

HYPERION'S FRACTURE

ONE

THURSDAY, MARCH 23RD

Tocumen International Airport, Panama City, Panama

HIS LEFT EYE wandered over her body. The right one didn't move. The mustache reminded her of a fat black caterpillar perched above thin cruel lips. Claire ignored the sweat trickling down her neck and the ache in her shoulders. She stood tall and returned his stare. It wasn't easy. She wanted to turn away. The scar marred the right side of his face, producing a permanent half grin and a milk-white cataract. Their eyes locked and he blinked. She wondered what violent act caused this cycloptic face as she pushed her passport over the counter. A shiver jolted her. The caterpillar bristled as the customs agent smiled.

"Eres bella." You are beautiful, he said.

"Gracias," Claire replied.

He stamped her passport and slid it back. The tension ebbed as she shrugged off her backpack, unzipped the main compartment, and stowed the papers.

“Enjoy your stay in Panama, señorita.”

She nodded then merged into the jostling crowd flowing through the terminal. Fleeting snatches of multilingual conversations slipped past as she moved upstream against the human tide. A few moments later she spotted a man standing by an escalator wearing a green shirt and khaki trousers. He held up a notebook-sized white piece of paper with *Dr. Claire Hodgson* printed in black block letters. Next to him stood a petite woman in her midthirties with raven hair cut in a pageboy style. She wore a floral print skirt with a pink blouse and began waving.

“Claire! Over here.”

“Meera.” Claire darted through the throng of travelers and they embraced.

“You made it.”

“I almost didn’t recognize you.” Claire stood at arm’s length looking at her friend. “You cut your hair. It’s so cute.”

“I had to.”

“It looks so good on you. I love it.”

Dr. Meera Jindal laughed and flipped her head from side to side. “It was too long, like wearing a turban in a sauna.”

“Why didn’t you post a picture?”

“I’ve been busy *and* it looks terrible.”

“Nonsense—you’re gorgeous.”

“Not after a few hours in the jungle,” Meera said. “A haircut and makeup can’t fix that.”

“Has it really been three years?”

“Almost. Madrid, remember?”

Claire shook her head and smiled. “It doesn’t seem that long ago.”

“A lot’s happened since then. Anyway, thanks for coming. I need some company. It gets lonely when you’re banished to an outpost.”

“Outpost?” Claire glanced at the people streaming past.

Meera laughed. “Not here. Panama City is awesome. I’m talking about where I live and work. Tonight, we’ll stay downtown.

Tomorrow I'll take you to the lab." Meera reached for the handle of her luggage. "You'll see what I mean."

The man standing next to them cleared his throat and extended his hand.

"Oh, forgive me for being rude." Meera placed her hand to her forehead. "This is Dr. Alvarez, my research partner and director of R & D at the institute."

"A pleasure, Dr. Hodgson," said Alvarez. "I've heard wonderful things about you."

She shook his hand. "Thank you, but please call me Claire."

He nodded and smiled. "If you'll call me, Rafael."

"Deal."

"Your accent, it's Australian?"

"From Sydney originally, but I live in the States now."

"Where?"

"The Raleigh-Durham area, North Carolina."

"Welcome to Panama." He hoisted her backpack, and the three of them walked toward the exit.

CLAIRE SCANNED the modern skyline and tapped the tinted window as they approached the outskirts of the city. "I count fifteen high-rises going up. This is a metropolis."

Rafael glanced at Claire in the rearview mirror while maneuvering their vehicle through late-afternoon freeway traffic. "Panama is no longer third world. Today we're the center of Central American banking and finance."

"Thanks to the canal expansion, it'll remain a focal point of global trade for the next century. What do you think of our giant corkscrew?" Meera asked as they passed the spectacular helical F&F Tower.

Claire craned her neck. "Too bad you don't have a wine bottle to go with it."

Rafael chuckled. “That would be nice.” He navigated the SUV through a maze of urban streets lined by glass-and-steel skyscrapers. “Welcome to the jewel of Panama, Latin America’s finest city.” A few minutes later, he parked in front of the hotel. “Checking in,” he said in Spanish to the valet and handed him the keys.

In a short while, they were registered and stepping out of an elevator onto their floor. “I have a call in ten minutes,” Meera said when they stopped in front of Claire’s room. “Relax and freshen up. I’ll meet you in the lobby at six. We have reservations at my favorite place in old town.”

“See you then.” Claire opened the door and walked to the window across the room. She flung open the sheer drapes revealing the turquoise splendor of Panama Bay. Twenty-two floors below, the beach was variegated by umbrellas and palm trees, while figures scurried like ants across the white sand. Exhausted, she flopped on the bed and closed her eyes. *How will Meera take the news? Will she be mad . . . jealous . . . hurt?* She hoped not. Too many lives depended on her cooperation. As her mind drifted into sleep an image of Hyperion flashed. She bolted upright. *Hang on boy, don’t give up.*

CLAIRE HELD UP HER WINEGLASS. “Congratulations. Bill must be proud of you.”

Meera’s smile faded as she touched her glass to Claire’s and shrugged. “I wouldn’t know.”

“Really? What happened? I thought you two were serious.”

Her head turned from side to side. “Haven’t heard from him in months.”

