

SPECIFIC IMPULSE

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(excerpt from www.charlesjustiz.com)

CHAPTER 1

Antonio Crubari sat in the driver's seat of the Hummer and rechecked the darkened corners of the surrounding alley. He hid back in the shadows so nothing could draw attention to him and no one could see him at such a late hour of the night. His hand drifted involuntarily to where he had earlier removed various knives from their customary places. He chided himself for his impatience. To be caught with any weapons on his body or in the large, stolen automobile would have been a beginner's mistake. Antonio Crubari was no beginner. If someone did come to investigate, the last thing the curious meddler would see would be a man with vaguely Mayan features stepping out from the driver's seat. Crubari did not need knives to kill. He simply preferred them.

He scanned the dashboard as he had done every few moments for the last hour. The motor was idling within limits. The oil pressure was on the low side of the green arc, but still acceptable. His tracker remained locked on to his target and displaying on his portable screen. He checked the time. In ten minutes, Mr. James Nutley, Department of Justice agent, would be dead.

His plan depended on his target behaving predictably. The target was intelligent, so he expected him to make intelligent choices. He also knew that his target had a meeting in the morning with his superiors, so he expected him to not waste time. His target had lived in the Las Vegas area. Consequently, his target knew shortcuts to avoid congestion caused by the tourist-fed traffic. His target also had his wife with him, so he would want to get back to his hotel as quickly as

possible. His target would strive to increase his chances of enjoying his wife's pleasures that evening and reduce the chances of incurring her displeasures with any delay. *Typical ... too predictable*, thought Crubari. *It would soon prove fatal.*

Of course, the wife had to die as well.

Crubari checked his portable screen and saw that his target was moving towards an area of traffic congestion. The congestion was going to get much worse. He had hired a professional to cause a wreck at exactly this time, at exactly this spot. The contract was to block traffic in all directions at a specific intersection for a minimum of thirty minutes. The traffic was getting worse on Crubari's screen and the target was almost at the congestion. *There, you're at the traffic jam and have to decide. Now which way will you go? Left – towards your hotel and more traffic, or right, through the warehouse district where there is little tourist traffic and towards me.* His target turned right. Now, Nutley and his wife would be dead in five minutes.

Crubari detested that he had to make such a complicated plan. His usual style was to remove his victims from circulation quietly and quickly. Unfortunately, Crubari had to address problems among the people with which he worked. These people, with deadly skills of their own, were working on tasks that would undermine years of Crubari's work. Direct action would not work, but if the death of this Department of Justice agent could be made to look like the act of a drunken driver, Crubari's own plans might be secure. That is why he had gone to the trouble of stealing the Hummer from such a dangerous individual.

There was no traffic in the warehouse district this late at night. Crubari watched the trace of his target reach a predetermined point, and drove the Hummer out of the alley onto a main street. He split his attention between the road and the trace. Within one block of impact, Crubari allowed himself to immerse in the task and time slowed down. Though he was traveling nearly ninety miles per hour, it was as if he were moving at a crawl. Colors around him were vivid and details sharp. Although he had planned the crash so his target would not have enough reaction time, Crubari would be able to maneuver the Hummer precisely to impact.

The subcompact car came into view from around the corner and Crubari saw that Nutley had his stepchildren in the back seat. The unexpected presence of the children did not change Crubari's mind. He nudged the wheel slightly into the target to hit further back on his victim's car. Crubari could feel the tires of his SUV straining to comply. His target never completed turning his head to see what had caught his attention out of the corner of his eye.

The impact felt gentle to Crubari, but the airbag inflation blocked his view for what seemed an eternity. He finally got it out of his line of sight and continued to the Hummer's drop point. The massive truck continued to run, but the smell of radiator fluid and the rising temperatures in the motor signaled that it would soon overheat and stop running. He had expected this problem. He pulled into a side street and ran the car into a wall. Crubari felt it important to lead investigators in the direction he wanted them to look. He got out of the car, splashed tequila on the upholstery, and threw the half-empty bottle on the passenger side floor. Yes,

he thought. *Investigators will think this a liquor-fueled joyride gone wrong.* He grabbed his portable screen and stuffed it into an oversized pocket in his jacket, turned and walked away from the car.

Crubari followed a predetermined route on foot back to the scene of the crash that took advantage of the shadows and darkness. A small crowd had gathered around the mangled wreck that had been Nutley's car. Several people had already pulled over to help and one woman had her phone out calling in the emergency.

"It's horrible," the woman was saying between sobs. "They're all dead."

Crubari stepped back into the shadows feeling pleased.

