

**Oak Ridge Apocalypse:
Dusk of Man**



QUARANTINE AREA



**BE ORGANIZED
BE PREPARED
BE SAFE**

CLASS Z ZONE

by W.H. Gilmore



An ExtrovertedNerd Publication
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Dusk of Man

Oak Ridge Apocalypse: Dusk of Man W.H. Gilmore

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This book is dedicated to my good friend Rob, who introduced me to the whole zombie phenomenon, and to Max Brooks for his amazing books “The Zombie Survival Guide” and “World War Z.”

Luck is a very thin wire between survival and disaster, and not many people can keep their balance on it.
~ Hunter S. Thompson

[T]he relentless note of incipient hysteria, the invitation to panic, the ungrounded scenarios - the overwhelming and underlying desire for something truly terrible to happen so that you could have something really hot to talk about - was still startling. We call disasters unimaginable, but all we do is imagine such things. That, you could conclude mordantly, is the real soundtrack of our time: the amplification of the self-evident toward the creation of paralyzing, preëemptive paranoia.
~ Adam Gopnik

In fact, I suspect that our only hope is disaster. Cruel tho' it is to say it, there has got to be a vast die-off in the human population - likely including us and our families - before the survivors find themselves in a world where a new and humble and 'religious' adaptation with nature is possible.
~ Edward Abbey

Prologue

1:30pm, September 10, 2016

Jack Brooks peered out the front window through the blinds of his home. The large group of shambling figures was still milling about. They had only been out there for about ten minutes. He had nearly gotten the kids ready to leave before they showed up. Now he would never be able to get the kids to the car safely. He could see it, just thirty feet from the front door, but it may as well have been thirty miles for all the good it would do his family.

Jack missed his wife, Rebecca. He hadn't seen her in a week. She never returned home from work, or even called to say she had run into trouble. He had only waited this long to give her time to get back. Now it looked as if he couldn't even get his three young kids out of the house. At least those things seemed content to stay outside. For the moment they weren't trying to get inside. He glanced back and saw little Ethan playing with some colored blocks by the sofa, stacking them in his approximation of a tower. Ethan had just turned two the day before, and it hurt Jack's heart that he couldn't even give his baby a birthday cake. With the power out they couldn't cook anything, and the food in the fridge was starting to turn. The food in the freezer might still be edible, but it all needed to be heated up in some way first. All the crackers, chips and other snacks found in homes with small children were long gone. Along with that the house phone was dead and the cell phone circuits stayed tied up. He gave up trying to call out because his battery was nearly dead. He had no way of recharging it.

Ben, his ten-year-old, was standing in the doorway to the kitchen, looking at him expectantly. Ben still looked at him as boys often see their fathers – as all powerful and invincible. He trusted his father completely. Even still, Jack could see the worry and lack of sleep showing in his son's eyes.

“Son, where's your sister?” he asked quietly.

“I don't know,” Ben replied. He was clutching furtively at his shirt, likely unaware that he was doing it.

Sarah was the free spirit. Being confined to the house for a week with no power, no entertainment to take her mind off of things, and her mother missing with no explanation, was the hardest on her. It was a lot for an eight-year-old girl to cope with. They heard a small scream come from the kitchen, and the back door slamming shut. Jack started that way, but Sarah came bolting into the living room and ran into his arms. He heard a sharp thud coming from the back door.

“I didn't mean to,” she cried as she hugged him.

“What didn't you mean to, honey?” he asked.

“I just wanted to go outside for a minute,” she stammered.

“What do you mean you wanted to go outside? Did you open the back door?” The something slammed into the back door again and they heard the tinkling of broken glass.

“It's not my fault,” she cried defiantly.

“Did you go outside?” he asked again more sternly.

“Only for a minute, but they weren't looking,” she said.

Just then the front door shook from another something hitting it hard. Jack went back to the window and saw four shadowy figures on the porch, and more were on their way.

“We have to go upstairs now,” he told the kids. He scooped up little Ethan who started crying for the loss of his leaning tower of blocks. “Go up to Ben's room now,” he directed the kids. Another thud shook the front door violently. He heard the door frame splinter.

Jack herded the kids up the stairs as the front door exploded inward. Zombies stumbled in the door and turned towards the stairs. He watched as the first one started to climb clumsily up the stairs.

“Ben, take Ethan,” he said, handing the baby to his son. “Go to your room and shut the door.”

“Are you coming?” Ben asked. He was trying hard not to cry.

“Just go,” he said again. “And do not open that door, no matter what you hear, do you understand me?”

“Please come with us,” Ben pleaded.

“Promise me you will not open that door,” Jack demanded.

“Don't leave us daddy,” Sarah begged.

“Promise me!” Jack yelled.

Ben couldn't speak, he just nodded.

"Now go," Jack said again. He looked back and saw the first zombie gaining the top landing. "I don't have time to argue with you." With that he unceremoniously pushed his children into the bedroom and shut the door.

The last time Ben saw his father alive, he was turning to face the zombies as the door clicked shut. His dad shouted, "Leave my family alone!"

Ben hugged little Ethan tighter to his chest. Ethan's crying had subsided to sniffles, his little tower of blocks having been forgotten. Sarah looked back and forth from Ben to the door, tears running down her face.

Outside the door they heard the scuffling of feet and their dad's grunts. They heard fists hitting flesh and bodies colliding with the walls. The scuffling grew fainter as it got farther down the hall, away from the bedroom. Their dad cried out in pain. Then they heard the loud thuds of several bodies falling down the stairs. But, then there was silence.

Ben could feel Sarah pressed against him as they stood in the back corner of his bedroom, not knowing what to do.

A few moments passed and Sarah asked, "Is daddy okay?"

"I don't know," Ben replied, listening to the quiet after the storm.

"Is he coming back?"

"I don't know."

"I want mommy," Sarah sniffled.

"So do I," Ben said as he hugged her closer.

Then, a faint shuffling sound came from outside the bedroom door, like feet dragging on carpet, like somebody building up static electricity to shock you.

"Daddy!" Sarah cried out.

"Shh," Ben hissed.

Sarah started towards the door and said, "I want daddy."

"Sarah, no," Ben admonished her.

Sarah screamed as the bedroom door crashed open. A zombie came shuffling in. It turned to face the children and moaned. Chills ran down Ben's spine at the sound. He looked frantically around for a way of escape, but there was none.

Part One

5:45am, August 31, 2016

The Paul Sinclair Reeves Research Laboratory was just one of several secure facilities at the Y-12 National Security Complex maintained by the Federal Government in Oakridge, Tennessee. All of the programs and projects in the Y-12 Complex were highly classified, and the work done in the P.S.R. Labs was no exception. Government research had been conducted in the Y-12 Complex since 1943, and included such programs as the Manhattan Project. Y-12 separated the uranium-235 for Little Boy, the bomb dropped on Hiroshima, Japan on August 6, 1945. In the age of the internet, much of the research was centered around computing, and especially cryptology. However, great strides were being made in the field of biology, and that was the focus of the P.S.R. Labs.

P.S.R. handled the world's most dangerous and deadly viruses, from smallpox and H.I.V. to strains of influenza, and a variety of synthetic compounds that were truly terrifying. They were on the forefront of research that promised an antiviral breakthrough on the level of what penicillin did to bacteria and infections. Their most recent gem was a compound under the code name R-83. This compound was part of their research into an engineered virus that would target and neutralize cancerous brain cells. It was the eighty-third iteration, and still nowhere near ready for human testing. But Dr. Keith Hines, PhD, the Director of Research for the P.S.R. Labs, was optimistic that they were close, what with twenty research scientists and a hundred lab techs working 'round the clock. If they got this right, many forms of brain cancers and tumors would be a thing of the past, and a Nobel Peace Prize would look really nice on Dr. Hines' mantel. But P.S.R. also had their dark side. They also worked to create viral cocktails to unleash widespread death on enemies of the United States. The irony was not lost on Dr. Hines that they simultaneously worked to save and end lives.

Due to the dangerous nature of the substances being handled, strict protocols were in place for accidental spills or physical exposure and infection. Every sample was labeled using a system of codes. The codes told how the substance was able to enter and infect the human body. One could tell at a glance just how communicable any given sample was. The P.S.R. Labs used four codes in a descending order of danger.

At the top of the list, and the most dangerous, was the code 'AR', which stood for Aerosol, and the samples labeled with it could infect you for simply breathing the air that it had evaporated into. The vials containing these samples had a red ring around the top for easy identification, and thankfully they were not often seen in P.S.R. Then came the code 'EP' with an orange ring. It could absorb through the skin, or epidermis. Next down the line was the code 'MM' with its yellow ring. These samples could infect a person through a mucus membrane such as the eyes, nasal passage, or another bodily orifice. At the bottom of the list, and the least dangerous, was the code 'BL' with a white ring. These samples had to enter the body directly into the bloodstream, either by injection or contact with an open wound.

Jeremy Collins checked his watch, 5:45am, and finished logging out the tray of small glass vials. There were twelve samples, each containing fifteen milliliters of a clear liquid. It looked like water, but looks were deceiving. Jeremy double checked the label for the code. It was marked 'Compound R-83 (BL)', and had a white ring around the top. Jeremy was relieved. He hated working with the red capped vials. The handling procedures for the Aerosol samples were cumbersome and difficult. Jeremy preferred to leave the testing of those samples to other people. Besides, they were also dangerous. He stepped out the door of the cold storage room and walked up the hall towards his work area.

Jeremy was twenty-three years old and only a year out of college. It was remarkable that he had a job in a top secret facility with a security clearance so young, and with such little experience, even if he was just an entry level lab tech. He looked the part of the geek that he was. He was actually borderline nerd. All he needed for full nerd status was a pocket protector and some tape on his glasses. He was five feet eleven inches tall and a little chubby at two hundred and thirty pounds. He had sandy blond hair, wore wire rim glasses and still had the remnants of his teenage acne. He wore khaki pants with a polo shirt and a white lab coat. The glasses and acne were just two of his problems held over from his teens. A third was arrogance. Rather than be thankful to have such a good job so young, Jeremy was bitter for still having to do the "crap jobs", as he thought of them, and for still being on third shift.

It takes no brains at all to carry around a tray of samples and push a few buttons on a centrifuge, he thought. I've worked at P.S.R. over six months. I'm obviously more capable than these idiots, but does

anybody ever notice me? Of course not. Their incompetence amazed him. Just a few days before, Jim Foley had misread the labels on a set of samples he was supposed to be working on. He wasted an entire day adding a UV reactive marker dye to each of a hundred samples, the wrong hundred samples, and in doing so ruined an entire batch of cultures that had been growing for three months. That major setback cost the program more than time. It cost a great deal of money in materials and man hours to recreate those cultures, not to mention the cost of properly disposing of the ruined bacteria. *If I were in charge, I would have canned his ass,* Jeremy thought.

It just served to prove that Mr. High and Mighty, the Doctor Keith Hines, PhD, was far too soft. Jeremy couldn't understand how such an incompetent man became the Director of Research at P.S.R. "Give me a couple of years, old man," he muttered, "and I'll have your job".

Jeremy turned the corner at the end of the hall, still preoccupied with his frustrations and brooding over the injustices, and didn't notice the sheen of water on the freshly mopped floor. Jeremy's foot slipped and he went down hard on his right hip. He jarred his teeth and bit his tongue. The tray flew out of his hands and crashed to the floor. One of the vials shot out and shattered on the floor. Jeremy stood up and rubbed his butt, wincing. He could taste blood, and he looked at his khakis and saw the wet spot from the floor. "Damn it!" he exclaimed. Jeremy looked up and down the hall for the yellow, wet floor signs and saw none. "Fucking idiots," he muttered. Then Jeremy saw the broken vial. "Son of a bitch," he cursed. Thankfully it was a small mess. Fifteen milliliters of liquid doesn't go very far, and the floor was already wet. He quickly scanned the hall again, this time to see if anybody had noticed the accident. There was thankfully nobody in sight.

Nobody needs to know, he thought. Jeremy scooped up the caddy with the eleven remaining, intact vials and went to deposit them on his workbench. He rubbed his aching backside as he went. "I don't get paid enough for this shit," he muttered as he got a broom and dustpan out of the janitor's closet.

Protocol dictated that he had to report the incident to his supervisor immediately. But then they would call in the goons in the hazmat suits, and he might even get quarantined for several days. *Not going to let that happen,* Jeremy thought. *Not with a brand new World of Warcraft expansion waiting on the computer at home. Definitely not over fifteen milliliters of liquid and a little glass.*

Jeremy ducked back into the hall and checked that he was still alone. So far so good. There were not very many people on third shift, so if he was fast about it he might get it cleaned up without anybody noticing. He quickly swept the glass into the dustpan, paying close attention to get it all. "Damn it," he cursed again. Some of the glass was too fine and wouldn't go into the dustpan, no matter how he swept it. He ran back to the janitor's closet and grabbed a wad of paper towels. He hurried back and dabbed at the mess, trying to coax the last shards into the dustpan. "Come on!" he said in exasperation. Impatiently, Jeremy swept across the mess too hard and a sliver of glass went through the now soggy paper towels and into the tip of his right index finger. "Shit!" he exclaimed, jerking his hand back. He looked at his finger and saw the tiny bead of blood welling up around the sliver of glass. "Damn it all to hell," he said. "Fucking janitor! Why the hell couldn't you put out a damn sign?"

Still cursing the lazy janitor, Jeremy threw away the paper towels and emptied the dustpan in the garbage can. Then he put up the broom and dustpan and went to the restroom to wash his hands. He examined his finger. *Hell, it's just a scratch,* he reasoned. *It's not all that bad. Didn't really even go all that deep, and it's not even bleeding anymore. I'll just keep an eye on it. It's probably nothing.*

Knowing how paranoid the powers that be were, Jeremy decided not to tell anybody about his little scratch. *They won't keep me in a cage like an animal if I can help it. Not over something so trivial.* Jeremy went back to his workstation and retrieved the tray of samples. He checked his watch and it read 6:00am. Quitting time wasn't for another two hours, but it wouldn't hurt to take off a couple of hours early. He went back to the cold storage room quickly and logged all twelve samples back in. Then, he dropped his lab coat off in the locker room, grabbed his cell phone and keys, and headed up to the security checkpoint. He glanced in Dr. Hines' office on his way by. *Good, he's not in,* Jeremy thought. *Too early for Mr. High and Mighty to grace us with his presence.* He got to the security desk without running into anybody else. Jeremy walked around the corner and smiled at the beautiful Officer Pamela Jennings.

"Mr. Collins, leaving early?" Pam asked as he approached the counter. Jeremy liked her and hoped one day to get her out on a date. *I'll have to ask soon,* Jeremy thought as he leaned on the counter between them.

"Yeah" he told her. "I've got a doctor's appointment in a couple hours. I need to go get ready for it," he lied.

“Okay,” she told him. Pam opened her shift notes on the computer and started typing in the entry for Jeremy’s early departure. “Good luck at the doctor,” she told him. “Hope it isn’t anything catching.”

“Yeah,” Jeremy said, leaning farther over the desk trying to see a little more cleavage. “It’s just a routine checkup. Nothing major.”

“Well, if you’ve got your badge, go ahead and buzz out,” Pam said. She turned around to check the in box on the wall to look for something she didn’t need, just to put some distance between herself and that awful stare.

“Yeah, I’ve got it,” Jeremy said as he admired her chest.

“You go on,” Pam told him hoping to get rid of him. “I’ll just note it in the log that you’ve left. Good luck at the doctor’s.”

“Thanks Pam,” he said. “I’ll catch ya later,” he called and winked at her on his way to the door. Jeremy swiped his badge and opened the door after the light turned green. He headed straight for his car, not waiting around for anybody to stop him.

Pam watched him leave and sighed with relief. “What a creep,” she muttered. Chills ran down her spine, thinking about his eyes crawling all over her chest. She picked up the phone and punched in the number for Dr. Hines office and waited for the tone to leave a message.

“Dr. Hines, this is Officer Jennings. As per protocol I am informing you that Mr. Collins has left early at 6:10am.”

Jeremy jammed his key in the ignition and winced, because his finger was a bit tender. He looked at it and saw that it was a little pink around the scratch, and it itched a little. *What do you expect from getting scratched by a sliver of glass? That’s normal. It’ll be alright,* he thought. Jeremy still wasn’t aware of his mortality; a fault many young people share. He threw his car in gear and pointed it towards the exit.

Twenty minutes later Jeremy parked his car in his reserved space at Centennial Village Apartments where he lived. It was a very nice gated community, certainly more than he could afford if mamma wasn’t pitching in a few hundred dollars every month for rent. But she had agreed with him. The extra security was worth the expense. Besides, the credit cards were eating him alive, and he had promised her as soon as they were paid off he could pay his own rent. *You just can’t be too careful these days,* he thought. *What with working an important job with a security clearance and all.* Besides, it was a post 9/11 world. Of course the club house with the hot tub and pool tables was a nice perk, as was the view of Solway Park and the river across Edgemoor Road. He would love to get Pam into the hot tub in a bikini, or better yet, no bikini. Jeremy grinned at the thought as he got out of the car and walked towards his apartment.

Jeremy was still grinning as he let himself into his apartment and locked the door behind him. He pressed the power button on his computer on his way by and went to the bathroom to take a leak. When he got back the computer was ready. He plopped down into his comfortable leather chair, intending to chase all of his problems away with several hours of playing World of Warcraft. He checked his email but there wasn’t anything important. Then he fired up the game and checked the auction house to see if there were any bids on his old Orc Armor. He needed the gold for a new mount. Then he glanced at his desk clock before losing himself to his war to defeat the Alliance.

7:08am, August 31, 2016

Dr. Hines sat down at his desk and sipped his coffee. He was a thoughtful man and liked to take a few minutes when he got to work every morning to collect his thoughts. He worked to organize his day before getting started to be more productive. His brown hair had very nearly all turned gray in the last ten years, but at least he still had hair. His dad had been completely bald before he was forty-six. Dr. Hines' features were strong; some would say almost handsome. He was not overweight, but you would not mistake him for athletic either. He wore a white shirt with a black tie and slacks to work every day. Dr. Hines took pride in his appearance and was always well groomed, and he kept his clothes well pressed. He liked to keep everything neat and orderly. Well organized was how he liked to think of it. He saw the message light blinking on his office phone and flipped his little notepad to a fresh sheet. He used it as a little running To-Do list, and found that it was a helpful tool in his effort to stay productive.

Dr. Hines reached up and pressed the message button on his phone. He had three messages and took notes on his To-Do Pad as he listened. His brow furrowed as he listened to the third and final message that was from Officer Jennings. He picked up the receiver and dialed the security desk number.

