



Chimera

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Sonny Whitelaw

“I worry about all this research on virulence,” Karl said, his tone deadly serious. “It’s only a matter of months—years, at the most—before people nail down the genes for virulence and airborne transmission in influenza, Lassa, Ebola, you name it. And then any crackpot with a few thousand dollars’ worth of equipment and a college biology education under his belt could manufacture bugs that would make Ebola look like a walk in the park.”

—Laurie Garrett, *The Coming Plague*; referring to a conversation between Karl Johnson (National Institute of Health) and Joe McCormick (Special Pathogens and Bacteria Branch, CDC), in the 1980s.

“The potential for biowarfare to destroy whole species or even end life as we know it is not inconsiderable.”

—Dr Meryl Nass, February 08, 2005 testimony to the US Senate Subcommittee on Bioterrorism and Public Health Preparedness Hearing.

-Prologue-

Zaire, 1976

An incredible thirst pulled Joshua McCabe out of his stupor. His throat felt like it was full of sticks and burning sand. And what was with that god-awful stench? Face buried in his pillow he groped the bedside table, hoping to find a glass of water. Instead, his fingers brushed against something warm and furry—that squealed and bit his hand.

Josh yelped, jerked his hand away and snapped open his eyes. A rat scurried off the table. Horrified, he sat up and looked around. What was he doing in the village clinic's private room? And why was the place buzzing with flies? His confusion abruptly took a darker turn. He'd crapped himself. Not only that, the stuff was smeared all over the bed.

Gagging back his revulsion, Josh ripped off his filthy shorts, staggered naked from the bed, and called, "Mom?" The room started spinning. He grabbed the doorframe, closed his eyes and tried to figure out what had happened.

Josh and his older brother, Ed, had flown into Kinshasa to stay with Uncle Albert for the week. There'd been a cricket match at the British Embassy, and everyone had been talking about a bleeding disease. He hadn't been paying much attention. The outbreak was nowhere near where he and his brother would be going. Besides, there was always some new bug being investigated. That's what his parents and their friends, including 'Uncle' Albert, did.

Details of the trip to the village were sketchy, blending with the memories of a dozen other bone-jangling rides across dusty roads that turned to bogs at the first drop of rain. The best part had always been the rides up the Zambezi River in a flat-bottomed skiff. Except his time, he'd felt too sick to notice anything other than the angry look on his

father's face when they'd arrived. The boat had been late and the old man, impatient to go further upriver with Ed, had been too busy to say more than, "Hello, Josh. How was school?"

Dad hadn't waited for a reply. He never did.

Josh vaguely remembered telling his mother that he had a headache, then he'd gone to bed early. Everything after that was a blur. Pain in his head and joints, like the worst flu imaginable, and his mother's voice. She'd been looking after him, he was certain of that. But then she'd stopped coming—the flyblown mess on him and his bed was proof of that.

Maybe she'd stopped coming because his father had returned. The great and mighty Dr William McCabe didn't believe in mollycoddling. Getting sick, he always said, was a way to build up your resistance. Josh didn't understand that—unless his old man meant resistance to being a burdensome child. Wasn't that what boarding school was all about?

Opening his eyes, he took a deep breath—and almost retched at the smell. Where was everybody? "Mom? Dad?" Conscious of his nakedness, and still unsteady on his feet, he took a few cautious steps out onto the veranda. "Hey! Anyone?"

Desperate for water, Josh noticed that the storeroom door was ajar. No one was inside, but stuff was scattered all over the floor. In the fading light his gaze zeroed in on a couple of unopened cartons of Perrier. Slumping onto the floor, he took several seconds to work the lid of the first bottle free, then drank the contents and opened a second bottle.

By the time his head was clear enough to think straight, it was dark outside. There were no lights inside the clinic, and the familiar sound of villagers preparing for the evening meal was noticeably absent. Okay, so he'd screwed up by getting sick, but his mother wouldn't have just

abandoned him. Even if she'd had to go upriver to join his father, the nuns at the clinic would have taken care of him.

Certain now that something was very wrong, Josh left the storeroom. He was about to walk into the main ward when he heard animals growling from inside. A spasm of fear gripped him—until he heard a plaintive yelp. Okay, that wasn't so bad. Not wild animals but a couple of village dogs fighting over...

Dread instantly replaced his fear. Fighting over what? He'd seen villagers that had been abandoned because most everyone had gotten sick and died. Or worse, massacred. It was Africa; it was common. And it was something that Dad said that he had to get used to seeing. But this village wasn't far from Kinshasa, and it was supposed to be safe from that sort of stuff, otherwise his parents would never have sent for him and Ed. So where was everyone?

He hurried back to his room. With surprisingly steady fingers, he lit the Coleman lantern by the bed. In the flickering light, he pulled open the drawers of the bedside table, searching for some clothes. Maybe in the cupboard on the other side—

A bundle of filthy rags, alive with cockroaches, lay crumpled on a dark patch on the floor. He couldn't see clearly, so he grabbed the light and raised it. It took a moment for the details to register. The bloody mess was—or at least had been—a person. Something black pooled in the eye sockets and mouth, and rats were chewing on the bare feet. One of the rodents looked up at him and defiantly went back to eating.

Recoiling in horror, Josh screamed and stumbled back onto the bed, but he couldn't take his eyes off the obscenity on the ground. Another rat scuttled over the body. It was then that Josh noticed the clothing. The shirt and shorts were just like the ones that his mother wore. And the filthy hair was the same length and colour as his mother's. But that obscene lump of shredded skin and putrid flesh wasn't his mother. It

couldn't be! A metallic glint caught his eye, and he saw her distinctive wedding ring on one of the half chewed fingers.

Vomiting bile and Perrier, fourteen-year old Joshua McCabe fled from the room and into the jungle night.

-Chapter 1-

Washington, DC, April 19, 1995

"You're a freak," snarled Special Supervisory Agent Robert Williams. "A brilliant, gifted, freak!" He stabbed a nicotine-stained finger at Special Agent Joshua McCabe's chest. "And you'll be damned in hell for what you did to that fine young woman."

Williams' red-rimmed eyes blazed with righteous fury, but McCabe saw the insanity beneath. The toad-faced head of the FBI's Behavioural Science Unit had played the same pathetic game for years. McCabe was guilty only of allowing himself to be entrapped. Twice. "Then I'll see you there," he replied.

The foyer door to the Director's office opened and Special Supervisory Agent John Reynold walked in. Regret wasn't in the FBI's vocabulary, except when it was strong-armed out of them by political necessity. Seeing it in Reynold's eyes came as something of a surprise to McCabe.

Snapping a flat, ugly smile on his face, Williams held out his hand to Reynold, and said, "Good to see you, John."

Reynold ignored it and pushed past him.

"Go right in please, Agents," said the secretary. "Director Spalding is waiting." Her indifference to the acrimonious exchanges that plagued the Director's office was surpassed only by her indifference to intimidation.

McCabe could almost smell the residue of terror embedded in the oak-panelled walls, from the days when Hoover ruled the kingdom. Spalding, however, was no Hoover. The Director had succumbed to Williams' notorious mind games—again—and this was the result.

"Gentlemen." Edwin Spalding stood from behind his desk and gestured for them to sit in the chairs opposite. The plush leather lounge

suite in the corner of the room was reserved for more celebratory occasions.

Accustomed to donning politically correct façades when it suited him, McCabe sat motionless through the full serving of regret and recriminations. A part of him even admired Williams' skilful shifting of hostility onto him. The FBI preferred its sacrificial decoys to come from the lower ranks.

Ten minutes later, McCabe tired of the game. He placed his resignation letter, ID, badge and weapon on Spalding's polished desk.

The wrinkles on Williams' brow deepened, and his lipless mouth twisted uncertainly. "What the hell are you doing?"

McCabe maintained his silence through another five minutes of platitudes and finger pointing. Enough. He pushed his chair back, stood, and dropped a file folder on the Director's in-tray. "If that's all, sirs, I have things to attend to, as I'm sure you do." He ignored Spalding's pleading look. The Director wanted—*needed*—him to press charges against Williams. It wouldn't be necessary. The file contained it all, including clear, professional recommendations regarding the head of the BSU. Robert Williams was insane. The only difference between us, thought McCabe, is that Williams doesn't know it.

Staring at the file as if it would bite him, Spalding reached out a tentative hand. McCabe swiftly retrieved the document. "Conditional on acceptance of my resignation," he said, his eyes unwavering.

Williams' sneer displayed an impressive set of crooked teeth. "You're bluffing, McCabe. You can't resign; you've got nowhere to go."

The silence stretched. McCabe counted his heartbeats, idly wondering how many remained.

"All right, Agent." The Director nodded curtly. "Resignation accepted. You can leave."

Face twisting in disbelief, Williams spluttered, "You *can't* let him go!"

McCabe dropped the file, turned and left in one fluid motion. Behind him, Williams shouted, "While you're snivelling in the corner, how many more will die, huh, McCabe? How many?"

Even the notoriously unflappable secretary looked up when Reynold barked, "That's enough, Williams! McCabe? Wait up."

Closing the outer door behind him, McCabe kept walking. He was set on only one thing: the spare weapon in his office. This time they could clean up their own mess. And he was most assuredly their mess, for Williams had created him, a monster to catch monsters.

Inside the office, Director Spalding turned to Williams, his tone low and threatening. "I don't give a rat's ass about your White House friends, this time you've gone too far. Apprehending Jennings was a public relations coup for the FBI, but it—*you*—destroyed a good agent. A good man."

"Get your hands off me!" Williams wrenched his arm from Reynold's powerful grip, straightened his tie and immaculate eight hundred dollar suit, turned on his heel, and stormed out of the foyer.

Reynold made to follow, but Spalding stopped him. "Let him go. Let them both go."

At six foot three inches and two hundred and fifty pounds of muscle, John Reynold towered over the Director. "I'm not letting McCabe walk away like that," he growled. "Not to a brief fling with the bottle and quick bullet to the head. We owe him. And I don't mean a goddamned three months' leave and employee assistance counselling."

"What do you recommend?" Spalding flicked through the file that McCabe had left. "We both know how he passed the psych evaluation but he's still a basket case. He wouldn't be human if he wasn't."

Shooting Spalding a contemptuous look, Reynold went to snap a reply, but the secretary's fractured voice and wide eyes stilled him.

“Director,” she said, holding out the telephone. “You need to take this call. *Now, sir!*”

“What,” Spalding barked, snatching up the phone. He froze, and then the colour drained from his face. “God help us, no!”

Two floors below, Joshua McCabe was focused only on the moment, for that was all that remained. He shut his office door and closed the Venetian blinds over the glass walls before sitting in the chair behind his desk. Unmindful of the clutter on his desk, he contemplated the legal pad, but a note was superfluous after all that had all been said. And done. He smiled sadly at the silver-framed photo by the computer. Regret came in many forms. Touching the image once, briefly, he turned the frame face down. Wouldn't do to get it bloodied. She'd hated blood. And guns. From the bottom drawer of the desk he withdrew the ankle holster, gun and clip, and placed them carefully on the blotter. *No more demons*. The clip slid into the weapon with a soft, oily click. *No more can you find me; I'm coming to you*. Smiling grimly, he flipped the safety off, raised it and—

The door burst open. John Reynold was breathing hard, and his face was taught with urgency. “I don't suppose you'd consider postponing that, would you?”

McCabe suddenly became aware of a commotion outside. “Why?” he said, his curiosity outweighing emotional need.

“Because someone's just blown up the Federal Murrah Building in Oklahoma.”

*

Pain punctuated the darkness. Jordan Spinner tried to cry out, but her mouth was filled with a pasty mix of dust and blood. She coughed and gagged, then moaned when sharp pangs tore through her chest. What had happened?

Eyes open or closed, it was dark except for the echoes of light flickering across her retinas. What did that mean? Was she blind? She carefully cleared her throat without coughing, and turned her head to spit out the globs of mucus. Something hard limited her movement, and every motion of her legs resulted in a breathtaking round of agony.

Slowly, very slowly, she isolated each piece of information. There had been an explosion. Snatched off her feet and pummelled by a superheated sandstorm, she'd tried to scream, but the air had been sucked from her lungs. Had she been knocked unconscious? Was it night? The pain stole her ability to think. Concentrating on breathing, just as she had when giving birth to Jamie, seemed to help.

Gritty, sticky moisture covered her face. It smelled like blood. She carefully manipulated her hand through a maze of what felt like rubble and splintered wood, and touched her eyes. She had eyes at least, even if she was blind. Her right hand was also free but her shoulder and forearm were wedged. And her legs...she couldn't feel them! Adrenaline terrorized her senses. *Blind and crippled?*

Jamie, Douglas! They'd been in the elevator. Oh, God! Where were they now? She had to get out. She had to find them! "Jamie!" she whimpered desperately. "*Douglas!*"

Her head throbbed so badly that she wanted to throw up. And the pressure on her bladder was unbearable. How long had she been here? Saliva finally flowed, and she spat out more dust, swallowed the rest, and emptied her bladder. It helped. And the stinging of the cuts on her legs drove away visions of a wheelchair. But where were her husband and son?

Unbidden, the memories of Jamie's happy chortle and soft curly hair merged with images of autopsied kids and bomb victims. *No!* Not her son! Not Jamie. But something inside of Jordan—instinct, training, or the

strange, tenuous connection between mother and child—forced her to confront the unthinkable. Jamie was gone.

Grief welled from deep in her chest, sending sharper pain through her cracked ribs. She could feel her own life slipping away, and stopped struggling. *Wait for me guys; I'll be with you, real soon. Just...wait.*

Distant voices. She could hear voices! There was movement near her head, and then came the flash of powerful strobe lights. It gave her a direction to demand, "My son. You have to find him!"

"It's okay, ma'am," replied a man. Reassuring fingers brushed her face. "We'll get him. What's your name?"

"Spinner. I'm...doctor...work for FBI."

"You're gonna be fine, Agent Spinner. Was your son with you?"

Jordan wasn't an agent, but she wasn't about to explain. "Day Care Centre."

A pause too long. "We're working on it. Tell me about you."

The question was a standard ploy to deflect attention from the truth. Jordan knew it well. She'd used it herself when confronted with grieving loved ones. "Broken rib, maybe two, mild concussion. Some blood loss, but I'm otherwise fine. Now forget about me and find my son!"

A gloved hand fumbled somewhere down near her thighs. "They're jammed in tight," said the man. "Can you feel this?"

"I'm a doctor," she repeated. "My spine is okay, although my leg might be broken. I'm...wedged. Listen, come back for me after you get my husband and son!"

Another voice called from somewhere behind. "Hey! We gotta get outta here. Now!"

"What?" the man's voice hitched with disbelief.

"They found another bomb!"

The instinct for self-preservation abruptly took over, and Jordan clutched his hand. Her would-be rescuer moved so that she could see

his face. Carefully lying down across the rubble, he whispered, "I'm not leaving you. I promise."

She knew she must have passed in and out of consciousness then, because the next thing she was aware of was the man saying, "Okay, Agent Spinner, we're gonna have to use jacks to get this masonry off you. But first the EMT's coming to hook you up with some juice."

"Bomb... My son."

He said nothing, but his face was bleak.

"Jamie," she whispered, and a terrible coldness shattered her soul.

-Chapter 2-

Republic of Vanuatu, SW Pacific, December 12, 1995

Dispersal: Minus 19 hours

Doctor Nathaniel Sturgess sat on a worn wooden bench inside Port Vila's Bauerfield Airport, typing his monthly WHO report on his laptop, waiting for the flight south to Mathew Island. The plane was due to depart in ten minutes, but that could equally well mean three hours, and Nate always made good use of his time.

The terminal was crowded with ni-Vanuatu; Melanesian natives of the South Pacific island nation. Women garbed in colourful Mother-Hubbard dresses, and men in shorts and t-shirts stood waiting amidst cardboard boxes tied with string and baskets woven from coconut-fronds.

Something caught Nate's eye. A Hessian sack was moving across the linoleum floor, tango style—two shuffles forward, one back—between huge bales of rice and a wicked-looking machete. An Australian couple, their noses wrinkled with distaste at the odour of sweaty, deodorant-free bodies, exotic food crops and animal droppings, looked on, fascinated and apprehensive. Behind them, someone was manoeuvring through the crowd with practiced ease.

"Hey, Mike!" Nate closed his laptop, stood, and pushed past the tourists—who still hadn't figured out where the check-in line was.

Michael Warner, a tall, burly American in his mid-fifties, stepped on the scales at the ticket counter. At the sound of his name, he looked around expectantly. "Sturgess! What are you doing here?" Warner's smile turned to a scowl when he noticed his weight. Stepping down, he shook Nate's hand.

"I could ask you the same thing." Nate winced at the vulcanologist's powerful grip. The Hessian sack bumped against his foot. Its ni-Vanuatu

owner picked it up, mumbled an apology and tucked it under his arm. The bag squirmed.

“I was checking Ambae volcano. Figured I’d replace the old sensors on Mathew and Hunter Islands while I was in the neighbourhood.” Warner turned to the ni-Vanuatu ORSTOM technician with him, and said, “Keep forwarding me the data on Ambae. I’m not convinced it’s going quiescent, no matter what your boss thinks.”

Since the volcanic island dubbed Bali Hai by James Michener had bubbled to life in March, it had attracted the attention of vulcanologists worldwide. Despite ORSTOM—the French scientific research organization—downgrading it to a Level 2 alert status, Ambae was still considered the most dangerous of Vanuatu’s many active volcanoes. The technician nodded, and began piling bags on the scale.

Motioning to Nate’s wispy blond beard, Warner said, “When are you gonna give up on that thing?”

“When you give up carrying excess luggage.” Nate’s eyes shifted from Warner’s luggage to the big man’s slight paunch.

Grinning ruefully, Warner made a half-hearted attempt to suck in his stomach. He said something in reply, but his words were drowned out by the noise of a twin engine Otter aircraft taxiing close to the terminal’s doors. A group of very large women dressed in their Sunday best burst into tears while around them, other people cheered. When the rumble of the engines died, a surge of humanity pushed forward. Familiar with the islander’s emotional farewells, Nate ignored the bumping and shoving until a persistent hand forced his shoulder around.

“Your name Warner?” the Australian tourist yelled above the noise.

Nate pointed to the vulcanologist.

Turning a malevolent eye on Warner, Tourist demanded, “The ticket guy said you took my seat. We were here first. What’s the story, mate?”

A second cheer filled the terminal. The Australian looked around, bewildered by the mercurial islanders, while his girlfriend shot nervous glances at the machete-wielding men crowding them. Her face said it all. Personal space clearly meant nothing to these people.

“Welcome to the South Pacific!” Warner shouted above the noise. “Nothing’s confirmed until your butt’s in the air. Where were you going?”

“Mathew Island. We were booked to see the volcano.”

The Australian’s beer belly was considerably larger than Warner’s. *Tourists*. Nate sighed and tucked his laptop away. *Seem to think they’re visiting Disneyland*. He pulled off his wire-framed reading glasses and replaced them with a pair of Polarised sunglasses.

“Well,” Warner drawled, “I’d personally recommend Tanna Island. The volcano is smaller and more accessible, and the plane’s stopping by there on the way south. Why don’t you ask? Maybe there are still seats available for that sector of the flight.”

“So *you* go to Tanna and gimme my seat! I paid a lot of money to get visas.”

The technician placed a placatory hand on the Australian’s arm. Tourist, mistaking the tech’s ORSTOM uniform for that of an airline official, handed over his ticket.

Nate glanced across the crowd at the airline clerk, who mouthed, “Tanna.”

“No place to sleep on Mathew.” Sounding more like a third-world hustler than a university-educated field officer, the tech added, “No restaurants. No hot showers, just bush toilets.” He looked pointedly at the woman’s high-heeled shoes, then his eyes turned meaningfully to the leaden sky. “No roads, just mud. Two kilometres from airport to village. Sleep in spare hut on ground. You bring bed? Mosquito net? Food? And rum to pay volcano guide. Tanna better. Active, lots of lava, good guesthouses, less mud.”

“Then why are you two going to Mathew?” Tourist demanded.

“I’m a WHO epidemiologist,” Nate replied seriously. “Just flew in from Noumea to investigate an outbreak of haemorrhagic dengue fever.”

The boarding announcement echoed through tinny loudspeakers. Warner was clearly having difficulty keeping a straight face as Tourist’s girlfriend paled. She tugged at her partner’s sleeve and whined, “C’mon Brian, let’s just go to Tanna. What difference does it make? It’s got a volcano as well.”

“Get full refund from travel agent for trouble,” the tech added with a helpful grin.

Brian Tourist was vacillating, but the surging crowds almost knocked his girlfriend down. Sour faced and grumbling, he returned to the ticket counter.

With the first rush of passengers past them, Brian’s girlfriend smiled gratefully at Warner. The smile slipped when they went out on to the tarmac. “Oh, honey,” she said to Brian. “The plane looks like a prop from some fifties movie!”

“It’ll be fine,” Brian assured her, chewing his lip. “Have you ever heard of a plane crashing in Vanuatu?”

Climbing aboard, her heel caught on an exposed rivet sticking up through threadbare carpeting. “I’d never even heard of Vanuatu,” she muttered, and perched on nearest vacant seat. “I hope they have toilets on the volcano.”

Several rows up front, Nate waited until they were airborne, then said quietly to Warner, “I wonder how they wangled visas out of Noumea?”

Warner’s bushy grey beard turned up in a grin. “The Froggies are probably hoping they’ll get themselves killed.”

“With that gut he’ll have a cardiac arrest before he gets high enough up the volcano to worry about lava bombs.”

When the Otter levelled out, Warner unbuckled his seatbelt, stepped into the narrow aisle, and almost tripped over a black piglet. The animal slipped through his grasping fingers but could not escape the more agile Nate, who dived on top of it.

“Good catch!” declared Warner, and headed forward to the cockpit.

Nate returned the squealing animal to its owner, a grinning Mathew Island boy whose name, he recalled, was Tom Kaleo. “You keep a tight hold of him, Tom, or I might steal him for dinner!”

On the aisle floor, the Hessian sack had also come to life. An angry rooster squeezed its head out and squawked its objections at being trampled by the piglet. Brian Tourist and his girlfriend stared saucer-eyed. “What the hell kind of airline is this?” Brian asked of no one in particular.

“Maybe Tanna wasn’t such a bad idea,” his girlfriend said, clinging to his hand.

Brian glowered. “Yeah. Hopefully they’ll be able to keep their damned *livestock* under control that long.”

The pig’s wet snout nuzzled the boy’s hand, tickling him. “Thank you Dr Nate,” Tom replied, averting his eyes from Brian’s.

Warner returned from the cockpit, ruffled Tom’s hair and sat down again. “If the island is cloud-free, the pilot’ll do a run over the top. So,” he added in a lower voice, “are you really checking for dengue? Or were you just saving my ass from *Crocodile Dundee*?”

“Haemorrhagic dengue has broken out on Ambrym and Epi Islands, and the wet season hasn’t even started. There have been fourteen deaths so far. The local clinics can’t handle it; so new victims are being medevac-ed to Vila. Mathew is probably too far south for dengue, but since New Caledonia is still claiming Mathew and Hunter, the French want to paint themselves the good guys.”

“Two hospitals to service eighty islands.” Warner grunted. “God help this country if there’s ever a serious outbreak.”

“There already is.” Nate scowled. “Malaria, TB, Hepatitis B, and now AIDS—which the government denies. It’ll tear through this place like every other sexually transmitted disease.” He glanced out the window. There was only so much he could do, and he wasn’t about to let it eat him alive. “How long are you going down for?”

“Just ‘till next week. I hope.”

Weekly flights to Mathew Island were notoriously unreliable, especially in the wet season, when the single dirt strip could become a bog within hours. “What’s the volcano doing?”

“Sensors are busted. I’m not worried, though. Mathew and Hunter are just babies, venting steam and fluff.” Warner’s look turned conspiratorial and, leaning closer, he whispered, “You bring any dive gear?”

“Why? You got some tanks stashed away?”

Nodding smugly, the vulcanologist replied, “Had four sent from Noumea on the last boat, ‘bout two months back. I want to see that submarine vent off the west coast. Figured I might get lucky with the weather. Ever dived in an underwater volcano?”

Nate shot him a withering look. “You want a dive buddy or not?”

“Don’t be a wimp.” Warner chuckled and closed his eyes.

Shaking his head, Nate opened his laptop to finish his report. Beside him, Warner dozed.

At Tanna Island, Brian and his girlfriend gratefully left the flight. From there, the Otter flew south for another hour and a half. When the engines changed pitch, Warner stretched and yawned, then pulled a camera from his bag and went forward again. Nate closed his laptop and followed.

The pilot smiled a greeting, handed them both a set of headphones and nodded to Warner. Nate squatted on the floor while the vulcanologist strapped himself into the right cockpit seat and lowered the side window. A hot, gritty rush of air tainted with the stench of rotting eggs filled the cabin. The fumes tore into the back of Nate's throat and scoured his sinuses. He almost choked.

"Man, that's the clearest I've ever seen it!" Warner picked up his Nikon and carefully focussed. "How close can we get?"

Most inter-island pilots cheerfully ignored regulations about flying over active volcanoes. Half the reason why they worked in Vanuatu was that, while the civil aviation boss in Vila might be pedantic son of a bitch, they could do pretty much as they pleased once out of sight. The pilot angled the Otter until all three of them could see deep into the heart of Mathew Island's active volcano. An incandescent orange lake swirled angrily around the vent, smashing against the interior walls like storm tossed waves. Hot air surged upwards, jostling the aircraft. Nate swallowed and braced himself.

"That's what keeps this baby quiet." Warner nodded in satisfaction. "Nothin' clogging up the works."

Nate had seen lava lakes before; there were two on Ambrym Island. They always affected him the same way. But he kept coming back, hoping to face it down. It was a visceral sensation that began deep inside the primitive part of his brain, sending a spasm of raw terror through his spine and into his gut. The churning lake was a brutal reminder that six billion humans inhabited a thin crust of congealed rock coating a shockingly violent ball of hell. He swallowed against the bile rising in his throat, telling himself it was just the stench. It wasn't until the pilot turned towards Mathew Island's short runway that he noticed Warner's frown. Adjusting the microphone, he said, "What's up?"

"I can't see the sensor box at the airport."

The volcanologist kept two sensor arrays on Mathew Island. One was at the airport, which the ORSTOM team regularly monitored on its rounds of the country's volcanoes. The second was a much bigger unit near the volcano's crater. Access to it involved a two-day walk through rainforest followed by a precarious balancing act along narrow ridges of loose scoria that crumbled away into gorges. Brian Tourist wouldn't have made it across the first jagged-edged lava flow.

"Still," Warner added, smiling happily, "I've just taken the best aerial photographs of Mathew's lava lake on record. The level's way down."

"That means the pressure in the magma chambers has fallen, right?" Nate said hopefully.

"I'll make a volcanologist out of you yet." Warner shot him an approving look.

Nate's only reply was a glare. He pulled off his earphones and returned to his seat for the landing.

For the Mathew Island villagers, the weekly inter-island flight broke the monotony of routine. The runway was lined with curiosity, laughter, waving hands and a solitary Land Rover belonging to the Peace Corps.

The Otter came to a halt near a tin shed. A lean Mathew Islander, naked except for his *nambas*—penis sheath—rolled a 44-gallon fuel drum across the grass while six passengers, including Tom Kaleo, Warner and Nate Sturgess disembarked. The Land Rover pickup coughed into life, turned and backed up to the aircraft's cargo hold. The pilot opened the cargo door, allowing everyone to unload their own luggage while he supervised the refuelling.

"Where are you staying?" Nate asked Warner.

"The cottage?" Warner sent him a hopeful look, and tossed a bag into the pickup's tray. "I brought gifts."

The clinic and nearby four bedroom cottage were the only structures on the island with a waterproof roof, concrete walls, and running water.

The wet season was due any day, and Warner's sensitive equipment needed to be kept under cover.

"Presents, huh?" Nate replied. "Peanut butter filled pretzels again?"

"Did you bring my soy sauce?" The door of the Land Rover opened and Katie Wood, an attractive, middle-aged woman dressed in white T-shirt and khaki shorts stepped out.

"Soya, wasabe and—" Reaching into his satchel, Nate dramatically flourished a gift-wrapped box and bundle of letters. "Chocolates and mail!"

A younger and somewhat chubbier version of Katie, complete with khaki shorts, rubber sandals and short dark hair, came around from the driver's side of the pickup. Whooping in delight, Judi Harris grabbed the letters, quickly kissed Nate, and began sorting through the mail.

"I can go one better." Warner reached into the Otter's cargo hold and lifted out a robust case. "Laptop and satellite. Anyone wanna surf the Internet?" he drawled seductively.

"Omigod!" Katie gaped. "It must have cost a fortune."

"Bloody Yank show-off," Nate muttered good-naturedly. He pulled the rest of his gear from the Otter and loaded it onto the truck.

Judi sidled up to the vulcanologist and hooked her arm through his. "Long time no see, Dr Warner. So, what does a girl have to do to send a few emails?"

"Gimme a bed for a week?" He stacked his bags next to Nate's, turned around and glanced meaningfully at Katie.

"Alone," Katie replied sternly. She picked up the last of the boxes labelled 'medical supplies'.

"I would never infer otherwise, dear Katie," Warner replied. "I just gotta work out what time we can hook into the satellites."

"See you in a week," the pilot said, shutting the cargo door.

"Just promise me you'll land." Nate glanced at the sky.

The pilot shot him a knowing look. "We'll see."

"You darned well better!" Katie snapped. "I'm supposed to be home for Christmas."

Nate climbed into the back of the pickup, but Warner stood staring thoughtfully at the end of the runway. The white sensor box with its seismic measuring equipment was visible, but it looked like it had been knocked over. "You want to check that first?" Nate asked him.

"It can wait." Warner clambered in beside him. "I want to get unpacked and set up everything."

On the drive to the clinic, Katie called out through the window to Nate, "What'd you bring for dinner?"

"Take-out Chinese. Microwave still working?"

"Of course not. But we've made a cooking pond at the hot springs."

"You don't mean the big pools behind the cottage?" Warner asked with a frown.

Katie shook her head. "The bathing pools are only warm, but a hundred metres further up, where the water bubbles out of the ground, it's close to boiling."

Warner relaxed, and turning to Nate, said, "Okay, well, how 'bout we go for that dive first thing tomorrow morning?"

They were passing through the village, and Nate was pleased to see that everything looked clean and tidy. He returned everyone's waves and smiles. Despite his dislike of the volcano, it was always a pleasure seeing the people of Mathew Island. "As long as I can be at the clinic by 0730."

"Suits me. I want to climb up to the main vent while this weather holds."

Nate glanced at the sky again. It was clear, but he doubted that would last.

-Chapter 3-

Quantico Marine Base, December 12, 1995

Dispersal: Minus 1 hour

“Put the gun down,” said Special Supervisory Agent Peter Brant.

Holding the wounded Agent Adams before him as a shield, Williams hardly spared Brant a glance. “You have no idea what it’s all about, what sacrifices have to be made to protect the country, the entire free world. If it wasn’t for us the goddamned place would be overrun by terrorists! But we know, don’t we McCabe?” Williams splattered saliva across Adams’ drooping head. “We know what it’s really like, what’s inside their minds, don’t we, Josh? *Don’t we!*”

The scene could have been a caricature of an FBI posse cornering its man—except that the perpetrator was one of their own. Half a dozen technicians crouched around the large, glass-walled briefing room, peeking around tables and upturned chairs. Five shirt-sleeved FBI agents took cover behind the concrete columns, and levelled their weapons at Robert Williams.

Only McCabe, who was closest to Williams, had held his ground amidst the pandemonium. “No, Rob. Tell me,” McCabe said, his eyes belying the softness in his voice. “Tell me how blowing up a building protects the American Way of Life. Tell me how shattering people’s lives does that?”

More agents poured into the room. Williams tightened his grip on Adams, who was slumping against him. Blood from Adams’ shattered chest bubbled out between Williams’ fingers and flowed onto his shirt and gold cufflinks.

The former head of the Behavioural Science Unit might be insane, but McCabe knew that Williams wasn’t stupid. A tactical support team would

already be surrounding the building; Quantico was on a Marine Base. Williams had no way out. The only thing stopping the agents from shooting him was his hostage, Agent Adams. But Adams was dying, a liability now. Soon, a sniper could make a clean hit.

“You snivelling little brat,” Williams sneered at McCabe. “You cut and ran. First to a woman, then, after you fucked her over, you tossed away everything I gave you. Your old man was right about you; you’re just like the rest of ‘em. Too gutless to admit the truth even as you work against it!”

Adams abruptly collapsed, causing Williams to stagger under the dead weight. His voice dropping to a whisper, Williams added, “Stopping us, stopping your father and brother from *protecting* the American people.”

An icy chill clutched McCabe. Before he could stop himself, he mouthed, “Ed?”

“You whimpering little asswipe. You of all people know that sacrifices have to be made. But too fucking clever Joshua McCabe—” Williams eyes flicked, and he grinned maniacally.

McCabe saw it too, a glint through the window and a flash of red from a sniper tracer; time was up.

Robert Williams lifted the gun’s muzzle to his right eye and pulled the trigger. With over three hundred foot-pounds behind it, the nine-millimetre projectile tore through his brain. Curdled grey and pink and yellow, and splinters of bone spewed backwards through the gaping hole, and hit the wall behind.

Horried FBI agents, trained to react instantly, froze at the sudden and shocking end to what would later be amorously described as ‘a situation’.

McCabe reacted first. Catching Adams, he gently lowered the wounded man to the floor, and placed a hand over the gaping wound in

his chest. Swearing, Peter Brant crouched opposite McCabe and began ripping away Adams' shirt. A flurry of confusion took over. Shouts for emergency kits and medics, expletives, questions, demands for answers, then Marine medics roughly pushed McCabe aside.

Eyes flickering open, Adams demanded, "McCabe!" A medic tried to place an oxygen mask over his face, but he batted it away. "*McCabe!*"

"Let him through," Brant ordered.

"Take it easy," McCabe said, pushing through the Marines and leaning over Adams.

The dying agent grabbed McCabe's tie, pulled him close, and rasped, "Oklahoma...five knew who. Chimera...human trials implemented. Convince them...sacrifice hundreds...for billions." Adams' grip relaxed, and he shuddered and convulsed. Hot blood erupted from his mouth and gushed across McCabe's hair and face, inadvertently catapulting him into another time and place.

A medic pulled McCabe away, then Brant jerked him to his feet, thrust a contorted face into his and demanded to know what Adams' had said.

Unresponsive, McCabe stared down at the blood dripping onto his shirt.

Chimera.

Demands from new arrivals were now directed at Brant. McCabe used the distraction to push a path through the frenzy of dour-faced agents and hysterical clerks. Then he was outside and running. Ignoring the shocked looks and cries of those he passed, his first instinct was to keep running. But there was nowhere to hide, not from this, so he went to his room at the Quantico 'Hilton'.

He didn't quite make it to the toilet before puking his guts out. Wrenching off his clothes, he turned the shower on as hot as he could stand it, and stepped in and washed himself down as fast as he could.

The bathroom door burst open. “What the *hell* is going on?” Brant’s eyes slid to mess on the floor, and his nostrils quivered with disgust. “If this is how you react—”

“My old man used to call it the puke factor.” McCabe spat out the last of the bile, tossed his head back, and shook himself like a wet dog. “What happens when you’re exposed to a Level 4 organism.” Odd thing, that. He never shook, just threw up. Stepping out of the shower, he pulled a white towel from the rack, and roughly dried himself.

“A what?” Brant demanded.

Ignoring him, McCabe walked into the bedroom and dropped the towel on the bed. He tugged a pair of shorts from the suitcase, and pulled them on.

“*Agent* McCabe! Brant’s voice was just short of murderous.

McCabe almost laughed. Instead he sat heavily on the bed and muttered, “The bastards have really done it.”

A knock on the door startled them both. “Come!” Brant called, apparently oblivious to the fact that it was McCabe’s room.

Assistant Director John Reynold strode in. Trailing him were two agents and a Marine major.

“What the fuck was Williams doing here?” McCabe demanded, belatedly adding, “Sir.”

Reynold turned to the men with him. His eyes ordered them to wait outside. The major looked like he was about to object, then he nodded and closed the door.

Shrugging out of his dark overcoat, Reynold replied, “Williams was suspended from duty pending the outcome of an internal enquiry. That was delayed due to the Oklahoma bombing. The Director reinstated him—administrative duty only, he wasn’t allowed to run cases.”

For a brief moment, McCabe regretted not pulling the trigger in his office eight months earlier. He pushed his wet hair off his forehead and

said, "Adams knew every single piece of evidence tabulated for McVeigh's trial like the back of his hand. And he learned something; something he knew only I would understand."

"Go on," Reynold said, ignoring Brant.

"A weaponised chimera is being tested on a human population." McCabe stood, and rummaged around his suitcase looking for a tracksuit.

Reynold sucked his breath in, and then demanded, "What were Adams' exact words?"

"'Oklahoma, five knew who. Chimera, human trials implemented. Convince them, sacrifice hundreds for billions.'"

"Chimera?" Brant's face screwed up. "What's a chimera?"

"A marriage born of insanity." McCabe eyed the tracksuit and wrested it from the bag. "It's a weaponised virus created with the properties of multiple viruses. *Human trials* don't mean in a lab; the lethality will already have been established. Someone is testing a bioweapon on a human population. Williams wasn't just insane, he was a megalomaniac, in the purest, clinical sense."

"Jesus, of all the people I might've suspected, Williams..." Reynold stared at him. "Okay, McCabe, talk to me."

It was a familiar routine. Reynold needed him to connect the dots. "Someone in the Federal Murrah Building stumbled over the evidence, or he or she was directly involved. At any rate, they had become a risk. In the days immediately following the bombing, local law enforcement agencies were overwhelmed by a spate of burglaries in victims' homes—"

"I've heard about your whacked theories, McCabe!" Brant exploded. "The robberies were unrelated opportunism by local thieves."

"Really?" McCabe shot him a scathing look. "Have you examined the pattern of the robberies? Or considered the victims? Adams found

something in the evidence room linking the bombing of the Federal Murrah Building to a planned test using a chimera, so Williams silenced him.”

“*McVeigh* bombed the Federal Murrah Building!” Brant lifted his hand and gestured angrily. “And what the hell has any of that got to do with Williams going psycho?”

“Robert Williams didn’t *go* psycho; he already was.” McCabe pulled the sweatshirt over his head. “But insanity does not preclude his acting in a calculated manner.”

“I saw *Outbreak*, too, McCabe.” Brant took off his rimless glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Sci fi conspiracies don’t belong in an FBI investigation. Besides, you’re a profiler, not a bioweapons expert!”

Snorting, McCabe glanced at Reynold, who shook his head. Okay, so Brant was out of the loop. “Lemme spell it out for you.” McCabe continued dressing while he talked. “Adams burst into the briefing room, agitated as all hell. Williams ran in and shot him—but deliberately did not make it a killing shot.”

“How do you know?” Brant snapped.

“Because Williams was a crack marksman. He needed a shield to keep himself from getting gunned down just long enough to find out what Adams had told me.” McCabe grinned weakly. “When Williams realised that I didn’t know anything, he killed himself.”

“And? So? What the fuck is all of that supposed to mean?” Brant barked, but Reynold clamped a warning hand on his shoulder. Replacing his glasses, Brant stared at his superior in disbelief. “You’re not taking him seriously?”

“Williams’ not only believed in protecting the American way of life,” Reynold explained. “He was obsessed with it. He had no compunction using every available resource in order to fulfil what he saw as a moral

obligation—no matter how sticky the ethics. No matter at what cost to people's lives.”

McCabe stood and let out a short, bitter laugh. Williams had viewed him as one such...resource.

“We’ve *got* McVeigh—” Brant objected.

“You’ve got what they wanted you to get,” McCabe interrupted. “You heard him. Before he killed himself, Williams said, ‘sacrifices have to be made, not just for this country, but the entire free world.’ McVeigh made a similar comment. Ever wondered why the FBI has been directed to ignore certain forensic evidence and *not* to pursue enquiries that might draw attention to the ‘Middle Eastern’ men seen with McVeigh the week prior to the bombing?”

Eyeing both of them suspiciously, Brant replied, “The Attorney General wants a solid conviction against McVeigh, not one muddled by conspiracy theories.”

“So the facts, the *truth* has to be sacrificed.” McCabe snorted. “One thing I’ll say about Rob Williams, he was no hypocrite. He was prepared to forfeit his own life in pursuit of his goddamned ideals.”

Brant’s look was frankly disbelieving, until Reynold said to him, “Don’t fall into the same denial that afflicts half of our government, beginning with our esteemed Director. Remember the Sarin attack in a Tokyo subway a few months back? We dodged a bullet that time. If it had been a biological weapon instead of a fast acting toxin, it would have been days, weeks, before anyone got sick. Meanwhile, anyone infected could have left Japan, spreading it to damned near every country on the planet.”

“So what does that make McVeigh?” Brant’s eyes darted between them. “A front man for a foreign attack? A latter day ‘lone gunman’? The Iraqis—”

“Williams involvement points to a group within our own government,” said Reynold, looking queasy.

McCabe sympathised. They’d finally caught the dragon by the tail, but they still had no idea how far the monster reached.

“You’re both crazy!” Brant ran the back of his hand across his jaw, but his voice lacked conviction.

“A few FBI, CIA, and DIA agents, and the more intelligent senior White House staffers, including the President and Vice President, have been alerted to what’s going on.” Reynold’s expression darkened and he turned to stare out the window. “Everyone else, including Congress, Senate, and the Pentagon, have deluded themselves into thinking that bioweapons are science fiction. If McCabe is right—and I wouldn’t bet against him—this group, people we know only as the Consortium, are planning a demonstration that’ll put the fear of God into this country.” He pivoted around, picked up his overcoat and headed for the door. “If it *is* a chimera, or if it becomes airborne after the initial contagion, there’s no guarantee it won’t spread beyond the test area.”

“And,” McCabe added. “There’ll be no cure.”

Clammy tendrils of evening mist drifted around the winter bare trees that lined the jogging track. McCabe barely noticed anything except his feet hitting the gravel path in a comforting rhythm. *Pound, pound, feel the blood pump, hear your heart beat.*

Williams’ death had extinguished one nightmare in his life and resurrected another. The bastard hadn’t been able to resist playing one last, sick mind game.

Pound, pound.

Still, the doubt niggled. Could Ed be involved? For God and Country, of course. Just like their old man. Yep, his brother had become a real chip off the old block. But Ed was in Brussels attending the WHO post-

mortem on the recent Ebola outbreak in Kikwit. And Ed hated Ebola with a passion—he had good reason to.

Mud and bugs, jungles and planes, fear. The stench of blood and human excrement, terror; not from snakes or scorpions or vindictive witchdoctors, not even from the cough of a leopard or snapping jaws of a crocodile, but of things unseen.

Run into the darkness. Pound, pound, feel your heart beat.

Sometime during the night he came out of the jungle and went to look for help. Packs of dogs wandered around, growling and fighting over human remains and crusted black pools of blood. The smell was so bad that it almost choked him. It was not just the odour of faeces and death, but what he later realised was that of burning flesh. Down by the river, the villagers had built a fire. They were vainly trying to exorcise the invisible demons by cremating the victims. When they saw him, they ran away, the expressions on their face, terrified.

Still naked, he returned to the clinic to wash and find some clothes. He soon gave up on the shower—there was no water—and went to the storeroom to find a lantern. Tucked away behind the Perrier were cartons of milk cookies, the ones that the nurses gave extremely malnourished children. He ripped open a packet and ate as many as he could.

Still weak from illness, but determined nonetheless, he carried the lantern outside and spent the remainder of the night scratching at the ground. He had to dig a hole deep enough to stop the leopards and dogs from digging up his mother.

When the sky finally began to lighten he saw how ineffectual his scratching had been. That left him with only one choice.

Steeling himself against the sight of her corpse, he went inside his room. Rats scurried under the bed, but the flies that gathered on her face and chest, ignored him. The smell was bad enough, but when he

tried to drag her across the floor, her skin sloughed off in his hands. He yelled out in grief and frustration, sat down beside her, and, for the first and only time, cried.

The rats started getting bold, and soon, they joined the flies crawling over her. He had to do this, had to give her a proper Christian burial, just like the nuns did. By pulling on her belt, he managed to get her to the veranda before his stomach revolted. The bile and half-digested cookies stung his sinuses as he spewed, and kept spewing.

A hand grasped his shoulder. Josh flinched and lifted his fist to strike back—a habit he'd acquired in boarding school. Staring at him with knowing eyes was a wizened-faced old man. In a surprising display of strength, the man picked up her body, and, ignoring the gore, slung her over his naked shoulder and carried her down to the river.

Unable to speak, Josh followed. Another villager, a middle-aged woman with no front teeth, helped the old guy toss the body onto the pyre.

First, her long, once beautiful hair went up in a bright yellow flare. Then the bloodied remnants of her shirt caught fire. Josh turned away, unable to witness the blackening of her corpse, unable to listen to the sizzling and crackling as his mother's flesh burned from her bones.

Back in the clinic he helped the old man pull out the remaining boxes of food and Perrier—the only safe drinking water in the village. Afterwards, they set the building alight. Then Josh went with the man to check all of the huts, not entirely certain what he was seeking. What he found was something that he'd never spoken of, to anyone. By the end of that day, most of the village was in flames.

He wanted to go mad, because in madness lay sanctuary. But he was not granted that relief. The surviving villagers' fatalism kept him sane, while the scavenged supplies and his immunity to the disease kept him alive.

Weeks passed in this strange non-madness, and then his father and brother returned.

The death of his mother should have driven Josh, of all people, to find a way to control hemorrhagic viruses. Or so his father had said after learning that Josh had taken his MD and, rather than turning to epidemiology and the 'family business', had instead taken refuge in psychology.

Even then, it had been impossible to put the nightmares behind him. Eggnog around the Christmas tree each year had been punctuated by candid snaps of erupting pustules and corpses piled like cordwood, the ground black with body fluids harbouring microscopic mass murderers from countless outbreaks in a dozen countries.

When he'd started consulting for the FBI, he'd been tempted to bring to the Christmas celebrations a few snapshots of his own, to outmatch his family's liturgy of horrors. But one or even a dozen brutally raped and murdered children were nothing compared to a killer that could mindlessly eradicate thousands. Or millions.

Or, under the right conditions, billions.

He was in a unique position to understand the potential of these bugs, but he'd avoided them as much as he'd avoided the awful talent that Williams had lusted after. Adams had come to him knowing that he would have no choice but to listen.

There was another choice. Simple, really. Just pick up your weapon, and do exactly what Williams had done. Fast, and conclusive.

So why was he staying? Because of his promise to Reynold? Some sense of moral obligation towards his fellow man? Or was it morbid curiosity? A need to pick and prod at his gross misjudgement of Williams, to understand what he had failed to see in the man?

Williams, of course, was having the last laugh. But Williams was dead. McCabe smiled. Being alive gave him more options. And that's why he'd stay. For now.

-Chapter 4-

Mathew Island, Vanuatu, 0330hours December 13, 1995

Dispersal

After dinner, Nate Sturgess and Michael Warner had bathed in one of the pools fed by the hot springs. Katie and Judi had lined it with river stones—the same stones that the villagers used for cooking. The ORSTOM tech at Vila airport had told the truth, there were no hot showers on Mathew Island. But there were plenty of hot pools, as long as you didn't mind the smell of brimstone.

Warner had squatted in the water up to his neck and joked about sacrificial offerings to Vulcan, which hadn't helped Nate's insomnia when he'd gone to bed later that night. Despite intellectualizing his relative safety, the regular rumbling from the volcano never let him forget that the clinic was only a short distance from the mouth of Hell.

Eventually, Nate had fallen into a restless sleep and dreamed about the surging lava that lashed at the walls of the vent. It was like an enraged beast, furious at being caged, relentlessly seeking a way out. If it ever found one... He abruptly woke. Was it his imagination, or was the rumbling from the volcano louder?

Just south of Mathew Island, a French Mirage F1 fighter-bomber flew west in a wide arc. Unwilling to advertise himself with a sonic boom, the pilot throttled back to five hundred knots before descending to four hundred feet. Despite the pods that were attached to the underside of his aircraft's wings, he felt naked, vulnerable at the lack of ordnance. Sure, the contents of the pods could inflict a greater death toll on human life than a half a dozen nukes, but it was a delayed weapon.

Glancing down at the island, he put aside his concerns. In the unlikely event of anyone seeing him, with an unmarked, unlit aircraft against a cloudy night sky, identification was near impossible.

He checked his instruments. The flight plan required him to make the first run at two hundred feet. UNSCOM documents confiscated from Iraq showed the ideal attack height for a similar biological agent was between one hundred and fifty and three hundred feet. Only a few microns in diameter, the chimera was too small to fall like dust or be affected by the forecast rain. In fact heavy cloud cover would protect it from the sun's killing rays. The creators of the deadly hybrid had considered coating the virus to protect it from UV light, but that could hamper its ability to be absorbed by human lungs. Besides, no one wanted this stuff surviving long enough to leave Mathew Island.

HEPA—High Efficiency Particle Arrestor—filters had been installed in the Mirage's ventilation system in the event that any particles penetrated the sealed cockpit. Although the chimera was not a toxin that could be absorbed through the skin, the pilot was also encased in an especially designed flight suit. Theoretically, the microorganism could not survive the altitude he would be flying at on his return. Nevertheless, the aircraft would be decontaminated after landing on a remote runway, and he would be quarantined in a Level 4 isolation unit for two weeks. No one was taking any chances with this bug.

Weather conditions were near perfect: a slight temperature inversion and excellent wind direction. His onboard computer calculated the Mirage's speed, height and distance from the projected target. The wing pods opened. Through British invented Venturi electric valves, forty kilos of the chimera dispersed evenly at a rate of two grams per metre over twenty kilometres in what was known as a line dissemination.

After completing his first run, the pilot banked one hundred and eighty degrees and climbed to six thousand feet. He made his second run a

few minutes later, dispersing another forty kilos over the large ash cloud erupting from Hunter Island's volcano. The chimera would cling to the ash particles like pollen grains to a sweater. In turn the ash would form the nuclei of rain droplets. In a few hours, when the wind picked up, these clouds would reach Mathew Island, rise over the mountains, and fall as rain. This secondary dispersal of the bioweapon would ensure a greater infection rate, hopefully around seventy percent.

Mission complete, the pilot turned the Mirage south and climbed to thirty thousand feet. After flying almost ten minutes at just under Mach 1, he headed due west into the prevailing winds, then veered north towards New Caledonia and the first refuelling point.

Two hours later, Nate and Warner drove the Land Rover to the western tip of Mathew Island, and parked on a horseshoe shaped beach. The black volcanic sands were warm underfoot, legacy of the countless hot springs that bubbled out across the island. The sun had risen, but the sky was as dark as the leaden ocean. "Storm's coming," Nate said, swallowing the last mouthful of a muesli bar. "Hope it's not the start of the wet season."

Warner spat into his facemask. "It's gonna be a bitch climbing up to the lava lake if it does rain. Still," he smiled happily, "this is the first chance I've had to see this underwater vent."

Unnoticed, several chimera particles landed on Warner's Lycra-covered shoulders, while others settled in Nate's hair. If they had put the regulators into their mouths and taken a deep breath, as many novice divers do, they would have inhaled five or six particles each, giving themselves a lethal dose. Instead, fins in hand, they walked into the water. Once under the surface they breathed out hard into the second stage of the regs, clearing them of seawater—and the virus. A dive instructor would have shuddered at their lack of BCDs and arse-about

technique, but they were old hands at this, as comfortable underwater as on land.

On the surface, it began to rain.

Four kilometres to the northwest, the villagers had begun their morning rituals. When Nathaniel Sturgess visited the island, his job didn't involve seeing patients at the clinic, but he generally would make himself available for a few hours each day. Monitoring dengue and malaria outbreaks in remote locations was not simply a matter of flying in, taking blood samples, and leaving. It was about education, community health, making sure vaccinations were up to date and bacterial infections properly treated. It was about developing trust, encouraging people to listen, and listening in turn.

Knowing that 'Dr Nate' was coming, the villagers had spent the previous day cleaning up. It hadn't rained in weeks but they sensed the wet season was almost upon them. Dr Nate didn't like it when they left things lying around for the *anopheles* mosquitoes to lay their eggs and grow, spreading malaria and dengue. They had learned that keeping the grass short and the immediate area around the village clean had helped reduce the incidence of infection, especially amongst children. And it kept Dr Nate happy. And Dr Nate always brought other medicines. He also brought books and colour pencils for the children, and balloons—although he had some odd ideas about putting them over the men's *pipi* to stop making *pikininis*. Babies were always welcome in the village. Too many young people left for the promise of work in the capital, Port Vila, and never returned.

While Nate and Warner silently bitched about breathing oily air compressed and bottled in New Caledonia two months earlier, fully half the villagers inhaled lethal quantities of the chimera. Less than four microns in diameter, the microbe readily moved from air-filled alveoli to

surrounding blood vessels. Its creators had designed it to be that way:
lung friendly.

-Chapter 5-

Washington, DC

Dispersal: Plus 15 hours

Special Supervisory Agent Peter Brant sat back in the limo and stared at the dark DC streets outside the White House. Until yesterday, he'd known McCabe only by reputation. The young agent had variously been described as brilliant, gifted, antisocial, even whacko. But the way he'd calmly stood his ground with Williams had been...chilling. How then could Adams' few words have rattled McCabe enough for him to puke his guts out?

Finally knowing the answer made Brant want to puke his own guts out. He pulled off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. It wasn't as if he'd been unaware of the FBI's shaky, in fact downright erratic, moral compass. And he would have been the first to admit that US foreign policy was more of a slimy, volatile fluid than a political dance of convenience. But what he'd learned these past few hours, beginning with the meeting in Director Spalding's office, had bordered on the surreal.

Spalding had handed him the classified file on McCabe, warning him that it wasn't a joke. Psychiatrists' reports and a dozen supporting interviews with the offenders backed up an extraordinary tale. Little wonder McCabe hated Williams' guts. Strange talent notwithstanding, McCabe was a brilliant profiler with an extraordinary analytical mind. He had worked for the Domestic Terrorism Unit because his intuitive leaps consistently left other investigators stumbling in his wake. McCabe's biggest problem, Reynold had explained, was controlling his impatience until those around him caught up.

In an atmosphere laced with nicotine and panic, the hours that followed that first meeting were marked by conferences with the entire alphabet soup of US government agencies. The FBI didn't normally talk to intelligence agencies, particularly the CIA and DIA. Ever. Which had resulted in embarrassing fiascos like allowing the World Trade Centre bombers into the country with no passport and visas, and bomb making manuals in their hand luggage, and then letting them leave again.

Directly as a result of Oklahoma, Bill Clinton had signed Presidential Decision Directive 39, designating the FBI as the lead federal agency for all operational responses to domestic terrorist incidents—including the threat of such an incident. Problem was, where weapons of mass destruction—WMDs—were suspected, the initial response, mass decontamination, and clean up was assigned to the Department of Defence, Marine Corps Chemical/Biological Incident Response Force, the US Army Technical Transport Unit, and the US Environmental Protection Agency, while the Federal Emergency Management Agency, FEMA, was to provide post-disaster management. Freely translated: if there ever was an attack, any investigation would be mired in a rat fuck of squabbling Federal agencies.

The heat inside the limo failed to compensate for the sick chill in Brant's gut. He pulled his overcoat tighter. It now seemed that a turf war was the last thing on anyone's minds, because senior personnel within the US government had been aware of something far more worrisome lurking in the shadows. So little was known about them that even the name, the Consortium, was nothing more than a descriptive label.

While aspects of the Consortium were reminiscent of the ancient Star Chamber, the scope of their mandate appeared to be much wider. And if Williams' actions were anything to go by, their members were fanatically determined to protect their secrecy. All that was known for certain was that the Consortium was mired in a post WWII hardcore Right-wing

mentality, that Western, and specifically US interests must be protected against all threats, both domestic and foreign—at any cost.

The meetings that evening had culminated in a session at the Oval Office. Based on McCabe's revelation, the President had immediately invoked the National Defence Authorization Act. Not legislated to come into effect until 1996, part of this Act involved cross-agency training for the handling of and response to WMDs. The first training programme was already underway at Quantico. By utilizing the personnel already there, they could avoid drawing undue attention to the investigation of the Consortium.

Over the next twenty-four hours, additional personnel from the CIA, DIA, FEMA and USAMRIID would converge on Quantico to join the FBI-led task force. On the assumption that members of this Consortium existed within the ranks of all agencies, including the military, diplomatic corps and the White House, everyone involved in the investigation would be subject to rigorous background checks.

Which would take time. Months, or, more likely, years. Given the urgency of the situation, they had to bring on board people who, while not necessarily the best qualified were least likely to be suspect. It was a hard call. As McCabe said, no one would have suspected Williams.

"Sir?" called the driver. "Dr Spinner isn't in her hotel room. Concierge seems to think he knows where she is."

Brant nodded and looked outside at the falling snow. The unsigned divorce papers sitting on his desk had been at the forefront of his mind for three days. They now seemed trivial.

*

Jordan Spinner dipped her hand into the water and pulled. One arm over the other, mindless stokes, endless laps from one end of the heated pool to the other. Blessed oblivion. If only it were that easy all of

the time. Dip, pull, stroke, over and over. But it would come to an end and she would go home and...

There was no going home. There was an apartment, yes, but no more home. No nursery, no soft cuddles with Jamie. No Douglas. Maybe it was time she packed up, sold the apartment, and moved back to Australia. *Home*, she thought bitterly, *the place they can't kick you out of*.

Technically, she was still on disability leave from the FBI, but the previous evening some lackey in the Bureau had more or less ordered her to get on a flight from Oklahoma City to DC. They'd probably brought her here to pay out her contract. With that on her record what chance would she have to get work with the Australian Federal Police? No family, no career, nothing left except pull and stroke, over and over, going absolutely nowhere across an endless sea of blue tiles and patchy black lines.

Jordan reached the end of the pool and stopped. A pair of polished black shoes stood close to the edge. She tugged off her goggles and looked up.

The shoes were attached to a bear-sized man with brown eyes. Hard eyes, with a potential gentleness resting beneath. Dressed in a charcoal suit and overcoat, he carried the unique bouquet of a supervisory agent or assistant director. Ex-military by the looks of him. "Dr Spinner?" he said.

Lips thinned in resignation, Jordan pulled herself from the pool.

Shiny shoes stepped back, and added, "Dr Spinner, I'm Special Supervisory Agent Peter Brant."

She accepted the towel he handed her. "Sir." It was the best she could come up with by way of thanks. Shit. It wasn't even 3am. The least they could have done was wait until office hours to fire her.

Her week-old blond stubble felt scratchy under the towel. Before Oklahoma—which had become an event, not a place name—she'd had long hair. Her best feature, her father had often said. The hospital had shaved off patches between the burns, to stitch the lacerations crisscrossing her skull. The result had been a bizarre pattern. She'd taken one look and told a nurse to shave it all off, inadvertently giving the psychologists unwanted ammunition.

"What, another psych evaluation?" she said, walking to the nearby bench and pulling on her track pants. "Or is this where you hand me a one-way ticket to Sydney?"

"I don't have time for bullshit," he replied in a tone that probably intimidated agents. "Your physical says you're fit for duty, and I need you, yesterday. But not unless you're ready to work."

"What kind of work?" Jordan had never been cowed by overbearing G-men, especially those at the top of the bureaucratic food chain.

Brant shot her a curious look. "Before turning to pathology, your expertise was virology?"

Now her interest was tweaked. "Yes, sir."

"Good, we'll need both." Brant held out a file folder. When she took it, he added, "Car's waiting to take you to Quantico. Briefing is in three hours." He turned and walked away.

"You haven't asked me if I'm ready to work," Jordan called.

"McVeigh was a pawn," Brant said, and kept walking.

*

"Congratulations on making Assistant Director." McCabe picked up his keys from the table. "Does that mean you're passing my leash to Brant?"

Reynold was standing at the door to McCabe's Quantico bedroom, Brant hovering in his shadow. Which wasn't easy, because Brant had at least fifty pounds of pure muscle on Reynold.

“Stop being a professional asshole, McCabe,” Reynold replied impatiently. “He’s on your side.”

That meant Brant had seen his file. Or was it the guided tour of the White House that had swayed him? McCabe closed the door and walked with them to the stairs. “If an attack has already occurred it’ll be days before anyone gets sick. Then another forty-eight to seventy-two hours before some emergency ward intern realizes they’ve got an outbreak on their hands.”

“That’s why we start now. I’ll head the overall investigation,” explained Reynold. “Brant will run an internal investigation into Williams and Adams. You, Agent David Wilson from the DIA, and Major Broadwater will advise on key aspects of the operations.”

McCabe’s step faltered. Susan Broadwater. Of course. Who else could they get now that his father was dead?

“Do you have a problem with that, Agent?” Brant said.

Had Brant noticed his hesitation? Or was it in his file? ‘Prior fucked up relationships included US Army Major Susan Broadwater, PhD in Messing Around with the Deadliest Bugs on the Planet’. “No,” he replied and handed Brant the keys and an envelope.

Brant looked at him suspiciously. “What’s this?”

“Keys to my apartment, my father’s house plus my lawyer’s phone numbers. You’ll need to investigate Agent Adams and me. I don’t just mean a follow-up incident report. You need to run a full background check, right down to our bedroom habits. I’ve told my lawyer to give you anything you want, without a search warrant. Bank accounts, passwords to my computers, everything.”

“Why? Because your brother is an epidemiologist?”

“Adams sought me out with information. Williams’ killed him but left me alive. I told you why but that doesn’t mean squat if I’m involved.”

McCabe's lips thinned. "And Williams implied that both my father and Ed were involved."

"Anything else you'd care to remember?" Brant's eyes blazed.

They had reached the bottom of the stairs. McCabe paused and turned to him. "Yeah. Don't get caught up in Williams' mind games." He began walking again.

"McCabe's right," Reynold said. "God knows what psychological traps that son of a bitch left behind."

The foyer was crowded with people, all headed for the lecture theatre. One of them was a tall woman with ragged, purple scars across a shaved head. The rest of her was hidden beneath tailored black pants and a grey polo neck.

McCabe knew that physically, Jordan Spinner had made a complete recovery. Psychologically, well, qualifications notwithstanding, he'd objected to her coming on board. She was an emotional liability they could ill afford; he himself was enough to contend with. But Reynold had insisted, so he'd let it slide. He'd work around Spinner, or walk over her, whatever was necessary.

"Doctor Spinner," Brant nodded politely when they reached her. "This is Special Agent Joshua McCabe. I'll introduce everyone else once we're inside." He gestured for her to precede them into the theatre.

She offered them a tight smile. Minimal makeup, and her only perfume was a lingering trace of chlorine. A swimmer. A habit from growing up on an Australian beach? Or did she need the amniotic comfort?

The seats in the tiered lecture theatre were almost full. On the podium, Susan Broadwater was deep in conversation with an African American man in his fifties, David Wilson. Supposedly Wilson was from

the Defence Intelligence Agency, but McCabe knew his paycheque came from the CIA.

