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**MICHAEL C.
GRUMLEY**

**COLD
STORAGE**

A THRILLER OF THE NEAR FUTURE

COLD STORAGE

MICHAEL C. GRUMLEY



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To all my wonderful fans.

1

The slide of the Smith & Wesson was drawn back and released in one motion, allowing it to snap back, producing a subtle jerk inside the man's hand that firmly gripped the worn black polymer handle. The motion was smooth. Familiar. Natural. As though the weapon were part of him. An extension of his right hand and arm. A motion that had become so instinctive, and his senses so sensitive, that he could detect the shift in balance as the bullet was chambered within the stainless-steel barrel.

"I'm nervous."

He glanced briefly at the younger man in the truck's passenger seat before turning to gaze back outside. "We have the right place, don't we?"

The passenger nodded apprehensively. It didn't help his nervousness. If anything, it made it worse.

It had taken months to track down the location. A small A-frame cabin hidden within the tree-lined hills outside Ogden, Utah. A plot of several acres accessible by a shared gravel road winding up the west side of a small hillside like a gray, meandering snake.

From inside the vehicle, both could see the dark outline of the cabin below. At least most of it. Peering down through dozens of pine trees parked on a largely forgotten side road.

After a long silence, he spoke again, attempting to allay the younger man's fears. "Don't worry. I'll take care of it."

His passenger gulped, attempting to slow his racing heartbeat. He was not a soldier or a mercenary, and he was afraid of violence. “We’re not going to hurt anybody, right?”

There was no response from the older man. He remained gazing through the driver’s side window into the blackness.

“Right?”

“Quiet,” the older man shot back. Squinting further down the mountainside. Noting a distant pair of headlights. Slowly and methodically, winding their way up the numerous switchbacks. “This may be us.”

Beside him, the younger man closed his eyes and swallowed.

★ ★ ★

The headlights slowed and turned into the cabin’s driveway before traveling another fifty feet and stopping in front of the shadowed structure.

For a long time, the car remained in front of the A-frame, awash in the brilliant glow of the headlights. The vehicle sat motionless until the purring engine suddenly switched off.

With the low beams still on, the driver’s door opened, producing a brief reflection as it swung out, then once again when the door was pushed shut.

★ ★ ★

From their position above, the older man noted the absence of the car’s interior light and focused on the silhouette as the figure moved through the bright glare on their way toward the cabin’s front door.

The driver tilted his head toward the other, who was also watching. “Well?”

“I’m not sure,” he said. “I can’t tell from here.”

The older man grinned. “Close enough for me.”

★ ★ ★

They waited until the automatic headlights went off, plunging the exterior back into night, replaced almost immediately by dimmer lights illuminating within the cabin before the older man reached for his door handle. Opening it slowly and stepping out, he carefully eased the door closed with a faint click.

He then watched as his passenger did the same, just as instructed. Slowly and softly.

He quietly motioned the younger man toward him and pointed down the hill.

“Why not take the road?”

“Dirt’s quieter than gravel. Go slow. And step exactly where I step.”

2

Now in front of the cabin, the older man remained stationary, examining its front porch in silence. He was shrouded within a shadow beneath the overhanging roof, just a step or two beyond the glow of the light from a nearby window.

His eyes then moved to the door. Solid with a standard knob and deadbolt, also attached to a standard wood frame and opening inward.

The two verified that no one else was in the car, which meant a single individual in the cabin.

The man in front of the porch estimated three steps to the top, skipping every other stair, and two long strides to the door. There were no signs of security, suggesting the door and frame were typical, and the doorknob and deadbolt were both secured by standard one-and-a-half-inch screws. Enough to pierce the thinner wood of the doorframe but not long enough to reach the stud behind it.

Of course, if he was wrong, his entry would be anything but a surprise.



The cabin's occupant was seated in a simple, somewhat dated living room. In a padded high-backed chair and deep in thought when there was a brief sound outside before the front door exploded in a sudden, violent crash, sending thin shards of wood flying across the room and across the floor as

the door swung wide and slammed into the wall. Ricocheting and bouncing back before a large hand stopped it in midswing.

The woman in the chair screamed, her glass of wine crashing on the wooden floor. Panicked, she scrambled up and into the back of the chair's high back before tumbling over an arm and attempting to crawl away.