“Security,” Pam answered.

“This is Dr. Hines. I got your message. When did Mr. Collins leave?”

“It was just after six. I noted it in the log,” she explained.

“Okay. I wonder why he left. We have work to complete here, and all these absences are hurting our productivity,” Dr. Hines replied.

“Well,” she said. She was quiet for a few seconds. “He said he had a doctor’s appointment. I imagine that a doctor’s appointment is a reasonable reason to leave early.”

“What doctor’s office would be open for a 6:00am appointment?” Dr. Hines asked her. “Never mind Officer Jennings. Thank you for your help.” He hung up without waiting for a response and logged into this computer terminal. He pulled up the work assignments that were listed for Mr. Collins for the previous evening, considering who he would reassign the jobs to.

Let's see what we have, he thought. Dr. Hines noted the serial numbers of the samples that Jeremy had been assigned to test and walked out of his office. *Why would he lie about going to see a doctor?* he wondered. *Something is weird.*

Dr. Hines went to the cold storage room and looked at the log book. *Okay, he logged out the R-83 samples at 5:45am.* The next entry really puzzled him. *Why only fifteen minutes? He couldn't have run the test in only fifteen minutes.* Dr. Hines opened the cooler door and located the tray containing the R-83 samples. He quickly spotted the empty hole, but counted them anyway. He pulled the tray out to inspect it closer, and checked that the serial numbers matched the work order. *This is not good,* he thought as he noticed the cracked corner of the tray. He placed the tray of samples back in the cooler, and to be thorough he checked the adjacent tray of samples coded S-83. All twelve of them were there. *Why would he take the R-83 but not the S-83? That doesn't make sense.*

“Ms. Jennings,” he said as he rounded the corner. “I need Mr. Collins' phone number, and I need to use your phone.”

“No problem, Doctor,” she said, starting to become concerned, seeing Dr. Hines grim demeanor. He always looked cool and collected, so something had to be seriously wrong for him to look so worried. As she pulled up Mr. Collins' security profile on her terminal she asked, “Is everything okay?”

“I don't have the whole picture yet,” Dr. Hines said brusquely. “The number?”

“Of course,” Pam said. She handed him the receiver as she dialed the cell phone number.

Mr. Hines looked at his watch. “Mr. Collins has been gone over an hour, and there's a missing sample,” he told her as the phone rang. “We'll need to tell Mr. Irons. This is a security problem, so he'll need to be brought in.”

Pam nodded and started to understand the gravity of the situation.

7:25am, August 31, 2016

Jeremy typed 'AFK' into the game's chat box, indicating that he was 'away from keyboard,' or as some preferred to call it, 'a free kill.' He looked at his ringing cell phone. It was a work number and he felt a lump rise up in his throat. He had wondered if they might call. He hadn't expected it so quickly. He noticed his finger next. It was swollen, and the whole end of his finger was an angry red color down to the first knuckle. He felt a dull throbbing of pain as well. *What the hell was that stuff?* he thought. He looked back at the phone. *Could they possibly know?* He doubted it, but suddenly he was very worried. *Okay, get a hold of yourself. Don't answer it. Let it go to voice-mail. It may be no big deal, just a lecture for leaving early without getting approval.* Jeremy waited a few minutes that felt like an eternity until his phoned chimed, indicating a new voicemail. He accessed it and listened with growing alarm to the voice of Mr. High and Mighty himself.

“Mr. Collins. When you get this message call P.S.R. immediately and ask for Dr. Hines. You left early, did not complete your work assignments, and there is a missing vial. You were the last person to log it out. I need you to verify that it was in the cooler when you left. Call back as soon as you get this message. It is urgent that I speak with you!”

Jeremy stared at his phone for a minute, not wanting to believe what he had just heard. *Do they think I stole it? Oh god! What if the police are already on their way?* Jeremy jumped up to run to his bedroom to pack and nearly fell flat on his face. He stopped to steady himself. The room spun for a few seconds before his head cleared. Then he ran to his bedroom and threw socks and underwear into a duffle bag with a couple pair of khakis and a couple of extra shirts. He grabbed the emergency credit card his mom had given him out of the desk drawer on his way by. He grabbed his phone on his way out the door, barely taking time to lock up. He completely forgot to log out of the game, much less shut down the computer. The only thing on his mind was getting away. Running. He had completely gone into panic mode. When he got to the car he double checked his wallet for the credit card his mom had given him 'for emergencies only.' "This is most definitely an emergency," he said to himself as he got in the car and started it up. Jeremy quickly drove towards the Interstate. He checked his fuel gauge, and it was good. He had enough to make it to Chattanooga at least. He wanted to get as far as he could before he had to stop. It was a long drive down to Tallahassee. Mamma always liked a surprise visit, so he thought he would just pop down for a while. *Maybe the finger thing will go away by then*, he hoped in vain. He checked his dash clock as he merged into traffic on I-40 towards the I-75 split.

7:29am, August 31, 2016

As soon as Dr. Hines hung up the phone, Pam picked it up and dialed the number for the Head of Security in the Paul Sinclair Reeves portion of the Y-12 Complex. Craig Irons picked up the other end on the second ring.

"Irons," he said.

"This is Jennings, sir," she informed him. "We have a possible Code Blue." By that simple statement she communicated the nature and seriousness of the emergency. A Code Blue indicated stolen materials by an employee.

"Initiate lockdown," Irons ordered. "I'll be there in two minutes."

"Yes sir," she said briskly and heard the line go dead from the other end. "He's on his way," Pam told Dr. Hines.

"Good, what's next?" he asked.

"He ordered us on lockdown," she told him as she pressed the red button under the counter. A crash gate came down covering the front door with a slam that made them both jump. At the same time a signal was sent to the main security office for the Y-12 Complex. Within minutes the entire Complex would be completely sealed. Security personnel scrambled to get their weapons to secure the perimeter.

"Of course," Dr. Hines replied.

As promised, Mr. Irons arrived with little delay. He asked, "What do we have?" by way of greeting when he got there. It was not just his impressive career in law enforcement that helped him land the job with P.S.R. He was all business. He always got right down to it and got the job done. His degree in Criminology and Justice from Kent State launched his twenty-year career in law enforcement. He spent two years with the Panama City Police Department, five years as a Sergeant with a Tennessee Sheriff's Office, and thirteen years with the Metro Nashville Police Department. He held certificates in Firearms Instruction, Officer Survival Tactics, and in SWAT/CRT. Craig Irons took his responsibilities very seriously. It didn't hurt that he was an imposing figure, standing six feet four inches and weighing in at two hundred and sixty-five pounds.

"Jeremy Collins, one of our Lab Techs, left early." Dr. Hines told him. "When I looked into his work assignments to reassign them I found a sample missing."

"What was his reason for leaving?" Mr. Irons asked Pam.

"He told me he had a doctor's appointment," she answered.

"Did he state a reason for this doctor's appointment?" He asked.

"No," she answered.

"Did he seem agitated or nervous? What was his demeanor as he left?"

"No," she replied. "He didn't seem all that nervous. He was just creepy, but that's normal for him."

"In what way," Mr. Irons pressed.

"He's just weird," Pam answered. "He just stares at me too much, makes me feel uncomfortable."

"Why have you not reported this to HR?" Irons asked.

"Well," Pam thought about it. "I mean, he keeps his hands to himself, and he has never said anything inappropriate. He just strikes me as a perv."

"We will deal with that later," Mr. Irons told her. "Carry on," he said to Dr. Hines.

"He logged out twelve samples of R-83 at 5:45am, and logged them back in only fifteen minutes later. Now one of the samples is missing, and Mr. Collins is not answering his phone. He has not replied to the message I left him either."

"I wish you had not tried to contact him. But, that aside, is anything else missing?" Mr. Irons asked.

“Not to my knowledge,” Dr. Hines answered.

“Okay, hold that thought.” Mr. Irons picked up the phone and dialed the Head of Security over the entire Y-12 Complex. “Stilman,” he said into the phone. “We have a Code Blue. Recommend full lock down.” He listened for a few seconds and then nodded. “Copy that,” he said and hung up.

“Dr. Hines, if you’ll come with me, we need to review the security video and determine what Mr. Collins was doing before he left.”

“Okay,” Dr. Hines agreed.

Mr. Irons sat down in the chair by the control board for the video surveillance system and motioned for Dr. Hines to take the other seat. The wall was covered with monitors showing various areas within the P.S.R. laboratories. “When did you say Dr. Collins logged out the samples?” Mr. Irons asked him.

“Oh, um, 5:45,” he replied.

“Okay, I’ll pull up the storage room at that time and we’ll follow his movements forward from that point and see what he did.”

“Okay,” Dr. Hines agreed.

Soon, the central video monitor showed the cold storage room, and Jeremy standing at the log book. “Here he is logging out your samples,” Mr. Irons said.

They watched as Jeremy picked up the tray of samples and exited the room. Irons switched to the hall camera and they watched Jeremy reach the end of the hall and turn the corner. Mr. Irons switched to the second hall’s camera.

“Why is he on the ground?” Dr. Hines asked.

“Hold on,” Mr. Irons said. He backed up the video to a few seconds before Jeremy came around the corner. They watched Jeremy turn the corner, slip and fall. The tray of samples flew out of his hands and crashed to the floor. “That’s why,” he said.

“That explains the cracked tray,” Dr. Hines commented. “And there,” he said pointing at some broken glass on the floor. “There’s our missing sample. He didn’t steal it. He broke it.”

“So why did he run?” Mr. Irons asked. The video played on and they watched Jeremy get the broom and dustpan to cover up his mistake. They watched in amazement as he got paper towels to finish it up.

“Wait, back it up,” Dr. Hines told him.

“What did you see?”

“Watch how he jerks his hand back. See that? He cut his finger on a piece of the glass. He’s infected.”

“How bad is that?” Mr. Irons asked.

“Not good for Mr. Collins, but it shouldn’t be dangerous to anyone else. See the white rings on the vials? That compound has to be introduced directly into the blood stream. The problem is, we don’t really know what it will do once it’s in a human. We’re not at that stage yet.”

“How bad?” Mr. Irons asked again.

“Right, well, simply put, that is a synthetic virus designed to attack cancerous brain cells. The idea is that this virus, being small enough to penetrate the blood brain barrier, will be able to enter the cancerous cells within the brain and kill them. The virus is supposed to break down the cancerous cells into glucose, a substance the brain can use as fuel. I don’t know what it will do to Mr. Collins’ brain. It could do nothing, since it is unlikely he has brain cancer. It could attack healthy brain cells, in which case Mr. Collins is in a great deal of danger. The only good news is that, since it has to be introduced directly into the blood stream, only Mr. Collins is in any real danger, and we may be able to help him if we find him soon enough.”

“Okay,” Mr. Irons said. “I’ll get the police looking for him.”

“I’ll get the hazmat crew started on that hallway and trash can right away,” Dr. Hines said. “We don’t want to take any chances. The least Mr. Collins could have done is dispose of the glass in one of the biohazard disposal bins. What he did endangered the other staff members.”

“Okay,” Mr. Irons said. “Unless you have any objections, I do not believe the lockdown is still necessary.”

“No objections.”

“Then I’ll call in and cancel it,” Mr. Irons said.

“Okay, call me if you need anything else,” Dr. Hines said as he stood up to leave. He checked his watch on his way out. Mr. Collins had been gone for nearly two hours.

7:30am, August 31, 2016

Old Willie Walker looked up from doing his rounds when the lockdown alarm started. He just shrugged and went back to his work. Quittin’ time was only thirty minutes away, but with a lockdown in place, there was no tellin’ when they would let him go home. Willie had been doing custodial work for over forty years. The last twenty of them were with the Paul Sinclair Reeves Research Laboratories. It wasn’t a bad job. They just had a lot of funny rules about

stuff. But that was okay by Willie. He was just an old black man doing his job. At sixty-nine years old he had no use for overly restrictive policies. He figured they had their reasons, so let them run around with their procedures and protocols, and all of that other foolishness.

Old Willie knew that he didn't need no procedures or protocols to empty a trash can or mop a floor. He admired the shine on the floor. He took pride in a job well done. He kept the floors so shiny they looked like they were covered in glass.

Willie pulled the top off of a garbage can to empty it. It was full to overflowing, so he pressed down on the trash to compact it and make the bag easier to tie shut. He jerked his hand back in surprise. He stared in disbelief at the piece of glass stuck in his palm. He was bleeding, but not too badly. It was just a little bead of blood.

What kind of fool would throw out broken glass and not cover it up? Willie thought. He plucked the glass out of his palm and dropped it back into the can. He wiped the blood off on his pants and looked at his palm. It wasn't bleeding anymore, so he went on with his work. Then he tied the top of the bag shut and pulled it out. He replaced the liner with a new one and dropped the full bag of trash in his cart. Willie continued on his rounds, muttering under his breath and wishing he could get his hands on the idiot who had put the glass in the trash can.

"That's a' right," Willie muttered. He had a shack out in the woods by his fishin' hole. Today would make a great day to just sit by the water and fish with a bottle of sippin' whiskey. Willie looked at his watch. He had about enough time to take the trash out to the dumpster and put the cart up before he would have to clock out.

8:00am, August 31, 2016

Mr. Irons strode purposefully to the front desk. Pam waited to hear if the news was good or bad.

"We got lucky on this one," Mr. Irons told her. "Mr. Collins did not steal a sample like we had feared."

Pam breathed a sigh of relief. "Good," she said. "I'm glad to hear it."

"He did cut himself on a piece of the glass container it was in, and likely infected himself with God only knows what, so we're not off scot free," Mr. Irons amended. "But there is no point in continuing this lockdown. Stilman concurred. He called it off, so go ahead and clear the code and raise the gate."

"Yes, sir. Does that mean Mr. Walker can go home?" she asked, gesturing towards Willie sitting on a bench nearby.

"Yeah, go home Willie," Mr. Irons told him. "We'll see you tonight."

"Thank you, sir," Willie said. He tipped his hat to Pam and said, "Mornin' ma'am. I'll see you later."

"Bye Willie," Pam called after him.

"As soon as your relief is cleared and gets here, you can go too, Ms. Jennings," Mr. Irons told her.

"Yes sir," she said. She watched him leave to go tend to some other pressing business, and she sighed with relief. She checked her watch and saw that it was only a few minutes past quitting time anyway.

8:30am, August 31, 2016

"Excuse me, sir," the man in the yellow hazmat suit said as he stuck his head into Dr. Hines' office. His voice was muffled due to the suit's helmet.

"Yes?" Dr. Hines replied, looking up from his paperwork.

"The hall floor is nearly done being scrubbed, but we cannot find the broken vial," he informed the director.

"I did point out which trash can, didn't I?" Dr. Hines asked.

"Yes sir, but apparently it got emptied before we got to it. All we found was a Starbucks cup and a couple of napkins."

"You're sure you got the right one?"

"We pulled the contents of the one you specified," he said defensively. "If it's not the right one, it's because we were told wrong."

"I didn't mean it like that," Dr. Hines apologized. "Of course you had the right one. I'll call Mr. Irons and have him check the security camera, but it's a safe assumption now that you'll have to search the dumpsters out back."

"That's just great," he said as he left the office, clearly not happy with the turn of events.

Dr. Hines picked up his phone and dialed the number for Mr. Irons. *This morning has been a rough week*, he thought as he listened to the ring pulses. Dr. Hines looked at his watch. Mr. Collins had been gone two and a half hours.

9:30am, August 31, 2016

Jeremy's finger was throbbing something awful as he drove into Chattanooga. He could feel his heartbeat in the pulses of pain. His finger was also starting to swell pretty badly, and it had started oozing some kind of clear fluid. Not

to mention that it was starting to smell bad. Jeremy wiped the sweat off his brow with his other hand. He was burning up despite of the A/C running full tilt.

Time for a pit stop, he thought. He looked up and saw a CVS Pharmacy sign off to the side of the Interstate. He took the exit and pulled into the store's parking lot. He maneuvered the car into a spot near the door and got out. He locked his door left handed to avoid hurting his right index finger and went inside.

Jeremy looked around apprehensively, not sure where to start. All of the aisles looked the same to him, and he couldn't seem to decide where to start. He was having problems clearing his head. It was like a fog had descended, not over his vision, but over his mind. Simple decisions were more difficult than before. He must have looked as lost as he felt, because while he stood staring at the aisles, a kindly looking older woman approached him.

"Can I help you find something, young man?" she asked politely. She was a short but well-built woman, a little on the overweight side. She had a pleasant smile, graying hair, and reminded Jeremy of his mother. Jeremy took a breath and felt better already. She would know what he needed. He looked at the name tag on the CVS shirt she wore.

"Yes, Betsy," he replied. "My finger is killin' me, and I need aspirin or Tylenol, or something."

"Let me see," she instructed him. He let her see his finger and was relieved to see the concern in her eyes. "You'll need a lot more than aspirin, young man. That's getting infected. How did it happen?"

Jeremy thought fast, not having prepared a story ahead of time. "Oh, umm, I shut it in the car door," he blurted out. He looked for disbelief in her eyes and didn't see any.

"Well, you may have broken it," she told him. "It's awfully swollen, how long has it been?"

"Oh, um," Jeremy stammered. "Yesterday. It happened yesterday."

"The swelling may be making it look worse than it is, but you really should go see a doctor about this. You broke the skin at the tip. If you clean it up and keep it covered, it should be okay until you see a doctor." She looked at him expectantly. When he just shuffled back and forth from foot to foot, and no reply seemed forthcoming, she said, "Oh, come on. I'll help you find what you need."

"Thank you," Jeremy replied, relieved to have the assistance.

"You'll need some peroxide," Betsy muttered as she led him down the aisles, making her selections from the shelves, "and some finger bandages." She led him down another aisle and asked, "Is Ibuprofen okay?"

"Yeah, sure," Jeremy replied. "I guess so."

"Ibuprofen helps to reduce swelling, as well as being a pain killer. It should help. You're not allergic are you?"

"No, that's fine," Jeremy said.

"Then let's get you rung up," she said as she led him to the registers. Betsy walked around the corner and keyed in her code to unlock it. "Can I get you anything else?" she asked him.

Jeremy got two twenty ounce bottles of Mountain Dew out of the little cooler by the register and said, "Just these, thanks."

Betsy busied herself with ringing up his items. "Now, make sure you keep it clean, and you really should see a doctor about getting some antibiotics," she told him again.

"Yes ma'am," Jeremy replied. He picked up the small bottle of hydrogen peroxide and looked at it dubiously. "How do those finger things work?" he asked pointing to the bandages.

