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P O Box 3340

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twilighttimesbooks.com/

Credits

Cover artwork—Kurt Ozinga

Managing Editor—Ardy M. Scott

PUBLISHER—Lida E. Quillen

The Melanin Apocalypse
Darrell Bain

Dedication

To all the oppressed people of the world, anywhere and anywhen. It is my sincerest hope that the events portrayed in this novel never happen.

Acknowledgments

I would like to extend my thanks to the following people for their help in getting this book into your hands. First and always, my wife Betty. She is a very astute judge of what's right and what may be wrong with a particular book and she has saved me from making a number of grievous errors in the past. She also has a talent for getting to the very heart of controversial subject matter. While I won't say she is always 100% right, it turns out that she is right very nearly all the time. Personally, I think our government could benefit from her advice in a number of areas if they would just ask.

As usual, Jamie Jones reviewed my flying sequence and saved my mechanically and aeronautically untalented self from making any number of errors. He and his family are really good friends even though we've never met other than over the internet.

I would also like to extend my thanks to Lida Quillen for her belief in my ability as a writer and the potential of this book to reach a large audience. Twilight Times Books is still a small publishing company and she risked a large amount of capital to bring this book to market.

Thanks are also due to Leslie Holman-Anderson, for her fine editing. Working with her is always a pleasure. I also appreciate her altering her schedule to coincide with mine for this particular book.

And finally, thanks to all my readers, especially those from the electronic book world. They are the ones who are really responsible for what success I have achieved as a writer. They have purchased my books, given me a following, written me letters with many very good suggestions and propelled my name to the very top ranks of authors whose books are released in electronic versions as well as print. Every time I see my name and books listed with such notables as King, Niven, Bear, Weber, Chrichton and other nationally known authors on the e-book best seller lists, I think of my readers and wish there was some way of letting them all know individually how much I appreciate their support. I suppose there isn't, but thanks folks, from the bottom of my heart, and I wish you all happy reading for many more years to come.

Darrell Bain

July 2005

...Scientists have declared that in ten years they will succeed in creating a radically new type of biological weapon. This weapon would be capable of infecting people according to a genetically predetermined marker such as skin color or eye shape. Infection could have a delayed effect or only begin once a certain type of medicine was taken. A recent closed seminar held by the CIA....

...the most terrifying new possibility is the hypothetical biological weapon that could infect people according to genetic markers. Not only would it allow for genocide; it would be created specifically for that purpose. A recent report by the British Medical Association stated that "the rapid progress in genetics could become the basis for ethnic cleansing on an unheard of scale in the near future.

Excerpts from article in *Gateway to Russia*, March 2004 by Vasili Sychev

CHAPTER ONE

On his hospital bed in the city of Port Harcourt, Nigeria, Benjamin Imhonde barely had the energy to raise his arm, but that was enough to see that his skin was becoming lighter. Several weeks ago it had been ebony black. Now it was several shades paler. He wouldn't have minded so much except that as his skin color faded, he became sicker ... and sicker. Benjamin made an effort and turned his head toward the bed next to him where his wife lay sleeping, exhausted from expending what little energy she had left in the simple act of using the bedpan. She had cried out weakly from the pain caused by her movements, but now she was silent.

Sleeping? *No!* She looked more like ... He didn't want to think what she looked like. He tried to raise his head but a wave of pain coursing through his body dropped it back to the pillow. A tear leaked from Benjamin's right eye, then another, and one from his left. He felt them trickling down his face and tried to rein in his emotions. Even crying hurt now. *I'm going to die*, he thought. *I've known ever since they moved us to the isolation ward.* But no one would tell him what kind of disease he and his wife had! Just before the transfer, he overheard talk that the sickness was sweeping through the city of Port Harcourt. Then an orderly told him yesterday—or was it the day before?—that only blacks were becoming ill, and even more ominous, that no one was recovering. That bit of information had been bought from the orderly, but Benjamin didn't mind; he could afford it. He was even willing to pay for more, but the orderly never returned.

Benjamin Imhonde tried one more time to move, to stretch his hand out toward the body of his wife. His arm barely twitched. That was his last conscious movement. An hour later the orderlies came to remove the bodies. They were Catholic nuns. They were white. They showed no symptoms of illness.

* * * *

Doug Craddock took a seat at the conference table in the administrative building of the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia. He nodded to the others present and smiled across the table at Amelia Foster. He had been with the scientist-physician once before on a mission, to the Congo where a pesky, previously unknown virus had popped up, then disappeared just as suddenly. Amelia's presence meant they must have a puzzle on their hands. She was CDC's top specialist in infectious diseases; they didn't send her just anywhere. He also knew Robert Handley, the man in charge of logistics and a good friend. The other person was new to him, a small attractive woman with light brown hair who looked to be in her thirties.

Amelia saw him looking and realized her oversight. "Doug, I'm sorry. This is June Spencer. She'll be head nurse on this little jaunt. June, Doug Craddock, in charge of our security detail. It was becoming almost routine for the CDC to send a security contingent along with the scientists and health workers when it was called on to investigate disease hotspots these days. There was even a new building going up next to the CDC complex, to be devoted to security.

"Hi," Doug said, smiling at her. The nurse gave a very slight nod in return, without a smile. He diagnosed her problem almost immediately. *Another one who thinks the world would be better off without guns—until the bullets start flying in their direction, then we're the first ones they call for.*

Amelia tapped her fingernails on the table to get everyone's attention again. "There's coffee and tea for those who want it. Now that everyone's here, let's get started."

Doug had been the last one to arrive. He poured coffee for himself while Amelia played with the keyboard at her place. The wall screen swam into focus. It showed a map of a large part of western Africa.

"Here's where we'll be going." An arrow moved over the map. It stopped at Port Harcourt, Nigeria. "As you can see, we'll be in Nigeria, near the coast. Port Harcourt is a relatively modern city so facilities should be adequate.

"And here's what we're investigating." The next image showed the body of a pale black man. His skin had a peculiar hue, as if some of the color had been scrubbed off with a rough cloth. Other than that, there were no signs of illness—yet he was obviously dead.

"What is it?" June asked.

"Good question. We don't know; that's why we're being sent. The disease starts with a tingling felt over the whole body and progresses over a period of weeks to extreme myalgia, neuralgia, intractable pain and death. The good news is that it doesn't appear to be contagious through airborne droplets, as diseases like the flu are. The bad news is that it's spreading anyway and the medical people don't know why."

Doug rubbed his chin where a five o'clock shadow was forming. He had a beard that showed more gray than did his wavy, dark brown hair, though his hair was beginning to be shot with white threads, too. To him, the new disease already sounded ominous, but then these days any unexplained phenomenon that caused death worried him. Damned terrorists.

Amelia continued. "We've already received specimens from some of the afflicted. So far, we haven't turned up what's causing the illness, though we're beginning to suspect a peculiar little enterovirus that resembles the poliovirus species."

"Polio? I thought we had wiped it out," Doug said.

"I didn't say it was the polio virus; just that it resembles it in certain ways. We'll have to wait and see what the virologists say. In the meantime, our job is to go there and assist in finding and identifying the vector."

"Any clues yet?" June Spencer asked. She and her team would be the ones having the most direct contact with patients. She played with a pendant at her neck, an odd arrangement of diamonds and gold, rolling it between thumb and fingers.

Amelia hesitated, as if reluctant to speak. "Well ... possibly. For some reason, it's only people of color that have become ill. That's rather peculiar considering what a cosmopolitan city Port Harcourt is."

The other three people in the room couldn't help it. Their eyes turned toward Bob Handley, whose skin was a rich brown color, bordering on black.

He ignored the stares. "Maybe it only strikes those carrying the genes for Sickle Cell," Handley shrugged. "Or maybe it's an all black neighborhood where the vector popped up."

"It doesn't matter right now," Amelia said. She brushed a tress of her blond hair away from her forehead.

Doug smiled inwardly, remembering a dream he had of running his fingers through that same tumble of blond hair. Amelia was a few years older than he and had an appealing, rather than pretty face. He had thought idly about asking her out now that he was getting over Doris' death, but doubted he would. There was no real spark there. They were fast friends, though she was nominally his superior.

"How many of us should I plan on supplies for?" Bob asked, holding his stylus ready. His PDA was on the table in front of him.

Amelia thought. "Four infectious disease specialists, two doctors, June's gang and I think all of Doug's

squad."

Doug sat up straighter. Amelia must be worried to want the whole squad. These teams usually took less than a half dozen security specialists. "You want my whole squad? Is there something I don't know?"

"Doug, I'm not sure of anything at this point. Call it a hunch, but I've got a feeling about this one. It's new, the symptoms are unlike anything we've seen before and despite Bob's disclaimer, I don't like that thing about it affecting only blacks. No, let me take that back. Right before I came from the office, I saw where a couple of Indians from Calcutta had come down with it, so it probably isn't confined to people of African descent, just those who happen to have dark skin."

"How dark were they?" Bob twiddled with his PDA, obviously somewhat uncomfortable with the subject matter.

"I have no idea. Anyway, that's about it, so far as facts that we're sure of."

"How many so far?" June asked.

Doug liked the way her voice sounded. It had a pleasant, melodic tone to it. She was pretty, too. Too bad she didn't seem to take to him.

"It's gone from a dozen or so a week ago to over three hundred hospitalized now and many more beginning to show symptoms. The clinics have long lines in front of them. A few dozen deaths so far, but according to my sources, none of the sick are showing any signs of recovery; on the contrary, they're getting worse. We'll be wanting to take level one precautions until we know more." Amelia had decided not to bring up what the virology laboratory director had told her; that there was a possibility the virus could have been tinkered with. She wanted to wait until they knew for certain, one way or another. No sense in letting unfounded rumors get started.

The other three groaned at the mention of level one precautions. In the tropics, the protective suits were burdensome and hot and very uncomfortable, especially when worn for long periods.

"We'll be leaving as quickly as we can, so get your people briefed and check with Bob for anything extra in the way of supplies you think you might need. Plan on the day after tomorrow at the latest. I know this is kind of rushed, but that's what we're here for. Any questions?" She scanned the three faces. No one responded. "All right, same time tomorrow morning we'll meet again and see where we are."

Doug rose from his seat. He gave Amelia a mock half-salute and strode quickly away, his mind already in overdrive, mentally running down his checklist of the things he would need to do to get his squad ready. There weren't many items on the list. Most of the squad were retired military, all professionals, all trained by him personally to be ready to go at an instant's notice. Two days? Hell, they could be ready in two hours if they had to. Something else was on his mind, too; Bob Handley. Before they parted, Handley stopped him with a touch.

"Doug—for some reason this scares me, the thought that only blacks are falling ill. If I buy the farm, will you see to the family?"

"Of course, but don't worry; just make sure you wear your biosuit and you'll be okay."

Handley's earnest black face held a graver expression than Doug had ever seen; ordinarily, he was cheerful almost to a fault. And he was such a good friend that they could honestly discuss race relationships and cultural attitudes with none of the intellectual posturing so common when the subject usually came up.

Doug remembered very plainly when he first became aware of racial differences. He was five years old and not yet in the first grade when he stumbled while racing along the sidewalk near his home. He fell and skinned his knees. The old black man who did yard work for the neighborhood helped him up while Doug tried to hold back the tears. *Big boys don't cry!* He remembered his Dad's admonishment but sometimes it was hard to keep the tears inside.

"You okay, little man?" The white haired old man asked, while brushing him off.

Doug nodded, unable to speak. His chin was quivering.

"You a big boy," the old man said, his smile showing a gold tooth.

Doug nodded again, feeling better. It really didn't hurt that much.

From out of the blue came another question that he didn't understand at first. "What you rather be, a black man or a white man?"

For the first time, Doug really looked at the old dark skinned gardener. His shoes were split and taped. A much used leather belt held up equally worn and patched jeans. His shirt was stained and wet with the pungent odor of dried sweat and his cap was a shapeless mass. But what Doug noticed most was his color and the way his face held a reservoir of old sadness that was never absent. He didn't laugh and sing and wear nice clothes like the black men he saw on television. He was very dark, almost black, and Doug remembered now that a lot of other people were dark, too, like the woman who came to clean house every week or two. He thought of his playmates and how they were all white. He thought of his parents and their friends. None of them worked outside all day in the yards or mopped floors. He hung his head, ashamed, somehow, but his child's mind had no idea why. Yet he knew the answer to the black man's question. From hundreds of overheard jokes and conversations a cultural bias had already soaked into his little mind. He didn't really want to say anything but his parents had taught him to always answer when an adult spoke to him.

"White, I guess," he muttered, looking up at the old man.

"Me, too," the black gardener replied in a soft voice. He seemed to be looking at something far beyond them, something out of sight. "You go home now, get them knees doctored."

Doug thought he had never seen anyone look as sad as the old man, even when he smiled. "Yes, sir," he said as he nodded his head and turned back toward home. In a moment he was running again, but not from excitement or playfulness. He was running to escape an unknown menace, something he didn't understand but knew was threatening.

He never forgot that episode, and even as a child, he began observing how blacks and whites treated each other and by the time he turned thirteen, he knew that blacks were considered an inferior race. He didn't know why, but he didn't agree with the prevailing attitude of his white friends and his parents. He didn't speak out openly very often, being shy and reclusive. He was considered a bookworm by many of his peers. It wasn't until he was grown and in the army that he began voicing his opinions at times and places he thought were appropriate, but it seemed as if he had always known it was an unfair situation for black people and even as a child always tried to treat blacks as politely and with as much consideration as any one else.

Bob Handley was the only person other than Doris he had ever told that story to. Remembering it, he patted Handley's shoulder, but was unsure of what else he could or should say.

Handley finally smiled at him. "You're a good man, Doug. I hope you come out of this okay, too."

"We will," Doug assured him again. But now he began to worry.

* * * *

June lingered after Bob Handley and Doug Craddock had hurried away. This would be her first mission after returning from her extended leave of absence.

Amelia smiled warmly at her. "I'm really glad to have you back, June. I'm sorry I haven't had a chance to talk to you before now. How are you doing?"

"I'm okay, Amelia. It just took a while for me to get over it. I guess no woman really expects to become a widow when she's barely in her thirties and..."

Amelia nodded sympathetically. "Yes, but—June, I saw the way you reacted to Doug. Please don't take it out on him just because he was a soldier. He's a good man and I'm glad he's going to be with us."

"I'm sorry. I know I was rude, but when he walked into the room, just the way he acted ... so ... so..."

"Soldierly?"

June granted Amelia a small chuckle. "I guess so. And I guess I'm still a little resentful that it wasn't the professionals who took so many of the casualties; it was the National Guard troops." She fingered her pendant, a nervous habit she wasn't even aware of. It was made from her wedding and engagement rings, cut down and set on a small flat oval made of yellow gold. "Anyway, is there anything special I need to know? Anything that's changed since I've been gone? I didn't want to ask while the others were here."

Amelia shook her head. "The only thing that's changed is that the world has become an even more dangerous place since you took your leave. I guess you know that, though."

June smiled and Amelia thought how engaging and cheerful a simple smile made her look. She was glad that June had decided to return. Moping wouldn't bring her husband back and Amelia was a firm believer in work. Perhaps staying busy would help dispel the last remnants of sorrow she still carried inside her.

"Oh yes, I have kept up with the news," June said. "The terrorists are getting worse all the time, aren't they?"

"Yes, they are. That's not our problem, though. We just want to identify this new bug and find a cure or a vaccine, if that's possible. At the very least, we need to find the vector."

"Well, if there's nothing else, I'm going to go brief my gang. Thanks for taking me back, Amelia. I really do appreciate it."

Amelia Foster watched the younger woman leave the conference room. It's good to have her back, she thought. June was an excellent infection control nurse.

In another part of the building, Amelia's superior sat at her desk in the CDC Director's office and rubbed her eyes. There were never enough hours in the day or enough money in the budget to cover everything that needed doing. Mary Hedgrade had to take the time for the next task though. Just in case. She punched a button on the console that held three phones, a speaker phone and a teleconference line connected to the big flatscreen on the wall behind her desk.

"Yes ma'am?" Her assistant's voice came from the adjoining office of the CDC Director's suite.

"Tammy, get Mr. Tomlin on line one for me, please. As quickly as you can arrange it."

Sometimes the wait to speak to Edgar Tomlin, Homeland Security Director, was a long one. Mary tried to review the latest morbidity reports, but couldn't keep her mind on the papers in front of her. Shuffling papers ate up an administrator's time, but there was no help for it; it sometimes seemed to her that the more advanced computers became, the more they generated a need for hard copies. While she was waiting, her mind wandered, but always came back to the subject of her call—that new illness in Nigeria. The last update from the initial small team sent a few days ago prompted her to make it. Doctor visits in Port Harcourt were far above normal, as were hospital admissions. Patients almost all had the same symptoms, a tingling sensation that advanced to pain and weakness. In itself, such a disease wouldn't have prompted her to notify Homeland Security, but the new report confirmed the earlier findings. Only people with dark skin were falling prey to whatever it was. More deaths had been reported, and even more ominous, still not a single person had recovered. There weren't that many bacteria or viruses so target specific—and so universally deadly.

Mary's assistant broke into her reverie. "Ms. Hedgrade, Mr. Tomlin is ready for you."

Mary picked up the secure phone. She barely knew Edgar Tomlin, but what little she knew of him struck her positively. He wasn't simply an out-of-work politician appointed to fill the National Security Director's seat temporarily until a new Director was nominated and confirmed; he was a career official and the former undersecretary, and CIA Director before that. His predecessor had died of a heart attack two weeks ago.

"Mr. Tomlin, I have some news for you. A new disease, a bad one, has poked its head up in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. It appears to infect only blacks and other very dark skinned persons."

"Good God! Won't that cause a run of paranoia! But why tell me?" He sounded impatient. Mary imagined his workload probably outweighed hers.

"There's a possibility that the original virus could have been deliberately altered to produce just that effect, Mr. Tomlin."

Dead silence reigned at the other end of the line for a long moment. Finally Tomlin spoke. He no longer sounded as if he wanted to hurry. "But you're not sure yet. Is that it?"

"Yes, sir. But we should know within a few days. I just wanted to give you fair warning. This could be a bombshell."

"Damn right it could! Bombshell is an understatement. What are your people doing about it?"

"I sent one small team initially. Within forty eight hours I'll have a complete contingent over there. I would appreciate it if you would have the Secretary of State pave the way for them. And I suppose you need to start your wheels rolling just in case?" Her last sentence was framed as a question.

Another silence, then he said "Yes, I'll start some preliminary work but ... uh, Mary is it?"

"Yes."

"Mary, I'm going to put a clamp on this. Tell your people not to talk about it, especially the part about it affecting only blacks. Good God, what would—wait! Is there any possibility it could spread to here? Is it contagious?"

"Mr. Tomlin, that's what we're going to find out. We have no idea yet how it spreads, nor exactly how fast; only that it's doing it, and doing it very rapidly." She didn't finish with the implication. Whether or not Tomlin knew it, Port Harcourt was a metropolitan city, the hub of both air and sea travel into and out of

Nigeria, the most populous nation in Africa. If it could be spread by human to human contact, as apparently it could in some way, then it was already present in nearly every country in the world. Including the United States of America. Globalization and universal air travel would have seen to that.

* * * *

Edgar Tomlin put down the phone and stared into space, reviewing the conversation in his mind. Had he responded properly? Been appropriately concerned? Finally he nodded to himself. Yes. He had said just what he should have.

CHAPTER TWO

Rafe Smith grinned gleefully at his companions and clenched his fingers into a fist, shaking it in the air. "We did it!"

There were five of them, all looking much alike; faces seamed with wrinkles burned into the skin by long exposure to the sun. They were dressed in jeans and snap button shirts and battered tennis shoes or heavy, lace up work boots. There were two cases of beer stacked in the kitchen of the old farmhouse, with more cooling in the refrigerator. It had been a long time coming and now they were celebrating.

"You reckon we'll get all the niggers?" Eddie Dunstop, Rafe's second in command, asked. He tipped a beer can to his mouth and swallowed. It went down easy and cold, a proper reward for a working man after a day outside at the construction site.

"Hell, yes," Rafe answered. "That crazy Swede said Africa's just the start. Before long there won't be a nigger left alive."

"Hallelujah!" Another of the men exclaimed. "Goddamned black apes, it's about time." He wiped his mouth after tipping a beer to his mouth and continued, "I still think we should of killed the Swede after we got the stuff from him. What if he gets caught and blabs?"

Rafe shook his head. "No, the big boss said we might need him later. Niggers ain't the only ones in the world causin' us trouble. There's the Chinks and Spics, too."

"How 'bout the Ragheads? Those crazy fucks are bad as niggers."

Rafe chuckled and stretched his long thin legs out on the patched ottoman in the living room. "We got it started, good buddy. Let's let this play out first. Which reminds, me, better stock up on ammo before it hits here. This is gonna to drive the niggers batshit."

Eddie stood up and stretched, then sat back down. His puzzled expression focused on Rafe, their leader and the one who was the primary contact with the Swede—as well as the one who received and dispensed the funds coming from the head man. "How they gonna do anything to us? Won't they just die off real quick like?"

"Naw, Eddie. It spreads kinda like the flu. You know, like it may go on for months before they're all dead."

"But Rafe, the flu don't never get ever'body! What if it don't kill all of 'em?"

"The Swede said it would, but it might take some time. Now relax and enjoy yourself. We've worked for this day a long time. From now on whites are in charge of the world."

"Except for the Spics and Chinks."

"Relax, man, relax. We'll get them, too, eventually. The Swede said he might could figure something out if he had some more time and money. I know, I talked to him good right before we split up."

Eddie nodded agreement. A new world was coming, one more to his liking. Like Rafe always told them, everything would be great when there were no more niggers or spiks or chinks. The whole world would be ruled by whites, like God intended it to be. He took another swig of beer and tried to visualize the future, but his imagination was limited. What he mostly thought about was how that goddamned black ape of a foreman who told him he was lazy would be dead, deader than last week's road kill. He wiped

his mouth and grinned.

* * * *

The security contingent for the CDC teams was housed in a huge converted factory building located just outside the eastern city limits of Atlanta. From the bits of lint and strings of colored cloth that still turned up sticking to clothing and gear, Doug suspected it had once been a textile mill. Those days are gone, he thought. China and Bangladesh and other low-pay countries manufactured almost all the mass produced clothing now. Still, the building was sufficient for their purposes. There was enough room to house several hundred troops, as well as a mess hall and lounge. A smaller building adjacent to it served adequately as a supply and arms depot. It was always under guard by a contract security firm. Those who were married or had some other arrangements were allowed to live away from the headquarters unless they were on the go team. That duty rotated and Doug considered himself lucky to have caught this assignment. He liked seeing new places and had never been to Nigeria.

The security building held a briefing and conference room, which was where Doug and his squad were now. He had just told them where they were headed.

"Nigeria!" One of the troops exclaimed. "That's Africa, huh?"

Doug was always astounded by questions like that. He was well aware of the fact that geography was no longer considered part of a well-rounded school curriculum, but damn, didn't people even read these days? Or watch something besides sports and cartoons? It was a pet peeve of his. He controlled his irritation at the man's lack of knowledge, even though Nigeria had been in the news for years with its perennial religious and tribal conflicts between Muslims, Christians and Animists over control of the country's oil supply and government.

"Yes," Doug acknowledged. "Nigeria is in western Africa. It's a big oil producer when they're not on strike or banging away at each other over religious issues. We're going to Port Harcourt on the coast. Be sure and go over the briefing packet I gave you, especially the street maps of the area around the hospital and clinics. All of them. I know you don't have much time but that's what the go team is for; a quick deployment."

"Can we expect any action?" Buddy Hawkins, a former Marine, asked. He had somehow missed the Gulf wars and the latest dustup in South America. Doug thought of the circumstances, the fact that only blacks and other dark skinned people were being affected by the disease. "I can't tell you officially, but personally? Yeah, I think there's a good chance of it this time." He didn't try to tell the young man that combat was hard, dirty, frightening and crazy, and nothing at all like the storybooks. If it came, he would find out the hard way, like every soldier in history had.

"Terrorists?" Martha Myers questioned. She was a short, dark-haired former army medic who had applied for and made the cut when the infantry began accepting females who could pass the strength and endurance tests. He liked her; she was calm and knowledgeable in her field, and well-read besides.

"No terrorism that I know of, but there's a factor here that's sure as hell going to get a lot of folks agitated, so we're taking our full load, machine guns and all." He told them as much as he knew and saw their faces lose the happy smiles over getting ready to go somewhere. The three blacks and two Hispanics in his twelve man squad exchanged glances and tightened their lips.

"Any more questions? No? All right, we're confined to quarters for the duration. We'll meet at nine in the morning after you've gone over your packets, and I'll find out in the meantime where we're likely to go to first and whatever else I can. We may have another day here, or we may not. Be completely ready to leave before you go to bed tonight. Comprene?"

Nods and muttered assents told him they were probably already geared up. There wasn't much he needed to worry about there. He had the best squad in the contingent and his men knew it. His had been one of the first units put together by Gene Bradley, the Security Director, a special forces colonel who had lost his left arm in action, though no one knew exactly where or when it had happened.

Just as Doug turned to leave, Bradley appeared. He wagged his finger and Doug hurried over to the doorway.

"Hi Colonel. What can we do for you?"

Bradley put his arm around Doug's shoulders and walked him back into the room. His squad members pushed out of their chairs and rose to their feet. It wasn't required, but military manners were hard to shake.

"I just got a call from Homeland Security," Bradley announced. "You now have orders not to talk about your mission, and there's to be absolutely no leaks about how this disease in Nigeria is affecting only people of color." His gaze roved the room, making eye contact with each of them.

"But sir—isn't it already public knowledge?" One of the older men asked.

"The disease is. Whom it infects isn't. And I've been informed there's a possibility of terrorism involved."

"Jesus Christ!" Martha Myers exclaimed. "Who would do a thing like that?"

"I have no idea. Just remember—no talking, even when you call your families. It's all right to tell them where you're going, since that's already been announced, but no details. Clear?"

"There won't be any leaks from this squad, sir. But I really doubt it'll stay secret for long."

"Yes, I realize that and I'm sure the people higher up do as well. They just want a chance to get a handle on what's really happening before speaking up. No sense in causing unwarranted panic. And we'll all be safer if it's not something being bandied about by the public just yet."

Doug nodded. America was becoming so ethnically and racially divisive that the least suspicion of action deleterious to a particular group was likely to cause anything from riots to political and physical retaliation against the other party. The former colonel turned and left as abruptly as he had come. There was never any waste motion with him. Doug knew his boss was just carrying out orders, but personally he thought it was a futile effort. The information net was ubiquitous and hardly anything stayed under cover for long.

* * * *

Manfred Morrison felt a chill steal over him as he read the update from the CDC just handed to him by his administrative assistant. He hadn't paid that much attention to the first notification about the new disease in Nigeria; new bugs seemed to pop up almost monthly these days, a result he thought came from continuing excursions into previously neglected habitats. The world was just growing too fast. But this ... This could be horrible, and not just because of the disease, but the repercussions from it. Natural or man made, the appearance of a new virus that infected only dark skinned humans would be explosive. Hardly anyone would believe it wasn't deliberately set loose.

The update held the attention of Manfred like nothing else had since his appointment to the post of Presidential Science Advisor. His eyes were fixed on it so avidly one might have thought he held a winning lottery ticket in his hand. The CDC scientists now believed the virus was related to the one causing polio, but thought it had been altered by methods that could only happen through deliberate manipulation in a laboratory. They still didn't know why it was so lethal nor how it spread, and hadn't

even begun to study the possibility of a vaccine. The update also confirmed his fears. The first cases were now being reported in other countries besides Nigeria, among them South Africa, Ethiopia, India and ... England? Then he remembered, England had a fair percentage of blacks in its population now. Manfred took a deep breath and continued reading. Houston, Texas was reporting several possible cases. And New York and Seattle hospitals thought they had some. Mexico City. He scanned on down.

Still no cure, not so soon, and still no one recovering. The president would be coming to him soon for recommendations. There hadn't been an inordinate number of deaths yet, but the way the thing was spreading and the way it affected only very dark skinned persons ... that was the biggest threat. Manny reached for his phone, intending to punch the number for a direct connection to CDC headquarters in Atlanta and see if any more information was available before requesting an appointment with the president. Instead he paused and stared at the skin of his own dark brown arm. His hand was trembling when he finally managed to look away and make the call.

* * * *

"Hello, Mr. Craddock," June said to Doug. He had gone to the forward part of the passenger compartment of the big military cargo plane to get another cup of coffee. He was surprised that her voice didn't sound nearly as frosty when addressing him as it had at their last meeting, even though he had hoped to have a few words with the new nurse. If nothing else, he wanted to find out if his original analysis of her attitude had been correct.

"Hello, Ms. Spencer. Do we have to be so formal, though?"

"I ... no, I guess not." No sense blaming him for Charlie's death, she thought.

"Good. I'm Doug, in case you don't remember. And it's June, right?"

"Yes. Douglas?"

He laughed, showing an even row of white teeth that appeared to have been capped but hadn't. "No, just plain Doug. My parents liked the short version, I guess. I'm wondering why we haven't met before now. Are you new?"

"I took an extended leave after my husband was killed in a helicopter crash."

Doug's smile disappeared. "I'm sorry, I didn't know."

"No reason you should have. I don't know why I brought it up."

"Nevertheless, losing a spouse is rough on anyone. I know."

June halted in the act of turning to leave. "You lost your wife?"

"It's been a while. The Mall Terrorists."

"Oh God! How terrible."

"It doesn't much matter how she died, June. Dead is dead. I loved her, but after a while you have to go on."

"Well ... maybe. Anyway, I'd rather not talk about it."

"Same here. What brought you to the CDC?"

"My husband worked for them in administration. It just seemed natural to take a job with them myself

when they had an opening. My folks tried to get me to go back to Houston and start over there after Charlie died. I did for a while, but once I decided to go back to work, I found I could come back here in more or less the same position I'd held before, so I did." June suddenly realized she was chatting with a former military man as if she felt no bitterness against the army.

"I guess we both must be idealists."

June had again turned to go but that remark stopped her as quickly as the former one had. "Why do you say that?"

Doug sipped at his coffee. "Anyone who volunteers for this kind of assignment has to be either an idealist or a closet martyr. You don't strike me as a martyr."

June hadn't ever considered herself an idealist. "More like being born with itchy feet. I like doing different things and going to different places." She was startled when Doug burst out laughing.

"Sorry," he apologized. "It's just that you used the exact term to describe my whole family. It's sort of a joke with us. We've always had problems settling down. I guess that's one reason I went into the military."

"You don't look old enough to be retired. Why did you get out?"

"Thanks, but I am retired. Five years ago, but I went in when I was seventeen. Like most teenagers, I didn't have good sense. I thought fighting a war would be fun and glorious. Couldn't wait for one to happen. Then when it did and I saw a few bodies, I realized how dumb I'd been." Doug didn't mention that his retirement was because of a leg wound that left him unable to march long distances and forced him out of the infantry.

"So why did you stay in?" June found that she was interested despite her vow to have nothing to do with anyone associated with the military from now on.

Doug poured more coffee. "I guess I'm an idealist in the purest sense. Being human, I suppose we'll always have wars and fighting. As long as it has to happen, why leave it to the ones who enjoy such things? I think the military ought to be made up of soldiers who hate to fight—but who, if it comes to it, do it well." His gaze wandered away from the present to events existing only in his memory. "It turned out that I was good at my job." He blinked and realized he was talking too much. "Sorry. Sometimes I keep talking after my mind says to stop."

June wondered if she should tell him that her husband had been in the National Guard—and died when called to active duty. No, he probably wouldn't be interested in how she felt about that. In fact, he would probably resent her attitude. Suddenly she felt nervous in his presence. "I'd better be getting back to my gang. We're still looking over the packets we were given. This was all done in such a hurry, there was no time before we left."

"Same here, and I'd better be getting back, too. Some of my guys aren't very well versed in geography. I keep telling them Port Harcourt is in Nigeria, not New England but I'm not sure they believe me. Nice talking to you." He walked back toward his seat, glad that he had apparently been wrong about her unfriendliness. She was easy to talk to.

June chuckled to herself as she followed Doug back down the narrow aisle between the trucks and jeep and their stacked and tied hand luggage. She had the same problem, too. One of her young male nurses had thought their only stop, Hawaii, was in the Atlantic Ocean. It was a brief one, just enough time for a maintenance check and refueling, then they were back in the air. She had checked her map distances and

wondered why they were taking this route, but supposed the military had a reason. They always had a reason, even if it didn't make sense. Like that helicopter flight ... no! Stop it, she told herself. Like the man said, dead is dead. Keep him in a special place in your memory and move on.

* * * *

The temperature and humidity were stultifying. The atmosphere hit Doug like a wall of heated fog as soon as he stepped off the big cargo plane. Whew! He thought, wearing biosuits in this place will sap our strength quicker than a sauna. "Stay close, guys," he told his squad as he looked around for their transportation.

Amelia was already talking with the head of the welcoming committee—an all military one, from the looks of things. As he watched she turned in his direction. "Doug!" she called. "Over here!" He hurried toward her.

"This is Major Mustafa. He'll be our liaison with the government."

Doug shook hands with the man. His skin was a rich black color. "Major," he said.

"And this is Captain Presley. He's in charge of the military detachment at the hospital. You'll be reporting to him."

"Captain, glad to meet you." His new commander nodded amiably. Surprisingly, he was Caucasian. Strands of bright red hair peeking from beneath the bill of his cap contrasted with the gray at his temples.

The major pointed. "Your transportation is arriving now. Quarters have been arranged near the hospital, or you may erect tents on the grounds. You will be given every assistance. The situation is rapidly becoming serious. I shall see you again once you've been quartered." He waved a hand as if including everyone in the statement and ran back to his jeep. The driver raced off as soon as he was seated.

In a pinch, they could all have crowded into their jeep or the trucks with their supplies, but using the two buses that the major had pointed to would be far more comfortable. It ferried most of them and their hand baggage to an old two story building only a couple of hundred yards or so from the big hospital, which Doug had learned was the only hospital in Port Harcourt. To be a manufacturing and transportation hub, the city had a surprisingly small population. He rode with Captain Presley in his jeep while Amelia and June rode in their own, driven by Amelia. Bob Handley had been assigned half of Doug's men to help with unloading and to stay with the trucks at the hospital. Bob would see that the arms and supplies didn't wander off, he knew. For the time being he and the other men carried only their light weapons.

One thing Doug noticed on their way was that traffic was light; there were few pedestrians and every intersection sported several soldiers and at least one military vehicle, either a jeep, SUV or armored personnel carrier. Had the situation deteriorated that quickly? He hoped not, but then why was the hospital being guarded—or was it just to keep order from too many patients wanting to get inside?

It was the latter, he learned quickly. "See," Captain Presley said as they neared the area and pedestrians increased in number. "More're becoming ill every day. There's only so much room. We're clearing out the building next to your digs for auxiliary wards but they aren't ready yet." His accent was a strange mixture of Nigerian, Australian and Scot.

There were also guards around their quarters. Doug wondered whether he should ask for more help from back home. No, it wouldn't do any good. Once they were airborne after the stop in Hawaii, Amelia had quietly gathered him, June and Bob and told them that she had received an encrypted call from home. The disease was cropping up in other countries. They would be needing security, too. This fact had

already made Doug decide to keep all his men at the hospital during the day and stay with the health workers when they came back to their quarters to sleep. No tents would be erected; he didn't want to take the time or trouble.

* * * *

Over the next week, Doug established a routine. When in a foreign country by invitation, the local authorities, both military and civilian had to be deferred to. His squad was there mainly to repel or ideally to prevent spontaneous attacks on the hospital infection disease specialists while they carried out their duties, much like marine guards at embassies around the world. There was little that could be done to resist masses of people if they were determined to overrun a place. And he personally was responsible for deciding at what point security and safety for the "Civilians" as they were called privately, could no longer be maintained. That frequently threw him into the company of Captain Presley, who attended the morning department head briefings held by Amelia for Bob Handley, June and himself. Privately, he conferred with Captain Presley more often.

Doug had his men on two shifts a day, noon until midnight and from then until noon the next day. It was wearing, but already he didn't like the signs he was seeing: the way black patients looked at him and the others as they were admitted, and particularly the increasingly surly—and fearful—attitude he noticed among the black soldiers guarding the approaches to the hospital and those assigned to the grounds and entrances. He mentioned it to Captain Presley.

Presley's ancestors were from Scotland. He was red headed, short and swarthy, with a tanned, freckled face. He wiped sweat from his brow as he made the rounds with Doug. "Can't say as I blame t' chaps, having t' wear those suits in t' heat. They can't take it more than an hour'r so at a stretch."

Amelia had allowed all their crew except the blacks and three others with dark skins to dispense with the biohazard suits as it became increasingly evident that Caucasians were immune to the disease—which was becoming known popularly as "The needles" after the pain symptoms. Officially, it was classified as *Enterovirus harcourtii*, named after the city where it was first discovered. The professionals referred to it as simply "The Harcourt Virus".

"Five of my own men are still in the suits, Captain, although I keep rotating them. And I don't think it's just the suits making the soldiers nervous and surly. Rumors are rife that it was started deliberately by white supremacists."

Presley shrugged. "Could be, old man. I dare say th're's them as 'ud do it 'f given a chance. Though given my druthers, I'd of rather seen 'em go after t' ragheads if they were of a mind t' kill off some 'un. Blasted retards, suiciders and all that. Don't give a bloody damn who t'y kill so long's it's Americans or Europeans."

"Funny place for it to start, though, Nigeria," Doug commented after pausing with Presley to speak to Buddy Hawkins and the three Nigerian soldiers guarding the main entrance, and to see whether or not they were having any problems. None so far, though if looks could kill, one of the black soldiers would have laid him out.

"Have to agree there. South Africa would've been a more likely bet. Or maybe your country. Lots of hard feelings both places, don't y'know? Even back home, lots of bad feelings. Bloody damned politicians, t'cause of t'all. How're your boffins doing? Any luck so far?"

Doug had to think a moment before remembering what the term meant. In England, scientists were sometimes referred to as boffins. "You heard Amelia this morning same as I did. We can't establish a vector. Hell, not even any clues yet."

Presley took out a pack of cigarettes and shook one free. He tucked it between his lips and offered the pack to Doug. Without thinking, he took one and accepted a light. As soon as the smoke hit his lungs, he felt the familiar satisfying sensation—and a sudden dizziness at his first breath of nicotine in months. It happened every time. War and smoking seemed to go together in his mind. There had been no shooting yet, but he was beginning to doubt they would get out of Nigeria without fighting.

"Same's back home t'way I hear it over t' radio. Our boffins say it's a virus, but 's peculiar. Seems to be spread by family sometimes, but not always. Blasted strange, eh?"

They paused again at the back entrance to the hospital. There, a gathering crowd was pressing forward toward rolls of barbed wire that had been hastily emplaced around the hospital grounds two days before, a worrisome sign in itself. All of the crowd were black. Many were yelling and shaking their fists, but others appeared barely able to stand and were being supported by what he supposed were family members.

Abruptly, an irregular volley of rifle shots rode above the crowd noise and silenced it for a moment. Doug scanned the scene quickly and saw that it hadn't turned violent yet; the Nigerian soldiers had fired over the heads of the crowd. It was a portent, though. He pulled out his military phone and thumbed it on to let the troops in front know what was happening. He had to wait a moment while a voice amplified by a bull horn warned the crowd to stay in line or to go to the new hospital just opened.

"Heads up, guys," he said, then after giving both the front and back guards time to recognize the incoming message signal, continued. "Those were warning shots, but stay alert. Remember, you're not authorized to use force unless it's the last resort—but don't hesitate if any of our people are threatened."

In the meantime, Presley was busy conveying information to his troops. When he saw that part of the throng had begun to troop off toward the newly rigged hospital, he spoke to Presley. "How much longer, do you think, Captain?"

Presley's normally nonchalant countenance had sobered. He shook his head negatively, knowing exactly what Doug was asking. "If 'twas my lookout, I'd be telling my chaps to start packing, old man. I rather doubt whites'll be popular 'round here in another day or two—not that we're very popular right now, eh?" His grin returned momentarily, then vanished again as his phone rang.

While he was talking, Doug was thinking. It would be nice if the scientists could stay long enough to discover the vector for the "prickles", another designation for the disease here, but their safety was his primary concern. Local news was already being censored, but Amelia had told him yesterday that the newly commissioned U.S.S. Andrew Jackson, one of their finest aircraft carriers, had arrived offshore with attendant ships, including part of a Marine Expeditionary force. Americans who wanted to leave would be evacuated. When that news got out here, as it inevitably would, the type of mild uproar he had just witnessed would be the least of their worries. Abruptly, he made his decision.

"Captain Presley, I'm going inside to tell our folks to get ready to leave. After that, I'm bringing all my troops and the medical people back here. I'm thinking we'd better call for a lift and get to the airport as soon as possible."

"I rather agree, old boy. Any chance of going with you?"

"You'll desert?"

"Call it what you like, old man, but I've kept my ear rather close t' the ground. It's sticky now, but within a fortnight, I'm willing t' bet white skins'll be hunted through t' streets like bloody foxes. I'd rather like to avoid that 'f I can."

"I can get you aboard a flight, Captain, but I can't guarantee what the customs and immigration folks back home will have to say about it."

"Better a lockdown than a coffin, eh?"

Doug couldn't argue with that. He waved one of his guards over, then sent him hurrying to drive one of the big trucks back to the quarters and bring everyone to the hospital.

CHAPTER THREE

Ali Green was called Fridge, his nickname, much more often than by his real name. Right now, he didn't give much of a damn what anyone called him. All he could think of was the little body of his youngest, his daughter and the last of his children. He had buried them all, one by one. His wife rested in a plot beside them. She had gone first.

Tears wouldn't come. He had already shed so many that there were none left, but he raged inside at the injustice of the world, at the way blacks were treated. He knew just as certainly as God made the earth that some whites, somehow, had been responsible for this newest scourge devastating the black race. He wanted revenge, but he didn't know who to strike out at. Deep down, he knew that all whites weren't guilty but he couldn't control his feelings. Somehow, someday, he had to make them pay.

He trudged away from the graveyard by himself. Many people, especially blacks, were beginning to avoid being close to others for fear of catching the disease, but Fridge didn't think that made much difference. After all, he had been with all four of his children and his wife and never showed the slightest sign of symptoms, the prickling under the skin that presaged the full blown disease.

He was looking down at the graveled path, lost in his thoughts. It almost caused him to collide with a well dressed black man barring his path.

"Go away," he said brusquely. "I don't want no company."

"Mr. Green, maybe I can help you. I'm from The Church of Blacks."

Fridge met his level gaze with his own, having to look down at the other man. Fridge was as big as a linebacker though he had never played professional sports. His career had been with the military. "How the church going to help me? They going to bring my family back to life?" He had heard of the Church of Blacks, of course. It had become very big in the South and big cities of the north over the last several years. He had never attended any of their services, not being particularly religious, though he did believe in God, in a vague, undefined way.

"We can't return your family to you, Mr. Green. But if you're seeking retribution, we have a place for you."

Fridge examined the man, closer. He was wearing a suit, even on this warm day, and carried sheaf of booklets in his hand. Now he remembered; he had seen him at the funeral home on another occasion, talking with other grieving friends and relatives of deceased blacks. "What you mean, retribution?" He felt a stirring inside, a spark of new animation at the thought.

"Doctor Taylor is looking for good men with military experience. I understand you were in the army."

Fridge knew the man was referring to Dr. Qualluf Taylor, a minister and founder of the Church of Blacks. "How do you know me?"

"One of our members recommended we come see you. I can't tell you much right now, but believe me, Doctor Taylor intends to make the white establishment pay for this latest outrage against our people."

"You think the government started it, huh?"

"Who else? Something like this doesn't just pop up from a jungle. We don't have proof yet, but we know, just like you do."

Fridge had to admit they were thinking alike. Still...

"Here, Mr. Green. Take one of these booklets. It will explain the church's philosophy. If you agree with it, or want to learn more, there's a contact number and address inside."

Fridge took the booklet from the man's extended hand. "Won't hurt to look," he said.

"That's all we ask. Thank you, sir." Fridge felt his hand being shaken then he was alone again.

Late that night, after reading the booklet, he decided to go see what the Church of Blacks had to offer him. Perhaps they had what he was looking for. He certainly had nothing else to do now, and little desire to do anything else.

* * * *

"But Doug, we still don't know anything about how the Harcourt virus is being spread! There must be something obvious we're overlooking. Can't we wait a few more days?" Amelia was agitated and haggard looking. She had been working as hard as anyone else in her scientific capacity and still finding time for all the administrative duties concerning the thirty people she supervised, but she felt their job was unfinished.

"What are you hearing from home?" Doug nodded toward the secure phone on the desk of the tiny office she had been assigned. It contained little else other than a half dozen folded chairs leaning against one wall.

Amelia ran her fingers through the portion of her hair below the clasp holding it behind her neck. It was beginning to feel greasy from not taking the time to wash it. "Oh hell, Doug, it's popping up everywhere. And did I tell you? Bob Handley came to me yesterday. I think he may have it, too. He's presenting some of the symptoms."

"Oh damn! Hasn't he been wearing his suit?"

"He says he has. But when I checked in at noon, I heard that a couple of our blacks at CDC contacted it, despite every precaution. We can't explain it!" She looked almost ready to cry from frustration.

"Well, crap. Amelia, if that's the case, can't you study the possible vectors just as well back home?"

"I ... yes, I guess we could, so far as that goes, but I was hoping we'd find whether or not it's a mutation of the poliovirus that was passed from some animal reservoir here or ... or..."

"Or whether it was man made?"

"Altered by man, anyway. I ... oh hell, Doug, I guess I've just been doing some wishful thinking. It's looking more and more like something that was deliberately altered, then planted. We just can't figure out how it's spreading! I..."

With the suddenness of a dish slipping from her hand and breaking, Amelia's composure finally cracked. Tears formed, then she began crying in earnest. Doug kicked the partially opened door closed and gathered her into his arms. She sobbed in broken gasps, trying to contain the abrupt release of emotion but unable to stop for long moments.

Finally she stepped back and fumbled in the pocket of her lab jacket for a handkerchief. She wiped at her eyes and smiled wryly. "Sorry. That's not like me, you know. It's just that ... how could someone *do* such a thing?" She sniffed again.

"I don't know, Amelia, any more than I can understand the endless number of terrorists so fanatical that they're willing to blow themselves up so long as they ... never mind, that's another problem. And security is my decision, not yours. Go get everyone here ready to go. I've already sent a truck back for my off-duty troops and any of your people that're there. Grab your notes and any specimens you think are irreplaceable, but that's all. Don't waste time trying to pack personal gear. Send everyone to the lobby. We're heading for the airport while it's still open."

"Has it gotten that bad already? I thought..."

"It's going to get that bad. That's my considered opinion, as well as that of Captain Presley. Go on, now. I'll try to make arrangements through the embassy for a plane."

First Doug used his military-configured phone to alert his off duty troops. He got Martha on the line the first try, and didn't waste words. "Martha, this is Doug. Get the troops together. Round up anyone else that's there and pile into the truck I'm sending for you. It's already on the way, so hurry. We're getting out of here."

"Got it," she said and hung up.

Doug liked dealing with the former medic. She grasped orders quickly and carried them out with dispatch. That matter taken care of, he dialed again.

Amelia's phone was a duplicate of his; both had securely encrypted lines to the American Embassy in Lagos and the CDC back home. He tried the embassy first and was unable to get through after several attempts. So much for arranging for a plane to pick them up. There might not be enough time to get one here anyway, he thought.

