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Chapter One

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Richard Pincent paused, his face grim. Taking a deep breath, he pulled open the door in front of him and walked into the cold, dank room. It used to be a store cupboard – now it had become an autopsy suite and the smell of death hung in the air. Death. The very word made Richard shiver, made his mouth curl upwards in revulsion. Death and illness, his old adversaries – he had beaten them once before and he would beat them again.

Dr Thomas, one of his longest-serving scientists, was standing over a corpse, his forehead creased into a frown, a bright light shining overhead.

He looked up; he seemed uncomfortable. 'I'm afraid it's bad news,' he said, turning his gaze back to the body – or what was left of it. The skin was tight against the bones, as though every ounce of moisture had left the body; the eyes were wide, staring. Richard wished Dr Thomas had closed them – he

would have done it himself if the very idea didn't make him retch. Instead he looked directly at the scientist, trying his best to hide any flicker of fear that his own eyes might betray.

'Bad news?' The ominous feeling of dread flooded through him. 'I don't want bad news. I thought I made that clear.'

Dr Thomas sighed and stood upright, wiping his forehead with his sleeve and taking off the plastic gloves that encased his hands. 'I don't know what else to say, Mr Pincent. I don't know how many more bodies I can cut open when I'm faced with the same conclusion every time.'

Richard stared at him angrily. 'The same conclusion? Are you sure?' His voice caught as he spoke and he cleared his throat loudly.

'Yes.'

There was silence for a few minutes as they both digested this prognosis.

'You're wrong,' Richard said eventually, his voice defiant.

'Mr Pincent, sir.' The tension was audible in Dr Thomas's voice. 'Just because you want something to be the case does not make it so. I have cut open several bodies now, and I'm telling you that I have found the same thing in all of them . . .' His voice trailed off as he saw the expression on Richard's face and realised that he had stepped over the line.

Richard held his gaze for a few seconds then dropped it. He looked at the corpse. Number 7. They

had been arriving every day since the beginning of the week when a Catcher had collapsed and his worried colleague had taken him to the doctor, suspecting food poisoning – the only possible illness in a world where Longevity had made illness and disease things of the past. By the time they had reached the doctor's surgery, however, the man was dead. Hillary Wright, the Secretary General of the Authorities, had been alerted immediately and had had the foresight to arrange for the situation to be tidied up quickly. Excuses were made and the body was brought to Pincent Pharma for analysis.

'I'm sorry,' Dr Thomas said carefully. 'I didn't mean to be negative.'

'No?' Richard's voice was flat, angry.

The doctor cleared his throat. 'No,' he said. 'But the facts remain. This virus is deadly. Longevity can't seem to . . . can't seem to fight it, sir.'

'Longevity can't fight it?' Richard repeated slowly. 'It cannot fight a mere virus?' He felt sickened. It wasn't true; it couldn't be true. Longevity fought every disease, every infection, every bacterium. It kept the world young, it fought off death, it bestowed the gift of eternal life on humanity. It also made Great Britain the most powerful country in the world. Like Libya in the late twenty-first century with its oil, or Rome in the first century with its armies, no one dared to cross its government, no one dared to challenge its demands. 'You're wrong,' he continued. 'Longevity fights everything. It's invincible.'

'Of course it is,' Dr Thomas said tentatively. 'But perhaps . . .'

'Perhaps what?' Richard's eyes narrowed.

Dr Thomas wiped his forehead again. 'Perhaps . . .' he said again, his voice tentative. 'It's just a theory, but . . .'

'But what? Spit it out, man,' Richard barked impatiently.

'Perhaps the virus has mutated. Perhaps it has found a way to . . . a way of . . .' Small beads of sweat continued to appear on Dr Thomas's forehead in spite of his attempts to wipe them away. He took a deep breath. 'Of beating Longevity,' he said finally, his eyes widening at the enormity of his words.

'Beating Longevity?' Richard looked at him uncertainly. 'What exactly are you suggesting?'

'I'm suggesting that we have a big problem,' Dr Thomas said, his voice cracking. 'I'm saying that if Longevity can't fight this virus, then . . . then . . .' He took a deep breath. 'Then we're all going to die.'