"They're just small Band-Aids," she replied. "You have used Band-Aids before, haven't you?"

"No, not really, and my mom didn't have any that looked like that."

"Tell ya what," Betsy said "as soon as I finish ringing you out, I'll help you bandage it up. How's that?"

"That would be great," Jeremy replied, very relieved. His head was still foggy.

"Okay. Now, how will you be paying for this today?" she asked him.

Jeremy pulled out his wallet left-handed, and carefully took out his mom's emergency credit card. "Here you go," he said as he swiped the card through the machine. While Betsy finished the sale, Jeremy popped the top off the bottle of Ibuprofen and washed a couple of them down with some Mountain Dew.

"Sign please," Betsy instructed him, indicating towards the credit card reader. Jeremy, careful to not bump his index finger, clumsily signed the screen. His signature looked worse than usual, even considering the use of the stylus on the touch screen. "Thank you," she told him. "Now let's get that patched up."

Jeremy put the credit card back in his wallet and clumsily deposited it back in his pocket. Then he let her take his hand to work on it.

"This may sting," Betsy warned him as she dabbed at the wound with a cotton ball soaked in peroxide. Jeremy winced, but let her work. Betsy carefully cleaned his finger tip and then opened the box of finger bandages. She set one aside and then opened a tube of antibiotic ointment. "This may help slow the infection some," she told him as she applied it to his finger. "But you still need to go see a doctor."

"Yes ma'am," he said.

“And this will keep the dirt from getting into it while it heals,” she added as she placed the bandage on his fingertip and folded the wings around to hold it in place.

“Thank you again,” Jeremy said, and he took another drink of his Mountain Dew. Drinking the cold liquid felt good, and the caffeine was helping lift the fog a little.

“That is quite alright, young man,” Betsy said with a grin. “You just take care of that finger. I’m sure it will be alright in a few days if you go see a doctor.”

“Yes ma’am,” Jeremy said again.

Betsy tossed the trash in a can under the register and put the rest of his order in a plastic bag. “Here you go, hon, have a wonderful day, and be sure to come back.”

“Yes ma’am,” Jeremy said, not wanting to tell her that it wasn’t likely he would ever stop there again. “You have a good day too,” he told her as he headed for the door.

Betsy watched him leave. *What a nice young man*, she thought. Jeremy reminded her of her own son, Richard. She felt really good about helping him. She hoped that someone would help Richard if he needed it and she was not there.

Betsy noticed her thumb was itching. She looked at the blister on the pad above the joint. “Now, when did that break open?” she wondered. *That’s what my flower garden gets me*, she thought.

Little did she know, by the time her shift ended, her thumb would look just like Jeremy’s finger.

Jeremy climbed back into his car and started it up. He dropped the bag into the passenger seat, and the opened Dew into the cup holder. He eyed the bottle of Ibuprofen and thought, *What the hell*. He popped the top off and swallowed two more. His finger still hurt like hell. At least his head was a little clearer, likely due to the caffeine, but welcome in any case. He pulled out of the CVS parking lot and headed back for the I-75 South onramp. He glanced at the dash clock as he merged into traffic. *Not too bad*, he thought. *Still making good time*.

10:00am, August 31, 2016

Dr. Hines looked up as Mr. Irons strode purposefully into his office. “What have you got?” the doctor asked him.

“They found the broken vial in the dumpster, or the remnants of it anyway,” Irons reported. “The security video shows that the third shift custodian, Mr. Walker, emptied that receptacle moments after the lockdown was initiated.”

“Okay, that explains that part,” Dr. Hines said.

“Yes, but it gets worse,” Irons told him.

“How is that?” Hines asked.

“It’s possible that Mr. Walker is also infected.”

“How do you know?”

“When emptying the receptacle, he pressed down on the contents of the can with his bare hand and reacted as if in pain. He picked something out of his hand, dropped it in the receptacle, and wiped his hand on his jeans. It could have been a piece of glass from the sample container.”

“That, we do not need. Where is Mr. Walker now?” Dr. Hines asked him.

“He went home when the lockdown lifted. I dismissed him myself. We have not been able to contact him. He doesn’t answer his phone. I’ve sent people to his house to get him, but they have not reported back yet.”

“So, we now have two infected employees at large. Please keep me posted.”

“Will do. Now, about Mr. Collins. The police his photograph and a description of his car and license plate number. They entered his apartment, and he is not there. They report that it looks like he left in a hurry, but as yet they are not certain where he would go.”

“His personnel file should list an emergency contact,” Dr. Hines offered. “Check that. It might help.”

“I already have. It’s his mother in Tallahassee. The police are watching his credit cards for activity to give them an idea of which way he is going, but we don’t think that will help.”

“Why not?” Dr. Hines asked.

“They’re all at their maximum limit,” Mr. Irons told him.

“I see,” said Dr. Hines. “All of his cards are maxed out?”

“The ones we know of are. I suspect he is running on cash, which is why there is no electronic trail,” Mr. Irons stated.

“That would make sense,” Dr. Hines agreed. “I still think he is headed for Florida.”

“You may be right. Just in case, the police are setting up a rolling road block at the Tennessee and Georgia border on I-75.”

Dr. Hines looked at his watch. “Mr. Collins has been gone just over four hours now. You can drive a long way in four hours.”

“We know. I’ll keep you posted,” Mr. Irons told him.

“Thank you,” Dr. Hines said to his retreating back.

11:45am, August 31, 2016

Austin Stanley snuck around the side of the school. He paused at the corner to see if any teachers were in sight. He was twelve years old, and had just started the 7th grade at Marietta Middle School. He liked middle school so far, but the day was just too good to spend in school. Besides, he had five dollars burning a hole in his pocket. There was a snickers bar and a Dr. Pepper at the corner store waiting for him, and he never passed up a chance to talk to Wendy, the cute clerk he liked.

He scanned the parking lot to see if the coast was clear. It was, so he quickly ran to the bicycle racks. As soon as he got there he went to work on his combination lock. Checking to see that the coast was clear every few seconds Austin quickly turned the dials to the right numbers. With it unlocked, he wrapped the vinyl covered chain around the seat post and clicked the lock shut. Trying not to make a lot of noise, Austin untangled his bike from the others. He looked up just in time to see a teacher step out the doors of the office wing and head towards the classrooms across Polk Street. Austin hit the ground and watched as she went by. He lay flat on his stomach. Without even being aware of it, he held his breath. She wasn’t one of his teachers, and he didn’t know her name, but that wouldn’t stop her from throwing him in detention. Austin worried that she might hear his pounding heart. It felt like it would jump right out of his chest at any moment. She walked briskly by, clearly intent on her destination and unaware of the truant in her midst.

As soon as the teacher was out of sight around a corner Austin popped up and checked to see that it was once again clear. It was, and not wanting to wait around and get caught, he pushed the bike out of the bicycle area, jumped on at a run and shot through the parking lot towards the Maple Avenue. Just as he rode behind the gym on Walnut Street he heard a man yell out, “Hey kid! Get back here!”

Austin looked back over his shoulder and saw the Vice-Principal jogging across the parking lot after him. He was gesturing for Austin to turn around. With his adrenaline pumping, Austin put on another burst of speed and shot off down the road away from the school. He hoped that the Vice-Principal had not recognized him. But with the sun on his face and the wind in his hair, it was hard to care. Just a few minutes later, Austin was riding up Holland Street towards the Exxon on Bells Ferry Road.

12:00pm, August 31, 2016

Jeremy rarely, if ever, got sick, but he sure was sick now. He felt worse than he ever had. He knew he had a fever, and his head was throbbing. He had muscle aches throughout his entire body. It felt like a really bad case of the flu. What did not feel like the flu was his finger. It was absolutely howling in pain. He had swallowed half the bottle of Ibuprofen already, and it was clearly not working. *Maybe I got a bad batch*, he thought with disgust. *Wouldn’t that just be my luck?*

He rested his head on the side of the gas pump, and the cold metal felt amazing on his temple. All too soon the pump clicked off. Even the click felt like a jab into his brain. He hung the nozzle back in its cradle. He forgot to grab the receipt from the pump and collapsed into the car. “Where the hell am I?” he muttered. He looked around and saw the Exxon sign. As his head cleared a little he remembered pulling off for gas in Marietta, just outside of Atlanta. Jeremy closed his eyes and willed the fog in his brain to lift so that he could get moving again. For a moment he thought he might pass out, but he fought his way back to consciousness.

He opened his eyes and started the car. He waited for his vision to clear up a little and he put the car in gear. He pulled away from the pump and went towards the exit on Bells Ferry Road. Jeremy looked left and saw there was no traffic, so he hit the gas. He heard a loud thump at the front of the car and looked towards the sound. As he slammed on the brakes he saw something sliding off the hood into the road. He watched as the thing slid off the hood of his car and realized it looked like a body. But something wasn’t right. It was far too small.

Jeremy brought the car to a screeching stop. He threw the transmission into park and got out to see what he had hit. As he got out of the car the bandage on his finger got snagged on the door handle and got stripped off. The pain was huge. Jeremy paused to let the pain subside and let another wave of dizziness pass. When he finally rounded the front of the car, Jeremy stared in horror at the broken body of a young boy lying in the road. Off on the sidewalk was the mangled remains of the kid’s bicycle.

I’ve killed a kid, Jeremy thought. He staggered over to the kid and dropped to his knees. The boy’s legs were not straight like they should have been, and then Jeremy saw the six inches of femur sticking out through a rip in the boy’s jeans. There were scrapes and cuts all over the boy’s face and arms, and blood trickling out of the corner of his mouth. Jeremy barely turned to the side fast enough to avoid vomiting on the poor kid.

Jeremy stood up and looked frantically around to see if anybody was coming. For the moment, there wasn’t a soul paying him any attention, but Jeremy knew it wouldn’t stay that way for very long. “Sorry kid,” he said as he bent over

and grabbed the boy's arms. He started pulling the kid off the road to the sidewalk. The kid came alive and screamed in pain as the shattered bones in his legs ground together. *Good he's not dead*, Jeremy thought.

"What's your name kid?" Jeremy asked as he got the kid over to the sidewalk. The kid didn't answer, so Jeremy asked again as he looked both ways up and down the road to see if anybody was looking. The kid still didn't answer.

Jeremy shook the kid's arm to rouse him and felt that bone shift. *Hell, I broke all of his bones*, Jeremy thought. The kid opened his eyes though, and he seemed to focus on Jeremy through the pain.

"What's your name kid?" Jeremy tried again.

The boy tried to answer, but couldn't. He turned his head and spit out a mouthful of blood.

"Come on," Jeremy encouraged him.

"Austin," the kid finally managed to whisper.

"Hey Austin, I'm gonna go get my cell phone to call for help, okay?" Jeremy told him.

"Please don't leave me," Austin pleaded. He tried to hold onto Jeremy's arm, but he didn't have the strength. He couldn't get his hand to work.

"I'll be right back," Jeremy told him. He brushed Austin's hand off his arm, smearing the discharge from his finger on the kid.

Jeremy got up and went back around to the driver's side of his car. He looked up and down the road again didn't see anybody looking. "Sorry kid," he muttered as he got in, threw the car into gear and tore off up the road towards the interstate. If the kid was lucky, somebody would find him and call for help. Jeremy had more pressing problems and couldn't wait around. He turned south on I-75, and a few minutes later he was on the I-285 bypass around Atlanta.

12:14pm, August 31, 2016

Stephen Johnston was pulling out of the Burger King parking lot across the street as Jeremy sped away from the scene. Stephen watched as the white BMW turned onto Cobb Parkway way too fast, tires squealing. *What's the hurry?* he thought. As Stephen turned onto Bells Ferry Road he noticed the prone form of Austin by the exit from the Exxon station. He slowed down to see what was laying on the other side of the road and pulled to a stop. He made a U-turn, got out and rushed over to the boy on the sidewalk by the road, left there like a nothing more than a piece of roadkill.

"Please don't be dead," he whispered as he dropped to his knees beside the kid. "Hey buddy, I'm gonna get you some help," he told the kid, not knowing if the kid could hear him. He pressed his two fingers against the side of Austin's neck and felt a faint pulse. He pulled out his cell phone and said, "Hold on kid," as he dialed 9-1-1. As the phone started to ring he looked up and saw a police car pulling to a stop behind his car.

"Oh, thank you God!" he exclaimed as the lights on the cruiser came on and the officer got out. "Call for an ambulance!" he yelled to the officer. "This kid needs help quick!"

"What happened?" the officer asked as he approached. "I don't know, but we can figure that out later," Stephen told him. "This kid needs help." Stephen moved so that the officer could see the kid better.

The police officer caught sight of Austin and said, "Yeah, we'll come back to that." He keyed the radio on his shoulder mike and asked the dispatcher to send an ambulance immediately.

"Hey, buddy," the officer told the kid "Wellstar is right around the corner. We'll get you there as quick as we can."

1:30pm, August 31, 2016

"Do you have a minute?" Dr. Hines asked as he stuck his head in Mr. Irons' office.

"Yes sir," Mr. Irons replied.

"I have a question, and then maybe an idea," the doctor told him.

"Okay, shoot."

"Have you looked at Mr. Collins' mother's credit card activity?" Dr. Hines asked him.

"No, why do you ask?"

"I was thinking, if Mr. Collins' credit card was maxed out, I doubt if he had cash to finance running away."

"Good point."

But if his mother gave him a credit card in her name," the doctor reasoned, "that would explain why there has been no electronic trail."

"It's worth a shot," Mr. Irons agreed. "It's a good idea, and well worth trying."

“Good. I just hope it works,” Dr. Hines said.

“Yes. It’s obvious now that the roadblocks haven’t helped, and nobody has reported seeing him, or the car yet. “I’ll try anything if it might help find him,” Mr. Hines admitted.

“Good,” the doctor said. “Keep me posted.”

“I will,” Mr. Irons replied.

2:00pm, August 31, 2016

By the time that Jeremy had driven out the south side of Atlanta, his head had cleared a little. The incident with the kid became a vague memory, and Jeremy couldn’t quite even remember the kid’s name.

But two hours had passed and Jeremy was coming up on Macon, Georgia. He had to take a leak really bad. It was a real bladder buster. He signaled his lane change and took exit 172 that promised to have a Citgo station. He was careful to drive slow. He didn’t want to draw attention to himself. The incident with the kid in Atlanta had scared the hell out of him.

Jeremy turned into the gas station and parked near one of the pumps. He shut off the engine and unfastened his seat belt. He didn’t even notice that he had used his injured finger to press the button, or that doing so had broken it open. It started oozing clear fluid and blood all over again. He could no longer feel that finger at all, and his hand and arm up to his elbow were numb and tingling. The Ibuprofen bottle was empty, and Jeremy attributed it to that. He just counted it a blessing that it didn’t hurt anymore. Even his headache had subsided somewhat.

Climbing out of the car, Jeremy had to visually check that his feet were under him. They had apparently gone to sleep while he was driving. *Hell, I’ve been in the car for seven hours*, he thought. Moving slowly, Jeremy walked into the Market Express and to the bathroom in the back. He nodded to the clerk on his way by, a pimple faced, teenage redneck.

“You look like hell,” the redneck said as he walked by.

Jeremy ignored him. His bladder hurt too bad to get offended, or to talk to some pizza faced kid.

As Jeremy stood in front of the urinal, he looked at his finger. It had swelled up to the size of a toilet paper tube. It had turned a nasty shade of blackish purple, and it smelled horrible, kind of like rotting meat. *Probably, have to be amputated*, Jeremy thought. Oddly enough, the thought didn’t really bother him that much. In fact, not much of anything did. Everything was fuzzy and distant. He finished up, shook off and refastened his pants. He nodded to the clerk again on his way back out.

“Come back,” the redneck said to his back.

Jeremy just gave a half-hearted wave in reply without even breaking stride. He staggered to the pump and swiped his mom’s card. He didn’t really need the gas yet, but he figured he may as well get some while he was stopped. He wouldn’t have to stop for gas again before getting to his mom’s house. As the pump worked, he leaned on his car and rested his chin on his chest. He alternately shook his feet, trying to get them to wake up. He hated that tingly, pins and needles feeling, but it beat the hell out of the pain his finger had been in. As long as that was gone, he would take some pins and needles.

When the pump clicked off he hung the nozzle up and collapsed back into his car. He started the car up and pulled out, pointing it towards I-75.

02:12pm, August 31, 2016

George Peterson, a State Farm Insurance salesman with an office just up the road, pulled into the Citgo station in time to see the young man stumble and stagger as he collapsed into his little white BMW. He pulled up to the same pump that Jeremy had just used and watched in disbelief as the white BMW weaved its way out of the gas station and up the road towards the Interstate. “Damn drunks,” he muttered. George figured it was none of his never-mind if a man wanted to drink himself stupid. “Hell, there’s no law against drinkin’.” But why the hell did they have to get in their cars and risk killing somebody?

George desperately missed his wife of twenty-two years. Nancy was the sweetest and most devoted person he had ever known, and despite the cliché’, she really was his best friend. Just three years ago she was hit and killed by a drunk driver. The pain was still very fresh, and George had to take a moment to collect himself before he got out to fill up his car. With the anger in check, and his eyes wiped dry, he got out and went around to the pump, still looking up the road after the drunk driver.

After activating the pump, George grabbed the handle. He immediately pulled his hand back in disgust. He looked at the slime on his hand and the pump handle. Some of it was hard to identify, but there was definitely blood in it. *Disgusting*, he thought. Now that it was all over his hand anyway, George put the nozzle in his car and got the pump going. Then he went inside.

“Hey John,” he said as he walked in.

“Hey George. Doin’ good?” the kid asked.

“Yeah, alright,” he replied. “You got an old rag or some paper towels to wipe this pump handle off? The last guy left something nasty on it.”

“Yeah, here you go,” he said as he handed George a small stack of paper towels.

“Thanks,” George said. “You’ll want to bleach it off too, ‘cause it looks like there’s blood in it. No tellin’ what that guy had.”

“Guy didn’t look too good,” John said.

“Great,” George said as he walked back out to the pump using a couple of the paper towels to wipe his hand off. He cleaned the majority of the mess off the handle, and when it clicked off he hung it up. He went back into the store and washed his hands in the bathroom. He scrubbed the hell out of the paper cut on his pinky finger, hoping to God it wouldn’t get infected.

“See ya later, John,” he said on his way out.

“Have a good’n,” John replied.

George started up the car and headed back to the office. An hour later his finger was starting to swell up and get painful. *Damn it*, he thought. He called his doctor’s office for an appointment. The receptionist told him it was too close to closing time, but if he came in first thing in the morning, they would work him in. George thanked her, and went home early.

