

EXCERPT FROM A REASON FOR DYING

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Ahmed's eyes opened slowly, his body shivering. He had fallen asleep only an hour ago after wrapping the man's body in the shower curtain and the woman in trash bags. He dragged them outside to the large garage. Had he felt better, he would have taken more care in hiding the bodies, but his strength was drained and Ali could barely move.

Reaching down to the foot of the bed, he grabbed the hand-stitched quilt; he had kicked off and pulled it to his chin, clutching it around his body for warmth. The television on the other side of the small room was on, but muted, and Ahmed could see that the cable news station was still broadcasting scenes from the cities they had fled. He reached for the remote control to turn the volume louder, fighting off the chills that wracked his body each time he moved.

"...new developments and growing concerns surrounding three cities in the Northwest. This is a live shot of the city limits of Cody, Wyoming. As you can see, the military is moving in and forming a perimeter around the entire city. There have been announcements over a loud-speaker that the city is being quarantined and that residents are encouraged to go to their homes and stay inside. Joanne, we are now prisoners in Cody with no way out. We noticed the military taking position about an hour ago. There are helicopters flying overhead and the atmosphere is one of surrealism and terror for us and the residents of this small community."

Fully awake now, his bloodshot eyes were riveted on the television.

"Okay, Jack, we'll get back to you in a bit. Right now we're going to Camden in Billings, Montana--where the scene is similar. Camden, what are you seeing there?"

"Joanne, it's been about an hour since we first noticed the military massing at the outskirts of town. The local broadcasts have been transmitting a quarantine notice, advising people to remain inside their homes unless they have flu-like symptoms, in which case they are to report to General Hospital immediately."

"On your last report, you told us the line at the hospital was several blocks long. What's the situation now?"

"There are fewer people in line now, but the bad news is that not many people are coming out of the hospital once they go in."

"Thanks for that update, Camden. Although we do not have a reporter in Powell, Wyoming, we did receive a report that the city of Powell was under the same city-wide

quarantine. Hours ago, the President addressed the nation and told us that a viral outbreak was reported in the three cities, but everything is under control and a quarantine zone is being erected to protect the nation and other countries and that the CDC is working diligently on a treatment.”

“Although the President stopped short of identifying the source of the outbreak, our sources have reported that the FBI is investigating a bioterrorism attack in the area. Apparently two Middle Eastern men are being sought in connection with the outbreaks...”

Ahmed turned the volume back down and struggled to get out of the bed. Wrapping the quilt around him and walking gingerly, he went into the living room where Ali was lying on a sofa sleeper.

The light on the end table next to the sofa was on, illuminating the pale complexion of his Islam brother. His normal brown complexion had been replaced by a yellowish cast in sharp contrast to the bright red blood that streaked and crusted from his nose, down the sides of his face. The sheets were stained with bloody black vomit and the stench in the room smelled of death.

“Ali, wake up,” Ahmed said, shaking his partner.

Ali was burning up and didn’t respond to Ahmed’s prodding. His eyes were mere slits revealing bloodshot scleras rolled back in his skull.

Ahmed made his way back to the bedroom and turned on the bedside lamp, squinting, as his eyes slowly adjusted to the brightness. The sudden light brought on a blinding pain as if someone had thrust a spike in his skull. He made his way to the dresser, retrieved his cell phone and pushed a speed dial number.

“Yes?”

“Saif, this is Ahmed.”

“Ahmed, my brother, I have been worried about you. You don’t sound well. What is your situation?”

“I fear the worst. I think we have contracted whatever illness they seem to be blaming on us. Ali is bleeding from his nose and mouth and is near death. I think I will be close behind him.”

“I have been listening to the situation and find it ironic that they are blaming us. Can you travel in your current state?”

“It is possible, but not far.”

“I have an idea, Ahmed, but I have to make a call first. I will be back in touch with you soon. Godspeed to you, my brother.”

Saif pushed the disconnect button on his cell phone and went to the bathroom to splash water on his face. It was 3:10 a.m., but he knew who he needed to call.

Retrieving a different cell phone, he scrolled through names until the display read “Doctor Reed Bates.” It had been some time since he talked to the Doctor from Fort Detrick and it was time the doctor was put to good use. Hopefully he would remember their last encounter and cooperate as he insisted he would.

After four rings the sleepy voice said, “Hello?”

“Doctor Bates, this is Sam Yasin. I assume you remember me?”

“I remember you. What do you want?”

“What do you know about the situation in the Northwest?”

“I haven’t been privy to that information.”

“Don’t insult me Bates. That would be a mistake you will regret.”

“Look, I’m telling you, I know very little.”

“Then you are of little use to me, so I will be making a visit to your wife first, then you.”

“Wait, no, you’ve got to believe me, I’ve only heard rumors.”

“What rumors have you heard?”

“There’s supposed to be some anthrax cases and Marburg. I’ve also heard something about an unknown virus. I figured you had something to do with it.”

“No, we have not. Marburg, that’s like Ebola, correct?”

“Yes, it’s a strain of filovirus--level-4 same as anthrax.”

“If a person died of such a virus, is it possible that their blood could be extracted and used as a weapon?”

“As long as the body fluids were collected in a reasonable time frame--yes. But, I don’t know what you would use as a delivery system, unless the virus could survive a short time outside a host. Marburg and Ebola typically can’t survive outside a host for any length of time.”

“Doctor, you are going to repay the debt you owe me. After this, we will leave you alone.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Get whatever items you need to collect two infected bodies safely. You will then harvest the body fluids and help us preserve it until we can put it to use.”

“I’m not sure I can get those kinds of supplies.”

“You had better figure it out fast. I will be calling you within several hours with further instructions, but you have to be ready by mid-morning. Goodbye, doctor.”

Saif turned on his computer and began looking for flights that would get him close to where his infected cell members were. He could fly into Casper or Gillette, Wyoming

without too much delay. Now he had to find a rendezvous point that they could reach by car. Somewhere no one would stumble on them.

Saif booted his computer and searched for maps of the Wyoming area on the Internet. He was searching for a location where he could send Ahmed and Ali that would be close enough for them to drive to, but secluded. It didn't take long to find one, Arvada, Wyoming.

Ahmed and Ali had become incubators for a devastating weapon of mass destruction against the United States.