The intruder stepped through the open doorway into the small living room, smoothly drawing his Smith & Wesson. Then raised and leveled it before the woman.

She was utterly frozen. Unable to move. Staring into the dark circular opening of the gun's barrel. Unbreathing.

★ ★ ★

From his white-bearded face, the man's eyes scanned the remainder of the room and peered past the cabin's moderate kitchen, then down its short hallway.

With his gun still raised, he waited several moments for his cohort to appear, but there was nothing. Leaving him staring at the woman in his sights.

His gray-blue eyes were hard. Unblinking, with an even harder face. No expression. No emotion. Just cold and calculating.

Devin Waterman stared at her for half a minute, watching the hyperventilating woman before finally speaking. "What's your name?"

Her mouth struggled to move, let alone form words.

"Tell me your name," he repeated.

After several moments, the trembling woman finally regained control of her lips. "N-Nora Lagner."

Waterman stepped back, keeping the gun raised, and examined the hallway again. This time, more closely. "Anyone else here?"

The woman named Lagner shook her head.

"If there is," he said, "I shoot, *then* ask questions."

There was nothing. No sound. No movement. Only them and their breathing. Prompting Waterman to ease the grip ever so slightly on his gun. "Sit down," he commanded.

Lagner stared momentarily before stumbling forward, haphazardly making her way back to the chair as if she were blind.

Waterman watched as she lowered herself into it cautiously and carefully. "You know me?"

Again, she shook her head.

"Good," he said. "It's mutual, and that means I have absolutely zero compunction over shooting you. All I need ... is a reason. Understand?"

Lagner nodded.

"Do you *believe* me?"

Another nod.

"Good. Then you're not entirely stupid."

The woman did not dare move. She remained steadfast in her chair, fearful and leaning forward, eager to comply.

Waterman then angled his head over his shoulder and called out loudly. "Get in here, kid."

A cursory look of confusion passed over the woman's face, and she glanced at the open door. Briefly noting where a large chunk of wood had been ripped away surrounding the now dangling deadbolt. Her eyes widened when Henry Yamada's face appeared from the darkness.

3

Yamada walked across the small room, stopping next to Waterman.

“Hey, Nora. Long time no see.”

The woman’s mouth dropped open. Her eyes moved back and forth between the two men. She was utterly shocked. “What the—”

“Shut up,” interrupted Waterman.

Yamada watched Lagner for several moments, surprised to feel his nervousness gradually morph into anger. “It took a long time to find you,” he said. “So, I guess you already know about your friend Duchik.”

Lagner silently nodded.

“I wish I could say I was sorry,” said Yamada, “but I’m not. Some people deserve what they get.”

At that, the look of confusion in Lagner’s large green eyes immediately turned to fear. God, they were going to kill her.

She watched as Waterman sat on the square coffee table in front of her, resting his gun on his knee but still pointing it at her, his right index finger still on the trigger. “Expecting anyone else tonight?”

“N-no.”

Waterman glanced briefly over his shoulder. “Good. Because if someone comes in, guess who I’m shooting first.” He didn’t wait for an answer. “Now, do you know who I am?”

Nora Lagner nodded.

“Because?”

She hesitated. "Because I read your file."

"Then you have to know I'm not the bluffing type."

No answer.

"So ... you're going to tell us everything," he said, "or this will be your last night on good ole planet Earth. Comprende?"

"Yes."

"Let's start with why you're still searching for us."

She swallowed and answered softly. "It's not my doing."

"Then whose is it?"

"People who were working with Duchik."

"Why, what do they want with us?"

"They don't want you," she said, "they want Reiff."

"What for?"

Her tone became almost matter-of-fact. "For verification."

Yamada stepped in. "Verification of what? You already have everything. All the files *and* his DNA. What else could you want?"

"There's a difference," she said, "between a DNA profile and the actual person, scientifically speaking."

Waterman and Yamada looked at each other before the older man frowned. "Who is this group? How big?"

"There were ten in total before he died. Now there are nine."

"Including you?"

Another nod.

"And they want what exactly?"

"Verification," Lagner repeated.

"I already asked you, verification of what?"

"That John Reiff is still stable," said Yamada.

When Lagner did not answer, Waterman studied her closely, squinting. "Why?"

