

A KILLER VIRUS IS UNLEASHED;
IT'S UP TO HER TO STOP IT.

AIRBORNE

DIANN
MILLS

CHAPTER ONE

HOUSTON
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Vacations offered a distraction for those who longed to relax and rejuvenate, but FBI Special Agent Heather Lawrence wrestled with the decision to take an overseas trip alone. Normally she arrived for a flight at IAH eager to embark upon a new adventure. Not this time. Her vacation expectations had bottomed out over four weeks ago after Chad had slammed the door on reconciliation. Was she working through her grief or avoiding the reality of a husband who no longer wanted her?

She waited to board the flight in a designated line at the gate. The hum of voices blended with airport beeps, and announcements swirled around her as though enticing her to join the enthusiasm. In the line beside her, passengers shifted their carry-ons and positioned their mobile devices or paper boarding passes. Ready. Alert. People eager to be on their way.

Heather offered a smile to those nearest her. An adorable little blond boy with an older woman found it hard to stand still. A middle-aged couple held hands. The bald head and pasty skin of the man indicated a medical condition. He stumbled, and the woman reached for him. A robust man held a violin case next to his heart. A twentysomething woman with pink hair and a man behind her with a scruffy beard exchanged a kiss.

Chad used to steal kisses.

If she pinpointed the exact moment when he chose to separate himself from her, she'd say when he returned from a third trip for Doctors Without Borders late last fall. He'd

witnessed suffering and cruel deaths that had scarred him. She'd encouraged his desire to help others, not realizing their future would take a backseat. While he drove toward success, their marriage drifted across the lanes and stalled in a rut.

The boarding line moved toward the Jetway. Each step shook her to the core as though she should turn and try to reverse the past seven months. She'd ignored her and Chad's deteriorating relationship in an effort to make him happy. A huge mistake. But she didn't intend to add the labels *beaten* or *weak* to her dossier.

A cell phone sounded, and a man boarding in front of her stopped to answer it. His shoulders stiffened under a tan sports coat, and he talked in hushed tones. Heather dug her fingers into her palms and forced one foot in front of the other while the man pocketed his cell phone and proceeded into business class.

A flight attendant greeted her, a dark-haired young man wearing a wide smile, relaxed and genuine, an obvious sign he enjoyed his job. She returned the gesture. His black jacket with two rows of silver braid on the sleeves and black trousers were magazine perfect.

Heather walked to a rear aisle seat in business class and hoisted her tote bag into the overhead compartment. Although it held essentials for every emergency in case her luggage was delayed, the bulging piece weighed less than the burden on her heart.

Easing onto her seat, Heather pulled the brochure from her shoulder bag describing Salzburg's music festival, a celebration of musicians past and present. First a layover in Frankfurt and then on to her destination. She'd rented an

apartment for ten days within walking distance of the historical center. The flexibility allowed her to choose her itinerary and cook or dine out. From the online photos, the centuries-old building had just enough updates to be comfortable without damaging its historic charm. She'd have hours to explore Mozart's roots, museums, the many churches, immerse herself in the culture, and think.

A female passenger, sporting red spiked hair and chin-length hooped earrings, stopped beside her. The woman carried a Venti Starbucks. "Excuse me." Her German accent a reminder of the destination. "Would you mind holding my coffee while I store my carry-on?"

"Of course." Heather held the cup while the woman shoved her small suitcase into the overhead bin.

"Sorry for the inconvenience. I wasn't thinking when I bought the coffee."

"It smells heavenly." Heather stood to let the woman pass and then handed her the cup.

"Thank you." The woman blew on the lid and took a sip. "I'm Mia."

"I'm Heather."

"Long flight ahead but soon I'll be home." She pointed to Heather's brochure. "Salzburg?"

"Yes. For a much-needed vacation."

"I'm from Frankfurt. Really missing my daughter and husband."

"You'll see them soon."

Mia broke into a wide smile. "We've done FaceTime and texted, but I want to touch their faces and hug them."

Heather continued to read the Salzburg brochure to avoid any personal comments from Mia, like whether she was taking

a vacation solo. An elderly man wearing a straw fedora and a white mustache sat in the aisle seat across from Heather. He pulled his phone from his pant pocket and used his thumbs on the keyboard like a kid.

Mia placed her coffee on the tray and made a phone call. *“Wie geht es meinem kleinen Mädchen?”*

Heather translated the German. *How is my little girl?* The woman’s excitement resonated through every word. Love. Laughter. Priceless commodities that Heather didn’t possess. Yet this trip offered an opportunity to rekindle her faith in God and chart a course for the future.

While the attendants made their way through business class with drink orders, Heather longed to have confirmation she’d made the right decision to take this trip. No one knew of her vacation plans except her parents and Assistant Special Agent in Charge Wade Mitchell in Houston. No one needed to know the why of her trip until she made a few decisions.

