

one
Vial

Fifteen Years Earlier

Dr. Jeffrey Thomas Candor's life was abruptly redirected the afternoon of February 3 by a series of related tragedies that would have exploded through the national press had the storm of the century, which crippled the East Coast under as much as four feet of snow, not stolen the headlines. Afterward, events of the day were successfully buried for nearly twenty years until the residents of a small town unearthed the veterinarian's dark secret. But on that winter morning, the possibilities of the accidents as well as the distant town of Lumby were the farthest thoughts from Jeffrey's focused concentration.

Standing at the kitchen sink of his Redding, California, town house, Jeffrey looked out at the frozen yard. The boughs of the pine trees bent unnaturally, weighed down by needles encased in heavy ice. Frost glistened in the rising sun.

"The roads will be bad in the mountains. You should postpone your trip," he advised his wife.

Laura sat at the dining room table, staring into her coffee mug. "My parents are expecting us," she repeated without looking up.

"I told you, I'm sorry but I have no choice. The surgery is scheduled for this morning. You'll just have to go alone."

"So you've said," she replied indifferently.

Jeffrey studied his wife for a long moment and wondered if there was one irreversible moment that had broken their marriage. He thought back on the eight years of their relationship, as he had been doing with increasing frequency during the past few months. Where in the path of their togetherness had their roads separated? He was growing weary of trying to diagnose their discord, of trying to cure them as he would a critically ill patient.

Sensing she was being stared at, Laura glanced up. "What is it?"

Jeffrey sighed. "Absolutely nothing," he said sadly and then looked at his watch. "I need to get going. You'll be home by dinner?"

Laura glanced out the window. "I may spend the night there," she replied.

He was no longer surprised by such a vague response and had long since stopped questioning Laura about her unplanned absences. "Whatever you want," he said as he pulled on his trench coat. "Just let me know when you're on the road."

She nodded, still looking away from him.

As Jeffrey expected, the roads were slippery, doubling his commute time. Thirty minutes later, he waved to the guard as he drove past the gate of the staff entrance to the American Zoological Park. The veterinary clinic was located on the north side of the complex, so Jeffrey followed the park's perimeter road as he had most every day since joining "The Park" seven years ago.

Although in acreage The Park was only the sixth-largest zoo in the country, for nearly eight decades, it had enjoyed a renowned reputation for its captive--breeding program for endangered species. By adding Dr. Candor, the nation's preeminent Ursidae or bear veterinarian, to its staff The Park had become a prime destination for endangered animals from around the world that would have otherwise been sent to large zoos.

Jeffrey lowered the window a few inches and inhaled crisp air heavy with the scents of pine and fresh straw, of which he would never tire. The feral sounds of the enclosed animals were usually also good for his soul, but on that cold and somber morning most of the animals were still inside, so an unusual quiet hung over the exhibitions.

Walking into the small clinic, Jeffrey went directly to his office and immediately read through a long fax written in broken English that had arrived from China a few hours earlier. He withdrew a medical textbook from his briefcase and opened it to the same page he had studied the night before, once again scrutinizing the illustrations.

Jeffrey scanned the bookshelf for yet another reference that might be of help, but couldn't find what he was looking for. Crammed between and in front of the books were stacks of research papers and back issues of veterinary journals. Tucked in the corner of the top shelf was his University of California Berkeley undergraduate diploma, covered with dust.

A young man, one of Jeffrey's two vet technicians, knocked gently on his open door. "Jan and I are ready for you," he said. "I'm about to scrub and our girl is on the table, drowsy and ready for you to prep her."

"Good. I'll be right there," Jeffrey said, and quickly reread the fax one final time before going down the hall.

In the pre-op room, Jeffrey pulled a pair of blue scrubs from a box marked "Candor" stored above his locker. It was generally assumed that Jeffrey was issued his own scrubs because he was the medical director of The Park, but the more accurate reason was that at six feet five inches tall, he didn't fit into standard-sized garb. On the one occasion he had had to resort to using staff-issued pants, the bottoms came halfway to his knees.

After snapping on his gloves and pulling up his surgical mask, Jeffrey walked through the swinging doors. The compact operating room was flooded with fluorescent light. On the closest wall, four X-rays hung on a view box for Jeffrey to reference during the resection.

He glanced over at the narrow observation window and saw three men and a woman behind the thick plate glass. Jeffrey nodded to the executive director of The Park. Standing to the director's left was the chairman of the board, whom Jeffrey distrusted, and to the chairman's right the senior curator. With them was a small Asian man, who appeared to be taking notes.

"All okay, Doc," the second tech said, carefully watching the animal.

Jeffrey looked at the X-ray viewer and then down at the patient.

A beautiful two-hundred-fifty-pound giant panda that had been loaned to the zoo five years earlier lay motionless on the metal table with two sheets covering her body. Through a collaborative effort between the U.S. and Japanese governments, Ming had been successfully bred by artificial insemination in 1987. That year, she and her baby were more famous than many Hollywood movie stars.

The bold black-and-white markings on Ming's face made Jeffrey smile. She had always been a gentle animal, far more trusting of humans than was natural for her breed. During her stay at The Park, she had remained in good health—until recently, when she had suffered an alarming loss of weight. After monitoring her for several days, Jeffrey had run a battery of tests. An ultrasound had revealed a large mass in her upper intestine. In Jeffrey's opinion, all noninvasive efforts to correct the problem would be futile. He was about to perform the operation necessary to save her life.

