping documents might not be completely accurate, but nobody in Customs on either end would want to inspect anything derived from Ebola virus.

Roughly four hours later, a surgeon in a full hazmat suit with triple gloves began performing the fluid sample extractions from Lorne's body that would normally be performed by the medical examiner. But given the suspected disease involved, the Dallas ME was grateful not to be doing this. Every sample was handled carefully and placed in special containers. No further examination, requiring opening of the body cavities, would be performed at this stage until the biologics were done. The cadaver would be double-bagged and refrigerated pending the outcome. The test results would take longer than usual due to handling precautions.

At GHI, meds would begin shipping to West Africa later that afternoon. In a show of arrogance, Jules was expecting to be even farther ahead than ever before in heading off the next outbreak. He was confident in the work of his team to predict the next mutation and was betting most of their financial investments in inventory of vaccines and antidotes on it. If his team was right, the publicity for GHI would be incalculable—worth millions. Adrenalin flowed at full rush. To him, he wasn't so much interested in the amount of money they got for the Institute; it was the challenge to get more. In any event, the money would be astronomical. He just needed to pull the trigger and deal with the prospective buyers. He would then deal with the other partners.

Payoff

Victor Diakité was sweating profusely. The bicycle he was riding was more than fifty years old. It was heavy, rusty, and had only three speeds to select. The red clay road from his village into the edge of Conakry was full of small ravines from the rainy season that had dried brick-hard during the oppressive summer heat. His village had poor electrical service, and he needed to charge the mobile phone

given to him by the Americans. The call was scheduled for ten o'clock in the morning, five o'clock at the caller's location.

Near the capital city, he went to his favorite café that allowed him to use their electrical outlet if he ordered something. He had coffee and rice bread. The air conditioning was welcomed. He only had a few minutes to relax before the phone buzzed. He answered in a muted voice while the phone remained tethered to the wall outlet. It would be a short discussion. He was being paid well to follow instructions, which were always brief, no questions were allowed and no names were used.

Victor answered, „Hello,“ then listened. Moments later, he replied, „Yes, I understand,“ and the call ended.

He had been the guide and interpreter for the WHO team to the village of Kambia Town, just across the border in Sierra Leone. Kambia Town was inhabited by different ethnic groups, generally ignorant of the causes of any diseases and in the locale where several deadly Ebola outbreaks had occurred. The WHO team made the trip shortly after Dr. Lorne Bridger had arrived at the Guinea capital; just after he had checked into his hotel and showered from his plane trip. Dr. Bridger had actually met with Victor immediately after arriving, before going to the hotel and then later meeting with the WHO doctors. Lorne had given a Styrofoam cooler to Victor with instructions to keep it refrigerated. Inside were unmarked thermos bottles. Victor still had the cooler at his home, in the ice box with fresh ice delivered each day costing six US dollars per bag.

Dr. Bridger was not looking well on the trip to the Kambia Town and had been lucky to have other doctors in the Land Rover with him. Everyone, including him, initially believed he was suffering from the time change and overnight travel. Dr. Van Acker had been most attentive. Lorne had seemed to improve after they entered the village and visited the health clinic. But after departing, he started complaining about his stomach and became feverish. Victor left the group near his home. The rest continued to the hotel and Lorne had died sometime in the early morning of the next day.

Victor was compensated nicely for his services through funds wired to his bank account. Having a bank account at all was a status symbol in his village. He wasn't stupid. He knew what he was being asked to do now was wrong. He'd done it before, and the pay was very good; more than he made in one year as a fisherman's helper. Tomorrow, he would take one of the thermos to Kambia as he was told.

Later that same night, he received a call from Dr. Abagael Van Acker. „Victor, I need to arrange a trip back into Sierra Leone, Kambia, as soon as possible.“

He was confused but sure that his assignment was not related to her request. „Yes, missus doctor Abagael. When you wish going there?“

„We will pick you up in the morning at the post in your village.“

„Yes, missus, I be there.“ He could not believe his luck. Money was sent to him for all of his travel expense, and now it would be free. He was truly blessed to have learned to speak English and the other local African dialects which kept him employed.

When the Rover arrived the next morning, Victor was ready. He carried an insulated bag containing his food and water, and a thermos. No one in the truck

noticed or cared about this. The trip would take about five hours along mostly improved dirt roads if they weren't stopped along the way. Travel in the region was always risky. Military and police checkpoints often demanded bribes to pass further. Sometimes bandits stopped vehicles in remote areas and could usually be satisfied with money. The WHO people were prepared for these „inconveniences“, but it was comforting to have a native speaker with them.

Once in Kambia, the health care people were busy with the native clinicians, informing them about Dr. Bridger and precautions that should be taken if any patients came with Ebola-like symptoms. There were no cases yet when they arrived. With all of the WHO people engaged, Victor left to have his lunch.

Mercenary

The phone number came from an advertisement in *Soldier of Fortune* magazine. He'd made several calls to find the right man.

The man answering spoke emphatically in a deep husky voice. „Okay, first rule, no names. You got that?“

„Yeah... ah, yes, I understand.“ The caller was hesitant—uncertain.

„Good. I read your text and understand you want someone *neutralized*, right?“

„Sure. I guess that's right. I... a...“

„Look pal, this is your deal. It's really simple, yes or no.“

The caller began stuttering uncontrollably. He hadn't stuttered since grade school. *This is embarrassing!*

After failing to answer, the other man said, „Look, calm down. I know this ain't easy. It never is, but I'm a pro who can solve your problem. You wouldn't call me if you hadn't done some searching to find me.“ He'd already verified the caller was legitimate by a series of calls using different locations.

The caller had composed himself. „I want the person gone for good.“ They'd agreed earlier on a call to a different number about who the target was to be.

„Alright, like I said, this ain't a hard one. Ten grand—cash. Five up front and five after... and, fellow, just so's you understand, I know where you live if you try to stiff me.“

„Oh, don't worry about that, I can afford to pay.“ *Why is it that low-life people always want to make threats?*

„Okay, make the money drop, and I'll be good to go.“

„Wait! How and when?“

„When do you want?“

„Soon... as soon as you can.“

„Okay, then within two weeks, but don't hold me to that. I gotta reconnoiter first; get the lay of things, check routines. It sounds easy, but I don't make mistakes. That could go bad for you and me.“

„So, how would you do it?“ It seemed like a logical question. He didn't want to risk failure.

„Simple—a couple high-power bullets, center mass. I don't believe in any of this television fancy shit: car explosions, fake electrical accidents. None o' that kinda

stuff. Looks dramatic, but doesn't always work and too complicated. This'll be a simple shoot-to-kill."

"Yes, but guns can be traced later." He was wondering if this guy was floating on an even keel.

"Not the way I do it. I gotta collection from my days in the agency; guns, AKs mostly, taken after action in South America and the sand countries. I got dozens, all undocumented. Anyway, afterward, I gotta forge in my basement and destroy the barrels and receivers, ain't no way to trace me."

"Okay, I'll put the money at your spot tomorrow morning, around sunup."

The voice cautioned, "One more thing, friend. I'll be watching and don't want you looking back, curious like. And don't forget: if I get stung cuzza you, I got friends. You dig?"

"Ah, yes, I dig... I mean I understand." The call ended, and the caller sat alone in the dark, shaking. He needed a drink.

Burning Both Ends

Jules was headed for Baltimore International Airport. His flight left in less than an hour, and he didn't want to upset the Saudi business men that had contracted at the Hawk Offices for the meeting and legal support. He'd done a couple merger presentations in the past, but this one was intriguing and gone further, fastest.

The Royal Family, who controlled most of the wealth in the world's largest oil-producing country, was making huge investments in the future. Oil wouldn't be the engine behind their economy forever. Allah had blessed them with the resource to become the richest country in the Middle East, but it was now up to the monarchy to assure their prosperity for the future. They also needed to insure against the "Arab Spring" happening in their country. The historically tribal citizenry all needed to feel the blanket of their benevolence. The only way to do that was to build a sustaining economic growth model.

The country had no other organic sources of wealth besides oil; the government needed to build a prosperous economy from scratch. One of their pillars of the economic plan was to focus on biotechnology. It was a daunting task for a Muslim country with a young generation that wasn't particularly motivated or interested in science. The government provided everything for a good life without much exertion. Why work hard when they didn't need to? The economic engineering had to be done through building infrastructure, education, and attracting people and acquiring technology. It was something that would require enormous investment and wasn't easy in the strict orthodox Wahhabi Sunni culture that didn't attract outsiders. In the twenty-first century, there were five major university complexes under construction in Riyadh along with major interstate projects and several light commuter rail systems, all at one time. Hundreds of billions were being spent. Jules knew this meeting could be the opportunity of a lifetime.

There was no way to place an accurate value on GHI. There was a huge subjective element. It was impossible to value an Institute that could predict the future and possibly end of the curse of Ebola virus. With the proven success of

their processes, they could find cures to other diseases once the world was rid of this scourge. He smiled and shivered just thinking about the success ahead for him. Hell, this might eclipse even Facebook and Microsoft. He imagined himself at the top of Forbes annual list of billionaires. He had to make his flight on time.

The first-class security line went fast, and he got to his seat as the last passenger to board the plane. There had been so much to do at work that morning, so many arrangements to be made, that he had cut his schedule close. There was no higher priority to him than the meeting that evening in New York. Thank goodness, Marie had arranged for a limo to be waiting at LaGuardia. The flight was less than fifty minutes, but he was able to close his eyes and get some much-needed rest.

He was in the car, headed for Manhattan in less than ten minutes after touchdown in New York, and he was at the Hawk headquarters building in less than half an hour, exactly on time. An assistant was waiting for him as he entered the massive lobby. Holding out her hand, she said, „Hello, Dr. Redinger. Please follow me.“ The banks of elevators were impressive, but she took him to a private alcove marked Executive Offices Only.

The ride up was quick with no intermediate stops. It wasn't clear what floor they were on, but the floor-to-ceiling glass gave a beautiful view of the entire city and the Hudson River. He wasn't intimidated as intended; he'd own this building someday if he wanted it. She led him to a large conference room, ten times larger than GHI's. The walls were covered in some kind of dark satin, and all the lighting was indirect. Several people were standing around a table more than thirty feet long as he entered. He smiled at them.

There were six people seated at the table and a larger support staff in the rows along the walls. His host was a senior partner, supported by an executive staff consisting of investment bankers and lawyers. They all looked alike to him in their hand-tailored designer business suits. Across the table from him, the three Saudi businessmen greeted him with soft handshakes, per their custom. They were dressed similarly to the Hawk people.

Jules smiled while greeting people and exchanging meaningless courtesies, enjoying the spotlight. Once settled, the Hawk partner opened the meeting. „I want to welcome Dr. Jules Redinger from Global Hemorrhagic Institute.“ Jules noticed a stenographer taking copious notes. He was also sure that the entire meeting was being recorded. The fellow continued. „With us today are representatives from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.“ He introduced each of them then went on. „Hawk has been retained by the Saudi Government to evaluate the potential for acquiring the technology and intellectual property, as well as, the assets of GHI. It's not a mystery why they would be interested in GHI, given all of the publicity surrounding the latest outbreaks of the deadly Ebola virus, and GHI's role in first predicting the event, and secondly, preparing the antidotes in time to prevent a major calamity.“ He nodded at Jules, „Well done, Dr. Redinger.“ Jules got the impression the speech was given mostly for the record of the meeting. The platitudes and acknowledgements were gratifying, but the purpose of the meeting was simply to bring buyer and seller together and try to get to a deal, plain and simple.

The floor was given to Jules who looked directly at the Saudis, always aware of the value direct cognitive connection had in these forums. He opened his briefcase and distributed several bound copies of his presentation. It was also displayed on theater-sized screen beyond the end of the table. Marie had provided the Power Point to the Hawk people. He looked at Osborne, „You’ve been given my presentation in advance. Do you want me to go over it?“

Osborne suggested that it would be good to go through it rapidly and stop if questions were asked. Several minutes later, it had gone well with some perfunctory questions asked mostly by the Hawk staff, apparently intended to enlighten the Saudis. It was clear to Jules that they understood it all very well and simply confirmed the decisions they’d already made. At the conclusion, there were no more questions, and they adjourned to another reception room for light refreshments before the foreign travelers departed to the airport. After the Saudis had gone, Jules and the Hawk partner sat together for a private talk. Jules listened. „Dr. Redinger, we want to thank you so much for coming here. Our client is genuinely impressed and intends to make an offer to acquire your entire Institute and all of its IP, including the lead scientists, which I assume includes you.“ Jules nodded but didn’t speak as the man continued to probe. „Have you thought about a number? How much you would be looking to sell for?“

Jules showed a little smile. He had learned that it was always best to let the buyer make an offer first. „You know Jim, I don’t know. We’ve thought a great deal about that very question and haven’t arrived at anything yet. We really don’t have any experience selling. But, we feel that the market will ultimately be fair. It just takes one offer to get the ball rolling, and I think everyone interested will start coming at us. I could be wrong, but I think there are lots of suitors just waiting for the blood in the water.“

James (Jim) Osborne was from an original Wall Street power family and knew how the game was played. „You know, Jules, if this becomes a Chinese auction, my client may not want to play. They certainly don’t want to stimulate an avalanche of offers. If they make an offer, they want it treated with sincerity and get an honest response. If you want to play it, I will recommend to them that they look elsewhere.“

Jules face was serious. „Look Jim, what do you want me to say? I don’t know how to value this thing. It’s big; really big, but there really isn’t a tangible way to put a price on it. If your client wants to make an offer, then make it. I can’t tell you in advance if it’s going to be accepted. I have partners in this, and we all need to agree... money talks.“

Jim stood and offered his hand, which Jules accepted. The investment banker gave no indication of his thoughts on valuation. „Have a safe trip home, Jules. I’m sure you will hear from us soon.“

For the first time today, Jules felt slightly off balance, but it didn’t last long. The Saudi’s hadn’t jumped with an offer for GHI, but they hadn’t abandoned it either. Hell, this was worth billions, and even the Saudis would need to call home before committing this much money. He said goodbye and left, confident that a solid offer would be forthcoming.

Visitor

John was in his own apartment. After his years in the military and school, he wasn't sure about his feelings toward Kelly. He liked her; that was certain. And, they were more than friends. He wasn't interested in dating anyone else. He didn't look at the online dating sites and hadn't had time to make any new friends in the area to match him up.

He dropped her at her apartment around six o'clock. He didn't mention dinner, and she didn't either. It was a dreary wet night, driving alone to his place in the dark. He hated the mid-Atlantic weather: never really full winter, yet too cold and damp to do anything outside. Spring would be nice for a few weeks until it got oppressively humid and hot. He stopped for Chinese takeout at his usual spot, planning to call her later.

His apartment was a two-bedroom, two-bath unit on the third floor of an old triple-decker building. The second bedroom served as an office with a bed if anyone visited, which hadn't happened yet. He liked the quiet enclave with nobody on a floor above him. The building was narrow, built along an equally narrow ridge of a small hill in a populated area. He had the entire width of the building with windows in both bedrooms and in the smallish open room at the other side that served as kitchen, dining and living room. It was a little bigger than he needed living alone, but it was comfortable and affordable.

He ate on the couch, watching the evening news. It never seemed to change. Terrorists were rampaging through the Middle East after the US disrupted the balance of power. Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Iraq, and Iran were now breeding grounds for ISIS and other evil extremists who had mastered the art of attracting misguided youths from around the world through social media. The US Secretary of State was somewhere in Europe in a meeting or some sort to end the troubles, as he had been for all of his tenure in office. Nothing changed.

John's anger grew as he watched, as it did every time, thinking about the absurd way Americans have always tried to superimpose their values on Bedouins. He'd seen the blood of Americans, too much blood, of young Marines and soldiers that politicians had thrown away on un-winnable campaigns for their own political agendas. He'd experienced the loneliness in a hole on some foreign hilltop, surrounded by people wanting to kill him. He'd been so scared that nightmares were frequent even now. He still had contact with some of his buddies from the service: some had damaged bodies, some would never be emotionally stable, and some were okay after returning from Afghanistan. They were his family now. He was often visited by the ghosts of friends who died while he tried to stuff their guts back in or who were trying to feel their legs that were blown off by a roadside bomb. Veterans were the only people he could really share his memories with: only they could put it into the right context. Kelly didn't know what he had done as a corpsman—he could never talk to her about it. He pressed the remote button and changed the channel.

His phone rang on the counter near his wallet and keys. Kelly didn't usually call him in the evening before he called her. The number registered a number in area code 207. „Hello.“

„John, is that you?“

Her voice was immediately recognizable. „Mary? Hey, how are you?“

She was silent for a moment. „I want to come see you.“

„Mary, what’s wrong?“

He couldn’t tell if she was crying or just mad as hell; maybe both. „Dad... he said some really awful things to me. I hate him. I don’t ever want to go back to the island or to school. John, am I messed up? I mean, it’s weird growing up the way I did. I don’t think I’m normal. I just don’t know what to do next.“

He owed her a debt of gratitude and wasn’t going to ignore her, but she was only a kid. „Look, Mary, I want to help you, but I’m not sure how? You should probably go back to your school and settle into the routine there, think about your options when you graduate. It’s not the island.“

„I am back at school. That’s not it. John, I need some time to get my life organized. Can I come stay with you? I don’t know anyone else to ask.“

His head throbbed. He could get into a lot of trouble taking her in, but she sounded desperate and young people, younger than he, could make some horrendous decisions when emotions were out of control. „Ah, look, Mary... sure, you can come here. Got a car?“

„No, but I can catch the bus or train to Baltimore. Isn’t that where you live?“

„Yeah. Close enough. I can come get you when you come in.“

„Oh, John, thank you, thank you, thank you.“

„Okay, now let me know what your schedule is, and I’ll get you. And, Mary, I’ll need to tell your folks about this.“

She was silent for a minute. „Okay, but just tell them that I’m already there or at least on my way. I don’t want them thinking that they can stop me.“

He didn’t want to lie to Gort; but on balance, a small lie would make it easier on them all. He would also make it clear that she would not be alone with him.

„Okay, Mary. When do you want to come?“

„I’m checking online right now. I can leave tonight and be there early in the morning.“

Great. Late to work two days in a row. „That’s fine. Just keep me current with your schedule.“

She was giddy. „Call you soon!“

The line went dead and he looked at his iPhone momentarily, unsure what to do. So, he pressed „1“.

She answered. „Hi, I didn’t think you’d call this early.“

„I have a problem. Can we talk?“

As he drove back over to Kelly’s apartment, he thought about how to explain his connection with Mary. There were obvious parts to be omitted, but in the end, he just told her the whole story—the long version. It surprised him that she grasped it immediately and, even more surprisingly, understood why Mary was coming.

Together, neither of them had any good ideas, but both knew it wouldn’t be healthy for an infatuated teenage girl to stay with him. He could control himself, but not her. In the end, they decided that Mary would stay with Kelly, but only so long as it would take to talk sense back into the girl. A week tops. Mary would be disappointed, but it might be just the experience she needed to bring her back to reality. Later that night, Mary sent a text message with her schedule to arrive on

Amtrak at about one in the morning, day after tomorrow. It was too late to get anything that night, but she could leave tomorrow morning and transfer through Boston in the afternoon. It gave them more time to prepare, even if it did mean they'd lose some sleep. He would call Gort tomorrow night, when Mary was in transit.

The next night, when John was alone again in his apartment, it was time to call Gort. He welcomed the chance to talk to his friend, but dreaded the subject. He couldn't put it off any longer and pressed the numbers. It rang several times; then he answered with a single word, „Gort.“

„Hey, Gort, it's John, John Hollis.“

„John! Good to hear from you so soon. You callin' to say I won the lottery or somethin'?“

Without much polite chit chat, John explained about Mary and their plan for her to stay with Kelly.

Gort was quiet for some time then spoke. „We kinda had a fight, John.“ John didn't say anything. „We got kinda tangled into a discussion that I don't think either of us wanted. John, we know she don't wanna spend her life here. It ain't for everyone. But, I guess I just came on too strong about her future, and she took it wrong. She figured I was tryin' to make her come here after she's done with school. Honestly, John, I don't want her unhappy. We're lonely, sure. Our boy is gone, and maybe he'll come home, and maybe not. Anyways, we miss our kids. It's lonely here like you know.“

John really didn't want to meddle any further. „Look, Gort, it's really none of my business. You all are my friends, and I don't want anyone hurt. I know Mary is confused. Hell, I couldn't wait to get away to the Navy when the time came. Kelly will talk to Mary—girl talk. She's my special friend, and I told her how you took me in. I think Mary just needs someone to lean on, and Kelly will be great for that.“

Gort's voice seemed to tremble slightly, just enough for John to picture the big rough man with a tear in his eye. At that moment, John felt what it must be like to be a father of a daughter he might not ever see again. It probably wasn't true, but John could feel Gort's pain. Gort appreciated the call and knew, in the end, that Mary would be safe and maybe even understand things better.

Driving from the train station at BWI at nearly two in the morning was surprisingly like any other hour of the day. There was plenty of traffic on the roads. She'd arrived with a very large suitcase, which he guessed contained everything she'd taken to school. She was mixed up and taking each day, one-by-one and wasn't making plans about anything. If she didn't go back, she wasn't leaving anything behind. He glanced at her. „So, are you tired?“

„No, I slept on the train.“

„How about food?“

„I'm not hungry.“

„Okay, well we're headed to my friend's house. Her name is Kelly. She's...“

She stopped him. „Wait... I want to be with you. You said I could stay with you!“

They bantered back and forth, but there would be no change of plans. He told her that he and Kelly worked together, and he would be around most of the time. He just wasn't sleeping at Kelly's. She pouted for the rest of the way to Kelly's, but she was polite and grateful when the girls met. He was taken aback when Kelly

quickly asked him to leave so that she and Mary could „get to know each other.“ He hoped it didn't mean any kind of confrontation was coming. He was invited to come for breakfast in about five hours. He didn't know what to think after that, but he was tired and wanted a few hours more to sleep.

He was back at seven for breakfast. „Where's Mary?“

Kelly said nicely, „She's sleeping.“

They didn't talk about their visitor again until they were in the car for the short drive to GHI. He asked, „So, what did you two talk about last night?“

She looked at him with a kind of „none of your business“ stares. „She's a nice girl, John. She just doesn't get along with her father right now. It's not too surprising at her age.“ He just nodded as she continued. „She doesn't think she can talk to her parents as an adult... sounds like dad's a hard case.“

He smiled to himself. „Yeah, Gort's like that, pretty domineering. So, what kind of feminine advice did you give her?“

„I told her about my father and mother. They had my future all laid out from the time I was born. I wasn't strong either. One day, after I finished my sophomore year in college, my dad and I got into a shouting match. It was the first time I stood up for myself.“

„What about?“

„He wanted me to be an engineer. He even knew that I should major in mechanical because there weren't many women in it, and companies were scrambling to balance their workforces. To him, everything had to fit some kind of blueprint. Anyway, I stood my ground. I was quitting engineering and going into life sciences. He didn't know anything about it. All of his associates were engineers. Even my mother was an engineer. He wanted me to be like them, and I said NO!

„It was crazy. I hated myself for hours after that and stayed in my room. He wouldn't even talk to me at dinner; but afterward, an amazing thing happened. He mellowed out and said he just wanted me to be happy. I think he and my mother must have had a talk. After that, I was able to show him the kind of career options I could have. He was really interested. Now, today, we're very close, and he's proud of me. He tells me so all the time. It was just that one time when everything changed between us. He'd always controlled my life, forever. Then it all changed. I stood up to him and he changed completely.“

He looked at her. „You had that discussion with Mary this morning?“

„Yep. She seemed to relax a lot. She thanked me and went to bed. She's sleeping like a baby.“

„Well, I've met her father. He's no pussycat.“

She gave him a sideways glance, „We women have our ways.“

Ambush

Two days after Mary arrived, the three of them had become great friends. Mary was ready to go back to school and feeling a little embarrassed for having brought them into her mess. But, it also served to reset the relationship between her and

John. Her fantasies dissolved after Kelly became her friend too. She would leave the following afternoon back to Portland. She even had a brief call with her father that never reached the mellow point Kelly had described with her own dad, but they were at least being civil. John was sure she was leaving with a new sense of self-worth and self-confidence. Kelly could do that.

That morning, Mary was going to GHI with them to see what they did for a living and how it benefitted humanity. John and Kelly had discussed it when they were alone the day before, and Kelly made the point that Mary needed to understand a much broader scope of options ahead of her. She'd grown up on an island with a single industry. Men fished and girls got pregnant, many before finishing high school. Any sense of another reality was totally artificial. Her only exposure to any other options was through television, and it had never really influenced her. She'd seen all the cops, lawyers, and doctors that producers could conjure up, but it wasn't real society. She'd lived in her own real, albeit weird, society. On the mainland, she'd seen people behaving normally without the violence on screen. Her problem was that she couldn't imagine anything outside of Matinicus; everything else she'd been exposed to was artificial. She needed to broaden her perspective, and it was the one thing John could do, with Kelly, to repay the Swensens.

They had some bagels and juice that John bought on the way to Kelly's that morning. Mary was animated about the prospect of seeing the real world of science with her two friends. She realized how the work John and Kelly did could change the world. They talked a great deal about school and how they had chosen their careers before leaving for the Institute.

Outside, a rusted grey Ram pickup was parked nearby with the tailgate facing toward the apartment. The owner had watched it for several mornings when the man and woman left for work around the same time each day. Their morning schedule was predictable. He had climbed into the bed of the truck under the decrepit camper shell and sat on some junk with a folding chair in front of him for balance. He was more nervous than he had imagined and his palms were sweaty. The money was good, and he had a job to do. He told himself repeatedly that it would get easier, but he had to do the first one.

He'd lied to his client. He lived in an old camping trailer on an abandoned lot near the Chesapeake Bay, over twenty miles away. His wife was gone, his house, his kids; hell, even the dog. It might have been the drinking and drugs, but he just seemed to have the worst luck with bosses. Over twenty-odd years, he'd fallen from police patrolman, production foreman on a road crew, to shelf-stocker at a building supply chain store, to being homeless. At barely fifty years old, he looked twenty years older. The world was cruel; he knew that, he'd experienced it. Every two-bit boss he'd ever had didn't have the brains God intended for a watermelon. He'd been dealt a bad hand in life and lost everything. He didn't blame himself; it was everyone he'd ever been around. He was tired of living in the mud and being stepped on. Now... now he had a profession that could pay him some real money! All it took was a couple conversations, and he got five thousand dollars stuffed in an old mailbox down the road. He'd watched the sleek sports car pull up to the abandoned mailbox and just slip it inside. He could live for months right now and never even finish this job. There were no contracts or receipts.

He only had to finish this job to get the other half of his money. His new profession as a contract killer was brilliant. He just ran an ad in the magazine and „*whammo*,“ FIVE THOUSAND. The guy didn't even negotiate. Later today, he'd get another five grand.

He owned an old .30-06 bolt-action rifle that his grandfather had used for deer hunting. It was about the only thing he took away from the divorce. His storyline to the „client“ was pure fiction. He had been a pretty good shot in Army basic training, but that was over thirty years ago, and he had never fired a rifle again. He had served with the rank of Private in menial assignments before the Army discharged him early for budget reasons, having never attended advanced infantry school. The box of his grandfather's ammunition was faded and only had a dozen, or so, cartridges. But even if the ammunition had lost some of its oomph, it wouldn't take much for the big rifle to do this job.

He had practiced using the folding chair as a gun support aiming through the back door of the camper shell. He could push the door upward and take the firing position in less than eight seconds most of the time. Once he was behind the chair, he was able to point and shoot. Sometimes, the chair would collapse accidentally, or he would inadvertently kick it while moving hunched over into position, but he was getting better at it. From less than a hundred yards, he figured that he could shoot fast and jump out of the back and get to the cab to escape. He was becoming a man of precision although he had never practiced the entire sequence. He'd never crawled out of the bed and run to the cab. It was early while he waited, before eight o'clock, but a swig of bourbon had helped calm his nerves. The morning was cold and raw with a freezing wind blowing. The sky was unusually dim and heavily overcast; but, at least, it wasn't raining.

His client thought he had hired a mercenary, a ruthless killer. Well, he was being one today. In fact, that was what he'd become in his mind. He'd convinced himself. No morals, no conscience... he'd seen the movies. His mind was right. He had done everything he'd claimed over and over in his mind. People are just flesh and blood, so what was experience anyway? He was mentally keen for this. He'd soon be able to ask for even more money. He just had a few problems: his pulse raced, his hands shook, and sweat was blinding him, even in the frigid confines of the truck bed.

Then the door to the apartment opened, and he stiffened, moving into position next to the tailgate, ready to swing the door up on the camper. The window was made of Plexiglas covered with dirt and bird droppings; but even through the muck, he could see that something wasn't right. There were three people coming from the apartment, not two. He pushed the door up slightly to get a better look. He needed to be careful not to be seen. He was parked among other cars in the lot and people were leaving for work around him. He needed to do this with split second timing. As he raised the glass higher, he slipped on the metal bed floor collapsing the chair as the door slammed shut, making too much noise. „*SHIT!*“

He hurriedly lifted it again as the three people continued walking in his direction. He recognized the man for sure. He didn't want a long shot, but he also didn't want them to see him. The window went up and eventually locked as he scrambled on hands and knees behind the chair, which wobbled and threatened to collapse again. He used his left hand to steady the chair and lifted the rifle with

his right to rest on the back. He was shaking uncontrollably as he remembered to pull back the bolt to load the gun. It was awkward chambering the bullet while trying to keep everything balanced. He completed the task and brought the rifle back into firing alignment. The targets were less than a hundred feet from him! He tried to aim, but the front and rear open gunsights wouldn't align as sweat filled his eyes.

Outside, John smiled and glanced at the girls, happy to be helping Mary get her life back on track. Kelly was clearly enjoying it too; this whole episode was helping define their relationship. He looked toward his Mustang and pressed the key fob to unlock the doors... then he saw the beat-up truck. It was out of place in the upscale complex—something wasn't right! Something was misplaced. It just didn't seem right. He reacted from instinct—he'd been ambushed before and just reacted without thinking. He knew in a split second that someone inside the truck was pointing a gun at them. He yelled, „Incoming“ and rammed the girls down between two parked cars. They both screamed, startled and hurt. The noise that followed was deafening; except to John, who'd heard it before, it sounded to him like a dud round or sub-sonic load. It could have been deadly, regardless.

The chair collapsed as the gun fired. The shooter dropped the rifle and scrambled to escape. He rammed into the roof, gouging his forehead while careening over the tailgate, falling out of the narrow window opening, landing hard on the pavement. He fell contorted on his side after scraping his arm against the rusty tailor hitch. He struggled to his feet, planning to run to the cab, but John was already on him. The sound of gunfire had triggered survival instincts; he'd been ambushed by the Taliban. He'd repressed the experience for five years, but some things cannot be forgotten. Rather than recoil in fear, he attacked. He closed the distance to the rear of the truck in less than four seconds, getting there as the shooter fell out. As he started to rise, John kicked his head and had him on the ground, barely murmuring through a broken jaw and smashed sinus. The old man was heavier than John, but out of shape. John smashed his face down on the pavement again without mercy. The injured man screamed obscenities and his bladder released as John yanked one arm high up his back in an arm lock, sending a lightning bolt of pain, dislocating his shoulder. The man screamed and cried again, „Ahh... my shoulder! You're killing me! Get off!“ He tried feebly to push up with his free left arm, but couldn't budge.

John leaned down, gasping at the man's odor. „Stop moving, scumbag, or I'll cripple you for life!“ Slightly more pressure would rip the old man's shoulder joint to shreds. He yelled back, „Kelly, call nine-one-one!“ She was already reporting the emergency. Other people were gathering around, some taking video with their smart phones. John now had both arms behind the man who lay with his nose and lips bleeding on the asphalt, sobbing helplessly. John held him without relaxing his grip. A police siren was blaring less than a mile away.

Detective

They didn't make it to work on time. Kelly was talking to Mary in the background, near her apartment, trying to console her, and the detective was talking to John after the shooter was taken away in handcuffs. „So, Mr. Hollis, what did you see?“

John explained the entire blurry sequence as he remembered it. „Basically, I just reacted from instinct. When the guy fired and missed, I got him down.“ She took his whole statement.

