

DISTURB

by JA KONRATH

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The world, it seems, does not possess even those of us who are adults completely, but only up to two thirds; one third of us is still quite unborn. Every time we wake in the morning, it is like a new birth.

—Sigmund Freud

Sleep is the only medicine that gives ease.

—Sophocles

Prologue

“I'm going to kill somebody. Soon.”

David leaned back on the mattress, fingers laced behind his blond head. His overdeveloped biceps strained the fabric of his T-shirt sleeves. He flexed his pecs, and his chest trembled like a bull shaking off horseflies.

Manny muted the television, sighing loudly enough for David to hear him. This was a familiar dialog.

“No, you won't. You don't want to get in trouble again.”

David grunted. He stared at the ceiling, imagining that this was a real apartment with people living above and below. But it wasn't real; it was a cage, pure and simple. The fake scenery outside the window and the phone that only dialed out to one number made it even more ludicrous.

“I'd rather go back to prison than stay here.”

“You know that isn't true. This is better for us, David. We can get through this. Look at all we've been through together.”

Manny was right. They'd been through hell. But the future only promised extra helpings, with no end in sight.

“I can't take it.”

“You have to.”

David clenched his teeth. The hate buzzed around in his head like a hornet's nest, desperately trying to get out. He made his decision.

“I want you to kill me.”

Manny turned away, shaking his head.

“No. That's not an option.”

“Anyone can take a life, Manny. All you need is the proper motivation. What if I took that fire ax in the hallway and chopped up your little girlfriend? Does it have to come to that?”

“I hate it when you talk like this.” Manny stood up and went to the kitchenette. He got a glass of water, staring at David's reflection in the framed Dali poster hanging above the sink. His stomach fluttered. David was older, bigger, and had a vein of mean running through him. A rich vein, that seemed to be growing. “I'm sure they're listening.”

David laughed, a sound like a large dog growling.

“Of course they're listening. We signed our privacy away. It's lost, just like our freedom. Our minds are next.”

Manny finished the water and sat on the edge of the bed. He tried to sound soothing. “We're a team, David. We have to see it though. That was the deal.”

“To hell with the deal.”

“David...”

“How can you handle it, Manny? How can you handle the dreams?”

Manny thought about the question. He suppressed a chill.

“I handle them.”

“Well, I can't. I have to get out. And if I leave, you know that a lot of people are going to die. I can't control myself, Manny. It's like a thirst.”

“It'll get easier. You'll see.”

David pressed his hands to his face, as if he were trying to keep his skull from exploding.

“At least you're the prize show dog. I'm the big mistake, kept in the shadows. Science gone wrong. Kill me.”

“No.”

David reached out and grabbed Manny by the hand, imploring.

“Just do it. Stick a knife in my ribs.”

“I can't.”

David's grip tightened. Manny tried to pull away, but couldn't. A shadow settled behind David's face.

“I can hurt you. I can hurt you real bad.”

“Please... David...”

With a quick snap, David bent Manny's pinkie backwards. The pain was instant and nauseating.

Manny yanked his hand free. His little finger jutted out at an odd angle. The blood leeches from his head, leaving his face ghost-white. He tried to stand, but his knees were spaghetti.

David's eyes got big. He put a hand on Manny's shoulder.

“Manny, Jesus, I'm sorry.”

Manny pulled back.

“Get away from me.”

“I didn't mean it. I swear. You see how I get? I can't control it.”

Manny managed to get to the bathroom. He ran cold water over his hand, but it didn't numb the pain.

“Did I break it again?”

“Go to hell.”

“I think it's just dislocated. I can pop it back.”

He gently tugged Manny's wrist away from the sink. Manny began to shake.

“Please, go away.”

“This'll just take a second.”

David got a good grip on the dislocated finger. Manny felt the bile rise.

“No, please...”

For the longest moment, Manny was convinced that David wanted to twist it backwards even farther, wrench the finger until it came off. But David simply gave it a quick tug and the pinkie snapped back into place. He stared at Manny, eyebrows knitted.

“I’ll stick with it, Manny. For you. But promise me that if I hurt anyone else, you end it for me. I know you could do it. You’re not as squeaky clean as they think.”

The pain was subsiding, and Manny’s stomach began to settle.

“I’ll think about it.”

“Sure. You do that. We have plenty of time.” David grinned. “And plenty of fingers.”

David left, and Manny locked the bathroom door. The situation was getting worse, and the mandatory shrink visits didn’t help at all. He thought about telling one of the research team, but that would ruin everything they’d worked so hard for.

Manny stared into the mirror, searching himself for an answer.

Maybe murder was the only alternative.

But could he actually kill him? Could he actually kill his own brother?

Manny looked down at his swollen finger and wondered if he could.

Chapter 1

“What would you give for an extra thirty years of life?”

The big man was no longer at the podium. He circulated among the tables, his grandiose voice having no need for a microphone. A neatly trimmed beard, the color of a black bear, extended along his jaw line and connected with a shock of matching wiry hair. Except for some busboys hustling empty plates, all the eyes in the banquet room, over a hundred sets, were on him.

“Think of it. More time to spend with your family. More time to get all the things done that need to get done. More time to enjoy life to the fullest. Time is money. Time is precious. But most of all, time is a resource, like oil or natural gas. How much is it worth to you?”

He paused, eyes twinkling. Dr. William May had seen this speech once before, but was no less impressed. Unlike other scientists Bill had met in his career, Dr. Nikos Stefanopolous had magnetism to match his brilliance. The barrel chested Greek could have hawked cooking utensils on late night TV with equal aplomb.

“We sleep one third of our lives. Thirty years. We don't have any say in the matter. But what if we did? What if we could take a simple pill that could replace a full night's sleep? Think of it.”

The audience did think of it, Bill included. An impressive feat, if possible.

“You would feel just as refreshed, just as fit, just as rested, as if you'd spent eight hours in bed. But instead of eight hours, this pill would do the same amount of work in just twenty minutes. Senator, I'm sure a pill like this would do wonders for your filibusters.”

The room laughed, and Senator Donner acknowledged with a nod and a grin.

“Such a pill is the culmination of twenty years of research into sleep. My daughter, Dr. Theena Boone, and myself have dedicated a good portion of our lives to the study of sleep, and its effects on the body. What does sleep actually do? What is its purpose? What chemical changes occur in the body during sleep? And most of all—can it be synthesized? At this point I'd like to introduce Mr. Emmanuel Tibbets.”

Dr. Nikos rallied some applause. Bill sat up, craning his neck to see over the table in front of him. This was new.

A large man got up from the head table and walked to the empty podium. Like Dr. Nikos, he was in a tuxedo. But his fit better, every cut and pleat hinting at the chiseled physique underneath. He had dirty blonde hair, cut in a military style, and his features were hard and angular, like a child's action figure.

“Thank you, Dr. Nikos. I would like everyone in the audience to think about the last time you've been up all night. We've all experienced the symptoms; being lethargic, grumpy, unable to concentrate or focus. We look, and feel, terrible, and that's from missing only one night's sleep. How many of you have been awake for more than twenty-four hours?”

There was a show of hands, over half of the audience.

“How about forty-eight hours?”

Most of the hands dropped.

“And seventy-two hours?”

Only a few remained raised.

“After seventy-two hours, your judgment becomes extremely impaired. You drive with the same skill as someone with a blood alcohol level of zero point two. You'd be constantly falling asleep, taking micro-naps for minutes at a time, without being aware of it—even if staying awake was a matter of life and death.”

Bill could relate. He'd had his share of sleepless nights. Especially in the last year.

“After seventy-two hours without sleep, you begin to hallucinate. You become paranoid, delusional, unable to function. Isn't it true, Dr. Nikos, that an EEG done on a person without three days of sleep is identical to someone suffering from acute schizophrenia?”

“True, Manny.”

“How was my last EEG?”

“Perfectly normal.”

“I ask the audience, do I seem to be experiencing any symptoms of sleep deprivation? Would you believe me if I told you I've been without sleep for seventy-two hours? How about ninety-six hours? A hundred and twenty? Dr. Nikos, do you have the time?”

The doctor made a show of rolling up his sleeve and looking at his watch.

“It just turned nine o'clock.”

“Nine o'clock. Which means I've been awake now for nine hundred and eleven straight hours.”

The audience was stunned to silence. After a moment, a single person began to applaud. It snowballed into a roaring ovation. Bill joined in.

Dr. Nikos joined Manny on the stage, eyes twinkling. He patted the larger man on the shoulder, then held out his palm to quell the clapping.

“Manny is part of the final phase of our project, the clinical test subject. Our drug, Nonsomnambulox—N-Som for short, has already passed the Chemistry and Pharmacological reviews of the Food and Drug Administration. Manny has taken one pill every day for the last thirty-eight days, which was the last time he's had a conventional night of sleep.”

The applause began to build again. Dr. Nikos talked above it.

“The R & D is nearing an end, and pending Medical approval, we're ready to go into production. Needless to say, what this drug could do for the economy, for the efficiency of the human race, for the quality of life of every person on this planet—it staggers the imagination. We can take some questions.”

Hands went up throughout the room, lawyers and politicians and businessmen; a who's who of status and influence in the Midwest.

“Is the pill expensive?”

“We plan on introducing N-Som to the market at fifteen dollars a dose. Are eight hours of your

life worth fifteen dollars?"

"What about side effects?"

"I'll let Manny field that one."

Manny grinned, showing perfect teeth.

"Since taking N-Som, I've lost fifteen pounds in fat and gained eight pounds in muscle mass. My immune system and healing abilities have increased dramatically. I also don't get tired. In fact, three days ago I was on a treadmill for eighteen hours."

The audience murmured its disbelief. Dr. Nikos beamed.

"We were even more amazed by this than you folks are, but we've found a reasonable scientific explanation. N-Som stimulates the pituitary gland, increasing production of human growth hormone. Manny may be the most fit human being on the face of the earth."

A woman at a far table spoke.

"What about dreams? I, for one, wouldn't give up my dreams for anything."

Someone else chimed in. "I love my dreams, too."

There were many nods of agreement, Bill one of them. On most days his dream life was better than his real one.

"The dreams." Manny's eyes got a faraway look, and his smile was beatific. "They're the most vivid dreams you'll ever have. Even though they only last a few minutes, they seem to go on for hours. And you remember them, every detail, from beginning to end."

"And when does the stock go public?"

General laughter. Dr. Nikos joined in.

"That depends on the FDA. And actually, the CDER agent responsible for N-Som's approval is sitting among us. Bill, please come up here."

Bill shook off the momentary surprise and was beckoned up to the podium. This was unexpected. Though getting in front of groups was part of his job, he liked to be prepared first.

He walked to the stage and Dr. Nikos shook his hand warmly. Manny offered his hand next; his grip was like slamming your fingers in a car door. Bill disengaged himself and Dr. Nikos put an arm around his shoulders.

"May I introduce Dr. William May, from the Center for Drug Evaluation and Research. We shall continue to extend our fullest cooperation to the Food and Drug Administration, and I'm sure once our data is examined, N-Som will be judged even safer than aspirin."

More applause. Bill felt a tad queasy; he wasn't sure if his stomach was balking at the crème brulee, or if he was afraid he'd be asked to say a few words. Thankfully, Dr. Nikos wrapped up his speech and escorted Bill back to the head table amid a standing ovation.

"Dr. May, let me introduce my daughter, Dr. Theena Boone."

Dr. Boone was around Bill's age, in her mid-thirties, dark and shapely. She had a smaller version of her father's Greek nose and enough hair on her head for several women. The soft black curls rested on her bare shoulders, and the neckline of her dress made eye-contact an effort.

“A pleasure, Dr. May.”

Bill took her hand and responded in kind.

“Please sit, Dr. May.” Dr. Nikos pulled out a chair for Bill. “I have to be social for a little bit.”

Dr. Nikos and Manny blended into the gathering crowd. Bill sat and faced the woman. He'd neatly slid from one uncomfortable situation into another. Small talk wasn't one of his strengths.

“Your father is an excellent speaker.”

To Theena's credit, she seemed completely at ease. As if suddenly being forced into conversation with a complete stranger was normal for her.

“He believes all Greeks should be outspoken; the result of seeing Zorba too many times.”

Unlike her father, Theena didn't have the slightest trace of an accent. Her voice was low, but soft in an undeniably feminine way.

“He does remind me a bit of Anthony Quinn.”

“Don't let him hear you say that; he'd be insufferable. I'm to understand that you'll begin your investigation tomorrow?”

Bill nodded. “It's not an investigation, really. All I do is review your testing and give a preliminary report to the committee.”

“But you have the power to stop the process before it gets to that, correct?”

“Yes.”

She took a sip of wine, leaving the tiniest trace of red lipstick on the glass. The rim had a complete circle of half moons around it, like a deliberate design. Bill thought of his own wine, back at the other table. A nice Merlot would take off the edge.

“I've seen Dr. Nikos lecture before, but this was the first time he introduced Manny. It's incredible.”

“Yes, we're all terribly excited. Manny especially. This drug has done wonders for him.”

“Was he the first human test subject?”

Theena's demure expression flickered.

“Actually, no. There was someone else who began the program at the same time as Manny. But there were... complications.”

“Something to do with the drug?”

“No, nothing like that. It was a personal matter. The N-Som worked fine.” Theena smiled. “I hope you aren't ignoring Mrs. May to be sitting here with me.”

Bill automatically looked at his wedding band.

“She... died last year.”

“I'm so sorry. Was it sudden?”

Bill almost blurted out a yes. He caught himself in time.

“She was sick for a long time.” The image of Kristen, lying in the hospital bed, filled his mind. “And you? Is Mr. Boone off mingling?”

Theena wiggled her large diamond ring. It caught the light and winked.

“Last I heard he was in Texas. I kept the name because anything is preferable to Stefanopolous. So, how does one get a job at the FDA?”

Bill thought about the long, boring version. After completing his studies at the University of Chicago and his internship at Rush-Presbyterian, Bill was undecided between a residency or private practice. He'd known from a young age that he'd be an M.D., but when the day finally came he realized that he enjoyed learning about medicine more than actually practicing it.

Congress made the decision for him. The year was 1992, and they'd just passed PDUFA—the Prescription Drug User Fee Act, which authorized the FDA to charge drug sponsors for their services, expediting the approval process. Suddenly CDER, which had been impossible to break into, had hundreds of openings for reviewers. Bill had leapt at the chance.

“I was just in the right place at the right time. How about you? You're a chemist, right?”

“Actually, I'm a pathologist, like my father. Specializing in neuropathology, of course.”

Bill's confidence slipped another notch. Beautiful, and a brain surgeon.

“Exciting work?”

Theena laughed, a rich, warm sound.

“I think I've developed a permanent squint from looking in the microscope so often. No, it's not what I would call exciting. But it's not without rewards, either. What time shall we expect you at DruTech tomorrow?”

“Whenever is convenient.”

“Anytime is fine. Research continues around the clock. Your predecessor preferred to work during the night shift.”

Bill raised an eyebrow. “My predecessor?”

“The prior CDER agent. Did you ever find out what happened to him?” Theena studied Bill's face. “You have no idea what I'm talking about, do you? He was sent by the FDA last month to review some preliminary research, worked with us for a week, and then left without a word. A Dr. Bitner?”

Bill knew Michael Bitner. They'd golfed on several occasions. He'd have to give him a call, find out what had happened.

“Someone call the police!”

The cry came from the other side of the banquet room, followed by shouts for a doctor. Bill hurried through the crowd, Theena on his heels. The activity was centered around the Men's Room. Bill had to shove gawkers out of his way to get in.

“I'm a doctor! Give me some room!”

At first, all Bill saw was blood. It took his brain a second to register that under all that blood was Dr. Nikos.

Theena screamed.

Bill knelt down, soaking his pants leg. He automatically reached for the carotid artery, then stopped his hand when he saw the gash in the doctor's throat, deep enough to expose the esophagus.

Dr. Nikos was gone, long beyond anyone's help.

“Over here! There's another!”

Bill was ushered over to a second pool of blood. In the center of it was Manny. His tuxedo shirt was shredded, over half a dozen wounds covering his abdomen and chest. A scalpel handle protruded from his sternum.

“Tried... tried to save... da...”

Manny coughed, spitting red. Bill tilted Manny's face to the side so the blood didn't run down his throat. His pulse was strong, but when Bill tore off Manny's shirt he didn't hold out much hope. The guy looked like a lasagna.

Bill left the scalpel embedded, concerned that removal would cause more bleeding. He enlisted four guys with cloth napkins to keep pressure on Manny's many wounds. He also put Manny's feet up on a chair to stave off shock.

The paramedics arrived shortly thereafter, intubing Manny and carting him away.

Bill looked around the room, trying to spot Theena. He went back into the banquet hall, the crowd parting for him when they noticed his bloody clothing. He checked her table, the hotel lobby, and finally the parking lot.

She was gone.

Chapter 2

Bill was in the shower when the phone rang. He let the machine pick it up, holding the curtain partially open to hear who it was.

“Bill, this is Theena Boone...”

Bill grabbed a towel and hurried out of the bathroom. The fact that Theena was attractive and single wasn't lost on him, but Bill tried to rise above that and convince himself his concern was professional. She'd just lost her father.

“Theena?”

“Bill. Hello. I... was wondering what time you were stopping by DruTech today.”

The question caught him completely by surprise.

“I wasn't planning to, actually. I figured, because of yesterday—how are you holding up?”

“I'm strong, Bill. Dad raised me that way. He also wouldn't want this to interfere with our work. N-Som was his dream. Now that he's gone, it's even more important that I finish what he began.”

Tough lady. Bill wondered how much of it was genuine, and how much was bravado.

“How's Manny?”

“Surprisingly well, for fifteen stab wounds. Collapsed lung, perforated small intestine, internal bleeding. He needed over sixty stitches, but is listed as stable.”

“Have the police found anything?”

“Manny said there were two attackers, both with ski masks on. No leads yet. Are you coming?”

Bill glanced at the clock on the nightstand. “I can be there by ten, if that's okay.”

“That's fine. I'll meet you in the lobby.”

Theena hung up. Bill dried off and went into the bedroom. He noticed a spring in his step that hadn't been there a few minutes ago. Being honest with himself was a trait Bill nurtured, and he knew he was excited to be seeing Theena again so soon.

Admitting it brought guilt. He glanced at his wife's side of the closet, full of clothes. Kristen's presence was still there; her plants that Bill carefully maintained, their wedding pictures on the walls, the Hummel figurines she collected. The casual observer couldn't have guessed that the condo had been occupied by a single man for more than a year.

Bill dressed in his best suit, a dark blue Armani pinstripe. He could tie a Windsor knot with one hand in complete darkness, but he still preferred the solace of a mirror. There was a tinge of red in his blue eyes; something he hadn't been able to get rid of since Kristen got ill. He used some Visine, then combed his light brown hair and noted that he'd need a trim soon. After a quick electric shave he was in his Audi and on the way to DruTech Industries.

The weather was unusually tame by Chicago standards, especially this late in the fall. At every crosswalk there was at least one person in shorts, and the few jackets Bill saw were draped over shoulders rather than being worn. The sun felt good on his face for a while, but he eventually pulled

down the visor when the glare became too much.

He played stop and go, eventually reaching I-90 and the path to the suburbs. Traffic was hellish, made even worse by the omnipresent construction, which had closed one lane off with orange cones. Bill had lived in the Windy City his entire life, and he'd never been on the Kennedy Expressway without suffering some kind of delay. The trip took seventy minutes, ten of which were spent on the off ramp to Schaumburg.

DruTech occupied an impressive five story building off a frontage road parallel to the expressway. It was sandwiched between a water reclamation plant and an AM radio station. Bill parked in a lot that was nearly empty. The front entrance was located between two water sculptures, marble and cascading, vaguely Roman in theme.

The lobby was expansive, the size of a small movie theater. It continued the motif, with polished terrazzo floors, white columns, and a front desk located under an arch. There were two elevators next to a small cafe, which was dark and quiet. In fact, Bill didn't see any people anywhere, other than the security guard.

He was sitting behind the desk, dressed in a gray uniform which fit a little too tightly. Before Bill had a chance to say a word the guard had a black phone in his hand.

“Good morning, Dr. May. I'll tell Dr. Boone you've arrived.”

“Thank you.”

Bill busied himself with wrinkle patrol, the trip having done cruel things to his suit. He was checking his hair in a chrome garbage can when Theena arrived.

Her white lab coat ended several inches above her knees, under which the hem of a short black skirt was barely visible. The doctor's face was carefully made up, her lipstick a more conservative shade than the previous night's. She didn't seem bereaved in the slightest.

“Hello, Bill. Thank you for coming.”

A handshake led to an awkward, but welcome, hug.

“If there's anything I can do.”

She pulled back and smiled. “Welcome to DruTech. Let me show you around.”

She took Bill by the arm and led him through the empty lobby. He commented on the dearth of people.

“Oh, that's Albert's doing—Albert Rothchilde. He insisted everyone take the day off due to yesterday's tragedy. Just a security guard and us today.”

“I've met Albert. Cheerful guy.”

“When the stock is up, yes. How much do you know about DruTech?”

“A bit. DruTech is a subsidiary of American Products. They make dish soap.”

Bill, like millions of other Americans, had a box of it at home.

“Correct. They lead the industry in environmentally conscious cleaning agents. Soaps, cleansers, whiteners, stain removers. A.P. also has a large share of the waste disposal market; biodegradable plastic garbage bags and such. DruTech was bought out by A.P. ten years ago, based on the strength

of one of my father's patents.”

“Pain-Away.”

She flashed Bill an appreciative smile.

“A skin absorbing analgesic. Doing a great business with athletes and the elderly. Albert is President of A.P., and is also the supervisory head of DruTech.”

“He runs both, personally?”

“I know, he seems too young. After his parents died, he did away with the committees. He's very hands-on, and both companies are flourishing under him.”

They stepped into a chrome elevator and Theena removed a plastic card from her coat pocket. She stuck it in a slot under the call buttons, and a green light flashed. The lift descended.

“Upstairs is all corporate office work. It's downstairs where we have all the fun.”

She winked. Was she flirting with him, the day after her father was killed? Bill wondered if this was her coping mechanism. He cleared his throat.

“Is N-Som the only drug you have in development?”

“There are others; an experimental burn cream, a decongestant—but N-Som is the main focus.”

“How many people are working on it?”

“Six, plus Manny.” Her smile faltered. “Five, now.”

There was an uncomfortable silence.

“It feels better, to talk about it. Grieving is a process that takes time.”

“Grief?” Theena's face was caught between a smile and a snarl. “My father was a brilliant scientist, and the world will mourn his loss. I have a mixed opinion. He... he did things.”

Before Bill could ask what she meant, the doors opened and she was walking briskly down the hallway. He followed, her words hanging in his head like a crooked picture.

The decor had changed drastically, all antiseptic white tile and harsh neon lights. It reminded Bill of a modern hospital.

“There are over a dozen rooms down here.” Theena spoke without facing him, her demeanor no longer playful. “Labs, offices, the computer center, two gyms, more medical equipment than an urban emergency room. And this.”

She opened a solid white door and held it for Bill. Inside, rather than an office...

“It looks like an apartment.”

Bill took in his surroundings. It was a fully furnished studio, complete with kitchen, den, and dining area. A stereo, cluttered with CD cases, and a pizza box on the TV gave the impression it was in use.

“Manny's room. This allows us to closely monitor him, while also giving him a semblance of normalcy. My father's idea; allow the N-Som test subject to go about daily life while taking the drug.”

Bill looked at a window. The sun peeked through the curtains, which was impossible.

“Fake view. It's a television monitor, can simulate all kinds of weather.”

She picked up a remote control and pointed it at the window. She switched from morning to night, a soft crescent moon replacing the sun. Another switch and it was day again, but overcast and drizzling.

“That's impressive.”

“I can also switch it to play movies, cable, pay per view. Even porn. Do you enjoy pornography, doctor?”

Bill faced her. Theena was unreadable—he couldn't tell if she was amused or sardonic.

“I don't have much of an opinion on the subject.”

Theena moved closer, into his personal space. Her breath was warm and smelled of mint.

“I've studied the neurological effects pornography has on the human brain. You've heard the old story, that men are turned on visually, while women are stimulated emotionally? Not according to my research. I've found that men and women get equally excited, mentally that is, while viewing pornography.”

“Interesting.” Bill felt his collar get a little tighter, and he fought the urge to pull at his tie.

“No one else seemed to think so, and I lost my funding. I think this country places too much importance on sex. It's a natural, necessary, biological process, but we keep it behind closed doors. No good comes from repression, don't you agree?”

Her smile sent a shock through him.

“I, uh, agree. Repression isn't a good thing.”

“It's different in Europe. More relaxed. There is no shame in a naked body. No shame in being open about your sexuality. Have you been with a woman since your wife died?”

Bill blushed. He was at a loss for an answer. The truth was he hadn't had sex in over a year, but that wasn't any of Theena's business. She may have been born in Europe, but Bill hadn't had that luxury. Her bluntness made him uncomfortable, and if that was an indication of his own repression, so be it.

Still, he was flattered to be hit on. If, indeed, that's what she was doing.

Theena touched his hand. Bill's ears burned.

“Would you like to see Manny's bedroom?”

He fought the urge to take a step back.

“Dr. Boone—Theena, I find you very attractive, but I don't think this is the right time.”

“Do strong willed women scare you, Bill?”

“No. But I wouldn't want to take advantage of your situation.”

She moved closer, her hand touching his hip, her long curly hair brushing against his neck.

“But I'm the one in control, Bill. How could you be taking advantage of me?”

Damn good question.

“Your father just died. You're confused.”

“He really wanted N-Som to be approved.”

Bill pushed her at arm's length.

“Is that what this is about? Theena, my job here is to review your research and based on that...”

Theena began to laugh. Her abrupt change of character was shocking.

“What's funny?”

“Sorry, Bill. I was just messing around with you.”

“Excuse me?”

“I wanted to see how you'd react, that's all. It's strange to find any gentlemen left in this profession.”

Bill blinked. He blinked again.

“This—this was a put on?”

“You're cute.” Theena touched him on the end of the nose. “But I'm not that easy. And my father did just die yesterday. Call it an integrity check. You passed. Come on, I'll show you the other rooms.”

Theena took his hand and led him out of the pseudo apartment. Bill felt as if he'd just been subjected to a battery of psych tests. He had to remind himself she was mourning, and people did crazy things while mourning.

But had it really been a gag? Bill was positive, if he'd wanted, he could have had her right there. Was he that easily fooled? Or was she that good?

Or was he that needy?

“We call this the Sweat Room. Treadmill, Nautilus Machines, Stairmaster, free weights. One of our testing criteria is to judge N-Som's effects on motor skills and muscle fatigue. Lack of sleep makes a person physically tired. Before Manny was put on the drug, we did a series of control scores. Prior to N-Som, he could stay on a Stairmaster for three hours before collapsing from exhaustion.”

Bill studied Theena. She was acting like a professional again. Part of him was disappointed.

“And while he was on N-Som?”

“We had to quit at nine hours because the machine blew a gear.”

She took him to a room across the hallway. Bill recognized several machines, including an EEG and an oscilloscope. Both were in operation, the electroencephalogram drawing a jagged polygraph line on an endless ream of paper.

“Is someone being tested right now?”

“Those are Manny's. He has remote sensors surgically implanted in his scalp, and they send the signal here. It's the only way to be sure he never sleeps, since it is almost impossible to watch him twenty-four hours a day.”

Bill was familiar enough to interpret the data. The frequency of the peaks and troughs indicated beta waves. Manny was awake and aware. Curiosity made Bill flip through the pile of folded pages, all with the same, continuous pattern.

He looked for a variation which would indicate unconsciousness. Delta, theta, or spindle waves were obvious signs of sleep; the frequency would slow and the voltage would increase, making

bigger and wider peaks. But he couldn't even find alpha waves.

“Doesn't he ever close his eyes?”

“Amazing, isn't it? Normally closed eyes slow down electrical activity, because the brain isn't being visually stimulated. Manny's brain remains in beta, even when he keeps his eyes closed for hours.”

“Shouldn't this show when he was put under for his operation last night?”

“Manny didn't go under. He insisted on a local anesthetic.”

“To repair a collapsed lung?”

“He didn't want to jeopardize the experiment.”

Bill thought about invasive surgery while being conscious. He shuddered. The guy was either very committed, or out of his mind.

The EEG needle began to move faster, the small peaks and troughs so close together it was hard to see the cycles between them.

“What's happening now?”

Theena looked closely at the readouts and frowned.

“Beta 2 waves. I've seen this before, usually when he's very irritated, or having an argument. But the police have a guard on him, and no one is allowed into his hospital room.”

“Maybe some reaction to medication.”

“No. He's not on any medication.”

“Not even antibiotics?”

“He doesn't need them. His immune system is incredible.” Theena pursed her lips. “No, he's definitely arguing with somebody. I wonder who?”

Chapter 3

“How did you get in here?”

Manny's voice was high pitched, frantic. The flimsy hospital gown he wore made him feel even more vulnerable.

David smiled at him.

“Your armed guard is taking a nap outside. Remember naps, Manny? Don't you miss them?”

Manny tried to rise out of the hospital bed, but David put a hand on his shoulder.

“Don't bother getting up. I won't stay long. Pity about Dr. Nikos, isn't it? You know what I saw in his eyes when I slit his throat? Not fear. Not pain. Just disappointment. It was delicious. How's your chest?”

David lifted up Manny's gown and peeked.

“Looks nasty. What is that tube?”

Manny tried to melt into his mattress.

“A drain.”

“Does it hurt?”

David prodded at the protruding plastic, pinching it between his fingers. Manny forced courage.

“What do you want, David? Did you come back to finish the job?”

“I wasn't after you, Manny. You know that. But you tried to get in the way. Don't you see the only way we can be free is if the experiment ends?”

“I told the cops.”

David grinned, patting his brother on the cheek.

“No, you didn't. You lied to them. I know you did. Now—who should we kill next?”

“Please...”

“How about the computer geek, Dr. Townsend? All those ridiculous graphs and charts, as if he could reduce us to just statistics. Or Dr. O'Neil? Aren't you sick of his fumbling attempts at taking serum samples? Maybe Dr. Fletcher. He tries to poke around in our heads with all the subtlety of a linebacker. Or Theena...?”

Manny's eyes got wide.

“Maybe I should pick up your Theena.” David rubbed his face, as if mulling it over. “We could have some fun together. I bet she's a real tiger.”

Manny tried to raise his arm, but it was taped to the rail so the saline drip IV wouldn't pull out. This greatly amused David.

“Yes, I think Theena it is. Unless you'd prefer someone else. Who should I kill instead of Theena? I'll let you pick.”

Manny stared at his brother with tortured eyes. This was worse than being attacked. David was going to kill someone, and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

But at least he could save Theena...

“Townsend.”

David's smile was ghastly.

“The computer geek. Excellent. I'll come back later with the details. Maybe even some pictures. See you, bro.”

David left. Manny looked at the phone. He had to talk to Jim Townsend, warn him what was coming.

He called DruTech and got the number from Barry, the head security guard. Barry attempted to wish him well, but Manny hung up on him, anxious to make the call.

Townsend wasn't home. His machine picked up. Manny left a message.

“Dr. Townsend. This is Manny. Your life is in danger. The same people that killed Dr. Nikos are going after you.”

Manny squeezed his eyes shut at the lie. How could he still be protecting David, after all he'd done? He swallowed hard, and continued.

“You have to go away for a while. Don't tell anyone where you're going. These people—they can't be stopped. They're maniacs. Please believe me. I don't want anyone else to get hurt.”

He gently set the receiver in its cradle and laid back down. Outside, clouds had covered the sun, turning everything gray.

Manny closed his eyes and wished, for the thousandth time, that he could just go to sleep.

Chapter 4

Dr. Jim Townsend hated days off. The call from Rothchilde's secretary came while he was in the car and already halfway to work. He'd briefly argued with her, insisting on coming in anyway, but she told him security had been informed not to let anyone in.

Irritating.

He was essential to the project. Without his organizational skills the experiment would be all over the place, untamed. Townsend had been the one to lay out the plans, run the schedule, catalog the results. His conclusions dictated what would be tested next. Though he didn't invent N-Som, it would never be ready for FDA approval if he wasn't on the team. The Nobel Prize people had better be aware of that when the time came.

Faced with the ugly prospect of nothing to do, Townsend pulled the Hyundai into a supermarket parking lot and weighed options. A frown creased his doughy face. He scratched at a spot on his glasses, pushed the comb-over back on his balding head, and tried to think of something to kill time until tomorrow.

Movies, and all forms of media entertainment, bored him. There was nothing to do back at the apartment; the little amount of time he spent there was for sleeping, dressing, and washing. Eating was a joyless necessity, usually something quick and convenient. His burgeoning stomach was a testament to this, but exercise bored Townsend as much as anything else.

The library? He needed to catch up on his reading; many of his subscriptions had run out, and prestigious scientific journals didn't send you a little card to fill out as a reminder.

A search of his wallet revealed his library card was expired. To get a renewal meant lines and hassles. The library was out.

Museums? It seemed a chore to go into the city, search for parking, fight the crowds of school children.

He thought, enviously, of his computer at work. When the strain became too great, he'd play a chess program to help ease his mind. It was somewhat banal, and he never lost, but it was the closest thing to entertainment that he pursued.

Though efficient on many different operating systems, Townsend had never gotten around to owning his own computer. The ones he worked on were always vastly superior to home versions. But he knew that modern models had a tremendous amount of speed and memory, quadruple that of only a year ago. Was it time to join the personal computer revolution?

"Why the heck not?"

Computer stores seemed to be everywhere in the suburbs, and Townsend located one of the larger chains and went inside.

Four different salespeople approached him, and each time he shooed them away, annoyed at the interruption. He finally did require assistance after deciding on a model, and of course it took forever

to find help. Such a burden, shopping.