CHAPTER 2

Dr. Cariña Maria Gonzalez took a deep breath of the thin, unpolluted Arizona air and smiled. To take such a pulmonary risk in the Los Angeles basin would draw stares from co-workers. She was thankful to have made the break from that particular insanity. Her sabbatical had restored a calm and sanity where tension and uneasiness had held sway.

Carin stretched to her full five-foot-eight height and strained her muscles until she felt her joints pop. With her eyes closed, she turned to face the sun, allowing her jet-black hair to stream behind her in the breeze and willed herself to relax. Tense muscles began to relent along every part of her body except her lower back. Those particular muscles were giving her the early warning signs of an uncomfortable night ahead.

At 37, Carin could not blame her back condition on age. She had suffered lower back pains since her teens even though she worked out regularly and kept her weight constant at 128 pounds. She smiled to think that back pain was one of the major reasons she changed focus during her graduate studies. An inability to bend down and pick up rocks was a liability for a geologist.

After work last Friday, she had returned to her apartment just long enough to pack a small bag and rush to the airport. There, after checking the weather and filing a flight plan, she opened the hangar door to drag out her most cherished possession, her tiny homebuilt aircraft, and pulled it into the waning

sunlight. The unique craft had taken eight years of precious personal time to complete.

Eight years was longer than the normal homebuilt aircraft project. That is, longer for anyone not a cursed perfectionist. Back in those days, if she found that any of the design was costing her some performance, she would redesign. She had not liked the drag profile the original plans gave her, so she redesigned the entire wing. After that particular decision had cost her a full year delay, she promised herself not to tweak the design any more. She kept the promise, more or less.

Now as she took her tiny aircraft on its first flight away from California, the little ship gobbled up the miles between Los Angeles and Winslow, Arizona without breaking a sweat. The thought made her flush with pride, and the flight across the Mojave Desert as the sun was receding behind her had been a meditation. With each mile, a little more tension in her neck relaxed. As each road passed underneath, her breathing became more regular and calm. Cruising past all the cars imprisoned on the ground, she could forget the worry and the stress that had chased her out of Pasadena. Left behind was the job that was no longer challenging and was looking more like a dead end. Left behind was a life that no longer felt right.

Some inexpressible force had drawn Carin back to the Barringer Meteor Crater. Years ago, she had spent an entire summer doing research in the crater for her master's degree. Now she wondered whether the force that pulled her to return was only a misplaced need to get back to that simpler and happier time.

The family who owned the land and the local authorities denied admittance below the crater walls to the public. This caused Carin some concern. Only sanctioned research teams could get access to the bottom. In fact, tours along the crater rim or along the crater bottom had ended a long time ago. The local authorities were so sensitive to disturbing the environment that they vigorously prosecuted rock collectors found picking up samples within several miles of the crater. They had even passed laws banning hunting in the area to preserve the meteorite's telltale signs for future scientists.

Fate raised its hand for Carin. On reaching the main entry gate of the crater, she noticed a group of twenty people getting off a local university bus. She walked over and saw they were packing equipment she recognized from her days of doing geological studies. Carin found the head of the research team, a short, fire-plug shaped bundle of energy named Jim Torres, and pleaded her case. As it turned out, he had read some of her early papers on planetary geology and agreed to have her come along.

"We'll just keep this between you and me," Jim had said with a wink. "No need to buy any trouble."

Carin readily agreed and before she knew it, she was standing at the lowest point of the crater, bathing in the final rays of a retiring sun. The sounds of classic Carlos Santana from her headset drifted around her and a feeling of unburdened release began to take hold for the first time in months.

She did a slow pirouette to look around and had to chuckle as some of her hair blew into her mouth. Carin let her mind drift back to the time when the

meteoroid had arrived at this spot in northern Arizona. The climate had been much cooler then and a wet, rich forest surrounded the impact area. Natives of the time would not find rattlesnakes, but they might have run into a woolly mammoth or a mastodon. When the impact occurred, it produced an explosion that was more than two thousand times as powerful as the World War II era atomic bombs. The air blast from the explosion churned the atmosphere in a manner that dwarfed Earth's most violent natural weather. Supersonic winds uprooted every plant within two miles of the impact point. The fireball scorched every living creature in its path out to eight miles. The pressure pulse killed animals fifteen miles away. The devil's own domain had opened and powerful demons had poured forth in the forest of northern Arizona on that ancient day.

Ruination befell the man whose name was associated with the crater. Time had proven Daniel Moreau Barringer correct, but his pursuit of the truth of the crater had left him penniless. Many of Daniel Barringer's friends and associates believed the crater's reluctance to yield its secrets caused his premature death. Carin Gonzalez felt a kinship with the old miner. *Being right isn't all it's cracked up to be*, she thought of the long dead engineer.