Susan looked up, and, flashing him a brief smile, said politely, "Josh. How've you been?"

"Peachy." He accepted her outstretched hand. Something must have triggered his social skills, because he surprised himself by adding, "Glad you're here."

She stared at him a moment, looking for the truth. "Me too. You, I mean." Her face twisted. "That didn't come out right. I know you'd prefer not to be here, but—"

"All right," Assistant Director Reynold said, mercifully interrupting yet another uncomfortable reunion. "Let's get started."

There was seating for four people on the podium out front: Reynold, Wilson, Susan Broadwater and McCabe. Brant sat with Spinner in the audience. Beside them, US Navy Commander Charles 'Chuck' Long was talking to Julia Giovanni, a CIA library researcher. Like Spinner, both Long and Giovanni had lost family members in Oklahoma. That didn't place them above suspicion, but McCabe knew them, and he was glad to have them here.

When everyone was seated and the doors closed, Reynold pulled the microphone close. He nodded to a handful of familiar faces, peered over his bifocals, and said, "Thank you all for coming. Many of you who were already here at Quantico came with the intention of either running or undertaking training courses that deal with WMDs. The reason courses were suspended and you were asked here early this morning is that we have reason to believe that such an attack is about to be implemented. Indeed, it may already have occurred."

The background sounds of shuffling papers, cleared throats, and scribbling pens abruptly stopped. The silence was deafening.

“Following this briefing you will be assigned to task forces to assess the risk possibilities, investigate leads, and devise management strategies for potential domestic and international responses. Team leaders will meet each morning and evening to collate data.” Reynold paused and looked around. “This is not a war-game scenario like Global ‘95ⁱ. This is not a test or a joke. We believe this threat to be real. It will not be discussed with anyone outside this room except with the express permission of myself or the people on this panel.” He gestured to McCabe, Broadwater, and Wilson. “An open dialogue will set the agenda for this briefing. Feel free to question any speaker at any time to clarify points. First up is Major Susan Broadwater, a molecular biologist with USAMRIID, the United States Army Medical Research Institute for Infectious Diseases.”

Scanning the faces in the audience, Susan said, “I know some of you are familiar with the current status of bioweapons. I’d ask you to be patient while we recap for the benefit of those who are not.

“Make no mistake.” She linked her hands together on the table and leaned forward, closer to the microphone. “Bioweapons—BW—represent a significantly greater threat to our society than any other form of weapon, including nuclear. BWs are relatively easy to make, transport and distribute, and in the worst scenarios they cannot be treated or vaccinated against. They have been called weapons of mass destruction. However, as the man who developed such weapons for the Russians, Ken Alibekⁱⁱ, correctly pointed out, they should more appropriately be called weapons of mass casualty.

“Several months ago, the Aum sect caused havoc using a *chemical* weapon in a Tokyo subway. BWs are a different ball game. And, contrary to popular opinion, they’re not new; they’ve been used since biblical times. When you leave here, you might like to check the history

of Lord Jeffery Amherst, who instigated the deliberate infection of Native American Nations with smallpox. The results were catastrophic.

“A human specific bioweapon can kill most of the population of a city before it even knows it’s under attack, leaving the physical infrastructure virtually intact. In rural areas it can destroy human life while leaving crops and livestock untouched, uninfected. Thrown into chaos, the remaining population can easily be overtaken by a small, lightly equipped military force. Relatively unskilled labour will take an additional few weeks to decontaminate an infected area of human casualties, leaving it ready for immediate habitation by an enemy’s population.”

The expression on some of the faces in the audience was frankly disbelieving. Acknowledging their doubts, Broadwater added, “In recent years, the public have been outraged to learn that in the 1950s the United States Government ran nuclear tests on unsuspecting civilian populations.” She cast a knowing eye at Wilson. “What is also public but not common knowledge is that biological tests were undertaken as well.”

Mutters of surprise travelled around the theatre. “In 1950,” Susan continued, “the United States Navy ran six mock attacks on San Francisco. They sprayed what they believed to be harmless *Serratia marcescens* towards the coastline. Three days later eleven patients with *Serratia* infections appeared in local hospitals. One man died. Army scientists concluded that all 800 000 residents of San Francisco, in a three hundred square kilometre area, had been exposed.

“By 1957, in ‘Operation Large Area Coverage’, the US Army was raining supposedly benign but easily detectable BW simulants over vast tracts of the continental US. Fluorescent particles of inorganic zinc cadmium sulphide over Winnipeg, Manitoba, St. Louis, Minneapolis, Fort Wayne, rural Maryland and Leesburg, Virginia; I could go on all morning. As to the effectiveness of BW agents, from 1963 to 1969, tests were conducted on animals at Johnson Atoll. The details are still classified,

however, I can tell you that BW agents were released on animals from a spray tank mounted on an F-105 Navy jet travelling at 600km/h. The acceptable kill rate was fifty percent.”

Like Broadwater, McCabe knew some of those seated in the audience, if not personally then through association. Susan’s history lesson was nothing new to them. Others, particularly the younger agents and technicians, were visibly shocked. He glanced at Spinner; her face was drawn and unreadable.

While Susan continued to rattle off detailed statistics, McCabe’s thoughts turned elsewhere, to Williams’ victim, Agent Adams.

The handling procedures and compilation of physical evidence from the Federal Murrah Building, the manner it was dealt with in the forensics labs, and its proper storage under Adams’ watchful eye would provide the legal foundation of the prosecution’s case against McVeigh. The evidence room had been Adams’ personal domain for months. McCabe needed to be in that room, now, to slip into the dead agent’s skin, smell what Adams’ had smelled, touch what he had touched, look with Adams’ eyes—instead of sitting here listening to a short history in BW. Problem was, if McVeigh’s lawyers got the merest whiff of something amiss, the case against him would evaporate—which screwed McCabe’s chances of gaining access to the evidence room anytime soon. Indeed, the Attorney General had ordered the room sealed.

“The new FBI mandates are designed to arm you with the tools to investigate and pre-empt attacks,” Reynold was saying. “Not just respond to them. Simply put, some organisms offer a threat so great that a successful attack will leave no one alive to run an investigation. Our concern is that such an attack has occurred, using a biological compound and delivery method considerably more sophisticated than those of the Aum Sect or our home-grown Rajneeshees Cults. The

sooner we know the details, the greater our chances of taking control and managing the situation.”

Managing the situation. McCabe almost laughed aloud. The phrase ranked up there with being *better prepared*.

As if reading his mind, Reynold shot him a look. “Special Agent Joshua McCabe is known to most of you either personally or by reputation as an FBI profiler with the Behavioural Science Unit here at Quantico. He transferred to the Domestic Terrorism Unit following the Oklahoma City bombing. Agent McCabe also brings a unique perspective to the current situation.”

Not unique, just uncommon. “Don’t be fooled into thinking the United States abandoned BW for ethical reasons,” McCabe began bluntly. “We didn’t. In 1969, President Nixon announced their abolition because the CIA told him the Russians were decades from developing anything viable. Nixon figured on dissuading not only the Russians but also several poorer nations from developing a cheap alternative to nuclear weapons. Scrapping BW research also shaved millions of dollars off the defence budget, assuaged domestic antipathy to the Vietnam War and nuclear power, and set the table for nuclear arms controls. Perversely, the eradication of BW research programmes in this country has now made us highly vulnerable to attack.” Which was exactly what the Consortium believed. *Damn you, Williams. Damn every one of you for your bitterness and you hubris.*

“These were halcyon years,” he continued. He didn’t need notes to recite it, chapter and verse. He’d been weaned on it. Literally. “If we could put a man on the moon we could do anything. We’d brought microbe-carrying insects under control with DDT. Yellow fever and malaria had disappeared in all but a few impoverished third world countries. Antibiotics slaughtered age-old nemeses like tuberculosis, and we were vaccinating against viruses like polio, diphtheria and

whooping cough. And, after a ten-year battle, we were on the verge of defeating the single greatest killer in human history, smallpox. Humanity was celebrating its perceived triumph over microorganisms. Health professionals went so far as to declare infectious diseases all but dead.

‘But just as smallpox was eradicated, something ugly, something even more nightmarish than smallpox or the plague crept out of the jungles of Africa: Ebola.’

A low mumble rolled across the audience. The very name inspired terror. *Blood and flies, the smell of burning flesh. Burning her.*

He picked up a glass of water, sipped—and almost spat it out. Perrier. Since when had Perrier replaced tap water in the water jugs? Someone in the room knew. Hell, a lot of people knew. Except that one of them was trying to mess with his head.

Defiantly swallowing half the glass, he continued, “Haemorrhagic viruses are common. We have our own, home grown Hanta Fever. And there are other African ones like Marburg and Lassa. But Ebola Zaire had a unique feel to it, as if something tangibly evil had evolved from our worst nightmares to replace smallpox. AIDS had already jumped species and turned pandemic, but we wouldn’t recognize that for another five years. And AIDS, for all its unique horror, is a slow virus, and it’s not airborne.”

“Excuse me,” said Spinner. “Ebola is not airborne. It’s spread by body fluids.”

Susan sent McCabe a look indicating that she would answer. “If it’s not airborne, ask yourself why the CDC keep it locked up in a Level 4 bio-containment facility, when AIDS is only in Level 2.”

“Joe McCormick from the CDC spent days surrounded by crashing Ebola Zaire victims in 1976, and he never caught it.” Spinner countered. “He does not believe it’s airborne.”

Ah, the comfort of denial so eagerly embraced by academics.
“Despite McCormick’s experience,” McCabe said, “there were multiple cases in Zaire where the epidemiology clearly pointed to airborne contagion.”

“There was no record of—”

“I was in Zaire,” he finished. “I witnessed first-hand what Ebola can do. In most of these places there were no records because there was no one left alive to make records, Dr Spinner.”

Spinner stared at him. He finished the glass of Perrier.

“I have personally seen it happen in the USAMRIID lab at Fort Detrick.” Susan’s voice cut through the mumbles of surprise. “And outside the lab, in Virginia, at the Reston outbreak.”

“I understood the Reston outbreak was a different pathogen,” said Spinner, less certain now.

This time, Susan spoke to her directly. “I was part of the Reston team. The genetic differences are minute; it’s the same clade of viruses. The final clincher came with the Kikwit outbreak earlier this year. Post-mortems found loads of viruses both inside *and* outside the alveolar cells in victims’ lungs. There’s no longer any doubt. Ebola can infect through inhalation.”

Eyes flickering uncertainly, Spinner scribbled something on her notepad. As a virologist she should have known about the Kikwit findings, but at the time she’d been in a hospital bed, likely isolated from the world by her loss. Was she now capable of climbing out of that personal nightmare and into a larger one?

McCabe could feel Reynold’s eyes on him, asking him to play the game as directed. He shrugged. “For the sake of discussion, let’s agree that Ebola-Zaire is not *readily* caught through airborne particles. We’re not talking about Ebola *au naturel*. We’re talking about a weaponised version; one *designed* to be absorbed through the lungs.”

The noises from the audience were now frankly disbelieving—until Wilson said, “Agent McCabe is correct. The moment the Soviet Union signed the Biowarfare Convention treaty in 1972, BW labs disguised as pharmaceutical plants began sprouting all over the USSR. They were run on a scale equalling, if not surpassing, their nuclear technology. It was also a hell of a lot easier to hide from satellite and spy plane surveillance. By the late 1980s more than sixty thousand people were engaged in research, testing, production and equipment design of BWs in the USSR. They could mass-produce anthrax at a rate of two tons per day with the same production efficiency and reliability—and similar manufacturing techniques—we use to bottle Coca-Cola.”

Once again, their audience fell silent, even apprehensive.

“This information comes to us courtesy of a couple of highly placed defectors,” Wilson added. “Despite some fancy footwork and bumbling attempts to hide the evidence, in 1990 an international BW inspection team learned that the Soviets could manufacture, amongst other things, between eighty and one hundred tons of weaponised smallpox per annum.”

Reynold leaned forward and, glancing at Wilson, said, “Agent Wilson was one of the inspectors on that team. Which is why he is here today.”

“What the West saw as a medical triumph,” Wilson continued, “the Soviets, who supported the smallpox eradication programme, viewed as a biowarfare opportunity. When the USSR disintegrated, they began selling off their BW manufacturing equipment and stockpile to anyone who had the money. In April last year, Iraq purchased five tons of VX nerve. Worse, in the cash strapped Soviet economy, most of the BW staff hadn’t been paid in years. The resultant brain drain to other countries, including Iraq, was—still is—more like a haemorrhage. And they’re not leaving empty handed.”

Five knew who. A dying man leaving a cryptic clue—except Adams was the antithesis of crypticism. His meaning was literal. Five victims of the Oklahoma bombing knew members of the Consortium, a group of bitter old men who couldn't stomach Nixon's order to cease and desist. McCabe scanned the theatre. Not just old men, but idealists who had, for one reason or another, slipped across the murky no man's land of morality. The physical evidence might be out of his reach, but not the files on the Oklahoma victims.

"You're saying the USSR sold weaponised Ebola and smallpox to Iraq?" Spinner blurted.

"No, something worse," McCabe replied, not entirely certain if her reaction was disbelief or alarm. "A *chimera*: a combination of the two."

"What's a chimera?" someone called from the audience.

"Genetically altered viruses, tailor made BWs," Susan explained. "It's no surprise the Soviets tinkered with them because you can pick and choose desirable traits; increased lethality, greater tolerance to UV light and so on, while discarding excess DNA baggage. Defectors had already warned us that they'd working on a chimera since 1989. Specifically, an Ebola-smallpox hybrid more virulent than the original organisms."

The room erupted in exclamations. Spinner's expression shifted. No question this time, she was frankly appalled. "Why in hell would someone make a virus more deadly than it already is?" she demanded.

"Why did we make a hydrogen bomb when we had an A bomb?" Susan pushed her notes aside. "Like any weapon, you want more bang for you buck."

"But who'd be insane enough to want to prove it?" Spinner added.

"That," Reynold said, "is what we're here to find out."

-Chapter 6-

Mathew Island

Dispersal: Plus 16 hours

The visibility during the dive that morning had been a remarkable fifty metres. Not uncommon in open ocean or at depth, but unusual on the windward side of an island, especially one now pounded by a storm. The underwater landscape had been surreal, alien. Stubby corals and sea pens grew in isolated oases across a lifeless desert of ebony sand. There were few fish around, except for pair of angelfish patrolling their barren kingdom, regally unaware of anything amiss.

Nate had expected to see the ubiquitous grey sharks. Small, no more than two metres long, the territorial animals commonly patrolled the deeper waters off coral walls. Warner had brought a sharpened aluminium rod along, not to inflict damage on the bad-tempered animals but to keep them at bay. But even at a depth of sixty metres inside the vent, the only sign of life were strangely isolated soft corals and sponges growing on the walls. Maybe the sharks didn't like the intense heat.

Neither Nate nor Warner had been inclined to go deeper; they'd already passed what was considered the safe limit for sport divers, and the temperature had been downright uncomfortable. During the ascent, they'd repeatedly had to wash the perspiration from inside their facemasks. Few air bubbles had erupted from the vent, but the thermal-springs had created temperature gradients, giving the water an oily look.

Despite his inherent dislike of volcanoes, Nate had been as fascinated as the vulcanologist by the strange landscape. It wasn't until they'd surfaced in the driving rain that Nate's sense of disquiet had set in. The dirt road back to the village was already a morass, which did not

bode well for the condition of the landing strip. If this was an overture to the wet season, he could be stuck down here for months.

Late that afternoon, as Nate stood tending a patient, the ground shuddered. Glass jars clinked against one another, and the steel instruments on the surgical tray rattled noisily. Like most of Vanuatu, Mathew Island was the exposed apex of an underwater volcano that extended miles beneath the ocean. Someone had once compared the archipelago to a dragon whose spiny back erupted blood and death from the Pacific waters.

Nate shook off the grim image and concentrated on cleaning pus from the boil on his patient's leg. The storm had done nothing to relieve the damned humidity, and the oppressive atmosphere was getting to him. "Okay, *bubu*, Sister will bandage it," he said to the old man. When Katie took over, he added, "Now remember, stop pinching the *pikinini's bonbons* and you shouldn't get so many boils."

The textbooks said that there was no relationship between sugar consumption and boils, but in the tropics, textbook answers didn't always apply. When Nate had arrived five years earlier, he'd been appalled at the rudimentary operating theatres and equipment. He'd soon learned to view the situation as a challenge, not only to his medical training but also to his personal ingenuity.

The ancient screen door of the clinic squeaked open, then banged shut behind Mike Warner. He was scowling and his clothes were filthy.

"What's up, rained out?" asked Nate. He went to the sink to wash his hands.

"Yeah." Warner smeared the mud off his face—and into his beard. "I got halfway to the top when a lahar stopped me."

Katie's head shot up. "You what?" she demanded.

"Heard it coming, got out of the way real fast." Warner grinned.

“Not fast enough, huh?” Ash from the volcano accumulated during the dry season. After a rainstorm, on flat areas it set like concrete, but on the steep slopes of the volcano it would rush down narrow gorges in deadly torrents.

“I had to get back down through it.” Warner’s nose wrinkled in frustration. “There’s no way I’m going to replace the sensor up near the crater this year. Still,” he scratched his beard, smearing the gunk around some more, “the seas don’t look too bad, and the weather forecast for tomorrow is good.” He turned to Katie. “If it’s okay with you, I’d like to take one of the boys and the launch to Hunter Island, to retrieve the data and replace the sensor.”

“Sure,” she replied. “There’s plenty of diesel and it needs a good run, clean out the cobwebs. Why don’t you go, too, Nate?”

“Can’t.” Nate dried his hands and glanced outside. The sun was setting and the sky was beginning to clear.

“Go on, take the launch and have a day off.” Katie helped the old man off the table. “We’ve already got everyone’s blood samples, and you’ll still be here another four days. I’ll have Nettie make you a picnic lunch.”

A trip to Hunter Island might relieve his sense of claustrophobia, still— “The villagers are going to want to see me at clinic tomorrow.”

“Nate, you’ve seen everyone who wanted to see you today,” Katie countered, helping the old man to the door.

Outside, Nate noticed the *bubu*’s grandson waiting. He nodded and called, “Good night, Samson.”

“*Gudnaet*, Dr Nate,” the boy replied, handing his *bubu* a boiled sweet.

Katie chuckled knowingly, closed the door and turned to him. “Really, everyone in the village is fine. As long as you go and visit the chief tomorrow night, have a shell or two of kava with them, they’ll be happy.”

The clinic was empty but for a woman who’d given birth earlier that afternoon. Both she and the baby were fine. The only reason she was

still there was because her husband was up on the northern side of the island, fishing. "Okay," he said, smiling at Warner. "You twisted my arm."

Later that evening, Nate sat on a camping chair beside the hot springs. Using a length of split bamboo, he held two pre-packaged meals in the water. The sun had long since set, but the glow from the volcano provided enough light to see. He generally ate whatever meals the villagers served him, having distributed his relatively exotic food and precious tins of coffee as payment in kind, but the rain had saturated everything, including the outdoor kitchens.

"Girls don't want dinner," said Warner, joining him. "I think they ate all of the chocolates. They're in the cottage, huddled over the computer and chatting to their buddies."

Nate accepted a beer and raised it in salute. "And you thought you could use it to get Katie into bed." The beer wasn't exactly icy, but it beat the hell out of water tainted with the stench of sulphur.

"Gimme a break."

"Katie's going to Vila on the same flight as you." Nate eased the packets out of the water. "You think they're done?"

"Yeah, drop 'em in this." Warner held out a large wooden bowl. "She's goin' back to the States for Christmas?"

"On Air Pacific. I confirmed her reservation before I left Vila." The ground rumbled and shifted alarmingly. Swearing, Nate made a quick grab for his beer. "Doesn't that ever bother you?"

Warner chuckled. "Nope." He pried the food packets apart and poured their contents into bowls. "You don't much like it, huh?"

"Why do you think I left New Zealand?"

"There's a valley on the island of Crete that's supposed to be full of ghosts, or demons or ancient gods, depending on your beliefs." Warner handed him a bowl of food. "When you go there, it fills you with such an

overwhelming sense of dread that the hairs on your neck literally stand up. Animals won't go near the place, not even birds. Just like Vanuatu, there's almost continuous seismic activity on Crete. Most of the time you don't notice the tremors—except in this one particular valley. The seismic waves and unique geological configuration creates an unusual subliminal harmonic—which happens to resonate with the part of our brain that triggers a fear response. You feel dread, even terror, and every one of your instincts is screaming for you to get the hell outta there, but only because of the harmonics, not because there's anything to fear. Still," he mused, "try telling your brain that."

"So you're saying the only reason I don't like volcanoes is the harmonics?"

"Nah." Warner downed the last of his beer and pulled a fork from his shirt pocket. "There's nothing unhealthy about fearing 'em. Vulcanologists have a higher job-related mortality rate than New York cops." He paused with his fork over the meal, thoughtful. "I like 'em because they're alive, creative and yet they're staggeringly violent. They're the one thing on this planet that nothing, absolutely nothing can stand up against. You can hide in the basement from a tornado, build a structure to withstand a cyclone, even a big earthquake or tsunami, and you can put out forest fires. Sure, there's been some success in diverting lava flows from smaller eruptions. But for the most part, when a volcano blows its top, you get out of their way or you die. It doesn't get any simpler than that. But they don't scare me because they're not malevolent. And I respect them. You wanna know what really frightens me?"

"Having all six of your computers crash at once?"

"Bugs, *your* bugs." He pointed his fork at Nate. "You can't see 'em, can't feel 'em until it's too late. They attack using—what did you call haemorrhagic dengue? Stealth technology?"

Nate nodded. "It fools the immune system, especially if you've had the non-haemorrhagic type first."

"Bugs scare the crap out of me." Warner glanced over his shoulder at the glowering volcano. "A hell of a lot more than that."

Later that night, Nate stretched out on one of the beds in the clinic and stared through the window at the pulsating clouds over the volcano. The sound of the surf on the shingled beach failed to relax him. Every time he closed his eyes, he could see the lava hissing and thrashing against the rim of the crater, like surf rolling up the shore, trying to reach him. Sleep, when it came at last, was restless and troubled.

-Chapter 7-

Quantico

Dispersal: Plus 27 hours

Jordan hadn't had time to do more than skim over the file that Brant had given her. Appalled by her ignorance, or more correctly, her gross naivety, she had sat through the morning's briefing in a state of shock. This was her profession, and yet it seemed she knew nothing of what had been going on.

After the meeting, Brant directed her to go with Tina Giovanni, a surprisingly youthful CIA library researcher. Giovanni led her through a warren of cubbyhole offices down into a massive archive room, and handed her a bundle of classified files. Jordan's immediate job was to bring herself up to speed on the latest research, and make herself available for round-the-clock consultation.

With Giovanni's help, she sorted the files into a grid pattern across the floor. At the top was a time line beginning in 1938, down the side countries by alphabetical order. Within an hour, Jordan realised she would need weeks, not days, to absorb the material. Giovanni, bless her, reminded Jordan that they weren't asking her to write a paper for *Nature*, they needed a virologist with the proper security clearances, and, in the worst case scenario, a pathologist qualified in a Racal suit and experienced with working in a hot zone.

Scanning the briefs and summaries of the files, Jordan zeroed in on research by the Soviets. The more she read, the angrier she became. It wasn't the screaming, tortuous rage that had set up residence in her soul since Oklahoma, but a quieter, deeply rooted anger at the actions of a latter-day Josef Mengele.

When her stomach began grumbling she realised that she'd missed breakfast and lunch. Grabbing a *Science* journal featuring articles on transposons—genes that jumped from place to place—Jordan left Giovanni snacking on her fourth candy bar and headed upstairs to the cafeteria.

“Why did Stanley Cohen and Herbert Boyer win the Nobel Prize?”

Startled, Jordan looked up from her half-eaten lasagne. McCabe's boyishly handsome face was only inches from hers. The low buzz of conversation, scraping of chairs, and the clatter of eating utensils seemed louder. She suddenly felt crowded, but refused to back away from him. “They envisaged using recombinant DNA as a delivery method to target certain areas of the body, like cancer cells, with specific drugs,” she replied. “They succeeded with *E. coli*.”

“By placing foreign genes inside *E. coli* to make them resistant to antibiotics,” McCabe replied, glancing down at the *Science* journal. “Two microbial Frankensteins were awarded the Nobel Prize for cutting and pasting genetic material from many life forms to create a new life form—a chimera. Just what the world needed, antibiotic resistant *E. coli*. I bet when Cohen and Boyer were kids they had those little books where you flip page sections back and forth to make an animal with the head of a lion, body of a goat and tail of a dragon.”

Could the damned man read her mind? “Your metaphor stinks.”

“If you knew your Greek mythology, you'd know it wasn't a metaphor, and are your buttons always this easy to push?”

Jordan winced. Not normally. “Einstein, Oppenheimer and Fermi suffered the same moral dilemmas with the atomic bomb. It pays never to forget that in the wrong hands, every tool can be turned into a weapon.”

“And there'll always be wrong hands, even amongst the good guys.”

“So, what can I do for you, Special Agent McCabe?” She closed the journal.

Instead of sitting down opposite, he sat beside her, close to her, then leaned even closer and whispered, “Think like a bad guy, then tell me your fantasies.”

She blinked and moved back just far enough so that he was still in focus. “I’m sorry?”

“Bad guy molecular biology fantasies,” McCabe added. “What chimera would you build with the credo ‘more bang for your buck’?”

“Haven’t you already decided it’s Ebola-smallpox?”

“I never take anything for granted. Sure, the Soviet’s developed an Ebola-smallpox chimera, but we don’t know how far they progressed. I want to know why—microbially speaking—they would choose that particular combination. Maybe they ended up developing a hybrid from four viruses. Or five. What bits go where? Why?”

The morning’s presentation had left Jordan struggling with the notion that a virologist would make an already horrific microbe deadlier. It was an obscenity that defied the most fundamental tenet of medicine, *primum non nocere*, first do no harm. Jordan pushed her plate aside and finished her juice. “Okay.” She turned to face him. “You obviously know more about virology than your average forensic psychologist.”

“Psychiatrist.”

“You’re a psychiatrist?” He hardly looked old enough. But then he’d been in Zaire—

“And you’re a virologist and board certified pathologist,” he shot back. “Dr Spinner, I’m not here to play one-upmanship or analyze your emotional state; I have my own issues to deal with. All I want is to pick your *professional* brain.”

Now he was pushing the right buttons. Did he know that? Did he care? He wasn't even looking at her. Jordan crossed her arms. It was like sitting beside a coiled spring in an expensive suit.

The analogy was driven home when he abruptly stood and walked out of the cafeteria, his dark overcoat flapping behind his long legs.

"Agent McCabe?" she called. When he kept walking, Jordan glanced at her half-finished meal, tossed the napkin on the table, picked up the journal and followed him. "McCabe? Wait up!"

He didn't stop until she grabbed his sleeve. "I said—" She placed herself directly in front of him. "Wait!" At one hundred and eighty centimetres she rarely had to stare up at a man, but McCabe had at least seven centimetres on her.

"We don't have time to wait." He stepped around her, pushed open the double glass doors, and walked outside.

"Fine." It irked her that he had climbed inside her head and knew exactly what was going on in there. She didn't want sympathy; she wanted to be treated like the professional that she was. But because he was doing just that, she was looking for a hidden agenda.

"Where do you want to have this conversation?" she said, catching up with him outside.

He swung around. "Right here."

A few flakes of snow landed on her face. No overcoat. Great. "My head's freezing. Let's get somewhere warmer."

"Why don't you let your hair grow back?" he said, walking back inside with her.

"I will, now." Jordan rubbed a hand over her spiky blond stubble. "Couple of places the bone was chipped, might've needed a small plate inserted, but it's okay now. Keeping it shaved made more sense, then it sorta became a habit." She knew exactly what his psychologist's—

psychiatrist's—mind would do with that, but she didn't much care. And if she was right about him, neither would he.

They passed the elevators to the stairs, went up two flights and through a bullpen alive with activity. McCabe opened a glass-paned office door and stood back for her to enter first.

The office was surprisingly large. Wooden slat blinds were pulled low over all the windows. The bookshelves were half empty, and the notice-board barren except for a lonely cluster of rainbow-coloured pin-tacks. No framed certificates or awards, no trophies, desk ornaments, or family snapshots. Either McCabe didn't have a life, or he kept it out of working hours, or this was a temporary office. "Yours?"

"For the moment." He pulled off his coat, hung it on a rack, went to the desk and opened a drawer.

Jordan sat in one of the two-seater leather lounge chairs opposite the desk. She looked up when something landed on her lap: a velvet-soft black beanie. Despite the central heating, her ears were cold, so she pulled it over her head. "Better." She offered him a quick smile. Brant had employed her to act as a consultant, conditional on her being able to work. And that meant instead of cadavers, she'd have to work with live people, even those who had a chip on their shoulder larger than hers.

"Talk to me." McCabe came around the desk and sat in the chair opposite. "I'm meeting the team leaders in half an hour."

"Stop me if I'm telling you stuff you already know. Do you want to take notes?"

"I have a good memory."

Douglas had said the same thing when they'd met. Jordan gripped the journal she was carrying, anchoring herself in the feel of the paper under her fingers. "I examined the Soviet research papers on combining viruses. They weren't as detailed as I would have liked, but at this time I

see no reason to refute their claims. Thing is, the work is old, three, four years old, so they've likely progressed.

"What you need to understand is that viruses and bacteria swap genes so fast that microbiologists don't talk of species, but clades. Microorganisms live together in a sort of soup. Sure, they compete with each other for an ecological niche, but they can also exchange genes via a direct recombination, or a transposon—a jumping gene for want of a better term."

Tapping the journal for emphasis, she added, "It's well-documented that a bacterium can become instantly resistant to antibiotics by getting the necessary gene from other organisms within this microbial soup. It can then pass this gene to other bacterium until, often within hours, we have a massive colony of antibiotic resistant bacteria. So, what we once thought of as a well-understood, normally harmless microbe can, under the right circumstances, become instantly lethal and highly resistant to drugs.

"Viruses are much smaller. In fact they're just bits of protein and nucleic acid. Because they're so tiny, they don't have space to carry much genetic baggage. They don't feed, breathe, or mate, but they do reproduce—by getting inside a cell and inserting genetic material that instructs that cell's manufacturing components to recreate copies of the virus. The copies, or progeny, then leave to infect other cells in a replication process that, unchecked, can turn a human body into a seething viral mass within an alarmingly short period of time."

Jordan scratched her head under the beanie. The material was soft, but the stubble caught it here and there. "The reason that this replication process doesn't normally happen is because our bodies have evolved defence mechanisms. Our skin and the mucous membranes in our nose, throat and lungs provide the first barriers. Viruses that get through are then confronted by a sophisticated immune system patrolling our

blood stream. Any virus that evades detection has generally done so by acquiring a few specialty genes from the microbial soup I mentioned. Once inside the host cells, the viruses then dump these unwanted genes in exchange for the genes to replicate. Think of them as having genetic weapons to slip past our defensive lines until they're safe inside our body's cells. Then they exchange their weapons for the ability to have offspring."

"So a molecular biologist only has to decide in which state he wants his virus, either stealth mode or replicating mode, and gives it the right bits of DNA," said McCabe.

"Well...in terms of making a virus from scratch, it wouldn't be that simple." Jordan rocked her head equivocally. "Most combinations wouldn't work. The best approach would be to start with a larger virus, strip the DNA that you're sure you don't need, and then replace it with the bits from other viruses that you know you want. By systematic experimenting, you could build an incredibly contagious, highly lethal bug that walks right past your immune system—or goes one better and uses your immune against you."

"Think like Frankenstein. What bits would you use?" McCabe sat back and clasped his hands behind his head.

"Smallpox is a good start. It's human-specific so you can't stop it spreading by killing insect carriers like you could with malaria or dengue or even bubonic plague. It's highly contagious, infecting and replicating in the throat, lungs and sinus passages. Plus it's a big enough virus to pack in a few Ebola genes, which would attack the major organs and eat them from within. Despite what you said about Ebola being transmissible through the air, smallpox is a lot more contagious, so you'd keep the genes for that, whereas virologists are not too sure how Ebola evades the human immune system. To make it really efficient, I'd use haemorrhagic dengue to get it inside the body, because that form of

dengue hijacks our immune system macrophage cells—the cells that kill intruders—in order to access every part of the body. Perhaps more importantly, in places where haemorrhagic dengue is endemic—Asia, Africa and the South Pacific, hell, even Texas and Northern Australia—health care workers would assume any outbreak was a natural, albeit particularly virulent strain of dengue.”

McCabe watched her talk, the way her mind explored the possibilities, the challenges. Her hands moved to accentuate points, retain this, discard that. Snipping and cutting, honing every gene until she’d sculpted a living monster that could become the ultimate weapon. He’d seen the same expression on Susan Broadwater’s face when his father had talked about it, all those years ago.

Abruptly, Jordan stopped speaking and stared at him, her eyes wide in surprise.

“Seductive, isn’t it?” he said with a knowing smile. “The challenge. Locked away in a state of the art lab, given all the money you want to play God, breathing life into your creation, birthing it then watching it live and grow and have babies of its own, to go out into the big, wide, world and—”

“Shit.” She snatched up the journal, leaped from the chair and grabbed her coat. “You’re a real asshole, you know that?”

He sat further back in his chair so he could look up at her. “Don’t confuse thinking like the enemy with being like the enemy. I just wanted you to see where these people are coming from.”

“You weren’t interested in picking my brains, just pummelling them.”

“I needed information, you needed a perspective. We both got what we needed.”

She jerked open the door and left.

Brant was right. Jordan Spinner would be a useful member to the team. She might resent her world view being turned inside out, but, given her recent personal losses, it was no surprise that she would cling so tenaciously to the shreds of her once dignified profession. She would go off in a huff for an hour or so, but then she would confront this new reality and dedicate herself to understanding it.

McCabe watched her walk through the bullpen, his watch cap pulled low over her ears. He liked useful tools.

His smile faded when he recalled that this was exactly how his father had seen Susan Broadwater.

-Chapter 8-

Mathew Island

Dispersal: Plus 28 hours.

Tom Kaleo woke that morning feeling a little ill, but he said nothing. Perhaps the fish he'd eaten the night before had been old. Or maybe it was from all the excitement. It had been three years since he'd left the village to go to school in Vila, and tonight there would be a big feast in his honour. He would drink the narcotic *kava* with his father and uncles in the *nakamal*, eat sweetened breadfruit and fresh *poulet* fish, and share stories with the village.

At eleven years old, Tom had a surprisingly good understanding of what his future held. His parents had sacrificed much to send him to boarding school, but they could not afford the fees for high school. Few students passed the entrance exams and only a rare handful received a full scholarship. Then, just before the exams, Tom had come down with dengue fever.

If he did not gain a place in high school, Tom's choices in life were limited. His work as a garden boy brought in a little money, but in order to stay in Vila he would have to steal to live. If the ineffectual police caught him, jail meant a place to sleep and food to eat, so that was okay. Or he could return to Mathew Island to work in the gardens and fish. He'd live in a bamboo-walled hut with a dirt floor and become entwined with the village politics, permanently enmeshed in a never-ending list of familial and social obligations that bound him to the village more assuredly than credit cards and mortgages bound Westerners to banks.

Despite the aches that had wracked his young body, he had forced himself to sit for the high school entrance examinations. The official

results weren't out until January, but when his Australian teacher had given him a *return* ticket to Mathew Island as a Christmas present, Tom knew it could mean only one thing. So he'd used the few *vatu* he'd earned looking after the teacher's garden, to buy his mother a small pig, a bag of rice, a little *calico*, and a packet of sugar. He had come home with gifts *and* he would be returning to high school in the new year!

Tom never realised that he wasn't simply bright; he was gifted. He would have breezed through high school and undoubtedly landed himself another scholarship to an Australian or New Zealand university. Medicine or engineering would not have been out of the question, either one of which was desperately needed in a country chronically lacking skilled professionals.

But Tom had been one of the first to inhale the virus the previous morning. Hundreds of chimera particles had readily passed through the alveoli in his lungs and then spread through his bloodstream. Because Tom had so recently suffered a bout of non-haemorrhagic dengue, his antibodies, already alerted for dengue, responded rapidly, sending signals to the immune system's primary killers, the macrophage cells. Legacy of one of its three genetic parents, dengue Type-2, the chimera allowed itself to be engulfed. And, as with dengue Type-2, Tom's macrophage cells failed to kill it. While he sat fishing from his canoe that morning, the chimera overcame and took control of these killer cells. Like a Trojan horse, the virus now had unhindered access to every organ in Tom's body.

By midmorning, Tom knew that he was getting worse. He'd never been seasick in his life, but sitting in the bobbing canoe made him ill. His muscles also hurt, just like they had when he'd been getting dengue. He said nothing to his friends in the canoes nearby, and instead concentrated on pulling in another big red *poulet* fish. He didn't want to be sick again, especially with the feast tonight.

*

The trip to Hunter Island was bumpy as all hell. Another wave of nausea washed over Nate, and he began to regret coming. "Hey Mike, want a break?" Taking the helm would keep his mind of his seasickness.

Warner glanced at him. "Sure, just don't run into anything, I don't fancy setting up camp here."

"Finally found a volcano you don't like, huh?" Nate cleaned the salt spray off his polarized sunglasses and then took the helm.

"It's not that. Look at the thing!" Warner stared at the island. "You'd be sleeping almost vertical."

If there was such a thing as an evil archetype, Hunter Island fit the bill. The volcano shot out from the ocean like a witch's hat. It was so black that even in full sunlight, nothing reflected off the surface. "I'm surprised no Hollywood producer's ever used it as the backdrop for some gothic horror film." Nate peered over the edge of the boat. Underwater it was much the same, a sheer drop into the depths. There were no outcrops of coral, no reefs extending out from the shore. "Then again, nobody would believe it was real. It's too damned evil lookin'."

The only place to land was in a small inlet tucked behind a lava flow. Nate tossed the anchor onto the rocky shore and helped Warner offload his equipment. He couldn't leave the launch for any length of time because the anchor's hold was tenuous, at best.

While Warner climbed the hundred metres to the top of the lava flow to replace the broken sensor, Nate collected soil samples and a few scrapings of moss, the only vegetation growing on the island. None of the samples carried any trace of the chimera; it had been washed away or decimated by UV light.

On the return trip, Nate viewed Mathew Island almost affectionately. Even the ever-present sienna clouds hovering over the volcano gave the island a warm, almost inviting aura.

“Boy, am I glad you guys are back!” Katie was waiting for them on the beach. Kicking off her sandals, she waded into the water, grabbed the gunwale and turned the boat so that its stern was facing the shore.

“Why, what’s up?” Nate asked, glancing around the launch to make certain that they had everything packed. “Accident?”

“No.” Katie held the boat steady while Warner lifted out his cases. “Around midday a couple of old *bubus* came to the clinic asking for you. They were complaining about headaches and nausea. I thought they just wanted some attention; you know, boast about seeing Dr Nate, so I gave them some paracetamol and told them to come back tomorrow. Then more people started coming by, all complaining of the same thing. Headachy, some are a little nauseous but no one’s throwing up, so I don’t think it’s bad food or ciguatera poisoning. An hour ago, the first cases from this morning returned—this time with a fever. At the rate we’re going, we’ll use two month’s supply of Panadol in two days.”

The launch’s fuel tanks were near empty and the oil needed changing, but that could wait. Nate tossed the anchor out as far as he could, jumped into the waist deep water, and waded ashore.

“Oh, and Mike,” Katie said to Warner as they carried the equipment up the beach. “I checked your email. There’s an urgent one from Seattle, so I opened it like you said. Your assistant said he’s worried about Mt Rainer. They want you back, post haste.”

“Oh, crap.” Warner’s face darkened.

“What is it?” Nate asked him.

“Cascade Mountains are unstable as all hell. Another Mount Saint Helens is a real possibility.”

Nate was only half listening. Three hundred metres away, up the hill, he could see the line of people waiting outside the clinic.

Later that evening, when Nate had finished ministering to everyone, he sat down to write in his journal. It was a habit he'd acquired in his earliest days travelling through the islands. Detailing everything he encountered in relation to exotic tropical illnesses and the treatments used by the locals had aided his research in traditional medicines. Before beginning a new entry he read over his previous notes from earlier that morning.

0530, Thursday 14 December 1995.

'Sharing dinner with Mike Warner last night, I had something of an epiphany: I'm getting too old for this. We broiled meals in the hot springs and ate by the light of the volcano. It sounds romantic, adventurous, but it was just plain tedious. I'm tired of sleeping on dirt floors, especially when they're mud. I'm tired of eating from tins and freeze-dried packets, or being served taro, breadfruit and bony fish cooked in coconut milk. I'm sick of having my things ransacked by pigs and chickens, and I hate living on top of a flatulent volcano. I can never sleep properly, and everything tastes and smells of rotting eggs. In truth, I feel like I'm wading through mud—even in the dry season. Now that the Vanuatu government has cut funding for its Malaria and Dengue Programme, they expect the WHO in Noumea, that is, me, to fill the gap, both financially and physically. They don't understand that pouring doctors in isn't the answer. Education and mosquito control, prevention, not more Chloroquine and Panadol is what's needed.

'On the positive side, the Mathew people have been keeping their village clean. With the wet season due, they've removed anything that might hold stagnant water, and the children's vaccinations are up to date. The incidence of malaria is way down, and there's been no outbreak of hepatitis or dengue. Being more Polynesian than Melanesian helps. Although they've never been successfully

Christianised—having eaten the only missionaries who ever made the attempt—they're more inclined to assimilate new ideas and Western medicines than, say the purely Melanesian Ambrym Islanders, who live under a permanent shroud of volcanic dust and black magic. The Mathew Islanders accept that germs and mosquitoes, not witch doctors, cause disease.

'Most of the credit has to go to Katie Wood and Judi Harris, the Peace Corps nursing sisters, and their three Mathew Island aids, Alice, Emily, and Nettie. Middle age hasn't slowed Katie down; if anything, she seems to have more energy than Judi, who's young enough to be her daughter. Despite the generation gap, the women have formed a close bond; they even wear each other's clothes—something Mike Warner appreciates because most of the time that means shorts and tank tops. It's too damned hot to wear anything else.

'Katie is returning to Seattle next week. I wonder if her family can conceive of what she's been doing, how wonderful she's been despite the unbelievable conditions that she works under? Judi will be alone for a few weeks. I'm not sure if that's such a great idea, but the responsibility will probably be good for her.'

Nate pulled his laptop closer to begin a new entry.

2030: Thursday 14 December 1995.

'Most of my clinical notes are attached to my hand written reports, but before going to bed I wanted to make some personal observations about this sudden outbreak. My first instinct was to look for a common cause. The only thing that comes to mind is the hot springs that provide the village with fresh water. Apart from a slightly sulphurous aftertaste, the water bubbles out of the ground boiling, and, of course, sterile. As it rained yesterday and the symptoms include mild gastro-intestinal upset,

I'm wondering if something washed into the common water supply. Unfortunately, I have no way of testing it.

'The symptoms worsened throughout the day and paracetamol has had only a marginal impact. Judi suggested a *giardia* infection, but it's unlikely the entire village would have come down with it almost simultaneously. Also, boiling water kills most microorganisms, including the parasitical *giardia*. Interestingly, of the six people who arrived with the flight on Tuesday, only one seems affected: Tom Kaleo. He brought with him a small pig—and what I now suspect could be an extremely contagious flu virus.

'The villagers are generally healthy and likely to get through it without too much discomfort, but it's hit them uncommonly fast, and it's putting a huge dent in the clinic's limited supplies.

'Mike Warner has been called back to Seattle urgently. Apparently Mt Rainer is causing some concern. Mike's organised a charter plane to collect him tomorrow morning, so I've requested that the Health Department load the flight with additional analgesics and sterile equipment, including masks and gloves.

'That idiot who pretends to run Vila Central Hospital, Gene Marshall, is foot shuffling. I told him to take it from the WHO supplies earmarked for the Dengue and Malaria Unit. I'll juggle the stock lists later, but this constant bickering over a few basic supplies that are not even under Marshall's control, and worse, his increasing propensity to dispute my professional judgment when his own diagnostic skills are notoriously appalling, is getting on my nerves.

'In addition to the speed of onset, the other aspect of this outbreak that concerns me are the symptoms. Although flu-like, they also exhibit dengue-like traits. Tom Kaleo assumed he was suffering a relapse. Although the symptoms do not rule out dengue, the epidemiology does; it's too rapid and has affected way too many people. Even had a swarm

of mosquitoes bitten Tom the moment he got off the plane at Mathew, it takes eight to twelve days for the virus to replicate in the mosquito's gut. The insects would then have had to bite each of the other victims simultaneously. And even then, it takes another four to seven days after someone has been bitten for symptoms to manifest.

'Whatever the cause, if Tom did bring it with him, it's a remarkable example of how quickly a contagion can be introduced into, and spread through, a closed population.'

Nate paused, glanced out the window, and then added, 'I just don't like the look of this thing; something about it bugs me—no pun intended. Mike Warner has agreed to take blood samples back to Vila. The lab there regularly tests for malaria and dengue, and it would be useful to rule that out. I've also asked them to check the white cell count. Meanwhile, I've started Tom Kaleo and eight others on two courses of antibiotics, just in case it is some gastrointestinal infection. I've also advised Katie, Judi, and Mike to re-boil all water and eat only pre-packaged foods until we're sure what's causing this.'

-Chapter 9-

Quantico

Dispersal: Plus 43 hours

McCabe's only request to Brant was that the investigative teams assigned to run extensive background checks on him and his family do not trash his place or delete his files in their usual bull-headed fashion.

Such investigations had a notoriously chilling effect on a person's career and personal life. Although logic dictated his innocence, given his connection to the case, especially his familial ties, the FBI should have relieved him of duty until he was cleared. They weren't keeping him on because of logic but because they needed him.

Except for a peculiar and mostly classified personnel record unconnected to the case, McCabe had nothing to embarrass him but bad personal habits, a fridge full of exotic life forms that Meg, his newly inherited housekeeper, had probably nuked by now, and a few dog-eared copies of Penthouse. His eclectic and somewhat bizarre collection of books and bookmarked websites could be considered disturbing, even damning, except that he was a forensic psychiatrist, a profiler of life's worst psychopathic killers, paedophiles, and the most rabid terrorist and white supremacist hate groups. The investigative teams would discover that Joshua McCabe lived in a singular world, a world of the mind. He ran and ate, breathed and slept like normal men. He passed psych evaluations, cleaned and oiled his weapons. He even watched a few games on the weekends. But he never socialized.

It suited McCabe. And it suited the FBI. Win-win all around, he thought—if he ever thought much about anything. Anything, that was, except what drove men like Timothy McVeigh, Shoko Asahara, and now, Robert Williams.

Following the initial briefing, Reynold had directed people to work in specific task forces. One team was assigned to review the post-bombing Oklahoma investigations with a new eye, particularly the spate of robberies at the homes of dead and injured federal agents. Other teams would commence the lengthy detective work of tracking every minute of Williams and Adams' last days, particularly their last hours. This would later expand into extensive background checks of dozens, possibly hundreds, of individuals and organizations—all of which could take months, even years.

However, assurances from President notwithstanding, the one place that could have provided them with immediate answers, the evidence room, would remain off-limits until every piece to be used in the McVeigh trial was checked and cross-matched against the database.

Williams would have known that, and he would also have known that removing any piece of evidence would instantly draw attention. *Ergo*, nothing would be missing. Security tapes had corroborated what records showed. Adams hadn't been in the evidence room for almost twenty-four hours before Williams killed him, nor had Adam's been examining the Oklahoma victimologies. Therefore, Adams had learned something outside that arena and had connected it with the evidence. This connection, in turn, had prompted him to run, pale and scared, to McCabe.

The sun wasn't up yet, and it was too dark for McCabe to use the vast and winding running tracks around Quantico. Instead, along with a platoon of Marines and handful of FBI agents, he ran around one of the well-lit ovals. Feet pounding the frozen ground in a metronomic rhythm, his mind settled into a familiar routine. Build the evidence—not the physical evidence, that wouldn't help him for now. Instead he focussed on what he knew, what he'd taught before Williams had convinced him that he was wasted in front of a classroom of undergraduates.

He could recall his last lecture, word for word. *Several aspects of the psychopathology of serial killers, mass murderers and terrorists, especially cult terrorists, overlap. Each work within their own intricate set of values, instilled into them by parents, peers, religion or government. Each dehumanises their victims. And each strives to gain control over their own lives through acts of torture and/or killing, by living out fantasies. They feel pain in some form and want to share the pain with the rest of the world, be it on an individual or mass scale. It's a philosophy commonly cited by the likes of people such as bin Laden, to 'punish' America for misdeeds going back to WWII.*

It had been such an oversimplified analysis. Not wrong, but vastly incomplete. The mistake that many investigators made was to lump all terrorists, even home-grown ones like McVeigh, into the same category. When religion was cited as the driving force, their motivations were arguably political. Fundamentalist Moslem Palestinian 'suicide' bombers used cheap, plentiful, 'intelligent' weapons—their bodies strapped with a few pounds of explosives—against superior, more heavily armed forces. Religious faith might promise a post-mortem reward, but their goals were ultimately socio-political.

McCabe's thinking slipped from the role of teacher into that of the profiler. As much as he believed the Consortium were attempting to hide the truth about Oklahoma, he was not convinced that they were directly responsible for the bombing. Something else was at play, something that on face value would appear to contradict the Consortium's goals. He must now consider the mindset of those whose social imperatives were very different to those of the average American. The best place to begin was by examining the motivations behind the bombing of the World Trade Centre in 1993.

That event should have been America's wakeup call. Despite speculation, the bombing hadn't simply been about revenge for the Gulf

War. It hadn't even been about religion so much as ideology. From the perspective of the bombers, America had spawned an evil that threatened to engulf the world, an evil not only propagated through modern technology—the Internet and Hollywood—but through economic pressure. America and its minions *demand*ed all others embrace these new evils: democratic rule, freedom of speech and expression, which encouraged criticism, even the denial, of God. America had spawned social anarchy and the destruction of family values. In short, America, an amalgam of adopted ethnic groups with one foot firmly planted in Judaism, had evolved a new and ungodly culture. It shoved this abomination down the world's collective throat, reached into homes, corrupted wives, turned children against parents, and corroded the principles by which people had lived for countless generations. Then, to cap it off, America viewed the rest of the world as, at best, incidental. It preached human rights but condoned, even partook in the slaughter of thousands of civilians in the name of freedom and righteousness.

Witness Vietnam.

As if all of that hadn't been enough, America had then stationed its infidel troops in the holy lands of Saudi Arabia. This was an act of abomination that went against every tenet of Islam. Indeed, it could be argued that *not* opposing this insidious evil was a sin in the eyes of God.

Presently, the only thing that restrained the more rabid Middle-eastern leaders was fear of retaliation. During the Gulf War, President Bush had told—not threatened or warned, but *told*—Saddam Hussein that if biological or chemical weapons were used against allied forces, the US would nuke Iraq into the stone age. So America, secure in the belief that it was too powerful to be attacked, too big to be toppled, and that any such move by a few camel-jockey rag-heads would invite swift and bloody retribution, had ignored the warnings.

1995 had been ringing with yet more wakeup calls, beginning with the Sarin gas attack in Tokyo by a new form of terrorist. How could you defend against, much less prevent attacks by the likes of Aum Shinrikyo, who wanted to destroy the world? When Congress had demanded to know how the sect's leader, Asahara, a fanatic with virtually unlimited funds and a worldwide network of operatives, had escaped the notice of Western intelligence and law enforcement agencies, senior FBI executives had replied that serious civil rights and constitutional constraints in both the US and Japan restricted investigations of any chartered religious organizations.

Waco had proved an embarrassing—and fatal—fiasco, ostensibly inciting McVeigh to bomb the Murrah Federal Building—the next wakeup call. Each insanity had triggered yet another greater insanity as violence beget violence. Law enforcement agencies, constrained by constitutional rights and due process—as they should be—were damned if they did and damned if they didn't.

Yet even after the World Trade Centre, Tokyo and Oklahoma, America still wasn't listening. Because America suffered from hubris: the belief that no nation could have surpassed its technology in developing the seeds of apocalypse. And because it suffered from conceit: if we couldn't develop bioweapons, no one could. And finally, because America believed it could and would retaliate if attacked.

The question must now be asked, who was the enemy? How would the US know if it had even been attacked? Could drug resistant TB be a biological attack? What about Mad Cow Disease in Britain? Russia's payback for destroying their economy? Despite Clinton's lobbying, America, as Williams had said, was woefully, even criminally unprepared for a BW attack.

McCabe slowed his pace. The altered rhythm brought his mind back to the present. He looked across at the buildings. Even now, task forces

were shaking the cobwebs off their informants, chasing leads on overseas and domestic terrorists, militia groups, religious cults and rogue states. They were wasting their time, because the Consortium was simultaneously working to bias information. And the Consortium, which included people like Williams, were fanatics only in their patriotism. They were out to prove unequivocally to a Republican-biased and agonizingly parochial Congress that any American city could successfully be attacked with a BW agent. By using a chimera, such a 'demonstration' could not be dismissed as a natural outbreak. The aim was not to hurt America or American citizens; indeed, the purpose was to *protect* them and the American way of life. The demonstration must therefore kill a significant proportion of an exposed population—but not in the US. To ensure the infection could not spread, exposure must be on a discrete group with no access to the outside world: controlled and contained. That narrowed the parameters. A lot.

A map. He needed a map and weather reports.

Inside the newly designated situation room a dozen agents and technicians were hovering over computers and telephones, doing what the FBI knew best—poking around peoples' lives.

In one corner hung a large world map. Clustered nearby were Peter Brant, David Wilson, Commander Chuck Long, and Dr Jordan Spinner. The table was cluttered with laptops, notes, and coffee cups. In front of them, writing on a large white board, stood Susan Broadwater. McCabe's gaze fell to her hips. She was the only woman he knew who could make military fatigues look sexy. No point going there. Safer to stare at the coffee pot.

"Developing a hybrid is one thing," Spinner was saying. "Weaponising it is something else again. Except for anecdotal evidence from UNSCOM and Ken Alibek, the Russian defector, there's no absolute

proof that a chimera, by definition a delicate organism, has been weaponised. The Aum sect tried it with botulinium—”

Wilson snorted dismissively. “They were a bunch of fuck ups.”

“Hello, Josh,” said Susan. Her eyes travelled to his damp hair, and she smiled knowingly. “Have you met Dr Spinner, yet?”

Spinner also looked at him. Her eyes were calculating rather than hostile. And she was still wearing the watch cap that he’d given her. He nodded and poured himself a coffee.

“Still hot?” Wilson’s eyebrows arched curiously.

McCabe walked to the map beside the white board. There were a hell of a lot of islands in the world. “Yeah,” he replied absently, running his hand down through the Gulf of Mexico. “So, Dr Spinner, let’s assume for a moment that our most paranoid delusions are real, and someone successfully weaponised the chimera. We’re looking for an isolated area with a small population and highly controlled access.”

“Why?” He heard the scrape of her chair against the floor. “I thought the point of the demonstration was for major impact?”

“The Consortium isn’t a terrorist organisation.”

“It isn’t?” Spinner came to join him at the map. The expression on her face was incredulous.

From the corner of his eye, McCabe saw Broadwater shake her head, a polite warning to be civil. Sure, he could do that. “The goal of terrorism is to undermine all aspects of Western society. This attack has nothing to do with terrorism. On the contrary, it’s about demonstrating the efficacy of a weapon in a controlled environment.”

“Which requires a ninety to one hundred percent nuking of a small population.” Chuck Long had also come to stare at the map. Focussing on where McCabe was pointing, he added, “You’re ruling out the continental US?”

“European nations are just as paranoid about BW,” countered Wilson. “We’re certain the Consortium is not limited to United States citizens. What’s Williams’ story, anyway?”

“He was a zealous patriot,” McCabe replied. He dropped his hand and turned around. Wilson was rummaging around a box of papers on the table. “Williams was fastidious, pedantic, believed in the death penalty, and had zero tolerance for fools. He also believed that the US justice system was so hobbled by civil liberties campaigners that it had become hopelessly ineffective. When it came to serial killers, Williams was convinced that only shock tactics would have any impact on the community, hence his penchant for releasing grisly reports to the media. I’m not moralizing his behaviour, but he acted that way in order to catch the perpetrators, and in turn, protect potential victims.”

“Extensive background checks on Williams and all known associates are being undertaken as we speak,” Brant reminded everyone. “Although nothing stands out yet, it’s only a question of time before we find something.”

Unable to hold back a dismissive grunt, McCabe replied, “You won’t find a damned thing. Williams knew how to cover his tracks. Better yet, he knew how to mess with your heads.”

“You worked with him for years,” said Spinner. “Why—?”

“Didn’t I see this coming? I’m a profiler, not a mind-reader.”

“There’s a difference?” Wilson muttered, still poking around the box.

Ignoring him, McCabe continued, “Picking at Williams’ behaviour to create a profile of his fellow conspirators is of only limited value.”

Finally pulling out whatever it was he was looking for, Wilson retorted, “C’mon, background checks are the FBI’s meat and potatoes. Right?”

McCabe sipped the coffee. Not bad. “Williams wrote the book on profiling. And the book said he was too arrogant to kill himself, so he went ahead and did just that.”

“To protect his fellow conspirators.”

“No.” McCabe corrected. “He wasn’t worried about being interrogated. Suicide was totally out of character. He did it because he couldn’t resist one last mind-fuck of his erstwhile protégé.”

“That’s a little egocentric, Josh.” Susan replaced the lid on the marker pen and dropped it on the table. “Even for you.”

“You have no idea, *no* idea, how his mind worked.” McCabe spun around to face her. “Nobody here does. And you have no idea of the obsessive, pathological hatred he had for me.” He saw Spinner’s expression. “Yeah,” he added, meeting her look. “Everyone here is thinking exactly the same thing. That I’m an arrogant son of a bitch.”

Spinner’s mouth opened in surprise, but she didn’t avert her gaze.

“I’ve already submitted a profile on Williams,” McCabe added. “But I’ll connect the dots for you. Background checks will find his computer hard drive erased and not a scrap of paper in his house, not even a Con Ed bill that could indicate his movements or contacts outside of normal day-to-day work. He has no safety deposit boxes, no hidden safes, not one item that could link him in any way to anything or anyone suspicious. His credit card bills will show nothing but normal purchases. His other bank accounts will offer no insight. His car might show unusual mileage, but all gas purchases for any activity he wished to hide would have been in paid for in cash, and he would have set up meetings in different locations so no one would remember him. His office files will be entirely work related, with nothing personal in them. After his wife died, he didn’t have a life outside of work so the best you’ll get from them are volumes of psychobabble.

“Williams lived in his mind,” he continued, aware that Brant was watching him with a calculating look. “Everything catalogued and checked, cross referenced and carefully tucked away. Only the loyal cadre who worked for him saw glimpses of that—and I’ll be talking to

them later today. Still, they only saw what Williams wanted them to see. He played mind games with everyone, not just criminals and suspects, but with his peers, his superiors, and me, because that's what he did, that's who he was. He was a master craftsman at it and he got off on it. He could have pleaded insanity on Adams murder, and denied any connection whatsoever to Oklahoma, and there would be no way to prove otherwise.

"Sure, Williams *was* insane, just not in that way. He did not think in a linear fashion and he never did things for one reason alone. He *defined* the antithesis to Occam's Razor."

"The sniper was targeting him," Spinner said thoughtfully. "Another two seconds—"

"Very good, Dr Spinner." She had picked up on the obvious detail that eluded everyone else. "Williams saw the sniper trace, so he had to kill himself *then*. Think about it," he added at Wilson's dubious look.

"Williams knew he was a dead man. Even if he'd surrendered, he wouldn't have lasted an hour in custody. Yes, I am implying that someone within this building—FBI, Marine, CIA—would have taken him out, because I know for certain that at least one person present at this morning's meeting is in deep with the Consortium, or had explicit instructions from them. Williams hated waste, and he couldn't stand the thought of his death being wasteful, so he used it to maximize confusion by doing something so totally out of character, so totally unexpected that it would drive every profiler who ever worked with him nuts, forcing us to second-guess every assumption we've ever made about him.

"Williams believed that Adams was dead and that I knew nothing. He wanted me alive *only* because he could play one last mind game with me, with *everyone*. That appealed to him far more than seeing me dead."

“So what are you saying?” Brant pushed his notepad aside and leaned back in the chair. The legs creaked dangerously under his weight. “That investigating Williams, profiling him, will get us nowhere?”

“No, he made mistakes. He neither recognised nor understood his own insanity, he didn’t make certain that Adams was dead, and he didn’t kill me.”

“Why did Williams hate you?” Spinner crossed her arms and leaned against the whiteboard, smudging one of Susan’s carefully drawn lines.

“You think knowing that will lend you insight into his motivations?” McCabe took another sip of his coffee, then decided to down it all before it went cold.

“You’re the profiler, you tell us.”

From around the rim of his mug, McCabe noticed Brant’s eyes flicker. How much had Reynold told him? More to the point, how much did Brant believe? Placing his empty cup on the table, he replied, “I had something of a...talent for catching serial killers, a talent Williams desired. He wrote the book on the subject and I used...methods not in that book.”

“You mean he didn’t like a young upstart grazing on his turf.” Spinner uncrossed her arms and began to pace around the table.

She was wrong, but it was as close to the truth as anyone would get. “I’ll re-evaluate Williams—and more importantly, Adams—as the investigation progresses and we trace their movements. Meantime we’re running against the clock. We need to know where this demonstration will take place. Background checks on Williams won’t tell us that. So, Dr Spinner, I’ll ask you again. Where would you run an outdoor experiment?”

He turned to the map. “It will be a small-scale event, but it must parallel the effect on a major US city. I’d considered a group of nomadic herdsmen, a remote mountain resort, maybe, except there are too many

wildcards; a lost Cub-Scout group, a hunter or Fisheries and Wildlife officer. Cruise ships are also out. They have a common water and food supply, either of which could be blamed.”

“The delivery system would most likely be an aircraft.” Susan leaned over the table and began gathering her things together, apparently due at another meeting. “That requires a well-equipped infrastructure and budget.”

“Not necessarily.” Wilson reached for the coffee pot, then thought better of it. “A crop-duster would do.”

“No, that’s no good.” Spinner shook her head. “It wouldn’t have the range. The Australian government lost control of a rabbit haemorrhagic virus recently. The CSIRO were experimenting with it on an island not far offshore. A storm came in and drove insects carrying the virus to the mainland. The insects bred and spread the virus hundreds of miles inland within weeks. If this attack is going to take place on an island, it would have to be very isolated.”

“The Aleutians?” Susan ventured, closing her laptop.

“Good choice.” Chuck Long nodded. “Limited access, especially this time of year. Some of those islands can only be reached by boat and can go months between visits.”

Turning to Spinner, Wilson asked, “How would the cold affect such an organism?”

Before she replied, Brant said, “Somewhere warmer, then. Maybe the Bahamas?”

