

Prologue

Alex checked his watch for the tenth time in less than twenty minutes. 5:50 PM.

Where are they?

He had started to lose his patience early, which came as no surprise. He had been lying under the McCarthy's play set for nearly an hour, as a vicious Nor'easter dumped thick waves of snow on him. This would be enough to test anyone's patience...and physical limits.

He lowered his night vision scope for a moment and rubbed his eyes. Now, even the green image in the scope added to his discomfort. He just hoped that Charlie was keeping a better watch over the stretch of ground that defined the ambush site.

He'd better be, or they could stumble right through here undetected.

Alex had doubts about spotting them with his night vision scope. The near absence of ambient light, combined with a blinding snowstorm, continued to degrade the already grainy image formed by the inexpensive first generation night scope.

He twisted open the green ceramic thermos, and poured the last of the hot tea prepared for him by Kate. He sipped the steaming tea from the thermos cap, and placed the cap down next to the rifle in front of him and took another look through the night vision. He could still see the Hayes' house, but the image was even grainier. He knew the batteries were not the issue; he'd just changed them. Soon enough, he'd have to rely solely on Charlie to spot them in time to spring a coordinated ambush. If not, he'd have to take the three men down himself, which wasn't optimal, but was still well within his range of capabilities. He didn't want to think about what could happen if they slipped by him. Nothing would stand between these psychopaths and his family.

As long as I see them before they're right on top of me I'll be fine.

Alex swigged the rest of the warm tea and replaced the lid. He tucked the thermos into his backpack and checked his rifle again. Looking through the Aimpoint scope, he saw that the red dot still glowed brightly in the center of the sight. He pulled back on the AR-15's charging handle, and ejected the bullet loaded in the chamber, leaving the brass cartridge in the snow where two other bullets lay. He'd ejected one bullet every half hour to ensure that the freezing temperatures had not affected the weapon's mechanical action. A malfunction tonight would spell disaster.

He suffered a sudden, violent, and insuppressible full body shiver, which rendered him useless for a few seconds. He couldn't last out here all night, and he knew it. He looked through the night vision scope again, and the green image confirmed that he was still alone. Staring through the scope, he wondered how it was possible for things to have spiraled so far out of control.

So far gone, in fact, that he now found himself lying under a neighbor's play set in a blizzard, eagerly waiting to kill. He never thought twice about doing this in Iraq. It was his mission. He didn't really have any problem with it here either, and he could rationalize this act on

several levels. He had to do it: for the good of the neighborhood, and probably society in general; but most importantly...for the immediate safety of his family.

And in the end, that was all that really counted for Alex.

Arrival

Chapter One

Friday, November 2, 2013

Alex was jarred awake by a loud pulsing vibration. He squinted in the darkness, and labored to turn his head toward the source of the persistent buzzing sound.

Shit, my iPhone.

The phone's display illuminated a half empty glass of water on the nightstand. He watched, still helpless as the phone moved closer to the edge with each vibration. Breaking through the murk of a broken sleep cycle, he reached for the phone to check the caller ID. *Maine Medical Center*. A jolt of adrenaline shot through his body, and Alex headed out of the bedroom to the hallway.

"Alex Fletcher," he answered in a whisper.

"Oh...Alex. It's Dr. Wright. I thought I'd get your voicemail."

Dr. Wright was the head of the Maine Medical Center's Infectious Disease Department.

"No problem, Dr. Wright. I usually don't keep my phone on the nightstand. Just happened to end up there tonight," he said, closing the door to the master bedroom.

"I'm glad you're awake, Alex. I'm fairly confident we've seen our first cases of the new pandemic flu tonight. Cases started rolling into the ER's early this evening."

"You said 'ER's'. More than one?"

"Yes. Three cases at Maine Med. Two came from Westbrook and one from Falmouth. And one case at Mercy, patient walked over from somewhere in the west end. I also have a confirmed case at Maine General in Augusta, and possible cases at Eastern Maine Med up in Bangor."

"Confirmed as what?"