Carin decided that she was finally in the right frame of mind to review her life. She set herself up to do a personal inventory of one Dr. Carin Gonzalez. First, she felt that she was an intuitive sort and that she understood people. *Then why can't I figure out men?* She decided to table that line of thinking for the moment.

She wondered whether it might be helpful to review her assets. She knew herself to be an attractive sort in the classic Hispanic mold, although, at five foot

eight inches, she was a little taller than average. Overall, she felt that her looks had been as much a minus as a plus, so no help there. She knew that her intelligence was high and she had difficulty hiding that fact. She had to admit it was a minus with some men. *No, let's face it*, she thought. *It's proven a minus with more men than I care to remember*. Like Raul, that cute post-doc from Chile. Carin had done everything but tattoo, "I'm yours if you want me" on her forehead. It had been clear that he had wanted none of what she was selling. He spoke the same language as that L.A. Laker cheerleader, though. This was not helping her.

She looked for something positive. She liked sports! However, that did not count, since she liked to play and loathed watching, especially on TV. How could men sit in front of a television screen for so many hours, just to watch something they could be *doing*? She had never been able to wrap her mind around that idea. That was a dead end.

She decided to take a reluctant and dreaded look at her career. Recently, her work had become confining and confrontational. She just did not get it. She felt she was good at understanding her fellow workers' feelings, but if she saw that somebody was doing something in a boneheaded fashion, she felt compelled to make the point known. Was that so wrong? For instance, take that last Mars Lander project. She recommended the team do an end-to-end check before launch and they looked at her as if she just landed from another planet. *This isn't rocket science, folks*, she thought angrily. *Hubble should have taught us that lesson*. Now the Mars Lander had buried itself into the Martian surface going about four kilometers per second without bothering to fire a single retro rocket and everyone

looks at her as if it were her fault. Her supervisor had the gall to imply that if she had been more forceful in her position, Carin could have spared the agency an expensive embarrassment. That same supervisor told her to sit down when she had originally brought up the problem. *Yeah*, she thought. *I understand people. Let's shelve this particular form of investigation, especially since it proves that I'm a jerk no matter how I look at it.*

Carin swept her eyes up to the lip of the giant crater. The rim of smashed and strewn boulders was a generations-old work of art. Some boulders scattered across the desert were the size of small houses. *Maybe one will drop on my head and knock some sense into me*, she thought. *No Carin, that's defeatist. Close your eyes, take another deep breath, and then reopen your eyes.*

Carin squared her shoulders and decided that she had to make changes in her life. She would take better care of herself since she was the only "Carin" that she had. From now on, if she saw a problem at work and it was not her project, then it was not her concern. She was going to keep her nose to the grindstone. She would brush and floss. Most importantly, Carin would remember that she could not trust men.

She found herself shaking her head. To make those changes would be to change who she was. Carin was not sure she could live with that person. *Oh well*, she thought. *At least I can brush and floss more.*

An airy whistling sound penetrated through the strains of an electric guitar crying on her headphones. She turned her head in time to see a man lunging at

her. He tackled her to the ground at the same time she felt a thunderous explosion split the air overhead.

Carin went to push her attacker off but he was already up. She jumped to her feet, assumed a defensive stance, and instantly felt foolish. She changed the move into one of brushing dirt off her jeans hoping he had not noticed her overreaction.

He was moving away from her, hurrying toward a point about thirty feet from where he had tackled her to the ground. He was a slim middle-aged man, a few inches shy of six feet and ran in a surefooted crouch. His ball cap had blown off in the explosion revealing a close-cropped head that was bald on top. He looked quickly in a full circle from the impact point, looked down at the ground, and then more slowly looked back toward to the horizon, turning in all directions. His eyes focused from one item to the next as if he were cataloging the entire crater. His facial muscles were taut and his expression was unchanging.

Moments later, the man stood upright and jogged back to Carin. He mouthed something to her, but Carin's ears were still ringing from the explosion. She could not hear what he was saying. She shook her head and pointed to her ears.

He cupped his hands and shouted, "Are you all right?"

This time she understood. "What the hell do you think you're doing, jumping on me like that?" she shouted back.

The man took no notice of Carin's ill humor. He kept scanning the horizon all around. He cupped his hands again. "I'm Jake Sabio. I'm sorry, but I can't hear a word you're saying right now. Can you hear me okay?"

Carin nodded.

Jake looked around one more time and cupped his hands again. He got close enough that she could feel the heat of his body. "Did you hear anything strange just before the explosion?"

She shook her head and pointed to her personal stereo. "I was listening to my music and didn't hear much, just some whistling sound overhead. Can you hear me yet?"

Jake gave her a signal with his thumb and index finger suggesting he could hear her a little bit then motioned her to the spot that he ran to following the explosion. He pointed to the ground.

"What do you make of this?"