After rebuffing pitch after pitch for accessories, Townsend allowed himself to be talked into two chess programs, each claiming to have beaten grand masters. He even felt a tinge of excitement, driving home with his purchases in the back seat. It wasn't nearly as fulfilling as work, but these boxes represented a slight promise of challenge, something he hadn't felt in a long time.

It took three trips to bring everything up to his third floor apartment. Badly out of breath, he needed a rest and a glass of orange juice before setting up his new system. His answering machine was blinking, but he was too preoccupied to notice.

Assembly was easy, and he didn't bother with the instructions. The system had dutifully included a CD for free internet hours, but he decided to put that off until later. Townsend installed the first chess program, somewhat surprised by his new computer's speed, and after familiarizing himself with the controls he began to play.

Within forty minutes, the computer was up a piece.

Townsend had to grin at the move. It was a brilliant one, a pin that forced him to give up his rook to save his queen. Townsend made the computer go back several moves, not to cheat, but to see if he could have prevented it. He couldn't have. The program had planned it at least six moves in advance.

“Wonderful.”

He hunkered down and continued play, trying to be wary but thrilled at the possibility of being beaten.

It was only when Townsend began to squint at the keyboard that he realized the sun had gone down. He checked the clock and was surprised to see he'd been playing for seven hours.

The computer had beaten him three games out of six. They were tied in this seventh game, and Townsend was preparing a sacrifice that would lead to checkmate if the computer didn't see it. The odds were slim; the computer saw just about everything. Unlike the chess program at work, this one could think several hundred moves ahead, and understood the concept of sacrifice for the sake of position.

He paused the game on his turn and ordered some Chinese food to be delivered. After a bathroom break and a splash of water on his face to keep him focused, he returned to the computer and made his move.

The computer didn't take the bait.

“I figured you'd see it. Good one.”

A knock at the door. Townsend was so involved with the game that he never bothered to question the obvious fact that his food couldn't have been there so quickly.

The man in the hallway was wearing jeans and a leather jacket. He wasn't delivering sweet and sour pork or any other food. Most irritating of all, it was someone that Townsend knew, and happened to dislike.

“What are you doing here?”

“Hello doctor.” David grinned, his pleasure genuine. “I came here to kill you.”

When he saw the scalpel, Townsend's annoyance puddled into fear. He took several steps back.

“This... this is a mistake. You'll jeopardize the project.”

“That's the point. Manny and I are sick of being guinea pigs. I think it's made us somewhat unhinged.”

“Manny and I? What do—”

Townsend saw the slash, saw the blood, but didn't feel a thing. He tried to speak and it came out in a gurgle.

David appraised the wound.

“The first cut is the deepest.”

When Townsend coughed, it was through the gash in his neck rather than his mouth. Things became blurry, and he fell over.

David closed the door behind him. He inspected the apartment, giving an empty monitor box a small kick.

“New computer? Nice.”

Townsend crawled over to his desk, reaching for the phone. He came up short and pulled his keyboard down on top of him.

“Careful, Dr. Townsend. You'll void the warranty if you bleed all over it.”

Townsend began to pass out. He knew that if he did, he'd never wake up. He had to get the phone, had to get help.

“Do you want the phone?” David laughed. “What are you gonna do with the phone, Dr. Townsend? Your tongue is hanging out your neck. Maybe I can help.”

David knelt down next to him. Townsend felt his consciousness ebbing, the darkness closing in.

He was almost dead when David began to work on him with the scalpel.

Almost.

Chapter 5

The sheer amount of collected data impressed Bill, but not nearly as much as the content. Each document he read was more fascinating than the last. He got up from his sofa and stretched, his back crackling like a bag of chips. He took a sip of coffee. Cold.

The clock told him it was coming up on one in the morning, but Bill wasn't ready to turn in yet. He plodded into the kitchen for another cup. He used three spoonfuls of instant, extra strong, and popped it in the microwave. The deluxe espresso maker stared at him from the counter, dejected.

The machine was Italian, a top end model. It had been their first purchase together, after moving into the condo. Kristen loved making lattes, and double cappuccinos, and espresso so thick you could eat it with a fork.

Bill turned away from it. The microwave dinged and he stirred some sugar into his coffee and went back to the sofa.

The log he was currently reviewing detailed experiments with rhesus monkeys. An early version of N-Som had kept a test animal awake for almost eight months. Bill wanted to find out how the experiment ended.

Day 236—Sam continues to act strangely, refusing his usual morning fruit. Vitals are normal, though his eyes seem a bit glassy. After discussing the situation with Theena, I order for a complete blood work up.

Bill reached for the next page, but there were no more in file.

He looked by his feet, to see if it any had fallen under the table. Coming up empty, he sifted through the previous pages, then the pages of several other folders.

Nothing.

Bill frowned. The guy in charge of organizing everything, Dr. Townsend, had done an amazing job putting every relevant bit of information about the project into coherent, chronological order. Previous experiments had ended with a calculation of results and Dr. Nikos's notes and conclusions. There were none to be found in this case.

Bill yawned. "Maybe back at DruTech."

He took another sip of coffee and peeled off his socks, balling them up and taking them into the bedroom. As he undressed, he thought about the unlimited potential for this drug. Revolutionary didn't begin to describe it.

A world without sleep. Where commerce existed twenty-four hours a day, and brilliant thinkers never became fatigued. There would be more time for work, to get things done, to make more money. And more time for play, to be with friends, to spend extra hours with loved ones. How much were those extra hours worth?

Bill knew. He knew more than anyone.

He yawned again, and glanced down at his coffee.

“You're not doing your job.”

It was late, anyway. Tired as he was, he might actually sleep well tonight. Bill was just sticking his toothbrush in his mouth when the phone rang.

Theena?

She hadn't come on to him again, after the scene in Manny's bedroom, and had remained strictly business for the remainder of the tour. Their meeting ended with a brusque handshake. Had her flirting really been an act? Or did she really find him as attractive as he found her?

Bill picked up the phone.

“Dr. May?”

It wasn't Theena. The voice was male, Midwestern, deep and cold.

“Yes? Who is this?”

“There's a package for you in the hall.”

A click, and then Bill was left listening to the dial tone. He walked, warily, to the door. The peephole showed an empty hallway.

Keeping a firm grip on the knob, he unlocked the dead bolt and eased it open a crack.

There was a thick manila envelope sitting on his doormat.

Bill again peered down the hall, then snatched the envelope and locked his door.

It was unmarked, unsealed. Inside was a VHS videotape without any label.

Bill searched his mind for a friend or coworker that might pull a stunt like this, but he came up empty. No one he knew would do this. Especially this late at night.

He shivered.

Part of him didn't want to play it, to put it away until the sun was out, until he had other people around him.

But curiosity overcame his trepidation. Bill popped the tape into his VCR.

After several seconds of black, a dimly lit room came on screen. It had concrete floors and walls. Possibly a basement. Bill could tell by the quality that it was home video.

“Come over here.”

The voice was off screen. Then two men walked into frame from the left. One had on a ski mask, and he was holding a gun to the back of the other man.

Michael Bitner.

Bill's golf friend, the doctor who had been assigned to the N-Som case before him.

“Kneel down.”

Mike had some blood in the corner of his mouth, and his right eye was swollen almost shut. He looked terrified. His captor forced him to his knees.

“N-Som will get FDA approval.”

Mike whimpered. “Yes. I promise it will.”

“I wasn't talking to you.”

The shot made Bill bite the inside of his cheek. Mike flopped sideways, twitched twice, then

was still.

The tape ended.

Bill double checked to make sure the door was locked.

Then he called the police.

Chapter 6

“How could he be gone? There was a cop outside the door.”

Captain Halloran scratched his graying mustache and shifted his bulk in the chair, which was small for him and seemed too low to the ground. He shouldn't have taken the seat when offered. It hurt his back, his knees, and made him seem fatter, older and less important than he actually was. Halloran knew Rothchilde had bought that chair for those very reasons—his own was higher and wider, with armrests that ended in polished mahogany knobs, like a throne.

He didn't like Albert Rothchilde. The man was whiny, arrogant, and spoiled. Whereas Halloran earned his rank by busting his ass for twenty plus years, Rothchilde was simply born into the right family. Halloran knew the guy wouldn't last two minutes on the street.

But this wasn't the street. This was Rothchilde's twenty-two room house, the one that was featured in *People Magazine*. Halloran glanced at some stupid painting hanging behind Rothchilde's desk. Rothchilde had casually mentioned its worth during a previous meeting, and then chuckled saying he'd bought the *Mayor* for less.

To make matters more uncomfortable, Rothchilde was completely right. Halloran's men had screwed up. All Halloran could do was grit his teeth and bare the storm.

“The Officer said he'd gone to get a cup of coffee. When he came back, Manny was gone.”

“Coffee?” Rothchilde smiled, but his beady eyes showed no trace of amusement. He was a thin man, almost skinny, with soft hands and slender fingers that were always carefully manicured. His hair was black, parted on the side, and his hawkish nose and slight overbite reminded Halloran of a rat.

“This man is worth over a billion dollars to me, and you lost him for a fifty cent cup of coffee.”

“The guy just had surgery. Who would have thought he'd get up and leave?”

“How do we know he left? How do we know he wasn't taken?”

Halloran tried to sound like the authority his title represented. “Couldn't have happened. Patient in the room across the hall saw Manny steal some clothes from a drawer. He called the nurse, but too late.”

Rothchilde let out a slow breath. Truth be told, Halloran was afraid of him. It didn't matter that he could break Rothchilde's skinny little canned-tan body over his knee like a broomstick. Rothchilde's power was greater than physical. The President of the United States took his calls. So did the capos of the biggest families on both coasts.

“We need him found, Captain.” Rothchilde used the rank as if it tasted foul in his mouth.

“Whoever killed Dr. Nikos obviously wanted Manny dead too. We can't let that happen. It would cause an unforgivable delay.”

“We'll find him.”

“Then why is your fat ass still sitting here?”

Halloran ground his teeth. The extra money wasn't worth it. He should tell this bozo off right here and now.

Instead, he left the office and went to check on the search for Manny.

Albert Rothchilde watched him go. Insulting Halloran was normally a fun activity, but there was no joy in it today. There was too much at stake.

Rothchilde swiveled around in his leather chair and stared up at his Miró. He found the use of color garish, and didn't think the composition was correctly balanced. But it was a Miró, and status couldn't be much more symbolic than that.

If things went according to plan, he'd be able to plaster every wall of his mansion with Mirós. That was frivolous yet lofty enough to make people talk about him. He could make his home the largest Miró museum in the world.

But that was only the beginning. Art was a hobby. Rothchilde wanted power. He wanted American Products to expand, for his corporate empire to grow.

And grow it shall. Perhaps he would become big enough to take over Microsoft. Or Disney. General Motors might be fun to run. He imagined launching a new sports car, calling it the Rothchilde GT.

“Maybe I'll buy it all.”

Rothchilde had his people come up with projected sales figures for N-Som. It staggered him, and he'd been around money all his life. With a conservative estimate of only ten percent of the US population taking the drug, Rothchilde would be making nine billion dollars a month. Of course, more than ten percent would take it. Within five years, half the population of the world would be taking it. And that didn't even include the proposed military contract, which would make him richer than the combined fortunes of the next seven runners-up.

Rothchilde idly wondered if France was for sale. He'd have his secretary make a few calls.

But first things first.

Someone was trying to sabotage the N-Som project, and Rothchilde needed to find out who.

There was a chance, however slight, that Dr. Nikos's murder had nothing to do with N-Som. Perhaps the doctor had personal enemies. Or perhaps it was just some unfortunate random lunatic. Rothchilde hoped that was the case, but he had to plan for the worst.

Besides the CPD, Rothchilde had enlisted his friends in the government for help. He also sent feelers out to all of the families he supported, to see if anyone in the underworld had issues with him. So far, nothing had come up.

“Could be anyone. Anyone at all.”

In his more creative moments, sipping hundred year old port and snorting coke off a call girl's welted backside, Rothchilde imagined he was being challenged by another pharmaceutical company. Sleeping pills were a billion dollar industry. Perhaps the manufacturer of Dalmane or Halcion was trying to keep their bread and butter.

It could even be the Sealy Mattress company, afraid of losing long-term sales. Soon, the

bedroom would be a thing of the past. The same with pajamas, hotels, night lights, caffeinated beverages, and a slew of other products related to the sleep/wake cycle.

Rothchilde delegated it to the back of his mind. All the wheels were in motion. Manny would be found, and his attacker would be dealt with. The important thing now was Dr. Bill May and FDA approval.

He opened a side drawer in his desk and took out Bill's file. The doctor had been a medical officer with CDER for over ten years. During that time, he'd overseen clinical trials on forty-eight different drugs. Only eight of these had gone on to receive FDA approval. Bill was responsible for killing the other forty.

Like most governmental offices, the FDA worked by committee. Besides the clinical review, new drugs must submit to Toxicology and Chemistry panels. Rothchilde had been able to pass these already—the chemistry reviewer had children. It was easy to coerce her into approval without having to reveal the secret manufacturing process. As far as pharmacology went, N-Som wasn't toxic. The way it was made didn't negate the fact that it worked, and worked well.

Unfortunately, the previous clinical reviewer asked too many questions. Rothchilde stared at Bill's file and hoped this wouldn't end up the same way. The doctor's history showed him to be smart, ethical, and stubborn. Three times in the past, companies had attempted to bribe him. Those companies were no longer in business. Even if Rothchilde threw an obscene amount of money at him, he knew Bill wouldn't take it.

Especially after the unfortunate occurrence with Bill's wife.

Perhaps there was a way to work that angle. It warranted some thought. Unfortunately, there was no other person in Bill's life that they could use to squeeze him.

Rothchilde wondered if the video tape was having its desired effect. Was Bill terrified and eager to please?

Doubtful. But that wasn't Rothchilde's plan. He hoped to unhinge Bill just enough to keep his full concentration off the review process. A scared man might miss the things his predecessor had uncovered.

Rothchilde predicted Bill's course of action. He'd call the police, who wouldn't help—Halloran would see to that. Bill might look closer at N-Som to find out its secret, but Rothchilde had disposed of all the risky paperwork. Another threat or two, maybe an actual physical encounter, and Bill would have no evidence that N-Som was dangerous, but every incentive in the world to approve it.

In a way, it was lucky that Dr. Nikos was murdered. He would have had to be dealt with sooner or later. The same as his daughter, and the rest of the team.

The grandfather clock in the corner of the den chimed four times. Rothchilde smiled. He was fully awake and alert, and would be for another eighteen hours. And the total cost? Only eighty cents a pill.

"I'm going to be the wealthiest man in the world."

Rothchilde's mirth disappeared when he remembered how N-Som was made. He couldn't get the

antacids out of his pocket quick enough.

“Chemicals. That’s all. Nothing more than chemicals.”

But it took the whole roll to calm his stomach down.

Chapter 7

Manny looked around Townsend's apartment. The first thing he saw was a heap of bloody clothing, stacked in the middle of the living room carpet.

Upon closer examination, he realized it wasn't clothing at all.

Manny turned quickly to get out of there, slipping on a wet spot. He fell forward, covering himself in gore. The scream grew in his lungs, and Manny squeezed his eyes shut and clamped a hand over his mouth to squelch it.

Don't attract attention, he thought. Stay calm.

He forced himself to carefully get off the floor. His clothes were soaked. He needed to change. Townsend's clothes? Doubtful. The man was half his size. Maybe he had a large sweater, but pants would be impossible.

After a focused search he found the laundry room behind some double closet doors. Manny quickly stripped and threw his bloody clothes into the machine, adding half a box of detergent. He left red hand prints on the lid and the knob.

There was some underwear folded neatly on top of the dryer. Manny took them and wiped the entire surface of the washer. Careful not to touch anything else, he walked naked through the condo, looking for the bathroom.

"Hello, Manny."

Manny yelped.

David was stretched out in the bathtub, the water a bright pink. He frowned at Manny. "Quit acting like a baby, and see if there's another bar of soap in that cabinet."

Manny couldn't move his feet. He stared down at his brother, who was picking bits of something out of his fingernails.

"Did you hear me, bro? Soap!"

Manny recoiled at the shout. He tore open the vanity and found a bar of soap.

"Thank you." David unwrapped the bar and rubbed it onto a rag, making red bubbles. "Want to come in? Water's fine."

Manny took a breath and found his voice. "Do you... do you feel better now?"

"Now? You mean, now that I've killed?" David thought it over, eventually grinning. "Yeah. Yeah, I do."

"You're a monster."

"Sure I am. We both are. Created in a lab, just like Frankenstein. It's the N-Som, Manny. You know it as much as I do. I don't see how you can stand the dreams without cracking."

Manny bit his knuckle, drew blood.

"They're only dreams, David."

"Sure they are. Here."

David searched through the bath water and came up with a scalpel. He held it out to Manny.

“I don't want it.”

“You promised. You promised if I killed again, you'd end it for me.”

Manny stepped back.

“I can't, David.”

“Kill me, Manny.”

Manny shook his head.

“Kill me, or I'll skin you like I did Townsend.”

Manny reached behind him, trying to find the door knob. David stood up, bloody water cascading off his naked body.

“It was hard, Manny. Like pulling the upholstery off a couch. You really have to put some muscle into it.”

David climbed out of the tub. He held the blade in front of him.

“I'll hurt you, Manny.”

“Please, David. I don't want to kill you.”

David frowned. The scalpel caught the light and glinted.

“Too bad. Well, I guess I don't have any choice then. You broke your promise, and I have to punish you.”

Manny began to cry.

The cries quickly became screams.

Chapter 8

The phone was ringing when Bill walked in the door. He was exhausted and scared, but his prevailing emotion was anger. This was insane.

Six hours at the police station had provided no help. The tape was clear evidence of a murder, and the fact that it was given to Bill was a threat that even a three-year-old could see. But the cops seemed to wallow in skepticism and ennui. The case was given to an overworked duty officer who thought it was a prank, and Bill was told they'd get back to him after their so-called investigation.

Bill answered the phone, half-hoping it was the asshole who gave him the tape. He wanted to vent.

"Bill? It's Theena. I've been trying to call all night."

Bill sat on the couch and rubbed his face. It had occurred to him that Theena could be involved. He had her down as a bit flaky. But the hundred grand question was; did that extend to murder?

"I was at the police station."

"Are you okay?" Her concern sounded genuine. "What happened?"

"It... I got a death threat. It has to do with approving N-Som."

"My God. Was it Manny?"

"Manny? No, why?"

"He's been missing from the hospital since last night. I have no idea where he is. I think the people who killed my father took him."

Bill tried to make sense of the news. "He could have left on his own."

"Maybe. But he was in bad shape."

"Have you checked..." Bill began, wondering if she'd checked Manny's remote EEG.

"Yes." Theena had anticipated him. "Manny's still alive. I'm at DruTech right now. He's in distress, running Beta 2 waves. It's been going on for a few hours. Are you okay, Bill?"

Her voice was soft, genuine.

"I'm fine. Someone sent me a video tape of Mike Bitner being killed."

Bill got no reply.

"Theena? Are you there?"

"I... I don't believe it. He's actually dead? This is, this is just horrible. What are you going to do?"

"Do you think your boss could do something like that?"

"Albert Rothchilde? I don't like the man, to be honest, but he's not the killer type."

Bill had only met the man once, and didn't like him either. He rubbed his eyes and tried to think.

"Is American Products doing well?"

"Extremely well. Stock is way up. I can't believe this is happening."

"What do you know about the other investors?"

“Albert has a controlling share. But there are dozens of other stakeholders. Politicians, businessmen...”

“The mob?”

Theena's silence told him more than if she'd answered.

“Look, Theena, I'm going to the Feds. They have an organized crime bureau. Maybe they can help.”

As he said it, Bill realized he'd left the tape at the police station. Maybe he could get it back somehow.

“I'm scared, Bill.”

“You'll be safe at DruTech. It has security. I'll give you my cell phone number if you need to talk.”

“I'm sorry. I feel like I'm the one who got you into this.”

“I'll be by in a few hours.”

“Thanks, Bill.”

Bill hit the disconnect button, then dialed his office at the FDA in Maryland, hoping that someone was there early. Luckily, a secretary picked up.

“Hello, Dr. May. How's the sleep research?”

“Exhausting. Laura, can you look up Mike Bitner's number and address for me?”

“Sure, just a sec.”

“Have you heard from Dr. Bitner lately?”

“No, not for a while. Here it is.”

Bill memorized the information and thanked her. When he called, he got Mike's answering machine. There were at least ten seconds of beeps, indicating unheard messages. Bill hung up.

“The police have to investigate.” Bill said it to reassure himself, but it didn't help. As the duty officer had repeated over and over, “There's no crime without a body.”

Bill was positive Mike was dead, but if a video of his murder wasn't enough proof, maybe he could find more.

Bitner lived in Roscoe Village, only fifteen minutes away. Bill took a cold shower to wake himself up. After dressing in chinos, a polo shirt, and an older blazer, he hit a corner store and bought a large coffee and a bottle of ma haung weight loss pills. He choked down four.

The sun was up by now and the city was opening its eyes. Bill's condo came with a garage, which he shared with three of his neighbors. He climbed in his Audi and headed north. Traffic was sparse, but there were a good number of joggers and bikers out. The caffeine and ephedrine hadn't kicked in yet, so Bill paid careful attention to his driving.

Bill took Addison to Hoyle and located Bitner's two-flat without difficulty. It was brick, slightly lighter brown than the buildings on either side of it. The porch light was on. He parked in front of a hydrant and waited until a roller blader passed.

Instead of trying the front door, Bill walked straight to the gate leading into the back yard. The

rear entrance was attached to a deck, where a wooden chaise without a cushion and a somewhat rusty gas grill kept a silent vigil. Checking either side of him for witnesses, he approached a window and peered inside. It was dark, quiet.

Bill could hear his heart, pounding with a combination of fear and stimulants. He contemplated returning to his car and leaving; other than traffic violations, Bill had never broken the law in his life. Breaking and entering was a felony, right?

The police won't help you. You need more evidence. Just do it.

He took off his jacket, put it up against the pane, and hit it with the heel of his hand.

The glass cracked with the sound of a gunshot, and the falling pieces seemed to tinkle forever. He locked his knees and refused to run away. Searching for the latch to unlock the window reminded Bill of the first time he assisted in surgery as an intern, trying to find the appendix while all eyes were on him.

A dog barked, a few backyards away. Bill probed the inside of the window frame for a full minute before locating the lock. Two seconds after that, it was up and he was in.

It was the kitchen. The only light was streaming in from the opening he'd crawled through. A steady hum from the refrigerator seemed to exaggerate the silence. He stepped clear of the broken glass and made his way into the hallway.

The drapes had all been drawn, and seeing was tough. He took a minute to let his eyes adjust, and then began poking around, careful not to touch anything.

There was a stereo, hundreds of CDs organized in a rack. An entertainment center hugged the wall, flanked by two large floor plants that were going brown. The sofa and loveseat were black leather. He searched a bookshelf and found some current bestsellers, magazines, some medical texts.

Nothing in the hall closet, nothing in the bathroom. Bill located the basement stairs and flipped on the light. He descended, slowly.

The odor hit him halfway down. It was a smell he knew well, and one he always hated. Musky, putrid, clinical, final.

At the bottom of the stairs, Bill went right. A hand was over his face, and when that no longer worked, he covered his nose with his shirt bottom. The basement was unfurnished, the walls and floor bare concrete. In one corner was a washer, dryer, and an oversized utility sink. Some cardboard boxes were stacked in the center. The furnace and water heater were side by side, next to a large PVC pipe that stretched down from the ceiling and into the sump hole.

To the left of all that, a concrete wall with a door in the middle of it. Much as he hated to, he made it his destination.

When Bill pushed the door open the smell enveloped him like a dry heat. He had to take several steps back or risk vomiting.

Bill decided to examine the rest of the house first, allowing time for the death room to air out. He went up to the second floor and located the bedroom. The dresser and closet contained nothing extraordinary. The bed was unmade. A nightstand drawer revealed a remote control for the TV,

some Kleenex, and a Robin Cook paperback.

Bill headed across the upstairs hall and found a study. The drawers had been pulled out of the desk, their contents strewn over the carpet. A large file cabinet had been similarly disturbed, files and papers littering the floor. Bill didn't think poking through it would provide any answers. It was doubtful that whoever made the mess left anything important.

On a hunch, Bill went back to the bedroom. Many doctors took their work to sleep with them. He looked under the bed, behind the nightstand, and eventually found the file wedged between the nightstand and the bed. The tab on the manila folder read N-SOM. It was thick, held closed by a large rubber band. Bill tucked it under his arm and went into the adjoining bathroom.

In the closet was an old tube of Ben Gay. He dabbed some on his upper lip. It burned, but it was a small price to pay to smell menthol rather than rot. Then he pushed aside his trepidation and walked back down to the basement.

The door was waiting for him. Bill approached without enthusiasm, knowing what was in there, knowing he had to look anyway. When he pushed it open, the stench surrounded him like a tropical breeze. He pulled the cord on a hanging bulb.

The tarpaulin-covered bundle in the middle of the floor was the source of the odor, and the shape left no doubt as to its contents. Bill still had to be sure, and holding his breath he pulled back the canvas.

Mike Bitner's eyes were open, two white marbles stuck in a pink, bloated face. Bill looked lower, saw the exit wound in the chest. The amount of dried blood staining the floor around him left no doubt that this was where he died. They'd videotaped Bitner's murder in his own basement.

Bill left the room and tried to think it through. He had to get the authorities to see this, without them knowing he'd been here. Maybe he could leave an anonymous tip. Pretend he was a neighbor, complain about a smell coming from the house. Or even say he heard shots, or saw someone breaking in.

Once the police found the body, they'd have to protect him.

Bill walked over to the stairs, planning the call in his head. The creak took him by surprise.

It had come from the floor above. Bill stopped, and heard it again, louder this time.

There was someone upstairs.

Chapter 9

“That window could have got broken weeks ago.”

Franco came up next to Carlos, the broken glass crunching underfoot. Carlos shook his head and scratched at his graying goatee. He had a dark face, all sharp angles, and it suited his personality.

“Floor's dry. It rained two, three days ago. This is recent.”

Franco shrugged, but he took out his weapon just the same, a laughably large Coonan 357 Magnum with a six inch barrel. Carlos's Colt Model 38 was already in hand, a reliable gun that never jammed like Franco's cannon.

“So you want to search the place?”

Carlos thought it over. If someone had been here, that someone might be coming back with heat. He didn't want to waste any time.

“No. Let's do it and get the hell out of here. Just be careful.”

Franco laughed at the warning, a girlish giggle that didn't fit with such a large, muscular body. He bore the badges of pro boxing; scar tissue around the eyes and a grossly misshapen cauliflower ear. Nothing frightened Franco. But Carlos had been in the business a lot longer, and you could get dead even if you weren't scared.

“Jesus, you smell that stink?”

Carlos didn't. He'd come prepared. The suit he wore was throw away, and he'd cut a menthol cigarette filter in half and shoved a piece high up in each nostril. The method was so old hat that his speech was barely affected.

Franco led the way into the basement. Carlos stayed a few steps behind, taking in everything. When he saw the light on in the corner room an alarm went off in his mind. Carlos was sure he'd turned it off.

The larger man walked in without a care, grumbling about the smell. Carlos stood at the bottom of the stairs and scanned his surroundings. There were some boxes. A large sink. A water heater. Several places a person could hide. He thumbed back the hammer on his gun and walked towards the boxes.

“I thought we wasn't searching.”

“Real quick. I wanna be sure.”

“Hurry up. I stay down here long, I'll deliver a street pizza.”

There was no one behind the boxes, or in the big sink. That left the water heater. He approached it and brought his gun around in a firm, two handed grip.

No one was there.

“You sure are cautious, for an older guy.”

“That's how I got to be an older guy.”

Carlos walked over to the room to help with the body removal. He didn't hear the small

expulsion of breath come from beneath the cover of the sump pit.

Bill knew he wouldn't have been able to do anything if they'd found him. He was on his knees in the sinkhole, curled up. It was a tight fit, made even tighter by the discharge pipe pressing into his back. He'd unplugged the sump pump before climbing in, and since it wasn't running and his head was bent forward he was practically drinking the foul water. If the killers had lifted the lid, it would have been like shooting a big fish in a small barrel.

When he'd heard them upstairs, Bill knew his hiding places were limited. He put the N-Som file in the dryer and was relieved beyond words that hole was large enough to hold him. Once the contorting was complete, the hard part was keeping still. As the footsteps drew nearer, Bill was sure he'd be discovered. He'd closed his eyes and begun to pray.

But the moment had passed, and it looked like he might actually live through this.

He sighed, too loudly for comfort. There was an odor, but it wasn't as bad as the death smell in the other room. Bill kept his left eye on the light coming in through the crack in the lid opening. He wanted to change position, but didn't dare for fear of making noise.

They'd come to get the body. He only had to stay there for a few more minutes, then he could get out.

Then something brushed his hand.

He flinched. It was a reflex. His head bumped against the sump lid, knocking it slightly askew.

"Did you hear that?"

Carlos cocked an ear to the side, listening.

"I didn't hear shit. Lift your end up higher."

Carlos pulled on his end of the tarp, drawing it closer to his chest. The effort made him groan.

"Don't have a heart attack, Grandpa. I don't wanna have to lug two stiffs outta here."

Franco laughed at his own joke. Carlos frowned. He shouldn't have been here with Franco, doing this. He was a specialist. The murder, that was worthy of him. This was grunt work. He stared at Franco, the cauliflower ear stuck to the side of his head like a fat pink pretzel. No wonder he didn't hear anything. Gino liked to joke that Franco's ears were for decoration only.

"I heard a noise in the corner."

"You checked it already."

Carlos nodded. There was nothing there. But he was sure he'd heard something.

"Maybe it's, whaddaycallit, senile dementia."

Franco laughed again. Carlos pursed his lips, making a silent wish that someday Gino put a hit out on Franco. Carlos would take that contract for free.

"Lift higher. You're not doing your part."

Carlos strained with his end. He hadn't been paying attention, and Franco had gotten to the stairs first. When the tarp began to leak, it leaked on Carlos.

Whatever had brushed against Bill was bony and covered in fur. He'd stirred it climbing in, and felt it move up along his body and breach the surface next to his cheek.

Dead rat, bloated and rotten.

Bill closed his eyes. The gorge was building in his throat, and he knew he had to do something or he'd throw up.

Carefully, he moved a hand up to the rat and took it between his fingers. He dragged it back under water, where the smell couldn't get to him.

The air was still funky, but the nausea had passed. He stared up at the lid. The crack was wider now, the cover several inches off center.

He braced for the worst, sure that they'd heard him and were on their way over. They'd pull up the lid and point their guns. The same guns that killed Mike Bitner. Bill would die curled up in foul water, clutching a dead rat, hearing the laughter of petty thugs.

But the seconds slouched by without incident. Bill heard nothing. His neck had begun to cramp, and his legs had long ago lost circulation. Slowly, gently, he straightened up his head and pushed back the cover, peering over the edge of the hole.

The basement was empty.

He climbed out, cold and shaking.

Carlos slammed the car trunk closed and wiped his gooey hands on his pants. Franco giggled.

“You look worse than the stiff.”

It was true. On the way up the stairs, the tarp came open and spilled all over. Carlos was a mess.

“I gotta go clean up.”

“No shit. Ain't getting in my car like that.”

Franco leaned against the hood and lit a smoke while Carlos made his way back into the house.

Bill was in the kitchen when he heard the back door open. There was nowhere to go except the bathroom. He was there in two steps, throwing the N-Som folder in the cabinet under the sink. Then he climbed into the tub and closed the shower curtain.

The shower curtain was transparent.

Carlos immediately noticed the water on the floor. He pulled out his gun and peered down the basement stairs. Dirty wet footsteps, leading up through the kitchen, and into the bathroom.

“Dr. May, right?”

Bill was pressed into the corner of the shower, shivering. The man before him was thin and angular. His hair and beard were dirty gray, and he had eyes the color of flint. He raised the gun to Bill's head.

“Answer me.”

“I'm William May.”

The man nodded. “Thought you looked familiar. We've got our eye on you, you know.”

The man winked at him. Then he fired the gun.

Bill crumpled into a ball. The shot was so loud it hurt. He hit his head on the bathtub edge and covered his face.

But other than his new lump, there was no wound. He hadn't been shot.

He peeked through his fingers and saw the man at the sink, washing his hands with some soap.

“Consider that a warning, Dr. May. I only miss on purpose. You see the body?”

Bill didn't trust his voice to answer.

“Did you see the body, or do I have to drag you outside and shove you in the trunk for a closer look?”

“I saw it.”

“Then you saw what happens when good doctors don't follow orders.”

The man rubbed a rag on his face. Another man, much larger, appeared in the doorway with a gun. He aimed it at Bill, but the older man pushed his arm down.

“We don't need to kill him, Franco. He'll cooperate.”

The big man squinted at Bill.

“That so?”

Bill nodded. His heart was a lump in his throat.

“Dr. May knows what's best for him. He knows he can't go to the cops, because we own the cops. That's why he didn't get any help with the video tape. He also knows he can't run, because we can follow him anywhere in the world. The only way he's gonna live through this, is he if approves the drug.”

Franco leaned over the bathtub and grabbed Bill by the shirt. He pulled him close with an ease that was terrifying.

“That right, Doc? You gonna approve our drug?”

Bill had never felt so helpless.

“Yes.”

Franco giggled like a woman. He gave Bill an approving slap on the cheek. It was like being hit with a board, and the stars came out.

“Good boy. Are you a medical doctor?”

Bill nodded.

Franco's face became solemn. He released Bill and unzipped his fly. Bill blanched. Revulsion and shame mixed in with his terror. He decided he had to do something, even if they killed him. When the big man dropped his pants, Bill made a fist and got ready to punch.

“What does that look like to you?”

Franco had hiked his boxer shorts over his upper thigh, and was pointing to a small brown mole.

“What?”

“Is that cancer?”

“It's... it's just a mole.”