"Damn it," he muttered and cursed the politicians who blocked the CDC security teams from direct communication with the military. They were required to go through embassy personnel if they thought help was needed. There was another way, though. Gene Bradley, the head of security for CDC, still had plenty of military connections. Doug took out his personal phone, plugged in Gene's number, then waited almost a minute while his call wound its way from satellite to satellite and through various connections before reaching Atlanta. And that damned line was busy, too. He hung on, hoping that Gene had his call waiting activated; his own phone number was tagged with an urgent symbol when and if it appeared on Gene's phone.

In the near distance several shots rang out. He heard some faint shouts, a distant scream, then the noise died away. *Come on, come on, answer, damn it!* he said to himself.

"Doug? That you?" Gene's voice came through, a little static mixed with it but understandable.

"Yeah. Gene, I understand there's a carrier offshore here. Can you get through to them and arrange for them to send some choppers for us? I think all hell's going to break loose here before long."

He waited impatiently for the answer, knowing that even at the speed of light, a call to and from the other side of the world sometimes took a second or two to make the circuit through satellites and ground relays.

"I'll put a flag on it to give you priority over the lace panty set. Where's the pickup?"

"Main hospital in Port Harcourt. They should have the GPS coordinates, but just in case, here they are." He read off the numbers, then added, "Give us one hour. And it wouldn't hurt to throw a little air cover over the embassy—and us, too if you can manage it."

"The embassy's already in the works, Doug. I'll try to get the flyboys to add you to their itinerary. Hang tough. Good luck." The line went dead.

"Gene will try to get some helicopters to pick us up, Amelia. Go round up your people and take them upstairs. I'll send a couple of my guys up in a minute."

Doug checked his Glock .45 caliber pistol, as he did several times a day, then hurried outside. Presley was waiting at the main entrance, his rifle in his hands. He was speaking to one of the black guards in a tribal language that sounded to Doug like someone trying to talk through a mouthful of food. As he watched, the soldier spit on the ground at Presley's feet and walked away. The other two Nigerians stared nervously after him but stayed at their posts.

"News?" Presley asked, not moving his gaze away from two groups of Nigerian civilians back behind the wire. The apparent leader of the smaller group was discoursing loudly to the larger throng, using his hands and arms to wave and point in the direction of the hospital entrance and back toward the center of the city.

"Chopper evac in an hour, hopefully. Can the roof support enough weight to take one? I hope so, because that's where I'm sending our folks."

"Why—oh, I see. Might be best, old boy." He touched the ear plug with the wire leading to where his little radio was belted. "Text to voice from the infonet. Blasted gov'ment wags can't stop that, no 'ay."

"What do you hear?"

"Riots in Lagos. Army desertions. Some whites lynched already. Bloody strange. 'S not like there's so many down with 't bug, but the net's gone haywire with conspiracy tales."

A noise caused Doug to look farther into the distance than the front entrance. The truck he had sent back to the old building where they had been sleeping was already on the way back. Good, he thought. They hadn't wasted any time.

The truck was only fifty yards from the main entrance and honking its horn to clear the way when he heard the sudden loud rattle of an automatic weapon and saw a row of holes stitch their way across its windshield. The truck veered and plowed off the street and into the barbed wire, running over several in the crowd who couldn't get out of the way in time. It tore through the barrier and came to rest just beyond the gap.

Doug's first thought startled him. It wasn't about how many might have been hurt or killed in the truck. It was concern that June might be one of the victims.

* * * *

Manfred Morrison sat across from President Marshall, along with Homeland Security Director Edgar Tomlin. He was giving his first briefing on *Enterovirus harcourtii* to the president.

"Sir, we've discovered the mechanism of the virus' action. It attacks melanin, the pigment that produces our skin color by interfering with the tyrosine metabolism during melanin production, causing quinol intoxication that progresses to lethal levels in those individuals who..."

President Marshall, held up his hand. "Spare me the jargon, Manny. I don't know anything about science. Just tell me when you'll have a vaccine ready and how many deaths we can anticipate before it becomes available."

"Mr. President, as yet we've been unable to determine the vector but..." He saw the warning glint in the

president's eyes and hurried on. "...and as for a vaccine, we haven't completely identified the antigen/antigenic properties, but we have determined that the initial and most rapid spread of the disease here is occurring in Seattle, New York City, Los Angeles and Atlanta. Also, South Africa seems to be a center of..."

"The major hubs of entry into the country by air travel," Edgar Tomlin broke in. "And South Africa! I'll bet anything that some of their damned white supremacists instigated this and..."

The president slammed his fist down on his desk. "Goddamnit, I don't want to hear about your bets! And I don't want to hear that there's no vaccine. I want to know for certain what country turned this thing loose on the world and I want a cure for this thing, and I want it soon! Do you gentlemen understand me?"

Both men could only nod. There was no arguing with the president when he was in this mood.

Manny rubbed his temples, trying to think of some way to explain to the president that vaccines or cures couldn't be produced overnight nor on demand. Even if enough was known about the virus to start production this minute it would be six months before sufficient quantities to inoculate all the dark skinned persons in America could be ready. He noticed that the secret service agent standing unobtrusively in one corner of the oval office had taken a step forward when the president exploded, and the agent was looking in his direction, not at Edgar Tomlin. Manny decided that he couldn't blame the man. Black anger was beginning to build throughout the country with the persistent rumors that their own government had developed the virus and clandestinely spread it into the population in order to rid the country of its niggers. He shook his head at the epithet that popped into his mind, like an assault on his reason, trying to make him join the growing miasma of resentment at whites over their immunity.

"Sir, I have every agency trying to track down the perpetrators of this atrocity. We'll find them soon." Edgar Tomlin tried to make himself sound confident and in charge.

"You'd better, or the goddamn country will explode. We've already had riots in Los Angeles." The president pounded his desk again. "And when we find who did it, we'll raze their fucking nation to the ground. Damned terrorists, it's probably one of those fucking raghead countries trying to get cute." He raved, already having forgotten that a moment before his Homeland Security Director had been blaming white supremacists. "You find somebody that knows something, and soon! And I don't give a damn if you have to rip them to pieces to make them talk."

"Yes, sir," Tomlin said. Damn the man, he was worse than his predecessor, demanding answers and not really caring much about their veracity. In this case, though, it didn't matter to him.

"And you, Manny. One week. You've got one week to come up with some answers. Hire some more scientists. Work overtime. One week, hear?"

"Yes, sir," Manfred said, his voice trembling with a host of fears that kept boiling up in his mind. Why can't we ever elect a president with at least a rudiment of scientific knowledge, he wondered. God knows the country could use some scientists in government these days.

"All right, that's all. Now get to work, both of you." President Marshall turned away, preparing to greet his next appointment. An aide was already in the oval office, urging the others to their feet and escorting them out one door as the next person came in from another.

* * * *

Another rattle of automatic fire exploded above the crowd noise. Doug was already running toward the truck, his pistol in his hand but his rifle still shouldered. Behind the mangled barbed wire the crowd had

retreated, then stopped, indecisive. A way into the hospital was open but the gunfire was intimidating. Doug still hadn't been able to determine where it came from.

More shots sounded, but this time he could see what was happening. Martha was down on one knee, her rifle in her hand, firing over the head of the crowd in three-round bursts. Abruptly, she lowered her aim and spent the rest of the clip on automatic. A scream answered her gunfire and the crowd broke just as he drew even with the truck and pulled open the passenger side door. Steam was rising from a burst radiator and blowing back toward him. At a glance, he could see that the man and woman in the cab were dead. He blanched sickly for a moment at the sight of the bodies, then grabbed their rifles and backed out in time to meet the rest of the CDC staff jumping from the canvas-covered bed of the truck, with his few men leading the way.

His four remaining troops were armed, holding their rifles high but not knowing where to shoot. Neither did Doug, for that matter. Then he saw the crowd continuing to disperse.

Martha ran up to him, eyes bright. A smudge of dirt streaked one cheek. "I got the one that fired at the truck, Doug! The soldiers ran off with the crowd. Sorry damn bastards!"

That was information enough for Doug. The truck had finished emptying and he gave a sigh of relief as he saw June was among the passengers. He waved his rifle over his head. "Come on!" he yelled. "Get to the hospital. Hurry!" He tossed the two rifles salvaged from the cab to one of his men and they all ran, with Doug bringing up the rear and running backward half the time.

Someone opened the big double doors of the hospital's main entrance as everyone came toward them, some carrying handbags, others empty handed. Doug and his guards followed, but remained outside. He used them to reinforce the back and front posts where the ones on the opposite shift still held fast. He was wondering whether to try and recover the bodies of his two people from the cab of the truck when he heard his name called.

Presley came around the side of hospital at a trot, breathing heavily. He stopped beside Doug, took a moment to get his breath, then started talking. "All the soldiers are gone. We're on'r own, now. I checked t' back. We're good there."

"Fine. Can you hold on here a moment while I..." His voice was drowned out by the roar of an approaching jet flying very low. It streaked overhead, the United States insignia plainly visible, and disappeared in the distance.

"I need to go inside for a moment," Doug finished.

"I'll hold the fort, old man, but 'f you hear shots, hurry back."

"Will do." Doug adjusted the sling of his rifle even as he realized he was still holding his pistol in his other hand. He holstered it and went inside. He was sweating heavily, even through the lightweight fatigues he wore. As he stepped past the opened doors, the jet roared by again. He turned to look and spotted a rising pall of smoke coming from the direction of the airport. Curious, he thought. He hadn't heard any explosions. Then faintly, from the same direction, he realized he was hearing gunfire. He went inside.

Amelia and June were standing together in the little office. Amelia was talking on the phone.

"Did everyone make it okay?" June asked him.

Doug shook his head. Hadn't she seen? "No. The driver and guard in front are dead. Where's Bob?"

"He's sicker today. Amelia put him to bed."

"The virus?"

She nodded, looking sad. Doug felt the same way. He had known Bob Handley for years, whereas the two men who had been shot were relatively new recruits.

Amelia secured her phone. "I certainly hope Gene has some helicopters on the way. We won't be leaving from the airport. It's under attack."

"What did the embassy say?"

"They're evacuating, too. The marines are coming in to try and secure the airport."

"Well, all we can do now is wait. Did you take Bob upstairs?"

"No, I have someone with him, though."

"Get him up. Carry him if you have to. The choppers will land on the roof when they come. I'll be with you in a few minutes."

* * * *

The waiting was interminable. Doug kept his phone off so that the guard downstairs could call if they ran into problems he couldn't see from the roof. In the meantime, he appropriated Amelia's phone to find out how it was going at the embassy. So far they reported no violence, though some demonstrators were beginning to gather, the spokesperson said. Once he saw one of the American jets circling the city fire a rocket near where the airport was located, but it was impossible to see the target. More smoke was rising from the area, black and turgid, as if fuel was burning.

Shots sounded from somewhere inside the hospital. Almost immediately his phone rang.

"Doug, some of the ambulatory patients are trying to come up the stairwell! I need help! I had to shoot one of them!" That was the guard he had posted at the entrance to the stairwell leading to the roof.

"Marker, Guterrez!" Doug shouted. "The main stairwell! Get there quick and disperse the patients!"

Captain Presley had been standing nearby. "I'll give 'em a hand," He ran off, unslinging his rifle as he went.

Doug thumbed in the numbers of the guards at the main entrance, then those at the back, and ordered them to move inside and to the stairwell, and to shoot if it was necessary to get there. That was the only access to the roof. He thought that somehow the patients had learned that helicopters were coming for the Americans and either resentment over their leaving or a desire to go with them had spurred the agitation. Whatever, they had to be kept back.

A bullet spanged off the abutment of the old television aerial nearby. Doug ducked reflexively even as he heard an answering shot from one of his guards.

"Everyone down!" he yelled. "Get down! We're taking fire!"

Some of the civilians appeared reluctant to stretch out in the trash and debris that layered the rooftop until another bullet chunked into the chest of one of the standing figures. The woman's mouth opened in a wide "O" of surprise, then she crumpled into a heap, blood geysering from the wound.

"Down!" Doug yelled again. This time, everyone obeyed. There was nothing to do for the woman. She had taken the bullet directly in the heart.

CHAPTER FOUR

By crawling to the edge of the roof and peeking around a decorative cornice, Doug could see that the crowd of supplicants and demonstrators they had dispersed were returning, this time with a sprinkling of soldiers among them—except that the soldiers were no longer under any kind of discipline. They were mingled with the growing throng in no particular order, distinguishable only by their uniforms. As before, some of the people were helping others too sick to stand or walk by themselves.

He felt sorry for the suffering that was plainly evident on many faces, even from this distance, but there was nothing he knew to do about it. There wasn't a cure, nor did palliative measures help much. Amelia and June had told him that the only thing to be done for the patients was handing out pain killers—or injecting them once the oral analgesics were no longer effective.

Another jet came over but did nothing to reduce the number of Nigerians converging on the hospital. Doug sprayed a full clip of warning shots into the dust in front of a group working their way around the shot-up truck, where the wire barrier had been breached. That halted them for a few minutes, but he knew it was only temporary. The soldiers who had been their guards only this morning knew exactly how thin his forces were.

Doug felt a hand on his leg and turned half sideways, careful not to bring his body into the line of fire from below. June Spencer had crawled up to him.

"Doug, are you going to have to shoot those poor people? Most of them are just scared."

Doug thought she looked angry, perhaps concealing the fright she must be feeling. What did she expect him to do if that crowd out there rushed them? He bit back a pithy comment and simply said, "I know, June, but we'll shoot to save our lives if we have to. It's something you're going to have to get used to if somebody doesn't get this bug under control. When people feel threatened, they become irrational. Even back home, the blacks are blaming whites for starting this thing. Please go back, June; it's dangerous here."

She searched his face for signs of rancor, then seeing none, she nodded and retreated. He turned back to his duties. He could see that a lot of the ones in the crowd would be dead soon anyway. A bullet might be a merciful release, he thought grimly, though that would be small consolation if he had to order his men to fire on them. Doug began making the rounds of the guards. He had three of his men on the roof and the rest guarding the stairwell below. Whatever else happened, he couldn't allow it to be overrun.

"Doug!"

He edged back toward the center of the roof to where he could stand up here and not be seen from the ground—though if the soldiers happened to think about it, they could simply climb up a few stories in the neighboring buildings and slaughter them all by firing from windows there. He walked over to where Amelia was standing.

"What is it?"

"The embassy is cursing at me because you diverted the first helicopters to us."

"Are they on the way?"

"Yes, so they say."

"Well, don't feel bad about it. Your data and specimens are probably worth more than the whole bunch

of them—and us too, for that matter.” He forced a grin. “But they have to rescue us to get them. How soon?”

“I don’t—” Both of them looked to the west as the unmistakable thwacking sound of a helicopter came to them.

“Help me clear everyone away from the landing pad! June! Martha! Get the folks away from the landing pad!” Doug felt like a damned fool for not having already taken care of that. He ran with the two women and began herding everyone toward the far side of the roof, cautioning them in a loud voice to *crawl*, not walk. The sprawled body of the dead woman, laying in a pool of blood amid buzzing flies, was a very visible inducement to do as he ordered.

They were barely in time. A big troop transport chopper lowered itself to the roof. Two crewmen jumped out, ducking low, and motioned for the loading to begin. Doug was nearly overrun by the civilians before June and Amelia got them under control, then they came near to panicking again as the explosive noise of a machine gun in the chopper cut loose, returning fire from the ground.

The two crewmen were counting. When the helicopter reached its limit, they both shouted “No more! No more! We’ve got another one on the way!”

Doug used his body and his voice added to those of the crewmen to help stop the bodies pressing forward. He turned his rifle sideways to help push them back. At the same time, he heard shooting from below the stairwell.

As soon as the two crewmen were aboard, the helicopter rose and swept off to the west, punctuating its departure with another round of machine gun fire and a cloud of debris blown about by its blades.

“Get back! Give the next one room to land!” Doug shouted as the remaining medical staff began pressing forward again. His voice was getting hoarse from trying to be heard over all the noise. More shots came from below.

“Hold them back!” He yelled at Amelia and June, and ran to the stairwell hatch. He was just in time to help Martha up the last steps before she collapsed in his arms. There was a bloody spot on her left side, just below where her armored vest ended; one arm dangled useless from a wound that had broken the bones of her forearm. It was bleeding copiously.

“June!” Doug called, but she had seen what was happening and she and Amelia were already there. They took Martha from him just as Buddy backed out, firing spaced shots at something below. He was unwounded but his face was nearly white despite the normal darkness of his skin. He knelt down and flipped the stairwell cover closed and shot the bolt that held it in place.

“Where’s the others?” Doug asked, already knowing what the answer must be.

“Dead. Just like we’re going to be if we don’t get out of here soon. Goddamn bastards.”

The other chopper came in, hovered, then moved sideways to the landing pad. As before, two crewmen jumped out, already waving frantically for the people to hurry and get aboard.

Doug felt numb. Almost his whole squad, gone. He swept his gaze in a half circle as he backed toward the hovering chopper, holding his rifle ready. He fired two bursts at the stairwell hatch when a cascade of automatic rifle fire burst the lock and it started to open. A head that had showed momentarily disappeared in a spray of blood. When he heard the almost hysterical voice of the crewman yelling at him again to hurry, he turned and ran. June was just being hauled into the opening; she had waited until all her

people were inside before leaving. He passed the crewman and rushed to the hands waiting to haul him inside. The crewman was hot on his heels. He barely made it before they were in the air, then almost fell out before another of the crew could get the door closed and latched.

Seconds later they were out of range, but not before several rifle rounds punctured the side paneling. It wasn't until a sudden, relative quiet fell despite the noise of the rotor blades that he realized the chopper's machine gun had been firing almost steadily the whole time they were on the roof and as they departed. When he had time to look around he saw that Martha, Buddy, Guiterrez and one other man were all that was left of his squad.

* * * *

There was a three day wait on the carrier, endurable only because Doug was able to enjoy a few intervals in the company of June despite the hours she was working and despite the grief he felt over the loss of so many from his squad. It was also tempered when word came from sick bay that Martha was going to recover from her wounds. Otherwise, he had little to do but wait, and avoid the embassy personnel when they arrived, still mad over playing second fiddle during the helicopter pickups. Other expatriates were brought aboard in a steady stream by helicopters, picking them up wherever they were in the most peril. Even communications with the CDC command structure was out of his hands. His phone was dead and he hadn't been able to find a replacement battery aboard ship. Amelia did keep him informed, though.

The second day out was the first time June was able to take a break and ask Doug to meet her in the recreation room of women's quarters. It was only about a quarter occupied and those who were there looked weary from overwork.

"You look sleepy," was the first thing he said to her.

She straightened up from where she had been slumped in a chair, trying to finish a cup of coffee. She smiled wanly. "I am. I just wanted to see you a few minutes before going for a shower and a little sleep. I wanted to apologize for questioning you back there on the roof of the hospital. My only excuse for not doing it sooner is that I've been working so much. I'm dead on my feet."

"Thanks, but I didn't take it amiss. Are there that many ill among the refugees?"

"There's enough to overwhelm the carrier's sickbay, so when we offered, they put us to work. It's mostly children with the usual things they come down with and black expatriates and embassy personnel who have contracted the disease here. Plus some wounded marines are beginning to come in, too."

"You said they contracted the disease here. Do you mean you've discovered the vector?" Doug pulled out a chair and sat down with the cup of strong black coffee he had drawn.

"Oh no, sorry. I phrased that wrong. They got it because they're black or dark brown, not necessarily from being here. I understand from the news back home that we're beginning to see a pattern of how it spread from Nigeria, but it's not following a traditional vector pattern."

"How so?"

"Well, look—we have one member of a family that comes down with it and not another. We may have roommates where one is ill and the next perfectly healthy. So far, at least."

"No pattern, huh?"

"Oh, I'm sure there is one. We'll find it soon, simply from letting the computers crunch the numbers and

data. That wasn't really what I wanted to talk to you about, though. Besides apologizing."

"An apology wasn't necessary, June. Really. And I'm open for whatever else you need to say. Go ahead."

"Doug—I'm sorry you lost so many of your crew. I know it must be hard on you. And I wanted to thank you."

"Thank me? For what?"

"For saving all our lives. The hospital was overrun and looted right after we got away. The poor patients were slaughtered." She dropped her gaze as if not wanting to think about what the scenes must have been like. Doug had heard about it, too.

"June, we were just doing what we signed up for. But why did the mob kill the patients? Weren't there a lot of sick ones among them, trying to get admitted."

June shrugged and stood up, abandoning her coffee with half of it left. "Lord knows. Probably a rumor got started that the way only way to stop it was to kill everyone showing symptoms." She shuddered. "People can be so cruel and unreasonable sometimes."

Doug nodded. "As I said on the roof, they get scared and then irrational. And I know you must have been frightened back there on that roof. Hell, I was, too, and believe me, an apology wasn't necessary." He saw that June was getting ready to go. "Are you leaving already?"

She covered a yawn with her hand. "I have to or I'll fall asleep in my chair. I'll try to get away and see you the same time tomorrow, okay? Maybe I'll be a little fresher then." She ran her hands through her hair, hanging in pale greasy tresses but still wavy. "And maybe this will look a little better after it's washed."

Doug wouldn't have minded and said so. Even like this he found her attractive. Her figure beneath the thin material of her tropical uniform more than compensated for the battlefield grunge. He told her so, indirectly. June kissed him on the cheek with a tiny humorous twitch that displayed her amusement at the way males think, then left him there. He would have been surprised had he known how many questions she had asked Amelia about him after their rescue.

* * * *

The third day aboard the carrier, a decision was made somewhere up the chain of command to ferry the CDC contingent back to America—and to give them seating priority on one of the first government-chartered commercial jets to fly into the Port Harcourt airfield after the marine commander pronounced it secure.

Like most military missions Doug had ever been involved with, it was a 'hurry up and wait' proposition. First they were grouped together near the huge carrier's helicopter landing area where they waited for what seemed like hours to leave. The constant noise of military jets idling, taking off and landing made conversation impossible. Doug spent most of the time kneeling next to Bob Handley's stretcher and talking to him, even though he knew he couldn't be heard. There was little else he could do for his old friend. Bob was in obvious pain despite the narcotics, and his mind wandered. He mumbled words sometimes, but it was incomprehensible with all the noise. Doug suspected he wouldn't have understood what he was saying anyway. Probably it was something about his family. He had a wife and four children. Whatever the words were, Doug intended to tell Flora, Bob's wife, that his last thoughts had been of them. He doubted Bob would make it home alive, or live much longer even if he did.

Once the big transport choppers finally took them off the carrier and deposited them near the partially burned airport terminal, there was more waiting, but little talking. A squad of shirtless, sweating Marines were collecting the last of the bodies from the crazed mob that had overrun the airport, hoping to find a way out of the country. No black or dark skinned marines were participating in that detail. Despite the lack of planes coming and going, it was still noisy with the sound of bulldozers clearing away the rubble of two burned out commercial jets, and there was still the intermittent sound of gunfire in the distance. The constant noise of Marine choppers going back and forth, along with the intermittent sound of jets circling above the choppers in a protective pattern, added more decibels to the mix.

There were almost three hundred people waiting for the first flight out from the airport. A cheer went up from most of them when a big commercial jet came in and touched down. Neither Doug nor June joined in; both were lost in their respective thoughts.

If those waiting thought they would be taken straight aboard when the plane landed, they were quickly disillusioned. It took another three hours before they were allowed to board, despite the plane having been refueled in less than an hour. Fortunately, the underground tanks of diesel fuel hadn't been torched like so many of the buildings had in the orgy of wanton destruction.

"That's us!" June fairly shouted when the portable stairs were finally wheeled out to the plane. She looked up at Doug's still grim countenance and felt sorry for him. It wasn't like losing a spouse, but Amelia had spoken to her the previous day about how military units bonded, something she already knew but had to be reminded of.

"I sure hope something comes from your work here," Doug remarked to June as she came back from checking on the patients going with them. She had seated herself beside him. Every seat in the aircraft was taken, but first class was being used for the ones who were too ill to sit, like Bob Handley and a few others.

"I do, too, Doug. For all my time with the CDC, I've never been in a situation quite like this one. Bob is resting comfortably, by the way. We've got him pretty well doped up."

Doug sipped at some coffee, grateful for the stimulating effect. "Is that all you can do for him?"

"We're giving him anti-viral medication with the morphine. It has seemed to slow down the progression of the disease a little, but it's no cure. And we're giving him and the others on the plane with us the last of it. We left most of our supplies behind." She reached and touched his chin. "Your beard is growing out in all kinds of colors. I even see some red in it."

"Uh huh. Just ignore the gray, please."

She laughed.

The idling jet's engines whined louder and it began to move. Shortly they were roaring and a minute later the big plane lifted off. It circled around and headed east, still climbing. This time they were taking the shorter route, across Africa and to a military base on the other side of the continent and from there across the Atlantic Ocean.

"Next stop Atlanta," Doug said when they lifted off from the base in Sudan, where an air mobile army brigade left over from the war there was still hunting down members of a new terrorist organization and destroying their supplies and training camps. When he got no reply to his comment, he turned and saw that June's eyes were closed. Her head rolled with the motion of the banking plane and came to rest on his shoulder. He was sleepy himself, but he didn't move, not for a long time.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Our mission parameters have changed," Gene Bradley announced to the members of the CDC security detachment who were present, almost all of them. "From now on, we'll be operating strictly in the United States. There's still two teams overseas as you know, but they're on their way home. Ms. Hedgrade has informed the president that no further purpose can be served by sending anyone else. However, we still have a job." He paused long enough for the chuckles to die down. There weren't too many of them. Even three days after the arrival of Doug's squad back at the CDC, the shock of losing so many of their own kept them subdued.

"From now on, our mission is to consist primarily of providing security to the CDC complex itself. We're also taking over direction and control of the guards from the private security firm the CDC has been using, as well as the few federal marshals they've been employing inside the buildings. You can see how the new chain of command will function by checking the latest download from my office. Be sure and study it, because you'll notice some reorganization. In particular, study the complete layout of the CDC buildings and grounds. Starting two days from now, this all becomes our responsibility. Tomorrow, some of the squad leaders will walk you through your guard posts and show you the rounds you'll be making.

"People, if you've been following the news, I don't have to emphasize how serious this thing is. If the CDC, or some of the other places working on this virus don't find a cure or a vaccine soon, we're going to see the worst explosion of violence and upheavals in our society since the Civil War. Just to put a figure on it, the statisticians have made a rough approximation based on current data and think that we could lose perhaps as much as 20% of our population if no treatment or cure turns up. Hopefully it won't be that bad. The 20% is the upper range of the calculations.

"Now a word to our own people of color. You can dispense with the biohazard suits. It's been determined that they're useless. Why, they don't know yet, but at least you'll be able to perform your duties in comfort. And I know I speak for everyone in saying we hope you all stay well.

"Now the next item is for all of us. At present, I'm going to allow those of you with families in Atlanta to commute to and from work, but I'm arranging for the contingency that we may have to keep everyone on the premises, so warn your loved ones of the possibility." He hesitated, then added "It may even be necessary for us to move to the main CDC complex until our building is ready.

"And finally, if it will make you feel a bit easier, I've been given the authority to call for military assistance should it become necessary. I sincerely hope it won't come to that point, but it might.

"All right, now I'm going to want to see all the squad leaders in the smaller conference room. You can all gather here again right after the noon meal and squad leaders will answer questions for you. Thank you."

In his usual manner, Bradley turned and left abruptly, not even noticing that the empty sleeve of his fatigue top had come unpinned. Doug had already concluded he would never get over thinking like the military officer he had once been.

* * * *

"Craddock," Doug said, answering the phone in his quarters that evening. He was expecting the call to be official; he hardly ever got private calls on this phone.

"Hi Doug, this is June."

"Oh. Hi, June. What are you up to?"

"Well ... I got your number here from Amelia. You're kind of hard to track down."

"Sorry. I should have given you my cell phone number when we parted. I've been wondering about you, but we've been kind of busy, what with us taking over the security here and me having to visit the families of the people I lost in Nigeria." He had thought of June despite his duties, but hadn't quite got up the nerve to call her on purely personal business. And his responsibilities had been pressing. He was just now getting organized and familiar with them.

"I thought you might have been tied up. Anyway, I was ... well, I'm free tonight and tomorrow. I thought maybe..."

It must be as hard for her as it is for me, Doug thought. "I'd like to see you, June. What do you want to do? We didn't have much of a chance to talk about our personal life or likes and dislikes in Nigeria."

"I'm not much for the night life. How about if we met for dinner someplace?"

"Sure. You name it."

"How about Morgan's? They have seafood, but there's other things on the menu, too. And we won't need reservations on a week night."

"Sounds good. What time?"

"Is seven all right?"

"That's fine. See you there. And thanks for calling, June. I need to get away from here for a little while."

June Spencer put the phone down slowly. She was scared in a way, but it was time for a change. Besides, she knew he needed a soothing hand, some sympathy, someone to care. Visions of his grim countenance had haunted her ever since their arrival in Atlanta, as well as dreams of gunfire and the sounds of swooping jets and clattering helicopters. She hadn't mentioned that she had asked Amelia to find out when he would be off duty.

* * * *

Doug dressed casually in slacks and a short sleeved shirt, with a light windbreaker to conceal the little forty caliber automatic he was licensed to carry. Traffic seemed lighter than usual as he drove through the streets near the main CDC complex. Its new additions stood out in contrast to the old architecture; he thought it superior. He picked up the Loop and headed east, while noticing that the people who were out and about were handling their vehicles as though their minds were somewhere else. He listened to an all-news radio station as he drove and thought that many of the drivers might be tuned to the same station. There was only one topic; the Harcourt virus. It hadn't yet reached epidemic proportions in the Americas but overseas, particularly in Africa and Europe it was rapidly headed in that direction. Nigeria was already devolving into anarchy. Whites took their lives in their hands simply by showing their faces. South Africa hadn't reached that stage yet, but rumors were rife and the number of blacks coming down with the disease was steadily increasing. In America ... he turned the radio off. Enough. Tonight he wanted to forget business.

The parking lot at Morgan's Seafood and Steakhouse was only a quarter filled, a rarity for the popular middle class restaurant this time of evening. June was already there, seated on one of the little benches in the waiting alcove. She stood up when she saw him come in the door.

Doug stopped, then came forward the last few steps. With her light brown, almost blond hair washed and fluffy, wearing a simple but attractive spring dress of pale green with a white belt that tucked in the

waist, and with makeup that subtly altered her appearance, she was very pretty—and very appealing. He couldn't help but grin his appreciation.

"You look great."

"Thank you." June glanced down, as if reassuring herself that it was her he was talking about, then smiled back at him and took his arm.

The under-worked hostess showed them to a table in the corner. No one else was seated near, which was puzzling to Doug, despite the dearth of customers. He looked around, wondering why that was while he pulled out the chair for June and held it until she was seated.

June's laugh tinkled with her explanation. "I tipped the hostess to get us a table away from everyone else in case we talked business. She won't seat anyone near us unless it gets crowded."

"Good thinking. I really wanted to leave the CDC behind for awhile, but I doubt that we'll be able to avoid it."

"That's what I thought, too."

Service was quick. They agreed on a carafe of the house chablis and it appeared a moment later. Doug asked for a little time to examine the menu before they ordered, though he already knew what he wanted. A medium seafood platter and baked potato always satisfied.

"I want the seafood platter and baked potato," June said, laying the menu down.

Doug laughed. "Great minds. That's what I'm having. I've only eaten here once and that was a couple of years ago. I hope it's still as good."

"Me, too. Don't you get out often?"

He picked up his wine glass and sipped reflectively. "It's taken me a long time to get over Doris' death. I more or less buried myself in work for a while and didn't go anywhere, even though I really didn't have to work, what with the insurance settlement. I moped around the house for a few weeks, then sold it and took a little apartment. Most of the time I don't bother with it, though. The quarters at the security building are all right."

June could appreciate his actions as well as the faraway look on his face. "We picked different ways to grieve," she said. "I just went home and stayed with my parents and helped them some with my two little sisters. I'm like you; I don't really have to work either, but after a while I couldn't stand the idleness. Staying home so much just kept the sadness working." She grinned as if sharing a guilty secret, then let it out. "Then last year I tried to write a novel, but I guess I don't have the talent. No matter how much I worked on it, it still didn't sound readable to me. I finally abandoned it."

Doug had to laugh, then quickly explained when he saw the pained expression on her face. "I've written a few short stories and tried to sell them. No luck, or probably more accurately, no talent."

"I guess anyone who likes to read a lot has thought about writing," June said.

"Uh huh. It's harder than it looks, though, isn't it?"

"Tell me about it!"

Appetizers arrived, a platter of cold crab claws intermingled with small boiled shrimp.

Doug dipped a shrimp in sauce and looked around the almost empty restaurant. "I wonder what the people in Washington are thinking right now?"

"Nothing constructive, I'll warrant," June said.

* * * *

Mary Hedgrade's face was lined with worry. It was never comfortable to be the bearer of bad tidings. In some countries, she thought she might be executed for bringing such news to the head of state, especially with the blunt concluding statement that not only did the CDC not have a cure or vaccine for the Harcourt virus, but there were no prospects for either in the immediate future.

President Marshall shifted his gaze uneasily around the conference table, trying to find a way to deflect the onus of Mary's words to someone else. She was telling him things he didn't want to hear.

"I didn't know," the President of the United States said. "I swear I didn't know!" His voice came out muffled. He raked his hands through his hair and looked accusingly at Edgar Tomlin, the National Security Director. "Why the hell wasn't the FBI after those people? God knows they've been trying to force blacks back to secondary citizen status for fifty years! How come you let them start a goddamned epidemic before arresting them?"

"Because the bastards got smart. They took off to South Africa and helped the white supremacists there with money, and took that crazy geneticist from Sweden with them," Conrad Seigler said. "We'll get them, though. We've tracked them back to America and we still have agents looking for the Swede. We think he stayed in South Africa." Seigler was the current head of the CIA and for a change this one looked the part, or at least as popular culture depicted spies, with dark hair and eyes that shifted constantly.

"We believe you, Mr. President. How would you have known? You don't have any scientific background," Secretary of State Joshua Brenham said. That was true in a sense, he thought. The capability for creating man-made epidemics had been included in presidential briefings ever since 9/11 but hardly anyone really believed it would ever happen. Certainly not the president. He barely understood the rudiments of science. He'd even made political hay of his lack until this came up. He probably had forgotten he even had an official science adviser. Now it was coming back to haunt him.

President Marshall Marshall dropped his hand from his hair to the table and twined the fingers of both hands together. They squirmed there like small animals trying to escape a trap. "How bad is it? Isn't there anything we can do to stop it? Anything at all?" He looked bleakly around the table with wounded eyes, red-rimmed from lack of sleep.

Conrad Seigler shook his head, while shifting his gaze around the table. "There's nothing to do except work on drugs that might help and try to develop a vaccine to prevent future outbreaks. According to Mary, the virus has already infected damn near every one on earth. Isn't that right, Mary?"

"Maybe. Probably not. No virus gets everyone. Anyway, it's too soon to predict exact numbers. I can tell you that it *will* infect a huge number of people, given enough time, simply by the lack of a vaccine and the fact that it's been tampered with so that we have no natural immunity to it. Let me run through what we know. The Harcourt virus almost certainly was originally released into the population in Nigeria..."

"To throw us off the trail," Edgar Tomlin interjected, wanting to make it clear why none of the homeland security agencies had discovered what was going on until far too late. He couldn't afford for his agency to be blamed.

"Yes," Mary Hedgrade agreed, concealing her irritation at being interrupted behind the new worry lines

creasing her face. "Then, from Nigeria they went back to South Africa and made sure it got started there to repay their friends for their help. After that, they traveled to Europe, then to the major hubs of air traffic into and out of the United States and on to other big cities of the world. According to Edgar, this all happened two years ago."

"Then why is it just now starting? Why didn't blacks begin dying then?"

Mary wanted to roll her eyes and look to heaven for understanding. Unable to do that, and knowing that the president had either not understood the briefing paper or hadn't even read it, she explained as best she could.

"The virus masqueraded as a very mild cold, with hardly any symptoms at all. No one paid any attention to it. It was programmed to migrate from the respiratory tract to the Kupffer cells in the liver and lie dormant until a trigger mechanism was activated. We think the triggering factor might have something to do with the number of times mitosis—cell division—occurs in the Kupffer cells, but we're not sure yet. At any rate, once it becomes active again, the cells release the virus back into the peripheral circulation. From there it invades the melanocytes, the pigment producing skin cells, and begins interfering with melanin production. It causes the tyrosine metabolism to malfunction, producing quinol intoxication and—"

"How many? Will everyone die?" The president interrupted Mary's discourse, knowing he wouldn't understand it. What he wanted was figures, something he could grasp. He scanned the room, seeking reassurance. There was none. The five men and one woman present besides him sat in silence, knowing that there was no answer, no solution. Not yet, and maybe never. Although no one mentioned it, the specter of the many difficulties encountered in controlling the HIV virus was present in their minds.

"How many?" The president asked again, raising his voice. "How many will die?"

Joshua Brenham knew. As Secretary of State, he was familiar with population distribution by race across the continents. He also knew that he was probably a dead man. To his credit, he repressed the slow, boiling rage he felt inside. It would do neither him nor anyone else any good to vent it here. "The very worst estimates say that unless the virus can be controlled, there may be as many as two to three billion deaths," he said quietly. "In America, the black population numbers about twelve per cent, roughly 35 million. Of course some of the ones classified as black won't have skin color dark enough to be affected, other than perhaps becoming rather sick, but those are more than made up for by other groups with dark skins. Some Hispanics, some from India and some Arabs and Orientals. Mary says that everyone who has naturally dark skin and has been exposed to the virus will become ill. The severity will depend upon how dark, but over half the population of the world will presumably display few symptoms, or mild ones at the most.

"Three billion! My God, how could they do it? How could they?" the president exclaimed, his gaze again roving the table. His facial expression expressed horror and outrage, but inside, he was beginning to feel a guilty hint of dark satisfaction that the blacks of the world would all die. Wouldn't that solve a lot of problems? He was incapable of imagining all the repercussions that such a pandemic would cause, most of them much worse than such relatively simple problems as discrimination and poverty and failures in education.

"Mr. President, it doesn't matter now," Edgar Tomlin said. "The important thing is that no one must ever know that it was American citizens who let this thing loose on the world. If that gets out, our entire civilization might fall. It may anyway, but if no one knows, we stand a chance of coming through the crisis."

You others do, Brenham thought. I have no chance at all.

"What if we just turned those nuts over to the UN when we catch them, and let them execute the crazy sons of bitches?" suggested General Borland Newman, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. "Wouldn't that do it?" Newman had a guilty secret, too. Already, he was thinking of how much more power he would hold once martial law was imposed.

Edgar laughed hollowly. "Don't you know? The UN doesn't believe in the death penalty."

President Marshall wiped at his eyes. "Don't bring up silly ideas, General. We can't let this get out. Edgar, I don't care what you do with those white supremacists that started this thing if we catch them, but I don't want anyone to ever hear about it if we do. Not a word. Understand?"

Tomlin nodded, wondering if he was hearing the president right. Probably, he thought, which suited him fine—except that he didn't think it could be kept quiet.

When no one protested, the president continued. "We have to start preparations now. Get a spin ready that downplays how bad it could get. In the meantime, get the rest of it all worked out. How to control the riots; hospital space and medical supplies; controls on the economy; National Guard units to call up; defense preparations; all the other things we must do to ensure the survival of our country. That takes priority, understand? Our country comes first."

"While blacks have no hope of surviving," Brenham said, unable to help himself, nor able to conceal the bitterness in his voice.

"I'm sorry, Joshua. I'm as sorry as can be. But how were we to know?"

The president was right in one respect, Mary Hedgrade thought. In the beginning, no one had any idea of the enormity of the consequences soon to arise from those first reports coming in from Nigeria. At first she hadn't believed it was possible herself, then that it might be, but that no one could possibly be so evil as to introduce that kind of virus into the world. And finally, when the evidence became overwhelming, she had put her face in her hands and wept. Once Mary realized what had happened, she had kept a very tight rein on all information the CDC discovered about the Harcourt virus, but she soon realized that concealment was not only pointless, but counterproductive. Only a White House directive had kept her from disseminating the CDC findings to the world. Not that it would do any good now, she thought. As Brenham had noted, the initial phase was past. For most of the susceptible population, nothing could be done for them unless a miracle occurred. It would simply have to run its course. She shivered and her mind returned to the conference room.

"How about nukes? Is there a possibility some country will try bombing us even if they can't prove we started it?" General Newman spoke again. Rows of ribbons adorning his uniform attested to his experience, though if one knew how to read the decorations it would be apparent that there were none denoting combat. He was a political general, one of the breed who made rank by cozying up to and catering to politicians.

Brenham gave him a sour glance. "Who can predict what's going to happen when people start dying? All you can do is keep our forces alert."

"Luckily, the virus won't be so lethal in the countries that have nukes," Conrad Seigler observed.

"Yeah, luckily," Brenham responded, unable to keep his voice from trembling. He wanted this to end so he could leave. The only thing keeping him now was his loyalty, not to the president, but to the institution of the Presidency.

"China might be a problem," Mary said. Her head was down, glancing at the notes on her PDA. "Their population is borderline. I think more than eighty per cent of them will survive, but there are going to be a hell of a lot of sick puppies there for a while. And sick men aren't always rational."

"You don't have to be sick to be irrational!" Brenham shouted, then hung his head, ashamed at the outburst. But damn, it was hard to keep it inside. Here these people were talking about a quarter of the world dying, yet they were safe and he was dead and his family was dead. It was so goddamned unfair!

CHAPTER SIX

"I hear you got a promotion," June remarked. They had finished their first glass of wine and were waiting on the food.

"Uh, huh," Doug confirmed. "I get to be responsible for everyone else's mistakes now."

June laughed. "The price of being good. I guess I'll be staying here, too. Amelia recommended me for a spot on her staff as her assistant. Administrative work is a little out of my line, but it will be interesting."

"Congratulations. I'm glad for you, June."

"Well, I got my fill of being lazy back home. And I imagine this place will be hopping for years to come."

"I'm sure it will," Doug agreed. He didn't offer any of the scary visions of what he thought would be happening in the country before long, not to mention the rest of the world. He knew from hard-won experience how violently people could react when they felt threatened.

The food arrived and for a time they simply ate and compared notes.

"No children," June said. "We were about ready but then ... well, anyway, I have no one dependent on me. Dad still works for an oil company in Montana but he's getting ready to retire ... Doug, do you think they'll be safe? Or how about if they move back to Texas like they say they're going to? Dad's something of a pacifist so far as guns are concerned. He thinks they should be outlawed."

"I wish I could tell you they weren't in danger, but—June, everyone is going to have to pull their heads in before long. When our black population starts dying in numbers, I think it will get bad. And here's another statistic I haven't heard much talk about. The military is about 25% black. I don't know about the Hispanic percentage, but it's fairly high, too. The army will be real short handed before long."

"What will that mean?"

Doug had already said more than he intended to. "Oh, hell, I don't know, really. It's a situation made for trouble, though. I just hope the government is taking steps to compensate for the loss of so many of their people, military and civil service. Back to your original question, though. I think your parents are probably safer in Montana than where we are, simply because they live in an area with a small population of blacks."

"That's what I think, too. I know it sounds like I'm ... well, you know."

"Yes, I know. When threats arise, people want to protect their own. It's just human nature. And I'll tell you something else, June. If I were black, I'd be more than just pissed off; I'd be thinking of revenge, especially if someone close to me died from the bug. In my opinion, the riots we've seen in the past are going to seem tame compared to what I expect we'll see before long." He reflected on their conversation. "For two people who didn't intend to talk business, we can't seem to stay off it, can we?" He had revealed much more of his anxieties about the future than he intended

"I guess it's on everyone's mind right now." She pushed her plate away and sipped at her wine.

"Dessert?"

"I shouldn't, but..." The sounds of approaching sirens interrupted her.

Both she and Doug listened alertly. There were more than just one. The noise approached, then faded, only to have the sound of another warbling siren grow in volume, then another.

"Somehow, I'd feel better if I got on back," Doug said. "I don't know if that's where they're going, but it sounds like they're heading in the direction of the CDC."

"I think I'll follow you. It may be nothing, but then again..."

"Yeah. Stay close."

Doug caught the waiter's eye. He paid and they left quickly.

When Doug saw a solid phalanx of flashing tail lights ahead of them on the loop, he signaled for a turn and watched closely in the rear view mirror to be sure June was following. She turned off with him, two exits before the off ramp he normally would have taken to get back to the CDC. He knew another way. It might take a bit longer, but it was safer, he thought. Then right after they exited, he realized they might have been better off staying on the freeway. Traffic appeared to be heavy in this direction, too.

As he continued to check and make sure June was close behind, he turned right, then right again, trying to go back and swing even farther around the area where his radio was saying a demonstration had gotten out of hand. He was beginning to suspect it was more than just "out of hand" and was cursing himself for leading June into it.

For a few moments he thought they were going to get clear without any more problems when he heard the ripping noise of a machine pistol on full automatic, loud even through the closed window of his car. Behind him, he saw June's car swerve off the road and up onto the adjoining sidewalk before veering back onto the street and coming to a jarring halt against the rear end of a parked car.

Doug stood on the brakes and twisted the steering wheel. His vehicle slid sideways, narrowly avoiding another car speeding recklessly in the other direction. He got the car into reverse gear while hitting the switch for the driver's window. It came all the way down automatically. Looking backward, he saw figures emerging from another car. Its occupants had been waiting at a side street for anyone with a white face to pass. He thought some of their gunfire must have been meant for him. If so, they had missed—but raked June's car with a row of bullets, hitting the hood and side window and blowing out a rear tire.

He backed quickly, but not quite fast enough. A black youth was already pulling the door of June's car open. She was screaming. Doug stopped, jumped from his car and yelled. The youth behind the one trying to yank June from the vehicle whirled and fired. Doug dropped instinctively as he saw what the boy intended and had his own little automatic in his hand as he hit the ground and rolled, with chips of concrete and asphalt chasing him. He raised his pistol and fired once, twice. The young black man fell.

The other tugged at June harder, not realizing that his companion had been shot. He staggered backward with a piece of June's blouse in his hand and tripped over the sprawled body of his cohort. Cursing, he drew a short barreled pistol and fired wildly in Doug's direction.

Still lying prone, Doug aimed and shot once. That was enough. His bullet punctured the youth's trachea just below his chin and shattered the vertebrae behind it. He dropped, with blood spurting from his throat in a red fountain. Doug ran forward while trying to look everywhere at the same time. He ducked his head and peered into the driver's compartment of June's vehicle, dreading what he might see. June uttered a short scream and shrank away from him, then saw who it was.

"Doug! Thank God!" She clambered out, shaking as if she had palsy.

"Come on, let's get out of here!" Doug said, daring to breathe again. He took her hand and hurried her toward his car. Seconds later he was speeding away, not worrying at all over possible repercussions from the two young men he had killed. Gene would see that no charges were brought, even supposing he or his car was identified.

As soon as he felt like they were out of danger, he pulled over to the side of the street. June came into his arms, still shaking. Doug comforted her while still remaining alert, then as soon as she quieted, he replaced the three cartridges he had spent and holstered the little automatic.

"I didn't even know you were carrying a gun!" June said. There was still a tremor in her voice. She suddenly realized that almost the whole front of her blouse was missing and that one of the shoulder straps of her bra had been torn loose, almost freeing her left breast from the cup. She gathered what material she could and held it close to her chest.

"Well, I don't advertise it all over the place, but I'm glad I had it tonight. Can we go on now? Or if you like, I have an old shirt in the trunk. I can get it for you."

"No! Let's just go on!"

The route he was on now took them to the other side of the CDC complex and on toward the security building with no more problems. Nevertheless, he kept his gun laying in his lap and continually scanned the streets for possible danger. On the way, Doug said "I'm sorry I got your car all shot up. I should have taken the longer way to begin with."