“That doesn’t sound like the William Plunkett I remember.”

“I guess a long-distance relationship was more than he could handle.” The tip of her index finger circled the rim of her glass. “I’m wasting the most important years of my life hunting flowers in a rain forest.”

"Trust me, you're not wasting anything. I guarantee he's going to take notice, along with a lot of others. You're doing incredible work, and those flowers are really important," said Claire.

"I doubt if the jerk has any idea what I'm doing. The great professor is too busy charming coeds half his age to think of me."

"He's not the first man with that problem."

"How could I have been so naïve? He won't even answer an email."

Claire sat up straight. "I'm surprised. He didn't seem the type."

"I've heard he's dating a graduate student. Can you believe that?"

"Well, weren't you one when you first got together?"

"That was five years ago and I was a post-doc."

"Do you miss him?"

"I'm over it. There was a time I thought we had something, but not anymore." Meera drained her glass and reached for the bottle.

"Well, you have to admit he's brilliant," said Claire.

"And gorgeous but, that's no excuse for ignoring me."

"He'll come to his senses, and he won't be ignoring you much longer."

Meera tilted her head. "What do you mean?"

"You'll see." Claire paused and sipped her Viognier while several diners walked past their table. "Where's Rafael?"

"With his family in Ancón. It's a suburb," Meera clarified. "We're borrowing some equipment from the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute at Gorgas Hospital. He'll pick it up then get us in the morning."

They were seated around an outdoor table at a rooftop restaurant near the Presidential Palace, overlooking buildings dating to the origins of the city. An expanse of brick and stucco structures with acres of terra-cotta roof tiles sprawled below them. A tropical breeze ruffled the edges of the tablecloth and blew strands of Claire's long golden hair across her face. In the distance, across the shimmering bay, skyscrapers in the modern part of the city cut into the horizon like giant jagged peaks backlit by the setting sun.

They ordered after the waiter refilled their glasses. When he walked away, Meera glanced around and looked at her friend. “I’m not complaining, but why the surprise visit?”

“I hope I’m not imposing.”

“Not at all, I don’t mean that. It’s wonderful, but the Stanford reunion *is* in two months.”

Claire put her wineglass down. “I know. I’ll be there.”

“You better be. I may need help dealing with Plunkett.”

“You’ll have no problem.” Claire folded her arms on the table and leaned forward. “I’m here because of your research. Remember your lecture in Madrid?”

“The Pharma Conference? Sure. I presented the results of our first antibiotic project.”

“Exactly. I was stunned. You’d discovered the solution to a problem we were having with our patients. We needed a long-acting antibiotic.”

“Seriously? Why didn’t you say something?”

“I wasn’t sure at the time, but I am now. That’s why I’m here. You’re on to something incredible.”

Meera’s face brightened. “You really think so?”

“I’m one hundred percent certain.” Claire tucked a wayward strand of hair behind her left ear. “Science is so serendipitous—I almost didn’t go to that meeting. I remember your presentation like it was yesterday. You talked about an experimental drug that was showing promise. It didn’t have a name back then. You called it compound SP-84 or something like that.”

Meera smiled and nodded. “I figured this visit must have something to do with Endovancin.”

“That’s right. Do you remember I cornered you afterward?”

Meera sipped her wine. “You wanted to trial it. Use it in your bone fracture experiments . . . preventing post-op infections. What happened with that?”

Claire nodded. “I’ve been working with an orthopedic trauma

surgeon, Mark Thurman. We've developed methods to speed up fracture healing using 3D-printed bone and stem cells."

"I read somewhere it's working."

"It is, but we've hit a few snags. Early on, there were too many post-op wound infections. After surgery, the experimental subjects were returned to an NIH monkey colony on an isolated island off the coast of South Carolina. We couldn't keep close track of them in the wild. They were too hard to locate. Daily medication was impossible. We needed a longer-acting antibiotic, one that lasted weeks, not hours. After watching the Madrid presentation, I knew your drug would solve our problem, and at the same time, we could help you with clinical trials."

"That was a long time ago." Meera swirled her glass, watching the legs run back into the bowl. "Back when Bill Plunkett knew I was alive. So why didn't we do it?"

"We have been."

Meera's eyes narrowed as she stared at her friend. "What are you talking about?"

"We needed help. I was getting desperate. So, I approached Jim Roberts."

Meera's head turned. "You talked to my boss? The CEO of Electra?"

Claire pursed her lips and nodded. "We . . . Mark and I, asked him if we could try it."

"He let you?"

Claire nodded.

"Why didn't he tell me?"

"I don't know. Please, don't be mad. He wouldn't let us say anything to anyone. It was part of the agreement. He wanted to keep everything compartmentalized for security reasons. He's super paranoid and didn't want any information about Endovancin leaking out. For good reason."

Meera brushed her bangs back from her forehead. "He's psycho paranoid. I think it's why he keeps the laboratory so isolated."

“Electra provided us with enough for several experimental trials with our rhesus monkeys. I’m sorry about the secrecy. We weren’t trying to keep anything from you. We believed Endovancin would reduce bone infections in our patients. The properties are perfect. It’s temperature stable and its long half-life means one dose is effective for two weeks after surgery. We were right. It worked. It prevented infections and kept us from having to round up the monkeys every day.” Claire stopped and smiled at the waiter as he placed the first course before them.