“Too accessible.” Long shook his head. “I’d go for the Indian Ocean, maybe the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Or the South Pacific. Lot of small islands out there, some damned near impossible to reach, and prevailing winds would have to carry the organism thousands of miles before it made landfall.”

“What about Johnson Atoll?” Spinner stopped pacing and came across to the map again.

“All the inhabitants were evacuated after nuclear tests in the 1960s,” Susan replied, pickup her jacket and pulling it on. “It’s not a good experimental area anyway; too easy to blame a disease on radioactive elements or old biological test organisms in the soil, water or food chain. No, it’s gotta be clean. Hell, there are dozens out there.” She had finished collecting her things was considering the map once more. “The smaller islands around Tonga, Samoa, Tokelau; take your pick.”

This was getting nowhere. Frustration gnawing at him, McCabe said, “We’re not going to stop it.”

“C’m on, Josh.” Susan placed a hand on his arm. “We can begin by tracing any unusual movements of military aircraft—”

Without pulling away from her, he snapped, “Which means we’re already too late.”

“So we line up the assets that we have based on the most likely locations,” Wilson said. “If it’s the South Pacific, then we have personnel and equipment that can deal with a Level 4 organism, and long range aircraft in Christchurch, New Zealand.”

Turning on her heel to face the DIA agent, Spinner demanded, “Why?”

Wilson smiled, shrugged, and began doodling on a note pad. “Nothing nefarious. Several countries use New Zealand as a major staging area for Antarctic bases. It’s summer down there now, lot of movement going on.”

“No, I mean why do you have assets there to deal with a Level 4 organism?” Her voice was hard and full of suspicion. What buttons had Wilson just pressed? Or was Spinner oversensitive about her obvious ignorance?

“Standard precaution.” Susan glanced at her watch and then picked up her laptop. “They’re isolated. An infectious pathogen could cut an entire base down in days. More importantly they’re bringing up ice core samples and finding new species—particularly on the microbial level—almost daily. A prehistoric, infectious pathogen is not out of the question. Something inactive in extreme cold, like a flu virus that hasn’t evolved with the human ecology, could become very dangerous very quickly when brought to room temperature.”

Everyone else began collecting their things, and Chuck Long said to Spinner, “We’re meeting with the Marine Corps and FEMA teams in a few minutes, to begin drawing up immediate response plans. Care to join us?”

The offer seemed to have mollified her somewhat, for a trace of a smile touched her lips. “Yes, I think I would.”

-Chapter 10-

Mathew Island

Dispersal: Plus 52 hours

“Chicken pox!” Nate barked a short laugh. “That’s impossible; chicken pox takes two to three weeks. These symptoms have come on too fast and hit too many people at once.”

“Nate,” Katie countered, “I’ve had three children and a sister-in-law who came down with it. I’m telling you, this looks like chicken pox: a mild fever with cold-like symptoms and the start of a pox-like rash, mostly on the trunk. And the adults, well, it’s normal for chicken pox to hit them harder.”

Standing at the cracked enamel sink, washing his hands for the third time that morning, Nate shook his head dismissively. “No. Haemorrhagic dengue has the same symptoms. Maybe it came from mosquitoes hiding in the damned plane, probably in the banana leaves. They must have bitten everyone at the airport literally the moment we arrived.” He went to grab the towel, but he’d already used it twice.

“Stop administering paracetamol or aspirin,” he said to Judi, who was jamming some dog-eared files into a metal cabinet. “And give them acetaminophen instead.”

“I’m not leaving.” Katie folded her arms determinedly.

He was not going to let Katie do this. She’d been on Mathew Island for the best part of a year. “That rainstorm was a warning. If you don’t get out today, you could be stuck here until well into the New Year.”

“If this is haemorrhagic dengue, you’re going to need all the help you can get!” Katie pulled the used towel from the rack and tossed it into the laundry bag. “Judi, grab a fresh towel, will you?”

The screen door banged open and all three turned to see Michael Warner walk in. “Morning, all.”

Katie looked at him, appalled. “Mike, what is it about you and mud?”

Wiping his filthy hands on his even filthier trousers, he replied, “I’ve cancelled the flight.”

Alarmed, Nate blurted, “What about our supplies?”

“You seen the airport this morning? You could set up a health spa with the number of hot mud pools popping out all over the place. It took me damned near half an hour to drive there and back. I’ve called the ‘chopper to come get me instead.”

“I suppose it did rain some last night,” Katie said thoughtfully.

“Some!” Warner barked. “I was seriously considering getting out a SCUBA bottle to wade *through* the runway to the sensor station—which is on the fritz, by the way. Somehow water got in and...well, it doesn’t matter, I have the data. Even if I didn’t have to get back to Seattle, I’d have called the ‘chopper.” He glanced out through the screen door to the volcano. “No way I’m gonna get up to the lava lake until April next year.” His expression turned calculating and he added, “There’s room for one more on the chopper.”

“I’m not leaving,” Katie replied belligerently. “I can’t. Half the village is down with this bug.”

“Twenty-two people is not half,” Judi corrected, handing Nate a towel.

“That we know of. What if you get sick too?”

Drying his hands, Nate said, “No one else came to the clinic during the night so I think it’s peaked. With the supplies I’ve ordered from Vila, and, with Alice, Emily and Nettie to help, Judi and I can look after twenty-two.”

Katie pushed her damp hair from her forehead. “Nettie is fourteen months pregnant and Emily is babysitting most of the younger kids. Both teachers called in sick this morning.”

“How sick?” Nate tried to contain a growing sense of alarm. “Did you include them in your twenty-two?”

“Yeah, I saw them a little while ago. They’re not bad, just headachy. I know, I know!” Katie tossed her hands in the air. “Dengue doesn’t affect most people badly; we’ve only got four nasties on our hands. But Nate, that’s four more than we should have.”

“Well,” said Warner, opening the door. “You guys figure it out while I get cleaned up. If we make Port Vila by 1330, we can catch the flight to Fiji, overnight there, and grab a direct flight to Seattle by tomorrow night. It’s cold,” he added shrewdly. “There’s snow.”

Glaring at him, Katie countered, “I wouldn’t be able to alter my flight schedule in time.”

Warner motioned to the cottage. “Satellite uplink is still active. Get online and change your reservations.”

“I understand your reluctance,” Nate said to her. “But you owe it to yourself and to your family. You’ve worked miracles here, Katie, but if it wasn’t this, you’d find some other excuse to not leave. You need to get out.” He gently tapped her sweat-dampened shoulder. “Before you take root—or turn into a mushroom.”

“Chopper’ll be here soon. Snow,” Warner drawled. The screen door banged shut behind him. “Blazing log fires, eggnog—should be a white Christmas!”

Katie chewed her lip, then turned to Nate and said, “If there’s only room for one more, it should be you. I can’t see the WHO footing a three thousand dollar charter flight just to airlift you off this rock.”

“You and Mike run off to Seattle together.” Nate grinned and put his arm around Judi’s shoulder. “We’ll stay here and have a torrid affair.”

Judi blushed but made no attempt to withdraw.

Hesitating a moment longer, Katie said, “Oh, all right.”

When she'd gone, Nate's genial smile vanished. Dropping his arm from Judi's shoulder, he said in a low voice, "Implement full sterile procedures immediately. Make certain Alice understands exactly what's involved: masks, gowns and gloves at all times, fans in all the rooms—plenty of ventilation, and bleach everything. Get the kids organised to go around and check the village for anything that will allow mosquitoes to breed. I know they've already done that," he added at the look on her face. "Do it again."

"You think it's going to get worse?" A worried frown marred Judi's features.

"I don't know, but I'm not taking any chances, especially with Katie leaving. And I'm not having her stay. Once the supplies arrive, we can manage with Alice's help."

The helicopter came in low across the water and landed on the grass knoll directly behind the clinic. A few children ran up from the beach, but the crowds that normally flocked to the aircraft were glaringly absent. The pilot, Gary Teocle, filled in his log while the machine was shutting down, then he stepped out and motioned for Warner and Sturgess to approach.

"Nate, Mike, where is everyone?" Teocle opened the rear door and began passing out boxes of pharmaceutical supplies.

"Half the village is down with some bug," Nate replied.

Teocle groaned. "Not that damned flu that's going around Vila. Knocked me for six a few weeks back. Thought I was coming down with dengue again."

"I think maybe," Nate replied thoughtfully. "I've been in New Caledonia the last two months, but I'd heard about it."

"Got room for another passenger?" Warner asked.

“How we doing for weight?” Teocle glanced at the vulcanologist’s bags. When Warner told him, the pilot nodded. “I’ll need to stop at Aneityum Island for fuel. I’ve got a couple of forty-four gallon drums with a hand pump stashed there.”

Nate lifted the last carton from the rear seat, glad to see it labelled ‘sterile masks and gowns’. He carried it to the shed at the rear of the clinic, where a handful of villagers crowded Katie.

“I’ll be back in April!” she promised everyone, carefully maintaining her distance.

“Here, put this on.” Warner handed her a pair of coveralls. “And tie your hair back.”

“Why? I’ll broil.”

“Only one door on the helicopter,” he explained. “The side where the baggage will be. It can get mighty chilly during the flight, even in hot weather. Comfort stop at Aneityum.”

Next, Warner clasped Nate’s hand and said, “I’ll be back around April too.”

“Hope you make the flight in time for your volcano,” Nate replied, walking with them to the helicopter.

“I remember once, years ago, abusing airline staff in Seattle because I’d missed a flight.” Warner hauled himself into the front seat. “If I’d made it, I would have been at Coldwater II with David Johnston when Saint Helens blew. Never worried about missed flights since.”

Fifteen minutes later, skimming low across the placid surface of the Pacific, Warner swore. “Ah crap, I left a laptop and satellite dish behind.”

“You want to go back?” Teocle asked.

Warner hesitated; they were already cutting it close. Despite what he’d said to Nate, if Rainier really was about to go, he wanted to be there. “Nah, all of my notes are on the other computer.” He smiled at the

pilot. "If Nate gets stuck down there for a few weeks at least he has Internet access."

-Chapter 11-

Quantico

Dispersal: Plus 55 hours

It had been a long time since Jordan had felt part of a team. Isolated by her loss and grief, plagued by self-doubt, she'd come to DC fully expecting to be fired. No matter how the psychologists had packaged it, right down to that boringly inadequate label, survivor guilt, she was a professional liability, and she knew it.

Crawling across the floor with Giovanni, reading accounts of BW experiments had come as a rude shock to Jordan. Her lack of knowledge had also shocked her, and reinforced her doubts about her ability to work. Then along came McCabe and promptly kicked her butt. The FBI had every right to expect her to be a contributing member of the investigation. Her skills might be rusty, but, if Brant was right and McVeigh was a pawn, she'd been given the opportunity to bring Douglas and Jamie's butchers to justice. She wasn't going to lose that.

Something else beside a sense of purpose was also awakening in her—a sense of outrage. There was a yawning chasm between the mandate of US national security systems and that of the Justice Department. And that chasm was geared to let the guilty to go free.

While national security agencies aimed to protect the US from attack, the Justice Department was capable only of prosecuting individuals, not foreign governments that sponsored such attacks. Ramzi Yousef had been found guilty of bombing the World Trade Centre. Blame one person, neatly dismiss the problem in the form of jail or death sentence. Blame a state, and suddenly, you were talking about war—a little outside the Justice Department's terms of reference. Even preventing a

terrorist attack was problematic. The best the Justice Department could do was slap a conspiracy charge on individuals.

Oklahoma, it seemed, was shaping up to be the same. Blame McVeigh, conveniently ignore or destroy any evidence that might interfere with his conviction, problem packaged and disposed of.

Jordan was upstairs in yet another briefing, fuming over the problem, only half listening to Brant, Wilson, Broadwater, McCabe and Chuck Long discuss possible suspects, when the words 'bubonic plague' caught her attention. "Plague?" she said, looking up.

"Williams would never have associated with a screwball like Benson," McCabe continued, ignoring her outburst.

"*Bubonic* plague?" Jordan repeated. She looked around the table expectantly.

"The ATCC—the American Type Culture Centre—sent it to Garry Wade Benson in the mail." McCabe was slouching back in his chair, looking bored and frustrated.

"They *what*?" she demanded, incredulous. "And why is it that every psycho in the FBI's files has three names?"

"Lee Harvey Oswald set the trend," he replied, deadpan. "It's the first feature profilers look for after childhood bedwetting."

A few chuckles erupted. Jordan blinked. Hilarious. Turning to Brant, she asked, "How?"

Exhaling noisily, he replied, "Benson used a genuine EPA registration number from the lab where he worked to place the order. It was only after the stuff was mailed to him that the ATCC became suspicious. They called the CDC, who suffered a collective stroke when they learned that bubonic plague had been delivered to Benson's home. They immediately informed the local Health Department."

"Who informed the police," Broadwater added, eyeing off a tray of sugarcoated carbohydrate bombs on the table. "And that's when it hit

them. Nobody knew what in hell to do. The Health Department had a hard time trying to convince people that it wasn't a hoax, and the fire departments of two counties had no idea how to respond. They'd been trained in industrial hazards, not biological terrorism. Eventually, they contacted us and the FBI." She poked at a donut, then, nose wrinkling in regret, looked away.

"That's what Presidential Directive 39 is trying to overcome; I got that much," said Jordan. "But who's Benson?"

"He's on the governing board of the National Alliance," Wilson replied, trying to suppress a yawn.

Jordan froze. Acutely aware that McCabe was watching her, she asked in a measured tone, "Isn't that William Piece's neo-Nazi organization?"

"The very same William Piece who wrote *The Turner Diaries*," McCabe said. "Supposedly inspiring McVeigh to act as he did."

"Did Benson and McVeigh know one another?" she demanded.

"No." Brant shook his head. "Benson is a white supremacist. He's convinced Iraq has smuggled agents into the United States as sleeper agents who will one day be ordered to use a weapon of mass destruction to attack New York. Benson figured if he salted New York's subways with plague, Iraq would be blamed and the US government would be forced to retaliate, presumably pre-empting deadlier attacks in the future."

"Wasn't that Williams' agenda?" Jordan pressed. "Sacrifice hundreds to save millions?"

"Hundreds yeah, not millions," McCabe said dismissively. He stood and began pacing the room, caged and restless.

Jordan understood that feeling well, she'd been doing a lot of pacing of late.

“Forget Benson.” McCabe shoved his hands in his pockets. “He’s a self-aggrandizing loudmouth with delusions of grandeur—the last person Williams would be involved with.”

Forget him? “What makes you think distributing *Yersinia* in a subway could kill millions?”

McCabe turned his back on her and focussed on the map. He seemed to be obsessed with it, and Jordan felt like she’d failed some sort of test.

Commander Long was a little more accommodating. “Another Operation Large Coverage experiment,” he explained. “In 1966, US Army technicians dropped light bulbs filled with harmless but easily traceable bacteria through ventilating grates and onto the track-beds of New York subways. The air movement of trains spread the bacteria through the tunnels.

“Benson intended using the same method during rush hour. His estimates of hundreds of thousands dead sounds like science fiction, but given *Yersinia*’s incubation period and the number of international flights passing through New York, it could conceivably have infected millions worldwide.”

Jordan swallowed against a suddenly dry mouth. “So you’re questioning Benson, right?” she asked Brant. “I mean; he’s incarcerated?”

“Judge smacked his wrist, ordered him to do two hundred hours of community service, and then set him free.” Brant slung his pen across the table in disgust. At Jordan’s look of disbelief, he added, “Benson’s a model parolee. Yeah, we’re interviewing him. The only problem we’re having is getting the guy to shut up long enough for agents to ask questions. He’s fixated on this Iraqi sleeper thing.”

Still stuck on the ‘set him free’ part, Jordan turned to Long. “Global ‘95?”

He exchanged looks with Broadwater, who shrugged and said, “No point holding back, now.”

Turning to Jordan, Long said, “Based on what we believe North Korea and Iraq have tucked away in their respective biochemical arsenals, the growing economic pressures on North Korea and the Tom and Jerry routine the Iraqi regime is playing with UNSCOM, five months ago the Pentagon staged a war game at the Naval College in Newport, to test our response capabilities in a worst-case scenario.”

McCabe had gone back to pacing, and Jordan sensed he felt she was wasting time with questions, but she needed to understand. “Worst case?”

“If they attacked US interests simultaneously,” Long explained. “We didn’t presume collusion so much as opportunism. North Korea makes a move and Iraq seizes the moment to attack on a different front.” Looking decidedly uncomfortable, he added, “The situation fell apart so fast that referees allowed us one ‘miracle’ each game day. We *still* lost.”

Following the monumental success of the Gulf War, given the technologically superior weaponry now wielded by the US, Jordan couldn’t see how that was possible, unless... “They used bioweapons.”

“The game scenario assumed that the North Koreans used stealth speedboats mounted with low-tech aerosol sprayers to saturate the DMZ with an unknown organism. Their special forces infiltrated the DMZ through tunnels, but instead of attacking troop, they took out our BIDS—our detector vehicles for BW agents. Even when the game scenario was remodelled, allowing us to recapture our BIDs, there weren’t enough of them to confirm what we’d been attacked with. The commanding general ordered our troops to get the hell out. Trouble was, he had neither the firepower to cover a retreat, nor sufficient vehicles to implement it.”

“Worse,” said Broadwater rubbing her eyes. “Our side couldn’t tough it out and wait for transport or reinforcements because the protective suits that we needed were all sitting in an Indiana warehouse. By the end of the war game the total number of troops infected—with anthrax as it turned out—was fifty thousand. And we couldn’t mount an offensive against North Korean troops.”

“Why not?”

“Picture it, Dr Spinner,” Broadwater replied tiredly. “Say that we had our ‘miracle’, and our troops instantly had sufficient protective gear. We employ South Korean civilians to provide everything from fresh food to water and telecommunications. What are they going to do when they see our guys donning gas masks? Stick around and die or take their families and run? Either way, our ability to supply and reinforce our troops has been eroded to the point where we were paralyzed.”

“Saddam Hussein sees how easily we’ve been crippled,” Long said. “So he attacks US bases in Saudi Arabia using a bioweapon. It’s meant as an act of terror, designed to not so much to kill a substantial number of US troops, but to panic the civilian population. Well, guess what? There were—still are for that matter—*no* biological sensors in Saudi Arabia. Nor are there sufficient protective suits for US troops much less civilian workers employed by the US, or utility operators including those who work in power stations or water plants. Hell, even the garbage collectors are dead or have fled with their families into the desert. And by now, every one of our available BW defensive materials is on its way to North Korea.

“Meanwhile, back here in the US, Iraqi terrorists unleash anthrax over Norfolk, Virginia and Washington DC, using nothing more than modified crop-dusters. As Major Broadwater pointed out in the initial briefing, a fifty percent *initial* infection rate from a correctly delivered aerosol is considered acceptable. Doesn’t matter whether you’re inside, once the

stuff gets into air-conditioning systems... Anyway, we decided the Iraqis weren't that efficient and we infected only twenty percent of the population of both cities—one hundred and fifty thousand people—and allowed another twenty percent secondary infection. Problem was, anthrax wasn't diagnosed until our hospital systems had been crippled by the influx of sick and dying people. And as you well know, Dr Spinner, prophylactic antibiotics only work when anthrax is treated early. By the time we'd realize that the US had been attacked, all of our resources, including every available antibiotic, was on its way to North Korea and the Gulf.

"Sure, we *retaliated*, and Pyongyang and Baghdad are nuclear slag heaps, but meanwhile two cities, including our central government, the White House and Pentagon are infected with a ninety percent fatal and essentially untreatable disease."

"You said one hundred and fifty thousand initial infection," Jordan corrected.

"Yeah, but we didn't know that until *after* the event. And we couldn't pick and choose who would be infected. As far as everyone was concerned, the entire population of those cities had been exposed." Shrugging, he added, "Cause *secondary* infection meant that by then, the real numbers were closer to three hundred thousand."

Jordan's coffee sat untouched as she listened wide-eyed to the astounding but very realistic scenario.

Long continued, "CNN brings in experts and paints a worst-case scenario. Most people misunderstand the difference between contagion and infection and assume that victims can spread the disease by coughing, even bodily contact. Naturally, hoping they aren't yet infected, everyone in Norfolk and DC try and get out of Dodge. Even if they stay, the services and utilities in both cities have collapsed because maintenance workers are also sick, dying or fleeing. The National Guard

is called in, but because they cannot be issued with protective gear—remember it's all on its way to the Gulf and North Korea—”

Feeling sick, Jordan held up her hand. “Okay, okay, I got the picture. If it were something contagious like smallpox—”

“Or a chimera.” Wilson tugged a dinner plate-sized Danish from the same box that Susan had eyed longingly. “The same scene would be replicated across the country—and a score of other countries—within weeks.”

“Well, then why in hell would *anyone* think it's necessary to demonstrate a real bioweapon?” Jordan demanded, shaking her head at the offer of a pastry. “Didn't Global '95 prove the point?”

“It was a wargame, Dr Spinner.” Broadwater reached into the box, and with a ‘what-the-hell’ expression, pulled out an iced donut. “A theoretical event, the actual results of which are highly classified, because the official outcome was a shit load scarier. But the dead were statistical, not actual. No one saw millions of American bodies bulldozed into makeshift graves—until nobody was left to do the bulldozing—and hell, can't we just build a few more stealth bombers to scare the crap out of Hussein?” She pushed the box across to Jordan. “Go on, enjoy. You only live once.”

“We're not saying nobody sat up and took notice,” Long continued. “President Clinton and Vice President Gore were honest-to-God freaked out by it, but you try squeezing a dime out of Congress. To them, it's about high-tech *offensive* wars; against a country, a city, a battalion of troops. Congress and the collective pencil pushers at State just do not believe such weapons could be employed, because the scenario is simply too frightening to contemplate. Whoever arranged this demonstration, if that's what it's meant to be, is going to make it so ugly and so shit-in-your-pants believable, with real, dead people—preferably nuking an entire population—that it terrifies Congress into doing

something instead of playing with toy soldiers and plastic tanks in a sand-pit at Norfolk.”

-Chapter 12-

Mathew Island

Dispersal: Plus 57 hours

Sturgess examined the distinctive pustules and muttered through his mask, “It *can’t* be chicken pox!” He reached up to rub the sweat from his face, then stopped himself, horrified at how close he’d come to touching his eyes.

With latex covered fingers, Judi gently felt the speckled lesions on Tom Kaleo’s stomach and hips. “What about Measles? Or German Measles?”

All of the woman in the village had been vaccinated against both diseases. Every child, too. At least in theory. Could Tom Kaleo have missed one of his shots? The boy had been in Port Vila for three years, but the College was meticulous about keeping the children’s vaccinations up to date; they had enough problems with malaria and tuberculosis. But even if Tom had slipped through the cracks, that didn’t account for everyone else. In the two hours since the chopper had left, the clinic had filled with people suffering all manner of symptoms. Everything from sore, bloodshot eyes to skin rashes, headaches, aching backs, nosebleeds, nausea, diarrhoea, and temperatures that walked all over Tylenol. It was too rampant to be haemorrhagic dengue, so what the hell was it?

Angered by his own accelerated heart rate and sweating palms, Nate bit down on his lip. He was fast losing control and he knew it. “Not with the other symptoms and a fever this high. It’s come on too damned fast!”

“That’s what you said three hours ago. Now look at it!” Judi spoke in soft tones, but he could hear the undertone of panic.

During his time in the islands, Nate had seen some horror diseases. Diseases most Westerners considered long dead, like leprosy and terminal syphilis. This—whatever it was—was cutting through the village like a scythe. Tom Kaleo could not possibly have come into contact with so many people and passed the infection on in such a short space of time. Even more puzzling was the complete lack of symptoms in the other passengers, himself included, who had travelled on the same aircraft as Tom.

Assuming, of course, that Tom was the carrier. Warner had seemed fine when he'd left, but what about the other passengers? A relatively common and uncomplicated childhood disease, chicken pox was notoriously disabling in adults. Once you'd contracted it, you were generally immune. Nate turned to Judi and asked, "Have you had chicken pox?"

She nodded. "You?"

"Yeah."

"Well," she replied cautiously, "that could explain why we're okay. Rob Warner and Katie have probably had it, too."

"What about the others who arrived with us on the flight? Are they sick?"

"I'll check, but we didn't see them yesterday, or this morning. What do you want me to give Tom?"

The boy's face was taught with pain and his skin was hot to the touch. Tom lifted his hand to scratch the welts but Judi said, "Don't scratch, honey, it'll just make it worse."

"Itches. Back...hurts!" Tom mumbled, half delirious.

"I know." Judi's voice was sympathetic and her eyes full of concern. "We're going to give you something right now."

“Diphenhydramine,” said Nate. “Add that to the cocktail and see how he goes. Get everyone to wash their hands in antiseptic and clip their fingernails.”

Going outside, Nate pulled off his mask and breathed deeply of the hot, wet air. *It is simply not possible*. He refused to give name to what he now believed was spreading through the village. He looked down. Beats of sweat dripped from his face onto the grass, mixing with the rainwater. Ali Maow Maalin was the last known natural case. Humans were the only known carrier; it was *impossible* for the disease to have lain dormant in the human population for fifteen years!

But what if it had lain dormant in the ground itself? Perhaps deep in one of the lava tunnels in some as yet unrecognised non-human carrier?

As had occurred in the Americas, traders and missionaries had subjected the people of Vanuatu to biowarfare and genocide. Blackbirding, a euphemism for slaving, and the deliberate introduction of the dreaded disease had reduced an estimated population of two million in 1773 to less than thirty thousand by the eve of the Second World War. The WHO had declared this same disease dead in 1980. In fact, wasn't it supposed to have been destroyed altogether a few months ago?

But the doubt refused to go away. Could somehow, all of this rain...? It was a preposterous notion, straight out of science fiction. Nate laughed at himself. He was seeing ghosts, phantoms of the single greatest killer mankind had ever known. A pox on you. Besides, given that Tom Kaleo was the index case, there was no possible way so many could have caught it simultaneously and exhibited symptoms this quickly. It had to be an allergic reaction, something in the water maybe. Or just a particularly virulent form of haemorrhagic dengue?

It had to be.

Nate stripped off the green scrubs, tossed them into a bleach-filled bucket near the door, washed his hands, and then went to the cottage. The first thing he noticed was Mike's laptop. He stared at it a moment, then headed for the shower to clear his head.

Standing under a desultory splatter of cold water, he reviewed the chain of events. Tom had come from Port Vila, and dozens of villagers had mobbed him when he'd arrived. Thirty-six hours later, Tom had displayed the first symptoms. About five hours later his grandfather and some of the other *bubus* and younger *pikininis* had become symptomatic. That indicated Tom had contracted something in Port Vila days earlier, something highly contagious and airborne, like flu. He wouldn't have become contagious until after the disease had entered his lungs and mucous membranes, which explained why no one else on the flight had contracted it.

Stepping out of the shower, Nate wrapped the towel around his waist and sat down at Warner's computer. The island's single radiotelephone was only operational for an hour in the mornings and late evenings—sometimes. He'd already spoken to Gene Marshall at Vila Base Hospital that morning, asking about the flu outbreak there. Marshall had said nothing about lumbar pain, itchy red rashes forming like circular pustules, and sore eyes. Why would he? Aching joints, sore eyes, and a high fever were normal flu symptoms, and a rash, well, could be the result of anything.

Knowing perfectly well that the hospital director would do nothing, Nate opened the laptop, wrote up a full description of what was happening on Mathew, and, using the satellite link, emailed it to Marshall and the WHO office in Noumea. Then he got onto the CDC web site.

Some time later Judi came looking for him. “What on earth are you doing, Nate?” Her eyes dropped to the skimpy towel draped loosely over his hips.

Conscious of his near-nakedness, he said, “Checking the symptoms and emailing Gene.”

“And?” she replied, rubbing her temples.

Mumbling, “Sorry,” he grabbed the edges of the towel and went to his room. “What about the other three on the flight?” he called as he dressed.

“Two of them took a canoe to the north side of the island before dawn on Wednesday, to hunt for wild pigs. They came back late this morning. They’re fine, but their wives are sick. The third person has a headache, but then so do I.” She rubbed her temples again.

A surge of adrenaline tore through Nate. Eyes wide with alarm, he ran out of the bedroom pulling a T-shirt over his head. “Are you sick?”

“It’s just the heat and humidity.” Judi smiled. “Not drinking enough water—my own fault. So, what did you find on the Internet?”

He was jumping at shadows. “Nothing much.” Spying a packet of cookies on the kitchen bench, he realised he was hungry. “Judi, about the sterile procedures, there are a couple of Perspex eyeglasses in the stuff that arrived today. Use them.” He opened the packet and offered it to her.

“I think that’s a good idea. Whatever else Tom has, I suspect he might also have TB. He began hiccupping a little while ago; swallowed his water too fast, but then he coughed up a few spots of blood.” She reached for the cookies, but the packet fell from Nate’s hand onto the floor.

“What did you do with the blood?” he demanded, trying to quell a full-blown surge of panic.

Eyes wide, Judi stared at the cookie bag, then up at him. “Changed his sheets of course, then tossed the soiled ones into the bleach tub.”

He ran out the door.

Judi stared after him. When she’d seen Nate sitting at the computer, the towel draped low over his slim hips, she remembered his quip about an affair, and the feel of his arm about her shoulder. Nate was a good-looking guy, and a nice one to boot. It had been a while since she’d known any nice guys. He might have been joking but hey! A month down here and you never knew.

The cookies lay scattered at her feet. She was hungry, but the thought of food made her ill. Nate had looked like he was about to be ill, too, when she’d mentioned the blood on Tom’s sheets. Biting her lip, Judi sat at the laptop and flicked open the history tab on the web browser. When the first page appeared onscreen, her eyes widened in disbelief. He had to be kidding. Except that the list of symptoms was eerily familiar.

‘Smallpox—known as the speckled monster in eighteenth-century England—appeared suddenly and included high fever, chills or rigors, cephalalgia, characteristic dorsal-lumbar pain, myalgias, and prostration. Nausea and vomiting were also common. After two to four days, the fever relented and a rash appeared on the face and inside the—’

The throbbing in Judi’s head turned into a full-blown drum orchestra. Smallpox was insane! Besides, the fever was getting worse, not relenting, and what about the red eyes? Tom’s eyes were bloodshot and swollen. There was a haemorrhagic form of smallpox, but it was a rare complication, and everyone else was already coming down with Tom’s symptoms.

Alarmed now, Judi flicked back through the web pages until her eyes came to rest on a virus shaped like a shepherd’s crook. She read, ‘The

incubation period ranges from two days to three weeks, depending on the aetiology. Symptoms include: high fever, headache, muscle aches, stomach pain, fatigue, diarrhoea, sore throat, hiccups, rash, red and itchy eyes, vomiting blood, bloody diarrhoea...'

Two days. No... *No!* It was impossible! Judi thrust her chair back, stood and stared at the screen as if it were contagious. Tom and the others had dengue. It *had* to be dengue! But as she pulled on a fresh gown, she noticed her hands were shaking. Taking a few deep breaths, she popped another couple of Panadol from the box, swallowed them dry and went to find Nate. They had to contact Port Vila again and...what? What were they going to tell Gene Marshall? That they had Ebola? The man would crucify them!

Her back began to ache.

-Chapter 13-

Quantico

Dispersal: Plus 61 hours

“Jesus, Susan, how in hell did you predict this one?”

Major Susan Broadwater fumbled for the bedside light. “Jake?”

“Yeah,” replied Jake Arnold from the CDC in Atlanta. “You asked me to call if anything came in. Well, I may have something.”

“What?” She finally found the switch, glad that she’d opted to stay at Quantico.

“A WHO doctor down in Vanuatu.”

“Where?” Sitting up and squeezing her eyes against the invasion of light, Susan checked the time. Just past midnight. She’d had an hour’s sleep. Not bad, under the circumstances.

“Vanuatu. It’s a South Pacific island nation between New Caledonia and Fiji, two hours flight from Brisbane, Australia.”

“An island?”

“About eighty of ‘em. This guy, Sturgess, is on the southernmost, called Mathew. It’s in the middle of absolutely fucking nowhere.”

Susan’s mouth went dry. She pulled the covers back and got out of bed. “Vanuatu... British, French, Australian, New Zealand, or independent?”

“Hell, I don’t know. Look it up! Anyway, he’s got some sort of outbreak going on. He initially suspected a flu virus that an eleven-year old boy brought down from the capital city by plane three days ago. Then the symptoms suggested haemorrhagic dengue. That doesn’t add up because more than half the village is already down with it. One of his nurses thought it could be chicken pox because the rash was more

pockmarked than dengue-like. But it's come on way too fast. And it's definitely haemorrhagic in nature."

Normally Susan never jumped to conclusions, but her gut instinct said this was it.

"The doctor," Jake continued, "is an epidemiologist. He sent a couple of digital images by email and it looks...well, thing is, the speed of the outbreak, the symptoms and simultaneous infection could indicate something more...insidious."

"Thanks, Jake, I owe you." Susan juggled the phone while she dressed. The familiar tension banished any residual sleepiness. "Now listen to me. Communications with this island, what are they like?"

"Sturgess said in his email that they have an unreliable radiotelephone service."

"But he has email?" She was trying, and failing, to pull on her shoes with one hand.

"There was a vulcanologist on the island. He left his laptop and satellite dish behind."

"Was?" Her stomach crawled into a tight little knot.

"Yeah." Jake's voice dropped. "Crap. I'd better find out when he left."

"You do that. And email me everything you have on this WHO doctor, Sturgess, including the pictures he sent. And Jake? I do not want to see this on CNN over breakfast."

"We stay in the loop, Susan. None of this national security bullshit. It could be a natural outbreak."

"And you called me because?"

She heard his deep sigh on the other end. "It's probably some tropical—"

"Jake."

"Take a look at the photos; more than half the village in three days? Shit, Susan, this is one scary bug."

*

When Jordan arrived in the situation room, she was surprised to see it alive with activity. Broadwater, McCabe, Brant, Wilson, and half a dozen field agents and technicians were already congregated around the large wall map of...she froze. Of all the places on the planet.

Someone bumped into her.

"Sorry," Commander Long said apologetically, and walked past.

Brant looked over Jordan's shoulder. "Teena Giovanni?"

Jordan glanced back to see the bleary-eyed CIA librarian arriving.

"Sir?" Giovanni longingly stared at Brant's cup.

"Black?" he said.

When Giovanni nodded, Brant handed her his coffee. Sipping it, the librarian contemplated the wall map. "Vanuatu."

"Specifically, Mathew Island," replied Brant. "What's the geopolitical background?"

Jordan's heart was pounding so hard it felt like it was going to explode. She grabbed the back of a nearby chair to steady herself.

Staring myopically at the map, Giovanni said, "It's a chain of emergent volcanoes created by the Pacific and Australia-Indian tectonic plates pushing together. Although its volcanoes have been relatively quiet for fifty years, Ambae came to life a few months back, attracting the attention of volcanologists worldwide. Mathew and Hunter Islands are the southernmost volcanoes. Strictly speaking they're not part of Vanuatu."

Brant frowned. "Explain."

Finishing her coffee, Giovanni placed the empty cup on the side table. Jordan stared at it, trying to focus on something, anything other than the sense of helpless terror threatening to overwhelm her.

"Until 1980 the country was known as the New Hebrides," Giovanni continued. "The prior colonial government was of a uniquely

schizophrenic nature: a joint British and French administration called the Condominium. It was less affectionately referred to as Pandemonium by the locals. The French and British consigned the islands to a brief footnote in their colonial history books. Americans know them only as a base for our Pacific campaign in the Second World War. Nobody else much cares. When they gained independence, the Anglophone Protestant government ditched the name New Hebrides along with planeloads of mostly Catholic French expatriates. It also claimed the two volcanic islands far to the south, Mathew and Hunter, as part of the new Republic. They didn't do this merely to tick off the French New Caledonian government, who also claim them, but to extend Vanuatu's exclusive economic zone by almost a third."

"So is Mathew Island part of Vanuatu or New Caledonia?" Broadwater wanted to know.

"The French are not letting them go. They like the idea of extending their territorial waters, economically and more importantly from our point of view, strategically. After years of diplomatic standoffs, Vanuatu and New Caledonia agreed to jointly administer them."

"Population?" Broadwater pressed.

Giovanni frowned. "I'll have to look it up, Major."

"Hunter's uninhabited," Jordan replied, surprised and grateful that her voice was steady. She sat down at one of the desks, still not completely trusting her legs. "They're both worthless chunks of basalt. Mathew has a population of a hundred and fifty, tops."

All eyes swung to her. "How do you know?" Brant demanded.

Jordan shot him an odd look. Surely he was familiar with her file. "I was born in Vanuatu. Left when I was fourteen to attend boarding school in Australia. My parents bought a construction and hardware business there."

Everyone began asking questions at once, but Brant's voice cut through. "What can you tell us?"

First they tore her husband and son from her, and now they were taking her parents and childhood friends? What the hell had she done to piss off God this much?

She jammed a lid on her emotions. This had nothing to do with God. "Hunter can only be accessed by sea, although there's no anchorage for anything bigger than a rowboat. Mathew Island has a runway of sorts, suitable for light aircraft only during the dry season. It's serviced by weekly flights from Port Vila, Vanuatu's capital. There's no wharf, but every three to four months a frontloading cargo barge sails down from Noumea. They bring in supplies and take on copra and some sandalwood. Ni-Vanuatu citizens and French nationals don't require a visa or passport to visit Mathew and Hunter, however, every other nationality does. And shades of the old Condominium, that means dealing with two sets of bureaucracies. Apart from a couple of Peace Corps volunteers working in the clinic, no one much goes there except vulcanologists."

"How often did you say there were flights?"

"Generally, weekly, but that could change now that it's coming into the wet season."

"Every Tuesday." Giovanni was sitting in front of a computer terminal. "They're sixteen hours ahead of us." She glanced at her watch. "That makes it Friday afternoon there, about 1740 hours."

Brant ran his hand across his jaw. "The Peace Corps volunteers—American?"

"Probably," replied Jordan. "Or Canadian."

"Give me ten minutes," Giovanni said, and began typing.

"What about the doctor?" Wilson asked. "If American citizens are in any danger, we can get the State Department involved."

“I have his email address,” Broadwater was leaning over a computer. “No wait, it’s not Sturgess’. He’s using the address of the guy who owns the computer.”

“Sturgess? Nate Sturgess?” Jordan demanded, feeling a surge of hope. She stood and went across to stare over Susan’s shoulder. “He’s a Kiwi—New Zealander. Nate’s a good guy, and a great doctor.”

“Spinner, don’t go anywhere, we’re going to need you.” Brant pointed to two newly arrived agents. “I want background checks and the current location of every expatriate who’s been on that island in the last six months. And I want them an hour ago!” Walking back to the map, he said to McCabe, “Isolated, limited access and communications, minimal population. Fits your profile.”

“Yeah.” McCabe downed the last of his coffee. “Poor bastards.”

Broadwater shot him a swift look. Concern—or was it sympathy—crossed the Major’s face. She stood and placed a hand on the agent’s shoulder. His lips screwed up in a bitter smile, then he crumpled the paper cup, tossed it into a bin, and walked out of the room.

Despite her preoccupation, Jordan wondered about that odd little exchange, until she remembered that McCabe had been in Zaire. She turned to the map. How many more lives were about to be torn apart?

-Chapter 14-

Mathew Island

Dispersal: Plus 62 hours

"I am not out of my fucking mind!" Nate yelled into the radiotelephone. "You've got to isolate anyone who's been in contact with Mike Warner, Katie Wood, and Gary Teocle, including everyone at the airport and on board the Vila-Fiji flight. Also stop Mike and Katie from leaving Fiji. And for God's sake, those blood samples you got off him, I...I'm not even sure they should be opened and examined in the hospital."

"Unless we do that, there's no way we can tell what it is!" retorted Gene Marshall, just as angrily. "And there is no way I'm going off half-cocked because you've got some hornet up your ass—"

"Listen, dammit. If it's a virus there's no way you're going to see it. You'd need to test for malaria and dengue of course, but you'd have to do an ELISA—"

"A whata?" Marshall whined.

"Antigen-capture enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay testing, it's a polymerase chain reaction to test for Ebola—although this thing looks more and more like some form of virulent haemorrhagic smallpox. Look, you can't do it, so I've addressed one set of samples to the Louis Pasteur Institute and another to the CDC. Right now the critical thing is to isolate everyone who's been in contact with it. And don't forget Aneityum Island; the chopper refuelled there, and they have cruise ships stopping in their so-called Mystery Island every other week."

Marshall's tone abruptly turned condescending. "Calm down Nate. You're overworked and you're obviously overreacting."

"I *am* calm!" Sturgess shouted. "Ten minutes before I called you I was panicking, now I'm as fucking calm as an economy-sized bottle of

Valium! There are one hundred and forty seven people on this island. Twenty-four hours ago I had eighteen people with symptoms. Twelve hours ago, twenty-two that I knew of. I've just spent the afternoon doing a hut-to-hut search. Near as I can figure, there are eighty-three either ill or unaccounted for, which means they could be lying sick up in the gardens or on the north side of the island. And the symptoms are either a haemorrhagic form of smallpox or Ebola that's morphed into some goddamned pox like disease—"

"You've been hit with nothing more than a particularly virulent strain of haemorrhagic dengue—"

"Don't patronize me, Gene. I know haemorrhagic dengue better than just about any other doctor on the planet! This is not dengue. And it hasn't hit in a normal infectious pattern—it's knocked out half the population in a terrifyingly short period of time, as if...as if they all caught it from a single source within hours of one another. As for the aetiology, it *had* to have been inhaled; there is no way it could have spread this fast otherwise. Are you absolutely sure no one in Vila has these symptoms; these bleeding pockmarks?"

"Of course they have!" Marshall snapped. "We've had eight more cases of haemorrhagic dengue since yesterday. Why the bloody hell do you think we sent you down there in the first place?"

"*You* didn't send me," Nate reminded him. "Now, for God's sake, get those blood samples to Noumea and Auckland, so they can make the connecting flights out. I've already contacted Brussels and the CDC in Atlanta—"

"You did *what*?" Marshall's voice cracked. "How? What did you tell them? If the media get hold of this, do you have any idea what it will do to tourism? You had absolutely no authority to bypass me and...and the Minister!"

Thank you Mike, thought Nate for the tenth time that afternoon.

"Remember, I have Internet access," he replied calmly.

"I absolutely forbid you to contact anyone again!" Marshall spluttered. "You can't go round screaming that the sky is falling without evidence. Notification has to go through the proper channels—after we've done the blood tests and ascertained what's really happening down there. I'm calling the CDC and informing them that you have vastly overstepped your authority. Then I'm calling your superior in Noumea and submitting a formal complaint regarding your obvious incompetence. You've finally lost it, mate. You're finished!"

Nate's nostrils flared in disgust. He'd spent ten minutes quietly trying to explain the symptoms to Marshall, but the damned...*administrator* was fixated on haemorrhagic dengue, refusing to entertain the possibility that anything was seriously wrong. "Don't you get it? Dengue is *masking* this disease. You have an ethical responsibility that outweighs political considerations. This is not your garden-variety haemorrhagic fever. This is something far more sinister, and unless you isolate everyone who has been in contact with it, I will make absolutely certain that you are *personally* held responsible for further outbreaks."

The line started to fail and before either had a chance to add anything, it went dead. Nate stared at the radiotelephone. Was it his fault? Had he alienated Marshall so much that the man refused to listen to reason? But the photos of Tom Kaleo's stomach and face glared at him from the computer desktop. Even a fool like Marshall must see that something very bad was happening on Mathew Island.

-Chapter 15-

Nadi Airport, Fiji

Dispersal: Plus 62 hours

Katie Wood stood under the stinging needles of her first hot shower in over a year. She'd never much liked baths. The bubbling springs on Mathew Island were sure better than cold showers for scrubbing off the pervasive volcanic ash, but nothing had removed the unending stench of rotten eggs. Finally, her hair felt clean, she *smelled* clean and soon she would be back in an air-conditioned plane—business class, no less!

They'd made the Air Pacific flight from Port Vila to Fiji only because bad weather in Vila had delayed departure by an hour. Then, when Mike had been checking with the ticket desk in Nadi, two business class seats on an evening flight to LA had become available. Katie had procrastinated; she couldn't afford the upgrade. Mike had tossed his gold Visa card across the counter and told her it was an early Christmas present, conditional on her letting him buy her dinner in Seattle.

The door of the cubicle beside hers clattered open. She'd better hurry. Their flight was due to board soon. But part way through drying herself, Katie paused. What was she doing—really? She liked Mike, but she still wasn't sure about a relationship. After her husband had died, with the kids now grown and doing their own thing, she'd wanted to feel useful. The Peace Corps had given her that. It hadn't been her intention to isolate herself from the rest of the world, but the relatively uncomplicated life on Mathew Island had been just what she'd needed.

Mike Warner had sat beside her on her very first flight to Mathew Island, three years earlier. Back then, her loss had been too raw, her emotions too brittle for more than polite chitchat. He'd returned to the island several times in the intervening years. Katie had finally come to

accept what everyone kept telling her. Mike's interest in Mathew Island had as much to do with her as the volcano. She didn't want to lead him on, but now that she'd left Mathew, she was anxious to return to Seattle to see her friends and family, and decide what she really wanted to do with the rest of her life.

The silky feel of the dress she'd bought in the Duty Free shop brought a smile to Katie's face. The clothes she'd worn on the helicopter were dusty and smelled of the volcano. She bundled them together and tossed them into a refuse bin—but not before ash drifted from one of the pockets and caught in the mucous lining in her nostrils.

While most of the original virus had long since been decimated by UV light, a few particles had lodged in more obscure, dark places, like the microscopic cracks on volcanic dust. By wearing a pair of overalls during the helicopter flight to Vila, Katie had inadvertently given refuge to several thousand chimera particles that had lodged inside the ash, within the folds of her blouse.

Katie sneezed, dislodging most of chimera-laden dust from her nostrils. Using a wad of paper to blow her nose, she removed the rest, and flushed them down the toilet.

"This is the final boarding call for all passengers on United Airlines flight 706 to Los Angeles. Would all passengers please make their way to Gate Seven."

Michael Warner cursed and logged out of the web browser. He was sitting in one of the hard plastic chairs in the boarding lounge, trying to access his email. By the look of the email box, Nate was using the account just fine, but the connection here was so goddamned slow that he'd been unable to open any messages. Nate's email addressed to him was probably to assure him that his computer was in good hands. As to

the emails from his office, well, he couldn't get back to the States any faster, so there was no point worrying about Mt Rainer.

"Ready?"

He looked up and did a double take. "Wow!" Katie looked amazing.

"I've never travelled business class before." Her ears reddened.

"Well," he said, standing and taking her carryon in his other hand. "I don't have much choice. I can't fit into a coach class seat."

Once they were airborne and the seatbelt sign had winked out, Mike stood and pulled out his carryon from the overhead locker. "I'm gonna get cleaned up and changed."

Like Katie's, Mike Warner's shirt was harbouring ash-borne chimera particles. The lightweight jacket he'd worn during the helicopter and Air Pacific flights had inadvertently protected the microorganism.

Despite his height, Warner had become adept at freshening up in aircraft toilets. He stripped off his clothes, releasing the ash into the air. A few specks settled in his hair and beard, but the rest promptly vanished into the air conditioning system and circulated throughout the aircraft. Using a warm cloth to wash himself, he took the time to trim his beard, shave his neck and comb his unruly hair. He splashed on a little cologne. The chimera either died on contact with the alcohol, or joined the other particles in the air-conditioning system.

Before Warner had even left the toilet to return to his seat, three cabin crew and eighteen passengers had breathed in lethal quantities of the virus.

-Chapter 16-

Quantico

Dispersal: Plus 63 hours

"I'm surprised he was issued a visa." Giovanni picked up her third cup of black coffee in one hand and a fourth donut in the other.

Brant unbuttoned his coat and pulled his tie to one side. "What's his name again?"

"Sturgess, Dr Nathaniel Sturgess. He's a New Zealander," replied Jordan.

"Why surprised?" Brant asked Giovanni.

Brushing a few crumbs off her notepad, the librarian said, "There's no love lost between the French and New Zealand governments. Little incident with the *Rainbow Warrior*."

"Nate is based in Noumea," Jordan added. "He works for the WHO. He speaks French and Bislama—the local language—and travels regularly between the two countries."

"That explains it then," Giovanni mumbled around mouthfuls. Staring at the computer screen, she added, "Says here he has an impeccable reputation. Doesn't seem the panicky type, and if he's managed to become best buddies with the French, he's obviously politically savvy."

From the other side of the situation room, Broadwater waved a hand to get Brant's attention. "I have a Dr Gene Marshall from Port Vila on the line," she called.

Brant nodded for Broadwater to put Marshall on the speakerphone. Jordan and the agents nearby, including McCabe, gathered around Broadwater to listen.

"Look, I explained all this to your colleague!" came the aggravated voice from the speakerphone.

“Dr Jake Arnold from the CDC?” Broadwater said.

“Yes!” Marshall said. “Aren’t you with the CDC?”

“USAMRIID,” replied Broadwater.

“*What?* This is ridiculous,” Marshall retorted. “Sturgess had no authority to call anyone. I’m in the middle of the French Ambassador’s dinner party. The Minister for Health is here, and I can assure you, the only outbreak we have on Mathew Island—and everywhere else—is haemorrhagic dengue. I’m not trying to understate the problem. It’s just that we know what it is and we have a handle on it. Sturgess is not competent to be alone down there. He’s grossly overreacting.”

“Have you seen the photos Dr Sturgess sent with the email?” Jordan asked him.

“To whom am I speaking now?” Marshall demanded imperiously.

“Dr Jordan Spinner.”

“You with the army too? Don’t you people have better things to do? I’ve told you and I’ve told the CDC, this is *dengue*! I’m tired of Sturgess’ holier-than-thou attitude. The man arrives here acting like some goddamned Dr Schweitzer, pandering to the locals. He infantilizes them by *encouraging* them to use their bloody useless so-called custom medicine instead of proper pharmaceuticals—and now it’s backfired on him!”

“*Mi stap wok long FBI. Yu lukim ol fotos wea Nate I bin sendem?*” Jordan demanded. She didn’t know Marshall personally, but she knew his type. The silence from the other end of the telephone confirmed it. He was running the only hospital in the capital, but couldn’t speak a word of the language.

“Who the hell are you?” Marshall finally spluttered.

“I told you, Dr Jordan Spinner. I work for the FBI. Have you seen Nate’s photos?”

“No! What photos? How the bloody hell could Sturgess have emailed you photos? He doesn’t even have...” Marshall paused, then snapped, “No, I haven’t.”

“Then I’d suggest you rethink your position, *Doctor*.”

“Exactly what are you implying?” Marshall’s tone turned belligerent. “That this is Ebola? You cannot possibly make such a ridiculous and unsubstantiated allegation!”

“Then have you analyzed the blood sample that Nate sent you?”

“Of course not!” Marshall’s voice turned whiney. “We only have two lab technicians and they’re backlogged. I told Sturgess I’d have them tested for malaria sometime tomorrow.”

“You mean you aren’t forwarding them as he requested?”

“We’re perfectly capable of checking for dengue. Besides, the CDC’s been whingeing about the Kikwit outbreak stretching its resources to the limit. Why are you so suddenly interested in us? And how is it that you speak the language?”

“Dr Marshall,” said Broadwater. “Under the circumstances we strongly recommend that you do not open those samples.” She went on to explain the exact way she wanted them packaged and transported. “And we’d also like blood and stool samples from the vulcanologist, the Peace Corps nurse and the helicopter pilot. Until we can ascertain the nature of this outbreak, we agree with Dr Sturgess’ assessment of quarantining Mathew Island, and would further recommend isolating anyone who has been there recently.”

“Can’t help you,” Marshall replied smugly. “Mike Warner and Katie Wood left for Nadi, Fiji hours ago.”

McCabe was standing beside Jordan, and she felt him stiffen. Broadwater’s eyes widened, and a ripple of fear rode across the room. People began muttering to one another until Brant’s hand shot up in a

silencing gesture. He opened his mouth to speak, but two technicians were already on it, pulling up flight schedules on their computers.

"Their names are Katie Wood and Michael Warner," Giovanni called to the techs.

"All right," Broadwater continued, speaking to Marshall in a carefully modulated voice. "What hotel are they staying in Nadi?"

"How the hell should I know?"

"Try the big resort hotels closest to Nadi airport, first." Giovanni was bringing up what Jordan though looked like credit card details on her computer screen.

"That's fine, Doctor," Broadwater said to Marshall. "Meanwhile, you will need to isolate the pilot of the helicopter and all passengers inbound from Mathew Island over the—"

"Hey, hey, hey!" Marshall interrupted. "You people don't have the authority to go ordering a quarantine. You don't even have blood samples. Anyway, what you're asking is impossible. The local airline doesn't keep tabs of ni-Vanuatu movements between islands. Half the time passengers don't even have tickets, they just pay the airline clerk on the ground."

"He's telling the truth," Jordan muttered. "But the airline could backtrack most movements if he asked."

"Well can you at least try?" Broadwater said through clenched teeth.

"Not until we know what this is," Marshall snapped back. "Now if you'll excuse me, my dinner is getting cold."

Through the speakerphone they could hear the telephone being slammed down. "He hung up." Broadwater pulled the receiver from her ear and stared at it, incredulous. "I don't believe it. He hung up on me!"

"Check all outbound flights from Fiji to the continental US," Brant was saying to the technicians. "Meanwhile, has anyone made direct contact with Sturgess?"

“We’re in contact with Dr Warner’s Seattle team,” replied an agent from across the room. “We’ve emailed Sturgess and requested he contact us.”

Broadwater stood and held up a cautious hand. “Before we go any further, if this is a natural outbreak, the WHO and the appropriate French organizations need to be notified.”

“Most everyone are in Brussels doing a post mortem on the Kikwit Ebola outbreak,” said Jordan. “Besides, Vanuatu does get some very weird, very nasty bugs.”

“You’ve seen these photos, right?” Commander Long held up a printed page.

Jordan took it. The image quality was good enough to make out the detail of individual pustules. Apart from the fact that the blisters were much larger, it was like an old textbook photo of haemorrhagic smallpox. Knowing that McCabe was staring at her, into her, she consciously schooled her expression. “It *could* be haemorrhagic dengue.”

“Or chicken pox,” Wilson quipped sarcastically. “The six foot chicken from hell.”

“All I’m suggesting is that you can’t just assume this is *it*!” Jordan said. “We cry wolf without hard evidence and—”

“Dr Spinner is right,” McCabe interrupted.

Surprised to get support from such an unexpected quarter, Jordan studied him. The man was a walking enigma.

Brant considered for a moment, then called in a loud voice, “Okay, people, we treat this as a *possible* BW attack.” To Wilson, he said, “Dave, place whatever resources you have in Christchurch on a Level 2 standby alert—no details as yet. You and you—” He turned to another pair of agents. “Full background checks, including the American citizens in transit, Warner and the nurse, Katie Wood. McCabe, assist Dr Spinner in tracking Wood and Warner’s movements during the time they

were in Vila. Major Broadwater, we need an action plan to deal with flights that have recently departed from Fiji and Vanuatu; you know what to do. That includes issuing an alert to the Australian and New Zealand authorities of a possible quarantine problem in Vanuatu.

“The haemorrhagic dengue outbreaks in Vila may be masking the spread of this thing,” Broadwater said.

“What about the State Department?” asked Wilson. “We’ll need access to Mathew Island—”

“That’s my job,” Brant cut in. “I’ll be briefing AD Reynold in a few minutes. Once you contact Christchurch, find out where an aircraft capable of deploying this thing could have originated, then we’ll start backtracking. Check all flight schedules, commercial and private, and I want records of all shipping in the area. You know the routine. All right, people, get cracking. And keep emailing Sturgess. We need to know what’s happening on that island.”

-Chapter 17-

Mathew Island

Dispersal: Plus 66 hours

Following his aborted conversation with Marshall, Nate spent a few precious moments getting a grip on his temper. The CDC wouldn't dismiss the images so lightly. Kikwit had made them very nervous.

Carefully dressing in surgical scrubs, he returned to the clinic. All six beds and three cots were occupied. On the floor, another dozen villagers lay on scraps of cheap, colourful cloth that they'd spread over woven mats. Worried family members crowded the clinic, wiping victims' faces and mouths with thin wads of towel.

He'd issued carers with surgical masks and latex gloves, but across the room, Tom Kaleo's mother patted away the blood and slime from the erupting pustules around the boy's nose, then used the same rag to mop her own tear-filled eyes. Nate's stomach tightened.

Outside, the situation was just as bad. Coleman lights hanging on the eaves cast harsh shadows across the veranda. Mothers sat with babies at their breast, vainly trying to ease their fretful crying. Younger children lay where they could, tossing in their sleep or whimpering in pain. Those free of symptoms sat or stood in huddled groups under the cold pools of turbid light, instinctually drawing close in the face of something they did not understand. They were waiting for him to give them medicine for those they'd left at home, the ones too ill to move.

Ebola amplified in a hospital setting. So did smallpox. The impossibility of his task suddenly hit Nate like a sledgehammer. *God help us, this thing is orders of magnitude more contagious than Ebola—or even smallpox.* It was then that he had some inkling of the truth, but he banished the notion as absurd, pulp fiction.

Although few chimera particles remained on Mathew Island, the volcanic ash clouds and subsequent rain had boosted the anticipated infection rate of fifty percent. Two thirds of the one hundred and fifty villagers now had the disease. Such a level of saturation was not necessary in a modern city. Even five percent initial infection would trigger panic, disrupt essential services, rapidly decimate the economy and, finally, tear the social fabric asunder. What small, remote villages lacked in sophisticated medical and emergency services they made up for in resilience and fortitude. Everyone was a friend, relative or neighbour. The sick and orphaned were never left to fend for themselves. Ironically, it was this compassion that now amplified the disease. Now in its second day, the virus continued its onslaught throughout the body. Fluid and mucus collected in the lungs and nasal passages, and whenever victims coughed, sneezed, or expectorated, they inadvertently spread hundreds of newly replicated chimera particles into the air.

An average person takes in ten litres of air every minute. In the warm, dark, unventilated huts and overcrowded clinic, the chimera quickly found new hosts. Those wearing surgical masks were hardly better off, for the tiny viral particles slipped through gauze as easily as mosquitoes pass through a razor wire fence.

Back inside the clinic, Nate went to check on Tom Kaleo. Countless fluid-filled pustules now covered the boy's body. His bright young brain had swollen, cutting off its own blood supply. In an attempt to force blood into his brain, Tom's body had elevated his blood pressure by almost two hundred percent in a process known as the Cushing reflex. This was now causing Tom to haemorrhage from his nose, eyes, and gums. Even his fingernails were bleeding. Each healthy cell was

invaded by a viral nightmare that replicated, then burst outwards. Every minute, millions of miniature bomblets were exploding inside Tom's body, sending yet more viral particles to destroy the remaining healthy tissue.

Without warning, Tom's mouth opened wide, and he cried out—and Nate paled with horror. Inside the boy's mouth, where the pustules had joined together, the skin had sloughed off and burst apart. Tom lashed out with his hand, inadvertently rubbing the heads off hundreds of pustules across his stomach. The skin simply fell away, revealing raw flesh beneath—which instantly began to haemorrhage. Nate glanced down the bed. Amidst the bloody diarrhoea and vomit that stained the sheets, were dark brown, granulated spots. Tom Kaleo's skin was not the only thing sloughing; so were his organs. His body had literally begun to digest itself.

Elsewhere in the ward, similar viral meltdowns were occurring in the other victims as lungs and livers, hearts and kidneys transformed into liquefied viral mush. Nate almost succumbed to the instinct to bolt, when a sudden movement caught his attention. Judi had been collecting the soiled sheets from someone else's bed. Now she staggered and thrust her hand over her mouth. Before he could reach her, she'd pulled down the surgical mask and began to vomit.

Blood curdling screams came from behind Nate. He whipped around. Every one of Tom's cries spewed a shower of viral-filled blood, directly from the boy's lungs. His limbs began thrashing uncontrollably, peeling skin off the lesions and tossing billions more viral-splatters about the room. It was as if the virus knew that Tom was dying and was seeking a way out of his body and into—

Something bumped into Nate. Nerves taut, he recoiled, and spun around. Judi was crumpled on the floor, sucking in great lungs-full of air between heavens. "What the hell are you doing?" he yelled at her.

Her eyes lifted to his, and he saw not only abject terror on her face, but also petechiae. Shaking with terror, Nate gasped, “Jesus, no!”

“*No!*” screamed Emma Kaleo.

Tom’s body arched into an impossible, backward angle, then he collapsed onto the bed and lay still. Wailing, begging him not to be dead, Emma threw herself across her son’s corpse. One of Tom’s sisters flung herself over his pustule-covered legs, exposing yet more viral particles. His father, already showing symptoms of the same illness, beat at his head as if to drive out his anguish. In the next bed, Tom’s older sister barely noticed; she was unconscious.

Acknowledging death, the ward burst into noise and life. People crowded around Tom, grasping him, demonstrating their sorrow loudly. The masks, the gowns and gloves, were nothing but hindrances now, so they pulled them off.

“Don’t touch him!” Nate screamed, trying to force his way through the crowds. “You’ll get sick too.” Faces appeared through the open windows to the veranda. Grief and fear stared back at him.

Although Tom’s heart had stopped pumping, the puncture wounds on his arms—where Nate had earlier tried to place a drip—and the hundreds of pox-like lesions continued to exude blood and discoloured fluid. Where the skin had peeled away, red lumps oozed from Tom’s raw flesh. His eyes, nose, and mouth quickly became dark burgundy pools amongst a landscape of grotesquely weeping pustules. Then his bowels relaxed. Faecal matter, mostly digested blood and muscle tissue, spilled onto the bed, and dripped to floor. Billions upon billions of hot viral particles continued their relentless invasion of the clinic.

Tom’s aunt screamed at the smell and feel of wet heat across her arms. Her revulsion was not at the faeces but at seeing her nephew’s chest flayed open, his skin hanging loosely across *her* limbs.

Accustomed to dealing with their dead, others used sheets or rags in a vain attempt to wipe the blood and filth from the boy's lifeless body, unmindful that they were aiding the spread of a replicating monster.

Shaking in impotent horror, knowing there was nothing he could do now to prevent the inevitable, Nate backed away. The villagers would not blame him for this; they were much too fatalistic. But he no longer had a place here. Nothing he could say would stop them from taking Tom's body away. Tonight, they would try to wash him clean, kiss him, hold him, and say farewell in a way that would assuage their grief more than the antiseptic funeral rights of urbanized societies. In the morning, after ensuring that every person in the village down to the youngest toddler had touched Tom's suppurating body in farewell, they would bury him.

Sweat dripped into Nate's eyes, blurring a scene strait from one of Bosch's paintings, playing out before him. He had to get away. *Now!* Gingerly helping Judi to her feet, he led her outside into the hot, humid night air.

