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Whiteout

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CHRISTMAS EVE

1 a.m.

Two tired men looked at Antonia Gallo with resentment and hostility in their eyes. They wanted to go home, but she would not let them. And they knew she was right, which made it worse.

All three were in the personnel department of Oxenford Medical. Antonia, always called Toni, was facilities director, and her main responsibility was security. Oxenford was a small pharmaceuticals outfit – a boutique company, in stock-market jargon – that did research on viruses that could kill. Security was deadly serious.

Toni had organized a spot check of supplies, and had found that two doses of an experimental drug were missing. That was bad enough: the drug, an antiviral agent, was top secret, its formula priceless. It might have been stolen for sale to a rival company. But another, more frightening possibility had brought the look of grim anxiety to Toni's freckled face, and drawn dark circles under her green eyes. A thief might have stolen the drug for personal use. And there was only one reason for that: someone had become infected by one of the lethal viruses used in Oxenford's laboratories.

The labs were located in a vast nineteenth-century

house built as a Scottish holiday home for a Victorian millionaire. It was nicknamed the Kremlin, because of the double row of fencing, the razor wire, the uniformed guards, and the state-of-the-art electronic security. But it looked more like a church, with pointed arches and a tower and rows of gargoyles along the roof.

The personnel office had been one of the grander bedrooms. It still had Gothic windows and linenfold panelling, but now there were filing cabinets instead of wardrobes, and desks with computers and phones where once there had been dressing tables crowded with crystal bottles and silver-backed brushes.

Toni and the two men were working the phones, calling everyone who had a pass to the top-security laboratory. There were four biosafety levels. At the highest, BSL4, the scientists worked in space suits, handling viruses for which there was no vaccine or antidote. Because it was the most secure location in the building, samples of the experimental drug were stored there.

Not everyone was allowed into BSL4. Biohazard training was compulsory, even for the maintenance men who went in to service air filters and repair autoclaves. Toni herself had undergone the training, so that she could enter the lab to check on security.

Only twenty-seven of the company's eighty staff had access. However, many had already departed for the Christmas vacation, and Monday had turned into Tuesday while the three people responsible doggedly tracked them down.

Toni got through to a resort in Barbados called Le Club Beach and, after much insistence, persuaded the assistant

manager to go looking for a young laboratory technician called Jenny Crawford.

As Toni waited, she glanced at her reflection in the window. She was holding up well, considering the late hour. Her chocolate-brown chalk-stripe suit still looked businesslike, her thick hair was tidy, her face did not betray fatigue. Her father had been Spanish, but she had her Scottish mother's pale skin and red-blonde hair. She was tall and looked fit. Not bad, she thought, for thirty-eight years old.

'It must be the middle of the night back there!' Jenny said when at last she came to the phone.

'We've discovered a discrepancy in the BSL4 log,' Toni explained.

Jenny was a little drunk. 'That's happened before,' she said carelessly. 'But no one's ever made, like, a great big drama over it.'

'That's because I wasn't working here,' Toni said crisply. 'When was the last time you entered BSL4?'

'Tuesday, I think. Won't the computer tell you that?'

It would, but Toni wanted to know whether Jenny's story would match the computer record. 'And when was the last time you accessed the vault?' The vault was a locked refrigerator within BSL4.

Jenny's tone was becoming surly. 'I really don't remember, but it will be on video.' The touchpad combination lock on the vault activated a security camera that rolled the entire time the door was open.

'Do you recall the last time you used Madoba-2?' This was the virus the scientists were working on right now.

Jenny was shocked. 'Bloody hell, is that what's gone missing?'

'No, it's not. All the same—'

'I don't think I've ever handled an actual virus. I mostly work in the tissue-culture lab.'

That agreed with the information Toni had. 'Have you noticed any of your colleagues behaving in a way that was strange, or out of character, in the last few weeks?'

'This is like the sodding Gestapo,' Jenny said.

'Be that as it may, have you—'

'No, I have not.'