“Any fresh ground pepper?” he asked, holding up the large wooden cylinder. The women shook their heads and he retreated.

“Go on,” Meera said.

“Like I said, we tried it. It worked better than expected, zero infections.”

“Great, but you didn’t have to make a trip here to tell me that.”

“There’s more. Everything was fine, until a couple of months ago when we began noticing problems. Some of our earliest patients began developing tumors.”

“Cancer?” Meera asked.

Claire nodded. “Osteosarcoma.”

Meera’s eyes widened. “Any ideas why?”

“The stem cells within the bone graft are hyperstimulated to differentiate into osteoblasts. A ton of cell amplification is occurring. We think there’s a transcription error either knocking out a tumor suppressor gene or activating an oncogene. Whatever the cause, since then, more cases have been diagnosed.” Claire leaned toward her friend and lowered her voice. “Here’s the interesting part: the tumors occurred before we started using Endovancin.”

“*Before* you started using Endovancin?” Meera repeated.

Claire nodded. “The lesions were in patients who didn’t get your drug. Patients who received Endovancin have been normal. Not a histologic hint of cancer.”

“What are you saying? It may prevent . . . ?”

“Not so loud,” Claire interrupted, looking around.

Meera leaned forward and whispered, "Endovancin prevents osteosarcoma?"

"Not only that; we think it's a cure."

Meera's fork clattered to the table. "You're kidding?"

"*That's* the real reason I'm here. The early experimental subjects didn't get Endovancin. They were given vancomycin. They began showing signs of tumor formation around two years after the original surgery. When the tumors began showing up a few months ago we biopsied them and the results confirmed the diagnosis. But this time, after the biopsy procedure, they received Endovancin. It was chance, pure luck. We just wanted to avoid a post-op infection and had switched to giving all the patients Endovancin. To our surprise, the monkeys showed an immediate response. They perked up and within a few days the tumors began shrinking. A month later we took more biopsies, this time, the bones *were normal*. X-rays were normal, tissue samples were normal. They were cured. The tumors were gone. And . . . they've remained in remission."

Meera sat slacked-jawed, stunned by what she'd just heard. "How many?"

"Seventeen, so far. Get this, no subject who originally received Endovancin has developed tumor symptoms, *and* no infections *and* no side effects."

"That's miraculous," Meera said.

"I want to try it on other cancers."

Meera became quiet and looked down at her plate.

"What's wrong? You should be jumping up and down."

Meera blinked. "I know. I should be. It's just that my nephew, Aaray," her eyes glistened as tears welled up, "he passed away two weeks ago."

Claire placed her hands in her lap and became quiet.

"Neuroblastoma."

"I had no idea."

"He was seven when it was finally diagnosed. I watched it destroy him. It was relentless."

“Oh, Meera,” Claire reached across the table and touched her forearm. “I’m so sorry.”

Meera smiled and touched her napkin to her eyes. “I arranged for my sister to bring him to Houston for treatment. They tried all the newest immunotherapies. At first there was hope, and he responded well for six months, but then he relapsed and died.”

Claire watched a tear tumble down her cheek and splash onto the tablecloth.

“Now you’re telling me I was working on a drug that might have saved him.”

“Possibly, but we don’t know, we just figured this out a few days ago. You can’t blame yourself for anything.”

“Excuse me, I have to go pull myself together,” Meera said and rose from the table. Five minutes later she returned. “I didn’t mean to fall apart. I thought I had it under control. Forgive me.”

“I understand. It’s my fault for bringing it up,” Claire said.

“No, no, it’s okay. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“You didn’t either. They are different tumors. We have no idea if Endovancin would have any effect on a neuroblastoma. Don’t beat yourself up.”

“If I’d known I could’ve tried.”

“Stop. Listen to me, we just analyzed the data and put the pieces together this week. You couldn’t have done anything to save him. You can’t change the past. I *do* know Endovancin may be the most important drug since penicillin. It may save millions of lives someday, but it’s not going to bring your nephew back.”

Meera blinked and dabbed her eyes. “God, what a mess. I’m sorry. Do I look like a raccoon?”

“You look fine. Stop apologizing and drink some more wine. This is a celebration. We have to continue testing. If we’re lucky it could help others like Aaray. Right now I need more. We still have experimental subjects who need treatment. Can you increase production? Mark and I are in the middle of several experiments and we’ve run

out. We want to try it in other species but can't proceed. I'm begging you to help us."

Meera took a breath then drank long and deep from her glass. The white wine was cool and crisp. It washed away the salty taste of tears. She nodded and sniffed. "Of course I'll help."

Claire reached across the table and squeezed her friend's hand. "Thank you."

"We can boost production, no problem but, you'll need to get approval from Electra. Did you ask Roberts?"

"That's why I'm here. He recommended I come down and take a look at your facilities."

"I think you'll find BCI unique. It's changed a lot in the last few years."

Claire squinted. "BCI? What's that?"

"My lab," Meera said and took another sip of wine. "That's where we're headed in the morning, Barro Colorado Island in Lake Gatún. It's the only place on the planet we've found that produces the active ingredient for Endovancin."

