

PANDEMIC
love

DANI MATTHEWSON

CHAPTER ONE

Friday, February 28th, 2020

5:17 p.m.

Dear staff,

I need TWO volunteers to temporarily relocate upstairs to the virology department as of next Tuesday, March 3rd. As you may assume, this is in fact due to the increasing number of COVID-19 viral samples needing to be tested within the hospital. We have a responsibility to work as a team during this time so I am putting the feelers out there to see who among you would be willing to shift there temporarily. The work is similar to that here in pathology – prepping slides and reviewing samples – but I warn, that you will be considered at INCREASED RISK of contracting COVID-19, as you WILL be working with positive specimens at some point during your time there. Also, please be aware that this position could potentially involve strict self-isolation requirements when you are not at work as a precaution, including away from family and friends.

The deployment may potentially last up to six months, so please make sure that this is something you are absolutely willing to do. If you believe that you can adhere to these rules, please let me know at Monday's staff meeting, as candidates will be decided then. Attached are the new personal protective equipment (PPE) guidelines you will

need to follow, as well as further information regarding sampling and testing etc. for your perusal.

Warm Regards,

Helen Richards

Head Management, Pathology
Coastal Campus Hospital,
Morningson, NSW, Australia

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Dana

‘Wow! That was intense,’ I say, shifting awkwardly in my computer chair. I let the words of Helen’s email wash over me again. ‘You WILL be working with positive specimens at some point.’

I take a sharp breath, both alarmed and slightly horrified that these extremes or ‘extra precautions’ have already started. I guess I shouldn’t be too surprised that they need help upstairs in virology as their workload has doubled since they opened a COVID-19 screening clinic at the hospital. What should I do? Should I lend a useful yet very reluctant hand? I look around my small, albeit neat living room, perhaps looking for an answer or a sign. I’m not entirely sure what though. Potentially sensing my unease, Mr Jezebel picks that moment to jump up onto my lap. He’s a perfectly coloured ginger cat, with white feet, a friendly white face and a cute pink nose to top off his handsome features. As he nestles into my warm embrace, he gets a few long deep reassuring strokes, letting him know that everything is going to be okay.

As I move from my computer screen to grab my phone sitting next to the keyboard, it goes off, alerting me that Milly is requesting FaceTime. I openly sigh, knowing that this is going to be a long-winded conversation about the email we both just received.

‘Hey, Mil,’ I say, trying to sound somewhat upbeat, despite the real

seriousness of the email and my current mood. 'How are things?' I smile, trying not to give anything away, thinking that sometimes I really hate FaceTime.

'Not great,' she murmurs, looking forlorn on screen. 'Haven't you read the email yet?' She looks at me, somewhat perplexed – as usually, I'm the first one to mention emails that we have received, telling others about the changes in guidelines or new protocols to put into place.

'Yeah. I have and I'm just contemplating it for now. I'm not sure what to do.' There's a long pause between us.

'Well, I really... I... I just can't do it!' She practically yells at me, but I can tell she's only nervous. Her usually neat and tidy hairstyle has mostly come undone, with multiple strands of bright auburn hair framing her frantic face. I can tell that she is frazzled by the email. 'I've got the kids to think of,' she says, rubbing the side of her face. 'How on Earth could I work and potentially catch COVID-19 unknowingly and then bring it home to my family? I can't. I just can't.' She's pacing now, her face coming in and out of focus on the screen. I catch a glimpse, though, of the worried lines imprinted on her freckled forehead. 'I don't even know how to bring it up with Tom in the first place, let alone actually contemplate working there!' She's starting to steam. I can see all the thoughts, possibilities and terrible outcomes coming into her foresight, and I worry that she will break down further, potentially into tears. So, I interrupt.

'They won't expect you to do it, hun. Helen will understand that you have concerns for Tom and the kids. She's not going to force you into anything. We work with fifteen other people, so surely two from the bunch will volunteer. You will be fine. We will both be fine.'

Another pause. 'So, you're saying that you're not going to put your hand up then?' she asks.

I sense a quite sudden shift in our conversation, from one of concern to one of expectation.

'Well, no, I wasn't planning on it,' I share with her, feeling slightly defensive.

‘Oh. Okay, then,’ she mumbles. But I know she has more to say. ‘I’m just saying that maybe *you* should do it. I mean, there’s only a couple of people at work that are still single, and with no kids or family to bring the virus home to.’