It was raining again. One more thing to worry about: how to get things washed and dried in this weather. Nate laughed maniacally. What did it matter? The whole fucking clinic should be burned to the ground! Inside, unless he missed his guess, there were enough hot organisms to wipe out every man, woman, and child on the planet.

The smell of human waste and blood and vomit clung to Judi. "I...I'm all right, Nate, just give me a minute. I'm so sorry, I—"

"Jesus, why didn't you tell me?" his voice cracked in desperation. "When did this start?"

"This morning, I guess. Maybe. I don't know! I had a headache, but I didn't take much notice. Then I started feeling sick while you were checking the village. I thought it was just the smell, lack of sleep, and...fear, you know?"

Swallowing his raging panic, Nate took a few breaths to steady himself. "All right. I want you to take a shower. Can you do that by yourself? Then change into fresh clothes and go to bed. Do you want Alice to help you?" He looked back inside the clinic. "Where is Alice?"

"Went home about an hour ago, to check on her mother and sister. I'll be okay, Nate. You'd better go back inside."

His stomach heaved at the thought. There was little he could do, not now. *God help us what is this thing?* He had to focus on Judi. Walking her to the cottage, he said, "What have you taken—aside from pain killers? No aspirin, I hope!"

"No. No, of course not." Her voice quavered. The darkness could not hide her terror.

"Fine, that's good," he said, more to inject some calm into himself as he tried to work out what he *could* do.

"What about Tom?" Judi asked.

"He bled out. He's dead, and...and I couldn't stop them from taking him. I want to get a drip in you now before—"

"Before you can't," she finished. "Oh God, Nate, I'm scared!" Inside the cottage, she turned her bloodshot eyes to his and wrapped her arms about herself. "Not so much of dying, I don't think, but dying like *that*..."

Returning her gaze, determined not to flinch from her breath, he said, "We've got one oxygen unit. I was going to use it on Tom, but I think the best chance we have is setting you up with everything we can."

"And if you get sick?" Her hands fell away and hung listlessly by her side.

He said nothing. There was nothing to say.

When Judi had closed the bathroom door behind her, Nate ran outside, stripping off his clothes as he went. Standing naked in the rain, he filled two laundry tubs with a solution of bleach. One was for his

clothes. The other he poured over his head and scrubbed himself until his skin burned.

The rain was warm, but he couldn't stay outside forever. After changing and checking on Judi, he went to the living room and sat in front of the computer. Would anyone in at the CDC have seen his email? No doubt shit-for-brains Marshall had called Noumea and screamed blue bloody murder. But the WHO was slow off the mark at the best of times, and Marshall was just an Australian administrator, not an epidemiologist. Nate's word accounted for a lot more.

And the evidence was now inarguable. This was not haemorrhagic dengue, or even Ebola. His fingers were shaking as he opened the laptop and typed in the password. His momentary relief at seeing message from the CDC was instantly replaced by dread. There were messages from the FBI and USAMRIID. The mere sight of the agency names confirmed his worst fears.

Unlike Jordan, Nate Sturgess was quite capable of believing the worst of his peers. He had always taken a close interest in unusual outbreaks around the world, especially when they appeared to offer solutions to inconvenient political problems—like the suspicious occurrences of exotic diseases amongst the Kurds. Nate had studied the siege of Stalingrad in World War II, and agreed with a conclusion that few held credible. Of the massive death toll on both sides, the most astonishing was the loss of over one hundred thousand German troops to a bacterial disease first seen in Tulara County, California. The Russians had successfully weaponised the plague-like disease, Tularaemia, and used it in a desperate, and arguably successful attempt to cripple Hitler's army.

Nate had also closely monitored UNSCOM reports. Despite his sympathy to the plight of the Iraqi people, as an epidemiologist, Nate was terrified by Hussein's biowarfare capabilities. That had resulted in a

few heated discussions with his French colleagues, who were appalled at the effect the post Gulf War trade embargo was having on Iraq's medical system—and the French economy, whose key trading partners were Middle Eastern countries.

A scenario that Nate had dismissed as pulp fiction just half an hour earlier, now offered the only plausible explanation for what was happening on Mathew Island. But this was the South Pacific. Who would want to attack them? And why?

Water from Nate's wet hair dripped down his collar, mixing with the perspiration that had already begun to form. He had to start thinking clearly. This wasn't just about Mathew Island anymore. This could be playing out elsewhere, including Vila. What had Gene Marshall said? Eight cases of haemorrhagic dengue in Vila that day? They *had* to locate and quarantine Katie and Mike.

Opening the FBI email titled 'secure line', he read the instructions and began typing.

-Chapter 18-

Quantico

Dispersal: Plus 67 hours

“The doctor is in!” announced a technician.

Jordan had just finished making her eighth call to Port Vila. Despite the late hour, she’d located an air traffic controller. Warner and Wood had boarded the Air Pacific flight from the helicopter without passing through the terminal. It was the sort of thing you could do in a small place like Vanuatu, where customs officials knew the locals and regulars, like Warner and Wood. The only people that had had any physical contact with them or their baggage were either on the Air Pacific aircraft or still in Port Vila. No other flights had arrived or departed since.

“Get everyone up here,” Wilson called. Dropping his sandwich into a trashcan, he rode his swivel chair across to them. “How long will it take Sturgess to access the secure chat room?”

“Give him a minute,” replied the tech, moving back so that everyone could see the screen. “The connection is kinda slow.”

“What have you got?” Brant demanded, striding across the room.

Wilson turned to answer, but the tech pointed to the screen.

“Sturgess is in the secure chat room we set up.”

A line of type appeared. *I’m assuming you have my first report, it began. The situation here has deteriorated rapidly in the last hours, with a confirmed fifty percent and estimated seventy percent of the island’s entire population now showing symptoms of an unknown haemorrhagic disease. First fatality was what I believed to be the index case, Tom Kaleo, who died a few minutes ago. He had a seizure, and then bled out*

through skin lesions reminiscent of haemorrhagic smallpox. The Peace Corps nursing sister, Judi Harris, is now symptomatic.

This is not—I repeat, not—haemorrhagic dengue. I cannot now be certain that Tom was in fact the index case, or that he brought this with him from Vila on Tuesday’s flight. To the best of my knowledge none of the other passengers who were on that flight are sick, although their family members are displaying symptoms. It is imperative that you locate Katie Wood and Michael Warner.

The message continued; describing the symptoms and funeral rites that virtually guaranteed infection of the remainder of the village.

Jordan stared at the screen. McCabe moved closer to her and whispered, “Does it fit?”

Disturbed by the measured way in which the FBI agent had used her the previous morning, or perhaps embarrassed because she’d responded in a less than professional manner, Jordan was uncomfortable around him. Why did he stand or sit so close to her? For a psychiatrist, he showed a surprising lack of respect for personal space. She crossed her arms and returned his gaze. “I think that’s a question for the Major, Agent McCabe.”

“Does the time frame fit?” he repeated.

Motioning for them to follow her, Broadwater led them away from the crowding agents. “He’s asking you, Dr Spinner, if this outbreak is commensurate with what we can expect from a weaponised chimera? The short answer is, yes, it’s within the parameters. But we need to get hold of it, eyeball it, run experiments—”

McCabe stabbed his finger at the wall map. “There’s your experiment. Don’t bank on the test subjects being alive when you reach them.”

Suddenly, Jordan understood. McCabe was six steps ahead of everyone else. Was it because he ignored inconvenient evidence and jumped to his own preferred conclusion—which in this case might be

right? Or because he had analyzed the available data, discarded the clutter that bogged down everyone else, and come to the only viable conclusion? Either way, she needed more than gut instinct. As the major said, they had to see the evidence: the pathogen itself.

“When a microbe is breathed in,” Jordan replied, “it doesn’t immediately go to the bloodstream. Depending on the type of organism it can remain in the alveoli of the lungs from an hour to several days.”

“So most of them could have inhaled it simultaneously, but while some fell ill within hours, others might remain free of symptoms for days?”

Broadwater nodded. “You’re trying to establish a time line. We’ll need that to track the disease.”

“More importantly, to figure out when it was deployed,” McCabe said. “Why was the Kaleo boy hit first? Was the aircraft he arrived on responsible for distribution, maybe via the cargo hold? Did the kid inhale the chimera while he was onboard?”

“Maybe he was already sick, and it attacked his weakened immune system, first,” Jordan ventured.

“Major,” Brant called. “Everyone else, back to whatever you were doing. Can we get this chat room thing on a larger screen?” he asked the tech.

“Yes sir, but it’ll take me half an hour or so to rig one.”

“Do it.”

“Sir?” Broadwater replied.

“Can you answer Sturgess’ questions?”

“What exactly do you want me to say? If we tell him what we suspect, he’s likely to email the Washington Post and CNN.”

“Tell him something, or he’ll know you’re stalling,” McCabe said.

Brant leaned over the keyboard and typed, *We understand your situation is urgent. We are currently notifying the relevant authorities and locating Dr Warner and Ms Wood.*

“Ask him to send timelines on the outbreak, treatments and—” Wilson began.

“He’s one doctor on an island with potentially one hundred and fifty victims of a BW attack,” interrupted Broadwater. “His only qualified assistant is symptomatic. He’s not gonna have time to fill out reports,”

McCabe shook his head. “Sturgess knows he can’t help the villagers without outside support. He’s terrified of it spreading off-island, repeatedly making reference to Warner and Wood and the possibility that haemorrhagic dengue is masking outbreaks in Vila.”

“You’re right.” Jordan looked at McCabe. “Nate’s an epidemiologist, not a doctor.”

“What are you talking out?” Brant demanded. “He’s a medical doctor.”

The tech left to set up a larger screen. Broadwater sat in the vacated chair.

“Sturgess is an epidemiologist, and he knows he’s in the deepest kind of shit.” McCabe looked at the text on the screen. “He’s more worried about the spread than he’s concerned with saving the villagers. They’re dead or as good as dead. He’s not gonna call CNN if he believes we’re taking him seriously.”

Dr Sturgess, typed the Major. My name is Susan Broadwater. I’m an epidemiologist with USAMRIID. Your report arrived just hours after we received limited anecdotal evidence suggesting that you may—repeat, may—have been exposed to a hybrid virus. Until we receive the samples you sent, we cannot confirm the nature of the organism. We take the matter very seriously and are currently tracking the whereabouts of all personnel who have recently been on the island. We appreciate your status is extreme and are preparing a response team.

Please do not communicate this matter to anyone outside this secure email address.

Before Broadwater could hit the send button, Wilson cried, “Whoa! Why the hell are you telling him it’s a hybrid?”

“Would you prefer I told him it was a weapon?” Broadwater countered.

“Send it,” McCabe said. “He’ll cooperate now he knows we’re all over it—and that we’re not bullshitting him.”

Although the FBI, in the person of AD Reynold, was technically in charge of the overall investigation, while USAMRIID was the designated response unit off US soil, Broadwater’s briefing the morning before, the one that featured the phrase, ‘no one left to investigate’, must have hit a raw nerve, because Jordan had never seen such a level of interagency cooperation before. The look on Wilson’s face said that it might now start to unravel.

Still looking unhappy, Wilson shrugged. “Ask him about the airfield.”

The major hit the ‘send’ button. Several tense seconds passed, and Jordan could only guess at what was going through Sturgess’ mind. Then, the reply appeared onscreen.

Runway’s a quagmire. With the wet season about to start, it’s only going to get worse. The only access is by helicopter or boat.

Nate—can we call you Nate? Broadwater typed. We know you’re on your own there and in the worst possible situation. We need for you to keep feeding us as much medical data as you can: timelines, symptoms, courses of treatment.

“Let Spinner talk to him,” said McCabe. “She knows him.”

“Not all that well. I just know that he does a great job.” Nevertheless, Jordan pulled her chair across and sat down besides Broadwater at the keyboard. If her and Nate’s positions were reversed, she’d appreciate being in contact with someone she knew.

Nate, she began, my name is Jordan Spinner. We met a few years back. I'm an Escapee.

"Escapees," she explained as she typed, "are expatriate children who grew up in Vanuatu and left to go to school. A lot of kids get stuck there and never amount to much. They always refer to us as Escapees—the ones who got away."

Major Broadwater is heading up a rapid response team leaving here shortly, she wrote. Meanwhile, another team of epidemiologists and specialists will be available around the clock for consultation. Any additional online support we can give you, holler. Someone will be monitoring this at all times, and we'll keep you updated.

Jordan! Sturgess replied. Hey, I remember you; you left the bar before it was your shout. Maybe I'll let you make it up to me one day. Seriously, I'm glad you're there. Before her symptoms progress, I'm going to set up Judi Harris with our only oxygen unit and begin a drip to maintain her electrolyte balance, although I have little to control her blood pressure. I'm going to clean up the clinic as best I can, then I'll transcribe my notes and forward them to you, probably in around three to four hours.

Okay, Nate, Jordan typed. I'll be right here.

An hour later, Jordan was sitting with McCabe, wracking her brains as to whom else she could find to track down the helicopter pilot, Gary Teocle. It crossed her mind to call her parents, but there was no time to negotiate that minefield. Her mother's favourite pastime was emotional blackmail served up with a massive side dish of martyrdom. If Jordan hadn't abandoned her 'real' family to live in America, dear, sweet little Jamie would still be alive.

Brant loomed over them. "I want you two packed and ready to leave in fifteen minutes."

“Sir?” Jordan frowned and stood.

“Major Broadwater’s team needs a pathologist. You know the country and the people, you speak the local language—you’re fluent in French too, right?”

Before Jordan could reply Brant turned to McCabe and said, “We need FBI agents and forensic personnel down there to pursue the investigation, people we can trust and who know what they’re doing in that sort of environment.” Gaze turning back to hers, he added, “Do you have a problem with that, Doctor?”

“No, sir, I’ve worked in a Racal suit before.”

“Orange is my favourite colour.” McCabe offered up a tight, humourless grin.

“Ours are green,” Broadwater said when she joined them. “Josh, you okay with this?”

“You mean my rampant claustrophobia or having to find a matching necktie?”

Despite his lame attempt at humour, McCabe’s face had closed up. Jordan’s apprehension shot up another notch. He wasn’t kidding about having issues of his own. There was nothing scarier and potentially more dangerous than a claustrophobic in a Racal suit wading through a hot zone.

“I know you want to stay here and pick Adams and Williams’ lives apart at the seams,” Brant said to him. “But that’s going to take time. I want answers, and right now Mathew Island is the only tangible evidence we have.”

Wilson came across and said, “The initial response team in Christchurch is gearing up now. They’re using the New Zealander’s Hercules aircraft to make a medical and supply drop to the island. They’ll be there in about—” He checked his watch. “Five hours—just after dawn.”

Jordon looked doubtful. "Crappy terrain for a parachute drop."

"They'll make a low pass over the runway and shove it out the back—standard procedure. We've notified Sturgess to expect the drop. Forecast is low cloud and rain, although the pilots can generally find a hole and skim underneath. You'll be using the same aircraft for your insertion."

McCabe raised an eyebrow at Wilson. "You mean you're missing out on a trip to the swaying palms and turquoise water's of the South Pacific?"

"Agent Wilson is meeting the United flight in LA," Brant explained.

"The USS *California* just left Brisbane for Guam," added Broadwater. "It's being redirected to Mathew Island. *California* carries two helos, although she can only operate one at a time. We'll only need one point of egress, Vila or Noumea. Distance to Mathew is about the same. Once we arrive, we'll set up portable quarantine units."

"AD Reynold is at the White House now." Brant picked up his overcoat and pulled it on. "I'm meeting him at State Department. We'll have clearance for you to depart for Mathew from either Noumea or Vila by the time you arrive in New Zealand."

-Chapter 19-

Fiji / United Airlines Flight 706, en route to LA

Dispersal: Plus 72 hours

Miriam Singh pushed her thick hair over her shoulder and finished mopping the floor of the last toilet cubicle. Miriam liked her job, not because it paid well, and certainly not because she enjoyed cleaning Nadi International Airport's bathrooms, but because travellers always left things behind. The early morning shift guaranteed a collection of pens and loose change, books, expensive perfume, jewellery, makeup, and clothing. Most of the useless items Miriam handed over to airport security. The rest she sold to a second hand dealer in town. More expensive and traceable items, like cameras, laptops, passports, wallets, and credit cards, she gave to her son, who took them to her brother, Tashi, in Suva. She wasn't sure what Tashi did with them, but it was a lucrative family business, especially the passports and tickets.

Despite her cultural heritage, Miriam was not a practicing Hindu. The only things she believed in was working hard to keep her large family together and putting her younger sons through school. She hoped that at least one would become a professional, a doctor or lawyer maybe, who could look after the family when she was too old to work.

After finishing the floors, Miriam took her time emptying the refuse bins. The morning's haul was scant. When flights were delayed, people had more time to think about their possessions. She picked out a few dollars and half a dozen ballpoint pens, a couple of ruined lipsticks and a collection of souvenir key rings and spoons. Then some clothes fell out. She snatched them up before they landed in the big bin at the back of her trolley. The T-shirt was well worn and dirty and smelled of something other than human body odour. She dropped it into the bin.

The shorts were no better. She checked the pockets before tossing it after the T-shirt. Then she considered the blouse. Dusty and sweaty but otherwise clean, it was a good quality cloth, certainly good enough for her daughter to wear to school. Miriam tucked it into her bag and continued her work until the bathroom was pristine. She might have been opportunistic, but she was thorough because she wanted to keep her job. By the time she'd finished cleaning, the only surviving chimera particles lay hidden in the pocket of Katie Wood's blouse, inside Miriam's bag.

*

The Boeing 747 hadn't changed altitude, so Michael Warner couldn't figure out what had woken him. Then he felt the hand on his shoulder again.

"Dr Warner?"

He sat up, and pulled back to focus. An orthodontist's dream filled his vision. "Eh...yeah? What time is it?" he said, hoping the teeth would back away.

"I'm sorry to wake you, sir," the flight attendant whispered insincerely. "Can I see your passport?"

Mike glanced at Katie again, then unbuckled his seat belt and withdrew his passport from his jacket. The attendant checked it. "I didn't need a shave when they took the photo," he quipped.

Apparently satisfied that she had the right man, the attendant said, "The Captain would like to see you. There's an urgent call for you from Washington."

"Seattle?"

"No, DC. Can you follow me please, Doctor?"

Why would anyone be calling him from DC? When they reached the toilets he ducked in, ignoring the attendant's moue of annoyance. Too

bad. If Mt Rainer was erupting there was nothing he could do about it up here.

“Lead on,” he said when he stepped out. Near as he could figure, he’d had about six hours sleep. Good, that’d reduce the jetlag.

Mike had been inside the cockpit of a 747 before, just not while it was in flight. The engineer sent him a troubled look. The pilot wasn’t frowning, but he looked none too happy, either. The attendant shot him another plastic smile and left, closing the door behind her.

“Dr Warner?” said the Captain.

“Yeah, what can I do for you?”

“Special Supervisory Agent Brant from the FBI wants to speak to you.”

“The Feds? What ‘n hell do they want with me?” He wasn’t worried; if he were in any kind of trouble they wouldn’t be calling him to the cockpit. So why was the co-pilot glaring at him?

The engineer gingerly handed him a pair of earphones, then snatched his hand back. With a wary eye on the crew, Mike placed the earphones over his head, and said, “Agent Brant? This is Michael Warner.”

“Dr Warner, are you travelling with a Peace Corps volunteer named Katie Wood?”

Mike’s stomach dropped. Katie couldn’t be involved in anything illegal, could she? “Yes, I am. What’s this about? Is she in some sort of trouble?”

“You were both on Mathew Island until yesterday morning?” Brant replied.

“That’s right. Why? What’s going on?”

“When you left, a number of islanders were ill. Is that correct?”

“Yeah. Some sort of flu, or dengue maybe. I wasn’t paying much attention. Why?” Mike began to get some inkling what this was about, but he didn’t feel sick, so he couldn’t see the problem.

By the look on his face, the captain was also listening to the conversation.

“Doctor, as of our last communication with the island about an hour ago—made possible by your computer, for which everyone is very grateful—twenty-two people have died and most of the island’s population, including the other Peace Corps volunteer, have become infected with an extremely virulent pathogen.”

“*What?*” Mike gasped. “That’s impossible! There were only twenty-two down with it when we left and... Oh, crap.” He ran a hand across his beard.

“That’s the information we have from Dr Sturgess.”

“Nate! How is he?”

“Asymptomatic at this time.”

“Twenty-two,” Mike repeated in disbelief. His skin crawled, and he could feel his heart thumping. “So you think Katie and I might have... What exactly?”

There was a pause before the reply, “We suspect a haemorrhagic fever.”

Mike’s vision blurred, and his knees almost buckled. He met the pilot’s hooded eyes. The world had watched in horrified fascination earlier in the year as Ebola terrorised Kikwit. All kinds of doomsday reports had emerged, about the consequences of the disease arriving in New York via an international flight. “Jesus, tell me you’re not serious!”

“We’ll be quarantining your aircraft as soon as it lands at LAX. Meantime, we need to know if you have any symptoms, and what your exact movements were, who you met, who you shook hands with—everything—from the moment you left Mathew Island and set foot on that flight. Do you understand me, Dr Warner?”

Despite his intense shock, Mike replied, “Yes, yes of course. Katie’s still asleep, but I feel fine.” Processing the information, he added, “Wait

a minute. Ebola, dengue, all of these haemorrhagic viruses take days, weeks for symptoms to appear. And despite all the hype, it doesn't kill one hundred percent of the victims within thirty-six hours!"

"This is a particularly virulent strain, Dr Warner—"

"Listen to me, Agent Brant. I've spent a lot of years travelling through some of the most godforsaken pest and disease riddled countries on the face of the planet, often in the company of people like Nate Sturgess. You get to learn a lot about bugs, especially the bad 'uns, like Ebola. You're only guessing, aren't you? Because there's no possible way you could have a blood sample by now. I know that because I personally delivered them to Vila. And why is the FBI instead of the CDC involved? Spill it, Agent, what's really going on?"

"I'm not an epidemiologist," Brant replied. "I'm a Special Supervisory Agent, which means I'm running the investigation. Dr Sturgess is treating this outbreak like haemorrhagic smallpox."

"*What?*" Mike was incredulous. "How the hell could—?"

"Smallpox was used in the eighteen hundreds to subjugate the population of Vanuatu," interrupted Brant. "Apparently it was responsible for eradicating over a million of the original inhabitants. At this time we're working under the assumption that somehow it remained dormant in an insect or animal, mutated into this...strain, and re-emerged in the population. When you land at LA, we'll get a blood sample from you and Mrs Wood. If you're in clear, then... Listen, if you're free of symptoms now—and given how fast it attacks and kills—there's every chance you've avoided infection. But with the apparent virulence, a wide range of precautions, *at all levels*, is absolutely essential. Do you understand what I'm saying, Doctor?"

Mike was scratching his beard. He felt ill all right—not from the microbe, but from the implications. "Yeah, I gotcha."

“Now please, Dr Warner, return to your seat, wake Mrs Wood and draw up a list of all your movements and contacts down to the finest detail. Did you buy a coffee or newspaper and hand someone money? Did you eat in a restaurant or use the bathroom and touch the handle to flush the toilet? Everything that you can recall.”

Ebola was not that contagious. Or that fast. And smallpox had been eradicated because it *only* resided in the human population. Brant was bullshitting him. “Will an FBI agent be meeting the aircraft on arrival?”

“Yes. The other passengers will be informed that they cannot disembark due to a medical quarantine. We have no desire to implicate individuals.”

The pilot’s nostrils flared. Mike scowled, and replied, “No need to make threats, we’ll cooperate, but once we hit the ground I want to talk to your agent. And he better be up to speed because it seems I know a little more about smallpox than you, *Special Supervisory Agent*, and things just don’t add up.”

Brant hesitated then said, “Fair enough, Doctor.”

Pulling off the earphones, Mike said to the captain, “Guess we’re on your shit list for dragging you into this little John Nance story, huh?”

The pilot barked a short, humourless laugh. “I flew a Tomcat in the Gulf War. I also talked to some of the Marines on board my ship. They saw...things up in northern Iraq. Why do you think the FBI is involved in this, Dr Warner?”

Mike knew it was a rhetorical question, but he answered anyway. “You know what the Feds are like. Gotta stick their noses in everything.”

“Yeah. None of the other crew members knows about this, by the way—and we’ll be staying with the Ebola story.”

Preoccupied with his thoughts, Mike was only now aware that the aircraft was descending. “Think I’ll go order a bottle of bourbon.” He turned to leave the cockpit.

“I might join you—alone,” muttered the engineer.

Mike Warner grunted. Shit. He hated bugs.

-Chapter 20-

Mathew Island

Dispersal: Plus 3 days

Nate washed in the hot springs, almost grateful that outside at least, the smell of brimstone overlaid that of human excrement. Everything he touched felt soft and slimy. Repeated dousing in bleach had reduced the sensation in his fingertips. In the distance, the radiotelephone bleated insistently, annoyingly. *God, somebody pick that up, would you?*

Under normal circumstances the radiotelephone operated only when the generator was running each morning and evening. Nate had left it on all night because he'd needed power to operate equipment, sterilize instruments, provide lighting, and to maintain his connection to the outside world via Mike Warner's laptop. The New Zealand Hercules was due to arrive soon, bringing with it more efficient generators, sophisticated communications equipment and a huge pharmacopoeia to treat the multiple symptoms of the hybrid microbe.

Sighing deeply, Nate dunked his head underwater to wash off the soap, stepped from the pool, dried himself, and then donned the last set of clean, dry surgical scrubs in the clinic. The morning was mild, a little overcast but clear enough to see a blood-red sun rising over the deceptively calm ocean. Another storm was brewing.

He knew that the surgical mask he tied over his face was next to useless, but since he was inexplicably free of symptoms, he wasn't about to abandon all caution. According to the email from the FBI, the supply drop would also include barrier nursing equipment and HEPA masks. Normal gas masks were useless against viruses, something the Israeli civilian population had probably been ignorant of during the Gulf War. Worse, unless the filters were correctly fitted and properly

maintained, the HEPA masks could be lethal. Nate hoped he could remember how to correctly fit them.

The radiophone bleated again. He ignored it and climbed into the Land Rover. During the night, Gene Marshall had delivered a vitriolic diatribe. It was immediately followed by a harsh call from the Health Department declaring him *persona non grata* in Vanuatu. The patrol boat was being sent to Mathew Island to arrest him. He'd burst out laughing. By the time the patrol boat arrived there'd probably be no one left alive.

On the short drive to the airport, Nate passed villagers preparing for the first of twenty-five burials—or perhaps it was twenty-six. At the current rate, by midday, fully thirty percent of the islanders would be dead. By now the villagers understood that whatever evil beset them, Western medicines were of no use. They brought the sick to the clinic only because the beds were softer and the roof was waterproof. Piling coloured cloths onto the mattresses to cover the gruesome stains, they lay the next victim down, then sat by the beds and prayed to a God that they had never believed in, or understood, to deliver them from this strange horror.

With the power steering long since shot, the ancient Land Rover was a bitch to drive. But it gave Nate something to focus on, and for that he was grateful. Back in the clinic, every room, every wall, even the ceilings were spattered with blood and body waste, including digested blood and organs. It was if nature herself were celebrating a hideous orgy of human destruction. Except if the Americans were right, there was nothing natural about it. He laughed bitterly; only mankind could have created such an abomination.

The Land Rover continued to churn through rather than over the road, until he finally reached the landing strip. Nate had never been on Mathew Island this close to the wet season. Although he knew the

runway was unserviceable, the sight of steamy mud everywhere amazed him.

The windsock hung flaccid and dismal in the rain. Nate pulled up at the dilapidated tin shed that passed for a terminal, stepped into warm, ankle deep gunk, and looked across the field. Warner had not been exaggerating; it looked like a dung-coloured lake. On the far side, something shifted and then exploded in a surprisingly loud plop. Mud pools had bubbled up beside the runway.

Chilled by the sight, Nate glanced back at the mountain. The low rumbles and amber glow illuminating the rain clouds was, in its own way, reassuring. The volcano continued its daily routine, oblivious to the human horror unfolding beneath.

A deep throbbing replaced the grumble. It was the sound of four huge Hercules engines. The lumbering grey plane approached from the northwest, seemingly slow, even ponderous in its approach. Then the noise abruptly grew to an unbearable pitch, and the great machine flew past, travelling scant metres above the ground. Nate caught a flash of the New Zealand Air Force insignia, followed by a dozen bright yellow boxes falling in quick succession from the gaping hole at the stern of the aircraft. The boxes hit the airstrip with a desultory splash followed by a muted thud. Despite being stuck in a bizarre nightmare, Nate felt a surge of relief. Hollering loudly and smiling, he waved his arms over his head. He could just make out the shapes of men in the back, and imagined he could see them wave back. The Hercules slowly climbed toward the rising sun, gently dipped its wings in farewell, and disappeared into the gathering clouds.

The drop had been so accurate that most of the crates had landed less than two hundred metres from him. Even more importantly, they were marked according to their contents. It took Nate almost two hours and three trips in the Land Rover to collect all of the boxes and transport

them to the clinic. He briefly checked on Judi each time he returned, but there was little more he could do to help until he'd unpacked the protective clothing.

Next he set up an outdoor shower, complete with a mixer that would deliver bleach at a 1:100 ratio. Another trip to the hot springs to wash off the mud, then finally, he dressed in surgical scrubs and a lightweight, disposable plasticized suit. He took a little time adjusting the HEPA mask before going into Judi's room.

"Hey, Nate! Sexy new gear." Staring at him with bloodshot eyes, she tried to smile, but her cracked and bloodied lips began to bleed behind the oxygen mask.

Nate swallowed. Judi's face was swollen and blotchy with subcutaneous bruising. Angry red pustules had already erupted on her face and arms, and her nose had been bleeding.

"I've got some new juice for you," he said jauntily, and set up a new drip. "Once you get better, you're gonna swoon over the stuff the Yanks—care of the Kiwis—dumped on our doorstep. There's about a hundred thousand dollars worth of high tech gear, including—"

Judi coughed, heaved, and began to choke. She turned her head and feebly tried to remove the mask. He grabbed a bowl and went to help her. The gobs she spat out were speckled with granulated blood. Digested blood. Her organs were sloughing. She was digesting her own stomach.

Trying to stave off a sense of hopelessness, Nate gently brushed Judi's hair from her face. He'd have liked to check her blood pressure, but it would trigger more bleeding through the pustules on her arms, or her fingernails, which were already bloodied, and he wasn't sure if he could stop it. When she finished coughing, he wiped her mouth, replaced the oxygen mask, and considered what drugs he now had available.

Victims of haemorrhagic diseases like Ebola, Lassa, dengue and smallpox, often became delusional. Eventually, they suffered a complete personality change as their brains succumbed to progressive liquefaction by the virus. It was a horrific internal war on all levels. Still labouring under the assumption that the organism was a hybrid form of smallpox, Nate took the fact that Judi recognised him and even tried to make a joke, as a sign that the disease had not far progressed. Although her chances of survival were minimal, he was now in a position to give her body every bit of help available. The trick was to sustain her vital systems while her immune system mounted a counter-offensive. A cocktail of anti-virals, Vitamin K, and blood pressure medication seemed the best choice.

When he finished setting up new drips, he steeled himself to return to the clinic. A number of villagers were either asymptomatic or suffering only the earliest stages of the disease. If he could get them into a relatively clean environment, like the village *nakama*—the open sided meetinghouse—and begin administering what he hoped might be prophylactic treatment, they stood a chance.

Sweat trickled down his back and under his arms. Even his groin was damp and itchy. Outside, came an astonishingly loud clap of thunder. Rain began to fall, not in measured drops this time, but a ferocious cascade that deluged the island. The Wet Season had arrived.

Nate opened the cottage door and ran through the deluge to the clinic, wishing he believed in God.

-Chapter 21-

En route to New Zealand

Dispersal: Plus 3 days

While a part of Jordan balked at Brant ordering her to Vanuatu, she knew that it would take months to unravel the connection between Oklahoma City and BW technology. Mathew Island was an evolving crime scene, mint fresh, and, despite her ignorance of BW technology, pathology in a hot zone was her area of expertise.

The military transport to New Zealand didn't provide the most luxurious facilities, but there were only fifteen passengers and over a hundred seats, giving everyone plenty of room to spread out, even sleep.

Broadwater was the designated team leader. With her came two USAMRIID microbiologists, a medical doctor and three enlisted men who provided 'technical support'. The size of the men implied they were more likely to provide physical support, but during the flight, Jordan learned that one of them was a graduate chemistry student while another had just been accepted into the Officer Training School. His expertise was biomedical engineering—specifically, the hardware used in Level 4 environments. Commander Long and three Marines, each one highly skilled in some aspect of weapons technology and biohazard cleanup, completed the military contingent. The remainder of the team included FBI technical staff, and an ex-UNSCOM weapon's inspector, who greeted McCabe like a long lost brother.

Originally, Jordan had intended to use the flight to catch up on a thick pile of research papers. However, the conversations between team members proved considerably more educational, particularly when the topic turned to South Africa's BW programme.

“The South Africans got smart after Rhodesia,” Long said. He was watching McCabe in a way that Jordan could only describe as calculating. “Just look at the Ebola outbreaks.”

“Oh, come on,” said Jordan, pulling a badly chewed pen from her mouth. “I concede that I’m on a vertical learning curve, but that’s practically a backwards loop.”

“Really?” Long’s smile carried no trace of humour. “How convenient that bacterial shigella—bloody diarrhoea—appeared simultaneously, camouflaging Ebola symptoms.”

If Jordan had learned nothing else these past days, it was not to assume anything when it came to BW. “Ebola and shigella are endemic in that part of Africa. Sporadic, isolated cases recur all the time. The Kikwit outbreak only spread because of unsound hospital practices.”

“Again, you know that for a fact, Dr Spinner?” Long’s soft drawl bore sinister undertones, as if he carried a dark, bitter secret that the rest of the world was better off not knowing. “Any sign of the carrier yet? The CDC’s banking on its being a rodent, maybe a bat, but it kills mice doesn’t it? So the rodent theory isn’t panning out too well.” He shrugged. “Wouldn’t be the first time someone used the place as a proving ground for a BW. Hell, it’s Africa, no one gives a damn.”

Something tugged at Jordan’s memory, something about anthrax. “Nass,” she mumbled, frowning in concentration. “Didn’t someone named Nass write a theory about anthrax?”

McCabe shot her a look of approval, while Broadwater said, “Dr Meryl Nass from the University of Massachusetts Medical School. And it was a little more than a theory. In the late 1970s, the Apartheid South African military intelligence and the Rhodesian army worked together in a war that they believed would dictate the future of Africa as a whole. It was a racial war, a dirty war that used every underhanded trick in the book, including the deployment of anthrax and cholera as bioweapons.”

“But anthrax is endemic in that part of Africa,” Jordan objected.

Long shook his head. “Back then, Rhodesia had an excellent health care system and veterinary service. It reported an average of thirteen cases of *bovine* anthrax annually and no human cases. In 1980, at the height of the war, there were 10,738 human anthrax cases, and an unknown, virtually incalculable number of cattle infections.”

Lips thinned in a knowing, bitter smile, Broadwater added, “No one figured out why until three years ago, when Nass researched the epidemiology of the outbreak. The anthrax spores managed to jump over vast tracts of commercial white-owned farms, without infecting a single animal or person, to go on to infect thousands of people and animals owned by tribal trust lands. Unusual epidemiology, wouldn’t you say? Not only did it not pick on the white population, it left their animals alone. All this at a time when white Rhodesians were moving their cattle around the country whenever they wished, while the tribal owned cattle and people were almost prisoners on their land? When did anthrax learn racial selectivity?”

“Same goes for cholera,” Long added. “We now know that the white-Rhodesian military distributed anthrax spores by seedcake to the starving cattle of Rhodesian tribal trust lands. Then they poisoned water systems with *Vibrio cholerae*. The anthrax was meant to kill cattle, the economic backbone of African villagers, to undermine the support structure of the black-Rhodesian guerrillas. Cholera was new to Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, but it remained oddly confined to the Eastern districts, where the white government was having the worst guerrilla problems.”

Jordan began flipping through her files, trying to locate the paper by Nass.

“You won’t find much,” Long added. “But when we get back, if you ask Wilson real nicely, he might let you look at the CIA files on

Lieutenant Major Albrecht Tissotⁱⁱⁱ, better known as Dr Death, who ran South Africa's Project Coast—*Jota* in Afrikaans—a biological weapons research project at the Roodeplaat Research Laboratories outside Pretoria. *Jota* specialized in assassinations using toxins and poisons, but it also researched Ebola, Marburg and other African haemorrhagic fevers, obligingly mailed to them by the CDC, and our old friends, the American Type Culture Centre.”

“The same place that mailed Gary Wade Benson Bubonic Plague,” McCabe reminded her.

“We Yanks just love giving this sort of stuff to anyone who asks,” Long muttered.

“The South Africans weren't interested in showing off,” McCabe said. “On the contrary. Project *Jota*'s aim was to infect entire populations with virtually untraceable diseases *because* these diseases were either endemic or occasionally appeared in the country—just as they'd done so successfully in Zimbabwe with anthrax and cholera.”

“But that doesn't prove Ebola was a bioweapon—”

Jordan faltered when Long leaned forward, pinned her with his dark eyes, and said, “Forget all those textbooks and papers you're reading, and go have a close look at how Ebola spread along the Zambezi River in 1976. The serological epidemiology doesn't make sense. Then check Dave Wilson's files again, and you'll discover something very interesting. Albrecht Tissot was in Zaire several weeks before the outbreak. And he was back there again before—and during—the last outbreak. The index case has now been established: Gaspard Menga. But I'll bet you a dime to a dollar that despite collecting eighteen thousand animal samples and thirty thousand insects from a jungle that has virtually no wildlife left, the CDC won't source the carrier. Like I said, it was an experiment in an outdoor laboratory. A lie wrapped within the truth. Like anthrax, Ebola is endemic in these areas.”

McCabe left his seat and headed forward. Jordan assumed he was going to the bathroom, until Long exchanged a look with Broadwater. The naval commander walked away.

The major also stood and went to leave, until Jordan said, "People have a hard time talking about Oklahoma when I'm around. It's like I'm carrying this gigantic placard that says, 'emotionally fragile, handle with extreme care.'" Smiling self-consciously she ran her hand over the stubble on her head, adding, "I can't blame them, I'm not exactly hiding the sign. But in a few months, when it grows back, maybe it'll be a little less obvious." She glanced in the direction that McCabe had vanished. "Sometimes the signs are invisible, but they're just as big."

Staring at her a moment, Broadwater went forward, presumably after McCabe.

The spirit of interagency cooperation was full of undercurrents. Jordan had no idea what the different layers meant, and she didn't much care, as long as they didn't interfere with the investigation.

"Ever been to a hot zone before, Doctor?" Standing in the aisle was Major Broadwater with two cups of coffee.

Moving her files so that Broadwater could sit beside her, Jordan replied, "I assisted in autopsying Hanta victims, Major. Several times. It's what got me interested in pathology."

"Good. This is not the trip to be finding out you can't deal with it. And call me Susan." She paused and sipped her coffee. "He crawled around inside yet?"

"What do you mean?" Jordan shot her a wary look. There was something about McCabe that bothered her. Hell, there was a *lot* about the agent that bothered her. Young, remarkably good looking, and moving with the grace of an athlete, he nevertheless seemed...older somehow. Whatever he'd seen in Zaire, it ran deep.

“Don’t let it bug you, he does it to everyone,” replied Susan. “Josh doesn’t mean to be rude. It’s just that he lacks the patience for social niceties—like not profiling everyone he meets.”

“You’ve known him a while, I take it?”

“Family thing. About four generations worth. His father broke New England ranks when he married an Egyptian doctor. My father did the same when he married into Spanish aristocracy.”

Jordan would have placed Susan Broadwater in her early thirties, but she had the beautiful, ageless face of her mother’s forebears. She could easily have been five years younger, or ten years older.

“Josh was always a serious kid,” Susan continued. “Too bright for his own good, too impatient with his teachers. His mother tempered that but when she died...” Her eyes filled with regret. “I had plenty to say about that to his father, Robert, but Rob was, in his own way, a singularly stubborn man. According to him Josh was fine. Both the McCabe boys had grown up in Africa, and had seen things that would have made the most resilient Western doctor run screaming. Josh had been alone in villages before. This time, he was fourteen, almost fifteen years old, practically a man. He’d deal with it.”

Before Jordan could ask her to elaborate, Susan added, “Robert and Jasmine McCabe were renowned epidemiologists. They wrote the definitive papers on Lassa fever. The boys travelled everywhere with them when they were younger. When it was time for school, they were sent to live with Jasmine’s family in Cairo, the later, an exclusive boarding school in Boston.

“Long, ugly story cut short, Josh came down with Ebola when he and his brother went to visit his parents while they were in Zaire. Jasmine caught the disease while nursing Josh, and died. Josh had to cremate her because it was the middle of the hot season and most of the villagers were dead or dying. Then he had to wait three weeks, more or

less alone, until his father and brother returned from up north, because by then Ebola was breaking out all over the country. Transport had ground to a halt and communications were non-existent. The government..." Susan's face screwed up. "You know the story. No one wanted to go near the place. His father didn't exactly blame Josh for his mother's death, but for a whole bunch of reasons I'm not going to go into, that's not the way Josh sees it."

Stunned by the revelation, Jordan shot her a sceptical look. Almost half the victims of Ebola survived, but ninety percent of them suffered some permanent scarring to organs. How in hell had McCabe passed the FBI physical—or psychological—exams?

"Oh, he had Ebola, all right," Susan said, meeting her look. "He was one of those few percent whose immune system kicks in fast enough to beat the virus without so much as a saline drip. Not that he had an easy time of it, but he came out of it with nothing but a well-developed set of antibodies. Physically, he was fine."

"But psychologically..." Jordan didn't have to imagine what the experience would have done to a child, especially one left alone in the middle of a village where everyone was crashing and bleeding out—while the outside world was too terrified to help.

"Josh grew up in Africa, Dr Spinner. As I said, he saw things that, well... Doesn't matter. Point is, he's an FBI agent. Incipient basket cases don't get given a gun and a badge. It's just that he has very personal reasons for hating Ebola."

"For hating it so much, he's well informed."

"Josh's antipathy towards his family's chosen profession is well-known." Susan's face hardened. "He mastered the art of hiding his emotions long ago. Now it's a profession."

Suspecting the relationship between Susan and McCabe—or his father, or perhaps both—had been a little more intimate, Jordan said, “And you’re telling me all this, because?”

“Because it’s easy to dislike Josh, hard to deal with what I’ve heard some describe as intellectual arrogance, and impossible to get close too him. He lives in his own world and views other people as tools. If they can’t help him, he has no interest in them. And has a lot of interest in you.”

“That’s a little harsh, isn’t it? I mean he has friends, like you.”

“We were close, once, until I began working with his father. The one thing Josh does have is an overdeveloped sense of loyalty to those whom life has dealt a crappy hand. Comes from living in a village that burned ninety percent of its population—mostly women and children—while the world abandoned it. Don’t mistake that for pity,” Susan added. “It’s empathy. Josh has no time for those who let personal demons hobble them.”

Jordan suddenly realised that the conversation wasn’t about McCabe but herself. “You’re telling me this because you think I’m hobbled.”

Downing the last of her coffee, Susan looked around the aircraft. “Everyone here knows one another and has worked with dangerous pathogens in the field. It’s an oddly eclectic little community, Dr Spinner, one that normally excludes the well-known names in the CDC because we deal with bioweapons; something the public is better off not knowing about. This is not the first time this sort of response group has been assembled. Many of these people cut their teeth in Iran and northern Iraq. And every one of them knows each other’s background, what makes ‘em tick.

“Don’t take Josh’ eccentricities personally. He’s not like you and me. He’s not fascinated by this bug. But even if he hates it, hates the family business, as he puts it, it won’t stop him from doing his job, especially

because he understands better than most what Nathaniel Sturgess is going through." Susan unbuckled her seat belt, and stood. "I don't expect your recent loss will get in your way, either."

"Thank you," Jordan said sincerely. "I appreciate that. And it's Jordan. I never did get used to being called 'Doctor'."

When Susan left, Jordan looked out the window to the marshmallow clouds. Joshua McCabe had been only fourteen years old. For the first time since Oklahoma, the fog of her own pain and grief seemed marginally less cloying.

-Chapter 22-

Los Angeles International Airport

Dispersal: Plus 3 days

United Airlines Flight 706 had parked at the end of a taxiway, and passengers had been informed that there was a small problem regarding quarantine. When a heavily armed SWAT team surrounded the aircraft, the captain assured everyone that it was just a precautionary measure. The scenario might have been straight out of a movie, but in fact it was a well-rehearsed operational procedure that had evolved in response to terror bugs like Ebola.

Tension permeated the aircraft like a bad smell, and the free drinks only added to the passengers' growing belligerence. The captain didn't explain the nature of the quarantine, however one of the flight crew must have heard, or been overhead, because the dreaded word Ebola erupted. It spread through the length the 747 in at a speed that defied Einsteinian physics.

This wasn't like a hijacking. Passengers weren't obliged to quietly cower in their seats. Instead they were hostage to the unknown, an ill-defined entity too small to see even with the aid of a microscope. Things on board began to turn nasty, and a panicked business class passenger managed to wrestle open one of the doors. He was confronted by several space-suited figures.

The panic that followed, thought Mike Warner, was nothing to what might have happened if the passengers had been told the truth. Holding tight to Katie's shaking hand, he stayed seated. It was impossible not to feel guilty.

The captain and the engineer arrived from the front of the aircraft with a second team, all of whom were dressed in the same bulky space

suits, and all of whom were armed. “Okay, everyone, please!” called the captain. “We’ll have you out of here in a few minutes. But please, you must calm down, first.”

It took several more minutes and some strong-arm tactics before something approximating calm was restored. The new arrivals cleared a path between Mike and the open hatch and then indicated that he and Katie should stand and come with them.

Nearby passengers, including the one who’d opened the hatch shot them a suspicious glare.

“To ensure that any possible cross infection is contained,” said one of the space-suited figures loudly. “Until we can trace the source, we’re going to separate people into different groups. Those who joined this aircraft from a connecting flight will be kept separate to those whose original point of embarkation was Fiji.”

Nodding gratefully to the FBI agent—he was sure the figure behind the plastic facemask was a Fed—Mike picked up his carryon and laptop.

“We’re going to have to ask you to leave them, sir. It will be necessary to disinfect the aircraft and all of the bags separately.”

Reluctantly leaving the laptop behind, Mike followed the agent into an otherworldly white-cocooned container lined with bench seats. Katie sat close beside him. He knew that she’d weathered too many horrible diseases and witnessed too many tragic deaths for this to rattle her. Still, when he’d broken the news that all those initially sick, including Tom Kaleo, were now dead, he’d seen the tears in her eyes. These people had been her friends, her family. She no doubt felt as if she’d deserted them and her colleagues in their time of need. Worse, inadvertently or not, she might have carried the deadly virus into the outside world.

Only the Fed who’d spoken joined them in the cabin. He waited until the hatch closed before saying, “I’m sorry about the delay in getting to the aircraft. It took a while setting up everything. I’m Agent Wilson.”

“FBI?”

“DIA.”

Well, that confirmed what he’d suspected. And dreaded. “All right, Agent Wilson DIA, what the hell is this thing? It’s been—” Mike glanced at his watch. “Twenty-five hours since we left Mathew Island and neither one of us show symptoms.”

“Dr Sturgess also remains asymptomatic,” replied Wilson. “We have no idea what this ‘thing’ is. It could be weeks before you fall ill.”

Mike glowered at him. “Don’t bullshit me. I told your boss you’d better be up to speed!”

“Or what, Doctor? As of this moment you will be held incommunicado.”

Katie gasped. Rising from his seat, Mike barked, “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Special Supervisory Agent Brant is not my boss. He is, however—”

“Running the investigation. And you’re with the DIA. Those two things and that spell one thing.” Mike stabbed a finger at equipment labelled USAMRIID “A biological weapon. When will you have the blood samples that Nate gave me?”

Wilson’s expression was clearly visible behind the hood’s plastic faceplate. “I was asked to tell you what we know,” he replied. “Health authorities in Vanuatu have refused to forward the samples to us. Instead they put them on a charter flight to Noumea. From there, they were shipped to the Louis Pasteur Institute in France. Near as we can figure, it will be at least another twenty-four hours before USAMRIID or the CDC can get their hands on a sample. And that’s no guarantee. There are already rumblings from within the French government that the samples may not be released. The French are more than pissed at the way this entire situation is being handled. Although Sturgess informed the WHO and CDC simultaneously, apparently the WHO doesn’t check

their email that often. Now the French claim they were deliberately kept in the dark until it hit the news services. The guy running Vila base hospital, Gene Marshall and a politician in Vanuatu have both denied that there's any outbreak, although they admit that there's an escalating incidence of haemorrhagic dengue."

The container they were in bumped to a halt. Grinding and lifting motions followed as they were moved onto another truck. Wilson explained they were being taken to a special military hospital at an undisclosed location.

"Jesus," muttered Mike, sitting down again. "And I thought Mount Rainer would cause nightmares. Still, none of this explains why we can't talk to anyone."

"My family are expecting me in Seattle tonight," Katie said, wrapping her arms about herself. Mike reached over and took her hand again.

"The families of everyone aboard the quarantined flights are being notified."

"Flights?" Mike's head snapped around.

"Every aircraft that departed Vila or Nadi after you passed through the airports has been quarantined. Flights into and out of Vanuatu and Fiji have been diverted or suspended."

Mike ran a hand across his head and face. Shit. The world was jittery after Kikwit; but for airlines and governments to move that fast when they had no idea what sort of outbreak... He stared at Wilson and said in a soft, flat voice, "You know exactly what this is, don't you?"

"Honestly?" Wilson's face screwed up. "No. No one does."

"But it's some sort of weapon, right?"

Wilson's tone changed, and he sounded like a cop reading them their Miranda rights. "Our number one primary is to contain the outbreak, and we believe we have achieved that. But we cannot risk anyone thinking this is a weaponised biological agent. It's now a national security matter

and until the immediate risk is assessed and your cooperation is assured, you will not be allowed to communicate with anyone outside the quarantine facility.”

The DIA were more than capable of making him and Katie disappear and then regretfully informing their families and colleagues that they had succumbed to the disease. He glanced at Katie. She’d sucked her lips into her mouth, but her expression was determined. “What do I have to sign?” she said.

A ghost of a smile crossed Wilson’s face. “Once we arrive at the facility, we’ll do a full blood workup on you both. There’s always a possibility that Sturgess made a mistake; it *could* be haemorrhagic dengue.”

“No.” Katie was emphatic. “Nate wrote the definitive papers on haemorrhagic dengue. Gene Marshall, on the other hand, is an incompetent bully, except when he’s being a professional sycophant.”

Despite himself, Mike grinned. Katie was no wilting violet. “All right, Agent Who Doesn’t Work For The FBI, you’ve got my full cooperation—on one condition. I get my laptop and bags. I’ve got a stack of data recorders that need analyzing. If I’m gonna be locked up for the next—well, however long this is gonna take—at least let me get some work done.”

Wilson’s smile was full-bodied this time. “We’ll make sure you get everything you want by tomorrow morning. Now, I want to go over every step you took from the moment you left Mathew Island.”

-Chapter 23-

Christchurch, New Zealand

Dispersal: Plus 4 days

“This is fucking insane!” Susan Broadwater’s fists clenched in fury.

Brant’s voice sounded tinny through the speakerphone. “I agree, Major, but we’re not going to get you into either New Caledonia or Vanuatu until we have hard evidence of something other than haemorrhagic dengue. The United passengers bought us a reprieve, not proof.”

McCabe turned away in disgust. By their nature, governments were slow-witted entities, made numbingly stupid by the bureaucracies that maintained them. But inject a healthy dose of terror into an equation, and governments became capable of acting with the same lightning reflexes as individuals. In the case of the French New Caledonian and Vanuatu governments, the dominant reflex was adamant denial—on all counts. Both countries insisted that they did not have a deadly outbreak on their hands, and both refused permission for the USS *California* to enter the territorial waters around Mathew Island.

The official explanation for the denial of entry cited the fact that the *California* was nuclear powered, and the Pacific island nations were, like New Zealand, nuclear-free zones. This bizarre volte-face by the French government, who popped off nukes in the Pacific with gay abandon, was not lost on anyone. But the French were claiming the moral high ground, because of the US government’s hysterical over-reaction to a ‘relatively minor’ outbreak of dengue fever.

Every *other* government was now acting with equally lightning reflexes. Flights and cruises were cancelled, and tourists still in Vanuatu and Fiji were left to demand assistance from their respective embassies.

The economic consequences for nations heavily dependent on tourism were dire. With the exception of journalists looking for a post-Kikwit story, nobody wanted to go anywhere near either country.

Vanuatu and New Caledonia were also mightily ticked off at the 'unwarranted entry into its air space by the New Zealand Air Force, at the behest of the US government'. And the Kiwi's weren't too chuffed about having to mollify their chronically hypersensitive northern neighbours. Meanwhile, over a thousand airline passengers in nine countries were under, or about to go under, strict quarantine while their aircrafts, which had departed Fiji after Warner and Wood had passed through Nadi airport, were grounded subject to decontamination.

For several tense hours, Assistant Director Reynolds' head had been on the Attorney General's chopping block, with Brant's lined up right behind. The State Department had crowed to the White House that it had advised against issuing the Ebola alert, adding in a private aside, 'this is what happens when you play on our turf.'

Then the United passengers began falling ill.

The State Department abruptly went mute. Every country with quarantined passengers crowed about its foresight in quarantining passengers inbound from Fiji. Vanuatu and New Caledonia alone stubbornly maintained that the disease was not Ebola, but dengue. Meanwhile, the response team had wasted an entire day sitting around an aircraft hangar in Christchurch, New Zealand, watching service personnel load crates into a Hercules bound for Antarctica.

Brant had then called from DC to update the team. "As for how this virus reached Mathew Island," he added. "We've traced the movements of all commercial and private international flights. Apart from Vanuatu's domestic carrier, no aircraft has been anywhere near the island for months—it's miles from regular routes."

“Given Sturgess’ reports, distribution of the virus appears to have been too even, too widespread to be anything but aerial,” said Susan. “That means a long-range aircraft with sophisticated delivery systems. Military. Forget civilian aircraft movements; trace *all* military aircraft in this region.”

“What was the time lapse between the vulcanologist boarding the United flight and the first symptoms appearing in their passengers?” McCabe asked.

“A pregnant woman was sick at twenty hours,” replied Brant. “Between twenty-four and twenty-seven seven hours for the others.”

Rapidly calculating backwards from the time Tom Kaleo had become symptomatic, McCabe said, “Check aircraft movements around December Eleven, Twelve and Thirteen, local time.”

“Include Australian and New Zealand aircraft,” Spinner said. “This is our region, after all.”

Susan shook her head. “They don’t have bioweapons or play footsie with Iraq.”

Spinner’s eyebrows lifted. “The French do. On both counts.”

“Now you’re getting it, Dr Spinner,” McCabe replied in a low voice.

“Has the CDC received those blood samples from Mathew Island yet?” Susan added.

“No.” The grumble in Brant’s voice was unmistakable even through the speaker. “Another black mark against the French.”

“You have the sick United passengers,” Spinner suggested, crossing her arms. “What about samples from them?”

“Secondary infection.” Susan’s face creased in a frown. “That will let us see the virus, but to figure out where they came from, who made this thing, we need a sample of the *original* weaponised particles. We *have* to get to Mathew Island!”

“There’s the United aircraft and the human carriers, Warner and Wood,” McCabe said.

Susan rolled her eyes at him. “Josh, you know better than that. Trying to find a chimera particle on them would be like looking for a particular and as yet unidentifiable grain of sand in the Persian Gulf.”

He smiled slyly. “The French don’t know that.”

A cunning look across Susan’s face. “You may not appreciate it, Josh, but not only do you have your father’s sense of humour, you also think like him.”

“All right,” Brant replied. “Another few hours will tell us if these United passengers have something besides dengue. If that’s the case, we’ll have the French by their diplomatic balls. McCabe? There’s no indication of tampering in the evidence room or the files related to that. However, Agent Adams’ personal computer has been sanitized. Nothing in his notes or diary indicates he was working on anything other than his assigned job either the night, or the morning prior to his death.”

The vast bulk of the evidence to be used in the McVeigh trial was not, as the public assumed, related to the technical aspects of the bombing or tying McVeigh to the crime. The Attorney General was going for the one thing every judge and defence attorney warned jurors not to consider: the emotive impact of the victims. This trial wasn’t about convicting McVeigh. Whether the public knew it or not, they were already in the sentencing phase.

There was, however, another kind of evidence, and it was right there in the same aircraft hangar room as McCabe. Chuck Long’s nephew had been killed and so had Tina Giovanni’s sister, but neither of them had lived or worked with any of the victims. And neither of them had been in the building. McCabe’s predatory eyes slid to Spinner. “Working on it,” he replied.

“One last thing, McCabe” Brant said. “The Perrier water.”

Even the name was sufficient to evoke memories. Avoiding Spinner's penetrating gaze, he replied. "Chilled, with a dash of lemon."

Ignoring the wisecrack, Brant added, "It was placed there by one of the canteen staff—because of a cell phone call supposedly coming from me. I'm chasing it down, but don't expect much."

"Probably the same person that sterilized Adams' computer."

"Perrier?" Susan shot him an odd look.

"Someone put it in my glass at the first briefing in Quantico," he explained.

It took her several seconds to make the connection, then she paled.

Like the South Africans, the Consortium had been smart not to draw attention to itself. Sterilizing Adams' computer and ordering the Perrier, a childish ploy designed to rattle him, were like neon signs. Williams would be rolling in his grave at the stupidity of such a ham-fisted ploy.

When the call ended, Spinner went to leave, but McCabe took her by the elbow.

"Agent," she said neutrally, stopping and turning to look up at him.

"Oklahoma."

Her expression froze, then her nostrils flared in anger. "You going to play Brant's game?"

"You think he made that story up, about McVeigh being a pawn, just to get you on board?" McCabe almost smirked.

"I think I'm standing in the middle of an aircraft hangar wasting time," she retorted.

"Then tell me what you were working on in Oklahoma."

"Listen, Agent McCabe, I'm prepared to do anything—*anything*—to find out who's behind this. But I can't help you unless you tell me what the hell is going on. This investigation is no longer about Oklahoma, but about a conspiracy, a bioweapon, and a bunch of people you refer to as the Consortium. Unless I understand how those people and events are

connected, you're going to have a bloody hard time digging anything useful out of my brain because believe me, I've been in there trying to find clues myself. You tell me where you're headed with this...conspiracy theory, and I'll let you crawl around inside my skull all you want."

He looked around the busy hangar. "Let's get out of here."

A few minutes later they were seated in the Antarctic Exhibition Centre's restaurant, just across the road. Although it was well into the evening, the sun had not yet set in the high latitude's summer sky. A Haglund pulled up just outside and disgorged some laughing tourists. Then a six-foot penguin waddled past their table, stuffed and mounted in the arms of a beleaguered looking father. Mum and the kids followed with food trays and excitement.

McCabe sipped his cappuccino. Spinner's scarred head drew a few stares from the penguin's owners, but as she'd said, he was more interested in what was tucked away inside her skull than what covered the outside. "Timothy McVeigh had agendas that coincided with the plans of other considerably more powerful and less visible individuals, including those within our own government."

"I've heard every conspiracy story in the book—and then some—about Oklahoma, but it'll take a lot to convince me the US government was somehow involved."

"Not the government," he corrected. "Individuals connected to the government going back more than a quarter of a century. Was your apartment robbed while you were in the hospital?"

"I suspect you know it was." Her eyes narrowed. "I'm not a child to be coddled into adopting a perspective that you need to vindicate one of your theories. Spill it or I'm gone."

He licked the froth from his lips. “Do you remember when you were trapped in the rubble, fireman and rescue crews had to clear the area twice, because they’d found other, undetonated bombs?”

“The Customs Service kept a *dummy* TOW missile in the Murrah Building. The missile was marked live because you don’t paint ‘dummy’ on a missile when you’re dealing with suspected arms and drug traffickers. As a member of the investigative team, McCabe, you should know that and also that there’s a gag order on the information because it could undermine current and future Customs stings. The public heard about the missile before the gag order. Next thing, it’s a conspiracy.”

“The gag order is to cover Customs’ butts; no one likes the idea that they kept missiles, live or otherwise, a couple of floors above the Day Care Centre,” he replied. “However, that in itself is a convenient cover to what they really found. Did you read the transcripts from the Oklahoma Highway Patrol’s radio dispatch logs?”

Frowning, Spinner shook her head.

“Actual transcripts are available; I’ll get you a copy when we get back to DC. Remember, the TOW missile was kept on the *western* side of the building. It wasn’t until after they’d removed the missile that an officer radioed that there was another bomb—not a missile—on the *south* side. At 10:37am the Fire Department confirmed a second device in the building, ordered the immediate evacuation of all rescue workers, and troopers to move all civilian personnel back one more block.

“The log entry at Forces Command, Fort McPherson, Georgia for April Nineteen at 11:57am then stated, ‘Two more explosive devices were located in the vicinity of the explosion site—evidently intended for the rescuers.’ Ask Agent Wilson, and he’ll tell you that a DIA Atlantic Command memo from Norfolk, Virginia—these guys have a fair idea of the difference between an explosives package and a dummy warhead—for April Twenty, stated, ‘A second bomb was disarmed, a third bomb

was evacuated.’ Finally, the FEMA Situation Report, also for April Twenty, reads: ‘Second and third bombs were located in the building. The second bomb was disarmed and the third bomb was evacuated.’ Interestingly and perhaps more pertinently, there was never any retraction or correction of any of these logs or memos; something that regularly occurs when new information comes to hand.”

Spinner opened her mouth to speak, but McCabe added, “It was later demonstrated that these disarmed devices were in fact *sixth* and *seventh* bombs, designed to detonate during the rescue operation. The first bomb, four thousand eight hundred plus pounds of ammonium nitrate, was in the truck that McVeigh parked in front of the building. An additional four bombs, timed to explode simultaneously, had been positioned by McVeigh and at least *three other individuals* on *Thursday April Eighteen*.”

Spinner paled, but then she said, “That’s not proof, McCabe. That’s interpretive. Where’s the evidence that additional bombs existed?”

“The United States Geological Survey published findings that two seismic waves were produced as a result of two detonations; the truck bomb, followed a moment later by the four placed charges attached to columns inside the building. These charges blew simultaneously.”

“That theory came about only because the shock waves from the truck bomb travelled through bedrock and through the air at different speeds,” she countered swiftly. “I’m not a geophysicist, but even I know that.”

He looked at her oddly. “You’re telling me the USGC report is ‘just a theory’, and instead you’re quoting something proposed by a *newspaper* journalist?”

Eyes blinking rapidly, she said, “I thought—”

“The journalist’s *opinion* was debunked when the remains of the building was demolished, and only one seismic train was detected for

each detonation.” Shaking his head, he added, “Spinner, the evidence I present may be open to interpretation, but it’s based on sound science, not urban legends and grandstanding tabloid journalism. You said you’re willing to do anything. Does that include shelving preconceptions based on what you’ve been led to believe?”

