

# Prologue

Fourteen-year-old Ana Santos knew half her family was near death.

She stood in the hospital hallway and beat on the thick viewing pane which peered into the isolation ward of Hospital Muniz in Buenos Aires. Inside the room, life support machines beeped and whirred in an effort to keep her mother, father, and older sister alive. Doctors and nurses in biosafety gear rushed to and fro doing all the things medical professionals did to save an infected person's life.

Ana turned Aunt Cristina. "I want to be with them."

The heavy-set older woman ignored Ana and answered questions from an officious nurse. "No, the girls were staying with me for the summer."

The nurse noted the response on a clipboard. "And have you or any member of your family ever had a history of Congo Hemorrhagic Fever?"

"No," Aunt Cristina said, running a quivering hand through her long black hair.

The nurse made another mark. "To your knowledge, have any of your family been to Nigeria or any other country in West or Central Africa?"

"No."

Ana spoke more forcefully, tears welling in her eyes. "I want to be with them!"

"You'll get it too," Aunt Cristina said, wrapping one arm around her niece.

Ana shoved the arm away. "I don't care!"

“Think of your sisters.”

Ana turned. Her two younger sisters, both still in kindergarten, wore matching panda pajamas and sat in molded plastic chairs. Tears streamed down their puckered faces. Ana wanted to tell them everything would be all right, but she wouldn't lie. She turned back and banged harder on the viewing pane, hoping her family would wake up.

None did.

As Ana started to cry, she focused on her older sister, Gabriella. Her face was pale and gaunt with sickness. Images paraded through Ana's mind: the nights Gabriella had stayed up late teaching her to read, the times Gabriella had walked her to school because their parents were already at work, and the crayon drawing they'd made where they walked hand and hand into the sunset.

Ana's hand thundered on the pane until her palm hurt, but her sister never woke up.

## Chapter One

17 Years Later

Dr. Ana Santos hurried down a glass walled office corridor and turned left into a small functional office. “Do you have the results?”

A portly older man glanced up from his cluttered desk. Dr. Venkatraman Ramakrishnan—or Venk to his friends and colleagues—adjusted his red-rimmed glasses. “You know MacArthur doesn't want to release that information.”

“Come on,” she said, smiling. “I did the work. How can you not tell me?”

Venk raked his white hair back over his head as if he was debating with himself. He sighed and his expression morphed into a broad grin. “94%...”

“Woo hoo!” Ana darted around the desk and wrapped her arms around his portly frame. “We did it!”

“You did the work, I just advised.”

Jeff Blakely, a lanky bespectacled blonde man wearing a lab coat entered. “The preliminary trial was a success?”

Venk rolled his eyes as if to say, ‘in for a penny, in for a pound’. “94%.”

“That is huge,” Jeff said, pumping his fist. He spoke quickly without pause. MacArthur will be stoked. We should go out and celebrate. Ana, call up Lei, maybe he can bring some cute girls from the compound...”

Ana lips tightened and Venk adjusted in his seat.

“What?”

“Take the rest of the day off Jeff,” Venk said. “We’ll start the prep for Ana’s field work early tomorrow.”

“What did I say?”

“That will be all, Jeff.”

The man left mumbling to himself.

After a few moments of awkward silence, Venk broached the unspoken topic. “He’s not wrong, though.”

Ana drew back. “How can you even suggest...”

“Not with Lei. Ed is hosting a party for his military contractor, who happens to be a gourmet chef. And the ladies say he’s quite attractive.”

Anxiety gnawed at her stomach. She hadn’t been out in three weeks and there was a chance she might run into Lei. “How about this. I’ll go if you do.”

Venk shook his head like a man about to perform an unwanted task. “I have meet the Nigerian Environmental Society at Yongkang’s formal party tonight.”

“I’m definitely not going there.”

“Then at least go to Ed’s.”

“I’ll think about it,” Ana said, turning to leave.

“Ana.” A note of paternal concern etched his voice. “It would be good for you. And Ed would make sure you have fun.”

Ana checked her watch. “I’m going to be late for school.”

She strode down the hall, grabbed her purse from a locker in the front foyer, and walked out the front door. The bright mid-morning sun and hot dry wind of Maiduguri, Nigeria assaulted her as soon as she hit the sidewalk.

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Twenty-five students of varying ages sat at desks in the one-room ramshackle schoolhouse. They all wore white and blue uniforms and all but one had Chromebooks on their desks.

Dr. Ana Santos stood next to a new TV and pointed to a structure inside the image of an animal cell. “Last one. Who can tell me what this oblong shape is?”

Zakia, the Chromebook-less girl, raised her hand. She was a twelve-year-old with natural hair, pulled up in the middle, and a twist out in the front and back.

“Yes, Zakia?”

“A mitochondrion.”

“Correct.”

Zakia beamed and then glanced at a boy with close-cropped hair who sat two seats in front of her. Ana noticed the look and remembered her own middle-school crushes.

Mamma Falade, a mid-20's pregnant African woman waddled toward the front of the room. “Now, class. What do we say to Dr. Santos.”

“Thank you, Dr. Santos.”

Mamma Falade rubbed her belly as if she'd just experienced a baby's kick. “And welcome our friend, Mei Xu.”

Mei stood. “Nǐ hǎo.”

“Nǐ hǎo,” the class replied.

Mei strode forward with the graceful confidence reserved for wealthy people. She switched the image on the TV to a picture of Beijing's Forbidden City. “Now,” she continued in English. “We'll talk about our upcoming trip to China!”

The class cheered while each smiled with the knowledge that, for the first time in their lives, they would experience the world beyond Nigeria.

Mamma Falade gestured for Ana to join her outside. A lonely tree shaded the left side of the low walled dirt courtyard and provided the only relief from the heat. “Could you hold this for me while I fix the wifi?”

“Let me do it.”

Mamma Falade smiled and held the chair as Ana stood and adjusted the satellite dish at the edge of the roof. “Thank you.”

“Of course,” Ana said, hopping down.

“A little birdie told me you weren’t going to go to the party tonight.”

Ana replied with feigned indifference. “I just don’t feel like it.”

“Oh, yes,” Mamma Falade chided. “Expensive gowns, great food, attractive men. It sounds *terrible*.”

Ana rattled off the practiced excuses. “I don’t have a formal dress and I have to go to Damboa tomorrow.” She avoided Mamma Falade’s eyes as she finished. “I just don’t think it would be a good idea.”

“It isn’t because a certain someone will be there?”

