

PROLOGUE

Sporting a New York Yankees ball cap and sunglasses, the man who called himself Snake blended in with the workers coming in for their evening shift at St. Francis Hospital. Keeping his face partially turned toward the floor, he passed several surveillance cameras, confident that his identity would remain hidden. To disguise his height, he walked slightly hunched with a dark backpack slung over one shoulder. His tattooed left hand, remained in his pocket, keeping it out of view.

Snake strode past two reception desks, one for radiology and one for general hospital admissions, manned by receptionists busily preparing for the inrush of morning patients. The tricky part would be to conceal himself in the utility closet without being noticed. He sidled down the long hallway past the side passage that led to the closet, shifting his eyes left and right. Two people were standing, talking within sight of the door. One glanced up and looked at him. The man looked like he might ask him a question. Snake walked past as if he had taken no notice. He didn't want to get caught up in a conversation with someone who might later remember him. Instead, he mounted the nearby elevator and rode to the top floor as a delaying tactic. There were no other passengers on the elevator to see him get off. The top floor was not being used because most of it was undergoing remodeling and he could hear power tools at the other end of the hall. He checked his watch and, after a few minutes, rounded a corner and entered a stairwell. Descending slowly, he hoped the two talkers would have moved on in time for him to arrive back at the utility closet. The stairway opened on the main floor, near to his destination. He glanced up and down the corridor and, this time, saw no one close enough to matter. There were no cameras in the side hallway, so he opened the closet door, stepped in, then closed it behind himself. There, he would wait to implement his plan.

CHAPTER 1

Jack put his head in his hands and stared blankly at the computer screen in his home office, feeling an unfamiliar pressure in his gut. No matter how hard he looked at the financial documents, in the end, it was not enough. For years he and his partners had been working hard, seeing patients every day and spending long hours in the office. Two years ago they had sold the practice to a local hospital, and had done well, at first. The situation had seemed like a good fit. Lately, though, the revenue had begun to slide, and the expenses had increased. While their salaries provided them a comfortable living, they had not taken raises in years as the practice limped along.

Running his hand through his salt-and-pepper hair, Jack released a sigh and wondered if he should still leave next month for that mission trip to Kenya. He'd already bought the plane tickets, but could he afford two weeks away from work? His partners had all gone overseas for various lengths of time to work in mission hospitals. Bangladesh, Haiti, India, and Thailand. He preferred Africa because of the year he had spent in The Congo in the 1980s. In Kenya he wouldn't have to worry about using a translator as often. In The Congo, where so much had happened and where he felt his life had changed, he had learned a trade language called Lingala. Knowing the local language had helped during his time there, but when he had tried to relearn it a few years ago, he been unable to dredge it up from memory. He was also inept at The Congo's official language, French. In Kenya, English was much

more prominent. He believed he would be more effective if he could communicate directly with his patients.

He shook his head and scowled over the finances and was about to log off the computer when a blood-red skull and crossbones symbol on a black background flashed across his screen. The skull stayed on the screen only a few seconds, and then it disappeared. It was his third time seeing this over the past week. Jack had no idea what it meant, but he didn't like it. He'd tried to enhance the security software by adding an antivirus feature. That had found lots of annoying things but it apparently hadn't fixed this problem. The skull and crossbones was freaking him out, and he was getting worried.

He decided he'd call one of his friends, also a patient, Thomas, owner of a computer tech company. Thomas had helped him on numerous occasions when he had computer trouble and would be the first call. Even if Thomas couldn't fix it, he may have seen this before and have an opinion about the symbol. It seemed everyone dealt with viruses eventually, but their system was supposed to be protected and up-to-date. If this was a virus, he wanted it gone.

"Honey, your dinner will get cold," the soft voice of his sweet wife called from the kitchen. Smiling, he thought about how wonderful his life was since he and Kathy married. The only unfortunate thing was his improved appetite, evidenced by the tightness of his belt. It was hard to control, though, being married to such a great cook.

"I'm on my way," he said. Jack looked once again at the computer screen, closed the program, and logged off the computer. The aroma that awaited him evoked a memory of coming home to his new wife, four years ago. That first meal together in their home with Kathy and her daughter was etched in his mind permanently. He could remember the candles, even the green napkins on the table. The thought lessened his anxiety somewhat, and a smile crept back to his face.

"Honey, are you okay?" Kathy asked from the doorway of his office. "You look a little pale." She came over and took his face in her hands. "You shouldn't bring work home, sweetheart. It's making you anxious."

Jack hadn't realized his worry was so obvious. The finance issue hung over him, but he hadn't shared that concern with her. He didn't

want to worry her, but he felt guilty about keeping it to himself. Their income was adequate. The house was paid off, and they had no credit card debt, but it made no sense that his income should be going down instead of up. Jack and his partners had always tried to keep their employees happy with annual cost-of-living raises and, usually end-of-year bonuses. But the hospital financial office had informed him that this year there was no money for bonuses. Their office just hadn't been "productive" enough. With Christmas approaching, there would be some unhappy people at his office very soon.

