

Blakesville, North Carolina

Luke carefully broke apart the moss used to hold in moisture during shipping of the burgundy *Phalaenopsis*, then set the orchid inside the clay pot, half-filled with a bark mixture to allow air circulation around the roots. He lived in an apartment a few blocks from the practice, and so had prevailed upon his father to build the greenhouse in the backyard of the Victorian. He heard the door open and glanced over his shoulder to see his father enter, gnawing on a pork chop.

“It’s past eight, you coming up for a bite? Fried pork chops, mashed potatoes and gravy.”

“What about vegetables? How can I continue preaching good nutrition to our patients when you set a bad example?”

“I got vegetables.”

“What?”

“Hot sauce. Made from peppers and they’re vegetables.”

“I give up. Just need to finish potting the *Phalaenopsis*. While you’re standing there, can you dip the *Vanda*?”

“Which one’s the *Vanda*?”

“Hanging over your head. And remember to use the distilled water.”

“Why didn’t you just say the pink one?”

Angus filled a bucket with distilled water from a plastic gallon container on a shelf, then unhooked the pink orchid and dipped the hanging roots into the bucket. “Just once?”

“Just once.”

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“Ever ~~think~~ instead of spending your time with *Vanda* and *Phal*—the purple one, maybe you should be out having fun at a club, ~~boogyin’~~ the night away?”

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“First, I like my orchids—they have a calming effect on me. Second, there are no clubs in Blakesville. And third, no one boogies anymore.”

“Well that’s the damn problem. How am I ever ~~gonna~~ get grandchildren if you spend all your time with posies? Linda Mackie likes the cut of your jib. Why not—?”

“Forced to eat her casseroles, I’d be dead in a week, which means you’d end up with no grandchildren and having to take care of Hilda Morehead’s ass rash yourself.”

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“Fair point. But there are lots of fish in the sea. ~~Which~~ reminds me, I need you to go to the Family Practice Seminar in Washington. It’ll be good for you. Get out of town, check out all of the new ~~fish~~.”

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“No way.”

“Only three days. Walt says we have to send one rep to satisfy our continuing education requirement ~~or~~ he’ll be forced to raise our malpractice premiums.”

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“Damn lawyers.”

“~~Can’t say I disagree, but~~ we have to protect ourselves ~~as~~ best we can, ~~which~~ means someone has to go. I’m the boss and I choose you. When you get there, you can look up your cousins.”

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“Come on, Dad . . .”

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“Relax, ~~just go~~ do what other single guys do at conventions: ~~have a drink, chase a girl.~~ Luke’s expression clouded, and Angus’s tone softened. “It’s been almost two years, son. She’d want you to move on.” When Luke didn’t respond, his father patted him on

the shoulder, and went back into the house.

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Luke forced his mind to remain in the present. He finished stabilizing the orchid with more of the bark mix, then set it where it would get indirect sunlight. He filled the mister and spritzed the bark and the delicate leaves, then turned off the light and left.

Now that he thought about it, he was a little hungry. He wondered how much time he had to talk his dad out of sending him to the conference.

The last thing he needed was three boring days in Washington, D.C.

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Atlanta, Georgia

Dr. Guy Yost walked past Edna and entered his office.

“How’d it go?” she asked.

“Fine.” He knew his tone was abrupt, but Edna’s hurt feelings were the least of his concerns right now. He closed the door behind him and removed his suit jacket. The Director had been suitably impressed with his report and at this very moment was on the phone to the Secretary of Health and Human Services. He seriously considered going home sick, but Nora would know something was up—over the last week she’d already asked him a half dozen times what was wrong, and didn’t accept his answer of “nothing” for a moment. No, he would stay and follow his scheduled routine. Act normal. Which meant traveling up to Washington the next day to speak at the Family Practice convention, the absolute last thing he wanted to—his intercom buzzed and Edna’s voice broke his train of thought.

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“Amy just called and wants to come up to see you. Are you available?”

Amy Bishop had been with him for less than a year, but already was one of his best lab assistants. She grew up on an Iowa dairy farm and did her undergrad at University of Iowa, then went on to graduate in the top ten percent of her med school class at Michigan. She could've gotten a job anywhere, but said in her interview that she'd chosen the CDC because she wanted to be part of a team protecting the entire country from catastrophic harm, rather than help patients one at a time. Guy was very fond of her cheerfulness and optimism. Whenever the nightly news bummed him out, painting a bleak future for America, he'd think of Amy and feel better.

