

Time 2 Die

Brent Ladd

A Codi Sanders Adventure Thriller

Dedicated to my son Brady—a true friend to others, willing to give even during the hardest times, no matter the costs. He will fight for what's right, consequences or not.

Chapter One

(Based on actual events)

LONG ISLAND, NY – JULY 2, 1906 – 4:23 P.M.

Charles Henry Warren spit on the worn floorboards as he slammed his beer stein back on the battered bar, spilling some of the murky brew. “What is this filth?” he said.

The demure barmaid dipped her head as she spoke. “Sorry, sir. I will pour you another.” She wore a dingy apron with her curly brown hair tied up.

She turned and moved sheepishly toward the backroom where the good stuff was kept.

Charles was dressed in a brown custom herringbone suit with an ironed white collared shirt and matching tie. He flicked a piece of lint off his coat before pounding on the bar in an effort to speed up the barmaid. “Come now, woman!”

He had a nervous habit of tapping his middle finger on his father’s gold pocket watch that he kept in his vest pocket, always making sure it was still there and situated securely away from any pickpockets. He surveyed his surroundings. The dark room seemed to be a haven for the less desirable of Long Island. There was a smashed and partially boarded-up window where sunlight leaked through the smeared remaining panes. It illuminated the stained, abused floor that had seen its share of blood and vomit.

A man with vile breath and rotted teeth stepped up next to Charles in hopes of starting a conversation with the wealthy patron and perhaps scoring a free drink. Charles gave the ragged man a stern glare that sent him down to the end of the bar out of smelling distance. In the back corner of the room were three hard-looking men that sat around a small weathered table speaking in hushed voices. They had a collection of empty glasses that now matched their pockets.

Charles had left his bank in New York three days ago to join his family at their summer beach house in Oyster Bay, along the north coast of Long Island. The sand and sun did little for him, and a household of children had finally driven him to this seedy sanctuary—Mollie’s Tavern.

By the time the barmaid returned with a fresh brew, Charles was starting to feel over-heated. He pulled at his collar before guzzling the warm beer in a single lift. A final look around, and he stumbled out of the bar. The barmaid was surprised that just one beer would have such an effect on a grown man, but she pocketed the two bits and turned to the next patron. “What’ll it be?”

Charles had walked twenty steps before he realized that the three men from the back of the bar had followed and surrounded him. He looked up with a dazed expression.

They were skittish, glancing around for a stray witness or policeman.

“We’ll be takin’ that watch and your wallet,” the larger of the three spat out, as they closed in around him.

Their body odor was overwhelming and Charles’s eyes started to water and burn.

One of the men palmed a small knife, making sure it was seen. Charles tried to speak, but an unexpected convulsion expelled most of his beer onto the cobbled street and all over the men’s shoes. There was a moment that seemed like an eternity before the action registered.

“He’s got the fever. Run!” The three thugs ran off, shaking their shoes in a strange tango, trying to flick off the beer-infused vomit that could be a death sentence.

Charles staggered in a crooked line past the gas lanterns and horse-drawn wagons that populated this section of town. He was oblivious to the shouts and calls for him to get out of the way. His vision was starting to blur as the fever spiked his core temperature to well above 106

degrees Fahrenheit. By the time he made it back to the beach house, he had crapped his pants and was shaking profusely. He reached for the door knocker, but it seemed unattainably high as he collapsed at his front door.

Within the week, the entire Charles Henry Warren family of eleven would be stricken, leaving three dead and four more fighting for their lives.

Mary Mallon closed the door behind her and started to unpack her sparse belongings. She laid them across the wood-framed bed in her tiny new quarters. Her last job with the Warren family had ended in tragedy, as part of the family had died off. Why she had not been affected was beyond her. New York City was caught up in a recent outbreak that was ravaging its occupants. It had left Mary out of work and back on the street at a time when most families were closing their doors to strangers. Luckily, there was a demand for good cooks, and she soon booked another job with a wealthy family in Brooklyn. She palmed a small gold Claddagh and let her fingers slide across the polished surface. The ring with the crowned heart represented love and loyalty, two things Mary struggled to feel these days. She held it close to her heart as tears welled and fell.

She thought back to her life in Ireland four years ago. The Boer War had started in South Africa, and nationalism was on the rise in Ireland. The economy was completely decimated due to an extended famine that had swept the normally verdant countryside. Catholic versus Church of England woes were at an all-time high and people were leaving their beloved emerald homeland in droves. Mary had watched her parents struggle to hold on to the family farm and their way of life while slowly succumbing to depression and starvation. She couldn't be a part of it any longer and left them behind for a chance at something better—anything.

Mary made her way to Dublin and found work at the Cat's Paw Inn. The pay was non-existent, but she was provided with a room and three meals a day. It was more than most people had and a lot more than she had hoped for. Her skill in the kitchen soon made her popular with the guests. Especially one in particular.

While working at the inn, she met a young man who won her heart—Miles O'Keeffe. He was a broad-shouldered, blue-eyed salesman who made her heart race and her burdens light. Miles sold her hook-line-and-sinker on a life together, but he had no dreams of staying in Dublin. America was where his dreams lie. He had saved enough for passage, and on a wet, stormy night, dropped to one knee to propose to Mary. It was not an average proposal.

"Mary, my love, I am going to America to start a new life, and I want you to be a part of it. I will work day and night and send you all I can so you can make the crossing. We will be together and start fresh in a new land, one that is full of promise. I will make for us a life that we can be proud of, a life with a family and a cozy home. But first, I must ask you to endure some hardships and time apart. I make this vow to you now, Mary. Do you accept, my love?"

Mary had paused, considering Miles's words carefully. It was everything she had hoped for. The time apart would be difficult, but she could cope. She had left her parents, and that had been the hardest thing she had ever done. This she could do.

"Yes, darling. I long to be your wife. I will do everything you ask to make this happen."

With a face full of adoration and hope, Miles placed a small gold Claddagh on her finger. The kiss that followed was filled with passion and young love. It was a dream come true.

The six months after Miles left for America had gone slowly for Mary, but hard work and a few side jobs helped pass the time in Dublin. She saved what little she made, along with the money Miles forwarded periodically, until she was finally able to pay for her ticket to New York. The

tramp steamer would leave for America on the morrow, and the thought of seeing him again consumed her, especially since she had not received any letters from Miles in the last two months. That put her on edge with concern.

Before leaving her homeland, she borrowed a horse from a close friend and rode south away from the city. There was one last thing she needed to do before she left Ireland for good. She nearly missed the small road that led to her family's old farm. She pulled abruptly on the reins and turned the animal down the road.

The two wooden headstones had not been there when she left. The familiar names answered all her questions. Mary stepped down and paid respects to a mother and father that had given up. That was something she would never do. Deep in her heart, whatever guilt she had been carrying for leaving them, faded away, knowing that had she stayed, there would be three headstones.

Mary wiped away her tears and placed the gold Claddagh back in its hiding place in her bag. She shook the memories away and returned to organizing her clothes on a small shelf.

The Thompson home was a grand affair with a limestone façade and polished woods throughout. Mary came to replace the old cook who had displeased the master one too many times. Mary would not make the same mistake. During the interview, Mary had asked almost as many questions as the butler who was doing the hiring. Storing information gleaned about the picky eaters in the family, she would make sure not to fix anything that might upset them. Tonight, they were in for a treat, one of her specialties, fresh peach ice cream.

Mary was a slim five-foot-three woman with brunette hair that she wore pinned up. She had a round face with petite lips and large cocoa-colored eyes. As an Irish emigrant, she dreamed of one day overcoming the prejudice of her upbringing. She swept aside a single tear as her thoughts hung for a moment on the man she had held above all others, Miles O'Keeffe. The fever had taken him before Mary could reconnect, leaving behind a pauper's grave and her memories. There was, however, a promise that came with a ring—to make a better life here in America—and she was determined to fulfill that promise. After all, America was a land of opportunity, and she planned to take full advantage of it.

There was a soft knock on her door.

“Yes?”

“There is a gentleman to see you at the servant's entrance,” the housemaid replied.

Mary turned from her thoughts and did a quick adjustment of her hair in her small hand mirror. She opened the back door to a short rotund gentleman in a beige tweed suit. His hair was a bit disheveled, and his small eyes were as black as midnight. He tried to clear his throat, but it turned into a cough.