02:45pm, August 31, 2016

“Great idea, sir,” Mr. Irons said as he entered Dr. Hines office.

“So it worked,” Dr. Hines said.

“Yes sir. One credit card in the name of Kathy Collins was used in Chattanooga at 9:42am, in Atlanta at 11:53am, and in Macon, Georgia about forty-five minutes ago,” he informed the doctor.

“So, he is going to Florida,” the doctor observed.

“Yes, sir, and I recommend that we go get him.”

“Shouldn’t we leave that to the police?” Dr. Hines asked.

“We could, but I believe he is not well,” Mr. Irons told him. “I have a feeling that, if you do have something to help with whatever bug it is he’s got, you’re going to have to go to him.”

“We’re not certain how sick the compound will make him or even if it will,” the doctor reasoned.

“Except that the Georgia Highway Patrol are looking for a white BMW involved in a hit and run that happened just minutes after Mr. Collins left the adjacent gas station,” Mr. Irons told him.

“That’s not good,” the doctor observed. “But it doesn’t prove that he is ill, just scared, stupid, and on the run.”

“The hit and run is on a twelve-year-old boy. Mr. Collins is young, and in many ways naïve, but he is far from stupid. I believe that your little cocktail has impaired his judgment. If I am right, that is just a small part of his impairment.”

“Okay. You make a good case. As soon as we know where to go, we’ll go. What’s the transportation going to be?”

“I’ve kept Stilman informed, and he cleared the use of the plane. It’s on standby now,” Mr. Irons informed him.

“Okay,” Dr. Hines said. “We’ll leave as soon as we have a confirmed location on Mr. Collins. I’ll go home and get an overnight bag and meet you back here.”

“I’ll do the same,” Mr. Irons said as he walked out.

03:45pm, August 31, 2016

Dr. Plimpton stripped the bloody gloves off his hands and dropped them in the biohazard waste can. Then he walked through the double doors separating the Wellstar Kennestone surgical suite from the adjacent waiting room. A couple sat side by side, holding hands and waiting anxiously.

“Mr. and Mrs. Stanley,” the doctor said. They looked up expectantly. “Austin is out of surgery, and the nurses are moving him to an observation room now.”

“How is he?” Mr. Stanley asked.

“He's a strong kid,” the doctor reassured them. “His injuries were pretty severe. Both of his legs, his left arm and six ribs were broken. We set both legs and his arm, but he may need additional surgery on that left leg. It's hard to know for certain.”

Mrs. Stanley turned her head and buried her face in her husband's shoulder. He comforted her as best he could, hugging her tight. “How long until we can see him?” Mr. Stanley asked.

“I'll take you there now,” Dr. Plimpton told them. “We have him heavily sedated, so he's not conscious and he won't be in pain.”

“That's good,” Mr. Stanley said.

“But there is something of concern,” the doctor added.

“What's that?” the father asked.

“Has Austin been exposed to anything recently that you are aware of?”

“No. What are you talking about?” Mr. Stanley asked, clearly concerned.

“I don't know how to explain it,” Dr. Plimpton said. “I've never seen an infection spread so quickly. In the three hours I was operating on your son, the infection formed around the lacerations on his arms.”

“What kind of infection?”

“I don't know. We're testing it now, and we're sending samples across town to the CDC. I was hoping that you might know something about it.”

“No, I'm sorry, but I don't.”

“Okay, well again, he's a strong kid. That's the only way he made it to us alive. He has a really good chance of pulling through this. We'll identify the infection as quickly as possible. In the mean time we have him on antibiotics.”

“That's good,” Mr. Stanley said.

“Come on. I'll take you to him,” the doctor told them.

“Thank you,” Mrs. Stanley said.

03:50pm, August 31, 2016

Jeremy drove into Tallahassee, Florida on highway 319. He could barely keep the car on the road. His vision was blurry, and the bright sunlight hurt his eyes. He couldn't feel his right hand at all anymore. It was like it was completely gone. It lay useless in his lap like a dead fish, and it smelled like one too. He looked down at his feet to see if his right foot was still on the gas pedal. No matter how he shifted around, he could not get the feeling to come back in his legs.

A blaring horn brought Jeremy's attention back to the road. He hauled the car back into his lane. He was realizing that he might not make it to his mom's house. He could feel his mind slipping. He couldn't concentrate on anything no matter how he tried to focus, and he hadn't even crossed over Interstate 10 yet. Jeremy saw a Shell sign ahead, so he slowed down and changed lanes to turn onto Maclay Commerce Drive. There were more blaring horns as the other motorists dodged his erratic driving. An elderly lady flipped him off as she sped by, though Jeremy never saw it.

Jeremy misjudged his speed, and his tires screeched as he made the turn, narrowly missing a truck waiting to turn onto Thomasville Road. He tried to slow the car further before turning into the Circle K lot, but not enough.

Mark Richards was at pump six filling up his rental car. He was on his way to the airport to catch his flight home. He was in Tallahassee for a business conference and looking forward to getting back to his apartment in San Francisco. Tallahassee was just too flat for his liking. The reason that he had such a great view of the bay was because of the hills. It was a beautiful view, even with Alcatraz Island in the middle of it, and despite the prison being turned into a luxury apartment complex.

Mark looked up from the pump and saw the white BMW come screeching onto Maclay. He knew something was wrong immediately, but like George back in Macon, Georgia, he wrongly thought that Jeremy was a drunk driver. The Beemer turned into the store's lot going far too fast. Mark got ready to jump out of the way if it became necessary. He saw what was about to happen too late. He felt powerless to do anything to stop it.

"Look out!" he yelled to the people in front of the store.

A woman scooped up her little girl who was maybe four years old and just barely jumped out of the way in time. A man got clipped in the leg as he almost got out of the way. Luckily for him he was not pinned between the BMW and the ice machine it crashed into. The force of the impact shoved the ice machine through the store's front windows.

Glass flew into the store and peppered the shoppers closest to the front. The Beemer came to rest with its crumpled hood protruding into the store and leaving a puddle of antifreeze. Mark ran over to the car and opened the driver's door. Before leaning in he noted the smell of gasoline. *That's not good*, he thought. It was difficult to pull the door open. It was binding on the crumpled quarter panels. He finally managed to wrench it open and it creaked on its bent hinges. Mark leaned into the car to help its driver and was hit by the stench that nearly bowled him over. He stood up and got a lungful clean air. A young man came running over.

"Can I help?" the young man asked.

"Yeah, help me get him out of the car," Mark said.

"I don't think we're supposed to move him," the young man said.

"What's your name, kid?" Mark asked.

"I'm not a kid," he replied. "Brian Gordon."

"Okay, Brian. Sorry," Mark replied. "I'm Mark. Now, do you smell gas?"

"Yeah."

"If that leak is in the engine compartment, it could get on the hot engine or exhaust manifold and ignite. I don't know about you, but I would rather pull him out now while the car is not on fire," Mark said.

"Okay man. What do you want me to do?" Brian asked.

"The smell is pretty bad in there, so be ready for it."

"Okay."

"Just grab an arm. I'll get the other and we'll set him against the window over there," Mark told him, gesturing towards a part of the store front that was still intact. He took a breath and leaned back in. He shoved the deflated airbag out of the way and pulled on Jeremy. Brian leaned in and got ahold of an arm to help. Working together they hoisted Jeremy out and pulled him over towards the store front.

"Man, you weren't kidding," Brian said. "This guy stinks."

"Yeah, he looks pretty sick," Mark added.

As they carried him, Jeremy started to stir.

Jeremy felt the hands holding his arms. He slowly came to realize that he was being carried, but he couldn't get his body to respond. The pain in his head was bad, but tolerable considering what it had been a few hours ago. He opened his eyes and saw nothing but white light that pierced his head with more pain. He shut his eyes and just barely stopped himself from shaking his head. *Already learned that lesson*, he thought.

Jeremy opened his eyes again and was relieved that the light did not hurt as bad as the first time. The world around him started to come into focus. He saw the shadows of two men on either side of him. He realized that he was no longer in his car and felt them setting him down on hard concrete. He panicked, and his paralysis broke. Jeremy struck out at the closer of the two blurry figures, which happened to be Mr. Mark Richards of San Francisco. His first punch caught Mark in the cheek. His ring left a shallow cut, and his finger left a trail of mucus and blood across Mark's face.

Mark recoiled in horror. He could feel the muck all over his face. Instinctively he wiped it off with his palm, smearing it across his cheek. He looked down in time to see Brian go flying backwards off of the driver.

Brian went sprawling on the pavement, scraping some skin off his palms as he went. Mark jumped back into the fray and quickly pinned Jeremy's arms down. "A little help here would be nice!" he yelled to Brian. "Get his legs."

“Yeah, yeah, I got it,” Brian said as he came back. He sat on Jeremy’s legs to pin them down and tried to help control his arms.

“Man, what’s wrong with this guy?” Brian asked. “He’s burning up, and is that blood?” he asked as he tried to wipe the slime off his hands on Jeremy’s jeans.

“Yeah, I think it is and I haven’t a clue what’s wrong with him,” Mark said. “I thought he was a drunk, but now I’m not so sure.”

“Hope it’s not catching,” Brian added.

“Yeah, that makes two of us,” Mark agreed.

4:15pm, August 31, 2016

Juan Hernandez had been a paramedic for thirty-two years. Amy Miller, his partner, was just twenty-six years old. Juan liked his job. It could be stressful, but it was exciting and new every day. He never knew what would happen from day to day, or even from one call to the next. Even still, after thirty-two years on the job, Juan liked to think that he had seen it all. That was what he kept reminding Amy of at any rate. He considered it part of her on-the-job training, the constant reminders of being the rookie. But she took it well. She was determined to earn her stripes and do her part.

Juan knelt by the young man that the civvies had pulled out of the mangled Beemer. He worked to stabilize the kid while Amy tended to the minor scrapes and cuts of the bystanders. Luckily, all the flying glass had only caused superficial cuts. There were a lot of them, but they were all minor. The man who had nearly been pinned between the Beemer and the ice machine had a sizable bruise on his thigh, but that was nothing to how bad it would have been had he been in a tin can sandwich. If all he got was a bruise on the leg, he was truly lucky indeed. The ice machine took the worst of the damage. It was crushed between the car and the rack of shelves inside the store. The melting ice was coming out through tears in the metal, and there were bags of chips and cases of soft drinks scattered all over the store.

Juan turned his focus back to the young man away from his partner. She could handle the others just fine. The young man under Juan's care was the real trick. Juan had his hands full enough trying to make sense of the kid's symptoms. He checked the guy's vital signs again. His pulse was weak, and he was running a fever of 105 degrees. Juan doubted that the accident had caused these symptoms. He believed it was the other way around. The symptoms, or rather the underlying cause, had caused the accident. The young man was delirious. He was barely responding to verbal stimuli, and his autonomic reflexes were weak or non-existent. The only visible injuries were his swollen and discolored hand, and a huge knot on his forehead that obviously came from running into the windshield. Juan looked at the spider-web of cracks on the windshield and wondered how the kid's head was not caved in. The whole front end of the car was crumpled in from the impact with the ice machine. “Lucky guy,” Juan muttered. “Hope you got good insurance dude.”

Amy came over and knelt beside Juan and asked, “How bad is it?”

“We gotta get him to the docs fast,” Juan told her. “Whatever he’s got ain’t good.”

“Is it that bad?” she asked, looking concerned.

“It is,” Juan told her. “His vitals are weak. There’s no way he should have been able to drive. He’s out of it.”

“Okay, let’s get him loaded up then,” Amy said.

They hefted Jeremy’s stretcher up and wheeled him to the rear doors of the ambulance. As they were pushing it in and locking it down, Officer Brown, one of the responding police officers, came walking over.

“We need to keep tabs on this guy,” Brown told them. “I ran his plates and someone up in Tennessee wants him.”

“This guy ain’t goin’ nowhere,” Juan replied. “I doubt he’ll go anywhere on his own power for a while, especially not strapped down like he is.” They had restrained Jeremy due to what Mark and Brian told them about becoming violent.

“Even still, I gotta follow you. I’ll be ready in about ten minutes,” Brown told him.

“This guy ain’t got ten minutes to wait,” Juan told him.

“Okay, I’ll get my partner to cover it. I’ll be right back.”

“Alright,” Juan replied as he stepped up into the ambulance. “But we’re leaving now.” Juan pulled the door shut and told the driver to take off. They pulled out and left Brown scrambling.

Brown yelled over to Officer Murphy who was helping process the scene, “Hey, they took off on me. I gotta run and catch them. You got it?”

“Yeah, go ahead,” Murphy hollered back.

“Thanks,” Brown yelled as he got into his patrol car. He shot off after the ambulance. He flipped on the lights and siren to catch up and then fell in behind them.

“You sure we shoulda left like that?” Amy asked.

“Don’t worry about it,” Juan answered her. “He may talk big when we get to the hospital, but he and I both know he can’t really do anything to us. Our job is to get the patient to the docs alive, not worry about warrants. That’s his job. Besides, is he behind us?”

Amy looked out the back window of the ambulance and saw a patrol car following close behind with its lights on. “Yes,” she said.

“Guess he coulda left sooner after all,” Juan observed.

4:35pm, August 31, 2016

The ambulance driver pulled up the ambulance ramp to the emergency room doors of the Tallahassee Memorial Hospital. Juan threw the back door open and Amy helped pull the stretcher out and wheel it inside. Officer Brown wasn’t far behind them. Juan chose to ignore him and his sour expression.

The emergency room was large and well lit. Hospital personnel were going about their business. They were obviously busy. Keith Bell, the head nurse on duty, approached and asked, “What have we got?”

Juan quickly briefed him on their patient’s status. “Subject is twenty-three-year-old male, fever one-zero-five degrees, acute infection right hand, and blunt force trauma to the forehead. Weak autonomic reflexes in the lower extremities, heart rate 52bpm, unresponsive to verbal stimuli. Two civilians reported he became violent when they attempted to render aid, which explains the restraints, and now he’s all yours. By the way, he’s also wanted, somewhere,” Juan added as he nodded in the direction of Officer Brown, “so good luck.”

“Yeah thanks,” Keith said.

Juan walked briskly back out, still pointedly ignoring Brown. Brown watched him leave, still wanting to tell him off but needing to keep Mr. Collins in sight. He followed Keith, who was wheeling Mr. Collins into an examination room.

Keith flagged down the doctor on the ER floor, Dr. John Sanders, “Hey doc, got a fender bender with bigger problems. You may wanna take a look.” Dr. Sanders nodded and came right over.

“What do we have, Keith?” he asked.

“23-year-old male, fever one-o-five, infection right hand, possible concussion, paralysis of the legs, weak pulse, unresponsive to verbal commands, and the para said he attacked a couple of civvies who tried to help, explaining the restraints,” Keith rattled off.

Looking at Jeremy’s hand, Dr. Sanders said, “No car accident caused that. Check all the numbers again. Get an IV started to get some fluids in him. Let’s also get him started on Amoxicillin in case that’s bacterial. Biopsy the hand and get it to the lab. We’ll see if we can find out which bug he caught. That lump on his head and his being so incoherent bothers me. Run an MRI. Let’s see if there’s any damage upstairs.”

“I’m on it,” Keith replied. Doctor Sanders finished scrawling his orders on the chart and handed it to Keith.

“Any questions?” Dr. Sanders asked.

“No sir,” Keith told him.

“Okay, if you need me I’ll be in the cafeteria getting a sandwich.

“Go eat, we’ll take care of it,” Keith told him.

Keith got the biopsy of Jeremy’s hand himself and delegated the rest of the orders. He wanted to deliver the sample to the lab personally to make sure it got done right away.

6:00pm, August 31, 2016

“Are you sure he got the Amoxicillin?” Dr. Sanders asked.

“Yes, sir,” Keith replied. “I checked with Debbie myself, and she assures me that she put it in his IV. She noted the chart when she did it.”

“Yes, I see that,” Dr. Sanders told him as he looked at the chart. “But it doesn’t appear to be helping. Does his hand and arm look worse to you?”

“Yes sir,” Keith replied.

“Okay, it’s not just me. It looks like the infection is moving up his arm, and it’s only been an hour and a half.”

“Yeah, it’s moving fast,” Keith agreed.

“That’s not even his worst problem,” Dr. Sanders said gravely.

“Really, what is it?”

At first, I thought I was looking at the wrong MRI images, but they’re his,” the doctor said.

“What’s wrong with them?” Keith asked.

“It doesn’t make any sense, and to be honest, I’m not sure how he’s still alive. His frontal, parietal and occipital lobes are shrunken. His temporal lobe doesn’t appear to be shrinking, but it’s all out of proportion. I can’t make any sense of it,” Dr. Sanders admitted. “I wish I had more training in neurology. It’s just not my specialty.”

“So what do we do?” Keith asked.

“First, let’s run an fMRI to see what’s still firing up there, and I’ll get Baxter in Neurology to take a look at the images. Maybe he can shed some light on it.”

“That sounds like a plan,” Keith said.

Jeremy stirred as they stood over him. He rolled his head over and squinted at Dr. Sanders. Just as the doctor thought Jeremy was looking at him, he saw that Jeremy’s eyes were shifting aimlessly back and forth, and his right eye was more dilated than the other.

“Mr. Collins,” Dr. Sanders said. “You’re in Tallahassee Memorial. Try to relax, okay?” Jeremy gave no indication that he had heard the doctor.

“I doubt you’ll get a response,” Keith told him, “not after what you said about his brain scans.

“Maybe,” Dr. Sanders agreed, “but it’s worth trying.” He bent over Jeremy and got right in his line of sight. “Mr. Collins, can you hear me?” he tried again.

Jeremy’s eyes momentarily focused on him before wandering off again. He opened his mouth and moaned. It was a soft and mournful sound.

“What do you think?” Dr. Sanders asked Keith.

“My first guess is pain,” Keith told him.

“I think you’re right,” the doctor agreed. “Let’s add some hydrocodone to his IV. That should help.”

“Yes sir,” Keith agreed. “Anything else?”

“Yes, I’m going to give him another healthy dose of amoxicillin before I go ask the lab what they’ve found. Can you send Debbie in? I want to hear it from her that the last dose was administered.”

“Yes sir,” Keith said on his way out the door.

6:30pm, August 31, 2016

Dr. Plimpton stood at the end of Austin's bed in the ICU of the Wellstar Kennestone Medical Center in Marietta, Georgia, unsure how to begin. He looked at the parents of the boy who were obviously afraid for their son, and angry at all the false hopes. Here he stood, ready to give them more of the same. *It's no wonder I have an ulcer and no hair*, he thought.

