

SILENT EPIDEMIC

The gurney blasted through the emergency room doors, while Robert Grady, M.D., straddled the lifeless patient, applying CPR. Dr. Danny Evans rushed to the racing gurney and accompanied the crowded rolling table to the trauma room.

"What have you got?" he yelled to the paramedics who had fallen behind so that doctors could take over the life saving process.

"White female, approximately twenty-five, deep lacerations on both wrists, BP is eighty over sixty." The paramedic ran the complete list of the patient's vitals while the staff continued to work on the unconscious woman. Her wrists had been sliced with great precision, with three perfectly executed cuts on her left side, and one on her right. There had been an enormous amount of blood loss.

"Get her typed and bring in five units, now," Evans yelled.

"We're losing her," Grady warned. "Her pressure is dropping."

"V tack," a nurse announced as a high pitch sounded from a monitoring device. The green flat line followed. The woman's shirt was ripped open.

"Give me one fifty," Evans yelled.

"One fifty," the nurse confirmed.

"Clear." Everyone moved from the patient, as the jolt forced the woman's body to jump slightly. The high pitch continued. "Two hundred. Clear." Again, the body jumped. The whining sound of the monitoring device was steady and deafening. "Two fifty. Clear." The body defied the machine. "We're going in," Evans announced, as a nurse handed him a scalpel. The woman's chest was sliced and opened quickly, while Evans forced his will into the lifeless heart. The rest of the hospital staff watched helplessly.

"She's been down too long," Grady said, mostly to himself.

"Adrenaline," Evans ordered, ignoring his colleague's prediction of doom. The doctor continued to massage the woman's heart, as the minutes ticked by.

"She's gone," Grady stated. But Evans couldn't let this woman go quite yet. She was too young to have her life end there in the emergency room.

"Not on my watch," he yelled to the lifeless form, and continued to work on her while the rest of the staff stood back. They were waiting for Dr. Danny Evans to draw his own obvious conclusion.

The woman had been lying on her living room floor bleeding out for an hour before her roommate had found her and dialed 911. Her long brown hair was caked with the blood that had seeped into the carpet. The staff looked down on her sympathetically as her body lay, unmoving, but disposed to the will of her doctor. She appeared to be at peace, as Evans forcefully worked to bring her back.

"She was so beautiful," a nurse sighed. Except for the slices on her wrists and the bloodstains, her body was flawless. There were no other notable markings, except for a small butterfly tattoo on her left shoulder.

"Do you want me to call it?" Dr. Grady asked quietly. Danny Evans ignored the suggestion, and continued his battle with death.

"Not on my watch," he repeated. The staff stood by, sadly resolved.

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Chapter 1

Carolyn Freeman was a square-peg person, living in a round-hole world. She viewed the conventional path that most considered to be a safe comfort zone with contempt. The down side was that this had always kept her from being a part of the mainstream. As a means of survival, Carol had always sought out other square pegs to associate with, keeping her from living in the isolated world of the “conformably challenged.”

From the time she could assign words to her thoughts, Carol’s favorite word had always been “why.” Carol questioned everything. If something didn’t make sense, she would beat the problem to death, demanding an explanation or alternative solution. And since the real world often made no sense, nor did it lend itself to alteration, Carol spent much of her time yelling at the rain.

The incongruence of her reality had left her burned out after only five years in the counseling field. The initial motivation – to seek out others like herself and make a difference in a troubled world – had not gone according to plan. The promising world of the helping profession should have provided the best of the square-peg population. A safety net devised of warm and accepting companions, who like herself, would plunge forward in an uncaring world working together to make it a better place. Within a short time, however, she had found them to be crazier than the patients and more apathetic than the checkout staff at Wal-Mart. The kind that asks, “How you are doing?” but never responds to the answer. One finally learns that it is a rhetorical question. Carol was surrounded by these people every day, yet she felt completely alone.

The “troubled world” was a bottomless pit of need. For every person she had managed to help elevate one-step higher, there were a thousand more needing something that was always out of her reach. Her unyielding logic – that each problem had to have a solution – left her exhausted and frustrated at the end of each day. This unfortunate phenomenon had landed Carol more and more inside her own thoughts instead of listening to patients during counseling sessions. She had become numb in a sense, and was finding it difficult to genuinely respond with anything like honest concern for their pain. There was an immense amount of guilt that went along with the realization of her fading commitment.

It was time to leave for the day, but Carol was on a mission. Worn out from the drone of policies, procedures and the paper trail of bureaucracy, she continued to plunge forward in an effort to force a solution to a problem that was drowning her. The small addiction department consisted of herself and one nurse. The rest of her staff was comprised of part time workers who came and left with such frequency that Carol barely felt their presence at all. This proposal would provide the proof she needed to support the blinding logic and cost effectiveness of increasing her staff.

She was punching numbers into a calculator when her phone rang. Carol regarded the ringing beast with contempt and thought for the ten-millionth time about smashing it with the closest heavy object.

"Yes?" she managed, trying to keep the obvious annoyance out her voice.

"There is a family out in the waiting room to see you, and Carol..."

"Yeah?" she sighed.

"You better come see this."

Carol hated these invasions. There were too many of them, and not enough of herself left to care. But Newberg Mental Health was the crisis center for Newberg County. This meant that anytime someone landed in an extreme and overwhelming situation, there was no need for an appointment. A counselor would drop what they were doing to rescue them. The policy on walk-ins was clear. If the "invasion" fell under your department's jurisdiction, someone from your group had to comply. She looked at her half-written, long shot of a proposal after returning the beast's head to its base. The party waiting for her in the lobby would most likely be extremely intoxicated and demanding. A small amount of inadvertent insults would usually be in the blend. Carol didn't think she could stand one more drunken tirade. She hadn't been sleeping very well and stopped to rub her eyes with her index fingers before dragging herself away from the safe quiet of her office.

Once again, she was the quarterback. All of the defensive line had left hours before. Carol had approached the issue several times already with no success.

"The problem," she would say to the center director, Buck Spears, "is the size of the population we are supposed to be serving." Spears would nod and appear to be evaluating the dilemma. "We have only two full-time people and the part time staff may as well be invisible." Once again, she would receive the standard managerial dribble about budgets and the cost of benefits for full-time employees. Carol would listen and quietly calculate the monetary losses from time spent training people who seemed to be in a revolving door of job opportunities. These meetings would always end the same way, with Spears providing the great American motivational pep talk and Carol taking the bait. *'I just have to come up with a way to better organize these people,'* she would think, and go back to her office and the drawing board.

Carol pulled herself out of her reverie and walked down the long hallway. The carpet was faded and walls were in need of either fresh paint or a wrecking crew. When Carol opened the door to the waiting room, she had to bite her lip to keep from laughing. Sitting in one corner of the room was the standard two parents and a young man who appeared to be in his late teens or early twenties. He was tall and painfully thin, and the faded jeans and white tee shirt he wore hung on his small frame. The oily, dark brown strands of hair that fell over his eyes were an indication that hygiene had not been on the top of his list of priorities. The scene would have seemed completely normal, except the young man was also wearing a pointed hat made out of tin foil. Carol looked over at the receptionist who had closed her sliding glass deflector shield, but was still visible through the glass. The receptionist just shook her head. Carol thought how nice it would be to have her own sliding glass deflector shield, but that was not an option for a quarterback. Instead, she reluctantly invited the family to come inside.

When the group was seated in her small office, Carol picked up the crisis clipboard and, with pen in hand, began the standard process. This phase of the interview did not require too much thought.

"Okay, I just need some information before we begin," Carol interjected, trying not to convey her sense of monotony. While the father provided all the vital information about the young man sitting between himself and his wife, the mother continued her argument with her son. From the tone of the woman's voice, it appeared as though this discussion had been going on for some time.

"Please, honey," the mother pleaded. "Just take off the hat. You look ridiculous and it's embarrassing."

"No," said the young man in a flat, lifeless tone and continued to stare off into space. That was all Carol needed to hear. In that one syllable, she heard the empty, haunted sound of a schizophrenic.

She completed the mundane form and set the clipboard aside.

"Carl," Carol said in a soothing voice, "can you help me understand what is troubling you today?"

"No," Carl stated in the same monotone he had used with his mother.

Acknowledging the patient's apparent absence, Carol turned to the family with an invitational look. The father responded first.

"Our son does not want 'them' to read his thoughts," the man stated wearily.

"It's more than that, Bob," the mother intervened.

Carol waited for the family to sort out their conflicting versions of Carl Banner's dilemma.

"He's not eating," the mother continued, "and he has loud conversations with no one."

Mr. Banner just nodded his agreement. The man looked exhausted and beaten down as a result of his son's new behaviors.

"Okay," Carol said, regaining control of the interview. "When did you first notice these changes in him?"

"Two, no, maybe three weeks ago," Mrs. Banner stated.

"Was there anything significant happening at that time?" Carol inquired. Normal life stressors that most people consider to be difficult, but manageable, can be viewed as traumatic and life changing to others - especially if that person is already hanging on the edge.

"No," the mother responded. "He has always been a loner and he seems depressed a lot of the time, but he has never been like this." She attempted to put her arm around her son, while he pulled away from her grasp defiantly. Mrs. Banner seemed used to Carl's need for detachment and returned her attention to Carol.

"Is he on any medications, or does he have a prior psychiatric diagnosis?" asked Carol.

"No. Carl has been a typical moody kid - nothing we couldn't handle." Every kid with a psychiatric problem was typical kid, where loving parents were concerned.

She stopped writing to rub her tired eyes again. The end of the day's fatigue was taking over, and she refrained from any further digging. Carl's current presentation went way beyond teenage moodiness, and she had no doubt that an anti-psychotic medication would be in order.

"Has there been any drug or alcohol use?" If Carl had engaged in any street drugs, she doubted that his parents would have known about it. If he had been using a mind-altering substance, the aliens would have had a field day with Carl's brain.

"My goodness, no," Mrs. Banner exclaimed, and tried to put her arm around her resistant son again. Carl sat like a stone with his mother's arm supporting his back and continued to sit in his chair with a vigilant eye out the window, guarding against any possible threat in the parking lot.

Carol excused herself and went off to find someone from the large pool of the psychiatric department. This was clearly not an addiction issue. Tired and extremely annoyed at the continued dumping tactics of her co-workers, she approached the counselor's break room. A group was situated around the table discussing something that was obviously amusing, and Carol interrupted the laughter to ask if someone from "psych" could finish a crisis call on a nineteen-

year-old psychotic male. The group looked up and each one in turn began giving a series of excuses. A few didn't bother with providing a reason and simply left the room. Carol, now feeling her blood pressure rise, squared off on the remaining counselor who had responded by returning to her magazine article.

"Do you think you could tear yourself away from your end of the day break long enough to complete your department's crisis call?" Carol inquired while attempting to control her frustration.

"I've already been here eight hours," the woman stated defensively, and left the room.

Carol's blood was now boiling as she looked at the clock on the wall, and calculated her own ten-hour day. Angry, she backtracked down the hall to her own office. People's pain and suffering often failed to conform to state workers schedules, and Carol had no choice but to complete what she had started. There was no one to throw the ball to, and this was going to be a little more complicated than a raging drunk in need of detox.

"Carl, do you want to tell me anything?" Carol asked hopefully.

"No," the young man stated again. Carol wanted to throw some cold water in Carl's face and ask him if he knew any other word besides no. She mentally slapped her own wrist for taking her frustration out on a patient. She knew that she did not do well with schizophrenics. There was nothing there to work with. At least in her own chosen specialty, one could dig down and find a fighting spirit underneath the fog. Here, there was no one home. She forced herself to plunge ahead.

"Has Carl said anything to cause you concern about his safety, or anyone else's?"

Both of Carl's parents just looked at each other blankly.

"Has he threatened to hurt himself, or anyone else?" Carol clarified.

"Oh no, of course not," the mother said. "Carl is a good boy." Carol's most effective tool for hospitalization had just been removed. She knew that he needed to be in a facility where he could be placed back on medication and monitored until his personal "demons" went away. She was determined to get him there.

"Okay, I need to ask about insurance," Carol concluded. The father wordlessly handed her a beaten looking card that had seen a lot of mileage.

"Excuse me for just one more minute," Carol said, as she left the bewildered family once again and went off to the copy machine and a private phone.

While Carol watched the copy machine swing back and forth, she worked to steady her emotions and dialed the number to Newberg Hospital. "Intake, please," Carol said to the hospital operator.

"One moment," the voice answered, and Carol listened to a terrible digital version of 'Hey Jude,' by the Beatles. It sounded like an electronic music box. Carol cringed as she inspected the copy of Carl's insurance card. *God, Medicaid!*

"Intake," a voice said, interrupting the Beatles unintended performance.

"Hi, this is Carol Freeman from Newberg Mental Health," she began. "I have a nineteen-year-old male with a possible history of depression. He is currently presenting with paranoid ideation, audio hallucinations, and is unresponsive to questioning." Carol could hear the intake worker writing and waited.

"Is he a danger to himself or anyone else?" the intake worker inquired. Carol had anticipated this, but could not see a way around the question.

"Not as far as is reported by his family," Carol answered.

"It appears that Carl is not a threat to himself or anyone else. He does not meet the criteria for admission." The intake worker stated this as if reading the words from her policy and procedure manual. During the familiar speech, Carol nodded her head back and forth in time with the words as she had done too many times before. Carol gave the woman an empty "Thank you," and hung up the phone. *I guess the only way Carl will be a danger to anyone is if he stops dodging the aliens, or whatever they are, and decides to start fighting back.* She shook her head in frustration. The truth about hospitalization criteria was that it was a crock. Anyone psychotic enough to believe that they were being stalked or monitored by outside forces was capable of doing a multitude of interesting things, none of which would be considered rational choices, but all of which had the potential for very dangerous outcomes.

In the good old days, Carol would have forced the issue a lot harder and probably would have gotten Carl the help he needed, but that required energy and motivation. These were two elements now missing from the equation today.

The next step in the crisis process was to set an appointment for the person so that they could begin receiving outpatient treatment. *What a lame alternative for Carl Banner.* But Carol was out of options. She made her way to the front desk where the schedule book was located. The area had been evacuated. *Must be after five o'clock, or else a fire broke out while I was on the phone,* she thought cynically. Thumbing through the schedule book, Carol grimaced at the full and unyielding pages, noting the next available appointment and filling in Carl's name.

"Four weeks?" Mrs. Banner shrieked, when Carol returned with the appointment card. "My son cannot go around with that thing on his head for four weeks. He needs to see a doctor today."

"I apologize," Carol offered, knowing that her words were a poor consolation, "but that is the first available appointment." The reality of the situation was that Carl would have to wait four weeks just to see a counselor and have his mountain of paper work filled out before he could even think about seeing a doctor. Carol had learned this lesson the hard way. In the past when she had taken it upon herself to slide patients who were "desperately in need" into doctor appointment slots before the mountain of paper was completed, she had received the wrath of both the doctor and the administration department. Carol had gotten into some knock-down, drag-out arguments with the doctors. The only thing she had accomplished was to cultivate a continued reputation with the entire staff, and raise her own blood pressure. The patient had never won out, and had always gotten the short end of the stick. She promised herself after the last fiasco that she would never attempt another rescue mission again.

"We'll get our own doctor," Mrs. Banner squawked, and slapped the appointment card down on the desk.

"Okay," Carol offered, "but if you have any trouble, I'll keep his appointment open."

"Thanks," the mother said sarcastically, and stormed out of the office.

"My wife is upset," Mr. Banner said sheepishly and walked out behind Carl, who was now using his index finger to test the direction of something in the air.

Carol stood in the quiet office, wondering what was going to happen to Carl before he could see a doctor. Psychotic episodes rarely healed themselves, and more than likely, he would continue to de-compensate. She doubted that his two sweet and unassuming parents would be equipped to deal with the escalation of his symptoms. Shutting off the light, she headed outside. As usual, Carol's day ended as it had begun. So much had been needed, with no solution available. Nothing had changed.

Chapter 2

Business would soon be booming, and Charles Roman was one happy guy. Now seated in his expansive office, Charles looked out the large bay window and took in the view of Atlanta. From this sixteenth story view, he could see the entire city with its slowly emerging lightshow that began every evening around this time. This was his city. He owned Atlanta.

Charles was not a big man and this characteristic extended further than just his physical size. At five foot eight, Charles wore custom tailored suits and a power hairstyle that exuded the image he liked people to see. His year-round tan, courtesy of the company's frequent flyer perks, supplied the finishing touch and made him a handsome guy.

Sitting at the helm, Charles began organizing the papers that covered the shiny oak surface of his desk. His usual evening activities would begin with a late departure from work, followed by a few drinks at the Victory Hotel. With any luck, he'd meet up with that hot little tasty morsel from Marketing and avoid having to see his wife all together.

But that plan would be delayed on this day. There was a light knock on the door, followed by the entry of his two in command. Sam Reynolds, his VP, and Jeff Edwards, Marketing director, entered with dread.

"This can't be good," Charles announced.

The two silently took seats facing the great man.

"We have a situation," Sam began.

Charles looked at both, waiting for the sky to open and rain on his evening. "Just tell me," he directed.

"The approval for Suprame got delayed," Jeff stated. "We just got the package back from them today."

"Why?" Charles demanded. "Haven't we paid them enough?"

The two looked at each other, not knowing which turd to drop on the man first.

Sam took the lead. "There's a new sheriff in town. This guy, David Manning, he's not a team player."

"The FDA has been getting some complaints about sedatives," Jeff added. "They want us to conduct one more study on the effects of termination."

Charles got to his feet and began to pace.

"We were promised an approval by the end of this month. We have spent some serious bucks to guarantee it. It's the drug that will ultimately save this company, and now this Manning guy wants us to waste more time worrying about what happens after the drug is no longer being used? How is that our problem?"

"The problems aren't happening while people are taking the medication. The problem begins when they stop."

"That's not a pharmaceutical problem," Charles yelled. "It's a prescription problem."

"Well, now it's Dominex's problem," Sam conceded.

Charles sat back down and raked a frustrated hand through his hair. "Look, guys, I really don't care what you do with this asshole at the FDA. Just figure something out. This drug is going on the market. I don't care if you have hold a gun to his head."

"Don't worry," Jeff said. "We'll think of something."

The two men watched Charles Roman grab his coat and storm out of the building.

“Well,” Sam said, “he handled that well.”

They had been here before, not sure how they were going to pull another rabbit out of their asses, but certain it would happen.

Charles sat smoldering for a few moments before speeding out of the parking lot. The radio was always tuned to Z93, and Charles felt some of the tension drift away. They’d handle the problem and he had a date. He began tapping to the time of “*Taking Care of Business*” on the steering wheel with one hand while loosening his tie with the other. Taking care of business had been a sweet deal. Dominex Pharmaceuticals had been in his family for decades before he was able to slide into the driver’s seat. In the old days, his father had run a respectable operation, focusing primarily on anti-inflammatory and arthritis medications. The company had done marginally well, driven by its long-term reputation of being a company of integrity. But in the past ten years, there had been so many companies manufacturing virtually the same medications. For the past decade, profits and subsequently the company’s stock value had been slowly spiraling downward.

When Charles’s father approached retirement, he had no other offspring, and despite the warning of several board members and friends, Charles’s father decided to take a chance on his son. It wasn’t so much the wasted college years. He told himself that his son was a “late bloomer.” It was the lying and deceit that made Charles a high risk. Never the less, Charles Roman Sr. had only one son. So Charles Jr. was in.

When Charles first took over as CEO, he didn’t know an aspirin from an anti-depressant. But when the reward was big money, Charles was a fast learner. He quickly learned that there were so many drugs designed to do one thing, and then ultimately used for a wide range of other disorders. By simply changing a small fraction of an already existing compound, a completely new drug could be marketed. Working with another company’s product, an anti-convulsive, Charles followed the parade into the wide world of sedatives.

Charles quickly realized that sedatives were the pot of gold at the end of the pharmaceutical rainbow. At no other time in history had there ever been the rash of depression and anxiety disorders we see today. With the two-paycheck economy, overcrowding and loss of the extended family, everyday stress, anxiety, and depression were at an all-time high. In the ‘50s and ‘60s, people would see their family doctors and, after all the standard tests, they would be told to go take a vacation, slow down, or get more sleep. In today’s fast pace, the world did not lend itself to these solutions and a quick fix had not just become a luxury, it had become a necessity.

Under the new regime, Dominex pharmaceuticals had the potential to become a multi-billion dollar proposition. Doctors would be provided with an ample supply of samples, cookies, and the promise of more to come. It was a win-win situation. The patient would provide the problem, the drug company would happily provide the solution and the doctor would be the hero. Everyone would be happy.

“No one happier than me,” Charles sang, substituting the words, “and working over time.” He pulled the Beemer in an empty parking space at the Victory Hotel.

Sheila had been watching the time tick away for thirty minutes and was not happy about being kept waiting.

“Would you like another round?” the bartender asked. Sheila checked her watch again.

“Why not?” she sighed. *It’ll make it that much easier to deal with him.*

Sheila Montgomery was there for one reason and one reason only. To move up into a position of power, no matter what she had to do to get there. Currently working for Dominex Pharmaceuticals in marketing, Sheila made good money, and the freedom of being out in the field gave her that added element of independence she always demanded. But the power to change things, and to be on the cutting edge, was not only Sheila's goal, it was her mission.

Sheila's thoughts were interrupted, when she felt a hand on her shoulder.

"Hi Charlie," Sheila said, as she looked up and smiled sweetly.

"Hi yourself." Charles took the bar stool beside Sheila and ordered a martini. While he waited for his drink to arrive, he checked the bar for any familiar faces. No one stood out, Charles noticed with a degree of relief. *It wouldn't take much to be noticed*, he thought. Sitting here next to this beautiful blond knockout, the regular bar crowd that frequented this establishment were already well aware of his presence by association. And the order of the day was to remain incognito.

Sheila was a knockout. That had always been something she had been able to use to her advantage. Now, at the age of thirty-five, nothing had changed. Her long blond hair, courtesy of Clairol, and long thin frame commanded the stage. Her large green eyes and flawless face were the finishing ticket. Women distrusted her and sometimes outwardly disliked her, but men were always ready, willing, and able to lend her a helping hand. And Sheila was always ready and willing to accept it. In fact, her whole world had revolved around the easy task of manipulation for so long, she really was no longer consciously aware of how much every waking moment of her life was not just based, but reliant on it. The fact that she had never had a close female friend was inconsequential. She told herself that she preferred the company of men, and for the most part, her needs were always met.

Charles's drink arrived and after the bartender was out of hearing range, he leaned over and whispered, "I missed you today."

Sheila wanted to gag, but instead kissed him on the tip of his nose and said, "I bet you did."

Charles wanted this woman in the worst way and reached into his coat pocket to feel for the room key.

"Would you like another drink before we retire?" he said, pleased with his clever metaphor.

Sheila was already feeling the effects of the two she had downed and told Charles she was fine.

"You certainly are," he agreed playfully, as he escorted his new friend out of the bar.

Charles seemed to be getting antsy and Sheila had early appointments in the morning. After the holding and the small talk, it was time to go. Fishing around on the floor for her belongings, Sheila eyed the powerful CEO. For all the talk and impressive "courtship," the whole thing had really been a pitiful few moments. The extent of their foreplay could have been measured with an egg timer. Sheila hoped not to have to repeat this performance too many more times.

"So," Charles began. "When would you like to get together and discuss your new marketing ideas?" He did not care about her ideas; he had better plans for their next meeting.

"I can come to your office anytime, Charlie," Sheila purred.

"My office was not exactly the place I had in mind," he replied provocatively.

"Come on," Sheila toyed. "I might start to think you're not taking me seriously."

"I'll take you anyway I can get you," Charles continued to play.

Working hard not to roll her eyes, Sheila just smiled.

"Okay, okay" he said with exaggerated exasperation. "Come to the office tomorrow at five."

"Five it is." *And next time, let's lose the egg timer.* Sheila winked and said, "Bye Charlie." She was out the door before Charles could reply.

Chapter 3

Carol Freeman sat in the waiting room of her doctor's office trying to be patient. She wondered to herself why doctors even bothered to make appointments. The appointment time had very little bearing on how long you sat and how long you had to wait to be seen. She felt compelled to just leave. She had made the proper arrangements at work, but her fear of getting busted gravitated her to the seat.

Carol could not get a decent night sleep and had resorted to some creative problem solving. She was sick of spending her days in a sleepy fog, often forgetting to do the simplest things, followed by night, when her head would hit the pillow and the mental hurricane would begin. Ruminating the day's problems, Carol would evaluate, analyze, resolve and re-invent. By morning, she was exhausted and the world's problems were still unresolved. Carol had recently found someone with a small and unofficial stash and suddenly, her whole perspective on medications changed.

But now the state of Georgia required all workers to take random drug screens. Without an official prescription, a positive test for benzodiazepines would be grounds for immediate termination. And Carol knew better than to take other people's medications. Had it not been for the desperation of being so sleep deprived, she wouldn't have crossed that line. Now, that line was getting ready to bite her in the ass.

Carol heard her name being called, and stood to follow the nurse into the appointed waiting room. After being weighed and providing her arm for the nurse to cuff, Carol sat in the flimsy paper dress. She looked down at her small body. Her best current attribute was her tiny waist and thin frame. It was a battle she had fought all her life, cycling between a size eight and a size twelve. Her life's mission was to stay thin, although there had been numerous times in the past when she had been on the losing side of that battle. Currently, she was a small person with a very large attitude. Carol could see her reflection in the waiting room mirror and gazed at her shoulder-length, curly brown hair framing tired blue eyes. Her youthful face was slowly fading and she could feel the weight of the world on her five foot two inch frame. Was the change in her appearance due to age or stress? She didn't know the answer to that question, but hoped it was the latter. The alternative meant that her youth was coming to an end.

The opening of the examining room door startled Carol and she looked up to see a face she did not recognize.

"Carol Freeman?" the heavily accented Mediterranean doctor said. "What can I do for you today?"

"Is Doctor Wesley on vacation?" Carol inquired.

"No. Dr. Wesley left this facility and I am taking on his patients. I am Doctor Rami."

"Well," Carol began hesitantly. "I have been having a hard time sleeping and tried this medication, Valipene. It really helped and I was hoping to get some of my own today." Carol could not help but notice the doctor's demeanor change.

After a long hesitation, the doctor said, "Alright, but only enough for a few days."