“Can I help you?” Mary asked, curious who this stranger might be.

“Are you Mary Mallon?”

She nodded with a certain amount of skepticism. “Aye.”

“I am George Sober with the city's sanitation department. I'm a sanitation engineer.”

Mary gazed at the man without expression.

This innerved George, and he stammered a bit. “Anyway, what I mean is . . . the Warren family hired me to investigate the outbreak of typhoid that took Charles and two of the children. Would it be okay if I asked you some questions?”

“Sure enough,” Mary said, as she stepped out onto the porch and closed the door behind her. “Terrible thing, that.”

“I believe I have traced the source of their sickness to the freshwater clams the family had on the first of July. Did you, by chance, eat any of those clams?”

Mary tapped her finger on her chin as she thought back to the date in question. “Yes. I ate four or five, I believe.”

“And you never had a fever or other symptoms?”

“No. I was just fine.”

“Do you remember where you purchased them?”

“Not really. That was a month ago. Maybe the fish hut on Ships Point Lane. Was a real shame, that. I loved that family. Typhoid is a nasty bugger. Hope I never get it,” Mary added.

George asked her several more questions and then thanked her for her time. He left more confused than he had been before the interview.

Mary closed the door and stepped back into the kitchen. The housemaid was hovering like a mother bird. Mary wiped her hands on her apron and started to prepare dinner for her new family.

“Who was that?” the housemaid asked.

“Some city engineer looking to blame the help for rich people’s problems.”

George Sober looked through the small window in the door. Bodies were lined up in six rows head-to-toe. The hospital was at maximum capacity. Each metal-framed bed held a patient who was struggling with the most deadly outbreak of typhoid fever in American history. Nurses and doctors did what they could for the dying and infirm. Those that succumbed to the vomiting, intense cramps, diarrhea, and high fevers were stacked like cordwood in the basement, waiting to be buried or burned. George was sure he had discovered the source of *Salmonella Typhi*, but Mary Mallon had eaten the freshwater clams just like the rest of the family, and she was fine. He would have to shift his investigation in another direction.

He needed to discover the cause and put an end to the suffering that seemed to be growing throughout the city. George knew that the toxin was spread through contaminated water or the feces of infected patients. Even flies were suspected of being able to spread it. Typhoid tended to assault the poorer sections of the city, making the outbreak in a wealthy family’s home highly unusual.

Three weeks later, two children were dead and everyone else was contaminated in the Thompson home. Mary left the house feeling only sorrow for her bad luck. She lifted her head and reminded herself that adversity was part of life and that it might take a few tries to get things working in her favor. The fever that was spreading through the town was just one more hurdle for her to overcome. So far, she had been unscathed. In fact, she felt great. That thought boosted her spirits, and she strolled down the street with renewed purpose.

“Miss Mallon!”

Mary stopped and turned to see the man from the sanitation department that had asked all those questions a month ago.

“It’s George Sober from the sanitation department.”

“I know who you are.”

“Of course. I’m not sure how to put this, but . . .”

“Go on then; spit it out! I have things to do,” Mary said.

“I think you might be a carrier for typhoid fever. You’re the only common denominator.”

Mary crossed her arms at the insinuation.

“You are what I call a healthy carrier, but to prove it, I need a sample of your . . .” George fumbled with his eyes and mouth trying to get the words out, “. . . to test it.”

“Sample of my *what?*” Mary demanded.

“Feces . . . your—”

Before he could finish, a fist struck him square on the nose. Blood gushed as he hit the ground.

Mary stepped over him in disgust. “Are you daft? I feel just fine—never had the fever. I am not responsible, ya bodach!”

She stormed off, leaving George on the ground, holding his damaged nose.

George paced as he waited for Inspector Roslyn to exit his office. His nose throbbed and both of his eyes had blackened. The New York Police Department Headquarters looked more like a church than a government building. It was a four-story monstrosity at Centre and Broome Streets built of carved limestone with crenelated columns, arched windows, and a tall central domed tower.

He could hear shouting and banging on the wall, as a man in the other room seemed to be angry with someone. After a long moment, a young patrolman scurried from the office, tears in his eyes. After a bit, the occupant, Inspector Roslyn emerged with purpose.

“George, I don’t have time for you now,” Roslyn said, as he tried to move past him.

“Inspector, you’d better make time. *I know how the fever is being spread.*”

The inspector stopped abruptly and turned back to the sanitation engineer, commonly referred to as the “shite meister” behind his back.

“It’s a woman.”

This made the inspector cock his head.

“She works as a cook and has infected everyone she has cooked for. She is what I call a healthy carrier.”

The inspector looked skeptical. “George, I really don’t have time for this.”

“She gives but doesn’t get.”

This seemed to make sense to Roslyn, as he paused and processed the information. “So what do you need? And what happened to you?”

“I need help catching Mary Mallon and testing her as a carrier . . . and . . . she punched me.”

“A wild one, eh?” he said, intrigued.

George gave a slight nod.

“Let me see if I’ve got this right. You want to use the New York City police force to catch a woman so we can collect and test her shite?”

“Exactly.”

The cat and mouse chase extended over five hours throughout the city before the police finally surrounded and arrested Miss Mallon. She was fit to be tied and continued to struggle even after being placed in a cell. She pled her innocence and tried everything she could to disparage George Sober, but women’s rights were many years away.

Mary managed to hold out for three days before the pain was too great, and she left a deposit in the provided bucket. She tried to toss the contents at the guards who barely managed to subdue her beforehand.

George had her feces tested quickly and was relieved when it came back positive for the bacteria *Salmonella Typhi*. News spread quickly that there was a healthy carrier dispersing typhoid all over the city—a woman and a veritable germ factory. Within the week, the prisoner had been given a name that would stand in infamy: “Typhoid Mary.”

Based on George Sober’s findings, the New York City Health Department imprisoned Mary under sections 1169 and 1170 of the Greater New York Charter. She was confined to a small bungalow on North Brother Island, just off the Bronx shoreline. It was part of the Riverside Hospital facility designed to isolate victims of contagious diseases like smallpox, typhoid fever, and tuberculosis.

Mary had lived in smaller rooms, but the thought of being a pariah to the civilized world did not sit well. She was allowed to venture only within fifty feet of her bungalow and had absolutely no contact with any persons. It was a prison without bars.

The exception came from the many doctors that prodded and probed her against her will. She was tested and experimented on for three years until she won her freedom in a controversial court decision. The new health commissioner, Ernst Lederle, agreed to release her with the promise that she would never cook again. It was a sacrifice for Mary to give up her true calling, but freedom was worth the price.

The smells and sounds of the city brought renewed joy to Mary. A joy she had almost forgotten living in seclusion as a guinea pig for uncaring scientists. As familiar sights and sounds filled her senses, it was like being born all over again.

The first order of the day was to put some distance between her and her now-famous moniker—Typhoid Mary. Her healthy distrust of men had grown tenfold. She needed to change her name and start over. Something easy to remember. As Mary Brown, she had a vastly improved chance to get work and start a new life. She picked up a paper and scanned it for hiring information.

After six weeks working at a laundry, Mary turned bitter. The pay was poor and the conditions harsh. She was practically homeless, and her meager two meals a day were making her too thin, and thin was not an attractive attribute for a woman. She needed to make a change, something to put her back on her feet. New York City was big enough to get lost in, and Mary Brown planned to do just that.

The Slone Maternity Hospital was looking for a cook. Mary dusted off her dress and applied. She had a natural way about her that made others feel at ease, and by nightfall, she had moved her belongings into her new housing. The hospital was a three-story building with room for up to thirty birthing moms and thirty recovering birth moms. Mary had never cooked for so many people before. She planned out her household menu and just multiplied it.

For her first night, she had something special planned—Shepard’s pie and peach ice cream. She poured heavy cream into a ceramic bowl and added fresh peeled and diced peaches. After pouring in the sugar and egg yolks, she finished off with vanilla and cinnamon. It was her specialty and a surefire way to win the hearts and stomachs of her charges, just as it had in the past. She stirred it all up with a wooden spoon until it was frothy. A quick dip with her pointer finger told her all she needed to know—delicious. It was a simple recipe that never failed to please, and it required no cooking.