A range of expressions he might once have found fascinating crossed her face. “Or chosen to believe” she mumbled bitterly. Meeting his gaze, she added, “I’ve had a few scales ripped from my eyes these past few days, Agent McCabe. That doesn’t mean I’m willing to abandon reason. You furnish proof, I’ll listen.”

An unfamiliar emotion nudged him, so he ignored it. For now. “There’s also another theory, namely that the second seismic wave occurred when the front of the building collapsed. But the seismic signature for that event is entirely different from a high-energy event like a detonation. The extraordinarily well-ignored USGS report vindicates the premise that there were *two separate high-energy explosions*, followed several seconds later by a low energy impact event.”

He picked up a packet of sugar, opened it and poured it into his coffee. “Forget the seismic theory,” he said, stirring his spoon. “Let’s go for hard, scientific fact. Spinner, a blast through air is a woefully inefficient coupling mechanism against heavy reinforced concrete beams and columns. The math is simple; at detonation, the ANFO in the tuck bomb that McVeigh left out front would yield a maximum pressure of one-half million pounds per square inch. By the time the blast wave hit the nearest of the building’s columns, that pressure would have dropped to three hundred and seventy-five pounds of pressure per square inch. By the time it reached the nearest column in the *second* row of columns—and remember, it was the second row that collapsed—it would have been down to between twenty-seven to thirty-five pounds per square inch. Yet the compressive yield strength of concrete is

around *three thousand five hundred pounds per square inch*. Columns and fragile materials like sheet rock and furring strips close to the explosion remained intact, while columns and structural beams *behind* them collapsed—with less force than I use on a punching bag!”

“Those columns snapped when the floors above collapsed,” she said, but her voice was uncertain. Questioning, not refuting.

“Have you seen the photographs of the column breaks? They unequivocally show very smooth and localised fractures—exactly as you’d expect from neatly placed cutting charges, and not from structural collapse.”

Another penguin wandered by. Somewhat shorter, it came with a seal and promises of punishment if Tommy didn’t leave his sister alone. Tommy looked like he would be happy to leave his sister alone, preferably in Antarctica.

“I can show you testimonials from over sixty international experts, all stating the same thing. Even more perturbing is the unprecedented rush to blow up the crime scene and bury the evidence before forensic experts could even examine the remains. As one USAF general said, *The effort required to bomb the Murrah Federal Building pales in comparison with the effort to cover up evidence*. The evidence has been shaped to fit the theory that McVeigh acted alone. Anything to the contrary is discarded or removed—one way or another.

“Exactly the same thing happened with the World Trade Centre,” McCabe added, watching her hands. She was unconsciously shredding a paper napkin. “Blame an individual, built a solid case against him, ignore or destroy any evidence that could dilute that conviction. The evidence was selected to shoehorn McVeigh into the US Justice System’s frame of reference.”

She looked up at him. “Problem packaged and conveniently disposed of.”

He saw it in her eyes. It had been eating at her, probably for months, but like every other victim, she'd clung to an explanation that fit her needs. "Good ol' US know-how caught the Bad Guy. Truth and justice—as long as they suit the American Way—will prevail. If the facts prove otherwise, bury them, because Democracy is sacrosanct, even at the expense of truth."

"If you are right—and I don't necessarily accept that you are—I had no knowledge of the—" She paused and lowered her voice. "The subject now under investigation. Besides, destroying the building and stealing my computer got them nothing but a computer."

"Why?"

"We used PCs at work. I used an Apple at home. No hacker can break into the files."

"Why use different systems?"

"Computers are tools. Just like you, McCabe, I like to control my tools, not the other way around, so I do—did—most of my work on the home computer."

Her jibe did not go unnoticed. Susan had obviously been talking to her. "How did you transfer files between the two? Floppies?"

"Good God, no. Floppies are unreliable and a security nightmare. I saved my work to a server so I could download it wherever and whenever I need it."

"The local network in the building—"

"Do you have any idea how many times the FBI servers, both internal networks and on the Internet, have been hacked into and screwed up? I use a private server, same as anyone with their own web site, except I use an encrypted one to store and transfer files. Whenever I back up, I dump the files off the computers, along with the cache. Everything I was working on right up until...that morning...is still on the server."

"Who else knew that?"

“No one except my husband. I was married to a software and network engineer.” She met his eyes. “There’s nothing there. What wasn’t personal I’ve already passed on to the FBI; current cases and such like. There are dozens of ways that other in the building could have backed up their files. The notion of blowing up a building to destroy evidence on someone’s computer isn’t reaching, McCabe. It’s fantasy.”

“That’s what Major Peter Jarhling at USAMRIID said four years ago, about a chimera. Is it also fantasy to suggest a group of conspirators would sacrifice the population of an entire island and unleash a potential planet-wide Andromeda virus just to demonstrate their point, using methods a little more sophisticated than a truckload of fertilizer?”

Spinner scrunched up the shredded tissue, then looked down, only now aware of what she’d been doing. Buzz cut and attitude notwithstanding, she was actually quite attractive. Some might even say beautiful. He tapped her hand to get her attention. “What happened to your personal effects after the bombing?”

“The FBI notified me that a few items had been found.” She carefully placed the wadded ball of tissue on the table, and clasped her hands around her coffee. “Jamie’s hat, of all things—it had his name and my telephone number inside, and Doug’s wedding ring. They never found his hands, but they found a finger with his wedding ring.”

She reached for the locket around her neck. Beside the locket, hanging on the chain, was a gold ring. He couldn’t be certain but it looked to be a larger version of the one she wore on her left hand.

“As you said,” she continued in a low voice. “They seemed very anxious to bulldoze the site and destroy what remained.”

“Identification?” He watched her grapple with her emotions. Spinner had been a surprise from the start. He had pushed her, pressing every button she had then some, but she refused to let that interfere with her professionalism.

“Doug had a birthmark. Dental records confirmed his remains. Jamie...a recent surgical scar and broken arm still in a cast. He’d been climbing a tree at his former care centre. Broke his arm and fell on a stick, stabbing himself in the buttocks. Naturally, we placed him a more secure day centre.”

Her expression abruptly snapped shut. She had revealed more than intended. Why was she determined to hide her emotions? Did she fear they would empower him—or endanger her? Or both? “Spinner,” he said in a tone that surprised him more than her. “Professionalism does not preclude compassion, and compassion is not synonymous with weakness, or pity.” He gave her no time to reply before adding, “The funerals?”

“A week after their bodies—what they could be sure were theirs—were released. That was almost a month after the bombing. Why?”

“Personal effects. What was withheld?”

She looked uncertain, took a mouthful of the coffee, and then said, “I don’t follow.”

“Agent Adams was assigned to evidence. Most of the evidence from the Murrah Building consists of personal effects that the prosecution will use to maximize the emotive reaction of the jury. The *forensic* evidence is minimal, except where it confirms the composition of the truck explosives. As you can now see, the FBI is not building a case on the type of bomb used. The truck blew up, the building fell down; ergo the truck bomb knocked the building down. Agent Adams was familiar with every piece of tabulated evidence. He found or saw something; *Five knew who*.”

“Five people in the building?”

Impatient now, his reply was sharp. “Obviously. But who? Adams found something in the FBI’s evidence room that pointed to five specific

people. He didn't recognise it at the time, but something, some outside piece of information triggered the connection in Adams' mind."

"Didn't Brant just tell you that Adam's computer had been sterilised? Which means any other evidence would also have been cleaned up by now."

"The defence attorneys have seen the full catalogue of evidence, including photographs. It was Adams' job to crosscheck everything so that nothing could be excluded by the defence. You should know that, Spinner. The same rigid rules applied to the autopsies."

Eyes narrowing, she said, "Which means that everything in the evidence room would have to remain untouched, otherwise the Consortium would draw attention to whatever went missing."

"So we're back to his computer."

"Which has nothing on it. So you need victimologies—and I'm one of the victims," she said, suddenly understanding. Downing the last of her coffee, she added, "Okay, Doug's files are also on the server."

He looked around. He wanted access to these files, preferably via a public Internet café, but there was nothing here.

"I don't have the codes," she said. "It'll have to wait until we get back."

Pushing back his chair, he stood.

"McCabe, sometimes tools need maintenance." She stood and grabbed his hand. Despite himself, he didn't pull away. Spinner had pieced together information and come up with conclusions that had eluded others. That she did not yet see the entire picture was mostly because he had not shown her sufficient pieces. All right, she was useful; he'd let her tag along.

Picking up her bag, she added, "When we get back, I want to see the evidence—"

“You’ll never be allowed access to the evidence room.” He placed a guiding hand on her back as they walked between the tables and past the gift shop.

“I want access,” she added impatiently, turning her head briefly to scowl at him, “to see every affidavit, testimonials, engineers’ reports, everything *you* have that supports your claim that McVeigh did not act alone.”

-Chapter 24-

Mathew Island

Dispersal: Plus 5 days

Nate spent the morning setting up drips and dispensing medication to those who remained in the clinic, but the blue plastic suit and HEPA mask he now wore only deepened the villagers' perception of him as an outsider. He spent the rest of the day going from hut to hut, distributing medication where he could and begging those who were not yet ill to come to the *nakamal* for treatment. Few would even talk to him.

Packs of skinny dogs trailed him everywhere. Tails curling between their legs, they whined and yelped skittishly. The animals normally lived off whatever meal scraps they could salvage, but with no one eating the pickings were slim. A large number of pigs were also wandering around. The black, razorback boars were normally hand fed cooked food so that their tusks would grow into a full circle; a sign of wealth for the owners. The animals had escaped by knocking over fence posts worked loose in the saturated ground. They looked up from snuffling through rotting garbage only long enough to establish that Nate had not come to feed them.

From inside a large hut at the edge of the village, Nate heard dogs growling and pigs grunting. He went inside—then ran back out, ripping his mask off as he went. Falling to his knees in the damped ground outside, he threw up.

Nettie, the young ni-Vanuatu girl who had been such an enthusiastic assistant at the clinic, had been heavily pregnant. The baby, covered in pustules, had spontaneously aborted, along with most of Nettie's blood and the contents of her bowels. But that wasn't what had made Nate ill.

The children that Nettie and Emily had been tending were all dead, and the animals were feeding on the grisly remains.

Closing his eyes, Nate sat on the ground for a long time, letting the incessant rain saturate him. It was only when he realised that his rubber gumboots were filling with water from the inside that he rose on shaky feet and climbed into the Land Rover. He wanted to give into tears of despair, but he couldn't afford that, not now. He had to get back to the clinic. Judi still needed him.

Based on what he'd seen in the huts, more than half the population of the island was dead, and the remainder symptomatic. He parked the Land Rover under the shed that separated the cottage from the clinic, stepped out into the thick, gooey slop and grimaced. Mud and more mud, the stuff was driving him crazy. Leaving his boots on, he entered the cottage. Once Judi got better he would burn most of the contents of the cottage, including the mats, and douse the rest in bleach.

"Hey, Judi, how's it..." Nate stood at the door for a moment before pulling up a chair, sitting by her bed, and taking her grossly swollen hand in his gloved one. Sometime during the three hours that he'd been gone, Judi had suffered a massive vaginal haemorrhage and bled out.

Too physically and emotionally exhausted to cry, he sat with her for a long time. He shouldn't have left her alone, but she'd urged him to go to Nettie and Emily. At least he didn't have to lie about what he'd found.

A massive burst of lightning hit nearby. It must have triggered something inside of him, because Nate finally curled his lip into his mouth and sobbed. Judi Holloway had dedicated her life to helping communities in third world countries because, like him, she knew it made a difference.

Abruptly standing, Nate picked up the chair and smashed it into the machine by her bed. It was a hundred thousand dollar unit to monitor blood pressure and heart rate. For that much money he could have built

fifty water tanks in fifty villages to collect clean, fresh rainwater. Or had thirty septic tanks installed and funded an education programme through community theatre groups, or a follow-up vaccination programme against Hepatitis B. Grass-roots solutions that didn't stomp all over their culture, but helped prevent disease and improve their quality of life. He could overlook the death of one or even a dozen individuals, not because he lacked compassion, but because he took a longer, broader perspective. Mathew Island had been a spectacular success in community health care. And for what?

The unit crashed to the floor, and his anger instantly evaporated. Everything, machinery, Judi's body, the clinic and the cottage, the entire village, all of it had to be torched, but it was raining too hard. Meanwhile, he had to protect himself.

Picking up Judi's corpse, lighter now that most of her fluids had gone, he carried it from the cottage and into the clinic. Dogs were milling around outside, lapping at the darker patches on the wet ground. He locked the body in a storage cupboard, returned to the cottage, and dragged her mattress and bedding out through the window. Then he mopped the floor and walls and ceiling with bleach. Afterwards, he stood under the outdoor disinfectant shower until the bucket ran empty. Finally, he went to the hot springs, removed the plastic suit, HEPA mask and his scrubs, stepped into the steaming waters—and rapidly withdrew his foot. The muddy water was near boiling.

He glanced at his arms. The warm rain, speckled with ash from the volcano, landed in heavy grey blotches on his skin. Filthy, stinking, sweating even in the goddamned rain, up to his knees in *fucking* mud, all he wanted to do was get clean and dry for five minutes! Fine! He snatched up his things, went back to the cottage, tossed everything into the bleach tub, then, still naked, he walked down to the bay where the launch was anchored. The hot springs bubbled out onto the beach.

Using the warm sand to scrub off the filth, he went for a swim. On the way back to shore, he stopped at the launch, grabbed a plastic cover, and used it as an umbrella on the walk to the cottage. The island now seemed deserted of all life, except for the animals, which so far, appeared unaffected by the virus.

There was canned food in the larder, and more cookies. Opting for baked beans, he opened the tin, collected a spoon from the drawer and then sat down in front of Warner's laptop. It took him almost three hours to detail his clinical assessment of the situation, the treatments he'd tried, time lines, all nice and neat in little black scrawls across the computer screen. The upshot, he said in his email, was that nothing appeared to hinder the progress of the disease. The index case, Tom Kaleo had died thirty-six hours after the first symptoms. Judi Holloway had died approximately thirty-seven hours after the onset of symptoms. Regardless of treatment, a similar time line, plus or minus two hours, applied to every victim he'd tracked.

The emails waiting for him gave him some hope. Mike Warner and Katie Wood remained asymptomatic, although nobody had yet located Gary Teocle, the chopper pilot, or checked the Aneityum Island villagers. The team from USAMRIID was in New Zealand and expected to be in Vila by morning, and Mathew Island after lunch. Nate also checked news bulletins from the now quarantined Port Vila. The number of deaths from haemorrhagic dengue was climbing, some passengers on the flight to LA now showed symptoms, others in Hong Kong, Sydney and a dozen other cities were also being monitored as they displayed the early, flu-like symptoms. It seemed the disease was contained; it would not spread into the community at large.

Near midnight, he shut down the generator. Despite the copious amounts of bleach he'd spread around the cottage, he could sense the virus lurking in the shadows, waiting for him to go to sleep so it could

climb into his nose and into his lungs and... He shook off the imagery but left the thin plastic suit on while he lay on the bed. Despite the heat of the tropical night, the suit provided a sense of security, like a child pulling the blankets over his head to hide from the bogeyman.

Dreams taunted him. Babies born with the skin ripped from them as they squeezed out of pustule-covered vaginas. Dogs with festering sores roaming the clinic, lapping up the blood and half-digested entrails from the floor.

Abruptly waking, he sat up from the bed with a gasp, and brought his glove-covered hand to his face to wipe away the sweat—but he hit the HEPA mask instead. The dreams weren't nightmares; he could hear the dogs nearby. They had set up an almighty howling.

Then abruptly, they stopped.

The village, the entire island, had gone terrifyingly quiet. The rain had stopped. The air was as still as the lifeless corpses in the clinic, and the dark presence of the pathogen was so palpable that terror grabbed and shook him. And shook him and shook him and *kept* shaking him. The whole *world* was shaking! And with it, an unearthly screeching noise shattered the silence.

Nate was knocked from his bed with such force that for one horrible moment, he thought that the volcano had erupted. The floor buckled. Shattering glass and cracking timbers flooded the air with yet more noise. He'd been through plenty of earthquakes; he'd been born in a country where they were as common as rainstorms. Vanuatu averaged five every day, the vast majority of which went unnoticed. But this! An enraged monster seemed to have gripped the island and was lashing it around like a rabid dog. Unaware that he was screaming, Nate slid across the bucking floor and fell into the wall.

The earthquake that hit Mathew Island at 0128hrs on Sunday, December Fifteen, continued for a full forty seconds. Seismographs around the world would measure it as 7.2 on the old Richter scale—a city-levelling quake. Mathew Island had no cities, just thatched huts that weathered the frequent grumbings of the earth with little more than a few displaced leaves. The only significant damage was to more permanent, concrete structures—like the clinic and cottage.

Finally, the quake stopped. A different kind of quiet settled over the island. Nate held his breath until an oddly reassuring grumble came from the direction of the volcano. Then he felt around for the Coleman lantern that he'd banged into on his way across the floor. Snatching it up, he primed the light and pressed the trigger. The tiny flame was worse than useless, limiting his vision to a flickering bubble of dust-filled haze. Still, he could now see his way to the bedroom door.

The living room was gone. Roof beams had collapsed, smashing the table where Warner's laptop had been. His only contact with the outside world now lay beneath the rubble. An aftershock hit, and the remaining section of the ceiling fell inwards. Raising his arm reflexively, Nate crouched under a fallen beam, then crawled through the debris to where the door stood buckled and splintered. He kicked it aside and went out into the star-filled night. *Thank Christ for small mercies.* The rain had finally stopped.

In the light of the volcano, the clinic looked to have weathered the quake marginally better. The corrugated iron roof had buckled, and the cement-rendered walls had cracked wide open. The louver windows had compressed and shattered, spraying shard of glass in every direction. But if the lack of sounds coming from the clinic was any indication, there was no one left alive to worry about.

Overcome with exhaustion, Nate sat down on the warm, soggy ground. He was tired, deathly tired. Tired of being hopelessly terrified,

tired of his impotence in the face of a microbial monster, tired of being slimy with sweat and rain and mire. Just...tired.

Another aftershock hit. The warm sludge jiggled. Through his gloved hand it felt soft, inviting, like a comforting blanket. He was tempted to lie down and sleep. Instead, he stood and staggered to the Land Rover, climbed inside, backed the vehicle out of the rickety shed, now leaning at a precarious angle, turned off the ignition and promptly fell into a—thankfully dreamless—sleep. If he was lucid enough to care about anything, it was that he didn't care if he never woke up.

-Chapter 25-

Norfolk Island

Dispersal: Plus 6 days

“Welcome to Australia.” Jordan walked down the boarding steps of the aircraft. “At least we’re half-way there.”

The runway was set in the middle of a rural landscape dotted by large stands of spindly trees, aptly named Norfolk Island Pines.

Susan’s look of exasperation softened. Back in New Zealand, Jordan had suggested that the response team meet the USS *California* at Norfolk Island. Geographically closer to Mathew Island than either Noumea or Port Vila, Norfolk was inhabited by the descendants of Fletcher Christian and his band of mutineers. Genetically predisposed to a suspicion of all authority, the Islanders were nevertheless Australians living on Australian territory. The sudden, unexplained arrival of the *California*, followed soon after by a charter flight from New Zealand, had the small community buzzing, and more than a little wary. It was no secret that Vanuatu was isolated because of an Ebola-type outbreak.

The current plan was to depart Norfolk Island for the twelve-mile territorial limit around Mathew Island, where the ship would wait until the diplomatic standoff was resolved. However the situation was changing by the hour. The condition of the nine United passengers had deteriorated rapidly, and the organism responsible was definitely not dengue. Assistant Director Reynold had been whisked off to the White House to brief the President. The French and Vanuatu governments were fast running out of excuses for declaring Mathew Island off-limits.

Once aboard the *California*, heading northwest at flank speed, communications techs set up a secure satellite video link to Washington,

DC. Susan called Brant for the latest update, including the status of Warner and Wood.

“They remain asymptomatic,” Brant replied.

“Particles could have been in their clothing, hair, anything, and been sucked into the aircraft’s air conditioning system,” said Susan.

“Yet they avoided infection.” Jordan didn’t mean to sound suspicious, but it did seem kind of odd.

“Pretty much confirming we’re dealing with a weaponised virus—”

“Because the chimera was probably encapsulated to protect it against decimation during delivery by an explosive warhead.” Jordan smiled stiffly, conceding the point. “I suppose they could have carried particles without inhaling them.”

Susan shot her a sideways look. “You’ve been doing your homework. It also means the entire aircraft and everything on it could be carrying the active chimera virus. Reynold’s off the hook with the White House, and we have every reason to demand access to Mathew Island.”

“Full decontamination procedures of all quarantined aircraft are being implemented as we speak,” Brant replied. “But we still can’t enter New Caledonian/Vanuatu territorial waters.”

“What about Nathaniel Sturgess? Has he been in contact since the earthquake?”

On the video feed, Brant frowned. “No. We have no idea what happened to him. He could simply have lost the generators and the radiotelephone.”

“Or he could be dead.” McCabe voiced what Jordan conceded was probably on everyone’s mind. “Sturgess’ last report said that everyone on the island was symptomatic—except him.”

“Dammit!” Susan exploded. “We could have been on that island this time yesterday but for that dickless cretin in Vila, Gene Marshall.”

“He’s still insisting that their outbreak is dengue,” said Brant.
“According to him, the number of people being admitted to Vila Base Hospital is still climbing, but their fatalities are what you’d expect from dengue.”

“If he’s telling the truth,” McCabe said.

Jordan bit her lip. No government wanted to admit it had Ebola. Vanuatu still insisted it was completely AIDS-free, when that was patently not the case. “I can’t see how Marshall could hide it,” she said. “Call the local newspaper editor. It’s a small town. He’ll know what’s going on in terms of symptoms and fatalities.”

“Already have,” Brant replied. “At this time we’re running with the theory that Port Vila escaped being hit, although we’re not ruling out the possibility that the dengue is masking it.” He looked off-screen, then added, “Major, I have Jake Arnold from the CDC on another line to talk to you.”

There was no image, but Jordan could hear someone asking if he could be heard.

“Yeah, Jake,” Susan replied. “What’s happening?”

“You tell me,” came the aggrieved reply. “You promised to keep me in the loop.”

“Hey, you got first crack at the samples from the United passengers.”

“You only sent them because you guys no longer have the facilities.”

Susan pulled a sour face. Jordan could guess why. As a result of fiscal cutbacks dictated by a Republican dominated Congress, USAMRIID had been downsized and no longer had Level 4 biohazard facilities.

“Stop sucking on a lemon, Jake. If it weren’t for President Clinton the CDC would be in the same mess. How long before you can give us some answers?”

A theatrical sigh cut through the static fizz. “I’ll need samples of the original particles, and blood samples from the presumed index case, Tom Kaleo.”

“Jake, we need to know what you have, *now*.”

“Gimme a break, Susan! You know this could take days, more ‘n likely weeks to run to ground. And, if your paranoia pays off, upwards of three months before we manage a genetic assay of a hybrid virus. The good news,” Arnold added, “is that I’ve talked to the guys at the Pasteur Institute.”

French virologists and epidemiologists had watched in dismay when their government ignored their warnings and allowed AIDS to propagate unchecked. Their scientists were far more jittery about potential pandemics than their bureaucratic masters, particularly in light of Kikwit.

“And?” Susan replied impatiently.

“And whatever the hell this thing is, it’s shredded the red blood cells. They’ve eyeballed it and are preparing to take electron photos this afternoon. They told me it wasn’t hard to find. The samples were almost pure viral mush. First glance, it looks like smallpox, but more complex. They’re guessing it’s some sort of mutated haemorrhagic *Variola*, although there’s no way they’re going to publicly state that. Hell, rumours that it’s Ebola are bad enough, but smallpox? Nuh-uh. Besides, you and I know better, right?”

“You and I also know better than to express that *opinion* to anyone. Don’t we, Jake?”

“I’m insulted.”

“I’m serious.”

“If the French are right, if *we’re* right, it won’t take long for the world to know, Susan. Once they analyze the genetic sequence—”

“Which, as you said, could take months. And meantime, the French government may have something to say about what information is given out. Jake—”

“I’m still insulted that you thought you’d have to ask,” he replied in a hurt tone. “And yeah, okay, I’m jealous. You didn’t invite me to your little party.”

“You’d sooner be in front of an electron microscope.”

Jordan heard his snort. “All right,” he replied. “I’ll let you know as soon as we see anything. And I’ll send you a copy of the photos as they come in. Just...keep me informed.”

“Will do,” Susan replied.

Brant was about to sever his connection to the *California*, when he held up his hand. “Wait. Wilson’s hooking up a satellite feed from LA. You still got visuals there?”

Aboard the *California*, the naval technician nodded and turned to another screen. It spluttered for a moment then a low-quality pixilated image appeared. It was not, as Jordan had expected, the DIA agent, but the rugged features of a middle-aged, bearded, heavyset man standing in what looked like a sterile containment ward.

From somewhere off screen, Wilson introduced Michael Warner, adding, “Dr Warner has been in contact with his office at the University of Seattle. His team there are receiving seismic data from Vanuatu. We’ve set up a satellite link so that he can monitor the situation on Mathew Island.”

“How are you doing, Dr Warner?” Susan enquired politely.

“Less nervous with every passing hour. You’re on your way to Mathew?”

“Yes, sir. How bad was the earthquake?”

Warner’s tanned face darkened. “They’re used to quakes. That’s not the problem. It’s the type of quake that worries me.” The urgency in his

voice was unmistakable. "Mathew is huge volcano, most of which is underwater. When it blew up a thousand years back it ejected a hundred cubic kilometres of earth into the atmosphere, leaving behind a caldera twenty miles in diameter. That's the big basin now sitting in the middle of the island. The explosion also cracked the island in two."

"Are you saying it might erupt again?" Susan's eyes widened.

"It's erupting all the time," Warner replied, his image on the screen periodically fracturing and freezing. "Mathew has two magma chambers. The largest is like a massive pressure cooker under tremendous pressure. It feeds into a smaller chamber above it, which in turn acts like a release valve."

Reaching off-screen, he lifted a piece of paper and held it up close to the camera lens. It was a geological map. Somewhat blurred, Jordan could nevertheless see what the vulcanologist was getting at.

"Of the eight big eruptions in the last two hundred years," Warner explained, "all have been from the small chamber. Generally what happens is that it forces the lava lake on the mountain to bubble over. Now, if that's blocked, lava either eventually shoots out like a champagne cork in what we call a Plinian eruption—like Vesuvius—or if it stays blocked, the fault splits open instead." He pointed to a series of pockmarks that stretched in a rough line across the island. "These are maars, old vents not much bigger than tennis courts, that sit directly above the fault. When they erupt, they toss out fountains of lava. Over here—" he pointed to the north-eastern tip of the island. "Are lava tunnels. The villagers have traditionally used them to escape eruptions."

Warner lowered the map and then replaced it with a photograph. "Last year, the data stopped transmitting because of a large quake. I now know that this quake caused the main magma chamber to be cut off from the smaller one." He didn't have to point out the features. A yellow and orange blob dominated the centre of a craggy cinder cone.

“This is the lava lake a week ago. The level has dropped, which fooled me into thinking the activity was down. In fact, it’s because the big magma chamber, the pressure cooker itself, has no way to vent.

“The night before we left Mathew, we had a massive rainstorm—almost eight inches,” he continued. “I was too damned busy trying to salvage what I could before the helicopter arrived, so I didn’t see it.” He moved the photograph away. Despite the jerky image, his frustration was clear. “The hot springs weren’t overflowing onto the runway. They were new mud pools breaking out!”

“And all of this means...?” Susan wanted to know.

Jordan had lived in Vanuatu long enough to have already guessed the answer. “When you analyze the data over the past twelve months,” Warner replied, “integrate the epicentres of the magma quakes and factor in the current data, it adds up to one thing. The pressure’s been turned up, and the release valve has shut down. Mathew Island isn’t going to simply erupt. It’s going to blow itself into oblivion.”

-Chapter 26-

Mathew Island

Dispersal: Plus 7 days

Nate sat inside the clinic's small office, finishing his report. His last patient, a boy of eight or nine whom he'd been treating with a desperate and bizarre cocktail of drugs, had just died. At first the lad had appeared to respond, but the dosages that Nate had administered to delay the rampant destruction caused by the virus had proved too much for the boy's young heart. As far as Nate could tell, he'd been the last living Mathew Islander.

The report detailed every step that Nate had taken. He also included observations and recommendations for alternative medication and procedures that he would have taken if there'd been anyone left. It was all very thorough, very clinical, very much what his superiors had come to expect from him. Writing it had also provided an intellectual refuge from the appalling human tragedy that surrounded him. Now that the report was complete, all that remained was bone-numbing despair. It didn't help that the aftershocks from the earthquake had not let up all day. If anything, they seemed to grow more frequent. They also seemed sharper, jerkier, not the long grinding movements of normal earthquakes.

Nate was right in thinking the tremors were noticeably different from the motion created by faults slipping and sliding past one another. If Michael Warner had been on the island, he would have told everyone to pack their bags and flee, even without first looking at his data. The quakes that shook Mathew Island were the result of extreme pressure in the secondary magma chamber.

With nothing more constructive to do, Nate pulled out his private journal and opened it to the last entry, made late the previous afternoon.

1750hrs 17 December 1995

‘The Americans did not arrive. Nor has the patrol boat come to arrest me. I haven’t seen anyone alive in the village all day. The only living things were pigs and packs of dogs, which have become increasingly aggressive, snarling as I walk by. There was little rain today. Tomorrow morning I intend to take every gallon of flammable fuel I can find and burn every structure to the ground. I’ll set up a tent to live in; at least I can keep it relatively dry, and the constant earthquakes won’t trouble me.’

He dismally contemplated the page. Force of habit had made him open the journal. Force of habit was all the structure that remained in the insanity of his world. He picked up his pen and began a new entry.

0300hrs Monday 18 December 1995

‘I’d forgotten that yesterday was Sunday. Christian religion played little if any part in the weekly gathering of the villagers; it was just an excuse to dress up and go singing.

‘The village is quiet. Not a peaceful quiet, but one of infinite loneliness, infinite...emptiness. *Taedium vitae*, it is the hour of the wolf, come to take away the souls of the dead—and the damned—for am I not damned?

‘A perpetual sickly, orange haze shrouds everything; the light from Hell’s gateway is just a short distance away. Here at its portals, rivers of blood filled with a billion silent demons lie in wait for me. I need only remove my mask to let them in.’

Nate turned to consider the obscene patterns of bloody rainwater and mud that covered the clinic's floor. In the dim light, the liquid pulsed and glowed with an oily, even attractive luminescence.

'See how they beckon, as the cleansing, cold fire beckons?' he wrote. 'Inviting me, insisting I join the others in a macabre dance of death. Let us in, they call, as the warm blood runs along the floor and pools at my feet.

'I am not a religious man and therefore I cannot take solace in a Greater Purpose. Nor can I blame an Old Testament God, or cry out, demanding why He spared me alone to bear witness to His judgment. How can I not believe in God when I have come face to face with Evil? Because this disease was spawned not from any fallen angel, any God of the underworld, but mortal man. We do not need to create metaphysical evils when greater ones are born of flesh and blood.

'Ninety nine point eight percent of all mammals that walked this planet are now extinct. In our hubris, humanity views itself the penultimate exception, yet our monoculture, so ecologists say, virtually assures a fate preordained by evolution. We build ships hoping to reach other worlds, other life-forms, while secretly gorging on the darker fruits of knowledge, birthing Promethean monsters destined to destroy us long before our star consumes us in its inevitable conflagration.

'I have reached for my mask a dozen times since my last patient died, knowing that the disease, having passed through human hosts, has only grown stronger. It may even have fed on the genes of other viruses, building itself into something so virulent that death might accept me in hours, not days. But to my shame I cling to life.

'In my cowardice, I fear learning that this grotesque insanity has reached beyond my singular hell. Why did the helicopters and patrol boat not come? Is it because this outbreak, this...attack was not an isolated event? Have nations retaliated and unleashed the final act of

suicide; a nuclear war? I'm not sorry the earthquake severed my contact with the outside world. While I remain isolated, uncommunicative, I can cling to the delusion that the world I left just days ago remains intact, blissfully unaware that sentience is an evolutionary failure.'

-Chapter 27-

Mathew Island, 0410hrs December 18

A bone-jangling earthquake shook Nate from the chair and knocked him onto the clinic floor. He cried out in revulsion at the feel of something warm and gooey enveloping him. With the windows broken, fresh rainfall had turned the floor into a thick bouillon of mud and blood, human waste and sloughed skin.

Nate retained the presence of mind to stand slowly, trying to find his balance while the clinic swayed like a ship at sea. Then the Coleman light rolled off the edge of the table and smashed to the ground. The quake ended and darkness fell.

Absolute darkness. Desperate, Nate looked around. The glow from the volcano normally allowed him to see something—a window frame, *anything* as a point of reference. But it had vanished. He'd never experienced such a complete absence of light. The only sound he could hear was his pounding heart and rapid breathing through the HEPA mask. His mouth went dry, and adrenaline pumped through his arteries.

He *had* to calm down! Carefully reaching out to his desk, Nate eased his hand across the drawers, dreading the electrical sensation of glass slivers slicing through his glove. In the second drawer he found his camera. Fingers trembling, he pulled it from its leather case and depressed the shutter. Nothing! Swallowing back nausea, he felt for the switch, turned the camera on, then depressed the shutter button again. The flash fired at around one ten thousandth of a second but it was enough to give him an idea where things were. He depressed it again and again, lighting his way across the floor until he reached the cabinet that stocked spare flashlights.

A grinding tremor rocked the clinic. He couldn't rid himself of the feeling that the quakes weren't normal. What was it about that valley in Crete? Harmonic resonance?

Nate had no way of knowing that the quakes were indeed harmonic tremors; continuous releases of seismic energy as magma in the larger of the two chambers moved about with increasing momentum.

Turning on a large, powerful flashlight, he looked around. The clinic's internal walls had collapsed in the first quake. The cracks in the external walls had now become wide gaps, and the ceiling sagged. The next decent shake would bring the whole thing down. It was time to leave, for good.

Earlier that evening, he'd packed the Land Rover with cases of tinned food and bottled water. All of his notes and journals now went into a double-sealed plastic bag inside his backpack. He tossed in an extra bottle of water along with another flashlight, some batteries, a First Aid kit, and a packet of wax matches. Last, he transferred the precious blood and tissue samples from the battery-driven fridge to a cooler box. Slinging the straps of the backpack over his shoulder, he held the torch in one hand and the cooler in the other, and carefully made his way across the broken glass to the back door. Outside, he looked in the direction of the volcano.

Even surrounded by death, the volcano had given the island a semblance of life. Now it, too, was lifeless; a black void, impossible to distinguish against an equally black night sky. Had the vent collapsed during the earthquake, or was the earthquake the result of the collapse? Either way, how long did he have until the pressure from the magma chamber forced a new vent open? Weeks? Months? And how violent would it be? He knew enough to know that an eruption was not imminent. It would take time for the pressure to build, but harmonic

goddamned resonance or not, his instincts were screaming at him to flee.

Another long, shallow quake rumbled through the ground. When it had passed he looked down at the mud. Although the rain had stopped, the ground seemed to dance upwards, not boiling, but it moved as if something were shaking it from beneath. He stepped down onto the ground, and was surprised by how hot it was.

“Oh God!” Nate’s skin crawled when he realised what had been bothering him. In his state of mind, he had thought the floor of the clinic was warm because of the blood, but of course that was impossible. Shining the torch in a wide arc across the compound, he now saw that the remains of the cottage had crumpled into a massive pool of bubbling sludge. Terrified, his breath coming in gasps, he nearly swooned when he remembered that Warner had always joked about the idiot who’d built the clinic directly over the fault line. That was why the springs had become unbearably hot these past days. The volcano wasn’t going to erupt, the *fault* line was splitting open—and he was standing directly on top of it!

With gut-wrenching clarity, he recalled how the lava lake had lashed out at the walls of the volcano’s throat. There was nothing slow and ponderous about it, like all those National Geographic programmes on Hawaii led you to believe.

Panting now, his breathing amplified through the filter of the mask, Nate ran, slip sliding across the hot wet ground, to the Land Rover. He risked a glance at the tires and thanked God that they seemed unaffected by the heat. “Fucking volcanoes,” he muttered to himself over and over. “I *hate fucking volcanoes!*” He was shaking and his legs felt rubbery as he climbed in. It was the sheer, unadulterated primal terror at the thought of being cooked alive.

The damned protective suit was getting in his way and he couldn't breathe through the *fucking* HEPA mask. "Jesus, God, what did I do to deserve this? Sacrificial lamb to Vulcan or a hideous death by viral nightmare. Take your pick!"

The lava tunnels that the villagers had historically used to escape eruptions were on the far side of the island. The road, now a river of jiggling gunk, only went half way. After that it was a good seven hours' walk. Despite his terror, intellectually Nate knew that he probably had plenty of time to make the trek. He'd drive down to the village first. If there was anyone left alive, they might have a better idea what to expect.

The sound of gasping served to remind him that he was losing it. He had to do this carefully, methodically. The last thing he could afford was to let the Land Rover get bogged.

During the drive, Nate kept glancing up at the volcano. Its charcoal silhouette was just visible in the pre-dawn light. He turned the corner—and swung the Land Rover into a squelching skid, barely colliding with a huge banyan tree that came crashing down across the road.

The mask stopped him from rubbing the sweat off his face. Another quake hit, the largest so far. He instinctively ducked, but there were no more large trees around. When the juddering had passed, he looked up. Purple lightning crackled around the volcano. The clouds had taken on an eerie greenish hue, and he could have sworn he saw something like a shadowy phantasm move around the peak. Then an unearthly sound filled the cabin of the Land Rover. It was as if the entire planet had turned into a huge, ringing bell. The sound grew louder and Nate covered his ears. The earth gave one final jerk and then the world shattered.

McCabe stood with his hands in the pockets of his jeans and stared over the portside gunwale of the *California* to Mathew Island. Or at least, where the radar said the island was. The night was so black that he couldn't see a thing.

Something—a long shudder followed by what sounded like a change in pitch in the *California's* engines—had woken him minutes earlier, and he'd gone to the designated situation room to find out the latest.

The warship had been running at flank speed with the south-easterly swell on their aft starboard. It had made for a relatively comfortable trip—in contrast to the storm over DC. The turf war to end them all had broken out in Washington.

The Attorney General, who had been close to decapitating Reynold and Brant, now insisted that the FBI had to remain in control of the investigation. This was based on the fact that only a military aircraft would have had the ability to deliver a BW to such a remote location. That implied military involvement with the Consortium. The Pentagon was adamant that such an accusation, which amounted to treason, was utterly baseless, and that the military was to be in charge of all bioterrorist cleanup operations. Clearly, Mathew Island was USAMRIID's responsibility. Any FBI investigation would have to wait until the decontamination was complete. The State Department had started talking again, and issued their advisory that, since the New Caledonian and Vanuatu governments had refused permission for the *California* to enter their joint territorial waters, the most prudent course of action was to abandon the island to the impending eruption, neatly resolving the entire mess. After all, it was unlikely anyone was still alive.

Besieged with objections from the DIA, who wanted samples of the virus, the Attorney General's Department declared that they wanted the scene investigated by their people. The CIA had belatedly joined the fray on the basis that the bioweapon had likely been developed and

distributed by foreign agents working in collaboration with American citizens, including defence personnel. Finally, the White House had stepped into the argument.

As Mathew Island was on the highest alert, declared the President, the population should be evacuated post-haste. The nearest vessel capable of undertaking this was the USS *California*. Pre-empting objections from the New Caledonian and Vanuatu governments, the White House Press Secretary released a statement in conjunction with the University of Seattle, warning of the imminent eruption. The press release went on to state that the *California* could evacuate the entire island by midday.

The French, via the New Caledonian government, promptly refuted the warning, and declared that the Americans were engaging in some as yet to be understood plan to destabilize the entire region, first by this ludicrous claim of an Ebola outbreak, and now bizarre predictions about the volcano. If Mathew Islanders were in danger, they would be evacuated via ships sent from New Caledonia, *merci beaucoup*.

Unfortunately for the French government, ORSTOM, the French geophysical research organization, had simultaneously released their own warning regarding the status of Mathew volcano. Further, ORSTOM issued dire predictions that tsunamis potentially generated by such an eruption could impact multiple Pacific Island states, including New Zealand and Australia. The earthquake had severed communications with Mathew Island. It was therefore imperative that an operation to evacuate islanders be implemented immediately. At dawn a reconnaissance aircraft carrying volcanologists would leave Port Vila and fly over the island. Meanwhile, the *California* should make every effort to assist.

The implications were clear. If even one villager died because the French New Caledonian government rejected the humanitarian aid that

was waiting on Mathew Island's proverbial doorstep, the world would demand to know why. Paris had replied that it would confer with the Vanuatu government and make a decision following the reconnaissance flight.

"We'll be leaving in fifteen minutes."

McCabe flexed his shoulder muscles and turned around. Susan was standing behind him with two steaming mugs and a cautious smile. Nodding his thanks, he accepted the coffee. He was under no illusions about what they were likely to find on Mathew. Nate Sturgess probably was dead, along with everyone else. And yet there existed a remote chance that the epidemiologist was still alive. Either way, the *California's* helicopter could take in a team to recover whatever biological samples they needed, and evacuate Sturgess before the French and Vanuatu governments were any the wiser.

Taking a sip, he asked, "Any chance of the French detecting us?"

"They don't have access to satellite imagery capable of making out camouflaged helicopters, and the radar operators will maintain a constant watch for the inbound ORSTOM flight. We don't expect their aircraft to leave Vila until after dawn, which means we have at least two and a half hours to collect Sturgess and the necessary samples. Not ideal, I know, but we're lucky the President intervened. Captain Rolston said he'd maintain the ship's position in international waters, which gives us the tactical and moral high ground."

Susan shot him a hesitant look, no doubt waiting for a snide remark about tactics and morals. When he said nothing she added, "Did you feel that earthquake, earlier?"

"I thought we'd just changed course."

"I've just gotten off the satellite phone to Warner. Seems that was the biggest quake yet." She turned around when Captain Rolston joined them.

“Morning, Major, Agent McCabe.”

Overhead a large flock of terns squawked a greeting and continued heading south. McCabe raised his cup in the direction of the dark blob that was now becoming discernible on the horizon. The sky was beginning to lighten, but the clouds over the island had an oddly verdant hue. “Shouldn’t the sky over the volcano be glowing or something?” He noticed two more people coming out on deck. One of them, Spinner, was rubbing her arms in the chill morning air.

“It was glowing,” Rolston replied, squinting over McCabe’s shoulder. “Lit up the sky and our radar like a damned lighthouse until that quake a few minutes ago.”

“Never knew you could feel a quake through a ship,” McCabe said, leaning with his back against the gunwale.

Rolston nodded a greeting to the new arrivals. “Generally, you can’t. I’d like to have a little more distance between us before it blows, so once you leave with the helo, I’ll be repositioning the ship twenty-five nautical miles due south. The chopper can fly faster than we can sail—”

A brilliant orange glow suddenly illuminated the deck and superstructure. McCabe spun around to look.

Rolston swore, “Jesus, too late. There she blows!”

-Chapter 28-

Mathew Island, December 18

Nate sat transfixed by the awful, magnificent sight. A thick column of incandescent lava ripped out of the volcano's throat, tore through the low clouds and pushed high into the atmosphere. He craned his neck to follow the rising column of molten earth until he could no longer see its top through the windscreen of the Land Rover. Opening the door to get a better view, he could actually make out tens of thousands of individual globs of lava shooting into the sky, while bolts of lightning slashed at the peak.

If Nate had been a superstitious man, he would have sworn that some ancient, evil god had unleashed its almighty wrath upon the world. Mere forces of nature could not possibly have fermented such a tempest. But for the moment, at least, he didn't feel particularly threatened. The eruption was from the mountain in the centre of the island, not from the fault line. That meant he'd be okay.

Grains of dust began peppering him. Glancing into the deathly still village, Nate climbed back inside the Land Rover and turned the vehicle around. The crackling sounds on the roof of the Land Rover's cabin grew louder. Hot, marble-sized tephra was raining down on him—okay, that wasn't something that he'd considered might happen. Here and there he could see tiny gobs of fire hitting the ground, but he dared drive no faster. Then the fireballs turned into large glowing blobs that struck the earth with audible *thunks*. It was just a question of time before a piece of lava hit the Land Rover. So much for not feeling threatened.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, he was out of range of the fallout. He kept driving, trying to place as much distance as he could between himself

and the deadly rain. No way was he going to reach the lava tunnels. So what now?

He only realised he was driving back to the clinic when he turned the corner—and came face to face with a pillar of fire shooting directly from the ground where the clinic and cottage had once stood. Behind it was a second lava geyser. The heat blasting from them was almost as overwhelming as the deafening hissing. What was happening? Nothing that Mike Warner had told him made any sense! How could the island—the fault *and* the volcano—have erupted so violently without any warning?

Nate brought his hand to his face, once again trying to wipe his eyes. Screw it! Opening the Land Rover door, he pulled off the hood, ripped open the remainder of the plasticized suit—now torn in a dozen places—and turned to stare behind him. The earth groaned and shuddered. The centre of the road seemed to fold in on itself, then another geyser of fire shot out. There was no way back *or* forward!

Snatching up the cooler and backpack, Nate started running through the jungle in the only direction left to him, towards the beach. His one hope was to use the launch to get off this hellhole of an island.

Now that the hood and suit were gone, he wanted to pull off his HEPA mask, but the fine ash in the air could be as deadly as any gas. Some of the falling cinders felt like wasps, burning tiny pinpricks in his arms and neck. Thankfully, the big lava bombs, which he could feel thumping into the ground less than a mile away, were not landing in this area. Where did the fault line begin and end? Where would the last vent open? Jeez, he wished he'd paid more attention to the geological maps.

It wasn't until he reached the headland above the beach that it hit him. The natural U shaped harbour was an old vent, explaining why it dropped off into deep water so fast. That meant a vent would soon open...*right here!*

Nate glanced fearfully over his shoulder. Another vent had already opened up behind him—almost as if they were chasing him. Up on the volcano, tracks of lava slithered like serpents down the valleys. He turned and looked over the harbour. The sun had risen far enough so that he could see the path down to the launch. An eruption of this size would bring someone, *anyone* to the island. The ORSTOM team at least. They would see him and...*omigod!*

In the next cove beyond the harbour, an orange glow turned into an exploding ball of hissing steam. The ocean itself seemed to crackle and burn. Great gouts of white billowed up through air thick with grey ash. It sounded like a thousand boiling cauldrons. Nate wanted to scream and run—but behind him, another pillar of fire spewed out of the ground.

Unaware of the sharp rocks slicing his bare feet open, ignoring the pain of hot sparks on his skin, he ran down through the rocks, thankful now for the HEPA mask. It protected his eyes from the ash and stinging fumes, and his lungs from microscopic particles that would have suffocated him. Yelping in pain, he looked down to see a strange glowing fibre tattooing his arm. It was a filament of volcanic glass—Pele's Hair. God help him if one landed on his head because if the hairs on his arm were anything to go by, it would set his head alight.

The launch was anchored just out of reach. All he had to do was wade out and... Just in time, he saw dozens of white gobs washing up on the beach. Dead fish, cooked by the ocean. It was then that he finally noticed the intense heat beneath his bare, bloodied feet. Any moment now, a vent would open directly beneath him. Gingerly, he tested the water with the back of his hand, vaguely noting that his knuckles were raw and bloodied. The water was near boiling.

Nate dropped the big cooler and looked around. He needed a branch to hook the launch and pull it close to shore. A palm frond perhaps? He started up the beach when a huge blast of heat and sand struck him in

the face, and sent him staggering backwards. Behind the line of coconut trees, another lava geyser shot from the ground, tossing gigantic banyan trees aside like matchsticks. He was now surrounded by erupting vents. There was nowhere left to go.

A black shape burst out from the underbrush. It was a large razorback pig with its mane on fire. It ran full speed into the ocean—and squealed like a banshee when it got there. The animal tried to swim back out, slipping in the sand, desperately to escape. Its screaming agony was a horrendous forewarning of his own fate unless he acted.

The incoming tide had edged the launch closer; its stern was just a tantalizing metre beyond his reach. Nate tossed his backpack into the boat, then grabbed the cooler and gingerly pushed it out through the mass of dead fish. Normally it would bob around like a cork, but filled with samples and ice, it sat low and steady in the water. With the heat of a blast furnace and adrenaline-fed terror driving him, he took a running leap from the beach, onto the cooler and then into the launch.

He didn't entirely escape injury; the cooler had dipped and hot water had flowed onto his bare foot, but it was only a minor scald. His shoulder, however, was worse, badly bruised from hitting the boat's gunwale.

Oblivious to the pain, he ran forward to the mooring line and released it. The pig's all too human cries reached a fever pitch. Something—he assumed it was the animal—bumped into the side of the boat. Then he saw that it was the cooler. Hooking it with a gaff, he hauled it onboard. The fibreglass hull of the launch was hot. How did fibreglass cope with boiling water? The rain of cinders intensified. Running to the wheelhouse, he turned the key in the ignition. It spluttered.

No, no, no, *no*! It *always* started first go! The intake was probably clogged with one of the thousands of tiny pieces of pumice floating on the water. He snatched up a machete that they kept on board, ran aft

and cut the anchor line, and batted away at the exhaust intake, hoping to dislodge whatever was blocking it. Then he stumbled back and tried the engine again. This time, it started, and his legs almost buckled with relief as the boat shot forward and out of the harbour's boiling waters.

-Chapter 29-

Mathew Island, December 18

“The big magma chamber is expanding at an unprecedented rate, placing pressure on the smaller chamber and forcing it to rise. This minor eruption is the result.”

McCabe couldn't tell if the jumpy image of Mike Warner was due to the poor quality of the satellite feed, or because the volcanologist appeared so agitated—or excited.

“It doesn't alleviate the pressure from the big chamber, though, because as far as we can tell, the two aren't connected,” Warner continued. “I'm still receiving data from the airport sensor, but I can't guarantee for how long.”

“That,” said Spinner, looking in awe out through a porthole, “is a minor eruption?”

The *California* was still twelve nautical miles due south of Mathew Island—and no one wanted to get any closer. The crew were dressed in fire-resistant battle dress and ordered to be on the alert for falling cinders. Given the steady fifteen-knot wind from the southeast, Captain Rolston had assumed they would miss the worst of the volcanic fallout. But according to satellite images the ejecta had already reached an altitude of sixty thousand feet. It now obliterated two thirds of the sky. Although the wind currently provided them with an unhampered view of the island, Warner had warned them to expect some ash fallout.

It was, as one seaman put it, like a Hollywood special effects machine run amok. The volcano continued its spectacular fireworks, with discharging electricity generating a monumental display of lightning. Using a pair of binoculars, McCabe counted eight separate vents, some near the ocean, all sending fiery geysers into the air. And those, as

Warner pointed out, were just the ones they could see. Over the following hours dozens more would open up on the north side of the island and across the caldera, all the way to the east coast.

Through their satellite linkup, Warner reminded them, “When the main magma chamber blows, it’ll take most of the island—and the surrounding waters—with it. You don’t want to be anywhere within a hundred miles when that happens. Two hundred miles would be better, and in deep water to ride out any possible tsunami. Even from that distance you’ll still get a light show that beats the hell out of anything you ever saw over Baghdad. Now,” he added, “When are you gonna send a rescue party?”

Captain Rolston’s expression turned incredulous. “Sir?”

More agitated now, Warner barked, “Rescue party! It might look to you like the whole island is on fire, but the villagers will avoid the fault line and lava flows. Yeah, there’ll be fallout and lava bombs, but they’ll have made for the lava tunnels up north. Given the lack of warning and the prevailing wind it’ll be too risky to get there on foot, so they’ll most likely put to sea in canoes, make their way south, then circumnavigate the island. They’re not stupid; they’ve been living with that volcano a long time.”

Wilson apparently hadn’t told Warner that the chimera had nuked the village. Still staring at the island, McCabe tried not to remember the low hum of flies lifting in black clouds from piled bodies, the taste of blood and vomit, and the sickly odour of rotting flesh.

“You cannot stand by and do nothing!” Warner shouted. “You went there to offer aid. Now goddammit, get out there and rescue those people!”

“It’s not that simple, Dr Warner,” Susan said. “The French and Vanuatu governments—”

“Fuck them! Since when has the United States let a couple of pipsqueak bureaucrats interfere with humanitarian aid? No, don’t answer that. But what are you gonna tell the world when the news gets out that you sat by and let a hundred and fifty people—okay, maybe less because of this bug—but nevertheless the entire population of the island fry because the Froggies told you to back off?” Warner’s expression faltered. “Exactly how many people got sick?”

“We’re not certain,” Susan replied. “We lost communications after the earthquake.”

One of the technicians had set up a camera on deck, and the images were being transmitted to Warner. The vulcanologist now glanced off-screen, presumably at the video feed.

In an aside to Susan and Rolston, McCabe said, “Aside from recovering Sturgess, if anyone who’s been infected has survived—”

“Their blood will contain antibodies,” Susan finished. “Josh, you know as well as—better than—I that antibodies may not be sufficient to form the basis of a vaccine.”

Rolston looked at them. “Vaccine?”

Ignoring him, McCabe said, “Ninety percent of Ebola victims die without the vaccine. Fifty percent with it.” He knew the figures because his own blood had been harvested to treat Ebola. “Susan, if his chimera gets off the island, we’re gonna need every resource we have.”

“Major?” Rolston asked.

Her face screwed up. “He’s right. The antibodies of anyone who survived are going to be vital.”

“All right Dr Warner,” Captain Rolston said, turning back to the camera. “What approach would you recommend? And how long do you estimate before the main magma chamber erupts?”

“Forget the helicopter,” the vulcanologist replied. “It won’t last five seconds in the ash fall. I’d use covered launches. Fire-resistant ones,

not plywood or inflatables. You'll need breathing equipment and protective eyewear, and deck pumps to wash down the ash and cinder. Send the launches to the northwest side of the island, keeping well clear of the western bay. Nate and I dived on the submarine vent last week. If it hasn't already opened, it soon will. The village is halfway between that western headland and the airport, but you'll probably see the villagers in canoes long before you get that far."

"The clinic?" Spinner asked.

"If it's not history by now, it will be by the time you get there."

Warner's frown deepened. "It was built directly over the fault line, and Nate knew that. The village is better positioned but I don't think you'll find anyone has stayed behind. Nate knows how to operate the launch. It's been surveyed to carry sixteen passengers but in an emergency he could pack at least twenty-five, maybe thirty people on board. They'll likely be carrying a lot of pigs with them and will be loath to give them up, so be prepared for livestock. As to how long you've got..." Warner hesitated. "Anywhere from three or four days...to five minutes."

"Educated guess?" Rolston said.

"What's your best speed?"

"In these conditions, thirty knots."

"I'd wanna be leaving there in no less than five hours. But," Warner added with a crooked smile, "I was forty minutes out when we ran a betting pool on Mount Saint Helens. Make it four."

"All right, well see what we can do."

"If you can keep the live video feed going," Warner said, "I'll keep you updated on what I think will happen."

"Will do." Rolston turned and led the team out of the communication's cabin. "We've got four ship's boats," he explained, walking along the companionway and out on deck. "All of them are fibreglass but only one of them, the captain's gig, is enclosed. It could carry twenty-five at a

pinch but it's operated from the open deck above and between the forward and aft cabins, so somebody has to be outside to drive it. The others are open topped thirty-three foot long liberty launches. I recommend taking my gig and one of the liberty launches. We jury-rigged an aluminium shelter for the launch about a year back. I can have the men erect that in ten minutes, but that's it."

They might reach the island and find they had to evacuate seventy bed-ridden people on boats designed to carry half that number. McCabe doubted it, but he also knew they had to try. "I want to go with the shore party," he said.

Susan stopped and turned to him. "Why? Josh, you don't have anything to prove—"

"I'm going too," said Spinner. "I'm a medical doctor."

Turning her gaze to Spinner, Susan said, "You expect to find dozens of critically ill natives taking a Sunday drive in their canoes?"

"It's Monday," McCabe retorted.

"Sturgess is probably dead. Josh, you must know that."

"And if he's not?"

"If we can't locate him, we may have no choice but to leave him. Four hours there and back."

"Less if we stand here arguing about it," Spinner said.

Susan stared at McCabe for a few tense moments, then she said to Rolston, "Ten minutes it is, Captain. And...thank you."

"I suspect you'll be cursing me before this is over, Major," Rolston replied, and left to organise the boats.

Nate had no idea what direction to take. Hunter Island with its ugly black peak looked singularly uninviting, but the nearest inhabited island, Aneityum was hundreds of kilometres northwest. Even with a compass he wasn't certain he could navigate there. He had no charts; he wasn't

even sure of the exact direction. Should he head for the lava tunnels? But if he headed east he'd be pelted with more than ash and Pele's Hair, and it would only take one small lava bomb to hole the launch. His immediate need was to get out of range of the fallout, and that meant heading west, then south. The southern side of the island *had* to be better than this!

Driving through the miasma, he began to wonder which direction was west. The electrical storm, or maybe it was the volcano itself, was sending the compass haywire. The thick air was like a gingery London smog, although it didn't dampen the sound. Periodic explosions ripped through the sky as Mathew continued to unleash its fury. Without his mask, he would have long since succumbed, but even so, breathing was becoming progressively harder; the exceptionally fine filters were designed to keep out particles the size of viruses, not ash. How long did he have? How fast should he drive? He decided his biggest problem was lack of visibility—until the engine died.

It wasn't a cause for panic. The engine intakes were probably blocked with pumice. He was lucky that the boat had brought him this far. But then he checked the fuel gauge—and stared at it in dismay. They always kept the tanks full! Then he remembered that the last time they'd used the launch had been the trip to Hunter Island. He'd never had the chance to go back and refill the tanks.

Cursing himself, Nate went below and opened the hatch. He had not travelled through the islands without learning how to improvise—inside and outside the operating theatre. The launch carried a small outboard motor as a backup, and he could erect a mast in minutes. He and Mike had checked everything before their trip to Hunter; he would be all right.

Hoping it might reduce the clogging effect of the ash in his filter mask, Nate tied a thin rag across his face, then set to work. Ten minutes later he had jury-rigged a mosquito wire mesh around the outboard motor's

water inlet. Hopefully that would work to keep out the bulk of the pumice. He set the thing up on the stern transom, pumped the fuel valve and pulled the cord. The engine started on the second try, and the launch moved forward again, although at a painfully slow pace.

It was becoming almost impossible to breathe, so he took off the rag. There were two black circles where the cloth had covered the filter intakes. They were so thick with ash that it crumbled from the rag to the deck when he touched it. He re-tied the rag in a different position. It was an improvement, but he'd have to remember to do it every few minutes.

Now that the launch was moving and the breathing problem resolved, he turned his attention to the mast. It took a lot longer to set up, and he had the hell scared out of him half a dozen times as blobs of lava and tangles of Pele's Hair hit the launch. Two small holes in the hull he'd plugged with the stuffing from lifejackets. The bilge pumps would work without the engine—they were battery-driven—but he would wait until he really needed them. Meanwhile, his bigger concern was that the noise of the eruption seemed to be growing louder. Then the seas around him began to get choppy.

At first he thought he had sailed past the leeward western end of the island and was now exposed to the south-easterly swell of open ocean. But a blast of hot steam and an eerie cherry glow from *beneath* the dark water told him he had hugged the coastline too closely. An underwater vent was erupting just a few hundred metres away!

Abandoning the sail, Nate ran to the outboard tiller and turned the launch away from the sound, praying the bubbling outflow would help push him away rather than drag him toward the vent. If he could just get the sail up, hot air pushing against him had to help. As soon as he hoisted the jib, though, the glowing filaments that had burned through his shirt and singed his back in countless places set the nylon fabric alight.

God, how bloody stupid! He cursed himself over and over while he tossed bucket after bucket of salt water onto the blaze. If he couldn't get the fire out, all that remained was a four man rubberized life raft—which would withstand maybe sixty seconds of aerial bombardment.

Visibility worsened and the air grew thick and heavy as *California's* launches approached the island. The overcast sky vanished, and the world became a dark and eerie place. Every few seconds bright flashes exploded off their starboard bow. Although the compasses were no longer operational, the GPS systems continued to work, allowing them to position themselves well clear of the island. Even without the GPS, the ruby glow through the haze was a constant reminder of what they were headed into.

A deep-throated roar soon drowned out the throb of the engines. Jordan frowned and peered into the gloom. "Sounds like a waterfall."

Seeing the island from a distance was bad enough, but sailing towards it was nerve-wracking. The first piece of tephra hit the launch. Then another and another until the staccato peppering sounded like hail on a tin roof. The aluminium cover on the nearby liberty boat protected the helmsman, but the cover over the captain's gig was less sturdy and the seaman at the wheel eyed the falling debris nervously.

"Look at that!" cried Susan, pointing ahead. The surface of the water had vanished beneath a seething carpet of pumice. The frothy dacite rocks were the volcanic equivalent of solidified foam. But they were not what concerned the crew. Bigger chunks of tephra now pounded the tops of the boats, and dimples began to form.

The wind picked up, and with no warning, the air cleared—and every eye turned from the launches to the terrifying scene off their starboard bow. Their helmsman, a young CPO, crossed himself and lifted a St. Christopher's medal to his lips. "Holy Mother of..." his voice trailed off.

“Are you a religious person?” McCabe’s voice was somewhat distorted as he yelled above the noise.

“Why?” Jordan replied.

“Just wondered.”

“I doubt that you *just wonder* anything.” She looked up at his eyes. They were fixed on a scene that some might have called Judgment Day.

The noise tapered off when they passed through the line of fallout. McCabe surprised Jordan by saying, “I don’t see Hell.”

“The creator destroying even as He gives birth.”

“I thought you weren’t religious?”

“Doesn’t stop me from using metaphors. If we find anyone alive amongst this, maybe I’ll light a candle.”

Susan clung onto the gunwale with both hands. “It’s as if the whole island is crashing and bleeding out.”

Jordan snorted. The major’s metaphor was more apt. Tracks of fast-flowing lava spilled over the lip of the crater, spilt into rivulets and reformed into wide flows further down the mountain. A banyan tree was tossed into the air like toy, then it fell and bounced before being engulfed by the rivers of liquid earth. Any trees that remained were being reduced to charcoal skeletons by the baking heat. In the foreground, seven pillars of incandescent fire sprayed upwards from the invisible crack in the earth. And above it all, lightning crackled and stabbed furiously at the bleeding mountain.

The engine coughed, spluttered, and died.

“Water intakes are jammed!” cried the helmsman. “Engine was starting to overheat, so I cut it.”

“How long?” Susan demanded.

The other launch slowed, then turned and pulled up beside them. “We’re having the same problem,” called an ensign. “We’ll have to rig up something over the intakes.”