“Send her up.”

“Actually, she’s standing right here,” said Edna through the intercom.

A moment later Amy entered. Barely 30, her blonde hair, rosy cheeks and rounded figure made her almost a caricature of a mid-Western farm girl. The first thing he noticed was that she wasn’t smiling. Amy always smiled.

“Good morning, Amy. How are you?”

“Fine, sir.”

She appeared nervous. “What can I do for you?”

“Um, it’s about the samples from the Korean students.”

Guy instantly felt the hair raise on the back of his neck. His throat dry, his voice raspy, he urged her to go on. “Yes?”

She set a thin manila folder on his desk. “In accordance with our standard redundancy protocols, I, uh, re-tested the samples and, as you’ll see, the results don’t match—”

Guy rose out of his seat. “You did what?”

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She instinctively took a step back. "Sorry, I ~~thought~~—"

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"Did it occur to you that when the Deputy Director himself, that's me, performs the ~~testing~~—which included, by the way, five re-tests—most people would consider that more than sufficient? Unless you're questioning my qualifications."

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She took two more steps back. God, she looked like she might start to cry. If she did that, he might lose it. He softened his voice. "Sorry for my tone. As you know, ~~the~~ results are very troubling and it has me a bit on edge. I apologize for raising my voice."

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"No problem, sir."

"Good. Now as you can imagine, in a day or two the rumors will be ~~flying high~~ across the media." He held up her manila folder. "So I need your word that any views you might have which might be considered in conflict with my findings will not be shared with anyone."

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"I understand, sir. Of course." She exited as quickly as she could without breaking into a run.

Washington, D.C.

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Esther Shipley scrubbed her face hard without worrying about her make-up. She would've loved nothing more than ~~to immerse~~ herself in a long, scalding shower to wash his smell from her body, but ~~she didn't want to spend a minute more in the townhouse~~ than she had to. She straightened her skirt and buttoned her blouse up to her neck. Maybe if he couldn't see her ~~breasts~~ she'd ~~be able to~~ avoid his usual goodbye grope. After taking a deep breath, she forced a smile and opened the door.

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George Clay was just where she'd left him, lying naked in the king-sized bed,

wrapped in sweaty crumpled sheets.

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“Thought you fell in,” said George.

“Girl needs time to freshen up.” She offered a coquettish smile which, though heavily practiced, would’ve come across as insincere to any one with half a brain.

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George patted the sheets. Come on back to bed, Star, honey.”

“Sorry, Georgie, you know the rules.”

She bent over and quickly kissed his acne-covered bald head. How could a man pushing sixty still get zits? He reached for her chest. She attempted to straighten up, but he was too fast for her—Georgie copped his feel. She pulled away and walked toward the door, pausing only to collect the plain white envelope leaning against the candy bowl on the dresser.

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“I’d be more than happy to compensate for the extension,” said George, his South Carolina twang making his plea sound even more pathetic.

“Got a schedule to keep.”

“But Bubba-Boy’s already standin’ at attention.” He peeled back the sheet covering his groin. “Can’t you at least give him a little kiss goodbye?”

She blew a kiss to Bubba-Boy, then grabbed a handful of M&Ms from the bowl.

“Thanks for the candy, Georgie.”

She turned away, her smile immediately converted to disgust, and left.

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FIVE

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Washington, D.C.

Irv Steiner glided quickly down the corridor without spilling his coffee. Long ago he'd developed the habit of not putting a lid on the cup so the contents would cool more quickly. When President Sanchez had held a press conference to announce his nomination for Secretary of Health and Human Services, he had highlighted his nominee's impatience as an asset needed to manage the cumbersome department of twenty-four separate sub-agencies and 70,000 employees. That impatience included not having to wait for his coffee to cool.

At age fifty-two, Irv had recently slowed down by reducing his marathon participation to just two per year. From zipping through Harvard undergrad in barely over three years (where his housemate had been a tall, handsome Latino kid from Maryland who currently happened to be President of the United States), to acquiring graduate degrees in both medicine and law in the time it took most people to achieve just one, Irv's impatience was legendary.

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~~He~~ entered the Secretary's private conference room and took his seat at the head of the table. Only two others were present—Jim Riggins, his chief deputy, and Chloe Robinson, his Assistant Secretary for Health.

