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## **The Rhesus Factor**

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**Book One of the Sanctuary Series**  
Sonny Whitelaw

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Dedication

*To Amber and Cody, my windows into the future.*

## Chapter 1

**Optimised PCR methods for detection of (the) TTV (virus) found, to our amazement, that thirty three percent of volunteer blood donors are infected with it. The virus is ubiquitous. In another PCR-improved study by Japanese researchers, TTV was detected in ninety two percent of the general population ... There are a lot of healthy people carrying the virus (Mushahwar says) which raises the question: 'What are these viruses doing in humans and not causing disease?'**

—Leslie Pray: The Mysterious TT Virus—What Is It? *The Scientist* 15[15]:22 July 23, 2001

In Washington DC, Presidential Science Advisor Jean Simmons was in her White House office, preparing to leave for a panicky heads of state meeting, following a forum that had achieved nothing, but scared everyone. Jean wished she could go home, call in sick, and sleep.

She felt sick all right, sick of heart. But people in her position did not take sick leave for something so mundane as a divorce. Jean had to keep reminding herself how many others in the White House were currently 'negotiating marriage dissolutions'. They came to work every day, smiled, planned, plotted, connived, back-stabbed and played the ugliest, most addictive game on the planet without thinking twice about being publicly declared unfit spouses. In fact, most of them wore it as a badge of honour, a declaration of their sacrifice in support of the administration. How noble.

Opening her compact mirror to freshen her lipstick, she examined her tired face. How many of them had to deal with their husbands having an affair with a boy twenty years his junior? Not only had she failed as a wife, she had failed as a woman. Jean tucked a wayward lock of burgundy hair behind her ear, snapped the compact closed and slipped it into her pocket. She picked up her copy of the Kamchatka Statement and dropped it into her briefcase. The issues it dealt with trivialized her personal problems; for it was an admission that the world's last superpower was finally being humbled—by an ocean current.

Jean went to shut down her computer, but the desktop file on Kristin Baker stared at her accusingly. She attached it to an email then added as an after-thought, 'This was the State Department's idea, not mine,' and sent a copy to Commander Nicholas Page.

Her office door opened in a flurry of waving papers and angry voices. Straightening her cream-coloured jacket, Jean pasted a concerned look on her face when the Director of the CDC, Andreas Clem, strode in.

'I'm telling you, Jack,' Clem was saying to the short, obese man trailing behind him. 'The President better be informed before he leaves because the implications are already trickling out on the Internet. It won't be long before some science journalist comes up with a very realistic prognosis.'

Jack Obermann, the Assistant Secretary of Health, snapped, 'There's enough apocalyptic garbage being bandied about in Kamchatka without you adding to the hysteria.'

Both men seemed oblivious to Jean's presence.

'Hysteria,' Clem said flatly and glared at Obermann. 'You'll know all about hysteria once this hits the wire services! Dammit, you've got this bureaucratic *idée fixe* that the CDC's mandate is to react to rather than prevent epidemics! Hell, during the '11 cholera epidemic, the government spent more money and resources on congressional finger pointing than containing the outbreak!

'So here we are again,' he added, tossing his hands in the air. 'You stuck your damned heads in the sand and hoped it would go away. Well it hasn't! Jean!' Clem finally turned to her. 'You tell him!'

Jean walked around her desk, shutting her briefcase as she went. 'Tell him what, Andreas? That Earth's defence mechanisms are finally going to wipe out the human plague with an immune response?' She was too tired to be tactful, even to Clem.

The CDC Director's dark eyes narrowed. 'You haven't read my email, have you? God dammit, Jean, this is not some imaginary scenario we're playing here. We've been collecting data on Rhesus for six years and—'

'It can wait a couple more days,' Obermann said, placing a pacifying hand on Clem's arm. He tossed Jean an apologetic look. 'I'll set up a meeting with the chief of staff when the President returns from Kamchatka.'

Jean picked up her briefcase to leave, but she stopped when she saw Clem's expression.

'What blood type are you?' he demanded brusquely.

She froze. 'Why?'

'Because at the rate the Rhesus virus is spreading, especially through DC,' Clem said, turning to Obermann. 'It's entirely possible you're already infected. Both of you.'

A perfect reason to excuse herself from this trip. She could go home and c And what? Jean's professionalism suddenly cut in. Rhesus had been around for years; everyone knew it was harmless. So what was agitating the normally soft-spoken CDC director?

Obermann's ruddy features darkened and the spidery veins on his nose throbbed.

'Your blood pressure's showing again, Jack,' Jean said and motioned for them to leave. She closed and locked her office door, then turned to Clem. 'Okay, Andreas, walk with us. Tell us the latest and if I think you have a case, I'll convince the Secret Service to let you on Air Force One to Kamchatka, because that's the only way you're going to see the President in any kind of hurry. Better call your wife and tell her you're going to be late for dinner.'

Two hours later, Andreas Clem glanced out the tiny window of Air Force One. He'd risen to his position over the bodies—literally—of good men who'd worked themselves into an early grave. He had resolved that he wasn't going out the same way, but right now, he wasn't so sure. Despite the air conditioning, he was sweating and his heart was racing. His hand shook as he wiped his face with a napkin. He was scared. No, he thought, be honest, you're *terrified*.

After 9-11, the Army Institute for Infectious Diseases—USAMRIID—had slowly usurped the CDC's investigative and management aspects of disease outbreaks, on the premise that such outbreaks might be bio-attacks. Within ten years, USAMRIID had been better equipped, both clinically and tactically, to deal with epidemics, and the CDC had inherited a new mandate: the restructuring of the disastrous US public health care system.

Economically gored by the Iraq War, the federal government had tossed the burden of public hospitals and health care programs onto state and county budgets already teetering on bankruptcy. The result had been an unprecedented nationwide closure of hospitals and clinics. The ACR cholera outbreak in 2011 and the successive collapse of insurance companies worldwide triggered even more closures. Now, on the eve of a new pandemic, American Insurance had folded. And the CDC's job was to wave a magic wand and make it all better. What's not to be terrified of?

Trying to calm himself, Clem took a few deep breaths. Outside, the sky had darkened and stars were

visible, not because it was nightfall but because Air Force One was an SP—a Space Plane. He wasn't impressed by the view; it served only to remind him how small the planet was. International flights were the perfect vector for plague organisms.

'You're up.' Jean tapped him on the shoulder.

Startled, Clem sat up. 'You read my report?'

'The whole thing. I've briefed the President; he'll give you a couple of minutes.'

Clem stood and adjusted his rumpled coat and tie. He wished he'd had the time to get cleaned up and changed; his bags were still in the DC hotel.

'And Andreas,' Jean added. 'You have my unequivocal support—if you agree to hold off announcing this until we formulate a response.'

After the introductions, President Edwin Blake took off his glasses and stared at Clem. 'Jean tells me that a plague virus has infected a significant percentage of the American population. After what we went through in 2011, why wasn't I informed sooner?' He wasn't angry, but his voice carried a depth of annoyance.

'Sir,' Obermann cut in. 'The Rhesus virus doesn't kill people. It doesn't even make them sick.'

*Doesn't kill people*; Clem closed his eyes in disbelief. Party politics, not professional competence had landed Obermann the role of Assistant Secretary of Health. Obermann still thought like a doctor—a mediocre one at that—not a public health professional.

'So what's the problem?' President Blake sat back in his chair and tapped his steepled fingers together.

'The CDC has just discovered a staggering side-effect.' Jean held up the report.

President Blake stared at Clem. 'Explain.'

Clem ran his hands through his wiry black hair. 'Sir, we initially thought the Rhesus virus only attacked a protein coating on human blood cells. This protein is an agglutinin that alerts the immune system to produce antibodies against disease.'

The President frowned and sat forward. 'It's another immunodeficiency virus, like AIDS?'

'No, sir. Blood group substances are weak antigens; they don't play a significant role in protecting the body from disease.'

'Blood groups,' explained Jean, 'are defined by the Rhesus or RH Factor, which denotes the presence or absence of the protein.' She glanced warily at Clem. 'It now seems that destruction of these proteins by the virus is just a *symptom* of a vastly more complex condition. Andreas is worried about the ultimate consequences.'

'Sterility.' Clem ignored Obermann's pleading look. Now that he was finally getting someone's attention he felt a little calmer—but not complacent; he would not be made the fall guy.

'So it's a secondary complication, like the mumps, right?' Blake said, looking at Clem.

'No, sir.' Jean shook her head. 'Sterility is the *primary consequence* of the disease. The Rhesus virus is spreading fast and it's...'



'One hundred percent contagious,' Clem said flatly, his eyes focused on the President's.

'In Rh-positive blood groups only,' injected Obermann; his bureaucratic mind at work.

'And one hundred percent of victims become sterile,' Clem finished.

President Blake blanched as the implications hit him. '*Everyone..?*'

Clem nodded.

Blake looked at Obermann and Simmons, then asked in a dangerously low voice, 'How long have you known this?'

Obermann swallowed and looked at Jean, who had the grace to blush.

Clem wasn't feeling so generous, but he was still a political animal. Pointing fingers now was a waste of time. They were too late, years too late. 'Mr. President,' he said tiredly, 'we've lived with the possibility of a doomsday bug since Ebola reared its ugly head. And AIDS is, in effect, a slow burning Andromeda. We knew Rhesus was destroying these proteins. And we knew it was spreading fast. But as Dr. Obermann pointed out, no one's been getting sick. Hell, Rh-negatives don't even *have* the protein so the virus was considered a harmless curiosity.'

'After the cholera epidemic the CDC should have been alerted to such a possibility!' Blake snapped. 'Need I remind you of what happened to your predecessor?'

Staring pointedly at Obermann, Clem said, 'After which the previous administration ordered the CDC to hand over all of our research on Rhesus to USAMRIID. In all fairness to the army, there are hundreds of thousands of bacteria and viruses in existence, any one of which has the potential to become a plague organism. In 2011, USAMRIID could not justifiably allocate resources to study one of many seemingly innocuous viruses while the worst epidemic since Swine Flu ravaged the country.'

'The draconian methods the army used to control cholera worked, but they were deeply offensive to the American people and arguably cost the previous administration the election. Although your administration reinstated the CDC's original mandate and we've been collecting data on the *spread* of Rhesus, our budget is still a joke—and USAMRIID still has control of our research.'

'It's the damned Republican dominated Congress,' the President declared. 'They keep vetoing the budget.'

Always watching your political butt. 'Yes, sir,' Clem continued. 'However you look at it the CDC has been set up to take the fall—again. We're not in a position to deal with any major disease outbreak. We're fighting a losing battle against incurable tuberculosis and STDs, West Nile virus, dengue, toxic algae blooms—the list is endless and exacerbated by climate change—while trying to re-establish ourselves as a creditable institution! I've spent hours juggling our budget and personnel in a desperate bid to fund the most basic investigations into the epidemiology of Rhesus. There's no money to study the virus itself. I'm not having the CDC wear this; there are too many dedicated people there. You need a scapegoat? Here's my letter of resignation.'

He produced an envelope from his file case. The envelope was empty; he had no intention of being tossed into career obscurity, but he knew how to play the game.

The President waved it aside. 'No, not this time. This time Congress is gonna wear the burden of its stonewalling, *I'll* see to that. What I need is your recommendations. Can we contain it? Forcibly quarantine the infected, like the army did with cholera victims?' His eyes darted between them.

Jean touched her wrist comunit and motioned to Clem; they were over time.

Leaning forward, his hand movements punctuating the urgency in his voice, Clem said, 'No, sir. Quarantine is useless because Rhesus is not infectious, and although I used the term contagious, that's not strictly accurate. The trigger, not the virus, is spreading *like* a contagion. You see, people can't catch Rhesus from one another because it's already inside of them—it's an endogenous retrovirus. That means it's hitchhiking in the DNA of people with Rhesus positive blood, just waiting to be switched on. I've seen some nightmare microbes but Rhesus scares the hell out of me because it's in our genes.' He stared at each of them in turn to emphasize his point. 'It's part of what makes us human.'

A shocked silence followed. The President ran a hand across the back of his neck, then asked, 'What percentage of the population are threatened?'

'Rh-negative is a genetically recessive trait that should have evolved into extinction,' replied Clem. 'Why it hasn't ... well, maybe a genetic failsafe evolved at the same time as the virus. If we can't stop Rhesus, at least Rh-negatives assure the continuation of the human species.'

'Don't beat about the bush,' Blake snapped.

'With all due respect, sir, I'm not. Ninety-two percent of the US population is Rh-positive—and up to sixty percent of these have already been infected. But politically, that's not the worst of it. Despite the current low rate in Asia and Africa, unchecked, the virus will go active in almost one hundred percent of non-Caucasians.'

'Good God!' Blake sat back in his chair and looked at Obermann. 'Jack, talk to me.'

Obermann swallowed and stammered. Jean said, 'Sir, if Rhesus really is in the genes of everyone who's Rh-positive, the demographics are undeniable. Virtually one hundred percent of all Amerindians and subgroups: South American Indians, Eskimos, Pacific Islanders and Asians, are Rh-positive. For African Americans,' she glanced at Clem, 'it's as high as ninety-six percent, and even the Rh-negatives in them are from the injection of Caucasian genes in previous centuries. For native Africans it's near enough to one hundred percent.'

'We're still running down statistics,' Obermann had finally found his voice. 'Hispanics are better off because the Rh-negative gene originated in Spain, where thirty percent of the Basques are negative—'

'Okay, okay, I get the picture,' Blake interrupted. 'But Caucasians are almost as badly off, right?'

'About eighty-seven percent,' Jean replied. 'But we're talking racial extinction for non-Caucasians.'

'How soon before you have a cure?'

'Sir, no one has ever developed a cure for a virus,' Obermann said.

Blake frowned. 'What do you mean? Of course they have!'

Obermann shook his head. 'Vaccinations to prevent catching some viruses, and anti-virals that inhibit the reproduction of others, yes, but no silver bullet.'

'Besides, Rhesus is endogenous,' said Clem. 'It's already in every cell of the body, and there's been next to no research on it. When we first learned about AIDS we thought we'd have it licked within five years. Forty years on—'

Blake stopped him with a raised hand. 'So unless you prevent it spreading, ninety-two percent of the

population will be sterile in ... How long do you estimate?'

Obermann stared upwards. 'No reliable estimates, sir, but based on the CDC's figures—which are yet to be verified—and given whatever triggered it will probably circulate the planet in a number of waves—'

'Get on with it!' the President snapped.

Silencing Obermann with a look, Clem said, 'It's not ninety-two percent. That's just Europe and the US. Factoring in Asia and Africa, over ninety-nine point nine percent of mankind will be sterile within ten years.'

## Chapter 2

**'Climate doesn't change smoothly. It happens in jumps and jolts,' says Stefan Rahmstorf of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impacts Research in Germany. In Buenos Aires, he revealed ... that northwest Europe could cool by several degrees as global warming shuts down the Gulf Stream. The current has already been weakened by increased flows of freshwater into the North Atlantic. While Europe faces a sudden chill, most of the planet could face equally rapid heating.'**

'Abrupt climate change is the historical norm,' says Jeff Severinghaus of the Scripps Institute of Oceanography.

—New Scientist: 14th November 1998

'Until three weeks ago I would have had to admit that (predictions were) a purely theoretical calculation,' Rahmstorf says. 'But now we have received data showing that the (Gulf Stream) has decreased by 20 percent since 1950.'

—New Scientist: 21st July 2001

Commander Nicholas Page, USN, picked up the popular science magazine. The bold cover text announced that the entire issue was 'dedicated to understanding The Kamchatka Statement'. Page flicked through the magazine until he found the article by Dr. Kristin Baker. The intelligence report that Jean Simmons had emailed him said that Baker was a thirty-two year old Australian marine engineer. The article revealed somewhat more.

'Throughout Earth's long history the climate has changed often and rapidly,' Baker wrote. 'The evidence is clear and irrefutable: in the composition of the soil and the shape of the land, in tree rings and Arctic ice cores, and after mankind arrived, in archaeological digs.

'At the end of the last great Pleistocene ice-age, Earth's climate began another of its periodic adjustments. In less than ten years global temperatures jumped more than five degrees Centigrade. Glaciers melted, the seas and rivers rose, inundating previously dry lands. And it rained. Not just everyday rain, but a deluge so great that climatologists called this period a fluvial.

'Then something extraordinary happened; a perverse side effect of global warming. The Gulf Stream shut down, and in Europe and North America the warming cycle went into full reverse. The air cooled and the glaciers returned as rapidly as they had retreated. Areas that had thrived under the warmer postglacial regime suddenly became inhospitable, driving species to extinction and devastating the lives of the cave dwelling humans that depended on them.

'But humanity had reached a watershed moment. Having enjoyed the relatively short benefits of warm weather, this new adversity birthed a human invention that would revolutionize the world: agriculture. It was a coping strategy, the first attempt by Homo sapiens to impose order on the environment instead of succumbing to it.

'The first feeble attempts at agriculture stumbled along for almost nine millennia. Then the world's climate seasawed again. The Gulf Stream returned, Europe and North America warmed and the glaciers receded. And this time, they did not return.

'As the ice melted and the temperatures soared, rain again inundated the world. Stories of vast floods abound in cultures from China and the Americas to the Middle East—although it seems only Noah

decided to tough it out instead of heading for high ground.

In the fertile crescent between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, floods might have drowned the hapless nomads and animals that missed Noah's Ark, but they were also a sign that spring had arrived to a planet too long wrapped in winter. From this veritable Garden of Eden, mankind went forth and multiplied, taking agriculture to Africa, Asia and the Americas. City-states—the precursors of modern civilization—were born.

For the next five millennia civilization marched inexorably across the globe. In the fifteenth century Europeans crossed the Atlantic, supplanted the prior inhabitants and claimed the Americas. It was serendipity that for the next four hundred years Europe and North America were blessed with some of the finest weather in millennia.

Few appreciated that these halcyon years were a direct result of climate. And almost certainly no one, at least not until the twentieth century, understood that this climate was regulated by the flow of the Gulf Stream.

The mechanism is simple enough. When seawater freezes, it leaves behind salt. This causes the remaining water to become dense and heavy, so it drops to the ocean floor. Each winter, above the Arctic Circle, the seawater freezes into an ice pack covering hundreds of thousands of square kilometres. And it produces huge volumes of dense, heavy water. With plenty of momentum and nowhere to go but south, the water falls to the Atlantic seabed then flows past Europe and Africa. As it crosses the equator it begins to rise, picking up nutrients and heat. In the South Atlantic it curves west before turning north then crossing the equator again and flowing into the Gulf of Mexico. Finally, a few years after leaving the Arctic, the water resurfaces near North America as the warm Gulf Stream.

From an economic point of view, the nutrient rich Gulf Stream supplied most of the seafood to Europe and North America. More significantly, the warm water brought temperatures to the North Atlantic four or five degrees higher than similar latitudes elsewhere. On the land, the temperate climate meant longer growing seasons and allowed agricultural lands to extend far to the north. There is no doubt that the conditions brought by the Gulf Stream helped birth modern Western empires.

But these empires fostered greedy and intemperate children, and in their endless search for power they pillaged the earth and burned the spoils: fossil fuels. Countless tons of carbon disgorged into the atmosphere and trapped heat, just as it does in a greenhouse. As the atmosphere warmed, less Arctic ice formed each winter. Worse, an enormous volume of freshwater disgorged from the melting icecap and glaciers into the Arctic Ocean. Finally, with nothing to drive it, the Gulf Stream, the vital oceanic conveyor belt that succoured Western Europe and the United States, shut down.

'The only surprise was that it didn't happen sooner.'

Commander Page put the magazine aside. Jean Simmons was right; duping Dr. Baker wasn't going to be as easy as the State Department thought.

\* \* \* \*

Kristin Baker felt the smoke, saw the noise and heard flames explode in the night as her senses turned inside out and the world collapsed in furious dismay.

Earthquake!

Masonry shattered. Her arms flailed and she tasted blood as she cart wheeled. Dust and heat filled her lungs. Her body was pummelled and her skin sandpapered. Then the breath was punched from her lungs as she landed on something—or someone—soft. Dazed, she steeled herself to ride out the last of the

violent seismic waves.

But none came.

Kristin's mouth and nostrils were filled with powder and mucus and blood. Her long, thick hair was filthy and matted and her eyes stung with grit. She tried to stand—but a second explosion knocked her down, then a brutal wave of heat enveloped her. This was no earthquake; she had to get out *now*!

Scrambling away from the heat, Kristin slipped, rolled, and then landed on cool wet grass. She pushed herself to her feet and ran barefoot through the manicured gardens of the Fijian resort hotel, down to the moonlit beach. Why did everything sound so muffled? Her left ear rang like a bell. Her right ear ... She reached up, touched wetness and found blood on her fingers. One bruised and one busted eardrum, but surprisingly, she seemed otherwise okay.

The same could not be said for the hotel. The beachside wing where she had been sleeping had partly collapsed. Behind it, flames swirled into the night sky like crazed Flamenco dancers; the garden wing and reception were an inferno.

Kristin's training finally kicked in. Despite the chill of the winter's night, she waded into the Pacific waters until her white cotton T-shirt and shorts were drenched. Myriad cuts and abrasions cried out at the salty invasion, but she ignored them and ran back to the hotel. Figures staggered past her. An overweight, middle-aged man, naked except for a torn and bloodied singlet, cried out, 'Jenny? Jenny!' Kristin almost gagged at the sight of his singed genitals and the shredded stump where his left hand had been. But she took him by the other arm and began leading him away. He stared dumbly at her for a moment, and then crumpled into her arms. She staggered and would have fallen but someone took his weight. The horrified eyes of an Indian Fijian met hers. Between them, they managed to help the man to the relative safety of the beach.

Lights jiggled along the foreshore like fireflies; Fijians from a nearby village were running towards them. Two stopped to help while others kept going. Some went back to the village with instructions to bring water, blankets, anything that might help.

Eyes turning from terrified to determined, the Indian stripped off his floral shirt while the villagers lowered the injured man to the ground.

'You know what to do?' Kristin gestured to what remained of the man's arm.

The Indian nodded. Shivering with the cold, Kristin picked up a piece of twine from the ground, tied her hair back, and ran to the hotel. She wondered how long it would take before the fire consumed everything.

By the time the fire trucks arrived, they could do little but add to the confusion. Ambulances came soon after, but the fire had spread to the winter-dry jungle, blocking the roads. It also forced would-be rescuers to back away. Yet a form of order evolved amidst the horror and pandemonium. On the beach, a vacationing doctor directed villagers and those with minor wounds to tend the badly injured as best they could, or to hold the hands of the dying. With an onshore breeze, they were safe enough. When the blaze made it impossible to return to the hotel, Kristin found the doctor and asked what she could do. Without looking up, he grabbed her hand and slapped it down on a pulsing fountain of blood. Kristin swallowed back her revulsion; it was an arterial haemorrhage from a child's nearly severed leg.

'Put your finger in here—hard!' the doctor ordered. The little boy stopped screaming and began to vomit.

For two hours Kristin helped the doctor perform rough surgery with a fishing knife, and bind gaping wounds with everything from safety pins to fishing line pilfered from villagers' canoes. Boats arrived to evacuate the wounded from the beach. Few were under any illusion that if the badly injured survived the trip, the understaffed and under-provisioned Nadi hospital would offer little help.

Dawn came, exposing the full horror of the night. Helicopters thumped overhead. Kristin expected to see medevac teams or perhaps the military. Instead, the machines circled like carrion birds, cameras protruding from the open windows, noisily feeding the world a breakfast of death and destruction. Her nostrils flared in anger. Terrorist carnage had become an accepted, everyday event; like holiday road tolls.

Beside her, the doctor swore, tossed a bloodied rag down then stood and rubbed his face in frustration. Kristin looked up at him, then at the indiscriminate slaughter around her. All she'd had to do was pick up a sonar, a little step in an attempt to save her corner of the world. Now she was squatting over a man with half a face, trying to save his life.

The doctor met her eyes and shook his head; the man was dead. Kristin shivered with cold; the blaze was too far away to offer any warmth. She stood, stretched her stiffening shoulders and realised she hurt in a dozen places. For the first time since the bombs shattered the peaceful holiday resort, she took in the entire scene.

Lights from the fire-trucks and ambulances flashed in the distance. Sirens blared in frustration. Boats were evacuating the injured, leaving grief and rage behind. Tourists in torn and bloodied nightclothes tripped over useless fire hoses and splashed through puddles of filthy water, desperately looking for children, husbands, wives. Some were already picking through the charred remains of the hotel, searching for possessions or, perhaps, answers. Something, anything that could explain the terrible night. Others sobbed or clutched comunit like lifelines, seeking the voices of loved ones and friends outside the surreal, bloody nightmare.

Kristin looked down at her wrist comunit. Like the rest of her, it was caked with ash, blood and the charred flesh of others. It was also smashed. The doctor wordlessly bent and unclasped the comunit from the dead man's arm, and handed it to her.

She hesitated, then took it and called Ben Mills, needing comfort in their safe if not altogether happy world.

Mills' dishevelled hair, unshaven face and worried blue eyes appeared almost instantly on the tiny foldout screen. 'What!' he snapped, not recognising the call signal.

'It's me,' Kristin said shakily, adjusting the inbuilt camera so he could see her. She hoped her face didn't look as bad as the rest of her; it would only worry him.

'Where the bloody hell are you?' demanded Ben. 'I've been trying to call for hours. It's all over the goddamned news services!' His eyes flickered off screen to what Kristin presumed was the wall TFT.

'I'm on the beach, east of the hotel.' She looked up at the news helicopters.

'I *knew* something like this would happen!' Ben shouted. 'You're always flaunting your *privileges*.' His boyish face screwed up petulantly. 'A paid junket to the US just to collect a piece of over-sophisticated technology. Well, you've only got yourself to blame. Forget that bloody sonar and let the Japanese take over the project like we agreed. And catch the next flight home. *Now!*'

Kristin stared at his image in disbelief. 'Ben, I've got to go. People are injured and they need—'

'For Chrissakes they've got trained rescue workers. The last thing they need is a do-gooder getting in the way!'

'I *am* a trained rescue worker!' she snapped, but he had already severed the connection.

The doctor's troubled eyes met hers, but before she could say anything, a text message appeared on the comunit's foldout screen. She looked down again and read, 'Don't bother to call until you're ready to apologize.'

Ben Mills' extraordinary behaviour these past weeks had reached an all time low. Kristin blinked twice, looked around at the devastation, and then calmly replaced the comunit on the dead man's wrist. Could her life be any more insane?

Kristin had been overnighing in Fiji only because there were no direct flights from the Republic of Vanuatu to the United States. When authorities gave her the choice of an Australian military transport to Sydney or her pre-booked commercial flight to LA, she chose the latter.

Crisp Caesar salad and a chilled wine accompanied the in-flight movie. She stared at the starched linen napkins and fine white porcelain. They had upgraded her to business class. The sense of order should have been comforting, but it fit badly, like the borrowed dress and shoes that she wore.

In LA, replacement documents and credit cards were waiting for her at the customs service area. She bought a comunit, clothes and a few necessities then caught a cab to a high-rise hotel overlooking one of California's famous beaches. A doctor at Nadi airport had insisted on dressing her minor cuts and burns. He had also given her something to numb the pain. Nothing could numb her mind.

In the shower, Kristin scrubbed her head and rubbed her eyes and wished she could take out her memory and scrub it, too. Finally, she curled up on the bed and cried, not entirely sure what bothered her the most, Fiji or Ben Mills. Eventually, she fell asleep.

Then came the familiar nightmare.

The next day's news barely mentioned Fiji. Flicking through the channels on the TFT screen, Kristin snorted in disgust. The headlines were dominated by one thing: a dozen heads of state, including the President of the United States and the Australian Prime Minister, were in Petropavlovsk for the formal release of the Kamchatka Statement. Their presence gave credibility to a scenario which less than eighteen months earlier had been dismissed as science fiction.

Kristin's new comunit buzzed. She checked the call signature, and, picking up her coffee, walked out onto the balcony. The California sunrise was colourful in a chemical way.

'You have reached Kristin Baker,' she answered. 'Leave your name and number and I'll get back to you when I have enough caffeine in my veins to speak coherently.'

'What time is it there?' asked a contrite voice.

'Almost 6am. Let me guess,' she replied, turning on the visuals. 'Ben bullied you into calling.'

John Mennenger, the Vanuatu Director of Fisheries, appeared on screen. 'Ben Mills doesn't bully me, Kristin.' His jaw set firmly beneath a neatly cropped salt and pepper beard.

Seeing the flash of annoyance in his grey eyes, Kristin replied, 'Yeah, just me. Well not any more. Do you have any idea what that bastard said when I called him from Nadi?'



'He was worried about you. We all were.' Mennenger's eyebrows lowered. 'Ben didn't ask me to call you, but *I'm* asking you to email him, because he promptly went on a binge. He's even turned off his comunit.'

Kristin sat heavily into the cane chair. 'C'mon, John, Ben's not a pretty drunk but he's never gone on a real bender. And he'd never switch off his comunit; he's married to the goddamned thing.'

'He had a propensity to do this before he met you. Then he cleaned himself up.' Mennenger sighed. 'I warned you that he's somewhat possessive—'

'Somewhat! You failed to mention he's also *somewhat* of an expert in emotional blackmail!'

'Listen, I need him and—'

'I needed support, not abuse!' she shouted, instantly regretting it. She shouldn't have flown with a busted eardrum, but no way had she been prepared to hang around Nadi. 'I just shared a bed with him. You're his boss, you need him, you sort him out. Meanwhile, I have a sonar to collect.'

'And then?'

Kristin saw a shadow cross Mennenger's nut-brown face. Annoyed, she screwed up her nose. 'Ben's just walked in, hasn't he?' When Mennenger's eyes flickered, she added, 'Replacement of the sonar was conditional on me taking responsibility for it, and that means personally bringing it back to Vanuatu. I'll set up the test runs, then I'm going on vacation. And contrary to Ben's expectations I am most definitely not staying there to play housewife. I'm coming back to the States to check out Woods Hole. I mean it, John.'

Mennenger's face disappeared momentarily. Kristin heard muffled voices, then the sound of a door closing. 'I've sent Ben outside,' Mennenger said when he returned. 'C'mon, Kristin,' he added in a concerned voice. 'Talk to me.'

'I told you when I called from Nadi airport that I was fine.' She rubbed her eyes. The damned Los Angeles air was so thick it actually stung. This side of the Pacific the ocean was grey-brown, not blue, and the beach was littered with joggers packaged in the latest fluoro-coloured thermo-regulated tracksuits. She wondered if the deluxe models came with oxygen bottles.

'I didn't wake you, did I?' Mennenger said in gentler tones.

Although he was only a few years older than her, Kristin had always thought of John Mennenger as fatherly. Maybe it was the beard. Relenting a little she admitted, 'I couldn't sleep.'

'That's understandable.'

'No, you don't get it.' She closed her eyes. 'John, why are the Japanese so anxious to take over this sonar project?'

'They're not offering to take it over, just—'

'Run it with *their* sonars and *their* technicians using *their* computers on boats provided by *them*.'

Kristin looked up and out over the ocean. For forty years Asian fishing cartels had plied the waters between Vanuatu's two hundred-mile economic zone and its twelve-mile territorial limit. They'd been forbidden from operating closer to shore because villagers claimed traditional land rights over the reefs. But villagers working from canoes never caught enough seafood to meet local demand, so the cartels had

repeatedly sought to have the legislation repealed. They'd bribed politicians, offered to employ local fishermen on their ships and promised the villagers all the free fish they could eat.

As a marine engineer under contract to the Australian foreign aid organization, ADAB, Kristin knew the cartels' ugly track record. If they moved into Vanuatu's coastal waters, they would remove entire populations of marine life—irreversibly destroying fragile ecologies—and toss the commercially worthless species, which made up a bulk of coastal catches, to the villages. Then they'd abandon the lifeless reefs and move on to the next financially challenged third-world nation.

'We all understand the sonar project is your baby,' Mennenger said in pacifying tones.

'No!' she replied angrily. 'I recommended Vanuatu Fisheries operate the project. *You* use the sonars to help village fishermen increase their catch, and you monitor it for ecological and economic sustainability.'

'The Japanese—'

'Knew all about my proposal before I submitted it! Think about it, John. The Japanese trade minister announced their aid package to the South Pacific would be re-evaluated pending the outcome of trade deals with their fishing cartels! Blackmail couched in diplomacy and well you know it! Then the US, *not* the Australian government, sends me a state of the art piece of equipment that can read the number of scales on a fish from a thousand metres, and a wet-behind the ears sonar technician who promptly loses it. An hour later the Japanese trade minister calls to assure you that Vanuatu's aid package would be re-evaluated—*positively!*'

'They want to fund sustainable projects,' Mennenger's frustration was obvious.

'Fund my ass; they want to run it! I don't think it's about control; I think they're scared of something. And as for the Americans ... I'm not used to losing a million dollar gizmo then being told, 'No problems, just come collect another unit', with the promise of a dozen more if I can show results within three months. There's another agenda here; I just can't see it—except in my dreams, where I keep seeing walls of death, like the old drift nets.'

Mennenger stared at her. After a moment's silence he said, 'You're right. You need a real vacation, like the ones people took before the war.'

Kristin snorted. 'So, now you want me out of Vanuatu before I crack up. Who's going to keep Ben in line for you?' And what was Ben's agenda? He was the only one who'd had access to her project notes.

'As you say, he's my problem not yours,' Mennenger replied. 'Kristin ... I can't begin to comprehend what you went through in Fiji, but promise me you won't make any rash decisions or voice any more suspicions until you get back here.'

'I had my suspicions before I left. Ben's attitude has just served to focus them.' She rubbed her eyes again.

'Promise me, Kristin, as a friend.'

'Maybe—as a friend. Now let me get outta here before the pollution kills me.'

## Chapter 3

In January 1995, a vast section of ice the size of Rhode Island broke off the Larsden ice shelf in Antarctica. Although it received scant coverage in the press, it was one of the most spectacular and nightmarish manifestations yet of the ominous changes occurring on the planet. Two months later, a three hundred foot deep ice shelf farther north collapsed, leaving only a plume of fragments in the Weddell Sea as evidence of its twenty thousand year existence.

Dr. Rodolfo delValle, who witnessed the event, said, 'The first thing I did was cry ... If conditions remain unchanged (rising global temperatures) could cause catastrophic floods all over the world. We thought the flooding would occur over the course of several centuries, but the whole process has been much quicker than anticipated.'

### —Ross Gelbspan: The Heat Is On

The Atlantic Ocean is a complex beast. It was not about to abandon its penchant for birthing some of the most destructive weather on the planet just because the Gulf Stream had shut down. When hurricane Adrina formed off Jamaica, it wasted no time tearing through Cuba and the Yucatan Peninsula. Tidal surges swept through coastal towns while inland, after months of drought, torrential rain triggered mudslides that buried entire villages. But Adrina had not finished its rampage; indeed, it had only just begun.

Florida residents watched nervously as the hurricane intensified over the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico, then began moving north.

In New Orleans—much of which lies below sea level—engineers checked dykes and pumps while civil authorities assured everyone that the city was prepared. Residents of New Orleans knew what to do. Since 1981 hurricane-generated floods had turned the region into a disaster area six times. People methodically taped their windows, boarded their shop-fronts, and stockpiled bottled water, candles and flashlight batteries. No big deal—except that Adrina chose to cross the coast during a full moon, when the tide was at its highest. The tidal surge that engulfed the city was unprecedented. The levees built to keep the waters out, now trapped it and the mud it brought, within. When Adrina passed, New Orleans resembled a post-apocalyptic Venice. The dead floated through streets metres deep in putrid, greasy water, while the living used anything that could float to navigate through the horror.

Having unleashed its fury, Adrina turned back into the Gulf and devolved into a low-pressure system. But it did not die. Instead, it lingered in the western part of the Gulf for several days, collecting moisture. Then it lifted northeast across New England, intensifying and drawing more moisture from the unseasonably cold North Atlantic. Finally, it moved across the Gulf of Maine. Weather forecasts issued for the Eastern seaboard advised that the remains of hurricane Adrina would bring 'significant winter weather'—the euphemism for a blizzard—across northern and eastern Maine. Nothing unusual about that forecast—except that it was June.

In winter, few if any businesses in Maine were seriously affected by bad weather. Unlike Washington, DC and New York, which had suffered two paralyzing spring blizzards in two months, Maine was accustomed to snowstorms; digging out was never a problem. But in coastal towns, fishing boats sat idle. Cray pots that should have been out in the once warm waters of the Gulf lay covered in snow. Inside restaurants, hotels, guesthouses and shops, people whose livelihoods depended on summer tourists watched the weather with the same nervous apprehension as New Orleans residents had just days before. Maine needed summer to get through its winter, but if the Kamchatka Statement was right, there might never be a summer again.

\* \* \* \*

In Newton, Maine, Simon Woodstein glanced outside the classroom at the snow-covered schoolyard. He knew why people were confused by the weather; it was an apparent contradiction to global warming. 'What mark did I give you on your last test, Mr. Kandilas?' he said to one of his students.

The boy mumbled sourly, 'A pass?'

'Perhaps I should reconsider that,' Woodstein replied. 'Mr. Camicci,' he asked another boy. 'How does humidity relate to global warming?'

'Humidity is caused by water evaporating into the air,' answered sixteen-year old Greg Camicci. 'And because hot air can carry a lot more water than cold air, global warming means the earth's atmosphere is carrying a lot more water. And what goes up has to come down—in buckets—full more than it used to. So there's a lot more storms and rain, floods and stuff. And that wouldn't be happening if global warming wasn't for real.'

Brian Kandilas sneered loudly, 'If the world is hotter, how come my friggin' nuts are freezing?'

Giggles rolled across the classroom. Woodstein frowned. 'Go on, Mr. Camicci, explain it to Einstein here.'

Glancing cautiously at Kandilas before replying, Greg replied, 'Global temperatures might have gone up only a few degrees, but that means there's a lot more energy to drive the world's weather. Instead of being just a little hotter everywhere, weather is *intensified*. So in places that are normally dry, droughts are worse. But in places where the air is chock full of water, there's more energy to drive the hot air way up into the atmosphere where it's freezing, then dumping on us not only rain, but hail and snow, even in summer.'

Woodstein nodded his approval, but then he added, 'Although you're correct about global warming causing weather extremes, Mr. Camicci, that's not why Mr. Kandilas is suffering scrotal shrinkage. It's something infinitely more frightening. How much do you all know about the meeting in Kamchatka this week?'

Brian Kandilas snapped, 'It's about why my old man is losing his job!'

Tucking his chin in, Woodstein regarded Kandilas over his bifocals. The boy was a known substance abuser, a bully with poor grades and a poorer attitude. But then half the kids in school fitted into one or more of those categories. As a teacher, Woodstein considered it his job to turn them into socially acceptable adults, ones armed with the tools to contribute to rather than burden society. However, society had just dealt them a stunning blow.

'Surprisingly astute, Mr. Kandilas. You will no doubt be discussing the sociological impact in Mrs. Murphy's class. This, however, is a science class.'

'Scientists and politicians,' called a girl from the back of the room, 'are deciding what to do now that the Gulf Stream has failed. When we didn't have a proper summer last year, everyone said it was just a bad year, a freak weather accident. But this year proves it.'

'The world's going into an ice-age because of global warming. Now *that* makes sense!' Kandilas quipped, flipping his pencil across his knuckles in a show of dexterity that Woodstein wished he would apply to his brain.

'Not the whole world; just a small part of it,' Woodstein corrected.

'Yeah, smack bang on top of us! My father says it's poetic justice,' another boy muttered.

His father has a point, thought Woodstein.

'If everywhere else is getting warmer,' Kandilas demanded, 'and we're getting cooler, why doesn't it just balance out?'

'The world's climate doesn't uniformly change from dry and cold at the poles to hot and humid at the tropics. Regional conditions: rainforests, deserts, mountains and the temperature of the ocean all influence local *weather*. Hike ten kilometres east from the Western Australian coast and you'll be dead from heat exhaustion and dehydration within hours. Do the same in South America, along the same latitude at the same time of year, and you'll likely fall down a glacial crevasse and freeze.

'Dramatic *regional* cooling over Europe and North America *commonly* occurs when the earth warms. The last time this happened, in a period called the Younger Dryas, it occurred soon after the last big global ice-age ended. The Kamchatka Statement is calling this one the New Dryas. But since this global warming event is man-made, I prefer the colloquial term: Industrial Winter. Even if global warming stopped this instant, the climate would yoyo half a dozen times over the next few centuries before settling into a new, long-term pattern.'

Simon Woodstein could see he wasn't getting through to them, so he walked over to a small specimen refrigerator. 'Think of it like this.' He placed his hand on the back. 'The coils of a fridge get hot when the inside is getting cold, right?'

Kandilas' face pinched in disbelief. 'Global warming is like a refrigerator?'

Another boy swiped Kandilas' head and said, 'And your nuts are in the deep freeze!'

Ignoring the chuckles, Woodstein continued. 'I'm just demonstrating how even in a common household appliance, heat is converted to energy then used to cool down something. On face value that seems illogical, yet we know it works; we use it every day.'

'But fridges are more complicated than that,' Kandilas objected. 'They have gasses and pumps and—'

'And global weather is a lot *more* complex, with gases—our atmosphere—and pumps. The pump causing *our* problems is the Gulf Stream.'

Woodstein walked back to the front of the classroom. 'My point is that you have to get out of this simple cause and effect mindset. Heating the planet has created a series of domino events. These events are interacting in different ways, some the opposite of what you might logically expect. That doesn't mean they don't make sense, just that you're seeing it as a black box. Heat goes in and ... oops! Hang on, why does cold comes out? Science is about opening the box and looking *inside*.'

The bell rang and teenagers scrambled for the door. Woodstein added loudly, 'That's your assignment: write an essay on the *mechanism* that caused the Gulf Stream to fail. The Kamchatka Statement is being released tomorrow and we'll be discussing parts of it. And know this,' he added ominously. 'Mr. Kandilas' father is not alone. This will seriously impact the lives of *every one of you* before you graduate from high school!'

\* \* \* \*

A few blocks away, Abraham Macmillan glanced out his office window at the leaden sky. 'We knew this was coming,' he said.

Joe Camicci pulled off his fur-lined hat and stared at his boss in disbelief. 'What do you mean *we*? You

knew American Insurance was gonna collapse and you didn't do anything about protecting our money?'

Macmillan shook his balding head and snapped, 'Of course I didn't know about that! This company has millions tied up in American Insurance. How in God's name we're going to sort that mess out...' He grimaced and folded his arms, revealing gold cufflinks on his starched sleeves. 'I'm leaving that to the lawyers and accountants. No, I'm talking about the Kamchatka Statement. Everyone knows what's in it, even if it's not official until tomorrow. Joe, you're my best foreman.' His voice softened. 'Will you please sit down; I'm trying to help you!'

Glowing, Joe took off his gloves, reached out a weatherworn hand and pulled up one of the leather-backed chairs opposite his boss' wooden desk. Macmillan's *everybody* were not the same as his. Everybody *he* knew thought this ice-age thing was tabloid horseshit. Sure, the weather was bad, farmers were losing crops for the second year running, and the price of food was going orbital. But that was the government's problem; *they* should do something about it. The construction industry was different; there would always be work building something.

When Joe was seated, Macmillan said, 'By now it's clear to everybody that last summer wasn't an aberration. I warned you then that developers were edgy. Nobody wants to build a shopping mall that might be buried under a ton of snow in five years.'

Joe remembered that he had laughed; that couldn't possibly happen. Two weeks later a summer blizzard hit. Thirty-two people had died and Joe had stopped laughing and started thinking. Now that it was happening again, and all his thinking wasn't changing anything. These *everybodys* that Macmillan talked about, politicians, developers, bankers and economists; they knew things. And they used them to get an edge, usually at the expense of every *other* body—like Joe Camicci.

'The North Carolina side of business is doing real well.' Macmillan idly ran his finger along the leather-lined blotter. 'And there's more major development projects planned for Georgia. We got in on the bottom rung of this, Joe, and that's allowed me to keep most everyone on.'

'I ain't moving to North Carolina.' Joe shook his head belligerently. 'I can't afford to. Besides, it's taken years to get Greg straightened out. He's doing okay now, real well, in fact, at school. Drag him away from his friends and the home he grew up in? No.' Joe kept shaking his head. 'I'm not risking that.'

'Greg graduates in ... how many years?'

'Two.'

'And your college fund was tied up with American Insurance, wasn't it?' Macmillan looked at him sympathetically.

Joe shook his head. Not in denial, but disbelief. He had no idea what the fallout from the collapsed insurance conglomerate would mean. He couldn't believe, he wouldn't accept, that they'd lost most of their savings overnight. Hell, AI was *big*; the government couldn't just sit by and do nothing!

'Nobody's getting out of this unscathed, Joe' Macmillan continued. 'But there's still money to be made, good money, you just have to know where. With the release of the Kamchatka Statement, though, opportunities will dry up, fast.'

'Five years ago,' he added, clasping his fingers together and leaning forward across the desk, 'I was invited to tender for a contract—a big one. I knew it was a long-term project. Every year companies like ours were asked to submit updated proposals. Few businesses bothered to invest the time, but I did. And it's now paying off.'

When Macmillan told him, Joe almost burst out laughing. But he also sensed this was one of those *everybody else* opportunities finally being offered to him, Joe Camicci. It was crazy of course. He couldn't uproot Greg. Besides, Sylvie was still trying to get pregnant on the IVF program. And then there was his father.

Joe started to reply when his boss stood and walked to the door. With his fingers on the handle, Macmillan added, 'I know you want to collect your boy from school before this next storm hits, so I won't keep you. Do yourself a favour, Joe, talk it over with your family; think about it a few days. But consider this, once the general public understands the Kamchatka Statement, the construction business in Maine is doomed.'

\* \* \* \*

'Makes you wonder what the animals think of it,' Greg Camicci said to his father. He kicked the icy sludge off his boots and climbed into the SUV. 'Maybe the bears and squirrels will go into hibernation.'

Joe watched his son buckle his seatbelt. Greg had inherited his father's olive skin and curly black hair, but his mother's fine Irish features and determination. 'They haven't had time to get ready.' He carefully guided his SUV out of the school parking lot. His wasn't the only vehicle with chains on its wheels. 'They'll starve. Especially the young ones; just like last year.'

Glancing at the mountains, Joe momentarily forgot his personal problems. He, too, wondered how the wildlife was doing. A raccoon had been foraging through his compost the night before. He'd chased it off but that was the second time this week. Maybe the boss was right, maybe that's all this place would be good for in five years, hungry 'coons.

His comunit buzzed. 'Joe Camicci,' he replied.

'It's Dr. Gracie Friand from County General Hospital. Mr. Camicci, I'm afraid something has come up—'

Anger clenched Joe's gut and he growled, 'You said the new cocktail of antibiotics should work!'

'Mr. Camicci, this isn't about your father's medical condition. It's about his insurance.'

The familiar, sick feeling of guilt gripped Joe. 'Now you listen to me,' he snarled into his comunit. 'I don't give a rat's ass how your bureaucrats juggle your accounts. American Insurance paid the bills for my father's surgery. Then he got cholera from *your* hospital!'

'While this hospital is not holding prior beneficiaries of collapsed HMOs and insurance companies responsible for outstanding medical bills ... Listen to me, Mr. Camicci!' Gracie Friand said urgently. 'I'm calling you about the public meeting tomorrow. You see; the entire hospital is closing. Immediately.'

## Chapter 4

It is almost an axiom that action for short-term human benefit will sooner or later bring long term ecological or social problems which demand unacceptable effort and expense for their solutions. Nature has always seemed to be working for a climax state, a provisionally stable ecosystem, reached by natural forces, and when we attempt to remould any such ecosystems, we must remember that Nature is working against us.

—**Nobel laureate Sir Mcfarlane Burnet, immunologist.**

Journalists are acutely aware that the public has a remarkably short attention span. While the Kamchatka Statement would make headlines for weeks, they were no less vigilant for the next big story. When a White House Press Corps journalist asked the White House Communications Officer why the Director of the CDC was on aboard Air Force One to Kamchatka, she replied that Industrial Winter posed new problems for public health care issues. She could not, however, explain why Clem's name was not on the passenger list. 'I'll get back to you on that; probably a clerical error.'

Clem also brushed the journalist aside with a similar explanation. But it didn't smell right. The Director of the CDC looked edgy, downright anxious in fact.

After arriving in Kamchatka, the journalist called the CDC in Atlanta. Director Clem, declared the CDC receptionist, was in DC. No, replied the journalist, he's in Petropavlovsk, with the President.

It was soon apparent that anyone with authority in the CDC was unavailable for comment. And none of the lower echelon had any idea that Clem had flown to Kamchatka, much less why.

The journalist called her network. They were already aware of an increase in activity at the CDC and the National Centre for Infectious Diseases—NCID. This, in addition to rumours about contaminated blood supplies. By the end of the working day there was a growing sense amongst the journalist and her news organisation that something big was going down, something unrelated to the Kamchatka Statement. It was now a race against time to break that story first.

\* \* \* \*

Andreas Clem felt like a barnacle clinging to the US delegation. He was visible, but most everyone ignored him. With the dire consequences of the failed Gulf Stream on their minds, people talked of crop failures, resettlement plans, congressional emergency packages and stock prices. In the face of Rhesus, Clem considered Industrial Winter meaningless.

Ignored or not, he had not been idle. Air Force One was the designated command post for the Presidential party, however the hotel had allocated multiple operational rooms to each nation's delegations. Clem immediately set up camp in the secure communications room, inadvertently escaping the one person who was looking for him: the journalist.

Clem had already issued directives to department heads within the CDC. Now they knew that they were in the middle of a pandemic—it was too widespread to be called an epidemic—priorities were changing. He appointed Roger Harrison, the virologist who had discovered Rhesus five years earlier, to head up the overall investigation. Then Clem began the frightening task of dismantling dozens of critical investigations into infectious disease outbreaks across the US and reassigning personnel to Rhesus.

\* \* \* \*

In the relative privacy of the hotel ladies' room, Jean Simmons finished taking an urgent call from her soon-to-be ex-husband, who had just discovered he had full-blown AIDS. What else could go wrong



with this absolutely fabulous week? Showing what amounted to some concern, he suggested she get herself checked. Jean laughed a little manically. Checked for what? When was the last time they'd had sex, three years ago? Four? Oh yeah, he'd forgotten that little detail.

Jean tried to put some order into her hair with a touch of styling mousse. She'd read somewhere that women who did not have sex suffered more from stress, heart attacks and ... oh to hell with it. She composed her features and went in search of Andreas Clem.

Jean knew the CDC director as a brilliant and articulate administrator who refused to be hung up on jargon. They would need that public relations talent in the coming days because Jack Obermann was clearly not up to it. She had once overheard Obermann refer to Andreas Clem as the administration's token African American. At the time, she dismissed it as Obermann's resentment of being branded the token fat man and court jester. Now, she wasn't so sure. She opened the door to the communications room and saw Clem talking on the secure TFT screen. One of the junior aides had found him a change of clothes and a shaving kit. Good. In this game, appearances counted.

Clem turned off the TFT and looked up. When he saw Jean, he opened his mouth to thank her for organising a room at the hotel for him, but her eyes stopped him. Jean wasn't tall, but her bearing added about two feet to her stature. 'Sorry,' he mumbled.

'Why, what have you done?'

Clem shrugged. 'It was just a general sorry, you know, for whatever.'

Jean chuckled. 'Your wife's got you well trained. By the way, have you had a chance to call her?'

'Yeah. Barbara's in Atlanta, contacting all her old WHO colleagues.'

'Good. The President wants you to brief the Secretary of State.' Jean glanced at the wall clock. 'In fifteen minutes.'

'Has he told anyone else yet?' Clem stood.

'No.' She placed a conciliatory hand on his arm before adding, 'Jack Obermann is downplaying it.'

Clem screwed up his face. 'What the hell is it with him?'

'You haven't established a clear causal relationship between Rhesus and sterility, just a statistical parallel. Obermann thinks you're misinterpreting the data. Let's face it, Andreas, sperm count and motility have been dropping at an alarming rate since the 1960s.'

'Rhesus doesn't alter sperm count or motility, and women still ovulate. The damned thing attacks the *genetic material*! I know what the problem is,' Clem added in frustration, shoving his hands into his trouser pockets. 'Rhesus isn't visible, isn't *visceral* enough. It isn't filling hospitals with some tabloid selling disease like Ebola or cholera.'

'Then give Secretary Winthrop a crash course in virology.'

Seeing her crossed arms and thoughtful expression, Clem said, 'What?'

'Exactly how did you establish a link between sterility and Rhesus, anyway?'

'The CDC has been compiling figures on IVF rates since the technology began. Sperm quality notwithstanding, in the last six years we've seen a disturbing downward trend in egg fertilization rates

worldwide, most notably in Western countries. A clinic in Melbourne, Australia tried the novel approach of employing a mathematician named Leigh Walker to run statistical analysis on patients' clinical histories. Three months ago Walker found a direct relationship between IVF failure and the activated Rhesus virus. After factoring out Rh-negative couples and running specific tests on Rh-positives to confirm Walker's suspicions, the clinic contacted Roger Harrison.'

'Roger discovered Rhesus, didn't he?'

Clem nodded, somewhat surprised that she knew. Then again, information was critical to the survival of senior White House aides. 'Harrison and Walker then ran analysis on data from other clinics worldwide and—'

'Wonderful!' Jean rolled her eyes. 'Obermann will tar and feather you and Harrison for breaking the Anti-terrorism Bioweapons Act.'

'Roger published his first paper on Rhesus months before USAMRIID confiscated his research!' Clem waved his hand in dismissal. 'No one could possibly have clamped a lid on it; the research had already been reprinted in a dozen international journals and on the Internet. Besides, it's like I told the President, the CDC only tracked the epidemiology, we've done no new research on the virus.'

Jean's expression changed from concerned to calculating. She glanced at the wall clock again. 'All right, we've got a few minutes to get your story straight. You've done okay so far but Obermann is running scared and he's had time to prepare a counter-offensive. The last thing we need is you two in a pissing contest, so I'll run interference.'

Clem could feel his heart race. He'd thought he'd convinced the President, but it now seemed he'd just gotten a foot in the door. 'It's still just one big game, isn't it?'

She tossed him a flat smile. 'Real, live chess—but the stakes are higher. Don't worry, Obermann loses at checkers.'

Ten minutes later Jean led Clem into the office set up for the President. 'Hungry?' she asked Clem. Without waiting for a reply she pushed open the door. 'There's food.'

Wondering how he could possibly eat when his stomach was in knots, Clem followed her in. The Secret Service-agents nodded recognition then ran handheld scanners over him. His pass beeped green and the agents opened the inner door.

President Edwin Blake was standing at a table stacked with sandwiches, condiments and plates. The top button of his shirt was undone and his dark tie was pulled to one side; he'd just finished giving another press conference on the Kamchatka Statement. He removed his glasses and absently placed them on the table; his personal aide picked them up.

'You've read the Kamchatka Statement?' the President said without preamble. He reached across the table and grabbed a napkin.

'Yes, sir.' Clem hoped his nervousness would be interpreted as concern.

'How will it impact the spread of Rhesus?' Blake sat down, and gestured for them to join him.

Before Clem could reply, Secretary of State Samuel Winthrop arrived. He was trailed by a sullen-faced Jack Obermann. Clem shook the Secretary's hand. Obermann pointedly ignored Clem, and busily piled sandwiches onto a plate.

Winthrop unbuttoned his suit jacket and sat beside Clem. 'Jack's saying that you don't have the data to back up your claims about Rhesus.' Winthrop, shot Obermann a disapproving frown.

Clem couldn't tell if the Secretary's frown was directed at Jack Obermann because of his comment about lack of data, or the way he stuffed food into his mouth. Maybe Jean was right. Winthrop needed a short lesson in virology. 'Since the virus was discovered,' Clem said, 'epidemiologists worldwide have monitored its spread.'

As Jean had predicted, Obermann pounced. 'You were ordered to hand your research over to USAMRIID!' he cried around a mouthful of turkey on rye. 'Revealing classified information on viruses to foreign countries is a breach of the Bioweapons—'

'Stop being an ass, Jack!' Jean exclaimed. 'You can't classify something that's been in our genes since we climbed down out of the trees!'

Clem knew that was an exaggeration. The Rh-negative gene and the Rhesus virus had probably evolved simultaneously, and recently, but Jean's remark served to make the point.

Obermann went to speak again, but Secretary Winthrop said, 'Okay, let me get this straight. Rhesus is a virus in our genes. What did you call it, endogenous?'

'That's right.' Clem deposited a sandwich on his plate. He had no intention of eating but he hoped his action might make him appear less nervous.

'How in hell did it get there?' Winthrop asked.

'Viruses are too tiny to carry much genetic baggage, so they evolved the ability to add or delete genes from themselves at will.'

'Which threw Darwinian natural selection theories on their ears.' Jean said. 'At least on a microbial level.'

'We know that algae blooms, for example, are giant, floating gene pools in which antibiotic resistance and virulence genes move between microbes and algae.' Clem's confidence grew as he warmed to the subject. 'Human effluent, polluted rainwater runoff, toxic waste, oil spills, ultraviolet radiation and global warming have added to this ocean-going gene *bouillon* in truly Promethean ways.'

'That's how El Tor cholera arrived in Peru in 1991,' Jean reminded the Secretary. 'By hibernating inside algae in the bilge waters of a Chinese freighter. El Tor eventually killed tens of thousands of people, but the average guy in the States took no notice because it was South America; *our* water supplies were chlorinated.'

'Until the next microscopic Frankenstein emerged,' Clem said agreeably, thankful that Jean was on his side. 'While everyone was worrying about Ebola arriving on a transatlantic flight, ACR—antibiotic and chlorine resistant cholera—arrived via algae in the bilge waters of transatlantic ships.'

'Not a good time to be dredging up CDC failures,' Obermann growled.

President Blake frowned. 'I never did buy into the Republican's deconstruction of *that* incident.'

'The CDC gave us a heads-up,' Jean said. 'In any case, safeguards to protect our water supplies against terrorism didn't take into account the nature of that beast.'

'Okay, but where does this new bug, Rhesus, come in?' asked Winthrop.

'ACR cholera serves to illustrate how microbes operate,' Clem continued. 'Some viruses don't even have DNA. When they infect a cell, using an enzyme called reverse transcriptase, they make reverse image copies of their RNA to produce a DNA version of their genes. Others, like Rhesus, exploit vulnerable locations along their host's DNA to *permanently* insert themselves into the host's genetic material. Humans carry, at last count, over five hundred viruses that inserted themselves into our genome over millennia, then pass via sperm or eggs to the next generation. Hence the name, endogenous—within our genes—retroviruses.'

'Like breast cancer,' Jean said to Winthrop. 'Not all women will get it even if they are genetically susceptible, it's usually triggered by some external factor.'

'That's right, sir,' Clem said. 'However, whatever triggered Rhesus appears to be spreading to *everyone* who is genetically susceptible—and that's ninety-nine-point-nine percent of humanity.'

Secretary Winthrop suddenly looked ill. He stared at Clem, dropped his half-eaten sandwich and said, 'What in hell started it?'

Clem shrugged. 'Like HIV it may have begun with a compromised immune system then invasion by another microbe, environmental factors or a combination of events that, individually, had no apparent impact. Our job,' he added, 'is to find out what and/or why. That's the relatively easy part; it's mainstream epidemiology and we already have some excellent leads.'

'And the hard part?'

'How to turn it off.'

\* \* \* \*

Driving northeast from LA, Kristin Baker grumbled to herself and lowered the car window. It was an irksome choice, stifling heat or desert dust. She glared at the broken air conditioning unit. What was the name of this company; Rent a Wreck?

The car suddenly jerked to the left. Grimacing in disbelief, she banged her hand against the steering wheel, slowed down and pulled off the road.

'Moral quagmires,' she muttered and got out of the car. Glaring at the punctured tyre, she added, 'I'm living in one and really, who gives a damn if I turn up an hour late in a white dress destined to become an engine-room rag? If the US Government had doubts about handing over another sonar, well fine. Maybe the Japanese should take over the whole damned project; it wasn't up to her who financed it.'

But handing a fisheries project to Japan was like giving the keys of a brewery to an alcoholic.

Kristin opened the trunk—then shook her head in disbelief. 'Terrific bloody hire car company with its ten year old junk!'

She sighed, angry tears ready to erupt. What was the matter with her? A flat wasn't the end of the world. Sure, Fiji had upset her, it would upset anyone, but she'd dealt with disasters before. And if she were honest with herself, she'd known for months that her relationship with Ben Mills was, at best, a mistake. Maybe John Mennenger was right, maybe she needed a real vacation.

Glaring vainly at the trunk, she didn't hear the approaching vehicle until it stopped on the gravel behind. She turned around; about time her luck changed. In consideration of her new dress, she'd swallow her pride and act the helpless female.

The driver donned a uniform cap and opened the door. Even better! For once when you need one, a

cop. But as he got out, Kristin saw his white uniform and realised he was a naval officer.

'Problem?' he called, walking towards her.

*No, you dimwit; I just pulled over to admire the endless view of rock and sand, with the odd, artistically placed cacti thrown in for effect.* But as he came closer, she saw his insignia and gold wings. Ah, a navy pilot. 'A puncture,' she replied. 'And typically, no jack.'

Nodding wordlessly, the commander went back to his car, opened the trunk and returned with his tool kit. Still without speaking, he pushed his cap to the back of his head and then bent under the front suspension of her car. A man of few words, this is going to be a breeze.

'Emergency brake on?' he said.

Of course she had the hand brake on! But she chastised herself. He was good enough to stop and help. If she was going to play dumb blonde, she'd have to put up with the whole act.

He had the car up in moments, then lifted out her spare. Instead of bouncing, it thudded onto the ground. Kristin brought her hand to her face and moaned softly.

'Pays to check once in a while.' His voice was gently chiding.

'I'll tell them when I pay the bill. If I pay the bill,' she muttered.

'Rental?'

'They delivered it this morning and I was, still am, in a hurry. Leave it, I'll call them to send a taxi.'

'Taxi?' He shot her a curious look, but before she could add anything further, he walked back to his car. 'My vehicle has the same sized wheels as yours, and I don't have far to go.'

'I can't let you do that.' She followed him. 'What if you get a puncture?'

He pulled out his spare and sent her a lopsided smile that stretched to remarkable green eyes. 'Unlikely, don't you think?'

While the commander rolled the wheel to her car, Kristin considered her options. He was probably headed for the same naval base, but she didn't feel comfortable asking him for a ride. Besides, the rental company would take hours to send a replacement.

Handing her his cap, he crouched to fit the wheel. Kristin just managed to control her amusement. She never realized that playing the helpless female could prove so useful.

When he finished, she thanked him and was rewarded with a dazzling smile. 'No problems. Have a good day, Ma'am.' He replaced his cap and touched the brim in an unexpected, charming gesture.

Driving away, Kristin glanced back at the commander in the rear-view mirror. Put him in mess whites and invite him to one of the Vanuatu embassy parties, and the women who normally fawned over the Australian naval officers would desert their customary post.

At the US Navy Browning Test Facility a naval rating climbed into Kristin's passenger seat and directed her through the base to a parking lot by a large building. As they walked inside, Kristin glanced back. The cursed vehicle would be an oven when she came out.

The rating led her through a maze of corridors then opened a door into a well-appointed foyer.

'Commander Page will be here soon. Can I get you tea or coffee while you wait, Doctor?'

'Tea, please.' Kristin eyed the door curiously when it double clicked behind the rating, but she resisted the temptation to check if it were locked. Instead, she examined the ancient naval vessels sailing the walls on seas of canvas.

A wall clock loudly ticked the minutes away. The rating returned with the tea and an apology. Commander Page had been delayed but would be with her soon.

'That's fine,' she replied. They were giving her a million dollar sonar; she could afford to be patient.

\* \* \* \*

It wasn't until he'd closed the trunk of his car that Nicholas Page noticed his rear left tire had picked up a nail and was flat. He turned around just in time to see the numbers on the license plate. He had no reason to suspect a set up, but he called security, ordered them to run a check on the plate, and to come collect him. Damned woman and her puncture; he just had to play hero, didn't he?

Ten minutes later, Nick entered his office by a rear door and glanced at the neatly packed bags by his now empty desk. 'Thanks, Chief,' he said to the CPO with him.

'No problems, sir. You may want to check the locker.'

Nick waited until the CPO left before pulling the keys from his pocket and opening the metal door. Then he stared at the blue evening gown.

Karen had asked him to hang it there rather than in her own, cramped locker. In the hospital, he only had to confront his memories. Here ... And yet, as his fingers brushed the silky material, he could almost hear Karen's voice. The bomb that killed her and injured him had also provided insight into the minds of two of the most wanted but least known terrorists in the world: Elhamy and Um Nehro. And that had given him a weapon. Use it, she would have said, and give 'em one for me. He intended to do just that.

Nick placed the contents of the locker into a bag and called the CPO to take them to his car. Then he read the updated file that security had left for him.

He was intrigued. Not only had Kristin Baker rescued multiple victims from the burning hotel, she had assisted a vacationing doctor in what could only be described as abysmal conditions. Most people, most *civilians*, would have taken the first flight home to their therapist, but Baker had continued on to LA. She was either very resilient, very stubborn or both. Then he saw the photo and grinned. He should have guessed.

Tucking the file into a bag, he handed the last of his things to the CPO, took a final look around and opened the door to the foyer. 'Dr. Baker, I presume?'

She looked up in surprise—and her eyes widened in disbelief. 'You didn't..?'

'Fraid so.' Nick's natural good humour quickly reasserted itself. He shook her hand and then opened the outer door.

'Commander Page, I am so sorry. Who would have believed it?' She stepped outside.

He chuckled and closed the door behind them. 'Must have picked up the same nail as yours.'

'Vanuatu curses don't normally follow me around but this project has been plagued from the start.'

The updated report mentioned multiple abrasions and minor burns across her back and thighs, and he'd felt a burn bandage on the palm of her hand. Three rooms closer to the hotel reception and she'd be dead.

Chance, kismet, a flip of the coin; if he'd taken the back seat in the aircraft, Karen would be alive and ... 'I saw the sonar technician's report,' Nick said as they walked. 'He stated that if he'd taken your advice the sensor would never have been lost.'

Kristin stared at Nick in surprise. 'He admitted that?'

'I read between the lines. The electronics are too sophisticated for your onboard systems.'

'And we can't afford to upgrade them. Someone's gone to a lot of trouble to design an electronic interface and write specific software for the replacement unit—for which I'm very grateful,' she added quickly.

'It's superseded technology,' he explained. 'We were going to scrap them until your proposal came along. The only reason the State Department sent a technician to Vanuatu was to confirm the units would be used for their intended purpose.'

He did not add that their intended purpose was somewhat different to hers. According to Jean Simmons, Kristin Baker had no knowledge of the Exodus Project, the classified codicil to the Kamchatka Statement. But Baker had been asking around, trying to find out how her proposal ended up in the hands of the US military. And why they had responded with enthusiasm. Twice.

'I was surprised anyone in the US had even heard of Vanuatu,' she replied. 'It's suffered a chronic identity crisis since changing its name from the New Hebrides.'

'The Navy has a long memory, Dr. Baker. The entire Seventh Fleet was stationed there during WWII.' He smiled down at her. 'We're accustomed to countries that change their name every time they change their regime.'

He had intended taking her through security to collect the sonar, but changed his mind. A tour of the facilities might help distract her. It would also be the last time he looked around. His assignment here should have been straightforward, but the past had come back to haunt him. And another friend had been lost in the line of duty. Maybe he would take a few days off when this was over, go surfing, clear his head.

Pushing open a wide door, he indicated she should enter ahead of him. High-pitched screeching assaulted their ears, and welding flashes caught their eyes. Bending close to her, he said, 'Your file says you're Australian but you don't sound like it.'

Evidently captivated by the huge engineering workshop, she replied absently, 'I haven't lived there for years, my accent's probably changed.'

'It's charming.'

A frown appeared on her face and she turned to look at him. 'My file?'

He said nothing and handed her a hard hat. She continued to look at him expectantly, but he took her elbow and led her beneath a submersible hanging in a gantry. As he guided her through the apparent disorder, a civilian technician in a white lab coat tossed him a friendly wave, while another slapped his shoulder in greeting. He returned the salutes of half a dozen enlisted men before reaching a glass-walled office. Nick tapped on one of the panes.

Inside the office, a lab-coated man looked up from a worktable, His face immediately split into a broad smile, and he walked across and opened the door. 'Commander! Welcome back. You're staying on?'

Nick shook the tech's hand, introduced Kristin and, closing the door, replied, 'Just passing.'