"Confirmed as nothing I've ever seen before. That's why I think we're dealing with this new virus out of Hong Kong," said Dr. Wright.

"That's more than six cases. How did this pop up here first and not Boston? It doesn't make a lot of sense."

"Boston has been hit with several dozen cases, possibly more."

"What do you mean? I didn't see anything on the news, or on any of the websites. We've been keeping an eye on this," Alex said.

"I don't know what to tell you, but I know for a fact that Boston has been slammed. A friend of mine at Mass General called to tell me to get ready. He said that area hospitals in Boston saw dozens of cases trickle in overnight Wednesday, with more showing up as the day progressed. Several dozen more by the time I talked to him."

"Why didn't the media catch this yet?" he asked.

"Well, between you and me, and I don't have to remind you that this entire conversation never happened-"

"Of course. Absolutely, Dr. Wright," Alex said instantly.

"We have been instructed by the state health department to report all cases directly to them so they can coordinate resources and notify federal health agencies. I assume that direction filtered down from DHS. They also asked us not to notify the media, in order to avoid a panic. I can understand part of that logic, but if you ask me, I think they're trying to keep this under wraps because they're not prepared. Unfortunately, this is the only direction we've received so

far from the state or feds. Or maybe that's a good thing for now. Aside from rushing us more useless avian flu detection kits, nothing else has been done. Alex, I have to let you go. I have a long night ahead of me."

"Sorry to hold you up. Thank you for the call, Dr. Wright. I really appreciate the heads up, seriously. The preliminary case fatality rates in Asia look high."

"Yeah, we're not taking any chances. This is different than the Avian Flu, which was bad enough. It makes the Swine Flu look like a common cold. And thanks for making a trip over here yesterday, especially considering the fact that the state's anti-viral stockpiles will fall under federal control if the flu spirals out of control. Your samples will really come in handy."

"Could you use some more? We've been instructed to keep our distribution of TerraFlu to a minimum, but I have no problem hooking you guys up. Really."

"I'll take whatever you can give me at this point, but I don't want you to get in trouble with Biosphere, Alex."

"I'm not worried about them. What time works for you tomorrow? My schedule is pretty clear, so I can make a trip over any time."

"How about 12:45? I plan to be back from the hospital at that point. My first patient is at one. We could take care of it then," said Dr. Wright.

"Works for me. See you at 12:45. Good luck tonight," Alex said, and waited for a reply, but the line was already dead.

He headed back into the bedroom, and looked over at Kate, who was soundly asleep. He walked over to her and kissed her on the forehead. She barely moved.

He left the bedroom and walked to his home office, activated his computer, and checked the *Boston Globe* and *Boston Herald*. *Still nothing.*

He checked the International Scientific Pandemic Awareness Collaborative (ISPAC) website, and navigated to their pandemic activity map. The map had changed dramatically since he'd last seen it, and was now interactively linked to Google Earth.

Color coded symbols represented reported flu locations, and when you passed the mouse over one of the new icons, basic information appeared in a text box, which could be further expanded for more detailed information. Light blue: cases of interest, Yellow: initial outbreak, Orange: small scale outbreak, Red: medium sized outbreak, Violet: large scale outbreak.

He zoomed in on North America.

Cases in Canada, Mexico, Central America...wait, wait, look at this, Los Angeles, San Diego and San Francisco. He looked at the East Coast and saw no colored icons. Alex adjusted the map to focus on southern California, and placed the cursor over the yellow Los Angeles icon.

"Los Angeles. Population 4,089,245. Isolated outbreaks. 190+ cases reported. Uncontained. Isolated outbreaks among ethnic Asian populations."

In a separate desktop window, he navigated to the *Los Angeles Times* homepage. He looked for the California/Local section. *Here we go.* He found an article and began to read:

Hong Kong Flu Hits Asian Community.

Cedars Sinai confirms at least a dozen cases of Hong Kong Flu. Mainly confined to Asian community. UCLA Medical Center confirms several cases. Mainly Asian community. East LA Doctor's Hospital sees its first cases late in the evening on October 31. Community leaders decry nearly one day delay in reporting cases to the public. Employee at Cedars Sinai contacts Los Angeles Times with information about suspected flu cases. Cases were being kept isolated

from other patients, and under a tight information seal. Times reporters launched an immediate investigation into all area hospitals, uncovering several dozen more cases."

