

VECTOR



ROBIN COOK

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This is a work of fiction. The events described here are imaginary.
The settings and characters are fictitious, even when a real name
may be used. They are not intended to represent specific places
or persons, or, even when a real name is used, to suggest
that the events described actually occurred.

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To Jean
with love, appreciation, and thanks

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**ne roy drugomu yamu, sam v neyo popadesh
(do not dig a hole for another,
you just might fall in it yourself)**

RUSSIAN PROVERB

**► VECTOR: (medical) a carrier that transmits an
infectious agent from one host to another.**

PROLOGUE

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 15

Jason Papparis had been in the rug business for almost thirty years. He started in the Plaka district of Athens in the late sixties, selling mostly goatskins, sheepskins, and fur rugs to American tourists. He did well and enjoyed himself, especially with the young, college-age female tourists to whom he invariably and graciously availed himself to show the night life of his beloved city.

Then fate intervened. On a sultry summer night, Helen Herman of Queens, New York, wandered into his shop and absently caressed some of Jason's higher-quality rugs. A romantic at heart, Helen found herself swept off her feet by an irresistible combination of Jason's soulful eyes and fervent attentions and the romantic mystique of Greece.

Jason's ardor had been no less. After Helen's departure for the States, Jason found himself inconsolably lonely. An impassioned correspondence began, followed by a visit. Jason's trip to New York only fanned the fires of desire. Ultimately he emigrated, married Helen, and took his business to Manhattan.

Jason's business thrived. The extensive contacts he had established over the years with rug producers in both Greece and Turkey stood him in good stead, and provided Jason with a monopoly of sorts. Instead of

opening a retail shop in New York, Jason had wisely opted for a wholesale business. It was a lean operation. He had no employees. All he had was an office in Manhattan and a warehouse in Queens. He outsourced all his shipping and inventory control and occasionally he hired temps for clerical work.

The business operated by telephone and fax. Consequently Jason's office door was always locked.

On this particular Friday his mail was dropped through the mail slot as it always was, but due to a thick catalogue it landed with a louder than usual plop on the wooden floor. At his desk, Jason's attention was plucked from his bookkeeping. He balanced his omnipresent cigarette on the edge of his overflowing ashtray, then got up to retrieve the mail. He was counting on receiving a significant number of checks to alleviate his burgeoning accounts-receivable balance. Regaining his seat, he sorted through the mail, placing each piece in its appropriate pile and the junk mail directly into the wastebasket. Reaching the next-to-last envelope, he hesitated. It was thick and square instead of rectangular. Jason detected a small, irregular bulge in the center. Glancing at the postage, he noticed that it was a first-class letter, not bulk mail. In the lower left-hand corner the envelope was stamped with an admonition: *Hand Stamp*. The explanation was: *Fragile Contents!*

Jason turned the envelope over. It was made of rather thick, dense, high-quality paper. It was not the usual paper for an advertisement, yet the return address was for *ACME Cleaning Service: Leave Your Dust to Us*. The business was located on lower Broadway.

Flipping the envelope over once again, Jason noticed that it was addressed to him personally, not to the Corinthian Rug Company. Below the address were the words *personal and confidential*.

With his thumb and index finger, Jason tried to determine the source of the bulge. He had no idea. His curiosity getting the better of him, he picked up his letter opener and sliced through the envelope's top flap. Peeking inside he could see a folded card made with heavy paper of quality equal to that of the envelope.

"What the hell?" Jason said aloud. This was certainly not the usual advertisement. He pulled out the card, marveling that some advertising executive had been able to talk a cleaning service into sending out such an expensive gimmick. The card was sealed with a tab. In the center of the front of the card was the single word *Surprise!*

Jason worked the tab loose from its bed and as soon as he did the card leaped in his hands and snapped open. At the same time a coiled spring mechanism propelled a puff of dust along with a handful of tiny glittering stars into the air.

Jason was initially startled by the sudden, unexpected movement, and he sneezed several times from the dust. But then a smile quickly appeared. Inside the card was the caption *Call Us To Clean Up The Mess!*

Jason shook his head in amazement. He had to give credit to whoever was responsible for this advertisement for ACME Cleaners. It was certainly unique and clever—and effective. Jason found himself wishing that he could enlist ACME Cleaners, but he didn't need a cleaning service since his landlord provided one.