The CPO groaned. "Which means someone, in other words me, will have to go over the side."

"Sir, over there, closer to shore. It's a boat!" A seaman called.

Nate wasn't sure he believed his eyes when the air cleared and he saw two grey launches coming around the western end of the island. He tried radioing them but the massive electrical turbine hanging over Mathew interfered with the signal. Glancing at the waterproof box of flares, he almost laughed out loud. Yeah, setting one off would really attract attention! But then he saw one boat stop and the other slow, and for the first time in a week, he began to feel hope.

Three minutes later, he pulled his launch alongside the *California's* stalled captain's gig. Someone called down, "Dr Sturgess I presume?"

"Yes!" he cried, hoping they could hear him through his clogged mask. He grabbed his backpack and the cooler, handed them up to the HAZMAT dressed crewmen, then let himself be pulled aboard. The first thing he noticed was someone in a HAZMAT suit buried waste deep inside the engine. "It's the pumice," he explained. "Once you clear it, you'll need to put some sort of mesh over the intakes. I can fix it for you, if you like. I'm used to pumice blocking—"

"Hey, calm down, Doc!" said a woman. "We're glad to see you, too, but you don't look like you're in any shape to do anything except spend a week in hospital."

Nate ran his fingers through his singed hair. "Do you have any idea how glad I am to see you—Major Broadwater, is it? And could I perhaps ask if you have a spare mask? Mine's going to kill me any minute."

A seaman handed him a HEPA mask then helped him remove the first one. Before they could stop him, Nate threw the used one over the side. "It's probably got a lot of hot agents in the filters," he explained, allowing them to adjust the replacement. "I'm likely just as lethal."

“Dr Sturgess, my name is Joshua McCabe. Is there anyone else alive on the island?”

The adrenaline that had kept him going suddenly deserted him. Nate brought his hand to his face then staggered. Someone helped him sit down just as the engine rumbled to life again. “I’m...not absolutely certain,” he whispered, then cleared his parched throat. “As far as I know, I lost my last patient at around 0300 this morning. There may be others still alive, sick in their huts, or fishing on the far side of the island. Whatever it was, this virus...it...” He closed his eyes, leaned back—and winced when his shoulders, covered in dozens of small burns, came into contact with the bulkhead.

Someone with a First Aid kit knelt before him. “Hi, Nate, it’s me, Jordan Spinner.”

He knew she couldn’t see his smile beneath his mask, but he tried to convey it in his eyes. “Hey, Jordan. You gonna buy me that drink now?”

“Sure, just as soon as we get you sorted out.”

Nodding, he whispered, “The virus, it just tore them apart.” He let Jordan help him take off his shirt. “What about Mike Warner and Katie Wood?”

“They’re still asymptomatic,” Broadwater replied. “Although twenty-one people on their flight are not so lucky. Nate, we have a time limit; I need to know if we should risk searching for others.”

“Every man, woman and child with symptoms died.” He felt the catch in his voice. Christ, he was going to start crying. Letting the anger take over seemed easier. “*Everyone*. I mean what kind of fucking lunatic develops, let alone uses a bioweapon that infects and kills *everyone*? But if I’m wrong, if someone was left alive, I can’t see how they could have survived the fallout from the eruption. I was at the entrance to the village when the volcano blew. Without the mask, I would have suffocated. But can I be absolutely certain? No. No I can’t.” He paused

and looked at each of them. “Why the time limit? The eruption can’t get any worse than this. Can it?”

“According to Dr Warner,” replied McCabe. “This is just the overture.”

“We’re good to go, Major,” said the CPO. “But I can’t guarantee the mesh will hold. If we leave now, we can be back with *California* within two hours.”

“How long do we have?” Nate stared at them.

“Warner said between two and three hours, maybe. We haven’t been able to update on the status of the volcano because we lost communications with the ship. Your call, Nate,” Broadwater said in a soft voice. “If you think there’s anyone left alive, we’ll give it a shot.”

Nate looked back over his shoulder at the island. Thick black clouds were starting to roll across the launches. Soon there would be nothing to see but an evil red glow. He suddenly regretted bringing the cooler. “*If* there’s anyone left,” he whispered. “It’ll be a more merciful death than the one dealt them by the virus.”

-Chapter 30-

USS California, December 18, 1995

Despite the pain from his multiple burns, Nate stood under the deck shower for a long time. He scrubbed his nails and the lesions across his knuckles, sucked disinfectant and water into his nostrils and sinuses and blew it out until his eyes watered. He was under no illusions that he could have become infected. Hell, for all he knew the launch had been covered in hot viral particles. The replicating monster could have set up residence in his blood stream and be hijacking his white blood cells even now. But he wanted to feel clean, even for a short while. And he desperately wanted to get the odour of Mathew Island out of his nose. Despite the HEPA mask, its stench was lodged in his subconscious, if not his olfactory nerves.

Finally, the water ran out and he opened his eyes.

“Nate.”

A woman dressed in a green HAZMAT suit was holding out a towel. “Thanks, Jordan.” Buck-naked and standing on the open deck of a US warship with two women staring at him, it was the first time in a week he hadn’t felt exposed and vulnerable. After drying himself, he looked back at the multicoloured bruise on the horizon, now receding behind them at thirty knots. Glancing at the towel he said, “If I were you, I’d toss it overboard rather than bleaching it.”

“That’s okay, Nate. We believe UV light decimates the organism. You want to let me take a look at you now?” Jordan handed him a pair of grey boxer shorts.

He pulled them on then walked across to a raised hatch and sat down. Two people in HAZMAT suits used a high-pressure hose to scrub

the area where he'd showered. The smell of bleach was almost overwhelming.

"I don't think I need to tell you that your prompt actions prevented a potentially catastrophic situation," said Susan Broadwater. "I... We don't want you to forget that in the coming days, no matter what anyone, including your employers, say."

The burn cream that Jordan was liberally slathering on his back was more annoying than soothing. "Ex-employers, I suspect. The French government is a little ticked off with me. And before I lost contact with them, I was informed that the Vanuatu government has issued a warrant for my arrest."

"What?" Jordan paused, and looked at him incredulously. Then she shook her head knowingly and added, "That'd be right."

"According to them, I've single-handedly fucked up their entire economy. What the hell." He smiled bitterly. "I may not live long enough for anyone to prosecute me."

Eyeing him with concern, Jordan turned her attention to the unusual, spiral shaped burn on his arm. "Why? Are you symptomatic?"

He shook his head. "Guess I'll know for sure in twenty-seven hours, huh? So tell me, what is it? Mutated smallpox?"

"We won't know for certain until we run a genetic assay on your samples," Susan replied. "But we suspect smallpox, Ebola, and something that maximized delivery and masked the outbreak."

"Dengue—maybe," Jordan said. "Hold up your foot."

Nate dutifully held out his lacerated, scalded foot. He looked at it and shuddered. Presuming he'd live long enough to forget the pain, memories of the terror of his last hours on the island would remain with him forever. "What's happening in Port Vila?"

"All done, Major," called one of the HAZMAT team, packing away the hoses.

“Thank you.” Susan pulled off her hood, shook her hair out, and said to Nate, “We don’t know for certain. They’re still insisting it’s haemorrhagic dengue, and we’re all praying they’re right.”

“If they had this...chimera,” Nate replied grimly, “even that prize asshole, Gene Marshall, would know it. Once the pustules form, a first year med student could see it’s not dengue. Did they quarantine Aneityum Island? What about Gary Teocle?”

“No word on them. Thanks mostly to post-Kikwit paranoia, the international press has effectively quarantined Vanuatu and Fiji.”

Jordan examined his arm more closely, then turned to the medical kit. “The burns aren’t too bad, except for that one on your arm. It’s going to leave an interesting scar. I’m going to inject you with antibiotics and a painkiller. After that there are some very anxious people waiting to talk to you.”

“Here,” he said, holding his hand out for the needle package and vials. “I’ll do it.” He smiled and added, “Last thing you want is a needle stick, right?”

The portable decontamination unit was not much larger than a coffin. When Nate had finished administering himself, he stared at it and said, “I’m grateful that you let me get cleaned up before shoving me in that thing, but is there any chance of a final meal for the condemned, first?”

Below decks, McCabe used a large glove box—a transparent, airtight container—to sort through Sturgess’ backpack. Nate had urged them to read all of his notes immediately. That would give the epidemiologist time to clarify any points in the event that he did not survive. In conjunction with hour-by-hour weather reports from December Nine through Fourteen, McCabe was hoping to use the information in the journals to build a timeline. Taking a deep, steadying breath, he began.

Based on the numbers treated in the clinic on the morning of the Fourteenth, it appeared that the chimera had initially infected around sixty percent. Somewhat on the high side, but then the sky had been overcast and there'd been a little rain. Tom Kaleo, who had arrived on the island the afternoon of December Twelve, had been one of the first to go symptomatic, most likely because his immune system had still been degraded from dengue. That information taken together placed dispersal around the early hours of December Thirteen. The temperature inversion that morning would have helped.

The second wave of infection would have occurred when the villagers cleaned up after the rain. The contagion, the spread of the disease from person to person, then occurred because of nursing practices and close contact with the initial victims. Sturgess' description of the way the villagers had treated Tom Kaleo's body confirmed what he'd explained in his email. As with Ebola, traditional funeral rights guaranteed further contagion.

Based on what they knew of the Soviet's research, once the chimera passed through the human body it might become more lethal, but it probably wouldn't live as long. That meant it was transmissible by body waste and fluids, not air. Only an autopsy would show for sure. If they saw the virus on both sides of the alveoli that meant it could be transmitted through coughing or sneezing, although UV light killed it. So, warm, damp, dark huts were perfect. Again, just like Ebola.

McCabe pulled his hands from the glove box, and rubbed his eyes. He knew Ebola was airborne, and not just in monkey houses like Reston or controlled labs. In Kikwit, pathologists had found the Ebola virus had invaded the skin cells, sweat glands and connective tissue of its victims. That suggested it was probably capable of infecting people through mere skin contact. This chimera might have the same properties.

Reaching into the glove box again, he checked the journal entry. Warner and Sturgess had spent the morning of the Thirteenth SCUBA diving, and then had gone to Hunter Island the following day. That might explain why they had escaped the initial infection, but what about Katie Wood? Perhaps it was sheer good luck. Both Warner and Wood had also escaped infection in the United aircraft, as had most of the passengers in business class. Those who had become ill included a pregnant woman and people whose immune systems were already compromised. One had residual flu, two were HIV positive, and one was a cancer patient. But what of the others who'd been perfectly healthy?

Flipping between the medical notes and Sturgess' journal, McCabe was reminded of something that he had impressed upon his students. Investigators brought both tools and burdens to any investigation. Their tools were experience and methodical, time-proven investigative procedures. But by the same token, their experiences, their preconceptions, burdened them. Each of them carried ingrained cultural world-views, mores through which they viewed the crime and the perpetrator. Serial killers followed a different set of ethics, different world-views, and in order to understand them and thus predict them, one needed to see the world as they did—which was not easy, largely because most people were not serial killers.

McCabe knew that his view of Ebola necessarily coloured his perception of *all* viral outbreaks, natural or manmade. Sturgess' journal catapulted him back in time to a steaming hot jungle filled with mind-numbing horror; the sense of abandonment, the belief that the world outside might have ceased to exist. The thought of taking your own life had nothing to do with suicide; it was about regaining control. Death became *your* choice, on *your* terms, not the terms of some mindless, alien monster. To paraphrase Montapert, *I am the master of my fate, the Captain of my soul.*

Robert Williams had made a similar choice but for different reasons. His suicide had achieved so much more than a mere wait for someone to kill him. It also pointed to the existence of someone at Quantico prepared to take him out. Someone very senior, with enough authority to gain access to Williams. Adams' computer had been sanitised, and then there'd been that stupid little attention-getting stunt with the Perrier. Spalding? Brant? No, although they both knew his background, knew about the Perrier, both of them had been busy elsewhere immediately after Williams' death, and both were too intelligent. No, it had to be some underling versed in Psychology 101—which ruled out any of the chief players in the Consortium. It also was someone who had personal information about McCabe himself, and believed he or she could make independent decisions when it came to protecting the Consortium. Middle management, then.

He heard footsteps and looked up. Susan was walking in, pulling off her suit as she entered. "You ready to talk to Sturgess?" She made a vague attempt to pat her hair back into place.

"After he's had some sleep." McCabe withdrew his hands from the glove box, stretched his arms, and leaned back in the chair. "I told Spinner to give him a sedative."

"Is that your medical opinion, or—?"

"Am I basing it on personal experience?" He pointed to the journal. "Sturgess was meticulous in his note-taking. It kept him sane."

"And what kept you sane, Josh?" she asked softly.

"Who said I am?" He tossed her a quirky grin and stood.

"He never blamed you or hated you." Susan came close, and brought her head to his chest.

She had done exactly the same thing the night that his father had died, the very same night that the Federal Murrah Building had been bombed. The two events were unrelated—or so he had thought. "My

father was too busy protecting the American people, the American Way of Life to worry about protecting his family. Why was he handling Ebola, Susan?"

Frowning, she replied, "I didn't say it was Ebola. Rob had accidentally injected himself with a Level 4 organism five days prior to his death. You know the routine; he immediately isolated himself. He didn't want anyone to tell you or Ed until...we knew, one way or another. He didn't want to put you through it again."

"Bullshit. He wanted me to face it like a man."

Her hand dropped, and her eyes darkened. "Why do you climb inside people's heads and mind fuck them?"

"Would you prefer I climbed back into your bed and—?" He stopped; the pain in her eyes reflected his. "My father hated me because I took my mother from him. Not because he loved her, but because he needed her. I refused to take her place, so he took Ed. Then he took you." He fleetingly wondered which of the three McCabe men she'd found best in bed. Dismissing the thought as an adolescent insecurity, he added, "I mean professionally, Susan. I'm not blaming you. I know how...persuasive he could be."

She turned away. "Have you ever considered that you reminded your father of his shortcomings? Of his inability to protect you—*both* of you?"

A commotion outside interrupted his reply. They ran up on deck, into the warm tropical night.

"Oh my God!" Susan cried, joining Spinner and Captain Rolston, who were standing at the rail, shaking their heads in disbelief. "How far away are we?"

"Three hundred and twenty nautical miles." Rolston replied. "We should hear it in a little over half an hour. I wouldn't want to have been any closer."

“If I didn’t know any better,” Susan added, accepting the binoculars from him, “I’d swear the sun was rising.”

Staring at the expanding light on the horizon, Spinner said, “Looks like your crime scene just obliterated itself, Special Agent McCabe.”

“We still have the evidence,” he replied. “Several billion copies of it.”

-Chapter 31-

Washington DC, April 1996

“Having now sequenced the chimera,” said Susan Broadwater, “we can confirm that the virus is indeed a hybrid created from dengue, smallpox, and Ebola genes.”

Tendrils of cigarette smoke caught in the beam of the projector gave the illusion of movement, but the image on the screen was flat and lifeless. McCabe looked around at the eighteen men and women in the room. He couldn’t read their expressions in the low light, but he could smell their agitation. Three months after Mathew Island, the investigation into Williams and the Consortium was dead in the water and the focus of attention was being shifted elsewhere.

Patriots all to the Western Way of Life, Michael Warner, Silva Wood, Nate Sturgess—indeed, everyone who knew the chimera had been manufactured—had agreed to propagate the public story that a mutated haemorrhagic dengue had biologically nuked an unremarkable island in the South Pacific. Final death toll, including twenty-seven people on the United flight, had been fewer than two hundred. No big deal. Worldwide, more people died every day from the flu. And Nature had conveniently mopped up the mess.

But the men and women watching Susan’s slide show knew better.

“Unfortunately,” she continued, clicking through the electron microscope images of the viral particle, “since smallpox can only be contracted by humans, we cannot examine the effects of the chimera in a clinical setting. In lay terms, we can’t inject it into animals and track the course of the disease. Nor can we develop, let alone test, any kind of vaccine.”

Slouched in a chair in front, CIA Bureau Chief Brad Montgomery asked in a smug drawl, "Can you elaborate on the origin of the chimera, please, Doctor?"

Here it comes, the conveniently packaged solution.

"The Ebola-smallpox component of this hybrid has Soviet fingerprints all over it, right down to the sequencing," Susan replied. The room lights came on and the projector shut down. "However, as I've been explaining, the micro-organism used to nuke Mathew Island is considerably more sophisticated than anything the Soviet's developed."

"Just like we told you." Montgomery jammed his cigarette butt into his coffee cup. "This has nothing to do with some imaginary Consortium in the US government. Soviet defectors took the virus and the technology to Iraq. Hell, just last year the Russians sold Iraq eighteen large, industrial fermentation vessels. Sure, Iraq maintained it was to grow single-cell protein for cattle food. But you know as well as I do, Major Broadwater, that the Russians also sold them exhaust filtration equipment capable of achieving ninety-nine point nine percent air purity. That degree of control you only need in a bioweapons' lab."

Susan went to object, but Montgomery added, "It's all there in the Chicken Farm documents."

He didn't need to elaborate; everyone in the room knew the story. In August 1995, Lieutenant General Hussein Kamel, one of Saddam's son-in-laws and director of Iraq's weapons programmes fled the country after a family quarrel over dinner that had left six people dead. Despite his defection, Kamel hadn't revealed Iraq's biowarfare capabilities. However, on the assumption that he had, Iraqi intelligence had accused Kamel of deceiving *them* about the existence of a secret BW program. They'd promptly handed UNSCOM a carton of carefully sanitized documents supposedly found on Kamel's chicken farm. The files—complete with gruesome images of human test subjects—confirmed that

Iraq had produced tens of thousands of litres of botulinium toxin, anthrax, aflatoxin, and ricin, and that they had been developing a dangerous viral programme dating back to the 1960s.

“There’s nothing in the original Chicken Farm documents that pointed to the development of a chimera virus,” Susan retorted.

Montgomery smirked. “Yeah, well, that depends on what you mean by ‘original’. And those documents sure as hell contained a few Russian names.”

Barely able to contain his disgust, McCabe stood, quietly slipped out of the room, and went downstairs to his office in the Hoover building. Slamming the door behind him, he threw himself into his chair and closed his eyes.

It had been early January before everyone on board the *California* had been released from quarantine. Susan Broadwater and Chuck Long had taken Nate Sturgess’ lethal samples to Atlanta, while Spinner had returned with him and the rest of the response team to DC.

Much to McCabe’s surprise, the FBI hadn’t ransacked his private files on the Oklahoma City bombing while he’d been away. Meg, his housekeeper, had explained that she’d placed all of his papers in storage in order to redecorate his newly acquired penthouse—something that she’d failed to mention to the ‘nice men’ who’d dropped by.

Spinner had only had time to skim over the documents before Brant had called and ordered her to Atlanta. The CDC were backlogged with so much work that Broadwater needed all the help she could get. Several times in the past four months, Spinner had returned to DC, parked herself in the spare bedroom of his apartment, and studied his files. She hadn’t said much, but the fact that she’d kept coming back told him that she had not dismissed his claims: in order to ensure McVeigh’s

prosecution, the government was deliberately ignoring crucial evidence in the Oklahoma bombing.

Meanwhile, he'd been scrutinising the background checks on the other victims of Oklahoma, including Spinner's dead husband.

Like hundreds of other government contractors with high-level security clearances, Douglas Spinner had worked in US embassies around the world, installing and upgrading high tech communications equipment. The fact that he'd worked in Iraq had briefly tweaked McCabe's interest, until the realisation that it had been the 1980s. Back then the US government had been pouring millions of dollars in aid into the impoverished, oil-rich nation. Douglas Spinner had been sent to Baghdad on six separate occasions to advise on the upgrading of Iraqi telecommunications and networking systems. Nothing in his time there or in the files that he'd backed up on a remote server, linked Spinner's husband to Adams' key phrase, *five knew who*.

Picking through the lives of Williams and Adams, right down to the type of take-out they preferred and who delivered it, had proven to be equally fruitless. Williams had left behind nothing that could link him to the Consortium. Adams' computer had indeed been wiped clean, and when McCabe had finally gained access to the evidence room, he'd found it held nothing more than what the Attorney General needed for the prosecution of McVeigh. But he couldn't shake the feeling that the connection was somewhere in that room.

The most frustrating aspect of the investigation was that the Consortium had achieved exactly what it set out to do. It had scared the crap out of senior US government officials and proven that a bioweapon capable of annihilating an entire population could be developed and deployed. Further, it had demonstrated that the dismantling of the US government's BW programme had hamstrung that same government's ability to track down, identify and retaliate against those who would

employ such weapons. Accusing whatever rogue nation happened to be the flavour of the month was a politically convenient fairy tale. It was the perfect lie, because, like the facts behind the Oklahoma bombing, it was wrapped in truth. No one, least of all those secret members of the Consortium within the FBI and the Justice Department, wanted to peel back that truth and expose the corruption beneath.

Any minute now Susan would come bursting into his office and rant about being made a party to such a monumental deception. McCabe sighed, opened his eyes, and noticed the paper on his desk. It was a secure fax from David Wilson. He scanned the contents then flipped to the photograph on the second page—and froze.

A violent wave of nausea hit him. Blindly reaching for the trash bin, he swallowed hard, trying to prevent the reflexive action. A minute or so later he stood, crumpled the fax into a ball and jammed it into his pocket. Carefully, he made his way through the bullpen to the men's room, surprised and somewhat gratified that he made it to the toilet before throwing up.

Family secrets, pieces of a puzzle he'd avoided for decades abruptly fell into place. *When gods wish to punish us, they answer our prayers.* Five minutes ago he'd wanted to stand up in that meeting and demand that the senior FBI, DIA, CIA and Pentagon officials pull their heads out of their asses and admit to what they seemed so determined to bury. But he hadn't. Why? Because somewhere in the depth of his subconscious he knew what had really happened and couldn't face the truth?

The cursed gift that allowed him to climb inside the minds of serial killers and their victims had not allowed him to penetrate those closest to him.

Uncle Albert.

-Chapter 32-

Johannesburg, South Africa, April 1996

McCabe glanced out of the window of the 747. From the air, Johannesburg appeared to have changed little since he'd last been there, more than twenty years ago. After his mother had died, there'd been no more trips to the southern parts of Africa. Even the regular stays with his mother's family in Cairo had shrivelled to a fleeting annual visit. For the most part, home had become boarding school or his uncle's house in Virginia.

Contact with his father during those years had been irregular. The occasional letter, almost always postmarked from places like Tehran and Baghdad, reminded Josh that, as a prodigy, great things were expected of him. His brother was already doing well in medical school, and young Josh would, of course, follow a career that had mapped out for him from the time he could remember. That expectation, the letters said, had become an obligation after Zaire.

While clearing customs and collecting his luggage, McCabe noted that some of the physical vestiges of Apartheid still remained. But a new constitution was due to come into effect in a month's time; one that would ensure a white minority never could again rule the nation. The economic fallout and massive problems facing the majority rule government couldn't suppress an air of vibrancy and promise in the atmosphere.

Outside, near the cab rank, McCabe saw David Wilson hurriedly walking towards him. "Sorry I was late," Wilson said. "Rush hour on the R24. Good flight?" He took one of McCabe's two bags.

McCabe wasn't entirely certain what Meg had packed, but she'd always had a knack of knowing exactly what he'd need. "Thanks for the heads-up. Your bosses know?"

Wilson paused in his stride and turned to him. Eyes narrowing, he said, "You think I'm yanking your chain? The CIA is up to it's fucking eyeballs in career bureaucrats, half of whom would prefer to believe Mathew Island really was a natural outbreak, while the other half are determined to pin it all on Iraq."

"No kidding. Albrecht Tissot?"

"I'll tell you in the car." Wilson began walking again.

Once inside the chauffeured vehicle, Wilson pulled his seatbelt on and said, "Albrecht Tissot was arrested two weeks ago in Pretoria, for possession of four hundred tablets of Ecstasy. Local authorities believe, and we concur, that it was to raise funds for *Die Organisasie*."

"That's a little desperate, even for them." McCabe glanced out the window. *Die Organisasie*, also known as Third Force, was a secret organization of disgruntled white South Africans. Working mostly in exile in the UK, they were under the illusion that they could topple the majority South African government. The bag of dirty tricks they'd used to cling to power had obviously taken a new turn.

"It gets better. The night he was arrested, Tissot died in jail."

McCabe's head snapped around. "Shit. I thought the Truth and Reconciliation Committee would have enjoyed parading Dr Death in front of the world."

"It's not what you think. Authorities are doing an autopsy now. Looks like Tissot committed suicide using one of his neat little concoctions."

Men like Albrecht Tissot didn't commit suicide, they were too damned arrogant... Which was exactly what he'd thought about Robert Williams. "Go on," McCabe said.

"Police searched his garage the next day, and guess what?"

“They found files from his Project *Jota* days?”

“Not just files, McCabe. They unearthed the entire fucking crown jewels—the Apartheid government’s complete biowarfare library going back decades.”

“Why would Tissot have killed himself knowing that the files would be discovered?”

Wilson shrugged. “You tell me, you’re the head doctor. The DIA got a call from State about fifteen minutes after the local CIA officer in the embassy here informed Langley. The South Africans practically fell over themselves throwing the files at us. And from what I can see, I can’t blame them. We found proof of Meryl Nass’ theory. Not just of the anthrax and cholera outbreaks in Zimbabwe—”

“Ebola.”

“When I read your name in Tissot’s journal, I knew you’d need to see for yourself. Jesus, McCabe, you could be the Truth and Reconciliation Committee’s star witness.”

McCabe swallowed back his nausea. It was growing dark outside, but the sights and sounds, even the smells rekindled the old nightmares.

“Where are the files being kept?”

“We’re on our way there now.”

The car parked outside a nondescript grey stone building on Jellico Street, just a few kilometres from the centre of town. The front entrance was poorly lit, but McCabe didn’t fail to notice the armed security guards lurking in the shadows.

Wilson led him to the rear entrance, also guarded, and opened a thick metal door. At the top of two flights of poorly lit stairs, McCabe paused. “What the hell...? I thought you said they found this stuff in Tissot’s garage?”

The entire floor of the building was crammed with cardboard boxes and wooden crates, metal filing cabinets and tea chests. Two men dressed in jeans and T-shirts were kneeling on a scrap of grubby canvas, sorting through books, while a middle-aged woman sat behind a computer terminal at a nearby desk. All three of them briefly looked up, nodded to Wilson in recognition, and went back to work. Wilson's failure to introduce them told McCabe that everything about this operation would remain secret.

"Yeah, well, the 'garage' extended underground to a massive laboratory." Wilson led him to a metal desk covered in folders. "Tissot wasn't just selling drugs."

"If the South Africans don't want this stuff, why not ship everything back to the States?" McCabe noted that the heavily barred windows were boarded over. The only ventilation came from a noisy air conditioner that had seen better days. What little he could see of the walls and floor was scratched and covered in stains and graffiti.

"The new government wants to divorce itself from the contents of the files, but they're not prepared to lose the evidence."

McCabe could feel the grit underfoot as he walked across the linoleum floor. "The Truth and Reconciliation Committee."

"The Human Rights Violations Subcommittee to be specific. They're pissed about Tissot's death, but they're banking on getting a few more names from his files. We're working with the Subcommittee to sort and catalogue the entire library." He pointed to a set of photocopiers and a stack of grey archive boxes behind the table.

"Shit, that's going to take years." The sheer volume of paperwork was staggering.

"Not necessarily." Wilson pulled out a plain wooden chair from behind the table, and motioned to McCabe to take a seat. "It's not as random as it looks. More importantly, Tissot kept a card catalogue system in his

study. I used that to go straight for the files on Ebola.” He untied the string on one of the folders and handed it to McCabe. “I knew you’d want to see this first, to verify its authenticity.” Wilson’s dark eyes met his.

“And?” McCabe prompted.

“You’re not gonna like it.” The DIA agent stabbed a finger at a couple of leather-bound journals sitting beside his laptop. “When you’re satisfied that the files are the real deal, check out Tissot’s diaries. You can fill in the blanks. Hell, we all know the story, just not all of the names.” He looked around the room. “But we will.”

The tension in McCabe’s stomach ratcheted up several notches. From somewhere in his childhood escaped a desperate voice before he could stop himself. “Dad?”

He felt Wilson’s hand on his shoulder. “It’s a journal, McCabe. It’s anecdotal.”

But Wilson had already said it. The evidence would be there, somewhere in this room, of that McCabe was certain.

“I’m going back to the hotel,” Wilson added, dropping his hand. “I assume you’ll want to stay here?”

Barely acknowledging Wilson’s departure, McCabe opened the first folder.

The tools employed by criminalists and epidemiologists are almost identical, which is why the CDC’s investigators are often referred to as disease detectives. Serial killers, be they human, microbial, or both, adopt patterns of behaviour that, while often unique to an individual person or disease, are nevertheless definable. Within a few hours, McCabe realised that Tissot’s files mostly were a set of comprehensive reports grounded in methodical scientific procedures. The microbiological side of it would be of more interest to Spinner and Susan. While the files also stated that Ebola had been tested in Zaire in

1976, anecdotal evidence was not enough, for such claims could be dismissed as delusions of grandeur. Because Tissot's primary intention had been to hide his outdoor experiment within a natural outbreak, McCabe's job was made doubly difficult.

Officially, the spread of the 1976 outbreak was blamed on the repetitive use of unsterilised needles by Belgian nuns—a common problem in third world nations with few resources. That so-called 'amplification in a hospital setting' still could not account for why the disease erupted simultaneously in fifty-five widely separated villages, when so few of those villages had had contact with the hospital. McCabe needed to find a clear link between Tissot and those villages, and that wasn't available in the files.

He hesitated before touching the first of Tissot's journals. Sitting under the flickering overhead light, surrounded by a coldly scientific liturgy of inhuman experiments, McCabe would sooner have touched one of Nate Sturgess' journals without the benefit of a glove box, than open up and crawl around inside the mind of a pathological butcher like Tissot.

Uncle Albert. What was he frightened of? The man was dead. The words in the journal held no power over him. They could not even pull him into what it was to be Albert, to empathise with a killer so closely that he could taste the blindingly compelling, erotic sense of power. He did not have to become this bastard in order to hunt him down.

No, but he needed it to hunt down those that had used the dark fruits of Tissot's labours. Taking a deep breath, McCabe pulled the first journal to him, opened the page, and skimmed through the entries to 1976.

Although he'd known what to expect, to see his name written there, so boldly, still came as a physical, and sickening shock. He found the

link that he was seeking almost immediately. And the memory hit him with painful clarity.

“Your eyes do not look good to me, Joshua.” Uncle Albert frowned and peered closely at him. “Come into the clinic and let me take a look at them.”

“I’m okay,” Josh replied, and continued playing with the cook’s pet monkey.

“I warned you that you must wash your hands after touching that animal.”

“I know!”

“Josh, do as your told,” Ed said, looking up from the report he was working on. “Dad’ll hit the roof if your arrive on the doorstep with conjunctivitis.”

“Oh, all right,” Josh mumbled. He stood and followed Albert into the clinic.

After pulling on a set of gloves, Albert took a vial from the fridge and carefully placed one drop in each of Josh’s eyes. “This will stop any infection before it has a chance to take hold.” He smiled. “It will be our little secret. Your father need never know.”

That son of a bitch. It had been the perfect ruse. Diseases that led to blindness inflicted half the villagers in that part of Africa. Good old Uncle Albert and his medicines would have been welcomed with open arms. Epidemiologists who had later tracked Ebola Zaire would never have thought to ask villagers if anyone had given them eye drops. Why would they? Disease couldn’t be spread from person to person when the dropper never touched the body.

Unless, of course, the dropper itself was filled with the virus.

Tissot's journals held much more, for they unlocked the key pieces to a secret world that McCabe had caught glimpses of but never fully understood. And the logic of it was compelling.

A key landed on the open page in front of him. "I got you a room at the Hyatt," said Wilson.

"Thanks." McCabe stood, walked across to one of the boarded windows, and looked out between the cracks down onto a park. The sun was coming up. "I think I'll go for a run." He turned and, seeing the look in Wilson's eyes, said, "My father knew."

Wilson said nothing. There wasn't a lot anyone could say.

He'd just finished his run and was walking through the lobby of the Hyatt, when the explosion rattled the hotel's windows. By the time McCabe reached the grey building on Jellicoe Street, the surrounding structures were well ablaze, and fire fighters were ordering everyone back.

It wasn't until later that evening, that it was ascertained that eight people, including Agent David Wilson, had been killed in the 'gas' explosion.

In Pretoria, Albrecht Tissot's house and adjoining garage had also mysteriously caught fire and burned to the ground. His wife and daughter had apparently been trapped inside.

-Chapter 33-

Oklahoma, April 19, 1996

The open-air memorial service for the victims of the Oklahoma City bombing failed to offer catharsis. If anything, it left a bitter taste in Jordan Jordan's mouth.

Nate Sturgess placed a consoling arm around her shoulder and mumbled something about McCabe. Jordan nodded. She's already sensed the FBI Agent's presence. At first she'd thought it was someone else wearing the familiar cologne. But no, McCabe was there in the sombre crowd that had gathered at the empty space where the Federal Murrah building once stood.

Jordan wished that both men had left her alone. The grief that Nate Sturgess and Joshua McCabe had suffered was different from hers. So, too, was the grief of those around her. As far as the rest of the world was concerned, the lone bomber in the Federal Murrah Building was in custody.

The service continued. The preparation for McVeigh's trial continued. Life continued, yet Jordan was no closer to the truth than the day it had happened, a year earlier.

Once upon a time, just a few short months ago, she would have dismissed McCabe's theories about a deliberate cover-up in the Oklahoma bombing as paranoid and delusional. But she would have said the same about a chimera virus.

She thought back over the past months, and the evidence in McCabe's files that did not fit the prosecution's case against McVeigh. In the crowd of mourners were people she knew, friends and colleagues, but, warned off by investigators, they were unwilling to go public with their doubts. Don't muddy the issue, they'd been told. Play the game,

play by our rules, and we get McVeigh. Open your mouth, uncover the truth and we lose him. Eventually, the warnings had become threats. Do you want to see McVeigh go free? Keep this up and he'll walk! They said it so often, in so many different ways to so many different people that it became a truth in itself until the evidence—the facts—had been discarded.

Lee Harvey Oswald might have pulled the trigger, but who really killed Kennedy? McVeigh had detonated the bomb, but who was responsible for butchering her husband and beautiful little boy?

Like the Federal Murrah Building itself, the evidence that might have connected the events had been bulldozed and buried. The Justice Department was using McVeigh's prosecution as a public relations exercise, a showcase for interagency cooperation and forensic ingenuity. Here is the crime, here are the suspects, here's the motive. All they needed to do was ensure that the forensic witnesses said the right things, while the real witnesses were kept away, so that twelve honest men and women could render the scripted verdict. Anything else, including McCabe's attempt to connect Oklahoma with subsequent the events on Mathew Island, had become a matter of 'national security'.

Those who knew the truth, knew that the Consortium was real and that it had somehow had a hand in the bombing of the Federal Murrah Building, were obliged to work within the constraints of an antagonistic Congress. Just a few days earlier, in his speech at Washington University, President Clinton had declared war on terror. But many, including senior members of the Pentagon, State Department and FBI, were determined to protect their turf against what they saw as a White House power grab. The sheer fact that Clinton the Democrat, a man they saw as a mere pretender to the Oval Office, wanted action, was the best possible reason to do absolutely nothing. Wars were things you declared on countries, not a few Moslem extremists.

And that, of course, was where the power of the Consortium rested. For the most part, their interests ran parallel to powerful factions within the US government.

The service was finally over. Jordan turned and walked away, leaving Nate to follow. The first time he'd seen her scarred, shaven head, he'd been concerned and sympathetic. In the months since Mathew Island, he'd become a friend rather than an acquaintance. It was only a question of time before he wanted to be something more.

Jordan spotted McCabe amidst the thinning crowds. He wasn't trying to be anything. She preferred that; it allowed her to retain her strength and dignity. It also allowed her to retain the shutters on her emotions. *How odd, McCabe can actually remain still.* He wasn't even looking at her.

"Brant send you to fetch me back?" she said when she reached him.

He said nothing. If there was one constant with Joshua McCabe, it was that he would not elaborate until it suited him.

"Hey, Josh! How ya doing?" Nate was clearly delighted to see the man who had been his principal debriefer.

Nate had figured McCabe to be, in his words, 'an intelligent cop'. After weeks of regurgitating everything he could recall to a dozen dark-suited men from a dozen federal US agencies, and one pathetic little WHO filing clerk who'd handed him his marching orders, Nate had thanked McCabe for helping him. He'd jokingly suggested that he should be a psychologist instead of a G-man. It was only later, when McCabe was out of earshot, that Jordan had revealed the truth. McCabe was a profiler. Her rummaged through human minds like others rummaged through garage sales, picking through people's lives, paying next to nothing for the odd, useful item, then leaving without a backward glance.

Still without looking at her, McCabe smiled at Nate and said, "Congratulations on your new job."

Well, that was different. Jordan was slowly categorizing the multiple facets of Joshua McCabe. Politeness was a tool. Or perhaps she was wrong. Perhaps McCabe genuinely liked Nate. Both men had been through a rare kind of hell, one that the FBI agent didn't have to psychoanalyse to understand. And Nate had never let personal demons hobble him. Was that why McCabe had come to Oklahoma now, on her last day here? To judge her ability to deal with her demons? To see how she'd coped packing up the final mementoes from Doug and Jamie's lives and shipping them to Australia, then putting the apartment on the market? Or was his interest more to do with what she'd learned from the other survivors whose lives had been shattered that day? Knowing McCabe, all of the above.

"Thanks," Nate replied. "Despite claims to the contrary, the CDC pays a whole lot better than the WHO. Conditions are better, too. No mud."

McCabe chuckled. "No volcanoes, either."

"Mike Warner has insisted on getting married on a 'nice' volcano. He's determined that my experiences on Mathew Island should not colour my perspective forever."

"And you're going?" Jordan was genuinely confused. She'd only been away from work a few weeks, during which time McCabe had learned to laugh and Nate had agreed to go to another volcano?

"I don't have any choice. I promised I'd be his best man." Nate shrugged. "And Katie would never forgive me if I didn't show. Now all I have to do is convince Jordan to take a few more weeks off work and come with me." He put his arm around her. It was a hopeful rather than a possessive gesture. "The way I see it, if Vulcan really had it in for me I would have been dead a dozen times over. I think Mathew actually cured my volcanophobia."

Jordan wasn't in the mood for this. She was happy for Nate, really. But her world was elsewhere—at least as long as the FBI continued to

employ her. "Sorry Nate," she replied. "I'm leaving for DC this afternoon."

"It's Friday. Can't you at least wait until Monday?" But he dropped his arm, shrugged good-naturedly, and added, "In that case, how about I buy you lunch?"

McCabe looked up. Jordan followed his gaze, to see Commander Chuck Long coming towards them. She felt a flash of resentment. This was to have been her time, alone with her memories and her grief. Then she saw Chuck's face, and remembered that the tragedy of Oklahoma was not hers alone.

Like her, Chuck had no desire to share his pain. In the time it took to reach them, his expression had shifted from sombre to friendly. Jordan resigned herself to an afternoon of unwanted companionship.

"Another?" Chuck asked.

McCabe shook his head and nursed his beer.

"Please," Jordan replied.

Nate had departed on an earlier flight to Atlanta. Her and McCabe's flight to DC wasn't due out for another hour, while Chuck was leaving for San Diego in a few minutes. She opened her mouth to say something while Chuck was gone, but McCabe was staring at the bottles lined up behind the bar. His face was as flat and expressionless as Jordan had ever seen it, and he had gone still again.

A tendril of fear began to work its way up her spine. All through lunch, it had been like he was working overtime to remain calm in the face of—

"Too bad about Hussein Kamel, huh?" Chuck had returned with a couple of club sodas and a bowl of peanuts.

Saddam Hussein had enticed his son-in-law back to Iraq on a promise of reinstatement as head of Iraq's BW programme. Kamel had

accepted. His remains had been found dumped on a rubbish pile a few days later.

At no point had Jordan ever considered Iraq a serious contender for the source of the chimera, despite the spin that the CIA had put on Kamel's 'Chicken Farm' documents. Iraq's viral programme simply was not that advanced. However, in the weeks that she'd been back in Oklahoma, she'd learned things that drew an unnerving connection between events. It just wasn't a connection that made any sense. Why would the Consortium, whose aim had apparently been to demonstrate the risk posed by bioweapons, specifically by Iraq, conspire to *hide* the evidence that Iraq had had a hand in the Oklahoma bombing?

Still watching McCabe, Jordan said, "Didn't Saddam say something about 'all being forgiven'?"

Picking up a handful of nuts, McCabe let out a derisive snort. Jordan sipped the soda. She was imagining things. McCabe was...well, McCabe.

Then a fleeting thought struck her. The Iraqi leader hadn't always been an enemy of the US, a fact that she well knew because of Doug's work in Baghdad. She studied McCabe. His face lacked any discernible expression.

"Well, the other sixteen who defected with Kamel sure as hell aren't going home." Chuck Long pushed the bowl of nuts aside. "They've opted to stay in Kuwait."

"There's been no attempt to bring them here?" Jordan said hopefully. Debriefing them could help untangle a lot of questions.

"To the States? Hell, no. They're helping the Kuwaitis set up counter-intelligence networks in Iraq *conditional* on not being taken anywhere near US soil. We screwed the pooch, big time, with the last defectors." Chuck shook his head in disgust. "The CIA are a bunch of fuck-ups."

McCabe tensed, and his head jerked up. "What are you talking about?"

Startled by his sudden animation, Jordan glanced around the bar. After the Cold War, the illusion of glasnost had supposedly seen a decline in the number of spies running around DC. But as old allies became new enemies, the numbers had, in fact, increased. Then again, this wasn't DC. The chances of anyone overhearing them in an airport bar were minimal.

Chuck lowered his voice before replying, "Back in 1994, twelve top-level Iraqi officials, including a couple of Yale-trained biochemists and molecular biologists, defected from Iraq to Kuwait."

"I remember reading something about that," Jordan said.

"Four of them stayed in Kuwait, but I found out yesterday that the eight scientists decided to place some distance between themselves and Iraq, so the CIA brought them to the US. Three of them were almost immediately assassinated by Iraqi agents. It was real Hollywood stuff. High-speed car chases, right in the middle of DC. The spooks took out the Iraqi assassins, but then the whole scene was replayed two weeks later, although no one was killed this time. Someone in the CIA was tipping off Iraqi intelligence to the movements of these guys, so the White House decided that, when it came to matters of domestic security, it was the FBI's jurisdiction.

"Yeah, old buddy." Chuck smirked at McCabe. "You guys got babysitting duty. But what happened next; you wouldn't read about it in a paperback. The Feds hauled them out west, way out west away from anything remotely resembling a CIA or FBI safe house, and shuffled them round for a while. Eventually, someone in DC decided to put them on ice in a secure apartment inside a goddamned Federal Building. Two weeks later—" He shook his head in disgust and downed the last of his drink. The boarding call for his flight had just been announced.

Jordan froze. "Here in Oklahoma? They kept them in the Federal Murrah Building under lock and key?" She turned to McCabe—and did a double take. He'd visibly paled "Josh," she demanded, trying to quell her rising panic. "What is it?"

He met her look. "Five knew who."

-Chapter 34-

En route to Washington, DC. April 19, 1996

McCabe wasn't entirely sure why he'd gone to Oklahoma. Initially he'd told himself that Spinner was the only one he could trust; her losses outweighed his, her desire to learn the truth, more compelling. But on the flight from South Africa, he'd realised that, over the last four months, he had come to view her not just as a tool but as an ally. From the very first day, when he'd ripped aside her illusions about her profession, she'd refused to let preconceptions rule her thinking. Fragile walls around her psyche, carefully constructed barriers, emotional crutches; he understood her better than she feared, for he *was* her. And, like him, she did not ignore or deny evidence because it did not conform to an accepted or politically convenient theory.

What he'd read in the Project *Jota* files had identified him as both witness and victim. He recognised that the impact of this now made him an impediment to the investigation. The same sort of impediment he'd thought Spinner was when he'd first interviewed her. Nate Sturgess and Chuck Long also had their own share of emotional baggage. It was personal, for all of them. But they were still assets to the investigation. And now, all the loose ends had come down to this one, simple piece of information.

The look of shock on Chuck's face no doubt reflected McCabe's own, but for different reasons. The naval officer, caught up in his own personal grieving, had genuinely failed to make the simple mathematical connection. Five Iraqi BW scientists had been killed in the bombing of the Federal Murrah Building.

The final boarding announcement call for the flight to San Diego came over the loudspeaker. "Dave Wilson is dead," McCabe said quickly.

"What?" Jordan demanded, his eyes widening still further. "When? How?"

Ignoring her, he watched Chuck's expression. It took a moment for the information to register, then the man's face darkened and his nostrils flared in anger. "You went down to Jo'burg?" he replied.

"Wilson gave me a heads-up," McCabe replied. "Who told you?"

"Same CIA contact who told me about the Iraqi defectors—straight after I was ordered to report to San Diego. I've been pulled from the Mathew Island investigation. The Navy suddenly has a pressing need for a weapons expert in some back room archive." Chuck stood and picked up his cover and bag. Briefly nodding at Spinner, he added to McCabe, "Keep me in the loop." Then he turned and walked away.

Eyes darting between them, Spinner stood and demanded, "What the hell is going on, McCabe?"

Still ignoring her, he watched Chuck leave. Everything was being cleaned up and neatly disposed of.

"McCabe!"

The boarding call for their flight was announced. He picked up Spinner's carryon, took her by the elbow, and said, "C'mon. Plane's waiting."

Seated with them on the flight to Chicago, a grandmotherly type kept up a running commentary about the latest Oklahoma bombing conspiracy theory involving aliens. McCabe almost wished it were true.

They managed to get seats to themselves on the connecting flight to Reagan. When the aircraft levelled off and the seatbelt light blinked out,

Jordan turned in her seat and demanded, “When were you were in South Africa? And what happened to Dave Wilson?”

“I’ll explain when we get to DC. Tell me what you found.” He loosened his tie.

Spinner looked like she was about to object, but then she said, “It’s not just Dave Wilson. Key witnesses, people I tried to talk to, are dropping dead like flies.”

No surprise there. “Who, exactly?”

“An explosives expert who was in Oklahoma at the time of the bombing wasn’t happy with the conclusion that the truck of ANFO alone could cause such damage. He took samples from the Murrah building to a laboratory for chemical analysis. The results showed fulminated mercury residue.”

“Which is normally employed in cutting charges that demolitions experts use to bring structural columns down.”

“He was going to take everything to the grand jury, but changed his mind when he became convinced that the FBI was determined to scuttle any investigative avenue outside the ‘lone bomber’ scenario. He was then hit with a subpoena demanding all of his materials relating to the bombing, including his lab test report—which has since vanished. Four days ago, his private twin-engine plane crashed in ‘mysterious circumstances’. Everyone aboard was killed.”

A flight attendant came by and offered them a drink. Spinner accepted a glass of wine, while McCabe ordered something he knew he wouldn’t drink. He then proceeded to fiddle with the cheap plastic swizzle stick. “Who else.”

“They’re the same people as in your files, McCabe.”

His files contained reports from over sixty reliable witnesses who had identified two Middle Eastern men seen with McVeigh during the week prior to the bombing. Eight independent witnesses had also seen

McVeigh and the same men in the basement the day before the bombing, doing what the witnesses had assumed was some 'telephone wiring.' To the best of McCabe's knowledge, nine of those witnesses had since died.

Angrily downing most of her wine, Spinner spent a good part of the flight relaying the remaining witnesses' stories in detail. Finally, she added, "Not one of them was asked to testify before the grand jury. On the contrary, they were directed to *not* make statements. And since most of them are Federal employees or cops, they've complied. The Bureau's fingerprint expert admitted to me that he'd been ordered—*ordered*—not to run checks on over a thousand fingerprints and palm prints taken from McVeigh's car and motel room. With McVeigh about to go to trial, they're still withholding twenty-two surveillance videos from the Murrah Building and the surrounding area!"

McCabe knew the details. He also knew that the 'Middle Eastern' men had been pulled off a flight to Jordan just hours after the bombing. When the FBI found bomb-making equipment in their luggage, one of the men confessed to having been a member of Hussein's elite Republican Guards. He'd emigrated to the US in 1992, along with Ramzi Yousef—the man convicted of the 1993 World Trade Centre bombing. More evidence that would never make it to McVeigh's trial.

"It makes no sense!" Spinner snapped.

Oh, but it did—now. "Garry Wade Benson—you remember, the guy with the bubonic plague?" said McCabe. "He might be a white supremacist but his paranoia is grounded in fact. Iraqi sleeper agents were sent to the US after the Gulf War, and some of them attempted to assassinate the eight Iraqi defectors. As Chuck said, they succeeded only in killing three."

She stared at him a moment. "And the remaining five were taken to Oklahoma. C'mon, McCabe, get to the point!"

He held the swizzle stick up to the light. There was no one, simple point. It wasn't a linear chain of events but a complex mesh of deception. Exposing just one part of the truth would bring the entire structure—and a good chunk of the US government—down like a house of cards. In order for Spinner to see that, she had to join the dots herself.

Her analytical perspective might also help him confront his own nightmare. Could he trust her that much? Or was it better to go to Susan? “During any investigation the first thing a profiler looks for is a pattern of behaviour. By definition serial killers are repetitive, and while their actions may escalate and evolve into increasingly complex scenarios, their behaviours can be predicted.” She glared at him impatiently until he said, “Based on the material evidence and numerous, creditable eyewitness reports, and, regardless of any preconceptions about the five Iraqi defectors or anything that furtive elements in this government may be trying to hide, what does the *evidence* tell you happened?”

The attendant offered to freshen their drink. Spinner shook her head while McCabe opted for a club soda. “No matter how illogical it sounds,” he added when the attendant moved on.

“All right.” She spoke in tones he knew well, an expert witness presenting cold, analytical data. “The plot to blow up the Murrah Building was conceived by Terry Nichols and Ramzi Yousef during one or more meetings in the Philippines. Nichols knew Timothy McVeigh wanted to punish the FBI and ATF for its actions at Waco. With the assistance of two Iraqi sleepers that McVeigh met through Nichols, McVeigh installed sophisticated cutting charges on the columns in the basement of the Federal Murrah building. The fertilizer in the truck was only the calling card; the primary blast occurred inside the building. Additional charges set to go off after rescuers arrived on the scene, failed to detonate,

possibly because the mechanism had been damaged in the initial blasts.”

“Okay.” He nodded in approval. “Now consider the pattern of behaviour and tools used within the context of past terrorist attacks on US interests. The Marine barracks in Beirut and the February 1993 bombing of the World Trade Centre. Spinner, in the first hours of the Oklahoma investigation, everything pointed to an Islamic Jihad cell in Tampa, Florida. This cell ties into a network of Osama bin Laden, which sponsored Ramzi Yousef’s group in the Philippines.

“Typically,” he added, idly tracing the patterns of moisture on the foldout tray with the stick, “people like Yousef concoct a plan, then, like a franchisee, they go to bin Laden for funding. Under a local banner, they then incite homegrown radicals to pull off the operation. That’s exactly what happened at the World Trade Centre. Bin Laden got pissed when we apprehended and convicted Yousef, because that’s never been part of bin Laden’s game plan. He likes to let the local organisation take the credit—and the fall, which may be a one-way ticket either to Paradise or a US Federal prison—while the franchisee moves onto the next disaffected country.

“It’s simplistic to dismiss the notion that white supremacists like McVeigh would shun Islamic fundamentalists, because both believe the American government is run by Zionists who support Israel. The enemy of my enemy is—”

“Still my enemy,” Jordan countered. The seatbelt sign went on, and the aircraft began to descend. “One minute you’re suggesting the Consortium is behind this, then you tell me it’s Iraqi agents, and now you’re claiming it’s bin Laden, whose fundamentalist philosophies are diametrically opposed to Hussein’s, but he’s ticked off about Ramzi Yousef’s prosecution?”

He smiled. "Go to the top of the class, Dr Spinner. You've grasped something the vast majority of the American people seems chronically incapable of understanding. It's dangerously naïve to assume that some sort of catchall mindless dogma universally motivates all terrorists. They work together *only* because of the belief in a common enemy.

"As to Iraq," he added, "during sentencing, Yousef said that he wanted to punish the American people, that, *The Iraqi people must not be made to pay for the mistakes of Saddam Hussein*, and that, *The United States tacitly supported Iraq during the 1980s, when Saddam Hussein killed thousands of his own citizens with chemical and biological weapons.*"

Her eyes widened in comprehension and she went to speak, but McCabe kept talking. "Bin Laden might be a fundamentalist, but he views the pillars of Western culture as our Achilles heel. He cheerfully raises capital through the stock market and charitable organizations, and he uses the darker fruits of Western materialism, like BW technology, and disaffected groups, such as anti-Semitic neo-Nazis, as potential *tools* against us. The hypocrisy is not lost on me, but he uses the term fighting fire with fire in a very clever, lateral-thinking manner.

"While McVeigh and Nichols' agendas were entirely different to those of Yousef and bin Laden, their goal was the same. To strike a blow at the United States government by bombing the Federal Murrah building."

There was a slight jerk as the plane landed. "What about Hussein and the Consortium? What did they want?" Spinner asked.

"The five Iraqi defectors housed in the building knew who was involved in manufacturing bioweapons in Iraq—I'm not talking about today, but twelve years ago when the US were pals with Saddam. Hussein wanted these five men dead because they were defectors. The Consortium wanted them dead because they could identify who had

worked with them on BW programmes. Four completely different motives, yet all desiring the same outcome.”

“You’re saying that the Consortium, including men like Williams, once supported Iraq’s BW programme?” Around them, people began to stand and collect their things.

McCabe bent the swizzle stick between his thumb and index finger until it snapped. He stood and dropped the two halves onto his seat. “It was a convenience that backfired. And it wasn’t just Williams, Spinner. One of them, the most brilliant and gifted of them all, perhaps, was my father.”

-Chapter 35-

Washington DC, April 19, 1996

Before Oklahoma, Jordan's contract renewal would have been a rubber stamp. Now, everything was an unknown, including where she would sleep tonight. She cared only insofar as she wanted to find the people who had ripped her soul out and... And now McCabe blithely informed her that his *father* was one of them?

Conversation had been impossible during the bustle of getting off the plane and through the crowded terminal. "Your father," she finally said when he pulled her bags off the luggage belt.

McCabe steered them out of the building with a gentle hand on her back. Friday evening in DC most people were trying to get out, not in. For once there were plenty of cabs. "He's dead, Spinner." His voice was devoid of emotion.

She wanted to say, 'I'm sorry' but instead demanded, "How long ago?"

"A year today."

"Good, God! Oklahoma?" she blurted, almost stumbling.

"No." He held the door open for her while she climbed into the cab. "Brant wants to see us on Monday morning. You can stay at my place. It's all there, even the family photos." Smiling bitterly, he added, "You'll like them, Spinner; snapshots of Ebola victims."

There was a lasagne in the oven, a salad in the fridge and a corked bottle of red wine—Australian—sitting on a table set for two. No candles. Jordan frowned. McCabe's understated but expensive taste in clothing, and Broadwater's comment about New England family ties had hinted at

old money, but she had still been taken aback by the size and comfortable stylishness of his penthouse apartment.

The first time she'd been there, Meg, middle-aged and motherly, had met them at the door and enquired politely whether Jordan would be staying for dinner. Later that night, when Jordan had been sifting through McCabe's files on Oklahoma, Meg had announced that she'd freshened up the spare bedroom and that there were clean towels in the guest bathroom.

McCabe's interest in her had never been anything more than professional. Even Meg hadn't presumed she was there to warm his bed. Saying no to the offer would have been petulant. Besides, the en suite alone was twice as large as most DC hotel rooms.

Each time Jordan had been to DC over the following months she'd stayed at his apartment. But this seemed a little too calculated.

"McCabe, did you tell Meg I was coming?"

"Meg should have been a detective, Spinner." He smiled crookedly.

"I'm serious, McCabe."

"Listen to this." He hit the button on his answering machine.

"Since you went to Oklahoma, I figured you might be bringing back that nice Dr Spinner. She'll be needing something warm and familiar, although I'm not sure if it's the right wine. I'll be in late tomorrow."

Jordan picked up the bottle of red wine. Expensive, even in Australia. She had always considered McCabe cold, indifferent, yet he employed a housekeeper who gave him humanity. Perverse. Contradictory. It fit.

"Tell me you didn't find Meg through the classifieds."

"Meg and her husband were live-in staff at my uncle's—my father's brother. I inherited her when they died."

"They?"

"My uncle was a diplomat. Died in a motor vehicle accident in Kuwait late last year. Meg's husband was driving."

“I’m sorry.”

“It was a lousy year. My brother got the house. I inherited everything else, including Meg. I got the better deal,” he added, smiling.

This was more of Joshua McCabe than Jordan had ever seen before.

“Why are you telling me this?”

He studied her a moment before replying, “To understand what’s going on, you need background. My background.”

“You father’s background, you mean.”

“My background is all I have to give. He was part of it, I can give you that.”

Her stomach growled. She had only picked at lunch.

“You wanna eat first?” He opened the oven and looked inside.

Suddenly, Jordan relaxed. She was tired, bone-tired, and the smell of lasagne, the oddly familiar surroundings, and even McCabe’s contradictions were the closest thing she had to familiarity and comfort.

After dinner, McCabe carried the coffees into the living room and placed them on the wood and glass table between the sofas. Instead of sitting, he walked across to where Jordan was examining a bookshelf that took up one entire wall.

She’d long since noted that the contents were mostly medical, psychology, and law books, with a strong showing of classical literature. There also were an entire section of unusual, gilt-edged books with Arabic text on the spines. Jordan fingered the scroll-like text. McCabe’s mother had been Egyptian, and he’d spent at least part of his childhood in Cairo. He was doubtless fluent in Egyptian Arabic and probably other dialects, for the same reason that she was fluent in French and several South Pacific languages.

Crouching, McCabe pulled a thick, leather-bound photo album from the bottom shelf, and handed it to her. She took it across to the coffee

table, sat on one of the couches and opened the first page. Ten cavity free smiles framed by ebony skin and enthusiasm stared out at her. Standing with them was a tall, olive-skinned woman with the large, slightly almond shaped eyes—a female version of McCabe. The next image was the same woman, this time her arm was around a short nun wearing a nurse's apron.

“Like Dave Wilson and Chuck Long, I had always suspected that the Ebola outbreak in Zaire was anything but natural.” McCabe sat beside her and picked up his coffee.

Jordan wanted to know what had happened to Dave Wilson, but when it came to explanations, McCabe would not be deviated from the course that suited him. Once again, she felt like she was being subjected to some sort of test, so she said, “You’ve just been to South Africa? Why?”

When he explained what had happened in Johannesburg, Jordan abruptly felt the wave of loss. Wilson, a man she hardly knew but someone who’d tried to expose the truth, was dead. Caught up in her own loss, once more she’d failed to see what was going on around her.

“Scientists, especially men like Tissot, really cannot destroy their own work, no matter how potentially incriminating,” McCabe added. “We knew Project *Jota* was real, Spinner. What we didn’t know was how far they’d progressed.”

McCabe all but slammed his coffee cup onto the table and ran back across his head in a gesture of frustration. “No doubt you noticed the glaring absence of Tissot’s photos in the reports that you read.” Leaping from the couch, he went to his computer desk, opened the drawer, withdrew a crumpled fax, came back and handed it to her. “Meet Dr Death—Albrecht Tissot.”

She examined the image of the man whose work featured so strongly in her research on bioweapons, trying to divine something, some obvious evil in his bland expression.

“Now look at the photographs on the second last page of the album,” McCabe added.

Turning the pages back, Jordan stared in dismay. Less wrinkled and with more hair, the same man was standing with his arms around two teenage boys. One was obviously Joshua McCabe. The second was an older, slightly stockier version.

“Tissot was a close family friend whom my brother and I called ‘Uncle Albert’—Albert Kraft,” McCabe continued.

He wiped a hand across his mouth—another nervous gesture, which was beginning to alarm Jordan. McCabe was never nervous.

“This photo was taken the week that Ed and I spent with him in Kinshasa, just before going upriver,” he said, looking down at the open page of the album. “My father must have already known the pattern of distribution of Ebola, so the cocky son of a bitch would have ‘known’ that my mother and I would be safe! But Uncle fucking *Albert* infected me. *I* was the one who brought it into the village. I was their living, breathing carrier of their goddamned fucking experimental bioweapon!” He abruptly strode into his bedroom.

For several moments, Jordan was too stunned to react. “McCabe?” She called, going to his bedroom door. When he didn’t answer, she took a hesitant step in.

It was dark in the room. She’d never been there before, but she knew the layout from a few passing glances. In the residual light from the living room, she saw him standing at the window, looking out into the night. The thin scabs over her emotions had been picked at today, but the anguish she’d seen on his face surpassed even her own. Walking in,

she gently grasped his shoulder and said, “Josh, you weren’t responsible. You couldn’t have known.”

A shudder rippled through his body. Jordan had once thought him cold, lacking emotions, but since Oklahoma she had become the same. As her hair grew out, most of the unmarried and a few married male members of the investigative team had tried, like Nate, to edge closer, but she quickly developed a reputation for aloofness, coldness. Like McCabe. Some considered them a well-matched pair.

He wasn’t looking for sympathy; he’d resent it as much as she would, but she understood him and his need for her now. “Tell me about it?”

Without turning, he said, “Nothing to tell. Places like that, Spinner, they’re used to diseases like Lassa, Marburg—Jesus, there are more haemorrhagic viruses than you can count. They’d normally hit, kill, and vanish back into the jungle before the outside world was any the wiser. Villages traditionally imposed a self-quarantine and then torched everything to stop the spread. Something as bad as Ebola normally burned itself out before it *could* spread.

He snorted. “But you know what breaks me up? Every time my old man looked at me, it was with loathing. He always made me think it was *my* fault.” McCabe squeezed his eyes shut, bit his lip and whispered, “And the hell of it was, he was right. But he had to have figured out that I’d been deliberately infected. Maybe not straight way, but later. Damn him to hell, he knew who Tissot was. Dad *must* have guessed what he was doing because he was just as hip-deep in developing BW technology himself!”

The tears finally broke free. McCabe slowly collapsed onto the floor, and Jordan pulled him into her arms, holding him close as he sobbed. It seemed to her that years of bottled up grief had finally been let loose. To be used like that... What sort of father would then allow his son to carry the burden of blame? But McCabe had already given her the answer.

“Your father was part of the Consortium.” She closed her eyes and held him close. It was incomprehensible to her that anyone could have chosen that road. “Why?”

He was quiet for a time, and then he said, “I grew up in the middle of a jigsaw coloured with moral greys. My life was mixed up amongst the pieces, but I never saw the pattern. And after Zaire, I deliberately chose not to.”

Lifting his head, he stared up and out of the window. A bitter smile twisted his lips and he added, “You saw how easily it can seduce you; the first day we met. It had long since seduced my father. Imagine what it was like. You spend your entire life dedicated to something that the government told you was vitally important, because the Reds were doing the same. Hell, it was your patriotic duty. Then, one day, without any warning, the same government orders you to chuck away your life's work. Not only that, want you to *burn* it, destroy it as if it never existed—and go play golf or something.”

