

THE SABBATH EXPERIMENT

a thriller by joseph massucci



sample chapters

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(about 108,000 words)

Prologue

"He who commands the future conquers the past."

– *George Orwell*

Chapter One

Lockdown

*Sabbath Fertility Clinic
Oak Brook, Illinois
Friday, May 1
9:25 p.m.*

Two men burst through the clinic's double doors with enough force to produce a floor-to-ceiling crack in the reception area's massive solar window.

Samuel Wreschinski, the clinic's security chief, whirled at the sound and saw two men marching with purpose toward his station. Wreschinski recognized the taller, more slender of the two, a young gentleman fresh out of some upscale British university, handsome and confident, a real charmer. Despite the night's spring rain, his raincoat remained draped over his arm, leaving his flamboyant double-breasted London suit speckled with droplets. He was the center's medical

instrumentation consultant who had paid regular calls to the clinic, always sporting a healthy tan regardless of the season, always ready with a smile for everyone. Wreschinski had made him a contractor's ID badge – his name was "Richard" something. A nice fellow, very talkative.

The second, shorter man, carrying a canvas bag at his side, wore a rain-streaked overcoat draped loosely around his large, stocky frame. His etched and pockmarked face gave him the look of a prizefighter who had weathered too many bouts. They were an unlikely pair – wrong to be here together after hours, and in such a rush.

As they approached, Wreschinski noted the larger man's eyes, a cold, sweeping stare that missed nothing. That look sent waves of dread through him.

Wreschinski's hand dropped to the desk, a movement the two men had anticipated. The larger man reached beneath his coat and deftly produced a 9mm semiautomatic handgun tipped with a thick-bore silencer. He thrust it a breath away from the security officer's forehead. The guard's hand froze just short of the silent alarm button.

"I wouldn't do that, Sam," Richard said, stepping around the marble counter and entering the security station.

Wreschinski, looking up into gun-wielder's dark stare, felt the blood drain from his face. He thought that he might pass out.

"Stand up please," Richard requested, his voice calm but firm. "Step back against the wall with your arms at your sides."

Wreschinski's mind swirled with thoughts of his wife and two girls. He was no hero – worse, he was underpaid in an unappreciated job. He had no intentions of giving his life and losing his family to protect this center. As far as he was concerned, these men could take whatever they wanted. But what could they possibly want here?

Wreschinski did as he was told. His heart racing, he stood and stepped away from his console until his back struck the metal wall with a solid *thud*, thus allowing the two full access to the clinic's security station. With his only way out blocked, he could only stand and watch in a functionless stupor as they worked.

The younger man, Richard, helped himself to the sign-in sheet on the marble counter top and scanned the list of names with his keen gray eyes. His studious expression gave way to a charming smile. "The old man is good ... all present and accounted for." He shot a glance at his associate and noted, "Only one on the cleaning crew tonight."

Richard sat down at Wreschinski's console and powered down the computer workstation that monitored the building's alarm zones.

At the same time his accomplice swapped his handgun for a pair of cutters and went to work on his hands and knees beneath the station's console. He removed the bottom panels and, with quick practiced mastery, began cutting the coaxial cabling that routed the flow of broadband data in and out of the one-story building.

Finished with the computers, Richard spun from his chair and rapped his knuckles on a metal door just to the left of Wreschinski. "I need access to this room."

For several long seconds, Wreschinski remained as rigid as a cement garden statue. He felt out of touch with his body; he didn't know if his passivity was an unconscious gesture of protest, or if he had simply gone into shock. The hefty associate stood suddenly and rammed his club-like fist into the center of the guard's stomach, breaking his paralysis and driving the air from his lungs in a great, hoarse cough as he doubled over.

Richard slid his hand into the guard's pocket and removed a generous fistful of keys. "Which one?" he asked, jingling the collection under the guard's nose.

Wreschinski touched a trembling finger to the first key on the ring. The young man inserted it into the lock and opened the utility door. The closet-size room contained the heart of the closed-circuit television system, which recorded feeds from a dozen cameras

mounted in all accessible areas. The stocky associate stepped inside and methodically reformatted each recorder's hard drive before powering down the units.

Finished, Richard gestured to the mahogany double doors leading into the facility. "Now escort us inside, Mr. Wreschinski." His pleasant, if somewhat cynical, grin vanished. "And let me give you some friendly advice: if you fail to open a single door on your first attempt, we no longer need you. At that point you are a dead man. Am I clear?"

Wreschinski, his eyes bulging from the blow to his stomach, knew this was no bluff. "You've turned off everything," he managed, his voice hoarse. "None of the doors will open."

The young man's winning grin returned. "We've only disarmed the surveillance," he said, "and, of course, the alarm. Don't you worry, Sam. We wouldn't be so foolish as to lock ourselves out. Now shall we go inside?"

Wreschinski unclipped the credit-card size building ID from his shirt pocket and waved it over the proximity reader beside the double doors. The red pin light turned green and he heard the soft, reassuring click of the magnetic lock disengaging. He closed his eyes and let out a long breath of relief.

Richard flashed the guard his impeccably bleached teeth while holding open one of the double doors for him. He waved Wreschinski through. The burly associate retrieved his canvas bag and followed, allowing the door to close behind him with a metallic *snap*.

With Wreschinski in the lead, the three marched single file down the main corridor through the core of the upscale fertility clinic. The hallway hosted a row of impressive offices and stainless steel rooms where the clinic's patients were examined and then counseled. All the rooms were darkened for the evening.

They were not alone in the corridor. At the opposite end, a middle-aged woman dressed in a light-blue smock emerged from the room marked "Men," carrying a bucket, which she placed onto a utility cart heavy with cleaning supplies. Wreschinski knew the woman, an employee with the building's after-hours cleaning service, who had attended to these rooms with meticulous care every night since the clinic opened. They would often chat before she left for the night, yet most of her conversation in broken English had prattled into one ear and faded, like elevator music. What was her name again? Grazyna? In what Polish town had she been born? How many children did she say she had? Tonight he wanted to know the answers to a hundred questions about her life.

Wreschinski said over his shoulder, "She speaks little English. She'll hardly acknowledge us."

Richard said nothing. As they approached the woman, Wreschinski offered her a forced smile of greeting.

The young man cocked his head toward his associate. The thug produced the silenced handgun and pointed it at the woman.

Wreschinski wooden smile evaporated. "What are you *doing!*?"

The woman returned her own look of confusion when she saw the terror in Wreschinski's eyes. Before he could utter a word of objection, the thug squeezed off a single round. There came a muted *thud* that produced a plum-size spot in the center of the woman's chest, a wound that split her heart in two. Her blood splattered the sterile wall behind. She let out a shriek, which died quickly with her as she spilled against the wall. She was dead as she sank to the floor, leaving a trail of smeared blood down the wall like a painted stripe.

Wreschinski eyes swam out of focus. "Oh my God! *Oh my God!*" He blinked rapidly, as if trying to clear a wayward eyelash. "She was a good woman ... she did nothing..."

The armed thug grabbed Wreschinski by the back of his collar and drove the silenced bore into the base of his neck, which felt like a poker he had just taken from a fire.

"I don't give a rat's ass if she was the Virgin Mary," he sneered, adding his hot breath to the gun's searing barrel.

He shoved Wreschinski forward into the lab's double doors.

"What he means, Sam," Richard said, "is we're not interested in how you felt about her ... we're only interested in your ability to open this final door for us."

Wreschinski ran a trembling hand through his hair and glanced back at Grazyna's body. Would his life soon be over like hers?

Wreschinski once again removed his plastic ID card clipped to his shirt. His hands were shaking so severely he didn't know if he could pass the card through the card reader with a clean swipe.

"Allow me," Richard said. He took the building ID and ran it through the grooves of the reader. A red pin light turned green. The young man beckoned Wreschinski to the keypad to finish the process.

Wreschinski raised a severely trembling finger and deliberately keyed in the lab's five-digit security code. He heard pneumatic *buzz* as the double doors unlocked and slid into the walls in a quick, fluid motion.

The room beyond was a state-of-the-art assisted reproductive laboratory, a high-tech workshop where couples paid small fortunes to doctors who used microinjection techniques to fertilize a woman's egg with sperm, incubate them, and transfer the resulting embryo into the

womb. The young man flipped on the light switches beside the door to bring the laboratory to life, revealing its cutting-edge glory.

Richard waved his associate inside. "Get to work," he said, urgency creeping into his voice for the first time since their arrival.

The thug knelt down over his canvas bag, opened it and began removing its contents. His dark eyes remained passionless as he worked, handling a detonator with competent precision.

Richard turned to the security officer and said with a note of apology, "Thank you, Sam. Unfortunately, I no longer require your services."

Richard produced a silenced handgun of his own from beneath the raincoat draped over his arm. Wreschinski raised a feeble hand of protest as the gun fired.

"Wait!"

A bullet pierced his right lung. Wreschinski stumbled outside the lab where he collapsed against the wall next to the cleaning woman's corpse. His breath expelled in a long sigh as he closed his hand around hers.

Chapter Two

Jonathan Sabbath

Richard Fox rearranged the raincoat neatly over his arm to conceal the gun before jamming his hand against a large, red button on the lab's far wall. A pair of doors leading to the clinic's executive suites slid open with a light *swish*.

Richard ran a hand over his gelled and layered haircut, and then glanced at his Rolex. He congratulated himself – *precisely on schedule!*

He walked down the carpeted hallway, passing one handsome office suite after another until he reached a door labeled "Conference Room." He turned the knob and entered.

The meeting room was impressively upscale, even by private practice standards, boasting a thick mahogany conference table and sofa-like chairs that adjusted seven different ways. Richard always

enjoyed coming here for meetings. When he opened the door, the five seated men around that table fell abruptly silent, their expressions registering disdain for the interruption. Richard knew that his unexpected appearance this evening violated stringent rules about staff meeting, which were strictly off limits to outsiders. An unexpected intrusion at these meetings was considered trespassing.

The center's 34-year-old director – Dr. David Sheppard – broke the awkward silence. “Mr. Fox, you have us at a disadvantage. We were not expecting you this evening.”

The young man adjusted the raincoat over his arm and, ignoring Sheppard, addressed the man seated at the head of the table running the meeting. “Jon, now that you’ve got them all together, please say goodbye.” Raising his eyebrow in warning, he added, “You don’t have much time.”

The gentleman seated at the head of the table, his stone expression half hidden in his hands, appeared singularly unfazed by the interruption. His name was Dr. Jonathan Sabbath, founder and owner of the fertility clinic. He was a slight man, barely five-foot seven, and wore his head completely shaven to hide his baldness and to give him a virile look of ferocity. He wore black-framed glasses with unusually thick lenses, which made the large eyes beneath appear otherworldly.

Sabbath removed his hands from his face and folded them neatly on the table's mirror-like surface. His soulless eyes remained fixed ahead, refusing to make contact with any of the other men. His jaw tightened, and his manner suggested he were about to deliver incriminating testimony in a court of law.

"Gentlemen," he began, his deep voice emotionless, "I'm afraid our association will come to an end tonight. Tomorrow, my facility will cease to exist."

The silence that followed filled the room like a living entity. Around the table, there were sober, stone faces. Finally, Dr. Sheppard leaned forward in his cushioned conference chair and said, "Jon, I don't understand. If this is about the bioethics commission's investigation into our practice, I believe we are well protected."

Sheppard's statement triggered an outburst of questions from the other three men. Richard, still standing in the doorway, let out a throaty chuckle. He alone was enjoying this meeting. His eager eyes watched the men closely, keen to witness how Sabbath would explain the clinic's sudden demise to his associates who had given up lucrative careers to help build this immensely profitable enterprise.

Sabbath raised a hand for quiet. When he once again controlled the room, he said without shifting his thick stare, "Tonight, this clinic

and all our work will vanish. All records will be destroyed. I have no choice.”

Dr. Benjamin Roth, the youngest and newest member of the team, broke the stunned silence. “You’re talking nonsense, Sabbath,” he said, his voice almost giddy. “This isn’t what we agreed on. You have no right—”

Sabbath slapped his open palms hard upon the table and shouted, “*I have every right! This is my clinic – my decision!*”

Disagreement erupted from the others. Richard grimaced. The young man actually gave the staff credit for overcoming their sense of shock and expressing outrage so openly to their superior and mentor. He could fully understand their confusion and their anger. Sabbath had blindsided them with this announcement – no, ambushed them. They could probably smell the failure, the certain disgrace if the true nature of their work here became public. There would be legal questions and complicity – criminal charges would be handed down. As bleak as their future seemed at this moment, he alone knew the prospects of a future full of criminal indictments was the least of their problems.

Dr. Roth stood. “I’m not listening to any more of this.” He thrust an accusing finger at Sabbath. “I trusted you. I gave up my

post to work with you. You lied to me. You've lied to us all." He jammed an arm into his sport jacket as he prepared to leave.

"Sit down, Dr. Roth," Sabbath said. "You are not going anywhere. No one is going anywhere."

"*Bullshit*," the doctor said. "The bioethics commission will be fascinated to know what you've been doing here. And I plan to tell them everything. I suggest you start burning your records. But I doubt you'll find them all in time before the court issues a subpoena."

As he turned to leave, Dr. Roth found himself staring into the business end of a silenced handgun pointed at his forehead. His eyes shifted beyond the barrel at its owner. The young man sported a winning smile just for him. There were no threats, no ultimatums. Just a *crack* as a 9mm bullet transfixed his brain. Roth's head flew back and the air expelled from his lungs in a rush that produced an involuntarily vocalization that sounded like "*HELL...*" His body crumpled onto the thick, expensive carpet while his massive head wound spouted spasms of blood in sync to his chaotic heart rhythm.

David Sheppard jumped to his feet. "My God ...!"

Richard redirected his handgun to the center of Sheppard's chest.