Gee, what a kick in the guts. I am momentarily dumbfounded, with my mouth hanging open in response to her audacity. I know she can see it too.

‘Dana, I only mean that maybe you should consider doing it, is all.’ She is serious and I get it; throw the single ladies and lads to the wolves and leave her and her family out of it.

The world has already started to go mad; every man for himself, I guess. But then again, maybe she has a point. I let her know I will think about it and end the call before I get too irate and say something I don’t mean. She has been such a good friend to me over the years that I choose only to blame her poor tactics on apprehension.

We are basically the same age and were quite close when I was new at work. She was blessed, however, with finding her soulmate early on in the piece, unlike me, and naturally, we have drifted apart a little. She has been there, though, as a shoulder to lean on, providing comfort and words of encouragement, as I stumbled between a relationship or two.

She has since gone on to marry Tom and have two little girls who are the light of her life. They really are wonderful and I guess I understand where her priorities are right now. Nevertheless, I will always have her back, and forgive her for being somewhat selfish in this very unsure time. That’s what I keep hearing: ‘unsure time’. Unsure of what’s happening, unsure of what’s to come and unsure of how it’s going to end, which seems very dark and ominous casting its spell all over the world. I guess only time will tell.

I stay seated for a moment, collecting my thoughts. After a few deep breaths, I swivel in my desk chair, remote in hand, to turn on the television thinking it might be a useful distraction right now. I am wrong. The news interrupts the usual program with large

headlines flashing across the top of the screen. 'WHAT EXACTLY IS CORONAVIRUS?', 'ANOTHER CONFIRMED CASE IN NEW SOUTH WALES', 'IF YOU HAVE ANY RESPIRATORY SYMPTOMS, THEN YOU SHOULD GET TESTED'. There are pictures of people alongside the headlines but appear to be mostly from various places overseas. People in queues, people in masks, all distancing from one another. Not at all uplifting or inspiring, making the burden of the email even heavier and my decision whether to volunteer or not even harder.

Turning off the TV, I spin the chair back around to my computer and roll my head, stretching out my neck. I decide that the inevitable can't wait and I should do something proactive that usually helps when I'm making a hard decision like this; to make a pros and cons list. Mr Jezebel must be able to sense my change in mood from uneasiness to one of decision-making and jumps from my lap. I pull up my sleeves, figuratively, putting both hands at the keyboard, and begin.

Pros

- Helping colleagues at work by both taking one for the team and being an extra needed staff member in virology during their increased amount of caseload. Maturity at its finest.
- Change of scenery from pathology to virology, which may have its benefits. They say change is as good as a holiday. Yeah, right. Not quite the holiday I had hoped to take.
- Already have the skills needed, which is fortunate – for them.
- For six months max. So Helen says, but what if it's longer? How long is a piece of string?
- I already live alone so I guess I won't have too much trouble self-isolating. As long as being around Mr Jezebel is okay. I will have to ask that one, but surely it would be.
- My parents have already taken the emergence of COVID-19 very seriously so they will not want to have me around spreading my potential germs. Bonus for me I guess. I'll just

have to teach them how to use FaceTime or similar for when I'm getting lonely.

- I do enjoy groceries being delivered to my door. Self-explanatory.

Cons

- I like where I work; change isn't for everyone.
- I don't know where anything is in virology, like the laboratory, the microscopes or the tearoom. But I suppose there will be some sort of induction.
- I don't know anyone. I think I met a girl called Lizzie from there last year when I had to run upstairs unexpectedly when we ran out of screening fluid. So maybe she still works there. That's one.
- I have to wear lots of personal protective equipment (PPE). Gloves and gowns and masks, oh my!
- I could catch COVID-19 and die. Hmm, now although a tad melodramatic, that is a BIG one.

Albeit the cons list is a little slim in its convincing argument, the chance of potentially dying from a COVID-19 infection is really up there on my other more long-term list of things NOT to do. I look at Mr Jezebel curled up comfortably on the inviting yet somewhat fading tan leather lounge and decide that I'm tired too. I decide that's enough for tonight and shut down my computer. It's 8.30 p.m. A sigh escapes me and like a spinster, instead of the twenty-seven-year-old that I am, I decide it's time to go to bed. I put my used mug and plate into the sink, thinking I'll wash them in the morning when I have more energy. I trudge upstairs to my room, throwing on my pyjamas before climbing into bed. There's so much on my brain tonight, it makes it hard for me to settle into an ideal sleeping position. I finally roll over onto my back, staring up at the blank ceiling. Trying my luck at meditation, I start deep breathing, thinking that at least I have an answer for Helen come Monday and at this moment in time, it's a firm no from me.

