

Chapter 3

D R . D U C

They were standing in front of Building 810 with their luggage, a cold wind whipping the hems of their dresses. Joanne was still sobbing and Stacy still burning mad.

“That fucking guy . . . who does he think he is?” she said. “A drug user? Max with mood swings? He was the steadiest guy on the planet. He ran the microbiology program at USC. He got that job because he was calm and organized, as well as brilliant. He wasn’t some X-over-Y geek head case.”

Joanne continued to cry and made no response. Her shoulders were down, her chin on her chest.

“Honey,” Stacy said firmly, “I know you’re torn up. So am I. But these people are lying. They’re lying about Max, and if they’re lying, the next question is ‘Why?’ And why did they burn his body? Were they trying to destroy evidence? What the hell happened here?”

Joanne looked up, tears still wet on her cheeks. Stacy reached into her purse, pulled a fresh tissue out of a travel pack, and handed it to her sister-in-law. “I want to find out what’s going on, and I

may need your help, but you can't help me if you don't pull yourself together."

Joanne wiped her eyes, sniffed, then blew. "How are you going to find out what went on? They're not going to tell you anything," she said.

"I don't know how Army docs are, but I know how civilian medical people think. It's standard procedure on a suicide to do an autopsy. I suppose the same holds true on a military base. If I ask Colonel Chittick for a copy of the autopsy, I'll probably just get ten pages of creative writing. So, I'm going to get Max's autopsy report myself."

"And they're just going to give it to you?"

"Let's go find out."

They went into the Base Information Center and got the Fort Detrick phone book. They took it to one of the long wooden tables at the far end of the room and sat there under the stare of a grandmotherly civilian volunteer in a brown wool suit.

"What are we looking for?" Joanne asked.

"Just a minute," Stacy said, as she paged through the book index. "Under 'Scientific Disciplines,' we have Microbiology, Aerobiology—that's wind, or insects usually. If this is a defense facility, I wonder why they're screwing around with that?" She shook her head in confusion, and kept going. "Then we have Immunology, Biotechnology . . . Chemical, Industrial. Nothing there. Next section is Plant Sciences and Entomology. Forget that. Here we go . . . 'Medical and Veterinary Sciences.' That's in USAMRIID. Okay, could be there," she said, and flipped to that section in the book.

"What?" Joanne asked.

But Stacy was scanning, muttering department names as she went. "Biometrics, Clinical Investigations, Bacteriology, Diagnostic Systems, Virology, and, bingo, *Pathology*. Page 212." She

flipped the book to page 212 and started looking. Then she stabbed the page with her index finger. "We're headed to Building 1666, Experimental Pathology, Labs A through H, first floor."

They moved out of the building, still carrying their overnight bags and the Information Center map of the base. They headed toward Building 1666 along the manicured walkways.

Fort Detrick was beautiful in late April, with flowerbeds blooming spring colors. There were elm trees lining the streets and old Civil War cannons. It was a twenty-minute walk across the Fort on the strangely named Ditto Avenue. They were chilled by the brisk weather, but they found the building on the corner of Potter Street and Randall Drive. It was a huge gray concrete-and-steel structure, an eighties or nineties addition. The sign out front read:

SCIENCE BUILDING 1666
USAMRIID

They stood in front of it and looked at the imposing architecture.

"What now?" Joanne asked. Her voice seemed small, blown away in the brisk wind. "What do you want me to do?"

"If I get stopped or it gets goofy, start flirting, distract somebody."

She smiled reproachfully. "Flirting. At last, a job I'm qualified for."

The building's lobby was large, with a tile floor and a huge personnel directory along one wall. A half-dozen more flags hung from pole stands. What they stood for Stacy didn't know, and couldn't care less. She looked at the directory board.

"What're we looking for?" Joanne asked.

"A secure pathology lab where they would most likely do an autopsy. They usually keep the paperwork in the O.R. till the body is released in case they need to check for other possibilities. I'm hoping it's still there. If they were hiding something I think they'd

do it here, and not take Max to a regular county morgue. They have a secure primate bio-operating room and lab in the basement. That's where I'd do it. Let's start there and work our way up."

"You sure you know what you're doing?"

"If I knew what I was doing I would have talked Max out of coming to this godforsaken base." Then she turned away and walked to the staircase.

The door leading downstairs was open, so they walked into the basement. The smell that greeted their noses was one Stacy was very familiar with, but Joanne wrinkled her nose in disgust. "Yuck."

The smell was a common toxic lab smell caused by the occasional broken bottle of chemicals and preserving fluids. Over it all was the stringent reek of formaldehyde. A man in a Naval Captain's uniform was approaching. He hesitated as they passed.

"Excuse me," he said.

Stacy and Joanne turned.