"*ENOUGH!*" Sabbath shouted. He was on his feet, both hands extended in a halting gesture, thus sparing Sheppard a bullet through

his heart – at least for a few moments more. “Richard, I *won't* have it this way!”

“You mean,” the young man said, lowering his handgun, “you can’t stomach the business of killing when it’s so up close and personal.”

Sabbath ignored him and said to the others, “Everyone please stay seated. Or there will be more bloodshed.”

Dr. Sheppard collapsed into his overstuffed chair and, like his two remaining colleagues, fell mute, his piercing eyes searching for answers.

Sabbath grabbed his navy blue suit jacket from the back of his chair and slipped his arms into it. “Please know that this is nothing personal—”

“*Nothing personal!?*” gasped Dr. Gregory Thornton. He was the oldest member of the team, a noted geneticist several years past his planned retirement age. He shook his full head of solid white hair.

“*Nothing personal!?*”

“What I mean to say,” Sabbath said, “is this is *business*. Unfortunately, I don’t have time to explain. I have what I need – the twins. If it’s any consolation, I can tell you that my life as you all know it is over. What I had hoped to accomplish would have benefited all mankind. Now I am no longer sure of anything.”

Sabbath's lifeless eyes remained downcast as though he considered saying something more to these men, but conceded finally that it was pointless. Richard knew that he did not view these men as lifelong friends or family members who deserved his confidence, his sympathies, or even a rational explanation. *This was business.*

Dr. Jerome Galvin, a passionate physician who could not sit still in the face of this senseless human butchery, fidgeting in his chair. "Jon, you're talking like a lunatic—"

"I'm talking about *IMMORTALITY!*" Sabbath flared, suddenly furious.

The men around the table jumped at the outburst. Richard knew that these poor suckers hadn't a clue what was at stake here.

Sabbath shook his head, disappointed. "I'm wasting my time." He said to the young man, "Let's go."

Richard extended his hand to the door. "After you, sir."

Sabbath slipped into the hallway, leaving behind three stupefied colleagues stirring in their seats. The young man withdrew an aluminum cylinder the size of a can of cola from the pocket of his raincoat and set it on the table.

"Enjoy," he said with a grin, and then followed Sabbath into the hallway. He closed the door behind him and locked it with a key from Wreschinski's ring.

"You've got two minutes," the burly thug boomed from the opposite end of the hallway as the lab's double doors closed behind him.

Richard said to his employer, "I suggest we leave immediately."

Sabbath readily agreed and followed the young man down the hallway to the building's emergency exit. Richard pushed open the door to the outside and let the spring drizzle wash over him. Their work tonight was nearly finished. Dr. Jonathan Sabbath threw his jacket over his shaved head and bolted into the night.

Richard, holding open the door, called to his associate, "Do hurry. Once this door shuts, it stays shut."

"Keep your shorts out of your crack," the thug hissed, marching down the corridor after them.

He followed Richard Fox out into the night and let the emergency door close behind him with a definitive *click*.

Chapter Three

Conflagration

Dr. David Sheppard was on his feet the instant he heard the conference room's lock drop into place, effectively imprisoning the three men inside. His eyes fell on Roth's body. The man's blood on the carpet had formed a huge, crimson cushion beneath his head. There's no way Sabbath would let them just walk away from what happened here tonight, Sheppard thought. Not after witnessing a murder. He intended to kill them all.

"There's gas building up in here!" Dr. Galvin huffed.

Dr. Sheppard exchanged disconcerting glances with the other men, expressions that mirrored their confusion and apprehension over an acrid vapor that began burning their eyes and nostrils. Smoke was filling the room.

"There!" said Dr. Gregory Thornton, indicating the small cylinder the young man had left behind.

They could hear an audible hiss.

Dr. Galvin was on his feet. "The bastard's gassing us!"

Thornton reached across the table, grabbed the canister and dropped it onto the floor with a cry of surprise. *"Sonofabitch ... it's hot!"*

The aluminum began spewing a thick, white fog. The three began coughing up the secretions building up rapidly in their lungs. Sheppard grabbed a cylindrical plastic waste container, emptied its contents and placed its open end over the canister to create a barrier. He yanked Thornton's arm and sat him down on it as though it were a chair.

"Keep your weight on this," Sheppard instructed. "Keep it pressed against the floor."

Thornton sat on the container, trapping most of the gas inside; however, a steady stream still leaked through the thick triple-ply carpeting. "I've inhaled too much," he gasped, shaking his head of white hair. He couldn't control his coughing. "My head ... Jesus, I'm going to pass out..."

"Stay with us, Greg!" Sheppard demanded.

Dr. Galvin grabbed an office chair and hurled it against the dark solar window. But the glass didn't shatter – in fact, the blow failed to produce even a hairline crack.

"Don't waste your time," Dr. Sheppard said. "It's bulletproof."

Galvin looked at him, astonished. "*Bulletproof!?*"

"Sabbath ordered them installed after the bomb threat in January," Sheppard explained. He examined the door, running his hand along the frame. They were singularly fortunate; the fixture wasn't built to hold people inside. "This is wood. We'll break through."

"For God's sake, David!"

Both men stood against the wall across from the door. "Use your shoulder," Sheppard instructed. "*NOW!*"

They sprinted the short distance across the room and rammed their shoulders into the door at roughly the same time. They heard a *crack*, but the door remained stubbornly intact.

Dr. Thornton spilled sideways off the waste container and tumbled onto the floor. A white cloud billowed up from where he'd been sitting, reducing visibility inside the conference room.

Sheppard began feeling the effects of the gas as though his head were a child's balloon filled past its bursting point. "*Again!*" he demanded between fits of coughing.

The two rammed their full weight against the door. This time the doorframe yielded, tearing the hinges from the plaster and hurling the shattered door into the hallway.

Galvin's eyes streamed with tears. "Greg's in there! Greg's in there! What are we going to do!?"

Sheppard rubbed a weary hand over his burning eyes, fighting the cloud's sedating affect. He tried to control his breathing without much success. "Open a door." He waved a finger at the emergency exit at the end of the hallway. "Get some air in here."

Dr. Galvin staggered down the hallway to the exit while Sheppard moved in the opposite direction to the laboratory. He slid his ID card through the reader next to the lab's double doors, but the pin light remained stubbornly red. *Damn them!* He jammed his fingers between the doors and, applying brute force, managed to pry them apart enough to slip through.

What he found inside made his blood freeze – a black canvas bag sat atop a cluster of four-foot-high oxygen cylinders. He moved to the bag and peered inside. His jaw tightened as he stared down at an electronic device with its display of rapidly changing numbers – an explosives timer. *Jesus!* The device would detonate, rupture the cylinders and ignite the combustible gas within. Sabbath intended to

kill them all tonight and destroy the center. But why? To protect his miserable secret?

"The emergency exit won't open!" Galvin hollered from the lab's doorway.

"Try the front!" Sheppard shouted. "And *quickly!* There's a bomb in this bag. He intends to burn this building to the ground."

"Burn the building!?" An astonished Dr. Galvin rushed to the cylinders and looked inside the canvas bag. "*Son of a ...!*"

"We'll leave through the front." Sheppard ran to the lab's double doors leading to the facility's main lobby and jammed his palm against the large red button. Nothing. He worked his fingers between the lab's exit door panels and managed to pry them apart. The first thing he spotted was the cleaning woman's body. Next to her, security officer Samuel Wreschinski lay folded in a fetal position, his blood streaming across the white ceramic floor.

Wreschinski groaned. Sheppard rushed to him, eased the security guard onto his back and removed his bloodied hand from the chest wound. "Let me see this, Sam." Sheppard grimaced and hollered back to his colleague, "We need to get this man to a trauma hospital!"

Dr. Galvin made no move to assist. He remained with the cylinders, a pensive finger on his lips, studying the detonator. "I'll move the explosives so the tanks won't rupture."

"Forget it!" Sheppard shouted. "Get Thornton out of that conference room. Take him out through the front."

Sheppard grabbed Wreschinski arm and wrestled him to his feet. The guard cried out in agony, a hand on his chest wound. Sheppard began half-dragging, half-carrying him down the hallway toward the clinic's reception area.

Inside the lab, Galvin stood hunched over the explosives bag. The timer's rapidly changing number sequence, seemingly at random, offered no clue to how much time remained before detonation. Galvin whirled away from the cylinders, his eyes scanning the laboratory for something, anything, sharp enough to cut through the straps that secured the detonator to the cylinders.

"Where's a good scalpel when you need one," he said to no one.

Sheppard turned back toward the lab. He saw Galvin, a pair of surgical scissors in hand, approaching the canvas bag.

"Jerry—!"

Dr. Galvin was cremated in a searing flash of light. The explosion transformed the laboratory into an oxygen-fed inferno and sent a huge fireball roaring down the hallway. Wreschinski slipped

from Sheppard's shoulders. The doctor barely had a second to raise both arms in front of his face for a shield, a gesture that offered him pathetically little cover. The enveloping fireball swept him off his feet. Fierce orange flames roared into his face. Then the pain – the excruciating pain – hammered every square inch of his skin, drilling him senseless.

Sheppard staggered clumsily to his feet, his clothing ablaze. The hallway had become a flaming maelstrom. There was nowhere to run, and nothing with which to douse the flames. The center's sprinkler system remained dormant. He staggered down the hallway toward the reception area in a vain search for a miracle that would deliver him from this unimaginable nightmare.

A miracle of sorts did indeed occur. One of the double doors at the end of the hallway suddenly opened for him. Grimacing in the choking pall, he staggered toward it. A lone figure filled the doorway – he couldn't see who it was.

"Help me—"

The figure raised a hand and pointed something at him. Sheppard saw a tiny flash from a muzzle and felt another searing pain just below his left shoulder. The impact hurled him back onto the ceramic floor. And there he stayed, unable to rise, and surrendered to the consuming flames. Death finally enveloped him.

Only then did the pain stop.

Part I

Imposter

47 Years Later

“The future is made of the same stuff as the present.”

–Simone Weil

Chapter Four

Elizabeth Kendall

*Edgewater Hotel Banquet Room
Madison, Wisconsin
October 5, 7:32 p.m.*

The small turnout for this prestigious fund-raising dinner was disappointing to Elizabeth Kendall and her campaign staff. The evening's host had a better than even shot of overtaking her opponent in the race for the presidency, and every poll supported that confidence. But only if she could keep her momentum. And that would require a world-class marketing campaign, she realized. If she couldn't raise enough money to mount a serious battle, she might as well concede the election tonight, save herself the embarrassment and save her few supporters the money they were only too eager to invest in her.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” shouted Senator Patrick Mason from the lectern, his amplified voice booming across the cavernous banquet room like thunder, “it is my proud honor to introduce the next president of the United States – *Kentucky’s Gov. Elizabeth Kendall!*”

Applause and cheers roared through the half-occupied room like a sudden storm. Her constituency didn’t represent the largest groups, but they certainly were the most enthusiastic and loyal.

When Elizabeth reached the podium, she grasped the senator’s hands affectionately as he kissed her cheek, and then continued to the lectern. She intended to launch directly into her remarks. But the applause kept growing in intensity the longer she stood there until table-by-table every person in the room was on his or her feet, slapping palms in a thunderous ovation. Smiling gracefully, she bowed her head so her tears wouldn’t be so obvious. She loved them all. This was a time for confidence and strength, not emotions, she told herself.

Finally, Elizabeth raised a hand in appreciation while attempting to regain control of the room. The audience took her cue and began returning to their seats, their eager eyes locked on the candidate. Finally, a deep silence settled over the room, an atmosphere thick with respect and expectation.

“Thank you very much, my dear friends,” she began. “I can’t tell you how much your support means to me. It seems the farther I climb, the higher the mountain becomes. I don’t have to tell you how expensive it is to run a campaign for president, especially when you’re the underdog. This morning I considered rewriting this speech to announce my withdrawal from this race and declaring electoral bankruptcy.” There were gasps from her audience. “I simply can’t compete with the corporate currency my opponent is pumping into his bid. Vice President Burke Knight is a household name with seemingly unlimited funds.”

There was an outburst of disagreement and protests from her supporters, an emotional eruption that threatened to turn ugly.

Elizabeth waved a hand and shouted above the din, “*But that’s not going to happen!* I made a pledge to you that I would raise the issues and fight for children and working families. And that’s exactly what I intend to do. I refuse to fight his style of politics – politics of division – a bleak, angry rhetoric, built on fear. As long as I have a voice, and as long as there are good folks like you willing to listen, I will speak out – not *against* my opponent, but *for* families!”

This triggered a roar of approval.

One man in attendance, however, did not appear to share the enthusiasm she so easily rallied. The gentleman, well into his 70s, sat

apart from the others at his own table in the back of the large ballroom. Nothing she said made him move a finger. He had courtesy press credentials, yet he wasn't a journalist. He was well-traveled, physically fit, with becoming white hair, tanned features and dressed in a dark British silk suit with a perfectly matured tie, distinguished in every way. He exuded confidence with more than a note of arrogance. He could have been a doctor, or even an attorney. He was no stranger to Elizabeth's fundraisers. In fact, he had attended the last four banquets in her swing through the Midwest, always aloof, always sitting alone.

He watched her, feigning polite interest in her speech with its messages of hope, opportunity and responsibility, which he had heard her give in person four times before. By now he was intimately familiar with its text, which presented the issues in a methodical, common-sense manner. He liked hearing her give it. She had good ideas – no, great ideas. She had practical solutions for the overheated economy, a conservative legal system, the boredom of virtual cyber education, the growing concern of genetic mutation and, of course, the campaign's key issue: Federal funding of life extension research – the so called "Immortality" legislation. She was always convincing, and always exuded integrity and honesty. The Kentucky governor was a

beautiful woman in every way, he concluded – physically, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually.