Jason tossed the card and envelope into his wastebasket, then leaned over to brush off the tiny glittering stars from the front of his shirt. As he did so he felt another tickle in his nose which caused him to sneeze several more times, hard enough to bring tears to his eyes.

As usual for a Friday, Jason finished work early. Enjoying the fall weather, he walked to Grand Central Station to board the five-fifteen commuter train. Forty-five minutes later, just as he was nearing his station, he felt the first twinges of discomfort in his chest. His first reflex was to swallow, but that had no effect. He then cleared his throat, which was equally ineffective. He then patted his chest and took several deep breaths.

The woman sitting next to Jason lowered the edge of her newspaper. "Are you okay?" she asked.

"Oh, yeah, no problem," Jason responded, feeling embarrassed. He wondered if he'd smoked more than usual that day.

That night, Jason tried to ignore the odd tickle in his chest, but it

didn't subside. Helen became aware that something was wrong when he pushed his dinner around his plate instead of eating. They were at their usual Friday haunt, a local Greek restaurant. The couple had started going to the place at least once a week after their only daughter left home for college.

"My chest feels funny," Jason finally admitted when Helen asked.

"I hope you're not coming down with the flu again."

Although Jason was basically healthy, his heavy smoking made him susceptible to respiratory infections, particularly influenza. He'd also had a serious bout with pneumonia three years earlier.

"It can't be the flu," Jason said. "It's not flu season yet. Is it?"

"You're asking me?" Helen returned. "I don't know, but wasn't this about the time you got it last year?"

"That was November," Jason said.

When they got home, Helen insisted on taking Jason's temperature. It was ninety-nine point four, barely above normal. They discussed calling Dr. Goldstein, their primary care physician, but decided against it. They were reluctant to bother the doctor on a weekend.

"Why does something like this always happen on Friday night?" Helen complained.

Jason slept poorly. In the middle of the night he had a hot flash resulting in so much perspiration, he felt obliged to take a shower. While toweling off he had a chill.

"This settles it," Helen said after putting several blankets on her shivering husband. "We're calling the doctor first thing in the morning."

"What's he going to do?" Jason grumbled. "I got the flu. He's going to tell me to stay home, take aspirin, drink a lot of fluids, and rest."

"Maybe he'll give you some antibiotics," Helen said.

"There's some antibiotics left over from last year," Jason said. "They're in the medicine cabinet. Get them! I don't need a doctor."

Saturday was not a good day. By late afternoon Jason admitted that he was definitely worse despite the aspirin, fluids, and antibiotic. The discomfort in his chest had worsened to pain. His temperature had risen to one hundred and three, and he'd developed a cough. But what he com-

plained about most was a splitting headache, along with generalized aching muscles.

Attempts to reach Dr. Goldstein were unsuccessful. The doctor had gone to Connecticut for the weekend. His answering service advised Helen to take her husband to the local emergency room.

After a long wait, Jason was finally seen by the emergency-room physician, who was impressed with his condition, especially after a chest X-ray. To Helen's relief, the doctor advised Jason's immediate admission to the hospital and referred the case to Dr. Heitman, who was covering Dr. Goldstein's inpatients. The diagnosis was influenza with secondary pneumonia, and the emergency-room physician started Jason on intravenous antibiotics.

Jason had never felt worse in his life as he was taken to his hospital room just before midnight. He complained bitterly about his chest pain, which was excruciating when he coughed, and about his headache. When Dr. Heitman came by to see him, Jason pleaded for relief and was given Percodan.

It took almost a half hour for the pain medication to have an effect. By that time Dr. Heitman had departed. Jason lay on his bed, exhausted but unable to sleep. He sensed a mortal battle was raging inside his body. Allowing his head to loll to the side, he looked at Helen in the half light and gripped her hand. She was maintaining a silent vigil. A tear traced a path down the side of Jason's face. In his mind's eye Helen was still that young woman who'd wandered into his shop in the Plaka all those years ago.