As much as Jordan wanted to believe that researching bioweapons was intrinsically abominable, and that she would never have gone down such a career path, the way that McCabe explained it, there but for the grace of God and one generation...

“At the time,” he continued, still looking out the window, “a lot of people believed it was un-American, plain and simple, to tear up and burn research. Tantamount to book burning, Dad said. Nixon was a fool and everyone knew it. Abandoning BW research would make us vulnerable to what everyone but the CIA were convinced were very active BW programmes in secretive, repressive regimes like China, Russia and North Korea.” He took a deep breath and blew it out forcefully. “And history has shown us that they were right. Meanwhile, BW researchers were tinkering with haemorrhagic viruses collected in South America and Africa, unaware that the South Africans were ahead

of everyone. Tissot must have been laughing his goddamned head off, watching everyone chasing their tails, trying to get samples of the 'natural' outbreak of Ebola in 1976, while the CDC were simultaneously trying to stop it in its tracks. That was the beauty of it, you see. Ebola *is* a naturally occurring virus."

Although he did not withdraw from her arms, his refusal to meet her gaze seemed to be a way of him distancing himself from her. Or perhaps he was so focussed on that gruesome that he did not see her. She gently stroked his back.

A bitter smile crossed his lips. "For the South Africans, having BW was about subtlety. Their ultimate goal was to attack by using an untraceable weapon, one that could be dismissed as an unfortunate but natural outbreak. For the Russians, it was about deterrent, because they couldn't compete with our nuclear arsenal. They filled intercontinental ballistic missile warheads with tons of anthrax and smallpox and botulinum, stuff that was dirt cheap to manufacture."

"And Iraq?" said Jordan. "What was in it for them?"

"Wrong question, Spinner. What was in it for the men in our government who viewed Nixon's 'criminal blunder' as a temporary aberration that would be rectified by the next administration?"

"It's hard to hide a secret in a democratic society. Especially a secret that requires laboratories and manpower and complex technical support. Although Iraq was a signatory, it never ratified the BW treaty. Besides, nobody else was taking much notice of the treaty conditions, why should Iraq? Don't forget, Saddam only came to power in 1979 because of the help of the US administration. Back then we had a brand new Middle Eastern puppet and a whole lot of uninhabited desert. Just as importantly, Saddam runs a tight intelligence ship. Free speech and dissent were never part of his regime's vocabulary, and when it comes to things like testing BW, he's a moral leper. The Consortium, who

figured that they'd only needed to bide their time until Nixon had gone, said to Saddam, *Can we have a little of your desert to develop a few things? In exchange, we promise we'll share.*"

He finally turned his head to meet hers, and she caught her breath at the pain in his eyes. He lifted his hand to her face, stroked her cheek and leaned down to—

Abruptly, his hand fell away and he withdrew. Confused, she reached up to touch him and said, "Josh—" But, eyes turning apologetic, he put a finger to her lips and took her hand away with his other.

In that moment she understood that ending this conversation in bed would have been a mistake. Or was it something more? Had the nightmares that stalked him stolen more than his childhood?

McCabe stood and walked into the bathroom, turned on the light, and stared at the vanity mirror for a moment before washing his face. Then he resumed his explanation as if the last few moments, that almost intimacy, had never occurred. Jordan wasn't sure what disturbed her more, his words or his sudden and definitive drawing of that emotional line.

"Baby steps, Spinner. It wasn't anything untoward, at first. Test subjects were monkeys and dogs, just like they were back here in the States—still are, as you know from your work on the chimera. But then, the checks and balances that existed within the old US biowarfare development infrastructure eroded and crumbled. With no ethical constraints, people within the Iraqi regime were willing to assist with this extraordinarily lethal technology. France and the US were throwing research into Iraq in exchange for a share the biotechnological largesse. Let's face it; we'd already demonstrated our willingness to test BW on our own unwitting civilian population with Operation Large Coverage.

"Then Khomeini took Americans hostage at the Tehran embassy. Amongst diehard right-wing advocates like Robert Williams and my

father, Jimmy Carter was considered more of a traitor than Nixon. Carter sat castrated and ineffectual while Iran thumbed its fundamentalist Moslem nose at the once mighty but now apathetic United States. We had, as some put it, become a nation of immoral weaklings, a fat and clumsy lion whose claws had been pulled.”

Yanking a towel from somewhere unseen, McCabe ran it across his face, adding, “While the Consortium was congratulating itself for retaining our BW capacity, war broke out between Iraq and Iran. And so, our patriotic Consortium had a ready-made opportunity to do what every weapons’ developer dreams of, a real live war to test their Frankenstein’s tiny dolls.”

He must have caught the look of repugnance on her face because his lips curled in a brief, knowing smile, and, walking back into the bedroom, added, “The US government wanted to ensure victory ‘at any price’.”

Standing, Jordan asked, “How could the Consortium have funded all this without anyone knowing?”

He made a sound of disgust and walked back to the window. Jordan could see outside to the streets below. The earlier rain lent an artificial freshness to the DC lights. “When it comes to black money,” he said, “our government’s sleight-of-hand abilities were honed during the Cold War. And the Consortium was—still is—a shadow part of our government. And they turned a blind eye when Hussein saw an easy way to rid himself of a few other pressing problems, like the Kurds and the Southern Marsh Arabs. But what no one planned on as Hussein turning rogue.”

He turned and faced her again, his expression more like the one he habitually wore. His demons had been buried once again, but Jordan was hardly taking any notice, for her own anger was beginning to surge into focus.

“Then entire nations like South Africa and the Soviet Union started unravelling at the seams, he continued. “But while the old South African regime hid their technology in Tissot’s garage and dreamed of the day when *Die Organisasie* would eradicate the black man from Africa, the BW technology, the scientists and the bugs the Russians had developed, spewed across the globe to the highest bidders.

“By then it was clear that the US had lost all control of Hussein. He knew we—and I mean the US, France and Russia—wouldn’t move against him.”

“Because you knew what he had. You’d helped him develop it!” The anger in her continued to grow.

“And Hussein knew the names of those in the Consortium, and he knew where the bodies were buried.

“UNSCOM was hobbled from the beginning. Not just by Hussein, but by Consortium, members working within the UN—French, Russian and American—to scuttle the inspections. They’re shit-scared of the truth coming out. It’s a cat-and-mouse game across a dozen nations, because equally, the Consortium *wants* the US to take BW technology very seriously, and it wants Iraq disarmed. And, just like Tissot wanted to turn back the clock and reinstate Apartheid, the Consortium wants the US government to return to the good old days before Nixon pulled the plug.”

“That’s insane! That would instantly trigger a biological arms race.”

He shot her a look. “Too late, Spinner. You know that. When Clinton stepped up to the ball plate, he brought with him the approach of make the third world a better place by sharing the largesse and everyone will love America. It’s a lot more cost-effective than bombing our enemies into the Stone Age, but it’s also naïve. Rogue states like Iraq and North Korea are years ahead of the US in their BW programme. They have no interest in making the world, especially the parts inhabited by their own

people, richer or better, because that would undermine their power base. The Consortium, people like Williams and my father and whatever other misguided ‘patriots’ are in on this—hell, for all I know half the people who were on that flight to New Zealand—are scared. Jesus, Spinner, Fort Detrick is practically in mothballs; USAMRIID has been downsized to a fraction of its original level, which is why Susan Broadwater has to go to the CDC cap in hand every time she wants to work with a Level 4 organism, and the CDC’s facilities are so decrepit most of them should have been bulldozed years ago.”

Snorting in disgust, he turned and switched off the bathroom light. “UNSCOM’s scratching around the desert tuning up scraps. Sure, the top weapons inspectors aren’t fooled. But to others, including a Republican dominated Congress, the *lack* of evidence is seen as proof that Iraq’s biowarfare programme is defunct. Jesus, talk about affirming the consequence!” He folded his arms and shook his head in disgust. “Clinton knows that the new enemy is not a nation but an ideology that uses terrorism as a weapon. Fighting that hinges on the need to prevent radical Moslem organisations from acquiring bioweapons and other WMDs. But Congress keeps refusing to approve the legal authorities necessary to wage this war on terrorism.”

Jordan leaned against the bed frame, almost light-headed. He was right, terrifyingly right—not just about the CDC, but everything else as well. The Consortium, the vigilantes, had decided on a wakeup call. And to protect themselves from discovery, they had—what? She grabbed his arm and demanded, “Blowing up a building just to kill five potential witnesses—”

“Hours before the bombing, the head of the Saudi Intelligence Service called the CIA’s former chief of Counterterrorism Operations to report that Saddam Hussein had hired terrorists to bomb the Murrah Building.”

“The Saudis *warned* us?” Her grip on his arm tightened.

A look of sympathy crossed his face. In all the time that she had known McCabe, she had never seen that expression, and it made her gut crawl. “*What?*”

“Think about it, Spinner. Given the number of people who normally worked in that building, a hell of a lot more than one hundred and sixty eight should have lost their lives. ATF and other federal agents, hell, even the judge who initially presided over the McVeigh case had found pressing reasons *not* to be in the building at the moment the bomb was detonated—they’d been tipped off on their pagers.”

Jordan had thought her emotions had been pummelled to the point of numbness, but each new revelation had its own impact. *All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.* A few people were alerted, fewer killed, but Williams said, *Sacrifices have to be made.* These were not good men, and all they had to do was—nothing.

Her anger finally burst open and she grabbed McCabe by the arms and tried to shake him. “They knew and warned a precious few, and they let kids, *my son*, be butchered....*fallout* in some twisted plan to ‘protect’ the American people from bioweapons that they themselves had developed! Who killed my husband and son, McCabe?” The pain of unshed tears—tears she thought had dried up and withered along with her soul—fractured her voice as she demanded, “You’ve known all along your father was involved and you never told me! Who are these people, McCabe? *Who are they?*”

The feel of his arms around her only inflamed her further. She tried to pull away from him, but he held her tightly until she no longer had the strength to battle him. She wanted to keep yelling at him, to demand the answers, but a persistent kernel of logic railed at her. He was as much a victim as she.

He was taking again, explaining his father had joined the CDC's Special Pathogen's Unit—or so he'd thought until reading Tissot's journals. McCabe released her, walk back into the living room and, selecting another photo album from the shelf, he began turning the pages.

Following him, she said, "And when the American public learnt the truth?"

"The American people have an unquenchable thirst for conspiracies, from Roswell to JFK to Elvis," he replied, intent on whatever it was he was looking for. "The various Oklahoma conspiracies are just more urban myths to be discounted by anyone but simpletons and the gullible supermarket tabloid set."

"But what about the evidence?" Jordan said, desperate to cling to anything of substance. "Williams killed Adams because of what Adams knew!"

"Adams wasn't much of a field man, but he was dogged, determined, and he had an extraordinary eye for detail—which is why he was assigned to the evidence room in the McVeigh case. Internal surveillance tapes show him having dinner in the cafeteria with Williams, and Adams was very animated, even excited."

Apparently finding the page that he was looking for, McCabe looked up and added, Spinner, you had to have known Adams. He was about as excitable as a week-old corpse. But he admired Williams, respected him, and he must've found something so extraordinary, something that implied a conspiracy that he went to the one man he trusted.

"Williams would have told Adams not to act rashly, but to 'sleep on it', giving the Consortium time to deal with the problem. The next day, Adams didn't go to the evidence room, but he did go to his computer—and found the hard drive had been wiped clean. That's when he came to me. But that's just my opinion.

“And with Tissot’s files gone, there’s no supporting evidence,” she said, trying to control the desperation in her voice.

McCabe’s eyes took on a cunning look. “Maybe not all of it. Here, take a look at this.” He handed her the album.

There was no label on the photograph, only a date: 1985. Jordan examined the faces of three Iraqis standing in a group that included an older, thicker-set grey haired version of McCabe.

“These three,” he said, pointing to the Iraqis, “are the same men I saw in Tissot’s files.” He reached across and pulled the photo from its sleeve. “I think I know where the rest of these photos are. And they’re all labelled.”

-Chapter 36-

Washington DC, April 20, 1996

The Virginia countryside was green and warm with the freshness of spring. The welcome at the McCabe residence—Jordan might have called it a mansion, but it wasn't quite large enough—was a little chillier. Artfully situated in a picturesque setting, complete with grazing horses, manicured lawns and mathematically perfect white picket fences, the stately home was more than well kept, it was pristine. A woman in soft grey jodhpurs and spotless riding boots met them with a curious smile—that froze at the sight of McCabe.

“Joshua,” she said in the well-rehearsed frigid tones of her upbringing. “How lovely to see you. We missed you at Christmas.” But then her face and tone softened. “Thank you for the gifts you sent the boys. Josh, we really did hope that you would come.” She placed a polite, antiseptic kiss on his cheek, then her eyes turned to Jordan. Her expression said that she was waiting for the Brooklyn drawl.

Judged and found wanting in her Wal-Mart jeans and oddly cropped blond hair, Jordan smiled.

“Julia,” said McCabe, “this is Dr Jordan Spinner.”

“Nice to meet you,” said Jordan, holding out her hand. “It's a beautiful place you have here.”

Julia's expression turned perplexed. Jordan was vaguely amused; McCabe was not going to explain her accent. It seemed his predilection for deliberate obtuseness extended to his family. But then, given what he had told her last night; secrets were an integral part of the family business.

“Is Ed here?” McCabe asked.

“You should have called first, Joshua.” Julia pouted, showing off an impressive and no doubt expensive set of carefully plumped lips. “He’s out riding with the boys.” Then her face cleared. “C’mon in and stay for lunch. I’m sure he’ll be delighted to see you.”

Julia McCabe’s mercurial behaviour intrigued Jordan. An hour later, she understood why. After a round of delighted greetings from ten-year-old Robert and eight-year old Jack, the boys ran upstairs to change for lunch. When the children were out of earshot, Ed McCabe led her and McCabe into the library. Closing the door, Ed turned to his brother and said, “And FBI investigation of me is not exactly what I’d expected by way of a Christmas present, Josh.”

“You heard about Albrecht Tissot?” McCabe shot back.

Ed’s frown deepened. “Yeah. I’ve been trying to access what they found. Why? What’s this about?” He held out his hand in the direction of some comfortable looking leather chairs.

The contrast between the two men was remarkable. They both carried the same athletic build, and both were tall, but where Josh was lithe, Edward was muscular, almost brawny. Facially, there was some resemblance, but Josh had inherited his mother’s fine bones and full lips. He looked more sculptured, while Ed’s features were rougher, more like his father’s.

Accepting the faxed photograph that his brother handed him, Ed’s eyebrows lifted in surprise. “Uncle Albert. Haven’t seen him in years, since...” his voice faded as he tried to recall the last occasion.

“1976, in the Congo,” McCabe replied. “That’s Albrecht Tissot.”

“You’re kidding...” Ed’s head shot up, and his eyes widened. “Jesus H. Christ. You’re *not* kidding!” He stared at the photo again and rubbed his hand across his jaw. “I don’t believe it!”

While McCabe’s expression didn’t alter, Jordan sensed his relief. The older McCabe had visibly paled—his shock was genuine.

“Now I know why my life’s been under a microscope.” Ed looked at his brother. “How long have you known, and why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“I only recently found out.”

“Then why—?”

“I spent Christmas in quarantine. Because of an ‘Ebola-like’ organism.”

The furrows across Ed’s brow flattened in disbelief. He sat forward in the chair and demanded, “*You* were on Mathew Island? What the hell were you doing, Josh? You’ve always hated—”

The library door opened. “C’mon everyone, lunch is served.” Julia was balancing a tray of drinks in one hand. “Outside by the pool.”

Over the smoked salmon mousse, Julia engaged Jordan in polite conversation, trying to extract the maximum information with minimal curiosity. McCabe applied his social face and played the perfect visiting uncle. By the time lunch was over, Jordan had decided that he really did like his nephews; it wasn’t a façade.

Finally, the boys were whisked off to baseball practice, disappointed that their father and uncle couldn’t come. When the maid cleared away the dishes and they were alone again, McCabe said, “Dear old Uncle Albert.”

“I’d like to claim you were insane for even thinking it, but...” Ed’s voice trailed off, and he again examined the photograph of Albrecht Tissot. “Why the charade? And why deliberately infect you and not me?” He pushed the photograph aside.

“It was an outdoor experiment,” McCabe replied. “You were the control.”

Ed stood and putting his hands in his jodhpur pockets, paced the wooden decking by the pool. His restless energy was a slower, calmer

version of his brother's. "Dad never blamed you for Mum's death. You blamed yourself."

"You weren't there." McCabe's eyes darkened. "You never understood the silent retribution."

"Have you ever considered that maybe he blamed himself?" Ed pulled his hands free and came to sit back down. "That maybe what you saw as loathing was *self*-loathing? That you were a...reminder of *his* failings?"

"That's exactly what Susan said. Which begs the question. Why did he never tell me—or you—the truth? He *knew* who Tissot was!"

"You don't know that!" Ed snapped and leaped up out of the chair again. "We knew him as Albert Kraft!"

"Hell, everyone knew everyone else back then. It was like a goddamned bunch of Masons in some elitist, secretive club." McCabe's face screwed up in disgust. "Dad had to have known that that son of a bitch infected me. But he hid the truth, and we both know that could be for only one reason. C'mon Ed," he added knowingly. "We both know how seductive it is."

"Don't try me, little brother." Ed swung to face him. "Save your mind games for your serial killers." But his voice softened as he admitted, "Up until 1972 Dad was part of the weapons' development programme. He was hardly around much when you were little, do you remember? We took all those 'holidays' to Hawaii, and Dad would disappear for days, weeks at a time."

"Johnson Atoll. I read Tissot's notes. He and Dad compared results."

Ed nodded. "Dad ran some of the most important tests. They were making remarkable progress. Initial kill rates beyond fifty, even sixty, percent. But the CIA...Josh, I don't know exactly what happened, but somehow they convinced Melvin Laird to arm-wrestle Nixon into shutting

down the entire BW programme, right on the eve of some of their most important discoveries.”

“They never shut it down though, did they? They just moved it out of view. And patriot that he was, Dad went right along with it.”

Ed continued to shake his head. “No. Mum was spending so much time in Africa by then, that Dad saw it as an opportunity to—”

“Bullshit. I might have been a kid, Ed, but I remember that night when Dad came home and accused Melvin Laird of being America’s worst enemy.”

Pinching the bridge of his nose between his fingers, Ed continued to shake his head. “That was a knee-jerk reaction.” The look on his face was as unsure as the tone of his voice.

“You suspected.” McCabe withdrew the photo of the three Iraqis with his father. “What about all those postcards we got from Baghdad? Now look at the date—1985.”

Jordan could see the same look of denial in Ed’s face that she had herself experienced the night before. He continued to shake his head as he said, “The line between defensive and offensive research is a hair’s breath, Josh. Dad worked for the Defence Department. Naturally there were things he never discussed with me. All I know is that there was a lot of bitterness over at Fort Detrick. People quit, most went across to the CDC or to Europe, to the WHO. Hell Josh, I was in medical school, you were at boarding school; you saw more of Dad than I.” He pointed to the photo, “And it’s an open secret that, back then, our government supported Hussein. This photograph doesn’t prove a damned thing. You can even tell where it was taken!”

“Tissot kept everything. It substantiates what Meryl Nass speculated happened in Rhodesia. The South Africans had already sourced Ebola, although that’s not what they called it, but they weren’t sure about it, they needed to experiment with it first. They used an isolated natural

outbreak in Zaire in late 1975 as a readymade cover. These men were Iraqis,” McCabe took the photo and returned it to the folder. “Because I saw photos of them with Tissot, in Iraq, dated 1984. Hussein wasn’t fussy about sources. Even back then he was playing with everyone.”

A note of desperation crept into Ed’s voice. “What else did Tissot say about Dad?”

“It’s mostly anecdotal, nothing that would incriminate him after 1972. The only direct evidence is this photo.” McCabe tapped the folder. “And that’s useless unless I can find out who these men are—or were.”

“Were?” Ed frowned.

“We think they may have died in the Oklahoma bombing,” said Jordan.

“Is that where you fit in?” Ed’s gaze shifted to her.

“Dad also kept journals, Ed. What happened to them?”

Hesitating a moment, he said, “As far as I know the Army went through the house at Martha’s Vineyard. They took pretty much everything. You saw what was left.”

“He would have expected the Army to do that.” McCabe glanced inside the house. “You ever get around to cleaning out the basement?”

“I’ve been promising Julia I’d do it, but you know what it’s like down there. It’s the size of a large apartment and Uncle Dave accumulated an amazing amount of stuff from his postings. I figured I’d make a weekend of it, with the kids, kinda like a treasure hunt. Now, I’m not so sure.” His lips thinned, and he added, “But it would make sense that anything Dad was trying to hide, he’d have kept here instead of the Vineyard. Listen, Josh, tomorrow morning we’re leaving early, I’m taking the kids fishing. Why don’t you come by, say, after 7:00am?” Standing, he reached into his pocket for a set of keys, and handed them to McCabe. “I’ve just had all new systems installed. The security code for the alarm is Granddad’s birth date. We won’t be back until after six tomorrow evening. In fact

make it later; we'll stop at a restaurant on the way home. I'd say give me a call on your cell phone, but I don't think the reception is too good up there, so let's make it no later than 7:30pm.

"And Josh," he added, "you find anything that incriminates Dad, I want to see it first."

When they arrived back at his apartment in DC, Jordan went into the bathroom. Seconds later, she heard McCabe call, "*Spinner!*"

Running out, she started to say "Wha...?" But he grabbed her arm painfully and yanked her out the front door.

"Fire!" he screamed, banging on apartment doors as he ran. "Get out! Everyone out now!"

"What fire, McCabe?" She tried to stop but he unceremoniously picked her up, slung her over his shoulder and ran down the fire escape. Behind her, she could hear people opening doors, asking each other what was going on.

"McCabe—*Josh!*" she demanded, angry now. "Put me down!" She tried to struggle, but he retained a tight grip on her for the entire eight floors, then tossed her onto the grass outside with a bone-jangling thump. "What the hell's gotten into you?" She demanded, sitting up.

He was already running back to the apartment block. "Run!" he screamed at her over his shoulder. "Bomb!"

"McCabe...!"

A bright explosion—Jordan could have sworn she saw the pressure wave—knocked McCabe backwards before the sound reached her ears. Then came the smoke and dust and grit and memories shredding the fabric of her sanity.

The screams in her ears were hers. She couldn't stop, until she felt McCabe's arms around her, pulling her to her feet, then holding her tight. Her cries dissolved into sobs until finally, she managed to bring

herself under control. Lifting her hand to his chest, she touched him. How was it that he was still okay? His scalp was bleeding and he was saying something, but the ringing in her ears wouldn't go away. Then it changed pitch. Sirens.

McCabe walked her to a park bench opposite the building. Fire poured out of the gaping wound where his apartment had once been. The rest of the building appeared relatively untouched. Shattered glass. Wails. Shouts of confusion, cries of disbelief.

Fifteen minutes later, Jordan stepped down from the paramedic's truck, nursing a bruised hip where McCabe had thrown her to the ground. That and a few minor facial cuts seemed to be her only injuries. AD Brant was standing at the back of another paramedic's van, talking on his cell phone. The medic was still bandaging McCabe's arm. Glass had sliced through his dark suit, cutting him in several places, but not badly. A dozen other residents of the building were being treated variously for shock and minor injuries. Four had been whisked off to hospital, but no one had been killed or badly injured.

Determined to take control of herself, Jordan stood, thanked the paramedic, and walked over to the second van.

Brant stopped talking and looked to her. "Dr Spinner, are you all right?"

Nodding confidently, she replied, "Yes, sir. McCabe," she demanded. "How did you know?"

McCabe glanced at the paramedic, who was still working on his forehead. "Meg left a meal in the oven and a note on the door."

"So?"

"She always leaves messages on the machine."

Jordan ran her hand across her forehead. "Just once, McCabe, can you cut to the chase?"

“Her note said that the cable company came, and she didn’t want to touch the telephone answering machine because they’d mentioned something about high-speed Internet access and telephone lines.”

“But you already have...oh!”

He glanced at Brant, who was still talking on his cell phone, and added, “I can’t reach my brother.”

“Oh, God!” Jordan’s stomach knotted and she reflexively brought her hand to her mouth.

“County Sheriff’s department is sending men out there now,” Brant said, snapping the machine shut. “I’ve already dispatched agents.” The phone rang again.

Jordan saw Brant’s face harden. His eyes kept moving around, watching people, looking for...what? Then he turned to McCabe, his jaw grinding in anger.

“Tell me!” McCabe demanded, pushing the paramedic’s hands aside.

“Your brother’s house,” replied Brant. “It’s on fire. They’ve called the local brigade—no explanation as to why they weren’t alerted sooner—but the sheriff doubts there’ll be much left by the time they get there.” Before McCabe asked the obvious, Brant added, “Both cars were still in the garage, no sign of the family.”

The world contracted. Jordan wanted to reach out to McCabe, but she was frozen, immobilized by fear and grief. His pain became hers until she could no longer separate the two. The boys, just children, more discarded refuse in this endless insanity.

Brant grabbed her before she hit the ground, picked her up in his arms and carried her to his car.

-Chapter 37-

Washington DC, April 21, 1996

The odour of charred timber drifted across the paddocks. Those horses that had escaped the stables nervously paced the sodden earth, their eyes white with fear, their heads tossing back and forth in apparent denial. A vet stood over one animal lying on the grass. Four animals had already been put down. As McCabe watched, three men gently coaxed the others to them. SUVs with horse floats waited lined up by the fence.

So far, firemen had found three bodies, or what remained of them. The heat had been so intense that the men were still speculating on the type of accelerant. It was going to be difficult, if not impossible, to locate the exact source point, they muttered.

More than twenty dark-jacketed men and women with yellow FBI labels on their backs rummaged through the remains, nimbly avoiding crime scene tape and yellow marker flags. Four more investigators stood around a gaping black hole in the ground. It had once been the basement. Fires burned up, not down, so it seemed likely to have started here, they opined. Paint, gasoline, hell, you know the sort of stuff that people store in these old basements.

The heat of the blaze was still evident in the smouldering remains, but it was just an echo, weak and stunted compared with the demon raging in McCabe's soul. He could already predict the line of investigation and the outcome. There was nothing more for him here, nothing he could divine from the scene, nothing he could use to find the guilty. He knew the reason, the *motive*. And he knew the perpetrators. Not those who had lit the match, but the ones who had ordered it. He knew them; he saw them every day. They walked the halls of the FBI and the Pentagon

with impunity, their names and faces obscured by lies and deceit and fabrication.

He turned away.

"I was wrong in doubting you, McCabe." Brant's jaw worked back and forth in anger. "These...people. There are things happening in the FBI... As of last evening the investigation into the chimera has been taken over entirely by the Department of Defence. I called you... *Fuck it!*" Brant pounded the railing with a meaty fist. "My call—I—triggered the bomb in your apartment!"

His jaw moved back and forth for a moment before he added, "Team members on the original chimera investigation are being reassigned as we speak; all files on it are being handed over to the DOD. Most everyone involved is being reassigned, or has disappeared into the woodwork."

"Susan Broadwater?"

"She's been sent to a post in Germany. Left early this morning." Brant spun around and strode to the dark car where Assistant Director Reynold stood talking to the fire chief and county sheriff.

Reynold looked at Brant, and then gestured for Spinner and McCabe to join them.

"Get in the car," Reynold ordered when they reached him.

McCabe hesitated, but then climbed in the back seat. Spinner got in beside him while Brant sat in the front.

"What's going on?" Spinner muttered.

"It's being cleaned up, Spinner," McCabe replied knowingly. "All the loose ends are being cauterized, one way or another. The public believes the outbreak on Mathew Island was natural. Those who know the sanitised 'truth' understand that it was a biological attack by Middle Eastern operatives as a warning to the United States. It's a perfect, ready-made conspiracy theory, a lie within a lie, just like Oklahoma."

“What about the investigation of Williams?” she demanded.

“The only lead we ever had was a dying Agent Adams warning us of a possible biological attack. Don’t forget, I’m the only one who drew the connection between Williams, Oklahoma and bioweapons, and I had...issues with Williams. As far as everyone else is concerned, Williams went nuts and blew his brains out.

“Maybe I made a mistake,” McCabe added, staring coldly at Brant’s reflection in the rear-vision mirror. “Maybe I drew the connection where there was none. After all, neither Williams nor Adams said the chimera had anything to do with Oklahoma. We just happened to be working on that investigation at the time. Agent Joshua McCabe will be sent to purgatory for a ‘grave error in judgment that unnecessarily consumed FBI time and resources to investigate unsubstantiated allegations connecting Robert Williams to terrorist activities.’ Am I close to the mark, *sirs?*”

Brant’s face reflected rage at the deception that had been played upon them all. “Even the President accepts it as a necessary political compromise if he really wants this war on terrorism on terms that Congress can live with.”

“I warned you at the beginning.” The exhaustion was beginning to creep over his. Not physical exhaustion, but the kind that longed for something more permanent. “Williams was mind-fucking me—*all* of us. He knew all along how it would play out—and I walked right into it.” So much for having an edge because he was still alive.

“The bomb in your apartment and the fire here...” Spinner’s words trailed off.

“Loose ends, Dr Spinner,” Reynold said, turning the key in the ignition.

“That vindicate your theories, McCabe,” Brant added.

“They vindicate nothing!” McCabe took in the smoking embers that had been his brother’s house and the charred remains of the two small boys in dark green body bags. “The fire will prove to be explainable; a leaky can of gasoline in the basement, accelerated by paint tins and thinners and any other convenient shit they feel like tossing into their report. The fire alarms? Hell, it was an old house, faulty electrics, even if Ed had only just had the system replaced. Sad, tragic, but nothing nefarious. The bomb in my apartment? How many psychos have I put away who are now roaming the streets, looking for payback?” He stared at Reynold’s reflection and snarled, “You should have waited until after I’d pulled the trigger before coming to my office that morning. Would have saved everyone a lot of trouble—and not a few lives, including what was left of my family after everyone else was conveniently *removed!*” His low voice cracked with bitter remorse.

Reynold turned the car onto the road. “It gave you a reprieve,” he said in hushed tones. “Now I’m going to ask you to take another one.”

When Reynold told them, McCabe burst out laughing; it was perverse—and perfect. It made purgatory look like a Club Med vacation, and it protected him by placing him smack bang in the middle of one of the most volatile place on Earth.

“I’ve arranged for Dr Spinner to go, too.”

Spinner, who had been looking out the window, arms wrapped around herself, suddenly appeared attentive.

“No,” McCabe barked. “It’s too dangerous. She’s not an FBI agent; she was never trained for this sort of thing.”

“She’s been asking questions, McCabe, too many questions. Do you think last night was just about you? Their virologist has left the team and they could do with a pathologist—and Dr Spinner is a native French speaker.”

Eyes wide, Spinner stared at the back of Reynold's head. "Advise that contract not be renewed, huh?"

"Your call, Dr Spinner. The alternative is that you get on this afternoon's flight to Canberra. Australian Federal Police are keen to have a pathologist of your calibre and experience working for them. New job starts a week from Monday, comes with a fully furnished house and a car. Wages are better, too."

McCabe began to relax. At least something could be salvaged from this, his all-time greatest fuck-up. "Take it, Spinner," he said. "Dig any deeper and you're digging your own grave. Get out now and you can get on with your life." He turned and smiled at her, a sad, honest smile. "Go home, Jordan," he whispered, using her given name for the first time. "You're not going to stop these people; you could just as easily stand in front of a hurricane and demand it stop. Go on home; you did your best, no one can ever fault you for that."

Jordan sat back into the folds of the plush upholstery. The months of emotional agony, the frustrations, the leads that disappeared into the halls of government, protected by people bound by a dark secrets and wielding far greater influence and power than any nineteenth-century secret society, and now the shocking violence, all of it suddenly weighed down upon her.

Her grandmother lived on a rural property about an hour's drive from Canberra. Home. It fit like a comfortable pair of slippers and favourite couch. The water tank where they collected green frogs, the bluetongue lizard living in the old backyard dunny—along with the poisonous red-backed spiders. The horses were not as sleek as their Virginia counterparts, but the cows were bigger, and the sheep's wool was thicker. Skiing in winter was just a few hours' drive south, summer beaches a few hours east. She hadn't much liked Oklahoma, but she'd

had Jamie and Douglas and a job she enjoyed, one that challenged her. She had a life. Canberra would be a good place to heal, and maybe, just maybe she could start living again.

-Chapter 38-

New York and Baghdad, January 1998

Chuck Long twirled drippy cheese around the corn chip and stuffed it into his mouth. A dollop barely missed connecting with his sweater and landed on the tablecloth. He poked his finger at a series of lines and arrows on the paper napkin, and nodded emphatically.

Replacing the lid on his pen, McCabe pointed to the rough map, and said, “We start out in this direction, then turn towards the university just as the first classes go in. By the time we arrive, he should be just finishing his lecture.”

“And we lose our keepers in the bustle of students rushing to get to the next classes,” Jordan finished. She tucked a strand of shoulder-length hair behind her ear and bit into the taco.

If nothing else, working for UNSCOM had introduced Jordan to some spectacularly good restaurants within a five-block radius of their New York offices. With the other weapon’s inspectors they would often pick a café or bistro at random, converge on it for a meal, and sketch out their ‘attack’ using eating utensils and paper napkins. The tactic had seemed absurd at first. But, as with every facet of her and McCabe’s lives, paranoia wasn’t a state of mind; it was a way of life. Their arbitrary choice of meeting places was just one more ploy in the bag of tricks they used to confuse Iraqi spies.

Two years earlier, Jordan had been given the chance to walk away. But she hadn’t been able to take it. Her reason for accepting Brant’s offer to join UNSCOM hadn’t been about bravery or self-sacrifice. It hadn’t even been about revenge, although that had certainly factored into it. It had been about waking up every morning knowing that people—trusted people—within the government of the world’s last

superpower held the leash to a doomsday Andromeda virus. The Consortium might have destroyed proof of its existence in South Africa and the United States. It could not, however, do anything about the evidence in Iraq—because Saddam Hussein was tenaciously clinging to the bounty of their prior relationship.

United Nation Resolution number 687 decreed that Iraq must unconditionally accept the destruction, removal, or rendering harmless of its weapons of mass destruction. While UNSCOM's mandate was to make certain that Hussein met the terms of that Resolution, Jordan and McCabe's was to find out who had armed Iraq in the first place. The fact that the two of them were genuinely part of UNSCOM was the perfect cover, because it gave them unrestricted access to information on all of Iraq's WMDs—including its research on bioweapons.

Unrestricted was a relative term, of course. Hussein's goal had nothing to do with compliance and everything with wearing down everyone by playing a bizarre shell game. He'd even gone so far as to issue a Presidential Directive that ordered his men to deceive UNSCOM.

As a result, the inspectors would pinpoint the right locations, then Hussein's Special Security Operations, alerted by a network of spies that somehow had infiltrated the inspectors' NY offices, would spirit away incriminating materials and scientists just before the UNSCOM team arrived. The Special Republican Guard provided the muscle, silencing people or simply making scientists disappear while claiming that they'd emigrated to the US.

To acquire the specific evidence that Jordan and McCabe needed had meant making a few unofficial excursions into Iran, northern Iraq, and Afghanistan. More often than not, such trips had involved running gun battles. Jordan had lost count of the number of times she and McCabe had saved each other's lives—generally at the expense of

someone else's. But the information and their strategies were beginning to pay off. They had managed to piece together a litany of deception that proved the US involvement in the Iran-Iraq war. They also had documented evidence that the French and Russians had continued to provide Iraq with growth medium, fermentation tanks, and expertise to develop BW, paid for in part by contraband oil.

Jordan took another bite of her taco. Beside her, a retired British Marine named Jonathan Brookes picked up McCabe's napkin and examined the scrawl between chilli smears. "That's the best route to the university?" Brookes asked.

"I've worked out alternative approaches in case we get the usual soda delivery van accident or some such excuse for the road being blocked," replied Chuck Long.

"I calculate we need five additional people," said Mikhail 'Mike' Shevenko, a Russian who had spent most of the eighties and early nineties hiding bioweapons from US inspectors himself. He pointed to where McCabe's scrawls indicated windows and fire exits. "Outside the College of Pharmacology here, here, and around here." Mike knew the game because he'd invented most of the rules. Those under suspicion commonly heaved documents out of the windows as soon as the inspectors entered a building.

This time, their target was Professor Shahir Al-Qaedi, an Oxford trained microbiologist who had worked with the toxin, ricin. The team had tried to interview Al-Qaedi on several occasions, but it seemed the good professor took an inordinate number of sabbaticals. Thanks to Jordan and McCabe's latest unofficial visit to Iraq, the team had learned that Al-Qaedi was lecturing at Baghdad University this week. Unfortunately that knowledge had come at the cost of the informant's life—which also meant that none of the inspectors knew what Al-Qaedi looked like. And records from Oxford were oddly missing his photo.

McCabe glanced at her across the table. Jordan didn't say anything; she didn't have to. Like any partnership between those constantly thrust into dangerous situations, the two of them had long since learned to read one other's state of mind. More importantly, they had learned to trust one another. McCabe's plan should work.

The UNSCOM team arrived in Iraq early the following morning. Instead of the normal pattern of checking into their hotels and spending the first day slicing through obsequiousness, the inspectors decided to take their white Nissan Patrols and Land Rovers and hit Baghdad University immediately.

Despite their well-planned tactic, Jordan, McCabe, Chuck Long, Jonathan Brookes, Mike Shevenko, and their five support personnel spent all morning running around the university looking for Al-Qaeda, while their Iraqi keepers constantly ran interference. It was more good luck than good planning when Brookes, the ex-Marine weapons' expert, recognised an Iraqi colonel in mufti running up the big central staircase. He was in a hurry. Brookes signalled to Shevenko, who was a few metres away, carefully observing the between-classes traffic, then Brookes followed the colonel up the stairs. Just as he reached the top, Brookes literally bumped into a tall, silver-haired man dressed in a dove-grey Savile Row suit. The man was carrying a large satchel. Brookes smiled, held out his hand and said, "Hello, I'm Jonathan Brookes."

Before the colonel could stop him, the man automatically replied, "Professor Al-Qaeda. Have we met?" Immediately the words left his mouth, Al-Qaeda paled and his hand went limp.

The colonel's features turned dyspeptic. He went to muscle Brookes, a large man even by Highlander standards, aside, but the even larger Mike Shevenko was already there, smiling through his shaggy beard and angling himself with Brookes to box Al-Qaeda in against the

banister. It was all very friendly and drew no more than brief glimpse from the passing students. Exactly what the inspectors had hoped for.

“Would you mind terribly if I had a quick look at what you’re carrying, Professor?” Brookes asked in his Sean Connery accent.

“Perhaps in your office,” Shevenko suggested, gently but firmly gripping the professor’s shoulder.

While McCabe and Brookes, the Arabic and Farsi experts, pored over the documents, Chuck Long, Jordan, and Mike Shevenko more or less dismantled Al-Qaeda’s third floor office. An hour later, they confirmed that the professor had kept a complete dossier on Iraq’s research on ricin. This provided the elusive link between the civilian Biological Section of the Iraqi Scientific Research Centre and the military’s biological weapons programme. For UNSCOM, the ricin documents were a major breakthrough. But for Jordan, it was the faces staring at her from one of the dozens of photographs on Al-Qaeda’s office wall that provided the Eureka moment.

“McCabe,” she said, carefully suppressing her excitement.

He was sitting on the floor dressed in fawn coloured jeans and an open neck shirt, his dark hair flopping over his forehead as he quickly scanned each page of the confiscated documents.

Reaching down, she shook him by the shoulder. “McCabe.”

He looked up, and then his gaze shifted to the framed picture in her hand. He all but snatched it from her fingers.

It was an old photograph, perhaps fifteen years, but the distinguished features of Al-Qaeda were recognisable. That was not, however, what had grabbed Jordan’s attention. Staring at them from the print was a group of thirteen men standing outside an industrial plant. She recognised eight of them. It had taken time and a lot of wangling with the CIA, but Brant had obtained the names and photographs of the eight Iraqi’s who’d defected to the US in 1994—five of who had died in

Oklahoma. Three of those five were the men from the photo album that had been destroyed in McCabe's apartment two years earlier.

McCabe studied the image for long moments, reacting only when Jordan pulled the photograph from his hand and thrust it under Al-Qaedi's nose.

"Who are these men?" she demanded. She knew that eight were dead, and one was Al-Qaedi. But who were the other four? Had they been the defectors who had remained in Kuwait? If so, she wanted to know where to find them, now.

Visibly angered by the cavalier manner in which his office was being ransacked, Al-Qaedi replied haughtily, "They emigrated to the United States in 1994."

"Standard Evasion number three," Shevenko drawled. "It's getting a little stale. Try something else."

Jordan was about to stop Shevenko. Al-Qaedi was telling the truth, at least about eight of the men. McCabe silenced her with a look. If pushed, the professor might overstate his case and reveal more than intended—and they still needed the names of the remaining four.

"Hussein bullied them into going with him," Al-Qaedi added bitterly.

"Saddam Hussein?" Shevenko said, confused.

"No. Hussein Kamel. You already know this!" Al-Qaedi snapped. "You play this childish game, harassing me, harassing my country when you *know* Kamel employed these men to run his secret research on viruses."

"Here we go." Shevenko crossed his arms. "Standard Evasion number four, 'It's All Kamel's Fault'."

Ignoring him, Al-Qaedi turned to McCabe, "First, your CIA tortures three of these men to death, and then five die at the hands of one of your own disaffected citizens! Even I know that the others turned tail and fled from your country to Kuwait."

“Then you will have no problem telling us who all of them they are, yes?” Shevenko demanded.

When Al-Qaedi rattled off the twelve names, McCabe said, “Try again.”

Al-Qaedi’s nostrils flared. “If you would care to follow me to the Registrar’s office, I will see to it that you are provided with their complete academic records. The names I gave you are correct. I have no reason to lie!”

Brooke and Chuck Long had already taken the bulk of the ricin papers back to the Unimog, a four-wheeled, light-armoured vehicle that was legally a piece of UN territory. Inside the Unimog, the Brit was photocopying the papers and Chuck was sending them to New York via a satellite burst transmitter. Jordan glanced at McCabe. Using the sign language they had become so adept at, they agreed there was nothing more to find in Al-Qaedi’s office.

“The good professor’s probably got a bone to pick with the Registrar,” McCabe muttered to Jordan as they followed Al-Qaedi downstairs.

“Either that or it’s another delaying tactic,” Shevenko said, shooting a sceptical look at Al-Qaedi’s back. Swamping them with mountains of useless paperwork was Standard Evasion number five.

The University Registrar, a pock-faced little man in a dapper, cream-coloured suit, invited them all into the office and began what Jordan assumed was going to be another round of ingratiating obfuscation. To her dismay, the registrar proved to be very much like his fellow countrymen—those who did not work for Hussein—an exceptionally congenial host.

“Very sad. They were some of our best scientists,” said the Registrar. He led them to the huge records room in the basement. With the customary Iraqi penchant for record keeping, he then proceeded to locate the extensive, well kept files on every single one of the men in the

photographs. And, unlike what Chuck had been told by the CIA, it turned out that all twelve men had been scientists.

Within minutes, Jordan and McCabe had the information that had eluded them for so long. The CIA, indeed, specific individuals within the CIA, had deliberately misled the FBI by falsifying the names of the men who had died in Oklahoma. These false names had effectively and very efficiently led her and McCabe on a two-year long wild goose chase.

In the hope of deflecting UNSCOM's attention from the ricin documents, Al-Qaeda suddenly became extraordinarily helpful. When it became obvious that Jordan and McCabe were particularly interested in the role that the United States had played in setting up Iraq's bioweapons' programme, the dyspeptic colonel, the registrar, and his assistants all but fell over themselves providing the inspectors with what McCabe described as the mother load.

The Consortium had successfully managed to deconstruct much of its history, but it had been unable to reach all the way back to the late 1960s to the meticulous records at the University of Baghdad. Nor had they been able to delete or doctor any names associated with the dead men and the projects that they had been working on—including the US sanctioned use of BW during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s.

What Jordan and McCabe now had was a virtual membership list of the Consortium. It included French nationals who had helped train the now deceased Iraqis in the development of BW, high-ranking members of the French military, and a number of Russian scientists who had worked with Netyosov—the man who had developed the Ebola-smallpox chimera.

Many of the US citizens were also top-ranking individuals in the military, FBI, DIA, DOD, including Robert Williams and Robert McCabe, and the CIA, including the person who had falsified the names of the Iraqi scientists and lied to the FBI: Brad Montgomery.

Williams had covered his tracks, but many of those listed were too high profile to scurry for cover. Inside the Unimog that evening, Chuck Long helped Jordan and McCabe transmit copies of everything directly to now Deputy Director of the FBI, John Reynold, the office of the Vice President of the United States, the US Attorney General's office, and the United Nations.

-Chapter 39-

New York, February 22, 1998

Jordan and McCabe's discovery of the records in the University of Baghdad remained a tightly guarded secret. This was made easier by the furore that resulted over UNSCOM's unearthing what would later become known as the Al-Qaedi ricin files, the confiscation of which instantly sent Saddam into a frenzied rage. In defiance of the UN Resolution, he reacted by declaring all of his presidential palaces off-limits. The standoff threatened to escalate until Kofi Annan flew in to personally negotiate with the Iraqi leader. At the same moment the meeting with Annan and Hussein ended in Baghdad, Jordan sat down for dinner with Nate Sturgess in New York.

"I've just had three weeks eating maize and more maize, flavoured with freeze dried vegetables." Nate tossed her a self-deprecating smile. "I swore I'd had it with field trips after Mathew, but here I am, at it again."

"The more things change, huh?" A crisp white napkin appeared on Jordan's lap, courtesy of the *mître d'*.

"Less bureaucratic infighting, more money, but the mud and bugs are the same." Nate perused the menu and beamed. "Steak, rare."

When the *mître d'* had finished taking their orders and left, Nate added, "What's the story with the Security Council? Why are they trying to railroad Richard Butler^{iv}?"

"Thereby hangs a tale. The Security Council consists of a pasty-faced French woman who hates Richard's guts, an overbearing Russian who thinks he's an ex-KGB heavy, and a pompous little Chinese official who dresses badly and suffers from chronic halitosis. To date UNSCOM has shown that Iraq produced ten *billion* doses of anthrax, botulinum toxin, and aflatoxin. They also found evidence of VX gas—"

“Didn’t the French labs fail to confirm that?”

Jordan began poking a saltshaker with a breadstick. “Yeah. The very same labs that failed to confirm your Mathew Island beastie was anything other than dengue.” Nate was still under the impression that the chimera had been manufactured in Russia and sold to a Middle Eastern terrorist group. He had knowledge of the Consortium, but, like everyone else, he also knew that France had substantial economic ties with Iraq.

Frowning, Nate said, “The French government has always insisted that Mathew suffered a ‘particularly virulent strain of haemorrhagic dengue’. The doctors and lab workers at the Pasteur Institute, some of whom I considered to be friends, not merely colleagues, wanted nothing to do with me after Mathew. As far as the French government is concerned, I’m the only one who survived, so I’m a coward. Or worse.” He shook his head. “You know all this. Don’t let me interrupt.”

“Nothing much more to tell.” Her stabbing grew a little more enthusiastic than was good for the bread stick. It broke. She brushed the crumbs to one side. “Every time UNSCOM sees smoke, whenever we try to get evidence of the fire the Special Security Operations make it disappear. Then they call in journalists to disprove our ‘ridiculous’ allegations.”

“Meanwhile,” Nate said sourly, “the shortage of medical supplies and humanitarian aid to Iraq continues. I’m not criticizing you,” he added quickly, raising an apologetic hand.

“Let me tell you something,” Jordan said, carefully keeping her rage in check. “It’s public, if not common, knowledge that, while our ships—and yes, I mean Australian Naval ships—are in the Gulf busting a gut to intercept illegal smugglers, millions of gallons of oil are being shipped by tanker convoys from Iraq into Lebanon, Iran, and Turkey, our *ally*. You do realize that China is the single largest consumer of Iraqi oil? In

exchange, using the same back door route, Russia, China and France are sending in anything—*everything*—that Hussein wants! Now do you see why they hate Richard? And what the press is *not* saying is that Iraq's earnings from contraband oil could clothe and house and feed and provide first class medical services to every last goat-herding citizen, and each of the Bedouin tribesmen! Instead, Hussein's using the so-called 'sanctions' to tighten the noose around his people's throats, proving to the world that the UN are the bullies."

She shook her head angrily. "Saddam may be a psychopath but he's a bloody cunning one with a hell of a flare for PR. If he ever defects, someone on Madison Avenue will snatch him up."

"Have you ever found out for sure who—" Nate stopped and looked around before added, "Mathew?"

"They're blaming Iraq."

"Jordan," he said with a frown. "What if...what if *they're* wrong? What if someone else has it? What if next time," he added, sitting forward and lowering his voice even further, "it's not a truck bomb in a building, but a sudden, unexplained outbreak of 'haemorrhagic dengue?'"

Giving herself time to think, Jordan chewed the end of the broken bread stick. Although it would take time, two to three years to carefully pull all of the pieces together, the legitimate powers in the US government now had the evidence that would ultimately bring down the Consortium. While the discovery of the Baghdad university files had given her a sense of great satisfaction, she realised, even before she'd caught the next flight out to the States, that her world-view since joining UNSCOM had altered radically. As much as it sickened her to admit it, in its own twisted way, the Consortium had been right. Dealing with the moral lepers who made up the Iraqi regime had taught her that BW now presented the single greatest threat to mankind's existence. Saddam's bioweapons' capabilities *had* to be destroyed.

"I know Nate," she replied tiredly. "That's why we can't give up. It's why I *won't* give up."

Someone was at her shoulder. Jordan instinctively reached into her short black jacket for a weapon that had become as much a part of her as her wristwatch.

Nate's expression just stopped her in time. "Josh!" he declared, standing from the table. "Hey, glad you could make it. When you said you were tied up I thought... What is it?"

Turning around, Jordan saw the artificially calm look on McCabe's face, and her heart began to pound. "What?" she demanded.

"Kofi Annan has just kneecapped UNSCOM," he replied, his voice stiff with tension. At Nate's incredulous look, he added, "Not deliberately; he's had the wool pulled over his eyes. Annan signed a new Memorandum of Understanding between the UN and the Republic of Iraq. It prevents us from accessing anything that Hussein wants to call a Presidential Palace."

Then she saw the documents in his hands. "Josh?" she said softly.

Wordlessly he pulled out the chair, sat down and handed her the sheets. They were a printout from a website run by the Arabic newspaper, *Al-Quds al-Arabi*. The text was in Arabic. "Osama bin Laden," he said, "has issued a fatwah declaring a war on the United States and all of its citizens and interests^v."

Nate's eyebrow arched inquiringly. "What's a fatwah?"

"A ruling on Islamic law," Jordan replied, watching McCabe. She knew he'd most likely memorised the content, but she handed the document back to him. "What does it say?"

Barely glancing at the paper, he replied, "*In compliance with God's order, we issue the following fatwah to all Muslims: the ruling to kill the Americans and their allies, including civilians and military, is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it*

is possible to do it. It's endorsed by bin Laden and one of his top lieutenants and leader of the Al-Jihad organization in Egypt, Ayman Al Zawahiri, run under the banner of the International Islamic Front for Jihad on the Jews and Crusaders."

It was the first time in US history that an ideology, not a country, had declared war on the United States. And over the following days, not one US newspaper, radio or television station would report it.

The waiter arrived with the steaks. "You want to order dinner?" Nate said. McCabe shook his head. When the waiter was gone, Nate added, "I thought those two, bin Laden and Hussein, hated each other's guts?"

No longer hungry, Jordan sat back in her chair. She'd made the same objections to McCabe two years ago on the flight from Oklahoma. God, how naïve she'd been back then. "They do, but bin Laden's extraordinarily opportunistic and has a specific, long term goal, one he believes may take up to a century to fulfil."

"Which is?" Nate prompted.

"The establishment of a worldwide Islamic state," replied McCabe. "One based on fundamentalist principles that make the Dark Ages seem scandalously progressive."

"Sounds like your typical nutcase terrorist with delusions of grandeur," Nate said dismissively, but as he brought the small chunk of pink flesh to his mouth, he froze. Putting his fork down, he said, "What? What did I say?"

"If UNSCOM can't disarm Iraq," McCabe replied, "the United States will. And if the US invades Iraq then Hussein, the very same dictator who brought new meaning to the term 'scorched earth', will do as promised and give bin Laden the keys to Armageddon."

"The chimera!" Nate paled and pushed his plate aside.

"After what Kofi did today," Jordan said in a strangled voice, "UNSCOM is on borrowed time."

Iraq didn't have the chimera, but Hussein had other pathogens, more than enough for a fundamentalist like bin Laden. The Saudi might not operate under quite the same principles as Aum Shinrikyo, but it was no exaggeration to think they might all be on borrowed time.

*

The attack came seven months later, and this time, there was nothing ambiguous about who was responsible. Mohamed Rashed Daoud al-Owhali and Mohamed Sadeek Odeh admitted that they had been under direct orders from Osama bin Laden to bomb the US Embassies in Nairobi and Dar Es Salaam. The bombing of the embassies achieved what the chimera had not. Congress was finally sitting up and taking notice of what the—now departing—President and his key advisers had been saying for the past six years.

Terrorism, specifically fundamentalist Islamic terrorist groups like al Qaeda, not nations like Iraq or Iran, was the new enemy. This twenty-first century war was not about politics or lines on maps, it was about ideologies. By the same token, the US could not risk a disaffected Saddam maintaining bioweapons. Clinton ended the matter decisively in December 1998 with Operation Desert Fox. McCabe and Jordan had been right, UNSCOM's days were numbered, but the inspections had served their purpose. Saddam's WMD arsenal had been dealt a fatal blow. He would likely regroup in time. After all, as one inspector put it, destroying a heroine junkie's stash does not cure his addiction. But for now the US administration's attention was focussed on the growing danger of al Qaeda.

-Chapter 40-

Washington DC, December 22, 2000

The disbanding of UNSCOM in the summer of 2000 meant that in order to build the prosecution of the case against all members of the quasi Masonic like tendrils of the Consortium, Jordan and McCabe would need a new cover. They were assigned, along with hundreds of other agents and operatives from a dozen agencies, to trace the convoluted financing of al Qaeda and affiliate organisations. It was a legitimate cover, for the lessons of Mathew Island had not gone entirely unheeded. Hussein had been hobbled but Bin Laden might be developing his own BW arsenal.

Following the terrorist paper trail, Jordan and McCabe crossed paths with other, older trails that led to further evidence against the Consortium. Slowly, systematically, the FBI and Justice Department built the cases against hundreds of US and French nationals, all highly placed within their respective bureaucracies. The links between these men and women demonstrated that a rogue element within the US government had been given advance warning of the Oklahoma bombing. They failed to act on this foreknowledge in order to neutralise the five Iraqi BW scientists who could blow the whistle on the Consortium's covert involvement in developing BW in Iraq between 1969 and 1989. Like Russia, France, China, and North Korea, the Consortium had seen the 1972 BWC treaty as an excuse to continue their BW experiments under a veil of secrecy. It was not restricted to a handful of renegade scientists and generals; it was a fully funded secret US government policy buried in so many layers that every White House administration after Nixon could genuinely claim ignorance. Williams hadn't just been trying to protect the Consortium's programme, which

appeared to have been dismantled in 1990—the same year he left the military and joined the FBI—he'd been trying to protect secrets that operated outside of, and independent to, Democratic or Republican regime changes. Realising that they'd handed Hussein the keys to the Pandora's Box of bioweapons, the Consortium had decided to shake up their respective administrations with a demonstration of the efficacy of a bioweapon on Mathew Island. The fact that they used a chimera that could, given the technology of the day, not have been developed prior to 1994, meant that the Consortium had still operated a viable BW's programme until at least December 1995.

If the US government's—albeit unsanctioned—role in the development of weapons used on the Kurds and disaffected Iraqis who opposed Saddam's murderous regime ever became known, men now in top US political and military postings would, rightfully, be dragged before an International War Crimes Tribunal. It would make the Watergate, Iran-Contra, and Lewinsky scandals look like a minor playground spats. The Consortium had become a secret bureaucracy in its own right, one that wished to both perpetuate and protect itself. And rightly or wrongly, it simultaneously sought to protect the core structure of the United States government.

While the investigative team had names and places and dates, the trail linking it to Oklahoma was still missing one vital clue. What had Agent Adams stumbled across to provoke Robert Williams into acting as he had?

As Joshua McCabe had suspected, the evidence had been right under their noses all along.

The pounding of the pavement beneath McCabe's feet was hypnotic. The feel of the leather strap of his ankle holster was a comfortable reminder of security. Tiny silver lights had turned the park, usually a

dark and somewhat dismal place, into a winter fairyland.

His step faltered when he realised he was running towards Spinner's apartment. No need to analyse what that meant. He abruptly turned and headed back. Spinner had made it clear that she wanted this week alone, to unpack and settle into her new DC home. Unpack what? he'd asked. She only owned a couple of suitcases. Hadn't she sent everything else back to Australia? Her closed expression had told him otherwise. He'd said nothing, done nothing to imply that he knew exactly what she would be doing with her time alone.

In truth, he wasn't entirely certain *what* she was doing. Jordan Spinner had erected defensive walls around her emotions years ago. The closer they had become as partners, the more they had come to trust one another professionally, the tighter she had closed her grip on her deepest feelings. He once thought he knew her better than she did herself. He now wondered if that was the problem. Sometimes it seemed Spinner acted contrary to his expectations just because she could.

Just as he left the park, the cell phone vibrated in his pocket. He pulled off his glove, and, slowing down, glanced at the number. "Yeah?" The lights turned green. He stepped off the icy curb to run across a wide intersection. When there was no reply, he lifted his watch cap from his ear. "Spinner? What is it?" Halfway across the road, his step faltered. Worried now, he stopped running. "Spinner!"

"I'm fine, McCabe." Her flat, measured tones told him otherwise. "Do you think you could come by?"

Ignoring the flashing red pedestrian light, he turned, and ran back across the road, reaching the gutter just as the first car shot past him with a muddy, half frozen splash. "I'm about five minutes away. It's snowing and I'm drenched. I'll come if you promise me a hot toddy."

"McCabe..." Her voice trailed off into a vaguely annoyed sigh.

“I said toddy, not teddy,” he added, trying on some humour. It failed.
“Spinner?”

“I’ll see you in five.”

He made it in three.

When she opened the apartment door, McCabe carefully examined her face. “Don’t tell me you called me all the way over here to fix your heater,” he quipped.

She walked inside without speaking.

Glancing down at his running shoes, he said, “Unless you want your new apartment’s carpet ruined...”

Absently, Spinner handed him the towel she was carrying, then turned and walked into the kitchen.

“Thanks.” He pulled off his shoes, closed the door, and went to the fireplace. The flames hungrily bit into the freshly stacked pieces of firewood. Whatever was troubling her, she was still thinking clearly enough to deal with mundane tasks—something that often eluded him. Of course, this was Spinner.

The apartment wasn’t a whole lot different to when he’d first seen it, just a few weeks ago. Meg had found it, declaring it was ‘just perfect’. And it was, in a completely different way to the apartment Meg had found for him. Looking around, he saw a big Apple flat screen sitting on the stylish, purpose built pine desk. A scattering of file folders and papers, and an empty jewel case was stacked up near a printer.

Spinner returned with two steaming mugs of what smelled like chocolate. He smiled his thanks and accepted the drink. She had called him; whatever it was she wanted, it had to happen on her time, in her terms.

“I was going through Douglas’ things—his paperwork. Although I suspect you know that.” She tucked a few hairs behind her ear in a familiar, nervous gesture, then went to the desk and picked up a piece

of paper. "I came across this."

The paper looked like an old spreadsheet, listing what appeared to be usernames and passwords for Internet service providers. "And?"

"Most of them are out of date; they're old FTP access codes for file servers. The ones that still exist are just public access files, the sort of thing Douglas used for work, although these are five years old."

McCabe nodded. Five years were a lifetime in the software industry.

"I'm showing you these so you can see the kind of codes Doug used. He didn't really need records; he had an extraordinary memory—like you. Not eidetic, but close. Then I saw this." She reached across the desk for another paper. It was a letter offering Douglas Spinner a contract in Iraq.

"These were in a sealed box in his attorney's office in LA." She glanced down at the floor where a bunch of file folders sat in an archive box. "The firm were moving offices and came across them, and, well, forwarded them to me. There's not much in them, but on the cover of one was...here." She picked it up. "There's a label with the date, and this."

Setting his mug down, he looked at the label. It could have been a series of index numbers but it looked more like the format on the spreadsheet. "An Internet service provider and password?"

"That's what I thought." Spinner sipped her chocolate. "On a hunch, I tried an FTP programme and..." Her words trailed off and she bit her lower lip.

It was completely out of character for her to hesitate like this. "You connected," he said.

"McCabe, you saw all of his files, the ones I gave you from the server. Doug worked for the federal government, or at least, that's what I thought. I found details of a bank account in Gibraltar—with a balance in excess of several million dollars."

The man she had loved and grieved over, who had fathered a child with her, had lived in a secret world. It did not come as a shock to McCabe; he knew all about secret worlds.

“At first I assumed it was the equivalent of a Swiss bank account hiding undeclared money he’d made during the height of the dotcom era. But I soon realised you were right. This is why my apartment was ransacked after Oklahoma; the hidden files that Adams found and Williams died to protect. They were never included in the forensic evidence used to convict McVeigh. The CD was listed under ‘victim’s personal effects’.”

He looked at empty CD case on her table. It was cracked and dirty and distorted by heat.

Sitting in front of the computer, Spinner grabbed the mouse and clicked an icon on the desktop. The message declared the disc ‘untitled’. It was empty, a blank.

And that was when it hit McCabe.

“Back then was the Jurassic age of computer networks. But Douglas was...brilliant. He didn’t just set up networks. He had access to highly confidential files. And he kept a record.”

If her husband’s memory was as good as Spinner said, and he’d been dodging taxes, he would not have needed to keep a record unless he’d intended using the file as proof of something. Or for blackmail.

“The day before the Oklahoma bombing, something was troubling Doug. He’d put a CD on to burn just before coming to bed that night. He generally did that when there was a lot of data to transfer because CD burners back then—”

“Took all night.”

“I know he took the CD with him when he dropped me off at work, because I almost sat on it in the car. Instead of leaving Jamie at the day care centre and going home like he normally did, Doug told me that he

was meeting someone in the sixth floor, but he had a few minutes to kill. Jamie loved riding in elevators, so Doug took him for a ride.

“McCabe, take a look at this CD.” She ejected it from the computer. “It’s mint new; there’s not a mark on it. Now look at the jewel case.”