"It's all right, you couldn't have known. Besides, it's insured. Did ... did you kill those boys? I don't think they were even grown yet."

"Yes, they're dead. I didn't have time to do anything else and they were trying to kill me."

"And God knows what they had in mind for me. Thank you. You've saved my life again."

"After risking it first. Not a good way to go about rescuing a damsel in distress. Have you still got your phone?"

"Yes, I have it—oh damn, no I don't. I forgot my purse! Don't go back for it, though."

Doug took his phone out and handed it to her. "Why don't you call in and see if there's problems at work? Just press the call button and hit seven, then hand it to me." He could have managed, but he didn't want to take his eyes from the road even for a second.

June took the phone, fumbled with it a moment while her breast almost escaped again, then handed the phone to Doug.

He listened for a second then said "This is Doug Craddock. I'm on Edge Street, coming in the back way. Do you have problems there?" He waited a moment, then spoke again. "Uh huh. Tomorrow? All right. Pass the word up that I'll be on the cell phone if I'm needed. Yeah, that's right. It's posted. Okay, thanks." He flipped the cover closed and stuck it back in his pocket.

"It's about what I thought after we left Morgan's. The riot, as they're calling it, is happening along Elderberry avenue and west of there. That area is mostly lower class and mostly black. Apparently some of the local toughs took it upon themselves to rid the neighborhood of any whites at all. It spread from there. We just happened to be caught by a couple of the kids that were driven off by the police. Bad luck. CDC is secure, though. All the action is several blocks away and about under control now. However, we're all being recalled, as of tomorrow. No more off-campus living. They've got an extra

crew doing a rush job on the place next door, turning it into temporary living quarters until our building at the CDC is ready."

"Is the recall just for the security guys or the medical staff, too?"

"Just us so far, but I expect everyone will be hunkering down there before long." Doug glanced over at her then looked away. "I've been heading toward the security building. Shall I take you home?"

"Doug ... I don't want to be alone right now. Could you stay with me?" Realizing that he might think she was implying more than just company, she amended the invitation—or request. She wasn't sure which it was. "I don't mean ... um, that..."

"It's okay. I know what you mean. Sure, I could stay with you, for tonight, anyway. I just can't guarantee I won't get called in, though."

"Well, let's go anyway. It's not all that far from work. I'll pack a bag and if you get called, I'll go in with you and stay in one of the transient apartments. There's always some empty ones. Or there have been in the past."

"Okay, which way?"

June gave him directions. As they turned into the apartment complex she directed him to, Doug burst out laughing.

"What's funny?"

"Nothing, except that we live in the same place."

June's lips parted in surprise. She giggled, then gasped. "Good Lord. It's like a bad plot from a romance novel. But why—oh, I remember. You said you hardly ever stayed here. That's why we haven't seen each other in passing."

It turned out that they were even in the same twenty four unit building of the six structures comprising the Southern Arms Apartments, and both were downstairs, though on opposite sides of the building.

The only difference in their apartments was the décor and furnishings, but while Doug knew his own place hardly looked lived in, June had already made hers into something resembling a home, even with what he suspected was rented furniture. He could definitely tell the difference. It made him nostalgic, remembering all the little touches Doris had used in their home that he would never have thought of.

"I'm going to have a bourbon and water as soon as I've changed," June announced. "There's wine in the fridge if you'd rather stick with that. Make yourself comfortable while I go change clothes." She hurried into the master bedroom and closed the door.

The kitchen area was open. Doug found the bourbon and made them each a drink, his a double. Once the shooting was over he had noticed a tremor in his body from the adrenalin rush that still hadn't gone completely away.

While waiting on June to return, he called Gene Bradley. "Should I report it?" he asked after telling his story.

"I'll take care of it, Doug. I doubt there'll be much fuss raised. Those two weren't the only deaths. A lot of whites were pulled from their cars and lynched before the police could get on it. Whites started retaliating, then the police had to fire on gangs from both sides to break them up. Hell, they even had to

shoot two of their own black policemen who were taking part in the riot, as the media is calling it."

"Thanks, Gene. I'll be in tomorrow morning, first thing, but call if you need me before then."

"No problem. See me when you get here." The phone clicked dead as he heard the bedroom door opening. June came back in, wearing jeans and a short white blouse ending at her waist.

"I went ahead and made your drink. I put it over ice. Hope that's all right."

June sat down beside him on the couch and picked up the glass. She sipped then smiled. "Perfect. Want to turn on the TV and see what they're saying?"

"Yes, I would," Doug said. Regardless of Gene's assurance, he wanted to know if the cops were looking for him.

If they were, it wasn't apparent. All the reporting was centered around the residential and small business area where most of the violence had occurred. It wasn't yet known exactly what had set off the rampage, other than the increasing number of blacks becoming ill or dying—while whites remained completely immune. Most of the businesses in the area had been looted then set on fire. A few were still blazing and a pall of smoke hung over the whole area.

"Someone leaked that information!" June said when the anchor began telling how the Harcourt virus had spread around the world as much as two years ago, then remained dormant until the present.

"They must have. I haven't heard that yet, even as a rumor."

"We just learned it a few days ago, but for the life of me, I don't know why we were required to keep it secret. I can't see where that helps a damn bit!"

"I'd bet it was being suppressed to give our politicians time to come up with a good answer for why it wasn't caught back then. And by now, I'd also bet they know its origin."

"Why wouldn't they release that information if they know? It seems to me like that would ease some of the unrest."

Doug shook his head and grinned cynically. "Not if it's our own people who started it, they wouldn't."

"Oh," June said, almost a whisper. "Is that what you think?"

"I wouldn't put it past some of the nut cases we have running around the country. The run of the mill white supremacists would have needed some help, though. I doubt many of them have an IQ over room temperature."

"Small consolation. Another drink?"

Doug drained his glass. "A single this time."

June got up to make them.

Eventually they had seen all they wanted to of the local news and switched over to national. It was a continuing litany of how the disease was spreading, interspersed with interviews of pundits and politicians, all taking positions that they didn't necessarily believe but thought would enhance their status or reelection prospects.

"Doug, I think I'm ready for bed," June said a while later. "Come on and I'll show you the other

bedroom, though you're welcome to stay up later if you like."

"No, I want to get up early in the morning."

June walked into the bedroom with him, showed him where towels and a spare toothbrush were kept, then before leaving, put her arms around his neck.

The kiss went on a long time, much longer than June had intended. When their lips finally separated, she whispered shakily, "Good night, Doug. Thank you again."

"Good night, June."

* * * *

Doug didn't hear the door open but the movement of the mattress when June slipped in under the covers woke him. He felt her arm slide around his waist and her body snuggle up against his back. He started to turn over but she gripped his forearm, then found his hand. Her voice stopped any further movement.

"Shh. Go back to sleep. I just couldn't stand to be alone tonight."

In a little while he heard her breathing slow as she drifted into sleep. It wasn't that easy for him, with the softness of her breasts pressing against his back and her small hand clasped in his.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Mustafa Jones had once been a preacher. He still preached, but over the years his sermons had gradually evolved away from their roots in the Baptist ministry. Several years ago he had completely broken from the Baptists and founded his own sect. It had grown slowly at first, but once he began espousing the mantra of blacks as underdogs it had gone much better. Now he was being asked to merge his following with the much larger Church of Blacks, headed by Qualluf Taylor, his own personal hero. Taylor crusaded for black political power, laws that demanded equal sentencing for equal crimes, more representation in the legislatures from local to national level, low cost housing and every other hot button initiative even remotely pertaining to blacks. Now there was more politics than religion in the Church of Blacks; Qualluf Taylor paid only token respect to it in order to continue its tax-free status while he sought more and more money and power. Mustofa had already agreed to accept the invitation to merge his sect with the bigger organization.

The Harcourt Virus was almost made to order for Mustafa and other black religious and political leaders—had it not been so universally fatal. As soon as it appeared, and the fact that only blacks caught the disease, When Mustafa began railing for total war against whites everywhere on earth, but particularly in the United States, he was following the lead of Qualluf Taylor and the Church of Blacks.

Mustafa Jones was a big man, not running to fat yet, even though he was in his fifties. He was very dark, with hair and short beard beginning to gray. He stood behind the lectern on a raised platform which had been erected only that morning in the old Pines Park area of Shreveport, Louisiana. His permit to demonstrate had been granted, then revoked, then quickly approved again by the mayor and city council after a crowd began gathering downtown around the courthouse.

Mustafa was sermonizing now in his best fashion; waving his arms, shouting to the skies for justice and denigrating everything in the world with a hint of white to it, with the possible exception of vanilla ice cream. "...and I tell you, brothers and sisters, the *White Man* is the cause of this latest outrage against our people. He has loosed this foul disease among us. Why else should it only attack black men and women?" His voice rose to a near scream. "I ask you, why? Why?"

"The *White Man* created this abomination and I tell you this, brothers and sisters, the *White Man* is still spreading their so-called Harcourt Virus." He emphasized *White Man* with a furious shake of his fist every time he spoke the words

"Harcourt virus!" He spat. "It's not a Harcourt virus, it's a black virus, dreamed up by the white power structure and designed to kill us all! They're spreading it all over the world. The whites are attempting to wipe out the black race completely and finally, like they've been trying to do for the last five hundred years!"

Mustofa strode back and forth behind the lectern, wireless microphone to his lips. He paused to wipe sweat from his forehead and to shuck his jacket. "We have to stop this foul and odorous affliction the *White Man* is spreading, killing our husbands, our wives and children. We have to stop them, and there's only one way to do it, brothers and sisters! We have to take the war to the whites. Yes! Yes! It's war, plain and simple. White men started this war against blacks! We can't let them win! Can we? Can we let them win?"

A huge rolling chorus of "No! No!" erupted from the crowd. Mustofa led the chant while he wiped his face and loosened his collar. He rolled up one of the sleeves of his shirt. He went back to his haranguing of the white race, but his voice began to falter. Sweat poured off his body, dripping from his chin and soaking his shirt. He began rolling up his other sleeve, then stumbled against the lectern. The microphone

bumped it with a loud knocking noise that was amplified almost to the level of thunder.

"Kill the whites! Kill them all," he managed weakly, then had to grip the lectern with both hands to keep his balance. His face shone wetly under the lights. His lips trembled as he attempted to continue speaking. "I ... kill..." The microphone fell and bounced on the flooring, making a curious drumming noise. His grip on the lectern slipped and he slumped to the plank floor of the dais. The lectern tipped and fell as he rolled onto his back. Aides scampered to help him while the crowd noises changed from organized chanting to a cacophony of muttering. That changed too, after someone shouted over the low rumble of voices.

"He got it! Mustofa got the Black Virus!"

Shouts and cries rose into the air. Someone pulled a pistol and fired into the air with the shout of "Kill! Kill the Whities!"

The carnage in Shreveport began with that first pistol shot. Frightened black women gathered their children while their men either pulled out concealed weapons or hurried back home to arm themselves, with guns if they had them, knives if they didn't. Shots began to ring out at the edge of the enraged crowd. A white policeman fell with a bullet to the head. An enraged brother officer, seeing his partner lying dead with a bullet in his brain, pulled his pistol and fired wildly into the crowd. The bullets hit several women and children, but none of the armed men.

Of the police detail which had been assigned to monitor the demonstration and keep order, only a handful survived and they were all black. The ones who tried to stand with the white officers were lynched right along with them and that quickly put a stop to aid from that direction. Within fifteen minutes it was all over.

After the police in the area were disposed of, there was nothing to stop the violence. Before the night was over the city was split in half between armed and warring groups of blacks and whites. Neither of them showed any mercy.

The governor of Louisiana called up the National Guard, but by the time the fighting was quelled, the casualties were well over a thousand, with several times that number wounded and whole neighborhoods burnt to the ground. Even the venerable charity hospital that treated mostly black residents had been overrun and almost all of the white doctors, nurses and workers on duty slaughtered. One other hospital suffered the same fate. The police department itself was fractured and no longer effectual because of fighting between black and white officers. In the ensuing chaos, no one paid any attention to the fact that Mustofa Jones had died from a heart attack, not the Harcourt Virus.

* * * *

June was gone from his bed by the time Doug woke up. He used the bathroom and brushed his teeth with the borrowed toothbrush, all the while thinking of the previous night and wondering where it would lead, if anywhere. He ran his comb through his hair and ventured out toward the enticing smell of frying bacon.

"Good morning," June said. "I was just about to knock on the door." She smiled prettily, though a faint blush appeared on her face.

"Good morning. I hope you're cooking for two."

"I am. Sit down and I'll pour you some coffee. How do you take it?"

"I can get it."

"'Sit down', I said. I haven't cooked for a man in a long time. Let me enjoy it."

"Just black, then." Doug pulled out a stool at the bar and watched as June poured the coffee and continued preparing breakfast. Before long he was seated next to her at the little dining table, digging into toast with eggs over easy, bacon and hash browns.

As they were finishing, June said "I'm sorry I woke you up last night. I had a bad dream and couldn't go back to sleep. I kept seeing that boy trying to pull me out of the car."

"It wasn't a bother at all," Doug responded.

June lowered her gaze, then raised it again. "That was the first time I've been in bed with a man since Charlie was killed. Even if it was just sleeping."

"I know how it is. It was well over a year before I went out with a woman and almost another year before I thought I was ready for a relationship. I was wrong even then. Doris was ... well, you're probably not interested. Suffice to say I had a good marriage. That kiss last night was more enjoyable than anything else I've done with a woman since she died."

June favored him with an assertive nod. She began gathering the breakfast dishes while trying to push away the faint feeling of guilt over her attraction toward another man. She couldn't decide whether she was being disloyal to Charlie's memory or not. Shouldn't a good marriage in the past mean something positive about how her emotions were being stirred now by the presence of a man who had also had a good relationship? She watched him covertly as Doug rose to bring his plate to the sink then stayed and rinsed while she placed them in the dishwasher. She stood indecisively afterwards.

"Do you need to stop by your place before going to work?" she finally asked.

"Yes, but if you want a lift, I can wait until you're ready."

"I do. It won't take me long. I reported my car stolen, by the way."

"Probably a good idea. Need any help packing?"

"No, I'll get what I need for now. Thanks."

A few minutes later he carried her suitcase out to his car and stowed it in the trunk. Before leaving, he said "All I need to do is get a quick shave and pick up a couple of my spare pieces at my place. It won't take but a few minutes, but I'd rather you stay inside here or come with me to my place until I'm ready to leave."

"I'll come with you." June locked her door and they began walking around the corner of the unit to Doug's apartment. "What did you mean spare piece?"

"My other guns. And June—I don't know what you think about weapons, but I'd sure feel better if you carried one with you from now on."

"I don't have a license. And I wouldn't know how to shoot anyway, even supposing I owned a gun."

"I doubt anyone is going to be checking licenses for a long time to come. And I can not only teach you to shoot but I'll give you something easy to handle. There's an indoor range that we use right near work. That's where most of us practice."

"Well ... I guess so. I hope I never have to use it, though."

"I sincerely hope so, too."

Once back in the car, with his face freshly shaved, Doug had just inserted the key into the ignition when June placed her hand on his arm. He turned, brows raised.

"Doug, before we leave ... I want to be kissed again." She leaned toward him.

Several long moments later, while their tongues were still playing warm games with each other his hand moved over her breast and cupped it gently. June tensed for a second then relaxed and enjoyed his touch. She had to almost force herself to finally break the embrace. She rubbed her cheek against his and laughed softly.

"Look at us, making out in a car like teenagers. And I still feel a bit guilty about it."

Doug took a deep breath and looked directly at her. "I hope that doesn't last. And I'll confess I feel somewhat like a teenager right now, so I have an excuse. How about you?"

"I think we'd better get going if we're going to go at all. One more like that ... never mind. It was nice enough to repeat in detail another time, but not now."

If he wasn't floating on air on the way to the CDC, Doug couldn't have proved it, because he certainly felt like he was. He wondered what it was about the woman beside him that had finally stirred something in his soul besides simple sexual desire.

* * * *

With the elimination of overseas missions, and with the private security guards and federal marshals now under his command, Gene Bradley combined the small squads into four contingents of just over a hundred men each, now referred to as platoons. Each platoon would be responsible for an eight hour shift of guard duty each day, with the platoons rotating on a three weeks on, one week off schedule. It was similar to how the military might have handled it, which didn't surprise Doug at all. He had been placed in charge of one of the four platoons and was with the other three platoon leaders in Bradley's office getting the latest briefing.

As usual, the former Colonel got to the point quickly. "In case any of you haven't been listening to the news, several cities now are in a state of virtual war between blacks and whites. There's a pitched battle going on right now in northern Louisiana and the governor has called out the National Guard. The upset here in Atlanta has been put down, but the city is still a powder keg. Any little incident could set it off. I want you to emphasize to your men to think before they start shooting. Not every black face is an enemy, nor even most of them. On the other hand, this may very well be the most important medical facility in America right now. It must be protected at all costs. I've recommended that an army battalion be assigned to help us, but so far it hasn't been approved.

"I hope it is soon, because the information has just been made public—leaked, I should say—that the Harcourt Virus was first released two years ago and has probably infected a good percentage of the world's population—and that it definitely had a human origin. I don't have to tell you what that's going to mean. The infection curve is still rising and the morbidity is still one hundred percent for blacks—or dark skins, I should say." He lowered his gaze for a moment. "Call it prejudicial if you like, but I want you to avoid putting anyone with dark skin in positions of authority." He caught the disquiet at that remark and clarified his statement. "It's not that I don't trust our people but if this thing continues, I want continuity in the chain of command and that's the only way to have it.

"Folks, this is going to get much worse before it gets better. It's showing up in India and the Phillipines, and also in China, though I doubt it will reach catastrophic levels there as it will in Africa. That whole

continent is rapidly slipping into complete anarchy, with whites being hunted down like animals. That, by the way, is why we may not get any army people here for a while. They're busy as hell evacuating as many of our people as they can from overseas, Africa primarily, but also from the Middle East."

"Until we see just how far this goes, you're going to have to stick close and keep your men here. We've got a limited number of transient apartments available. You can announce that to your troops and have them apply over in the administrative building if they want to bring in their families. If they run out of room in the transient apartments, you're authorized to bring families to your own quarters. Just keep them busy with something and out of our hair.

"Now I've given you your assignments. Three weeks on, one week off. The eight hour shifts will be rotated. Other than that, you can assign your men as you see fit.

"One more thing. I want each of you to send me five men, preferably ex-military who are familiar with heavy weapons. Machine guns and RPGs. I'm going to organize a heavy weapons detail. The National Guard here loaned us some surplus, so we're well equipped. Doug, I've picked one of your men to head that up, Buddy Hawkins. I know he's black, but he's the best qualified and he'll have assistants who can take over if he gets sick."

Doug winced inside but his face showed nothing. Buddy was one of the few of his squad who had returned from Nigeria. He had planned on making him his assistant.

"All right, that covers it from my side. Questions?"

There weren't many, and the few they had dealt with supplies of all kind for their men, now that no one was allowed to leave. Doug didn't feel Gene's answers were entirely satisfactory, but he knew the ex-colonel was doing the best he possibly could. There hadn't been any contingency plans for this situation, not anywhere. There were several shops within the complex but few that sold what they would eventually need most; clothing, phone batteries, toiletry items and other essentials they were used to getting somewhere else. The briefing was finished within the next ten minutes.

Doug's section had the second week off. At first he was annoyed because he wanted to try spending some more time with June and see what developed, but then after thinking about it, decided that allowing their relationship to simmer for a week probably wouldn't hurt. But when he called June to tell her his schedule she sounded disappointed.

"Are you on duty the whole time? That sounds horrendous!"

"No, just eight hours out of each twenty four, but unfortunately, my section drew the night shift the first go round, midnight until eight. We start tonight."

"You're off during the rest of the time, though?"

"Well—officially, but in reality, I have to be available any time. I don't have to stay in our compound, though, so long as my phone is working and I don't go far."

"Good. I work tomorrow but we're getting one day a week off and the day after tomorrow is Sunday. Come over to the transient apartments as soon as you're free that morning and I'll make us something to eat. It's on the second floor and has my name on the door." June had managed to get one of the last of the units available and moved in immediately.

"That sounds great, but I don't want to put you out by cooking for me."

"Not to worry. I hate to fix a meal just for myself. About nine? Will that give you time to get your

whiskers off?"

"Sure. Okay, thanks, June. I'll see you then."

Doug began cleaning and checking his weapons, including the little .25 automatic he intended to give to June. Presently, he found himself whistling.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Sir, we have to do it, even if we have to fight our way in. Regardless of what else happens, we can't let our oil supplies perish, and that's not to mention several nuclear power plants that need securing. We simply can't let those go unattended. You remember what happened with just that one in Russia, or the Ukraine maybe, I don't remember exactly. Chernobyl. And that other one. They both caused horrendous contamination even though they were contained before they blew completely. Think what would happen if one went all the way out of control. And we're going to need every bit of oil we can get if we intend to remain a player in world politics. Alternate fuels and our polymerization plants won't make up the difference yet." Joshua Brenham figured this would be his last meeting as a cabinet officer. The first symptoms of the Harcourt virus had started a few days before and were becoming worse as time went on. He had taken a pain pill before arriving at the conference room. Whatever happened, and regardless of his personal feelings, he wanted his legacy to be that of one who had done his best, not only for the country but for the world as a whole.

President Marshall rubbed his chin and didn't answer. He had been entertaining vague notions of colonizing some of the empty continent once the blacks all died off. Particularly the oil producing areas, like Nigeria. Joshua was finally giving him advice he wanted to hear.

"We can't do it all, man," Borland Newman countered, looking directly at Joshua. "We're going to lose thirty percent of our military to that goddamned virus as is! And I just met with the joint chiefs. We need to federalize the air carriers to try getting more of our people home, particularly from Africa. Now you want me to send troops for something else? Can't the U.N. handle it? Besides, it might be better to let them blow."

"What!" Joshua couldn't believe he had heard the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs right.

"Stop and think a moment. According to trends, Africa is going to become almost completely depopulated. That's going to leave the whole continent up for grabs, just like back in colonial days. And while it's happening, we're going to be busier than the other great powers because of our own population mix. Where do you think we'll stand in the world if we let the Europeans, or China or hell, even Russia take over?"

"General, there aren't but a few nuclear plants in Africa, although we may need to keep our eye on several in the Middle East. The Muslim nations are becoming more belligerent than ever. Some of their people are infected too, you know."

"My job is to tend to the security of the country, Joshua. And speaking of which, Mr. President, I want the rest of the National Guard federalized."

"All of them?" the president asked mildly. "I've already given you two divisions."

"Yes, sir. Every single one. And while you're at it, start thinking about the draft—especially if you want me to divert troops for humanitarian missions as Joshua requested."

Brenham stared balefully at the four star general, but made no other comment. He had already argued privately with the president about the matter.

"I think our own country has to come first," President Marshall said. "However, we can try working with the U.N."

"With what?" General Borman asked." He shuffled the briefing papers on the table in front of him, as if to

remind the president again of how thinly stretched his forces were. "We're going to lose a good many of our expatriates as is. We simply haven't got the facilities to get to every damn corner of that benighted continent, much less start meddling in the Middle East again. If we do anything at all, it should be to help secure only the plants that we know for certain are going to be abandoned, and if we have to, try to grab selected oil fields. But while we're at it, you'd better get Homeland Security to pay attention to our own nuclear facilities. The way things are going, some of the mobs may try capturing one to hold over our heads."

"For what?"

"Damn it Joshua, you know as well as I do. Most of the blacks in this country think the white race started the virus and that we can cure it if we have a mind to. That's what I'm talking about. They may take a plant hostage and demand that we produce a cure." He stared belligerently at the Secretary of State, willing him to understand.

"Gentlemen." The president's voice stopped the bickering. "Here's what we'll do. I'll federalize the rest of the National Guard and authorize calling up the inactive reserves as well. I'll go to Congress and ask for a draft, but don't expect any action there immediately. You know how slow work."

"That's okay, Mr. President," General Newman said. "We need to get the Guard units up to speed first. Hell, even if we had a draft and just ran the draftees through minimal training, we're talking several months before we'd get much use out of them."

"Fine, General. Now for the rest of the agenda. I want you to make plans to secure those few nuclear plants in Africa, then your next priority will be to make sure the U.S. has sufficient oil to last us through this emergency. If you have to invade some country, let me know and I'll authorize it. No, better than that. I'll give you a written directive now, authorizing the joint chiefs to use such force as they see fit, anywhere they feel it's necessary, in order to assure our country has sufficient energy supplies and to keep it safe and functional. I'll have it drawn up and get it to you later in the day, after my staff dresses it up in enough ambiguous language to stymie muck-racking reporters and the opposition in Congress.

"And Joshua, I want you to work with our U.N. ambassador and see how much help you can wring out of those yahoos. Tell her..."

Despite his personal dislike of the man, Joshua had to admit that he could make a decision when warranted. This time, though, he would have to get a new secretary of state to carry out his doctrines.

"Mr. President, I'm sorry, but I shall have to tender my resignation today. It seems as though I have the Harcourt Virus. I won't be able to work any longer."

The other two men at the table instinctively drew back from Brenham, even though intellectually they knew they couldn't be infected.

"Joshua, I'm very sorry. I wish there was something I could do."

"Thank you, Mr. President. I would simply hope that you'll keep the research on the Harcourt Virus going at full speed, particularly at the CDC. That's the only real hope for us unless some other country comes up with more than we have so far."

"England and what's left of the European Union are devoting as much of their resources as possible to a cure and a vaccine, Joshua. Maybe between them and us, or perhaps in other countries, we can come up with something before..." His voice trailed off, but Joshua knew what he meant.

"I sincerely hope so, Mr. President. Now, if you'll excuse me, I want to go home and be with my family. General. Mr. President." He nodded at both of them and took his leave.

After he was gone, President Marshall stared at General Newman, who seemed to be lost in thought.

"General, is your mind moving in the same path as mine?"

Newman smiled thinly. He knew exactly what the president was thinking. "Yes, sir. If we can hold the country together, and this thing doesn't start a world war, it will have taken care of one big trouble area in the country."

"Exactly. No more race problems."

"Black race problems, at least," Newman agreed, nodding to himself. "The virus will effectively eliminate all the damn promotion quotas, outreach programs, affirmative action, interracial discord and all the other factors involving race that the army or the country shouldn't have to worry about."

* * * *

Doug yawned despite the coffee he had consumed during the night and the two additional cups he had with the breakfast June made for them.

"Sleepy?" June asked when she saw Doug trying to cover it up.

"Uh huh. A sudden change in sleeping patterns is hard on the body. Then just about the time we get used to it, we'll be off for a week, then on the day shift, then on the evening and so on."

"I've worked days most of my career. Isn't there an easier way to do it?"

"Sure. Stay on the same shift all the time. But with this many people, you'd always have some who didn't like the hours, regardless of which rotation they were on." He yawned again. "Listen, I'd better go hit the sack. Thanks for the breakfast."

"I enjoyed doing it."

Doug stood up and June walked him to the door. He stopped there before opening it. "June, how about when I'm on my week off? Can we get together then?"

She smiled at him. "We don't have to wait that long. Why don't you come over Wednesday evening for a little while if you can. Call first, though. Amelia has me putting in overtime most days."

Doug tipped her chin up and brushed her lips with his. "That sounds fine. I'll have to drink coffee or tea, though. Or maybe as many as two drinks, depending on how early it is before going to work. Can I bring some takeout?" He let his hand drop away from her chin.

"If you like Chinese or Pizza, you can; otherwise I'll make some sandwiches."

"Chinese it is." He pulled the door open, suddenly feeling bashful and unsure of himself, thinking this was like dating as a teenager all over again.

"Doug."

He turned to face June again, and felt a blush begin creeping over his face.

June gazed at him from the depths of her lovely brown eyes, using them to hold him in place as effectively as gluing his feet to the floor would have done. "It's like beginning to date all over again, isn't it?" she said.

"I think you're a mind reader. I..." He was suddenly lost for words.

June smiled pensively, then stepped closer, inviting him to embrace her. Her body felt small and soft and comfortable against his own, making him not want to leave.

June pulled her lips from his after a long moment. "Go get some sleep. We can talk about it later."

She didn't have to mention what she meant, and he was grateful for her presence of mind in putting it off until they were both rested. When it happened, he wanted the experience to be good for both of them. As he pulled away from the apartment parking lot he noticed that the dumpsters were full and bags were beginning to pile up around them. After thinking about it for a few minutes while driving back to the security building, he realized what was happening. Blacks and Mexicans handled almost all of the garbage details and they were either falling ill or quitting to be with family members who were sick. Or simply walking off and going home to nurse their boiling rage. He knew that if the Harcourt virus wasn't brought under control soon, white America was going to begin to realize just how much they had come to depend upon unskilled labor for the tasks no one else wanted to do. Soon though, thoughts of his time with June pushed those deliberations aside. It was much nicer to visualize her and remember the pleasurable sensation of their embraces and kisses and fantasize about what might follow.

On the way back to his own place, Doug noticed how many signs were going up proclaiming that The End Times were at hand, or that the Rapture was coming soon. Most of them urged unbelievers to accept Jesus so that they wouldn't be left out. He hoped those types of people wouldn't begin causing problems. The country had more than it could take care of already.

CHAPTER NINE

Mary Hedgrade's business in Washington was finished. For all that the briefing of the president had accomplished, she thought she could just as well have done it on a conference call and saved the time wasted flying to Washington and back. She knew that it was probably President Marshall's penchant for secrecy that made him demand her physical presence. Her thoughts about the meeting caused her mind to drift so much that she didn't notice when the limousine began slowing, nor how traffic was stacking up at an unreasonable rate for this time of day. When she did finally bring her attention back to the present, she glanced irritably at her watch, thinking there must be an accident somewhere ahead of them, and hoped it didn't lead to missing her flight back to Atlanta. A few minutes later traffic came to a complete stop and she began to hear the warbling of sirens.

After ten minutes with no movement, she tapped the plexiglass divider between her and the driver's compartment to get the man's attention. He had a cell phone to his ear and was listening avidly. When the tapping didn't work, she glanced down and saw the button that activated the intercom. She pressed it and said "What's happening? I'm going to miss my flight!"

The driver answered in such a thick accent that she could barely understand one word out of three, but the gist of it seemed to be something about a mob and rioting. She thought she heard a reference to tear gas but wasn't sure. The driver put the phone to his ear again, then held it away from him as if in surprise. He ended the call and turned on his radio.

"Can't you find an alternate route?" Mary asked then realized as soon as she had uttered the statement how foolish it was. There was no way to move; the taxi was hemmed in from all sides.

"No," the driver said brusquely. Nevertheless he began turning this way and that in his seat as though scanning for some way to escape the traffic tie up. He said something else that Mary didn't understand. He sounded vaguely like a Russian scientist she had talked to some months ago through an interpreter. His appearance matched that of some Russians, at least, with his pale skin and just a hint of an epicanthic fold to his eyes. His face had a deer in the headlights stare, a frightened look like that she had seen on the patients in Nigeria arriving at the hospital for treatment.

Mary couldn't hear the radio; at first she thought it must not be working, then she saw the little wireless earpiece he must be using. He began staring at the radio console as if it were talking directly to him.

Mary began to feel the first stirrings of fright. "What's going on? What do you hear?" she demanded to know.

The driver didn't answer, even though he turned and stared at her as though she were an alien preparing to climb through the divider to get at him. Abruptly, he came to a decision. He opened his door and began weaving his way hurriedly through the close-packed vehicles. As soon as he made it to the sidewalk, he began running back the way they had come and was quickly lost from sight.

Mary didn't know what to do. Apparently he had heard something very scary from his phone or the radio. Others must have too, for more vehicles were emptying. Mary leaned forward and saw that he had left in such a hurry that he hadn't even shut the motor off. The keys were still dangling in the ignition. She gathered her purse and briefcase and opened the rear door, drawing an irritated glance from the woman in a Mercedes next to the limousine when her door banged into it. Mary tried to open the driver's door and found it locked. It refused to budge. She swore when she found there was no way to get inside, short of breaking the window—and she had nothing to use for that purpose. She looked around, hoping for some help, but even the others who had stepped out of their vehicles ignored her. She didn't even try

to get a feed to her PDA, knowing the batteries had been exhausted during her meetings with the government officials. The back compartment of the limousine hadn't had connections for recharging it.

The people getting out of their cars all seemed to be looking ahead. Some had already decided to abandon them and were walking around indecisively once they reached the sidewalks. She quickly saw why. Not too far in the distance a billow of smoke was rising from behind the conglomeration of one and two story buildings of a small shopping center. As she stared at it, a flicker of flame appeared at the base of the smoke. The sirens were still wailing but not sounding much closer and no emergency vehicles were in sight. She thought she could hear shouting voices mixed with the warbling of the sirens but couldn't be sure—until a few minutes later.

It was screams rather than shouts she identified, screams of terror, and they were coming closer. She stood, vacillating for a moment, then decided to follow her driver's example. She threaded her way through the stalled traffic to the sidewalk and began walking. Others were doing the same, but many of them weren't walking; they were running. Mary began to wish she had worn sensible shoes rather than the three inch heels on her feet. Moments later she quit worrying about her shoes. A crazed mob of blacks burst from a side street, plainly intent on violence toward any white person they saw. Mary kicked off her shoes and began running for her life. She made it two blocks before she plowed headlong into another gang emerging from the shattered doors of a liquor store they had been looting. Cries of ferocious triumph and elated epithets came from the looters as they surrounded her. Hands grabbed at her clothing and ripped her purse away. Other hands yanked at her hair and grubbed at her breasts.

"I'm a scientist! I'm trying to help you!" Mary pleaded over and over, but it did her no good. She was dragged kicking and screaming back into the store. Before long she was crying, then begging for mercy. Shortly after that she began wishing for death, so the pain and degradation would be over with. Her wish was granted, but not before her abused body became almost unrecognizable.

* * * *

"I still can't believe she's gone," June said to Doug when she called him. It was Wednesday evening but she was still at work. "My God, what a horrible way to die."

"June, at the risk of sounding blasé about it, we're going to see more and more incidents like the one that Mary Hedgrade got caught up in. I feel horrible about it, even though I didn't know her that well. Damn it to hell, the president should have activated the National Guard unit there or brought in some army troops to help maintain order. He knows damn well what the proportion of black residents in the capitol is and how they would react. Damn politics!"

"She was ... I guess I knew her a little better than you, since my job brought me into contact with her now and then. She's..." There was an interval of silence while Doug waited for her to begin speaking again. He knew she was trying to get her voice under control. Presently she resumed. "She was the Director for a long time, wasn't she?"

"Yes, she was practically an institution here. Well, I guess that takes care of our plans for tonight, doesn't it?"

"I'm sorry, Doug. I was looking forward to it, but God knows what time I'll get away. Amelia is in conference right now. This isn't for publication, but I think she may be nominated for Mary's spot."

"If anyone deserves it, Amelia does. Look, I know you must be busy. Call me later if you get some time."

"I will. And we'll get together Saturday if nothing else happens."

Doug gave a short, mirthless chuckle. "No telling what things will be like by then, but unless you hear

differently, I'm still free."

"Me, too. So far. 'Bye, Doug. Take care."

"You, too. Don't leave the complex unless I can be with you. Okay?"

"I won't, you can bet on that!"

* * * *

"I really didn't want this," Amelia said, talking as much to herself as to June. She was cleaning out her desk and sorting through items accumulated over the years, some she had completely forgotten about. "I'd much rather stay in field work than go completely into administration. It's so damned boring and politics-ridden."

"Can't you have refused?" June asked, pulling the drawstrings closed on one bag of discarded bric-a-brac from Amelia's desk then shaking out another.

"It's kind of hard to turn down a direct request from the president." Amelia peeled off her knee length white lab coat and stared at it for a moment. "Guess I won't be needing this anymore." She folded it into a neat bundle then looked at June and managed a wry grin. "Don't mind me, I'm just talking to myself."

"That's all right, Amelia. Or should I address you as Madame Director?"

"Oh, Lord, June—let's not have any of that! And while I'm on the subject, do you want to come along with me? I'm going to need an assistant I'm comfortable with. Think before you say yes. It's going to be a pluperfect headache, I can tell you that."

June knew this would come up. Like Amelia, she wasn't ready to get completely away from field work, but also like her, felt an obligation to serve where she could be the most useful. Reluctantly, she nodded. "I guess if you can stand it, I can. I just hope it doesn't take up all of our time."

Amelia smiled knowingly. "Well, regardless, I insisted on having a full week to wind up affairs in this office before taking over the job. You can have the weekend off, just like you planned. Enjoy it, because it may be the last one for a while."

June wondered why she was blushing. It wasn't a crime to date a man, not after two years of being a widow. Maybe it was because she was seriously considering turning it into more than a mere date.

* * * *

President Marshall was relaxing. He had just finished with his last appointment of the morning and was having his lunch and preparing for a short nap, his unvarying noon routine. His feet were propped on his desk in the Oval Office while he munched on a sandwich. He liked to eat in the office; it saved time and was conducive to thinking. He had made it very plain that he wasn't to be disturbed during his lunch hour for anything less than a nuclear war, the Rapture or an alien invasion.

The lone secret service agent who always stood unobtrusively against the wall behind the president stayed out of his line of sight. He used text messaging and a vibration alert for his phone to avoid distracting him. Suddenly the agent felt his phone vibrate. He held it up to read the message. Only his training kept him from avoiding panic.

"Mr. President! Get up, sir! Danger One!"

Danger one was the code for a possible attempt on the president's life. Marshall's feet hit the floor with a thump just as two more agents burst into the oval office. Before he could get his mind in order the agents

had him by the arms, one on each side, and were hustling him away.

"Hey! What—"

"No time, sir! The White House is about to be overrun! You have to get away!"

"Overrun? Who—goddamnit, where's the army? Where's the guards? Do something!"

Neither of the agents answered. They hurried the president along, following two more agents toward the safe room beneath the White House. The two in front were carrying on a conversation on their phones, trying to keep ahead of the threat.

By the time the elevator door closed behind them, Lurline Tedd, Chief of Staff for the White House, was by his side. As soon as the president saw her, he began to calm down. Lurline wouldn't let anything happen to him; she was always on top of whatever crisis might be threatening.

"Lurline, what is it?" He asked, trying to keep the tremor out of his voice.

"The demonstrations got out of hand, then they were joined by half the blacks in the city. The guards had to open fire, and that only enraged them. I've got General Newman bringing in a paratroop division to restore order," Lurline said in her even, matter of fact voice. No one had ever seen her out of control, not even for a second.

"Maybe we better stay away until this virus thing gets cleared up."

"You can't, Mr. President. What would the world think if you couldn't run the country from your own capitol? Don't worry, the paratroops will be here soon; they were already on alert. And I want that damn political advisor of yours fired for allowing the demonstration to be held in the first place. It was a stupid decision."

Even if Lurline was unflappable, President Marshall thought she looked more worried than he had ever seen her. Just as the elevator doors opened to let them out a rumble was felt vibrating the building from somewhere above. "What was that? Are they using explosives?"

"RPG, probably," one of the agents remarked, drawing glares from his superior and Lurline both.

"Don't worry, we'll contain them, sir," the senior secret service agent tried to assure his boss. But Marshall thought he looked worried, too.

"How many of them are there? How did they get so close to the White House? Damn it, this shouldn't be allowed to happen!"

No one answered him. Instead, he was urged along until they arrived at the "bunker", as the secure room was called. It was self contained but had an underground passage that led out of the White House and to several different escape routes; including a helicopter landing pad and a ready to go convoy of armored cars.

President Marshall took his seat at the head of the table in the conference room of the bunker. Soon the smell of coffee permeated the air.

"Why aren't the screens lit up? I want to see what's happening." Marshall glanced toward one of the walls that held an array of monitor screens.

Lurline nodded to one of the agents while she continued making notes on her PDA about how to handle

the aftermath of the fiasco. He lit up three of the monitors; one showed national breaking news, the others gave panoramic back and front views of the area around the White House and the streets and buildings beyond, taken from recorders on the rooftop above them. Those two appeared almost identical. The streets swarmed with black citizens, men and women alike. Many of them were climbing over the fences surrounding the White House, using crates and boxes and even a few automobiles as steps. Some fell as Secret Service snipers on the roof fired at them, but the pressure of the mob behind was too great to stop, especially as the rifle fire couldn't be heard over the crowd noises—and the noise of their own guns. The White House guards had all disappeared except for a few uniformed bodies sprawled on the lawn.

"Good God!" the president exclaimed. He felt a queasy sense of fear begin to envelop him. "We'd better get out of here!"

"We're working on it, Mr. President. We have to be certain that the other end of an escape route is open before leaving. Don't worry; no one can find their way down here." Lurline didn't mention what might happen if the building were set on fire.

It was another half hour before a way was found to leave safely. All the while, President Marshall watched the scenes around the White House as if mesmerized. He took one look back over his shoulder as he was being escorted out. An army helicopter had been trying to rescue the snipers from the roof. The helicopter began smoking, whether from gunfire or mechanical problems wasn't apparent, but the result was catastrophic. It tilted sideways and made an arc toward the ground. It crashed directly into the dense blanket of humanity, then exploded in a ball of fire. Flames were licking at fallen bodies and running figures from the periphery of the crash site as the door closed behind him.

CHAPTER TEN

It was a bad week for Doug. Bob Handley had hung on long past the time they expected him to, but he finally died. Doug was almost glad when he passed away. He had suffered great pain at the end, refusing narcotics so that he could remain coherent. His wife called Doug to tell him when it was over.

"I'm sorry, Joan. He was a good friend. Is there anything I can do?"

"You can kill those bastards that started this if you ever find them," Mrs. Handley sobbed.

He thought it better not to answer that. Instead, he asked "Are you still feeling all right, Joan? How about the kids?"

"We're okay so far, Doug, but ... oh God, why is this happening? Who could hate us so much?"

Doug had no answer for her, nor did anyone else. The week ended with the Harcourt virus still raging uncontrolled, but with the White House back in the hands of the government.

Doug had spent more time watching that event play out than he should have, missing sleep and then having bad dreams over some of the scenes the cameras showed. The exploding helicopter was what had effectively ended the siege, burning a huge swath through the crowd and stampeding most of the rest of them. Armored personnel carriers began pushing onto the grounds by evening, leading a reinforced paratroop battalion in on foot as it had been decided it was too dangerous to jump in. Even so, the soldiers took casualties from remnants of the mob firing from behind overturned vehicles and windows of buildings, venting their pent up anger in the only way they thought was left to them. Finally, the commander ordered heavy weapons into action. Any place harboring snipers was leveled to the ground.

Automatic sprinklers saved the White house from burning, but there was still damage, a lot of it caused from the army troops who had gone through the building room by room, shooting at anything that moved. Several clerks and service people who had managed to hide in nooks and crannies from the mob were killed by mistake before it was over.

The carnage outside was sickening. Burned and mutilated bodies lay where they had fallen while more soldiers poured into the area and began clearing and securing an area stretching in a half mile radius around the White House, and clamping heavy controls on an even wider circle. The bodies were still lying where they had fallen when Doug came off duty the next morning. He stayed awake long enough to listen to a bleary eyed president peel off the political gloves and declare martial law in every state of the Union. Doug fell asleep before he heard the Presidential Press Secretary began reading off a list of executive orders that would take effect the same day.

* * * *

The phone woke Doug late that afternoon. He yawned as he reached for it.

"Hello. Craddock here."

"Hi Doug, this is June."

He laughed sleepily. "I always recognize your voice. What time is it? Never mind, I see the clock. Hey, I've slept all day!"

June laughed. "Good. Are you still off for a week?"

"So far. How about you?" He felt a wave of energy surging through his body just from hearing her voice.

"Just the weekend, but you can come over whenever you're ready."

"All I need to do is get a shower. What can I bring?"

"Something to drink if you can find anything."

"Huh?"

"Oh, I guess you haven't heard. Liquor is going to be rationed. Everyone has been stocking up today."

"What—never mind. You can catch me up when I get there. How about food?"

"Bring some bread if you have any. I've been afraid to go shopping."

"I could try to find some takeout."

"Don't bother. From what I've been hearing, and seeing as I drive, I think most of the fast food places are closed, as well as a good many of the restaurants."

Doug knew she was right. He had seen that happening all week as help didn't show up and drivers failed to make deliveries. "All right. See you in a bit. Keep your doors locked and your gun handy, even if you are living here now. There's still lots of nut cases loose and this stuff is making them even loonier than usual."

"I know. I'll be careful."

Doug stripped off his underwear and showered quickly, feeling guilty for not having taken June to a firing range while they had a chance. He had run her through a dry firing exercise, but nothing gave a person a feel for a handgun except actually shooting one. Tomorrow maybe.

Before leaving he bundled up a few items to drop off at the dry cleaners in the complex. He glanced at the dishes in the sink and decided they could wait a little longer. He was anxious to see June now that he was clean and dressed in his usual jeans and jacket. He found a package of frozen dinner rolls in the top of the refrigerator and bagged them, along with a few other items, including a bottle of wine and a fifth of rum. He checked the lock on his gun cabinet and the door and headed for his car. If they could manage it, he intended to escort June back to their apartments in the city to pick up a number of items that were already getting hard to find at the CDC complex.

The dry cleaning store was open, but not taking any new business. The owner was having to do almost all the work by himself and couldn't handle more customers until he caught up with the backload.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Craddock," he apologized. Most of my help is either sick, dead, or just left one day and never came back." Seeing Doug's stricken look and the size of his laundry bag, he sighed. "All right, you've been a good customer. Leave it with me. It will be a day or two longer than usual before it's ready, though."

Doug gave him a grateful smile. "Thanks Billy. I really do appreciate it."

* * * *

June had moved into one of the CDC transient apartments just in time, Doug thought. From the number of children playing in the halls and outside under the careful eye of the parents, there were probably no vacancies left. He juggled his bundles and rang her doorbell.

"Hi, Doug. You look nice and fresh," June said as she kissed him lightly. She took his plastic bags of

goodies while he held onto the bottles until he was inside and could set them down.

"You look nice and fresh, too—and also very pretty," he said. She was wearing white shorts and a pale blue blouse with the tails tied across her middle and a pair of flip flops that looked well worn.

"Thank you. Take your jacket off and get comfortable. The power has gone off a few times the last few days. In fact, it's been off in the apartments for a half hour and just came back on. It was getting so warm in here I decided to break out the shorts."

Doug wasn't surprised at the power outages. He had been awake for some of them and knew there would be more and more as time went on. He hung the jacket across the back of a chair, making sure his off duty handgun was easily accessible, and telling June that it was there. After the scenes he had seen of Washington, and with the city population of Atlanta better than fifty per cent black, he wanted to be ready for any contingency, even here, where men that he knew were in charge of security. He had seen re-runs of the Washington mob while dressing, where the press of bodies swept all before them. A handgun probably wouldn't help in a situation like that, but it was comforting all the same.

"If you're not hungry yet, dinner can wait," June said. "I did some chicken breasts and potato salad."

"Sounds good. Frankly, I could do with a stiff drink. It's been a long week."

"I have some coke left if you want to use the rum."

"That's fine. How about you?"

"Just one, then I'll switch to wine."

Doug found the mix in the refrigerator while June produced glasses. He made the drinks while she busied herself with setting the little table and readying the rolls to brown whenever they decided to eat.

The transient apartments for singles contained a small kitchen, a combination dining nook and living room, a bathroom, and bedroom. The furniture consisted of a small couch and two other chairs, a little dinette set with folding chairs and a television screen on one wall with computer and phone connections. June's comphone was such a constant companion on the job that with both wireless and manual connections to the big wall screen available, she hadn't brought her desk unit.

