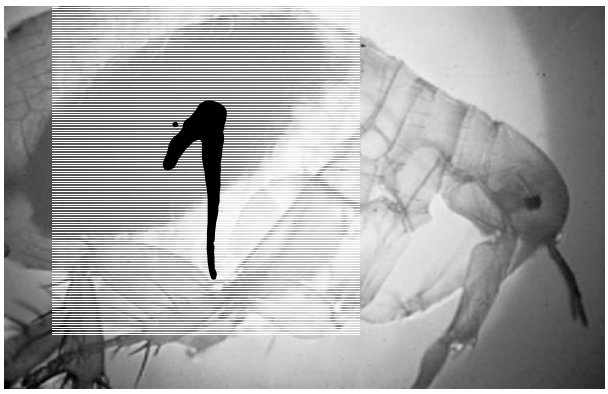

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Special Agent Nathan Donovan lifted his tray table and peered down at the small plastic case wedged between his feet, just as he had done a hundred times before. It was a beverage cooler really, nothing more, the kind he might have smuggled in to a Mets game or taken to the Jersey shore. The simple red lid was unceremoniously duct-taped to the chalky white body, giving it an altogether unassuming appearance—as though it might contain nothing more than a frigid six-pack or a picnic lunch for two.

Well-meaning scientists at the University Hospital in Kuala Lumpur had plastered the thing with every cautionary label imaginable. Long strips of neon-green tape flashed the word BIOHAZARD at regular intervals; fluorescent orange stickers warned of CORROSIVE MATERIALS and CHEMICAL HAZARD; even the Radiology Department chipped in, adding a series of triangular black-and-yellow labels declaring: DANGER! THIS EQUIPMENT PRODUCES IONIZING RADIATION WHEN ENERGIZED.

Donovan had carefully removed all of it, for the same reason that half of his fellow counterterrorism agents in New York City declined to wear their FBI

windbreakers: It just doesn't pay to advertise. The Malaysian authorities thought the shrieking labels would hold the curious at bay—Donovan knew they would have just the opposite effect. He might as well hang a sign around his neck that says, LOOK WHAT I'VE GOT! Only a fool or a novice stamps SECRET on the front of a secret document. A professional will take a plain blue cover every time.

At the University Hospital, words had buzzed around Donovan's head like Malaysian fruit bats. Microbiologists and disease specialists tossed around terms that he could barely pronounce, let alone comprehend—words like *panenterovirus*, *cytomegalovirus*, and *respiratory syncytial virus*. All he understood—all that was explained to him—was that Malaysian pig farmers were dying by the hundreds and no one knew why. The disease began with raging fever, followed by delirium, then sudden and irreversible coma. Those were the lucky ones; the less fortunate were left conscious to face the wasting agonies of vomiting, diarrhea, and internal hemorrhage. Each path was different, but the destination was ultimately the same: a violent and certain death.

No one knew what it was, how it was carried, or how it was transmitted. The disease resisted all known antibiotics, even the big guns like *streptomycin*. That's what set off all the bells and whistles at the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta: That kind of antibiotic resistance rarely occurs in nature. It suggests intentional genetic manipulation, and that raises the possibility that some idiot, or group of idiots, might be trying to play dice with the universe again.

No one knew what do. On Malaysian hog farms gas-masked soldiers trained their assault rifles on squealing pigs, decimating entire herds, while across town other farmers smuggled their own pigs past roadblocks to market in other states, allowing the disease to

leapfrog from region to region and, inevitably, from country to country. That's why the CDC wanted a look. It was only a matter of time; in the global village of the twenty-first century there is no such thing as a local outbreak.

A local pathologist had managed to isolate the virus from the blood and spinal fluid of two cadavers before becoming one herself. Before her own brutal demise she succeeded in growing a fist-sized lump of the stuff in a culture of porcine kidney cells. Scientists at the University Hospital packed the mucosal mass in an airtight metal container, surrounded it in dry ice, and packed it carefully in a simple red-and-white cooler, addressing it to the CDC's Division of Vector-Borne Diseases in Fort Collins, Colorado.

But one courier company after another turned the shipment down. No one would take the risk. No one was willing to say, "We'll absolutely, positively have it there by 10:30 tomorrow morning—unless we happen to drop it, in which case half the western U.S. will begin vomiting blood." That's why the CDC called the Joint Terrorism Task Force, and that's why they called New York: because NY agents are known as the best and the toughest in the Bureau. And that's why the job went to Nathan Donovan: because no one was better, and no one was tougher.

He glanced down at the box for the hundred-and-first time. Maybe no one was dumber, he thought.

At the hospital, they had handcuffed Donovan to the cooler like a diplomatic courier. For most of the flight from Kuala Lumpur to Los Angeles he sat with the box in the center of his lap, clutching the handle with both hands like an old woman in Battery Park. But it occurred to him that a single, inadvertent gesture, like reaching out to a flight

attendant for a bag of peanuts, could jerk the cooler off his lap and onto the floor. But it can't fall off the floor, he decided, so he removed the handcuff and slid the cooler between his feet.

