

HOT ZONE

BOOK ONE in the ZULU VIRUS CHRONICLES

A novel by Steven Konkoly

Chapter One

Dr. Lauren Hale leaned against the cool wall and took a moment to regroup. She closed her eyes and rubbed her face, taking several deep breaths. Just the thought of walking back through the emergency room doors made her nauseated. At this point, she'd been on her feet for close to fifteen hours, seven hours longer than her scheduled shift. Staying a few hours past the end of a residency shift wasn't unusual, especially during a day shift, when she could rely on a full night of sleep to recuperate—but this was something entirely different.

The emergency room had been slammed with a steady flow of patients all day, the number of check-ins increasing hourly. So far, none of the attending physicians had hinted at releasing her from the ER. The arrival of the second shift in the late afternoon had barely made a dent in the overcrowded waiting room, which left her less than optimistic about her chances of leaving when the overnight shift arrived. They were slammed. The line to check into the ER now snaked at least a hundred feet along the sidewalk leading to the parking lot.

She slowly exhaled through her mouth and opened her eyes. Back to work. Before she pushed herself off the wall, the doors swung inward, revealing Dr. Larry Cabrera, her supervising physician. He stepped inside the small hallway and removed his blue facemask. Lauren straightened, momentarily blanking on where she should go next.

"I'm heading back in, Dr. Cabrera. Just needed a few seconds to myself," she said.

"That's fine, Dr. Hale," he said. "We could all use more than just a few. I'm hoping to get you out of here when the third shift arrives. I just need to get a handle on who actually shows up."

"Is the third shift light?"

"A little. Same crap that's apparently making it's way around the city."

"Any idea what we're dealing with?" she said.

"At first I thought it might be a late season flu wave. Fever. Headaches. Drowsiness. Fatigue. Now I'm not so sure. The headaches seem too severe. Migraine level. And I haven't seen a single patient with a cough or runny nose."

"The volume of patients arriving within such a compact period of time strikes me as odd. Have you ever seen this with the seasonal flu?" she said.

"We occasionally get swamped with flu cases during the fall and winter months, but when I say swamped, I mean a full waiting area that we clear over the course of the day. Not a growing mob outside of the entrance."

"At what point do we shut down the ER?" she said.

Dr. Cabrera gave her a quizzical look. "Shut down?"

"I mean stop accepting patients," she clarified. "Shut the doors. At least temporarily."

"I hadn't given that any thought. Nothing like this has happened before," said Dr. Cabrera, his voice trailing off.

"I better get moving," she said. "I need to work my way through the general examination unit."

"How long has it been since a patient has moved out of there?" said Dr. Cabrera.

"At least three hours," she said.

At the start of her shift, the general examination area still served its original purpose. Patients were escorted from the waiting room and thoroughly assessed, often subjected to a battery of tests intended to determine the underlying cause of their symptoms. By midmorning, they had filled most of the Emergency Departments one hundred and fifteen beds, mostly with patients reporting similar symptoms. They'd reserved a few critical care beds, along with an intensive diagnostic and treatment unit bed for acute emergency cases like heart attacks and car injuries that could not be diverted to other hospitals.

"We've filled every bed in the hospital, and all of the area hospitals are reporting the same thing," he said. "I don't see this getting any better."

Shouting erupted beyond the swinging doors, from the waiting room. Moments later, a nurse dressed in dark blue scrubs burst into the hallway.

"We have a problem!" she yelled. "One of the patients is getting violent!"

"Shit," said Dr. Cabrera, already barreling past the nurse. "Where are the cops?"

"There's another disturbance outside," said the nurse, following him. "They just left."

Lauren took off with them, entering the ER waiting room in time to see a massive man shove a young woman into a group of patients scrambling to escape the mayhem. The woman stumbled backward, losing her balance and toppling a mother trying to get her toddler out of the way.

The three of them hit the tile floor, the young woman landing on the kid, who let out a pitiful scream. A man dressed in a tracksuit yelled a few obscenities at the attacker, after getting out of his seat to intervene.

Before the good Samaritan took more than two steps, a thick fist jackhammered his face, exploding his nose. The man dropped to his knees, blood covering his mouth and chin. To Lauren's horror, the giant aggressor gripped the bloodied man's head with both hands and pulled it into his rising knee. The violent impact made a sickening crunch, snapping his head backward into an unnatural angle and exposing the front of his neck.

When the crazed attacker pulled back his jackhammer fist, with the obvious intention to strike the man in the neck, Dr. Cabrera lowered his head and rammed straight into the lower right side of the guy's back. The doctor knocked him far enough away to disrupt the lethal blow, but the man didn't go down. Not even close. Roaring, the enraged attacker grabbed Dr. Cabrera by the lapel of his white lab coat and swung him into a very recently vacated row of metal chairs. The doctor bounced off the chairs and fell to the ground, instantly scrambling backward on his hands and feet to get away from the man bearing down on him.

Without thinking, Lauren charged through the panicked crowd of patients, arriving in time to deliver a downward kick to the back of the man's left knee. The sudden strike buckled the joint, dropping him to the floor momentarily. He lashed out at her closest leg, knocking the Dansko clog of her right foot.

She staggered backward in fear, tripping over a patient that had curled up in the fetal position on the floor. Landing hard on her back, she lay there unable to draw a breath, while the grunting madman lumbered slowly in her direction; his murderous eyes locked onto hers. Lauren pushed against the floor with her arms, rising into a seated position—the wind still knocked out of her.

The man stepped over the curled up patient a few feet away and snarled.

“Kill you, bitch.”

“Stop. Please. Just stop,” she begged, scooting desperately along the floor. “We can help you.”

“Kill youuuuuu,” he howled, before lunging after her.

Before the full weight of his two-hundred and fifty pound body pinned her body pinned her to the hard floor, she curled into a ball, wrapping her arms around her head. Her brain instantly switched into raw survival mode, transmitting one message—protect your head. There was nothing she could do to fight this guy. She was the mercy of others now.

The first blow cracked one of the fake ribs on the right side of her ribcage, blasting her with a sharp, excruciating pain. She resisted the instinctive reflex to lower her arm to protect the ribs. A second, more powerful punch followed almost immediately; agony overriding instinct. The moment her arm moved to her side, the man hammered the side of her head with a single blow, bouncing it off the arm she had tucked underneath.

She lay pinned beneath the monster, too stunned by the attack to react. When the assault did not immediately continue, she opened her eyes and flicked them upward. The man had a police baton under his neck, both hands clawing at the officer behind him. She felt some of the weight lift, and didn't waste a second analyzing the situation. She grabbed the nearest chair, and pulled herself free of his legs. As she scrambled free, a pair of strong hands lifted her to her feet; a familiar, muffled voice barely breaking through her terror.

“I'm getting you out of here,” he said, wrapping her left arm around his shoulder.

He guided her to the swinging doors that led to the ER examination and treatment areas. Glancing over her shoulder, the short journey unfolded like a surreal, slow motion scene from a horror movie.

Three police officers wrestled the attacker to the floor, one of them pressing a stun gun into the side of his neck. The man's legs twitched in synch with the rhythmic crackle of the electricity, as they pressed him against the tile. The waiting room had vacated around the pile of officers, leaving two catatonic patients upright in their chairs. As Dr. Cabrera pulled her through the doors, she could have sworn that one of them was moving her lips without making a sound. The good Samaritan in the blue tracksuit sat propped against the chairs along the far wall; eyes rolled back in his head—face smashed. *What the hell just happened here?*

Chapter Two

David Olson poked the thick bed of grey ashes in the lakeside fire pit, hoping to unearth a few dying embers. Starting a fresh campfire was easy enough, but there was something profoundly satisfying about reviving the previous night's fire. He dug his walking stick deep into the sunken pile; immediately rewarded with a wisp of smoke and a faint, orange glow. Perfect. David cleared the area around ember and gently topped it with a small bundle of twigs and bark shavings he'd dried next to the fire last night.