The technician picked up a small black case and placed it on the table. 'That's a pity, Commander. We could do with your expertise.' He opened the case and lifted out the small, torpedo-like sensor. 'Same model as the last one, Dr. Baker, except for this fin attachment, something the Commander here designed. Allows it to swim through turbulent layers with less signal interference.'

Nick glanced down at Kristin and noticed her quizzical expression. She wasn't looking at the sonar; she was looking at him. His comunit buzzed. He excused himself and stepped outside the office to take the call.

As he talked to security, Nick watched Kristin through the glass windows. While Dr. Baker's file was heavy on detail, it failed to capture her vibrancy. Sun-bleached hair and a handful of freckles across tanned skin told of a life at sea; strong legs and shoulder muscles from hours underwater. Baker was no armchair scientist on a cushy government contract. He briefly flirted with the idea of telling her the truth, but it would only aggravate the perennially strained relations between the White House and the State Department.

When he returned to the office, Kristin and the tech were standing with their backs to him, examining the detachable fin on the sonar sensor.

'So,' Kristin was saying, 'who do I thank for the re-designed software?'

'The Commander designed that, too,' replied the tech. 'Occupational therapy, I guess. You know what hospitals are like.'

'Instead of a firecracker, we gave you an Atlas rocket.' Nick shut the door behind him. Kristin spun around. 'I believe that's what you wrote in your report,' he added. 'So it seemed prudent to simplify it.' He met her unwavering gaze and was suddenly and unaccountably very turned on. What the hell, she wasn't *that* attractive, not like the women he normally dated. Not like the sensuous beauty of Karen. Still, maybe playing babysitter wasn't going to be tedious after all.

'Thanks, again,' Kristin said. 'I understand I'm to have an escort until I leave the States. Why, if it's de-classified? Is there something I should know?'

He shook his head, wondering how long he could maintain the charade. Unlike whoever had dreamed this one up, Kristin Baker wasn't stupid. 'Standard security procedures.'

When the tech handed him the sonar case, Nick gestured to a steel fire door at the rear of the office, and said. 'We can leave through here.'

Once outside, he said, 'I hope you like steak for dinner.'

Kristin scanned the car park, clearly puzzled.

'It's being returned to the rental company,' He continued walking—until he realised she wasn't following. Turning back to her he explained, 'My car's more comfortable.' Then he watched with amusement as a range of expressions crossed her face, and settled on annoyed.

'No offence,' Kristin replied stiffly, 'but there are a few inconsistencies here. I'm very grateful for the spare tyre, escorted tour, sonar and cup of tea, but I can tag along like a lame duck for only so long. My



belongings—what's left of them—were in that car.'

'Not any more.' Nick's vehicle pulled up beside them. A white helmeted chief petty officer emerged and saluted.

Opening the passenger door, the CPO said to Kristin, 'Doctor, your bags are in the trunk. Yours, too, Commander.'

Plush upholstery and cool air conditioning invited them out of the scorching desert heat. Nick placed the sonar case on the rear seat and said, 'Thank you, Chief.' He glanced at Kristin then climbed into the driver's seat. 'I'll answer your questions on the way.' He might not agree with the deception, but he still enjoyed the game, especially as he held an irresistible ace.

She hesitated, then frowning uncertainly, got in.

The CPO closed her door and saluted again. 'Good luck on your new assignment, sir.'

Nick saluted back. 'Thank you, Chief.'

After they passed the security gates, Nick turned to Kristin and said, 'All right, what would you like to know?'

'I probably sound petulant, but I don't like being kept in the dark. Security checks and a file on me, I understand. And I certainly have no objections to you or anyone else from the Navy taking me to the airport. But there's no sense in it. Once I'm on the plane, it's destination anywhere. And if your security is that good you'd know my flight leaves in a few hours, so dinner is out. And how come a navy pilot—sorry, aviator—is playing chauffeur? Okay, maybe that's got something to do with you recently being in hospital, but if there is any risk surrounding the sonar, considering what just happened in Fiji, I think it would be good of you to let me know. And—'

'Whoa, slow down!' He laughed. She really was astute. 'We had a security problem at the base that resulted in my enforced vacation in the hospital. Because of that ... incident, current operational procedures require previously classified decommissioned hardware be accompanied to its destination. So you're coming with me to Australia.'

'What do you mean, *I'm* coming with *you* to Australia?'

'We're saving the Vanuatu taxpayers money by putting you on an FSP early this evening. So,' he smiled in anticipation, 'how do you like steak for dinner?'

Kristin's mouth opened and closed soundlessly. 'Nobody pays tax in Vanuatu. It's an offshore haven and did anyone think to consult me? Or do you guys have me tabbed so well that you knew I'd give ten years salary to get inside a Fighter Space Plane?'

'You can't involve yourself with the diplomatic wranglings between the South Pacific Fishing Forum, foreign governments and fishing cartels, especially with the covert support of your own government without having your background checked.' His eyes danced merrily at her expression. Touching her arm in appeasement he added, 'It's nothing to be worried about. Your file is a collection of readily available facts, including you having a private pilot's license. We're flying three FSPs to Australia, you have a high level security clearance, and you haven't said whether you like steak yet.'

She opened her mouth to speak then closed it again. Finally, she tossed her hands in the air. 'I give in! What about the airline ticket?'

'Cancelled and credited to the Vanuatu Government. Now, how about dinner?'

'Do I have any choice?' She sighed in feigned exasperation but couldn't hide her delight. 'Since you've taken control of my life you may as well feed me.'

Nick smiled in satisfaction and turned onto the freeway.

## Chapter 5

**Some of the most important contributors to human capability may be hard to sell exclusively to one person at a time. This is especially so when we consider the so-called public goods, which people consume together rather than separately. This applies particularly in such fields as environmental preservation and also epidemiology and public health care. I may be willing to pay my share in a social program of malaria eradication, but I cannot buy my part of that protection in the form of 'private good' (like an apple or a shirt). It is a 'public good'—malaria free surroundings—which we have to consume together.**

—Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, economist.

At the public meeting in Newton, Maine, to discuss the closing of County General Hospital, Joe Camicci listened closely while the director of the hospital read out a list of institutions that would take the displaced patients.

'Immediate closure will necessitate the diverting of 87 300 annual outpatient and 53 400 annual inpatient days to these other facilities,' said Camus Fielding from the raised podium at the front of the room. 'Since every hospital in the country is facing similar economic pressures, these hospitals will accept only those inpatients covered by listed HMOs or insurance companies, or by pre-payment or bank guarantee of estimated medical costs. Anyone not covered will be required to make alternative arrangements. As to outpatient and clinic—'

'Alternative arrangements!' a woman in front of Joe cried, shaking her fist in the air. 'Your hospital *made* my husband sick! And now American Insurance has bellied up, you turf him out onto the street and tell me it's *my* problem?'

Joe turned around when a man behind him called, 'Hey, I got the same problem!'

'Same here!' another called, then another. People pushed their folding chairs back and stood, gesticulating or pointing accusatory fingers.

The conference room in the hospital's ground floor was designed to seat over a thousand people. Joe estimated it was packed with almost twice that number. Poor ventilation and poorer thermostats contributed to making the room uncomfortably warm, fraying already volatile tempers.

Director Fielding called for order and signalled to the security personnel clustering ineffectually around the four entrances. The guards looked angry—but not at the crowd.

'Nosocomial infections in this hospital,' the director continued when the first wave of outrage passed, 'do not exceed the national average. Compared to Boston and New York—'

'Cut the jargon,' someone at the front yelled. 'I am ... I was a doctor here! He means that more people die in hospitals from bugs caught while being there than the medical condition that put them there in the first place!'

'Compared to Boston and New York,' Fielding repeated, his voice taking on a steely edge, 'this hospital's record of dealing with nosocomial infections is outstanding!'

What he didn't add, but Joe had already found out, was that nosocomial infections were the hospital's waking nightmare, and not just from a medical perspective. Legal costs, staggering out-of-court private settlements and crippling insurance premiums had all contributed to the financial downfall of County

General.

'Now you can toss abuse all you want,' the director added, visibly shaking. 'But I'm just as angry and upset as the rest of you! Additionally, hospitals like ours have carried a tremendous public health care burden by treating underinsured or non-insured individuals.'

'Then boot out the freeloaders,' someone cried. 'I've been paying taxes and HMO contributions that supported this hospital for almost thirty years. You stole my right to decent medical care and wasted it on ... junkies and winos!'

Fielding's face darkened. 'Less than twenty percent of people in this country have adequate medical coverage. Eighty percent of Americans are most certainly not junkies, winos or *freeloaders*. Less than *one percent* of federal and state tax revenue is fed back into the entire public healthcare system in this county, of which this hospital is but one part. Turning our backs on public health care places the entire community at risk. Diseases like ACR cholera don't give a damn if you work out and eat right or if you're an obese bum! And they sure don't pick and choose victims on the basis of whether you pay your taxes or not. We abandon uninsured people; we're all at risk!

Demands shouted him down. 'What was the point of paying insurance?'

'How did this happen?'

'*Who's responsible?*'

The director almost knocked his chair over when he stood and leaned across the table. 'Who's responsible?' he shouted, slashing an accusatory finger across the room. '*You're* responsible! You want, no, *demand* the benefits and protection that government regulations bring, presuming that good health is your God given right, or at least one you can buy with a pill. Yet you're simultaneously wedded to this anti-government sentiment, of decrying regulatory bodies, particularly public health care professionals for interfering in your democratic rights when we're trying to enforce the very safeguards that protect your health!

'You can't have it both ways,' he continued when the voices died down. 'After the cholera epidemic, the terms *regulation* and *public health* became synonymous with interference and anti-democratic *control*. So you voted in a Democratic President—but hedged your bets with a Republican Congress that will not entertain any motion to install a fair and equitable health care system! You want to blame someone? Blame yourselves!'

Joe stood and made his way through the crowds to the back doors. Behind him, someone yelled, 'That's bullshit! Since the Carter administration, the AMA and American Hospital Association have stonewalled every congressional and presidential attempt to introduce a national health care system, particularly when it contained clauses obliging them to treat financially underprivileged Americans!'

Closing the double doors behind him, Joe walked to the elevator. On the way, he caught snatches of conversation from grim faced orderlies, exhausted secretaries and hollow-eyed interns. How were they supposed to move hundreds of bedridden patients and their files to other hospitals before the end of the week? Meantime, how could they feed them now that suppliers were refusing deliveries to the bankrupt hospital? Would staff be paid this week? What about *their* HMO, vacation pay and overtime? How many patients would have life-support turned off and where in hell were they going to find another job while hospitals and clinics everywhere were closing, or 'rationalizing' their staffing?

Joe felt isolated, alone with his problems while around him, people grappled with theirs. Despite the central heating, he pulled his thick woollen jacket tighter and thrust his hands into his pockets. Everyone

there, staff, patients and visitors alike, had one thing on their minds: the closure of the hospital. *That* was tangible. It had immediate impact on them and their families' health and livelihoods. Nobody was talking about the Kamchatka Statement. It was just too big to grapple. The changing climate was the government's problem. Besides, a little more snow had nothing to do with getting a job or paying the bills—except to people like Joe.

While he waited for the elevator, Joe watched the TFT screen mounted on a nearby wall. Images of dead livestock and motor-vehicle accidents flashed into view. Last night's expected storm had mostly missed Newton but it had caused havoc in Portland. Joe chewed his lip. His boss was overlooking a huge opportunity: repairs. And for a moment Joe thought, why, I'll just start my own business! I can repair storm-damaged houses, install central heating and insulation ... His thoughts evaporated at the scenes of American Insurance executives hurrying into closed meetings. Insurance companies were going broke and the Kamchatka Statement had sent the stock market plummeting. Soon, nobody would have money for repairs, let alone home improvements.

Beside him, a middle-aged woman snarled to her companion, 'This ice-age stuff is all nonsense. Everyone knows the planet is getting warmer! It's just an excuse to increase taxes. And you watch, supermarkets will also raise their prices and claim it's the weather! We've had summer snow in New England before.' She shrugged out of her overcoat and stared at the screen in defiance.

Joe had a sudden urge to grab her and shake her and scream that the sky was falling but no one was paying attention! But the elevator came and they stepped in. His disquiet grew when they went up two floors and the doors opened to a group of blue space-suited figures. The woman gasped then laughed nervously when she realized they were doctors. Everywhere, large notices warned visitors that they were entering an infectious diseases area. Doors bore red and white 'no entry' and biohazard symbols. Key card locks and retina scanners punctuated the walls beside them.

The woman turned into a hallway. Above the sign saying 'Ward 4' was a much larger sign declaring it 'Restricted Access'. An armed security officer stopped her and pointed to the sign.

'It's so damned big, I didn't see it,' she said, shrugging his hand off in annoyance. 'Anyway, my son is in there.'

'Sorry, ma'am,' the guard replied. 'No one, not even immediate family goes in *there*.'

The woman stalked off to the nurse's station. Joe heard the guard mutter, 'Everyone's the same. Walk 'round with their goddamned eyes shut, ignoring the signs, then they say, 'it don't apply to me!'

Joe swallowed hard. This was crazy; it was 2016 in Maine, America, not 1916 in some flea-bitten third world country!

But in the hospitals of America more people were dying of infectious diseases than in 1916.

An obese redheaded doctor dressed in hospital greens looked up from the nursing station. 'Mr. Camicci!' said Gracie Friand. Her movements sent her auburn curls wobbling in absurd counterpoint to her Jell-O cheeks. 'I've been trying to call you!' Friand composed her face into one of practiced sympathy.

'I was at the meeting.' Joe's voice cracked and fear clutched his stomach. 'I turned off my comunit.' All thoughts of the Kamchatka Statement vanished.

'I'm so sorry, Mr. Camicci.'

Joe staggered and clutched the desk. 'You said he'd be all right! You told me...' but his voice failed. He felt her arm about his waist. The security guard helped him to one of the uncomfortable plastic chairs lined up along one wall. A small part of Joe's brain registered the fact that outside, through the barred windows, dark clouds were blotting out the summer sky. Another storm was coming.

Dr. Friand was talking. Something about ACR cholera having an extraordinary capacity for gene swapping, protecting itself against everything they threw at it. But Joe knew all about ACR cholera. He knew it was endemic in the US and that its periodic reappearances scared the hell out of everyone. What he hadn't figured on—and clearly, neither had the hospital—was his father contracting a strain that *thrived* on the antibiotics used to treat a relatively minor post-operative staph infection. Nor did Joe understand how Alexis had become infected when he had been isolated from the ACR ward.

'Under normal circumstances,' Friand added, 'our epidemiologist would begin an immediate and very thorough investigation. But with the hospital closing, everyone is packing to leave. I'm real, real sorry, Mr. Camicci.'

\* \* \* \*

'And so,' said Mary-Lou Murphy, 'over the next five years New England's climate will become more like Labrador's.'

'Even if that's true,' Greg Camicci said to his teacher. 'People still live and work in places like Labrador City, right?'

'Yeah, and look at them,' quipped Kandilas.

Mary-Lou Murphy loathed Brian Kandilas. She would never admit it but he frightened her. The contents of the Kamchatka Statement frightened her even more. Not because of what it contained but what it didn't.

Unwilling to drive through the sludgy snow that morning, Mary-Lou Murphy had caught the bus to school. It was a beautiful summer's morning and the remains of the 'freak' blizzards were slowly melting. Most everyone in the bus seemed to be wearing brightly coloured clothes, as if to ward off the dark weather. But in the school staffroom, nobody disagreed when Simon Woodstein called the sunny day, the calm before the storm. He hadn't meant it as a bad cliché.

'One more wisecrack, Mr, Kandilas,' Mary-Lou added, 'and you're on detention.' Ignoring his sneer, she continued. 'More than any other single factor, civilizations arose where conditions for agriculture, which is dependent on climate, were ideal. And most civilizations fell because of a change in *climate*. Maybe rivers used to irrigate their land changed course or dried up, or barbarians or other civilizations escaping drought or floods in their homeland invaded them. But the single-most important underlying causal factor that saw civilizations rise and fall was *climate*. Western civilizations grew and expanded to the Americas because the Gulf Stream created the right climate. And now that it's failed, well, what's our civilization based on?'

'Democracy?' someone replied.

'Yes, but what *drives* our civilization?'

'Trade? The economy?'

'Exactly! And economies are like living things.' She rubbed her hands together. It might be a sunny spring day, but the temperature hadn't reached the forecast high. Outside, dark clouds were gathering.

'Economies are dynamic,' she continued. 'They evolve in response to their environment and when that environment changes, they must adapt, or risk extinction. In the Kamchatka Statement, the term *environment* is used in an *ecological* sense. The Statement includes ways of adapting our economy to a changing ecology.'

'So we don't have to evacuate New York and DC because they'll be over-run with glaciers,' someone quipped.

Mary-Lou Murphy frowned. 'The Great Lakes were carved out by glaciers. And New York and Washington DC were once under hundreds of feet of glacial ice. But more pertinently for us, glaciers formed the Gulf of Maine the last time the Gulf Stream shut down. Still, you're right,' she added reassuringly. 'There's not going to be a mass evacuation from New England. What this situation does mean, however, is that we have to rethink the basis of our economy. And not just in Maine. Other states are also being affected, especially those whose economies are based on agriculture.'

'What does that mean for us?' asked Greg.

'It depends on your work. Take the service industry, like doctors, nurses and teachers, or IT. No matter what the weather is like, people need medical services and schools. For those who work via the Internet, the weather might be personally inconvenient but it doesn't stop them from making a living. But the agricultural sector is different.' She gestured outside to the dirty leftover snow. 'For the second year running blizzards have killed orchards and summer crops all the way down to Connecticut. Farmers can't meet their payments and food's already costing more because supply can't meet demand—market forces are pushing the price up. Farmers can't simply change what crops they grow until they know what the new weather's going to be like, and around here, it may be impossible to grow any kind of food outside of a hothouse. Same applies to farmers down south and out west. Their crops are suffering the other effects of global warming: disease, insect pests, frost, heat stress, flooding and water shortages, especially out in California. Banks have been calling in loans and farmers are losing their homes and equipment. Now teachers, nurses and IT professionals, those providing services, are being affected ... because?' She looked at the class expectantly.

'The cost of everything from orange juice to bread and meat, wool and cotton for clothes and material ... and furnishings ... and cosmetics and toiletries made from agricultural products ... Oh man, *everything* is going up?' Greg frowned as he began to grasp the magnitude of the problem.

'Exactly. And if we import them, that upsets our trade balance, and our economy. Then there are all these out of work, homeless farmers. They're not buying food or clothing, they're not going to the hardware store or renting movies or going to shows, so retail trade is declining, entertainment venues are losing business, and staff are being let go. Soon, manufacturers will lay off factory workers because fewer people can afford what they make, whether it's plastic food containers or plastic food. Every day, more and more people are walking off their farms or the banks are foreclosing. They can't get work and the cost of living is going up. Who's going to help them move to new areas and provide them with the skills and equipment to grow new crops—which might take five years to mature, like orchards—when the banks won't do it because they foreclosed on loans?'

'The government?'

'And how does the government get the money to do that?'

'Taxes.'

'But who's going to pay taxes if all these people are out of work and have no where to live and no food to eat because no one can grow it anymore? What happens then?'

Greg frowned. 'Things start falling apart and society breaks down.'

'Yes, Mr. Camicci, exactly.'

Mary-Lou Murphy let them absorb that for a few moments before adding, 'And that's what the Kamchatka Statement aims to prevent. Because the failed Gulf Stream is changing the ecology, the government is implementing a plan to adapt our economic base before it becomes extinct. One of the principle components is encouraging people in primary and affiliated industries to move out of New England.'

'But, Mrs. Murphy,' Greg said, 'if the same problems are happening right across the States, where's everyone going to go?'

\* \* \* \*

Nicholas Page and Kristin Baker left the restaurant just as the promised storm finally hit. Heavy rain and thunder made conversation difficult, so they sat in companionable silence while Nick turned the car into traffic.

A fine steak, an unexpectedly enjoyable dinner companion, and soon he would be back in space. They were simple things but then the pleasures Nick took from life were fundamentally simple, as opposed to the complexities of his work.

Before coming to the restaurant, he had stopped by his apartment to drop off his things and pack for the trip to Australia. Kristin had understandably been curious as to why he hadn't done so sooner, so he'd explained—truthfully—that he'd been away until that morning. When he walked out of his bedroom, he'd seen her looking at a photo of him and Karen. Beside the framed picture was the enamel box containing Karen's ashes. Kristin lightly touched the engraved date on the box—just two months earlier—then turned and met his eyes. It should have been an awkward moment but something in her expression made it less so.

'Don't let me forget that,' he said. 'I have a promise to keep.'

Over the course of the evening he'd allowed Kristin to entice the story from him. At first he'd been brief, clinical, explaining that someone had planted a small bomb in his aircraft, killing Lieutenant Commander Karen O'Ryan and injuring him. Then he'd slowly opened up and talked about Karen's career as a naval aviator, about the things they'd been through together. And the promise? He smiled sadly and told Kristin to wait and see.

It was not yet evening but the darkness of the storm gave that impression. Shattered rainbow fragments of light danced across the window as the wipers of his car tried to keep pace with the deluge. Kristin had curled her legs beneath her, zipped up her white jacket and wrapped her arms about herself. It was a familiar posture, one he'd seen often, especially in the hospital. He gently touched her shoulder.

Startled, she looked up. 'It's just the sirens and thunder, and the red and blue lights,' she explained.

The worst of the storm had passed and the rain had dropped to a steady beat. 'You helped with the rescues,' he said softly.

Kristin looked out of the passenger side window. 'I've been in earthquake and cyclone cleanup crews. But they were natural disasters. Devastating, horrendous, but not the result of *intentional* butchery.'

'They tell you about seeing a counsellor?'

'There was no time and really, I'm okay. It just ... reminded me.'



'Not everyone suffers post-traumatic shock. But if you need to, is there anyone you can talk to, later?'

I have a close friend who's a clinical psychologist, but I'm not sure how she—how anyone I know—could understand, let alone relate to it.'

'I don't think any sane person can *relate* to it.' Nick knew he risked alienating her but something prompted him to add, 'I've blown up buildings knowing civilians were inside. And I'll do it again and again until this thing is finished, without hesitation. Because it's necessary. At the same time it's the necessity of it that disgusts me. I never have and I never will like it, or relate to it.'

When Kristin didn't respond, he added, 'Horrorified or merely shocked?'

'I've given that a lot of thought these past few days,' she said slowly. 'Years of Middle Eastern conflicts forced us to deal with our oil addiction by developing hydrogen fuel cells. But we failed to recognize that our erstwhile suppliers had become *dollar* junkies, vicariously enjoying the fruits of our economies while declaring us morally bankrupt. Islamic fundamentalists have used escalating poverty to feed their power base until global terrorism has become a perpetual state of existence. Now, zealots everywhere are using this war as a shabby excuse to commit outrageous acts of violence.'

She turned to face him. 'They use our compassion against us by deliberately locating military targets in the middle of civilian homes. They *plan* the resultant images of burned and maimed innocents staring accusingly at us from the six o'clock news. War forces us into living with shades of grey. We have to trust that our shade is a little whiter.' She let out a short, sad laugh. 'And I thought I lived in a world of moral dilemmas.' Catching his eyes, she added, 'Thank you for putting it into perspective.'

On one level he was surprised, but equally it fit with what he knew about her. Kristin Baker was courageous enough to rescue victims from a burning hotel, but she was also a pragmatist.

Personal relationships made Nick and, more importantly, those around him, vulnerable. Karen O'Ryan had died because fifteen years ago he'd killed Elhamy and Um Nehro's youngest brother.

The Nehros and the group they worked for, the Shatt-al Arabs, had not survived by indulging in personal vendettas. Yet that's exactly what they had done when they'd planted that bomb in his and Karen's aircraft. As a result, it had exposed the terrorists. He would finish with the Nehros, one way or another, very soon. Despite, or because of losing Karen, when that was over, he wanted to see Kristin Baker again, to share a meal and talk of island paradises in the sun.

At the entrance to a military base, Nick brought the vehicle to a stop and let the window down a few inches. A sentry held out his hand for the expected ID and peered closely at their faces. While he disappeared inside a building, a guard watched them carefully from a distance, semi-automatic assault weapon at ready. The rain-slicked poncho and dripping helmet made him seem more dangerous, as if the weather had heightened his senses. The sentry returned, saluted, returned their IDs and motioned them to proceed.

After driving past the familiar line of odd shaped buildings, Nick turned and parked in a large hanger. 'The Chief will look after you,' he said to Kristin when a feamle CPO opened the passenger door. 'I'll be down in a few minutes.'

Nick found himself caught up in a friendly obstacle course of handshakes and greetings until he found out the man he was looking for. He handed over the enamel box and was assured that everything was set to go. Strictly speaking he was breaking about a dozen regulations, but it wasn't the first time, nor was he alone. It was a practice commonly accepted by the Navy, a privilege granted to an elite fraternity.

Deep in thought, Kristin followed the CPO through a maze of tunnels. Life in Vanuatu had exposed her to diplomatic and military attachés from a dozen countries. She associated Page's unconscious grace and mannerisms with an East Coaster raised blue blood, but explanations notwithstanding, surely the US government didn't give every recipient of outdated equipment the same VIP treatment; it was a sonar, not a nuclear submarine.

In a locker room, the CPO manhandled a G-suit and a second, peculiar, double layered suit from a locker. The additional suit was a combination inner lining and harder but malleable exterior, designed to protect her if the canopy of the FSP ruptured.

'You can pee in here if you need,' said the CPO, pointing to a coupling. 'But I suggest you use the ladies' first. They've never come up with a decent system for women and you'll only be in it a short time.'

Kristin looked around. A dozen people in the room were in various states of undress. She took the CPO's advice and used the bathroom, then, somewhat self-consciously, stripped naked and donned the G-suit.

After struggling into the outer suit, Kristin suddenly realised that soon she would be in space! A smile tugged at her lips. She absolutely refused to let anything, especially her problems with Ben Mills or any reservations she might have about the sonar interfere with a lifelong dream.

When Kristin was ready, the CPO took her through the hangar and onto a floodlit tarmac. Three charcoal-black FSPs sat side by side. Ground crew moved around the machines, checking things, while others clambered about the cockpits. The storm had passed and everything smelled fresh and clean, even the ubiquitous chemical stench of LA had disappeared. Kristin knew she was grinning like a schoolgirl, but didn't much care.

The CPO helped her up the short ladder to the cockpit. Climbing into the rear seat where the RIO would normally sit, Kristin muttered, 'Good thing I'm not claustrophobic.'

After some struggling she decided you didn't so much get into the thing as wrap it around you. Unaware that Page was sitting in the front seat, she wondered aloud how he squeezed his one hundred and ninety centimetre frame in.

'We got a special shoehorn for the likes of him,' the chief replied heartily.

Finally, with helmet, gloves, plumbing seals and oxygen checked, the CPO gave her the thumbs up and moved the ladder away. Kristin cleared her throat, activating the intercom.

'Strapped in?' Page called.

Kristin's eyes widened. '*You're driving?*'

'You got a problem with that?' he replied.

She could hear the laughter in his voice. 'No! No, of course not! But ... when did you get out of hospital? I mean, when you said there were three FSPs going to Australia, I thought you meant...' she trailed off, then added, 'I don't normally babble.'

Page continued to chuckle as he ran his checks. 'The first time in an FSP can do that to you. The chief explain those releases?'

'Yep.' Kristin figured that remembering the instructions was probably pointless. If they went down, even in atmospheric flight, she doubted they'd find enough of her to fill a teaspoon.

The canopy lowered and before she knew what was happening, acceleration compressed her into the seat. Then the space plane rotated abruptly. Her visor displayed velocity—already near Mach 3—acceleration, rate of climb, height ... What! Kristin rolled her head and tried to peer out of the cockpit, but the force of acceleration held her firmly in place. How the hell was the commander controlling this thing?

'We ascend to one hundred and fifty thousand feet then begin to curve at five hundred thousand,' said Page. 'If you need the bag make sure you maintain oxygen flow between barfs. Otherwise, keep your helmet sealed.'

Kristin blinked rapidly. Nausea? With the adrenaline rushing through her? She'd read the Fighter Space Planes specifications but statistics meant nothing! What was it one of the pilots had said? After flying an FSP, sex seemed trite.

She heard Page talking to the control tower and the other pilots. Then he switched propulsion systems to accommodate the increasingly thin atmosphere. Kristin's eyes moved around continuously, taking it all in, trusting that the oxygen mask hid the silly grin on her face.

'You okay back there?' Page asked a few minutes later.

'If becoming an FSP junky is considered okay. You realise you've ruined flying light aircraft forever?' She made no attempt to hide the wonder in her voice.

'We won't be going full orbital of course but the view's almost as good. So,' he added, 'tell me more about this tropical paradise of yours.'

Kristin snorted softly, a paradise full of vipers. 'It's not mine for much longer, I'm moving to the States.'

'Say again? I thought you were under contract to ADAB?'

'My offshore contract finishes soon, that's why I want to get this sonar project established. I could stay with ADAB but only if I accepted a desk job in Canberra, and I hate Canberra. It's a cold, miserable place and I can't stand diplomatic dinner parties. Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute has offered me a place on their Kamchatka Response Team.'

There was a moment's silence, then he said, 'Would you consider staying on?'

'In Vanuatu? On one level I'd love to but the government can barely pay their staff now. And career wise, it's a no brainer. The Kamchatka Statement is just that, a statement. It takes real live people to implement the response plans. That's where I come in. Being offered a place at Woods Hole—'

'Is no surprise,' Page finished, 'given your novel solutions to marine engineering problems.'

She smiled sadly. Ben's reaction hadn't been quite so ... flattering. But then she wondered how Page knew about Woods Hole. Come to think of it, how had he known what she'd done in Fiji? She recalled the photograph of Karen O'Ryan, and a wave of regret washed over her. 'The only thing that puts me off leaving Vanuatu is this damned war,' she said. 'Living there, it's easy to forget that people like you lose friends and loved ones every day, sacrificing their lives so that people like me can get on with ours.'

'Each of us does what we can, Doc. You're trying to improve the lives of those around you, trying to hold it all together. We fight to defend that, despite the sacrifices, including the moral ones.'

Sacrifice for duty. What was her duty and which ethic must she sacrifice? Vanuatu was an artificial sanctuary in a world gone horribly wrong. Did she really want to leave, despite the ideological wars she

was embroiled in on a daily basis? If she compromised her ethics she could stay and continue to make a difference. But how long before a compromise demanded payment in kind, until she was no better than those whom she battled?

Unwanted memories returned. Not just lights and sounds, but sensations; black and red, burns and blood, the smell of death, burning rubber, burning flesh, the screams, the grisly, charred body parts, the child's dismembered foot. Despite her assurances to Page, Fiji had been the stuff of waking nightmares.

Kristin heard Page talking to the other pilots. Abruptly, the FSPs closed formation until the other machines appeared scant metres from their port and starboard wingtips.

'Don't be alarmed,' Page said to her in a subdued voice. 'We're performing a little manoeuvre.'

'What kind of manoeuvre?' Her eyes widened as all three FSPs suddenly pulled into a vertical climb, punching through the upper atmosphere until they reached the edge of space.

'A salute,' Page whispered, and touched a release button.

The FSPs continued to climb, then looped over in a reverse roll. 'Oh my God!' Kristin whispered. The sky was filled with thousands of tiny stars, winking out of existence like dying fireworks. She sat in silence, a privileged witness to the pilots' final farewells to Lieutenant Commander Karen O'Ryan. Kristin recalled Carl Sagan's immortal words: *we are star stuff*.

Moments later the blue and white crescent opal of Earth's dayside burst forth from the black womb of space. The shimmering atmospheric haze erupted in an explosion of light across the heavens; their increasing height and incredible speed had caught the sunset.

Kristin looked out at the other FSPs. Their bellies glowed cherry red, startling her until she remembered why. For a little while, as she watched the planet below, her problems, and the problems of the squabbling inhabitants below, evaporated in the face of a majesty few had ever beheld.

It is beyond words, she thought, and knew that she would never see the world in quite the same way again.

## Chapter 6

**A group of nine islands, home to 11,000 people, is the first nation to pay the ultimate price for global warming ... The authorities in Tuvalu have publicly conceded defeat to the sea rising around them. Appeals have gone out to the governments of New Zealand and Australia to help in the full-scale evacuation of Tuvalu's population. After an apparent rebuff from Australia, the first group of evacuees is due to leave for New Zealand next year ... Tuvalu is paying for the rich world's experiment with the global atmosphere. At that price you could say that it has become the world's greatest creditor nation.**

—Andrew Simms: 'Farewell Tuvalu' October 29, 2001, *The Guardian*

When Jean briefed Andreas Clem on the Exodus Project, the CDC director's initial reaction had been shock and outrage. But Clem had read the Kamchatka Statement, he knew what was at stake. He soon calmed down when he realised they were better placed to fight Rhesus than he first thought.

Meanwhile, President Blake called the Australian Prime Minister, Paul Anderson, and asked if he could reschedule their dinner appointment earlier. The Prime Minister, who was staying in the hotel, agreed. The two heads of state had planned the meal and an early morning excursion to the erupting Klyuchevskaya and Kamen volcanoes to discuss the security aspects of the Exodus Project. But that evening, when Clem briefed Anderson on the Rhesus virus, food was the last thing on the Prime Minister's mind.

'*Ninety two percent?*' he croaked after clearing his suddenly dry throat.

'Of Americans, maybe a few percent less in Australia, but given your immigration policies of the last forty years, we estimate about the same,' said Clem.

'Jesus, Mary and Joseph!' Anderson sat back heavily into his chair. 'All this and World War III.' He shook his head in denial, and loosened the yellow tie from around his neck.

'Hard to believe it could mean the decline and fall of human civilization as we know it,' Clem added.

'Dammit, Clem, don't be so fucking melodramatic! It's not some dead-man switch Nature programmed us with!' Obermann snapped, unmindful of Blake's scowl. The President did not countenance profanity, at least not from others.

Turning on Obermann, Clem snapped, 'Isn't it? Every plague organism burns to a peak then suffers a dramatic die back until reaching a stable relationship with its environment. Or it becomes extinct. Why? Because it can't sustain itself in a closed environment. There's no question that humans have reached our peak burn on one very small planet!'

'Gentlemen,' Jean interrupted tiredly. 'Nobody's about to throw their hands up on this one. We've already put a lot of wheels in motion, including an emergency congressional session at the end of the week.'

Obermann said, 'Jean, that's to consider how—'

'To bully every backwater nation into dumping all their petrochemical and coal driven power generators, vehicles and machinery within six months,' Clem interrupted. 'You remember, the ones we sold them cheap after converting ours to hydrogen fuel cells? You better issue the Congressmen with cold weather gear.'

'This has nothing to do with the Kamchatka Statement!' Obermann's face began to take on the same hue as his puce shirt.

Clem snorted. 'On the contrary, climate change has created an ideal ecological playground for microbes to play swap-the-genes in.'

Anderson was only half listening to the argument; he was still trying to process the staggering revelation. This explained why Blake had looked so drawn since arriving in Kamchatka; it wasn't Industrial Winter that was bothering the President so much as Rhesus. He caught Blake's eyes. 'What are you planning to do?'

The President motioned for Clem to answer.

'Epidemiology,' explained Clem, 'is like reverse engineering. Although we know little about the virus itself, we already have serum samples on broad population bases worldwide, through hospitals and blood supply companies who have been tracking Rhesus and other apparently innocuous viruses. To find out what triggered Rhesus, we need to trace this thing back to its source, and that means more serum samples on a much broader population.'

'Sounds like a needle in a haystack,' Anderson declared. 'Wouldn't it be faster to use gene therapy or something to remove Rhesus?'

Clem pulled his hand through his wiry hair. 'I'm not a geneticist or molecular biologist but in the past few days I've talked to a lot of top people, and frankly, they're stumped. Admittedly there have only been a few experiments, but even when the virus has been stripped from human germ cells—ova and sperm—fertilization fails to occur. Every cell is affected, including the bone marrow cells now used for therapeutic cloning, organ and tissue replacement—which could explain why organ cloning has suffered serious setbacks these last five years. In short, we're almost certain the sterility can't be reversed, so our priority must be to stop Rhesus from spreading. As for deleting it from the gene pool so the next generation is immune, well, no one's about to try full cloning for obvious reasons. It's illegal in most countries, including the States.'

'That may have to change—fast,' said Obermann.

'Fine.' Clem nodded agreeably. 'Get it rescinded. We strip the Rhesus gene out of Rh-positive ova and sperm from donors in which the virus is not yet active, produce a batch of fertilized eggs, find surrogate mothers in which the virus is still dormant, hope it doesn't go active in them for the next nine months, then we have a lab full of living, breathing, Rh-positive babies without the gene. We deliberately infect these newborns with activated Rhesus and see if they're immune. By the time we get results—'

'Okay.' Anderson shifted uncomfortably in his chair. 'We don't need to be drawn and quartered by the ethicists.'

'We know that Rhesus wasn't active in stored blood samples prior to 2010,' Clem went on. 'So something triggered it around 2010-11. And before you ask, it started before the ACR cholera epidemic. Unfortunately, that disease just served as a distraction.'

'There are a lot of theories about the trigger, including the Hoyle-Wickramasinghe hypothesis,' Obermann injected.

Anderson blinked and stared at the ruddy-faced assistant secretary. Then again, the diseases-from-space theory was due to come into vogue, like yoyos and miniskirts.

'No need to muddy an already complex issue,' said Jean. 'If it came from space, it came about the same time as that big, black monolith.'

Blake was politically obliged to suffer fools like Obermann. Fortunately, he had also surrounded himself with people like Andreas Clem and Jean Simmons.

'I've asked Dr. Roger Harrison, who first identified Rhesus, to lead the initial task force' Clem continued. 'But we need an international task force under the umbrella of the WHO, although it has to be free of their political obfuscation. And we need it immediately if we are going to have any hope of tackling this thing.'

Anderson had just learned more than he'd ever wanted to know about microbes. 'Sounds like if it wasn't this,' he said. 'Some other killer bug would be out to get us.'

Running a hand across his tired eyes, Clem replied, 'We develop a cure, or kill one bug, a dozen new ones leap in to the vacated ecological niche and vie for supremacy. They react to every counter measure we throw at them almost before we can get the pills onto pharmacy shelves. But I gotta admit, this one's the granddaddy of them all, it was pre-programmed from *within* us.'

His mind churning, Anderson said, 'If you can't find and disable the trigger...' He stopped. Not all of those present were privy to the Exodus Project. 'The Kamchatka Statement may be immaterial.'

'Worse,' Jean said. 'This is not like AIDS, there's not going to be any social moralizing. When Asia understands the demographics of Rhesus—'

His stomach clenching, Anderson said, 'They'll assume it's a bioweapon and scream racial genocide, accusing North America and possibly Europe, of clearing the way for mass migration.'

'All the facts are already circulating the Internet,' Clem added. 'And now that we're requesting data on Rhesus from hospitals and public health care clinics, we have days, not weeks before this goes public.'

'Less,' said Jean. 'The press corps is asking why Andreas was on Air Force One. We need to pre-empt this with an informed statement as soon as we get back to DC.'

'Why not issue a statement now?' Anderson stood and began restlessly pacing the room.

'Because the findings are too staggering,' Clem replied. 'Every country will want to run its own investigation, and it will take months to analyze the data.'

'If what you're saying is true, we don't have months.' Anderson turned to Blake.

'We don't, Paul,' President Blake replied. 'It's a time bomb with a short fuse. Based on what we know, Rhesus will go active in three hundred and fifty thousand people *tomorrow*. And another three hundred and fifty thousand the next day. And the day after that. And every day thereafter until we put a lid on it.'

The Prime Minister stopped pacing and rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. Like Edwin Blake, he considered their predecessors' failure to take global warming seriously as a lapse bordering on criminal negligence. But one area of Australia, the Western MacDonnell Ranges, had begun to flourish under the changing climate. Armed with the knowledge that the Gulf Stream was shutting down, he and Blake had used recent agricultural developments at MacDonnell, and the fact that it was sitting smack bang on top of the largest aquifer in the world, as the keystone for the Exodus Project.

An early—and fatal—error with a wheat fungus had reminded them of the dangers of playing genetic scrabble. Consequently, they had built a modest Biohazard Safety Level 4 facility at MacDonnell. The

2011 ACR cholera outbreak highlighted the need for the US government to resurrect the CDC's original mandate. Under the Exodus Project, logistically it made more sense to expand MacDonnell's Level 4 labs than attempt to patch up the CDC's ageing Atlanta facilities.

'Okay,' Anderson said, turning to Clem. 'MacDonnell is all yours. We'll need to apprise the entire team immediately.'

'Already in the pipeline.' Blake also stood, signalling an end to the meeting. 'I just wanted to talk to you first.'

\* \* \* \*

When the Space Planes landed at Williamtown Air Force Base in Australia, Kristin called her secretary in Vanuatu. 'Marie, I'm in Sydney.' The RAAF base was almost a hundred kilometres north but she wasn't about to elaborate. 'I'm checking into a hotel to sleep off the jet lag, then I'll be on the midnight flight to Vila. Can you ask the captain of *Marmet* to dock at the wharf? And make sure the spare cabin is fit for human habitation.'

'You're bringing another technician? I'll book a hotel room. They've been painting the hull and everything's a mess,' Marie replied.

'Why? *Marmet*'s due to go up on slips soon and they'd do a better job ... No, no, don't answer; I don't want to know. And no, I'm not bringing a technician; I'll sleep in my office. Just tell the skipper to get the wheelhouse unmessed and make certain the batteries are charged. I need to rip out the old electronics and install the new system. And Marie, don't bother to meet me at the airport, I'll get a taxi.'

Because aircraft automatically deactivated personal comunits, Kristin didn't turn hers off in the RAAF helicopter that shuttled her and Page to Sydney. When they disembarked on the hotel's rooftop helipad an hour later, Kristin glanced at her comunit and groaned. Marie had obviously passed the information to Ben, sending him into panic mode. He'd called, seen the 'user in flight' message and sent her a text message demanding an explanation.

Kristin wanted nothing to do with Ben until she figured out what he was up to. But right now, she was angry enough to call and tell him the truth. That instead of a commercial flight from LA to Sydney, she'd hitched a ride on an FSP with a disturbingly attractive naval aviator. Oh yeah, that'd go down well.

Distracted, she hardly noticed Page check them into the hotel. 'I'm sorry, what did you say?' she said, turning to him.

'I asked if you wanted lunch,' he repeated. 'Is everything all right?'

The concern in Page's eyes only emphasized Ben's shabby behaviour. Smiling weakly, she turned off her comunit and replied, 'I'm not hungry but don't let me stop you. I promise I'll go straight to my room and avoid being abducted.'

Page chuckled, placed a hand on the small of her back, and walked with her to the elevator. When they passed the dining room, the enticing smells that wafted out cause Kristin's stomach to grumble loudly. Page shot her a curious look, then taking her by the elbow, guided her into the restaurant and held a seat for her. But he did not sit. Instead he said, 'Is it my company you object to?'

'No! No,' she replied quickly, gesturing for him to sit down. 'On the contrary.'

'The message on your comunit?' He took off his cap and pulled out the chair opposite.

The waitress arrived with menus, giving Kristin time to collect her thoughts. Was there something in her



file that indicated she was a security risk? Her frown deepened. She wasn't but Ben sure as hell might be.

Page reached across the table and gently covered her hand with his. She noticed the Naval Academy signet ring on his hand. Then she looked up and saw that his eyes had changed colour, from hazel green to a deep jade. The expression in them was supportive, not seductive. Smiling tiredly she said, 'Personal issues.'

The waitress returned. He moved his hand to pick up the menu. Kristin found herself wishing he hadn't. She couldn't help but feel attracted to him.

After the waitress took their orders and left, Kristin said, 'I think I'm suffering the ultimate jet lag.'

'Do you want to talk about it?' His green eyes held hers.

'The jet lag, Fiji or my personal problems?'

'Strictly speaking, it's not *jet* lag.'

Kristin burst out laughing.

'That's better,' he replied with a quirky grin.

Their meal arrived and they talked, not about her personal problems or Fiji but about things that made them both laugh. When lunch was over they lingered until the restaurant closed. In the elevator, crowds pushed Kristin back until she was hard against Page. She almost gasped at the contact. Crisp tan uniform, firm muscles, body heat, the rise and fall of his chest, masculine odour mixed with a subtle, expensive aftershave.

He bent and whispered in her ear, 'With your luck, we'll have a power failure.'

She turned and pretended to glare at him.

Later in his hotel room, Nick sat down, rubbed his face and rested his head against the back of the chair. They had given Kristin Baker the sonars on the assumption she would act in a certain way. He's known about the Woods Hole offer, but ADAB were supposed to have renewed contract in Vanuatu. It was only when she told him that she was leaving that he realised the State Department and Australian Foreign Affairs had totally screwed things up. In Williamstown, he'd called Jean Simmons and added, 'Someone had better brief Dr. Baker—and fast.'

Jean had made it abundantly clear that she disagreed with the State Department's advisory to keep Kristin Baker out of the loop. Still, it would take time for Jean time to cover all of her bases. By then, Dr. Baker would be back in Vanuatu and the problem would be out of Nick's hands—at least until he finished what he came for.

A long run in the cool, winter air would help clear his head, but Nick couldn't risk anyone seeing him. Courtesy of Ronald Denning, the captain of the Australian anti-terrorist squad, Nick's room and hire car were under an assumed name. Good thing Kristin had been preoccupied when he'd checked them in, it'd saved him having to fabricate an explanation.

In a few hours Nick would drop her at the airport and meet Denning. At 0600, using his own name, he'd catch a commercial flight to Coffs Harbour, a small city a few hundred kilometres north of Sydney, and check into a beachfront resort hotel. Famous for its fishing and surfing, the resort was quiet, easily accessible by land and sea, and offered apparently limitless avenues of escape. In fact, it was also surprisingly easy to secure, especially with the number of Australian defence force personnel already in

place. The counterintelligence was also in place, setting the bait for the Nehros.

He closed his eyes. He could barely recall the explosion in his aircraft. Perhaps the sound had been muffled by his helmet or momentary unconsciousness. All that he could remember was the sudden awareness of multiple sensations: intense pain in his leg and hip, blind in one eye, greying vision in the other, wind whipping at him, ruptured canopy, horizon spinning and rolling. His right hand, still firmly holding the control stick, had been surprisingly steady. After scouring the remains of the instruments with his good eye, he'd tried to life his left hand, but the bones in his forearm had stuck through his suit. Electronics dead ... Karen screaming that her shoulder was gone. Control tower calling ... aircraft in an uncontrolled spin, thrashing his head around, sending lancing pains through his jaw. Dead stick. No choice but to eject, except the canopy frame was distorted. He'd looked around and seen pieces of Plexiglas jammed into some very bad places. If he manually punched them out, at 55 ft/second the Martin Baker would turned them into reverse bug splat. Try the stick again ... Karen's screams dying as she, too was dying. Calling to her to hang on, to not let go, he'd get them down!

Shuddering airframe—then suddenly, he gained some control. *Forget the instruments; just fly the damned thing!* Pulling off his oxygen mask, pushing back his visor, wiping both eyes and discovering that only blood obscured his sight. With bifocal vision he regained his perspective. 'Hang in there, honey!' he'd called, 'I'm putting us down real soon!'

Cries fading to moans, then Karen's final, calm whisper. 'Hey buddy, it was a great ride. See you on the other side.'

Then silence.

He'd brought the aircraft down hard, blacking out almost instantly. Good thing it wasn't a carrier. Hands pulling him from the cockpit. One look at Karen and he'd known. Her entire left shoulder had literally been sliced away by a piece of airframe now embedded in her seat. She'd taken the worst of the blast. There'd been nothing to ask the medics, nothing he or anyone could have said, or done.

In the Sydney hotel room, Nick abruptly leaned forward and stood. He walked across to the window and pushing the drapes aside, looked outside. It was a pretty city, embracing a stunning harbour. Sailboats with colourful spinnakers cut a path across the water, dodging sleek ferries. He could just see the shape of the Harbour Bridge to his left. To his right, the graceful white sails of the Sydney Opera House, a little discoloured with age, arced over the water.

A long time ago, he'd made the same pact with Karen as he had with his SEAL team. If one of them died through the actions of another, they would never succumb to guilt; they'd seen too many good people lose it that way. It could just as easily have been he who was now dead, from another terrorist group hell bent on revenge against Karen for bombing some godforsaken stone hut or camel-skin tent.

He'd been over this in the hospital, and said his final good-byes just hours before. Why was he dredging it up now? Because he had focused entirely on the coming confrontation, not what lay beyond: the Exodus Project. Until a marine engineer who didn't even know the Project existed, reminded him that there was another world besides war and death and terrorists.

He liked the way she laughed.

After closing the curtain, Nick pulled off his shirt. The next few days would be exacting but for the first time in months, he could see past them into the future.

A few rooms away, Kristin glared at the crack in the curtain. Her insomnia had nothing to do with the sliver of afternoon sunlight peeking through; she could generally sleep anywhere, anytime. Despite the

exhilaration of the space flight, in a few hours she'd be back in Vanuatu, back to the real world of riding the crest of one drama to the next. And the inevitable confrontation with Ben.

When she'd conceived the sonar project, Ben had been lukewarm. When it had been approved, he'd been ambivalent and when the first unit and technician had arrived, Ben had been outright hostile. Then when they'd lost the sensor, he'd all but gloated. It came as a rude shock to Kristin to realize that every pleasure she took from life, every one of her achievements compounded Ben Mills' insecurities. He was jealous of her, professionally and personally.

But that didn't entirely explain his determination for the Japanese to take over the project, nor their advance knowledge of her proposal. She bit her lip. Somewhere in the fog of his neurosis he must have reasoned that if the Japanese adopted the sonar project it would force her to abandon it. And that meant she would have to marry him if she wanted to stay in Vanuatu and keep the fishing cartels, including the Japanese, in line. He wasn't malicious, just foolish.

Kristin sat up and pounded the pillow into shape. It was her fault. She'd given Ben the impression that she hated leaving. Whilst that was true, it was not for the reasons that he'd assumed. She would go back to the house—she had never really thought of it as home—only long enough to collect her things. The spare bunk on *Marmet*, even the couch in her office was more comfortable and less embittered than the bed they'd shared.

As for Commander Nicholas Page, she could dismiss her attraction to him as ... proximal, yes that was it. But she knew it would be a long time before she could banish memories of his eyes. Those damned, chameleon green eyes.

## Chapter 7

A major battle is underway: In order to survive economically, the biggest enterprise in human history—the worldwide coal and oil industry—is at war with the ability of the planet to sustain civilization. The trillion dollar a year coal and oil industry is pitted against the oceans, forests, ice-caps and mountains of the earth as we know them today ... In the U.S., the mere threat of impending climate change has impelled (these) industries to engineer a policy of denial. While their campaign may seem at this point no more sinister than any other public relations program, it possesses a subtle antidemocratic, even totalitarian potential insofar as it curbs the free flow of information, dominates the deliberations of Congress, and obstructs all meaningful international attempts to address the gathering crisis.

### —Ross Gelbspan: The Heat Is On

Simon Woodstein ran to investigate the commotion. He arrived just as Greg Camicci spun around, pulled his fist back and punched Brian Kandilas in the face. The expression on the Kandilas' face was priceless. The spray of blood and mucus from his torn nose was even more gratifying. It was about time someone took that bully down.

Cries and shouts rolled through the corridor. A girl shrieked, 'You killed him!' Others were more upset at the blood and snot splattered on their clothes.

Before Woodstein could reach him, Kandilas pushed away helping hands and stood. Then he charged Greg. Woodstein cried a warning. Greg turned, but too late. He grunted as he was slammed into the locker, then he doubled over Kandilas, pulling him to the ground. Greg's teeth scraped against Kandilas' nose, but he did not bite him, instead he pushed the bigger boy away in revulsion, then spat out the blood and muck in his mouth.

Taking the opportunity to grapple with Kandilas, Woodstein pulled the heavyset boy up and pinned his arms behind his back. Shouts of 'cut it out' and 'that's enough!' rang through the corridor. Someone else grabbed Greg, but it was obvious that he had no desire to continue the fight.

Kandilas, on the other hand, was screaming and spitting, crying like a baby and kicking his legs, demanding to be let go. Thankful that he had worn thick boots that morning, Woodstein ignored the blows to his shins and tightened his grip.

'All right!' yelled Principal Frank Tumot. 'That. Is. *Enough!*' He forced his way through the crowd of teenagers. 'Everyone to their classes. Now! Anyone here in sixty seconds is on detention for a week! Right,' he added, turning to the protagonists.

'I'll fucking *kill* you, asshole. Nobody hits me!' Kandilas screamed at Greg, oblivious to Tumot's thundering voice.

'One more word out of you, Mr. Kandilas and I swear that's it, you're expelled!'

The other teacher released his hold on Greg, who tucked his woollen check shirt back into his jeans.

Two security guards took the still struggling Kandilas from Woodstein. Kandilas had at least two inches and twenty pounds on Greg but years of taunting had evidently been packed behind the punch, and it had paid off. The bigger boy's face was a mess; his ice-hockey sweater was torn and dribbled with blood.

'Who started this?' demanded the principal, his eyes blazing through his thick glasses. Without waiting for a reply he added, 'Get them down to the infirmary. And call their parents. I'll be down in a few minutes.'

Simon Woodstein indicated that he would take care of Greg. He waited until Kandilas was out of earshot before saying, 'What possessed you to take on—?' His anger turned to concern when he saw the amount of blood coming from Greg's torn scalp and lip. He brought his fingers up to brush Greg's curly hair away, but Greg jerked his head back. 'Hurts, huh?' said Woodstein.

The angry red bruise that extended from Greg's bloodied mouth to his swollen eye was already darkening. He'd obviously been pushed hard against the locker, catching the door edge-on. Presumably that's what had triggered the fight. Kandilas had a habit of shoving people against things then claiming he'd 'bumped' into them.

'I don't think it'll need stitches,' Woodstein added. 'A couple of butterflies will stop the bleeding. Had enough, huh?'

Greg shook out his right hand and winced. Then he sucked on his blooded knuckles. 'Kandilas does that to someone every goddamned day.'

Eye's narrowing in regret, Woodstein said, 'It wouldn't have something to do with me making you show him up in class, would it?'

Greg shrugged.

'Unfortunately you know Tumot's rules. It doesn't matter who started it,' Woodstein added.

'If someone thumps you, you report it then sit down with the other person and a counsellor and 'talk your problems through'. Yeah, right,' snarled Greg, 'Kandilas' brain isn't big enough to hold a conversation. Suspension.' He shrugged again. 'Fine, I can live with a suspension. My grandfather just died and—'

'I'm sorry!' Woodstein stopped and turned to face him. 'That's why you were already upset.'

Greg shook his head. 'Wasn't that. The old man was ... mean, ugly, just plain bad, I guess. I'm glad he finally died and let us alone. But when Kandilas shoved me, I dunno. Maybe I figured it was time he left me alone, too.'

They continued walking to the infirmary. Woodstein didn't know much about young Greg's home life, except that his sister had died during the ACR cholera epidemic, and the grandfather had lived with them for a time, but not recently. 'I'll talk to Mr. Tumot.'

'I don't need an excuse!' Greg objected, wiping the blood from his eye with the back of his hand. 'Nobody, not even the principal has the right to tell us we're supposed to put up with being punched every second goddamned day! *Talkin'* to Kandilas has just made him do it more often and harder! Maybe now he'll think twice before pickin' on someone else.'

Woodstein pushed open the infirmary door. He might agree with young Greg Camicci, but the school policy applied to everyone.

\* \* \* \*

Kristin shot the Vanuatu Minister for Home Affairs a withering gaze. Ignoring her, Amos Lingano walked down the boarding tunnel to the already delayed aircraft. The gate attendant sent her an apologetic look. Poly-Melanesian flights were habitually late, a fact Kristin had depended on when she'd overslept. As the last passenger to check in, she was the first evicted when Lingano decided he felt like going home. Civil Aviation regulations be damned, Lingano, as Chairman of the Board, did as he pleased.

'Well ... evict someone from business class!' Kristin demanded, knowing Lingano would never slum it.

'We did. Paul Jacobs agreed to economy,' replied the contrite attendant.

Kristin clamped her jaw shut. Paul Jacobs was a Poly-Mel pilot. Barely able to keep her voice civil, she said, 'My suitcase?'

'Baggage handlers are locating it now. You can collect it from the passenger service desk.'

Page took her by the elbow and pulled her away. 'No point staying here.'

She turned her scowl on him—he'd overslept as well. He'd also broken a few speed records driving her to the airport. Then his clearance had sped her through security, allowing her to take the small sonar unit on board as hand luggage. She let out a resigned sigh as he hurried her from the gate. What the hell, he could verify her story as she went back through customs and security.

Moments later the passengers inside the Poly-Melanesian plane had just sufficient time to comprehend their impending deaths as a small bomb exploded.

'Get down!' Page yelled, throwing the sonar case aside. He pushed Kristin against a structural beam and dived on top of her just as a second, much larger explosion rocked the terminal. An equally large explosion followed moments later.

The blasts drowned out Kristin's cry. A wave of choking heat, debris, dust and ash rolled across them. Page lifted her to her feet and tossing her carry-on bag over his shoulder, grabbed the sonar and shouted, 'C'mon!'

Trembling, Kristin looked up in disbelief. The screaming attendant rushed by them. Burned and bloody-faced, she looked like a nightmare banshee through the smoke-filled air. Hoarse cries and alarms, flames and death, Fiji relived in a perpetual mind loop. Images flayed at Kristin until she felt Page take her by the shoulders and pull her along.

'We've got to get out of here!' he yelled.

Behind them, the heat was a physical thing. Flames licked through the smoke. A wrenching groan warned her that the terminal arm was collapsing. If they didn't get out, they'd be dragged back into the inferno.

In an effort to calm herself, Kristin gulped air—then began coughing on the smoke and particulate matter. She let Page pull her along, unsure where they were going until the smoke began to clear. People in uniforms and Day-Glo orange touched them and asked if they were all right, then directed them to the exits.

Once outside, Kristin grabbed Page's coat lapels. With tears streaming from her eyes, she cried, 'We've got to help! We've got to go back and—'

He looked down at her, took her arms and said gently but forcefully, 'No. Not this time.'

She tried to pull away, until he encircled her with his arms and made her listen. 'There were only two explosions. The damage is contained. There are already too many people running around and that terminal arm is on the verge of collapse.'

Kristin rubbed her nose, vainly trying to dislodge the stench of death. 'I heard three explosions.'

'The first probably triggered the fuel tanks of one aircraft. When it blew, it took the aircraft beside it.'

'Okay,' she mouthed and suddenly sagged against him. She felt a stab of guilty relief that this time she did

not have to face it.

He wrapped his overcoat around her—she had dropped hers somewhere inside. Then he all but carried her through the cold, clean air of the winter night. Around them, people were running and crying, calling out or giving orders. Sirens and flashing lights, darkness and the smell of fire. And death. Always death. He released his grip for a moment. She staggered and almost fell.

'Are you hurt anywhere?' Page asked, catching her. She wondered what he was doing when he pulled away from her and examined the backs of her legs. Then he touched her right ear and gently brushed her hair aside to check her neck. 'Any burns?'

'No ... I don't think so.' Kristin closed her eyes against the images, vaguely realizing that gang wars, drugs and the socially inspired violence of her childhood had been replaced by a new form of death and casual destruction. She thought she had escaped it by leaving Australia, but there was no escape anywhere.

'How long,' she whispered desperately. 'How much longer can we go on like this?'

Nick did not answer. Instead, he took her into his arms and held her close. He'd automatically analyzed the blast as he'd pulled them from the terminal. Terrorists no longer viewed newer aircraft powered by relatively non-combustible fuel cells as potential guided missiles or sitting bombs. But equally, they seemed blind to the fact that by targeting petroleum-fuelled aircraft like the Poly-Mel plane, they were subverting their own cause.

After giving brief statements to the security team that now swarmed across the airport, he led Kristin to the car park. Looking back over his shoulder, he regarded the building with a professional eye. Fire fighters had already brought the blaze under control; the damage was contained. Glancing down at Kristin, he said, 'Can you walk by yourself?' It was important for her to regain some measure of control.

She nodded. Nick stayed close to her on the walk to his rental car, and held the door for her while she climbed in. For a moment in the terminal he had also relived another explosion.

When he'd realized that Karen was dead he'd almost released the controls of the aircraft. But he'd never been one to take the easy way out. Along with the flight surgeon's medicals and incident report investigations, he'd undergone psychological evaluations. He'd accepted their invasion into his emotions as the price for getting back into the cockpit, but had dismissed the warning that some feelings of impotence could be expected. He'd been through worse.

So why was he now surprised that Kristin was essentially unharmed? Had some part of him expected failure—or had something triggered his internal alarms?

Nick started the car to turn the heat on, but instead of driving away, he sat a moment, recalling each detail. While Kristin had argued with the attendant at the boarding gate, every instinct in him had been screaming to get them out of there. Then he'd all but dragged Kristin away ... Not because of something seen or heard, but something *smelled*—jet-fuel. It was an associative memory, before the days of hydrogen fuel cells. The odour brought memories of explosions and death. This time, it had saved their lives.

He had to call Denning. The Australian anti-terrorist captain needed to know what was happening in the terminal just before things went to hell. Then he swore softly, this would drive the Nehros to ground. Months of planning shot to hell.

Navigating the car past bright orange witches' hats, gesticulating state emergency service personnel and

ambulances, Nick used his ID and coded security passes to pass through hastily erected police and military blockades. Once on the main road from the airport, he glanced across at Kristin, surprised to see her calmly staring at him. 'You okay?' The few drops of blood from her ear had already crusted.

'Not really. Thanks for getting me out of there. I panicked.'

'That's understandable.'

'Not for me. I don't do panic well, but I'm fucking pissed off.'

He was surprised by her expletive. She rubbed the heels of her hands against her eyeballs, trying to clear away the grit.

'Sorry, but if I don't get angry I'm going to cry,' she said. 'And I can't stand whimpering.' But her voice betrayed her.

Nick flicked the button on the dashboard to lower her window. 'Take deep breaths. It'll help control the nausea.' At least, for a time.

Nodding gratefully, Kristin closed her eyes and rested her head against the window frame. Moments later she said, 'Where are we going?'

He glanced at her then down at himself. His navy blue uniform was almost as filthy as her white dress. 'We need to get cleaned up. Hotel?'

'I don't have any clothes—again. I don't know why I bother with luggage...' She bit her lip. 'Oh God. I'm whining about a lost suitcase when dozens, perhaps hundreds of people have just lost their lives, their limbs and their loved ones.' Grasping her stomach, Kristin covered her mouth.

Thinking she was about to be ill, Nick began to pull over, but she shook her head and motioned for him to keep driving. 'It just hit me,' she whispered. 'If that was the Poly-Melanesian Airlines plane, I should be dead!'

'If you'd been in a different hotel room in Fiji—don't go there, Kristin, there's no point.'

'Turn here. I ... can get clothes from the Airport Hilton,' she stammered. 'What ... were your plans for the evening?'

'Nothing, now.' He pulled into the entrance. Kristin was putting on a good front but he could hear the shock in her voice, see the way she was trying to hold herself together. He was not leaving her alone tonight.

A pair of RAAF helicopters skimmed low overhead, momentarily dampening the noise of yet more sirens screaming along the road. Nick climbed out of the car. The hotel doorman's worried eyes darted between them. 'Sir? Ma'am? What happened?'

'Bomb at one of the international departure gates,' Nick replied.

The doorman paled and reached out to help Kristin from the car. 'Ma'am, do you need a doctor?'

Kristin shook her head and waved off the offer of his white-gloved hand. 'I'd just get you dirty. No doctor, I'm fine.'

'Your ear,' Nick said, watching her carefully.



'It's all right.' She touched her cheek. 'I perforated my eardrum in Fiji. Yeah, I know,' she added, tossing him a chagrined look. 'I shouldn't be flying, especially in an FSP.'

Indicating the porter should collect his luggage and the sonar case, Nick picked up Kristin's carry-on bag. She seemed to have recovered enough to walk unaided; nevertheless, he took her by the elbow until they reached the reception desk.

'Can I leave you to check in?' She took her carry-on bag from him. 'I should get some things before everyone else starts arriving.'

He watched Kristin walk into the 24hour duty free shops. She looked like a waif, all but lost inside his big navy overcoat. She had also lost her shoes.

Ignoring the young salesgirl's curious stare, Kristin purchased a few personal items from the gift shop. Then she walked into the exclusive clothing store and began pulling things off the racks, glancing at them only long enough to check her size.

A meticulously dressed saleswoman came from behind the counter and said, 'I'll have to ask you to leave.'

Handing the woman the clothes, Kristin grabbed an expensive pullover. 'You have any other colour?'

'No,' the saleswoman replied haughtily. 'Are you a guest of the hotel?'

Kristin hated pink but it would have to do. She handed it to the woman then grabbed a leather jacket and tossed that at her as well. 'Since you don't have overcoats,' she muttered and headed to the counter. On the way, she snatched up a pair of short leather boots. 'If they don't fit, I'll change them in the morning.'

When the saleswoman asked for ID before accepting her credit card, Kristin slapped her passport card on the counter, in no mood to explain her appearance.

Page walked in. Gently placing an arm about her waist, he said, 'Take your time.'

'I'm finished,' she snapped at the saleswoman—who was now fixated on the tall naval officer with the gold wings. Even rumpled and none too clean, Page's good looks had the desired effect. Kristin allowed herself a weak smile, and turning to him, said, 'I'm becoming an expert at replacing blown up luggage. You saved the sonar, that's the main thing. I couldn't face asking for another, even with you to explain why.'

Taking the carry bags from her, he stayed close during the walk through the lobby. It was already filling with airport refugees. Kristin caught their glazed looks of horror and wondered if she looked the same. In the elevator she asked, 'What floor am I on?'

The elevator stopped and the single door opened. 'This one,' Page replied. When the porter opened a nearby room door, Page added, 'I got us a suite.'

Kristin shot him a doubtful look, but there was nothing seductive in his voice when he added, 'I'll explain when we get inside.'

'The real explanation?' She took the shopping bags from him. 'Or the 'just standard security precautions' one?'

He glanced at her sharply but she left him to tip the porter and headed for the shower.

## Chapter 8

'You're worried about 400 now—with the effects of global warming your children will be worrying about 400,000!'

**—42nd President of the United States, William J. Clinton, Sydney, 09 September 2001, in a speech referring to an incident involving 400 illegal immigrants attempting to enter Australia by boat.**

Prime Minister Paul Anderson was a simple man. At least that's what the PR blokes had the public believing during his election campaign. He'd often wondered how he, a kid from an almost-slum Sydney western suburb, had become the nation's leader. He carried self-doubt like a mantle, and the Australian public, whose national pastime was politician bashing, loved him for it.

Being a divorcé had added to his 'acceptably flawed' political image. Although Anderson didn't think of himself as good looking, his Highlander ancestry showed in his tall, athletic build and piercing blue eyes, ready smile and easygoing charm. It had certainly wooed the female voters.

There were other advantages in being single, like no wifely demands to redecorate the Lodge or its staff when he became PM. Still, he occasionally craved the company of a woman, not just to satisfy his more fundamental needs, but for simple companionship. His most eligible bachelor status was also an albatross. Every time he was seen in public with a woman, the press set up camp on her doorstep and that was the end of that.

Glanced at his comunit to check the time, he figured he should either be sleeping or working—or panicking, like everyone else. Ed Blake had told him that the Pope had been informed about Rhesus in the hope that he might quell racial backlash before it began, at least amongst predominantly Catholic countries like Spain. Anderson suspected it was a futile hope. The lines of power within the sacred halls of Saint Peters were more convoluted, mercenary and power hungry than those of the White House. Claiming Rhesus was divine retribution might inspire a surge of converts, the Vatican equivalent to vote catching.

He reached for his coffee, but realizing it was empty decided to go down to the communications room.

'A fellow insomniac, I see.'

Jean Simmons looked up, then quickly stood.

Anderson headed for the percolator, two grey suited bodyguards trailing him at a respectful distance. 'Sit down, Jean. May I call you Jean?' He was pleased that she was there. He had always admired her. At dinner that evening, he'd found himself wishing he could get to know her a little better. 'I just came for the coffee. The stuff in my room is lousy.'

Jean smiled when he sat beside her at the table. 'Can I help you with anything, Prime Minister?'

'You can start by calling me Paul. Australians don't call their heads of state by title unless they're blaming us for something.'

Chuckling, she moved aside her laptop computer. 'Well, is there anything I can do for you, Paul?'

'Wake me up when it's over.' He sighed and closed his eyes. 'I'm not in denial,' he added hastily, 'just a little punch drunk.'

