

## FOUR

It was his voice. It was him. And he spoke the private nicknames that they had always used for one another.

After hearing the nickname, she had an immediate flashback, back to their student days at Harvard. At the time, most colleges still used the Social Security number as the student ID, the same ID number printed on every school document, including class schedules, grade lists, academic transcripts, and tuition bills. The students insisted the school not use Social Security numbers. They wanted to protect their privacy and confidentiality from an ID number assigned by the US Government.

The university complied. Working with the student body, they adopted an alternative system that used the first three letters of the first name followed by the first two letters of the last name. The students' four-digit month and day of birth followed the cryptic pseudonym. Carrie Bock was Carbo0613, and Bartholomew Bowa was Barbo1218.

As Carrie Bock and Bartholomew Bowa became friends and later lovers, they adopted their university mnemonics as their personal nicknames. They called each other "Carbo" and "Barbo." But they carried it out secretly, as they did with their romance. The aliases were used privately in their phone calls, emails, and especially inside their one bedroom apartment in Somerville.

"Barbo! Or should I say, *Mr President?* Congratulations!"

"Thank you. It's been what, about twenty years, Carbo?"

"Yeah, but now in your new job, you can find me pretty easily."

His easy chuckle was still the same. She envisioned seeing his beautiful smile and hearing his laugh.

"Carrie, I'm sure you're busy these days, but I need to see you."

The statement struck her without warning. It was the last thing she expected to hear. She was still shocked by Clancy's news. Now the President of the United States has asked to see her.

"What is it, Barbo?" Her voice became serious.

“I can’t discuss it over the phone. If you’re willing, I can have a limo at your house first thing tomorrow morning to take you to the airport. We can meet, have lunch, and I promise I’ll have you back in Boston before early evening. I’m sorry this is the way for us to see each other again after all these years. But, Carrie, it’s very important...for our country’s security.”

The message was clear. And somehow it let her breathe a little easier. He wanted to see her on official business and not for anything personal, despite their intimate relationship so many years ago.

“Sure, Barbo. It’s the weekend, and I’ve got nothing else going on. I must be back up here as soon as possible to check up on my father.”

“How’s Jimmy these days? Is he still playing golf? I remember him trying to teach me, but I never got the hang of it.”

“He’s doing okay,” she lied. “I look forward to seeing you tomorrow, Barbo.”

“Same here, Carbo!”

On Saturday morning, a second limo driven by a Secret Service agent whisked her away from Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport. It was soon speeding past the sparse weekend traffic to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

When she was escorted into the spacious reception area known as the “Blue Room,” Carrie felt her anxiety escalate. It wasn’t the invitation into the White House that gave her anxiety but the thrill and uneasiness of seeing Bart Bowa for the first time in twenty years. The thrill was from the memory of the man she once loved and who had once loved her enough to want to marry her. The uneasiness was from the memory of her rejecting that love and marriage proposal after their graduation.

The door opened and she looked directly at the man with whom she had shared laughs, love, and dreams so many years ago.

Naturally, and without hesitation, they rushed towards each other. They embraced warmly and kissed each other on the cheek.

When they separated, he looked into her eyes.

“My God! Carbo, you haven’t changed a bit. You look the same as you did when we first met. You’re still twenty two years old.”

The flattering comment made her smile and shed a joyous tear. She reached inside her suit jacket pocket for a tissue. Wiping away the tear, she laughed.

“You still look the same, except for those few gray hairs I first noticed on TV while you were campaigning.”

“Come, follow me. I have a private meeting room for us on the next floor. We don’t need the formality of the Oval Office, and we can have lunch sent up later.”

The oversized den had walls lined with oak shelves that were filled with a wide variety of books. Some shelves held American law books, and others held hardbound novels and nonfiction books.

“This is a mini-library. I come here often to think without any interruptions. There’s a fresh pot of coffee and some hot water for tea over there.”

Carrie couldn’t take her eyes off the man with whom she had lived for a year during her young and ambitious life. He hadn’t changed. He still had the same relaxed personality and was comfortable to be with.

“Carbo, if it’s okay with you, I want to get right to the reason I asked you here. As I said on the phone, it’s important that we meet.”

“That’s why I’m here,” she replied.

The President provided Carrie with detailed background to the Pakistani terrorist group, SAN. He explained how Beijing’s spies had gathered intelligence about the little known terrorist group. He outlined how the SAN had possibly acquired or developed a racially selective bioweapon. His briefing included the initial contact between an agent of China’s Ministry of State Security and Under Secretary of State Warren Lee and several follow-up meetings with staff from Homeland Security and the CIA.

“We first thought that such a weapon was improbable. However, after some convincing arguments, we decided that we needed to explore the feasibility of such a specialized virus. If a virus with genetic discriminating capabilities has already been created in the laboratory, we must do the same and test its effectiveness. The

assumption is that our scientists can identify the three major racial groups of humans: Mongoloid, Negroid, and Caucasoid. And we've speculated this might be done, not precisely, but by searching and identifying genetic markers of skin melanin, hair type, and other ethnic or racial traits.

"If we can develop a synthetic-organic viral agent that is racially discriminating, we'll shift our goal. The next phase of the mission becomes simple and focused. We must create an antidote, or preferably, a prophylactic serum, a vaccine, to inoculate and protect people from such a racial bioagent. It's the only way to prevent any attempt now or in the future at any biological genocide."

Carrie listened intently to her former lover tell the story. When the President stopped speaking, she sipped her coffee before commenting.

"First of all, Barbo, I'm not a geneticist. I agree that no single race gene has been discovered yet, and it's doubtful that one will ever be found. You mentioned clusters of genes representing characteristics of a race. On the surface, I believe that this is scientifically possible, though, as you alluded, not without a margin of error."

"We realize that. We have also been told through Intelligence sources that the virus is designed to be incredibly contagious. After a person is infected, he spreads the disease to others of his own race with similar genetic clusters. And as with extremely contagious epidemics, the number of victims would increase exponentially. Can you imagine hundreds of millions of people dying, whether Whites, Black, or Asians? The potential pollution and spread of other diseases from rotting corpses could kill millions more. The thought sickens me deeply."

Both the President and Carrie were silent as they considered the almost unfathomable consequences.

President Bowa took a sip of coffee, more to break the tension than to quench any thirst.

"And despite the questionable accuracy of Chinese intelligence about such a weapon, we have no choice but to be prepared to counter it. As I said, if it is feasible, we need to develop a way to

prevent it from infecting the people of the world. I personally feel an antidote isn't the solution."

"Why?" Carrie asked with a furled brow.

"As is usual with infectious and contagious diseases, the antidote is administered much too late for some victims, and possibly in this case for very many."

"All of what you have told me is horrifying," Carrie answered. "You don't need me to tell you that, or about the difficulties in creating a solution. You have access to some of the best scientists, including specialized bio-geneticists, in the country."

"That's true."

Carrie leaned back into her chair. "So, Mr President, why did you really ask to see me?"