

TWO

Hammond Industries owned four Gulfstream G650s and two G650ERs. The suffix on the latter stood for ‘extended range’, as it could hold four thousand more gallons of fuel than its smaller cousin and travel seven thousand nautical miles nonstop. Since the outbreak had effectively grounded this mini-fleet, Jason had no trouble commandeering one of the ERs for himself. Following discussions with Katie and Noah about everyone’s role in the operation, he took off early the next morning. He had one stop in San Francisco to top off the tanks, then he was back in the air moving westward over the Pacific.

“So what’s the *official* story about the first patient in China?” Jason asked into the headset mic that curved around the side of his face. “I should at least know what the rest of the world’s been told.”

“There are numerous conflicting reports,” Noah replied, his voice coming through strong and clear from more than three thousand miles away.

“Not surprising.”

“No.”

“According to the World Health Organization’s chronology,” Katie said, “the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission noted a cluster of what they believed to be pneumonia cases on December 31. At the time, however, the coronavirus had not yet been identified as the causative pathogen.”

“There’s nothing before December 31st?” Jason asked.

“Not on the WHO site.”

“Are you in the office, Kates?”

“Yes, I’m sitting at your ugly desk.”

“Okay, check out my Firefox bookmarks. There should be one from a BBC site from early May.”

“May 5th—got it.”

“There was some patient treated in Paris on December 27th, right?”

“Yes.”

“I read the article,” Noah cut in. “Just like in Wuhan, they thought the person had pneumonia first, but it was later ID’d as Covid.”

Jason nodded. “And that right there tells us a lot—the French case occurred four days *before* the first one listed on the WHO timeline. And I’m sure the information they used came from the Chinese government.”

“I wonder how much of a coverup is really going on?”

“There’s another bookmark, from *The New York Times*, for an article dated February 7th. It’s about Li Wenliang, the doctor from Wuhan who noticed the outbreak right at the beginning.”

“I’m reading it now....” A few beats of silence followed from Katie’s side of the conversation, then she said, “Wow, as soon as this poor man opened his mouth, they shut it again. Here’s the first paragraph—*He was the doctor who tried to sound a warning that a troubling cluster of viral infections in a Chinese province could grow out of control, and was then summoned for a middle-of-the-night reprimand over his candor.*”

“Shortly after that,” Jason added, “he acquired the virus himself, developed the infection, and died.”

“Good God,” Noah said in a near-whisper.

“And he wasn’t even a virologist, Noah.”

“What was he?”

“An ophthalmologist, living a nice, quiet existence in Wuhan. But he noticed that something unusual was developing in the area; a respiratory illness that was spreading fast and had a symptomology that reminded him of SARS. So he went online and expressed his concerns in a chatroom with some people he knew from medical school. It was barely one or two steps above thinking aloud to yourself while making dinner. But the government found out and pounced on him.”

“I’m seeing that now,” Katie said. “*In early January, he was called in by both medical officials and the police and forced to sign a statement denouncing his warning as an unfounded and illegal rumor.*”

“Early January,” Jason repeated. “That meant he already noticed others showing their symptoms. With corona, it can take up to two weeks for symptoms to appear, and in some cases even longer. So if we work backward and figure conservatively, we’re talking about mid or even early December. Let’s take another relatively small leap of faith and say that the cases for which Dr. Wenliang was sounding the alarm weren’t the first ones, i.e., our elusive Covid patient zero wasn’t in that cluster. That means—”

“November,” Katie said. “The first case could easily have been in November.”

“That’s right,” Jason replied. “And I don’t think it’s beyond the realm of the possible that there were cases—*known* cases—even before that. Think about how many cases were misdiagnosed as pneumonia, then add in all the asymptomatic carriers.”

“They’re discovering more of those earlier misdiagnosed cases every day,” Noah jumped in. “All around the world.”

“Right. So the notion that this thing could’ve appeared in November or even October is extremely possible. Which then means it could’ve been spread to other nations around that time as well.”

“If that’s true,” Noah said, “and it turns out Chinese officials knew all along and suppressed the facts...” He let out a heavy breath. “The rest of the world is going to go postal on them.”

In the pause that followed this disturbing conjecture, Jason scanned the natural beauty visible through the Gulfstream’s front windows. It had long been his opinion there was no shade of blue more astonishing than that of the Pacific Ocean. Stacked above it was a sunny sky of endless clarity. And there wasn’t a speck of land within view. In that moment there was only him, the singular mechanism shuttling

him forward, and an expansive region of the Earth that had been as it was for thousands of years before he was born, and would remain so for thousands more after he was gone.