In May 1915, Manhattan’s Sloane Maternity Hospital was struck with an outbreak of typhoid fever. Twenty-five workers and patients were infected, with two dead and several on the cusp. Mary had never understood the need to wash her hands, as she felt perfectly healthy. Surely, she

did not pose a risk. It was a recurring thought that had perplexed her over the last few years. She packed her bags and left the infected hospital. Maybe it was time to try a new city. She had heard good things about Chicago.

The latest epidemic was traced back to the hospital's cook, and a simple description of her had the health department back on her case. They had lost track of Mary Mallon after her release and for some unknown reason, she had gone back to cooking.

A citywide search commenced for the most deadly woman in the city's history. To date, she was responsible for hundreds of infections and an estimated fifty fatalities.

As Mary moved through the crowded streets of New York, she could feel the net closing in around her. Throughout the crowds, policemen searched with tenacity, armed with a printed image of her. It seemed like they were coming from every direction. A quick turn down an alley had her unexpectedly trapped. She tried the door at the end, banging and pleading for it to open, but to no avail. Her shoulders slumped and tears flowed as her American dream came to an end.

Mary was once again quarantined to the Riverside Hospital on North Brother Island. She unpacked her belongings in the small bungalow, knowing this was her final destination. This small cottage separated her from others on an island isolated from the world. She slid the keepsake ring onto her finger. It would be its new resting place. She was left with nothing but time and memories. One in particular that had haunted her for many years was the memory of a young lover who had made her a sacred vow—Miles O'Keeffe. A man she had lost to the fever before she had even stepped off the boat in New York.

Mary spent the last twenty-three years of her life as a virtual prisoner in forced isolation, mostly due to the public opinion that had turned firmly against her after her failure to stay out of the kitchen. On November 11, 1938, Mary Mallon, alias Typhoid Mary, died. There was no autopsy performed, and she was buried at Saint Raymond's Cemetery in the Bronx.

Chapter Two

KOLKATA INDIA – 8:35 A.M.

The state of West Bengal is characterized as one of the last British bastions in India. It stretches from a shared border with Bhutan in the Himalayas and runs along the neighboring country of Bangladesh. It finally ends at the Bay of Bengal where six major rivers end their journeys. Calcutta, renamed Kolkata in 2001, has a history as an East India trading post and is the state's largest city. Now, with a population, including suburbs, of just over fourteen million, it is an overcrowded city rich in history, wealth, and extreme poverty.

Prem rode in the second car of the electric tram. The seat cushion had worn away leaving a patinaed iron bench. He could feel every bump. The city was ripe with people, cars, and smells. Street vendors called out for customers, and on every corner, the aroma of curry and garlic competed with raw sewage. The heat and humidity were oppressive, like an overbearing mother-in-law.

The tram was overloaded, as usual, and the old electric motor could finally take no more. With a sudden *hiss*, it smoked and died, leaving the two-car street tram dead in the intersection. Within a few minutes, the entire roadway was clogged in every direction with horns honking and people shouting.

Just another day in India.

Prem followed his fellow passengers off the tram in search of another way forward. He was rail-thin with a full head of hair and a thick mustache. He wore a white collarless shirt, faded jeans, and an optimistic expression. He was about to start his new job for a medical company that was expanding in the area. He used the small signing bonus to travel up from Mumbai. The interviewer for the job had been somewhat cryptic about the new position, but Prem was not in a position to ask questions. He had recently lost his betrothed in a humiliating scandal. She had run off with another man three months before they were to be married. Prem spiraled downward and was released from his last job at a company he had worked very hard for before his implosion. This new opportunity was a rare chance at a fresh start in a new city away from the judgmental looks of friends and family.

Prem cut across three streets and hailed a cab, which was too expensive for his fellow tram riders. Within a few moments, he was back on his way.

The warehouse was an older steel structure with several pieces of siding rusted through. The back of the building had a large ramp with an access door for loading and unloading. Prem paid his cabbie, moved up the ramp, and ventured inside. It took his eyes a moment to adjust to the contrast in light. Eventually, he saw a cargo truck with several large barrels tied to the back.

An older man approached him. They greeted each other by giving *namaste*, each touching palms and bowing slightly.

"You're late," the man said. He was dressed in a dingy white lab coat and wore round-framed glasses that matched his face.

"India."

It was an excuse that seemed to satisfy his new boss, who gave a knowing nod. "Follow me."

Prem followed the man over to the older Ashok Leyland truck. The front cab looked like the head of a van, and the back half was a flatbed.

"You're going to relish this, Prem," the man said. He placed his hand on one of the barrels tied to the flatbed. "Inside each barrel are five hundred flies."

“Flies?” Prem asked, not relishing it at all.

“Yes, *Musca Domestica*. They are all females, and they are sterile. So what you are going to do is release them into the wild. Mr. *Musca Domestica* will come along and do his business but nothing will happen. Within three months the fly population will be cut by two-thirds. It’s science at its best, my boy. And it will significantly reduce the spread of disease. Next month, we are going to do the same with mosquitoes.”

He said the last part with a grand flourish of his arms. He placed his ever-present clipboard on the truck bed. “Here, let me show you what we need done.”

The man gave Prem his instructions and handed him a cellphone and a map. They shook hands, and Prem drove away with a smile that reached both ears. He was feeling happy for the first time in a long time—this was going to be a *great* new job. He was going to help make his country a better place to live.

Prem followed the map that led him out to the suburbs and into an agricultural area beyond. He was always amazed at the infinite shades of green in the countryside. West Bengal was famous for its rice, potatoes, and jute production. The terrain had plenty of water and fertile soil. He let his mind wander with possibilities. He could now afford an apartment and a motorcycle. He would be a man about town, someone whom others would look up to.

The paved road turned to dirt and then mud as Prem drove out into the state’s jungle heartland. The earthy smells were so foreign to the city life he was familiar with. After about an hour, he pulled over at kilometer marker 128, as instructed. The road was empty here. On the right side of the road were rice fields as far as the eye could see, and a small river flowed on the left. Beyond was raw jungle. Not a place you wanted to go.

Prem stepped out of the truck and stretched. He looked around but saw no cars or people. A rare sight. He followed his boss’s instructions by grasping a small lever shown to him back at the warehouse. It was mounted next to the cab, just under the bed. He gave it a yank. The tops of the barrels slid open and a swarm of black flies filled the air. What would normally be a frightening sight was glorious to Prem. He watched as they filled the air and moved and spread like a possessed black cloud. He shielded the sun from his eyes with his palm as he watched the display. The swarm surged, swayed, and eventually dissipated until there were only a few flies left in the area.

He took out his cellphone, dialed a preprogrammed number, and stood next to the truck feeling a great sense of accomplishment. He couldn’t wait to report in. As the phone rang he heard a small click under the bed of the truck. Prem looked down to see what it was.

The explosion was sudden and intense as the structure of the truck disintegrated and expanded outward. It moved through Prem as if he weren’t even there, eviscerating him and taking out a chunk of the road as well. When it was over, there was little left that could be identified as a vehicle, just a hole in the road. And an unusual number of flies in the area.

She pulled herself through the water with ease. It required complete focus to maintain every element of the task. Breathing, body movement, direction, and form. As Codi neared the end of the pool, ready to flip and accelerate off the pool wall into her streamline form, out of the corner of her eye she saw her partner, Joel, standing at the pool’s edge. Codi pulled up and looked at him curiously as she lifted her goggles to her cap, her breathing still labored but controlled.

“I think you’re losing it, Joel,” she said. “It’s Sunday morning. Aren’t you supposed to be in church?”

“I made the mistake of taking my phone with me.”

“You didn’t have to answer it.”

Joel nodded, slightly embarrassed.

Codi sighed and climbed out of the pool. Joel averted his eyes, as her lean, well-formed figure clad only in a bathing suit, shed water. He watched his partner as she stepped over to a nearby bench and grabbed a towel, his eyes starting to water from the chlorine in the air.

“Give me a few. I’ll meet you outside,” Codi said.

Joel nodded eagerly and turned to leave, ready for some fresh air.

Working for the FBI’s Special Projects division out of D.C. came with some unexpected moments, but that was all part of the job description. Codi had transferred there after a bout with the GSA (General Services Administration), where she and Joel cut their teeth on a high-profile case that launched them to celebrity status within the agency. The FBI recruited them, and it wasn’t long before they had made a name for themselves there as well.

“So what’s up?” Codi said as she slammed Joel’s car door.