'I think we all feel that way. Have you talked to your staff yet, about Rhesus?'

'It scared the crap out of them, especially in light of this.' He tapped a copy of the Kamchatka Statement lying open on the table beside Jean's computer. The data on the open page showed how England's climate would be more like Iceland's by the end of the decade. 'Although it gives us good reason to accelerate the Exodus Project, we proceed too fast and it'll reek of opportunism at best, and genetic prejudice at worst. Especially since I'm Rh-negative.'

'You too, huh? I've never had the time to have children but I'm glad that choice wasn't taken from me.' She let out a small sigh of frustration. 'There was no doubt about the long-term problems of global warming, but that was the catchword, long-term. While half the South Pacific nations vanish at high tide, they aren't the planet's breadbasket. Do you remember when the Republican administration was crowing about the economic benefits of the melting Arctic icecap?'

Anderson sipped his coffee. 'I recall the exact quote. 'With the North West Passage open most of the year, an overburdened Panama Canal will be alleviated, freight costs and shipment times will be reduced and new fishing grounds opened.' So what happened? In a bizarre repetition of the Atlantic cod disaster, vital species have been fished into economic if not actual extinction.' He wrinkled his nose and shook his head in disgust.

'I sometimes think they rode to power on the slogan, 'The problems of future generations are not our concern.' Well, if Rhesus is as bad as it looks, we've ensured there won't be much of a future generation,' Jean replied morosely.

'We have an idea what to expect based on the 1816 Tambora eruption.' When Jean frowned, Anderson added, 'It was an Indonesian volcano, bigger than Krakatoa. Tambora tossed up so much heat-reflective dust that it surrounded Earth like a shroud. It snowed in New England in June then, too, and the cost of food doubled. In France, grain shipments travelled with an armed escort to prevent attacks by starving peasants. It more or less kick-started the Revolution.'

Jean's eyes went to the graphical presentation of statistics from France. 'Crop failures, but the ski resorts are still open. Humph,' she snorted. 'Soon, tourists will be able to ski over most of Europe, but they'll have nothing to eat.' She glanced at Anderson again. 'Was he a good teacher?'

He took another sip of coffee before replying. 'President Blake? We didn't always see eye to eye, especially about soils.'

'That's your overriding concern about Exodus isn't it? Soil quality.' Jean idly fiddled with her own, empty cup.

'Yeah.' Anderson looked at her thoughtfully. She wore no wedding ring. He also noticed her fine, unblemished hands, and that she wore only clear polish on her neatly clipped fingernails. 'The North American agricultural boon wasn't just about good climate. You were blessed with some of the most productive soils on the planet. We've got some of the worst. No matter how much technology we chuck at it, that's not going to change overnight.'

'But the results from MacDonnell are staggering.'

'Will it matter now? I'm sorry.' He smiled and briefly touched her arm in apology.

'It's all right, Paul. I've had a few more hours than you to digest the impact of Rhesus. You wouldn't care to tell me when you and the President dreamed up the Exodus Project? Rumour has it that—'

He laughed. 'That we cooked it up over a bottle of whiskey on the side of Mt. Pinatubo. Well, it was bourbon and Mt. St. Helens. It began with that argument I was telling you about.'

'Soil quality?'

Anderson nodded, put his cup down and told her the story of how two men, a geologist and a geomorphologist, accidentally conspired to save a planet.

'Back in 2001, the Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, and your President, George W. Bush, effectively scuttled the Kyoto Protocol to reduce carbon emissions. Oh, sure, it was signed a few years later, but by then it had no teeth. Howard and Bush claimed our respective economies were more important than esoteric issues like global warming—thereby securing North America and Australia's positions as first class passengers on the *Titanic*. Europe saw the iceberg coming, literally, but Bush and Howard told them to take a hike.

'Global warming was already causing the icecaps to melt, glaciers to retreat and the sea to rise. It might have seemed insignificant then. Hell, despite the insane weather, people were still arguing about whether it was real or not. Nevertheless a lot of water and ice was moving around, changing the weight ratio and pressure on unstable tectonic plates. It also meant higher water tables and glaciers melting directly above magma chambers, placing increasing pressure on seismically active areas.'

'Including the Cascades Mountains,' Jean said.

'That's right, that area is extremely unstable. As you no doubt know, Ed—President Blake—and I did most of our postdoctoral research on volcanoes. I'd also been keeping track of other global warming issues. When I saw that the Gulf Stream was failing, I knew then that even if the Kyoto protocol had been ratified, nothing was going to stop the coming storm. Maybe it was the bourbon,' he said, smiling. 'But that night on Mt. St. Helens, we began to plan for the consequences.'

One of the communications team on the far side of the room swivelled around in his chair and pulled a page from a printer. String across to them, he said, 'Mr. Prime Minister?'

Anderson accepted the decoded message. As he read, his stomach churned in shock. He could feel his hands begin to shake, but he wasn't sure if it was from anguish or fury.

'Prime Minister?' Jean's voice was concerned. When he didn't react, she touched the back of his hand. 'Paul?'

It could have been worse. Most of the damage was concentrated in one terminal arm, and casualties were limited to two aircraft, cargo handlers and ground staff in the immediate vicinity. 'Somebody blew up an aircraft at Sydney airport.' Jean's fingers clenched over his. Reluctantly pulling his hand away, he said, 'I have to go.'

She stood with him. 'Of course.'

But as he met her eyes, he couldn't quite bring himself to leave.

The Australian Minister for the Environment, Bruce O'Brien, ran into the room, breaking the momentary spell. 'I was watching CNN.' O'Brien was breathing hard and his nostrils were flared, not from running but from shock.

'Ronald Denning is crawling all over it,' Anderson replied as they left.

Back in his rooms, Anderson made the necessary calls, then sat heavily back into his chair. 'I'll talk to the

press in fifteen minutes.'

'You wanna know where these bastards came from?' O'Brien said. 'Read this while you're waiting.'

Anderson perused a report that was in many ways more worrying than the attack on Sydney airport. 'How many boats is that this week?' he asked, looking up.

'Thirty-eight. And that's just the ones we know about. Now the Kamchatka Statement is out, we can expect them to treble. Bugger it!' O'Brien stood abruptly, and thrust his hands into his pants pockets. 'I know as well as you that most of these boat people are genuine refugees, but God knows how many bloody terrorists have infiltrated! We can't just *let* them in or we'll lose a hell of a lot more than two planes and a terminal arm. Even with the Americans' help we don't have the resources to process that many refugees, let alone patrol such a large expanse of water. We never have,' he added glumly. 'Patrol boats are having a hard enough time chasing illegal fishing boats outta there. We know their own governments sponsor some of these refugee boats. Now that those same governments are refusing to take them back I don't know what the hell we'll do.'

'Soon half the planet will be on the move, trying to escape droughts and floods, heat and cold.' Anderson shook his head and stood. He needed to change into a fresh suit and more sombre tie. 'That's all we need, millions of refugees infected with a species-destroying plague, all with their hungry eyes focused on Australia.'

\* \* \* \*

Kristin examined her shattered comunit. She'd discovered when replacing her old one—just the day before—that insurance didn't cover terrorism. She tossed it into the trash bin, pulled on the ludicrously expensive jeans and pink pullover, and stared at herself in the mirror. The day after she'd lost her virginity she'd examined her face in the mirror, trying to see if she looked older, or at least worldlier. It had bothered her that a familiar face had stared back.

Once again, except for the lack of makeup—which she rarely used anyway—the face in the mirror was the same as the one she had worn to Fiji. No darker, no more worldly, certainly no wiser.

She dried her hair and told herself she should be thanking God she was alive. But she couldn't, because others, people she knew like the Poly-Mel pilots and crew, even that fat slob of a politician, Amos Lingano, were probably dead or horribly mutilated. And she couldn't do a damned thing to help, not even go down to the Red Cross and give blood; she'd already done that in Fiji.

Despite cleaning her teeth and rinsing with mouthwash, Kristin couldn't shake the burnt oil taste in her mouth. Tossing the brush aside in frustration, she tied her hair back and opened the bathroom door.

While Kristin was occupied, Nick called Ronald Denning using the DNA triggered encryption software on his comunit. After describing everything to the antiterrorist commander, Nick added, 'It was small, just sufficient to rupture a fuel tank.'

'Jesus mate,' replied Denning. 'You've got more bloody lives than a cat. 'Alright, thanks for letting me know.' Then he swore. 'Fuck it, this will drive the Nehros and the Shatt-al Arabs, and most of our other sources to ground!'

'Yeah. Call me if you need anything.' Nick rubbed his eyes.

'Will do,' Denning said and disconnected.

Pacing the room restlessly, Nick's eyes occasionally strayed to the bathroom door. There was no way

Kristin could be deceived any longer. He glanced at his comunit. Jean Simmons had called while he was talking to Denning; he pressed the reply button.

'Nick!' Jean answered. 'Tell me you were nowhere near Sydney airport!'

He snorted. 'Twenty seconds from ground zero. Nothing to do with my operation,' he added quickly. 'It's blown.'

'I'm sorry,' she replied, genuine regret in her voice. 'But we have another situation.'

When she explained the Rhesus virus, Nick was silent for a moment, and then he said, 'Are you certain it isn't a bioweapon because—'

'Absolutely. Without going into details, it's a genetic virus that's probably been switched on by something in the environment.'

The bathroom door opened. He turned to see Kristin walking out. 'The political fallout, Africa, South America, hell, the Asians will go nuts.'

'We know,' Jean replied tiredly. 'As to keeping Dr. Baker out of the loop—'

'What moron in State dreamed that up?' He met Kristin's stare. 'She's not stupid, she knows something's going on.'

'Tell her,' Jean replied. 'Everything, including the details of Rhesus, We've only got hours, days at the most before the press finds out. I'll handle State. Can you get the sonar working within forty-eight hours? We're going to need the leverage sooner than we thought.'

'Yeah. They can forgo test runs if I set it up.'

'Good, then the President wants you back here immediately. We're arranging an FSP to collect you from Vanuatu.'

'Just make sure they clear the landing issue or I'll be thumbing a ride on a commercial flight.' Nick pulled the tiny, cordless plug from his ear, dropped it on the table and ran his hand across his jaw. He needed a shave.

'Okay, give. What's going on?' Kristin demanded.

'More than you want to know. How's your ear?'

'Don't change the subject, I've flown with busted eardrums before, it'll heal just fine.'

He smiled, so had he. He was also right about his assessment of her: stubborn yet resilient. 'What blood group are you?'

Kristin's face screwed up in confusion. 'What? Why?'

Unbuttoning his shirt cuffs, he walked past her. 'I'm going to take a shower first.' He needed time alone to process the new information.

'Wait a minute.' She grabbed him by the arm. '*What* is going on? Was it the Poly-Melanesian plane that blew up? And that didn't sound like the sort of conversation I should have overheard. And I'm O-negative. *Why?*'

'Then you've probably just turned into a target. Like me,' he added grimly. When she didn't let go, he pursed his lips and gestured for her to sit down. The shower could wait.

'To answer your first question, yes, your plane was the target. I don't know who was responsible but I'm certain it had nothing to do with the sonar, or me. That aircraft was the only petro-chemical driven plane on the tarmac.'

He sat beside her on the couch, and pulled off his tie. 'You recently wrote an article for a science magazine on the Kamchatka Statement.'

'So?' she replied. 'I'm a marine engineer. What's that got to do with this sonar? Or my plane being blown up? Or my blood group?'

'When did the Gulf Stream show signs of failing?'

'What is this, twenty questions?' she said impatiently. When he didn't answer, she replied, 'Hard, verifiable data? Fifteen years ago. That's what makes the Kamchatka Statement so laughable. Ross Gelbspan described it perfectly when he said, 'After running a cost-benefit analysis on the global environment, the US government decided it imposed an unacceptable burden on its economy.' Then your government indulged in inverted environmental accounting and declared that increased carbon dioxide would benefit the environment. Not only would the forests they chopped down grow back faster, food crops would produce a higher yield! I'll give them one thing,' she added in bitter tones. 'They were consistent. They applied the same creative accounting techniques to their multinational conglomerates. The economic cost of that malfeasance was staggering. The environmental cost ... well, here we are folks; despite the political and economic inconvenience, the Gulf Stream has thumbed its nose at US policy and shut down.' She snorted and crossed her arms. 'Let's see the White House impose economic sanctions or declare war on an ocean current!'

He chuckled at her wry look. 'Yeah, that about sums it up. As you pointed out earlier, the Kamchatka Statement is the *public* document outlining what we think will happen, and the provisions to deal with it. While there are quite literally thousands of think tanks and research organizations, like Woods Hole, developing response strategies, there is also a highly classified section. And I promise you it's not as lame as the Statement. I've been authorized to brief you on the basis of your understanding that.'

'Okay,' Kristin replied slowly. 'On whose authorization? The US or the Australian government?'

'Both.'

Nodding for him to go on, she stood and walked across to the bar fridge.

'Despite political posturing,' he said. 'Like you, the European, Canadian, US and Australian governments knew that the Gulf Stream was on the verge of collapse—it was only a question of when. Well, now we know. But back in 2001, people were still confused over global warming issues. The average guy on the street had no idea what losing the Gulf Stream meant. And most people have very short attention spans. If you had told them then that global warming would freeze their asses off within twenty years, they would have tossed their hands in the air and said, make up your damned minds, then they would have forgotten about it twenty *minutes* later.'

'Especially while their email buddies in Virginia were frying. That's why disaster management precludes evacuating people too soon.' Kristin held up a bottle of red wine. He nodded. She removed the cork, adding, 'They get impatient, go home and are promptly killed by whatever's coming.'

'Exactly. But while governments were aware of the potentially catastrophic social, economic and most

importantly, political fallout, even had we the will to do so, the combined resources of mankind could not have prevented the Gulf Stream from shutting down. So these same governments began planning for the consequences.'

Kristin had her back to him while she poured the wine. 'And that's what the Kamchatka Statement is.'

'Ye ... es,' he replied equivocally. 'But the real plan was set in motion fourteen years ago, in 2001. What do you do when floodwaters are coming your way?'

She turned around. 'Sandbag everything, especially—'

He shook his head. 'Bigger than that. *Much* bigger.'

'Grab what you can and evacuate everyone ... Oh, my God!' She stared at him in shock. 'But you couldn't do it before Industrial Winter started having an impact, because people would never have accepted it!'

'But there was one thing we could start evacuating. Australians have been critical of their government for allowing US military bases to expand and additional bases to be established here, fearing it creates more targets for terrorists. Thanks,' he added when she handed him the wine.

'That's naïve.' She sat beside him again. 'This isn't a war between countries, or even military forces, it's a war of ideologies. We're all potential targets—even the backwater of the South Pacific, as clearly demonstrated tonight. I might not be living in Australia but I'm more comfortable knowing those bases are here.'

'Why?' He still wasn't sure how much she'd figured out.

'In the next twenty years global warming will make Australia a very desirable piece of real estate. Some Asian nations are allied with the West in this Middle Eastern mess but certainly not the Moslem ones. Any one of them, including our nearest neighbour, could take over Australia in forty-eight hours without working up a sweat. But they'll think twice if it means bloodying your nose on the way.'

'But if the US economy is in tatters,' he countered.

Kristin stared at him. 'Which is now a genuine concern, we'll be left to fend for ourselves. And forget mother England, they'll be using ice-picks to get out the front door.'

'Our economic and political futures depend on protecting Australia,' he replied. 'Your country's population is less than a tenth of the United States' because it's mostly desert. Technology can't stop Industrial Winter but it can green a desert, especially one that's already getting more rain. However, Australia needs a much larger *skilled* population to expand its economic base and to defend and maintain a democratic government.' He sipped the wine and waited for her reaction.

Kristin knew that no matter what their ethnic origins, an uncontrolled invasion into Australia by millions of unprepared, unprovisioned refugees would do as much damage as an invading army, because the economy and democratic government would disintegrate under the sheer weight. She stared at Page, realizing that the converse was also true. A large but carefully planned influx of provisioned and skilled immigrants, with technological resources, equipment and the capacity and willpower to defend a society based on similar democratic principles, would benefit everyone—if Australia could improve agricultural productivity. 'Oh my God. How did our politicians pull that off? Sell you Western Australia?'

Page smiled. 'No, although we leased a reasonable chunk of it and part of the Northern Territory, this agreement includes Canada and European Union members. Haven't you wondered why, over the last



decade, multinational companies have been setting up head offices in Australia? Governments are not the only ones who can see what's coming.'

'I'm not an economist, and I don't follow the stock market, but I see your point. Still, what does any of this have to do with the sonar?'

'Until recently, US interests have been predominantly concerned with the Atlantic and the North Pacific. The South Pacific was taken care of by France, Australia—'

Her eyes lit in understanding. 'China and Japan, although their idea of 'taking care of' means stripping our resources. And the US didn't want to butt in because China and Japan are your allies in the war! So now you have a vested interest in the South Pacific—having trashed your end of the planet—you toss me a sonar so I'll act as an unwitting agent provocateur. Exactly what am I going to find? And how many other people have you duped into this charade? And what,' she demanded in an increasingly aggravated voice, 'has this got to do with my blood group making me a target?'

'I'll get you another drink.' He stood and reached for her glass. 'The shades of grey just got a whole lot murkier.'

## Chapter 9

**'No species must conquer its environment to live successfully within its limits. Until recently it has not been hinted that this quirk of the human mind might perhaps be suicidal...**

**—Kenneth Brower: Wake of the Whale**

In the tropical waters of Vanuatu, Lieutenant Commander Donald Pascoe watched over the radar operator's shoulder and considered his options. No question the New Chinese fishing boats were stationary.

'They haven't seen us yet.' Sergeant Moti of the paramilitary Vanuatu Mobile Force sounded surprised.

'Their engines are running at idle and their generators are working,' confirmed the sonar operator. 'But no other activity, no nets are being deployed or lifted. Nothing. They're just sitting there.'

'They're up to something,' Pascoe muttered suspiciously.

The lanky Australian naval officer had only recently arrived in Vanuatu with a new patrol boat, a gift from the Australian Government. He'd hunted these bastards off northern Queensland and the Gulf waters for years. Catching them was always tricky because they had an agreement with Papua New Guinea and Indonesia to fish within their territorial waters. The trawlers always claimed to have 'drifted' across the invisible border into Australia's economic zone.

It's even harder here, thought Pascoe as he fingered the binoculars around his neck. They could fish inside Vanuatu waters, just not this close to land. Unless he caught them with their nets deployed, he couldn't prove a damned thing, and they usually cut their nets and ran at the first sign of a patrol boat. This time, using Ambrym and Epi Islands to hide from the fishing boats' radars, he'd crept up on them during the night.

Something about it didn't feel right. Pascoe shuddered and buttoned his blue uniform jacket. The boats had refused to respond to their radio calls and light signals, and there was no sign of movement on the decks.

Moti stepped from the bridge onto the deck 'Something is wrong,' the big sergeant muttered, and lifted the megaphone to his lips a second time.

'No shit, Sherlock,' Pascoe snapped nervously.

While Moti called the ship again, Pascoe turned to the radio operator and said, 'Wake Fisheries Director Mennenger and Minister Kati. And suggest to Mennenger—*not* Kati—that he notify the Chinese Embassy, I want this to go down by the book.'

Pascoe joined Moti outside, lifted his binoculars and scanned the area again. It was a fine winter's morning. To the north, Ambrym Island's twin volcanoes glowed malevolently beneath the low, angry-looking clouds that permanently capped the island. In contrast, the surrounding sky was clear and blue, the sea was calm and the air, still and cool, although the stench from the trawlers was a bit thicker than usual. Pilot whales or false killer whales, he wasn't sure which, had ridden their bow all the way to the first New Chinese mother ship. Bottle nosed dolphins took their place when the larger, black cetaceans veered away. Tiny, Hawaiian spinner dolphins leaped in the distance. 'Oh, oh.' Pascoe suddenly felt sick. He knew why the fishing boats were there. And what their freezers held.

But it was worse than he thought. Much, much worse.

An hour later, Corporal Vira and a seaman ran along the deck of the first trawler. They were panting and their dark faces were grey with shock. 'Dead, sir. All of them,' Vira said to Pascoe. The corporal's voice was shaky, and he eyed the relative sanctuary of the patrol boat.

Ni-Vanuatu were supposedly God fearing Christians, but scratch the surface and a five thousand-year old culture that was more devil worship than animism erupted. Pascoe ignored the corporal's pleading looks and his own gut wrenching fear, and bent to examine the Chinese seaman's body. As with the other corpses, the man's sphincters had relaxed in death, and the contents of his bowels had soiled his clothing and the deck. The man's face was frozen in a mask of pure agony; he had died clutching his stomach and screaming. Pascoe swallowed hard. He had seen some horrific things in his life, but it was the absence of physical trauma that now terrified him. Using the baton, he lifted the corpse's stiffening shoulder and examined the naked back. Telltale blue and blotchy marks indicated the early stages of hypostasis.

'He's only been dead a few hours,' Pascoe muttered. 'Just like the others.' Turning to the corporal he said, 'You check the holds?'

Vira nodded. His eyes fixed on the patrol boat.

'What else did you find?' Pascoe was determined to sound calm. If he showed any sign of panic, he'd instantly lose control of his men.

'There are no nets, not one on board. Not much tuna in the holds, but many sharks, turtles and menfish—dolphins and small whales—dead, like him.' Vira pointed to corpse.

Pascoe's hand-held VHF radio crackled. 'Commander?' came the voice of Sergeant Moti. The sergeant and three men had taken the patrol boat's inflatable to the second ship.

'Sergeant, anyone alive, anyone at all?' Pascoe said into the radio.

'No, sir, although some of the bodies are warm. We are returning now.'

'I ordered you to take the helm and maintain a safe distance until the tug boats arrive.'

A crackle of static followed, then came Moti's voice. 'I am unable to carry out that order, sir.'

There was no point arguing or threatening them. Their fear of demons was too strong. And unless he missed his guess, they were probably right; demons were at work here, microscopic ones. Staring at Vira, Pascoe replied into the radio, 'All right, secure the vessel, engines at idle and drop the forward and aft anchors, then return to the patrol boat.'

Vira ran off to comply, while the relief in Moti's voice was obvious. 'Yes, sir.'

\* \* \* \*

Joe Camicci looked around the field of graves. Each was a signpost of loss for countless families. Beside him, the priest stood talking of a good man, a loving father and grandfather. But there'd been nothing good about Alexis Camicci. Even in death his father had left only a pall of guilt. Over his son, for killing his mother during childbirth, over Greg, his grandson, for letting Crystal drink from a park water fountain, catching cholera and dying, and over his daughter-in-law, Sylvie, for exiling him to an old men's' home.

Empty words for an empty coffin. Joe closed his eyes. His father's ashes were on the other side of town, mixed with half a dozen others in the hospital's biohazard waste crematorium. The hospital had organized the funeral. The least we can do, said the doctor, Gracie Friand, but you understand why we can't release Alexis Camicci's remains.

Sure, he knew. It was the same reason the army had never given them Crystal's body, not even her ashes, when his little girl had died.

Joe's face twisted bitterly. He hated himself for feeling relieved that his father was dead—which is exactly what Alexis would have wanted. Sylvie squeezed his hand. He looked down at his wife. Her fair skinned cheeks and petite, freckled nose were pink from the cold, or perhaps it was anger. Her eyes said it all. Don't let a vindictive, drunken old man take you on one last guilt trip.

Greg had left the funeral service to stand by his sister's grave. His lips were moving as he talked to Crystal in kinder tones than he'd ever used when she'd been alive. The psychologist had assured Joe that Greg had accepted that Crystal had passed away, and, that despite Alexis' vicious accusations followed by Greg's temporary refuge in drugs, his son had learned to put aside the blame. Not even the doctors had known where ACR cholera had come from, or how to treat it, until it had been too late. Now, in the years since her death, Crystal had become Greg's confessor, someone who neither criticized nor passed judgment on him.

The priest finished. A few of Alexis' acquaintances—he didn't have what you'd call friends—tossed a handful of dirt on the coffin. Most likely they'd come to the service because it was a fine, sunny day. Everyone had foregone overcoats, trying to fool themselves it was summer. But the chill in the air and the dirty clumps of snow lurking in the shadows told them otherwise. Joe shivered and wished he'd worn his hat.

Greg joined them. Sylvie pulled off her leather glove and picked up a handful of soil. Joe could feel the good riddance in the way she tossed the dirt onto the coffin. She turned and headed to the car park. Joe understood; her hypocrisy only went so far. Besides, it was warmer in the SUV. He indicated that Greg should to go next.

'Why? There's nothin' in there.'

Joe's eyes widened and he looked at his son in alarm. 'What are you talkin' about?'

'It's the law.' Greg shoved his hands deeper into the pockets of his jeans. 'Anyone infected with ACR cholera is cremated. They're changing it to include the new strains of tuberculosis, too.'

'How did you know that?'

Joe demanded, worried that Greg had guessed the other carefully hidden truth.

'School. Besides, it's not like we're the only ones to lose family to some bug or other.' Greg glanced over his shoulder at his sister's equally empty grave. 'I understand why you buried an empty coffin when Crystal died—for Mom. But why did you bother with Grandpa?'

Joe sucked in his breath and stared at his son. 'How long have you known?'

Greg shrugged. 'A while, I guess. It's sorta like when you're little, you start wondering about Santa Claus 'coz things don't add up, you know? Then when you find out, well, it just evens it out in your head. Mrs. Murphy says funerals are necessary rituals. I dunno. I remember Crystal here.' He touched his chest. 'Not in some empty grave.'

They walked back to the SUV in silence. Joe slid into the passenger seat. Sylvie took the scarf from around her dark red hair and handed it to him in exchange for the car keys. A familiar ritual.

On the drive home, Joe stared out the window, trying to figure out what it all meant. He unconsciously ran the silky scarf through his fingers, not unlike the way Alexis used to with a rosary. He heard Sylvie

say something to Greg but he wasn't listening. All he could think of was that everything seemed to be a sham, a façade, a poorly constructed house of cards that was all falling apart.

It wasn't until they were home and Greg had gone upstairs to his room that Joe turned to his wife and said, 'He knows Crystal's grave is empty. And Alexis!'

Sylvie brought her hand to her mouth and her eyes widened. Joe shook his head. He couldn't think straight, much less talk about it right now. He opened the fridge, pulled out a beer, went inside and turned on the TFT screen.

\* \* \* \*

When Jean Simmons had learned that the Poly-Mel aircraft had been targeted, her first thought had been for Nick. He'd managed to get himself into, and out of, more scrapes than she could count over the years, but the last time it had been personal. Karen O'Ryan hadn't just been Nick's lover; she had been a childhood friend, to all of them.

Squeezing her eyes closed under the spray of hot water, Jean rinsed the shampoo from her hair. She'd hated the idea of using Nick to catch the Nehros, but was equally sad that, thanks to the bomb at Sydney airport, he would not have the closure they all sought.

Then a sly grin crept across her face. On the upside, it now meant telling the State Department that in light of Rhesus, their advisory on Kristin Baker had been ignored. She hoped Baker was the forgiving sort.

Stepping from the shower, Jean's thoughts turned to another Australian, Paul Anderson. She had declined President Blake's offer to join them on their breakfast sightseeing trip to the erupting Klyuchevskaya volcano. Paul had teased her and...

Good grief. How had she ended up on a first name basis with the Australian Prime Minister? Edwin Blake had been Ed to them all for years, until the moment he became President. Then he was Sir, or Mr. President, even in her thoughts. Ed was in storage, along with his house and their lives.

Jean wrapped the towel around her hair. Catching a glimpse of her naked body in the full-length mirror, she stopped to look further. At thirty-eight she still didn't look too bad. She screwed up her eyes to sharpen the focus. Not wearing glasses helped blur the effects of gravity, if not age. Besides, who was she kidding? She didn't have time to sleep in a bed, let alone use one for recreation.

After changing into a dark chestnut pants suit, she finished packing, called the hotel porter to collect her bags and went down to the communications room in search of Andreas Clem.

'It's an open cheque book,' Clem said when Jean walked in. 'Make out your wish list.'

From the wall TFT screen, Roger Harrison replied, 'I've been tossing wish lists on your desk for five years. Did you tell that son of a bitch Obermann what strangling our budget has done to aid the spread of Rhesus? Sorry, Dr. Simmons,' he added when he caught sight of Jean.

She waved it off while Clem replied, 'He got the picture. Be grateful. After years of scrounging for basic lab supplies and office equipment you can now have anything you want.'

'But not the one thing I need: the five years of research stolen from me by that military moron over at USAMRIID, Dixon.'

'Roger, stop wasting time on recriminations,' finished Clem. 'Air Force One is leaving soon. Get on a flight to DC and bring a clean shirt, the President wants to talk to you.'

## Chapter 10

Today, 25 million environmental refugees are roaming the world ... Their number exceed all other types of refugees—political, economic and religious ... In thirteen years, if not before, their number is expected to double. But if predictions of increasingly severe conditions are realised, the tidal wave of environmental refugees will dwarf even that projection. At that point, the number could grow tenfold, to more than 200 million homeless migrants wandering the planet. This forecast is not the speculation of chicken little. It is based on an eighteen month research project using input from several UN agencies, the World Bank, refugee assistance groups, scientists and field workers from all over the world ... in their extraordinarily well-ignored report titled Environmental Exodus, published in 1995 by the Climate Institute...

—Ross Gelbspan: The Heat is On

It was difficult to tell which was worse, the sulphur fumes clawing at his sinuses or the hot ash congealing his eyes. Paul Anderson lifted the bandanna from around his mouth and nose to wipe his face. It did little more than re-arrange the muck. He blinked and peered through the rising steam, trying to discern the strange, skeletal silhouettes in the distance. A gust of wind momentarily cleared the air to reveal them as islands of burnt matchsticks. Lava rivers had left tracts of the forest untouched, but pyroclastic flows had stripped the trees of every leaf, every trace of life. Not even a cricket chorused in the morning.

Although he had spent half of his adult life on volcanoes, they never ceased to enthrall him. Anderson turned to contemplate the ruined landscape below. It had once been green with a sugar frosting of high altitude snow. Now, it lay heavy with an overcoat of grey ash pockmarked by volcanic bombs. Black and white etched the entire world, with shades of sepia and grey giving form and texture.

Nearby Mount Klyuchevskaya belched black ash through a slowly rising white steam cloud. The base of the cloud glowed angry red, reflecting the molten heart within. Moments later a silent rumble echoed through his bones, followed soon after by an audible roar. Adrenaline coursed through him when the rumble increased, shaking Mount Kamen beneath his feet.

It was irresponsible to have come here. Klyuchevskaya had not yet finished re-arranging the landscape and Mount Kamen, its sister, would soon join the chorus of destruction. Ah, but the temptation! When he and Ed were young men, the awesome power of volcanoes had wooed them. Then a different power, a more human power had seduced them, bringing with it responsibilities that forbade foolish risks. But damn, it felt good! Only in places like this did he truly feel alive, and, more importantly, humbled. After what he'd learned these past days, he'd needed this perspective.

Edwin Blake turned to him and said, 'They hate this.' His eyes twinkled in amusement.

Anderson glanced at the dour Secret Service-agents. Their anger was as palpable as the cloying fumes. They were prepared to protect him and Ed from any human assailant, but against the raw, unpredictable power of the planet, they were impotent. *Something our predecessors failed to remember.*

Ed signalled it was time to go. A helicopter swooped down and rested its left skid on the slope of Kamen volcano. The co-pilot motioned anxiously, one eye on the belching ash clouds. Secret Service-agents helped them along. Anderson turned his eyes from the chopper's downdraft, and noticed other agents assisting Ed. Dammit! What we've become hasn't turned us into frail old men!

Or has it?

The powerful whomp whomp of the machine blasted his ears. Someone put earphones across his head, muting the sound. His gritty eyes slid across the presidential seal on the side of the machine, but he did

not read it. He knew Ed had sought it as much as he had also sought the loftiest peaks. And like him, his old teacher had found the ultimate summit of power far lonelier than any mountain.

Anderson accepted the outstretched hand of the Marine sergeant, then let himself be pulled aboard and strapped into a seat. When the others were settled in, the door slammed shut and they flew upwind off Mount Kamen and around Klyuchevskaya volcano. He accepted a warm, wet face cloth and scrubbed his face clean, then looked outside at the scorched landscape, pockmarked with volcanic bombs.

His thoughts turned to bomb at Sydney airport. The bastards responsible were probably on the other side of the planet by now, but they could just as easily be running around the city, sightseeing for other targets. Turning to the President, he said, 'Captain Denning reckons the airport attack wasn't the Shatt-al Arabs, but it will still drive them to ground. No point leaving your man in place now.'

'I've ordered Commander Page back to DC after he sets up the sonar in Vanuatu.' Blake adjusted his earphones. 'I'm also sending more military SPs across to add to the FSPs now at your disposal. I want to minimize delays in transporting the necessary equipment and personnel. Using military aircraft also gives us tighter security.'

'Speaking of Vanuatu,' said Blake's personal aide, handing them each a small TFT screen. 'This just came in.'

High-resolution satellite images showed the decks of two decrepit New Chinese trawlers. Dozens of bodies sprawled across the decks cast harsh shadows in the early morning light.

Adjusting his glasses, the President scowled. 'What am I looking at, bio or chemical?'

'There's no intel at this time, sir. Authorities in Vanuatu were alerted to the situation by an Australian patrol boat dogging the ships. They're getting a medical team together now.'

Anderson frowned. 'I doubt it's chemical, not in an open area like that. Probably biological.' He turned the screen around, examining the floating death ships from different angles. 'We know what the sonar is going to reveal. Maybe someone was trying to hide the evidence.' His frown deepened. 'The plane blown up at Sydney airport was destined for Vanuatu.' He shook his head; that made no sense. Dead men might tell no tales but their ships would.

'Perhaps some rabid greenie organisation have gotten their hands on something,' Blake replied, but his eyes said he didn't believe it. He removed his glasses and put them on the seat. They immediately disappeared into the aide's pocket.

Handing the TFT screen back to the aide, Anderson muttered, 'This week just keeps getting better and better.'

Two hours later Air Force One left Petropavlovsk for the United States. Minutes after that, Prime Minister Paul Anderson's aircraft departed for Australia.

When the aircraft had levelled off, Anderson noticed O'Brien's look of distaste. 'Yeah,' said Anderson. 'I'm filthy and I stink. Volcanoes are like that. What's the latest?'

'Ambassador Joel Gordon is missing, presumed dead,' O'Brien replied. 'He was in the Qantas plane at the adjoining gate. The same catering truck serviced both aircraft.'

'You think it was meant for our ambassador to the US? What does Denning say?'

'Dunno. My guess is retaliation for that incident in Lebanon, or our agreeing to expand US bases.'

The seatbelt light blinked out. Anderson stood. 'Don't buy into that bullshit. Since when did they need an excuse to hit whatever takes their damned fancy?' He turned to his aide. 'I want continued updates and a statement ready for release as soon as we arrive in Canberra. I'm going to shower and change, then I want to talk to President Taangiroa in Vanuatu; their aircraft appeared to be the target, maybe they have some ideas. And find out what you can about those ships.' He hesitated when he saw O'Brien's dyspeptic look. 'What's the matter?'

O'Brien shrugged. 'I was just thinking that Joel Gordon hated flying.'

\* \* \* \*

Standing on the deck of one of the fishing boats, Commander Donald Pascoe watched the helicopter approach. The tugboats waiting to tow the ships back to Vila were upwind at what Pascoe hoped was a safe distance—if whatever had killed the crewmen was airborne; there was no way to be sure.

They'd anchored the New Chinese trawlers on the shallow rim of the active submarine Kuwai volcano. Pascoe knew that Kristin Baker would throttle him when she found out he'd chucked a couple of picks on the pristine reef, but there had been no alternative.

The helicopter landed on the stern. Holding his cap against the downdraft, Pascoe fought the urge to be ill. He was now on the wrong side of an invisible barrier, one that separated him from the rest of the world with surgical masks, protective eyeglasses, latex-gloves and orange plastic suits worn by the three people climbing out of the machine. He made no move to approach while they offloaded the Styrofoam containers; he did not want to come into contact with anything that was headed back to civilization.

One of the figures had a distinctly feminine shape. When Pascoe realised who it was, he felt a surge of anticipation. The man with her was rotund and elderly. A few wisps of snowy, white hair stuck out from beneath his elasticised hood. Thick lines marked his brow, but as they approached, Pascoe could see that his eyes reflected intelligence and humour. He nodded in greeting, but waited until the chopper left before turning to the third person in the group, John Mennenger, and said, 'Thanks for coming, John. I half expected a HAZMAT team.'

'We got the next best thing.' Mennenger put down one of the containers and accepted Pascoe's outstretched hand. He turned to his companions and introduced them. 'Lieutenant Commander Donald Pascoe, this is Dr. Maddison Paine, a WHO epidemiologist assigned to the Health Department's Dengue, Malaria and TB Unit. And this is Dr. Jason Crookshank, a Canberra pathologist staying with Maddy for the holidays.'

Pascoe nodded gratefully when Maddy handed him a set of gloves, a surgical mask and glasses. It was probably too late to protect him but it removed the psychological barrier between them. 'Hey, Maddy, sorry to drag you out here.' Despite the unflattering coveralls she managed to look both feminine and attractive. He wondered if Crookshank was a family friend, or professional colleague.

'You two have met?' Mennenger said.

'At the High Commissioner's reception last week,' Maddy replied. Her blue eyes met Don's, businesslike, but friendly. 'Have you or any of your crew touched any of the bodies, Commander?'

Pascoe pulled the ends of the gloves over the cuffs of his long-sleeved blue coveralls, then he slipped on the mask and glasses. 'Yeah, but when I realized what it might be, I ordered everyone who's been on board or handled anything to deck-shower with disinfectant and seawater, then remain on deck, away from the rest of the crew. I also had them put all of their clothes and shoes in double sealed garbage bags and douse them in bleach. I'm the only one still on board either ship.' When they looked at him in surprise he added, 'I've seen what bioweapons can do.' His expression said he would not elaborate.



Maddy's dark eyebrows lifted. 'Thank God you were so quick witted, Don. If it's chemical, then the effects would have been immediate and there'd be obvious superficial signs, so I think we can shelve that for the moment. If it's a pathogen, chances are good that you've avoided infection.'

Taking the containers from Maddy's hands, Pascoe led them forward. The smell was worsening as the day warmed but only Mennenger wrinkled his nose at the combined odour of human excrement, decaying marine life and squalid living conditions.

'I brought one of the new sonic multi platform PCR analyzers,' Maddy added as they made their way through the ship's companionways. 'That will tell us straight away if it's a bio or chemical agent. I'll also take samples and send them to MacDonnell for analysis.' Vanuatu's medical facilities did not have provision for autopsies and certainly nothing for dealing with potentially hazardous biological material.

Pascoe stopped when they reached a large cabin with four long mess tables. 'I figured you could set up in here.' The cabin was well ventilated, with open portholes and an overhead hatch. 'I cleared the tables and doused them with bleach.'

The pathologist, Crookshank, said, 'If a PCR analyzer rules out bio and chemical agents, I'll perform a basic autopsy on board. It won't be thorough.' He began unpacking one of the polystyrene containers. 'But it may narrow the problem, perhaps even give us a quick answer.'

Over the following hours the doctors investigated both ships, examining the bodies, galley, food, nets—every aspect that might hint at a cause of death. Meanwhile, Pascoe led Mennenger to the wheelhouse to re-examine the computers and logbooks. 'Anything more on the bomb at Sydney airport?' Pascoe asked when they stepped inside the relative shade.

'I was too busy organising the helicopter and tug boats, and keeping Ambassador Peng at bay.' The mask muffled Mennenger's voice. 'He's screaming blue bloody murder.'

'Tough.' Pascoe sorted through the clutter on the chart table. 'We ran this one by the book.' He found the log and flicked through the grubby pages until reaching the last entries.

Mennenger readjusted his mask and wiped the sweat from his eyes with a handkerchief. 'Shit,' he muttered. His hand began to shake as he stared at the cloth. 'I've probably just infected myself.'

Pascoe knew that John Mennenger was a war veteran. He must have had seen plenty of dead men before, in far more gruesome situations. But the Fisheries Director seemed uncharacteristically distracted. Then again, bioweapons tended to have that effect.

'I doubt it, so long as you didn't use it the cloth to touch anything else, first.' Pascoe tapped the open page. 'Although my Chinese is not one hundred percent, it looks like they deployed dozens of nets last week, and hauled in a big load yesterday. They redeployed the nets yesterday afternoon, and then had themselves a little party. That doesn't make any sense to me, so maybe I'm reading it wrong. Can't be sure until we poke through all of the freezers, but you saw what was in the first one. There's some tuna, sure, but not enough to get excited about. Mostly there are sharks, rays, turtles and *Tursiops*—bottle-nosed, not spinner dolphins.'

Both men knew that in the Western Pacific, the most efficient way of catching yellow-fin tuna was to net the easily spotted spinner dolphins that swam with them. Many nations, including the US, employed so called dolphin safe release nets, but every year more than 300 000 of the small cetaceans still died. Like many environmental issues the problem had been redefined by setting 'acceptable' kill quotas based on the guesstimated surviving spinner population. As long as the tuna boats killed only what was within quota, the tuna was marketed as 'dolphin safe'. And it was no secret that Asian ships considered the

dolphins fair game. A freezer full of the larger, bottle-nosed dolphins made no sense because they did not generally swim with tuna.

Unless the nets were designed for something else.

'According to this,' Pascoe continued, 'some of the crew began acting weird yesterday, then most of them came down ill after dinner. First one died at 0100, then the log entries cease.' He tossed the book aside in disgust. 'If it was food poisoning they should have radioed for help!'

'Probably terrified of being caught inside coastal waters. You said yourself they've been one step ahead of you for weeks.'

Donald Pascoe went outside the wheelhouse and looked thoughtfully at the hoists mounted on the stern of the ship. The absence of nets was weird, but not as weird as two hundred dead seamen on two ships with the wrong kind of dolphins in their freezers. 'Peng's got some serious explaining to do,' he muttered.

## Chapter 11

'The likelihood of such a (Gulf Stream) shutdown will be highest ... at a time when the world will be bulging with people threatened by hunger and disease and struggling to maintain wildlife under escalating environmental pressures. It behoves us to take this possibility seriously.'

—**Walter Broecker, deep oceanic current researcher, Lamont-Doherty.**

John Mennenger paused outside the ship's mess, trying to regain some control over his emotions. It had been the morning from hell. First had come the wakeup call from the airline, telling him that Kristin Baker had been on board the bombed Poly-Mel plane. Before he'd had a chance to digest that news, Pascoe had radioed from the patrol boat. Then everything went nuts.

Dealing with Ambassador Peng, the Australian High Commission, a half a dozen government ministers, the health department and VMF had distracted Mennenger for a time, but then on his way outside, he'd passed Kristin's office. Ben Mills had been sitting on the floor, clutching Kristin's clay fish mobile in his hands, sobbing. Mennenger had wanted to say something, but Kristin's death kept coming over him in waves. So he'd just stood there, wondering how he was supposed to cope with everyone else's grief when he had to deal with his own.

When Ben saw him, he got up, angrily smashed the mobile onto the floor, pushed past him and stormed out of the office. Mennenger had wanted to follow him, but the helicopter was waiting to take him to the fishing trawlers.

'You ready?'

Mennenger turned around and saw Don Pascoe staring at him. He still hadn't told Don about Kristin; the words kept sticking in his throat. Yeah.' Mennenger opened the hatch and walked into the mess.

'Gentlemen!' Maddy looked up. 'Thought we'd lost you.'

Maddy Paine and Crookshank had exchanged their uncomfortable plastic suits for green scrubs, although they had retained their masks, gloves and protective eyewear.

'Okay,' Maddy continued. 'I've run samples, including yours and your crewmen, Commander, through the PCR analyzer half a dozen times. Apart from two of your men having traces of malaria and a residual dose of the 'flu, you're clean. These guys,' she nodded to the bodies on the mess tables, 'were in a lot worse shape.'

'What killed them?' asked Pascoe.

'Dunno, although I can tell you they did not die from any weaponised chemical.'

'Pathogen?'

She shook her head. 'Neither weaponised nor *au naturel*.'

'I've only done partial autopsies on two bodies,' said Crookshank. 'I'm going to stop right there because their brains, kidneys and livers display the earmarks of an unusual kind of neurotoxin. Without a gas chromatograph, we can't be absolutely certain.'

Mennenger had also stripped out of his orange suit, but instead of scrubs, he was dressed in the standard Fisheries grey shirt and shorts. 'Can't be certain, as in you don't know, or don't want to speculate?'

Crookshank exchanged looks with Maddy. She sighed and poked a surgical instrument at what looked like a human liver. Pascoe's mask of stoicism began to slip. He swallowed and looked away.

'We have our suspicions,' said Crookshank. 'But if it's what we think, well, it shouldn't have killed them, at least not overnight.'

Maddy turned to Pascoe and said, 'Don, I know your crew are probably spooked.'

He crossed his arms and turned back to her. 'Hell, *I'm* spooked!'

She smiled and dropped the instrument into a tray. It landed with a metallic clang. 'It's not contagious, or infectious. Tell them it was fish poisoning.'

'Ciguatera?'

'No. Just a *really* bad fish poisoning. Tell Ambassador Peng the same thing, at least for the moment. It's not exactly true, but it's not a lie, either. I'll get these samples on the evening flight to Brisbane. They don't have to go to MacDonnell, so we should have the results first thing in the morning.'

\* \* \* \*

Kristin had slept badly. Not because of changed time zones, and not because of nightmares—unless she included waking ones—but because of what Nicholas Page had revealed. At first she'd been angry. Then she'd realised that the Exodus Project and the Rhesus virus trivialised her concerns about the Japanese. Then, after a few brief hours of troubled sleep, came the news about the death ships in Vanuatu.

Page had immediately organized another RAAF helicopter to take them to Brisbane, where they would catch the evening Qantas flight to Vanuatu. She'd jokingly asked him why he didn't get an FSP to take them there directly.

'I need a few days to get clearance, and a spare FSP.'

It had taken her a few moments to realize he was serious.

When the Brisbane check-in attendant asked her a third time if she had any baggage, Kristin snapped, 'It's sitting under the remains of Gate 72 at Sydney Airport.'

The woman's lips rounded in surprise.

After they'd cleared customs, Kristin asked Page, 'How many did you say were on the ships?'

'Approximately two hundred.'

'I give up. How does this fit with what you've told me so far?'

'You tell me. Just last week we intercepted a communiqué from the cartel's headquarters in Hong Kong, ordering their ships to retain *all* of their 'accidental' catch of marine mammals and turtles. The other cartels have since followed suite. I understood the ships normally kept those animals, anyway.'

'It's taking longer and longer to fill their freezers because most pelagic species' populations are crashing. That's why Japan is trying to get into Vanuatu's coastal waters, and why I wasn't as surprised as I should have been, by what you told me last night. They're desperate.'

Pleased to see that the Qantas aircraft was powered by hydrogen fuel cells. Kristin handed her boarding pass to the gate attendant. 'One the perks—the *only* one—of working on those hellish ships is that the crew live off tuna and dolphin meat. As a rule, they consume small or damaged animals, saving the best

quality specimens for market.'

'They've still got to eat, right?' said Page. 'Maybe they're hauling something else up in those nets, something incredibly toxic.'

'That killed all two hundred men on both ships?'

'We'll have a better idea once we get this operational.' He lifted the sonar case he was carrying. 'In fact, it's now a priority. What we find may prevent other ships' crews from dying of the same thing.'

She shot him a cynical look. 'So now you can openly give us the sonar because you're trying to save the lives of your good and dear friends, the Asian fishermen. Their governments would cheerfully sacrifice them in order to protect their dirty little secret.'

'Yes, but you know what we Yanks are like. We have these uncontrollable urges to save the lives of the poor, downtrodden masses.'

A sly grin crossed Kristin's face. She was suddenly looking forward to seeing Ambassador Peng Lee.

\* \* \* \*

The storm that hit Washington DC and New York during the night killed one hundred and forty-eight people, many of them homeless or elderly. Emergency admissions peaked sharply, and then fell just as abruptly when vehicles could no longer navigate through city streets. But hospital waiting rooms did not empty; there was no way for people to get home.

The release of the Kamchatka Statement had done nothing to alter the cities' limited ability to deal with blizzards. This was not so much from lack of foresight by local authorities, but lack of resources, both financial and physical. Both cities had blown their annual snow budget by the end of March. And there are only so many places you can stack snow.

The picture postcard scenes around DC that morning belied the coming danger: floods. With the forecast return of 'normal' summer temperatures and up to five inches of rain over the next three days, Virginia officials ordered sand bags deployed and pumps readied to protect the historic Old Town district from the Potomac River. The Susquehanna River posed an even greater threat. Communities in the Shenandoah Valley and the mountainous regions to the north were preparing to evacuate to high ground—as soon as the roads were cleared of snowdrifts as high as two-storey houses.

With both Dulles and Reagan International closed, Dr. Roger Harrison's flight had been diverted from Atlanta to Norfolk. He messaged Andreas Clem that the Capital was snowed in and he was stuck at Norfolk International wasting valuable time.

Harrison, a thin, woebegone looking man with long brown hair and a wispy beard, had a propensity to dress in crushed velvet trousers and leather jackets. He looked more like a refugee from Woodstock than one of the world's leading virologists, making him easy to spot in a crowd. Less than an hour later a Marine sergeant tapped him on the shoulder and told him a helicopter was waiting.

It was an unnerving experience for the virologist, being flanked by Marine guards as they negotiated their way through the crowds of stranded passengers. Many people stared at him, or eyed his briefcase, worried it might contain some lethal device. None could possibly have guessed that it held the blueprints to something far deadlier than any bomb, and that most of them were already infected.

Mindful of Clem's advice, when Harrison arrived at the White House he changed into more conservative clothes—which just added to his irritability. But instead of the Oval Office, he was escorted down to the

basement. Inside a shoebox-sized office, Andreas Clem sat at a coffee table, typing on his laptop.

Clem looked up when he heard the door open. 'Roger!' he said, relieved and somewhat surprised that the Marines had delivered the virologist as promised.

Harrison's scowl deepened as he looked around Jean's office. It was windowless. A well-used bicycle clung tenaciously to one wall, while the others sprouted shelves stacked with books and file boxes.

'It's quieter down here.' Clem stood and came around from the wooden desk. 'Don't forget, during the Republican administration, the science advisor's office was a few blocks down the road and around the corner. So, what's the latest?' He gestured for Harrison to sit.

The young virologist shook his head. 'Mayumi Yoshida has come up with the same weird socio-economic demographics as our guys.'

'Go on.' Clem put his hands in his pockets and leaned back against the desk.

'The incidence amongst Japanese businessmen is significantly lower than their female counterparts—and far less than in rural areas.'

The door opened. Jean Simmons, an expensively suited White House staffer Clem recognised as Robert Dugas, and Colonel Charles Dixon from USAMRIID strode in.

Once upon a time, back in the twentieth century, USAMRIID's relationship with the CDC could best be described as a tempestuous, collaborative competition. Clem had bitterly resented the way USAMRIID had usurped the CDC's role in 2011, but was fair-minded enough to admit that if not for USAMRIID's tactics, ACR cholera might have killed millions, not thousands. But, like Roger Harrison, Clem still held Dixon personally responsible for absconding with Roger's research on Rhesus.

Meeting Harrison's venomous look Dixon said, 'I'm not here to steal your thunder, Dr. Harrison. I'm happy to see you credited with the discovery of Rhesus.'

Clem waited for the 'but'. Dixon turned to him and held out his hand. 'Andreas, good to see you again.'

Pulled his hands from his pockets Clem pointedly crossed his arms, although he kept his face neutral.

'Alright.' Dixon conceded. 'The President ordered me to kiss your butt and make up, return all of your research and accept that Roger here is running the show. But I can't promise I won't do a little backseat navigating.' He held out his hand again. This time it was a conciliatory gesture.

'Fair enough.' Clem took it. The office immediately seemed less crowded.

'I believe congratulations are in order,' Dixon said to Harrison. 'When are you leaving?'

'We haven't told him yet.'

'Told me what?' Harrison demanded, panic evident in his voice.

Clem stared at Jean. Her expression said, 'coward,' but she turned to Harrison and explained. 'Andreas recommended to the WHO that you should lead the international team to investigate Rhesus. I think Brussels was relieved. Thing is, Roger, you'll be running it from Australia.'

'What?' Harrison's stared at her in dismay.

Jean quickly briefed him on the Exodus Project, finishing with, 'Of course we'll need you to leave as soon

as possible.'

Blinking myopically, Harrison sat down on a corner of the coffee table. 'How long have you know about this ... project?' he said to Clem.

'I was only informed in Kamchatka.'

'So, now that's out of the way,' Dixon said dismissively, 'where are we at?'

Clem well knew Dixon's impatience, but Roger would need time to absorb the implications of the Exodus Project, so he replied, 'Roger was just telling me about the Japanese demographics. Mayumi Yoshida has been tracking Rhesus for—'

'Excuse me,' interrupted the advisor, Robert Dugas. 'Why are we worried about the Japanese?'

Jean put a hand on Dugas' arm. 'Has anyone briefed you on this virus yet, Rob?'

Dugas shook his head. 'That's why I'm here, I need to know how this will impact the Exodus Project.'

'We'd all like to know that,' Jean mumbled.

Clem leaned against the desk again, crossed his ankles and said, 'Okay, what you need to understand is that there's a direct correlation to the speed a disease spreads and how closely people live together. In a typical developing country a child living in an urban slum is forty times more likely to die from an infectious disease than his or her rural counterpart. Infectious diseases spread because of sociological factors. And whether it's a city office, the subway, a restaurant or gay bathhouse, infectious diseases are like fires. A lone house in the middle of a prairie, a fire burns itself out. But set an inner city wooden tenement ablaze and you get a repeat of the ACR cholera outbreak. However, Rhesus is endogenous, so we're looking for an unidentified trigger that may not be spreading like a normal infectious pathogen. And that's outside the rules of everyday epidemiology. So in terms of resettling large numbers of people—'

'Put it this way,' Dixon said to Dugas. 'No one knows what's triggering Rhesus, but it's a better than even bet that you're infected. The Japanese have been tracking this thing for years. What we learn from them, or any one of a hundred countries, just might help solve this thing.'

Dixon was right, but in ways none of them could possibly have imagined.

## Chapter 12

Between 1940 and 1982 ... billions of pounds of synthetic materials poured into the environment, exposing humans, wildlife and the planetary system to countless compounds never before encountered. Consider a few figures that sketch the magnitude of this global experiment. U.S. production of carbon-based synthetic chemicals ... topped 435 billion pounds in 1992, or 1,600 pounds per person. Global production is estimated to be roughly four times greater, but actual figures are impossible to come by. Around the world, one hundred thousand synthetic chemicals are now on the market. Every year, one thousand new substances are introduced, (the vast majority) without adequate testing and review.

### —Colburn, Dumanoski and Myers: Our Stolen Future

'Interesting place you have here,' Page said, looking around Kristin's office.

'Most of this stuff belongs in a museum, including the couches,' she replied. 'But I seem to find a use for it all.' On the shelves, between journals, files and books were engine parts, diving equipment, tools and old marine band radios. There was a gearbox under one table and pistons clustered around the leg of another.

Page tested one of the large couches with his hand and then laid down on it. 'Hey, this is not bad!'

After propping the door open with a chipped, bronze propeller, Kristin took off the horrible pink pullover and tossed it on her desk. She'd give it to Marie in the morning. The she looked around. 'Something's missing,' she muttered.

'How can you tell? Page swung his long legs down when she came to sit beside him.'

Her laughter faded when she met his extraordinary green eyes. Swallowing, she looked away. Okay, so she was attracted to him, but under the circumstances it was inappropriate. Then she noticed the remnants of clay scattered on the floor. Someone had shattered the whacky fish mobile that had hung over her desk. Disappointment and anger surged through her. Only one person with access to her office was that spiteful. Time to change the locks.

Page covered her hand with his. 'Do you want me to come with you?'

His gesture surprised her but when she looked into his eyes she saw nothing fanciful in them. Who was he, really? He had not passed through the security gates at Sydney airport, something she had not thought about until after the explosion. When he'd all but carried her from the terminal, she'd felt the hard shape under his uniform coat. It was only as they'd sat in the relative safety of the car that it had registered. Then he'd used a different security gate at Brisbane airport, and again when arriving in Vila. And lastly, his behaviour towards her was ... something to which she was unaccustomed. Ben would never have offered her support in anything. He was too busy demanding it from her.

There were too many secrets here, and she was such an easy pawn. Did her file include a psychological profile? Dr. Baker, caught in a relationship with an emotionally stunted partner, will respond well to a kind word and gentle hand? Take her for a ride in an FSP and she'll probably drop her panties for you? God, this was worse than dealing with the Japanese. At least their bribes were less ... personal.

Or were they? What about Ben?

The events of the past days, the situation with Ben, her lack of sleep and attraction to Page, and his propensity to stand way inside her personal space suddenly combined to annoy the hell out of her. She



pulled her hand away, stood and walked to her desk. 'It's hot in here. Why are you still wearing a coat?'

'Because it conceals my weapon.'

Disarmed by his unexpected honesty, Kristin turned to face him. 'Why are you carrying one?'

'It's standard operating procedures while escorting equipment and personnel—'

'Bullshit.'

When he didn't respond she added, 'You can cut the charm routine. I'm politically savvy enough to know when yesterday's backstabbing has become today's support mechanism. How do you want your pawn to play it?'

A shadow of regret crossed his eyes. 'You're not a pawn, Kristin.'

'Dr. Baker to you. And if the cap fits.' She turned to leave but in one swift move he was standing before her, firmly holding her arms.

'Informing you why we gave you the sonar is the White House's way of creating a deliberate leak outside its *public* foreign policy. The Rhesus virus is still being factored into the equation, but nobody doubts the shifting sands of diplomacy have just turned into quicksand.'

Releasing her, Page unbuttoned his uniform coat and took it off, then lifted off his shoulder holster and weapon, and rummaged through his bag. 'In 2001, nobody in the West wanted a war against Islam. They just wanted to stop barbaric regimes that spoon fed terrorism. And most Moslems arguably suffered more from the hands of these same barbaric regimes and the terrorism they fostered than any Western nation. He stripped his uniform shirt and undershirt. 'But that didn't stop them calling a Jihad. And it didn't stop their perception of the West as the Great Satan.'

'Each side,' he said, putting on a fresh undershirt, 'believed the other was evil. And each side said if you're not with us, you're against us. So, whom did they choose?' He replaced the holster and pulled a casual button down shirt on. 'A morally bankrupt society that taught women it was all right to bed any men she chose without the sanctity of marriage, to forgo religion in favour of Hollywood and the Superbowl? Or the more fanatical aspects of their own culture, one that directed their discontent with their own meagre lives into a rage against those who flaunted materialistic wealth?'

He turned to meet her gaze. 'No sane person wanted a war, but when the lines were drawn and people were told they had to stand on one side or the other, the world was obliged to make choices.'

'No matter how the diplomats dance around this new issue, unless somebody dreams up the cure to Rhesus real fast, there's going to be a new war. This time it won't be about territory, ideals, religion, oil or even water, but something even more ridiculous than the colour of your skin. This one will be about an invisible protein on the coating of red blood cells.' He snorted. 'There's not even a question of degree, no moral greys. You're either born with it or without it. Hell, most families are mixed blood groups. But if history is anything to go by, soon there'll be new lines drawn. Those with a genetic investment in the future of the planet will align themselves against those who would take what they can now, because if the Rhesus is as bad as what they're saying, there will be no future generation for most people.'

He held up his hand to forestall her anticipated objection. 'I'm not saying that's the way we want it to play out. But you think you got problems with illegal fishing boats now, once Asian nations learn the demographics of Rhesus, Western governments will be forced to protect their economic interests. And people with your skills, not mine, will be our first line of defence.'

Kristin was leaning back against her desk, unconsciously admiring his body while he changed. Her frown deepened when she caught a momentary glimpse of recently healed wounds, but it was his words that impacted on her the most.

Page walked up and placed his hands either side of her on the desk. He leaned close to her, too close, and added softly, 'No one knew about Rhesus or your blood type when we gave you the sonar. But it doesn't take rocket science to reach those conclusions. You play this any way you want. It's a rare moment in history when a government bureaucrat is so tied up with larger concerns that she says, and I quote, 'Dr. Baker's a proven entity, under the circumstances let her run with it.' My suggestion Doctor, is don't look a gift horse in the mouth. When you're finished I'll help you install the sonar and you can start using it in the morning.'

Despite his intimidating proximity she refused to break eye contact with him. He turned and went back to his bag, unzipping his uniform trousers as he went. She opened her mouth to speak but realized he'd said all he intended to say on the matter. Just because he was right made him no less infuriating. She turned and left.

During the drive from the airport, Kristin had known the New Chinese ships were docked at the Fisheries wharf long before they'd seen them. Seeing Page's expression, she'd explained the unique bouquet that such ships always carried. But there 'd been something more, something she couldn't quite discern. Then Page had told her; it was smell of death. And the stench of terror.

Although it was almost 7pm, well past office hours, most of the Fisheries staff were on the wharf, scattered amongst the uniformed VMF—Vanuatu Mobile Force—officers, politicians and bureaucrats. Floodlights illuminated the dock, the New Chinese ships, and the arriving VMF troop trucks.

Dressed in a cheap black shirt and pants, the President of the Republic of Vanuatu, Wilson Taangiroya, was talking to the Chinese ambassador, Peng Lee. The contrast between them was almost comical. While Taangiroya was tall and dark and sported a magnificent Afro haircut, Peng was short and bald and wore a tailored white tropical business suit.

The harsh shadows cast by the lights made it difficult for Kristin to see who was with them, although she noticed the distinctively tall shape of Maddy Paine. The flash of white uniform undoubtedly belonged to Donald Pascoe.

Shocked faces turned her way and animated conversations ground to a halt. Then Wilson Taangiroya flashed a set of remarkably white teeth. He opened his arms wide in greeting and, taking a few steps towards her, cried, 'Dr. Baker! We thought you had been killed in Sydney!'

Kristin's stride faltered. Some idiot bureaucrat had made a monumental blunder. 'I'm sorry to have to tell you, Wilson, but Amos Lingano is probably the one who's dead. He bumped me from the plane at the last minute. I caught this afternoon's Qantas flight from Brisbane.'

'Why didn't you call?' Mennenger exclaimed, relief flooding his voice.

'I had no idea you were worried. There was so much confusion, my new comunit was busted, then I needed to clean up and get to Brisbane...' She trailed off, conscious of Ben's narrow-faced look and unkempt appearance. His shirt looked like it had been slept in and his cut-off jeans were none too clean.

'Didn't feel like sticking around to help this time?' Ben said sarcastically.

'It was a different situation,' she replied.

Taangirola hugged her and planted a bristly kiss on both cheeks. She almost chuckled at the President's expression. Despite the shocking events of the last twenty-four hours, he couldn't help looking pleased that one of his key adversaries was dead.

'I'm very glad you are here, Kristin,' the President said when he released her. 'You heard of this?' He pointed to the ships with chubby, ring-covered fingers.

'Wilson, I ... yes. Look, I learned a few things today. Are they all dead?'

'Every last one of them.' Maddy Paine pushed her dark curly hair off her face with her sunglasses then took her sweater from around her shoulders and pulled it on. It was chilly now that the sun had set.

Suddenly, Ambassador Peng began waving his arms. 'No!' he yelled at the stretcher-bearing VMF soldiers emerging from the trucks. 'You not to touch. You not to go on board. No right!'

Commander Pascoe quickly moved to block Peng. 'Ambassador, these vessels have been legally impounded. They were caught fishing inside—'

'No!' Peng shook his round head vehemently. 'Drifting, not fishing. Dead men do not fish!'

Pascoe's expression hardened. 'Ambassador, those ships were smack bang over Kuwai when we spotted them on radar. There is no way they *drifted* there; the crew hadn't been dead that long.'

Before Peng could interrupt, a white haired, elderly man that Kristin didn't recognise, said, 'You can't leave hundreds of cadavers on those ships! Now, Ambassador, we've already discussed this.'

While the men argued, Mennenger took Kristin aside and explained, 'That's Robert Crookshank, a pathologist. He's helped to set up Korman Stadium as a temporary morgue. Peng wants the dead men repatriated, but it's impossible, there are only a handful of lead-lined, hermetically sealed coffins in the country—and Peng's refused to have any more flown in.'

He didn't have to explain further. With no crematorium and no adequate storage facilities for cadavers, burials would have to begin the following day.

Peng turned to a copper-skinned, overweight ni-Vanuatu dressed in rubber thongs, grubby red T-shirt and dark glasses. Despite appearances, Samuel Kati was the Minister for Primary Resources.

The New Chinese government poured aid money into Vanuatu, most of which remained in the personal bank accounts of politicians like Kati. Those same politicians were accustomed to doing what they were told. 'Your government is puppet of Australians, again!' Peng snapped at Kati.

Kristin regarded Peng with narrowed eyes, then she turned to Maddy, and said loudly, 'What about storing the bodies in the ships' freezers?'

'C'mon, Kristin, you know what happens!' Mennenger replied, exasperated.

Kristin knew. The boats were floating death traps not worth the fines levied for illegal fishing. Typically, the owners abandoned impounded vessels and their crews. After protracted negotiations the crews were repatriated and the boats, scuttled. But not before the diesel to run the generators, which in turn operated the freezers, ran out and tons of decaying fish sent an appalling stench across the docks—although not as rancid as the one that now filled the air. Storing the crews' bodies in the freezers only delayed the inevitable. Looking back at Peng, she said, 'I'm sure the Ambassador will guarantee the fines will be paid in record time.'

Despite the cool of the evening, Peng's face was beaded with sweat and wet patches darkened the underarms of his suit.

Crookshank shook his snowy head. 'We're still not sure what killed them. Even frozen, I won't—'

'It's obvious what killed them,' Kristin interrupted. She'd figured it out during the flight from Brisbane. 'And I know why you don't want us rummaging around your ships, Ambassador.' Meeting Peng's glare, she added, 'It's got nothing to do with respect for the dead seaman; you don't give a damn about them. You don't want us looking closer at the contents of the freezers, or noticing the hoists are designed for a different style of net!'

'Kristin!' snarled Ben. But no one heard him as demands for explanations filled the air.

Even with the open doors and windows, the training room inside the Fisheries building was uncomfortably warm. A half-dozen overhead fans kept the ever-present mosquitoes at bay while a few moths battered themselves to death on the exposed fluorescent lights. The walls were pinned with Admiralty charts and diagrams; the room was normally used to teach maritime courses. Kristin had suggested they adjourn there because it was less public. Everyone now clustered around her with folded arms and expectant looks.

'C'mon, Kristin,' said Mennenger. 'How could you possibly know what killed them, or what's on those ships?'

Samuel Kati pulled his mirror sunglasses off and demanded, 'Yes, how is it that you think you know this?'

Ben shot her the same ugly look but she ignored him and met Kati's bloodshot eyes. The minister had obviously been pulled away from a kava bar. 'Same way as I know what you did on that fishing boat last year.'

Kati's eyes bulged; the unspoken question clear on his face: how did she know?

'Same way as I know about *everything* you do,' Kristin added, playing the familiar game. But Kati was still useful, so she ignored the temptation to go further. For now, a touch of terror was sufficient.

When Kati stepped forward menacingly, Mennenger held a conciliatory hand between them. 'Kristin, you've been through a lot recently—'

'And I've learned a lot, too. Been keeping an eye on the Asian fishing markets, have you, John? In the last few weeks, with a predicted crash in the amount of whale and dolphin meat currently available, accompanied by a dramatic increase in demand because poultry and livestock diseases in Asia have seen millions of animals slaughtered, the value of marine mammals has increased a hundredfold. The cartels ordered the crews on their vessels not to consume anything even remotely valuable. Don't you find it a little odd that hours after hauling in their nets, every crewman aboard both vessels, dies?' She pointed through the window to the odorous ships. A VMF truck trundled past. The smell didn't seem to be as bad now that the wind had changed direction.

Turning to President Taangiroa, she added, 'I'm not going to make formal accusations against the New Chinese government or the cartels until I produce hard evidence. But if I'm not mistaken, they're setting illegal nets designed to trap a lot more than fish—and it's killing them. Until we can recover the nets and stop their crews from deploying more, I suspect those won't be the last death ships that Commander Pascoe encounters.'

'We'll need a few hours to install the new sonar's circuit board and software, then anyone who wants can join us on a nice little boat trip to Kuwai to see exactly what a pair of *drifting* fishing boats have left behind.'

Peng's eyes widened. *So much for the inscrutable oriental.* 'Now, if you would all excuse me, we need to get *Marmet* ready.' She moved to leave.

