

Prologue

May 15, 2012, Meando Point, Africa 8:07 p.m.

The thin man sat, a laptop balanced on shaky knees; death the only other presence. How many hours since he'd slept? Twenty-seven? Thirty, maybe. A gas lantern threw the tent's only dim light and the heat was intense, even at night. It crawled up from the dirt beneath his feet and slid up into his pant legs. His name was Dr. John Valley, and he hated Africa. Hated the flies and the smell, and most of all the dust. A fine layer of it covered every surface; likely even his lungs. He turned back to the report on the glowing screen.

"Initial sample subjects: Three. Older female expired this morning, six minutes after one o'clock a.m., child expired four-forty-two p.m. Third subject, female age twenty expired eight-ten p.m. Quarantine effective. No other villagers exhibit signs or symptoms of disease. Evacuation of area and return to United States May 16, 2012. Samples obtained and transported."

Valley closed the laptop and slid it into the carrying bag. He shoved away from the makeshift desk, the metal folding chair leaving deep tracks in the red earth below. Clearing his throat, he moved to the tent's entrance. A yellow contamination suit, similar looking to an astronaut's, lay in a heap on the floor. He pulled it on quickly, experienced now at buckling the straps and attaching the bits of Velcro. The suit was followed with a heavy mask and respirator, then a pair of latex gloves. The inside of the mask was still damp and smelled faintly of sweat. He picked up the waiting biohazard containment cooler near the door flap and pushed it open. He couldn't feel the air, but knew it was hot; the high keening of cicadas penetrated the hooded mask. Quickly looking both ways, he entered a smaller tent to his left.

An inky, fetid darkness had slithered into corners of the tent and curled into pools on the dirt floor. A puddle of dull, yellow light fell over the figure of a woman on a sweat-stained cot. A sheet covered her body. Her limbs had a mind of their own, desperately jutting out of the sheet, trying to find coolness in the oppressive heat. The smell, Valley knew, would be nauseating; the metal, sticky scent of blood, feces and a residue of disinfectant.

The young woman had once been beautiful. Her face, now crusted with wet sores, was piteous. She moaned. Valley moved to the foot of the cot, tucking the thin sheet tightly around her feet and calves as he went. He worked his way up her body, leaving her left arm protruding from the shroud he had created.

With gloved hands, he secured a tourniquet to her upper arm, pulling it taut. He extracted two vials and a syringe from his coat pocket. Skillfully, he inserted the needle into her vein, adjusting it slightly so that the flow of dark, maroon liquid began. He was not rough, but businesslike, as though she were a car he was repairing. When the second tube was full he capped it and placed it into the small cooler, holding his breath until the tubes were secure within the layers of foam.

"There, there." The doctor spoke quietly through his mask, his eyes moving over her face. "Are you hot?" She moaned again. He dipped a cloth into a bowl of tepid water on the floor, wiping it over her face.

"This will all be over soon," he murmured. The wiping stopped and the woman opened her eyes. Valley balled up the cloth, shoving it into her mouth and covering her nose with his other hand. He leaned his weight against her. She gagged, gasping for air that wasn't there. Her body shook; arms and leg straining under the thin swath of sheet. He looked away. She struggled more and more weakly against his hands. Finally, her weight released into the cot. She stopped struggling.

He sat for a moment longer, watching a beetle cross the dirt floor in front of him. It meandered drunkenly, affected by the heat, maybe. He checked for a pulse. Finding none, removed the cloth from her mouth, and dropped it to the floor. He closed her staring eyes, and pulled the sheet up over her face.

Valley walked from the tent, the cooler in his hand. The darkness was pressing, lit only with the hot tips of stars. He pulled off the respirator and gloves, dropping them in the dirt outside the green tent. The air was nearly as hot outside as it was in, but it was not fetid. It wasn't filled with the scent of death and hopelessness and fear. He breathed deeply and smiled.

Chapter One

Day One

Albany, New York

The private phone rang shrilly in the pristine office. It was late, nearly midnight. The noise broke the quiet so cleanly that the man jumped, startled.

"Yes?"

"It is I. Everything is in place." The voice was low, melodic.

The man sighed, passed a hand over his face.

"I need your go-ahead before I begin."

"Yes." The man closed his eyes against the visions before them. Once this began, there was no going back.

"Yes, go-ahead?"

"Yes."

"It's done."

The caller hung up. The man spoke to his empty office, the dark night pressing around the windows like smoke. "God help us."