He flinched at the door’s impact. Codi had always been a bit of a bull in a china shop, but Joel had mostly gotten used to it. He placed a few drops of Visine AC in both eyes and blinked rapidly as he spoke.

“I think I’m allergic to your gym.”

“No, what’s up with work?”

“Oh, boss called. He needs us to pop up to New York. Something about a stolen corpse.” Joel started his Prius and put it in gear. “Here, I got this for you.” He handed Codi a coffee cup that matched the one he was drinking.

“A stolen corpse is definitely not an FBI thing. Why us?” Codi asked.

“The city requested our assistance. It was some kind of celebrity. The New York office is slammed, so our boss gets a call from his boss and then asks us to look into it. It all rolls downhill,” Joel said, as he pulled the car into traffic.

“You have given this a lot of thought, haven’t you?” Codi said.

Joel had no answer. It was his nature to overanalyze and overthink things. Codi popped the cap off the cup and breathed in the aroma. Joel’s predilection for great coffee was well known.

“So I guess we drew the short straw,” she said after releasing the aroma with a satisfied sigh.

“That’s all I have so far,” Joel said.

Codi replaced the lid and took a sip. “This is good coffee. What is it?”

“Mandheling beans from Sumatra. They use a wet hulling process where, after they remove the skins, they ferment the beans overnight to break down the mucilage. That gets—” Joel realized he had gone too deep when Codi gave him a sideways glance that said *seriously?*

They drove on in silence for a bit, each sipping from their cups.

Codi broke the silence. “So tell me . . . what’s going on with your Mountie?”

“She has a name,” Joel replied.

“I know she has a name. I introduced her to you.”

“You did? I don’t remember that.”

“Stop deflecting, Joel.”

“We have date this Friday,” he said sheepishly.

Shannon Poole of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) was stationed in D.C. as a liaison officer. She had teamed up with Joel and Codi on a particularly tough case involving terrorism, launched, in part, out of Canada. Joel just managed to hold his own against the brash street-smart operator. She had saved his life, and he had returned the favor twice. The seemingly

odd couple had found common ground, and they were now making consistent time for each other in their lives.

Codi was happy for her partner who had struggled after the untimely death of his last companion. He had been powerless to save her, and she died in his arms, which put a real dent in his normally optimistic personality. But Codi could see the old Joel returning.

“I’m happy for you—for both of you,” Codi said.

“Thanks,” he said with a growing smile.

“New York, huh . . . I could go for some good pizza. Wake me up in four hours.”

Pullin Ikaika stared in the full-length mirror. He loved the face that was staring back—the body, the mind, everything. At six-foot-three and 230 pounds, he was an imposing figure. As he buttoned up a starched white dress shirt, he glimpsed a tribal tattoo on his chest that told of his roots. A final inspection had him removing a micro-spec of lint on the lapel of his ten-thousand-dollar custom silk suit. It was tailored not for comfort, but to display his physique. To Pullin, appearance was a source of power that could be wielded as effectively as a gun. He was the very image of vanity wrapped in an ego that only extreme wealth could sustain. He was a ruthless man who delighted in using the backs of others to propel himself forward. Had he ever taken the time to see a therapist, the word *sociopath* would have come up, but Pullin had no time for such trivial pursuits.

He turned and collected his Richard Mille, Pablo Mac Donough watch with its double skeletonized baseplate and titanium bridges. It had a black bezel with a unique see-through crystal. Built to withstand the rigors of polo, but this watch had never seen a horse. Pullin opened a drawer and pocketed two of the day’s burner phones. At fifty-two, he still had all of his dark brown hair. His olive-colored skin gave him the appearance of a permanent suntan, and his irises were so dark, they looked black. High cheekbones and a strong jawline made him attractive to both women and men alike, but he had little interest in emotional and physical connections. He wasn’t gay, bi, or heterosexual; he was asexual. To Pullin, there was no one in the world more desirable than himself. Humanity was nothing more than a virus, and viruses left uncontrolled could be dangerous. Which reminded him. He hit the plunger on one of the many hand sanitizers stationed throughout the house. It was an unconscious act that was repeated often throughout the day. He rubbed his hands together until they were dry. He was now ready to begin.

The house was much more than a house; it was a compound with a sandstone façade and a gray slate roof. Set on five acres of lakefront property on the Nevada side of Lake Tahoe, it was one of the last homes built on the lake before the state park took over the shoreline. The main house was twenty-five thousand square feet. It had numerous bedrooms and plenty of room to entertain hundreds. But Pullin did little entertaining. This was his sanctuary, his place of respite.

A second building on the property was built to match the main house. It was a large rectangular two-story building covered in solar panels with several satellite dishes. There was a parking area behind it and a covered walkway between the two structures. This was where Pullin’s businesses were run. He had satellite offices in several cities across the globe, but he kept his allies and best employees close. For example, Edgar Fallman on the financial side. The man was a wizard with numbers and accounts. He considered himself the Ivar Kreuger of modern times.

The thirty-something Welsh-born numbers man could cook the books and still make the IRS think they were getting the lion’s share. He had been working for Pullin for just over three years now. Edgar was fastidious to a fault, always primping and mirror-checking his reflection—not a hair out of place. He had learned the behavior from his boss and was the ultimate suck-up. His

attempt at being a “mini me” was not lost on Pullin, who showed complete indifference to his employee’s actions. He was more concerned with results; that’s what spoke the loudest to Pullin.

The office interiors looked like a cross between a luxury home and a Wall Street financial office. There was a mix of fine couches and chairs with natural woods used throughout. Standup desks blended with touches from local artists, all connected with the latest technology. It was the best of both worlds, and Pullin ran his companies like his own personal Monopoly game, but he collected at every turn.

The real surprise on the property was the underground structure. Just outside the office complex was a small stone building with a large set of glass double doors and a sophisticated entry system. It led to a foyer with a staircase leading downward and an elevator large enough to haul equipment. Two stories underground was one of the most sophisticated labs in the country. There, they could splice genes and repair or rebuild DNA and RNA. Viruses and bacteria could be grown, altered, and killed, and vaccines could be designed, replicated, and modified. It was the beginning of something much larger that was beginning to consume Pullin’s thoughts and actions.

Pullin stepped into his favorite room in the house. It was bigger than some people’s entire home and lavishly appointed with polished woods and handmade tiles. The back wall had four screens, each tuned to a different financial channel. News of an outbreak of a superbug strain of typhoid in India caught his attention. He pressed the volume button on a remote and listened carefully to the reporter.

“Over one hundred are now dead, as health officials battle a new superbug version of typhoid fever spreading across the state of West Bengal. Authorities have moved to quarantine the area. This particular superbug has proven to be resistant to all known antibiotics so far and is spreading unlike any previous outbreak here. Our hearts go out to the families of those—”

Pullin hit the mute button. He checked the Indian stock markets, the BSE, and the NSE. Both were in a free-fall. The small twinkle in his eyes was all that revealed his joy of the millions he would make over the next few weeks. Millions he could put to good use.

Chapter Three

BRONX – SAINT RAYMOND’S CEMETARY – 1:47 P.M.

The gravestone was a solid chunk of gray granite that matched the darkening sky. It was carved with a curved top, lilies, and a simple cross. There was an empty hole in the ground in front of it about twice the size of an average coffin. Police tape, flapping in the wind, surrounded the scene, encompassing a fresh pile of dirt on the right side. Codi looked around. This was an old section of the cemetery with many unique headstones lined up head-to-toe, side-to-side, all leading toward a small hill. There were a few trees around, but otherwise, the place was eerily vacant.

“Mary Mallon, died November eleventh, 1938 . . . My Jesus mercy,” Joel said, as he read the headstone’s engraving.

“I thought there was a celebrity angle here. Who’s Mary Mallon?” Codi asked no one in particular.

Joel took out his phone and started a Google search.

“Typhoid Mary.” The voice from behind them startled Joel. He turned to see a thirtyish Black male with short-cropped hair and a dazzling smile. He was wearing jeans, a blue button-down, and an off-the-rack sport coat. The badge clipped to his belt introduced him before his mouth did.

“I’m Detective Jennings. You must be our FBI agents. Sorry no one was here when you showed up, but there is really nothing left to guard, and with our budget cuts, the office didn’t see the point. Besides, hanging around in a cemetery seriously creeps me out.”