“You sure? I don't remember having it.”

The smaller man laughed. “You don't remember how to count to ten without using your fingers.”

“Shut up, Carlos. I want the doc's opinion.”

Bill cleared his throat. “Has it gotten bigger? Or has it ever bled?”

“No.”

“Then it's just a mole. Sarcoma has an irregular shape, and it grows and bleeds.”

Franco seemed relieved. He pulled up his pants and walked out of the bathroom.

Carlos tossed Bill the rag and winked again.

“Be seeing you, Dr. May.”

Then he was gone.

Bill sat back in the tub. He wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. He did neither.

After a few minutes, he got up and put his hands on the bathroom sink. His stomach was dancing Mambo number five, and he leaned over the toilet. Nothing came.

Bill washed up without looking at himself in the mirror. Then he sat on Mike Bitner's sofa in the living room, the N-Som folder clutched to his chest, and didn't move for almost half an hour.

The drive back to his place was a blur. Bill felt nothing, and yet he felt everything. He knew that he had almost died, and an experience like that was life-changing. He also knew that he'd done nothing to prevent it, and his cowardice made him rethink his self image.

They hadn't killed him, but they'd changed him forever. The important question; was he changed for the better, or for the worse?

When Bill pulled into his garage, he didn't notice the man hiding in the shadows.

The man with the scalpel.

Chapter 10

The blinking light indicated the call was a transfer. Special Agent Smith set down his coffee, hit the button, and picked up the receiver.

The caller was Dr. William May of the FDA.

He laid it all out for Smith, starting with the murder of Dr. Nikos.

Smith listened closely, asking the questions he was trained to ask, taking notes when appropriate. The caller went on to talk about the video tape, the lack of police involvement, and finally went into the harrowing tale of discovering the body and being caught by the two killers.

When Dr. May was finally finished, Smith reassured him that the Bureau would get some men on the case. He advised him to stay in his home, avoid strangers, and try to always have friends around him.

Smith gave Dr. May his personal cell phone number, and said he should call if anything else happened. He also told him that the FBI would keep him under protective surveillance, but they were going to stay out of sight so as not to arouse suspicion. It seemed to calm Dr. May a bit, and he thanked Smith before getting off the phone.

Smith reviewed the notes, to make sure he had the story straight in his mind. When he was satisfied that he did, he picked up the phone and called Albert Rothchilde.

Chapter 11

When he saw himself, he was someone else.

The gun was in his hand. He knew what he was going to do, and he was powerless to stop it.

His wife was asleep. He woke her up, let her look down the barrel and have one last scream before he shot her in the forehead.

The sound woke up the kids. Bobby, the youngest, began crying in his bed across the hall. His older sister Sally came into the room, eyes wide.

“Daddy! What did you do to Mommy?”

She took the bullet in the chest, and when she fell it was slow motion, almost beautiful, like a ballet dancer.

He went into Bobby's room. His son was frightened, hysterical.

“Don't be afraid. Daddy's here.”

He picked him up, held him close. When Bobby began to calm down, he put the gun under the boy's chin and fired.

“Just one more.”

He turned the gun around so his thumb was on the trigger and the barrel was pointed at his own chest.

“Forgive me, Lord.”

Then he pulled.

Manny opened his eyes and screamed. It took him a second to realize where he was. He saw the scalpel in one bloody hand, the bottle of pills in the other.

N-Som dream.

He shivered and pulled his knees up to his chest. Bad batch. One of the worst. He wondered how many of the pills in the bottle came from the same source. Manny shook his whole body like a wet dog, trying to erase the memory from his mind.

But he couldn't, of course.

Didn't matter. It was over, and he was fully refreshed. The fatigue that had been setting in before he took the N-Som was gone. His fear was replaced with a feeling of strength and well-being.

Manny stood up. He was in Dr. May's garage. There was a car parked in Dr. May's spot, where one hadn't been earlier.

The doctor was in.

Manny was infused with a sense of purpose. He hoped he wasn't too late.

He put the scalpel and the pills in the shopping bag, on top of the Tupperware container, and eased the entry door open. It led into a hallway, beneath Bill's condo.

Manny walked fast, not wanting to be seen. The washer had faded the stains on his clothes, but the bandage on his hand was soaked with blood and would prompt questions.

The elevator took him to Dr. May's floor. He knocked on the door. Almost a minute passed. Manny knocked again, harder. His tongue tasted like pennies, and he realized he was biting it.

“Manny?”

Bill was in a bathrobe. His hair was wet and smelled of shampoo.

“Dr. May—quick! Inside where it's safe.”

He stepped past the doctor and looked around the room to make sure it was empty.

“Is anyone else here?”

“I'm alone, Manny. Are you all right? What happened at the hospital?”

Manny walked to the sofa, thought about sitting down, decided against it, and paced back to Bill.

“They took me.”

The lie came out weak. He wasn't sure why he was still covering for David, after all the horrible things he'd done. Fear? Devotion? Guilt?

“What happened to your hand?”

Manny stared at his fist, the gauze almost completely red.

“They cut my finger off. Can you sew it back on?”

Manny reached into the bag and removed the Tupperware container. His little finger was carefully sealed in plastic wrap and surrounded by ice.

Bill reached for the phone. “We have to get you to the hospital.”

“No! He... they, they'll find me there. I have to stay here, to protect you.”

“Manny, you need microsurgery to reattach a finger. I don't have that kind of equipment here.”

Manny held Bill by the arm, imploring.

“You don't understand. It's not safe. The people who took me... they said that you were next.”

The doctor seemed to think it over.

“Fine. Let me put on some clothes, and we'll go someplace safe.”

Bill went into another room. Manny chewed his fingernails, both eyes locked on the front door. He knew David was close by. He could practically smell him.

When they were kids, Manny and David had been very close. Even when they were fighting. Even when David did bad things. And more bad things were coming, Manny was sure of it. He could feel them drawing closer.

“Are you ready?”

He jumped at the doctor's voice. Bill put a hand on his shoulder.

“It's okay. It must have been horrible, but you're safe now. Got the finger?”

Manny clutched the bag to his chest.

“Good. Let's go.”

Bill led him down the stairs and back into the garage. It was a hellish walk for Manny, expecting David to pop out behind every corner. He felt a tad safer once they were in the car and driving.

“You've lost a lot of blood. Are you light headed?”

“A little.”

The car stopped at a light. Manny checked to make sure his door was locked.

“When was the last time you took N-Som?”

“A little while ago.”

Bill nodded. “Do you think maybe you should put the experiment on hold for a little while, get some sleep?”

“NO!”

The doctor flinched at the outburst. Manny tried to tamp down his emotion.

“I mean... I can't stop now, there's too much at stake here. This was Dr. Nikos's dream. I'm okay. I really am. I'm just scared. As you said, I've been through a lot.”

A car honked behind them. Manny jerked around. Just an SUV, wanting Bill to go because the light turned green. Bill complied.

“So... what's it like? Being on N-Som?”

“Like?”

“How does it feel?”

Manny was used to questions. He was asked them every day by the team's shrink, Dr. Fletcher. The familiarity made him relax a bit.

“It feels normal. You just don't get tired. Dr. Nikos calls it ZFS—Zero Fatigue Syndrome.”

“Physically or mentally tired?”

“Neither. I can exercise for a very long time. I can also concentrate for extended periods. I never get sleepy.”

“How about when the drug wears off?”

“As long as I take it every 24 hours, the effect never stops. If I miss a dose, I start feeling tired and I know it's time to take it again.”

Like earlier. Manny couldn't remember when he'd last taken the drug; the visit to the hospital had interrupted his daily dose. But the fatigue had been an indicator it was time.

“Are there side effects? Does it make you jumpy? Irritable?” He looked at Manny. “Paranoid?”

“N-Som isn't a stimulant, Dr. May. I'm acting paranoid because people are really after us.”

They drove in silence. It got to Manny, and after a minute he had to talk.

“Look, Doctor, this is an amazing drug. Not only does it replace sleep, it improves your health. I don't get sick anymore. Dr. Nikos and Theena have injected me with different diseases, and none have any affect. I can gain muscle mass at an amazing rate—in one week my biceps grew two inches. And healing... watch this.”

Manny found the scalpel in his bag and took it out.

“What are you doing?”

He brought the blade up to his cheek and make a shallow cut from his ear to his lip.

“Manny...!”

“Calm down, Doc. I have a pretty high threshold for pain. Now look.”

He lowered the visor and adjusted the vanity mirror so he could watch too.

There was bleeding, but not much. After a few seconds he wiped his cheek with his sleeve to show that it had stopped all together.

“See?” Manny put his fingers on either side of the cut and spread them open. The wound had closed.

“It's healed?”

“Not completely. My blood clots at the same rate that yours does. But both sides have knitted together already.”

“How is that possible?”

“Sleep promotes healing. While asleep, the glands manufacture chemicals.”

“The pituitary gland. It makes human growth hormone. It's responsible for building muscle, repairing damage, and a slew of other things. But an abundance of HGH is dangerous, Manny. It produces a condition known as acromegaly. The bones and organs enlarge, causing deformity and ultimately death.”

“Not in my case. N-Som fools the brain into thinking it has slept, and the brain responds by increased hormone production. But my increased metabolism compensates for it. In technical terms, N-Som overrides the superchiasmatic nucleus of the hypothalamus and the midbrain reticular formation, resulting in...”

“I know,” Bill interrupted. “I read the chemical review. N-Som is a synthetic excitatory neurotransmitter. But I didn't know it affected anything other than the Circadian Clock.”

Manny grinned, his pleasure genuine.

“Pretty amazing stuff, huh? So you understand why this experiment is so important. Once this drug is approved, not only will the productivity of the human race increase, the individual quality of life will too.”

When Bill pulled into the parking lot, Manny saw that they were at the hospital. His smile melted.

“What is this?”

“Unless you can grow your finger back, you need surgery.”

“I told you...”

“Manny, I'll be with you the whole time. We'll be safe.”

But Manny knew better. If he went in here, there would be forms to fill out, insurance information, DruTech would be called...

David would find them.

“I can't...”

“Manny, please be reasonable.”

Manny looked down at his hands. He could live with nine fingers. But eight? Six? Two?

David had threatened to cut them all off if he tried to interfere. That, and worse.

“My finger doesn't matter, Doc. The Project matters. You, Theena, everyone involved is in danger. He wants to kill all of you.”

“Who, Manny? Who wants to kill us?”

Manny nervously glanced in the rearview mirror. He was so shocked that he yelled.

David.

“You have to get away, Doc. Go!”

Manny pushed out of the car and ran away as fast as he could.

Chapter 12

When Bill arrived at DruTech, Theena was waiting at the front door. Her lab coat was over another short skirt, and her hair was in a loose ponytail. She hugged him, and Bill felt the tension slip away for the short time she was in his arms.

“What happened?”

Theena was appraising the mark on Bill's cheek, where Franco had slapped him.

He gave her the whole story as they made their way to the research level. When the elevator stopped, he'd just gotten to the part with Manny.

“He's okay?”

There was excitement in her voice, perhaps a bit more than Bill found comfortable.

“He says some people took him from the hospital and cut off his finger, but he got away from them. I took him back there so they could reattach it, but he ran off.”

“That poor man. He must be terrified. And you too. Bill, I don't know how you managed it. You're very brave.”

Theena kissed him on the cheek.

Bill tried to shrug, but it came out more like a squeak. She took his hand and they left the elevator.

“The others are here—everyone except for Jim Townsend. I left several messages, but haven't heard from him.”

“Is that normal?”

“For Jim, no. I keep wondering if he had some kind of accident.”

Theena ushered Bill into a conference room. It was a moderate size, the walls adorned with motivational posters with sayings like “All answers began as problems.” The lighting was softer than the harsh neon of the hallways, and the air smelled faintly of tobacco. A large oval table was surrounded by a dozen chairs, only three of which were taken.

“This is Dr. Bill May, from CDER. I'm sure you all remember him from the other day. Bill, this is Dr. Mason O'Neil, our MD.”

Bill shook his hand. Mason was about ten years older than him, short and stout. He had furry gray sideburns that seemed to swallow his ears, an obvious attempt to make up for the lack of hair on his head.

“Next to him is our chemist, Dr. Julia Myrnowski.”

Julia was young, chubby, with short blonde hair. She smiled shyly at Bill and offered a moist, limp hand.

“And this is Dr. Robert Fletcher, our psychiatrist.”

“Call me Red.”

Bill couldn't imagine why—the doctor's hair was pure white. Red seemed to read Bill's mind.

“Nothing to do with my hair. I was a bookworm when I was younger. Nickname stuck.”

“Nice to meet all of you.” Bill glanced at Theena, unsure if he was supposed to tell the day's events. She pushed on without acknowledging him.

“I'd like everyone to state a brief overview of their work here, to give Bill an idea of how we're running this project. Can you start, Mason?”

“Of course.” Mason had a school teacher voice, the friendly kind. “I'm basically Manny's doctor. I oversee all of the testing. Tissue work ups, serum samples, vitals, lab tests, that sort of thing.”

“And how is his health?”

“Remarkable. Every possible stat has improved since he began using N-Som. Blood pressure, cholesterol, body fat, endurance, you name it. You're an MD yourself, correct? I'd be thrilled to go over his charts with you.”

Bill had seen many of them already. Mason did thorough work.

Theena smiled, comfortable playing group leader. “Julia? Can you tell Bill about your job?”

“Well, I work in the lab a lot. Sometimes with Mason doing testing, but my specialty is NMRs and mass spec.”

“Julia is the one that mapped the atomic make-up of the N-Som molecule.”

“Three molecules, actually.” Julia blushed. “It's a beautiful drug, on an atomic level. I've built several models.”

“I'd like to see them.”

“Sure.”

Julia blushed. She was so shy Bill felt an urge to pat her head.

Red coughed into his hand and cleared his throat.

“And I assess Manny's mental state, along with providing needed therapy.”

“Does he need therapy?”

“We all need therapy, Bill. Perhaps Manny needs a bit more than others.”

Bill had gone over some of Manny's physical reports, but hadn't been privy to any of his psych evaluations other than a brief bio.

“I've read a little about his past. He grew up in a foster home.”

“Yes, with his brother, David. Their mother was a drug user, neglectful. The state took over custody.”

“Can you give me your personal assessment of him?”

Red smiled, apparently delighted by the question.

“Complicated man. He has a grounded sense of right and wrong, yet many times in the past he chose the wrong. Burglaries, car theft. We got him through the CIRP, you know.”

Bill hadn't known that. The Correctional Institution Reform Project offered prisoners reduced sentences by allowing them opportunities to volunteer in scientific programs.

“What was he in for?”

“Assault. He started a fight in a restaurant, hit another man with a beer mug. When the police arrived, he fought with them as well.”

“So he's temperamental.”

“When I first got him, yes. I'd like to say that my guiding hand has made him a calmer person, but I don't think I'm the cause in this instance.”

“N-Som?”

“I think so. Besides his many physical improvements, Manny has become calmer, more at ease with himself, and even a nicer person.”

“Is he ever paranoid? Delusional?”

Something passed behind Red's eyes.

“Manny has some unresolved issues involving his childhood, and has resulting ego problems. I'm sure you know how hard self acceptance can be, especially if you've made some big mistakes.”

Bill was taken aback. Did Red know? Was this talk of self acceptance and big mistakes a reflection on Bill's past?

“I'm not sure I understand.”

“I'm sure you do. I read about you in the paper last year, Dr. May. You and your wife. But obviously, with therapy, a person recovers. You did seek professional help, right?”

Bill felt it build inside him. He tried to repress the bottled emotion.

“The topic is Manny, Red.”

“Surely you can talk about it after all this time.”

The memories came flooding back, and Bill couldn't stop the switch from being flipped. With them came pain, guilt, and self-hatred.

“Whether I can or I can't isn't your goddamn business.”

Red stared at him without expression.

“I apologize, Dr. May. If you need an ear, I'm here. It's almost impossible to get over things like that without help.”

Bill tried to swallow, couldn't. All eyes were on him, watching him while he cracked. He stood up to leave.

“If you'll excuse me.” Bill fought to keep his voice even. “The last thing I want to do is tell a group of complete strangers about how I murdered my wife.”

Chapter 13

Theena watched Bill storm out of the conference room, his face ablaze with pain. Against the advice of Red, she followed, somewhat surprised by the degree of her own concern.

Bill was leaning against the wall, his thumb and index finger pressing his eyes closed. Theena touched his shoulder and discovered he was trembling.

“Bill? What happened in there?”

When he took his hand away from his face, his eyes were red.

“I’m not sure I can talk about it.”

“Have you ever talked about it?”

Bill said nothing. Theena waited, watching him wrestle with some inner demon. When he finally spoke it was flat and without emotion.

“My wife Kristen had an inoperable brain tumor. It didn’t respond to conventional therapy. I knew there was an experimental drug that looked promising, but it was still in pre clinical development—it hadn’t been tested on humans.”

His mouth twisted in a sour smile.

“I pushed the application through the Investigational New Drug process, even though the sponsor wasn’t prepared for clinical testing. The FDA can do that for emergency cases; allow a treatment IND even if the drug hasn’t been approved.

Theena could guess where this was going. Her stomach clenched with pity.

“The tumor was slow growing, but I didn’t want to waste any time. I rushed her into treatment. I can remember promising her it was going to be okay.”

His red eyes glassed over. His voice was a pain-filled whisper.

“The first dose killed her.”

Theena tried to touch his cheek, but Bill turned away.

“I shouldn’t have pushed it through. If I had more thoroughly investigated the drug...”

“She was going to die anyway, Bill.”

He laughed, a harsh expletive sound.

“The very next month, a doctor in Europe perfected a new procedure for mid-brain tumorectomy. If I’d waited a few weeks, Kristen would still be alive.”

There was nothing Theena could say, but she tried.

“You did it to save her.”

“I killed her. It was no different than putting a gun to her head.”

Bill walked off in the direction of the elevator. Theena could imagine trying to live with that guilt, and she felt terrible for him. She also felt something else; a tenderness inside her that had been missing for a long time.

Theena followed, grabbing his sleeve.

“Don't go.”

He shook his arm free. She grabbed him again, harder, yanking him around to face her. Bill's face was vulnerable, but there was also inner strength there. He was hurt, and for some reason this hurt her too. It was impossible to bring his wife back, and almost as impossible to make him forgive himself.

But maybe, for just a moment, she could help.

Before he could object, she had her fist locked around his tie and her mouth pressed to his.

Bill resisted for the briefest of moments, and then kissed her back.

It wasn't tender or tentative, as first kisses usually were. This was hard, frantic. He gripped her tight, both hands pressing into her lower back, and she wrapped her fingers in his hair and tried to pull him even closer.

It didn't take much effort to lead him to Manny's room. The passion continued to grow in Theena until it drowned out all other thoughts. Bill's wife, N-Som, her father's death, Manny's disappearance; nothing mattered except sensation, and she gave herself to it fully.

They got as far as the sofa before the clothes came off. She didn't expect Bill to last long—it had been a while for him. But he surprised her, and when the rhythm she liked began he was able to maintain it until she found release, sinking her teeth into his shoulder.

He came while she was riding the wave, and for those few precious seconds, everything in life was perfect and pleasant and real.

Theena luxuriated in the post-glow, his weight on top of her, their sweaty bodies, the feeling of his heart beating against her breast. Sex with a new man was often awkward, but this was as good a start as she could remember.

She whispered in his ear, giving it a tiny nibble and tasting salt. “I really needed that.”

Bill pulled away and grinned at her. “It sure beats psychotherapy.”

“Cheaper, too.”

He kissed her, tenderly this time, and then maneuvered so he was sitting on the sofa. She curled up next to him, hooking one leg over his knee.

“Are you okay?”

He thought about it for a moment, and nodded.

“I've got a lot on my plate, but I'll manage.”

“Can I be forward?”

Bill laughed. “I think you already were.”

“My father's funeral is tomorrow. I'd like you to take me.”

“Of course.”

Theena had been putting off mourning. When she saw Dad in that casket, she knew she'd break down. Having Bill with her would help.

“So it's really been over a year?”

He nodded.

Theena found the remote control and aimed it at the fake window. After a few sunsets, the porno channel came on.

“After that long, I bet you have a shortened refractory period.”

Her hand found him, and she proved herself correct.

They took it slower this time, now that the urgency was gone. Theena enjoyed the change of pace, almost as much as she enjoyed the change of partner.

She wondered, idly, what Manny was doing at that moment. She'd never said they were exclusive, even though the poor dope proposed marriage every time they made love. He would probably fly into a jealous rage if he found out.

But as she approached orgasm, it wasn't Manny she was thinking about. Nor was it Bill.

In her mind's eye, she saw someone completely different.

The only man she'd ever truly loved.

Chapter 14

After sitting in the conference room for several minutes, Dr. Red Fletcher knew that Theena and Bill weren't coming back. He assumed that they were in Manny's room—it was obvious they had the hots for each other, even if you weren't a trained psychoanalyst. Under the guise of testing his assumption, he bid good-bye to his colleagues and went to his office, located a few doors down.

The room was an intentional replica of the office at his practice downtown, with the same style Victorian desk, the same leather couch, many of the same books on the shelves. There was no view, naturally, but he compensated with several landscape paintings and soft track lighting. A place for thinking, a place for healing.

The main difference between his two offices was the secret place, as he liked to call it. The brown door in the corner was always locked, and Red had the only key.

Red went into the secret place and switched on the light. The Mac on the desk hummed; it was always on. The space was small, cramped, the size of a large closet. He sat down at the keyboard.

Dr. Nikos had been the only other person that knew about this place—Red had needed his permission and funding to set it up. But Nikos hadn't even known the tip of it.

Along the walls, in racks, were dozens of labeled CDRs. The computer looked like any other modest system, unless you examined the back and noticed the extra cables running to and from the CPU. Red typed a command and the sound came up on the speakers.

Moaning and breathing, from Manny's room.

Red smiled. He'd been right. He checked to make sure it was being burned on the CD, and then turned the sound down.

Bugging Manny's room had been his idea. Red was an ethical doctor, but this was an exceptional case. Manny was his patient, yes, and he wanted to help him. But first and foremost, Manny was a guinea pig for an experimental drug. Red's job here was to evaluate the psychological effect it had on Manny, and if that meant violating his trust, so be it.

It was a good thing he did, because some of the things Red had recorded were extraordinary.

He took down a CD labeled “MANNY and DAVID #7”, put it in the second disk drive, and turned up the volume.

Voices filled the small room, David and Manny in a heated argument. Red sat down and picked up his notebook, leafing through it.

“You cover for me. You always cover for me.”

“I have to, David. You're my brother.”

Red squinted at his handwriting, wishing it were more legible. He found the session he wanted and read. Manny had been talking about his youth, describing an instance where David killed a neighbor's dog. Manny told their foster parents. David was sent to juvenile hall, and like most kids in juvee, he'd been abused.

Manny had never gotten over the guilt of doing that to his brother. Even though Manny hadn't been the one to beat the animal to death, he felt responsible.

“Stop it, David! You're hurting me!”

Red pursed his lips, listening to the tape, wondering if he could actually hear the sizzling sound of the hot iron on skin or if it was his imagination.

He questioned, yet again, if he should have attempted to stop it. True, Manny's healing abilities were accelerated, but shouldn't he have stepped in and tried to prevent him from being hurt?

“Not my job.” Red said the words to reaffirm his decision. “My job is to observe and evaluate.”

Dr. Nikos had never known about the friction between Manny and David. Red had planned on telling him, but had wanted to gather enough data to formulate a diagnosis first. He knew David was violent, but was unsure if his incessant mention of homicide was real or imaginary. He believed that David would never actually kill someone. It was just tough talk; bravado and swagger.

Or was it?

A sobering thought, especially in light of Dr. Nikos's murder. But Red was sure it couldn't have been David. David hadn't been there.

No, someone else killed Dr. Nikos. Red set it in his mind. It had to have been someone else.

He popped out the CD and checked on the sounds in Manny's room.

More moaning and groaning.

Red smiled. “Ah, youth.”

He left it on, again telling himself it was for professional rather than prurient reasons. Theena intrigued him. As a Freudian, he was immediately aware of the complex she suffered from; it was her primary motivation for beginning the affair with Manny. Red was unsure of her motive in this instance.

It might have been the need for sex, but she seemed to have been getting enough of that already. Was she doing it with Bill out of pity?

The moans didn't sound like pity to Red.

Something else then. Romantic feelings, perhaps? Or perhaps Bill was a more appropriate substitute than Manny was.

Red switched off the sound and left the room, locking the door behind him. Fascinating as she was, Theena wasn't his patient. She had a right to her secrets.

He did, however, pocket a CD labeled MANNY and THEENA #4, to listen to later.

It was only lunch time, but with Manny still missing, Red had no reason to stay at DruTech. He pondered going into the office downtown, but everything there could wait.

Red chose to go home. Rather than track down his fellow employees to inform them he was going, he used the intercom. Units were in every room, on the wall next to the entrance. He stood next to his and pressed the speak button.

“I'm heading home. Good day, everyone.”

His voice echoed loudly over the house speakers, imbedded in all the ceilings throughout the

complex. A moment later, the speakers bellowed with a feminine voice.

“GOOD-BYE, DR. RED.”

Red smiled. Julia always responded. He hardly ever talked to her professionally, but he knew her shy nature made self-reaffirmation through others a necessity. In return she always offered affirmation back in greetings and farewells.

He knew she was awaiting a response, and he gave it to her.

“Good-bye, Julia. See you tomorrow.”

“SEE YOU TOMORROW.”

“Have a nice day.”

“YOU TOO. HAVE A NICE DAY.”

He could have replied again, knowing Julia would keep this up forever. But amusing as it was, he wanted to get on his way.

Red owned a ranch house in the wealthy town of Barrington. The sun was out in full force, and in the parking lot Red paused to take some big, full breaths. Autumn was in the air, with its own special, earthy smell.

The weather was mild enough to roll down the windows halfway, and he took a route through the forest preserve to see the trees turning. Nature pleased Red, and fall colors were a special delight. The leaves reminded him of his youth, placing them under paper and rubbing them with a crayon to get impressions. Simple tactile pleasures.

The hit from behind was wholly unexpected.

Red always drove under the speed limit. Mostly for safety's sake, but he also got a secret pleasure causing road rage in the impatient.

As a result of his driving habits, he'd been rear-ended several times. It had never been his fault, and was never anything more serious than a fender bender.

This was different.

Red's head was jerked back, and his car swerved onto the shoulder. He hit the brakes, spun, and finally came to a stop facing the wrong side of the street.

When focus returned, he saw what had hit him. It was a pickup truck, full size, the chrome bumper wrinkled like a piece of tin foil.

The driver hopped out of the cab and hurried over to Red, opening his door. Red was grateful for the speedy assistance, until he looked into the driver's eyes.

“David?”

“Hiya, Doc. Beautiful day for a drive.”

David reached down and unbuckled Red's seat belt. He firmly tugged the older man out of the vehicle. Red was a solid man, tall enough to have played basketball in high school. But David handled him as easily as if he were a child.

Another car slowed down beside the accident site, the driver sticking his head out the window.

“Are you guys okay?”

“I think so.” David shrugged. “No one's hurt, but my wife's gonna have a fit.”

“Do you want me to call the police?”

“Already did. Thanks.”

David waved, and the car sped off.

Red was still stunned, and his neck was beginning to ache, but he wasn't afraid. David had apparently followed him from DruTech, and he obviously needed to talk.

“You seem sort of edgy, David. Any idea where Manny is?”

“That cry baby? No idea.”

“I have to question your method of approach here. Wouldn't a phone call have been easier than rear-ending me?”

“Sorry, Doc. You know I'm impulsive sometimes.”

Red nodded, then winced.

“Neck hurt? Let's go sit down.”

David took Red's arm, assisting the older man with his footing on the bumpy grass. David led him down the ditch and over to a copse of trees. He leaned the psychiatrist against a massive oak.

“Thank you, David.”

“With the ditch, you can barely see the road over here. It's like we're all alone in the woods.”

Red agreed. “Private. It's nice to get away, sometimes.”

David sat next to the doctor and twirled a brown oak leaf in his fingers. Red waited. Silence was important. It was good to let patients work things out for themselves.

“I was there.”

“Where, David?”

“When Dr. Nikos died.”

Red did his best to hide his alarm.

“I didn't notice you there.”

“I came later, after the speech. I know Dr. Nikos didn't want me there. Manny's the success. I'm the failure.”

“That's not true...”

“It is true. That's why I killed him.”

For the first time in his professional career, Dr. Red Fletcher felt a spike of fear. He'd had David pegged as antisocial, prone to fits of temper, but not homicidal.

His diagnosis had been wrong.

It all made sense now. And Red was in serious danger. Stupid, to have let his own ego blind him from the truth.

Red controlled his breathing, trying to treat the conversation like it was just another therapy session.

“You believe Dr. Nikos thought you were a failure.”

“Of course. If anyone knew about me, do you think N-Som would get FDA approval? I know

I'm a secret. That new CDER guy, Bill, doesn't even know about me, does he?"

"No."

"See? Big embarrassment."

Red chose his words carefully. He didn't want to get David riled up. They had a relationship, mentor and student. He could still control where the situation went.

"You're not an embarrassment, David. You may have some problems..."

"Problems?" David spat. "I sliced Dr. Nikos up like a pizza. And when Manny tried to stop me, I did the same to my own brother. The one person in the whole damn world that I love."

"You... you need help, David."

"No shit."

"But we'll be able to work it out. It isn't your fault that Dr. Nikos is dead. We can actually blame the drug. You can get through this, David."

David crumpled the dry leaf in his hand, the brittle flakes grabbing the air and blowing away.

"Sometimes I think I can. Sometimes I really do." His mouth formed a lopsided grin. "But it would be a lot easier if I just killed you."

David took a scalpel out of his back pocket. Red felt the sweat bead up on his forehead. He kept his voice steady.

"That's not in your best interest, David."

"You said it yourself. I can blame the drug."

David moved closer. Red crab walked backwards, keeping his feet between him and the advancing blade.

"I can help you, David. I can help make you well."

"I appreciate the effort. Really, I do. But between me and you, Doc, I think psychiatry is a big load of horseshit."

The scalpel flashed. Red tried to defend himself, tried to ward off the unrelenting slice after slice after slice. After a while he gave up and just prayed for it to end quickly.

But it didn't.

"Now it makes sense." David laughed, digging in. "Why they call you Red."

Chapter 15

Nathan White liked every aspect of his job except this one.

His mother thought being a courier was the same as being a pizza delivery boy. She couldn't have been more wrong. They both involved driving, and dropping things off, but the similarity ended there.

Even though he worked for a company, Nathan was technically an independent contractor—his own boss. But more than that, he was actually part of something. Many people, companies, and institutions depended on him.

Fed Ex offered next day service, but in many cases that wasn't quick enough. Sometimes it had to be the same day, or even within an hour.

Nathan had delivered contracts that saved companies from bankruptcy, organs for emergency transplants, evidence that helped convict murderers, water to disaster victims—things that helped make the world better.

He was paid well, treated with respect, and people were always happy to see him when he arrived just in the nick of time.

Kind of like Superman, Nathan thought. Except Nathan was fat with acne and no super powers.

The job had only one downside; the DruTech run. Or, as he called it, the cadavalivery.

He picked up his two-way radio and spoke to headquarters.

“Dispatch, I'm at the morgue, over.”

“Roger, Nathan. Make it quick—you wouldn't want the corpsicle to thaw.”

Nathan winced at the joke. He got out of the car and rang the buzzer at the rear entrance. Like always, his mind began to wander while he waited.

Once a week, for almost two years, Nathan had been coming to the morgue to pick up packages. The procedure was always the same. He'd give Sully a sealed envelope, Sully would give him an insulated box.

The boxes varied in size, some small enough to hold shoes, some large enough for a TV. They were always cold to the touch. Sometimes they steamed slightly, and the odor made Nathan gag. A year back, a package had even leaked, and the stain was so rancid Nathan had to cut it out of the upholstery, resulting in a hole in the back seat.

Nathan knew that even the big boxes were too small to hold an entire cadaver, but he had no doubt the boxes had something dead in them. After all, this was a morgue.

So his mind played tricks every time he made the DruTech run. He'd imagine the box was full of illegal third trimester abortions. Or severed limbs, which were going to be cooked and served to a secret club of corporate cannibals. Or that he was picking up different body parts each time, and a mad doctor was building a monster out of them.

One thing was certain; the weekly deal was shady. It always took place at the back entrance,

which was never in use. It always involved an exchange for an envelope full of cash (Nathan never opened it, but it felt like cash). And Nathan was paid for the run off the books, in cash as well.

Nathan patted his pocket to make sure he had the envelope. He did, naturally. If there was one run he didn't want to screw up, it was this one. Nathan harbored many fears of what would happen if he'd accidentally lost the envelope. He figured he'd wind up in one of those insulated boxes, and his replacement would deliver his parts to DruTech for nefarious purposes.

The door swung open, and Nathan jumped. Sully snorted at him. Pale, hairy, a drawn out face—Sully looked exactly what a morgue attendant should look like. As usual, he wore his bloody apron. Little things were stuck to it on this occasion, and Nathan had no desire to know what they were.

“Got the envelope?”

Nathan handed it to Sully. The dour man stuck it in his back pocket, then bent down and handed Nathan a medium sized Styrofoam box, the lid sealed with tape.

It was steaming.

Nathan held it away from his body, trying not to sniff the rising fumes. Sully laughed.

“Get a move on. You don't want to have it with you when it thaws and wakes up.”

The color drained from Nathan's face, and Sully slammed the door. Sully always messed around with him like that. There couldn't be something actually alive in there.

Right?

Nathan didn't want to find out. He hurried to his car, placed the box on the roof as he opened the door, and when he went to grab the package it slid out of his hands and hit the ground.

Nathan yelled in surprise. This was the worst thing that had ever happened in his twenty-three years of life.