Within moments, the single tendril of smoke that had risen from the ashes of the rock-lined pit morphed into a steady smolder. The first flame of the morning crackled through the twigs soon after that. By the time the kindling fully caught fire, David had arranged three modest logs over the blaze in a tee-pee shape, filling the gaps underneath with sticks and a few thin strips of wood chopped with his hatchet from the logs. He had the makings of a solid campfire.

His only real challenge at this point was waking his teenage son for "breaking camp pancakes." The three logs would go quick. After that, they'd have to resort to some of the sketchy stuff they had found near the lake. Soggy, dead wood likely passed over by the rest of the campers that had passed through during the early summer. He'd sat it next to the fire to dry, but there was only so much you could expect from deadwood. The cast iron griddle he'd lugged for miles needed to go over the fire immediately. The first pancakes would be ready within twenty minutes.

David gently blew on the fire, encouraging it to rise, before walking over to their low-profile, two-person tent. He unzipped the front screen and stuck his head inside, wrinkling his nose at the dirty sock smell.

"Josh. Time to wake up," he said, in a far too civil tone for a teenager accustomed to sleeping in to noon. "We need to eat and pack up. It's a long hike out."

Predictably, his son didn't stir inside the thick mummy bag. He grabbed the bottom of the bag and shook it.

"Rise and shine, Josh. Time to get moving."

Josh groaned, his voice muffled inside the down cocoon.

"You up?" said David. "I have to start cooking the pancakes in a few minutes."

His son mumbled something a little closer modern English.

"Give me a sign of life. At least get your head out of the sleeping bag."

"I'm up," said Josh. "Sort of."

"I'll get some coffee brewing, too," said David. "We'll need to filter enough water for the hike back. If you could get that going, I'll have the pancakes ready by the time you fill the Camelbaks."

Josh unzipped the bag partway, lifting his head part way out of the sack. He brushed the unruly mop of hair from his face, squinting at David.

"I'm up. Sort of. What time is it?"

“A little before seven,” said David. “If we start out of here by eight, or so, that should put us back in the parking lot by noon. Grab some lunch on the way through Bloomington. Maybe check out the campus. Then home.”

“I’m still joining the Marines, dad,” said Josh, lowering his head.

“Then I suggest you report for water filtering duty ASAP, or I’ll wake you up drill-instructor style. Trust me. You don’t want that.”

“I’m up. Seriously.”

“See you in a few,” said David, backing out of the tent.

David knew better than to directly engage in the Marines versus college battle. Having enlisted in the Marines right out of high school, he didn’t occupy the high ground—and he saw nothing wrong with Josh enlisting. He just wanted to be certain that his son had adequately researched all of his options before making a decision—especially since the kid had the grades for college.

Actually, he had the kind of grades that made a kid competitive for a ROTC scholarship and other options that gave him a college degree first. Then again, Josh could enlist and go to school on the G.I. Bill later, if he decided to get out of the Marines.

That’s how David had done it. Got out as a corporal, after four years at Camp Pendleton, then got his associates degree in criminal justice. After a few years with the Westville PD, he started night school to get a bachelor’s degree in the same major. Presto. It wasn’t the traditional route to getting a college degree, but the end result was the same—plus he’d dodged student loans.

On top of that, he’d seen a bit of the world and earned a steady paycheck since graduating from high school. Not a bad deal at all. Still, David wanted his son to give each opportunity serious consideration. His own mediocre high school academic performance had left him with far fewer prospects.

If Josh followed in his father’s footsteps and enlisted in the Marines, it would be based on a well-explored decision. At the very least, it needed to look like one. His ex-wife would kill him otherwise. She was already convinced that their son’s stubborn interest in the Marines was David’s idea. It wouldn’t hurt to have Josh mention a university visit or two when he returned to his mother after this trip.

David walked back to the fire pit to tend the small blaze he had created. It would be short lived, but hopefully enough to ignite the larger pieces of deadwood—or at least start them smoldering. If they didn’t catch right away, he’d use them to prop the frying pan he’d lugged into the wilderness. There wouldn’t be a lot of time to fuss around if that was the case.

He had the dry and wet components for the pancakes in separate containers, requiring little more than a transfer of contents from one to the other. A quick shake of the bag, and he’d have the batter they’d need to cook the pancakes—a breaking camp ceremony they’d shared every summer since the divorce. Eight years, and they’d only run into trouble twice getting the fire right.

He really wanted this morning to be perfect. If Josh enlisted, this could be their last summer camping trip in the Hoosier National Forest. He’d start his senior year this fall, and the Marine Corps liked to ship high school graduates away right after graduation. Especially graduates with high SAT scores, who might get second thoughts about spending the next four years in a barracks, instead of a college dorm.

With that somber thought, he rearranged the rapidly burning logs, so he'd have a flat enough surface for the pan—just in case the dark logs arranged along the fire's boundary failed him. He didn't want the end of the trip to be a disappointing memory for his son.

Chapter Three

Emma Harper sat across from her husband, skimming the restaurant's menu—not finding what she wanted. They had a two and a half hour layover in San Juan's international airport, and she'd hoped to grab some authentic Puerto Rican food.

"You want to try another place?" said Jack. "Looks more like traditional Spanish fare than local stuff."

He'd read her mind, or the look on her face. One and the same much of the time. She wore her heart on her sleeve, so to speak, making it easy for him.

"This is the only place that didn't look or sound like some kind of chain restaurant," she said. "Paella might be nice. Are you good with the menu?"

"As long as you're good with it," he said. "I don't see chips and salsa."

"I never thought I'd say this, but I don't think I could eat chips and salsa again for a month," said Emma.

"You did put a considerable dent in the cruise ship's tortilla chip inventory," said Jack.

"Are you saying I ate too much?" she joked.

"I'm not saying another word," said her husband, closing his menu. "This looks good."

Emma turned the menu toward him and pointed at the first page. "We can order the grown up version of chips and salsa. Tapas."

"Are you saying I'm not a grown up?" said Jack.

"I'm pleading the fifth, too," she said, putting her menu down. "I can't believe this vacation is over."

"It's not over until I say it's over. Last mojito in paradise?" he said, squeezing her hand.

"Why not?" said Emma, checking her watch. "We still have another ten and a half hours until one of us has to drive."

"It's going to be a long day," said Jack. "I might have two."

"Or three," she added.

Their waitress appeared, taking their drink and tapas order.

"Do you think your territory survived without you?" said Emma.

"Sales probably improved," he said.

It was an old joke between them. Jack worked a sales territory on the north side of Indianapolis for NevoTech, a top international pharmaceutical and biotechnology company based in Indianapolis. Three years ago, a territory on the south side of Indianapolis ranked number three out of sixty for sales in the region, a feat that would have earned the territory manager an all expense paid trip to Mexico or the Caribbean—if it had one. In this case, the territory had gone without a sales representative for more than half of the year, and had become the tongue-in-cheek rally cry for more vacation days. *The longer the reps stayed away from their territories, the better the sales!*

“Maybe Nevo will pay for next year’s trip?” she said.

“And maybe they’ll select you to represent headquarters at one of the trips,” said Jack.

She worked as a financial analyst for NevoTech’s Benefit Plan Investment team, a promotion she’d landed after spending five years in various finance positions within the company. Occasionally, they selected high performing employees from the various departments to attend division sales awards trips. Kind of a spread the goodwill program designed to keep the corporate drones from complaining too loudly about the lavish rewards and bonuses heaped on the sales force.