CHAPTER TWO

It's Monday.

Tensions at work have been ramping up this morning due to Helen's email sent last Friday, like a pensive cloud has descended, and work has transformed from a once chatty environment to a very cold and distant one. I felt like everyone was looking around the department, wondering who would put their hand up as tribute; and that's almost what it is, volunteering for a war you cannot win. Why anyone would put their hand up is beyond me. Maybe loyalty, maybe moral fibre or maybe simply, those without fear. Surely fear has to play a big role in people's decision-making when dealing with COVID-19. Fear for themselves and for loved ones – that would make sense as to why the hoarding of items from grocery shops has started. It was the first thing I saw on the news this morning. People are scared and don't know how to deal with those feelings, so they are grabbing what they can while they can. I get it, I'm anxious right now too.

I splash cold water onto my face, looking up at my reflection in the work bathroom mirror. I appear slightly paler than normal, with my naturally golden-brown hair, looking a little dull and deflated, quite matching my mental state accurately. I make sure my mascara isn't running down my face before I take a closer look into my big brown eyes, a tad glazed with worry. Two people from my workplace, two colleagues and two friends are about to be sent away to deal with

what we others don't want to.

Silently psyching myself up for the meeting waiting to begin on the other side of the hallway, I take a deep breath, steadying my nerves. I finally dry my hands, throwing the paper towel into the trash on my way out. It's now or never.

* * *

'Welcome, everyone! Please, take a seat.' Helen has just started the meeting as I make my way over to a vacant seat towards the back of the room, trying to sink down a little in order to attract less attention to my still-drying face. I look around the room – a full house today. Looks like even those at home have come in for today's meeting. I'm here full-time so there's no meeting I have missed in over the five years of working here, except when on the occasional sick day, or mini holiday escape. I give a smile to Milly who is sitting near the far wall as she glances in my direction. She looks worried, nervously biting her lip, but she gives me a little nod back, acknowledging my presence. She must've been one of the first workers to arrive, now sitting there on high alert, but I can tell she has her defences up. This must really be getting to her if she can't even smile in my direction.

'Let's begin, shall we,' starts Helen, ever the authority figure, with her sharp nose, cropped blonde bob and red-rimmed glasses. 'As per my email last week, I need two people to move upstairs to virology to assist in the collection, preparation and screening of COVID-19 samples. With the numbers still rising every day, we are looking at a deployment of up to six months, potentially more.'

Everyone shifts in their seat, quiet as mice, listening intently.

'I have had interest from one person in the group so far, that being Angus.' Helen gestures in Angus' direction, giving him a warm but tight smile.

The whole crowd turns to look at Angus, some appear shocked, some relieved, that at least there's someone taking one for the team. 'Angus

and I have discussed his role thoroughly and after much consideration, we have agreed with his deployment starting tomorrow. So, thanks again to you, Angus.' Helen claps towards him and other staff members join in, not very enthusiastically, I have to say. Angus nods his head of silver-streaked dark brown hair in nervous appreciation. I notice that the lines on his forehead seem deeper than usual and that his smile no longer holds high on his face, reflecting that of someone who has had very little sleep.

Tomorrow! I cannot believe it. It's too soon, surely. Poor Angus, he doesn't know what's in store. But then again, none of us do.

Helen clears her throat and continues, 'This does, however, put me in a very precarious situation. I had hoped that more than one person would come forward. So, I ask now, is there anyone here who is willing to join Angus and venture upstairs to virology from tomorrow morning?'

Silence, nothing but silence. A pen dropping would be louder. 'Okay. I had a feeling it would go this way and unfortunately, that means we have to resort to older picking methods and choose someone's name from a hat.' Wide eyes and collective gasps were heard across the room at that moment, those of shock, terror and fear. You name it, you got it.

The next ten minutes are the most awkward; Helen and her assistant Rebecca with their prepared list of everyone's names cut them into little strips, roll them into balls and literally put them into a cap that is sitting off to the side in the lost-and-found cardboard box. The tension in the room is building as everyone looks around, hoping it's not them who gets chosen. How selfish can we be? At least that's what I'm thinking as I silently shake my head to myself.