The package landed on its corner. The impact caused the top to pop off, flapping open like a hinge, the tape still stuck to one edge.

The steam slowly dissipated, revealing the thing inside the box.

Nathan stared down in horror. It was worse than anything he could have imagined. His mind screamed at him to run away, but his legs remained locked and his eyes couldn't tear away from the nightmare before him.

It was a human head.

The head was severed under the jaw line, packed in smoking dry ice. Two curly wires were stuck in the tear ducts of its open eyes, the other ends attached to a large lantern battery.

And it was opening and closing its mouth.

The scream was in his lungs, filling them, but he couldn't get it out of his throat. He was so terrified he couldn't exhale.

There was a soft, rhythmic *click click click* as the head's upper and lower teeth met, as if it was chewing.

Or trying to speak.

“Whoops.”

Nathan turned and saw Sully standing next to him. The scream finally came out, but it was more like an asthmatic wheeze, so high-pitched only dogs could hear it.

Sully bent down and picked up the box, holding it under Nathan's face.

“See? You woke him up. Now it must feed on the blood of the living.”

Nathan's bladder let loose and the blood drained from his head. He was about to pass out.

Sully snapped the lid on and put the box in the back seat.

“You okay, kid?”

“... it's... it's... still alive...”

Sully laughed and clapped Nathan on the shoulder. “It's not alive. Some doctor's going to use it for experimental research. The battery keeps a small electric charge in the brain so the tissue doesn't decay, and the jaw moving is just a reflex.”

Nathan began to sob. Sully frowned, clearly embarrassed.

“Look, kid, it's no big deal. No harm done. You want to come in, get cleaned up?”

Nathan shook his head, his hand reaching into his wet jeans for his car keys. Sully took out the envelope Nathan had given him and removed a fifty dollar bill. He shoved it in Nathan's vest pocket.

“Here, have a nice dinner on me.”

Nathan mumbled a thanks. It was automatic. He didn't feel thankful at all.

“If there's anything left, pick up something for our friend here. Maybe he'd like a pack of gum.”

Sully opened his jaw and clicked his teeth together, doing an eerie imitation of the head.

Nathan climbed into the car, oblivious to Sully's laughter. He drove in a daze, way over the speed limit, paying no attention to traffic signals. When he got back to headquarters Nathan quit on the spot, and demanded they remove the box from his back seat and take it to DruTech themselves.

The next day he got a job delivering pizzas.

Chapter 16

Bill had never been to a funeral where it hadn't rained.

Today was no exception. He huddled under an umbrella, Theena clutching his arm hard enough to bruise it, trying to remain calm while the minister's droning voice got lost in the wind.

There had been a wake earlier, loud and good natured, pharmaceutical people mingling with politicians, investors, family members. But it was all bad for Bill. The closed casket brought back memories of his wife's funeral, and several colleagues he hadn't seen since then felt the need to ask how he was coping.

Theena hadn't said a word since this morning, when she apologized for not putting on any make-up. Her nonstop crying since then was the reason why.

But he'd managed to stay strong through the wake, for Theena, for himself. He wasn't sure how much longer he could last. When he'd learned that the funeral was being held at St. Matthew's it took all of his will power not to walk out on Theena.

He looked to his right, again, over the rows of graves, to a barren tree on a hill a hundred yards away.

His wife was buried under that tree.

Bill hadn't visited her once since she'd been interred. The scene had been very much like this one, support people mumbling meaningless words of sympathy in the rain.

A procession had formed before Dr. Nikos's casket, mourners pulling flowers from an arrangement and setting them on top. Bill tried to ease Theena into line, but she refused to move. The people standing to their left had to walk around them.

Finally, adorned with flora, the coffin was lowered into the muddy earth. Theena wailed, a sound like a tortured ghost, and collapsed onto the ground. Bill knelt next to her, cradling her head, feeling his wife watch them from the hill.

Several people came by, including the minister, offering their assistance. Theena simply sobbed. After a while, she and Bill were the only ones left.

The wind got worse, stinging as it slapped their faces. Bill's pants were soaked to the thigh. He could imagine how cold Theena was, in a black skirt, sitting on the ground in a little ball.

"We have to get you inside."

"No."

"Theena, you'll get sick out here."

"I'm not leaving Daddy."

Bill tried to lift her by the armpits, but she fought him. He had an irrational impulse to slap her, make her get up so he could leave, and that made him feel even guiltier than he already was.

"I want to put a flower on his casket."

She allowed Bill to help her up, and they approached the grave.

The hole was already filling with water. So cold and wet and alone. Awful.

Theena picked a rose and dropped it. The flower bounced indifferently off the casket and fell alongside. Theena shook herself free of Bill's arms and ran, across the cemetery, towards the parking lot, her face in her hands.

Bill watched her go. He wanted to follow, but his feet had something else in mind. They took him in the other direction, up the hill.

Kristen's headstone was black marble. All it listed was her full name, her birth date, her death date. The carver had asked Bill if he wanted anything else, a phrase or line.

To sum up a person's life in one phrase had seemed so pathetic at the time, and Bill had passed. Now he wished he'd put something, anything there, to set it apart from all of the other nondescript graves, rows and rows of them.

"I'm sorry, Kristen. I'm so sorry."

He cried, letting it all out, sobbing with his whole body like Theena had. He was so overwhelmed with grief that he didn't notice the two men approach him from behind.

"Well, lookee here, Franco. It's the Doc's wife."

Bill spun around. It was the two thugs who'd almost killed him the day before.

"It's nice that you visit her, ain't it Franco?"

Franco put out a palm and shoved Bill backwards. Bill tripped over his wife's stone and landed hard on his butt.

"I thought we told you not to call the cops."

"Easy, Franco. Can't you see the guy is grieving here? You gonna kick his ass on top of his wife's grave? Show some respect."

The older man, Bill remembered his name was Carlos, held out his hand to help him up. Bill refused to take it.

Carlos shrugged and got down on his haunches.

"Franco is right, though. We warned you not to call the cops, and you went and called the FBI. We feel like maybe you didn't take us seriously."

"Fuck you." Bill spat in his face.

Carlos smiled. He took out a handkerchief and wiped his cheek. Then he backhanded Bill across the face.

"I'm sentimental, so I'll forgive that. But we need you to understand that no one's gonna help you, Doc. You could call the CIA, Internal Affairs, the goddamn Governor, and no one will help. But we'll hear about it. And we won't be happy."

Bill probed the inside of his mouth with his tongue, tasting blood. A tooth was wiggly. He stared up at Franco, but there was no fear. There was no pain, either. All Bill felt was a coldness inside him. He embraced it, drew strength from it. This wasn't going to be a repeat of yesterday.

He made a show of getting to his feet, looking weak and beaten. Then he made a tight fist and hit Carlos with everything he had.

Carlos went down. Franco stood there, immobile and confused. Bill lowered his head and charged the bigger man, connecting solidly with his gut. Franco grunted and doubled over, and Bill swung hard between his legs, an upper cut that he put his whole body behind.

Then he ran.

The grass was slippery, and it was hard to keep his balance. He heard the thugs yelling after him, heard a shot and felt it go over his head, but he didn't stop. Not until he reached the parking lot and found Theena sitting in his car.

Bill scrambled for the door handle, his free hand digging for the car keys in his jacket pocket.

They weren't there.

He tried his blazer pockets, vest pocket, pants pockets, patting his body all over.

No keys. They must have been lost in the scuffle.

Theena hadn't even noticed him—she was staring blankly out the window, an emotional zombie.

“Theena! We have to get out of here!”

She didn't bother looking. Bill glanced over his shoulder, saw Franco and Carlos coming down the hill.

He reached in the car and wound his fingers around Theena's long, black curls. Then he yanked.

She was jerked from her seat, the pain making her yell. Bill locked his hand around one of her flailing wrists and pulled her out the driver's side door.

“We have to go!”

There was a boom and a crash, and a spider web of cracks blossomed in the Audi's rear windshield. Theena's eyes widened, and Bill dragged her away from the car as another bullet smacked into the open door.

With her long legs, Theena had no problem keeping up with him. They ran, hand in hand, through the parking lot and onto the street. There were apartment buildings on either side, for blocks in either direction. Bill tugged her towards the nearest one, heading for the front entrance. The security door was locked. He frantically pressed buzzers, hoping someone would let him in.

“Who is it?”

Bill put his face to the intercom speaker.

“Please! Someone is trying to kill us!”

“Who is this? Lionel?”

“Open the door!”

Another thunderclap, the bullet slapping into the brick wall and peppering Bill's face with bits of wet rock.

They took off in a crouch, making a beeline for the next apartment building.

No one answered the buzzers.

“They're coming.”

Theena's voice was soft, fatalistic. Bill chanced a look. Carlos and Franco were jogging towards them, less than a hundred yards away.

Bill looked in the other direction. The street was deserted, not a vehicle in sight. They ran for it.

Halfway down the block, a car turned the corner and began to approach. Bill released Theena and waved his hands over his head, yelling for the car's attention.

The car didn't slow down, and veered slightly out of their direction as if to drive past. Frantic, Bill tried to position himself in front of it, holding out his hands, praying the driver would stop.

The driver slammed on the brakes. The tires couldn't find purchase on the wet pavement and the car hydroplaned, rushing at Bill faster than he was able to get out of the way.

It slid to a stop just a foot before impact.

Bill placed his palms on the hood. The driver was invisible behind tinted gray glass. He was probably petrified, wondering if this were a robbery or a car jack. The car was a late model Lincoln Continental, the rain beading off the many coats of wax.

Bill motioned for Theena to come over.

"We need help! Someone's after us!"

The driver's window rolled down.

"Bill May? Theena?"

It was DruTech President Albert Rothchilde.

Chapter 17

Theena glared at Rothchilde. He was in all black, except for a blood red rose pinned to his lapel. He had come to the funeral late, and left early. But she had a pretty good idea why he'd stuck around.

Rothchilde returned her obvious anger with a blank stare, then focused on Bill. "Are you both all right?"

"Some people are chasing us. They have guns."

"Guns?" Rothchilde raised an eyebrow.

Theena kept her voice even. "Open the doors, Albert."

"Of course."

Rothchilde hit the unlock button. Bill climbed into the back seat, Theena the front. She watched her boss try to feign concern.

"Shall we head to the police station?"

Bill shook his head. "They won't help. Just get us out of here."

Theena noticed the faintest of smiles appear on Rothchilde's lips. "Are you sure you're okay? Who were those men? Were they trying to rob you?"

"I think they're organized crime." Bill opened his mouth to say more, but nothing came out.

He suspects Rothchilde, Theena thought. Maybe the guy isn't as gullible as he looks.

"Just take us home, Albert."

"Well, I still think we should call the authorities. Do you want to go home, Dr. May?"

Bill said nothing.

Theena could understand his trepidation. They knew where he lived.

"You can stay with me, Bill."

"Are you sure?"

Theena nodded. Rothchilde gave her a slight jab in the ribs, which she ignored.

"If I can stop at my place and pick up some things."

"Of course. Just show me the way."

Bill directed Rothchilde to his condo and told them he'd only be a minute. When he was out of the car, Theena turned to Rothchilde and slapped him.

"You asshole! They were shooting at us!"

Rothchilde's eyes twinkled.

"They missed. They're pros, Theena. They were just delivering a message to Bill. You weren't even supposed to be involved."

"You're a bastard."

He gave her knee a squeeze.

"We both have the same goal here, darling. I see you're playing your part to the hilt. How was Dr. May? It's been a while for him, I understand."

Theena refused to be baited.

“Have you found out who killed my father, yet?”

“Not yet. I've got the whole Chicago PD on it.”

“Maybe they aren't looking in the right place.”

“Meaning?” Rothchilde moved closer. “Oh, I understand. Maybe they should be looking in this car, right?”

Theena looked into his eyes. Beneath the amusement they were blank, dead. She wondered, not for the first time, what she'd gotten into.

“You killed Mike Bitner, didn't you?”

“There's no way to prove that.”

He did, the bastard. And he was reveling in it. Theena felt a tickle of fear spider-walk up her spine.

“How do I know you didn't kill my father, too?”

“You know I didn't. It wouldn't make sense. He was worth too much.”

“What does that matter? Maybe you had your own warped little reason. Once a killer, always a killer.”

Rothchilde pinched her cheeks and squeezed them together, making her lips pout. “And once a whore, always a whore.”

She shook out of his grip. He put his hand on her knee again, rubbing.

“I didn't kill your father, Theena.”

His caress was cold, oily. She didn't know if she believed him or not.

“How about Dr. Townsend and Dr. Fletcher?”

“What about them?”

“They weren't at the funeral.”

Rothchilde frowned. “Yes, I noticed that, too. I'll have Halloran check on them. I should probably put some men on you as well. If someone's trying to sabotage me, they may go for you next.”

Theena folded her arms.

“I can take care of myself.”

“Of course you can, dear. If the bad guy comes to your door, you can always fuck your way out of danger.”

She made a fist, intent on putting a permanent dent in his long pointed nose. But Bill was leaving the building. He'd changed into jeans and a new jacket, and was lugging an overnight bag.

Rothchilde blew her a kiss. “It's that fire in you that makes you so dynamite in the sack.”

Bill climbed into the back of the car, putting his suitcase on the seat next to him. “All set.”

Rothchilde didn't need directions to Theena's apartment, but she gave them anyway. Bill may have suspected Rothchilde, but he gave no signs that he suspected her. She wanted to keep it that way.

They drove in silence. Theena harbored so many doubts that sorting them out was difficult. She had originally aligned herself with Rothchilde because they shared a common goal. Whomever sponsored N-Som needed to have deep pockets and major clout. Theena was a large part of the reason that American Products acquired DruTech. She'd slept with him at her father's request.

But sex and murder were two entirely different things.

Theena knew men, what they wanted, and how to control them. She thought she had Albert wrapped around her finger. Now she wasn't so sure. And the stakes had gotten higher than simply getting N-Som approved.

Theena thought about Townsend, and O'Neil, and Julia and Red. She'd been working with these people for years. They were her family. Now Townsend and Red were missing, Manny had been attacked twice, and her father was dead.

Could she be next?

Theena furrowed her brow, trying to come up with a solution. Rothchilde owned the police. He had friends in both the state and federal government. He was in bed with organized crime. If Rothchilde wanted them all dead, who could she go to?

Don't panic, she told herself. Maybe he was telling the truth. Maybe it would all work out for the best.

She knew it was a lie, but she clung to it anyway.

It was all she had.

Chapter 18

Carlos was holding a napkin to his swollen lip when the car phone rang. He had a pretty good idea who it was.

“Yeah?”

“You were supposed to scare them, not shoot them.”

Carlos spat some blood out the window. He pretended it was in Rothchilde's face.

“The prick sucker punched me.”

“I thought Gino told you to follow my orders exactly. Shall I tell your boss you're having a listening problem?”

What was with this guy? They were doing him a favor. He could show a little respect. These big business types felt like the whole world should bow at their feet.

“No, Mr. Rothchilde.”

“I'm glad we understand each other. I just dropped them off at Theena's place. The situation has changed. I want them out of the picture.”

“Out of the picture?”

“Theena and Dr. May have worn out their usefulness to this organization.”

Carlos shook his head. At the first little bump in the road, Rothchilde wanted to whack everybody. And saying this on an open line, yet. Gino must have been making a real mint off of this idiot to keep him around.

“That's not a smart idea, Mr. Rothchilde. Two FDA agents dead, both on the same case, plus her father and her.”

“We had nothing to do with her father.”

“So? Cops will still look.”

“Let me handle the cops. You just clean out your wop ears and do what you're told.”

“I'm Cuban.”

Rothchilde went off on a yelling jag, and Carlos hung up. He looked at Franco, who was clutching an ice pack between his legs.

“He wants us to take out the Doc and the girl.”

Franco smiled.

“Good. I'll enjoy snuffing that guy. And the girl will make a yummy dessert.”

Carlos frowned. He didn't like the way any of this was going. He decided to call Gino.

“Whaddaya want?”

“Gino, it's Carlos.”

“No shit. You see that big bright display on your phone? It's called Caller fucking ID.”

No respect. Didn't anyone see the movie *Scarface*? Now Pacino, he had respect. Maybe it was just this generation. Carlos had worked for Gino's father, years ago. That man respected everyone

who worked for him, and he got that respect back. Carlos would have taken a bullet for him. He wouldn't take a mosquito bite for Gino.

“He wants us to take the doc and the girl out.”

“Jesus. That guy. Okay, you do it, make sure it don't get back to me. I don't want it to look like a hit. Maybe a robbery. Or some crazy killer Charlie Manson thing. Messy. Franco is good at that psycho shit.”

Carlos sighed. It kept getting better and better.

“You got it, boss.”

Gino hung up.

“We gonna do it?” Franco was practically drooling.

“Yeah. We have to make it look messy.”

“I like messy. We need to stop at the store for supplies.”

Carlos kept a box of disposable latex gloves in the trunk. He also had duct tape, carving knives, and some butcher's aprons, along with his disguise. The tools of the wet trade.

“We're set.”

“You got rubbers, too?”

“Rubbers?”

“Make it messy, right?”

“Jesus, Franco.”

Maybe it was this generation. Carlos suspected MTV had a lot to do with it.

“Stop at that place on Damon. They sell the extra large kind.”

Carlos pointed the car east.

Chapter 19

Theena's apartment didn't match her personality. It was plain, with little frill or flourish. There were no photos of friends or family anywhere, and the bland painting hanging over the sofa looked like it came with the frame, probably purchased because the color scheme matched the sofa and love seat.

Neat, tidy, impersonal. *Sort of like a motel*, Bill thought. The only distinctive object in eyeshot was a potted cactus next to the front door, jutting out of its terra cotta pot like a two foot, green exclamation point.

“Are you hungry?”

“Tired, mostly.”

They'd spent the previous night in Manny's room, and hadn't slept much. Bill could say without question it was the best day he'd had in over a year. It was more than just the sex. He felt connected. For a few wonderful hours, Theena had taken away his guilt and loneliness, and given him back a shred of self-worth.

But the woman Bill had been with yesterday was nowhere to be found at the moment. Today's Theena was withdrawn, distant, defeated.

“The bedroom is the second door, there.”

Bill yawned. He needed a nap, but there was a lot he had to do. The N-Som folder he'd taken from Bitner's house was in his overnight bag. Among other things, Bill was anxious to see how the experiment with Sam the monkey ended.

But it was more than that. Bill didn't want to sleep because he was afraid Carlos and Franco might find him. He couldn't be caught unaware.

“I'm okay, thanks.”

“You look exhausted.”

“I am. But I don't think sleep is a good idea right now.”

He wanted to share his doubts about Rothchilde with Theena. Bill had a solid feeling that the A.P. President was behind those two thugs, Franco and Carlos. He also believed that Rothchilde had some kind of pull with the Chicago PD, which is why Bill hadn't gotten any help.

But something held Bill back. Even with all he'd shared with Theena, there was still something he didn't completely trust about her.

Or maybe the lack of sleep was just making him paranoid.

“I have some N-Som.”

“Hmm?”

“You could take a pill. Then you don't have to sleep.”

“No thanks, Theena.”

Theena came over to him, serious.

“Bill, I've been working with this drug for almost a decade. It's safer than taking Vitamin C.”

Bill didn't answer. Any courage he might have harbored concerning unproven drugs died with his wife.

“Look.” Theena dug into her purse and took out a pill bottle. “You've read up on the chemistry, right? There's nothing toxic in here, Bill. They're neurotransmitters. The body manufactures these naturally. It's an acetylcholinesterase inhibitor, which activates the aminergic drive.”

“I know what it's supposed to do. But is that all it does?”

“Manny's been awake for over a thousand hours. He's fine.”

“Are you sure of that?”

“This is how sure I am.”

Theena popped the top off the bottle and placed a pill in her mouth, swallowing it dry.

“It takes about four minutes to be absorbed into the bloodstream—the drug has an amino acid chelate so it immediately passes through the ion channel. Then it produces a reaction similar to narcolepsy. But it isn't really sleep because the brain stays in alpha.”

Theena sat down on the sofa and stretched out her legs.

“The effect lasts anywhere from ten to twenty minutes, and then you snap immediately out of it and you're completely awake and aware.”

“No residual effect?”

“None. The brain counteracts the drug with an increased production of norepinephrine. You wake up refreshed.”

Bill was intrigued.

“If it inhibits sleep, why do you have a narcoleptic episode for twenty minutes? Shouldn't it simply keep you awake?”

“N-Som doesn't inhibit sleep. It replaces it. The same neurotransmitters that are responsible for waking are responsible for sleeping. N-Som affects the sleep center first, causing a state we call hyper-relaxation. The brain automatically releases its own neurotransmitters to counter the effect. The result is twenty-three hours of ZFS.”

“Zero Fatigue Syndrome. Manny mentioned it.”

Theena laid back on the sofa and closed her eyes.

“I may toss and turn a little. It's possible to rouse a person in hyper-relaxation, but not easy—it's like trying to wake up someone in deep sleep.”

“Will you dream?”

Theena nodded. “Extremely realistic dreams. You'll almost swear they're really happening. Even though they only last a few minutes, several hours can seem to go by in your head.”

“Well, then. Sweet dreams.”

Theena nodded. After a minute, her breathing began to slow down.

Bill sat down next to her and took her pulse. Her heart beat twenty times in fifteen seconds. That was average. He waited and tried again. It had slowed to sixteen. A minute later it went down to

thirteen, and stabilized.

He opened an eyelid, and the eyeball was moving back and forth. REM. She was focusing on some unseen object. He reached for the table lamp and moved it closer, but the pupil didn't dilate.

"Theena? Can you hear me?"

Bill gave her a light shake and a tap on the cheek. She didn't respond. Her skin was noticeably cooler to the touch.

If Bill hadn't read any of the N-Som reports, he might have thought she was going into shock rather than reacting to the drug in a predicted manner.

He waited by her side for the next ten minutes, holding her hand. It brought back images of Kristen, sitting next to her hospital bed as she slept. The memory hurt, but not as much as it used to.

Perhaps he was beginning to heal after all.

Theena's hand slowly became warmer, and her breathing quickened. She opened her eyes a moment later, her face cracking in a smile.

"I was surrounded by loved ones, warm and happy. It was beautiful."

Bill couldn't deny she looked one hundred percent better. The dark bags and redness were gone from her eyes. Her face was brighter. She seemed like a new person.

"Want to try it?"

"I'm still not sure."

Tina touched his lips with her fingertip. The moodiness was completely gone, and she was back to playful and flirtatious.

"I bet you were one of those kids in college who never tried pot."

"Wrong. I had a roommate who grew the stuff in our dorm closet. He had a pair of four foot female plants, called them Laverne and Shirley."

"So what's stopping you?"

"I already told you."

"Bill, if you can't trust your own judgment, why do you stay with the FDA?"

Damn good question.

Bill sighed, relenting.

"Fine. I'll try it."

"One thing. I just had a pleasant dream. But some of the dreams in hyper-relaxation aren't pleasant. I'd say the ratio is something like ten to one. It has something to do with the refining process, we're not entirely sure yet."

"So I might have a nightmare?"

Theena nodded.

"Nightmares and I are old buddies. I can handle nightmares."

Theena handed over the pill. It was oval and the color of caramel, covered with tiny brown flecks. Like a miniature robin's egg.

Bill swallowed it without water.

“Would you like the sofa, or the bedroom?”

“The sofa is fine.”

He traded places with Theena, reclining as she had. There was a tickle in his throat. He hoped this wasn't a mistake. He hoped nothing would go wrong.

Bill closed his eyes, and felt the beginning stirrings of panic.

“It's okay.” Theena put her hands on his. “Nothing to be nervous about. You'll have a quick dream, and be back to full capacity in fifteen minutes. You trust me, right?”

I want to, Bill thought. But I don't know if I can.

Then everything went black.

Chapter 20

Carlos and Franco circled Theena's apartment building twice before finding a parking spot.

"I'm outta change. Pay the meter."

Franco giggled. "We come here to waste some people, you're worried about a traffic fine."

Carlos sighed, the weight of the world on his shoulders.

"You ever hear of the Son of Sam?"

"I saw the movie. Mass murderer guy."

"Where is he now?"

"In jail."

"You know why he's in jail? The cops traced his parking tickets to the scenes of his crimes."

Franco paid the meter.

Carlos checked the street for bystanders, then popped the trunk. In a gym bag, next to the murder kit, was a baseball cap and matching jacket, both with a Fed Ex logo. Carlos put them on and picked up a medium sized Fed Ex box and an electronic clipboard. The gizmo was key to the disguise. Only the real deal would have an expensive gadget like this, with an LCD screen that recorded your signature.

"I'll call when I'm in, be ready."

Franco was picking his teeth with his thumbnail. If he'd heard Carlos, he didn't acknowledge it.

Carlos walked to Theena's building, package under his arm, putting himself in the role. The key to any deception was believing it yourself. He was an employee for an overnight delivery service. This was his tenth delivery of the day, and he only had three more before quitting time. Before he pressed Theena's buzzer, he took the time to fill out the blank receipt taped to the package.

Then it was show time.

"Yes?"

"Federal Express delivery, for Dr. Theena Boone."

"Who is it from?"

"Albert Rothchilde, American Products."

Carlos took a step away from the door. If she were able to see him from her window, she'd see a Fed Ex guy.

Sure enough, she buzzed him in.

Carlos took the elevator to the fifth floor. He turned on the electronic clipboard, and the screen glowed faintly. His gun was in his belt, under the jacket. Carlos rehearsed his lines before approaching her door.

Knock knock. "Fed Ex."

He tried to look bored while she gave him the once over through the peephole. When the door opened, it was only a few inches. The safety chain was on.

“Dr. Theena Boone?”

She nodded. Carlos showed her the box. The Fed Ex box was too big to fit through the crack in the door. If she wanted her package, she'd have to open up.

“I need your signature, here.”

He held out the clipboard, making no attempt to slip it through the door.

“Just a second.”

The door closed, and he heard the chain come off.

Carlos had his gun in hand when the door reopened. He shoved it under her chin hard enough to make her teeth click.

“In the apartment, move.”

She stepped back, her face awash in surprise. Carlos took a quick look around. The doc was on the couch, snoring.

Carlos pulled Theena close, one arm around her neck. He reached back into the hallway for the dropped box, and closed the door behind him. Then he fished out his cell phone and hit the speed dial.

“I'm in.”

Chapter 21

When he opened his eyes, Franco and Carlos were standing over him.

“Good morning, Doc.”

A large hand grabbed him by the shirt.

“This is what happens when you don't play along.”

Fear coursed through him, so hot and deep it was just as palpable as the blood in his veins. He was off balance, and summarily dragged away in a half stumble, half crawl.

A gun was pressed to his head. It felt huge. He watched, unable to move, barely capable of drawing a breath, while Carlos pulled on a ski mask.

There was a camcorder resting on a nearby box.

They were going to videotape his death.

He looked around the room for a weapon. There was nothing suitable. *Do something*, he screamed in his mind. *Don't die without a fight*.

He made a fist and swung, a big loping blow aimed at Franco's chin. The large man twisted, catching the punch on his shoulder. He giggled, high pitched and horrible, and then hit back.

The hitting went on. And on.

“Quit it. We have to do this on tape.”

Franco gave him one more kick.

“Aren't you excited, Doc? Gonna star in a movie.”

The world had become pinpoints of pain. Rather than cringe, he embraced the sensation. It might very well be the last thing he ever felt.

Carlos handed Franco the camcorder.

“If it means anything, Doc, I kind of liked you. You were an okay guy.”

Franco pointed the lens.

“Action!”

The red light on the camera began to blink.

“Come over here.”

Carlos led him into the corner of the room. He couldn't get his brain around what was happening. The magnitude was so tremendous he refused to accept it.

“Kneel down.”

He tried to think of something, a reason, a point. Not just for his death, but for his life. Something, anything, to take with him into the void.

“N-Som will get FDA approval.”

A speck of hope. Was this all just another scare tactic, to make him approve that damn drug?

“Yes. I promise it will.”

“I wasn't talking to you.”

He didn't even feel the shot. The wind left his lungs, as if he'd fallen on his back. He tried to breathe, but his brain couldn't get his lungs to work. Everything got fuzzy, soft. His life leaked out the large hole in his chest.

I hope there's something else.

But he knew there wasn't.

That was his last thought, and he died.

Chapter 22

Bill's eyes sprung open and he sucked in air. He sat up, frantic. His hand felt his chest.

No hole.

N-Som dream.

Theena had said they were realistic, but he had no idea. The detail, the imagery, the tactile sensations, all making him feel as if he'd actually been there.

Mike Bitner's death.

The perspective was different than the video tape. Bill felt like he'd actually lived through his death, seeing everything happen through Bitner's eyes, feeling what he felt up until the very end.

And unlike a regular dream, this remained lodged in Bill's head like a real memory. He could close his eyes and still feel the cool concrete of the basement floor under his knees...

"Good morning, sleepy head."

Bill stood up and spun around. Carlos was standing by the front door. He had on some kind of delivery uniform. Standing next to him, a gun pressed to the back of her head, Theena was fighting not to cry.

Bill blinked and shook his head.

This was no dream.

"Sit down, Doc. Put your hands above your head."

"Where's your fat buddy?"

"He's coming. You in a hurry to get this party started?"

Bill considered his slim options. Carlos was only half a dozen feet away, the sofa between them. Going over it was faster than going around it, but either way Carlos would be able to shoot him before he got there.

He had to think of something, and fast. Once Franco arrived the odds would become much worse.

"I have a lot of money."

"Is that so?"

Bill nodded. He laced his hands behind his head and walked over, trying to look submissive.

"Two hundred and eighty thousand dollars. You let us go, you can have it."

"And you got this where, in your wallet?"

"In a CD. Two phone calls, I can pull it all out."

He stood in front of Carlos, his muscles tensing.

"And how do I get the money, once you pull it out?"

"We can go to the bank, together. Franco stays here with the girl, so I don't try anything funny."

Carlos laughed. "I like that, Doc. You're a thinking man. Wouldn't work, though. Soon as we got out in public, you'd start screaming your head off."

Bill set his jaw. He had to make a play for the gun. It would endanger Theena, but there was no other choice. They were both going to die anyway, and he wasn't going to go out like Mike Bitner did, on his knees wondering what the meaning of life was. One memory like that was enough.

"I can call my lawyer. He's got authorization on my account. He can bring the money here."

Carlos grinned. "It's getting better. But wouldn't the bank be suspicious, taking out all that money?"

Bill eyed Carlos's pistol. He hadn't ever fired a gun, but he had a basic understanding of how they worked. Carlos had a revolver, the kind that gunslingers from the old West used. Pulling the trigger caused the hammer to draw back. When the hammer fell, it would hit the bullet in the cylinder, causing the gun to fire.

Bill stood in front of Carlos, his hands out in supplication, his voice frantic.

"I'll tell him I need it for bail, for my cousin."

"Clever, Doc. You're a clever..."

Bill shot out his hand, aiming for the hammer, grabbing the gun near the back.

Carlos fired. A spark of pain shot up Bill's wrist.

Instead of falling on the bullet chamber, the hammer pinched the webbing between Bill's thumb and forefinger. The gun couldn't fire.

He tugged. Carlos refused to let go of the weapon, being pulled along with it. They fell to the floor.

Bill was bigger, and younger, but he'd never been in a real fight before. The older man snarled and kicked with ferocious energy, tearing at Bill's eyes with his free hand, trying to bite Bill's arm.

Bill strained, trying to kick Carlos away, but he received a stiff poke in the eye and the pistol was ripped from his hand.

"You son of a..."

There was a thumping sound, and a scream. Bill squinted, focusing his blurry vision.

Theena had whacked Carlos across the face with her cactus.

She dropped the pot. Half the plant was gone, a ragged break on top leaking milky fluid.

The other half was embedded in the killer's face. He wrestled with it. Some of the needles held like fish hooks, stretching his skin as he pulled. His wail was keening, a hurt puppy.

Bill scurried to his feet and picked up his overnight bag—he didn't want to lose the N-Som file. Then he grabbed Theena's wrist.

"Back door!"

She stared for a long moment at the man writhing on the floor, then ran with Bill to the apartment's rear entrance.

They hit the stairwell and bounded down two at a time. Their footsteps echoed on the concrete, and Bill couldn't be sure he didn't hear someone above, coming after them. It fueled his fear.

The cold gave Bill a shock when they stepped outside. The earlier drizzle had frozen, forming an icy sleet. Without a coat, the weather pinched at his cheeks and hands. He tugged Theena through

the alley, trying to decide where to go.

He saw a cab, coming down the block. Bill chanced a look behind him. Franco, charging towards them like a bull, his head down and fists pumping.

Bill stepped in front of the cab, forcing it to stop. He and Theena practically dove inside.

“Go! Go! Go!”

The cabbie gave Bill a look of annoyance. He opened his mouth to object and then noticed Franco barreling towards his cab.

“A hundred bucks to get us out of here!”

The cab squealed tires, doing a little fishtail peel-out, leaving the overgrown thug hollering after them.

“Are you in some kind of trouble?”

Bill didn't answer. Where could they go?

“We could try the police...”

Theena shook her head. “Those were Rothchilde's men. He owns the police.”

Bill remembered he had Agent Smith's cell phone number. Carlos and Franco had known he'd called the FBI, but they could have found out by bugging his condo, or hacking into his phone records. Or the FBI could have told them. Should he take the chance?

“Does he own the FBI?”

“I don't know. It's possible.”

Bill's cell phone was in his jacket, back at Theena's. He looked at the cabbie's picture, posted on his license. His name was Fasil. Bill tapped on the glass partition.

“Fasil, do you have a cell phone?”

“I'm sorry, I do not lend it to customers.”

“One call. I'll give you another hundred.”

Bill fished out his wallet and slipped four fifties through the opening. The cabbie handed Bill his phone.

Bill's trembling fingers refused to obey, and he dialed the wrong number three times. The fourth time, the call finally went through.

“Agent Smith.”

“This is Dr. William May, I talked to you the other day.”