Burlington, Vermont

Everett James was late. As though a genetic trait, he accepted the habit like his brown hair which waved where he didn't want it to and eyes which required glasses. Snider, his editor, wasn't so accepting. The big man might have his third coronary attack if a single sentence of this trial, let alone the prosecutions opening statement, was missed.

Everett bounced his palms on the steering wheel. Three more blocks to the courthouse. Parking on Main Street was of course, impossible. The parking garage two blocks up? It was pouring out, water gushing along the side of the road like a small brown river; litter bobbing up and down like tiny flood victims.

He slammed on the brakes as a hippie in a purple headdress and a mane of thick coiled dreadlocks walked off Church Street without looking in either direction. "Shit," Everett said. He sighed and waited while the woman meandered across the street, mangy dog trotting behind her. A dirty grey piece of clothesline connected the dog's collar to the woman's thin wrist. They were both soaking wet.

A black SUV was edging out of a spot. Everett nosed in, grabbed his black bag and ran to the white stone building two blocks away. Rain pelted the back of his jacket, soaked his Converse sneakers and drenched his hair before he'd reached the wide stone steps, steep and slippery in the rain. He pushed his way into the courthouse just as the prosecution was closing his opening remarks. Everett could tell by the "...and so, ladies and gentlemen of the jury," that it was nearly over.

The room was cavernous, chandeliers, probably weighing a thousand pounds each hung from the pressed tin ceiling. A damp smell of wet umbrellas, and jackets, and dust motes permeated the room.

The prosecuting attorney swaggered back and forth in front of the jury box, his finger stabbing accusingly at a blond man in a pale blue suit who sat at the defense table. Everett spotted a seat toward the middle of the room, smiled apologetically at the people he had to climb over to reach it. His wet bag dripped all over them and he racked up a few glares and an irritated, "Hey! Watch it!" from the man sitting nearest him. He tucked the dripping bag under his chair. Trying to ignore the icy looks and listening intently, he retrieved the laptop from his bag and woke it with the press of a button.

This was a murder trial for a guy named Campbell; a murder with grisly details and disturbing photos entered as evidence. The man had allegedly killed his elderly father who suffered from Alzheimer's, his wife of four years, and their small son methodically. He'd then, again allegedly, deposited their bodies down a ravine at the back of their house. The defendant sat at his table with his lawyer, looking rather comfortable. In fact he seemed fascinated by what was being said about him by the prosecution. He leaned, chin in his hand, mesmerized by the prosecuting attorney. His own lawyer leaned over to him and whispered something. The defendant moved his hand back under the table, continued smiling. The attorney whispered something else. The man stopped smiling.

Everett stayed for most of the afternoon, listening to the slow drone of the defending attorney's voice, uncomfortable in his damp clothes and soaked shoes. When the trial broke for the day, Everett saved his notes and tucked the laptop back into his bag. He stood, stretching loudly which earned him another glare and mumble from the guy to his right. Everett's stomach growled. A hotdog with extra relish and mustard sounded good.

Outside, the rain had slowed to a misty drizzle. He didn't see the hotdog guy around, and his stomach growled again. He walked up Church Street, a pedestrian-only brick street in the heart of Burlington. It featured an eclectic mix of posh clothing stores, head shops and Vermont-made products. Everett followed the street up to the top of the block where a Starbucks was housed inside the mall. The smell here was always the same; the bitter, warmth of coffee and the dry scent of books and newspapers.

It was crowded today. He ate a sandwich and burned his tongue on a tall mocha latte. After he was finished eating, he pulled out his laptop and started organizing his notes.

An hour later the place had cleared out. Two baristas behind the counter were laughing and talking as they cleaned the machines, setting out fresh pastries and cookies in the glass cases. His cell rang. He answered it on the third ring, trying to move his notes without splashing his second cup of coffee on them.

"Yeah, it's me," his boss's voice boomed. "You know that article we ran yesterday about the new building complex going up downtown? Well, the contractor has some issues with your quotes. Serious ones. Get your ass back to the office. We need to talk."

St. Albans, Vermont

Bayview Senior Housing lay on the outskirts of St. Albans Town. The town, smack in the middle of the agricultural county of Franklin was one of fourteen towns spread over six-hundred and ninety or so square miles. An exporter of maple syrup, milk and more recently, organic produce, its residents were a diverse mix of farmers, yuppies, artists, entrepreneurs and low-income families, some several generations' poor.

Bayview, where Ava Morely parked her aging sedan, was made up of residents mostly from the latter group. Her Honda chugged twice, hard and loud, before quieting.