June had already seated herself on the couch by the time Doug finished mixing the drinks. She patted the seat beside her when he handed her the rum and coke, garnished with a slice of lime he had discovered in the vegetable cooler. He sat down, took a big long swallow and sighed.

"Ahhh. I've been wanting this the whole week but I don't like to drink alone."

"Me, either. I guess you haven't watched the news yet?"

"Just while I was dressing and that was mostly re-runs."

"Well, President Marshall issued a number of edicts to go with his martial law. I think some of them will cause problems rather than helping. He declared a night curfew for blacks but not for whites, other than those going to or from work. Can you imagine?"

"Aw shit. Excuse the language, but what in hell can the man be thinking? Doesn't he know that's going to just stir them up even more? Not that I can blame them much. Hell, I can't blame them at all, can you?"

"I guess not. If I were in their position and had been stepped on like they have for 500 years, then been

on the receiving end of a virus that was going to kill everyone I held dear ... well, you probably wouldn't have had to give me a gun. I would have gone looking for one."

Doug sipped at his rum. "Yeah, same here. Still, it's not our fault, and so long as people of color are all stirred up, we're going to have to be careful."

"They're going to be stirred up even more soon. The staff virologists have definitely determined that the Harcourt virus was deliberately altered, then almost certainly spread intentionally."

Doug had expected that to become apparent. Still, it was bad news. "Oh, man. That's sure to get out. A bombshell like that can't be contained."

June took a big gulp of her drink, wrinkling her nose a little at how strong it was to her, but taking another taste before setting it down. She turned to Doug, frown lines between her eyebrows showing how troubled she was. She started to speak, hesitated, then decided to go ahead. "Doug, I hate to tell you, but there's even worse news. And please, don't repeat this anywhere, okay?"

"Maybe you'd better not tell me if it's that sensitive."

"No, I want you to know. Just keep it between us. Okay?"

"All right."

June sighed, then told him. "The new morbidity reports and transmission projections just came out. The Harcourt virus is still almost one hundred percent fatal—and if the infection rates continue along the same curve as they have so far, we're going to lose up to a quarter of the world's population, all within the next six months to a year. That's if we don't find a cure."

Doug grimaced. "How about a vaccine? Couldn't we immunize anyone who hasn't caught it?"

"That's the rest of the bad news. We've been running tests on random samples of the population now that we've identified the antigenic properties of the virus and ... Doug, over half the world is already infected!"

"But how...?" Even having worked for the CDC for a number of years, he wasn't well versed in the mechanics of infectious diseases.

"It was designed to infect, then become latent for a certain length of time. We're not real sure of the mechanism there, but it really doesn't matter. A vaccine wouldn't help the people who are already carrying it."

"Good God, I hope that's all of your bad news," Doug replied. "I don't see how we can..." He saw the look on her face. "Oh damn. There's more, huh?"

"Yes," June admitted. She blinked back tears before continuing. "Now the ones coming down with the active phase of the disease will begin infecting those who didn't get it the first time around. We proved that this week."

Doug shook his head, unable to comprehend how anyone, no matter how evil, could have loosed such a plague on the world. He was speechless for a moment, unable to get his mind around the numbers. Finally he said, "I can see why you don't want this getting out. But it will. Nothing that horrible can be kept secret long. My God, June, just think of having to bury that many corpses while civil violence is tearing the country apart! It can't be done. Unfortunately, I've seen situations like that. On a much smaller scale, true, but still..."

"I know. And that's not all. Secondary infections from unburied bodies and failing health systems will only make it worse."

"Christ. And what about our transportation system, the trucks and trains and ships and barges that supply the cities? Not even counting the farmers. Before all that breaks down the country better start stockpiling food. So should the CDC." Doug finished his drink and got up. He headed for the bottle of rum. He picked it up and looked back at June. He saw the concern written on her face.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to get blind drunk and try to wipe the images from my mind, but I do want one more. Then maybe we'd better eat."

"I agree. Make me another, too—not quite as strong as the last one."

* * * *

President Marshall had finished reading the briefing that included the same information June had passed on to Doug. The only other person in the oval office other than a lone secret service agent was Lurline Tedd, his chief of staff.

"What in hell are we going to do about this, Lurline? When this gets out the country will go wild. I don't know if even the army will be able to hold things together."

Lurline had already been turning the data over in her mind, running through various options at a speed she had become famous for. She had quickly reached the only decision that made sense. She ran her fingers through her short gray hair, tousling it into a disarrayed tangle that had also become famous and provided gist for the political cartoonists. "We've got the ones who started this thing in custody, don't we?"

"Yeah, the CIA found them a couple of days ago, right back here, all except for that goddamned scientist who created the virus. We lost track of him in South Africa when the country started disintegrating. Hell, Lurline, we even lost contact with our agents who were still searching for him. They're probably dead by now."

"Good. No, I didn't mean that the way it sounded. What I meant is that we can use that as a sympathy spin. Make sure a couple of the agents are depicted as black even if they weren't. Do you know how those crazy bastards were captured?"

"No, but.."

"Never mind, make them out to be heroes regardless of how it actually happened. And be sure to tell the reporters that the geneticist who dreamed this whole thing up was not from the United States. Tell the press we think he was killed in South Africa along with the agents who had captured him. The reporters..."

"Damn it, Lurline, you keep talking about reporters! Why in hell do you want the press in on this? It's bad enough that all the perpetrators except for that fucking deranged scientist were from America. Why tell the world?"

"Because you're going to order their public execution, right after a quick and dirty drumhead trial by the army. The sooner the better. I'll get someone from the legal office to draw up the executive orders governing trials under martial law. We left that out originally. There's precedents, but best to nail it down tight."

President Marshall rubbed his chin. The more he thought about the idea, the better he liked it. Trust Lurline to come up with a way to divert public attention from the real issue, at least long enough for the

military to get the country under control. A thin, measured smile grew on his face.

"Okay, we'll do it. How about tomorrow night, prime time, for the execution?"

Lurline considered. "That'll be fine, but make sure the press gets a transcript of the trial. I'll use McAllister for that. He used to be a script writer. And make damn certain the players cited in the transcript don't talk."

The president smiled again. "I'll take care of that part of it. No need for you to get involved."

Lurline didn't want to know how the lawyers and military judges would be kept silent, but she knew it wouldn't be hard. Everyone has skeletons in the closet. Besides, she knew that whoever the president used would see to it that the participants in the trial knew what would happen to them if they did break their secrecy oaths. Skeletons would be the least of their problems.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Doug ran his hand over the soft smoothness of June's bare breast from where he was propped on one elbow, admiring the perfection of her body. It looked perfect to him, at least, from the disheveled locks of her wavy brown hair down to her slim legs and small feet. Fading bikini tan lines drew his attention to her firm breasts with their small pinkish brown nipples and the flare of her hips guarding the lightly trimmed triangle of curls at the junction of her thighs.

"You're beautiful," he said. "And that was a beautiful experience. I hope it was as good for you as it was for me."

She reached up and caressed his cheek. "It was good, Doug, although I wouldn't know much about first times. You're only the second man I've ever been to bed with." Her eyes reflected a merry cheerfulness. "And I'll confess, I was afraid God would strike me down dead for climbing into bed with any other man than Charlie." She pulled his head down for a short but emphatic kiss.

Doug laughed. "I'm glad he didn't." He stretched back out and curled her into his arms. Her breasts pressed against his chest then flattened as he pulled her closer. Within a few moments he could hear her breaths becoming faster and heavier, desire making the sounds clearly audible.

June tugged at his shoulder and shifted her position, silently urging him to make love to her again. She wanted it even more than she had the first time, wanted it to be slower and more intimate than their first urgent coupling. The anticipation was compelling as he moved over her and planted little kisses on her lips and nose and ear. She moved again, lifting her hips, and felt their bodies come together, then gasped as he slipped deliciously inside her. She curled her arms around him and held him close as he began to move. Her body responded eagerly, in almost perfect tune with his. A rising tide of desire flooded her senses, making her want him to be even closer. She locked her legs around him and felt and heard her breath coming in short little bursts of sound, matching the slowly increasing pace of his thrusts. It seemed to go on and on, becoming wonderful and thrilling; a floating, all-enveloping sensation that captured so much of her mind and body that she forgot everything else.

Doug heard June's voice rise to a crescendo of unintelligible noises, culminating in one long, drawn out explosion of sound as she found her release. His own body was caught up in the muscle straining intensity of their second orgasm too, so much so that when it was over he barely had the strength left to move.

* * * *

"Turn it off, Doug. I don't want to watch!" June turned and buried her head against his chest. The big screen was showing a row of five scruffy looking white men dressed in orange jump suits tied to posts with their hands behind them. Three of them had badly bruised faces; the other two might also have been beaten, but they kept their heads hung down so that it was impossible to tell.

The impending execution of the perpetrators of the Harcourt virus had been on the news all day, though Doug and June hadn't seen it that morning. Most of their day had been spent in a bewildering remembrance of the night before. Neither of them had talked much about it but frequent touches and kisses and sitting snuggled together while they talked said more than words could have. Doug was so happy to be in her presence that he could barely stand to let her out of his sight. He was even happier that June reciprocated his feelings in the little womanly ways of showing affection he had missed so much. The rather strong Bloody Mary they had each consumed before breakfast compensated for the bit of overindulgence in wine after dinner the night before. It was just enough to get them smiling and touching each other even more, and had sent them off to bed again right after eating. The noon newscast was when they first heard of the trial and scheduled execution.

Doug could understand the psychology behind making it public, and using a firing squad rather than lethal injection. Not allowing blindfolds was another psychological touch. He suspected that the bruises were a calculated exhibition, meant to be noticed. When the sword was raised for the countdown of the order to fire, he zapped it off.

June's body quivered as he held her. He stroked her temples and kissed the top of her head until the trembling stopped.

"Thank you," she said. "I've already seen enough violence, even though I can't feel one iota of sympathy for those brutes. I'm glad they had a military trial so the damn lawyers didn't get involved and string it out forever."

Doug stroked her back. "I am, too, even though that transcript of the proceedings we downloaded was fake."

June sat up straight. "A fake? How do you know?"

"I was in the military, remember? I served on a court-martial once for an enemy alien guilty of murder. I'm pretty sure at least parts of transcript were fabricated, if not all of it. For one thing, the timing was too convenient—right after the White House itself was overrun, and right when the origin of the virus and how many deaths it's going to cause was getting into the media. There may not have even been a trial at all."

"Surely our government wouldn't—oh hell, that's just turning my face to the wall. Of course they would. What else made you suspect it?" She leaned away from him, far enough that she could see his face.

"The wording. Those guys are supposedly from Mississippi and northern Louisiana, but the phrasing attributed to them doesn't ring true. Remember, I'm an old southern boy, even if I don't have the same attitudes. The part of the transcript that has them ranting about how they were willing to die for the cause of White Supremacy sounds more like it came from the mouths of college graduates instead of high school dropouts like all but one of them are. Then further on, it goes back to sounding like something they would say, about the supreme court, abortions, gay rights and so forth, all in language about the level of fourth graders. It gives the impression that they're about as bright as a bunch of door knobs, which is probably true. I doubt that any of them, except maybe the one with a couple of years of college, have IQs higher than room temperature with the air conditioning going. The transcript was a hurry-up job and they made mistakes. Hell, even that story about the CIA agents killed in South Africa while capturing them sounds phony. It's more likely they turned them over to the Marines at our embassy there and then got caught up in the rampages while they were still trying to hunt down Johannsen, that rogue scientist.

"I guess I'm just naïve. I might not have suspected anything wrong if you hadn't told me."

"You're no more naïve than I am—and that's what the government wants. They were counting on reactions just like yours—and mine, for that matter."

June looked puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"Weren't you glad to see those nutcases caught? And put to death? They've caused such a horrible number of agonizing deaths, and they're the ones responsible for all the riots and violence and looting by the black community. That's what people were thinking about all day; how they were going to get their just desserts. And I'll bet you that the national commentators hardly even question the story of that geneticist's death. You noticed they didn't mention a body, didn't you?"

June rested her cheek against Doug's chest while answering. Her voice was so hampered by emotion that

he could barely hear her. "I guess you're right, Doug, once you made me face facts. But do you know what the worst part of it is?"

"What's that, sweetheart?"

"We've known such things were possible for years, but we've concentrated more on how suicide bombers, or how maybe an atom bomb or a chemical weapons could be sneaked into the country by terrorists, and as much as ignored how a few geneticists and a bit of money could cause an epidemic killing millions. We should have been monitoring genetic labs all along and maybe prevented this."

Doug hated to contradict her, but he shook his head. "Yeah, I guess we might have. But June ... how could we have stopped this when we haven't even been able to wipe out meth labs inside our own country or heroin and cocaine smuggling? Hell, we can't even stop the goddamned oxy pipeline that feeds pseudooxytocin solution to the date rape and pedophile customers. If I ever got my hands on any of those lowlifes that prey on young girls and women I'd probably execute them myself. Especially the ones that seduce kids not even out of elementary school. There's no worse scum on earth."

"I'd take my turn with those, too. Let's change the subject, Doug. This is too depressing."

"Fine by me. Shall we talk about how pretty your eyes are? Or how much I like it when you tell me you love me?"

June blinked. Her lips parted as she remembered fairly screaming the words during the throes of her last orgasm. A visible blush appeared on her face and neck. "Did I say ... yes, I did, didn't I? Oh, goodness, Doug, I..."

Doug pulled her to him and kissed her as thoroughly as he knew how. "I think I've fallen in love with you, too. How did it happen so fast?"

"I don't know, but you make me feel like ... like this was ordained to happen. Does that make sense?"

"It does to me, and we're the only ones that count, aren't we?"

June nuzzled his neck. "Yes. But kiss me again, just to be sure."

He did. She was sure.

* * * *

This can't be right! Rafe Smith struggled futilely at his bonds. He stared wildly at the riflemen preparing to execute him and his cohorts. *They're supposed to thank me, not kill me!* He saw the officer raise his sword and begin the count.

"Wait, wait! You can't kill me! I'll talk! I know who..."

"Fire!" the officer called loudly, his sword sweeping downward in a precise arc. Rifles firing in unison drowned out Rafe's last words. His body slumped forward against the restraints and hung from the pole, lifeless. A physician moved onto the courtyard. As quickly as Rafe was pronounced dead, the doctor retreated and it was the next prisoner's turn to die.

Reading the charges, the sentence, then the execution and pronouncement of death of the five white supremacists took a long time, just as planned. The president had been the one to suggest that the executions be stretched out so that the scene of their punishment would stick with the audience, both live and to those watching the broadcast. He watched the first two himself, then got back to business.

* * * *

There were only three persons present in the underground bunker beneath the big military base near Tel Aviv; Yitzhak Luria, the premier of Israel, Sheila Goldblatt, his Chief of Staff and General Yael Rabin, the highest ranking man in the Israeli armed forces.

Yitzhak Luria's ancestors were a mixture of Eastern European and second generation Sabra settlers. He was short, stout and known among his intimates for his cut-throat brand of poker. He was proposing to play poker now on a grand and unprecedented scale. "We'll never have a better opportunity than right now," he said, his voice level and determined. "No matter what we do, or how many peace treaties we sign, the Arabs are determined to wipe us out. This is our chance to end the threat for all time." He stared forcefully at the other two persons in the absolutely secure bunker. Meetings here were never recorded and Luria never brought an aide with him, nor allowed others to do so.

"Iran and Pakistan have nuclear weapons," Goldblatt said bluntly. "What if they decide we're behind it and retaliate? No, let me rephrase that: *when* they decide we set the virus loose they'll retaliate. What then?" She shifted the penetrating gaze of her clear blue eyes toward Yael Rabin.

Luria felt the satisfaction welling up inside him. Goldblatt hadn't been angered or horrified at the very mention of his proposal. Instead, he saw the remnants of the beauty which had once graced her face become brighter and more apparent. Luria turned to Yael Rabin. "Yael? What about it?"

General Rabin slouched lower in his chair and lowered his gaze, a peculiar posture for a general, but Luria knew he did it when he was giving serious consideration to a subject. His forehead below the widow's peak of silvery white hair wrinkled in thought. He remained silent for long moments before responding.

"Iran is no problem. We know exactly where their nukes and missiles are and how to take them out. Pakistan? Maybe. No, I'll call that probably, depending on how much time I have to nail down the locations. And I'm sure you realize we'll have to do a preemptive strike on both countries as soon as we set the virus loose, as well as Egypt, Syria and Jordan."

"Why so soon?" Goldblatt asked, brushing a straying lock of hair from her forehead.

"Think about it. Their biologists aren't dumb and you know they recruited scientists from Russia after the USSR disintegrated. We know they're still working in Egypt for certain, and probably in Iran. As soon as lighter skinned Arabs start dying, they'll realize we instigated a new epidemic and strike back at us, just like we would if our positions were reversed."

"All right, let's say we decide to do the preemptive strike right after infecting as much of the Middle Eastern population as possible with the virus ... what if they have one of their own?"

"You mean a virus targeted toward genes specific to Jews?" Luria asked.

Goldblatt shrugged her shoulders. The movement was barely visible under her jacket and sweater. The bunker was always cold and she had come prepared. "If we can do it, so can they." She knew the Jewish population was particularly susceptible to a virus that went after particular genes. Jews carried a number of unique genes simply by through long centuries of marrying only their own people.

Luria let a thin smile cross his face. "Don't worry about it. We have a ringier in the Egyptian's biowar weapons development center and they pass information around. They don't have anything like the Harcourt virus yet, or like the one we've had for years that can target Arabs. They are doing their damndest to develop one, though. Which is why I say strike now, while the world is preoccupied with all the blacks dying and we have the chance." He paused then added what he thought would be the clincher. "The good thing about our bug is that it targets not just the Arabs, but all the Middle Eastern

countries."

"How so?" Goldblatz asked, as a new worry suddenly occurred to her. "How about our own Arab citizens?"

Luria shrugged. "It will get a lot of them, true, but it's a price we can pay. There's a lot of Arab sympathizers among them, you know. That will solve another problem."

"Even so, the world won't take kindly to this, Yitzhak. And a preemptive strike will initiate a war with all the Arab and Middle Eastern countries. America won't help us this time, not if they know we instigated the new virus."

Luria turned to Rabin. "General?"

General Rabin had been turning the complexities of the proposal over in his mind, including the certainty of all out war with their Arab neighbors should they decide to do it. "Let me think," he said. The bunker was small, but still allowed room enough to pace. Rabin stood up. He lit a cigarette and began walking around the conference table, puffing furiously. Clouds of smoke from the cigarette wafted up toward the intake of the air conditioning vent. When he had smoked the cigarette down so low that the scorched smell of the burning filter was detectable, he sat back down.

"As you say, Yitzhak, we'll never have a better chance. And Sheila, I have to disagree. The Americans will help. Maybe not publicly, but they'll see that we have sufficient replacements for munitions and armaments." He lit another cigarette, got it going good and continued. "There's the religious factor, too. Half the people in America already think the Harcourt virus is the work of God, preparing us for the End Times. Those people will applaud us for attacking the non-believers. And despite the anti-Semitism still prevalent there, almost everyone in America would love to see the Arabs get a dose of their own medicine. They've been the terrorists too long. Trust me, they'll help us if we need it. Maybe not with manpower, because they're tied up at home, but their Air Force will be free to act if we need them. And I know for a fact, they have plenty of munitions stockpiled."

Goldblatz wrinkled her forehead, trying to imagine why anyone would help them after loosing a virus that might kill a hundred million people—and some of their own citizens as well.

"Don't bother wrinkling your brain to go with those lines on your face, Sheila. It's simple. Besides everything else, with the Arabs dead, the oil fields will be up for grabs. Do you think the Americans will let Russia, China, or Japan take them? Or the European powers? Not a chance. They'll try, though. You name a country with insufficient indigenous supplies and they'll begin loading their troop transports. The Americans will love it if we get there first." When he saw that Luria's Chief of Staff still wasn't completely convinced he looked at the Prime minister. "Yitzhak, may I?"

"Go ahead."

"Sheila, The American politicians already have their secret think tanks pinning down scenarios for re-colonizing Africa, and their military planners are working up the contingency plans. They aren't about to let other countries grab all the oil. But they're going to be tied down for a while with so many of their citizens dying. This virus will clear out a huge area of oil producing areas. Wherever Mouloukhia is eaten, they'll die."

"Oh." Goldblatz's frown lines disappeared. She shook her head and said sadly, "Human nature doesn't change, does it? Well, better we instigate a holocaust this time than be on the receiving end, but let's not fool ourselves into thinking we're superior to the ones who started this. We're going to be committing genocide, pure and simple. And once the world settles down, we may be tried and executed, even

though no country is going to really be sorry to see the blacks and Arabs all dead. However, they'll need some scapegoats to soothe their sensibilities and we'll be prime candidates."

Her statement sobered the prime minister and the general, but the planning went on.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Doug was sorry to see June have to go back to work Monday morning. He held her in his arms while the door to her apartment was still closed. He looked into her eyes and thought about how quickly she had become the epitome of all he held dear. "You'll call soon as you get off?"

"You know I will, sweet. Or better still, rather than me calling, why don't you go back and gather whatever you think you'll need and move in here with me?"

Doug gave her a long kiss, but didn't let her go. "That might be fine for when I'm off or on the day shift, but I'd disturb you with my coming and going when I started working nights again. This place is pretty small, you know."

"I don't care. AT least you'd be here, and don't forget—sometimes I'll have to work late, too."

"I'll have to bring my guns and cleaning equipment and weapons with me."

"I still don't care."

Doug grinned. "Must be love."

"It is, stupid man. Now kiss me again and let me leave before I'm late on Amelia's first day in the Director's chair."

Doug did kiss her again, but still didn't let her go.

"What is it now?"

"A key?"

"Oh. Just a minute." June ran back to the bedroom and came back a moment later with her spare. "Here. Make us a nice dinner for tonight. 'Bye.'" She gave him a quick firm peck on the lips and practically ran down the hall toward the elevator.

* * * *

Nabil Hassan, an Arabic Jew with a false passport, didn't like to think about what he was doing. He didn't know for certain that the contents of the little spray bottles of breath freshener he had already carried to three countries were lethal, but he suspected as much. No matter, he would carry out his orders. Wherever he traveled, he dispensed puffs of vapor from the tiny containers into the atmosphere of closed environments. He drove to the Syrian capitol of Damascus first, after the Mossad helped him cross the border and provided him with a car. The first time, he simply dispersed it into the intakes at the air terminal, and then into the bathrooms of the jetliner on the way from Amman, Jordan to Bahrain, the playground of Rich Arabs. From there, he was headed to Cairo, Egypt.

Nabil was only one of several couriers, all agents of the Mossad, the secret service of Israel. Perhaps the Mossad wasn't quite as efficient as it had been in the past, but this was a relatively simple operation, even though it portended enormous consequences for the future. Within a week, it was done. The only problem had been the increasing disruption of travel as black Africans who could afford it frantically bought and bartered and fought over every available seat that would take them away from the sickness that was consuming their compatriots at an ever increasing rate. Some countries had already barred travel from Africa but others still allowed immigration, particularly people with lighter skins who possessed technical skills.

Although Nabil and the others might have suspected they were spreading a contagious virus similar to *Enterovirus harcourtii*, they had no way of knowing that there was a great difference. This one targeted a gene peculiar only to the genetic pool of the Middle east and some areas beyond, causing it to begin producing a protein which interfered with the protein another gene coded for, an enzyme involved in metabolizing a byproduct of the Mouloukhia leaves of an Arab national dish by the same name. The virus altered the protein, causing the digestive pathway of Mouloukhia in those carrying the wrong gene to go awry, producing a lethal toxin that quickly caused death. Even the season was right for the virus to spread and kill rapidly, late Spring. Mouloukhia was hard to find after the season ended except for the dried variety in gourmet or specialty shops. Nabil and his cohorts spread their tailored virus around the Middle East just at the right time, when rich and poor alike were eating dishes made with fresh Mouloukhia leaves.

* * * *

Doug took another bite of the pork roast and complimented June. "You're a much better cook than me. This is good."

It was the week following his time off. June was working late almost every night helping Amelia after she took over the reins of the CDC, but on this Friday night, she had called to tell him Amelia had flown to Washington and that she would be home early enough to prepare a meal herself.

"Thanks. It would be better if supplies weren't getting scarce. Amelia is talking about having us all eat in the cafeterias when rationing goes into effect next week."

"It might be just as well," Doug said, glancing over to where the workday weapons he was keeping in June's apartment were stashed, his heavy handgun and a rifle/shotgun combo that was just being issued to the security force. "It's getting a little scary going out to shop. So many blacks have just given up and are either staying home or roving the streets in armed gangs."

"I know. I worry about you every time you leave the complex."

Doug decided not to mention that it had been necessary to fire some warning shots to keep a gang of drugged up black youths at bay on one of his shopping trips. It would only cause her more worry. He felt sorry for them. So young and already having to stare death in the face, through no fault of their own. The army had begun using food as an inducement to get help collecting and burying the increasing number of bodies. "It's hardly worth while anyhow, except for food. There's not much left in the shops worth buying."

"And it's too dangerous. I've seen how worried you are, Doug. It's thoughtful of you to try sparing me the gruesome details, but don't you think Amelia knows what's going on? And passes it on to me?"

Doug pushed his empty plate away and took a sip of wine. His face was lit with a wryly amused grin. "You're always one step ahead of me. I guess if we decide to get married, I'd better always be honest with you."

June was already up, preparing to collect the dishes. She came and stood behind his chair and put her hands on his shoulders, then leaned down to tickle his neck with her lips. "If that was a proposal, I accept, but let's stay engaged for a little while first if you don't mind."

Doug felt June's pendant moving on his skin as she continued nuzzling him. He slid out of his chair and stood up. He kissed her briefly, then took the pendant in his hand, holding it so that he could examine it more closely. "Is this the reason?"

"Talk about someone being a step ahead. You've known all the time what it was, haven't you?"

"Guilty, but I'm admiring, not complaining. I buried Doris with her rings. Now I wish I had thought of your idea, having them made into a pendant or a regular ring. It was a beautiful gesture and tells me what a wonderful, caring woman you are."

Tears gathered in June's eyelashes. One separated and trickled down her cheek. Doug gathered it with his forefinger before it could fall and touched it to his lips. That induced others to overflow. She leaned against his chest, unable to talk for a moment.

"I'm sorry; I didn't intend to make you sad," Doug said softly.

"I'm not sad, silly; I'm happy. Never mind, if you want to get married now, we will."

"I do, but we can make it whenever you like."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

"Good. Let the dishes wait; let's go to bed."

* * * *

Doug kissed June good by and reluctantly left the bedroom. She was off for the weekend, but he had two more weeks yet before having any days completely free. On the way to the security building, he stopped twice for gas, thinking how glad he would be when the new building next to the CDC complex was ready for occupancy. It was becoming dangerous for the guard force to go back and forth from where they were presently housed to the CDC. Without the single army battalion patrolling the streets of Atlanta, he thought it would already be next to impossible. At that, he was very dissatisfied that only one company detached from another battalion had been assigned to help guard the immediate area around the CDC. To his mind, it was grossly inadequate.

The first place he stopped at was closed. The big front windows of the convenience store were shattered and the shelves inside strewn with rubble. He suspected that the owner had died and it had been looted in his absence. He remembered the man well, a black man in his fifties with graying hair who always wore a cheerful grin. He once told Doug he had begun work there right out of high school and eventually bought the store when its original owner retired.

The second place was open but he had to wait in line. He noticed that many of the men wore holstered handguns as openly as he had begun doing, while others carried rifles or shotguns as they pumped their gas. A weapon in sight gave an obvious signal: no easy pickings here.

By the time he filled up and paid for the gas and some non-perishable items he could store in the trunk of the car until that evening, he barely had time to make it to Gene's early morning briefing. Teresa Williams, William Jurgens and Gary Jones, the other three platoon leaders were already there.

The first thing he did was head for the coffee pot. The convenience store had been out. He poured a cup and took his seat with the other three security heads just as Gene Bradley arrived. Doug thought he was beginning to appear worn, but he got right down to business, as usual.

"Good news. The new security building will be ready two days from now. Tell your troops to make plans to move their personal gear over there on their own time, but I want a detail of two men each from your platoons tomorrow morning to help move our munitions. The army will furnish transportation, but they tell me they can't spare the men." Gene's lips twitched in a caricature of a smile. "At least they're taking some pressure off us now."

Doug thought about remarking on the conditions he was seeing to and from work, but the thought died as Gene brought the subject up himself.

"Now for the bad news. In case you haven't looked at the news this morning, a foul rumor has gotten started that the government ordered the CDC to deliberately infect the black population with the Harcourt virus. That's going to cause lots of problems for us. Conditions are already dangerous in the city, as I'm sure you know from the sights you see every day to and from work. They'll certainly get worse after that rumor makes the rounds, and I wouldn't be surprised to see a mob trying to gut the CDC. There's also an opposing rumor just getting started that the CDC has found a cure for the Harcourt virus but is deliberately keeping it secret so the black population will die off. If that one flies, we'll really have problems.

"The government is issuing denials, of course, but you all know how little faith anyone puts in government statements these days. The more they deny it, the more people will believe the opposite, blacks especially. Any time people are faced with death, they start grasping at straws. That's how all the bogus cancer cures and remedies make money, simply by giving people hope when nothing else does."

He paused, as if annoyed at himself for getting off subject, then went on. "And last, we have the religious element. There's a strong feeling in the country that the disease affecting blacks is simply a harbinger of worse to come, the so-called "End Times", and it's making believers edgy and almost as dangerous as armed blacks who have lost hope." The security chief eyed each of them in turn. "I want you to make a special effort to squelch rumors and gossip and talk about religion playing a role here. I don't mean for you to denigrate religion in any way, just tell your people it has no place on the job. If necessary, relieve them of duty and send them packing. I can guarantee that no EEOC or Department of Labor bureaucrat will come sniffing around to see that you played fair with them."

Gene paused, a signal for questions if anyone had them.

"What's the real status of research on the virus, Gene? Are we going to find a cure or not?" Teresa asked. Doug knew her well. She had told him that her husband, a dark skinned immigrant from India, was showing the first symptoms of the viral disease.

"That's out of the realm of my expertise, but I can say that none of my superiors have mentioned a cure being in the works."

Doug knew that none was. June had first hand knowledge of what progress was being made, and so far there had been very little.

"They'd better find one soon," Teresa said. "My husband will probably recover, but people expect the government to produce something to combat a world wide epidemic—when it comes to our shores, anyway."

"Virology doesn't work that fast," Doug volunteered. "And cures for viruses don't come easily in any case."

"How about a vaccine?"

Teresa asked the question as if she were trying to find a ray of hope somewhere. Maybe for her husband's relatives, Doug thought. "Like Gene said, that's not my area of expertise, but as I understand it, a vaccine may be possible but it won't help the people already infected a bit. Vaccines are only a preventative measure."

"All right folks, back to our jobs. We're in charge of security, not viruses." Gene glanced at his watch.

“Last item. I've asked for a whole army battalion to surround the CDC and make it secure from outside threats. Barring some country tossing a nuke our way, of course. I think we'll get the troops after what I heard on the news this morning, but it may take some time. I've also asked to have our security force doubled, but again that may take some time. Stay alert and tell your people to do the same.

"Oh yes. I've also asked that we be excluded from the draft now that Congress finally passed the bill. We can't have the army taking all our best troops when they're already trained for duty here. Now I think that's all I have for this morning.” He glanced at his watch again. “It's time for you to go, too."

The four department heads stood as Gene left, his stride as hurried and purposeful as ever. In this case, it was justified. He needed to be in on a conference call to Washington.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Dov Rechtman watched the cockpit display change as a third of the Flight of F-22 Raptors split off from the main body and surged ahead, on their way to Iran. He and the rest of them held back for refueling. It had gone well so far, just as the contingency plans called for. The tanker was disguised as an El Al commercial jet. Even if they were spotted taking on the additional load of fuel, no suspicions should be aroused. It wasn't unusual to see Israeli fighter bombers escorting commercial airplanes in this area.

While he waited his turn for fuel, he thought back over the route they had taken, down the Red Sea and out over the Arabian Sea, with his own next stop Pakistan. He was confident that they would complete their mission with a sweet craft like the Raptor to fly and the very newest bunker busters on the hardpoints beneath the wings. He heard three clicks, a pause, then two more in his helmet, the signal that the tanker was ready for him. He extended the metal tipped drogue out in front of his aircraft as he dropped a few feet then nosed slowly toward the refueling boom extending from the tanker, catching it on the first try.

Moments later he clicked his radio twice, signaling that he was full, and eased back on the throttle enough to disengage from the refueling boom. Now they were ready. He gave another series of clicks, signaling that the mission was still a go. The fighters acknowledged and followed his lead as he began dropping down toward the waters far below. They would go in at near tree-top level, depending on speed and the stealthed aircraft to disguise them. The disguised fuel tanker would head back to base, emitting some clicks on the way to make any listeners believe it was a civilian craft with an erratic radio which caused the initial clicking signals. It would be replaced with another tanker by the time they returned.

Later on, the flight split into more elements, each containing at least two aircraft, aiming for nuclear weapons storage sites, rocket silos and nuclear processing plants. Dov and his wingman were going after the nuclear facilities buried so deeply inside the mountains that the Pakistanis thought they invulnerable to air attack, even with nuclear weapons. Dov knew they were wrong, though he also knew the mission hadn't been possible until last year when they had acquired the F-22 Raptors and the new, still top secret, bunker busters.

A light began blinking on his panel, the computerized flight plan telling him it was almost time to begin gaining altitude. Shortly it began counting down the seconds. At almost 1.6 times the speed of sound, Dov began climbing, and now two other lights began blinking and cursors and other digitized numerals on the display told him the exact altitude and vectors he must match to begin the bombing run and how far off the parameters he was. When the numerals indicating the accuracy of his flight path went into the fourth decimal place, he engaged the targeting computer and went Weapons Hot. From here until the release point, only a dire threat would cause him to override the computer. The bunker busters would be fired automatically at the precise time.

One minute later he felt the first of the bombs release, then seconds later it shot out ahead of him, followed at exactly timed intervals by the other three. Seconds later the bomb, propelled by an extra rocket assist built into it, penetrated deeply into the mountain then exploded, exactly on target. The next went in with just enough time between it and the first for most of the gases from the explosion to be expelled from the deep hole it had made. The second one burrowed deeper into the crater made by the first and the third even deeper. The final bomb penetrated the voluminous underground cavern and went off with tremendous force. In the enclosed area, the pressure had nowhere to go except out the narrow entrance the bombs had made going in, and the narrow entrance tunnel only wide enough for trucks to pass, which was closed in any case. That wasn't nearly enough. The force of the explosion and the heated gases it created ripped facilities asunder, tore equipment apart and before it had time to dissipate,

and collapsed the granite roof, burying the facility under thousands of tons of rock that destroyed whatever was left.

By this time, Dov's wingman had followed with his own ordnance, just in case the first hadn't been sufficient or had malfunctioned. It wasn't really needed, but it penetrated the rubble from the roof and added more tons of rock over that which had already fallen. Also by this time, Dov was already into his turn and hurtling back down toward the earth. At the proper moment he began leveling out. He was joined a moment later by the other Raptor and they streaked back toward the Arabian Sea where another tanker would be waiting. He didn't try to notify the Israeli high command of the successful mission. Satellite imagery would show them and he didn't want to take chances now. With the Pakistanis alerted, the return trip was the most dangerous part of the mission, but it had been part of a time on target precision attack. Even as the nuclear complex was rendered useless, other wings of the Israeli Air Force were attacking airfields all over the Middle East very similar to the way they had won the Six Day War many years ago. Dov felt an immense sense of satisfaction. His father had been a pilot in that war. He was an old man now, but still alive. He would be proud of his youngest son's accomplishments this day.

* * * *

Once Doug finished making rounds with the guards for the first two hour shifts, he returned to the little cubicle he had been assigned as an office. The other three drifted in after him, nodded and began doing the same thing as administrators do all over the world, reading reports, work schedules, abstracts and projections. Some of them Doug didn't need to see, having already gotten the information from June. Other items on his monitor did draw his attention, even though most of them didn't pertain to his immediate concerns.

China was making threatening noises as more and more of her citizens fell ill, even though it was becoming apparent that many of them would recover. Taiwan was busy buying arms wherever they could find them and dispersing troops to its coasts, expecting an invasion now that the United States had too many problems at home to offer help and protection.

Almost a third of the blacks in America were showing at least some symptoms of the Harcourt virus, with the curve still rising, but hospitals were so swamped that little could be done for them other than palliative measures. The government still refused to relax restrictions on drug sales, even though the end stages of the disease was extremely painful. Doug shook his head over that one. So far as he was concerned, every restriction on the books covering heroin and morphine production should be lifted. At least easy access to those two drugs would allow the ill to die with some dignity. On the other hand, immigration authorities were so short handed that the drugs were coming into the country almost openly, so for the present it probably didn't make much difference.

The army was burgeoning with new soldiers as every man and woman who had prior military service was subject to recall and the new draft law was calling up those of age who hadn't. They were being given uniforms and weapons and being flung into problem areas as quickly as possible, often with little or no refresher training. Almost a third of the draftees ignored the initial summons, but he noted that a new edict of the martial law governing the country now called for penalties up to and including death for failure to report. That would take care of many reluctant soldiers, he thought. New bases were being opened and old one reactivated to take care of the influx of draftees who had to have military discipline and arms training instilled in them. The country was still holding together, though shakily.

Most of the African continent had degenerated into anarchy. Calls by the United Nations for troops to restore order had largely gone unanswered. Russia had closed its borders with China. France was in the throes of one giant party. Germany was issuing militaristic statements hinged with—

"Hey Doug, turn on the news!"

Gary Jones' voice interrupted his perusal of the flow of new information. Doug looked up to see him standing in the doorway of his cubicle.

"What is it?" he asked, even as he clicked for a twenty four hour news channel on his larger screen.

"Israel just started a war! Goddamn, you'd think we had enough problems in the world without the Arabs and the Jews going at it again, wouldn't you?"

"Uh huh, you'd think so," Doug replied. "Drag up a chair if you can find room." As the senior platoon leader, he had a big wall screen in his cubicle while the others were still waiting on theirs to be delivered.

The networks were carrying the new war as breaking news. As Doug watched and listened, he felt the presence of others come into his cubicle. He glanced over his shoulder and saw that Teresa and William Jurgens had joined them. "Hi, Will, Teresa, join the crowd. Last one here gets to go back and fetch the coffee."

Teresa grimaced, but it was a friendly gesture. "Why do women always wind up bringing the coffee?" she asked rhetorically, but was back in a couple of minutes, juggling three cups and plastic spoons with packets of creamer and sweetener.

"Black," Doug said shortly when she asked him how he took it. He groped for the cup, trying not to take his eyes from the screen, and almost dumped it all in his lap. It was showing a map of the Middle East and beyond, with starbursts where Israel jets had purportedly bombed. There were too many of them to count immediately, but his eyes tracked toward Iran and Pakistan first, countries known to possess nuclear weapons.

"They're attacking Pakistan, too! Why them?" Gary asked, bewildered because she thought it wasn't an Arab country.

"They have nukes—and while they may not be Arabs, they are Muslims. Same for Iran, for that matter; they're Persians," Doug informed him. "The Jews are just making damn sure they don't get an A-Bomb lobbed at them. But I don't understand why they started a war now."

"Maybe they're afraid the Muslims are blaming them for the Harcourt virus. It's killing lots of Arabs, and other Muslims besides, the dark skinned ones."

"Could be," Doug admitted, but he had seen nothing in the news or his briefings to support that idea.

"They'll play hell getting us to help them this time," Teresa remarked.

"Yeah. That's what's puzzling. But maybe they think this is an opportune time to get rid of the nukes in the Middle East. Other than their own, of course."

The others laughed, but there was no humor in the sound; it was simply a typical human response, where laughter sometimes serves when nothing else will do. It was common knowledge that Israel possessed nuclear weapons and had for many years.

There was little factual information being broadcast, other than Israel had launched air strikes on several countries, and that they were continuing. When the network began relaying the usual strident posturing by political leaders, with Pakistan, Iran and the other nations claiming they were attacked without warning and Israel stating that they had been provoked beyond all reason, Doug turned it off. It still didn't make much sense to him, but rather than discuss the subject without access to more facts, he shooed the others out of his cubicle and got back to work. Noon rounds were coming up.

* * * *

"Are you sure that woman we put in charge of CDC knows what she's doing?" President Marshall asked across the conference table.

"Administratively, I can't say, Mr. President, but that really doesn't matter too much right now. I can tell you she has top notch credentials as an infection control specialist, which is what the CDC is about, after all. If she says we've got a new virus loose, I think we can believe her." Lurline Tedd was beginning to wonder if the rest of her life was going to be spent in a state of crisis. She didn't mind political turmoil nor the bone grinding travel schedule of election years, but death dealing pandemics were something new to her—and now there appeared to be a second one on top of the Harcourt virus.

"Okay, assume she's right. Who did it this time?"

"Israel," General Newman said flatly. "Not much doubt about it. According to the Foster woman, it's targeting Arabs and Middle Easterners only. Who else would do that?"

He didn't seem particularly concerned, which made Edgar Tomlin uneasy. "Are we going to help them?"

"Of course we are," General Newman said. He flicked an imaginary piece of lint from the sleeve of his uniform and stared at Tomlin until he looked away. "You don't want the Russians or Chinese grabbing all the oil fields, do you?"

"Is it really going to be that bad?" Lurline asked.

"According to Amelia Foster, it is. Her scientists say it's targeting a gene that's specific to damn near every person in the Middle East except Jews. It's even getting their Arab citizens. Another problem solved."

"What—oh." Lurline suddenly realized what the general was thinking of.

"Right," President Marshall said. "No more Arabs in our country either, if it spreads to here. Maybe we can use their Mosques for barracks." He chuckled to himself.

"Sir, all Muslims aren't Arabs. In fact, they aren't even a majority," Lurline informed him, while she felt sick inside at the way the president and General Newman were reacting.

"What? What do you mean?"

Lurline looked around and saw that the others were leaving it up to her to correct the president's erroneous assumptions. She knew that in this case it was a common mistake, not just something the president didn't know. A majority of the population of the United States was woefully ignorant of geopolitics, particularly where it involved religion. Most citizens equated Arabs and Islam in their minds—or rather Arabs and Muslims. Most didn't even know that Muslims were simply practitioners of the Islamic religion and numbered at least a billion. "Arabs are just a small fraction of the Muslims in the world, sir. It doesn't even include Iran and Pakistan, though it appears that they're susceptible, too. Actually, only about fifteen per cent of Muslims are Arabs. Indonesia is mostly a Muslim nation, for instance, but has few Arabs. In fact..."

The president waved a hand, indicating that he wasn't in the mood for a lecture. "Never mind." He turned his attention to General Newman again. "General, just tell me what this means for us. Who are we going to have to fight, if anyone?"

"The Jews are going to have to handle this one themselves, sir. Remember, a quarter of the army was black before this crisis started and they're either dead or likely to be. Or they've deserted to be with family members who are ill. As it is, we're barely keeping order here at home and what troops we can

spare for overseas are going to be busy securing nuclear power plants left untended and rescuing our expatriates. What we can do is funnel some munitions to Israel under the guise of using their airfields to refuel the planes we're sending for our distressed citizens. However, I'll continue with our contingency planning for taking over the oil fields in Iraq and Nigeria, and maybe a few other countries that are going to become depopulated fairly quickly." The general still didn't seem concerned about the war Israel had initiated.

"And you don't think anyone else will jump in?"

"Well, the Europeans certainly aren't going to challenge us. By the time they get around to agreeing on anything, we'll have the army back up to levels high enough to discourage them or anyone else, except maybe India and China—and they haven't the naval power to project their strength like we do. If China attacks anyone it will be Taiwan, and why should we care about them now? There's a whole new continent rapidly becoming depopulated, and enough oil there for the taking; enough to last for decades."

"You're sure they won't fight us?" President Marshall was liking this more and more. No American casualties, oil fields open for easy occupation, a whole empty continent to exploit. And perhaps best of all, no more racial problems. At least not from blacks.

"Mr. President, China and India are in almost the same shape as us—except that most of their citizens will recover, while most of our blacks will die. In the meantime, their economies are collapsing faster than a popped balloon and their manpower is tied up treating the enormous number of people sick with the virus."

"But our economy is going downhill, too," Lurline interjected. "We can't lose over ten percent of our population and expect it to stay healthy."

"All the better," Tomlin said, suddenly recognizing the benefits of the rapid inflation of the dollar. "We can pay off our debts with inflated dollars, where we have to pay at all. Once we get past the hard part, this virus will be thought of as a Godsend for us, not a catastrophe."

Lurline was as pragmatic and exacting in thought as a research scientist but this was going too far. "You both sound like you're *glad* to see a billion people dying. Don't you care a whit for them?"

"Lurline, there's not a damn thing we can do for them. Isn't that what Amelia ... what's her name, Foster, told us yesterday? And if we can't, why not take advantage of the situation? It's not like we started the damn virus."

"Five of our citizens did."

"But we didn't order it done," President Marshall said. "Look, I'll have our U.N. Ambassador make a major speech denouncing Israel, just as soon as the news gets out about the new virus."

"Have her do it now, then he won't have to even mention the new virus," Tomlin suggested.

"Right. We'll do it that way. General Newman, do you have anything else to add?"

"We're set, Mr. President. You've already given me the authorization to strike immediately if any country threatens to attack us during this crisis and you've warned all the nuclear powers what will happen if they even think about using those weapons. All we have to do now is sit tight, wait for the blacks to finish dying, then be ready to go wherever it will do us the most good. I think we should even consider some of the South American countries. They're going to lose almost as high a percentage of their population as we are. Lots of dark skinned South Americans. And the Caribbean—just think of it. We'll have a free reign

there, what with the blacks no longer in control."

The president looked puzzled for a moment, then his face lit up. "Yes, that's right! Jamaica and so forth. They're mostly black, aren't they?"

"And the Bahamas and a lot of Cubans. It's about time Cuba got taken down a peg, I don't care what the treaty says."

"Right. Edgar, why don't you and Lurline get together and go over our homeland security problems and get the planners working on South America and the Caribbean. I'd like to talk to the general a while longer about some weapons development we've been postponing far too long."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Doug fumbled with the plastic bags of goods he had bought while filling up the car with gas, wondering where June was. She hadn't answered the bell when he rang to get her to help with the packages. Finally he set two of them down and took out his key to unlock the door. Inside, he found no sign of June. He was beginning to panic when he saw the typed note pasted on the refrigerator door, the first place she knew he would look upon arriving. He set the bags on the counter and read it.

Doug—Amelia got back from Washington and asked me to come in for a few hours. I'll be home soon as I can. There's some frozen pizza we can have with the last of the wine, so don't cook. Love you.

(three hearts)

J

* * * *

He felt his heart soften as he read the note and saw the carefully drawn hearts. A sense of love and protectiveness swept over him, making him realize that he would do almost anything to make her happy and keep her safe. He also knew his feelings weren't just a reaction to a new love. The emotion that engulfed him when he thought of her was like nothing he had experienced before, not even with Doris. Perhaps it takes a mature person to really appreciate what love is, he thought. That, and someone who reciprocated the love, as June so obviously did, even agreeing to marriage so soon after meeting, if that was what he wanted. Another wave of love and ... what was it? Admiration, that was it. Love and admiration was what he was feeling. All his experience with her so far made him think she was as near to perfect as a woman could get. It also caused him wonder how he managed to get so lucky.

He was still standing there, staring at the note with the door open behind him, when June arrived. He was so deep in thought that he didn't hear her as she entered, nor see her as she stood and watched while he read the note again and again. It was such a simple thing, but the little hand drawn hearts she had added to it touched him in a way that a more explicit expression of love might not have. He took the note down, kissed the hearts, then folded it carefully and put it in his billfold.

