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Derek Stillwater leaned forward and dug his paddle into the flat surface of the Chesapeake Bay. He was far out in the bay on his ocean-going kayak, the afternoon sun beating down hard, spangles of reflected light like silver fish darting along the waves. Only three miles into a fifteen-mile workout, his tank top beneath the life vest was already soaked with sweat. In the distance he heard the beat of helicopter rotors, not unusual in this very busy body of water. He knew from living on the bay that Coast Guard helicopters routinely flew overhead, as well as military, private and tourist choppers.

He aimed the prow of the kayak toward the Chesapeake Bay Bridge and paddled hard. He was only starting to warm up, the muscles in his shoulders and back starting to loosen as the blood and oxygen flowed. Sucking in the salt air, Derek felt good. Life was good. A beautiful day, gorgeous water, the sun on his face, skimming across the waves like a dolphin.

The sound of the helicopter grew louder. Turning his head, he saw a red, white and blue Coast Guard chopper sweep around him, very low.

Jesus, he thought. The prop was kicking up so many waves he was afraid he might capsize.

The helicopter's loudspeaker boomed: "Are you Dr. Derek Stillwater?"

He gave a thumbs-up.

The voice from the helicopter: "We're dropping someone down to help you up."

Stillwater sighed. This was not good news. So much for the beautiful day. From the open door of the helicopter a figure in a black wetsuit began to descend on a rope. When the officer hit the water he swam over to Stillwater, rope towed behind him.

"Secretary Johnston ordered us to find you ASAP and deliver you to an investigation site, sir. There are cops at your boat and cutters cruising the bay. We got to you first. You're going to need to take off your vest and put this harness on."

The Coast Guard officer had a deep voice with a Texas twang.

"This is a three thousand dollar kayak," Stillwater said, slouching out of his life vest. "I'm not going to just abandon it." He paused, squinting up into the downblast of the chopper rotor. "Any experience with kayaks?"

The Texan broke into a broad grin. "Yes sir."

Derek nodded and slipped into the harness. He handed over the paddle and shouted, "Slip 112, Bayman's Marina, 'The Salacious Sally.' Just leave the kayak on the rear deck."

"Don't worry, sir. I'll take care of her."

"Yeah, and have fun."

The Texan laughed. "Yes sir. You too."

Stillwater shook his head. "Un-fucking-likely." The Texan gave a thumbs-up to the chopper and they reeled Derek Stillwater skyward.

The pilot of the helicopter was a young woman with black hair cut in a wedge. She had flashing green eyes and an oval face and Stillwater thought she was pretty cute, though entirely too young to be behind the controls of a helicopter. He kept both observations to himself. There was another coast guardsman on the flight deck manning the winch. He helped Stillwater in.

Derek shouted, "Can you land at the marina? I need some things."

"We're to take you directly to the—"

"I have two GO Packs on my boat. I have to have them!" The wind roaring into the chopper was so loud they could hardly hear each other. "Can you stop there?"

"Yes sir. We'll call ahead and have the local cops clear the lot. Will you be long?"

"No."

The guardsman was a lean redhead with freckles. *I'm getting old*, Derek thought, darting another glance at the pilot. *Well, maybe not too old...*

The chopper ascended in a hurry, arcing toward land. Through the open cockpit Derek watched the Texan in his kayak diminish in size. *Going, going, gone*, he thought.

In about four minutes the chopper landed in the marina parking lot. On each end two cop cars, lights flashing, were keeping people at bay. Jumping out, Stillwater dashed to the docks, aiming for slip 112, his boat and home, a 52-foot Chris Craft Constellation. It was a large marina, heavy on sailboats rather than cabin cruisers. Derek didn't know why that was the case,

but it was, the marina looking like a denuded forest with hundreds of masts jutting skyward. He jumped aboard, unlocked the cabin door, quickly snatched a fax from the machine, snagged a blue nylon frame backpack and a military-issue duffel bag and sprinted back to the helicopter. He threw his GO Packs into the chopper and clambered in after.

He gave an OK and they lifted off. Derek glanced at the fax.

To: Dr. Derek Stillwater, Ph.D.

From: James Johnston, Secretary

Department of Homeland Security

CODE RED

Immediately evaluate, coordinate and investigate assault on U.S. Immunological Research in Baltimore, MD. Preliminary reports indicate possible theft of a Level 4 bio-engineered infectious agent by unknown subjects. FBI on scene. Inform ASAP.

Below the typed message was a handwritten note. It said:

**WHY AREN'T YOU WEARING YOUR GODDAMNED PHONE?
GODSPEED AND TAKE CARE. JJ**

Derek tore the message into pieces and let them flutter out the open cockpit door. Then he dug through his nylon pack and drew out a pair of jeans, a T-shirt, socks, underwear and a pair of shoes. Stripping, he noticed the cute pilot taking a glance over her shoulder. Buck naked, he grinned, made a turn-around gesture with his finger and shouted, "Not on the first date."

The co-pilot grinned, then looked startled. "What are you doing?"

Having pulled on his clothing, Derek was holding his swimsuit and tank top out the hatch. "Drying my clothes," he said.

* * *

From the marina it was a short hop over Baltimore to the incident site. The chopper set down in the parking lot of U.S. Immunological Research. Before climbing out, Derek scrambled up next to the pilot. "Thanks for the lift. What's your name?"

"Cynthia Black."

"Cindy?" He offered his hand. "Derek Stillwater. Mind if I call you when this is over?"

"When what's over?" she said, shaking his hand.

He shrugged. "If I get called in, it usually means the end of the world."

She considered him for a moment. "Well," she said, "if it doesn't end, sure, give me a call." She picked up a pen Velcroed to the dashboard. "Got some paper?"

Stillwater held up his hand. "Write it here."

Cynthia Black cocked an eyebrow, then scribbled her cell phone number on the palm of Stillwater's hand. "Good luck."

He grinned, clutched a chain around his neck for a moment, then tipped a salute to the other guardsman and jumped out of the chopper, GO Packs over each shoulder.