They made introductions, and the detective gave them one last look of appraisal. “They sent two of you, huh?”

Codi disregarded his comment and knelt by the hole to inspect it. Joel raised his hand and then realized what he was doing and put it down. “Did you say Typhoid Mary, as in *the* Typhoid Mary?” he asked, afraid of the answer.

“That’s right, Mary Mallon, *the* Typhoid Mary.”

Joel’s face turned white and he stepped back from the grave. The wind seemed to pick up.

“Though what someone would want with an old skeleton is beyond me,” Jennings said. “Although, Halloween is coming up. I suppose it could just be some prank or a creepy satanic ritual. Maybe the bones are going into a giant cauldron.”

Codi ignored his babble. “It looks like it was dug with hand shovels.”

“That’s our opinion as well,” Jennings replied.

“Why do you think the FBI got called up on this?” Joel asked.

“New York has a lot of history. Not all of it good.”

“9/11,” Joel piped up.

“Sure. But Mary Mallon might be responsible for more deaths than any other individual in our history. The mayor asked for the FBI’s help, not us. The last thing he needs is a bunch of conspiracy theorists spinning this into a public panic or another health crisis.”

Codi stood and faced Jennings.

He said, “Frankly, I’m glad you’re here. My plate’s a little full, so let me know if I can be of any assistance. There’s nothing more I got on this case—no surveillance footage, no real evidence, and no suspect. And right now, I got a real murder to attend to. Good luck.” Jennings turned to go.

The wind picked up as the sky continued to darken. A storm was coming.

“Hey, detective!” Codi called out. “Do you know where we can get a good slice?”

“Try Louie and Ernie’s down on Crosby.”

Joel and Codi watched, somewhat stunned, as the detective effectively washed his hands of the case and left.

“Looks like we got ourselves another hit show,” Codi said.

“One that is politically charged.”

“Great. Well, at least we got the 411 on some good pizza.” Codi smiled sarcastically. “Come on let’s get out of here. This place is creepy.”

The FBI office in New York City is located on Federal Plaza in Lower Manhattan. Codi and Joel were given a small back room on the thirty-seventh floor. The room had old carpet, one folding table, and three metal chairs. It was lit with vintage recessed fluorescents. There were no windows and only one door. The only decor was an extremely faded picture of J. Edgar Hoover and a sunrise photo of the Statue of Liberty.

They had sent a forensic team down to the cemetery in hopes of finding clues while Joel set up his laptop and started in. Codi sat next to him waiting for their next move. This was the hard part of her job, but one thing she had learned in the military was patience.

At five-foot-eight, Codi could hold her own with most men. She was an avid swimmer and took physical fitness seriously. She had even competed in college in both relay and as an individual. She had a lean, fit figure with long brown hair and intense brown eyes flecked with gold. Some would say that Codi was driven, but that would be selling her short. She used intelligence and tenacity to make her way forward without being afraid of good old-fashioned hard work. She knew that being a woman required more effort on her part and that was something she relished. But over time, Codi realized there was more to life than job success. She had found herself seeing a bigger picture and actually allowing an emotional relationship, something she had never had before.

After graduating college with top honors, Codi received several promising opportunities. But she left them all behind and joined the Marines as an enlisted soldier. She had something to prove to herself and to her dead father. After three arduous years, she was one of the very few females ever admitted to BUD/S training. Becoming a SEAL was her do-or-die goal. Nothing would stop her from achieving it. Nothing except a misogynist “boys club” that conspired against her. She was forced to tap out or DOR (drop on request) after a tragic injury left her ankle shattered, along with her dream. She would never forget the pain as she rang the brass ships’ bell three times, signaling her exit.

Afterward, Codi spiraled down into a dark place that cast her out of the military and practically on the street. Eventually, she phoenixed from the ashes of despair and destructive behavior. The experience had changed her in many ways. She found there were some things more important than success. She found a softer side and married it to her driven side. It allowed her to appreciate others in a way she never had before.

She accepted a job as a GSA agent where she was responsible for tax and fraud cases, essentially a paper cop. Though she felt like she had let herself down, Codi put her best foot forward. She embraced the job with fervor and quickly got the attention of her superior, Director Ruth Anne Gables, a strong, politically connected leader who took Codi under her wing. She pushed Codi when needed and supported her when there was trouble.

Codi was assigned to work with Joel Strickman, a computer-savvy agent with a heart of gold. His wiry frame and unkempt blond hair framed his naturally positive curiosity for life. They had found success bringing justice to several individuals who had defrauded the US government. But

it took a cold case from the 1940s to bring them into the light. It had started benign enough but quickly escalated to international implications and, ultimately, global terror. It pushed Codi to her breaking point and unleashed her full potential. She battled impossible odds to bring down a madman bent on world destruction.

It seemed the harder she was pressed, the harder she pushed back. It wasn't stubbornness but determination born of a confidence her father had instilled in her at a young age. In the end, she was credited with saving hundreds of thousands of lives.

The case got her noticed at the FBI, and now, she found herself in a position as Special Agent Sanders, assigned to the Special Projects division based in the D.C. field office. For Codi, her career was back on track, and even her personal life was finding its groove. It was a good time to be her.

She glanced at her phone, hoping for a text from Matt—Dr. Matt Campbell—the man with whom Codi had become involved. They had met on one of her first cases when they were nearly killed at the hands of a madman—twice. The resulting stress formed a bond that was stronger than either was willing to admit.

After the case, they spent nearly a month together convalescing. During that time, Codi and Matt had time to heal their physical wounds and discover a love neither was expecting. Eventually, work pulled them in different directions, stunting the growth of a relationship with little time for maintenance.

Recently, Matt had taken a job at a think tank in the D.C. area. At first, his close proximity put pressure on the relationship, but they re-found their stride and things were going very well. Codi and Matt had become a couple, and that was both strange and awesome. Now, she would do everything in her power to not mess things up. But fate always seemed to have its way.

“So what do you think?” Joel asked.

Codi leaned forward in her metal chair. “I think I’m going to have to cancel my dinner with Matt tonight, and this room smells like a mix of old air conditioning and carpet cleaner.”

“Yeah, it’s making my nose run,” Joel said.

“Can’t you access this information remotely?” Codi asked.

“Sure.”

“Then let’s get out of here. This place stinks.”

“There’s a highly rated coffee shop nearby I’d like to try.”

“Perfect.”

Dr. Erwin Mahl was getting a headache. He had been strenuously focusing on his microscope for over two hours. It was still his preferred method over viewing the HD screen illuminated right next to him. He pushed back in his chair and used his long bony fingers to rub the bridge of his narrow nose. He was a short gray-haired man of Bangladesh heritage. He was extremely thin and had never been able to put on weight. His large dark eyes seemed alien-like on a giant head that held prominent ears that stuck out like two satellite dishes on a redneck’s trailer.

Nearly twenty-five years ago, Erwin’s father nationalized the electrical grid across Bangladesh and took it over. It had made the family extremely wealthy, but money can be fleeting. His only son, Erwin, had come to America to study biology. He started out with a large house just off the UCLA campus in Brentwood and a nice Porsche 911s. Things were good, and he was looking forward to college life. Halfway through his matriculation, however, everything changed. Bangladesh authorities raided his family’s business and reclaimed what they felt was rightfully the

government's. The drama that ensued caused his father to succumb to a massive heart attack. His mother fled the country with only the clothes on her back.

Erwin picked her up at the airport. She was inconsolable for the next several days. He felt powerless. He made a vow that he would take care of her every need. He gladly sold his house and car and used the money to help them buy asylum in the States. It had been a struggle, but with a few student loans and a side job, Erwin eventually got his degree and graduated with honors. He made good on his promise to his mother. He slowly worked his way from a small apartment to a condo and eventually a beautiful home. Erwin's mother grew older and fell prey to influenza one winter. A simple but deadly flu stole the breath from her lungs. He was melancholy for a brief period and looked for someone to blame—too many people at the grocery store who didn't wash their hands or some idiot sneezing openly in a line. But he would never know.

An alert on his smartwatch pulled him from his thoughts. The expected delivery was here.

"Siri, open the loading door," he said into his watch. He grabbed a handful of peanuts and left the room.

Dr. Erwin Mahl stepped into the back loading area next to the elevator as the truck's driver and passenger carefully rolled the rotting coffin into the room. They placed it on a large stainless steel table with wheels.