Carol was now becoming annoyed and told the doctor that her sleep problem had been going on for some time, and most surely would not go away in a few days.

After some additional infuriating conversation and unspoken suspicion on the part of Dr. Rami, Carol walked away with her prescription. Confused by the whole encounter, she wondered if the doctor had thought she was a drug addict. Knowing full well that she had no history of addiction herself or at any time had there been any in her family, Carol just shook her head. *Jerk*, she thought and left the building. She was going to sleep soundly tonight, and right now that was the only thing on Carol's mind.

By the time she arrived at work, she had forgotten about the strange doctor. In fact, all of the morning's events had disappeared. She happily walked to her office and thought for the first time in a while, *Today is going to be a good day.*

Carol picked up the messages left on her desk. When she saw the one from Buck Spears, she quickly turned and headed for the Center Director's office. Heading down the long corridor, Carol's thoughts creatively evaluated the possibilities. She had turned in the futile proposal, but who knows? This place never followed a logical course of action. When she reached Spear's partially closed door, Carol knocked tentatively.

"Come," the voice commanded. Carol entered the room and knew immediately from his face that all was not well.

"Did you tell one of my counselors that they could not leave at the end of the day?" Spears demanded.

"No," Carol said emphatically. "I merely inquired if she could interrupt her end of the day break to see a walk in."

Spears did not reply at first and glared at her. These encounters were happening more and more as Carol's patience with what she perceived as lazy state workers was wearing thin.

"Carol," Spears sighed. "You have to use better tact. After all, you are a manager." *An overworked one.*

"But," Carol began.

"No buts," Spears interrupted. "I'm busy and there's nothing more to say."

Carol looked at the Center Director. This had once been a reasonable individual. Now reason seemed to be replaced by hostility at every turn. Carol left Spear's office fighting back the tears. When she made it to the privacy of her own, she let the tears flow. Never had she been so frustrated and felt so alone. It was as if the logical order of the world had been replaced with a new one that supported apathy and self-indulgence. She just couldn't live in that world and was being beaten weekly for it.

Sam Reynolds had been working for Dominex Pharmaceuticals for the past five years in accounting. His recent promotion to Vice President of Operations had come two years ago when he had creatively saved the CEO's proverbial ass. Mr. Charles Roman had an expensive lifestyle and this might have been his undoing. When the company's upcoming audit would have revealed an unexplainable deficit, Sam's ingenuity and the shifting of funds quietly made the indiscretion go away. The CEO recognized good work and employee potential. Now Sam was his right hand man.

Sam sat in a slightly smaller version of the office of the CEO. He had always been a stocky guy. His height of five foot ten did little to carry his extra weight. Furthermore, he had inherited his father's early balding trait, and his receding black hairline continued to age the man. At the age of thirty-seven, he looked more like fifty. Sam knew he would never exude the

corporate image and felt damn lucky to be where he was. With his own private secretary and big fat salary, Sam would go to the ends of the earth to protect his new status if need be. Today, the immediate problem did not require such travel, but it did require some quick maneuvers.

Several people had reported becoming ill after stopping use of the drug Valipene. These reports had made their way to the FDA and Dominex Pharmaceuticals was now being required to do some additional research on the effects of drug termination. Sam knew that a delay in marketing of the generic drug Suprame would create a financial burden the company might not survive. He shaped and re-shaped a paper clip in his hands as he worked the problem through in his head. He had to make this FDA requirement somehow go away.

In previous dealings with the FDA, Dominex had primarily worked with a very "receptive" officer. Bob Whitford had been the guy in charge of final approvals in Atlanta and had always been open to monetary gain. He had retired just prior to the final testing phase of Suprame. Everything that had been submitted up to that point had literally flown by the approval process.

When David Manning took over, he had become Dominex's worst nightmare. He was a man of integrity. The man could not be moved by money, however he seemed to value the stability of his marriage. So, when Manning became the new figurehead in Atlanta, Sam took out an insurance policy, just in case. Well, the prior footwork was about to pay off. Sam reached for the phone and dialed a number he knew well.

"Rico," Sam said. "You remember those pictures you took of that guy from the FDA?"

"Sure," the man replied. "I didn't know you could do that with Jell-O. He crumbled like a house of cards when he saw those pictures."

"Sure he did" Sam agreed. They had only used the photos as a warning. But the guy was either too stupid or too much of a hero to take the bait. They had not been bluffing. Now it time to turn up the heat.

"So, what's on the agenda for today?" the man inquired.

"Do you think you can find our Jell-O girl?"

"I think I can," the man stated.

"Good. And Rico," Sam added, "a lot is riding on this."

"Can I just rearrange his face?"

"No, leave the man's face alone for the time being. Just set up a meeting place outside of here," Sam said and hung up the phone. The last thing they needed right now was a suspicious looking woman coming into the building. Sam allowed himself a moment of cocky reverie. With his feet up on his desk, he leaned back and thought to himself how wonderful it was that pictures and negatives could be shredded, but Jell-O girls never seemed to go away. Sam got to his feet and went to give Charles an update. But as he walked past the sixteenth floor elevator, the door opened. A beautiful woman emerged that Sam did not recognize. He watched her glide up to the office of the CEO, knock and enter as though she owned the company. This was clearly not a good time.

"Sheila," Charles said, almost as a song. "How was your day?"

"Long, Charlie," Sheila said flatly. She sat down in the chair facing Charles's desk and removed her pumps. As she lifted each foot to give them a quick massage, Charles could not avoid noticing how her already short skirt rode to the top of her thigh. Charles got up and went to her, massaging her shoulders.

"What can I do to make you feel better?" Charles asked sweetly. This was exactly the question Sheila had hoped to hear.

"Sit down, Charlie," Sheila said. "I think I have the answer to that and maybe a whole lot more." During the next fifteen minutes, Sheila gave an impressive marketing proposal using charts, graphs and occasional cleavage. All but the cleavage was wasted on Charles, who only had one agenda. Sheila continued, despite the awareness that he really was not paying attention. "And in order to accomplish this," she concluded, "I would have to be in a better position to oversee the daily workings of our department."

"You want to be the head of marketing?" Charles asked in an amused tone. Sheila got up and put her arms around him.

"Don't you think I can handle it?" Sheila purred, as she playfully kissed Charles on his ear. Charles was getting dizzy from the contact.

Never able to make a rational decision in the heat of battle, Charles said, "Okay, kid, but give me a few days. There's a small matter of someone else currently occupying that spot."

While a happy Sheila led a willing Charles to the couch, he thought, *I'll let Sam figure out how to pull that one off*, and locked the door.

At the other end of the hall, Sam was just returning to his office when his phone rang. "Sam Reynolds," he answered.

"Jell-O girl's name is Ann Boniture," the voice replied.

"Good Work, Rico," Sam said. "So where is she?"

"Still in town. At least she was last night."

"Well, let's get a little bit better acquainted, shall we?"

Rico hung up the phone and tapped his index finger on the receiver a few beats. He was used to turning up the heat. The original blackmail had been used in the preliminary trials. At that point, Manning seemed to be on board. When the animal trials were approved, he had received the pictures and the negatives. Then he suddenly got a conscience.

Well, they were gone now. It would be almost impossible to lure Manning back into the same situation a second time. He had sworn off strip clubs. But the stripper still remained. He felt certain he could find a way to make this guy squirm at just the mention of her name. People conceded to threats when the implied consequences were ones that a person desperately wished to avoid. And he knew David Manning would die before he'd let his wife find out about what he'd done.

Rico locked the door of his dingy smoke-saturated first floor apartment. If things went well with Ann Boniture, his price would include a residential upgrade. In Atlanta, it was way past rush hour, a term that was becoming more and more redundant as the city had become a sprawling life force. People from all over the country were attracted here every year due to its mild weather and booming economy. Atlanta marched forward year after year, oblivious to recessions and unemployment rates. The result was a city that now stretched out for a one hundred mile radius and was continuing to expand every day.

Rico knew exactly where to find Ann Boniture. He had set the bait and taken the pictures that had subsequently been destroyed. He returned to the scene of the crime.

Ann Boniture was a career girl. Her current employment at the Blue Stallion as a dancer was only a short-term venture. Her lifelong dream was to get out of Georgia altogether and make it in Hollywood. She had saved an impressive amount of money, avoiding the drug trap. Ann lived a clean simple life, deviating only slightly when the proposition allowed her to add substantially to her bank account.

It was now 2:00 AM, and the few people remaining in the smoke-filled club were being asked nicely to adhere to last call. Ann gathered up her few belongings and began making her way to the door. It was late, and her level of fatigue made her the most extreme version of her anti-social self. So, when a vaguely familiar face asked for a moment of her time, she was more than a little resistant. When the man offered her a twenty-dollar bill, she slowed her pace and then finally said, "Okay, but please just a moment. I'm fried."

The man ushered her to a table and pulled a chair out for her. When they were both seated, Ann listened with partial patience.

"Do you remember a guy named David Manning?" Rico prompted.

"David Manning," Ann recited several times to herself. She couldn't really place the name, and besides, at 2:00 AM, her brain was not functioning at its best.

"Pictures at the hotel," the man offered. "FDA."

"Oh yeah, now I remember," Ann said, cringing at the memory. "Not one of my finer moments."

"Well, it was a very productive moment," the man added. "And now my employer would like to offer you another, uh, business opportunity."

Ann was now wide-awake and continued to listen.

"We want to know if you would be willing to go to his wife and, shall we say, share the details of that memorable night."

"I thought the pictures were enough and that this was over," Ann said.

"They were at the time. Now we need to engage this dude's help again, and we think he probably won't just offer it out the goodness of his heart."

"Fair assessment," Ann offered. "How much?" she added, always the accountant.

"My employer hadn't actually gotten that far. How much do you need?"

"Twenty five hundred," Ann ventured. She knew that this "employer," whoever he was, could easily fork out that much without a thought.

"I'll check it out," Rico confirmed. Getting to his feet, he offered his hand in an informal agreement. Ann stood as well, and accepted the handshake. The man was quickly out the door, and Ann stood momentarily wondering how she could ruin someone's marriage for twenty five hundred dollars.

Chapter 4

Carol left her office early, informing the receptionist that she wasn't feeling well. That was not really too much of a stretch from the truth. Every confusing encounter at work was leaving her more and more sick at heart. She had spent the afternoon in a managers' massacre meeting. The organization was getting ready to open a central crisis unit. The primary function of this department was to accept all incoming crisis and new patient calls, determine the appropriate pathway, and input the information into their new computer system. Each center was required to provide one volunteer to run the new unit. No one who was qualified was crazy enough to do that, and so now came the crucial moment when the center would "help" volunteer someone.

Carol sat and watched, mesmerized, as the entire management group quickly came to the same conclusion simultaneously. Vicky Manson was to be the sacrificial lamb. Carol couldn't believe what she was hearing. Vicky was one of their best counselors. She was caring and hard working. It was as if this was not the first meeting on this subject. Their conclusion was too rapid and too decisive. Carol was sure she had missed something.

She began to raise an objection, questioning the process of this decision.

Spears immediately cut her off by saying,

"Okay, sounds like we have a winner," and with that, the meeting was over. Carol wandered back to her office in a daze. They had just guaranteed Vicky's resignation. No one that good would quietly go sit in front of a phone and a computer screen every day. Carol had always prided herself on her intuitiveness, but lately, nothing was making any sense. It was as if a force beyond her control was at the wheel and despite all her efforts to reclaim it, the momentum continued to pull her and everyone else further off the road.

Carol pulled into the drug store parking lot and made her way inside. Handing her prescription to the pharmacist, she began to feel some semblance of calm returning. The man took Carol's note from the doctor and told her it would be about ten minutes. Carol simply nodded.

Sitting in the small waiting area, she ran over the past few weeks' events in her mind. Had she been out of line with the lazy co-worker who refused to complete the crisis call the other day? Was there some logic to Vicky's job transfer that Carol could not see? Carol was no longer able to be objective. It was a world gone mad. When the rights of lazy staff were strenuously defended and hard workers were sent into exile, then the laws of physics had ceased to exist, and this was becoming a group effort.

Carol didn't think she was being paranoid, but her words were continually being twisted and motivation misconstrued. And the one constant in the equation was an on-going deterioration of her credibility. Who was benefiting from this the most? Carol was pondering this question, when she heard her name called.

"Ninety five dollars," the pharmacist stated. Carol just looked at the man in amazement. "Your insurance doesn't pay for name brands and there is no current generic for Valipene. One is supposed to be released soon, though," the man offered. Carol reluctantly fished out her debit card and handed it to the pharmacist.

“Well, I hope it comes out soon,” she said, feeling a little victimized, but desperate for the medication. Carol took the card and the small bag and left the store, heading home.

When she entered the house, her husband looked up from his computer screen and said, “Another great day, huh, Carol?” Carol had one of those faces that eliminated her from ever being a successful poker player. She just looked at him and sighed. “Carol,” he said emphatically. “It’s not worth it. You go there day after day, and every time you come home, you look like death warmed over.”

“Josh, I’m not quitting.” The debate over Carol’s job had become a daily tennis match. Where else would she go? Who would look out for her patients? How would the world continue to turn without her? The truth was that she hated to admit defeat, and this was turning into the biggest defeat of her life. She had always thought that there was no problem that did not have a solution. She just hadn’t yet figured out what that would be in this case.

“Just let me see how things go after a few decent nights’ sleep,” Carol offered. Her husband of fifteen years knew better than to argue with her. She was often too obsessive and stubborn to abandon a mission until she was officially defeated. Josh just sighed loudly and returned to his computer screen.

Josh Freeman was dealing with his own dilemma. At the age of forty-five, he was still basically a ditch digger. It wasn’t that his new irrigation business was not doing well; it was just that digging in the dirt was his least favorite job. Josh had been in the dirt in some form or fashion all his life, and the substance was now his biggest nemesis. He quietly wished he had never tried to dive into self-employment, and now felt stuck in the proverbial mud.

Josh had one of those kind faces with compassionate green eyes that always seemed to be smiling. While wearing a baseball cap to hide his slightly thinning brown hair, he could pass for much younger than he was. His clean-shaven face completed the youthful appearance. Josh went back to his computer and alternative career plan.

The screen before him showed an array of charts and graphs that if evaluated accurately, had the potential to equate into mega bucks. Enough for both of them to retire from the pseudo American dream they were living. Carol’s current dilemma did not ease the pressures of this mission. Josh returned his thoughts to the stock market and tried to screen out every distraction, of which there were many.

“There is an answer in here somewhere,” Josh said quietly to himself. And there was. He just hadn’t stumbled on to it yet.

Sam paced back and forth in Charles’s office and ran an annoyed hand through what little hair he had left.

“Sam, just get her into that management position,” Charles stated. “She’s no dummy. She can handle the marketing department.”

“And just what am I supposed to do about the small matter of Jeff Edwards already doing that job?” Sam asked with more than a little sarcasm in his voice. Charles was not used to being questioned and just looked at Sam in amazement. Sam stopped pacing and took a deep breath. “These fires are coming faster than I can put them out,” he said more calmly. Charles knew the request was unreasonable and loaded with his own hidden agenda. He decided to lend fate a helping hand.

"Sam, please sit down." Sam sat, hunched over with his chin supported by one hand and looked up at Charles with an "okay, what" expression. "Can we promote Jeff?" Charles offered. Sam let out a long flow of air and said,

"Sure, if you want to pay him more, I can promote him to anywhere."

"Fine then. You decide where to put him and I'll okay the money," Charles resolved. "Now, I'm late, so if there's nothing else...?"

"Nope. Everything is peachy," Sam sighed and stood to leave. Charles watched his V.P. shuffle out of the office and made a note to himself to okay a raise for Sam as well.

Sam sat heavily down in his chair. What had started out as a fun challenge had become three-dimensional chess. Sam did not like having to manipulate so many people so many times a day. It was aging him. Well, at least he wasn't going to have to fire a good man in the process. He had no idea what kind of marketing manager Sheila would be, but one thing was certain. She would look good doing it. Sam reached for the phone and spoke into the speaker.

"Margie, could you please ask Jeff Edwards to see me before the end of the day?"

"Sure thing. Also, while you were away from your office, a Mr. Rico called. Said you'd know what it was about."

"Thank you, Margie," Sam said and disconnected the intercom call. He dialed and silently prayed to the blackmail god that he had no more fires to put out today. Rico answered on the first ring.

"Hey man," Rico said. "We found the girl." Sam thanked the prince of darkness, or whoever was responsible for such doings. "Her price is twenty five hundred. That okay?"

"Sure, fine," Sam said.

"So what's our next move?" Rico asked.

"Now we contact Mr. Manning and see if he wants to... compromise."

"Okay," Rico agreed.

"Keep me informed."

"You'll be the first one I call," Rico said and hung up.

Rico sat silently and wondered how he was going to best present this little gem before dialing the number to the FDA. More than likely, if he told the receptionist who he was, the guy wouldn't even take his call. Rico dialed and waited.

"Food and Drug Administration," the voice answered.

"Yeah, hi," Rico said, stalling for time. "Mr. Manning, please."

"May I tell him who's calling?"

Rico thought for a moment and then decided to improvise.

"This is Detective Brunner, uh... he'll know what this is about." Rico listened to the hold music and mentally worked on his presentation.

"I'm sorry, Detective, Mr. Manning is away from his desk. Can I have him call you?" Rico thought for a moment.

"Well, actually, I wanted to see him today. Do you know what might be a good time to catch him?"

"Mr. Manning can see you..." Rico heard pages turning. "...At three-thirty. Will that be okay?"

"Fine," Rico said, "thanks." That was only an hour from now. Rico would have to drive there. The Atlanta branch of the FDA office was not an easy bus commute and the building had

its own off-street parking. Rico decided to use the extra time to clean up. He couldn't very well waltz into the FDA building looking like a street thug.

David Manning was sitting in his cracker box office looking at the message his secretary had handed him on his way in. He had no idea who this detective guy was and, in light of past events, had very little trust in the validity of that name. He thought seriously about leaving early and avoiding the whole potentially bad scene, but he knew that if it was who he thought it was, he'd find him anyway. *May as well just get this over with.*

David Manning had been licking his wounds since his one and only indiscretion at the Blue Stallion. Although David was a semi-regular customer, the sum of his activities had always been to simply watch, and then go home and have sex with his wife. But that night was different. He really didn't have that much to drink that night and still suspected that someone had slipped something into his beer. Three beers had never caused him to black out before. He wouldn't know how it would affect him now. David Manning had not touched alcohol after that night. He still had to go back for his six month HIV test hopefully for a conclusive negative, and was losing sleep worrying over the outcome

Manning was Government Issue through and through. He had been with the Atlanta branch for twenty-five years and enjoyed the slow pace and the big benefit package. He had a nice house in the elite town of Dunwoody. His children, now off on their own had everything they wanted growing up and his wife had never had to work. But lately, the drug companies were getting more cutthroat and greedy. David's recent promotion as head of Research and Review required him to grant final approval before a drug could be recommended to Washington. At the main office, there would be a final panel review, but David's signature was the official stamp of approval. What used to be a logical process had become a circus of greedy and entitled corporation tactics.

The sound of the intercom buzzed through and made David jump slightly. David hit the button and said, "Yes?"

"Detective Brunner is here to see you, sir."

"Send him in," he answered reluctantly. When Rico entered his office, he was not at all surprised.

"Hi, Manning" Rico greeted cheerfully. Rico did not feel especially cheerful, but thought they should start out on a positive note.

"Have a seat," was all David could muster back.

Rico never conducted business on someone else's turf. Too much of a chance for the person to record a conversation.

"Better yet," Rico said. "Let's go for a walk. It's a great day."

David followed Rico out the door and told his secretary that he'd be back soon.

After rounding the corner of the FDA building, Rico spent the next ten minutes outlining what shortcuts Dominex Pharmaceuticals wanted in the final test stages of their new drug and what they were prepared to do if they didn't get it. David just walked silently listening and smoldering. He wasn't going to dance this same dance again. "You know what?" David finally chimed in. Rico stopped walking. "I have had enough of you people. If you think you can just waltz in here every time the spirit moves you, you're nuts."

"Now wait, Manning."

"No waiting, and no negotiating," David said in a louder voice. "This is it."

"It is?" Rico said, attempting to gain control. "What is *it* Manning?" David was tired of running and, besides, he doubted seriously he could keep cutting corners for Dominex Pharmaceuticals without getting busted eventually.

"I think it's time my wife heard the whole truth," he said finally.

"You're full of shit," Rico said. "You have no intention of telling her, and who do you think your wife will believe?"

It was a valid question. One that David had been over way too many times himself already.

"I guess we'll find out who's full of shit," David said. "Now, please excuse me. I have a legitimate business to run."

Rico watched the FDA man charge off in a huff and thought, *Well that went well*. Driving home, he evaluated the situation. It was the oldest and best blackmail defense. Tip the blackmailers hand and spill out its messy contents yourself; thus, problem solved. But sometimes not. It was always a gamble for the one being blackmailed. Which choice had the worst consequences? Rico pondered that question and was sure Manning was doing the same at this very moment. Was he bluffing? Rico thought he was, but the guy was really pissed. Anger sometimes is a great motivator and Rico admitted that this was a tough call. He would have to pass this on and see what they wanted to do. Sam would not be pleased. Of this much, Rico was very sure.

Sheila sat happily in the chair facing the V.P. of Operations for Dominex Pharmaceuticals, although her emotion was not conveyed outwardly. She did not allow such emotions to show when she was in her "game" mode. Sam was outlining the responsibilities of her new job function. Sheila was not listening. This first step had not taken nearly as long as she had expected it would. That "chance meeting" at the pharmaceutical convention in Palm Springs was no chance meeting. The coincidental chain of events that had led up to the eventful meeting and subsequent seduction of the CEO had been the result of a long and elaborate plan. Since that time, she continued to deliver her drug samples to doctors, pass out cookies and smile the smile of Miss Congeniality, no matter how battered her feet had become. But Sheila had only the crown in her vision and now, as far as she was concerned, she was that much closer to wearing it.

"So, your office is at the end of the hall," Sam concluded. "If you need anything, I'm sure your secretary, Janette will be able to help."

Sam stood up and offered his hand. Sheila stood as well and accepted the conversation's conclusion. She was eager to get situated.

"Let me know if you have any problems," Sam said.

"Thanks," said Sheila humbly and waved on her way out the door.

Sam sat staring at the vacated seat that had just had the privilege of Sheila's ass. Earlier that day, that same chair had supported a very angry former Director of Marketing. Jeff Edwards had been with the company for fifteen years. Sam could still hear his words bouncing off the office walls.

"You've got to be kidding," he had shouted. "Why are you doing this?" Sam had no easy available answer.

"Jeff," he had consoled. "You are one of the best. The Marketing Department has been doing a bang up job, but if we don't get this new drug on the market, there will be no marketing department to run."

Jeff had always been a team player, and sat quietly digesting those words. "Alright," he conceded, "but I'm a business man, not a scientist. Why me?"

"Because," Sam interjected, "our Research and Development Department is about to become more of a business and we need someone to add that edge." *Good speech*, Sam thought to himself. Actually, Sam had no idea what direction R&D was going in light of their current dilemma, but it was a good option to keep open.

"Okay," Jeff had finally sighed, openly not happy but resigned to the idea.

"Good," Sam had said, feeling more relieved than he dared show.

"Effective immediately. Oh, and did I happen to mention the raise?"

"Touché," was all Jeff had said to the added salary. "I need to go find some boxes," he said over his shoulder, and was out the door.

Sam was deep in thought when his phone startled him out of his reflections. "Sam Reynolds," he answered into the receiver.

"Sam, we have a slight problem." Sam recognized the voice and the familiar knot at the pit of his stomach.

"What's the problem, Rico?"

"He says he's not going for it."

"What the hell does that mean?" Sam said, getting more annoyed.

"He said he's going to tell his wife everything," Rico explained. There was silence. "Sam," he continued. "I think he's bluffing. It's the standard bluff. What do you want to do?"

Sam thought a minute.

"Calling his bluff will cost us twenty five hundred dollars," Sam said, more to himself than for Rico's benefit.

"And if he does tell his wife the whole story," Rico added, "that money won't even buy you a hamburger."

Sam sighed loudly and began mutilating a paper clip. It wasn't the money that bothered Sam. Twenty five hundred dollars was an executive lunch. It was the amount of time this cat and mouse game was costing him.

"Rico," Sam concluded. "I'll get back to you." Sam looked at the pile of mutilated paper clips on his desk. He wondered to himself how many shots of hard liquor it would take to forget this whole day. "Not worth it," he answered himself. He would still have to deal with all this, and a hangover tomorrow. He had to take the risk. Twenty five hundred dollars was a drop in the bucket compared to the billions that Suprame represented. But mostly, Charles Roman would have cow if he heard that there was going to be a long delay.

Decisively, Sam picked up the phone and dialed the familiar number.

"Rico, go ahead with the plan."

"You got it," came the reply.

"And listen, we have to step on it, so let's make this happen quickly."

"Got it," Rico answered, and the line went dead.

Rico pushed open the heavily tinted door of the Blue Stallion and went inside. He was momentarily mesmerized by the form up on the stage. "Excuse me," a man said, as he attempted to get around the obstacle created by Rico. Rico found an empty stool at the bar, and began looking for Ann Boniture. He had taken the pictures himself months before, and her exquisite form was burned in his memory.

The dancer finished her routine, and another took her place. *Nice*, Rico thought, *but that's not her. Oh, well.* Rico chuckled to himself. He had had to wait for people under worse circumstances than this. Rico ordered a beer and enjoyed the choreography.

Several beers later, Rico spotted Ann on the stage. She quickly spotted him and gave him a wink.

Ann proceeded to engage the steel support beam provocatively. However, she was not thinking about the pole or what it represented. She was quietly adding twenty five hundred dollars to her savings account total. When the song ended, Ann quickly found Rico and was sitting beside him at the bar.

"Hey, you're good," Rico said, and lifted a finger towards the bar tender. "Buy you a drink?"

"Just a Sprite," Ann told the bartender and turned her attention to Rico. Rico recounted the exchange between himself and the angry FDA man.

"So, you will be calling his bluff," Rico concluded. He wrote an address down on a business card, and handed it to her. "Now give us twenty-four hours to persuade this guy to change his mind."

"And when do I get paid?" Ann interjected.

