

The Red Problem

A motion detector spilled light on a white-haired gentleman as he stepped from his Jaguar. A light snow salted the shoulders of his overcoat.

Inside the two-story window-less building, Reynolds waited for the buzzer to sound before unlocking the deadbolt and opening the steel door.

“Senator.”

“This better be good,” Senator Huxley said, a gruff edge in his voice.

“Actually, it’s *not* good.”

“We’re talking about the blood thing?” Huxley took in Reynolds’ burrowing blue eyes, slender frame, and unbuttoned lab coat.

“Yes sir, the blood. Sorry to interrupt your evening. But this can’t wait.”

Reynolds offered to hang the jowly, sixty-year-old’s winter coat on a peg. But the senator waved him off.

“I’ll keep it on.”

“Fair enough.”

Reynolds led Huxley down a dark hall and through a security door into a stark white laboratory. The polished floor, glass beakers, and racks of polystyrene vials shone so bright under the LEDs, Huxley had to pause to clear his blinking vision.

“This way,” Reynolds said. He kept his lips slightly pursed as if to impress the severity of the matter.

Stopping at a demonstration table, he gestured to a stainless-steel platter.

“Have a look here. Tell me what you see.”

“A dead rat,” Huxley said.

“A gutted white *rattus norvegicus*.”

The red-eyed animal lay splayed on its back, its torso sliced from neck to rectum, little pink fingers paralytic in the air.

“And what do you not see?”

“What do I *not*?” Huxley’s brow furrowed like corduroy. “I don’t understand.”

“Where’s the blood?”

Huxley looked again, shook his head. “There is no blood.”

“Right. Well, there *is*. It’s just not red. Not even pink.” Reynolds plucked a long-stemmed Q-tip from his lab coat pocket. He rolled the end through a sticky paste on the plate and held it up to Huxley’s face. “The blood is colorless.”

“That’s what I’ve been telling you,” Huxley said, pointing at the swab.

“Yes, it is. We did some digging after what you said at the steak house.”

“So, it’s not a hoax. Then...”

“Does anyone know you’re here?” Reynolds interrupted.

“Here?”

“At our lab.”

“No. You caught me out Christmas shopping for my grandkids.”

“No one?”

“Not a soul, why?”

Reynolds twirled the Q-tip between his fingers. “Because we need to be stone cold careful. Whoever is behind this could be right under our nose.”

“Who are you, again?”

“We’re an independent watchdog group. We investigate viable conspiracy theories. As such we keep our work on the down low.”

“No, got that, but I forgot your name.”

“Oh, it’s Reynolds, sir.”

“Okay, Reynolds, so what in God’s name is the deal?”

“We’ll get to that.” Reynolds dropped the cotton swab on the platter, picked up a clipboard. “Follow me.”

Ceiling lights popped on as they passed work station after work station of microscopes, monitors, and chemical testing equipment.

Reynolds stopped at a high counter. “Have a seat.”

Huxley maneuvered his hulky frame onto a stool. On the counter he saw lidded petri dishes containing various fluids and substances.

“What’s all this?” Huxley said.

“First things first. We need to know what you know.”

“Nothing more than what I told you the other day at lunch.”

Reynolds adjusted the yellow legal pad on the clipboard. “Then help us with the timeline.”

“Timeline?”

“Of the incidents.”

“Oh, okay, well there’s three I’m aware of. First was the prison. The warden and I went to school together. He called me. That was what, a month ago?”

“Yes, a prison. That makes sense.” Reynolds drew a pen from his breast pocket.

“How so?” Huxley said.

“Pick a closed environment for a trial run. Then wait for a fight to break out, a stabbing.”

“How about a riot?”

“That’d do the trick,” Reynolds said.

“It did. The warden was in shock. Those who were beaten didn’t bleed. He said, ‘It looked like snot.’”

“Like snot?” Reynolds jotted a note on the paper.

“Like that rat. Pretty strange for a prank if you ask me.”

“And the next?”

“That was a week, ten days later. Joe, the warden, calls me again. Tells me what happened at the army base.”

“In Denton.”

“Yes.”

Reynolds made note. “Another localized incident.”

“Joe says, ‘Something’s goin’ on, Hux.’ I told him I’d look into it. But it got buried in the stacks. Then last week, Camp Randolph.”

“Marines.”

“That got me off my ass. I’m on the horn with the Governor to test the water at the base. I propose a full inquiry to my committee. They

rolled their eyes. ‘Mental overload,’ I hear one say. Then you call. Glad somebody’s listening.”

