

PROLOGUE

Centro Nacional de Infecção, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, December 2000

Mateo and Luiz stood before an old wood door with dingy peeling paint that might have been white, long ago. A wide silver-gray iron bar with spots of yellow-orange rust crossed the door at waist height. One end of the bar disappeared into a metal slot like a giant deadbolt. A large old-fashioned custom-made iron padlock secured the other end.

‘How old do you think that lock is?’ asked Mateo.

‘Maybe, is a hundred years old. I wonder where it comes from,’ answered Luiz as he inserted the oversized old-fashioned key that he had been given, into the lock.

Mateo lifted his upper left lip and arched his eyebrow on the same side as he looked toward Luiz, as if to say, you think this old lock will open. Luiz turned the key. He twisted, then twisted harder. The key reluctantly turned with a grating noise, and the heavy lock fell open.

‘I hope this is not too big of a job. Besides these ancient places make me nervous,’ said Mateo

‘First, we see how many freezers there are. Then we know how long it takes.’

‘I go to my cousin’s wedding next week, so I hope to god this doesn’t take more than a few days.’

‘You have cousins here in Brazil, Mateo, or do you have to go home?’

‘Yes, no I mean. No cousins here in Rio. I have to go home to Colombia.’

Luiz pulled the iron bar out of the slot and set it against the wall, making a bell-tone ring as the steel hit the concrete floor. The sound sent shivers through Mateo. Then Luiz reached into the darkness, around the corner to the wall,

brushing aside flimsy cobwebs, and flipped a light switch illuminating gloomy walls that had the distinctive appearance of not having been gazed upon for many years.

They stepped through the stale air, down the concrete stairs to the windowless basement. The walls that had never been painted and were covered with years of accumulated grime and dust mixed with gossamer cobwebs. The upright freezers were once shiny white, now dull, with spots of rust erupting through the paint here and there.

‘Hijo de Puta,’ said Mateo. ‘There’s eight freezers. Many more than is good, but maybe they are not too full. Just so we’re finished before I have to fly out next Wednesday. We could work this weekend?’ he said encouragingly to Luiz.

‘Un huh,’ is all Luiz said to what he thought was a ridiculous question.

‘Don’t you think working this weekend would be a good idea. Get it over with?’

‘Maybe you Mateo, but not me. I have plans, no.’

Luiz started opening the freezer doors. ‘We’re in luck. Look at this one on the end. It’s almost empty, so we can transfer the samples fast from the next one, so they don’t thaw out. I was afraid we were going to have to bring down boxes and a lot of dry ice to keep them cold as we listed them. We’ll inventory this one first. Then we can move the next refrigerator stuff into it. Get some gloves on, pull that table over and I’ll get the computer booted.’

Mateo pulled an old rickety table over in front and quickly unloaded the freezer’s contents, putting several small boxes and Styrofoam containers onto the table.

‘Tell me what the first box says and put it back. We’ll go rapido so they don’t thaw. That should suit your time schedule too.’

Mateo smiled and started reading labels. Some he read with difficulty. Luiz typed them into the computer spreadsheet. With the few containers, the first freezer went quickly, and they started on the next, which was packed full. Mateo took out a couple of stacks of small boxes and wire containers holding glass slants and set them on the table and then closed the freezer door.

‘There’s hundreds in here. This could take forever. Do you suppose any of this is bad?’ asked Mateo.

‘I don’t think so. The professor said they are old, and many are probably dead. He thinks most are samples of plants, mushrooms, and soil bacteria. After they have our inventory and see what’s here, they will either destroy them or move them to the university microbiology department.’

‘Yes old, older than me. This box says *P. Aeruginosa*, 1966 on it,’ said Luiz.’

‘Yes old,’ confirmed Mateo.

This one I know. It’s a bacterium. It is one that sometimes we are asked to culture for sick people.’

‘Ana...car...dium occi...dentale,’ as Mateo struggled with both the spelling and pronunciation. What’s that?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know more than you. I’m not going to know most: I know some people bacteria and have heard the name of others, like I said, the human infectants we grow for patient’s culture tests. Most will be unknown to me.’

Chapter 1

‘Where’s Barbara?’ asked Jim.

‘Ah...Doctor Milton’s home sick. She asked me to fill in for her, with you,’ said Nusmen, looking decidedly uncomfortable.

The two men were nearly even in height, with Jim's defined muscles giving him the larger, wider presence compared to Nusmen's beanpole body. Jim studied the man for a few seconds. Looked at his crazy untamed hair, watched his Adams Apple move up and down as Nusmen kept swallowing, apparently nervous. Colonel Johnson, Nusmen's boss and temporary director of the Biological Warfare Center, considered the respectful way Nusmen had said Dr Milton's name.

Then he said, 'The general has put a lot of faith in you. I didn't have anything to do with putting you second in command of BWC's laboratory. What I do have is a long history with General Crystal and I trust his judgment. And Heather always said you were good with botanical studies, as well as being helpful to her in the field research, but I considered you to be...'

Nusmen finished his sentence, 'weird?'

Jim didn't say anything. There were probably several psychological terms to describe Nusmen besides weird. He would bet that Katarina had a mile-long psych profile on him. *He would ask her for it.*

Nusmen continued, 'Well you were no doubt right and still are. It doesn't mean that I don't love this place, the chance to be here. I'll never forget what the general has done for me. I have even made friends here...uh maybe a friend; Brad, and I think Dr Milton likes me, even though I am not very good with people, so maybe weird is, ...ahh, right. I don't know...I've never paid much attention to what people thought.'

Jim put his hand on Nusmen's shoulder thinking, *Maybe the general and Heather were right.* 'You keep doing the job I hear you're are doing, and everything will be fine. Respect is important, you seem to have that from people that matter, maybe one good friend is more important than many. Let's quit chatting and get on with it.' Something Nusmen, the general and Colonel Johnson had in common: none liked small talk, and while Jim had listened and was perhaps coming to a new understanding of Nusmen, he had had enough chitchat for the moment. The colonel and the general just didn't like to waste time with small talk and Nusmen didn't either, but for a different reason—Nusmen didn't know how.