"You only get paid if we need you," Rico explained, "but I have a bad feeling that this guy isn't going to crumble. I'll call you with the go-ahead."

Ann reached for a blue napkin, and jotted down her number.

"Call me at home," she told Rico, as she handed him the napkin. "We have exhausted this as a meeting place."

"Hope I won't need this," Rico said, "but I think we will."

Ann stood, picking up her glass.

"Here's to infidelity," she toasted and walked away with her drink.

Chapter 5

David Manning looked across his desk at the unwanted and uninvited visitor. He had refused another nature walk.

"You're out of time," Rico stated. "My employer will give you twenty-four hours to agree to ditch the added research."

"Your employer can go screw himself," David spat and shot to the door. With one trembling hand on the door, he pointed the other at Rico. "Tell Dominex to go screw themselves," and opened the door so hard, it hit the wall with an amazing force.

Rico got to his feet and walked to the open doorway.

"Take twenty-four hours to think about it."

"I don't need twenty-four hours," Manning yelled, unconcerned about the open door. "I gave you my answer. Do I have to draw you a diagram?"

Rico refrained from commenting about the interesting visual the FDA man had just offered, and looked at the red-faced, trembling man. He actually thought he saw steam coming out of his ears.

"Okay, Manning," Rico said walking through the door. Turning back, he said, "Oh and Manning, expect a visitor, and I don't think it will be the ghost of Christmas past." *Very clever*, Rico thought to himself as he entered the elevator. *But I don't have a real warm feeling about this.*

Ann usually woke up at 2:00 PM, so when the phone rang at twelve thirty, she was not pleased. She let the answer machine pick up the call and was just rolling over to go back to sleep, when she heard Rico's voice. Ann grabbed up the phone and greeted Rico in a groggy voice.

"You're on," was all Rico said.

"When?"

"As soon as you can get there."

"So, how far do I go with this?" Ann asked.

"Give him a chance to change his mind. Once you tell his wife, it's over - so be convincing. But if it does go that far, take it all the way."

"Should I profess our undying love for each other?"

"Good idea. That little sting will remind him that we don't play. Maybe next time he won't push his luck."

"I never make house calls," Ann interjected. "Believe me, I'll have his attention."

Ann glanced at the clock and groaned. She had only gotten to bed just five hours ago. "Strong coffee," she mumbled and went to the kitchen.

David Manning sat in his living room with the TV on, but he had no idea what he was watching. He was preoccupied. When the doorbell rang, the frazzled FDA man jumped to his feet. "I'll get it," he said. There was no reply from the kitchen, where his wife was putting dinner together. When David opened the door, he was finally face to face with his worst nightmare.

"Hi, David," Ann greeted. "We need to talk."

"You're wasting your time," he responded. "She already knows."

"Who is it?" came the voice of his wife, as she approached the opened doorway.

Sam was getting tired of dialing the number to his outside handy man and listening to the phone ring. He was getting ready to hang up when the receiver was quickly snatched up.

"It didn't work," Rico told his employer. Sam said nothing. "I really didn't think he had it in him," Rico continued, "but his wife already knew everything."

"Damn." Sam sunk into his chair.

"We still have to pay her," Rico reminded him reluctantly.

"Yeah, I know. Talk to you later," he said, and hung up.

The failed blackmail was unprecedented. They had never had to resort to such pathetic tactics in the first place. The cash was always enough. Now, they were out of ammunition. Sam had no choice. He began to formulate a new plan. As he bent and un-bent the paper clip in his hand, he pondered his options. Conceding to the research was going to create a long and unacceptable delay in marketing Suprame. Finding a shortcut didn't seem to be an available solution. Sam shook his head in disgust. He had been trying to force the hand of someone who would not budge. Manning's annoying propensity for procedure had been a major stumbling block since his promotion. How could he win against someone like that? Doing things by the book was not Dominex's style, but that was what Manning required. As Sam searched his creative mind for the answer, a smile slowly came to his face. He pressed the intercom buzzer and said, "Margie."

"Yes?" the phone speaker chimed.

"I want to meet with all of the research team this afternoon, and tell Jeff Edwards that I want him to attend as well."

"Yes sir," the phone speaker replied. Sam sat and continued to formulate a plan. This would take more time than blackmail, but it was fool proof. Sam was quietly congratulating himself on his ingenuity when his phone buzzed again. "Sam, Mr. Edwards was not in his office in the marketing department." Sam put one hand on his balding head and cursed under his breath. "A Sheila Montgomery said she would be glad to attend. But where's Jeff?" Sam sat shaking his head at his own stupid forgetfulness.

"Sorry, Margie," he replied. "Jeff was transferred to R and D."

"Research and Development? When did this happen?"

"Never mind," Sam said annoyed at the outcome. "Just please find him."

Sam did not need an outsider at this meeting and as far as he was concerned, Sheila was an outsider. He didn't know her and was sure as hell not ready to trust her, no matter how good the CEO thought she was. His estimate of Charles Roman's ability to evaluate things objectively when it came to his hormones was minimal at best. "Oh, well," Sam sighed. "If the CEO can't keep his dick out of the equation, I can't keep being his safety net."

"So here's the situation," Sam concluded to the attending staff. "We can't release this new medication without drug termination research."

"How long will this take?" one member chimed in.

"Depends," was the answer from within the group. "The difference in the chemical compound between Valipene and Suprame is almost undetectable. If we find an existing group on the original drug now who are willing to undergo a period of abstinence, that might be acceptable."

"Right," another added. "Then at least we don't have to wait for a new test group to begin taking the drug."

"How long of an abstinence period do we have to monitor?" came the next inquiry.

"Six weeks," Sam stated, avoiding eye contact with the CEO.

"And how long will the test subjects have to have been on the medication?" This question came from Sheila.

"Varying stages," Sam answered with surprise at such an intelligent question.

"It will take us some time to accumulate an appropriate test group," someone interjected.

"Right," Sam agreed. "Anyone want to volunteer for the recruitment stage of the study?" He looked over the group and saw only one raised hand. Sheila was smiling at him with her hand held high enough for everyone to see. *Shit*, he thought to himself. How would it look if he rejected the only volunteer for a job that nobody else wanted? He stalled, hoping someone, anyone else might rise to the occasion, but no one did. He didn't blame them. It was a long tedious process. "Okay, Sheila," he conceded, and silently prayed he would not regret the outcome. "Then if there are no further question," and after a brief silence, it appeared no one had any, "let's get on it immediately," Sam said concluding the meeting.

Everyone stood to leave. "Oh, Jeff," Sam interjected. "Could you wait just moment?" When the room cleared, there were three men remaining. Sam, Jeff, and an annoyed CEO.

"Are we sure there is no way around this?" A question Sam had expected and knew he was not going to avoid.

"Yes, Charles," Sam responded. "We forced our hand one too many times and the FDA isn't budging this time."

"But what if these test results aren't good?" Charles demanded. Sam looked at Jeff, and said,

"Charles, they will be." Charles looked at both men and knew he could count on them. Besides, this was now getting into an area he wanted to know nothing about.

"Fine," he said. "I'll give you six months, and I mean six months." And with that, the CEO was out the door. Sam knew he meant it. Now turning his attention to Jeff Edwards, he said,

"Okay, business man, here's the plan."

Carol was sitting in a small room with ten other patients. The chairs were arranged in a circle. She was trying hard to stay focused on the rambling of one group member.

"So, if you were drunk when you had a wreck, your body would be so relaxed that you probably wouldn't get hurt."

"Wait a minute," Carol interjected. "Are you trying to tell the group that they should stay drunk all the time in case they have a wreck?"

"Well, no," the patient responded, while the rest of the group began snickering. Carol held back a smile herself. She couldn't believe what these people came up with.

"Listen," she stated firmly. "If you think back on all the 'wrecks' in your life, it was the drug or the drink that caused the wreck in the first place." The group could see that their counselor was on a role, and knew her well enough not to say a word. The laughter faded. "We all need to get something here," she continued. "The world owes us nothing. No one cares if we make something of our lives or if we trash it." Carol looked at the sheepish group and realized she was hitting them pretty hard. Looking up at the clock, she said, "Come on guys, you all deserve better. See you next week." As the group noisily stood to go, Carol added, "And make sure you go to at least three meetings this week. I'll be checking your meeting sheets." Carol hadn't checked a meeting sheet in a long time, and wondered if any of them were even attending their mandatory twelve step meetings.

What had started out as a "liberal" approach had turned into "addicts run amuck." She had believed that if you treated people with dignity and respect, they would rise to the occasion. This had not turned out to be the case. Addicts were fast learners, and most of them already knew what they could and could not get away with. Carol had resigned herself to the situation by saying that the patients were adults. If they wanted to recover, they were given the tools. She was not responsible for their bad decisions. But the truth was that she could not be a hard liner. Carol was as soft hearted as they came when it applied to troubled human beings. If coddling facilitated recovery, Carol would have rehabilitated the entire world by now. But addicts did not need coddling. They needed someone to shine a harsh light on their reality, and the consequences that had resulted from their chosen path. Carol did not have it in her to force people's faces into the obvious mud. Her compassion was her greatest gift, as well as her biggest obstacle.

She had just made her way back to her office and a ringing phone. "God, the receptionist must have radar," she thought. "This is Carol," she answered.

"Line three," was the reply. Carol punched the button and stated her name once again.

"Carol," the caller began. "Carl is worse. He won't come out of his room and he has nailed his bedroom door shut. He thinks everyone is in on this big plan to use his thoughts."

"Has Carl been in to see the doctor?" Carol asked.

"He wouldn't go," Mrs. Banner continued. "He said that the mental health center was the primary headquarters for 'Them.'"

Jesus, Carol thought to herself.

"And I think he got his hands on a gun," the mother added.

"What?" Carol asked, instantly at attention. "How long has he had a gun?"

"A few days, the mother answered.

"I'm going to have to call the police," Carol stated.

"Oh no," the woman wailed. "He's not a criminal. Please don't involve the police."

"It's just for safe transport," Carol said reassuringly. "We have to get him to the hospital." Carol let the woman absorb the information.

"Okay," she conceded. "Please hurry."

"I have to get a doctor to sign a form for involuntary commitment," Carol added. "Since he is considered an adult, you can't do that for him. As soon as I get that, I'll make the call."

"Thank you," the mother said, conveying her panic and desperation.

Carol dialed the number for Tri-County's "doc on call" and asked for the doctor to be paged.

"That will be Doctor Morganstern," the operator answered. Carol thanked her.

“Dr. Morganstern,” she groaned. The doctor was a new addition to Tri-County and did not work and play well with others. Morganstern did not readily admit patients, and Carol had already complained about her once before to Spears, when the doctor had refused to admit a cocaine addict who had begged to be admitted into detox.

“Cocaine addicts do not go through withdrawal,” the doctor had stated adamantly. Carol had attempted to argue that even though severe depression and sleep deprivation were not life threatening, they were still symptoms of withdrawal. She had attempted to persuade the doctor by adding that most of them can’t stop using without some kind of controlled intervention. In the end, the patient had been left to his own devices. Carol was certain that those devices had resulted in the patient’s demise.

She busied herself with the pile of papers on her desk. The paper trail of a bureaucratic system was a losing proposition. She was writing furiously when her phone rang. “Line two,” she was told. Carol pressed line two and identified herself.

“This is Doctor Morganstern. What have you got?” Carol had to deliver Carl’s history from memory amidst the stack of unrelated files that had overtaken her workspace. When she finished, the doctor asked if he was a danger to himself or anyone else. Carol couldn’t believe the question.

“Well, I’m guessing that if he has a gun, he might decide to use it.” She was having a hard time keeping the sarcasm out of her voice.

“Do we know for a fact that he has a gun?” the doctor asked.

“No,” Carol answered. “His mother said she thought he did.”

“And when you assessed him, did he present with any safety issues?” the doctor asked. Carol paused remembering a psychotic Carl wearing the tin foil helmet. The same patient who was now fortified in his room with the doors nailed shut.

“Safety issues, Dr. Morganstern?” Carol asked in disbelief. “He thinks that an alien force is after him. Up until now, he has chosen to hide from them. I guess the safety issue goes to what he’ll do in self-defense.”

“We can’t admit him based on what he might do. Tell the family to make an appointment.”

“What?” Carol said, feeling her temper rise.

“Didn’t you say he did not keep his last appointment?” the doctor asked.

“Yes,” Carol replied. “I also said that he would not come in because he thought we were in on the plan.”

“Well, we can’t be responsible if the patient won’t come in for help,” Morganstern replied with finality. “Just make the appointment,” and with that, the doctor was gone.

Carol was furious. She hated this system. A patient with no money had to be holding a gun to their own head or pointing it at someone else before they could get any attention. The only benefit to the stupid admitting policy was that state workers didn’t have to work, and insurance companies saved a bundle. Carol felt one of her rages coming on. She knew she was momentarily out of control, and should have taken a walk around the block. Instead, she made the fatal choice. She punched in the number for the Medical Director.

“This is Carol Freeman, and I need to speak to Dr. Abernathy now,” Carol spat into the phone. When the Medical Director answered the call, Carol sprang into action. “Dr. Abernathy, we are having a big problem with Dr. Morganstern,” she explained. “I have lodged prior complaints, but nothing has changed.”

“Why don’t you tell me what the problem is this time?” the doctor interjected.

Carol went through the entire scenario, adding her commentary along the way. When she was done, there was a momentary silence. Finally the doctor responded. "Well, Miss... what is it? Freeman? We managed to hold this center together before you came here, and I believe we will manage after you are gone." Carol's rage was replaced by fear. She was about to soften her approach, when she heard the doctor loudly hang up.

"Oh shit," Carol said out loud. She tried to get the doctor back on the line before he followed through with his implied threat.

"The Doctor is on another line," the receptionist told her. "Do you want to hold?" Carol had a pretty good idea who the doctor was on the line with, and quietly returned the receiver to its cradle. What had she done? She knew full well that management at Tri-County did not take kindly at all to having their authority questioned. This had not been the way to get Carl, or anyone else for that matter any help.

Carol waited for the inevitable. The one constant at Newberg Mental Health was the rapid and efficient information highway. People doing their jobs at the speed of drying paint was one thing, but consequences and revenge were always top priority. She didn't have to wait long. Spears was in her doorway looking at her angrily.

"Carol, get in my office." Carol walked down the hall and planted herself in the appointed chair. She was not given the opportunity to speak. "Are you out of your mind?" Spears spat.

"No, the patient is," Carol interjected.

"Shut up," Spears yelled. "What do you think you are doing, complaining about one of our doctors to the medical director? You are supposed to come to me."

"I did," Carol pleaded.

"Bullshit," Spears yelled. Carol was flabbergasted. She had never heard the Center Director talk this way. She knew she shouldn't have handled the problem this way, but the doctor was wrong. Couldn't anyone see that?

"Carol, I don't want you to make any more decisions on your own. If you have to go to the bathroom, ask me, and I'll tell you if you really have to go."

Spears was livid, and Carol kept quiet.

"I don't trust you anymore," he continued. "If you tell me something, I will assume that it is a lie."

That hit Carol hard. She had made some bad decisions and was clearly not a good politician, but she was not a liar.

"Do you have anything to say?" Spears challenged.

Carol felt beat to her knees. She had just lost the one thing she valued most: her credibility.

"In light of this conversation," Carol said, "I don't really care anymore."

"Then get out of my office," Spears ordered.

Carol shot out the door and did not stop until she got to the receptionist's desk. "I'm sick," Carol said. "I'm going home." She charged furiously out the door, leaving a bewildered group in her wake.

Driving down the small town road to the interstate, she was strangely resolved. She didn't feel like crying, she felt angry. This bastard had just called her a liar. No one had that right. He had just stepped over a very important line as far as she was concerned. She had devoted herself to this job. She had jumped in and done anything he had asked her to do, and she had done it with the spirit of a champion. Now she was supposed to ask him if she could go to

the bathroom. "He can kiss my ass," she announced to the empty car. She began the process of letting go.

Carol called in sick the following morning. She was not ready to face the mess that had become her rapidly deteriorating career. Padding around the empty house, she marveled at how well she felt, despite the tragedy of the day before. She had personally begun to feel so much better since she had started sleeping. She had been taking one pill each night as prescribed for the past few months and couldn't believe that such a small little pill could have such a profound effect on her insomnia. It was beginning to lose a little of its initial effect, but all in all, she was sleeping and that was all that mattered.

Now at least when the people around her fell short, she didn't mind so much taking up the slack. What Carol failed to realize was that her unfortunate need to hold the world together had been a big part of what was causing her insomnia. This was an issue that would eventually be the second biggest nemesis in her life. But for now, she was satisfied. Her only immediate dilemma was having to see the strange little doctor again. She was keenly aware that she had only five pills left, and with no refills, Carol had no choice but to return for another visit.

The last visit had made her blood boil for days. The strange little man had asked her if she had thought about hurting herself or anyone else. Carol had gotten irate. "I ask those questions myself to others every day," she had responded coldly. "I don't need a 'psych eval,' I need to sleep every night." Nevertheless, the strange little doctor told her she was depressed and had notated the diagnosis in her medical chart before he would write her another prescription. "Fine, I'm depressed," Carol said sarcastically, and left the office with the only thing that mattered, her pills.

Driving home from the doctor's office that day, Carol had debated loudly to herself. "I know depressed when I see depressed," she announced out loud to no one. "And I'm not depressed. Maybe a little homicidal." The guy actually had to slap a label on her before she could walk out the door with a prescription. Insomnia wasn't enough?

Carol continued this tirade all the way home. By the time she got there, she was so angry she just took a pill early and went to bed. The truth was that Carol had been so angry that day she had taken two pills. She told herself that one sometimes just didn't get it anymore, and on days like this, the extra dose seemed justified. In general, she had been angry about one thing or another most of the time. This would be Carol's number one future nemesis. The one that ultimately had the potential to take her down.

Carol had the whole day off and reluctantly decided to take advantage of the time. She picked up the phone and dialed the number to the doctor's office. When the receptionist answered, Carol made an appointment for her medication checkup. Her blood pressure had been on the rise lately, and she had attributed that to her job. She hoped it would be better today. Carol checked the time. She had two hours before she had to assume the insulting role of depressed patient. She headed to the kitchen to find coffee and some mind numbing TV.

Carol entered the doctor's office on time. Sitting in the uncomfortable wooden chair, she was keenly aware of her own nervousness. *What if he puts me through the third degree again,* Carol thought. *I don't think I can stand another round of stupid questions.* Carol got up when her name was called. The nurse frowned at her cuffed arm and said, "one-forty over ninety." *My God,* Carol thought, *this is so unusual.* "You might have to consider blood pressure medication if this keeps up," the nurse said.

"I really don't understand this," Carol replied. "My blood pressure has always been normal. I guess my job is really getting to me."

"Well, something will have to change," the nurse warned, and added the information to her chart. Carol sat waiting for the doctor wondering what she had the option to change. While she thought about it, her blood pressure wasn't the only change she had noticed. She had these occasional bouts of nausea and diarrhea. Sometimes she felt mild flu-like symptoms when she knew she didn't have the flu. *Strange*, Carol pondered, *how stress could affect you*. This would also explain those few moments of explosiveness she had experienced. There were times at work lately when she had come un-glued. Things that only mildly annoyed her before had suddenly become a trigger to become enraged. Looking back on each one of those incidences, Carol couldn't explain the rage. It had become an even bigger source of staff alienation, not to mention her questionable job status.

When the door to the examination room opened, Carol was relieved. A different, friendlier face greeted her. "Hi, Carol," the friendly face said. "I'm Doctor Hopton."

"Oh thank God," Carol said out loud. The Doctor just looked at her with amusement. "I was expecting the other doctor, Carol explained. "He always gives me the third degree."

"Well, you can relax" the doctor said. "Now what can I do for you today?"

Carol felt all her anxiety melt away and gave the friendly face her medication history.

"So, if it's okay," she concluded, "I wondered if we could increase the dose. It's losing its effect."

"Sure," the friendly face responded, and quickly wrote the prescription.

"Thanks," Carol said in a sigh of relief.

"Patients usually know what's best," the doctor said. She adamantly agreed.

Carol returned home and found her husband in his usual spot: in front of the computer screen. "Carol, isn't the medication you're taking Valipene?" Josh asked without removing his eyes from the computer, or noticing her unusually early arrival.

"Yeah," Carol responded while she changed into her comfortable house grubbies. "Why?"

"Because I see here that a company is about to launch a generic for that drug." Carol waited for an explanation. "This company," Josh said, pointing to the screen, "Dominex Pharmaceuticals. And their stock is going through the roof."

"That's nice," Carol said, picking through the mail.

"It's very interesting," Josh said. "They still have some sort of research to complete, but this indicates that all the players here already know the outcome."

"Well, the sooner the better," Carol responded. "The cost of this stuff is ridiculous."

"Says here," Josh continued, "that anyone willing to be a part of the final research will get their medication for free."

"Free?" Carol echoed.

"Yeah, and they will pay a thousand dollars for the trial."

"Where do I sign up?" Carol asked.

Josh turned and looked at his wife.

"The research involves people already taking the drug."

"Okay, that's me," Carol said, wondering about his sudden interest.

"The company wants those people to go off the medication for six weeks."

"Oh," Carol said.

“Yeah,” Josh sympathized.

Carol just walked off saying over her shoulder,

“So what’s for dinner?”

“Insomnia,” Josh said in a partial joke. The joke was lost on Carol.

Sitting in front of the TV later that night, Carol pondered the possibilities. She had gone without sleep for years. Certainly she could manage it for six weeks. A thousand dollars and free meds were worth six weeks of insomnia.

“Josh,” Carol said.

“Huh?” he replied while distracted by the antics of a drunk driver arguing with the arresting officer. “They show the same idiots every week,” Josh laughed.

“Josh,” Carol said, louder.

“What?” Josh said, focusing on his wife.

“I think I should volunteer for that research group.”

“Okay,” Josh said, wondering if she was really serious. “I’ll print out all the details for you.”

“Maybe I don’t have to start right away.” Carol had just increased her dosage from one to two milligram tablets and wanted to get a few last night’s sleep in before she had to go back to the long nights of insomnia.

A commercial came on and the couple watched the confusion develop due to a garbled cellular phone conversation. Josh shook his head while he got up to go to his computer. When he returned, a high-speed police chase was under way. “Here,” Josh said, and handed the printed material to Carol. Carol read the contents and pointed to the page.

“Here’s the contact person. I’ll call her tomorrow.”

Chapter 6

Sheila Montgomery sat in her new office. She was so happy to be off the street, so to speak, and in the real line of fire. She had volunteered to help compile the study group for the last phase of the company's research on Suprame. Her incentive strategy had been readily approved and was working well to attract a large group of volunteers. Her own personal incentive had been to remain at the pulse of Dominex's activities. She had been the only one to volunteer for this initial endeavor, and despite Sam's obvious reluctance to put her in the middle of their precious study he had had no choice. She was currently in the driver's seat.

Although the FDA required a random group, it was Sheila's primary responsibility to carefully screen each candidate. The precedence that the company's medical staff had outlined was very specific, and those who did not meet the criteria were immediately rejected. Valipene had been prescribed primarily for seizures when it first hit the medical community twenty years before. From there, it had also been used for a wide range of anxiety disorders. The candidates with a history of seizures were immediately rejected for obvious reasons of liability. There had not been too many contacts from individuals suffering from anxiety; however, a few brave souls had made contact with the company and were also rejected. The outcome of those individuals would have had a profound effect on the research results. In fact, any candidate with a history of any kind of psychiatric problem was immediately shown the door.

Sheila was closing in on her quota of five hundred test subjects and was looking over the list of volunteers when her secretary buzzed in. "I have a Carol Freeman on the line," her phone announced.

"Have you finished screening her?" Sheila inquired.

"Yes, ma'am, and she qualifies," Sheila took the call.

"Okay," she concluded. "You will be required to stop taking the drug for six weeks, and that will begin in one month. On that day, we want you to arrive here at our office at nine AM to check in and have a physical examination." Sheila opened the schedule book, and gave Carol her appointment and start date. Satisfied that she had been understood, she hung up the phone and added Carol's name to the list.

Preparing for this study had required a lot of leg work in the beginning, but now she was finding that the project had taken on a life of its own. With things moving so well, she decided to call it a day. Sheila was definitely enjoying coming and going as she pleased without so much as a disapproving glance from anyone. No one in their right mind would mess with her. She was a good "friend" of the CEO. A relationship that was not yet completely platonic, but her ability to dodge the man had resulted in minimal contact these days.

Sheila had a mission and her focus remained on one target and one target only. Charles Roman was simply a means to that end. Satisfied that there was no unfinished business, she left the office and headed home.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Edwards. Ms. Montgomery has left for the day," the receptionist stated timidly.

"That's okay," Jeff replied. "I just need to check some of the study information. I'll be in and out of there." With that, Jeff Edwards entered the empty office, leaving a skeptical receptionist as he closed the office door. Jeff could not believe the twisty turns of his job with Dominex. He had spent years working a traditional eight-hour day, and now he was sneaking around his old office. Lucky for him, he did not have to try to blend into the woodwork. He belonged here. He would not have been very good at the spy business, because he stuck out like a sore thumb. Jeff had long thin wispy blond hair that he combed straight back and wore in a ponytail. His appearance was somewhat awkward due to his excessive height. He was six-foot five, and only weighed about one-ninety soaking wet. He also never had to shave. His face and body parts remained forever hairless.

Jeff continued to rummage through Sheila's drawers, looking for anything significant about the research study. The sour expression on his face conveyed his opinion of the woman now occupying his old office. He was not at all pleased with the shift in job responsibilities. Especially when his old position was now filled by someone he felt was so completely unqualified. Not only was this woman out of the office more often than in, but when she was here, she seemed more interested in what every other department was doing rather than in her own.

This made Jeff's assignment that much easier, but the fact that marketing in general had been taking somewhat of a dive was disheartening. After all, Jeff had built that department himself. He felt he had a personal stake in its success. He had to admit that a lot of the problems in the marketing department now had to do with the type of products they were selling, and that the delay in Supreme had not just effected marketing. The entire company had taken a hit. But there was some consolation in the fact that Sheila's name was connected to the dive rather than his own.

Jeff found the clipboard with the impressive list of volunteers for the research group that Sheila had compiled and noted the total. The information included the names of the volunteers, their ages and diagnosis. There was also a space provided for the length of time the individual had been on the medication. "Good," Jeff said to himself, and removed the pages from the clipboard. On his way past the secretary's desk, he smiled and said, "I'll have this back later." Jeff headed for the nearest copy machine.