'Just one more question. Is your temperature normal?'

'Fuck me, are you saying I might have Madoba-2?'

'Have you got a cold or fever?'

'No!'

'Then you're all right. You left the country eleven days ago – by now you would have flu-like symptoms if anything were wrong. Thank you, Jenny. It's probably just an error in the log, but we have to make sure.'

'Well, you've spoiled my night.' Jenny hung up.

'Shame,' Toni said to the dead phone. She cradled the receiver and said: 'Jenny Crawford checks out. A cow, but straight.'

The laboratory director was Howard McAlpine. His bushy grey beard grew high on his cheekbones, so that the skin around his eyes looked like a pink mask. He was meticulous without being prissy, and Toni normally enjoyed working with him, but now he was bad-tempered. He leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his head. 'The overwhelming likelihood is that the material unaccounted for was used perfectly legitimately by someone who simply forgot to make entries in the log.' His tone of voice was testy: he had said this twice before.

'I hope you're right,' Toni said non-comittally. She got up and went to the window. The personnel office overlooked the extension that housed the BSL4 laboratory. The new building seemed similar to the rest of the Kremlin, with barley-sugar chimneys and a clock tower, so that it would be difficult for an outsider to guess, from a distance, where in the complex the high-security lab was located. But its arched windows were opaque, the carved oak doors could not be opened, and closed-circuit television cameras gazed one-eyed from the monstrous heads of the gargoyles. It was a concrete blockhouse in Victorian disguise. The new building was on three levels. The labs were on the ground floor. As well as research space and storage, there was an intensive-care medical isolation facility for anyone who became infected with a dangerous virus. It had never been used. On the floor above was the air-handling equipment. Below, elaborate machinery sterilized all waste coming from the building. Nothing left the place alive, except human beings.

'We've learned a lot from this exercise,' Toni said in a placatory tone. She was in a delicate position, she thought anxiously. The two men were senior to her in rank and age – both were in their fifties. Although she had no right to give them orders, she had insisted they treat the discrepancy as a crisis. They both liked her, but she was stretching their goodwill to the limit. Still she felt she had to push it. At stake were public safety, the company's reputation, and her career. 'In future we must always have live phone numbers for everyone who has access to BSL4, wherever in the world they might be, so that we can reach them quickly in emergency. And we need to audit the log more than once a year.'

McAlpine grunted. As lab director he was responsible for the log, and the real reason for his mood was that he should have discovered the discrepancy himself. Toni's efficiency made him look bad.

She turned to the other man, who was the director of human resources. 'How far down your list are we, James?'

James Elliot looked up from his computer screen. He dressed like a stockbroker, in a pinstriped suit and spotted tie, as if to distinguish himself from the tweedy scientists. He seemed to regard the safety rules as tiresome bureaucracy, perhaps because he never worked hands-on with viruses. Toni found him pompous and silly. 'We've spoken to all but one of the twenty-seven staff that have access to BSL4,' he said. He spoke with exaggerated precision, like a tired teacher explaining something to the dullest pupil in the class. 'All of them told the truth about when they last entered the lab and opened the vault. None has noticed a colleague behaving strangely. And no one has a fever.'

'Who's the missing one?'

'Michael Ross, a lab technician.'

'I know Michael,' Toni said. He was a shy, clever man about ten years younger than Toni. 'In fact I've been to his home. He lives in a cottage about fifteen miles from here.'

'He's worked for the company for eight years without a blemish on his record.'

McAlpine ran his finger down a printout and said: 'He last entered the lab three Sundays ago, for a routine check on the animals.'

'What's he been doing since?'

'Holiday.'

'For how long – three weeks?'

Elliot put in: 'He was due back today.' He looked at his watch. 'Yesterday, I should say. Monday morning. But he didn't show up.'

'Did he call in sick?'

'No.'

Toni raised her eyebrows. 'And we can't reach him?'

'No answer from his home phone or his mobile.'

