

ONE

Xiaogan, China

About thirty five miles northwest of Wuban

Li Chen lay on the bed of his rented villa slicked with sweat and laboring through every breath. He'd been suffering the effects of the virus for the better part of three agonizing weeks, and he knew the end was near.

It began as nothing more than a tickle in the back of his throat, first noticed while watching TV in the living room one evening. A bottle of cold water took care of the problem, and he thought no more of it.

The coughing started the following morning. It was hot and dry, which was unusual for him. On the occasion when he did come down with something, a cough would be accompanied by heavy congestion that always found its way into his sinuses. That wasn't the case here. His chest rattled with each raspy bark, and there were times when they'd launch into an explosive series that was impossible to suppress. An episode might last three or four minutes without pause. Afterward, his throat felt like a chimney. More water would soothe it to some degree, but it was a temporary respite at best.

The fourth day brought the onset of fever and shortness of breath. He awoke with the former and discovered a reading of 38.9°C / 102.1°F on the thermometer's LED. By midafternoon he was unable to inflate his lungs to full capacity. Every attempt resulted in another coughing jag, and in one instance he had to struggle to keep from vomiting. In the evening, aches and pains of stunning intensity rooted their way into every muscle. And a bowl of pork dumplings, his favorite since childhood, went to waste when he realized the infection had mitigated his sense of both taste and smell.

He knew he'd contracted the pathogen presently being called the 'coronavirus' throughout the media and beyond. He also knew that name was a simplified form of its full designation—severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2, which in itself was commonly abbreviated as SARS-CoV-2. He had taken the time to do this research because he was the kind of person who had to know all the details of things that affected him directly. He had learned that there were many different types of coronaviruses, seven of which could infect humans, and that the first examples found in human hosts had been documented in the mid 1960s. He knew this latest strain was considered remarkably efficient, able to spread at an astonishing exponential rate. He also knew that the most vulnerable recipients were those above the age of sixty-five, and those who were younger but suffered ongoing health issues such as chronic liver and kidney disease, immune deficiencies, diabetes, and asthma. As a sixty-two-year-old male who'd smoked for more than two decades and was now showing the early signs of COPD, he was well aware that he was high on the virus's hit list. But perhaps most importantly, he knew he should have either checked himself into a hospital for treatment or, at the very least, remained in self-quarantine for the duration. Instead, he'd made a point of going out and interacting with the public—and he'd done so very much on purpose.

Everything hurt now, even the smallest movements. His body felt thoroughly beaten, like he'd been hit by a truck. The rhythm of his breathing became unsteady, vacillating between prolonged wheezes and staccato bursts. He'd been experiencing dizziness for the last few hours, and he believed he had even passed out once or twice. The disorientation caused him to lose track of time. He looked over at the room's single window. The shade was pulled down, but the sun was presently drawing a bright rectangle around it. His eyelids eased shut. When they fluttered open again, the rectangle was nearly gone. Hours had passed, he realized. They felt like seconds.

A rumble in his stomach came to life and began rapidly migrating upward. He forced himself out of the bed and rushed to the bathroom. As he reached the

doorway, the tremor subsided. He leaned forward on the frame, panting and puffing. A cursory appraisal of the bathroom's mundane features—tub with shower curtain, tiny toilet, even tinier sink, and all jammed into a space small enough to be a closet—produced an equally mundane thought. *It'll be easy to clean afterward.* From there, however, came one of greater substance and import.

It's time.

He removed the cellphone from the pocket of his shorts. It was black all around and had the appearance of a basic iPhone. But that was mere camouflage, meant to deflect the curiosity of others. This device was not a consumer product and could not be acquired through any retail supplier in the world. The encryption protocols alone were leaps and bounds ahead of what the ordinary reader of *Wired* or *Computer World* imagined possible.

Li Chen pressed his thumb over the print reader along the bottom, and the screen came to life. There was no wallpaper behind the grid of icons; the phone didn't offer such a feature. Merely a field of dark blue.

Among the family of apps were the basics—internet, text, email, camera, clock, calculator. In the lower right corner, however, was one that seemed incongruous. A menacing anime face stared up at the user, and the legend beneath it read **IF YOU DARE**. His hands shaking badly, Li Chen made three attempts to tap this before it finally launched. But instead of a game, a keypad blossomed onto the screen. It took all of his remaining strength to correctly enter the ten-digit code. There was no room for error, for there would be no 'remaining attempts.'

Now a message appeared in a red box—

YOU ARE SURE?

He pressed his thumb on the print reader again, and the keypad returned. He paused now, wondering if there was any other way out of this. But a renewed disturbance in the pit of his stomach, considerably more forceful than the last, closed

the question. He entered the final code, and the phone's screen unceremoniously died. It would not come back on, he knew. All of its data had been instantly obliterated, and all of its circuitry—much like his own, he couldn't help thinking—was fried.