MEERA AND CLAIRE sat in the lobby drinking coffee when Rafael emerged from the revolving doors of the hotel entrance.

"Good morning," said the Panamanian as he pushed his wide-brimmed hat from his head so that it hung from its drawstring on the back of his shoulders. "Ready to hit the road?"

"All checked out," Meera said. He grabbed their bags and began walking toward the door. The valet helped him place them in the back of the Land Rover. Claire noticed the large crate. "Is that the equipment?"

"An HPLC. Ours is on the blink," said Rafael. "We need it to isolate the antimicrobial molecules from the plant extracts."

They climbed in and Claire donned her sunglasses. "You run high-performance liquid-chromatography in the rain forest?"

“Every day,” replied Rafael. “Except when the machine isn’t working. This should keep us in business until Electra sends a replacement.”

“How long will that take?”

“A couple of weeks,” said Rafael.

“Impressive,” said Claire. Despite the heat, she and Meera were dressed in lightweight long pants, long-sleeve shirts, and canvas hiking boots. She had an Australian bush hat in her lap, and her hair was pulled back in a thick braid. Technically, it was the dry season but they were prepared for the rain forest. Rafael drove through the congested streets of Panama City and onto the highway. Soon, they were cruising east on the Panama-Colón Expressway. Twenty miles outside the city, Rafael exited onto a two-lane road with canebrake up to its shoulders. A few minutes later, they rounded a curve and could glimpse the canal in the distance.

Meera looked at her friend. “Our boat is docked at the dredging piers. We’ll take it to the island. Rafael has a few more items to pick up in Colón. He’ll catch a ride from there.”

“I thought boating in the Canal Zone was restricted.” Claire said.

“It is,” replied Rafael. “Very restricted.”

“The government granted the Smithsonian rights to build a laboratory to study the canal’s impact on the rain forest shortly after it opened.”

Claire looked over her sunglasses. “A hundred years ago?”

“The institute has conducted research on Borro Colorado Island almost since Lake Gatún was created in 1913,” Meera said. “Don’t worry, I’m a licensed pilot. Enjoy the ride.”

They crossed a bridge over the Chagres River and turned toward the docks. The steel-blue water of the canal was before them. The waterway was several hundred yards wide at this point and stretched east and west as far as they could see. Rafael parked by a pier. The humid air enveloped them like hot breath when they stepped from the air-conditioned vehicle.

“Whoa, now I understand why you cut your hair.”

Meera and Claire grabbed their luggage and followed Rafael. He walked down the dock and stepped onto the Smithsonian's twenty-five-foot center console Boston Whaler and took the bag Meera handed him. Claire passed him hers and stepped on board as Meera stood at the console lowering the engine unit into the water. The three-hundred-horsepower Mercury Verado roared with the first turn of the ignition key and idled like a giant purring cat. Rafael stepped back onto the pier and loosed the lines. He stood holding the bowline as Meera put the engine in gear.

"See you back at the island," he called out and tossed the rope to Claire as the boat motored away from the pier. Meera guided the vessel slowly into the waterway while Claire pulled the fenders over the gunwales. Once in the canal, Meera opened the throttle and they surged forward. In a few seconds the boat was slicing through the water on plane.

"It's about a thirty-minute ride," Meera shouted over the engine noise and rushing wind. She accelerated until the speedometer read thirty miles per hour. Behind the center console the air was less turbulent, but on either side the wind whipped their hair and pressed their clothes tight to their skin. Claire shoved her hat into the overhead storage compartment and gripped the railing. Canal traffic was moving eastward, and Meera stayed on the right side of the waterway, well clear of the giant ships navigating the channel. She turned into the wakes and cut speed when crossing the large swells.

"Good Lord," said Claire as they overtook a Panamax vessel. She tilted her head upward as they passed fifty feet on the starboard side. "Look at the size of that thing. It's a floating warehouse."

"More like a city block twenty stories tall," Meera responded. "Hang on." The bow rose and slammed down the other side of the wake. "You all right?"

"Tough on the knees," Claire said, easing her death grip on the hand railing.

"Don't go overboard."

"No worries." They had traveled about ten miles when the

waterway opened up to the immense expanse of Lake Gatún. Sunlight glinted off ripples on the water's surface. Meera steered a northeast course and pointed straight ahead to a small speck in the distance. "That's BCI," she yelled. Ten minutes later they'd reached the island, and she turned into a sparkling blue cove surrounded by emerald hills. She cut speed as they passed several moored vessels and glided up to a floating dock. Meera put the engine into neutral while Claire threw the bowline to a young man who caught it and guided them alongside the structure. He secured the line and the women disembarked.

"Got it, José?" Meera asked.

"Yes, Dr. Jindal. It's good to have you back."

Claire stopped and took in the scene. It reminded her of a small college campus built into a jungle mountainside. They carried their bags up the long steep flights of stairs to the research facility. Without a headwind and cooling effect of the water, the heat began taking its toll. Claire's heart rate doubled and drops of perspiration rolled down the center of her back as they ascended. She wiped her face with a shirtsleeve and counted five buildings that made up the remote enclave. Two of them were new construction. The other three were being renovated. Scaffolding had been erected and workers were making repairs to the façade.