Looks like a cover up.

Alex put the cursor over the yellow San Francisco icon: *"San Francisco. Population 853,758. Isolated outbreaks. 100+ cases reported. Uncontained. Isolated outbreaks among ethnic Asian populations."*

He then moved the cursor south to San Diego and placed it over the yellow icon.

He changed the view to China, and saw that dozens of southern coastal cities were shaded either orange or red; Hong Kong and the surrounding areas were shaded violet. He passed the mouse over one of these areas:

"Greater Guangzhou city. Population 12,100,000. Massive outbreak. 8,000+ reported cases. Uncontained. Containment efforts focused on Guangdong Province."

8,000 plus cases in one city? I thought there were only 26,000 altogether in China yesterday?

Alex passed the mouse over a few more cities in the area around Hong Kong, and saw similar text fields. He quickly added up the other numbers, and calculated roughly 77,000 reported cases in southern China.

He zoomed out of China, and settled on a world view. Colored dots appeared to sweep outward in a concentric wave from Southeast Asia. A solid perimeter of blue dots extended from Japan, through South Korea and Vladivostok, then reached across northern China and connected with Pakistan and India. India was covered in blue dots and yellow dots; orange icons appeared centered over several major cities within India. Oddly, Java Island contained no dots. He placed the cursor over Java.

"Java Island. Population 150,000,000. No reports."

Something's up over there.

Beyond Asia's ring, blue colored dots littered every continent, concentrated on nearly every major city. He almost wished he hadn't seen the map. He felt his stomach churn as a wave of anxiety blanketed him. Still, he walked back to the bedroom and lay down next to Kate, feeling secure lying there with her. He closed his eyes and started breathing deeply in a futile attempt to induce sleep.

Chapter Two

Friday, November 2, 2013

Alex's body shuddered and his eyes flashed open. He searched the bright room to confirm that he was still lying in bed with his wife, Kate, in their Scarborough, Maine home. His heart pounded through his shallow breath. He touched his forehead with the back of his right hand, and wiped the sweat on his gray T-shirt, leaving a dark stain near the neck.

Jesus. I don't ever want to see that bridge again.

He turned his head to look at his wife. Kate's face was turned away, and she had the covers pulled up over her neck, and all he could see was her jet black hair.

Thank god she didn't wake up. I don't need her starting in on the VA counseling again.

He'd had successfully dodged a phone call to the Togus Veteran's hospital for the better part of nine years.

He sat up in bed slowly, careful not to wake Kate. The sky to the east was clear, and the room was aglow with pre-dawn light. Alex slid out of bed, walked over to Kate's side, and kissed her on the forehead. Her head stirred slightly, and she settled back into the pillow, her mouth forming a nearly imperceptible smile. She looked peaceful buried under the covers, and he watched her for a few more moments, trapped by her tranquility. Kate slept soundly every night. His heart was still thumping rapidly as he walked quietly to the master bathroom.

Several minutes later, in his home office, he sat down to check for any updates to the flu situation, and navigated to his internet homepage. He scanned the national and international headline summary section of the homepage, and shook his head slowly:

China Acknowledges Deadly Disease Within Border; China Imposed Quarantine To Keep Deadly Disease Out; Unknown Disease Spreads Through China; China Admits WHO (World Health Organization) Teams To Outbreak Areas; Deadly Disease Outbreak In China.

No surprises here. Only took them two days to acknowledge what the rest of the world already knew.

He clicked on an *Associated Press* article and shook his head again.

Fucking Chinese.

Alex exited the kids' bathroom dressed and freshly showered, having lost his bid for the master bathroom. He quietly descended the hardwood stairs and eased into the kitchen unnoticed. The smell of coffee overtook him as he surveyed the area. A small sauce pot simmered on the stainless steel gas range, cooking what he really hoped was something other than Kate's lumpy oatmeal. A red toaster just to the left of the stove promised to deliver a more suitable breakfast alternative. A glass of orange juice, two open bread loaves and several containers sat in disarray on the black granite kitchen island. Kate moved quickly between the island, refrigerator and stove.