“After what he did?” Ana said, anger evident in her voice. “I hope I never see him again.”

“So, he is the reason.”

Ana’s anger popped like a burned-out bulb. “He’ll be there with *her*.” She sighed. “I don’t want to give him the satisfaction of seeing how much that hurts.”

“He did what he did. But you can’t let him stop you from living your life. Go out. Find the right man.” She patted her belly in an exaggerated manner. “Settle down and have babies.”

Ana laughed—the first time she had laughed in three weeks.

Mei appeared at the doorway. She was an attractive Chinese woman in her early fifties who had the remarkable ability to appear a decade younger than her actual age. “They’re ready for you.”

Mamma Falade and Mei exchanged places and Mei put her hand through Ana’s arm and led her across the barren school yard. “I want you to come to my party tonight.”

Ana glanced back toward the school and understood. “You two planned this.”

Mei smiled and patted Ana's forearm as if to say, 'of course, but that doesn't matter right now'.

They had both volunteered at the school for the last year. Despite how close they had become, Ana couldn't understand why Mei wanted her at a party with her philandering ex-fiancée, who's deceit was another version of his father's crime. "Why would you put me through that? You know what he did."

"I have my reasons for wanting you there."

Ana shook her head. "I just...can't."

"Mama Falade is right, you need to get out."

Ana removed her arm. "I appreciate the offer, Mei. But I'm not going."

Mei sighed. "I hope you'll realize that the world will pass you by unless you fight for what you want." The woman gave Ana a playful shove out of the gate. "If you won't go to my fabulous party, at least go to Ed Stephens BBQ. You need to get out and *live*."

## Chapter Two

The corporate office in London, England was decorated like a room at Versailles. A tabletop picture frame on the mahogany desk displayed a bald beefy man in his 50's sitting with a buxom blonde wife and three college aged children. The picture jerked back and forth in time to the thrust of sex until it came to a rest.

MacArthur Bertrand III rolled off the desk. He did not look like the man in the photograph. He was athletic, with a full head of black hair greying at the temples. He pulled up his dove grey suit pants and then helped an alluring gray-haired woman off the desk.

The lithe early 60's woman buttoned her crème-colored chemise blouse with quick fluid movements which caused her diamond wedding ring to glint in the office's lamplight. Rosalind smiled up at MacArthur. She thought he was enjoyable company—someone who assuaged the worries of corporate life.

MacArthur finished dressing. “We’re late.”

“I’ll be there shortly,” Rosalind replied, as she sauntered toward the private washroom.

MacArthur glanced at the desktop picture as he left and smiled knowing Roger Islebaum had no idea what was coming.

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MacArthur strode into the massive boardroom as Roger Islebaum was explaining a corporate report on a large flat screen. Eleven expensively dressed men and women sat around a mammoth African Blackwood table listening to the presentation. MacArthur glad-handed several people before sitting on the far side of the table.

Moments later, Rosalind entered and offered an apologetic wave. She whispered greetings to several board members as she slinked to her seat on the near side of the table.

“...and that’s the summation of the last fiscal quarter,” Roger said. “If there is nothing else, I’ll move on...”

“I’d like to discuss item six on the agenda,” MacArthur said.

Roger Islebaum grimaced, but nodded.



MacArthur stood and buttoned his jacket—demonstrating a self-assured Regional President. “All of you have read my proposal. Profits under Chairman Islebaum have been static while the profits of our competitors have skyrocketed. The reason? They’ve rushed products to market faster and earned higher market penetration.” MacArthur prowled the table locking eyes with board members and placing his hand on the shoulder of others. “We must anticipate the next crisis and be the first to provide a solution. That is not only good sense, it is good business.”

Several heads nodded their assent like lemmings.

“Therefore, I motion for an immediate vote for new leadership.”

The occupants exchanged whispered murmurs. The top of Roger’s head flashed scarlet. He sneered, “Is there a second?”

Saanvi, an immaculately dressed Indian woman in her mid-seventies, smiled slyly at MacArthur. “I second the motion.”

MacArthur acknowledged the woman and sat in his seat.

Roger’s eyes narrowed. He glared at the people sitting around the table. “Very well. All in favor raise their hands.”

Saanvi and half the table raised their hands. The vote was six in favor and five opposed when it reached Rosalind.

MacArthur tried to hide a smile. He was going to become the CEO and turn this company into the richest pharmaceutical company in history.

Rosalind kept her hand on the table.

MacArthur’s expression darkened but Rosalind smiled demurely.

The table erupted in conversation. Roger quieted them. “The motion failed. In light of this development, and that no member of the Xu family is here to vote, I suggest we table our

business until the next meeting. All in favor.” A majority of the board members raised their hands. “The motion passes,” Roger said. “This meeting is adjourned.”

The members stood and Rosalind quickly exited the room.

As MacArthur attempted to follow her, Roger blocked his path. He spoke in a companionable voice, but his words dripped with venom. “I know you’ve gambled everything on the Maiduguri venture.” He then whispered, “I’ll have an emergency board at the end of next week in N’Djamena. When they see your failure, you’ll lose your job, your stock, and, when I’m done, your own father wouldn’t hire you.”

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The Gulfstream G700 streaked through the midday sky. Although it seated up to 18 people, MacArthur was the only passenger. He sipped a Macallan scotch and stared out the window, assessing his next move.

Assets and liabilities, he thought. That’s what it could all be reduced to. And he realized the board vote, Rosalind’s betrayal, and Roger Islebaum’s vendetta, showed that he was drastically in the red.

He pressed a button on his satellite phone. “We need to move everything up. We have seven days.” Muffled responses came from the other end of line. “I know the problems this will cause. I’ll be there this afternoon to discuss.” More inaudible speech. “Leave Dr. Santos to me.”

MacArthur rang off, took another sip of his Macallan, and considered Dr. Santos like a debit in a ledger. She was observant, stubborn, and determined. She would notice the increased production of deliverables and ask questions. When the answers didn’t make sense, she would investigate and, when she realized the truth, raise the alarm. She was too honest to be bribed and couldn’t be convinced to aide the plan.

And with Roger monitoring the Maiduguri facility, he couldn't transfer her out of Nigeria without raising suspicion. Besides that, the woman wouldn't leave. Congo Hemorrhagic Fever had killed nearly half her family. She was determined to wipe it out.

The only remaining option was to kill Dr. Santos.