She asked, „Do you know for sure that he was aiming at one of you?“

„I heard the round pass very close. It sounded sub-sonic. It was no accident; he'd planned the ambush. I'm sure when you measure the ballistics path, you'll figure it out.“ He was tempted to bring up Lorne's warning, but didn't.

She continued, „Would the perp have any reason to harm you or either of the ladies that you know of?“

„Honestly, no. I've never seen that guy before. It was an ambush, and we nearly walked into it. None of us have any enemies that I know about. You can ask them (indicating the girls) yourself.“ The detective nodded that she would be doing that.

They stayed in the parking lot for over an hour while the police sorted through the truck and interviewed witnesses. John was surprised how well Mary held up, but figured that Kelly had calmed her down. He would need to call Gort later to tell him about it. The truck was finally towed away, around noon and the three of them went back inside Kelly's apartment.

Kelly had a lot of questions to ask John. The conversation remained low key, mostly to avoid alarming Mary, who had become more composed. A couple hours later, they took her to the train at BWI to return to Portland. She wanted to leave, but also wanted a promise that she could return sometime and see the Institute, which Kelly promised. John was sure that the experience impacted Mary far more greatly than any of them understood, but he also sensed that she was going to be making some plans for the future. He kissed her on the cheek, and said he would see her again soon—promise.

Kelly called Charlie sometime in the late morning, telling him what had happened. He was shocked and glad nobody was hurt. They decided to go to the Institute after Mary left, but it was basically a waste of time. They spent several hours retelling their experience to concerned colleagues, never even getting to the labs.

Anxiety

„Charlie, you should have seen it. They all sat mystified by my presentation.“ Jules had been in Charlie's office early the next morning after meeting with the Saudis in New York, sometime after the sniper attack had happened to John and Kelly. „I guarantee they'll make an offer. I bet they're with the Hawk people right now hammering it out. I had a chance to talk to the partner in charge and got our message across that this needed to be a big number and don't try to low ball. I let him know that it could be a deal killer.“

Charlie was excited. Until recently, the prospect of wealth and retirement was just a dream. It wasn't reality. But listening to Jules now, the reality of it was taking hold. „When do you think we'll hear? Should we just wait until they contact us? What if they don't?“

„Gotta be patient partner... patient. I can hardly stand it myself, but you can bet that they need to get the okay from back home. Deals this big can't be decided by three shmucks alone.“

„So, how high will they go, Jules? What did you tell them?“

„Nothing! See, Charlie, that's the strategy in business negotiations (which neither of them had done before). You don't ever want to set a price, not in the beginning. Let them come up with a number. I just let 'em know that it would be a waste of time and probably kill it from our side if they were unrealistic, and I made it crystal clear that it had to be huge.“

Charlie smiled so wide his ears seemed to recede back into his head. „I can't wait to hear, Jules! You're the man!“ Both were awkward giving high-fives, something out of character.

Marie knocked on the door and announced a phone call for either of them. Charlie pressed the button, and they both listened on the speaker. „Jules, Charlie... we just got word on Lorne's death.“

Abagael was calling from the WHO van as they headed back toward Kambia. Jules spoke first, „Go ahead, Abagael.“ They instinctively both leaned closer to the phone to hear well.

„I just heard from an Air Force Doctor in Texas. She's a surgeon who is doing the examination. They found his body mutilated by internal failure. The cause was a new pathogen, a new form of VHF.“

Charlie spoke. „You mean he died of Ebola? Where did he come in contact? He was only on the ground less than a day when he got sick.“

She answered. „My guess is Kambia or the hotel. He wanted to go to the hotel and it made some sense after his long trip. He was at the hotel for a couple hours, then we went there straight away to Kambia because they had been experiencing problems with their water supply and some increases in infections that the local clinic could not diagnose. It's fairly common here, but Lorne didn't want to take any chances. He wanted to go there immediately.“

Jules this time. „But, Abagael, are there other cases?“

„No. So far, no. No one had died in Kambia when we got there, and most of the patients were treated and released, apparently without any further problems. No indication of Ebola. We only were there for approximately an hour then turned back toward Conakry for his hotel again. He was not feeling too well, and we suspected that he suffered from the trip. You know the rest.“

Both scientists were bewildered. Charlie observed to no one in particular, „He couldn't have gotten sick in Kambia. The incubation for Ebola takes days, even a couple weeks before symptoms are seen, and he wouldn't have died that quickly unless it was well along. He would have to have been sick before leaving the states.“

She agreed. „Yes. I agree. It's a mystery, but now we need to go back to Kambia to be sure there is no disease. It is highly unlikely that Lorne became so sick from a short visit, but we must check all possibilities with the medical authorities. We

also need to warn them to be observing all patients now. It is possible that he may have infected people there.“

„Abagael, this is Jules. How are you feeling?“

Question

Elsewhere, John and Kelly were alone in her apartment that evening, reconstructing the day. She asked, „What’s this all about, John? That man was trying to shoot us, or maybe just me, or just you?“ She trembled, trying to maintain her composure.

He answered thoughtfully. „I have no idea, Kell. This has all become too weird. There’s no explanation that I can think of. It might be connected: Lorne’s warning, his death, our friendship... I just don’t have a clue. I hope the police will find something out.“

Almost on cue, John’s mobile rang. „Mr. Hollis, this is Detective McAlister, at the Baltimore PD. We met this morning after the assault at Miss Egan’s apartment.“ He acknowledged her, looking at Kelly and switching to speaker so she could hear. „We’ve started talking to the alleged perpetrator. His name is Cordell Shipman and he doesn’t have a permanent address, although he’s from the area and has a former wife and children in the region. Anyway, he’s cooperating. He almost seems to want to go to prison. I don’t want to be too judgmental, but it looks like it would be an improvement in living conditions for him.“ John remembered the smell.

„So, he’s talking. What’s this all about, Detective?“

„I can’t tell you everything, but can you and Miss Egan come to the PD in the morning? I’d like to get some more facts from you and maybe share some more information.“

They agreed to be there at nine o’clock in the morning and left a voice mail for Charlie to expect them to be late again in the morning.

Kelly asked John to spend the night with her. She felt safe around him. His whole demeanor had changed. He had changed with their circumstance; she didn’t really know how to rationalize it, something she had always been able to do, but John was different, and she felt safer just having him around. She knew he’d been in combat before, but he would never discuss it. Now, she’d seen him react, confronting danger. It was part of his past. She had panicked and curled between cars, protecting Mary. She would have been helpless if the shooter had been able to come at them. She was paralyzed and thought that anyone else would have reacted the same way. There was a gun! Guns kill, and she didn’t want to die. John not only recognized the danger before the shot, he’d been completely cool. It wasn’t natural. He reacted instantly, pushing both women out of sight, and then he charged as the shot missed. It seemed like suicide, yet he wasn’t crazy. Somehow he knew, or sensed, that the shooter would panic. John charged him! Who charges toward someone pointing a gun at you? He wasn’t intending to die, he just knew what he had to do, and did it. She realized how much she didn’t

know about him and what he was capable of. In an undefinable way, it scarred her, but she also wanted him protecting her that night.

It could have been awkward. They hadn't ever spent a whole night together before. John went back to his apartment and packed some clothes, not really knowing what to expect. When he returned, he assumed he'd be on the couch. They had the TV running through the evening, but didn't really watch anything. The ambush and suspicions about work dominated their discussion. When it was late, Kelly gestured for John to stay with her. They had cuddled in bed but had no deeper physical contact than a kiss goodnight. Neither slept soundly.

In the morning, they left early. Baltimore traffic was terrible during rush hour, and it took almost an hour to drive the beltway around the city. Police headquarters was on the north side. When they arrived, John asked for Sharon McAlister, Sergeant of Detectives, and they were escorted to a small conference room. The escorting officer offered them coffee, which John accepted, black. Kelly wasn't interested. They didn't wait long. The Detective came into the room with a thin manila folder and a pad of paper. She closed the door, eliminating background noise from all the phone calls in-process outside. McAlister was tall for a woman, almost six feet wearing flats. She was middle-aged, but women's ages were impossible for John to guess. Her thick glasses obscured dark circles and deep creases at the corners. Her appearance was of a hard-working woman in a position mostly reserved for men. Neither John nor Kelly had any doubts about McAlister's qualifications. As she closed the door behind her, it seemed like every desk officer on the floor was talking to someone about a crime or an emergency.

The detective started by showing them a picture of the shooter and the awful conditions he lived in. „First of all, are either of you familiar with this man?“ They looked at the picture and both shook their heads. „I'm not surprised. From what Mr. Shipman says, he doesn't know you either.“

„Then what was he doing in my parking lot, shooting a gun in our direction?“ Kelly was shaking.

The Detective had a serious expression and didn't mince words. „He was trying to kill you.“

Kelly reacted with shock, „Me! Why, me?“ Her lips trembled. She'd never hurt anyone in her life. She'd wanted a career that would help people, help all of mankind. Why would anyone want to hurt her?

„That's why I wanted you to come in today, both of you. Mr. Shipman is talking pretty freely; he's admitting everything.“

John asked, „So, what's this about, Detective. Why does he want to hurt Kelly?“

„I was hoping you could help me with the answer. Mr. Shipman has admitted taking money to shoot both of you, Mr. Hollis.“ John was weighing whether to tell her about Lorne's warning, but it didn't point anywhere particularly. He would need to find out what put him on someone's hit list before any of it made sense. If he could solve that mystery, then he would tell the police. She continued. „Shipman signed a confession. He actually seems grateful to have been caught. He's like some of the career criminals in our prisons. They want to get caught. Prison life means three meals and a bed. The idea of freedom scares them. If they don't have a family or loved ones to take them in, life on the streets terrifies them. They actually want to be inside. Mr. Shipman is like that, although he's never

been behind bars before that we can tell, and he wasn't actually trying to get caught this time. But since he was captured, he's been relaxed and seems grateful."

John wanted a better answer. "That doesn't explain anything. He had to have a motive, a reason?"

She looked at him, wondering if he was telling her everything. "His motive was money, simple as that. But that isn't why you both should be concerned—someone wanted you dead and was willing to pay serious money to hire a killer."

John was confused. "That guy was a pro hit man? He just looked like a derelict to me, some scumbag from under the trestles. If he's a hit man, then I'm Santa Claus."

She would have smiled if it weren't so serious. "He was desperate. Probably has an alcohol or drug problem that caused him to lose everything. He made up a fictitious background and ran an ad in *Soldier of Fortune*, so someone hired him. Someone, a man he thinks, paid him five thousand dollars to kill you. I don't know who was more amateurish: the would-be assassin or the client. It's the client we want now; he's still out there and could try this again with someone with real experience next time. Neither of them met, so he doesn't know who hired him."

John glanced at Kelly momentarily, who remained silent. "Look, Detective. I can't be sure, but it could be work related. One of the owners of the lab where we work told me that I might be in danger a couple weeks ago. He never said why, but it could have something to do with some information I discovered accidentally." He glanced at Kelly briefly. "Since we both work together and have a relationship outside of work, Kelly could also be in danger."

McAlister was taking detailed notes. "What was the information?"

"That's just it, I don't know."

"Okay, who's the owner you mentioned? I can talk to him and probably get him to open up since he could be an accessory to attempted murder."

"He's dead."

Victor

He wasn't feeling well. He was scared. He'd seen Dr. Lorne get sick and knew that he'd died the same day that the WHO team was taking him to his hotel. Riding his bicycle again, he was going to the open market to buy a fish for his mother to cook, but it became harder for him to maintain balance or to see the road. His vision blurred. He stopped just as his stomach purged. A few hundred meters further along, he stopped in the boiling heat again, this time to rest. It was early in the afternoon, and he was a young man. If anyone had seen him, he would be embarrassed to admit that he had to rest, lying on the dirt. But, he also lived in a region that suffered the deadliest virus outbreaks in the world, and he knew how the diseases could spread between people. Everyone knew, and people would not come to his aid.

He lay back, crawling on his back and elbows, farther away from the edge of the road in case a bus rumbled past. His bike was still lying close to the roadside and

could be crushed by vehicles, but he was too sick to worry about it. He imagined sitting near Dr. Lorne inside the truck for hours going to Kambia and then returning. He laid on the hard crusted earth as gusty wind blew fine red dust over him. His forearm covered his eyes from the burning sun. It was hot, but he was cold. His arm dripped sweat, streaking mud down his cheeks. It was dangerous to lie on the ground, powerless to move if the snakes and scorpions came to hide in his shadow. The pain intensified, and he could no longer move.

Miles away, the WHO team was busy at the clinic in Kambia. A number of patients had been admitted in the past twenty-four hours with symptoms that could represent an outbreak. The senior staff people could speak English well enough to understand the instructions from the UN doctors. About the only protective equipment available for personal protection were boxes of surgical masks and latex gloves. Everyone was hurrying to get protected to some extent, but they all knew it was foolish to believe they could prevent a serious epidemic if the virus bloomed.

Alone

She trembled. Sitting at the kitchen table with John gave her some sense of safety, but he couldn't be everywhere, not all the time. „I'm scared, John.“ He'd made her a cup of tea after they got back from talking to the police. He reached for her hand as she continued. „I mean, who would want to hurt us? You didn't do anything, did you? You never said anything to me, but someone wants to kill us? Why? It doesn't make any sense.“

He looked at her. „Kelly, I don't have any ideas—none. I've told you everything, and there's nothing that I know of. I got the warning from Lorne, and all he said was things were not what they seemed, but I never got the chance to talk to him again. The only thing that could be a clue is those files on the computer that I didn't decode.“

She shook her head, speaking as tears streaked her cheeks. „Why would that be important to someone? Important enough to kill us? I would never kill anyone. Why kill us?“ She knew that she was emotional and not thinking rationally. She tried to focus. „Do you think I should go stay with my parents or my sister?“ Before he could answer, she corrected herself. „No, that would only endanger them.“

He looked at her with determined eyes, holding one hand. „No. No one can help us if someone really wants us dead. There'll be another attempt, and odds are that someone will succeed. Whoever sent that last clod won't make the same mistake twice. The best thing I can think of is to get back into the lab and find those files if they still exist and then figure out what's in them. If I can do that, we can catch the guy.“

„Can't the police do that?“

„No. It would take a subpoena to get into the computer, and then they'd have to find out what the files meant. They'd never get a subpoena based on a warning

from a dead man. Maybe if I can figure out the code, it'll tell us something, and then we can tell the cops."

She suddenly became angry. "You think someone at the Institute hired this guy, this assassin?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. Someone interested in those files must be involved. How else does this all hang together? Until we know what's going on, I don't want to assume anything. We both know these people; they're all good scientists, good people, saving lives. I just don't want to believe someone we know could get involved in murder." He looked at the clock. "I need to get back to the lab. Maybe I can figure something out."

"You're not going there alone; you're not leaving me behind. I still work there, too. We both should get back in there." He just nodded.

They were at the Institute a few minutes later and were surprised to see the Baltimore PD car parked in a visitor spot near the entrance. When signing in, John asked the guard what was going on, and all he could say was that two plain-clothed cops were in the executive offices. John and Kelly went to the lab, 4B, and he immediately logged into his workstation. It seemed like the perfect time to get into the files, while Charlie and Jules would be distracted. Kelly went to her desk and began working on collating data, but it also gave her a vantage point to let John know if someone was nearby.

In the conference room, Detective McAlister and another officer were meeting with Charlie and Jules together. Marie had offered them drinks, but all declined.

Jules was a bit fidgety, not surprisingly. "Well, officers, what's this about?"

Both officers were experienced at reading body language. McAlister spoke while the younger male detective took notes. "Gentlemen, we're investigating a shooting event that involved two of your employees and another lady. I'm sure you know about it."

Both executives nodded and Charlie spoke. "Of course, we heard about it and talked to Kelly and John, but what's that got to do with us?"

She remained unreadable. "We're just talking to people they know and work with."

For the next hour, the two men answered questions about Kelly and John's work history, grudges or rivalries at work, disputes with management, and even their personal relationship. Charlie barely held his composure, listening to Jules talk about Kelly and John... "Two of our best employees" and "can't imagine anyone disliking them," on-and-on crap. Charlie was honest in his assessments; he didn't need to fabricate answers. It was hard to avoid telling them about Jules' intention to fire them, contradicting all the positive platitudes from his partner. He couldn't conceive that Jules had actually tried to kill them... that would be too much to believe.

In the lab, it took John several tries before remembering how to navigate through the complex file structure at GHI. The folder was under one of Lorne's private passwords. John knew the password as a result of a telephone call from Lorne on one of his earlier trips to West Africa. He had needed some information and gave his password to John. If Lorne had intended to change it after his return, it never happened. Lorne was both trusting of John and careless about computer security. He had his files properly protected, but didn't change things often

enough. John had seen the file name „Dolos“ among hundreds that Lorne listed in his project files weeks before. The name wasn't consistent with the alpha-numeric labeling sequences of all other projects. He hadn't thought much of it at the time, but had gone back to open the file folder weeks later when he was bored. Looking at the information now, it still made no sense; it was obviously encrypted. He then realized that someone could be running keylogging software. How else would Lorne have known John was snooping in the files? By going into this same folder now, his keystrokes could be watched by someone in the network. He hoped that he didn't get shut out before he could figure out the project. If someone wanted to confront him at the Institute, it might be the one trying to kill him. Either way, he was back into the file.

He scrambled to find a thumb-drive in his desk and quickly copied the file, half expecting someone to charge into the lab at any moment. It didn't happen. He put the drive in his pocket and closed the file, returning to routine work at his computer.

The police were gone shortly after that, and John expected someone to come after him for the breach of propriety. He had signed an agreement, forbidding any information from leaving the Institute, which could basically put him in jail, and they could sue him for the rest of his life. The key-logger program would have recognized the removable disc „save“ instruction. But he and Kelly finished their work alone; nobody came to the lab, and they left at five o'clock, much earlier than normal.

In the car, she started to speak, and he signaled for silence. They couldn't be sure the car wasn't bugged or being tracked. Instinctively, he looked for following cars, but couldn't see any.

Kambia

The WHO doctors looked like aliens from space in their HazMat suits. These were not positive pressure suits, but were better protection than the native physicians normally had. Abagael Van Acker was certain that it was an outbreak. Her medical team was having difficulty talking to the patients. Their interpreter and guide, Victor, would not answer his phone, despite numerous attempts to call him. It didn't matter; she knew what they were witnessing. She'd seen it before.

She called her small team together, and they helped each other decontaminate. „We've got to go back to Conakry and request supplies.“ One doctor objected and wanted to stay, but she was insistent. „We don't have anything to treat them with, and the worst that could happen is that some of us get sick from this. If that happens, the world will panic and our countries will just send medical planes to evacuate us and quarantine us to protect the rest of the world. We won't be able to help then.“ They all finally agreed and drove away.

When she had adequate phone connection, Van Acker made a call. He answered, complaining that it was the middle of the night. She ignored him. „Jules, we are declaring a medical emergency here. Do you have any more information about Lorne's medical examination?“

He sat upright. „Ah... yes, Abagael. We received the report today. He died of VHF, as you expected. But, I have some good news that I was going to call you about in the morning. It's the mutation that we've been preparing for. It's the same disease that we have been building vaccine and antidote for since the end of last year. We have a good supply.“

„Jules, are you sure? This sounds like a miracle!“

It sounds like money in the bank to me. He could hardly wait to get the news to Wall Street. He was waiting for this to happen. Now the Saudis would be throwing money at them! „Look, Abagael, I can arrange an air shipment later this morning. You should have the first batch by tomorrow afternoon.“

„That would be wonderful, Jules. Is the payment to be the same as before?“ She would need to contact the WHO, and get funded through the UN.

„Let's not worry about it now. We'll work it out. Right now, it's important to save lives.“

The call ended, and he looked at his bed-stand clock, three-thirty in the morning. He couldn't sleep with all the excitement. He got dressed and called Charlie, waking him and telling him to get to the Institute and call all the other people he needed to get the shipment together.

At Kelly's apartment, both were sleeping, but they had been awake only a couple hours earlier. They'd developed a coded way to talk and used written notes to discuss important matters: matters that could mean their lives. The Dolos file was apparently created by Lorne, who was a brilliant scientist and physician, but who didn't have much tolerance for complex math problems. John was able to break the code after transferring the Excel file to his laptop. It proved to be a simple substitution of a letter to a fixed number of positions down the rows on the standard keyboard, commonly called a „Caesar Cipher“. That part was easy to figure out. The more complex problem was developing a key-shift routine for his computer that would do the decoding of the entire 54-page report automatically. Otherwise, it would take several long days to translate manually and would not be fault free.

After a few failed trials, the program they'd done together began working, and the lines of the file began changing into logical letters and numbers. It was still in scientific jargon, but it was all familiar to Kelly and John. When it was finally done, both were exhausted and went to bed, uncertain about what it meant. They held onto each other in bed, but the confusion and threat both felt couldn't be put aside. Both felt comfort being together, but they also knew they had already escaped death once. That thought pervaded every emotion. The data might unlock the mystery, but they were too tired to figure it out that night.

The next day was Saturday, and they chose to stay inside her apartment and work at deciphering the file. The parking lot was full and no suspicious vehicles could be spotted, but it wasn't easy to see them all clearly. Kelly lowered the blinds. Hours later, after five cups of coffee and a meager breakfast of toast and jelly, they were frustrated. Several theories were raised and disproven. The files were actually a log book broken into days. There were hundreds of days entered since the file originated. Each day was nothing more than a list of numbers which grew several times per month. The numbers included a three-letter prefix followed by numbers that represented production lots of medicines, antigens, antidotes,

and virus cultures. There were only four or five different prefixes and the numbers sequenced each day by a higher four-digit extension, based on the date code. They agreed that it was a record of production which included thousands of entries or agents being produced in lab 4B. That explained the large size of the lab's robotic storage compartments behind the glass wall in the chamber. Even working inside the chamber didn't include access to the actual containers being stored.

John brushed his hand through his short hair. „Kelly, I don't get it. What are we looking at? What's the big deal? Why did Lorne make this file?“

She just shook her head. „He had some reason. The operations records are done automatically, and this represents a lot of redundant work. Did he get you involved tracking this stuff?“

„No. I've never been inside the chambers, and he never sent any data for me to enter. He must have done all this himself; but why?“

At the institute, the Operations crew worked from before dawn on Saturday, carefully preparing a large shipment to Africa. As biohazard material, special paperwork and handling was needed. Everything was stacked carefully in special containers that could maintain constant temperature and pressure for air shipment. Everything was counted and documented in quadruplicate for records and billing purposes. The UN always paid GHI, but never quickly. This time, in the background, Jules wasn't worried so much about payments. This could well be the last shipment before the Institute was sold. The whole packaging operation was done by robots under remote control, preparing the shipment inside the sealed chambers, and then robots moved the triple-sealed crates to the standard loading dock after undergoing several decontamination steps. The prospect of any pathogen being present in the open atmosphere inside the storage facility was, essentially, zero, and there was equally small risk of something breaking or opening accidentally during packaging; yet, everything had to go through a decontamination sequence and certification before the containers were safe for commercial transportation. All the paperwork went to Matt Hanson and then to Marie for record keeping and billing.

Negotiation

He didn't wake his wife before leaving the house and driving a few miles away to a vista point along the Chesapeake. It was too early for tourists, so he was alone. His only worry was that some park police officer would get suspicious about a car parked on a perch with a single person watching the sunrise. It was Saturday, and most people would still be sleeping. Even if someone was near enough to hear his voice through the soft top, they wouldn't understand the discussion. Hell, he told himself that he was being paranoid. He could see in all directions, and nobody was near him, not even morning joggers or dog walkers. He was alone waiting for the call. Then it buzzed.

He answered, „What took you so long?“

The male voice had a distinct Middle-Eastern accent. „I am not some peasant you can be ordering around. I will call you when I am ready. Not before.“

„Look, I don't know who you think you are, but I'm not risking going to prison for you.“

The voice continued. „No. You risk for money, is this not right?“ It was rhetorical. „You have some news for me?“

„First off, are you using a disposable phone? If Interpol or some other world law agency decides to cooperate with the FBI, I don't want them finding you, which could lead to me!“ He never liked talking to this man. He'd hated their first discussion. He couldn't be trusted. The only reason for dealing with him at all was the money. He'd proven that he could pay after their first arrangement. He had simply wired the money as a „down payment“ with no collateral required.

„Is not to worry, my friend. Is all safe. Believe me; no police come into this country. They lose head too easily... hah!“ The man was chuckling to himself.

„Okay, we don't have much time. I have news of a shipment that is coming your way. I will give it to you when you send the rest of the money to my island account.“

„What news is it? How can I trust you? You could be sending nothing, and I am to pay you one million dollar. You are thinking me a fool?“

„Look, I'm not crazy. I know that you have people in this country, in this area, who would kill me if I lied to you.“

„You think I do not know you can fly away and never be found!“

„Look, pal, a million may be a lot where you come from, but it's not enough to skip town around here. Besides, I have proof.“

„What proof do you speak of?“

„Check with your friends in Western Africa. Tell them to go to Kambia, Sierra Leone. As I promised, you will see.“

„So, we will do so. And now tell me of the shipment.“

He gave the details then drove home for breakfast with his wife and kids.

Perplexed

„So why does an inventory get connected to murder, attempted murder in this case?“

Kelly gave a slight shrug. „John, how could we know? It goes back at least a couple years from what I can see. Look how big the file is. What is it, about fifty pages?“

He studied the data. „Yeah, the date codes show it. Each time there's an addition or vials are used, the entire inventory gets updated. It's like years of repeated results, nothing changes that much.“

„What are we going to do, John, if we can't figure anything out? I get this awful feeling that someone could be out there, pointing a gun at us again, only this time he'll be a real assassin.“

He thought for a moment, then started manipulating the mouse and typing. „I'm sending this to Mary for safe keeping. If anything happens to us, she can send it to the police and explain that it's linked to us. We don't know why, but it needs to go somewhere that nobody will find it, and no one knows about Mary. She was only

listed as a minor in the news report. She's not a relative, and there's no way for anyone to know we're friends. I'm telling her not to open it, but to send it to the Baltimore PD if I get hurt." He didn't want to say „killed.“

Pressure

Investment bankers work around the clock. They never sleep. Jules was on the phone with Jim Osborne at Hawk as soon as he felt it was a halfway decent hour. „Look, Jim. I know it's their holy day this week (Saturday), but they need to know this. If they see it happen just as we predicted, they'll want GHI for sure.“

„I agree, Jules. I'll try, but I can't promise anything; I'll try.“ Actually, he knew exactly what this was worth to GHI, the Saudi government, to Hawk, and to himself. Hawk, Goodwin, and Manchec was a leading global investment banking company located on Wall Street, hiring the best talent that American „B“ schools could produce, and Jim Osborne was one of their top producers.

Jules went back to the lab. There wasn't anything to be accomplished by his suiting up and going inside the containment area. Charlie's people had done it all. He just wanted to see the truck pull away and then see the final manifest. He was already thinking ahead about how to get the maximum publicity when GHI, again, saves the world from Ebola. In the past, the news did it all, but now, after two prior outbreaks, maybe there was something he could do to speed up the publicity.

He called Kathy Dittami, the reporter who interviewed him the week before.

Error

„Gort, believe me, I wouldn't want Mary to get hurt either.“

„Well, John, I ain't no high flyin' scientist, but my little girl was around gun play 'cuzza you.“

John knew exactly how Gort felt; he was entitled. „Gort, you can think anything you want about me, but I would never want Mary hurt. Do you think I knew some yahoo with the gun was coming after us, me in particular? I would never have let Mary be around anything like that.“

Gort was trying to remain calm; after all, John had called him. But in the back of his mind, he knew John had come to their island, hiding from something. Maybe he was not telling everything. „Okay, yeah, well, you know I had to say my piece. So that's that.“ After a pause, he added, „She said you charged at the guy, John. Are you crazy or somethin'?“

„I can't answer that, Gort. Maybe I am crazy. After two years with the Marines in Afghanistan, I didn't know how else to act. I could be nuts, but there was something about it all, it happened so fast, that I just thought the guy would panic when I came at him and run. He tried.“

„Yeah, Mary said you got him down and held him. You got some balls, John.“

He chuckled. „Yeah, well I'd rather keep them to myself.“

„Okay, enough said. Mary said you sent her a weird document; said there was a couple errors in it.“

„Errors? Did she say what it was?“

„Nope, she just said she was gonna call you when she got through it. You know she used to do all my bookkeepin'. She's a smart gal with numbers. Wouldn't know it to talk to her, but she's real good.“

John couldn't wait. *What had Mary found? She wasn't supposed to open the file!* He had hoped that she wouldn't open the file, but she had ignored him. In reality, he'd figured she would. He ended the call with Gort and called her.

Mary had still been shaking when the train pulled into the Portland station. A girl friend had picked her up, and they talked for hours about her experience. Her friend didn't understand at first—„You were in a gunfight?“

„No, not exactly. I was with my friend John and his girlfriend when some old guy tried to shoot us. It was wicked weird. We were just walking to get in John's car to go to the lab where he and his girl, Kelly, work. They're both scientists, and they were going to show me where they worked. Anyway, all of a sudden, John smashes me and Kelly between some cars.

„I didn't know what was happening, except he ran, and I heard an awful loud boom, a gun. It was all kind of a blur, and me and Kelly were both scared to death. Then we heard something and looked up and saw John tackle this big, dirty old guy. John yelled for us to call nine-one-one.

„I mean, I was so scared. Not at first; I didn't know what was happening at first, it was only after I learned what happened, then I got real scared. John and Kelly, they took me to the train station right after that and gave me a ticket back home, to here. All I could think about was the sound of the gun. It's not like you think; it's real loud and scary. My head was ringing. I kept trying to sleep on the train, but it was like a nightmare. I keep seeing this guy in my head with his gun coming up and shooting us. I'm gonna have nightmares!“

They relived the trauma several times that evening. When Mary called her father and explained it, Gort went ballistic. She had to reassure him over and over again that she was all right. He'd felt so helpless away from her on the island. She had some trouble sleeping that night, but her anxiety subsided gradually the next day when she attended classes. That afternoon, with the email and attachment from John, she started feeling more normal again. She didn't have any important homework, nothing that couldn't be put off, so she looked at the big report. She loved puzzles and she was determined to impress him. He didn't really know much about her, so she wanted him to be impressed. She knew he was stuck on Kelly who was more his age, so Mary's relationship would never go beyond infatuation with the guy she'd met in the store that night on the island. He had been more handsome than anyone she'd ever known on the island or at school, and, when he talked, he was obviously smart. But he was also older, and they would never have the kind of relationship she had imagined when he stayed with her family, but they would always be friends.

She focused on the big report. It was just a long list, fifty-plus pages, of alphanumeric entries that would make any normal person cross-eyed and sleepy. But, she was intrigued. Partly, she knew it contained some kind of secret,

something John thought was important; maybe, something important enough to make someone a murderer.

John called after ending his discussion with Gort. „Hi, Mary. I just talked to Gort. He said you got home okay.“

They talked about the experience again, and it was clear that Mary was starting to be less emotional and more analytic. She mostly wanted to know why someone wanted to shoot at them. He explained again, just as he had rationalized to himself and Kelly that he wasn't sure, but it had to be related, logically, to Dr. Bridger's warning. Lorne had told him he was in danger, and it was somehow related to the report he'd now sent to Mary. Partly, it was the gravity that commanded her interest. Something about the information could be worth life or death.

„John. I mighta seen something.“ Before he could respond, she continued. „Did you look at the whole report?“

„Yes, I did, Mary. But it doesn't say anything. It's just a bunch of long numbers.“

„John, I don't know about what you do, except the little bit you told me. You also told me you didn't know what the report was, right?“

„Well, I think it's some kind of production record, but it's not like the standard system we use. This was a manual system done in Excel by one of our scientists, one of our owners.“

„You told me he died, right?“ She knew the answer.

„Yeah, he was my friend. He brought me into the Institute, and I basically worked only for him. He was one of the original three owners, but he wasn't the kind of guy to sit in the executive offices like the others. Dr. Lorne Bridger was a true working scientist, always in the lab. He didn't like corporate politics or meetings with investors. He just wanted to fight disease.“

She knew the doctor had been something like a father figure to John. John's father had died just a couple years before, and Dr. Bridger had helped fill the void. „I know that you miss him, John. But, I think there's some things about his data that you need to know about.“

„Yeah, Gort said you might have found something.“ He was skeptical that a high-school girl would find anything important, but he didn't want to be judgmental. *Maybe she did find something.*

She began reciting the obvious. „Okay, there are a bunch of columns with numbers. When I went through them, I noticed something. Maybe you can explain it.“ She didn't wait for him to answer. „The first column has part numbers, I guess. They look like date codes and batch numbers. The rest is pretty easy: description, quantities, bin location, shipping dates, and such. The last column is the amount in stock.“

„Where's this going, Mary? I can read all that.“ He didn't want to be pushy, but he didn't want to spend useless time going nowhere either.