Stuffing the Salzburg brochure into her bag, she snatched the aircraft’s information and confirmed the layout for 267 passengers, restrooms, exit doors, in-seat power, on-demand entertainment, and three galleys. She always noted the details of her surroundings, another habit of working so many FBI cases. Always be prepared for the unexpected.

If the trip had been FBI sanctioned, her present circumstances might not hurt so much. How ironic she worked the critical incident response group as a behavior analyst, and she wrestled to understand her own life.

Right on time, the flight attendants took their assigned posts while miniature screens throughout the plane shared the aircraft’s amenities and explained the passenger safety instructions. The captain welcomed them moments before

the plane lifted into the clouds.

On her way. No turning back. She prayed for a safe journey and much-needed answers.

Food smells from business class caught her attention, a mix of roasted chicken and beef. Too often of late, she forgot to eat or nothing appealed to her. To shake off the growing negativity, she paid for Wi-Fi and grabbed her phone from her bag. Time to concentrate on something other than herself.

She glanced at the incoming notifications. No texts. Her emails were an anticipated list of senders when she longed for a change of heart from Chad. Sighing, she closed her eyes. Between her job, Chad, and stress, too often she fought for enough pillow time.

Two hours later, she woke from a deep sleep to the sound of a woman's scream.

CHAPTER TWO

Heather whirled toward the ear-piercing cry behind her. She released her seat belt and rushed back to the economy section. The overhead lights snapped on to reveal the middle-aged couple whom she'd seen at the gate. The panic-stricken woman beside him held a tissue to his nose. Blood dripped beneath her fingers and down her wrist.

Not a muscle moved on the man's face, and his eyes rolled back into their sockets. Heather approached him in the aisle seat. Before she could speak, the woman gasped, a mix of sobs and a struggle for composure. "Help me. I can't stop the bleeding."

Heather used tissues from the woman's lap to help block the blood flow. "Try to stay calm."

The woman nodded. "I shouldn't have let him talk me into this trip. He's been so weak."

From the front of the plane, the male flight attendant who'd greeted passengers earlier rushed their way. He carried two kits, one labeled first aid and the other biohazard. A female attendant trailed after him.

"Help is here," Heather said to the woman. She moved aside for the attendant to administer aid. She prayed the ill man was undergoing a minor problem—an easily resolved issue—and for the woman's comfort. But his lifeless face showed a grim reality.

"Sir, how do you feel?" Not a sound or movement came from the man. Blood flowed from Heather's mass of tissues.

The male attendant twisted off the seal of the biohazard kit and searched inside. He drew out a pair of nitrile gloves and wiggled them on. The female attendant opened the first aid kit, ripped into a gauze package, and handed it to the male attendant, who applied it to the man's nose. She

opened the biohazard waste bag to dispose of the soiled materials.

The male attendant captured the woman's attention. "Ma'am, I'm Nathan. Is this your husband?"

"Yes. He's very hot."

Nathan touched the man's forehead. "How long has he been feverish?"

"He was fine when we boarded. Perhaps over an hour into the flight?" Her sobs subsided to soft cries. "Do something. Blood's coming from his mouth."

Heather touched her shoulder with a clean hand. "Take a deep breath."

"How can I? Roy's not breathing."

"That's his name?" His gentle voice ushered in compassion.

"Yes. I'm Catherine."

He bent to speak to Roy. "I'm Nathan. Give me a few minutes to administer first aid." He replaced the gauze on Roy's nose for the second time and turned to the female flight attendant, who'd paled but didn't tremble. "Leave the kits. Call the flight deck and tell them what's happening."

She rushed to the front of the cabin.

"This is my fault." Catherine held Roy's hand. "He finished chemo and radiation for lung cancer, but his doctor hadn't cleared him for the trip."

"Catherine," Nathan said, "I know you're worried, but try to stay calm. Has he experienced these symptoms before?"

"No."

A voice spoke over the interphone. "If a licensed medical professional is on board, we have a medical issue. All other passengers, please remain in your seats."

Within moments, a lean man arrived from the right side of business class carrying a leather case. "I'm a doctor." Heather stepped back while he examined Roy and spoke to Nathan.

While the doctor stood over Roy with his back to Heather, Nathan turned to her. "We've got this handled. Please return—"

"No, please. Let her stay," Catherine said. "If she doesn't mind."

Nathan frowned. "Okay, for the moment. Our manual states we have to keep the aisle clear around the patient."

"I understand," Heather said. "I'd be happy to sit with her, and I'm Heather."

"Miss, if the pilots call our med service on the ground, I'll need you out of way so we can relay instructions."

The doctor and Nathan lowered Roy to the aisle and treated him. They blocked Heather's view of the procedure, but the doctor rummaged for something inside the leather case. For the next ten minutes, she waited for the doctor to reassure passengers of the man's recovery.

Catherine's hysteria spun in a cloud of uncertainty that left unchecked often spread panic. She unfastened her seat belt and rose on unstable legs. "Please, tell me my husband is all right." The female attendant gently urged her back onto the seat.