The FDA had always been a complex overlay of multiple agendas. But lately, the daily traffic was getting to be more than David Manning could manage. He had not been in charge of final approvals until recently, but he was certainly paying the price for his predecessor's leniency. There had been numerous complaints coming in daily about Valipene. These problems were not just being reported about that one medication. The problems seemed to extend to any medication with the same underlying compound. These drugs had been on the market for forty years. The problem now was that people no longer took pills for an entire lifetime without question. With the more advanced communication system of the Internet, people had access to more information and felt more autonomous in their own treatment.

Prior requirements by the FDA had only met prior prescribing habits. Drugs were tested based on the use and the side effects of the drugs while they were being taken. The issue of drug termination had never really been an issue before, but it certainly had become one now. No one at the FDA wanted to be accused of burying information, even though it had been common

practice with Bob Whitford at the helm. As long as he had remained in his position, he had covered his own tracks. Now David found himself falling into them daily. No wonder the guy had been able to retire so soon. He had raked in a lot more than a government job salary.

The other problem David was facing was that the drug companies had grown in size and power. There were now a staggering number of interested parties attached to its successes and failures, and many of them were not even connected directly with the companies themselves. As more and more people in public office began to benefit from the financial success of pharmaceuticals, pressure had become hard bearing on the FDA to approve various medications, whether or not they had met all requirements. The casualties that had been left in the wake of "FDA and political sellout" had been manageable up to this point. David wondered how long the walls of grace could contain these potential disasters before there was a massive flood.

David himself had recently avoided a disaster of a more personal nature. He wished he could have taken the credit, but in the final run, it had been his wife's amazing backbone, not his. David would remember that day for the rest of his life. He had not been able to bring himself to tell his wife anything. How could he expect her to understand what he had no way of understanding himself?

When the stripper had shown up on his doorstep, he thought he was going to have a heart attack. It was his wife that had saved the day. She had invited the stripper to come inside, and then quietly listened to her story. When the girl was done, his wife had calmly sent her away, stating that she had already known about her husband's brief indiscretion.

"Did you really know?" David had asked, closing the door and still in fear for his marriage.

"David," his wife answered. "Do you really think I could be married to you all this time, and not know when there is a problem?"

"Why didn't you say something?" David said, in a rush of relief.

"I didn't say I was happy about it," his wife answered, and walked off. She did not inflict any further verbal punishment on him. As far as she could tell, he had already suffered the required amount.

Now, David was free. He had spent months feeling trapped inside the clenched fist of Dominex Pharmaceuticals and now they would pay the price. "Those people have no idea who they are screwing with," he said out loud with a new sense of power. David looked at the preliminary research proposal submitted by Dominex. He couldn't see any holes in it initially, but he would find them eventually. "That drug will never see the light of day if I have to die keeping it off the market."

March twentieth was a date that Carol would remember forever. It was the day she was demoted from her management position at Newberg Mental Health. Driving home in the freezing car, she ran over the events in her head. She had been summoned to Spears's office. She had not felt nervous or worried. She had felt numb. Spears had not said a word, and had simply handed her a form to read.

This is to inform you that you have been terminated from your position with Tri-County Health Systems as Addiction Program Manager, effective this date. You are being offered the

position of addiction counselor with Newberg Mental Health. If you have any further questions regarding your transfer, you may contact the Department of Human Resources.

There had been a whole page of legal mumbo jumbo, but Carol did not take the time to read it. She had gotten the message. Starting Monday, she would be working in the same department, but would no longer be the manager. "Sign it," was all Spears had said to her. Carol had just gazed back at the tiny man. She knew she had made some mistakes, but her heart had always been in the right place.

Carol had started out with so much respect for Spears. In the final run, Buck Spears had turned out to be the perfect model of a state worker. The unspoken code of ethics at Tri-County was "Never make waves." The order of the day in a wave-free work place required tight controls. No one who had the potential to create those waves was allowed to survive, regardless of how valid the issue. Carol had not been Spears's first casualty, and knew she would not be his last.

As she pulled up to a stoplight, Carol began to feel the temperature of the car, and adjusted the heat. As her state of numbness subsided, Carol felt a sense of sadness and relief. She drove the remaining miles home.

Josh Freeman was a man driven by his desire to be free. He believed in the great American dream. He just didn't agree with the traditional method of obtaining it. He compared the forty-plus hour workweek lifestyle to running a marathon on a treadmill. In the end, you may have run a thousand miles, but you are in the same place as where you began. The system was designed to feed itself. Its manpower was simply a means of continuation, with no end in sight for the worker bee. His vision of happiness was the open road and a whole world waiting to be explored.

Josh studied the charts on his computer screen. The stock and commodities markets were not inanimate objects. They were a living, breathing entity with emotions and mood swings. There were numerous "trading gurus" who wrote books and taught seminars. Josh was beginning to realize that there was no one method or truth. The answer was a composite of all methods, along with some additional insight that resided within himself. He did not yet have that insight.

Josh had sectioned off one part of a room that was filled with a large, beat up oak desk. There were papers covering the entire floor area. On the walls, there were pinned-up poster boards with stock market acronyms, times and symbols that were meaningless to the casual observer. To anyone who had ventured into that part of the house, it was a housekeeping nightmare. To Josh, it was the road map to his dream.

He had become especially interested in Dominex Pharmaceuticals. Not because his wife was sleeping better, but because the recent rise in their stock valuation did not make sense. Dominex had been prepared to market a generic drug that had the potential to make the company billions in annual revenues. Their market date had been postponed when they were suddenly required to provide additional research. It did not make sense for the company's stock valuation to rise so drastically, just when they had been hit with such a long delay. *What is going on with that company?* Josh wondered. He wrote some notes down in his spiral notebook, and moved on to another chart.

Chapter 7

There was an excited buzz in the air as the research team of Dominex gathered in the conference room. Jeff Edwards stood at the head of the table, accompanied by a few members of his department. Sam Reynolds was seated at the far opposite end of the table, followed by Sheila Montgomery and a few people from her staff.

"Well, I think everyone is here, so let's get started," Jeff directed. He nodded to a young man sitting to his left, who stood and handed out packets to everyone.

"Thank you, Rick," Jeff said. "Now will everyone please turn to the first page? On page one, you will see a list of our research volunteers and the corresponding numbers, which we will use to identify them during all phases of the study. This is being done to avoid any age or gender bias. The number ranges will be used to organize their start dates. I will maintain their corresponding identities. Any questions?"

Jeff scanned the room and noted that Sheila was studying page eleven. *Not good.* There were no questions and Jeff forced himself to ignore Sheila.

"Now, if everyone will turn to page two, you will see all the additional information on each volunteer." Sheila was still on page eleven. "Turning to page ten," Jeff continued, "we have outlined the start date structure. We will see ten volunteers each day. They will come in for complete physicals and drug screens, which will provide us with a baseline for each volunteer. On the date the volunteer comes in for their physical exam, they will surrender all of their medication. It will be returned at the end of their six weeks of abstinence.

"The startup phase, or Phase One, will take ten weeks to complete." Jeff paused for input. No one had any. "Moving on then," Jeff directed, "everyone turn to page eleven."

The group noisily turned pages. Sheila was staring straight ahead at Jeff. He continued to ignore her, and kept his focus on the other members of the team.

"On this page, we have outlined the follow up process for Phase Two of the study. The volunteers will come in every ten days to have their vitals checked and to submit to a drug screen. We know that all the volunteers will test positive for the basic compound on their first day, but it should be completely out of their systems after ten days to two weeks.

"What is Pharmed?" Sheila interjected.

Jeff did not answer her, and looked to Sam for assistance.

"It is the onsite lab we created to save costs," Sam interjected.

"It can't be that much to test for one substance," Sheila argued.

"We are not testing for just one substance," Jeff spat back. "There are a multitude of substances that effect the brain in a similar way. Drug addicts have known that for hundreds of years."

Sam gave Jeff a warning glance.

"Alcohol, for instance, affects the same part of the brain as the drug Valipene. If any of the volunteers were to compensate for the drug by using another, they would have to be eliminated from the study."

"Besides," a member of R&D interjected, "we're being required to do complete drug screens by the FDA, so what's the point of debating this?"

"I agree," Jeff stated. "Now, may I continue?" he said mostly to Sheila, daring her to speak. "Our department will maintain all the Phase Two data prior to turning it over to the FDA."

"Now," Jeff emphasized. "Are there any questions?"

"What will the rest of us need to do during the study?" a member of marketing asked, afraid of getting any of Sheila's leftover wrath.

"Nothing," Jeff answered. "Your work is done, and I want to thank all of you for bringing us this far."

"Yes. Good work everyone," Sam added. "And rest up this weekend. We have a busy ten weeks ahead of us."

With that, everyone stood to go back to their primary jobs. Everyone, that is, except Sheila, who remained behind scrutinizing page eleven.

Back in her office, Sheila continued to ponder the one question that kept sticking out in her mind. Why had she not heard one word about any onsite lab until now? She thumbed through her files and pulled out the expanse of paper that made up her preliminary research files. She had every single memo and outline that had been printed since the first day of this project. Carefully scanning each page, she worked through the stack until she reached the packet she had received today.

"Nothing," she said. "There is not one word here about an onsite lab."

She also wondered how they would be able to present Pharmed as an independent test site. The lab was in their building. How could it be considered to be objective screening, when it was owned by the same company submitting the data? None of this was making any sense. *I don't know what is going on, but I intend to find out.*

Sheila waited until the building had cleared. On a Friday night, everyone left on time. When she reached Jeff's office door, she felt inside her pocket and fished out the keys she had gracefully removed from Charles Roman's desk. *He had been so busy removing my clothes, he never noticed my hand inside his desk drawer,* Sheila thought. She slipped one key inside the door, but it would not turn. She tried another with the same result. "Third time's a charm," Sheila said, as the key opened the office door.

Inside the office, Sheila quietly closed the door and retrieved her tiny flashlight. The tiny light scanned an immaculate office. "Anal asshole," Sheila said under her breath. The animosity between herself and that man had grown to be a large and wonderful hatred of each other. Sheila went to Jeff's desk and dug through each drawer, looking for files. There was nothing in the drawers but drawer stuff. "Figures," Sheila said with contempt.

She moved to the file cabinet and was not surprised to find it locked. This was of no concern to Sheila, who was an expert with a nail file. File cabinets had "dummy locks," or locks for dummies. They were no match for the "criminally gifted." The whole idea was to never invite the criminally gifted to hang around your files.

She had the cabinet unlocked in a jiffy and was thumbing through the files with their neatly typed tabs, when she heard footsteps coming from down the hall. "Shit," Sheila whispered, and quickly scanned the office for a place to hide. She had just dived into the closet and closed the door as she heard two men enter the office.

"She is far too curious," a voice said. Sheila noted that the voice sounded very much like Jeff's.

"So, what are you going to do about it?" the second, unidentifiable voice questioned.

"I don't know," the Jeff voice answered, "but this is too important to be screwed up by that twit." Sheila could feel her face turning red.

"Hey," the number two voice said. "Why don't you give her some 'important' assignment to keep her busy?"

There was silence.

"That's not a bad idea," the Jeff voice said finally.

"Good, so can we go home now?" the number two voice said.

"Sure, let's go," the Jeff voice answered. Sheila could hear them moving towards the door. "I bet the boss has an important assignment for her," the Jeff voice laughed.

"Too bad she isn't more generous," the other agreed. Both men were now laughing as though they had just heard the funniest joke ever delivered. The laughter grew faint, as the door closed behind them. Sheila could still hear the jokes and the laughter continuing down the hall.

She waited five minutes before daring to come out from the safety of the closet. "That anorexic weasel," Sheila hissed. "If he's such a marketing genius, how come he didn't even notice his office door was unlocked?"

She moved back over to the files, more determined than ever. In the third drawer, Sheila found what she was looking for. She removed a file, labeled P2. *Clever*, Sheila thought. *Like no one will figure out that P2 means Phase Two*. Sheila carried the file over to Jeff's desk and made herself at home. She carefully scanned each page until she found pages she had not seen before. *What the hell is this?* Sheila scanned memos dated from two months prior, outlining an onsite lab that would carefully screen and monitor each patient's progress. The last memo discussed the importance of controlling the final results and made the claim that the onsite lab would most efficiently accomplish that goal. The location of Pharmlab had a different downtown address. *Very clever*. The other location was probably a Chevron Station. She had never seen these memos, and wondered how they had been distributed so easily without her knowledge. She stared at them as though they were on fire. Did Dominex intend to forge the lab location and the results if necessary? There was so much more involved with this study than a volunteer's drug screen result. She scribbled down the alias pharmlab address and returned the file to its place, remembering to re-lock the file cabinet.

I don't know what they're trying to pull, Sheila thought, *but if they think they can get away with this, then they must be nuts*.

Carol had been lying on the couch for two days. She felt officially beaten. Life offers no rule handbook or user guide. You just know inherently that when you are knocked down, you should get back up and fight harder for what you want. Another unfortunate reality is that there are a given number of tries. After those have been exhausted, it is time for a new game plan. The only problem with this cold, hard reality is that by the time a person reaches the "new game plan" stage, they are out of juice. For an undetermined length of time, the individual feels void of any power. There is no fight, no creativity, and no sense of hope.

Carol dragged herself off the couch and walked in to the kitchen. Maybe some coffee would help. Standing at the kitchen sink, she began to fill the pot with water, and noticed her wilting plant in the windowsill. She stuck a finger into the dirt. It was dry. This plant had been the product of an oversized spider plant. The original plant had been thrown out and neglected. Yet, after months in exile, the plant had refused to die. Carol had dragged it out of its

dark, abandoned corner, and had given it a new home. To her, the plant and its offshoot represented an undying spirit – survival against all odds.

Carol poured some water into the dirt and thought, *Even hard core survivors need to be watered occasionally.* She was feeling sorry for herself. A condition she felt had been hard earned. She felt justified. Carol stood at the kitchen counter and waited while the water began to run through the coffee grounds. The gurgling sound of the coffeemaker gave re-assurance that help was on the way. She had one more night of drug-induced sleep to look forward to, and then she would be off her medication. The money for the research could not have come at a better time. She wasn't ready to embrace the heartache of pounding the pavement looking for another job just yet. She intended to wallow in her demotion for a while.

Chapter 8

The Study

Monday morning at Dominex Pharmaceuticals began day one of Phase One. The first ten volunteers sat facing each other in the waiting room in nervous anticipation. Some of the volunteers had been on their medication for ten years or more. The primary motivation for all of them was the knowledge that after six weeks of inconvenience, they would never have to pay for the drug again.

Carol waited her turn in silence. As a counselor, she was surprised that the commonality of their issue did not inspire more conversation. She noted that this was a scared looking group of people. She felt compelled to ease the tension, and mentally kicked herself. Although she was not in the same position as some of these people, she had her own problems. It was not her job to be the drug company's cheerleader.

"Brian Carter," the nurse called from an open door. Carol watched as Brian got to his feet, and Carol gave him a smile that said, "I know. Just hang in there." Brian Carter disappeared as the door closed behind him.

"I don't know why I'm so nervous," the woman sitting across from Carol said. Carol wasn't sure the woman wanted a response, but answered her anyway.

"It's the unknown."

"Well, I don't think it will be a big deal," another volunteer chimed in. Carol felt an ease in the tension. At least they were all talking to each other.

"Yeah, it's only for six weeks," the first woman responded. Carol noticed that the woman was holding on to her medication bottle with a death grip.

This is a house full of issues, Carol thought, and decided she had preferred the silence.

"Carol Freeman." The nurse had appeared again in the opened door. Carol was glad to move on, and followed the nurse inside. "Please go into exam room three, remove your clothes and put on the gown.

Carol hated the intimacy that was demanded of people in doctor's offices. In no other situation would an individual be expected to drop every guard that maintained their dignity and sense of safety. Here, it was expected, and Carol reluctantly complied. She sat on the exam table in the flimsy gown, swinging her legs back and forth and reading the poster on the wall for the third time. *Don't let arthritis keep you from your life*. She studied the picture above the caption showing a vital middle-aged woman playing soccer with two children at her heels. All of them were laughing and appeared to be having the time of their lives. Below the poster was a stack of brochures with the same caption and picture. *Maybe I should take up soccer*, Carol thought to herself humorlessly.

The nurse arrived and began the standard exam process. She cuffed Carol's arm and checked her blood pressure. "One twenty four over eighty. Very Good." Carol was amazed.

"Wow," she said. "All I needed to do was get demoted and my blood pressure is back to normal."

The nurse ignored the comment and completed the preliminary exam. She then asked Carol about her medication history. Carol told the nurse that she had been on the medication for six months and that she had increased her dosage from one milligram to two milligrams one month ago.

"Well, that would explain the decrease in your blood pressure," the nurse said. Carol looked at the nurse with a confused expression on her face. The nurse continued. "We find that after the patient is on a low dosage for a while, they experience some strange side effects. After we increase the dose, they are fine. Don't ask me to explain why," the nurse said candidly. Carol just nodded. Now that she thought about it, the strange flu symptoms had also disappeared in the past month. She had been so pre-occupied with her job situation, she hadn't noticed. The nurse handed Carol a cup and instructed her to provide a urine sample. "Once you have done that," the nurse said, "the doctor will be in to see you."

Carol took the plastic cup into the bathroom. She put the sample inside the little metal cabinet marked, "Place Sample in Here," and returned to the waiting room. *Why hadn't her doctor's office said anything about 'low dosage' side effects?*

Instead, they had scared the crap out of her, talking about mysterious causes and blood pressure medications. She made a mental note to confront the doctor next time she saw him.

A kind looking man with gray hair entered the examination room. "How are you today, Mrs. Freeman? I'm Doctor Walsh."

"Okay," Carol responded.

"Now, I just need to listen to your heart."

Carol allowed the doctor to place the stethoscope under her gown.

"Good," the doctor announced, and placed the instrument on Carol's back. "Take a few deep breaths," the doctor instructed. Carol complied. "Your lungs are nice and clear," the doctor informed her. "Now comes the part all patients hate."

"Oh good," said Carol in an attempt to keep herself calm.

"Well, the ticklish ones anyway," the doctor clarified. "Lay down on the table," the doctor instructed. Carol scooted forward and lay down. The doctor checked her abdomen and Carol tried not to jump off the table. "You are one of the ticklish ones," the doctor told her.

What gave me away? she thought, staring at the ceiling.

The doctor checked Carol's chart and asked if she was on any other medications. Carol informed him she was not. "Okay, Mrs. Freeman," the doctor concluded. "We want to see you back here in ten days. Same time, okay?" Carol nodded. "You can get dressed now."

When Carol re-entered the waiting room, she noticed that only two remained. She smiled at the remaining volunteers, and went to the checkout window. A nurse asked Carol for her medication bottle. Carol handed it to her and noted with surprise that she really didn't want to give it up. "We'll return this to you after the study is concluded," the nurse reassured her as she handed Carol a pamphlet outlining the rules of the study. "Read this over carefully. You cannot consume any alcohol or unauthorized medications during the study." Carol thanked the woman and left the building. When she reached the general vicinity of her car, she noticed Brian Carter in the parking lot.

"Hey, you survived it," she said jokingly. Brian turned, looking somewhat relieved.

"Yeah, no big deal. Did they tell you to come back in ten days?" Carol nodded. "Good," Brian said in relief. "I thought maybe they found something wrong with me."

"No," Carol said. "Don't worry. They're probably doing that with everyone." Brian walked over to where Carol was standing. She guessed that he was in his late thirties, or early

forties. He was tall and muscular. His straight brown hair was cut stylishly short. His neatly trimmed mustache finished off his handsome appearance. He seemed to want to say something, but was unsure about how to say it. Carol waited.

Finally, Brian said, "I'm a little nervous about going off this stuff. I've been taking it for so long, and these people don't really seem to care."

"Well they are only interested in one thing," Carol interjected.

"That's what worries me," Brian stated.

"Here," she said, getting out one of her business cards. "Here is my number at work. You can call me there anytime. You know we are all in this together." Brian seemed a little relieved as he reached for the card and placed it in his wallet.

"Thanks," he said, "I guess I'll see you at the next drug fest." Brian walked back to his car. Carol waved goodbye and headed to her first day at work in her new position. On the way, she turned on the radio. "*Roll With It Baby*" was in full orchestration. Carol couldn't help but smile and wondered if God spent part of his time as a D.J.

Sheila had arrived to work at the usual time, despite Jeff's instructions to the research team to be early that day. She now had an outward and obvious hatred for the man, and had no problem letting him know about it. He had no idea who he was dealing with. If she had wanted him gone, she had the inside track to make that happen. But Jeff was not her primary concern. She just regarded him as an annoying obstacle. He did not make important decisions, so who was behind the creative twist in the research design? Sheila's mission was to find out. Maybe it would turn out to be something she could use.

Sheila had a special interest in the outcome of this research project, but if some additional dirt could be obtained along the way, it would become another tool to be used to her advantage. She entered the waiting room that had been arranged for the volunteers. To her surprise the room was empty. She opened the door and walked inside the examining room area and met one volunteer on their way out. Sheila barely took note of the woman, stepping aside so she could make her way to the door. Sheila continued down the hall and entered the room labeled Pharmed. Inside, she found a table that was stacked with the volunteers' charts, and began reading them. "I'm sorry, but this is a restricted area," a voice said, startling her.

"It's okay, I'm Sheila Montgomery. I'm on the research team." Sheila watched the woman pick up a phone and dial.

"Mr. Edwards," the woman said into the receiver. "I have a Sheila Montgomery here." The woman became quiet as she was obviously listening to a long reply. "Sure, Mr. Edwards. I'll take care of it," she answered and hung up the phone. "Ms. Montgomery, Mr. Edwards has advised me that no one is authorized to be in here. I'm sorry, but I'll have to ask you to leave." Sheila did not want a scene and returned the chart she was reading to the table. When she turned to leave, the woman added, "Oh, and he'd like to see you in his office." Sheila turned on her heels and marched off in the direction of Jeff's office. *What a coincidence. I want to see the little mosquito too.*

When she arrived at Jeff's office, the door was opened and she could see that he was not alone. *Great, the mosquito has backup.*

"Ah, Sheila," Sam Reynolds said engagingly. Sheila took a few awkward steps into the office, and accepted the chair that Sam offered her. "Thanks for coming so quickly,"

"No problem," Sheila responded, making it sound more like a question than an answer. Sam picked up on the implied question and jumped right in.

"Sheila, we have just been made aware of a problem that we want you to help us with."

"Sure," she replied.

"Our marketing department in New Jersey is in dire straits."

"Go on," Sheila said, suspiciously. Sam was on a role, doing what he did best and was not detoured by her tone.

"We had a good Marketing Coordinator, but he left the company a month ago." Sheila did not say a word, keeping a steady gaze on both Sam and Jeff. Sam continued. "Well, since then, our northeastern district sales are down substantially."

"Really," Sheila said, unable to keep the sarcasm out of her voice.

"That's right," Jeff chimed in. "We need an experienced marketing person to go in and fix the problem." He had emphasized the word 'experienced' to convey his obvious opinion of her qualifications. Sheila ignored the jab. She could not believe what she was hearing.

"So you want me to go to *New Jersey*?" Sheila emphasized the last two words, making them sound like a disease.

"Sheila," Sam interjected. "Your role as Marketing Director extends far beyond the southeastern division, didn't you know that? I thought we had discussed this when you were promoted."

"And besides," Jeff added, "it's only for a few months." Sheila could not help but notice how happy Jeff looked at this very moment.

Sheila was smoldering. Jeff Edwards was an insignificant worm. His little "special project" plan would have been limited to what he was authorized to throw at her. Sam Reynolds was a greater force, and she had not anticipated having to take him on as well. She should have expected this. She was so focused on her mission, that she had underestimated the possible pitfalls. She still didn't know what was going on, but her assessment of its implication had just taken on new heights. If they were this desperate to get rid of her, they were covering up more than an onsite lab. How was she going to get to the bottom of this from New Jersey? She only had one option: Charles Roman.

Sheila had to get out of this cozy meeting fast. "When do I need to be there?" Sheila concluded.

"I think they need you right away, but one week should be sufficient." Sam offered generously.

"Thanks," Sheila said, getting to her feet. "If you will both excuse me, I'm late for an appointment." Sheila walked quickly out the door. She wanted to stick around and argue about it, but she had to find Charles. She had no intention of going to New Jersey, and he was the only one that could stop it.

Sam walked over and closed the office door. "Well, that went well," he said, pleased at having avoided a scene.

"Don't kid yourself," Jeff responded. "She gave in too easily. She has no intention of going quietly."

"Well, she can kick and scream all the way, but she's going."

"We'll see," Jeff said skeptically. "She will need to stay out of the picture until the study is over. The last set of volunteers will not even begin their six weeks of abstinence for ten more weeks. This whole process is going to take a total of four months."

"You don't think we can keep her in New Jersey for four months?" Sam said with a smile.

"She is very resourceful."

"So am I," Sam said. "You leave Sheila Montgomery to me. We need you to keep your focus on this study."

"That's fine by me," Jeff said with a sigh. "That woman gives me the creeps."

"Oh, she's harmless. As long as you don't get in bed with her."

Sheila was marching down the hallway to Charles' office with fire in her eyes. She did not know how things had de-compensated so quickly. Her curiosity about Pharmlab was not out of line. It was a surprise addition at the last minute. Why were they all acting so paranoid? It would have been stranger if she hadn't reacted with some question about its sudden appearance. If she had known that the onsite lab was going to be such a sensitive subject, she would have been more covert about it. Now she was being sent off to the North Pole.

As Sheila reached the CEO's office door, she was stopped abruptly. "Ms. Montgomery, you can't go in there," the secretary warned.

"The hell I can't," she responded coldly, and knocked on the door.

"No, really," the secretary said more forcefully. "Mr. Roman gave me specific instructions that he was not going to see anyone today." There was no answer from behind the door, and Sheila was momentarily derailed.

"Who is he in there with?" Sheila asked suspiciously. The secretary released a long breath and just looked at Sheila.

"Look, he doesn't tell me what he's doing, or where he is going. I'm just following orders." Sheila understood the secretary's position, but did not have time for empathy.