Carin looked at the small blast area and became quiet for a moment. "It was an airburst for sure. Not much energy in the burst, but the object seems to have vaporized before impact. No cratering from debris...that's odd. It didn't explode symmetrically. Very odd, actually."

Jake scanned the ground around the small impact mark. "I hadn't noticed before, but look at that. You're right. And it looks like it was pointed straight at us."

"That's not what I meant, but I see now what you mean. I meant that it didn't just blow up like a balloon in all directions equally, but it exploded with most

of the force moving horizontally, especially towards us. Some of it should have gone straight up as well as straight down. That would have left a crater with little spatter marks and some debris from whatever it was. I don't see any of that."

Jake pointed to the East rim of the crater. "I caught a glimpse out of the corner of my eye. It just barely cleared the rim over there." He was still scanning the horizon. Suddenly, he focused all his attention on her. "I'm sorry, but I didn't catch your name."

"I'm Carin Gonzalez and I'm one of those strange people who don't appreciate getting jumped on and dragged to the ground." She took a breath and added, "Except when someone is saving my life, of course. Exceptions granted for damsel rescuing." She managed a thin smile and offered her hand.

Jake shook her hand with an acknowledging nod and said, "I'm Jake Sabio. You're a geologist or geophysicist of some kind." It was not a question.

"I've got a Doctorate in Machine-Based Intelligence, but my masters work was in Geological and Planetary Sciences and I don't like evasive people."

Jake's face remained rigid in concentration. Without breaking his third complete scan of the crater rim he said, "I'm not being evasive if you don't ask me a question."

He pointed at the ground. "This was an airburst, not a ground burst. It wasn't an artillery shell because we're still here, and a ground-based explosion doesn't explain the 'incoming' sound."

Jake paused a moment to secure his ball cap back in place. He asked, "Could a meteor have done this?"

“Meteoroid,” Carin corrected.

“What?”

“Meteoroid,” she said again without lifting her gaze from the ground. “A meteor is a phenomenon in the sky – the streak behind the rock in space. The actual rock is a meteoroid until it hits the ground. Then it’s a meteorite. It’s a common mistake.”

Jake continued to divide his scan between the crater rim and the ground before him. “I stand corrected,” he replied. “Could a *meteorite* have caused this?”

By this time, Carin’s hearing had recovered and she could see that some people were coming down from the rim. She said, “You seemed focused on this. Is there something special I should know?”

Jake gave her a puzzled look. “Doctor, your life must be interesting if explosions are an everyday event. I personally don’t get that many explosions in my life, so I get interested when an unexpected one happens in my vicinity. Call me paranoid. I’ll initially assume someone was trying to get you or me or both since that’s the opinion that involves us the most personally.”

Carin gave him an amused look. “For a man who just perpetrated an unprovoked assault on an unsuspecting, defenseless woman, you’re quite abrasive.”

Jake turned to her and his face immediately became neutral. His lips were relaxed and his eyes barely showed the sharp intellect behind them. “Doctor, I get the feeling that you may be caught unsuspecting for the briefest of moments, but I don’t think you’ve ever been caught defenseless.”

His face just became unreadable! She thought. *He must have seen me staring at him.* She nervously shifted her attention to the ground to get her mind back on track. A pattern in the explosion marks became clear to her. “No, it can’t be a meteorite, or I should say that it is unlikely.”

“How unlikely?” Jake pressed.

“About as unlikely as you being struck by lightning while being attacked by a shark.”

Jake pursed his lips and appeared to whistle. Carin only heard it as a distant tone. He said, “Okay, that’s unlikely. What gives you that impression?”

Carin shrugged and pointed to her ear. “First, you heard it approaching. I assume that’s why you jumped on me. You have a military background.”

“Navy, and yes, I definitely heard incoming.”

“Annapolis grad, right? No, I’m not a mind reader; I can see your class ring. That explains why you dragged me to the ground when you heard incoming. Just a reflex taught on your first summer at the Naval Academy. How and why did you get so close to me?”

“I’d been trying to get your attention, but I never caught your eye. I could see that you were deep in your own thoughts and was trying not to be rude, but I could tell you were a geologist of some kind by the way you were looking at the different parts of the crater. I wanted to ask you some questions about the formations at the rim.”

Carin looked at the man closely and began to share his concern. “You’ve heard artillery incoming before?”

Jake looked taken aback. “Yes, but this was different. The Doppler shifted twice before it went quiet.”

The Doppler shift was the way you could tell when a train went by. The frequency of the sound suddenly shifts much lower, but Jake had it all wrong. Carin was shaking her head. “There’s no way the Doppler could have shifted. You’ll only hear a Doppler shift in the first place if some object changes its motion relative to you. *This* thing was coming at us the whole time, so the Doppler can’t even shift once, much less twice . . .”