He went to set the phone on the sink, but it slid from his fingers and clattered on the floor as the infection landed another punch to the gut. He dropped to his knees, the world around him swirling, and lurched for the toilet. The violent oral expulsion that followed contained more blood than anything else. It felt to him as though he was vomiting up his insides wholesale. This continued in surging intervals for what seemed like an eternity, and his last mortal thought was that there couldn't possibly be much more left inside to disgorge.

A few moments later, his heart abdicated further duty and his dead body fell forward, wedging itself between the toilet and tub.

Coastal New Hampshire

Two days later

"I've never heard you mention him," Katie said before taking the last bite of her sandwich. Then she leaned over and gingerly wiped her hands together, allowing the last of the crumbs to fall onto the patio's flagstone flooring.

"I haven't spoken with him in awhile," Jason replied. Even sitting down it was obvious he was a bit taller than the average male. Slim, dark-haired, and subtly handsome, he cut a very healthy figure in his mid thirties. "He's been busy, I've been busy. You guys have been busy. Everyone's busy."

Noah laughed humorlessly. "As busy as people can be during a national quarantine."

"Yeah...."

Jason stared across the shimmering lawn that extended to the edge of the estate's northern property line. It was a perfect spring day, in his opinion—mid seventies, light breeze, blue sky with no more than the few clouds necessary to create a scene worthy of calendars and postcards.

“And he works specifically for whom?” Katie asked.

“CIA. At least he always has, so I'm assuming he still does. He helped my dad with a few things back in the day. That's where the connection started.”

Noah found himself unable to hold back a smile. There was a time, and not so long ago, when Jason wouldn't have made a reference to his father even if threatened at gunpoint. His father, his mother, his sister Joan; collectively they had been an immutably taboo subject. It was understandable, given how close the Hammonds were prior to the accident. Jason and his father may have had their tense moments, but the underlying love and devotion never cracked.

Noah Gwynn had occupied a front-row seat at every stage of the family's journey—Alan and Linda's marriage, Joan's birth followed by Jason's two years later, the first steps and first teeth, first days at school, first dates. Thanks to the vacuum created by Alan's staggering wealth, the four of them seemed to be living in a Hallmark movie. Then a mysterious plane crash in the Caribbean erased three of the four, and Jason suddenly found himself in a tale of a very different nature.

“It really says something that he's willing to come here now,” Katie pointed out, “in the midst of a pandemic.”

“That's what worries me,” Jason said. “But we'll see.”

The front doorbell rang out a cluster of heavy notes reminiscent of an Anglican cathedral. Jason absolutely hated the sound of it, but he hadn't been around for much of the main house's new construction. Between time spent in France and Malaysia, he left such details to Noah and Katie. And while they kept promising to get it changed as soon as possible, they conspired to keep forgetting about it.

Jason left them for a few moments, then returned with their featured guest. Deion Bishop looked every bit the devoted government agent—suit and tie, freshly

shaved, bright-eyed and imminently sober. Alan Hammond had taken a liking to him from the first. Deion had worked his way up through the Detroit projects, earning near-perfect grades throughout elementary and high school in spite of the manifold distractions caused by gang violence, drug wars, and a hopelessly alcoholic mother. In a world that had broken so many, his resolve only became stronger. And through it all, he miraculously managed to maintain a positive nature. The day after he graduated, the government came calling. They knew they had someone special.

“Deion, this is my wife Katie, and I’m sure you remember Noah.”

“Hello, Deion,” they said in unison.

“Hello to both of you,” he replied with a nod, his voice unusually deep and rich. “Please forgive me if I don’t come over and shake your hands. I have a feeling it’s a custom we won’t be practicing for much longer in society.”

“No, probably not,” Noah said. “And perhaps that’s for the best.”

“I couldn’t agree more.”

Jason smiled at him. “Would you care to sit and talk here, or in my office?”

“Maybe we should go to your office first.” He gave Noah and Katie a look of polite regret. “No offense, of course.”

“Not at all,” Katie said. “Do what you have to do.”

“Thanks...”

Jason’s office was the one room in his nouveau mansion that had yet to be decorated or even fundamentally arranged. The desk, a recently purchased walnut behemoth, sat in the center of the room with a standard chrome-and-leather chair. Jason regarded them with the same degree of contempt as the doorbell, but he wasn’t here enough to care that much. He suspected Noah had chosen both to please himself, but it wasn’t worth starting an argument over.

The only guest chair was tucked in a corner with a stack of boxes on it. Jason set them on the floor and dragged the chair over.

“So,” he said once they were both seated, “no mask for you?”

Deion laughed. “I get tested every day now. That’s not exactly an agency rule yet, but it may as well be. Nevertheless—” he pulled an N95 out of his jacket pocket “—yeah, I wear it all the time. I took it off while I was standing on the front step. So unless *you* have the virus, I’m sure I do not.”