„Did you compare the quantities: the amount manufactured, how much shipped, and what's still in the bins?“

„No. But our processes here are bullet proof. The computers keep track of everything in and out. The record keeping is always perfect. The Institute is highly

regulated, and this kind of information is error free. It has to be. This is a lot of what I do every day.“

„Look at it! They almost all add up, right? But, there’s a couple errors.“

„Mary, if you want an accurate inventory of anything, you would need to look at our corporate data. Much as I liked Dr. Bridger, you can’t expect a homemade spreadsheet to be perfect. Not with all these entries. It took him years to assemble all this, there’s bound to be errors.“

He doesn’t think it was important! She’d just spent a whole night finding a couple small errors. *Is that what he thinks?* „John, I think you’re wrong. Look, the math is simple. Excel formulas do it all. All he had to do was enter the starting quantities and subtract the shipped quantities to get the amount left in the bins, right? That’s a formula. Excel uses the formulas and doesn’t make mistakes. But, guess what? Dr. Bridger didn’t use formulas for every row. Most of them yes, but not all of them. He must have actually counted stuff in bins then made some manual changes. Look, I checked the last column. Almost all of the remaining stock is computed by formula, error free I bet. But there are four lines with differences where he deleted the formulas and made a manual entry. If you had five and use three, you should have two left, right? Well, there’s four „bins“ that don’t add correctly. He changed the numbers manually. He must have been checking all the bins himself—at least these four. When the quantity didn’t match the formula amount, he made the entry manually. It wasn’t small errors, either. I know how this works ‘cause my work program at school is counting inventory of supplies. I compare the difference between computer math and make adjustments by hand when the actual supplies don’t match the computer record.“ *Yeah, like office supplies are as important as germs.*

He was thinking. „Are you sure about this?“

„Why do you think I stayed up all night checking this report? It wasn’t easy. I found four little blocks in fifty pages that he changed the quantity.“

„Look, Mary, there has to be an explanation. Maybe the usage information was wrong. Instead of three on the paperwork, they actually took only two. Couldn’t that screw up the quantity?“

„Oh, yeah.“ She sounded sarcastic. „Look, you just said the official Institute system records were always right... right?“

„We get audited by the Department of Health and Welfare along with the CDC a couple times a year. If there was ever a discrepancy, it’s a big deal, we would all know about it, and it hasn’t happened since I’ve been there.“

She smiled to herself, not fully understanding the implications. She was just making a point about the file he’d sent. „Okay, John, well, from what you say, all the production and shipping information on this report is originally downloaded from the Institute data base. So, the spreadsheet should be completely accurate. It’s the information taken from your official system. But, the new production bin quantities are done by your lab computer on the spreadsheet, and not taken from your system... right?“

He didn’t fully comprehend her rationale, but he was starting to understand her better. She was smart, maybe more „practically“ smart than he was. He sat back and thought before answering. „Which lines are you talking about, Mary?“ She

read them off. Two were from two years ago, one from one year, and one recent. „These are spread across a long period.“

„What do you think, John?“

„I’m not sure yet, Mary. I need to do some more checking. You might have solved the puzzle, but I need to check some things.“

„What does it mean? I was up all night and was nearly shot for being near you. I deserve some kind of answer; what does it mean?“

„I honestly don’t know. For now, it only means you’re a genius, Sherlock. I can’t tell if this is important or not, but it could be really important. I just don’t know yet.“ He didn’t want to contemplate it; not yet, not until he had more proof. It could be why Lorne was dead, and why he had almost died. He had to be sure.

Danger Zone

Kelly was still afraid to leave her apartment. They sat together on her couch. „Do you think it’s safe, John?“

„I don’t know, Kelly. I wish I could be sure. We still work at the Institute, as far as I know, and nobody saw me download the file. They were all tied up with the police when we were there, so there’s a good chance that I got away with it.“

„It scares me. We could be in a trap.“

„Look. We’ve got to do this. There’s no way to know the real facts if we don’t check ourselves. Hell, I’d go into the inner lab myself if I had access. You’re the only one that can do it.“ He was familiar with the bins as a concept, but had never actually seen one. They were inside the containment area and kept behind a glass partition. All activities at the bins were done by robots controlled by the scientists on the other side. Kelly had access inside the containment, but had never been involved with the inventory. That hadn’t been her job inside, and she’d only been in that particular area a couple times in her brief tenure at 4B. She would be on her own inside the chamber to find the bins and count the vials.

She agreed reluctantly, almost fatalistically. The ambush had left her feeling vulnerable. She could have died and never seen it coming, and they both knew it could happen again. If something was serious enough to risk hiring a contract killer, no matter how inept, then it was serious enough to try again. She couldn’t just leave and disappear. She hadn’t spent all of her life until now, training, just to go hide on a mountain somewhere. She’d need to give her work history and references to get a comparable position anywhere else. Besides, they didn’t have any proof that this involved the Institute at all. It could all be coincidental, only she didn’t really believe in coincidences.

„Okay, I’ll do it.“

The following morning was Monday, and they left for work earlier than normal, just to alter their pattern and avoid unwanted contact with people at the Institute. John had gone out before her to check the parking areas and roadsides nearby. Together, they hurried to his car that was already running. A few minutes later, at the Institute, they signed in and went immediately to Lab 4B, bypassing the cafeteria. None of the executive offices seemed to be occupied yet.

Kelly immediately suited up with John's help and was through the first airlock before other employees began their morning rituals. They had a plan. She would do a physical inventory of the bins Mary had identified, while he noted any shipments or additions that had occurred after Lorne's last entry.

It was more complex than he'd expected. There had been a large shipment over the weekend. Much of the inventory was depleted. He'd never experienced a major Ebola outbreak during the year he'd worked there, so reductions in inventory were rare. Now, half of it was gone; maybe more.

While Kelly was inside the inner lab, John could sense the pressure change slightly as the outer door to 4B opened. He turned to see Fred entering from 4A. He smiled at John, „Hey, John. I didn't see you here over the weekend. We were all working our asses off getting stuff shipped out. It looks like we got us an outbreak in Africa again.“

It was odd; Fred was never sociable. „We stayed home, Fred. After the attack, we decided to stay indoors over the weekend.“

Fred came closer and sat in the chair next to John, appearing to be sociable, in position to see the computer screen. „Yeah, well, we had a real gang-bang here, bosses brought in pizza, and we had a real party. We sent some pallets out in record time. It all came out of your lab.“

John sensed that Fred was looking at the display. „Yeah, I was just checking. I've never seen so much stuff leave so quickly.“

Fred said, „Should've been here last year about this time, and the year earlier. Same kinda drill. A call comes from the WHO, and we ship out immediately. It's one reason we're the new go-to Institute for treatments. GHI has a good record for manufacturing the right cures before they're actually needed. Where's Kelly?“

„Oh, you know, she's inside (gesturing to the airlock) checking on things.“

Fred stood to leave. „Well, just let me know if I can help. I made the data entries at your console, so let me know if there are any questions.“

John just nodded as Fred left. There had been hundreds or even thousands of vials of serum shipped out, according to the shipping manifest John was reading. He continued to note all of the items shipped. Kelly was only going to verify the four bins identified by Mary.

Kelly had been inside the containment area for about an hour when Jules rushed into 4B. He barely acknowledged John, which wasn't particularly out of character. He went directly to the suit chamber and signaled John to help him get dressed. This was technically Jules' lab, even if he hadn't worked with Kelly since assigning her to it. It was an awkwardly silent experience for John, and Jules didn't even look at him or gesture in any way before closing the airlock. He was inside with Kelly.

John rushed back to his workstation and pressed the intercom button, speaking into the microphone extending from the top of his display console. „Hello, Jules, I hope everything is in order.“ It was a feeble and obvious attempt to warn Kelly that the owner was in the chamber with her. It was too late.

She was manipulating a mechanical arm when Jules approached. „What are you doing?“

She nearly dropped the bin when he startled her. It was all she could do to manipulate it back onto the shelf before addressing him. „I'm spot checking some

items. A lot moved out over the weekend, and I just want to be sure we caught it all.“

He gestured her away. „Those are not the things we shipped. That is live virus which is never to be touched. Only I or Dr. Bridger can touch that unless you have a specific work order. Now, I want you out of this lab.“

„But Dr. Redinger, Jules, you said that you would be working with me in here, and this is the first time you’ve even come in. I don’t think I need to be ordered around like some janitor!“

„You will do whatever I tell you to do, now get out of here. Consider this research area off limits for now!“

If he wanted to raise suspicion, he’d done a good job. She was scared again, twice in only three days. She didn’t fear him physically; he couldn’t do anything inside the lab with John watching. It was more the tone of his speech and demeanor. She turned abruptly and walked to the decon chamber.

Once outside, she was trembling as John put his hands on her shoulders. „He... he deliberately scared me, John. He could see what I was doing and wanted to frighten me. He wasn’t there to instruct or help; he wanted me away from there. He ordered me to leave.“ It scared her. Jules had seemed openly hostile, not like before.

He put his arms around her briefly, then gestured toward the door. „Let’s get out of here.“

As they left, Jules came out of the decon chamber, just missing them. He called the security desk with instruction to stop them and send them to his office. As they got to the lobby, the guard did as ordered. For a brief moment, John thought about ignoring Jules’ order or telling Kelly to leave without him. She seemed to read his mind and she grasped his hand, „Let’s go.“ As they walked toward executive row, she said, „What’s he going to do, fire us? What reason would he give that wouldn’t raise suspicion?“

When they entered through the glass doors, Irina Petronova was visible inside Charlie Ritter’s office, clearly upset about something. Her accent and hushed tones prevented any clear reception, but John was able to hear Kelly’s last name, „Egan“, clearly enough, just as the door was closed.

They entered the next suite, ignoring the Office Assistant. Jules was already seated behind his massive wooden desk. He glared as they entered with a severe expression then looked down at his desk. „Close the door.“

John did so as Jules continued to command. „Sit down.“

Both did as they were told, but John reacted slowly asking, „What’s this all about, Jules. You seem agitated.“

Jules turned slightly red. „I want to know what you two are up to. You’ve both been acting mysteriously. Last Friday I got interviewed by the police, again involving you two.“

John didn’t appreciate the officious tone. He would normally address him by his formal title, but decided to level things a bit. „Jules, I don’t appreciate your tone of voice. Are you accusing us of something—either one of us? If you are, then put it out on the table. Otherwise, we deserve more respectful behavior. We’re out of here otherwise.“

Jules pounded the desk. „You can leave when I’m through with you. You pipsqueaks; you work for me, and as long as you’re on the payroll, I’ll talk to you any way I choose!“

John could see Kelly out of the corner of his eye, sitting silently. She had learned that he could react aggressively, if provoked. He raised his voice slightly, not a full yell, but slightly. „Well, guess what, Jules, I can be a free agent in the length of time it takes to walk out the front door. Now, you’re wasting our time, so tell us what you want, or we walk.“

Jules hadn’t been talked to like that in decades. He was momentarily stunned. As a lab technician, John had always been mild and polite, he seemed like the kind of young man that would never do anything to irritate anyone or object to anything. Regaining some of his composure, he said, „Do you really want to joust with me, boy?“ He waited a few seconds for the challenge to sink in. „Now, I want the truth. You’ve been acting strange for a couple weeks, and then someone takes a shot at you. That’s not normal. Then today, I catch Dr. Egan here snooping around the storage bins where she doesn’t belong. I know you two are up to something, looking for something, and at GHI that’s my concern. What are you two snooping around for?“ He looked straight at John, „Is that plain enough, hot shot?“

John stood to leave, gesturing Kelly to follow. „Bye, Jules, unless you want to fire both of us on the spot, we’re out of here. We might come back in the morning. If you want us out, we’ll know when the guard won’t let us in.“

Jules reacted quickly. This would complicate any site visit by the Saudi’s or other buyers if the lab was empty. „Now, wait! Wait, sit down... please sit back down.“

They stood still, not saying a word, so Jules continued. „Look, we’re at a critical time right now. I’m trying to fight a world outbreak of Ebola virus and also expecting one or more potential buyers to look at GHI. I can’t have our most important lab unstaffed. Hell, how would it look if I was the only researcher running 4B. We’d get laughed at. We’d look like a shoestring operation. You two are vital to us right now. I need you at least until the sale is complete.“

John was surprised by Jules’ mellowing and candor. „Why the hell should we care about some investors? Seems to me you should be treating us with kid gloves, not haranguing the hell out of us. You know, Jules, you should be looking for ways to reward us, rather than berating us.“ Kelly was shocked but proud of John. She hadn’t told John about the value of her stock options that would vest immediately if the Institute sold.

Jules withered and looked down momentarily. „You’re right... you’re right. Look, I’m under a lot of stress right now. Normally, I thrive on stress, but not this much. I’m getting pulled in two directions at once, and I shouldn’t be using you as outlets. I apologize.“ He almost sounded sincere. „Why don’t you take the rest of the day off and come in tomorrow. You’re not fired; hell, I couldn’t fire you if I wanted to. You’re both assets of the Institute. If you wanted a raise, I’d have to think about it. So, please, just leave and let’s forget all about this.“

They both nodded and left without saying another word. They signed out and were silent until they reached the parking lot at Kelly’s apartment. When they were outside the car, she looked perplexed, shaking her head. She was still shaking and

her voice elevated. „What was that about, John? I don't get it. He's not just worried about selling the Institute. Something else is bugging him.“ Trust a woman's intuition.

He looked at her. „You got any ideas?“

„Not yet, but I do have the inventory.“ She tapped her head.

Mystery Man

He was calling from his favorite perch at the vista point above the Chesapeake. „Okay, did you get the shipping manifest?“

The man with a strong Middle Eastern or Eastern European accent (he couldn't tell the difference) answered. „It is here and very specific.“

„Okay, then, send me the rest of my money.“

„Not so quickly, my friend. Do you know when the UN (WHO) people will pick up? What route? What time?“

„No. How the hell would I know that?“

„Please, there is no reason to be rude. We are watching them. This is enough. When we have your shipment, you will be paid.“

He wanted to protest, but what could he do? They had everything they needed, and he had no further leverage. He reminded himself that the „token“ down payment had been received as he instructed. He had nothing to lose at this point and everything to gain—a million dollars.

Meanwhile in Guinea, Abagael Van Acker was at the air cargo terminal, waiting. GHI had emailed the air waybill information. The Delta flight was scheduled to arrive at six in the evening. The weather was clear and hot as the sun set over the ocean. It would have been a beautiful view if they weren't fighting the clock to prevent an outbreak. Their UN delivery van with WHO markings gave them privileges on the airport. It wouldn't matter in most of the developed world, but in Guinea, it carried weight. It would be a five-hour drive to Kambia, which she didn't like to do after dark. It was a huge risk. This was still Africa and any number of things could happen after dark in the wilderness, none of them good.

The plane appeared first as a reflection, a glint, coming from the direction of the setting sun. As night closed in, the plane's landing lights became discernable against the red solar ball, which was sinking below the horizon as the flight approached touchdown. She had two medical assistants with her, one acting as the driver. Neither was particularly fluent in English and they didn't understand the natives in Sierra Leone. They were hard workers, but their medical training was questionable. In the WHO, in Africa, it was useless to complain, so you accepted whatever people the UN offered. Van Acker just wished she didn't have to beg for everything. At least her friends at GHI were always eager to help. If she had anything to feel satisfied about, it was that she would be saving lives.

It took another hour for the plane to offload its cargo and for the medical supplies to clear customs. They were on their way after eight that night. At the outskirts of the city, they had to find a specific crossroad to pick up their new guide and interpreter. Victor had been out of contact for days, and it was unwise,

and unsafe, to travel without a local guide. There were no reliable maps of the area, and GPS was useless. If they tried it alone, driving by compass, it could be a formula for death. Their new guide, Chima, was waiting. He was just a boy, and Dr. Van Acker was initially uncertain about taking him to Kambia. She didn't want to cause another young casualty.

The route from the capitol of Guinea to Kambia, Sierra Leone, is one of the most dangerous in the world. Dr. Van Acker never felt easy traveling through the civil-war ravaged border districts, full of swamps and with one of the poorest indigenous populations in Africa. The life expectancy was only a little over forty. This was also the rainy season, so the dirt roads often washed away. As they left the lights of Conakry behind, they were traveling into total darkness. The equatorial tropical temperatures and elevated humidity gave the air a solid quality. Air conditioning didn't exist in their truck because their bodies wouldn't respond well to the difference when they were outside. Storm clouds blocked whatever moon and starlight that might have existed. They would be alone in the low swamplands, with no other drivers daring to be away from the safety of the villages at night.

Nobody talked. It took too much energy. Besides, they could hardly understand each other. Each was lost in their individual thoughts, but all stayed awake, alert for anything that might stop them. Chima, the guide, gave occasional instructions to the driver, but it was otherwise silent in the truck except for the engine noise or the tires fighting the undulating ground. One of the medical technicians had tried talking to her, practicing his English. His speech had been agonizingly bad and her head throbbed. The trip would take five hours in daylight, but longer this night. It would have been more comforting if any other vehicles shared the road. It was lonely and dark, and there were no reliable communications other than the CB radio, with nobody listening on the other end.

Several hours after passing into Sierra Leone, they were nearing Kambia. There was no visible clue yet, no signs, but enough hours had passed that it wouldn't be too far ahead. Van Acker didn't know why she was nervous. She was always nervous when far from civilization in dangerous territory; anyone would be. Someone observing would be sure she was insane to do this. Most medical doctors who came to Africa stayed short periods then went back to lucrative practices and security in their home countries. But this was the life she'd chosen; she kept telling herself that it was the right decision. Her parents were both still living and proud of their daughter for her dedication and compassion.

Chima and the driver began chattering nervously, but she couldn't understand. The truck slowed as it turned a tight corner in the mangrove forest. They were approaching a rice field, and the road made a sharp ninety-degree turn. The two men up front were straining to see something that wasn't immediately visible from the rear seats. Then the truck stopped abruptly and a lone man with a rifle stood ahead in the glare of the headlights. As she looked harder, there were more shadowy figures in the darkness beyond.

She screamed. „Go! Go! Don't stop!“ The driver hesitated until Chima yelled something also.

The driver floored the truck while everyone bent low, instinctively. The truck gained speed slowly, giving the gunman a fraction of a second to dive away. The

shadowy figures were moving also. The UN truck sped through them, and Dr. Van Acker didn't know if the bumps under their tires were from the road or bodies. She was crouching almost onto the floor. It didn't matter. If they stopped, they would die. She knew it. She only hoped the driver could see the road as he hid low behind the wheel.

Extreme poverty and numerous warring factions resulted in high crime rates in the country. Roadside bandits were common. In most cases, they had no vehicles for pursuit. These men had guns. She'd seen them. The engine roared, but the sound of bullets passing around them had been loud as they sped forward. When bullets hit the truck, it sounded like hammers or hail, like a storm she'd been through as a child. She prayed that nothing vital was hit, including the people with her. The robbers had assault rifles. Automatic gunfire confirmed it. That meant they had been part of the separatist army or something worse, Islamists. As a woman, she had more to fear even than the men who would simply be killed. The population of the country was seventy-percent Muslim and a small fraction, unemployed young men primarily, used the Islamic ideology as an excuse to murder and ravage in the lawless region. This had been one of the travel advisories she was given before coming back to West Africa. No western government people were allowed to travel in northern Sierra Leone. She could have declined the assignment on this basis, and at that moment she was wishing she had. It didn't matter who these men were or their motives; they were shooting to kill.

Proof

They were at her apartment sitting together on the sofa reading the printed report, looking for answers. It was a long, tedious process and both wanted the explanation to come from some misplaced notation that might have been missed in Mary's review. He shrugged. „I don't know, Kelly. I've gone over all of it. I added the vials of everything produced since Lorne's last entry and subtracted the ones used or shipped out over the weekend. None of it had anything to do with the four bins. Nothing was added or used or shipped to Guinea last weekend, yet you have different numbers than Mary, and hers didn't match the official inventory records to begin with. And, the actual numbers are all lower than the records show. If errors were made, you'd think there would be both plusses and minuses. What's the chance that every error would be negative?“

They both knew the answer but didn't want to believe it. Someone had either recorded the actual quantities in error, or had been removing vials without recording it properly. She sat back in frustration. „John, we've got to determine what was in those vials.“ She was serious, but also knew it didn't need saying. Whatever it was, it wasn't valuable to anyone but scientists working on a specific strain of virus. There was, however, another alternative that neither wanted to think about.

They were the only ones able to find the truth, which meant they had to keep searching. The only data in question came from an unofficial record kept by a

dead scientist. There was no way to validate any of the official Institute records. If they wanted to be whistle blowers, they would need to prove that a crime was committed. In this case, the data was so esoteric and unexplainable that it was incomprehensible to anyone outside the Institute. They needed proof, something that lay people could understand. They could not quit the Institute. However awkward their relations were with management, with Jules, they had to eliminate possible explanations if they were ever going to continue making a difference, fighting the deadly disease. If there had never been reason to be suspicious, the Institute was the best job either of them could want.

They stayed together again that night as an early winter rainstorm pelted the bedroom window. Both were emotionally numb after all that had happened over two days. Kelly curled tightly next to John burying her face under his chin, feeling safe. He stroked her finely textured hair, smelling its sweet freshness and sensing a feminine side of her that was usually veiled behind a stoic scientist exterior. She was scared and vulnerable, and, for the first time, she seemed to really need him. It affected him. He embraced her without any emotional reserve—something he'd never done before with another person. That night, they made love passionately, over and over again. It was an outlet; but more than that, it was a completely open and honest elevation in their relationship, something special to both of them. Their fears were forgotten for a time that night.

The night's bliss had nothing to do with rational behavior. If they had thought about it, they might conclude that a degree of fatalism was overtaking them and obscuring rational judgement. They were under attack for some unknown reason. Their work was so difficult to explain or monitor that it was impossible to prove anything was wrong to the police. Hell, they couldn't prove it to themselves. There had been multiple audits by the government during the period of Lorne's record keeping and everything was in order. They had no evidence that anything was wrong at the Institute, except for Lorne's message and some errors in a spreadsheet. Even with their experience and training in the lab, they couldn't pinpoint what it meant.

They reported to work normally the next morning. Kelly started in 4A with Fred, which she had been neglecting too long, and John went back to 4B. He hadn't had much analysis to do since Lorne left, and neither Kelly nor Jules were generating anything new for him, so he began digging into the suspected data.

John's first interest was reconstructing the bin data, including additions, reductions, and final balances from years before. The Institute's control systems were foolproof, completely accurate. Everything added and subtracted properly. The computer records continued to show several hundred of the vials in question to be in the suspected bins, which were inside the isolation storage area. No human was allowed to enter behind the glass wall. Kelly had almost finished counting the last vials when Jules had stopped her. She finished counting three of them, but not the fourth bin. It took an enormous amount of time to do accurately, lifting each vial from the bin using a robotic arm and then not losing count. It wasn't possible to write anything with the heavily gloved hands. The three bins showed, again, that the quantities recorded in the system were larger than they physically contained. But the numbers were even lower in one of the bins than Lorne's records showed. Two more vials were missing.

The random numbering and barcoding system didn't disclose the actual content of the vials. The system could decode it, but none of the workstations inside the labs had this capability. Only the „C“ level people had the ability to decode it, for security reasons. If the average people in the Institute didn't know what was in the vials, no one would be tempted to steal. At least, that was John's belief. The chief executives had never actually disclosed the reason for coding the labels.

The day passed normally. John and Kelly left the lab with no more encounters with Jules or anyone else. John had decided to throw another challenge to Mary, calling from the apartment. „Mary, I'd like to ask another favor.“ She acknowledged. „I need you to look at the data for the items inside the four bins that are in error; see if you can figure out the code on the vials. I think they'll all be the same in each bin.“ She agreed to do it for him.

That night, a cold winter rain was raging and clouds blocked any hint of moonlight or starlight. It was well after midnight, just before dawn, when a darkened car pulled into the parking lot, near Kelly's apartment. It stayed far enough away to avoid detection, but close enough to observe when the pair left.

Attack

„Jules, listen to me. We were attacked!“ For a woman accustomed to tense situations in hostile areas, Abagael sounded unusually shaken.

He was having dinner alone. „Abagael! What do you mean? Are you all right? Tell me...“

She was shaking, having difficulty holding the small mobile phone as the others huddled around her. It was unlikely that they were followed on foot, but they were all still scared. „On the road to Kambia, some armed men tried to stop us. They shot at us; they shot our truck.“ She paused for a moment to let her nerves settle. „None of us are hurt, but we might have a problem.“

„Tell me, what is it?“

One of the shipping containers, the hermetically sealed pallets; you know, the expensive ones with their own refrigerators and pressure pumps. One of them, the one in back, got some bullet holes. It probably saved our lives, but there's damage inside.“

He rubbed his throbbing temples. „Abagael, that could be a problem. Do you have any way to open it safely and check inside? I don't think a few holes are a problem; the systems can handle it even if the lid is off for a while, but you don't want any damage to the vials inside. You need to check and let me know if everything inside is all right.“

She agreed. „I was planning to do that. I just need to get them to some open space with adequate lighting. I don't want anyone else nearby.“

„Okay, that sounds right. And, Abagael; be sure to wear your HazMat suit.“

„Why, Jules, is it dangerous? We normally just handle it like any injectable drug.“

„Look, Abagael, when we make vaccines and antidotes, we use live virus. They're not problems, but I don't know what would happen if a bunch ended in a pool

after a hot bullet ran through it all.“ It was a really lame explanation, but he couldn’t think of any other reason to give her. He wanted her to be safe.

She looked at the others with her. They would need to lift the container out of the truck and find good lighting before opening it. They couldn’t be careful enough. The drugs were needed immediately, and she couldn’t quarantine the truck. Anyway, if there was a live virus problem, they had already been exposed while escaping.

Several minutes later, she found only one vial damaged with the fluid leaking down inside the packing material. She pressed the „redial“ button. „Jules, we had some damage, one vial was punctured.“

He pulled a pen from his coat pocket. „Shoot. What’s the number on the bottle?“

She read it off, and he hesitated a moment, and then said he would need to check their records and call her back. He signaled the waitress and ordered the bill without finishing, hurrying back to the Institute. Something about the number baffled him. It didn’t seem to be from the sequences they’d established years ago at the Institute—not the sequences for treatment drugs.

He drove too fast for the rain-slicked road in the dark. The windshield wipers were on their fastest speed, but the downpour was gaining intensity. Everything was black. The road blended with the brush alongside, and the white line disappeared under the glimmering sheet of black ahead. He was compelled, something resonated from his discussion with Abagael; something wasn’t right. He knew it was the number, but he wasn’t sure what it was that was wrong. Something had gone desperately wrong, *but what was it?* He’d been at GHI since the beginning, since he, Charlie and Lorne had pooled their resources to start the Institute. They’d worked for years after starting the Institute to earn the certifications and get procedures in place that were fail-safe.

He skidded to a stop in the parking lot, slightly askew between lines on the pavement and rushed rain-soaked into the lobby, passing the guard who was trying to enforce their sign-in policy. Jules could be abrupt and terrifying in certain moods and the guard was keen enough to back off. In moments, Jules was at his computer terminal pounding on the keys. No other people were in the executive offices that late at night. He logged into the ERP system—Enterprise Resource Planning—that kept track of all information related to their inventories. The number that Abagael had provided was not in the records.

His hand shook as he picked up the desk phone receiver and tried to remember Matt Hanson’s mobile phone number. He slammed it down in frustration and used his iPhone. It went to voice mail. „Matt, we have a problem. Call me; we need to talk, ASAP. Better yet, get your ass in here so we can figure something out.“ His anxiety began taking hold of him. His hands shook, and he was seeing spots in his vision. Then his mobile phone rang.

It was Matt. „Jules, what’s wrong? I’ve never heard you like this before. You sure I need to come in? Jill and me are out at dinner; it’s our anniversary. Is it something that I can do over the phone?“

„Matt, I’m on this damn system of yours, and I can’t find a sample number.“

Matt spoke in a muffled tone, „Ah, Jules, did you check the shipping manifest? Maybe we forgot to enter everything.“

„What! Forgot! Are you a lunatic? We dont *forget* anything at GHI. Aren't you the senior admin guru around here? Besides, if you *forgot* something it would still show up somewhere. If you ship something, it deletes from inventory. If you don't ship it, it still shows up. So, what is it? Is this thing on some notepad somewhere, and not entered in the system? If that's true, then the inventory would still show it. If it's not in the inventory records anymore, then it shows up in the shipping log and invoice register, but it isn't there either.“

Matt wasn't aware that Jules actually knew how the system worked. He'd never shown any interest in the past. „Jules, I'm sure it's locatable. Can't I just enjoy an evening out with my wife and figure it out in the morning?“

„Look, Matt, I don't think you understand. There are people in Africa right now exposed to this stuff. It could be a life or death situation.“ He began thinking about the impact on their sale price if this made the news. „Please, get your ass in here!“ As an afterthought, he added, „And apologize to Jill for me.“

Matt looked across the table at his wife. He'd planned this special night weeks ago and had arranged the perfect table, located at a window overlooking the ocean. They had just ordered their main course and finished their second glass of red wine. He looked at her and could see that she already anticipated his words. „Jill, I...“

She interrupted, leaning forward so others couldn't hear. „Shit, Matt. You work your ass off at the Institute, and the one night we want to spend together without that Hitler on your back, he still gets between us.“ She wasn't crying; she was just mad as hell, and the mood of the evening had soured.

He tried to take her hand, but she recoiled. „Jill, I'm not going to rush out of here for him, not this time. I'm going to sit right here and enjoy our meal together. Besides, he doesn't know if we're just down town or clear up in Delaware. Hell, I'll just make something up.“

She didn't smile. „So, we just eat, and you run to papa, is that it?“

Their meals arrived, and he didn't answer. They didn't talk again until it was time for desert. When the desert cart arrived, she didn't consult with him, but said they were done and asked for the bill. Their special evening was destroyed.

Jules paced. He couldn't stand being alone in the office with nobody to boss around, not with something this important. Abagael was stranded in a potentially dangerous situation and needed his help. Twenty minutes went by, and he was about to call Matt again when Irina Petronova came rushing into his office. „Jules, what's wrong. Matt called me and said you needed help with our system. You know that I have the most understanding of it. What is the problem?“

He sighed. „Irina, there's a shipment in Africa that has been shot up. Our WHO contact, Dr. Abagael Van Acker, is there and gave me this number (he showed it to her). This vial was damaged and there has been exposure. I'm not sure, but it looks like a virus sample, but I can't find it in the system. I can't tell if it shipped? It shouldn't have shipped outside GHI. Matt says it might just not have been deleted from our system, in error. How could that be?“

He started to say more, but slumped back into his chair when she took over his computer keyboard. After about five minutes of methodically searching through several files, Irina didn't have an answer either. Her Russian accent grew stronger. „Look, Jules. I think she must be mistaken. The number must be damaged.“

He was incredulous. „What are you saying, Irina? It’s a complete number. Look at the sequencing. It’s our numbering system. How could she make a mistake? This is a complete number, and it’s not like any others. This is a live virus!“

She looked stern, but had no answer. „Then it is a mistake somewhere. What am I to say?“

He started thinking about the sale of the Institute. „Mistake! MISTAKE! We can’t have mistakes here! Look Irina, we gave you the biggest stock option of all employees. You deserved it, and, we owners all agreed that your models were our most valuable asset. You could make a fortune when we sell. How can you be casual about this? It could be a live virus. Do you know how many laws and regulations could be broken? Do you know what this could mean?“

She remained unflustered. „Nevertheless, Jules, there is nothing we can do from here.“ He didn’t answer. She just turned and walked away, back to her office. She had nothing planned for the evening, like all of her evenings. Internally, she was mad as hell, but she wasn’t going to let Jules see her that way. *How could this get so screwed up!* She wanted to scream.