He felt the aching stiffness in his back and legs again. He arched backward, and his two hundred-and-twenty-pound frame flexed the back of his seat like a beach chair. Behind him he heard an expletive in some unknown tongue, like the bark of a small dog. For eighteen hours he had unconsciously squeezed the cooler between his legs, as if it might somehow squirt out and slide down the aisle like a wet bar of soap. Only now, on the final leg of his journey, did he begin to relax—but only a little.

The 737 lifted off from a west-bound runway and headed out over the Pacific one last time before turning northeast on its two-and-a-half hour route to Denver. Donovan surveyed the sea of heads around him: Some slumped backward in restless slumber; others nodded together in intimate conversation. Some seats appeared empty, until a tiny pair of hands gripped the top of the seat and then quickly vanished again. There were heads of all shapes and colors and sizes; there was long hair, short hair, and hair long gone; there were streamlined ears tucked tightly back against skulls, and large, curling ears that jutted out like diving planes on a submarine.

Donovan didn't care. He was looking for eyes—eyes that turned away when he looked at them, eyes that lingered a little too long. He moved his right leg slightly until it bumped the seat in front of him; he felt a reassuring metallic tap from the Glock beneath his pant leg. He hated the ankle holster; it made the gun too hard to reach. But in the current social climate, allowing fellow passengers to catch a glimpse of gunmetal from

beneath a blazer was a definite faux pas, and Donovan found himself wearing the ankle holster more and more. Better than no gun at all, he thought.

They passed directly over Santa Monica now. Out his window, in the distance, he could just catch a glimpse of the cliffs at Malibu. They continued to climb over the sprawling San Fernando Valley, gaining altitude for the hop over the San Gabriel Mountains ahead.

Then it happened.

Donovan heard the blast before he felt the concussion—from somewhere in the forward baggage compartment, he thought. The floor in the first-class galley buckled wildly and then flattened again. The shockwave traveled back the full length of the plane, causing the entire fuselage to visibly ripple. Donovan was astonished that the airframe could contort that far without disintegrating—yet somehow, the plane was still intact. Overhead compartments sprung open like a line of mousetraps, vomiting out carry-on luggage, briefcases, shopping bags, and a blizzard of coats and sweaters. Above each row of seats a rectangular door dropped open and a tangle of tubing and bright yellow plastic dangled down like a sea of jellyfish.

In his mind, Donovan could see the bomb: a small device, probably homemade, nothing more than a few feet of wire with a timer attached to an explosive charge. No, not a timer, an altimeter—set to go off at cruising altitude to maximize the loss of life and disperse the wreckage as widely as possible. It was a small blast in relative terms—definitely not C4, probably not even TNT. Probably just a canister of gunpowder embedded in a cocktail of nails and ball bearings for shrapnel. A simple bomb, really, a

beginner's bomb—the kind you could build for twenty-five bucks with parts from a local Radio Shack.

They were lucky, he thought. The blast had blown downward, away from the passenger compartment—but it must have ripped the belly out of the ship, and there were things down there you didn't want to lose, things like hydraulics, and landing gear, and fuel lines…

For an instant the entire plane was silent and still, a freeze-frame before the panic to come. Bodies were rigid, faces frozen in disbelief. Arms angled everywhere, with white-knuckled fists clutching at seat backs, arm rests, fellow passengers—the way a man grabs on to a limb when it breaks away from a tree, Donovan thought. And it would do them just as much good—because outside the plane, he heard the trailing whine of the engines as they began to lose power.

Then the nose tipped forward, and the plane started down.

Donovan watched stone-faced as the image before him erupted into motion. There were shrieks and sobs and mournful wails, some more animal than human. Long-unsaid prayers were dredged up from childhood memories; complete strangers embraced; mothers clutched at wild-eyed children, combing hair and straightening collars as if they were preparing for school photos and not death. Some wept quietly, some spoke aloud to no one in particular, and some sat in peaceful serenity. And over the intercom, through tearful sobs, a flight attendant offered insane instructions on how to "prepare for an emergency landing."

Donovan looked out the window and measured the angle of their descent against the horizon; they were coming down like a mortar shell. It wouldn't be a landing, it

would be a detonation, with six thousand gallons of high-octane jet fuel erupting on impact—half of it vaporizing in a roiling fireball, and half of it spewing like napalm over whatever god-forsaken neighborhood or trailer park that happened to be nearby. The debris would be spread over half a mile; a week from now a DMORT team would be sifting through the wreckage, searching for bits of bone and tooth, fragments of DNA to offer comfort to grieving families. They'll be mailing us home in envelopes, Donovan thought—that's all that will be left.