The sound of June sniffing back tears announced her presence to him. He turned and saw twin streaks of wetness on her cheeks where the teardrops had made a path down to her chin. One of them was still hanging there. It dropped away as her chin quivered.

Doug had no idea she had been watching him. "June! What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all, you sweet dummy. Come here."

He moved toward her and she came into his arms, then hugged him so tight he feared she might crack a rib. He heard her sobbing and finally it dawned on him that she must have watched him kissing the note. "June, sweetheart, I..."

"Don't say another word," she murmured against his chest, where he could feel her tears wetting his fatigue top. "A moment later she said "You just touched me where I live. Know what?"

"What?"

"I think I'm going to keep you."

* * * *

June added extra pepperoni and sausage to the frozen pizza to liven it up, while Doug poured a

coming-home drink for each of them from a liter of Jim Beam, the only bourbon he could find to use up their liquor ration. He knew they were using the last pizza, too. As soon as she had the food in the oven, she sat down next to Doug. She felt for his hand, found it and leaned her cheek against his shoulder. A moment of quiet passed before she said anything.

"You know, that was so sweet, kissing that silly little note then saving it." She rubbed her cheek against his shoulder, liking the sense of comfort she felt being so near him.

"I guess I'm sentimental. I didn't mean to make you cry."

"I'm glad you did." She pulled away from him far enough to see his face. "Do you still want to get married?"

"Of course I do." He squeezed her hand.

"Then let's do it tomorrow. I'm scared you might get away."

"No chance of that. But I don't know a pastor. Do you?"

"No, but I could ask around if that's what you want. What denomination?"

"June, sweetheart, I guess I should tell you, I'm not very religious. Well, actually, I'm not religious at all."

She laughed. "My, the things you learn about a man when you have him cornered. As it turns out, I'm not either. You were in the military, though. You should know a military officer can perform a marriage under martial law."

"Really? I didn't know that."

"Now I have to confess. I checked into it. An officer can waive the blood tests and waiting period, too."

It was Doug's turn to laugh. "I've not only been cornered, I've been roped and branded."

June set her drink down and pulled his head down to kiss him. "Just roped. The branding comes tomorrow. After that, you're mine."

"And you're mine, too. Why do I feel like I just won the lottery?"

June's expression suddenly went from happy to concerned as she looked at him, his face only inches from hers. "Oh gosh. Seeing you with that note distracted me. You may not feel like you won the lottery after I tell you what Amelia was in Washington for."

"What's wrong?"

"There's another virus. This time it's targeting Arabs."

"So that's why Israel started a war. I wondered about that, when the Arabs were going to lose a fair percentage of their population anyway. I suppose they started the virus, huh?"

"We don't know, but it's likely. The virologists have been working on some samples flown here for the last week or so. It's definitely a bug that's been altered but they haven't sorted out its mechanism yet, how it works. Doug, has the whole world gone crazy? Is someone going to loose a virus targeting whites next? Or Redheads? Or ... or left handed Armenians, for God's sake!"

Doug pulled her to him again, trying to absorb the new calamity. His thoughts ranged wildly but kept

coming back to how he could protect her—and was dismayed that he could find no answer.

"Sweetheart, I guess something like this was inevitable once the genie escaped from the bottle and I don't know what we can do about it, other than keep the CDC going and hope they can come up with something."

June nodded, unable to speak for thinking of the new tragedy occurring. Images of babies and children appealing to their parents for help as they lay dying flashed through her mind. She shivered and held Doug tighter until she could get her thoughts back in focus. She looked at him with tears streaking her face and chuckled weakly. "I guess that's something else you're going to have to get used to. I cry easily, even over things I can't help."

"That's not a bad thing. Sometimes I wish I could just let loose instead of holding my emotions inside me. I've sure enough seen sights I wanted to just break down and cry over. And there's going to be more and more of them." He sighed. "Well, as I've already said, it's nothing we can do anything about, other than play our small role here. If there's any hope for bringing this under control it's in places like this."

"Amelia says she thinks it's too late to control what's loose now. She's going to change the whole direction of our research toward wide spectrum treatment of future viral epidemics and development of a general class of viricides."

"Hasn't that been tried already?"

"Oh, sure. Like with the AIDS virus. But just think, if all the research poured into developing a vaccine had been spent on treatment to begin with, instead of years later, a whole lot of lives could have been saved. Amelia recommended that the president go to the U.N. with a world wide program."

"Hmm. I'll confess I haven't much faith in the U.N., but I guess it couldn't hurt and might even help. Isn't that the pizza I smell?"

"Whoops!" June jumped up and ran to the oven, catching it just in time.

* * * *

Just as Gene Bradley—and Doug—had feared, the CDC complex rapidly became the focus of a boiling sense of outrage and betrayal on the part of the black population. Ever since the first inklings of the Harcourt virus infecting only dark skinned persons, the blacks of Atlanta and other cities had begun arming, with their religious leaders and militants alike urging drastic action. When the new rumors that the CDC had actually developed the virus and given it to the government to deliberately spread among the black population became rife, the agitation reached new heights. Atlanta was more than fifty per cent black, and even with a portion of the city population dying or dead, it was being augmented with ones coming in from the countryside, and even from out of the state, despite curfews and travel restrictions.

"We're getting some more troops in Atlanta, but it's going to be next week before the army brigade they're sending here arrives," Gene Bradley told his platoon leaders. "I've hired some more people and asked the mayor to broadcast an appeal for volunteers. Frankly I don't know whether that was a good idea or not—it may just stir the pot past the boiling point, if it isn't already there, but I felt obligated to try. I think it's going to get real hairy here before long."

"How about the army troops already here? Can't they protect the complex?" Gary Jones asked. He looked very worried. Doug thought he had probably been following the same news accounts he had.

Gene thought for a moment, then shrugged and gave them one of his rare smiles. "There's only one way to find out, isn't there?" Then he sobered. "I've looked at all the possible routes a mob might take if they become determined to get to us. I've narrowed it down to one probable path and one not so likely but

possible. Army commanders aren't real good at taking advice from civilians, even from ex-colonels, but I passed it on to the battalion commander. Whether he'll assign any of his troops to help the company we've already been given, I don't know. He does have the rest of Atlanta to take care of and only has the one battalion to work with.

"What I want you to do is keep your troops close and have those who aren't on duty ready to respond to an emergency. Gary, I want you and Teresa to set it up so that our off duty people are not only ready, but organized as a reserve force, then pick two people to captain it while each of them is off. That way, they'll know exactly how to respond and there won't be any waste motion.

"The mission will be the same: protect the CDC entrances if attackers get that far. The scientists working here are the best hope for the future and I don't want anything to happen to them." Gene looked at the others to be sure what he said had registered. "Comments? Suggestions?"

"I have one," Doug said immediately. He had been thinking about it for the last few days. "If worst comes to worst, is there any reason the CDC staff can't help defend the place?"

"I hate to bring amateurs into a fight, but it's still not a bad idea. I guess you can take charge of that in addition to your other extra duty."

"Other?"

"Oh. Sorry. I must be overworked; I meant to announce it first thing. You're going to be second in command here. If anything happens to me, you have the ball. I'll talk to you later today about it."

"Thanks. I guess." Doug's response brought a mild chuckle from the others.

"Anything else? Anyone? Okay, meeting's over." Gene shoved his chair away from the table and was gone before the rest of them were on their feet.

* * * *

Doug and June said their vows in the office of the CDC Director at noon the same day, in front of a harried looking army major, with Amelia and Gene as witnesses and an equally harried looking private doing the recording. It went quickly. Doug was afraid the simplicity and impersonal nature of the ceremony would cause June to wish she had asked for something more traditional, but she appeared radiantly happy afterwards, putting his mind at ease. After they had exchanged heartfelt kisses and accepted congratulations, the Major and his clerk quickly left.

The honeymoon lasted all of thirty seconds. Doug and June were preparing to make their exit and hurry back to her apartment when Gene spoke up and stopped them.

"Don't leave yet, Doug. While you're here, you may as well give Amelia a heads up on your idea of arming the staff. I've already spoken to her about it, but it's going to be your show."

"Would you mind staying, too, June?" Amelia asked. "I'm sorry, but since Prince Charming is going to be tied up for a while, you may as well keep him company."

"I don't mind," June lied as she and Doug exchanged amused glances at how quickly their mutual plans for consummating the marriage before he had to go to work had been changed.

"Good. Let's get to it, then. Doug?"

He went over the procedures, some of which he had already put into motion that morning, surveying all the staff who had arms training and also owned weapons. He could supply arms to some of those without

from the security armory but not all, and preferred that they use firearms they were already familiar with should they be called to help defend the complex. And he knew that if a mob ever broke through the thin army lines, they would need every one of them.

It was a professional briefing but he kept June's hand in his the whole time, occasionally bringing it to his lips and kissing her fingers. By the time he and Amelia was finished, there was barely time to go back to the apartment and exchange his civilian clothing for fatigues, then head back to begin his shift.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Emilee Bailey's black face showed a patina of perspiration under the harsh camera lights. Her speech to the United Nations assembly had gone over about as well as she had expected, perhaps better. She had been interrupted only three times by shouts of violent disagreement and outright disbelief. At the end, there was only a smattering of applause. She didn't blame the delegates for their less than enthusiastic reception because she didn't believe half the words she had just spoken herself.

As she stood before the podium, ready to take questions, she wondered again why she hadn't simply resigned—or better yet, disclaimed some of what she had been ordered to say. In the end, she had decided to go along. If she hadn't, she would simply have been replaced and someone else put in her place to make the same speech—and she thought she very well might have been permanently silenced and her death attributed to the Harcourt virus. Her newly appointed “aide” sat behind her, a constant reminder of how extensive were the powers granted the president under martial law. He was an agent of the Homeland Security Council, there to be sure she said what she was supposed to—and to let her know that the surviving members of her family could be locked up indefinitely without charges if that was what it took to keep her in line.

Emilee doubted that much would get done in any case. Most countries had a percentage of blacks and dark skinned citizens and were busy at home, just like the United States was. She could look out over the chamber and see that almost every seat was filled—but she knew that some of those ambassadors no longer served effective governments. In some of their countries, there was no government left at all.

Phrases from the speech she had just given were still running through her mind. ... *demand that Israel cease all offensive operations immediately ... stand ready to offer unconditional assistance to the beleaguered continent of Africa and all other areas afflicted by the Harcourt virus ... no territorial ambitions in Africa nor designs on the Arab world ... stridently deny providing assistance to Israel in carrying out their air strikes ... must put our own house in order ... deny in the strongest possible terms that the United States government had anything whatsoever to do with instigating the Harcourt virus. The proof should be apparent in the fact that our country is also suffering grievously from ... have no knowledge concerning the new virus that has cropped up in the Middle East ...* That statement had been inserted into her speech at the last moment as news of the new virus became public knowledge.

There was more, but it all went into a summation of how the United States was making every effort to restrain Israel, find a cure for the Harcourt virus, render aid to Africa and other afflicted nations, help Russia and the European powers to secure nuclear power plants that were at risk of being abandoned, and in general tell the world how benevolent and helpful her country's efforts during the crisis were. Parts of the speech were true, but other facts had been shaded and she knew she had uttered some outright lies. Modern diplomacy, she thought with bitter self loathing.

Her answers to the questions were little more than a recap of the text of her speech. As quickly as she decently could, she declined to provide any more answers and took her seat. She did her best to ignore the derogatory remarks coming to her translator earphone during the debate that followed. Fortunately it didn't last but another hour, then was suspended until the next day. After that, she had a short break before meeting with the Permanent Security Council members, where the real decisions would be made. Not that she thought much would be accomplished there, either.

* * * *

Doug's platoon was on the three to eleven shift. He was tired but not impossibly so when he arrived back at the apartment that he and June were already beginning to call home. During the day he would have

been amused at the sight of men and women in white coats carrying their own trash out to the dumpsters had it not been a portent of how many vacancies there were for workers who performed the mundane but necessary housekeeping tasks all over the country. The cafeteria food was suffering from the same shortage. The potatoes at dinner had been lumpy and undercooked and the meatloaf had an odd taste to it that he didn't care for, as if it had been diluted with too many crackers or bread to make it go further.

June was awake and watching the news when he came in, wearing a thin yellow silk robe, a souvenir from a mission to Thailand a few years ago. It shimmered as she stood up to greet him, some of the fabric clinging to the curves of her body as if attached to her, while other parts of the material flowed with her movements, presenting as pretty a picture of a new bride as he could ever wish for.

"I thought you would be in bed by now," he said, leaning his rifle carefully against the wall and taking her into his arms.

"I was, but I set the alarm so I'd be awake when you came home. Have you eaten?"

"I had a bite at work. Don't worry about it. How was the rest of your day?"

She pointed to the wall screen. "About like that. I didn't feel like reading, so I watched how the world is going to hell until I couldn't stand it any more, then turned it off. Are you ready for your drink?"

"If you don't mind. I need something to perk me up; it's been a long, long day."

"Go ahead and get your shower; I'll make it for you."

"You're a doll. Also a dutiful wife. And a beautiful one. Make it a double because I'm only going to have one." He winked, kissed her in a manner that promised much more later and headed for the bedroom, unbuckling his holster belt as he went.

When Doug returned a few minutes later, feeling clean and somewhat refreshed, June had turned off the news and was sitting in quiet silence.

Doug sat down and took a big sip of his bourbon and water, savoring the bite and the warmth it started in his middle. "Anything good on the news?" He slid his free hand in under the hem of her robe and caressed her thigh with gentle motions.

"Not on the news, but Amelia got something good in the feed from Washington. It's not being made public yet, though. Remember that scientist who created the virus for those Nazi skinhead nutcases we executed?"

"Johannsen? Sure. Did someone finally pop him?"

"Even better. He's been captured."

"Why is that better? We'll just execute him, same as those other Aryan supremacist bastards. For my money, he ought to be hung up by his balls and beat to death with rusty barbed wire."

"Amelia thinks he might be able to help find a cure, or a treatment. Possibly a vaccine. She's requested that he be brought here and put to work under armed guard."

Doug wasn't a scientist but he tried to keep up with developments, particularly since taking his present job. He couldn't follow the reasoning. "What can he do that the scientists here can't?"

"I don't know the details, but Amelia said he might be able to help by re-creating the steps he took to

alter the virus in the first place. I haven't got the knowledge to judge, but if she says so, I'll trust her."

"Well, yeah. Still it's too bad that madman is going to be allowed to live longer than he should just because of what he knows."

"I agree but he'll certainly have our scientists right beside him, hurrying him up. And when we're finished with him, the army gets him and he can join his companions in hell."

Doug grinned humorlessly. "If there's any blacks left in the army, I sure wouldn't let any of them be on his guard detail." He thought a moment. "For that matter, I wouldn't let any of the blacks still left in the lab get close to him. He might wind up being injected with a lethal dose of bubonic plague or something similar."

"I think I'd inject him myself if I knew we were through with him. I just can't understand how anyone could do what he did."

Doug finished the last of his drink. "Don't try to understand psychopaths like that. You can't." He stood up and reached down a hand to help her up. When she was standing he stroked her back with one hand and fondled her breasts through the thin silk material of her robe with the other. "This robe makes you look even more beautiful than you already were. Too bad you're going to have to discard it so soon."

June's hands were already clasped together behind his neck. She smiled. "I'll just have to suffer. It's not like you can't see me in it again. The itinerary for any new bride includes lots of dressing and undressing. And fun in between, so let's go try the in-between part."

"Spoken like a true bride. And the groom won't put up a bit of resistance. Shucks, he may even help a bit."

"He'd better!" June laughed. They almost bumped into the bedroom door from not being able to take their eyes off each other while heading toward the bedroom.

* * * * *

Qualluf Taylor was well satisfied with the results so far. He had taken over the reins of Mustafa Jones' large sect when its founder died in Shreveport; from the Harcourt virus as the church biography had it, but in reality from a simple heart attack. Qualluf did nothing to discourage the church version of his demise. With its followers and his own Church of Blacks, he now headed the largest and most militant black organization in America. He was an accomplished preacher, an activist, and had both a degree in theology and a PhD in psychology from Yale. He used his knowledge of the factors which motivated human behavior to good effect with the church. In this case, he knew that thinking the death of Mustafa Jones came from the Harcourt virus impelled his followers to heights of rage that dying of a simple heart attack could ever have done.

Qualluf Taylor was an educated man but he had little problem convincing himself that the virus had been developed by the CDC, not after his son had contacted it in Africa then disappeared into the chaos there, nor in believing they possessed a cure they weren't sharing with the world. Even if he hadn't thought the rumors were true, he would have used the prevailing beliefs of the black community to lead the Church of Blacks on their crusade, for if they weren't true, what else was left for the black community except vengeance? Virus aside, he would finally get revenge for his brother, a bad apple who had been sentenced to life in prison, then killed there while his white companion got only ten years for the same offense. Wayward or not, the difference in the punishment was grossly unfair. That was what had started him on this road to begin with, long years ago.

His penetrating gaze held the members of the church council in thrall while he explained what came next.

"The airport is in our hands so the white army can't bring in reinforcements by air. Now we have to take the CDC before that bug kills us all. They got the cure all right. All we got to do is capture the scientists and wring their scrawny white necks until they be glad to tell us. That means no killing except the guards. We going to wipe out every single one of them motherfuckers, then wipe our asses on they clean white underwear, but leave the scientists alive." Qualluf could speak perfectly correct English but always threw in some black patois when in the company of his fellow blacks. Perfect English marked a brother as a white toady, no matter what his feelings.

Qualluf scanned the faces again, seeing the anticipation and anger on every face there. He thought of the millions of dark skinned bodies buried in mass graves around the world and the anger rose in him as well. The scientists would die, too, just as soon as they disgorged their secrets. And if they didn't give them up, they would die anyway. The small closed room reeked of stale food and body odor, a legacy of the long drive from Louisiana to Georgia. No matter. He would shower tonight, but not until he finished with the white woman. Let her shrink from his smell; let her cry and wail all she pleased; the more the better so long as others heard her. Qualluf didn't really enjoy the experience; in fact, he felt sorry for the woman. She had nothing to do with starting the violence, but that wouldn't stop him. She was guilty by association, and he had to show his followers how heartless he could be, how ruthless and uncaring about any disaster befalling a white person. Besides, nothing could compare with the disaster his people were suffering.

"Okay, tomorrow be the big push. We going to take casualties but we got the power and we got the guns and we still got the bodies. You all listen to Fridge and do like he say. You know he been in the military and he know how to handle them wimpy white army boys. Just remember, do what you like to the guards and the army but don't hurt the people inside. We got to have them if we going to live."

Qualluf sat back and let Ali "Fridge" Green take over.

Ali was nicknamed after an old professional football player who had been called "The Refrigerator" because of his size and irresistible momentum once he got going. Ali was a recently retired infantry Sergeant Major with more combat experience than most active duty soldiers in this era of terrorism and guerrilla tactics. His specialty had been urban warfare.

The Fridge took over and began going over the routes toward the CDC with his lieutenants, the known army positions and what they could expect in the way of resistance. He knew almost to the inch where the army guard posts were located, how they were manned and how many soldiers were on duty at any given minute. All this information was being fed to him by a lighter skinned black serving with the small army unit guarding the CDC complex. The man relished passing the data to the Church of Blacks; his wife had died three weeks ago from the Harcourt virus.

The only part of the operation that Fridge didn't care for was that it had to be carried out during daylight hours; there was no way to compete with soldiers who had access to night vision equipment. Fortunately, the airport had been relatively easy; the small army contingent was too busy holding the lid on Atlanta proper to think of the airport, a very stupid mistake on someone's part. With the airport in his hands, he felt like they had a good chance of succeeding. They would have the CDC complex in hand well before army reinforcements with heavy weapons could arrive. Anything coming in by chopper, he thought they could handle with the half dozen shoulder-fired missiles in their possession. Adding to that advantage, most of the metropolitan police force had disintegrated with the loss of so many blacks and the deaths of so many others trying to keep the city under control. What few were left kept to the white precincts and simply tried to limit the damage there. The black neighborhoods were left to their own devices and the whites were sticking as close to home and work as they could, fearful of being assaulted by angry and frightened blacks, or even white miscreants taking advantage of the lawlessness.

Shortly before dawn, thousands of dark skinned men and women began marching toward the CDC complex, intent on either beating the cure out of their white scientists or putting them to death, the very same fate they believed every dark skinned human on earth faced in the near future.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

General Newman couldn't help but be satisfied that the armed forces were finally going to be built up to a level he and the other members of the Joint Chiefs considered adequate, even if it was coming about as a result of a world wide calamity. He worried a bit about the enormous task of integrating all the recalled former servicemen and women back into the service and getting the new draftees trained and into the field, but that was what subordinates were for. His main concern was stability in the nations possessing nuclear weapons—or biowarfare agents such as the Harcourt virus, or that new one, the Goldwater virus, named after the first patient known to have died from it. He thought it was ironic that the first person to succumb had been an Israeli citizen of mixed Arab and European ancestry who had the bad luck to inherit the wrong gene from his Jewish father and Arab mother. The man had been even more unlucky to be a passenger on the aircraft harboring Nabil Hassan and his little spray bottles loaded with the deadly brew. He knew that Nabil Hassan had been caught with the goods on him and executed.

General Newman chuckled to himself, thinking that Goldwater would much rather have lived than have his name immortalized after his death as the Goldwater virus, though it was seldom called that except among professionals and those who avoided derogatory language. It was more commonly referred to, especially in casual conversation, as “The Arab Virus”, after the group it infected. In truth, he knew it was lethal even to some non-Arabs such as Iranians because of their common ancestry. And he had to give the Jews credit—they had loosed the bug even knowing it would infect some of their own citizens.

General Newman realized he couldn't predict which nation might produce the next pandemic, though the intelligence agencies pointed to several with the possible capability. He couldn't order them nuked, though, no matter how much he might think it would eliminate a risk. There was too much of a chance for escalation. Maybe later, if things worked out.

His primary concern now was holding the country together in the face of the increasing disruption of supplies and continuing violence in the big cities. Part of Los Angeles had burned to the ground before the bitter, vengeance-bound rioting of its black citizens had been subdued, and part of Chicago was heading in the same direction. He shuffled requests for troops and reinforcements from around the country with an eye on vital areas of industry or transportation hubs. Those received priority. Then there were the nuclear power plants.

Already, he had been forced to send reinforcements to the few plants in Africa his soldiers and airmen were guarding; White faces were anathema in that continent, and there were still plenty of revenge-minded blacks left alive. The whites of South Africa at last report had been wiped out almost to the man, though not without some fierce battles. And now that the Goldwater virus was getting up steam, he was going to be forced to send more troops, these into the Middle East, and have others ready. Israel might help later, but right now they had their hands full fighting off the Egyptian, Syrian and Jordanian armies, the same old antagonists who had been slugging it out for well over half a century. Whatever else happened, he had to try to keep any of those nuclear plants from melting down and contaminating the whole world.

Then there was China and India. So far both nations seemed content to make noises rather than trying to invade other countries and that was good. India especially was probably glad in some perverse way that Pakistan was under the viral gun—or their leaders might have been glad had not so many of their billion citizens been ill. Many would die, but many more would recover. If the country stayed together, it might cause trouble later on. China was even more of a problem. He seriously doubted from the intelligence he was receiving that China's central government could prevent the country from fragmenting into a balkanized travesty of a nation, where different provinces would be ruled by warlords and with God

himself not knowing who controlled their nuclear weapons.

The general sighed. Problems, problems, but perhaps before it was all over, the world would be aligned differently and much more to his liking. He pushed those concerns aside for the moment and turned his attention back to the most pressing problem requiring action, Atlanta and its icon, the CDC. The president had decided that whatever else happened, he couldn't allow the damn black monkeys to destroy that haven of scientific talent. General Newman had to agree with him in a way. The CDC complex had gathered the best virologists in the world to work on the new diseases. There was no telling when they might be needed in the future. He had been forced to cancel the intended airlift of an army brigade to Atlanta. The rioters must have some sensible leaders because this time, they took the airport before the locals could react and blocked the runways by driving vehicles out on them, then burning or rigging them with explosives. Another armed mob was headed straight toward the CDC, killing and looting as they came. They had to be stopped, somehow. Reluctantly, he picked up the phone to alert the last two battalions of airborne troops he had available for deployment and ordered them to jump into the suburbs tomorrow morning. He knew it would be chaotic and very, very messy but here was nothing else to do; he didn't even have enough helicopter transport available for them. Atlanta would just have to suffer. Urban warfare was never pretty. He got a battalion of Marines moving by road from the east toward the airport, then turned his watch over to the vice chairman. He knew he was dopey from lack of sleep; otherwise he wouldn't have delayed so long making those decisions, though he still didn't fully agree with the president. All the blacks on earth could die so far as he was concerned, and good riddance.

* * * *

Amelia was up and in her office early; she had been so tired the evening before that when she finally had been able to get away she still hadn't gone over the latest progress reports. Her conscience had pushed her to come in early today and review them before starting the regular day's work.

She entered her password and pulled up the files from each department and began scanning them, trying to absorb the gist of each, if not all the details. It was a chore she disliked, but a necessary one in order to supervise the direction of research and allocate resources to the most promising projects. The first thing she saw was that Johannsen, the rogue scientist responsible for the Harcourt virus, had arrived late yesterday evening and was being guarded by a mixed detail of Marines and government security agents in a recently depleted basement storeroom. She thought she had better warn the virologists—in fact, all of the staff, to watch him closely and report anything he did out of the ordinary to her immediately. She wasn't about to trust a psychopath like that very far.

There was still little progress on devising a vaccine. She made a note to pull two of the scientists working in that department and reassign them to drug research, where she found a few hopeful signs of possible treatments, if still tentative and largely untested ones. She began hurriedly scanning the following file, one concerning the latest bits of knowledge about the Harcourt virus, not expecting to find anything useful there. She already knew more than she wanted to about how that damnable virus worked.

Suddenly her gaze hung up on a sentence. The words seemed to fairly leap off the screen and into her mind. Could it be possible? She read it again, then took a deep breath and went back to the start, reading more slowly this time. Eventually her breathing slowed to normal as she found only a hint of what, for a few excited moments, she hoped desperately was happening. Unfortunately, it was little more than a hint. She sighed with disappointment, even while castigating herself for expecting anything like a virus to be so simple as to change its characteristics overnight. However, it was certainly worth following up on. She decided to assign more people to that end of the research, even before knowing where she would find them. Just as she started on the next file, her phone rang.

"Amelia, this is Gene. Alert your people. It looks like we've got a big crazy mob heading this way, and the airport's was taken over by a mob last night."

"All right, but what...?" She heard a click as the phone disconnected and she was suddenly speaking only to herself. Despite the speeded up beat of her heart, she yawned. It was still early. She looked over to the coffee pot and saw that it was ready. Her hand trembled as she poured. When Gene sounded excited, it could be nothing but trouble. The first person she called to come in was June. As she put down the phone, she was suddenly grateful that Johannsen had arrived here before the airport was closed. He and his guards must have come in on one of the last flights before it was overrun. It was possible he had some useful information, but she really didn't hold out much hope.

* * * *

Doug woke to the persistent sound of the phone ringing. He glanced at the bedside clock. It was blinking, signaling that sometime during the night a power outage had occurred. As he reached for the phone, he dreamily thought that he and June might not have noticed even if it had happened while they were still awake, so absorbed in each other they had been. He plucked the handset from its cradle and handed it to June, who was already sitting up. The sheet had cascaded down to her waist with the movement, leaving her as prettily bare to the waist as a generously endowed centerfold from the old Playboy magazines he had perused as a youth, except that she was more beautiful in his sight than any of the remembered images. And realer, he thought, reaching for his watch to see what time it was. He blinked as he saw that it was only four in the morning.

June nudged him. "It's for you."

Uh oh, he thought as he took the phone. A call this time of the night could only mean trouble. "Craddock," he said.

"Get here quickly, Doug. We've got troubles," Teresa said without identifying herself and hung up, no doubt to call others on the list—or to rush toward whatever crisis was at hand.

He replaced the phone and pushed the sheets away. "I've got to go, sweetheart. There's some kind of security problem."

"What is it?"

"I don't know, but that was Teresa. She never panics and she wouldn't have called without a damn good reason." He leaned over to kiss June then swung his feet off the bed and stood up.

By the time Doug was dressed and had collected his weapons and gear, June had a cup of instant coffee waiting. He took it gratefully, kissed her again and hurried toward the elevator. Behind him, June was taking a call from Amelia that had her up and dressed so fast they might almost have shared the elevator.

* * * *

The new security building was a scene of utter chaos when Doug arrived. They had barely gotten moved in and orderlies and couriers had little idea where each platoon was quartered, where the offices were, where the command centers were located, and in many cases who was even in command of different functions.

He reported to Gene and was immediately told to start trying to get the lines of communication working smoothly and send all the troops off duty to their alternate posts, particularly to the front of the complex where it appeared the majority of the mob was heading.

Doug got busy but was hampered by the fact that many still hadn't gotten the word that he was Gene's

deputy. He couldn't contact Teresa for long minutes, though Buddy answered his phone quickly.

"Doug, I'm getting my off duty boys lined up. We'll be ready to go in a few minutes, but some of them don't remember which command they're in. I heard shooting from where the army company is headquartered. Maybe Teresa decided to see what the situation is there. I haven't been able to contact her."

"Get your troops to the front entrance and position your fire teams as soon as you can. Don't worry about Teresa's people; I'll take care of them. And don't worry about who belongs where; just make sure they have their weapons and ammo and get them going. This probably isn't going to be much fun, so keep your phone open as much as you can. I'll touch base with you quick as I know something more."

"Are we to fire before being fired on? What're the rules?"

Doug didn't hesitate. "If you decide there's a threat in your section, do whatever you think is necessary and I'll back you. Whatever happens, we have to hold them away from here."

Doug began rounding up sleepy-eyed squad leaders and getting them organized to help defend the complex. He knew the situation was going to turn into a bitch before the day was over, if not before. Too many new people, too much ground to cover, little or no air cover. If it came to fighting, it was going to be just like urban warfare—in a situation made to order for the attacking force.

Priorities has been set already and weren't to Doug's liking, even though they made sense. The science building where the research staff were both working and living and the treatment facility were first in line to hold and defend. After those the new security building and the transient apartments were next. The administrative building was last on the list, the very place where June would be working during the day and the worst-situated for defense. He tried to keep that out of his mind, but he couldn't help worrying, especially as the gunfire he had been hearing in the distance began increasing in volume.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

As the impending battle for the CDC was shaping up, President Marshall was attending his combined intelligence briefing, the one he disliked because of the presence of the vice president. There was nothing in the constitution or government protocols that forced him to invite Vice President Marlene Santes, but for all his small minded, provincial and prejudiced attitudes, he did have a sense of duty toward government that impelled him to keep her at least marginally informed, and this weekly meeting was the method he chose. The world situation was so dicey that if something happened to him, say a heart attack, stroke, or—but he didn't like to think about the last one. He was perfectly capable of committing troops to action where many of them might be killed or maimed, but he was a coward at heart. The thought of combat had kept him from enlisting for a term in the armed forces, even though he had considered it for political advantage at one time. In the end, it hadn't mattered because he had attained the ultimate prize anyway. And if the first little sideways approaches to General Newman were an indication, he might remain in the oval office past the normal two terms. Right now the thought of holding onto power was little more than fantasy, but perhaps...

He got his thoughts back in order as Vice President Santes entered the briefing room. A sense of duty might compel him to keep her in the loop in case she had to suddenly take over the reins of government, but that didn't make him like her any better. She was a symbol of the changing demographic map of the United States—though the map wasn't quite the same now as it had been when he put her on the ticket; a necessity in order to collect enough of the Hispanic, women and black votes to get into office. Already some five million blacks in North America were either dead or dying, with at least half that many Hispanics, and many more of them either ill or falling victim each day. After the Harcourt virus ran its course, he doubted he would have to use Santes to win election again, though it was too soon yet to know. Politics was a game of days and weeks, not years.

"Hello, Marlene, how are you this morning?" he welcomed her courteously, standing up when she entered the room, like he had been taught as a child. He thought Marlene appreciated the little courtesy, although it was hard to tell. She kept her thoughts close to the vest. A fantasy of her naked and submissive raced through his mind, as it frequently did in her presence. She was quite attractive, especially so for her age, with no trace of gray in her dark auburn hair and no sign that she might be dyeing it. Even though she was in her fifties, she still had a slim, curvaceous figure and few wrinkles to her face. Her dark eyes; bedroom eyes said some pundits, probed at him and he thought she found no fault with his greeting.

"I'm fine, Mr. President, thank you." She nodded to General Newman, Edgar Tomlin, Lurline Tedd and Cantrell Willingham, the new secretary of state designate. "Gentlemen, Lurline."

"Shall we get started then?" Seeing no dissent, the president turned to the Secret Service agent. "John, I'm sure we'll be fine, and there are some matters here which don't need to be overheard."

John Dawson nodded and left the Oval Office, his face impassive, but his mind whirling with what he had already heard over the last weeks. Listening to high government officials, including the president, talk like that had shaken him. It wasn't unusual to hear lies and idiocy coming from politicians, but this? Maybe he hadn't been wrong after all, in what he had done when he first heard about the Harcourt virus. But again, he was just a secret service agent. Who was he to say what was right or wrong in world politics?

The president had used the possibility of a secret service agent being captured by terrorists to arrange for total privacy when he most needed it. As soon as the door closed behind Dawson, President Marshall nodded to Tomlin.

"Go ahead, Ed. What do you have for us this morning?"

Tomlin glanced at the door to be sure that it was indeed closed. "I really don't like discussing vital matters here, Mr. President."

"It's fine, I assure you. This office is as secure as anyplace in Washington."

Tomlin wasn't as certain as the president was; recorders had become so small and unobtrusive they were hard to spot, even by professionals. Nevertheless, he began.

"First off, the war. There's some good news there. It looks as if the damned J—as if Israel did get all of Pakistan and Iran's nuclear missiles and the bunker busters we sold them took care of that facility Pakistan had buried so deep under the mountains. They were a little more circumspect with Iran. They only took out the nuclear weapons facilities and the missiles they knew were armed with nukes, leading us to believe they intend to send a big commando team in to shut down their uranium enrichment facility."

"Why should they have let Iran off?" Vice President Santes asked, still aggravated at Tomlin's derogatory, almost-voiced remark about Jews.

"It's a little too close to home. I believe they were afraid of fallout, whereas the facility in Pakistan was pretty well contained—and farther from them."

Santes nodded and Tomlin continued. "At any rate, the Israeli Air Force did a remarkable job. The Middle Eastern states that declared war have no effective air cover left and the Israeli army is doing just about as it pleases. It appears as if they're not immediately intent on conquering any of the adjoining countries, but merely pushing the opposing armies back far enough to put their artillery out of range while the virus they turned loose is creating havoc in the Arab ranks. The CDC projects a very high kill rate for Middle Easterners carrying the particular gene it's targeting, which by the way, no one has figured out yet. Smart. They can sit back and take over the neighboring countries after the Arabs are dead with no risk."

"Crazy is more like it," Santes commented. "What could they have been thinking of?"

"Maybe that killing every Arab they can is the only way they'll ever be able to live in peace."

"It won't work. The world will remember what they did once this crisis with the Harcourt Virus is behind us. If you ask me, they'll be even less secure in the long run simply because of the overwhelming number of Muslims in the rest of the world. However, I guess that's not germane to the discussion right now. I'm sorry I interrupted."

"Thank you Mrs. Vice President," Tomlin said, the exercise of having to use her title as distasteful as always in his mind. He thought women had no business participating in the world of geopolitical military affairs. Or even in government above a certain level. Santes should have remarried after her husband died, he thought, instead of going into politics.

Marlene Santes wasn't fooled by politicians of Tomlin's ilk, but sometimes she found it advantageous to let political rivals think otherwise. She listened as Tomlin continued with his briefing.

"Well, that's the story in the Middle East so far as the war goes. We've communicated secretly with Premier Luria and he'll accept some of our oil field workers to augment his special forces. They'll help secure the oil fields as the Arabs die off, and idle them down until we can get more troops into the area. In return, we keep the munitions in the pipeline to them so long as they're needed. If that virus continues spreading the way it has so far, we won't have an Arab problem before long, just like we won't ... like we won't have any more problems securing our chromium from South Africa," he finished lamely, then

added as a distraction, "The whole African continent has disintegrated into complete anarchy except for a few of the northern sections that were the last to be infected. And with the new virus, I guess those will go soon, too. Lots of Arabs there, as well as dark skins."

The vice president, as well as everyone else in the Oval Office, knew what he had started to say first, but she and the others politely ignored the slip, while Tomlin cursed to himself. He hated the idea of having not only a woman but a goddamned Spic in the vice president's seat, even if she was light skinned and still pretty and slim enough to make a ... he got his thoughts back to the briefing with difficulty, only to be interrupted by the vice president again.

"Edgar, why are we helping a nation that's committing genocide? I know the Israeli government is denying they have anything to do with the Arab virus, but we know better, don't we? So why?"

President Marshall answered her, truthfully. "Marlene, we didn't choose to have that situation thrust on us on top of the problems we already have at home, but since it was—well, we can't let the nuclear plants contaminate the world, nor can we allow the oil fields to go untended. Despite all our efforts, we're still dependent on Middle Eastern oil, and so are our allies."

The vice president nodded, face impassive, and Tomlin continued.

"All right, now to South America. The Harcourt virus is loose on that continent too, of course, but it's spreading a bit slower due to the remoteness of some areas and transportation difficulties. Our intelligence from there indicates that it would take a major effort on our part to secure the nuclear power plants because of so much antagonism against North Americans and so much of the population still alive. The virus isn't killing as high a proportion of Hispanics as it is blacks, but it does get all the dark skinned ones—and there's plenty of them in South America. Or were, but the ones left are so angry that we don't dare show our faces. Our recommendation is to ask the United Nations to send troops."

"You're living in a dream world, Edgar," General Newman said abruptly. "Don't you realize how many of the peacekeeping troops used by the U.N. have always come from countries with a high proportion of dark skinned people? Besides, even the countries that are still functional are having problems of their own, just like we are. You won't get much help there."

"Then what do we do?"

The general shrugged. "If any of the South American nuclear plants go, the fallout will stay below the equator, according to our meteorologists. They'll either have to take care of the plants themselves or suffer the consequences."

Vice President Santes winced, a visible expression. She knew the general was right, but she failed to see how anyone could be so blasé about human life and the ecology of a whole continent. She started to say something, then realized the others were looking to her for a comment, simply because she was Hispanic. As if where her great grandparents were from gave her some special knowledge of a whole continent, she thought. A typical stereotyping so common to politicians. And to humanity in general. Skin color and national heritage were ever present in American affairs these days and there was no way to avoid it, distasteful as it was. "Isn't Brazil a Portuguese culture? Doesn't it have a high proportion of whites?"

"Not enough to sway the rest of them far enough to allow our troops into the country. And I haven't got them to spare anyway."

Santes eyed the general. He was the type of person who took the hard realities of military affairs and applied them to every single aspect of life, whether they were a good fit or not. He cared nothing about people, only how they affected the military. But it was useless to say anything. Perhaps when Marshall

left office she would run for the presidency. In the meantime, she had little influence on the direction of government and it was senseless to pretend otherwise.

President Marshall tapped his fingertips on the table. "Let's move on, it's getting late. What else do you have, Edgar?"

"Just Russia. I think they'll hold together, but I can't say as much for some of her neighbors. I think we may have to ask them to keep some sort of order there, much as I hate the thought."

"All right. Do as you think best, but don't let them get the idea they're going to become a world power again. Do you agree, Cantrell?"

The new Secretary of State nominee still felt out of place at the seat of power and was reluctant to voice his opinion, particularly since he thought both the president and General Newman were making decisions the vast majority of the electorate would disagree with, and the rest of the world would be aghast at. Some of what they said he considered little short of criminal. There was one point he agreed with, though. "Sir, I concur with the decision to let the Russian government handle any unrest or destructive situations on their immediate borders. But can't the Europeans help?"

"If they'll spend the money and supply the troops, certainly. I doubt seriously they will, though. They're as broke as us."

"And don't have much in the way of armed forces anyway. Too much spending on welfare." General Newman commented, thinking to himself they were getting what they deserved now.

"Suppose I try and see what I can come up with?"

"Fine, you do that. What else?"

Cantrell Willingham had the impression that the president was catering to him, but he pressed on, furrowing his high patrician forehead with the kind of wrinkles women thought attractive on older men. "Sir, I'd like to at least try to improve relations with the South American states. I've already ordered our ambassadors to approach the appropriate governments to inquire about the attitudes and feelings of their citizens. If we can..." He was interrupted by the vibration of his personal phone, the one he carried so that he could be notified immediately of emergencies in real time. "Excuse me, sir. This must be another bad crisis." He listened for a moment and hurriedly hung up when he saw the irritated look on the president's face. Apparently he had violated protocol by taking a call in the Oval Office.

"That was our embassy in Brazil. Their army just took it over."

"What! Damn it, that's an act of war!" General Newman roared. "Edgar, damn you, why weren't we warned?"

Tomlin shrank from the General's wrath. He didn't have a clue. Almost all of his field agents were busy in the Middle East or Africa, trying to keep abreast of problems there. "I don't know General, but I'll find out."

President Marshall got to his feet. "Gentlemen, Marlene. It's late. Let's break this up and reconvene in the morning. General, keep me abreast of any decisions you make about our armed forces."

It was a dismissal.

The vice president was thinking furiously as she hurried back to her own office. It sounded to her as if the president and his Chairman of the Joint Chiefs were in collusion, making decisions and taking actions that

in calmer times would only have occurred with congressional consultation and approval. She reviewed the articles of martial law as she understood them. Most people might think it gave the president unlimited powers, and it did to a certain extent—but only within the country's own borders. It had nothing to do with the rest of the world. When Santes arrived at her office, she began looking over her own intelligence reports to see if they were in agreement with the presidential briefing.

* * * *

General Newman hadn't mentioned what was going on in Atlanta during the briefing. He hoped to get the situation under control again now that the army brigade, less one battalion, had parachuted into the suburbs and the Marine battalion was rolling down the interstate in that direction as rapidly as possible.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

By nine o'clock in the morning Doug began receiving both casualties and stragglers from the company of soldiers guarding the approaches to the CDC complex. Seeing the exhausted white faces above the collars of their army fatigues, streaked with dirt and rivulets of sweat, along with the blood and agonized sounds of pain, revived flashes of memory from combat he had seen in the past. He shook off the images and tried to help as best he could.

He sent the casualties into the ward where patients with the Harcourt virus were receiving experimental treatment. Those not too seriously hurt were bandaged and thrown back into the fight with his own men. He allowed no objections. Usually all it took was mention of the fate they would suffer should the complex be overrun—and that there was no place to retreat to.

The able bodied soldiers were hustled to the barricades, thrown up as far from the complex as possible. He hoped they could stop the onslaught before the mob invaded the CDC buildings, but he was beginning to suspect they weren't dealing with a disorganized mob, as first thought. The soldiers reported the attacks on their positions bore a resemblance to standard infantry tactics rather than attempts to overcome them with sheer numbers and madness. He reported that observation to Gene, who was making rounds of all the posts, using his presence to encourage the troops to hold fast.

All morning the gunfire had been growing in volume, becoming louder as it got closer. An hour ago, the single transport chopper attempting to bring in reinforcements to the company of soldiers went down in flames from a direct hit by a missile. He watched the whole thing, seeing his rising hope of relief vanish quickly as the streaking trail of the shoulder fired missile tracked directly into the chopper. From what he saw, there couldn't possibly have been any survivors.

"Goddamn bastards!" Buddy Hawkins, the former Marine, exclaimed from where he was checking the light machine gun bunker. "So much for the army getting us some help."

"Maybe not," Doug said. He left Buddy and went to check on the next barricade. But no other helicopters appeared overhead and the last he heard, the airport was still in the hands of the rampaging blacks. No communication was being received from there, boding ill for the airport staff. As he went about his rounds, he had a fleeting thought that it was too bad the CDC complex was so close to several of the largest black communities; had it been situated on the other side of the city he thought they might have gotten more help from the white citizens. He quickly dismissed the wishful thinking; it did no good at all.

Back at his combat headquarters, set up just outside the front entrance of the science building, he put a finger over his ear to help him hear what Amelia was saying on his phone.

"Doug, we're taking fire in the administrative building! Can't you do something?" Her voice was strained with fright and worry.

"Which direction is it coming from?" Doug's own voice, calm up until now, almost broke over his own worry. He hadn't heard from June. So far as he knew she was still with Amelia.

"We're on the west side of the Administrative building. All the windows are shot out on this floor. Doug! I can see soldiers! They're running back this way!"

"Stay down and hang on! I'll send some troops. Are the staff down on the first floor?"

"Yes! I can hear them shooting from here!"

"How about the spotter I put up there?"

"He's dead. I sent someone up to check on him and they said he took a bullet in the head while he was trying to see what was happening."

Doug gritted his teeth and asked the next question. "How long ago did that happen?"

"A half hour ago. Doug! The soldiers aren't stopping! They're running right on past!"

"You and June stay down, Amelia. I'll try to get you some help." Damn it all, Amelia should have reported it when the spotter was first killed. For the last half hour he had been assuming they were safe from attackers coming from that direction. There was no use blaming her, though. She wasn't military. And where was Gene? He should have been back by now.

"June isn't here. She went down to join the others defending the entrances."

His heart bounded around inside his chest at that, but there was nothing he could do except wish he hadn't been quite so precipitous about taking her to the firing range that one time. What he had been hearing was mostly rifle fire. What in hell did she think a popgun of a revolver could do against assault rifles? He knew he was raging at himself instead of her, but something had to be done quickly and the admin building was far removed from his position. He thumbed his phone, wanting to talk to Teresa and see if she had any troops left in reserve, and whether she had seen Gene. He got no answer and cursed, then tried the platoon leader who should be next nearest to the administrative building. He felt a sense of relief when someone answered this time, but only for a moment.

"Branklin, Post three,"

"Roy, Doug here. We're in trouble at the admin building. Can you send some troops to help them?"

"No. Goddamn Army bugged out. I'm trying to collect stragglers and put them on the line here to keep us from being overrun. I was just getting ready to call *you* for help."

Doug felt as if an arrow had impaled his heart. He closed his eyes for a moment, trying to think of something else to do. There was nothing. He had to steel himself to keep his voice steady. "You'll have to hang on, Roy. Make sure everyone knows what'll happen if they get taken, if they don't already. If we can beat them back on the other side of the complex here, I'll try to get some help for you."

He thumbed the phone off and continued calling. Bullets began striking the improvised bunker, smashing holes through the piled up furniture. He ducked lower, shielding his body in the shallow hole dug beside the sidewalk leading into the science building. He knew in his heart that their forces were too thin to prevent the complex from being overrun if the attacking force was willing to accept enough casualties. The only part he had a chance to save was the security and treatment buildings, and the science building where he had placed his combat headquarters and the heaviest defenses. It was the one area that absolutely had to be held. If necessary, he would put the scientists themselves into the fight. Better to lose a few of them than the whole bunch, and he had seen to it that they were armed.

From the direction of the admin building he heard the explosion of a rocket propelled grenade. He shuddered, hoping the enemy didn't have many of them. His own supply was limited and the men who knew how to use the RPGs were limited, too.

A momentary lull in the fighting allowed him to leave his headquarters in Martha's capable hands until Teresa returned. He was thankful Martha was back, even with one arm still in a cast. He ducked and ran with his rifle ready, heading for the next barricaded entrance where communication had ceased. Just as

he dived for its shelter, a burst of automatic rifle fire kicked up concrete shrapnel as it walked along the sidewalk. A number of the concrete chips got him in both legs and the forehead, but it was a bullet in the calf that sent him tumbling. He hung onto his rifle with grim determination and slid into the narrow depression behind displaced earth and landscape timbers. Shovels to dig emplacements had been surprisingly hard to come by.