Jules needed answers. He needed them now, but his two top system experts couldn’t help. *What the hell is going on?*

He was frustrated, but needed to give Abagael answers; she could be in danger if anyone had come into direct contact with the suspect vial. If someone touched anything and washed hands, the virus could be in the water supply or on anything else that was touched. He had to prevent anything from reaching the press if the vial contained what he suspected.

He dialed frantically. After only one ring, she answered, sounding flustered. The reaction from the ambush was setting in. She’d felt threatened before, but had never had anyone actually shoot at her. In past encounters, she was always between warring factions and could claim neutrality on humanitarian grounds. It had always worked before. This time was different. These men wanted to rob them. Her team had nearly lost their lives. She was sure of it. Some of the other doctors, with less African experience, were so terrified they still couldn’t speak. She had to keep them all together and isolate the truck until Jules called back.

She felt hopeful when his number appeared in her display. „Jules! Tell me what we’ve got. What should I be doing next?“ He could hear her frantic appeal for help, and then he heard something else, gunfire! The phone resonated with a distant echo then yelling and more gunfire.

Jules yelled. „Abagael! What’s happening? Abagael!“ It was silent on the other end. He thought he could hear the sound of footsteps, and men using a language he couldn’t understand. He pressed the end button and sat silently, unsure what to do next.

International News

It was barely a filler item in the morning news. Armed bandits had attacked a UN sponsored medical mission to Sierra Leone. *Four people had been killed, including three doctors from the World Health Organization.* No further information

was available. Jules and Charlie watched in horror as pictures from the scene were shown on the cafeteria flat screen. No bodies were shown. They flipped through other channels, trying to see if any more information was available but found nothing.

One of the early morning technicians came in for coffee and stood behind them. „Wow! Was that our shipment?“

Charlie looked at him. „We don't know, but it could be.“ He then looked back as Jules kept hopping through channels. The technician left. „You know, Jules, rumors will start to fly.“

Jules never stopped watching the screen. „I know, Charlie. I wish there was video of the inside of the truck. I just want to know if our crate was taken.“

Charlie shrugged. „What good would it do for someone to steal our medicines? They're not worth anything to anyone else.“

Jules just nodded. He didn't know what to say. He needed to check the manifest and inventories one more time to be sure there was no live virus shipped with the medical supplies. *How could it possibly be?* He needed to be absolutely sure. If there was a screw-up, he'd get to the bottom of it; but for now, he just needed to be sure that GHI value wasn't hurt. Something was bothering him, but he couldn't quite put a finger on it.

Away, the Porsche pulled quietly onto the vista parking lot above the Chesapeake as it had several times before. It was still early. He'd left before his wife and kids were up so that he could have time for the call to his contact then drive on to work. „You got it, right? I saw it on the news... Good, so I can get my money now... Yes, that is the account.“ The line went dead. He would watch the wire transfer information. It was a good day in Baltimore, grey and gloomy, but a good day nevertheless. He was never going to get wealthy selling the Institute like the others, so he'd get his by other means. He loved GHI. Actually, he loved what GHI had given to him.

Suspicion

John had begun a ritual of leaving the apartment ahead of Kelly to scout around the area and get the car started. He would go out in the morning and drive to a nearby parking space in one of the covered areas near her door after others had departed for work. Sometimes he'd been lucky and parked in a good spot the night before, but it didn't happen often. It would be difficult for anyone to get a clear shot from any distance this way, but he still liked to walk around the area, checking out the cars for anything suspicious. This morning, it was cold and damp, threatening to rain again. He hated the Maryland humidity that multiplied the cold effect in winter and would also make the summers unbearable. Except for the job and Kelly, he would think about moving somewhere more temperate, maybe even back to California. This would never happen. He knew it. Kelly meant everything to him now, and she wouldn't move far away. In fact, with her credentials, she didn't have many options, and her family was spread around the

East Coast. She would be miserable even if he could convince her to move. He wouldn't do that.

Caution

She watched from inside, then walked briskly to the car when John was in position, never lingering. He was already in reverse gear, ready to move as soon as her door closed. He behaved casually, but was alert for danger. As they left the lot onto the main road, he said, „I need to get a dark suit.“

„I'm sure that Lorne wouldn't have minded if you showed up dressed casually. I just wonder if the coffin will be closed or open.“

He thought about his mentor. „Yeah, he wouldn't mind, but I want to be invisible, just another guy in a mourning coat.“ He added, „I plan to go to the wake on Wednesday night.“

She looked out the side window. „I'll go too. I don't want to be alone.“

He held her hand on the console between them. „It would make me feel better, too. I bet the coffin will be closed for health reasons. Some people have a tendency to touch, and sometimes even kiss a corpse. That wouldn't be good with this bug.“

He was still feeling a little paranoid when they parked at the GHI and looked in all directions for anything suspicious.

As they walked together to the entrance, Kelly said, „I wonder if Jules is still going to act like an ass? Do you really think we're too valuable to fire?“

He grinned slightly. „You're more valuable, but I bet he wouldn't shit-can me and risk losing you at the same time. He's too hung up on selling GHI.“

„Yeah, but he was really weirded out on Friday. What was he accusing us of? You really put him in his place, by the way. Thank you for that.“

It worried him too. „Something put a bug up his ass. Of course, we were snooping where Lorne warned me not to go. I wonder what Lorne was hiding that got Jules so upset. He's up to something, I'm sure of it. He had no reason to dress you down that way. If he tries it again, I could face an assault charge.“

„Look, John. I'm not that delicate. I can fight back, too. Maybe not physically, but I can take care of myself.“

He smiled, holding the door for her. „Oh, I'm sure of it.“

The rest of the morning went by normally. Kelly was inside the sealed chamber for most of the morning, and John entered data and formatted the tables. He thought about going into the secret files, but it wasn't necessary; he had the hard copy at home.

Kelly was following the testing protocol inside the lab and scanning results into the system. She was still too nervous to go where Jules had ordered her to stay away. Having warned her, he would have the perfect excuse now for firing her if she provoked him.

The day went by normally, a blessing after everything that had happened recently. It was weird. One day, every move they make is followed, the next day, nothing. They left GHI after six in the evening. The night air was cool and clear. The wind had abated, and it was almost pleasant—almost. Their fears had

subsided slightly after a peaceful day, but John kept his vigil nevertheless. They agreed to go straight to the mall for his suit and stopped at Pizza Uno for dinner. All in all, it was like any other normal night in suburban Baltimore.

The shock hit them when they returned to her apartment. It was trashed inside. She stood petrified in her doorway, not believing the damage done to everything. John was behind her and moved her gently aside before going in first. „Don't move.“ He went into the living room, carefully stepping over her things before entering her bedroom and bath, cautiously. No one was there.

Even the furniture was destroyed, completely broken apart, with stuffing everywhere. The bedroom was the same. The bed, mattress, and spring were disemboweled. Drawers were all pulled out and emptied on the floor. Clothing was everywhere. „John... why... why? Who did this... why?“ She stood with her shoulders slumped, crying on his arm.

He held her. „It's all part of the same thing, Kelly. Someone thinks we have something that can hurt them. It's related to the Institute, to Lorne's death. It's in the data.“ *The data!*

He stepped back into the living area, looking for his laptop. She joined him. Everything related to their computers and peripherals was gone. Their computer bags and storage drives were gone. When they couldn't find the printed inventory report, it confirmed all of their suspicions.

He grabbed her hand. „Come on.“

They stepped over debris and closed the door with all the lights out and ran to his car. She protested. „Shouldn't we call the police?“

„We can do that later; they'll just take a report and ask a bunch of questions. Everyone will think we're lunatics with everything else that's been going on. We still need to find out what's wrong at GHI; that's the key to all of this.“

She knew he was right and also that the police were limited in the amount of supposition they could follow. They needed something solid and criminal in order to get involved. John went first and Kelly followed in shadows back to his car. It was only after they'd started moving that nerves began reacting. Kelly was shaking from a combination of anger and fear. She'd been violated. Her private domain had been destroyed. She cried. „Who could do this! John... I mean, who could do that to my home. I never hurt anyone.“

He thought about answering, but the sentences couldn't form. It was all, in the final analysis, because of him. If he'd kept his nose out of the files as he should have, none of this would be happening. *Does she blame me? Hell, it is my fault after all.* „I don't know, Kell... I just don't know.“ He wanted to say more, but the words didn't come. They drove in silence to his apartment.

Two days later, John wore his new suit and Kelly wore a simple black dress. The wake was held at Foster's Funeral Home, near Lorne's home. It was his wife's choice. Everyone at GHI was in attendance. John introduced himself and Kelly to Mrs. Bridger, and she recognized his name, but there were many people crowded in the small room so conversation was difficult. There was an anteroom next to them with refreshments, where many of the staff, including Kelly's lab technician Fred Cooper and his wife, were standing, alone. They spoke briefly and had some light refreshments before John signaled his wish to leave.

Outside, Kelly commented. „Did you notice how none of the senior managers talked to us. It's like we've got some horrible disease or something.“

He was walking a little too fast for her heels and slowed when she tugged his hand. Other people were coming and going from the parking lot, and he didn't see the note under his windshield wiper until they were seated. He was about the start the engine. „Hold on, what's this?“ He reached around the window pillar and pulled it inside. It read: „*Be careful where you look.*“

He crumpled it and threw it to the floor and hit the steering wheel with a fist. „What the fuck! Why do I keep getting these cryptic notes? They never say anything; I'm supposed to guess!“

Neither understood it, and they drove immediately to his apartment. He didn't speak, but she felt compelled. „Maybe we should call Detective McAlister and show her the note.“

He shook his head. „What would she do? It doesn't say anything.“

„John, I know you're upset and angry. So am I. Maybe the police can start to put this all together. Look at all the circumstances. Maybe there are finger prints on the note. If they could get a subpoena, they might find something.“

„Kelly, what have we got? We don't have anything more than a gunshot and some vague warnings.“ He knew she was right, but felt that involving the police might just escalate the situation. Only someone with access to lab 4B could solve this and getting the police involved might cut them off.

„What about my apartment?“

„They're not going to send out a detective for a trashed apartment. Hell, I don't even have my computer any more to show Lorne's report.“ An alarm went off in his head and he began talking to himself. „My computer; my emails; my dialogue with Mary. If someone breaks my password, Mary could be in trouble!“

Kelly thought for a moment. „How strong is your password?“

He shook his head. „I thought it was clever. 2014Mustang—my car. Most people wouldn't know my car, but anyone who's paying attention at GHI knows it. Smart people can figure it out fast.“ He shook his head, „How stupid could I be to get her involved—stupid.“

She became serious. „Okay, so we need to get this solved quickly, before anyone figures out her connection.“ They'd been having discussions—„what ifs“ really—about everyone at GHI that might be involved. They had no hard evidence except the way people, like Jules, related to them. Hell it could be several people together. They couldn't eliminate Lorne either. Maybe he'd been in some kind of plot with others. It didn't seem likely given his close relationship with John, but they didn't have any evidence to eliminate anyone. They didn't have anything implicating anyone either. Now, Mary could be in danger and she'd be the easiest target in the world.

„I've got to warn her. She needs to disappear back onto the island. They can't surprise her there, it's too close knit.“

She nodded. „Yeah, you need to warn her, but the best chance of protecting her or us is to find out what's going on. Right now, we have Jules' greed on our side. He won't fire us, and he doesn't want us to quit. He shouldn't want us hurt either if he wants to sell GHI. We have the perfect chance to keep digging there, even if it's right in front of him, them—whoever's doing this.“

It made sense. He knew she was right. Once again he wanted to bang his head on the wall for involving Mary in their mess. Ultimately, it had given them the one major clue, but it also put her in danger. He shouldn't be taking other people's safety too lightly. He had done it with Mary and now she was in danger. He could only blame himself. Hell, she didn't even know who he was a couple weeks earlier. Now, her life could be in danger because of him.

Dishonesty

Later, Jules had always trusted his intuition. He couldn't sleep long that night. Seeing his old friend's wife and friends, and associates from work, only confused him more. Something was wrong. Too many bad things were happening to people around him. Irina was being evasive, he was sure of it. She was odd, that was true, but she was much too casual about the strange vial number. She had to know something was wrong. *How could she dismiss it so easily?* She knew it could be very serious, possibly damaging GHI. She just walked away! What could this mean? His pulse was racing. He'd been at his desk since three in the morning, doing nothing, just pondering. He could hear people arriving a few hours later. By nine o'clock, he couldn't sit still any longer and let the mind-games continue spinning out of control. „Marie! Get Dr. Egan in here!“

He paced in his office, waiting for Kelly to arrive. *My God what's going on?* She arrived after more than twenty minutes, after decontamination. She was still wary of Jules; he'd been acting strangely toward her and this time she'd come alone, without John for moral support or protection. She walked straight into his office, and he signaled for her to sit, delaying a moment himself before taking a chair beside her. She maintained a stiff formal demeanor. „Dr. Redinger, you summoned me?“

It wasn't lost on him that she was nervous, even uncomfortable in his presence. He slumped slightly and folded his hands in his lap. „Kelly, Dr. Egan, I owe you an apology. You have every right to be angry at me. You've been assaulted verbally and physically, both by me and others, and it isn't fair. It's certainly not fair from me.“ She looked at him more directly, but didn't speak as he continued. *Did he have a split personality?* It was obvious that he had something to say and wanted to finish it. „I've been under a lot of stress. I don't know which is most nerve-racking: the investors, the death of my oldest friend and colleague, or an attack in Africa on another friend; she's with the World Health Organization. I was on the phone with her when they were attacked. I don't know if she's alive, but I fear not.“

He paused long enough for her to respond. „Dr. Redinger, Jules, I'm sorry for your troubles. Is there anything I can do?“

He looked at her without speaking for several seconds, and then said, „There may be something else.“

He looked down again and seemed to be thinking what to say, but she spoke first. „Jules, does it involve me?“

He regained his composure and sat upright, looking directly at her. „I don't know Kelly. I don't want to think so, but I have another problem that may involve you directly or indirectly.“

She feared that she was going to be confronted by the report John had been analyzing. „Um... can you be specific, Jules?“

„Kelly, you've been acting a little strangely lately. Hell, I guess we all have for so many reasons. I don't know how else to approach this other than to ask directly. What were you doing in the active virus cell in 4B?“

Her fears were turning into reality. „What do you mean, Jules?“

„Oh, please, don't try to bullshit me. What were you doing there when I caught you in the wrong part of the lab?“

Her brilliant mind worked fast, trying to formulate an answer. „Jules, I could tell you that I was lost or that I made an error in my directions, but we both know that's not true.“ She hesitated, wondering if she'd made a mistake. But, he wasn't stupid. She had to roll the dice. „Dr. Bridger has a spreadsheet on his workstation, John's station. A few weeks ago, Lorne warned John that he could be in danger for discovering it.“

Jules interrupted. „What spreadsheet?“

She continued. „We're not sure. It seems to be some kind of inventory, but it's over fifty pages and encrypted. There seem to be some anomalies.“ She wanted to be very careful. „There is one category that is different than Institute records.“

He was almost afraid to ask the obvious question. „Are you talking about the live virus?“

She was surprised by his directness, half expecting a deflection. „We're not sure. That's something John and I were trying to verify. That's when you interrupted me inside 4B.“ This revelation scared her, expecting Jules to explode, but he did the opposite.

„Kelly, I'm going to share something that's bothering me badly.“ She stiffened. „I have information that might indicate that live virus was shipped to Africa. It wasn't on the manifest, and one of the vial numbers read to me by Dr. Van Aker in Africa shouldn't have left here.“

She now understood why he was worried. This could be the downfall of GHI. „Could it be a mistake?“

„Mistake! How the hell could it be a mistake? Sorry, Kelly, I don't mean to shout. The only mistake that makes sense is that Abagael didn't read it properly, but that's impossible. The whole number sequence wasn't wrong. It's a virus number.“

She started understanding. „Jules, let me ask you: Do you think this had anything to do with Dr. Bridger dying? Is this why someone tried to shoot John and me?“

„I don't know, Kelly. My worst fear is that they're all related. But, I really want to believe it's just an accident, just coincidental. But, it can't be. I'm sure of it.“

This conversation was creating a strange bond. Jules had revealed information that could cause problems for GHI—maybe fatal problems. It didn't make sense until he clarified. „Kelly, I need your help. I need you and John to work with me on this. I don't know whom else to trust until we know what's going on.“

She was skeptical. „Why trust me? Why me and John?“

„I don't know. Honestly, you've given me more reasons to not trust you. The fact is that Lorne trusted John, yet Lorne might have been behind whatever's going on, and you're getting shot at could indicate some pretty big-time criminal activity. I guess I'm just hoping I'm right. Am I?“

She nodded. „So, what's next?“

„I'd like you to go back into the virus storage cell and finish what you started.“

Edgy

„What do you mean you killed them! You fucking moron! You were going to just rob them... So, why did you shoot them, they didn't have any guns... What do you mean unimportant, this was a friend of the Institute, we needed her... Oh, don't give me *the will of Allah*, you lunatic... Respect you—Bullshit! Look, I could care less if you rag heads kill each other, but this wasn't necessary... So, where's my money? You got the shipment, now transfer the money... No, I will not be patient! We had a deal and, if you want any more, you need to play ball... Yeah, it's all there; everything you need to kill an entire village and to immunize your buddies... What do you mean it was *broken*? ... You shot what? ... Well, that's your problem, pal... I didn't say it was bullet proof... How many? ... Did you notice which vial it was? ... The numbers on the side—you do know how to read, don't you? ... Well tell those other idiots to stop handling everything and send me the numbers: it could be vaccine or it could be the germs. Chances are you just killed your entire team; so, send the money pronto, just in case you guys all die in the next couple weeks... Yeah, well, fuck you and your murderous god, too! Just send the money.“ He pushed the „end“ button and sat overlooking the bay. *How could I be so stupid?* He started the engine and drove out of the parking lot. He wasn't headed home.

Uncertainty

John shook his head. „I don't know, Kelly. With everything that's happened, do you think we can trust him?“

„John. Call it woman's intuition. Call it whatever you want, but we need to trust someone. You and I can't get much further otherwise, and I can't live being scared all the time. The virus inventory must be the key to everything that's happened. We can only count and look at a spreadsheet that's already outdated, and compare to the Institute record on the server. We know there are differences, but not what it all means. I don't want to get shot at again. I don't want you shot. If Jules is a bad guy, then nothing has changed; we're still in danger. On the other hand, why say anything to me? He already knew I was in the virus cell, so why ask me to get a complete count? He could just as well have told me to stay away, and we would be stuck right where we were.“

He grimaced. „You're right, but I still don't like it. He's a strange duck, trying to make a fortune. I just figure there's more going on than we know. But, I get your point. We should try to get an accurate count on the virus vials.“

Kelly nodded and went to the dressing chamber, then disappeared into the lab interior, visible to John on the closed circuit cameras. She was only inside for less than an hour before entering the data into a terminal for John to use in the outer lab workstation. He had thought about sending a text message to Mary, but wasn't sure what to say. Getting Jules involved might lead back to her if he wanted to dig deep enough, but that was a big „if,“ and she was still hidden from view if someone was watching them. He didn't want to scare her unnecessarily.

As Kelly decontaminated, John was busy collating the information she'd gathered. He would compare it to the Institute records later. For now, he wanted to update Lorne's spreadsheet.

Her hair was disheveled as she came out of the last airlock. „So, what's it look like?“

He didn't take his eyes off the monitor for more than a few seconds, then returned to the keyboard. „I don't know yet. I think the live virus errors are all in one group, and it looks like the numbers shrunk again, down ten more vials. Are you sure you counted them all accurately?“

She looked at the screen over his shoulder. „Yeah, I got them all. It's pretty foolproof in there. Everything is isolated by batch numbers. The vials are arranged in numbered carrier slots. It's easy to count.“

He leaned back toward her. „Then that's it. Another ten vials have been removed. I just need to check the Institute records. I didn't think they'd ever be shipped out of here, but I need to make sure they were on the manifest over the weekend. If not, then there's a different problem.“

He didn't need to elaborate. Even if it was an errant shipment, the missing vials would make national news if reported and probably shut GHI down.

Disclosure

Irina's glare turned from her normal unfriendly scowl to sinister. „Do you know how bad this is? Do you! I should never have gotten involved with you, such an imbecile.“ Her normal disdain for other scientists didn't compare to the disgust she felt for anyone without a PhD in hard science. She was wringing her hands together.

Matt Hanson wasn't a scientist; he was a CFO, a bean counter; but, he'd been around these prima donnas all of his career and learned to hold most of them in equal disdain. Most of them couldn't manage a checkbook. Besides, Irina looked like she was raised by monkeys then beaten out of the trees with an ugly stick. „Fuck you, bitch.“

„What? You think you can talk to me this way!“

He didn't smile. „Yeah, I'll talk to you any way I want. You're a fraud... an ugly fiend and a fraud. Everyone thinks you're a genius; well, I know better. Don't forget that I know your secret. You only exist because I created you! You were just

naval lint a few years back, and I made you a star. You wanted fame and fortune, and I gave it to you.“

She demurred, only slightly. „Without my credentials, you would still be alone in that lonely little office of yours watching your 401K and wondering if you'd live in a double-wide in Wyoming in a few years. You had nothing. You know nothing important. Without me, your little scheme would still be a fantasy. I do not know how you married such a beautiful woman who had your beautiful children. She must be even more of an imbecile than you.“

The bantering went on until both were exhausted of it. They did, in fact, have important business together: dark, evil, illegal business. They were bound together by the scheme that implicated both of them in murder.

She finally broke the chain of dialogue. „We must speak to Jules immediately.“

Later, coming directly from the lab's, John and Kelly were no longer following office protocol. They walked directly into Jules's office where Kelly spoke, while John stayed by the door. „Jules, we've done a physical inventory and double-checked everything. There are more than ten virus containers missing.“

He looked at the printout she'd handed to him. „Ten, you say?“

She touched a line on the paper. „More than ten. Ten since the last update by Dr. Bridger. There were vials missing before then; that's what Lorne was recording, we're sure of it.“

He thumbed through the pages. „This is a huge report, how can you be sure it's accurate? There could be lots of errors.“

John didn't like what he was hearing; there was something skewed in Jules' attitude. „Dr. Bridger didn't make any mistakes. There were only two batches that showed bad counts. Everything else was dead-on correct.“

He looked at the cocky technician, „You found this, John?“ You? By snooping around in Dr. Bridger's private files?“

Kelly was mystified by his attack on John. Just hours earlier, he'd been polite, even inviting, suggesting more investigation. Now he was obtuse, like he'd forgotten their whole discussion, the alliance in truth. John was angry and about to launch into tough dialogue, or worse, when Kelly preempted him. „What's going on, Jules? You were all over this in the morning. You agreed with us and asked me to check the inventory more thoroughly. I did it, and John just checked it again and updated Dr. Bridger's records.“

„I didn't ask you to update some unofficial spreadsheet. We have an official record, and I wanted to have it verified, that's all!“

She stared at him, speechless. Everything about his attitude was different. Jules continued. „Now give me the information and give me that copy of the spreadsheet. And you, John, go to the lab right now and erase the data. I don't want confusing reports rattling around the Institute. Lorne's not here anymore, and we don't know what that report is about, so get rid of it. It only confuses things.“

John took a step forward as Kelly turned to confront him. „John, don't say anything. Just go back to the lab and delete the folder with Dr. Bridger's spreadsheet.“

John had been ready to deck the older man. It wasn't that an asshole boss was belittling an employee. To John, at that instant, it was personal. As a young man

and trained soldier, he only knew one way to respond. If Kelly hadn't intervened, the owner would have been on the ground in seconds and probably bring a lawsuit—the American way. John abruptly did as Kelly requested; he was mad as hell but left the office and returned to the lab because Kelly wanted him to go. He respected her and trusted her judgement, even if it meant countering his own instincts. Kelly stayed behind, bewildered by the change in attitude. „Jules, what's this all about? This morning you confessed some awful suspicions to me, but now it's like it never happened.“

He ignored her as he fumbled with his keyboard, examining the display. „Ah... ha! The record and the inventory are in agreement.“

She was shocked. „But...“

„Return to your lab and get your things, Egan. We'll call you when you can return. In the meantime, we will begin an investigation into your technician boyfriend. Don't be surprised if criminal charges are brought for disclosing proprietary information. Now, get out!“

Jules hoped he hadn't overplayed it. Who knew what damage a couple of young, intelligent people could do if they smelled a rat. He hated it. This was nothing to do with him, yet now—everything.

An hour earlier, he had been visited by Irina Petronova and Matt Hanson. They were a completely mismatched pair entangled in a complex conspiracy that could bring down GHI. Without any announcement, Matt and Irina had entered his office and closed the door. Jules had been growing suspicious of everyone at GHI. He was nervous that someone was involved in a monstrous crime, putting GHI in the middle of it. Matt stooped over, placing both hands on the desk. „Jules, we need to talk.“

He looked at them both. „What's this about?“

Irina spoke up. „Matt, sit down and be quiet.“ He stood upright but didn't sit. She looked back at her boss. „You have a problem, Dr. Redinger. We are here to explain that problem, and you must listen to our entire explanation, or you may miss some important points. Do you understand?“

Jules looked first at her, then Matt, then back to her. „What do you mean coming in here, Irina? Why's Matt here. He doesn't get involved in any of your work.“

She sat down and signaled Matt to do the same. His servitude toward Irina surprised Jules. Matt was a front-office executive, while Irina was an operations person, a lab rat. She'd been promoted farther than her social graces would have allowed, but it had been a reward. „Jules, we have to inform you that there has been a misuse of the Institute resources.“

He stared hard at her, afraid of what she might say next. „What do you mean, *misuse*?“

Her Russian heritage became more apparent as she spoke under duress. „You see, there are some things that will shock you, no doubt, but are nevertheless true. I will ask Matthew to explain first, and then I will continue with factors.“

Jules could barely control his anger. „Irina, if you've been taking live virus from the Institute, you will pay. One way or the other, you will go to jail.“

She continued unflustered. „That may be the case, Jules, but not because you reported any crimes, as the law would require. You will be in criminal behavior

because of what you do not report. In that case, we will all *swing together*, as they say.“

Jules perspired as his nerves took over. „What are you saying?“

She looked at Matt. „You may tell him your story, Mathew. Tell him everything. Leave nothing out.“

For the next several minutes, Matt described how he had met with a dark man that he believed was with an Islamic group, probably ISIS or Al Qaeda. He had not asked. He didn't care. The man had offered him a million dollars for live Hemorrhagic virus along with the vaccines to protect them. Matt had not asked them why. He knew why. It was only about money. He wasn't going to get much when GHI sold and would probably be replaced when another owner took over. This was his only chance to get rich, and he took it.

Jules was stunned. “You mean you got involved in biologic warfare, in weapons of mass destruction? Do you realize the position you're in? The position GHI is in? You must be insane! I will report it, of course.“

Irina sat slouching like a man. „No, you won't.“ Jules didn't know what to say but just stared at her in disbelief while she continued. „You will listen to all that we have to say, and then you will be our partner. As you will see, you are already part of this.“

„No, I'm not!“

„Yes, you are, and I will explain.“ She did explain. It was so outrageous that he couldn't believe most of it, yet the data validated her story.

Hanson had approached Irina to be a partner, someone who had access to the interior labs. Irina was a loner, someone no one liked. She'd been overlooked at the Institute for years by the owners. She'd been guardedly open to Matt's proposition and also vindictive towards her colleagues who would never treat her as an equal. She didn't hesitate to become his inside partner. In fact, he hadn't had any trouble convincing her. She'd been raised without a conventional sense of morality. Her South American family history had roots started by a Russian war criminal, a mass murderer who had never hidden his past from his granddaughter. To the contrary: he'd been proud of his „work“. He felt an invincibility that came from deciding if other people lived or died as easily as the decision to have toast with breakfast. When a particularly vile young boy had taunted the young girl, her grandfather has arranged for the boy to disappear. To her, this was an appropriate solution. Her upbringing had molded her personality and given her beliefs which had never changed.

Matt Hanson was not a friend. They barely knew each other. The fact that he had come to her, given his nefarious motives, didn't bother her. He was not asking to be a friend; he needed something that only she could, or would, provide. He was no scientist, but he was greedy and clever. He had offered her a percentage of his illicit money, but Irina had a different, even more sinister idea.

She understood immediately how the scheme could grow to benefit them both and her in particular. With a new murderous ally receiving the live virus in Africa and testing it locally as part of the deal, she could start a plague for which GHI had already prepared an antidote; she could even create the data to prove her prediction ahead of the outbreak. Matt's new „friends“ would insure the outbreak. She would be the savior. GHI would become famous. She would prove to everyone

that she was a genius, ahead of all other biotech companies working on these diseases.

Matt knew that Irina had been passed over for promotion many times and was desperate for recognition. They formed a mutual pact based on a hideous certainty to follow. Thousands of people—or even more—would die horrible deaths. But they would both become wealthy: Him by selling the germs, and her by predicting the correct virus. It was brilliant and diabolical at the same time. She became the mastermind, the manipulator. Matt was simply a thief.

Jules was immediately mortified. He would call the police! But, no, it would disprove the Institute's ability to predict the next outbreak and remove all of the Institute's certifications. All of their creditability in the scientific world would disappear. They would lose everything. These two employees, without involving any of the partners, had managed to place everything in jeopardy.

Jules was powerless. He'd been subjugated by subordinates, people who had no right to even be employed by GHI. Irina was a disgrace to her profession: an incompetent, diabolical scientist who had survived and advanced only through deception. Matt was more understandable: he was simply greedy and unable to manipulate anyone. Irina was the evil villain, Matt was the buffoon. But, in the final analysis, Jules had no options. He must continue the charade. His future, his fortune, along with everyone at the Institute depended on his silent agreement with these two murderers. From this point on, it would be a question: Who really works for whom?

Danger

Kelly was still upset by Jules' reverse in attitude. He didn't want to see the inventory numbers. Something had changed during the day, and Jules was hostile again. She and John left the Institute in a rush, heading toward his apartment. She gripped the car door's armrest as rage and fear started overtaking her. „John, I'm not delusional; I know what I was told to do. He wanted me to go into the lab and count the inventory. He wanted me to count it! He was as sure about the theft as I was. He talked openly about it to me. Now, he has somehow swept everything under a rug. Why did he change?“

John was driving faster than usual. The sun had set minutes earlier, and the road was damp. Wind blew occasional bursts of colorful fall leaves, smearing on to the road like grease as tires passed over. „I know, Kell. He's a snake. Something must have happened today, and he did an about-face. Something about the missing virus set him off. The only thing I can figure is that there's someone else involved. Someone changed his mind. We can't trust anyone.“

She spoke emphatically, „Something has to be done! I don't know how, but the inventory records have been changed. We can't prove anything and the police would never be able to find out.“

„Maybe—and maybe not.“ He stared ahead, thinking. „I still have the spreadsheet.“

„How could you? They trashed your computer at home and took the drives. They'll wipe the workstation clean in the lab. I bet someone's doing it right now.“

„It's still in my Gmail account. I sent it to Mary and didn't delete it. It shows the vial numbers that were missing. They might have adjusted the inventory now to match the actual count, but we know it didn't match then so the serial numbers in Lorne's report are missing.“

She cautioned. „Maybe we shouldn't talk about it in the car.“

He nodded agreement, then pulled off at a rest area, signaling for her to get out with him. There were a couple lights over the lot, but it was generally dark as they stood alone. They were both wearing winter coats and Kelly pulled up her collar against the biting wind as John continued. „I screwed up. I used Mary's name in the car.“

„What can they get from her email address? Is there anything in her message about her location?“

He shook his head. „I don't remember. Boy... if I screwed up again and Mary's in danger, Gort will kill me.“

She squeezed his hand. „Okay, you might have made a mistake. You need to call right away and warn her.“

It was misty and cold in the darkened rest area. No other cars were stopped. In fact, there wasn't much traffic at all on the two-lane hillside road. The Mustang merged back onto the road and John was careful, accelerating slowly on the slick pavement. With more than three hundred horsepower under the hood, he was careful about spinning the tires but was up to highway speed in less than ten seconds. Moments later two tall headlights flared in his rear-view mirror like monster nostrils in some horror film. *Where did those come from!* John reached up to his mirror, to lessen the glare.