'Okay then, we are ready to start! Rebecca, you hold the cap and I'll pick the name.' Rebecca lifts the cap up high in the air and I see all the faces in the crowd staring intently, holding their breaths, waiting for that inevitable moment someone's name will be called. Helen reaches up and plucks a name, rolling it open between her slightly shaking fingers. I think she knows who she would pick if she had the chance

but I'm not so sure that the cap will be as considerate.

She clears her throat. 'Uh-hm. The second person escorting Angus upstairs to virology is... Milly Copperfield.'

A large gasp comes from where Milly is sitting. I look over and she has both her hands covering her face, immediately crying into her palms. Oh no! Milly! Silence ensues in the room, apart from Milly's distressing tears. I look around. If it is this distressing for her, then I have no choice.

'Hold on, Helen!' I pipe up, standing to my feet. 'I am so sorry I didn't raise my hand earlier but I am happy to volunteer to go upstairs with Angus.'

I have drawn everyone's attention now, especially that of Milly and her wailing woes. Helen looks in my direction, seemingly pleased with my sudden outburst.

'Alright then, Dana, thank you for coming forward. Please come and see me after we are done here and we can discuss how this is going to work.'

I shut my eyes and lower back down onto my seat, breath taken. What did I just do? Am I going to regret this? No. I need to do this for my friend and for her family.

When the meeting comes to an end, Milly stands up and heads straight towards me. I gingerly stand, averting my eyes as I'm not sure what she might say, but then I feel a big warm embrace.

'Thank you, thank you, thank you!' she loudly whispers into my ear, then stands back, holding onto my arms with such gratitude showing on her face.

I sigh. 'You're welcome, Mil. As soon as Helen said your name, I just knew I had to bite the bullet, as they say, and do it,' I say sheepishly.

'Well, I owe you. No! My family owes you a massive debt. I do hope everything works out for you and it's not a whole six-month deployment.'

'I hope so too. Okay, well, I better go. I must meet Helen for "the talk",' I say, air quoting. 'I'll talk to you later though, okay?'

‘Yes, okay, sounds good. And thank you so much, again.’ She gives me another quick hug then turns and hurries out of the room, probably running to go tell her husband the almost upsetting news.

After all the other staff have left the room and I’m the last one remaining, I wrap my arms around myself tightly, thinking that perhaps I should have lingered on Milly’s hug a little longer. It may have just been my last one, indefinitely.

I knock on Helen’s door, clearing my throat to make my presence known. Helen looks to be finishing up a phone call as she gestures and mouths ‘one minute’ to me with her finger held up. She’s no doubt talking to the powers that be, making sure they are happy with me as the second nominee. I know Angus is an experienced, near-retirement kind of staff member, which is all well and good; I am just a bit concerned that I might be out of my depth.

‘Sorry about that, Dana,’ Helen says as she hangs up the phone and gestures for me to take a seat before her. ‘As you can imagine, I’m having to cross a lot of Ts and dot a lot of Is in a very short time frame.’

‘Yes, I gathered that,’ I say as I pull up the chair underneath me.

‘I just wanted to say... thank you, Dana, for volunteering to help virology out during this unsure time. I no doubt feel that it may have been a spontaneous decision, perhaps spirited by the selection of Milly in the draw?’

I look down nervously. Helen knows that Milly and I are good friends both here and outside of work.

‘Well, yes, actually,’ I confess. ‘I thought better me than her—’

‘—to do the job?’ asks Helen.

‘Uh, no... to contract COVID-19,’ I say timidly, playing with my fingers. It’s honestly what my decision came down to.

‘I see.’ Helen lets out a long sigh. ‘I don’t expect that you will contract COVID-19 from working upstairs. Yes, you will be working

with the virus but they have all the necessary precautions in place to make sure that does *not* happen. I am most confident that you will be fine during your time up there but you will have to follow their strict rules. In fact, I have a list of them here and I will give you five minutes to have a read-through and make sure that you understand and are okay with them.’

Helen passes over the two-page document and then heads out of the room. I assume to give me some privacy or perhaps to make another call. The first page (front and back) looks like rules that must be followed, and the second page (front and back) has diagrams and pictures of personal protective equipment (PPE) to wear, when/how to wear it, and information about the DECT phone and duress alarm I’ll be wearing. Well, that’s disconcerting. I don’t want to be under any duress. I grimace. Maybe I’m not quite ready for all that this entails; nevertheless, I read on.