“Unless it’s guided,” Jake completed for her. “And it doesn’t go quiet unless it’s going really fast and coming right at you.”

Carin surveyed the scene. While looking around, she twirled her amethyst ring on her right hand with her right thumb. She admitted to herself that it was a silly nervous habit, but it gave her comfort. The stone setting was a gift from her mother and father when she was a senior in high school. Twirling it made her feel close to them. It was the only jewelry she wore.

“Well, it wasn’t a meteorite . . . Oh my God, there’s somebody down over there. C’mon.”

As they jogged over to the unconscious form of one of the researchers, Jake asked, “How can you be sure it wasn’t a meteorite, Doctor?”

“Mostly, because you heard it. After all, the sound waves got to you before the object did. To be going so slow that you were able to react and not only hit the deck, but bring me down with you . . . no, that’s way too slow for some rock that has just survived atmospheric reentry. Besides, you said that it approached

on a shallow angle from the East. That would tell me that the object should've been going faster rather than slower."

Carin and Jake got to the victim on the ground. "It's Jim Torres," said Carin. "This is the guy that got me into the crater by letting me join his research team."

Torres was lying face down, but had one hand out. Carin grabbed his wrist. "He's got a good pulse," she said.

Carin leaned her mouth close to the man's ear. "Doctor Torres, are you all right? It's Carin Gonzalez."

Torres let out a low moan and rolled over. Carin instinctively pulled back. Small holes that were still oozing blood pocked Torres' face and neck. It was as if buckshot the size of grains of sand had blasted the short man.

Jake pointed to his chest. "He's breathing normally. Maybe he just got the wind knocked out of him."

Torres sat up coughing and waving his hand at Carin. "I'm fine, I'm fine – just let me catch my breath. Is the rest of the group okay?"

Carin looked around for the other team members. "Look, another person is down."

Torres continued to cough but finally said, "Really, I'm fine. Please check on the other members of the group."

Jake and Carin both got up and ran to the still form of a woman about twenty yards away. Jake asked, "How does the shallow entry angle apply?"

Carin had to think a moment to retrace their previous conversation. "What? Oh, if it were a rock on a reentry path, its apparent velocity to us would

have had the Earth's rotational velocity added on. At this latitude, that would have been about 500 miles per hour added on top of whatever speed it had. Hard to stay subsonic unless it was very light, but then it would have probably burned up. However, if it goes slow, you would expect a more vertical approach – either way, it doesn't add up. Whatever caused the explosion, it wasn't a meteorite.”

Jake was nodding as they got to the next victim. Carin checked the woman's pulse and it was as strong and regular as the man before. Jake commented, “Regular breathing like Doctor Torres.” He stood up and scanned the horizon. It was clear to Carin that he kept a special eye on the folks fast approaching. Unexpectedly, he asked, “What else, Doctor?”

“Remember the explosion pattern we saw on the ground? It proves that this thing vaporized just before impact. Fine and dandy, but you heard it so it had to have been subsonic. So, if this was a space rock, where did it get the energy to vaporize? If it was this small and picked up that amount of energy on entry, it would have come apart closer to the point of maximum heating when it was going faster, which means when it was much higher – say a couple of hundred thousand feet higher. No, this has the earmarks of a mechanical device. Look, there's someone else down.”

As they jogged to the next victim, Jake pointed to a fast approaching rescue group. “I agree with you about it being a mechanical device, doctor. I think that everyone who was in the crater during explosion is down.”

Carin slowed down and looked around the crater. Sure enough, still forms were dotted around the crater. “Everyone except us, Captain.”

A sense of dread washed over Carin. She was not normally susceptible to paranoia. However, she was not about to point out to the responders that she and Jake were the only two not affected. “Jake, they’re going to be getting these folks out of here at max speed and filling up the local hospitals. I feel fine and you look healthy. I don’t see any reason to load up the local facilities with our carcasses since we seem to be okay.”

Jake continued moving but turned his head to look at Carin as if for the first time. For a moment, he did not say anything. Then a slight nod that was more in his eyes than in any motion he made. “Translation: since we are about to have company, you’re suggesting that our story is that we ran down here when we heard the explosion so we could help.”

That was exactly what Carin was trying to say. She took a breath to protest, but Jake made a small gesture of his hand that stopped her. “I have to agree with you, Doctor. Too many things don’t add up here. I think it’s in our best interest to get some answers before we share our experience.” Jake reached into his back pocket and took out his wallet. From it, he extracted a small card and handed it to Carin. “Here, take this. It has my e-mail and phone numbers on it. I check them once a day. I may be paranoid, but let me know if anything else unusual happens to you. And I mean anything.”