Helen's image began to fade as welcome numbness suffused Jason's body. At twelve-thirty-five A.M. Jason Papparis fell asleep for the last time. Mercifully, he was unaware when he was later rushed to the intensive care unit by Dr. Kevin Fowler, who waged an unsuccessful battle for his life.

CHAPTER 1

MONDAY, OCTOBER 18

4:30 A.M.

The hum of the commuter plane's engines was ragged. One moment they were screaming as the plane headed inexorably earthward, the next they were eerily silent, as if they had been inadvertently switched off by the pilot.

Jack Stapleton watched in terror, knowing that his family was aboard and there was nothing he could do. The plane was going to crash! Helplessly he shouted NO! NO! NO!

Jack's shouting mercifully yanked him from the clutches of his recurrent nightmare, and he sat bolt upright in bed. He was breathing heavily as if he'd been playing full-court basketball, and perspiration dripped from the end of his nose. He was disoriented until his eyes swept about the interior of his bedroom. The intermittent sound wasn't coming from a commuter plane. It was his telephone. Its raucous jingle was relentlessly shattering the night.

Jack's eyes shot to the face of his radio alarm clock. The digital numbers glowed in the dark room. It was four-thirty in the morning! No one called Jack at four-thirty. As he reached for the phone, he remembered

all too well the night eight years ago when he'd been awakened by a phone call informing him that his wife and two children had perished.

Snatching the receiver from its cradle Jack answered the phone with a rasping and panicky voice.

"Uh oh, I think I woke you up," a woman's voice said. There was a significant amount of static on the line.

"I don't know why you'd think that," Jack said, now conscious enough to be sarcastic. "Who is this?"

"It's Laurie. I'm sorry I've awakened you. It couldn't be helped." She giggled.

Jack closed his eyes, then looked back at the clock just to make sure he had not been mistaken. It indeed was four-thirty in the morning!

"Listen," Laurie continued. "I've got to make this fast. I want to have dinner with you tonight."

"This has got to be a joke," Jack said.

"No joke," Laurie said. "It's important. I have to talk with you, and I'd like to do it over dinner. It's my treat. Say *yes!*"

"I guess," Jack said, reluctant to commit.

"I'm going to take that as a *yes*," Laurie said. "I'll tell you where when I see you at the office later on this morning. Okay?"

"I suppose," Jack said. He wasn't as awake as he'd thought. His mind wasn't working up to speed.

"Perfect," Laurie said. "See you then."

Jack blinked when he realized Laurie had disconnected. He hung up the phone and stared at it in the darkness. He'd known Laurie Montgomery for more than four years as a fellow medical examiner in the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner for the City of New York. He'd also known her as a friend—in fact, more than a friend—and in all that time she'd never called him so early in the morning. And for good reason. He knew she was not a morning person. Laurie liked to read novels far into the night, which made getting up in the morning a daily ordeal for her.

Jack dropped back onto his pillow with the intent of sleeping for another hour and a half. In contrast to Laurie, he was a morning person, but four-thirty was a bit too early, even for him.

Unfortunately it was soon apparent to Jack that more sleep was not in the offing. Between the phone call and the nightmare, he couldn't get back to sleep. After half an hour of restless tossing and turning, he threw back the covers and padded into the bathroom in his sheepskin slippers.

With the light on, Jack regarded himself in the mirror while running a hand over his stubbled face. Absently he noted the chipped left incisor and the scar high on his forehead, both mementos of some extra-office investigating he'd done in relation to a series of infectious-disease cases. The unexpected fallout was that Jack had become the de facto guru of infectious diseases in the medical examiner's office.

Jack smiled at his image. Lately it had occurred to him that if he had been able to look into a crystal ball eight years previously to see himself now, he would never have recognized himself. Back then, he'd been a relatively portly, midwestern, suburban ophthalmologist, conservative in dress. Now he was a lean and mean medical examiner in the City of New York with closely cropped, gray-streaked hair, a chipped tooth, and a scarred face. As far as clothes were concerned, he now favored bomber jackets, faded jeans, and chambray shirts.

Avoiding thoughts of his family, Jack mulled over Laurie's surprising behavior. It was so out of character. She was always considerate and concerned about proper etiquette. She would never phone at such an hour without good reason. Jack wondered what that reason was.