His wife's voice pulled him out of this contemplative state—"Do you think there's really been a concealment effort of that magnitude?"

"I'm going to do my level best not to presume anything at this point," Jason told her. "All governments keep secrets, and all do so for reasons that make perfect sense to them. So I'm going in with an open mind, plus an inquisitive nature that may or may not be welcomed. We'll see. But with that being said, have you ever heard of a man named Jiang Yanyong?"

"No."

"He was, by all outward appearances, the archetypical patriot of the Chinese Communist Party. For example, he was a general in the People's Liberation Army—a nearly impossible post to attain without being viewed very favorably by the big wheels. He also happened to be a doctor; a surgeon to be precise. And in 2003, he leaked a letter to the international community blowing the lid off—are you ready for this?—the SARS outbreak."

"Jason, you're kidding," Katie said.

"I am not. He knew the government was fudging the statistics. So, with inside information culled from a Beijing hospital, he provided the accurate number of SARS cases to the world, including deaths. It was profoundly embarrassing to the leadership, and I'm certain it's one of the main reasons they're so sensitive to what's happening now. Remember, the virus that caused the SARS outbreak in 2003 and the one we're dealing with now are very closely related."

"Incredible."

"I'll bet this Dr. Yanyong became a very polarizing figure among his countrymen," Noah said.

"He still is."

"He's alive?"

“Yes, although no one hears from him now.”

“Why’s that?”

“He’s been under house arrest for little while.”

“‘A little while’ meaning how long?” Katie asked.

Jason debated whether or not to answer, then decided there was no point in doing otherwise. Not as long as Uncle Google was readily at hand to gratify the most arcane curiosities.

“Since around the time Covid showed up.”

Jason landed at Wuhan Tianhe International Airport shortly after 11:00 AM local time. A small contingent of uniformed men wearing masks and driving a military jeep guided him to a private tarmac. No sooner had the Gulfstream’s door opened and the staircase unfolded than one of the soldiers was barking orders. Jason was not allowed to remove his luggage except for one carry-on bag, which in itself was searched within an inch of its life. He was also relieved of his protective mask and gloves and provided with a different set. It was explained that they couldn’t be sure if his had been contaminated. He then received a spot test for Covid that involved a painful nasal swabbing and a fever scan. He had to wait by the plane while two of the soldiers sped off with the swab, returning in just under an hour with the news that he was infection-free. While they were gone, the group leader—a major, Jason noted, per the single star framed by two lines on his shoulder insignia—extracted enough personal information via rapid-fire questioning to write his biography. Jason couldn’t help wondering if he was being regarded as a visiting dignitary or a state criminal.

He was then escorted inside the airport, which was fully modernized and absolutely spotless. The floors looked like mirrors, and there wasn’t a stray gum wrapper or cobweb in sight. As he continued down the wide hallway with his armed entourage, he couldn’t help noticing that no one was taking particular notice of him. Were people escorted by groups of grim-looking soldiers around here every day? It certainly seemed so.

A woman emerged from the crowd and headed straight for him. He knew this was his chaperone before she even introduced herself, as Deion's description had been dead on—early thirties, long hair as black as Jason's and flowing in waves down to her shoulders, with an aura of amiability stood in vivid opposition to that of his initial welcoming committee. She wore a tan business suit and moved with the fluidity of a runway model.

Following a quick bow, she said, "You are Jason Hammond, I presume?" in English so perfect it was arresting. There wasn't even a hint of an accent, as if she had spent her entire life in the US and had come here solely to greet him at this moment.

Jason smiled behind his mask and offered a perfunctory bow of his own. "That's correct. And can I presume you are Ms. Ling Zhao?"

"I am," Ling replied. "How was your journey?"

"It was fine. Good weather all the way over."

"I'm glad to hear it."

Ling turned to the major and issued one quick command. Her smile never faltered, but there was an unmistakable note of ferocity underneath the professional tone. The major gave salute so spirited it was almost injurious, then he and the others made a swift exit.

Ling began walking again and politely gestured for Jason to follow.

"I'm sorry if you feel like you were overly scrutinized. We are highly sensitive to all international visitors at the moment, as you might imagine."

"Perfectly understandable. And speaking of understandable, your command of the English language is amazing."