Lagner blinked wordlessly at Waterman, reluctant to answer, until the older man gripped the gun and lifted it again from his knee.

It was effective. "To revive another," she quickly answered.

“Another person?”

“Yes.”

“Who?” asked Yamada. “Duchik?”

Lagner shook her head. “Liam is dead. Reiff saw to that. The project was always about more than just John Reiff. It was intended to pave the way. Reiff was just the first one. But we can’t continue without knowing he is free from any longer-term complications.”

“You mean life-threatening complications.”

“Correct.”

Yamada, wearing a look of skepticism, was still studying her. “Who is it?”

“It doesn’t matter,” she answered.

“So, John is their medical ‘canary in the coal mine.’” Waterman waited for confirmation from Lagner, but didn’t get it, driving him to point the gun at her again.

“Killing me is not going to get you anything,” she warned. “And finding *them* will be much harder than finding me. Which you were foolish to do.”

“Why is that?”

She looked up and squinted at Yamada. “Even if you think you’re being careful. All tracks can be traced.” Lagner’s voice began to turn aggressive. They were not going to kill her. At least not yet.

Waterman’s reply was like ice. “Then letting you live will only help their effort.”

Lagner’s arrogance suddenly vanished.

“By your own words, you’ve acknowledged that we have to kill you.”

Her eyes widened.

Waterman then stood up. “It’s nothing personal.”

Lagner suddenly panicked. “Wait! *Wait!*”

The older man calmly edged the slide back on his gun, verifying a bullet was chambered.

“*No!*” she cried. She looked at Yamada only to find him appearing just as shocked as she. “*Stop! Wait! I can help you!*”

Waterman gave a dubious frown. “By giving us away?”

“I’ll tell you anything you want to know!” cried Lagner. “*Anything!*” She then blurted, “I’ll tell you how to hide from them!”

“It’s been almost a year, and they haven’t found us yet.”

She watched as Waterman once again raised the gun. “*Please don’t! I swear I can help you!*”

He was unmoved but paused when Yamada placed a hand on his arm. “Devin, wait. We came here for a reason, remember?”

Nora Lagner latched on to the reference. “Of course you did! You want something. What is it? Just ask me!”

“She can’t be trusted,” said Waterman.

“I can!” cried Lagner. “You can trust me! Ask me anything, and I’ll tell you, I swear!”

The gun remained lingering in midair, with Waterman’s finger snaking through the trigger guard and resting lightly on the metal trigger. “Like what?”

“Anything!” she cried.

There was a long silence before Waterman spoke. “Where is it?”

Nora Lagner looked at him, confused. “Where’s what?”

“Where is ... *it.*”

Shaking her head, she looked nervously at Yamada. “*It* what?”

“The Machine,” answered Yamada. “Where is the Machine?”

Lagner nodded eagerly. “I’ll tell you, I’ll tell you! Just lower the gun.”

Watching it fall, she opened her mouth to continue until suddenly catching herself in midsentence, where she stopped and stared at them in bewilderment, thinking for several seconds. “Wait. Why do you want the...?”

There was only one reason they would want the device, and it took Lagner only moments to realize it. When she did, her mouth dropped open in stunned silence.

4.

As they barreled down the dark, winding road, Yamada dialed a number on the burner phone and handed it back to Waterman, who continued steering with one hand. The call was answered immediately.

“How’d it go?”

“Good and bad,” answered Waterman.

“Did you get a location?”

“Yeah, we know where the Machine is. But we have a very short window.”

“How short?”

Waterman put his other hand on the wheel while braking through a tight turn. When the road straightened again, he brought the phone back toward his mouth. “Two days, maybe three. Until they realize Lagner is missing.”

★ ★ ★

On the other end, Wayne Coleman calmly placed his own burner phone on the table in front of him and enabled the speakerphone, allowing Rachel Souza to listen in.

“Where’s it at?”

“Prescott.”

Coleman mulled for a moment. “Four hours away. Five max.”

“Ask her if we can be ready that quickly.”

Rachel spoke up. “I’m right here. I’m thinking.”

★ ★ ★

Studying the road in front of him, Waterman slowed for another turn before straightening the Explorer and punching the gas. “Well?”

Rachel bit her lip, still thinking. “We don’t have a lot of choices.”

“No, we don’t. The kid and I should be back by oh seven hundred.”