"Any trouble?" Dr. Mahl asked.

"None whatsoever," the driver replied, as he dusted himself off.

"Good. You didn't open it did you?"

"No way, doc. Not in the job description." He gave Dr. Mahl a wry smile.

"I should have something more for you two in the next couple of days. So take some time off, but keep your phone on."

"Of course," the driver replied as the two men headed for the elevator, already planning their depravity for the night. They walked with a posture and gait that came from intense military training. *Special forces*, Dr. Mahl surmised. Though they had been nothing but professional, they still made him uneasy. His boss did the hiring and stratagems outside the lab. Dr. Mahl would have to trust his decisions.

He placed a mask over his face and pulled on safety goggles. He wheeled his new arrival back into the lab where he began to carefully remove and discard anything that wasn't human, including the scraps of clothing that remained on the body. The corpse was still intact with grayish rough skin sucked tight against the bones. The mouth was open in a never-ending scream from beyond and there was still some hair on the scalp. Dr. Mahl loaded the remains into a specialized grinder and hit the green button.

A sound reminiscent of a fork caught in a garbage disposal ensued. After a few minutes, Dr. Mahl removed just over three liters of a fine tannish-gray powder. He poured two liters into a large Pyrex jar and added one-and-a-half liters of a ten percent solution of sodium hypochlorite (NaOCL). He used a glass rod to stir the mixture until it resembled a runny pancake batter. The mixture was then drizzled across porous paper, eventually becoming a thick paste. He scraped off the paste and spread it across a pane of tempered glass. He then set the glass pane in a dryer and set the timer for twenty minutes.

Dr. Mahl removed his gloves; it was time for a snack. He had an extremely high metabolism and needed to eat every few hours or his body would literally start consuming itself. He chewed on some carrots dipped in chutney. He often thought that if he could isolate the defective gene that caused his metabolic problem, he could sell it as a weight-loss product.

“I see you have started without me,” Dr. Kamba said as she entered the room. His colleague was a tall thirty-seven-year-old Kenyan woman with a broad forehead and tight cornrows in her hair. She had been working with Dr. Mahl for several years, and they had developed an efficient non-verbal communication system. They had met in a lab in South Africa a few years back, and she immediately impressed him with her attitude and aptitude. She was extremely bright and one of the best sounding boards he had ever worked with.

“You are welcome to finish what I have started,” Dr. Erwin Mahl replied. “We have a large sample, and I feel confident that we will have our answer soon.”

“That is very good news,” she said as she moved over to the table where Dr. Mahl was standing.

“How’s the chutney?” she asked.

“*Hmm . . .* mango chutney, and it is very good. I have a friend that shipped it to me.”

A beep from the dryer told them it was time for the next step. Dr. Mahl watched as Dr. Kamba followed a procedure developed by Hochmeister and Budowle, placing the purified powder in equal parts of phenol-chloroform and isoamyl alcohol. This mixture was then covered and set aside to digest overnight.

“There we go. Now, we just have to wait,” Dr. Kamba said as she set the sample on the shelf.

“Let’s start a second batch so we have a backup,” Dr. Mahl said. His mind spun with the task given him. It seemed impossible, but this new sample might just change everything.

The swanky little café was decorated in French country chic with old-world-style wooden tables and an eclectic collection of antique chairs. The bar had two red-and-chrome La Pavoni brewers and a good selection of beans. Joel did the ordering while Codi found a comfortable place for them to work with plenty of natural light. As they sipped their coffee, Joel opened his laptop and used a VPN to securely access a search engine. He would not be able to access FBINET this way, but he had a way around most computers. He adjusted his glasses and read from a page he had selected.

“Typhoid is a bacterial infection that can cause a high fever, diarrhea, and vomiting. It can be fatal and is from the bacteria *Salmonella Typhi*. The infection is often passed on through contaminated food and drinking water and is more prevalent in places where proper hygiene is not in place.”

“People rarely washed their hands back at the turn of the century,” Codi said.

Joel shuddered at the thought. “I could never have lived back then.”

He continued, “Typhoid Mary was the first person identified as an asymptomatic carrier of typhoid. She never showed any signs of being infected and worked as a cook. She is credited with infecting hundreds of people and somewhere around fifty deaths.”

Joel clicked his way through several more pages. “Although here, it says only six deaths for sure.”

Codi leaned over to look. “I guess they had no real way of connecting the deaths back to her then,” she said as she took a sip of her hot coffee.

“Probably. There have been other asymptomatic carriers, just not documented.”

“That’s the problem. You don’t show any symptoms, so you’re not on the radar. If Mary hadn’t been a cook, they would never have found her.”

“And she wouldn’t have killed so many people,” Joel replied.

“True.”

The afternoon rolled on with limited useful information.

Codi’s mind started to drift back to a recent trip she had taken.

Three months ago, she made a trip to San Diego to see some college friends and to reconnect with her estranged mother. Growing up just north of San Diego had been a fulfilling experience. Her father was a demolition diver for the Navy, or UDT, a job that sent him away for long periods of time. Conversely, when he was in town, he was very active in Codi's life. She took to the water at an early age, and her dad taught her to swim and surf almost before she could walk. He took her camping and taught her basic wilderness skills, including gun safety, maintenance, and shooting. Codi flourished and soon found that few people were faster than her in the water.

Her idyllic family dynamics came crashing down the day her father passed. The toll it took on her mother could never be quantified. Codi's mom spiraled into a psychological abyss. There were many days when her mother disappeared, and Codi was sure she would never come back. It forced her to grow up fast and trust in only one person—herself.

Codi used her dead father as a spirit guide, pushing herself to extremes to make him proud, competing at everything she did. She would never forget the look on her mom's face when she shared her plans to follow in her father's footsteps and join the military. It cracked open the widest fissure yet that had separated them. Codi found herself alone, with no support system, forcing her to succeed or fail on her own. Ultimately, it made her an overtly driven woman with something to prove.

Codi met her mom for lunch in a small café in San Diego. A brief hug was followed by a few awkward moments. Eventually, a conversation started and they found detente. Codi was not looking for an apology. Each had reacted to the death of a husband and father differently and that was how life often worked. They would never be close again, but at least they could be on speaking terms. The conversation seemed stilted and forced at times, but they muddled through with a promise to do it again.

Joel read from his browser, "It says here that, on average, two hundred thousand people die each year from typhoid."

Codi snapped from her thoughts. "Two hundred thousand? That's crazy. I've never heard anything about it in the news."

"That's because typhoid typically hits the poor areas of the world."

Joel scrolled down looking for something that might be relevant to their case.

"Do me a favor, will you?" Codi asked. "Check out the last two months in regards to anything new about typhoid fever."

Joel typed furiously and then paused as something seized his attention.

Codi looked over. "What?"

"There was an outbreak of a superbug strain of typhoid in India last month. . . . Something about it *spreading in an unusual way*."

"Superbug?" Codi asked.

Joel adjusted his position in his chair. "Yeah. It's a strain of the toxin that's resistant to all known antibiotics. It's quite lethal. Hundreds of people have died so far."

"How is that even possible, this superbug?" Codi asked as she sipped on the dregs of her cold coffee.

"Well, each time a bacteria goes up against an antibiotic, a few versions of the disease survive. Natural mutations."

Joel turned, leaned toward Codi, and put his elbows on the table. "Imagine if you were to take those survivors and replicate them. Now, do it all over again with another antibiotic. Eventually, you would have a superbug that could not be killed by any known medicine. Scientists have been

warning us for years that it was coming.” He leaned back with a shiver. “It gives me the chills just to think about it.”

Codi looked up for a second while she processed this scenario. “This isn’t one of your late-night conspiracy theories, is it?”

“No, I saw it on the news. Plus, there was the Spanish flu. That was a superbug that killed nearly a hundred million people in 1918. The strange thing with that was the people it killed were usually the stronger, healthier ones. Their immune systems reacted to the flu virus by going into a sort of hyperactive mode. It was the uncontrolled immune reaction that damaged their lungs rather than the virus, and they filled with blood and other fluids, eventually drowning them.”

“Ahh. Was the superbug in India man-made?” Codi asked.

“Not necessarily. Over time, nature can do the same thing. It’s called cellular Darwinism. That’s why I try to never take antibiotics. I want to keep my immune system at full strength,” Joel said proudly.