Richard nodded, digesting this. 'Die,' he said thoughtfully. Then he shook his head. 'Impossible. Longevity is invincible. You know that. Everyone knows that. Our society is built on that reassuring fact, Doctor. I am the most powerful man in the world because of that fact. There is no virus that Longevity can't destroy. Man is immune to illness, to ageing, to death. There must be another explanation.'

'No,' Dr Thomas said, shaking his head. 'No, Richard, you're wrong.'

'I'm wrong?' Richard looked with interest at the scientist he had known for so long, the man who had served him faithfully for decades, never questioning him, barely even daring to look him in the eyes. Until now. 'That's a bold accusation.'

Dr Thomas sighed heavily. 'I'm sorry, sir. I didn't mean – it's just that the enormity of this – if I'm right, what it means for me, for you, for everyone . . .' He was sweating heavily now. Richard looked away in distaste.

'If you're right,' he growled. 'So at least you'll admit there is a chance that you're wrong. And may I suggest that this chance is a very big one. You are not a brilliant scientist, Doctor. You did not invent Longevity; you did not invent anything. You simply research things I ask you to and give me your findings. So please excuse me if I don't take your proclamation of the end of the world too seriously. Or even at all seriously.'

'But if this virus is left to spread there's going to be an epidemic,' Dr Thomas said, wringing his hands desperately. 'Longevity has suppressed our immune systems – we don't have need for them. A virus like this could kill millions. Hundreds of millions.' His face twisted uncomfortably.

'And that's it? That's all you have for me?' Richard's eyes narrowed angrily.

Dr Thomas cleared his throat. 'I wondered if maybe we should consider Old Medicine,' he said cautiously. 'If we go back through the files, tweak one

or two old drugs, I'm sure we can come up with something that might help. Antivirals. Even antibiotics, for secondary infections. The incubating period for this virus is five months. If we could develop a vaccine, perhaps, then we could –'

'Old Medicine? Old drugs?' Richard cut in angrily, his face creased with incredulity. 'You want us to go back to the Dark Ages when each disease had to be treated separately, when it was a fight just to keep people alive?' He could feel the vein in his neck throbbing angrily.

'No. I mean yes. I mean, we have to do something, don't we?' He was agitated; Richard could see the fear in his face as he spoke.

'And then what? We wait for the next virus to take hold?' Richard could hear the stress in his own voice and forced himself to take control.

Dr Thomas looked up. 'I don't know,' he said quietly, his shoulders slumping. I'm just looking for answers like everyone else. I don't want to die, Mr Pincent. I don't want my family to die. I don't . . .'

He didn't finish the sentence; instead he started to sob quietly, pathetically.

Richard turned away, searching for anything to look at other than Dr Thomas and the body laid out on the slab. But there were no windows to relieve his sudden claustrophobia – nothing but grey walls. This was a room, like others around it, that had been used variously over the years as a torture chamber, a prison, a hiding place. It swallowed its inhabitants

whole, rarely returning them to the land of the living.

'You appear to have lost faith,' he said eventually.

Dr Thomas looked at him uncomfortably. 'I haven't lost faith. I just think we need to warn people. We need to do something before more bodies arrive here in the dead of night. We need the Authorities to know. They need to make plans.'

Richard looked thoughtful for a moment.

'You think we should tell people? Is that it?'

'Longevity cannot fight this virus,' Dr Thomas said determinedly. 'Think of the implications, Richard. It is going to spread. Spread unhindered. It will become an epidemic, a pandemic. It will kill everyone in its wake. It will –'

'Stop!' Richard shouted, holding his hand up. Then, without warning, he rounded on Dr Thomas, gripping him by the shoulders. 'You spend your days in labs, enjoying the benefits of Longevity, being paid by me for years to improve Longevity, to perfect the formula, to keep Pincent Pharma at the top, and now you turn round and you tell me that we need to dig graves? The only reason anyone is alive is because of me, because of my drugs. The world owes me everything. You owe me everything. And the threat of some virus that doesn't even exist as far as I know is enough to make you predict the end of the world?'

Dr Thomas went pale, then cleared his throat again. 'We owe you everything because you promised us we would live for ever. If you cannot keep that

promise . . .' His voice was trembling, but there was steel in it.

Richard closed his eyes briefly then looked back at the quivering doctor. He would not listen. He could not listen. Longevity would triumph, because the alternative was too terrifying.

'Enough of this,' he said curtly. 'You will continue to conduct autopsies until we have different conclusions. Do you understand?'