"You're hit, Doug!" One of the men said as he rolled over to reload his rifle.

"I'll manage. What's happening here?" Then he saw the sprawled bodies behind him and how few were still defending this entrance. He had almost turned away, then jerked his gaze back to the bodies. One of them was Gene Bradley, his head almost severed from his body by what must have been shrapnel from an RPG. He looked away quickly, feeling his gorge rise. Always the good ones, he thought sadly.

"The phone got hit and Gene bought the farm and we haven't had time to call anyway. We were damn lucky to stop them this time, but we can't do it again. Get us some help!"

While intermittent gunfire raked their position, Doug wrapped a bandage around his leg to slow down the bleeding. The troops fired back whenever they had a target. His leg was beginning to throb but there was no time to worry about it. *Think!* He told himself. This was the transient apartment building where he doubted anyone was still left inside. Gene's last order had been for all non-combatants to gather inside the science building. The administrative building was a bad position to try to defend, but if the transient quarters couldn't hold, he could at least take the troops when they abandoned it and use them to try to rescue the occupants of the admin building. And June.

"All right," he said, coming to a decision now that he knew for certain he was in charge. "We're going to abandon this building, try to hook up with the admin site. We'll get everyone there, evacuate the wounded, then all of us fall back to the treatment and science buildings. Maybe we can hold those and our security center."

The man in charge of the post nodded, then let loose several quick, three round bursts of rifle fire. "I'll pass the word," he said. "Just tell me when. And it better be damn soon!"

"Give me a lot of covering fire for five minutes," Doug answered, "then run like hell to the rear entrance here. I'll gather everyone else along the way and we'll try to get to the admin building. You try to hold here long enough to cover us when we retreat from there with the staff. Got it?"

Another nod.

"Give 'em hell!" Doug shouted as he jumped up and broke into a run. Bullets chased him despite the covering fire, making all too familiar noises as they displaced air near his head and gouged holes in the brickwork adorning the ground floor of the building. Chips of brick joined the shards of shattered glass piling up from shot-out windows.

By the time Doug flattened himself behind the bullet riddled bunker at the back of the building, his leg was bleeding copiously again. He tightened the bandage even as he counted heads, then had to duck as a fusillade of shots came from near the admin building itself. Two of his men were hit. The others crouched behind what cover they could find; the bunker was too small to contain them all. He took a chance and raised up far enough to see, using a whole clip on automatic fire to keep heads down over where the shots had come from. His heart sank as he saw a whole swarm of black men in civilian clothing break from concealment around the corner of the building and rush the entrance. The few defenders fell quickly, then the blacks took cover inside and behind the captured post and began shooting back at them, putting out a volume of fire he couldn't hope to match. More blacks cascaded from around the other corner and he knew it was hopeless. The building was lost, along with everyone who might still be in it, including

June and Amelia.

"June!" For long seconds he could think of nothing else but her. Tears leaked from his eyes. A rifle butt jabbed him in the shoulder, bringing him back to his senses.

"Doug, we've gotta get out of here before they get us, too!"

Doug knew the woman was right. He didn't even remember her name but for the moment she was thinking clearer than him. There was nothing he could do but agree. And do it. Ducking and crouching, they retreated, picking up a few stragglers along the way. A few minutes later his force hooked up with the platoon still holding the treatment facility. And here he found most of the medical staff, come down to help defend their patients. He searched frantically, but could see neither June nor Amelia, nor anyone else he recognized from the admin building. They were either dead or captives.

"Look!"

It seemed as if the voice came to him from a far distance. It jerked him back to reality. Doug's chest heaved as he tried to bring his attention back to the situation at hand. The remainder of the security force and what staff had escaped were depending on him for direction. His gaze followed the pointing finger of the man who had spoken. As he watched, parachutes began filling the sky.

* * * *

"Goddamn motherfuckers. They coming in heavy, preacher. Here and the airport both," Fridge Greene said, flipping his phone closed. He wiped at the trickle of blood coming from beneath the bandana wrapped around his head.

Qualluf's body was wet, too, but with sweat. The building they had captured had lost electrical power during the fight and a spring day in Atlanta can be the equal of high summer farther north. They were in trouble, but he wasn't done yet, not while he had captives. "How many made it here before they cut us off from the main body?"

"Not enough to hold this place, preacher. We have to let them know we got captives, then deal." It was all Fridge knew to do now. Either that or kill the captives and go down fighting. He stared at the black skin of his forearm. They were dead men anyway; that gave them an advantage in negotiating.

"All right, see if you can get in contact with whoever's in charge of the rest of those miserable, death-dealing bastards. Make sure they know we got plenty of prisoners." He grinned, showing his two front teeth with the diamond-embedded initials, CB, for Church of Blacks. "And make damn sure them whiteys know how many women we got. And what we got planned for them if we don't get no cure." Qualluf was well aware of the prevalent bias of white men when they thought of their women having sex with black men, and particularly prejudiced were southern men, which he figured many of the opposing force would be. This was Atlanta, after all, and the Army had always had a higher proportion of men from the Deep South than from other parts of the country. He showed his teeth again. Just let him hint at rape and see how fast they rolled over!

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"Sir, we've regained contact with Colonel Christian, the brigade commander of the unit that parachuted into Atlanta."

President Marshall looked up at Lurline from his desk, irritated at having been interrupted during his perusal of world casualty figures from the Harcourt and Goldwater viruses. Then he remembered. The CDC. Perhaps he could get a later update. "Good. Have someone talk to the CDC director and get me the latest uh ... morbidity report. He rolled the phrase around his tongue to get it out. Uttering the words gave him a feeling that he was on top of the situation and knew exactly what was going on, though only a few weeks ago he'd had no earthly clue what a "morbidity" report entailed, except perhaps something about death.

"Uh, sir, I'm sorry, but it seems that part of the CDC is still in the hands of the rioters."

"Well, damn it, can't Mary—I mean, um what's her name, the woman that replaced her, spare a few minutes to tell us what's going on in the rest of the world with these viruses? Isn't that the agency that gathers them?"

"Yes sir, but ... Amelia Foster, along with most of the administrative staff, have been captured by the mob."

"Goddamn it, Lurline, what did General Newman send those troops to do—sit on their ass? Aren't there enough troops to re-take the place?"

"I assume so, sir, but the blacks are threatening to kill all the hostages if we don't meet their demands."

The president felt color brightening his face. His yellow phone rang once and its bright yellow light began flashing. He reached for it, punched the hold button and turned back to his Chief of Staff. "Isn't the CDC staff mostly clerical workers and such? Can't they be replaced?"

"I suppose so, sir, but ... well, it wouldn't be a good thing politically to have them slaughtered because we won't negotiate?"

Marshall looked at the flashing yellow light again. Whatever it was, it could wait a moment. The red phone was the only one that demanded immediate, unqualified action and he hoped it would never ring. In the meantime ... "Look, Lurline, we can't have a bunch of black apes holding our most important health facility hostage, and never mind the clerks. Tell the Brigade commander I want it back in our hands within forty eight hours or he's gone."

"But I can't..."

Marshall sighed. Always problems. Suddenly he thought of a solution. "I've got it. Let the vice president handle the situation. Just tell her she has to have it settled within two days or the army does it for her. Got it?"

"Yes, sir. I'll go tell her right away."

"Good, but stay close. God knows what that yellow light is about." He plucked the phone from its cradle, while thinking how smart he had been to give the Atlanta problem to Marlene. If it turned out well, he would get credit for being a good administrator. If the shit hit the fan, it would be the vice president's fault. Either way, the CDC would be up and running again in a couple of days or heads would roll, not even counting those of the hostages.

General Newman was on the other end of the line. "Mr. President, I have confirmed reports that China is attempting an invasion of Taiwan. I've spoken to Willingham, for what that's worth, and he suggests it's an effort on China's part to divert attention from the health and economic crisis on the mainland. I didn't know it until just now, but the Chinese have had a banking collapse."

"Again?"

"Yes, sir, according to Willingham. The State Department always gets financial reports first, even before Tomlin's people. Can't we do something about that?"

"Maybe later. How serious is the situation?"

"Pretty bad. China's threatening to use nukes if Taiwan doesn't spread her legs and be raped quietly, but it looks as if the Taiwanese are going to defend the island anyway."

"What do you want to do, Borland?"

"I say let 'em fight, sir. Taiwan won't be a pushover, and if China goes nuclear, I think Russia will jump in. So much for China."

"How sure are you that we won't have to get involved?"

"Sure enough to give you that advice. If they start mixing it up, Russia won't get off scot free. We could get lucky and wind up with both of them so battered that neither is a threat to us any longer, either economically or politically. Mr. President, I think if we just sit tight, we may wind up in charge of every part of the world that matters. At any rate, it's worth taking the chance. We'll hold on to the African nuclear facilities and cooperate with Israel on the oil fields. Once the virus runs its course, we can work with England and split up Africa between the three of us. And this time, by God, we won't let the jungle bunnies have any say in how we run the place if there's any of them left. They haven't the intelligence. Look how they fucked up the whole continent once the colonial powers left. If we and every other bleeding heart nation on earth hadn't kept pouring money down the drain there, they would have gone back to mud huts and grasshopper soup long ago."

President Marshall didn't have to think long to give his approval. If he and the General Newman could keep the United States functioning, they could have the whole world in their hands within a few years. By God, those viruses are the best thing that's happened to the country since kicking Mexico's ass way back before the Civil war, he thought with a smile. He ran the various scenarios and how they might play out through his mind for a few moments, then turned his attention back to the morbidity reports, picking up from where he had been interrupted. He had learned to read them after a fashion, if not completely, and it was looking good.

The infection curve for the Harcourt virus was beginning to show signs of peaking, but the numbers of infected blacks and Hispanics were very satisfactory. The CDC was projecting a sixty per cent mortality for blacks in the United States and that was only for the initial infection. Below that curve were figures for secondary infection rates, taken from antibody studies. It predicted that most of the rest of the blacks and darker skinned Hispanics would become infected, though it might be another year or two before they started dying if the disease followed the initial pattern. Never mind, there was time, and having to wait just meant he could keep Martial Law in effect that much longer.

The Goldwater virus was even more promising. Marshall actually smiled when he interpreted those figures. The ragheads would be finding out very shortly that their God wasn't so great after all. Goddamned pagans, sticking their asses up in the air to pray. What kind of religion was that? Serves them right, he thought.

The president didn't notice the expression on John Dawson's face when he smiled over the morbidity reports. He was so used to having the Secret Service agent there five days a week that he rarely noticed him any more except for the special, private conferences when he made him step outside.

Dawson knew what the papers the president was reading contained. He had been there when an aide dropped them off with the words "Latest morbidity reports, sir."

* * * *

Doug sent two couriers to try contacting the commander of the army troops, to apprise him of the situation in the CDC admin building. It was an agonizing, three hour wait, while he kept his troops on guard against further incursions toward the part of the CDC complex he still held. The wait was complicated by the ache in his leg. Painkillers were in short supply and he had given his morphine packet to the doctors for use on the more seriously wounded. He passed along explicit instructions to not fire unless fired upon and the shooting gradually slowed to a halt. When it did, he sent a courier over to the administrative building, waving a white flag. In the meantime, he tried to ignore the noises drifting across from the transient apartments, where the few unbroken windows had been opened to let in some air. Apparently the invaders were sacking the apartments, and by the sound of it, had found enough liquor to turn the looting into a party. The man bearing the white flag had disappeared into the admin building and not yet returned.

The firing from back where the army paratroops had landed continued, but eventually one of the couriers made his way back, along with a captain in fatigues that still retained a bit of a crease. A staff officer, Doug knew immediately. Nevertheless, it was a contact and that was what he had been hoping for.

He got painfully to his feet as the captain was led into Gene's office, now his by default.

The captain looked around as if searching for someone with an officer's insignia sewn on a fatigue collar. Doug waited him out. Damned if he would give him the satisfaction. Finally the officer said "You're the commander here?"

"That's right, Captain. Doug Craddock." He had to force himself not to touch the seeping wound on his forehead where a concrete chip had struck him.

"I'm Captain Saflin, Mr. Craddock. I thought there was a former colonel in charge. Where is he?" The question was posed as if couldn't imagine why a commanding officer couldn't be as clean and alert as he was. Certainly he wasn't envisioning anyone with a dirty face streaked with a mixture of blood and sweat and a bloody bandage on one leg.

"He was killed in action, so you're going to have to be satisfied with a former major. Shall we get to business? The people holding the hostages are probably getting impatient."

"What is it you want, Mr. Craddock?"

"I want to save some lives, if I can. The CDC director is a captive, as well as most of the administrative staff. I want the army to hold off while I negotiate with them."

"Mr. Craddock, our mission is to restore order to Atlanta and regain control of The Center for Disease Control. We are in the process of restoring order to the city. The CDC comes next. I'm sorry if hostages get hurt, but our orders leave little leeway for negotiation."

"At least hold off until I find out exactly what the situation is in the captured buildings"

Captain Saflin cocked his head, listening. "It sounds as if a drunken party is going on in one of them."

"That's the living quarters. I'm not worried about what happens there. It's the staff we need to save. They're needed to run this place."

"I'm sorry, but..."

A knock on the door interrupted them. Doug's envoy to the admin building entered without waiting to be told to come in. He began talking immediately. "Doug, they say they'll negotiate, but they want the man in charge. I guess that's you, now. They said you can bring one person with you and to come unarmed."

"How about the staff? Are they still alive?"

"I saw some of them, Doug. They're scared to death, but don't look like they've been hurt yet, other than the ones that tried to fight. Some of them are dead. I saw..."

"Never mind, Ben. Wait on me outside and you can go back with me." Doug very carefully refrained from asking who had been killed. He dared not think of June while he had everyone else to consider.

"You heard the man, Captain Saflin. Would you like to come with me?"

The officer looked as if he had been asked to jump off the top of a tall building without a parachute. "Uh, no. I need to report back to Colonel Christian. I'll tell him what you said, but I can't guarantee anything."

"Wait a moment then. I want to send someone with you to report back to me." Doug went to the door. "Ben, round up a volunteer to go with Captain Saflin here to the Army command post. Bring whoever agrees to go back here quickly."

"Got it, Doug."

Doug noticed the look of disapproval on the officer's face. He forced a smile. "What's wrong, Captain? Not used to first names from subordinates?" Immediately after he had spoken, he wished he could take the words back. There was no sense in antagonizing the man. "Never mind," he amended. "We're pretty informal here."

Before Ben returned, the desk phone rang. Power to the building was out, but the phone lines were still intact. He almost dropped the phone when he picked up the handset and heard who it was.

"Office of the Vice President of the United States calling for Colonel Bradley."

Doug took a deep breath, suddenly feeling out of his depth. "This is Bradley's assistant. Doug Craddock. Colonel Bradley was killed in action, so I'm in charge."

There was the barest hesitation. "One moment please."

While he was on hold, Doug said to the captain sotto voice "Sir, please wait here. I believe this call may interest you."

A moment later he heard a voice that sounded like the vice president he had heard on the air, yet subtly different. She's not speaking to an audience, that's the difference, he decided.

"Mr. Craddock, I'm told you are in charge of the defense of the CDC now."

"Yes ma'am."

"Fine. I could offer condolences for Colonel Bradley, but I imagine we have more important things to talk about. I understand some of the staff are being held prisoner?"

"Yes ma'am. Amelia Foster, the director; her assistant, and an unknown but large portion of the administrative staff. I've sent a courier over with an offer to negotiate for their release."

Doug thought he detected a note of relief in her voice. "Good. I'm going to give you a phone number that connects directly to my personal phone. Take it down, please."

Doug wrote while she carefully read off the numbers.

"I've got it, Ms. Vice President."

"It's Mrs., please. I was married, you know. Now Doug—it is all right to call you Doug isn't it?"

"Certainly ma'am," he answered, feeling a sense of warm regard for the vice president course through him.

"Fine. Now then Doug, I've just been in contact with the brigade commander in Atlanta and ordered him to try his utmost to free the hostages without bloodshed, despite the havoc those people have caused. In a way, I can't blame them."

"Neither can I, Mrs. Vice President," Doug responded. And deep down, he couldn't.

"Good. Colonel Christian told me he had sent someone back to you with a courier you dispatched. Is he there yet?"

"Yes ma'am. Captain Saflin is standing by right now."

"That's wonderful, because I've temporarily lost contact with the colonel. Let me talk to the captain, please."

Doug handed over the phone. "It's the Vice President, Captain Saflin."

He saw the officer stiffen as he listened, despite an expression that grew ever more disapproving the longer he held the phone. Finally he turned it back over to Doug.

"Doug Craddock, Mrs. Vice President."

"Doug, I've given the captain orders to return and tell Colonel Christian to contact you as soon as possible and to follow your lead in the negotiations. Please try to get this settled without any more violence."

"I'll do my best, ma'am." He hesitated, but felt he had to ask. "Ma'am, is there any chance these rumors about government involvement are true?"

"Doug, I can only say that from conversations I've had with the president and our national security director, the government was not involved. Now I've got to go. Do your best, and thank you for helping. Call me if you need me."

"Yes ma'am. Thank you." He placed the handset back in the cradle and raised his brows at the captain, whose puckered cheeks looked as if he had a mouthful of alum.

"Mr. Craddock, apparently you have more political influence than the new military governor of Atlanta. I've been ordered to tell the commander that you will negotiate with the rioters—and to bring him to your headquarters so that he can participate."

"Fine. Get him back here as quickly as possible." Doug grinned. "If I'm not here, send him over to the

admin building. That's where I'll be.” He saw no good reason to inform the captain that if he had any political influence, this was the first he had heard of it.

CHAPTER TWENTY

All the captives were crammed into the lobby of the administrative building. There were only two small bathrooms for them and people waited impatiently in lines. There was still no power to the building but fortunately the water system was working.

Amelia had just come from using the facilities, even though there was no toilet paper left and they had been forbidden to send anyone to the basement to have it replenished. She had found the lobby staff and got them to show her their paper files, then decided on her own which ones could be sacrificed to use as a substitute for paper in the bathrooms. It was very hot. Some of the men had stripped to the waist, but none of the women followed suit. She didn't blame them, not the way the guards stared at them with eyes full of menace and anticipatory lust.

"I guess I'll have to go stand in line soon again soon," June remarked, pulling her blouse away from her chest and blowing air down inside.

"There's too many people crowded in here," Amelia said. "The bathrooms are getting filthy. I'll be back in a minute. I'm going to see if the guards will let me assign someone to keep them at least minimally sanitary."

June nodded, but didn't speak. She was deathly afraid for herself and the others and was worried sick about Doug's safety. Had they taken the whole CDC complex? Had its defenders all been killed, or had some escaped? The guards brusquely repelled any requests for information. One woman had become hysterical and gotten a rifle butt in the face for her trouble. June remembered only snatches of the defense training she had very briefly participated in, firing her little pistol until the two clips she carried were exhausted. She had no idea whether she had hit anyone or not. After that she had begun nursing the wounded until they were overrun. An image of a man being gunned down as he tried to the last to keep them safe flashed through her mind. After that it had been mass confusion, with an influx of black men and women boiling through both entrances to the improvised treatment ward, shouting triumphantly, waving rifles and pistols, cuffing and clubbing everyone to the floor amid screams of fear and prayers to the Almighty. She had expected to die then, but surprisingly, only two persons had been shot, both of them so hysterical that they wouldn't stop screaming.

Amelia returned a moment later. Blood was trickling from the corner of her lip where one of the guards had slapped her. It was beginning to swell. "So much for that. I guess they'll stay dirty, but ... June, when you go, would you please tell the people to try to clean up after themselves as best they can? Tell everyone to pass it on to the people in line behind them, too." She searched her pockets for something to use to staunch the flow of blood but found nothing. She had to be content to wipe at it with her hand then smear it on the carpet.

June got up and stood in line until her turn came. When others came to stand behind her, she repeated Amelia's request. Ten minutes later, she saw what Amelia had meant. Since her last trip, the conditions inside had deteriorated. She wet some of the copy paper she had brought with her to try wiping gunk from soiled surfaces. Soon enough, she had to quit because of impatient sounds from those waiting to relieve themselves.

Amelia was dabbing at her lip with a handkerchief someone had found for her when June returned. All the way back she had seen one of the black guards following her with his eyes, a smirk of sexual innuendo giving an indication of what he thought would occur in the near future. She shivered despite the heat as she sat back down.

Amelia saw the look on her face. "Hold on, June. If it's possible, Doug will rescue us."

June felt tears gathering and brushed at her eyes. "Oh God, Amelia, he may not even be alive! I don't think I could stand it if he's been killed. I can't go through that, not again. I love him so much."

"Don't give up hope. Remember, the rest of the people here are depending on us." Amelia put an arm around her, hugged her for a moment, then stood up. "Stay here for a moment while I circulate and try passing out a little comfort and reassurance."

June took a deep breath and fought back the tears. She felt ashamed of herself. So many people around the world had lost whole families, children included, and they had died in agony, most of them. At least if Doug..." She bowed her head and tried not to think of it.

Amelia was back a few moments later. She licked at her swollen lip and tried a smile. "I couldn't do much. It hurts to talk. And I must look like an ogre." She brushed her uncombed hair back behind her shoulders.

June suddenly saw the smirking guard moving toward them. She sucked in her breath, thinking this was probably the beginning of what would prove to be much worse than captivity in a sweltering room. Instead, the guard touched Amelia's shoulder.

"On your feet, white meat." He laughed at his rhyme. "Get your pussy moving. The Preacher want to see you." He grinned again, showing some missing teeth and looked directly at June. "You next, bitch. I put my name down for you." He prodded Amelia with the barrel of his rifle. "Move!"

June started to feel her soul shrinking down into a place she didn't want to go to. She bit her lip, then forced herself to sit up straight and find a reservoir of courage. She was a nurse, damn it, and with Amelia gone to God knew what fate, she was in charge. She couldn't break down. She squared her shoulders and in a moment was back in control. She made a vow to herself that she would never let go again, no matter what. If Doug was dead, she would make him proud of the way she conducted herself, and if she lived ... well, she would bear whatever came with as much dignity as she could and go back to him with her head held high. In the meantime, she would quit acting like some little shrinking violet and try helping those here in far worse shape than herself. Some people were beginning to show signs of heat exhaustion; the body heat of so many people in an enclosed area was adding to the already hot and humid environment. She got up and began mingling with the packed crowd of sweltering humanity. Presently she heard screams coming from one of the closed rooms. She and a few others started in that direction but were stopped by a guard. After that she sat back down and tried to shut out the sounds of the screams. It was a long time until they died out.

* * * *

"Hello, Fridge. It's been a long time," Doug said the instant he spotted his old platoon sergeant. *By God! Maybe they had a chance after all!* Fridge had been a damn good platoon sergeant and a good man in all other respects. But what was he doing with people like these?

Ali Greene froze in momentary consternation. Goddamn! Doug Craddock, his old subordinate when he was an assistant platoon sergeant and his superior after Doug went through officers candidate school and got his commission. Fridge remembered how they had both been surprised and pleased when they wound up together again, this time with Doug as a new second lieutenant and him a full platoon sergeant. He also remembered that as a platoon leader, Doug had never lied to his men and turned out to be the best officer he ever served under. He hadn't let a commission go to his head, either. When their paths crossed later and they were no longer together in the chain of command, Doug had resumed their old friendship even though he had advanced to captain by then. Doug and his wife had visited his home,

played with his kids, and stayed on a first name basis with him as if there was no divide between their respective ranks.

"Captain Craddock!" Fridge held out his hand before he quite realized what he was doing.

Doug shook the proffered hand grinning at the big man, glad to see him again despite the circumstances. "Just Doug now. How you doing, Fridge?"

Fridge looked down at their clasped hands and then withdrew his when he saw disapproval written on Qualluf's face. "I'm okay so far, Cap ... Doug. But this ain't a friendly meeting, not now."

Doug sobered. "Yeah, I know. I'm sorry, Fridge. How's Latanya and the kids?"

"They're gone."

"Oh, shit, Fridge. I'm sorry. I'm sorry as hell." He saw tears in his old friend's eyes and instinctively moved forward and hugged him. "Goddamn those bastards who started this shit. Damn them all to hell!"

Qualluf broke it up, while at the same time wondering how he could use the apparent past friendship of the two men for his own purposes. "Sorry don't get it, peckerwood. You sit down. Now!" He pointed to a folding chair set up in the small office off the lobby. The windows were both broken, letting some air in from the outside, but it was still baking hot. Beads of perspiration were forming and running down the faces of everyone in the room.

"You're Qualluf Taylor, aren't you?" Doug said, almost sure he recognized the man.

"I'm the man got your balls in my hand, that's all you need to know."

Doug nodded to Buddy Hawkins, the person he had chosen to bring with him. He would rather have had Teresa in case something happened to him but he didn't dare bring a woman into this environment. He and Buddy took their seats. Qualluf, Fridge and a guard by the door were the only others in the room.

Qualluf slid ostentatiously into the seat behind the desk, the position of power. He gave Buddy only a cursory glance but glared at Doug, already aware of where the power lay. "Okay, white boy, here's what..."

Doug held up his hand. "Mr. Taylor, we won't make much progress if you start off using epithets. How about us keeping the discussion cordial?" Doug knew he was no diplomat, feeling much more comfortable in a structured environment like the military, but he did understand the art of negotiation enough not to let the other side start off in a dominant position.

Qualluf continued to glare. "You been using epithets for 500 years."

"I haven't," Doug said quietly, keeping his gaze firmly locked to that of Qualluf's. "Besides, that's not the issue here. Your status, and that of the people you're holding captives, is."

"Listen, peckerwood, we dead anyway. Why should we give you anything?"

"Because the Vice President of the United States is counting on the people you're holding to help find a cure for the Harcourt Virus, or failing that, a treatment. She's authorized me to do what it takes to get them back on the job." Doug didn't bother to distinguish between administrative staff and the scientists. He didn't know if the leaders like Qualluf knew the difference. And poor Fridge was probably still so grief-wracked that he didn't give a damn.

"Huh. Like that Santes bitch care what happen to black folk."

Doug got to his feet. "Mr. Taylor, I won't go any farther with this discussion while you have that attitude. I've spoken personally to the vice president. Believe me, she's grieving as much as I am. I lost my best friend to that damned bug."

"White men don't have black friends. Now you..."

Fridge had been standing and listening. He said "Preacher, you can trust this man. I know him. He about as good as they come."

"Trust him to do what?" Qualluf spat. "Let us go home to die? We want the cure you been holding back and don't try claiming you ain't got it. You do."

Doug sat back down. He didn't like the man sitting across from him one little bit but he couldn't just walk out—even supposing they would let him. "Mr. Taylor, believe me, there is no cure yet. We're still working on it—and you're the one holding up progress. You don't really believe we would hold back a cure if we had one, do you?"

"I damn sure do. Your fucking white man's government started this hell-spawned virus. You think we don't know that? You think shootin' those dumbass rednecks going to convince us it didn't start in Washington?"

"No. To begin with, there's not a soul in Washington smart enough to create a virus capable of causing a pandemic, except maybe Mrs Santes. She was a doctor before she entered politics."

"They give the orders. Same thing."

"Mr. Taylor, the Harcourt virus was created by a rogue scientist by the name of Savak Johannsen. He was aided in his movements and funneled money and was helped to move about by those very same men who were publicly executed. The money came from a white supremacist organization which has since been declared illegal. Their members are being hunted down and rounded up. You know all of that as well as I do." Doug didn't mention that Johannsen was being guarded at the same instant over in the science building. That was a trump card he would play if he had to. He wanted to ask about June's status but didn't dare for fear of having her singled out—or learning she was dead.

Qualluf leaned back in his chair and motioned to the guard. When he came over, Qualluf said "Go fetch the bitch and bring her back here." After the man left, he crossed his arms over his chest and simply stared. Qualluf's eyes glinted with hidden amusement at the shock the white boy had coming—and an uneasy remembrance of the woman's screams. He shrugged off the image. Sympathy could play no part in his life now, and that woman deserved what she got. He was convinced of it.

Doug looked over at Fridge. His old friend and comrade gazed silently back, his face immobile, but Doug thought he saw signs of uneasiness being hidden behind that mask. A couple of minutes later, he found out why.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Amelia was barely recognizable. Her face was battered almost beyond recognition, with cut and swollen lips and cheeks. One eye was almost completely closed and the other was only partially open. Her hair hung in greasy strands to her shoulders, laying lankly on the tattered remnants of her blouse. It had rips and missing buttons and she no longer owned a bra. One of her breasts was almost completely exposed. The pants she had been wearing were also torn at the seams and streaked with blood. She limped painfully while being supported under one arm by the guard. When he let her loose she dropped to the floor. A moan escaped her grotesquely swollen lips.

"Good God! Amelia!" Doug was off his feet and down beside her instantly, ignoring orders to halt. Amelia squinted painfully and appeared to recognize him. "Doug," she whispered pitifully.

He looked up from where he was kneeling beside her, rage written in the stark lines of his face. "You sorry bastard! What did you do this for?"

Qualluf simply looked at her. "Tell him, bitch. Tell him what you told us."

"They made me say it," Amelia said, seeming to find a fragment of remaining courage. "It's not true. We didn't ... didn't start the Harcourt ... virus. We don't ... don't have a cure." She peered blurrily around the room, seemed to recognize Qualluf. Her voice rose, shrill but cracking at the end. "There is no cure!"

Qualluf jumped to his feet, roaring. "Goddamned white bitch! You told me there's a cure! We want it!"

"Doug, please..." Amelia's voice broke completely as she collapsed into a heap, sobbing and moaning.

Doug stood up, coming between her and Qualluf. "The negotiations are ended. They won't start again until I see her taken to the treatment center and turned over to the doctors."

"Keep talking, white meat, an' you be lookin' just like her," Qualluf said.

Ignoring him, Doug took out his phone and rang his office. Teresa answered. "Doug here," he said without preliminaries. "Send two men with a stretcher over here immediately. Have them wave a white flag as they come. They'll be expected." He flipped the phone closed and closed the distance between himself and the preacher, his expression hardened into rigid flinty lines. "And you call me anything except Mr. Craddock again and it's going to be Fridge I negotiate with, and you're going to be left out of whatever amnesty I can arrange. Now go tell your men to let the stretcher bearers through."

"I'll do it, Preacher," Fridge said to Qualluf, a sudden desire to live taking hold of him. Seeing Doug had revived something inside that had been lost beneath the vast bleakness left by the loss of his family. He glanced down at Amelia then looked away, ashamed of what he had let happen.

Qualluf looked rebellious and stood his ground.

Doug watched as Fridge strode over to the door. He spoke to the guard in the old command tone he remembered so well. The guard left immediately, giving Doug a clue to where at least part of the black power in Atlanta resided.

"Thanks, Fridge. We can work this out—and listen; I've been party to most of the progress toward a cure here. I can tell you that there isn't one, and in all honesty there might not be one in time to help. The scientists and doctors have just now discovered a few promising drugs to follow up on. They may or may not work and that's all I can tell you. However, if they do, I'll personally guarantee that no bureaucratic bullshit keeps them from being dispensed quickly."

"They stalling," Qualluf said, still angry at Fridge's usurpation of authority.

"The scientists and their staff have been working twelve hour shifts, seven days a week," Doug returned. "Don't tell me they're stalling." He felt a weak touch on his leg and looked down. Amelia's fingers were trying to get a grasp on his fatigue trousers in an attempt to attract his attention. He bent down and put his head near hers, seeing how white her complexion—what was left of it—had become.

"Doug, it was..." Her eyes rolled up and she lost consciousness. He touched her face. It felt cold and damp, symptoms of shock. He stood up and looked around, then grabbed some heavy volumes from a bookcase against one wall. He stretched Amelia's body out and propped her feet up on them. That was all he could do. When he finished, he stood back up, staring at Qualluf with an expression of such raw hatred for the man that the preacher finally averted his gaze and returned to his chair behind the desk.

* * * *

The stretcher bearers and Colonel Christian arrived at almost the same time.

"Get her to a doctor soon as you can," Doug instructed the men. "She's in shock." He watched them carry Amelia from the room at a fast pace, then before the guard could close the door, Colonel Christian was led into the room.

"Who is it here that's in contact with the vice president?" he asked immediately. Christian was a tall man with even features and the tanned skin that showed him to be a field officer.

"I am," Doug said. "Fridge, could we have some more coffee in here? This may take a while and I'm too tired to stay awake much longer."

"You don't need no coffee," Qualluf said.

Fridge nodded to the guard, ignoring Qualluf's baleful glare. He was gone less than a minute and returned bearing three Styrofoam cups of coffee. While he was out, Doug introduced himself, at the same time making a swift appraisal of Christian. He looked young to be a full colonel, indicating either a high level of competence or a lot of political pull.

"I want to confirm those orders from the vice president," Christian said. "Our military communications are still erratic. Someone must have put a satellite suppressor in the same orbit as ours."

"The phone's still working. Let me try." Doug dialed the number he had committed to memory. A woman with a pleasant voice answered. He identified himself and asked for the vice president. A moment later she was on the line.

"Ma'am, I have Colonel Christian here and we're with the leaders of the group holding the hostages. Their names are Qualluf Taylor of the Church of Blacks, and Ali Greene." He handed the phone to the colonel.

The brigade commander listened for a few moments, nodding his head occasionally. Finally he said "I understand, ma'am." He flipped the phone closed and handed it to Doug, then turned his attention to the two black leaders.

"All right, I've just been told that I'm to follow Mr. Craddock's lead in the negotiations. Let's get started."

Doug liked the man's take charge attitude but wasn't sure how well it would go over with Qualluf Taylor. The Church of Blacks' leader was still glaring, first at Doug, then at Colonel Christian, and finally even at Fridge. Doug shrugged mentally and said "Mr. Taylor, we need to get the CDC back in operation as quickly as possible. They're not just working on the Harcourt virus yet, though some drugs are showing

promise. There's a new virus loose as well."

"I know about the new one. First Blacks, now Muslims. And you telling me the government not behind it?"

Doug sighed. The man was fixated on the idea and he didn't have any idea how to get him off it. "I won't argue the matter with you; the Vice President of the United States told me personally that she has no knowledge of government involvement and that the president himself gave her the authority to end this standoff. And I've already told you that so far as I know, there is not a cure for the Harcourt virus, not yet. Even a vaccine is still months away, if one can be developed at all. So tell me now, what is it you want?"

Qualluf didn't answer for long moments. He appeared to be running his options through his mind. Doug was about to ask again, when he broke the silence. "All us folk go free. You white boys can go free, but we keep the women to be sure you don't renege."

"No. Here's what we'll do. Every one of you can go free. No retaliation. You release the hostages. You can leave a dozen observers of your own choice to remain here at the CDC. I'll give them authority to poke into any records they want to. Any at all. They can stay as long as they like, observe any of the research they like and I'll allow them to report back to you once a day." He held up a finger to indicate that he wasn't finished yet, then added "And I'll recommend to the vice president that enforcement of drug laws be suspended insofar as it covers painkillers; heroin, morphine and the like. I can't guarantee that last part; all I can do is ask. Now if that's not enough, why don't you tell me about anything else that's bothering you."

"*You* bothering us, just like you been for 500 years. We got your women already. And if they's no cure, we dead anyway. Maybe we just keep them and see how long it take to fuck 'em to death." Qualluf grinned, displaying his diamond studded teeth.

Doug clenched his teeth in an effort not to climb over the desk and throttle the black preacher. *He's playing to our fears, Doug thought, and he's right. No matter how you feel intellectually, there's always the cultural stuff. It's hard to root out. Goddamn him, if ...* He bit his inner lip hard enough to draw blood. "You're not going to do that, Mr. Taylor."

"I'm not, huh? How you planning on stopping me?"

Doug looked at his watch. "If either myself or Colonel Christian aren't back within another two hours, I've left word for my people to contact the army and tell them we're dead. That will be their signal to re-take the CDC by force."

"We'll set the motherfucking place on fire you try it."

"If we don't come back, your only contact with the army or the government is dead. You'll wind up tied to a post just like those sorryass white supremacists were, instead of being in line for the new drugs if they work. Why in hell don't you try helping for a change?" The lie about having to make contact within two hours came out of his mouth so quickly that he didn't know he had formed the idea until he had said it, and then he knew it was a precaution he should have put in place before coming here. If he and Christian both died, there would be no point in further negotiations, the way he saw it.

Colonel Christian spoke for the first time, forming his words carefully. "Mr. Taylor, my original orders called for me to secure the CDC facility as my number one priority. It's only through the good offices of the vice president that we didn't simply move in here and kill every one of you that resisted. Now let me add something else to the discussion. Mr. Craddock?"

"Go ahead Colonel."

"Before I left my headquarters, I gave orders to temporarily halt our advance and to fire only when fired upon. I don't want any more civilian casualties than necessary to restore order. Agree to Mr. Craddock's conditions and you can return with me and help settle the population down and put those rumors that started this fighting to rest. You would be doing both your country and your people a favor."

"Ain't my country no more. No deal. Like I told you, we dead anyway." Qualluf folded his arms across his chest again, as if prepared to wait for better terms.

Exasperated, Doug looked over at Fridge. His friend had a distinctly uncomfortable expression on his face but appeared to be waiting on developments before making any kind of decision on his own. Somehow, he had to get Fridge over to the side of reason. He didn't think that even losing his family could have robbed him of all the good he remembered in the man. He was trying to think of something else to say when a knock came at the door.

"Come in!" Qualluf bellowed.

A light complexioned black man with a pistol stuck in his belt stepped into the room. "Preacher, we just grab a white boy holdin' a white flag. He say some Amelia bitch want to talk to the man here. He say it 'portant, like about that 'hannsen dude invented that viral be killin us. Say he has to know. What you want me do with him?"

Doug stood up. He caught Amelia's name and the reference to the scientist even through the thick vernacular of black patois the man spoke.

"Colonel, I think I better run back over there for a few minutes and see what this is about. Do you want to stay or go?"

"I can stay for awhile. Perhaps Mr. Taylor and Greene and I can talk further while you're gone."

"I ain't say you can go yet," Qualluf said, half rising from his chair.

"Well, I'm going. Fridge, I need to speak to you for a moment."

"No!" Qualluf shouted.

Doug stared daggers at the man. "Mr. Taylor, Fridge lost his wife and children to the Harcourt virus. I lost my wife to the Mall Terrorists. I promise, this is personal and has nothing to do with our negotiations."

"No."

"I'll talk to him, Preacher," Fridge said mildly. "Can't hurt nothing. And maybe we better let him go see what's so important back there." Without waiting on an answer, he took Doug's arm and escorted him out of the room.

As quickly as they found a boundary of privacy in the hall, Fridge said "I didn't know about that, Doug. I'm sorry."

"Thanks, Fridge. Listen, as badly as Amelia was hurt, she wouldn't send for me if it weren't something important. In the meantime, would you do me a personal favor?"

"If I can."

"I just remarried. My wife's name is June. She was on the admin staff. Would you see if she's among the captives and if so, find out if she's okay? And I'd appreciate it if you would keep it quiet."

"I can do that much. June you say? Describe her for me."

Doug did so. Fridge nodded, then said "Doug, try to get us out of this. I believe you, but that preacher got more power here than me and he's convinced the government is behind the whole thing." He looked down at his feet for a moment, then back up at Doug. "I was too, until I talked to you. I never knew you to lie."

"Thanks, Fridge. I'll do my damndest to get it done. And trust me, if I thought the government was behind this, I'd be on your side."

That drew a thin smile from the big man. He escorted Doug on down the hall and outside, then designated two guards to go with him back to the science building under a white flag. After that he went looking for June Craddock. He wondered if she were as nice a woman as Doug's previous wife had been.

On the way back, Doug mentally reviewed everything he knew about the preacher. He recalled reading that Qualluf had a PhD. in psychology. Was that why he was using black vernacular, to make him think he was dealing with a dumb black man? Probably he thought. Too bad the preacher didn't know that Doug had managed to remove most of the negative cultural attitudes toward blacks he had grown up with. Being in the military and fighting alongside men and women of all races was one quick way to make both sides see how vulnerable they were—and how in a crunch, skin color was the last thing anyone thought of.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

President Marshall rubbed his hand over his face, feeling unshaven whiskers. It was late at night and his day hadn't ended yet. Every time he tried leaving the Oval Office, something else came up to capture his attention and prevent him from getting some badly needed sleep.

The latest crisis was in North Korea, where they were threatening nuclear retaliation for deaths caused by the Harcourt virus. Damned crazy Koreans, getting upset over casualties from the disease that were minuscule compared to some nations. Why hadn't Clinton, or even Bush, taken out their nuclear capability when they had a chance? Goddamn wimps. Now look. He shoved the briefing paper toward the pile destined for the shredder. What did they expect him to do? Personally, he thought they were going off the deep end because the world economy had crashed, and without exports they couldn't feed their people. They ought to be glad the Harcourt virus was thinning them out a little. Fewer mouths to feed.

General Newman wanted to act now, take out their nukes, but he had refused. It might come to that, but he wasn't going to start it. The little bastards had been digging into their mountains for damn near a quarter century. Deep probing satellite imagery showed so many tunnels and caverns that there was no way to get them all, despite the general's confidence. That man was beginning to grate on his nerves. But what to do?

Finally he pressed the button that called in an aide.

"Get me Willingham. Tell him to get his ass up here as soon as possible."

It's worth a try, he thought. Get China to do the job. They had the manpower and the nukes, if it came to that. Anything to keep them away from America. The nation was holding together but he didn't think it could survive the panic that would be caused by an atomic explosion on North American soil. China's war with Taiwan wasn't going well. If he offered to stop all replacement munitions shipments to Taiwan and withdraw the few naval units near the island, maybe they would come around—if their government survived long enough. So many factories on the mainland had shut down that the peasants and workers were going hungry.

Australia. Now that was one of the few nations in the world almost unaffected by the Harcourt virus. Damn smart of them, keeping blacks and Asians out of their country, and their indigenous blacks were no problem. Besides they would be dead soon. Australia had a fairly decent navy, according to General Newman. Suppose he offered some inducements, additional weapons perhaps, for them to send some troops to Africa and the Middle East? Maybe even South America, at selected ports that could be easily defended. Best to keep a toehold there if they could. At least the Aussies weren't big enough to turn on the United States and had never developed nuclear weapons. He made another note for Willingham.

He looked at his next brief and scribbled an okay with his distinctive flourish. Defaulting on some of the bonds held by foreigners and releasing the gold in Fort Knox to the citizenry would help stimulate the economy. Of course the default wouldn't be couched in those terms. It would be worded as a "postponement in payment", but he knew the debts would never be paid.

Marshall sighed. Where was Willingham?

A half hour later the man appeared, tie askew and hair uncombed, as if he had been running his fingers through it. The president frowned. He had never seen the man in such a state.

"I'm sorry I was delayed, Mr. President, but a suicide squad just crashed a jetliner into a skyscraper in

Chicago, and Turkey and the Kurds are fighting again. What are we going to do?"

Marshall groaned. Would this madness never end? Goddamn it, the Arabs were finished. Why didn't they just go quietly to their heaven and virgins and so forth and quit this martyr bullshit?

* * * *

June did the best she could to keep the captives calm and under control and to give what little aid she could to some of the older workers who were prostrate with heat exhaustion. All she could really do was keep pushing liquids and bathing them with cool water. Fortunately, there was plenty of water and the guards allowed them to go to and from the fountains. She avoided the area where the smirking guard lolled in one of the padded lobby chairs, knowing he had turned her into a focal point; a visible object of the misery the blacks were suffering. She was scared of him. She had just finished tending to an older woman whose breathing was becoming irregular, using cool water carried from the drinking fountain, when the guards changed shifts. The smirking black who had been following her all day with his eyes didn't leave the lobby like the others who had been relieved. Instead, he headed in her direction as she went over to check on a patient.

The wounded and sick staff workers were laid out in rows at the edge of the crowd, where what little air circulation there was could get to them. Most of them were suffering silently, but a few were moaning with pain. June was kneeling by the side of a man, checking his pulse, when she felt a presence behind her. She looked around. The guard who had been watching her was wearing a leer now. "On your feet, bitch. Some other peoples got needs, too." His lips split into a grin, displaying his missing teeth.

June didn't move, but simply stared up at him, in the manner of a death row inmate whose cell had just opened for the escort to enter, ready to usher the prisoner on the short but utterly terrifying last steps to the death chamber.

The black's lips closed in anger at her lack of response. A knife suddenly appeared in his hand as he leaned over her. The point broke the skin on the side of her neck, a pinprick, but it felt as though the knife was entering her body—just as this man planned on doing, and just as brutally as a knife blade would have been. His other hand closed over her upper arm, gripping it painfully. He jerked her to her feet. She felt more pain as he pulled on her, and felt the point of the blade dig in and open up a narrow cut. A second later it was at her back, probing at her spine as she felt blood wetting her blouse below the shallow neck wound.

"This be sharp, bitch. How you like it you be par'lyzed? Move you pussy."

Stumbling with fear, June complied. She couldn't endure the thought of the knife blade entering her spine, seeking out her spinal cord. Better to let him have his way and hope she survived. She had seen a figure out of one of the windows who she thought was Amelia, being carried back to the science building on a stretcher, and now she remembered the screams she had heard shortly after Amelia had been dragged off, to the same room this man was steering her toward. *That's going to happen to me*, she thought, her mind skittering around imagined scenes, as if trying to find an alternate when the previous one was too frightening to contemplate. *Oh, Doug! Doug!* She cried his name to herself as if she were praying, and perhaps she was.

The door opened and a hard shove sent her reeling inside. She landed on the carpeted surface, near where it was already spotted with blood stains. They were still damp and sticky.

* * * *

Amelia looked worse than when he last saw her, Doug thought. IV bottles were hooked to both arms and her head had been partially shaved to expose a deep gash running from her forehead back past her

hairline. The swelling had increased and purpled, like a discolored volcano dome rising under pressure from below. He knew she could barely see to recognize him through eyelids so puffed that they allowed only slits of light, but she was conscious and alert, no longer in shock. She gripped his hand and squeezed feebly. He felt tears leak from his eyes at the sight of her mangled face. He could only imagine what damage had occurred to the rest of her body, and didn't want to think about the degradation she must have suffered, nor what it might have done to her mind.

"Doug ... thank you. I have to make this quick, because I've been holding off taking a shot and I'm going to have surgery soon; I've got some internal injuries, they said." She breathed heavily through a miasma of pain, then found the strength to continue. "I found out just before the attack. Johannsen says ... Doug, he says the funding and technical data came from us. It was just funneled through the supremacists ... Oh God, I didn't want to believe it, but he swears it's ... it's true."

"You mean to tell me the CDC gave him a start on the virus?" He simply couldn't believe that.

"No, no ... it didn't come from here. It was a private lab, funded by the CIA, he thinks. He ... he says Edgar Tomlin was in on it ... when he was Director ... oh, Doug, please find out if this is true. Please. We have to know."

Everything Amelia said was filtered through the distortion of pain from her injuries, but he understood almost every word. It made him feel sick inside just thinking that their own government might have been responsible for the catastrophic result of Johannsen's actions. He stood, stunned, unable to even speak until someone tapped him on the shoulder. He turned around to see a tired looking young woman in surgical scrubs. Nearby was an operating room gurney.

"We're ready for her. I'm going to give her the pre-op now."

Doug came back to reality. "Just one more minute. "Amelia, has he said anything about a cure or a vaccine?"

"No cure. Jenkins thinks the ... the data he got from him may ... may make a vaccine. And there's something else he ... I can't think now. I hurt inside."