Carin turned to take the card and noticed for the first time that several dozen small holes peppered the back of Jake's denim jacket. She pointed to the holes. "Look at that. Are you okay?"

Jake pointed to the sleeves of her ski jacket. "Look. You've got them too."

Jake untucked the back of his shirt and raised it slightly. His back had dozens of little red welts, one to match each hole in his jacket. Carin pulled back a sleeve and noticed she had the same welts. One was still bleeding slightly and, while she watched, it healed over, turned an angry red and then settled down to a dull pink.

Jake had been watching too. "That should have taken a week at least."

At this point, the rescue group came within shouting range. Carin slowly turned to face them. Her sabbatical had just taken a curious turn.

CHAPTER 3

Crubari checked his disguise one last time before stepping out of the lavatory of the private jet. He smiled. Regardless of how good he got at disguising his looks, to his eyes he could always make out his vaguely Mayan features — the set of his eyes, the shape of his head. It did not matter. He was confident the disguise would be proof against anyone trying to discover his identity. It always had in the past.

He had heard of the explosion within an hour of its occurrence. This was not surprising since he paid several news companies for any reports of freak explosions that had mysteriously disabled or injured people. Of all the explosions he had examined over the years, this one was the most promising.

He chartered an airplane to fly him to Burbank, California as soon as he received the news. There, he had a rental car driven to the plane for him and then left the crew of the airplane waiting while he drove himself out to the smaller Van Nuys Airport in the San Fernando Valley. There, he boarded another jet that would take him to Winslow, Arizona. Such ways of muddying his tracks had long become instinctive. He did what he could to blur the picture, paying for everything in cash. He always included a healthy tip. It helped to assure him prompt and polite service and that no one asked awkward questions. If his assumptions were correct, he would have to hurry; the deaths would soon begin. If the event in the crater turned out to be what he suspected, then he was more than likely already too late.

The jet landed at the small airport in Winslow just after midnight. The flight crew agreed to stay by the aircraft and be ready to leave on his return. As soon as he stepped off the boarding ladder and started for his waiting car, his phone rang. It was a message from one of his news agencies. Several of the victims of the explosion had died already. It was happening quickly this time. He would have to hurry.

There was no traffic on the streets. *This is good*, thought the man. *There will be fewer witnesses*. Crubari scanned the hospital parking lot for a darkened area and found one corner where the overhead lights had burned out and not been replaced. He shut down the car in the shadow and scanned the parking lot light poles and building walls for security cameras. He did not see any, but he would still act as if they were there.

Next, he turned his attention to the hospital and smiled. Luck may be at his side today. The hospital was an old building, possibly World War II era. While Crubari was not a student of architecture, he had sufficient working knowledge for his purposes. Modern hospital designs required more frequent air exchanges. They built the older hospitals before air conditioning and had to include ducting to fit within the space available. He walked to the side of the building rather than the front door and noticed the building had a basement. This was almost certainly pre-World War II. He stooped closer to one of the basement windows and noticed they were painted shut. A plan began to form in his mind.

With the ease of one who had performed the task many times, he entered the hospital and put on a lab coat that he found in the empty doctors' lounge. He

walked along the deserted corridors until he found a nurse. "Excuse me. I need to interview any survivors from the crater."

The nurse looked at the man and asked, "Who are you?"

He smiled and leaned towards the night nurse extending his hand. "I'm Doctor Juarez with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention," he said. "Is the attending physician available?"

The nurse began walking as she talked. "I'm so glad you're here doctor. I've called the attending, but she won't be here for another hour. They called her over to St. Mary's across town on an emergency before all our patients became symptomatic. They are all in terrible distress. They spike a high fever and then they expire about four hours later. Only five of the crater patients are still alive."

She suddenly stopped and looked around. After a moment, she took a step closer to Crubari and whispered, "They all died, Doctor. All but five patients from the crater have died."

The nurse turned around and began walking again. "I'll take you to the team leader. He was still conscious a few minutes ago when I checked his vitals. I'm afraid his fever is starting to spike just like the others."

They walked past the nurses' station and he noticed standard office file cabinets. Crubari smiled to the nurse and said, "I didn't realize we were in such a state. Could I please borrow a pad and a pen?"

The nurse looked around before walking into the nurses' station to a stationery cabinet in the corner. While he was waiting, he noticed the file cabinets were not of the locking variety and they were not the thick-walled, fireproof

cabinets required in modern hospitals. He looked at the handles on the cabinets and gravitated to the shiniest one. It was marked To Be Filed.

The nurse walked up to Crubari and said, "Here you are, doctor."