“Yes, Dr. May. Are you in trouble?”

“Yes. You still have agents watching us, right? We need them to take us in. Too much is going on.”

“Where are you right now, Doctor?”

Bill didn't sense any kind of deception. But that could have been because he wanted a way out of this so badly.

“We're in a cab, heading southbound on Foster.”

“Foster and what?”

Bill squinted out the window.

“Irving Park Road.”

“Okay, Doctor. I need you to park and wait there until I can contact my men. Can you do that?”

Bill instructed the cabbie to pull over. Theena shot him a panicked look.

“Okay, I did it. Now what?”

“Some agents will approach the cab. They'll show you ID. You can go with them, they'll take you to a safe house. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

The line went dead. Bill patted Theena's thigh. “It's okay. The good guys are coming.”

The cabbie swiveled around in his seat.

“You want me to park here?”

“For a few minutes. Someone is coming to pick us up.”

He put an arm around Theena and felt shivering. Bill wasn't sure if it was her or him.

A few minutes passed.

“Come on, Smith. Where are you?”

“Smith?” Theena pulled away from Bill, her eyes wide. “Gerald Smith?”

“Special Agent Smith is the Fed I talked to. I don't know his first name. Why?”

“I've overheard Albert on the phone before, talking to someone named Gerald Smith. I got the impression he was with the FBI.”

Bill chewed his lower lip. To his right, a dark sedan with tinted windows approached the cab and slowed to a stop.

“Bill, we have to get out of here!”

The doors of the sedan opened, and two men in suits got out of the car.

“Bill, please!”

“Fasil, get ready to move if I give you the signal.”

“I appreciate the money sir, but I am becoming frightened. Please get out of my cab.”

One of the men tapped on the window. He was holding up a wallet, showing Bill his ID and badge.

“Dr. May? We're the FBI. Step out of the vehicle.”

Bill was torn apart with doubt. If Smith was a good guy, this whole thing would end here. The Feds would take them in, they'd tell their story, and hopefully it would be enough to put Rothchilde away.

But if Smith were in this with Rothchilde...

“Bill, if we go with them, we'll die. Please.”

Theena squeezed his arm, imploring. Bill decided he couldn't take the chance, tempting as it was.

“Fasil—please drive us away from here.”

“I do not want to get involved.”

“Please, Fasil. If we get out here, these men will kill us.”

“Then they may kill me as well. Get out of my cab.”

Bill took off his watch, a high end Movado with a diamond at the twelve o'clock mark. He held it up to the glass.

“It's worth over two grand. Just drive us away from here, and it's yours.”

The FBI agent tried to open Bill's door. Theena screamed, and Bill pulled on the handle to keep it closed.

“Please, Fasil!”

There was a screech, then the cab rocketed forward. Bill turned around.

The agents had drawn their guns.

“Get down!”

The pop-pop-pop of gunfire ensued, immediately followed by the metallic twang of bullets hitting the trunk.

Fasil made a hard right, the cab skidding around the corner at such a speed Bill thought for sure they'd crash.

But even on the slick street, the tires held.

Fasil followed up the maneuver by narrowly cutting off a bus, careening into oncoming traffic, and taking a hard left into an alley.

He stood on the brakes. The cab screeched to a halt a few feet in front of a dumpster.

“We shall wait here for ten minutes, until we are sure they are gone.”

“Thank you, Fasil.”

Bill began to put the watch in the pay slot, but Fasil held up a hand.

“No need. I come from a country where the government oppressed me. Many people helped me to escape. I am happy to help you.”

Bill put his watch back on. With his shaking fingers, it required every bit of his concentration.

Theena leaned towards Bill, snuggling against him. He put his arm around her.

“We have to go to DruTech, Bill.”

“Won't they guess we'll do that?”

“It doesn't matter. There's security around the clock, and they work for me, not Rothchilde. We can be safe there, until we sort this out.”

“Maybe we should just leave the state. Or the country.”

“For how long? If we run, they'll be waiting when we get back. I'm not going to let these bastards chase me away from my life.”

“Why don't you two go to the media?”

Theena and Bill looked at Fasil.

“I do not know what your story is, but it seems very big. If you involve the media, it will force the government to take action against those who are after you.”

Bill's foot was resting on his overnight bag, which contained the N-Som file he'd gotten from

Mike Bitner's place. If he could prove something crooked was going on, the media was a logical place to turn.

But was Theena involved? How deep was she in?

“Fine, we'll go to DruTech. How about the other doctors on the team?”

“I'll call them, tell them to meet us there.”

Bill handed Theena the cell. “Have them pack a bag—we don't know how long we'll have to stay.”

Theena dialed a number and spoke for a few minutes with Dr. Julia Myrnowski, the chemist. Then she left messages with Dr. Jim Townsend and Dr. Red Fletcher.

Bill was staring out the window, watching for the sedan, when he felt Theena jerk next to him.

“You okay?”

Theena was holding the cell phone at arm's length, staring as if she'd never seen one before.

“I just called Mason O'Neil, our MD.”

“What's wrong? Is he all right?”

She looked at Bill, terror filling her eyes. “He was screaming.”

Chapter 23

Dr. Mason O'Neil tried to judge how much blood he had left by looking at the puddle on the floor.

The outlook wasn't good.

He was down at least a pint. His blood pressure was dangerously low, hypovolemic shock just around the corner. The tingling in his extremities and his rapid heartbeat confirmed the diagnosis.

Mason tried, once again, to put some pressure on his brachial artery to staunch the bleeding. His hand was knocked away.

"Don't prolong it, Dr. O'Neil. I have other things to do today."

His tormentor paced before him, like an expectant father in a waiting room, constantly checking his watch. David. When Mason had let him into his apartment fifteen minutes ago, he couldn't have predicted this turn of events.

"I've done nothing to you. In fact, I always considered you a friend."

"You conduct experiments on all of your friends?"

Mason's mouth was dry; his tongue felt like a paper towel. It was getting harder to speak.

"You volunteered. All you had to do was say you wanted out."

David sneered. "And go back to prison. Some choice."

The doctor watched the blood run down his fingertips, still flowing freely from the deep wound on his wrist. Drip. Drip. Drip. Like sand in an hour glass, each passing second bringing him closer to death.

"So why are you still taking the drug? If you're so against the experiment, why are you still using N-Som?"

David appeared confused.

"I'm not."

"I can see the pill bottle, in your coat pocket."

David shoved the bottle father down, as if it shamed him.

"You treated us like lab rats."

"But you're not in the lab now. You're free. So why are you still taking it?"

David's face became pinched. He nervously twiddled the scalpel in his fingers.

"It's addictive."

O'Neil let out a slow, soft breath. He was getting sleepy.

"We both know it's not addictive. You're taking it because you want to. Because the experiment is important to you."

The MD gently lifted his wrist above heart level, a pathetic attempt to stave the flow. David didn't notice.

"If the experiment is so important, why am I killing everyone involved?"

Mason's thinking was becoming blurry, and he couldn't have made up a lie if he'd wanted to.

"Because you're out of your mind."

David laughed. The sound was forced, but it caught and quickly escalated into an hysterical giggle. Mason shifted, again pressing his fingers deep into his brachial artery. His pulse was rapid, weak.

"Okay, Doc. I'm crazy. I'll admit it. But you did it to me."

"I didn't know, David. No one did."

"Dr. Fletcher knew. Good old Red knew for a long time."

"He didn't tell us. If he had, we would have stopped this. No one wanted to hurt you."

David knocked his hand away. Mason groaned, the blood coursing through his arm and spurting. It sounded like a small squirt gun.

"Do I have to cut off your fingers to get you to stop that? Consider yourself lucky. I skinned Townsend, and Red is hanging by his intestines in the forest preserve. I'm letting you off easy."

Mason's head titled forward. His eyes were rheumy.

"I'm going to die."

"That's the point."

"Manny wouldn't want me to die."

David bit his knuckle. He paced away from the doctor, then back again.

"Call an ambulance." His voice was barely above a whisper. "You can still help me."

"No help!" David pointed at him, his finger accusing.

"Please, David."

"You know how N-Som is made?"

Mason knew. They all knew. The fact that Rothchilde had somehow passed the FDA's pharmacological review was amazing. The president of DruTech couldn't have done it honestly.

"You know how it's made, and you let me take it anyway."

"You volunteered."

"Not for this." David's eyes took a trip somewhere. Somewhere horrible. "I've seen things, Doc. Things no one alive has seen. Can you imagine?"

Mason couldn't imagine. Once was bad enough.

"Do you know I've died forty-three times? And I remember each time, like movies branded into my head."

"I'm... I'm sorry."

His breath was becoming fainter, and consciousness was drifting away. All of Mason's senses softened, grew fuzzy.

"Seeing things like that can really mess a person up, Doc."

Mason felt as if he was sinking in a deep, dark pool. A small part of him wanted to protest, but didn't have the energy.

"Manny... Manny..."

“Manny isn't here, Dr. O'Neil.”

David cradled the doctor's head in his hands. Mason only had a vague awareness of it.

But he became fully aware when David began to pound his head against the hardwood floor, over and over, trying to crack it open like an egg.

And he was still somewhat aware when David succeeded.

Chapter 24

“Don't let anyone into the building except DruTech staff. If the police come, demand to see a warrant.”

“No problem, Dr. Boone. Everything all right?”

Theena smiled thinly at the security guard. “No, Barry, it's not. Has anyone else arrived?”

“Dr. Myrnowski went down to the lab a few minutes ago. She's the only one.”

“Did the delivery come?”

“It came this morning. I signed for it, but the box looked damaged.”

A flash of fear. “Damaged?”

“Cracked on the side, top kind of messed up.”

“Was it leaking?”

“Didn't seem to be.”

“Thanks, Barry.”

Theena went into the elevator, Bill a step behind her. If something had happened to the contents of that package...

“I know this is a stupid question, but are you okay?”

Theena put her key card in the slot and looked away from Bill. He was so concerned. She felt a tinge of something in her gut, and wondered if it might be guilt.

From a very young age, Theena realized that men were the ones with the power. Her father had proven it time and again. Men controlled the money, the government, the world. They did it by threatening, bribing, blackmailing, fighting, insulting, extorting, stealing, and killing. None of these were inherent female traits.

But a woman could have power. All she had to do was learn to control men.

Theena was an expert at this. Flirting. Flattery. Seduction. Sex. They were all tools; a means to an end. Her personal taste didn't interfere with her goals—sometimes she liked the guys she slept with, sometimes she didn't.

Bill, she liked. She liked him so much it was messing up her game plan.

Theena glanced at him, his broad shoulders, the laugh lines in the corners of his eyes. For the briefest of moments, she forgot about N-Som, and power, and goals. She pretended that she was just a woman, and Bill was just a man, and they were together. No control, no betrayal, no ulterior motives. Just love.

It was a sweet little fantasy, but that was all it was. Real life conspired otherwise.

“I'm fine. This is a lot to handle.”

Bill nodded. He took her hand. She hugged him, unsure if her actions were real or pretend.

“I have to check something in the lab. If you don't mind, I need to do it alone.”

“Not a problem. I want to look at the N-Som file anyway.”

She forced some crocodile tears and looked at him.

“With all that's happened, you think the drug can still be approved?”

“If it's safe, I'll approve it.”

Theena hugged him again. The elevator stopped and Bill went off to the conference room, a folder tucked under his arm. She had a momentary spike of panic, but then she remembered that there was nothing incriminating in the N-Som file she'd given Bill—it had all been edited.

Her mind drifted to Michael Bitner. Another man she'd liked...

Dr. Julia Myrnowski was in the lab, peering through a microscope when Theena walked in.

“Hi, Julia.”

“Hi, Theena. How are you holding up?”

“Fine. The package is here?”

“In the freezer. I haven't opened it yet.”

Theena took a white smock from her locker and removed a hair net from the side pocket. She put both on. After snapping on a pair of latex gloves, she went to the freezer.

The box was definitely cracked, and the tape on the lid looked like a repair job. This wasn't Sully's work—she paid the morgue attendant too much for him to make mistakes. The courier must have done it.

Theena made a note to change services. If they'd seen what was inside the box, she could explain it away. But dropping important material like this was inexcusable.

“I want to do the biopsy and convert right away. Can you assist?”

“Dr. O'Neil is better at it than I am.”

“Dr. O'Neil isn't here, and I could use a second set of hands.”

Julia frowned. Theena couldn't blame her. It was a pretty hairy extraction procedure. But there was no one else, and this had to get done now.

Theena placed the box on the table, next to the surgical vise. She snugged a pre-fitted plastic cover onto the clamps and turned the handle to open them wider.

Then she went to the autoclave and pulled out the sterilized instruments; enlarging burs, dura separator, skull traction tongs, cranial drill, saw blade and guide, and various retractors, curettes, forceps, and rongeurs.

After spreading out the tools on a tray, the moment of truth arrived.

Theena broke the seal on the box, letting out a breath when a wisp of carbon dioxide plumed upward. If there was still dry ice, perhaps the specimen hadn't been compromised.

She unwound the tape and lifted off the top. The smoke dissipated, allowing her to see the perfectly preserved severed head.

Theena's lower lip trembled. She pulled the wires out of its tear ducts and gently removed the head from the box.

“Daddy.”

The tears came. Theena gingerly placed Dr. Nikos Stefanopolous's head in the vice, and after

sniffing once, she reached for the scalpel.

Chapter 25

Bill sat in the conference room and leafed through the file he'd found at Mike Bitner's house. Almost immediately, he began to notice differences between this file and the one Theena gave him. Omissions, mostly. But also some completely different experimental results.

Some of Manny's CTs and PETs showed abnormalities, which grew as his N-Som usage continued. In the file Bill had at home, the scans were all healthy and normal.

There were also notes that Manny had been put on the antidepressant Prozac and Xanax antianxiety. The doses had continued to go up, rising to levels that Bill thought were toxic. Eventually, Dr. Red Fletcher began giving him Compazine. This was a powerful antipsychotic, given to people with serious mental problems.

Manny's mental health wasn't the only irregularity. His diet had become increasingly extreme. He once went without food for a period of six days, refusing to eat. When the fast ended, he went into a phase where he only ate marshmallows and raw meat. Last month, Dr. Nikos came into Manny's room to find him devouring a box of pencils.

Theena's story of Manny being on a Stairmaster for nine hours was true, but it didn't end because the equipment failed. It had ended because Manny began to scream, and was unable to stop screaming for several hours, until his throat began to bleed.

But Manny wasn't N-Som's only casualty. The more Bill read, the worse things became. He leafed through one disastrous animal experiment after another. Test subjects would become catatonic, or erratic. They would refuse food and sex. Some became sick, others became violent.

The worst thing that happened was to poor Sam the monkey.

Bill located the missing page, the end of the experiment. After Sam had become lethargic, he'd gone into a rage, attacking Dr. Nikos, biting Theena, and eventually...

Bill read the paragraph again.

Day 241—We found Sam this morning, dead in his cage. Cause of death was a massive hemorrhage. Sam had pulled his own eyes out.

He scanned through the autopsy report. A lesion was found in Sam's corpus callosum, extending upwards to the cerebrum. Smaller lesions were found on the cerebellum, medulla, hypothalamus, and pons.

The monkey's brain was almost twenty percent scar tissue.

Bill put down the folder and pushed away from the table. Could Theena have known how dangerous this drug was? Could all of this information have been hidden from her somehow?

He tried to make it work. He wanted her to have been deceived. Her father could have falsified data. Maybe she was kept in the dark. Maybe...

He picked up the Sam report again. The notes were in Theena's handwriting.

So she knew.

She knew N-Som was dangerous. And she tried to hide that fact.

“What else have you done?”

Bill stood up, his heart racing. Had she been lying to him about her feelings, too? Was she in league with Rothchilde? Worst of all, did she have a part in Mike Bitner's death?

He'd been deceived. Used. Played for a fool. The tenderness that had been growing inside him crumpled and blew away.

Bill collapsed in the chair, wondering what to do next. There was only one certainty. He wasn't going to approve N-Som.

There was probably another certainty as well; Rothchilde's men were going to kill him.

Bill had to make sure the truth about the drug got out, so even if he died, the drug wouldn't be released. The media was probably the best option for that.

But first...

First he had to confront Theena.

Bill headed for the lab. He had every right to be angry, but mostly he was numb. He had no idea what he was going to say to her. Accuse her? Ask for an explanation?

He opened the lab door, watched as Theena quickly tossed a cloth over whatever she'd been working on.

“Bill! I'm sorry, I'm in the middle of something. If you could wait outside...”

“I know.”

She began to say something, then stopped. Her eyes changed. Bill detected sorrow in them, but sorrow wasn't good enough. Nothing would be good enough.

Julia, who was standing by Theena, saw the intensity going on between them. She excused herself and hurried out of the room.

Bill walked over and calmly pulled the sheet off the bulge on the table.

Dr. Nikos's head was in a vice. Theena had performed a craniotomy, and the skull cap was resting next to the head, upturned like a bloody, hairy bowl.

All at once, Bill knew. He knew a secret even worse than N-Som's damaging effects.

N-Som wasn't synthetic.

“You make the drug out of people's brains.”

Theena said nothing. She just gave a soft nod.

“So the pill I took, where I had the nightmare about Mike Bitner's death...”

“I didn't know, Bill. My father prepared that sample. I thought Rothchilde had paid Bitner off. I swear.”

Bill was barely listening. He pulled out a chair and sat down.

“That wasn't a nightmare, was it? It couldn't have been. The images were too strong for a nightmare.”

“Bill...”

Bill focused on her. “I was experiencing his last thoughts, wasn't I?”

“Bill, I'm sorry.”

“You grind up people's brains to get the neurotransmitters. But memory is chemical. So you're actually stealing their thoughts as well.”

Theena grabbed his hand, knelt down next to him.

“Bill, I swear. I only found out about Bitner's death today. Albert told me in the car. He's after both of us now.”

Bill looked at her as if she'd just sprouted horns.

“How could you? How could you do this, and still try to get the drug approved?”

“Bill...”

“Was it the money? You did it for the money?”

“It wasn't for me, Bill.”

“Then who?”

Theena bit her lower lip. The tears streamed down her face.

“I did it for Nikos.”

“For your father?”

“He was more than my father.” Theena looked away, her face burning with emotion. “He was also my husband.”

Chapter 26

Theena focused on the floor, unable to bare Bill's accusing stare. She could never make it up to him. She knew that. But at least she could offer an explanation.

“My real father had me late in life, when he was in his fifties. He died on my ninth birthday. Heart attack. It was sudden.”

Theena closed her eyes, tried to remember his face. The memories were elusive. She had a vague recollection of a dark, fat man, whom she and her mother feared.

“Nikos was my cousin. My uncle's son, on my father's side. After my Dad's death, he began to see my mother. They eventually married. But there was a problem. I had a terrible crush on Nikos.”

Theena swallowed. She chanced a look at Bill. His eyes were far away, but he appeared to be listening.

“Nikos was everything my father wasn't. He was my mother's age, almost twenty years younger than my father had been. He was handsome. He was a scientist. And he treated me like a princess.”

Theena hadn't spoken about this in over ten years, since she went to see that psychiatrist. He'd called it an Elektra Complex. The female version of Oedipus, being in love with your father. But Nikos wasn't her father, really. He raised her, and acted like her father, but the incest taboo wasn't there. In Greece, cousins are free to marry.

“Nikos loved my mother. He loved me, too, but not in that way. And I began to hate my mother for it. Can you imagine? Being jealous of your mom? But I was. I took up an interest in medicine, just so he'd pay attention to me. I knew I could win him over. And I did.”

Theena could remember the day clearly.

“I'd been terrible to him for many years. Teasing him. Leaving the door open when I showered. Walking around the house naked. Breathing in his ear when I kissed him goodnight. He always remained a perfect gentleman. Up until the day I graduated high school. That night, while my mother slept, he came into my room.”

It had been Theena's first time. Recalling it still gave her shivers.

“We tried to hide it for a while, but my mother eventually found out. She left us. I begged Nikos to marry me. At first, he refused. He was becoming prominent in his field, and didn't want the scandal. I convinced him, eventually, and we had a secret ceremony. But while in public, I had to be his daughter. I took the last name Boone, just so I could wear his ring.”

She smiled ironically.

“Here's the funny thing. For years, I was always competing with my mother for his attention. And then, when she's finally out of the picture, I had to compete with his work.”

She stared into Nikos's eyes, wide open and dead. They looked at her with the same feeling as when he'd been alive.

“N-Som was his dream. His life. I became a neurosurgeon so I could be part of his dream. But

he was never fully mine. He was married to science, not me.”

Theena lost her smile.

“I’ll never forget the first time he asked me to sleep with another man. A Senator, with a lot of money and power. We needed the government grant, so my father, my husband, pimped me out.”

The sobs came suddenly, racking her body. She’d never allowed herself to feel the shame before. Theena had always cited love as her motivation. She slept with other men because she loved Nikos. She worked with him on N-Som, knowing it was potentially dangerous, out of love. Love led her to betray her own mother. Love led her to bribe Mike Bitner and initiate a course that led to his death.

She hadn’t lied to Bill about that. She truly thought Bitner had left the country with a suitcase full of cash. But Rothchilde had used her, just like Nikos had. Theena had never been in control. She’d been fooling herself.

Theena sat on the floor; the guilt was so heavy she could no longer stand. Her nose was running. She could feel Bill’s eyes on her, burning like heat lamps. Theena wanted to run, hide someplace far away, where she could never hurt anyone again.

“I’m going to tell the media.”

Bill’s voice startled her. She didn’t look at him, but she silently agreed.

“The authorities will get involved, Theena. There may be arrests.”

She sniffled. “It’s the least I deserve.”

“I have one question.”

Theena didn’t know if she could handle it. But she nodded anyway.

“You’re trying to make N-Som out of Nikos’s brain. Why?”

“I think... I think Albert murdered him. This is the only way I can prove it.”

“You want to see your husband’s death? Feel his last thoughts?”

She found an inner reserve of strength and met his eyes.

“I have to. I have to know who killed him.”

Theena could sense Bill was struggling with it, figuring things out.

“I’m sorry I got you involved with this, Bill. My motives were selfish, and now you’re in danger.”

Bill walked over to her. He seemed more preoccupied than upset.

“How does N-Som affect a person in long term use?”

“We’re still not totally sure. Manny has become unbalanced, and there are some shadows on his CT that might be lesions. When they first appeared, I pleaded with Nikos to stop the experiment. But he and Manny insisted on continuing.”

“How about short term? Taking it once and a while?”

“I’ve taken it almost a dozen times. Not consecutive days, but every few. My last CT was normal.”

He squatted down next to her. Theena wanted, needed, for him to just hold her, but she didn’t

dare ask.

“Is it safe to take it now, after you just took some at your apartment a few hours ago?”

“I'm not sure. But I'm willing to try it.”

Bill didn't say a word for the longest time. Theena didn't know what to expect from him. Was he going to spit in her face? Hit her? Call her names? That's what men did. And in this case, she felt as if she deserved it.

But she didn't expect him to hold out his hand. Theena took it, trying to keep her emotions in check.

“What now?”

Bill's face softened, just a bit.

“I'll help you prepare the drug. Can you make two doses?”

Theena squeezed his hand and nodded.

“Okay, then. Let's find out who killed your husband.”

Chapter 27

Albert Rothchilde wanted to break something. On days when he leaned towards self-reflection, he knew that he was a tad spoiled, had a wee temper, and wicked little sadistic streak. The perfect solution would be to find a whipping boy. Someone that he could keep in a cage and beat whenever he felt lousy.

Perhaps someday in the future. When the billions started rolling in, there was very little you couldn't buy.

But for the moment, all he had was Captain Halloran. He made do.

“You fat, incompetent bastard.”

Halloran's face reddened. He cleared his throat.

“You should have told us to watch your people earlier.”

“You should have figured it out yourself. It's your job, you pathetic prick. You should have put my people under protection after Nikos was murdered. Have you checked on Julia?”

“She's at DruTech, with Theena and Bill. We've got men there, watching the place.”

Rothchilde drummed his fingers on his desk, thinking. Halloran's men had found Dr. Townsend and Dr. O'Neil, both dead. They'd also gotten word that Dr. Fletcher had been killed near his home in Barrington.

These were people that he still could have used, alive. And the two people he needed erased, Theena and Bill, were now under this idiot's protection.

“The plan has changed. I want them dead. Theena, Bill, Julia, and Manny, when you find him.”

Halloran narrowed his eyes.

“I've done some bad things for you, Albert. But I'm not a hired gun.”

“You idiot. I'm not paying you to kill them. I have people for that, people who won't fuck it up like you would. You just need to turn the other way. Do you have any sway with the Schaumburg Police?”

“I know the Chief. We're friends.”

“When all hell breaks out at DruTech, the Schaumburg PD may be called. How much will you need to buy me some time with them?”

“Some people can't be bought.”

“You'll convince him.”

“And if I don't?”

Rothchilde smiled blandly. “While I find it amusing to see that you still have a little bit of backbone left, you're in too deep to back out now. If those people aren't killed, I'll go down. If I go down, you go down. How are cops treated in jail, Halloran? The lifers will swap you for cigarettes.”

Halloran shifted his weight from one foot to the other. He was frowning.

“I'll need money.”

“Name your price.”

“Two hundred fifty thousand.”

The number elicited a guffaw from Rothchilde.

“A quarter of a million dollars, to bribe a stupid suburban cop?”

“Captain Drury is clean. I need a big number to tempt him. It may not even be enough.”

Rothchilde observed Halloran. They both knew the number was ridiculous, but was the Captain actually trying to scam him, keep some of it for himself?

Ultimately, it didn't matter. It was pocket change to what N-Som was going to bring in.

“I don't have that kind of cash here, and I assume he won't take a check. Come back in an hour.”

Halloran shuffled off.

Rothchilde swiveled around in his chair and eyeballed his Miró.

After this was over, there would be an unavoidable delay in the schedule. He needed scientists, discreet scientists, to take over the N-Som research. The FDA was going to be a washout, so the smart thing to do was take production to another country. Mexico, probably. Not nearly the same regulations there, especially if you had money.

It wouldn't be the same as selling the drug legitimately in America, but he'd still make a fortune through internet sales. It would take years before the US could ban it from importation, and by then he'd have enough money to buy the Presidency. Plus there was Europe, Asia, the world market to exploit. And of course, good old Uncle Sam.

The Army wanted twenty-four-hour soldiers. It wanted them badly, and was willing to pay for it. Rothchilde would be able to use much of the altered N-Som paperwork to close the sale, confident that the military wouldn't care in the least about the FDA setbacks.

The only possible hurdle was the dreams—some of those N-Som dreams were pretty disturbing, and Rothchilde didn't want to think about some three star General trying out the drug and reliving someone else's violent death.

But Rothchilde had already planned for that. While it had proven impossible so far to synthesize N-Som, the source could be changed. Rather than harvest the neurotransmitters from the brains of dead people, Rothchilde planned to use aborted fetuses.

A second trimester fetus had the same brain chemicals that were needed to make N-Som, but it didn't have any memories. Dr. Nikos had given Rothchilde a sample to try, and the results were enthralling. Not only did the drug keep you awake and aware, but the N-Som dream was the most beautiful, most content, most relaxing thing Rothchilde had ever experienced. He had actually gone back to the womb. The feeling was so good, he could easily triple the price of the pill and people would still demand it.

Rothchilde stood up and pulled back the Miró. It swung away on hinges, revealing his wall safe. He dialed the combination and tugged the door open.

The current situation was a setback, but only a small one. Once the rest of the team was dead, he could rebuild.

Rothchilde took out five stacks of hundred dollar bills and set them on his desk. Then he picked up his phone.

“Yeah.”

“Theena and Bill are at DruTech. So is another doctor, a chemist named Julia Myrnowski. I want her taken care of as well. The guard at the desk has a security card. You'll need it to get to the basement level. There's a slot in the elevator.”

“Will the guard give it to us?”

“No. You'll have to kill him, too.”

He heard Carlos sigh. “Why don't we just set the whole building on fire?”

“Don't fuck this up, Carlos. No more mistakes.”

“You're asking us to walk into a public place and start wasting people.”

“You won't have any trouble with the police. I've already taken care of that.”

“I still don't like it.”

Rothchilde frowned. He'd have to talk to Gino about this guy's attitude.

“Be ready to go in ninety minutes. You get this done, there will be a bonus.”

“How much?”

“Triple.”

Rothchilde could picture Carlos, adding up all that cash in his greedy little mind.

“We'll take care of it.”

“I know you will.”

He hung up. Rothchilde looked across the office to a framed photo on the wall, of his father, Albert Rothchilde Sr. He'd been a pitiless, terrible parent, but his business skills were brilliant in their ruthlessness. In one of his rare kinder moments, he'd talked to young Albert about wealth.

“The key to getting it is taking risks. The key to keeping it is avoiding risks.”

Diversification. Never put all your eggs in one basket. Which was true, and which also led to his untimely death. As the elder Rothchilde watched his son grow, he saw in him the same lust for power that he had. He'd groomed his son to be his successor, teaching him the ins and outs of corporate domination. He taught him too well, in fact.

On Rothchilde's twenty-first birthday, he got in touch with some of Chicago's disreputable element, and for a small cut they permanently ended the career of Albert Rothchilde Sr. and his wife, leaving young Albert a fortune.

Rothchilde smiled at his father's picture. “Should have diversified.”

Then he picked up the phone and dialed Gerry Smith. If Carlos and his dumb partner failed, he would make sure the FBI seals the deal.

Chapter 28

“Dr. May, let me introduce my daughter, Dr. Theena Boone.”

Dr. Nikos winked at Theena, a signal for her to turn on the charm. It was one of the few things she was good at.

“A pleasure, Dr. May.”

Bill shook Theena's hand, returning the greeting.

“Please sit, Dr. May.” He pulled out a chair for Bill. “I have to be social for a little bit.”

Bill was in good hands, Nikos knew. She was a much better whore than her mother was.

The speech had gone as expected, the audience eating it up. He looked around for Manny, and found him shaking hands with one of the Governor's aides.

“Can I speak to you a moment?”

Manny nodded. “Sure, Dr. Nikos. If you'll excuse me.”

They walked through the banquet hall, smiling and waving at people. So many wanted their ear, it became obvious that privacy was impossible. Luckily, the washroom was empty.

“Did I do okay?” Manny was nervous, agitated.

Nikos looked at himself in the mirror and fingered his beard, smoothing it out.

“You did fine. But I need you to do something else.”

Manny tugged at his collar.

“I just want to get out of here. I don't know how much of this I can take. I feel the walls closing in.”

“Take it easy. It will be over soon.”

“I need something, Dr. Nikos.” As if cued, sweat broke out on his forehead. “I'm about ready to tear my face off.”

“All I have on me is Compazine. You take one of those, you'll act like a drooling idiot. I need you sharp. Did you see the back table? With all the military men?”

Manny nodded. Nikos had to admit, the guy looked close to cracking.

“I need you to go impress them. They're the ones offering the defense contract.”

“I don't know. I... I can try.”

Manny went into a toilet stall and closed the door behind him. Nikos frowned. Their prize pony wasn't doing so hot. Trotting him out for the buyers might not be the smartest move.

Unfortunately, Rothchilde had insisted. Everything hinged on the military money. With unlimited funds, Nikos was sure he'd be able to develop a synthetic version of N-Som. He was morally compelled to. The experiments with fetuses were promising, but Rothchilde was already making deals with several South American countries...

The president of American Products wanted to finance baby factories; paying scores of impoverished women to get pregnant and abort. The whole thing left a bad taste in Nikos's mouth.

A moan, from Manny's stall.

“Manny? Are you okay?”

Nikos knocked on the stall. There was another moan, louder.

“Manny?” The door was locked. “Let me in.”

A scream, so shrill it pierced Nikos like glass. He took a step back and kicked the door in.

Manny sat on the toilet. His tuxedo was in shreds, and there was so much blood he looked like an autopsy in progress.

In his left hand was a scalpel.

“Manny!”

Manny fixed his eyes on Dr. Nikos. His gaze was malevolent.

“No. Not Manny. I'm his brother, David.”

Nikos took a step back. Manny's voice, his posture, his demeanor—all had become threatening. He wasn't acting like Manny at all. Nikos recalled the monkey experiments, and what long term N-Som use had done to their brains. He'd been deceiving himself about the drug's safety, turning a blind eye to the truth, and now the awful realization of what he'd done was staring at him like a hungry animal.

“Manny, get a hold of yourself. You aren't David. David died when you were kids.”

Manny stood up. His lips peeled back, revealing bloody teeth.

“I didn't die.” He tapped his temple with the scalpel handle. “I've been up here all the time.”

“We need to get you to a doctor, Manny. I had no idea you were this bad.”

Manny took a step forward. “The name is David.”

Nikos felt fear. He was a big man, robust, but he'd seen what Manny was capable of. Manny could bench press three hundred and fifty pounds. Manny could punch through safety glass with his bare hands. And now, some internal switch had been flipped, and this unstoppable machine had become a full blown psychotic.

Nikos raised his hands in supplication.

“David is dead, Emmanuel. He committed suicide in juvenile hall. Don't you remember? You told me yourself. Please, Manny...”

“Stop calling me Manny!”

The move was so quick, Nikos couldn't even lift an arm to defend himself. All he saw was a blur, and then there was a waterfall of blood cascading down his chest.

Nikos clutched his neck, felt his fingers sink in to the trachea. He fell over.

“You killed him! You killed him!”

Nikos watched as Manny screamed at himself, turning the scalpel inwards and jabbing it over and over into his own chest. Eventually he collapsed as well.

“Dr. Nikos... I'm sorry. I couldn't stop him.”

Nikos barely heard. He stared at the bathroom ceiling, knowing it was the last thing he'd ever see.

Theena's mother was right. She'd always told him that all of his hard work would kill him.

He almost laughed at the irony.

I never should have left her, he thought. One of many mistakes he'd never have a chance to fix.

And then he died.