★ ★ ★

In the small, darkened room, Rachel hovered over an old Formica table as she replied, glancing at her watch and then at Coleman, “We’ll be ready.”

★ ★ ★

Minutes later, Rachel burst through the door of her makeshift lab. The term “lab” was a stretch. It was an old bedroom converted into a stopgap workshop, with nearly every square foot packed with medical and diagnostic equipment. Several computers with their adjoining monitors and keyboards occupied one corner, and two small, glass-doored refrigerators with petri dishes and test tubes were in the other. And to the right, dozens of cages stacked one on top of another, creating a veritable wall of wire and mesh filled with hundreds of mice.

She methodically scanned cage after cage, examining over a hundred tiny “house” mice, also known by scientists as C57BL/6. The most common strain used in biomedical research. And to her relief, all were still moving.

Rachel exhaled, followed by a deep inhalation as if trying to prepare herself for what came next.

It was the moment of truth. They had finally located Lagner and, more importantly, the Machine. The one thing that was absolutely integral to their plan. What she did not expect, however, was how little time they would have.

It meant everything she had done had better be right. The testing, the experiments, all of the trials. The slow, painstaking process of gene editing

was unforgiving, and the chance for error heightened under such a compressed timeline. Meticulously recording every test, every result, every detail, regardless of the outcome. All carefully documented, then tested again and again to ensure her end results were not just accurate, but predictable. She had gone through thousands of tiny subjects whose DNA was as close to human as she could get under the circumstances. And given their limited resources while working in complete secrecy. Everything she had done ... had better be right.

It was the medical equivalent of working in someone's garage for nine months with nothing but duct tape and an ice box. Okay, that was an exaggeration. But it sometimes didn't feel far off. Toiling away in a room with no windows, minimal ventilation, and illuminated by the sterile overhead glow of fluorescent lighting.

Trying to reason her apprehension away, she turned and glanced behind her right shoulder at their strange contraption, centered upon a medium-sized table and shaped like a giant porcelain egg. Slightly marred and nicked from constant use, with thin wires emerging from every direction of the device. Thin silvery strands resembling a mass of wild, unkempt electronic hair. Snaking together less than two feet away into organized and braided bundles, running down the nearby wall where they disappeared into a much larger computer casing.

It was extremely crude, but it worked. A miniature version of the same Machine they had been hunting down. This one small and compact and just large enough to house her tiny C57BL/6 subjects.

Its modest size and energy requirements allowed her to test the new genetic sequencing not just hundreds, but thousands of times. Endless attempts to apply the changes she had derived from the DNA of a capuchin monkey.

Dallas had proven difficult to find. Nightmarishly difficult. But find him they did. After turning over nearly every rock and twig within a quarter-mile radius of the habitat at what remained of the old Phoenix Zoo. Hampered not only by the environment and the monkey's small size but also by how

clever Dallas ultimately proved to be. And not just impressively clever ... almost *eerily* clever.

★ ★ ★

It was then that Rachel's attention was interrupted by a powerful truck engine roaring to life outside. *Wayne*.

5

Waterman and Yamada were late, but not by much, pulling into the driveway of a nondescript house in the middle of a sprawling Las Vegas suburb. Slightly rundown with a stucco facade and painted an all-too-familiar desert beige, it was like every other dwelling in the neighborhood. An unorthodox yet effective camouflage, allowing them to hide in plain sight and beneath the largest blanket of electromagnetic noise in a two-hundred-mile radius.

Once through the front door, the men navigated around several plastic crates of supplies waiting in the hallway to find Rachel Souza and Wayne Coleman waiting at the kitchen table.

Yamada wasted no time, withdrawing a laptop from his shoulder bag in midstride and dropping into a chair. He pushed the lid open and waited for the computer to resume before logging in with a short flurry of typing.

Already onscreen was a satellite map filling the window. “Here’s the location.”

Under a headful of frizzy gray hair, Wayne Coleman squinted at the screen. “I don’t see anything.”

“That’s the idea,” quipped Waterman. They watched as Yamada zoomed in from a wider image displaying a small city and surrounding desert to a tighter patch, the desert located northward. Appearing as little more than fifty square miles of barren hills, endless dirt, and scrub brush.

Coleman frowned. “Not helpful.”