She handed Crubari the pad and pen. He thanked her, clicked the ballpoint pen, and scribbled on the paper to get the flow of ink started. After she turned to lead him to the patient, Crubari rubbed his thumb across his scribbling and smiled at the smear it left. *Water soluble*, he thought.

They entered the team leader's room and he went to the chart at the foot of the bed. He had no idea what he was looking for on the chart, but the nurse would become suspicious if he failed to look. It was a ritual. Crubari understood ritual. He let out a deep sigh of resignation and turned to the nurse. "Could you please check on the statuses of the other patients from the crater?"

The nurse hurried out of the room, clearly happy to comply. The man turned to the team leader and said, "You are not *El Ehido*. I do not even have to test you. Where is the *El Ehido*?"

The patient opened his eyes and stared at the man. "What are you talking about?"

The man continued as if the patient had not spoken. "There is always one *El Ehido*. But everyone from the crater is either dead or unconscious except you, and you soon will be."

"Dead?" the patient cried. "All twenty-two of them? Wait! They said we caught a virus! What *virus* is it that doesn't leave any survivors at all? How can a *virus* even spread, if it kills a host that fast? Oh God! All dead..."

The team leader was too weak to continue. He simply shook his head, obviously entering the delirium phase. Soon, he would be unconscious and then he would be dead. No science or power on Earth could change that.

It was time for Crubari to leave, but first he had to ensure the subsequent investigation would not only point away from him but away from the truth. Unfortunately, at that moment the nurse walked back into the room in an agitated state. "One of the other patients is dead. The others have slipped into comas. Doctor, what's causing this?"

The man stared at her intently and said, "Infection. We have seen it before. Unfortunately, it is powerful and non-responsive to treatment. I have a theory that I would like to test. Are there any maintenance personnel available at this late hour?"

The nurse nodded. "Mr. Tanner should be available. He's usually here all night and on weekends."

"Excellent," replied Crubari. "Could you please call him and let him know that I would like access to the basement? It might help solve this problem."

The nurse walked over to the bedside phone and placed the call. She hung up, turned to face Crubari and said, "He'll be expecting you down at the basement access with the door unlocked. I can walk you down now if we are finished here."

Crubari shook his head. "I need you to write down a few thoughts for me, if you do not object. My mind works better this way. It shouldn't take more than a minute or two."

The nurse looked as if she wanted to deny the false doctor's request. Instead, she replied, "Certainly doctor." Then she sat down and pulled a pen and paper from the desk. "Ready," she said.

Crubari began pacing back and forth in the tiny room. He kept his gaze casual, but he was carefully noting the position of every object around him and listening for anyone that may be coming to the room. "Let's begin by listing what we know, even if it's obvious. Write down that the virus kills all of its victims."

"Got it."

"Good. Let's see – I don't know how it infects people."

"Okay."

"Write down that I'm probably infected and that scares the hell out of me."

"Got it, sir. Anything else?"

"No, that is all, thank you. By the way, could you please write your name at the bottom of the page in case I need to contact you later?"

As the nurse lowered her head to write her name, the man picked up a folded bed sheet at the foot of the patient's bed. He unfolded it and stretched it from one corner. When the nurse finished writing, she began turning her head to the man. She never completed the move. Faster than an eye could track, the man wrapped the sheet around her neck, pulled her to a standing position while he stood up on the chair where she had just been sitting.

The struggle lasted no more than a minute before the nurse was still.

The man tied the end of the sheet around to form a slipknot around her neck and tied the other end on the orthopedic bed frame. He then reviewed the note the nurse had written.

**The virus kills all of its victims.
I don't know how it infects people.
I'm probably infected
and that scares the hell out of me.**

Norma Crane

It was an inarticulate suicide note, but it would have to do. The nurse could describe him to the authorities. If the next part of his plan worked, that would not be an issue. If it did not, at least Nurse Crane's suicide closed one small detail that he would not have to deal with later.

He walked to the nurses' station and pulled open the cabinet marked To Be Filed. He did not bother to remove any files, but continued to the fire escape at the end of the hall. He descended to the first floor, exited the staircase, and looked right and left to see if anyone was around or if there were any security cameras. Seeing neither, he closed his eyes and listened. After a moment, he heard the sound of shuffling feet off to his right. He waited a moment longer, heard a muffled cough from the same direction and turned to walk towards the sound.

A short, slim man with ruffled gray hair was waiting by a heavy door. He had his hands in the upper pockets of his overalls. "Are you Doctor Suarez?"

"No," replied Crubari extending his hand to the maintenance man. "I'm Doctor Juarez from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention."

The maintenance man released Crubari's hand. "Yeah, whatever. Norma said you wanted to see the basement. There ain't nuthin' there that could be any of your business."

Crubari smiled. It would be a joy to complete the next part of his plan. He pointed at the open doorway and motioned down the stairs. "Please indulge me if only for a moment."

