

FIRST
THE CURE.



THEN THE
OUTBREAK...



CODE RED

NANCY FISHER





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She was still half asleep when her feet hit the floor, her hand reaching for the bedside clock while her mind puzzled over its strident ringing. She sat for a moment on the edge of the metal cot, blinking in the darkness. She felt dull and edgy. She shivered in the early morning coolness, knowing it wasn't just the temperature. The blood was starting to get to her. Not the blood itself - she was used to blood - but the horror that was in it.

She turned to the figure beside her and shook him gently. "Time to get up, Jean."

He groaned and rolled over, then sat up. "*Merde*. What's the time?"

"Five-thirty. The pilot wants to leave by seven."

"Are you sure you want to come? It's over an hour to the air-strip. And you'll be driving back alone."

"I've done it before. I picked you up when you flew in, remember?"

"How could I forget? You drive like a marine." His smile warmed her. He ran his fingers through her short dark curls, then swiveled around and began the daily ritual of shaking out his boots; who knew what might have crawled in through the chinks in the rough wood floor during the night? "But tiredness can cause mistakes, sometimes fatal ones." The words floated back over his shoulder. "And you've been going flat out for days."

"So have you," she answered.

"Yes, but tonight I'll be sleeping in a soft bed in Lima. You'll still be at risk in this godforsaken jungle. You should sleep while you can."

"I'll get plenty of sleep," she told him with a smile, "with you off to France for two weeks." She knelt on the bed and wrapped her arms around him from behind. "Anyway, I'll be going home, too, in a few days. Back to New York."

He dropped the boot and turned to embrace her. "I'll call you

from Marseilles the night you get back. Three days from now, yes? And before you know it, my aunt will be feeling better, and I will jump on a plane and come flying home to you."

They kissed deeply and long. How quickly it had happened, this *affaire de coeur*. Two doctors sent on a mission of mercy by the prestigious International Medical Aid organization, clinging together in the midst of death. Finally, he released her, and they began to dress.

They loaded his suitcase and small carryall and the equipment bag with its distinctive blue-and-white IMA logo into the muddy Jeep, and went rattling across the still-sleeping compound. Beyond the wide, bleach-filled ditch that separated and protected the staff's living quarters from the "hot zone" of makeshift lab and hospital buildings, Lucy could see a faint flashlight beam bobbing along a rutted path - a nursing sister going to check on her patients. Brave woman, she thought. Dr. Lucy Nash had trained in a hospital fellowship for infectious diseases, then done a rigorous two-year stint in epidemiology and virology at the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, where she'd achieved a coveted Level Four clearance. She'd seen a myriad of viral illnesses, but nothing as horrific as this.

The overcast sky lightened a little as they bounced along the rough jungle track toward the small airport some twenty miles away, where a plane waited to take Dr. Jean-Pierre Didier across the mountains to Lima. Lucy studied his strong hands on the wheel. Healing hands. "No new cases for over ten days," she said. "I'm pretty sure we've contained it. Thank God it's not airborne."

"Jesus, yes," he agreed with real feeling. Airborne, this thing would be impossible to control. "You think we'll ever identify the host?"

Lucy shrugged. "I've been concentrating on the most likely carriers: birds, insects, rodents, and monkeys, but the microscope studies haven't turned up a damn thing so far. Still, it took Mackenzie four years to identify the host of the Machupo arenavirus in Bolivia, back in the sixties. . . ."

"A mouse, wasn't it?"