“Fat chance.”

“Then unless we both get lucky, looks like we need to start saving again. Or settle for an inside cabin next year,” said Jack.

“Once you go balcony, you can’t go back,” said Emma.

“We could always do one of those third rate all inclusives,” said Jack. “Might need to get a series of shots before we go.”

“As long as they have chips and salsa.”

“You and your chips and salsa,” he said, taking her hand again. “I’ll go anywhere—as long as it’s with you.”

She stared into his bluish-gray eyes, seeing that he’d shifted gears from jokester to devoted husband in a blink of the eye.

“I love you, Jack.”

“I love you more,” he said, suddenly breaking the serious gaze. “You heading up with me to grab Rudy?”

“I hadn’t planned on it,” she said, hesitantly. “Thought I’d grocery shop and get the house back in order. I’d go Saturday, if your mom doesn’t mind holding on to her for another day.”

“I’m sure she wouldn’t mind, though I hate to make him wait.”

“He has no concept of time. We could have driven around the block, or gone on a nine day cruise,” she said. “Why don’t you take off early, have breakfast with your mom and get back by the early afternoon. We can grab dinner somewhere outside in Broad Ripple, with our boy.”

“Sounds like a capital plan, my love,” he said, before moving his menu off the table to accommodate their inbound drinks.

Once the waitress departed with their entrée orders, Jack raised his mojito.

“To another amazing vacation, with the most amazing woman in the world.”

“Back at you,” she said, clinking her glass against his.

“Did you just call me a woman?” said Jack.

“Probably,” she said, before taking a long sip.

Even inside a bustling airport, her mojito tasted like vacation. Emma considered the sweet rum concoction to be the queen of tropical drinks. Perfect for any warm weather occasion, or non-occasion. She made a mental note to buy the ingredients needed to extend their vacation over the weekend. The weather prediction called for mostly sunny in the high seventies. Perfect for an evening with on their backyard patio. Suddenly, the prospect of leaving paradise didn’t sound so bad. Another paradise awaited, until Monday—when they both returned to the real world of jobs, bosses and corporate responsibilities. Until then. She’d take it one mojito at a time.

Chapter Four

Dr. Eugene Chang eased the Cessna 206H Stationair into a wide left turn, dropping from two thousand feet to one eight hundred feet altitude during the course adjustment to his upwind leg. With the Indianapolis Executive Airport clearly visible to the east through the pilot's door window, he passed his approach information over the airfield's designated common traffic advisory frequency (CTAF) and scanned the sky around him. The airport was a non-towered facility, so he was on his own to determine if it was safe to proceed with the landing.

Clear skies and a late afternoon sun simplified the task. He didn't see any nearby aircraft. With the upwind run nearly finished, and the airport roughly at his eight o'clock position, Chang banked the Cessna left and crossed in front of the airfield. He was effectively circling the airport, part of a traffic pattern ritual determined by wind direction.

He dropped to four hundred feet on downwind leg, before turning to base leg and his final approach. Despite the continued lack of competing traffic in the sky or on the runway, he dutifully relayed his actions over CTAF—just in case. The big sky around him could get very crowded, very fast, a bad scenario on final approach.

With the aircraft's nose lined up with the runway, he slowly dropped altitude and bled power, until he reached the sweet spot where everything gets quieter, and Cessna felt like it was slipping through the air with little resistance. His approach was rewarded with a textbook, minimal bounce landing at the northern end of the runway. He throttled back after a few seconds on the runway, slowing the aircraft to a safe taxi speed.

Chang turned the plane onto the nearest taxiway connector and made his way to the main tarmac, where Montgomery Aviation, the field's sole Fixed Base Operator, would take over. They'd inspect the aircraft and refuel it, before moving it into covered storage at the field, where he could access it at any time.

One of Montgomery Aviation's service staff guided him into one of the spaces reserved for Montgomery Aviation's signature clients, and chocked the Cessna's wheels once the aircraft was stationary. When the technician gave him a thumbs up, he left the engine running and squeezed through the two front seats to get into the rear passenger compartment. A few seconds later, he was on the tarmac with his briefcase and a small carry one bag.

"Welcome back, Dr. Chang," said the technician, offering a hand. "Can I run those to your car?"

"I got it, Jeff. Thank you," said Chang. "Hey. Whatever you guys did to the engine made a big difference. She didn't feel sluggish at all."

"I figured you might notice, Dr. Chang. We replaced the oldest cylinder with a brand spankin' new one. No more gunking up after a month or so. On top of that, we cleaned the shit out of the engine. Every nook and cranny we could reach without a

taking apart the case. The way you run this bird, you might consider a thorough cleaning like that every few months.”

“Put it on the calendar, and we’ll work around my flying schedule, when it gets closer” said Chang.

“Sounds good, Dr. Chang. I’ll have the head shed send you an email with the tentative date.”

“Thanks, Jeff.”

He nodded goodbye and started to walk away, not meaning to be rude, but not exactly in the mood for a conversation after the five-hour flight.

“Dr. Chang?”

Maintaining what he hoped was a neutral face, spun slowly around to face Jeff.

“Do you have any flight plans this weekend?” said Jeff.

“Nothing solid,” said Chang. “I need to catch up on things at the lab after my trip.”

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to lower the left wing’s rear spar. Just a small adjustment. Looked like you’re still flying a little left wing heavy. Might take a few adjustments, and a little trial and error, to get the roll tendency out of her, but it’ll be worth it in the long run.”

“Was it that obvious?”

Chang’s arm was a little stiff from applying constant pressure to the stick. In fact, he engaged the autopilot two hours into the flight to give his arm a rest. It was more an annoyance than a real problem. One he’d put up with since he’d sold his Cessna 172 Skyhawk and upgraded to the Stationair last fall.

“Been doing this for close to thirty-two years. I’d been meaning to bring it up, but didn’t want to hit you with too much at once after you bought her—and it’s not a critical fix. I’d run out of fingers and toes counting the number of pilots I’ve known that flew a crooked plane for years out of habit. It’s an easy fix on a Cessna. I can tackle it in a few hours, honestly. I just can’t guarantee I’ll get it all done at once. Weekends are getting busier.”

Chang walked back to the aircraft, well aware that he might not get out of here for a while. Jeff could easily tack another hour onto his already long day, if no other aircraft arrived to interrupt. Given the few private flights he’d seen in the air north of Indianapolis on the way in this afternoon, today had the potential to turn into one of those marathon conversations. Still, he couldn’t shrug off the man’s sincere offer to help, and he suspected Jeff could use the opportunity to rack up some paid moonlighting hours.

“I can stay put for the weekend,” said Chang. “I appreciate you taking care of me, and I’d be happy to pay the shop’s regular hourly rate.”

“I’ll give you a discounted rate since this is on the side,” said Jeff, producing a business card from one of his pockets. “Give me a call Saturday, if you change your mind about taking her up. Sunday is supposed to be a clear, sunny day.”

He took the card and stuffed it in his wallet, removing one of his own.

“Thanks again, Jeff. You guys have my personal number, but I’m not the best at keeping track of that phone. There’s a business mobile number on this card that I monitor all the time.”

“Great. I’ll buzz you when I finish. If you don’t hear from me by close of business Saturday, or I don’t hear from you, it’ll be Sunday. Definitely won’t go longer than the weekend,” said Jeff. “Hey. I’ll let you go. You must be bushed.”

“Sorry I’m not a little more chatty, Jeff,” said Chang. “I feel like I packed three weeks into three days on this trip.”