"Amelia, I'll have this tracked to the source, be sure of that. Now you get well." He squeezed her hand and made way for the medical people. He watched as Amelia was administered a shot by the nurse in scrubs, then transferred to the gurney and wheeled away. A moment later he headed toward the basement where he knew Savak Johannsen was being guarded. If he had time after that, then he would talk to Stephen Jenkins, a scientist June had told him about earlier who was doing research on a vaccine for the Harcourt virus. Every bit of information he could gather might be useful in freeing the hostages. The thought of hostages brought images of June back into the forefront of his mind. He tried not to think about what Fridge might have found out.

The last thing Doug did before leaving Amelia was to give his personal phone number to Amelia's nurse and ask her to have Amelia call him just as soon as she recovered from the surgery and was able to talk. He impressed on her the importance of his message by telling her it might mean the difference between freeing the hostages or not.

* * * *

"One of your thugs took her off," a woman Fridge was questioning said bitterly.

"What! Where did he take her? Quick, woman!"

"So you can get in on the action, goddamn you! This is a ... a place of science, not a ... find her yourself.

I won't tell you." She bowed her head, expecting to be hit or slapped.

Fridge didn't give a damn what she thought right at the moment. Instead of slapping her, he reached out one huge hand and gathered the lapels of her blouse and yanked her toward him. "You fool, I'm trying to save her, not hurt her! Now where is she?"

"Who are ... I don't know who you are. No."

Fridge tightened his grip and put her face inches away from his. His eyes burned with urgency. "Listen to me. I know Doug. He sent me to find her. Now where is she?"

It was the use of Doug's first name that convinced her. She searched his face, saw that it showed only a highly impatient concern, not a desire to join his fellow in whatever brutalities were taking place. She pointed toward a door. "In there."

Even if she had not shown him the way, Fridge would have found it a second later when a shrill frightened scream rent the air, petrifying in its intensity. Fridge pushed the woman away from him and ran toward the sound, drawing his pistol as he went. The door was locked. He backed off and kicked hard once, twice, and the lock peeled away from its rended frame. The door burst open.

June had just managed to jerk loose from the man assaulting her and was running toward the door where he leaned his rifle. The edge of the door slapped her in the head as it flew open, knocking her down. When she saw the huge black man shove the door closed behind him, she began crying. *Not two of them*, she thought hysterically. Then she saw the gun he was holding. *They're going to kill me when they're finished. Oh, Doug. We were so happy*. She bowed her head, shedding bitter tears as she waited for them to finish stripping her. She was already bare to the waist. Her breasts had bright streaks fingernail scratches marring their surface.

"You want some too, Fridge? Hold her for me first. I give her a piece of black meat, maybe she stop fighting." The guard's laugh halted abruptly as the flat of Fridge's calloused palm struck the side of his face with brutal force. He staggered backward and bounced off a wall. His eyes grew wide as Fridge advanced on him.

Fridge's mind was harkening back to memories of how nice Doris Craddock had always been, how supportive of her husband's concern for the troops. "Get your black ass out of here, Teacup. Any man have a need to rape a woman got something wrong in his head. No, wait. You tell the men The Fridge got this one marked for his own. Anybody diss her, they in a world of hurt. You hear?"

June's assailant nodded, knowing Fridge never made idle threats. Before he let the man leave, Fridge removed the clip from his rifle and ejected the cartridge in the chamber. "You get your ass out there and pass the word. I done had enough of this shit. It's one thing to fight a man when you think you got a reason. Raping helpless women not going to help anybody. Now git!"

Fridge didn't worry when he turned his back on the man. He had seen the fear on his face. He looked around, spotted June's bra and blouse. He picked them up. "Here, Mrs. Craddock. Get yourself covered and go back outside. Anybody bother you again, tell them the Fridge got you covered." He tried to smile at her but it was a caricature.

June looked at him, dubious of his sincerity, but willing to go along. At the very least, he had saved her from being raped and most likely beaten. She turned her back and started to put on the bra, then saw that it had been wrenched from her body with enough force to bend the hooks before tearing them out of the fabric. She dropped it to the floor and pulled on the blouse. She had to hold it together for now and hope she could find a safety pin or two outside. She turned to face the big man who had saved her.

"Thank you, whoever you are. What ... how...?"

"Never mind for now. Me and Doug go back a long time. He asked me to look for you." Finally Fridge did smile, but it was a very small one. "Looks like I found you just in time. Go on out with the others now. I'll follow you."

Suddenly the import of his words hit June like a blow. "Doug! He's alive!"

"He's alive," Fridge confirmed, urging her gently back through the doorway and out into the lobby.

June returned to the captives with a freshened heart, despite the path taken to get there. *Doug was alive!*

* * * *

Doug wanted to see Johannsen alone. He made his way to the Science Building, limping painfully from his leg wound. The basement was a cavern, divided off into storage rooms, pallets of supplies, vaults and bare machinery that kept the building functioning. Doug had been there only once or twice doing security checks, but he knew the general layout. He waited a few moments on the service elevator but for some reason it seemed to be stuck at the basement level. Maybe the power outages had damaged some of the circuitry, he thought. Impatient, he took the stairs and hurried down them. He didn't trust Qualluf Taylor to wait on him too long.

He pushed open the basement door and stopped in his tracks. A short, well muscled white man was dragging a body away that still had a knife hilt protruding from its back. Doug reacted almost immediately, but still almost lost his life. The moment he drew his gun and yelled "Stop!" the man dropped the body and flung himself sideways. He rolled, drawing a pistol and firing at the same time Doug did. Both of them missed with their first shots, but the other man was moving and Doug wasn't. He was able to take better aim. His second bullet cratered the man's forehead.

Doug knew there had to be someone else around. Assassins coming into a facility like this one wouldn't be working alone—and he knew intuitively that they must be after Johannsen. He ran for cover as soon as he saw that his shot had gone true. Gunfire rang out from behind an idle forklift as he ran. His quick movement saved him, but he didn't get away free. He took a bullet in his upper left arm and as he fell, another in same leg where he had been wounded before. His assailant made a single mistake; he came out from cover too soon, thinking he had done a complete job.

Doug had hung on to his pistol as he went down, knowing that if he dropped it, he was dead. He got off a quick snap shot that startled the gunman, then another that thudded into the man's stomach. He gasped and fell backward, clutching his middle. Doug approached cautiously, his left arm dangling numb and useless and limping from renewed pain in his leg. He looked first at his fallen foe, then around, then back at the sprawled figure of the man he had shot. He lay on his back with his arms outflung, twitching and sucking air as if trying to breathe. His weapon lay nearby, a small automatic. An assassin's weapon. He knew now why the two bullets hadn't done him more damage.

Doug appropriated the other weapon, frisked the man awkwardly but quickly with one hand, then began searching for Johannsen. He found him in the third room he investigated. Doug didn't know at first which was the prisoner, but one of the men was certainly dead. He hoped it was the federal marshal. He bent over the other man and saw that he was still alive, though he had been shot through the chest. Somehow, it must have missed his heart and lungs for he stared hopefully up at Doug with glassy blue eyes set below long hair as yellow as ripe corn.

"Are you Savak Johannsen?"

"Yes. I'm hurt." He breathed heavily. "Get a doctor."

"In a minute. Tell me where the financing for the Harcourt virus came from."

"It was your CIA. The director; I saw his name on some ... documents."

"What documents? Where?"

"I'll tell you. A doctor, please." His voice was weakening.

Doug needed proof. "Where are the documents? What did you see?"

"Shane Stevenson. Charleston. House. In..." His eyes rolled up and he lost consciousness. Doug thought of rushing up the stairs to find a doctor to try saving the lives of the men still breathing, but doubted he would make it. He was beginning to feel woozy from his own wounds. He used his phone, but didn't know the number of the treatment facility where he might find a doctor and had neglected to plug it into his phone's memory. He called his own battle headquarters. As soon as he got an answer he recognized Teresa's voice. He said "Teresa. Doug here. There's been a gun battle in the basement of the Science Center. Someone tried to take Johannsen out. Send a doctor and two—no, make that three gurneys; I'm hit, too. And hurry. If I'm not responding by then, Johannsen is still alive in his room and one of the gunmen is lying out in the open by the forklift that you'll see as soon as the elevator opens."

"Got it, Doug. Hang on; I'll have someone there in a few minutes if I have to carry them on my back!"

Thank God Teresa wasn't making rounds, he thought. She would have help here quickly. He limped back to the elevator and removed the chair that was preventing the door from closing, then sat down nearby. He leaned against the wall and examined his wounds. The upper arm was the worst; blood was still flowing copiously from it. The dizziness began enveloping him again. He unbuttoned his fatigue shirt and pushed the left side lapel over to add another layer of cloth to the wound, then lay down on that side, even though it hurt. He hoped the pressure would slow the bleeding. Then the world began spinning and his awareness faded.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

I want that Johannsen character brought to Washington so we can try him and execute him publicly, like we did those others," President Marshall said.

Edgar Tomlin couldn't agree more; he wanted him dead in the worst way. He had begun feeling relatively safe after the white supremacist gang that helped Johannsen had been executed in such a hurry that there had been little time to question them. Even so, it had been a near thing, with Rafe Smith yelling out an accusation at the last moment. Fortunately, he hadn't been understood and the firing squad ended any further chance of him talking.

There's such a thing as being too damned efficient, Tomlin muttered to himself, thinking of how the president had insisted on Johannsen being taken to the CDC immediately after capture. It had been nothing more than wild political reasoning, thinking that if he were in custody, and working under guard to reverse the effects of the virus he had created, then the government would be absolved of blame. Tomlin thought he had Johannsen taken care of when the porch monkeys in Atlanta responded to the rumor that the CDC was harboring a cure—with his personal agents helping to spread it—but that hadn't worked either. The blacks reacted like he thought they would, but the army had gotten there too fast, and the thin CDC security force had put up an admittedly heroic resistance. After that failure, he had sent the last two agents he could personally call on in Atlanta to finish off Johannsen for good.

He looked at his watch. By now, that matter should finally be taken care of. "I'll see to it, Mr. President. And I think executing him is a good idea."

"I'm not so sure," Lurline said. "Wouldn't he be more valuable alive, so he could be forced to help find a cure or a vaccine? After all, he created it; he should know more about it than anyone else."

"If the nation gets out of this with a whole skin, the sonofabitch did the world a favor," General Newman said, forgetting momentarily that Lurline was in the room with them. Goddamn broads. They got no more business in government than they do in the army, he thought, waiting for the outraged response his remark was sure to evoke.

Lurline felt more like crying than arguing. How did a man like that get to be Chairman of the Joint Chiefs? And the president wasn't rebuking him, either. "You can't mean, that, General," she said. Beneath the conference table her fist clenched the hem of her skirt to prevent her nails from digging into the palm of her hand.

"No, of course not. I was just thinking in military terms, our oil supplies and so forth."

Sure you were, Lurline thought. Aloud, she said "Mr. President, Vice President Santes has been in contact with Colonel Christian and Doug Craddock, the security chief at CDC. They're negotiating with Qualluf Taylor as we speak."

Marshall nodded approval, but he had more important things on his mind. Like China, Korea and the Middle East. Which reminded him. "Have you talked to Willingham again?" The president had decided that their meetings could do without his physical presence unless he had something urgent to say. He didn't like the man's patronizing air of superiority, as if anyone who hadn't graduated from Harvard was automatically incapable of understanding how the establishment worked. Of course he had been taken down a peg when the U.N. headquarters was demolished by a mob of blacks, but that wouldn't last. His kind thought they should be running the world and that everyone else was incompetent.

"Yes, sir, I spoke to him shortly before arriving here. He's been in contact with the Russians. They'll try to

restrain China. However, the military advisor to the premier wants to talk to General Newman about aid if China's invasion of Taiwan keeps going badly for the Chinese and they turn on Russia. Frankly, I think you should talk to Willingham. He seems to be taking hold and I'm not well versed in international affairs."

"I'll see to it. Now let's talk politics. What about the End-Timers? Are they going to cause us as much trouble as that damned Church of Blacks?"

Politics was something Lurline did understand. "The End Timers are marginally beneficial to the party so long as they don't get too much wilder. I can't say they do much good for the nation as a whole. Many of them have quit work, anticipating the arrival of the Rapture before they run out of money."

"Crap!" The president exclaimed. They *had* to keep production and distribution going and food distribution couldn't stop, not for anything. Hungry people were unpredictable. "Well, what should we do about them, if anything?"

Lurline considered. The End-Timers were a rapidly expanding faction of Fundamentalist Christianity, taking Biblical predictions to heart. Or rather interpreting Biblical pronouncements, mostly from the book of Revelations, in a way that indicated the End Times were at hand. Personally, she thought many of them were simply combining the Bible and current events into a convenient excuse to quit work. She had seen many people like that, men and women caught in hateful, minimum wage jobs that barely kept food on the table or their kids fed; or husbands and wives making themselves believe the End Times would terminate relationships that had grown unbearably oppressing. But most of them were sincere believers. They could be reasoned with.

"Sir, I think you should go on a nationwide hookup during prime time and explain that while the Rapture may be coming, they'll miss it if they starve to death or get killed by mobs of hungry people. Urge them to stay with their jobs. Urge them to help keep the cities running. They'll listen to you; just give them the type of speech you're famous for, then take questions for fifteen minutes or so." Lurline knew she was giving good advice. President Marshall, whatever his faults, was a superbly convincing orator.

"All right, set it up, but make it day after tomorrow. I'll be tied up with the U.N. tomorrow. Which reminds me—I need to see Emilee Bailey beforehand. Get her over here first thing in the morning."

Lurline made a note. "Yes, sir. How about the Arab ambassadors. Several of them are demanding to see you."

"Stall them. The Arabs are no longer a problem, or won't be shortly. Isn't that right, General?"

"Yes, sir. Another couple of months and we can move in, assuming we can release some of our troops from street duty. It's funny," he mused. "Whatever bug the Jews used, it's infecting Arab and non-Arab alike. Iran is suffering almost as much as Egypt and Syria, and the farther away from the Middle East, the fewer people are infected."

"Good. The more of those goddamned fanatics that die, the better I like it. I'll have some more morbidity figures from the CDC once it's completely back in our hands, but I was told the last ones I saw aren't likely to change much. Listen, let's break this up for now. I've got to see the speech writers and get them going, then some of the governors. Damn it, there's just not enough hours in the day to cover everything."

"Perhaps Vice President Santes could assume some more duties, sir?" Lurline suggested hopefully. Anything to bring more rationality into the government.

"I'll manage," Marshall said shortly. "Besides, she's busy with the CDC negotiations right now."

As if that's taking up all her time, Lurline thought. He doesn't want to share power. Except with General Newman, maybe.

* * * *

"Damn it, there's no help for it. I *have* to get back," Doug insisted. He had regained consciousness upstairs and was forcefully resisting attempts to treat him. "Just bandage me up good, splint this arm and give me some crutches." A hell of a negotiator I am, he thought. Damn it, I should have gotten Colonel Christian's personal phone number. I bet he has his own phone with him. Qualluf probably wouldn't have believed he was hurt until he saw the bullet holes though, so it probably didn't matter.

There was a weary nurse standing by the gurney. "Mr. Craddock, you're in no shape to go anywhere. Your upper arm is broken and your leg has a bullet hole in it on top of your previous wound."

"I'm sorry. I'm responsible for every one of our people being held captive. I don't care how you do it, but get me over there. Send someone with me if you think I'm that bad. And give me a phone number where I can reach Amelia immediately." He needed to talk to Amelia in more detail as soon as she was out of surgery and able to speak.

* * * *

In the end, the medics just gave up. An air cast was put on Doug's arm to immobilize it, a few stitches were taken to pull his wounds together temporarily and his leg bandaged tightly enough to prevent any more bleeding. All the while it was going on, Doug kept telling them to speed things up. When he left, riding a gurney, the nurse accompanied him. She was carrying pain medicine and another IV bag to use when the one dripping fluids into his good arm was exhausted. He was past his self-imposed time limit by the time the gurney was rolling along the walkway between buildings, but the blacks were becoming accustomed to the white flags by now.

Surprisingly, Fridge was outside to greet him as he returned.

"I heard you caught a ride back, Doug. What in hell you been doing, trying to feed yourself with your left hand again? You know you ain't got that much coordination." He eyed the nurse tagging along with him. "How bad you hurt?"

"I'll live, but we've got more problems than a broken arm or a shot up leg. Let's go."

"Yeah, the preacher's getting impatient. Come on, we'll go in through the lobby."

Doug was searching the room the moment the big front doors opened. He didn't have far to look. June had been alerted by Fridge and was waiting just inside the entrance.

"Doug! Oh, sweetheart, what happened? Are you hurt? Oh God, stupid question," she added as she leaned her head near his and kissed him.

Doug raised up enough to meet her lips. "I'm fine. Or maybe not so fine, but I can't take time off to be sick. I'm glad you're not hurt. I was so worried that..." He saw the untreated wound at the neckline of an overlarge white tee shirt, apparently borrowed from a man. "What happened to you?"

"It's all right, this man here saved me from anything bad."

"June, baby, we're going to have to talk later. I've got a situation waiting that may be the most important thing in the world right now. Fridge? Can she come?"

Fridge shook his head. "Not a good idea. Mrs. Craddock, I'm sorry, but you'll have to wait here."

"Fridge, thank you for taking care of her, but I think she could join us. She may know something that has a bearing on the information I'm going to give you."

"How so?"

Doug hadn't wanted to bring her into the danger of the negotiations, nor let Taylor know his wife was anywhere close, but this was bigger than both of them.

"June's been acting as administrative assistant to the CDC Director. I'll tell you more inside. It's not good, but maybe we can make something out of it."

"All right," Fridge conceded. He was getting impatient with the preacher himself.

Fridge escorted Doug back to the same room he had left an eternity ago, it seemed like. June and the nurse, one on each side, accompanied him, with Fridge leading the way.

"Who these bitches?" Qualluf demanded as Fridge began moving chairs aside to make room for the medical cart.

"Good God, what happened to you?" Colonel Christian asked, fearful that the fragile truce had somehow been broken.

"I'll get into it with all of you in minute." He turned to his nurse. "Ma'am if you would, give me an injection of pain medicine, but only half a dose. Then you'll have to leave us alone for a little while. You can wait out in the lobby." Doug knew he had to have something to alleviate his pain, but wasn't going to take enough to muddle his senses.

"Your pain medicine is in the I.V. All I can do is speed the drip up a little." She adjusted the flow, then said, "I have to stay with you to monitor your vital signs," Doug was insistent that she go, but she left only after he told her June was a nurse. What he had on his mind was too vital to get out in casual conversation. Not before he had a chance to use it. Once the nurse closed the door on them, he got down to business.

"Have you two made any progress while I was gone?" Doug looked at Christian, then Taylor. Taylor glowered and didn't answer. The colonel shook his head. "Only so far as allowing me to send my aide back to tell my deputy that I'm in no danger here, and to respect the truce."

Doug spotted a carafe that was an addition to the room. "Is that coffee?" he asked, pointing with his good arm. "If it is, I need some to help keep me awake long enough to get through what I need to tell you."

June brought the coffee to Doug without asking permission. Qualluf stared balefully at her, but said nothing. Despite himself, he was curious over how Doug had gotten his wounds and what he was up to now.

June helped him to raise the upper portion of his body enough to gulp some of the hot coffee and make good eye contact with the others, then he began. "Mr. Taylor, I may owe you an apology," he said, then waited on the reaction. It wasn't exactly what he would have hoped for, but given the man's fixation on mistreatment of blacks from the age of exploration until now, he wasn't surprised.

"Huh! Every motherfucking white in America and Europe owe us an apology. Damn little good that do now."

"I told you before, I'm not responsible for anyone else's actions, only my own and the men I command. If

it makes you feel any better, I've never agreed with the way blacks have been treated, but that's neither here nor there. What I wanted to apologize for is that I found out I might have been wrong. There is a possibility you may have been right about the government being involved with instigating the Harcourt virus. Or some people in government, at least."

"Doug, no!" June exclaimed. "Our government couldn't have done this!"

Doug was watching Fridge's reaction rather than Qualluf's. He sensed that he was going to have to depend on his old friend to hold things together until he had a better grasp of exactly what had actually happened with Johannsen. And he needed the Colonel, too.

Qualluf stood up. "Just like I said. We can't trust any of you sorry motherfuckers. That's it, conference over." He started toward the door.

"Fridge, stop him. There's more!" Doug winced as he tried reflexively to reach his arm out to stop him—the wrong arm.

Fridge was nearer the door than Qualluf. He moved in front of it. "Preacher, let's hear it all before we decide anything. Go ahead, Doug. I hope you got more than this, though."

"I do." Doug sipped more of the coffee. He could feel the effects of the pain killer lessening his hurt, but it was also making him groggy. "June, stop the pain medicine. I have to stay awake."

Qualluf moved back to his chair, knowing he had reacted too quickly. What else did this man know? How had he been hurt? How could he be used? Was there maybe a cure after all? Better to wait and see.

After Qualluf had reseated himself, Doug continued, encouraged by June's hand slipping into his after he downed the last of the coffee. "Let me tell you what happened when I went back to talk to Amelia. She told me that some CIA agents had brought in that crazy scientist, Johannsen, who created the Harcourt virus. He arrived right before the airport was closed, so Amelia and her scientific staff haven't finished questioning him about whether he knows how to stop the virus or not. About the time Amelia was giving me this information, she had to be taken to surgery to repair internal injuries as a result of the beating she got while here. If it hadn't been for that I might have had more for you."

Doug saw that Qualluf's perpetual glare faded from his face for once, telling him plainer than words who had been responsible for Amelia's torment. He thought the man might even have been in on it, but he didn't want to know. It would only prejudice him in the hours to come.

"We want that man," Qualluf said.

Doug had been hoping for that reaction. "I may give him to you, but not before we drag every bit of what he knows about the Harcourt virus out of him. He suggested there was evidence of his contacts in government in some papers he told me about. That was after I rescued him from what I think were government agents intent on silencing him. That's how I got hurt." He tapped the air cast on his arm to emphasize the point. "Now here's what I want us to do." He explained his ideas as clearly as he could. He had been thinking furiously ever since learning of Johannsen's presence and the possibility of government involvement.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

"So here's how I see it," Doug finished up. "I want some scientists and other experts to examine the documents that Johannsen told me where to find before we say anything. Colonel Christian and some of his men will go get them first and bring them back here in order to keep anyone else in the government from stopping publication if they prove to be true. Same for the possibilities of a vaccine or a cure. We want to get that out, too, but I see no sense in giving people false hope before we're sure, and frankly, I don't think the black and Hispanic communities would believe us without proof. And last, I want the people here released, with Mr. Taylor sending scientific representatives of his choice into the CDC to monitor the work there. Mr. Taylor, you can either go into the CDC or go with Colonel Christian to secure the documents or send your representatives to each place and stay here with your people; it's your choice." He looked at the others, trying to gauge everyone's reactions, then added, "Whatever we do, we don't want either the government or the military, other than the colonel here, to get wind of what we're up to until we can publish our findings on the net in a believable manner. So far as I know, it's only Edgar Tomin who's involved in this mess, but there may be others. In fact, there's almost certain to be others and we want to get them, too."

Fridge blew out a breath of air. "Doug, you never did do things small. This is a lot to take in all at once."

"I know. And it may not be all, yet. I forgot to tell you, that I left word for Amelia to call me as soon as she's out of surgery and awake. There was something else she was trying to tell me before she passed out. She'll probably be in surgery, then recovery for a few more hours. Johannsen is in surgery, too—and as much as I hate the man, I hope he survives long enough to question him some more." He felt his eyelids dragging. "In the meantime, I've got to rest for a while if you want me to carry on."

Fridge nodded. "He's right, Preacher. If there's a chance for our people, we got to go along with him."

Qualluf looked as if he had a bad case of indigestion. "How do we know he's telling the truth? Maybe he's just trying to get those CDC people free."

Incongruously, Fridge laughed out loud. Even Doug peered at him curiously, wondering what was funny.

"Preacher, do you really think Doug would have shot his arm practically off and put another bullet in his leg just to try fooling you? Or let you know his wife is here? Or that Johannsen is just one building over? Uh uh. He's telling the truth. We're going to go along with him."

"Since when did you take command?" Qualluf said.

"I didn't. But I will if I have to."

Doug noticed that both men had dropped almost all of the black vernacular.

Qualluf stared at his military commander and slowly nodded. "I'll pick the best men available to go into the CDC along with the people we've been holding here. And I'll send some more men with the colonel to be sure we see everything if he finds any papers in Charleston. Then as soon as I quiet the people on the lines down, I'll be over at the CDC myself. I want to be present when Johannsen is questioned."

"Done," Doug agreed, then expounded on his last thought, which had depended on everything else to come off right before it would be possible. "And one last thing. After we all agree on where we go from here, I'm going to call the Vice President back, but I'm not going to tell her yet about the possibility of Tomlin's involvement. I'm afraid it might leak. But once we know, I want to see if the three of us can get a joint national broadcast audience after we release the data to the net."

"That might—hell, it probably will—get me a court martial," Colonel Christian said, "but assuming all this stuff is true, I'll do it. Goddamn, I should have gone into business with my Dad, like he wanted me to. Not that business is going to be very good for a long time to come, but it would sure as hell be safer!"

Doug called Teresa and told her to allow the armed blacks to enter the CDC and accompany anyone they wanted to as part of the bargain he had struck. Then he made that call to Santes.

* * * *

Vice President Santes was alarmed at first that it was Doug Craddock's wife calling her, but only momentarily. June quickly explained part of what Doug had done and that the pain killing drugs had finally put him to sleep in the midst of dialing her number.

"So the hostages have been released and a truce is in place for the time being?"

"Yes, Mrs. Vice President, but there's more he needs to do, and I think he's the only one who can make everyone work together. But please, don't let any of this get out yet. There's other parts of the overall problem he hasn't got settled yet, particularly what else Johannsen knows, and he still needs some time with Amel—the CDC Director when she gets out of surgery." June still didn't have any idea of what else Amelia might know. Whatever it was, if anything, she hadn't told either her or Doug before the attack happened. Either she had reason to keep silent or events had overtaken her before she could speak and she had been scared to confide it to anyone while being held captive. And it might very well be nothing, as Doug had suggested. As if there wasn't enough already.

"Alright. Give everyone there my thanks for working with me. I'll tell the president the hostages have been released and we have a temporary truce but that we need more time to work out details."

"Thank you ma'am. We should know more in another day or so. I'll tell Doug to call you as soon as he's awake again. But he has to go into surgery soon himself."

"I see. That was a heroic thing he did, just to hear about it. Good bye now. Have someone call me back every six or eight hours to keep me informed."

"Yes ma'am, I will."

June thumbed the phone off, wondering at the way events shaped a person's life. Just a few short weeks ago she never could have imagined that she would not only be married again, but that she and her husband would be talking to the Vice President of the United States over one of her private lines!

It was dark as the former hostages made their way back to the science building, accompanied by the men and women selected by Qualluf to go with them. June wanted nothing more than get under a shower and into clean clothes, but she forced herself to ignore her bodily needs for the time being. It had suddenly occurred to her that not only had she been talking to the Vice President, but that she and Doug were temporarily in charge of CDC operations. Or she and Teresa until Doug was back on his feet. It was a humbling thought, and a frightening one at the same time.

"We should dress his wounds," Doug's nurse said. "All the doctor did was put in a couple of quick stitches to hold the wounds closed and load him up on antibiotics and pain killer. He's going to need surgery, too."

How to tell a nurse that sometimes what seemed urgent to a medical person had to take a back seat to considerations much more important. June wanted to take care of Doug, but she knew he had to have some rest, too. She wondered ... maybe his surgery could be done under a local anesthetic so he wouldn't be incapacitated for a long period like a general anesthetic would do. "He needs to rest more

than anything. And then he has to either stay awake or be capable of being woken up. Would you please go talk to the doctor who treated him first and see if the work he needs could be done under a local?"

The nurse nodded dubiously, but went to ask, wondering what had gone on in that closed room she had been barred from. Something very important, evidently.

* * * *

Tomlin was barely listening to the president. *Damn it, that was my last best chance to take him out*, he thought. Now what? Security, that's the key. The guard force at the CDC must have taken lots of casualties. Maybe if he got authority to augment it with his own agents? No, better yet, get the Santes bitch out of the way and have the military take over dealing with the blacks. Then...

"Edgar, what's wrong with you?" the president asked irritably. He was suffering badly from lack of sleep and his National Security Director was off in la-la land.

"Oh, sorry, Mr. President. I was just thinking, now that the situation in Atlanta has calmed down, perhaps Vice president Santes could be relieved of those duties and given something else to do." Anything to get her out of the way.

"Like what? There's nothing else she can do that I can't do better. Besides, she said there's still a lot of issues to be resolved. I extended the deadline for her and the army until the end of the week. So long as she's doing well there, why move her?" Marshall was grudgingly sincere in his praise, despite never having liked the idea of a woman in a position to take over running the country. He was so depleted of energy that he didn't question why his national security director was so interested in removing the vice president from the Atlanta impasse.

"Well, all right, but I really think..."

"No, and that's the end of it. I need your attention concentrated on security for the whole country, not just one little segment of it. Don't you understand yet how violent and unpredictable the blacks are? The ones still alive, that is. Besides, Santes as much as hinted that the CDC security director might be able to come up with a solution that will quiet that damned Church of Blacks down. I sure don't want to spoil her chances if that's true. If we can stop their agitation, we can use the army to better purposes elsewhere. Now let's get back on track here. I have to go on the hookup to the U.N. in an hour."

"Yes, sir," Tomlin responded, trying desperately to sound matter-of-fact while inwardly he roiled with fear of being found out.

"Good. Now go over your border security again. I don't want some damn Arab sneaking in here and popping me just because the Jews are killing them all. Why haven't we been able to close our borders?"

Tomlin knew the president was asking him to fix a problem that had been ignored or given short shrift by congress for the last hundred years. There was no fix, not until the draft expanded the army by orders of magnitude and that couldn't be done overnight. "Mr. President, it's a better bet to increase your security rather than try to keep the borders sealed. We still can't do it. And to keep Arabs out, we'd just about have to shut down airline travel completely. Half the security staff at the airports were black and half our southern border guards were Hispanic. We've lost a lot of them to the virus and some more from them simply quitting their jobs. Fortunately, air travel is down drastically, but that doesn't cover it all. I'm sorry sir, but you know we've never been able to stop illegal immigrants crossing from Mexico and Canada."

"Damn wimpy congress wanting Hispanic votes too damn much," General Newman added. "By the way, the army has temporarily lost contact with the brigade commander in Atlanta. Something about a crucial trip he had to make. You know anything about that?"

"No," Tomlin said. Crucial trip? Now what?

"Vice President Santes gave him the authority. I wonder where he's off to?"

"He didn't say. He simply informed his deputy that he was going after information vital to national security and would return within a day or so. I'm going to have his ass if I find out he's lying."

"Forget that," Marshall commanded. He focused his next question on Lurline. "What's the state of our transportation now? Is there anything else I need to do? Any executive orders?"

"Actually, since Atlanta calmed down yesterday, the violence has tapered off elsewhere and road and rail traffic is moving well enough. It's like everyone is waiting to see what Qualluf Taylor has to say. All he's done so far is issue a statement urging calm "for the time being" and promised a major announcement soon."

"Fine, fine." The president laughed briefly. "Maybe we need to bring those folks who did the negotiating into government. They seem to know what they're doing, and they got it done fast. General, how about you?"

"We have some problems with the media on a few of the martial law edicts, but nothing serious yet. It could become an issue for them, though. Damn jackals."

Marshall ignored the comment about the press, and he knew which issues were causing trouble. He disliked reporters but knew they were as necessary in modern-day politics as campaign funds. "Lurline, is there a spot open where I could have a brief press conference? I'll try calming their jitters. And General, maybe you could instruct the other chiefs to pass the word down from the top that I'm displeased with the use of so much force."

The general nodded. Lurline said "I'll make some time, sir. They'll want to talk to you after your U.N. speech in any case and we can take care of both at the same time." Lurline had to admit that President Marshall was performing better under pressure than she ever expected—but she still would much rather have seen Marlene Santes sitting behind the desk in the oval office. Marshall scared her the way he depended so much on General Newman, and delegated so much power to the man.

* * * *

All Colonel Christian had to go on was a name and city, Shane Stevenson and Charleston. The internet had quickly tracked down the only two persons with that name, assuming that the city referred to was Charleston, South Carolina.

The first had proven to be a dud, a mild mannered retired postman who seemed overawed at the gang of military men and women swarming around his home, mixed with a medley of blacks dressed in everything from suits to jeans. He was entirely cooperative and friendly once he got over being scared. Christian couldn't know for certain the man was innocent, but he gave him a presumptive pass. Just to be safe, he left one of his sergeants to stay with him while the other suspect was checked out.

The helicopter lifted off from the street in front of the first address and headed toward the outskirts of Charleston, where the other Shane Stevenson lived. As soon as it settled in to a landing, the colonel's troops began the drill, spreading out to surround the old frame home with the red brick chimney. It was located in a shabby neighborhood and isolated from its neighbors by an abandoned two story structure of brick on one side and an overgrown vacant lot on the other. Colonel Christian let his men perform their tasks with a minimum of supervision, as befitted a good commander, while he followed with his aide and the representatives from the Church of Blacks.

His men were still outside the front door when he noticed the incongruity. Smoke shouldn't be coming from a chimney on a day this hot!

"Take the house! Now!" he yelled and began running. He saw the door being kicked in before he got there, sick at the thought they might be too late.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Doug gritted his teeth and did his best to bear the pain without complaining and with a minimum of pain killers. Even in the cool atmosphere of the operating room, he was sweating heavily by the time his wounds had been cleaned up, sutured, re-bandaged and his broken left arm immobilized in a solid cast with an opening that could be lifted to examine the wound then latched back closed.

The doctor stripped off his gloves and tossed them aside. "Mr. Craddock, that should do you. Check in every day for my nurse to change the dressing and check your wounds. The nurse will give you some pills for pain. And you be sure you take all of the antibiotics I gave you. Don't stop until they're gone. Understand?"

"Got it doc. Thanks."

"That's all right. I'm sorry I had to hurt you."

Doug forced a grin. "I asked for it. Where's June?"

"Your wife? With the Director, I believe."

"Amelia's awake?" Doug felt his pulse leap in his chest.

"Yes. She's doing fine. Still a little groggy at last report. It's a good thing you got her over here when you did. She had a ruptured spleen that was bleeding into her abdominal cavity. Her surgeon had to remove it."

"Thanks again."

"Thank you again for getting her back for us. She's doing a fine job." The doctor strode out, peeling off his gown as he went, headed to yet another room and another patient.

The medical people are the real heroes, he thought, watching the doctor leave. They had risked their lives to help defend their patients, then gone right back to work.

"Slide over here Mr. Craddock," the nurse said, easing the familiar gurney next to the operating room table.

"Where am I going now?"

"Just outside the door to a wheelchair. Then you're on your own."

"I can walk, I think."

"Maybe you can, but you aren't. Not after all the trouble I went through to find you that wheelchair."

* * * *

"I don't like it," Tomlin said to the person on the other end of the line. "What's he up to?"

"Nothing that concerns us, Edgar. Just be cool. And damn it, don't call me at this number again."

"I can't help it; I'm worried. I've only got one man left at CDC and he's not an agent. He can't do anything but report or maybe pass a weapon on to someone in position where they can take action. And speaking of reporting, he just sent word that Craddock has headed back to meet with the preacher again and Christian again."

There was a silence. After a moment a sigh. "All right, if it will make you feel better, I'll send someone I can trust to Christian's headquarters unit with orders from me to keep an eye on him and to eliminate him if I give the order. So far as anyone will know, it will be a simple transfer. Now don't call me again. Use our regular contact methods."

Tomlin switched off the phone, still dissatisfied. Regular contacts! They always took at least twenty four hours and frequently longer to get data to the right person. He looked down at his hands. His nails were bitten back to nothing. *I never bit my nails before. Why now?* But of course he knew why.

* * * *

Amelia had the head of her bed elevated at about a fifteen degree angle, enough to make good eye contact with anyone she was talking to. She was still pretty groggy from the anesthetic and the painkiller drip in her I.V., but not so much that she couldn't reason or know what was going on around her. "Hello, Doug," She smiled as he pushed his wheelchair into her room. "I heard what happened to you. Aren't we a pair?"

The sound of Doug's name woke June from her nap. She got up from a chair on the other side of the bed where she had been dozing and came around to Doug.

"Mmmm," he when she finally removed her lips from his. "That's better than medicine. One more like that and you'll have me up and running around the room." He brushed a tear from her lashes with his forefinger.

"What have you two been talking about?"

"Johannsen," they both said at once.

He raised his brows. Information about the scientist was what he had come for. "Good. Amelia, I hate to rush you, but I've got to get back to the other building and try to keep the pot from boiling over again. When we were talking right before you went into surgery, you mentioned something else you had found out about Johannsen. Do you remember what it was?"

Amelia looked puzzled for a moment, trying to recall the memories. Suddenly her face brightened. "Oh! I remember now. I told you there was a possibility of a vaccine, didn't I?"

"Yes."

"And that a couple of drugs are showing promise of being at least partially effective in limiting the level of quinol in the blood from the..." Seeing his frown, she smiled. "Let's just say we might have a treatment, if not a cure. It's not certain yet, though. And of course even if we do develop a vaccine, it will be too late for most blacks."

"Nothing seems to be very certain with virology, does it?"

"No, that's the nature of the little demons. But here's the good part of what Jenkins got out of Johannsen at their first meeting. He said that during his initial lab experiments, the Harcourt virus began attenuating after its hiatus in the cells first infected. He thinks that will probably happen with humans, too."

"What do you mean, attenuated?"

"Sorry. That means it changes and even if it still causes the same disease, it's not as serious. We also know it has mutated somewhat, because it's not migrating to the liver of people with secondary infections. The people who're catching it now go right on and present with the symptoms after a short time, weeks instead of two years or so. Also, from what few reports we have so far, it appears that most patients are

recovering from the disease caused by the secondary rather than primary infection. That's what was so important. Just bear in mind, this is from a very limited amount of data. We've lost contact with all the medical teams in Africa, ours and the U.N. both. That's where the disease was first spread but we can't get any reports from there. The whole continent is a disaster zone, medical and otherwise."

As she related that news, Doug's face was a study in conflicting emotions; first smiling with delight, then the smile descending into a frown. When she finished, he sighed. "But again, you're not sure, huh?"

"No, but on this subject, we should know more in a short while."

"Well, I guess that's good news. It will be great if it works out like that. All right, I'll have to be satisfied. Thanks. Can you spare June long enough to wheel me to the front exit?"

"Certainly. But if she's not back in a half hour, I'm going to send someone to find her." Amelia watched as June pushed Doug's wheelchair out the door. What a perfect couple they make, she thought; then sadly, began wondering why she had never married.

* * * *

Before leaving the building, Doug paused to call Vice President Santes. Somehow, he had to bring her into the drama, especially if Christian found proof of Tomlin's involvement with Johannsen. Had he been asked, he wouldn't have been able to say exactly why he didn't trust the White House. Maybe I just don't like the guy in office, he thought, then discarded the idea. That wasn't it. His distrust went deeper, down to the visceral level. He didn't necessarily believe Marshall was involved, but he doubted the man would be willing to do anything to hurt his reelection chances; to his eyes, he was obviously a man who enjoyed the exercise of power. Making public Johannsen's and Tomlin's collusion, if it proved to be true, would probably force him to resign. Doug would conceal the knowledge if he could, until the right time to release it. Or perhaps not. He would probably have to trust Santes in the end. No one else had the clout to protect them. He raised the white flag on its slender pole and one of the black security guards came to meet them.

* * * *

Colonel Christian was glad he had ordered his men to break the door down. The occupant was in front of the fireplace, tossing papers and folders into the fire.

"Get that fire put out!" he roared, but a quick thinking sergeant was already ahead of him. He emptied his canteen onto the smoldering papers, bypassing the time it would have taken to run water from the faucet and carry it back.

While that was going on, both soldiers and blacks swarmed over the man doing the burning.

"Don't kill him! Jerry, Kilgore! Check the computer and grab all the backups you can find. Waller, help me sort through these papers. Quickly, now!"

Shane Stevenson, as the man owning the house indeed proved to be, had fortunately been in too much of a hurry. He threw enough documents into the fireplace to almost smother the first flames he started, and he hadn't gotten the fire going good again when the water put it out.

Lieutenant Waller knelt beside the colonel, with a black man in a suit coat but no tie on his other side. A moment later he raised his eyes to Christian. "Sir, no wonder those white supremacists we executed didn't leave a trail to their lair. Everything is right here. Files on the whole organization, from years back."

Christian took the papers and shuffled through a few of them. "These are good, but not all I want. Go make sure the computer records are secured. Hurry."

Puzzled, the lieutenant went off to comply, wondering why the colonel wanted him there. Two men and two women were already doing that.

As quickly as the lieutenant was out of sight in the spare bedroom that had been turned into an office, Christian, nodded. "Here it is." He caught the eye of the man representing Qualluf. "See it?"

"I see. I got something else here, too. Look."

Colonel Christian's face paled as he read. "Good God! Keep this quiet or every one of us will be shot!"

"Is it true, though? Why would anyone leave records like this laying around when they could have it all on a portable drive they could just throw away?"

"I don't know. Hell, maybe they do. We've got what we came for, though. Now..."

"Sir! Colonel!"

Christian looked up. His troopers were holding a second captive. One of the men was grinning. "He drove right up before he realized what was going on."

Christian's quick mind sorted out the difference between his two prisoners. The one who had been burning the documents looked to be past sixty. The one being held by the grinning PFC was much younger. Probably the older man had kept paper records and the younger one had been in the process of scanning them into computer files, then decided to run an errand. A quick look at the printer confirmed it. A page from one of the files was under the scanner lid. He pointed to the computer. "Take this out to the chopper. Load the prisoners and make damn certain they're tied securely, then grab all the papers and let's get back to Atlanta soon as we can. Where's Captain Russell?"

"Here, sir."

"Good." He pointed to one of Qualluf's representatives. "You stay here with this man. Both of you search the place—together—and collect any other evidence you find. I'll leave you a couple of men in case any more of these scum show up. Just sit tight after you finish searching this place and I'll send for you when I have time." Captain Russell was one of his finest staff officers and one of only two army men on the mission, besides himself, who realized exactly what they were after. Lieutenant Waller was the other one, and even he wasn't in on all of it.

Minutes later, the helicopter was in the air, heading back to the naval base where he had borrowed it and where their plane was waiting. Very soon, Christian knew he was going to either be hailed as a hero or tied to a post facing a firing squad. However, if they made it back and he got a chance to pass the information on to Craddock, and perhaps the vice president, chances were better for him to live. Business. Why hadn't he gone into business?

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

"What you find out?" Qualluf said as soon as Doug's chair was wheeled back into the room they had been using from the start of negotiations.

"In a minute. Did you get any rest, Mr. Taylor?"

"I took a good nap."

The reply was short, but Doug noticed he seemed to have lost his glower. "May I have some coffee? I got a little rest, but most of my time went into patching me up enough to keep going."

Surprisingly, Qualluf poured the coffee himself and brought it over to his wheelchair.

"Where's Fridge," Doug asked? Qualluf had only one other man in the office, an assistant he hadn't met yet.

"He's sleeping. Should I wake him?"

"Depends. Let me call Colonel Christian and see how he's doing. If he found what he went after, I want everyone here."

Qualluf nodded.

Doug dialed Christian's number. He answered almost immediately. "Christian."

"Colonel, this is Doug Craddock. Where are you?"

"Just landed at the airport. We'll be there shortly. Have some coffee ready. Maybe even a bottle. We might need it before the day is over."

The line went dead, causing Doug to smile sadly. Christian reminded him of Gene, the way he handled things so abruptly and efficiently. But a bottle? He must have found whatever he had gone for. Goddamn. He turned to Qualluf.

"Do you ever have a drink, Mr. Taylor?"

"Alcohol? I've been known to."

"The colonel says we may need one. I think he found the treasure," Doug said, glancing at the other man. He didn't know whether Qualluf's aide was in on the secret or not.

Qualluf noticed. "Good. The folks getting impatient. And you can trust Franklin. Frank, this is Mr. Craddock. He runs the security for CDC. Also, he's got the VP's ear."

Doug noticed this was the first time the preacher had used his name. Maybe it would work out yet. "Well, while we're waiting, I can tell you a bit more news. The CDC Director is out of surgery and will live. Johannsen is out of surgery, but still in bad shape. He's in intensive care and can't talk now, but the docs think there's a good chance he will live to be executed. You may get him yet Mr. Taylor, because—"

Qualluf leaned forward in his chair. "Mr. Craddock, it appears we're going to have to be working together, maybe for a while to come. I think we can dispense with formality except while outsiders are present."

Doug was immensely relieved. The man appeared to finally be willing to work constructively toward reducing the violence in the country. "That suits me fine. By the way, if you still want Johannsen after this if over, you can have him as far as I'm concerned. But ask me before he's handed over. I think I've come up with an appropriate punishment."

Qualluf gave Doug the first glimmer of a smile he had ever seen the man cast his way. It wasn't much, but it was there. "If you've thought of an appropriate punishment, it's more than I've been able to do."

"I'll let you decide. And now, I think it's time to get Fridge back in here. The colonel should be arriving soon."

The next few minutes passed in idle talk, with Doug asking questions about Qualluf and the Church of Blacks. He had read the usual articles but if he was going to be working with the man, he wanted his facts direct from the source. Qualluf proved to have an interesting background. An origin in the ghettos of Chicago, juvenile detention, a mentor who had finally got him interested in learning, a wife and family that Doug realized had rarely been mentioned, even after his name and church became prominent. Like Fridge, his family had suffered. One of his grown sons was missing and presumed dead in Africa, where he had been doing environmental work, and one of his adult daughters had just shown the first signs of infection. So far, his wife and the child still at home were well, but Doug could tell by the way he talked that the disease was like a specter, always hovering in the background. He wondered how he would feel in a similar situation, where death wasn't imminent, but loomed like a poisonous creature that would inexorably find him. When the talk died, he called the vice president's office and asked that she be standing by.

* * * *

"Here's the situation," Colonel Christian said as he tried and failed to hold back a yawn. "We've got proof positive that Edgar Tomlin has been mixed up with that little gang of white supremacists for years. The only reason I can see that it never got out is that his contacts never put anything on a computer or used email."

"Then how did they keep in touch or coordinate anything?" Doug asked.

Christian grinned. "I wondered the same thing, but on the way back I ... persuaded ... Shane Stevenson to spill his guts. He didn't want to at first, but when I threatened to kick him out of the plane without a parachute, he got real vocal. Those guys kept things so damn simple we might have never found them out."

"How?" Doug, Fridge and Qualluf asked almost simultaneously.

"The bastards used the post office! Anyone who opened their mail could have found them out, but who would have thought of that?" He shook his head in disgust at the irony of it.

"Be damned. I would never have suspected them of sending such sensitive material through the mail," Doug admitted.

"That was the beauty of it. No one else would have, either." Christian took a big swallow of coffee laced with bourbon. "God, I needed this. The galley on the plane was out of coffee, and soda doesn't do it for me. Okay, he said lots of things and I've got it all recorded. One matter is so sensitive we need to make copies of our conversation along with copies of the paper and computer files and put them in a very safe place, one where no one would ever think to look—or can get to if they do. Suggestions?"

"How about the CDC safe for our copies. Qualluf?"

"I got a place. It would take the whole damn army to get into the bowels of the church. But ... if it's that important, I think we need a second party in on it." It pained him to make that admission, but he hadn't got where he was by being a fool.

