

In the private laboratory known as ViraVax, Rico Toledo has uncovered a horrifying truth. In this place, run by a mysterious group called the Children of Eden, the worst suspicions of ex-intelligence officer Toledo have been confirmed: his partner has been genetically programmed for assassination—and Toledo may have been altered too.

ViraVax

Bill Ransom

Copyright 1993, 2011 Bill Ransom
Originally published 1993 by Ace Books

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without the express written permission of the copyright holder, except where permitted by law. This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination, or, if real, used fictitiously.

This book is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

Ash Wednesday
18 February 2015

Chapter 1

Nancy Bartlett staggered away from her husband's body on their living room floor, gun smoke trailing the air behind her like a guardian angel. Her right hand cramped from its grip on the stubby Galil. Nancy used her left hand to pry the right free, then she let her shaking knees drop her to the couch. A winking red light at her Watchdog console signaled that security was on the way.

The mess in front of her on the living room floor did not resemble Red Bartlett any more than the monster he had become had resembled the shy genius, the pride of ViraVax. Red had attacked her, his own wife, with a fury that she had not imagined possible. Her devastated apartment was testimony to that fury.

Nancy set the hot Galil next to a chunk of skull and hair on the couch, then willed her trembling body into the kitchen, where she wouldn't have to look at what was left of her husband.

Thank God, Sonja's not here!

Their daughter was spending the weekend and her fuel ration coupons at an airstrip out of town, garnering all the flight and simulator time she could get.

Nancy and Sonja lived in the capital of Costa Brava, near the U.S. Embassy

compound, where Nancy worked and Sonja attended American School. Red Bartlett lived and worked at the ViraVax facility in the Jaguar Mountains, but visited his family most weekends and holy days at their security apartment in the capital. Today was Ash Wednesday, and a scrap of Red's forehead wore the smudge that told her he had stopped off at the cathedral for the late Mass.

Nancy Bartlett wanted to hold her daughter with a pain she could hardly bear, but she would rather die the most horrible death than have her daughter see her now.

I might still get that chance, she thought. Maybe I should call Rico. . . .

A tone sounded from her Watchdog and she heard the doorlocks *snick* aside. Security would notify Colonel Toledo soon enough.

Four people stepped inside, all wearing full contamination gear. Two carried the shorty assault Colts made for entry into closed spaces, and they prosecuted a quick search. One lugged several cases of equipment and, when the all-clear was signaled, muscled the bulky cases into the room with the body. No one spoke. The only sound in the room was the *whisk-whisk* of their bulky suits and the rasp of their respirators.

Nancy had never cared for ViraVax, nor for the Agency's security games that surrounded the labs, but tonight she was thankful for it. She was liaison between the United States and the Confederation of Costa Brava, so the Defense Intelligence Agency investigator would keep ViraVax, the Costa Bravan police and newshounds at bay. She had to tell her story, but at least it would be private. At least, in its ugly way, it would be to family.

Chapter 2

Major Rena Scholz arrived at the Bartlett apartment at half past midnight, just eight minutes after dispatch. She wore civilian dress under the hazard suit so that she could establish rapport with Nancy Bartlett as soon as possible. The major was already drenched in sweat and cursed the suit's faulty circulator. It seemed to the major that she spent all of her time in Costa Brava drenched in sweat, swatting bugs, daydreaming of home in Colorado. Tonight there would be no daydreaming.

The major toted a drab gray briefcase in her right hand, and over her left shoulder the rape kit hung like a bulky purse.

She posted MPs at front and back doors, activated her helmet camera, then attended to Nancy Bartlett.

"Nancy, I'm Rena Scholz," she began. "Do you remember me?"

Nancy sat at the dining room table without looking up. Splintered chairs and broken glassware littered the floor. Behind her, the dead man's mottled legs sprawled beside the overturned coffee table. One bullet had passed through the dining room wall and punched a hole the size of a quarter through the refrigerator door.

She put up a helluva fight, Scholz noted. The major tapped her gloveware and framed Nancy Barlett in a close-up.