## Chapter Three

The pedestrians hustling across the streets of Maiduguir, Nigeria were dressed in all manner of attire, from used western t-shirts and pants, to long shirted dashikis, to the bright geometric patterned kente. The traffic resembled a herd of angry cattle with dozens of men in twenty-year-old vehicles honking their horns as motorcycle taxis weaved around cars. Every driver yelled curses and made obscene gestures to anyone who blocked their path.

Ana strolled with the pedestrians. The heat felt like an oven and thin rivulets of sweat trickled down her back. She had gone home and debated whether or not to go to Ed's party. The deciding factor was Ed's text: 'If you don't come tonight, I won't make you any more espresso martinis.'

She had then held a lengthy debate where she tried on various outfits and finally settled on a white fitted button-down shirt, tapered jeans, flats, and a textured hat. She thought her choices complemented her heart-shaped face and thin figure and she fancied herself as a stand-in for her favorite Brazilian actress, Bruna Marquezine.

Turning the corner onto a side street, she passed a row of small cement block houses painted light gray. Barefoot children ran up to her begging for money. She gave them each some Naira and smiled as they scampered away.

Ahead of her, four armed guards stood behind a large cement barricade. Each rested a hand on a machine gun attached to a strap resting across their chest.

As she neared the checkpoint, two Chinese men and one striking Chinese woman exited the post laughing and joking.

Ana spun and tripped. She used her hands to catch herself on the barricade, but her purse spilled onto the road. She cursed her clumsiness and wondered if she could collect everything and slink back home before *he* noticed her.

She grabbed her compact and reached for her wallet at the same time a male hand grabbed it. Ana glanced up at a bookish Chinese face with rimless glasses and sharp handsome features. Her heart ached with hurt and anger. The anger won. "I've got it," she said curtly, tugging the wallet away from him.

"I want to help," Lei Zhou said.

They both stood. Ana remembered all their shared intimacies: their discussions about books, the childhood traumas that drove them to ardently pursue their chosen careers, their different cultures, and their loneliness at living in a foreign place.

His infidelity had destroyed what they had shared. "I'm fine!" She thrust her wallet and compact into her purse like she was punching a pillow.

The two other Chinese stared while waiting for Lei. The stocky man, Feng Xu, seemed embarrassed, like he felt guilty for something. And the woman, Bao Li, appeared smug. She was tall and so gorgeous that Ana still felt insecure around her.

Feng whispered to the woman, who then sauntered to Lei with the grace of a predatory cat. She ignored Ana. “We’re going to be late for Yongkang Xu’s formal event,” Bao said in Mandarin, pulling Lei away.

Ana wanted to make a snarky comment in her halting Mandarin, but didn’t speak up. Her eyes, however, followed the couple as they strolled down the street. Before they rounded the corner, Lei glanced over his shoulder and locked eyes with Ana. She turned away.

One of the guards noticed her. “Miss, are you coming or going?”

Ana knew she could go home and eat Rocky Road ice cream and drink Chablis like she had done every night for the last three weeks. She wondered for the hundredth time, *‘What is it about me that made him choose her?’* She then remembered Mei and Mama Fallade’s words, ‘you need to live’.

Her lips tightened and she strode up to the guard and presented her ID.

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Ana entered a courtyard with a social event in full swing. Dozens of people in casual Western, Asian, and African clothes mingled like old friends while American country songs played through hidden speakers. Four story apartments surrounded them, effectively forming a barrier between the foreign living compound and Maiduguri, Nigeria.

“I’m so glad you got out of that dingy laboratory,” Ed said in a deep Tennessee twang, handing her an espresso martini. She turned and saw Ed Stevens.

Ana was glad to see him. His friendship had carried her through some rocky times. She kissed him on both cheeks and his scraggly black beard itched. Between the beard and large barrel chest, he always reminded her of a Papa Bear. “I’ll have you know it’s immaculate.”

“Yes, yes, doctor.” Ed grabbed her hand and dragged her through the crowd. He acknowledged each group as he passed: raising a hand to one, making a comment to another, or laughing at some joke he heard.

“Where are we going?” Ana asked.

“I want to introduce you to one of my best friends.”

She started to object, but then realized Ed wouldn’t stop pestering her until she agreed. A slightly annoying characteristic that Ana didn’t realize was the social equivalent of how she acted at work.

Ed led her to the far side of the courtyard where a man in jeans and a black t-shirt stood in front of a mammoth grill. He was taller than most, with a swimmer’s build, and short unruly blonde hair. She watched as he moved between the grill, the adjoining oven, and placing food on stainless steel serving platters with the practiced ease of a professional. Ana noticed he had a *really* cute butt.

“Carter,” Ed said.

Carter glanced over his shoulder, a lock of hair falling impishly across his forehead. He had deep blue eyes and stubble on his face. He smiled when he saw her; and something about it made her think he was a bit of a bad boy, but a really attractive one.

“Carter Davis, this is Dr. Ana Santos,” Ed said.

Carter’s smile was infectious and Ana couldn’t help but smile back. “Nice to meet you,” She put effort into making her words sound normal.

“Likewise,” Carter said, staring at her with undisguised interest. “I’m plating the last of the food now. Give me a bit and I’ll join you all.”

“Food’s on,” Ed shouted, gesturing for people to serve themselves from the buffet platters.

“You need any help?” Ana asked, again trying to remove any trace of nervousness from her voice. The man had an air of unpredictability—danger—about him, like coming upon a tiger in the jungle. She found it a little scary, but also a little thrilling.

“Nope, I got it.”

Ed said. “He’s kind of a lone wolf in the kitchen.”

“I heard that.”

“Brother, I ain’t saying anything you don’t already know.” As Ed and Ana filled their plates, Ed whispered, “Relax, you don’t have to be nervous. He’s a good guy. One of the best.”

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Carter joined his friends at a corner picnic table.

“This is delicious,” Ana said, the two martinis relaxing her. “What type of BBQ is this?”

Ed boasted, “It’s Carter’s take on 21<sup>st</sup> century nouvelle cuisine.” Ed pointed to each of the items. “Bourbon and cherry marinated BBQ; Basmati Rice with Brie, black beans, and Sriracha; and that’s pear and broccoli salad with walnuts.”

“Ed only hired me because of my culinary skills,” Carter said, taking a swig of his German lager.

“That’s not true. You’re taller than me. The bad guys shoot at you first.”

Ana ate another forkful of food. “It makes my mouth feel...”

Ed said, “Clean.”

“Yes. How do you do that?”

Carter smirked at Ed. “You gonna’ let me speak?”