“No problem, Dr. Chang. I tend to run my gums a little long from time to time, or every time,” he said, followed by a deep laugh. “You take care.”

“You too,” said Chang, shaking Jeff’s hand.

He always felt this way after returning from the Edgewood Chemical Biological Center. Twice a year, a few dozen of the top virology researchers in the United States descended on the center to receive classified briefings on current and projected biological threats against the United States. Edgewood shared current intelligence and research insights, hoping to glean the same from the scientists, many who worked for or consulted on behalf of massively wealthy companies or universities—with bigger research budgets.

It was an informal outreach program, with the hope of outsourcing some of the desperately needed research and development work, in the realm of countering biological weapons at the microscopic level. Informal in that it was kept unofficial; a universally agreed upon term of participation. Nearly three years ago, a barely thwarted biological attack against multiple targets on the East Coast had turned a mostly ignored threat into a lucrative business.

Nearly every major pharmaceutical company devoted significant resources to the development of vaccines, “fixed-spectrum” antibiotics and next generation biologics to keep Americans safe from the next attack, and university research laboratories across the nation started programs to seize the seemingly unlimited supply of grant money shaken loose from federal budget by politicians.

It had taken on the air of a reckless frenzy, but in the end, when the fervor died, like it always did with these things, his field will have benefited—and the core group of virologists that expended vacation days to attend these “off the books” meetings would be better positioned to make sustainable advances in the fight against weaponized microorganism.

He patted the aircraft’s wing before he left, giving the red and white Cessna a long look. The six-seater was a significant upgrade from Skyhawk, giving him a little more range and a lot more piece of mind. He’d flown several single propeller aircraft over two decades as a licensed pilot, and had never felt this comfortable. The Airstation was a pleasure to fly on long trips, and fun enough when all he wanted to do was get into the air. Put the lab well behind him, and below, in this case.

It also provided an additional layer of anonymity to his “unofficial” travels. NevoTech would have to conduct some serious surveillance and private investigative work to figure out where he had vacationed this week. Landing field records were spotty at best, especially at the fields he utilized. He paid in cash for everything, not that he had incurred many expenses. Mainly fuel. Piecing together this puzzle would be an expensive effort, not that he put it past his employer. They had a lot riding on his research. The stock price had been in a steady decline prior to the announcement that NevoTech would take the lead in developing several prophylactic, periodically boosted treatments and vaccines for the most pressing

bioweapons threats against civilians, here and abroad. Profit projections floated in the high tens of billions of dollars. He wouldn't put it past them at all, and had taken more measures than a private aircraft to ensure his secrecy—and safety.

Chapter Five

David Olson turned his pickup truck onto the main road that cuts through the Highland Ridge, eager to sink into his well-worn recliner later tonight and watch the Cubs game. As much as he mourned packing up their gear and saying goodbye to the idyllic lakeside campsite, by the time he'd hiked three-quarters of the way back to the parking lot, his mind became focused on one thing. Heaving that monstrosity of a backpack into the pickup bed and getting back to the comforts of home. His son had felt the same way.

The mind had a funny way of shifting gears. One minute you couldn't get enough of nature. The next you couldn't stand another minute of it. Same thing happened on their Florida trips, back when he was married. Nobody wanted the last night to end. They always enjoyed a few happy hour cocktails beachside, followed by a leisurely sunset dinner. A late night walk in the sand to dip their feet in the ocean one last time. They'd practically have to drag Josh back to the hotel room. They next morning, it was back to reality—everybody looking forward to getting home.

Unfortunately, with both of them tired after the long hike out of the forest, initial enthusiasm for the campus visit idea pretty much died on the short drive to Bloomington. Stuffing themselves at the Steak and Shake near the College Mall killed it completely. Neither of them felt like exploring the university on shaky legs and full stomachs, so they bypassed the university and beat most of Indianapolis's rush-hour traffic. They hit a few backups northwest of the city on Interstate 465, but managed to get to their turnoff before the masses escaped from work.

"What do you feel like for dinner?" said David.

"Pizza," said Josh. "Definitely pizza."

"Pizza it is. I'll order us a loaded with cheesy bread for the Cubs game."

"Two orders of the cheesy bread?" said Josh. "With blue cheese dressing."

"Sounds like a plan," said David. "I need to run out to Krogers after we offload the gear and clean up. Grab some groceries for the rest of the weekend. You want omelets for breakfast?"

"That'd be great, dad. Maybe some hash browns?"

"Patties or the shredded kind? Or home fries?" said David.

"Uhhhh..."

"I'll get both, and some cheddar cheese to melt over them."

"Awesome!"

"Just don't tell your mother," said David.

His ex-wife had been on a bit of a healthy-eating kick for the past year, declaring war on carbohydrates, cheese and sugar. Rather than push back against her requests to honor their son's forced diet changes, he politely agreed to do his best at the house. When they were out at a restaurant, all bets were off. He wasn't about to play menu police with his boy. Pizza and cheese smothered hash browns hardly qualified as "doing his best," but he'd been informed by Josh that, "mom occasionally

falls off the cheese wagon.” As far as David was concerned, his son had more than earned the right to eat whatever he wanted after spending more than a week in woods.

“What about some nachos? They’d go great with game,” said Josh.

“No you’re pushing it,” said David. “Plus. You can get those tomorrow night at the movies.”

“Sweet,” said Josh, as David turned the pickup onto their cul-de-sac.

Their two-story, red brick and vinyl siding home became visible as soon as he completed the turn. Two houses from the end of the long cul-de-sac, he was tucked away nicely in a quiet, friendly neighborhood, with protected forestland behind his house. Protected by town zoning laws that required a strict percentage of “green space” in all of the neighborhood developments. Unless a tornado knocked the trees down, a possibility in central Indiana, the forest wasn’t going anywhere. A good thing, because he valued the privacy it gave him, as most cops did.

“Looks like the grass took a hit,” said Josh.

“Yeah. I kind of expected as much,” said David. “Great weather for camping. Not so great for the lawn.”

He’d set the sprinklers up and soak the ground off and on over the next week, hoping for the best. Worst-case scenario—his lawn got a three-week jumpstart on browning. The rest of the lawns in the neighborhood would join his shortly. Late June and July were hot and dry around here.

David drove just past his house and stopped, backing his truck into the driveway, as close as possible to the garage without hitting it.

“Another successful camping trip, buddy,” he said, patting him on the shoulder.

“It was a good one dad,” said Josh. “Maybe we could get the kayaks up next year. We can skirt the edge of the lake and pull in at designated camping areas. Day hike from the sites.”

“Not a bad idea. Never thought of that,” said David. “We could probably haul more supplies that way. Set up a base, and then move on. I like it. If you want, we can take the kayaks out to Eagle Creek Reservoir tomorrow. Spend a few hour paddling around.”

“I’d be up for that,” said Josh.

“Great. We can head out after breakfast,” said David, pressing the garage door opener.

While his son offloaded their packs, David made his rounds through the house. His brief yet thorough exploration served two purposes. First, to make sure the house hadn’t sustained any obvious damage during their absence. Overflowed toilets. Broken washing machine hoses. Animal infestations. Dead sump pump. Whatever the home-owner fates might have decided to randomly thrown at him while he wasn’t here. Second, to ensure that nobody had broken into the house—and decided to wait for him.

As a veteran Westville police officer, he’d sent enough criminals to prison over the years to keep him constantly looking over his shoulder. His professional life had only caught up with him once, when the brother of a recently incarcerated meth-cooker took a few swings at him with an aluminum baseball bat outside of the west side Starbucks.