“Okay . . . hypochondriac much?”

Joel’s smile suddenly died.

Chapter Four

UNDISCLOSED LOCATION – NEVADA – 1:47 P.M.

After collecting the DNA from his sample, Dr. Erwin Mahl placed it in a gene sequencer. He programmed his requirements and hit enter. A panel of lights blinked while tracking a predetermined course of action. He was hoping he and his colleague could isolate the flaw in the sample's genes or DNA that had allowed the famous Typhoid Mary to be asymptomatic to typhoid fever and effectively immune from the disease. He reached into his drawer for a quick protein bar. The tests would continue into the night.

"I'm right behind you with the second batch," Dr. Kamba said.

"I've been thinking . . . let's completely separate our efforts and see if we both come to the same conclusion."

"Excellent idea. I'll have an answer a couple of hours behind you. Right now, however, I'm beat. See you in the morning," Dr. Kamba said, as she headed for the door.

"Yes, the morning, Doctor. Thank you. I do need to get home and get some sleep myself."

Dr. Mahl stood. He felt sure he would get his answer. Now, all they had to do was find a way to alter a person's genetic code to make a vaccine. This was the cutting edge of science that he had trained for all his life.

He reached for the light switch and turned to look back at his desk with a hopeful, and at the same time, helpless feeling. Science had always required brave, open-minded professionals to break new ground and discover the unknown. Sometimes, it took several lifetimes; sometimes it came in leaps and bounds. Dr. Mahl was hoping for the latter.

The half-swing on his club sent the ball spiraling into the air with a ton of back spin. It hit six feet from the pin and practically stopped on a dime. Pullin wiped the grass from the top of his shoes with a small towel from his bag before doing the same to his clubhead and putting it back in the bag. The early morning air was dry and crisp. It would be a perfect autumn day. He had started his round at 6:00 a.m., as he did every Thursday when he was in town. Pullin had the whole place to himself. The course would delay opening until he was finished. Golf was one of the few sports where you could compete against yourself. He had no need for the camaraderie or competition of others. This was his time to reflect and focus, letting his mind go for a spell. It was when some of his greatest ideas had come—alone on the golf course. His head of security, a man named Crispin Gales, was the one man he allowed to tag along. Mostly because he would carry his clubs, but also because he knew how to remain silent while scanning the surrounding area for possible threats. The man was a model of efficiency—at times more robot-on-a-mission than human—but always professional.

Gales was a South African mercenary who had done much of the heavy lifting for Pullin over the years. A rare mix of Black and white from a time when his country was strictly segregated, his extremely short light-brown hair topped a face with a permanent scowl that he even took to bed with him.

Pullin lined up his putt and swung his arms pendulum-style through the ball with just enough force to send the ball toward the hole. He recalled growing up poor near the north shore of Oahu in Hawaii when he found an old rusty set of golf clubs that had been tossed inside a dumpster.

Young Pullin took the set and cleaned it up. He then sneaked onto a local public course in nearby Kahuku after it closed just before sunset. The experience had been thrilling, but his game was a disaster. He had collected three range balls and lost them all after only two holes.

But young Pullin was not discouraged. He found more range balls, and after-hours golf soon became a regular endeavor. He smiled at the memory of his humble beginnings as he watched his ball circle the cup and ultimately drop. He had come so far from that elementary school kid with a set of rusty old clubs.

The memory of Kahuku pushed him to the time when, as a young man, he was involved with the HSM, Hawaiian Sovereignty Movement. The group was dedicated to putting Hawaii back into Hawaiian hands. His Polynesian brothers, after all, were not separated by land but were connected by water. Each of them had watched as Haoles (mainlanders) and Gigenes (Chinese) raped and pillaged their homeland for nothing other than a dollar. Deforesting and clearing nature with little concern for the fragile ecosystem. He had seen it time and time again as he traveled and expanded his business. Man, by nature, was reckless and greedy with little regard for the future of our planet.

Back in the day, the locals had tried to fight back, but nothing they ever did was enough. Pullin convinced a select few that it would take violence to tear the outsiders from their profits. The group spent many nights planning the perfect attack on a local hotel in Waikiki, the hub of their hubris. On the night they were to initiate the operation, the Five-O (local slang for police) came down on them hard. It turned out that one of the brothers grew a conscience and ratted everyone out. Pullin managed to escape by hiding in a patch of bushes at Fort DeRussy. His dreams of a better Hawaii shattered with shaking fear. He was now a person of interest to the police. The next morning, he left his homeland, hoping to come back and start again one day. The fear was now something he had erased and managed, but his passion to make a difference had only grown.

Currently, things were very different. He could buy and sell an entire golf course just for the fun of it, and he could change not only his homeland, but soon, he would have the ability to change the entire world to better fit *his* design.

A buzzing in his pocket had him reaching for one of his phones. He flicked it open to see a thumbs-up emoji. Pullin checked his watch and waited a few moments while he opened a website in his browser. He hit a few keys and then dropped the phone and smashed it to pieces with his heel.

The next tee was a dogleg to the left. Crispin handed him the number one wood and watched as his boss placed the ball carefully on the tee exactly three-quarters of an inch above the grass and then stepped back. Everything in life required precision and perfection, and Pullin would not shortchange himself today. He addressed the ball, pulled back, and swung through, hitting it dead center, the text already forgotten.

Garrett Scott waited until he had a signal and then logged onto his VPN. He navigated to a twitcher site called Birdbrains. He scrolled down and found the drafts section of the message board. He checked the time and leaned back to wait the two minutes and thirty-eight seconds until the top of the hour.

He was a blond-haired, blue-eyed contractor who specialized in fixing problems—any problems—commonly known in the corporate world as a fixer. In his younger days, he had been part of Denmark's Jaeger Corps, their army's special forces division, where he had specialized in unconventional warfare. The teams had been cross-trained by some of the best in the world, including the SEALs, Recces, and SAS.

After two tours of duty, Scott left Jaeger Corps to take advantage of the money being poured into mercenary contract work. He had proven himself on many occasions and soon moved up the ranks of skill and clientele. At the age of forty-two, he had seen and done it all. In his current job as a fixer, it was like being a tiger among lambs. He so rarely came up against a worthy opponent, it was laughable. The world's corporate riff-raff was unprepared for violence, and it required very little on his part to bend the narrative in his bosses' favor.

At precisely 1:00 p.m., an *H* popped up. This was his cue. He typed a reply to the only person in the world that shared his ID on the site. *Watched the site, 2 F agents and 1 detective are all that are left on the case. Should lose steam within 2 weeks. Site already being covered back up.*

Garrett Scott watched as the words started to delete before his eyes. Then a new message began. *Take no chances. Clean up on aisle three.*

He nodded to himself and then deleted the words. He logged off, leaving an empty page behind. He knew what needed to be done—the removal of three government stooges. It seemed overkill to him, but he was the doer, not the planner. Good-doers did as they were instructed. And he was very good.

“Chicken made from plants? Interesting,” Matt said through a mouthful of food. He seemed to be chewing much longer than usual. The two sat at Codi's small dining room table amid candlelight and soft jazz. The sun had set long ago and a full moon cast a blue glow on the room's sheer curtain.

“Yeah,” she said. “It's supposed to be way healthier than real chicken. I got everything from this little health food store on D Street. The lady there helped me pick it all out. Figured we should try and eat more healthy with the schedules we keep and all.” Codi said the last part while trying to chew the rubbery faux chicken herself.

Now that Codi was back from New York City, they had finally made time for dinner together. She convinced Matt that she would cook something special, not a side of her she had shown him before. He seemed very enthusiastic to be a part of her culinary world, but with every chew, that enthusiasm was waning.

Matt reached for his glass to wash down the food.

“What is this stuff?” Matt asked, smacking his lips and making a scrunched-up face. He was trying to place the flavor of the beverage.

“Kombucha. It's good for you. Filled with probiotics or something.”

“Just not so good for your taste buds.” He still tried to be grateful for Codi's attempt at making dinner.

They sat at the zinc-covered table in Codi's apartment. The lighting was low and there was even a small pumpkin spice votive candle. Codi's attempt at a romantic and healthy dinner was an incredible gesture, and she had gotten half of it right. Matt was determined to eat it all. He took another bite and began the prolonged chewing process required.

“So what's new with you and Joel?” he asked.