When the scientists finished their climb Meera turned and swept her arm over the tropical panorama. "This island was once the peak of a mountain. When the Chagres Dam was built, the river flooded the valley and created Lake Gatún, and we're standing on what's left above the surface. The plant and wildlife were trapped on this summit. The result is a unique ecosphere we've been studying for decades."

"It's beautiful," Claire said.

"And full of botanical treasures. These are our newest facilities, courtesy of Electra Pharmaceuticals." They continued walking to the side entrance of the nearest building. Meera flashed her ID badge over a sensor and the door slid open. "The laboratories were finished

about six months ago, funded by a ten million dollar donation from Electra to the Smithsonian.”

“Based on antibiotic research?”

“Not *just* antibiotics. Did Roberts have you sign an NDA?”

“Yes, he wouldn’t say anything until he had it in his hands.”

“We have a number of products under development. EndoV is just the first of several long-acting antibiotics effective against methicillin-resistant staph. The newer drugs are ten times more potent than vancomycin and last for weeks and months. One of our postdoc fellows is working on a new treatment for *C. diff*. A single dose of a compound we call AQ-327 cures it in our animal model.”

“Incredible,” replied Claire.

“We also have several promising chemotherapy compounds.”

Claire smiled as she stopped and peered into a laboratory through the door window. “This place is a pharmaceutical Garden of Eden.”

Meera smiled. “C’mon. I’ll give you the tour. We’ll start with the labs in the new buildings, then the garden.” She led the way down the hall. “These labs are for product testing. The building next door is where we produce the compounds. Everything from plant processing to purification and packaging is done there. It’s small scale but perfect for product development.”

Forty-five minutes later, they exited a door on the third floor and walked across a footbridge to the hillside plateau behind the building. “You’ve thought of everything,” Claire said. “What does the Smithsonian get out of this?”

“You mean for letting us into this Garden of Eden?”

Claire nodded. “Couldn’t it spark a massive search for compounds and harm to the rain forest?”

“Like a pharmaceutical gold rush?”

“Something like that.”

“That’s another reason why Roberts is so security crazy. He doesn’t want to start a stampede of exotic-plant poachers in the region. However, like most things, there’s a financial interest.”

“Of course,” said Claire.

“The institute thinks of it as partly an altruistic role in helping mankind.” Meera pushed a clump of branches to the side as they walked on a path toward the rain forest. “Also, they’ll collect a big chunk of drug royalties. Several could be blockbusters. Plus, Electra is helping them by renovating the original buildings and supplying new labs and office equipment.”

“What about the Panamanians?” Claire asked.

“They get a percentage of the royalties, and BCI will be the primary ecological research center for Central America. The Smithsonian has a long-term lease, but just like the canal and the Canal Zone facilities, it will eventually be turned over to the Panamanians.”

“Like Gorgas Army Hospital?”

Meera nodded.

“Is it all biomedical research?”

“Not at all. The canal requires immense amounts of water. So much that some scientists are worried about the effects on the rain forest. The institute is interested in the long-term ecological consequences and preventing any adverse outcomes.” Meera began walking toward an opening in the vegetation that led into darkness. It was like walking into a cave.

“This is a Hobbit hole.” Claire chuckled.

“More like a Hobbit tunnel,” replied Meera. After a few yards, the dense foliage opened up into the rain forest. The overhead canopy greedily absorbed sunlight, and only a few rays penetrated. The ground was a carpet of plant life. Buttress-rooted trees lined the path, towering hundreds of feet above. A network of vines crisscrossed overhead while a steep cinder-block staircase dating to the Second World War led up the mountainside. At this time of year, the climate in the forest was reasonably dry, and the insects were tolerable. They had gone only halfway up the staircase when Meera put out her hand to halt the ascent. “Look, do you see it?” she whispered, pointing into the canopy.

“See what?”

"Shhh. The toucan. Up there to your right."

The yellow face turned in profile, revealing its enormous beak. "Spectacular," Claire whispered.

The bird watched as they marched along a ridge overlooking the lake. A moment later, the hair on Claire's neck rose. She stopped in her tracks. A primal wail came from above and increased in volume. A few moments later the guttural roar engulfed them.

"What the *hell* is that?"

"A pack of howlers," Meera said. "They're on the move."

"Those are monkeys? Bloody terrifying."

"They're harmless."

"They sound like hell-bound banshees."

"Relax. They're moving on." The cacophony diminished as the pack of monkeys moved through the trees high above them. "It's not far." A quarter mile later Meera came to a stop. "We're here."

Claire looked around. She could detect no change in the terrain. "This? What are you talking about?"

Meera squatted. Her finger touched the petals of a small flower the size of a buttercup. "Bees."

"You've been in the jungle too long."

Meera chuckled and waved an insect away from her face. "They're tiny orchids related to *Ophrys apifera*. The blossoms look like bumblebees. They grow here because they have a symbiotic relationship with a particular fungus found only on BCI. So far, they haven't been identified anywhere else."

Claire inspected the ground and noticed several more. "They're all over."

"The active ingredient isn't in the flower. We don't harvest the entire plant; we just pluck a few leaves. It doesn't take much. A four-ounce jar full will make enough drug to conduct all your research trials."