"Is he in there with a man or a woman?" Sheila asked, refusing to be put off the scent. The secretary knew that she was not going to get this shark off the hunt for blood.

"I really don't know. I was at lunch when the person arrived."

"I see," Sheila said. "Didn't take him long."

She was halfway down the hall when the secretary said, "It never does." But Sheila did not hear her. She wasn't supposed to.

I am in the crapper, Sheila thought. I never should have cut him off, but who would have expected this? She had only a week before she was going to be shipped off to New Jersey. She had no plan, but she knew she had better come up with one damn fast. She decided to wait out the little "meeting" Charles was in. Whoever this bimbo is, she is not keeping me from getting to him, she thought, kicking a chair out of her pacing path. I have too much time invested in this.

Charles Roman had not been in his office with anyone. He had alluded to a daytime meeting to his secretary, because it was more believable and understandable than the truth. The truth was that the handsome, fearless CEO was losing his nerve and was in no mood to see anyone. The company's revenue was falling. This would not have been such an overwhelming problem if Charles had not been spending the past six months expanding the company. He had assumed that his wonder drug would have been on the market by now, and all the expansion would have been needed and justified.

The expansion had not just taken the form of a new building, currently under construction, and additional staff. The expansion had also included an upgrade in his life style. The coming of Suprame had inspired a beautiful new home on sixty acres of rolling hills in the elite and expansive suburbs of North Atlanta. And since his new residence required a longer commute, he had upgraded his mode of transportation. He had also hired someone to

become his permanent driver. Charles loved the new house. He loved his car, and he especially loved having a driver. Unfortunately, Charles was running out of money and time. He had a minimum of four months before Supreme would see the light of day. His company and his personal expansion would come closing in on him long before then.

Charles was sitting back in his chair with his feet up on the desk and his eyes closed when he heard the door open abruptly. He opened his eyes and sat up, startled by the intrusion.

"Charles," Sheila said, closing the door and sitting in the chair facing him, "we have to talk."

"Well, you are a nice surprise," Charles said, regaining his composure.

"Listen," Sheila said, remaining focused, "you have to help me."

"Of course I'll help you," Charles soothed. "What's going on?"

"They're sending me to New Jersey." Her opinion of the state was conveyed in spades on her face.

"Sheila," he laughed. "You make it sound like you're being sent to Siberia."

"This is not funny," she said, bordering on rage.

"Okay, I can see that. Why don't you start at the beginning and tell me the whole story."

Sheila spent the next fifteen minutes telling Charles everything she could without giving him any real information. After all, Charles was probably the primary conductor on the ride to hell. Without any real information, she found she was having a hard time making a case for herself. How could she justify the need to remain in Atlanta without divulging the reason?

After she finished tap dancing around the issue, Charles just looked at her dumbfounded.

"Sheila, I still don't understand the problem. As I see it, you have done a good job with the study, but now you are needed elsewhere. Is that right?"

"Sure," was all Sheila could say. "But Charles, this research study is my baby. I put it together, and I should be the one to put it to bed."

Charles thought for a minute. His current situation would be better with her around. At least she was a good distraction. "Okay Sheila," he said, under the guise of consolation. "I'll talk to Sam."

"Oh my God, thank you," she said in relief.

"Don't thank me yet," Charles conceded. "I just said I'd talk to him."

"Yeah, but you are my big strong CEO," Sheila said, getting up and moving to Charles's lap. While his raging hormones were ready to comply, a remaining brain cell was aware of the classified information still visible on his computer. Sheila began nibbling on his ear, while Charles provided weak objections.

"Wait a second," he stalled. *Just let me log off of this program.* Even in heat, he knew better than to leave his financial records glowing on his monitor.

Sheila, who was not in heat, zoned in immediately. He was very motivated to close down the program he was looking at. She had to know why.

"Charlie," she said, stroking his thigh. "How do you log onto this thing, anyway? I can't figure mine out."

"Want me to show you?" Charles purred.

Sheila looked him adoringly, and asked, "You can do that?"

"Well of course," he said proudly. Sheila watched, while Charles restarted his computer. "Now when you get to this part," he said, "you have to put in your password. Do you

know what your password is?" Sheila just gave him a look of helplessness. "That's okay," he continued. "We'll use mine for now, and I'll get our computer tech to issue you a new one tomorrow." Sheila watched closely, while Charles typed in the word "money." "See?" he announced, as the computer's desktop came up. "Easy as that."

"Thanks, Charlie," she said, planting a kiss on the back of his neck. *He really is a prisoner of his own libido.*

"Well, I'm not sure about the study," Charles whispered in her ear, but you can put me to bed anytime you want." He didn't bother locking the door. It was well after 5:00 PM.

Chapter 9

Carol was planted on what had become her permanent place in the house. When she wasn't at work in her new subservient role, she was on the couch in front of the TV. It had become her hiding place. She had been off the medication for three days and was indescribably exhausted. The first night had been of no consequence. She had awakened numerous times throughout the night and felt tired the next day, but she was used to that pattern. The following two nights, she had been up more than asleep, and when she did sleep, it had been very light and fitful. Carol was familiar with insomnia and with the feeling of exhaustion as a result. But the fatigue she felt now was unlike anything she had ever experienced before. It was as if her arms and legs were useless. She felt weak and unable to lift herself off the couch. The only time in her life when she had been this weak was during an illness, and she wasn't sick.

Carol dragged herself off the couch and made her way to the phone. She dialed the number at work and informed the receptionist that she would not be able to make it in. It had only been a few days since her demotion, and she felt sure that people would attribute her absence to that. And although her motivation was hanging by a thread, Carol would not have been able to navigate herself to a Caribbean cruise. Carol hung up the phone and walked back to the couch. She lied back down, breathless from the effort. *What is wrong with me?* She was too weak to call the doctor, much less drive there. She decided to wait one more day. Waiting was the path of least resistance.

It was Friday and the study at Dominex had completed its first week. The company had received fifteen distress calls from its first fifty volunteers. The majority of those calls had come from the volunteers that had begun the study early in the week. The primary complaint was weakness, fatigue and flu like symptoms. They had all been instructed that some discomfort was normal and to remain home to rest. It would pass.

Charles Roman was seated in the conference room, accompanied by Jeff Edwards and Sam Reynolds. The topic of the day was not the reported symptoms. The topic was Sheila Montgomery. Charles was shaking his head. "I don't understand why it has to be Sheila. We have people who are more experienced and can deal with the problem as well, or better." Sam and Jeff just looked at each other. The CEO liked to keep his hands clean, but in this case, he had to be informed.

"Charles, are you aware of the calls we received this week from some of the study volunteers?" Sam began.

Of course he was unaware. Phone calls went to his minions. He glared at the two men and gave an impatient hand gesture to tell him more.

"So far," Sam continued, "we have received fifteen calls out of the fifty volunteers. Their complaints of flu symptoms were not unexpected."

"And?" Charles said, unimpressed. "We already knew this from the reports the FDA has received."

"Okay," Sam continued. "We don't know how many volunteers will have..." Sam searched for the correct word, "...problems."

Charles was beginning to understand and asked, "So, what's this got to do with Sheila?"

"We might have to get creative," Jeff interjected. Charles now used both hands making the same "let's have it" gesture. "For some reason, Sheila has made it her mission to keep a sharp eye on this study."

"Well, sure," Charles said. "She feels like it's her study."

"We can't have that," Sam said, and looked at Charles to be sure he understood the seriousness of his statement. Charles slowly began to nod.

"Okay," he said. "But she won't like this at all."

"Tough," Sam said. "And just so she is real clear on this, we'll put it in writing. I don't feel like having any more meetings about this." As far as Sam and Jeff were concerned, they had already clocked too many hours on the "Sheila issue."

"Silent knives...dissect me, and I feel no pain."

On Saturday morning, Carol awoke in terror. She felt as though her entire abdomen was on fire. Carol began to groan and Josh rolled over to see what was wrong. "I'm in trouble," Carol said. Josh placed a comforting arm on Carol's stomach, and she screamed out in pain. The soreness was unbearable and Carol began to cry. "What is wrong with me?" she said between sobs.

"I don't know," Josh said, in a panic. "Do you want to go to the emergency room?"

"I don't want to move," Carol cried. "Call the doctor's office. There has to be someone on call."

Josh was up dialing, while Carol worked to calm herself down.

"Just take deep, slow breaths," Josh said, while he waited for someone to answer the phone. When the answer came, he attempted to describe the details of Carol's problem.

"I'll have the doctor return your call," the woman said. Josh gave her a phone number and hung up.

Carol was no longer sobbing when Josh returned with a cold washcloth. He was placing it on her forehead, when the phone rang. Josh grabbed the phone on the first ring. "Dr. Hopton. Thank you for calling."

"Let me talk to him," Carol interjected. Josh handed the phone to her. Carol gave him the entire history of the past five days.

"You should go back on the medication," Hopton advised. Carol thought about his statement for a minute before responding.

"This is from stopping the medication?" Carol asked in alarm.

"Most likely, it is."

"If this is what happens when I stop taking that...crap..." Carol did not finish the sentence. She was in shock.

"You shouldn't have stopped your medication without my consent," he stated firmly.

"I stayed on it with your consent," Carol said angrily. "If I'm sick from going off this shit, then I'm addicted to it. Why would I want to continue an addiction?"

"If you insist on going against medical advice, then I would advise you to go to the emergency room," Hopton responded coldly. "You did not have my consent to stop the medication. You did that on your own." Carol couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"The issue is not whether I did this with your permission," Carol yelled into the phone. "The issue is that I am addicted to a medication that *you* prescribed."

"The only thing I can tell you to do is to go to the emergency room," he stated again, with hostility.

"Yeah, right," Carol said, and hung up the phone with prejudice. It didn't matter. Hopton had already disengaged – literally.

All Josh could do was stare at her. Based on her side of the conversation, things had not gone well. All the color had drained from her face as she worked to understand what just transpired. This friendly faced, smiling doctor had just undergone a major personality change.

Finally, Carol looked at Josh.

"He shouldn't have kept me on that shit, and now he's out of the loop."

"What does that mean?" Josh said.

"It means he is covering his ass." In the next few moments, Carol came to grips with the horror of her reality. She had been innocently popping a pill every night, and had never realized that slowly and quietly she had become severely addicted. Her need for sleep and the maintenance of a workaholic had made her conveniently blind to the obvious. *My god! What have I done?*

It was Monday, and week two of the study. Sheila read the memo for the third time. *Please be advised that your assignment in New Jersey has been confirmed. We have considered your request to reassign this project to your staff and find it to be in the best interest of the company to maintain your personal representation. Your departure has been scheduled for Wednesday of this week. A complete itinerary will be sent to you via email. We appreciate your support.* The memo was signed by Charles Roman.

Sheila crumbled the paper into a ball and threw it across the room.

"Lousy shot," a voice interjected.

"Hi Jerry," Sheila said flatly.

"Hi yourself. The trash can is behind you."

"I wasn't aiming for the trash can," she said angrily. "I was aiming for Jeff's head."

"Then you're a really lousy shot."

Sheila could not help but laugh. Jerry Owens had been working with her since her assignment to the research study. He had been a reliable staff member and also a friend when she needed one. Sheila needed one now.

"Jerry," she began. "Shut the door. I need your help with something."

He closed the door tentatively, and sat down to face her. Jerry had one of those youthful faces that had no age. His curly brown hair was cut short to keep it manageable. The man's six-foot frame was lean and muscular, as a result of all the hours he spent at the gym. He was one of those health club junkies that got up at five in the morning, pumping iron while everyone else was hitting their snooze alarm. Also a vegetarian, he had clean living down to a fine art.

Sheila filled Jerry in on everything that had transpired, including her suspicion about Pharmed and her impending travel plans. "Woah!" was all Jerry could muster. "This is heavy."

"Jerry, no one says heavy anymore. But you're right. This is heavy."

"So, what are you going to do about it?"

"I'm going to New Jersey," Sheila answered. "The question is what are *we* going to do?"

"Oh no," Jerry said alarmingly. "I would like to keep my job, thank you very much."

"Jerry," Sheila said, attempting to gain some control of the situation. "You are not going to lose your job."

"Yeah?" he said excitedly. "They love it when you go snooping around in their files with a flash light in the middle of the night. Maybe I'll get promoted to the James Bond division. I hear they make good money."

"Jerry, calm down," Sheila ordered.

He took a breath, and said, "I'm calm. This is calm," although his voice did not promote his claim.

"Jerry, I won't put you in the line of fire. Besides, I have some clout with the CEO."

"Yeah, I see where that clout has gotten you so far. Do you have any idea how cold it is in New Jersey this time of year?"

Sheila ignored the jab.

"Jerry, I just need you to keep an eye on things while I'm gone."

"We're back to the James Bond thing again."

"Look, here is the list of all the volunteers. They are all local. I just want you make contact with them, and keep tabs on their progress."

Jerry scanned the sheets of paper she had handed him.

"Five hundred people is a lot of tabs," he said reluctantly.

"Just do the best you can," Sheila said, feeling some relief.

"Fine," he concluded. "But if anyone tries to run me off the road in the middle of the night, I'm coming to New Jersey to find you."

"Jerry," Sheila said. "You watch too much television."

Jerry just shook his head.

"I'm leaving on Wednesday," she concluded. "I'll call you when I get settled. And Jerry, thanks."

"For being a sap, you're very welcome," Jerry said, and went out the door.

Sheila retrieved the balled up memo off the floor, and read it again. Charles Roman was no longer a useful ally. Together, they had succeeded in temporarily getting her off the scent.

Carol was not due for her ten-day checkup for two more days. She had made several calls to Dominex that morning but had not gotten a call back yet. She had also refused to go to the hospital over the weekend, despite Josh's insistence. She was shell-shocked. She had told him that doctors had gotten her into this mess and she had no intention of letting one get near her now. So, she spent the weekend in bed, nursing her unusual flu symptoms.

It was now 2:00 PM, and she needed some medical attention. Carol sat up and tried to slow the spinning inside her head. *How can I drive to Dominex*, she wondered. *I can't even*

negotiate a straight line to the bathroom. Carol put her hands to her head, but the room would not stop turning. *I have to try,* she thought. *I can't lie here for two more days, wondering what is going on.*

Carol slowly got herself dressed. When she looked in the bathroom mirror, she was horrified. She looked like as if she had aged twenty years. Her face was pale, and lined with creases that had not been there before all this started. Her eyes were sunken, and her pupils were tiny dots. It was a deathly image that was staring back at her. *This is as good as it gets today,* she thought defiantly. *They are going to have to deal with me.*

Carol slowly made her way to the car. She knew that she was in no condition to drive, but there was no one else to drive her. She had told Josh to go and check on his crew, and not to worry about her. He had been home with her all weekend, and he needed to check in.

Carol started the car and was amazed at how nervous she was. She had driven in all sorts of bad conditions before, but this fear... She did not understand it. Carol had made it down to the end of her street before she felt the first wave of panic hit her. "Oh my god," she cried out, and pulled to the side of the road. She knew what a panic attack was, but had never experienced one first hand. Carol threw the seat back to its reclining position and began some slow breathing exercises. She forced herself to take long breaths through her nose, and then gently blew the air out through her mouth as she rode wave after hot wave of extreme fear. As the ocean attempted to pull her under, she remained focused on one cloud and her breathing. Finally, with beads of sweat running down her face, the attack began to dissipate. She slowly pulled the seat back into its upright position, and looked around momentarily in a daze. Carol wiped her damp face, and took one last long breath.

She now knew for the first time what her patients had experienced. It was a sudden rush of terror that had come from nowhere, and for no reason. Had she not known what was happening to her, she would have been completely over taken by it. She could not imagine what that would have felt like. The preview was bad enough. Carol looked around her, and locked her car doors before pulling away from the curb. She had no idea what she was afraid of, but the prevailing fear was absolute.

Carol decided to drive to the doctor's office instead of making the trip downtown. She wasn't sure she could make it in her condition and the doctor's office was only a few miles away. Carol pulled into the medical building parking lot. The brightness of the sun had been unusually painful and Carol was forced to put on sunglasses when she got out of the car. She walked the short distance to the building and inside to the waiting room. When she got to the receptionist's window, she was out of breath. The receptionist looked at Carol and gasped. "You can come right in," the girl said.

Carol walked the last few feet into the examining room, and collapsed into a chair. Her rapid breathing continued as a nurse entered and slipped the blood pressure cuff up her arm.

The nurse took Carol's blood pressure, and said, "Let's try the other arm. This can't be right." The nurse repeated the process and looked at Carol with concern. "It's one sixty over one ten. Let me get the doctor," she said, and shot out of the room.

Carol didn't need to know what her BP was to know that she was in trouble. She had never felt so sick or scared in her life. Despite her best effort, the tears began to flow. Carol was wiping them off her face when the nurse returned. "Dr. Hopton said that high blood pressure is normal after stopping the medication. He said you should go home and rest."

"He said this is normal?" Carol asked incredulously.

"I'm sorry," the nurse said, and escaped the room quickly.

Not as sorry as I am. The doctor was not even going to come into the room to see her. Carol slowly got up and walked out of the building. The blinding sun reminded her to retrieve her dark glasses. Breathless and afraid, she made her way back to her car. Carol didn't know what she was going to do, but she was sure that whatever it was, she was not going to be able to rely on her doctor. As long as he had been writing prescriptions, he had been her best friend. But the doctor was not going to be involved in her drug withdrawal. She had become too much of a liability, and he had washed his hands of her. Shaking, Carol put the key into the ignition. As she drove home, she feared having another attack. She crept slowly in the right lane, almost hugging the shoulder, while irate drivers went around her.

Finally safe inside her four walls, she quietly got back into bed and pulled the covers over her head. *How long is this going to last?* However long that was, she was now on her own.

Chapter 10

Sheila was home, packing her bags for the frosty north. Her plan was to clean up the marketing problem, if there really was one, and get back to Atlanta. She had found a vulnerable spot at Dominex. It was exactly what she needed to get where she was going, and just as she had caught the first scent of blood, she had been derailed. Jerry was reliable, but no one had the “hunting skills” that She prided herself in having.

Sheila zipped up her travel bag, and sat at the edge of the bed. Looking around the beautifully decorated room, she wondered what she was going to do with the empty apartment. Sheila had expensive taste. Her preference for the finer side of life had brought her to Buckhead, Georgia. The rugged name was in no way descriptive of the posh and elite part of Atlanta. In the heart of midtown, Buckhead was next door to everything the city had to offer while remaining neatly tucked away in high-life suburbia. Health food stores and elite restaurants lined the commercial part of town and joggers were more abundant than cars.

Sheila’s monthly rent for a one-bedroom apartment would have placed two families in houses, as long as the houses were not in Buckhead.

The posh high-rise sported a small gym, an indoor and outdoor pool, an exclusive off street parking garage, and a doorman. Sheila’s apartment was lavishly furnished in white. There were occasional splashes of color in a few paintings that were hung on the walls and carefully placed pieces of décor. Sheila loved her apartment and was not at all happy about leaving.

She had gotten a neighbor to agree to keep an eye on things while she was gone. There were no cats to feed or plants to water. Sheila hated anything messy, so there was really no upkeep. Security was tight, so the place would be fine while she was gone. But just the same, her neighbor would go in occasionally just to be sure.

One last look around, and Sheila was reluctantly ready to go. In the circular driveway downstairs, the company car was waiting. The driver had gotten out and was engaged in conversation with the doorman when Sheila emerged from the lobby. “Ms. Montgomery?” the driver called out. Sheila nodded.

“Here, let me get that,” the doorman said in regard to the large suitcase she was pulling on its wheels.

“Thanks, Richard,” Sheila said, and got into the car. Everything was securely placed in the trunk, and she was off to Hartsfield Airport. Her itinerary had outlined a direct flight to Newark, where another driver would be waiting to take her to the hotel. The company had secured a room with a kitchenette and would be footing the weekly bill. Sheila read between the lines and realized two things. They intended to keep her there for a while, and there wasn’t going to be any room service. *One room with a kitchenette in New Jersey. Just shoot me.* She looked out the window as she approached the College Park area. The sky was filled with bright silver metal birds.

Carol had been up all night. The horrible symptoms she was experiencing were at their worst during the night hours. The pain in her muscles was overwhelming, and her head vibrated

with an unrelenting, agitated buzz. When she did doze off, she was tormented by obscenely graphic nightmares.

On the other hand, she was not as weak or exhausted as she was during the day. At night, she was sharply alert and defied sleep with a vengeance. Attempting to keep her sanity, she had lovingly labeled the horrible symptoms “night hell.” She guessed that the withdrawal was at its peak during the time when she would have taken the drug.

By late morning, “night hell” would subside and “day hell” would take its place. The intense muscle ache would subside, but the bright sun was blinding. When she looked out the window, the leaves on the trees appeared as one big green blur. In fact, she had begun to see the whole world that way. The fatigue would set back in and the ground would return to its wave-like motion. She also noticed with alarm that her emotions were out of control. The level of anxiety she felt was constant and overwhelming. She had not had another panic attack but she had also not ventured back outside the safety of her house. Carol would try to relax into the day cycle, but as the sun began to go down, she would know with dread that another terrifying night was only hours away.

The strange flu symptoms she had experienced while she on the low dose of the drug had been a dress rehearsal for the symptoms she was experiencing now. Her stomach remained in knots, and she spent more time in the bathroom than in the bed. Carol believed she had truly found hell.

It was her day to report to Dominex for her ten-day checkup. Carol was no longer interested in the study, the free drugs, or the one thousand dollars. She was currently fighting for her life. The realization that she had become addicted to Valipene was her only focus. She asked Josh to call the company and inform them that she was off the volunteer list. Her only concern at the moment was to get through this horrendous nightmare and get back to work.

Her experience in addiction recovery had been helpful; however, up to this moment it had never been personal. She predicted that she would be sick for at least a few more weeks, and then, like all other drug withdrawals, the symptoms would subside and she would be free from the poison that had done this to her.

Carol was sitting up in bed with the remote control close at hand. She could tolerate daytime television. In fact, it helped divert her attention from her illness. The commercials, on the other hand, had a strange effect on her anxiety symptoms. She could feel her agitation growing out of control whenever they would come on. The mute button was her only defense. She knew how strange and frightening all of this was, but the counselor in her understood what was happening on a different level. She was the patient and the doctor, guiding herself through a terrifying journey. She would see herself through this. She had to. It was the only way to the other side.

Carol was looking at the muted automobile commercial. A man was holding a sign that said zero percent and zero percent. She was sure he was shouting and was glad she had grabbed the remote control. The phone by the bed had the ringer turned off, but she could hear the ringing from another room. Carol lifted the handset and said hello.

“Is this Carol Freeman?” a man asked.

“Yes, this is Carol,” she answered.

“Hi. This is Jerry Owens from Dominex and I’m calling to check on how you are doing.” Carol sat up in the bed and shut off the TV.

“Jerry,” she began, “I guess no one told you that I’m out of the study.”

“Really?” Jerry said. “What made you decide to quit?”

"I'm deathly ill from this withdrawal," Carol continued. "I had no idea that I was addicted to this drug, and now after only six months of taking it, I'm fighting for my life." There was silence at the other end of the phone while Jerry absorbed the information.

"Carol," he said finally. "This is news to me. I agreed to call and check on you guys, and you're the first one who has answered the phone. Tell me what's going on."

Carol was happy to comply. She spent the next ten minutes describing her symptoms, the visit to the doctor, and her current inability to leave the house.

"Have you contacted the company?" Jerry asked, in an attempt to help her.

"About ten times. I keep leaving messages, but so far no one seems concerned enough to return my calls."

"No one has called you back?" Jerry asked incredulously.

"Nope." She wanted to add that, based on what she knew now, it really was no surprise.

"I'm sorry about this," Jerry said. "I will get your information to the right person."

"It doesn't matter anymore," Carol said. "My only concern now is to get better. I'm never taking that poison again."

"I understand," was all Jerry could say. "Well, take it easy," he said, at a loss for anything more.

"Thanks for calling," Carol said, and hung up. She sat pondering the conversation. This guy seemed so nice and so concerned. Not at all like the people she had been dealing with at Dominex. Carol checked the caller ID, and jotted down the previous incoming number. Jerry Owens might be a valuable contact person. But that would be later, when she was better. For now, Dominex and their little study were no longer her concern.

Sheila was just inserting the key into the front door of her hotel room, and could hear the phone ringing inside. Leaving her suitcase in the hallway, she ran inside to grab the phone. "Hello," she said breathlessly.

"Hey, I found you," Jerry said.

"Jerry, how did you know where to call me?" Sheila said, catching her breath. "I didn't even know where I was until about thirty seconds ago."

"The marketing department in lovely downtown Newark did."

"Did Dominex burn down?" Sheila asked, placing her travel bag on the chair.

"Not funny, but I am getting some very distressing information."

"I'm listening," Sheila prodded.

"Sheila, these volunteers are getting really sick. I've only gotten in touch with about ten of them, but they are all telling me the same thing."

"Go on," Sheila said, intrigued.

"They have all tried to contact the company, and no one is responding to them."

"No shit," Sheila said in amazement. "How can no one be dealing with them? Aren't they coming in for follow-up examinations?"

"A few are coming. The ones that haven't gotten deathly ill are coming in, but some of them are too sick to leave the house."

"Jesus," was all Sheila could muster.

"This can't be good for the outcome of this study," Jerry continued. "But I think there's a bigger issue here. This one woman, uh, Freeman. Carol Freeman. She told me that she'd only been on the medication for six months."

Sheila was now in the chair, with the bag in her lap. She was holding the receiver with one hand, and massaging her temples with the other.

"Carol Freeman is one of the house bound," Jerry concluded.

Sheila sat, opened mouthed, trying to absorb what she was hearing.

"Sheila," Jerry said.

"Yeah?"

"What is going to happen to the volunteers that have been on this stuff for the past ten years?" Both remained silent, while they processed the meaning of Jerry's last statement.

"I think I'll do a little friendly checking in," Sheila said finally.

"Good luck," Jerry said cynically.

"I'll get back to you."

Sheila went to retrieve her suitcase from the hall and double locked the door. Newark was not Buckhead. *I'll probably have to buy a gun.* She walked back to the end table that hosted the telephone and started dialing. Halfway through, the phone began making short bleeping tones. *You have got to be kidding.* Sheila pulled out the card from under the phone and read the long distance dialing instructions. The company had made no provisions for long distance phone calls. This did not surprise her. Sheila got her calling card out of the travel bag and punched in a long series of digits that were her escape from the evil world of toll restriction.