"That's because I spent seven years in your country, most of them earning a master's degree in economics from Stanford."

"Very impressive."

"I was already fairly fluent because English is required in some schools here. But the time I spent in California perfected it."

“To say the least. By the way, do you mind if I ask what’s happening with my luggage?”

“It will be brought to the hotel and left in your room. I’ll tell you up front that it will be searched. But unless they find narcotics or explosives, all your belongings will be there. You have my word.”

“Again, understandable, and I appreciate your candor.”

“I think you’ll find that we’re not as militant as some believe. Just very cautious.”

“I am here with a wide-open mind, Ling.”

“Excellent. So where would you like to begin your investigation?”

Jason shrugged. “Deion told me you’ve been following the same trail for awhile now, so we may as well start there. Who have you determined to be the earliest patient thus far?”

“A male from Huangpi District. A construction worker, thirty seven years old.”

“And he died from the infection?”

“No, he survived. His doctors initially thought it was common pneumonia.”

“Would it be okay if I ask when it was determined that, in fact, he had Covid? And please remember that my mission here is classified. If I repeat anything you tell me to the media, I will be tossed in a federal prison the minute I return home.”

Even with this assurance, Ling appeared hesitant. Then, lowering her voice as if there were hidden microphones around every corner, she said, “On or about November 14th.”

Jason could feel her looking to him for a reaction, so he nodded and replied with, “I figured it was probably some time in November. Does he know how he contracted it?”

“He does not. He hadn’t been traveling, nor had he been near any of the so-called wet markets. Also—and I’ll say this since I know you’re going to ask—he was

not inside the Wuhan Institute of Virology, either. Someone in his position would have no reason to go there.”

“Hmm...perhaps one of his construction co-workers had it first.”

“We’ve interviewed all of them, plus they were tested and cleared. But if you still want to talk to the man, I’ll take you to see him.”

Jason nodded. “That would be good.”

They passed through a set of glass doors and out to the street. It was hot and muggy, with the distinct scent of human perspiration and a lingering industrial aroma of some sort just beneath it. Ling led him to a parked BMW sedan with government plates.

“Would you like to conduct the interview now,” she asked as she opened the door on her side, “or go to your hotel first?”

“We can go to see him now. But I do have one small request.”

She stopped just before getting in, staring at him benignly from across the hood. “What is that?”

He smiled. “Can we grab something to eat on the way?”

Jason chose a Kentucky Fried Chicken along the fringes of Wuhan, mostly because they seemed to be everywhere and the sight of the red-and-white buckets aroused that part of his palate. Ling told him KFC was the most popular American fast-food chain in China, with McDonald’s running a surprisingly distant second.

Since drive-thru was the only option, they ate while zooming down the highway on their way out of town. Jason admitted inwardly that he was impressed Ling didn’t seem to mind eating and driving at the same time; and in a nice BMW at that. He was a veteran of automotive dining and often thought of himself as part of a vanishing species. God knew Katie and Noah wouldn’t engage in such insipid activities.

En route, they continued with their getting-to-know-you conversation. Jason answered the inevitable questions about his past exploits, while Ling told stories from

a childhood that mirrored his own in that she was born into a family of considerable wealth and connection. Jason sensed a subtle arrogance bred from a condition he thought of as ‘Overt Stature Awareness.’ But he was inclined to forgive this because he knew stratified social structure had rooted itself with light speed in China following their gradual transition to a market economy. And those who found themselves lucky enough to dwell in the upper tiers often waved the flag of their position with such unlabored persistence that it seemed entirely unconscious. Ling, he decided, was of this mind.

As they moved further from the city, the balance between the natural and the manmade began to shift. A half hour later, they were surrounded on either side by vast open spaces with a minimum of greenery.

A paved road appeared on the right, and Ling made the turn without comment. Moments later, a secure installment of unusual architecture came into view. It was no more than two or three stories high, with the front facade tilted back at a modest angle and covered with black panels. As they drew closer, Jason could see that the construction was relatively modern; no more than eight to ten years old at the most. There were two other features he couldn’t have missed if he tried. The first was a complete lack of windows. The second was the chainlink fence that surrounded the property. It was electrified and further augmented by a loosely applied spiral of razor wire along the top.

Just before they reached the gate, Jason said, “Is this some kind of an isolation hospital?”

Ling smiled but did not turn to him.

“Oh no,” came her carefully measured reply, “this is one of our prisons.”