"Have you identified the active molecule?"

Meera nodded. "That's why Rafael borrowed the HPLC. We

can isolate and purify the compound, and we've almost worked out its molecular structure."

"Can it be produced on a larger scale?"

"That's what I mean. It's not complicated. I'm putting the finishing touches on a process to synthesize it now. As soon as the HPLC is set up, I plan on purifying my latest batch." Meera bent down and tickled a bee blossom with the tip of her finger. She stood and began walking back along the trail. "Rafael should be back by now."

"Who else knows about this?" Claire asked.

"The location? No one. The people who work here don't know the active ingredient. They just make the product."

"I mean its properties," said Claire.

"Not a soul, unless you've told someone about your results."

Claire shook her head.

"No one can know about this. We're the only ones who know the true potential."

"What about Rafael?" Claire asked.

"He probably has an idea. Endovancin is a special product. He knows it's a great antibiotic, but that's it. He doesn't know I've been tinkering with it. I've worked out ways to alter the chemical structure. It's been modified to be more potent. It's not the same drug I talked about in Madrid three years ago."

"Whatever you did, it works," Claire said.

"If what you say is true, then you and I are the only ones who know it may cure cancer."

"You've applied for the patent?"

"Electra has. For the earlier version. This derivative binds to a different G-protein receptor."

Claire's hand came up to her face. "But it's covered in the application, right?"

"It should be." Meera shrugged then swatted a branch away from her legs. "I'm not sure what the original patent filing covers. I just develop the products."

Claire stepped over roots and tangled vines trying to keep up as they trekked down the narrow path. "You have to check, right away before anyone gets wind of its potential."

"I'll talk to Roberts. Who else could possibly know?"

"My postdoctoral fellow and our histology technician have seen the data, but I'm sure they don't know the full implication," Claire said. "Mark Thurman, my research partner, knows everything I do, but he's not a worry. I was referring to big business. If information about its effects leak, there will be a lot of people wanting that formula."

"It's too early to speculate. There's a ton of work to do before the FDA gives its approval," Meera said as they descended from the hills. "Electra is a small private company. No one on Wall Street knows about them."

I wouldn't bet on that, Claire thought.

Meera loped onward like a gazelle. Claire's thighs quivered as they negotiated the last steep cinder-block staircase in single file. She paused and pulled a handkerchief from her back pocket and wiped sweat from her face and neck. They were almost down the mountainside when Meera stopped.

Claire caught up and stood on the step behind her. She put her hands on Meera's shoulders. "What is it?"

She pointed at an opening in the foliage permitting a view of the water far below. In the distance two boats were approaching. "We don't have any deliveries scheduled this late."

"Maybe it's Rafael," Claire said.

"He should have been back an hour ago, and he would be in one boat. Not two."

They hurried off the mountainside and entered a building. Meera jogged down a hallway to her office facing the bay. They stood at the window, gazing two hundred feet below at two forty-foot boats with official government markings being secured at the docks. "What are those?" Claire asked.

"PCA. Canal Authority. What are they doing here?"

“That’s what I’m supposed to ask,” Claire said.

The desk phone began to ring. Meera picked up the receiver. She held the handset to her head and listened. Seconds later she hung up. “Come on. We have to get out of here.”

“What’s going on?”

“That was Rafael. The people on those boats aren’t the Canal Authority. We’re under attack.”

Claire looked bewildered. “*Attack?* This is a research lab.” They heard the staccato sound of automatic gunfire.

Meera returned to the window. “They’re coming.”

“There are at least thirty men down there,” Claire said, now standing next to her.

Meera bolted across the room and opened the top drawer of a filing cabinet. She grabbed several files and stuffed them into her backpack. The gunfire sounded louder. She went to the back of her computer and yanked the thumb drive from a USB port.

“Come on! We have to get out of here. Follow me.” She ran to the door and peeked into the hallway. She stepped back and shut it.

Meera turned and put her finger to her mouth. Down the hallway, the sound of men shouting commands in Spanish penetrated the walls. Pistol cracks followed the crash of doors being bashed open. The sound of boots tromping in the corridor grew louder.

Claire almost didn’t notice her cell phone ringing. She pulled it from her pocket and saw Mark’s picture on the screen. She swiped it and held it to her face. “Help, we’re in trouble.”

The office door imploded, striking Meera. She hit the floor and slammed into her desk. A half dozen uniformed men burst into the office, brandishing guns.

“Don’t move!”

Claire palmed the phone and placed it on the desk behind her. She stepped toward Meera and helped her up.

“I said halt!”

The women stood frozen as the armed men surrounded them. A civilian dressed in a linen sport coat and panama hat strode through

the doorway. He removed his mirrored aviator sunglasses and smiled.

"Good day, Dr. Jindal." He stopped and looked at Claire. "Dr. Hodgson, what a pleasant surprise. So nice of you to join us."

"Who are you?" Claire asked.

"An admirer."

"What is this?" Meera said, caressing her bruised cheek. "You have no right. We're here under the authority of the Panamanian government."

"Save it, Meera. They don't care," Claire said.

"You're right. I'm here for one thing. The Endovancin files, Dr. Jindal. The ones you *stole*."