The truck rammed them from behind. John's Mustang was less than half the truck's weight. Kelly screamed as the airbags slammed her head into the headrest. The car spun sideways, lifting the driver's side and nearly rolled over. John's mind sped to supersonic speed as everything became slow motion. All the windows exploded as the Mustang distorted. He turned the wheels toward the skid, but the truck was now pressed squarely at his side. The Mustang had spun part way, lifting both driver-side tires off the ground. His mind raced as the huge grill pressed sheet metal inches from his face, like some giant shark attacking from the depths.

Everything happened in slow down with an adrenalin rush. The airbags had exploded properly, but had no effect after a few milliseconds. John's headlights no longer pointed down the road, but were instead aimed at the guard rail. The tangled masses of steel were joined together at fifty miles per hour when the Mustang's nose hit the railing, spinning the car further around as the truck jolted to the right, disengaging. The car's rear bumper grabbed more railing, spinning them completely around, rolling the car, toppling it twice, then stopping upside down on the opposite side of the road. The car wheels were still spinning above them. It was eerily silent with no movement inside as gasoline from the ruptured tank bathed them. The truck had disappeared.

The narrow curvy road followed the steep side of a hill. The railing on the cliff side had prevented them from plummeting into a creek far below. This was bad

luck for the attacker and the only good news for the Mustang. The road wasn't busy, but cars were stopping to help. None actually saw the accident. Two men ran to help, slipping on the wet surface now awash with gasoline. John's lights were still on, wipers running and vapors misted from gas hitting the exhaust pipe. There wasn't a fire, but any spark would roast everyone instantly.

People were yelling orders, as more joined to help. The top of the car was crushed underneath and the occupants couldn't respond. It took a couple of tries before the men got the Mustang rolled upright, landing hard, rocking on its suspension. Gas poured out freely from a tear in the bottom of the tank. Two men, driven with fear of an inferno, pulled at the doors with superhuman strength. Only the passenger door could be opened. Another responder was a nurse who would normally have wanted them left unmoved, except the chance for an explosion was too great. She joined in the screaming chorus—„Get them out of there.“ Kelly's bloody body wasn't easy to pull free, but John was nearly impossible to move across both front seats with the tight console, steering wheel, and collapsed roof. They got Kelly out and carried her across the road. It took several more minutes to pull John out after someone bravely crawled inside to cut the seat belt. Men tugged at his arms, possibly causing even more harm, but eventually got him out.

Careful hands combined to carry both victims farther away from the explosive area. The intermittent rain probably helped prevent a fire. Several people had called 911 and were gathering around the two victims on the roadside, lying on blankets from someone. Everyone was wet and cold. People checked vital signs and administered first aid. John was unconscious. He had a pulse and was breathing on his own. Two people worked on Kelly giving mouth-to-mouth and CPR. Headlights bathed them in columns of light with blood washing everywhere in the light rain. Sirens screamed in the distance.

In a hotel room several miles away, the laptop screen showed „Welcome“ as the man finished typing „2014mustang.“ *Not much of a password, John.* For the next several minutes, he checked the files and found Dr. Bridger's inventory records, which he immediately deleted—permanently. Then he checked Gmail, and messages to Mary Swensen appeared several times under the search word „report.“ One had the attached report, which he deleted without possibility of recovery. Where are you at, Mary?

Frantic

The next day, news of the accident hadn't reached GHI specifically, but it was announced on local news stations, withholding identifying the injured people. Kelly's name was released a day later after her parents were notified, but John's name was withheld—pending notification. In his case, there wasn't anyone to notify since he had no immediate family. Labs 4A and 4B were now being tended by Fred and Dr. Petronova. Marie remained at her desk, but spoke loudly towards the open office door. „Mr. Osborne is holding for you, Jules.“

Jules grabbed the phone from his desk. „Jim. How's it going?“

„Things here are fine, Jules. I’ve been meaning to call this week. Would you be able to support a visit from the Saudis later this week or next? They finally got the okay to move to the next level.“

This was a relief. With everything that was happening, he wanted the sale of the Institute to move forward, as quickly as possible. He wasn’t going to compromise on price, but he wanted it done before anything else went wrong. He could talk around Lorne Bridger’s death, but the screw-up in Africa could blow up at any time if the press got involved, and GHI was implicated, or if something else alerted the local authorities. „We’re ready and raring to go, Jim. What would be best for them? None of us is traveling in the next few days.“ It was a risk with their missing lab scientists, but the Saudis wouldn’t know the difference, and he wouldn’t divulge anything to them.

„Okay, fine, I’ll check their ability to fly. I think they want to move this along quickly.“

„That would be great, Jim. Just give me a day or so warning.“ *Music to my ears!*

He yelled out. „Marie, get Charlie and Matt in here, pronto.“ He suddenly realized that he didn’t have a good acquisition attorney. Their Institute lawyer was used for risk avoidance and lawsuits, but he’d never been involved in a corporate sale that Jules knew of, at least nothing as big as GHI and especially a sale with so many regulatory issues and restrictions. He needed someone good. „Marie!“

Barely five miles away, John and Kelly were fighting for their lives, but nobody from GHI had visited. Charlie was the first to arrive at Jules’ office. „Jules, did you hear? Dr. Egan and John Hollis are in the hospital! Fred Cooper told me. They had a car accident.“

Jules felt like he was stepping from one fire into another. „My god, Charlie! Is it serious? I just invited the Saudis to GHI. We can’t have Lab 4 empty!“

„I don’t know, Jules. I’m gonna drive over and see them if I can get in.“

„Yeah, get over there. Let me know when they’ll be back. I gotta get us all tuned up for the investors, and we don’t need this problem right now.“

Matt Hanson nearly collided with Charlie as he exited. He seemed happier than a CFO had any right to be. „Jules, what’s up?“

Jules hated the charade. This jerkoff could screw up the whole thing through his greed. Between him and Irina, Jules didn’t know which one he hated more. „Forget it for a moment... do you know anything about our two people being in an accident?“

Matt lost eye contact for a split second: Just enough to raise suspicion. „Accident? I... hadn’t heard. What kind of accident?“

Jules was ready to strangle the little snake. Something in Matt’s demeanor bothered him. „It doesn’t matter. So, here’s what does matter: You get all the financials together again for a class-A pitch. We have some investors coming, and I want to knock it out of the park.“ He glared at the shorter man. „You got that, Matt? It’s gotta be our finest pitch ever. This is round two with these guys. I know they want to buy GHI and are willing to pay top dollar.“

The CFO hesitated for a minute, unsure how the power structure had actually changed since bringing Jules into the scheme developed by him and Irina. He didn’t have the strength to compete with Jules, so he decided to demure this time, but only this time. He and Irina were now in charge; at least he felt they should

be, since it was they who really got investor attention on the Institute. Jules and his buddies would have wallowed around doing research and retired on mediocre 401Ks if he and Irina hadn't figured how to jump ahead of the other biotech companies. Hell, Jules and Charlie would be wealthy men now because of their work. He hadn't dropped the real bomb on the owners yet. He would wait until an offer was on the table before demanding a larger share for him and Irina. „Okay, Jules, I'll get it together.“ Pompous ass!

News Flash

The national news started with a breaking story: „Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone is spreading like wild fire in a village near the border with Guinea.“

„Damn! Damn, damn, damn!“ Jules couldn't contain his frustration. Abagael was supposed to be in position with the vaccine. But she was now dead, and that asshole Hanson had caused it, maybe indirectly, but he caused it. They could rush another shipment of the antidotes and vaccine, but it would eliminate their remaining supply, which wasn't enough if the outbreak enlarged. If the plague spread further, outside the Kambia district, there wouldn't be anything more that GHI could do, and the major drug companies would get all the publicity. „Damn!“ He slammed the desk. He didn't even know whom to contact now that Abagael was gone. He knew it didn't really matter, since the Institute would be contacted soon enough by whomever was taking the lead in fighting the outbreak, probably someone at the CDC or WHO or the UN. They needed to start preparing the next shipment, and he, personally, would insure that the weasel down the hall wasn't able to slip in any live virus. *How could I have ever trusted that idiot?*

Hanson was in another part of the Institute, complaining privately to his co-conspirator. „Who does he think he is, Irina? I mean, he'd have nothing if it wasn't for us. Nothing! We came up with this idea, right... am I right? And when Bridger got suspicious, it was brilliant how we solved that problem. Heck, it was brilliant, making him get sick in Africa... brilliant! This whole thing is fantastic, and that egotist, Jules, still thinks he's in charge.“

She'd listened patiently to his ranting, but it was time to put him in his place. „Calm down, Matt. First, you must remember that only Jules can really sell the Institute. Only he can stand up to the peer review of the bio-scientists. You and I are only underlings in this regard.“

Matt had always felt treated like an ant compared to the scientists, but now it was different. He and Irina were in charge. „I don't know why you think that, Irina. We've got 'em by the balls, and they know it.“

„Matt, this isn't about who is in charge. You would never be able to run the Institute. You have no scientific knowledge.“

„What the hell does that mean? It was my strategy that got us here, got us to where money is about to come raining down. I think that's the real brilliance, thinking strategically; that's what I bring.“

His exuberance worried her. He was a loose-cannon, cocked and ready to fire. „Matt, Matt. You need to calm down and think. First of all, your strategy does not

exist. You made a deal with a terrorist for your own selfish motives. You were selling a bio-weapon to kill masses of people for your own wealth. From that point of view, you needed me to actually handle the deadly germs. There was no brilliance. There was only greed, and a terrorist finding the weak link. You are that link.“

„That’s bullshit, Irina! If I hadn’t gotten you involved, you’d still be counting bottles in a hazmat suit.“

He was like talking to a third grader. „Matthew, please do not be so offended. You will be rich soon enough if you do not do something stupid. At this point, there is no evidence of a crime, and Dr. Redinger is going to be sure it is never revealed. We no longer need to worry about disclosure, unless we bring it upon ourselves. If you want to engage in power-politics at the Institute, you will fail, and we will all go to jail. Do you understand me?“

He pouted. „Why are you saying this, Irina? I thought we were partners?“

It was tiring. „Matt, why do you not see what is happening? Let me clarify things for you. First, you created the opportunity for me, I acknowledge this. But, your motive was just to get some money for selling germs. It is not a strategy. A world criminal came to you because you were weak.

„It was my years of work on simulations that made your plan possible. Without my work, you could not have come to me. This is what has made the Institute valuable. I am a scientist of high value to the owners, yet I do not run around trying to be the boss. I will be famous and rich and never be in charge of anything. You must take the same position. Let Drs. Redinger and Ritter take all the credit, and you will become rich because of it. Do not pretend to be smart enough to control anything in this. Now, you must simply do as you are told and enjoy the outcome. You will get a good share of the sale value, I will assure you of that, but the timing must be synchronized carefully to when the last signature on the sale is about to be made. That is the time of maximum leverage. I must manage this, not you.“ She was pressing a finger onto his chest.

He didn’t know what to say. He could have punched her for the way she was belittling him. No one respected him, not even Irina. „Fine, if that’s the way you feel, then fine! I’ll play the little accountant role, but if anything starts to go wrong, Irina, I’ll be right on top of all of you.“

„No you won’t, Matt. Think about it. I know this is hard for you. You have a young family, and you have the chance to be a rich man and live like others only wish. But you need to stay calm and take orders and let the scientific people manage this.“

It didn’t take long, as anticipated, for queries to come into GHI regarding the outbreak in Sierra Leone. Jules asked Charlie to take charge of preparing another shipment of vaccine, but he stipulated that he would examine the containers before they were sealed. Charlie had not been brought into the cabal with Irina and Hanson, and Jules didn’t intend to do it. He didn’t want any more live virus in any shipment. He could contain things from this point as long as nothing nefarious went on with his co-conspirators.

The CDC wanted an emergency shipment of antidotes and vaccines sent from GHI immediately to Sierra Leone. The Government would arrange transportation and handling with qualified physicians at both ends. There would be some

lingering contractual paperwork and pricing to resolve, which Matt's group would handle, but the immediate task was to ship everything. Charlie was in charge of operations and asked Irina to manage the internal process of assembling the shipment, since Kelly and John were incapacitated. Irina would work with Fred Cooper.

Investigation

Elsewhere, after several days, Detective McAlister was able to talk to John at the hospital. Kelly was still on life support in the intensive care unit. Sharon McAlister was a pro. She presumably was upset that another attempt was made on the couple, and she had no leads to the person(s) behind it, but she continued her investigation with pure professionalism.

John's head was slightly elevated in the bed with a monitor attached at several points hidden under covers. He had IVs in both arms. His face and arms had various bandages and his eyes were only partially opened. She was gentle. „Mr. Hollis, if you are awake enough, I want to ask some questions.“

He was groggy but able to speak. „How is Kelly?“

„She's still unconscious in intensive care. She's being well cared for but can't be interviewed now. I need to know what happened.“ Witnesses had said that John complained about being run off the road, and she needed to confirm if this had been another attempt on their lives. „What can you tell me about the accident?“

He leaned his head back harder against the pillow and tried to open his eyes more fully. „It wasn't an accident. We were rammed from behind.“

She was taking notes in a small notebook. „Did you see the car?“

He thought for a minute. „It was dark outside and misty. I was driving average speed and got slammed from behind. I tried to control it but the car swerved out of control. I don't remember much after that.“

„Did the other car stop?“

„I don't know. About all I remember is waking up here.“ He thought for a moment. „I remember seeing a huge grill, like some kind of big truck. It could have been a pickup; you know, they all have big grills now'days.“

„Do you think it was deliberate? Couldn't it have been an accident; maybe a hit and run by some juvenile driver?“

He licked his lips. „I guess it could have been, but you're not here because you think it was accidental. And, I don't remember seeing any other cars near me. Best I can figure it, someone in a pickup was behind me without any lights. I always look around when I drive, and there were no lights behind me. I'm sure of that. Whoever did this had his lights off until the last few seconds.“ John closed his eyes and rocked to one side away, facing away.

He was tired or doped, so she left at that point. She would get a copy of the local police report and ask for the car to be examined forensically at their station.

Later that evening, Charlie Ritter visited, bringing flowers. John thought it was odd getting flowers but appreciated the gesture. Charlie hadn't been able to see Kelly, but told John that she was getting good care. The visit was cut short by a

nurse. John needed to rest; but after Charlie left, John pressed the call button and asked about Kelly. The nurse had a kind face. „John, she’s in critical condition.“

He was agitated and sat partially upright. „What does that mean? I hear it all the time on the news; but, what exactly does it mean. What about Kelly?“

„She’s in the ICU and unconscious. Her vital signs are weak and outside normal range.“

„So, is she going to be all right?“ He was panicky.

„The doctors don’t know yet, John. She’s young and appears to have been in good health before the accident, so she’s got a good chance.“

A good chance? The words resonated all night as his eyes closed. Sometime during the night, the medications took over, and he slept.

Mary

She thought about her new friends in Baltimore often, but now that the fall/winter holiday season was nearer, she was consumed by schoolwork and dreading going home again. After only a short time, John and Kelly had influenced her. She now had a plan to get off the island, and it didn’t culminate behind a counter in some obscure New England diner. She wanted to be more like her new friends. She’d always been good at math, but had ignored the urgings of her teachers to pursue engineering or science. It just wasn’t part of the culture where she’d been raised. In her world, she could be a lobster fisherman or his wife. But now, John and Kelly had showed her that anything was possible. Kelly was a doctor and a scientist, yet she was a real person, someone Mary could talk to like anyone else. She could envision being someone like Kelly; all it took was studying hard and getting the right degrees. Her parents never really mentioned it, but now she could see that it could happen for her. Kelly was a woman, a girl, just like her.

Mary had started asking her teachers about college. Where did they go? Could she get in? Is one college better than another? How to pay for it? The answers swirled around in her mind. She would need to work on her grades, and her counsellor said she would help her with the rest. She would take the SAT in May. School was now exciting for her. She’d never applied herself before, but now it was different. She would study hard for the SAT and improve her grades. She was a junior and now determined to have perfect grades for her last two years. She would go back to Baltimore over the winter break and tell John and Kelly—they would be excited for her.

Due Diligence

„Jules... Okay, I got the Saudis on line for tomorrow. Can you support this? They’re actually in Washington now, so they’ll drive up in the morning. I can catch a plane to BWI and be at your place before they get there, say nine o’clock?“

„Sure Jim, we're ready. If they want to move out on this, so do we.“ Jules wasn't sure if Hanson would be ready; but screw it, one way or the other Jules would be ready.

„Okay, that's great. I'll tell them it's a go for ten tomorrow. I'll see you then.“

„You bet, Jim. We're ready.“ They ended the call and he yelled through his open doorway... „Marie, get Hanson in here!“

Matt showed up a few minutes after Marie paged him on the intercom. He wasn't too energetic. „Yeah, Jules?“

„Matt, the buyers will be here in the morning. How're you doing on the financials?“

„Like I said before, Jules, it takes time to get everything in the right format.“

He didn't like the way the CFO was asserting himself. „Matt, close the door.“ He did. „You're a stockholder, and we have a chance to make some real money with this deal. It might be our only chance if that shipment of virus you sent gets discovered. If that happens, if your buddies screw up somehow, this whole deal could tank instantly and we could all go to prison. Time's short, and we need to get the sale done quickly. It's important to you, too!“

Matt shrugged, just to irritate Jules. He was pissed that the boss characterized him as a „stockholder“ with his puny options. He would be a real partner-level holder soon enough if Irina was right. „I'll have it ready by tomorrow, Jules. You may not see it before they get here, but it won't be anything new.“ It was maddening, listening to the little man, but Jules chose to say nothing more to the accountant.

The following morning, Jim Osborne arrived about nine-thirty, driving a rented oversized Cadillac SUV. He was escorted by Marie to the executive conference room where Jules was making final preparations and adjusting the overhead projector. He still did not have the updated financial presentation from Hanson. He greeted the Hawk partner with a firm handshake, to which Osborne responded, „Remember, Jules, soft handshakes.“

„Yeah, I know, but you're not from Saudi, so man up.“ Jules loved an audience and was excited to have a serious buyer coming. „Marie... get Hanson in here and tell him to bring the financials. Sorry, Jim, I'm a little distracted. Would you like some coffee?“

The CFO arrived ten minutes before ten with a memory stick. He introduced himself to the investment banker while Jules loaded the data into the computer. Jules hadn't invited Matt to stay for the meeting, but it didn't stop the younger man from taking a seat at the table. Jules glanced distrustfully at him while fumbling to get the slides in the right sequence but didn't say anything, probably because Osborne was present.

Moments later, Charlie Ritter joined them, saying: „Marie just went to get our guests in the lobby.“

Without waiting to meet Charlie, Osborne left to intercept Marie and greet his clients in the lobby. It was the proper protocol, which none of the GHI executives understood. They'd never sold a business before and weren't accustomed to having guests that could literally put a billion dollars on the table.

By lunchtime, Jules had mesmerized the investors and offered to have lunch catered before touring the facility. They declined, citing necessity to be back in the

Capitol region for another meeting. They were totally non-committal, which left Jules deflated. Osborne walked with them to the entrance, returning in fifteen minutes. It had seemed like an eternity to the GHI men who were trading critical comments to each other about: „you should have said this; we could have emphasized that; etc., etc.“

When Osborne returned, he had a grin on his face and shook Jules' hand. „You did it! They're on their cells right now formulating an offer. I think you'll have it on the table by the end of the day or first thing tomorrow.“

The GHI executives shared glances of bewilderment, then euphoria. Charlie spoke first. „You coulda fooled me, Jim. They hardly smiled and didn't ask anything significant. It looked like a big bust to me.“

Osborne, smiled, addressing all of them. „That's the way they are. They do this kind of stuff day after day. It's kind of a negotiating ploy. Don't expect their best offer to be the first one. They like to negotiate. The first offer will be a red herring to test your resolve, to lower your expectations. Now; I represent them, so I can't really advise you, except to say they want the Institute. They want it bad. You guys just need to decide exactly how much it will take. Think in terms of a cash sale.“

Worried

They tried to kill us—twice. John couldn't get the thought out of his mind. It was a miracle they were still alive. He needed to be with Kelly. They'd try again; they'd failed and would try again. A third attempt wouldn't fail. He was sure of that. He was badly bruised and had some cuts, but would be cleared to leave the hospital in a few hours. Hospital security wasn't perfect, and Kelly was defenseless. The night nurse had said Kelly was still critical, bleeding internally with some yet-to-be diagnosed injuries and would be in surgery in the morning. Her parents had come to Baltimore to be nearby but had had little chance to actually see her. She was still in a coma.

It was nearly ten in the morning when John was released. He went immediately to the ICU unit where Kelly's parents were waiting. They hadn't met John before the accident, but Kelly had told them about him and their relationship. It was comforting to all be together, waiting for post-op news. The wait seemed endless. The surgeon finally met them in the waiting area in the early afternoon, explaining that Kelly had lost her spleen and ruptured a blood vessel that was now repaired. She would be sedated for several hours, and they wouldn't be able to see her until late that night, after visiting hours... but an exception would be made for family. After that, John excused himself while Kelly's parents stayed at the hospital.

Several thoughts were converging in his mind. They were involved in something deadly, something that concerned the Institute. Someone, or „someone(s),“ was trying to kill them. If it were just him, he'd pack up and leave. He'd disappear for a while. But it wasn't just him. Kelly was also in danger, he was sure of it. Both attempts to kill him were when he was with her and might have been targeted at both of them. He was the person who had meddled in the database, so he had to be the primary target, but she had become involved, too, and people at GHI knew

it—at least Jules knew it. The hard part was piecing it all together. There was no answer, yet. The world's most deadly virus was involved, and he assumed that terrorists or some secret government agency wanted it as a weapon, but he had no way to prove any of it. The attacks on him and Kelly had been clumsy, arranged by someone with no experience. He also needed to worry about Mary. He was alone and needed answers fast.

The hospital had an Enterprise car rental office. After taking a new Nissan, John drove to his apartment, constantly evaluating everything around him. It was still daylight and he wouldn't be caught by surprise again. He half expected his apartment to be trashed like Kelly's, but it wasn't touched. At least nothing obvious was disturbed. He moved carefully into the bedroom, wary that a bomb or trap was waiting, but nothing happened. He pulled a locked metal box from under his bed. Kelly didn't know about it and would have objected before now. Now, she would understand.

Events in the last few days had revived emotions he'd left behind five years earlier. He'd left Afghanistan behind and rejoined the real world. Now, latent alertness was back. The box contained a 9mm handgun and other war memorabilia. He hadn't opened it since returning to the States. After medical training as a corpsman in the Navy, he'd been assigned to a Marine Corps Force Reconnaissance company for training at Camp Pendleton. They had deployed as a company to Afghanistan, where he'd completed two one-year tours before his enlistment was over. He'd considered staying in the Corps and going to Officer Candidate School, but he'd seen more combat than most military people and wanted to maintain his sanity. Most of his time „in-country“ had been spent on isolated patrols in the northeast, near the border with Pakistan. This meant climbing along steep mountain trails in small units for days, trying to track enemy movements. Many times, they'd been involved in ambushes, sometimes attacks by the enemy and other times when set up by the Marines against the enemy. In fire fights, every Marine, regardless of specialty, was an infantry soldier first. Everyone used a weapon. John's primary job was to tend to the wounds of other Marines, some quite hideous. But when he wasn't bandaging and arranging medivac, he was firing his weapon and inflicting casualties as expertly as the other grunts. They'd been outnumbered and surrounded twice, fighting hand-to-hand for survival. By the time his last tour was over, he was as experienced as any other Marine.

Now, he had to protect Kelly. He knew there would be another attempt to kill them, and the hospital was where she was most vulnerable; right now, she was completely helpless. Hospitals have security personnel and the staff is vigilant, but they are not impenetrable, especially if an attacker is desperate or cunning. After two failures, someone had to be feeling desperate. He changed into black cargo pants and put the Beretta in his thigh pocket where it wasn't noticeable, and then left for the hospital.

When he arrived, Kelly's parents were still there, waiting silently, patiently. They hadn't had much time to talk with John earlier. He was obviously injured, and they'd been waiting to hear about their daughter. Now, after some idle time, they wanted answers. The questions were general in the beginning but quickly got right to the point. Why had their daughter been shot at and run off the road with him?

John was the obvious target of these attacks and they wanted to know what he had done wrong. What had he done to lead to murder?

John sat across from them, positioned to see the entrance of the ICU ward. Kelly was somewhere inside, lying silently with monitors attached and tubes stuck in her arms. He wanted to talk to her parents, but he wasn't going to lose sight of anyone approaching the ward. „Honestly, Mr. and Mrs. Egan, I don't know why any of this is happening. I would only be guessing. The police are investigating, but there aren't any answers yet.“

Kelly's father didn't buy it. „John, look; our daughter has been near death for hours and was nearly shot before that. You must have some idea what this is about. What the hell is going on here?“ Mr. Egan knew how to ask questions and how to keep the responder off balance.

He was also right. „Sir, I can only speculate, but it may be linked to the Institute where we both work.“

Her mother was alarmed. „John, why the Institute? Kelly wanted that job so badly. They put her in one of their most important research laboratories. It's what she wanted, what she trained for all those years. How could this lead to someone trying to harm our girl?“

John remained cautious. He knew the obvious conclusion. It wasn't their daughter who was the target. She'd almost been killed because she was close to him. He'd put her in danger. „Ma'am, I'm wondering the same thing.“ He held up his hand before they could protest. „I'll tell you everything I know, but nothing I can prove.“ He told them everything from the beginning; even the fact that he had involved Kelly in examining the inventory of live virus, which had to have been the point where things turned violent. He could see that they blamed him for Kelly's injuries. She was their only daughter who was saving lives, maybe even saving the world until she met John. Now her future at GHI was uncertain, maybe even over, and someone was trying to kill her. His prospects, as a future son-in-law, if there ever had been any, were dim.

The rest of the evening was one of awkward silence. The Egan's sat across from him, fumbling through magazines or fiddling with smart phones and tablets but not talking to John again that night. Mr. Egan glanced up often, whenever a door opened or an elevator chimed. He was maintaining vigilance, just as was John. He didn't blame them; they had every right to hold him responsible for Kelly's injuries. He blamed himself. If he'd just stayed away, become a lobster fisherman, she would be fine right now. It was his fault.

Sometime around midnight, a nurse approached them. The Egan's were resting with their eyes closed, but Mr. Egan was awake with every sound. John hadn't closed his eyes for a moment and was completely alert. As the nurse came closer she said, „Kelly's awake and would like to see you.“ The Egan's both stood, but the nurse quickly corrected. „She asked to see John. Are you John?“

Mr. Egan objected. „Nurse, we're her parents. He's just an acquaintance; we're her parents, and we want to see her—now!“

The nurse was obviously experienced with highly-stressful situations. She looked kindly, but firmly, at the Egan's. „If you will be a little patient, folks, I'm sure she wants to see you also. But right now, she asked specifically for this gentleman.“

If looks could kill, John wouldn't survive this attack. He followed the nurse and ignored their glaring stares. As they entered the ward, the nurse cautioned, „No more than ten minutes and don't upset her. She's had major surgery.“

He nodded. „I understand.“

Most of the beds were empty. Kelly was in the center of the beds with no partitions separating the beds. In the ICU, privacy and visitors were not primary concerns. John had been there many times, visiting wounded Marines. Her face was swollen and bruised with a large bandage around her head where it had shattered the side window. She was wearing a neck brace and couldn't turn to see him approach. Her eyes were remarkably alert as she saw him and she spoke through a split lip. „Hey, how are you?“ She knew he would be worried sick and blaming himself again. She wanted to see him first because she knew her parents; she knew they would be crucifying him with words and looks. She knew them well. She loved them all, but worried most about John doing something foolish.

He'd stood beside wounded comrades before, but never someone he loved like Kelly. If his feelings had ever been vague regarding her, they were clear now. He loved her, heart and soul. She was a mess at the moment, but she would heal. Even if she was scarred, it wouldn't make a shred of difference. He loved her more than anything in life.

He was suddenly angry, mad as hell that someone was doing this to them, to her. Impulse drove him. He'd find the GHI people responsible, starting tonight. He would pistol-whip each until he got answers. It didn't matter that most of them would be innocent. Kelly was innocent! She was a good person, the best, and she'd nearly been killed. She didn't deserve any of this. He wouldn't kill anyone, but he'd hurt them if he had to. There were no limits to his retribution. It sickened him to think that someone's greed, someone's disdain for life, had caused this.

„John!“ He'd been lost in his own remorse, not paying attention to her. She had a pained look after speaking loudly.

„Kelly, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Don't talk.“ He bent to kiss her cheek, the only spot without bandages.

„John, I don't... you... feel guilty.“

He answered softly, „Okay.“

She paused and tried to move her head, painfully. „John, I mean... You didn't cause...“

Her struggling only deepened his grief for her. „Kelly, if I hadn't gotten nosy, none of this would have happened. My curiosity nearly got you killed—twice. It may have gotten Lorne killed. I caused it all and there's no doubt about any of it.“ He wasn't seeking forgiveness; it was all true.

She struggled to be more alert than she should have been, probably due to an adrenalin rush. „You've got to listen. I... get better, and I want you (pause)... when I walk out of here. You could do something rash. For my sake, I just... ahh, this to end. Don't go back to the Institute.“ Her message was clear even if she couldn't get all the words out. She didn't want him doing anything. She wanted him to stay with her and, when she was well enough, run away.

He didn't look straight at her. „Okay, but if someone's still after us, I don't know how well we can really hide. You're a known scientist. With data mining today, anyone can be found.“

The pain she felt was obvious. „I know... what’s the purpose. If we... away and nothing happens to the bad people involved, their motivation... to us goes away, too. I just want you to stay healthy until... get out of here.“

His expression softened. „Did I ever tell you that I love you?“

She struggled to turn slightly toward him. „Not in words, but I know.“

„Your parents hate me. They know it’s my fault that you’re involved. They’re right, of course. I’d hate me, too.“

„Don’t worry. They’ll love you over time.“

They’d talked long enough. Kelly’s eyes were watering as he turned away. She knew he wasn’t listening to her. She wanted to scream after him to stop, but she didn’t have the strength. She also knew it was hopeless to try to stop him. He left her bedside, walking past the Egans, as they stood outside the ICU, waiting. He sat again, watching. He wouldn’t stay indefinitely, but he wasn’t leaving her now. If the Egans stayed, he would get some sleep. If they left, he would stay alert all night, if necessary.

Found

There you are, little bitch. Her email address was simple, *mary.swensen1@gmail.com*. Mary Swensen had a Facebook page. There were actually several Mary Swensens, but only one that listed her email address. *Love Facebook*. It listed her high school in Portland, ME, and had numerous pictures showing the same girl in most of them. It was easy to verify that school was in session by checking their webpage. The two people in the hospital weren’t going anywhere soon, so he could fly to Portland in the morning and take care of business there. In a day or two, he’d be back in Baltimore to finish off Hollis and Egan.

In the morning, her phone rang while she was in class and went immediately to voicemail, then a text message. „Mary, you need to call me, it’s urgent, John.“ When she called back, he explained what had happened and warned her that his computer had been stolen, so someone could know that he’d sent the spreadsheet to her. He warned that she could be in danger. Someone was trying to kill him and Kelly, and she would also be on the list. Initially, she argued that she’d be hard to find, and he explained how easy it really would be. She was scared. He advised. „Look, you need to tell the school admin office to be suspicious of anyone inquiring about you on the phone or in person. Don’t leave the campus and stay indoors. Stay with friends all the time and try never to be alone. I’ll call Gort and alert the city police.“

She protested. „Don’t call Gort. He’ll just get mad and make me come home right away.“

„Maybe that’s best, Mary.“

„No. I just met with my counsellor and put a plan together. I want to be like you and Kelly, John. I want to be an engineer or a scientist. I can do it. I know I can.“

„Look, Hon, I just don't want you to get hurt. I'm gonna call Gort, and you can talk to him. Believe me, both Kelly and I will help you realize your dream, but you've got to stay safe now. That's the most important thing.“

„John, I can't lose time in school, not now, not with a plan.“

„Okay, look, I'm also going to talk to the principal and tell her what's going on. She'll arrange for you to stay on track in school.“ He hesitated, thinking about what Kelly had told him. „I'm going to get this solved here, and I'll do it fast. You shouldn't miss much time. I'll end this.“

„How, John? You don't even know who's doing it.“

„Please just trust me, Mary. I'll solve this, and you won't get hurt with school. I just want you safe. When Kelly is well, and this is over, I want to talk to you about career plans. You'll be a brilliant scientist.“

They ended with John unsure what he would do next. He couldn't just sit quietly and let people he loved get hurt. The police were powerless without more information.