When Elizabeth finished her speech, the audience once again was on its feet to feed her applause and cheers of support. A pity, the gentleman thought. She would probably make an outstanding president. But, as she had noted in her opening remarks, she had one major handicap – money. With less than two months remaining in the election, she had simply run out of resources for a serious challenge against her corporate-backed vice presidential opponent, who intended to pay whatever necessary to sink her slim chances.

“Thank you very much, my friends,” she shouted over the applause. *“God bless you all!”*

A radiant Elizabeth Kendall stepped down from the podium and waded through the outstretched hands of the wall of supporters eager to meet her.

The elderly gentleman watched Elizabeth work her way through the crowd, expertly making friends with everyone she touched. He looked forward to meeting her. He sat there quietly with his hands folded, his eyes never leaving her, observing her every movement and gesture. When the crowd began thinning, Elizabeth excused herself from her table of staff members and walked straight toward him. As she approached, he rose respectfully from his chair.

She extended her hand to him. "Hello, my name is Elizabeth Kendall. I've seen you at some of my other fundraisers. But we've never had the opportunity to meet."

He grasped her hand. "I'm honored, Miss Kendall."

"Elizabeth."

"My name is Richard Fox, and I am a great admirer of yours."

They shook hands politely, each studying the other's face, probing for motives.

"I detect a slight British accent," she noted. "Are you a journalist?"

He smiled and shook his head. "I'm a businessman. I represent a concern that would like to see you as president. I'm prepared to make a generous donation tonight on behalf of that concern."

She beamed with genuine appreciation. "Thank you, Mr. Fox. That will mean a great deal to my campaign. I'll have my treasurer speak with you as soon as she's free."

"Elizabeth!" a woman called from several tables away.

A middle-aged woman, 40 pounds past her ideal weight, and carrying a oversized leather-bound book, stepped up to the candidate and gave her an awkward hug.

Elizabeth's smile never wavered. "Do I know you?"

"Gosh, no," the woman laughed. "I'm Molly McCarthy. I went to Iowa State with your sister. I've been trying to get in touch with her for *years*. But she's vanished. I was hoping you would help me find her."

Elizabeth's engaging expression remained intact. "I'm sorry. I don't have a sister."

"I brought her picture," Molly said, holding up a college yearbook. "She never signed this."

Elizabeth took the proffered book and read its cover: Iowa State University – Class of 2024. The woman opened the book to a marked page of class portraits and pointed. "That's her. I've always assumed the two of you were related, even though her last name was different from yours."

Elizabeth's mouth fell open when she saw the picture. The young woman in the photo looked exactly as Elizabeth did in her early twenties, with the same distinct smile, same high cheekbones and same alluring eyes. Even her ashen hair was cut similar to the way she used to wear it, although she would never have chosen that plaid outfit. The name below the photo was Suzanne Perry.

"The resemblance is uncanny," Elizabeth huffed, unable to take her eyes from the portrait. Finally, she looked at Molly, mystified.

"But I don't have a sister ... nor do I have any relatives who look anything like me."

Molly's confounded expression indicated that she too was having her doubts. "If this is just a coincidence – wow, what an incredible coincidence, huh?"

Still not absolutely convinced, Molly flipped through the pages of the book to others she had marked. This one showed two young women on a cheerleading squad their arms and legs spread in the air forming perfect X's with their bodies. "There we are together."

Elizabeth recalled the days as her university's head cheerleader.

The woman flipped though several more pages. "Here's another one of her in drama class, and another in chorus."

Elizabeth shook her head, amazed. "I studied drama in my junior year, and I've always belonged to a chorus. We performed the musical *Dating Copernicus*."

Elizabeth turned to the gentleman and asked, "Would you excuse us for a moment, Mr. Fox?"

Fox bowed respectfully. "Of course." He returned to his chair at the empty table; however, he positioned himself to hear every word of their conversation.

"This is very interesting, Molly," Elizabeth said to the woman.

"I don't know what to say ... I thought for sure the two of you were related." Embarrassed, Molly pulled the book from Elizabeth's hands. "I'm so sorry to have bothered you with this."

"Don't be silly," Elizabeth laughed good-naturedly. Before Molly could reclaim her book, Elizabeth yanked it back and opened the front cover. "This yearbook is a gem. I never knew I had a double out there somewhere. I'm surprised she's never contacted me." She borrowed Molly's pen. "In any event, since Suzanne never signed it for you, allow me."

Molly, best wishes, Elizabeth Kendall (Suzanne's twin!)

Both women had a hardy laugh as Elizabeth returned the yearbook. They walked back to Elizabeth's table, arm-in-arm, like old school friends. Elizabeth introduced Molly around her table of staffers, showing off the amazing pictures.

In the back of the room, creases of concern marred Fox's distinguished features. He shook his head. Surely no one would take the photos as anything more than an interesting curiosity. Nevertheless, further delay would be dangerous. He would have to act soon, he decided.

Very soon.

Chapter Five

Gilbert Yates

Virtual Boardroom
ONX Corporation
October 6, 8:04 a.m.

The corporate secretary announced to his colleagues seated around the conference table with all the dramatic fanfare of a concert master: “To the esteemed members of ONX’s newly constituted Board of Directors, it is my privilege to introduce our Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of this newly merged venture—” his hand shot toward the man seated at the head of the table “—*Mr. Gilbert Yates!*”

The well-dressed men and women around the executive conference table stood and filled the room with robust applause, their expressions a blend of genuine pride and enthusiastic support.

Gilbert Yates bowed his head respectfully, humbly, as though giving thanks to the Almighty for the honor of sainthood. However, his new position had nothing to do with an act of God. He knew very well that his appointment was the result of hard work, persistence, skillful politics and hereditary genius. His parents had encouraged their inventive son to develop his great mechanical ability and sense of scientific curiosity. Forty years later, he had introduced a dozen new technologies into the marketplace, each of which was having a profound effect on society in this century. However, none would be as lucrative as "PELICAN," an innocuous code-name for a quantum energy technology that promised to generate and store vast amounts of inexpensive power. Yates owned the invention of the century. His technological breakthrough was widely touted as the catalyst that would usher in a new global economic order and would change the world as dramatically as nanotechnology had changed medicine two decades earlier. But that was only the beginning. Quantum communication, quantum computers and quantum teleportation were already on his mind's drawing board.

Also a savvy businessman, Yates alone had worked out the impossible details behind the merger between his technology start-up and the world's largest energy company. The deal had created one of the most powerful economic entities in the world with a stunning

future. It had also made the senior managers of both companies unimaginably wealthy. And Yates was at the helm. His personal net worth now stood at more than 57 billion, and was rising spectacularly every day.

Yates had little in common with the typical corporate chairman. His thick, wavy brown hair fell unbecomingly across his boyish face, half concealing a set of engaging green eyes that could read intentions with uncanny accuracy. Even at 47, he took pleasure in insubordination which, as a young man, his superiors had tolerated as long as he delivered results. And he never failed to do so – spectacularly. He exuded genius, not only in business and technology, but also when dealing with people. Energetic and excessive, Yates engendered loyalty from every one of his employees.

Despite the meeting's apparent intimacy, Yates was actually sitting a thousand miles away from ONX's executive boardroom in Chicago. Loath to travel, he was, in fact, seated in the office of his Annapolis bayside retreat linked via a teleconference connection to the company's virtual boardroom, a splendid chamber that did not exist anywhere in the physical world. With a simple network connection, the computer-generated meeting room gave senior managers the ability to interact face-to-face with their colleagues where ever they might be.

Yates stood up from his desk, while the computer shadowed his every movement. He stared at the text suspended in front of his eyes, a few sound bites he had scribed earlier for the press, which was granted a special feed to the opening of the new company's first board meeting. Yates, wearing a sloppy sweatshirt and denim slacks, had instructed the unit to dress him – also for the press – in a becoming two-button charcoal suit, white shirt and a red bow tie. Computer enhancement had also given his thick locks a stylish haircut.

“Thank you my friends and members of the press,” Yates began in his trademark boyish voice. “It’s indeed an honor to lead a great company at such an exciting time. We are in the middle of a revolution – a world turned upside down. This is a revolution on several different fronts with change occurring beyond all prediction. With this merger—”

Yates stopped mid-sentence as another man entered the room. This was no online latecomer; someone had physically entered his home office in Annapolis. Such an interruption was unconscionable, and he wondered how this could possibly be happening. As the man approached, he could only stand frozen and stare dumbfounded at –

– *himself!*

The strange intruder walked through the center of the virtual conference table, while the attendees, miles away, sat unaware, their

eyes fixed on their new leader, anticipating his next remark. To Yates, this was far more disturbing than seeing a ghost. His mind searched through all plausible explanations – a system hiccup, a phantom image, a corrupted file. But he knew those possibilities were ludicrous. The intruder stepped within a breath of Yates' nose and scrutinized his twin's features with mirrored keen, curious, piercing green eyes.

Yates began questioning his own sanity. If he continued with his remarks, he most certainly would appear like a babbling fool in front of the others. His cordial expression hardened. "Please excuse me. An urgent matter requires a moment of my attention."

His finger touched the "Mute" button on his desk panel. In the virtual boardroom, Yates's three-dimensional image froze and faded to 50 percent transparency as he momentarily took himself offline. His associates looked at each other, puzzled – but wasn't Yates always full of surprises?

Once offline, Yates babbled, "*What ... what—?*"

"Thank you – by muting that call first, you acted just as I would have." The intruder screwed his neck around and said over his shoulder, "That's a hundred each of you owes me."

Yates glanced beyond him and saw two other men standing inside his office doorway, real thugs with real handguns hanging

loosely at their sides. Framed in the doorway, standing sentinel over the abduction like a godfather, was an distinguished looking older gentleman with pure-white hair. Fear unlike Yates had ever known it seized him. He had been called many things during his career, but action hero wasn't one of them. He had no formal training in self-defense, no natural instincts to ward off an assault of any kind.

Yates face went white. "What is this? My God, w-who the hell *are you?*"

"I am *you!*" the man said with the identical cordial smile that had won Yates countless friends. "Better you start the meeting than me. I never could stomach fanfare and introductions. But neither could you."

"This is madness" Yates's fingers reached for the phone panel. Before they could make contact, the imposter stopped him with a simple wave of his hand, which held an Assisted Cerebral Function disc. The signal from the palm-size device immediately disoriented Yates, while the electromagnetic emissions mapped to his alpha brain waves slipped him instantly and quietly into unconsciousness. His legs buckled from under him, and the intruder eased him into his office chair.

Richard Fox stepped into the room and beckoned the other two men. "Get him out of here *now!*" He directed his intense stare at the imposter. "Get back in that meeting."

The two men holstered their sidearms and moved to assist, while the imposter slipped the band off Yates' head and secured it around his own. He gave the headgear several seconds to calibrate, while watching the conference table with its board members come into focus and solidified before his eyes. Although he had never met any of the company's directors personally, he knew each one of them from their files. He glanced up at the notes Yates had scribbled for himself, put a finger on the keypad and promptly erased them. His audience saw none of this, nor could they see him wave a data card over the unit's reader, which immediately displayed another set of notes for him to read.

The imposter stood facing the virtual conference table, cleared his throat and touched the "Mute" button to reengage his transmission. To the audience who had been patiently awaiting his return, the three-dimensional computer visualization of Yates, reacquiring the source, finally snapped back to life.

"Please accept my deepest apology for this interruption," he said, spreading his hands palms up in a gesture of humility. "My wife called from her holiday in New York City with a personal emergency."

There were nods and chuckles of sympathy around the table.

“Now I very much want to share with you my vision, my hopes, my promise for one of the greatest enterprises of this century.”

Chapter Six

Special Delivery

*ONX Group Headquarters
200 E. Randolph
Chicago, Illinois
October 6, 9:30 a.m.*

"Who says the world isn't an interesting place?" were the first words of greeting from Danielle Houston, senior staff assistant in ONX's legal department. "Nick, you're not going to believe what just arrived."

Her boss, Nick Kaufman, the corporation's general counsel, rolled his abundant torso back into an equally abundant leather chair, stretched his arms until they crackled, then locked his fingers into a hammock for his head. Time for a break. Besides, Danielle's eager manner in his doorway, waving a thick envelope, would stir anyone's curiosity. He enjoyed debating offbeat subjects with his young, eager

protégé to break up monotonous days of approving corporate legal briefs. And he liked the way she looked, especially when she wore the tailored low-cut sweater that showed off her cleavage. Danielle was bright, capable and extremely thorough – the best researcher he had ever mentored. What had she unearthed for him this time?

“What am I not going to believe?” his question disappeared in a canyon-class yawn. He waved her into his office.

Danielle stepped up to his marble desk and set the bulky envelope on top of a scattered stack of reports in front of her boss. She stepped back, grinning.

Kaufman’s dull, sunken eyes tried to ascertain what inside the bulging envelope could be so interesting. He could discern nothing from the envelope’s exterior, only that it appeared to be old, its manila shade fading.

“Okay, you’ve got my attention,” Kaufman said. “Use it wisely.”

“Clinton Herring’s law office just sent this over by special courier,” Danielle said.

Kaufman shook his head. He had never heard of a lawyer named Clinton Herring. A private-practice attorney, he assumed, one of 10,000 in the city. So what?

“So?”

“So take a look inside,” Danielle urged.

Without a trace of enthusiasm, Kaufman picked up the envelope and weighed it in his palm as though his hand were a scale. It was lighter than he expected, as if weight somehow equated importance. The nondescript envelope had no postage, postmark, or any other information typed or written upon it. There was no way to guess its contents. Someone had opened it neatly with a razor – Herring, he assumed. He stuck his thick fingers inside and withdrew an archaic videotape cartridge. As a collector of vintage media, he found this extremely interesting, and Danielle knew it. A folded sheet of faded yellow paper was wrapped awkwardly around it. Someone had unfolded and read it; he assumed Herring again. The note smelled old.

Danielle settled her tall, slender frame into a leather chair in front of her boss' desk. "That belongs to the estate of a woman named Teresa Wolf. Herring is the executor of her will. He found that envelope in one of her safe deposit boxes after she passed away last month."