'Doesn't that strike you as odd?'

'That a single young man should extend his vacation without forewarning his employer? About as odd as rain in Glen Coe.'

Toni turned back to McAlpine. 'But you say Michael has a good record.'

The lab director looked worried. 'He's very conscientious. It's surprising that he should take unauthorized leave.'

Toni asked: 'Who was with Michael when he last entered the lab?' She knew he must have been accompanied, for there was a two-person rule in BSL4: because of the danger, no one could work there alone.

McAlpine consulted his list. 'Dr Ansari, a biochemist.'

'I don't think I know him.'

'Her. It's a woman. Monica.'

Toni picked up the phone. 'What's her number?'

Monica Ansari spoke with an Edinburgh accent and sounded as if she had been fast asleep. 'Howard McAlpine called me earlier, you know.'

'I'm sorry to trouble you again.'

'Has something happened?'

'It's about Michael Ross. We can't track him down.

I believe you were in BSL4 with him two weeks ago last Sunday.'

'Yes. Just a minute, let me put the light on.' There was a pause. 'God, is that the time?'

Toni pressed on. 'Michael went on holiday the next day.'

'He told me he was going to see his mother in Devon.'

That rang a bell. Toni recalled the reason she had gone to Michael Ross's house. About six months ago she had mentioned, in a casual conversation in the canteen, how much she liked Rembrandt's pictures of old women, with every crease and wrinkle lovingly detailed. You could tell, she had said, how much Rembrandt must have loved his mother. Michael had lit up with enthusiasm and revealed that he had copies of several Rembrandt etchings, cut out of magazines and auction-house catalogues. She had gone home with him after work to see the pictures, all of old women, tastefully framed and covering one wall of his small living room. She had worried that he was going to ask her for a date – she liked him, but not *that* way – but, to her relief, he genuinely wanted only to show off his collection. He was, she had concluded, a mother's boy.

'That's helpful,' Toni said to Monica. 'Just hold on.' She turned to James Elliot. 'Do we have his mother's contact details on file?'

Elliot moved his mouse and clicked. 'She's listed as next of kin.' He picked up the phone.

Toni spoke to Monica again. 'Did Michael seem his normal self that afternoon?'

'Totally.'

'Did you enter BSL4 together?'

'Yes. Then we went to separate changing rooms, of course.'

'When you entered the lab itself, was he already there?'

'Yes, he changed quicker than I did.'

'Did you work alongside him?'

'No. I was in a side lab, dealing with tissue cultures. He was checking on the animals.'

'Did you leave together?'

'He went a few minutes before I did.'

'It sounds to me as if he could have accessed the vault without your knowing about it.'

'Easily.'

'What's your impression of Michael?'

'He's all right . . . inoffensive, I suppose.'

'Yeah, that's a good word for him. Do you know if he has a girlfriend?'

'I don't think so.'

'Do you find him attractive?'

'Nice-looking, but not sexy.'

Toni smiled. 'Exactly. Anything odd about him, in your experience?'

'No.'

Toni sensed a hesitation, and remained silent, giving the other woman time. Beside her, Elliot was speaking to someone, asking for Michael Ross or his mother.

After a moment, Monica said: 'I mean, the fact that someone lives alone doesn't make them a nutcase, does it?'

Beside Toni, Elliot was saying into the phone: 'How very strange. I'm sorry to have troubled you so late at night.'

Toni's curiosity was pricked by what she could hear of

Elliot's conversation. She ended her call, saying: 'Thanks again, Monica. I hope you get back to sleep all right.'

'My husband's a family doctor,' she said. 'We're used to phone calls in the middle of the night.'

Toni hung up. 'Michael Ross had plenty of time to open the vault,' she said. 'And he lives alone.' She looked at Elliot. 'Did you reach his mother's house?'

'It's an old folks' home,' Elliot said. He looked frightened. 'And Mrs Ross died last winter.'

'Oh, shit,' said Toni.