John Mennenger stopped her. 'Kristin, you can't just drop bombshell like that and then walk away! If you know what's killing them—'

Kristin did not wish to appear argumentative, just inarguably correct. The best way to do that was ... She glanced at Ben. His face was frozen in comprehension. 'Ask Ben about his graduate research on the endocrinology of Polar bears.'

Demanding expressions shifted to Mills, who replied almost automatically, 'It was on the cumulative build-up of what's known as persistent artificial compounds—PACs—include things like DDT, dioxins, mercury and PCBs. They amplify through the food chain, accumulate in the liver and body fat, then pass to the next generation via the placenta and breast milk. We chose Polar bears because as the largest land predator, they're at the top of the food chain. What happens to them could arguably predict the global food chain in years to come.'

'The Polar bear population isn't just declining,' he added. 'It's crashing. We found concentrations of PCBs as high as three hundred parts per million. We already know from myriad wildlife studies that forty parts per million causes serious problems: physical abnormalities in reproductive organs, abnormal sexual behaviour and aberrant nurturing patterns leading to rapid population decline.'

'PCBs were banned in the US forty years ago,' Crookshank countered. His frown deepened when a large cockroach flew in and scuttled across the wall. More would follow during the night, attracted by the floodlights and smell.

'Only some, certainly not all.' Ben shook his head. 'And that didn't make them vanish—except from public awareness. There's still *two billion kilos* of the stuff circulating the biosphere. Then there's mercury ... Hell, we found alarmingly high levels of a score of toxic compounds.' He paused and stared at Kristin thoughtfully. 'Toothed whales and humans are also at the top of the food chain.'

'You said it to me a dozen times, Ben. We know humans are also affected because in the last sixty years we've started to display identical symptoms. Reduced learning capacity, rapidly declining sperm count, burgeoning respiratory and allergy problems, attention deficit disorders, autism, reproductive health problems and, dare I say it, abnormal sexual and aberrant nurturing behaviour.'

'But the skyrocketing human population—' Pascoe began.

'Is peaking out,' Ben said. 'PCBs are nothing compared to say, oestrogen-mimicking compounds. These same compounds, used in things like pesticides to kill disease-carrying insects, have unquestionably saved tens of thousands of lives over the past fifty years. But the long term ecological cost is staggering, and arguably, unacceptable. Even from a purely human perspective, as well as doing novel things to our endocrine systems, it's created ecological niches that new, deadlier bugs are now filling.'

In a few hours, days at the most, the world would know about Rhesus. Unless stopped, the virus would likely prove deadlier to mankind than any disease that had gone before. Kristin shuddered.

'What's any of that got to do with what killed them?' Pascoe jerked his thumb at the ships.

'Maddy knows,' Mennenger said. 'How 'bout it, Maddy? Care to share?'

Everyone turned to the epidemiologist. Maddy Paine chewed her lip and exchanged looks with Crookshank. His expression said it was her decision. 'Our preliminary tests indicate Minamata disease,' she said, folding her arms. 'We need the test results to be absolutely certain.'

'What?' Pascoe stared at her in dismay.

'That's an awfully big stretch, Maddy,' said Mennenger. 'They would have to be consuming huge quantities—'

Kristin shook her head. 'Not if they were eating dolphin livers and keeping the flesh for sale. Remember, dolphins are warm blooded. The crew have to bleed and gut them before freezing them.'

'Oh ... *oh!*' Mennenger's look of disbelief was tempered by uncertainty. He rubbed a hand across his beard and stared thoughtfully out at the ships. 'God, you might be right.'

'What,' demanded Pascoe in frustration, 'is Minamata disease?'

'Methyl mercury poisoning,' replied Maddy. It's named after Minamata City in Hiigata, Japan. In 1956 a chemical factory discharged tons of organic mercury into the harbour. Tens of thousands of people fell ill, many died, and children were born with shocking deformities. Their mothers had eaten fish saturated with mercury while they were pregnant.'

'I read about it,' Pascoe said, nodding. 'How come these guys have it?'

'Just like PCBs,' Ben replied, 'over 100 000 kilograms of organic mercury is poured into the atmosphere *every year* by chemical factories worldwide. And like PCBs, what goes up, comes down—straight into the food chain. Large, long-lived marine predators; mammals, sharks, tuna, swordfish, you name it; they're *all* saturated with dangerously high levels of mercury.'

'The WHO recommends consumption of no more than 0.4 micrograms of mercury per gram,' said Kristin, meeting Pascoe's eyes. 'Adult dolphin livers, especially the bigger species like *Tursiops*, commonly have more than 4 000 micrograms per gram. One meal of dolphin liver is enough to kill *anyone* from methyl mercury poisoning. A big meal of mature *Tursiops*' liver, and you'd be dead within hours.'

Pascoe groaned in understanding. 'The logbook entry! They'd just hauled in a big catch of *Tursiops* then had themselves a party. They couldn't eat the meat, so they gorged themselves on liver!'

\* \* \* \*

Simon Woodstein walked into the locker room. 'A two day suspension give you enough time to finish your assignment, Mr. Camicci?'

Greg pulled a bound document from his bag. 'Are we doing this stuff again next semester?'

Looking at him over his bifocals, Woodstein said, 'I understand this fixation on the weather and the social consequences of Industrial Winter is a little tiring. but it's necessary—'

'That we understand what's happening in the world.' Greg handed him the assignment. 'Seems to me that the world is holding its collective breath, wondering what's gonna happen next.'

It was the sort of insight Woodstein had come to expect from young Camicci. Before he could reply, a spectacled, overweight boy came rushing into the locker room.

'Hey, Greg!' Jason Laminsky called. 'Sorry, Mr. Woodstein,' he added, all but colliding with the teacher.

'Slow down, Mr. Laminsky!' Woodstein said. Being hit by two hundred and forty pounds of enthusiasm and momentum would not end well.

'Yes, sir, but d'ja hear about Brian Kandilas?' Laminsky's words gushed out and he leaned over to get his breath.

'Make my day and tell me he dropped dead,' Greg said.

'He dropped dead!' Laminsky wheezed, looking up. The expression on his face was a strange mixture of gratitude and fear.

Woodstein knew the grossly overweight boy was a regular recipient of Kandilas' bullying, but he said disapprovingly, 'Mr Laminsky!'

'No joke, sir. My Mom just called. She's down in Portland now.' Laminsky wheezed again. 'With Mrs. Kandilas. They won't even let his mom see his body!'

The school principal, Tumot, walked into the locker room. Woodstein recognised the look on Tumot's face, he'd seen it during the ACR cholera epidemic. An icy claw of fear clutched his genitals.

'I'm sorry, Greg,' Tumot said. 'You'll have to come with me.'

'What's wrong? I didn't do anything!'

'No, you didn't.' Tumot met Woodstein's look. 'A quarantine team is on its way.'

\* \* \* \*

Joe Camicci's fingers shook as he left the real estate office.

'Here, let me drive,' said Sylvie when he fumbled the car keys.

'No, it's okay.' But Joe let his wife take the keys. When Crystal had taken ill and the army had quarantined them all, Sylvie had got everyone organized. She was only a nurses' aide but she'd understood more than most what had been going on. And that had helped focus everyone, especially when people started losing family. 'We're all family, now,' she used to say, and she'd given comfort where she could. Joe thought that Sylvie had been able to accept Crystal's death more because so many other children, all part of 'their family', had already died.

'Greg's not sick,' Sylvie said firmly. She started the engine. 'If he was, we'd have known.'

Joe looked out the window, refusing to entertain the idea that his son might be a carrier. It was a fine day again. The sky was summer blue; it even *smelled* warm.

He glanced at his wife. Last night, after the funeral, he'd told her what Macmillan had said about the building business in Maine going to hell, but that there were opportunities in North Carolina. And since most of their savings were tied up with American Insurance, they probably couldn't afford to stay on with the IVF program. Besides, with the clinic closing along with the hospital and well, maybe c

Sylvie had already been ahead of him. With Alexis gone and Greg knowing about Crystal's grave, she'd said that it was time they moved on with their lives. Then he'd seen her hand snake across her belly. Her period was late. She wanted a new beginning, for all of them, and suggested they go down to the real

estate agent and look around their database for inexpensive rural houses in North Carolina. They could sell this house, pay off their mortgage and start again.

Joe's mouth had gone dry when they'd seen how many houses in Newton were up for sale—and how expensive houses had suddenly become in areas immediately outside what the agent called 'the Industrial Winter Zone'.

It was crazy! The Kamchatka Statement was just a plan; something the government talked about and maybe, a few years from now, they'd do something. But not today. Today was a normal summer's day. Maybe a little cooler than you'd expect, and maybe the mountains had too much snow on them, but there were no glaciers climbing though his back fence today, just that damned raccoon.

No, today he had different problems. Today, Macmillan had called and told him he had to make a decision by Friday.

Today a boy named Brian Kandilas had died.

Today his son, his only child, might have to go into isolation because of the thing that had killed Kandilas.

Today, he had no medical insurance, his wife might be pregnant, most of their savings were gone, and the house was worth less than a quarter what it cost.

And tomorrow, it would be worth even less.

'Now the hospital's closed,' he said, 'we'll have to take Greg down to Portland.'

Sylvie watched the traffic lights. 'They'll do a blood workup first but if something is wrong, maybe it's better if I take him to Rebecca's.' Rebecca was her cousin in Richmond, Virginia. 'It might cost a bit but it'll be cheaper than staying in a Portland hotel.' The light turned green.

Joe ran his hand across his face. But for how long and how are we gonna pay for it? Too many words, too many fears stopped him from speaking.



## Chapter 13

**For every action, there is an equal but opposite reaction.**

—Sir Isaac Newton

Ben Mills felt like he'd been wrung out and hung up to dry. Everything, every goddamned thing was coming unstuck. He knew better than most that planetary systems had started to buckle. Those who saw the events outlined in the Kamchatka Statement as the Northern Hemisphere's problem were either arrogant or blind to the economic and social consequences worldwide. But in Ben's mind, climate change paled to more insidious, less visible environmental problems. Like PCBs. And organic mercury.

He tossed the empty beer can towards the rubbish bin. It missed. Lifting his bare feet off his office desk, he leaned forward and stood, staggering a little. He grasped the edge of the desk and glared at the bin. It was full of beer cans. Bloody cleaner hadn't emptied it from last night. As for Kristin, if that bitch was angling for a fight, she was going to get one.

Leaving his office in the Fisheries building, he ignored Mennenger's call for him to wait up, and dodged a departing VMF truck. Fuck, it smelled bad.

Aboard *Marmet*, Kristin was soldering wires together when she heard Page's stifled yawn from the access hatch. 'To make up for my earlier rudeness,' she called, 'you can sleep on the green couch. It's longer. I'll take my purgatory on the blue one.'

He chuckled. 'I don't mind sharing.'

Kristin was about to reply when she heard someone jump onto the deck. Footsteps followed, then the door to the wheelhouse opened. She dropped the soldering kit in the toolbox and, without turning, said, 'Ben.'

'Enjoy your little ego trip?' he said savagely. 'Or was the ride in an FSP with our new best friend more to your liking?'

'Exactly how did you come by that information?' Kristin picked up the toolbox and turned around. Ben was still wearing the same grubby clothes he'd had on earlier in the evening.

'I have my sources.'

'So it would seem. I'll move my stuff out of the house as soon as I can.'

It took him a few moments to find his voice, then he waved his hand dismissively and snapped, 'Don't be so bloody childish!'

'Welcome home, dearest,' Kristin mumbled, stowing the box in a locker. 'Can we talk about this later, in private?' She had no desire for Page to overhear what was bound to be an ugly domestic squabble.

'I don't give a fuck what the crew hears!'

Kristin compressed her lips. So be it. 'Your marriage proposal,' she said, meeting his eyes for the first time, 'was conditional on me giving up this sonar project, which amounts to giving up my work, my life. In Fiji, it became painfully clear to me that you have no time for anything or anyone but yourself.' She pushed past him and went back to the computer. Alcohol and petulance had turned his boyish good looks ugly. He also needed a shower.

'I was upset, and I had every right to be!' he snarled. 'I told you not to go, and look what happened! You can't tell me it was a coincidence that you were nearly killed in Fiji, then you and that bloody sonar got a ride in a highly classified aircraft ... space plane, whatever in hell you call it. Then the Poly-Mel plane you're supposed to be on blows up. And exactly how did you manage to survive that?'

She turned around. 'I told you; Lingano bumped me from the flight. You know he's notorious for doing that. Sorry for upsetting your plans to be the grief-stricken lover. And what coincidences? You didn't want me going because the chances of being killed are pretty bloody good almost anywhere in the world these days. Fires, floods, cyclones, mudslides, blizzards, infectious diseases and terrorists thrown in for good measure. Don't fly, don't drink the water, don't breathe the goddamned air! The world is a dangerous place, Ben, so what else is new?'

'My work is my life and that conflicts with our relationship. I wish I had more time to make this easier but,' she motioned outside to the impounded ships, 'things are moving too fast for that. I'm sorry Ben; it's my problem, not yours. Go find yourself a woman who'll stay with you in your nice little paradise and forget the rest of the world as it falls apart around you.' She turned back to the computer; the argument was a pointless, gnawing circle, as always.

'You sanctimonious bitch. I offered to *marry* you!'

'And why was that? Because you couldn't get funding for your projects without me as part of the package? How much did the Japanese pay you to keep them informed about this sonar? Or is it a two way street? They spy on me—'

Incensed, he grabbed her by the shoulder and swung her around to face him. She recoiled at the sour smell of stale alcohol on his breath. Somehow, it was more repulsive than the vile smell from the ships.

'They offered help and you spat in their faces!' he snarled.

'How did you find out about the FSP?' she demanded.

'You'd throw away millions in aid from Japan just to stand on that righteous bloody indignation of yours. You don't give a fuck about this country. You're just a bloody *consultant*.' His grip on her shoulder tightened and he brought his face closer to hers. 'You used me and this country as a stepping stone for your ambitions. You trampled all over us and now you're gonna leave us to deal with the political fallout.'

She was right. He wasn't malicious, just stupid. And if the Commander was right about the nets, she'd been almost as stupid. 'Let go of me.' Her voice was low and threatening. He'd never manhandled her before and she wasn't about to put up with it now. 'And answer my question.'

Ben released her just as someone appeared from the below-deck's companionway.

'Problem?' Page entered the wheelhouse, wiping his hands on a rag.

Kristin snorted. Was that the Commander's only pick-up line? 'No, he's just drunk.' She was conscious of further footsteps on the deck. Ben might not care if the crew heard, but he didn't have to work with them. 'He wouldn't dare touch me because he knows I'd break his neck.'

'What's going on?' John Mennenger demanded, stepping into the wheelhouse. 'Who are you?' he added when he saw Page.

'Commander Nicholas Page, United States Navy, designed the sonar's software,' said Kristin. 'Given the current situation, he's here to help install and calibrate it. Commander, this is Director of Fisheries, John Mennenger and the chief biologist, Benjamin Milczewski or Ben Mills to his friends—of which I am no

longer one.'

That blindsided them. Ben's jaw slackened and Mennenger's eyes widened in surprise. Kristin added, 'Ben, go sober up or you'll be seasick tomorrow.' She glanced at the wheelhouse chronometer and corrected herself. 'Today.'

'So you're the one responsible for this,' Ben growled, taking a step towards Page.

'C'mon, Ben,' Mennenger gripped his shoulder. 'I'll take you to my place. It's been a long day.' He sounded as emotionally wrung out as Ben.

Ben's anger suddenly deflated. 'A bloody long day.' He shot Kristin a pleading look.

Relenting a little, she said, 'Get some sleep, we leave at 0500 hours.'

When they had gone, Kristin turned to see Page frowning at the computer. 'Oh, bugger,' she swore under her breath. She hadn't finished soldering the connections.

'It's going to take me half an hour to program it. Where do you want it to go?' he asked.

Grateful that he'd said nothing about the argument, Kristin pulled out the tool kit again, and said, 'There's a couple of shipwrecks and an old Qantas flying boat sunk in the harbour.' She pointed to the on-screen map. 'The co-ordinates and depths are already in the system. Let's see what your toy sees.'

While Kristin finished soldering, Page entered the program then walked outside and nonchalantly tossed the torpedo-like sensor over the side of *Marmet*. Back inside, they watched the sensor zoom past the Qantas aircraft, sending a picture of near perfect clarity to the computer screen. Then it continued its circuit around the islands, showing underwater detritus, reefs and large schools of fish in extraordinary detail. Finally, it returned and swam into the sling Page had hung over the stern. Kristin laughed in delight. It would have taken her weeks to obtain that degree of control. Pity they now had to use it for an entirely different purpose.

'I'll import all of your navigation charts into the program,' said Page as he sat in front of the computer terminal.

Kristin went outside, lifted the sling and pulled out the sensor. She rinsed it in freshwater then sat on *Marmet's* aft hatch waiting for it to dry. VMF soldiers were still moving about, recovering bodies from the nearby ships. A mild, south-easterly breeze now carried the worst of the smell away.

'Penny?' Page said when he joined her a few minutes later.

She smiled and moved a little so he could sit beside her. 'I saw you standing at the back of the training room tonight.'

'And?' He sat close so that their arms brushed.

'I was thinking about Industrial Winter, mercury and the Rhesus virus, and Lovelock and Margulis hypothesis.' Seeing his bemused expression, she added, 'Reductionism is, at best, stiff-necked science. For the last fifteen years mainstream scientists have come to view the Gaia hypothesis as both good science and a good metaphor. Earth—the biosphere and the physical planet—acts *like* a living organism. It's simple cause and effect, really. We push the environment and it pushes back. But slowly, subtly, often unpredictably.'

He snorted softly. 'I wouldn't call Industrial Winter *subtle*.'

'Half your congressmen insist that because climate change has happened before, it 'proves' the problem isn't manmade. And you said the Exodus Project includes genetically modifying crops to survive Australia's saline soils. We can't help ourselves! Even when faced with a self-inflicted catastrophe, first we deny responsibility, and then we start another game of ecological Russian roulette! Maybe Earth's finally tossed its hands up—metaphorically speaking—and Rhesus is a whack over the head with a four by two.'

'Equal but opposite reaction,' he said, contemplating the Chinese ships.

She saw the direction of his gaze. 'I'm not saying those poor buggers deserved to die, but they've been stripping the ocean for years and now it's turned around and bitten them on their collective arses.'

He shot her a quizzical look. She stood, picked up the sensor and locked it in away. 'Okay, it's not their fault that dolphin livers are toxic. And I wouldn't wax so metaphorical if I wasn't tired. But let's face it, we're reaping what the last hundred years of technology has sown.' Failed to suppress a yawn, she closed the wheelhouse door and stepped onto the wharf.

'Green couch, huh?' said Page when he joined her.

'You better not snore.'

\* \* \* \*

With files tucked under one arm, a bag of Thai take-out under the other, and cups of coffee in both hands, Jean used her hip to push open her office door.

'What is it?' Clem snapped,

Jean smirked and walked in. 'I see you've settled in nicely, complete with attitude.'

He looked up from her desk, then stood. 'I'm sorry, Jean, I forgot where I was for a moment...' His voice trailed off when he saw the food. 'Y'know, I'm not sure when I last ate?'

'I figured.' She handed him the coffees then carefully placed the files on a stack of archive boxes. Dropping the take-out on her coffee table, she opened the first file. 'You hear about that mass mercury poisoning in Vanuatu?'

'Yeah. Those damned trawlers! The owners should be charged with murder. The WHO have been telling them for years that the big pelagics aren't fit for human—in fact *any* consumption!' He shot her a calculating look. 'How come you're so well informed?'

Jean shrugged. Nick had told her of Dr. Baker's theory, which had been vindicated two hours after the plane carrying the pathology samples landed in Brisbane. While she was genuinely appalled by the deaths, the existence of the illegal nets would serve as a diplomatic playing card in the days ahead. 'Whenever there's a war,' she said thoughtfully, 'the first thing that's sacrificed is the environment. Agent Orange in Vietnam, oil spillages in Kuwait and Iran, depleted uranium in Iraq and a nuke in Kashmir. You can bet your next pay cheque that we'll find more toxic stuff floating around when this latest Middle Eastern mess is over.'

Clem glanced at the back of take-out and said, 'I'll go wash up.' He opened the office door—to see the impeccably groomed Secretary Winthrop standing there with his hand poised to knock.

'Good, I'm glad you're here.' Winthrop walked past him, Jack Obermann waddling behind.

Staring at Clem, Obermann demanded, 'When are you going to prepare the official statement about

Rhesus?'

Jean suddenly felt claustrophobic. What with the four of them and Obermann's belly, space in her office was at a premium. Then a junior White House aide poked her head in the door and announced, 'Information about a killer blood virus is being circulated on the Internet!'

Winthrop and Clem simultaneously barked, 'What!'

Seeing the panicked expression on Obermann's face, Jean asked him, 'Did you know about this?'

Obermann's eyes slide to the next person down the pecking order, Clem.

Winthrop must have noticed, too, because he snapped, 'Dammit, Jack, we don't have time to play pass the buck! Once this hits it will take on a life of its own. We have to get there first with the facts, not some hyped up speculative Internet crap!'

Jean leaned across her desk, clicked on a news channel then swivelled the screen around so they could all see.

An anchorwoman held a slim, manicured finger to her ear. 'It's being confirmed now,' she declared. 'The WHO has just issued an advisory about a highly virulent blood virus called Rhesus.'

'Idiots!' Clem slammed his fist on the desk in an uncharacteristic display of frustration and anger. The coffee cups jiggled dangerously.

'This substantiates, at least in part, the reports from an assistant to an epidemiologist here in Atlanta,' continued the anchor, 'that a plague blood virus has already infected much of the population of Washington, DC. The interesting twist here,' she flashed an indulgent smile, 'is that the assistant says, get this, that aliens released the virus, called Rhesus, as a precursor to planetary invasion, and that the CDC and the White House have known about the virus for months but have kept it secret for fear of causing panic.'

Jean heard a stifled groan from Obermann. The man's cheeks were bright crimson and he was shaking his head in denial. She recalled his Hoyle-Wickramasinghe hypothesis; he wouldn't have. Then again ... 'Okay, Andreas,' she said, turning to Clem, 'you have five minutes to prepare for a press conference, because you are now in the hottest seat on the planet.'

## Chapter 14

**Modern civilizations grew from city-states, not nomadic tribesmen. But nomads have the flexibility of moving when climate changes, city-states do not, unless they wage war on other city-states and displace them.**

Aboard *Marmet*, Kristin handed John Mennenger a mug of tea from a pot on the small galley stove. John clasped it firmly, trying to warm his hands as he moved back into the adjoining saloon. The early morning air was mild, but everyone was chilled by the news coming from the TFT screen.

Crowded into the saloon were a dozen ni-Vanuatu chiefs and politicians, the roving American Ambassador for the Pacific, Thomas Simmons, and Drs. Jason Crookshank and Maddy Paine. Simmons pointed to the TFT and said it was his niece, Jean Simmons, standing beside Andreas Clem in the White House Press Room.

Ben had positioned himself as far from Kristin as possible. But when Page squeezed past John Mennenger to reach her, she could almost smell Ben's testosterone across the crowded saloon.

'If only news of the Rhesus virus had broken later,' she said to Page, handing him a mug of black coffee. 'We're almost at Kuwait.'

He thanked her and, sipping his coffee, looked outside. She followed his gaze. A pod of dolphins had joined *Marmet* inside Vila Harbour. Now, looking around, she could see dolphins for miles. At certain times of the year large pods of toothed whales inhabited the area because of the high concentration of food fish—which explained why the New Chinese ships were there.

'Perhaps you're wrong about how people will react to Rhesus,' she said. 'Since it won't make them sick, they'll probably withdraw into comforting, what-you-can't-see-and-can't-quantify-won't-hurt-you, denial. Hell, an entire generation did that with global warming.'

'Maybe.' Page turned back to her. 'I'm just a naval aviator, I leave science and philosophy to others.'

Recalling his considered analysis of the previous evening, she snorted softly. He was no military automaton spouting Pentagon rhetoric. 'Have you forgotten your PhD in physics?'

'Fluid dynamics. You been checking up on me?' he asked in a voice she wished was a little less sensuous.

'It's only fair.' She glanced at Ben. 'Everyone else seems to be doing it to me. I went online when you were in the shower this morning and accessed a few newspaper articles. You're also a Navy SEAL. You've had a busy career.'

He shrugged. 'That's the Navy for you. And you're a marine engineer who knows more about climatology and political intrigue than sonar installation.'

She turned off the stove. 'I'm not normally so fumble-fingered. Put it down to lack of sleep and other ... distractions. But don't change the subject. What is it that you really do, besides fixing flat tyres and installing sonars?'

'That is what I do, fix things.' He put his cup down.

'Problems, you mean.'

'That's right, problems.'

'Classified type problems.' Her gaze was unwavering. 'There's still a lot you haven't told me, isn't there? Like why you sleep with a gun.'

His eyes turned mischievous. 'I offered to share the couch with you instead.' Turning serious once me, he added, 'You know why we gave you the sonar, including the broader political reasons.'

She stared at him over the rim of her cup, then turned her attention to the screen, where Andreas Clem was clearing his throat.

When Clem finished explaining what Rhesus was and the steps currently being undertaken to deal with the virus, questions flew thick and fast.

The White House journalist who had been chasing him in Kamchatka was incredulous. 'You've known about this for five years and you only informed the President a few days ago?'

Glowing at her, Clem replied, 'In 2011 the CDC published Dr. Harrison's report describing the virus' destruction of the protein coating on Rh-positive blood cells. Over thirty papers on the *presence* of the Rhesus virus have been reviewed in international publications since then. There has been nothing secretive about it. It wasn't until a few days ago that an Australian mathematician, Dr. Leigh Walker, confirmed the *correlation* to sterility. We are yet to establish a clear, *causal link*.'

Another journalist called, 'Isn't it true that you would have known more if this administration had agreed to your repeated requests for funding?'

Clem knew that there was no way to keep politics out of a pandemic, especially one that left only a handful of Caucasians untouched. On the upside, the White House Press Corps had more sense than to ask him about alien invasion rumours. 'Congress has repeatedly vetoed the CDC's budget. Our resources have concentrated on life-threatening infectious diseases including TB and the new strains of ACR cholera now endemic in many US cities.'

'Doctor, you said that you've recommended the WHO lead an international task force. Why not the CDC now that your original mandate has been reinstated?'

Was it parochialism or was she just not paying attention? 'Rhesus is not restricted to the borders of the United States—'

'Yes, sir, you've made that quite clear,' she interrupted impatiently. 'But isn't it because the government fears the political ramifications of Rhesus? Isn't it true that every inhabitant of third world and developing countries will be made sterile, while a significant percentage of Caucasians living in countries affected by Industrial Winter, including the US, are immune to the virus?'

The journalist had barely finished when the pressroom erupted.

Aboard *Marmet*, it took a little longer, but Kristin could see the growing comprehension amongst the ni-Vanuatu. 'Well, that's done it.' She put her cup down. 'Nothing like a hint of ethnic cleansing to ruin comforting denial.'

The engines changed pitch. Page glanced at her and she nodded. While he went aft, she went forward to the wheelhouse. Don Pascoe had given them the location where he'd first sighted the New Chinese ships. Now it was time to find the nets.

'Commander Page is deploying the sensor,' she said to the sonar operator. 'Let's see what we can find.'

The young ni-Vanuatu crewman's face creased with concern. 'We haven't even tested it!'

'We're not looking for a net or those animals moving around out there,' Page said as he joined them. He gestured to the dolphins in the waters around *Marmet*. 'We're looking for a *wall* of motionless bodies, fish, turtles, sharks and cetaceans. I've programmed the first run to start at a depth of twenty five metres.'

'You know the rim of this volcano better than anyone,' Kristin added to the operator. 'If they're there, you'll see them.'

Raised voices punctuated furiously gesticulating arms as people moved from the saloon to the forward deck. Kristin stepped outside and joined Mennenger, who was clasping the handrail and looking out over the ocean. She had heard tourists describe the clear, tropical waters as toilet bowl blue. It was an unfortunate yet surprisingly accurate analogy. A few metres away, some young dolphins put on an acrobatic display. Any other time she would enjoy their antics, but knowing what the nets might reveal, it just made her feel ill.

'They're in shock,' Mennenger said.

'I'm sorry?' Kristin turned to face him.

'They've had to deal with too many disasters these past days,' he added, referring to the men on deck.

'Welcome to *my* world.'

Mennenger stared at her. 'Last night, did you know about this Rhesus thing? And why is he here, really?' He glanced at Page, who was still in the wheelhouse.

'He's here to save lives. The US government knows about these nets, the ones missing from the ships that Commander Pascoe found. It's just as I suspected, John. The cartels are employing a deadlier style of drift net.'

Heads turned in their direction. She pitched her voice so that everyone could hear. 'Following the Japanese economic crash and Chinese-Taiwanese rebellions, both governments agreed on certain fishing policies. You know most of the details of course.' She nodded to Mennenger. 'We were at the conferences—but ignorant of behind the scenes negotiations.' At least, most of us were ignorant. She glanced at Ben.

'Knowing that the war on terrorism had sapped our resources to monitor them,' she continued. 'They designed a cunning innovation to drift nets. These new nets sit about twenty-five metres below the surface, so they're not affected by large draft vessels, and virtually impossible to detect with normal, commercial sonars. In any case, they're set well away from shipping lanes, off areas of warm, up-welling currents where deep-water food fish are attracted to shallower depths. Like here, around an active submarine volcano.' She pointed to their portside where an expanse of dappled green water indicated a reef.

'A few months ago, the cartels decided to test the nets in Vanuatu waters. They knew that with only one patrol boat to monitor an impossibly large economic zone, the chances of anyone catching them inside coastal waters were almost nil. The nets proved staggeringly successful. The US government became aware of the situation almost immediately because they have classified, satellite images showing the nets' deployment and recovery. That's why they were so forthcoming with both the original sonar and its replacement.

'The US government is also aware that the damage caused by these nets is, like their ill-conceived



cousins the drift nets, extensive.' She met Ambassador Simmons' knowing eyes. When the Ambassador had boarded *Marmet* that morning, he'd greeted Page like an old friend. 'However for political reasons they could take no *direct* action.'

Mennenger angrily turned to Simmons. 'You bloody well *knew*?'

The aging ambassador replied, 'Don't be so quick to appoint blame, Director. Ask yourself why both governments processed Dr. Baker's request so expeditiously. In the normal course of events, Dr. Baker would have found these nets and taken action to prevent their further use.'

'Mioko!' Mennenger whispered, referring to his Japanese wife. 'She *told* me she'd overheard something about a special kind of net, but I didn't listen to her!'

'Mioko told me, too,' said Kristin. 'At the time, I thought she'd misunderstood, after all, it's not her field of expertise.' It had been bugging her, though, which no doubt explained her recurring nightmare.

Mennenger went to reply but then his eyes suddenly filled with comprehension—and sympathy. He swallowed and turned to Simmons.

'It's okay, Director,' said Ambassador Simmons. 'Dr. Baker is not committing professional suicide. She's just saving everyone here a deductive leap that others will make in the coming hours, especially when they realize the racial implications of Rhesus.' Turning to Kristin, Simmons added, 'It's always sat heavily on me, that we knew but—'

Page stepped from the wheelhouse, interrupting him. 'Gentlemen,' he said, placing his hands on Kristin's shoulders. 'We've just found a net and I'm doing a broad side scan now. The shapes are readily distinguishable: some tuna, but mostly sharks, turtles and big dolphins, lots of dolphins.'

\* \* \* \*

'This journalist's insinuation that Rhesus is a racially specific bioweapon could quickly devolve into a nightmare of biblical proportions.' Jean said. She hated meetings in the Oval Office. Despite the auspicious surroundings, sitting in comfortable lounge chairs around an antique coffee table seemed to lessen the importance of what was under discussion.

'A disc jockey in Georgia is broadcasting the original Orson Welles' War of the Worlds,' said a junior aide.

'That'll spark dozens of suicides,' President Blake growled, leaning forward for emphasis. 'There are people in this room catering to the panic. It will stop, and stop now.' He winced.

Jean figured his indigestion was acting up again. She noticed Obermann was also wincing. He claimed he'd mentioned the Hoyle-Wickramasinghe hypothesis because NASA had consulted the CDC for its planned Moonbase experiments. The possibility of viral material travelling in space dust had been under serious consideration for two decades. How anyone, especially someone who collated material for an epidemiologist, could turn a theory about how life might seed planets into an alien invasion conspiracy was beyond her.

'Don't look so smug,' Obermann whispered to her in an aside.

'The fishing cartels are exposed, aren't they?' she whispered back.

'At the expense of our relationships with Asia! Thanks to Clem's mishandling of the press conference, they'll assume Rhesus is a bioweapon!'

'Your blood pressure's showing again, Jack. Or is that look on your face a guilty conscious?'

Sending her a sour look, Obermann said in a louder voice, 'NASA is about to issue a press release on their research. If Andreas had been more cautious at the press conference—'

Jean glared at him. Clem was being magnanimous and Obermann, the fat fool, was still trying to appoint blame. 'Andreas didn't reveal the demographics of Rhesus,' she said dismissively. 'We all knew it was only a matter of time before journalists put it together.'

'In real terms,' Clem said, 'unless we find a way to stop Rhesus, Industrial Winter won't matter a damn.'

'I agree,' she said. Others around the table nodded.

'Regarding the Rhesus conference in MacDonnell,' Clem continued. 'We're inviting participants from a wide range of fields. It's short notice, I know, but make no mistake people, this is a war and the conference is our opening salvo.'

'People are demanding that ethnic groups with African American and Asian heritage be isolated from the rest of the population in order to contain the spread of Rhesus.' Obermann stared pointedly at Clem.

*That's it, I'm going to shoot him and put us all out of our misery.*

'God, not a repeat of the cholera nightmare,' someone groaned, while another asked, 'Would that help?'

Clem shook his head. 'I ruled that option out from the beginning. It's too widespread. Besides, not all of us are Rh-positive. I'm A-neg.'

Obermann's curled lip flattened and his look of contempt faded to uncertainty.

'Jamaican heritage,' Clem explained, 'Spanish Basque genes. My wife and kids are the same. But I'd like that kept quiet otherwise conspiracy theorists will use it as ammunition to propagate their claims, citing me as the government lackey who probably created the thing.' No one missed the warning look that he shot Obermann.

'Every news channel is featuring some new horror twist on Rhesus, mostly brought about by fear, a fear that is feeding on itself and escalating out of all proportion,' said the President. 'I need to know what emphasis to place on this in order to quell panic.'

An hour later in the White House Press Room, President Edwin Blake stood tall, grasped each side of the lectern and looked seriously into the cameras. It was his patrician look, honed and refined. His deliberate pause ensured the complete, undivided attention of the billions watching his second address in two days. It also gave him a moment to consider the words on the teleprompter.

'In recent months,' Blake began sombrely, 'we have been confronted with the inescapable conclusion that we are bearing the excesses of our forefathers. Not just as a nation but as a species. Climate change brought about by greenhouse gasses is now an accepted fact of life. Sea level change and melting glaciers have exacerbated geological instabilities. This has resulted in more frequent and more intense earthquakes, tsunamis and volcanic activity. Extreme weather conditions have led to record flooding in some areas, while others suffer crippling droughts. This country has experienced every extreme from avalanches and blizzards, hurricanes, floods and mudslides to raging forest fires. The loss of the Gulf Stream and the subsequent Industrial Winter, the escalating skin cancers and extinction of not thousands, but tens of thousands of species due to habitat destruction, even the triggering of the Rhesus virus—all appear to be the result of hundreds of years of cumulative environmental depravation. However,' he paused for effect, 'there are those who would use the current problems to further their own agendas,

who would incite panic and riot amongst the American people in order to press their terrorist causes. We cannot and *will* not allow ourselves to be used in this manner. The Rhesus virus has been with us for millennia but has only *recently* been triggered, most likely by something within the environment. These issues are unrelated to terrorism, which we will continue to fight on all fronts.

'Fellow Americans, we stand together today at the dawn of a new era. We may choose to crumble, to continue on our road of self-destruction, or we can choose a new path, one that will take us into a better world, a better future.'

Blake went on to explain how previously uninhabitable deserts now experiencing new rainfall patterns could be turned into productive farmlands, not only in the continental US, but also in Australia. It was the first hint that the re-settlement plans in the Kamchatka Statement might expand to other countries.

'As a species,' Blake continued, 'we have an extraordinary capacity to adapt to our environment. America and Australia are comparatively new nations built by immigrants; people willing—and sometimes unwilling but nevertheless obliged—to pick up their families and move on, to set down new roots and make new lives and adapt to new environments. Our forefathers did not have the resources available to us, to achieve this; nonetheless they still built great nations.'

'As outlined in the Kamchatka Statement, I will be going to Congress soon, to present a Bill to facilitate the regional planning and migration of people working in the areas of primary resources afflicted by Industrial Winter. This Bill is not part of a social welfare package. It is one that recognizes that in order to maintain our way of life, to defend our democratic society and our freedom, we must act now to deal with the inescapable consequences of Industrial Winter.'

'We will rise to these new challenges. And we will meet them. And we will succeed. Thank you. God Bless America. God bless us all.'

\* \* \* \*

'How many of your ships are fishing within our economic zone?' President Taangiroa asked the Chinese Ambassador. While the Vanuatu President's position was largely ceremonial, Taangiroa held considerable political clout, especially in foreign affairs.

'I not have figures,' Peng replied blandly.

'Eighteen,' supplied John Mennenger.

'That we know of,' added Kristin, marvelling at Peng's recent inability to speak English with the Oxford accent he'd once affected. 'There are fifteen Japanese ships, too, and there could be dozens of unauthorized ones—not all members of the cartels, of course.'

They were sitting around the dining room table in Taangiroa's modest home. Although Kristin had showered and changed, the stench of decaying marine life still clung to her hair. Or maybe it was John. He hadn't had time to get cleaned up.

With them was Commander Pascoe. Kristin idly wondered how he and Page kept their crisp, white uniforms in such pristine condition. Ambassador Peng, on the other hand, had abandoned his Saville Row suit for a cheap, poorly cut rayon shirt and pants—not unlike the clothes Taangiroa habitually wore. She considered Peng through lowered brows. What was he up to? Was he trying to project a subliminal solidarity with the impoverished ni-Vanuatu?

Pascoe sat forward. 'Sir, eight Japanese ships have reported deaths amongst their crew, and most of them are suffering symptoms that sound like acute methyl mercury poisoning. Three additional boats have

failed to make scheduled radio contact with their base in Espiritu Santo. We're not sure of the location of every vessel, although domestic inter-island flights have been alerted and pilots will begin reporting ships' positions tomorrow morning.'

Kristin looked outside. A flamboyant tree framed a magnificent sunset over Port Vila Harbour, but the view was wasted on her. Sunset brought darkness, giving the fishing boats time to escape into international waters. But fleeing would not save anyone who ate the deadly livers. Until the cartels retracted their orders, the men had to eat *something*.

'If you are requesting to be allowed to board these boats, Commander Pascoe,' said Taangiroa, 'I must refer you to the Attorney General's Office because I have no knowledge of the law in this matter.'

'Only those vessels which are not responding to calls,' replied Mennenger. 'We can't allow ships to just float around out there. They're a navigation and public liability hazard.'

'Then there's the health aspect,' added Kristin. 'A couple of hundred dead bodies cooking in the sun.'

'No. We have agreement. *You*,' Peng stabbed a finger at Pascoe, 'already break *our* agreement.' He encompassed Taangiroa with a sweep of his hand. 'By arresting our ships!'

Kristin began to understand. Peng was creating alignments. On one side, the impoverished ni-Vanuatu and innocent Chinese fishermen. On the other, wealthy Western interests with their starched white shirts and fancy patrol boats. No matter that the patrol boat now belonged to the Vanuatu government, and Pascoe was assigned to the Vanuatu military, perception was everything.

Shooting Peng an incredulous look, Mennenger said, 'Mr. Ambassador, your ships were found directly over Kuwait. The nets—'

Kristin interrupted. 'John, the evidence is circumstantial. Anyone could have put those nets there.'

Mennenger turned his glare on her.

'If, however,' she added, 'we learn that the tracking system in your ships' computers recognizes the signals from the submarine buoys we found attached to the nets, Ambassador, it's another story. It breaks *your* agreement with the South Pacific Fishing Forum. Under the current circumstances, deploying nets also amounts to a death sentence for the crew. You've seen the test results.' She held up the medical report from Brisbane. 'The mercury content of livers found in the ships' galleys is enough to kill an elephant. Hell, the mercury content in the *flesh* is five hundred times the WHO's acceptable standard. Regardless of the legality of how these animals ended up in freezers of your ships, the fishing cartels cannot allow them to be sold for human consumption. It violates your own country's public health laws.'

'Do not presume to threaten me—you know what killed crew! This report is a fabrication!' Peng tossed his copy aside. 'Minamata disease no longer exists. Government cleaned up all waste years ago. Besides, Minamata took months, years to kill, not hours. This thing that killed crew is *bioweapon* America make, like Rhesus, to kill non-Caucasians—including *your* people.' He pointed at Taangiroa. 'So they can move their *primary resource producers* to Vanuatu when you are all dead!'

Kristin groaned. And so it begins.

She left soon after. Another time she might have accepted Wilson's invitation to stay for dinner. She genuinely liked the President because he wanted the best for his people, and his wife made a superb Tahitian salad. But Page was leaving soon. Peng's objections notwithstanding, she was going out with

Pascoe on the patrol boat the following day. Page had promised to have satellite photos relayed to the patrol boat every six hours. With luck, one of the fishing boats would still have nets on board, forcing the Chinese Ambassador to end this stupid and deadly charade.

Her mind turned briefly to Prime Minister Anderson's press conference. She presumed his and President Blake's speechwriters had worked together to dole out a few palatable snippets of the Exodus Project, but their delivery styles highlighted their cultural differences. While Blake, a descendant of old money, turned on the success in the face of adversity hype, Anderson, the son of good old Aussie battlers who'd immigrated from Scotland, said that Australians knew how to roll up their sleeves and get on with it without whining.

Driving through the Fishery's gates, she looked around in surprise. The dock had never been so empty. The helicopters, cranes and forklifts had been moved to the main wharf, and all the usual clutter was gone. Even the huge net they'd recovered from Kuwait that morning had been bulldozed onto the grass. For the first time since the dock's construction—thank you very much, Japan—it was clean and empty. She was still chuckling when she walked into the reception.

Courtesy of a gossipy air traffic controller, gawkers who had crowded the dock that morning were now lining up at the airport in anticipation of seeing the FSP. They had no idea the VTOL—vertical take off and land—FSPs were almost as manoeuvrable as helicopters. Only a handful of people knew it would be setting down on the dock—a far more secure location than the airport. Even the VMF soldiers patrolling the perimeter assumed they were there solely to enforce the *cordon sanitaire* around the impounded Chinese ships.

'Good evening, Ambassador, Commander,' Kristin said to Simmons and Page when she walked into the reception. The door to Ben's office was open, and she could see him talking to the customs and quarantine officers. 'I apologize for this morning's slam-dunk but I didn't want anyone sidetracked by other issues.'

Simmons shook his head. 'Other issues being our underhanded attempt to embarrass our allies. I was just telling Nick that your timing was perfect. You set the scene out there, then had their undivided attention for the dramatic unveiling. Now, no one gives a damn why we gave you the sonar, just that exposing the cartels will presumably save lives.'

Relieved that the Ambassador agreed with her strategy, she glanced at Page. 'You can thank the Commander for the timing.'

'How did Ambassador Peng take it?' Page said.

'Same as the Japanese trade delegate. Plausible deniability. I expected nothing less. They can't stop us boarding vessels drifting in Vanuatu waters but what I hadn't expected was them both implying that the US—with Australia's complicity—is responsible for Rhesus and the mercury poisonings. Peng's claiming they're biological weapons.'

Simmons nodded grimly. 'That attitude is escalating. I'll remind Ambassador Peng that when it comes to Rhesus, Caucasians are only a few percent better off than everyone else.' He sighed. 'Although I doubt he'll let the facts get in his way.'

Kristin turned to Page. 'When's your ride due?'

'A few minutes. Would you excuse us, sir?' he said to the ambassador, then took her by the elbow and led her outside.

Mills and the others followed, anxious to see the arriving FSP.

Page gently squeezed Kristin's arm and said in a low voice, 'Don't advertise yourself as Rh-negative.'

She went to speak, but remembering the look of fear on Taangiroa's face, and Page's words in Sydney about becoming a target, she nodded. 'Commander—'

'Nick.' His mouth lifted into the by now familiar, quirky grin.

'Nick, I'm sorry again about last night. I'm usually the one who uses other people's personality traits to affect a desired outcome. I guess I was piqued because someone was doing the same to me. So, what else have you got planned?'

His smile faded into regret. 'I can't tell you, but you may see me sooner than you think.'

Kristin went to speak but the high-pitched sound of the arriving FSP made further talk impossible. By the time Page had completed the formalities and suited up, the road outside the Fisheries dock was again swarming with curious onlookers. A round of brief handshakes, then it was Kristin's turn.

'Thanks for the ride, Commander—Nick,' she said, giving him the traditional kiss on both cheeks.

He responded by a chaste kiss her on the mouth—except that his lips lingered a moment too long. Reluctantly moving away, he saluted Ambassador Simmons and climbed into the FSP. Before the canopy closed, he tossed Kristin a wink and called, 'Be seeing ya, Doc.'

## Chapter 15

**'One person infected every four seconds, one dying every ten seconds. The global statistics are almost too grim to shock. TB claims more lives, often young and productive, than malaria, more even than AIDS. And yet TB lacks the pull of HIV, Ebola or Malaria. No Hollywood movie dramatises its workaday carnage ... Three million people are dying every year. (This is) a microbe you can catch simply by sleeping in the same room as someone (infected). TB is not humdrum, it's Ebola with wings.'**

—Mario Raviglione, head of TB control for the World Health Organization (WHO)

At least one third of all active cases in New York City in 1990 were drug resistant ... One strain, dubbed 'W', was resistant to so many drugs that it was essentially untreatable.

### —Laurie Garrett: **Betrayal of Trust**

Holding his wife's hand, Joe sat stiffly in the hard-backed chair. They were inside Dr. Gracie Friand's new Portland Hospital office. Friand was griping about not being able to find anything since she'd moved from Newton, but Joe wasn't interested. He'd spent the last twenty-four hours desperately clinging to Simon Woodstein's words, that Greg wasn't showing any symptoms.

The day before, Joe and Sylvie had arrived at school to see ambulances and quarantine units everywhere. By the time they'd found someone in authority, it had been too late. The isolation ambulance had left, taking Greg to Portland Hospital. And Greg wasn't the only one. The entire school was now under quarantine.

Finally, Friand seemed to find what she was looking for. She flashed Joe an artificial smile. 'Here it is. The good news is that both you and your wife have tested negative. As for Greg, except for the tuberculosis, your son's blood work is good, really good. He's a healthy young man with an immune system well geared to fight it.' Friand nodded to emphasise her point but her smile faltered as she added, 'It means daily drug injections for up to a year, and the damned things hurt like the dickens. I know; I've had to go through it.'

Joe didn't want to say anything in front of Sylvie but this same doctor had given him assurances about his father. The next day, Alexis was dead. Joe cleared his throat. 'A year?'

Friand put down the report, laced her chubby fingers together and leaned across her desk as far as her ample bosom would allow. 'Tuberculosis has evolved, Mr. Camicci. Years ago, people stopped taking their TB meds when they felt better, not when they'd killed the bug. So it mutated, got stronger. Then AIDS came along and worked hand in glove with TB to turn it into a superbug. I don't want to frighten you because Greg has every chance of a full recovery, but *only* if he takes every single last one of his meds and undergoes every single treatment to kill it outright. Depending on how good his immune system is and a whole bunch of other things, it could take a year. Or less, or a lot longer, especially living in a place like Newton, now that the weather is all screwed up. If you lived in a dryer and warmer climate, it might be a lot faster.

'Mr. Camicci.' She looked at him seriously. 'Did you know that your son is Rh-negative?'

Joe nodded. 'I'm O-negative. Sylvie had an injection after Greg was born. You know, to stop problems with later pregnancies.' He glanced at his wife and realised he had just reminded her there would be no more pregnancies. Her period had started during the night, then on the drive to Portland, the IVF clinic called. Her blood had tested positive for Rhesus, so they were dropping her from the program. Joe bit

his lip and clasped her hand a little tighter.

'Greg is not only negative, he's O-negative,' Friand said. 'The emergency Rhesus package that's going to Congress will mean his TB treatment is priority funded. Not that others with TB will be left to pay for it entirely,' she added quickly. 'It just means that now you don't have health insurance, the cost will mostly be subsidized under that package. And that's a good thing because Greg's medical costs could run into tens of thousands of dollars. If you take Greg to Virginia for treatment—'

'We're not,' Joe said emphatically. 'We just mentioned Virginia last night because we have family there, and we were told this could take some time, months maybe. Not a year!'

With toddlers of her own, Sylvie's cousin had made it clear that she didn't want anyone with TB in the house. In fact, she couldn't understand how they could think such a thing.

'Your son doesn't have to be in isolation, Mr. Camicci. Although this is a highly virulent strain of TB, we're working on a specific cocktail of antibiotics geared to suit Greg's individual DNA.'

'So why did Brian Kandilas die so fast?' Joe said. 'They told me he caught TB from Greg during the fight.'

Friand shook her head. 'Brian Kandilas had full blown AIDS.'

'AIDS! He was just a kid!' Joe's eyes widened in alarm.

'Despite what Greg said about getting some of Brian's blood in his mouth,' Friand replied reassuringly. 'Your son is clean. I can't reveal who else has this strain of TB; it's against medical ethics. All I can say is that PCR tests have shown almost thirty percent of the grade and almost ten percent of the school's population tested positive. So don't let anyone tell you that Greg gave Brian TB. Brian could have caught it from anyone and his weakened immune system failed to deal with it. And that statistic I just quoted?' she added as an afterthought. 'It doesn't mean all those students have the disease, just that their blood has antibodies, which means they've been exposed to this particular strain. Greg is one of a handful who has actually contracted TB. But Greg is fortunate because unlike the others, we caught it early, and his immune system is dealing with it. We want to cure Greg before he gets sick, and we want to make sure he can't pass it along to anyone else.'

'How long has this been going on!' Joe cried.

'Tuberculosis started making a dramatic comeback in the 1980s,' said Friand. 'It's just that with the new public health care laws, this strain of TB means Greg must be registered. The hospital will discharge him this afternoon but he will be obliged to report to a clinic or hospital every day to receive his medication. If he fails to do so, then the law requires that he be placed under quarantine. Now,' she added, pulling up a file on her computer, 'if you're still living in Newton that's not going to be quite so easy because ... let me look it up, but I think here in Portland is the nearest clinic we can slot you into.'

'But we're one hundred and fifty miles away!' Joe watched her scan the computer.

Friand nodded. 'I'm afraid so. With the Kamchatka Statement and the closure of County General, there are just not enough facilities. Here it is. Okay, we can place Greg on a priority listing for somewhere closer, especially as he's Rh-negative, but the hospital shortage is only going to get worse. For the time being, Portland it is.'

An hour later, Joe stood in the courtyard of the hospital cafeteria. Familiar sounds filled the air. Kids fighting over who got the most fries, plates rattling, people laughing, pigeons flapping, picking up a few



morsels. It was warm, hot, in fact. It was summer.

Sylvie came out with a tray. Two coffees and a sandwich, but Joe wasn't hungry. His son was still inside the mammoth, forbidding walls. Joe noticed his wife's hands shook when she placed the tray on the table. Sylvie had just called her cousin and told her they'd been cleared of TB, and that Greg wouldn't have to go into quarantine because he wasn't really sick with it. But he'd heard Rebecca ask, what about Rhesus?

Joe knew his wife wouldn't lie. And, like most people, Rebecca didn't understand Rhesus wasn't contagious, at least not in the regular sense. And of course Rebecca herself couldn't have it because she had two little babies. Sylvie had been on the IVF program and despite that, couldn't fall pregnant. Sylvie had been confined with all those people back in 2011 during the cholera outbreak. What other diseases might Sylvie be carrying?

As Joe listened, he felt ill. 'Becca was making out as if Sylvie was dirty, contaminated. Then when Sylvie reminded her cousin how much they'd done for her, 'Becca made some excuse about the baby crying and switched off her comunit.

Sylvie poured sugar into her coffee 'While you were in the bathroom, the estate agent called.'

'What did he want?' said Joe morosely, and sat down. He felt impotent, crippled, unable to move in any direction.

'He has an offer for the house.'

'You mean ours?' He looked at her dumbly. 'Where we gonna live? We can't afford to move; you saw how much we'd lose!'

Sylvie took a deep breath. 'Joe, it's a good offer, almost as much as we paid for it! And we can't afford to stay! You'll lose your job if we do, and even if Greg is allowed back in school, he can't make a three hundred-mile round trip every day. Government paying or not, I'm not letting them lock him up in some quarantine ward, because he could catch something else—like Alexis did! I've lost one child, Joe, I will not lose another!'

With each word her voice shook more. He couldn't stand seeing his wife like this; Sylvie had always been the strong one! 'Okay, okay,' he said reassuringly. 'What did the agent say?'

She pulled a napkin off the tray and wiped her nose. 'He said that because you were in construction we'd probably be entitled to some of the government re-settlement subsidy. By the time we pay off the mortgage we'd still have enough left for a down payment on a small place maybe out west. It means starting all over again but at least we'd have *something*. Most folks don't even have that much But everyone is thinking the same thing, he said, so prices were going all over the place.'

'Ours down and everybody else's, up,' Joe replied bitterly.

'And it's just going to get worse. Joe, we can sell our house *today*, now, but maybe not tomorrow. I'm not one for making rash decisions, you know that, but I don't see that we have any choice.'

Joe felt trapped, squeezed so tight his head wanted to explode. He stood abruptly, almost knocking over the coffee. Jamming his hands in the pockets of his jacket he turned and yelled in a tortured voice, 'Why? God dammit, why? We did all the things we were supposed to do! We paid our taxes and HMO. We built God damned environmentally friendly malls and offices and powered them with hydrogen fuel cells! I bought one of the first hydrogen fuel cell trucks and planted trees on Earth Day and collected garbage on Clean up the World Day ... and ... and recycled, but *where in hell did any of it get us?*'

A dozen heads turned their way, and he saw a security guard watching. Joe held his hands up in defeat and sat down again. He snatched up the coffee and swallowed it in a few gulps, burning his throat. But that was okay, it just added to the sick fire in his stomach. When he looked up again, his eyes caught the alphabet animal pictures on the wall. They were designed to brighten an otherwise drab hospital courtyard that faced the children's ward. But one of them gave him an idea.

\* \* \* \*

Down on Cape Cod, Samuel Winthrop Junior kicked the sand on the beach in frustration and anger. No he did *not* understand why he couldn't go to school! Just because some bug meant people couldn't have babies, and it was a little colder than normal ... sheeit! He'd busted a gut getting on the team and practising, practising every afternoon for weeks for this final game.

A tear rolled down his cheek. Go upstairs and do your homework, his mother said; we don't know what's going to happen. Sammy sat down in the cold, soft sand, put his elbows on his knees and rested his head in his hands. How come that meant no ball game? Typical grownups, wouldn't give him a straight answer. Every time he did something wrong he had to give a logical reason. When he asked them about something, they replied 'because we said so'. It just wasn't fair!

Sammy glanced back up the beach. The Secret Service were nowhere to be seen, not even his dipshit bodyguard. He'd managed to fool them again. He got up and began walking. If Ricky'd gone to the game, then he could tell his mother and they'd have to let him go, too. It wasn't too late if they left soon. If Ricky hadn't, with two of them out of the game, maybe his coach would postpone it and maybe...

What was that on the beach? With a ten-year-old's morbid fascination, he thought it might be a dead body. Maybe it had washed up in the night and the police would be called and take fingerprints and ask him lots of questions. Maybe it was disgusting and the fish had eaten out the eyeballs and lips and he could tell them how he bravely pulled aside the coat to look for ID ... No, better not do that, just look and he could tell Ricky all about it. He could be famous, just like his dad! Why, a story like that could keep a guy good for a week! Maybe a day off school wasn't so bad after all. He ran to the dark shape.

It moved.

Sammy stopped. Maybe the guy is still alive and he, Sam Winthrop Junior, the Secretary of State's son, could rescue him. That would be even better! He'd call the paramedics then keep the guy warm or something and he could be a hero. Boy, wait 'til Ricky hears about this!

But when he got closer, his hopes were dashed. Awe, it's just some dumb ol' fish washed up on the beach. Still it was a pretty big fish, looked like a shark. Hey, maybe he could get the teeth; they ought to be worth something.

Then he saw the second, smaller shape. A little one! And he saw that they were not sharks but a stranded dolphin and its baby.

Oh no! He was good at biology and he knew these creatures were no fish. Once, when his teacher held up a model of a brain and asked everybody what it was, the whole class said a human's. But they were wrong. It had been the brain of a dolphin.

As he approached the stranded pair, he heard whistling from the big one, probably the mother. He knew dolphins never hurt people, so he plucked up the courage to go nearer.

Sammy kept watching her eyes. He was sure she was watching him in return. As he inched closer, he could see she was all cut up in places, with sores on top of her body. She looked sick, really sick, like she was going to die, although her baby looked okay. Except, of course, if she died then so would the

baby. Wasn't that what normally happened to baby animals?

He blinked and stepped backwards. What was he supposed to do? All his great ideas meant nothing unless he could actually do something! He glanced at his wrist and cursed. He'd taken off his comunit so that his bodyguard wouldn't know he'd snuck out. It was ten minutes to his house and at least ten to Ricky's. Despite the snow on the beach the afternoon sun was strong, drying the dolphin's skin. He racked his brains trying to remember what his teacher had said. Their skin had to stay wet, but the tide had gone out and they were on dry land.

Sammy stared at the water. His parents had warned him a hundred times not to go swimming because the water was dirty. He'd disobeyed them and got sick, real sick with hepatitis, and nearly died. He never went back in the water again—mainly because it was too cold. No wonder the dolphins were sick, living in that crappy stuff.

With no other choice he took his gloves off, scooped some water up in his hands and splashed it over their backs. Not enough. He looked around. He and Ricky found heaps of things washed up all the time. There! A soda bottle; that would do. He filled it with seawater and poured it over the mother then another over the baby.

Okay, now what? Sammy sat and looked into the dolphin's eye. This wasn't like a dog. This was like a person. He was certain the mother wanted him to help. The baby didn't have marks or sores like her; maybe it would be okay if he could find someone to take care of it. Maybe he should take off his jacket and protect the baby. Jeez, he thought, maybe I should just do it! He soaked his jacket in the water, then carefully covered the baby dolphin so its blowhole and eyes were exposed.

Ten minutes, that's not long. He'd heard about dolphin strandings before, especially around here, and lots of people coming to the rescue. But the more he thought about it, maybe not. He might not have been taking much notice of all the fuss, but somehow, he didn't think anyone would worry about a couple of half-dead dolphins today.

Sammy looked back into the mother's eye, alight with intelligence—and this time, he cried out at the unexpected, powerful intrusion. The anguish!

Not old enough, or experienced enough to understand the loss of great dreams, he was suddenly thrust into a whirlpool of devastating emotions. Something had reached inside of him and done something irreversible to his soul.

Young Samuel Winthrop was forever altered.

She died soon after. Sam knew that he could never explain what had happened, what he not only felt, but *knew*! Great wracking sobs tore at him, but after a while, he stopped. There was nothing for it now; he had to stay with the baby until someone came for him. He would not let this baby die. If he did, a part of him would also die.

Sue Winthrop knocked on her son's bedroom door. 'Sammy? Sam!' she called. 'Sammy, open the door please!' But it did not open. She tried the handle, but he'd locked it from the inside. She could hear running on the gravel outside and thumps on the stairs.

'What time did he go in, Tom?' the agent climbing the stairs said into his mouthpiece.

Sue hated that. The Secret Service-agents talked to each other as if her family was a logistical problem, rarely consulting her directly. She couldn't blame Sammy for wanting to escape, but why today of all days?

The agents conversed in low voices, then tried calling Sammy's comunit. It beeped from inside his room; he'd taken it off—again. Then the agents went into the next bedroom. Sue followed, biting her lower lip. Another shout from outside. Sammy's bike was gone and it was obvious by the broken trellis that he'd climbed out the window and down the monkey-puzzle tree. Sue elbowed the agents aside. She bit her lip harder when she saw how far he might have fallen.

'Probably cycled to Ricky's place,' they said. 'Isn't the first time he's pulled this stunt.' They looked at her accusingly.

Sue thought it more likely he'd walked along the beach to Ricky's, hiding his bike to lead them astray, but they dismissed the idea. A ten-year old did not have that sort of cunning. Sue closed her eyes. Oh yes he does, you forget who sired him.

Knowing Ricky's family had gone to DC, the agents told Sue they would go haul Sammy back by the scruff of his neck.

'He's my son,' she replied, glaring at them. She grabbed a coat and stormed out the back door.

Sue walked along the water's edge, remembering the summers when you could still swim in the water. Now it was too cold and too polluted to swim anywhere. She buttoned her coat and quickened her pace. On the edge of the beach grew a row of tall she-oaks. Wind gusted through the branches. Sue looked up. It couldn't possibly snow again, could it? The eerie sounds of the tall trees sent a chill of foreboding through her. Sammy would be at Ricky's, or he'd be somewhere on the beach; he always was.

Minutes later she rounded a bend and saw Sammy bending over something. Her relief instantly turned to terror when she saw the helicopter descending towards them. With the sunlight directly behind it, Sue saw what she thought was a weapon pointing towards her son. '*No ... Sammy!*'

Secretary of State Samuel Winthrop stood in his White House office, listening to the Secret Service agent. 'He *what?*' Winthrop turned on his TFT screen and brought his hand to his brow as he watched the televised images of his son holding a baby dolphin—with the assistance of a well-known news reporter. He said to the agent, 'Well then get the animal to an aquarium. And find out who's responsible for allowing that damned news helicopter into restricted air space! I want that pilot's license rescinded and the traffic controller prosecuted. And no, I will not give permission for Sammy to be interviewed!'

But word was already spreading. Secretary Samuel Winthrop's son had heroically rescued a baby dolphin stranded on a Cape Cod beach. Now that the baby's mother had died, the race to save the animal instantly became a strategic exercise that captured the media's attention, and took on a life of its own.

## Chapter 16

**I wonder whether you know that whales consume more than three to five times the marine resources (that humans do). I also have to point out that there are 800 million human beings that are undernourished.**

—Japan's agricultural minister Tsutomu Takebe, Reuters, July 4 2002

Kristin lay on the bunk in *Marmet's* front cabin, reluctant to get up. She rubbed her eyes and wondered what horrors this day would bring. Death had become her constant companion in the last week. Fiji, Sydney, the ships on the dock, the wall of death at Kuwai, and day after day of boarding death ships with Don Pascoe.

She stood, slipped on a fresh T-shirt and went to the galley for coffee. Just as she took her first sip, her comunit buzzed. Without checking the call signature she replied, 'Baker. Why can't people call at a decent hour? It's just after 0500 and I haven't had my caffeine fix.'

'Sorry,' John Mennenger said. 'I thought you'd be awake.'

'I am, but you must know by now that at this hour, my brain isn't.'

'Why can't I get an image?'

'I'm using my old comunit. No visuals and no news services. Do you really want to see me after days at sea without a shower or hairbrush?'

Mennenger chuckled. 'Okay, well, one of the techs finally hacked into the impounded ships' on-board computer systems and decoded the tracking software.'

'Do we have Peng by the short and curlies?'

'The beacons are unique to each fishing boat, probably to prevent them from poaching each other's nets. But yeah, we got him,' John replied. 'The signature beacons on the nets recovered from Kuwai match the impounded ships'. Where are you now?'

Kristin took another sip before replying. 'Kuwai. I transferred off the patrol boat onto *Marmet* last night. At the risk of sounding inhumane, the walls of death are sickening me even more than the dead crewmen. The carnage being inflicted on marine life is appalling! Have you made any progress with the cartels?'

'Oh yeah,' he replied sourly. 'Their members never infringe on coastal waters, use only agreed upon fishing techniques and strictly adhere to the policy of releasing all protected species. Since that means the crews cannot possibly be eating dolphin in any form, whatever is killing them must be a bioweapon.' He paused before adding, 'Now that we can connect their trawlers to the nets—'

'Cartel executives will claim they're 'renegade' ships.' She went out on deck. 'They don't even have to evict them from their fleet; they're conveniently dead! Jeez, we're going to have to find enough nets and match them to cartel ships to build a watertight case.'

The night before, she had instructed *Marmet's* crew to videotape the recovery of the nets and record the species and size of the dead animals. She now headed forward to the wheelhouse, not yet willing to see how many baby dolphins or endangered species of turtles had been hauled up while she'd slept.

'With Rhesus and this Industrial Winter thing,' Mennenger said, 'they're making noises about pulling out

of Vanuatu at the end of the current contract year. Hell, Kristin, without the income from the fishing cartels and Japanese handouts, this country is economically screwed.'

If the Exodus Project meant Vanuatu was important to the Americans, why hadn't ADAB tried to renew her contract? Kristin frowned. Dammit, Page had to know more than he'd told her. Then again, Rhesus had thrown everyone's plans into disarray.

She leaned against the wheelhouse cabin, lifted one foot onto the rail to balance herself against the motion of the boat, and stared across the jumbled ocean. A wave crashed across the bow, sending a fine spray of salty mist over her. She covered her coffee with one hand as she breathed in the clean, fresh smell. Wouldn't it be nice if she could just order *Marmet* to keep going, just sail away, maybe drop her off at Mota Lava Island. It was about as far from civilization as you could get, deserted except for a village of ni-Vanuatu who had remained virtually unchanged for five thousand years. She could build a hut on one of the white sandy beaches—the same beaches where tons of refuse, fishing nets and soda bottles, rubber thongs and plastic containers washed up every year. And she could live off reef fish saturated with mercury and PACs, thereby guaranteeing her children would be born with one the ever-increasing numbers of developmental disorders. What a great idea.

'If it wasn't so tragic it'd be funny,' Mennenger continued. 'Some reports coming out of Japan are blaming the *dolphins* for killing the fishermen.'

'And I suppose Peng is still pandering to racial paranoia?'

'Non-stop.'

Kristin used the sleeve of her shirt to wipe the salty dampness from her face. Recalling Nick's words about a new war, she said, 'Sometimes I feel like I've stepped into an Orwellian inversion of reality. Unless the fishing cartels drops this histrionic bioweapons rant, things could get real ugly real fast.'

'Dr. Baker, Dr. Baker! Come quick, we've found one alive!' called a crewman.

She tossed the remains of her coffee over the side and said to Mennenger, 'Gotta go.'

Following the crewman to the stern she asked, 'What is it, a turtle?'

'No, dolphin!'

Kristin skidded and almost fell on the slime-covered deck. Then her eyes fastened on the big *Tursiops*, a common, bottle nosed dolphin. It moved listlessly, but it was alive. 'How did you get it out of the net without hurting it?' She crouched down to examine the animal.

'It wasn't caught, it swam in as we were recovering the net.'

Looking up at the hoist, she saw numerous dead *Tursiops*, including a baby, still in the net. It was impossible to tell if the surviving dolphin was the calf's mother—even deciding the sex of the animal was not easy—but given its actions, it was a fair bet. 'Okay.' She ran her hands along the smooth flank of the adult. 'It's okay,' she added softly, feeling a spark of elation. 'We're going to take good care of you.'

For the first time in days, she wished Ben was with her. From what she could see, the animal had an abscessed tooth, a few minor lesions and a series of partially healed circular wounds on its belly. She turned to the nearest crewman and said, 'Get some towels and bring up a deck hose and bunk bed stretcher.'

He ran to comply, and Kristin ordered the other crewmen to lower the hoist. She briefly examined the

dead dolphins in the net. Hair follicles along the calf's rostrum told her it was a new born. And it was still warm; it had only died a short time ago. Except for lesions from struggling in the fine mesh and the ubiquitous cookie-cutter shark bites, all the animals seemed healthy enough. And that angered her. Bad enough that marine mammals were being decimated by toxins and immuno-deficiency diseases, but losing what appeared to be a healthy pod of females and young in the godforsaken nets compounded the tragedy.

The captain came aft and watched the crew retrieve the remainder of the net. 'Why not just let her go?'

'These are very intelligent animals. She's distressed, and she's just lost most, if not all of her pod, and possibly her calf. There are a lot of nets in this area. We toss her back now, and, disoriented, she'll likely end up in another net.' Kristin stroked the dolphin's scarred rostrum. 'I'm not taking that risk, if only because her liver could end up in the belly of some poor bastard on a trawler.'