Kate was dressed in a knee length navy blue skirt, and a pressed French blue shirt. Her navy blue suit coat lay folded over the back of one of the black high-back stools at the kitchen island. Her hair, arranged in a tight pony tail, starkly contrasted her deep blue eyes and fair

complexion. Compared to Kate, Alex looked like he just returned from a Caribbean vacation, owing to a mix of Sicilian and Irish genes. His black hair was not as pure as Kate's, but his eyes shared the same deep blue color. The toaster popped.

"Toast's ready!" Kate said, as she turned around and saw Alex. "Oh, hey. Good workout?"

"Not bad. Quick one. I didn't get up in time for a run...up a little late last night. I got a call on my cell from one of my infectious disease doctors," he said.

"What time?" she asked, eyeing him warily.

"Just past midnight. He thinks this mystery flu has already hit Portland," he told her, putting both hands on the island.

"What makes him so sure? We haven't seen anything on the internet, or the news."

"I think we might be a day behind the West Coast. After I talked to him, I saw some articles published out of LA referencing possible cases, and the ISPAC website lists LA and San Francisco as having several dozen confirmed cases of the new flu. Dr. Wright also said that the cases didn't resemble anything he's seen before. I think he tried to run some lab tests, and came up empty."

"Did he say that?" Kate pressed.

"No, but he definitely said the cases didn't resemble anything he's seen before. I don't think he was talking about symptoms."

Alex heard some mumbling from the great room, and glanced toward the sound of the voice. He saw that the family room LCD TV was fully operational, set to the Military Channel. Their twelve year old son, Ryan, scurried into the kitchen to collect his breakfast. He was already dressed for school, in faded blue jeans and a red long sleeved rugby shirt. Ryan shared the same hair color as his father, but little else. He was born with emerald green eyes, and his mother's fair skin.

"What's up Mr. Man?" Alex said to his son.

"Not much, Dad. Hey, are you picking me up today after cross-country?"

"Yep, 4:45 right?"

"Sure, but around back so I don't have to walk around to the school pickup circle."

"I certainly wouldn't want to add another hundred yards to your workout."

"None of the parents pick their kids up at the circle, Dad."

"You are as right as your mother."

"You're in a slightly antagonistic mood this morning," Kate said.

"Yeah, I feel like pushing it today," replied Alex.

He smiled at Kate and raised his eyebrows. Ryan continued past his dad and pulled a plate out of the cabinet over the coffee maker. He slathered a piece of toast with butter and raspberry jam.

"Did you see what's going on in the Orient?" asked Alex.

"Nice. Could you find a few more politically incorrect terms to slip into your conversations? Don't listen to your dad, Ryan," she said, and turned back to the range.

Ryan looked up at his mother, then shifted his glance to his dad. Alex raised his shoulder and mouthed the words, "I don't know."

Ryan returned to the family room and the volume from the great room TV increased.

"Mom, can you get my juice for me?" Ryan yelled over the noise.

"Can you grab that for his royal highness?" Kate said to Alex.

"Surely my royal queen," he replied and delivered the glass to his son.

“Hey, should I teach Ryan the Chinese national anthem? Me Chinese...me play joke?” asked Alex.

“You could probably skip it and we’d all be fine. So what’s happening in China?”

“They finally admitted to a full scale outbreak of some mystery virus in the south, and they also claim to have imposed their one way travel ban because they were confident the disease didn’t originate in China. They were trying to keep it out,” he said, shaking his head.

“How does that make any sense? So they tried to keep the virus from entering their own country, but did nothing to keep it from spreading outside of China?”

“Apparently, they’re convinced the epicenter is somewhere else. Hey, give them a break. At least they didn’t keep it a secret for three weeks like in 2008. I read an Associated Press article, and one of the Chinese officials sounded proud of their new transparency efforts, like they did a much better job handling the issue this time.”

