

# OUTBREAK

DAVIS  
BUNN



**BETHANYHOUSE**

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Published by Bethany House Publishers  
11400 Hampshire Avenue South  
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438  
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of  
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Bunn, T. Davis, author.

Title: Outbreak / Davis Bunn.

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota : Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2019]

Identifiers: LCCN 2018042273 | ISBN 9780764217920 (pbk.) | ISBN 9780764230011 (cloth) | ISBN 9781493418411 (e-book)

Classification: LCC PS3552.U4718 O98 2019 | DDC 813/.54—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018042273>

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Cover design by Kirk DouPonce, DogEared Design

19 20 21 22 23 24 25      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is dedicated to:

Dennis Brooke, Laurie Brooke, Mindy Peltier,  
Kathleen Freeman, Kim Vandel, Vanessa Brannan,  
Lynnette Bonner, Janette Lemme, Judy Bodmer,  
Karen Lynn Maher, Lesley McDaniel, Beverly Basile,  
Janalyn Voigt, Gigi Murfitt, Monique Muñoz,  
Gary Gilmore, Jessie McArthur, Ramona Furst,  
Janet Sketchley, Anitra Parmele, Mark Hall,  
Diana E. Savage, and Cara Dennis Thomas

And to the memory of:

Dave Jilson, Cornell Thomas, and Joy Gage

And most especially to:

Sarah Gunning Moser and Larry Moser

Steadfast.

Friends.

# one

Avery Madison was awakened at eleven minutes past midnight by a most unexpected phone call.

The caller was someone Avery would never have anticipated speaking with. Not directly. Certainly not without an army of aides and lawyers. Just the same, Avery was woken up and ordered to leave his safe little Annapolis lab. And travel here.

The Atlantic coast of Africa.

Avery flew through the night and most of the next day, landed in Liberia, and transferred by chopper to a research vessel leased by Bishop Industries. Which was a total surprise to Avery, who took pride in knowing every aspect of his company's research program.

The skipper was a white Zambian named Trevor. No last name, as far as Avery knew. Trevor wore a stained uniform and a blond beard dappled with oily sweat. He showed neither surprise nor scorn over Avery's complete lack of knowledge regarding boats and the sea. Upon arrival, Avery went below, showered off the multiple flights, and slept for eleven hours. He woke at sunrise to a sea so flat and featureless, it looked like pounded tin. Trevor

informed him they were seventeen kilometers off the coast of southern Senegal, approaching the Casamance River mouth. Before his midnight conversation with Kenneth Bishop, Avery would have guessed Casamance was a steak sauce.

Avery stood next to the ship's pilot and surveyed the empty vista stretching in every direction. If nowhere had a navel, it would be here.

Which was when the radar technician said, "Skipper, we've got a blip."

Avery's stomach had been doing swoop-and-dives ever since he'd boarded the research vessel. He stepped out onto the balcony rimming the pilothouse and gripped the painted metal railing. Avery could not see where the placid sea ended and the horizon began. His father the astronomer could tell him all the reasons why the equatorial sun seemed so much bigger. Just then, though, Avery was simply glad that the air helped to calm his nervous belly. There was no way he could be seasick. The floor of his lab was less stable. But telling himself his queasiness was all mental made no difference.

The skipper joined Avery on the balcony and said, "Time to suit up."

Kenneth Bishop's instructions had been brief in the extreme. The head of Bishop Industries had no idea whether his worries were valid. The World Health Organization had discounted the rumors as just another West African myth. Fears about health issues were regularly overblown, as Avery well knew. When Kenneth Bishop had made official inquiries, the WHO spokesperson claimed a poorly trained field nurse had spread unfounded rumors. Then the story had merely expanded with each telling, until the illness had become a shadow monster that felled thousands.

Only this time, the rumors ran in parallel with other secret reports Kenneth Bishop had received. The company's CEO had

refused to give Avery any other details. He wanted Avery to go in, check things out, and report back. Without having his observations clouded by factors that may or may not be true. Which Bishop could not confirm. Yet.

Avery followed the skipper down the narrow stairway. “Where is it?”

“Nineteen kilometers and closing.” Trevor opened the fore-deck locker and pulled out a white hazmat suit and oxygen tanks in a matching white backpack.

“Is that really necessary?”

“You’re the doc. But my orders were specific. You approach alone, you avoid any exposure. I bring you back healthy and in one piece.” Trevor held his arms out. “It’s your call. But if I were you, I’d suit up.”

The heat rose steadily with the sun. Avery often worked in a bio-secure lab and was so comfortable with hazmat suits, he could type a report in his gloves or work with fragile lab glass, no problem. But struggling into the suit’s stifling confines while on a drumming boat was different. The skipper had done this many times before, so he knew to start the battery-operated A/C and open the oxygen bottle’s intake valve before sealing Avery’s collar and taping the gloves at the wrists. The helmet came last, and instantly Avery was comforted both by the cool wash and the polarized faceplate.

By the time he was fitted and had inspected his equipment box one final time, the crew had lowered the dinghy into the water. The skipper performed a radio check, then Avery followed him along the lee railing, back to the stern stairs. Back to where the first mate had started the dinghy’s outboard motor and stood ready to cast him off.