Kaufman sank back into his chair, twisted his bear-like body around its cushions as though trying to rub out an itch, while turning the videotape over in his hands, considering it. In his youth he had rummaged through boxes of similar tapes in his parent's basement, though he'd never seen any of them actually play. All their family

videos had been transferred years before to optical storage, then eventually to data cards. This tape appeared larger than the ones he'd grown up with. An unfamiliar logo – "Memorex" – was stamped onto its black casing.

"So what's on this?" he asked, his eyes narrowing.

"Take a look at that letter," Danielle instructed, once again on her feet and leaning across the desk to help him unfurl the note.

Kaufman shooed her away, unwrapped the legal-size sheet of yellow paper from around the cartridge and opened it, careful not to rip it along its worn creases. He put on a pair of half-reading glasses. He was old-fashioned and too lazy to have his eyes fixed. The typed letter was dated five years before he was born.

"Teresa," he read aloud in his raspy voice. "In the event of my death, please give this tape to my colleague Walter Blake, co-founder of Biogentic Inc., in Cambridge, Massachusetts. This is a matter of grave importance, and I want to make sure the authorities see this. I will leave it to Walter's discretion as to the best way to approach the authorities. I'd rather you not view this – I want to spare you the details." Kaufman squinted through his reading glasses, his nose in the air. "There's a scrawled signature that looks like *Benjamin*."

Kaufman turned over the page in search of more information. There wasn't any. He looked questioningly over his glasses at his

staffer. "I never heard of Biogentic. And who the hell is this *Benjamin?*"

"There is no Biogentic Inc.," Danielle said, "—not anymore, at least. Herring did some digging. Biogentic was acquired by Carrington Laboratories, Inc. ONX purchased Carrington in 18 years later for its biochip patents."

"You're losing me," Kaufman warned, waving his hand. "So we absorbed what a half century ago was once Biogentic. That doesn't explain why this tape is in my hands right now rather than with this Blake fellow."

"Biogentic's Walter Blake died some 30 years ago," Danielle said. "So, by default, the next in line to get that package is our very own CEO Gilbert Yates."

"Whoa." Kaufman couldn't shake his head fast enough. "I'm not bothering Gil with *this*. Especially with everything on his plate right now with the merger. It couldn't possibly mean a thing to him now, or anyone else, for that matter. That damned Herring is really stretching his administrative powers – shit, he just wants this piece of crap off his desk so he can close the estate and collect his fee." He began waving the note like a court summons. "And who the hell is this *Benjamin?*"

"Dr. Benjamin Roth was Mrs. Wolf's first husband. She had gone through four by the time she died last month after falling headlong down a dozen cement porch steps."

Kaufman winced. "So can I assume the good doctor is dead too?"

"He was killed three weeks after the date on that letter," Danielle said, pointing. "Herring didn't know any details."

"*Shit.*" Kaufman felt suddenly dizzy as all the pieces started falling into place. He took off his glasses and rubbed his eye sockets as though trying to bore his way to the source of a migraine. "So why the hell wasn't this delivered 40-odd years ago?"

Danielle shrugged. "Herring suspects Mrs. Wolf never knew about this envelope."

That drew a curious glance from Kaufman. "She never looked into her late husband's safe deposit box?"

"She had seventeen boxes in four banks. Herring found that tape with Roth's personal papers – nothing of any tangible value. Herring thinks she might have forgotten about this particular box. Apparently, she wasn't well organized. Or maybe she just left his stuff alone to secure his memory. The only thing Herring knows for sure is that she never bothered to open that envelope. Benjamin Roth's

instructions were never followed. It's been sitting in a bank vault, unopened, for nearly a half century."

Kaufman considered the videotape cartridge in his hand as though it had suddenly become a priceless Ming vase. Is this some sort of murder evidence? "I want to see this."

Danielle shook her head with its close-cropped blond hair. "That's where we run into a dead end. They haven't made a machine that can play that format in 40 years."

There was a long pause as Kaufman contemplated the tape. He checked the time readout on his wrist databand. Finally, his chubby cheeks settled into a mischievous grin and he waved his hand as if to say that that nagging detail was no obstacle. "Leave it to me. Meanwhile, let's have some fun. I want you to find out everything you can about Dr. Benjamin Roth – especially how he died."

Chapter Seven

Transport

*Over Idaho, altitude 80,000 feet
October 6, 11:07 a.m.*

Gilbert Yates' eyes opened with a start. The air was oppressively warm, and he had been sweating enough to soak his shirt as thoroughly as if he'd just run a summer marathon in Houston. For the moment he remained still on his back on what felt like a metal shelf while he let the disorientation of a bad dream abate like a hangover. What time was it? There wasn't enough light in the large, cavernous space above him to make out specifics beyond broad geometric shapes and shadows. The metal against his back was vibrating, and he could hear the constant rumble of what he assumed were aircraft engines.

Shifting his position slightly, he discovered that his hands and feet were bound with tight rubber straps.

Yates twisted his head to the side and saw two men sitting across from him, their eyes closed. One was notably larger and bulkier than the other, with the face of a bulldog. These were the same thugs who had broken into his Annapolis home to abduct him. Where was the third man – their ringleader? The surreal experience of staring into his own face came flooding back to him. He couldn't be sure if the recollection was real or, more probable, the aftermath of some sedative with an hallucinogenic side effect.

Yates' eyes moved to the floor. He spotted a palm-size flat, circular object on the grating beneath him, which apparently had fallen from his seat. He recognized it as an Assisted Cerebral Function unit, a disc that controlled electromagnetic brain waves associated with sleep cycles. Physicians routinely programmed the units to put their patients into a relaxed, meditative state or, if desired, drop them directly into a deep non-REM sleep. However, only licensed health workers were allowed to use these devices; in fact, no one outside the profession could legally possess one because of the risks of triggering convulsions.

As Yates emerged from his stupor, the pieces of what had happened to him began falling together. His abductors had rendered

him unconscious by simply placing the unit near his brain stem. Out cold. Instantly. But to keep him out, the disk needed to remain at the base of his skull. He was awake now thanks to the compartment's ceaseless vibration, which had shaken the disk loose from the back of his collar. One thing puzzled him, though: in order to work effectively, a technician had to first map the unit to the patient's unique brain frequencies, which required careful calibration and testing.

Incompetent mapping could induce a seizure. He wondered how the perpetrators had managed to map his brain without his knowledge or his cooperation.

Yates' eyes scanned the rest of the barren metal fuselage, taking in as much of his surroundings as possible. All the light seemed to come from a small, round portal just above and to the right of where he was laying. Staring at it made his eyes ache. If he could sit upright and get a glimpse out that window, perhaps he could determine his location and, more important, where these men were taking him.

One aspect of this abduction offered him some hope: if these men wanted him dead, they could have killed him by now. So he would unlikely die for simply sitting up.

Get your ass moving!

Yates swung his legs off the bench and, in a single stiff

movement, raised his body into a sitting position with his feet on the floor. His head swooned with the shifting blood flow. The two men seated across from him opened their eyes in unison. Yates offered them his most disarming nod of greeting as though it were perfectly normal to be sitting up awake in their company. As the men lurched forward, Yates twisted his upper torso around as much as his restraints would allow and pushed his face against the aircraft's portal like a child in front of a candy store window. He was high above the clouds looking down at what appeared to be the Rocky Mountains at an altitude of about 15 miles, heading unknown. It promised to be a long trip back home. The wing decal said "ONX." The kidnappers were using one of his own cargo jet transports to abduct him!

Yates heard the mechanized *click* of a handgun as a steel muzzle pressed against his temple.

"Turn around!" the man with the gun ordered.

Yates, swallowing hard, twisted about until he was once again facing forward, his eyes level with the weapon's muzzle. He felt a unique burst of anxiety from having a loaded gun pointed at him by a lowlife perhaps crazy enough to use it. He glanced up into the gun-toter's face, which looked like it had never cracked a smile in his lifetime, and saw no chance of negotiation. Just animal reaction.

"The damn thing fell off him!" said the second man, younger, perhaps of Hispanic descent. He tossed aside the cerebral disk in favor of an archaic syringe kit. "Should've used this shit in the first place."

Yates raised his bound hands. "May I ask you gentlemen just one question please?"

"No!" barked the gun-wielding man.

With little preparation or warning, the younger man plunged the syringe needle into Yates' neck. He squirmed to protest the sudden, sharp pain. The sedation's effect was instant.

Yates felt himself sliding back into a horizontal position as the compartment grew black as though a quilt were pulled over him.

Chapter Eight

Confession

*Museum of Broadcast Communications
Chicago, Illinois
October 6, 12:14 p.m.*

"I need your help again, Stan," Kaufman said, pushing his way into the museum curator's office that doubled as his workshop.

A startled Stanley Henderson, arguably the best historical audiovisual engineer in the country, spun away from his cramped workbench. He rarely hosted visitors. "You scared the lemons out of me, Nick!" He waved a micro-laser welding stick as though it were a weapon and snarled in his native Welsh accent: "Ya gotta give me some warning before banging in here!"

Kaufman eased the door shut behind him, apology not on his agenda today. "I need you to do something for me."

Stanley's frown lines evaporated when he spotted the faded manila folder under his guest's arm. "What goodies have you brought me this time, oh fellow collector of the exotic and the beautiful?"

Kaufman made himself at home by draping his raincoat over the room's only other chair. He threw a glance of disdain at the engineer's desk – a field of ancient technical articles that probably would never get read scattered among the ruins of equally old circuits, tools and a half-dozen mostly empty and crusty chocolate mugs. The room itself was small and confining, a tight haven for slobs. He hated coming here. But Kaufman didn't utter a word to Stanley about his housekeeping. The broadcast museum represented his only option. And Stanley – the quintessential geek, a 60-year-old "boy" deeply passionate about his toys – was the only person who was intimately familiar with every piece of the museum's century-old broadcasting gear.

"I need to view this," Kaufman said, setting the envelope carefully on top of a large spool of cable.

Stanley let out a short, piercing whistle as he removed the cartridge. "So, Nick Kaufman, you do indeed come bearing exotic gifts." He deftly opened the cartridge's hinged door, pulled out several inches of tape with a special pair of tweezers and held it up to his

workbench's spotlight. "Definitely warm and *sneltzy!* Where'd you get this?"

"Never mind where I got it," Kaufman said. "Can I see what's on it?"

Stanley expelled a breath of rebuff. "You don't expect me to read the original signal off this, do you?"

"I thought that's what you did for a living," Kaufman said, "unless you've been bullshitting your bosses all these years."

"I might have been able to give you something if this tape had been stored in a clean room, no higher than 73 Fahrenheit. But it's been badly abused. You should see what the humidity's done to the oxide. The image'll blow a big wet one – I'll be lucky to snatch 20 percent of the original signal." Stanley shrugged fatalistically. "But I should think I can give you some reasonably intelligible audio."

Kaufman nodded. "If I can at least hear it, I'll owe you."

The technician, smelling opportunity, was on his feet in an instant, waving the cartridge. "These are impossible to come by. You can repay me handsomely by letting me keep this. I can restore the oxide, record new signal and add it to my archives."

"If I can at least hear what's on that tape, I might consider donating it to your cause," Kaufman allowed.

Stanley, beaming, stormed into the hallway and led the attorney to a nearby door labeled "Antiquities." He unlocked the metal door and beckoned Kaufman into a larger windowless room filled with computers, diagnostic displays and equipment he didn't recognize. The overhead lights blinked on automatically.

"Consider yourself extremely fortunate, Nick Kaufman," Stanley said. "I don't allow many people access to this room, and usually only fellow engineers."

Who outside the field would want to come in here, Kaufman thought? The antiquities room – a poorly lit workshop, crowded with racks of mystifying audiovisual equipment, some new, most vintage – was as chaotically organized as Stanley's office.

"Too bad the cheap bastard who recorded this didn't encode in digital," Stanley said. His narrow eyes scanned rows of rack-mounted equipment, searching for a particular model. "I have a dozen algorithms that could have reconstructed the image ... ahhhh, here she is."

Stanley powered up an ancient JVC videocassette deck, set the cartridge inside the drawer, then pressed "Close." They both watched, fascinated, as the cartridge disappeared inside. Thanks to Stanley, every machine on the premises, regardless of its age, performed even better than designed.

He keyed in several entries on a rack-mounted patch bay. "I'm routing the deck's output through a signal amplifier then into my CPU, where the image'll be reconstructed in real time. You know, I really should be charging you for this."

"Do you want my money," Kaufman asked, "or my tape?"

Without a moment's hesitation, Stanley blurted, "Your tape. *Definitely* your tape."

Ready, Stanley pressed the "Play" button on the deck's front panel. Kaufman stood rooted and quiet while a river of visual static poured across the archaic paper-thin argon display. Stanley was right. Time had not been kind to the recording, and any hope of seeing something of value faded with each passing moment of visual noise. Kaufman grimaced in dismay. They might as well have been watching the remains of a transmission that had been bounced back from Mars.

Suddenly, a picture began to form. Kaufman, his adrenaline gushing, slipped on his reading glasses and leaned toward the screen. He could make out a relatively young man, perhaps in his early '30's, with light wavy hair and wearing a suit, sitting at an office desk. All the color information was gone, as were most of the man's features. He appeared to be looking directly into the camera, though Kaufman couldn't be sure.

"My name is Dr. Benjamin Roth," came a muffled voice from the tape.

Stanley's eyes were beaming. "Outstanding!" He adjusted a software setting until the face became sharper and better defined, though far from perfect. The sound, however, became louder, crisper and perfectly intelligible.

Kaufman nodded his appreciation.

"If you're watching this, I'm most likely dead," said the man on the tape. "Whether my death appears to be an accident or not, have my body autopsied. Exhume my remains, if you must. But please don't make any assumptions.