Fortunately for everyone involved, the kid was blind drunk; his home-run swings missing wildly from the start to finish. On top of that, half of David's shift had been inside the coffee shop at the time, easily overpowering the guy without much of a fight. How the dude had missed the three squad cars parked in a row behind him baffled everyone. Maybe he didn't care, which was why David checked every door and ground floor window for signs of forced entry, and looked in every closet before fully relaxing at the end of a shift.

Finishing his quick tour of the ground and second floors, he turned his attention to the basement. He'd taken special precautions with the basement, since the space offered a lot of hiding places, especially the unfinished areas he used for storage. The door leading to the basement had a deadbolt that could be locked and unlocked from both sides, but only with a key. It sounded a bit Hannibal Lecterish to have a lock on the outside, but it gave him peace of mind that nobody could break in through one of the full-sized, sunken window wells in the basement and get upstairs. Likewise, nobody could break in up here and slink into the basement to hide.

David inspected the deadbolt, finding it locked. Fishing a key ring out of his pants, he opened the lock and turned on the stairwell lights. A quick inspection of the basement windows showed no problems. The only way to get in would be to smash a window. Satisfied that some small time junkie wasn't hiding in his house, he headed back upstairs.

The house felt a little stuffy, so he adjusted the thermostat, hearing the air-conditioning unit kick in outside. Always a good sign, too. So far everything still appeared to work! Aside from moving some sprinklers around, he could kick back with his son and enjoy the rest of the weekend. Walking into the kitchen, his hopes for a low key last few days of vacation faltered. The LED message box on his answering machine blinked FULL. Shit. He'd never come home to a full message box before.

He pulled his cellphone from his pocket and powered it. The device had been powered down since he left the house with his son over a week ago, one of his nonnegotiable vacation procedures. The department and his ex-wife had pressed the panic button one too many times over the past several years, cutting a planned vacation or long weekend short. He'd solved that problem by turning off his phone. It was amazing how nobody had a crisis, when they knew his personal LoJack system had been disabled.

When his cellphone grabbed the nearest cell tower signal, it buzzed for several seconds, as text message and voicemail notifications filled the screen. Shit. Every number was a Westville PD extension or a personal cell number from an officer on the force. The calls and messages started yesterday morning. Something big must be up.

With his son still cleaning the tent and rinsing their camping tools, he decided to break protocol and give the station a call. If there were a true emergency, he'd feel terrible not pitching in. David pressed speed dial for the duty sergeant.

"This is Sergeant Jackson. David?"

"I just got back with my son from camping, sergeant. Saw a ton of messages."

“Shoot. I hate to ask while you’re still on vacation, David, but we’re down a few officers in each shift. Some kind of flu virus or something going around. Pretty bad from what we’ve heard.”

“Food poisoning?” said David. “A bad batch of meat at Del Rayo on any given day could take out half the department.”

Jackson laughed.

“No kidding. Take my ass out for sure. No. It’s definitely not your garden variety bug. The hospitals in Indy are slammed, and their PD is struggling with absences. Way worse than us. The hospitals in the northern suburbs are starting fill up, too. I could really use your help to fill at least one of the shifts.”

“How soon?”

“As soon as you can get in,” said Jackson.

“How many officer are out?”

“Twelve,” said Jackson. “I really wouldn’t ask if I didn’t think it was necessary.”

“That’s more than a few. Let me call my ex. She mentioned heading out of town with her boyfriend at some point this week. If she’s around, and doesn’t have a problem with me cutting my time with Josh short, I’ll get over to the station ASAP.”

“Thanks, David. Let me know as soon as you hear, so I can start working on a duty roster that keeps people off double shifts.”

“I’ll be in touch soon,” said David, ending the call.

Damn. He wished he hadn’t turned on his phone. The thought of giving up two days with his son didn’t sit well. The thought of calling his ex and asking her to take Joshua back early, knowing that she wouldn’t give him time back in the future, made him feel resentful.

“Stop it,” he mumbled to himself.

He couldn’t let this ruin what had been an exceptional week with his son. Two days wasn’t the end of the world, nor would it make a dent in his relationship with Joshua. If anything, he could still order pizza and cheesy bread...even make nachos, and enjoy the Cubs game with his son, before bringing him to his mother. Jackson would have to settle for him showing up later tonight.

David leaned against the refrigerator and dialed Joshua’s mom, secretly hoping that she was out of town. In that case, there was no way he could take a shift. He wasn’t going leave his son alone at home overnight, and risk losing visitation privileges, to fill a shift he was under no contract obligation to fill. Only a declared state of emergency was grounds for recalling officers from vacation. A little flu bug hardly qualified.

When the call went to voicemail, he left a quick message explaining the situation. After that, he searched through his contacts list for alternate numbers, and repeated the message on her home phone and work line. That was it. He’d done his part. The ball was in his wife’s court now. He’d take a shower and knock out the grocery run, so he could maximize the time with his son, if forces conspired to put him in a patrol car later tonight.

Chapter Six

Dr. Hale paused outside of the ER conference room door long enough to catch the gist of the conversation. She wondered how her bruised face might alter the discussion. Additional police officers had been permanently stationed in the emergency room after the attack that nearly killed her, but with an increasing number of patients exhibiting aggressive behavior, it was only a matter of time before someone was seriously injured again. The guy wearing the tracksuit lay in the hospital's critical care unit, still unresponsive after twenty-four hours. Lauren had been moments away from joining him. She felt lucky to walk away from the same rampage with a mild concussion, splitting headache and two severely bruised ribs.

The room calmed when she entered, before breaking into a round of clapping and applause. The noise aggravated her pounding head, but she smiled through it, not wanting to dampen the one light moment her colleagues had probably experienced all day.

"The karate kid is back," said Dr. Cabrera, patting her on the shoulder.

"What did I miss?" she said.

"What didn't you miss?" he said. "Things are getting worse out there—and in here."

Dr. Zachary Wu, head of the ER department, quieted the group of doctors and nurses that had been packed into the small room.

"Dr. Hale. Welcome back," he said, barely pausing long enough to sound sincere. "We have five minutes. Let's make them count."

"I don't want to be a dick here," said Dr. Jeff Owens, one of the ER's most experienced doctors. "But the current situation is unsustainable. Frankly, what we're doing here no longer falls under our mission. And now they want to pull back some of the police?"

Dr. Hale interrupted. "I thought they added police."

"They did, but the police department has its own staffing issues. Half of them are sick," said Dr. Wu. "They don't have enough officers to patrol the streets, let alone guard the hospitals."

"Babysitting these patients is not our job," said Dr. Owens. "We wouldn't need this kind of police protection, if we moved infected patients out of our beds. With the ER slammed like this, we're barely mission capable."

"That's the hospital's call," said Wu.

"Then we need to have a heart to heart with hospital administration," said Owens. "Because we're caught in a perpetually worsening cycle here. Most of our beds are occupied by these mystery virus patients, who require constant observation by our security staff and the police. What are we looking at now? One out of ten patients getting aggressive?"

"At least," said Dr. Cabrera. "It seems to be getting worse."

"On top of that, we have patients exhibiting symptoms of advanced neurological damage!" said Dr. Owens.

"What?" said Lauren. "What do you mean?"

She vividly recalled the two patients sitting upright in the ER waiting room, seemingly oblivious to the raging lunatic that had cleared the rest of the patients from their seats. Something hadn't been right with them, but they'd gone unnoticed until the room emptied. Then there was the guy curled up into a fetal ball on the floor.

"While you were out of the ER, we started to see some unusual symptoms in an increasing number of patients. Seizures in particular. A lot of speech pattern disruptions, too. Some memory loss," said Dr. Wu.

"Sounds like encephalitis," she mumbled.