Alex lowered his voice. “It’s unbelievable really. Just like in 2003, when they put their first astronaut into orbit. Who gives a shit? It took them forty years to finally steal enough information about our rocket program to put a human in space. Congratulations. And now? Well, now they only sit on information critical to mankind’s survival for two days, instead of weeks. I don’t think we can ever trust them. I have a bad feeling about this one,” he said.

“Whatever it is, we’ll be fine,” Kate answered.

“Hey, I’m gonna eat and run. Emily’s in the shower, so she should make the bus. I promised the folks at the Mercy ER that I would stock them up with TerraFlu, so I want to hit them early. I guarantee that Biosphere is going to ask us to stop signing over samples,” he said, pulling a coffee mug from the cabinet.

“Is that a big deal? I mean, aside from making your day easier than it already is.”

“Very funny. Samples are scarce already, but eliminating them in the face of a pandemic crisis will not be perceived as a cool move by Biosphere.”

“Can’t the doctors just write a prescription for the pharmacy?”

“Sure, and at this time of year, the pharmacies should be well stocked with anti-virals, but most of the offices are looking for any reason to stop seeing reps, and they barely tolerate us as it is. It’ll get ugly quick if Biosphere restricts samples.”

“They won’t buy off on the ‘greater good of the community’ speech? Stockpiling drugs for the national pandemic response?” Kate asked.

“Would you?”

“Probably not,” she admitted.

“Especially when they know for a fact that they won’t see any of it when the shit hits the fan. Health and Human Services will swoop down and grab it all for selected treatment centers,” he said.

“Sucks to be you today,” Kate taunted.

“Let’s hope not,” Alex said as he walked over to fix some breakfast.

“Seven o’clock. Turn on the *Today Show*,” Kate said to him.

Alex found the remote and turned on the kitchen TV, just in time to see Matt Lauer appear on the screen. “Someone better say something about the fact that the Chinese sat on this for two days.”

“Good morning, on Friday, November 2nd. The news dominating the thoughts of all Americans today comes to us from Southeast Asia, where the evidence of a growing pandemic virus is mounting. Earlier this morning, Chinese government officials verified that an

unidentified flu strain has caused several major outbreaks in the southern coastal regions of China. They have also confirmed that the cases are not caused by a strain or variant of the H5N1 Avian Flu. This announcement sparked uproar in the scientific community, where fear of another pandemic is rising.”

“Turn it up honey, I can’t hear over that frigging Military Channel,” said Kate.

Alex raised his voice, “Ryan, can you turn that down? We’re trying to listen to something important about the world over here.”

Kate responded first, “Are you seriously going to get into it with him again? Just turn up the volume, please, we’ll miss the whole segment by the time you two figure it out.”

Alex shook his head and raised the volume so he could hear Matt Lauer clearly.

“Thomas McGreggor from the Department of Health and Human Services joins us this morning to shed some light on these developments. Mr. McGreggor, welcome.”

“Thank you, Matt.”

“Now, one of the Department of Health and Human Services’ major roles is to implement the national strategy to prevent or slow a pandemic’s entry into the United States, and to limit the domestic spread of the disease.”

That sounds like a monumental task, and frankly, some experts just don’t think it’s possible for a single department to accomplish these goals. They all seem to agree that the national plan is solid, but argue that very few of the recommendations in the plan have been implemented. The statistics are sobering. Some experts cite a compliance rate of less than ten percent with the plan’s recommendation at local levels, and it appears that little money is flowing down from Washington. Critics also suggest that most of the money is heading overseas to fund the WHO.”

“Certainly these critics like to point fingers at Washington whenever they can, but a pandemic is a complex emergency, requiring an effective and coordinated response on many levels. The bulk of the costs occur once the pandemic strikes, and when this occurs, each state will receive disaster level funding to ensure continuity of pandemic response operations.”

Matt shifted in his seat.