Jack shaved and climbed into the shower while he tried to imagine why Laurie would have called in the middle of the night to arrange a dinner date. They had dinner together often, but it was usually decided on the spur of the moment. Why would Laurie need to line a date up at such an hour?

While Jack toweled himself dry, he decided to call Laurie back. It was ridiculous for him to guess what was going on in her mind. Since she had awakened him as she had, it was only reasonable that she explain herself. But when Jack made the call he got her answering machine. Thinking she might be in the shower, he left a message asking her to call him right back.

By the time Jack had eaten breakfast it was after six. Since Laurie still

hadn't called, Jack tried her again. To his chagrin, the answering machine picked up for the second time. He hung up in the middle of her outgoing message.

Since it was now light outside, Jack entertained the idea of going to work early. That was when it occurred to him that perhaps Laurie had telephoned from the office. He was sure she wasn't on call, but there was the possibility that a case had come in that particularly interested her.

Jack called the medical examiner's office. Marjorie Zankowski, the night communications operator, answered. She told Jack that she was ninety percent sure that Dr. Laurie Montgomery was not there. She said that the only medical examiner there was the tour doctor.

With a sense of frustration bordering on anger, Jack gave up. He vowed not to spend any more mental energy trying to figure out what was on Laurie's mind. Instead he went into his living room and curled up on the couch with one of his many unread forensic journals.

At six-forty-five, Jack got up, tossed aside the reading, and hefted his Cannondale mountain bike from where it leaned against the living-room wall. With it balanced on his shoulder, he started down the four flights of his tenement. Early in the morning was the only time of the day that loud quarreling wasn't heard in apartment 2B. On the ground floor, Jack had to navigate around some trash that had been dropped down the stairwell during the night.

Emerging on West 106th Street, Jack took in a lungful of October air. For the first time that day he felt revived. Climbing onto his purple bike he headed for Central Park, passing the empty neighborhood basketball court on his left.

A few years ago, on the same day that he had been punched hard enough to chip his front tooth, Jack's first mountain bike had been stolen. Listening to warnings from his colleagues, particularly Laurie, about the dangers of bike riding in the city, Jack had resisted buying another. But after being mugged on the subway, Jack had gone ahead with the purchase.

Initially, Jack had been a relatively careful cyclist when riding his new bike. But over time that had changed. Now Jack was back to his old

tricks. While commuting to and from the office, Jack indulged his self-destructive streak by taking a twice-daily, hair-raising walk on the wild side. Jack believed he had nothing more to lose. His reckless cycling, a habitual temptation of fate, was a way of saying that if his family had had to die, he should have been with them and maybe he'd join them sooner rather than later.

By the time Jack arrived at the medical examiner's office on the corner of First Avenue and Thirtieth Street, he'd had two protracted arguments with taxi drivers and a minor run-in with a city bus. Undaunted and not at all out of breath, Jack parked his bike on the ground floor next to the Hart Island coffins and made his way up to the ID room. Most people would have felt on edge after such a harrowing trip. But not Jack. The confrontations and physical exertion calmed him, preparing him for the day's invariable bureaucratic hurdles.

Jack flicked the edge of Vinnie Amendola's newspaper as he walked by the mortuary tech, who was sitting at his preferred location at the desk just inside the door. Jack also said hello, but Vinnie ignored him. As usual, Vinnie was committing to memory the previous day's sports stats.

Vinnie had been employed at the ME's office longer than Jack had. He was a good worker, although he'd come close to being fired a couple of years back for leaking information that had embarrassed the office and had put both Jack and Laurie in harm's way. The reason Vinnie was censured and put on probation rather than terminated was the extenuating circumstances of his behavior. An investigation had determined he'd been the victim of extortion by some unsavory underworld figures. Vinnie's father had had a loose association with the mob.

Jack said hello to Dr. George Fontworth, a corpulent medical examiner colleague who was Jack's senior in the office hierarchy by seven years. George was just starting his weekly stint as the person who reviewed the previous night's reported deaths, deciding which would be autopsied and by whom. That was why he was at the office early. Normally, he was the last to arrive.

"A fine welcome," Jack mumbled when George ignored him as Vinnie had. Jack filled his mug with some of the coffee that Vinnie had made