"What was that?" said Dr. Cabrera.

"Or meningitis," she said.

"Son of a bitch," muttered Cabrera. "Leave it to the resident to put two and two together."

"Can't be encephalitis," protested Dr. Owen. "Not in these numbers."

"I agree," said Dr. Wu. "This is something entirely different. Something nobody's seen."

"Have we sent any of the patients to radiology? An MRI would show swelling," said Dr. Cabrera.

"A polymerase chain reaction test of cerebrospinal fluid would be conclusive," said Hale.

"I thought you were studying emergency medicine?" said Cabrera.

"I'm interested in a pediatric emergency medicine fellowship," she said, suddenly very aware that the entire room was focused on her.

"Were not doing spinal taps," said Dr. Wu.

"Damn right we're not," said Dr. Owen. "We can send some patients on to radiology. Bring an anesthesiologist down for the spinal taps."

"All of the attending physicians can do a spinal tap," said Cabrera.

"Not anymore. This group is shot," said Dr. Owen. "How much sleep have you logged in the past forty-eight hours?"

Dr. Cabrera started to calculate the number.

"The answer to that question is *not even fucking close to enough to mess with the spine*," stated Dr. Owens. "And I don't anticipate any of us getting any sleep soon. We've lost three doctors and six nurses from the overall rotation already."

"Lost?" said Dr. Hale.

Dr. Wu grimaced and shook his head. "Some just disappeared. Slipped away when nobody was looking. The others are sick. Same symptoms. Dr. Edwards is strapped to a bed in the psych wing. We didn't want to keep him here."

"That's where half of these patients should be right now," stated Dr. Owens.

"Jesus," said Dr. Hale. "Is anyone else...sick?"

"Good question," said Dr. Owens. "Dr. Edwards didn't give us much warning."

"Let's get back to the question of police protection," said a young looking doctor toward the back of the conference room. "If the patients are getting worse, and the police are disappearing, where does that leave us? I have to be honest. I'm one

patient rampage from slipping away myself. Sorry, but I have a four month old baby and a pissed off wife at home. If we've moved into the patient warehousing business, I can't imagine stick around very long."

The room broke into a discordance of yelling, most of the room angry with the young doctor, a few joining his cause. Dr. Hale wanted to pursue Dr. Owens's statement about Edwards. What had he done so suddenly?

"Dr. Blake. We all have lives outside of the ER, and it's not like we're sitting around useless," said Dr. Wu. "We'll implement a new triage protocol, after I can meet with some of the administrators. I can't effectively shut down the ER without their input. If you choose to leave, nobody will stand in your way—but that's the end of your career here, as far as I'm concerned. Sorry to be a dick, as Dr. Owens is so fond of saying, but we're obligated by contract to be here in the event of a disaster."

"We don't even know what we're dealing with," said the young physician.

"Doesn't matter. We're on the front lines of something big. That's all—"

Dr. Wu winced, bringing a hand to his head before continuing the sentence. "That's all we need to know."

Dr. Hale looked at Dr. Owen's, who met her glance with an almost imperceptibly raised eyebrow. She scanned the rest of the faces, finding a few concerned looks, but nothing that raised any serious alarms.

"You okay?" said Dr. Cabrera.

"I'm fine. Just exhausted like everyone else...and dehydrated. Make sure everyone remembers to keep the fluids going," said Dr. Wu, still looking a little shaken by what she assumed was a sudden headache. "Are we good?"

The younger doctor raised a finger, garnering an impatient nod from Dr. Wu.

"It's going to be a long night. I suggest we restrain any of the patients that have exhibited symptoms beyond headache and fever," said Dr. Blake.

"That's more than a third of the patients," said Dr. Cabrera. "We have four sets of restraints."

"I'm sure the psych floor can lend us a hand," said Dr. Blake. "Hell. We can use duct tape. Plenty of that in the storage closet."

"We'll get sued off our asses if we start preemptively lashing patients to their beds," said another doctor. "Duct tape? What the fuck? Imagine that photo getting around the internet."

"Exactly," said Dr. Wu. "That's why I need to talk to someone above my pay grade before we take any drastic steps."

"Fuck. Then call them up right now!" said Dr. Owens. "Duct tape is sounding pretty good right now."

"I've tried," said Dr. Wu. "Nobody is answering my calls."

The room went dead silent.

"Seriously?" said Dr. Owens.

"Yes. We're on our own until the morning, with whatever police support we can wrangle," said Dr. Wu. "Dr. Hale. I'd like you to liaison with the Indianapolis PD sergeant in the parking lot. Let him see your bruised face, and make the case for a strong police presence inside the ER tonight."

"Are the other hospitals dealing with the same thing?" said Dr. Lundy, a normally soft-spoken, easygoing member of the ER team.

“They are. Every hospital in Indianapolis is slammed. This is widespread,” said Dr. Wu.

“How widespread?” said Dr. Blake.

“Citywide for sure. I don’t know about the suburbs.”

“Have we contacted the CDC?” said Dr. Cabrera, looking surprised by Wu’s answer. “If this is widespread, it could be a pandemic outbreak, or some kind of biological attack.”

A few of the doctors and nurses laughed condescendingly at the doctor’s comment, but most of the room remained ominously silent.

“Damn it, Larry,” said Dr. Wu, grinning. “I hadn’t thought of it. I’ll get on the line with them right after this meeting. Maybe they can send one of their outbreak response teams, or something.”

Dr. Cabrera began to respond. “If this is city wide, I’d be surprised if they—”

The sound of staccato gunfire stopped him in mid-sentence. Screams from the direction of the ER waiting room catalyzed the doctors, scrambling most of them into the hallway Dr. Wu took off for the waiting room, trailed by most of the staff.

Dr. Hale started to follow the group, but stopped when she noticed that Dr. Cabrera and Dr. Owens had paused just inside the conference room. She backed up few steps, catching Cabrera’s attention.

“In here for a second?” he said, motioning for her to join them.

She glanced furtively at the swarm of white coats and blue scrubs surging through the waiting room’s doors, before joining them inside the conference room.

“What’s up?” she said.

“First. How are you feeling?” said Cabrera.

“Tired. Head hurts,” she said. “Otherwise I’m fine.”

Owens gave him a concerned look.

“Seriously. I’m fine,” she said.

“Mind if I check something?” said Cabrera, producing a forehead thermometer from his lab coat pocket.

“Really?”

“Really,” he said, and she immediately understood why.

Dr. Owens kept a neutral face while Cabrera pressed the thermometer to her left temple for a few seconds, followed by her forehead. Moments later, the device beeped. He showed her the temperature on the LED readout, before turning the screen toward Dr. Owens.

“Ninety-eight point eight. Normal,” said Owens, clearly relieved.

“I figured her headaches were concussion related,” said Cabrera.

“That’s reason enough to send you home, Dr. Hale,” said Owens.

“I can manage for now,” said Hale. “How many of the staff are running a temperature?”

“We don’t know,” said Cabrera. “Dr. Owens and I haven’t found the right moment to suggest staff-wide temperature checks.”

“It would be the beginning of the end for the ER,” said Owens. “Not that we’re moving in any other direction.”

“Dr. Wu didn’t look good,” said Hale.

“No. He didn’t. And if Wu goes, the ER will follow,” said Owens. “Based on patient observation and history, I say he’ll be out of commission by noon tomorrow. Maybe sooner, depending on how long he’s been hiding the headaches.”

“Jesus. Out of commission?” she said.

“Fever and headache will put him in a hospital bed,” said Cabrera.

“If he’s lucky,” said Owens.

“Jesus,” said Hale. “Is there anything we can do?”