Plan Ruined

„What do you mean *sick*, Jamal?“ Hanson had closed his office door to answer his mobile phone, showing a number for West Africa.

„All of my men, they are sick, very sick, and their families, they are sick also. It is very bad. We must have help.“

Matt was also sick, sick of working with these radicals. „Where's my money? You said you had taken care of it. You get it to me, and I will tell you how to get well. It's all in the same shipment you stole.“

„You must help soon, or many will die.“

Matt didn't flinch. „You think? Yeah, man, you get to meet Allah personally, sooner than even you planned. I could care less, you mean nothing to me. The world would be better without you lunatics. But, I'll tell you what; you send me my money, and I'll get you all well. Think of it as my special gift, the power of life or death over you assholes.“

„We will drink the other bottles and come for your head. You have seen our brothers in ISIL have you not? We will come for you.“

He laughed. „Yeah, drink it. Drink it all! You'll die more quickly. You'll suffer horribly, but you'll die faster. Good luck with that.“

„What do you want, Mr. Matt? We can send you girls.“

„Fuck the girls. I don't need girls. We had a deal, send the money: U.S Dollars... comprende?“

The voice seemed to weaken. „As you insist, the money will come. Now, tell us what to do.“

„Call again tomorrow, if you're still alive, and I'll tell you what to do if the money is in my account. If you're still alive, that is.“

„Oh, you can be sure, Mr. Matt. You can be sure. I will live long enough to remove your head and the head of your wife and each of your children, you will see.“ The line went dead—*stupid rag head*.

Hanson was actually shaking after the call. This guy couldn't get to him from Africa. He'd never be allowed on an airplane. The only way to talk to these monsters was with force. The stupid idiots had opened the container after shooting it all up and handled the virus. *How dumb could anyone be?*

There was a knock at his door. „Yeah, who is it?“

She answered, „Irina.“

At the hospital, things were finally making sense. Sometimes it took a crisis for pieces to fall into place. John knew what he had to do. The Egans had been at the hospital all day, and he was able to leave for rest and to clean up. He was in the shower when it started coming together. He knew where one piece of the puzzle was located, or rather, who it was.

Later, it was already dark in the GHI parking lot where John waited patiently. He knew his target's pattern. If the inventory system records had been changed, regardless of who took the virus, only one person could do it. At least he'd know who was taking it, the „owner“ of information technology. When the little weasel finally came out of the lobby doors, John was waiting. In less than a minute, the new red Porsche began backing out of its reserved parking space. To avoid suspicion, John's rental sped out ahead of the sports car. It was safe to go ahead because John knew the route to the beach house along an isolated country road above the Chesapeake. He'd done reconnaissance.

The drive around the southern side of Baltimore, past BWI airport took about twenty minutes during rush hour, then meandered into the smaller rural roads, finally getting to the lonely bayside road through the national sea shore areas. In another twenty minutes, they were only a few miles from the house when John found the spot. He had been driving slowly to frustrate and draw the sports car close behind, then he accelerated. At seventy miles per hour on the narrow two-lane road, John slowed again, drawing them close together. Headlights behind him wiggled as the driver's anxiety rose, impatient to pass. At about fifty miles per hour, John downshifted to low gear, causing the rental car to nearly lock the rear wheels, without showing brake lights. The sports car hit the rental with a resounding thump.

The road didn't have a shoulder and John put his arm out the side, signaling to pull into the vista parking lot just ahead. He didn't know it was the same location used to arrange the virus sale. It was a dark moonless night in the vacant lot, so John drove straight across to the rock wall along the cliff overlooking the bay. The damaged sports car skidded to a stop beside him and the driver jumped out, mad as hell. The parking lot was closed for visitors at dusk, with a sign warning that police would patrol, but the reality was something else in this remote area. There were no lights anywhere. Hanson was furious, first looking at his bumper between his headlights, then rounding the other car to confront the driver. He was shocked when John Hollis stood out of the driver's door. „Good evening, Mr. Hanson. We have something to discuss.“

Hansen didn't know how to react. This couldn't be a coincidence. „Hollis... what are you doing! You wrecked my new car!“

John glanced over. „I think under the circumstances, you hit me, not the other way around.“

„Are you an idiot? You deliberately slowed to cause this, it's your fault! I'll file a police report.“

John stepped closer, emphasizing his size. „No, you won't. In fact, no one will ever know about this meeting.“

Hansen was shaking visibly. „I don't know what you're pulling here, but I could have you fired. Now I'm leaving!“

John gripped the man's shoulder, as he attempted to turn away. „Not so fast, Matt. You've got some questions to answer.“ The accountant was in his early forties, about fifteen years older than John.

Hansen jerked hard, but couldn't get free. „Let me go, you scum. I'll get you for assault now, and maybe kidnapping.“

John controlled his temper. „Well, then, murder would solve it, right?“

Hansen showed genuine fear, looking into the fiery eyes of the man who was standing in front of him, half a foot taller. „Murder... what do you mean? It's just a little fender bender. Heck, let's leave now and forget the whole thing.“

John gripped tighter. „No, that's no good. You damaged my car.“ John glared within inches of the shaking accountant.

„Okay, Okay. I'll write you a check for a thousand right now. That's more than enough.“

John shook his head. „No. That's not nearly enough. Come with me.“ John dragged Hanson forward in front of his own headlights, to the knee-high stone wall, separating them from the sheer cliff. „So, enjoy the view because it'll be your last.“ He was fighting his most primitive urge to throw the jerk over.

There was a smell of urine in the cold still air. Hanson tried to wiggle free, panicking. „What the hell! What are you doing? You're crazy!“

John grabbed the smaller man's arms and lifted him on top of the wall, then grasped his belt while pushing Hanson's upper body over the side. Hanson screamed, as John spoke. „Calm down... want me to lose my grip?“

Hansen started bawling like a baby. „I don't want to die! Please, I'm afraid of heights; don't do this, I'm begging.“

John pulled him back and threw him onto the Porsche. „You've got one chance to live. I don't plan to spend all night out here freezing my ass off.“ John's voice had a sinister quality that he'd never used before. Hanson was still whimpering, obviously ready to say anything. „The virus records are wrong. Tell me why you forged the inventory. You're in charge of all company data. That means you know how the data changed.“

„They're not wrong. I swear.“

John jerked him up violently and threw him against the barrier. It was cold, and Hanson was wet all over, sweating from fear and unable to control his body functions. „No... No! I'll talk, I'll tell you.“

It only took two minutes to get the whole story out. The only thing missing was the killer. It wasn't Hanson. He didn't have the balls himself and hadn't hired anyone. Hanson was too paralyzed with fear to lie. He'd never seen anyone act like John with the demeanor of a cold-blooded killer. John knew the man would remain petrified, remembering this night long after he let him go. Hanson would be afraid, always looking for John, ready to run. John had been a nicely-mannered

mild man at the Institute. This was someone strange and unknown, someone who knew how to kill without clemency.

John hated this part of his past, something he'd left behind in the mountains of Afghanistan. But now, someone had threatened his life and the people he loved. They would reap the whirlwind.

Anxious

Early the following morning, Jules got a call from Jim Osborne who wanted to arrange a conference call with his client at ten o'clock. Osborne couldn't say for sure, but he expected his client, the Saudis, to make an offer. Jules confirmed that ten would be fine and then went to the office, earlier than ever before. He was so excited, he could hardly drive. When he arrived, it was too early for most of the staff, but Charlie Ritter was always early. He came to Jules' office when he heard him arrive. „Hey, in early, what's the deal?“ Charlie suspected it had something to do with the sale.

Jules found it hard to control his enthusiasm. „Charlie, my man, we're about to realize our dream. Osborne is arranging a conference call with the buyers for ten today. You need to be there; just you and me, the owner-executives. We'll let Lorne's wife know about it after the money's on the table.“

Both men could hardly control their glee. They were sitting in Jules' office with their feet on the desk when Marie arrived. „Wow, you two look pleased with something.“ They just smiled at her as she continued. „Did you hear the news?“

Jules was smiling. „What news?“

She was serious. „There's been a second Ebola outbreak in Guinea, across the border from Sierra Leone. At least they think it's Ebola. The UN is sending aid workers there now. They don't know for sure, but it's just like other outbreaks, same sort of symptoms.“

The mood changed. Jules asked Charlie, „How's the shipment to Kambia going?“

Charlie answered. „It should be all done today. It's the last of it, Jules. If you want to split it up, you need to decide today, but I don't think it would do much good that way, not enough for either place.“

Jules pondered for a moment. „Send it as originally planned. We have the order from the CDC and haven't had any official instructions yet about a second outbreak. It may not even be the same thing.“

Charlie left to finish the shipment. Jules called Marie. „Get Hanson in here!“

It was another half hour before the CFO came to work still shaking from the encounter with Hollis the evening before. His wife had sensed something wrong, but he couldn't tell her anything. She didn't know about the illegal dealings. She'd be crushed. She'd leave him if she knew he was helping terrorists with germ warfare. He was helpless against Hollis, he knew it, but he didn't want to lose his family because of his stupidity. When he went to Jules' office, he hadn't slept and didn't know what to expect, worried that Hollis had gone farther. „You wanted to see me, Jules?“

Jules was seeing red. „Did you hear the news, Hanson?“ It was only the second time in years that Jules had addressed him disrespectfully. „Did you hear about the second outbreak?“

Hanson shook his head. „I don't know anything about it, Jules.“

„Well, let me tell you about it, Matt, because I think you do know all about it. I believe the second outbreak is caused by the shipment that was going to the WHO in Sierra Leone. You know, the one you caused to be stolen and that killed the doctors. You fucking idiot! You caused this!“

„Jules, there's no proof. You're accusing me of something with no proof.“

„Proof! You want proof? I don't believe in coincidences. You shipped live virus in WHO shipments. You sent it to some terrorists and you want proof! Well, guess what. What do you think will happen when they match strains from both outbreaks... huh? How will they connect the dots? Maybe these two villages over a hundred miles apart have people visiting each other and drinking out of the same glasses and fucking each other! Yeah, that makes sense; let's go with that. You moron! That fairy tale falls apart the moment someone finds our shipping container. You know, the one containing live virus that we shipped, breaking countless international laws. I think this falls under *Weapon of Mass Destruction*. Yeah, that's what it is, a WMD produced by GHI.“

Blood vessels looked like they would burst in Jules' head while Hanson stood silently. „Not only will you single-handedly, correction, you and that bitch Petronova, destroy this Institute, you'll go to prison for the rest of your lives—at least.“

Jules was out of sarcasms. He was in this, too. He'd known about it and done nothing. That made him a co-conspirator. He looked intently at Hanson, pleading with his eyes. „Matt, you need to destroy the evidence.“

„What! Are you nuts, Jules? How am I supposed to do that? Do you expect me to hop on a plane and fly to Africa and ask them nicely to return the container? I wouldn't go near the thing, even if I could get near to it. These guys are fanatics, and they don't like me.“

Jules was enraged. „I don't care how you do it, j—just get it done... no excuse. Just get it done!“

Hanson needed someone to talk to, someone to console him and share his rage. He went to find Irina. She was usually in the office early, working with her boss, Charlie Ritter, but her lights were off, and there was no indication that she'd come in. He went to Lab 4 where Fred Cooper was speaking on the intercom to someone inside the chambers. Hanson asked, „Hey, Fred, have you seen Dr. Petronova?“

Fred was one of the least hospitable people at the Institute and seldom talked to anyone outside the confines of his lab. All he said was, „No.“ Then he continued conversing through the microphone with someone unseen that sounded a lot like Ritter.

Later, at ten o'clock, Charlie had finished stacking all of the remaining vaccines and antidotes into the bio container for shipment. Jules could check it later, after their conference with the Saudis. He decontaminated and went to the executive offices just as the phone call with Osborne was beginning.

Jules was sitting quietly, waiting for the others to join in. The star phone was on mute as he waved Charlie to sit. The call back from Osborne was quick. The

investment banker made the introductions. All three Saudis who had visited GHI were on the call, plus one they had not met. Osborne did the introductions then asked the senior Saudi official if there was anything particular they wished to discuss. Osborne and the GHI execs held their breaths, waiting for the call to begin.

The main Saudi negotiator, Mohammed bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, began. „Thank you all for being our gracious host at your Baltimore Institute. We were very pleased with your story of success. As you know, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, through the benevolence of the Royal Family, is investing heavily in bio-technology for the future. Many new hospitals and universities are being built. This will be the foundation of the necessary infrastructure to attract world-class scientists. With this background, we would welcome your technology to our country. You have proven the ability to model and predict changes in virus and develop medicines to stop pandemics before they can begin. We would like to have this capability and to expand on it through further development and investment.“

There was a pause, and Jules released the mute button. „My dear Mohammed, you humble us with praise. I only hope that our Institute can be a part of your future vision. Our achievements are known around the world and would be a great boost to your place in the world’s scientific communities.“ He was smiling and winked at Charlie who was listening intently.

„You are exactly right, Dr. Redinger. Now, before we proceed, can you comment on the news of today, regarding a new outbreak in Africa, only days after realization of an Ebola outbreak in a neighboring country?“

Jules momentarily bit his upper lip, thinking. „Ah... we have heard of such an outbreak, but we do not have any direct knowledge yet. As far as I know, it is not confirmed yet as Ebola. In any event, we are sending a large shipment of our latest vaccine and antidotes to Sierra Leone under a very nice contract from the USA’s Centers for Disease Control.“

Mohammed answered. „So, you are also prepared to stop the second outbreak, in Guinea, I believe, when it is confirmed. We would assume it is the same virus because the conditions are similar. If your predictions in Sierra Leone are correct, then they should also apply to a region nearby. We are very anxious to make some announcement regarding this and conclusively show success in both outbreaks when it is confirmed.“

Jules looked at Charlie before speaking. „We can only be sure when it is confirmed, Mohammed. We have prepared enough medicines for a typical outbreak; it takes months, so this may be a bit different.“

Mohammed understood Jules’ hedging on this point. „Are you saying that you have no more medicines?“

Osborne tried to intervene. „Now, Mohammed. This is all premature, don’t you think? Is this the sole reason for your call?“

„No, it most certainly is not the reason, but it is related because it speaks to planning and foresight. We must know all dimensions to the Institute’s ability to forecast the future and to prepare for it. You are suggesting a business based on intangibles, on intellectual property value. We want to know if that value extends to magnitude of outbreaks as well as identifying the morphology.“

Jules responded. „There have never been two outbreaks occurring at the same time. This is something we are looking into. It’s always a tradeoff regarding the amount of medicines to produce. Our modelling can usually predict the next form of the virus, but not the possibility of multiple outbreaks or the case when a single event grows excessively before world aid organizations call GHI into action.“

„Thank you, Dr. Redinger. Now let me begin with our analysis.“ Mohammed had not mentioned an offer, which unnerved Jules and Charlie. Osborne had said they were experienced negotiators and were good at this. For the next few minutes, the Saudi financial manager provided numbers related back to the GHI financial statements. He spoke of: return on assets, cash flow, balance sheet, intangible assets, and more. Both GHI owners found it frustrating.

Charlie suggested privately to Jules that Matt Hanson should be involved, but Jules waived it off. The last thing he wanted was to get mired down in number crunching, unless the Saudis insisted. So far, they had not. In the final analysis, both sides were interested in only one number—how much the Saudis would pay for the technology. After finishing the financial review, Jules stated that they didn’t have much reason to respond, that they understood how pro-forma accounting worked, and nothing discussed by the buyer really required a response. The Saudis had simply recited their conclusions, without seeking clarifications.

Just as it seemed that the rituals surrounding the core negotiations were boring everyone, Mohammed was ready to extend an offer. Jules and Charlie were alert. „Drs. Redinger and Ritter, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia would like to offer to purchase your Institute. Since it is based almost exclusively on intangibles requiring key personnel to retain its value, which nobody in a free society can assure will remain in the future, it will be incumbent on those of us wishing to purchase the Institute to reach agreement with the key employees or risk having nothing in the end. Therefore, we must view this as a very high-risk venture. Not so risky from a performance standpoint, that is proven. But we must account for the fact that most of the value may reside in the minds of some of your most brilliant people.

„Based on these factors, we are willing to make you an offer that will subsequently require confirmation negotiations and contracts with many people, yourselves included. Based on the salary information you kindly provided during our explorations, we are prepared to offer lucrative increases to such key personnel including yourselves. Our offer will be firm, once this is accomplished in say, thirty days. But, before beginning these extensive and rigorous negotiations with your people, we are making you, the owners, an offer for the assets of the Institute, including the use of its current name, and not including liabilities. You will keep all liabilities. We are prepared to set down a formal Purchase and Sale agreement, once we have your agreement in principle.“

There was a pause for Jules and Charlie to consider this. Charlie just shrugged, signaling to Jules to continue. Jules responded. „This all seems reasonable from our standpoint as long as the P&S agreement is valued properly.“

Osborne remained silent, fighting the impulse to pressure closure quickly. Mohammed continued. „Well, if we are agreeable in principle, we will make an offer to purchase all tangible and intangible assets of the Institute for a fixed price of twenty million US dollars.“

Before Jules could react, his cell phone rang. It was Osborne. Jules excused themselves to discuss the offer, muting the phone. „What’s this, Jim! Are they crazy? There’s a couple of decimal points missing in this!“

„Calm down, Jules. I told you they were tough.“

Jules suddenly felt that they were back to square one after months of work to get to this point. He felt enormous pressure that Charlie didn’t share. Charlie wasn’t always in tune with the outside real world. He liked working in the labs, away from the outside factors. He’d be happy to keep on puttering. Jules, on the other hand, understood the problems they were facing when the stolen shipment was discovered. Charlie wasn’t even aware that live virus had been included. That fact alone could destroy the Institute, leave them broke, and probably in prison. Even thirty days for negotiations with their employees seemed like an eternity to Jules. Then there was the real problem that there wasn’t any „intellectual property“. It was a scam invented by two sub-par employees. The owners had bought it hook-line-and-sinker. Charlie still believed it. Hundreds of people had died in outbreaks that their lab people had deliberately caused. Jules was now complicit and would swing with the others if they were caught. His options seemed non-existent. Even with a few million dollars in hand, could he escape the clutches of the police? Could he disappear? Dreams of luxury retirement in America had vanished when Hanson and Irina confessed. Now, he had to sell quickly and disappear.

„Look, Jim, are they really serious with this number? It should be a lot higher.“

„Jules, like I’ve told you, I work for them. They pay my fees and commission, so you can’t ask me such questions. All I can say is that you and Charlie need to discuss it and take it or refuse it. If you refuse, they could walk, or they could listen to a counter offer. It’s really up to you.“

„Okay. I’m gonna talk it over with Charlie.“ He ended the cell call and looked across the table. „What do you think?“

Charlie wasn’t familiar with all of the issues pressuring Jules. „It seems low to me, Jules. I thought you were saying we’d get hundreds of millions. Why would you want to accept this?“

„Honestly, Charlie, I think it’s worth more. But if we’re wrong in our predictions, and our vaccine doesn’t work this time or the next, we could be worthless. So, I guess, on the one hand, we have enough money on the table to each walk away as millionaires. There’s three primary owners and some minors, and a bunch of debt to pay off. So, I figure that we’d each walk away with somewhere around three or four million. At our age, that’s not bad.“

„So, what are you saying? You want to go with this or start over?“

Maybe the Saudi tactics were working. Jules needed to make this happen. He needed Charlie’s agreement. „Okay, let me make a counter offer.“

Charlie reluctantly agreed. Jules pressed the mute again, „Mohammed, are you there?“

„Yes.“ The voice was firm.

„Ah, we’ve discussed this internally and we think the Institute is worth more money. Lots of people have shown interest. I can give you specifics if you wish, but our position is that it’s worth at least fifty million under your conditions.“

The silence was alarming, causing Jules' pulse rate to rise and beads of sweat to break out on his forehead. The response finally came. „Doctors, we are prepared to raise our offer to thirty million, but no more. As you say, take it or leave it.“

After more private dialogue between owners, the deal was accepted at thirty million.

Hospital

When John returned to the hospital, the Eigans were in the waiting area near the IC unit. Mr. Eigan was dozing while slumped in a chair and Mrs. Eigan was lying on her side uncomfortably in another chair beside him. Mr. Eigan responded when John sat down across from them. He explained that Kelly had been awake off and on, so they'd been able to see her for short periods, but they were exhausted. She was recovering well. The surgeon had told them that she would be moved to a standard room in a few hours. They hadn't been able to sleep well at the hospital. They were civil to John, but not welcoming, and he suggested that they return to the hotel to rest while he remained vigilant. They were hesitant, but fatigue ultimately forced them to agree. They didn't like John; at least, they didn't like what had happened to their daughter when she was with him. They didn't know him and were not interested in getting acquainted, for now. Maybe this would change in the future, but not now. They didn't need to like him, but they trusted him to watch over Kelly and call them if something happened. He was obviously capable and loved their daughter; he was just dangerous for her to be around. In the hospital, he would be a reliable guardian.

Shortly after they left, the nurse told John that Kelly was awake and wanted to see him. He wasn't sure what to expect, but it was remarkable how much better she looked after only a few hours. The neck brace was gone, and she could move her head. It was still bandaged, and her lips were swollen, but she looked beautiful to him. He bent to kiss the undamaged part of her cheek that wasn't covered. „Hey, how are you?“

She tried to smile, but it hurt her lips. „The doctor said I would be out of ICU by tomorrow morning.“

He gently reached for her hand. „That's wonderful. I bet you'll be out of here fast after that.“

„I'm going home with my parents, John. I'm never going back to the Institute.“

He didn't know how to react immediately and couldn't envision going back to work without her. He knew this would have been a hard decision... the work was important to her. It had been her dream job, the culmination of a life studying for this exact role. But on an emotional level, there was a more horrifying prospect: he felt he could lose her. *Is she breaking off our relationship?* Her parents obviously didn't like him. He understood why, but it wasn't his fault. He hadn't done anything wrong. If anything, he'd discovered a plot to kill masses of people. But, it had also endangered Kelly. He'd used her to unravel the mystery surrounding the spreadsheet, and she was now a target for assassination. He squeezed her hand

lightly. „It’s a good idea, Kelly. I’m sorry I got you into this. It’s best if you were away from here.“ His tone wasn’t convincing to her or to him.

„What will you do, John?“ He was upsetting her again but didn’t know what else to do.

He thought for several moments trying to control his own emotions, as so many issues coalesced in his head at once. „I don’t have a choice, Kelly. I’ve got to end this. I need to get some evidence for the police. I need a paper trail that doesn’t seem to exist or to get a confession from someone. Right now, you and I, and maybe Mary, are loose ends. Someone wants us dead, and I need to end this before they succeed.“

She gripped his hand. She’d seen a different side of him since the first assassination attempt. She might even need to be afraid for him. Her mind was conflicted between strong feelings for him and moral reservations about what he might be capable of doing. In her soul, she was a humanitarian and couldn’t stand the thought of someone she loved harming another person. For the last few days, she’d seen John react to hostilities, and it had scared her. But he was motivated to save lives, to save her life and maybe thousands of others. She didn’t know how to reconcile her feelings and needed time away to think about it. „What are you going to do, John? I’m leaving, and you should, too. Somehow, someday, they’ll get caught, whoever it is. Someone will figure it out. Tell the police what you know and disappear. That should be enough to eventually catch them.“

He couldn’t tell her what he’d learned from Hanson, or how he’d learned it. He knew where to go next, but it wasn’t something the police could do. He was already outside the law and would be compounding his crimes. The police couldn’t act on the information he’d forced from Hanson. It was hearsay at best. Just the opposite, John could go to prison for assaulting the bastard. He looked at her with kindness and longing, fearful that he was losing her, but he didn’t have any other choices—more people would die waiting for the wheels of justice catch up—or maybe never catch up. He squeezed her hand gently. „You just get better now and stay with the people who can love and protect you. I can’t do that right now.“

She asked again, „What are you going to do?“ Tears were forming again. She was pushing him away and it hurt, no matter how rational the decision to leave him might be. There was a fissure between them, a gap that might never get reconciled. She couldn’t put herself in his position. They’d both had vastly different life experiences that affected their most basic behaviors. She couldn’t harm a fly, but knew that John was capable of things she couldn’t imagine... at least it seemed so at the moment. Her mind ached trying to piece together all the events over the past several days, but injury, drugs, and the fog of too much sleep just couldn’t put it all together now. Maybe she would still love John, but she didn’t have a grasp on anything right now. *I need to get away, back home for a clean start.*

„Finish it.“ He didn’t want any more dialogue. Her monitor was beeping more rapidly, and anything he said would just upset her more. Before she could speak, he kissed her cheek again and released her hand. „I’ve got to go now.“

She began to protest, but he had already turned away. She didn’t know what to say or what to think. John was doing something, and he didn’t want her to know about it. She could see it in his eyes and hear it in his evasive answers. She didn’t

want him hurt, but understood the reality of the situation. If he could end it, he would need to do it alone. The police were powerless without evidence of a crime. They were investigating the shooting and the hit-and-run, but there was nothing leading to a motive that could be considered a larger crime. There was something wrong with the virus inventory; they both knew it, but there was no evidence that could prove it to anyone else. Someone was trying to kill them to prevent it being discovered. John also knew something that he wasn't telling her. She could sense it, but he wasn't going to share it with her.

The Ghost

Irina never slept soundly. Her apartment was never completely quiet. Freeway traffic outside and thin walls separating neighbors made it difficult to rest. Sometimes, she would hear their late night lovemaking, and it excited her. She would lie silently fanaticizing her own arousal with some ethereal vicarious lover. But mostly, there was just random noise.

It wasn't important; she'd learned to ignore it all, but, now, she had complex and conflicting thoughts and often found the best solutions in dreams. She visualized the interior lab, 4B, where she was carefully placing the virus inside the container. It hadn't been her idea, but ever since Matt Hanson had come to her with his scheme, she was obliged to work with him. It gave her the idea for creating a plague that only she could predict. Matt had handled the contacts for getting the initial virus planted. Unfortunately, it had led to the death of Victor Diakité (the first guide/interpreter) through carelessness, but it wasn't a surprise. He didn't have any protective clothing or training, so it was inevitable that he would suffer the same fate as others using the town well. Too bad. It had eliminated a person involved in their scheme. It wasn't clear that Matt could find another idiot in Africa to create the next plague.

It didn't matter. The owners had arranged for a buyer of the Institute to interview her and negotiate a big salary. She would be rich from her shares in the company. She would sleep soundly throughout the night, anticipating the huge reward she would get for her work. She would buy a big house with a steel gate. She would buy an H1 HMMWV, the real military truck, not the fake HUMMER built by GM on their pickup chassis. She would have it all. She would live in complete isolation, away from other renters and neighbors. She would have no guests except a few relatives from Argentina if any of them wanted to visit. None ever had in the past. She would have cleaning people and caterers to take care of her. She would have a massive super computer system in her own workroom to develop some of the programs she had been thinking about for years. She would not be famous, she didn't want fame. She just wanted to lead the solitary life she had always craved.

She was conflicted regarding the timing to confront the owners with a demand for a larger share in the sale of GHI. She would approach Jules because he was now a conspirator and knew she could bring down the Institute if she wanted. Charlie was ignorant of it all. Neither of them would ever get a dime if it had not

been for her, but only Jules would know this. He would need to convince Charlie to share the money. It shouldn't be hard; Charlie knew that she'd developed the algorithms. At least, that is what he would think.

She rolled onto her back, smiling in her dreams, thinking about the other ways she would spend the money. She was imagining a warm sandy beach at an exclusive resort. Young beautiful men paid attention to her, which had never happened in real life. She could feel the ocean tide slowly rising around her, cooling her. She would move higher up the beach soon, just as her piña colada poured feely into her mouth, aided by a cabana boy. *You idiot, are you trying to drown me!* She dreamed that it was being poured through a funnel and she gagged. It wasn't a dream!

Her bed was soaked around her as liquid ran down her face onto the mattress. She was suddenly awake, her eyes trying to adjust to the dim light seeping below the window blinds. Her arms and chest were crushed by an enormous weight, preventing her from moving. What! She tried to scream, just as a large latex-gloved hand compressed her mouth, trapping the flood inside. She gasped, realizing that it was not a dream. She panicked and gagged. A nightmare! She could see the form on top of her. The beast was a dim yellowish form; a ghost! She had always feared ghosts from the time she was a girl. She was afraid of the dark!

The ghost leaned forward, inches from her mouth before speaking. „Irina... dear Irina. You've been a bad girl, very bad.“ Her eyes were wide from terror. „If you speak or raise your voice, I will tape it shut. Otherwise, we're going to have a little conversation. Do you agree, or do I use the tape?“

She nodded forcefully, fearful of suffocating if her mouth were taped.

He released his hand over her mouth, and she spoke. „Who are you? What are you doing dressed like that? You're drowning me!“

He put his hand over her mouth again. „Not quite *drown* as you say. Do you recognize this thermos?“ He held the small stainless cylinder next to her face and her eyes widened in terror. „It's from the Institute. It's one of the older Hemorrhagic viruses, and you just swallowed a mega-dose.“ Tears formed in both her eyes as her pudgy cheeks nearly exploded. The male voice continued in very clear hushed English. „Now, we're going to have a discussion, and you're going to answer all of my questions. If you do that, I'll tell you which virus it is, and you might get to the antidote soon enough to prevent the disease. I'm not a doctor, so you will need to think carefully about how much time you want to waste before you tell me exactly what I want to know. I just imagine that sooner is best. Now, are you ready to talk?“ She nodded violently.

For the next few minutes, Irina answered all of his questions. She was panicking. Her accent became pronounced and interfered as she struggled to repeat answers. *Anything to get the beast off and get to the Institute.* If she recognized him, she didn't indicate it. It didn't matter. They had worked together in Lab 4B for about a year before Kelly had transferred from 4A and Irina got elevated strangely to executive status. She'd been a tyrant, including having him run personal errands. Nobody respected her at the Institute, yet she was promoted. He knew where her apartment key was hidden in a crack behind her mailbox because of the errands she had demanded of him when she was in the lab. He also had a good feeling of when she was lying. She was very bad at it; and,

besides, he had Hanson's information to corroborate it. She wasn't lying; she was too scared to lie. She told him everything.

When she had finished explaining the conspiracy and answering all of his questions, her hard exterior had disintegrated into a sobbing blob encased in dripping bed sheets. He didn't need to warn her not to move, she was paralyzed with fear. He actually had mild sympathy for her and could only imagine what it must be like to awaken with someone on top in the dark forcing liquid down their throat. He'd seen the closed cells in Afghanistan where water-boarding took place. His sympathy for her only lasted for a brief moment as he climbed off. He only had to reflect on the horrors she'd caused in Africa. Most of the people she had killed were nameless statistics, but Lorne Bridger had been a close colleague, someone who respected and trusted her. She was as cold-blooded as he was pretending to be.

He stripped off the hazmat suit in her living room and left quietly, still hearing her sobbing in the bedroom. It wasn't exactly water boarding, but the result was the same. She'd be fearful for weeks that he had actually poured a virus down her throat.

He had one more stop that night.

Judgment

Earlier that same day, Mary's roommate came looking for her in the library. She knew Mary would be studying for the SAT and researching colleges for entrance standards. There was no librarian on duty after hours, and it was almost time for the janitor to lock up. „Mary, the office left a message for you. There was an older man asking about you. He said he was some kind of relative, but they didn't give him any information.“

That was all it took for Mary to grab her coat and purse and run to the hallway with her roommate, looking in both directions. „Come with me.“ Both girls were scared. Her roommate knew about John's warning; Mary had been edgy all day and now looked terrified. They ran together outside, toward Main Street. There was light foot traffic in the freezing cold and few cars were moving through the misty night fog. Mary thanked her roommate and left for the dock area, alone, looking all around for any sign that someone was following. She used her cell phone to call Gort, telling him that she was coming home and would explain when she got there. She was able to catch the last water taxi to the Island.