"I am currently in the employ of Dr. Jonathan Sabbath's Fertility Clinic in Oak Brook, Illinois. I want to relay the true nature of our work there which, if were made public, would certainly bring criminal charges against the clinic's founder and its staff – including me. Because of the illegal nature of our work, the secrecy, the risks, and now the mistrust, I feel that it is necessary to make this recording in the event circumstances should find me dead. This is my insurance policy."

Kaufman scrutinized the front panel of the playback unit, found what he was looking for, and then jammed his finger on a button labeled "Pause." The image froze.

Kaufman said to the face leaning over his shoulder, "Don't you have something to fix?"

"Are you kidding?" Stanley beamed. "This is *snarky!*"

"I'm telling you to get lost," Kaufman snapped. "And fast!"

Stanley shook his closely cropped head. "There's no way you're gonna stay in this room *alone.*"

"Then give me a *friggen* private listening piece."

Stanley's expression mirrored his anger. "You're not going to give me that tape, are you!?" He thrust his index finger at Kaufman's nose. "You owe me, *goddamit!*"

Kaufman said nothing. He waited until Stanley had closed the door securely behind him before resuming the recording. For the next 18 minutes, Kaufman listened, spellbound, while Dr. Benjamin Roth, with a deliberate and clinical tone, summarized the substance of his work at Dr. Sabbath's facility. As he spoke, Nick Kaufman's jaw disappeared into this chest.

Kaufman hadn't expected this, hadn't expected anything of this scale. He actually had to remind himself to breathe while he listened. Roth's confession from beyond the grave and over the chasm of decades was so outrageous that, if even 10 percent of what he said was true, this tape represented the story of the century. The confession also brought into question the stability of the economic

society in which he had grown and prospered, a tear in the very fabric of modern civilization. Could what he said possibly be true? Roth used the final minutes of his carefully laid out disclosure to justify his intentions, some banter about science and the benefits to mankind. The good doctor wasn't about to leave his legacy to the misinterpretation of the authorities.

When the tape was over, Kaufman could only sit in a numbed stupor while Roth's revelations lingered in his brain like the aftermath of a physical blow. He couldn't swallow. *But is it true?* For all he knew Roth was a practical joker and this was some sort of game. He thought about it – why wouldn't it be true? After all, Roth had died shortly after making this tape, just as he had feared.

His mouth, wooden and dry, fell open and out came a huff. "Oh my God ..."

It took Kaufman a full minute to shake the shock-induced fog from his mind and start thinking again like an attorney. He began to feel the weight of responsibility that fate had suddenly placed on his shoulders. After what he had just heard, he could no longer believe in anything. More important, he could trust no one. He briefly considered destroying the evidence and forgetting what he had just learned. Then his eyebrows rose over a lit expression. Wait a minute

... there was money to be made here. An astonishing amount of money! And he alone held the key to the bank.

"What have you done, Dr. Roth?"

Kaufman glanced at the door, suddenly paranoid. He couldn't leave this tape with Stanley, nor could he ask him to dupe its contents onto a data card. *No one must see this!* Now that he knew Roth's secret, he had a responsibility! But to do what!?

The door suddenly opened and Stanley blurted, "I need my room back—"

"GET OUT OF HERE!" Kaufman roared.

Stanley vanished in a scurry of retreating footsteps.

Kaufman retrieved an electronic notepad from his overcoat's pocket. With a shaking finger, he pressed "Rewind" on the ancient video player and cued up the tape for another viewing. When the tape was ready, he pressed "Play."

While Dr. Benjamin Roth once again recounted his fantastic confession, Kaufman's notepad transcribed every word.

Chapter Nine

Father

Frankfort, Kentucky
October 6, 2:32 p.m.

"So tell me your decision, Liz," Joseph Kendall urged, before his daughter even had a chance to greet him with a kiss.

Elizabeth, pausing in the doorway of her father's grand study, glared at him in mock surprise. She knew very well that her father, the four-term ex-governor of Kentucky, was anxious to know if she was still a willing candidate for the office he had tried and failed to win twice in his career. Or had she already conceded her defeat and would merely go through the motions until the election? She kept him in suspense a little while longer by taking a detour through his world-class oak bar, helping herself to a bottle of Curtis Cola from the refrigerator, though not bothering with a glass or ice.

"I'm staying in," she announced, raising her cola as though toasting the decision. "I made it this far with the party's limited resources. So I've decided to give this campaign my best shot."

Kendall's 76-year-old face, marvelously preserved and reconstructed to maintain his gentle but dignified lines, beamed with genuine pleasure. He was exceptionally proud of his daughter, and he knew she could win this; in fact, he knew she could achieve anything she set her mind to. There was also relief in his expression. He would readily admit his longing to see the inside of the White House from a vantage other than a visiting politician or tourist. After two defeats, he now aspired to live the office vicariously through his daughter.

"That makes me very happy, dear," he said, kissing her cheek as she strolled passed him. "You know I support your decision wholeheartedly."

"It wasn't entirely my decision," she admitted, taking a seat on the sofa across from his huge chair. "My fundraising received an unexpected boost yesterday."

"Oh?"

"A group of companies and private individuals, mostly businessmen who want me to stay in the race, gave my campaign coffer a generous infusion."

"Who are these men?" he asked, sinking into his chair. "What's their agenda?"

"They don't have an agenda," she said, "or at least nothing they cared to share with me. There are no strings attached to their support. I received enough money to begin mounting a solid marketing campaign against my illustrious rival, Mr. Burke Knight."

Joseph Kendall couldn't have appeared more pleased. "This is great news, Liz. I'm thrilled for you!" Then he broached the sensitive subject: "If you need money, please know that I'm prepared to put up my personal assets to see you achieve this wonderful goal."

She shook her head emphatically. "I won't allow you to do that, dad."

"Is it the specter of failure?" he asked.

"Failure is a distinct possibility," she said. "It would take tens of millions to even challenge what Knight's raised. I could never live with myself if you were wiped out only to see me defeated."

Kendall sighed. "We agree on most things politically, academically and socially. But there's one area we differ—"

She watched her father with inquiring eyes, awaiting his answer.

"—the vision of you as President of the United States," he said.

"I can see it so very clearly. In fact, I've never felt so certain about anything in my life. But for you that vision is murky – you can't see

yourself achieving this goal. That is your Achilles' heel, a handicap that will temper your attitude. Even a small lapse in confidence now will make all the difference between winning and losing."

Elizabeth set down her cola on the low table before her, her eyes narrow and hard. "Oh, I can see myself achieving that dream, dad. But I can also see the resources behind Knight's plan to defeat me. He won't let me have this. Knight is ruthless and will do everything in his power to block me. He intends to ruin me. He would love for you to spend your fortune so he could watch us both lose everything in the end. There's no way I will take you down with me."

Joseph Kendall's voice turned angry. "Knight is a common gangster. He lacks your honesty, your integrity, your wisdom. The voters will see this. Besides, only you will push through Federal funding for life extension research."

She smiled. "Aha, I see you have your own agenda."

He thrust his index finger at her. "Damn right I do. *Selfishly so!* I have a keen interest in staying alive long enough to watch you make history. Knight will kill the Federal funding bill. He won't allow it to pass and take billions in patent licenses from his corporate backers. Life extension therapy in the hands of the people? There's no way Big Business will let that happen. Only you will get Federal backing with no corporate strings attached."

Elizabeth raised a hand to stop his preaching. "I fully understand the issue, Dad."

His voice softened, and he spoke slowly, his tone full of concern. "You're singularly unique, Elizabeth. Remember that. There's no one else remotely like you in the world."

Elizabeth let out a laugh to change gears. "Well, that's not true. There is someone out there who looks just like me, a woman my age from Iowa. A classmate of hers showed me a picture in a college yearbook. We were identical! I don't have a twin sister out there you haven't told me about, do I?"

Joseph Kendall shared her amusement and scoffed away the idea. "Of course not. Your mother and I worked very hard to conceive you. And believe me, it wasn't easy – but, oh, how it was worth it!"

"Are you sad I never gave you grandchildren?" she asked, her glistening eyes serious.

Kendall shrugged and shook his head. "I don't question the wisdom of the Lord, not for one second. If your Russell hadn't been taken from us so soon, who knows? You might have had a family and I would have grandchildren." His face lit up and he threw out his arms in a gesture that said anything's possible. "When you're settled in the White House, the most eligible men in the world will come courting. You'll have your pick of the very best. It's not too late, Liz. I may yet

live a very long time and see my own grandchildren have grandchildren!"

She laughed; Elizabeth could always count on his optimism. "Well then, I better get back to work. I don't want to keep all those eager men waiting! My next stop is Portland. I'd like to spend a day recharging at the house in Winter Mountain on my way."

Joseph Kendall grabbed his scotch and raised it to Elizabeth. "Here's to your successful bid for the White House. Come January, let the suitors line up outside your door on Pennsylvania Avenue.

Chapter Ten

Ghost

*ONX Group Headquarters
Chicago
October 6, 3:38 p.m.*

"Jesus, Nick," Danielle Houston gasped from his doorway. "You look like you've seen a *ghost*."

Kaufman sat slumped in his deep office chair, his eyes downcast and glued to nothing at all. He hadn't even bothered to remove his raincoat.

Danielle moved tentatively toward his desk, her eyes full of concern.

"I *have* seen a ghost," Kaufman groaned, his eyes vacant like a mortally wounded soldier on a battlefield. "I haven't decided if this ghost will now haunt me or ..." He paused as though debating the

level of candor he should share with his assistant. He looked suddenly at her. "... or make us very rich."

"Nick, tell me what's happened." Danielle watched him, anxious, her lips pressed together firmly. "This is about the tape?"

Kaufman nodded. "Roth was murdered."

"I know." She approached his desk. "And so were his colleagues. Their murders were never solved." She held up the data card. "I've assembled a report."

Kaufman extended his hand palm up to accept the card – his hand was shaking slightly. "So let me see."

Danielle placed the data card in his palm. "I want to view that tape—"

He cut her off with an abrupt, "I haven't decided what to do with it."

Danielle's long expression registered her disappointment at his low level of trust in her.

Kaufman rocked forward in his chair and waved the card over the desk's reader, which activated the wall display's presentation screen. A six-foot horizontal section of his wall lit up and showed the card's menu. Danielle ran a hand over her closely clipped head of blond hair. *Time for work.* She stood rigidly straight, assumed her

best professional manner and touched the menu's first icon. A high-resolution color photo of a single-story office building filled the screen.

"You're looking at the fertility clinic in Oak Brook, Illinois, where Sabbath employed Benjamin Roth and three medical doctors," she said in a smooth, sober tone that had impressed many courts of law. She waved a finger over the bottom of the screen to bring up another image – this one a portrait of a professional-looking man in his middle '30s, with light wavy hair, fashionably styled, and wire-frame glasses.

"Meet Benjamin Roth," Danielle said, extending her hand toward the screen as a gesture of introduction, "the only non-M.D. on Sabbath's staff."

The photo revealed much more detail than did the ancient videotape in Stanley's lab – a young man, bright and confident, perhaps with a lucrative future. Kaufman focused on the face, absorbing it.

"Roth was born in Evanston, Illinois, in 1968," Danielle recited. "His father, James, was a successful physician with a private practice in Chicago. Benjamin graduated from the University of Chicago in 1992 with a dual Ph.D in genetics and statistics. After two year post-doctorate at Brown, he became associate professor of Genetics and Developmental Biology at Northwestern. I'm still collating the substance of his research. He married his college sweetheart, Teresa

Petschel, on June 25, 1996. He had no children. He died on May 1, 47 years ago."

Danielle touched the bottom of the screen and another portrait appeared. This one showed a serious-looking man, perhaps 50, with a shaved head and thick glasses with black rims. The man in the photo wore a light blue shirt with suspenders, and he appeared to be addressing a group of people out of the camera's view.

"This is Dr. Jonathan Sabbath," she said, "founder of the Sabbath Fertility Clinic. His facility was an upscale, state-of-the-art infertility center that offered injectable therapy, reproductive surgeries, treatment for male factor infertility, intracytoplasmic sperm injection, in vitro fertilization, donor eggs, and more. With a grant from Biogenetic seven years earlier, Sabbath pioneered a revolutionary gene therapy treatment that resulted in an unprecedented pregnancy success rate at that time of more than 70 percent. He published more than 25 research papers on infertility and reproductive endocrinology, and lectured internationally on the subject."

While Danielle hammered him with facts, Kaufman leaned forward, scrutinizing every detail of the doctor's face. "How could he?" he blurted. "How could such a brilliant man betray so many people?"

Danielle stopped abruptly, confused by his remarks. "I beg your pardon?"

Her boss apologized for the interruption with a wave of his hand.
"Tell me more."

She returned to the screen. "Sabbath employed three board-certified specialists in reproductive endocrinology and infertility: Dr. David Sheppard, Dr. Jerome Galvin and Dr. Gregory Thornton."

She flashed the faces of the three doctors on the screen, one after another.

"They all look competent," Kaufman noted. "Too competent. No doubt you'll tell me that their credentials were impeccable and that they represented the best in their field, the best talent Sabbath could buy."

"Precisely," Danielle said. "Affluent couples paid a premium for their services. Thanks to Sabbath's genius and the top-notch skills of his associates, more than 1,500 women were successfully impregnated during the clinic's three years of operation."

Kaufman suddenly rose to his feet as though something had just occurred to him, something so obvious, yet he had overlooked it completely. Color rushed into his cheeks. "I want the names of his patients. *Every one of them!*"

"That's not possible," Danielle said. She touched the bottom of the screen to bring up an image of a building destroyed by fire. Smoke could still be seen rising from the blackened foundation. "All

patient records were destroyed in the May 1 fire. Police labeled it arson, the deaths murder."

Kaufman frowned. "Surely they kept duplicate files off site."