“Watch your back, for one,” said Cabrera. “Any of these patients can go haywire at any moment. We usually get some warning. Abusive language is a dead giveaway.”

“What happened with Dr. Edwards?” said Hale.

“He fell into the *no warning* category. Probably been nursing a headache and fever for a while, but he didn’t exhibit any neurological symptoms until he started beating a patient. Fortunately, he lost his shit right in front of a police officer, who stopped him cold with his Taser. We had him strapped to a gurney and out of there pretty fast.”

“And nobody has any idea what’s causing this?” said Hale. “It sounds like encephalitis, but I agree that it’s too widespread. Rabies? Violent outbursts have been recorded with rabies.”

“Rabies is a hundred times rarer than encephalitis, especially in the United States,” said Owens.

“It has to be something that affects the frontal lobe,” said Hale.

Owens frowned. “If we can schedule a spinal tap with anesthesiology—sooner than later—I have a friend at NevoTech that could very likely make sense of this. He specializes in this field.”

“Could you do the spinal tap yourself?” said Hale.

Owens rubbed his face and squinted, before slowly nodding. “I don’t see why not, but I think I more or less convinced Dr. Wu that we need someone from anesthesiology to do it.”

“Fuck anesthesiology. Wu’s crossing his t’s and dotting his i’s on this one. No way he’ll let you walk out of here with an official hospital sample,” said Hale. “We have no idea what we’re dealing with, and may need to rethink our biosafety posture. All the sterile gloves and masks in the world won’t make a difference against BSL 3 or 4 pathogens. The sooner you get a sample into your friend’s hands, the better. We’ll figure out a way to get you a patient. What are the collection protocols?”

“Where did you find her?” said Owens.

“Random residency assignment,” said Cabrera. “Lucky. Right?”

“Very,” said Owens. “To answer your question. We’ll need to time this right, especially if we don’t run it through the hospital lab. Cerebrospinal fluid needs to be processed within an hour of collection, or mixed with a Trans-Isolate medium if the wait time will be longer. We don’t carry the T-I medium in the ER. Ideally, my friend would be set up and waiting for the sample by the time I do the spinal tap. One of us would have to run it over to him.”

“Maybe we should explore the hospital option. Sounds like a lot of moving parts,” said Cabrera.

"We may have to go that route anyway. There's no guarantee my friend is in town. He travels a lot for his research. If he's here, I'm almost certain he'll want to take a look. Even if it means waiting until the morning, I think it'll be worth it. He studies potential biological threats, manmade and naturally occurring. If he can't determine what we're dealing with, this might be a brand new virus strain."

Angry voices rose from the waiting room, drawing them into the hallway.

"Shit," said Cabrera, moving hesitantly toward the double doors.

She swore to herself that she'd run in the opposite direction if she heard gunfire. They might be under obligation to stay here and treat injured patients, but nothing in her residency agreement stipulated she had to work in a war zone. Gunfire in the ER equaled cancellation of that contract. She highly doubted anyone would argue differently. As they edged toward the waiting room, Dr. Wu and two of the ER nurses burst through the double doors, followed closely by a blood splattered police officer carrying another officer in fireman's carry.

"Multiple gunshots!" yelled Wu. "Get trauma down here immediately!"

"On it!" yelled Cabrera, disappearing into the office next to the doors.

"Owens. Emergency room one!" said Wu.

"Meet you there," said Owens, sprinting ahead and yelling over his shoulder.

"What the fuck happened?"

"Guy just walked up to us screaming his head off!" yelled the cop. "As soon as we started to walk over, he unloaded. Hit some civilians behind us, too."

Hale hated to ask this question right now, but she felt it was important. Possibly a chance to force a decision that should have been made hours ago.

"Where's the officer in charge of the police detail?" she yelled. "We need to secure the ER."

"We're about to save her life!" said Wu, stopping momentarily.

The police officer plowed past him, following Dr. Owens and the nurses.

"It's only a matter of time before this spills into the ER," she said.

He muttered a few curses, before looking up at her. "Help the ER staff move the drive-by victims into treatment rooms—then lock the fucking doors. We're closed until further notice."

"Right," she said.

She took off for the waiting room to assess the situation, slipping on the floor. Nearly falling, she steadied herself and looked down at the blood-covered, black and white checkered tiles. *That's a lot of blood.*

Cabrera poked his head out of the officer door, a phone in his hand. "Did he just close the ER?"

She took a moment to respond. "Yeah. I need to figure out how to do that."

"You need to clear the waiting room. We don't have the resources to monitor a room full of loose cannons. Then shut the doors."

Hale nodded, before turning her attention toward the waiting room. How the hell was she going to shut down the ER and eject close to a hundred patients. Hale took a deep breath, the answer coming to her moments later.

"That'll work," muttered Hale, pushing the door open to the chaotic waiting room.

The only police officer visible had a patient face-planted against the wall next to the ER's wide sliding door. He was the only authority figure among a sea of desperate, deteriorating patients. She briefly considered the options, settling on the one that would solve their problem the quickest. Trying to drag the rest of the wounded through this gaggle could prove disastrous. *This is the only way.*

"Officer! We need to evacuate the ER. There's been a bomb threat," said Hale. "Everyone. Move to the exit. We've had a bomb threat."

All hell broke loose in the waiting room, as patients stormed the sliding door, which opened just in time to accommodate the panicked mob. The officer released the woman he'd detained and moved out of the way, the stream of patients dragging her away. He spoke into his radio and barged through the storm of people. When he reached her, he took her aside.

"There's no bomb threat, is there?" said the officer.

"No. We needed to defuse this situation before it spiraled completely out of control," she said.

"A little late for that."

"I agree," she said, making direct eye contact with him. "The officer that was shot is with our best people right now. Trauma is on the way. He's going to make it. I need you to clear the remaining of the patients when this dies down, and barricade the door after we move the drive-by victims inside. The ER is closed."

Chapter Seven

Eric Larsen woke from a sound sleep, his brain slow to register the insistent rapping at his door. He peeked at the digital alarm clock next to his bed. 3:36 AM. The knocking continued. *Another mobility drill. Wonderful.* Before he could form the words to answer his staccato summons, the door flung inward, a set of keys dangling from its knob. Larsen covered his eyes with a hand; the hallway's blazing lights silhouetted the figure in the doorway.

"Don't hit the lights, please," said Larsen.

The room's overhead lights flickered momentarily, before bathing the room in a dull, institutional fluorescent glow.

"Thanks," he muttered, reaching for the lamp on his nightstand. "Kill the lights. I got it."

"No can do," said the man they called the *grim reaper*. "The colonel wants all teams dressed and assembled in the pit within five. First bird rolls in twenty-five minutes."

Right after this drill, he'd remove the translucent plastic ceiling panels and yank the light tubes. Larsen had made that same promise before, always opting for sleep instead. He apparently hated losing sleep more than the lights.

"Got it," said Larsen.

Larsen's feet hit the thinly carpeted floor, his hands reaching for the pair of tactical cargo pants crumpled on chair next to the nightstand. With his pants secure, he rushed into the hallway, knocking into Laura Ragan. Ragan held firm, bouncing him into the doorframe. Somehow she was already dressed, complete with drop holster.

"Walk much?" she said, brushing past him. "And put a shirt on. You know—so you sort of look like a team leader."

"Didn't your mom teach you not to run inside?" he said, smirking.

Ragan mumbled an obscenity about his mother and shook her head, while knocking on one of her teammates' doors. She was all business with Larsen, if not a little hostile, which suited him fine. He wasn't here to get chummy with anyone. He was here to collect an easy, oversized paycheck that had fallen into his lap.