“At the steak house I believe your words were, “It’s got that fishy smell.”

“Yeah, I’m calling doctors. They can’t make hay of it. They say red-less blood is an anomaly.”

“Of course they’d say that. And, as you know, anomalies can mean many things: a rare occurrence, a new development. Our team sees them as red flags.”

“And?”

“This is *not* an anomaly.”

Huxley stood, took off his overcoat and folded it over the adjacent stool. “So, if it’s no anomaly, what the hell do we have here?”

Reynolds heard the scuff of Dr. Willow’s clean-room slippers on the vinyl floor.

“Right on cue, Doctor,” Reynolds said. “I’d like you to meet Senator Huxley. Senator, this is Dr. Austin Willows. He heads the lab.”

Dr. Willows wore a buttoned lab coat and carried a conical flask in his left hand. He had a gleaming bald dome and a graying, short-cropped beard. Large, black-rimmed glasses saddled low on his nose.

“Good to meet you,” Huxley said. No handshake extended.

“We retrieved blood samples from the army base,” Willows said.

“And what’d you find?”

“It’s a chemical compound that makes blood colorless when exposed to the air. We extruded the primary ingredients. They include a

heated diethylamide and heavily succussed cortyx 5 that transforms the hemoglobin color... “

Huxley lifted his palm. “Whoa...”

“... and a nickel ammonium carbonate serves as a catalyzing agent that prolongs the ...”

“Enough. I get the picture.”

Willows thrust the flask under the senator’s nose. “It’s tasteless, odorless.”

Huxley jerked his head away.

“And there appear to be no side-effects that would alter or imbalance one’s physical health or mental capacity.”

A ring tone sounded.

“Hang on.” Huxley dug into a pocket of his coat and took the call. “Hey. Yeah, still out shopping with the last-minute crazies. But I was able to buy Riley the big stuffed unicorn she wanted. Uh-huh. Alright. Be back soon as I can.” Huxley closed the call, blew out a breath. “So, Doctor...”

“Willows.”

“Right. So, what’s the upshot?”

“Given the extent of the lab work involved, this complex additive is no prank. It’s calculated piracy.”

Reynolds tapped his index finger on the clipboard. “Someone out there is removing the red from our blood.”

“Who? How?”

“Let’s first answer the why. Why would anyone want people to have colorless blood?”

“Think about it,” Willows said.

“I have.”

“So have we,” Willows said.

“And? Why is red a problem, Senator?”

“I may be out on a limb here, but if it’s intentional...”

“Yes?”

“Well, how can anyone talk about bloodshed if you can’t see the blood?”

“Exactly. The bloodshed is invisible.” Reynolds eye-checked Willows, then looked back at Huxley. “Go on.”

“It doesn’t take away the act of violence, the deaths. But it softens the gut reaction.”

“Makes it more innocuous,” Willow said. “Less messy. No stain.”

“Yeah,” Huxley went on. “The red color of blood has always been a shocker. This way, you don’t see the life draining out.”

“Just oozin’ life,” Willows added.

“Less visual impact,” Reynolds said.

“Exactly. It gives people a false comfort.” Huxley said.

“You nailed it. I’m impressed.” Reynolds said.

“You really think that’s behind it?”

“Absolutely,” Reynolds said. “Head wounds, bullet wounds, bomb-scattered body parts. Let the journalists pop their Nikons. Let TV news broadcast it. There’s no grisly pools or spatter.”

“There’s never a trace of red,” Willows said.

“Clear as hair gel. Which sterilizes the atrocity,” Reynolds said.

“Makes the murdered look merely asleep.”

“More humane, don’t you think?” Willows said.

“Humane? Hell no!” Huxley pounded the counter. Vials trembled on cabinet shelves. “It’s a corruption of reality! A way to control the population. Like fear. Like fake news.”

“True,” Reynolds said. “So who do you think’s behind it? The Armed Forces?”

“Two military bases? Be my first hunch,” Huxley said.

“Deep state,” Willows said.

Huxley pondered that for a moment, then squinted at the flask in Willows’ hand. “So, how does that stuff work?”

Willows swirled the thick liquid in the flask. “Any number of conveyances.” He reached across the counter for a glass jar of water. “Allow me.” He poured a dribble from the flask into the glass and held it to the light. “Dissolves in water. Invisible. Not the slightest cast. And... can you hand me that petri dish there?”

Huxley slid the dish across the counter. Willows opened the lid and poured a couple droplets onto a small mound of white powder.

“And see, it’s undetectable in sugar, in salt. Makes administering it on a mass scale surprisingly... easy.”