At least that's she was going to put in her report. She sat beside the dolphin and continued to stroke it, marvelling at the satiny feel of its skin. 'It's okay, we'll take care of you, I promise.'

The tears in her eyes, Kristin told herself, were from the foul stench. But she began to wonder how they would take care of it. She glanced at her comunit. *Marmet's* holds were almost filled with nets. They'd have to return to Vila and off-load them before coming back out for more.

A crewman arrived with a pipe and canvas bunk bed. 'Cut holes here and here,' she instructed him. 'Then fill the biggest ice container, the three metre one, with seawater and we'll lower her into it.'

'Why the stretcher?' he asked.

It will both support her and restrict her movements so she can't thrash around and hurt herself. Dolphins tend to be calmer in these situations than other animals, so we shouldn't have too much difficulty.'

When the animal was sitting comfortably in its makeshift sling and *Marmet* was headed for Vila, Kristin said, 'Keep the deck hoses pumping into the tank. Make sure her blowhole is clear but her skin stays wet, we don't want her drying out.'

She called Mennenger. 'Better get Ben down to the dock. We're bringing in an injured dolphin.'

'What's your ETA?'

'Bout 0900. And John, contact Sea World on Australia's Gold Coast for advice on what to do with an exhausted, stressed *Tursiops* with an abscessed tooth.'

As *Marmet* neared port, the crew washed down the decks in preparation for docking. Kristin went aft to check on the dolphin when her comunit buzzed. She glanced at the call signature, and emotions flooded her. On one level she was delighted, but on another, she still wasn't sure of his agenda. 'Commander Page,' she answered in a neutral tone.

'Dr. Baker,' he replied. 'How's the sonar operating?'

'It's doing well, but it's slow work. We're about to dock with the holds full of nets.' She chewed the inside of her lip. It was an open comunit line and she didn't want to discuss the ongoing issues with the fishing cartels. 'Now what?' she added.

'We're sending you more units. They should be there in a few days.'

The dolphin beside Kristin suddenly splashed and squealed.

'What's that?' Page asked.

'We pulled a live female *Tursiops* from one of the nets.'

A crewman had picked up the baby dolphin to toss it into a freezer box. Whether the adult dolphin had reacted to the sight of the calf, or it was just coincidence, Kristin had no idea, but she said, 'Don't! Just ... carry the baby out of her line of sight.'

'Baby?' Page said, his tone urgent.

'Yeah, newborn dolphin. I think it might be hers but it's dead, along with about twenty juveniles and adults.'

'What's the condition of the female?'

Kristin wondered why he sounded so excited. 'Distressed but otherwise seems healthy. Why?' She went below to retrieve her bag.

'You haven't heard about Secretary Winthrop's son?'

'Heard what?'

Like any good news drama the situation for Sammy Winthrop's orphaned dolphin—now called 'Sammy'—seemed to grow increasingly desperate. The only female toothed whales in captivity in the US were unsuitable as surrogate mothers. Although vets could set up a drip feed to sustain baby Sammy, it was a temporary solution with an inevitable outcome unless they could locate a lactating female willing to adopt it.

Inside the Fisheries building in Vanuatu, John Mennenger turned off his wall TFT screen and walked outside with Ben Mills.

'A dolphin calf,' Ben said, 'hardly more than newborn, is going to be damned difficult to keep alive even if they find a surrogate mother. The fact that it was stranded means it's probably sick.' He caught the stern rope tossed from *Marmet*, tied it around a bollard then jumped on board.

Mennenger followed, but stopped when he saw Kristin coming out of the saloon. 'Picking up strays again?' he said.

She dropped her bag and covered her comunit so that Page couldn't hear. 'You could have warned me about Ben when we first met.'

'I did.'

She glared at him as they walked to the stern. She didn't trust the security of comunits, and this was the first chance she'd had to talk to John alone since she'd returned to Vanuatu. Dropping her voice she said, 'Ben warned the Japanese about the sonar project. That's why they were so anxious to take it over.'

Startled, John turned to her with a frown. 'Not Ben,' he replied, shaking his head emphatically. 'You were right about the cartels, but don't let your personal issues with him cloud your judgment.'

'He's been getting classified information from someone about my movements. I don't like being spied on, John.'

Ben was already beside the makeshift holding tank, examining the dolphin and whispering softly to it. He looked up at Kristin and said, 'She's a lactating female. Did you keep the calf? We can check its DNA



to see if it was hers.'

'It's in the cool room. Look, I know this is a really wild idea, but since she's lactating...' Kristin didn't have to continue, Ben's eyes opened wide in comprehension. 'I have Commander Page on the line,' she added, lifting her wrist.

'*He* suggested it?' Ben demanded.

'He called to find out how the sonar was going, and, look, is it totally out of the ballpark, or ... ?'

Ben shook his head in dismissal. 'It's a logistical impossibility.'

'It's only a hop in a military space plane,' Kristin countered. 'They have small, cargo carrying VTOL SPs that can land right there.' She pointed to the wharf.

'Don't be stupid! The dock won't take the heat or the weight!'

She looked at him squarely. 'As an engineer, I can assure you that your Japanese pals built the damned thing to withstand a major seismic event. An FSP didn't dent it, neither will a cargo SP.'

'We don't have the expertise or facilities to deal with dolphins—'

'It's a twenty minute atmospheric SP jump from here to Australia's Gold Coast. They can land in Sea World's car park, no problem. Ben, I know she might reject the calf, and the orphan might not accept her, but we'll never know unless we try. The media has pushed the story way beyond the point where cost is a factor.'

Involving Vanuatu would focus media attention on the fishing cartels, too, but she wasn't about to tell him that.

He paused, then demanded, 'So what are you waiting for?'

Kristin lifted her comunit. 'You heard? Ben thinks it's not totally ridiculous, but that's as optimistic as he'll go.'

John Mennenger arranged the landing formalities and Ben prepared the dolphin for transport while Kristin went to the house they had once shared and packed a bag for him. She hated catering to Ben's dependence on her but it gave her a chance to clear some of her things out.

When the cargo SP put down at the Fisheries dock late that afternoon, Kristin stayed in her office. She would have liked to have seen inside the machine but the wharf was jammed with VMF soldiers, customs, immigration and civil aviation authorities, all of whom had been surprisingly co-operative for the second time in a week, and all of whom were tripping over each other with varying degrees of self-importance.

Kristin was sitting with her ankles crossed on the windowsill, a cup of tea in one hand, watching the activity on the wharf. A knock came at her door. 'Yeah,' she replied absently.

'Hey, Doc.'

She dropped her feet, swivelled around in her chair—and looked up into Nicholas Page's extraordinary green eyes. She couldn't help but smile. 'What are you doing here?'

He shrugged. 'Someone had to drive.' He unfastened the collar of his grey-green flight suit.

Kristin quickly composed herself. Despite her initial reaction, she absolutely refused to let him charm her, if for no other reason than he seemed so good at it. She crossed her arms. 'That Naval Academy charisma might normally get you what you want, Commander, but I'm still short a few explanations. Now give.'

His smile faded. 'I have the Secretary of State's wife and son on board.'

'What? Why?' She stood and stared at him incredulously.

'The Winthrops are family friends, I'm Sammy's godfather.'

She frowned. 'Okay ... that's an explanation, but it's not a reason.'

Page breathed deeply. 'The dolphin goes into respiratory distress when it's separated from Sammy.'

Kristin felt a tug in her gut.

'We'll need someone in Australia to keep the media happy; this could be an opportunity,' he added.

Maybe the US government was using her, but they both wanted the same thing. Thankful that she'd had a chance to shower and change into halfway decent clothes, Kristin opened the top drawer of her desk and grabbed her passport card. Then she picked up her shoulder bag and one of the smaller cases she'd brought from the house.

Page shook his head as he followed. 'Next time, try to be a little faster.'

'Next time, huh.' She grabbed her new leather jacket on the way out. 'Why do I get the feeling this is going to become a habit?'

## Chapter 17

**Human disease is emerging as one of the most sensitive, and distressing, indicators of climate change. Floodwaters in arid North East Kenya caused Rift Valley fever, a cattle disease, to jump the species barrier and kill hundreds of people. Victims of the 'bleeding disease' died so fast that doctors at first suspected it was anthrax. As temperatures rise, mosquito-borne yellow fever has invaded Ethiopia, while dengue fever is spreading through the Americas and has reached Texas...**

—New Scientist, January 1999

Joe stood in his boss' office staring at a large map of Australia. 'Where?' he said, screwing up his face.

'Three hundred miles north west of the Olgas,' Macmillan replied. 'The Olgas are near Uluru, the Aboriginal name for Ayers Rock. You heard of it?' He was standing with his hands on his hips, the cuffs of his sleeves rolled up in a work like fashion.

'Okay, yeah, big red rock in the middle of the desert.'

Macmillan had opened the large map on a long table by the door. Until today, Joe had never noticed the table was inlaid with green leather; it was normally buried under a mass of building plans and blueprints. Not anymore.

'The project is near Lake Macdonald, under the Western MacDonnell Ranges.' Macmillan walked back to his desk and opened a drawer.

Joe found Ayers Rock and the Olgas, then his finger traced a line northwest until he reached a blue check-marked square. There were deserts in every direction: The Great Western, Tanami, Great Victoria, Sturt, Great Sandy, Gibson and Simpson. And the 'lakes' were dry, barren salt flats named after the explorers who died looking for them, except for one named Lake Disappointment.

'The lakes used to be dry for years. Once every decade or so it would rain, and they'd fill. The desert would come alive with wildlife.' Macmillan pulled a large envelope from his drawer. 'In the last fifteen years they've been getting more rain in this area, a lot more. And that's affecting the climate. It's changing there, Joe, just like it's changing here, but in different ways.'

Joe looked up. 'This is the project you've been working on?'

'We won the contract,' Macmillan replied smugly. Then he conceded, 'There are other companies, other nations, including the Australians, Canadians, British, Germans and Dutch. It's already the size of a small city, mostly underground, like Coober Pedy.'

'Coober what?'

'An opal mining town on the edge of the Great Victoria Desert.' Macmillan joined Joe at the table and handed him a half dozen 10x8 photographs. Joe flipped through the images while Macmillan continued to talk. 'It's so hot outside during the day that they built most of the town underground in old opal mine shafts. Anyway, the army built most of this place under the MacDonnell Ranges, although there are other, classified projects all around nearby Lake Macdonald, and the government wants to accelerate expansion.'

Joe's eyes narrowed and he looked up. 'Because of the Kamchatka Statement, right?' He wondered why he hadn't heard about it before. Then again, except for the news about Samuel Winthrop Junior and

a dolphin, he hardly ever heard about Australia. Who did?

It's not just military, Joe. There are hundreds of thousands of civilians, agriculturists, horticulturists, agronomists and the tradesmen needed to maintain the infrastructure.' Macmillan walked to the window and looked outside. 'I know it sounds like the middle of nowhere but it's already a hive of activity. And you said you wanted to go somewhere warm and dry, for Greg.'

'Not the middle of the goddamned desert!'

Macmillan spun around. 'Joe, this is huge! Seventy years ago the Israelis turned barren desert into productive farmlands using Australian flora to do it. This project is on a scale hundreds, maybe thousands of times larger.' He pointed to the images in Joe's hand. 'You can taste the excitement! It's not the middle of the desert anymore, but the middle of the largest landscape and engineering project since God made Eden. Everybody wants to be part of it!'

*Everybody.* Joe shook his head. The picture of a kangaroo on the hospital cafeteria wall had reminded him that there *was* a way out. Australia was as big as the United States but supported less than a tenth of the population. When he looked at the map he could see why. It was like Death Valley from San Francisco to Washington, DC. And it was wild! Even the wet, tropical north made the Florida everglades look like a theme park. He spread the photographs across the table and examined each one closely. They were not the kind of images most people would get excited over but they caught Joe's professional attention.

'Virtually uninhabited and ready to be tamed,' Macmillan added when he joined him. 'The Australians have clung to the edges for two hundred and fifty years. Now, with the climate changing, they're starting to move inland. We've got a chance to colonize a new land, just as our forefathers did, but it's as President Blake said, we have modern technology and the benefit of experience. We can do it *right* this time!' he said, his finger stabbing at a photograph of an enormous water recycling plant.

'And you say you've already got approval for us to move?' Joe chewed his lip.

'I should have told you sooner.' Macmillan rolled down his sleeves and fastened the cuffs. 'I submitted every one of this company's employees for consideration. I knew some people wouldn't want to move any further than North Carolina but I didn't want to delay things when the time came. And the time is now, Joe. Remember that job you did for the university, the biolab expansion? Because of that and your blood group, they're asking for you to work on a semi-classified project expanding a biolab facility at MacDonnell. You'll be getting four times the money there as in North Carolina. With tax breaks, when you come back in a few years you'll be set for life!'

Joe recalled reading something about a conference on Rhesus. He was immune to this new bug. Maybe that's why they wanted him. Well that was okay by him but—'What about Greg's TB?'

Lifting his coat off the rack by the door, Macmillan nodded cautiously. 'I made some inquiries. It's the best climate for TB patients and once Greg is settled into a treatment routine he can come out and join you. But I can't afford to delay sending you any longer.'

Was he seriously considering this? Joe's heart pounded.

Macmillan pulled on his coat and slapped him on the back. 'Listen, Joe, it's probably better this way. You go to Australia now and take a few weeks to settle in. I know Sylvie, she'll be happier with you out of the way while she packs and finishes up here.'

Joe looked down. He couldn't argue with that. Yet it just didn't seem ... right. Like he was running away

or something.

'The company will ship your things there—we're sending container loads of equipment almost daily. And it gives the doctors time to work out Greg's treatment. But Joe, I need an answer. There are a lot of other people who'd snatch this opportunity.'

*Other people, everybody else.* Joe Camicci sensed this was his last chance to be one of these *other people*. Sylvie was right, there was nothing holding them in Newton anymore. He looked out the window to the dull, grey sky. 'Can you give me a minute? I need to make a call.'

'Use my TFT, Joe.' Macmillan opened the door. 'I've got a few things to do, I'm going to Australia next week, too.'

Joe hesitated, then he called the real estate agent. 'That guy still interested in buying the house?'

'He's spent the day looking at other properties, Mr. Camicci and we're about to close up for the evening, but he's here now. I'll ask him.'

A lump of lead settled in Joes' stomach, but he couldn't see any other way.

'He's not too sure. You have to understand, it's a buyer's market.'

The lead grew heavier. 'Well if he wants it, I'd be willing to come over now and sign the contract.'

There was a muffled conversation off screen, then, 'Congratulations, Mr. Camicci. And let me assure you that you got a good price.'

Later that night in bed, Joe felt Sylvie gently rub his shoulder. 'Can't sleep?' she asked.

Shifted restlessly in the bed, Joe groaned and sat up. The curtains were open and moonlight lent a warm glow to the bedroom. He reached for Sylvie's hand and pulled her to him. 'It's like a bad dream.'

She wrapped her arms around him and snuggled closer.

'I can't believe I'm even thinking about it. Two days!'

'Joe, it's okay.' Her voice was as reassuring as the warmth of her arms. 'Who bought this house in the first place? Who got everything packed and moved when you were on that job in Seattle? I was pregnant then, with a toddler to take care of. Now with Greg to help me, I'll get it done in no time.'

'But we're uprooting him, taking him away from his friends!'

'Are you talking about Greg—or you?'

He shook his head and looked down into her understanding eyes. 'Maybe some. But two days! That doesn't give me time to see everyone, to say goodbye, you know?' There was so much to do, his mind kept making out lists and tossing them away.

Sylvie rubbed her hand across his chest. 'A lot of the people you work with, your friends, they're going too. I told Angie Hartwig and she said Des is leaving tomorrow and Russ Dervedde is going next week. Josh Hartmann has already gone to North Carolina and—'

A noise outside caught Joe's attention. He squeezed Sylvie's hand and got up. 'Damned 'coon I bet,' he muttered as he walked downstairs. He pulled his boots on, grabbed a flashlight and overcoat, and opened the back door.

'Dad?'

Wrapping his coat around himself, Joe turned to his son. 'It's probably just a raccoon, go back to bed, Greg, it's below freezing outside.'

'What are you going to do?'

Joe opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again and shook his head. He went outside and walked down to the compost pile. The grass crunched underfoot. Frost, he thought absently. At least it wasn't snow. He shone the flashlight into the 'coon's eyes, startling its excavation into the vegetable peelings. Joe could see two little ones behind it; he, or she, had brought the whole family this time. What the hell, it wasn't his yard anymore. Or his compost heap. 'All yours, pal,' he said and walked back into the house.

\* \* \* \*

Virologists, microbiologists and epidemiologists are a notoriously suspicious lot when it comes to microbes. Traditionally, management of epidemics begins by appointing specific tasks to experts in their respective fields. But Rhesus was unlike any epidemic that had gone before. It was a pandemic that had invaded the human genome long before civilization arose. Epidemiologists weren't looking for a microbe, but a trigger. And that rendered the established rules for managing outbreaks useless.

Although burgeoning infectious diseases consumed their time and resources, health professionals had systematically gathered data on Rhesus where and when they could. Now that it had been elevated from one of thousands of curious microbes living in the human ecology to a potential species killer, they set most other work aside and read every paper they could find on the virus. Then they began jockeying for position within their respective organizations; everyone wanted to get to the conference at MacDonnell.

Despite the influx of offers from respected virologists and epidemiologists worldwide, Dr. Roger Harrison did not want to surround himself with traditional thinkers. While the conference would be open to just about anyone who could raise the funding to come, Harrison wanted a core team in place at MacDonnell as soon as possible. So he sat down with Andreas Clem's wife, Barbara, and worked through hundreds of names. Then he left it to the Clems to contact everyone, while he packed and flew to Australia.

The first thing that hit Harrison when he stepped out of the plane at MacDonnell was a blast of heat. It was immediately followed by a surge of anger. There to meet him was Dr. Allan Saunders, an administrative genius that Harrison had hand picked for his team, and Colonel Charles Dixon. Harrison almost turned around and got back on the aircraft.

'Roger, how was your flight?' Dixon held out his hand.

Ignoring Saunders, Harrison snapped, 'I should have known.'

Dixon turned to Saunders. 'I'm not on his Christmas list.'

'This is not some damned bioweapon!' Harrison spat.

'No it's not, Dr. Harrison.' Saunders motioned him to a waiting helicopter. 'Roger,' he added in a placatory voice, 'you invited me to select my team. Most of the technical and administrative people already here, or arriving in the next few days, are part of a long established plan. I understand you have only recently been briefed on the Exodus Project?'

Harrison went to reply, instead, he clamped his jaw shut and glared at Saunders.

'Dr. Saunders was short listed to run the expanded facility five years ago,' said Dixon. 'That he was also on *your* list of recommended personnel is a measure of his professional capabilities, not an indication of

the Australian's or the WHO's *carte blanche* approval of your requirements. Roger, we might not have seen eye to eye in the past, but we're all in the same profession. We all knew ACR cholera was just the overture.'

Harrison's jaw worked back and forth, but he said nothing and climbed into the helicopter.

The MacDonnell Level 4 facility was not, as Harrison assumed, in the underground complex. It was located fifty miles north, in a beautifully landscaped compound the size of a moderate university. Harrison expected a few labs and offices, not state of the art equipment, and not one but *four* electron microscopes. Multiple blocks of biohazard 2, 3 and 4 safety labs with intricate ventilation systems, animal rooms separate from the main complex, well appointed, serviced apartments and carefully designed conference rooms completed what the sign at the entrance foyer advertised as a Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial and Research Organization—CSIRO—Agricultural and Microbial Research complex.

By the end of the first week, Harrison had begun to appreciate the scope of the still expanding facility. To his utter dismay, Colonel Dixon was proving to be an exceptionally helpful ally. Harrison found himself increasingly dependent on the Colonel's military connections to get what he wanted, fast. Even better, Dixon wasn't some military jarhead but a highly qualified and arguably more experienced epidemiologist than Harrison himself. A dozen investigative avenues had opened, and abrasive personalities were, if not exactly working together, at least listening to one another.

That morning, when one of the WHO's top administrators walked into the briefing room, Harrison felt a momentary twinge of guilt. Officially, the team was working under the guise of the World Health Organization. In fact, with Barbara Clem's assistance, the MacDonnell facility had all but hijacked the beleaguered organization's name, many of its brilliant but disillusioned personnel, and access to its worldwide network. Harrison wondered how long before the WHO's more conservative elements raised the alarm that the rug was being ripped out from under Brussels and carted off 'Down Under'.

An elderly epidemiologist sitting beside Harrison whispered, 'This reminds me of the smallpox campaign in the seventies, when we moved through countries like an avenging army. We beat that enemy then,' he said, 'through the sheer bloody-minded determination of the men and women in the field. We fought the WHO's bureaucratic pipsqueaks at every turn and broke every one of their goddamned rules. We beat smallpox *despite* the WHO, not *because* of 'em! Whatever you do, Roger, don't let the bureaucrats run the show this time, either, or you've already lost.'

The epidemiologist sat back when Leigh Walker, the mathematician who had discovered the connection between Rhesus and sterility, said, 'Can someone please explain to me why the virus attacks the proteins on Rh-positive blood? Is the virus decimating these proteins first because they offer a potential defence?'

'There's no reason to think that,' a virologist replied.

'Why not?'

'If the proteins are, as you suggest, a first line of defence, then Rh-negatives would be the *first* to be affected because they lack the protein. But the virus is absent from Rh-negative genes, and those with Rh-negative blood are not being rendered sterile.'

'So apart from attacking and killing these proteins,' Walker said. 'Rhesus doesn't appear to do anything except make people sterile? Isn't killing its host, or in this case the host species, counterproductive?'

'That's high school biology,' an Australian microbiologist replied. 'Anthrax, for example, *requires* the host to die in order to spread.'

'Okay, but why attack only *this* protein? What I'm getting at, and I'm no medical doctor, of course,' said Walker, 'is the point that has been stressed at every press conference. There is a direct *correlation* between decimation of these proteins and sterility, but no *causality* has been established. Is the *virus* making people sterile, or is it guilty only of attacking the protein—?'

'Which is breaking down and making people sterile!' finished Harrison excitedly.

While arguments circled the room, a French haematologist said, 'I cannot see why that would be, but it is also true that there has been so little research done on these proteins, it cannot be ruled out.'

Then a British doctor caught everyone's attention. 'I have seven reports here,' he held up a folder, 'of women with positive blood groups who have received O-negative blood transfusions. In every case the protein decimation ceased and Rhesus appeared to go into remission.'

Exclamations and sounds of shock travelled the room. 'What about transfusions from other negative blood groups?' someone called.

The Brit shook his head. 'No data. I'm not a haematologist and until now I assumed O-negatives were universal donors because their blood type *lacked* the protein. But what are the other differences between negative and positive blood groups? Are we looking at this from the wrong end of the tunnel? Could negative blood groups contain something that inhibits, perhaps even kills Rhesus, or at least stops the protein decimation and sterility?'

Despite the possibility of finding a quick cure, Harrison wasn't alone in visualizing a frightening scenario. Beside him, the epidemiologist voiced the same concerns, 'Somebody better find out real fast, because if he's right, negative blood will become more precious than gold.'

Within hours, the news had broken. Harrison's first instinct was to call Andreas Clem and have the White House chew out the 'expert source' and the news station for tabloid sensationalism. But the WHO was riddled with disenchanted people, some of whom made a career out of being irresponsible. It was probably the same self-aggrandizing fool who'd released the initial advisory about Rhesus.

'Is it possible?' Jean asked when she called him from DC a short while later. 'I thought every disease produced antibodies unless your T cells were shot, like AIDS. And Andreas told me this was nothing like AIDS.'

'It isn't,' Harrison replied. 'With *some* diseases you can collect plasma from infected people who've recovered and use that as a basis for a vaccine. But that's not a universal panacea. Catch dengue fever and you develop a healthy batch of antibodies. But then catch *hemorrhagic* dengue, and when your antibodies, already alerted to be on the lookout, attack the virus, it goes into stealth mode. Normal viruses are swamped and killed, but hemorrhagic dengue takes control of the macrophage cells and uses them as Trojan horses to gain entry into every organ in the body.'

'This news report,' Harrison added, gesturing to the screen. 'Is an *unqualified assumption* that negative blood can be used as a vaccine or treatment. It's utter nonsense!'

'But the data—'

'Shows nothing of the kind!' Harrison tossed aside the British report on which the news story had been based. 'While the women tested positive for Rhesus virus before receiving the transfusion, their current blood work shows that although Rhesus is still active, the blood proteins, which normally break down within a month of Rhesus going active, are still present.'



Jean frowned. 'Well, doesn't that prove—'

'It proves nothing except sloppy science! There could be any number of reasons.' Harrison cried tossing his hands up in the air. 'The entire report is based on *six pregnant women in one city in the UK!* We have data from blood bank services worldwide on tens of thousands of Rh-positive recipients of Rh-negative blood. Rhesus is going active in them at the same rate as people who have never received blood transfusions or blood products. We don't have time to disprove every godforsaken quack theory that hits the Internet and news services. C'mon, Jean, you're immune, but you're forgetting basic scientific principles and grasping at any quick fix that presents itself!'

She looked at Harrison. 'Sorry, you're right, of course. I had this momentary desperate hope that unlike AIDS, a miracle cure was just around the corner. The Jehovah's Witnesses are having a field day, blaming blood transfusions for the spread of Rhesus. Minutes after this hit the news, the Red Cross was inundated with people *demanding* blood transfusions!'

## Chapter 18

**Humans (should) view themselves as smart animals swimming in a microbial sea—an ecology they cannot see, but one that most assuredly influences the course of human events.**

—William McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples*

Australia's offer to host a worldwide conference on Rhesus opened the floodgates of international attention, especially from Asian nations. But it also inflamed the accusations that Rhesus was a biological weapon aimed at nations little impacted by Industrial Winter. Although Australia was geographically divorced from that argument, Asian politicians accused Australia of being an arrogant mouthpiece for an equally arrogant United States. Media publications ran documentaries on the number of US troops now stationed in Australia, and perhaps more ominously, on the Australian-controlled Christmas and Cocos-Keeling Islands, just a few miles south of Indonesia's capital. And Indonesia, journalists kept reminding everyone, had the largest Moslem population in the world. Questions became demands. Why is the WHO holding a conference on Rhesus in Australia? Why did President Blake's recent speech contain so many references to Australia? Perhaps Australia better look out, editorials warned. The globalization of the world's economy these past decades had become synonymous with *Americanization*. Perhaps this economic *Americanization* and its predilection for invading Moslem countries, was a forerunner to something far more ominous.

In a live interview with a prominent Asian business news program, the Australian Prime Minister contrived to lose his patience.

'If you'd done your homework,' Anderson said, 'you'd know that these wild allegations of Rhesus being a biological weapon are ignorant, tabloid sensationalism. Apart from the fact that it's an endogenous retrovirus,' his tone insinuating that if the interviewer didn't know what that was by now, he was backward, 'Rhesus is active in most people in Western nations. *Most people*. That's more than fifty percent! Yet most of Asia, South America and Africa are currently unaffected. In areas like rural Indonesia the rate is less than one percent. Now if we find a cure for Rhesus tomorrow, who's going to benefit most?'

'But in the long term,' countered the journalist, 'some Caucasians will not be affected, whereas more than five billion Asians and Africans—'

'Have the most to gain from coming to a conference aimed at stopping Rhesus,' retorted Anderson. 'Australia and the United States have lost half, *half*,' he stressed, 'of our next generation, and at the rate at which the Rhesus trigger is spreading, in five years we will have lost ninety-two percent! That's got nothing to do with Industrial Winter or the Kamchatka Statement. HIV and TB notwithstanding, Asia and Africa's population will increase by fifteen percent. So,' he concluded, his eyes narrowing, 'if you're stuck in this bioweapons groove, ask yourselves, who's out to get whom?'

\* \* \* \*

Kristin leaned against the tall wooden gate of Sea World's quarantine pool yard. A large beige sail extended across the pool. Standing in the shallows, dressed in blue wetsuits, Ben Mills, the Sea World vet and two dolphin trainers were examining the female *Tursiops* and its adopted calf. A tender look crossed Kristin's face as she watched them. Ben was laughing at something the vet was saying.

With the entire resources of the US Government and the world's second largest oceanarium to call on, the operation to transport the animals to Sea World, Australia, had gone like clockwork. Now, two days later, Sammy Winthrop, clad in a bright orange, child-sized wetsuit, stood waist deep in the heated

quarantine pool while Sue Winthrop sat with Nicholas Page on a nearby bench seat.

Sammy laughed and looked up to see if his mother was watching. The calf pulled away then swam back to him. Sue took off her sunglasses and waved to him. She pushed the sleeves of her sweater up, linked her arm with Nick's and said, 'Thank you.'

'For what? I just drove,' he replied.

Sue squeezed his hand. 'Sure, just like always, my knight in shining armour.' She caught his eyes. Sue had never regretted her decision to marry Samuel Winthrop, but she had never completely fallen out of love with the man beside her, either.

Sammy sat back on the steps of the pool. Sue added, 'You don't have kids, Nick, you can't imagine what it's like, living in constant fear for him.'

Following the events of the last few days, Sue had desperately needed to talk to someone. Her husband was too busy and the Secret Service-agents too aloof. Only Nick, with whom she'd once been intimate, might understand her carefully hidden emotions.

'The agents just makes it worse.' She glanced at the watchful men standing nearby. They looked ridiculously out of place with their dark suits, darker glasses and bulging armpits. Nick was also armed, but she had always dismissed it as part his uniform, like a policeman. 'They're a constant reminder that I can't protect Sammy. Then, when I saw that helicopter hovering over him ... She fiddled nervously with her sunglasses.

'Sue—'

'No, Nick, listen to me. It isn't just the thought of Sammy's death that terrifies me. It's the loss of ... future. Sammy's my doorway into that place I'll never see, or be part of, a thread through time. We only glimpse it through a misty shroud of possibilities. Our children turn those possibilities into realities. It doesn't matter that we don't see that future, it's enough to know it exist. And when we die, it's the knowing that a part of our existence, our children, and grandchildren are going about their lives with thoughts and plans into the future, that lets us rest in peace.'

She laughed self-consciously, and added, 'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to get carried away.'

Although Nick had immediately grasped the political ramifications of Rhesus, it had been on a purely intellectual level. Now, for the first time, he began to comprehend its emotional impact. He placed his other hand over Sue's and said, 'I think you've given voice to what a lot of people feel, now that we know how widespread Rhesus is.'

Sue put her sunglasses back on and smiled bitterly. 'Here I am talking about future generations when humanity's greed has stolen most of our futures.'

Nick shook his head. 'Maybe you're not infected.' Releasing her hand, he stood.

'I'm not, but Sam is,' she replied, rubbing her hands down the grey legs of her track pants. 'He was one of the first tested. It's okay, Nick. I know it's not politically correct. Maybe it's even selfish, but I can say it to you. Maybe Rhesus will give the Earth a chance to recover.'

Sammy climbed out of the pool, and, grabbing a towel, called, 'He's going to be okay, I know it! They're going to wait another day before taking care of the mother's tooth, but they've already given her some medicine for it. The baby's suckling okay, too. Can we stay? They promised to show me the Polar bear cubs!'

Sue smiled and stood. 'We have to go back with Nick on the transport SP tonight.'

A shadow crossed Sammy's face and he glanced at the Secret Service-agents. 'Well, can we come back and see how they're doing?'

Nick well knew Sammy's predilection for getting into trouble. 'Sure,' he replied. 'But only if you promise not to run away from the Secret Service-agents anymore.'

Sammy's face flickered.

'Listen to me, Sam.' Nick took off his tan cap and crouched down to Sammy's eye level. Despite the security measures, there were some realities that Sammy should not be protected from. 'Do you remember how you felt when Karen died?'

'You almost died, too.' Sammy looked down, and twisted the brightly coloured towel in his hands.

'There are people out there who would do the same thing to you, Sam, just to punish your father for being who he is. And those people probably know that you like to run away. That helicopter belonged to the news station, but it could just as easily have been one of those bad people. Every time you hide or run away, your mom feels just like you felt when Karen died. You might know you're okay, but your mom doesn't. And one day, if you keep doing it, things might not turn out so well. The world is going to become far more dangerous over the next few months, Sam. I know what it's like to lose someone I thought I should have been able to protect. I don't want—you don't want your mom to feel that pain, do you?'

Sammy's face crumpled and he shook his head. He dropped the towel and ran to hug his mother. 'I promise I won't do it anymore,' he said, holding on to her tightly. 'And I'll look after Mom, too. I promise.'

'I know you will, Sam.' Nick smiled and stood.

Sue nodded and mouthed, 'thank you'.

'Now can I go see the Polar bears?' Sammy implored.

Nick shook his head at the resiliency of children. Sue glanced over his shoulder, and said, 'I think someone's waiting for you.'

Looking around, he was surprised to see Kristin watching them. Replacing his cap he said, 'No, she's waiting for Dr. Mills.' He kissed Sue on the cheek and added, 'Go take Sammy to see the bear cubs, I'll meet up with you this evening.'

'Nick,' said Sue. When he turned back to her, she added, 'I might have been preoccupied but I'm not blind. Dr. Baker was watching you in the SP, not Dr. Mills.'

Nick said nothing, but he was thoughtful as he walked around the pool. He had hoped to finish with the Nehros by now, to put that part of his life behind him and concentrate on the Exodus Project. When he'd walked into Kristin's office in Vanuatu, her immediate reaction to seeing him had swiftly been tempered by a healthy dose of mistrust. He couldn't blame her; he'd been party to a monumental deception. She might now know that he'd disagreed with that tactic, but she was also right in suspecting he was still withholding information. No matter how much he regretted that on a personal level, he had no choice; it was his job.

'How are they doing?'' Kristin asked when he joined her.

'Sue's resilient and Sammy, well, he's a kid. It's been one big adventure for him.'

I asked the staff here about Sammy's connection to the calf. Mystery solved. Dolphins have a considerably higher survival rate during rescues if someone stays close by the animal and talks to it. On the trip back from Kuwait, the female was much more settled when one of us stayed with her.' Kristin put her hands into her leather jacket. 'But of course, Sammy's connection made for a far better human interest story.'

'Confronted by things they can't change, like Rhesus and Industrial Winter, people need to be inspired,' he replied. 'They need to know that human ingenuity and technology can save the world, even if it's only in the form of a dolphin and a small boy.'

The facilities and resort hotel at Sea World had allowed everyone, including the dolphins, to avoid an over zealous media. Frustrated, the press pounced on the one person who knew something and had been willing to discuss it: Kristin Baker. Although she was neither as skilled nor as experienced as the publicity-seeking politicians who had jostled her for airtime, she had successfully drawn attention to the carnage inflicted by the Asian fishing cartels.

'I caught part of the news last night,' he said. 'How did you describe it? The 'marine equivalent of clear felling entire countries of rainforests'?'

'We let a few news teams in for an hour yesterday, to film Sammy swimming with the dolphins,' she said. 'No interviews, mind you, but they segued it with the more grotesque 'walls of death' footage I gave them from *Marmet*.'

The stark contrast had provoked an intense reaction. Riding the waves of public opinion, politicians were currently decrying the 'appalling wholesale slaughter' of marine life by Asian fishing cartels. The Australian Prime Minister's now famous interview also added fuel to the outrage, although the Japanese were quick to point out that Rhesus was spreading through *their* country at an alarming rate.

Nick glanced down at the folded newspaper tucked under her Kristin's arm. 'Front page again?'

'Second only to Rhesus.' She opened the paper. 'Any other time, rescuing a dolphin wouldn't make page fifty. Look at this.' Pointing to the editorial, she read, 'Both the government and opposition are in agreement about setting up an immediate board of inquiry and implementing a thorough search of Australian waters for illegal nets.' Some ministers and a whole gaggle of backbenchers are demanding a comprehensive review of *all* Asian trade agreements, not just the cartel's fishing rights. I presume that's what your bosses wanted, especially after Paul Anderson neatly shifted the blame for Rhesus.' She touched his arm and added quickly, 'I'm sorry, I'm being petulant again.'

He snorted softly. 'You're a born rebel, Dr. Baker. You just can't stand the idea of siding with politicians, even if you agree with them.'

Kristin chuckled. 'I'm too used to fighting bureaucratic stupidity and political greed.'

Her eyes turned to Ben and her smile faded. But Nick also noticed her wistful expression. 'He's a good man,' he said.

'He's a good biologist.' Her lips compressed in regret. 'Seeing him like this, I'm reminded of why I was attracted to him. That doesn't alter my decision to leave him, the relationship is all wrong, but it was nice to see this side of him again.'

Nick recalled the night they'd installed the sonar on *Marmet*, the way Mills had treated her. He'd had a

background check run on the biologist and immediately understood what had been bothering Kristin, and why she had been—still was—so reluctant to discuss it. Little wonder she viewed Nick with equal suspicion. Personal relationships made her vulnerable—something he understood, if for entirely different reasons.

Handing him the newspaper, she said, 'I better be going. I need to get into town and book a flight back to Vila.'

'Why go to town to do that?'

'I also need a new comunit, my other one died in Sydney.' She held her wrist up. 'This is a spare, but only the chronometer and phone works. Too much salt water.'

Hoping to spend a little more time with her, he said, 'We're flying back late this evening. Want a ride?'

She stopped and turned to look at him. 'Really?'

Nick offered her a smile and briefly clasped her elbow. 'I told you I was sending you more units. We have four that I forgot to offload when we collected you in Vila.'

'I doubt you'd ever forget anything,' she muttered, tossing him a disbelieving look.

'So how 'bout showing me the sights?'

'You mean what's left after the last cyclone. All right, if you tell me why you asked me all those questions when we first met, when you already knew the answers.'

Nick studied her face as he opened the door for them. He wished he could be as honest as she was persistent. 'Things have changed since then.'

'Okay, but what was supposed to have happened after I 'discovered' the nets?'

'The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs can answer that, I can't.' And damn them for not briefing her yet.

'But you know,' she pushed. 'I tried to call you in your room last night but according to the hotel you don't exist. And you're still carrying a weapon. Come to think of it, I've never seen you without it.'

When they were outside the oceanarium, away from the crowds, he stopped and gently taking her arm, turned her to face him. 'I can't tell you,' he said, urging her to understand. The Nehros might have gone to ground with the Shatt-al Arabs, but he wasn't about to advertise his presence in Australia, or walk around defenceless.

Kristin looked up into his eyes. Suddenly, she relented. 'Fair enough,' she replied. Walking down the steps to the nearest taxi she added, 'But that gun will set off security alerts in every souvenir shop in town.'

'No it won't,' he said smugly, and opened the cab door for her.

Eighteen hours later, Kristin was back in Vanuatu, unloading bags from John Mennenger's utility. 'These are the last ones,' she said, dropping them on her office floor.

'Is Commander Page the reason you're leaving him?' John asked her.

Kristin gestured to her belongings. 'Thanks for helping me get the last of my stuff out before Ben comes

back.'

'You didn't answer my question.'

'You mean Ben's question don't you, John?' She tied her hair back in a ponytail then bulldozed file cases off the green couch. It was close to 1 a.m. and she needed sleep. She removed the belt from her jeans, took off her jacket then grabbed a rug and cushions from a shelf. 'Why do men automatically assume you're leaving them for some other guy? Is it an ego thing? It's actually kind of insulting. I don't need a man to define myself. So the answer is no, it's got nothing to do with Nick. After Fiji and Sydney I realized that life is too damned short. Walking a tightrope every day is one thing; at least I'm achieving something. Coming home to it every night was something else again.' She laid down on the couch, pulled the rug over herself and closed her eyes. 'And you can quote me if you want. Decide which vessels you want these new sonars installed in, and I'll start on them in the morning.' She yawned, rolled over and added, 'G'night, John. Can you turn the lights out when you leave, please?'

When Mennenger had gone, Kristin snuggled into the folds of the couch and smiled. It took her a few moments to realize why. Traces of an expensive aftershave lingered. And something more: clean, crisp uniform, a quirky smile and green eyes. She groaned softly, vaguely annoyed with herself. No, she didn't need a man, but she'd sure enjoyed their afternoon together.

## Chapter 19

**You can't sue a doctor for violating an ecosphere, but you can sue for failure to give an antibiotic that you think would have enhanced the possibility of patient survival.**

—Mark Lappé: *Germes Won't Die*

Sylvie Camicci was sitting in the kitchen when Greg got home that night. She saw her son's gaze flicker to the Bible lying on the table, but she smiled confidently, hoping he wouldn't notice the telltale smears around her eyes. 'Settlement for the house came through,' she said.

'Yes!' Greg cried, dropping his coat and hugging her.

'We have to be out by the weekend.' Her face clouded.

'That's okay. We can live out of a suitcase for a while.'

Sometimes Sylvie wondered if Greg's enthusiasm was for her benefit. This was the home he'd grown up in, surely he'd miss it, miss his friends! But then what she'd said to Joe was also true. Most all of their friends were going, or had already left. 'No, you don't understand. Our visas still haven't been approved. And they won't give us tickets without visas.'

'Listen, Mom,' Greg replied carefully. 'The doctors won't say it outright, but I don't think they'll let me go to Australia until—'

'They have to!' Sylvie cried indignantly. 'Your father's already working there!'

'Maybe you're right, and maybe not. But just to be safe, I've been checking things out. There are a couple of cheap motels near the hospital—cheaper than me bussing to and from Portland every day—and the hospital florist is willing to give me a job making deliveries. We can stay in Portland, and I can work.'

Sylvie looked at him in horror. Give up school at sixteen and get a job? What about college? It was their place to provide for him! And this was *their* home! She pulled away and wrapped her arms about herself. All her memories of Crystal were here, but they were already leaching away, packed inside a ship to Australia. It wasn't right!

Biting her lip, she pushed past her son, opened the back door and walked outside. Something, some movement down near the compost caught her attention. She slipped on the icy steps, fell on her elbow and then burst into tears.

Once upon a time, she'd imagined her and Joe growing old in this house. Their grandchildren would come to visit, and make snowmen in the backyard while she cooked Thanksgiving dinner. Or it would be summer vacation, and the children would play up in the old tree house. She rubbed her bruised elbow and stared at the tree house. Joe really needed to nail the shingles back on ... But Joe wasn't coming home. Joe would never see the tree house again, and there would be no more summers.

Greg stood on the step behind, holding her coat.

'Go back inside,' she said through her tears, the pain in her heart outweighing the slight bruise on her elbow. 'You're not supposed to be out here, you'll only get yourself worse.'

'I've just walked home from the bus station! Besides, I'm not sick,' he objected, wrapping the coat



around her. 'I know what's bothering you, but I don't want to stay in Newton anymore. Everything's changing. It's not just the weather, it's other stuff, things worse than drugs. The sooner we leave, the better.' He paused then added, 'Becky Laminsky was attacked by a vampire cult this afternoon.'

'What?' Sylvie's eyes rounded and she turned to him. 'How is she? Did they catch them?'

Greg shook his head grimly. 'They haven't even found her yet. Jason called and told me.'

'I have to call her mother!' Sylvie stood to go inside. 'How did they know Becky was Rh-negative?'

'That's the insane part, she isn't, at least not according to Jason.'

Sylvie stared at her son. She swallowed hard, wanting to hold him, to protect him against the world. But nothing could protect him against the insanity that now raged. Most vampire cult members didn't even *want* to have a baby, but that didn't stop them from accusing Rh-negatives of secretly withholding cures to everything from ACR cholera to AIDS. Their web sites even listed 'ways to recognize' Rh-negatives, and described the best methods for extracting their blood. Some were calling for Rh-negatives to be branded, while having RH+ tattooed on their own foreheads. But the most heinous had begun abducting children then advertising a permanent supply of virgin, Rh-negative blood for sale.

National and international public health care services released continuous denials that Rh-negative blood held a cure for Rhesus or any other disease, but the incidence of attacks was increasing. Blood donations, particularly from the critical O and negative groups, had fallen to the point where donors were being offered payment, something that had ceased in the early days of AIDS. Even so, supplies were at a dangerously low level. And in a rapid replay of the 1980s AIDS fiasco, every few days some new scandal erupted. The active Rhesus virus had been found not only in blood, but also blood products.

'You keep telling me to look on the bright side.' Greg walked back inside with her and locked the door behind them. 'I've got a deadly strain of TB that's not making me sick but it's saving my butt from lunatic bloodsuckers. Go figure.' He started to chuckle.

Sylvie started to laugh with him. It may have been a little manic, but it was better than crying.

Late that night, after Greg had gone to bed, Sylvie wandered listlessly through the cold, empty rooms of the house. All but a few pieces of furniture had been shipped to Australia. Her footsteps echoed on the polished floorboards as she recalled all that had been, and all their lost dreams. The agony of Crystal's death had been compounded by old Alexis' behaviour. Locked in pain, Sylvie had failed to see her father-in-law drive Greg to drugs. It was only when Greg had overdosed and nearly died that she'd pulled herself out of her lethargy of grief. She'd quit work, ordered Alexis out of the house and dedicated herself to reclaiming her son. It hadn't been easy, but she had gotten through it by fortifying herself with sips from a past reality.

The night of Alexis' funeral, she'd pulled out one of the family DVDs and slipped back to a time when summers brought long, lazy days instead of bitter storms. Back when her family was safe and whole. Crystal had been only seven and Greg, eleven years old. He'd been playing big brother, teaching Crystal to backstroke in the warm waters of the lake. Sylvie loved those scenes because her children had been happy and healthy, the sun had been shining and the sky had been blue and cloudless. And on the mountains behind, just a few traces of snow had reminded them of a winter long past.

She'd been so sure she was pregnant that night, and that such days would come again. They would move to some place that had never heard of the Gulf Stream, and start over. But the new life she'd envisaged was already in tatters. She wasn't pregnant, never would be again, and Greg had TB.

Shivering, she wrapped the housecoat around her and thought about Becky Laminsky. The police had found her body dumped in a park. Sylvie glanced out the window. Street lamp cast pools of turbid light onto the sidewalk. The furtive shapes of racoons skittered by. She looked up. It was a clear night, although the halo around the moon foretold another storm.

Suddenly, Sylvie wanted to get away, right away—*now!* She hurried downstairs to pack the remaining china. In the morning, she would have the last of the furniture, heirlooms from past generations, placed into storage. Their remaining possessions would fit in the SUV, and then she would drive the two of them to Portland and check into one of the motels Greg was talking about.

While carrying the empty packing boxes into the kitchen, Sylvie sternly reminded herself that she had a son who could never catch a disease that robbed her friends of grandchildren. And unlike others, Greg's TB was curable. She had a husband who loved her, was faithful and cared for his family; that certainly put her in a minority. They had been given the chance of a new life and work in a country not unlike their own. Compared to most, they were doing okay.

\* \* \* \*

'Someone will put a bullet through Anderson if he's not careful.' Mioko Mennenger downed the last of her margarita and grabbed a handful of pistachios from the tray.

Kristin came out onto the back deck of *Marmet* with another round of drinks. She had finished installing the first of the three new sonars that afternoon, just as *Marmet* limped back to port with a bent propeller shaft. Although she'd wanted to help recover nets, her time was better spent in Vila training mechanics and technicians to install, operate and maintain the sonars. It was taking her considerably longer than if she worked alone, but that was part of her job description: to train ni-Vanuatu to take over her position when her contract expired.

The media, which had descended on Vanuatu to follow-up the drift-net story, had further hampered her. Fortunately, John Mennenger had taken them in hand, but she had been their 'expert' in Australia. Despite her denials, journalists now considered her instrumental in discovering the nets.

Sitting by the aft hatch with Mioko was Maddy Paine. The epidemiologist's long legs were propped against the deck rail, and she was critically examining the chipped nail polish on her toes. She glanced up when Kristin handed her another glass. 'Cheers.' Maddy sipped from the glass, then licking the salt from her lips, added, 'Yeah, advertising yourself as Rh-negative is painting a bull's eye on your forehead.'

Handing Mioko a drink, Kristin sat beside her on the hatch. The Chinese ships had been moved and the air smelled clean and salty. Cocktails on the aft deck at sunset was a far more enjoyable way to spend the evening than fighting off tourists during happy hour at The Bar.

'I'm not so sure about that. You see the latest on these vampire cults?' Kristin said.

Using her sunglasses, to push her curly hair off her face, Maddy said, 'They're just a handful of morons waving the neo-Nazi racist flag. They'll disappear into the sewers once this conference gets going.'

Kristin was doubtful. The blood typing was more than about race. It was about desperation, and the supply and demand of an illegally acquired substance—a substance that ran through her own veins.

'I can't believe a science conference has been organized so quickly,' said Mioko. 'It generally takes months to submit papers and—'

Maddy interrupted with a shake of her head. 'It's not going to be like that, at least not at the outset. Science has become increasingly compartmentalized; few researchers have time to review papers other

than those in their own fields. That's got to change. Roger Harrison is inviting people from a wide range of disciplines because the virus was switched on by *something*, not necessarily a biological trigger.'

Mioko sent them a disapproving frown. 'Hey, c'mon you two, this was supposed to be a girl's night out, not a wake!'

Maddy chuckled. 'Sorry. It's just that we've suspected something like Rhesus was waiting to pounce, especially when the climate began changing so abruptly. While I don't subscribe to the tabloid interpretation of the Gaia hypothesis—it's new age, crystal-carrying bullshit—I do agree,' she glanced at Kristin, 'that the Earth acts *like* a self-regulating, living organism. I just can't ascribe it with self-awareness, an intelligence with a specific agenda—to eradicate the human plague—as the lunatic fringe are preaching. God help the poor buggers, some are actually worshipping Gaia as a real, living Earth Goddess.'

Kristin sighed and reached for the nuts. 'Why do people turn metaphors into objects of worship?'

'It started,' Mioko answered wryly, 'with the Bible. They're just symbols, but people need symbols to rationalize their world any way they can.'

'Metaphor or not,' said Maddy, plucking a pistachio shell from her pants. 'Once upon a time diseases either overran our immune system and we died, or our internal forces repelled them and we survived. Sure, we used herbal medicines to assist that process, but we didn't change the ecology.'

'Until we developed sophisticated drugs,' Kristin said.

'Compelling microbes to devise altogether novel ways of attacking us,' said Maddy. 'As an epidemiologist, I've always taken a more ecological perspective. For seventy years doctors have administered antibiotics as a *carte blanche* solution to every household bug, while farmers fed it to their stock by the truckload. That practice has allowed microbes to burgeon into far more virulent organisms than have ever previously existed.'

'Like AIDS,' Mioko said.

Maddy shook her head. 'AIDS is an entirely different critter. It was—still is—a microbial Pandora's box. It attacked us in a way no epidemiologist envisaged, even in their worst nightmares. It's doubtful it would ever have emerged from the African jungle if we hadn't invaded its terrain first. Then it retaliated with a level of sophistication that seemed almost intelligent. I've often thought of AIDS not so much as a disease but a biological bulldozer clearing the way for other, emergent diseases like TB and ACR cholera to attack—with devastating results.'

She looked across the bay and added, 'We've had an appalling time fighting drug-resistant tuberculosis and cholera. But there was always a deeper-seated fear; that something far more infectious and virulent would enter the human playing field, now made extraordinarily vulnerable by AIDS. Then along comes Rhesus, as unexpected and utterly different to anything that's ever gone before. Not out of the African jungles, but from *within us*, a fifth columnist. It's not even taking advantage of people whose immune systems are compromised, it's attacking us on an entirely new front.'

Maddy stood, leaned on the deck rail and tossed the shell into the water. It hit with a plop then sent ripples scampering across the water, distorting the reflected colours of the sunset. 'Despite the susceptibility of non-Caucasians, the activation of Rhesus is up to ten *thousand* times greater in middle to upper income white suburban households than a homeless black guy in Brooklyn. And that breaks all the rules. It's as if Rhesus is aware of AIDS and the more conventional infectious microbes, and decided on a new tactic. But since it probably invaded our bodies thousands, even millions of years ago, that's one

hell of a forward plan.' She laughed self-consciously and turned to face them. 'Now I'm beginning to sound like some of these radical Gaia proponents, when it's really just ecological opportunism.'

Kristin stared across the tranquil harbour waters to the islands beyond. Less than two weeks earlier she had sat on this same hatch, saying something very similar to Nicholas Page.

Nick had not called since their awkward goodbye at Vila airport. With a dozen people watching, all she'd been able to manage was a platonic kiss and a thank you for the lunch and afternoon in the Gold Coast. She'd seen the look of regret in his eyes, but no matter how nicely he'd packaged it, she still felt like a pawn.

'I said,' Mioko repeated, 'how have you been since Fiji?'

Kristin looked up. 'I was going to come and see you, professionally. Then after Sydney airport...' she trailed off and sipped her drink. 'I suppose Ben's been in everyone's ear.'

Mioko nodded, while Maddy said, 'I've been avoiding him. He's a lousy drunk, no offence, Kris.'

'None taken. I left Ben and his emotional baggage when I got back from the States. I'm just kicking myself for taking so long.'

'What did you ever see in him?' Maddy asked.

'Sex?'

The three women burst out laughing, then Kristin added, 'C'mon, you know what it's like in a town this small. I fell into a groove and before I could get out, it grew into a hole.'

'Are you sleeping with the Commander?' asked Mioko.

Kristin rolled her eyes. 'You're as bad as your husband! No, of course not, I'm just cI don't know. I never thought I'd be an hysterical female but I didn't handle Sydney well.' She met Mioko's eyes. 'But then came the death ships and Rhesus, and it put the whole damned mess into perspective. I can't say I'm not having the occasional bad dream, but my point of view has been radically altered.'

'So, what about the Commander?' Maddy pushed.

Kristin smiled. 'What? I'm not allowed to have friends without sleeping with them? I don't know much about him except that he's been through a lot worse than I have.' She caught her friend's eye and added softly, 'He's a nice guy, but his interest in me is purely professional. Besides, with everything else that's going on, I doubt I'll ever see him again.'

## Chapter 20

**In just six months of breast-feeding, a baby in the United States and Europe gets the maximum recommended dose of dioxin, which rides through the food chain like PCBs and DDT. The same breast fed baby gets five times the allowable daily level of PCBs set by international health standards for a 150 pound adult...**

—Colburn, Dumanoski and Myers: *Our Stolen Future* (1996)

Here we go again. So, it turns out that poisonous polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) are turning up in our food more often than we thought—and in larger amounts.

—**Editorial: *New Scientist* 30 June 2001**

Jean was surprised to see the Australian Prime Minister waiting for her at Canberra airport. Behind a barrier of police uniforms and suits in dark glasses, news cameras and photographers lay in ambush, ready to pounce. 'Ignore them,' Anderson said needlessly. 'They're in a feeding frenzy over the vampire cults.'

'Prime Minister.' Jean smiled.

'Paul,' he corrected. 'And apologies for the distasteful pun.'

'Paul—I never expected you to personally greet me.'

'I promised the President I'd look after you, and I will. Getting you past this mob,' he tossed a politician's smile and wave to the press, 'is the first step.'

Jean looked at him curiously. Immune to the charms of politicians, she had found the Australian's lack of pretence refreshing. But for a head of state to greet her at the airport, even if she was a senior White House adviser, was sending an exceptionally strong signal.

'Won't be long,' he said. 'I have no intention of giving them more than a thirty second sound byte.'

Questions flew thick and fast while camera lights glared. 'Yes, I will be attending the opening session of the Rhesus conference. No, I am not going to comment on Rhesus except to stress that we will continue to crack down hard on vampire cults. Yes, the Attorney General is working on shutting down all domestically based vampire web sites and the servers catering to them. Yes, I'm fully aware that does not stop Asian servers, but we're working on other avenues. Reporting the truth that Rh-negative blood can't cure people, and in fact will exacerbate the spread of other diseases wouldn't hurt either,' he said sternly to one reporter.

He moved away and stepped into the limousine in a practised manoeuvre, then sat back and said, 'Welcome to Australia, Jean.'

The dance from airport to limousine via the press was not new to Jean, but the Australian version was more crowded because security around Anderson was minimal. She inclined her head and smiling, replied, 'Thank you, Paul. I've been looking forward to this.' And she suddenly realized she had. Not just because she'd never been to Australia, but also because she was seeing Paul Anderson again.

'So have I. Tired?'

'No. I slept all the way.'

'Excellent. I haven't anything scheduled this evening, would you care to join me for dinner?'

Jean was looking out at the wide avenues, low buildings and eucalypt trees. She recalled that Canberra had been architecturally designed and purpose-built to serve as the Australian capital. 'I'm all yours,' she replied.

Seeing the expression in his eyes, she blushed and added quickly, 'I have a reputation for letting my guard down when I'm around friends.'

'Then I'm flattered to be considered a friend.'

Jean took his advice and changed into a casual pair of pants and a pullover for dinner; there were only the two of them. Afterwards, Paul sent the staff to bed then led her to the kitchen where he made hot chocolate. When he handed her a cup, she said, 'Y'know, I like that you can do that.'

'Make chocolate?' They walked to the large library. A distinctive eucalypt and wattle smell came from the wood burning in the fireplace.

'Yeah,' she said thoughtfully. 'Just, you know, go to the kitchen and make it when you want, without having to go through a chain of command, two floors and a secret service-agent.'

Anderson chuckled and sat on a comfortable looking black leather couch. 'Don't get the wrong idea; it's not always that easy. If we'd gone out for dinner the whole circus would have tagged along, including the press.'

'That, I'm familiar with.' She sat beside him and tucked her legs under her. 'The White House is made of glass. You get used to tabloid hacks interpreting a run in your stocking or smudged lipstick as proof of a torrid lunchtime affair with some hapless intern.'

'It doesn't bother you?'

'It used to, I think, but then we started a competition; the President and his immediate family can't enter. Entry fee is twenty dollars and the best 'tabloid magnet' of the year wins you a weekend in Bermuda. Anything you do or say there that's regurgitated by the press or Republicans cannot be used to boost your chance in the following year's competition.'

Anderson almost choked on his chocolate. When he stopped laughing, she added, 'You know, we haven't talked about Rhesus or terrorists, the Exodus Project or Industrial Winter for nearly two hours?' She cocked her head and regarded him quizzically. 'Are you flirting with me?'

'It took you two hours to figure that out?' He put his cup on the coffee table.

Jean suddenly felt nervous, like a schoolgirl with a bad case of butterflies. She hadn't been with anyone since she'd left her husband. And this was the Australian Prime Minister for heaven's sake.

Anderson sat back. 'We can talk about vampire cults if it would make you feel more comfortable.'

'I don't want to talk about them, they give me the creeps,' she said quickly. 'Tell me more about MacDonnell. You don't think my going to see the agricultural domes will raise any flags?'

'About the Exodus Project?' He picked up his cup again. 'I don't think so. The press are bored with it. We make a song and dance every time another dome is raised or scientists produce more wheat for less water, and they yawn and print it on page fifty-seven. To the public it's another housing and development project. To environmentalists, it's the evil government stuffing up hundreds of thousands of kilometres of

utterly barren sand and rock with genetically modified self-sustaining ecosystems.'

'Nothing like hiding the truth in plain sight.' Jean finished her chocolate and stood. 'Well, I guess I better get some sleep if I'm going to spend tomorrow walking around the desert. What time do we leave?'

'Five a.m. We'll take a transport SP, that'll get us there before six.' Anderson stood and walked her to her bedroom.

Jean turned to say goodnight, but couldn't quite get the words out. She shouldn't be doing this, it was too fast, but she also knew she wanted it. Hell, with their lifestyle there was precious little time to dance around the subject.

Anderson cupped her cheek with his hand and kissed the corner of her mouth. A tender offer, nothing that would embarrass either of them if she turned away. When she didn't, he moved his lips across hers in a soft kiss. He lingered a moment too long—or not long enough. 'Goodnight, Jean,' he whispered, his lips barely brushing her ear.

Before she knew it, she was standing in her bedroom and he was gone. Jean stared at the door and crossed her arms. A slow smile spread across her lips. Paul Anderson had a reputation for pulling, not pushing voters to the polling booth. Apparently he applied the same tactics in the bedroom.

They spent the next day surrounded by aides, advisers and journalists, touring the state-of-the-art facilities at MacDonnell. The press, however, were more interested in badgering them about the vampire cults and the Rhesus conference than horticultural achievements. By late afternoon Paul Anderson had allowed an ever-suffering look to cloud his features; one he abandoned when the journalists and cameras were out of sight. 'Told you,' he muttered smugly. 'Too bloody interested in vampire cults to give a damn about the latest drugs grown in GM spinifex grass.'

Jean tucked her chin in to hide her grin; Paul thrived on the game. Although they didn't have a chance to talk in private that evening, she was enjoying everything so much more because she was with him.

For his part, Paul Anderson realized that he wasn't just attracted to Jean Simmons; he was quite smitten by her.

\* \* \* \*

While Leigh Walker and Roger Harrison had worked together to establish the effect of Rhesus, Harrison had taken on a supervisory role at MacDonnell. This had not concerned Walker; he'd been too busy pursuing the statistical spread of Rhesus to pay attention to the physiology or biological consequences of the virus. However, he had not been sleeping well the past few nights. Something about the statistics bothered him, something he couldn't put his finger on. It wasn't until Roger Harrison was giving his opening speech at the First International Rhesus Conference that Walker was struck by one of those rare, eureka moments in science.

Unfortunately, it was televised worldwide.

'As a result of AIDS, since the late 1980s we have an excellent database of blood samples.' Roger Harrison flicked on the large screen display. 'Using seroepidemiology—blood samples—to track the virus, it appears that Rhesus was inactive before 2000. While it then appeared sporadically up until 2010, something triggered it in the community at large in the winter of that year.'

Harrison looked up. There were almost two thousand people crammed into the massive lecture theatre for the opening of the conference. Every one of them was staring at the figures and charts on the screen.

'Since the appearance of Rhesus predates ACR cholera by some ten years, we do not believe there is a *direct* connection,' he continued. 'What cannot be dismissed however, is the explosive worldwide growth of Rhesus within two months of the ACR cholera outbreak in the United States.'

Removing his glasses, he looked around and added, 'Ladies and gentlemen, AIDS taught us the risks of drawing definitive, and in retrospect inaccurate conclusions in both the epidemiology and pathology of retroviruses. I must therefore strongly caution everyone here not to make those same mistakes.' He turned and snapped at the cameras, 'There has been more than enough damage done by the ridiculous assertion that Rh-negative blood holds curative properties. The Rhesus virus is delayed in all pregnant and nursing women, *blood transfusions notwithstanding!* However, this has led us to suspect a hormonal link to the Rhesus trigger.

The infection rates of diseases in cities are normally inversely proportional to the socio-economic stratum. But in this case, the reverse is true. So, the Rhesus trigger is not airborne nor is it in public water supplies, because the homeless and impoverished living in inner-city areas remain relatively Rhesus free, while their wealthier counterparts display infection rates as high as eighty percent.'

It didn't take lateral thinking amongst epidemiologists to draw the inevitable conclusion, but for others, Harrison spelled it out. 'In other words, it's most likely something people dwelling or working in city and urban areas purchase and consume, something generally unavailable to those with little or no income.'

Before Harrison could continue, Leigh Walker jumped out of his chair, and, waving his papers around, called, 'That's it, that's *it!*' He bounded onto the stadium and all but shoved the papers under Harrison's nose. 'I'm a bloody idiot; I should have seen it days ago!'

Harrison, familiar with the mathematician's excitability, ignored the surprised mutterings that rumbled across the audience, and looked down at the papers.

'The parameters are different and it will have to be adjusted for delay in ... Here!' Walker cried impatiently, grabbing Harrison's laptop and turning it to face him.

The mutterings in the audience grew louder. Harrison held up his hand and said into the microphone, 'Just a moment please, just bear with us.' He knew Walker, this was important.

Walker connected to the network, then his own computer, and transferred the files. He quickly plugged in the parameters used in Harrison's statistics and beamed. 'Voila!'

On the wall-sized display screen behind them, Harrison's graph illustrated the exponential sales of bottled water, which followed the ACR cholera outbreak in the United States. Walker overlaid his chart showing the incidence of Rhesus. The two graphs were offset by approximately one month. Walker then moved the time frame to compensate. The lines on the graphs then overlapped so closely that in most places, the line showing the incidence of Rhesus activation was lost beneath that showing the sales of bottled water.

The graphs were not just eerily similar; they were virtually identical.

Harrison stared at Walker, who was moving his hand over his now pallid face. 'Omigod, omigod,' muttered the mathematician—a sentiment reflected by the audience as the startling conclusion penetrated.

Roger Harrison was not concerned with controversy. He had refused to avoid the political quagmire of the genetic/racial connection, correctly reasoning that political foot shuffling and pandering to religious sensibilities and moral indignation had delayed proper AIDS research for almost a decade. Airing the obvious at the outset cleared the way for valid, scientific discussions. But this! This wasn't controversial; it was catastrophic!



'Sales of bottled water jumped almost eight *thousand* percent worldwide following the ACR cholera outbreak in the United States!' he said.

Sitting in the audience, Paul Anderson stared at the screen. He, too, immediately understood the staggering implications of Walker's discovery, but the information being whispered to him took priority. His jaw clenched, but his eyes also glittered in satisfaction. A known Shatt-al Arab had been sighted in Canberra.

Gently touching Jean's hand, he said, 'I have to go.' Before she could reply, he stood.

On the way out, he glanced back. Jean's expression said that she was torn between Walker's gut-wrenching implications and concern for whatever had pulled him away. Still, she had the presence of mind to send him an understanding nod and brief smile. He savoured it, carrying it with him into the waiting nightmare.

Down on the podium, Harrison and Walker were comparing the figures from different cities and countries. Each newly calibrated piece of data served only to confirm Walker's postulate, but then someone called out the obvious. 'It couldn't possibly be bottled water! There are too many different sources, different treatment plants, different mineral compositions!'

From the audience, a woman that Harrison recognised as a cell biologist called, 'If the breakdown of Rh-positive blood proteins is causing sterility, with hormone mimics in mind, I remember an old research paper, maybe twenty-five years old, about oestrogen leaking from polystyrene flasks.'

Silence settled across the auditorium. A few nodded their heads and sat forward in interest. Then someone cried out, 'Oh crap, that could just be it!' while others grunted expletives.

'Let me recap?' the biologist said, glancing at Harrison.

Harrison motioned for Walker to keep comparing statistics for different cities—and for the cell biologist to keep talking.

'Researchers at Tufts Medical School in Boston,' she said, 'were researching breast cancer cells when they were plagued with a series of what they thought were laboratory contaminations. It took them a couple of years to discover their plastic centrifuge tubes contained an apparently inert substance, p-nonylphenol.

'Manufacturers added nonylphenols to polystyrene and polyvinyl chloride—PVC—to make the plastics more stable and less breakable.

'When breast cancer cells were stored in these tubes they showed an oestrogen-like response; that is, they proliferated. Around the same time,' she added. 'Stanford researchers discovered a protein in yeast that bound with oestrogens. It was also a contaminant—bisphenol-A—in the polycarbonate lab flasks used to sterilize water. And it also leached out when exposed to high temperatures and caustic cleaners.'

Maddison Paine paled and whispered to her companion, Jason Crookshank, 'The idea of slipping into a catatonic foetal position seems incredibly attractive about now.'

Crookshank stared at her in alarm.

Maddy stood and called out, 'A few years later, there was also research on plastic linings used in US food cans. The plastic in about half contained bisphenol-A. Concentration was around forty times what the Stanford researchers reported was enough to make breast cancer cells proliferate. The point being that contamination occurs where plastics are not considered to exist—like food cans.'

'The very act of cleaning, heating and sterilization,' Maddy gloomily concluded, 'causes supposedly inert substances that act as *hormone mimics* to leach from polycarbonates and plastics. It's not the water,' she said. 'It's the bottles!'

'Wait a minute, wait a minute,' a science journalist called. 'Wasn't fibreveg hailed as a toxin-free replacement to polycarbonates and plastics? And aren't most water bottles and can liners now made from fibreveg? And if Rhesus is delayed in pregnant women, wouldn't oestrogen *delay* the onset, not trigger it?'

A half dozen people tried to answer but a thick German accent cut through. 'Never presume!' said an endocrinologist. 'Hormones are a complex symphony. You cannot simply *blame* or *credit* oestrogen or androgen mimics for Rhesus or breast cancer or testicular deformation any more than you can *blame* the sun for skin cancer! We need the sun. We need hormones, but the balance is subtle! We don't know why Rhesus is delayed in pregnant and lactating women, but we do know that we have been releasing countless tons of hormone mimics into the ecosphere for generations. We had no idea what this irreversible global experiment was doing to us all ... until, perhaps, now.' He sat down heavily.