Ed sipped his vodka martini in one hand while gesturing for Carter to ‘go ahead’ with the other.

“It’s just science. I balance opposing flavors with the PH levels of the food.”

“I never heard a chef talk about the science of food. How did you learn to cook like that?”

“My mom. She was a chemistry major in college and applying it to cooking was her hobby. We used to have the best family dinners until...well, for a while.”

Ana noticed a flash of emotion cross his face. Was it pain? Insecurity? The idea of this military man being vulnerable piqued her curiosity. She wasn’t the type to be so forward, but she sipped her martini and let the alcohol embolden her. “Tell me about it.”

## Chapter Four

Feng and Lei stood next to the southern bar. They wore well-tailored Mandarin collared tuxes and drank Baijiu as the guests at Yongkang Xu’s formal event passed by them.

Feng observed Lei staring at the floor and knew his cousin’s mind. “Let her go.”

“Don’t start,” Lei replied.

“Help me understand. After the way she ghosted you—for no reason at all—why do you still want her when you can have her?”



Feng's eyes fixed on Bao Li's tall lithe frame as she strode toward them. She wore a red and gold Cheongsam dress that accentuated every curve. Men stared. Women narrowed their eyes and subtly barred their teeth.

"Hello, boys." Bao hugged and gave a la bise kiss to each of them. "You both look handsome."

A white jacketed waiter sidled up to them. "Gentlemen, Mr. Yongkang Xu would like to see you both." The waiter gestured his white-gloved hand toward the other side of the room. "Ms. Li, he requests that you assist Ms. Mei Xu while she engages with guests."

"Duty calls," Bao Li said, waggling her fingers goodbye. But her eyes lingered on Lei like she was staring at a coveted designer handbag.

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Yongkang Xu's greying black hair was swept backward in a conservative style. He stood tall and rigid in a Mandarin collard tuxedo and surveyed the crowd in his wide dining hall.

Men and women wearing expensive formal wear from Europe, Africa, and China chatted in small groups throughout the spacious room. Waiters in white jackets flitted through the crowd offering libations and hors d'oeuvre while a Chinese vocalist sang in a high falsetto to the plucked strings of a seven stringed guqin.

All was proceeding as he had planned. He noticed his son and nephew approach. "Any problems?"

"Everything appears to be going well," Feng replied.

"Appears?"

"Yes, Jiang is in charge of..."

Yongkang spoke with contempt. “This is not a social event. It’s a business event. Anything that goes wrong reflects poorly on our reputation. And...” the older man paused as if he were a teacher waiting for a response from a slow pupil.

“...reputation is everything,” Feng replied. “Yes, Father. I remember.” He nodded goodbye to Lei and left.

Yongkang glanced at Lei and then his mouth curled into a wistful smile. “When I was your age, I too socialized with many women.” His smile snapped off and he captured Lei’s gaze. “But I never let any of them influence my goals or my duty. You are a member of this family by blood, if not by name. I have called in favors to bring Bao Li here. She is an excellent match: smart, attractive, from a good family—one that is willing to overlook your father’s stain on our family’s honor...”

Lei stiffened. He wondered what he’d have to do to cut the shadow of his father’s crime from his life.

“You’re in Africa,” Yongkang continued. “Fortunes are made or lost here by your actions. And I will not let your...indulgences...destroy you like they did your father.”

Yongkang tilted his head toward a waiter who stood a respectful distance away. The waiter hurried forward. “Ms. Mei Xu requests your presence. She is in the southwest corner of the room.”

Yongkang acknowledged the message and the waiter left. “There is a delegation from Abuja who wish to discuss the practicality of extending our belt and road initiative to other parts of the country. I expect you at the Damboa construction site tomorrow at 8 a.m. to discuss the engineering aspects of their plan.” His eyes once again scanned the room as if to ensure everything was in order. “And you will move forward with Bao. I find her to be an incredibly

attractive and engaging young woman.” With those final words, he strode toward MacArthur Bertrand III.

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Yongkang Xu sat with perfect posture behind a respectable wooden desk in his study. All the furniture consisted of the ornately carved, widely spaced, wood pieces which exemplified the Chinese Rosewood style.

MacArthur, wearing bespoke tuxedo, was aware the decor was designed to make people sitting on his side of the desk feel like supplicants.

Yongkang sipped tea from a porcelain cup while making polite conversation. “Are you enjoying the party?”

MacArthur wondered again what Yongkang knew. The man was inscrutable. And although MacArthur took great pleasure piercing the illusion of his happy life, it was imperative Yongkang not discover the subterfuge. “Yes, the shrimp toast was excellent, and the steamed buns were hot and fresh. I know how difficult that is to do at an event like this. I trust your son, nephew, and wife are well?”

Yongkang acknowledged the praise. “They are. Although, like all family, they tend to follow their hearts instead of their duty.”

MacArthur lamented how Chinese etiquette forced these kinds of social conversations before any business discussion. He preferred direct conversations about wants and needs.

“Passion without planning leads to mistakes.”

Yongkang nodded. “My wife mentioned that you inquired how we would vote in the InViron board meeting next week.”

*Finally*, MacArthur thought. He crossed his legs and tried to appear relaxed. As if the next few minutes wouldn't determine the result of a decade of planning and the accrual of tens of billions of dollars. "Yes. Both of you have expressed reservations about my business plan. What points can I clarify?"

"You promise an incredible increase in stock value, but your plan is predicated on the world needing your vaccine. How can you think that will occur?"

"Human behavior."

Yongkang motioned for him to continue.

"There are now 8 billion people in the world. The need for food, housing, and raw materials are driving people into increasingly remote areas, where the most contagious and deadly pathogens exist. These same people are travelling and trading with every nation on the globe. It's only a matter of time before the Marburg Virus, Congo Hemorrhagic Fever, Lassa Fever, or the Nipah Virus spread.

Countries spent more than 65 Billion dollars on Covid vaccines, which increased pharmaceutical profits by *18,000* percent—and Covid's mortality rate was only 2.4%. How much more money will nations spend on the vaccine for Congo Hemorrhagic Fever, which has a mortality of 30%, or the Marburg virus, which has an average 44% mortality rate?"

"But you've only perfected the Congo Hemorrhagic Fever vaccine," Yongkang interjected.

MacArthur adjusted position in his chair. This was the most crucial point in his speech. "Yes, but I have research facilities dedicated to creating vaccines for the other viruses—each in the World Health Organizations' top ten most likely viruses to cause the next pandemic. All are on the cusp of a breakthrough. What I need is more capital to expedite the research."