The doctor eased up from Roy and spoke reassuring words to Catherine. He peeled off his blood-covered gloves and tossed them into the bag. Had Roy succumbed to the lung cancer or a complication?

Nathan walked to a galley area. "Ladies and gentlemen, I am Nathan Howard, your lead flight attendant on board your flight today. We appreciate your concern for the man

receiving medical attention. We will transport him to the rear of the cabin, where he'll be comfortable. A doctor is tending to him, and the medical concern is under control. Thank you."

Heather supported the airline's protocol designed to keep everyone from alarm and terror while the crew addressed issues. Yet a few people craned their necks to watch the scene as though it was a morbid form of entertainment more interesting than the recycled movies on the screens in front of them.

Nathan returned to Catherine. "I know you'd like for the young woman to sit with you, but it would be easier for the flight crew and safer for her if we placed an attendant here. Can we do that?"

"I guess." Catherine's lips quivered.

Heather bent to speak. "I'm not far." She understood how Catherine had latched on to her, a stranger, for moral support.

Nathan and the doctor picked Roy up and carried him to the rear. Roy was either unconscious or dead.

The female flight attendant sat in Roy's seat and held Catherine's hand. "I'll stay with you for as long as you like."

"Can I join my husband?"

"When the doctor is finished, I'll escort you back."

Heather returned to her seat—her mind weighed with concern.

"Gott hab Erbarmen," Mia said.

"Yes, God have mercy."

"You speak German?"

"A little. Spent a year in Frankfurt when I was in college."

"The sound of it makes me long for home." She hesitated.

“What’s wrong with the man?”

“His wife said he’d recently completed chemo treatments for lung cancer. I’m sure the doctor is doing all he can. The airline has doctors on the ground, and they’ll consult with the doctor on board. Between them, they’ll figure out what’s best.”

“Do you work for the airlines?”

“No.” Heather smiled. “I’m with the Department of Justice.”

Mia rubbed her palms together. She’d already stated her desire to see her family. “Will the flight be diverted?”

“It depends on lots of factors. The man may just require rest.” Heather wasn’t going to state the excessive blood from Roy’s mouth and nose pointed to his death. By now the doctors at Medi-Pro-Aire, an advisory service for airlines, had been contacted and put in communication with the pilot.

“I read the airline’s cost to emergency divert range from \$10,000 to upwards of \$200,000,” Mia said.

“I don’t doubt the cost, but with this airline, the safety and welfare of the passengers always come first. They don’t blink at the cost of diversion. It’s on management’s mind post-action.”

“Can the pilots be called to the carpet for making a safety decision?”

“I’m sure their procedure is in place to protect the passengers.” Heather forced comfort into her voice. “We’ll be okay.”

Muffled voices around her prompted alarm.

A man shouted for help. “My wife has a terrible headache.”

A man in business class vomited.

"My son has a fever," a woman said.

"Please, the man beside me has a nosebleed, and he can't stop it."

"What is going on?" Mia whispered. "All these people are suddenly sick. Frighteningly sick."

Heather wished she had answers while horror played out around her.

"I'm afraid." Mia's face turned ashen.

"We have to stay calm." Heather craved to heed her own advice.

Throughout the plane, people complained of flu-like symptoms. Another person vomited. Heather touched her stomach. A twinge of apprehension crept through her.

Nathan spoke over the interphone. "If you are experiencing physical distress, press your call button. Flight attendants will be in your area soon with damp paper towels. Use these to cover your mouth and the tops of beverages. As always, remain in your seats."

Heather messaged ASAC Mitchell in Houston with the medical emergency report, including the symptoms.

He responded. The FBI, TSA, CDC, and Medi-Pro-Aire are on it. Are you okay?

Yes. People's symptoms indicate a serious virus.

The doctor on board has given a similar conclusion.

She trembled as she typed. Looks similar to what Chad described in Africa.

The doctor said the same. Is the man dead?

I think so.

How many others are sick?

Heather surveyed the passengers within her sight and

typed. From my seat, I see around ten in business class, and I hear the sick in economy. Will the plane divert?

No decision yet. Keep me posted. You are our eyes.

Beyond what the doctor on board relayed to those on the ground, ASAC Mitchell must believe she held the voice of reason and objectivity. The irony of their interpretation. The viruses were usually zoonotic or caused by insects, and the symptoms created intense suffering. She blinked to clear her head and not ponder the worst.

With panic gripping her in a stranglehold, she imagined what others were feeling. A man questioned why the plane hadn't landed. A woman bolted to the galley and held her mouth. The man who held the violin marched to the business class restroom but fell face-first and vomited.

The elderly man across the aisle from her coughed. His nose trickled blood.

Heather grabbed tissues from her bag and handed them to him. "Will this help?"

"Tell me this is a nightmare." He gripped her arm—fiery hot.

Available for preorder in paperback and e-book at your favorite retailer and at Tyndale.com.