“We still have not identified the virus,” he began.

“Stop telling us what you have *not* done,” Mr. Stanley told him. “What do you know?”

“Our lab has exhausted their resources. We're waiting for an answer from the CDC. I'm sorry that I don't have better news for you.”

“Thanks for nothing,” Mr. Stanley said. “My son is dying, and you don't even know why. Almost his whole body is covered with this infection, and nothing you've done has even slowed it down.”

“Part of that is likely due to Austin's severe injuries...”

“You've said that before. If you don't have anything new to tell us, please leave us alone with our son.”

“Yes, sir,” Dr. Plimpton said. “I'll check in later.”

The Stanley's ignored him as he exited the room, but Dr. Plimpton really couldn't blame them. Nothing about their son's condition had followed the expected course of any known injury, condition, infection, virus, or other malady he could find. Consequently, all the treatments seemed to have no effect at all.

7:00pm, August 31, 2016

Kathy Collins set her bowl of soup on the coffee table, muted Jeopardy, and answered the phone. "Hello," she said.

"I am calling for Mrs. Collins please," a stern female voice informed her.

"Call me Kathy," she said, "and how may I help you?"

"I'm calling from Tallahassee Memorial in regards to your son Jeremy. He has been involved in a traffic accident."

"What happened?" Kathy cut in, suddenly frantic for her son. "Is he okay?"

"When can you come in, Mrs. Collins?" the voice asked.

"Call me Kathy," she said again. "Is Jeremy okay?"

"I'm sorry ma'am, but I don't know. The doctors are taking care of him. In the meantime, can you come in?"

"Yes, of course I'll come in," Kathy started but broke off. "Wait, I don't understand. Where did you say you are?"

"Tallahassee Memorial," the voice repeated.

"I don't understand," Kathy said. "Jeremy lives in Tennessee. Why is he in Florida?"

"I don't know that either, Mrs. Collins," the voice told her.

"Kathy, please call me Kathy."

"Okay, Kathy. We are in Tallahassee. You do live in Tallahassee, right?"

"Yes, of course I do. I just don't understand why Jeremy is here. He lives in Tennessee."

"Yes ma'am, you've said that," the voice told her.

"But what is he doing in Florida?" Kathy pleaded.

"I'm sure that I don't know ma'am, but he is here. The sooner you arrive, the sooner you can find your answers," the voice responded.

"Yes, of course," Kathy replied. "I'll leave right away."

"Yes, ma'am," the voice said as Kathy hung up on her.

7:50pm, August 31, 2016

"Okay, explain to me how Mr. Collins has been in a Florida hospital for nearly four hours, and you just now found out," Dr. Hines asked, clearly displeased with the news.

"There were multiple agencies in three states looking for Mr. Collins, two of those states want to question him regarding possible criminal charges," Mr. Irons answered. "Apparently, there was some debate whether to contact Tennessee, or Georgia, as Georgia is seeking Mr. Collins for his hit and run outside Atlanta. They notified both states. My guess is they decided not to get involved and let Tennessee and Georgia fight over who gets dibs."

"I see," the doctor replied. He sat there and stared at his desk for a minute, collecting his thoughts. "We know where he is now, so we should go. Our best hope to learn what this compound does to the brain is in Florida, so we better get there before the custody fight gets started."

"I agree," Mr. Irons said. "Whenever you're ready, the plane is on standby."

"I hate that we lost four hours," Dr. Hines told him. "We could have already been there, couldn't we?"

"Yes sir," Mr. Irons replied. "The plane is a C-12, a twin turbo-prop. It will take about three hours of flight time, plus the commutes on both ends. You should be speaking to Mr. Collins before midnight."

"Okay, let's go," the doctor said.

8:00pm, August 31, 2016

Judy, the hospital receptionist, saw Kathy coming and sighed. Kathy had that frantic look of worry, stress, and too little information that was exacerbated by having to negotiate Tallahassee's heavy evening

traffic. Kathy paused just inside the lobby's glass doors. Then she zeroed in on the reception desk and made a beeline for it.

"Can I help you, ma'am?" Judy asked as Kathy approached the counter.

"Yes, my son is here. Jeremy Collins. That's C-O-L-L-I-N-S," Kathy rattled off, obviously in a hurry to get to her son.

"Yes, ma'am," Judy said as she started keying it into her terminal. "I'll need to see some ID."

"Is that really necessary?" Kathy spat at her. "Where is my son?"

"I'm sorry ma'am, but I cannot tell you where he is unless you're family, and ..."

"I just told you I'm his mother," Kathy cut her off.

"Yes, but anybody can say that," Judy reasoned.

"Just tell me where my son is," Kathy demanded.

"I will be happy to," Judy told her, "as soon as I see some ID."

Kathy glared at Judy, but she started digging in her purse.

"I'll be talking to somebody about this," Kathy grumbled as she pulled out a wallet. She flipped it open and showed Judy her license. "Satisfied?"

"Yes ma'am," Judy told her. "I am sorry..."

"Just tell me where my son is," Kathy interjected.

"Of course," Judy replied, put off by Kathy's rude behavior. "He's in the ICU, room 253."

Kathy was already leaving before Judy had finished her statement. She went to the elevators and began jabbing at the button repeatedly, as if pressing it repeatedly would bring the elevator car faster.

"You're welcome," Judy said to Kathy's back, and if the elevator button were capable of feeling, Judy believed she would understand how it felt.

Kathy barely spared the police officer sitting outside room 253 a glance on her way in. It took a minute for her to take in Jeremy's blanched features. He almost looked peaceful, until she realized it was not peaceful sleep. It was more likely that he was passed out from exhaustion, and on death's door. "Oh baby, what have they done to you?" she whispered. Kathy eyed the machines that were attached to him and started to cry. *Have to be strong now for my baby*, she thought, and dried her eyes. She got herself collected and walked back to the nurse's station.

"Excuse me," Kathy said to the nurse behind the counter.

"Yes ma'am," the nurse replied as she looked up from her paper work.

"My son, he's in 253. Why is there nobody in his room caring for him?"

"I'm sorry ma'am, but he is not our only patient. We are working to diagnose what is wrong with him, but it..."

"You don't even know what's wrong with him?" Kathy blurted out. "He got here at 4:30, right? Why don't you know?"

"These things take time; we are..."

"You've had nearly four hours," Kathy cut her off again. "I was not even contacted until an hour ago."

"Ma'am," the nurse tried again, "we are working on it."

"Apparently not hard enough. What is being done right now?" Kathy asked.

"You'll need to speak to his doctor about that," the nurse told her.

"That sounds like a great idea," Kathy agreed. "Call him."

"I will notify Dr. Sanders that you would like to speak to him as soon as I see him," the nurse offered.

"Have him paged," Kathy demanded.

"I'm sorry ma'am, but we only page doctors for..."

"That was not a request!" Kathy shouted. "You people are obviously not taking my son's health seriously, and I demand to talk to my son's doctor, now!" Kathy stamped her foot on the word 'now' and glared at the nurse.

"Ma'am, please calm down."

"I will not calm down until I speak to his doctor," Kathy shrieked. "That is my son, and I will not let you kill him with your incompetence."

“Ma’am,” the nurse raised her voice, “if you do not stop shouting at me I will call security and have you removed from the hospital. If you want to help your son, don’t fight us. Help us.”

“I want to speak to his doctor,” Kathy repeated, but at a more reasonable volume.

“I understand,” the nurse replied. “I will send him to your son’s room as soon as he comes back. Maybe he can give you some answers.”

“When will that be?” Kathy demanded.

“Ma’am, I don’t know,” the nurse said in exasperation.

Kathy looked up and down the hallway in the offhand chance that the doctor in question would show his face. She swallowed the lump in her throat and turned her attention back to the nurse, the one that she could focus her anger on.

“Why is there a police officer outside my son’s door?” Kathy asked her.

“I don’t know,” the nurse said again. “I suggest that you ask him.”

“Is there anything you do know?” Kathy spat at her.

“I understand that you are frustrated and scared,” the nurse replied. “If you would like to wait in your son’s room, I will make sure Dr. Sanders comes to speak to you as soon as possible.”

“You see that you do,” Kathy said as she stalked off toward Jeremy’s room. She glared at the officer on her way by, as if daring him to say anything at all.

8:20pm, August 31, 2016

Dr. Hines watched out the window as the unmarked, government plane lifted off the runway in Chattanooga. *At least we’re in the air*, he thought. He did some quick mental math. With three hours of flight time they would land in Tallassee around 11:20pm, and a thirty-minute drive would put them at Tallahassee Memorial at roughly 11:50pm, so Irons had been right. It would be about midnight before they got to Mr. Collins.

“It’s been a long day,” Dr. Hines said to Mr. Irons across the aisle of the small plane. “I’m going to see if I can get some sleep.”

“Good idea,” Irons agreed. “I think I’ll try to do the same.”

9:00pm, August 31, 2016

Kathy was sitting in a chair beside Jeremy’s bed, feeling helpless. Three times in the last hour she had gone back out and asked why the doctor had not been in to talk to her, and all three times the nurse had told her to be patient. *That’s the answer for everything*, she thought. *Be patient*. The officer outside the door would not tell her anything at all, which was worse than the little she could get out of the nurses. It seemed nobody wanted to give her any information at all.

Kathy was so wrapped up in her anger and feeling helpless, that she nearly didn’t notice Jeremy stir. She just barely heard him whisper, “Mama.”

Kathy was by his side in an instant. “I’m here, baby,” she said as she stroked his hair back off his forehead. “Mama’s here. I’m taking care of you.”

“Water,” he whispered.

“Okay,” Kathy said. “I’ll be right back.” She took the cup from beside his bed and quickly filled it from the bathroom faucet. She came back and gently lifted his head off the pillow to help him drink, feeling much better herself for having something useful to do. “There you go, hon,” she said softly. Jeremy took a few sips, but seemed to lose focus. Kathy set the cup to the side. “There’s more here if you want some,” Kathy told him.

“Oh good, he’s awake,” a male voice startled Kathy.

Kathy whirled around and looked at the man. From the clothes to the look of arrogant pride that only doctors and lawyers ever truly master, Kathy guessed his profession. “It’s about time you got here,” Kathy snapped at him. “Are you Jeremy’s doctor?”

“Yes, I am. Amanda said that you were rather insistent about speaking to me,” he told her. “I am Dr. Sanders.” He held out his hand to shake hers.

“Now that you’re here,” Kathy said ignoring his hand, “What is wrong with Jeremy?” She was fighting hard not to lose control of herself, now that it mattered most.

“We’re still not certain,” Dr. Sanders began.

“What do you mean you’re not certain? Jeremy has been here over five hours. How do you not know?”

“I’ll tell you what we do know. How’s that?” he asked.

“Okay,” Kathy agreed.

“He arrived with a high fever and an infection in his right hand. He had a knot on his forehead from the car accident. The infection was there before the accident, and likely his fever and disorientation caused it,” the doctor told her.

“If it’s an infection, give him antibiotics,” Kathy said.

“We have,” he replied. “The infection did not respond to Amoxicillin at all. So we tried cephalexin, and then [doxycycline](#), and there has still been no response. The infection is still spreading. We think it’s a virus. The lab is still working on identifying it. We’ll know more later.”

“If it’s a virus, can’t you give him a shot, a vaccine or something?” Kathy asked.

“Well, yes and no. Vaccines are typically administered to prevent a virus from getting started. It’s too late for that. And, vaccines are not the same as antibiotics. A good, broad spectrum antibiotic will work against various kinds of bacteria, but a vaccine will only work for the one virus it was designed to fight. The wrong vaccine would do no good, and might even hurt him more,” Dr. Sanders told her.

“Isn’t there anything you can do for him?” Kathy asked as she sat in the chair by the bed. She felt defeated. She didn’t know what to do.

“Yes, and we have,” Dr. Sanders stated. “We got his fever down with an ice bath. It was up to 108°. We’ve made him more comfortable with hydrocodone. We may have slowed the infection. It spread from his hand to his elbow in a little over an hour. We seem to have stopped it there. However, I do have more bad news.”

“I don’t know if I can take any more of that,” Kathy admitted.

“I understand how you feel.”

“I doubt that,” she said flatly.

“Fair enough,” the doctor accepted. “Due to the head trauma, we were worried about brain damage. We gave him an MRI, and it showed some abnormalities.”

“What kind of abnormalities?” Kathy asked, resigned to hear the worst.

“There is some damage, but we won’t know how bad it is until he fights off the virus and we can talk to him,” Sanders told her.

“How bad do you think it might be?” she asked.

“Well, we also got an fMRI, and it showed limited activity. Right now we can only guess. Expect significant changes to his behavior and personality,” Dr. Sanders warned her.

“Okay,” Kathy said as she stared at her feet.

“I am sorry I don’t have better news he told her. “I’ll stop by the lab and see how they’re coming along. Maybe they’ll have something to tell me.”

“Okay,” Kathy said. She reached over and held Jeremy’s hand, his whole one, and watched as Dr. Sanders left.

11:25pm, August 31, 2016

“Wake up sir,” Mr. Irons said as he shook Dr. Hines’ shoulder. “We’ll be on the ground in a few minutes.”

“Okay,” Dr. Hines said as he wiped the sleep from his eyes. “What time is it?”

“11:25,” Mr. Irons answered. “We’re a little behind schedule, but the pilot said we should touch down at about 11:30.”

“So, about five minutes,” Dr. Hines said.

“Yes sir,” Mr. Irons agreed.

“Okay, I’m up” Dr. Hines said. He looked out the window and watched the lights of Tallahassee get bigger.

12:00am, September 1, 2016

Kathy heard somebody moving around in the room and it woke her up. There was a nurse examining the machines attached to Jeremy. "How is he?" Kathy asked.

"Sleeping, I think," the nurse replied. "Let me get Dr. Sanders," she added and left to go find the doctor.

Kathy got up and stretched. She felt Jeremy's forehead with the back of her hand, and he was still very hot. She took a wet cloth and dabbed his face with it. She rewet it in the bathroom sink to cool it off and laid it across his forehead. She looked up as Dr. Sanders entered the room, followed by the nurse.

"That was fast," Kathy said.

"I was in the nurse's station," the doctor told her as he bent to read the machines. "Let's see what we have."

"What's wrong now?" Kathy asked.

"Well," the doctor began, "his heart rate and oxygen levels are down, irregular breathing. Let's check his pupils." Dr. Sanders shone his pocket light into Jeremy's eyes and saw no change in dilation. "It does look like a coma. Good call, nurse." Turning to Kathy, he continued, "It seems that he is in a coma now. The good news in that is that he is not feeling his pain."

"But what does this mean? He's going to be okay, right?" she asked, the fear showing in her eyes.

"I don't know," Dr. Sanders answered truthfully. "I spoke to the lab tech working on Jeremy's samples. He can only verify that the cause is a virus, but nothing more. I expected it to be a virus since the antibiotics did nothing for it, but I hoped they could at least tell me which virus."

"Please tell me my baby's not going to die," Kathy pleaded. She started crying, no longer able to hold her composure.

"That I don't know either," Sanders told her. "We're doing all we can. I don't know what else to tell you. The lab has sent the samples to the CDC in Atlanta. The best we can hope for is a quick reply from them."

"But a coma. People usually die after going into a coma," Kathy sobbed.

"I am truly sorry, but don't give up yet. A coma does not automatically mean he's going to die," Dr. Sanders tried to reassure her.

"Did I hear you say that Mr. Collins is in a coma?" a new voice said from the door.

Kathy looked up and saw two men in the doorway. One was wearing a white lab coat and carried a small black bag in his hand. For a second Kathy thought she was looking at an old-time doctor with his house call bag.

"Who are you?" she asked as she tried to dry her eyes.

"I am Dr. Hines," the man in the lab coat told her. "I just flew in from Tennessee."

"This is not a good time for Mr. Collins to change doctors," Dr. Sanders told him.

"I'm not that kind of doctor, sir," Dr. Hines told him. "I will not be replacing his current physician."

"So what kind of doctor are you?" Kathy asked, "And why did you come?"

"I hold PhD's in neurobiology and microbiology," he informed them. "I am also Mr. Collins' supervisor. We've been trying to find him all day, although this is not how I had hoped to find him. We have a lot of questions for him, and I was hoping I could have helped him."

"And how might you have done that?" Dr. Sanders asked.

"Have you taken any images of Mr. Collins' brain?" Dr. Hines asked.

"Yes," Dr. Sanders answered.

"Then perhaps we could start by looking at those, and we'll go from there," Hines suggested.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I don't believe you have properly identified yourself, or shown me reason to divulge confidential patient information," Dr. Sanders countered. "If you know what is wrong with Mr. Collins, you need to tell me."

"That information is classified, and who might you be?" Dr. Hines asked.

"I am Dr. Sanders, the physician trying to keep this young man alive. Now, are you going to help, or shall I have you removed?" Dr. Sanders threatened.

"Will you both stop fighting and help my son?" Kathy shrieked.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Collins," Dr. Sanders apologized. "Perhaps we should speak in the hall," he said to Dr. Hines.

"Perhaps," Dr. Hines said, and he and Mr. Irons stepped out the door.

“I’ll be back later,” Dr. Sanders told Kathy.

Kathy nodded, wiped her eyes, and tried to compose herself.

“Perhaps we can start over,” Dr. Hines said as Dr. Sanders joined the two men in the hall.

“No, but maybe we can move forward better than we started” Sanders countered.

“Fair enough. I work for the government,” Dr. Hines told him. “I’m the Director of Research at the Paul Sinclair Reeves Laboratories in Oakridge, Tennessee. My associate here is the Head of Security, Mr. Craig Irons. Mr. Collins is one of our Laboratory Technicians.”

“That is all very fascinating,” Dr. Sanders replied, “but I fail to see how this will help Mr. Collins.”

“In this, you will need to trust me. I am uniquely qualified to help Mr. Collins. I do know exactly what substance he is infected with, and it really is classified. I cannot tell you what it is. I would risk going to prison for sharing just the name with you.”

“Then how do you plan to help, if you can’t even tell me what it is?”

“As I said before, I have extensive experience in neurobiology and microbiology, and I am very familiar with the virus Mr. Collins is infected with. If you provide me with Mr. Collins’ charts and scans, I might be able to help.”

“And as I said before, that is confidential patient information. I cannot divulge that without consent,” Dr. Sanders replied.

“Who can give consent?” Kathy asked from behind Dr. Sanders.

“Only the patient, or his or her immediate family,” he replied.