“Ah,” Yongkang said, smiling as if seeing MacArthur’s endgame. “And you need to become CEO of InViron because Roger Islebaum will not increase your funding.”

“Exactly. His slow reaction to the Covid pandemic demonstrated he doesn’t have the vision to lead the company.” He leaned forward. “Think about the numbers: whoever gets ahead of the next pandemic will have 8 billion customers with a desperate need for their product.”

Yongkang rested his tea on the table and gave MacArthur his full attention. “Still, this is a speculative endeavor. I could sell InViron stock and invest it in infrastructure projects in Africa and receive a guaranteed return.”

“That will only net you 12-15% on your money. If we conservatively average \$40 per dose, that yields 320 billion dollars—for the *first* round. The booster shots could double or triple that amount, which would net you a *1400%* increase in your investment.” MacArthur sat back in the chair, confident in the numbers. “Refusing to back me in the board vote is not good business.”

Someone knocked on the door.

“Enter,” Yongkang said.

Mei glided into the room and smiled. “You will be late for your next appointment.”

“Thank you.” Yongkang stood and buttoned his coat. He gestured for MacArthur to leave. “We’ll continue this conversation at a later date.”

Anger flared on MacArthur’s face. Roger’s threat had set a deadline on his plan. He must get the Xu family vote before the board meeting next week or his years of work would yield no profit.

MacArthur stood, buttoned his own suit jacket, and smiled at Mei. He had another way of getting the Xu family’s vote.

Mei continued speaking to her husband. “I trust everything is set for the children’s school trip to China?”

“Yes.”

As Yongkang led them out the door, MacArthur and Mei locked eyes.

Yongkang noticed.

## Chapter Five

Lei stood alone on the outskirts of the formal party. He stared at his drink and fingered away beads of condensation off the glass.

“You look like you don’t want to be at my party,” Mei Xu said, a sly grin on her heart-shaped face.

“Sorry, I’m just...”

She rested a hand on his forearm and stared pointedly into his eyes. “I understand.”

Her eyes drifted to Feng, who was speaking to a security guard across the room. “Do you remember that night we all went to Jujube Tree?”

“Yes.”

Mei took his arm and led him towards the exit. Guests nodded or waved greetings and she offered a warm smile to each of them. “We all thought it was to celebrate your new engineering job and Feng’s graduation from flight school. Yongkang waited until the end of the meal before he told us about Nigeria.”

“I know,” Lei said. “It was the first time I’d ever seen you and Yongkang argue.”

“You and Feng both stood up for me. I was so proud of you both. Not only for speaking your mind, but also of what you both had accomplished, and what you hoped to achieve.” She paused before continuing. “And then Yongkang spoke about what he expected from each of us and how we owed him and...we all gave up our dreams for his goal. Don’t misunderstand me. It’s right to help your family. Noble. But what I want for you and Feng, more than anything, is for my two boys to follow their hearts.”

“Thank you, Aunt Mei,” Lei said. Her words had lifted a weight off his shoulders. He gave her a quick kiss on the cheek and hustled for the exit.

Mei stopped in the center of the room and stared at Feng again. She wanted him to find the courage to stand up to his father too.

She caught MacArthur’s tall handsome form enter the room and met his eyes. She inclined her head toward the interior of the mansion. MacArthur nodded.

\* \* \* \* \*

The orchids on top of a hand carved mahogany coffee table in Yongkang’s mansion rocked to the thrusts of passionate sex.

The orchids slowed to a rest and the room became silent.

Voices sounded in the hallway. MacArthur attempted to roll off Mei.

“No!” she ordered.

As the conversation neared, Yongkang’s voice rose above a gaggle of others. He was showing people his house.

MacArthur glanced down at Mei. He realized she *wanted* Yongkang to discover them. He needed to jolt her into action. “What would he do if he discovered us?”

Mei cocked her head toward the door. Yongkang was right outside. If he opened it...well, she knew what would happen. But she was done hiding her loneliness.

For a few interminable seconds, the voices seemed to linger...and then continued down the hallway.

Mei shook her head. Another opportunity for freedom had vanished.

“That was too close,” MacArthur said.

She shoved him off and he started to dress. After a few moments of silence, he said, “Think of the freedom you’d have if my plan works.”

Mei pulled on her auburn and black striped Ponte midi dress. She turned her back toward him and lifted up her long black hair without saying a word.

MacArthur obediently zipped up her dress. He was indulging her because she and Yongkang had joint tenancy of the Xu family’s InViron stock. He needed either Mei or Yongkang to back him, he didn’t care which. “This isn’t only about me. If I’m CEO, I could discreetly issue shares solely in *your* name.”

Her eyes drifted to the floor as if considering the offer. It was refreshing dealing with a man whose goals and manipulation were so blatant. She didn’t think he realized she was manipulating him too.

She turned and stared into his eyes. “I’m not ready yet.” She noticed anger on his face, but believed she could delay for a few more days. She understood owning her own InViron stock would allow her to finally free herself, Feng, and Lei from sacrificing their lives—their dreams—for Yongkang’s greed. But she had one more Go stone to place on the board.



## Chapter Six

Zakia had changed her blue and white school uniform for a dark shirt and pants. She hopped over a low cement wall surrounding a retention pond and clandestinely approached a group of dark clad boys and girls ranging in age from 7 to 16.

“We were going to go without you,” Sami whispered upon seeing her. “You remember the plan?”

Zakia nodded.

The group crept down the hill to a steel grate covering a four-foot drainage tunnel. Sami, the oldest and tallest boy, snapped the lock with a pair of bolt cutters while another boy used a small tube to squeeze oil onto each hinge. The two boys then lifted the grate; its squeak barely rose above a whisper.

One by one, the group duck-walked up the vertically sloping cement tunnel while avoiding the shallow drainage water. The tunnel ended at another steel grate. Through the bars, beyond the water lily pond surrounded by rose bushes, was a massive lawn filled with expensive cars parked in neat little rows. Occasionally, a valet would park another car and then run back to the lighted mansion at the far edge of the Xu family compound.

Sami grasped the grate and shoved. Nothing happened.

“Oga said he paid...,” a young girl began.

“Shut up,” Sami whispered, and shoved harder. The grate swung inward.

Sami turned and smiled.

