

PROLOGUE

Ken Halcombe was very angry. It was his fault. He knew it. They could say what they liked, but he knew it was his fault. Once again, he failed, and a man died.

He was in charge of the agency responsible for the security of that project. One man was dead, and another was seriously injured.

Ken sat with four of the most powerful men in the country in an oak-paneled boardroom. One was the chairman of the board of directors of Dibley Pharmaceutical. The other three were government representatives. Before each of them lay a copy of Ken's report.

They met to try to find a solution to a problem that could have major repercussions.

Harry Dibley, chairman of the board of directors, called the meeting at the instigation of the others.

Brad Fidler, head of operations at National Security and Ken's old boss, sat opposite him. He owed a lot to Brad, who helped pick up the pieces when Ken's world collapsed around him. When Ken resigned from the agency, Brad negotiated the plum position Ken now held. Ken was glad Brad was there.

Harry, a heavy-jowled man, sat rigidly straight in his usual position at the head of the table. "You knew it was going to happen," he lashed out curtly.

"Yes," Ken replied.

"Why weren't we told?"

Ken took his time answering. Harry wasn't pleased, but it was Ken's decision not to panic his superiors. His voice hardened as he replied.

"When I was informed of the situation by National Security, I felt it was something my agency should handle," Ken said. "I didn't think it was important enough to worry the board."

"You mean you chose not to tell us."

"Yes, for reasons I have just stated. Let me explain. The tip-off to the National Security Bureau came from an undercover agent. There was no indication when it would happen or who would be involved. The only thing the informant could tell us for certain was that the mastermind behind it was Terry Boulton. If the information was incorrect, it would've interfered with some very important research. We were contracted to provide security, and that's what we chose to concentrate on."

"Well, it didn't work, did it?"

The chairman was baiting him. Ken knew his security was good. Harry knew it, too. Ken swallowed hard, trying to hide his anger.

"Security at Dibley Pharmaceutical is normally tight," Ken replied. "A double chain-link fence topped with razor wire, electronically secured, surrounds the entire complex. At night, bright security lights illuminate the perimeter, and dogs are released. Guards patrol the grounds at irregular intervals while other guards man the gate twenty-four hours a day. Employees have to use high-tech company ID cards to get through the gate."

Ken paused to let them assimilate the information. "The guards have a list of approved visitors. If a name isn't on the list, that person isn't admitted. There are codes for access to the main doors and to all doors leading to security areas. Different codes are required to enter or exit any of those doors."

Harry nodded slowly.

"We reinforced our normal security measures. A double-check was performed on all security clearances. Then we changed all the door codes and issued new ID cards. Only those who worked there would've known of the changes."

"Sounds like you took adequate measures," Brad said. "What about the two who were present during the robbery?"

"They were information technologists who, we believe, had no idea of the top-level project the company was involved in. That project was kept under even tighter security. The only people at Dibley who knew about the project were the three men and one woman who were currently working on it, and, of course, the board of directors."

Beside Ken sat the only man in uniform, the graying General Carswell. Ken knew him only by sight and reputation as a tough leader who let nothing stand in his way.

"As I perceive it, Chairman," the general said, "we're six days downtime from a robbery in which at least five people entered a seemingly impenetrable complex. It appears we have no idea who they were, and the only clue is the informant's suggestion of the possible mastermind. The most important thing is, we don't even know where the research documents on the development of XL-23 are."

Lionel Thomas, head of Internal Affairs, sat quietly opposite the general. Lionel was a man who took in everything and said little. He directed his unblinking stare on Brad.

"We're working on it," Brad replied to Thomas' unasked question.

Ken didn't like Thomas, but he respected his dedication to the country. Ken had worked with him often in joint projects between Thomas' department and security operations.

Harry, resting his arms on the table, leaned forward. "It's obvious our security is good. Who is this Terry Boulton?"

Ken was relieved when Brad answered for him.

"He's a master criminal who has carried out similar operations in other countries. Terry is cunning. He keeps away from the action and is never directly involved. Working through others, he manages to carry out very daring operations.

"In every case, the outcome is the same. His associates are killed, leaving no one to connect him to the operation. Terry is the prime suspect in all the other operations, but he's never been arrested due to insufficient evidence. The artifacts, jewelry, artwork, or stolen documents are never seen again or turn up in a part of the world where we can't recover them. Rumor has it that if you want anything and can pay Terry's price, he'll get it for you."

Boulton's operational style was something Ken knew a lot about. He had cause to remember.

"Then he's working for someone else," General Carswell stated.

"Yes," Brad replied, "possibly a foreign power."

The general nodded. Ken knew all of them had already considered that possibility, but that was the first time it was stated openly. That meant they had to face the deadly seriousness of the situation.

Harry's expression became uncertain. "How do we know they don't have it already?"

"Information from our network leads us to believe that the documents haven't been delivered yet," Ken said. "Boulton's usual method is to wait until the situation calms down before recovering the stolen goods. Then he's free to transfer them to whoever ordered them on consignment."

"Why haven't we heard of him before?" General Carswell asked.

"This is the first time Boulton's been to our country that we know of," Brad said. "We took the tip-off as serious, and we thought we could contain it. Knowing how dangerous he is, we placed him under surveillance when he legally entered the country four months ago. We saw him coming through customs and tailed him ever since."

"What has your surveillance learned about him since he arrived?"