“Oh, you know, Special Projects, just trying to bring another dead case to life.” Codi took another sip of her drink. “You're right; it isn't good. I think I have some wine left over in the fridge.”

“Fridge wine's gotta be better than . . . what did you say this was?”

“Kombucha.”

“Bless you.” He smiled.

“Funny.”

Codi opened her refrigerator and located the re-corked bottle of Chard.

Codi and Matt had found that comfortable rhythm couples have when everything is going well. They would try to get together two or three times a week and did their best to have actual conversations rather than just sitting around texting each other back and forth on their cellphones and sharing the occasional meme. Codi came to enjoy these moments, as they were a great way to unplug from the drama of being a special agent for the FBI.

She grabbed two glasses, poured from the half-empty bottle, and then sat back down. “Okay, where were we?”

“To us.” Matt lifted his wineglass.

They clinked glasses and each took a sip hoping to remove the taste of the Kombucha from their palate.

“How long has this bottle been in your fridge?” Matt asked.

“Honestly, I have no idea.” She started to laugh. Some of the wine dribbled out of her mouth. Matt soon followed, and they were lost in the moment. After a bit, the laughter died out. Matt leaned over the small table. Codi met him in the middle. It was a metaphor that matched their relationship, each giving equally. The kiss lasted only a few seconds, but the passion behind it lingered.

“Burger and a beer?” Matt said.

“That sounds wonderful.”

They got up and left the apartment, leaving everything behind on the table.

Supervising Special Agent (SSA) Brian Fescue stepped into the conference room, carrying his laptop. Codi’s boss had a casual way about him that hid the seriousness of his position and the cases he often oversaw. His Jamaican heritage was something he was proud of, but his accent he kept well hidden until he became upset. Brian was about three inches shorter than Joel, but he was built like a tank. And his cappuccino-colored eyes seemed to get to the truth no matter how hard you tried to hide it. He was good to his agents and worked just as hard as they did. Codi, and even her partner Joel, had flourished under his tutelage.

It was not often that he had a chance to meet with all of his agents at once. Most days, they were off following up leads or buried in the enormous load of paperwork the government agency seemed to thrive on. Today’s meeting, however, had been on the books for quite some time.

SSA Brian Fescue smiled as he padded across the gray carpet toward his seat. He was wearing a fitted blue suit with a white collared shirt and a magenta paisley tie with a matching pocket square. He loosened his coat button as he sat at the head of the rosewood veneer oval table, surrounded by black office chairs, each holding an agent from his team. Behind him were a whiteboard and a pull-down screen.

After a particularly intense case that Brian had first worked with Codi, he stepped away from the field and into an office job. His wife had given birth to their second child, Abigale, and he felt strongly that the field was no place for a good family man.

He was a committed husband and father. When the administration offered him his current position, he was happy to take it. A chance to blend the job he loved with the home life that was so important to him. He was now the driving force behind the FBI’s Special Projects division based in the Washington D.C. field office. He had recruited Codi and Joel. Together they had solved

several cold cases and had become two of the division's shining stars. Their results had gone a long way with the brass to confirm that Brian was the right man for the job.

"Thanks, all, for being here this morning," he said to the group. "I wanted to say you have been doing some solid work, and it has been noticed. So good job." Brian cleared his throat and continued. "We are currently closing more cases percentage-wise than Special Projects has ever closed, and I attribute that to you. So, kudos!"

Codi clapped her two pointer fingers together in a silent but sarcastic, *Yay!* Joel reached over and tried to pull her hands down. Brian ignored them and hit the remote that lowered the screen as he continued the briefing.

"As you know, from time to time, we are asked to help out with other departments' cases, depending on the nature of the case and how busy they or we are. Today I come bearing gifts. We have been asked to help out the Cleveland office and the Denver office with two pressing cases. Both offices are overloaded."

Brian powered up his laptop and plugged it into an HDMI cable leading to a projector. The screen lit up showing his homepage. A happy family photo partially covered in icons popped up. The photo was taken three months ago during the Fescue's summer vacation. His wife, Leila, and their two children, Tristan and Abigale, could be seen smiling for the camera just before a giant wave was about to wipe them out.

The peanut gallery remarked on the kids taking after their mother and other silly comments before Brian could click over to the page he wanted. It left him with a proud smile as he read the list of cases to be distributed.

Each case was assigned to a team, and the e-files were sent to their corresponding emails. Brian always had agents in mind as he assigned cases, but he was willing to listen to their pushback.

"Now, I also have a few cold cases that have new leads that have come back to life. A couple of them have been haunting the FBI for decades."

"If it has anything to do with D.B. Cooper, I'm out," Codi said. "Been there, done that."

She and Joel had hit a dead end with the famous skyjacker cold case when a Washington teen found a wad of the missing ransom money along the Colombia River.

"Well, funny you should mention that." Brian turned his attention to Gordon Reyas. "There has been a team of retired investigators working the cold case, and they claim to have solved it. They identified D. B. Cooper as a former CIA man, Robert something-or-other. The main office wants us to take a look at their findings. Maybe you and Anna can finally put this one to bed?"

Gordon and his part-time partner Anna nodded their heads.

"Good luck," Codi said.

"And last, but not least . . . Tylenol. It's all yours, Codi and Joel."

Brian finished up the meeting and again thanked his team for their hard work. He ended with, "And remember, slow and steady wins the race. No unnecessary risks, please."

He left his agents and headed over to the main offices for a budget meeting with his higher-ups.

"Tylenol? What is he talking about?" asked Codi, as they walked back to their offices.

"I have no idea, but I could use a couple right now. I've had this headache all morning," Joel said while rubbing his temples.

"Probably a brain tumor. You should get checked."

"You might be right. I should call and set an appointment for an MRI."

"Joel, it's a headache. Relax, you'll live longer."

Joel nodded, realizing she was undoubtedly right. Codi just rolled her eyes as they entered his office. Busting her partner was one of her favorite pastimes, and anything along the hypochondriac scale was just too easy. Joel was the perfect partner for Codi. He was super book- and computer-smart with a streak of loyalty as long as they come. His tendencies, however, to go by the book and overthink things were both very fixable in her mind, and she had managed to move the needle somewhat in her direction.

Joel took out a bottle of Tylenol from his desk and chased two capsules with bottled water. He opened his computer and clicked on the file Brian had sent them and read the caption. “‘The Tylenol Murders.’ What?”

“I seem to remember something about this. Some nut case put sodium cyanide inside Tylenol capsules,” Codi said.

Joel suddenly turned pale as he started to read the file. A light sweat beaded on his forehead as he fought the rising panic. He had just swallowed two Tylenol capsules!

Codi smiled to herself and played with the thought of how long she should wait to tell him. She decided to give him a break.

“It was back in the eighties; nothing to worry about now.”

Joel calmed slightly as the two agents read through the file.

The week of September 29th 1982, seven people died from sodium cyanide poisoning within the Chicago area. The toxin was loaded inside Tylenol capsules. Once authorities realized the source, they worked with the media and manufacturer to warn people and recall all Tylenol from the market. Police drove through residential streets using bullhorns to warn people, “Don’t take Tylenol!” They also went door-to-door, collecting bottles. Announcements were made on school intercoms, radio, and TV. It cost Johnson & Johnson over \$100 million in recalled product alone.

The FBI quickly realized that the tampered bottles came from various sources, so sabotage during production was ruled out. The culprit was most likely buying Tylenol from several stores around the Chicago area and then replacing the acetaminophen with cyanide inside the red and white capsules. They would then return to various stores and put the bottles on the shelf.

During the investigations, a man named James William Lewis sent a letter to Johnson & Johnson demanding \$1 million to stop poisoning their product. Police were unable to tie him to the crimes, as he and his wife were living in New York City at the time. He was, however, convicted of extortion.

“Several suspects were investigated,” Codi said. “But no one was ever officially charged. Hmm. So I guess we get another crack at it.”

“That case was the reason we now have tamper-proof bottles today that none of us can open,” Joel added as he read further.

In 2009, Illinois authorities renewed the investigation, and federal agents searched the home of Lewis. They seized a number of items, but nothing ever came of it.

“So he didn’t do it. What’s the new lead?” Joel asked.

Codi scrolled through the file to an addendum at the bottom and read the notation. “Prison confession. Looks like we’re going to the Windy City. No, make that Tamms, Illinois. Wherever that is.”