'But that's impossible. There are no other conclusions I can draw.'

Dr Thomas was looking Richard in the eye and it unsettled him. Years ago, people used to say that death was the great leveller. Richard disagreed – it was *fear* of death that made men forget themselves.

'I see,' he said. 'Well, in that case I'm sorry.'

'Sorry?' Dr Thomas looked at him hopefully.

'Yes, I'm sorry,' Richard said, nodding his head slowly. Then, in one deft movement, he took out a pistol and fired it. Dr Thomas looked at him in surprise, then slumped to the floor, blood oozing from his chest. 'Sorry,' Richard continued, 'that you've given me yet another body to dispose of. Sorry that I've lost one of my best scientists.'

He took out his phone. Dr Thomas was dead, but his words, his worries, were still hanging in the air like dust. Richard felt as if he was choking on them.

'Derek? It's me. I need you down in the basement.'

'Of course.'

Richard put his phone back in his pocket, then

leant against the wall. He didn't have to wait long. Derek Samuels, his head of security, appeared minutes later. From his expression Richard deduced that he was not shocked by the sight of his former colleague now lying lifeless on the floor.

Immediately, Richard felt relief flood through him; immediately he felt the familiar reassurance of Derek's businesslike voice and demeanour. Derek Samuels was the only man Richard could trust to be entirely unemotional, to focus on the job, to show no interest in the rights, wrongs, ifs or buts. If he had a conscience, he hid it well. Richard suspected that he enjoyed his role as enforcer, enjoyed the power he yielded, enjoyed the suffering he caused. Richard had had no idea all those years ago just what a companion Derek would turn out to be when he offered him £5,000 to do him a favour, to take care of someone for him, to help him get rid of a problem.

'So Thomas didn't find the answer you were looking for then?' Derek asked, his tone as businesslike as usual.

Richard shook his head and sighed. He suddenly felt very tired.

'No,' he replied wearily. 'He said it was a virus that had mutated, that had discovered how to get past Longevity. He said it's going to be an epidemic. He said we're all going to die.' He attempted a laugh, but it rang hollow.

'Ah,' Derek said grimly, as he lifted the body into a plastic bag and started to clean up the mess. 'I see.'

Richard found himself watching Derek in admiration as he methodically got to work. The one man who never let him down, whose long life had been dedicated to smoothing the path for him, dealing with his enemies, protecting him from his friends.

'I don't know what to do,' he said, his voice so quiet it was barely audible. 'What shall I do, Derek?'

Derek looked up and frowned. Then he turned back to the blood on the floor and continued to clean it. 'Have you still got any of the original formula left?' he asked matter-of-factly.

'The original formula?' Richard's brow furrowed. 'No. Well, a drop, perhaps. But we copied it exactly. You don't think . . .'

'I don't think anything,' Derek said. 'It was just a question.'

'Yes,' Richard said, his mind racing. 'But a good question. An important question. You think that it's the copying that's the problem? You think that the copies of copies are no longer as powerful as the original?'

Derek shrugged lightly. 'I wouldn't know about science, sir – that's your domain. But photocopies – they're not originals, are they?'

'No, no they're not,' Richard said, beginning to pace. 'But we don't have the formula. We never found it. All we have is copies. It's all we've ever had.'

'We never found it back then, but that doesn't mean it isn't out there somewhere,' Derek said as he attended to the body, wrapping it up as though it

were simply an animal carcass going to market. 'He'll have written it down somewhere. Must have done.'

'We've searched,' Richard said uncertainly. 'We've searched everywhere.'

'We searched a bit,' Derek conceded, 'but you had the stuff itself. Your scientists copied it OK, didn't they? We didn't think we needed the formula. We stopped looking.'

'We stopped looking.' Richard nodded, his eyes lighting up.

'So now we start again,' Derek said, standing up and inspecting the floor, which was now spotless.

Richard breathed out, his shoulders relaxing slightly. They would find the formula. The formula would solve everything. No mutated virus. No pandemic. No end to everything he had spent his life building up. Everything would be back to normal. Everything would be restored.

'Thank you, Derek. I knew I could depend on you.' Richard allowed himself to exhale, then he looked at Derek meaningfully and left the room, making his way briskly back to his office, away from the bowels of Pincent Pharma to the light, airy spaces above.