Zakia didn't smile back. Her heart beat faster and she started to sweat. If she got caught, the police would kill her. If she didn't bring back a lot of tech, Oga would beat her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ana, Ed, and Carter laughed and talked as they strolled down the road. It was after 9pm and the streets were empty.

Ana had had a great evening. She, Carter, and Ed had talked and laughed about everything and she, remarkably, had forgotten Lei and Bao and everything else for a short time. The martinis had helped.

"Why do you live outside the compound?" Carter asked.

"I wanted to experience what life is really like in Maiduguri." It was her standard response to that question. But, as she stared up at him, and the alcohol lightened her burdens, she realized she wanted to share the real reason she usually kept to herself. "But it's more than that. I grew up around a lot of people: crowded house, crowded neighborhood, then all those years in university housing. When I came here, I wanted to have *one* place all to myself."

"Now that, I get," Carter said.

Ana believed he did. She stopped in front of a small white two-story townhouse with a cement wall.

Ed glanced between his friends and smiled the knowing smile of a perennial third wheel. "That's my cue." He kissed Ana on both cheeks. "I'll pick you up tomorrow at the usual place?"

"I'll be there."

"And you," he said, bear hugging Carter. "0900 at the rally point. Tony will bust my balls if you're late."

"No problem. And, thanks again for the job, man."

“Always, brother.”

He waved goodbye and ambled into the night.

Ana fumbled for her keys to the wrought iron gate.

Carter observed her with that warm infectious smile. “I’d like to keep talking, if you’re up for it.”

Ana’s heart skipped. She could still sense that tiger underneath him and it exhilarated her. And whether it was the martinis or Carter’s presence, she needed that right now. “I’d like that.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Lei walked down the long row of cars with a knot in his chest. He and Ana had spent almost a year together. She was warm, smart, funny, and compassionate; she even volunteered at a school. But after they got engaged, she had ghosted him—refused to even see him.

He couldn’t understand *why*. He’d been a good boyfriend. Kind, considerate—he was at times possessive, but there was a reason for that. And he had never cheated on her. After everything they had meant to each other, he couldn’t believe she would drop him without a word.

He reflected on Aunt Mei’s words. He had to follow his heart. *Lilies*, he thought. He remembered Ana loved lilies and that Aunt Mei had a lily garden at the far end of the compound. He would pick a bouquet, drive to her house, and wouldn’t leave until she opened the door. He phished out his phone and flicked on the flashlight option.

Five meters ahead of him, in the narrow space between two cars, stood a girl and boy in dark clothing. The taller boy spun around and shoved past the girl, knocking her off balance. The girl, clutching a silver laptop, pushed against a car to catch her balance. The car alarm blared.

For a moment, Lei caught a clear image of her—eyes and mouth popped wide in panic, whip-thin frame, and natural hair, pulled up in the middle with a twist out in the front. Then the girl sprinted away.

Lei chased them between parked cars but soon lost sight of them. He jogged left and then right, searching under and between cars, but the thieves had vanished. He pressed a speed dial number on his phone as he walked to the edge of the makeshift parking area.

“Yes,” Feng answered.

“Two teenagers are roaming the parking area. I think they’re stealing things out of cars. There may be more.”

“My father is going to kill me. I’ll send some men.”

Lei swept the area one last time. His light illuminated a pond surrounded by rose bushes. Water lilies dotted its surface.

## Chapter Seven

Ana flicked on the lights as she and Carter entered her house. She lamented that it lacked any aspects of hominess. It had a small functional kitchen, bland rental furniture, and generic travel posters, which hung in frames on the walls. Her only personal items were a series of small desktop photos. She realized she had never thought of this place—of Maiduguri—as her home. It was simply the place where she worked.

She glanced at Carter and gestured for him to take a seat as she walked into the kitchen.

“I don’t have any beer, but I do have Chablis?”

“Water is fine,” Carter replied. “I have to work tomorrow.”

“Is sparkling okay?”

“Fine.” Carter picked up a desktop photograph from a thin side table and sat on the couch. It showed Ana and two younger women with a family resemblance standing in front of Christ the Redeemer statue in Rio, Brazil.

Ana returned from the kitchen with two green bottles. She handed one to Carter and sat next to him on the couch. She had an odd moment of *déjà vu*: she and Lei, sitting on the same couch, talking and laughing while drinking San Pelligrino. She pushed the thought aside. Lei was not Carter. Lei was introverted, bookish—almost nerdy, and never liked physical expressions of affection. Carter was outgoing, physically expressive, although obviously intelligent, was not at all bookish.

“Your family?” he asked, touching her shoulder.

She pushed Lei from her mind and smiled at the thought of her sisters.

“My younger sisters, Elena and Karina.”

Carter stared at her and let the unasked question hang in the air.

“My dad and I—don’t speak.”

Carter rested her hand in his. “I understand absent fathers.”

His hand was warm and his expression inviting. She believed he would really listen. She stared at the green glass bottle as she spoke, “He wasn’t absent. He...half my family contracted Congo Hemorrhagic Fever when I was young. He survived, but he became overbearing and belligerent—like the TV chef Gordon Ramsey. He believed all women should be married and pregnant before age 18. He hated that I was always studying. He’d invite his friends and their sons over for ‘family dinners’ desperately trying to marry me off. I’d usually talk about biology

or physics and they'd quickly lose interest; most men don't like women who are smarter than they are."

"Smart women are sexy as hell." He leaned forward and kissed her. It was soft and slow at first. She closed her eyes and savored the cool wetness of his tongue.

He removed the drink from her hand and she began to lose herself in the kiss, and then her mind reasserted itself. "I don't normally do this," she began.

"I didn't think you did."

His answer was immediate and smooth, which set off a warning bell in her head. Maybe he did this all the time. But he pulled her close and continued with the soft, wet kisses, which made her think of sunshine on a warm spring afternoon. She pushed herself away again. "We may work together. Maybe we should...."

"They're assigning me to MacArthur Bertrand's detail, not yours."

Again, another quick response. Her mind battled her emotions. He embraced her with a soft strength that evoked images of tenderness and safety. And she wanted this, but she needed to be completely honest. She would not have any more lies in her life. "I just got out of a relationship. I don't..."

"Then a friend like me is exactly what you need." He stared into her eyes and slowly pulled her back into his arms. They kissed again. Not the slow wet kisses of earlier, but deeper, more passionate ones. His arms moved around her back in what was a half embrace and half massage, which released all the tension in her shoulders.

He started to remove his black t-shirt. On impulse, Ana pushed his hands away and pulled it off to reveal well-defined muscles on his torso. Her cheeks flushed.