Jason shook his head and smiled. “No, none of us do. We get tested pretty frequently, too. A privilege open to the wealthy during these impossible times, I’ve noticed, but not necessarily everyone else.”

“I know,” Deion said with remorse that was absolutely sincere. “We’re working on that.”

“I know you are. So what can I help you with?”

His guest leaned forward, dropped his head, and lightly clapped his hands together. His tie dangled between his legs like a hangman’s noose.

“Uh-oh,” Jason said. “This can’t be good.”

Deion looked up again. “No, the situation we’re in isn’t good at all. What I came here to ask you...whether *that’s* good or not is for you to decide. But the situation, no.”

“What situation are we talking about?”

“The outbreak is causing some serious problems. I don’t just mean with the illnesses and the deaths. That’s tragic beyond description.”

“Well over a quarter of a million deaths worldwide, with more to come. I think that meets the requirements of a tragedy.”

“And the economic impact—you can’t imagine. Or maybe you can.”

“I can,” Jason said. “Roughly thirty million unemployment claims this past April alone; the most in American history. Then there’s the direct correlation between the average number of hours worked overall and the number of Covid deaths. They crisscross each other to create essentially a giant ‘X’ on any chart. Same with school closures. Less hours worked and fewer jobs occupied also means less mobility among the public. While the upsides there include a reduction in traffic, road accidents, and related pollution, it also means a reduction in gasoline usage. Oil dropping into

negative territory for the first time ever, reaching a nadir of nearly negative forty dollars per barrel. If that's not insane, nothing is. Air travel from 2017 to 2019 remained fairly steady at around 175,000 annual flights. But once the virus rolled into our lives, that number dropped to around 60,000. The airlines work on paper-thin margins to begin with, so there's one more industry in its entirety circling the drain. The DOW, the Nikkei, and the FTSE all shedding around 35% at one point—slightly more than a full third, which is downright cardiac—and then bouncing back to between 15% and 20%.”

“You are well informed as always, Jason.”

“The information's out there for anyone who wants it. And by the way, the International Monetary Fund is predicting a recession worse than 2008, possibly a genuine depression. Although I should add that they do believe we can avoid it if we get a reign on the outbreak and things start to pick up by the end of 2020.”

“Do you believe that?”

“I do. The only real barrier is this pathogen, and we're just a few steps away from getting a handle on it. First is readily available testing. We have to know who's infected and who isn't. Second is treatment, and we already have some medications that appear to be working. Third is a vaccine. On that front we've got more than a hundred candidates being fast-tracked through development. And last, people have to be certain in their hearts and minds that it's under control. Once they believe it—*really* believe it—then we can get back to normal.”

“And you think that'll happen?”

“Definitely. We got smallpox back in the bottle, and that was a lot nastier than this thing. There are scores of capable people working around the clock. Lots of funding, too. And lots of international cooperation.”

Deion's smile returned. “That last point is directly related to why I'm here.”

“The international cooperation?”

“Yeah.”

“Is there a problem within the medical disciplines? Among doctors and scientists around the world? I can’t imagine.”

“No, nothing like that. There’s another international issue. One that’s...well, *political* in nature.”

Jason’s hands came up. “Stop right there, Dee, because that’s where I draw the line. I’m sure you know my views on the political game.”

Deion didn’t appear the least bit thrown by this reaction. “I do. Everyone at the agency does. In fact, probably everybody who’s ever heard of you does. You’ve made it crystal clear that your interest in politics is somewhere between nothing and zilch.”

“Even less than that.”

“Fine. So you won’t be running for mayor anytime soon.”

“Not even for local dog catcher.”

“Got it. Then I should tell you next that the task we’re requesting of you is *not* political in nature. Just that it has international political implications. Big ones.”

“So what do you need?”

Deion paused here. Jason could tell it was not for dramatic effect.

“We need you to help us stop a massive global conflict from erupting. And no, I’m not exaggerating.”

Silence hung between them like a cloud as each man tried to climb into the mind of the other.

“Well, you have my attention now,” Jason said finally. “What, exactly, is the problem?”

“It’s the situation with China.”

“China? Everyone knows about the tensions between our two countries at the moment.”

“It’s more than that. It’s a whole new dimension that Covid has created. You want statistics? Here’s one—there are over a hundred domestic hate crimes against

our Asian-Americans citizens being reported every day now. They're being randomly beaten. They're being denied entry into supermarkets and other essential businesses. They've been thrown off trains, subways, and buses. It's beyond appalling. Even those who were born here are fearing for their lives. And as you implied before, we're not currently on fantastic terms with China in the first place. The trade situation has become horrific. More than \$100 billion in lost exports in the last few months alone, plus nearly four million jobs."