The name of the decrepit facility was a mystery. The only water on the property trickled from a broken fountain, a cement block which was cracked in three places and had graffiti sprayed onto its base.

The building was dilapidated, its paint peeling. The porches trying to run away from the fake brick. This housing complex consisted of three different, equally ugly, squat brown buildings.

They formed a wide "U" around the broken fountain, which was bordered with some straggly flowers. The lawn was brown and looked as well done as an overcooked steak.

Ava adjusted the big black nursing bag on her shoulder and walked up the front sidewalk. It had been during her younger sister, Megan's second and last cancer diagnosis that Ava had decided to return to school and become a nurse. Her parents, she guessed, would have been proud of her degree had her graduation not occurred two weeks after their younger daughter's funeral.

She swiveled a hip to keep the bag from sliding from her shoulder and pulled the front door shut behind her. A nearly overpowering scent of unwashed bodies, cigarette smoke and something chemical filled the airtight stairwell. She'd forgotten the Vick's Vaporub; it helped with the odors.

Mr. Langly, an old guy in apartment one, didn't believe in bathing. It wasn't an assumption on her part; he'd told her that he hadn't bathed in more than two years. He was trying for some kind of record.

Today she was here for a new client visit. The elderly rarely called of their own accord; most often a concerned relative, a worried neighbor, or clergy member contacted the agency. This one though, had been a self-referral. The notes were sketchy but it seemed the woman had a nervous disorder, possibly a misuse of meds. Ava climbed the stairway to apartment 407 and knocked. Nothing. She knocked again. Nothing. She waited a few polite minutes and then knocked very loudly.

About to give up and slip her card under the door, it finally opened. A wizened woman, stooped and bent, stood in the crack between the door and the frame, the chain pulled taut. She wore a white house dress dotted with faded blue flowers and a brown sweater. Her hands were claw-like with arthritis and her shoes had Velcro closures. Ava smiled as the old woman peered uncertainly through hazy blue eyes.

"Mrs. Johnston?"

"Call me Violet." Her voice was surprisingly hearty.

"Violet, I'm Ava Morely. I'm with St. Albans HomeCare."

"I know, I know." Violet cut in, waving her hand at the door's chain. "Hold on while I get this blasted door open, would you?"

The door opened slowly. Violet stood with her arms askew.

“Well, are you going to stand there all day?”

It was hot and dry in the apartment and there was a faint smell of cat urine, though pets weren't allowed in the building.

“Not much to look at are you? One of those bookworm types.”

Elderly people, Ava had learned in her fourteen months on the job, often forgot, or more accurately gave up caring, about a little thing called manners.

“Ha.” The old woman spat on the bedraggled carpet.

“Come this way.” She said over her shoulder as she limped down a short hallway. She led Ava into a tiny, white bathroom.

“This here's my morning poo. You need to see it?” The old woman asked, lifting the toilet lid.

“Ah,” Ava said. “Looks great.”

Violet snorted, shaking her head.

“You're new, ain't you?” she asked.

Ava nodded.

Violet snorted again, then chortled. “I know you didn't need to look at my poo. I was just testing you out. New nurses, you have to be sure they aren't too squeamish, you know?” She flushed the toilet, slammed the lid shut and moved over to the clawfoot bathtub.

Ava's cheeks reddened.

“Since you're a new patient of HomeCare, Violet, I'm here to do an initial assessment. I need to listen to your heart, take your blood pressure, that type of thing. Is there somewhere else we could...”

“Hold your horses, missy. I got something I need you to help me with first.” Violet smacked her lips together, arms akimbo. She stared intently at the bathtub.

“This here's where I've been having problems.” said Violet. Ava surveyed the bathtub.

“You mean getting in and out of the tub?”

Violet waved her hand dismissively. “Nah, not that. I'm as spry as my Uncle Henry. He hopped in and out of the neighbor woman's bed until he was 96,” she said. “My problem is that I've got a,” she looked around the room suspiciously, “a peeping Tom.”

“I see.” Ava said, stifling a laugh.

“I take my bath here nightly. And that's when I hear it.” She looked at Ava, squinting.

“Hear what, exactly?”

“That's when I start hearing the thumping.”

“Thumping?”

Violet went on to describe in detail her bathing rituals. It was when she ran the water, Violet said, that she noticed the thumping.

“Have you heard the noise at other times?” asked Ava.

Violet thought for a moment, extra wrinkles creasing her forehead.