“Then show him whatever he wants to see,” Kathy told him.

“Ma’am, we don’t even know who he really is,” Dr. Sanders objected.

“No, but you can always look at his ID,” she countered. “Besides, you said you don’t know what Jeremy has, and he says he does. If there is a chance he can help my son, let him try.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Dr. Sanders said. Turning to Dr. Hines he said, “Come with me. I’ll show you what we have.”

“Thank you,” Dr. Hines replied.

Kathy turned around and went back to her son’s side, leaving the two doctors in the hall to their work.

12:47am, September 1, 2016.

“Fascinating,” Dr. Hines said as he looked at the images of Mr. Collins’ brain. “When were these images taken again?”

“About five, nearly six hours ago,” Dr. Sanders told him.

“Remarkable,” Dr. Hines said as he studied the image.

“I’m happy that you’re so fascinated, but aren’t we here to help Mr. Collins?” Dr. Sanders asked, a little put off by Dr. Hines’ glib expression.

“Yes, but look at this. His entire forebrain is severely diminished. It’s nearly gone entirely, replaced with some fluid. We’ll need a sample of that. Then, of his midbrain, only the hypothalamus appears to be intact. Even if it does look altered. Moving on to the hindbrain, the Pons is greatly enlarged, the Medulla is nearly gone completely, and his Cerebellum is half its normal mass. How is he still alive?”

I am not a neurologist, maybe you can slow down a little,” Dr. Sanders said.

“Okay, let’s look at the fMRI. That will shed more light on it for you. Look at the forebrain area. There is extremely limited activity, and that is restricted to the motor cortex, primary visual cortex and the primary audio cortex. I also see a little activity in the area of the occipital lobe commonly thought to be where images are perceived as faces or bodies.”

“Okay,” Dr. Sanders said.

“So, he can move, see, hear, and recognize faces and bodies,”

“Okay, what else?” Dr. Sanders asked.

“Okay, the midbrain. The only activity there is in the hypothalamus, and it is limited to the region commonly thought to control appetite.”

“So he’s hungry,” Dr. Sanders observed.

“You could say that, but I doubt that’s important. Moving on to the hindbrain, the Pons is functioning pretty much normally, the Medulla not at all, and the Cerebellum only partially,”

“What does that mean?” Dr. Sanders inquired.

“The Pons is the bridge between the spine and the brain. That’s why signals are still getting to the body. The Medulla controls vital reflexes, like respiration, heart rate and blood pressure. Those functions are starting to fail. The Cerebellum helps coordinate movement. He has motor control, somewhat, but not well.”

“So you’re saying he won’t be able to get around on his own if he beats this virus,” Dr. Sanders observed.

“No, because his whole forebrain is nearly gone, everything that made Mr. Collins the person he was, his personality, is gone. Without his reasoning functions, motor control is moot,” Dr. Hines informed him. “All of the areas associated with reason, memory or cognitive functions are turned, or turning, to fluid. I would like to know what that fluid is.”

“So how do we help Mr. Collins?” Dr. Sanders asked.

“We don’t. Mr. Collins is gone. There is nothing left of Mr. Collins. But, you can order a new MRI so we can see if there are any new changes since the first one,” Dr. Hines told Sanders.

“The MRI we have is only six hours old, what could have changed?” Dr. Sanders protested.

“Mr. Collins left our facilities in good health at six o’clock yesterday morning. Eighteen hours later he is in a coma. This virus is causing a very rapid change in the structure of his brain, as you can see in these images. I would like to see how much more it has changed in the last eight hours,” Dr. Hines argued.

“Very well, I’ll get it done. I’ll put the order in before I go home. I’ve been here eighteen hours,” Dr. Sanders told him.

“Okay, go get some sleep. I’ll see you when you get back,” Dr. Hines told him.

After Dr. Sanders walked out of the room, Mr. Irons approached Dr. Hines. “Are you going to give Mr. Collins the antidote you brought?”

“No,” Dr. Hines told him. “You heard what I told Dr. Sanders. Everything that made Mr. Collins who he was is gone. It’s a wonder he’s still alive.”

“So what do we do now?” Mr. Irons asked.

“Study and learn,” Dr. Hines told him. “Nothing can save Mr. Collins now. I would never have injected R-83 into anybody at this stage of our research, due to the uncertainty of what it would do, but it would be a huge waste not to learn from Mr. Collins doing it to himself.”

“That sounds cold-hearted,” Mr. Irons stated.

“I’m just being pragmatic,” Dr. Hines said. “If there is a chance to make R-83 work as intended by learning from this fiasco, I’ll try. Otherwise it’s a wasted opportunity.”

“If you say so, sir” Mr. Irons said.

4:07am, September 1, 2016

The EKG machine hooked up to Jeremy started beeping, and Kathy looked up in alarm. The EKG machine showed a flat line, and it was emitting the steady tone indicating no heartbeat. She jumped up, ran into the hall and yelled, “Nurse, help!”

Nurses rushed into the room, one of them pushing a crash cart. They quickly went to work trying to revive Jeremy. Kathy stood in the corner, feeling so powerless and afraid. A nurse yelled, “Clear!” and the others held their hands up. A shock went through Jeremy’s body, causing him to cinch up and fall back to the bed. The steady beep continued. They tried again as Dr. Hines came into the room. He stood off to the side and watched as the nurses worked.

“Clear,” the nurses called again, but the steady beep continued, unchanged. “We’re losing him, doctor,” the nurse said. “Some help here?”

“Push one-amp adrenaline,” Dr. Hines ordered.

“Yes, sir,” the nurse replied.

A hypodermic was produced and injected into the IV tube in Jeremy’s wrist. “Hit him with the defibrillator again,” Dr. Hines told them.

The nurse called “Clear,” and Jeremy’s body jerked again, but the steady beep stayed unchanged.

“No, please no,” Kathy cried.

“Come on, doctor, save him,” she begged.

“I’m sorry,” the doctor told her and looked at the clock. “There’s nothing more we can do. Time of death, 4:08 am.”

4:30am, September 1, 2016.

“Ms. Collins,” Dr. Hines started.

“What do you want?” Kathy replied harshly. She kept looking at Jeremy on the bed.

Dr. Hines ignored her rudeness. “We need to study what happened to Jeremy,” he told her. “We would like to do an autopsy to learn more about the effects of the virus.”

“So, now that you killed my Jeremy, you want to cut him up. Is that right?” Kathy asked bitterly.

“I am very sorry for your loss ma’am. I understand how you feel.”

“Don’t!” Kathy cut him off. “Do *not* pretend to understand how I feel. You killed my son.”

“We can go talk to a Judge and get a court order, in the interest of public safety. I am hoping that you will save us some time. If you would be willing to sign a consent form, we can start right away. Understanding how this virus works is vitally important.”

“How do you know that cutting up my son will give you anything?” Kathy asked defiantly.

“I’m certain of it,” Dr. Hines told her. “After what I’ve seen on his MRI’s, it’s obvious this virus did severe damage to his brain. We need to see exactly what that is. Will you help us make Jeremy’s sacrifice worth something?”

Kathy sat in silence for nearly a full minute. When she spoke, she just stared at her feet. She wouldn’t look the doctor in the eyes. “Okay,” she said. “Give me the form.”

“Thank you,” Dr. Hines told her. He handed Kathy a clipboard and pointed to the line on the form. “Right here,” he told her.

Kathy signed the consent form. Then she stood up and walked out without another word. She walked out the front door of the hospital, wanting nothing more than to curl up in her own bed. She rubbed her eyes with her hands. They were red and swollen. She thought it was from all the crying, but they were starting to itch, which made her worry about pinkeye. *Never know what you’ll pick up in a hospital*, she thought. On top of that, she had a splitting headache. *Too much stress*. It was not like her typical migraines, but it was getting pretty bad none-the-less. She found her car in the parking garage and left for home.

6:00am, September 1, 2016.

Dr. Angela Dillon ran down her checklist one last time, making sure she had all the tools she would need to start the autopsy. The twenty-three-year-old male subject was on his way down from the ICU. Of course, double-checking like this was pointless when she had Nurse Zhang assisting. Kim Zhang, an immigrant from North Korea, was fiercely independent, and did her job with an efficiency not seen in any of the other nurses. During the Korean War, Ms. Zhang had fallen in love with an American G.I. He promised her they would marry if she could make it stateside. She risked her life getting out of North Korea after the war, and stowed away on a ship to the United States. Having arrived in the US, surprisingly undetected, she hitchhiked to the G.I.’s home, despite not speaking any English. That is when she discovered that he already had a wife. He had made the promises believing that she would never be able to get to the states, or find him.

With a broken heart, Kim went to the immigration office and asked for asylum. She decided never to rely on any man again. She taught herself English and worked her way through nursing school. She worked hard, and now earned in one year more money than she could ever have hoped to earn in her entire life in North Korea. But, she never lost sight of where she came from.

Dr. Dillon watched as Nurse Zhang performed her duties. She looked back at her checklist, marked off the last couple of lines, and looked up as two orderlies wheeled in a gurney with a body on it, and a doctor following close behind.

David O’Connor was late getting off work. He worked the 10:00pm to 6:00am shift, but it always seemed that they asked him to stay over whenever some trivial thing needed to be done. This time he was pushing some stiff to the morgue. At least he wasn’t emptying a bunch of bedpans.

Lee Martin arrived to work a few minutes before six. He was sitting in the break room finishing his cup of coffee when O'Connor asked if he could help move a stiff. *Sure, why not*, he thought. So he clocked in and went with O'Connor.

O'Connor and Martin wheeled the body into the morgue, followed by Dr. Hines. "Where do you want him, doc?" O'Connor asked Dr. Dillon on their way through the door.

"On the table over here," she told them. "Thank you, guys."

"No problem," Martin said.

They pushed the gurney up next to the stainless steel, autopsy table and locked the wheels. O'Connor grabbed the body under its shoulders and Martin got its feet. They quickly hefted it onto the table and pushed the gurney out of the way. Martin pushed it past Dr. Hines and out into the hall. O'Connor stopped and asked, "Need anything else, doc?"

"No, I've got it from here, thank you," she replied.

"Alright, I'm going home. See ya later."

"Okay," Dr. Dillon said. O'Connor turned to leave, and Nurse Kim Zhang took her place at the table opposite the doctor. "Can I help you with something?" she asked Dr. Hines who had approached the table."

"I'm Dr. Hines, ma'am. I am just here to observe."

"Very well, please don't get in the way," she told him.

"Yes, ma'am," he said with a grin. This was her domain, and he didn't want to intrude, but he desperately wanted to see Mr. Collins' brain.

Dr. Dillon studied the body, especially the infection on his right hand. "We'll want to biopsy that," she said to Nurse Zhang.

"Yes, doctor," Nurse Zhang replied. Then the hand twitched.

"Did you see that?" Dillon asked Zhang.

"What?" she asked. But before either of them could say more, the body's eyes popped open. Dr. Dillon gave a little cry and stepped back, but she quickly mastered her fear. The body sat up on the table and the blue sheet fell down into its lap.

"Orderly!" Dr. Dillon yelled. Then she stepped forward. "Lie down, sir. You shouldn't exert yourself," she told it as she placed her hand on its chest to press it back down. The body's eyes focused on her and an eerie moan escaped its lips. Its arms shot out and grabbed her arm. It pulled her in and bit her hard on her left shoulder. Dr. Dillon screamed and tried to pull back. It took a piece of her shoulder off and swallowed it, not bothering to chew. Nurse Zhang was beating on the body from the other side, trying to get it to let go of the doctor, and Dr. Hines was backing into a corner, wide eyed and unsure of what to do.

O'Connor heard the doctor yell for help. He turned back in time to hear her scream and saw the corpse biting her shoulder. He watched in horror as she wrenched herself free, minus a large piece of shoulder, and the blood flowed down her scrubs. Then the corpse grabbed the nurse and took a piece out of her wrist. As he ran to help them he thought, *The bastard is eating them. He's really eating them.*

O'Connor was desperately trying to free Nurse Zhang from the corpse's grasp when Martin yanked her back and out of reach. O'Connor shoved the corpse back down on the table and pinned its shoulders down. Then he yelled for Martin to bring the gurney back. They needed to restrain the body, and the autopsy table didn't have any restraint anchors. While O'Connor was turned to talk to Martin, he felt the corpses teeth sink into his left arm. He jerked back, cursing.

"Hurry up, damn it!" he yelled at Martin. "The bastard bit me. A little help here, doc!" he yelled over to Dr. Hines. Dr. Hines turned and fled from the room.

"I'm coming," Martin said as he hustled back in with the gurney and the restraints. He slammed the gurney up next to the autopsy table, not taking the time to lock down the wheels. O'Connor and Martin grabbed a hold of the body and hefted it towards the gurney, but this time the body was working against them. It was twisting around, trying to get another bite of O'Connor, and they didn't get it over the gurney. It rolled sideways out from under the corpse. They were overbalanced and all fell to the floor. Martin rolled over, but not fast enough. The corpse grabbed a handful of hair, dragged Martin's head in and bit his right ear off. Martin screamed in pain. He scooted away from the corpse and watched in horror as his ear went down. He felt the side of his head and the pain exploded. He took his hand away and it was covered in blood.

The corpse was standing up to come after Martin again when O'Connor grabbed it from behind around the chest. In an impressive feat of strength, O'Connor lifted the corpse off its feet and slammed it down on the gurney. Martin and Nurse Zhang rushed over and quickly got the restraining straps in place and cinched down. Dr. Dillon, careful not to use her injured arm, plunged a hypodermic needle into a vein in the corpse's neck and shot him full of Pentothal.

"That should knock him out pretty quick," she said. "Come on guys, let's go get patched up. We'll send someone else down to deal with him when we get to the ER. And where is that Dr. Hines? What a freakin' coward!"

6:18am, September 1, 2016.

Dr. Dillon led the battered team into the ER, each doing their best to hold pressure on their respective wounds. As they walked in, their colleagues ran to their aid. Dr. Dillon, even in her injured state, took charge.

"There is a patient in the morgue, restrained on a gurney," she told Keith Bell, the first nurse to approach her. "Send someone to get him back upstairs."

"Yes, ma'am," Keith replied. "I'll go get him." He turned to an orderly and said, "Come with me." The pair left to go retrieve the cadaver gone wild.

"And do not remove the restraints," Dr. Dillon called after them.

"Yes ma'am," Keith called back to her.

"Okay," Dr. Dillon said to the remaining gaggle of nurses, "he lost his ear, so see him first," she said, indicating Lee Martin. Mr. Martin was whisked away to an examination room to get patched up.

"Nurse, how bad is your wound?" she asked her friend. "Let me see." Nurse Zhang allowed Dr. Dillon to see her wrist. It started bleeding badly as soon as it was uncovered. Nurse Zhang quickly reapplied pressure.

"You're next," Dr. Dillon told her.

"Mr. O'Connor, how is yours?"

"Not bad," he told her. "You go ahead of me. Your shoulder's pretty bad."

"Okay, thank you," she said. As she was being escorted to an exam room she ordered, "Someone clean and bandage that arm for him."

"Yes, ma'am," a nurse replied and went to take care of Mr. O'Connor.

"I don't need anything," Mr. O'Connor told the nurse. "I just wanna go home."

"At least let me wipe it off with some disinfectant," she told him. "It won't take a minute."

"Okay, but make it quick. I'm already twenty minutes over quittin' time."

6:28am, September 1, 2016.

Nurse Bell went with the orderly down to the morgue to retrieve the mysterious patient he was told about. Like everybody else, he didn't understand how a living patient could be sent to the morgue for an autopsy. *Somebody's getting fired over this one*, he thought. He and the orderly walked into the morgue.

"Let's see what we've got," Keith said.

They immediately spotted the patient strapped to the gurney. He would be hard to miss.

"I know this one," Keith said. The patient was straining against the straps and trying to sit up. He was moaning and drool was running down his cheek. There was drying blood around his mouth.

"Easy there, big guy," Keith said as he approached the patient. "Just relax. We're going to take you upstairs and get you some help, okay?"

The patient did not respond to his words, but continued to strain against the bonds.

"What's his deal?" the orderly asked apprehensively.

"Don't know," Keith admitted. "He came in yesterday before I got off. He was in a car accident. He had that infection on his arm, but it didn't look that bad then."

"I thought Dr. Dillon said she sedated him," the orderly said.

"She said that, but it don't look it," Keith replied. "Come on; let's get him upstairs so they can deal with him."

"You bet."

6:42am, September 1, 2016.

David O'Connor pulled his car into the liquor store a few blocks away from the hospital. It was a rough night, and he figured he deserved a little something, a little bottle of relaxation to take the edge off, just this once.

"Mornin', David," the clerk said as he walked in.

David just grunted at him as he walked by. He went and got a fifth of Ancient Age. It wasn't the best whiskey, but a working man like him had to be happy with what he could get. He went back to the counter and set the bottle down.

"Doin' alright this mornin'?" the clerk tried again.

"Rough shift," David replied. "A stiff got up and went crazy. Took a piece out o' my arm 'fore we could get him tied down."

"Sorry to hear it. That'll be twelve eighty-six," the clerk continued.

David slapped down a twenty and waited for his change.

"Your change," the clerk said. "Go get some sleep. Hope the rest of your day is better."

"Thanks," David said. He turned and walked out.

"See ya tomorrow," the clerk called after him.

David just grunted and kept going. He climbed into his car, dropped the plain brown bag on the passenger seat and pointed the car towards home.

6:49am, September 1, 2016.

"I'm telling you, Mr. Collins sat up on the autopsy table," Dr. Hines said to Mr. Irons off to the side in the ER.

"How is that possible?" Mr. Irons asked.

"I have no idea," Dr. Hines admitted. "I promise you, he was dead at 4:08 when I called it."

"Maybe he was in some kind of suspended animation," Mr. Irons suggested.

"Not possible," Dr. Hines countered. "That may fool somebody taking a pulse manually, or checking respiration, but not when the patient is hooked up to an EKG. It would have showed a blip for the faintest of heartbeats. There was nothing."

"Okay," Mr. Irons said cautiously. "But how do explain him being alive now?"

"I can't," Dr. Hines said in frustration.

"You!" they heard from across the ER. They both turned in the direction of a very angry Dr. Angela Dillon zeroing in on Dr. Hines.

"Not good," Dr. Hines said quietly as she approached. "I didn't exactly acquit myself well during the crisis," he admitted.

"What the hell were you thinking, running out of there as we got attacked? You've got a lot of balls now, standing there like everything is fucking peachy." By this time, Dr. Dillon stood right in front of Dr. Hines and fiercely stared him down. Her right arm was in a sling and she had changed into a fresh set of scrubs.