The man was seen again the next day, and someone in the school admin office had reported him to the police. They found him coming out of a drugstore near the campus. They questioned him about his interest in the girl's school, and there had been a report filed from the school. He explained that he was newly retired and just roaming around the country dropping in on people who were distant relatives. He wasn't sure if Mary was related, but a few online sites had listed a „Mary Swensen“ in Maine as someone from his family tree. It was an obscure explanation that the police couldn't validate one way or the other. They recorded the information from his driver's license and advised him to keep away from the

school. There wasn't anything more they could do at that time. The following morning, he bought a ticket to Matinicus Island. Her Facebook page showed pictures of her at her home on the island, and he figured she'd be scared enough to leave when the school let her know about his interest. *Love Facebook!*

He was average height but stocky with crewcut gray hair. Although in his mid-fifties, he stayed in shape, weighing a bit more than two hundred pounds. His cruel weathered face reflected the life he'd chosen. He'd been a soldier all of his adult life, first in the military and then contracting for an intelligence agency as a mercenary. As a youth, he'd craved adventure and joined the Special Forces, usually working in small groups outside the main-stream military. He'd learned to kill early in life and later became so hardened that it was almost tedious, murdering people. It didn't matter if someone explained the reason for killing; he didn't care after years of it. At some point, the government had judged him unfit for duty and released him... fired with prejudice more accurately. He'd never respected authority and ignored protocol. He became a liability, a „lose cannon“, who nobody wanted on any operating team. That experience, being cast off from the government he'd served for more than thirty years, had embittered him.

For a time, he'd been lost in booze, feeling sorry for himself. He'd never had a wife and family, nobody to care about. Missions had always interfered. He didn't regret that part. It had allowed him to roam at will without any ties. However, after being cast away from the government, he still needed to work and he only had one profession. He'd never risen to management levels in the government, and his retirement pay was low. He wasn't ready for real retirement and had never figured on outliving his final tour of duty. He had only one skill, killing. He wasn't a clever or even a skilled assassin. He was a soldier who could use a gun. He didn't practice martial arts and didn't use explosives.

He wasn't even a highly-paid contract killer. He could be hired by a handshake at a bar and collect a few thousand dollars. He wasn't expensive or elegant. He didn't torture. He just killed with a gun, sometimes using an entire magazine at short range. He was long past feeling remorse for any victim, regardless of sex or age. It was just business. His only discipline was working out at a gym several times a week. In his „profession“, physical conditioning was important. Even if he could blend in as a late middle-ager to unsuspecting victims, people hired him partially because he looked tough.

He stayed in the dark, outside on the deck of the boat, beside the salon where all the other passengers were comfortably reading or playing games on their iPhones. He didn't want contact with anyone who might remember him later. The night wind cut through his short gray hair, and he pulled the coat collar tight around his neck. It was near freezing. The salt air blew in gusts, making it feel twenty degrees colder. His eyes teared and spray pelted him as the large boat surged forward in the darkness. If anyone noticed, they would think he was crazy. Most were seasick from and oblivious to anyone else. He never looked inside and could care less what people thought if they did see him out on deck alone.

It took almost two hours of cruising over the violent sea under weak starlight. The choppy swells were about six feet tall, causing the boat to pitch downward into the each black swell, causing even more spray, washing the whole deck. He

tried to shelter behind parts of the cabin structure in the shadows, but wasn't completely successful. He was chilled to the bone.

The boat finally pulled up to the only dock on the island, with Swensen's closed business, around six o'clock at night. The sun had set almost two hours earlier. He was one of three passengers departing at Matinicus, carrying a silly sports bag for plausibility. It wasn't much of a disguise; he stood out like a cheerleader at a wake compared to the islanders walking ahead. If he wanted to look like a professional killer, he had succeeded. He hadn't realized that the island had only a tiny one-industry village... he didn't blend. He stopped a short distance from the boat, which was already backing away; to let the others get farther ahead. He pulled his old Blackberry from his pocket, dialing a number that had been programmed in the bar in Baltimore where he was hired. There was no answer, so he left a terse text message, announcing his arrival on the island.

He stopped on the dock, trying to match scenes from her Facebook page with the village surrounding the harbor. It was dark, and the perspective wasn't certain, but there were a couple houses that looked familiar. There was only one incandescent light on the pier as he walked toward the path ahead, leading to the general store.

Inside, Ben was standing behind the counter, as always. He had tried to set earlier hours, but people nearby always called him for some emergency, usually involving dinner, so he stayed open past eight each night, sometimes past nine if a villager wanted to talk. The door creaked open, and he hailed the stranger who looked around with a featureless expression. „Hey, mister, welcome. What can I help you with?“

The man in the doorway moved slowly, evaluating the store's interior before taking a soda from the cooler. There was nothing friendly about his expression. Many of the fishermen had a mean appearance also, so Ben wasn't particularly alarmed as he spoke in a raspy voice, ridged from the cold boat ride. „I need a cottage for rent. Where can I find one?“

Ben replied, „Well, sir, there's a couple round about here, but they's closed for the winter.“

The man remained motionless with no expression in his face. „I'd still like to talk to the owners. Maybe they'd make an exception for an old man, at least for a night.“ He put twenty dollars on the counter. „Keep the change.“ It was less of a question—more of a demand.

Ben smiled. „Well, sir, I know the Swensen's keeps theirs open even though it's not normally for rent this time a year. Want me to call 'em?“

His expression never changed—stiff and mechanical. „Swensen, yes, that's the name I remember from an ad. Yes, call them. I'd like to see it.“

Ben picked up his landline receiver and dialed. „Gort, hi, it's Ben over at the store... yep, still workin'... Gort, there's a fellow here a lookin' for your cottage... Okay then.“ Ben hung up the old phone. „Okay, he said to send you right over.“

„That would be great. How do I find him? His name is Gort, did you say?“

„Yessir, it's real easy.“ Ben motioned the stranger to the front of the store, looking through the big glass window, facing the harbor. He pointed at the dock. „Ya see that there dock? Well, you just walk down there and turn left when you get almost to the wood part. Just walk along the jetty there, around the harbor.“

There's a cement walk there so's you won't damage those fine shoes. When you get to about the end, just walk up to the front door of the yellow house and knock. Gort Swensen will take you right over to his cottage."

The man thanked Ben and followed his directions, just as Ben had described. In the darkness, along the jetty, he tossed the soda into the harbor, unopened. He stopped midway in the dark and pulled his Glock-23, .40-caliber, from his coat. After he got finished at Swensen's, he would go back to the store and eliminate the witness, then wait for the morning boat back to Portland. He checked the magazine and cycled a round into the chamber before de-cocking it [?] and returning the gun to his pocket. He didn't know how many people would be at Swensen's, but he had five extra magazines, fully loaded. The house was just as Ben described it. He stood in the dark, observing for several moments, evaluating the surroundings. There was dim light coming from somewhere inside the house. With neighbors close by, he couldn't scout around the perimeter. They were probably just watching TV. These island hicks didn't have any idea what was about to happen. He felt inside his coat pocket, gripping the gun.

There was no response to his knock on the door. He stood in the dark and knocked again, harder. He was about to try the door knob when a commanding voice came from behind, "Freeze! ... Don't move... Don't even move a muscle!" The man initially ignored the instruction and started to turn. "I said, Freeze!"

He'd been in gunplay before, and some yokel yelling commands didn't scare him. The guy probably wasn't armed and if he was, he'd be so nervous that he couldn't shoot straight. It took steady nerves to use a gun to kill. It wasn't about aiming and pulling the trigger, it was about overcoming terror. The killer gripped his pistol tightly inside his pocket. His instinct was to turn and fire quickly, but something in the voice behind stopped him. He could aim and shoot through the coat if needed, and the guy behind probably wasn't even armed. Talk was cheap. It would be best if he could get rid of him without waking up the whole town. Most people would panic and run. Even if they could shoot, they would almost always miss when facing real danger. They always screw up, sometimes shooting themselves. He wasn't scared of some islander, even if he wore a badge.

"I'm not warning you again. One more millimeter and you're a dead man."

Something in that voice told him to stop. There wasn't a nervous tremor. This guy wasn't scared. The killer spoke slowly. "Look friend, you don't know what you're doing. I have business with Mr. Swensen. Unless that's you, I suggest that you back away and get the hell out of here."

"I'm Swensen as far as you're concerned, *friend*. You should know that I have a 9mm gun with a full magazine and a round in the chamber. I'm ten feet away and even a blind squirrel couldn't miss. I could unload all eight shots in you before you could squeeze a trigger."

The man became nervous. No one with any capability had ever gotten the best of him, not in thirty years. "What's the deal, boy? You sound too young to know how to use that thing."

John stood in a Weaver stance unflinching. "Force Recon, and I know how to use a weapon. Release your grip on the gun in your right coat pocket and bring your hand out very, very slowly. If I lose sight of your hand, you will die."

The man raised his arms away from his body „Now listen, friend. We can work something out.“

John moved closer, cradling the gun in both hands and never losing aim at the base of the neck. „I’m not your friend, and I’m losing patience.“

The hands slowly raised and the man turned toward John. „Who are you?“

„I’m just someone on your hit list. John Hollis is my name, I’m sure you recognize it. Now undo your coat with your left hand and drop it to the ground. Be very slow about it.“ John watched the left hand for any unwanted motion.

„I’ll freeze without a coat out here.“ After complaining, with no reaction from Hollis, the man did as he was told. John didn’t give a shit about his comfort. Without being told, the older man interlaced his hands behind his head after the coat fell. He knew the drill. He’d now go to jail awaiting arraignment for gun charges or something stronger that would eventually all be thrown out. It would just delay his assignment a couple days.

John moved forward, grabbing the man’s shirt and pulled him off of the stoop, being extremely careful and keeping the gun pressed against the middle of the man’s chest. He patted the man for weapons with his free hand. „Gort! Come on out.“

Gort came from the side of the house where he had been standing in shrubbery along with two other mean-looking lobstermen. John didn’t immediately see the fish gaff Gort carried until it jabbed into the killer’s side. The man doubled over as if hit with a bat, unable to breath with the huge 4’ hook in his side. Gort looked at John with sincere appreciation.

„We got it from here, John. You can go on up to the cottage and tell Mary and the Mrs. that it’s under control. This here fella will be gone and ain’t gonna bother anyone again. You don’t need to tell them that part.“

The man was crumpled over with both arms wrapped across his midsection, unable to look up. When he tried to pull the hook free, Gort jerked it upward causing the man to scream. „Fuck you, huckleberry, I’ll see you in a couple days; you can count on it.“ He was gasping between words.

John didn’t know exactly what to do. He’d caught the guy, but local justice was now up to the residents. He had an idea what would happen to the killer and was thankful Kelly knew none of this. She would believe in the law; but out here, these lobstermen were the law. John had stopped the guy, so it would end here.

Gort’s companions grabbed the injured man by the arms, lifting him upright as Gort pulled the hook free. The nameless killer’s face showed the pain of broken ribs and being skewered, probably through a lung. Gort looked at John. „Go ahead on up now, John. This here fella is gonna do a little midnight lobster fishing with us.“

John nodded knowingly, as the man reacted, now fearing for his life. It hadn’t occurred to him that there wasn’t a police station on the island, no police at all. „Wait! Now wait! I got rights.“

Gort smiled. „Yeah, out here mister, you got the right to remain silent—forever.“

The killer looked at John, eyes pleading for help, but John only gave a small knowing look then shook his head as he turned away. Justice had finally caught up with the murderer. Tonight, John was a believer in capital punishment.

He had landed at the island airport a couple hours earlier from Portland, barely beating the killer. A few hours later, he was returning to Portland before midnight. He'd said goodbye to Mary and her mother at her family's cottage, assuring her that the threat was over. The killer was no longer a problem, but he didn't explain further, and she didn't inquire. She'd live on the island her whole life and knew how things were done. He had offered to have her fly back with him to the mainland for school, but she wanted to spend the night with her mother then return in a few days. The pilot had agreed to fly him over and wait in the plane for two hundred dollars. The night was cold and breezy, but otherwise clear all along the east coast. After landing at the Portland airport, John drove south through the night to be back with Kelly before dawn.

He'd tracked the man to the Island after having a painful discussion with Fred Cooper the night before—painful for Fred. He'd learned from Irina that she'd brought Fred into their cabal. Fred had worked with Irina for years and was one of the few people she could tolerate. They had similar personalities. Fred had no scruples and fit perfectly into their scheme. She didn't need to offer him much incentive. He'd been resentful of John's position in 4B and felt that Kelly had usurped Irina. He didn't really like Irina, nobody could really „like“ her, but she was the nearest thing to a friend he had at the Institute. Fred's only role in the conspiracy, working on instruction from Irina, had been to „dispose“ of John and Kelly, which he had botched twice.

This information all came out in John's „conversation“ with Fred that would cause him to use all of his sick days from work. This killer had been a pro, even if he was an inelegant thug. His problem, created by Fred, was the requirement to check in with every move, presumably to let Fred approve expenses when traveling. He had notified Fred that he would be following Mary to the Island on the six o'clock boat, which had given John enough time to warn Gort and get to the island.

Homeward Bound

John was back at the hospital at eight in the morning. Driving through the night, he thought about how to explain to her that she was out of danger. He was certain of it. Jules was still a problem, but he wasn't a murderer and would be happy just selling the Institute and disappearing. Ironically, there was still no evidence of a crime that John could take to the police, and he'd broken some serious laws. He just wanted to see Kelly again and let her know she was safe.

When he arrived at the hospital, visiting hours hadn't started, and the hospital staff would not admit him unless he was a relative, so he went home for some badly needed rest. He would come back to the hospital at ten o'clock.

When he returned, Kelly looked much better. Some of the swelling was gone, and the bandages had been reduced. She smiled as he walked to her bed and kissed her cheek, avoiding her split lower lip. He stood for a moment and was about to say something when her parents entered with two suitcases. Mr. Egan

gave John a quick smile then turned to Kelly. „Okay, kiddo, we got your stuff. As soon as you're ready, let me know. We already signed the release papers.“

Kelly could see that John was confused. He didn't need to say anything. „John, I'm going home with my folks today.“

He almost stammered. „Kelly, I... I thought you'd be here longer. I...“

„My dad talked to our family doctor and the docs here. They arranged an ambulance and a medical plane to take me back to Connecticut. I'll spend a couple days in our local hospital, and then go home.“

She was leaving him. He wanted to have time to explain some of what he had learned. As far as she knew, they were still in danger, and John still had no clues. It wasn't true, of course, but he couldn't say anything with her parents in hearing range. He wanted to say something, but Mr. Egan insisted, „Young man, let's leave Kelly alone so she can get dressed.“ Her father ushered him out without a chance to speak to her again.

The two of them, John and Kelly's father, stood awkwardly silent in the corridor, waiting for Kelly to get dressed with her mother's help. John wanted to say something, but he knew his relationship with her parents was extremely fragile. Anything could set up a barrier that could never be breached. It wasn't fair; he knew it. They wouldn't understand, and Kelly was confused and frightened. He needed to communicate with her, but it wouldn't be today. She was slipping away.

It took her almost twenty minutes to be ready to leave. Kelly was in no shape to travel, but her father had obviously pulled strings to get her released. The man hated John, it was obvious, and wouldn't give him any more chances with his daughter. For now, her parents were in charge of her.

When the room door opened, she was sitting in a wheel chair that John hadn't seen folded in the corner. There were more awkward minutes waiting for the hospital orderly to come and wheel her out. Mr. Egan moved the suitcases toward John. „There you go, young man. Be useful.“

John did as instructed, and Kelly's mother remained positioned between them. If Kelly objected, she didn't indicate it. They went down the elevator together, toward the emergency entrance. An ambulance was waiting. Her parents and EMTs helped her onto a gurney for the short trip to the local airport where a medically-equipped airplane was waiting. Mrs. Egan would fly with Kelly and Mr. Egan would drive her car home. John stood back with the luggage until Mr. Egan put it in his car. Once again, to stifle contact, Mr. Egan shook John's hand briefly, saying, „Well, so long, John. Don't worry anymore about Kelly. She's back home with family.“ *So what am I?*

The ambulance door closed and drove away before he could do any more than wave and mouth the word, „Good-bye.“ Kelly gave a quick smile and looked away.

Sick at Heart

He stood motionless, trying to process what was happening. Ever since the accident and Kelly's parents' arrival, he had felt their relationship dissolving. She was independent and highly intelligent. She could make her own decisions. But

their relationship had changed. They'd been through some terrifying situations, and she'd been nearly killed. Did she blame him? If that was it, he could try to overcome it; but it seemed more permanent somehow. When they had been together, she had never seemed close to her parents. She'd grown up as an intellectual project of two technologists with minimal nurturing and forced-adulthood. She had been socially aloof in school because she related more closely with the teachers than the students, often more familiar with the subjects even than the teachers. She'd intimidated other kids and had never been invited to proms or dances. Her parents had convinced her that she was just „too smart“ for other kids. Now, maybe, they had convinced her similarly about John.

Their relationship seemed to be over. He thought he knew her well, but now... maybe not. She'd seemed too willing to leave. She was back under the parental umbrella that had shielded her from a normal life as a youth. She now accepted their guardianship again. She trusted them to protect her more than John. She'd never even given him a chance to explain what he'd learned. She lacked confidence in him. He'd said he'd take care of things, and he was close to succeeding. She didn't know any of that.

That night, at the apartment, alone, dead tired and depressed, he felt totally isolated. His life had evolved to working at GHI and loving Kelly. His parents were dead. He had no other family. Sitting on the sofa, nursing a beer, he was alone, absolutely alone. He'd never felt so lonely before, even on those nights on patrol away from base camp in the mountains of northeastern Afghanistan. There had always been people in his life, but now there was no one. It wasn't certain that Kelly was completely out of his life, but, tonight, it felt that way. He put his head back and closed his eyes. Sleep deprivation was finally affecting him. He hadn't slept comfortably or long for over a week. His head ached and his eyes burned even when closed. His body needed downtime. He couldn't think.

Hours later, after collapsing on the sofa, he was awake. The headache was gone, and he felt totally alert. Somewhere in his dreams, he's assembled all the pieces; he knew that people at the Institute had aided terrorists and caused thousands to die in false plagues they had started. None of this knowledge was acquired legally; he had committed countless crimes to unwire a two-pronged conspiracy. Nothing could be used by law enforcement. But, he had to stop it; he had to find a way. Something in the back of his mind had started moving more pieces of the puzzle into place. Kelly wasn't out of his mind, but other lives were also on the line.

Urgency

The Saudis had sent a consulting firm to interview key personnel at GHI. The objective was to develop individual incentive programs that would ensure that the intellectual property, personal knowledge, remained in place after the Institute changed ownership. Of the thirty-odd technical staff, only a handful was in this group. First on the list was Irina Petronova: after that, the BSL-4 personnel were vital, and then Charlie Ritter. Jules was the overall boss, but he was farther removed from the technology and not on the list.

The consultant asked about Kelly Egan's availability, and Jules had explained that she'd had an accident and was in the hospital. Marie called each morning to check on Kelly's status and learned that she'd checked out sooner than expected, but no more information was available. Jules was furious and called Jim Osborne. „Look, Jim. I don't know where she is. As far as we know, she was living with her lab assistant, John Hollis, but we can't find either of them (he lied about even trying to reach Hollis). Hollis was driving when the accident happened, but wasn't hurt as badly. I know the consultants want to meet with them, but I'm not sure when that will happen.“

Osborne wanted to reassure Jules. He'd been through more acquisitions and mergers than he could remember and knew how anxiety affected sellers, sometimes destroying deals. „It's not a major issue, Jules. We can wait a few more days. I'm sure they'll both show up, and then the contracts will all get completed.“

„It is a big deal! What if another offer comes in?“

„We'll deal with it! Why are you so hyper? This kind of deal takes time, and you can't pressure these people. They have money and sincerely want the Institute. You're secure even if it takes a few extra days.“

Jules couldn't tell Jim about all of his concerns—Osborne was the buyer's representative. Jules was running against the clock, sure that the FBI or Commerce or someone else from the Government would arrive at any time to „investigate“. It was only a matter of days until the GHI container was found in Guinea and the live virus discovered, he was sure of it. He wracked his brain with ways to move the Saudis faster. Charlie was even acting a little strange around Jules. He wasn't under the same pressure. He didn't know about the hijacked shipment „problem“. Jules couldn't say anything to Charlie. They'd known each other for thirty years, yet didn't always share the same values. Neither Hanson nor Irina had involved Charlie, which was the only wise thing they'd done. Jules knew Charlie would never condone anything illegal, not even a slight deviation. There were no „slight deviations“ in Charlie's world. He would sooner see the sale scrubbed and people in jail than violate the law. After thirty years out of medical school, Charlie still took his Hippocratic Oath seriously.

That morning, John had reached a decision. Legal evidence or no, he had to try to stop the Institute from killing more people. The conspirators might not value life far away in Africa, but he'd been alongside the Afghans; he knew them as ordinary people. Before going there, they had just been some inanimate image on the news programs, just like the Africans now. He'd gotten to know them as real people. It changed his perception of foreigners. They were flesh and blood with dreams and families, every bit as deserving of life as people he lived around. All people deserved the same respect for life. The West Africans were humans also, just decades or centuries behind in development. He was sickened, thinking that his Institute was deliberately infecting people with a killer disease for money. He knew Kelly would share his feelings along with most of the dedicated Institute people.

He didn't know where to start, but he felt the Baltimore PD was as good as any since they were already aware of the attempt on their lives. Detective McAlister agreed to meet with him at the station. As he drove there, he tried to formulate his thoughts. How was he going to get everything into the open in a way that would put the guilty people behind bars? He had said that he had information about a

conspiracy at the Institute that had been the cause behind the attempts on his and Kelly's lives. He did have the information, but there wasn't any good way to disclose it without implicating himself in major crimes.

Less than an hour later, he still didn't know exactly what to say or how to say it. He was sitting in a small conference room with scuffed green vinyl floor tile, dirty beige cement block walls, and gray steel furniture. There was one interior window into the office area with a mini-blind closed for privacy. McAlister had a notepad and a recorder. The recorder unnerved him, and he asked about it. Her only response was that she would „keep it off if you want.“

He asked to be off the record for now, and she agreed. He began, „I've worked at the Institute since graduation from college over a year ago. We make vaccines for deadly viruses, including Ebola.“ He went on to explain the whole story, as he knew it. He didn't think there were errors or omissions, but he couldn't be sure. Much of the information was coerced, for sure, and he believed it was true, but there could have been lies and omissions. He wasn't relating information firsthand; it had all come from the people he tortured. McAlister had stopped writing long before John finished. He hadn't noticed while spilling his guts.

He finished the short version, leaving out the final episode on Matinicus Island and was prepared to go more deeply into a complete description of why so many people had confessed, but stopped. She was transfixed on him. „John, are you aware of all the crimes you committed and just admitted to?“

He shrugged, „Probably not, but I know I did some illegal stuff.“

„Yeah... ya think! I'm a police detective. You're in a police station surrounded by people sworn to uphold the law. I should put you in lockup right now.“

„What about what I told you?“

She took a breath and stared at him. „Can you prove any of this? I mean, will anyone corroborate anything?“

„No. I don't think anyone is dumb enough to say a word. The whole house of cards would crumble if anyone spoke up; they'd also go to prison. They'd all lose their millions.“ He shook his head. „No. nobody will say a word.“ He was ready to hold his hands out for cuffing. He'd spilled his guts and nothing would happen. He couldn't even claim to be a whistle blower to the feds; nothing he said could be proven. There were no records in existence without Bridger's data and his explanations. It was all destroyed except for the email to Mary, which was a clear violation of his secrecy agreement with GHI. Even if he gave it to the police, it couldn't be validated.

She remained stern but compassionate. She understood that he was risking a long prison term by coming to her. She'd been in law enforcement almost twenty years and learned to read people. And then there was the shooting, and possibly the car crash; these either scrambled his brain, or helped prove his assertions. She had no doubt that he had tortured people into submission, and that made him a criminal, but it also piqued her instincts. „Look, John. It took guts to come here. I know you want to do the right thing and are willing to risk the outcome for admitting several felonies. I'm going to sit on this for a few days, and maybe something else will happen that will open things up for investigation. We don't have it yet. This isn't admissible as evidence. As you know, it's not what you know... it's... you know the rest.“

On the one hand, he was relieved. He wasn't arrested. But his confession didn't mean squat. The Baltimore PD wasn't going to do anything. He understood that they couldn't, but he felt good that his story was heard. If something happened to him, she knew (almost) everything that he knew.

He went home and sulked. Kelly was gone, and he was at a dead end. He skipped having a beer, going straight to the bottle of gin he'd started last Christmas. It was half full. After an hour, he'd finished two small martini-sized drinks. He thought about calling Kelly. She was all that he could think about. She had been dominating his thoughts since the first incident with the shooter. They were an „item“ before that, but the near-death experience had solidified his feelings. They only grew more intense over the following days. After leaving him at the hospital with barely a „goodbye,“ he felt like his heart was ripped out. She'd barely looked at him. He poured a third drink but didn't put it to his lips. He couldn't call Kelly. If she had had feelings for him... he just didn't know anymore. She needed time to recover, and maybe their relationship never would. He knew her well enough to know that she wasn't impulsive. She decided to leave for good reasons, and he wasn't going to change them, not now. It would take time, and maybe her feelings for him would never re-emerge. He picked up the phone and dialed a familiar number.

Arrest

„John, are you sure about this?“ She was shocked.

„It's the only way, Detective.“

She paused then spoke softly. „All right; there will be a squad car at your apartment in a few minutes. You need to be prepared to surrender. Do you have any weapons?“

„No. I won't have anything on me. I keep a handgun under the bed, but it's locked.“

„Leave it there.“

McAlister wasn't sure what he was doing. She wouldn't take action against him unless someone complained, which wasn't likely under the circumstances. John was an enigma; she'd known people to confess to crimes because they wanted the publicity or didn't feel secure in free society, but never someone like John. He was a young professional with a great job. Why throw it away? He was going to confess his crimes, on the record.

More than an hour later, he was escorted by two uniformed officers into the station wearing handcuffs behind his back. He was booked and taken up to the same conference room as the one he was in earlier in the day. McAlister told the officers to remove the cuffs and leave them alone. „John, have you been drinking?“

He smiled. „Yep.“

„Then go home and sleep it off. This is ridiculous. Do you want to go to prison? Do you want that kind of record? You'll be throwing your life away.“

His smile vanished. „I know all of that, Detective. I appreciate your counsel; I really do. But I’ve thought about this, maybe a little too much, but I know what needs to happen.“

She shook her head. „All right, it’s your funeral.“

He remained serious. „Look, if I confess to all of it (he had omitted Matinicus Island), you’ll have to investigate, right?“

She could see where he was headed, but wasn’t a hundred percent sure of her answer. „I guess; there won’t be a prosecution of a crime without an indictment, which will require some proof, but you’re taking a helluva chance.“

He thought for a moment, nodding slowly. „Then start investigating. I would suggest you start with Hanson, then Petronova, then Cooper, and then go to the owners Drs. Redinger and Ritter. Do them all sequentially, alone, and don’t let them have time to compare. Someone will crumble or their stories won’t match. If nothing comes of it, you can release me. If they admit I tortured them, they’ll have to invent some reason. If none of this works, you’ve got my confession, and I’ll go quietly to prison for a long time.“

She shook her head again. „Confessions are best in writing.“

He agreed.

The following morning, there was an email addressed to the President of Global Hemorrhagic Institute. It read:

„Gentlemen, we are of the joint medical task team in Guinea, WA, exploring an outbreak of disease. It has the characteristics of Hemorrhagic Fever. Local residents have shown us to a facility where the outbreak appears to be centered. There is a large biologic shipping box with a label from your Institute. It is damaged and appears to have been shot with some bullets. Are you aware of this container and can you please provide a shipping manifest?

„Sincerely, Josef Leedjärv, Director Doctor, Embassy of Estonia“

Jules breathed deeply. „Damn! Damn that idiot. We’re screwed.“ He sent the message to Charlie, asking him to send the manifest and explain that this was diverted by outlaws from the outbreak in Sierra Leone. There would be more emails, and Charlie would give them instructions to use the medicines in Guinea. It would only be a short time before they questioned some of the vials, and more messages would fly back and forth. Charlie wouldn’t understand, of course. Jules could confuse things enough to stall a few days, and he would try to push the Saudis to move faster.

Marie came in. „Jules, there are some police, some detectives in the lobby. They want to interview some of our employees.“

He was furious and nervous. „What’s it about, Marie?“

„They wouldn’t say. There’s a list of people to talk to, including you and Charlie.“

He mumbled his thoughts, which she couldn’t understand. „It can’t be the virus, they don’t know yet, it can’t be.“ She was looking strangely at him so he enunciated, „I’ll go see them.“ He stood abruptly and walked toward the lobby. When he arrived, three officers, one a woman, greeted him. Two wore business

suits, and one male was a uniformed officer. Detective McAlister spoke for the group and introduced the others.

He wasn't sure what the protocol or decorum should be for a police visit. „Ah... what's this about, Detective?“

She handed him a list. „Sir, we need to talk to these individuals. Some of them may be victims of assaults that we're investigating.“

He looked dumbfounded, „My name's on here, but I wasn't assaulted.“

„Yes, sir, the incidents involved another employee, and we need your input on this person.“

„Look, we're extremely busy here. We've got a couple of Ebola outbreaks in Africa that we need to be working on. These people are necessary to get medicines shipped. Can't this wait?“

„Sir, if possible, I want to do this here, today. It will save time if we can see them here without dragging them down one-by-one to the station. I doubt that you want to come to North Baltimore. So, if it will be all right, we'll try to be brief. This is only a preliminary investigation. We just want to get a general idea if a crime has been committed against these people. If you have a spare office or conference room, we would like to keep these discussions private so that people aren't embarrassed.“

„Well, I haven't heard about any assaults.“

„Exactly, sir. These people are probably too timid to tell you. That's why we need to keep these private. I'd like to request meetings in the order of that list, following the timelines of the assaults as they've been confessed.“

Jules was pouring sweat. They were trapped. There was only one thing connecting all these people. He knew Irina was bullet proof, but not Hansen. They needed time to rehearse, but the police weren't giving it, and he was out of excuses. „Okay, if you follow me, I'd like to keep this in the executive area so that other people don't get alarmed.“

„Certainly, sir.“

He led the way, and the police followed, Detective McAlister at the front. Hanson was first on the list and had the office next to the conference room. He was shaking nervously when Jules told him to see the police. The boss wanted to communicate with Hanson privately, but the police were always there. They exchanged knowing glances, but didn't allow time to coordinate answers. In reality, Jules wasn't aware of any assaults and wanted to hush everyone. *Who assaulted who?*

As soon as the door closed, Jules raced to find Irina working in lab 4B. He entered the key code and passed through the heavy glass door to stop her before going into the containment chamber. In his haste, he didn't realize that the uniformed officer was close behind. Irina sensed something urgent and raised a hand to stop Jules before he could speak, motioning him to see the officer standing outside the lab door watching his interactions. He stiffened with his back to the door, „Dr. Petronova, there are two police detectives in the executive conference room interviewing one of our employees.“

She didn't fluster easily, but knew immediately that something dire was happening. „What is it about, Jules?“ Both of them were careful to continue the

charade with eyes watching. The officer couldn't hear the dialogue, but could probably recognize if people were acting normally under the circumstances.

„Honestly, Irina, I don't have any idea. „Were you assaulted recently?“

So that's what this is about. She dismissed it. „It can be explained, Jules. My apartment has thin walls, and I am sure that my neighbor misunderstood a program I was watching on television. That would be the answer.“

Jules didn't believe her. If that was it, then why was Hanson being interviewed? ... And why the request for the order of people to be interviewed? The officer's presence outside the lab was a concern. Jules couldn't appear to be coaching Petronova. But something was definitely wrong and he didn't know about it, it scared him. Their unholy alliance was something he never wanted, but at least they should be honest amongst themselves for mutual preservation, even if for no other reason. *Why had Hanson and Irina both been assaulted?* The police don't send all this manpower to meet this many people without a connection to something big. His knees shook and he hoped the officer wasn't watching closely. Petronova knew enough now at least to be on guard. Beyond that, Jules felt sick that he wasn't the one in charge, the one with all the answers. Two or even three people, counting Fred Cooper, could be involved in something that he didn't know about. No matter what it was, he was chained to them like slaves on a sinking galley boat. Jules figured he needed to show correct protocol and a presumed lack of concern, so he asked Petronova to tell Cooper to be ready. Neither was aware that Cooper was still out „sick“. He left the lab, figuring the officer would follow, which was the case, giving Irina time alone with Cooper to arrange their stories.