Chapter 29

David exited Route 53 at the Schaumburg off ramp. He'd always wanted a pickup truck. When he and Manny were kids, they shared a small die-cast toy. It was the only thing that stayed with them, from foster home to foster home. Their one constant. He even remembered how they lost it.

It was nearly twenty years ago. They were walking home after school, taking a short cut through a field. Manny began throwing stones at a bird's nest, trying to hit the bleating chicks inside. David told him to stop. When Manny refused, David tossed their truck into the woods, never to be seen again.

Or was it the opposite? Had he been the one who was trying to hit the bird's nest?

He shrugged it off. He had a real truck now. Full size, with four doors, all wheel drive, and a bumping stereo system.

The only drawback was the smell. David lowered the window another three inches. The truck's former owner had voided his bowels when David stuck the scalpel in his neck, and he hadn't found a suitable place to dump him so the body was still in the back seat.

The clock read just after five, and most of the DruTech employees would be going home for the day. David knew that the N-Som team always worked late. There was a good chance Theena and Dr. Myrnowski were still there, along with the FDA guy. Once those three were taken care of, David would finally be free.

He fought the departing traffic, inching his way through the parking lot until he found a space near the front entrance. When he turned off the ignition he noticed the bandage on his hand.

David was missing a finger.

When had that happened? He knew that he'd cut off Manny's finger, to teach the coward a lesson. But had Manny somehow done the same thing to him?

The memory was hazy. He could picture himself, hacking at the joint, wiggling the scalpel to get through the knuckle. He could also remember a moment of white hot pain, but was that his pain or Manny's?

He entered the DruTech Building, unable to figure it out. The answer was so close, tantalizing him, something he was almost on the verge of remembering.

The security guard, an overweight ex-cop named Barry, offered a curt nod.

"Good evening, Manny. Glad to see you're out of the hospital."

"I'm not Manny. I'm David."

Barry raised an eyebrow.

"You feeling okay?"

Actually, he wasn't feeling okay. The missing finger nagged at him. It meant something important.

"Who else is here?"

“Dr. Boone and Dr. May from the FDA. Dr. Myrnowski as well.”

“I don't have my elevator pass to get down to the basement.”

“No problem, Manny. I'll take you. Let me call down to Dr. Boone.”

David put a hand on Barry's wrist, not allowing him to pick up the phone.

“I'd prefer to surprise her.”

He emphasized his point with a squeeze, feeling the wrist bones beneath Barry's flab. The guard's eyes widened.

“Sure, Manny. I'll walk you to the elevator.”

David smiled and released his grip. The chubby man led him to the lift, his gait uneasy. He used his security pass in the slot under the call buttons. The green light went on, and the doors closed.

“You have something on your shirt.”

David looked down, and wasn't surprised to see a large dried blood stain on his stomach. He had no idea whose it was. He'd killed so many people.

He touched the stain absently, and was startled to find a lump underneath. David lifted up his shirt.

Something that looked like a small plastic faucet was sticking out of a puckered hole in his belly. It protruded almost an inch. There was a fine mesh screen on the spout, leaking brown fluid.

Barry made a face.

“Ouch. A surgical drain. They put one of those in me when I had my colon operation two years ago. Keeps the swelling down after surgery. You should keep a bandage over the end so it doesn't drain into your clothes.”

David touched it. He'd seen one before, on Manny, when he'd visited him in the hospital. But why did David have one? He pinched the end and began to pull.

“You really shouldn't...”

Barry stopped talking, only able to stare. An inch of tube came out, wet and slimy, making a sucking noise like a worm crawling out of the muck. Then two inches. Four.

David continued to yank. The sensation was sublime, a soft finger moving through his insides. Almost a foot of tubing came out of his stomach before he reached the end.

He stared at the tube, curious. It was filled with foul smelling liquid the color of cola. The open end dripped onto the floor. David watched as the hole in his stomach closed like a tiny mouth.

Barry made a gagging sound. The elevator stopped and the doors opened.

“Thanks for the ride.” David smiled at Barry and handed the mute guard the drainage tube. Then he stepped out of the elevator.

The hallway was quiet, serene. Dr. Nikos sometimes piped music through the intercom speakers, but now the only sound was the hum of the neon lights.

David hated this place. It was worse than prison. Terrible as doing time was, it had a tangible ending. You could dream about getting out. Here, at DruTech, there was no end in sight. And the only dreams you had were of other people's deaths.

David went into his room and took off his shirt. Finding Theena and Bill asleep on his bed was a delicious surprise.

He changed into a sweater and sat down next to Theena.

She was really quite beautiful. He could see why Manny was in love with her. David touched her smooth cheek, then let his hand slide down her neck, past her shoulder. He cupped a breast. Squeezed.

Theena didn't wake up.

David took her pulse, watched her breathing. She was having a little N-Som siesta. Bill's pulse was also weak, his wrist cool to the touch.

So... what-to-do, what-to-do? David took the scalpel from his back pocket. Two quick slices, and they would never wake up. He touched the blade under Theena's chin. She whimpered, her eyes rolling back and forth under her lids.

Bad dream.

"Sucks, doesn't it?"

He put the scalpel back in his pocket. This wasn't the right time. David wanted her to be aware when she died. She had to know what was happening, and why.

"See you soon, sleeping beauty."

He gave Theena a lingering kiss, forcing his tongue between her lips, licking her teeth. Then he got off the bed and left his room, on the prowl for Dr. Myrnowski.

The hallways hummed. David moved cautiously, even though he had no need to. It made him feel like some jungle beast, stalking prey. He was the master of his domain. The top of the food chain. Unstoppable.

He found her in the kitchenette. She was sitting at the breakfast bar, nibbling a bagel. Pudgy, blonde, shy Julia Myrnowski. He hoped she was enjoying her last meal.

"Hi, Julia."

Dr. Myrnowski almost fell off her stool.

"Manny. You startled me."

Why was everyone calling him Manny? Was there some big joke going on that he didn't know about?

David sat next to her.

"Do you mind if I ask you a question?"

She nodded, but her body language didn't concur.

"You've tried N-Som, right Julia?"

The chemist shifted, leaning slightly away from him.

"Hmm? No, I've never tried it."

David sidled closer. "Why not, it's perfectly safe, right?"

Julia was visibly uncomfortable. She'd always been a real wallflower. He wondered if she were still a virgin. He wondered if he should check.

“Yes, I guess it's safe. But I'm not big on taking drugs, I guess.”

“I see.”

Julia offered a meek smile, then got off her stool and put the remainder of her bagel in the refrigerator.

“I'm, um, going back to the lab.”

“No you're not.”

Julia had no idea how to respond to that. She just stood there, stupidly, a deer in the headlights.

David was next to her in two steps. The chemist shivered, tried to make herself smaller. David fed on it like junk food.

“You're afraid of me.”

A small whimper.

“You're afraid, because you know what N-Som has done to my brain.”

“Please don't hurt me...”

David let the anger wash over him. This feeble, cringing, pathetic creature was earning her salary by torturing him to death.

He put his arms around her, sympathetic. She started to sob.

“I won't hurt you, Julia. Unless you think this hurts.”

The scalpel slid into her back, up under the shoulder blade.

Julia went rigid, and then collapsed onto herself like an old building.

A keening wail escaped her lips, and her arms flopped and twitched with a mind of their own.

“Well, I guess it hurts after all.”

David knelt next to her. He cradled her head in his arms and gave her the sweetest kiss, amused at how her lips trembled while he jammed the blade in and out.

Chapter 30

Bill woke up first. This was the second time he'd undergone another person's death, and it hadn't gotten any easier.

The experience was so much stronger than normal dreaming. While under N-Som's influence, Bill had not only relived Nikos's final thoughts, but also the man's feelings and senses. The bathroom smelled like lemon disinfectant. Nikos's voice sounded different, because he'd heard it through the ears of the man speaking it. Worst of all, Bill felt the scalpel enter his neck, the blood leaking down his throat like hot acid.

No wonder Manny was so messed up. He'd taken N-Som how many times? Add to that the organic brain damage...

Bill knew enough psychology to be familiar with Dissociative Identity Disorder—what used to be termed multiple personality. He never bought it. Supposedly, children who were abused retreated into an alternate personality within their minds as a way of escape. Bill viewed it with the same disdain as so-called Repressed Memory Syndrome. A shrink could very easily, through inadvertent suggestion, implant these beliefs in a person's head during therapy.

But Manny was something different. He'd been chowing down on brain chemicals for so long a schism had formed between his left and right hemispheres, dividing them. Through Dr. Nikos's eyes, Bill saw Manny change into someone else.

And Bill was converted into a true believer.

He glanced at Theena, lying on the bed next to him. Her face was glossy with tears. He felt a knot of pity.

Not only did she experience her husband's death, she was also privy to his thoughts about her. Thoughts that were neither loving nor pleasant.

Bill looked around the bedroom for a box of tissue. They were in Manny's pseudo-apartment, the only place in DruTech with a bed. After extracting the brain matter from Dr. Nikos's head and processing it into N-Som, they came here. Bill had almost balked at taking the drug; knowing where it came from, knowing what it did. But he wanted to learn the truth as much as Theena, and she had made trusting her impossible. So they'd taken the plunge together.

“Nikos...”

Theena opened her eyes. There was no Kleenex, but Bill found a roll of paper towels by the dresser. He tore one off and offered it.

“He thought I was a whore.” Her voice was soft, small.

Bill didn't say anything. Theena had made some big mistakes, because of love. He'd been captaining that same ship for over a year.

“You saw what I saw.” Theena's face flushed, and she hid behind the paper towel. “You saw what he thought of me. A man I devoted my whole life to. I was a regret. His last thought was

regretting me.”

Bill juggled embarrassment and compassion.

“He didn't think that. He regretted leaving your mother.”

“Same thing.”

“Theena...” Bill chose his words carefully. “Your husband, he wasn't a very good man.”

Theena took a while to respond.

“I know. You won't believe me, but I didn't know anything about the fetal experiments. I also had no idea Manny was this bad. I showed him his CTs, tried to get him to quit. But Manny was just as obsessed as Nikos. Blind. Both of them were blind.” She let out a slow breath. “Me too.”

Maybe it was because he'd felt her husband's thoughts, but Bill wasn't angry at Theena anymore. He couldn't condone what she'd done, but he hadn't ever truly forgiven himself, either.

“You can make it right. We can make sure this drug is never put on the market.”

“We can't go up against Albert. He's too powerful.”

“He may have some friends in high places, but if we go to the media with this, the public will demand recourse.”

“How about Manny?”

How about Manny? He was truly screwed up, possibly beyond any help. Bill pitied him. But he'd also seen the cold blooded way he killed Dr. Nikos.

“We have to let the authorities take care of Manny.”

“It's all my fault.”

“We can't handle him ourselves, Theena. He's too far gone, and too dangerous. You know what he's capable of, physically. It would be like trying to catch the Terminator.”

“THEENA? BILL? YOU AWAKE?”

Bill jumped at the sound. A man's voice, coming over the intercom speakers. Manny. But Bill knew that even though the voice matched, this wasn't Manny at all.

“YOU'VE GOT TWO WAYS OUT, THE ELEVATOR AND THE EMERGENCY STAIRS. I CAN ONLY WATCH ONE. SO HERE'S THE GAME. IF YOU CAN MAKE IT TO ONE OR THE OTHER, YOU'LL GO FREE. BUT IF I CATCH YOU... TELL THEM, JULIA.”

The shriek was the most frightening thing Bill had ever heard. It went on and on, raw terror and extreme pain, like the bleat of a tortured animal.

The awful sound was cut short with a gurgle and some bubbly coughing.

“IF I CATCH YOU, YOU GET TO JOIN DR. MYRNOWSKI HERE. THE CLOCK IS TICKING. GOOD LUCK.”

“Julia...”

Theena was two steps to the door when Bill caught her wrist.

“Hold it. We have to think.”

“He's killing her.”

“She's already dead, Theena. We go rushing blindly into the hall, we're next.”

Theena's face was distilled anguish. Bill could guess his expression was the same. They both fought to keep cool heads.

“Okay...” Theena's brows scrunched up. “The elevator is down the hall, to the left. The emergency stairs are to the right.”

“Where is Manny?”

“He could be anywhere. Every room has an intercom next to the door.”

Bill looked around the room, saw the phone. Theena intercepted him.

“Doesn't dial out. It's a direct line to the lab.”

He took out his cell phone, but again Theena shook her head.

“Too far underground. No signal.”

“Are there any damn phones down here?”

“No. Nikos wanted us to be isolated, shut off. No interruptions.”

“How about security?”

“The lab has a link to the security desk, but Manny knows that too.”

Bill wanted to rip out his hair. “How about a fire alarm?”

“There's a box in the kitchen. It can be pulled.”

“Then the fire department would come?”

Theena nodded, but neither of them moved. They weren't anxious to go out into the hallway. Bill scanned the ceiling for a sprinkler. There was one over the bed, but he had no way of setting it off. For this first time in his life, Bill wished he smoked.

“Maybe I can talk to him.” Theena chewed her lower lip. “Manny and I have an understanding.”

“That's not Manny.”

“I can try anyway.”

“First let's do something about this door.”

Theena helped him push the dresser up against it, snugged tight underneath the knob. For good measure they put the desk behind that. Bill gave the door a firm tug, but it didn't budge.

“That should be okay. Now what?”

Theena pressed the intercom button on the box next to the light switch.

“David? It's Theena.”

“HI, THEENA.”

“We want to help you, David. We want you to get better.”

“I'M TOUCHED.”

“I mean it. I know that this experiment hurt you. It's not your fault.”

“I'M GLAD YOU THINK SO. OPEN THE DOOR, WE'LL TALK.”

Theena threw Bill a desperate look. He joined her by the intercom.

“David? It's Dr. Bill May from the FDA.”“

“HELLO, BILL. HOW'S THE INVESTIGATION GOING?”

“It's over. N-Som won't get approval in this country.”

“TOO BAD. WE'VE ALL WORKED SO HARD. MANNY WILL BE CRUSHED.”

“Can we speak to Manny?”

“I DON'T KNOW WHERE HE IS.”

Bill took a shot. “David, you're Manny. He's inside you. You're the same person.”

No response. The silence stretched. Theena tapped Bill on the shoulder.

“Is it smart to confuse him like that?”

“As far as we know, Manny's not a killer. Only his alter ego is. Maybe a catharsis will snap him back to normal.” Bill hit the intercom button. “Manny? Are you there? Hello? Manny?”

“I JUST PICKED UP A NEW CD. WANNA HEAR IT?”

A groan came over the loudspeaker. It was feminine, undeniably sexual, and Bill could identify it from experience.

Theena looked mortified. The female voice was joined by a male one, the sounds of two people making love filling the entire underground complex.

Bill was confused. Was it a recording? How?

“I REALLY NEEDED THAT.”

Theena's voice. That was what she'd said after she and Bill had sex the first time. But the voice that answered didn't belong to Bill.

“MARRY ME, THEENA.”

It was Manny. Out of breath, vulnerable.

“YOU'RE SO SWEET, MANNY.”

Theena blushed furiously. She lowered her head, refusing to look at Bill.

“PLEASE, THEENA. YOU'RE THE ONLY REASON I STAY HERE. THE N-SOM—
SOMETIMES IT MAKES ME CRAZY.”

“YOU KNOW IT'S SAFE, MANNY. DR. NIKOS AND I WOULDN'T MAKE YOU DO THIS
IF THERE WERE ANY POSSIBLE DANGER.”

Theena put a hand over her face. The playback ended, and the room got eerily silent.

“Nikos told me to sleep with Manny. To keep him on the project.”

“Even though it was hurting him?”

Bill felt bad right after it left his mouth. They both knew what her mistakes were, and he shouldn't keep rubbing her nose in them. But hearing her with Manny stung. It was more than jealousy. Being with Theena had made Bill feel special, and he'd hoped the feeling was mutual.

She started to cry, but caught herself. Bill could sense the courage it took her to meet his gaze. “What you and I did, yesterday...”

“Theena, don't.”

“I need to say it, Bill. For what it's worth, no one made me do that. I did it on my own.”

They stared into each other's eyes. Maybe it was ego, maybe it was gullibility, but even after being lied to so many times, Bill believed her.

“DO YOU STILL THINK THERE'S NO POSSIBLE DANGER, THEENA?”

Theena jerked her head up at the speaker, and then launched herself at the intercom.

“Manny, I know you can hear me. You and David are the same person. I know you're inside him, somewhere.”

“IT SOUNDED LIKE HE WAS INSIDE YOU A MINUTE AGO. DID YOU ENJOY THE RECORDING? I GOT IT FROM THE LATE DR. FLETCHER. IT WAS MARKED 'MANNY AND THEENA #7'. YOU SURE KEEP BUSY.”

“Dammit, Manny! You're not a killer! You're my friend, and you can fight this!”

They waited for a response. None came.

“Manny?”

Silence. Had Theena gotten through to him? Was he in some grand conflict with his other self, fighting for control.

BAM!

The knock on the door startled them both. They exchanged a frightened glance.

“Theena? Bill? It's Manny.”

His tone was meek and submissive. Theena put her hip against the dresser and began to push.

“That's him. We can open the door.”

Bill held her back. “He could be faking it.”

“How do we know?”

Bill wished he'd paid more attention to psych class in college. He knew that all DIDs had a core personality. Manny was the core. Did the core ever know about the other identities?

Bill didn't think so. He recalled that old Sally Field movie, *Sybil*. She didn't know that people existed inside her.

But it went beyond that—Manny and David thought they were separate people.

“If that's Manny, how did he know we're in here? David knows we're in his room. But if Manny just woke up, he wouldn't know what was going on. Right?”

Another knock. “Theena? Bill? I'm okay now. Open up, I'm scared.”

Theena edged the desk back into place.

“We can't, Manny. We don't know if we can believe you.”

The room shook with a massive WHUMP. Bill and Theena jumped back and stared with horror at the fire ax blade poking through the door. It worked itself free, and David winked at them through the newly made hole.

“Hi, guys.”

Bill spun around, frantically looking for something he could use as a weapon. He picked up a floor lamp with a heavy brass bottom, ripping the cord out of the wall.

David chopped away at the door, making fast progress. The upper half was quickly full of holes, and every whack connected more of them together. He soon had decent sized opening.

Bill moved closer, holding the lamp like a baseball bat. When David reached his arm through to push back the dresser, Bill swung.

He connected solidly with David's shoulder, the metal lamp vibrating in his hands at impact.

David howled like a kicked dog, his arm snaking back through the opening. They watched him move away from the door, out of view.

Bill's breath was coming out in pants. His whole body shook with adrenaline. Theena put her hand on his back and he jumped in surprise.

"I think he's gone."

Bill tried to open his hands, but they refused to let go of the lamp. He took a cautious step towards the opening, trying to get a better view of the hallway.

"Is he there?"

Bill couldn't see David, but he wasn't going to stick his head through the hole to be sure.

"I don't know."

"We should make a run for it."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea."

"THAT WAS A NICE SHOT, DOC."

Again, they both were startled by the intercom.

"I THINK MY SHOULDER IS DISLOCATED. IF I ASK REAL NICE, WILL YOU OPEN THE DOOR AND FIX IT FOR ME?"

Bill saw no reason to answer.

"I THOUGHT DOCTORS TOOK AN OATH TO HELP PEOPLE."

Theena pulled a drawer from the dresser and moved to smash it against the intercom. Bill held her back.

"We may need it later."

"I can't take his mocking."

"I know."

She began to tremble.

"This is my fault. This is all my fault."

Bill managed to set the lamp down. He reached for her and they held each other.

"WHY DON'T YOU JUST OPEN UP, GET IT OVER WITH? I PROMISE I'LL MAKE IT QUICK AND PAINLESS."

David broke out in a hysterical giggle. It was the distilled sound of homicidal madness, and scared Bill out of his wits.

"WAIT, JUST WAIT A SEC, I KNOW I CAN SAY THAT WITH A STRAIGHT FACE."

Bill closed his eyes. This was a nightmare. No—worse than a nightmare. You could wake up from those.

"LOOK, GUYS. NO ONE IS GOING TO HELP YOU. I'VE KILLED EVERYONE ELSE. DR. FLETCHER, DR. TOWNSEND, DR. O'NEIL... ALL DEAD. YOU'RE THE LAST ONES."

"How about Barry upstairs?" Bill was running out of ideas. "Will he check on us when we don't come up?"

Theena frowned. "Security is used to us staying down here overnight. David's right. No one can help us."

"YOU DON'T HAVE ANY FOOD, AND EVENTUALLY YOU'LL GET TIRED AND HAVE TO SLEEP. I DON'T HAVE THAT PROBLEM. JUST ACCEPT YOUR FATE." Another insane giggle.

Bill held Theena tighter.

Theena's voice was barely a whisper. "We're going to die down here, aren't we Bill?"

"No. Of course not. We'll figure something out."

But Bill had a horrifying feeling that she was right.

Chapter 31

The gun felt heavy in Captain Halloran's pocket. It was an old Smith and Wesson Rimfire, a throwaway piece, untraceable. A 22 LR wasn't his preferred weapon of choice—when Halloran walked the beat, he'd always used something with more stopping power. But at close range, it should be fine.

He was oddly at ease with himself for a man about to commit murder.

The way Halloran saw it, he had no choice. He was in over his head, much too far to back out. Rothchilde had put him in an untenable position. A man of his rank couldn't allow himself to be connected with any of these murders. Prison terrified Halloran. Cons weren't nice to cops on the inside.

So it was a matter of self preservation. Rothchilde was getting too careless, ordering murders like they were pizzas. He had to be taken down. The two hundred and fifty k wasn't the motivating factor. It was just a bonus.

At least, that's what Halloran kept telling himself.

He'd gotten into the mansion using the key Rothchilde had given him—the DruTech President didn't want his servants to know how often Halloran came and went.

Rothchilde's paranoia had served Halloran well. The icing on the cake was Rothchilde's office—afraid of being overheard, he'd had it soundproofed. The guy was practically begging for someone to shoot him.

Halloran let himself in after a one-two knock.

“How did it go with the Schaumburg police?”

Classic Rothchilde. No greetings. No pleasantries.

“Fine. Where's the money?”

Rothchilde offered one of his frequent condescending smiles. “It's in my wall safe, of course. Do you think I'm going to let you just walk out of here with a quarter of a million dollars?”

Halloran didn't like where this was going.

“How am I supposed to give it to him?”

“You don't have to. I already made arrangements.”

The cop's eyes narrowed. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, I called up Schaumburg myself. Strangely, the Captain there doesn't even know you. But he was willing to look the other way for only thirty thousand.”

Halloran took out the piece. “I'm through messing around, Albert. Just give me the cash.”

Rothchilde continued smiling. “Frankly, Captain, I'm surprised. I didn't think you had the stones to cross me.”

“The safe, Albert.”

“Isn't it your intention to kill me anyway? Why should I also let you take my money?”

Halloran's face twitched. He could feel the sweat climb down the back of his neck. The moment was getting away from him. Halloran had killed a man before, in the line of duty, clear self-defense. Killing in cold blood was a horse of a different color. If he was going to do it, it had to be now, before he lost his nerve. The money wasn't the motivating factor. This was self-preservation.

Halloran thumbed off the safety.

"Before you shoot me, maybe you should know about my insurance."

Rothchilde glanced up at the corner of the room. Halloran followed his gaze.

A video camera winked down at them from the corner.

"A rich man like me needs security."

Halloran snarled. "Where's the VCR?"

"I don't think I'm going to tell you."

It kept getting worse and worse. Halloran had spent his career talking to criminals who couldn't understand how their careful plans had gone so wrong. He was watching the same thing happen to himself.

"I could make you tell me."

"Perhaps. Or you could continue to work for me, and I'll give you a nice bonus. Put away the gun."

Halloran didn't move. This had gone very sour, and the very last thing he wanted to do was give Rothchilde the upper hand again. But what else could he do?

Halloran shoved the gun back into his pocket.

"Good cop. I've got your bonus in here."

Rothchilde opened his desk drawer and stuck his hand inside. Alarm bells went off in Halloran's head. Rothchilde was moving too fast, and the expression on his face was wicked, almost bloodthirsty. Halloran dug back into his pocket, pulling at the 22, getting it caught on the fabric.

Rothchilde's hand came out holding a large 9mm. He didn't hesitate. He didn't talk. He aimed it at Halloran's face and pulled the trigger.

Maybe he's not a good shot.

That was Halloran's last thought, and it went out the back of his head with a good portion of his frontal lobe.

Rothchilde watched the cop pitch over, a fine mist of vaporized blood settling to the ground after him.

It had been like shooting skeet at the club. Aim, squeeze, score. Easier, even; a clay pigeon was small and fast, not fat, stationary, and stupid.

Rothchilde stood up and walked around the desk, surveying the damage. There was a black, gooey hole where Halloran's left eye had been. His other eye was wide open, still registering shock. It delighted Rothchilde so much that he located his Polaroid and took a picture.

When the novelty wore off, he realized that this had to be dealt with. There were stains, and as

time wore on there was sure to be an odor. He picked up the phone and dialed the familiar number.

“Yeah.”

“Carlos, when you're finished at DruTech, I need you and Franco at my place.”

“I got hit with a cactus.”

“I can't say that I care. You both must come here when you're finished.”

“Okay.”

Rothchilde frowned. Didn't the man want to know why?

“I need you to dispose of something.”

“Okay. I said we'll be there.”

Rothchilde tried to quell his desire to brag. This was his first kill, a symbolic rite of passage. He proved that he had the intestinal fortitude to get his own hands dirty—wet work, the mob called it. Carlos should have sensed that, offered to share their bond and welcome him as a member of the club. Instead, Rothchilde got blind obedience.

“How long will you be?” Rothchilde had to slip it in. “This body is doing terrible things to my carpet.”

“Should be soon. We're pulling into DruTech right now.”

Was the man dense? Or was he so used to murder that it had become mundane to him?

“Fine.” Rothchilde sighed. “Keep me posted.”

He hung up, annoyed. Why did he care what Carlos thought, anyway? The man was a petty thug. Even worse, he was the hired help. Rothchilde would have to be content with keeping his victory to himself.

His spirits buoyed a bit when he noticed the hole in the far wall. Using his letter opener, he pried the slug out of the wood paneling. It was mashed on one side, like a small lead mushroom, still sticky with Halloran's blood.

Rothchilde placed it in an envelope and locked it in his wall safe. If he couldn't share the experience, at least he could keep a trophy.

Then he sat back at his desk and relived the whole scene in his head. The look on Halloran's face was priceless. He wished he could do it all over again.

Then he remembered the security camera.

Excited, Rothchilde left his office, locking the door behind him. He moved at a brisk clip, down the grand staircase, into the library, through the keypad entrance where all of the security VCRs were located. Several minutes later he was watching the correct tape on his big plasma screen, mouth frozen in a grin and eyes wide as saucers.

It was hugely disappointing.

Rothchilde's equipment was state of the art, but its purpose was to aid in security, not produce Hollywood blockbusters.

First of all, there was no sound. All of the delicious things Rothchilde had said—taunting Halloran, getting him to put away his gun, all of it was missing. And while the color was fine, the

stationary downward angle didn't show either of their faces.

But the worst part was the speed. The VCRs recorded in time lapse, so an entire twenty-four hour period could fit onto one eight hour tape. It only videotaped one frame every second, so things were ridiculously speeded up. From the time Halloran entered the office, until he was dead on the floor, lasted a measly eight seconds.

Rothchilde tried to watch it using the slow motion button, but the result was still jerky and unimpressive.

A pity. He would have given a lot of money to see himself in action. Too bad there wasn't a way.

But there was a way, wasn't there?

Rothchilde stood up, heart hammering. It might not work. He'd shot Halloran in the head. Perhaps he'd damaged the part of the brain that can be made into N-Som.

But it was worth a try, wasn't it?

He bounded up the stairs, back to his office, and called Carlos. They would have to postpone the murders, until Rothchilde could force Theena to turn Halloran into N-Som.

The phone rang, and rang, and then he was connected to Carlos's voice mail.

"Damn it."

The dumb thug had turned off his phone. He was probably very close to killing them both. If that happened, it would be weeks before Rothchilde could find replacement scientists to do the work.

If it was one thing the rich hated, it was waiting.

Rothchilde hung up and dialed his pilot.

"Fredrick? I need you to fly the chopper over to the mansion, ASAP. I have to get to DruTech as quickly as possible."

Fredrick complied. Rothchilde rarely used the helicopter, and it cost an extraordinary amount of money to keep it always on standby, but it looked like his indulgence would pay off today. Weather permitting, he could be at DruTech in twenty minutes.

But he had something to do, first. Rothchilde went to the kitchen and quarter-filled a plastic garbage bag with ice. Then he grabbed the largest butcher knife in the rack and headed back to his office.

Chapter 32

Carlos didn't like it.

There were unwritten rules for hits. That's how he'd lasted in this business as long as he had. Bending the rules was asking to get caught—or worse.

The DruTech building was practically empty, but it was still a public place, and that went against the rules. Carlos wasn't some inner city gang-banger who got his kicks doing drive-bys. Carlos was a pro, and he wasn't being treated as such.

There were other rules being ignored as well. Never work with a partner, especially a dumb ox like Franco. Don't do contract work for the corporate sector. And most of all, never return to a crime scene. He'd broken all of these in the last two days.

It got worse. That moron Rothchilde called a little while ago, bragging he just wasted someone, wanting him for yet another garbage run. The risk of cleaning up after amateurs was incredibly high. It just wasn't right.

“You okay? Looks like you got a saggy diaper that leaks.”

Franco laughed at his own idea of wit.

“Stay sharp. This one feels like it could be messy.”

“I'm always sharp.”

Yeah, right. Sharp like a box of dumb bells.

Carlos parked where they couldn't be seen from the front entrance, and again did the Fed Ex thing. The doors were locked, but one fat security guard was reading a paperback behind his stand in the lobby. Carlos knocked.

The guard made a show of walking over, pulling out a loaded key ring and fumbling with the lock.

“Late today.”

Carlos gave him his practiced 'average Joe' shrug. “Overnight guaranteed, even if there's nobody here.”

The guard looked him over.

“You cut yourself shaving?”

Carlos seethed beneath his bandages. He'd spent twenty minutes in front of a mirror, pulling out cactus spines with tweezers, and he didn't find it amusing.

“Yeah. I always shave my forehead.”

Carlos offered the clipboard for the guard to sign. Then he did a discreet screening of the perimeter before putting a bullet in the fat man's temple.

The sound was deafening, but this was the suburbs—they weren't used to hearing gunfire. No one would guess that's what it was.

Carlos knelt next to the guard and did a quick frisk. He took the keys, his wallet, and found the

elevator card Rothchilde had described.

Franco came up behind him, and together they hauled the body into the lobby and locked the door.

“How many guards are on?”

“Just the one. We can take our time.”

The elevator had a slot beneath the call buttons, and Carlos jammed in the card key.

Franco giggled in his girl's voice. “Like James Bond.”

Carlos sighed. Maybe it was time to think about retiring. The mob didn't offer a pension, but he had a few dollars socked away. Plus he'd put money in the 401k. Not enough to live like a king, but enough to get by.

When the elevator stopped and the doors opened, Carlos sensed something was wrong. Franco picked up on his vibe.

“What is it?”

“Not sure.”

Franco sneered and walked into the hall. He was completely unprepared for the maniac with the fire ax who came careening around the corner, whooping and swinging.

Carlos managed to get his gun out. The guy chopped away at Franco like a tree, sluicing the white walls with blood, his howls mingling with Franco's wails. A scene from a slaughterhouse in hell.

Carlos had five shots in his Colt's cylinder and he fired them all.

Three of the slugs buried themselves in Franco's back, ending his misery. The other two took the psycho in the chest. At least, Carlos thought they did.

Franco dropped to his knees and slumped over, but the other guy ran back the way he came, not giving any sign that he was hurt.

Carlos stood there, stunned. The 38 Special was warm in his hand, a trail of smoke spiraling up from the barrel. Why didn't that guy go down? Carlos was positive he'd hit him.

He thumbed the extractor and emptied his brass into his hand. Without needing to look, he located his speed loader in his pocket and nudged in six more bullets. Holding his breath, he strained to hear down the hallway. The only sound was the drumming of his own heart.

“YOU CAN'T KILL ME.”

A man's voice, coming from everywhere at once. Carlos traced it to the overhead speakers.

“Come out and I'll try again!”

“LET'S PLAY HIDE AND SEEK. YOU'RE IT.”

Carlos moved cautiously, keeping both hands on the gun. A trail of blood droplets glinted on the tile floor. He followed them, hugging the far wall as he turned the corner.

The loudspeaker giggled.

“GETTING WARMER.”

Carlos stopped. He was scared. Fear was an old, familiar roommate, but he didn't show up too

often.

The first time Carlos killed someone, as a green thirteen-year-old joining the Latin Kings, he was scared. Every time Gino made him deal with those crazy Colombians, with their dead eyes, he was scared. Years ago he'd gotten arrested, and some punk ass street cop, hungry for a promotion, beat Carlos with a phone book, trying to get him to squeal. He'd been scared then, too.

But this time the fear was different. Carlos felt like he was in a haunted house, waiting for some deformed monster to jump out and say boo. A bullet proof monster with an ax.

“DON'T STOP NOW. YOU'RE SO CLOSE.”

Carlos knew he should turn around, take the elevator back up, and get the hell out of there. Why walk willingly into a nightmare? He could come back with more men, take care of this the right way.

Gino wouldn't stand for it. Franco was Gino's nephew. He'd trusted Carlos to take care of him. If Carlos came back without avenging him, he was dead anyway.

He began to move forward again.

“Come out! Come out, I'll finish you off!”

The hallway came to a division. Carlos looked left, and then right, searching for the blood trail. He went right.

“WARMER. WARMER. GETTING HOT.”

The door up ahead was ajar, a smear of blood on the knob. Carlos tried to swallow, but his throat was too dry.