Almost too easy. One month locked down in the middle of nowhere Indiana, followed by a few days of sustainment training. One month off with his wife and baby daughter, playing outdoors in the Colorado Springs area. He'd have the house paid off in three years, plus enough money in savings to pay for his daughter's college. Not a bad gig at all, as long as one of these odd-hour shakedowns didn't turn out to be the real thing.

Larsen walked calmly to the room next to his and pounded on the door. A few seconds later, the door opened to reveal a fully dressed, towering, muscular black guy. Randy Dixon, the team's second in command, took one look around and shook his head.

“Does everyone but me sleep in their clothes?” said Larsen.

“Fly’s down, man,” said Dixon, nodding at his pants. “How long and where?”

“The pit. Four and a half minutes,” said Larsen, adjusting his zipper status. “I’ll wake Peck. You get Brennan. Meet at the entrance to the southern stairwell in three.”

“Got it,” said Dixon.

Four minutes and twenty-seven second later, Larsen’s team filed into the sunken auditorium, and sat in the closest empty row to the front—behind the rest of the unit. A few dozen members of the unit watched them settle in; disapproving eye rolls and head shakes heralding their arrival. Larsen raised his right hand in front of his face; glancing at his watch with an exaggerated interest, before lowering it and mouthing “fuck you” to his audience. He had zero patience for these posers.

The man standing in the shadows next to the auditorium screen moved forward into the light. Warren Cooper, a.k.a. *the colonel*, pressed the keyboard on the computer station next him. He was about as real a colonel, as the bearded gentleman featured on the side of a KFC bucket. An imaginary title bestowed upon him by his staff, from what Larsen guessed. It didn’t really matter. He was the senior Department of Homeland Security official at the compound. Everyone’s boss.

The floor to ceiling screen next to Cooper illuminated, displaying the aircraft manifests. Shit. It was going to be a long day. A Cat One alert put the entire unit in the air. Drill or no drill, it was a big fucking deal.

“There you have it. Category One deployment,” said Cooper. “I want to report wheels up on our last bird within twenty minutes. Sooner if possible.”

“Any indication if this is a drill?” said one of the team leaders, who had moments ago cast him a condescending look.

Larsen couldn’t resist. The guy had been an asshole from day one. “What do you think, Ochoa?”

Ochoa’s entire team cast murderous glares at him, as muffled laughter filled the auditorium. Cooper pressed onward like the verbal exchange hadn’t occurred.

“Get to your aircraft. Mission details will be delivered when before the aircraft start to taxi. Good luck. God speed. Hope to see you all back here shortly.”

Cooper said the same thing every time, betraying nothing. A fact some of his colleagues appeared unwilling or unable to grasp. In the seven months Blue Team had spent in active status on the base, they had also done the same thing—every fucking time—until they received their mission packets. Zero variation.

Most of the time, the packet instructions told them to debark the aircraft and report back to the auditorium. Drill completed. Sometimes, the initial instructions outlined their kit requirements, and the aircraft took to the sky. They’d change into the required gear, still unaware of their detailed mission parameters, and wait for the aircraft commander’s permission to open the next set of instructions. Typically, those instructions informed him that the aircraft was headed back to Grissom Air Reserve Base for landing and debark. Twice in his career with the unit, they had been instructed to egress from aircraft, in-flight, over the airbase, putting their wingsuit and parachuting skills to the test.

He studied the screen for a few seconds, while the rest of the room scrambled for the exit to the tarmac. *Zombie*, his team’s call sign, was manifested with *Specter*,

Banshee and *Vampire* on aircraft three. Wonderful. *Specter* was Ragan's team, and *Vampire* was Ochoa's. Two of his biggest fans. At least they'd have plenty of room to stay out of each other's way. They'd been assigned to one of the C-130E's.

Larsen slowly got up from his seat, making eye contact with Ochoa, who was bunched up with the rest of the teams trying to squeeze through the double doorway. The team leader sneered, clearly on the verge of spewing another ill conceived comment or insult.

"Take your time, Larsen," said Ochoa.

"Hurry up and wait. Takes less than a minute to get to the flight line," said Larsen, tapping his watch. "Keep my seat warm if you don't mind."

"I'll take a dump in your seat! That'll keep it warm!"

Ochoa and his team laughed, a few of them adding that they'd warm up all of Larsen's team's seats.

"The C-130 has sixty-four seats. I count sixteen of us on the manifest. How many shits are you planning to take?"

Everyone inside the auditorium started to laugh, including Cooper.

"You can go fuck yourself!" blurted Ochoa. "We're all wondering why the fuck you're even here."

"Because someone has to check your math from time to time," said Larsen, before turning to his own team.

"You better watch your shit!" yelled Ochoa.

The guy had horrible impulse control, which was probably why he got booted from the Dallas PD. Actually, he didn't get kicked off the force. Just suspended—for the third time in his five-year tenure as a patrol officer. Larsen guessed he'd landed the job here because of his brief stint with Dallas SWAT. Everyone here had some kind of paramilitary experience.

"I'll start watching mine, when you start counting yours," said Larsen. "Correctly."

Ochoa's half-cocked response got lost in the laughter.

"You enjoying yourself?" said Dixon.

"Not really, but he tees himself up—and he's a dickhead."

"We *all* have to live with that dickhead, and his disciples."

"Very true," said Larsen. "Sorry for stirring him up. Everyone else good?"

Jennifer Brennan gave him a *thumbs up*. She still looked half-asleep, which was a good thing considering the fight he had just picked. She and Ochoa most definitely didn't mix. Brennan had "gently" kicked him in the testicles, during a volleyball match, after he got a little too gropey with her along the net. She didn't take shit from anyone, which made her a good fit with Larsen's less demanding leadership style. He assumed that's why he hadn't been kicked in the balls—yet.

The fourth member of the team, James Peck, was a different story altogether. He presented an alert, but disinterested look—like always. It was no secret that Peck wanted to transfer to a different team. The disapproval heaped on Larsen by the other team leaders got under his skin.

Unfortunately for both of them, Peck's skillset as the team's communications and technology specialist was the most difficult and expensive to replace. Unless another ComTec from the unit was willing to swap places, the only way he could get off the

team was to resign, or get Larsen fired. He kept a constant eye on Peck. The former Ranger had started to hang out with the likes of Ochoa and other prominent haters, who undoubtedly encouraged the divide.

“You good, Peck?” said Dixon.

“I’m here,” said Peck, before shuffling away.

His team filed out of the auditorium last, entering a long, well-lit corridor resembling a school hallway. Metal doors stenciled with team names flanked each side. Each room served as an individualized team staging and preparation area, mostly used for regularly scheduled training missions and team meetings. All of the equipment and gear cases they would find in their assigned aircraft had been packed in these rooms.

The deep buzz of powerful turboprop engines reverberated inside the cinderblock structure, intensifying as they approached the open door to the airfield tarmac. When the team ahead of them vanished into the darkness beyond the door, leaving them alone inside the hallway, Larsen was hit by the bizarre urge to turn back. The feeling passed just as quickly, but it was the first time he’d ever felt that way before. He’d never experienced the proverbial “bad feeling” about any operation or mission before, even with the SEALs. He let out a quick laugh.

“What’s up?” said Dixon.

Larsen wasn’t one of those superstitious pre-mission ritual types at all, but he had no intention of informing his team “he had a bad feeling about this one.”

“Nothing. Just thinking how much it would piss off Ochoa and Ragan if we walked to the aircraft,” said Larsen.

Peck shot him a disapproving look, which almost convinced Larsen to do it. Instead, he stepped onto the shadowy tarmac and broke into a jog toward the third aircraft in the line of darkened behemoths.

