

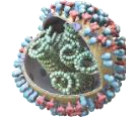
Patient Zero: Chronicles of a Deadly Transference

By Ashley Payne, PhD.

© 2025 Ashley Payne. All rights reserved.

Patient Zero: Chronicles of a Deadly Transference

By Ashley Payne, PhD



Author's Note:

This story was born from the tension between science and silence, truth and fear. As someone rooted in public health and storytelling, I've often wondered what happens when we trace a crisis to its biological origins, but also to its human ones. Patient Zero is a speculative reflection on accountability, vulnerability, and the cost of curiosity. It explores the weight scientists carry and the questions they leave behind. This story is fiction—but it's haunted by reality, perhaps, by healing, too.

Setting:

Patient Zero: Chronicles of a Deadly Transference is a grounded sci-fi thriller that follows a brilliant epidemiologist who uncovers a link between a global outbreak and her past involvement in a controversial vaccine trial. As political pressures mount and the media hunts for someone to blame, she's forced to confront the ethics of her silence and the ghost of the patient who started it all. Blending scientific realism with emotional tension, this short story is ideal for adaptation into a dramatic pilot, audio fiction series, or limited prestige series exploring science, scandal, and redemption.

To the lab.....

Part I.

Dr. Ra Dorse hadn't blinked in nearly a minute. The sterile light of her research terminal flickered in her glasses, illuminating eyes that rarely betrayed fear. She wasn't one to panic. She was one to act measured, methodical, and relentless. But now, staring at the sequence unraveling across the screen, she sat completely still, 98.7% identical. The sample ID matched one she hadn't seen in years—D0456. Buried in an encrypted archive, forgotten until tonight.

The air in the lab was cool and filled with the gentle hum of equipment that usually comforted her. Now it all felt too loud. The computer pinged again, and the sequence was stable, mutating slowly. That meant it had been here somewhere longer than they thought. She tapped open the file history. Her name sat at the bottom of the chain of custody.

Collected: 2 years ago
Trial: East Africa
Project: ImmunoVectorVAX
Subject: Unknown

Dr. Dorse closed her eyes, and then it came back as the sunlight filtered through the canvas walls of a field tent, the dry taste of worry in her throat, the laughter of a child echoing in the distance. A vial was placed in her hand with her signature on a clipboard. Promises made. She had trusted the protocol and the science. And now?

Now the same strain was burning through four countries. Hospitals are overflowing, and governments are scrambling, with entire cities closing in on themselves. And at the center of it, a name, a file, a memory. She stood too quickly, the room tilting slightly. Her breath caught somewhere between anger and disbelief. Her phone rang twice before she snatched it up.

"Soulee," she said, voice low. "I found it. It's not random. It's us. The trial. Patient zero... It's ours."

There was silence on the line. Then Soulee's voice was clipped and cautious. "Ra, that was classified. How did you—"

"I never deleted the backups." Another silence. The kind that carried too much meaning.

"We need to talk," Soulee said finally. "Off-record."

Ra's eyes returned to the screen as data still danced in front of her. She felt no comfort in it now, only a strange grief. Like mourning something before it's fully gone. Outside, the rain began to fall, soft at first, then steady. The kind of rain that didn't cleanse, just reminded you what was already sinking.

Part II.

Dr. Dorse didn't sleep as the rain had given way to a thick and soupy fog, clinging to the windows of her apartment like a question she wasn't ready to answer. Her laptop glowed from across the room, but she kept her distance. Every time she looked at it, she saw the truth she could no longer unknow. She understood that she was part of this outbreak, a horrible disaster. However indirect, her hands had touched the spark that lit the fire. The world hadn't learned the name of the virus yet, only the numbers: cases, deaths, ventilators, shortages. What they didn't know was the story behind those numbers. The trial, lab, and file that should've been archived, erased, and never seen again.

Ra wrapped her hands around a mug of lukewarm coffee, more for something to hold than anything else. Across from her, her dog-eared copy of *The Hot Zone* lay open on the table. The irony wasn't lost on her. She used to read it for inspiration. Now, it felt like prophecy. Her phone buzzed....encrypted line.

"Soulee!" She hesitated. Answering meant stepping into something irreversible. But silence was a choice too, and she'd already made too many of those.

She slid her finger across the screen. "I can't cover for you," Soulee said, not wasting time. "I'm not asking you to."

"You know what this means, right? If the data connects our trial to the first cluster, you'll take the fall." Ra exhaled. "Maybe I should." A beat of silence.

"No," Soulee said. "What you should do is help fix it, quietly. Through the right channels. We'll re-sequence the strain and check your original samples. If there's a mutation pathway, we'll find it."

Ra looked out at the street below. Lights blurred in the fog. The world kept moving, unaware that its foundation was already cracking.

"Patient zero didn't have to exist," she whispered. "Not like this."

"You didn't create the virus, Ra. You created a system that didn't listen when you tried to do it right. That's different." Was it? She didn't know anymore.

"Send me everything you have," Soulee continued. "We'll do it together, but if this leaks before we're ready, before we understand it, they'll bury you and the truth."

Ra ended the call without answering, not out of disrespect but because she wasn't sure what kind of truth she wanted to protect anymore. She turned toward the laptop. The file was still open. She clicked SAVE AS.

THREE DAYS LATER

Ra's name trended for six hours before the agency could suppress it. Not because she leaked the file or because of whistleblowers or saboteurs, but because the outbreak had found its voice. And in that voice, someone recognized hers. The headlines weren't kind.

Immuno-Vector Lead Scientist Linked to Early Trial in Contagion Zones. WDF(World Disease Factors) Insider May Have Withheld Key Data in Global Spread. Patient Zero Traced to Experimental Vaccine Project: Cover-up Suspected.

There, buried beneath speculation and half-truths, was her face, an old press photo. Bright-eyed and idealistic with the kind of face people like to blame when they're scared. She watched the footage from her hotel room, an anonymous place off-grid, booked under an alias. The walls were the kind of yellow that pretended to be cheerful. Luis Ortega, a young and sharp journalist, appeared on screen, dangerous in the way that truth-tellers always are.

"According to confidential sources," he said, "the original sequence of the current virus may predate the first confirmed cases by nearly two years. If that's true, we're not just dealing with an outbreak; we're dealing with a failure of global systems. Of accountability."

He paused dramatically, "And someone out there knows more than they're saying."

Ra quickly closed the laptop. She couldn't breathe, and suddenly, there was a knock at the door, soft and intentional. She froze! Another knock three times, then silence. She walked to the door and placed her hand on the knob but didn't turn it and just stood there. If it were Soulee, she'd bring protection and strategy. If it were Luis, he'd bring the world. She opened the door, and in the hallway stood a man, early 20s. He was unshaven and tired, holding a folder. No badge or press credentials. "I think I'm the one you're looking for," he said.

Ra stared. He stepped forward quietly. "I'm not supposed to be alive," he added. "But I think I was your patient zero."

About the Author

Ashley Payne, PhD, is a Scientist, storyteller, and spiritual creative whose work lives at the intersection of public health, ancestral memory, and speculative fiction. With a background in infectious disease and health equity research, her writing bridges the scientific and the sacred. Ashley is the voice behind #TheScientistWhoWrites, creating narrative experiences that explore identity, truth, and transformation.