“BURNING UP! YOU'RE ON FIRE!”

He kicked the door and went in low, gun close to his body. It was a small kitchen, something large and bloody slumped on the floor in front of him.

Carlos fired three times at the figure, four times, his brain registering that this wasn't the guy, that this was some poor dead girl, but he couldn't stop firing, he was too scared to stop, and when he was out of bullets and clicking on an empty chamber he felt movement behind him.

Carlos spun, falling to the ground as the man with the ax towered over him like an immense shadow. He had a sick, happy smile on his face, and there were two bloody bullet holes in the front of his shirt.

Why was this guy still standing?

Carlos heard a horrible scream, and realized that it was coming from himself.

Then the ax fell, and the screaming stopped.

Chapter 33

“We should go now, while they're busy.”

Bill agreed. When they'd first heard the gunshots, he and Theena had held out hope for rescue. Their escape plans evaporated when they realized the two mob thugs had come to call.

But the situation had improved slightly. Close as they could figure, Carlos and David were in the kitchen. That meant the hallway to the emergency staircase was open.

Bill displaced the desk and Theena helped him drag the dresser out of the way. They had problems opening the door; the ax had done so much damage the mechanism was stuck. Bill gave the knob three solid kicks to free it up.

They pushed out into the hallway, liberated and frightened. Theena uttered a surprised gasp.

David was standing at the corner. He looked like a blood-drenched demon from hell, swinging his ax and staring at them like Satan coming to collect souls.

Bill grabbed Theena's wrist and they sprinted in the opposite direction. His feet were fueled by terror, and they made it to the fire door and up two flights of stairs before Bill had time to even take a breath.

Two more flights, and they were at the lobby door. Bill wasted precious seconds fumbling with the dead bolt, and then they were suddenly through. They ran to the front doors and pushed against the glass.

Locked.

Bill stared at the keyhole, unable to comprehend it. He rammed his shoulder against the doors but they didn't so much as shudder.

Theena came up behind him, holding a cylindrical chrome garbage can. She and Bill hefted it on their shoulders.

“Close your eyes.”

They rammed it into the glass door with all they had.

There was a loud clanging sound, and the can bounced off the glass. There wasn't so much as a chip. What the hell were they making glass out of these days?

“There has to be a fire exit somewhere. Come on.”

Again he grabbed Theena's wrist and they ran back behind the security desk, practically tripping over Barry's body.

Theena screamed. The security guard looked like a dropped watermelon from the neck up.

Ding.

Bill and Theena turned as one and faced the elevator.

It was coming up.

Bill had no idea what to do. The DruTech Building was big, fifteen stories and hundreds of offices. Maybe they could hide somewhere, wait for help to come.

“Barry...”

“Barry's dead, Theena.”

“He has a gun.”

Bill hustled back to the security guard's body. Sure enough, there was a gun in a leather holster on his waist. Bill knelt down, fumbling to unbutton the clasp.

Another ding. The elevator doors parted like a stage curtain.

David smiled at them. There was a splash of blood on his face, matting one side of his hair. His shirt and pants were streaked with gore. He was leaning on his ax like a walking cane.

“Are you guys trying to get away from me?”

Bill tugged at the gun, pulling it free. He'd never held one before, and was surprised by its weight. This was a different kind of gun that Carlos had, not a revolver, but the other kind where you loaded the bullets in the bottom. He pointed it at David with shaking hands.

“Don't come any closer!”

David stepped out of the elevator, swinging his ax.

“Are you sure you know how to fire that gun, Doc?”

Bill closed one eye, aiming at David's chest. This whole scene was surreal. Bill didn't want to kill him. The thought of killing someone scared Bill almost as much as getting hit with that ax.

“David, please.” Theena was on her knees alongside Barry. “We want to help you.”

“Sorry, Theena. I don't have a choice.”

He raised the ax up over his head.

Bill closed his eyes. This was not what it was supposed to feel like. All of those movies and books, where the hero nonchalantly blew people away by the dozens. That was garbage. This was real, and frightening, and so very final.

Worst of all, Bill knew what it felt like to kill somebody. Horrible, beyond words. He wasn't anxious to relive the feeling.

“Bill.” Theena gripped him, trembling. “You have to.”

He bit his lip and pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened.

“That's a semiautomatic, Doc. You have the safety on. It's that lever in the back.”

Bill's fingers pushed at the little lever to unlock it. His resolve was slipping away. David seemed to know it, too, and found it humorous. He'd begun to swagger.

Bill forced courage. He pointed the gun again and fired.

Click.

“Nothing in the chamber, Doc. You have to work the slide. Don't you watch TV?”

David continued towards them, grinning. He was less than five yards away, twirling the ax like a baton. Theena crouched behind Bill, her hands on his shoulders.

Bill pulled the top half of the gun back, and the mechanism loaded the round.

He fired.

The shot was wild, way over David's head, and the gun bucked so hard it almost flew out of Bill's hands. There was a jingling sound when the spent cartridge hit the terrazzo.

“Keep both eyes open, Doc. Squeeze the trigger, don't jerk it. And you have to lean into it a little. Want me to show you?”

This was too much, having make the same horrible decision over and over. Bill took a deep breath and tried to keep his hands steady. David was less than ten feet away. He couldn't afford to miss.

The ax cocked back. Theena screamed at Bill to shoot. He pulled the trigger.

The shot hit David high in the chest. He fell over, the ax skittering across the floor.

Theena cried out in relief, burying her face in Bill's neck and holding him tight. Bill let out the breath he was holding and pulled her close. He felt a wave of sickness wash over him. The implications of what he'd done began to gnaw at him. He'd taken a life.

“Look at Manny!”

Bill spun around, half expecting to see the man back on his feet, like some unkillable Halloween monster. Instead he saw Manny cough, his chest rising and falling.

Bill's hope soared. “He's still alive.”

“Help him.”

Bill wasn't sure that was such a hot idea. He was happy Manny wasn't dead, but if he suddenly recovered Bill didn't think he could shoot him again.

“Theena...”

“Bill, please. It's not his fault.”

She was right. If ever there was a textbook case of insanity, it was Manny.

Bill went to him, felt the carotid. Pulse was weak but steady. He tore open Manny's shirt and used it to wipe away the excess blood. There were three bullet holes, one in the sternum, one just above the belly button, and one through the right nipple. Incredibly, they were no longer bleeding.

“We need to get him to a hospital. Call 911. Get the police here, too.”

Theena nodded. Bill gently lifted Manny into a sitting position and examined his back. One exit wound, under the shoulder blade. The other two bullets were still in his body somewhere. Manny's breathing was raspy, shallow. He laid him back down and put an ear to his chest. Collapsed lung.

“Get something to put under his feet.”

Theena finished the phone call and brought the chrome garbage can over. They placed Manny's legs on top to help improve blood flow to the brain and stave off shock. All at once, Manny started to twitch and tremble.

Bill listened to his chest again. The arrhythmia was obvious. He guessed it was ventricular tachycardia—Manny's heart had to be up near two hundred beats per minute.

“What's happening?”

“He's having a heart attack. A clot probably dislodged.”

“What can we do?”

Bill didn't have an answer. In a fully stocked ER there was plenty he could do. But without drugs, all he could manage was keep CPR going until the paramedics arrived. Manny's heartbeat, though fast, wasn't effectively pumping blood through his body, and if Bill couldn't get the blood to circulate, the man would be dead within minutes.

He raised Manny's neck, opening the airway.

"Bill, there are drugs in the lab downstairs."

"What kind of drugs?"

"Everything. We're stocked for World War III."

"Heparin? TPA? Streptokinase?"

Theena nodded.

"How about epinephrine and beryllium?"

"I'll be right back." Theena ran for the elevator.

"Hold on. You shouldn't go down there alone. We don't know if those two mob guys are dead."

Theena's face was frantic. "I can't just let him die, Bill. It's my fault this is happening."

Bill thought it over, then handed her the gun. "Don't take any chances. And don't forget the syringe."

Theena took off. Bill stared down at Manny, watching his face contort in pain. His legs thrashed, kicking the garbage can across the lobby. He'd gone from V-Tach to V-Fib, his heart playing an erratic game of stop and go, beating without coordination. He'd also stopped breathing.

Bill raised both hands over his head and brought them down hard, giving Manny a precordial thump on the chest. The object was to restart the heart's electrical current and override the arrhythmia. A defibrillator would work better, but he doubted even Theena's well stocked lab had one handy.

He checked Manny's heartbeat and hit him again. Then he did a quick mouth sweep and tilted Manny's head up, giving him the breath of life. Bill fell into the familiar rhythm of CPR, putting one hand over the other and pressing on Manny's ribcage, feeling the heart spasm under his palms.

A sound, from outside. Bill turned to look through the doors, continuing his chest compressions.

A helicopter was landing in the parking lot.

Before Bill had a chance to laud the incredible speed of Schaumburg paramedics, Albert Rothchilde climbed out of the bird and ran to the front doors.

Bill gave Manny another breath, wondering what to do. Why was Rothchilde here? To see if his goons finished the job?

Rothchilde unlocked the front door and entered the lobby. He held a glistening black garbage bag. He approached Bill with an expression of quiet amusement.

"Dr. May. So good to see you. Is Theena still with us?"

Bill punched Manny's chest again.

"We need to get this man to a hospital. Help me with his legs, we'll use your chopper."

"Sorry, but I don't think so. In fact, why don't you just stop trying to help him." Rothchilde

produced a gun from his pocket. "Now, please."

Bill continued the CPR. Rothchilde might hire guys to do his dirty work, but Bill didn't think him the type to do it himself.

Rothchilde aimed and fired, putting another bullet into Manny's gut.

Bill jumped back, raising his hands. So much for his character assessment. He looked down at Manny.

Manny twitched twice, and then was still.

Rothchilde was all smiles. "Much better. Now where's Theena?"

Bill felt anger clogging his throat, making speech difficult. "You bastard."

"Dr. May, I have no time for games. Don't make me ask you again."

"You're going to kill me if I help you or not."

"True. But if you don't help me, I'm going to shoot you in the kneecap. It's supposed to be excruciating. Shall we see?"

Bill mulled it over. Theena was one of the reasons he was in this ridiculous mess. Why should he suffer, especially since Rothchilde would inevitably find her anyway?

But he couldn't do it. He couldn't let this megalomaniac find her, even if it meant pain. Bill was confused about his feelings for Theena, but if he could protect her he would.

"Those thugs you hired shot Manny and took her away."

Rothchilde squinted at him. "That doesn't make sense."

"They said they wanted to find out what she knew. That it was worth a lot of money."

A flash of panic swept over Rothchilde's face.

"Do you know where they took her?"

"Back to her apartment."

"And why aren't you playing hero and trying to save her?"

Bill tried to sound cold. "I don't owe that bitch anything."

Rothchilde smiled. "She is quite the little charmer, isn't she? Did you find out about her and daddy yet? And he's the one that sent her to me. There's enough in that relationship for a lifetime of therapy."

Bill had to get him out of here. Theena could be coming back any second.

"You'd better go. The police are on their way."

"No, they aren't. I've taken care of that."

Rothchilde moved closer, his focus intense.

"Move your arm, please. I want a clear shot at your heart."

Bill knew with absolute certainty that he was going to die. This was more than Rothchilde simply needing him out of the way. The bloodthirsty bastard actually wanted to shoot him. He was practically drooling.

Bill grasped at a straw.

"I'll take money."

“What money?” Rothchilde laughed.

“Half a million.”

Rothchilde rolled his eyes, obviously enjoying himself. “And why would I give you half a million?”

“For the FDA to approve N-Som.”

The smile faded and Rothchilde raised an eyebrow.

“An interesting proposal. But I don't think you'll do it. You're too honest.”

“You could keep men with me until it's finished. We could have all the paperwork done by the end of the week.”

Bill watched him think it over. He could almost see the little balance scale in Rothchilde's head, weighing the pros and cons.

“You'd do it for a measly half a million?”

“Half a million, plus my life.”

Rothchilde pondered for what seemed like an eternity. Finally, he grinned.

“Deal.”

Ding.

They both looked off to the side.

The elevator was coming up.

Bill fought panic. As soon as Theena stepped out, Rothchilde was going to catch the lie and kill him.

“Ready to go?” Bill took two casual steps towards him. Rothchilde bayed him with the gun.

“Hold on. I want to see who's in the elevator.”

“It's probably Dr. Myrnowski. I asked her to bring me some medicine for Manny.”

“We'll see in a moment, won't we?”

Ding.

The doors opened. Bill tensed.

There was no one in the lift.

No... there was something crouching down. Something unbelievably bloody.

Rothchilde cocked his head, looking like a confused dog. “Carlos?”

The lump raised his arm. It ended in a gun.

Bill dove to the side when the shooting began.

Rothchilde danced back and forth, firing with insane glee, the muzzle flashes lighting up his eyes.

Carlos was a ruin, not even recognizable as human. He was barely able to hold up the weapon, let alone aim.

Bill took off. The front door was unlocked, the portal to freedom open. But Theena was still in the basement.

He headed for the emergency exit.

Bill threw a glance over his shoulder and watched Rothchilde stand over Carlos and pump round after round into his extremities, the mobster wiggling like a worm on a pin. The look on Rothchilde's face was rapturous.

Bill ducked through the doorway and took the stairs down two at a time. When he reached the lower level he screamed out Theena's name.

“Bill?”

She ducked out of the lab, her arms filled with drugs.

“The gun! Quick!”

“What about Manny?”

Bill grabbed her arm, bottles toppling to the floor. “Your boss showed up, he just killed Manny.”

“Albert? I don't believe...”

There was a distant bell. The elevator was coming down.

Bill pivoted back towards the staircase, then hit the brakes.

Was Rothchilde really in the elevator? Or did he just send the elevator down to force them up the stairs, where he was waiting?

“Dammit. We have to hide. The gun.”

Theena handed it over. Bill ushered Theena back into the lab. He needed a vantage point, a place where he'd have a clear shot. There were three large counters, lined up in rows, each running half the length of the room. Bill pulled Theena behind the corner of the farthest one, crouching behind the built-in sink.

“Albert really shot Manny?”

“While I was giving him CPR. Then that mob guy came up in the elevator, and Rothchilde shot him in the arms and legs.”

“Why would he do that? I thought they worked for Albert.”

“To be honest, I think he did it because he liked it.”

Bill fumbled with the gun. He found the button that released the clip, and was shocked to see there was only one bullet left. That plus one in the chamber. Two bullets didn't seem like a whole lot.

“Should I use the intercom, try to talk to him?”

“I don't think it will help.”

“So we should just wait here and shoot him when he comes in?”

Bill jammed the clip back in. “That's the idea.”

He rested on one knee and kept a bead on the doorway. The adrenaline was wearing off, and Bill tried to come to grips with their situation. He was planning on killing someone. It went against everything he knew, everything he was. His education, his sheltered upbringing, his lofty morals, his profession; none of it mattered any more.

After Kristen's death, he'd made an oath to never hurt a person again.

I don't have a choice, he told himself. Rothchilde was going to kill them both. If it didn't happen today, it would happen soon enough. The man had too much to hide, and murder was his only out. Plus, the son of a bitch enjoyed it.

Self-defense, self-defense, self-defense. It echoed in Bill's head, his mantra. But he kept seeing Manny after he shot him, falling to the ground, gasping for air. Then he saw Kristen, her vitals slipping away moments after he gave her the injection that was supposed to heal her.

There was a noise in the hallway. Footsteps.

Bill no longer wanted to hold the gun. He wanted to drop it and run away.

The door opened.

Theena nudged him. Rothchilde stuck his head in the door and took a cautious look around.

Bill knew he couldn't do it. Maybe his morals were too strong. Maybe he was afraid of the guilt. Rothchilde was only ten feet away, a sitting duck, and Bill's hands shook with effort but he couldn't kill the man like this.

He fired a bullet into the ceiling instead.

Rothchilde dropped to the ground and rolled behind the opposite counter.

"We've both got guns." Bill's voice was wavering as much as his hands. "There's no way to get out of this cleanly."

"Exciting, isn't it?"

So exciting that Bill wanted to retch.

"Theena? Are you with Dr. May?"

Bill put his finger to his lips, but Theena was too angry to hold back. "You're a killer, Albert."

"I know. It's very empowering. Listen, darling, I need your help. I have a... specimen, and I need you to make some N-Som out of his brain. If you do that, I'll let you both go."

"It's over, Rothchilde!" Bill tried to sound confident. "Just walk out of here. You have time to get out of the country before this story breaks."

"Theena, honey. Listen to me. This can't end peacefully, but I promise you'll survive. You have my word. Take Bill's gun away from him. Just take it away, sweetie. He won't fight you."

Theena grabbed the gun and pulled. Bill had been gripping the weapon loosely, and she pried it away before he could react.

He looked into her eyes, unable to speak. The depth of her betrayal left him devastated.

Theena raised the gun. Her face was so sad, the saddest thing he'd ever seen.

"Bye, Bill."

Then she sprung up over the counter and launched herself at Rothchilde's hiding place.

Bill reached out, realizing her intent too late, trying to stop her. He watched her disappear behind the next counter.

The gunshot was deafening.

Chapter 34

Albert Rothchilde felt incredible.

He thought he knew power. Rothchilde grew up ordering servants around. He was a corporate hot shot who planned hostile takeovers for the thrill of it. A wall street maverick, with long term investors from around the world following his lead time and again. A man to be feared, by his competitors, his employees, the prostitutes he beat up.

But he hadn't known true power until today.

Firing people, hurting people, crippling them financially, all of that was child's play.

Murder was the ultimate rush.

It made everything pale next to it, the feeling of taking someone's life. Better than sex and money and drugs. Better even than the billions of dollars he'd earn with N-Som.

His gun, a 9mm Sig-Sauer that he'd only previously used to shoot targets at firing ranges, felt like an extension of his body. Killing Halloran was just a taste. Shooting Manny and Carlos made him realize what an intoxicating addiction this had so quickly become.

Now, crouched behind the counter in the lab, in an actual gun fight, Rothchilde felt like a god.

He was caught completely by surprise when Theena jumped in front of him and fired.

Missing.

The bullet passed so close to his face he felt the breeze. The sound was thunderous, both terrifying and exhilarating. He sat there, transfixed, as Theena pulled the trigger again and again, the gun clicking harmlessly, her expression changing from anger, to confusion, to fear.

The smile slithered across Rothchilde's mouth like a snake.

“Out of bullets?”

Theena raised the gun to strike him with it, but she was a mere mortal. Rothchilde was a greater deity. He gave her a firm punch in the nose and she fell backwards, her black mane falling over her face when she landed.

There was blood on his knuckles. Her blood. He anointed his forehead with it, and then stood up.

“Come out, Dr. May. Or I kill her.”

“Don't do it, Bill!”

Rothchilde reared his hand back to strike her. She stared at him defiantly, her jaw thrust outward, her eyebrows furrowed in anger. It turned him on a great deal.

“Okay, Rothchilde. You win.”

Bill stood up from behind the counter, his hands over his head. The look on his face was pure defeat. This was a man with no hope left.

Delicious.

He wanted to feel Bill's fear, know his defeat at the hands of a superior male. A chest shot

should do it. Or perhaps he should shoot his legs first, have him crawl around and beg for his life.

Rothchilde brought the gun around.

“No!”

He glanced at Theena, amused.

“Don't tell me you have a little crush on Dr. May. I didn't think you were capable of feelings.”

“You kill him, I won't help you.”

“I think I'll be able to convince you.”

“I can't make N-Som by myself, Albert. It's a two person job.”

Rothchilde hesitated. He knew nothing about the manufacturing process of drugs, and had no idea if she was lying or not. If he killed Bill now, he'd be able to relive the whole gun battle. But if Theena really needed two people...

Rothchilde stared hard at Bill. Shooting him would be so sweet. He'd heard the term 'itchy trigger finger' in countless old westerns, and fully understood what it meant.

“I can still push N-Som through CDER. You'd have approval in a few days.”

The President of American Products frowned. He normally didn't deny himself pleasure, but the hassle he'd save himself if the FDA accepted N-Som was greater than his bloodlust.

“Fine.” He lowered the weapon, exercising his absolute self control. “I have a head in this bag. How many doses can you extract from it?”

His little wench had gone submissive, pouting. “Ten to twelve.”

That was perfect. Rothchilde could envision an N-Som cabinet next to his wine cellar, vintage Cabernets alongside the last thoughts of the dozens of people he would kill. Like a personal collection of snuff films that he alone could savor.

“Get started. I don't have all day.”

He tossed the garbage bag to Theena. Her repulsion was priceless.

Rothchilde sat in a chair and kept a bored eye on the doctors while they set Halloran's head in a vice.

They were all too busy to notice the EEG machine sitting on a table in the back.

Manny's EEG machine, scribbling down a continuous jagged line of Beta waves on an endless ream of paper.

Chapter 35

Manny opened his eyes to pain.

It was an alarming experience. Not the pain—he was used to that. But the feeling of waking up. That was something he hadn't done in a long time.

He looked around and discovered he was in the lobby of the DruTech Building. There was blood all around him. When he tried to sit up, he realized the blood was his.

“You don't look so good.”

David was staring at him, reflected in a chrome garbage can that had fallen over.

It was one of those moments of instant clarity, like a fog lifting. All at once Manny understood.

He only saw David when he looked in a mirror.

Manny had seen David at Dr. O'Neil's place. He'd gone there to warn the doctor, to tell him he had to hide. But David had gotten there first. The apartment looked like a slaughterhouse. David had been sitting on the sofa, eating a box of chalk.

Manny had tasted chalk, too.

He tried to remember prior conversations with David. They all involved a mirror of some kind. Through the vanity mirror in Townsend's bathroom. In his bed back at DruTech, which faced a dresser with the oversized mirror. Was there a mirror at the hospital?

“The window, next to your bed. You could see my reflection in there.”

Manny stared at the garbage can.

“I'm you.”

“Don't act so surprised. This is news to me, too.”

“You're not really my brother. You're me.”

“We're two sides of the same coin, Manny. This is what I've been trying to tell you. This is what that drug has done to us.”

Manny closed his eyes, tight as he could. He tried to remember the night of the banquet, when David killed Dr. Nikos. But the memory didn't exist. He remembered going into the bathroom, seeing David, and then nothing else.

“That memory is mine, Manny.” When David talked, it was like a speaker emanating from the middle of Manny's head. “It's like we're two people, sharing one body. I have my thoughts, you have yours.”

Manny began to shake, the tears streaming down the sides of his head.

“How many people have we killed, David?”

“Do you want to see?”

He didn't. God help him, he didn't want to see.

“I think I can show you the memories. They're yours, too. We're of one mind.”

“Please, don't.”

The feeling was similar to *deja vu*, like suddenly remembering something that you'd known all along, but many times stronger. The memories flooded into his head all at once, overpowering him. He saw everything... Dr. Nikos... Dr. Townsend... Dr. Fletcher... please make it stop... Dr. O'Neil... Dr. Myrnowski... no more oh god there's more... a big man with a gun... and then a smaller man, the ax chopping and chopping...

Manny threw up. He watched David throw up as well.

"How about Theena?"

"She's in the lab, downstairs. We were going to kill her, too. But we've been shot a few times."

Manny touched his chest and David let him see the shots, relive the experience. The small man, Dr. May, Albert Rothchilde...

"We should be dead."

David agreed. "But we're not. We can't die. Not like before. I won't die again like before."

Manny had been in gym class when the assistant principal pulled him aside, gave him the news that his older brother David had killed himself at the juvenile correctional institution. The institution he'd been sent to because Manny tattled on him.

"You're not really David. David's dead."

"His body, yes. But your memories keep him alive. Your guilt made him grow. And the N-Som—well, you know what a bad deal that turned out to be."

Manny could remember his reaction to David's death. How he became withdrawn, violent. Almost as if he was filling the void created by his brother's absence. Manny became the one who got into trouble all the time. Trouble that continued into adulthood with, arrest after arrest.

But never murder.

Manny bitterly laughed, the action causing the pain in his chest to flare.

"I should have killed you when you asked."

"It's too late now."

Manny shook his head. It wasn't too late. The next chance he got, he was ending it.

"Won't work, Manny. First of all, we don't die easily. But mostly, I won't allow it."

"You won't allow it? It's my body."

The face reflected in the garbage can changed. At one moment, Manny was looking at David's reflection. Then there was a shift, and he could sense that it was David who was looking at him.

"I'm in control now, Manny. You follow my will."

Manny experienced a feeling of isolation, darkness. He tried to cry out, but he kept getting smaller and smaller, his vision dimming. His own mind was trapping him, shielding him from his own senses. He tried to scream, but nothing came out.

A moment later, he was gone.

David sat up. He could feel Manny inside him, struggling to free himself, like a tiny fly in a web.

It was a strange experience, but an understandable one. The mind was a mysterious thing, but

science was demystifying it a bit more every day. David knew enough to grasp what was happening to his.

Memory is chemical. He could remember an early lecture from Dr. Nikos, talking about experiments with flatworms. They could be taught simple stimulus/response reactions, and these reactions could be passed on from Group A to Group B by feeding Group B the brains of Group A.

In his free time, of which he had a lot, he'd read about the collective unconscious, and inherited memories known as archetypes. These were common in animals. How could horses walk minutes after birth? How did salmon know to travel upstream to spawn? It was called instinct, a genetic imprint passed on to offspring. A form of inherited memory.

But it was so much more than memory. Every thought was a chemical reaction happening in the brain. Movement, speech, emotion, motor skills; these could all be removed with a scalpel or overridden by an electric probe.

Even the personality was nothing more than a complicated exchange of neurotransmitters. Drugs can alter mood and control behavior. A blow to the head could turn a nice person into a permanent jerk, and a lobotomy could tame even the most savage psychotic.

David was simply a result of complicated chemistry and brain damage. Every time he took N-Som, a residual amount stayed in his brain—a stockpile of other people's neurotransmitters. It literally took root, changing his chemical structure, allowing Manny's violent thoughts to grow until they'd taken over the core of his personality.

A maniac is born.

David sat up, ignoring the pain. He no longer needed thoughts of revenge to compel him to kill. The compulsion existed without logic; it was an emotional response. And David's overriding emotion was hatred. He didn't question it. He just went with the flow.

David got to his feet, wobbling a bit. A coughing fit brought up quite a lot of blood. He took a few tentative steps until he was sure he could trust his legs.

His ax was waiting for him, near the security desk.

Then he headed for the emergency staircase.

“A hunting we will go.”

He was just opening the front door when he saw someone walk into the lobby.

Chapter 36

Special Agent Smith didn't consider himself crooked.

He'd entered the Bureau out of college, young and full of energy. The FBI had been his dream job. The pulse-pounding training he'd gotten at Quantico promised him a career filled with thrills and shoot-outs and manhunts and TV interviews.

But real life conspired against him.

He broke his ankle tripping down a flight of stairs just one week after graduation.

Three operations later, Smith still didn't have full use of his foot. He was assigned to the Chicago office, riding a desk. Smith had become a bureaucrat, which was a fate he'd been purposely trying to avoid when he joined the Feds in the first place.

So he pushed papers for three long years, secretly jealous of the agents around him who saw action. Agents who actually got to draw their guns on the job. He debated the pros of drinking himself to death versus the cons of eating himself to death. It was during the mayor's holiday party, while Smith was attempting to do both, that he met Albert Rothchilde.

Smith knew from the start that he was being fleeced. Rothchilde was looking to buy a friend in the Bureau, and Smith was the perfect candidate; pathetic, angry, needy. The president of American Products pushed Smith's buttons with the skill of a cult guru; asking questions, listening closely, offering praise and reassurance.

Rothchilde sent him Cuban cigars, expensive wine, concert tickets, high priced call girls. He invited him to the country club, took him golfing, let him use his condo in Florida for vacation. Smith was courted by Rothchilde for almost two months before the man asked him for a tiny favor—some information on organized crime that only the FBI was privy to.

Smith provided the info. Not because he felt he owed Rothchilde for his kindness, or because he was under the spell of his Svengali-like manipulation. Smith did it for a single, selfish reason; it was exciting.

Being bribed to steal FBI documents was a thrill, like being a double agent. The extra money was nice, but Smith would have done it for free. The more outrageous Rothchilde's request, the more fun Smith had figuring out how to pull it off.

What began as simply buying information had become much more dangerous. Smith routinely sent agents out into the field to secretly run Rothchilde's errands. Only Smith knew the true reasons behind the missions, and he'd climbed high enough within the Bureau to be able to cover his own tracks.

It was like a chess game. Smith stopped drinking, lost weight, and actually began to enjoy work again.

But everything in the past paled next to that moment, the moment Smith entered the DruTech Building.

This wasn't just stealing files and sending agents on fake missions. This was the real deal. Smith was actually in the field himself. When he saw Rothchilde's chopper outside, he got even more excited. His mind filled with fantastic scenarios, saving Rothchilde in a hostage situation, neutralizing the targets, being able to actually shoot somebody.

Smith couldn't run the hundred in less than thirty seconds, but for the very first time he felt like a real Fed.

He scanned the lobby, overhead, then at eye-level, and finally sweeping the ground. His pulse broke into a rumba when he saw the guard's body. Smith moved in for a closer look, favoring his good leg. He wanted to shout out in excitement when he saw the head wound.

This was it, what he'd waited his whole life for. Real danger. He knelt down next to the corpse and felt for its pulse, knowing he wouldn't find one, doing it anyway because that was what they always did in the movies. He could imagine telling this story later, people hanging on his every word.

"He's dead."

Smith spun, knees bent in a crouch, both hands on his weapon in a perfect Weaver stance. Just like he'd practiced a hundred times. But none of his training prepared Smith for what was standing fifteen feet away from him.

At first, he thought he was looking at a corpse. The man was caked with dried blood, which seemed to streak out of the four bullet wounds in his torso like fireworks. Any one of those wounds should have been fatal, but the guy was standing there, obviously alive, with a goofy grin on his face. And an ax.

Smith went by-the-book. "Drop the ax! Hands on your head, get down on your knees!"

The man lifted his hands above his head, but he raised the ax with them.

"Drop the ax!"

The man didn't drop the ax. He did something that Special Agent Smith wouldn't have ever expected. He held it like a lumberjack and threw it.

Smith's reflexes took over. If he were a seasoned pro with plenty of field experience, perhaps his first instinct would have been to fire the gun. But since he wasn't, Smith did what anyone would have done when an ax came at them. He put his arms over his face and ducked.

The ax handle hit him across the forearms, sending his gun flying.

Smith got up out of his crouch and was seized by an overwhelming feeling of giddy delight. He'd been absolutely sure that the ax was going to bury itself in his head. The fact that he'd escaped with only bruised elbows was amazing.

But it wasn't over yet.

The bloody man was walking towards him, his arms wide open. Like a giant bird of prey, swooping down.

Smith knew he needed to find the gun, but he couldn't take his eyes off the spectacle before him. When he returned to his senses, it was too late. All he could do was run.

But Smith and running weren't good buddies.

He took off through the lobby in a comical hobble, his bad ankle unable to fully bear the weight of his body even after all of the therapy. It was like trying to run with a ball and chain on his leg. Smith pushed past the pain of bones rubbing against each other, but it just didn't work right.

He chanced a look over his shoulder and saw the bloody man following in a brisk walk. Not even running, but quickly gaining ground. He'd picked up the ax.

Ahead of Smith was a dark hallway, doors at the end. He was sweating now, fear and pain pushing out his prior thoughts of glory and excitement.

“What's wrong with your leg?”

Smith concentrated on the doors. If he could just make it there, maybe he could lock them somehow, keep the bloody man away. It wasn't that far. Smith forced himself to move faster, ignoring the fire in his ankle, pushing himself harder than he ever had in his life.

He made it! The bloody man was only a few steps behind him now, and Smith grabbed the door handle, turning it, pushing forward with his shoulder.

Locked.

But it wasn't over yet. He still had his training. Hand to hand combat. Martial arts. He hadn't practiced regularly, because there hadn't been a need. But he still knew enough to defend himself, even if his opponent did have an ax.

Special Agent Smith spun around, feet planted a shoulder's width apart, arms out in a defense stance.

“Keeeyaaa!” Smith's battle cry echoed down the hallway.

The echo lasted longer than he did.

Chapter 37

“Is it damaged?”

Rothchilde was referring to the thalamus, hypothalamus, corpus callosum, and other parts of the brain that were harvested to produce N-Som. In the head he'd brought, all of these parts were intact. The bullet had only done damage to the motor cortex, central and longitudinal sulcus, and occipital lobe.

“It's fine.”

“There's enough to make N-Som?”

Theena nodded, removing a section of the medulla oblongata. Bill raised an eyebrow at this, but kept his mouth shut. Theena was grateful for that.

They ground up the tissue with a mortar and pestle, and then began the laborious task of making it into a pill.

Theena didn't bother with precise measurements this time. She also abbreviated the suspension in the acetonitrile and eyeballed the amount of the dimethylformamide dispersant. Rothchilde didn't know any better.

Since DruTech contracted out for the actual pill manufacturing because it was a complicated process, the way to make ingestible N-Som in the lab was to simply add some hydroxypropyl methylcellulose and sodium starch glycolate, then spoon the mixture into empty gelatin capsules.

The work, although forced, had a calming effect on Theena. This day had been a trip to hell, with no end in sight. She was happy to lose her mind in a familiar chemical procedure. But as it neared the end, she began to worry about what would happen next.

“Those don't look like N-Som.” Rothchilde was eyeing the capsules suspiciously.

“We can't make tablets here. We don't have the proper equipment.”

Rothchilde pointed the gun at Bill. “Take one.”

Bill shrugged, reaching for a capsule. Theena had a terrible moment of mind-bending panic, and made her decision immediately.

She grabbed a capsule first.

Rothchilde gave her a disapproving glare. “I was talking to Dr. May.”

Theena knew she must look like hell, and she couldn't recall a moment where she'd ever felt less sexy. But she'd been manipulating men all of her life, and for the very first time her life depended on it.