"Dominex. How may I direct your call?" the receptionist asked.

"Sam Reynolds, please," Sheila directed. She waited for the call to be transferred and wondered how she was going to approach this delicate subject.

"Sam Reynolds."

"Sam. It's Sheila."

"Well, hi," Sam said.

"I just wanted to let you know that I got here," she ad-libbed.

"Great," Sam answered. "I'll let everyone know."

"So," she interjected casually. "How is everything going with the research study?"

"Just great."

"No problems?"

"None," Sam confirmed. "Everything is going fine, so you just worry about the marketing problems up there."

"Great," she said, convincingly. "I will. Bye, Sam." Sheila pressed the switch hook and immediately began to dial again. *This is going to get expensive.*

"Jerry," she said, as soon as she heard the receiver picked up. "Sam said everything is going fine with the study."

"Are you serious?" he asked incredulously. "Trust me Sheila, everything is not fine. In fact, I'll be surprised if we don't get hit with a big fat law suit before this is all over with."

"I don't know what we can do. If the company won't acknowledge that there's a problem, we can't exactly shift into rescue mode."

"I feel so sorry for these people," Jerry said.

"I do, too," she agreed. She had an agenda where Dominex was concerned, but innocent people suffering in the process had not been part of the plan.

"There is nothing we can do right now," Sheila concluded. Jerry remained silent for a moment.

"I'll continue to contact them," he said, finally.

"Thanks, and document everything."

"I will. Bye."

Sheila sat staring at the phone. She had expected some problems for the volunteers, but she had planned to be there. Her early intervention might have saved these people a lot of suffering. What she had not anticipated was the ease at which the company was covering up the problem. These people were getting deathly ill, but because the illness had rendered them all helpless victims, Dominex was somehow managing to contain that information. This would not detract her from her goal, but at what price? Sheila pondered that question with dread and remorse.

Josh Freeman was sitting at his computer with one eye on the screen, and the other on his wife. Her behavior had been really bizarre lately, laughing out of control one minute, and crying the next. She seemed so scared, and yet at the same time, he saw strength in her he had never seen before. Josh looked at the stock information for Dominex Pharmaceuticals. The value had continued to climb. He shook his head as he looked at the screen. Where was all of this optimism coming from? If the other volunteers were having half the problems that his wife was having, the value would have dove into the basement. Instead, everything was sunny in Dominex land.

Josh looked up when he saw Carol walking through the house. "Do you need anything?" Josh called out.

"No thanks," Carol answered coming into the little office area.

"Why are you dressed?"

"I have to try and go in," Carol explained.

"Why?" he asked, elongating the y to express his disapproval.

"Too much time has passed, and I do not want to lose my job," Carol said defiantly.

"After what they have done to you?" Josh said, not feeling the need to finish the thought to its obvious conclusion.

"There are people counting on me."

"I think you're nuts," Josh told her, "but that has never stopped you from doing what you wanted before."

"Good," Carol replied. "You're a fast learner."

Carol needed to at least make an appearance. She had been gone for two weeks, and even though she wasn't any better, too much time was passing. In some ways, she was actually getting worse. The intensity of her agitation was giving way to constant fatigue and exhaustion. She felt as though her heavy, lifeless limbs would not carry her across the room, much less to work. Nevertheless, Carol gathered her purse and keys and headed out the door.

When she reached the car, she remembered her previous panic attack. She reminded herself that that was how panic disorders overtook their victims. Memories of previous attacks, and the fear of repeat performances were at the heart of every person who had surrendered their lives to its clutches. Carol backed the car out of the driveway, and told herself to relax in fifteen-second intervals. She did this for twenty-three miles until she found herself pulling into the

mental health center parking lot. "I am Spartacus," Carol whispered, as she got out of the car, and into the painful sunlight.

Carol made her way into the building and down the hall to her office. She noted the pile of phone messages, files and notes that covered the entire surface of her desk. Breathless, dizzy and exhausted, Carol sat in her chair and rested her head on her desk. The surface of the metal was cool on her face providing some momentary relief. She did not know how she was going to do anything beyond this current activity.

Carol lifted her head and tried to force her eyes to focus on the debris on her desk. There were numerous phone messages that were so old, she was sure someone must have handled them by now. But around here, that was a lot to assume. Carol was beginning to sort them in order of importance, when she paused on one that read, "Brian Carter called." The message was dated with last week's date. Carol stopped sorting, and dialed the number on the phone message. She let the phone ring for a long time, and was getting ready to hang up, when she heard a very faint and shaky voice say hello.

"Brian?"

"Yes?"

"This is Carol Freeman, from the study. You called last week?"

"Oh, yeah," Brian said. "I pretty much gave up on you."

"Sorry about that," Carol said apologetically. "I've been out sick for the past two weeks, and I just got your message."

"I told them it was urgent," Brian said weakly.

"That doesn't mean much around here," Carol said, feeling the old resentment returning. "It would have required that someone actually get off their ass and call me." Carol realized she was back on her soapbox, and Brian did not sound like he was in any condition to hear it. "Anyway, enough of that," she said, shaking off her frustration. "How are you doing?"

"I'm really sick," Brian said, and proceeded to give Carol a long list of symptoms that she already knew only too well.

When he finished describing his illness, Carol said, "Brian, I know. I have felt exactly the same way."

"Oh God," he wailed. "I thought this might be from stopping the medication, but no one at Dominex will return my calls." Carol was not surprised to hear this, and wondered how many of the volunteers were sick and unable to find any support.

"Listen, Brian," Carol said soothingly. "This is withdrawal from Valipene. We are sick because we're addicted to it."

"Why would my doctor keep me on a drug if it was addictive?" Brian asked in alarm.

"I don't know," Carol stated. "I have been asking that same question for the past two weeks."

"How long is this going to last?" he wailed, now in a panic. "I can't even leave the house. The thought of going outside scares the crap out of me."

"Brian," Carol said. "Try to calm down. Do you have anyone there to look after you?"

"My wife."

"Good," Carol said. "Listen Brian. The worst thing you can do right now is panic. It just feeds into the symptoms. Try to remember that this is all physical."

"I feel like I'm losing my mind," he said weakly. Carol could tell that he was crying.

"I know it feels that way, but I promise you, you're not." Carol waited while he collected himself.

"So, how long is this going to last?" Brian asked again.

"I wish I knew," Carol said. "I don't think it will last very much longer," she added encouragingly. "In the meantime, you need to rest."

"That's all I've been doing," Brian sighed.

"That's okay."

"God, if I had known what this crap was doing to me..." Brian began, and did not complete the obvious conclusion.

"I know," Carol said, beginning to feel herself tear up. She wiped her eyes, and took a deep breath. "Listen," she concluded. "Call me anytime. My home number is unlisted because of my job. It's 555-4581. We'll get through this, I promise."

"Carol?" Brian said, now shifting his focus to her. "What are you doing at work?" Carol just shook her head and then answered,

"Crawling on all fours, and hanging on to this bogus job."

"You should go home," he instructed. "If you feel anything like this, you have no business being anywhere but in the bed."

"That's what my husband said."

"He was right," Brian stated emphatically.

"This won't last much longer," Carol rationalized.

"And I thought I was crazy."

Carol could tell that Brian's level of anxiety was lessening. "We're going to get through this," she repeated, for both their benefits.

"If you say so," he answered skeptically.

"Go watch some sitcoms," Carol directed. "It'll take your mind off being sick."

"Thanks," Brian said. "At least I'm not in this alone anymore. That helps a lot."

"Take care," Carol concluded. She hung up the phone and stared at the mess on her desk. On her best day, this would have been a lot to handle. Today, she could not organize a single thought. Carol decided to do what everyone else did at Newberg Mental Health. She sorted through papers and moved files from one place to another until it was time to go home. No one came in to see if she was alive or dead. She was grateful for their apathy. She was not yet able to explain her situation to herself, much less to anyone else. Carol watched the building clear from her office window. When she was sure she could stagger out to her car unnoticed, she turned off the light and went home.

Chapter 11

It was after 5:00 PM on Friday and everyone at Dominex had left for the start of their weekend. Sam Reynolds and Jeff Edwards were walking down the hallway to the area that had been set up for the final research study. "We have some interesting data," Jeff reported, as he reached the door to the lab. Both men went inside, and re-locked the door.

Turning on the light, Sam said, "Let's have a look."

Jeff reached over for a small stack of files and picked them up.

"These are the files for the volunteers that actually came back for their follow-up exams." Placing them down, he pointed to the pile sitting on the other side of the table. "Those are the files for the volunteers that have not returned."

"What's the count so far?"

"One hundred and fifty people have started phase one. Out of those, one hundred people have been due for their follow up exams. Out of those one hundred, fifty-one have returned."

Sam pointed to the small stack of files, and Jeff nodded. "The fifty-one that have come back are presenting with hypertension, anxiety, headaches, and nausea."

"Well, that is really no surprise," Sam interjected. "We expected a small percentage to go through some discomfort."

"The ones that have come in are the ambulatory volunteers."

"In English," Sam prodded.

"Able to get around," Jeff explained. "The other forty-nine have all called in and told Margie that they were too sick to leave the house."

"Yeah, I knew my secretary was getting frustrated with phone calls," Sam said, rubbing his thumb and forefinger on his tired eyes.

"She's been after me to call these people back," Jeff continued, "but I really don't know what to tell them."

"Well, the last thing we do want," Sam interjected, "is for them to start going to emergency rooms. We need to keep this quiet."

"No shit," Jeff added.

"We are going to have to provide them with some medical attention," Sam said. "It's the only way to keep them contained." Both men sat quietly staring at the files.

"You know these forty-nine people are just the tip of the iceberg," Jeff said. "We have three hundred and fifty people that haven't even started the process yet."

"It has to be big enough to manage a lot of people, and away from here," Sam said, mostly to himself. "We have to provide them with something that will give them some relief without creating any alarm or attention to the study."

"How about a doctor's office?" Jeff offered. "I have some good contacts from my marketing days."

"We have to have complete confidentiality," Sam said.

"I think I have someone in mind," Jeff added. "I'll contact him Monday. We can start these people on Valipene, or something similar to ease the withdrawal. The trick is going to be getting it into them without them knowing it."

"If we have the doctor's office dispense it, we can tell them it's vitamins," Sam said.

"We aren't getting paid enough for this," Jeff sighed, visibly exhausted.

"I'll pass that along to the CEO," Sam laughed.

"Do you ever think about selling real estate?" Jeff asked.

"Only every day," Sam answered. "Come on Jeff, let's go home."

Sheila sat in the small temporary office they had provided for her in the Newark division. She had been given free range of the Marketing Department and a small staff to work with. Sheila didn't mind a challenge; she just hated the lousy timing. She had set up an email address and had been communicating with Jerry every day. She couldn't keep using her calling card at forty cents a minute, and she didn't want the company to see a huge bill to Georgia. Email was free and confidential. Sheila had waited for everyone to leave before she checked for any new communication. She clicked on the check mail icon, and waited.

Hi Sheila, wish you were here - mostly because I'm sick of calling these people and hearing the same story over and over. You wouldn't believe how sick these people are, and no one is doing anything about it. When I call, my heart goes out to them, but what can I do???? Think of something please.

Have a safe weekend - Jerry.

Sheila read the message and cursed under her breath. *What the hell can I do? They sent me nine hundred miles away so that I couldn't do anything.* She returned the message.

Jerry - I'm so sorry to have put you in this position. If I'd known it was going to get this bad, I would have come up with a better plan. I can't think of a thing - except to tell you to encourage these people to go to a doctor. Just document everything. We'll need it.

Thanks, Sheila

Sheila packed her briefcase with things to work on over the weekend. She had no interest in the social life of Newark, New Jersey. She wanted to get this job done and get out. Working over the weekend was an adequate diversion. The Efficiency Hotel was walking distance from the office. Another way Dominex had found to save money. They hadn't furnished her with a rental car because everything was within a five-block radius. This assignment wasn't supposed to be comfortable. She was being put in her place. She also knew that when the time came, Dominex would be put in theirs. She felt comforted by that thought.

George Donovan, M.D., was the worst kind of doctor imaginable. He was not what anyone would consider a compassionate person, and he was willing to be creative. Dr. Donovan graduated at the top of his class, but from one of those south of the border universities. His lack of status had made it difficult to break into the medical community. His primary motivation for being a doctor had been family pressure and money. But George Donovan had not been making very much money. He had found his first position with the VA in Atlanta, and was modestly compensated for minimal work. Donovan's talent as a physician far exceeded the demands of the VA, and the money was never going to be acceptable.

Donovan's father was a doctor. His two older brothers were surgeons, and his mother, a psychiatrist. His future had been decided before he had entered the first grade. His secret motivation had always been to work on Wall Street where the only time you worried about

another living breathing soul was when he got in your way. Donovan had the shark instinct, but had not found a way to use it to his advantage – until recently.

Dr. Donovan knew a good enterprise when he saw one. Sedatives and pain pills had become his bull run. He had become so successful treating an addicted population, that he had recently moved his practice into one of those ritzy medical buildings and was finally driving a car that said, "I am a Successful Doctor."

There were no other doctors working with Donovan. He could not take the chance. His staff consisted of a nurse, who was also his bed partner, and a sprinkling of office staff, who were never knowledgeable enough to be a threat to his manner of doing business. Most doctors quickly identify drug-seeking behavior and refuse to continue providing a patient's drug of choice. Dr. Donovan, on the other hand, would graciously look the other way, and the addict population all knew him well. The unspoken rule of doing business with Dr. Donovan was to never fill prescriptions at the same pharmacy. Donovan never had to provide his patients with instructions. An addict already knew how to play the game.

George Donovan, M.D., pulled into the underground parking garage that was conveniently in the basement of his office building. His shiny Jaguar occupied the primo spot next to the elevator. Dr. Donovan pulled into his space and checked his hair in the rear view mirror. At the age of forty-five, he could pass for someone in their thirties. He worked out regularly and, unlike his patients, believed in a healthy lifestyle. Donovan smoothed over his jet-black hair with one hand. Satisfied with the image, he was about to flip the mirror back up, and jumped slightly when he saw that someone was standing right behind his car.

"Hey, Donovan," the man called out in an attempt to announce his presence.

"Jeff Edwards," the doctor said, relieved. Donovan emerged from his car with his hand outstretched and Jeff reached to shake it. "Where have they been keeping you locked up? Not that I'm complaining," Donovan said. "That new woman looks better than you do."

Jeff took on a hurt expression and said, "And I thought I was better looking."

"Sorry, you just don't have the required cleavage."

"Ah, but I may have the required money-making proposition," Jeff returned.

Donovan raised an eyebrow and said, "Well, let's go up to my office. I'll buy you a cup of coffee."

Dr. Donovan and Jeff Edwards entered the office waiting room. The staff had already arrived, but it was still too early for any Monday morning patient traffic. The doctor did not require appointments, so it meant nothing for his waiting room to become standing room only. In a few hours it would become just that. But for now all was quiet and the two men made their way into the exam area and down the hall to Donovan's private office. On the way through, Donovan addressed a pretty young blond girl wearing too much eye makeup and said, "Peggy, could you bring in two coffees?"

"Sure thing doc," she replied. Donovan closed the door behind them and said,

"I wouldn't mind playing doctor with her, but the nurse would have my hide."

"How is Sally?" Jeff inquired.

"Just as feisty as ever. If it weren't for her, I'd still be working for the VA."

"Hold on to her then," Jeff said. "Little blond girls come and go, but women like Sally..."

"Don't I know it," the doc agreed. "And just in case I forget, she reminds me every day."

"So, where is she? I thought you two came in together every day."

"Personal day," Donovan answered. "She's earned it. We have been so busy lately, knock on wood."

Just then, the door opened and smiling Peggy handed each man a steaming cup.

"Thanks honey," Donovan said. "And could you hold all my calls while I'm in this meeting?"

"You got it, doc," she replied, and was out the door.

Settling into his chair, Dr. Donovan said, "So, what is this great money making proposition?"

"That's the beauty of it," Jeff began. "You don't have to do anything different than what you're already doing."

"I'm listening," Donovan said. Jeff gave the details of the entire drug study, along with the major problem that had developed as a result.

"We have to get these people quietly stabilized," Jeff concluded.

"How many people are we talking about?"

"It's looking like forty nine percent of the volunteers are going into extreme withdrawal within five days of stopping the drug."

"And you are surprised by that?" Donovan said, shaking his head. "You drug companies amaze me. You manufacture this stuff, and you don't have any idea how addictive it is."

"Well, we never had to conduct this type of study before," Jeff said in defense. "And now it's biting us in the ass."

"I bet it is," Donovan said. "So, what do you have in mind?"

"We need to get a reasonable amount of the drug back into them, so that their withdrawal symptoms will subside."

"You can't do that on your own?" Donovan asked. "You guys make the stuff."

"We can't have all those sick people around the study. And besides," Jeff added, "if they realize what made them sick, they may become too much of a liability."

Donovan sat pondering Jeff's words and began shaking his head.

"I think I see where you are going with this."

"We will contact the volunteers that need medical attention and refer them to you," Jeff instructed. "We'll supply you with the medication. You dispense it here and tell them it's vitamins."

"Prescription vitamins?" Donovan laughed. "Are your volunteers that stupid?"

"I wouldn't call them stupid," Jeff said. "Just desperate. Besides, we'll come up with appropriate packaging. We weren't going to put it into prescription bottles."

"Good thinking." The doctor pulled out a calculator and punched in a few numbers. "Let's see. Forty nine percent of five hundred is two hundred and forty five. That's quite a jump in patient load."

"You'll figure out a way to accommodate them. I'm not worried about that," Jeff said. "They will be told to identify themselves as Dominex study volunteers," he continued. "You can charge us for an office visit and we'll supply the drugs. It won't cost them anything. Oh, and I almost forgot, we still have to get urine samples from these people."

"You're going to drug screen them after they go back on the medication?" Donovan laughed.

"Seems a little futile, I know. But we have to go through the motions. Our courier will pick them up every other day and bring the specimens back to our own lab for testing."

"Very clever. When should I expect the barrage of victims?"

"They are volunteer subjects," Jeff corrected, "and you can expect them just as soon as we can get in contact with them." Jeff stood up and shook Donovan's hand. "Always a pleasure doing business with you," Jeff said. "I better be getting back to the office. I have my work cut out for me." And with that, he was out the door.

Jeff stopped at a traffic light and pulled out his cell phone. He dialed the number to work and wondered to himself how far this was going to go. He had started having problems with his stomach that had all the earmarks of a baby ulcer. He had also started having trouble sleeping and kept having the same re-occurring nightmare. The theme was always the same. He would be walking through a battlefield. In the distance a mob of sick and dying people would be staggering towards him. In one hand he held the cure pill. In the other he held the poison. As the moaning, crying mob approached, he would reach for the cure pill and it would be gone. The poison would be the only thing remaining. As the mob collapsed on top of him he would wake up in a cold sweat. He did not believe in symbolism, but the meaning of this dream was smacking him in the face.

His life had been such a normal one. He had married his childhood sweetheart and they had started their family immediately out of college. He had gone on to get his master's degree in business and his wife began teaching elementary school with a bachelor's degree in education. They had two girls, now sixteen and eighteen years old. Jeff had upgraded their residence three times, and his family now resided in a quiet, upscale community in Marietta, Georgia. Jeff loved his life and wanted nothing changed, except maybe the past few months at Dominex.

Jeff had worked for Charles Roman, Senior, and remembered the old days with longing. There had been no hidden agendas or creative politics. The company had survived on honesty and integrity. Jeff liked the idea of moving into the fast track, but he did not like the current method of getting there. He secretly wished that this new drug would never get FDA approval and they could all go back to the way things were before. *Stop dreaming*. This order was directed to both his day time and night time activity. Jeff had no intention of ever leaving Dominex. It had become as much a part of him as his home life. Wherever Dominex was going, he was going with them. He realized, with sadness, that the wheels of progress had been set in motion and that he would never see the good old days again. The "new and improved" Dominex was his future. He would have to make it work.

Jeff's secretary answered the phone, and transferred the call to Sam. "We're all set with the good doctor," Jeff reported.

"Good work," Sam answered.

"We will have to set up some generic packaging for the medication, and either you or I should contact the volunteers," Jeff interjected.

"We'll split the phone contact," Sam directed. "Otherwise, it will take too long."

"I'm on my way in. Just wanted to give you a heads up," Jeff concluded, and pressed the end button on his phone.

Chapter 12

Carol dreaded the mornings. She had been dragging herself into work for the past two weeks and it wasn't getting any better. Her exhaustion was at its peak in the morning. She had also started experiencing severe depression. The anxiety had been one thing. She had been able to talk herself through the anxiety, but depression did not respond to logic.

Carol understood addiction. She knew that each drug affected and enhanced a different part of the brain. A person's drug of choice was usually not by accident. If a person tended to be anxious they would typically turn to something that would calm them down, such as alcohol or sedatives. If a person remained depressed, there was nothing like a cocaine or speed high to temporarily free them of that dark cloud over their head.

The problem with a drug solution is that daily stimulation of that part of the brain eventually damages and weakens its normal functioning. The necessary level of chemical release is no longer provided. The addict is eventually screwed because they now lacked what little they had to start with. Anxiety and depression returns, now to a whole new level and without the benefit of chemical balance. The substance no longer delivers temporary relief because daily stimulation of that part of the brain had rendered it almost useless. Unable to face a world now darker and more frightening than the one they originally escaped from, the addict continues to do the only thing that has ever given them any peace. But because it no longer works, they are stuck in an unending cycle that resembles hell.

The only way out is through a dark and frightening tunnel. The physical and emotional torment of a damaged brain is a nightmare that only a chosen few will ever know. The weakened part of the brain, no longer functioning at a normal level, leaves the remaining functions with no checks and balances. It is brain activity run amuck, and the early recovering addict is literally bouncing off the walls for an undetermined length of time. For the few brave souls that make it through to the other side, there is a return to something resembling "normal." Some veterans swear the damage is temporary. Others believe that you can never fully recover. Where the delicate balance of neurotransmitters and brain chemistry are concerned, there is no true and absolute measure. The reports of recovering addicts are subjective and based on each person's memory of what "normal" used to be.

Carol knew that her anxiety was from a physical cause. She had sedated herself to sleep every night and now her normal sedating ability was gone. In its place, every nerve ending was on fire. She had been able to talk herself through the torment by understanding its cause. Her recent depression, however, was beyond her control. The sadness and hopelessness she woke up with every day did not give a rat's ass regarding its cause. There was a hole in her soul. It was pain of a nature that screamed to be removed and the need to wait for healing was not accepted or understood.

There was another interesting side to Valipene withdrawal. Carol had begun to notice with horror that her abdomen was rapidly expanding. She looked five months pregnant. The problem with that was that she wasn't. Her clothes no longer fit while her body continued to expand every day. Carol wondered where the ceiling was on her new found expansion. Would it stop, or would she eventually explode? She had begun to diet furiously, but was too weak to exercise. Carol cursed herself and her doctor every waking minute of every day. There was no

justification for the torment and no peace. The one question she had yet to ask herself was why she had needed the sedation in the first place. Recovery comes in stages.

Carol sat in her office with her head in her hands. The dizziness was unrelenting and the simplest task had to be relearned. Carol had been attempting to place papers in a file in the correct order when she realized that she couldn't remember the correct order. This was a simple task. She only needed to match the type of documentation to the corresponding section, yet she felt completely confused and unable to discern one page from another. The inability to recall simple information was beginning to scare her. Her mind no longer functioned efficiently. It wasn't her exhaustion; it was a substantial decrease in her cognitive ability.

She had attempted to deliver group lectures that she had given hundreds of times in the past. They were part of her. But to her horror, she could no longer remember the flow of her presentations. She would begin a thought that was designed to lead to a wide area of exploration, only to realize halfway through that she had no idea where she was going. She had begun looking for any excuse to avoid lecturing, and was showing a lot of videos in their place. The quality of the addiction program was taking a dive, but her mind no longer served her. She had lost her edge. She feared it would be another tool against her if anyone else ever discovered her new disability, so she continued to go through the motions of being competent.

Carol was looking through another file attempting to jog her memory for the appropriate format when her phone buzzed. She jumped at the sound. Any abrupt noise these days made her come unglued.

"Carol," the receptionist said apologetically, "we have someone in the lobby that needs to see a counselor and no one else is available."

"Okay," Carol said into the phone, and hung up. She knew she could not dodge her job forever, even though crawling into a hole somewhere was what she desired most of all. Her step down from management had been a blessing. Since her return to work, the demand on her physically and emotionally had been greatly diminished. Carol abandoned the confusing file and went down the hall to the waiting room.

In the lobby, a woman was seated wearing sunglasses. She had her knees up to her chest and was hugging herself in the fetal position. Carol took one look at the frightened woman and forgot about her own torment. "Hi, I'm Carol. Please come in."

The woman slowly got to her feet and followed Carol down the hall to her office. Carol asked the woman if her eyes were sensitive to the light and the woman nodded. She went to the window and closed the blinds.

"Is that better?" Carol asked.

"Yes, thank you," the woman replied, and removed her glasses. She looked as though she had not slept in weeks.

Carol got out her intake form and began the information gathering process. The woman's name was Clair Warner and she was thirty-six years old. She was coming in today due to extreme anxiety and depression. She also said she was feeling very sick, but believed that she just had the flu. Clair had been on a medication for five years. Her doctor had thought it would help with her pre-menopausal symptoms. She had taken it faithfully, until she heard about a volunteer study.

Carol slowly looked up from her clipboard, and said, "Oh, my god."

The woman looked at Carol in surprise.

"Was the medication you had been taking Valipene?"

The woman nodded in affirmation.

"Did you stop taking it for the study they are conducting at Dominex Pharmaceuticals?"
Again, the woman nodded yes.

"How long have you been off the drug?" Carol inquired.

"Just a week."

"Clair," she began. "I am very familiar with the problem." Carol proceeded to explain the nature of the drug they had both become addicted to. At the end of the lengthy explanation the woman began to cry. Carol handed Clair a tissue and waited.

"What am I supposed to do now?" Clair said between sobs. Carol did not have a ready stock answer. She remembered her own response when she had suddenly been hit with the reality of her situation. It had taken Carol weeks to come to terms with the damage that the drug had done to her brain. In some ways, she still had not come to terms with it at all.