"You don't have a pass. You can't be down here without a pass."

"I'm from Colonel Chittick's office. I'm looking for the on-duty pathologist."

"You'd better go back and get your pass, first," he said.

Now Joanne looked at him and put her hand to her mouth, "I'm feeling sort of green," she said, batting long lashes. "These smells down here . . ."

"She's our new computer programmer. I was just showing her around. Would you mind taking her out? I'll only be a second. Wait for me outside, hon."

Concerned, the Naval Captain looked at Stacy.

"Please," Stacy added, smiling helplessly. "I haven't got time to go all the way back to the fourth floor of Building 810 and get that damn pass off my overcoat. The Colonel is on a tear this morning."

Her mention of the right floor and building seemed to ease the Captain's concerns. He took Joanne's arm and led her to a door in the center of the hall and then out.

As soon as they left, Stacy was off, down the hall. She approached a desk with a nurse in a civilian smock.

"Who's got the duty down here this morning?"

"Dr. Duc," the nurse said.

"I'm sorry, who?"

"Dr. Martin Duc. And he's heard all the jokes. He's Vietnamese, good guy."

"Which way?"

"Down that corridor, to the right. Through the second set of swinging doors."

"Thanks."

She was gone again, moving fast, bustling now like all the other people at Fort Detrick. Her leather-soled shoes beat a rhythm on the basement linoleum. She passed a medical closet, put on the brakes, backed up, and opened the closet door.

Inside were mops, pails, and cleaning solvents. Then she saw what she had been hoping for: Folded neatly on a shelf were green medical smocks. She put one on, pulled the tie around her slender waist, and grabbed a hair cap off the shelf, pulling it over her head. Then she saw a clipboard for ordering detergents and cleaning fluids. She took it. *Why does a clipboard instantly make you a person in authority?* she wondered.

She reentered the corridor and went down the hall, found the double swinging doors, and went into the lab area. She passed a woman rolling a medical tray full of instruments.

"Looking for Doc Duc," she said breezily.

"Lab B. He's doing a chimp post-mortem."

"Thanks." She pushed into Lab B and saw a tall Asian man in scrubs working over a metal drainage table with a chain-mail autopsy glove on his left hand and a rubber surgical glove on his

right. He had a small, dead female chimpanzee opened, with a Y-cut from her sternum to her crotch. He was weighing organs as Stacy came into the lab.

"Who are you?" he said, glancing up.

"Dr. Courtney Smith," she lied. "I'm doing the integrated pathology report on Max Richardson for Colonel Chittick's office, and we didn't get our final copy of the organ recital."

"It was inter-officed over there yesterday."

"Well, it didn't get there," she said, "and our Chief Medical Officer is throwing one of his passive-aggressive fits. I'm taking the heat. If you could get a copy of it for me quick, it would *really* help."

"I've got to get this post-mortem done. And I'll need to see your authorization."

She moved over to him, ignoring the last remark, and looked down at the dead female chimp. The insides of the baby primate were tumorous and devastating. She decided to throw some medicine at him for bonding. "What are those?" she asked, pointing. "They look like clusters of hemangioma tumors."

"Pretty good," he smiled. "Most people think they're just fatty growths."

"She looks too young to have that many," Stacy said. "Is this second-generation infestation?"

"Yep," he said. "We're testing pyridostigmine bromide with some of the Gulf War insect repellent we used. I think, by mistake, there was a bad chemical cocktail over there. The father of this baby chimp is a carrier and seems fine, but his little girl here really got hammered. It resembles a condition we're studying in children of Gulf War vets." He turned off the lamp and peeled off his gloves. "I guess I can get that report for you before I do the brain. I gotta get the rubber apron anyway. The cerebral cut is gonna be a mess." He moved to a file cabinet and pulled it open.

"Richardson . . . Richardson . . ." He rifled through folders.

“Here we go . . . You’re in luck. Autopsy is still down here and I have an extra in the folder, so I won’t need to make you wait for a copy.” He handed it over.

“Thanks a heap,” she said, and took the ten-page report.

She was out the door before Dr. Duc turned the light back on over the table.

They were in Unit Six of the Lakeview Motel, which was a quarter of a mile from Lake Frederick with no view of water. While Joanne watched the end of the five o’clock news, Stacy went through Max’s autopsy.

His blood work was normal, no trace of drugs, stimulants, or depressants. She paged slowly through, reading everything.

The shotgun had obliterated the palatoglossal arch at the back of Max’s throat. The pattern of buckshot had traveled up, taking with it his entire brain stem, blowing a hole out the back of his head the size of an open hand.

She choked back tears as she read.

The big surprise came on page six.

“I don’t believe it,” Stacy said softly as she finished reading.
“The sons-of-bitches actually murdered him.”