"Records like these are highly confidential and, at that time, stored mostly on paper," Danielle said. "If duplicates exist, they were extremely well hidden ... or I would have found them. No traces of these records ever surfaced. At least six people were murdered that night and no one was ever arrested for the crime."

"What about other employees?" Kaufman said. "Someone must have known the location of backup files."

"Investigators questioned three nurses, a receptionist, four contractors, several patients who came forward, and even two administrative temps," Danielle said. "Nothing they offered led anywhere. I have the transcripts."

"And none of the principals survived?"

Danielle shook her head. "All five of the clinic's staff were present the night of the fire. According to the police report, the exits were methodically locked. An explosion ignited several tanks of oxygen, enough to assure that the structure burned to the ground fast, taking with it everyone locked inside, along with all physical evidence – files, computer records, lab specimens, the works. Also killed that evening were a cleaning woman and the off-hours security

supervisor. Someone wanted to make sure all traces of the clinic were destroyed. But here's the puzzle – *why?* The police first suspected a radical pro-life group that had made a bomb threat earlier that year; but the investigation yielded no evidence of their complicity in this fire. The tape we received yesterday is the case's first solid lead in half a century. Technically the case is still open, the evidence still exists."

"What about Sabbath?" Kaufman asked. "Where's he now?"

"Presumed dead," she said, "although his body was never recovered from the ruins. A suitable DNA comparison wasn't available, so his remains were never positively identified."

Kaufman, grimacing, shook his head. "He survived." He dumped his portly frame back into his chair, color once again draining from his face. "He most likely fled the building after locking his associates inside, leaving them to burn to death. Poor bastards."

"Why would he do such a thing?" Danielle asked. "And why has he never surfaced in all these years?"

Kaufman shrugged. "To protect a secret. Roth was involved in something huge and highly illegal, and he feared for his life enough to make that tape. The poor sonofabitch even wanted his body exhumed for an autopsy to prove he was murdered."

"Then let's order an autopsy."

Kaufman shook his head in resignation. "I'm sure there's nothing useful left after all these years."

"I had to differ. Their bodies were never buried."

Kaufman sat granite-faced. "What are you talking about?"

"Their bodies were cryogenically frozen as evidence," she said. "Every one of them. They're in the same condition today as the night they died."

"What!?"

She reached for the screen and scrolled ahead in her presentation. Another picture showed several rows of human-size tanks in a room with walls made up of a labyrinth of pipes. "This facility was set up by the State of Illinois Special Forensic Unit to preserve the bodies of homicide victims under special circumstances – mostly unsolved or unexplained murders. Their corpses remained in this facility until 2035 at which time they were transferred to the campus of the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana – the leading cryogenic facility in the country."

Kaufman stood and gazed out his window at the street below as though searching for a way to exploit his ... responsibility. Finally, he said, "Any one of them would know."

Danielle shook her head. "What do you mean, Nick? Who would know what?"

Kaufman moved away from the window and settled into his chair once more. And there he sat, saying nothing, staring, his eyes for the first time gleaming with what could have passed for optimism ... or was it opportunity. She couldn't be sure.

"Nick, will you please tell me what this is all about?" she said, her tone annoyed. She didn't like when he hid things from her, crucial things. He had grown eerily cryptic since this morning, and his manner genuinely frightened her. "What could the contents of that tape possibly have to do with us today?"

"It has *everything* to do with us today!" he exploded.

Kaufman raised a hand of apology, his eyes closed as he allowed his emotion to calm. When he spoke, his voice was all business. "I want to see the remains of these men. Please arrange it ... tomorrow, if possible."

Chapter Eleven

Consummation

*Annapolis, Maryland
October 6, 9:35 p.m.*

"Gil, have you gone completely mad!?" Mrs. Melanie Yates exclaimed. "I've never seen our bedroom so ... well, so awesome!"

More than a dozen candles cast a warm, sensuous glow over their bayside retreat's plush, imperial bed. Her favorite Mozart *divertimento* flowed sweetly from the walls.

The man sitting comfortably in the middle of the bed about to seduce her wasn't her husband, but she had little reason to believe otherwise. His birth name was Keith Shaw. The man Melanie had married was nearly 3,000 miles away, while this imposter sat cross-legged on their bed, dressed only in a pair of inadequate red stretch briefs, which did not compliment his slim, soft physique.

Shaw, staring at her, could barely contain his lust. He had desired Yates's wife each of the long years he had trained for this deception. He found this woman enormously attractive, her features perfect, her long, naturally curly brunette hair sensuous, and her physique lusciously appealing. He couldn't have selected a better woman himself, he concluded – not in his lifetime. Twelve years younger than him, Melanie's sensuality had served as a powerful motivator for Shaw, whisking him through his intensive training with honors and ahead of schedule. Now he intended to reap the rewards of this masquerade in full. If this little test failed to dupe her – if she somehow saw through his deception – then she would be dealt with quickly. He prayed that wouldn't be necessary ... for his sake.

"Come to me, babe," he said, beckoning her with an outstretched arm. "I want you on this bed with me *now*."

"Gil," she laughed, "this merger is affecting your brain!"

Shaw knew she wasn't accustomed to seeing him so aggressive, so ... *sexy!* He wondered how long it had been since she and her husband had made love with any emphasis at all, let alone with passion. He had to be careful here tonight. Shaw leaned back onto his elbows and stretched out his legs before him, letting her see the hard outline that stretched his briefs like a circus tent.

"And other things too!" she added with a huff.

He loved her cheery smile, loved her cute giggle. *Damn*, he wanted her!

"Don't ask questions," he said. "Things are going incredibly well for me and I never felt so alive. I want to make up for a lot of long nights away from you." His tone softened. "I've hit pay dirt, sweetheart, and our lives will never be the same."

"Oh, Gil," Melanie said, sitting on the bed. "I don't mind your work, and I know you have tremendous responsibilities. I'm very proud of you. I always have been."

He could see the longing in her gaze as she climbed into bed with him.

"Ah, not so fast," he said, rocking forward to block her way. "You're not allowed in my bed with clothing."

Melanie retreated, broke into a seductive smile and began removing her silk blouse and slacks. Her white lace lingerie looked nice enough, he thought. Nevertheless, tomorrow he would buy her new ones, sexier and more revealing. He might even pick up a few toys to pleasure her. Would she approve?

She snapped off her bra and tossed it aside, then slid down her panties, kicked them off her feet and stood naked before him. The knot in his briefs became more pronounced as he took in every bit of

her beauty. Gilbert Yates was smooth, he thought. He had wooed and won the perfect woman.

Grinning, he gave her permission to come to him. She crawled onto the bed and lay down on top of him, pressing her firm body into his. Their tongues danced and played together for a long time, while his hands explored her body, his fingers feeling every curve and crevice. Finally, they broke their embrace with simultaneous sighs of fervent desire.

"Gil," she moaned.

Melanie slid down his body and removed his briefs. She drew in a sharp breath at what lay beneath. "I can see that you won't need a lot of foreplay tonight!"

"It's been too long," he scolded her.

Shaw could no longer contain his lust for this woman and swept her up into his arms. He gave her a hug, pressing her perfect breasts tightly against his chest, and then honored each of her nipples with a generous kiss. He set her gently on her back in the center of the bed and climbed on top of her, his member eagerly poking her entrance like a determined invader. He'd waited too long for this, and he would not be denied. With a quick push, he slid effortlessly inside her.

They let out simultaneous gasps of surprise and pleasure. Shaw began thrusting hard and evenly into Yates's wife. Melanie cried out

with delight, her moans singing to him. It didn't take him long to begin throbbing. With a final thrust, he released his passion deep inside her. She wrapped her legs tightly around his waist and let out a moan of gratitude as he filled her.

Don't you worry, Mr. Gilbert Yates, he thought. I'll see that your sweet Melanie is no grieving widow!

Chapter Twelve

Interrogation Table

Aleutian Islands, Alaska
October 7, 2:17 a.m.

Gilbert Yates' eyes fluttered open. His head throbbed and his stomach lurched, not unlike the morning after a monster drinking binge. He recalled waking aboard his company's transport – but nothing since then. The last thing he remembered was seeing an archaic syringe hurtle toward his neck. *Barbaric bastards!*

Gone were the metal fold-down seat and the rumble of engines. Instead, he was lying on his back, staring up at a vague, cement ceiling. A dim amber glow bathed the room. He tried unsuccessfully to move his arms and legs. Looking down he saw that his naked body was clamped within an array of metal bars that held him in a grip he knew couldn't be broken. Where was he and, more important, what was happening to him?

Suddenly, bright and glaring lights filled the sterile room, revealing all the cracks on the crumbling concrete ceiling above. He thought he would vomit while wincing and squinting against the harsh light.

“Good morning, Mr. Yates,” boomed a deep male voice with a slight European accent.

Yates rolled his head and struggled to focus his eyes while they skirted from corner to corner, searching for the man who had just spoken. He saw no one.

“I regret that I could not meet you personally upon your arrival,” the voice said.

Yates realized that there was no one in the room with him; the voice was part of a remote transmission, amplified and equalized so he wouldn't miss a word.

“Who are you?” Yates asked. “And where the *hell* am I?”

“My name is Richard Fox,” the voice said. “We will make proper introductions when I eventually arrive. As to *where* – you are now a resident of an abandoned federal super-maximum security penitentiary on one of Alaska's more remote Aleutian Islands. This 300-cell facility was built 40-odd years ago to isolate the very worst federal prisoners far from the mainland. Mostly it held terrorists involved in that nasty Japanese incident back in '09. Those who worked or were incarcerated

here called this rock 'Devil's Island II' in homage to the French penal colony from which there was no hope of escape.

"Sadly, this particular supermax prison was mothballed after less than 10 years of service. These islands are notorious for their treacherous coasts, fierce sudden storms and unrelenting seas; access was simply too difficult. There are also uncorrectable foundation problems, which will cause the facility to finally collapse within the decade. But that wasn't the real reason it was abandoned, Mr. Yates. A human-rights watchdog group fought viciously to end incarceration here. Psychiatrists who studied prisoners in solitary said they suffered symptoms ranging from memory loss to severe anxiety to hallucinations and delusions. Under the severest cases of sensory deprivation, they simply went mad. Former inmates simply called this hell. However, with a little housecleaning and retrofitting, this facility now serves my needs perfectly. Best of all, it is reasonably economical to operate. There is no need for a large security force – prisoners like you are not going anywhere. Consider this your new home, Mr. Yates. It will also be the last home you will ever know. It can be a long stay, or a short one. I haven't decided. And, of course, it also depends upon your cooperation."

"What do you want from me?" Yates asked.

“Yes, shall we get down to business? Let me tell you why you’ve awakened to find yourself strapped to a most unusual table. For our purposes today, let’s call the surface on which you are restrained the ‘interrogation table’.”

“If you want ransom money,” Yates said, “I can arrange to get you whatever you want.”

“Not money,” the disembodied voice informed him. “I now control your personal assets and those of your newly merged corporation. You’ve developed a brilliant piece of technology, Mr. Yates. I applaud you – the world should applaud you. However, it would be most unfortunate if your quantum energy invention ended up on the market at this time. It would drive traditional energy companies, in which I have a considerable investment, out of business. So, I’ve drafted a new agenda for ONX.”

“Now wait just a *damn* minute—!”

“As for your personal fortune,” Fox continued, “I must say I don’t agree with the direction of your investments – a portfolio in danger of losing considerable wealth if technology shares decline. You are a great inventor, Mr. Yates, but a terrible investor. I will correct that.”

“So what do you want?”

"Something much more valuable to me," the voice said: "I need *information*." The word rippled over Yates like an electric field. "I need to know two things: first, you have a safe with astonishing encryption in your home office in Annapolis in which you keep your personal papers, journal, passwords and the keys to your various bank boxes. I need access to that safe."

"*Screw you!*" Yates shouted. "There's no way you'll open that safe!"

"Let me explain how this interrogation will proceed. You will always have three options. Option one: whenever I ask you a question, you will answer it quickly and accurately. Very simple, and there is no lingering effects. Option two: you will answer my questions after experiencing great pain. Let me show you—"

The lights strained and dimmed. Suddenly, Yates was wracked with convulsive agony as a near-lethal flow of electricity surged through his nervous system. The excruciating pain continued for an interminable 30 seconds before the current ceased. Yates lay slumped against the table, heaving, blood spilling from his mouth where he had bitten through his tongue.

"Option number two," said the voice, "is usually sufficient to enlist the cooperation of most men who have laid on that table. Do you have anything to say to me before I show you option three?"

Yates, sweat draining from every pore, screwed his eyes shut and shook his head. *"Fuck you!"*

"I applaud your courage," said the disembodied voice, "but not your choice."

Yates, lying absolutely still, opened his eyes and scanned the room for any sign of danger. All seemed quiet and still.

Then, suddenly, he became aware of a strange sense of detachment, as though he were floating – like a soul without a body.

"Option three," said the voice, "is simple chemistry. You've just absorbed a compound that will affect your brain's frontal cortex – an area known as Brodmann Area Ten, if you know your anatomy. This is your brain's moral center, the bit of tissue that sorts 'right' from 'wrong.' Very soon you will answer my questions as eagerly and as accurately and as completely as if I were your closest confidant. Unfortunately, a byproduct of the compound initiates the most unfortunate hallucinations. I'm told that even those with the heartiest of mental constitutions will eventually go irrevocably mad after only a few sessions. Let us hope we will not need to resort to this option with any frequency."

Fear, extraordinary in its intensity, enveloped him. Yates stared up at the plaster ceiling, which transformed before his astonished eyes into a huge whirlpool of red, boiling ... something. Or was he looking

down into it? Grossly disoriented, he could no longer discern the difference. It was as though he were dangling helplessly over the thick, burning pool that threatened to incinerate him in the most excruciating manner.