They kissed again, more passionately this time, and he deftly removed her white button-down. A pang of self-conscious needled her because she hadn't worn her sexy bra, but in mere seconds, the bra was off. She had a brief thought of moving to the bedroom, but lost herself in the moment.

He positioned his hands between her thighs in a practiced massaging motion. She moaned as she unbuttoned the top of his jeans and reached inside; and smiled.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lei parked in front of Ana's house and opened the wrought iron gate. It didn't squeak because he'd oiled it, and he smiled knowing that part of him, part of his time with Ana, was still there.

He carried the bouquet of fresh cut lilies in his hand as he strode up Ana's walkway. His eyes drifted to the gauzy curtained front window and he froze in mid-step.

Carter and Ana were on the couch. Their clothes were half off and they kissed passionately.

Lei's heart turned to ice and that numbing cold shot through his whole body. His arms dropped to his side and he stumbled backwards down the walkway, thinking '*Ana and Carter are going to have sex*'. His heart exploded like a can of soda left in the freezer for too long.

His first thought was to bang on the door and yell, 'How could you do this to me—to us!'

But he wouldn't. He couldn't. Ana had, for some unknown reason, ghosted him. And now, she had chosen someone else. All he'd ever wanted was to make her happy.

He turned and shuffled toward his car like a kicked puppy.

But he didn't drop the bouquet of lilies.

## Chapter Eight

Yongkang's party was in full swing. Mayor Ali Idiagbon, wearing a western tuxedo and standing devoured another guotie dumpling.

His wife stood next to him and ate a cracker heaped with caviar. She stared at the giant African standing three meters away with undisguised contempt. The man named Ghost was massive: at least six foot five and muscled like one of those giant warriors from the Mali Empire. While that titillated her, she was more concerned with him wearing a safari bush outfit in the middle of a formal event. She yanked the top of her sequined gown over her ample bosom, which was threatening to pop out. "I mean, he works for you. Can't you make him dress appropriately? These are important people. We need to at least *appear* like we control our staff."

Mayor Idiagbon sighed heavily and bristled at his wife. He turned to Ghost knowing that there was only so far he could push the man. "Wait in the car, please."

Ghost didn't acknowledge the mayor. He simply strode toward the exit. Halfway across the room, he noticed MacArthur Bertrand and a tall attractive woman at his elbow. MacArthur was chatting up his security chief Tony Pagalini, while she glanced around the party in the bored manner of someone who'd rather be somewhere else. Their eyes met. She smiled. Before he realized it, he had smiled back.

\* \* \* \* \*

MacArthur thought again that Sofiatou was a valuable asset: tall, confident, intelligent, and very attractive. She had grown up in Maiduguri yet still had the sophistication of someone



who had travelled. Men wanted to tell her secrets and women spoke to her in a revealing way they would never have spoken to a foreigner. And she would do anything for her son. He caught her smiling at the massive African man named Ghost. And, to his surprise, the normally taciturn Ghost smiled back. It would be a good idea to have Mayor Idiagbon's mysterious gendarmerie think favorably of him.

MacArthur whispered to Tony. "Find out what you can about Ghost. But keep an eye on me. I'll need you shortly." Tony nodded and moved into the crowd.

MacArthur and Safiatou moved from clique to clique giving congenial handshakes and warm greetings while introducing Safiatou. When they were only a quarter of the way into the room, a high shrill voice yelled, "Mr. Bertrand, so good to see you again." Both turned to see Ms. Idiagbon beelining toward them, dragging Mayor Idiagbon by the arm like a hooked fish, and using her free hand to yank up the top of her dress.

"Ms. Idiagbon," MacArthur said, "you're looking as lovely as ever."

She giggled.

He then turned his attention to the mayor. "I trust things in Maiduguri are going well?"

Ms. Idiagbon leaned forward and whispered, "He's thinking about running for the *governorship*. Can you imagine? I mean, their house is 4,000 square feet. 4,000!"

"I can," MacArthur whispered back. "He would make a wonderful governor."

Ms. Idiagbon grabbed Safiatou's arm and pulled her away. "Let's let them talk. Oh, did you hear what happened to ...?" Their voices faded into the crowd noise.

MacArthur scanned the room and confirmed they could speak without anyone observing or overhearing them. He handed the mayor a thick envelope. "A donation for your campaign."

The mayor opened the flap eyed the stack of euros. He then dropped the envelope into his jacket pocket. “Your gift is much appreciated. What can I do to return your generosity?”

“There will be a convoy leaving for Damboa tomorrow. I need to make sure the people in the lead vehicle never arrive.”

Mayor Idiagbon furtively glanced around. “That is a very expensive proposition.”

“I’ll make another donation once the task is complete,”

The man nodded.

MacArthur returned the gesture and strode toward his next task.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tony Pagalini escorted MacArthur and Sofiatou out of Yongkang’s party.

MacArthur spoke to Tony quietly so no one would overhear. “What did you learn?”

“The only thing people know about Ghost is that he walked out of the C.A.R. and that the mayor has something on him.”

“The fact that he walked out of the Central African Republic alive says a great deal about him.”

MacArthur glanced at Sofiatou. “Get to know him. See if he is open to working for me.”

Sofiatou nodded. She did not like the arrangement she had with MacArthur, but she had to think of her son.

They approached the white Cadillac SUV

“Goodnight,” Sofiatou said.

“Goodnight. Thank you for your help tonight.”

Tony opened the passenger door and MacArthur sat in the rear passenger seat. He stared out the window with his chin resting on his thumb and his forefinger perpendicular to his lips.

When Tony had started the car, MacArthur said, “I want you to ensure the mayor’s fighters eliminate Dr. Santos.”

“He’ll probably hire Boko Haram. Those guys aren’t known for their precision. And then there’s the loss of my men, the vehicle...”

“I’ll compensate you for any losses and double your personal salary.”

## Chapter Nine

Ana and Venk checked the contents of three stacked columns of clear hard plastic containers with digital clipboards. The containers held all the supplies the Damboa Isolation Hospital requested, as well as what she needed to draw blood samples from the vaccine participants.

The surrogate father and daughter were silent as they worked. Finally, Venk said, “You’re glowing.”

Ana blushed but thought carefully before she responded. “Carter is a very nice man.”

They were both silent for a short while until Venk faced Ana. “I just don’t want you getting hurt again.”

“I know. But Carter isn’t like Lei.”