The cracks in the plastic were filled with dark dust. He sniffed it; residual traces of carbon, a burnt smell. As he’d suspected, there was also heat distortion but the label adhered to the inside although damaged and hard to read, showed Douglas Spinner’s name and contact details.

“Doug always labelled both the CDs *and* the cases. He might have had a good memory, but he was a meticulous file keeper when it came to other people’s work. He made a point of tagging all of his blanks when he bought them. The FBI returned some of Douglas and Jamie’s personal effects almost immediately—but this CD and a couple of other items were only returned to me *after* McVeigh’s trial. I never looked at it before; I had no reason to.”

It was not the evidence, but the *lack* of evidence that proved it had been tampered with. McCabe fingered the disc. “All they had to do was replace a CD.”

“The original CD probably was damaged, just like the jewel case. But Agent Adams must have found a way to retrieve the data. And we know exactly what was on it, what Adams’ saw!” Spinner declared.

She had obviously retrieved the files from a previously unknown server, and read them before calling him. It was the evidence they had been looking for. Douglas Spinner had kept a journal of his trips to Iraq between 1980 to 1988. The files contained photographs, many of people that McCabe recognised, including his father and the five Iraqi scientists killed at Oklahoma. Some of the photos were eerily reminiscent of those destroyed when his apartment had been blown up.

“The ‘five’ were kept on the sixth floor of the Federal Murrah Building,”

he said. “Spinner, your husband must have seen them—or they recognised him. Douglas wasn’t blackmailing anyone,” he said, gently clasping her shoulder. “He was providing supporting evidence to their claims!”

“McCabe, if we try to do anything with this before McVeigh is executed—”

“I know,” he said, unable to hide his excitement as he read the titles of the files. Her husband really had been meticulous. He’d kept records of the initial experiments with the chimera, including the names of the researchers. There was even a mention of Mathew Island. And it had all been undertaken in the United States. The Consortium had moved their operations back home, and easily hidden themselves amongst the hundreds of burgeoning biotech companies scattered around Washington DC. “It’ll take months to tie it all together, Spinner, and build a watertight case, but we have ‘em!”

Pulling up another chair, McCabe grabbed the mouse and began flipping through the files at random. It was all there, all the things they’d been searching for, and more, far, far more. And all this time and it had been sitting right in their laps.

It took him a few moments to realize that Spinner wasn’t moving. He glanced at her. Her normally tanned face was stiff and pallid with shock. “What is it?” he said, standing.

“The money,” she replied in a cracked whisper. “Where did Doug get so much money? And why did he hide it? There’s only one reason, McCabe. Douglas knew what these people were doing. He hacked into their files for years, even after they moved back to the States. He knew about their plans for Mathew—that’s what Agent Adams saw. He either kept a record to blackmail the Consortium. Or worse, he was working for them!”

Tears rolled silently down her face. Despite the horrors they had

encountered over the years, he'd never seen her lose control before.

"Welcome to the family business, Spinner."

She collapsed into his arms as grief welled up and burst out in deep, aching sobs.

-Chapter 41-

Nadi, Fiji August 04, 2001

Miriam Singh looked at her washing machine in disgust. Her brother, Tashi, had given it to her as an early Christmas gift in 1995. Miriam remembered the occasion clearly because she had come home from work, somewhat disgruntled that the airport toilets had not produced a more lucrative haul. And there, waiting for her in the outdoor kitchen, was a brand new washing machine! Electricity and lighting were relatively new, luxury items in this part of Nadi, but a washing machine! It would elevate her status in the community beyond measure.

Tashi had made a great deal of money from Miriam's fruitful job; a modest washing machine was a small thing, but then Miriam's needs were few. He'd promised her that if things went well, he would buy her a refrigerator the following year.

But things had not gone well. The disease that struck down Mathew Island in Vanuatu had also devastated Fiji's economy. Then Mathew Island had erupted and a tsunami had hit the southern coastline of Viti Levu, killing dozens and destroying coastal resorts and hotels. Fiji had reopened for business soon after, but because of the fear of disease, tourists—and their dollars—had stayed away for months.

"It's broken!" Miriam declared. "And Moti didn't come to work today."

Moti was her Melanesian house girl; a middle-aged woman whose job was to clean the house and look after the younger children while Miriam was at work. It was normally Moti's job to do the laundry, but in the last weeks the house girl had become increasingly unreliable. Old fears and resentments had rekindled since hundreds of Fijians had been laid off work in the sugar industry. The new Prime Minister was Indian-Fijian, not Melanesian, and there were rumours of discontent in the military.

“Maybe it’s just a fuse, or the solenoid,” Tashi said, and directed two of Miriam’s eldest sons to pull the machine from the wall.

Shaking her head, Miriam went into the house to fill the bathtub with water. She was on the nightshift at the airport. If she hurried, she could soak the clothes, and her daughter could wash them when she came home from school.

While Miriam scratched shavings of coconut soap into the bathtub, she listened to the radio. The outside world thought of people like her as part of the ‘Fijian-Indian’ problem. Her great-grandparents had been brought from India to Fiji to work the British owned sugar plantations—the indigenous Melanesian Fijians having been dismissed as too lazy. Generations passed, and the Indians had thrived socially, economically and after the British had left, politically. It soon became clear that the Indian population, who had purchased the sugar plantations from their erstwhile masters, and who now dominated Fiji’s economy and political structure, would outgrow the numbers of native Melanesians living in the island nation.

The upshot was that in 1987, Colonel Sethi Rabuka had led a bloodless, military coup against the government, demanding that constitutional changes be made to guarantee that Melanesian Fijians rights, especially in matters of land ownership, culture and self-determination. Fiji belonged to Fijians. Indians were imports, guests. The coup had instantly dented the perennial ‘friendly islands’ image Fiji had once presented to the world.

Miriam had been at work when the military arrived at the airport with their trucks and their guns. She’d crouched in the corner; terrified that they would shoot her. The soldiers were happy for the tourists to leave; part of their plan was to destroy Fiji’s economy, which was almost entirely dependent on tourism and sugar—industries dominated by Indians. The scramble to leave the country had continued for three days.

Miriam had convinced the soldiers to let her do her job; consequently she had brought home a considerable haul from panicked tourists anxious to escape on whatever flight they could.

Eventually things had returned to normal. The tourists had returned, the economy had recovered and racial tensions had eased. The country had its share of natural disasters, annual cyclones, floods, unexpected outbreaks of dengue and of course, the problems that had come about because of Mathew Island, but politically, things had been going well—until a young upstart Eastern Province Fijian with a university education began stirring up old resentments.

Tugging a worn sweater around her shoulders, Miriam left for the four-mile walk to the airport. People outside Fiji thought it was all about Indians versus Fijians, but that was wrong. It was a power struggle between the Western Province Fijians and the Eastern; Indians were political pawns in the middle. But the grumblings amongst native Fijians grew louder every day. Unless the Prime Minister acted, she feared something bad would happen.

In the laundry shed, Tashi was examining the rusty, soap-encrusted fittings. In the void where the machine had stood was a tawdry pile of socks and underwear, a five-year old collection of items that had slipped behind. He picked up a blouse that had been wedged between the washer and the laundry sink. It was old and smelled a little mouldy, but it had remained surprisingly intact during the five years of its confinement. Tashi shook out Katie Wood's discarded blouse, wiped his greasy hands on it, then tossed it on the pile of mildewed socks. Hundreds of chimera particles scattered into the air of the dark laundry room. Despite sharing living space with an assortment of mould spores, the chimera had lost none of its potency.

Tashi took a deep breath and stared at the machine. He figured it would take him three days to get the parts to fix the washing machine.

In three days he would be dead.

-Chapter 42-

Canberra, Australia August 13-16, 2001

The soap bubbles slide down Jordan's leg and into the water. She had always loved her grandmother's bathtub. Its enamel had cracked and the bronze claw feet were dull green with corrosion, but it was a warm, private place to escape her brother.

Thankfully, she'd seen little of Brian after he'd left Vanuatu to attend boarding school. Her parents had doted on him whenever he'd returned, leaving her to feel forgotten and, if she was honest with herself, resentful. Finally, it had been her turn to escape, except that, instead of going to boarding school, she'd been sent to live with her grandmother and attend day classes at the local college. Even during school holidays she hadn't flown back to Vanuatu. Brian and their parents had joined her and her grandmother in the big old Canberra farmhouse. Consequently, Jordan hadn't been to Vanuatu in years. Except, of course, for their little boat trip to Mathew Island.

She turned her attention back to the National Geographic programme airing on the portable television. Mathew Island, declared the narrator, was just a tenth of its original size. The volcanic eruption six years ago had transformed it into a low-lying horseshoe shaped chunk of basalt, with a narrow, beach of ebony sand. Hundreds of white seabirds had taken to roosting on one of the island's craggy cliffs. With nowhere to land their helicopter, the film crew had contented itself with documenting the pockmarks in the shallow water near the western end of the island. Underwater vents, they explained. In a few years one would break through the steel-grey waters, Mathew Island would begin to rebuild itself, and the two coconut trees and short grasses that had taken root on the beach would seed, and extend to that side of the island. Then in

another millennium or two, the volcano would once more burst forth in monumental fury and—

“Georgie?”

Jordan winced. Brian had been only three years old when she was born. Unable to get his mouth around her name, he’d called her Georgie and done so ever since. It hadn’t much bothered her until he started calling her Georgie Porgie, teasing her for her tomboy traits. “Yeah?” she replied, trying very hard to keep her tone marginally less acerbic than she felt.

“Some guy named Nate calling from Sydney. I hope it’s not something to do with work, Georgie. You promised you’d spend the week helping me clear out this dump.”

Climbing out of the bathtub, Jordan grabbed her Grandmother’s old robe and wrapped herself in it. It was winter, cold enough outside to freeze the pond outside, and the bathroom wasn’t much warmer. That’s another thing they would have to take care of, the ducks. “It’s not a dump,” she said, angrily opening the bathroom door and snatching the phone from Brian’s hand.

He sneered and returned to the kitchen.

“Nate? Nate Sturgess?” she said.

“Hey, gorgeous! How’s it going?”

“I was just watching a television documentary on Mathew Island.”

Jordan smiled, delighted to hear from him. “Long time no see, buddy. Where are you?”

“Sydney. I was in Fiji for a conference. Stopped by in Vanuatu a few days back. Bumped into your parents at the airport. I’m sorry about your grandmother.”

Her grandmother’s funeral had provided the setting for an awkward family reunion. Brian had accused her of insensitivity to their mother, who’d been worried sick every day for the last five years. Jordan’s face

had been plastered across television screens a dozen times, usually in some confrontational situation with yet another short-tempered, gun-toting Iraqi official. The ignominious disbanding of UNSCOM, Brian opined, had underscored its complete waste of taxpayers' money. As a medical doctor, he said, she should be ashamed of herself for having played a supporting role in trade sanctions that had caused the suffering and death of so many innocent children.

Brian's ignorance was surpassed only by his presumptuousness, but Jordan reminded herself that most people thought the same way. Not the ones who mattered, and certainly not her peers, but nevertheless, it rankled. If her brother knew a fraction of what she'd really been doing, the number of fire fights she'd been in, the number of men she'd killed while she and McCabe had traipsed across one Godforsaken desert and Iraqi prison hell-hole after another in search of the truth, he'd have a seizure.

"They let you back into Vanuatu without arresting you?" she said to Nate.

"Different government."

Well, good to see some things were a constant. Vanuatu changed Prime Ministers as regularly as other people changed underwear—generally for the same reasons. "I can't keep up."

"How's it going, Jordan, really? I mean, after the execution."

She closed her eyes. Timothy McVeigh's execution in June had brought some closure, but the men behind him were still alive, still free, and hundreds of other victims had fallen prey to terrorism in the intervening years: US civilians and embassy officials, soldiers and sailors, Tanzanian and Kenyan civilians, dead or shockingly mutilated from bombs eerily reminiscent of Oklahoma.

"Jordan?"

“Sorry, Nate. You got me out of the bathtub and I’m dripping everywhere.”

“Are you naked?” he asked seductively.

“What would Annie think, you asking questions like that?” she scolded.

Laughing, he said, “I’m coming to Canberra for the weekend. What about dinner Friday night?”

She and Brian had spent the last week going through Gran’s things, packing most of the big items and tossing the rest. The old farmhouse was already a very different place to the one she remembered. Brian had agreed to share the cost of restoring it before it was auctioned off. They should have finished sorting and packing everything by the weekend.

“Where will you be staying?”

Nate told her the name of the hotel. Then she returned to the bathroom, closed the door, and climbed back into the tub.

*

On Friday afternoon, Jordan drove her brother to the airport, then checked into Nate’s hotel. An hour later she was sitting with Sturgess at a booth in the hotel bar. It was early, two businessmen talked over a beer, a few backbench politicians congratulated each other on some minor coup, and a newspaper journalist was trying to get a story out of a nervous looking, acne-ridden political aide.

Their talk drifted to the last days of UNSCOM. “When Richard Butler’s contract finished,” she said, “they should have given him a medal. Instead, many, too many, now look back on UNSCOM as a sad, sick joke.”

In the end, she wasn’t entirely sure who was worse; the sadistic, megalomaniacal Iraqi regime, the Western governments who had continued with the BW programme despite signing the BWC treaty, or

the Consortium who had allowed her son to die in Oklahoma, then seeded Mathew Island with the chimera to prove how dangerous the weapons they developed were. All of them had had reasons for wanting UNSCOM to fail in its attempt to uncover the many layers of truth.

“So you transferred to the FBI’s anti-terrorism unit...and then resigned. Why?”

“When Clinton was in office, he had something called the Hart-Rudman Commission evaluate the post-Cold War changes in threats to the national security of the US.”

“You mean things like terrorist organisations?”

“As well as rogue nations, and individuals like Qadaffi, Hussein, bin Laden and so forth. The Commission didn’t complete the final draft until Bush came to power. Titled, ‘Road Map for National Security: Imperative for Change’^{vi}. The report predicted that the United States would be attacked by terrorists using a weapon of mass destruction, either nuclear, chemical or biological, within the next few years. They stated categorically that casualties would be in the order of thousands, possibly tens of thousands. The Commission presented the report to Bush Junior five months ago.”

“And?” Nate sat forward. “He knows about Mathew, doesn’t he?”

“He dismissed the findings as a ‘Clintonesque fantasy’ and that Operation Desert Fox, the one to destroy the last of Hussein’s stash of bioweapons, was a *Wag the Dog* fictional war to draw attention from Monicagate.” Jordan’s lips thinned. “We, and I mean the ex-weapons inspectors and the military and intelligence personnel, were staggered. Bush is dismantling every antiterrorist system that Clinton put in place, simply *because* Clinton believed they were vital. And on the one hand, while claiming Desert Fox was a fictional war, he simultaneously claims that it and UNSCOM pulled Saddam’s BW teeth, so he can now walk

into Iraq with impunity. One way or another, he intends to pick a fight with Hussein.”

“Is he out of his fucking mind?” Nate had put his drink down, and was staring at her, eyes wide with disbelief. “Don’t they understand the genie’s out of the bottle and—” He stopped and visibly brought himself under control.

Jordan picked up a her wine. “There’s no such thing as partisan politics in DC, Nate. It’s scorched earth politics.”

“It was all for nothing?”

The Consortium thought the same, so they’d been planning another ‘demonstration’—this one more convincing. Only they would never see it carried out. McCabe had been right; it had taken the FBI years to put everything together. They now had a watertight case, and the US Justice Department was ready to swoop. Congressmen, high ranking military officers, FBI Assistant Directors, and CIA, DIA—hell half the federal agencies in the US—and, most shocking of all, senior White House officials would soon be indicted; the charges beginning with treason and conspiracy and ending with genocide.

The cynic in her knew that many would cut a deal. Like the Iran-Contra affair, underlings would take the fall and the rest would disappear into obscurity, only to reappear a few years later running on some Congressional ticket or other. To circumvent that scenario, the FBI had decided against individual arrests and timed the operation to hit the key players in the Consortium when they met in New York a few weeks from now.

Jordan didn’t know the details. After she’d handed over the files that Douglas had burned on the still missing CD, the FBI, in the form of McCabe, Brant, and Reynold, had thanked her very much and told her to back off. Brant had even asked her to resign. When she’d tried to call

McCabe, he'd become conspicuously unavailable and remained so ever since.

Ostensibly, her resignation and his reassignment were to lull the Consortium into a sense of false security. Publicly, it was because the antiterrorism units within the FBI were being downsized, the result of Bush's 1980s mentality of making the world a safer place with ballistic missiles and Star Wars 'defensive' programmes. Once the Consortium was in custody, the current administration would crap itself, and Jordan would officially be asked to return—or so Brant had said. Question was, did she want to?

Money wasn't an issue. The Gibraltar account was from legitimate offshore, tax-free contract payments through a company named Halibern that had worked in Iraq in the 1980s. If Doug had been blackmailing anyone, the money either had never been paid or was in yet an untraceable account, the details of which had been buried with him.

But money couldn't buy the world's safety against people like bin Laden. It was only a matter of time before he struck again, and next time, it would likely be something nastier than a hole in the USS *Cole*.

Her mobile phone rang. She put her glass down, reached into her bag, and scowled at the number. Valiantly resisting the temptation to drop the phone on the floor and grind it under her heel, she snapped, "McCabe. So, suddenly you've become available again. How nice—"

"You following the situation in Fiji?"

Jordan paused. "Their latest coup? Eighteen have been reported killed and the international airport is closed. Why?" She noticed that Nate was looking at her oddly.

"Turn on CNN."

Nate's phone began ringing. When he answered it, all colour drained from his face.

A cold, sick feeling clawed out of Jordan's stomach and constricted her throat.

-Chapter 43-

Sydney, Australia August 18, 2001

“The leader of the rebellion, Stephen Kato, is threatening to kill the remainder of the hostages unless his demands are met. Since most of the military is supporting him, he may get his way.”

“What exactly are his demands?” Colonel Susan Broadwater asked the Australian diplomatic attaché briefing them.

Susan had been sent to head up the twenty-three-member response team. Many of the faces were familiar to Jordan; they had been part of the Mathew Island group. This time, they would get to see the outbreak, and there would be no volcanic eruptions to clean up the mess; Fiji had already erupted—politically.

“New elections guaranteeing a Melanesian Prime Minister and autonomous Fijian rule over the land,” replied the attaché. “From what we understand, Kato has not personally killed or tortured any of his hostages, nor has he ordered or condoned such actions. In fact, he’s condemning it. Those who know him—he was educated at Melbourne’s Monash University—say he is honestly appalled that it’s come to this. Unfortunately, lower echelon bullies, particularly enlisted soldiers, were responsible for the initial casualties, most of whom were native Fijians. It’s the usual opportunistic lawlessness and anarchy that results any time there’s a breakdown in the political structure of a country, something Kato’s teachers said he should have prepared for.

“As bad as it sounds,” continued the attaché, “the situation in Fiji is a bloody side less dangerous than say, Bougainville or Aceh.” At the blank looks on some faces, he added, “Fiji is an internal squabble. Both sides have gone out of their way to avoid hurting tourists or expatriates. It may seem paradoxical, but this is their problem; they want everyone to keep

away until they've fixed it. Kato's biggest concern is that we—Australia—will send in our military to restore order. But while he has most of the government, including the current Prime Minister, under lock and key, that's not a risk we're prepared to take.”

“Does Kato understand what's going on in Nadi hospital?” asked Nate.

“For sure. The hospital's chief surgeon, an Australian named Dr Glenn Morris, spoke to Kato, who actually came down to the hospital to see for himself. Kato's no dummy, he immediately grasped the implications, and he's deeply concerned that the initial outbreak occurred within the Indian community. Despite his politics, Kato's bloody scared that this may exacerbate racial tensions. He wants a solution, not a massacre. He's told Morris to do whatever is necessary. Having said that, Kato remains determined, he's not letting this stop him having his coup.”

“I'm not attempting to downplay the political situation,” said Susan. “But the coup is actually working to our advantage. With the international airport and sea ports shut down, we have a closed system, and the guy in nominal control of the country wants help and is actively asking for it.”

“What about the media?”

“It's being described as an outbreak of haemorrhagic dengue, but the place is crawling with journalists, mostly Australian, and all of them have satellite phones,” replied the attaché. “It's been almost six years since the outbreak of that haemorrhagic dengue on Mathew Island, and the volcano overshadowed that event because the eruption and subsequent tsunamis killed a hell of a lot more. Almost everyone has forgotten about the disease. However, if—when—some journalist sees the people in hospital; well, the lesions are nothing like haemorrhagic dengue.” The attaché stared at Nate thoughtfully.

Like everyone else, Jordan's initial reaction had been to assume that the Consortium had struck again. However, the epidemiology said otherwise; the pattern of infection followed that of a natural outbreak.

"Great!" Nate growled. "Instead of containing a virus that's ninety eight percent contagious and one hundred percent fatal, it means we only have to contain a virus that's ninety eight percent contagious and one hundred percent fatal."

Susan sent him an exasperated look.

"Okay." He shrugged. "This time, the index case is one person, not half an island."

"Take us through the epidemiology," Susan said to the attaché.

"A Fijian Indian businessman was admitted to hospital on the morning of August Six with extreme haemorrhagic dengue-like symptoms. Tashi Singh was a known AIDS sufferer and medical staff had assumed that he'd contracted an aggressive dengue. The distinctive pustules led them to believe that he had also contracted a rampant form of sarcoma. Knowing Singh's immune system was already compromised, no one was surprised when he died that night. His status in the community was such that he'd been placed into a private room. Members of his family sat with him the entire time, but despite their stoicism, they were horrified by the way he bled out in the end. The room had literally been sprayed with blood and body fluids.

"The nurses refused to go anywhere near him or the room, so it was left to the family; his nephews, sister, and wife, to wrap his body and remove it from the hospital in preparation for the traditional Hindu cremation. Tashi's sister, Miriam Singh, took it upon herself to clean the room. Fortunately, she appears to have been very thorough. She used the disinfectants and bleach provided by her airport employers."

The attaché picked up a glass of water and took a few sips before continuing. "Dr Glenn Morris had been at a conference in Suva at the

time. When he got back, he was informed of Tashi's death, and checked out the room. He found an extremely bloodied mattress—which he ordered burned—but no sign of the horror the nurses had described. Like everyone else, Morris had assumed that Tashi's AIDS had exacerbated what he hoped was an isolated incidence of haemorrhagic dengue, and that the rest was just exaggeration fuelled by racial tensions and a general air of uneasiness amongst Fijians and Indians.

“The following day, August Eight, friends and family helped build the funeral pyre, and, less than twelve hours after he had died, Tashi was cremated.”

“Why so fast?” Chuck Long asked.

“It's the tropics. Hundreds attended, but the only people known to have had any physical contact with Tashi's body were his wife, sister, two nephews and eldest son, all of who remained sequestered in Miriam's house after the funeral.

“On the morning of August Nine, Miriam woke feeling ill. Her sons and nephew also complained of stomach cramps and general malaise, but put it down to bad food. We know this only because she mentioned it to a family visitor. Since the Singhs were to remain at home house day—it was part of the mourning period—the friend thought nothing of it. The day after, everyone, including Tashi's wife, were either too ill to leave to go for help or were already dead. In different circumstances someone might have missed them and gone to investigate, but everyone assumed they were in mourning. On August Eleven, neighbours went to the house and discovered what they thought was a massacre. Assuming the worst—Stephen Kato had picked that morning to stage his coup—they believed they would all be butchered in their beds, so they made no attempt to notify the mostly Melanesian Fijian authorities. Most of them made themselves scarce by running off to what they hoped would be safer, rural areas.

“We do know,” continued the aide, “that the Singh family were cremated in a very low-key ceremony on August Twelve. From what Dr Morris has been able to piece together, an unknown number of people came into contact with the bodies or handled the bedding in the house. Ten men came down with similar symptoms on August Fourteen. Despite the coup, their families eventually took all of these blokes to the hospital; their symptoms were just too extreme to deal with at home. All were dead by the following day, Thursday. Worse, by now some hospital staff had begun complaining of dengue-like symptoms.

“After the coup, Morris parked himself in the hospital to deal with injuries in the riots. He didn’t see the first victims of this bug until late in the evening of August Fifteen. He reckons he knew straight away that it wasn’t dengue, but he had the presence of mind to warn his staff that as far as family members and journalists were concerned, it was.”

“Why didn’t Morris notify the CDC immediately?” someone called.

“Kato has complete control of the country’s communications systems: radio, phone, even Internet. Morris could have told any journalist with a satellite phone, but he wasn’t prepared to do that until he had informed the man in nominal control of the country—Stephen Kato. I haven’t talked to Kato, of course, but Morris says that he knows the bloke quite well, and that Kato was prepared to listen when Morris drove directly to parliament house and demanded to see him. Kato didn’t go down to the hospital until the next morning—yesterday—but what he saw scared the living daylights out of him. Kato allowed Morris to call the CDC and send digital photos via the Internet. That’s when we were also informed.”

Beside her, Spinner felt Nate’s tension. More than anyone there, Nate understood that the attaché’s succinct, somewhat bland briefing belied a hideous nightmare that had only just begun. Although she, indeed, many of the team members, had dealt with this horror in the lab and seen its

effects on the United Airlines passengers, to Nate it was very, very personal.

“Morris immediately implemented barrier nursing procedures and refused to release the bodies of victims to their families for burial. Still, the latest updates have twenty-six people symptomatic,” the attaché continued, reading from a clipboard. “Eight hospital staff, ten patients who were already in hospital for other complaints, two soldiers who helped remove the first victims’ bodies, and four new patients who knew, or had some contact with, the first hospitalized victims.

Looking up again, he finished with, “As you are aware, there was some suggestion at the outset that Stephen Kato must release his hostages, stand down, and allow the civil servants to return to work before the international community would be willing to assist. No surprise he’s rejected this proposal, reiterated his demands, and added that, since he has control of the military, most of the roads, the infrastructure and local radio and television stations, he can guarantee any arriving team safe passage and tight security. If we refuse, his only option is to allow foreign journalists to enter the hospital and beam the images to the rest of the world. He also added that, if he steps down now, the military would have absolutely no control over people moving in and out of the area or removing the deceased from the hospital. So far, he’s taken Morris’ advice and placed a *cordon sanitaire* around the hospital, the Singh’s neighbourhood and the neighbourhoods of other people who have caught the disease. He’s trying to isolate it. He steps down, we lose that.”

“All right everybody,” said Susan, standing. “Let’s get moving.”

Jordan boarded the chartered aircraft in silence. Around them, people chattered, reviewing well-rehearsed scenarios and discussing optional plans. She smiled and shook everyone’s hand, fielded polite questions

about how she'd been doing and what she'd been up to since UNSCOM had disbanded.

McCabe had arrived at Sydney on the same flight with Susan and the rest of the team. Although he met her politely, even tossing her one of his dry jokes, it was as if the years together had never happened. Worse. The very first day they had met, back in Quantico, he had walked inside her personal space and set up residence there. Now he treated her like nothing more than a passing acquaintance. But what really rankled Jordan was that, now she thought about it, his whole attitude had begun to shift the day that Susan Broadwater had reappeared in their lives.

UNSCOM inspectors had learned to watch themselves, watch what they said and who they said it to, mistrusting everyone.

For her and McCabe, the paranoia ran even deeper. They'd had to assume that every phone call, every computer file; was tapped because someone—perhaps one of their team members—was betraying their plans to the Iraqis, or just as bad, the Consortium. The deeper they had delved, the more evidence they had uncovered, the more intricate and complicated the situation had become. When it came right down to it, for six long years the only ones they had ever trusted were each other.

Although Jordan had worked side by side with Susan Broadwater in a Level 4 lab for months, examining and experimented with the chimera, she had always had the feeling that the Major—Lieutenant Colonel now—was keeping something from her. It wasn't until after Jordan had been asked to resign that she began piecing the facts together.

McCabe's father had died the same day as the Federal Murrah Building was bombed. The last person to see him alive, by her own admission, was Broadwater. Broadwater had been in Kuwait when Josh's uncle, Samuel McCabe, and Meg's husband had died in a motor vehicle accident, one involving a 'large, military style truck'. The truck

had never been found. Then Broadwater had been 'reassigned to Europe' the same night that Edward McCabe and his family were burned to death. Broadwater had then reappeared in New York immediately after Scott Ritter had accused the UNSCOM team of spying for the CIA, and then resigned as a weapons' inspector. Suddenly, the Iraqis had been even better informed of the team's movements. Was it because, as McCabe had insisted, of the new protocols that Kofi Annan had agreed to, which required the weapons' inspectors to bend over backwards every time they wanted to visit a university or industrial plant? Or was it because Susan Broadwater was part of the Consortium? Okay, so Susan's name had never appeared in the list of names of known and suspected members, but Susan had been Robert McCabe's protégé, and one-time lover.

When Susan had turned up in New York, her story had not been dissimilar to Jordan and McCabe's. The night McCabe's apartment had been bombed, Susan had been reassigned to purgatory in Europe, with a warning that any attempt at communication with either McCabe or Jordan would result in a permanent assignment to Dead Horse, Alaska. Notwithstanding, three years later, Susan had been promoted.

After UNSCOM had been disbanded, Susan had again vanished from their lives—or at least that was what Jordan had thought. But within days of discovering Douglas' connection to the Consortium, Susan Broadwater staged a comeback. Now she was in charge of USAMRIID's new Biosafety Level 4 labs.

What was wrong with this picture?

During her last conversation with McCabe, before he'd become 'unavailable', Jordan had mentioned her suspicions. He'd replied that she was being overly paranoid. In fact, he'd kept in regular contact with Susan throughout the years. When Jordan had demanded to know why

he hadn't bothered to inform her, McCabe had reminded her that his and Broadwater's families had known each other for several generations.

His simple explanation had stunned Jordan. Of course. It was the 'family business'. Jordan was an outsider. She'd been nothing more than a tool for him as he relentlessly pursued his damned Quest.

It had been her Quest, too.

Past tense. The Quest was over. The FBI didn't want her anymore; *he* didn't want her anymore.

Now, Colonel Susan Broadwater was heading up the team going into Fiji, to deal with the same chimera virus that had set Jordan on her six-year search in the first place. Broadwater's credentials said she was from the CDC, not USAMRIID. Sure, Jordan's own credentials said the same thing, as did Nate Sturgess'—who really was working for the CDC. Still, Jordan was deeply suspicious.

On the flight to Fiji, she sat beside Nate, while the man she had come to think of as her partner, Josh McCabe, sat three rows in front of them, his head close to Broadwater's. They were conversing in low voices. When Chuck Long walked by Jordan, he did a double take, then looked back at McCabe, and said, "You two have a lover's quarrel?" Not waiting for a reply, Chuck kept moving aft.

"Really?" said Nate, tossing her a look of surprise.

"What?" Jordan slowly turned her gaze to his. The tone of her voice should have been fair warning, but, she mentally conceded, Nate was probably too preoccupied with his own demons to notice.

"You and Josh," he said. "You've been giving him the cold shoulder since he arrived."

"McCabe and I not and never will be *lovers*."

"Sure, Jordan." Nate rolled his eyes in disbelief. "You've just spent the last five, almost six years together in a *platonic* relationship. Hell, the body language between you two alone was enough to give it away."

“Yes, I watch McCabe, and he watches me. It’s a survival habit.”

“Survival?”

“I told you before Nate, we learned to watch our own backs and each other’s. Keeping tabs on your partner’s location and reading their state of mind and signals is a tactical habit, in New York or Baghdad.”

“I was talking about the *California* back in ’95, long before you two took romantic vacations to Iraqi military installations!” he declared, seemingly oblivious to the danger that lurked.

Jordan took a few measured breaths before saying, “McCabe is driven by needs that preclude personal relationships. We both are.”

A look of regret crossed Nate’s face. “Fine, you two were never intimate, but he and Susan Broadwater were. Maybe they’re—”

She almost gave herself whiplash turning around. “How the hell would you know that?”

Okay, so she’d suspected as much. No, when it came right down to it, she knew. Why else would Broadwater have given her that sweet little ‘hands off, Josh is broken goods’ talk, on the flight to New Zealand all those years ago?

“I’m...sorry,” Nate blurted, confused and obviously embarrassed. “I assumed you knew. When I was in quarantine that Christmas, Josh and I talked about a lot of things, including the Zaire Ebola outbreak. It was Susan who encouraged him to pursue psychiatry—against his father’s wishes.”

Jordan felt like she’d been punched in the stomach. McCabe had shared that piece of information with Nate within days of meeting him, but had failed to mention it to her after years of living in each other’s pockets. She really had been just a tool.

With what he no doubt thought was insight, Nate said, “Nothing you do will bring them back, Jordan.” His expression softened. “McVeigh’s dead. Isn’t it time you got on with your life?”

“The chimera’s not dead, is it? Now if you will excuse me, I have work to do.” She stood and, grabbing her laptop, went to sit in a vacant seat.

-Chapter 44-

Nadi, Fiji August 18, 2001

Nate recognised the look on Dr Glenn Morris' face. It was the same combination of manic relief and sheer terror that had befallen him on Mathew Island when he'd seen that email from the FBI.

The Australian, a tall, grey haired man with a youthful face and the ingrained suntan of an expatriate living in the tropics, immediately identified many of the team members. He held out his hand to shake Broadwater's, and called her Colonel.

"Dr Morris," replied Susan with a tight smile. "We would prefer it if everyone here assumed we're all from the CDC."

"Oh, c'mon, Colonel, this is not a natural virus! I don't care what you people say, this thing is some sort of weird combination of smallpox and Hanta or Marburg, Ebola maybe. And if it isn't, why are they here?" He waved an arm at Josh, Jordan and Chuck Long. "They are—they *were*—UNSCOM inspectors." Then he turned on Nate and demanded, "Mathew Island back in '95. It wasn't a natural outbreak, was it?"

Nate opened his mouth to reply, but Morris added, "I was hoping they'd send you."

While Nate didn't know Morris well, he considered him a far more adept public health care professional than Gene Marshall had been in Vanuatu in 1995. And he understood Morris' desperation; he'd been trying for years to forget it. "Thanks, *mate*."

"I'm sorry." Morris shot him a rueful grin. "I mean, I'm certain this is the same pathogen you saw on Mathew Island. It has to be!" He led them around the aircraft to the luggage doors, summarizing what he'd been doing to combat the disease.

It was a familiar eulogy: *I've tried A, I've tried B, I've tried every combination imaginable, but nothing works*. Nate was loath to tell Morris that nothing would.

The soldiers lining the runway weren't exactly a welcoming sight. Still, they appeared considerably less trigger-happy than their African counterparts that Nate had had the displeasure of meeting over the past five years. The men now assigned to escort them also seemed uninterested in the new arrivals' conversation. They were more concerned with watching the large boxes of equipment being unloaded from the flight. Stephen Kato had given them strict orders not to allow anyone off the aircraft who wasn't a member of the designated CDC team. The orders also demanded a thorough search of the boxes for weapons.

"Dr Morris," Susan said, "I would strongly suggest that, as far as you're concerned, everyone here is from the CDC. You must know what sort of panic will result, otherwise."

"We might be in the middle of the South Pacific," Morris retorted, "but we all have television. We all saw what happened in Iraq."

"When UNSCOM was disbanded," replied Susan, "we went to work for the CDC. Nothing abnormal in that."

Morris shrugged. "Have it your way."

*

McCabe walked out of the heavily guarded medical ward, wishing he could throw up. They'd already set up decontamination showers as a staging area, so he'd be free to rip off the hood of his HAZMAT suit and puke his guts out. He was determined not to.

"You okay, Josh?"

Susan was beginning to sound like Spinner. "Sure, just getting a breath of fresh air."

“You’re still plugged into your air supply,” Susan reminded him. “Josh, you might be medically trained but no one’s expecting you to have to confront this.”

“Don’t pander to me, Susan.” But he added in gentler tones, “Nate has more demons to confront than I do.”

“Nate wasn’t a teenager.” She clasped his arm and stared up at him through the plastic hood.

Another figure stepped out into the cool evening air and came to join them. Cocooned inside a Racal suit and a professional façade, Spinner said, “Tests confirm it’s the same organism.”

“And as far as we know, no one has survived infection past day four,” Susan said. “I want to see the Singh’s house. I want to see where this thing began.”

They arrived in a convoy of military trucks at the cordoned-off village. From beyond the hastily erected barbed wire fence, dogs barked and children cried. Despite the late hour, lights blazed in almost every home. Since the coup, the Indian Fijians had lived in a state of terror. Irrespective of what they had been told, from what McCabe could make out, they were convinced that the Singhs had been butchered, and that any moment they would be next. Otherwise why were they penned like animals? The villagers, and the journalists who had to return to their hotels before the six o’clock curfew, were informed that they had been quarantined because of dengue. Surprisingly, no journalist pointed out the obvious. Barbed wire and guns were no match against an insect borne vector. Dengue was transmitted by mosquitoes—it did not spread directly from person to person.

The HAZMAT-suited teams emerged from the trucks and walked with the soldiers to the Singh’s house. A troupe of curious Indian-Fijians followed, until Susan said to a corporal, “Keep the villagers back. And

tell your men that, if they want to stay free of the disease, they mustn't come anywhere near the house."

Despite the gory mess, the house had been looted and vandalized. Some of the vandals would be dead by now or lying in bloodied pools in the hospital, helplessly waiting for the chimera to turn them into liquefied mush. McCabe pushed the thought aside. He was here to examine a crime scene. His personal nightmares had nothing to do with that.

"Records verify that Miriam Singh was employed for more than twenty years by the cleaning company that services the airport. Fits," Susan observed while they walked through the modest weatherboard house. "Katie Wood recalled throwing her soiled clothes into the trashcan in the ladies' showers. Singh must have seen something she liked and squirreled it away."

"And it goes through six years of wash and wear then suddenly infects her brother?" Spinner quipped. "That's not a stretch, it's preposterous."

"Not necessarily." Nate carefully negotiated the fragments of smashed glass. "In the last few years I've learned not to disregard improbable circumstances. Maybe the chimera was shaken out of the blouse. All that the virus had to do was stay in a dark, relatively dry place. Smallpox is like that; it can survive for years in the right conditions. We still have no idea where Ebola normally resides in the ecology. And Tashi Singh's immune system was already badly compromised, one particle might have been enough."

"How would you know all that, Nate?" Spinner demanded. "Information on the chimera is classified."

McCabe looked across at her. He couldn't make out her expression in the darkness, but he could tell by the stiff way she was holding herself that something was wrong.

"C'mon, Jordan, I was there, remember?" Nate replied.

“And you were in Fiji recently, too, weren’t you? We never did ascertain how the original chimera was distributed on Mathew Island, just that it struck the village down soon after you arrived. Then everyone caught it, by your own admission, *after* they came to the hospital.”

“What are you getting at, Jordan?” he said, clearly confused.

“Think about it, Nate. Everyone but you, Wood, and Warner caught the virus. You had no way of knowing that Warner would call the helicopter that morning. Maybe you hadn’t infected him and Katie Wood, but you knew it was possible that they could carry the chimera on their clothing. You kept stressing in your emails, over and over, that we had to find them and quarantine them and anyone they’d been in contact with. According to your notes, the virus then went on to infect *everyone* *else*. Everyone, that is, except *you*, when all you had was a surgical mask and rubber gloves?”

“Spinner—” McCabe began.

“Consider the evidence—isn’t that your line, McCabe?” she said, pivoting around to face him. “When we picked up Nate in the launch, the first thing he did was toss his mask over the side, a mask that might have contained the *original* airborne chimera, not one that had passed through a couple of bodies. He *said* everyone else was dead and that there was no point checking. Then we find out that, an hour after dropping Katie Wood and Michael Warner in Vila, Gary Teocle lands a big contract in New Caledonia. He never made it. His helicopter went down somewhere in the Pacific. Was Gene Marshall the bastard that you painted him, Nate? Or did he deliberately send those samples to France instead of the CDC because you ordered him to?”

She was evidently about to add more, but McCabe took her by the shoulder and forced her to look at him. “Jordan, you’re overreacting.” He knew why, but he was surprised by her vehemence.

“Am I?” she cried. “You never suspected ‘Uncle Albert’ or my hu—”

“*Spinner!*” He’d never used that tone of voice on her before, and she stepped back from him as if he’d slapped her.

Bringing her to Fiji was a mistake. She’d resigned, and she should have been kept right out of it. And yet, played correctly, this argument could also work to the FBI’s advantage.

Between Bush’s cutbacks, the current low morale in the FBI, and Spinner’s leaving, any investigations into the Consortium appeared to have ground to a halt. Now, if he and Spinner were seen to be at each other’s throats, those unnamed lower echelon members of the Consortium, people he was certain were with them right here, right now, might be lulled into complacency.

“You’re some piece of work, Jordan,” spat Nate. Turning on his heel, he marched out of the house and into the night.

“I knew when you left you weren’t cut out for this anymore,” McCabe said, his tone deliberately condescending.

Even in the darkness, he could Spinner’s her eyes widen in disbelief. Around them, everyone had gone still.

“Either pull yourself together,” he snarled. “Or leave.” He released her shoulder and walked into the bedroom. The sickness in his gut now had nothing to do with the gruesome, blood-filled room. He’d publicly humiliated the one person who least deserved it, the one person he could trust. But he had to protect her at all cost. Especially now that they were so close.

The water trucks arrived, and the soldier set fire to the house and outdoor laundry with its broken washing machine and chimera particles. Just before dawn, the convoy packed up and left. The villagers would remain under quarantine for another week, but it seemed that this area at least was free of the virus.

While Nate, McCabe, and Broadwater rode together in the first truck, Jordan sat in the second vehicle with Chuck Long and the other team members, feeling frightened and angry—and worse, isolated. Her accusations had risen more from an acutely sensitized paranoia rather than a genuine distrust of Nate. He was right about the way the chimera had appeared in Fiji; she'd seen it time and again in Northern Iraq. Strange illnesses wrought upon the Kurds that had slaughtered thousands. Every few years a pocket of infection would reappear for no good reason. Like Nadi, it might begin with just a single infection. Then funerary practices ensured it spread to the community at large. But in the Singh's house, as she'd stood amidst the brown crusts of viral filled blood and flyblown faeces, it seemed there had been too many coincidences in her life, and her arguments appeared chillingly logical.

Years of hunting bioweapons had taught her that Mathew Island had to have been seeded by an aircraft specifically equipped for the job. That made her accusations against Nate even more ridiculous. She closed her eyes, angry with herself for lashing out at him. Was she capable of trusting anyone, ever again? Was that why McCabe had encouraged her to resign? Had he seen into her mind, picked it apart, and recognised that she was no longer capable? No matter how often, or how much they had disagreed with one another over the years, he had never gone out of his way to humiliate her.

She bit her lip, trying to hold back the unfamiliar sensation of tears. It wasn't McCabe who'd publicly humiliated her. She'd done it all by herself.

"C'mon Jordan, don't beat yourself up over it," said Chuck Long. "We're all entitled to lose the plot once in a while."

"But not in a hot zone," she replied. "Never, ever in a hot zone."

The vehicles turned onto the road leading to the hospital compound, and stopped at the barricade. At the sound of angry crowds Jordan

looked up. Soldiers climbed out of the trucks and began shouting. In the predawn light she could see that people were trying to get *out of* as well as *into* the hospital grounds.

She was about to jump down from the truck when someone fired a short burst from an automatic weapon. Then everyone was screaming and running. Some fled back into the hospital while others disappeared into nearby buildings.

With reflexes honed in Iraq, Jordan dived onto the floor of the truck, Chuck landing heavily on top of her. Seconds later, she found herself at the bottom of a pile of very heavy HAZMAT suited bodies. Much to her annoyance, she heard Broadwater's commanding voice, calmly taking control of the situation and settling everyone down. The trucks started moving again and continued into the hospital. By the time Jordan climbed out, almost everyone was already inside. No one bothered to check if she was all right.

No one being McCabe.

It wasn't as if she'd expected him to come rushing over, but they had always been aware of each other; a glance of mutual reassurance was all it took. Shots had been fired. McCabe should have been watching her back. She should have been watching his—just like she was watching it right now. He was standing at the entrance to the hospital with his back to her, talking to Nate, Susan Broadwater, Chuck Long, and Glenn Morris, the hospital director. Dismayed by his indifference, she joined them.

"The problem," declared a visibly shaken Morris, "is that the patients who *don't* have this chimera are scared shitless and they want out. You can't blame them. They can see what's going on. Almost half—*half*," he said, pressing his point with a wave of his hand, "of the nursing staff are sick with this thing. And people are dying by the fistful!"

"How many new patients came in during the night?" Nate asked.

“There’s a curfew until 6:00 am, that’s why so many people were waiting outside when you arrived.”

Susan groaned. “And now they’ve scattered, taking the infected with them.”

“Worse,” said McCabe, looking over their shoulders. “A pack of journalists have just arrived.”

“Oh, well, that’s great.” Susan glared at Morris. “I warned you what would happen once they got wind of this.”

Morris’ eyes narrowed behind his mask. “Get a grip, Colonel. You think you can go running around Nadi in these getups,” he said, tugging at his own bright orange HAZMAT suit, “and burn down houses without broadcasting yourself to the world?”

“Right about now,” McCabe muttered to Broadwater. “I wouldn’t mind one of Saddam’s Special Republican Guard units to come rolling in across the lawn.”

Jordan caught Chuck Long’s grim smile. Suddenly, she felt like an outsider. Just a few months ago, McCabe would have said that to her, not Broadwater. Angry with herself for succumbing to such a stupid, childish emotion as jealousy, she pushed past them and into the hospital. She was a doctor; at least in there she might be able to do some good.

-Chapter 45-

Fiji, September 03, 2001

For ten days, Jordan played her role thoroughly and methodically, working with the team to isolate the spread of the chimera, moving from village to village, inspecting, then burning the homes of people who had become infected, and listening with a sympathetic ear to those who'd lost loved ones, possessions, and their livelihood.

Her upbringing in Vanuatu had inured her to the rudimentary dwellings that many called home. Dirt floors and snuffling pigs, mangy dogs and wary chickens, it was as familiar to her as it was to Nate Sturgess. For the others on the team, those who had been in Iraq, Africa and South America, it was a variation on a common theme, a bizarre juxtaposition of poverty and dignity. Jordan explained kindly but firmly in terms that the villagers understood, that this was a disease they could not treat with traditional medicines, a sickness that passed from the dead to the living. For the sake of their children and mothers, brothers and uncles, the dead had to remain within the barbed-wire confines of the hospital that had become a charnel house, and their possessions had to be burned.

It had not been pretty, but it had been effective. The number of dead reached almost a hundred before the incidence of new cases began to taper off.

When Jordan returned to the hotel late on the evening of September second, it was with the knowledge that the last new case was forty-four hours old. The outbreak was officially over. Six patients remained but they would be dead before morning. No one doubted the chimera might have hidden again in some dark corner of a hut or a pile of unwashed bedding, but they had capped the demon. This time.

Ignoring hotel regulations about nighttime swimming, Jordan plunged into the cool waters of the pool. It was the first time in weeks she'd been able to swim, and she stretched out arm over arm, lap after lap, hoping the rhythmic motion would bring some order to her chaotic emotions.

On the flight to Fiji, Nate's accusation that she was jealous had rankled. She and McCabe had become a mutually exclusive world of two, equally invested in the same burning need to find and bring down those who had butchered their loved ones and torn their lives apart—until she'd told him about Douglas' secret files. Then he'd begun withholding things. Nothing unusual in that, McCabe was notoriously stingy with information, but not with her, not with the trust that they'd developed during the last years. Not until Susan Broadwater had reappeared.

Jordan swam faster, trying to get warm, but the memory of Nate's words chilled her. McCabe and Susan had a 'history'.

How many nights in how many godforsaken grubby hotels had McCabe come banging on her door, or walked in without knocking to wake her from a deep sleep, and insist on talking through some idea through? How many times had they shared a hotel room, camel-skinned tent, or pickup truck and not once, ever, had he made the slightest romantic overture? McCabe had no interest in her as a woman. He seemed to have little or no interest in any woman—or man. He was interested in only one thing.

Tired of obsessing, she reached the end of the pool and stood in the chest deep water.

"Hey."

Jerking her head back, she squinted in the moonlight, and demanded, "Who's there?"

"Nate."

“Oh.” The pang of disappointment was heavy. She climbed from the pool and accepted his offering of a towel. Despite the limited light, she noticed the spiral burn in his forearm and suddenly, the years of pain and horror snapped into sharp focus. “Nate.” She tried to meet his eyes in the darkness. “I am so sorry for what I said to you. I’ve been a bitch on wheels since we got here.”

“I thought maybe it was just exceptionally pronounced PMS,” he quipped.

She bit her lip. “I never once asked how you were holding up.”

“Believe it or not,” he replied. “I’ve seen worse in the years since. Not as deadly, of course, but we’ve proved the chimera is containable. What near destroyed me on Mathew was the sense that it was unstoppable, the sheer terror that it could have spread off-island. And of course, that damned volcano doing a Dante’s Inferno. How you’re holding up is more to the point, isn’t it?”

The night air was cold and she began to shiver. “You want to come back to my room for a drink?”

“Finally!” he cried in exaggerated relief. “You’re propositioning me!”

“I don’t proposition married men.” She chuckled, and, wrapping the towel around her waist, headed for her room.

With an exaggerated sigh, Nate followed.

“I think—no, I know I’ve lost my sense of perspective,” Jordan said sometime later.

They were sitting in cane chairs on the hotel room balcony, looking across the beach. The silhouettes of coconut trees framing the moonlit waters of the South Pacific failed to entrance her; the scene was too familiar.

“Why did you really resign, Jordan?”

“The FBI is not the same outfit that I began working for ten years ago, Nate. And I’m not the same person.”

“Nothing to do with Josh, then.”

Was she jealous of Susan? Perhaps, but not romantically. “McCabe has always treated me as a professional. Sure, we became close, as friends and comrades in a very dangerous world, but we’ve been working together for a very long time.”

Years ago, she might have said that she and McCabe had been working on something that would finally be over in a few weeks, but even that much could alert the Consortium. She could not trust Nate, not entirely. And now, not even McCabe could be trusted. Was she paranoid, or was he sleeping with the enemy? That she could not discern the truth told her that resigning had really been for the best. “I’m not an FBI agent, Nate. Never will be. And when it comes right down to it, as odd as this may sound, I’m not part of that world. Australian forensics has come a long way since 1990; I did some checking after Gran’s funeral. With my background I can more or less write my own ticket.” She looked up and, meeting his eyes, smiled. “I’ve decided to come home. For good this time.”

“Your grandmother’s place?”

“Doug left me enough money so I can buy my brother’s half.” And half of Canberra, for that matter. “Brian and I are sharing the cost of restoring it, then we’re putting it up for auction. Tomorrow morning—” she glanced at her watch. “*This* morning, I’m going to call my solicitor and authorize him to purchase it. That way, Brian gets a fair market price for his half. I’ve got to return to the States to lease out my apartment in DC.” And wait alone, looking on as those who destroyed my life are finally vanquished.

She fingered the locket on the chain around her neck; inside was a photo of Douglas and Jamie and a snippet of Jamie’s hair from when

he'd been born. Beside the locket was Doug's wedding ring. She absently rolled it through her fingers. After discovering his secret files, she'd wanted to pull off the ring and toss it away. But McCabe had said Doug wasn't part of the Consortium. He'd been *contracted* by them to carry what appeared to be a highly classified, US government sanctioned job. Then Doug had tried to assist the FBI in its investigations.

Somewhere along the line of hotel rooms was McCabe, probably with Susan. His relationship with Susan Broadwater notwithstanding, he was right to dismantle their dependency on one another. After a six-year detour they could finally move on with her lives. She smiled at Nate. "Funny, now that I've made the decision, it feels liberating."

-Chapter 46-

New York September 11, 2001

McCabe felt the sponginess of damp grass beneath his feet, the endless cadence of each step as his feet softly pounded the ground.

Pound, pound, feel the blood pump, hear your heart beat. He couldn't afford to run himself into exhaustion today. In a few hours, a lifetime of secrets would be exposed. Even if the Consortium were alerted now, right this minute, the Attorney General had enough evidence to arrest every one of them.

Exposing them, the depth of their decades' long malfeasance would shake up the administration, indeed, much of the world. Some of them would declare diplomatic immunity, many would make bail within hours, but it would be too late to destroy documents and computer files, especially those kept at the Pentagon. Not all of the Consortium members had been as pathologically meticulous as Williams in covering their tracks. The years he and Spinner had spent searching were proof of that. *You should never have let me live, Rob. You should have known I'd hunt them down.*

It would be a beautiful day. The sky was free of clouds, the summer foliage in the park was green, and birds chattered in the morning. The skies over Iraq had been blue and cloud free, too, and parts of the landscape, green and inviting. Spinner had said the Iraqi skies reminded her of the skies over the Australian desert.

He thought back to the first time he'd seen her. High-heeled shoes capped by a bald head and a scowl. Their partnership, a bureaucratic marriage born from mutual needs and forged by circumstance, was finally over. Her quest to find and to bring to justice those who had stood by while the Federal Murrah Building was bombed, was down to its last

hours. Today she would have closure. He smiled and shook the sweat from his brow; he only wished his journey could end so well. The pact he'd made with himself was almost over. The old nightmare, the old demons were waiting in the wings. He had no intention of letting them have him.

Pound, pound, feel the blood pump. So much blood had been spilled by so many people to protect the Consortium's secrets. He wondered how many men he and Spinner had killed, how many running gun battles they had survived. How many times their hotel rooms had been tossed or blown up. How many hours had they spent in planes, trucks, and hotel rooms in pursuit of an endless, international sleight of hand? Brant and Susan had been right. The only way to protect Spinner from the inevitable fallout had been to distance himself from her. Perhaps he was also protecting himself, divorcing himself from his dependency on her, making his decision to do what he had to do less difficult. Unlike him, she was a normal human being, entitled to a normal life. No question that she deserved that.

His cell phone rang. "McCabe," he answered, slightly breathless.

"It's done," declared Assistant Director Peter Brant.

Pound, pound. "All of them?"

"Three hundred and thirty eight and a thousand and seventy two."

McCabe broke the connection. Three hundred and thirty-eight arrest and more than a thousand search warrants had been issued across five countries. Most of the arrests were middlemen, but in a few hours the main cast, some of the country's most powerful individuals, would be meeting to discuss their next move in a thirty-year old conspiracy.

When George W Bush had declared that a high casualty terrorist attack on US soil was a 'fantasy', McCabe had actually found himself sympathizing with his father. What would it take to make the world wake up? Iraq was a hobbled player in a huge, international game where

alignments shifted like quicksand. If the demonstration on Mathew Island and the subsequent, secondary infection in Fiji had no impact on current thinking, what would it take? A demonstration on US soil? The Consortium would not get a chance to try.

Leaving the park, he hit the streets. The hotel was six blocks south. New York wasn't his favourite place, but like any city, early mornings housed a fascinating sub-culture; pigeons and delivery vans, cabs and street vendors, the smell of exhaust fumes and coffee, bagels and, well, New York. He turned and ran along Broadway, already crowded with pedestrians and yellow cabs in a pre-rush hour that never quite seemed to end.

He reached the hotel, glanced up at the tenth floor and wondered if she was awake. Every day, every night in Fiji he had wanted to go to her. Not as a lover—never that—but he had come to trust her like no other, and he knew the pain that she carried behind her carefully maintained barricades. Her suspicion of Nate Sturgess was clear evidence of that. She was confused and angry. *And hurt. Don't forget hurt.*

The first time she'd killed someone had been to protect him. Death she could handle in a pinch, but to take a life had torn her apart. He'd held her that night, while she'd shivered in shock. But she had not cried. The only time he'd ever seen her cry was when she'd learned the truth about her husband. Bitter tears that had soaked his tracksuit. He'd carried her to her bed and held her in his arms, slept with her. But not as a lover. Never, ever as a lover, always as a friend, a companion in a strangely twisted journey through life. Now that, too, was gone.

Back in his hotel room, McCabe showered and changed. Then he checked the time. Eight thirty. *Just an hour, Spinner, and it's all over. Your journey will be complete, your truths understood, the answers you needed, given. It brings you no joy, I know, but it brings closure. Take it,*

Spinner, take it, go home and get on with your life. And Spinner? Don't look back, for I will not be here. He left his room, went up to hers, and knocked once.

She opened the door. The confusion in her eyes tore at him. He fought back the overwhelming urge to tell her the truth, and that he wanted, *needed* for her to stay with him. Without her he had no excuse to go on.

But he would not risk her life, not anymore. His phone buzzed.
"McCabe."

"Showtime," said Brant.

"Everyone?" His unspoken question: was Susan Broadwater amongst them?

"Yeah. The last ones are in the elevators now."

Brant hung up. It was the signal for McCabe to leave and join the surveillance vehicle. There he would listen to the Consortium's discussion, hear Susan's words of betrayal. Then the tactical teams would move in.

Turning her back on him, Jordan walked into the hotel room. The open door was tacit permission for him to follow. "When are you leaving?" she said.

"Now."

"One last ditch, McCabe?"

A dozen times in a dozen countries he'd left her in pursuit of some tenuous lead or another. Because it had not been her job to risk her life. Because she wasn't an agent but a civilian scientist. Yet she'd seen more action than some trained soldiers, been shot at more times than he could count. Killed more often than was good for anyone. "You can see everything from here, Spinner." He walked over to the window. The view from this angle was perfect. She would see every one of them—including Susan Broadwater—marched into black cars with tinted

windows, and then driven away. “McVeigh’s dead, and these are the last of them,” he added unnecessarily.

“It’s been a strange six years, Special Agent McCabe,” she said softly.

Jordan Spinner had been a fellow traveller on a journey that had once been his alone. He had hoped she would leave without regret. But as he stood there, he saw the tears in her eyes. For the first time since he’d known her, he was unable to conjure up some glib remark. He clasped her shoulders, and turned her to face him. “I would never have made it without you, Jordan.”

Surprised at his rare use of her first name, she blinked. Then her eyes softened and she brought her hand to his face. “Nor I without you.”

At the touch of her hand, the smell of her familiar warmth, he faltered in his resolve. Just once, to hold her and kiss her goodbye, to—

Her face creased into an uncertain frown. Dropping her hand, she looked out the window. He followed the direction of her gaze, and his eyes widened as the impossible, the unthinkable unfolded before them in appalling slow motion.

“No!” she screamed in denial.

McCabe did not hear his own cry of disbelief and rage as he threw himself against her, pushing her away from the window and onto the floor. The shockwave blasted through the windows, showering the room with heat and glass and dust. The entire hotel shuddered and groaned. And then came the screams.

-Epilogue-

Washington, D.C. December 12, 2001

“Nate Sturgess once told me,” said Jordan, “that the quick capture of Timothy McVeigh was like having the Holy Grail handed to you on a platter. It was too easy, creating a sense of dissatisfaction amongst the victim’s families. Perhaps that’s why I feel robbed. Day after day I search the remnants of a thousand shredded lives, trying to give closure to loved ones, vainly seeking closure for...hated ones.”

She was standing in Assistant Director Brant’s office in Washington, DC, looking out the window. Through the drizzle, the dome of the Capitol building appeared smudged and streaky. The US Constitution was beginning to look much the same. “The hardest thing to stomach is knowing that the Consortium was right. An attack on US soil by an extremist fundamentalist group would kill thousands—just not in the way they predicted.” Jordan let out a short, hard sound of disgust, and turned to face Brant. “Is it too hackneyed to call their deaths poetic justice?”

Peter Brant stood from his chair, put his hands in his pockets, and joined her at the window. “We know who went into the South Tower. We know—and I can’t tell you how—who was in the room when the first plane hit. We know that some, but not all, survived the initial impact, and that many of them chose to jump rather than...” He shook his head and met her eyes.

“I take no pleasure in that knowledge, sir.”

“No one does. But with the files destroyed in the Pentagon, it *is* over, Jordan. There’s no one left to prosecute. The small fry, the support personnel, either worked under the assumption that they were employed by the US Government on a top secret project, or were petty criminals who had no knowledge of the overall picture.”

He took a deep breath, pulled off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "We want you to stay. Now, more than ever before, we need your expertise. Not," he added hastily, "to identify victims or build the case against bin Laden—we have that—but to continue working with the FBI, in the field of forensic science."

"Two months ago you accepted my resignation."

"To protect you until this was over." He replaced his glasses and stared at her. "It was never intended to be permanent."

"Of course a great deal has changed since then," she said. Outside, the rain had stopped. The streets glistened dully in the wetness. "I suppose the real question is, do I want to be around to dodge the flak now that the FBI is under investigation for failing to *prevent* 9-11?"

Brant's lips thinned. "We need you. We need your expertise, but not unless you're prepared to come back to work."

Smiling sadly, Jordan lifted her hands and examined the now faded scars. It seemed a lifetime ago that he'd said those words to her.

"Take a few weeks off, go home to Australia and think about it," he added.

Home. Even Brant saw her as someone who didn't quite belong here. "Exactly what sort of job did you have in mind?"

"How do you feel about working with McCabe again?"

"We've just spent six years together, sir." And in the end I discovered that he was sleeping with the enemy. Could she work with him again? More to the point, could she ever trust him again?

"We both know that Afghanistan is just the beginning."

"Pandora's Box," she whispered.

Brant went to the door; the meeting was over. "You can walk away and hope, or you can stay and try to make a difference. In the short term, we need you at Quantico."

She thought for a moment, then joined him at the door and accepted his outstretched hand. “As you said, sir, the world has changed.”

In an office upstairs, Joshua McCabe was sitting in Assistant Director Reynold’s office. The last time he’d been there had been over a year ago. A photograph of Bush now replaced Clinton’s.

“The shit is flying in every direction,” Reynold said. “Mostly from the top down.” His gaze slid to the photograph, and he all but sneered.

“You expected less?” McCabe said. “Did anyone have the guts to remind the White House of the Hart-Rudman Commission’s report? Or that it was the White House that ordered our investigations of bin Laden to be *downsized*? Did anyone think to remind them of the number of planned attacks we successfully foiled—until they came to power, that is?” He abruptly leaped from the chair. “I know; a hundred successes don’t outweigh one failure. I know that one well,” he added bitterly. “You asked me once if I could postpone my...early retirement plan. Guess you want me to wait a little longer, huh?”

Reynold looked uncomfortable. “If you wouldn’t mind. Brant’s asking Dr Spinner to stay on.”

Now it was McCabe’s turn to look uncomfortable. “You going to tell her the truth?”

“Which one?” Reynold shook his head, picked up his pen and looked down at the report on his desk. “You tell her whatever you want, McCabe,” he said dismissively.

“If I tell her, you’ll lose her.” He walked to the door.

“Your call.” Reynold began writing. “And McCabe? Close the door on your way out.”

ⁱ Actual war game, the details of which will be explained in a later chapter.

ⁱⁱ His real name. Kan Alibekov changed his name to Ken Alibek when he defected.

ⁱⁱⁱ Name has been changed.

^{iv} His real name. In this conversation, the character, Spinner, is relating actual documented events. A full account can be read in 'Plague Wars' by Tom Mangold.

^v This did indeed occur exactly the same day as Anan signed the memorandum with Hussein.

^{vi} Actual report, Hart and Rudman are their real names.