A face rose from the center of the hellish whirlpool – the face of his sweet Melanie. His wife smiled up at him, reassuring him with her gentle eyes that she fully supported his decision to remain silent. She would die for him, protecting the contents of his precious safe.

Yates desperately wanted to touch her, to hold her. *“Help me...honey...!”*

Her expression changed abruptly into a mirror of his own despondency. She began weeping, and then her face contorted in agony, a mask of terror so severe that it absolutely horrified him. Her long, beautiful curly hair burst into flames, its wiry ambers shrinking into her head as it burned. What was left of her features melted beneath the surface of the crimson caldron while she continued to gaze up at him – this time with loathing. She had paid a terrible price to keep his secrets secure, and she now hated him for it.

“Nooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!”

Yates desperately wanted – NEEDED – to reveal everything about his damn safe. He no longer cared anything for it ... he no longer wanted any part of its contents.

Yates couldn't get the words out of his mouth fast enough:
*"UV6X974W872! Wait 30 seconds, and then re-key the string,
followed by another string: W7B24. The safe will unlock in 10
seconds. If there's an attempt to open it before that time, the unit will
remain locked for the next 12 hours regardless of any attempt to
repeat the process!"*

There it was. Having told him, he felt totally relieved and happy. The choice – the right choice – was so simple. He felt so very proud of himself.

"Thank you, Mr. Yates," the voice said. "You responded faster than most subjects I've worked with. We will carry out your instructions as you described. Need I tell you that if for any reason the safe does not open per your instructions, we will explore options two and three again, but in much more depth."

Yates's breath was heaving in and out. The flaming whirlpool continued to spiral before his eyes. He closed them to black out the delusion, but the image continued to spiral through his head, faster and faster. He could see other faces down there, other eyes percolating to the surface, staring up at him in terror. He thought he recognized some of them. Surely they would reach for him and pull him down there with them.

"Please make it stop!"

"I need one more piece of information from you," Fox said. "I need to know your wife's favorite flower, in a romantic sense. What would you give to charm her?"

"Roses," Yates shouted. "*White roses!*"

"Thank you, Mr. Yates. That is all I need for the moment. To show you that I'm a generous man, I will repay your cooperation with sleep. When you wake in several hours, most of the effects of the compound will have passed. Meanwhile, I will look forward to meeting you in person very soon."

The room's sterile lights blinked off, leaving only the unusual amber hue. The subdued luminosity had a calming effect on him.

"*Thank you...*" he gasped, sobbing, "*THANK YOU...!*"

Yates heard a soft *ping* behind his left ear. Instantly the room turned black, and he would remember nothing more about the experience.

Chapter Thirteen

Directive

Cary, North Carolina
October 7, 7:14 p.m.

"Please come in, Richard," came a thin, barely audible voice from the dimness. "I'm eager for our talk."

Richard Fox closed the door behind him. The room was dark with a pervasive odor of sweat and urine laced with heavy medication. The only useful source of light came from a small, low-wattage lamp on the table beside the bed. Colorful pin lights from a rack of medical equipment added ambiance, but nothing more. The patient couldn't tolerate light. The table lamp was a courtesy to Fox.

"What news did you bring me today?" the old man inquired. Despite the thinness of his voice, Fox could hear the strained eagerness in his inflection.

"We have Yates," he said. "The transfer transpired without incident."

"Excellent! Now tell me about Kendall. I'm most interested in Kendall."

"Suzanne is almost ready," Fox said, then, laughing, added, "Who would have thought Elizabeth Kendall would actually have a shot at this election?"

"I did!" the old man wheezed. "She has excellent genes."

"But what chance does she have? She faces tough competition from the vice president."

"I want him out of the race—" the old man spat, "*—NOW!* I must insist that you be more aggressive. This is too priceless an opportunity to throw away with compulsive planning. If Kendall's support wanes and she goes down in the polls by even one more point, I fear she will concede the race. Then we've lost everything."

Fox's expression lost every trace of levity. "I understand, sir. There is one other matter you should know about. A woman approached Elizabeth Kendall at last night's banquet and showed her a picture of Suzanne from a college yearbook. The two were friends."

The feeble man shook his head, his eyes squeezed shut. "*No ... NO!*" His bulging eyes flared open. "You must block *any* attempt to inquire after Suzanne Perry. *She no longer exists!* Silence this college

chum if you must. I insist that you put an end to your preparations and act *now!* Richard, this is my one chance for policy influence at the highest levels. Think of the global resources that will be at our disposal!" He added in a whisper, "It's also my last chance."

The old man was out of time and Fox, of all people, understood what was at stake. A college chum wouldn't get in their way.

Fox touched the old man's arm reassuringly. "I'm already looking after the matter, sir. Everything will be done exactly as you say."

The old man smiled up at his deputy. "You're a good man, Richard." He touched Fox's hand and forced a smile. "Please know that I appreciate everything you've done for so many years. I owe you my life."

"You've given me much more in return," Fox said, returning his grateful touch. "I only wish I could do more for you ... to help you."

"You will, Richard. You most certainly will."

Fox turned off the lamp and withdrew from the room. The brief conversation took its immediate toll on the patient. As he shut the door behind him quietly, Fox knew the old man had already slipped into an exhausted sleep.

Chapter Fourteen

Mountain Trail

Winter Mountain, Colorado
October 8, 7:54 a.m.

Elizabeth Kendall relished the wind and the speed and the adrenaline only mountain biking could provide. The morning air was cool and crisp, thanks to a weather front that blew through during the night and dumped a half-inch of rain over the state. The sun was out, and by noon the last of the moisture would have evaporated.

A little night rain, however, couldn't stop her vigorous morning muscle-and-cardio workout. Elizabeth looked forward to mountain biking every time she managed a quick getaway to her father's beloved Colorado retreat; the workout also gave her the chance to pump 20 miles around some of the most breathtaking mountain trails in the country. She much preferred cycling to jogging, which she

seldom pursued after breaking an ankle 20 years earlier while skiing down a slope not far from here. However, maneuvering a bike over the terrain's uneven trails, deep dips and occasional steep climbs offered a much better workout than jogging ever could, she reasoned.

Elizabeth was sharing the experience this trip with a companion – a personal bodyguard, courtesy of her party. Elizabeth wasn't accustomed to having a "chaperone" along for the ride. But she could hardly object. Given her strong standing in the polls, the party intended to protect its priceless asset. In fact, she had become good friends with former Secret Service Agent Pamela Wilson, a very lean, very physical African American who had no trouble keeping up with her whether on a bicycle or on foot. Riding abreast with her was merely a courtesy. Wilson often sprinted ahead, her eyes always moving, searching, anticipating what might lie hidden under the next shrub. The agent had an exceptional eye for detail.

"What's your pleasure today?" Agent Wilson asked as they reached the end of the dirt road. The real fun lay on the paths beyond.

The wooded intersection presented the riders with two tracks of varying difficulty. The trail to the right offered a medium challenge for expert cyclists, which they both were. But the workout wasn't as strenuous, the scenery less interesting. Serious cyclists always opted

for the left trail, labeled "Expert." Its remote and punishing paths down Winter Mountain were nothing less than spectacular, the experience breathless. The "expert" route was always worth the extra workout, even if meant dismounting and walking at times.

For Elizabeth, there was no contest. "Need you ask?" With a helmet strapped under her chin and leather biking gloves over her hands, she vanished through the bracken and down the narrow "expert" path. "This is *my* trail!"

"You're a glutton for punishment, girl," Wilson laughed, and gave her own bike a push start. She began pedaling after her client, determined not to lose sight of her. "My, don't we have energy this morning!"

"I feel great," Elizabeth called back to her. "Just try to keep up, please!"

Elizabeth, in fact, had enough energy for both of them. The excitement of recent events fueled her vigor; the additional funds she had received allowed her to finally mount a serious campaign, and that meant a promising shot at this election. Up here, away from everyone, alone with her thoughts, she could fully comprehend the magnitude of who she was and what she could accomplish. And today everything felt *perfect!*

Elizabeth raced well ahead of her, challenging her bodyguard to an impromptu contest. She pedaled until her leg muscles strained, and then shifted into the lowest gear and crept up the short but steep incline, dodging loose limestone cobbles, determined to reach the crest before Wilson's bodybuilder's legs could overtake her. She almost succeeded. She reached the summit just as Wilson, who wasn't even standing to ply extra torque, zipped past her. Beating her client in a bike race was never Wilson's intention; in fact, such a stunt would be a blatant abdication of her responsibility to protect her. Once she assured herself that the trail ahead was clear, she allowed Elizabeth to regain the lead for what every mountain biker lives for – the downhill stretch. This one offered a magnificent view of Winter Mountain Valley, an extraordinary panorama that stretched for miles below them. Wilson's place was always slightly behind and to the right of her client, watching her back.

They began cruising in tandem down a single track, their bikes bouncing occasionally over rocks as they picked up speed. Wilson's grin turned into a frown when her rear wheel slipped and spun in the mud, which had formed a trough down the middle of the path.

"Slow down, Liz!" she hollered to her riding companion. *"It's too wet!"*

Elizabeth ignored her. She had taken the lead and intended to keep it, unaware that her bodyguard had no intention of overtaking her.

The narrow trail gave way to a grassy clearing riddled with a pattern of man-size boulders. The idea was to navigate between the rocks, which offered a natural obstacle course with sharp bends and an occasional blind curve. But the wet grass made maneuvering treacherous. Wilson's rear wheel skidded across the grass, and she thrust out her legs to keep from spilling, barely maintaining control.

"Let's stop!" she shouted, weaving her bike around the boulders, determined to keep up with her client.

Elizabeth's competitive grin vanished when she realized she couldn't slow down without losing control of her bike. She began pumping her brakes and put down both legs to cushion a fall.

Wilson saw something – a streak – fly toward Elizabeth. A bird? She couldn't be sure; all detail vanished into the backdrop of trees. Elizabeth's bike flew out from under her, leaving her airborne at 20 miles an hour. The candidate landed in a heap on her side, her arms protecting her head as she rolled helplessly between the boulders like a rag doll.

Wilson watched, horrified. *"No—!"*

Suddenly, a hard, blunt object struck Wilson solidly in her chest with the force of a sledgehammer. The impact blasted the air from her lungs with a great *whoosh*, and she flew backwards off her bike, her feet above her. She landed on the grass and tumbled out of control in a cartwheel over one boulder, then another. Unlike Elizabeth, she couldn't have landed in a more dangerous spot. She felt the bone in her left ankle snap as the rocks hammered her body dozens of times. She slammed with a grunt against a third boulder that finally stopped her, her right arm crushed by the weight of her body.

Intense pain shot through every limb, and her chest felt as though it had been hit with a baseball bat after a homerun-size swing. She knew at least one rib was broken. Dazed, she tasted blood, lots of blood, while strange halos spiraled before her eyes. She couldn't draw in a breath and, despite wearing a helmet, struggled against a possible concussion.

What the hell just happened? She tried to sit upright, but quickly gave up the effort.

A fat, cylindrical object as long as her forearm rolled to a stop just out of her reach. She recognized the peg immediately. Typically fired from a shotgun, police used these pegs, made of dense polymer composites, to stun and immobilize rather than kill their targets.

"Oh, God...!"

Pamela Wilson saw movement among the foliage on the peripheral of the clearing. Two men dressed in camouflage fatigues emerged from the brush and raced toward Elizabeth who was laying on her stomach between two rocks. Wilson reached around with her good left hand and withdrew a customized Colt semiautomatic from her back holster. She thrust it before her with a shaking hand.

A boot appeared from nowhere and kicked the weapon violently out of her grip. The Colt flew across the grass and spun to a stop by a set of well-polished two-tone shoes. The owner of those shoes, a gentleman with pure-white hair and distinguished features, stooped to pick up the weapon with a white-gloved hand.

Wilson screwed her head around to see who had kicked her and grimaced from the pain in her neck. There, towering over her, stood the man with the boots – a huge brute with no neck, shoulders as wide as a billboard, and infant-like features that seemed too small for his flabby face. He was dressed in a suit, a light-colored fabric stretched unnaturally over his enormous torso. She saw no signs of a soul behind his dull, dark eyes. Pure animal.

Wilson twisted back to see Elizabeth. Her jaw dropped when she saw another person, a woman, emerge from the forest – it was Elizabeth Kendall, wearing a blue jumpsuit. One of the men crouched beside the fallen candidate and appeared to give her an injection. The

two men then stripped her down to her white undergarments. The woman with Elizabeth's appearance unzipped the front of her jumpsuit and stepped out of it wearing only her black underwear. Several scratches and bruises marred her arms and legs.

"Those are special ordered," the woman noted, indicating Elizabeth's undergarments. "I need them."

Elizabeth's double unsnapped her bra and, without a trace of modesty, passed it to one of the men. She took Elizabeth's white pair, which fitted her breasts perfectly.

Wilson, watching the exchange while doubting her sanity, fought a concussion-induced blackness. Surely this delusion was the result of her fall. Don't black out now, she warned herself. *Stay alert!*

"I can understand your confusion," said Richard Fox, strolling toward her.

Wilson looked up at him, but her eyes were unable to focus.

"This promising presidential candidate and her bodyguard were surprisingly reckless today while going for their regular morning ride," he said. "The night rain created conditions that were not suitable for safe biking down this trail. As a result, you both took a nasty spill. I'm afraid the agency will blame you for this accident. You failed to protect your client. In fact, your dereliction of duty almost got our next president killed."

"Bullshit," Wilson spat.

"Elizabeth Kendall will recover uneventfully with just a few scrapes and welts, a wiser and more careful candidate," he explained. "She will actually gain a few points in the polls out of sympathy."

As he spoke, Agent Wilson watched the two men roll Elizabeth onto a flexible stretcher and lifted her for carrying. The woman with her appearance, now clad in Elizabeth's riding outfit, slid a ring on her finger and strapped the candidate's databand around her wrist.

"You, I'm afraid," the gentleman said, "died in the freak fall."