'As to fibreveg,' an industrial chemist added. 'It's a vegetable derived polymer that's pretty much replaced petroleum based plastics in the last five years. It was marketed as a natural alternative, but plants are impregnated with decades of impurities poured into our ecosystem, including, as my esteemed colleague pointed out, hormone mimics. *Nothing* on this planet is free of artificially manufactured toxins and hormone mimics.'

'Including the large fibreveg water-cooler bottles found in every office building in most Western countries since the 2011 ACR cholera outbreak!' Leigh Walker finished.

Everyone began speaking at once.

'Caution, ladies and gentlemen,' Harrison called, trying to bring order back into the room. 'Although the connection is apparent, let's not assume it's the right one and abandon other avenues of investigation!'

But Jason Crookshank's face had turned as white as his hair. 'We're fucked.'

Maddy Paine slumped further into her chair when she realized the conference was being broadcast live. She wasn't thinking about Rhesus so much as what this would do to the worldwide incidence of TB, ACR cholera and gastro-intestinal diseases. 'Well and truly,' she muttered agreeably.

## Chapter 21

Buenos Aires daily diary on the climate change convention, 11 November 1998; Arabian Nights: Delegates are being kept up all night by oil-producing countries demanding compensation for future losses of revenue. Oh my.

—Fred Pearce, *New Scientist*

Kristin was pulling off her fins when her comunit buzzed. She reached inside the wheelhouse and picked it up with one hand as she peeled off her wetsuit with the other.

'Baker,' she replied. 'Hang on, lemme get out of this thing.' She released the air from the regulator, removed it from the SCUBA bottle and dropped it on the hatch. 'Okay, talk.' She grabbed a towel.

'Good dive?' Page said.

Kristin looked at the call signature. The visuals weren't on, so how did he know? 'Thrilling. I just installed an external sensor on a boat with a full blown coral reef growing on its hull.' She glanced at her bloodied knuckles. 'I suspect some of the inhabitants are setting up residence in my blood stream.' She grabbed the bottle of alcohol, poured it over her hands—and promptly yelped.

'You okay?' His voice was uncertain.

'Yeah,' she gasped. 'Just a little preventative first aid.'

'Ever heard of antibiotic cream?'

Staring at the blank screen on her comunit, she said, 'Are you trying to be funny? Next thing you'll be suggesting I invest in fibreveg water coolers.'

'You heard, huh?'

'Me and six billion others. So, what can I do for you, Commander?' She tried to sound casual when in fact she was delighted to hear from him, although she wondered why his visuals were disabled.

'Tell me how you're doing.'

Towelling her hair dry, she replied, 'I've finished installing the remaining sonars and set up five additional boats with hull sensors and computer connections. If one vessel is out of action it's an hour's job to transfer a computer to another. More importantly, I've trained two Fisheries engineers to install everything. I'm not as proficient as you at calibrating the units, but that gave us a chance to try out my original idea. We invited the local fishermen on board to see what the sonar operators were seeing. They climbed back into their canoes swearing that it was some sort of trick. By the time we finished they were grinning from ear to ear.' She paused while she pulled a sweater on. 'It'll take a while to refine the technique but now that I know it works, I'm a lot happier. Only problem, of course, is that we need the sonars to recover those hellish nets.'

'Excellent. As soon as you complete your reports, can you email me the results? We've earmarked more units for Vanuatu. Are you still going on your vacation?'

'Tomorrow morning.' She pulled on her jeans.

After a moment's pause, he said, 'Has Foreign Affairs talked to you yet?'

'They asked me to take credit for discovering the nets and finding Sammy's orphaned dolphin a mother, and, where possible, keep your name out of the media.'

When he didn't comment, Kristin added, 'Working with the South Pacific Fishing Forum is the limit of my job description. These nets and the mercury contamination issues are way beyond that; it's a political problem now. I'm no longer worried about keeping the fishing cartels out of coastal waters; no way they'll be getting back into Vanuatu anytime soon. Hell, why would they want to?' she added bitterly. 'Based on the damage one net does, multiplied by the ships we know of, they've near stripped the place. I half expect ADAB to cut me loose sooner because with half the South Pacific nations finding nets in their waters, no government is ready to deal until the political and economic fallout of Rhesus and Industrial Winter is better understood. That's going to take months. Feel free to interrupt at any time; you called me, remember?'

'I'm glad it's working out for you.' There was another long pause, then he added, 'I have to go.'

Kristin stared at the comunit's message screen. It declared that the caller's unit had been disconnected—then switched off. She collected her things, climbed into the inflatable dinghy and went back to the Fisheries wharf. Instead of returning to her office to shower, she walked along the dock and sat in the sun. It might be the tropics, but it was mid-winter and the dive had chilled her. So had her conversation with Nicholas Page.

She hit the comunit replay button. Email results to him, glad it's working out for you, have to go. It wasn't just his words; it was his tone of voice. When he'd briefed her on the Exodus Project she'd had the impression that her involvement wasn't limited to the sonars. Then he'd stood in her office and said that when the world learned of Rhesus, people like her would be their first line of defence in a new, subtler war.

Kristin couldn't shake an intangible sense of something unfinished with Nicholas Page. After the media had run a current affairs program on her role in 'discovering' the nets, and Sammy's dolphin rescue, Ben had accused her of delusions of grandeur. Maybe he had a point. But what she'd told Nick was also true. Since the sonar project was successful—not in the way she'd intended, but it had cemented the offer from Woods Hole—with Industrial Winter and Rhesus now on centre stage, her role in Vanuatu was effectively over.

Strapping the comunit to her wrist, she walked back to the Fisheries building. Commander Nicholas Page was a charming naval aviator with extraordinary green eyes and a dazzling smile. What woman wouldn't be hooked by that package? Get a grip, Kristin; it was a courtesy call, and a goodbye.

Then why had he sounded so ... sad?

\* \* \* \*

The sounds of Kristin's SCUBA regulator had reminded Nick of Vanuatu's clear tropical waters, coconut fringed beaches and warm, balmy weather. From the cockpit of the transport SP, the reefs and islands had looked like opals dropped into a sapphire sea.

He looked up at Canberra's steel grey winter sky. Kristin was right. It was cold and miserable but he couldn't comment about the diplomatic dinner parties; he and Denning were there to raid the Shatt-al Arab's safe-house. And while he trusted Denning's team, something about the tip-off didn't add up.

Nick frowned. Australian Foreign affairs still hadn't briefed her; they were worse than the State Department for obfuscation.

'What was that about?' asked Ronald Denning. He pushed the door open and they stepped into a

featureless grey building.

'A reminder.'

'Of what?'

Nick smiled sadly. 'Of the real world. Of might have beens.'

Denning walked into the operations room. 'Don't go there, mate, it hurts too bloody much.'

The room was filled with black-clad bodies, tension and anticipation. The live satellite images projected on the wall screens showed five infrared figures moving around inside a suburban Canberra home.

'Only five,' Nick muttered in frustration.

Captain Denning walked to the head of the room. 'Okay, everyone,' he called, turning to face them. 'We don't have the luxury of waiting until dark. Our intel and their movements lead us to believe they'll be gone by nightfall. The good news is that the self-destruct explosive mechanisms normally employed by Shatt-al Arabs in their safe-houses have been dismantled.'

Nick ground his teeth together. The Nehros were long gone, if they had even been there. These were just the leftovers.

'Surrounding houses?' someone asked.

Denning nodded. 'We lucked out for once. You're wearing Federal Police uniforms because as we speak, Federal Police are raiding properties suspected of harbouring vampire cults. Thirteen simultaneous raids across Australia and New Zealand, and dozens more in the States and Europe—this is just one more. The cover is simple. This house is a refuge for a vampire cult dealing in ACR cholera infected blood. ACR cholera never got a decent foothold in this country. That will explain our apparent overreaction when the media does its usual post-mortem. The nuclear decontamination crews are using vehicles and suits almost identical to biohazard cleanup crews.'

While Denning continued the briefing, Nick watched the satellite image. Glowing, orange figures moving about the green-hued screen. One figure walked into the garage and placed something into the trunk of a car.

Denning finished, and the teams left for the waiting vehicles. Three helicopters were already in the air, monitoring movements while staying out of visual range of the house.

Nick felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to look into the deep blue eyes and tanned face of Ronald Denning. The Australian's uncanny ability to predict and circumvent terrorist activities had attracted offers from some of the world's most elite anti-terrorist organizations. But while Denning had been consulting for one such organization, his wife and children had been butchered in their Canberra home—retaliation for his successful hostage rescue in London. Denning had buried his family and refused all offers until the Prime Minister asked him to straighten out the country's ad hoc anti-terrorist squads. He'd agreed—conditional on it being based anywhere but Canberra. Now, at Nick's behest, he was back in the nation's capital.

'It's possible one or more of the Mahmeds are still in the house,' Denning said to him.

The four Mahmed brothers were members of the Shatt-al Arabs, but their first loyalty was to Elhamy and Um Nehro. Sloppy procedures by the youngest Mahmed brother, Imhri, had led US intelligence services to trace the bomb on Nick's aircraft directly to the Mahmeds, and thence the Nehros—all of whom were

in Australia.

'I've given clear orders that we want them alive,' Denning added.

'If the Mahmeds are in there,' Nick replied as he adjusted his Kevlar jacket, 'it'll be a rat fuck.' But he placed an appreciative hand on the Australian's shoulder. Denning's team were the best chance they had.

The street was lined with double garages, eucalypt trees and neatly clipped lawns with chuff-chuffing sprinklers. Despite the forecast snow, winter had been unseasonably dry. The house was well positioned with multiple escape routes: roads, back lane, and rugged bushland behind. Neighbouring houses offered low fences and potential hostages: kids playing in the yards; parents home from work, relaxing for the evening, cooking dinners.

The first team was moving through the bush to plug that potential escape route when a flock of galahs screeched their objection and scattered from the trees. Around the corner from the house, inside a parked utility van, Denning's nostrils flared in anger. The infrared satellite images of the surrounding homes showed adults answering phones, hurrying into yards and then disappearing back inside with the smaller shapes of children.

Nick chewed his lip in frustration. Why not use a bullhorn to announce their presence? But in the safe-house there was no sign that the occupants had noticed anything unusual. People still moved back and forth, loading the vehicles. One of them was even lying down on a bed. These were definitely low-level soldiers. Nobody of importance would allow their security to be that lax.

Denning ordered the designated teams of four to move in. A dog began barking. Nick cursed and pulled on his helmet. On the monitors, he watched four shapes move swiftly towards the back of the house, and another four to the front. A surge of heat/light suddenly filled the screen, and one of the five infrared figures inside the house flew back against the wall.

'Go, go go!' Denning called. The van surged forward and, ignoring the speed bump, rounded the corner with a screech of burned rubber.

Nick slammed the doors open and was out and running even as the vehicle tore up the gravel driveway of the house.

Smashing timber and glass, yells, semi-automatic weapons fire. Denning and Nick were inside seconds after the first teams. Cordite dust in the air, cracking glass underfoot, sounds of crying and grunting. Distant screams from terrified neighbours. More dogs barking, sirens approaching, helicopters thumping overhead. One body splattered against the far wall, sliding to the floor even as they watched. Two more down in the next room. Fuck it! Nick angrily turned one over.

Blood gurgled from the man's shattered throat, and his body twitched as he stared vacantly up at Nick's visor covered face.

Denning cursed aloud when he examined the second man. Half of his head was gone.

'Sir!' Sergeant Peterson and one of the team members emerged from a bedroom, dragging a terrified old man dressed in shabby, ill-fitting clothes between them.

The old man held his hands to his face to fend off the expected blows. '*Ne me tuez pas! Ne me tuez pas!*' His legs buckled beneath him.

'No one's going to kill you, old man!' Peterson said, but the man sagged to the floor, wetting himself as he babbled, begging not to be killed.

Nick ignored him and walked into the bedroom. On the floor, surrounded by black-clad bodies, shattered particleboard and plaster, a familiar, bloodied face glared up at him. Nick pulled off his helmet and hood and stepped closer. Despite the winter's cold, his dark hair was damp with perspiration. ' *Bonjour*, Imhri,' he said to the black-eyed man on the floor.

Imhri Mahmed's eyes shone with rage as he stared at Nick. Mahmed tried to spit, but blood welled into his mouth. Two of Denning's team crouched beside him, endeavouring to stop the blood cascading from his mangled right arm and the gaping, bubbling wound in his chest. Two medics rushed in and pushed Nick and the soldiers aside. They pulled out clamps and tore open plastic bags of IV tubes. In seconds, trauma equipment was scattered across the floor as they frantically worked to keep Imhri Mahmed alive.

'You never could do anything right, could you, Imhri? You failed to kill me. Now, you failed to kill the old man. You should have been able to kill everyone and destroy all of the evidence before we reached you, *oui*?'

One of the medics cursed and shot Nick a sour look.

But Nick could see the only thing keeping Imhri alive was rage and pain. He knew that feeling well. Ignoring the medic, he crouched down and picked up the gun Imhri had used on three of his companions.

'A toy, Imhri?' Nick said dismissively. ' *Un petit jouet pour un homme insignifiant*.'

Imhri howled and tried to lunge at him. The exasperated medic turned to Nick. 'Sir!'

But Nick smiled and casually tapped his head microphone. 'Ah, Imhri. The other team has just secured the Sydney safe-house, and the device. Soon, you'll be joining your brothers in Paradise.'

Imhri's eyes lit in delight, and he croaked in broken English, 'You lie! They only had the trigger, and they left Bondi days ago!'

'Why so much information, Imhri?' Nick's smile widened. 'Thanks anyway, but I'll pass.'

Imhri's eyes rounded and he tried to curse, but the effort was too much and he started choking on the blood now flowing freely from his mouth.

Nick calmly walked out of the bedroom and into the kitchen, then punched a hole through the thin, fibro wall. Watching Imhri die gave him no satisfaction. It was more of a teaser. More like ... bait?

'Good thing that wasn't brick,' Denning said as he came in.

Ignoring his bloodied knuckles, Nick turned and glared at the Australian. He breathed deeply, trying to regain a measure of self-control, and then he said, 'I don't buy it. Imhri Mahmed was too low on the totem pole to know where the other safe-houses were. And he sure as hell wouldn't know who had what components, or reveal that information to us. Even he wasn't that stupid.'

'Unless they're back in Turkey and they sent word to pack up this place? Maybe he's telling the truth to confuse us,' said Denning.

'What about the old man?'

'He's too frightened to talk now, but he'll tell us soon enough.'

'Soon enough to stop them?' Nick said, his frown deepening.

## Chapter 22

**In the year 2065, on current trends, damage from climate change will exceed global GDP.**

—**Andrew Dlugolecki, director of the UK-based General Insurance Development**

Greg Camicci stormed out of the motel room. How could his mother be so stupid! And now that she'd sold the SUV, they were stuck in Portland. Okay, so she'd gotten a good price for it, but the point was she was still living out of a suitcase, still expecting they'd be getting on a plane any minute. He figured it'd be months, maybe longer, before he was allowed to go.

Heading east towards the water, Greg relived the argument with his mother over and over. She was more interested in watching those stupid old family DVDs than looking out the window and seeing what was happening in the real world. Mr. Woodstein and Mrs. Murphy had been right, everything was falling apart.

Down on Dobson's Wharf, bunches of homeless people huddled like withered, grey leaves around the burning trash cans. Lumps of rags lay supine here and there. Gaunt faces appeared from some, while others were barricaded behind cardboard boxes and newspapers, trying to ward off the bitter cold.

It would be dawn soon and he could go to the hospital cafeteria and get some coffee. Then he could hang around the florist shop with Alice, maybe make a few early deliveries. He sniffed in the oily, rancid smell of the wharf, tightened his coat and picked up his pace.

Greg knew his mother would worry about him being gone all night, but right then he didn't much care. Besides, she knew he'd turn up at the hospital for his injections, the shit-painful needles they jabbed him with every goddamned day.

Distracted by his thoughts, Greg failed to notice the men following him. The predawn air seemed colder in the dark corners of the trash-filled alley. He reached up to pull his cap lower over his ears—and was knocked to the ground when something hard slammed into his back. He went to roll over but someone kicked his head into the concrete sidewalk. Blinding pain shot through his skull; the pain seemed to suck the air from his lungs, stopping him from calling out. He tried to bring his arms around to lift himself up but someone was dragging him, then pulling him. Two people, no three, maybe four! He started to scream but a filthy, greasy rag was shoved into his face, blocking his mouth and nostrils. He could hardly breathe, much less talk! He struggled and kicked out with his legs, pushing at the hands holding him until he heard a satisfying yelp of pain.

'Shut the fuck up!' a voice hissed near his head.

'He kicked me in the fucking balls!'

'What fucking balls? Hold him still or I'll do more than kick 'em!'

Greg kicked out again. After another satisfying grunt, he heard, 'Cocksucking piece of shit, I'll fix you!'

If Greg thought the throbbing pain in his head was agonizing, the blow to his left leg was beyond belief.

'You asshole!' cried the enraged voice near his head. 'Don't waste his fucking blood!'

'I didn't cut him, I just busted his leg, stop him from kickin!'

Greg wanted to scream but the greasy rag was making him sick, or maybe it was the pain. He heaved



and felt vomit gush hotly up his sinuses and out his nose—and back down into his throat! He began to choke, and bile burned his throat until someone—the hissing voice near his head—had the sense to pull the rag out of his mouth and twist him onto his side.

They were arguing over him, but Greg wasn't listening as he continued to vomit and choke, splattering the ground as they went. Then they dropped him, and for a merciful moment, he blacked out.

But it was only for a moment. He came too and moaned loudly as the smell and taste of vomit vied for attention with his burning throat, the throbbing pain in his skull and the blinding agony in his leg. He tried opening his eyes but they were glued shut with something, blood, vomit or the filth he could smell on the frozen ground, he couldn't tell which.

'It's pumpin' out okay, he's still alive.'

Until then, Greg was too hurt and too shocked to comprehend what was happening. But the words loosened his bowels and abject terror tore through his pain. Vampires had him! He almost vomited again when he remembered the bodies he'd stumbled across one morning down at Dobsons'. Vampires had drained them of blood, then dumped them like pieces of crumpled refuse. 'I'm ... I'm not..!' he croaked.

'Shut the fuck up! We tested it, you're a neggie all right!'

'I ... got ... I'm sick! TB!'

'Bull shit man! You ain't sick.'

'No ... you gotta listen, my name's on a list at the hospital. That's where I was going. I got the TB that kills you in days, man! I ... it killed a kid at school in Newton!'

'Then how come you ain't dead?' sniggered a feminine voice.

But the world spun and Greg knew he was going to be sick again. It was like some bad trip, really bad trip and he was being sucked down and away. He began to heave and someone turned him on his side, letting him upchuck. They didn't want him dead until his heart stopped pumping out every millilitre of blood.

Greg was too old to keep alive, only younger kids were small enough to lock away and keep under control. And the vampires weren't interested in what bugs he might be carrying, just that his blood tested negative—O-negative at that. They'd get top dollar for his blood.

The pain in Greg's head faded and his leg seemed far away as he continued to heave, even as he lost consciousness.

\* \* \* \*

In MacDonnell, the reception dinner was over and people were leaving. Jean walked beside Paul Anderson to the entrance. With them were Roger Harrison, Colonel Charles Dixon and Leigh Walker.

'No matter what their ethnicity,' Walker was saying, 'every Rh-negative has Caucasian genes in their family tree. Pogroms of ethnic cleansing in parts of Asia and Africa are bad enough. But in Melbourne? And these vampire cults—'

Anderson interrupted, 'The police raids this afternoon have clearly demonstrated that we will not tolerate such barbaric behaviour.'

Colonel Dixon, dressed in mess uniform, shook his head. 'People are scared, Prime Minister. And

scared people act in barbaric ways. Hell, the Spanish government is blaming ETA for Rhesus, claiming it's some sort of Basque conspiracy!

'It's not just fear.' Walker nervously fingered his bow tie. 'It's stress. We had those horrendous bushfires in the southern states and that devastating cyclone and flooding up north. Brisbane is still more river than city, and on the Gold Coast, the esplanade along Surfer's Paradise is now the first wave break. I know, I know!' He held up his hand at the look on Dixon's face. 'You're in worse shape after Hurricane Adrina and those blizzards on the East coast. Spain, France, most of Europe is in a hell of a mess. But that's my point. The stress is driving people and governments alike past breaking. With Industrial Winter and now Rhesus, our social structure is heading for a critical mass.'

'Stress notwithstanding, analysts are predicting an unprecedented baby boom worldwide,' Harrison said. 'Rh-positives not yet infected are trying to become pregnant before it's too late. That will exacerbate the already horrendous spread of sexually communicable diseases, including drug-resistant hepatitis, tuberculosis and the new strains of untreatable syphilis and gonorrhoea.'

Harrison didn't have to add that in third world and underdeveloped countries it would place unparalleled demands on economies already severely depleted by physical disasters, localized warfare, STDs and burgeoning infectious diseases.

At the entrance, Anderson accepted his overcoat from an usher. 'The latest polls show ninety four percent of Australians are now in favour of the US expanding its military presence here. Rhesus may have actually done us a favour, but immigration is being hit with a flood of additional applications and we're going to have to deal with the question of blood type.'

'Why?' Jean asked him.

Anderson helped her into her coat. 'We're not a retirement village. If this plague can't be stopped, letting in a disproportionately large number of Rh-positives will create a top-heavy elderly population, placing an unsustainable burden on the economy. Not for many years of course, but I am not going to ignore the issue as my predecessors burdened us with global warming.'

'I'm not so sure it's just a problem for the future.' Jean turned up the collar of her coat. 'Both our countries were settled and worked by people who had a vision of the future, not only for themselves but generations to come. What will people work for if they no longer have that? But restricting entry based on blood type ... what was it called, last time you did something like that?'

Grimacing, Anderson donned his white scarf. 'The White Australia Policy.'

'Excuse me, sir,' an aide interrupted. 'The call you were expecting.'

Anderson moved back inside to take the call while the aide escorted Jean to the waiting limousine. Inside, she used the time to carefully arranged the folds of her black evening gown. The limo was spacious compared to the relatively modest car that Paul had used in Canberra, but it would soon be filling with people.

A few minutes later, she saw him emerge from the building and wave goodnight to the journalists. Then he climbed in beside her.

'No aides?' Jean was surprised when the car departed immediately.

'They're too busy.' He looked out the window thoughtfully. 'An octogenarian Russian physicist, that's all Denning's team managed to take alive.'

Jean frowned. As far as the public knew she was in Australia for the Rhesus conference. In fact her real role was liaison for the Exodus Project. 'It raises a frightening spectre. Is the old man talking?'

Anderson shook his head. 'Denning reckons it'll take a day or two. What they found at the house confirms what we suspected, though. The Shatt-al Arabs were behind the plutonium theft. Unfortunately it seems they've long gone, taking everything with them.'

'Except the old man. Why?'

'Because he is old, or potentially more useful here.' Anderson pulled off his scarf. I don't know,' he added, shaking his head and sighing. 'Everyone's got a different opinion. Denning's the only one I really trust; he unearthed the link between the Shatt-al Arabs and the plutonium. Your Commander Page thinks the same way. I understand he's already briefed you?'

Jean nodded, but her frown deepened. She'd seen the look of doubt on Nick's face when he'd called her after the raid on the safe-house.

'Neither of them is convinced it's as clear-cut as it seems,' Anderson said, confirming her thoughts. 'But all the evidence points to one thing; most of the Shatt-al Arabs, including the Nehros, are either on their way or already back in Turkey. The public are probably glued to their TFTs right now, watching footage of the raids on vampire cults. If they only knew that the Canberra one broke up something far more sinister.'

He looked at her and added, 'On the bright side, now that the Rhesus trigger is linked to fibreveg containers, this evening's arrests should do away with the whole damned vampire thing.'

'I doubt it. We know what causes AIDS but that hasn't given us a cure. Remember how the drug V-1 took off in Thailand back in 2002? V-1 is still around. And it's still being made from the blood of HIV positive people. Desperate people will try anything.'

Anderson bit his lip. 'Point taken.' He reached down and took her hand. 'Thanks.'

She laughed humourlessly. 'For dashing your hopes?'

'For coming with me to this reception tonight; for making the last few days more bearable.' He leaned across and kissed the corner of her mouth. Then, as he had the first night, he slowly moved his lips across hers. His hand moved along her arm, gently holding her as he deepened the kiss. She reached inside his black dinner jacket and slid her fingers around his waist, feeling firm muscle beneath his starched shirt. Like Edwin Blake, Paul Anderson had not let the responsibilities of office detract from his physical fitness regime. Indeed, both men argued that their mental fitness depended on it. Perhaps that's part of what attracted her to Paul. He exuded strength and energy even when weighed down by world events.

She rested her other hand on his thigh, and then delicately caressed his lips with her tongue. He moaned softly and pulled her closer, accepting the invitation.

Jean knew the tinted limousine windows were impervious to onlookers, but a flash of lights from a passing car made her jump. He immediately released her and withdrew. 'It's not you, Paul,' she said, caressing the inside of his thigh. 'I just had a momentary, schoolgirl vision of being caught.'

He reached up to cup her face with his hand. 'The press will go to town.'

'Will that be a problem for you?'

'I'm divorced. Even conservatives don't demand celibacy from me.'

She shot him a look. 'I'm divorced, too. Signed the papers just before coming here. I meant politically.'

'Ah!' He smiled ruefully. 'I'm already accused of being in bed with the Americans. May as well get hung for a sheep as a lamb. What about you?'

Jean moved her hand higher. 'I'm looking forward to a nice, long weekend in Bermuda.'

Anderson chuckled and leaned down to kiss her again.

## Chapter 23

The World Trade Centre was easy ... The next time a nuclear device is set off, it most likely will not be by a government. It will probably be set off by some group of people who are so frustrated at being consigned to desperation that they will be driven to potentially outrageous acts of terrorism.

—Dr. Norman Myers, The Climate Institute

Nick stared at the mutilated bodies in the Bondi Beach Pavilion. He couldn't shake the feeling that he'd missed something. The old Russian had confirmed what Imhri Mahmed had said and other intelligence sources pointed to: the upper echelon of the Shatt-al Arabs, including the Nehros, were back in the Middle East. They had bigger concerns than finishing off him. The Russian had also confirmed the location of the Nehros' safe-house in the Sydney suburb of Bondi. Autopsies on the bodies would take time, but their condition tracked with what they knew of Elhamy's ... predilections—except for one thing. Imhri had told him that the Nehros had left days ago. These men had only been dead a short while.

The medical examiner looked up. 'Twelve hours, fourteen, tops,' he said.

Elhamy tortured his victims—'recreational toys' he called them—for days, even weeks, but he rarely killed them. That would end his pleasure in inflicting pain. Nick nodded to the ME, stood and walked outside. Ignoring the flashing lights and crime scene tape, he stared thoughtfully across the beach and past the break to where a group of wetsuit-clad surfboard riders jockeyed for position.

'Maybe you're right,' he said to Denning when the Australian joined him. 'Maybe Imhri told the truth to mess with our heads.'

'And those poor bastards?' Denning gestured inside the Pavilion.

'The clean up crew would have been ordered to slit their throats and dump them.' The Shatt-al Arabs had slipped through their fingers—again.

'At first glance it looks like a drug related murder.' Denning looked out over the waves. 'Winter westerlies; makes for beautiful surfing conditions. My place is only five minute away. With the Nehros and Mahmeds in Turkey, you're no longer a target, at least not here.' He turned and met Nick's troubled eyes. 'Why don't you take the day off, use my wetsuit and board, it'll help clear your head.'

He wasn't due back in Canberra until evening. 'Y'know, I might just do that.'

\* \* \* \*

Kristin sat at her desk with her arms folded, watching the international tribunal hand down its ruling. Citing evidence of a deliberate cover-up and misleading the public, a similar class action had resulted in a hundred and forty-nine billion-dollar award against Phillip Morris in 2000. This ruling, said the panel of judges, was based on thirty-five years of obfuscation, bribes and blackmail. The greatest public relations campaign since the tobacco companies; to confuse the world over global warming, to convince the public and governments it was scientific hokum, that there was no irrefutable evidence that the climate would change and sea levels would rise.

'Did you hear the verdict?' John Mennenger asked as he and Mioko walked in.

'Seven hundred billion dollars,' Kristin replied, shutting down the desk computer. She wondered if it was for the last time.

'Think they'll ever enforce it?' said Mioko.

'It'll be dragged out for the next twenty years,' her husband replied, picking up one of Kristin's bags. 'Just like the tobacco companies' fiasco at the turn of the century. This is just the start of an avalanche of lawsuits against every oil and petrochemical company on the planet. By the time they're forced to pay out, they'll have siphoned their assets off and hidden them elsewhere.'

Kristin took a last look around. Marie had cleaned out most of the files, and she'd finally sorted and stacked journals and books into neat rows along the shelves. All the machinery parts had gone down to the workshop and most of her desk was now visible. To anyone else it looked like she had finally organized her office, but Kristin knew better. When she returned to Vanuatu, she would be killing time until her contract expired. Her office was now like that of any other passing bureaucrat living out of a suitcase, not a working marine engineer who had until recently begun to think of Vanuatu as home.

'That much money is hardly a drop in the ocean—no pun intended—as the sea level rises.' She stood and picked up her hand luggage. 'Most people on this planet live on the edge of waterways, and every one of them will soon be impacted.'

They walked out into the morning sun and climbed into John Mennenger's Land Cruiser. 'You going straight to Canberra?'

Kristin glanced back at the old Fisheries building, already nostalgic for its peeling paint, grubby fly-screens and slothful overhead fans. Her linoleum-floored office was old, but it was big, and all hers. And she'd sure miss that green couch. 'Yeah, I can catch a direct flight from there to Boston.'

'I don't get it,' said Mioko. 'Why insist you go to Canberra before taking leave?'

'ADAB hinted, somewhat petulantly, they may pay out her contract,' Mennenger replied.

'If so,' Kristin added, 'I'll catch tomorrow's flight back here and pack everything before going on to the States.'

Mioko turned to look at her. 'You really think ADAB will do that?'

Kristin shook her head. 'What's a bet they order me back to Canberra to sit out my contract in some four by four cubicle in the bowels of a government office?' Seeing the look on Mennenger's face she added, 'If that happens I'll request a mutually agreed termination. With accumulated vacation pay I won't starve before setting myself up at Woods Hole.'

At the airport she hugged the Mennengers goodbye and boarded the aircraft, fully expecting to be back the next day.

Kristin had been too busy to give much thought to Nick. At least, that's what she told herself. She slept on the green couch because it was more comfortable, and she emailed her interim report to him because he had asked for a copy. Maybe it would take a while to shake memories of his green eyes and ready smile, the way he stood too close to her or the indelible sensation of stubble and softness as he kissed her goodbye—twice. But, like Vanuatu and her flight in the FSP, Commander Nicholas Page would eventually become a fond memory.

In Sydney, the aircraft taxied to Gate 68. Kristin couldn't avoid noticing the construction work at Gate 72. She clenched her jaw and looked away. The aircraft's forward hatch opened. A tall, uniformed man entered and began talking to the first officer. Passengers stood, collected their belongings and began shuffling forward.

In the bustle of disembarking passengers, Kristin hadn't realized that the uniformed man was Nick until he

removed his cap and said, 'Dr. Baker.'

Her first instinct was to toss her arms around his neck, but she quickly composed her features and quipped, 'Using your security clearances again, Commander?'

'Rank hath its privileges, Doctor.' He replaced his cap, took her flight bag and walked out with her.

'One little tantrum and I'm stuck with Doctor forever?' She tried to relax, a seasoned traveller arriving at a familiar airport, but it was impossible not to remember her previous, less than pleasant encounter. And why was Nick waiting to meet her?

He moved closer and gently clasped her elbow. 'Pays to be cautious, especially when I've rearranged your flight plans without your permission again.'

They exited the tunnel and she turned to look at him. 'I have to be in Canberra this afternoon. Or do I?'

'I'll give you a ride. I've arranged to have your bags taken to the World Tower. A chopper will collect us from there this afternoon.'

Her pace slowed. 'Am I still meeting with ADAB?'

'Same building; Foreign Affairs.'

She stopped and looked at him expectantly. 'Okay, you won't tell me. What have you got in mind meantime? It's almost 11am.'

'An early lunch in the Sydney Tower restaurant? I'm told it has the best views—and steak—in town.'

His tone was light, almost playful and she began to relax. Maybe Foreign Affairs was finally going to tell her whatever Nick couldn't. It also meant no waiting for her luggage, and no coming back to the airport. Flying, she had no problems with, especially when she was at the controls. Airports and hotels with crappy security systems were another story. 'What are you doing in Sydney?'

'I ... went surfing this morning, but I need to be back in Canberra tonight. And,' he added with a slow smile, 'I wanted to see you.'

'A girl could get used to this kind of treatment. I suppose you've already cancelled my flight—'

'And had it credited to your account. C'mon, helicopter's waiting.'

'I feel like a time-travelling tourist,' Kristin said as they looked out from the revolving restaurant to the city below. Demonstrators bearing placards from an earlier generation filled the streets: end the war, stop the polluting industries, impose sanctions on countries using fossil fuels, save the whales, save the world. Save ourselves.

'My uncle told me about protests like these in the seventies. Against nuclear bombs and the Vietnam War.' She snorted softly. 'He opined that the most anti-materialist generation the world had ever known grew up into the most consumer driven generation of all time.'

'It's harder to fight an ideological war than a shooting one,' Nick said. 'Especially when ideologies fly in the face of vested economic interests. When they realize Rhesus has stolen their genetic investment in the future, most will snatch what they can, and live for today, just as their parents and grandparents gave up environmental issues for a mortgage and two cars.'

Kristin leaned against the window. 'That's more or less what you said a few weeks ago. I thought you

were being pessimistic but it's already happening. President Taangiroa was on my flight. He called me up to business class to tell me that a couple of fishing cartels have offered them huge bribes. Ambassador Peng told him that by 2100 there'll be no ni-Vanuatu left, so why shouldn't the current generation enjoy what they can before Rh-negs, who undoubtedly triggered Rhesus, move in and take over? Peng accused me of being one of *them*. When the President asked me outright, I lied. Told him that I had no idea what my blood type was, but that I'd check and get back to him.

'Then on the way back to my seat, I struck up a conversation with the French chargé de affairs. There's a growing movement of radical Rh-neg organizations in France and Germany. They call themselves the only true Aryans; inheritors of a dying Earth despoiled by 'genetically impure' Rh-positives. It's turning into gang warfare, the vampires versus the Aryans.' She sighed in annoyance. 'It doesn't matter what issue we use to draw the lines, does it? We seem to revel in this need to define *us* versus *them*.'

A few blocks away in a surveillance centre, an elderly ex-cop named Graham Evans watched the Circular Quay railway station video monitors. Evans remembered the anti-Vietnam War demonstrations very clearly; he'd been in them as a kid. Now his granddaughter was marching in one very much like them, demanding an end to war.

In his heart, Evans sympathized with his only grandchild, but he knew what could happen during demonstrations. It was also the perfect opportunity for the bloody terrorists who attacked Sydney airport to do something worse. But all he could do was keep a sharp lookout and pray to God that his granddaughter stayed in the background.

In Sydney, as elsewhere, it was a peaceful day, with songs not heard in the streets for more than half a century. The words of two generations before, of Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel, John Lennon and Bob Dylan echoed through the canyons of office blocks, while the money merchants looked out from their windows above, shook their heads and laughed at the futility of it all.

Down on the streets, strangers offered each other drinks. Street vendors cheered them on while shop girls idly watched through windows, hoping to see something exciting.

At Circular Quay station, Alim Sara whispered to Um Nehro, 'I do not understand why we were given this job. And I do not understand why we must manually detonate it.'

Um looked at him scornfully. 'It is not your place to understand why.'

'If the Russian designed the bomb, he could have designed a remote trigger,' Alim replied sarcastically.

Um glared at him. '*Elhamy*, not the Russian, designed the bomb! To achieve maximum destruction there is only one place from which to detonate it. It is too risky, too exposed, to trust that no one will discover it. You volunteered for this, you *know* this and now you quiver like a coward!'

Alim wasn't a bright man, which was the only reason he still lived. Um knew they needed six people for the operation, so Elhamy had lured the other two members of their cell away, then did to them what he needed to satiate himself, before dumping their bodies in the Pavilion. When Um had checked the news that morning, the report had stated that two unidentified bodies had been found on Bondi Beach. Um knew the authorities had identified the victims, just as she knew Imhri had been successful. The Russian was still alive, and the butcher, Page, had taken the bait.

Alim's eyes narrowed. It was an affront to his manhood that a *woman* should lead an operation. It didn't matter to him that Um controlled her brother, whom Allah had seen fit to curse with a strange madness as well as the knowledge of how to build such a weapon. It only mattered that she was in charge. He was willing to die and no *woman* had a right to call him, Alim Sara, a coward! But he resentfully held his



tongue as they disembarked from the train. Soon they would meet with the others, then the bomb would be fitted together and the world would know that—

'Hey, watchit mate!'

Alim stared stonily at the white-haired infidel on the lower step of the escalator, refusing to apologise for striking him with the bag.

'Bloody wog,' muttered the man, turning away.

Alim glared at him malevolently. Soon, he thought, you will be bloody dead, *mate*.

Just as Alim and Um alighted from the train, Graham Evans returned from the bathroom and sat in front of the Circular Quay railway station monitors. He watched as they walked through the ticket barrier. There was something odd about them. Maybe it was their expressions, or lack of them. When everyone else's face had some sign of animation, even if it was animated boredom, these two looked like they were trying not to look like anything.

Pedestrian traffic was heavy; marchers were preparing to join those from the southern side of the city. Evans' last bank of monitors displayed the Taronga Zoo Park wharf. The ferry arrived, but only a handful disembarked. Evans dismissed most as local commuters, until two passengers walked across the short gangplank. They were carrying an identical bag to the first pair. Evans did not believe in coincidences, and those bags bothered him. He called his supervisor, who immediately switched channels to the Taronga Zoo wharf exit. Yes, that's them, Evans affirmed when the pairs met.

'Bingo!' exclaimed the supervisor. The four suspects climbed into two separate taxis and left. 'Follow them!' He ordered Evans, then picked up his comunit and called someone.

Evans saw a third pair with yet another identical bag leave in another taxi. He had no difficulty following all three cabs; each headed south and stopped at a mid-city shopping complex, Centrepoint Arcade.

'Where are they now?' the supervisor demanded.

'Centrepoint. They could go anywhere from there!' Evans felt his bowels loosen. Bloody terrorists, and his granddaughter somewhere nearby!

Inside the arcade, multi-level walkways led to stores and other arcades, allowing pedestrians to walk almost from one side of the city to the other, entirely underground. Cameras monitored the area, especially at railway station entrances, but it was infinitely harder than watching street-level road traffic monitors.

Evans began to sweat. He *knew* the cases contained bombs. So why hadn't they headed towards Elizabeth Street where most of the demonstrators would be? Or Hyde Park, which was already packed with people?

Um Nehro embraced her brother, Elhamy, and watched him step into the elevator before returning to the Sydney Tower booking office. The booking agent lay dead at her feet, tucked neatly under the booth's covered table. Um's clothing matched the uniform well enough to pass cursory inspection. Not one of these rich, godless infidels had noticed anything was amiss as they walked by, draped in their designer clothes and averted gazes.

Once they reached the top of the Sydney Tower, the Mahmeds and Alim would secure the eighteen restaurant staff while Elhamy assembled the bomb. If it detonated before Elhamy's practised fourteen minutes so much the better, for that minimized the chances of discovery, and Sydney would be

uninhabitable for a dozen millennia.

Um had considered destroying the elevator's mechanism once it reached the top, but that might've drawn attention from technicians. 'Temporarily out of service' notices were simpler. She told inquirers they would be open again in twenty minutes and yes, she could take a booking for the restaurant and sell them a Tower ticket.

Despite Alim's concerns, she and Elhamy had spent years setting this up. And now it was time! Her baby brother's murderer would die, and the Australians, who had butchered the rest of their family, would know the same pain and horror and death that had defined her life. For a moment the sheer sense of power threatened to overwhelm her, but she calmed herself and waited. Alone with her thoughts. Alone with her revenge.

Nick was washing his hands in the men's room when he heard shouts and the short, staccato burst of automatic weapons' fire. He instantly cursed himself for letting his desire to see Kristin outweigh the risk. Glancing up and around for a hiding place, he rapidly considered the options. More shouts and gunfire, but further away.

As unimaginable as the scenario was, this *had* to be the Nehros, but it had nothing to do with him. Instead, his worst nightmare was in play.

He reached for his comunit—and switched it off. If they were using signal locators he'd be dead before he'd hit the last digit. He extracted a large knife strapped to his calf and risked a glance out the door. Swiftly moving into the women's toilets, he was confronted by a white-faced, pinch-lipped Kristin. What was taking them so long? They weren't stupid enough to forget checking the toilets.

With a finger to his lips, his eyes scoured the room, and arrested on an access panel. It was a cleaner's closet cleverly designed to appear part of the wall. If they'd taken this long to get to them, they might just miss it. He swiftly opened it and pushed Kristin inside. He went to close the panel behind her but with surprising strength, she grabbed him and pulled him in. Before he could stop her, she closed the panel—just as the bathroom door slammed open.

It was pitch black inside the closet. Nick mentally cursed Kristin until he considered that if he'd been found in the women's toilets, they would assume he was hiding someone and sought her out. Stall doors banged open, then the bathroom door closed and footsteps faded in the distance.

Kristin was pressed tightly against him. He couldn't risk speaking yet, but he grasped her wrist and felt for her comunit. She squeezed her other hand between them and he heard the soft *beep* as she deactivated it. He just hoped she'd continue to keep her head because if he was right, a hell of a lot more than their lives was at stake.

A few blocks away, Captain Ronald Denning watched the Circular Quay station tapes replay. He tried calling Nick but his comunit was switched off. Why?

'Son of a bitch!' whispered one of his team, then the room erupted in panic.

'Okay! Okay!' Denning shouted. Shit. And where in hell is Nick? 'Assuming the worst,' he demanded, 'where would they put it and how long do we have? And get Peterson's team in there now!'

As each scrambled to their jobs, an image of the immediate areas surrounding Centrepoint appeared on the screen. 'Got it!' shouted a woman. 'It has to be. It's the logical place to ensure maximum damage!'

The image froze on the immensely tall Sydney Tower above Centrepoint Arcade. The room burst into

another flurry of activity. Seal the Tower, the order went out, but Denning knew it was too late. Eight, almost nine minutes had passed since the Mahmeds and Nehros had entered the arcade.

'They could have placed the bomb and be making their way through the underground tunnels to different train lines out of the city,' someone called.

Others quickly injected their analyses. Because of the march, the terrorists could either escape by walking underground to World Square where there was a commercial rooftop helipad, or by catching the monorail to the Darling Harbour helipad.

But Denning knew the Nehros had no intention of escape. 'Based on information from the Russian,' he said in a surprisingly steady voice, 'it can be assembled in minutes. It's lunchtime and people will be clambering to enter the restaurant. To avoid discovery they'll detonate it as soon as possible.'

Smaller screens displayed transmissions from the head monitors used by Peterson's team. They were inside Centrepont, running up the escalators to the podium level where elevators would carry them to the Sydney Tower.

A sense of impotent fury gripped Denning. He slammed his fist on the table. This went against everything they knew! What they'd extracted from the Russian fit with their other intelligence; the Shatt-al Arabs, including the Nehros, had left Australia with the bomb! Yet as he watched the monitors, his mouth twisted in bitter irony. It made sense. While the Mahmeds had been in hiding with the Canberra cell, they'd fed the Russian a believable story, including the location of the Nehros' safe-house in Sydney. Imhri Mahmed had remained behind as a sacrificial decoy, probably to atone for his fuck-up in the States. It had probably been Imhri who'd called in the anonymous tip—which explained why he'd 'failed' to blow up a house that should have been booby-trapped. It also explained why Imhri had used a gun to take out everyone but the Russian.

And he'd swallowed it whole.

Nick had known something didn't add up. Nevertheless he had come to Sydney, inadvertently positioning himself for the Nehros to make the final, fatal move in this nightmare game.

Then Denning remembered Nick had asked him the best place to take someone to lunch. He felt a surge of hope; the game was still in play!

Inside the broom cupboard, Nick gently grasped Kristin's hand. She was shaking and her palm was clammy, but despite the sporadic weapons fire, shouting and screaming, she remained motionless and didn't speak. Good girl. He reached inside his coat, eased his gun out and placed the weapon in her hand. She hesitated, then took it. He leaned close until his lips brushed her ear. 'Ever use one?'

She shook her head and whispered, 'Only a .303 to kill wild pigs.'

He again considered his options. The Nehros wouldn't have missed finding them, unless they only needed to secure the restaurant for a short time. That meant he was probably right about why. An old, twentieth century aviator's curse came to mind. *Jesus, Ron, we really screwed the pooch this time.* 'Just cover my back. I'd prefer no gunfire because it'll alert the others but ... Two hands, watch the kickback and don't get your skin caught in the rebound.' He felt her hands around the weapon and adjusted her grip.

'Got it,' she whispered.

He could feel her fractured breathing, almost panting, through her mouth. She was terrified, but still thinking on her feet. He reached up to touch her face, quickly kissed her mouth and said, 'Safety's off.'

Then opened the cupboard door and stepped out.

Sixteen minutes had passed since the terrorists had entered Centrepoint. Denning began to sweat. The data kept spewing into his ear, but he cut it off and sat at the nearest terminal. He may not be able to save the city, he may be a dead man still breathing, but he would keep everyone online informed until the last. They had just one, flimsy hope.

Kristin's stomach lurched and she stifled a cry. Outside in the restaurant, upturned tables and shattered limbs lay tangled amidst white linen cloths drenched with blood and viscera. She knew why the restaurant patrons had been killed. After the World Trade Centre, terrorists had learned the hard way that civilian prisoners could no longer be trusted to sit by like fearful sheep, because people now knew that the stakes were no longer just their own lives.

Keeping her eyes behind them while Nick led them towards the kitchen, Kristin wondered what the stakes were today. It had to be something terrifyingly big, otherwise he would never have enlisted her help. Not just any old bomb then, maybe a—

A movement caught her attention. She glanced forward to see Nick's arms move in a blur. A sickening crack followed. He handed her an automatic assault weapon and quietly lowered the body to the ground. She could tell by the gut-wrenching way the man's head hung that Nick had snapped the man's neck. No hesitation.

Her mouth went dry when he whispered, 'When it comes time to use it, you cannot hesitate, not for a millisecond. Do you understand me?'

Nick's eyes were like hard emeralds as he showed her what to do. She nodded and handed his now sweaty handgun back to him, then turned her eyes to cover their backs as they continued towards the kitchen.

With only minutes to go, Um knew that nothing short of an armed assault could stop them. A second Sydney Tower girl was due on duty at any moment. The newcomer would immediately know that something was wrong. Um could not hide another body, so she walked to the automatic gate and using her stolen security card, opened the elevator doors. She stepped in, pressed the button and the doors closed.

Too late! Sergeant Peterson railed at himself. He leaped over the turnstiles and jammed his fist on the button, but it made no difference, the elevator would travel to the top of the tower before returning. The remaining elevators were now genuinely out of order, thanks to Um's last minute use of wire cutters.

Um reached the top. She stepped out and over the body of a dead kitchen hand, and called out.

Gamil Mahmed answered from the other side of a partition, 'What is wrong?'

'Nothing,' she replied, 'I wanted to be here when it happens.' Um walked over to the curtain windows and looked out. It was a superb view. The revolving restaurant was bringing them around to face the Eastern suburbs. Somewhere down there, Nicholas Page was searching for the house. She hoped he would live long enough to appreciate how badly he had failed.

'Where are Kali and Rashid?' she said when Gamil joined her.

'Watching, making sure Elhamy is left undisturbed.'

'How long?'

'Another few minutes. It took us longer than expected to secure the restaurant. Some resisted.'

If they had not been enjoying the view they would take with them to Paradise, Um might have noticed the elevator descend.

Kali Mahmed gurgled. Arterial blood shot out, spraying an obscene pattern against the cream-colored wallpaper. Nick lowered him to the carpeted floor.

It was the swiftness as much as the violence that shocked Kristin. Within seconds the man she had been about to dine with had killed two human beings. No warning, no put your hands up you're under arrest. Just swift, uncompromising ... death. Something he was clearly practised in. But she refused to allow the horror to distract her.

Sergeant Peterson rocked from one foot to the other. The body of the dead Tower receptionist behind the booth had confirmed their suspicions. The rest of his team had deployed to cover all exit points, while eight of them now stared at the elevator doors, as if willpower alone would force a more rapid descent.

Amidst the protests of shoppers and shopkeepers, uniformed police were clearing the area. Peterson turned his stony stare to an indignant merchant. The gold-draped matron suddenly stopped complaining, hurrumphed, then ushered her girls from the store and locked the doors.

Finally, the elevator reached their floor. Agonizing moments passed while the doors slowly opened. Slowly, too slowly it ascended. Peterson remembered that he'd had dinner there once, trying to impress a girl. The damned elevator had shot up then, eager to fleece him of a small fortune. Why the hell was it taking so long this time? He mentally reviewed their plan. No time for a roof entry by helicopter or the emergency stairs, their only viable option, the elevator, sucked. He just hoped the terrorists had not collected weapons stashed elsewhere ... unless the cases held only one bomb and an assortment of dismantled automatic weapons? Too many bloody ifs but one thing was certain, they'd have the elevator exit covered.

He considered a stun grenade to disorient them when the elevator doors started to open, but without knowing where the terrorists were placed, it could equally serve as a warning. The chances of Commander Page being there were slim, but even if Captain Denning was right, Page's comunit being switched off didn't necessarily mean the Commander was still alive.

The elevator slowed, the doors opened ... to an empty lobby? What? They couldn't be that stupid unless—

'Come on, I said!' a voice in Arabic called from the kitchen. 'It is ready!'

Peterson didn't understand the words, but the intent was clear; they had run out of time. He motioned two of his team to secure the floor while the others ran towards the voice. As he rounded the corner, he heard weapons' fire and saw a man's head erupt in a bloody, bone-splintered mess. A second man fell; cut almost in two, while a woman turned her weapon on the source of gunfire. Peterson fired off a brief burst, knocking her down, while his partner simultaneously aimed at a struggling pair, one of who was wearing the uniform of a US naval officer. Then everyone was shouting, 'Drop your weapons!'

Kristin was overpowered and shoved painfully to the floor. The stench of cordite and blood and terror filled her nostrils. Big men, helmeted and black masked bodies surrounded her, shouting. Powerful hands pulled at her, explored her body, lifted her dress, checked inside her panties and bra, roughly pushed at her, and then wrenched her arms back with bone jarring force. She felt the hot sting of tears, out of control until one warm, familiar voice; gentler hands and reassuring touches finally took over. She clutched at his bloodied and torn jacket, sobbing uncontrollably as weeks of death and fear and terror

finally took their toll.

'It's okay, it's okay. It's all okay now,' Nick kept saying over and over as he held her close and stroked her shoulders and hair. But it would never be okay again. The world had changed and she had been dragged along.

Then Kristin stopped her cascading thoughts and focused. The world still turned. She was alive, they were both alive and she could collapse into hysteria, or pull herself together and deal with it.

She lifted her head and choked back a manic laugh. Nick was holding out a wad of expensive cloth napkins. She took one and blew her nose, then wiped her eyes. 'I am so glad I used the bathroom before this happened.'

'Do you have any idea what you just stopped?'

Kristin gagged and shook her head. 'I ... killed some people. I saw his skull burst open like a ... a—'

But Nick forced her to meet his eyes. 'You killed a man with his finger on the button of a nuclear weapon. Half a second later, we wouldn't be sitting here talking about it, and two million people would have been dead, or dying.'

The colour drained from her face and she sucked in deep, shuddering breaths. Wave after wave of nausea threatened to engulf her. Then she glanced in the direction of the men she had killed. A wall of black clad bodies blocked her view. 'Is it c?'

Peterson replied, 'It's relatively safe; we're getting a team up now. When you're ready, Dr. Baker, we'd like to take you out of here.'

Kristin stood, but clung shakily to Nick. She forced back the tears, as she forced down the bile in her stomach. She hated hysteria. 'Sure, okay. Uh, I left my bag and shoes in the toilet.'

Nick exchanged a look with the sergeant, and then he said, 'Take your time.'

While two female members of Denning's team took Kristin to the ladies' room, Peterson turned to Nick. 'She did good, sir.'

Nick nodded. 'She sure did. How's Um?'

Peterson turned and checked with someone. 'I just clipped her,' he replied. 'She's coming around now.'

'Our intel on this was worse than useless. We walked straight into it.'

'The Captain's expletives were long and colourful,' Peterson said.

'I bet. Well, we finally have her. Now all we have to do is find out how many more of these things her brother built—and where they've taken them.'

Kristin sat on the toilet for some minutes trying to control her shaking and nausea. 'Dr. Baker?' one of the women called. 'Are you okay in there?'

With a hand on the door for support, Kristin stood and walked out. She was almost relieved when she saw the white, haggard face staring back at her from the mirror; it finally had the grace to look like she felt. She was missing an earring and her dress looked like it had been used to scrub the deck after hauling in one of those bloody nets. 'I feel like an idiot for cracking up.' She smiled nervously at the women with her.

'Hey, you're not trained for this,' said the nearest one. 'You did more than okay. There's a vehicle waiting to take you to a secure location for debriefing.'

Debriefing. You mean relive it all over again. Kristin washed her face and brushed her hair. 'So, every one of them is dead?' How many did I kill? How many human lives did I take? One? Two? Ten? Did it matter anymore? Did anything really matter anymore?

## Chapter 24

**A recent study ... found that the water flow in the River Euphrates, which runs from Turkey through Syria and Iraq to the Arabian Gulf, is halved in years with a strongly positive NAO (North Atlantic Oscillation—el Niño's cousin) index. This should set diplomats thinking. The three countries have a long-running argument over low water levels in the Euphrates. Turkey and Syria have both dammed the river, and in 1975 Iraq threatened to bomb a Syrian dam, while Syria blamed Turkey for the water shortage downstream.**

—New Scientist, January 2001

'That allegation is ridiculous,' Roger Harrison continued walking. The press were hounding them, demanding immediate answers. What was the point of the Rhesus conference, they insisted, unless it had resulted in something other than allegations about water bottles?

Talking over his shoulder as he went, Harrison added, 'The conference defined strategies to research the *microbiology* of Rhesus and track down the trigger. To make some farfetched and totally unsubstantiated claim that USAMRIID released it is as ridiculous as the earlier alien invasion rubbish.' He buttoned his suede coat, intent on escape. It was snowing outside and the journalist was dressed for indoors.

'Is it?' snapped Susan Teasdale. Her heeled shoes clacked noisily against the tiled floor as she lengthened her stride. 'Dr. Harrison, isn't it a fact that neither the CDC nor the WHO have been entirely forthcoming with information on Rhesus?'

Harrison felt the camera light bore into his soul, flaying his professional façade, exposing the secret fears that haunted him in the early hours of the mornings. This was the reporter who'd tactlessly linked the demographic spread of Rhesus to the Kamchatka Statement, then worse, ignited the so-called vampire cults.

'Isn't it a *fact*, Ms. Teasdale,' he snapped back, 'that irresponsible journalism has not only contributed to, but caused the death and suffering of hundreds of innocent people by deliberately mis-reporting and sensationalizing—'

'We report only the facts, Dr. Harrison. Facts that you have kept secret and that the public has a right to know.' Her short, dark hair seemed to bristle with her growing anger.

'The public's right to know,' Harrison muttered in an ever-suffering voice. 'The public has a right to the truth, in the *correct context*, not your twisted version!' He was annoyed with himself for letting her bait him, but he doubted she would use the footage.

'Well now's your chance to explain your version of events in 2011 when USAMRIID ordered all of your work on Rhesus handed over to them,' Teasdale pressed.

Harrison ground his teeth. He had learned the hard way, the *journalist's* way that facts were like statistics, you could turn them inside out and still tell the 'truth'. 'Ms. Teasdale, despite evidence linking the trigger to a chemical compound found in fibreveg, you implied that USAMRIID deliberately released—'

'Or inadvertently, Doctor. I'm prepared to concede that.'

'Gracious of you,' he snarled, making no attempt to hide his sarcasm. 'But USAMRIID didn't have



samples of Rhesus until the virus had already triggered in the community at large.'

'Then why did the Secretary of Health order you to hand your research over to Fort Detrick?'

'Secretary of Health McDuff was a retired army general, an ex-Fort Detrick doctor with a personal grudge against the then CDC Director, Mirik Yolán.' Unmindful of the camera, he added, 'He was just pissing Yolán off.'

'So it's thanks to him that ninety-nine percent of people might become sterile?'

'No. It's thanks to journalists like you. I know about you, Ms. Teasdale.' He tossed a glare over his shoulder. 'You have a Masters in environmental management yet you spent ten years destroying the credibility of ocean and atmospheric scientists about the effects of a failed Gulf Stream.'

He stopped so abruptly that the cameraman bumped into him. 'You deliberately pandered to people's simplistic cause and effect perception of global warming when you knew darned well that the planet's weather systems are considerably more complex.'

Teasdale straightened her already impeccable jacket and thrust the microphone into his straggly beard.

Brushed it aside Harrison continued, 'As a journalist you had a responsibility to *inform* the public, not confuse them! You were wrong then and you knew it. You're wrong now and you know it, but you're stirring a hornet's nest because you get paid for it. Worse, you get off on it. You're wasting time badgering people with false allegations when...' his voice trailed off. The cameraman's gesticulations had turned frantic.

'What is it?' Teasdale snapped impatiently.

'I've been monitoring a satellite feed,' the cameraman explained. 'There's just been another terrorist attack in Sydney.'

'Where?' she demanded.

'Sydney Tower,' the cameraman replied. 'And get this,' his voice fractured. 'They think it was a nuke!'

Their antipathy instantly forgotten, all three of them ran to find the nearest TFT screen.

\* \* \* \*

Sirens screamed through the city, penetrating the noisy crowds congregated outside Centrepoint. Bad enough that the demonstration had blocked city streets, now everything was being cordoned off because of a bomb scare. Despite their grumbling, no one tried to break through. Bomb scares had a bad habit of turning into gutted buildings, destroyed cars and shredded lives.

Few paid any interest to the black, armoured vehicle leaving the area. Inside, Kristin was grateful for the feel of Nick's arm around her shoulders. She took comfort in the sound of his heartbeat: strong, regular, calm. Alive. She was also grateful that he wasn't asking her inane questions about how she felt. 'Where are we going? I'm supposed to be in Canberra this afternoon,' she mumbled.

Peterson, who was sitting opposite, replied, 'The Prime Minister is aware you have been delayed. And why.'

Kristin grinned sickly. She was still clinging to a past reality. A nuke. In Sydney. She shuddered again and felt Nick's arm tighten. How he was he involved? The anti-terrorist squad seemed to be following his orders. Was it courtesy towards an allied military officer, or was the relationship more direct? She

noticed his knuckles were bleeding.

They drove into the basement of a building that Kristin did not recognise. People in military uniforms led them up a grey-walled stairwell. She was only vaguely aware of her surroundings until they stopped outside doors marked 'men' and 'women'. She didn't want to leave Nick, but he insisted she would feel better after showering. Two armed female corporals accompanied her inside. They were not guards, they insisted, but were there if she needed anything.

'In case I pass out, you mean,' she mumbled.

Kristin stripped off her clothes then stepped into the bland shower cubicle with its ugly, stainless steel faucet and nozzles. She heard people on the other side of the wall. Nick was talking to someone. She couldn't make out the words but she took some comfort in the sound of his voice. Then the water was turned on and she heard nothing but the pounding of her own heart in her ears.

When Nick stepped out of the shower, Denning handed him a towel and said, 'You involved with her?'

'You asking me as a friend, or investigator?'

'We don't need to investigate her, we did a complete follow-up and psychological profile after Fiji, and we've been keeping tabs on her ever since, you know that.'

He said nothing as he dried himself.

'You'd like to be,' Denning said softly.

'After today? Forget it.' Nick pulled on a pair of khaki-coloured shorts.

'She's extraordinarily resilient, Nick. She'll deal with it.'

The pain Nick had felt when Karen had been killed was incomparable to what Ron Denning had suffered. The Mahmeds and Elhamy Nehro were dead, and Um Nehro was in their custody, her life now belonged to them. She wouldn't be able to pee without someone watching, and her only visitors would be unsmiling men armed with needles. He took no pleasure from that thought, although he did feel a sense of completeness.

He finished dressing in the khaki fatigues that Denning had brought with him, then said, 'But can she deal with me? I dunno, Ron. Maybe it's because I've been wrapped up in this business for so long, I'd forgotten why. It's like those giant termite mounds you guys have out west. Every time we stomp out one, damned near killing ourselves, and losing good men and women, good friends along the way, we look up and see scores of 'em all the way to the horizon.' He pulled his shoes on then met Denning's gaze. 'Meeting her, it reminded me of why we're doing it. Most people are oblivious to our world, but that doesn't make them any less strong, less professional and...' He stood and threw down the bunched up towel. 'So what do I do? Drag her headfirst into our cesspit then rub her face in it.' He smiled sadly at Denning. 'What the hell are we talking about this for?'

'Because I'm your friend. Because the first thing we sacrifice are personal considerations. Because I was wrong in telling you not to go there; you're right Nick, she's strong.'

'And she's in shock. Once she gets over that, she won't want me around as a reminder.'

'I'm not so sure about that.' Denning stood. 'I'll look after her, okay?'

Nick looked at him gratefully and slapped him on the shoulder. 'Thanks, buddy. Now, who's screaming

to talk to me first?'

Dressed in a pair of khaki coveralls—her own clothes were ruined—the guards led Kristin into a bland, grey-walled conference room with a bland table and even blander, government-issue chairs. At least there was no mirror. She shook her head at the offer of coffee and asked to see Nick.

He came by long enough to say, 'They'll debrief us together in a little while, but I need to talk to some people first, okay?'

His eyes were full of tenderness and admiration. Briefly clasping her arm, he smiled reassuringly and left. Then came the questions, ones she had few answers to, because it all happened, she kept saying, so quickly.

Ronald Denning arrived soon after. Kristin stood and accepted his outstretched hand. 'Firstly,' he said. 'Everyone here has probably told you but I'm going to say it, too. Your actions saved an incalculable number of lives today—including mine. Can I get you anything?'

She swallowed. 'A stiff margarita, some lunch, or is it dinner by now? And an answer as to how long I'm going to be here. I was due in Canberra today, and subject to the outcome of that meeting I was hoping either to get back to Vanuatu or leave for the States tomorrow.'

Denning motioned to someone. 'Dinner is easy but I'm not sure how long we'll need to keep you. Unfortunately the media downloaded and broadcast some of what occurred today.'

'How?' Kristin frowned.

His lips compressed. 'Thing is, it's all over the news. And some bright spark recognized it as a nuclear device. Your exact role is not clear, but your face is.'

Kristin sat back in the chair. She had recovered from the initial shock; the hot shower had helped considerably, but now it was starting to sink in. She had killed people. She had pulled the trigger and a few small pieces of metal had shred through flesh and organs and bone and caused incalculable havoc on two human beings. She had just ... splattered them across the wall. Her hands began to shake and she could feel the sting of tears burn behind her eyes. 'Oh, joy,' she muttered.

'Try not to let this upset you,' Denning said kindly. 'Sydney exists because you put down two rabid dogs. We're working on a statement now. Meanwhile, we'll keep you under wraps.'

She sucked in a few deep breaths, looked around and said, 'What about Commander Page?'

'The Commander is talking with his superiors in Washington. He'll join us in a few minutes.'

Moments later Nick and Sergeant Peterson arrived. Peterson shook her hand and repeated Denning's thanks. 'And I really am very sorry for manhandling you in the restaurant,' he added.

'That's all right, Sergeant. Under the circumstances, I'm just glad you didn't shoot me.'

Glancing warily at Nick, Peterson said, 'So am I, Doctor.'

Then the questions began again but this time, with Nick there, it was easier. Although she did not look to him to speak for them both, she listened carefully to his answers and descriptions of events, considered them, and understanding more of what was required from her, elaborated on her previous observations. Nevertheless the interview provided little more than what their individual stories had revealed. Finally, she said, 'Who were they?'

Before Denning could answer, the door opened. Two uniformed policemen walked in with platters of hot Mexican food. Kristin chuckled when she saw a salt-rimmed margarita in a glass the size of a small fishbowl.

When the door closed again, Denning said, 'You understand this is classified. The woman's name is Um Nehro.' He glanced at Nick. 'Maybe we should step back a bit. When the UN was stationed in Turkey about fifteen years back, Um's younger brother, a boy of nine or ten, made a practice of befriending soldiers in the usual street urchin manner. Then he'd lure them into ambushes where they had their throats cut. One time, his intended victim, the Commander here, caught him. While trying to escape, the lad fell off a wall and snapped his neck.'

She paled and turned to Nick.

'The outcome was unintended but I can't say I regret it,' he replied flatly. 'Imprisoned, he would have learned to refine his art and a lot more people would have died over the following years.'

Kristin's nostrils flared and she sucked in her breath. No regrets, shades of grey; terms that had become painfully familiar these last hours.

Ronald Denning knew how deeply that incident had affected Nick, but Nick was also correct in his seemingly cold analysis—and Denning understood his friend's ploy. Kristin Baker had inadvertently been exposed to their ugly world; better she know all of it if he intended pursuing a relationship with her. If she couldn't deal with it, Nicholas would walk away without a backward glance, although not without some sadness.

Then he saw Kristin's eyes. They reflected tacit understanding, and support. When she clasped the back of Nick's hand, Denning's respect for her climbed another notch. 'The Nehros have long harboured a personal hatred for Nicholas,' he continued. 'But we were all surprised by the sabotage of Nick's aircraft, because it led us to their whereabouts. No doubt by now Um's bosses in the Shatt-al Arabs are very pissed off. It seems that along with her companions, the lovely little bitch killed or betrayed most of her cell and hijacked the nuke that her brother made. Um had no intention of surviving, by the way; she would never have avoided her erstwhile compatriots tracking her down and meting out a nasty punishment, and she's always aspired to martyrdom.'

'Who are the Shatt-al Arabs?' Kristin asked.

'Ever heard of the GAP project?'

'What engineer hasn't? It's the Turkish acronym for the South Eastern Anatolia Development Project: some twenty-two dams and nineteen hydroelectric projects along the Euphrates River. It's supposed to be completed in 2020.'

'Supposed is correct. While ninety-eight percent of the water carried by the Euphrates originates in Turkey, it's the *only* reliable source of running water for Syria and Iraq. It's a heinously complex situation, has been since the middle of last century, but in the last twenty years global warming has reduced the flow of the Euphrates to less than half, turning a precarious water situation into an increasingly desperate one. Every year, Turkey allows less water past its borders, but once the last GAP dams are complete they could conceivably turn off the tap, permanently.'

'Water, or more correctly access to water, is the single most contentious issue in the Middle East,' Nick said. 'Despite popular belief it was the primary cause of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Turkey claims traditional sovereignty over the Euphrates. Even without the hydroelectric power that the GAP project is designed to generate, the Turks will need every drop of water to sustain their growing population.'

'And this has a bearing on nuking Sydney ... how?' Kristin asked.

Denning replied, 'The Shatt-al Arabs were responsible for the theft of fissionable material stored in a Western Australian containment facility. Um's brother, Elhamy was a nuclear physicist.'

'Why was Um running things? She's a woman, isn't that kind of unusual?'

'Elhamy was as mad as a cut snake.' Denning recalled the condition of the bodies they'd found that morning. 'He was a sociopathic killer responsible for some horrifically sadistic murders. He was also a genius whose expertise was highly desired by any number of rogue states. As for Um, she's a rabid bitch, but she was the only one who could control her brother. Because Elhamy was as much of a danger as an asset to anyone who had him, Um came with the package. And when it came to protecting them, Um was considerably more cunning than her brother. That's what made the sabotage of Nick's aircraft so unusual.'

Kristin frowned. 'Okay, go back to the terrorist group, the Shatt-al Arabs. Why did they want a nuke?'

'You've probably never heard of them because their goals have nothing to do with the West. They're named after the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, the historic cradle of civilization. Shatt-al Arab signifies a joining together, not just of the rivers, but religious, ethnic and environmental refugees from all three countries who have nothing left to lose.

'It's primarily a mixture of the PPK, the Kurdish Workers Party, and the remaining Iraqi Shiite Marsh Arabs—the Ma'dan,' Denning continued. 'Strange bedfellows, whose common ground is that Iraq tried to wipe them both out. Late last century Saddam Hussein drained the southern marshlands, creating an ecological nightmare as devastating as the drying of the Aral Sea. He did it purely to destroy the traditional homelands of the Ma'dan, who maintain links with predominantly Shiite Iran. Hussein also tried to eradicate the Kurds. Remember, Iraq tested biological weapons on them.'