The heavy rumble of Humvee’s sounded outside.

“Where is Jeff?” Venk asked irritably. He plucked his phone from his pocket and texted.

“I thought he was in the lab?”

“No,” Venk said, shaking his head. He stared at the screen as if expecting an immediate response, but none came. “He said he forgot his laptop at home, but that was two hours ago.”

“Well, looks like we have to do the heavy lifting again.” She placed the digital clipboard on a side table and hefted a container toward the door. She backed into the touchbar and the door opened.

Tony Pagalini stood on the steps holding her body armor.

“Where’s Ed?” she asked, as one of the guards took the container from her hands. The military contractors all wore beige body armor, baseball caps, and handguns, with machine guns either clipped to their chest or slung across their back.

“I sent him up early,” Tony said, putting it over her shirt like a tank top.

That had never happened before. Ed had always driven her. She wondered if something was wrong.

That’s when she noticed Carter, standing guard on the street side of the Humvee. He faced away from her, evidently scanning the crowds and opposite buildings for threats. She remembered what they’d shared last night and smiled.

“Carter,” Tony said.

Carter turned. His eyes flicked to Ana and...slid past her to Tony.

“You take point with Harry,” Tony said.

“The principal shouldn’t be in the lead vehicle.”

“I know what I’m doing.”

“But...”

“Who pays your salary?”

“Roger that,” Carter replied.

Carter held the rear passenger door open for her. She smiled and met his eyes, but his face was stoic, like a marble statue. There was no hint of any of the emotion he’d shown last night. She was about to make a biting comment when he said, “This isn’t normal, is it?”

The comment struck her as odd. She answered reflexively, “No, it isn’t.”

He closed the door and hustled to the driver’s seat without a word or glance.

Ana’s chest clenched. She remembered Lei deceiving her. ‘No,’ she thought. ‘I will not let that happen again.’

## Chapter Ten

The Humvee convoy sped southwest out of Maiduguri. The terrain outside changed from scrub bushes, a few trees, and waist high grass to dense forest that lined either side of the dirt road. Carter’s head swiveled from side to side as he searched the landscape for threats.

Ana sat in the back right passenger seat. He wore the same baseball cap and military contractor gear as Carter but appeared so young that he could have passed for a high school student.

“I’m Harry, ma’am,” the boyish man said. “It’s really great to be here with you. I hear you’re our resident expert on viruses.”

Ana didn’t like being called ‘ma’am’. She doubted she was even ten years older than this newly minted adult. But his face was so cheerful and eager, she had to smile. “At least one

person appreciates me.” She immediately regretted the comment. She thought it sounded too passive-aggressive.

“Focus on the situation, Harry,” Carter said, not looking back.

“Yes, sir.”

“And don’t call me sir. We’re not in the army anymore.”

“Roger that, si...”

Carter’s words were sharp. Precise. Nothing like the warm, easy-going man she’d had sex with last night. And he *still* hadn’t acknowledged her.

At first, she thought it might have been something she’d done. But he had left promising they’d have a date this weekend. And he had seemed really loving. Not the ignoring asshole he was now.

She remembered feeling devastated when Feng had first told her that Lei had cheated on her with Bao. She’d isolated herself from their common friends and drowned her emotions in wine and ice cream. That had been the wrong approach for her mental health.

But her situation with Carter was different. They weren’t dating or *engaged*; and she had known what she was doing. Still, his indifference to what had happened between them stung. More than that, it annoyed her *a lot*. She might confront him about it later but, right now, she wanted to make him *notice* her.

She wasn’t the type to unbutton the top two buttons of her blouse and flirt—not without espresso martinis. And, with Harry in the vehicle, she wasn’t going to talk about what they’d done last night. She racked her brain for something that would shock Carter into acknowledging her and realized she had knowledge that would slap him in the face.

She spoke to Harry while eyeing Carter. “A year ago, there was an outbreak of Congo Hemorrhagic Fever. It was contained and the infected were isolated in a Damboa Isolation Hospital. I was brought in to study the new variant and work on a vaccine.”

Harry turned toward her; his face full of concern. But Carter’s eyes never left the road.

“Is it dangerous, ma’am?” Harry asked.

“The symptoms have a lot in common with the flu: dizziness, headache as well as general muscle aches. But it gets much much worse: abdominal pain, throbbing heads, photophobia—sensitivity to light, and, of course, there is the 30.71% average death rate.”

Harry’s face drained of color.

Carter’s eyes snapped up and stared at Ana in the rearview mirror. ‘There’, Ana thought, smiling smugly. She stared out the window, treating him like he’d treated her.

But his attitude still annoyed her. A slow simmering anger rose inside her and she knew it would soon come to a boil.

\* \* \* \* \*

Carter was hyper-focused, scanning the road and the surrounding forest for threats. He understood what Ana was doing and that she had every right to do it. He was ignoring her. He didn’t want to ignore her. She was warm, intelligent, and there was an ease about being with her that blunted the hyper-focused anxiousness he always experienced in the field. But if he became distracted, even for a moment, people died. It had happened before, and his teammate Greg Abbott had been killed, leaving a wife and three children without a father. He had vowed to never let that happen again.

And something was *wrong* with this mission. He remembered Tony saying Ed had driven ahead to help the Chinese infrastructure team and, later, his casual order to have his vehicle—the

one containing Ana—take the lead. The principal’s vehicle should never be in front. And Ed had not texted or called about the change. He remembered he had had this same uneasiness in Afghanistan right before Derek Greene...

A high whistling sound, similar to a super-sized bottle rocket, rose in volume as a streak of light and smoke speared toward them.

“Incoming!” Carter yelled, as he swerved the vehicle.

## Chapter Eleven

The front of the Humvee exploded in light, smoke, and thunder as the vehicle flipped forward like a tossed coin. They were thrown from side to side by the force. Ana slammed her head against the window and her vision snapped off.

When Ana awoke, the vehicle was on its side and she hung sideways by her seat belt. A high-pitched ringing filled her ears and the world swam around her. She noticed Carter reach down from atop the vehicle and release her seat belt. He caught her arm and hauled her up and out the passenger side door and pulled her down the undercarriage to the ground.

It took her a moment to catch her bearings. They were at the edge of the forest on the east side of the road. The underside of the Humvee had slammed into a tree.

Ahead of them, a large green military truck blocked the road. Dozens of men and boys in dirty t-shirts and fatigue pants, some not even teenagers, streamed from the truck firing machine guns at them.