Answers

The interviews took all day in private. The following morning, Detective McAlister ordered that prisoner Hollis be brought to their interview room. John wore an orange jump suit and handcuffs that were removed when he was alone with her. She spoke first. „Well, John, we're going to release you. There will not be any indictments issued against you.“

His face revealed his astonishment. „Didn't you get anything?“

She thought for a moment. „I don't know. We questioned each of them in the sequence as we agreed, and nobody would verify an assault. Along with this, they didn't admit talking to you at all about an illegal shipment. They all said some disparaging things about your behavior recently. Jules even mentioned that you were *on the bubble* for hanky-panky with one of the scientists who works and lives with you. He called it unprofessional for colleagues to be openly affectionate. He mentioned that you'd both been missing and that they had tracked your time at the hospital.“

It had never been certain that his plan would work, but he was livid anyway. „That bullshit artist! He's painting me as a bad employee. That's crazy. I'm one of their best; I work in the most secure lab at the Institute. I've only been there a little over a year and they've moved me into the most secure lab.“

McAlister remained passive. „Don't get worked up. There's something going on there. I'm not sure where it leads, but not all of the answers seemed to mesh.“

He was focused. He might have put his future welfare on the line, but that didn't bother him. He wanted the truth to come out. „Did you ask them about discrepancies in the virus inventory?“

She looked at him. „Yes. I asked everyone, and Matt Hanson was the most evasive. You said that he was the one who maintained the records, and he really squirmed when I asked about it. I asked several times, and he got more nervous each time. He didn't admit anything, but I'd bet a week's salary that he did alter some records.“

John wanted something more incriminating. „He did it. That bitch Petronova killed my sponsor, Dr. Bridger, to cover it up. But, you'll never get her to admit it, and I don't have any idea how she did it. Somehow, she got the virus in him without him knowing it and timed it perfectly so that he was in some remote part of Africa when it flared. She's not the brightest person at the Institute, but she's certainly the most vicious one.“

„What about Charlie? He's the real technologist over everyone. Do you think he knew what was going on?“

She checked her notes. „He was interesting. He was really upset about you and Kelly. I think it was genuine. He was shocked by some of the questions. I didn't tell him about the others, but he's intuitive. He knows something's going on.“

She closed her notes. „I'm sorry, John, but there's no smoking gun. I'm going to release you today.“

He realized how odd it would be for him to object. He just shook his head and went back to the holding cell to wait.

Confrontation

„What the hell was that all about, Jules?“ Charlie Ritter was furious. He knew Jules well; he could tell by evasions that something was wrong. The police presence upset him. He'd known Jules to be cunning and maybe willing to skirt around regulations to sell the Institute. *Had something more sinister happened?* He didn't want to think about it, but he had to get to the bottom of it. He would talk to all of the others.

Jules didn't have the patience right now. „Cool off, Charlie. It's nothing. It will blow over. The cops didn't find anything.“

„What were they looking for, Jules? That female detective kept saying something about viruses mis-handled or missing. Are they suspecting something about Lorne's death? It WAS a coincidental exposure in country, right? Is it anything other than that?“

„Look, Charlie, I don't know, nor do I have time to speculate now. Let it go. I've got to work on the sale. The police won't be back. They didn't get anything.“ Inside, he was seething.

„That's not what I'm asking, Jules, I don't want to speculate either... What the hell's going on?“

Jules was avoiding eye contact. „There’s nothing that I know of. Look, it may be something in your area. They may be asking if our virus cultures are all accounted for.“ Jules regretted saying it. He knew that was the point. He also knew Charlie would hunt down the answer. Charlie would figure it out eventually. It was the assaults that worried Jules. He would strangle that answers out of his two co-conspirators if need be.

Charlie looked at him blankly. It was like his old friend had suddenly put up a wall. It was a wall with a small sign saying „verify the inventory“. He walked out without saying anything more, which worried Jules.

Jules had wanted to meet with all of the employees who had been interviewed. He needed to know what was going on. Why were the police talking to these specific people? He was furious and scared, but the damned uniformed officer had seemed to be lingering around his office and Jules couldn’t talk to anyone while the police were there. It would have raised too much suspicion. Later, when the police had gone, all of the people they had questioned had left the building and wouldn’t answer their phones. It terrified him to think someone had blabbed.

Compression

The still unfinished gin bottle was in the fridge. He thought about it. He’d been thinking about it for almost an hour since coming home. He kept rolling McAlister’s answers over and over. Maybe something had been accomplished. He just wasn’t sure what it might be. He decided to get a good night’s sleep before his next decision.

Meanwhile, Jules was trying to sleep hours later when another message from Africa arrived at the Institute:

„Dear Doctors, kindly answer my last email. We must determine how to administer the medicines if they are for that purpose. Please advise us of that fact.

„Josef Leedjärv“

The next morning, Jules was in the office before six o’clock. His anxiety had reached a new high. He was aware of it and made a special effort to control his temper. He had to think clearly, but was having self-doubts. Lack of sleep and high blood pressure made him physically unstable. He was touching fixed objects, like desks, counters, doorframes... to steady himself. He was having trouble using his keyboard. *Where’s that fucker Hanson?* He read the email and knew they had to do something; something! But what? He pushed the intercom button on his phone. „Charlie, please see me... Jules.“

Several minutes later Charlie arrived. „Sorry, Jules, I was half suited up when you paged.“

„It’s okay, Charlie. We got another message from the guys in Africa. They want to know how to use the medicines recovered from our stolen shipment.“

Charlie paused before answering. „Jules, the manifest is clean. I thought you sent them our normal protocol for early-stage treatment? Of course, it may not be completely effective if it's a different strain.“

„I got distracted. I thought you answered it.“ He knew Charlie wouldn't do that. He was really trying to find a way of avoiding the inevitable; the medical people in Africa would be exposed to the virus in the container. The vials were all marked and would be discovered as soon as the on-site docs read the labels. Part of him wanted the vials to be sealed to protect people from the germs. But part of him also wanted them destroyed by the bullets to hide the illegal shipment. He could only hope that all the virus bottles had been destroyed by bullets, but there hadn't been much damage, only three rounds actually hit the shipping container.

He also knew that the entire container was now infected. He could envision some ignorant villagers opening it and handling the broken bottles, spilling germs everywhere. Any syringe or surgical glove that touched anything in the container might be covered with the virus.

He wrote the following:

„Dear Dr. Leedjäv, sorry for the delay; we had a departmental mix-up. Please DO NOT use anything in the damaged container and avoid all contact as much as possible. It is unknown what could be the consequence of damage, as it was described. If possible, destroy the entire container by burning in a high-intensity fire, being careful not to breath any vapor or other escaping gases. In handling the container, utmost care must be taken, treating it as an extreme biohazard.

„With regard, Jules Redinger, President, Global Hemorrhagic Institute“

It would be weeks or months before anyone concluded that the two regions had the same virus strain. The message was sufficiently vague to hopefully avoid further inquiry regarding the contents of the container. He prayed that no one recognized the live virus modules.

Marie came to work at her usual time, around seven-thirty. „Good morning, Jules. Did you see that John Hollis is in today? He signed in just before me. He must be recovered. I wonder if Kelly is better too.“

He looked at Marie, not sure what to say. „Ah, are you sure? Maybe you were on the wrong page of the sign-in log.“

She thought it a strange comment. „Jules, you know that wouldn't happen. John's at work. I bet he's in the lab right now.“

Jules had purposely never asked the conspirators, of which he was now one, if they'd been involved in the attempt to shoot John and Kelly, or if the car crash was deliberate. He didn't want to know. But he also needed to be in charge. A couple of renegade employees couldn't usurp him. He'd faced a dilemma, a crossroads: he could report the culprits, but greed had prevented this. It had also brought him into the export violation and a plot to start an epidemic. The victims were mostly just illiterate Africans, but still... his own hypocrisy baffled him. He'd always tried to be an ethical example to his peers and employees. He'd now forsaken it all for money. He was part of a crime that could put him in prison for life. There was no backtracking, he'd chosen his course.

Jules needed to see John, even if only for appearances. He hated John. Somehow... somehow unclear to Jules, the lab tech had the power to shut down the entire Institute and ruin his life forever. It was unbelievable that one person could hold such power over him. John wasn't part of the conspiracy; in fact, he was the opposite, the anti-Christ, the person able to destroy everything. How could Jules face him? He needed to know what the police had been told; it could only have come from John or Kelly. There'd been a serious accident involving two key employees, and he would be expected to inquire about them. He passed by Marie, saying, „I'll be in 4B for a little while.“ She just nodded.

Moments later, Jules could see through the glass wall into the outer lab area. John was sitting at the workstation, transcribing the information backlogged from the inner lab since he was away. Jules made a point of opening the door quickly, creating a rush of pressurized air out of the environmentally controlled area. John looked up and swiveled around to face his visitor. Jules walked over quickly. „John, how are you? How is Kelly?“

John smiled pleasantly. „We're both fine, Jules, thanks for asking.“

„Ah, is Kelly coming in today too?“

„No. She's pretty banged up right now. She's at my apartment and probably won't be cleared for work for a few weeks.“

Jules shook his head. „A damn shame.“

John stared at him for several moments before speaking. He'd made up his mind to smoke out the people who had tried to kill them. „I went to the police, Jules. I think they visited you.“

Jules was immediately uncomfortable. „Why did you do that, John?“

He leaned back slightly, but stayed sitting. „I think you know, Jules. You would have to know. I paid some night visits to some folks here who told me all about some shipments of virus to Africa. It's been going on for a while, just so you could be the first Institute with a cure. It's brilliant, in a diabolic-sick sort of way.“

„I don't...“

„Don't bullshit me, Jules, I know all about it. Your lackey Hanson and Ms. Bitch Petronova both told me their stories. That prick Cooper's gonna be out for a while mending after that stunt with his truck. Funny thing though, none of them will file charges against me. Seems strange, right?“ John paused for a moment to let Jules speak, but he just stood in silence. „You see, I was thinking about it. Those guys all had something to lose if they admitted why I went after them. Funny thing; they're all silent for the police. They didn't want to validate what I said when I confessed.“

Jules stammered. „John, I don't know what you're talking about...“

„Bullshit! You didn't even ask what I told the police. I know the cops didn't tell you. They were investigating an assault charge, one I brought on myself. You either learned it from your buddies in low places, or figured it out. You're acting all wrong, Jules. You should have come in here wanting to know all the details. But, you already knew what happened.“

„John... I...“ But, just as he was about to say something, Charlie Ritter came into the lab. John broke his glare at Jules, who just stood motionless.

Charlie smiled and took John's hand. „How are you, John, and how's Kelly? I tried to come visit you, but you'd already checked out, and Kelly was in ICU with

no visitors. I can't believe that this would happen right after someone tried to shoot you! They must be connected. I don't believe in coincidences. You look pretty good, considering, but how's Kelly?"

„She's fine, Charlie. Thanks for asking. She's at home recuperating. But it'll be a while before she's well enough to come back.“

Jules cleared his throat before excusing himself, leaving Charlie alone with John. He now had another problem. What if John unloaded accusations on Charlie?

But it didn't happen. The two men remaining in the lab continued talking about the events of the last several days... two GHI scientists nearly killed and a shipment to Africa that was ambushed with several fatalities. Both agreed that it was a strange set of circumstances.

The conversation clarified some things, and John hadn't revealed anything. He didn't need to. Charlie wasn't coy about anything. He was genuinely concerned about his employees. Ironically, it was Charlie who had the most lab access. If one or both of the owners was involved in using inventory illegally, Charlie was the logical one. But he wasn't involved; John was sure of it. Not only that, it hadn't escaped Charlie that Jules acted strangely when leaving. It would be normal to stay with him and John while they conversed. Instead, he'd abruptly departed when Charlie entered, as if he had been waiting for an excuse to leave. John was one of their star employees, and Jules should have been more concerned. It led to another discussion.

Confronted

Charlie decided to suit-up to check something. John had accomplished his objective and decided to leave. As he departed the lab and started down the main corridor, he met a few associates who were concerned about him and Kelly, so he didn't move too fast. Before he got farther, he encountered Jules, Hanson, and Irina standing in the corridor leading to the lobby, looking at him, partially blocking the path. They had been huddled together, not anticipating him leaving so early. They stood together, but no one seemed to know what to do next. John picked up the pace; looking straight at them saying, „Get out of my way.“

They split apart immediately, letting him pass, all looking at the others, expecting someone else to do something. Such fucking wimps. He continued on toward the lobby with several startled onlookers all wondering why he'd been so rude to the executives.

John felt good leaving the building. He had figured some things out. It was all subjective, but the body language had said enough. He now knew that Jules was involved.

Meanwhile, in Jules' office, the conspirators were meeting behind closed doors. Jules was sitting, looking at his steepled fingers while Hanson ranted. „We've got to do something. That guy's dangerous, he knows too much.“

„What do you suggest, Matt?“ Jules was less deliberative in his words and continued sarcastically, „You want to have him killed? It's probably the only way

to stop him. And—oh gee—that idea's been tried, more than once! One of you geniuses, or both, have messed things up from the start." Jules didn't really know, or want to know, who was behind the murder plots. He hadn't looked at either of them.

"On the contrary." Irina didn't like the older man's scorn. "My plan was working perfectly, making you a rich man, until this bumpkin got involved." She looked at Hanson.

He recoiled. "Hey, Grizelda! Watch your ugly mouth. I got the in-country feet you needed." Hanson really hated the female scientist. What a group, inseparably bound together in crime, yet loathing each other. None could trust the others but had no choice.

"Stop it, both of you!" Jules' composure was shattered. Less than a month earlier, he'd received accolades from his peers around the world. Now he was in a deadly plot with morons who would surely send them all to prison for life and destroy the Institute. *How could anything get so fucked up so fast?* It took a special combination of ignorance and brilliance.

The phone rang, and Jules excused the other two who disappeared into some dark cavern elsewhere in the building, probably Irina's office, to continue plotting. He was sick of it. "Hello!"

Marie knew he was on edge. "It's Mr. Osborne, Jules."

"Oh." He paused for a moment to compose himself. "Jim, it's good to hear from you. How are our friends from the sand country doing? Any money on the table, yet?" He did his best to sound aloof.

"Not yet, Jules. But I have a problem; you've got a problem, and I want some straight answers."

"Ah... Okay, shoot." *Great, another headache.*

Osborne had anger laced throughout every word. "I just heard that the Commerce Department was sending some Special Agents to your place to seize all records and lock you down."

"What! Impossible! Why would they do that?"

Osborne wasn't in a casual mood. After all, he'd been the one to polish the resume for GHI and sell it to the Saudis. There'd been consistent dialogue about him only representing the buyers, but it wasn't altogether true. His credentials were on the line, which meant more to him than the commissions on one small deal. "I'm not going to tell you who, but I just got the call, and I want to know what's up, Jules."

Jules' head pounded. "Jim, I... I don't know what to say, I don't know anything about any Federal Agents."

"Don't be cute with me, Jules. I can smell a rat deal a mile away, and you've got a serious problem. I heard something about illegal exporting. Sound familiar?"

"Look, I can't say anything more now, I'll call you back." He slammed the receiver down.

Vindication

The neck of the second gin bottle teetered in his hands between his knees. John sat slumped on his second-hand sofa with no plans for the future. He'd come to GHI right out of college and planned to stay for life if he liked it. Now, he'd lost his girl, nearly been killed twice and, for all intentions, lost his job. Doing the right thing hadn't amounted to much. Africans were dying, murdered by a virus from his lab and many people now knew it, including the police, yet nothing was being done to stop it. He lifted the bottle and took a long gulp, gagging as the liquid burned and spilling down his neck onto his bare chest.

The confrontation with Jules was the final action he planned to take. It was over. The only person he respected at the Institute now was Charlie Ritter. He was the last person John had spoken to. Charlie didn't seem to believe what John said. If he did, maybe he could do something, but what? GHI was his life too, just like Jules. Would he destroy a lifetime of work out of principle? Not likely... John took another deep gulp.

His head was spinning and his physical dexterity was going away fast. He was drunk and hated it. He'd never liked the feeling and now he was alone, really alone, with no thoughts of the future and no past that he could go back to. Gort! Gort was the answer. John would go back to the island and take over Gort's business. He would convince Mary to come back to the Island, and they could live in Gort's cottage and eat lobster pie, lobster pizza, lobster bisque, lobster cakes... for the rest of their lives. It didn't get any more peaceful than that. He could be happy. He set the bottle on the floor near his feet and stretched out on the couch. He could sleep for days after all that had happened. *Shit, what else is there to do now?*

The morning, however, brought a different reality with a head ready to explode and a mouth trampled by a thousand wild horses. He had been drunk once before after a tough mission with his Marine buddies, and he'd sworn it would never happen again, but here he was. He struggled up and stumbled to the bathroom for something to help dull the pain. His mouth felt awful and he probably had the breath of a camel.

While he lumbered around feeling sorry for himself, Charlie had spent a sleepless night. John's assertions had been so outrageous that they might have been true. He couldn't sleep. For over twenty years he'd worked unfailingly, building a wonderful institution to help mankind. They had found ways to predict and stop Ebola virus! Had it really all been a lie? He had both hated and loved Irina Petronova. She was the worst human he knew, yet she had broken the code, she'd actually learned to model viral mutations. But John said it was a sham, it never was true. Worse, she'd been responsible for hundreds or thousands of deaths using germs cultivated at GHI, his Institute!

It had taken a few hours during the night when he couldn't sleep to convince himself that the discrepancies in Lorne Bridger's records were accurate. There was no proof, but Charlie had enough respect and confidence in his former colleague to trust his records even more than the expansive information system kept by Hanson. Hell, the official Institute records could be modified easily by someone with the right system access and motivation to do it—Hansen. How could he not see it? He was the Chief Operating Officer and knew all the employees; he knew all the scientists like his own children. That's why it had to be true. Everything John

Hollis told him was true. Irina was evil, and Hanson was a greedy murderous bastard. He would have fired her years earlier if her scheme with the accountant hadn't changed everything. It had all been a lie.

In the early morning, before dawn, Charlie's wife awoke, finding him slumped on the side of their bed, unmoving, focused somewhere in space. „Charlie... are you all right?“

He turned to her and kissed her gently. „No“ was all that he said.

An hour later at the Institute, before Jules could organize his thoughts following Osborne's call, there was a knock, and Charlie came into the office, closing the door behind him. The two had known each other for their entire professional careers and Jules could read his partner's mood. Charlie stood speechless for several seconds before taking a seat, speaking slowly but directly at his partner in an accusing tone. „We have a problem, Jules.“

„Now look, Charlie, I don't need any more grief. Can't this wait?“

Charlie looked at his colleague and then spoke softly. „I called the Customs Office in Baltimore. There should be some officers here in a little while.“

Jules was furious; he stood, not knowing what to say next. „What... why?“

„You know why, Jules. I wish it weren't so, but I think you know it all.“

„What are you talking about?“ He wasn't a good actor.

„Stop playing games! We've known each other a long time.“ One thing Jules could never doubt was Charlie's ethics.

„Jules just shrugged and sat back down. „What do you want to know?“

„All of it, tell me everything from the beginning.“

Charlie already knew most of it. John had told him what he knew, and Charlie had gone into the containment area checking samples. He then went to Matt Hanson, demanding to know how the inventory records got changed. The physical inventory and the records were in complete accord. The problem with that was Lorne Bridger's worksheet. Charlie had known Lorne as long as Jules but had been much closer personally. Both were lab researchers with impeccable credentials, respect and shared values. The moment John described the worksheet that Lorne had developed secretly, Charlie knew Lorne had discovered something... something terribly wrong; he believed it immediately. It took only moments to realize that Hanson was involved, along with Irina and probably Jules. He didn't care that the Saudi deal would fail; he only wanted the Institute to survive. Even if they couldn't really predict the next virus, they were doing other important work, and the greed of a few people was threatening the entire creditability of GHI. They could destroy GHI and the reputations of everyone associated with it. Charlie listened patiently, asking very few questions. Jules laid it all out.

Jules finished, then pleaded, „Charlie, you can't let this get out. It'll kill us. We'll get nothing. The Institute will fail, and we'll all go to jail!“

Charlie stood and grasped the doorknob. „No, Jules; you're wrong. You and your friends will all go to jail for the rest of your lives. I will do everything in my power to save the Institute, but you are all going to fall; I'll make sure of it.“ He turned to leave.

Jules' normal confidence and composure was shattered. „Charlie, you can't do this! I'm not the guilty person here. If you're not careful the whole place could be lost, we could be broke!“

Charlie turned back, remaining characteristically cool, unfazed by his partner's words. „Do you think I don't know this? Don't even try to play innocent with me. You're in this up to your earlobes. I don't know when you got involved, but you're sure as hell in it. Don't try to lie about it. You and your conspirators killed my friend, our friend, and you killed Dr. Van Aiker. You killed countless others in Africa! For what, Jules... for money? Hell, we had a good business here. We weren't going to be millionaires, but the Government paid good money for our R&D... but you couldn't be happy with that. You had to go for the big bucks! When did you lose sight of the founding principles that we had when we formed GHI?“ Charlie was red-faced and could feel his blood pressure rising.

Jules shriveled, slumped in his chair behind the big desk. His eyes pleaded, and his voice was weak. „Charlie, please, don't do this. I... I didn't know Irina and Matt were doing this.“ It was one last feeble plea.

Charlie felt some sympathy, but not much. „Look Jules, I don't believe you conspired with anyone in the beginning, but somewhere along the way you got involved. Your scruples failed you. You once took an oath to do no harm. That should have been your guiding principle. Other medical people have fallen from grace; you're not the first, but there's no coming back once fallen. Once you abandon your faith, it's a one-way street.“

Jules was looking at his hands folded in his lap. „We'll lose it all if you give us up.“

Charlie had his hand on the door knob. „Stop it. Don't expect me to pity you. You're a dead man as far as I'm concerned.“ He let go of the door and faced Jules for one last statement. „I'll tell you what, Jules. You will confess everything you know. Your testimony will convict Matt and Irina, who will face capital charges. You'll go to prison for a long term, maybe the rest of your life. I am going to rebuild our Institute. I may need to start from scratch or even below that with the stigma, but I'll bring it back. You will sign over all of your shares to treasury stock that I can use to attract and reward good people who join me. You will relinquish all ownership claims. You won't need it where you're going.“

The reality of his situation hit him like a train. Jules' mind hadn't fully comprehended the finality of it all until Charlie's ultimatum. „Charlie! What are you talking about? I haven't been convicted of anything. Hell, there's no proof!“

He'd never been overt or assertive since forming GHI with his partners, but Charlie was taking command like a field general facing impossible odds. He stepped to the edge of the desk and glared down at his former friend. „Don't go there, Jules. I'm the proof. I can validate everything. I've seen the reports, both Lorne's and the company's system; I've counted the live virus. I'm the expert who will tip the scales. You can be one hundred percent sure that I can prove it all. Do you really want to confront me in court?“ Jules didn't answer, but remained a shrunken, beaten man. Charlie turned and left for the lobby to wait for the Customs Agents.

Failings

A large white van pulled into the parking lot half an hour later. It had a wide green stripe and logo from the Department of Homeland Security. Charlie watched as four agents, three men and one woman all dressed in business suits, walked toward the entrance. He greeted them at the door. They displayed their credentials and signed the register before following Charlie toward the Executive wing. They had only progressed halfway when Marie came screaming down the hall toward them, collapsing in Charlie's arms. „He's... Jules... he's..." she could only point and the Agents ran with Charlie to Jules' office. It was a ghastly scene.

Jules was hanging from the ceiling fixture with his calves brushing the desktop. His shoes twitched above the ground. His necktie was a noose. Marie had heard a crash as he stepped off the desk. He twitched and flailed, gasping involuntarily, fighting for breath. His neck didn't break, and he was strangling to death. His face was swollen and dark red.

Two Agents grabbed Jules' legs and held him up while Charlie climbed up to untie him. It took several seconds to loosen the knot from the ceiling and several more seconds to loosen the tie around his windpipe. Jules' face was getting darker and his lips were blue. He had no detectable pulse. Two agents began CPR while Marie called 911.

By the time the EMTs arrived, Jules had experienced agony to no avail. He had been wheeled to the ambulance, handcuffed to a gurney.

Hanson, Petronova and Cooper were absent from the Institute but captured that same day. Hanson surrendered at home and Cooper was found at home in bed recovering from injuries after „falling down stairs.“ Petronova was arrested as she tried to board a plane for Argentina.

Jules had survived only to be ultimately convicted of conspiring to provide biologic agents to terrorists and mass killings of African civilians. He would serve twenty-five-to-life, only because he cooperated with the prosecutor.

Hanson and Petronova were both convicted of attempted murder and crimes against humanity. They were both incarcerated for life without possibility of parole. Cooper testified against the other two and got a fifteen-year sentence for attempted murder. No one was convicted for Lorne Bridger's death.

The Institute's reputation was blemished but not destroyed. Charlie made it his mission to rebuild.

Reconciled

Charlie tried calling John Hollis after Jules was arrested and removed from the building, but there was no answer, so he drove to his apartment. The vision of Jules hanging himself haunted Charlie, and he knew John was depressed. Charlie pounded on the door. At first, it seemed like a dull rhythm far away to John, but it grew louder and more persistent.

John wore jeans with no shirt. He rolled off of the couch, kicking an empty bottle as he attempted to stand. Pressure behind his eyes narrowed his vision and his equilibrium was shot. That damn knocking hurt his ears. „All right! Stop banging on the door. I'm coming.“

He rested his head on his forearm braced against the door frame. Maybe he'd imagined the door pounding. He reached down for the knob which wasn't locked and opened the door a crack. „Yeah?“ He was shocked to see Charlie Ritter outside and fumbled to open the door further.

Charlie stepped back a half step. John smelled bad and had the breath of a corpse. „Ah, John, have you been drinking?“

The younger man stared dumbfounded before nodding, „Yeah... yes, I guess I had one too many last night; this morning... What time is it?“

„It's afternoon, John. Look, get dressed and I'll take you to breakfast.“

John looked at his boss momentarily then closed the door without comment. After several minutes, Charlie was going to knock again when the door opened. At least John was going to listen to what he was about to tell him.

Resurrection

Jules confessed after being arrested and the others all hired lawyers and invented cases against each other. Following Jules' conviction, the others fought through several trials and appeals, but ultimately lost on all counts.

The damage to GHI was severe and the stigma might never be completely erased. In reality, it served as an example to the world of the thin protections that exist over potentially catastrophic weapons. Charlie remained as the only active owner at GHI, and Carol Bridger had equal voting rights. She agreed with his vision for the Institute. They no longer claimed ability to forecast Ebola outbreaks, but developed vaccines for other diseases. BSL 4 was eliminated at the Institute and the floor space used as a storage area.

Charlie wanted to reward John. The kid had stuck his neck out a mile and nearly been killed doing it. He'd also lost the person he loved when Kelly left. John didn't know his status when the conspiracy had crumbled. He assumed the worst. He could not have been more wrong or more shocked when Charlie asked him to join him again as Director of Laboratory Operations. He felt both relieved and grateful, accepting the position without reservation. It wasn't the same job that it would have been if GHI had actually retained its status, but it had a special new appeal for the challenge it represented like a new startup laboratory. He had a large percentage of the ownership options that might even be worth something in the decades ahead. He would never let that thought cloud his dedication to the principles and ethics of the „new“ GHI.

It took several months to get things reorganized. Many of the technicians and scientists had resigned to avoid being tainted by the GHI label, and the commercial partnerships had all been dissolved. Only a few on-going US Government projects continued. The math and simulation department was eliminated, and the Institute resumed its focus on basic biotechnology research.

John had had a close bond with Lorne Bridger and was forming a similar relationship with Charlie. They shared common values. John was satisfied most of the time with his new role, although he still suffered from the void left by Kelly. He'd almost called her several times, but never finished. She'd been willing to leave him, even eager and she never contacted him after leaving. He was moving on with his life, determined to forget her. He immersed himself in work, often staying late into the night, then going home for a frozen dinner. There was no alcohol at his apartment.

He now used an office in the executive suite, next to Charlie. Jules' former office became a filing and storage room. They met informally each morning to discuss the projects. There weren't many, but it was enough to pay the bills. It wasn't an exciting business, although it was occasionally rewarding when a discovery looked promising. They had been awarded some new R&D projects and began a slow recruiting process. Vetting of new candidates included a close assessment of personal values and ethics. There would never be a repeat of the conspiracy that had nearly destroyed them. They'd struggled for several months after GHI was lambasted in the news. Some of the Government grants had been cancelled, and there was only a small amount of funding to continue their most important research projects. Sponsors began returning slowly after the reorganization and considerable effort by Charlie and John in „selling“ the reformed Institute. John was content, if not necessarily happy, much of the time.

Half a year later, Charlie asked John to walk with him on an inspection of all the labs. It was one of the routines they had begun after reorganization. It ended at the old BSL4 lab, now BSL2. Charlie paused longer than usual. John looked at Charlie, then through the glass wall into the empty chamber with its silent robotic arms. Charlie saw John's longing stare. „Kinda wish it hadn't gone down this way, huh?“

John continue staring into the glass, „Yeah, but I guess we just need to keep looking forward and forget about the past.“ Then he looked at Charlie. „Don't ever let money rule your life—that's the lesson from all of this, isn't it? Good people can go bad... really bad... killing people bad, but they weren't genetically born to be that way. Money did it here.“

Charlie looked through the glass again. „Ain't it the truth. Come on, I'll buy you a cup of coffee.“

It was another common ritual for the two most senior employees to go on breaks together. John followed his boss to the small cafeteria, and allowed Charlie to pour him a black cup of not-so-fresh java. His back was to the entrance when she entered. He turned around and froze, unable to move. She was dressed in a white lab coat, looking more beautiful than John had remembered. He stared, almost paralyzed. „What ...“

She didn't move either, equally stunned. Charlie broke the silence. „John, meet your new Senior Biotechnology Scientist assigned to BSL2.“

She looked puzzled, not addressing John but keeping eye contact with him. „Charlie, I thought you said he took a new job?“

Charlie smiled. „He did! He's our OPs Director now, for all the labs.“

John was still speechless, locked in her gaze. The last time they'd seen each other, she was bandaged, recovering from surgery and leaving him. Charlie

continued. „Well, I need to get on with other things. John, why don't you show Dr. Egan how things are set up now?“ He left without waiting for a response.

They were alone, both just looking at each other. If other employees passed along the outer corridor and saw them through the glass wall, none stopped to gawk.

„Ah... welcome back, Dr. Egan.“ He still hadn't moved.

She had a slight smile. „Thank you, Mr. Hollis. Are you gonna show me around?“

They walked and talked for about half an hour about all the changes at the Institute, ending in his new office. John was conflicted, not knowing what else to say or how to begin. He wasn't sure about their relationship, or even if there was a relationship. Kelly's parents had built a barricade between them in the hospital, and she had accepted it. *Why was she back?* „Ah...can I get you something?“

She had a serious expression, which softened as she spoke. „Not now. I'm guessing you're wondering about why I'm back?“ He didn't have a response. „Charlie called me a couple of weeks ago and explained how everyone was arrested, and explained how he was putting the Institute back together. Now, I guess that he's also a match-maker. He said you no longer worked in the lab and kinda implied that you were gone. I just assumed that you left the Institute.“

He started to respond, but she interrupted. „He also told me something else. He told me how you'd figured out the whole thing and done some dangerous things that could have gotten you put in jail for a very long time.“ John didn't know what, if anything, to say, so she continued. „Charlie said it was all over, and I could feel safe. I even called Mary to see if she was all right, and she told me how you'd saved her life. John, you brought this whole thing to an end single-handedly.“

He was slow to respond. Nothing she did signaled anything personal between them. He stammered. „I just realized that there wasn't any other way to end it, and it had to end. People were dying. I was just happy that Charlie backed me. There are great people working here, doing important work. That means more to Charlie and me than money. He lost two close friends, Lorne and Jules, but feels strongly about the Institute.“

She smiled. „He also thinks a lot of you professionally and personally.“

He shrugged and looked away. „I'm glad someone did.“

„John, if it's all right with you, I'd like to think we might still have a chance together.“

He was quiet for a moment and just looked at her. „Kelly, it's all I've ever wanted, I was destroyed without you. But what about your parents... they hate me.“

„You saw them at their worst, John. I wasn't in a condition to argue with them and was blinded by pain. They don't know everything that happened, and they don't know you, the real you. For now, let's leave them out of the formula.“

He smiled. „Okay, so how should we begin?“

„I was thinking about a weekend together on an Island off the coast of Maine.“

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