Dried blood caked Nancy's blond hair black. A grotesque swelling dominated the right side of her face, also smeared with blood from her flattened nose. The silk housedress that she clutched around her was marred with bloody handprints, and her hands wore their dried blood like brittle gloves. Other than the facial damage, Major

Scholz saw no other wounds.

Nancy nodded, a barely perceptible nod.

“You’re the captain who briefed us before Costa Brava.”

Monotone, the major noted. *Affect: flat.*

Nancy’s swollen lips made enunciation difficult.

“That’s right.” Rena said, “only it wasn’t called Costa Brava then, and I’m a major now.”

“Time flies,” Nancy said.

Her voice remained flat and she didn’t look up, she didn’t move.

“Can I get you something? Coffee?”

“A shower,” Nancy said. “I’d like to clean up.”

The major’s helmet speaker crackled and her tech sergeant’s voice rasped, “Fluid and tissue tests negative, Major. He’s not a hot one. Not anything we know, anyway.”

“Thanks, Sergeant.”

The major stepped out of her hazard suit with relief, and not just from the heat. Setting a traumatized person at ease was hard enough, but being dressed like an alien made it damned near impossible.

Major Scholz disattached the recording device from inside her sweat-soaked jacket and set it on the table between them.

“I’ll have to examine you first,” the major said. “It’s the same exam you would get at the clinic.”

“No! You know what he did, you know who he is. . . . Can’t you just let me get clean?”

Major Scholz was relieved at the flash of anger in Nancy’s blue eyes. If she had continued staring impassively at the tabletop, then she would be a tougher nut to crack. Rena picked up an overturned chair and took a seat across the table. She folded her hands in front of her and spoke softly, her modulations practiced and precise.

“I got into the service as a nurse,” she said. “I’m here to help you. We can get this done quickly, right here in private, and get you cleaned up right away. We have to document everything, you understand why. Then you can clean up and we’ll move you to another apartment while you get your bearings. We don’t have to stay here for the interview. The exam will take ten minutes. I’m not going to hurt you and I’m not going to embarrass you.”

Nancy sighed and pulled the bloodstained silk tighter to her throat.

“All right,” she said. “Let’s get it over with.”

Major Scholz found no major wounds on Nancy Bartlett, though her vulva and vagina revealed multiple tears and her body was a mass of bruises. Bite marks that broke the skin, silent screams, tattooed both breasts and the back of her left thigh. Her nose had bled profusely.

Besides the usual body-fluid samples from the vaginal vault, the major was careful to take samples of dried blood from Nancy’s hair, fingernails, hands and abdomen. She asked Nancy whether she wanted a morning-after pill, which the woman accepted. The major was relieved. It meant she didn’t have to slip it to her by subterfuge.

She must know what they’ve been doing over there, the major thought. *He’s had nearly sixteen years to tell her.*

That was something she’d have to find out, on behalf of the Agency, but it could wait

until the secondary exam.

The major sealed her gloves and samples into a sterile bag and sent it off by courier, then she helped Nancy into the shower.

Now the tough part, the major thought.

She set up her camera, donned a new pair of gloves and began her examination of Red Bartlett's nearly nude body.

He lay prone with his legs crossed as though he had spun around as he fell. One white athletic sock, his only clothing, clung to his left foot. Rena noted the obvious: two exit wounds beneath the left scapula, which probably took out his major vessels and left lung; one centered at about T5 that must have paralyzed him immediately from the waist down and blown up his aorta. An unidentifiable number of rounds had turned his cranium to brain goo.

The major moved Bartlett's head enough to make out three blood-filled holes in the carpet. A new Galil 10mm handgun sat as though on display on one of the couch cushions. She counted eight shell casings on the floor around her.

She hit him three times in the kill zone before he went down, she thought.

The rest was insurance.

Red Bartlett's lower face and jaw were intact, and what she saw when his jaw dropped open forced a sharp intake of breath. Gobbets of flesh were caught between his teeth.

She tweezed them out and placed them into a sterile bag.

What she saw when she turned back to him never would have appeared in her report, if it had all stopped there. No one would believe her and, indeed, she would have questioned the observation herself.