"Is that language really necessary?" Dr. Hines started.

"You bet your ass it is," she cut him off. "Of all the low down, dirty, cowardly things I've ever seen. Where the hell are you from? You don't work in this hospital, do you?"

"Umm," Dr. Hines stammered, completely taken aback by the assault on him.

"What, afraid of a little woman too?" she chided. "Where do you work? You can bet your ass your supervisor will be hearing from me."

Dr. Hines swallowed and took a breath. "I work for the government, ma'am," he said.

"Is that so? I didn't know they hired spineless cowards," she continued the assault. Mr. Irons had to turn away to hide a smirk. "Where?"

"That's classified," Dr. Hines said, thankful for any out.

"Sure it is," she quipped. "How convenient."

Excuse me, doctor," Keith Bell said from behind her.

"I'll get back to you," Dr. Dillon told Dr. Hines. "Yes, Keith?"

"I thought you said you sedated Mr. Collins," Keith told her.

"I did, Pentothal," she replied, still glaring at Dr. Hines.

"Okay, well, you're going to want to come see this."

“Just tell me, Keith. I’m a bit busy here.”

“No, you’re really gonna want to see this for yourself,” he insisted.

“Very well, but it better be good. I was just getting started here,” she said to Dr. Hines. Dr. Dillon followed Keith to Mr. Collins’ examination room. He was still strapped down to the gurney. As soon as they entered the room he started straining against the straps again, trying to get at them.

Dr. Dillon walked over to the bed. “Just relax, Mr. Collins. We’re going to take care of you,” she told him.

“Doesn’t do any good,” Keith said. “It’s like he doesn’t understand English anymore.”

Dr. Dillon looked back and saw Dr. Hines standing just inside the door with Mr. Irons. “You may as well come in, now that you have your bodyguard and the patient is strapped to the bed,” she said. “Keith, do you have his chart?”

“Yes, ma’am. I brought it up with him,” Keith said.

“Let me see it,” she said. “I want to see who declared this man dead and sent him to me.”

Dr. Hines shifted uneasily as she flipped through the pages to find the right entry. Dr. Dillon glared at him and said, “This just keeps getting better.”

“Doctor,” Keith interrupted her “that’s not what I wanted you to see.”

Turning to Keith she said, “Honey, didn’t your momma ever teach you not to get between a lioness and her prey?”

“No, ma’am,” he replied with a grin. “Good advice, but really, look at Mr. Collins’ vitals now.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“He doesn’t have any.”

There was silence in the room for a few seconds. Dr. Dillon asked, “What do you mean, he doesn’t have any? He has to.”

“I’m telling you, doctor, he has no pulse, is not breathing, and his body temperature is 75°, just barely above room temperature.”

“That’s not possible,” Dr. Dillon protested, looking at the struggling form beside her.

“That is why I told you, you’ll want to come see this for yourself,” Keith told her again. “You check them. Please tell me I missed something.”

“How is this possible?” Dr. Dillon wondered aloud, looking at the monitors Keith had just finished attaching to Mr. Collins.

“You got me, doc,” Keith replied, “but maybe Mr. Hines wasn’t wrong.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she said. “Of course he was wrong, and there has to be something wrong here. Check all the connections again.”

“Doctor, I’ve checked them all four times,” he told her. “You watched me check them all four times.”

“Then the machines must be malfunctioning,” she countered. “Switch it out for a new machine.”

Lee Martin walked in the door, sliding past Dr. Hines and Mr. Irons. “Hey, doc,” he said. “I’m glad I found you.”

“Yes, Martin?”

“Can I get you to look at my ear? I know it got bit off, and it’s going to hurt, but not this bad. The pain meds are not helping at all.”

“Yeah, I’ll look at it. Let’s go to your room so I can uncover it,” she told him. “Try a new machine,” she instructed Keith on her way out.

“Let’s see what we’ve got,” Dr. Dillon said as she peeled back the bandage to examine the wound on Lee Martin’s head. “There is some redness and swelling,” she told him. “It looks like it’s getting infected.”

“That’s not good,” Lee said.

“No, it’s not,” she agreed, putting the bandage back in place. “Let me check something really quick. I’ll be back in a few minutes.” She went to the room between Mr. Martin’s and Jeremy Collins’.

“Ms. Zhang,” she said, “I need to check your wrist.”

“It’s fine,” Nurse Zhang replied. “I want to work.”

“You don’t need to work injured,” Dr. Dillon told her. “Don’t worry about your rounds. Someone else will take care of it. In the meantime, I need to look at your wrist. Mr. Martin is complaining of pain, and his ear looks infected.”

“My wrist is fine,” Nurse Zhang repeated.

“Please, let me look?” DR. Dillon pressed. “It’s important. I hope I’m wrong, but it’s important.”

“Okay,” Nurse Zhang relented. “Then can I work?”

“We’ll see,” Dr. Dillon told her. They carefully removed the bandage from Ms. Zhang’s wrist and looked at the hole in her skin. It showed the same redness and swelling that Mr. Martin had where his ear had been. “That’s what I was afraid of,” she said.

“What?” Nurse Zhang asked. “What is wrong?”

“Your wrist is getting infected, just like Martin’s ear,” she said, and I’ll bet my shoulder is too. It has been hurting. Give me a hand,” she said, trying to shrug off the arm sling.

“What do you want me to do?” Nurse Zhang asked.

“Look at my shoulder,” Dr. Dillon told her. “I’ll hold the shirt out of the way. Peel back the bandage and tell me if you see swelling and reddening around it.”

Nurse Zhang carefully peeled back the bandage and looked at the part of Dr. Dillon’s arm where the skin had been stretched in the attempt to cover up the hole.

“Well?” Dr. Dillon asked.

“Yes, it is red and swelling,” Nurse Zhang told her.

“I was afraid of that,” she said. “We all three have an infection, and I’ll bet Mr. O’Connor does too, and they’re the same thing that Mr. Collins came in with.”

“What is it?” Nurse Zhang asked.

“I don’t know, but we’ll find out,” Dr. Dillon said as something dawned on her. “I think I know just who to talk to about it. Excuse me, Ms. Zhang. I have a doctor to find.”

“Okay,” Nurse Zhang said as Dr. Dillon left the room.

Dr. Dillon walked back into Mr. Collins’ room and found Dr. Hines with Keith bell, and the two of them were working on hooking up a new EKG machine while Mr. Irons watched.

“What does Mr. Collins have?” Dr. Dillon asked Dr. Hines.

He looked up from the machines. “I can’t tell you that,” he told her.

“You’re going to have to,” she said as she approached him, “because we now have three more cases, and maybe a fourth. I am one of those cases, and you need to tell me what ‘your boy’ gave me when he bit me,” she demanded.

“First, that’s not possible,” Dr. Hines told her. “He bit you. It’s blood born. It can only be transmitted from blood to blood.”

“Are you sure about that? Because I’m not so sure. Now what is it?” she asked again.

“It’s classified.”

“You want me to tell you in which orifice you can stick your classified?” she shot back at him. “Tell me what’s in my body!”

“I can’t,” Dr. Hines told her. “If I tell you, I go to federal prison. Threaten all you like, but I cannot tell you what Mr. Collins is infected with. But I assure you, you are not.”

“We’ll see soon enough,” Dr. Dillon said. “Mr. Bell, I need you to do something.”

“Yes, doctor,” he answered.

“Biopsy Mr. Martin’s ear, Ms. Zhang’s wrist and my shoulder. Have the lab compare them to Mr. Collins’ samples. Then put us and Mr. Collins in quarantine, and get Mr. O’Connor back so you can quarantine him as well.”

“Yes, doctor,” he said as he walked out to get it all started.

6:58am, September 1, 2016.

David O’Connor pulled his car into his drive, the bottle of whiskey already half gone. He stumbled up to the front door and let himself in. He staggered into his bedroom and observed his empty bed. He took another long pull off the bottle and swore. His wife had taken to sleeping in their guest bedroom. He slammed the door shut and went into the bathroom. He took a swig of the whiskey to wash down four aspirin for the

headache he was getting despite the booze. He wandered back into the bedroom and sat on the bed. He took another pull from the bottle. He kicked off his shoes and socks. Then he drained the last of the bottle and threw it in the corner with the pile of bottles just like it. He lay down and passed out as soon as his head hit the pillow.

7:40am, September 1, 2016.

David O'Connor's cell phone rang in his pants pocket, but he didn't hear it. Had it been taped to his ear, he still would not have heard it. After eight rings, it fell silent.

Nurse Debra Williams waited patiently as the phone rang. She was disappointed when the call went to voicemail. "You've reached David O'Connor, leave a message," she heard. She waited for the beep.

"Mr. O'Connor. Please call the hospital as soon as you hear this," she instructed him. "It is urgent that we reach you right away. Thank you." She hung up and called him again. She kept trying, but nothing short of a freight train rolling through his bedroom would wake him up.

9:00am, September 1, 2016.

"It's a match, doctor," Keith said as he entered Dr. Dillon's room. "Your infection is caused by the same virus that Mr. Collins has."

"I hate being right sometimes," Dr. Dillon said. "Have they contacted Mr. O'Connor yet?"

"No, ma'am," Keith reported. "Debbie has been trying for hours, but he won't answer his phone."

"Has anybody gone to his house?"

"Yes, but nobody answers the door. They report that his car is there. Perhaps he left with his wife, or something like that," he reasoned.

"Maybe," Dr. Dillon conceded. "Have you told Mr. Martin or Ms. Zhang yet?"

"No. I came straight to you first."

"May as well let them know too. It's bad news, but they deserve to know."

"Yes, ma'am," he said on his way out.

9:10am, September 1, 2016.

"Are you going to offer them your antidote?" Mr. Irons asked Dr. Hines as soon as Keith was out of earshot.

"Yes," Dr. Hines answered, "and there's no point in putting it off. Let's go see the good doctor."

The two of them entered Dr. Dillon's room. "Just the man I wanted to see," Doctor Dillon said sarcastically. "Of course, I use the word 'man' loosely."

"Yes, doctor," Dr. Hines said. "I know we did not meet well, but I really am here to offer you assistance."

"Thanks, but no thanks," Dr. Dillon told him. "I want nothing from you."

"Even if I have an antidote for the virus you now have?"

"You have an antidote?" she asked dumbfounded. "When were you planning to share this information?"

"When it stood a chance of doing some good," Dr. Hines said.

"Mr. Collins isn't good enough?" she asked.

"Mr. Collins is dead," Dr. Hines countered.

"I can still hear him up the hall being not dead," she said. "He never stops moaning. He's awfully loud for a dead guy. He doesn't sound very dead to me."

"I've seen his MRI scans," Dr. Hines told her. "Every part of his brain that accounts for reason or memory is jelly. There is nothing left in there of Mr. Collins, but you are not that far along. The antidote still might help you."

"What do you mean, might? Has it been tested?"

"No, but it's the only chance you've got," he told her.

"No, sir," Dr. Dillon spat at him. "I put my life in the hands of medicine. I will not let you inject me with some experimental, unproven substance."

"Doctor, please be reasonable," he asked her. "This antidote was engineered alongside the virus to counteract it."

“The virus was engineered?” she said in shock. “Who engineered it?” she asked.

“That’s not important,” he told her.

“You did, didn’t you?”

“That’s classified,” he told her.

“Yeah, back to your favorite answer. But my answer is still no, especially now that I know you made the virus. You need to leave my room now,” she told him as she pushed the call button.

“Dr. Dillon, I can help you.”

“You have helped quite enough,” she said. “Has your antidote been approved by the FDA?”

“No,” Dr. Hines admitted as Keith Bell walked into the room.

“What do you need, doctor?” Keith asked.

“If that man and his goon don’t get out of my room, call security,” she instructed.

“I’ll go,” Dr. Hines told her, “but please think about it.”

“Just get out,” she said.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said as he and Mr. Irons walked out.

“Think about what?” Keith asked.

“He wanted me to let him inject me with something he says is an antidote for this mystery virus,” she told him, “but it’s untested. Make sure he doesn’t give it to Martin or Zhang.”

“Right away, doctor,” Keith said on his way out.

“What now?” Mr. Irons asked when they got out of Dr. Dillon’s room.

“One down, two to go,” Dr. Hines said. “Let’s see if Mr. Martin is more reasonable.” They went over to Lee Martin’s room and stepped inside.

“Mr. Martin,” Dr. Hines said. “How are you doing?”

“Not so good,” Lee said warily. “What do you want?”

“I want to help you,” Dr. Hines told him.

“How do you plan to do that?” he asked skeptically.

“He wants to inject you with an antidote that is not FDA approved,” Keith said from the doorway.

“That is hardly a fair assessment...”

“But that is what you told Dr. Dillon, didn’t you?” Keith interrupted.

“This antidote could save their lives,” Dr. Hines protested.

“Or, it could kill them,” Keith countered. “Dr. Dillon told you no, and now you’re moving down the line trying to find a yes.”

“You have no idea what you’re doing,” Dr. Hines told him.

“Yes, sir, I do. I know exactly what I am doing. I’m following the doctor’s orders. She told me to make sure you don’t give it to our friends.”

“Doctor,” Lee asked, “did Dr. Dillon refuse it?”

“Yes,” Dr. Hines admitted, “but...”

“Then I don’t want it either.”

“Please be reasonable...”

“I said no,” Lee said firmly, “and I don’t want to hear any more about it. I trust Dr. Dillon. If she wouldn’t let you give it to her, you’re sure as hell not giving it to me.”

“Don’t bother talking to Nurse Zhang,” Keith told Dr. Hines. “My next stop is to warn her about you, and if you continue to try to push treatments not approved by the FDA, I’ll get security to escort you off the hospital grounds.”

“Very well,” Dr. Hines said. “Suit yourself. You do realize that your friends will likely die without this antidote?”

“You have given nothing to show that getting the antidote will change that,” Keith countered. “Shall I get security?”

“No, I’m done,” Dr. Hines said as he and Mr. Irons left the room.

“That went well,” Mr. Irons said when they got outside the room.

3:15am, September 2, 2016.

Dr. Sanders stood beside the bed of Nurse Kim Zhang. They had watched all day as she deteriorated. Nothing they tried had slowed it down. She followed the exact same progression of symptoms that Mr. Collins had. Dr. Sanders triple checked everything. She had no pulse, was not breathing, and the monitor showed no brain activity at all. But, considering the hysteria over Mr. Collins sitting up on the autopsy table, they were not about to take any chances on it happening again.

Dr. Sanders turned to the nurse on his right. "Do you concur? Is she deceased?" he asked.

"Yes, doctor," she replied.

"Debbie?" he asked, looking to his left.

"Yes, she's dead," Debbie agreed.

"Let's get this autopsy started right away. I want to know what the virus did to her."

"Yes, doctor," Debbie said. She went to the door and motioned for the orderlies waiting outside. They came in and transferred Nurse Zhang's body to a gurney to wheel her down to the morgue. In the morgue the orderlies transferred Ms. Zhang to the autopsy table.

"Thank you, gentlemen," Dr. Jones said. He had been waiting for her and already had his tools prepped.

3:55am, September 2, 2016.

Dr. Sanders stood next to the bed of Lee Martin. He was seeing the pattern now, and had predicted Martin's death would happen before 4:15 am. He was only 20 minutes off. He only had five cases to go on, and only one of those had died. Obviously they had missed something with Mr. Collins. Dr. Sanders was still trying to figure out how Dr. Hines might have mispronounced the man dead. He was not taking any chances now, even though Nurse Zhang was already on the autopsy table with some of her organs removed. Certainly, he had not been mistaken with her. So again, he had two nurses with him to verify the death of Mr. Martin.

"Ladies," he asked, "what do you think?"

"Deceased," the first replied.

"Yes, doctor," the other agreed. "No pulse, not breathing, no brain activity. He is dead."

"Thank you, ladies. Let's send him to join Ms. Zhang."

They exited the room and the two waiting orderlies went in to take Mr. Martin's body to the morgue.

4:05am, September 2, 2016.

This was turning out to be another very long day for Dr. Sanders. He was standing by the deathbed of a third colleague. This made three in just under an hour, and Dr. Angela Dillon had been his friend. It pained him to have to do his job, but do it he must.

"Nurse, is she dead?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," the nurse whispered through her tears.

"Nurse?" he said to the other.

"Yes, sir," she replied. "She's dead."

"Thank you, ladies," he said softly. "That will be all."

They left the room and Dr. Dillon to the waiting orderlies.

4:30am, September 2, 2016.

David O'Connor lay in his bed in a coma, now only partially due to the alcohol. His wife slept in the guest room as normal, and unaware that he had not left for work that night. His fifteen-year-old son slept in his room, unaware that anything was out of the ordinary. The alarm clock that did not wake him up at 8:00 the previous evening changed to 4:31am, and David's heart stopped.

4:56am, September 2, 2016.

Dr. Peter Jones worked diligently on his patients. He had Nurse Zhang on the autopsy table. He was well into the procedure, and had so far found nothing out of the ordinary. The Y-incision was laid open wide, and he noted there were no broken ribs. He had removed her stomach, liver, and kidneys for testing. None showed any signs of damage or failure, but the lab would determine that. They would also get the biopsy he had taken from the wound on her left wrist, but the virus had already matched that of their mysterious Lazarus case. Next were the heart and lungs, but the ribs had to be moved out of the way for those.

Dr. Jones turned and picked up the rib cutter to open her chest cavity and gain access to the heart and lungs. Nurse Zhang's eyes opened as he turned away from her. His left hand was still within reach as he picked up the rib cutting device. She grabbed a hold of his arm and pulled his hand into her mouth. She clamped down, severing his pinky and ring fingers completely. She bit down hard, cutting through tendons and muscle. His blood welled up in her mouth and dribbled down her cheek.

Dr. Jones cried out in pain and yanked back hard on his hand. His fingers came off in her mouth, but she was holding on tight, and he dragged her off the table. She landed hard on her back and lost her grip. Dr. Jones stumbled back and stared dumbfounded at his left hand, minus two fingers. For a moment it reminded him of a book he had read while in college. It was about some gunslinger that got bit by giant lobster-like monsters in typical Stephen King fashion. He was snapped back to reality by Nurse Zhang moaning mournfully. He dropped the rib cutter to apply pressure to his badly bleeding hand as he took another step back. He looked up in time to see nurse Zhang standing up. As she straightened up, her intestines spilled out and hit the floor with a sickening splat. She gave another mournful moan and started shambling towards him, dragging her entrails behind her.