"I'm fine," said Jack, smiling. He stood to follow her and said, "I'm sorry I've been working at home. I'll try to stop. It's just that . . ." He trailed off and looked around as if he could find the right words somewhere in the room.

"Just what, sweetheart?" Kathy asked, trying to get him to look directly at her.

Jack let out a sigh. "All right, I do want to talk to you about it, but not right now. Let's have that wonderful dinner I can smell." Jack leaned down and kissed his wife.

Kathy was not completely satisfied with the resolution of their conversation. "I'll hold you to that. We'll talk later," she said.

Jack put his arm around Kathy and tried to ignore the anxiety that felt like lead in his own heart. They walked together into the kitchen where she'd been slaving away on another gourmet meal.

Esther, Kathy's youngest daughter, now seventeen and a senior in high school, was just getting home from school. One of the more prominent players on the volleyball team, she had diligently attended two-a-day practices since Thanksgiving. The volleyball season was just getting underway, and they were already playing preliminary matches. She came in the front door and tossed her gym bag on the floor. "Hi, Mom. I'm home," she called from the front entry.

"Hi, Hun. Hurry and wash up. We'll wait for you," Kathy called as Jack filled glasses with ice.

"I'll set a place for her," said Jack.

"That would be great." She stopped, put her hand on the counter and fanned herself with the other one. "I'm hot," said Kathy brushing a wisp of hair from her forehead with her sleeve. "I love this kitchen, but it gets so warm when I'm fixing a meal. It can be

almost unbearable.”

Jack hadn't noticed the increased temperature, but he nodded sympathetically. Many women suffered from hot flashes and feeling warm, and they'd talked about it before. Kathy was always hot. Jack had suggested that she talk with her gynecologist about hormones, but Kathy didn't want to take any new medications. Instead of bringing it up again, he asked, “Would you like me to turn on the fan?”

Kathy smiled at him. “That would be lovely.”

Just as Jack switched on the oscillating fan, Esther came in and flounced into a chair at the table. “Man, it's windy in here.” Without waiting for a reply, she said, “I'm hungry! Mom, your food always smells so good.”

Kathy, flustered by the fan comment but flattered by the compliment, smiled at her daughter and tried not to roll her eyes. She said, “It's nice to see you home a little earlier today. How was practice?”

“I got three kills and four blocks. But, Dad, I bruised my knee. Can you look at it after dinner?” she answered in rapid succession.

Jack blinked at being included and smiled, “Sure, Honey. Does it hurt to put weight on your foot?”

“Nah, I just want your opinion. The trainer already told me what to do,” she said. “Can we eat?”

Jack nodded without answering. He reached out his hand to Kathy who took it.

Kathy put her hand out to Esther, who did roll her eyes but took her mother's hand in hers as Jack prayed, thanking the Lord for the meal.

After dinner, Esther seemed to have forgotten all about her knee. She quickly put in her earbuds and left the dining room. Her dishes still sat at her place. Jack tried to get her attention, but she didn't see him and couldn't hear him. She disappeared down the hall into her bedroom, and Jack stared after her with mild frustration.

“We should say something,” Jack started, with a slight irritation in his voice.

Kathy closed her eyes and made a slight motion with her hand. “I know, I know.” She shook her head. “It's been getting harder to get through to her lately.”

Jack, who had never been a father to a teen before marrying

Kathy, asked, “Was it this hard with your other kids?” He smiled and took Kathy in his arms, as much to fulfill his own need for closeness as to comfort her.

Kathy had six other children. Now, most were married, and among them were six grandchildren ranging from a few months to seven years old. Kathy pressed her cheek against his chest. “At times they were all a little like this. It will be all right. You know, she’s not openly rebellious or into drugs. I worry, though. Ever since that kidnapping, even with counseling, she has been a little different.”

Three years earlier. The kidnappers had taken Esther after a church service. Because of their hired bodyguard’s quick thinking and the Lincoln Police Department’s rapid response, the episode had been brief. Nevertheless, fear had kept Esther from church for a long time. Jack thought she was doing well.

Jack’s mind went to some of his patients who had been difficult teenagers. Some had gotten involved with drugs or alcohol at that age. One young mother he had seen that day was distraught because her son was being charged with assault. It made him smile to realize that Esther was very good in comparison. “I understand,” he said, releasing Kathy just enough to look lovingly into her eyes. “And you’re right, she is a good girl. I just think she should be more helpful. More respectful, especially toward you.”

Kathy leaned up and kissed Jack on the cheek. “She will be. But you’re right, too. I need to hold her accountable to some basic tasks.” She walked over to the counter and picked up her smartphone. She turned it on and tapped quickly on the screen. In a moment Esther’s door opened down the hall.

“Mom! You don’t need to text me,” Esther cried.

Jack laughed, shaking his head. “I guess you know exactly how to handle her.”