"I agree it's awful, but how *I* can help with—"

"It's the conspiracy theories, Jason."

"About how the outbreak got started?"

"Yes."

Jason shrugged. "Of course there are going to be conspiracy theories. When there isn't a clear answer on something of this magnitude, the human imagination fills in the blanks. It's our nature to hate things that are unresolved. I'm sure you've heard the one about Covid coming from outer space. Another is that it's the result of 5G technology. A third—this is my favorite just on the idiocy factor alone—is that Bill Gates created Covid so he could then give everyone a vaccine that contains a nano-sized microchip. And, of course, there's the whole idea of it having been genetically engineered in a lab somewhere. The mere fact that we'd be able to trace it back to its source should debunk that notion immediately. But, of course, it doesn't."

"And that's the problem," Deion said. "It's not just the conspiracy theories by themselves. It's the sum total of *everything*. There are multiple negative factors working against China at the moment that could easily lead to an international conflict with multiple players. It wouldn't take much at this point, either. We live in a very precarious time, as you know. Just one person with the right technology combined with the right amount of smarts can do a lot of damage. Who knows this better than you? Almost entirely on your own, you cracked the code on the Kennedy assassination. Who took the president down in the first place? One person. All Oswald had in 1963 was a rifle that he obtained under a false name through a mail-

order catalogue. So let's move ahead a few decades. In 1995, four people carried out the Oklahoma City attack using an IED made from industrial fertilizer. *Four*. Now think about the tools at the average person's disposal today. The situation with China is a powder keg with a short fuse, and one person could very easily light it. China's angry with us for all sorts of reasons, we're angry at them for all sorts of reasons. And other nations are ticked off at them, too, most of whom are allies of ours. Putin probably wouldn't lose any sleep if we all went after each other. A few nukes later and he's the king of the planet. Or whatever's left of it, anyway."

"There is certainly a very dangerous set of circumstances in play right now, no doubt about it."

"We have *got* to turn the pressure down before things get any worse. All the misinformation about Covid that's out there—misinformation that a lot of people are taking as gospel in the absence of concrete facts—is moving this world to a very dark place."

"Okay, so what's the solution?"

"To determine the true origin of the Covid outbreak so some of the resentment toward China can begin simmering down."

"You mean going over there and doing the detective work?"

"Yes. Because the Chinese can't do it themselves, since no one is going to believe them regardless of what they find. And we can't send any of our own people there. If they're discovered, we're screwed. Plus, the moment we presented our findings to the world, everyone would think we were skewing the results for *our* purposes. Same with any of our allies, or any of theirs. The political ice is too thin right now."

"So you want me to do this specifically because I'm not political?"

"And more to the point because people will believe you. The Kennedy assassination, the disappearance of Amelia Earhart, Howard Hughes's will, the death of Princess Diana, Flight MH370—you've cracked them all, on your own time and at your own expense, and you've asked for nothing in return. On top of that, you've

steered your late father's companies toward all sorts of remarkable humanitarian endeavors. Like the child-safety products you developed. That line of 'panic jewelry' alone has already thwarted nearly a thousand abductions. You've also given tens of millions to housing, food, and education for the underprivileged, and millions more to the protection of animals. You're as credible as it gets these days. You're like the last Boy Scout."

"I'm not the last," Jason said. "There are plenty of others. The problem is no one's listening to them."

"Okay, fine. So will you do it?"

"I doubt the Chinese government will take kindly to—"

"They're going to help."

"Really?"

"Yeah. They'll send an agent to assist you with some things. Someone who's already been on this trail for awhile."

"An agent, or a minder?"

"No, nothing like that. They're pretty serious. Think about it from their perspective—nothing would benefit them more than having this resolved. How's your Chinese, by the way?"

"I don't speak it."

"All the more reason you'll need this woman's assistance. Her English is superb."

"Good."

"So you'll do it?" When an answer didn't come right away, Deion added, "We'll pay you whatever you want."

"I don't need money."

"What, then?"

"I'll let you know," Jason replied. "But just to be clear—and since you conveniently didn't mention this, I'm thinking I'd better—if anything happens, there is to be no linkage between myself and the agency, correct?"

“None whatsoever. Just like on the old *Mission: Impossible* TV show, we will disavow any knowledge of you. It’ll be the classic Jason Hammond headline—once again, you’re taking it upon yourself to find the answers that the rest of the world wants to know.”

“About the origin of Covid-19.”

“Correct.”

“Which, essentially, means I have to find the *person*. The very first one.”

Deion nodded. “Yes, that’s your target—Covid patient zero.”

“Or the world could go to hell in a handbag.”

“Something like that.”

Jason sat contemplatively for a few more moments. Then he smiled and said, “Gosh, Dee, no pressure here.”

“None at all.”