Dr. Jones' bravery and professionalism broke and he bolted for the door. He had enough presence of mind to barricade the door once he was outside the autopsy room. He grabbed a nearby desk and slid it in front of the morgue's door so Nurse Zhang could not follow him out. Then he yelled for help.

5:00am, September 2, 2016.

Nurses and orderlies arrived quickly. Dr. Jones tried to explain as best he could.

"I was in the middle of the autopsy when she bit me. She sat up and came after me," he said. "I ran out and blocked the door. We need to get her restrained."

Paul Cooper an orderly, asked, "How should we do that?" Isn't she one of the quarantined cases? We have to be careful not to be exposed, right?"

Dr. Jones looked at his mangled hand with sickening realization. "For that matter," he said, "I have to be quarantined now too." It didn't escape his notice that those closest to him took an involuntary step back, not wanting to join him. He understood.

Paul Cooper spoke up again, "Well, she is contained. Let's not panic. A couple of us can suit up in hazmat gear and get her strapped down."

"Right," Dr. Jones agreed. "While you get suited up, we'll make sure she stays in there."

"Good deal," Paul said. He and Michael Brown, another orderly, left to get the suits and get ready to deal with nurse Zhang.

5:28am, September 2, 2016.

Paul Cooper and Michael Brown came back in their hazmat suits. "Okay, are you guys ready?" Paul asked. "You pull the desk back, and we'll push her back as we go in. Get the desk propped back against the door once we're inside."

"Exactly," Dr. Jones said, let's do it." They watched as the nude and gutted Nurse Zhang continued to struggle against the door to get out. They took up their positions around the desk, ready to move it out of the orderly's way, and back again quickly.

Just when they were about to carry out the plan, they heard a scream and yell of pain from behind them. They all turned to see that Lee Martin, whose body had been on a gurney awaiting his turn on the autopsy table, had gotten up. He had a hold of a nurse and was biting her neck. She was struggling as hard as she could, but she couldn't get away from him. Then Martin bit through her carotid artery. A spout of blood shot out and splashed across his face. He seemed not to notice, and kept taking huge chunks out of her neck. Paul and Michael, in their hazmat suits, rushed over and tackled Martin off of her. They pinned him down, and avoiding his mouth, lifted him onto his gurney and started strapping him down. They turned around and saw several nurses attempting to staunch the floor of blood from the nurse's neck.

Dr. Jones looked from Lee Martin to Kim Zhang in the morgue. Then he looked at Angela Dillon on her gurney a few feet away. Mr. Cooper," he said.

"I'm a bit busy, doc," he replied.

"I know. As soon as you're done with that one, come over here and strap Dr. Dillon down too."

“Isn’t she dead?” Cooper asked.

“Yeah, but so was he, and so was Nurse Zhang in there,” he continued. “To be safe, please strap down Dr. Dillon. We’ll get to Nurse Zhang in a minute.”

“Okay, coming,” he replied.

They finished strapping down Lee Martin and then did the same to Dr. Dillon. “I have to say, doc, that it’s weird to be restraining the dead.”

“I know,” Dr. Jones agreed. “It is, but let’s just try to be safe.”

They went back to the door to the morgue. They hefted the desk out of the way and Cooper and Brown went in. They got Nurse Zhang restrained on a gurney, and Dr. Jones joined them.

“Thank you, gentlemen,” Dr. Jones said.

“No problem, doc,” Cooper said.

5:48am, September 2, 2016.

“Mr. Irons,” Dr. Hines said. “This situation is getting out of hand fast. We need to contain it. What do you suggest?”

“It’s time to call in the cavalry,” Mr. Irons told him. “We need to lock this place down and keep this from hitting the press.”

“Can you do that?” Dr. Hines asked.

“You bet I can,” Mr. Irons stated. “Let me call Mr. Stilman in Oak Ridge. He’ll get the army down here to quarantine the hospital.”

“Do it,” Dr. Hines told him.

6:28am, September 2, 2016.

Amanda O’Connor was sitting at the table and nursing a cup of coffee. She had a small TV on the counter, and was watching the morning news. The news anchor was talking about strange events at the hospital where David worked.

“Our sources first revealed that a young man from Tennessee was admitted at 4:30pm on Tuesday. He had an unidentified infection, and was declared dead at 4:08 am on Wednesday. This is where this exclusive breaking story gets strange. They were about to perform an autopsy on the young man when he woke up. Since then, multiple other patients who were declared dead have awakened, one of them a nurse of the hospital, also on the autopsy table. The hospital officials have declined to comment, and one has to wonder how trained medical professionals could make such a mistake...”

Amanda got up and went to check on Jason. “You up, honey?” she called to him.

“Yeah, I’m up,” Jason called from the bathroom.

“The bus will be here soon. Come get your breakfast,” she called back.

“Be there in a minute,” he said.

Amanda went back to the kitchen and sat down in front of the TV. She sipped her coffee and relaxed. Jason came walking into the kitchen and sat down. Amanda slid his plate over to him. “You want some orange juice?” she asked.

“Sure,” he said.

Amanda got up and went to get a glass out of the cabinet. Then she heard a loud thud in the master bedroom. She poured Jason’s juice, set it in front of him, and went into the living room. The thumping noise repeated. She looked out the front door and saw that David’s car was in the driveway. She went over to the bedroom door. “Honey?” she called. “David, are you in there?” She got no answer.

She opened the door and stepped inside. David was standing in the bathroom door with a strange, vacant look in his eye. “You okay, David?” she asked again. “Why didn’t you go to work?”

David moaned. It gave Amanda a chill. Then he lurched towards her, unsteady on his feet. She stepped back, meaning to leave, but she didn’t move fast enough. He caught her by the arm. She said, “David, you’re hurting me.” He didn’t respond.

David pulled her in and bit her on her cheek. Amanda screamed and fought to get free, but David was too strong. Jason yelled, “Let go of her!” He flew past his mom and tackled his father off of her. The two of them went tumbling onto the bed and almost slid off the other side. Jason was raining blows down on his dad,

taking out the pent up anger for years of abuse he had watched his father subject his mother to. David rolled over, grabbed Jason's arm and bit him high up on his right bicep. Jason hit him again and pulled free. David was still trying to stand up off the bed when Jason ran out the front door with his backpack in his hand.

Amanda, fearing David's wrath should he get a hold of her again, also fled. She grabbed her keys, ran out the door, got in the car, and left not looking back. Shortly after she was gone, David came stumbling out the front door that had been left open. He let out another mournful moan and went wandering up the street.

6:34am, September 2, 2016.

"How the hell did the press catch wind of it already?" Mr. Irons shouted. He watched the TV in the waiting room as a news correspondent talked about the events inside Tallahassee Memorial Hospital.

"You know it would have gotten out eventually," Dr. Hines reasoned.

"Yes, but the army response is still fifteen minutes out," Mr. Irons told him. "This is a nightmare. Who told them?"

"It doesn't matter," Dr. Hines said. "We just have to contain it if we can. The story is out. All we can do now is try to keep the virus from spreading outside the hospital."

6:45am, September 2, 2016.

Jason stopped around the corner from the bus stop. He wiped the tears off his face and tried to compose himself. High school was hard enough without the other kids seeing you cry. It only added fuel to the fire. He checked the bite mark on his bicep and pulled his shirt sleeve down to cover it up as best he could. The puncture wounds were not big, or deep, and it wasn't bleeding. It just hurt, but he had had worse.

He put a neutral expression on his face and stepped out to face the crowd at the bus stop. He immediately caught his friend Alex's eye. Alex came over to greet him.

"Mornin', Jason," he said.

"Hey, Alex, how ya doin'?"

"Good. What's wrong?" Alex asked. He might fool the other kids, but he and Alex had been friends since second grade.

"Old man's drunk again," Jason replied, looking at his feet.

"Sorry to hear it, man," Alex replied. Alex knew well the hell Jason's dad put him through. Nothing more needed said.

Changing the subject, Alex said, "My mom is going to take me to get my permit Monday."

"That's cool," Jason said, glad for the distraction. Alex was three months older, so he would be able to get his learner's permit first. Both boys were very excited about finally getting to drive. "She gonna' get you out of school for the day?"

"Yep, and then I get to drive home," he said, obviously pleased with the thought.

"That's cool," Jason replied again as the bus rounded the corner a couple blocks up. "You're still a jerk," Jason ribbed him for being first to drive.

Alex grinned and said, "Yup, but a driving jerk." The bus pulled to a stop with a squeal of the brakes. They boarded the bus and headed off to another day in the hell that is called High School.

8:00am, September 2, 2016.

"I don't need to see the nurse," Jason protested.

"Dude, your arm looks terrible," Alex countered. "I know you don't want to rat out your old man, and stop telling me it wasn't him. I don't believe you. Tell them it was a dog if you have to, but it's getting infected."

"Yeah, I know, but it'll be alright," Jason said defiantly.

"Dude, you said it hurts like hell. They'll give you something for it, and we'll get back to class. Come on, don't play the hero. Let the nurse help you. Besides, she's hot."

"You're not going to let this go, are you?"

"Nope," Alex said simply.

"Fine, I'm going."

"Good," Jason replied. "See if you can see down her shirt," he added with a grin.

“You're such a perv,” Jason replied.

They walked into the clinic and Jason went up to the counter. The nurse asked, “What’s the problem boys?”

Jason lifted his shirt sleeve and said, “I got bit by a dog, and it’s hurting like hell.”

The nurse looked at his arm. “Doesn’t look like a dog bite. Who was it?”

“It was a dog,” Jason said, but he couldn’t look her in the eye as he said it. He hoped she wouldn’t press it too hard.

“Uh-huh. Tell me what you want, but that is no dog bite. And you, young man,” she addressed Alex, “what’s your story?”

“I’m just with him,” Alex said.

“Okay, well I’ll take it from here. You can go back to class,” she told him.

“Yes, ma’am,” Alex said. “I’ll catch you later,” he said to Jason on his way out the door.

“Alright, come over here and let’s clean that up,” she told Jason.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said. He walked around the counter and took the seat she offered him. She got a bottle of peroxide and some bandages. Then she put on some blue examination gloves.

“Let’s get that sleeve out of the way,” she said as she rolled it up. “It doesn’t look deep, but it had something dirty in it. Who did this?”

“It was a dog,” Jason repeated, intently studying his feet.

“Okay, suit yourself,” she said. “This may sting a bit.” She took a cotton swab soaked in peroxide and scrubbed the debris out of the punctures. Jason hissed a little, but sucked it up. “Not too bad, is it?” she asked.

“No, it’s good,” he said.

She put a bandage over it and tossed the trash in a nearby can. “You’ll want to keep this covered up for now. When you get home, tell your parents you need to go see a doctor. This is getting infected and you need antibiotics. Okay?”

“Okay,” Jason said, but he had no intention of telling his parents any such thing.

“Alright,” she continued, “let me get you a couple of aspirin, and then I’ll write you a pass to go home.”

“I don’t need a pass to go home,” Jason protested. “I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not,” she told him. “You need to see a doctor, and we can’t let you stay here and put the other students at risk when we don’t know what that is.”

Jason just stared at his feet. “I don’t want to go home,” he repeated.

“Are you scared to go home?” she asked. “Is that bite from your dad?”

Jason continued to study his shoes. “I just don’t want to go home.”

“Your mom?”

Still no answer.

“I can’t help you if you won’t tell me who bit you, and that’s no dog bite.”

“I’m fine,” Jason said again.

“Okay, you’re fine,” the nurse said, “but you’ll have to go be fine at home. You’re not staying here.”

“Okay,” Jason said.

“Now, take these,” she said, handing him two aspirin and a small cup of water. Jason downed them and thanked her. She handed him the pass to go home and he left the clinic.

Alex was waiting for him outside the office. “That took a while,” he said. “Come on, we’re late for class.”

“She’s sending me home,” Jason told him. “I told her I was fine, I don’t need to go home, but she wouldn’t listen.”

“You’re the only guy I know that would get bummed for being sent home from school. Dude, just go home.”

“I really don’t want to,” Jason said pleadingly. “It’s hell at home, and I tackled the old man this morning.”

“Oh, right,” Alex said. “Didn’t know that part.” Alex thought for a minute. “Tell ya what…”

“Yeah,” Jason said.

“My folks are at work. My sister is at school. The house will be empty until I get home. Take my key and crash out in my room until I get home. It’s Friday, so you can just stay the night.”

“You sure, man?” Jason asked. “I don’t want to get you in trouble.”

“No problem,” Alex replied. “No one will know, and if I do get in trouble I don’t care. I’ll worry about that later.”

“Thanks man,” Jason said. “I owe you, again.”

“See ya later, I gotta get to class.”

“Okay, see ya.”

Alex headed off to algebra, and Jason started walking to Alex’s house.

11:30am, September 2, 2016.

“The hospital grounds are locked down,” Mr. Irons reported to Dr. Hines.

“Good,” Dr. Hines said. “How bad is the press?”

“They only have part of the story, thank God,” Mr. Irons said. “Of course, if they had the rest of it they wouldn’t believe it. How is Mr. Collins?”

“I have tested and retested everything,” Dr. Hines told him. “He still has no pulse. I’ve hooked him up to four EKG machines. His heart really is not pumping. Except for the fact that he is moving, he has almost no signs of life.”

“What do you mean, almost?” Mr. Irons asked.

“I performed another fMRI, and he has minimal brain activity. The only neurons firing have to do with motor functions, vision, hearing, and appetite.”

“Is he dead or not?” Mr. Irons asked.

“I’m inclined to say yes, simply because he has no circulation, no respiration, and is room temperature. But, he is awfully animated for a corpse. I’m about to perform the same fMRI scans on our other three cases. Hopefully they will shed some light on the situation.”

“What about the antidote?” Mr. Irons asked.

“I only brought two doses with me. I’ll need to go back to Oak Ridge to get more.”

3:30pm, September 2, 2016.

Alex walked into his room and saw Jason stretched out on his bed. He shook Jason’s shoulder to rouse him. “You alright, man?” Alex asked.

“What? Huh?” Jason muttered.

“Man, you’re burning up,” Alex told him. “I’ll get you some water.”

“Yeah,” Jason said and went back to sleep.

“Alex returned with the water and set it on the bedside table. “Here’s some water, dude. Sleep it off, man.” Alex left Jason to rest and shut the door on his way out.

6:15pm, September 2, 2016.

Mrs. Simmons came walking into the family room and saw Alex and Amy watching TV. "Hey guys, I'm home," she said.

"Hi, mom," they both said.

"You guys have a good day?" she asked.

"Yeah, it was good," Alex said.

"It was alright," Amy replied.

"Where's Jason?" she asked Alex. Jason tended to spend more time at Alex's house than his own, so it was unusual for him to not be there.

"He had other stuff to do today," Alex lied.

"Okay, well, I'll start dinner," she said.

"Okay," the kids chorused.

11:00pm, September 2, 2016.

Alex turned off the TV and went up to his room. Somehow, he had kept his parents and sister out of his room all evening. He walked in and shut the door softly behind him.

"Dude, did you fart?" Alex asked. He wrinkled his nose and covered his face with his sleeve. Jason was still stretched out on the bed. He hadn't moved at all. Alex shook him but he didn't stir.

"Dude, can I have my bed?" he asked his friend. Jason didn't reply. "Guess you need it more than I do," he muttered. He pulled Jason's shoes off and threw a blanket over him. Then Alex grabbed a pillow and a blanket to crash on his futon. He pulled the blanket up over his face to cover up the smell, hoping it would clear out soon.

3:38am, September 3, 2016.

Jason's body was baking with a temperature of 107°. His breathing was shallow. He didn't move. His heart stopped beating, and a few seconds later, so did his breathing. Alex, just a few feet away, slept on. He was unaware that his best friend had just died in his bed.

5:52am, September 3, 2016.

Alex heard a faint shuffling sound. He looked up and saw Jason standing by the bed. Jason turned towards him. Thinking Jason had got up to go to the bathroom, Alex turned over to face the back of the futon and closed his eyes.

Jason moaned, shambled over, and bent over Alex's exposed back. He grabbed a hold of Alex. Alex stirred and asked, "What're ya' doin'?"

Jason bit down hard on Alex's shoulder, taking a large chunk of skin off. Alex jerked awake and screamed in pain. He struggled violently trying to get out of Jason's grip, but to no avail. Alex's dad came rushing in and grabbed Jason off his son. Amy stood in the hall and watched as Jason attacked their dad, biting chunks out of his arm and swallowing the pieces.

6:00am, September 3, 2016.

"Dr. Hines," Mr. Irons said, "I have bad news."

"Not more."

"I'm afraid so," Mr. Irons told him. "We didn't contain the virus to the hospital. There are reports coming from all over Tallahassee of people getting attacked and bitten. It's completely out of hand. Washington just had the FAA shut down the Tallahassee airport. No flights are going out or coming in."

"Is it contained to Tallahassee?"

"I doubt it. Do you remember Mr. Walker?"

"Right, I forgot about him," Dr. Hines admitted.

"We never found him. Not to mention, I'm getting reports of similar cases of bodies waking up in the morgues in Tennessee, Georgia, Florida, and one case in California."

"How the hell did it get to California?" Dr. Hines protested.

“The world is a smaller place now with air travel,” Mr. Irons told him. “This could just as easily cross the pond too.”

“Dear God, what a mess.”

“You can say that again. I think it is time to think about getting back to Oak Ridge and retrieving the rest of your antidote, and making a lot more of it,” Mr. Irons suggested.

“Okay, let’s go. I’m assuming that the FAA ban does not apply to our plane.”

“Actually, it does. We’ll have to drive. I’ve got a car waiting for us outside.”

“What a mess,” Dr. Hines said again as they headed for the door. They walked outside and were immediately confronted by a soldier.

“I’m sorry, sirs, but you’ll have to step back inside. This hospital is quarantined.”

“We know,” Mr. Irons told him. “I’m in charge here, and placed it under quarantine. Now stand down, Captain.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but my orders came down from Washington. Nobody leaves this hospital, and that includes you. Please step back inside.”

“There must be some mistake, check again,” Mr. Irons told him.

The soldier leveled his rifle and repeated, “Sir, step back inside, now. I will not ask again.”

Mr. Irons raised his hands palms out, and stepped back. “Yes, sir,” he said. “Take it easy. We’re going.” He and Dr. Hines slowly backed into the hospital lobby and let the door shut between them and the army captain.

“What now?” Dr. Hines asked.

“We find another way to get to Oak Ridge,” Mr. Irons stated.

“How do suppose we do that?”

“Patience, my friend. Have patience. I’ll get you to Oak Ridge. Just give me a little time.”