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“Morning, sir,” said Chloe.

“Morning. So what's going on?” Chloe had insisted on the meeting, which meant bumping a critical conference with the Chairman of the House Appropriations

~~S~~ubcommittee on Health. The honorable representative from Kansas had not been happy, and Irv was in a battle for more funding to educate those below the poverty line about breast and prostate cancer. But Irv trusted his team implicitly, and Chloe was the farthest thing from an alarmist.

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“The samples from the ~~North Korean~~ students,” said Jim.

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“Ellen had Guy Yost, her top deputy for infectious diseases, re-run the tissue sample tests himself. In addition to being head of the department, Guy is a highly regarded virologist in his own right.”

Suddenly the congressman from Kansas was the farthest thing from Irv's mind. His stomach twisted into a knot. “And ...”

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“According to Yost, the vials found in the possession of the students contained the ~~Cocktail~~,” said Jim.

Commented [SA34]: Does this need to be capitalized? The proper name for it in the next paragraph is “China Cocktail.”

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The “Cocktail” was shorthand for the in-house slang, “China Cocktail.” After a one-year moratorium, China had resumed its controversial research combining the highly lethal but non-transmittable H5N1 flu virus with the ~~easily-transmittable~~ H1N1 virus. China argued that the benefits of studying ~~such a lethal strain~~ in a controlled laboratory setting in order to develop a vaccine outweighed the unlikely risk of it being released into

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the general public. Pressured by the United Nations and the international community, China had agreed to the voluntary moratorium, but recently announced it was starting up the hybrid research again.

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Irv couldn't believe his ears. "That's impossible. How could—?"

"I'm no politician, sir, but China is North Korea's chief sponsor," said Chloe.

"North Koreans move back and forth easily between the two countries. It's conceivable that there could have been a North Korean agent working at the lab who somehow got hold of the hybrid samples."

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"The tissue tests run on the students confirm they died of exposure to the Cocktail," said Jim. "This is above my pay grade, but our relations with North Korea are at an all-time low. It's likely these students were sent here to release the vaccine into the general population. The virus was contained in perfume spritz bottles. Somehow they bungled it and got infected themselves."

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"None of the vials were full," said Chloe. "It's likely the students released the virus and the flu is spreading like a benign, seasonal strain. And with all the tourists in Atlantic City..."

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Irv heard the words but couldn't process them. A deadly outbreak without an available vaccine was his greatest nightmare.

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"Send out a code to every pharmaceutical company on the list. All pending work is to be set aside. Every resource is to be directed to developing a vaccine. Fast."

He picked up the phone resting conveniently on the polished mahogany table to his right. He needed to make two calls—first to the World Health Organization, and second, to the White House.

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Geneva, Switzerland

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Vout Koster had served as the top advisor to the World Health Organization's Director-General since the beginning of her first term. After hanging up the phone with Irv Steiner, he couldn't remember ever being so scared. The H5N1/H1N1 combination virus—what the Americans called the Cocktail—struck fear in virtually everyone working for WHO for three simple reasons: it was lethal, it spread easily, and no vaccine existed to stop it.

In 2011, the World Health Assembly had passed a resolution authorizing a Pandemic Influenza Preparedness Framework to great fanfare. Member nations bound themselves to share effective vaccines via stockpiles controlled by the WHO. Unfortunately, no one had come up with a vaccine to combat the Cocktail, so if his old friend in Washington was right, the world might soon be standing defenseless against a plague that could inflict the same level of damage upon the human race as a nuclear war.

If the Chinese had somehow allowed North Korea—and the immature brat who ran it—access to their research sample of the combination virus, they should be condemned in the strongest terms.

Vout pulled open his lower desk drawer and withdrew his bottle of Chivas Regal scotch. After two healthy swallows, he took a deep breath and headed for the door. The Director-General would need to be briefed immediately.

Washington, D.C.

Mike Sanchez stepped away from the two yellow-gold sofas facing each other across the center of the golden oval rug—an area he thought of as "the golden bowl." The

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senior people in his administration filled the seats and were engaged in what the State Department would euphemistically describe as a “frank exchange of views.” Over his two terms as Maryland’s governor, he’d sometimes found it productive to step away and allow those with opposing viewpoints to go at it. He paid little attention to their words—each highly intelligent and a forceful advocate, he knew that egos had long since entered the fray and the discussion had evolved into seeing who could score the most debating points.