Wilson looked up at him. *"What!?"*

Fox nodded to the brute. Billboard man reached down and grabbed Wilson's head by her chin and forehead.

"Take your hands off me!"

She grabbed his massive hands and tried her professional best to break his hold. It was a futile gesture. With a slight flex of his wrist, he twisted her head quickly to one side. There came a snap. Wilson let out a gargled gasp of air – her last. The brute held her head grotesquely to the right, while her eyes darted and fluttered aimlessly.

Fox, handling her handgun carefully, stooped and returned the weapon to her holster. What a shame, he thought – a woman so

vibrant, so capable, so full of life. He actually felt a fleeting pang of regret.

“Your family will always love you,” he assured her. “They will staunchly believe that their own kin, former agent Pamela Wilson, died in the line of duty while guarding the next President of the United States. It’s quite a legacy. Perhaps you will even get your name in a history book – certainly in her biography.”

Agent Wilson’s eyes, staring up at him wide with shock, had grown dim and vacant. Finally, she was gone. The brute released her and let her head fall against the boulder. Fox took her transceiver, crossed the field and presented the communications device to the woman with Elizabeth’s appearance.

“Make your call for help,” he instructed her.

She took the transceiver from Fox and said, “I want you and your men out of here first.”

“How are your bruises?” he asked.

She touched her jaw. “Tender.”

“If they are not sufficiently convincing—” He threw a nod at billboard man, who was carrying the two stun pegs in each hand. “—I’ll arrange to have them redone.”

"They're sufficient," she assured him, inspecting a bruise on her forearm. Then she glared at him. "And keep your *fucking* animal away from me, Richard."

Chapter Fifteen

Cold Storage

*Lazarus Institute of Cryogenic Revivication
University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana
October 8, 8:37 a.m.*

Danielle felt the temperature drop rapidly as the slow-moving lift took them to the cryogenic center's basement.

"Yes, I'm intimately familiar with these subjects," Dr. Herbert Faulk told her, while Kaufman stood in the rear of the car, seemingly detached from the conversation.

The director of the University of Illinois' cryogenic research program was a sturdy, well-proportioned physician with dark, thinning hair and an impeccably trimmed goatee. Although Faulk had just celebrated his 59th birthday, he had told them that expensive age-management therapy had restored his body to a 45 year old – mature

enough to exude success, yet youthful looking to attract the younger women. The procedure had fallen somewhat short of his expectations, he admitted, thanks to a lifetime of less-than-sensible eating.

Achieving better results – and a more youthful body – would require a major breakthrough in genetic cell-regeneration research, a goal that so far had eluded the world’s best scientific minds. But it was only a matter of time. Today, everyone’s greatest fear was dying prematurely before the big breakthrough. Of course, there was always the option of living cryogenic suspension, a procedure he endorsed wholeheartedly.

“The bodies were released to us about 15 years ago,” Faulk said. “I oversaw their transfer personally.”

The service lift’s doors opened to a white cinderblock hallway beneath the center. Dr. Faulk led Danielle Houston and a tired-looking Nick Kaufman down a corridor that apparently saw little traffic, as evidenced by the few small-scale tire tracks marring the otherwise unblemished linoleum floor. It was cold down here, yet Kaufman refused to button his raincoat. Danielle was faring the worst in the low ambient temperature. She hated being cold. She was shivering, even wrapped in her down-stuffed overcoat.

“They arrived together in a single trailer,” Faulk explained, walking briskly, his white frock fluttering behind him like a cape. He

seemed to enjoy the low temperature. "It was quite an event, or at least those of us overseeing the project thought so. The transfer was the first time the State's Cryogenic Forensic Unit had ever released ... victims. Even though their murders were never solved, the judge saw little point in keeping the bodies in evidence lockup after more than 30 years and agreed to release them to us. It finally came down to money; over the decades the Unit was accumulating too many bodies to look after them all properly. Cryogenic storage isn't getting any cheaper, you know. About 10 years ago, the State began releasing the Unit's cryogenic victims to their families, who typically had the bodies thawed and buried. However, there's legislation pending to put a stop to that practice; the proposal threatens Class C manslaughter charges if there's a chance of revival. The issue gets very complicated – and expensive. In the case of these men, however, the bodies aren't in very good condition and too many years have passed. No family is about to claim them. So we'll eventually use them for research. The Unit has since released 72 others to us. We like murder victim cases because they present some interesting opportunities."

At the end of the corridor, the trio encountered a steel cargo door that spanned the entire wall. There were no windows to see what lay beyond. Dr. Faulk waved his thumb over the proximity reader, and the door began opening upward, releasing a blast of frigid air into their

faces, apparently the source of the basement's arctic temperature. Danielle thrust her hands into her coat pockets but found little warmth there.

"This room is actually heated," Dr. Faulk explained as he led them inside. Overhead lights, harsh and glaring, blinked on. "But the modest furnaces are no match for the extreme temperature radiated from the vessels themselves. Most of the canisters down here were built around the turn of the century and are extremely inefficient. None of them are double-hulled."

Dr. Faulk selected an orange self-warming overcoat from a rack just outside the door. "I suggest you wear one of these," he said, slipping his arms down the sleeves and zipping up the front to his chin. He wrapped the hood around his head and secured it under his chin, leaving exposed only his eyes, a large protruding nose and his mouth.

Both Kaufman and Danielle declined, neither wishing to shed their coats, even for an instant, for a warmer garment. Besides, she didn't expect to stay long.

They entered the room beyond while the cargo door closed automatically behind them. Dr. Faulk checked his electronic notepad. "They're all the way in the back." He cocked his head. "Follow me."

The room resembled a warehouse with high, cinderblock walls covered with what looked like frost. Instead of boxes and crates,

however, the room hosted countless rows of large, vertical titanium canisters each containing a frozen cadaver positioned head down to protect the brain in case of accidental thawing. A high-tech graveyard, Danielle thought.

As they made their way toward the back row, Faulk squeezed his hands into a pair of thermal gloves. "I believe the last five canisters hold your guys."

He led the way down the row, consulting his notebook repeatedly, and stopped three-quarters of the way.

He touched a gloved hand to one of the huge cylinders and said, "This one holds genetic material from at least two people who were the closest to the source of the explosion. Dr. Jerome Galvin's DNA was identified, as was Grazyna Pitucha, a cleaning woman on duty that night. Jonathan Sabbath's remains are most likely in there too, but tests were inconclusive. Forensic was lucky to positively identify the other two; most of the genetic material was nearly cremated. There's nothing useful for us and we'll dispose of this container when we need the room.

"The next two canisters," he said, pointing, "hold the remains of Dr. Gregory Thornton and Dr. Benjamin Roth, whose bodies were recovered from the ruins the day after the fire. The bodies were badly

damaged and are also of no use to us. Even the vessels are junk. Perhaps your firm would like to claim them?"

Kaufman responded with a grimace.

Dr. Faulk scanned the final two files on his notebook screen: the first showed the face of a man in his late 30s, with coal black hair and sincere green eyes that could penetrate you. The second file included the photo of a plump middle-aged man, balding, dressed in a uniform.

Faulk indicated the last two canisters in the row. "Those two contain the bodies of Dr. David Sheppard, the clinic's director, and Samuel Wreschinski, the facility's security chief. Wreschinski's an outstanding specimen, well preserved; but I'm not so sure about Sheppard. Firefighters recovered their bodies near the entrance of the clinic shortly after the fire broke out. They were in terminal comas when paramedics arrived and were pronounced dead at the scene. On their way to the morgue, paramedics in a specially equipped ambulance began cryonic stabilization."

"In English please, Doctor," Danielle said, irritated by his academic prattle in so cold an environment. "Better yet, can you explain this in the warmth of your office?"

"*Cryonic stabilization* minimizes damage to the patient for eventual revival," Faulk said, rushing his words. "While en route to the morgue, their bodies were cooled in a portable ice bath down to

near zero degrees centigrade. Their circulation and respiration were supported with heart-lung resuscitators, and their blood was treated with anti-coagulants.

“At the morgue, the coroner was instructed to begin phase two called total body washout, which simply means replacing the blood with organ-preserving perfusate. Once stabilized, the bodies were shipped on ice to the State’s Special Forensic Unit where they were treated with cryoprotective solution and preserved by freezing them with liquid nitrogen.”

“Why take such extraordinary measures to preserve their remains?” Danielle said. “Since their deaths were murders, in those days a medical examiner would have been obligated to dissect the bodies.”

“Roth’s and Thornton’s bodies were autopsied,” Faulk said. “Wreschinski and Sheppard were examined during the freezing process, but neither was dissected. It wasn’t deemed necessary, based on the results of the others. There were also considerations made for their eventual revival. Wreschinski was marked specially for that purpose. One of the founding missions of the State’s Cryogenic Forensic Unit was to preserve victims for that eventuality. One day they could potentially serve as witnesses to their own murders. Think of the possibilities!”

Kaufman grunted, then asked, "What about brain damage from oxygen deprivation? Maybe you'd only revive a severely handicapped man with no memory."

"Always a risk," Faulk allowed, "but these two men's cases were special, and that's the way police handled them from the beginning. Besides continuing circulation and respiration on the way to the morgue, paramedics administered barbiturates to reduce brain metabolism. So brain damage should be minor."

"Will they ever be revived?" Danielle asked.

"Their cases present interesting questions," Faulk said. "Of course we know how to reverse the freezing damage to their bodies through nano technology, and a medical team can repair tissue damaged by the fire. But keep this in mind: over the past 10 years we've revived 27 patients, all of whom volunteered for cryogenic suspension and most of whom still had family to care for them – yet every one of them had significant adjustment problems. Three have even opted for assisted suicide. We've never revived an individual who had been murdered or, for that matter, a person killed in a traumatic accident. Those cases represent entirely new challenges, which we've only begun to explore. What sort of trauma does an experience like that do to one's psyche? How does the brain cope after such violent damage to the body? Mental reconstruction still has

a long way to go, and there's so much to learn. But we'll get there ... eventually. After all, there are more than one million victims in similar stasis here and across Europe alone." He patted the titanium shell. "They're waiting for us patiently. But they're in no hurry."

"What happens to the soul while the body's in stasis?" Danielle asked.

Faulk gave her an odd look. "You're joking, of course."

A shiver rippled through Danielle that had nothing to do with the room's low ambient air temperature. "Thanks for the tour, doctor. Nick, are you ready to leave this ice house for warmer climes?"

Kaufman knelt down in front of one of the canisters and wiped the frost from the Lucite frame, an identifier with the name, age, and circumstances of death. It read simply: Samuel Wreschinski, 43 years, arson homicide, Oak Brook, Illinois.

Kaufman threw a glance over this shoulder and asked the doctor, "What does it cost?"

Faulk looked at him, puzzled. "I don't understand your question."

"Revival," Kaufman said. "What does it cost to revive a man from cryogenic stasis?"

Dr. Faulk shrugged. "Our cost is about four million. That doesn't include surgeries to correct disease or any physical damage

that caused the death. All we attempt to do is deliver the patient alive and correct the damage caused by the cryogenic process. We offer no guarantees of success. We currently have 20 bodies in our queue scheduled for revivication over the next 12 months."

Kaufman stood and rubbed his hands together for warmth. "Five million."

Dr. Faulk and Danielle looked at each other, confused, neither one understanding the meaning of the words the corporate attorney had just uttered.

"Five million," Kaufman repeated. "I'll pay you five million to bring this man out of stasis – but it must be done immediately. Five million to put him at the head of your revival queue."

Danielle thought she was dreaming. *"What!?"*

"That's four million to cover your costs," Kaufman said, "and another million toward your research for traumatic memory reconstruction."

"That's out of the question," Faulk said, shaking his head. "We have priority research and guaranteed grants."

Kaufman immediately upped the stakes. "Ten million."

Faulk was speechless. His eyes glistened and steam poured from the exposed parts of his face as he considered the offer.

"An extra six million for your research," Kaufman offered. "That should also merit you a healthy bonus."

"What do you think you're doing, Nick?" Danielle said, astounded by his offer. She shook her head. *Had he suddenly snapped and plunged head first into some sort of madness!?* "You can't authorize this as a company expense." As the ramifications of what he was proposing sunk in, she shouted, *"Stop this ... I won't let you continue!"*

Kaufman glared into her eyes; his look was dead serious. *"I can and will authorize. This is a crucial legal matter that affects ONX and I need a statement from this man. As head of security, he would know where the clinic's off-site records were kept. He may even know where Sabbath is today."*

Danielle was finding it harder and harder to breathe down here. *"Stop it, Nick ... please!"*

"There are other lives at risk," he continued; "untold billions in capital may have been swindled and lost. And the very medical breakthrough for life extension the world has been searching for may finally be at hand. *You have no idea!* I can and will approve the appropriation for his revival. If you try to interfere in any way, you can consider yourself off my staff. And let me remind you of your confidentiality agreement. Mention this to anyone, internally or outside the company, and I will prosecute you to my fullest abilities."

Stunned by the daunting reprimand, Danielle's rapid breathing materialized in short puffs of vapor. "But what you're doing simply to get information is *immoral*. That man will need *dozens* of transplants and nanosurgeries. Will you pay for those as well? Will you look after him?"

Kaufman, his face screwed up in irritation, ignored her questions. He turned his back to her and leveled Dr. Faulk with a hard gaze. "I need some answers from this man. Will that be possible?"

Dr. Faulk had already mentally calculated the probabilities. "This will be an interesting challenge. But I see no extraordinary complications. I'll first need to examine the body in detail. Let me emphasize that I cannot guarantee results. And there are *no* refunds."

Danielle knew there was no stopping her boss. *God help them both – Nick and the man he would attempt to revive*. She tightened her overcoat. It had suddenly become much colder in the storage room, or so it seemed.

"Okay, then let's get started," Kaufman said, nodding. "I'll have the funds transferred to you this afternoon."