Bartlett's flesh slumped and settled before the major's eyes. She would never forget the slightest rustle against the carpet, the foul odor of perforated bowel. Had it stopped there, the major could have completed her exam and noted nothing of it.

But it didn't stop there.

His skin sagged off its bones onto a bloody patch of carpet separating her from the body. Major Scholz had to work fast to get any samples at all. This action, though for naught, would earn her a commendation for bravery but not a promotion.

Complete rejection of tissue, she noted, *everything suppurating into a brown sludge, leaking out of splits in the skin.*

A horrible odor, with the heat.

Worse than gangrene, she thought.

Tests said he wasn't hot, but the major wasn't taking any more chances. She sealed herself back into her suit, then gave the appropriate orders. The major struggled to concentrate, to control her breathing. She did her job, and did it quickly before what was left of him was gone.

She tweezed a few bone samples into a bag, then documented her best memory of the more serious gouges, cuts and scratches that covered most of his upper body. Later she would note, on the Watchdog's visual replay, a dozen infected mosquito bites that dotted his lower legs.

The major sealed her gloves inside a second bag along with the rest of her samples, and the tech sergeant *whisk-whisked* out to the van with them. She spent a few minutes mentally scrubbing her hands over the kitchen sink, trying to think of something ordinary

or something pretty, something that didn't remind her of blown-up flesh and blood.

The major downloaded police reports on the other victims from her Sidekick and scanned them briefly before returning the device to its case. Murders of two young men and three vicious rapes had been reported in the past six hours, and her machine told her that Red Bartlett was a ninety-nine percent match as the perpetrator.

He could have broken under the pressure of his work.

Bartlett lasted longer than many who had worked out there. But ViraVax was private business and those were rumors, murders without bodies, a Costa Bravan problem.

That would be nice, Rena thought, but this one's messier than that.

Red Bartlett was Colonel Rico Toledo's best friend. And Colonel Rico Toledo was Major Scholz's boss.

She ordered a quarantine, which guaranteed Nancy Bartlett six days of heavy drugs, tests and significant memory refinement. When Nancy stepped into the embassy limo for her ride home at the end of the sixth day, she would know whatever the newspapers knew—whatever the colonel wanted them to know, whatever ViraVax taught her to know.

In six or seven days, Nancy Bartlett would remember that Red Bartlett had been tortured and murdered by several intruders, one of whom left behind a weapon traced to the Peace and Freedom Party, the predominantly Catholic guerrilla underground. Probably no one would ask Nancy Bartlett if she found it strange that Red Bartlett was the only Catholic employed by ViraVax, yet he was murdered by Catholics. At least one suspect would be shot while resisting arrest.

In Costa Brava, as in Northern Ireland or the Middle East, religion was a serious business, a very big business. In Costa Brava, the face-off came down to the Children of Eden versus the Catholics. ViraVax was built and operated by the Children of Eden, as was the current Costa Bravan government.

Besides, the major knew that nobody except the missionaries, who were rotated every two years, had ever transferred out of ViraVax no matter what their religion. Nobody who worked there for real would ever go home.

Red Bartlett sculpted artificial viral agents out of bits of protein. The major knew that Red did not invent the technique, but his steady, freckled fingers perfected it. His tiny agents manipulated genes, switched hormones and disease on and off, and he was good at it. He fought famine, and won. The company that employed him was not nearly so kind.

Like many other passionate researchers, Red devoted twelve-and sixteen-hour days to the lab. He would have worked seven days a week as well, if ViraVax management did not insist on everyone observing their Sabbath. His presence at the family apartment on Fridays and Saturdays often was fraught with frustration and impatience. He spent more and more time drinking with his Agency friend and the major's boss, Colonel Toledo.

Records indicated that Bartlett's caution at the lab was exquisite, particularly following nearly simultaneous contagion incidents in the Philippines, Japan and Brazil. The tech sergeant's tests had indicated that this was not one of those incidents.

Somebody has gone to a stage two study without authorization!

The major wondered whether it could have been Bartlett himself. Even Jonas Salk had injected himself first, proving the polio vaccine safe for others.

Who could have done this to himself?

Data on one of this night's murder victims scrolled through her Sidekick. Major