“Yup. Sometimes when I'm starting the dish water.”

“Ah. Violet, have you had the super take a look at your pipes recently?”

“Nope. I'm on a fix-ed income.” She said fixed as though it had two syllables. “Besides it ain't the plumbing. It's that Bob Pench. He lives next door to me and he's a...” She stuck out her bottom lip, making her look like a bull dog. “He's a peeper, that's what.”

Ava nodded her head and murmured, “Hmm.” Mr. Pench, Ava knew, was not a peeping tom. He was nearly as ancient as Violet and couldn't see past the length of his arm.

“Well, I can certainly speak to him, but it seems to me that the thumping might be coming from your water pipes. It tends to be a pretty common occurrence in older buildings. But Violet, I’ll talk to Mr. Alps about taking a look at your plumbing.”

Violet frowned at Ava.

“It’s that man.” she insisted. “Trying to get a look at my plumbing when I’m naked.”

Ava cleared her throat. “Like I said, I’ll be happy to speak to Mr. Alps--”

Violet cut her off.

“You take a good look around, see if you can find a hole. I’m going to make me a drink. You want anything?”

Ava shook her head.

“Violet, I really need to start this paperw--”

“I’ll be right back.” Violet retorted, shuffling down the hall and Ava looked around the bathroom again. With a pipe wrench she might be able to fix the problem herself.

Fifteen minutes later, Violet tottered into the living room where Ava had balanced the laptop on a rickety coffee table. The old woman was wobblier than before, holding a child’s sippy cup in one hand. Ava swore she smelled gin.

“You find the hole where that man’s been a peeping?”

“No, I sure didn’t. But Violet, I really need to get started on this paperwork. In order for us to provide you with nursing services--”

“Bah.” she said. “Yoush don’t havta do that. I don’t want no nursing services. I needed someone to find that peeper.” She took another sip of her drink. “No peepers. What kinda help are you?” she uttered this last bit under her breath.

Ava followed the now tipsy Violet to the door. The dreary hallway felt surprisingly fresh and cool after Violet’s stifling apartment. Ava turned back to the door which was shut firmly in her face.

“Violet, I’d really like to have you reschedule your appointment with us,” Ava said through the flimsy door.

“We offer a sliding fee scale,” she continued. “Most of our services are paid for by state and federal grants, so if you’re worried about money, you don’t need to be.”

Violet didn’t seem worried. She muttered, “yeasch, yeasch” and belched. Loudly.

So much for sweet little old ladies.

Chapter Two

It had been a long day. Ava longed to go home, crawl into pj’s and watch an old movie with her good friends, Ben and Jerry. She stopped at Naples Market for a caffeine fix instead, stirring three nondairy creamers and two packets of sugar into a dark roast. She paid the heavily tattooed girl at the counter and returned to her car, opening all four windows. A cold drink would have made more sense. The humidity was high and the temperature in the mid-eighties.

Mrs. Georgia Wallace, Ava’s last patient of the day, was at the Franklin County Hospital on Westover Street. Ava sipped the coffee and inhaled; the dark smell welcome. She headed east on Route 104. The road cut through farmland, red barns set like rubies against a background of emerald green.

Looking out over the wide fields dotted with black and white cows, Ava inclined her head closer to the open window and breathed deep. The air smelled of earth and new green leaves. She turned up the volume when Blondie's "Heart of Glass," came on and smiled.

Fifteen minutes later she stepped through County's automatic sliding doors which opened with a squeak. To her left was the small closet of a room dedicated as gift shop, to her right, the elevators.

Marvin, the security guard, sat crookedly on a metal stool. He was probably her age, originally from Mississippi where she'd gone for her first bachelor's degree.

She smiled and waved. He waved back, tiredly.

"How're you doin' Miss Ava?"

"I'm fine, Marvin. How's your new baby? Still keeping you up at night?"

Marvin smiled.

"Yes ma'am, he sure is. That baby has got some lungs on him. Takes after his mama."

Ava laughed and got into the creaking elevator.

Georgia was a transplant from Virginia. Though she'd lived in Vermont for the past twenty-seven years, natives to the state would still refer to her as a flatlander. The term described anyone who wasn't born and raised in the Green Mountain State. More stringent Vermonters considered anyone who couldn't trace their roots back seven generations to not be a "real Vermonter."

Room four-hundred and two was large and had the same smell that hospitals are known for: leftover food, and chemical cleaners; of disinfectants trying to cover the scent of something unhealthy. County was a lot less luxurious than Hill Crest, the private hospital in Burlington. Here, beds lined each side of the room, staggered like uneven teeth. There were four in this room and three were full.