“I don’t know if I agree. Let me read directly from the DHS manual. ‘Ideally, states develop a multilayered strategy that delineates responsibilities at all levels of society to ensure the viability of government functions and services, such as energy, financial, transportation, telecommunications, firefighting and public safety.’ This sounds like an expensive proposition. My parents’ hometown can barely scrape together enough money to repair winter damage to its roads. Where will towns and cities get the money to implement these preparations?”

“Well first, I don’t agree with the statistics that claim only six percent of the national plan is implemented. We’ve seen amazing progress throughout the nation, without reliance on

more federal money. An appropriate level of funding is available at all levels, for implementation of the plan.”

“I hope you’re right, because the situation in China has health officials concerned that the world might be on the verge of a deadly pandemic.”

“Matt, the United States is in good hands. Since 2008, our nation’s pandemic response capability has been vastly improved. From vaccination production and research capability, to anti-viral stockpiling. We learned a lot from the Avian Flu, and applied those lessons to the national plan in place today.”

“So given the events unfolding in Asia, what is DHS’s primary concern at the moment, and what part of the national plan is being implemented?”

“We are working in close coordination with the CDC and WHO to receive real time information regarding all aspects of the crisis. Our number one priority will be to prevent this disease from entering and spreading in the United States. Currently there is no indication that the disease has spread to the United States, though we have activated passive foreign traveler detection protocols. Customs officials have been alerted to identify and track any foreign travelers that appear ill.”

“Is this for real?” Alex said to no one in particular. “It’s already here. How could he not know that? Full of shit.”

Kate silenced him with a hand signal, so she could hear the rest of the segment.

“Will these travelers be detained?” asked Matt.

“Not under passive protocols. Active protocols require a massive personnel increase, as you can imagine, and will be implemented when it is certain that a pandemic grade illness is headed to our borders.”

“Has DHS considered the possibility that the disease has already entered the U.S. in considerable numbers? For nearly three days, travelers have left China for the U.S. and hundreds of other locations abroad, and the ISPAC website indicates that it may have already hit the west coast.”

“We’ve definitely considered this, and fortunately, the number of passengers traveling to the U.S from China within a three day period is small. We are tracking all of these passengers and taking steps to ensure that if any of them are sick with this disease, they will be identified immediately. We feel confident that the disease is limited to China right now. Right now, we are taking the appropriate steps given the information available. And thanks to the Chinese government, the information is flowing much more efficiently than in 2008.

And to address the ISPAC website. None of their figures are official CDC or WHO statistics. If the flu arrives in the U.S., we’ll know first.”

“You’ve gotta be shitting me,” Alex said, clicking the TV off.

Kate stifled a laugh. “That guy didn’t sound very convincing,” she commented.

“If this guy represents the government’s attitude toward the situation, then we’re screwed.”

“Looks like your day is most assuredly going to suck,” Kate said, wearing an overly fake sympathetic face.

“Yeah, I really need to get rolling here.”

Chapter Three

Friday, November 2, 2013

Alex sipped a hot cappuccino and admired the trees that flanked Route One just north of Falmouth's commercial center. After supplying Mercy Hospital's emergency room with at least ten times the amount of TerraFlu drug samples he was currently authorized to distribute, he charged a Starbucks coffee to Biosphere Pharmaceuticals and decided to take a scenic drive north toward Yarmouth. It was a little late for peak leaf peeping, but he wasn't disappointed. Dense marvels of orange, red and brown still served as the foreground for a stark blue sky.

As he left Falmouth, he wondered how many people in town knew about the flu case in their midst.

Probably not very many. They're keeping this quiet for now.

During his visit to the ER, nobody had mentioned the flu case that Dr. Wright said had passed through their doors the night before, and he hadn't seen any unusual signs of activity inside the ER. Not wanting to compromise his source of information, Alex resisted every urge to push for information. The only thing out of order was a single police officer stationed at the ER entrance, chatting with hospital security. He had been through these doors over a hundred times, and this was the first time he'd ever seen an officer posted at the hospital.

Alex entered Yarmouth, and passed through the business district. A few minutes later, he saw a modern, two story medical office complex come into view on his left. He activated the left turn signal and cruised over the yellow median into the Yarmouth Medical Building's parking lot.