“Holy shit.”

“Whoever is behind this, it appears they’re bringing it out in whispers,” Reynolds said. “A strange case here, an incident there.”

“Time release, the sneaky assholes.” Willows said.

“Copy that,” Reynolds said.

“So, how long would it take for this to go...?”

“Coast to coast? Oh, no time at all,” Willows said. “Pour enough of it in the reservoirs, the water supply. Hell, seed the clouds.”

“Good God. We need to get the word out.”

“That’s why I called,” Reynolds said. “We got to move on this mach10.”

“We don’t know how many are already infected,” Willows said. “For all we know *you* could be...”

“Me?”

“One way to find out. Doctor?” Reynolds winked at Willows.

Willows lifted a needle off the counter. “If you don’t mind, Senator?”

“Just a little prick,” Reynolds said.

“Only take a second.”

Before Huxley could object, Willows lifted the senator’s stubby index finger and gave it a poke. Instantly, a dollop of clear, mucous-like fluid sprouted from his fingertip.

“Fucking hell!” Huxley hollered.

“Don’t touch it! Don’t smear it! I need your sample!”

Reynolds handed Willows an empty petri dish. He clutched Huxley’s hand, pinched the finger to squeeze out more blood.

“Where have you been?” Reynolds said.

“I dunno! All over!”

Willows reached into his pocket. “Just happen to have a Bandaid handy.”

“Got in you somehow, some way, your drink, your food...”

Willows wiped Huxley's finger with a tissue and tried to apply the Bandaid, but Huxley's hand wouldn't stop shaking.

"Take it easy," Willows said. "I'm trying to..."

"Easy? Fuck easy. Jesus!"

"No worries, Senator," Reynolds said. "We'll get the team on it, flat out."

Willows finished applying the Bandaid. "I will personally gather clinical poof. Otherwise, they'll explain away as an allergic reaction to something or meds, herbicides, a virus."

"Once verified, and we blitz the media, there's bound to be an uproar."

Willows closed the lid on the petri dish. "Right. People will protest. Let's just pray it's not too late."

Reynolds' tone softened. "So far, Senator, you're the only one who's been sounding off. Am I correct?"

"What?" he stuttered.

"Can you think of anyone you've shared this with who would alert the FBI, Homeland Security? Huh? No one?"

"Not yet, I mean, like I said..."

"Then you, Senator, you're the man to run it up the flagpole."

"Buy a bullhorn," Willows said.

"Shout it from the Capitol steps," Reynolds added.

Willows pointed to the senator's hand. "Show them your finger."

Huxley glanced at his Bandaid.

Reynolds and Willows stood silent, glaring at him.

Huxley took a labored breath, swiveled himself off the stool.
“You’re right, dammit, you’re right. I’m the man to blow the whistle!”
“We’ll support you with all the data,” Willows said. “And see that it’s published in the most credible scientific journals.”
“We’ll nip it in the bud.”
“We damn well better,” Huxley said.
Reynolds held up the senator’s overcoat. “And hey, come election time, it’s bound to win you a third term.”
Huxley stiffened. “That’s the last thing on my mind, mister!”
“Fine, whatever, you’re still the man,” Reynolds gave him a pat on the shoulder.
Huxley pivoted and began to lumber away.
Reynolds nodded to Willows.
“But, but... there’s just one thing, sir.”
Huxley abruptly turned. “What’s that?”
He didn’t catch the glint of the ice pick in Dr. Willows’ fist.
“Well, because you’re the man... the one and only man...” Willows plunged the ice pick deep into Senator Huxley’s chest. “... you need to go away.”
“Huxley’s torso caved and shuddered. His startled eyes grasped the deception with terrifying clarity. “Y-you...” he groaned and, seizing Dr. Willows’ lapel, ripped buttons off the lab coat as his body twisted and went down.
Reynolds chuckled. “Show them your finger. Very funny.”
Willows kneeled over the senator, pressed two fingers on the man’s neck and exhaled a breath of relief. “One less obstacle.”

“A major one.” Reynolds pulled the cell phone and car keys from Huxley’s pockets.

Willows hoisted the senator by the armpits and started to drag him away. “Did you hear me sneak in lyrics from Mack the Knife?”

“No. Guess I missed that.”

“Oof,” Willows grunted. “If only there was a way to shrink bodies. They’re so cumbersome.”

“Yeah, well, first things first.”

Willows eyeballed Huxley’s blood trailing across the floor. “Look, no cleanup.”

“That’s the beauty. And such a glossy sheen.”

“Yeah,” Willows said. “Like floor wax.”