He reached across the desk and picked up Claire's phone. His eyes widened and he flung it across the room. It bounced off the far wall and came to rest near Claire's feet with a shattered screen. He walked over and stamped it into the carpet. He leaned his face close to hers. The odor of stale cigarettes and cheap cologne assaulted her like a pesticide.

"Try a stunt like that again and you'll regret it," he hissed. He turned toward Meera, holding out his hand. "The files, please."

"What are you talking about? I'm no thief. This is *my* work."

"Liar," he said, sneering. "You helped yourself to others' research. You fled and set up shop with Electra. Pathetic."

"You're crazy. I discovered it!"

"That's not the way we see it. I'm taking it back. You're a common thief. An academic fraud."

Meera marched up to him. "It's my work, my research. Electra owns the rights. I'll see you in court."

"I wouldn't worry about that," he said and pushed her backward. She stumbled and tripped over a chair and fell to the floor. "There's not going to be any lawsuit. No one knows about it."

"Jim Roberts knows. He will sue your ass."

"You haven't heard?"

"Heard what?" Meera asked.

“Roberts was killed in a bicycle accident yesterday. Struck down by a car. Such a terrible tragedy.” He turned to the uniformed leader. “Pack up the computers and the filing cabinets.” He nodded to Claire and Meera. “Bring them with us.”

THE BOAT SURGED from the dock and accelerated across the bay. Claire and Meera were seated on the deck with thick zip ties binding their hands and feet. Rags had been crammed into their mouths and sealed shut with duct tape. Claire struggled to free herself. It was pointless. The Hunter S. Thompson look-alike held Meera’s backpack and glanced at his watch. Thin wisps of black hair fluttered from under his hat, and a cigarette dangled from the corner of his mouth. It bounced up and down as he spoke.

“Say goodbye to your research,” he said, laughing. Ten seconds later, a series of blasts ripped through the buildings, followed by the sounds of explosions heard from a half mile away over the rushing wind and engine noise. Flames poured from the second- and third-floor windows. BCI faded into the distance as the boats sped onward. Several minutes later smoke billowed above the treetops.

The two women were shoved flat on the wet foredeck and covered with a tarp. Their bodies bounced and rolled like a load in a clothes dryer as the high-speed vessel skimmed the lake’s surface. The boat flew over the water for half an hour. Then they skidded forward as the engines were cut. The tarp was ripped away. Brilliant sunlight made Claire squint, but she recognized the towering bow of an anchored freighter. Their boat idled into the dark shadow cast by its enormous structure. She could make out the letters FESCO written in ten-foot-tall white letters down its side. A rope ladder was lowered from the main deck while the women’s hands and feet were cut free.

“Up you go, and don’t slip.” She felt a stabbing pain in her ribs as someone prodded her with the barrel of a rifle. “Get moving.”

Claire grasped the swaying ladder and began the fifty-foot ascent with little feeling in her hands and feet. The rope bounced and shook against the metal hull. Halfway to the top she looked down into the black shadows. If she fell her body would be crushed on the boat below. She wiped the image from her mind then reached upward and grabbed the next rung.

TWO

SATURDAY, MARCH 18TH

Oaklawn Park Race Track, Hot Springs, Arkansas

Five days earlier . . .

MARK THURMAN SPOTTED his friend leaning against a stall. The horseman was halfway down the far side of the crowded corridor. Mark waved and clenched Claire's hand as they maneuvered through the throng. The scent of hay and horses filled the stable complex. Hundreds of race fans wandered about discussing the equine athletes. Their conversations blended into background noise as Mark focused on avoiding a collision. They passed penned Thoroughbreds, who every now and then looked around with indifference as they munched alfalfa and clover. Most of the horses had several assistants tending to their race-day routine. The couple weaved around the final group of pedestrians and hurried across the aisle.

The man standing next to the stall watched them. He was about Mark's age and wore a camel hair sport coat, starched white shirt, bolo tie, and jeans. At a little over six feet he was almost Mark's height but looked taller because of his cowboy boots and Stetson. A

broad grin spread across his face as they approached. He barked a laugh then reached out and embraced Mark. "Well, well! It's about time you dragged your butt down to these parts."

Mark smiled and stepped back, feigning a left hook to the ribs. "It has been too long. I don't have any excuse."

"Me either. We suffered and did too much scut to not see each other more often."

"It was a long five years, but we made it."

"The last time we were together I had my doubts. I thought we were going to lose you."

"Don't remind me."

"You look damn good. What a comeback." He looked at Mark from head to toe. "You're more fit than you were in residency. What have you been doing?"

"Same as you. Working and try take care of myself." Mark stepped sideways. "I'd like you to meet Dr. Claire Hodgson. She's the brains behind our recent research."

He stepped forward, tipped his hat, and held out his hand. "Pardon me, ma'am. I'm Mike Rhodes, but call me Dusty. Most everyone else does."

Claire laughed and shook his hand. "All right, Dusty. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise," he replied as the horse behind him stretched its neck over the rail and nosed the brim of the Stetson, tilting it downward over his face. "Hey boy, cut it out." Claire covered her mouth stifling a laugh as he readjusted it. "That rascal always does stuff like that when I'm talking to someone. He's trying to make me look bad."