'Historically, everyone's got it in for the Kurds, including Turkey' Nick added. 'The Ma'dan also blame Turkey for damming the headwaters of the Euphrates in the '80s. Without that, Hussein could not have drained the southern marshes. Additionally, the new regime in Iraq has threatened Syria over the GAP project because Iraq fears what little water Turkey might let through after its completion will not get past the Syrian border. But the Shatt-al Arabs accept recruits from other organizations who've honed their skills on terrorist activities against the West.'

'So, the Nehros had it in for you and Australia,' Kristin said, looking at Nick. 'But the Shatt-al Arabs have got it in for Iraq, right?'

'Not quite,' Denning replied. 'Because of the GAP project, both Iraq and Syria are openly threatening Turkey, as too, are the PPK. By secretly funding the terrorists, Iraq and Syria hope the Shatt-al Arabs and Turkey will destroy one another.'

'So much for the Arab world thinking the American's control Iraq. What were these Shatt-al Arabs planning to nuke before Um stole it?' Kristin asked.

'That's what we hope to learn from Um and a Russian physicist we have in custody.'

Kristin looked at him sceptically. 'I don't know about the Russian but a martyr wannabe won't tell you much.'

Denning hesitated. How much more could she deal with?

'What are you using on Um?' Nick asked him.

'Same drugs as the Russian.'

'We should have something soon, but this time,' Nick tossed him a wry look, 'we follow my instincts, not yours.'

'Last time I followed yours, I ended up with a bullet in my butt.' Denning saw Nick slowly turn his hand over and clasp Kristin's. When she didn't pull it away, he wondered if she understood—until he saw the pain in her eyes.

## Chapter 25

**Long before the systems of the planet buckle, democracy will disintegrate under the stress of ecological disasters and their social consequences. Two different men independently expressed this chilling insight to me—William Ruckelshaus, the first head of the EPA and now CEO of Browning-Ferris Industries; and Dr. Henry Kendall of MIT, the recipient of the 1990 Nobel Prize for Physics.**

### —Ross Gelbspan: The Heat Is On

'But are *you* okay!' cried Sylvie Camicci. 'Australia was supposed to be safe!'

'We're on the other side of the continent,' replied Joe. 'I'm more worried about you and Greg. They keep telling me the visas will only be a few more weeks but they've been saying that since before I left.'

Sylvie bit her lip. 'We've found an inexpensive motel near the hospital. Greg picked up part time work in a florist.'

'What about school? And why isn't he answering his comunit?'

When the police had raided the vampire gang's warehouse, they'd thought they'd been too late to save Greg. But her son had clung tenaciously to life long enough for them to get him to the hospital. It was then that Sylvie finally confronted the new world in which she lived. Greg had needed blood, a *lot* of blood. It had to be O-negative, which was in critically short supply. And he'd needed urgent medical attention. His leg was broken and he had concussion. All of that was going to cost. As with many hospitals around the country, they would not admit Greg unless he either had medical insurance or guaranteed payment to cover his bills.

'You can't just turn him away!' she'd shouted. Her arguments had fallen on sympathetic but helpless ears. They were so backed up that the average waiting time in emergency was three *days*, while outside, on the streets of Portland, ambulances were driving around with emergency cases that hospitals simply refused to take. Greg was lucky he'd even gotten in the door.

Sylvie hadn't been about to argue. She'd handed over all the money she'd gotten for the SUV, and pledged what was left from selling the house, after paying off the mortgage, to the hospital. Joe could never make it back to Portland before Greg ... No! Greg would not die! He'd made it this far; they'd all come too far for that to happen! 'His comunit got busted and I don't see any point buying a new one until we get to Australia. We've been over this before, Joe, he can afford to take a few weeks off school, especially coming up to summer vacation.'

'Where's Greg now?' Joe asked suspiciously.

'At the hospital,' Sylvie replied truthfully. Joe had to stay in Australia. Now more than ever they needed the money that he was earning. 'C'mon Joe, you know what Portland's like. I don't know anything about Australia. Is MacDonnell really inside a mountain?'

When Joe had seen Sydney from the air, he'd felt less nervous about the whole thing. The airport could have been in any city in the US, except a little less frantic and a little more tidy. The street signs looked much the same, although everyone drove on the wrong side of the road. Parts of the south coast had reminded him of Maine, especially the small fishing towns. The beaches were better, the forest wasn't called forest, but bush, and the air seemed different. It smelled of eucalypt rather than pine, even in winter. It wasn't home, and it was sure different, but it wasn't *foreign*. It was a place they could get used

to. At least, that's what he'd thought until the flight inland.

Once they'd passed the coastal mountains things had changed, fast. Thickly wooded bush disappeared into scrubland then vanished altogether. Joe had flown over deserts before, but not one that stretched two thirds of the way across a continent. Sure the landscape changed some, from brown desert to red desert to rock desert then finally, yellow desert. Except for dry, white salt-panned waterways scarring the land and roads and a rail track travelling in straight lines for hundreds of miles, they could have been flying over Mars. Then he'd learned that much of the land wasn't as uninhabited as he'd first thought; it was taken up with cattle stations that dwarfed even the largest of Texas ranches. How *that* land could support anything was a mystery to Joe.

The plane had finally landed near the western end of the MacDonnell Ranges. They weren't the sorts of mountains Joe was used to. These were giant skeletons of jagged rock thrust up through the dust and sand. The airstrip was indistinguishable from the surrounding desert and the dust-covered windsock had hung like a limp shroud. Joe had stepped out into heat so strong that it'd sucked the moisture right out of his nose and eyes. And it was winter! The sun had hurt his eyes too, like snow blindness. And everything was *big*. Some of the monster trucks that had been driving by had axles over seven feet from the ground.

Then he'd been led underground and into a waiting, air-conditioned magna-grav train. Some time later he'd emerged into one of hundreds of connecting underground caves. But it hadn't feel like being in a cave, he said. It was more like being in a set of interconnecting malls and apartment blocks joined by magna-grav transport instead of the subway. Except for the scale, it reminded him of a mining town.

'The project I'm working on is at Lake Macdonald,' Joe explained. 'They say that when it joins up with Lake Mackay in a few years, it'll be the size of Lake Ontario. Honey, wait 'till you see it! It's like this giant garden set right down in the middle of, well, I guess it's not really a desert anymore. There are thousands of water birds and wildflowers everywhere. And there are sailboats and motorboats on the lake and they've got fishing and ... everything! There are hundreds of domed agricultural buildings surrounded by thousands of newly planted GM modified eucalypt trees. They say that in ten years it will look more like their east coast.'

'It's good here, honey,' Joe added reassuringly. 'Different, nothing like home, but we can put aside plenty of money then go back to the States when Greg's ready for college.'

'It sounds great, Joe, really great,' she replied.

But Joe heard the fear in her voice.

\* \* \* \*

'Jesus wept!' Denning gasped.

Nick paled. 'I'll have to get back to DC immediately.'

The drugs used on Um had given them far more than they could have gleaned otherwise. And far more than they'd feared. Elhamy had built at least three more viable nukes for their fanatical masters, using plutonium smuggled out of Russia years before.

A lab-coated man stood beside two dark-suited officials watching Um Nehro as she lay supine on the bed. So pretty, Denning thought, with raven hair and olive skin. And a genuinely evil mind. Suddenly, Um's face contorted and she screamed like a banshee. One of the anonymous men helped him try to restrain her. Um's powerful, flailing arms lashed out, catching Denning on the cheek and knocking him backwards. The lab-coated man grabbed her naked foot and harshly jabbed it with a syringe. Um's hysterical screams gradually turned to anguished sobs.



It was a political problem now. Denning could almost feel the reins of Canberra pulling him out of Sydney and catapulting him into the nightmare that Um had revealed. Despite the Nehros' personal agenda, he was relieved that Australia was not on the hit list.

But the Middle East was about to blow up in *all* of their faces.

A short while later, Denning rested his head on the crook of his arm and leaned against the toilet bowl. It had been such a nice dinner, pity he was losing it. He flushed the toilet again, stood and opened the stall door. His stomach felt a little better, though he was still sweating. He methodically washed his face, cleaned his teeth with his fingers and popped a mint into his mouth.

Ronald Denning's illness did not concern him. He'd always managed to contain it until he was alone. Years before, the shrinks had told him that it was his way of coping. He wondered how Nick was coping after their pleasant little jaunt through a madwoman's mind.

He glanced at his comunit. The PM had called his personal number within minutes of Um's ... debriefing.

'Chopper'll pick you up from the top of World Square in half an hour,' Anderson had said. 'Listen, Ron, I'm sorry to take you away like this but I've had a belly full of these damned Le Carre types.'

Sure, no problem. He didn't have anyone to go home to, not even a cat; he'd buried it with the remains of his family. Maybe the PM wanted him because they both hailed from Sydney's notorious Western suburbs. At least they could talk without tripping over the plums in their mouths.

The flight to Canberra was short. So short it seemed Denning hardly had time to wonder what the Prime Minister really wanted.

'What I want, Ron, is you here in Canberra, permanently.' Anderson had shown him into his office, then sat down and lifted his feet onto his desk.

Denning sat by the fire, warming his hands on a mug of hot chocolate. Canberra in midwinter was bloody cold.

'We've been holding our collective breaths for three quarters of a century,' continued the Prime Minister, 'waiting for some mad bastard to pull the pin on a nuke. I don't count Kashmir or Korea; they were political. Not that this wasn't but ... oh hell, you know what I mean.'

Denning nodded. This was the first time a group of individuals had tried to nuke a city for personal revenge. That single outrageous act could unleash a planet-wide era of anarchy and terror. Compounded with the international paranoia already created by Rhesus and the Kamchatka Statement, the potential for a nuclear exchange between multiple nations and rogue groups was staggeringly high. If Rhesus couldn't be stopped and these were the last generations, Asians, Africans and most Middle Eastern countries had nothing to lose. The Shatt-al Arabs, whose name also meant 'the end of a long journey', would soon realize that all they had left was revenge.

The Prime Minister confirmed his thoughts by adding, 'The proportion of Rh-negatives amongst Middle-Eastern Moslems is only one or two percent less than Christians and Jews, but many Moslem countries are predominantly Asian and African. Rhesus has redefined a whole new set of so-called 'racial' lines. We've long believed that this Middle Eastern war could not be maintained by nations that hated each other more than the West. Rhesus, and now this incident, may provide the opportunity to rearrange alignments to our benefit—but only if we can recover these nukes.'

'Ron, I need you here.' Anderson's eyes pierced his. 'I know your feelings on the matter, but you must

know that your talents are needed to pursue this to the utmost.'

Denning had built his career on his instincts. He'd often tried to analyze it but his wife had once told him it was counter-intuitive to attempt to reason out emotional matters. She'd been right; the more he'd second-guessed himself, the more he was prone to err. But his damned infallible instincts had not saved her, or the kids.

He rapidly blocked that memory before it crippled him.

'Look,' Anderson added, his tone urgent. 'I've asked you to take over the security on the Exodus Project before and you've always knocked it back. It's getting out of hand now that events are escalating. I need you because we both know the escalator is moving at full speed and there's no shutting it off.'

In the fireplace, a piece of wood fell with a soft shower of sparks. The Prime Minister swung his feet down and stood in one swift movement. He walked to the fireplace and picked up a poker. 'Hell, Ron, this isn't just about the Exodus Project anymore. Industrial Winter, Rhesus, *none* of it matters if the damned planet's turned into a nuclear wasteland!' Moving the screen aside, he pushed the coals around.

'What choice do I have?' Denning gestured with his free hand.

'You can tell me to bugger off.'

'Yeah, right.' Denning looked shrewdly at the Prime Minister. 'Okay, on one condition.'

'And that is?'

'You also let me completely revamp federal security measures.'

Anderson nodded and returned the poker to its bin. 'You're on.'

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Before Ronald Denning had left for Canberra, he'd arranged for Kristin to be taken to his secure Sydney home. It wasn't until the following morning when she'd watched the news programs running continuous broadcasts on the failed nuking, that the full impact of what had happened, hit her. Her life, her plans for the future, had been turned inside out. Whatever ADAB or Foreign Affairs had wanted to talk to her about, her tenure at Woods Hole, all of it had become meaningless in the face of recent events.

Kristin initially consoled herself with the thought that once the fuss had died down, no one would recognize her; the images of her in the Sydney Tower were practically unrecognizable. But news stations were rehashing the 'wall of death' nets and dolphin rescue stories. Good God, the last thing she'd ever wanted was to be famous. Recognized and respected within her profession, yes, but slaughtering nuclear terrorists was not her profession.

The hardest part was that for her own safety, her personal comunit had been deactivated. Except for a bunch of security guards and a monosyllabic housekeeper, she was alone. She could use Denning's household computer to set up a dummy persona and email address, but he'd warned her not to take that risk. She hadn't even seen Nick after the debriefing, and according to the news, he was back in DC. By the time Denning came home two days later, Kristin had been ready to pick up a gun and shoot someone else. But at least he'd brought someone with him that she could talk to.

Three more days passed before Denning returned again, this time in a helicopter to take her to Canberra. Two hours later she was with Prime Minister Paul Anderson, who spent fifteen minutes thanking her for averting a disaster that would have killed more than a city, it would have crippled a nation. Then Anderson went on to explain what he had in mind.

'I'd like you to act in an advisory role on fishing policies not only in Vanuatu, but Australia and the entire South Pacific. You'll be reporting directly to the Ministers for Primary Resources and Foreign Affairs. I need you to devise strategies to effectively deal with the political fallout from these godforsaken nets, and the deliberate incursions by Asian countries into our economic zones. I can assure you the ministers will pay close attention to your recommendations, and my door's always open. The position comes with a salary increase three times your current scale, a diplomatic passport and a high security residence here in Canberra—although I don't expect you'll be spending much time here. It's not a political appointment but a public service one, so any change of government won't affect you. Kristin,' he added. 'We need you, this country needs you—'

'Please, Prime Minister, don't try that tactic on me,' she objected. 'I'm an Australian, not an American. I can't be sucked up to with hackneyed rhetoric.'

Anderson's face cleared and he chuckled. 'Good.' But then he turned serious. 'In fact, it's important you understand this isn't just about Australia, or Australian interests. Commander Page has briefed you on some aspects of the Exodus Project. I need pragmatists, not diehard liberal patriots to deal with the bloody mess we've put ourselves in with Industrial Winter and Rhesus.'

*Put ourselves in.* Political fallout be damned, Anderson was a politician who accepted the blame and was trying to do something about it. Wasn't that an oxymoron?

Kristin recalled Nick's words; that people like her were needed in this new kind of war. Anderson was right; this wasn't about Australia, or America or even the South Pacific. As terrifying as the prospect was, this was about surviving on a planet they had totally screwed up. Nicholas Page and Ronald Denning were dealing with one aspect of that. Anderson was asking her to deal with another. She took a deep breath and looked out the window to the snow-covered trees beyond. She couldn't turn away from her responsibility as a human being.

That evening, Kristin explored her spacious new home with a sense of disbelief; four bedrooms, a study and spa big enough to swim laps in. The house was brand new, with large windows and skylights designed to maximise light and minimise energy consumption. Surprisingly, it was also tastefully decorated. Someone had turned on the central heating, and there was a fire burning in the large living room.

There was also a potted eucalypt tree that she knew would produce spectacular red flowers during summer. The pot was wrapped in expensive gift paper and a red ribbon. Frowning, Kristin checked for a card, and found a bottle of her favourite red wine instead.

She jumped as the large household computer TFT screen buzzed and Nick's face appeared on the screen. 'I am not going to ask how you knew I was here.' She glared at him. 'Canberra. I should have known there was no escaping it.'

Nick tried, and failed, to compose his face. 'It's a generous offer.'

'Generous nothing. Anderson's using my currently lofty status as the woman who saved Sydney from being nuked—thank you very much, why didn't you take the bigger gun and get your face plastered across the six o'clock news—to feather his political nest.'

'My face was plastered across the news, but I was just doing my job. You, however, are a civilian, and you make a far prettier hero. First you expose the greedy fishing cartels' unprecedented malfeasance, then you save an entire city.' There was a suspiciously smug look on his face.

She tossed him a dirty look. 'Thanks ever so much. Do you do this to every woman you meet?'

'Only beautiful marine engineers.'

Trying not to let his flattery distract her, she said, 'It's snowing. And grey. And how much did you know?'

'DC's hardly better, and it's summer here. The Prime Minister isn't asking you to stay locked in Canberra, just use it as a base.'

'How much did you know?' she repeated.

He shook his head. 'Honestly? Not much.'

'Then why did you accompany me to Australia with the sonar? You had no intentions of coming to Vanuatu until—' She stopped. Although the communications line was supposedly secure, she was reluctant to discuss some things openly.

'Until after Sydney airport was attacked?' he finished. 'You accompanied me, remember? We really were just flying the FSPs to Australia.'

'Just good luck, huh?'

Before he could reply, Kristin pinched the bridge of her nose and said, 'I'm sorry. It's just that I sat on my butt in Ron Denning's house for days, seeing myself kill those men over and over. Then I'm given everything I could possibly want and a whole lot more to boot. And I accepted of course.' She looked around at the house. 'It's just ... politics. I hate politics. And politicians. And bureaucrats. Now I'm being turned into one.' She sighed and shook her head. 'And you're a physicist who can disarm and kill a trained terrorist faster than I can blink.'

When Kristin saw his closed expression, she suddenly understood that his feelings for her were not limited to professional courtesy. But equally, he was constrained by his profession. Her first instinct was to reach out and touch him. 'I am so sorry. I keep doing that, don't I?'

He tried to brush it off with a wave of the hand, but she knew that if there was going to be anything more between them, she must say so now. 'I might have lived in a backwater, Nick, but I understand the need for security, and I know what it's like to have to keep secrets from the one person you want, and need, to talk to. I am most definitely not letting a bunch of terrorists, especially dead ones, get in the way of a friendship.'

'You're quite a lady, you know that?'

She laughed. 'And you know the way to a girl's heart. Grange Hermitage! Don't tell me you got that from my file!'

He grinned. 'I asked Ron Denning for advice on the best Australian reds.'

'Remind me to thank him.'

'When does your Prime Minister want you to start work?'

'Last week.' She rubbed her eyes. Life, the thing that happened to you while you were making other plans.

'I'll soon be spending more time in Canberra than Washington. When I get back there, how 'bout we try lunch again?' His voice was hopeful.

'Where will you be staying?'

'It depends.'

'This house is on an estate guarded like Fort Knox, and it's huge. Why don't you stay here? I'll cook you a steak and we can christen the place.'

His eyebrows lifted and his lips twitched. 'Does christening mean the same in Australia as it does here?'

With teasing eyes she said, 'If you mean is it like christening a ship, yeah, except I prefer red wine to champagne.' She held up the bottle of wine. 'I'll save this until then.'

'Ah,' he said, pretending disappointment. 'We'll talk then and I'll explain everything.' At her sceptical look he repeated, 'Every, everything.'

## Chapter 26

**At the World Summit on Children convened by the U.N. in September 1990, the Bush administration was in the dubious position of having, on the one hand, to pledge sweeping concern for the health and survival of the world's children while hoping no one would publicly note that the health status of America's impoverished kids rivaled that of children in much of Africa and South Asia.**

—Laurie Garrett: *The Coming Plague*

Not only (has) America's cities sunk to Third World levels of childhood vaccinations and access to health care, but its surveillance and public health systems (has) reached states of inaccuracy and chaos that rival those of some of the world's poorest countries.

—**CDC Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report 43 (1994)**

The failed nuking of Sydney had provided the media with a week's worth of headlines, but with the perpetrators dead or captured, interest in the story quickly waned. The Rhesus conference was also fading from public interest, especially when more women than ever were falling pregnant. People had enough to worry about without fretting over things that did not directly impact them. In the White House, Andreas Clem felt like he was wading through treacle.

Throwing his pencil down on the conference table, Clem pushed his chair back in frustration. 'It's what we call thirdworldization,' he said. 'And as much as it's been dismissed as an impossibility in this country, that's exactly where we've been heading for the last forty years. No,' he sat forward to stress his point, 'I'll go one step further. When it comes to public health care we're already there; have been since the 1990s.'

Exhausted looking White House aides, senior members of the Democrat Party and economics advisors sat around the long table. Half empty Chinese take out containers and coffee cups lay scattered amongst thick reports and laptops.

Obermann had spent most of the meeting either eating, or crying foul at what he claimed were the CDC's gross exaggerations and desire to paint him as the scapegoat for its failings. 'That's utterly preposterous!' he spat, vigorously scrubbing black bean sauce off his tie.

Tired of Obermann's obfuscation, Clem leaned across the table and said, 'Is it? For an Assistant Secretary of Health you've kept yourself extraordinarily ignorant of the chaos the public health care system is in! Have you so quickly forgotten that the escalating incidence of multiple drug resistant TB, began in the eighties in New York, escalated in the nineties and is now virtually endemic in all major American cities?'

'Then the CDC failed in its mandate to—'

'We failed?' Clem said incredulously. 'It wasn't the CDC's mandate to follow up on walking time bombs in New York City and make them take their meds! The federal government slashed the TB control and surveillance budgets in the eighties, and continued to slash them—'

'Gentlemen!' Jean called over the link from Canberra. 'We were discussing the impact of Rhesus if it continues to expand at its present rate, not engage in a thirty year old debate!'

Clem nodded his apology. Forcing himself to adopt his familiar, lecturer's role calmed him. It did not,

however, calm the recipients of his news. 'It is now evident that hundreds of millions of people have become infected within a very short space of time by a clandestine pandemic.' He glanced at Jean. 'I warned you weeks ago that because Rhesus is not visible, not visceral enough, that despite initial panic the more pressing issues of extreme weather and subsequent failure of the public health system and utilities have created conditions in some parts of the US that amount to thirdworldization.

'While many environmentalists are praising Rhesus as the solution to world overpopulation, they're ignorant of the true consequences to society. Unlike other outbreaks, Rhesus will not overburden whatever little remains of our health care system in the immediate future, because Rhesus does not make people ill. However, as the population ages and the birth rate rapidly declines, in thirty years society will be disproportionately structured. Hell, we've already got a top-heavy elderly population; a rapidly shrinking workforce cannot possibly sustain it.

'As much as some in this meeting would like to divorce health care, and specifically, Rhesus, from the socio-economic pressures brought about by rapid climate change, the two have a direct bearing on one other, politically, economically and socially.

'Let's put it another way,' Clem said, catering to Obermann's penchant for statistics. 'What's going to happen when thirty five geriatrics are utterly dependant on one adult, an adolescent, and a baby for their survival? Ten of these elderly people are infected with multiple resistant TB, and another four have full-blown AIDS because production of anti-AIDS and TB drugs, and other infectious disease vaccines like polio, measles and diphtheria has virtually ground to a halt due to the collapsing infrastructure. That's not fiction, that was the case in Russia twenty-five years ago and look what happened there! Back here in the States, the adolescent, although Rh-negative, is HIV positive and his meds are becoming so expensive that he has to give up school in order to work and pay for them. And his baby sister has just started coughing up blood.

'Now multiply that scenario across the United States. Make ten percent of these not-so imaginary groupings environmental refugees, continuously fleeing from encroaching glaciation in the north and extreme, unpredictable weather elsewhere, and even factoring in President Blake's bill to fund resettlement, it is economically impossible for this country not to suffer thirdworldization.'

In the shocked silence that filled the room, Clem added, 'As I said to the President and Prime Minister Anderson in Kamchatka, the decline and fall of civilization as we know it.'

'Inconceivable,' Obermann said dismissively. But his hands were shaking and his nose and cheeks were blotchy.

'Is it?' Clem said. 'In 1990, a man growing up in Bangladesh had a better chance of surviving his sixty-fifth birthday than an African American man in Harlem, the Bronx, or Brooklyn. Violence notwithstanding, disease, poverty and inequitable access to medical care were the major reasons. In 1992, the US Department of Health and Human Services predicted that there would be 60 000 AIDS orphans in this country by the year 2000. A private survey predicted 80 000. They were wrong; it was over 200 000.

'I could quote statistics like these all day but the bottom line is, the fiscal reduction in social services, and the taking of public health care out of the hands of professionals and giving it to hospitals, doctors and pharmaceutical companies has done more damage to this country's so-called modern living standard than any other single factor, except perhaps global warming. Add that to the continuing drain on what social services do exist; education cutbacks, downsizing hospitals and staff to the point where the average waiting time in an emergency room is two days, *if* they'll even accept you; the alarming increase in the elderly and chronically ill, along with the equally alarming increase in the numbers of medically uninsured,

and you had a recipe for disaster thirty years ago. This meeting was to consider worst-case scenarios; well now we've got Rhesus, I've given you the best. Who's next?' he asked, looking around.

\* \* \* \*

Three weeks after she'd left Vanuatu, Kristin returned bearing gifts. But as she stood on the dock contemplating the number of nets the Fisheries boats had collected, it was clear that not everyone was glad to see her.

'Do you think you could make the effort to be around more, instead of dumping your work on other people?' said Ben. It was an accusation more than a question. 'How are we supposed to find all these nets if you only bother to drop by with your new boyfriend—'

'Commander Page is not here,' Kristin interrupted. 'I haven't seen him since the attack on Sydney. And whilst it's none of your business, he is not my *boyfriend*, although I admit he gives me a measure of personal support that you never have. Lastly, I now have other responsibilities, ones extending outside Vanuatu.' She waved a greeting to John Mennenger.

'Bullshit! You get off on the power. And why bring in *another* Yank to fly the chopper when one of our guys would do?'

She was not about to let Ben's sour mood ruin her enjoyment of being back in Vanuatu. Although she had been away only a short time, when the cargo plane came in to land, she'd smiled at the familiar sight of the vine-clad jungle and stands of coconut trees, the clear blue waters and white sand beaches. And it was so good to be warm again! The tropical sun was a far cry from Canberra's bleak weather.

'Before I left, I taught the ni-Vanuatu mechanics how to install and operate the sonars,' she said. 'The helicopter coming in on Friday is on loan from the US Navy, as is the pilot and an experienced sonar technician and helicopter mechanic. You can't have it both ways. Either complain about me fulfilling my contract ahead of schedule by teaching ni-Vanuatu to install and operate sonars, thereby giving them full-time work, or complain about me *not* giving ni-Vanuatu the work of running helicopters. Either way, my contract is over.'

When John Mennenger joined them, she said to him, 'I'm impressed. I didn't think you'd get so many nets with just four sonars.'

They began walking to the Fisheries building. John's smile faltered when he glanced at Ben. 'You okay?'

'It's that smell, and a lousy hangover.' Ben swallowed and he took a deep breath. 'Yeah, we, uh, could do with a few more. It's a big ocean out there. Given the number of misbegotten nets we've found so far, God knows how long before we get them all.' His eyes were on the nets, on the sea, on the dock, anywhere but on Kristin.

She pushed open the screen door of the Fisheries building and walking inside. 'I've requested eight more sonars.'

'We don't have *that* many ships,' Ben retorted.

'Ben, stop being so damned contrary. You wanted more; I'm getting them. Two of them will come with additional helicopters and six can be installed on boats. The helos are on loan, but not the sonars, you get to keep them because this is not a one-time exercise. As the press so gleefully reports, the Asian population will continue to grow for some years before Rhesus peaks. Since their governments are still in denial over the mercury issue, illegal trawlers will become the new growth industry—at least until they've stripped the place clean.'



They walked through the foyer. Kristin continued, 'You can get a fleet of vessels working together. Small leisure boats can use the sonar to pinpoint the nets and larger boats can take them on board. You also need political strategies as well as ongoing maintenance programs, strategies that can't wait for a few months until things get back to normal, because this is the new normal.'

John pushed open the door of his office. Ben trailed him inside.

'I've knocked up some proposals,' Kristin added. 'Give me a minute to get my notes. I left them in my office.'

'Your office?' Ben sneered. 'I thought your contract was finished.'

Taking a steadying breath, she replied, 'I'll have everything packed and out of there by Friday. Meanwhile, John has been good enough to allow me to use it. Now, if you'll excuse me.' She turned and left.

John Mennenger decided to let Ben's remark slide. Instead, he sat behind his desk and said, 'This should be interesting. Kristin always managed the political intricacies extremely well—'

'Oh, come off it,' Ben interrupted, sitting in the chair opposite. 'She causes more problems than she solves.'

'I'm thinking more of Samuel Kati,' John replied warily. He still wasn't certain how much Ben knew of Kristin's true role. He wasn't even sure how much he knew, although it made sense that she was involved in the rumoured Exodus Project. 'I haven't had any directives from ADAB yet, but our friendly neighbourhood Minister for Primary Resources isn't the only one who's concluded that Kristin's old job will need to be filled. Kati's not keen to see an expatriate replacement.'

'Then get a local; a Vanuatu citizen wouldn't cause as much friction,' Ben said dismissively.

With sudden insight, John realized that Ben resented Kristin. He kicked himself for not seeing it sooner. 'Kristin did not create diplomatic problems.' Ben went to interrupt, but he stopped him. 'She refused to be bought off and, believe me, she had some very attractive offers. Fearing she might level accusations of attempted bribery, the slighted parties attacked her credibility.'

Ben rolled his eyes in disbelief. John decided it was time to enlighten him. 'She could have compromised just a little, and bought herself citizenship.'

'Bullshit! How the hell would you know that?'

'Because we discussed it. Because offers were made in my presence.' Although John kept his voice calm, he was astonished at the extent of Ben's bitterness—and ignorance. 'Why didn't she talk it over with you? Come on, Ben, giving Kristin's position to a Vanuatu citizen is out of the question.'

'What makes you think I meant me?' Ben snapped. 'And why shouldn't the position be localized?'

John looked at him in pity. 'Do you think for a minute that the Asian trade guys—not to mention our own beloved Kati—wouldn't eat a ni-Vanuatu alive? Your marriage proposal ... Dammit, she couldn't discuss it with you because of the confidentiality of her work and its potential conflict with yours.'

He suddenly remembered the morning after the Poly-Mel plane had been blown up. Ben had been sitting on the floor, crying. John now realised it had not been from grief, but self-pity. And rage. He also recalled his conversation with Kristin in LA. With fresh insight he said, 'You resent her!'

'What?' Ben's face screwed up in angry disbelief. 'You know nothing about it!' He abruptly stood, leaned across the desk and snarled, 'She would never have discussed this with you unless you were fucking her. Christ, I should have seen it sooner! Does Mioko know or am I the only fool around here? Hang on, now I get it,' he added knowingly. 'It all makes sense! You leaked information on the sonar project to the Japanese through Mioko, and convinced Kristin it was me!'

This was a side of Ben that John hadn't seen in a long time. Paranoid, petulant, and impossibly belligerent. 'Sit back down, Ben.'

When Ben continued to glare at him, John added, 'I'm not asking you, I'm ordering you. Sit!'

Ben grasped the chair, obviously seething.

It's about time you understood that your personal relationship with Kristin often rubbed edges with your professional one.' John forestalled any interruption with a raised finger. 'Which finally rubbed raw. *That's* why she left you. Kristin did not belong to you lock, stock and barrel. She had good relationships, personal, even loving but not sexual relationships with many people, of whom I was one. She had some strange ones, too. Maybe you could call them bad. She had Kati wrapped around her little finger.'

'Yeah, well I'd like to know how she managed that,' Ben replied suspiciously.

'Maybe,' John said softly, 'she was a better diplomat than you gave her credit for. Get it through your thick skull that she worked on many levels for the Australian Government; levels I am not at liberty to discuss with a *Vanuatu* citizen—or have you forgotten you revoked your Australian citizenship? You're not the only one who cares for her and you're not in a position to judge her. How you could possibly think you or any *Vanuatu* citizen could replace a sensitive, Australian Government position ... ah!' He shook his head. 'Kristin was privy to a lot of classified information and played her cards close to her chest. I don't think anyone except Kristin knows them all.'

'What are you saying, huh? That she was some sort of ... spy for the Australians? And if it wasn't Mioko, who the hell told the Japanese trade minister? I might have wanted their money but not at that price!'

Before John could respond, the door opened and Kristin walked in. 'I'll pay Kati a visit and persuade him to take a more reasonable position.'

Ben froze, while John actually blushed, wondering how much she'd heard. 'You know it's not that simple, Kristin,' he stammered. 'Vanuatu doesn't make independent decisions about fishing rights. It's a Pacific Island agreement. Trade ministers of foreign nations must deal through the South Pacific Fishing Forum.'

Kristin looked at him oddly. 'Being based in Canberra hasn't turned my brain to mush, John. I know the political structure of the SPFF better than you.'

Turning to Ben, she said, 'Why do you think the Prime Minister appointed me? Because I happened to be in Sydney Tower at the right time? If that's what it takes for you to stomach it, fine, fob me off as a trouble making Australian bureaucrat. But you're no help to this project, so please leave John and me to bumble through in our own inept way. However, on your way out the door, you might recall that I was on my way to Canberra when I left here. Sydney was just a detour.'

Ben took a deep breath and looked at John. Refusing to meet Kristin's gaze, he slunk deeper into his chair and mumbled, 'Go on.'

Kristin took a file from her folder. 'Kati's not the only one with sticky fingers, but there's no point publicly exposing any of them; that would only open the way for unknown quantities to step in. Despite being

corrupt, and a total prick to boot, Kati's good at his job. I'll point out a few realities to him and other Forum representatives. As an Australian bureaucrat who doesn't need to worry about my contract or residency permit, with my hands on Australia's foreign aid purse strings, not just fisheries, but all areas, I no longer have to play nice.'

'And Ben,' John added, meeting his infuriated look. 'As for who leaked information about the sonar project, why don't you consider who your drinking buddies are, the ones who told you about Kristin flying to Australia in an FSP?'

A look of doubt crossed Ben's face but he glared at Kristin. 'You've always hated the Japanese.'

'Mioko is my best friend, and she's Japanese. And like her, I've never *hated* anyone, but we both loathe shortsighted greed. It was Mioko who warned us not to trust them, however you ignored her advice.'

'So now your blaming me for telling them about your precious bloody sonar project?'

'No one's blaming you,' she said quickly. 'I made the mistake of not investigating her warning about the nets. And the sonar project wasn't a deep dark secret. But unless you keep your lip buttoned from now on,' she held up the file, 'we'll know exactly how the information got out, and you can kiss your job—and likely your entire career—goodbye.'

She handed John her proposal. 'Whilst it's true that the economic realities of the agreement are immutable—every island nation needs the revenue from selling fishing rights—remember I made damned sure the fines for contravention are huge. The hours I spent up at the Attorney General's Department have also paid off. There are no loopholes for the cartels to squeeze through because you can—you *have*—collected sufficient evidence to demand considerable compensation from buyer countries and corporations. Played correctly, the South Pacific Fishing Forum could cancel the cartels' contracts for the next twenty to thirty years and live well off the fines.'

'What!' Ben burst out. 'No international court would ever agree. Even if they did, the litigation would drag on for years, just as these compensation claims against the oil companies will, until there's nothing left!'

'This has never been a free country,' Kristin replied. 'And it's a tax haven. Do you have any idea how much money the cartels have tied up here? Do you understand that this government can freeze billions, not millions, but *billions* of dollars until a court decision, or out of court settlement is reached? You could live off the interest alone.'

'God almighty, we'd never get away with it! Can you imagine the impact it would have on the international community? It'd undermine our tax haven status in a second! Why we'd—' John could hardly splutter out the words.

'John,' Kristin said, smiling grimly, 'the world has been turned on its ear. The cartels will scream to their governments, which will scream at Vanuatu while crying on the world's collective shoulders. But you saw how quickly sympathy for those dead seamen turned to antipathy when the media broadcast footage of the nets. And every day more nets are being found. All it takes is the strength of will to start the ball rolling. I'll give Kati and President Taangiroa and the other SPFF countries that strength of will. This is just one small step, and certainly not as drastic as others we'll see in the near future. I told you I'd continue to help you with the tools we already have. You misunderstood exactly what tools I meant.'

John Mennenger sat back in his chair and began to read her proposal. He started to chuckle. 'My God,' he said. 'We might just pull this off!' Glanced at Ben, he added, 'You never did get it, did you? You can dream up all the biological solutions to environmental problems in the world, but they aren't worth zip

unless you have the political and economic clout to enforce them.'

Ben still looked sullen, nevertheless he turned to Kristin. 'So where do we start?'

## Chapter 27

The moot point is whether Leviathan can long endure so wide a chase and so remorseless a havoc; whether he must not at last be exterminated from the waters and the last whale, like the last man, smoke his last pipe and then himself evaporate in the final puff.

—Herman Melville: *Moby Dick*

Joe Camicci rolled down the sleeve of his thin, cotton work shirt. It was the second time he'd donated blood since he'd arrived. Before Rhesus there'd already been a chronic shortage. Mad Cow in Europe, Anthrax in Africa and South America, Cholera and West Nile Virus in the US, bird flu in Asia and TB and AIDS everywhere. People infected through blood transfusions and blood products, were attacking pharmaceutical companies and hospitals with endless lawsuits. Joe vaguely wondered if that had contributed to the collapse of American Insurance. Now hospitals weren't talking about a shortage of clean blood supplies on a local or even national scale, but international. Triage was a word no one was yet willing to use, but that's what it was coming to.

Joe was still angry with Sylvie for not telling him about the vampire attack on Greg. And he was even angrier with her for not using the house money to stay in a better hotel, a safer hotel. But he shook his head in frustration; nowhere was safe anymore.

'How's that, Mr. Camicci?' said the nurse.

'I'm fine,' he said, sitting up. But he wasn't fine. He was angry. Here he was building the extended Rhesus research facilities and giving blood whenever they asked, but he couldn't get medical insurance for his son because Greg had the new strain of TB. 'Pre-existent condition' they'd said. Even if the emergency Rhesus package made it through Congress, it wouldn't pay for the medical bills resulting from the attack on Greg.

A familiar sense of helpless terror gnawed Joe's gut. He wanted to go home, back to his wife and son, but now the house money was all gone he had no choice; he had to stay in Australia to support them. It was like he was some Mexican, working across the border to keep his family fed! Except in his case, it wasn't food, but medical bills.

He got up and left.

\* \* \* \*

In Portland, Sylvie's fingers shook as she opened the envelope. She almost tore the precious piece of green paper, the one they had been waiting on for almost six weeks.

'What is it, honey?' Alice Stephenson asked.

Alice always wore a flower-patterned smock over her huge body. Sylvie wasn't sure if the florist was trying to camouflage her size amidst the flower-filled shop, or if being so big was some sort of license to wear bright, ugly clothes.

The departure date on the green paper leaped out at her. She didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Finally, she said, 'Can I take a few minutes off?'

'Why don't you go up and see him, now? It's almost two. You can swing by here at four and make the last deliveries then.'

Sylvie looked up gratefully. The big woman was so shocked when she'd learned that Greg had been

attacked by vampires, that she'd immediately offered Sylvie the delivery job, to help her get by. Sylvie had cried in gratitude and taken to helping out Alice around the store, wrapping flowers and boxing gifts. She felt a spasm of momentary guilt for leading Alice on like this. But people came by every day asking for work; it wouldn't take Alice long to find someone else to deliver flowers.

Placing the envelope carefully into her handbag, Sylvie left the hospital florist shop to see her son. When she opened the door to the ward her eyes immediately travelled to Greg's bed. It was empty! Her mouth went dry. What was it now? Every time something good happened, like Joe getting work in Australia and selling the house so fast, something bad happened! She strode to the nurse's station, trying to quell her panic.

A man was at the desk yelling, 'What do you mean you can't perform emergency surgery on my daughter because she's *waitlisted* for blood! Now you listen to me, she's tested negative for the Rhesus virus and I've paid cash for everything, every goddamned thing since she was admitted. And I can pay whatever it costs to—'

'Sir, it's not a question of cost but availability. There just isn't enough Rh-neg blood—'

'But she's Rh-positive!'

'Yes, sir, but there are so many litigations against blood supply companies, including the Red Cross and this hospital, that the insurance companies won't allow us to handle anything but Rh-negative blood. And since Rh-neg donors are in short supply—'

The man wasn't listening. 'It's because she's HIV positive, isn't it?' He thumped the table with a meaty fist. 'I knew it! I knew you people would say that! Well, we'll see about that, I'm calling my lawyer!' He spun around, almost knocking Sylvie over.

'Mrs. Camicci?' A young, bearded security guard put out his hand to steady her. He sent a disapproving look at the enraged man talking into his comunit. The man glared back.

'What's happened?' Sylvie demanded. 'Where's my son?'

'It's okay, Mrs. Camicci,' the guard replied. 'We just transferred all...'. The irate man was watching them with narrowed eyes. The guard took Sylvie by the arm and motioned them to move down the hall. Lowering his voice, he added, 'We moved your son into the secure Rh-neg ward with a bunch of other non-infectious patients.'

'But Greg has TB.'

The guard nodded. 'Doctor said he wasn't a danger so long as everyone took the standard TB precautions. We really need to keep all Rh-negs in a secure area. Would you come with me now and we'll get you a pass?'

Sylvie nodded jerkily, and the guard led her into the elevator.

'You sure are lucky,' the guard said on the way down.

'Lucky!' Sylvie was incredulous.

'Your son is Rh-neg. Haven't you heard the news?'

Sylvie shook her head.

'The hospital has made a policy decision regarding the Rhesus virus. Those testing positive have to be waitlisted for treatment and blood transfusions.'

'Is that legal?'

'Blood supply has fallen way below critical. Only Rh-neg blood is safe, and when you consider how few donors there are, by the time you test for HIV and everything else ... well, there just ain't that much to go around. It's no different to organ transplants. Rh-neg blood is the new growth industry in Mexican and Asian black markets, but everyone's saying it's mostly HIV or TB infected. Can you imagine where they're getting it from?' He shook his head.

'Most likely vampire cults right here in Portland,' Sylvie replied, shivering. Whoever had injected themselves with her son's blood was probably dead by now. The thought gave her no satisfaction.

The guard led her from the elevator to the security area where she was photographed and thumb-printed, then shown to the secure ward. A dozen people looked up when she walked in. With everyone there dressed in the ubiquitous white hospital gowns, it took her a few moments to locate Greg.

He was standing on crutches, staring out through the barred window to the falling snow. He turned and smiled at her. 'Hi, how come you're so early?'

Sylvie didn't mention the terror that had cut through her when she'd found him missing from the ward below. Maybe she was wrong in keeping her fears to herself, but Greg was still feeling guilty about the vampire attack, mostly because it used up what little money they had left. Both the men in her life were carrying enough emotional burdens, she wasn't about to add to them, so she smiled and pulled out the letter.

Greg's face lit, but he kept his voice low as he whispered, 'It came! What about tickets? When can we go?'

'Two weeks.'

'Ah crap. Two more weeks locked up in here!'

'Yes, but we've got them now,' Sylvie replied firmly. 'You'll be walking better by then and the TB will be in complete remission.'

'Is that why we couldn't go before?'

She held his eyes and said, 'You were right all along.'

'Hey!' He smiled and put his arm around her. 'We made a deal, right? Nobody's taking any blame for what happened.' But then he frowned. 'Are we going to have enough money to make it until then?'

Vampire cults had gone underground but they were still circulating the names of known Rh-negatives. Despite the staggering hospital bills it was cheaper for Greg to remain there than for them to find a secure apartment. The motel they'd booked into when they'd arrived in Portland had been shabby, but she'd figured she could put up with it for a few days. After Greg's attack, the cheap rooming house she'd been forced to move into made the motel seem palatial.

Sylvie often woke at nights to the sound of gunshots or people being beaten up, sirens or gangs of youths kicking in the dumpsters, waking the homeless seeking warmth in the trash. Then she'd lie awake and cry, bitter and resentful that her life, their lives, had come to this. Every morning she passed a growing number of homeless. Just yesterday she'd tried to get by someone sprawled on the rooming house steps. She'd

pushed against him, thinking he was drunk or drugged. His stiffened body fell over. He was dead. Not from alcohol or drugs, nor even from being beaten up or exsanguination by vampires. He'd starved to death, or maybe, as the cops said, it had been from the cold. It was killing record numbers this summer. Nobody wanted to think about what would happen come winter.

She repeated the familiar mantra: compared to some, they were doing okay. She'd gone back to Newton for a few days and sold the heirloom furniture she'd put into storage, and she was no longer ashamed to eat one or two meals a week at the Salvation Army kitchen. While the government procrastinated over who was eligible for the resettlement package, which amounted to little more than a few thousand dollars, Joe was already in Australia. They had enough money to pay for Greg's treatment while the government argued about the constitutional validity of the so-called Rhesus emergency package. She had a poorly paid job and a cockroach-riddled roof over her head.

'We can if...' but she couldn't look her son in the eye.

'If what?'

'You can't be a blood donor until you're cured of TB, maybe not even then' Sylvie looked down. The hospital is asking Rh-negative men to become sperm donors. And they're paying.'

'Getting paid to jack off? Sure!' Greg laughed at his mother's embarrassment. 'Wait'll I tell Jason. Maybe I can make it a full time career!'

Glaring at him, she handed him her comunit. 'You better call your father and tell him—about the visas, not about your new job!'

\* \* \* \*

Jean stood beside Clem as questions from the White House Press Corps machine-gunned the podium. It had been almost a week since Andreas had addressed the media, but a new generation of ACR cholera had escalated in nine US states. She feared that was just the beginning. A massive education campaign was underway, along with voluntary testing for Rhesus. Many countries were making it compulsory but in democratic nations like the US, where public health care mandates conflicted with constitutional rights, it was impossible to enforce. Rhesus was not, as one Republican senator with selective memory maintained, a fatal or even debilitating illness like ACR cholera.

Wondering how a disease fatal to most of mankind could not be defined as fatal in itself, Jean glanced down at the figures. In Australia and Europe almost forty percent of those tested were Rh-negative, when only eight percent of the entire population was negative. The conclusion was clear; ethnic groups with a preponderance of Rh-positive blood groups were avoiding being tested. If only those Rh-positives tested were taken into consideration, the infection rate was running as high as ninety percent in some cities.

Jean touched Clem on the arm. He had taken most of the heat while she had been in Australia, now it was her turn. 'Science is not grounded in unsubstantiated opinions,' she replied to accusations that scientists had deliberately withheld information from the public. 'Scientists therefore present their work in ways that might appear conservative, even bland, in order to maintain accuracy. To state anything without proof is not science, it's sensationalism.'

'Secondly, scientists adhere to the paradigm of detached investigation; they do not make social or economic decisions on the basis of their findings. They are not policy makers. In the 1980s and '90s, science presented us with trends and probabilities regarding global warming. Because it was impossible to predict the exact outcome and propose time lines for those outcomes, a Republican dominated Congress listened instead to pseudo science quackery sponsored by oil companies falsely claiming science was in dissent over global warming. The only dissent was in the details, not in the issue itself.'



'Now with all due respect to Dr. Obermann, he is not part of any investigative team. Until his resignation yesterday, Dr. Obermann continued to downplay the Rhesus threat to public health. That his view has now changed is admirable, but I suspect it is no coincidence it occurred only after he and his family tested positive for Rhesus. Infection does not confer him with overnight expertise.

'As we have repeatedly maintained since the Rhesus conference, to state categorically that Rhesus is triggered by drinking from *some* water coolers or water bottles is overly simplistic, irresponsible and potentially libellous.'

'Isn't Fibreveg Coolers under investigation by the FBI's bioterrorism unit?' a journalist called.

'FC Ltd. is *co-operating* with the FBI and CDC in an effort to track one of thousands of possible avenues.'

'By co-operation, you mean a court order overruling the FBI's search warrant!'

'The *scope* of their co-operation is for the courts to decide!' said Clem. 'FC Limited is justified in wanting to protect its intellectual property rights, and to protect itself from liability. We are only using the FBI's expertise in bioweapons because of its efficiency in tracking chemical compounds. There is no intention to prosecute any fibreveg manufacturers; we just want to analyze the components in order to exclude them from our investigations.

'Meanwhile,' Clem stressed, 'thousands of people in this country are sick and hundreds are dying from waterborne diseases and gastronomic infections, because they're afraid of drinking from fibreveg bottles. Worse, after ACR cholera, many mistakenly believe the water itself is the culprit when this is patently not so!

'In the seven weeks since we've discovered the impact of Rhesus, we've learned more than what was understood about AIDS seven *years* after identifying it. But we still cannot state with absolute certainty what triggers it.'

God dammit, thought Jean, science has given us an ostrich philosophy to live by. We operate under the paradigm that unless there is *irrefutable* evidence that something is harmful, it's deemed safe. That self-delusion has finally caught up, but here we are, still propagating it.

'But you can't state categorically that the Rhesus trigger is not in fibreveg water bottles and coolers, can you?' someone else called.

Clem hedged. 'I can't state categorically that it's *not* in *anything*! The majority of Americans are past childbearing years or not planning further children. These and already infected individuals have no reason to fear Rhesus, but they have every reason to fear life-threatening waterborne diseases. For children, and adults planning a family, get tested, find out if you're infected. If not, you would be advised to consume only fresh foods and water bottled in glass. For those living in high risk areas of TB and ACR cholera—and they have been notified—boil all tap water.'

Jean stood back as Clem went on to list the CDC advisories. When the press conference was finished she turned to leave, but an aide called her aside. 'Mayumi Yoshida from Japan is online,' he said in a low, worried voice. 'Roger Harrison in MacDonnell is also waiting online for you.'

Jean touched Clem on the sleeve, then followed the aide.

'What's going on?' asked Clem as they walked.

'Don't know, but I suspect it's not going to be good news.' She turned into the conference room to see

the images of Yoshida and Harrison on the screens. Both of them looked up when Clem closed the door.

'I understand your continued reluctance to incriminate fibreveg water bottles,' Yoshida said without preamble. 'But we began with the hypothesis that if water coolers were responsible for triggering Rhesus, office workers would show a higher incidence in the rate of infection after 2011. Based on the seroepidemiology we found just that, but noticed a paradoxical reversal in the wealthier classes until we reached a glaring absence in businessmen above a certain socio-economic level.'

'On closer examination of their diet,' Yoshida added. 'A single, common factor has been identified: uninfected individuals in this demographic have regularly eaten whale or dolphin meat since 2011.'

Jean groped for a chair. 'Oh my God,' she gasped.

'This finding is supported by the results of blood and tissue samples taken from the dead crewmen aboard fishing vessels around Vanuatu, Indonesia, Australia, and other countries,' continued Yoshida. 'We also tested the population of Taiji village here in Japan. The village regularly harvest dolphins and small whales for consumption and sale. They remain free of activated Rhesus.'

'That's ... I don't know what to say, Dr. Yoshida.' Clem was unable to keep the shock from his voice. 'We'll need to verify your results, of course. We can't afford a repeat of the Rh-negative 'cure' fiasco that resulted in vampire cults.'

Yoshida shook her head imperiously. 'Remember we've been tracking Rhesus for years, even if we did not know its effects. It doesn't appear to require more than a few grams of cetacean meat to stave off the Rhesus trigger, although we have no idea why or how long it confers immunity. All I can say is that it does not provide a cure for those in whom Rhesus has already activated.'

In Australia, Roger Harrison stared at the screen open-mouthed. 'It will take years to run the necessary experiments!'

'Meanwhile,' Yoshida continued in her clipped voice, 'we will harvest as many cetaceans as we can now, before they're all gone, and freeze every last cell of their meat so we can analyze it and identify the active constituents.' She repositioned her wire-framed glasses on her nose, and stared defiantly from the screen.

Jean glanced at Clem, who was trying to compose his features. Don't let this woman near a journalist, she silently pleaded.

'Mayumi, you can't do that!' Harrison's face screwed up.

Yoshida's eyes narrowed. 'Every dolphin-hugging Rh-positive human of reproductive age will instantly abandon their 'save the whale' principles when they learn this.'

Clem ran a hand across his forehead. 'Mayumi, you're forgetting the mercury problem.'

'No. The businessmen ate only small quantities of cetacean *flesh*, not offal. The mercury content in the flesh is no worse than what is seen in your Great Lakes fish, or many other commercially harvested fish, for that matter.'

When Clem ran his fingers through his hair, Jean realised it had thinned noticeably in the last weeks. One thing about Yoshida, she cut right to the heart. 'The black market—'

Yoshida interrupted again. 'It is different for you in the West, with your Rh-negative genes. You will not stop us from harvesting every cetacean we can find. And you dare not attempt to try,' she added warningly.

Jean suddenly understood that this wasn't a discussion; Yoshida was informing them. The Japanese government would take whatever action it saw fit. They would not be alone.

## Chapter 28

**As crude a weapon as the caveman's club, the chemical barrage has been hurled against the fabric of life—a fabric on the one hand delicate and destructible, on the other, miraculously tough and resilient, and capable of striking back in unexpected ways.**

—Rachel Carson: *Silent Spring*

The smell of seawater and mould, occasionally overshadowed by a whiff of decay from the nets outside, wafted through the broken window slats of the Fisheries building. Kristin took a final look around at the mismatched shelves, threadbare floor rug and cheap furniture. The contrast to her new office in Canberra was staggering but she smiled a little wistfully when she grabbed her jacket and closed the door for the last time.

She went outside and walked down to the beach beside the Fisheries dock, took off her shoes and sat down in the sand, enjoying the feel of the cool, slippery grains through her toes. The village children were playing in the water, laughing and splashing one another. But the sight did not make her smile; it only reminded her of the coming plague. Soon there would be no more children; Melanesians were exclusively Rh-positive. For all the problems that she had dealt with here, the past few years now seemed like a long summer vacation.

'Dr. Baker,' Marie called from the Fisheries building. 'There's a call for you on the HF radio.'

Kristin stood and brushed the sand from her shorts and ran back into the building. Picking up the old black microphone, she said, 'Baker,' fully expecting to hear the voice of *Marmet's* skipper. Or perhaps Ben, to whom she had not really said goodbye.

'You have to get back to Canberra—fast,' Nick said without preamble.

Confused, Kristin screwed up her face. Nick was in DC; why was he calling her on an HF radio? Then it hit her; he must be in the air and his call was being relayed from the transport SP sitting at Vila airport. 'Why, what's happened?'

'Something to do with the Japanese government, fishing rights and Rhesus.'

Kristin scratched her head. A few grains of sand fell out. 'What?'

'Captain, have you finished unloading?' asked Nick.

A third voice that Kristin recognized as the transport SP's pilot cut in, 'Yes, sir, we're scheduled to leave for the Solomon Islands in two hours.'

'The transport plane can go on without you, Kristin. I'll come get you.'

'Where are you?' She felt a surge of excitement.

'I'm diverting to Vanuatu now, ETA thirty-three minutes. Should be there just after last light. Where can I collect you?'

'What are you in?'

'An FSP. I told you I'd be commuting.'

No matter what this was about, it meant she would be seeing Nick again, and that prospect excited her

more than another ride in an FSP. They'd been talking almost daily but even secure lines were notoriously easy to hack into. Since they were both working on highly classified projects their conversations had tended to dissolve into frustrated sighs. And if she was honest, the frustration was on more than one level.

'The dock's jammed with nets. How about the airport? And what about clearance? Security?'

'No problem, Doc,' replied the transport captain. 'We'll delay our departure until you've left, I'll notify officials now.'

Two and a half hours later, Kristin and Nick arrived in Canberra. They'd barely had time to strip their flight suits before being hurried to the Prime Minister's office. Kristin wished she'd been able to shower and change into warmer clothes; she was still wearing shorts. Nick draped his flight jacket over her shoulders when she stepped from the vehicle.

'Thanks.' Despite the disturbing development with the cetaceans, she was almost hypersensitive to his proximity. The undercurrent of desire in his eyes reflected hers. Once this meeting was over, their long distance word play would finally be resolved.

In the Prime Minister's office, Anderson was sitting at his desk, frowning at the image of Jean Simmons on the TFT screen. Roger Harrison shook hers and Nick's hands, quietly introduced himself and gestured for them to sit with him by the fire. Kristin stared longingly at the epidemiologist's purple velvet trousers. As ugly as they were, they looked warm.

'Can't you just find out what's in the whale meat and mass produce that?' Anderson asked Jean Simmons.

From DC, she replied, 'The Japanese have been harvesting whales for decades under the guise of scientific research. Although most of the meat went into the marketplace, they've done more research on cetacean biology than any other nation. But it's still going to take time to identify why it prevents Rhesus from triggering. I've yet to review her figures but if Mayumi's right, the Japanese probably have the largest supply of whale and dolphin meat, followed by the New Chinese, Norwegians and Icelanders.'

An aide offered Kristin and Nick steaming mugs of chocolate. Kristin accepted a cup and wrapped her hands around it gratefully. She sat close to Nick on one of the comfortable black leather lounges. Although it was relatively warm in the office, it was snowing outside. But the weather didn't chill her as much as Yoshida's findings.

'Governments will undoubtedly confiscate all known supplies once they learn this,' Jean finished.

'Which will be?' Anderson tugged off his necktie.

'Mayumi reported her findings to the Japanese Minister for Health before informing us. It should be hitting the media any time.'

The Prime Minister nodded. Then he caught Kristin's pinched face. 'You have any ideas about this?'

Sitting forward she said, 'Between mad cow, anthrax, foot and mouth and a dozen so-called avian viruses that have systematically decimated domesticated livestock worldwide, the value of 'red' marine mammal meat is orders of magnitude greater than fish and shellfish of any kind. Now, it'll be incalculable. Thing is, we've hunted the bigger whales virtually to extinction. Hell, no one's even seen a Blue Whale in two years. Now, at their nadir, we discover our futures are inexorably linked with theirs. If Dr. Yoshida is right, then, through whatever political means are necessary, and policed as rigidly as possible, a worldwide ban must immediately be placed on their slaughter, otherwise, once they're gone, it's all over

for Rhesus-positives, folks.'

Both Anderson and Harrison looked at her oddly.

'Look, the idea of harvesting them for pharmacopoeial purposes makes me ill,' Kristin continued. 'But it may be the only pragmatic long term solution—as long as you can ensure a genuinely sustainable population, which means leaving them the hell alone as of right this minute. More than likely they won't need to be harvested at all once they identify the active component. But that's not going to happen if everyone starts running around and killing every cetacean in sight. Besides, pragmatic solutions are what you're paying me for,' she finished.

Anderson tapped his fingers on the desk. He stared at Harrison. 'How long will it take to identify this active component?'

Harrison met Jean's eyes. 'Weeks?' he said. 'Maybe a month? It's not a difficult process. We'll start work immediately, of course, but you can be certain Dr. Yoshida has already begun.'

'All right.' Anderson said to Kristin. 'In the meantime, your priority is to implement those proposals to block the cartels. If they can't isolate whatever is in the meat, as you say, protecting the animals may be the only hope of halting the spread of Rhesus.'

\* \* \* \*

Nick sat down in the couch in Kristin's living room. She was still at the Prime Minister's office, and would probably be so for some hours. He stared at the flames and smiled. Real fires were a luxury afforded to the local residents because, by surrounding itself in genetically modified trees, Canberra had become a carbon sink. In addition to generating carbon credits, all new homes, including this one, produced enough power through combined technologies to contribute back to the national energy grid. Australians thrived on pragmatism. He only wished that practical ingenuity could be applied to chasing down the Shatt-al Arabs. Catching Um had afforded him some small personal satisfaction, but it had quickly been lost in the face of a new and terrifying reality.

He'd hated leaving Kristin so soon after what was now euphemistically referred to as the 'Sydney Tower incident'. Ron Denning had organized a psychologist to stay with her for a couple of days in his Sydney home. Although Kristin had been initially reluctant to talk to the pithy no-nonsense woman, she was intelligent enough to realize that nobody walked away from a situation like that emotionally unscathed. Even he had been required to undergo a—mercifully brief—psych evaluation when he'd returned to DC. Although he had not read the entire updated report on Kristin, he had seen the concluding paragraph that described her as one of the most well grounded people the psychologist had encountered.

From the moment he'd read the first file on Kristin Baker, Nick had been intrigued by her. Not just by her lifestyle—anyone could go live on a tropical island and become an environmentalist—but by her insight and that apparently unlimited Australian pragmatism. She'd known the sonar was a setup, and she hadn't been wooed by flights in FSPs. If he'd been impressed by her actions in Fiji, her quick wits and self-control in the Sydney Tower had elevated his regard for her by orders of magnitude.

She was also incredibly desirable, especially with her hair mussed from sleeping on a couch. But of one thing Nick was also certain. Women, even exceptionally well-grounded woman who handled ugly situations with aplomb, did not take kindly to being deceived. Kristin might understand that he'd had no choice in his dealings with her, but it had obviously left a sour taste in her mouth. And regardless of the circumstances, slitting people's throats over lunch tended to have a dampening effect on any relationship. Despite the long conversations and friendly banter since Sydney, he wasn't fooling himself into thinking she could deal with anything more than a platonic friendship.

Nick took a deep breath—and wrinkled his nose. He needed a shower.

The main bedroom ensuite was a work in progress. The cracked spa had been pulled out, and the plumbers obviously had not been expecting Kristin back so soon. Nick found the second bathroom and had almost finished undressing when he heard the front door open. She'd managed to get away faster than he'd expected. Or maybe he'd been sitting in front of the fire chewing over the never-ending Shatt-al Arab problem longer than he'd thought. He was just hanging his shirt on a hook when the bathroom door opened. Kristin walked in, and bumped into him.

Averting her eyes, she mumbled, 'Ah ... sorry.' She went to turn away, but the recently healed wounds on his naked body must have caught her attention because she turned back and frowned. Crouching down, she gently ran her fingers along the jagged edge of the main one, which ran up his thigh and hip, and around his back. Although it had been the most superficial of his wounds, the scar looked the most spectacular.

'Are you alright now?' His voice was concerned.

'Yeah,' he croaked, trying—and failing—to suppress his body's feral reaction to the feel of her hands and the sight of her kneeling before him. 'But not if you keep doing that.' He quickly bent to pull his pants on, adding, 'Someone's at the door.'

Kristin stood and shot him a grin, one containing a promise. On the way out of the bathroom, she muttered, 'If Anderson wants me back again tonight, I swear I'm resigning!'

'Inspector Giovanni!' Kristin said to the man waiting at the door. 'C'mon in, I was about to make the coffee.'

Glancing at Nick, who was standing cautiously behind her, Giovanni replied, 'Evening Doctor, Commander. I didn't mean to disturb you, just making sure everything is all right.'

Kristin stood back. 'No, it's fine, Inspector. You two have met, I see.'

'The Inspector was good enough to show me around,' Nick said.

'Coffee won't take long but please excuse me if I don't smell so good,' said Kristin. 'I haven't had a chance to get cleaned up yet.'

She noticed Giovanni's eyes linger a moment on the scars on Nick's chest. She also noticed the look the men shared, and the way Nick deftly moved his hand out of sight when she turned to go inside. 'I'll put a sweater on,' he said.

Over coffee, Inspector Giovanni explained the new security procedures. If Kristin rebelled at some of the changes in her life, she also appreciated that Giovanni and his team were as discreet as possible. And she appreciated the time he'd taken to teach her about guns. She had grown up on a cattle station where rifles were necessary tools. Shooting vermin was more humane than baiting or trapping them, but outside that arena she thought that guns should be banned. And yet she had used one to kill two people. Maybe if she'd known more she might have been able to wound them instead.

'Dr. Baker's a natural shooter,' Giovanni said as he sipped his coffee.

'Tell me about it,' Nick said approvingly.

'I was aiming for his legs,' Kristin replied, pushing the gut-wrenching image of Elhamy's exploding head from her mind.

'Kristin, it was necessary. If you'd waited to take proper aim we wouldn't be having this conversation.'

'Yeah, I know,' she conceded. 'I'm only learning to use one now because I don't like being kept in the dark.'

Her double meaning was clear. Nick inclined his head in understanding.

Unaware of the subtext, Giovanni said, 'I hope you can talk her into carrying a gun, Commander. She won't let us send a bodyguard with her when she's outside of parliamentary grounds.'

'Who's going to take a pot shot at me?' Kristin said. 'The only one who's pissed off with us for preventing that nuke going off, is in custody.' But she caught the look between the two men. 'All right.' She put her mug on the table. 'What is it this time? And don't give me the run-around about standard security procedures because the PM doesn't carry a gun.'

'That was before Sydney,' Giovanni replied. 'No, the Prime Minister still doesn't carry a weapon, but he's agreed to a complete revamping of security measures.'

Nick smiled knowingly. 'You mean Ron Denning is laying down the law.'

Giovanni laughed. 'Yeah, something like that. I'm a cop, so I'm a naturally suspicious bastard.'

'Listen,' Kristin said as she filled a dozen, lidded mugs with coffee, 'I can live with being left out of the loop; all you need do is tell me that you can't tell me. I only want to learn enough about guns so that if I'm ever handed one in a pitch black broom closet again, I know which way to point the damned thing.' She tossed a handful of sugar and milk sachets onto a tray and added, 'You two can go around armed to the teeth and answer the front door with one hidden behind your back all you want, but I'm not carrying a weapon and that's final.'

She handed the tray to Giovanni, who was chuckling at Nick's raised eyebrows. 'You can't pull the wool over the Doc's eyes, Commander,' he quipped, standing to leave.

'So I'm learning,' Nick replied ruefully.

'Thanks for the coffee.' Giovanni walked down the front steps.

Kristin smiled. 'Thanks for the firearm lessons. Just tell your men to leave the mugs on the back doorstep and I'll collect them in the morning.'

She closed the door and turned to look up into Nick's emerald eyes, now darkened by desire. Memories assailed her, but this time ones she had taken comfort in. His proximity in the hotel elevator, the sight of him sleeping peacefully on her office couch, the way he'd held her after Sydney, the leather and man smell of his flight jacket. And now, his sleek, naked form as she opened the bathroom door.

He leaned down and kissed her softly, a gentle, teasing foreplay of lips, but Kristin was in no mood to draw this out, there'd been too many delays already. She brought her hands around and under his sweater, exploring the soft hardness of his back, pulling him closer as she deepened the kiss. Then she felt his firm, slightly callused hands move under her shirt. He gently cupped her breasts, stroking her nipples with the pads of his thumbs.

Moaning inarticulately as he unbuttoned her shirt and moved his lips down the sensitive flesh of her neck, Kristin brought her hands around to tug the zipper of his trousers. The zipper didn't move. She tugged again, but to no avail. His hands slipped away from her to pull at the jammed zip. Nothing happened. He pulled more forcefully. Perplexed, he stepped back to get a better grip. Despite his heroic efforts the zip



refused to budge. Realising the problem, Kristin bit her lip in amusement.

'What the hell ... ?' he muttered. In his rush to pull his pants on, the teeth had jammed in the material. Finally, he put his hands on his hips and mumbled, 'I do not believe this!'

Her grin turned to a chuckle, and, shaking her head, she said, 'Are you always this suave?'

He glared at her then burst out laughing. 'Either way, I stink and I'm taking a shower.' He gently embraced her and leaning down to nuzzle her ear, added, 'Care to join me?'

'Sure,' she replied. 'But tell me, Commander, how are you going to get your pants off?'

'Ah,' he said as he walked with her to the bathroom. 'Trade secret.'

## Chapter 29

**For the sake of argument, let's retreat into a more comforting scenario. Let's assume that droughts (brought on by climate change) in the wheat growing areas of North America are not so severe that they starve our own population. They only starve those in poor countries who depend on us for basic nutrition...**

**—Ross Gelbspan: The Heat is On**

'As the second year without summer progresses,' the newspaper editorial said. 'It becomes clear that the Kamchatka Statement predicting Industrial Winter is, if anything, conservative in its estimates. Record snowfalls, killing frosts, unprecedented flooding and devastating droughts are forcing farmers drained by economic hopelessness to leave their lands and families for cities already burgeoning with the homeless and destitute. Cold-hardy microbes thriving in the age-old ecology of overcrowding and unsanitary conditions have jumped shaky economic barriers and are spreading among the wealthy and poor alike. Basic commodity prices have escalated at a staggering rate, exacerbating inflation and crime, adding yet more pressure to our overburdened society.'

Replace killing frosts with floods, Industrial Winter with global warming and it applied to most of the cities in the world, not just Portland or New York, thought Sylvie. She downed the last of her lunch—black coffee without sugar or milk, which cost extra—placed the newspaper back on the hospital cafeteria rack and left.

The antiseptic smell vanished as soon as she rounded the corner and walked into the florist shop. The ever-present fragrance of roses always made her feel welcome.

'Oh honey, I'm so sorry, but I have to give you notice,' Alice Stephenson blurted. 'You've seen what it's been like around here!'