Staff MUST:

- Access the virology department ONLY from the entrance at the east wing, second floor via swipe card.
- Carry ID/swipe card on persons at all times.
- Collect and wear a DECT phone from the department’s entrance each morning. This can be used to call out of the department and will also be used to call the staff member assigned to that number when needed throughout the day. The DECT phone also acts as a personal duress alarm when needed (see over page).
- Keep a 1.5m distance (wherever possible) from other staff members within the department and within the hospital.
- Abide by the personal protective equipment (PPE) guidelines (see over page) when dealing with specimen collection and screening.
- Pick up specimens from other departments/wards around the hospital when required.
- Wear fresh civilian clothes to work daily, changing into clean

scrubs on arrival to the department.

- Shower and wash hair daily. Women must wear hair up and out of their face. Men must be cleanly shaven (for better PPE mask fit).
- No jewellery to be worn except a plain wedding band.
- Clean and short fingernails, free from nail polish, artificial nails or any other adhesive.

The list continues over the page. Holy smokes. Talk about strict. I'm surprised there's no mention of individual bowel habits or the use of daily dental flossing. This list, albeit full-on, is still manageable; hell, there are already twenty or so people upstairs in virology who are having to abide by this list and I'm sure I can too. Helen chooses this moment to return, a blank look on her face, and not even a hint of uneasiness behind her eyes. I close the pages and rest them on my lap.

'How did you go? Do you think these rules are something you can follow during your time in virology?' Helen quietens, giving me one last chance to back down.

I clear my throat. 'Yes, Helen. I think I can make it work.'

She is suddenly enthusiastic, holding her hand out for me to shake. I stand to meet her hand, assuming the meeting is all but over.

'This is brilliant news!' She clears her throat. 'I have here your new swipe card to access virology from upstairs, east wing'—she hands it over—'and your current identification badge will suffice. Janine is the head of the department of virology and she will meet both you and Angus on the other side of the entrance door tomorrow at eight a.m. prompt.'

I look around for a pen; maybe I should be writing this down.

'As this is a lot to take in, and as you now have to get yourself prepared for tomorrow, I am going to give you the rest of the afternoon off. Grab what you need from your workspace and head home for the day.'

I take a deep steadying breath. 'Okay, Helen. Thank you.' I leave the room with surprising haste, heading over to my desk.

I grab my backpack from underneath and start to put my belongings

into it: my stationery, mug, tea bags, muesli bars and packet soups I've stored for those just-in-case-I-forgot-my-lunch days. I look around the room, soaking in my last view of the place for a while, so eerie and quiet whilst everyone is at lunch. I've never really been in here alone to see it. One final computer shut down and I am done. There's no one here to say goodbye to, so I decide to just head out on my own, shrugging my backpack onto my shoulders and walking to the side exit door. It's a quicker walk to the car from here and a less likely chance that I will run into anyone. I'm not really feeling up to faking a smile right now.

It's a cool afternoon and I notice that the wind has picked up as I hold my backpack straps closer to my chest and look down, watching my feet tread one over the other. I quickly make ground. It roughly takes five minutes to get to my car, heading down the exterior walkway, crossing the pedestrian crossing, heading down a flight of stairs and continuing onto the flattened asphalted pathway. Cars lined up, side by side. I look up to see my little blue micro of a car tucked away next to a large charcoal-coloured ute. I'm distracted only for a moment, but it's then that my foot finds an uneven patch in the ground, catching my shoe and sending me spiralling to the ground hands first.

'Ouch!' I call out, slowly pulling back onto my knees. I furiously wipe my hands on my pants before assessing the damage.

I am lucky to have one small graze on my right palm but I can feel there's at least one graze per knee too. I awkwardly get myself up, rubbing my hands together, face turning beet red with embarrassment. I look around the carpark, making sure no one has witnessed my little incident and find myself limping the rest of the way to the car, the outside of my left ankle quite sore as I do. I unlock the car and inelegantly drop into the driver's seat, giving another look to my hands and a rub of my knees. I hang my head, feeling like a fool. What a predicament of a day. Not quite how I had intended for it to go. I start up the engine, deciding that now's a perfect time to leave. Thank goodness there was no one else around to literally watch

me fall. I'm sore. I'm defeated. I'm embarrassed. As I wipe away a small tear that has escaped down my face, I put the car into drive and hurriedly pull away.