"Well, as I see it," Carol said, "you have only two options. Your first one is to go back on the medication. If you do that, the withdrawal symptoms will most likely subside."

"But doesn't that mean that I will have to take this stuff for the rest of my life?"

"That is precisely what it means," Carol responded. A whole new set of tears appeared on Clair's face and Carol's heart went out to her. "Clair," Carol said soothingly, "the other option is to suffer through the withdrawal until you are free of the addiction."

Clair had her face in her hands and looked up at Carol with a terrified expression.

"I don't know if I can do that," she said weakly.

"I understand," Carol said in an attempt to console her. Both women sat silently in contemplation of the horrible dilemma they were both in.

Finally, Carol said, "I know for a fact that there is hope. This will be the hardest thing we will ever do in our lives, but there is peace on the other end."

"How can you be so sure?" Clair asked, wiping her face with a fresh tissue.

"I see it every day," Carol answered. "This won't last forever. It can't."

"I wish I could be that sure," Clair sighed.

"Why don't you take a few days, and think about what you want to do?" Carol offered. "This is a lot to take in all at once." Clair nodded as she processed Carol's words. "In the meantime," Carol continued, "you should get some rest and be comforted in the fact that you are not crazy and you're not alone."

Clair blew her nose and let out a long breath.

"Okay," she said. "I'll think about it."

"Good. Here is my home phone number." Carol wrote her number on the back of a business card and handed it to Clair. This was seriously stepping over the line in counselor land. You were never supposed to blur your professional contact with personal contact but Carol didn't care. This situation was so far outside the realm of anything she had ever learned in any ethics class. This was survival and none of them had anyone they could rely on except each other.

After Clair left the office, Carol completed the crisis call form, marking it as "resolved," and set it aside. The kind of help Clair needed was not going to come from further contact at a mental health center. Carol jotted down the phone number that Clair had given her during the intake process. She didn't know where this whole thing was going, but all her contact information would be available if she needed it. So far in this nightmare, she had encountered two other victims who had been blindsided in the same way she had, and one sympathetic person at Dominex. They were all part of a bigger picture.

Brian Carter was sitting in a recliner trying to focus on the antics of Barney Fife. He had not been able to lie down without his anxiety taking over. He had been permanently camped out in the chair day and night since his phone call to the mental health center.

Brian had found out that when the chips were down, he could not count on his wife for any real support. She had been sympathetic and understanding for the first few weeks, but Brian's illness was beginning to wear on her nerves. "Do you really think that I am faking this?" Brian would argue. "No one would choose this." Brian's wife would appear to listen to his explanation, but would always respond with some psychobabble about mind over matter. Brian eventually gave up the hope that his wife would understand, but her inability to do so had taken its toll on his faith in her.

Brian had been married to Pam for twelve years. They had no children. Pam had a career, and that was her baby. Brian did not like his wife's priorities, but he hadn't realized their extent until after they were married. He had occupied his time and his frustration with his own job at the Atlanta Journal Constitution, and had been making good money in sales and distribution. But without the constant distraction of his job, Brian had become painfully focused on everything else. His anger and bitterness at his wife, past and present, was almost as bad as his withdrawal.

It was midafternoon and Brian knew that his wife would not be home for hours. She had never worked a normal eight-hour day since he'd known her. Consumed with the emptiness of the house, he began flipping channels. He was about to settle in on Wheel of Fortune when the phone rang. Brian cursed the noise and got up to answer it.

"I'm trying to find Brian Carter," the caller stated.

"You found him," Brian said humorlessly.

"Brian, this is Sam Reynolds from Dominex Pharmaceuticals."

"Go on," he said coldly.

"I understand that you have been having some problems stopping the medication."

"To say the least," Brian interjected.

"Well, we don't want to leave you in the lurch," Sam said, trying to console an obviously angry volunteer.

"You have a magic wand?" Brian asked, not letting the man off the hook.

"I wish I did," Sam said, "but we have made arrangements for you to see a doctor and we will take care of all your expenses."

"Really?" Brian asked incredulously.

"Sure. We never intended for our volunteers to have any problems."

Brian thought about what he was hearing, and finally said, "Okay, where do I sign?"

Sam gave Brian all the information regarding Dr. Donovan.

"You don't need an appointment," Sam concluded, so you can go whenever it's convenient.

"Okay, thanks," Brian said, feeling less at odds with his caller. He hung up the phone and finished writing down Sam's instructions. "No time like the present," he said to himself. He really didn't feel as though he had the strength to move, but the idea of getting some medical attention made the most sense.

He made his way out the door and to the driveway, when he suddenly remembered that he had not driven a car since the onset of his illness. For some inexplicable reason, he was

afraid. He paused, not knowing what his next move should be. He certainly could not count on Pam. She would never let him live down the fact that he was afraid to drive and she wasn't available during business hours anyway.

Brian was angry with his wife for abandoning him when he needed her most. He was angry with his doctor for facilitating his addiction and subsequent withdrawal from hell. Anger was a good motivator. Brian looked up at the sky and said, "It's you and me. We're going in."

Determined, Brian started the car and backed it out of the driveway. He stayed focused on his anger all the way to the doctor's office and that diversion kept him from acknowledging his fear. Brian parked the car in the underground lot and kept his ticket for validation. He had been instructed that Dominex would cover that expense as well.

The elevator beeped for the visually impaired as it made its advance upward. Brian got out on the twelfth floor and rounded the corner to suite 1210. The waiting room was packed and Brian silently groaned, knowing he would have to plant himself and his illness in a room with too many people for a very long time. Well, he was stuck here. He signed the check in sheet at the receptionist's window. Looking around, he found one seat at the end of a long row of chairs. He quickly grabbed it knowing that at least he wouldn't have people sitting on both sides of him. This was going to be a test in anxiety control. Brian remembered his anger and decided to take the challenge.

One and a half hours later, Brian heard his name called. The nurse held the door open as he walked to the examination area. Brian explained his connection with Dominex while the nurse slipped the blood pressure cuff over his left arm. Wordlessly, she completed the preliminary examination and began writing. Brian waited for her to complete the paperwork before asking her if everything was okay. "You're blood pressure is high," the nurse said vaguely, "but that is to be expected in your situation." Brian did not like the detached manner of this woman and pressed on.

"What, specifically, is my blood pressure, and what, specifically is my situation?"

The nurse looked up from her clipboard and studied the determined young man. She was not used to inquisitive patients. Most of the patients she came in contact with did not allow themselves to go into withdrawal and knew their situation better than she did.

"Why don't we wait for the doctor? I'm sure he will be able to answer all of your questions," she concluded and went quickly out the door. Brian sat staring at the closed exam room door, wondering if he had made a mistake by coming here. This was not the treatment he had expected. He was very sick and he expected to see some concern and urgency. Just then, the door opened and a man entered the room.

"Hi, Brian. I'm Doctor Donovan. Sorry you had to wait so long."

Brian began to relax. Maybe he should give this guy a chance.

"You are having some difficulty since you stopped taking Valipene," the doc said, more as a statement than a question. Brian just nodded. "And you do not want to go back on the medication, is that right?" Donovan inquired.

"I can't be addicted to a drug," Brian answered flatly.

"I don't blame you. Then in that case," the doc continued, "we will start you on these vitamins." Brian looked at the doctor with a face that said, "Are you kidding?" "I know what you're thinking," the doctor responded. "But these are very powerful vitamins. You can't even get these at the drug store. They are distributed by physicians only."

"I'm having a hard time believing that this illness can be dealt with by just taking vitamins," Brian said.

"Most people say that when I suggest this course of treatment, but it really does help."

"Okay," Brian said, reluctantly. "I was really afraid of taking any other medications anyway."

"No doubt," Donovan agreed. "I would predict that you will start to feel better within three to five days."

"That would be a miracle," Brian interjected.

"Miracles do happen," Donovan said as he wrote in Brian's chart.

Donovan walked over to a locked cabinet, and removed a small brown envelop. Brian noticed that the cabinet was filled to the brim with similar looking packages.

"Looks like you are prepared for an epidemic," Brian noted.

"Generous salesmen," Donovan responded as he locked the cabinet. "Now these are very powerful. Do not, and I repeat, do not take more than one a day."

"What would happen if I did?" Brian asked suspiciously.

"They would become toxic," Donovan explained. "More than one per day will not speed up your recovery and will most likely cause liver damage."

"Good reason," Brian agreed.

"This is a one week supply," Donovan continued. "As long as you stay on these vitamins you will be fine. When you are running low come back to the office. If you are not having any problems the nurse will do a quick check in and give you another week's supply. You won't have to wait to see me." Brian liked the sound of that.

"Thanks, Doctor," he said, and reached out his hand.

Driving back home, Brian felt hopeful. He silently prayed to the drug god and promised to never touch another medication again if he could just escape the pain he was feeling at that moment. He was so focused on his little envelop of vitamins he forgot to be nervous about driving home.

Chapter 13

Sheila looked over her small staff standing around the conference table and told everyone to sit. It was time to begin the meeting. For the past six weeks, she had been working hard to organize and light a fire under them. They had passed out more cookies and muffins to doctor's offices in six weeks than in the prior six years. "Atlanta tells me that our numbers are up thirty percent," she announced. The whole room was filled with applause. "Thank you," Sheila said, bowing gracefully, "but they want us to increase sales by another ten percent."

"Why don't we just mail them a kidney?" one of the staff called out.

"I know," Sheila agreed. "They are making me crazy. And I can't go home until we meet that quota. You all know what that means?" Everyone in the room groaned. They knew only too well what that meant. It meant that she would be riding them all relentlessly until she could see the Newark airport from the clouds.

Sheila had made no bones about her assessment of this current assignment. To her surprise, however, she had taken an immediate liking to the staff. They had welcomed her with enthusiasm and had invited her to every group adventure. She had declined in the beginning but eventually gave in to their insistence. She had to admit that she had never felt as though she belonged anywhere before. Her past hidden agenda had demanded that she remain focused and detached.

But Sheila had not come in to this city or this assignment with any goal other than the one she had been sent there to accomplish. Despite all that, she found to her surprise, that she was a really good marketing manager. The job in the past had always been a means to an end, but now the job was her sole focus. No one in Atlanta had expected the northeastern division to accomplish so much in such a short space of time. The added ten percent requirement had been a stalling tactic.

"Now look," Sheila said to the grumbling staff. "We can do this, no sweat. We'll just increase the radius around the city." Sheila passed out small packets for everyone. "The first page is a map of the northeast region. I made that mostly for me." Everyone laughed. "The solid line shows the areas we have already covered. The dotted line shows the expanded areas we will move into, effective immediately.

"Good," one of the staff interjected. "If we went back to same places, they would all have to go on diets."

"Well, we don't want to be responsible for that," Sheila returned. "The next few pages are a breakdown of individual assignments. None of you will have to travel very far within your new area. Anyone have a question?" The group was busy studying their new territories. No one seemed to have any questions.

"Oh, and did I mention the bonus?" Sheila added strategically. The group stopped studying the pages and looked up at her. "There is the little matter of a five day trip to Hawaii," Sheila added. Everyone suddenly had lots of questions. "Let me explain it first," Sheila said, quieting the sudden barrage of chatter. "The bonus is a vacation for two. The one whose area contributes the most to our increase in sales will win the trip to Hawaii. There are no rules and no limits to the methods that you may use to achieve this goal."

"What kind of time frame are we looking at?" one staff member asked.

"When we reach our forty percent mark we will stop the clock," Sheila challenged. The room was filled with excited chatter and Sheila knew she had found a good incentive for this group.

What the staff didn't know was that she had not been able to get the home office to bite on the bonus idea. After several days of pleading she had given up and decided to foot the bill herself. It was worth it to her to wrap things up here. Dominex would not expect her to pull this off so quickly and there was no way they could come back with an increase in expectations again. They would have to concede and she would be at their doorstep long before they were ready for her.

"Well, if you'll all excuse me," one of the staff said, "I have a vacation to win."

"Yeah, are we done?" another chimed in, "we're burning daylight."

"We're done," Sheila announced. "Everyone get out there, and may the best man or woman win." Everyone went swiftly out the door. *Good work, Sheila.*

When everyone was gone and the frenzy had died down, Sheila went to her computer to check her mail. There were two messages from Jerry. The first one read, *Sheila - too much going on to sum up. You have to call me, Jerry.* The second one was obviously sent after Jerry had waited for a phone call. It read, *Sheila!!! Urgent!!! Call me - Jerry.* Sheila had been so caught up in her Newark quest she had forgotten to check her messages for the past twenty-four hours.

Unconcerned about phone records, Sheila dialed Jerry's direct number. *Dominex will just have to get over it,* she thought to herself while she waited for Jerry to pick up the phone. "Jerry Owens," he announced.

"Jerry, it's Sheila."

"Well, it's about time!"

"Sorry, you wouldn't believe the hoops they have been sending me through up here."

"Yes, I would," Jerry responded. "If you could see the fires they have been putting out, it's no wonder they had to expand the maze they have you running through."

"It's gotten worse?" she asked with foreboding. "Jerry, I don't think I even want to hear this. I was actually having a good day."

"Sorry," Jerry said, "but I think you really need to know about this." Sheila opened her desk drawer and got out a miniature Hershey's bar.

"Okay, Jerry. I have chocolate. Let's have it."

"All the volunteers that got too sick to continue the study are being sent to a doctor," Jerry began.

"You made me eat chocolate for that?" Sheila laughed.

"There's more," he said. "Dominex is footing the bill *and* the vitamins."

"Vitamins?" Sheila repeated skeptically.

"Yeah, vitamins," Jerry said exaggerating the first syllable to show his contempt. "No one knows for sure what is in those vitamins, but I'll tell you one thing. Those people better not stop taking their One-A-Day's."

"What the hell are they trying to pull?" Sheila asked.

"The whole packaging department spent one solid day doing nothing but filling small brown envelopes with Suprame. They told us it was for a special order overseas."

"Why did they need their order in brown envelopes?" Sheila said suspiciously.

"No shit," Jerry responded. "And the following day after packaging finished with their little overseas order, people were herded like cattle to this Dr. Donovan's office." Sheila

remained quiet and fished another mini Hershey's out of her drawer. "You know what they're doing, don't you?" Jerry interjected.

"Doesn't take a genius to figure that one out," Sheila said between bites.

"All the sick people are going to magically get better," Jerry said ironically. "Just think," he continued, "all that healing from a multiple vitamin."

"Then this stuff goes on the market," Sheila continued, "and Dominex is free and clear. After all, they tested the stuff. No one will be able to come back at them and say they didn't take every precaution."

"Dominex ceased to be a respectable proposition some time ago. You can thank baby Roman for all the new daytime drama," Jerry said. "And I'll tell you another thing," he continued, "I have been working for this company a long time, and I will be watching my 401K grow into five digits regardless of the creative politics junior seems to like so well."

"Jerry," Sheila said, "that is precisely why we have to be so careful in how we deal with this. We can't do anything to jeopardize our own positions."

"At what price?" Jerry asked.

"Don't take this stuff too personally," Sheila reasoned. "You aren't the one doing this."

"I know," Jerry said. "But it just makes my blood boil when I think of how they are using these people."

"The battle is not over yet," Sheila said in a conspiring tone.

"I don't think I like the sound of that," he interjected. "What are you planning now?"

"Could you check out an address?" Sheila inquired.

"I guess so. What are we looking for?"

"I'm just curious about something," she said.

"Sheila, this is your partner in crime, remember? Tell me what I'm getting into."

Sheila told him about the strange alias address for pharmlab, and explained that the FDA had required the lab work done by an independent facility. "I didn't really have time to check it out before I left," she explained, "but in light of this new development...."

"Okay," Jerry conceded, "I'll check it out, but you owe me a dinner when this all over."

"I'll be back soon. Just be careful."

"Maybe I should down a couple of those vitamins," Jerry said.

"Jerry," Sheila interjected, "you should eat some chocolate instead. It's less lethal, and it tastes a lot better. I'm hanging up now."

"Bye, Sheila," Jerry said, and hung up.

Baby Roman is clumsy, Sheila thought to herself, as she crumbled up the empty candy wrappers. Her staff was hot on the trail and she would be home soon.

Brian Carter had been taking his vitamins for three days, and was beginning to notice an improvement. He had actually slept for five hours the night before and his intense dizziness had become an occasional wave. He was still feeling weak and tired, but he was a new man. Brian picked up the phone and dialed the number to the mental health center.

"Hey," Carol said. "How have you been doing?"

"I'm doing better, since I started taking those vitamins," Brian answered.

"What vitamins?" she asked suspiciously.

"Didn't Dominex call you and tell you to go to Dr. Donovan's office?"

"Yes, and I told them that another doctor was not a solution for me."

"So you never went?"

"It was a doctor... No, make that two doctors, that got me into this in the first place. I'll pass on doctor number three," Carol stated adamantly.

"Well, he really helped me," Brian said defensively.

"Did you say he put you on vitamins?" Carol inquired.

"Yeah and they have been working pretty well so far."

Carol was silent momentarily, trying to process what Brian had just told her.

"Carol?" Brian said finally. "Is something wrong?"

"This doesn't make sense," she responded. "The damage can only be repaired naturally, and only over time."

"That's what I thought too. But I really am starting to feel better. I slept for five hours last night!"

Carol could hear in Brian's voice that he was elated. And not only that, he did sound so much better.

"Okay," she began cautiously. "Would you do me a big favor?"

"Sure. We're the Valipene Survivors Club."

"I want you to come in and give me a urine sample," Carol explained.

"You want urine?" he asked incredulously. "What for?"

"Humor me."

"Okay, but it'll cost you."

"Thanks, Brian."

"I'm on my way."

"You're not only a trooper, but a punctual trooper," Carol offered. "See you soon."

Carol had a very bad feeling about Brian's situation and the infamous Dr. Do novan. If what she suspected was true, then all the time Brian had put in suffering through the early stages of recovery had just been erased. Carol had stepped over the line at work so many times already, it really didn't matter anymore. She pulled out an active file and copied the name onto a lab slip. After putting the same name on the specimen bottle, she set the package aside for Brian when he arrived.

Charles Roman sat in the back of his new Beemer on his way to work. He loved having a driver. It gave him time to think. But today he would have preferred the distraction of traffic. He had a spreadsheet on his lap and was going over the company's current expenses. He was out of time. There was no way they were going to meet their expenses. The study had to run for another two months before they could start raking in any profit from Suprame. Charles pulled out his cell phone and dialed Sam's private number. "Yo," Sam answered.

"Yo, yourself," Charles repeated. "That's a very informal greeting."

"Well this is a very informal phone line. What's up? You never call on your way to the trenches."

"We have a situation," Charles said.

Sam rolled his eyes and thought, *When do we not have a situation.* But phone conversations give one the benefit of confidential facial expressions.

"What's going on?" Sam inquired tentatively.

"We are going to have to lay off some people," Charles said reluctantly.

"Why?"

"We were not prepared for the delay in the Supreme market date."

"Well, I know we started construction on the new building," Sam reasoned, "but we stopped work on it when we got hit with the extra research requirement."

"The new building wasn't our only added expense," Charles explained. "We hired more people as well."

"Factory and distribution people at eight dollars an hour," Sam interjected.

"Okay, Sam," Charles surrendered. "There were added expenses you didn't know about."

Sam sat down in his chair and let out a long, frustrated breath. "Charles, not again," he said finally.

"Look," Charles said defensively, "how was I supposed to know that the study was going to take this long?"

"I thought you preferred not to know all the gory details," Sam answered.

"I don't... I mean, I didn't. But I do now."

"Good. I'll tell you what. When you get in, I will fill you in. And when I'm done with that, you can fill me in."

"Always the life saver," Charles said.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Sam responded and the line went dead.

A few layoffs won't kill anybody, Charles thought to himself and put the annoying paper away. He turned up the volume on the back speakers and enjoyed the rest of the ride.

Sam paced back and forth in his office. It was a means of exercise that he had taken to fairly regularly these days. *If we get past all this insanity*, Sam thought, *I am going on a really nice vacation*. Sam had not taken one in five years, but he was certainly ready for one now.

He didn't really know how much Charles Roman Jr. wanted to know about the company's current situation, but the more he knew the better it would be for Sam. He was tired of protecting this guy. Especially since the guy was causing most of what he needed protection from. Sam decided to go to the study wing and get all the current statistics. Charles could have as much of that reality as he wanted.

Sam walked down the long hallway and had almost made it to the volunteer's waiting room, when he heard a loud argument coming from that direction. When he opened the door, he saw a man standing at the receptionist's window. He was visibly upset and waving his arms while yelling at the frightened woman behind the window. "Oh, Mr. Reynolds, thank God," the woman said, when she saw him.

"What's the problem?"

"I just want my medication back," the man yelled, "and this woman said I have to take that up with the doctor. I don't give a crap about your doctor. I just want my meds back and I want out of this insane study."

Sam understood the man's anger and said, "Genie, do you know where... I'm sorry, what did you say your name was?"

"Tolens," the man said through clenched teeth. "Barry Tolens."

"Do you know where Mr. Tolens's medication is?"

"I'll go see if I can find it," the frightened girl said as she ran out of the receptionist area.

Sam turned to the angry man and said, "Why don't you come inside where I'm sure you will be more comfortable?"

Barry Tolens looked around the waiting room area and realized that he had created quite a scene. Several of the volunteers were looking at him in astonishment.

"I think that is probably a good idea," Tolens agreed.

Sam guided the man into one of the empty exam rooms and asked him to have a seat.

"I'm sorry about that," Tolens said apologetically. "I have been off my medication for the past ten days and I can't stand it. I'm sorry, but I just can't go through with the study."

"That's okay," Sam said consolingly. "Not everyone is cut out for this. Genie will bring you your medication and we will still provide you with your money and free prescriptions, just for making the effort."

"Really?" Tolens asked in amazement. "Now I'm really sorry I yelled at everybody."

"Forget it," Sam said. "I already have." He shook the man's hand and left the examination room. Genie was on her way in and stopped to thank Sam profusely.

"I didn't know what to do," she explained.

"If anyone else comes in and wants their medication back you can give it to them," Sam said. "Just be sure and get their full name and report it to me."

"No problem," a relieved Genie said. "And thanks again."

Sam went down to the lab and found the stat book lying on top of the patient files. "I need to borrow this," he said to the lab technician. The technician looked up from his urine specimens and held up his hand to detain him.

"These drug screens we are doing on the urine that was delivered from downtown are coming up positive for benzo's," the technician announced with concern.

"No," Sam corrected, "they should all be negative."

The young man looked at Sam in confusion.

"Didn't Jeff Edwards explain the protocol we wanted?"

The lab tech shook his head, bewildered. "I just started here yesterday," the man said timidly, "but I'm sure these test results are accurate."

Sam eyed the young man suspiciously. He had enough on his plate right now without worrying about some eager upstart flying an ethical flag in the company's face.

"What is your name?" Sam inquired.

"Roger," the man stammered.

"And do you have a last name?" The man was beginning to sweat and weakly offered up his last name.

"Kaplan."

"I see," Sam said threateningly. "Well, Roger, run them again. And if they come back positive, this will be your second and last day with Dominex." The VP calmly left with the book, leaving a shaken lab technician to read between the lines. The obvious message: to get with the program or find another job.

Sam carried the information back to his office, stopping at his secretary's desk. "Margie," he said. "We need to make arrangements to return medications to all the volunteers that have dropped out of the study. I'll get the list of names for you."

"Gee, thanks," Margie said. Sam knew that the study had been a heavy load on his secretary.

"Margie," he added, "You know you're the best."

"Yes," she agreed. "I just didn't know if you knew it." Sam gave her a smile and headed back to his office.

"Oh, Sam," she called. He turned back around. "Charles is looking for you." Sam nodded and turned right to go back down the hall.

Sam and Charles sat at the conference table in the CEO's office with all the study statistics in front of them. Charles was working hard to absorb the information. Finally, he concluded, "So, what you're telling me is that forty nine percent of all the volunteers are becoming extremely sick when they stop taking Valipene?"

"That's correct. And of the fifty-one percent who haven't become sick, only thirty percent of them are reporting having no uncomfortable symptoms. That's only fifteen percent of the entire group," Sam added.

Charles looked at Sam and said, "That's not good."

"No, it's not. We did a quick evaluation of the remaining fifteen percent. Everyone in that category had been on the drug for less than six weeks."

"So, the longer a person has been taking Valipene, the sicker they become when they stop?"

"The correlation is not exact," Sam explained. "We find that some individuals are more prone to withdrawal than others, but in general, yes, time frame is definitely a factor."

"You said that this would be fool proof," Charles said, taking his eyes off the pages and leveling them on his VP.

"And it will be," Sam assured him. "Do you want to know the details of Phase Two?"

"I guess I need to," Charles said reluctantly. "But before we get into that we need to look at our current financial situation."

"It will take two more months before all the volunteers have completed the study," Charles directed.

Sam nodded.

"Our recent expansion required a substantial increase in revenue and for obvious reasons, it isn't there yet."

"And terminating a bunch of eight dollar an hour employees is going to fix the problem?" Sam asked incredulously.

"I'm afraid we will have to dip into some of the higher paid work force," Charles responded. Sam and Charles sat in silence while Sam absorbed that piece of information.

"And what do you propose to do in two months when Suprame goes on the market and we need them all back?" Sam asked finally.

"Actually," he said contritely, "I hadn't thought that far down the road." Just then, Charles lit up and said, "Why don't we just tell them it's a temporary layoff?"

Sam couldn't believe what he was hearing. This man was not going to let go of a single luxury while honest, loyal, hard workers went months without a means to pay their light bill.

"Charles," he said finally. "That's not going to work. Good qualified people are not going to lie around the house for two months waiting for their jobs back. More than likely you will never see them again. Why don't you let me think about another solution?"

"Fine by me," Charles said happily. "Now tell me about Phase Two."

Chapter 14

Carol went up to the front office to check her mailbox. She had been anxiously waiting for the lab to drop off her latest batch of drug screen results. The large green and white envelope was folded into her designated slot and she grabbed it. Not willing to wait a minute longer, she tore the envelope open and sorted through the pages until she found the alias she was looking for.

There it was in green and white. Lorenzo White, alias Brian Carter, was positive for benzodiazepines.

"Oh, shit," Carol exclaimed.

Several of the secretaries and counselors looked over in her direction.