Theena smiled as seductively as possible, and brushed up against Rothchilde with a smooth roll of her hips.

“You killed this man, didn't you Albert?”

Albert met her gaze, trying to look nonchalant. Theena lowered her voice, breathy and soft.

“I want to see it.”

“Really? You're a fickle one, aren't you?”

“Just because I want to be on the winning team?” Theena pouted slightly, a move that always worked for her. “You won't let me share your victory? Share your power?”

She placed a hand on Rothchilde's arm and caressed it. His face softened.

“Maybe we could try it together.”

Theena nodded, putting the capsule between her lips. She held it there, like a cigarette, teasing. Rothchilde raised a hand and plucked it out.

“Not now. Later. We have other things to do now.”

Theena struggled to hide her relief. Rothchilde turned his attention back to Bill.

“You're still interested in pushing N-Som through the FDA?”

“You're still willing to part with half a million?”

Theena eyed Bill. Had Rothchilde actually been able to bribe him? Or was Bill planning something else?

Rothchilde nodded his head. “We'll give it a try, then. Let's gather up your things. You know I'll need to hold you someplace until all the paperwork goes through.”

“I'd want assurances that I'd be released when it happens.”

“Of course. You're sure it won't bother you allowing N-Som on the market, after seeing what it did to poor Manny?”

“I'll live with myself.”

Rothchilde's mouth twisted. “Yes. You're good at that, aren't you? Gather up your things, we won't be coming back.”

Bill nodded, and as he turned, Rothchilde shot him in the back.

Chapter 38

The feeling was similar to a muscle cramp, multiplied by a hundred. It hit Bill like a pick ax in the right shoulder, the pain flaring across his back and extending down his arm.

He pitched forward, vision blurring, bouncing on the unforgiving tile floor.

“I watched your extraction procedure, Theena. You'll be able to do it yourself next time.”

Bill felt a hand on his back, directly on the wound. Theena, trying to stop the bleeding. It amplified the pain and he saw stars.

“No more killing, Albert.”

“Theena, dear, you don't think he's really going to approve our drug, do you? He's just buying time.”

Bill tried to gauge how bad the wound was, but he couldn't without seeing it. He could breathe okay, and bend his arm. His best guess was the bullet broke his shoulder blade.

“I don't want you to kill him.”

“You said you wanted to be on the winning team. I'm the winning team.”

Rothchilde held out his hand for Theena. “Come on. You can process his brain and we'll relive his death together.”

Bill knew it was over, and the thought didn't bother him too much. His quality of life hadn't ever been what it was when Kristen was still alive. He didn't like dying at the hands of a bastard like Rothchilde, but it was probably a better way to go than being hacked to death by David.

Theena met his eyes, and he nudged her, trying to get her to save herself.

She took Rothchilde's hand, got daintily to her feet, and punched him between the legs.

Rothchilde doubled over, still gripping the gun. Theena launched herself at him, both hands locking on his weapon, kicking frantically at his legs to get it away.

“I'M BACK.”

The voice boomed over the intercom, unmistakable. It infused Bill with a fear that made his pain seem minor. Somehow, David was still alive.

Bill rolled over and saw Theena and Rothchilde topple to the floor, his hand entwined in her hair. Bill managed to pull himself over to them, adding his good hand to the wrestling match for the gun.

Rothchilde was thin, slight, and not much of a fighter. Theena clawed at his eyes and face, and sunk her teeth into his wrist.

He screamed out a slur and let go of the gun.

Bill grabbed it and had a momentary tug of war with Theena, who was too enraged to notice he'd joined the fight.

Rothchilde, both hands free, managed to scramble to his feet. He grabbed a handful of the N-Som Theena had produced, then ran out the door.

Theena managed to pull the gun away from Bill and she fired two wild shots after him, ready to squeeze off a third.

“Save the bullets!”

She stopped, looking at Bill with confusion, and then relief. Without thinking, she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him, causing him to yelp at the pressure.

Theena relented and hurried to a medical cabinet.

Bill managed to sit up. “David's still alive.”

“First things first.” She hurried back to Bill with a large metal case, and unsnapped it. Using scissors, she cut away the back of his shirt.

“I'm giving you a shot of morphine first.”

“Not morphine. I need to stay alert. Do you have any Novocain?”

“How about lidocaine?”

“That'll work.”

Bill felt a prick in his shoulder.

“I KNOW WHERE YOU ARE. YOU'RE IN THE LAB.”

“How long will it take to numb you?”

“We don't have time to wait. Just do it.”

“This is going to sting.”

She emptied a bottle of alcohol on the wound, and tears squirted out of Bill's eyes.

“Here, bite this.”

Theena handed Bill a roll of gauze. He'd barely gotten it in his mouth before something sharp went into the bullet hole and began to poke around.

He moaned, his nervous system lighting up like a Christmas tree. Theena dug deeper, and deeper, and then there was a small sucking sound and a tremendous feeling of relief.

“I got the slug. You need stitches.”

“We have to get out of here. Dress it.”

Theena slapped on some cotton pads and taped them to Bill's skin. The lidocaine hadn't completely numbed him, but it was taking the edge off the pain.

She helped Bill to his feet. He was woozy.

“Can you walk?”

“Watch me.”

They were halfway to the door when David filled the entrance.

“Hi, Theena. Dr. May. You'll be happy to know that Manny and I have resolved our differences.”

He swung the ax.

Chapter 39

Theena jumped back. The ax cut the air inches before her face, ripping out a few stray strands of hair that didn't move as fast as she did. Her butt hit the counter behind her, and David lifted the ax again, his eyes shining with a madness she knew all too well.

"I don't want to kill you, David!"

Her grip on the gun was tight, certain. David advanced.

She shot him in the thigh, and he folded in half and hit the floor, still clutching the ax.

"Go ahead, Bill! I'm covering him!"

Bill had a moment of uncertainty, then he stepped around David and fled the lab. Theena kept the gun and both eyes on David, following Bill's route. David's eyes tracked her every step, a cobra poised to strike. He had one hand clamped over the wound on his leg, but already the bleeding was slowing down.

"We have to get out of here."

Bill turned for the elevator. She caught his arm, holding him back.

"You need a key card." Theena fished it out of her lab coat. He eyed her strangely when she offered it to him.

"How about you?"

"I have to contain David. If we leave, so will he."

"But we'll be safe."

"He needs help, Bill. I owe him that."

The look he gave her was priceless, a cross between bewildered and resigned. He was such a good guy. Maybe when this was over...

She pushed the impulse away. Theena couldn't think about happily ever after. She knew she didn't deserve it.

Bill let out a long breath. "What do you have in mind?"

"We can tie him up. There are jump ropes in the gym."

"Lead the way."

They jogged down the hall and turned left. Blood was spattered over the floor and walls, and many of the overhead fluorescent tubes were smashed. The remaining lights flickered and hissed, erratic strobes throwing crazy shadows. A portion of Theena's resolve eroded with every step. Her sense of responsibility was slowly being overtaken by her fear. David seemed to be hiding in every corner, ready to leap out and mutilate all of the people that hurt him.

And she was the last one.

The gym was a decent replica of a modern health club; too bright, completely encircled with mirrors, and crammed with stacks of machines that looked like torture devices. For some insane reason, the equipment locker had a padlock on it. Theena shoved the gun in her pocket. She

unclipped the overhead T-bar from a lat-press and wedged it in the latch. She twisted, her muscles bunching with effort. The lock was bending... bending... *SNAP!*

Theena tugged open the locker door and snagged five jump ropes, shoving them under her armpit.

“Theena!”

She turned at Bill's voice, followed his frightened gaze.

David was in the room with them, leaning on the ax like a cane. He grinned.

“Is the Stairmaster free?”

Theena drew the gun.

“Drop the ax, David.”

“This ax?” With a violent jerk, David thrust the ax into the mirror alongside the doorway, smashing glass with an ear-bursting crash.

He shifted and swung in the other direction, shattering a reflection of himself, droplets of his blood peppering the glinting shards that fell at his feet.

Theena took careful aim and shot him in the leg again. There was a small eruption of blood, and his knees buckled, but he somehow managed to stay on his feet.

She shot twice more, the first bullet missing, the second taking off part of David's calf.

He still didn't go down.

“Hold your fire!”

Bill threw himself at David, a fifteen pound barbell in his good hand. He connected solidly with David's chest. There an audible thump, and both men toppled over.

Theena was there in three steps, kicking away David's ax. He was flat on his back, arms and legs akimbo. His eyes were open but unfocused.

The time to act was now, but she didn't want to take the gun off of him to tie him up. Bill managed to get to his feet, wincing. Unfortunately, he wouldn't be much help in the knot-tying department with a broken shoulder blade.

“Take the gun.”

Bill hesitated, then accepted it. Theena wasted no time, winding a jump rope around David's ankles, cinching the knot so tight her arms burned.

“Theena!”

Bill's warning came too late.

David jackknifed into a sitting position and batted her across the face. She fell to the side, just as David was rolling in the opposite direction.

Towards his ax.

Her vision cleared in time to see David grip the handle, lift it back to swing at her.

“Bill!”

He fired.

The gun offered an anticlimactic *CLICK*. There were no bullets left.

The pain was as blinding as it was sudden, an explosion in her right side just above her hip. Theena stared down at the thing buried several inches in her side, unable to fathom what was happening.

An ax. She had an ax sticking out of her.

She touched it, fingers trembling, blood bubbling up and swallowing the blade.

There was a sucking sound, and suddenly the ax was out. Theena watched her life spill out of the hole in a gout of blood.

She stared at David, lying a few feet away from her, lifting the ax for another blow.

Then everything went black.

Chapter 40

“You killed her!”

Manny had been watching everything happen in mute terror, unable to stop it. He was a passenger in his own body, unable to control his muscles, his actions, his intent. David had banished him. All he could do is scream out his feeble protests to deaf ears as one atrocity after another was committed by his hands.

But when the ax hit Theena, the balance of power shifted.

Manny's rage inflamed his brain like a fever, forcing David back. He stared at the ax and willed his hands to open. They did, the ax falling to the ground.

His eyes scorched Bill, the cords in his neck bulging. He forced out the words.

“Pick... up... the... ax.”

Bill remained rooted, jaw agape.

“Give it up, Manny.” David's voice echoed in his head. “You can't win. I'm going to bury you so deep in our mind, you'll never come back out again.”

Manny pleaded again. “The ax...”

“Look! Theena's still breathing! Why don't we crawl over there and finish the job?”

Manny rolled onto all fours against his will. But his voice was still his own.

“The ax!”

Bill bent down and took the ax in his good hand. He held it away from his body, as if it were a poisonous snake, a stricken look on his face.

“We're going to snap her neck.” Manny began to crawl to Theena. Every inch was a struggle, and it was a struggle he was losing. “I'm going to let you feel the bones break beneath her soft skin while you're squeezing.”

“Kill me!”

Manny's hand shook, but he couldn't hold it back. It was reaching, reaching for Theena's throat. Manny felt himself being pushed back again, back into the dark space, David muscling him down and taking over.

“PLEASE KILL ME!”

His hands reached Theena's thin neck, and began to squeeze.

THUNK!

The ax hit him in the small of the back, pinning him to the floor.

There was no pain. Just a spreading warmth that was almost pleasant.

The struggle was over. The conflict in his mind and body seemed to have ended. David's voice had lost its anger. It was quieter now, almost peaceful.

“You finally did it.”

Manny saw David, in his mind, but he was a kid, no more than nine-years old. And Manny saw himself, a year younger than his older brother. They were sitting together on the porch of their house,

sharing an apple. A happy time, before the State took their mother away. Before foster homes, and juvee hall, and suicide.

“I didn't want to kill you, David.”

“I know. It wasn't your fault.”

“It wasn't?”

“No, Manny. I shouldn't have killed those cats. It was wrong. You did the right thing to tattle on me.”

“But juvenile hall...”

“I was never going to be happy, Manny. That's how it was for me. It wasn't your fault I ended it. It didn't have anything to do with you.”

“I wish things turned out better.”

“I know. I'm sorry.”

David took something out of his pocket, handing it to Manny. It was small, yellow, and seemed to shine with its own inner light. A die-cast pickup truck.

“I love you, David.”

“I love you too, Manny.”

The warmth was all around him now, covering him like a blanket. It was different, so different than all of the other times he'd died taking N-Som. There was no fear, no pain, no emotional turmoil. Manny was infused with a deep and calming peace, which welcomed him into the thing he wanted most of all.

Everlasting rest.

Emmanuel Tibbets let out a gentle breath, closed his eyes, and went to sleep for the last time.

Chapter 41

“Theena.”

Bill knelt down next to her, gently taking her hand off the wound.

“Bill...”

It was bad. The tear was ragged, ugly. The ax had penetrated the dermis and subcutaneous tissue, neatly severing her external obliques. There was a lot of blood. Deep inside, he caught a glimpse of liver and ascending colon.

Bill placed her hand back over the injury, keeping pressure on it. Her pulse was weak, but rapid, her skin clammy to the touch. The onset of hypovolemic shock, brought about by massive blood loss. This was turning into a repeat episode of what happened with David in the lobby.

He wouldn't fail this time. He wouldn't let her die.

“I'll be back.”

“Don't go.”

Bill ran out of the gym, trying to remember the direction of the lab. He found it by noticing all of the medical supplies Theena had dropped in the doorway. Bill scooped them up; streptokinase, atropine, epinephrine, beryllium, an IV drip and a bag of saline. He then entered the room and picked up the bottle of alcohol and the syringe Theena had used on him, as well as the metal first aid box.

When he arrived back in the gym, Theena was in V-Fib.

Bill hung the IV from one of the nearby exercise machines and threaded the needle into her wrist. She wasn't breathing, and her heart was in chaotic arrhythmia, shaking and trembling in her chest. Bill hit her chest as hard as he could, sending shock waves of pain through his injured shoulder. Then he tilted up her head, pinched her nose, and filled her lungs with his breath.

Into her IV he injected a syringe full of epi. He began chest compressions, both arms rigid, bending her rib cage to force her heart to pump blood. He could only keep it up for thirty seconds before the ripples of agony in his back made him close to passing out. Bill forced his breath into her, and gave another thump on the chest.

Her pulse was still erratic.

“God dammit!”

Bill wouldn't let it happen. Not again. He couldn't lose her, too.

He drew a 500 milligram dose of beryllium, a powerful anti-arrhythmic, into the syringe and injected the bolus in an IV push. After another thirty seconds of CPR, he checked her heart.

A normal rhythm had returned, but it was too slow, much too slow.

“I won't let you die.”

Bill administered a dose of atropine, and the effect was almost instantaneous. Her heart rate rose dramatically.

Bill checked her carotid. Pulse still weak. She didn't have enough blood in her system to raise the pressure. He had to close up that wound.

In the med kit was a box of single use Ethilon needles, pre-threaded with black monofilament. He tore open a pack and then dumped rubbing alcohol over his hands and a pair of scissors.

Theena moaned when his fingers entered her. The blood flow had slowed considerably. He tied off four veins, and then gently tucked her ascending colon back into her muscle wall. Then he sutured the subcutaneous tissue back over the oblique, and closed her up with twenty-eight stitches across the epidermis.

His back was on fire when he finished, his forehead sopping wet. Bill checked her pulse.

Strong and steady.

“Bill...”

Her eyelids fluttered. Bill felt his chest well up, emotion threatening to choke him.

“Theena.”

Pain be damned, he bent down and held her. In that single moment, the only thing that mattered in the whole world was the woman in his arms. Alive and breathing.

He hadn't let her die.

Bill gave her a shot of lidocaine near the injury to help with the pain, and then located the elevator card.

They weren't completely out of the woods yet. Theena was still in critical condition, and needed to get to a hospital. Plus there was the danger of Rothchilde coming back. Bill needed to get them out of there, along with enough evidence to make sure N-Som was never approved and Rothchilde was implicated to the fullest extent of the law.

Bill took the elevator to the lobby and used the phone to dial information. He got the number for the Hoffman Estates Police Department. After several minutes of convincing them that he'd already tried the Schaumburg PD and they hadn't come, they promised to drop by. Bill reminded them to bring an ambulance.

Then he went back into the bowels of the building to find the N-Som file he'd gotten from Mike Bitner's place. It seemed like an eternity ago.

The file was where he'd left it, in the conference room. Inside was enough information to expose the truth about N-Som. Hopefully this, coupled with Theena's testimony, would be enough to put the DruTech President away for a long time.

It was the very least the bastard deserved.

Chapter 42

The only drawback to flying by helicopter was the noise. Unless Rothchilde wore one of those ridiculous radio headsets, he had to yell for his pilot, Frederick, to hear him.

The bird banked left, Rothchilde's dinner almost leaving his stomach from the maneuver. Below them, streetlights and headlights sparkled like stars, competing with the real deal overhead. The Chicago skyline could be seen in the distance, anchored by the blinking antennae of the Sears Tower and the Hancock Building.

Rothchilde decided it might be prudent to leave the country for a few weeks. He wasn't sure how this whole DruTech mess was going to resolve itself. The best scenario had Manny killing Theena and Bill, and then dying himself. But things seldom ended neatly.

The smart thing would be to send in his own troops and clean the place out—bodies, evidence, everything. Unfortunately, Rothchilde had murdered both of the people he could use to do that, Halloran and Carlos. Their bodies would be found, and Rothchilde wasn't anxious to answer persistent questions from either the police or the mob.

So he would go on vacation. Let things settle down. He'd get his lawyers on it, extricate himself from the situation, and get everything back on track. The military contract should still hold up, and he already had some places picked out in Mexico for N-Som production.

Rothchilde yawned. Before he could do anything, he had to take care of Halloran's headless corpse, decaying in his office. Messy. Rothchilde tried to think of someone he could call to assist him, someone who would ask no questions. But he didn't place his trust in many people.

His servants would do it, if ordered to. They feared him. Maybe he could have them wrap up the body, haul it someplace secluded, and then Rothchilde could kill them, too. No witnesses. The only problem was replacing them; it was so hard to find good help these days.

Rothchilde rubbed his eyes. Exhaustion seemed to settle on him like a thick blanket. Sleep now wouldn't be wise. He needed to be alert and focused to deal with everything happening.

There was N-Som back at the mansion. He hadn't taken any since the day before, so he was ready for another dose.

But he didn't have to wait until he got back home, did he?

Rothchilde stuck a hand in his pocket and pulled out the capsules Theena had made from Halloran's brain. He'd killed the captain just a few hours ago, but already the memory of the act was fading.

Maybe what he needed right now was a refresher.

He opened the onboard cooler and took out a Perrier. The pill went down easily, bubbles mixing with a pleasant tang of residual blood, and he settled back in his seat, ready to re-experience his first murder from the victim's point of view.

Rothchilde closed his eyes, a sweet smile settling on his face. The anticipation was exquisite.

Better than the Christmas Eves of youth, waiting for Santa.

The first effects of N-Som were sensory. Sounds became blurry, touch was muted. Opening the eyes yielded a dark, fuzzy world, which dimmed as the drug took hold, eventually spiraling the user into blackness. Then the dreams began.

But Rothchilde felt nothing.

He waited. Normally, he'd have been under by now. Was it taking so long because the sample was fresh? Theena mentioned that she didn't have all the equipment to make pills at the lab, and so she'd given him a capsule. Did the fresh stuff take a longer time to get into the bloodstream?

Minutes passed. His smile faded. He began to wonder if the little whore had duped him.

A moment later, he realized just how duped he had been.

Albert Rothchilde had forgotten how to breathe.

He thought he was unconsciously holding his breath at first, tense because the N-Som hadn't kicked in. But when he tried to inhale, he found that he just couldn't. His lungs refused to obey.

His eyes flapped open and he tensed, the first stirrings of panic building inside him. This was impossible. A person just didn't forget how to breathe. Breathing was automatic. He opened his mouth and sucked in his stomach, trying to fill his lungs. It didn't work.

Had Rothchilde known anything about anatomy, he might have noticed that Theena hadn't harvested the parts of Halloran's brain normally used for N-Som production. Instead she'd gone deeper down, into the brain stem, and taken sections of the medulla oblongata.

These fibrous neurons housed a very primitive part of the brain; the reflex centers. They controlled a person's swallowing, sneezing, heartbeat, blood pressure, and breathing.

Just as a regular dose of N-Som overrode a person's thoughts, this refined dose was overriding Rothchilde's instinctive knowledge of how to breathe.

Rothchilde began to see red. His lungs screamed at him, begging for air, but his brain was full of reflex neurons that had frozen in death.

His heart stopped next, in mid beat. The pressure in his chest was excruciating. Every nerve cell in his body fired, sending out distress signals to the brain in the form of pain. Rothchilde's brain responded by ordering the release of adrenaline, which did nothing but heighten his awareness of his terrible situation.

Rothchilde thrashed in his chair. Every muscle in his body burned, starving for oxygen. Black spots mingled with the red in his vision. He tried to scream, but nothing came out.

The pilot, Frederick, couldn't have done anything even if he'd left the controls. All of Rothchilde's systems were crashing. The reflex center of Rothchilde's brain was convinced it was dead, and it was just following orders.

Rothchilde went rigid as he was seized by a spasm of pure agony. He voided his bowels and bladder. His vital organs began to shut down. Rothchilde was helpless, and aware that he was helpless, and the frantic struggle for breath coupled with the body-wracking pain was more than his mind could handle.

The neurons in his head all fired at once, and during that microsecond they burned into him an eternity of torture without escape.

He was no longer rational at this point, or he might have seen the irony. He had, after all, wanted to experience Halloran's death.

Frederick began emergency landing procedures, but there was no hurry.

The president of American Products was dead long before they touched the ground.

Chapter 43

“The ambulance is on the way, Theena.”

Theena didn't respond. She looked terrible. Her face was pale, waxy, and her jowls seemed deflated, hanging limply on her face. But her pulse was strong, and she was awake and aware.

Bill touched her cheek. “Are you thirsty?”

She shook her head.

Eventually, Bill would have to go upstairs. He wanted to be there to greet the authorities. But he still had reservations about leaving Theena alone. He'd started her on a streptokinase drip to prevent blood clots from clogging her heart. It was a risky move, considering her injury, but that was looking surprisingly well.

“Where are we?” Her voice was hoarse, low.

“DruTech, the lower levels. In the gym.”

Her eyes swept the room, coming to rest on Manny. The ax was still buried in his back.

“Manny's dead.”

“I'm sorry, Theena. I didn't have any choice.”

Theena's shoulders began to shake. She was too dehydrated to form tears, but she cried just the same. Bill held her, sharing some of her grief.

He hadn't wanted to kill Manny, but at the same time he knew it was the right thing to do. Not only did it save Theena, but in a strange sort of way it had saved Manny as well. Bill hoped the man was finally at peace.

“I'm going to check on the cops. Will you be okay for a few minutes?”

Theena didn't answer. She just stared at the puddle of her own blood, congealing on the floor.

Bill kissed her forehead, then got to his feet and grabbed the N-Som file. The rubber band broke, spilling papers all over the gym floor.

He bent over, the pain flaring in his shoulder, and began to gather them up. Every single sheet was important. This was more than just proof N-Som was dangerous. This was evidence of murders. Many murders.

His hand closed around one of Manny's CT scans, a three dimensional picture of his brain. It was labeled Day 45. There was so much scar tissue it was surprising he had lived up to that point.

Bill examined the picture closer, reading the handwriting on the margin. His stomach clenched.

This wasn't Manny's scan.

He searched through the papers until he found the log. Written in Dr. Nikos's hand. A day-by-day account of the second clinical test subject. Someone else, besides Manny, who'd been taking N-Som and hadn't slept in over one thousand hours. Someone else, whose brain was just as fried.

Bill heard movement behind him. He spun around, his head swimming, shocked beyond words. How could this be so? How could he have missed this? He remembered when he first met Theena,

her telling him about another test subject.

“Theena...”

She stood over him, her face oddly calm. Her eyes were distant, unrecognizable.

“My name isn't Theena.”

And then she hit him with the ax.

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Author's Afterword

The book you're now reading has never been conventionally published.

Let me backtrack a little.

In 1999 I landed a literary agent with a technothriller novel called *Origin*, about the United States government keeping Satan in an underground research facility in New Mexico.

Origin was my seventh novel, and arguably the first I'd written that was any good. The other six never got published, though they did garner me more than 400 rejections. Apparently *Origin* wasn't good enough either, because it was rejected by damn near every editor in New York.

Undaunted, I wrote another technothriller, blending in elements of science, mystery, and humor. *The List*, in my opinion, was better than *Origin*. Not only was it trendy, tying in closely to the work being done on the Human Genome Project, but it had more heart than its predecessor.

It didn't sell either.

I decided my problem was mixing genres. Since there's no *Thriller-Humor-Horror-Sci-Fi* section in bookstores, I needed to write something that fit easily within an established genre.

I chose a medical thriller, in the style of Robin Cook and Michael Palmer. No humor this time. Just a by-the-numbers, straightforward, homogenous thriller, with an everyman hero trapped in a terrible situation that quickly spirals out of control.

The book was called *Disturb*. My agent hated it, probably because it had no humor in it, and she never sent it out. So *Disturb* remains my only book that has never been rejected.

After *Disturb*, I wisely chose to put the humor back into my narratives, and wrote *Whiskey Sour*. I've been writing Jack Daniels thrillers ever since.

When I started having some success with the Jack books, I looked back on my earlier novels and decided to offer *Disturb*, *Origin*, and *The List* as free downloads on JAKonrath.com.

The reader response took me by surprise. The books have been downloaded thousands of times each. I'm humbled and flattered by the attention my failures have gotten, and have answered quite a bit of email about them. The question people most often ask is, "When will these be published?"

I still don't have an answer to that.

Origin, *The List*, *Disturb*, and my short story collection *55 Proof* aren't available in bookstores, or libraries, or anywhere other than JAKonrath.com and Amazon Kindle. They don't have ISBN numbers. They haven't been catalogued by the Library of Congress. They haven't been professionally typeset, or edited. But fans, collectors, and completists have asked for them, so here they are.

Disturb is my red-headed stepchild. While I love the main concept, and many of the scenes and ideas, there isn't much of me in the book. If anyone wondered what a JA Konrath thriller would look like stripped of its humor, this is it. Many years later, I wrote another book without any humor in it. I used the pseudonym Jack Kilborn, and the book was a horror novel called *Afraid*.

I hope you enjoyed *Disturb*, and would love to hear what you thought. I wrote this back in 2002, and recently in the news there has been talk of pharmaceutical companies working on the same thing that I postulated five years ago. Let's all hope they aren't as unethical as the scientists in *Disturb*.

Also, as an added bonus, following this afterword is a horrid little story I wrote a while back, but didn't include in *55 Proof*, called *Dear Diary*.

Joe Konrath

April, 2009

DEAR DIARY

A Short Story by JA Konrath

Sept 15

Dear Diary,

First day of school! I hope this doesn't turn into a repeat of last year, when Sue Ellen Derbin and Margaret "Superbitch" Dupont decided to try and kick me off of Pom-Pons. When I think about all those things they said about me it makes me soooo mad! Who cares if my parents never had a lot of money or anything, and so what if I don't have any stupid designer clothes, I'm still a better person than them. They were so jealous of my blonde hair and blue eyes and my heritage. I hated those phonies soooo much!!! It's so nice they don't bother me anymore.

My schedule is English, Algebra, Biology, Lunch, Gym, History, Art, and Music. It's nice to finally be an eighth grader and get the classes I want. But I still don't want to be here, and if I ever have kids I'll let them decide if they want to go school or not. I don't care if it's a law, the law stinks and so does school!!!

But it's not all bad. Robert Collins is in my math class and he's sooooo cute! He's got the best butt I've ever seen on a thirteen-year-old, and when he smiles with those dimples I sincerely want to die! We got to choose our own seats and I sat next to him. Tomorrow I'll wear more perfume and see if he notices.

Sept 16

Dear Diary,

Pom-Pon tryouts were today, and I'm Captain of the first squad! With Sue Ellen and Margret Superbitch gone, it was waaaaay too easy. Debbie Baker made squad two leader, and I could tell she was pissed that I beat her out. Tough titties, Deb!!!

But even better than that, Robert commented that he liked my perfume today! I wore a little extra, and while we were doing our problems he wrote me a note that said "Is that you who smells so good?" I almost died, right there in class.

I know I'm going to save that note forever.

Then I did something that was totally unlike me. I asked him if he was still going out with Pam Escher. He said no, Pam was now dating Stu Dorman. It seems Stu dumped Melissa for Pam and Pam dumped poor Robert. I feel bad for him, but not for me. Wouldn't it be great if he asked me out?

Sept 17

Dear Diary,

HE ASKED ME OUT!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

I couldn't believe it. We were done checking our homework and he leaned over so his lips were

almost touching my ear and asked if I wanted to go out after school! So I skipped Pom-Pon practice and we walked over to Barro's Pizza and shared a small pepperoni. I didn't actually eat any, because of my special diet, but he didn't notice. We talked a lot about school and about how everyone is too concerned about appearance rather than being real and he told me about his family that came from New York and I told him that my family actually came from Scandinavian. He was super intelligent and serious. I never would have guessed he was so smart because he's so cute. I wonder if he'll be THE ONE. He's so cute it would be great if he was.

Sept 18

Dear Diary,

I got in BIG trouble for skipping Pom-Pon practice. Debbie Baker kept sucking up to Mrs. Meaker, saying how I shouldn't be squad captain if I didn't show up. The little bitch. Mrs. Meaker didn't say much, other than I had to make sure I didn't miss it again.

Robert and I passed notes back and forth during math. Nothing lovey-dovey, just talk because math is sooooo boring. I wish he had the same lunch period as I did. He said he would ask me out again after school but he has football practice. I told him I had Pom-Pons, and maybe we could meet after. He said great. But my practice ran late (practicing Debbie's stupid new drills) so when I got to Barro's he wasn't there. I hope he isn't mad.

Sept 19

Dear Diary,

Robert looked hurt in Math today, but I wrote him a note in English to explain everything and when he read it he forgave me. He asked me out again after school, and I agreed, even though I would miss another practice. Practicing five times a week is too much, if you ask me. We met at Barro's and got another pepperoni (which I didn't eat), and we talked for two hours. I told him all about runestones and Viking mythology and the Heimskringla and he really seemed interested. Then halfway during our talk he reached out and held my hand. I thought I would die!!!! His hands are so strong and big. Maybe he is THE ONE.

Sept 20

Dear Diary,

WEEKEND!!!! I'm gonna spent it all in my basement, getting stronger and watching my diet. If you want to be the best, that's what you have to do.

Sept 22

Dear Diary,

That bitch Debbie got me kicked off as squad one leader!!!!!!!!!! I just missed two stupid days! I cried in the bathroom for a half hour. I want to kill her! She talked to Mrs. Meaker and Mrs. Meaker

said I wasn't meeting up to my responsibilities. I hate them both.

Robert waited for me after practice so I had a shoulder to cry on. He even kissed me, but it was only on the cheek. He's such a doll. He invited me over to his house for dinner, but I lied to him and said my parents already had plans. I couldn't tell him about the basement. But maybe I will soon.

Sept 23

Dear Diary,

Debbie didn't come to school today. I wonder why? (Ha!) I asked Mrs. Meaker if I could have my squad leader position back, and she said maybe. She'll say yes when Debbie misses another practice.

Robert kissed me on the mouth today, for the first time! It was weird and exciting! He even used his tongue!!!! He's soooo sophisticated. It was right after practice. He waited for me, and wanted to walk me home. I lied and said my parents didn't allow visitors. He believed me, and then he leaned over and kissed me. I thought my knees turned to Jell-O. I now know that he is THE ONE.

Sept 24

Dear Diary,

I've been thinking about it a lot and I've decided to show Robert the basement. I invited him over after practice and lied and said my parents weren't home. I said I'd make dinner. He was impressed that I could cook. I didn't tell him that I couldn't.

By the time we got to my place it was already getting dark, and Robert said he should call home and check in. But I told him to look at my basement first, because I had a big surprise.

When I turned on the basement light, the hissing started. Robert asked if it was the furnace, and I giggled. Then I pulled the cover off the cages.

Debbie Baker was tied up in the first one, naked, lying in a smelly puddle of her own piss. She twisted and banged her head on the cage door and looked so funny I had to laugh. Robert just stared.

Then I pulled the tarp off the other cage. Margret "Superbitch" Dupont hissed. Sue Ellen Derbin was crying, like always. Sue Ellen had no arms or legs, and was lying naked on the hay I put down for her, which she messed again. Gross! I had to stop feeding her so much dog food.

Superbitch Margret had one stump of an arm left, severed at the elbow. Both had those awful brown scars where I had to burn them to seal the wound after I cut off a limb. I couldn't let them bleed to death. That wouldn't be right.

Robert got really freaked out, and I explained to him they were hissing because I cut out their vocal cords. That way they couldn't attract attention. He turned around and tried to go up the stairs but I had locked the basement door. I told him I thought he was staying for dinner. That's how you get strong. By eating your enemies. One piece at a time. That's what my Viking ancestors did. But the people have to be alive when you eat them, or else you don't ingest their souls. Their souls are what really made you strong. They made me strong. That's why I was Pom-Pon captain. And that's

why I was going out with the cutest boy in school.

As I explained this to Robert, he started to yell for help. I tried to tell him not to be scared, because he was THE ONE. THE ONE to share this secret with me. Together we could live forever. It was okay. You didn't have to eat them all at once. You just do it a little bit at a time. I told him I had already eaten my parents. It took two years before I finished the last of Dad.

But Robert just kept on screaming, and I finally had to hit him over the head to shut him up. I guess he wasn't THE ONE after all.

I stripped off his clothes and tied him up and used the long scissors to snip his vocal chords. Then I looked over his trim body and decided what I wanted to eat first. I plugged in the electric saw and built a fire in the pit to heat the cauterizing iron.

I didn't want Robert to bleed to death. That wouldn't be right. I couldn't ingest his strength then. And he looks strong enough to be able to feed me for a loooooooooong time.

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