CHAPTER 2

Jack and Kathy sat together on the sofa while Jack laid out the work issues and finances for her in a somewhat shortened explanation. Kathy asked, “So your income is declining at work? How long has this been going on?”

Jack sighed. “It isn’t that easy to tell exactly when it started. We’ve never been at the top of the charts when it comes to income, but we’ve never had a year where our personal incomes actually went down.”

Kathy looked thoughtful for a moment. “Do I need to go back to work?”

Jack was mildly shocked. “Oh, no, sweetheart. That’s not what I’m saying. We’re okay financially. I don’t mean that.”

“What about Esther’s college costs?” she asked, still slightly upset. A tear began running down her cheek. “I’m sorry I’m not contributing.”

Jack took Kathy in his arms and held her. “No, it’s okay. It’s okay. You wanted to know what’s been going on, and you have a right to know. I’ll get together with my partners and see what we need to do, but there’s no reason to worry about the future. I have money already saved for Esther’s college. Our retirement funds are doing well. Even with things going down at work, I still make a decent living. Please don’t worry.”

Kathy sniffed and wiped her eyes. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to get so upset, but you are worried. I can tell.”

Jack realized his own thoughts were affecting his wife. “I didn’t think of it that way. I need to get more information and get to the bottom of this, not just worry.”

Kathy sniffed and looked briefly at the ceiling. “I don’t know. Maybe I’m also getting emotional over Esther and the way she’s been behaving lately.”

“She does seem distracted,” Jack replied.

“It’s more than that,” said Kathy. “She has always been such a sweet girl. Yesterday she was plainly rude on the phone to one of my friends. I was in the basement, and she didn’t know where I was. She answered the phone and told my friend that she just picked a bad time to call. She didn’t make any effort to find me.”

Jack shook his head. “I’ve been thinking she’s busy with her own life.”

“I spoke to her about it, but she just passed it off as no big deal,” said Kathy. She put a hand to her forehead and sighed.

“Are you okay?” Jack asked, kissing her on the cheek.

“I think so,” Rubbing the back of her neck, Kathy said, “I’m tired and have a little headache,

but you help me feel better.” Though a lot of her symptoms of weakness and numbness had gone away since her brain surgery six years earlier, Kathy continued to get headaches. Sometimes they built up to a severe level. She had been getting regular check-ups, now every six months since her brain surgery. At the time the neurosurgeon had not been able to get every bit of tumor but radiation had abolished all signs of it. The only evidence of the cancer that remained on her MRIs was scar tissue from the surgery. She had done extremely well. It was rare to survive her form of cancer and become cancer-free. Her oncologist wasn’t ready to make that declaration, but Kathy had already exceeded all expectations. She had kindly told her specialist, “It was God, and of course your treatment.” The oncologist had scoffed, at first, but lately, she had been more circumspect, asking about Kathy’s faith.

Kathy was kind and helpful in discussing religious things. She invited her oncologist to church. Her response had been a distinct “maybe.”

Jack moved over and massaged Kathy’s neck. “We should go to bed a little early, so your headache doesn’t get worse.”

Kathy smiled up at Jack with a slightly suggestive smile. “That sounds like a good idea.”

Just then Esther walked into the room. “Hey, Mom and Dad, I’m going out. I need to see Jennifer and work on some homework.”

Jack looked at his watch. “It’s already 8:30, when will you be home?”

“Oh, I don’t know, like one a.m.,” she said sarcastically.

Jack scowled. “Esther, there’s no need for that attitude. I just wanted an idea about your plans,”

“Sorry. I’ll be back by ten. We have to talk about a project,” she said, turning toward the door. Before Jack or Kathy could say anything, she had her earbuds in her ears and was going to her car.

“So much for going to bed early,” said Jack shaking his head.

It was Kathy’s turn to scowl. “If she just needed to talk about an assignment, they have Facetime. She doesn’t need to go over this time of night. She didn’t really ask, did she?”

Jack pulled Kathy to his chest and wrapped his arms around her. “She’s growing up and away from us. You’ve done it before, with your other kids. Is this harder because she’s your baby?”

Kathy burrowed against Jack’s shoulder, holding his arm around her. She sighed deeply. “Maybe that’s what’s really going on. It is harder for me, somehow.”

“By this time next year, she’ll be away at college.”

“Oh, no. She’s going to stay home, close to her mother, and go to the community college,” Kathy said, smiling. “She just thinks she’s going away.”

They both laughed. Esther had made it clear that she intended to go away and had already been accepted at a small college in Missouri. She could always change her mind but she would be able to play volleyball there, and she knew several girls from the previous class who had started in September.

“We’ll make it through somehow. Let’s just pray about it now and try not to worry,” said Jack.

“I’ll agree to that if you’ll pray for your office and agree not to worry too,” said Kathy, seriously.

“Okay. And I’ll call a meeting for tomorrow night with my partners to discuss the financials.” He rested his cheek on his wife’s head, and they prayed together quietly, moving their anxieties from themselves to God.