Mark reached over the rail and rubbed the horse's nose. "That's easy. Is this your all-star?"

"Meet Hyperion, the fastest three-year-old on the planet," said Dusty with a broad grin. He stood next to the stall where a diminutive horse with bay coloring and a white patch on his forehead pawed at the wood shavings and hay carpeting the floor. The horse leaned toward him and snorted. Dusty stepped back. "I said stop."

“He’s got a mischievous streak,” Claire said, reaching up and scratching the horse’s ears. “Maybe he wants some attention.”

“He’ll have plenty in a couple of hours.” Dusty turned to face Claire and in a solemn tone said, “I want you to know that no matter what others may tell you about the guy you’re with he really is a decent human being. Don’t believe those rumors; he’s not wanted by the authorities.”

Mark laughed.

“Thanks for clearing that up,” replied Claire with a smile.

“No, really, in all seriousness, if it weren’t for Mark, I wouldn’t have made it through orthopedic residency, and we wouldn’t be standing here today. I owe him a lot.”

“Don’t believe that for a second,” said Mark. “We endured it together. Without him I might have rung the bell and given up medicine.”

“That wasn’t going to happen,” said Dusty.

Claire tilted her head and looked at Mark. “What’s scut?”

“It’s medical slang for the phrase, some common *unimportant* task.”

“Otherwise known as a menial job given to a med student or junior resident,” Dusty added. “When you first begin clinical rotations you know just enough to be dangerous.”

“So you’re given a ton of scut in order to be useful and kept out of trouble,” Mark explained.

“Things like keeping up with labs, reporting on test results, looking up journal articles, starting IVs, drawing blood cultures. Stuff like that,” Dusty said.

Claire folded her arms. “Isn’t that important?”

“Sure,” Mark answered, “but it’s no fun when you’re doing it every day for your whole service, month after month.”

“That’s usually for thirty or forty patients. It gets old fast. Whatever unpleasant hospital chore that needed to be done, you can bet Mark and I were asked to do it.”

Mark leaned his arm on the top rail of the stall. “I think it’s a rite

of passage for doctors in training but it was frustrating. When you're in a surgical residency you want to learn how to operate. We wanted to be in the OR."

Dusty nodded, "Those first few years I think I slept in the SICU more than my apartment."

"We didn't appreciate how much we were learning about pre and post-op patient care. How to get them out of the hospital and safely back home. That's just as important as operating, probably more important. But it sure seemed like the attendings were trying to make us quit. Those were miserable days. Don't bring that stuff up. I've been trying to erase those memories."

"All right, change of subject. Did you place your bets?"

"Twenty bucks at four to one," Mark said.

Dusty slapped his thigh and laughed. "A double sawbuck! That's all? Need a loan?"

Mark's eyebrows arched as a grin stretched across his face. "You know I'm not a gambler."

"Well, I am," Dusty declared. "I put down a lot more than that. What about you, Claire?"

"You know it. I plan on leaving with more money than I came with." She reached up and touched the white patch on Hyperion's forehead. "I love his star."

"His celestial birthmark," Dusty said.

"Hi there, fella." She rubbed the horse's nose then felt his soft fuzzy lips nibble at her fingers. "I don't have any mints," she said. A second later, she snatched her hand away as the animal gave a snort and shook his majestic head. She released the bridle as he stepped back in the stall. "Skittish."

"He knows it's a big day," Dusty told her, leaning over the rail and rubbing the beast's neck. "This will be his toughest competition. We're about to find out if he can deliver."

"He looks . . . a little small compared to the other horses. How tall is he?" Claire asked.

"Fifteen."

"Fifteen hands? Is that normal for a Thoroughbred?" she asked.

"He's a wide receiver. Not a defensive end. Don't worry about his height. Worry about how big his heart is. This guy's a scrapper. He's feisty. His grandfather was Risen Star."

Claire looked at him. "Who?"

"One of Secretariat's line. He won the 1988 Preakness."

"Still, he looks small," she said.

"That's what they said about Seabiscuit. And he can run just like him, you watch." He reached over and patted the horse's neck. "He's slender and sleek." There was an awkward pause for a few moments then Dusty looked in Mark's direction. "How was the Arlington?"

"Great hotel. Thanks for making the reservation."

"No problem. It's a landmark in Hot Springs. I tried to get you in the Al Capone suite."

Claire brushed her long hair behind her shoulders and placed her arm around Mark's. "It's just down the hall. There's a sign on the door."

"A lot of interesting guests have stayed there over the years."

"I think the hotel is booked full. Sorry we were late. I didn't expect the traffic."

"The population doubles this time of year. Race season is a big ticket in Hot Springs. The Rebel Stakes is a Kentucky Derby qualifier."

"Hyperion's first meeting against Rampage," said Claire.

Dusty nodded. "Otherwise known as the Black Plague."

Claire's eyes widened. "Really?"

"That's what I call him. He's a big nasty bastard."

"The newspaper said they're the favorites."

Dusty tipped his hat to her and looked at Mark. "The lady knows more than she's letting on."

Mark nodded. "I figured that out a while ago."

"If you're into horse racing, Oaklawn racetrack is the place to be this weekend."

A blonde woman in a pink designer dress, matching high heels,