

Chapter 2

A COMMUNITY OF EXCELLENCE

The cab turned off Military Road, past a huge monument sign that read:

FORT DETRICK
A COMMUNITY OF EXCELLENCE

The letters were electrified, and the monument sat on a manicured front lawn by the stone-pillared main gate like a misplaced theater marquee. Three flags whipped in a cold April breeze. The American flag stood tallest in the middle; next to it the flag of Fort Detrick and the state flag of Maryland. The main post sat on four hundred acres at the corner of a twelve-hundred-acre government site. The taxi stopped at the gate while a uniformed Marine M.P. with a white helmet and webbed pistol belt told them that Colonel Chittick was officed in Building 810, one block east of Doughton Drive. He handed the driver a map and let them pass.

The buildings that made up the old section of the Fort were four-story dark brick structures that had been originally built in the

late forties. They were blocky and rectangular with no design significance. Over the years as the Fort expanded, a startling variety of architectural styles had surfaced: boxy stucco buildings from the fifties, concrete tilt-ups popular in the sixties, followed lately by the steel and glass of the eighties and nineties. Fort Detrick was a huge, grassy, campus-like facility with thousands of personnel, both military and civilian. Max had told her that most of the Fort had been demilitarized in the seventies, when President Nixon had shut down the U.S. bio-weapons program. The Army still maintained a defense bio-research facility that was under strict military controls. There were officers, both men and women, in every uniform of the U.S. Armed Services moving briskly along the cement walkways. There were an equal number of people in white lab coats.

The taxi pulled up in front of Building 810, which was one of the old brick-faced structures. Joanne and Stacy got their bags out of the trunk.

“Thanks,” Stacy said, paying the driver, who promptly drove off. She was surprisingly calm, in what she had come to realize was one of her “disconnect” stages. During a disconnect, her mind could deal with Max’s death as an abstract fact, as something that had simply happened: *Max is gone. I loved Max. He was my reason for being. I’ll deal with it. I’m functioning.* In this state, these were just thoughts, not devastating downdrafts that threatened to blow her against untenable realities. During her disconnects, she was strangely detached from all of it. Then, just as suddenly, her mind would swell with anguish and those same concepts would threaten to drive her to her knees.

She suspected her disconnects were part of the protective mechanism built deep in her psyche that allowed her to deal with only so much grief at one interval. Then she would click into abstract mode, where, for a few minutes or an hour, she was able to break out of the black and get a few breaths of air before she would be pulled down again.

After the cab drove off, the two of them stood uncertainly in front of Building 810. Now that she was here, looking at the huge military medical facility, her idea that she would go kick ass and find out why Max was dead seemed foolish, if not impossible. Somehow, in her mind, when she had envisioned Fort Detrick, she'd made it small and insignificant, like the wooden fort in *F-Troop*. The real Fort Detrick was a huge, menacing facility, with monument signs and flags, full of dedicated, bustling professionals. More than a fort, it seemed a fortress.

"So, let's go talk to this guy," Stacy finally said, gathering her resolve as she and Joanne picked up their overnight bags and moved past the monument sign that read:

BUILDING 810
HEADQUARTERS AND ADMINISTRATION
FORT DETRICK

Colonel Chittick's office was on the fourth floor in the corner, and was a large, square room with wood floors, rectangular windows, and a huge desk. His assistant, an Army Captain with red hair and a mustache, showed them into the empty office. On the walls were pictures of different units that Colonel Chittick had been assigned to. In the shots, the men were arranged in rows like football teams. Under each picture were the unit designations.

Stacy was looking at one, labeled:

5TH MEDICAL BATTALION
SAN MARCOS, PHILIPPINES, 1968

She was wondering which of the hundred or so men in the shot was Colonel Chittick, when the door opened and a surprisingly handsome fifty-year-old man in an Army Colonel's uniform entered the office. He had silver-gray hair, a square jaw, and beautiful rows of even, white teeth. On his lapels were the winged medical

insignias. He was a recruiting poster doctor, she thought, who now wore an appropriate look of troubled sympathy and grief.

“Mrs. Richardson? I’m Colonel Chittick, and I’m so sorry to meet you under these tragic conditions,” he said softly, shaking her hand.

“Thank you,” she said, and then motioned toward Joanne. “This is Max’s sister, Joanne.”

The Colonel shook her hand, then nodded his head, a silent genuflection to their grief. “May I offer you a seat?” he said, and led them to the sofa on the far side of the room, which sat under a huge framed Medical Battalion flag.

The Colonel chose an adjoining chair. “I really didn’t know your husband at all,” he began gently. “He was working with Dr. DeMille over in USAMRIID—that’s the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases. It houses the largest bio-containment lab in the U.S.,” he said with a tinge of pride, as if Stacy had no understanding of Max’s work. “I understood that your husband was a wonderful, dedicated scientist.” He paused before heading into uncertain, potentially dangerous terrain. “I guess sometimes a high-powered mind like his can possess a strange mix of both brilliance and tortured emotions.” His voice was slick and cold: Vaseline on ice.