The technician made a rude noise, reached around the open doorway and turned on the lights. Crubari followed the man down the stairs, closing the door behind him, and into the basement, noting its general disarray and unkempt appearance. A distribution array for the hospital oxygen was against one wall. Several sturdy steel racks filled with boxes of records were close to another wall. A small electric forklift had its charger connected in one corner. The floor had a series of water drains in a line dotting the gray, industrial floor. Hospital supplies lined yet another wall on steel racks and a small, poorly lit work area sat with tools spread on the workbench.

"Old building," said Crubari.

"Yeah, but if you think there's some of that Legionnaire's crap or some such in the ducting, you can forget it. That's the first thing we looked for before any of you out-of-town hotshots showed up. We're clean."

Crubari nodded. "Do you heat the building with propane or natural gas?"

Tanner did not answer immediately. Finally, he pointed to the wall behind the stacked file boxes on the shelves. Crubari walked over to where the technician had pointed. "The meter is on the inside of the building."

“Sure,” replied Tanner. “They used to do it that way. It’s an old building.”

“Yes, except if there is a break in the line before the meter, the flow is unregulated and would pour in at a tremendous rate.”

Crubari walked over to the tool bench. There were several tools spread out on the bench next to pieces of a garbage disposal. An oxy-acetylene torch was on the far side of the bench. “Do you have a rag disposal bin?”

“Of course I do. It’s right there next to the bench. It’s the green can. What’s this all about anyway?”

“Has the Fire Chief cited you for this basement?”

“Real funny. Bert and I go back to high school so we got an understanding. He tells me what to fix and I fix it. Besides, what can go wrong? This hospital’s been runnin’ for more ‘an fifty years and nuthin’s happened and nuthin’s gonna happen.”

“Unfortunately, something terrible is about to happen.” Crubari reached into the green can and removed an oily rag.

“For example, suppose you were to drive that electric forklift in the corner and knock over that set of shelves. The shelves would fall into the natural gas pipe and allow unregulated natural gas to begin pouring into this room.”

“That ain’t gonna happen.”

“Why is that, Mr. Tanner?”

“Because I think you’re a phony. I’m callin’ the cops and let them figure out what to do with you.”

The technician began to turn towards the stairs, but never completed the move. Crubari was on his back placing him in a chokehold while pressing the oil soaked rag against his mouth. The brief struggle ended and Crubari hurried to set up the details. He unplugged the forklift and positioned it in the correct area to push over the shelves. At that point, an inspiration struck him. Any fire or explosion resulting from his work would be more spectacular with a higher concentration of oxygen.

First, he had to set up the cause. If the planned destruction was not complete, he wanted a finger pointing at the late Mr. Tanner. He found some rubber mats used on the shower and tub surfaces to keep patients from slipping and put one over each water drain. Crubari estimated that five or six fire trucks would respond to the fire he was about to start. The hospital was in an industrial area, so each of the trucks would be pouring two thousand gallons of water per minute. That would help ensure the basement would fill with water and destroy most of the evidence.

Next, more details. A natural gas fire would blow itself out. He needed a constant source of ignition to keep the destruction going. Natural gas was mostly methane. That meant that it would rise to the ceiling when released. It also meant that he wanted one part natural gas to two parts oxygen for the optimum combustion. The basement ceiling was twenty to twenty-five feet high, so he wrapped the oxy-acetylene hose around the stairs fourteen feet above the basement floor, and lit the torch. Crubari picked up Tanner's body and propped him up on a ladder within reach of the torch.

He looked around and felt that his fiction was in place. He walked over to the shelves next to the oxygen array and pulled them until they were at the balance point. He could not afford to raise an alarm with the sound of the shelves falling, so he leveraged the shelf and gently lowered it onto the oxygen lines. Gaseous oxygen began hissing and Crubari knew the clock had started.

He walked over to the shelf next to the natural gas lines and tried to imagine the flow of natural gas as it flooded the room. There would be eddy currents and waves attached to the ceiling that had to balance with the oxygen pouring in. When he felt the oxygen had mostly filled the room, he poised the shelf on the gas line and let it slip until the line broke free.

Crubari turned to run up the stairs and beat the flow of natural gas. The mercaptan smell added to natural gas was distinctive and would bring help running. He took the stairs two at a time and stepped through the door while setting it to lock. With his back to the door, he looked left and right to make sure that he was alone. Certain that he was by himself, he sniffed the air. He could not detect the rotten egg smell of the mercaptan. The basement door would hold in the smell long enough. The air exchangers would not clear the gas.

Crubari looked for signs he may have left. Noting none, he walked down the empty corridors, replaced the lab coat and hurried to catch his waiting airplane home.

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