

DEAN KOONTZ

Originally published under the pseudonym Leigh Nichols

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ESTRATTO

Tina said. "Right now I just want to know how the hell Danny wound up in this place." "To understand that," Dombey said, "you have to go back twenty months. It was around then that a Chinese scientist named Li Chen defected to the United States, carrying a diskette record of China's **most important and dangerous: new biological weapon in a decade**. They call the stuff **'Wuhan-400'** because it was developed at their RDNA labs outside of the city of Wuhan, and it was the four-hundredth viable strain of man-made microorganisms created at that research center. **'Wuhan-400 is a perfect weapon**. It afflicts only human beings. No other living creature can carry it. And like syphilis, **Wuhan-400 can't survive outside a living human body for longer than a minute**, which means it can't permanently contaminate objects or entire places the way anthrax and other virulent microorganisms can. And when the host expires, the **Wuhan-400 within him perishes a short while later, as soon as the temperature of the corpse drops below eighty-six degrees Fahrenheit**. Do you see the advantage of all this?" Tina was too busy with Danny to think about what Carl Dombey had said, but Elliot knew what the scientist meant. "If I understand you, the Chinese could use Wuhan-400 to wipe out a city or a country, and then there wouldn't be any need for them to conduct a tricky and expensive decontamination before they moved in and took over the conquered territory." "Exactly," Dombey said. "And **Wuhan-400 has other, equally important advantages over most biological agents. For one thing, you can become an infectious carrier only four hours after coming into contact with the virus**. That's an incredibly short incubation period. Once infected, no one lives more than twenty-four hours. Most die in twelve. It's worse than the Ebola virus in Africa—infinately worse. Wuhan-400's kill-rate is one hundred percent. No one is supposed to survive. The Chinese tested it on God knows how many political prisoners. They were never able to find an antibody or an antibiotic that was effective against it. The virus migrates to the brain stem, and there it begins secreting a toxin that literally eats away brain tissue like battery acid dissolving cheesecloth. It destroys the part of the brain that controls all of the body's automatic functions. The victim simply ceases to have a pulse, functioning organs, or any urge to breathe." "And that's the disease Danny survived," Elliot said. "Yes," Dombey said. "As far as we know, he's the only one who ever has." Tina had pulled the blanket off the bed and folded it in half, so she could wrap Danny in it for the trip out to the Explorer. Now she looked up from the task of bundling the child, and she said to Dombey, "But why was he infected in the first place?" "It was an accident," Dombey said. "I've heard that one before." "This time it's true," Dombey said. "After Li Chen defected with all the data on Wuhan-400, he was brought here. We immediately began working with him, trying to engineer an exact duplicate of the virus. In relatively short order we accomplished that. Then we began to study the bug, searching for a handle on it that the Chinese had overlooked." "And someone got careless," Elliot said. "Worse," Dombey said. "Someone got careless and stupid. Almost thirteen months ago, when Danny and the other boys in his troop were on their winter survival outing, one of our scientists, a quirky son of a bitch named Larry Bellinger, accidentally contaminated himself while he was working alone one morning in this lab." Danny's hand tightened on Christina's, and she stroked his head, soothing him. To Dombey, she said, "Surely you have safeguards, procedures to follow when and if—" "Of course," Dombey said. "You're trained what to do from the day you start to work here. In the event of accidental contamination, you immediately set off an alarm. Immediately. Then you seal the room you're working in. If there's an adjoining isolation chamber, you're supposed to go into it and lock the door after yourself. A decontamination crew moves in swiftly to clean up whatever mess you've made in the lab. And if you've infected yourself with something curable, you'll be treated. If it's not curable . . . you'll be attended to in isolation until you die. That's one reason our pay scale is so high. Hazardous-duty pay. The risk is part of the job."

"Except this Larry Bollinger didn't see it that way," Tina said bitterly. She was having difficulty wrapping Danny securely in the blanket because he wouldn't let go of her. With smiles, murmured assurances, and kisses planted on his frail hands, she finally managed to persuade him to tuck both of his arms close to his body. "Bollinger snapped. He just went right off the rails," Dombey said, obviously embarrassed that one of his col-leagues would lose control of himself under those circumstances. Dombey began to pace as he talked. "Bollinger knew how fast Wuhan-400 claims its victims, and he just panicked. Flipped out. Apparently, he convinced himself he could run away from the infection. God knows, that's exactly what he tried to do. He didn't turn in an alarm. He walked out of the lab, went to his quarters, dressed in outdoor clothes, and left the complex. He wasn't scheduled for R and R, and on the spur of the moment he couldn't think of an excuse to sign out one of the Range Rovers, so he tried to escape on foot. He told the guards he was going snowshoeing for a couple of hours. That's something a lot of us do during the winter. It's good exercise, and it gets you out of this hole in the ground for a while. Anyway, Bollinger wasn't interested in exercise. He tucked the snowshoes under his arm and took off down the mountain road, the same one I presume you came in on. Before he got to the guard shack at the upper gate, he climbed onto the ridge above, used the snowshoes to circle the guard, returned to the road, and threw the snowshoes away. Security eventu-ally found them. Bollinger was probably at the bottom gate two and a half hours after he walked out of the door here, three hours after he was infected. That was just about the time that another researcher walked into his lab, saw the cultures of Wuhan-400 broken open on the floor, and set off the alarm. Meanwhile, in spite of the razor wire, Bollinger climbed over the fence. Then he made his way to the road that serves the wildlife research center. He started out of the forest, toward the county lane, which is about five miles from the turnoff to the labs, and after only three miles—" "He ran into Mr. Jaborski and the scouts," Elliot said. "And by then he was able to pass the disease on to them," Tina said as she finished bundling Danny into the blanket. "Yeah," Dombey said. "He must have reached the scouts five or five and a half hours after he was infected. By then he was worn out. He'd used up most of his physical reserves getting out of the lab reservation, and he was also beginning to feel some of the early symptoms of Wuhan-400. Dizzi-ness. Mild nausea. The scoutmaster had parked the expedi-tion's minibus on a lay-by about a mile and a half into the woods, and he and his assistant and the kids had walked in another half-mile before they encountered Larry Bollinger. They were just about to move off the road, into the trees, so they would be away from any sign of civilization when they set up camp for their first night in the wilderness. When Bollinger discovered they had a vehicle, he tried to persuade them to drive him all the way into Reno. When they were reluctant, he made up a story about a friend being stranded in the mountains with a broken leg. Jaborski didn't believe Bollinger's story for a minute, but he finally offered to take him to the wildlife center where a rescue effort could be mounted. That wasn't good enough for Bollinger, and he got hysterical. Both Jaborski and the other scout leader decided they might have a dangerous character on their hands. That was when the security team arrived. Bollinger tried to run from them. Then he tried to tear open one of the security men's decontamination suits. They were forced to shoot him." "The spacemen," Danny said. Everyone stared at him. He huddled in his yellow blanket on the bed, and the memory made him shiver. "The spacemen came and took us away." "Yeah," Dombey said. "They probably did look a little bit like spacemen in their decontamination suits. They brought everyone here and put them in isolation. One day later all of them were dead . . . except Danny." Dombey sighed. "Well . . . you know most of the rest."