“I’m sorry, what?” Stacy asked, her chin coming up, thrusting forward.

“What I meant was, a genius as complex and gifted as your husband probably found it difficult to live with both his huge intellect and his complicated inner thoughts.”

“I thought you just said you didn’t know him,” Stacy challenged.

“Well, I didn’t. I . . . what I meant was, often this is the case. With superior intellect there is sometimes also emotional instability.”

“Well, if you didn’t know him, Colonel, why don’t you keep

those opinions to yourself. Max was very squared-away. He was not some geek scientist, lost in the intellectual ozone.”

“All I meant . . .” He stopped and nodded. “I’m sorry, I take your point.”

He was now obviously humoring her. Stacy Richardson was beginning to take a giant dislike to Colonel Laurence Chittick.

They all sat looking at each other, searching for the right thing to say next. Stacy had an uncontrollable urge to get away. “We’re here to make arrangements to take Max’s body back to California,” she said.

Colonel Chittick subtly replaced his expression of gentle concern with a look of mild consternation.

“Is that a problem?” Stacy asked.

“Well, no . . . It’s just . . . you mean his remains, I think?”

“I mean his body,” she corrected.

“You know, of course, he was cremated?”

“He was *what?*” She looked at Colonel Chittick, her mouth slightly ajar, staring in abject disbelief.

“He was cremated yesterday.”

“Who gave you permission to cremate him?” Her voice was ringing against the white walls in the large office.

“He did.”

“*He* did?”

“It was in his medical folder, under ‘death requests.’ Everybody stationed here, both civilian as well as military personnel, fills one out.”

“Colonel, he did not want to be cremated. I know, because we discussed it. He bought several plots next to his mom and dad at Forest Lawn when they both died. He wanted the whole family to be buried there, with them.”

“He must have changed his mind.”

“What the hell’s going on here?” she suddenly said, rising off the sofa.

“Maybe you need to tell *me*, Mrs. Richardson.”

Stacy turned to Joanne, who was sitting up straight, her knees tight together, hands folded in her lap like a good girl waiting outside the principal’s office. “Joanne, did your brother want to be cremated?”

“No. Like you said, we bought all the graves side by side, next to Mom and Dad. There’s six of them.”

Colonel Chittick got up from the occasional chair and moved around to his desk, opened a folder, rummaged in it for a second, found a sheet of paper, and handed it to Stacy. “Here’s his death request sheet.”

“It’s not signed, Colonel,” she said, looking at it.

“It wasn’t the last page of the medical form. I have that here, with his signature.” He again rummaged around for a paper and found it, holding it out to her.

Stacy didn’t take it. She was reading the death request sheet. “Under ‘Religion’ you list seven denominations, and there’s just a check next to Catholic. ‘Have you had any of the following diseases?’ Check, check, check. These are just check marks. Anybody could have filled this out, put this sheet in there.”

“And now you’re making some sort of accusation?” Colonel Chittick no longer looked like Ward Baxter. Now his skin was stretched tight across his jaw, his eyes were piercing and dangerous.

“Colonel Chittick, my husband did not commit suicide. He had no suicidal tendencies.”

“I don’t know that you’re in a position to judge that, Mrs. Richardson.”

“And you *are*? Some guy with a buncha fruit salad on his coat, who never even met him?”

Colonel Chittick moved away from his desk and stood directly before her. Although he towered over Stacy, she held her ground. “You are forcing me to take this into areas I would rather not go.”

“Help yourself. If you’ve got something, let’s hear it!”

“Your husband seemed to some of the people he was working with here to have an overly volatile personality. He was subject to huge mood swings.”

“That’s absurd.”

Chittick moved back to the desk, pulled a few official forms out of the folder, and handed them to her. “These are, for want of a better term, colleague complaints, filed by his co-workers here. There were even some suggestions that Max was a possible substance abuser.”

“Go fuck yourself!” Stacy said.

Colonel Chittick was unprepared for this. Finally, he recovered and said, “That would seem to bring this interview to a close.”

“Substance abuse? Of course we’ll never know, because you burned up his body!”

“We complied with your husband’s stated requests.”

“I don’t know what happened here, Colonel, but my husband didn’t commit suicide. He didn’t use drugs! He wasn’t depressed, and he never asked you to cremate him! I think this is some kind of giant cover-up, and I’m gonna find out why!”

“Of course, you’re welcome to pursue any legal avenue of redress you find worthwhile. And now . . . I have his ashes, if you’d like to take them, or we can send them to any address you leave with my secretary.”

Joanne started crying softly on the sofa. Stacy became aware of her sobbing and turned to her. “It’s okay, honey. Let’s just get out of here.” She helped her sister-in-law off the sofa, and they moved to the door.

“Mrs. Richardson,” Colonel Chittick said.

Stacy turned and glowered at him.

“It is very hard to lose a loved one.” The recruiting poster guy was back. “Anger is the shadow that always follows death, and it is not uncommon for people to have an urge to strike back.”

“Colonel, you haven’t seen anything yet,” she promised.