"Ava!" Georgia outstretched her arms, a smile on her face. Ava squeezed through the maze of clear tubes and hugged her.

"How ya doin', Sugah?"

"I'm good Mrs. Wallace. How are you feeling?"

"Oh, I'm feelin' much better. Much better. My fever is gone and praise the Lord, my coughing is nearly done too!" Mrs. Wallace had been admitted with pneumonia more than a week ago.

The woman in the bed nearest Georgia Wallace grumbled something under her breath and rolled to her other side, facing away from them.

"That's Rebecca," Mrs. Wallace said in stage whisper, "she's done tired of hearing me preach the Good Word, I'm sure." She smiled hugely, seemingly unfazed by the woman's disgust.

"Well, I'm glad to hear you're feeling better. I brought you something."

Ava pulled a Tupperware container out of her big handbag and handed it to Mrs. Wallace who was holding her hands together as gleefully as a child at Christmas.

"Tell me those are some more of those Caramel Apple Bars, please!" she said.

"They are."

Technically, visiting nurses weren't supposed to have favorite clients. But who wouldn't love Georgia Wallace? Ava deposited one of the gooey bars on a napkin and poured Mrs. Wallace a glass of water from the pink plastic pitcher.

Georgia groaned in pleasure as she bit into the bar, crumbs tumbling down her johnny.

"Mmmmm, girl you can bake. Ever think of opening a bakery?"

Ava laughed, shook her head.

"Well, I thank you my dear. This was awfully good of you."

There were a few minutes of companionable silence as Georgia enjoyed her treat. She sighed finally, in mock bliss.

“Do you have any good stories?” Ava asked. Georgia liked to wheel herself as close to the ER as she could get, basking in the drama of incoming patients and embellishing the stories for her visitors.

“Oh, Honey, you just wait until I tell you about the goings on last night.”

Fifteen minutes later the woman’s eyes fluttered to stay open.

“Mrs. Wallace, you need some rest and I need to get back to the office.” Ava set the container on the side table. “You take care of yourself and I’ll stop in later this week.”

Mrs. Wallace yawned, smiled at Ava.

“Maybe I will take a little nap. Thank you again, Sugah. You’ve got a heart of gold.”

Ava squeezed the old woman’s hand. She was already dozing.

* * *

The man was tall, arrow straight and dressed in a cleric’s collar. His suit fit his body like a glove and the aging nurse at the station, Alice, couldn’t help but notice as he passed.

He murmured a soft, “good evening,” to her and smiled. He had beautiful straight teeth, she noticed but when she looked at his eyes, her breath lodged in her throat. Blue as ice, so blue in fact, they looked nearly white. There was a hollow, doll-like quality to them, like looking into the strange eyes of a shark.

Alice nodded, tried to keep her face impassive. She watched as the priest walked down the hallway to the left of the nurses’ station, and entered room four four-hundred and two after knocking gently on the door.

She shivered, rubbing her rough hands over her arms. If it was true that the eyes were the windows of the soul, that priest was damned.

Early a.m., Albany, New York

The man’s cell phone rang during a break in the early morning meeting. He excused himself from his colleagues and their pastries and stepped into his office. He shut the door before flipping the phone open.

“Yes?”

“It’s done.”

He breathed out, relieved.

“All went according to plan at the hospital?”

“Yes. An elderly woman; it won’t take long.”

“Good. And now?”

“We wait. The virus will spread like wildfire; hours not days. Stay calm; I will be in touch.” The melodic voice faded silently and the man closed the phone slowly. It had begun.

County Hospital, St. Albans, Vermont

Betty Saberth, R.N., was tired. It had been a rotten night. She’d burned her hand ironing her scrubs before starting her shift at eleven p.m., nearly rear-ended a pickup at a stop light on Main

Street, and been cursed out by William Hawthorne, one of the newest surgeons, who didn't like the way she'd made notes in one of his patient's charts.

Her shift had ended five minutes ago, but she had one stop left to make: Room four hundred and two. All the women were resting. Betty moved to Georgia Wallace's bed, adjusting the old woman's thin cotton blanket. Georgia was a favorite of hers. Betty wished she were awake now, so she could ask Georgia for advice.