"The vice president," Doug said emphatically. "If we can't trust her, we may as well all go turn ourselves in."

"Okay, but I talk to her," Qualluf insisted. "What is it you found, colonel?"

Christian surveyed the room. "Anyone can be made to talk. How about just us three for right now, with copies for each of us?" He eyed Qualluf's aide whom he had just been introduced to. "That's no reflection on your dependability, Mr. Franklin. It's just ... well, I'll let your boss decide after I tell him, and he can select one other person to conceal a copy of the documents. How's that?"

"Fair enough," Franklin admitted. He left the room while Doug sucked in cool air, thankful that the staff had got the power working again.

Christian sighed and let it out. "Tomlin has been working with General Newman, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs."

Dead silence reigned while the others absorbed the impact of Christian's announcement. "Yeah," he said as he saw their reaction. "That's how I took it, too. At first. After that I got so mad I wanted to kill the son of a bitch. And before any of you ask, there's very little chance the information has been planted. It's all true."

"I'd better call Santes," Doug finally said.

"Wait. Let's decide what we want her to do first."

"Do?" Fridge asked emphatically. "Do? We need to court martial the bastard and execute him!"

"How? Christian said. "That's done by the military. Pretty hard task to get the boss of the whole military establishment to submit to a court martial, don't you think?"

Doug understood. "The president has to relieve him from duty and order it done. But ... damn, I hate to say it, but the president is such a political animal, I'm not sure he would do it. Oh, he might relieve the general of his duties, but even that would make him look bad. He might just try to cover it all up."

"Or worse," Qualluf said.

"Yeah, as much as I hate to say it, Qualluf, he might do worse than that. I just don't trust the man like I do Santes."

"But can Santes do anything? The vice president has no real authority, you know," Christian said.

"Marshall will do it if we make this whole thing public," Qualluf said. He clinched a fist, indicating his determination. "Especially if we let Santes in on it."

"If General Newman isn't on to us already," Christian said. "He's a smart son of a bitch, even if he did get where he is through politics. I guess we better go with the VP if no one has a better idea. Maybe she'll come up with a way to handle this, but God help us if she's in on the plot, too."

No one had a better idea. If Doug could have crossed his fingers while dialing the vice president with one hand, he would have. While he was talking to her, Christian was on his military phone, advising his

deputy commander that he was back at CDC headquarters and Qualluf was talking with the Church of Blacks authorities, giving them instructions to stay calm a little longer—and to exhort the rest of the black community to do the same.

* * * *

Santes sat quietly in her soft, form-fitting chair in her prestigious but powerless office. She waved away an aide, saying she needed to think for a few minutes. She had two concerns. First, would President Marshall take constructive action or simply try to cover up, even deny what had taken place; and secondly, could Qualluf Taylor be trusted? One thing she knew that needed doing immediately was to inform her most trusted assistant where the duplicates of the paper and computer would be stored. She pressed a button on her desk and only a minute later, Baron O'Keefe IV entered.

Santes smiled to herself at all the amusing barbs and political cartoons she had seen since taking office. A Hispanic vice president with a man carrying one of the most aristocratic names of the eastern establishment working so easily and casually with her was grounds for endless speculation on the political strategy involved in placing him in that position. In reality, there was no strategy; Baron O'Keefe was simply one of the best political operatives in Washington, though he had mostly worked for the other party. When she got a chance to sign him on, she hadn't hesitated in calling him for an interview, then hiring him halfway through it. She had found no cause so far to regret the decision.

A half hour later, O'Keefe loosened his tie and accepted the small snifter of brandy Santes offered him.

"Thanks," he said. "I can't recall a time when I've felt the need of a drink more. This is almost unbelievable."

"Not to me it isn't. You haven't been around Newman and Tomlin nearly as much as I have. Now Baron, the big question is, do we let the president in on this or simply announce it first and then ask him for cooperation?"

O'Keefe rubbed a hand across his receding hairline while he sipped at the brandy and thought.

Santes knew better than to hurry him. He had a mind that could integrate facts, figures, behavior and implications of political equations better than anyone in Washington—or the whole country, for that matter. Not only that, he was seldom wrong in his astute judgment of people and how they might react under given circumstances.

O'Keefe stood up and paced a few steps, then sat back down. "There's only one way to do this," he decided. "Go ahead and announce. I think he'll try to deny the whole thing publicly; it makes him look stupid for appointing both men. Privately, he'll ask them to submit their resignations "in the best interests of the nation". However, just doing that won't fly with blacks and Hispanics, and particularly not with Qualluf Taylor. I've met the man. He's no dummy; in fact, he's brilliant. He and his staff are going to want Newman, Tomlin and Johannsen's heads on a platter. You'd better tell the president what we predict will happen if we don't hand them over; what's left of the black community will go after his balls like a shark after blood. After the announcement, I think you should meet with the men and women down there who broke the story and wrap the rest of it up then."

"Doug has already told me he offered to give up Johannsen as soon as the CDC's finished with him. That was part of their terms even though it may not be strictly legal. But you think we should go ahead anyway? Announcements, then the meeting to wrap it up?"

"Certainly, even though it puts them all in danger. Men who would instigate such a world wide catastrophe will have no compunctions about killing those three men and the CDC Director. They'll stop at nothing, and remember, we don't know everyone involved in this affair. Those five jerks we executed

were just the scum on the pond. The fish with teeth are still swimming around free. Now here's how I'd work it: First, release enough information to keep the rioting and violence down. Give the poor souls some hope with the possibility of a cure. Next, ask for a national hookup in your name, then bring them all to Washington to introduce them—no, I have a better idea. You fly to Atlanta for that. It will go over better if it comes from the site where the plot by Tomlin and Newman and the white supremacists was first unraveled. That will be more effective politically, especially if the Director of the CDC is recovered enough to attend."

Santes had been taking notes on her PDA, the stylus moving busily over the screen in her distinctive handwriting. When he was finished she looked up. "I've got it all, but I want one change. I'm going to release everything, including what we know about Newman and Tomlin, before I leave for Atlanta tomorrow morning. The meeting there will be simply for reinforcement and also to give everyone some heroes to look up to for a change. Telling it all first is also a precaution, in case someone has managed to tap into any of our conversations. Don't announce that I'm going to Atlanta. Don't even let the president know or he may try to stop me. And thank you Baron; as usual, you've got it right. It was a good day for the country when you came to work for me."

"I've enjoyed every minute of it. I wonder if those people in Atlanta know how famous they're going to be? And how much they're going to be loved by some—and loathed by others?"

Santes had Baron O'Keefe begin preparations for a flight to Atlanta, with her recorded announcement to be made just before departure.

"Why there and then?"

"Just as I said, Baron. I'm afraid President Marshall might try stopping me by ordering my plane grounded on some pretext or another, or do something even more drastic. I guess what it comes down to is that I simply don't trust the man."

Baron O'Keefe nodded his agreement with her opinion of the president, then left to arrange her flight and prepare the groundwork for her announcement.

Vice President Santes dialed Doug's number in Atlanta, where she knew they were waiting for her to decide what to do. If this didn't settle the country down, she didn't think there was much hope of anything else doing it.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

Doug made notes on his PDA while June held the phone to his ear. Christian and Qualluf hung on his every word, even though they could only hear one side of the conversation. It didn't take long. He put the phone up, grinning broadly.

"Okay, folks, we've got a lot of ground to cover. Vice President Santes is going to announce everything we told her to the whole damned country tomorrow morning, then..."

"Great!" "Wonderful"

He held up his hand. "There's more. She's flying to Atlanta right afterwards and wants all three of us, as well as Amelia, present tomorrow evening to repeat the same thing and to congratulate us all—on national television. Then she's going to ask all of us to serve on a council that she wants to use to solve other problems elsewhere, even after martial law is lifted. She'll ask for the council to be empowered by Congress to take action so it won't wind up being just another talkathon. And by the way, she's also going to recommend that martial law be lifted, beginning immediately, but in stages to make sure local authorities can handle affairs as the stand-down progresses." He grinned again, even more broadly. "I guess she liked the way we finally decided to work together instead of fighting." He yawned and that set off a chain reaction.

"I think we all better check with our deputies then get cleaned up and be presentable before we see the vice president," Christian said. He sniffed the air near an armpit stained with successive layers of perspiration. "I don't know about the rest of you, but I think I'm becoming personally offensive. The TV announcers won't come near me the way I smell now."

That got a laugh.

After some final details were arranged, among them the withdrawal of the blacks from the CDC transient quarters and admin building, Qualluf stood up first. "I believe I have more work to do than you gentlemen, so I had better get busy." He held out his hand.

Doug took it. Colonel Christian's face lost its smile but he accepted the fact that his former enemy was suddenly an equal partner. He was a realist. He shook Qualluf's hand and nodded.

Qualluf eyed him, remembering his psychology training. "I'm sorry about the casualties you and Doug suffered, but given the circumstances, I doubt either of you would have done much different had you been in my place—particularly after those rumors got started. And before we forget, I want to ask the vice president when I see her to investigate their origins. It ... never mind. I'm sorry. A lot of good people died."

Christian shook hands. "I'm sorry, too, Qualluf. I may not agree with some of the methods you used, but as you say ... well, any of us might have reacted much the same if we were susceptible to the Harcourt virus," Christian admitted. "If we do wind up on that council the vice president mentioned, let's try to prevent it from ever happening again."

"For sure," Doug added. "He looked over at Fridge. "Old friend, I wish I could bring your family back. As is, please try not to blame us. The majority of whites aren't like those nut cases. And don't let's lose touch again, okay?"

Fridge nodded, shouldering his rifle. He took Doug's hand, gripped it tight enough to hurt, then Doug pulled him forward and hugged him with his good arm. A wellspring of emotion prevented him from

speaking for fear of bursting into a fit of crying.

They all departed, each to their respective headquarters.

* * * *

The vice president's announcement hit the country like a bombshell, taking even President Marshall by surprise. Had he known in advance, he would have tried to use the martial law edicts to prevent the media from disseminating the astounding story. But after thinking about it for a few minutes, he knew it would have gotten out anyway, either by the media refusing to obey restrictions or through propagation over the net. Give her credit, he thought. She did it exactly right—for her, damn her soul. Didn't she understand the politics involved in something like this? It was going to mean he would either have to resign or see that martial law was clamped even more tightly on the nation. Why hadn't she come to him first? His mind whirled with all the implications, but like most politicians, his thoughts centered on how they would affect him—and his hold on power.

He called his appointments secretary into the oval office and had him clear his calendar, then turned to Lurline. "What in hell was the woman thinking of, putting that stuff out without us approving it in advance?"

"Don't you believe it, sir?"

"Goddamnit, yes, but there were better ways to handle it." He tapped his fingernails on the desk, trying to think. So Edgar and the general were behind the whole thing. He wondered briefly whether they had anything to do with the second virus, the one devastating the Arab population, then decided it didn't matter—except some of the damned ragheads were sabotaging their oil wells with radioactives, trying to make sure that if they couldn't have them, no one else would either. Maybe having Newman and Tomlin arrested and tried by courts martial would settle the blacks and Hispanics down. But that would only mean they would begin calling for his resignation. Guilt by association, he thought, forgetting how secretly pleased he had been that so many blacks, a source of instability in the nation ever since its founding, were dying. Now it seemed as if perhaps they wouldn't all die, after all; only about 60% of them, along with some of the country's other dark skinned citizens. It would make for a simpler nation to govern if he could just hang on. Better to fire the crazy bastards and deny the whole story. The whites would believe him, he thought. They had a vested interest in staying on top, and this would mean far less competition. His astute political mind knew that people believed what they wanted to believe and justified it later with religion, philosophy or other schools of thought they agreed with.

The president never stopped to think that most the problems came from whites believing darker skins meant inferior races, much like the Japanese thinking anyone other than them were barbarians, *Gajin*, before the country was opened; or the Romans, who believed if you weren't a Roman, you were barely human. It was an old story when human culture was still young.

"All right, here's what we do," he finally said. "Fix up an announcement denying the truth of the story and put a clamp on the press. I'll ask Tomlin and Newman to resign, then congratulate the CDC on solving the problem of the Harcourt virus, even if they aren't completely sure yet. If Johannsen pulls through his surgery, we'll try him in a military court and execute him publicly. The black community will like that, and since they'll believe they all aren't going to die now, they'll settle down and go back to work."

Lurline thought of all the scenes of mass burial she had seen across the country, the world; the whole devastated continent of Africa with smoldering cities and deserted villages, dead lying unburied. And now ... now, to find that officials of her own government had been involved, had *started* the vile disease, and that the president didn't intend to prosecute them, simply because he wanted to hang on to power. It was the end. It would have been the end even if he hadn't intended to announce a cure before it was certain

there was one. She couldn't work for the man any longer, not under these conditions.

"I'm sorry, Mr. President, I won't be a party to simply sweeping this under the rug, no matter what the consequences."

"What! Lurline, there's nothing else to do!"

"Then you'll have to do it on your own, Mr. President. I'm resigning, effective immediately. I hope you see fit to change your mind and do what's right." She rose and walked out of the office, wondering why she had stayed so long to begin with.

* * * *

"I'm glad to meet you sir," Captain Foley said after saluting properly.

Christian eyed the baby faced captain, the newest member of his headquarters staff. Foley had arrived while he was absent. He would have much preferred keeping Captain Russell rather than this newcomer, but he was still back in Charleston at Shane Stevenson's erstwhile residence examining the captured documents. "Welcome aboard, Captain. Have you been orientated and issued all the equipment you'll need here?"

"Yes, sir. The staff took care of me very well." He shifted his pistol belt up a notch, wishing for a shoulder holster as he normally wore—but normally his assignments called for civilian clothes. Right now he was wondering how he could possibly carry out the latest orders he had received; to take out the colonel at the earliest opportunity.

"Fine. I'll have the XO assign you some duties tomorrow. Right now, just get familiar with the status and disposition of our forces and see Sergeant Major Brannigan first thing in the morning, or before then if he has time for you. He'll brief you on the civilian situation and how the civic affairs teams are organized."

"Yes, sir," Foley answered, unintentionally showing his displeasure that he, an officer, might have to adjust his schedule to that of a sergeant.

"Good. Now I need to get some rest. We have a big day coming up tomorrow. Rutledge, I'll want the various commanders here at 0600 hours tomorrow for a briefing. God night." He strode off, hoping he could stay awake long enough to shower and brush his teeth before collapsing.

* * * *

Qualluf and Fridge had to browbeat some of their more militant compatriots to make them see reason, but after learning they would get Johannsen to do with as they pleased and that Qualluf would be part of a government council assigned to solve problems—and that the vice president was on their side, they finally agreed. Then both of them went off to get some food, sleep and a bath.

* * * *

Doug had called ahead. He was both dragging and hurting as his chair was wheeled back into the Science building, where June was waiting for him in a temporary office. He knew Amelia was still in a hospital bed, but she had arranged for a networked computer to be brought to her room. She was conferring with medical centers all over the world, pleading for updates on the progression of the Harcourt virus and information from the Arab world where the other virus was still raging unchecked.

June was running the routine administrative affairs while Amelia concentrated her efforts on the broader picture. She was in the computer alcove, her back turned to the room, as she worked with suppliers to arrange for replacement of all the goods that had surely been destroyed or stolen at their former offices and those of all the other clerks and supervisors who kept the huge facility running efficiently. New

computers to download their backups into and food to restock the cafeterias were her primary concerns. She heard the door opening but kept her eyes on the computer monitor. Her administrative assistant, a young, efficient man of Vietnamese ancestry called out to her.

"June, you've got a visitor."

She rolled her chair away from her work station and swiveled around to see who it was.

"Doug!" She got up and ran to him, tears gathering and blurring her vision at his appearance. He looked as if he was about at the limit of endurance. He had bags under his eyes and unwashed hair plastered to his head, making it look almost black rather than brown. The lines on his face seemed to have grown more prominent almost overnight. She didn't know they were mainly a result of his avoiding any more pain medicine in order to stay awake. "Doug, you look terrible!" She put an arm around his shoulders, ignoring his body odor.

Doug kept his mouth closed as she kissed him, feeling the tacky taste of teeth gone unbrushed too long.

"I'm fine, I just need some sleep. I have to talk to you and Amelia a moment first, though, if Amelia is free."

"She's working from her bed, but I can get her on a conference line from here."

June sat back down and played with the computer keyboard. The big wall screen across the room brightened and came into focus.

I'm not the only one who looks terrible, Doug thought. Amelia was sitting upright in a hospital bed with a sheet covering her to the waist. Her thin nightgown showed darker and lighter areas of her body beneath it, the result of bruises from the beating she had taken. Her face was still swollen and discolored. An IV line was hooked securely into her forearm, with the line moving this way and that as her hands played with her computer controls. The swelling around her eyes had gone down somewhat and she no longer had to peer through slits between her eyelids in order to see.

"Doug, you don't look very good. You need some rest."

"Look who's talking—and I intend to get some rest very shortly. I just wanted to update you and June, then borrow June for a little while, if I may. I have to have some help getting cleaned up."

"I should think so. Go ahead, just give me a quick summary of anything the vice president didn't cover in her speech."

Doug went through the essentials quickly, just in case Amelia had missed any of it. Then he told her of the impending vice presidential visit and the proposed council.

"Oh, goodness! My chance for fame and look at my face!"

Doug was glad to see she still retained a sense of humor. "Don't worry about your face. Amelia, having you with us will reinforce the need of someone besides the military to ride herd on the civilian population if she convinces the president to start lifting martial law. You'll be perfect. Everyone I know trusts you. Even Qualluf Taylor has decided you're sincere."

"Thanks to you. All right, you go ahead and rest; I've had some already. June, you needn't come back until in the morning. Just let your Ky know where you're at and I'll drop what I'm doing and take up where you left off. I'm about ready to turn this mess here over to the statistics group anyway. Oh—I'll also borrow Ky from you to help arrange the TV interview here. They'll have to if they want me involved."

And I suppose the Secret Service will be around, too, checking on security."

"Ky always knows what I'm doing. He'll catch you up quick, then do whatever else you need. The man is so efficient he scares me sometimes."

"Good. If that's all, then shoo. Go to bed."

June wheeled Doug out.

"Where are we sleeping?" he asked. "We can't go back to our apartment yet; the bomb squad has to sweep it for booby traps, though Qualluf said he would try to have any that his men know of disarmed."

"There's a little room near the Chief Scientist's suite designed for when an overnight stay at the office is necessary. Amelia appropriated it for us. We can manage there. I've already got it equipped with everything you'll need, including clean clothes that Teresa sent over."

"Which reminds me, I've got to..."

"You don't have to do anything. Teresa is as efficient as Ky. If my husband is going to be meeting the vice president, I want him to look like he's still living instead of something the cat dragged in. Right now you could just about pass for a corpse."

True to her word, the little room was ready, complete even to a shower. June had even thought far enough ahead to procure plastic bags to protect the cast on his arm and the wounds in his lower leg. By the time he had brushed his teeth and showered, with June stripping his clothes and helping him as he sat on the seat inside, he was nearly gone. He would have been, had it not been for the pain. A pill took care of that and he fell asleep in mid-sentence. He never did remember what he had been talking about.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

"What do you mean she's gone! Where in hell is she!" President Marshall roared at his new, temporary Chief of Staff. With Lurline gone, he felt as if he was foundering, unable to keep what needed to be done separated from what could just as easily be either postponed or cancelled entirely.

"I don't know sir. I didn't know she had gone anywhere until you asked me to contact her. Ms. Tedd didn't leave any instructions for me in order to assure continuity. I..."

"Well, get her on the phone, you fool! No wait. Have you heard from General Newman?"

"Was I supposed to, sir? I didn't know. And do you mean call the vice president or Ms. Tedd?"

Marshall avoided an explosion of temper by the barest of margins. He buried his head in his hands, then massaged his temples to calm himself down. It wasn't Credence's fault. Lurline had been so efficient she had rarely relied on her assistant for backup and as a result the man was totally lost. The president raised his head, wishing he could have a drink. He glanced at his watch. Hell, it was late enough. One wouldn't hurt.

"Make me a drink—no, come watch me while I do it so you can see how I like it."

As President Marshall carefully measured out precisely three quarters of a shot glass of hundred proof premium bourbon, he gave Credence instructions on what to do next.

"First try to get in touch with General Newman and tell him I want his resignation immediately. If you can't reach him, get the joint chiefs together for a conference call and notify me when they're ready." He poured the shot glass of bourbon over two ice cubes in a small water glass and added enough water to bring it three quarters of the way from the rim. "Next, try to reach the vice president. No, try to find her first. See if her plane has left. Whenever you reach her, notify me immediately. I want to talk to that bi ... that lady." He stirred his drink, tasted by downing a third of it, then held still for a moment while it burned its way down and began warming his body.

Back behind his desk, the president continued. "Call my quarters and tell the family I'll be staying here overnight. There's too much going on to leave the office. I'll try to get a nap here if I can. Get the speechwriters and press secretary. Have them fix up a denial of Santes' story, but include a statement that both of those crazy fools involved with the Harcourt virus are leaving office 'for the good of the country', but don't phrase it that way. The speech writers will know what I mean. And finally, get that colonel in Atlanta on the phone. I have some orders for him. That's all; now get busy."

Mylan Credence left the president sitting at his desk, sipping bourbon and sifting through briefs that had been stacking up. The president was rubbing his eyes as he closed the door behind him. Then Credence began trying to sort through everything the president wanted done while thinking that maybe Lurline had the right idea. Resignation was beginning to sound like a preferable option to this madhouse.

* * * *

"Mr. President, I won't help you brush this under the table. I joined the ticket because I honestly felt it would help our party govern better. I'm sorry to see I made a mistake. I won't deny this story under any circumstances, and I won't return to Washington."

"But Marlene, we'll be thrown out of office."

"Perhaps, but I swore an oath to defend the constitution, not the office. This is the right thing to do. Edgar

and General Newman should be arrested and tried."

"I've asked for their resignations."

"And have you gotten them?"

There was silence at the other end of the line, allowing Santes to hear the barely audible hum of the big jet she was on descending toward Atlanta. When the president came back on the line he simply said "I'll talk to you later."

Thoughtfully, she handed the phone back to an aide and considered what to do. "Call the local media in Atlanta. Tell them I'm having a followup press conference at the CDC. Give them approximate times. Tell them to contact the CDC for more details. Then send the press back here. I'll want to talk to them before even stepping off the plane."

* * * *

Too bad, General Newman thought. We could have worked with the man. He picked up his phone and gave a set of coded signals to one of his operatives while glancing down at his wastebasket, where lay the tatters of the resignation document an aide had prepared after hearing the president call for it. The frightened aide had hurried away while Newman muttered to himself. If that fucking Marshall didn't know how to run the country, then by God, he did. It was the president who was going to leave office, though not in a formal way. He was seeing to that right now. And after that—well, after Marshall was gone, there would be some real changes made. America had been let itself be a doormat for those gook countries too long. By the time he was finished, they'd be singing a different tune. He grinned crazily. If any of them were left.

* * * *

Edgar Tomlin had prepared and signed his resignation, but not yet sent it to the president. He was staring despairingly down at the one page statement when the General called.

"Edgar, just sit tight. I have the situation under control. I'll take care of the president. You take care of that Santes bitch."

"How?"

"You know how, Edgar."

"I don't want to go that far. It will be traced back to us and we'll be executed! Besides, the president is denying the whole thing. We're safe."

"You damn fool, don't you think you're a dead man if you back down now? You can't quit. You sit tight or I'll take care of you myself. Hear?"

Edgar Tomlin put down the phone, wishing he had called a halt to the process when he had a chance. But then, he reflected, after I provided the funding, it was inevitable that it would go on to a conclusion. And isn't this what I wanted? A world without blacks, the Arabs no longer dictating policy to us because of a geological accident that located them on top of hundreds of billions of barrels of oil? Maybe Newman can handle it. He who rides a tiger ... the old adage drifted through his mind as he slowly tore the resignation into strips and fed them to his shredder. Then he gave the orders. It would have to be done in a hurry. Fortunately, he had been making plans, though he had hoped it would never come to this.

* * * *

John Dawson wiped beads of perspiration from his wife's dark colored face. "Can I get you some more

pain medicine, honey? Anything?"

His wife gripped his hand. "John, I'm sorry, I'm not very brave. Could ... could you get me enough to just end it? You know there's no hope." She grimaced as another wave of excruciating pain swept over her body.

He squeezed her hand, feeling all the love he held for her welling up inside, creating almost as much ache in him as the Harcourt virus that was ravaging her body was inflicting on her.

"All right," he said, choking the words out. He released her hand and went to prepare a solution that would ease her out of life in dignity. As he mixed it he heard President Marshall at another press conference, denying again that he was covering anything up. John Dawson didn't know if that were true or not, but he did know from the conversations in the oval office he had begun recording once his wife fell ill that if he were not complicit in knowing how the virus began, he was certainly in sympathy with its consequences. It was time to release the recordings. It would mean his job, possibly prison, but he no longer cared. The light of his life was going to be permanently dimmed as soon as he returned with the medicine.

* * * *

In the big ward at the CDC where treatment facilities had been set up, Leroy Barclay lay dying. He had little regret. Life had never offered him much, he thought. And all because I was born black. Well, if he had to go, he intended to see that some of the damned white men who had made life miserable for his people went with him. That was possible now, and his first target would be one of the highest officials in the government that had been guilty of so much of the oppression and exploitation. He thought of the gun concealed beneath his body and tried to look sick instead of guilty as the secret service agents roved through the room, searching for possible threats. The patients weren't forced to undergo body searches and the metal framework of the bed made metal detectors effectively useless. After a while they left, but he waited. He would be able to hear them coming when it was time; a political entourage would make lots of noise.

* * * *

Silas Morgan could practically feel the cancer eating away at his body. He ignored the pain while he cradled the sniper's rifle in his arms. This would be a long shot, but well within the realm of possibility for him. Marine snipers were the best in the world, and he had been among the best of the best. He knew he was doing a good thing. General Newman himself had recruited him. Well, not personally, but he had assurances that the general and others high in government were behind the effort. That's what was needed to put the country back on the right path, a path where the niggers and Jews and Spics were kept in their place instead of being allowed to run free, acting like they were just as good as whites. Shit, they even let them marry traitorous white sluts now and it was *legal*! Well, he might die; no, he was certainly going to die, but he would leave behind a better country, with a man in charge who didn't play politics with subhuman mud people. He knew he was the right man for the job, too; There was no chance of getting away, not from this close, but it didn't matter. He was dying from cancer anyway. They might kill him out of hand or try to hold him for trial and execution before his natural death, but it still didn't matter. The little pill in his shirt pocket would take care of that, and also exclude any possibility of giving up the men he worked for.

In the distance, the throng was gathering, getting ready for the president's appearance. He eased the barrel of the rifle forward, into its final position. Just a few minutes now ... he saw the president striding toward the podium, thinking of what a great spot he had picked for the press conference. The White House stood in the background, a perfect icon for the cameras, a reminder of the power behind his words. Up until now. The president stopped at the podium and looked down at his notes, already laid

out for him. Silas had already adjusted for wind and elevation. He moved the rifle barrel minutely, centering the crosshairs of the scope on the president's head. He took a deep breath, eased it out and slowly pulled back on the trigger.

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

The interview with the vice president was finished. Doug had been surprised at how bright and hot the lights were and finally fully realized why interviewees had a tendency to perspire under them. Fortunately, that was over and now they were touring patient wards. Vice President Santes had insisted on visiting some of the patients before leaving and asked for Doug and the others to come with her.

There was little warning. One minute everything was fine; the next, the lead secret service agent suddenly became alarmed. He pressed a finger to his ear, better to hear the feed coming to him from the device affixed to his other ear. "The President!" he yelled. "The president has been shot!"

All eyes turned toward the vice president, including those of the secret service agent. Only Doug was in a position to see the patient's hand coming from beneath the covers. Without thinking, or with any concern for his own safety, he dived for the gunman's hand with his only good one. He barely managed to deflect the shot. The bullet plowed into an agent beside the vice president. Before others could converge on him, the patient cried out in frustration, trying to wrest the gun from Doug's grasp.

Doug was in a position where he could get no leverage. He held on grimly and could only stare in horror as the gunman was able to slowly turn the barrel—toward him. He flinched, but didn't let go, knowing the vice president had to be protected no matter what. At the last second he managed to get his other arm in the way, the one with the cast on it. The next bullet plowed a furrow into the cast and through the muscle of his forearm. He was shoved away an instant later and two more shots rang out, but those were from the secret service agents. With the abrupt report that the president had been shot, they were taking no chances. The assassin was dead; the agent he had shot instead of the vice president was dead from the hollow point that plowed into his neck, shattering his spine. Doug was the only other casualty, and even he didn't realize he had been hit until he saw smoke still curling from the cast and felt the beginning pain from his wound.

All the rest of the rest of the episode was anti-climactic for him. When June saw blood seeping from the hole in the cast and out of the opening near his hand, she insisted that he be cared for right away.

His wound could be treated under local anesthetic; only the muscle had been hit.

"We've got to stop meeting this way," Doug joked as the same doctor who had repaired him before attended to him again. He flinched as the cast cutter touched his arm. The circular, toothed blade looked ominously sharp.

"Young man, I'm certainly willing to call a halt to it. I had just dozed off for some well deserved rest when this happened." He had to talk around the noise of the special instrument used to cut away the cast, an electric saw with a blade that vibrated rather than spun.

"Was the president hurt or killed? Have you heard?" Doug asked, his eyes still fixed on the saw. Surprisingly, it proved to be not dangerous at all. The vibration just ate through the cast without touching his skin.

"I think he's dead, but don't take my word for it; I'm just going by what people have told me." The nurse used an instrument to gently open the cast along the cut and replaced it with a temporary device to hold his broken arm immobile while the new wound in his forearm was attended to.

"The president is dead," June said, returning from a quick visit to Amelia to see whether or not she was needed back at her desk immediately. "There's something else causing a lot of upset. A secret service agent released some recordings made from the oval office and they're just now being broadcast. If the

President wasn't in on the plot with Tomlin and General Newman, he was certainly in agreement with the results. If he hadn't been assassinated, he would have had to resign anyway. And if not, he certainly couldn't have been re-elected.

"Ouch," Doug said to the surgeon. "You missed a spot."

"Sorry. Do you want me to inject you again?"

"No, get it over with. I need to get back to work."

"We still have to replace your cast, you know."

"I know all too well," Doug said. "June, I'm fine. If you need to get back to your office, go ahead. All I need to do is check with Teresa when I'm finished here, then consult with Colonel Christian and Qualluf. Are they still here?"

"I think they're both being questioned by the secret service."

"Ouch. That's not for you, doc," he added hurriedly. "Those guys could take forever and we need to get Qualluf and Christian out of here and back where they belong."

"I'll talk to them," June said. She leaned forward and kissed him. "Call me when you're free. I'll be at the office."

"Wait. If the Secret Service doesn't cooperate, have Amelia try calling Vice—I mean President Santes. I don't know if this number will still be good, but you can try it." He gave the number to her and June hurried away, while the doctor gave him a peculiar, but very respectful appraisal before returning to his suturing. Doug winced again, but didn't complain. He wanted this to be over and done with. He eyed the secret service agent standing nearby, waiting to question him as well.

* * * *

Vice President Santes was hustled away from the CDC and to her plane. By this time, word had come that President Marshall was definitely dead and that she would succeed to the presidency. Her first order after shakily taking the oath of office from a hastily recruited judge was to issue an arrest warrant for Edgar Tomlin and General Newman; under the terms of martial law there was no waiting for a judge's approval. She settled into her seat as the plane took off, feeling the mantle of ultimate responsibility descending over her, as she knew it had so many times before in the country's history. She began making notes on the most urgent tasks facing her, even while knowing there would be many more added to her list the second she stepped into the Oval Office.

Before they landed in Washington, she got Amelia's call, on the number she had given Doug. She listened for a moment, then told Amelia to call her back if the men were not released. She wagged her finger at the nearest secret service officer, who also happened to be the same one who had run her detail since she had assumed the vice presidency.

"Who's in charge of the detail now?"

"Until we get to Washington, I guess I still am, Mrs. President. After that, I don't know."

"I'll try to see that you stay with me, if that's your preference. In the meantime, call your boss in Washington and tell him I want Qualluf Taylor, Colonel Christian and Doug Craddock not to be bothered until they have some time to spare. I'm sure there's very little they could add to the picture in any event."

"Yes ma'am. I'll do it immediately." He hurried toward the front of the plane.

President Santes resumed scribbling notes on the yellow legal pad. Her PDA had been lost in the scuffle, but word had come that it had been found and would be returned. Without a hint of amusement, she mused about how her first thoughts, her first priorities, would almost certainly be preserved on this pad for future historians. Then she did smile inside, knowing how far removed from her true thoughts these notes were. Some things were best left unwritten.

* * * *

Captain Timothy Foley cursed fluently, but only to himself. He had just heard of the new president's order to have both General Newman and Edgar Tomlin arrested. So much for his own orders. There was no longer any sense in trying to carry them out now, with no one to report to, especially since there had been only a slim chance of killing the Colonel anyway. He had about decided to try shooting him in plain sight of others and trying to make it look like an accident. All that would get him now was very probably a thorough going over from both the secret service and military intelligence officers. He had no illusions about being able to stand up under the type of questioning they could bring to bear. But ... now he was stuck here, in a combat unit and God only knew when he would be able to get out of it. His fear of combat had been what impelled him into General Newman's service in the first place; that and his own belief in the white supremacist movement. Now it looked as if he would eventually have to face combat anyway. He felt his body beginning to tremble. This duty was about as bad as punishment for the orders he hadn't carried out would have been. Damn it all, life wasn't fair! Suddenly he wondered whether or not the general would betray him after his arrest and began trembling worse than ever.

* * * *

"You can't arrest me, you damn fools! I'll have you all thrown in prison! I'll have you executed, by God!" General Newman yelled at the military police officers who had entered his office without knocking or a by your leave.

"Put the cuffs on him. Don't let him hurt himself," ordered the lieutenant colonel in charge of the detail.

Enraged, the general lunged for the side drawer of his desk where he kept a pistol concealed. He very nearly made it, with the military police inhibited by his four stars and exalted position as head of the whole military establishment. A female captain acted first, rushing to grab his hand when she suspected what he was up to. The others followed quickly.

General Newman was hustled out of his office, hands secured behind his back, raving threats and blandishments, spittle flying from his mouth. Eventually, he had to have his mouth taped shut so that charges could be read to him.

* * * *

Edgar Taylor went silently when his turn came, but tears streamed down his face as he visualized what lay ahead. In the days that followed before his execution, he realized there had never been a chance the American people would have allowed a military dictatorship, even if both assassination attempts had succeeded.

* * * *

The first thing President Santes did after arriving at the White House was get Lurline Tedd on the line. She knew that Lurline was privy to many of Marshall's machinations and she knew Lurline had walked out on the president over the issue of Marshall not arresting Newman and Tomlin.

"I need you to come back, Lurline. We have to have some continuity here and you're the best person for it. The country needs you."

"In what capacity would I serve?" Lurline asked from the den of her home, surprised that the new president wanted to talk to her at all.

"It would have to be as assistant Chief of Staff for the White House. Or Presidential Advisor, if you prefer a different title. I can't bring in someone else over the head of my own chief."

Lurline didn't really need time to think. She was already missing the hustle and bustle of the Oval Office, and she knew the president was perfectly correct; she was the best person available to get the new administration off on the right foot. Already, there were rumblings from congress about the arrest orders and the way Santes had handled the situation in Atlanta. There was also debate over the authenticity of the Dawson recordings, which were stirring a huge amount of controversy. Some also thought Santes should have been much harsher on the rioters. Perhaps Lurline could furnish information on the former president that would still some of the unrest. At the very least, she could show the president the most efficient way to manage the office.

"I'll be very glad to come back to work, Mrs. President. And Presidential Advisor is completely satisfactory as a title."

"Fine. Thank you very much, Lurline. I personally appreciate it and I know others will, too. Can you start tomorrow morning, or do you need a little more time to arrange your personal affairs?"

"I can start tomorrow, Mrs. President, although I may not manage to get there first thing in the morning."

"That's all right. Um, you might bring a change of clothes and your personal toiletry items. I expect to keep you very busy for the first few days, if not longer."

Lurline let out a merry laugh. "No problem, Mrs. President. Thank you for your confidence."

The line went dead. Lurline replaced the phone and began packing, whistling to herself. After a moment she recognized the tune. It was an old one, *Begin Again*.

CHAPTER THIRTY

"Where's Johannsen? I would have thought he would be out there with them," June said. She and Doug were laying on the bed two weeks later, backs propped against big pillows leaning on the headboard, watching a news cast. It was the first time they had managed a day off to simply relax and be by themselves, back in their apartment in transient quarters, which had been cleaned up and refurnished.

Doug looked at the screen as the camera again panned across the three stakes set in a courtyard. Shane Stevenson, General Newman, and Edgar Tomlin stood with their hands tied behind them, with others in the wings, waiting their own execution. The eyes of Newman and Stevenson were wild, faces contorted as what was about to happen impinged with brutal force on their consciousness. Tomlin had accepted the offer of a blindfold; the others had not. General Newman had a wide piece of tape plastered across his mouth. No one wanted to listen to his ravings any more, not even the newsmen.

Doug looked surprised. "Didn't I ever tell you what was going to happen to Johannsen? No, come to think of it, I didn't. Part of the initial agreement that stopped the fighting here was that once we had milked Johannsen of all he knew about the Harcourt virus, and his connections with the white supremacists, was to hand him over to the Church of Blacks. In fact, if I heard the anchor right, they'll be televising his demise right after the executions here."

"I don't want to watch either of them, but I would like to know what they're going to do to Johannsen. I can't abide the thought of anyone being tortured, even him. They should just kill him."

Doug's arm that was in the cast couldn't be used much, but he moved his fingers to touch her thigh where he had pushed the sheet aside. He caressed her fondly, thinking of how much he loved her. "Well, they're not going to torture him, in the classical sense of the word, but he's not going to have a painless death, either."

"Well, what, then? A lethal injection?"

Doug confessed, hoping she wouldn't think less of him. "It was my idea, June. And yes, it will be a lethal injection, just not a regular one. I thought of it back when we were still negotiating. Savak Johannsen is going to receive a fatal dose of quinol, the substance that causes such a painful death in dark skinned people who have the virus. He's going to die in the same kind of agony as all his victims did. I couldn't think of a better way for him to go."

"Lord have mercy! How long will it take. No, don't tell me, and let's turn this off. I don't want to watch." When the screen went blank and silent, June rolled onto her side. "I don't know if I totally agree with you, but I certainly can't think of a more fitting death for him." She lay her head on his chest.

Doug felt himself wanting to make love again. There had been very little time for it the last two weeks. He curled his arm around her. He kissed her and ran his good hand over her shoulder and the curve of her hip.

June looked up. "Again? Good."

"Mmm hmm. Only thing is, with this damned cast, the only comfortable way for me is on my back."

"Just pretend you're a woman," she laughed. "I'll take care of everything else."

* * * *

Fridge stood out of the way of the camera lights and watched Johannsen writhe under the quinol

intoxication. He stood there for a long time, but finally it began to remind him too much of seeing his family die in front of his eyes, while he watched, helpless to do anything for them. He turned around and left.

"No comment," he said to the gaggle of reporters outside. He didn't want to talk to anyone right now. Instead, he decided to visit the cemetery where his wife and children were buried. They had died early enough in the pandemic so that he had been able to bury them, rather than having their bodies consigned to a mass grave. One day when he had time, he would place markers. For now, all he wanted was a quiet place to grieve one final time before placing their memories in an archive of his mind where he could call up the happy times they had spent together. Maybe ... the thought flitted away on the wind, but he didn't try to revive it.

* * * *

Qualluf Taylor stayed until the last, almost twenty four hours later. Johannsen had suffered, but when the time came that he was no longer responsive, he called a halt to it and ordered another injection to finish him off. Afterward, he went back to the office he had been given in the Atlanta chapel of the Church of Blacks. There was still work to be done until the Presidential Council got organized. Santes was keeping her word.

* * * *

Doug returned to his duties the next day. He enjoyed the frequent contact with Amelia, where he could see June, but that was about to end. She blew him a kiss as he pulled open the door to Amelia's office. He paused there to blow the kiss back to June. She caught the imaginary missive and touched her fingers to her lips. She smiled serenely at him, a promise of things to come when they were alone again.

Inside, Amelia was on the phone with someone. She motioned him to a seat. He took it and tried not to listen to the conversation, thinking it might be private, but he couldn't help overhearing an occasional "Mrs. President" as she talked.

Amelia replaced the phone. "Did you and June enjoy your day off?" she asked, a twinkle in her eyes.

"Immensely," Doug said. "Too bad we can't have more of them. Or a honeymoon."

Amelia looked pensive for a moment. "You may have one despite yourself. That was the president, as I guess you heard. She wants you in Washington next week if congress approves her request."

"Request?"

"Yes. You've been nominated for the Congressional Medal of Freedom."

"I didn't do anything to merit that honor."

"Don't be modest. Haven't you been following the news? You're a national hero."

"Me?" Doug was astounded. If anyone was a hero it was the men who had died defending the CDC complex. All else had followed from that.

"You. And she's also requested enough authority for the council so that it will have some real power. If that's approved, and I suspect it will be, you may as well stay in Washington. I'll hate to lose you and June but you're ready to move on." She laughed. "Doug, there's even talk of you being on the ticket with President Santes if she runs for re-election, which I expect she will."

"What! Me a politician? Never! Once we get that council organized and running good, I'm going to take June home and have a family. She says she's ready."

"Hmm. The president is awfully good at persuasion."

"She'll have to be damn good to ever get me to agree to that!"

EPILOG

Three years later, Doug wondered where the time had gone. The Harcourt virus had run its course and the secondary infections had proven to be much milder than the original. The virus had indeed attenuated—for the better, though the world was still suffering from its aftereffects.

The African continent remained largely a lawless wilderness, the violence and fighting over scarce food supplies having taken a very heavy toll on the survivors of the virus. The Middle Eastern population was severely depleted, but Israel hadn't gotten off scot-free. It turned out that they hadn't gotten all of Iran's nuclear arsenal as they thought they had, and an atomic bomb had exploded over one edge of Tel Aviv, the largest city in the nation. They had retaliated with a single atomic explosion over Tehran to emphasize the unwavering policy of retaliation, an eye for an eye, but they were still picking up the pieces of Tel Aviv, and neither the Middle Eastern nations or Israel were a force in world politics any more.

Doug thought the world was very fortunate that only those two atomic bombs had been used and that so far only one nuclear power plant had suffered a meltdown. It could have been much, much worse.

China had become balkanized, with warlords holding various sections of the country. It was a very scary situation, for no one knew which ones, if any, controlled the small nuclear arsenal China had possessed. Taiwan was cautiously trying to help, but they had their own troubles, too. Before the war with China petered out its cities had suffered a ferocious barrage of conventional weapons, and a large portion of its navy had been sunk. And of course some of their citizens had died from the Harcourt virus.

Russia was cooperating with the reconstituted United Nations, now called the Confederated Nations, and with the United States—so far. He had no idea how long that would last, but the relationship showed promise.

In the end, a billion and a half people had died before the cure and prevention of the Harcourt and Goldwater viruses were fully developed; not as many as predicted by some scientists, but certainly bad enough. The world was only slowly coming out of the economic depression, but no one begrudged the money being spent on the huge new research facility being built alongside the CDC in Atlanta. Its mission would be very simple: find a way to prevent such a man-made calamity from ever happening again. The scientists he had talked to were cautiously optimistic.

The Presidential Council for Urban and National Affairs had done some very good work after congress relented and gave it enough power to override political protests at some of their actions. Amelia, Fridge, Qualluf, Franklin and a very competent woman by the name of Selena Martinez were still running the Council and he continued to serve as the chairman, with General Christian as the military advisor. President Santes was considering General Christian for a seat on the Joint Chiefs. It was a good choice, he thought.

Doug sighed. There was only so much he, or the army or the nation could do, even under the banner of the newly organized Confederated Nations, after the original organization disintegrated into chaos, accusations and recrimination, then fell completely apart. That had been a good thing, he now realized. It allowed a completely new start and provided an opportunity to get rid of the cronyism and bureaucracy-fattened old union that had become increasingly unable to function effectively, even before the Harcourt virus.

"What is it sweetheart?" June asked, concern carrying an almost visible presence in her voice.

"Nothing, really. Just thinking of all that's happened and all that still has to be done."

"Come here," June said.

He walked over to where she sat, rocking and nursing their firstborn child, a daughter.

"Please relax, Doug. You know you can't do it all. You're a fine and wonderful man and I love you, but this is a time to relax. Be grateful for what we have."

Doug smiled, looking down at his daughter, happily and innocently nursing at June's breast, without a care in the world. He met June's gaze and nodded. "You're right, as usual. I'll try harder. You deserve all of my time I can give."

June nodded. She looked up and returned his smile, very content, and thinking that he wouldn't be Doug if he didn't try so hard. He was doing a wonderful job and everyone of consequence knew it.

Later that evening, as they were preparing for bed, the Steward knocked. She heard his voice plainly. "I'm sorry to disturb you, Mr. Vice President, but President Santes wants to talk to you."

Doug gazed helplessly at June. He closed the door and came back to her. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. Maybe I can handle it from here. If I can't I'll let you know before I leave."

"It's okay. I know she wouldn't call you on a Sunday unless it really was an emergency. Just try to hurry."

"I will," Vice President Doug Craddock assured her. And he would, too. His wife and daughter were more important to him than anything else in the world. In the end, nothing else really mattered.

Afterward

This was a rather difficult book to write, and I realize it might arouse intense emotions among cultural and racial groups in the United States and other parts of the world. However, I feel like the story needed to be told, and saw no better way to do it than through a fictional account of what may become a very real possibility in the near future. Many articles have been published concerning the inherent danger of genetic manipulation of disease-causing microbes and viruses, perhaps even prions, but they are read mostly by professionals, and the dangerous possibilities rarely impinge on the general public's consciousness. Fiction, on the other hand, reaches out and touches readers at the gut level. They can see in fictional form how a genocidal pandemic could affect real people and real nations, real families and real children—just like their own. I hope that they take note and urge our representatives in Washington to begin research now to limit the damage should something like the virus described in this book be released into the world.

At the risk of appearing gauche, I would also like to state that some of the despicable attitudes and beliefs described in this book are most emphatically not my own and I trust that any offence I may have caused is outweighed by the need to alert the country to one of the many dangers lurking in the future. The near future, I might add.

I might also mention here that I took some liberties with the layout and organization of the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta and its nearby environs. It was rather ironic in a way. I asked the CDC for a map or a description of their outside building (or buildings) and was refused. Perhaps they thought I was a terrorist! At any rate, as the potential for biological terrorism increases, the CDC might very well come to resemble the description in this novel.

I also took a few liberties with the White House, but not many.

Author Bio

Darrell is the author of about two dozen books, in many genres, running the gamut from humor to mystery and science fiction to non-fiction and a few humorous works which are sort of fictional non-fiction, if that makes any sense. He has even written for children. For the last several years he has concentrated on humor and science fiction, both short fiction, non-fiction (sort of) and novels. He is currently writing the fourth novel in the series begun with "Medics Wild."

Darrell served thirteen years in the military and his two stints in Vietnam formed the basis for his first published novel, "Medics Wild." Darrell has been writing off and on all his life but really got serious about it only after the advent of computers. He purchased his first one in 1989 and has been writing furiously ever since.

While Darrell was working as a lab manager at a hospital in Texas, he met his wife Betty. He trapped her under a mistletoe sprig and they were married a year later. Darrell and Betty own and operate a Christmas tree farm in East Texas which has become the subject and backdrop for many of his humorous stories and books.

Visit Darrell's web site: www.darrellbain.com/

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