"Until the day after the robbery, he worked as a barman at a local bar. He met Donna White, a music teacher, from the local high school, who sings at the bar two nights a week. He moved in with her after a relationship developed.

"My agent's report is included in the paperwork before you. It also states that Boulton made no phone calls. He left his apartment to go to work or go out with Donna. Sometimes, they're joined by Paul Johnson and his fiancée, Michelle Coates, as well as Tom Henderson occasionally. On several occasions, it was just Boulton and Johnson."

"Isn't Paul Johnson the man who was killed?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Ken said. "Tom was the one who was injured. They were the two information technologists. We put them under surveillance, too."

General Carswell studied the report. "It appears to be an inside job, correct?" He turned in his chair to face Ken.

"We're working on that basis, Sir. The only connections with Boulton inside the plant were Johnson and Henderson. Johnson's dead, so that leaves Henderson."

"What about the women? You said Terry was living with one of them."

"Yes. Donna White. We're regarding both as suspects. Either they were in it from the start, or they were used."

Harry's face became livid. "Good God, Man! The other woman lost her fiancé in this robbery. How can you possibly suspect her?"

Ken knew that Harry felt personal distress because his employees were violated. "We can't overlook any possibility. They work at the same school, and, although they're considered valuable members of the school staff, we don't really know much about them. Until we're certain they weren't involved, we can't rule them out."

The general picked up his report. "Let's go over the facts. You say that the robbery took those on duty that night by surprise?"

"Yes," Ken said. "Though perhaps surprise isn't the right word. Except for Johnson and Henderson, no one knew about the robbery until the guard made his rounds half an hour after the fact."

"No way to identify who broke into the factory? Just five shadowy figures in black skivvies, jeans, and ski masks who appeared briefly on the surveillance cameras?"

"Yes, Sir. At least five. We've determined their height and build, but there's not much else to go on. We have no prints or clear descriptions."

"Was Boulton one of them?" Harry asked.

"I wish it were that easy," Brad answered, "but Boulton has an unshakable alibi. At the time of the robbery, he was with Donna White and her friend, Michelle. The agents on surveillance reported Boulton was escorting both women to a social event."

"Has Boulton been questioned?"

"No, General. Sorry, but my agents lost him," Brad admitted. "He shook his tail and disappeared without a trace. We've put out an all-points bulletin on him and are circulating his picture and description to all major law-

enforcement agencies, including customs and immigration. He's a master of disguise, so we can't count on picking him up that way."

A shadow of annoyance crossed the chairman's face. "This hasn't done Dibley's any good."

Ken nodded slightly, knowing that Harry felt strongly about the image of his company and employees.

"I believe, Gentlemen," Harry continued, "it's up to you to locate and recover the documents. I won't have my employees upset any further. We've done all we can."

"What, exactly, have you done?" General Carswell asked.

"Apart from what we did to try to prevent such things, we issued public statement to the press indicating it was a theft of a half-million-dollar payroll. We have also protected our government contacts by carefully not mentioning them."

"Very wise." The general regarded Harry over the top of his glasses. Though he spoke quietly, an undertone of cold contempt edged his words. "What were your public statements?"

Sensing the subtle insult, Harry's back stiffened. "The public was told that the robbery took place with two men assaulted, one fatally," he said in an ominous tone. "The survivor made a moving statement about five masked men surprising them and opening fire without provocation. He sustained a bullet wound to the head, which immobilized him.

"He stated he lay still beside the body of his friend, unable to move or call out, while the men ransacked the office. He wasn't conscious when they finally broke into the safe. We have offered a reward of quarter of a million for information leading to the arrest of the five assailants."

Brad nodded. "We agree with you, Harry. It's better if you leave this to us. We have the means, though we still need your help. Although we have surveillance on three suspects, it's not enough. We need someone to go undercover, and we'd like it to be Ken."

"Why not one of your own men?" Harry snapped.

"You know that Ken once worked for us, and he was one of the best. He knows all the security arrangements here, as well as in other places throughout the country. He'll be accepted working undercover here as an information technologist supervisor, just as he was in Heverington."

"You've talked to them, have you?" Harry asked coldly. "You know what that was about?"

"Yes. We know it was just drug theft. Oh, come off it, Harry. You know we constantly update our information."

"Yes, I realize that, Brad, but I'd prefer being told. How do you feel about this, Ken?"

Ken felt the director's eyes scrutinizing him closely. "I want the chance. Boulton got through our security. He's a danger to everyone and must be stopped." He paused. "I'd like to use the name Ken Hall, as I did in Heverington, and go into the firm under the same conditions."

General Carswell slammed his briefcase shut, effectively ending the meeting. "Gentlemen, I think you'll agree that it's vital to our country that we find those documents and the people responsible for the theft."

Ken saw the cold look the general gave Harry, who remained motionless, staring at his clasped hands.

"And, Mr. Chairman," the general continued, "it's vital to Dibley's."

Harry looked up at the thinly veiled threat. "There's one condition. I want to be continually updated on the progress of this investigation."

Nodding, Brad said, "Ken will arrange a report on a regular basis."

Ken pushed back his chair, stood, and left. He'd already been briefed by the silent, thin, balding, hawk-eyed head of Internal Affairs, Lionel Thomas. Only he and one other in the room knew the special precautions they'd taken to safeguard the top-secret documents.