Her mind kept going back to the conversation, or more accurately, the reaming out she'd gotten by Dr. Hawthorne. Why couldn't she ever think of a quick comeback when one of the doctors lit into her? She knew how to make chart notes. She also knew she was a good nurse. But confrontation always sent her spinning, her brain mixing up signals and words so that she stood there, mute, unable to defend herself.

Her stomach was hot and tight as she replayed the conversation again. Leaning over Georgia to grab the water pitcher from her bedside table, she noticed a peculiar smell. It was a mix of sourness and burnt metal. Odd.

Betty went into the bathroom to get a fresh washcloth for Georgia. She wet the cloth, turned the water off, walked back to the bed and turned on the small nightlight beside the elderly woman's bed.

She gasped, cloth dangling from stiff fingers. Georgia's face, which had been turned away from the door, was covered in open, pus-filled sores. Clear liquid oozed from the sores, streaking over the wrinkles. The odor, Betty discovered, was emanating from the sores. She stepped back involuntarily, dropping her cloth on the floor before running out the door and back to the nurses' station. This was not pneumonia. And it wasn't the flu. *Definitely, definitely not the flu.* This was something much worse.

Hill Crest Hospital, Burlington, Vermont

Thomas McCourt was scrubbing up when he overheard one of the nurses, Mary, talking with the anesthesiologist.

"County... I guess it's spreading pretty fast." The rest of her response was lost over the sound of water in the sink running over his hands.

Mary came up alongside him, his gloves and cap ready in her hands.

"Have you heard about that Dr. McCourt?" Thomas shook his head, stretching his hand toward the sterile glove.

"I guess County has a pretty serious strain of influenza. Started with an elderly woman this morning and it's already spread to eleven people. I heard that it has some of the same signs as Avian, but it seems to be spreading even more quickly. Of course, when you stack patients up like firewood, well...that's what happens." Thomas nodded, but his stomach tightened. Some medical professionals forgot that patients didn't want to be treated in tight conditions any more than doctors and nurses wanted to practice in that way.

"Do you know if it's contained?" Thomas asked, moving toward the door to surgery with his hands held up in typical pre-surgery position. Why wear sterilized protection if one was going to touch a germ-infested door?

"I haven't heard," said Mary. "The first patient, an elderly woman showed signs in the early hours but it's progressing fast. In fact," she paused, backing through the door and holding it for Thomas, "they're concerned that it might be hot."

A hot virus was airborne and something that every medical professional feared. Nearly impossible to contain, they were medical professionals' nightmares. Often the only choice was complete quarantine. To quarantine a full hospital, particularly one as overcrowded as County, would be a logistical nightmare. Thomas would call his colleague, Dr. Michael Brown at County when he finished his surgeries this morning.

He drew a deep breath, clearing his head. The patient lying on the table in front of him needed his full and complete attention.

Burlington Gazette Office

"What do you *mean* you missed the prosecution's opening statement?" Snider's voice shook his office windows. Everett sat calmly in front of him, cup of coffee balancing on one crossed knee. Snider was forever lambasting one staff member or another. Last week he had had Joni, the woman in charge of the obit section, in tears for some minor infraction.

"I'm sorry. It was an unavoidable delay..."

Snider bit in, a bulldog after a steak.

"Your *unavoidable delays* are really starting to irritate me, James! You better get your act together. Fast. Got me?"

"Yeah, uh, sir."

Yesterday he'd gotten chewed out for his quotes in a feature story he'd written on a new development company. Apparently, the contractor of the project at Burlington's Waterfront had felt his quotes cast him in an unfavorable light. Journalism ethics were on Everett's side, but that didn't keep Snider from reaming him out. The development company paid big bucks for full color ads in the *Gazette* and Snider wasn't about to put those on the line. Ethics be damned. Snider waved a file in Everett's direction.

"What do you know about this viral outbreak over at County Hospital?" He continued without waiting for a response. "Lulu's working the story but she doesn't have the sense of an anteater. I want you over there, talk with the doctors, nurses whoever. And for pity's sake, get whoever's in charge of the Pandemic Response Team. Forget the PR people! They're just going to put a sweet spin on disaster. There could be a hundred bodies stacked up and they'll be talking about the new paint job in the waiting room."

Snider waved Everett towards the door.

"What are you waiting for? A raise? Don't hold your breath, James."

Everett walked out.

"And close the door, would ya?"

Most of the staff had bets going on when Snider's next heart attack would occur. The man was a ticking time bomb. Everett cracked his knuckles and sighed. It was going to be a hell of a day. First stop, his office. Second, to sweet talk Lulu into turning over all the info she'd gathered on the viral outbreak.