He listened for the feeble voice on the intercom again and slowly shook his head. You can put your seat back in an upright and locked position, you can put your head between your knees, but you're still going to *die*. That's all there is to it; that's how it is. The good people of United Flight 296 to Denver were dead, every last one of them, and there was nothing they could do.

Then Donovan looked down at his feet.

There sat the little red-and-white cooler nestled between his feet, blissfully unaware of its impending destruction. But—*would* the crash destroy the cooler utterly and completely? Inside that cooler was a life form, and like all living things it would do everything in its power to survive. He visualized the crash again: the nose-first impact, the pulverizing momentum of eighty-five tons of imploding metal, the incinerating belch of fire—no living thing could survive that.

Or could it? The virus was a living thing, yes, but it was a living thing sealed in an airtight container, packed in dry ice, cradled in thick foam, shielded by plastic armor… Was the cooler fireproof, he wondered? Would it disintegrate on impact? Would it melt? Would the plastic crumble, the dry ice vaporize, and the canister rip apart like a tin can in

a campfire? Or would the plastic casing only fracture? Would it bounce and roll and ricochet, but still survive the impact?

Or would the blast throw the cooler free of the plane? Donovan had worked crash sites before; he remembered picking his way through the utter annihilation, every fragment of the plane and its contents reduced to inches—and then suddenly find a handbag or attaché completely intact, as though it had been gently set aside before impact. Would the cooler be the handbag this time? Would it crack, and split apart, and dump its living contents onto the surrounding debris?

And when the DMORT team worked its way through the wreckage, would some hapless deputy coroner lift the empty canister and peer inside? Would he casually toss it aside, then wipe the sweat from his forehead or rub the smoke from his eyes? And when he went home that night, would he kiss his wife? Would he hug the kids? Would he pat the dog and shake hands with a neighbor?

Donovan looked around the plane. It was a ghost ship, filled with specters already beginning to fade away. They were already beginning to grow quiet, already acquiescing to their inevitable doom. They were already dead, every one of them. There were maybe two hundred on the plane—but on the ground, there were millions.

Donovan looked out the window. He had about a minute, no more.

He jerked the cooler up onto his lap and began to tear away the long, grey strips of tape. When he opened the lid, a silent mist poured over the sides and down onto his legs. From the center of the ice he slid a tall, silver canister and began to tug at its lid. It opened with a dull pop. He held his breath and peered down into the black interior.

Then he turned to his right and dumped the gelatinous blob in the center of the aisle.

He watched: The mass seemed to hesitate for a moment, then dissipate into the carpet. It seemed to spread and grow, putting out feelers like a vine, reaching out just like the rest of the passengers for someone, something to hold onto. But it didn't matter—It was unprotected now, and it had no more chance of surviving than they did.

Than *he* did. The thought crossed Donovan's mind for the first time. He took a deep breath and leaned back in his seat. He had never been afraid of anything in his life, and he was not about to start now. He closed his eyes and put death out of his mind. Why not? He'd never feel it anyway.

Then, from outside the window, he heard the rising drone of the engines, followed by a heavy, sinking tug in his gut. Everywhere around him people gasped and stiffened, anticipating the impact—but the impact never came. Instead, the nose of the plane began to turn upward. As the engines continued to accelerate the 737 leveled off, then once again began to climb.

From everywhere on the plane came astounded gasps and great, heaving sobs of relief. Passengers stared out the windows in astonishment; they stared at one another in unspeakable joy; they stared at the ceiling and uttered silent thanksgivings.

But not Nathan Donovan. He stared at a fist-sized stain in the center of the aisle.

Then he heard a voice say, "What did you do?"

He looked up. There was a young boy standing in the aisle, staring with him at the spotted carpet. The boy looked up into Donovan's eyes; the eyes were dark and wet and sunken deep into the pale little face. He was terribly thin, and the sagging neck of his

blue hospital gown draped down over one bony shoulder. On both elbows, white strips of surgical tape secured pads of folded gauze.

Donovan couldn't bear to look at the boy. He shut his eyes hard. "I'm sorry," he said in a whisper.

"I don't feel so good, Daddy."

When Donovan looked again the boy was backing slowly away down the aisle. His hair was gone now, and tiny veins coursed over his head like pale blue threads. The skin of his face was sallow, almost transparent, and his skull was clearly visible beneath.

"Wait," Donovan pleaded.

But the boy kept getting smaller, and thinner, and farther away.

"Wait!" Donovan shouted after him. "I can help! I can fix this!" He dropped to his knees in the center of the aisle and began to furiously scrape at the spot with his fingernails—but the spot only grew larger. It spread to the edges of the aisle now and sent ominous tendrils creeping up the sides of the seats.

The boy spoke one last time in a distant voice.

"Why won't you help me, Daddy? Why don't you love me anymore?"

* * *

Nathan Donovan sat bolt upright in bed and stared into the darkness. He ran his fingers through the cold, damp mat on his chest and wiped his hand on the sheet. He turned and looked at the clock.

It was four a.m.—the usual time for the dreams.