Jeffrey glanced at the observation window and then at his staff, all of whom were wearing surgical masks. Tension gripped the operating room. "This is a simple operation, folks," he said. "Everyone take a deep breath and relax." He followed his own advice as he put the anesthesia mask over the panda's face. Only when he was sure that she was fully under did he pick up a scalpel.

During his career, Jeffrey had operated on most species of bears. In fact, the prior fall he had traveled to Washington, D.C., at the request of the National Zoo, to lead one of their more complicated surgeries on a pregnant polar bear. But he had never operated on a great panda or on an animal that was as critically endangered as this one. With only sixteen hundred pandas in the wild, and another one hundred eighty in captivity, the value of each fertile female was incalculable.

Jeffrey's hand was steady as he made a fourteen-inch incision in the animal's abdomen, cutting easily through the thick layer of fat. Once the blood was suctioned and the epidermal layer pulled back, Jeffrey changed scalpels and continued through the layers of dense muscle to reach the intestines. He glanced up at one of the techs, who, after studying the panda's vitals, nodded back.

Forty-five minutes later, the tumor was successfully removed and Jeffrey began cauterizing the numerous arteries and veins that had been severed. The surgery was going better than expected. Just as he picked up a suture needle to close the stomach wall, a woman rushed into the operating room. Not wearing any scrubs, she stayed near the door.

"Jeffrey, there's an emergency call for you," she said.

He looked up only for a second. "It can't wait?"

"He said no."

Tom assumed it was the call he had put through to China about Ming's operation. "Put it on the speaker, please."

Suddenly, the quiet of the operating room was broken by a voice booming out of the speakers. "Dr. Candor?"

Jeffrey continued suturing. "Yes, this is Jeffrey Candor."

"This is Dr. Wilson at United Hospital. Your wife has been in a car accident and is in critical condition. She's on life support. It would be best if you could come immediately."

Jeffrey's heart began to race and nausea came over him. He shook his head to clear his thoughts and glanced up at the

clock, trying to calculate the minutes. "I'll be there in less than an hour."

Jeffrey knew better than to look at his two technicians, to see the alarm in their eyes, or worse, to allow them to see the alarm in his. Then everything began to move in slow motion; each suture seemed to take an eternity to knot. Jeffrey's eyes blurred and he felt sweat beading on his forehead. He couldn't help but look at the clock again.

Thirty agonizing minutes later, the final suture was tied and sterile bandages were taped over the incision. Jeffrey quickly removed his mask.

"We need to give her some antibiotics, but you can start waking her up," Jeffrey said as he crossed the room and reached into the drug cabinet. He grabbed a vial of clear liquid from the shelf and a syringe from the drawer. The simple act of loading a syringe, something he had done thousands of times before, served to calm his shaken nerves. Returning to the operating table, he quickly injected Ming and, without thinking, put the empty vial into his scrub pants pocket.

Jeffrey headed for the door. "You can reach me on my cell phone," he said.

"Let us know how Laura is," his vet tech said.

Jeffrey didn't take the time to change out of his bloodied operating garb. Storming through his office, he grabbed only his car keys, forgetting both his wallet and cell phone. Once outside, he immediately noticed that much of the ice had melted, and within minutes he was traveling eighty miles an hour down the freeway. An overpowering blend of fear and regret washed over him as his thoughts darted from one memory to the next. He and Laura had been so distant during the last six months, but he still loved her. Perhaps there was a chance for them . . . if she survived.

Arriving at the emergency room forty minutes later, he looked frantically for help, for someone who could tell him where his wife was.

"Dr. Candor?" asked a nurse in a white lab coat.

"Yes. How is my wife?"

"We have her stabilized," the nurse explained. "Her hip is fractured in multiple places. The surgeon requested an MRI after seeing the X--rays."

"When will they operate?"

"She'll be taken into the OR directly from imaging. But I need to tell you . . ." The nurse paused. "I'm sorry. She lost the child."

Jeffrey's eyes blurred. "What child?"

"Your wife was about ten weeks pregnant."

Jeffrey hunched over, as if someone had struck him in the stomach. "I didn't know."

"There's a doctor's conference room at the end of the hall. Why don't you wait there? The surgeon will be down as soon as possible."

"Thank you," Jeffrey said, nodding weakly.

In the empty lounge he sank into a chair and rubbed his eyes. It's true that time passes at different speeds, Tom thought. It slows down so we can remember each excruciating detail of horrendous events in our lives: the color of the walls, the coffee stain in the carpet, the noise of the water fountain, the betrayal of a wife.

Jeffrey wondered who Laura had turned to for the intimacy that had been missing from their relationship for quite some time. Who had made love to her and how would Laura look into that man's eyes and tell him that she had lost their child, a child conceived in an illicit affair?

Oddly, among all of the emotions that surged through Jeffrey, jealousy was not one of them. Nor was anger. What he felt was far worse: a dispassionate resignation, and chilled indifference that his marriage was over. At that moment, with this knowledge of his wife's unfaithfulness, all feelings he had for her were abruptly and permanently deadened.

He dug his left hand deep into his pocket and began playing absently with the small glass vial that had contained the antibiotics for the panda. Realizing what was in his hand, Jeffrey walked over to the trash can marked "Medical and Hazardous Waste." Just as he was about to throw the vial away, something on the label caught his eye: a small red line across the top of the text. He was confused; the label on the antibiotics vial had a green background, but this one was bright red—the color of warning. He read the label carefully: "Potassium Chloride." And then he realized that he had done something that every veterinarian has done at least once: he had grabbed the wrong vial. The tragedy was that this one time, with that extraordinary panda, he hadn't caught his error before injecting the drug into the animal.

In that instant, he knew Ming was dead. "Oh, God," he moaned, "what have I done?"