Parking in front of Yarmouth Family Practice Associates, Alex started to open his car door just as his iPhone buzzed in the center console tray. The screen read "Mike G." Mike Gallagher was his Portland sales colleague, and one of a few good friends at Biosphere Pharmaceuticals.

"Hey, Mikey."

"I saw you called earlier. What's up?" Mike said.

"I got a call from Dr. Wright last night. Late. He said that several suspected cases of the mystery flu rolled in last night. Three of them at Maine Med, one at Mercy and a few cases scattered up north. He said that one of the cases is a guy from Falmouth. The others are from Westbrook and Portland," said Alex.

"Jesus, already? Fucking Falmouth?"

"Yeah, but what's worse, is that he also said the hospitals down in Boston started seeing cases late Wednesday night. A friend of his at Mass General called him Thursday morning, and told him the cases started trickling in on Wednesday night and have continued ever since. I scoured the Boston papers on the internet, but didn't see shit about it."

"They probably want to be one hundred percent before they start running stories about the flu, right?"

"I don't know. Dr. Wright also said that they were told by the state to sit on the information for now. Only report to the state. He was told the state would disseminate the information to the feds. I was in Mercy this morning, and they didn't say a word. Nothing. There was a real cop at the door."

"No shit. What did he mean by 'sit on it?'" asked Mike.

“He said they were told to keep the media out of it until further notice. To avoid a bum rush of the system I guess,” Alex answered.

“First case in Falmouth of all places. I need to get Colleen and the kids out of the school.”

“I definitely think you should keep your kids out of the schools at a minimum, and your wife needs to get out of the classroom, at least for a couple of days until they can figure out what’s going on with this thing. Can you convince her to take a few days off?” asked Alex.

“I don’t know. I think I can convince her to let the kids stay home, but she just started teaching at the high school last year. It’s near impossible to get a job at the high school level in Falmouth. She’s afraid to do anything to piss them off.”

“I can imagine. Just make sure she plays it smart. Give her one of those stupid patient education handouts about washing hands, and send her to school with a case of Biosphere hand sanitizer bottles,” Alex added.

“Yeah, because we all know a little hand sanitizer will stop the flu in its tracks,” Mike said sarcastically.

“Better than nothing.”

“I don’t know. I need to give her a call, man. I’ll call you later.”

“Good luck. I’m headed into Yarmouth Family Practice. Who knows what awaits me in there.”

“Probably nothing good. Later man.”

“Yep,” Alex said, and put down his phone.

He got out of the car and walked around to the back of his company car, a hybrid Subaru Forrester, to open the hatchback. He pulled a black nylon sales bag from the rear cargo area and slung the padded carry strap over his shoulder. The strap pulled down on his suit coat, exposing most of the white dress shirt on his right shoulder, so he adjusted the bag and his jacket. Alex stood behind his car for a moment, enjoying the warm breeze blowing across the parking lot. The winters in Maine were long enough for him to fully appreciate the gift of a seventy degree day in early November. He took a deep breath and headed for the entrance.

“This should be interesting,” he whispered to himself.

Twenty minutes later, he emerged from the office and glanced at his watch. *10:15. Not bad for a morning’s work.* He could make a few more sales calls in Yarmouth before grabbing an early lunch, but he wasn’t feeling particularly motivated in light of the brewing pandemic. He was fairly sure this will be his last day calling on doctors. If the current situation escalated into a full blown pandemic, the last place he’d want to visit would be a medical office. He stowed his sales bag and climbed into the company car. He sat there for a moment, thinking about his next move, when he suddenly grabbed his iPhone. He’d forgotten to check his company voicemail when he got started that morning, and would not be surprised to find a few messages from corporate headquarters regarding the crisis in China and its impact on Biosphere. In the wake of recent events, Alex anticipated some very distinct guidance regarding customer interactions.

He dialed his voicemail account and found a new message.

Conference call at 11:00. I guess I have time for one more office visit.

He placed his iPhone on the front passenger seat and started the car.