Avery wanted to be brave. He wanted to be as calm about all this as the boat’s crew, but beyond that small craft stretched a

whole universe of unknowns. Everything his safe little lab had kept him from ever needing to confront.

The skipper must have seen such geek-type nerves many times before, because he said, “We’ll direct you by radar. We’ll monitor you the whole way. Any sign of trouble, you say the word *alert*. Now, show me you’re listening and repeat that word back to me.”

“Alert.” Avery did not recognize his own trembling voice.

“Good man.” Trevor pointed to the second motorized craft now moored alongside the dinghy, then at the two crew members donning hazmat suits of their own. “You call out, and we’ll be at your side in no time flat.”

Avery accepted the first mate’s hand and clambered into the dinghy. He stood gripping the wheel and watching the crew push him off. Out into the big unknown. Alone.

“The black lever is the throttle. It controls the engine’s power.” Trevor’s calm tone came through Avery’s earpiece. “Push it forward, slowly now. Good. Steer it just like you would a car.”

Only now did Avery realize how thirsty he was. He licked dry lips and asked, “Where do I go?”

“Steer toward your two o’clock. No, the other direction.” The man’s voice did a great deal to help steady Avery’s nerves. “Good. Now push the engine up a notch. Another. Okay, that’s fast enough. Your target should become visible in about five minutes.”

“Where will you be?”

“We’ve been ordered to hold well off. But we’ll keep you in visual range from the top deck.”

The moment of greatest fear happened when the sea changed. One moment it was all crystal blue. The next, the water became stained a sullen brown. Avery knew he had entered the Casamance River’s runoff. Yet his brain told him he had entered a danger zone. And the glimmer on the horizon only heightened his dread, for closer to shore the ocean waters appeared to be

stained a violent red. Avery tried to tell himself it was merely reflected sunlight. But his queasy gut said otherwise.

Trevor said, “Your target is fifteen hundred meters dead ahead.”

“I see it.” The fishing craft cut a low silhouette through the brooding waters.

“Okay, pull the engine control back a notch. Another. I have you clear in my binoculars. When you get close, swing the wheel to the left and slow further. That will plant you alongside—”

“Wait!” Avery said.

Trevor’s voice held tension for the very first time. “What is it?”

“*Don’t bring the ship any closer!*” Avery continued forward, then cut the engine when he was ten meters away from the fishing boat’s side. He could see the barnacles, the wormholes, the stained waterline, the net still attached to the two cleats on the bow railing.

The hand.

“Avery!” Trevor said his name for the first time. Only he did not speak it. He barked. “Report!”

“Something’s very wrong,” Avery said. Strangely, the sight of that motionless hand dangling over the starboard rail actually calmed him. His heart raced, but it felt as though ice pumped through his veins. “I think everybody’s dead.”

By the time Avery photographed the three bodies and gathered blood and tissue samples, the skipper had suited up and joined his two crew members on the emergency boat. The inflatable was seventeen feet long and powered by another massive Mercury outboard. The crewmen drew the two craft together as the skipper climbed into Avery’s dinghy. The inflatable held a pile of gear amidships, almost as tall as the seated men. The skipper asked, “You need more samples?”

The question confirmed the dread filling Avery's gut. "There are more boats?"

"Eighteen within radar range. None are moving."

"Then yes. I should—" He stopped speaking, because the skipper was already radioing for guidance from the mate handling the radar.

Trevor handled the boat with far greater speed than Avery could, which was good because the fishing vessels were spread out over a twenty-square-mile patch of water.

All of them were floating caskets.

After seven or eight boats, the revulsion diminished to a stain no stronger than the sea's brownish tint. Avery was able to look beyond the obvious and begin doing what he was here for. Which was to search for reasons, and that meant analyzing the deathly scenes for similarities.

The problem was, he couldn't find anything.

None of the fishermen showed any marks. There were no pustules marring their skin. Nor was there visible evidence of a particular disease. The longer he and the skipper continued their silent journey, the more focused Avery became on the mystery.

All these victims had been cut down in the middle of just another day's work. Nets had been spread from most of the boats. The central holds were half filled with the day's catch. There clearly had been little to no warning. Which meant three things.

Whatever killed them had a very short gestation period.

The infection rate was almost one hundred percent.

The chance of survival was virtually nil.

By the time they had taken samples from the last boat, the sun was sinking into a blood-red sea. The Casamance River mouth was less than a kilometer west of them. When Avery closed his sample box, he asked, "Can we go have a look at the river mouth?"

In response, Trevor restarted the motor and aimed the craft toward the coast.

Fifteen minutes later they stopped and drifted a hundred meters off the southern shore. Trevor cut the engine and said, "That's the town of Diembering straight ahead. Half the population fishes, the other half smuggles. In recent years, the town has spread to the river's northern shore. The one bridge there directly in front of you is the only link other than boats."

The beach was the same muddy brown color as the tidal wash. The vegetation beyond the town formed a green impenetrable wall. Avery said, "I don't see any movement."

"What's more telling is smoke from cooking fires," Trevor said.

Avery scouted the town. "What smoke?"

"Exactly." Trevor started the engine. "We're all done here."

Only on the return journey did Avery understand what role the second craft played. The gathering dusk became illuminated by tiny flickering flames, bright as floating candles. A dozen or more, all of them burning fiercely.