Sylvie brought her hand to her mouth. Despite her reaction, she wasn't surprised, or upset like Alice thought. She was relieved. Since the vampire attack on Greg, Sylvie had become wary, in fact downright suspicious of anyone asking how they were doing. She and Greg planned to leave for Australia without telling anyone but the doctor. They had good reason to keep quiet; their passport cards and visas were worth a lot of money, almost as much as Greg's blood, to certain people.

'I was going to tell you yesterday, but when you got that note and all, well, I just figured...' Alice's voice trailed off. Then she added, 'I'll be shutting down the shop for a bit each day, and making deliveries myself.' She looked worried. 'I don't know how much longer I can even keep that up. I get to the markets earlier every day, but there's fewer flowers and everything's more expensive, especially the exotics, you know?'

Sylvie nodded wordlessly; fewer flowers, more expensive and a luxury item to boot. Most folks were having a hard time just paying the medical bills. Flowers, well, as one guy said, what was the use of something that didn't fill your belly or keep you warm?

Alice's eyes pleaded forgiveness. 'What are you gonna do, hon?'

'I'm going to go deliver this,' she replied cheerily. 'Don't worry about us, Alice.' Sylvie looked around the brightly coloured shop, donned her gloves and scarf, and picked up the wreath. 'That letter I got yesterday? My cousin in Virginia says we can come stay now that Greg's TB is in full remission. Thanks to the help you gave us with this job and all, we'll be fine.' She smiled over her shoulder and left.

Crossing the street to the nearby church—her most frequent destination of late—Sylvie ran the calculations through her head. She'd paid the airport tax and had the tickets; all they needed was the bus fare to the terminal. They could sleep at the terminal lounge the night before the flight, it was secure enough to protect Greg, and they'd be fed on the plane, so they could miss a few meals without starving. She had just enough to pay the rooming house for the last few nights—she'd do that today—and she could help out at the Salvation Army in exchange for meals. Nodding to herself, she scuffed the snow off her boots and walked into the chapel. She'd take her comunit to the pawnbroker just before they left, that would give them emergency funds.

Inside the church, Sylvie hardly noticed the grieving woman. But when she placed the wreath on the nearby table, she saw the man sitting with her. He was the same guy who'd been complaining at the nurses' station just yesterday. Then she saw the small, white coffin, and her head spun. It was the same size as Crystal's.

Swallowing hard, Sylvie left the chapel. She stopped outside and, for the first time in weeks, looked around. Grey people in grey clothes walked along grey streets speckled with grey snow. Youths stood in a doorway, waiting for an opportunity to hit on someone. A trash can had been set on fire, offering a little heat and warmth to the half dozen standing around it. Others sat propped against the walls, wrapped in grey newspaper. The city's human detritus had become fixtures in her vision, a part of the city landscape, invisible to those who hurried by, for they were oblivious to anything other than their own misery.

Sylvie, the flower girl, some of them called her. She ducked her head and hurried on. She wasn't part of this strange, other dimensional world. She was a visitor, just passing through! Walking quickly by dumped cars, she saw kids rummaging through the gutter trash, then she turned into a different, more desperate insanity in the overcrowded entrance of the hospital. But just for a moment, she stopped and realized why this place disturbed her so much. It wasn't real, it was a prop, a bad joke played on them by city officials. A Charles Dickens novel come to life. This wasn't Maine, 2017; it was London, 1817. She shuddered and hurried back to Alice's Florist Shop, clutching her security pass and passport card as tightly as others clutched food coupons, rosaries and Bibles.

\* \* \* \*

For the first time since the failed nuking of Sydney, Kristin immediately fell into a deep, contented sleep. It wasn't merely sexual contentment, she told herself when she woke once to find Nick's hand caressing her hip. Although she smiled at the memory of what followed and conceded it might have contributed. But in the morning, seeing him lying sprawled across the bed, her contentment was on a deeper level than mere sex. That Nicholas Page had hidden, and would continue to hide things from her was something she now accepted as part of his job. And there would be times when they could not be together, perhaps for months, but that was part of who and what they both were.

Her eyes explored the scars her hands and lips had caressed the previous night. They were not ugly; he'd been lucky the flesh hadn't puckered around them. But she could see by their extent, even the small, white marks on the upper part of his body, that the shrapnel wounds from the bomb in his plane had been severe. In time many would vanish, and the larger ones fade to thin lines, but she wondered about the scars on his soul.

'I count myself extraordinary lucky that I can still fly.'

Kristin sat up, embarrassed by her scrutiny. 'How did you land the plane—afterwards?'

'I was too angry to die.' Nick pulled her down into his arms. 'I just wanted to get down, find out who was responsible and tear them apart.'

'And did you?' she asked in a low voice.

'I can't say I had a lot of trouble killing Kali and Rashid Mahmed. And you took out the last two for me.'

She turned to look at him. 'Why did they keep you in hospital for so long?'

He sat up and ran his hand along her tanned leg. 'Despite appearances,' he gestured to his scars, 'none of the wounds were permanently debilitating. Even my busted arm was a clean, uncomplicated break, so I was back in the cockpit a lot sooner than anyone realised. But Naval Intelligence had set up a convincing cover. With faked medical charts, I only had to sleep at the hospital and be around most days long enough to be seen using rehab equipment—'

'Giving the impression you were disabled when in fact you were fine. Why?'

'You haven't figured it out yet?' He smiled sadly.

'I see a lot of pieces, including ones I'd label with words like bait, but not the whole picture.'

He swung his legs off the bed. 'It's Saturday, do you have to be anywhere?'

'I set things in motion last night. Can't do much now until Monday morning.'

'I'll put the coffee on.'

A short while later, Kristin led him outside and down a large yard backing onto bush. In one hand she carried a mug of coffee and in the other, a bag full of animal feed pellets. 'They like to graze on the grass,' she explained of the half dozen Eastern Grey kangaroos grazing contentedly in her backyard. Vapour trails billowed softly from their warm snouts. Much of the snow had melted overnight and the sky was clear; it would be a beautiful day.

Nick stared at them. 'I always thought kangaroos were ... well, not this common.'

Sitting on the stiff grass, she reached into the bag and held her hand out to one of the animals with a bulging belly. It cautiously took the food pellets, and a long, skinny leg appeared from the centre of its stomach.

'What the..?'' He slowly sat down beside her.

Exchanging the toast in Nick's hand for the bag, she said, 'Don't let them snatch it from you. They're wild but accustomed to people. While many species of kangaroos are endangered there's more of this kind now than when James Cook landed back in 1770. They like suburban backyards that adjoin the bush because they can graze on the lawns. They *thrive* on pasturelands we created for sheep and cattle. But where sheep create massive erosion problems and can't adjust to extreme climate conditions, wallabies and kangaroos are naturally adapted. They can even delay embryo development, choosing to give birth when environmental conditions suit them, be it winter or spring. There's a growing trend to farm them and emus, especially now that so many diseases are decimating traditional livestock. It makes more sense, both environmentally and economically.' She bit into the toast then wrinkled her nose. It was cold.

'Something that appeals to you.' He chuckled when the leg disappeared back into the kangaroo's belly, to be replaced by a curious head, a pint-sized version of the adult one above.

Nodding equivocally, Kristin tossed the toast onto the ground. A magpie swooped down and snatched it up. 'We humans claim success as a species because of our extraordinary adaptive abilities. But that's arrogant—and wrong. We've become hopelessly dependent on technology, trying to force environments

to adapt to us. During the Younger Dryas we developed agriculture, which set us on a path to dominate rather than work with the rest of the planet. Sharpen a stick to make a spear, plant a seed to grow some grain and soon it was build a nuclear weapon to wipe out a country, remove a rainforest to feed the starving billions. Self-awareness became self-centredness and we've spread like a cancer, killing the larger organism. Ironic, isn't it, that a similar climatic change—the New Dryas—is bringing it crashing down around us?'

The soft muzzle of a kangaroo pushed at the bag in Nick's fingers. Two dark paws reached around his hand and pulled at it.

Kristin continued, 'Our forefathers flooded Australia with maladaptive, non-indigenous livestock and food crops for arcane, culinary reasons. I don't mean to be preachy; I'm not an animal liberationist leftist greenie. But the fact remains that a relatively small number of people on this planet have benefited from technologies that could ultimately cost us our survival as a species. That's a hell of a price tag for a few creature comforts.'

In a nearby eucalypt tree a flock of kookaburras began laughing in raucous harmony, startling a flock of sulphur crested cockatoos into loud screeches and flapping white wings. Nick said, 'It's like a zoo around here!'

'Some wildlife has adjusted to urban sprawl, but most species have suffered badly from habitat destruction and introduced pests. With climate change and a rapidly increasing human population, rare and endangered species are under even more pressure. But I didn't bring you out here to discuss the environment. Now that you've had your way with me, would you mind explaining exactly who you are and what you do?'

He pulled another fist full of pellets from the bag and gave it to the insistent kangaroo. 'My recollection of last night was that you had your way with me.'

She nudged him in the ribs but he grabbed her hand and kissed it. The kangaroo took the opportunity to knock the bag from his hand. He tried to grab it back, but it was too late, pellets scattered across the short grass. She rolled her eyes and said, 'Lightning reflexes, Commander.'

He smiled and brushed the remainder of the pellets from his lap. 'I grew up in the Navy. My father was a two-star admiral before he retired, and my mother was in intelligence. Military officers commonly have Masters and PhDs. Academic studies are a necessary prerequisite of progress through the ranks.'

'Fluid dynamics: it makes sense for a naval aviator. But a pilot who is also a SEAL?' The kangaroo looked at her expectantly.

'Was a SEAL, I'm getting too old for those long swims,' he replied. 'There's a common misconception that people trained to carry out clandestine operations, to kill swiftly and efficiently, are mindless automatons. Killing machines. But killing is not what it's about, at least not directly. It's about undertaking exacting, tricky jobs without being killed, in extremely hostile environments. The men trained to do that are qualified in diverse skills. I know SEALs with IQs and qualifications the equivalent of college professors.'

'Point taken.' She sipped her coffee then said, 'Go back to when Um Nehro's brother was killed.'

'I'll get to that in a minute. Before becoming a SEAL, I worked with design engineers on the sonar that you're now using. However, for the last few years I've become increasingly involved with Naval Intelligence, tracking down infiltrators within the military. Sleepers. Not just military, but civilian support personnel.'

'I thought people in those positions underwent rigorous background checks?'

He stood, held out his hand and pulled her to her feet. The kangaroos moved back warily. 'You're right, but nothing's infallible. Someone once said that the Bill of Rights shouldn't be a suicide pact. Unfortunately, even with the systems we have in place, people slip through. How can you run background checks on your suppliers if you're stationed in the Middle East? Everyone is suspect, from the video rental guy to the fruit seller.'

Kristin led them through the bush to a jogging track. Early morning joggers, including armed members of Giovanni's security team, passed them as they walked. Thinking of Um Nehro's younger brother, the one Nick had inadvertently killed, she said, 'And a boy would be the least suspect.'

'We should have remembered that trick from Vietnam. With the recent transfer of so much equipment and personnel to Australia, given the number of Middle Eastern refugees flooding this country in the last twenty years—'

'Okay.' She nodded. 'I see where you're going. It was, and still is, a huge problem. Until recently only about three percent of those who applied to come here were accepted. But if they managed to land here via illegal boats from Indonesia, around thirty percent got to stay, even if they couldn't always provide identification or proof of origin.'

'You got it. I was working with a joint Australian/US team handling the security aspects of the Exodus Project. When we discovered classified sonar technology turning up on the international black market, I went undercover to track the source. The details don't matter, but a couple of those involved were enlisted men whose backgrounds checked out down to Mom's apple pie. They were facing charges of espionage and treason but were stupid enough to think killing me would solve their problems.'

'And these same people, Americans, were involved with the Shatt-al Arabs?'

'I don't think they knew. Or if they did they didn't care; they were just in it for the money. There are opportunistic criminal elements in every level of society, including the military,' he added at her look of disbelief. 'The Shatt-al Arabs weren't interested in the technology; they were just using it to raise capital. We found evidence linking the enlisted guys to Imhri Mahmed. And we knew the Mahmeds first loyalty was to the Nehros. When Elhamy discovered my involvement, against his sister's wishes, he saw it as an opportunity for a little personal revenge.'

'Did you find that out from the enlisted men?'

'Imhri Mahmed ... removed them and the evidence, but he didn't realize they'd backed up their files, including contacts and bank account numbers, on a remote server. That led us to Australia. Although the Nehros hated Australians because commandoes killed their family during the Iraq war, we knew the Shatt-al Arabs had set up operations here. And we had already linked the theft of weapons-grade plutonium to the Shatt-al Arabs.'

Kristin's eyes widened. She stopped and stared at him. 'You knew..?'

'There's enough weapons-grade plutonium missing from ex Soviet states to build a dozen nuclear bombs. You can get the plans off the Internet and most of the other components are available over the counter. But making one requires a little more expertise than reading a blueprint. Despite intensive investigations we never tracked down everyone involved in the Kashmir nuking, although Elhamy Nehro was short listed as one of the designers.'

She clasped his arm and looked into his dull green eyes. 'You lost friends in that, didn't you?'

'My old SEAL outfit was stationed in the Gulf of Khambhat. They hitched a ride on a transport plane, sightseeing over the Pir Panjal Ranges. The pilot saw the detonation then radioed his observations and location—and that he couldn't outrun it. His voice cut off a few seconds later. I should have been with them but I was back in the States, at my father's funeral.'

'So you left the SEALs and went to work for Naval Intelligence.'

'That about sums it up.'

'Not quite.' She began walking again. 'Why were you sent to Sydney?'

'Elhamy has always allowed personal issues to drive him, and Um hasn't always been able to control that.'

'So you were sent as bait, to draw Elhamy into attacking you, thinking you were vulnerable.'

'I was going to meet Ron Denning after I dropped you at Sydney airport that first night. However it's entirely possible that Imhri Mahmed *did* know about the files on the server. Elhamy wanted me in Australia—specifically Sydney—before detonating the nuke.'

She shot him a sideways look. 'Jeez, who was baiting whom?'

He shook his head. 'In this business you can never be sure. Don't be fooled by Western propaganda. These people are extremely intelligent, resourceful and highly motivated. They demonstrated that on 9-11 and they've continued to demonstrate it in the years since.'

Kristin recalled the tail end of the conversation she'd heard in the Airport Hilton. 'The airport attack, was it the Nehros?'

'No, but it helped them because it heightened security around the city, forcing the Shatt-al Arabs to split up and go to ground. They also split up the bombs—a procedure to prevent any of their own from stealing them and selling to the highest bidder. But they made one big mistake; they didn't know the Nehros and Mahmeds were tight. Elhamy had part of one nuke in Sydney, the Mahmeds had another in Canberra, and Um had the detonator. All they had to do was meet up and twenty minutes later ... The Nehros only mistake was being greedy. They lured me to Sydney then risked taking the nuke to the Tower.'

'Why? Did she know you were in the Sydney Tower?'

'Height increases the range of the blast. If they'd detonated the nuke on top of the Tower it would have killed and maimed thousands more.'

They walked in silence for a few minutes, and then Kristin said, 'So taking me to Australia really was just a convenient cover.'

'Not even that. I wasn't about to sit in a coach class commercial flight when we needed to deliver a couple of FSPs to Williamstown—although flight records will show I was a passenger. When Sydney airport was hit we knew the Nehros and Mahmeds would go to ground, so we called off the operation.'

'Then everything else started falling apart.' She could understand why Sydney was not considered high risk for a terrorist nuclear attack; there were too many other plump targets, like DC, or New York, even London or a major European city. But she now understood there were also unexpected targets, like Turkey.

'Um wasn't wasting a nuke or her life in Sydney because it would have been psychologically devastating,' he added. 'The entire purpose of terrorism is to terrorize. We now believe they knew about the Exodus Project. Nuking Sydney would have destroyed Australia's image as a relatively safe haven.'

'That explains why our government is telling everyone the Sydney Tower nuke was a dud.'

He nodded. 'It's also a disinformation campaign.'

'You mean you hope the Shatt-al Arabs might think any other nukes they have won't work? But the one in Kashmir did.'

'Elhamy was just one of the designers of that bomb.'

'What about that Russian physicist?'

Nick looked uncomfortable. 'Yeah, he was another. Sometimes the drugs used to extract information have an adverse affect on blood flow to the brain. He had a stroke. He's not dead, but he's more or less a vegetable.'

Kristin stopped walking, closed her eyes and groaned. 'And we're the good guys. Is that why you were armed to the teeth when you took me to lunch in the Sydney Tower?'

'I wasn't armed to the teeth. That knife comes in handy for a lot of things.'

She chuckled as she recalled him standing in the bathroom with the twenty-centimetre blade delicately picking at the zipper teeth. 'I was worried you might slip and end the evening's entertainment before it began.'

'I never slip,' he replied seriously. 'But yeah, the moment I heard gunfire in the restaurant, I figured why. The only possible reason they could have wanted that location was to detonate a nuke. Seeing Rashid Mahmed confirmed it.'

Kristin swallowed and ran her tongue around her now dry mouth. Nick's story had given form and texture to the people she had killed. Before, she had seen them only as human beings—albeit contemptible ones—whose lives she had taken. Now she understood they had chosen a course of action that, in her mind, revoked their right to be called human. She linked her arm through his. 'Thank you.'

He smiled down at her. 'That's why Inspector Giovanni wants you to carry a gun. He knows you're not going to use it unnecessarily. It's not just to protect you, but those around you.'

'I understand, but that's just not who I am, Nick. I don't feel so bad now about killing those two. Hell, half a second later and they would have been dead anyway, but it's not something I want to make a career out of. It's not my place to make value judgments on whether a person should live or die and a gun makes that choice too easy.' With sudden insight she said, 'Is that why you use your hands, or a knife?'

'To my way of thinking it's reprehensible to stand on some self-delusional moral high ground and refuse to kill, when killing a few will save hundreds, even millions of lives. What tools I use to effect that depend on the circumstances.'

He turned to meet her eyes and added, 'You told me once that we have to trust our shade of grey is whiter. But I'm human. While I never enjoy killing, I can't say I didn't get a measure of satisfaction from personally taking out Rashid and Kali Mahmed.'



She reached for his hand and said, 'Who said that a sure sign of civilization is the ability to hold two contradictory ideas in one's head at the same time?'

He smiled. 'T.S. Eliot.'

'Just a naval aviator, huh.'

They walked back towards the house. Kristin pointed out a sugar glider, a small marsupial possum, jumping across the treetops. 'Is this a good time to ask exactly how far the Exodus Project extends? Are we going to become another US state?' She watched his eyes. 'If you can't answer, I'll accept that. I mean it; I know there are things you can't reveal. I don't want you to lie, or ever feel you have to lie to me.'

He smiled and squeezed her hand, glad that she understood. 'I can't tell you, but I know someone who can.'

\* \* \* \*

Paul Anderson didn't much like golf, but since he wasn't allowed to rock climb anymore, he'd added it to his exercise regime. Golf also allowed him to watch his opponents, and supporters, strategize, especially when forced to play in winter.

'Well, if you don't play,' Anderson said to Kristin and Page, 'you can be our caddies.'

Page chuckled. 'That's fine by me, sir, except I wouldn't know a five iron from a branding iron.'

Bruce O'Brien, the Environment Minister laughed and looked up. Dark clouds were fast overtaking the blue sky. 'C'mon, lets get a few holes in. The afternoon forecast is for snow.'

'So,' Anderson said as they walked, 'you want to be fully briefed on the Exodus Project. How much does Kristin know?'

'More than what she's been told, sir,' Page replied.

Anderson nodded and positioned the tee in the ground. 'It's what I would have expected.' He made a few practice swings then hit the ball. 'Ah, crap.' He stood back for O'Brien to take his shot. It hardly fared much better.

They began walking again. 'Thanks to that whistle blowing cretin, Obermann, details are leaking like a sieve.' Anderson shrugged. 'It's a little sooner than we'd hoped, but by its nature the Exodus Project was never something that could be kept entirely secret. The Kamchatka Statement bases the predictive outcome of a mini-ice-age in North America and Europe on extremely well documented 14 000-year-old geological, archaeological and paleo-botanical records. The yoyo-ing climate—including prior Gulf Stream failures—are historical facts that had extraordinary ramifications on mankind's development. But you know what I'm talking about.' He looked at Kristin. 'I read that article you wrote.'

She looked at him, surprised.

Anderson lined up another shot, took a swing and grunted when the ball did exactly what he didn't want it to do.

O'Brien looked smug.

'We can't be sure exactly how far glaciation will spread this time,' Anderson continued. 'Nor how long it will last, because hydrogen fuel technology notwithstanding, we're still pouring millions of tons of

greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, and these volcanic eruptions and forest fires aren't helping. But the immediate and most worrying impact of climate change is the reduction in grain production. Other crops are important of course, but grain feeds most of the people on the planet. And a significant chunk of it is produced in the American and Canadian mid-west, now suffering badly from climate change.'

They stopped and waited for O'Brien, who sent a wad of grass and dirt flying further than the ball. Members of the security team with them chuckled.

'We conceived the Exodus Project based on the prognosis that with biotechnology and soil engineering—and the fact that we could tap the mother of all aquifers—parts of Australia could rapidly be adapted to take on the role of the planet's bread basket.' Anderson led them around a clump of shrubs. 'We knew there would be a lag, of course, between the losses in one area and the development in others. Our soils are ancient, saline and infertile, and no one could be entirely certain what the climatic outcomes would be. But more importantly, there has long been a misconception that market forces drive economies, especially free economies. Whilst that's true from an economic perspective, economists seemed to have forgotten that produce, not money, forms the basis of those market economies. No market force in the world can coerce a farm that's turned into an infertile dust bowl to produce crops, especially if the climate is against you—and getting worse.'

They stopped when they reached his ball. He took a few moments to line up the shot then promptly hit it into a small pond. O'Brien sniggered.

Anderson sighed and rested his hands on his club. 'To give you an idea, in 1988, the hottest year in record to date—every year since has been progressively hotter—a mid western drought resulted in a thirty percent decline in the production of crops in the US, while Canadian grain production dropped thirty-seven percent. In consumer terms crop production fell below consumption for the first time in three hundred years. That's when a few insightful economists and planners really began to worry. Seven years later scientists were quietly pressing the panic buttons.'

'But no one was listening,' Kristin said.

'Not no one,' Anderson corrected.

They watched O'Brien hit his ball into a sand trap. 'God help us, you're actually worse than me, Bruce.' Anderson turned to Page and Kristin. 'A few key people and some privately funded think tanks began considering future possibilities, although it wasn't until we were sure the Gulf Stream was failing that the Exodus Project became more than a whimsical set of what ifs.'

'So the military build up of US assets in Australia,' Kristin concluded, 'is not just to protect us from a flood tide of refugees and maintain a democratic government, they're designed to protect what you see as the planet's future breadbasket.'

'That's a vast oversimplification of course. The Exodus Project runs to a few hundred volumes and a few million words, none of which have 'Exodus Project' stamped on them. But it's not as selfish as it first looks. Although I admit it's self-interested because unless market based economies, and the produce that they're dependent on can be protected, then social systems, beginning with democratic rule, will collapse.'

'And those people in third world countries who are on the brink of starvation now, won't have a snowflake's chance in hell,' Kristin replied thoughtfully.

Anderson pulled a ball from his pocket and set it on the ground by the pond. 'That's why your role, and people like you, is so important. Asian fishing cartels are turning the oceans into the equivalent of

underwater dust bowls. Democracies and free market economies, no matter how inept or unfair they can be on an individual level, are still the best overall *systems* that we have. Not just for those living and working in them, but for most everyone.' He hit the ball and it vanished into a thick stand of young GM eucalypt trees.

'What about Rhesus?' Kristin said. 'That must have thrown a spanner in the works.'

The temperature had continued to drop and it now began to snow. O'Brien muttered, 'I can't see the damned ball anymore. I'm using my democratic privileges to vote we all go back inside for a free-market economy beer.'

Anderson laughed. 'Fair enough.' He indicated to one of the security team that they were returning. 'Rhesus couldn't have come at a worse time. In the minds of many countries, particularly Asian ones, it justifies the rape of the oceans and the stripping of resources everywhere. You knew that,' he said, meeting Kristin's eyes. 'Which is why you developed those controversial management strategies. But desperate people with hungry bellies and no futures cannot be reasoned with, so we've had to escalate the military build up in this country.'

'Don't think for a minute that this is just the US and Australia. You're seeing only that aspect because of your dealings with the sonar and your friendship with the Commander here. Europe is also involved. In many ways the Exodus project is misnamed. No one's considering entirely abandoning Western Europe and the eastern seaboard of the United States because the weather is getting chillier. People live and work quite happily in Scandinavia and Iceland. But our amended immigration policies are necessary because we need the population base to support the infrastructure I've described, and to protect those market based economies that we all depend on, no matter what side of the equator the wheat is grown.'

'I understand that, Prime Minister, but is there any point in turning Australia, or parts of South America or Africa for that matter, into the planet's breadbasket if in eighty years the human population has declined by ninety percent?' Kristin pulled the hood of her jacket over her head. The snowfall was increasing.

'Closer to ninety-nine percent,' Anderson corrected. 'But you're right. It has thrown a spanner into the works insofar as it is impossible to predict whether the Rhesus virus can be stopped. And until we are able to make projections based on future population statistics, and see exactly what's going to happen as a small, but geopolitically vital chunk of the Northern Hemisphere heads into deep freeze, we're continuing with the Exodus Project. But as I said to Ronald Denning,' he added, glancing at Nick. 'The entire point may be moot unless the Shatt-al Arabs are stopped.'

## Chapter 30

Then the different flood came, as humanity reached its first billion and passed it—the flood that seemed to need no stemming. That flood, as it surged ever higher, extinguished old freedoms. What replaced them was not new freedom, but license, an arrogant assumption that no title to a place was valid unless written in a newly invented language by one of the most recent arrivals on the planet. For this new flood there was no new Ark. It is already too late for a hoard of splendid creatures—and for how many lesser ones we never knew?—to find sanctuary.

### —David Bower, Founder Friends of the Earth

Sylvie checked her fabric shoulder bag for what seemed the eighteenth time, making certain their passport cards, tickets and green papers were in place. She put the TB medication in the side pocket, picked up Greg's nylon backpack and shook Dr. Friand's hand.

'Where are you going now?' Friand tucked her podgy hands into the pockets of her white coat.

'Airport.' Sylvie adjusted the bag on her shoulder. Her heart was pounding and her hands were shaking. They were leaving! Just a few more hours and they'd be out of here and starting a new life, away from the cold and grey and death. 'But I don't want anyone to know,' she added in subdued tones.

'I thought your flight wasn't until tomorrow?'

'It isn't, but it's an early one, and I figured the airport would be safe enough.'

Friand nodded in understanding. 'Australia, huh, well send me a postcard.'

'Maybe you should think about going yourself.' Greg leaned on his metal crutches.

'Me?' Gracie Friand laughed without humour. 'Haven't you heard? Infectious diseases are the fastest growing industry in Maine. Why would I leave?' She shook Greg's hand. 'Good luck.'

Taking one last look around, Sylvie walked with her son to the elevator.

\* \* \* \*

'Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.' Clem looked up from his computer. He smiled a greeting and motioned for Jean to take a seat. 'Close the door,' he added. 'When are you leaving?'

Jean rubbed her eyes. 'Paul's flying in tomorrow. He and the President are attending the Secretary General's dinner in New York the following night. I'm going back to Australia with him then.'

'How's your husband ... sorry, ex-husband, taking it?'

'I think he had some vague hope that I'd come home and take care of him. He knows better than to believe the press, especially over sex scandals.'

Clem snorted and clasped his hands behind his head. 'I wouldn't exactly call it a scandal.'

'Even if it is true.'

Forthrightness was essential in the current political climate, so with Jean's agreement, Paul Anderson had pre-empted speculation by admitting that they had developed a 'close' relationship. So far, the press had been reasonably magnanimous.

'He must realise he can't compete with a Prime Minister.' When Jean frowned, Clem added, 'I know you like the guy, not the position. Besides, the President didn't appoint you as permanent liaison for the Exodus Project just so's you could go live Down Under.'

She smiled gratefully. 'Have you seen much of your wife?'

'Not since you told me to call and tell her I'd be late for dinner. Seriously,' he added at her alarmed look, 'Barbara's in Australia, too, with the kids.'

'Her old WHO position?'

'I feel better knowing they're in a secure area. It's only a matter of time before some disgruntled whistleblower, like Obermann, reveals they're also blood group negative.' Clem's face screwed up. 'Imagine what vampire cults will do with that on the Internet! The Director of the CDC, the man associated with the discovery of Rhesus, an African American with negative blood! God, Jean.' He abruptly stood from his chair and looked out of the pokey window into the White House grounds. 'I'm so sick of this crap.'

'C'mon Andreas.' Jean walked around his desk and placed a hand on his shoulder. 'Maybe you should take a few days off. Go fishing or something.'

'With you leaving in two hours?' He chuckled mirthlessly and turned to face her. 'Besides, I'd only depress myself by calculating how much mercury, PCBs and dioxins I was ingesting with every scaly mouthful. I said at the start we were too late. In 2001,' he added despondently, 'the WHO said TB could be controlled in five years with just \$400 million more per year. Affected countries, including this one, wouldn't put up forty. Now, that single disease is costing the US alone, billions.'

'You still have an open cheque book on Rhesus.'

'Yeah, at the expense of the TB and every other health care program. No matter what you call it, it's still triage.' He chewed on his lip. 'We're closing the barn door after *everything's* bolted. Pharmaceutical companies are trying combinations of nucleoside analogue reverse transcriptase inhibitors, everything from Abacavir to Zidovudine, to hit Rhesus.'

Jean frowned. 'What's the point? They already know that neither successful AIDS drugs nor stealth nucleosides work.'

'Yeah, but something in whale meat is acting like—' His desk computer buzzed. Glancing down at it, Clem rotated the screen so that Jean could also see.

Roger Harrison stared out at them. A second image opened to reveal Mayumi Yoshida—who looked distinctly unhappy. When she explained why, Harrison blurted, 'Good God, Mayumi, you ruled that out!'

Yoshida's face darkened. Harrison mumbled an apology and added, 'I'll call Leigh Walker; he needs to see this, but if you're right, we're completely screwed.'

Jean stared at Yoshida's figures in disbelief. When Andreas had told her the effects of Rhesus, it had frightened her, but not on a visceral level, not like cholera or TB. Now she wanted to crawl back into bed and forgetting the whole thing. This wasn't ironic; it was a cruel trick of nature.

Pulling both of his hands through his hair, Clem muttered, 'I do not believe this!'

'I'm sure we can effect a balance,' Mayumi said. 'We must establish a minimum dosage and—'

'And what, Mayumi?' demanded Clem. 'What if it's too little? Too much? What are you going to base it on, body mass? And what if it only works in conjunction with cetacean meat?'

'I doubt it,' said Harrison. 'Because it would explain why the onset of Rhesus was delayed in Chicago, Illinois, Detroit and Duluth, in fact, the entire Great Lakes region.'

While Harrison, Yoshida and Clem argued, Jean kept re-reading the figures, hoping to find some glaring hole in the Japanese researcher's data. As with the connection to whale meat, this new finding must be verified, but she suspected Yoshida would be proven correct; the Japanese woman was too meticulous to err.

Once Rhesus was activated, something in whale meat acted like a reverse transcriptase inhibitor, just as oestrogen acted as a temporary inhibitor in pregnant women. When the women gave birth Rhesus started up again. In the case of the Japanese businessmen, Rhesus remained dormant even when they stopped eating whale meat. Now they knew the reason why.

'We will begin immediately by testing the population of Niigata for Rhesus.'

'C'mon, Mayumi,' Harrison cried. 'You'll need trial samples on uninfected volunteers. You know the drill; it'll take years!'

'And will your government,' Clem said, his voice as close to panic as Jean had ever heard it, 'release this information as it released the information about cetacean meat?'

For the first time since she'd met the Japanese epidemiologist, Jean thought she detected a sign of regret on Yoshida's face. It passed quickly.

'I do not believe it would assist in the investigation,' Yoshida replied stiffly.

Minutes later Leigh Walker was on line. 'Too bloody right it wouldn't assist!' he spat as he scoured the figures. 'I'll start correlating data immediately.'

'I will send you a full report,' Mayumi adjusted her glasses. 'You must verify it, of course, but we will be pursuing the investigation based on this hypothesis.'

When they disconnected, Clem began pacing his tiny office. 'This emphasizes my point about TB. I'm not suggesting we ignore Mayumi's findings or in any way abandon research on Rhesus, but we need funding *now* to maximize the human potential in the elderly; improved productivity, health, mental and physical. Trouble is, none of that will happen while we're teetering on the brink of thirdworldization. In fact, *nothing's* going to happen without draconian measures that make USAMRIID's actions in the cholera outbreak seem positively civilized.'

Jean was hardly listening. 'If—when—Mayumi's findings get out,' she said in a strangled voice, 'then we face the additional prospect of mass poisonings and a generation of fertile but mentally and physically deformed Rh-positives.'

\* \* \* \*

Lieutenant Commander Pascoe said into the radio, 'I repeat, stop your engines and prepare for boarding!'

Just outside the wheelhouse, Kristin ducked when high-powered automatic gunfire from the game fishing vessel rang a tattoo along the patrol boat's deck. Someone screamed. She turned to see blood spurting an impossible distance across the forward deck. Trying to crouch and run at the same time, she yelled, 'Nick!' The patrol boat turned sharply, throwing her against the bulkhead and knocking the wind out of

her.

Nick had already appeared from the other side of the wheelhouse. He ripped off his sweater and ran to staunch the blood arcing from Corporal Vira's almost severed right leg. 'Call the medevac chopper!' he yelled to Pascoe.

Kristin tried to stand, only to be thrown off-balance when the patrol boat swerved to avoid another round of fire. 'Dammit, Pascoe!' she swore under her breath, knowing he had no choice. At least the rough seas were pitching the game boat around, making it a difficult platform to shoot from.

Another round of bullets slammed into their stern. Kristin cursed the marksman for his accuracy. What the hell was Nakamuro thinking?

Nick took Vira's place on the forward 20mm gun, but even from where she was, Kristin could see that the trigger mechanism was shattered. The bow of the patrol boat plunged into the trough of a wave, sending a spray of salt water over everything. Nick looked back and ran a hand across his throat.

Inside the bridge, Pascoe's handsome face screwed up and he cursed. 'Why isn't Moti returning fire?' He snatched a waterproof jacket from a hook and began pulling it on.

Kristin turned and climbed up to where the aft gun was mounted. Seconds later, the fibreglass-hulled game fishing boat rolled heavily to port. A long line of splintered holes appeared well below the starboard waterline.

Pascoe looked up at her. 'Didn't think that was Moti,' he said with a grim smile. 'He would have fired on the bridge.'

'Can I suggest you back off until they abandon ship?' She lowered the gun. The game boat was obviously disabled, and sinking.

'What about their catch?' Pascoe grabbed the wheelhouse hatch as the patrol boat ploughed into the trough of another wave.

She wanted to rail at him, but it was an unavoidable fact; dolphin meat was now hundreds of times more valuable than its weight in gold. This was the twelfth vessel the patrol boat had encountered in three days. The only oddity here was that the game boat wasn't illegal, or foreign owned; it belonged to a wealthy local Japanese businessman. They'd seen it hauling one of the long nets across its stern and ordered it to standby for boarding. It'd immediately dropped the net and powered away, but the patrol boat had quickly caught it.

Trails of Vira's blood were coagulating across the bridge's windows. 'You want to risk a bullet in the head?' Kristin said as she followed him into the bridge, panting. She brushed ineffectually at her long hair. It was wet with salt spray and stank of cordite. 'If Nakamuro is stupid enough to fire on us, you can bet good money he'll toss any carcasses in whatever sorry excuse for life-rafts he's using before abandoning ship. I suspect that son of a bitch Kati has a hand in this! He's best buddies with Nakamuro.' She pulled her sunglasses off and vainly tried to dry them with the hem of her saturated T-shirt.

Water was dripping from Pascoe's blond hair onto his collar. 'Shit, you're probably right.' He ordered the helmsman to stand off while signalling the sinking vessel they would take on the crew.

The game boat listed dangerously and life-jacketed men tossed frozen dolphin carcasses overboard. Pascoe snatched up the microphone and, abandoning radio etiquette, screamed, '*Marmet!*'

'I see 'em!' replied Ben. 'Are you in need of assistance? We heard gunfire.'

'No,' Pascoe answered, looking south at the approaching helicopter. 'I'll take care of her crew, but find those carcasses!'

Kristin tied her hair back, replaced her glasses, grabbed the medical kit and went forward.

Nick glanced up at her and quipped, 'Let's drop by Vanuatu on the way to DC, go on a nice little boat trip together and assess the situation.' His dark hair was spiky and his tan uniform was plastered wetly against his skin. He was also splashed with dark crimson blood.

She sent him a withering look, then prepared a syringe of morphine. 'Okay, it was a crappy idea, but you can't say I don't take an interest in your line of work.' She ran an alcohol swab over Vira's shuddering thigh, then injected him.

When the six game boat crew were safely on board, Kristin went forward to the bridge and said to Pascoe, 'Jabo Nakamuro's not with them, and two of them are sick.'

The Australian naval officer had been too busy making sure his patrol boat was seaworthy to be worried about the condition of the fishermen. 'They're lucky to be alive,' he shot back. Nevertheless, he followed Kristin to the aft deck.

The handcuffed Japanese fishermen were sitting under the watchful eye of Sergeant Moti and three armed guards. None of the prisoners had said a word since they'd been pulled from the ocean. As Pascoe watched, he felt the same creeping fear he'd experienced when they'd boarded the first death ships, months earlier. The patrol boat was punching into the seas, but rough ride notwithstanding, the prisoner's weren't suffering from seasickness. Two of them were shaking and twitching, while another two stared ahead, glassy eyed. Only the captain and the one who had fired on them seemed fully alert. And their faces reflected quiet rage. 'Looks like they've been dining on liver sashimi.'

'Maybe.' Kristin pulled on a borrowed waterproof jacket. 'I've never seen anyone in the throes of mercury poisoning. You?'

Pascoe shook his head, then pushed the wet hair back off his face. 'Do you speak Japanese?'

'Nope.' She turned to look at Page.

'French and Arabic.' He stripped off his blood and saltwater soaked shirt.

Kristin looked at him twice before turning back to Pascoe. 'Well, we should get them into dry clothes, and maybe you should call Maddy Paine to meet us at the wharf before anyone disembarks. Just in case.'

One of the twitching men fell forward, vomited, soiled himself and went into convulsions.

'What is it? Did they eat the dolphin's livers?' Pascoe asked the captain of the game boat.

Kristin tried talking to him in Bislama, the native Vanuatu language. She kneeled beside the sick man and with Page's help, rolled him on to his side. She glared at the captain and tried English. 'He's sick, dammit! Don't you want to help him?'

The man stared at her wordlessly with flat, angry eyes.

Pascoe's face screwed up. 'Here we bloody go again,' he muttered darkly and returned to the wheelhouse.

In Vila, Pascoe ordered the patrol boat anchored two hundred metres off the fisheries dock. John



Mennenger brought Maddy Paine across to them in a Zodiac, then returned to the dock. Pascoe, who had changed into his white uniform, held out his hand to help Maddy aboard. 'Next time,' he said, 'can we meet over dinner or something? This is not my idea of a fun second date.'

Maddy was wearing gloves, mask and protective eyewear, and her curly hair was pinned back on her head by her ever-present sunglasses. Her eyes twinkled. 'It is for me. Anyway, since the dolphins that *Marmet* collected have been gutted, I'm betting it's a case of mercury poisoning. Lead the way, Commander.'

When Pascoe came back out on deck again, Kristin said to him, 'I called Nakamuro's office.'

'And?' Pascoe motioned for them to go forward to the bow. He wanted to place as much distance between himself and the sick Japanese seamen as possible.

'He's in Australia,' she replied. 'According to his office, the guy who went into convulsions is Nakamura's personal secretary. The rest are senior management.' She unzipped the waterproof jacket and pulled it off.

'What the bloody hell possessed them to fire on us? They only had four dolphins!'

'These days, four dead dolphins are probably worth more than his entire chain of hotels.'

'Commander?' Moti called from the wheelhouse.

When Pascoe went back inside, Kristin turned to Nick and said, 'I'm sorry.'

'For what?'

'For dragging you into this. I knew you had to get back to DC. If it's not mercury we could be quarantined for days.'

He leaned on the deck rail of the patrol boat and looked out over the tranquil harbour. 'I never apologized to you for Sydney.'

'Why would you? You had no way of—'

'Kristin, Karen O'Ryan died because she was close to me. You almost died for the same reason.'

'What about Fiji, and Sydney airport?' she replied with a short, nervous laugh. 'They had nothing to do with you. If you're trying to tell me that we shouldn't—'

'I'm trying to tell you that the world is full of what ifs.' He turned to face her. 'Karen and I flipped a coin that morning to see who'd be doing the flying. If the politician hadn't bumped you from the Poly-Mel flight, and I hadn't smelled avgas and jet fuel and hurried you from the boarding gate, we would both have been incinerated. If we hadn't gone to the Sydney Tower for lunch, you would have been in Canberra when Sydney, and I, were vaporized. If you hadn't had the courage to pull the trigger—same outcome.'

He looked around at the quiet harbour lined with coconut trees and sandy beaches. 'This morning, I agreed to drop by Vanuatu on the way to DC because ... well, to be honest, when I met you, it reminded me that there's another world besides the one I live in. To risk a bad cliché, it was like a breath of fresh air.'

Kristin shook her head ruefully. 'Some fresh air! You get shot at, then quarantined!'

'I've been shot at and quarantined before.' He pulled her to him. 'I can't live my life on what ifs. Once I start down that road it's time to quit, and I won't quit; I can't, any more than you could give up what you're doing.'

'Eat, drink and be merry, huh?' she said, enjoying the warmth of his body and the feel of his strong hands.

'When I can snatch a few moments. Can you live with that?'

She pulled back a little to meet his eyes. 'I don't think I could live any other way.' Then she smiled. 'I was going to wait until it happened before telling you, but the Attorney General's office has given the green light to the Central Bank. Next week, after I get back from DC, the entire South Pacific Fishing Forum will act as one to freeze assets and block Asian fishing cartels. I'll be up to my eyeballs in diplomatic wrangling, and poor old Don Pascoe will really have a job on his hands, keeping everyone out.'

'Say what?' Pascoe asked when he joined them.

Kristin explained.

'As long as the US government sends those extra Coast Guard ships they've been promising,' Pascoe replied.

'It may take a little longer than you hope,' Nick said. 'There's been a sharp decline in terrorist activities since the nuke.'

'And that's bad because?'

'Because they've only had a few centuries to develop animosity towards Western colonial powers; less than fifty years towards Uncle Sam. Their hatred for each other has been simmering for thousands of years. The campaign against the West had them working together for a while; the Sydney nuke changed that.'

Pascoe's brow furrowed. 'You saying things are about to hot up again?'

'When Boutros Boutros-Ghali was the United Nations secretary general,' said Kristin. 'He predicted that the next war in the Middle East would be fought over water, not oil.' She turned to meet Pascoe's troubled gaze. 'It's taken a few years and a few wars longer than he thought, but Boutros-Ghali was right, deadly right; the cradle of civilization might yet become its grave.'

Before Pascoe could comment, Maddy came up on deck, taking her mask and gloves off as she walked. 'You're in the clear. As you suspected, it's methyl mercury poisoning.'

The crew emerged from the patrol boat's saloon with the first stretcher. Ambulance officers followed them. 'There's one other thing; spooky, really,' Maddy added, watching them. 'The worst victims, the two I don't think will survive, tested negative for Rhesus.'

Pascoe crossed his arms. 'So?'

'Soon after we heard about Rhesus, Nakamura asked me to test his staff,' Maddy replied. 'They *all* tested positive, including the two who are now free of Rhesus. No surprise, they use bottled water for everything, from drinking to washing.'

'Could you have made a mistake?' Kristin said.

'It's unlikely.' Maddy frowned. 'The test is for the presence of the blood protein and I would have said you can't just lose those proteins then suddenly reacquire them, but that's exactly what appears to have happened.'

Kristin was watching the epidemiologist's face. She looked more than spooked. 'Maddy, exactly why did you retest them for Rhesus just now?'

'I've been sending samples to MacDonnell almost daily. Here's the thing. Every one of the dead seaman that you've encountered,' Maddy glanced at Pascoe, 'is negative for Rhesus. At first I didn't think much of it because we know that Asian countries aren't being hit as hard by Rhesus. But it still struck me as weird. So just this morning I checked the Japanese database, including fish market workers who drink nothing but bottled water. I found the same results.'

'Oh, brother,' Kristin whispered, meeting Mennenger's now wide eyes.

Nick and Pascoe exchanged confused looks, until Maddy spelled it out for them. 'Methyl mercury may not only stop Rhesus from activating, it could be the cure—but only in lethal quantities.'

## Chapter 31

**The beginning of the end will come as morality disappears and conflicts arise. Then Fimbulwinter—three years with endless winter—will befall the world. The days will grow colder, storm and sleet will pound the world, the well (waters of the earth) will be polluted and the leaves yellowed with poison. The moon and the stars will be lost in a dense white fog, then the rivers and the lakes and the sea will freeze. The wolf Skoll will open his jaws and consume the sun and his brother Hati will devour the moon, sending the world into everlasting night. The stars will vanish from the sky, the earth will shudder with earthquakes as every bond and fetter is burst. From all corners of the world, gods and demons will converge and the last battle will be fought. Surtr will hurl fire in every direction and the nine worlds will burn. Everything will perish and the earth will sink into the sea.**

### —Norse legend of Ragnarok or Gotterdammerung (end of the world)

Prime Minister Paul Anderson shrugged off suggestions from his aides that attending an environmentalist organisation's photographic exhibition in New York with President Blake was making a political statement. 'When it comes to the future of this planet, maybe we should be asking Green Earth's advice,' he replied. 'Look, you can't go wrong stating the truth. Ed and I are dropping in for fifteen minutes before the Secretary's dinner, purely to see the section on volcanoes. Everyone knows he and I are a little kinky about volcanoes.'

At the gallery, Anderson's eye caught a large double print. He did not need to look at the catalogue to know where they'd been taken. On the right, the brooding hulk of Koryakskaya volcano loomed over the unsightly Russian town of Petropavlovsk Kamchatskiy. Dirty, grey ramshackle buildings tumbled over themselves into the dirtier, grey Avacha Bay. Ugly cinderblock apartments stretched beyond to the brooding, volcanic landscape. The sheer malodorousness of the foreground pulled the viewer's eye from the magnificent volcano. However the left print, the almost identical Yalta volcano taken half a planet away, sat as the visual centrepiece, a majestic backdrop to a foreground of truly monumental birch trees and clear, magnificent harbour waters. The similarities, and contrasts, were staggering.

'Remember when we sat on the side of St. Helens,' Anderson said to Edwin Blake. 'Viewing the world through the bottom of a bourbon bottle?' They had discussed how human civilizations were based on complex, interdependent relationships between people, technology and nature. 'History has shown us again and again that upsetting the balance gives rise to revolutions: political, social, industrial and technological. And the consequences have always been staggering.'

'You used Easter Island as the classic example of a closed system that had consumed itself into extinction,' replied the President. 'But Earth is a *global* island; there is no escaping it.' Blake absently patted his pocket, then held out his hand. His personal aide handed the glasses to him.

Anderson smiled. Ed might be running the most powerful country on the planet, but he was still losing his specs.

'I read the Gettysburg Address again last night.' Blake examined the prints more closely. 'I wish I had the wisdom to see so clearly into the future. Look at us, Paul, we're a nation of apathetic weaklings, have been since the Second World War. We've been too busy glutting ourselves to consider our children's futures. Now, with Rhesus, most people have even less reason to care. Hell, democracy renders the shelf life of most political issues to only four years. With the Republicans trying to impeach me over the Exodus Project, I'll be lucky to last another four months.'

'Maybe you better go back and read Abe Lincoln's words again.' Anderson accepted a glass of beer from the waiter. 'Because you're going to have to make the American public eat them. The only reason they want to impeach you, and the Libs are calling for a no-confidence vote in me, is because they know the only hope of preventing chaos is to rescind most democratic rights. They want to be at the helm when that happens.'

Blake sighed. 'When President Clinton signed the anti-terrorism bill after Oklahoma, he effectively moved this country one step closer to a police state. That deeply saddened him, both political parties, and most freethinking Americans. Then after 9-11 we sliced away a whole bunch more. Now we have states of emergency in eighteen states, martial law in twelve cities and curfews in another seven.'

Anderson sipped the froth from his beer. 'We're going to have to take radical steps to protect MacDonnell. Drawing attention to it has been a double-edged sword.'

Many regarded the greening of Australia's deserts with envious eyes, inspiring them to abandon their homes and make for a new land of milk and honey. Few comprehended that MacDonnell was a relatively tiny oasis created through cutting-edge technology, or that it was thousands of kilometres inland from the inhospitable beaches where illegal boats abandoned refugees. Those not captured by immigration authorities died on the trek across lands infinitely more hostile and less fertile than their own. 'The bleeding heart liberals want us to just 'let them go'. Soon I may have no choice,' he said grimly. 'We don't have the resources to track down every one of them.'

They moved further into the gallery. Anderson caught sight of Jean talking to the President of Green Earth. 'I thought Jean was more useful to you in DC?'

Blake shook his head. 'I gave her a choice. She's a good team player, Paul, not an easy thing for any White House staff member, even if they do ride high on the stress. Why? Do you object?' His eyes danced with merriment. 'There's going to be little enough pleasure in the world over the coming months. Embrace what you can—you're both Rh-negative and young enough to have children.'

Before Anderson could reply, they were ushered into the reception room where Michael Turoa, the President of Green Earth, officially opened the exhibition.

Turoa spoke briefly but eloquently about the state of the planet and how the revenue for the exhibition would be spent. Anderson thought that on face value Green Earth's ideas held merit. But then good ideas always did. Problem was, people were notoriously mulish when you were trying to help them.

As if Turoa had read his mind, the President of Green Earth finished his speech with the point that people around the world wanted these changes, demanded them in fact. All they needed was to be shown how.

The first steps had already begun with the Exodus Project, but Anderson wondered where the journey would take them.

'Green Earth is like any other bureaucracy,' Blake said, turning to him. 'They employ an ex-White House speechwriter—'

'Did I hear you refer to us as a bureaucracy?' Turoa interrupted as he joined the statesmen. 'We don't have a Congress that takes four to six years to haggle over and constantly reject reasonable and worthwhile legislation. We don't have senators trading supporting votes like baseball cards. And because our members are united in our goals, we're not self-serving butt watchers.'

Blake looked at him curiously. 'True, but like any bureaucracy, Green Earth now spends most of its time and resources on perpetuating its own existence.'

Turoa went to reply, but Anderson interrupted. 'That's not a criticism, it's an observation. You've abandoned campaigns to prevent the extinction of hundreds of species, including the Blue Whales, because it was impractical. Bureaucracies, including yours, can only function if they're pragmatic. You've just said the benefits from this exhibition will be used to protect the remaining populations of cetaceans. Exactly how are you going to achieve that now every fishing boat on the planet is trying to harvest them?'

Anderson wasn't trying to be contentious, he was genuinely curious. When the news eventually leaked that the 'cure' for Rhesus was not specifically whale meat, but an exceptionally high concentration of methyl mercury that could be obtained by eating large amounts found in most seafood, fishing cartels would have one more excuse to sweep the oceans clean. If Green Earth had practical ideas how to stop that before it happened, he wanted to hear them.

'That's an odd question coming from you.' Turoa replied. 'I've had the same question put to me by dozens of people in the last week. Interesting people, like the president of the American Tuna Boat Association. And I've had the Norwegian, Icelandic and Japanese governments on Green Earth's back to do something even while their ships sink ours. Save our whales, they keep demanding. They're not interested in saving them, just harvesting them before everyone else does. I've had my family threatened by the FBI and your office.' His eyes shifted to Blake's. 'And every other pencil-pushing bureaucrat since this issue began. We've fought these bastards—including your administration—for years over the degradation of the marine environment and illegal fishing practices. Now you ask, as if we're their custodians, how we're going to protect cetaceans?' His voice became louder and more emphatic with each sentence.

'Well, we can't!' He all but slammed his empty champagne glass on the nearest table. 'Because it's too late! We told you, over and over again. And our parents told you, decades ago. *But you would not listen!*'

Without realizing it, Turoa was shouting. The crowds in the gallery stopped their chatter to watch. 'As David Bower said forty years ago, it's too late for the hoards of splendid creatures who once roamed this planet—and for how many lesser ones, we never knew—to find sanctuary. Too late for our children and our children's children that we'll never bear to hear them.' He waved his arm towards the haunting, wistful melody of humpback whale song coming from hidden speakers. 'Too late for future generations to breathe clean air and eat food untainted by a thousand toxic compounds. Too late for them, too late for us!

'Look around you, all of you!' Turoa turned to the silent group of overdressed, over-jewelled and overfed statesmen, millionaires and billionaires who'd flown in from all over the world for the exhibition. 'How many of you have ever stepped foot outside of 'civilization'? How many of you have ever rubbed the earth between your fingers, listened to the call of a wild creature or smelled a rainforest after a storm? A few, yes, I know. A few have made camp in the *remains* of a jungle so that you can sit in wait to kill something for your secret trophy rooms. Which one of you, or those like you, shot the last wild tiger on the planet, or hunted the last rhinoceros, or sits on a stool made from the last free African elephant's foot? Who amongst you wears the ivory of the now endangered walrus because your greed for elephant ivory drove those great beasts to extinction in the wild?'

Stunned people blinked or sipped their drinks, then wandered away from the embarrassed silence.

Turoa snatched another drink and looked down. He had presided over Green Earth for so long because he had been the perfect diplomat, never raising his voice, never criticizing the hands that fed Green Earth—until tonight. He stood, obviously terrified the effect his outburst would have on the exhibition.

Paul Anderson cleared his throat. 'You should fire your speechwriter and wing it more often. Look

around.'

Ushers were sticking small red 'sold' labels on prints as people beckoned them from all over.

\* \* \* \*

Since exposing the Shatt-al Arab's plans, Captain Ronald Denning never knew what it was to feel rested. He slept where his head fell and ate what was put before him. Despite, or because of, what they had learned from the Russian and Um Nehro, the trail had dead-ended. They needed time, but he had no idea how much. Their one real hope was that the Sydney nuke had been wired up so bizarrely, only Elhamy Nehro had known exactly how to trigger it. It could be months before the Shatt-al Arabs figured out how to detonate the others.

Or they already knew and were cautiously moving them into position. Tracking nuclear material was, on face value, a relatively easy task, if those transporting it were stupid enough to let it get within range of the detection equipment. The Shatt-al Arabs were very patient and not the least bit stupid.

Denning was too tense to go to bed. What if something happened while he slept? What intelligence would he not see that might provide them with a clue? Hell, they still hadn't figured out how the nukes were smuggled out of Australia. The simple fact was that Australia's vast coastline was impossible to patrol let alone defend against the tidal wave of humanity now swarming in. Getting out was even easier.

He was talking to Ankara when someone put a sandwich in front of him. He looked up to say thank you when the line screamed in a high-pitched tone and the visuals abruptly vanished. Exclamations echoed around the room. Denning blanched. The awful, high-pitched scream...

'What the bloody hell was that?' someone demanded.

Denning's voice was filled with agony. 'That *was* hell.'

## Chapter 32

**We humans are about as subtle as the asteroid that wiped out the dinosaurs ... It's often said that our goal must be to 'save the planet'. But that's plain wrong. Earth can manage fine without us. What's really happening is that we are driving our own mass extinction—just like that famous asteroid. The real battle is to save ourselves from ourselves.**

—New Scientist, April 2001

It was difficult to tell which was worse, thought Anderson, the horror before him or knowledge that they had failed. He allowed the tears to roll unchecked down his face. Dawn revealed no skeletal silhouettes. Clouds of sickly yellow steam hid nothing; not even a matchstick. The heat had removed every leaf, every trace of life. No birds or crickets would ever chorus in the morning again and any rain that fell would bring only death.

He contemplated the ruined landscape before him. Claw marks of something vile and sickening gouged the surrounding hills of slag. Odious grey smoke wafted listlessly upwards from deformed things that might once have been buildings. Smokey darkness etched the entire world, with shades of grey hardly adding form or texture. It is beyond description, he thought, as his despairing heart tried in vain to wish it were not so. He and Edwin Blake had sought the loneliest and most devastated places on earth, but what the camera on the remote vehicle relayed to them was beyond loneliness, beyond devastation. Beyond hope. Distance protected his body, but nothing could protect his soul.

Anderson began to speak but stopped. Words could not articulate the horror. Beside him, Jean sat white faced and silent.

God forgive us, thought Anderson the atheist, for what have we done?

But God did not answer.

'He gave us the right to free choice,' President Blake said, echoing Anderson's thoughts. 'But did He think we would choose this?'

Blake paused then asked the man beside him, 'Do you believe in God, Commander?'

Nicholas Page had never been able to bring himself to believe in an Old Testament God, perhaps because he'd been involved too long in a war that was, at its most fundamental level, about man's interpretation of God. In his mind, the God concept was a gestalt interpretation of life, a broader but less conscious form of the Gaia hypothesis, so he replied, 'Without life there can be no God.' He stared at the congealed landscape on the screen before them.

'Yes, Edwin Blake replied, 'God has left this place. We drove Him away.'

With an aching spirit, Nick muttered, 'We should have been able to prevent this.'

'You know better than to take on the burden of guilt, Nick.' Kristin grasped his hand.

'Dr. Baker is right, Commander,' said President Blake. 'Do not hold yourself accountable for the actions of madmen. Indeed, we brought this on ourselves in our insane desire to develop such weapons. And in our righteous hubris, we believed that we alone would control them. We ate of the forbidden fruit and now we must carry the burden of consequence.'

Istanbul and Ankara, the political and economic centres of Turkey, were no more. There were further



fears that the Mediterranean basin had cracked deep inside. A series of escalating earthquakes presaged major eruptions, sending areas around Mt. Vesuvius and Mt. Etna on high alert.

'We've already driven the environment against us,' Anderson said, 'but that wasn't enough, oh no. We had to top that by driving the physical planet against us.'

Each man and women in the room was trying to clutch something, anything, to rationalize the irrational.

'The message was clear,' Nick said. 'We're committing genocide through sterilization. We either provide them with the vaccine against Rhesus or they'll detonate the others. And next time, Turkey won't be the target.'

The transmission died as the tiny rover failed to deal with the congealed, radioactive landscape. Designed for the harsh Martian landscape, the impossible conditions on Earth defeated it.

'A vaccine which doesn't exist,' Clem said despondently.

Anderson snorted. 'Maybe we should give them a bucket load of methyl mercury and tell them it's the best we've got.'

Blake shook off his growing lethargy. He looked at Samuel Winthrop and said, 'How is the evacuation proceeding?'

'The National Guard is barely coping in most of the major cities. Sir, we really would like you to leave now.'

Blake nodded and slowly stood; the usual spring in his step had vanished.

Now that the Exodus Project was going public, DC was considered the most likely target. Intelligence sources doubted the Shatt-al Arabs could smuggle a nuke into the States, so Canberra was running a closely contended second. While few believed the terrorists would waste what everyone believed was their last viable nuke on the small population of the Australian capital, that they had built the weapons on the outskirts of the city made it a real possibility. Most of the Australian parliament and their family members were already on their way to the MacDonnell underground facility.

On the way out, Nick said to Kristin, 'Secretary Winthrop is staying in DC with the Vice President for another twenty-four hours. He asked me to take Sammy with us.' A brief, sad smile flickered across his face. 'I suspect it's his way of trying to make up for his absence.'

'What about a flight suit?'

'Sammy's big for his age. We'll get a suit and change to a dual control FSP at Andrews.'

\* \* \* \*

'Ma'am?'

Sylvie woke instantly, sat up, and breathed a sigh of relief. Greg was still beside her, still okay. In her nightmares, she had lost him. 'What time is it?' She rubbed her wrist where her comunit had been.

'The tarmac is secure and we're loading everyone now.' The young soldier moved on to the next person.

Sylvie needed to use the restroom. She glanced around; the barricaded first class passenger lounge looked more like a refugee camp. It was also beginning to smell like one. The last days had been a surrealistic nightmare. They'd only been airborne a few minutes when the news about Turkey had

reached them. At first everyone on board had thought they would have to turn back or land somewhere in the mid-west. Then they were told LAX. Somewhere in between they'd lost, or someone had stolen, all of their bags. Fortunately, Greg had been carrying their documents on him while she carried his medication.

At LAX they'd been herded from place to place, told they'd have to stay in LA or return to the East Coast. Then they were told all aircraft had been grounded, and lastly, that there were no flights to Australia except for returning expatriates. Sylvie had produced their passport cards, the precious green letter and another proving her husband's residency in Australia. More waiting, more herding. She'd worried about running out of Greg's medication but she'd worried more about admitting to anyone in authority that he had TB.

Officials checked their documents. Someone tested Greg's blood to verify he really was Rh-negative. Then finally, the backs of their hands had been stamped with indelible ink. She and Greg were no longer people, but barcodes. But they were on The List, and that's all that mattered.

Sometime later, in the men's room, teenagers had knocked Greg's crutches out from under him, pinned him to the ground and stolen all of their documents. Airport security had found him bruised but otherwise unhurt. Their lost baggage had seemed trivial in the face of this new reality. With no money and no ID except the barcode, Sylvie hadn't been able to call Joe and let him know they were okay. But Greg was unharmed, they were still on The List, and now, they were finally leaving.

Hurrying from the bathroom, Sylvie saw armed soldiers herding exhausted, bedraggled people into the waiting transit buses. They shuffled forward, like cattle, packing into the vehicles as closely as possible. A few babies cried, but the toddlers were too bone weary, and the children too frightened to fuss. Most everyone was Rh-negative with barcodes branding the backs of their hands. Sylvie shivered and shook off the inevitable imagery.

Where's Greg! She looked around frantically until she saw him. The soldiers had found him a walking stick and were helping him aboard.

Half an hour later they were in the air and eating the first decent meal Sylvie had seen in weeks. She was filthy and exhausted but her stomach began to unknot. She thought back over the last frantic days. Soldiers, confused and frightened people, crowds pushing at airline check-in counters, mobs demanding to be let on flights, others offering money, valuables, even their blood, anything to get a ticket out. Gunshots as people stormed barricades, anarchy and terror gripping everyone as cities evacuated. Sylvie looked out the tiny window of the military transport SP into the moonless night. The security guard at the hospital had been right. They were lucky.

\* \* \* \*

Sammy Winthrop sat on the icy lawn, hugging his knees tightly, watching the agents pack the helicopters. He avoided his mother's gaze when she came and sat beside him.

'Sometimes, Sammy, grown-ups make promises they can't keep, no matter how hard they try,' said Sue, putting her arms around him, taking warmth and comfort as much as giving it in the bitter cold of the night.

'Dad promised he would come, too! Instead I bet he's planning to nuke someone as payback.' Sammy reached up and pulled his woollen cap lower over his ears.

Sue tightened her arms and held him close. Sammy understood more than was probably good for a little boy. Well, not so little anymore. She was about to reply when she saw the lights of another aircraft come in from the south. The secret service-agents showed no surprise when it landed nearby.

Sammy raced out of her arms shouting, 'You came, you came!' But his face dropped in disappointment when Nick emerged from the cockpit and pulled off his flight helmet.

'I'm sorry, Sammy,' Nick said, catching Sue's eye. 'Your dad is still busy in DC, he'll be joining you in Australia in a day or two. But he asked me if I could take you with us.'

Sue took a deep breath while Sammy screamed excitedly. The future was a feared, unknown thing. Everything had changed, forever. Somehow she knew she and Sammy would be okay, but she had a dreadful feeling that she would never see her husband again.

'With your permission, of course?' Nick said to her.

Sammy's eyes were pleading. Sue smiled through her tears. 'Where will we meet you?'

Nick handed her a slip of paper. Sue glanced down at it, trying to discern the letters in the darkness. 'Captain Ronald Denning heads the Australian security team,' said Nick. 'He's a buddy of mine, he'll look after you.'

Nick hugged her as much as his suit would allow, then helped Kristin get Sammy ready.

Twenty minutes later, Sue stood back for them to ascend. There would be time for grief later, but for now she stood watching the FSP lights until they disappeared amongst the stars.

\* \* \* \*

Ben Mills sat on the beach near the Fisheries building. The sun had gone swiftly from the winter sky, and Venus shone like a beacon in the purple-red twilight. He would just as soon have been at The Bar getting loaded, but with international flights cancelled, it was overflowing with scared and angry tourists.

He brought the bottle to his lips and gulped down the burning liquor—and almost choked when his comunit called. Checking the call signature, he saw that it was relayed from a radio. 'What do you want?' he demanded drunkenly.

'In case satellite communications are interrupted in the next few days,' Kristin replied, 'I wanted to say goodbye.'

'What are you talking about?' he grumbled impatiently.

'You must have heard the ultimatum. There is no vaccine for Rhesus and nothing anyone says is convincing those demanding it, otherwise.'

Ben's face twisted in alcoholic confusion. 'Where are you?'

'We've overhead now.'

His shifted his gaze from Venus to what he'd first thought was a satellite blinking a track across the twilight sky. She had deserted him and now interfered with his pursuit of numbness. For that reason if no other he wished her gone. A flash of hatred born of disappointment soured his voice. 'Just called to gloat, huh.'

'I'd hoped you wouldn't be so bitter.'

'Bitter! God, what a joke. I'm not bitter, I'm just not the naïve, trusting fool I was a few months ago. Don't forget to say goodbye to Mennenger, too,' he snarled.

'I already have.'

Regret momentarily replaced acrimony. 'We had a chance there, for a while. This will kill everything.'

'Not necessarily. It could conceivably set off more earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and tsunamis. That'll hasten the cooling over Europe and North America, and the warming elsewhere. The human response? Who knows, but research on Rhesus will grind to a halt if infrastructures break down. Most of Vanuatu is safe and it's high enough out of the ocean to offer some protection. Ben, you predicted this,' she added. 'Maybe not the exact details, but you were right about society collapsing under the strain.'

'And I was right about you using me, using all of us *provincials*,' he snapped at the blinking light as it headed west. 'Does that poor bastard in the cockpit know you'll walk all over him, too, to further your precious *career*?'

'Goodbye, Ben.'

Ben tried to reconnect but the uplink was gone. 'No! Don't go!' he called to the disappearing light in the sky. 'Not yet! *Don't leave me!*'

Unaware of Kristin's conversation with Ben, Sammy said, 'Everything looks so perfect from up here!' His voice was filled with wonder. 'Like nothing down there really matters.'

'Maybe it doesn't, Sammy.' Nick reached across with his gloved hand and gently rested it over Kristin's. 'A penny?'

Like everyone else on the planet below, she knew the future was an uncertain, frightening thing. Then again, wasn't it always? Despite the problems that waited for them when they landed, she knew that everything would eventually work out; the planet had survived worse catastrophes in its four billion years of existence. 'I was just thinking of an old Sunday school sermon. "Man shall come and go, but Earth abides."'

'Ah, Ecclesiastes.'

Kristin squeezed his hand. 'Just a naval aviator, right?'

Above his oxygen mask, Nicholas Page's eyes crinkled in a smile.

## Endnotes

**1:** Tufts Medical School in Boston. Soto, H. Justicia, J.Wray, and C.Sonnenschein, 'p-Nonylphenol: A Estrogenic Xenobiotic Released from 'Modified' Polystyrene,' *Environmental Health Perspectives* 92:167-73 (1991)

**2:** J. Brotons, M. Olea-Serrano, M. Villalobos, V. Pedraza, N. Olea, 'Xenoestrogens Released from Lacquer Coatings in Food Cans,' *Environmental Health Perspectives* 103 (6): 608-12 (1995)

## Ark Ship: Book Two

"Humans are no longer one species," Ryl continued, idly rolling the wine in her glass. "Some of us regressed a million years and leaped into a future that might have been, becoming Metas. On Earth, the Rhesus plague deleted a huge chunk of genetic diversity in humans, taking with it a very special gene. As you reach out to the stars, to explore new worlds, to seek the sanctuary planet, Gaia, you will meet other species and situations that telepaths cannot deal with. A dangerous toy, Dim5 travel, for it opens you to predation. As a small gift to help you on your journey, to warn you when the path to be trodden is perhaps not the safest one, twenty-five men and women from the twentieth century were taken, adjusted slightly and delivered to you. These are the C20s."

"All right, Meta, you called them gifts. Why gift them to us?" Captain Jassom asked.

"They're early warning devices," Ryl replied. She downed the last of her wine and, meeting his eyes, added grimly, "Believe me, you're going to need them."

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