He stood at the eastern door to the office and looked out to the Rose Garden. Late Washington in July reminded everyone that the most important city in the country was built on a swamp, but Mike loved it. The presidency had taken him to some of the most beautiful cities in the world, but none compared to Washington in his mind.

He could hear voices rising behind him and he knew he’d have to intervene soon. As he turned, he noticed that a few of the roses were suffering from the Washington summer heat and humidity and needed pruning. He smiled to himself, recalling how, as a boy, he’d spent many 16-hour days working with his dad and uncle in their landscaping business—he’d gone from the boy who prunes the roses to the man whose office overlooks the Rose Garden. America was truly amazing, and in his mind, as corny as it sounded, the last best hope of the world.

He heard Ed Duncan let loose with a “that’s fuckin’ bullshit!” and figured he’d better return to the bowl. He was no saint, but he did object to the indiscriminate use of profanity, especially the F-word. Even before he’d been elected he’d rarely used the word—he’d never used it in the Oval Office, and didn’t appreciate it when others did either.

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"That language is not appropriate in this office."

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"Sorry, Mr. President." Vice President Ed Duncan did not appear sorry in the

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least.

"So, where are we?"

"I just don't see how you can conduct diplomacy with a madman," said Duncan.

In his early sixties, Duncan looked older than the ten years that separated him from the President. And whoever dyed the rim of hair surrounding his blotchy bald head did a lousy job. Thick wire-rimmed glasses magnified his watery blue eyes, leaving the impression of a man who was constantly suffering from allergies. Even when he smiled, Ed Duncan always looked angry.

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The President noticed George Clay, the senior senator from South Carolina and the chairman of the Senate Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee, nodding in agreement.

"The kid's barely old enough to get a hard-on," said Clay, "and he's playin' soldier with real nukes."

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"Jin's saber-rattling, that's all," said Secretary of State, Cassius Allen. "Just like his father and grandfather before him."

"Is he still closing Kaesong?" asked the President, referring to the Kaesong Industrial Zone which both North and South Korea jointly administer.

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"Yessir," Allen responded, "but, again, so did his father. Mr. President, if we over-react every time Jin amasses troops on the line, we're just giving him the status he craves."

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The President turned to CIA Director, Anna Wong. Upon taking office three years earlier, he'd appointed Anna to clean up the agency after a series of minor scandals during the previous administration. He realized when he'd left the group to their own devices a few minutes earlier, he hadn't heard a female voice. That was good. America's chief spy should keep her mouth shut.

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"Do we have any reason to believe Jin's threats should be taken more seriously than in the past?" The President noticed Wong pause to gather her thoughts before responding, a habit others in the town could benefit from emulating.

"We have known for several years that North Korea maintains intermediate-range BM-25 Musudan ICBMs on mobile launchers, which would be virtually impossible to intercept prior to launch, and could easily reach Guam and Japan. Their most recent nuclear test is also problematic."

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"The UN condemned those tests," said Secretary Allen.

"Whoop-de-shit," said Clay. "Words. You think Jin and his thugs are afraid of words? Besides, he knows he's always got China next door actin' as his sugar daddy."

Wong continued. "We also have active intelligence suggesting their long-range ICBM development is a lot further along than we had originally believed."

"But they still have to be able to devise a nuclear device small enough to fit on a warhead," said Allen.

Wong lowered her gaze. The President pressed her. "Anna, ...?" She glanced at Clay and the President understood. "George's chairmanship gives him full clearance."

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"As you can understand, North Korea's insularity makes hard, verifiable intelligence difficult to come by. However, based on observations from two independent

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human sources, they already have the capability to launch a long-range nuclear missile that could definitely reach our west coast—and most likely our east coast as well—with a 65% chance of success.

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A soft chime interrupted the momentary silence. The President picked up his phone. His secretary knew only to interrupt him when it was important, and over the last three years her judgment of what constituted important had never been wrong.

“Yes, Erin.”

“Secretary Steiner’s here, sir, with Mr. Bryant.”

Bruce Bryant was the President’s Chief of Staff, and his presence with Irv was noteworthy.

“They say it’s important, sir, and ...”

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“And what?”

She lowered her voice. “They look scared.”