

Victor inched his way into the chair by the nearest bed; he would sit quietly as if he were the patient's loved one. The patient was unconscious and hooked up to a noisy ventilator. The cleaning lady mopped with her back to him; for now, no one was paying him any attention. But he'd have to wait longer.

"Don't forget the patient in isolation," he heard one of the aides say from across the room. "We still have him, and he takes three times as long as the others, what with putting on all that protective crap we have to wear."

"He's got some horrible disease," her coworker answered, "but now that he's awake and all, seems to be a nice guy." The aides chatted, still oblivious to Victor.

He stiffened. They were talking about Matthew. *So he was awake?* Victor almost bolted out the door, across the hall into Matthew's isolation room, but he did not move. His goal was retribution. His resolve had not weakened. Another few minutes. Just a few more minutes. Victor eased down in his chair.

After stuffing soiled sheets into a laundry bag, the two aides moved toward the door.

Then a realization jolted Victor so violently that he felt light-headed. What if somehow, the lethal bacteria could be tracked to him? He'd been seen in the ICU talking to Norman. Would somebody make the connection? Norman Kantor and Victor Worth: former colleagues; lethal staphylococci. If he was implicated —Matthew had no one but him. Victor could not take the chance of getting caught. Not now.

Just as suddenly, a solution suggested itself. Instantly, Victor acted on it. He had no time to analyze, to weigh the pros and cons. To consider anyone other than Matthew. He needed to proceed. He patted the pouch of his leather bag. Plenty. Not only enough culture material to kill Norman, but enough to kill every patient in the ICU. Infecting multiple patients would give him cover, camouflage. But he had to act. Now.

Hunching, he reached into his pocket, removed a pair of rubber gloves, and pulled them on. The old man in the bed closest to him

was not breathing on his own, either sedated or unconscious. He noted the name posted at the head of the bed: Bart Kelly. Physician: Dr. Nelson.

Victor calculated that the hospital would be so busy trying to figure out how their ICU became infected with such a deadly, resistant bacteria that nobody would remember him. Nobody would connect his history with that of Norman Kantor, the intended victim. By then, Matthew would be safe in D.C.

Gloves on, Victor reached into the culture transport pouch and deftly selected an impregnated swab from the secure carrier. He eased forward, inserted the saturated swab into the old man's nostrils, swiveled it, and for extra measure, wiped it around the exposed end of the tube coming out the man's nose. Done. Victor imagined himself looking like a concerned layman, just observing a patient.

He moved to the next patient, next bed. Still no one was paying him the slightest attention. He leaned over a middle-aged woman in a deep sleep—sedated, maybe—but he'd have to be careful. His gloved fingers pulled out a second swab and gently wiped it on the woman's cracked lips. She slept, and he applied as much pressure as he dared. The inoculum would be smaller, but surely enough to jump-start the noxious bacterium.

In the third bed, Victor found a younger woman. Tubes going everywhere, but the woman's eyes were open. Had she seen him with the swabs? Should he infect her—or just move on? Instant decision needed.

Victor moved to the next bed. The cleaning lady mopped, her back to him, oblivious. He knew he had to hurry before staff flooded the place. The old man in this bed mumbled incoherently, moving his lips, not awake, but not asleep either. Not as many tubes running into him. Victor decided to pass him by. Why, he didn't know.

Next, a man on a ventilator. Older. Eyes closed. Mancini, another Dr. Nelson patient. Victor pressed his third swab around the tube coming out of the patient's mouth, returning the used swab, as he'd done each time, to its secure holding container.

Now he was about ten feet from Norman Kantor's bed. How long had it taken him to process three patients? Only a minute or two, but it seemed like hours. After Norman, he'd get out.

Victor's heart rate accelerated as he moved to Norman's bedside. Hovering over his one-time mentor, Victor steadied his hand. How propitious. Norman would succumb to the very staphylococci he claimed to have conquered. Except the staph that would be painted around and inside his nasal mucous membrane was several generations more virulent and much more resistant to that flawed antibiotic Kantor had developed for Keystone Pharma. This staph would eat away at the insides. A painful but deserved reality for the old bastard who denied Matthew a chance to live.

Victor grinned as he proceeded with the inoculation. Norman's eyes were closed, his breathing regular with a light snore. Victor deftly inserted the swab into Norman's first nostril. Norman stirred; his eyes fluttered for an instant. Second nostril done. The bacterial load would be more than adequate, but he could not resist Norman's open mouth, so when he replaced the used swab, he reached in for another that he quickly inserted inside his cheek, pressing against Norman's gums to release the maximum bacterial load. Norman opened his eyes a slit, and a smile seemed to form as he recognized his former colleague. But the smile faded to a grimace as he fell back into slumber.

Inoculating Norman had taken only seconds. Victor looked around. The mopper was working herself out of the room, approaching the door, blocking his immediate exit. He should stop now. He'd infected his target, his primary mission accomplished.

The pathetic-looking boy in the bed next to Norman stirred and seemed to call out. Norman knew that he needed to get out of there, but he had to wait for the lady mopping the floor to move away from the door.

"Water," he thought the boy was trying to say, but his voice was too weak for Victor to be sure. Victor approached the bed, hoping to placate the kid. Like most of the ICU patients, he was hooked up to multiple tubes and instruments. But unlike the others, he was awake, eyes focused on Victor in an alert stare. What had this kid seen?