"Fallen angel," Carol explained sheepishly and quickly walked back to her office.

She closed the door and sat down on the patient's sofa. *What am I going to tell Brian?* Then the full reality suddenly hit her. If Brian was being given a compound with the same agent as Valipene, then everyone going to this doctor was being deceived in the same way. Carol had no idea how many people were going to see Dr. Donovan, but this whole situation had just escalated from unfortunate victim to intended harm. Carol got the paper she had used to compile names and phone numbers, and dialed the number for Jerry Owens. Carol waited, but she only got his voice mail. She left a generic message. She did not want to leave any details on an answer machine.

Her next contact was Brian Carter. Carol knew he would be home and dreaded having to break this kind of news to him. He had been so happy, thinking he was free from his addiction. He was more of a prisoner now than he had been before. Brian answered on the third ring. "Hey, Brian," Carol said, trying to sound cheerful.

"Hey, counselor. How's it going?"

"Listen, buddy, I got your lab result."

"And what did it say? Do I have some fatal disease?"

Carol began stalling for time and said, "As near as I can tell, you are going to outlive us all."

"So everything is okay?" he concluded.

Carol did not respond.

"Uh oh," Brian said, when he got no response.

"You want this over the phone or do you want to meet me somewhere?" she asked, finally.

"That bad?"

"You know where the Denny's is on Memorial and 285?" Carol asked.

"Yeah," Brian answered. "It's not far from where I live."

"I'll meet you there in thirty minutes."

Carol cleaned off her desk and brought the patient files back up to the file room. Files were always locked away each night for patient confidentiality. There had never been a break in at Newberg Mental Health, as far as anyone knew. Carol couldn't imagine what anyone would do with patient information. There were much better things to go after in the middle of the night, but it was regulation nonetheless, and they were all required to comply. Carol signed out early,

telling the receptionist that her symptoms had gotten worse. The girl nodded sympathetically. Everyone knew that Carol was sick and had been unusually nice to her. Carol left the building and drove to the Denny's to meet her "fallen angel."

Brian was already seated at a booth when she arrived. Carol scooted into the seat opposite him and said, "'You look good for someone terminal.'" Brian did not laugh.

"Okay, tell me what is going on," he demanded, visibly shaken. Carol could not put him off any longer. She told him about his drug screen result and explained that the result could only be from one substance. It had to have been in the vitamins, and that was what had made him feel better. "So, you're telling me that I am back on that drug?" Brian said in alarm.

"You are," she confirmed. Brian grabbed his water glass with one shaky hand, barely able to navigate it to his mouth. "Brian, I am so sorry," Carol said not knowing what else to do.

Brian sat quietly for what seemed like an eternity to Carol. She allowed him the time he needed. She was used to uncomfortable silences. "This is a nightmare," he said finally. "The harder I fight it, the deeper I fall."

"Brian, this was not your fault," she said soothingly. "You had no way of knowing what they were giving you."

"Yeah, well, you didn't fall for it," Brian laughed ironically. "You had enough sense to stay away from doctors altogether."

"Wait," Carol interjected. "Don't turn my obsessive paranoia into a virtue. I am just as confused as you are. I just happened to pick the right phobia. I got lucky." Brian grabbed the water glass again, having the same shaky result.

"What am I going to do?" he wailed, as tears welled up in his eyes. He didn't want to cry in front of anyone, but he had not been able to contain himself. Carol handed him a napkin and waited.

After a moment Carol said, "Brian, there are only two choices." She didn't have to provide much more of an explanation than that. He knew exactly what she meant.

"There are always only two choices," she continued. "It doesn't matter what brought us to this point. All that matters now is that we are addicts. I kept trying to tell myself that my situation was different and that I wasn't like those hard-core addicts I work with. But you know what?" she said, in deep reflection. "There is no difference."

"How can you say that?" Brian asked incredulously.

"Look at what we are dealing with right now," Carol explained. "Our bodies need that drug. Without it, we can't function. From a medical stand point there is no difference between our addiction and an alcoholic's."

"Okay, medically speaking, maybe not," Brian conceded. "But we didn't run around popping pills all day and all night. We were only following a doctor's advice." The man was visibly shaken by the implication.

"Brian, did you ever take more on a given day than you were supposed to?" Carol interjected.

"What do you mean?" he asked defensively.

"Say you had a really bad day," Carol continued. "Did you ever justify an extra dose because you had had a really bad day?" Brian thought about it for a moment, and shrugged his shoulders.

"A few times, maybe."

"Don't feel bad," she said. "I did too." Carol was coming to grips with her own reality, and like it or not, Brian was going to go along for the ride. "I got blindsided because I had this

hard and fast definition of addiction in my head," Carol continued. "If you were not compulsive and out of control, you were okay. We didn't have to jump from doctor to doctor because the dose wasn't cutting it anymore..." Suddenly, Carol stopped in mid thought.

"What?" Brian inquired.

"Increase in tolerance," Carol whispered to herself.

"What does that mean?" he asked.

"Increase in tolerance," she said again, looking straight at Brian. "The other sign of addiction is an increase in tolerance. That means the original dose becomes ineffective and you need more to achieve the same result. I was on one-milligram tablets. Within a really short space of time, that dose wasn't getting it anymore. I started having strange symptoms." All of a sudden it was as if a light had been turned on in Carol's head. "Those strange little symptoms were tolerance withdrawal."

"Okay, now you've really lost me," Brian interjected.

"Once the body's tolerance to the drug increases, the dose is no longer enough to keep the person from going into withdrawal."

"I guess that was when I started increasing my dosage," Brian said contritely.

"Precisely," Carol agreed. "And let's be honest. Did we tell anyone about our extra pill popping behavior?"

"Well, no one would have understood," Brian said, again on the defense.

"Or was it that we didn't understand it ourselves?" Carol added. Brian didn't answer but simply nodded. The truth was blinding and impossible to deny.

"And here's the clincher," Carol announced. "The ultimate definition of addiction is the preference for a mood and mind altered state. We have to ask ourselves, why did we need sedatives in the first place?" Brian shrugged his shoulders. He clearly had never thought about that question and had no ready answer. Carol sat shaking her head. The truth had been staring her in the face for months, but she had been so busy taking care of everyone else and blaming doctors and pharmaceutical companies for her tragedy, that she had missed noticing the train wreck that had become her life. The wreck that she herself had caused.

"The reason I couldn't sleep at night was because of my obsessive need to fix everyone and everything. I would become outraged at all the injustice in the world and it kept me in knots all the time," Carol reflected.

"So, how is it that you can suddenly see all this now?" Brian asked.

Carol thought about it for a minute and then said, "I got too sick to keep up the pace. You have to keep moving to stay ahead of the obvious. I can't move fast enough anymore."

"I think I know what you mean," Brian admitted reluctantly. "Ever since I became chair-bound, I have had to focus on everything that I had been able to ignore before." Carol looked at Brian and nodded. Both sat and silently pondered their new awareness.

Finally, Carol let out a long breath and said, "So, regardless of the unconventional way we got here, we're addicts. The road we are on now is identical to everyone else's and no amount of denial or rage is going to change that fact."

"So, what is the first step?" Brian asked bravely. Carol began to laugh.

"This isn't funny," Brian said, trying not to smile.

"I'm laughing, because there actually is a first step; twelve to be exact."

"Okay," Brian said, "what is it?"

"Powerlessness," Carol stated. "Admitting that we are powerless over this drug, and that our lives as a result have become unmanageable."

"Boy, is that a fact," he agreed.

Carol fished a small book out of her purse.

"Here," she said, handing it to Brian. "Here are all twelve steps, along with a list of meetings. I get my meetings at work, and whether I had realized it or not, they were actually helping me get through this."

"But I thought those meetings were for addicts who can't stop."

"On the surface, it is," Carol explained. "But underneath the obvious cause and effect, those meetings help us come to grips with what brought us to our addiction in the first place. Recovery isn't just abstinence," she explained. "It is also about admitting the truth about ourselves and learning to live a better way."

Brian absorbed Carol's words and said, "Well, I guess I just went to my first meeting."

"This was the power addition," Carol said, smiling. "No charge."

Carol left Brian to go home and begin his recovery all over again. She ran over all they had talked about and all that she had come to realize. She knew that from this moment, she could no longer run her life in the same obsessive way. She would never be able to justify her old behavior. The change would be hard, but without it she would never fully recover.

Sam shook hands with Gary Price and thanked him for seeing him on such short notice. "Not a problem," Price responded. "How can I help you?"

"I need to make arrangements for a loan," Sam began. "You're familiar with our company and all of its assets?" The bank manager nodded. "Well, we have had an unfortunate delay in the market date of our new drug."

"I see," Price responded.

"And although our spending was justified in preparation of the new product, we were not prepared for this long delay."

"How much of a delay are we talking?"

"No more than two months," Sam said. "So, we just need a short term loan of, let's say, two million to be paid off in six months."

Price looked over the list of assets Sam had brought with him. "We can probably do that," Price said finally. "But with all your other outstanding debt, we will have to have this paid off on time."

"Great," Sam said, and stood up to shake the bank manager's hand.

"So, you realize that we are providing this loan against your company's assets?" Price confirmed before accepting the handshake.

Sam nodded and said, "Once this drug goes on the market, we won't have any problem paying this off."

"Okay," Price agreed. "I'll draw up the papers and you can come by tomorrow to sign them."

"Thanks again," Sam said, and went out the door.

When Carol arrived at home she noticed the answering machine blinking, indicating one message. She hit the play button and listened. It was Jerry Owens letting her know that she could contact him at the number provided any time after 5:00 PM. His home phone number, she thought. Carol decided that she could probably trust this guy. She checked the time. She couldn't contact him for at least another hour and she had really wanted to check on Clair Warner before speaking with anyone from Dominex.

Carol pulled out her number sheet and dialed the number she had gotten off Clair's intake form. A very groggy sounding person answered the phone and Carol did not recognize the voice. "Is this Clair?" she inquired.

"Yes," the voice answered weakly.

"Clair, this is Carol Freeman from the mental health center. I wanted to check in and see how you are doing."

"Oh, that's very sweet of you," Clair said, a little more coherently. "I went to that doctor they told me to go to and I can't believe how great I feel." Carol closed her eyes and sat in the nearest chair waiting to hear the rest.

"These vitamins are great," Clair continued. "I know you are only supposed to take one a day but I was in really bad shape."

Oh no, Carol thought.

"How many did you take?" she asked hesitantly.

"Just two today."

"Today," Carol repeated. "How many did you take on other days?"

"Well, yesterday I took three and I've certainly been catching up on all my lost sleep."

"I bet you have," Carol said, sadly. "Go splash some cold water on your face, and come back to the phone. I need to fill you in on a few things." Carol could hear the phone being put down and waited for her to return.

When she returned, Carol filled her in on everything she knew about the vitamins the doctor was handing out. Clair listened to the explanation. "I guess I should have known that a vitamin couldn't make me feel this much better, or this sleepy," Clair interjected.

"You're lucky you haven't had to be rushed to the emergency room from an overdose," Carol instructed adamantly.

"Carol, I don't think I can go off this medication. I have thought about it and the withdrawal was too much for me to handle."

"I definitely understand," Carol assured her, "but you have to promise to stop taking more than one per day." Clair promised and thanked Carol for being so concerned about her. Before Carol could question her any further Clair was gone.

In Carol's line of work she had received promises from the pros and had come to know a line of bull pretty well when she heard it. She really had no idea about Clair's medication history other than what Clair had reported. But she was pretty sure that the sweet woman who had come into her office the other day had just crossed over the line into a whole new world of drug use. Carol felt absolutely helpless. There was nothing more she could do. Clair was an adult and as such, she was allowed to make her own choices, bad or good. At least she had been warned about the possibility of an overdose. Carol looked up at the ceiling and said, "Please take care of her."

She was about to change out of her work clothes when the phone rang.

"Carol, this is Jerry Owens," the caller announced. "I thought I'd try you once more before leaving the office." Carol wasn't sure how to approach the issue or if she could trust Jerry's motives, but she had to do something.

"Mr. Owens," Carol began carefully, "there are some very bizarre things going on with the volunteers in your study."

"Well, it's not exactly my study," Jerry qualified, "but go on."

Carol proceeded to fill Jerry in on what had happened to both Brian and Clair as a result of their office visits with Dr. Donovan. Jerry did not respond immediately, as he came to realize how public this knowledge had become. What should he do now? At no time in any of his conversations with Sheila had they discussed the possibility that the volunteers would figure out what was going on.

"Well, as I said," Jerry improvised, "I'm not directly involved with the study."

"I'm confused, then," Carol stated. "When you contacted me the first time, you said you were following up on our progress."

"That's true," Jerry stuttered, working hard to keep from sounding like an idiot. "They give the Marketing Department assignments from other areas during down time." Jerry was shaking his head at the stupidity of his statement.

"But you do work for Dominex Pharmaceuticals," Carol said, stating the obvious. "And last time we spoke, you said you would get my information to the right person." Jerry knew where this was going and didn't have a clue what he was going to say next. "So, who would that be in this particular case?" Carol inquired adamantly.

"I'm not really sure," Jerry said, wanting to unplug the phone from the wall, "but I will try to find out."

"Don't bother," Carol stated. "They probably already know, don't you think?" Carol was on the war path at that moment, which always resulted in enough dripping sarcasm to repaint a small house.

"I'm sorry I couldn't be more helpful," Jerry offered weakly, trying to gracefully end a conversation that was rapidly going down the tubes.

"So am I," Carol said angrily, and hung up.

"I'm going to kill Sheila," Jerry said, out loud to no one. "She leaves me here to contain a tidal wave, while she goes off to the happy bakery in Newark, New Jersey." Jerry continued his tirade for several minutes before sitting down at his desk. He checked the time, knowing that Sheila would most likely still be in the office. He hated relying on email. It required that the recipient be available on the other end to receive it.

Jerry visualized his 401K being flushed down the toilet. What could Sheila tell him that he didn't already know? This new turn in the Dominex saga had the potential to take the whole company down. If that happened, Jerry, Sheila, and a whole lot of other hard working people with families were going down right along with it. The "mission," as he understood it, was to target the sedative issue and make it public. At no time had Sheila ever alluded to taking out the whole company. Dominex represented a whole generation of good products and good employees. This was one of those ethical issues that could be debated forever. People were going to get hurt in this situation, no matter which side of the argument they took.

The volunteer's new awareness was a time bomb with a very short fuse. Time was of the essence. If they didn't clean up this mess, and quickly, Sheila's "mission" would never see

daylight, and the company would most likely be shut down. He didn't have time to wait for an email from her. *They have to know*, Jerry concluded. He was young and single and despite his attachment to his 401K, he would survive the fall. But there were a lot of people who wouldn't. Jerry had known and worked beside these people for a long time, and genuinely cared about their survival. Then there was the bigger issue. The whole sedative problem had to be exposed. And that required the delicate fabric of time. *I have to tell Sam*, Jerry decided reluctantly, and went out the door to find him.

Carol was livid. *He knew!* This person's character was yet to be decided, but he was a terrible liar. There were so many layers of deceit going on at that company, she couldn't begin to understand it all. But she knew that it had to stop.

Carol stood by the phone, wondering what she could do, when the familiar rush of panic came in on her. "It's happening again," she cried out, and rushed into the bedroom. Carol quickly lied down on the bed and started the slow breathing exercise that had worked before. This panic attack was far worse this time. Carol worked to control the wave that was attempting to overtake her. After a good thirty minutes of controlled breathing, Carol felt safe to sit up.

She went to the bathroom, and wiped the ocean of water off her face and neck. Looking into the mirror, Carol was reminded of the blatant truth about her own nature, and her recovery. She no longer had the luxury of being a crusader. This illness was life sensitive. Every intense emotion that resulted from her past knee jerk reactions was causing the withdrawal symptoms to take her into a chokehold. Weak and dizzy, Carol went back to lie down. Who would save the day? For the first time she was faced with an answer she had never thought of before. It was possible that the day might not be saved by anyone. This was now a test of faith. Letting go and letting a higher authority deal with all the chaos was a process with which she was completely unfamiliar.

Chapter 15

Sam Reynolds had never been so tired in his life. Sitting across from him were Jeff and a new addition to the disaster control club. "I just thought you had to know," Jerry said, trying to fill the silent tension.

"You did the right thing," Jeff told him. "The question is: what are we going to do about it?"

Sam was not so much focused on a solution as he was a new realization. If Jerry knew even a part of what was happening with this whole mess, others probably did too.

"Jerry," Sam interjected. "Who else in the company knows about this?"

Jerry was not about to involve anyone else in his decision to come forward, and just shrugged.

"No one, as far as I know."

"So, how did you get involved in this?" Sam continued.

"This person contacted me," Jerry improvised. Improvisation was getting to be the order of the day. "When Carol Freeman asked to speak to Sheila, they put her through to me." *Not bad.* To his surprise and embarrassment, he was actually getting better at this.

"Okay then," Jeff concluded, satisfied with the containment issue. "Thanks for coming to see us."

"No problem," Jerry said, with relief, and stood to go. He did not want to be involved in any further dealings with these two. They would figure out how to save Dominex's proverbial ass, and he would continue to sleep at night. "Have a nice day," Jerry said ironically, on his way out the door.

"Very funny," Sam said to the man, after he was out of earshot.

"Do you think we can trust this guy?" Jeff asked, after closing the office door.

"We don't really have a choice," Sam answered. "As long as he is with us, he is motivated to protect us. Separated from his job... There's no telling what he might be motivated to do."

The two men sat in silence, thinking about the problem. "Well, one thing is certain," Jeff said finally. "We have got to get all that Suprame out of Doctor Donovan's office before anyone starts snooping around there, but what do we put in its place?"

"Good question," Sam concluded. "That is a very good question."

Josh Freeman came home covered in mud and grime. His unfortunate choice of self-employment had him digging in the dirt more often than he had ever thought possible. Making a beeline for the shower, he noticed Carol curled up in the bed. "Are you okay?" he asked, peeling off his shirt.

"I have had better days," Carol responded.

"Well, let me get this layer of crud off and I'll fix you some tea or something."

Carol lay quietly in the bed. She didn't want tea; she wanted justice. Old habits die very hard, and even though she knew she had new limitations, she could not help but focus on the

injustice of what had happened to her and a lot of others. Carol waited for Josh to get out of the shower.

He emerged, a different shade of human being, and Carol sat up in the bed. "Josh, I need you to call someone." She told him about Brian, Clair, Dr. Donovan, and Jerry Owens. Josh sat at the side of the bed, taking in all the new information.

"Jesus," was all he could say when Carol finished her story. "So, who could we possibly call?"

"I'm not sure," Carol sighed. "We could start with the state medical board."

"You want to report this doctor to the medical board?" he inquired.

"I want to report several doctors and one pharmaceutical company," Carol said, "but for right now, I guess I'll have to settle for the one doing the most damage."

Josh pulled out the Metro Atlanta Business phone book. The city was so large that there were three sets of thick, heavy books covering the commercial listings alone. "God," Josh swore. "Could they make these blue pages any more confusing?" Carol did not offer any help. In her current mental state, she did not think she could have even found the phone book.

Finally, Josh found a number for the Georgia State Medical Board and dialed it. He listened through several sets of menu instructions, punching in the corresponding digit to what he wanted. After jumping through a long series of hoops that had been laid out by the inanimate machine, he hung up the phone and shook his head. "What?" Carol inquired.

"After all that I was instructed to submit my concern in writing," Josh laughed, humorlessly. "What would you do if you had to report a doctor on a rampage with a knife?"

"Probably call the police," Carol answered, feeling extremely worn out. She was used to bureaucracy. Her entire field thrived on it but she was in no condition to deal with it today. Maybe Brian was in better shape to send their complaint in writing. She would call him later.

Jerry had given Sheila enough time to get back to her "hut," as she referred to it. He had decided to call her from home. That way, there would be no phone record for Dominex to tie them together. Sheila answered on the first ring. "I hope you keep a large chocolate stash at the hut," Jerry began.

"I'm totally 'chocolated' out," Sheila answered. "What's up?"

Jerry filled her in on his phone call from Carol Freeman, his decision to tell the VP, and the little meeting in Sam's office. "So in conclusion," Jerry said, "I am fulfilling my promise to you and I am on my way up there to kill you now."

"Jerry, I had no idea that this would get so weird," Sheila said apologetically. "But, for what it's worth I think you did the right thing."

"I was hoping you would say that," Jerry said, and let out a long stream of air in relief.

"They have no idea that I am on to them too?"

"I don't think so," Jerry said. "Thanks to all the fun I have been having here in your absence I seem to have developed the ability to lie."

"Jerry, sometimes that is a necessary skill."

"Well, it never seemed necessary before."

"Okay, you're upset. Can't say that I blame you." Jerry reached up and massaged his headache.

"The thing I don't understand," he said finally, "is what good is it to keep a close eye on everything that is going on if we can't actually *do* anything about it when we find out?" Sheila had confided in Jerry, telling him almost everything, but her true mission was something she wasn't willing to share with anyone.

"We just have to wait until the appropriate moment," Sheila said.

"Doctors handing out sedatives to unsuspecting patients sounds like a good moment to me."

"There is a whole lot more to this scenario," Sheila added. "Dominex is getting ready to put a drug on the market that, when taken longer than a few weeks, is systematically and painfully addictive. They aren't going to provide any specific prescribing guidelines or warnings. People will be left on their own to discover what has happened to them after they are so far along in their addiction they can't function without the drug."

"Sounds like a well thought out plan to me," Jerry said.

"You're right," Sheila confirmed. "There is no coincidence that people will become sedative lifers. Dominex stands to make billions on that very plan."

"Okay," Jerry conceded, "I understand what you're saying. But what do we do in the meantime?"

"Document everything," Sheila reiterated. "I promised you that I would not put you in the line of fire, and I won't. You did a gallant thing today, protecting the innocent people who rely on that place to feed their families. And you have been a big help to me."

"Okay, stop it already," Jerry said. "I have been officially smoothed over."

"Good," Sheila sighed. "You know you will have to be a lot more careful now that Sam and Jeff know you are aware of what's going on."

"Yeah," Jerry said reluctantly. "I was just so happy to get out of that office today without getting the third degree, I hadn't really thought about a future plan."

"Just stay in the shadows," Sheila instructed.

"Just call me Bond, James Bond."

"And call me asleep," Sheila yawned. "It's a school night. I'll talk to you tomorrow, okay?"

"Good night, Sheila," Jerry said and hung up.

Jerry sat by the phone and wondered what to do with all his nervous energy. It was only seven thirty. *This would be a good time to check out that Phamlab address*, he thought. Pulling out of his driveway, he thought momentarily about how this little adventure would play out on TV. They're probably watching my every move, and I won't make it back alive. He had to shake off the eerie sensation that had been instilled in him by Hollywood.

Jerry continued around the 285 loop until he arrived at the Tucker exit. Pulling the paper out of his pocket, he checked the address Sheila had given him. The lab had to be only a few miles down highway 78 to his destination. He slowed down when he got closer to the general area of the address. The odd numbers ran consecutively on the left side of the street. Finally, he found the number he was looking for: 2107 Highway 78 was an abandoned looking house. Jerry pulled into the driveway and stared at the dark building with its boarded up windows and demolished walls. There had been some kind of fire that had rendered the thing a lovely shade of black. The debris in the front yard was piled several feet high, and included a bathtub and a rusted-out hot water heater. This was too weird for words. If this house was a lab, he lived at the White House. What if the FDA went looking for this place? The cockiness of Dominex went way beyond any reason. Jerry pulled out a small camera and snapped a few shots of the

dilapidated building. The sun was almost down, but he caught the essence of the situation. Backing out of the driveway, he headed for home.

Carol awoke from a nap and glanced at the clock. Eight thirty PM. Not too late to call Brian. She sat up cautiously, and was surprised at how drained she felt. The anxiety attack had wiped her out, and the nap had not really made any difference. She had to get up anyway. Carol walked passed Josh, who was sitting at his favorite place in front of the computer, and gave him a wave. "Feeling better?" he asked. "Sure," Carol lied. She went to the phone and dialed Brian's number.

A woman answered the phone and Carol attempted to identify herself and her connection to the drug study. She always felt compelled to explain herself when calling someone of the opposite sex and their significant other answered the phone. She could not help but notice that the woman was unusually cold to her and resistant about putting her husband on the phone. Carol waited for the woman to finish her exaggerated breathing that she guessed was supposed to convey annoyance.

Finally Brian came to the phone. "What was that all about?" Carol inquired.

"Don't ask," Brian said, obviously unable to explain any further.

"Well, how are you feeling?"

"Do you remember what the first few weeks were like?"

"Unfortunately, I do," Carol stated.

"Do you need to know more?"

"Damn," Carol said.

"Well, it will pass," he reasoned. "At least this time, I know what's causing it. That helps."

Carol did not have the heart to burden Brian with details about her strange conversation with Dominex or to ask him to do anything. She remembered how hard it was just to lift her arms off the bed. It wasn't that she was so much better now. She was just getting used to living this way.

Carol told Brian she would check on him during the day when he was a little freer to talk. "I'll be here," he said, sadly.

"It'll get better," she said reassuringly, and hung up. *Poor Brian.* She couldn't imagine going through the early stages of withdrawal twice. This, compounded by whatever was going on over there. It didn't sound like he was getting a whole lot of understanding. Carol walked over to Josh and hugged him from behind.

"What was that for?" he asked.

"Putting up with me."

"Do I have a choice?" Josh laughed.

"No," she said, and walked off to find dinner.

After a quick dinner of eggs and toast, Carol spotted the empty seat at the computer. She decided to take advantage of the time. Carol drafted a letter to the Georgia State Medical Board, outlining her suspicion of Doctor Donovan, evidenced by the drug screen she had done on "one of the study volunteers." She knew full well that she couldn't submit a drug screen to them with Lorenzo White's name on it. She should have taken the extra time to open a chart on Brian, but her energy and her mind didn't go the distance these days. Hopefully, they would investigate the

doctor's office first and find what they needed. With any real luck, they would even be able to tie the doctor's activities to Dominex. In either case, she hoped the reference to the drug screen would motivate a visit to the doctor, but that there would be no need to actually submit any hard copy evidence.

Carol printed the final version of her letter and then ran the envelope through the printer as well. *Very official looking.*

Josh returned to his domain, just as she was sealing the envelope. "Could you put this in the mail box?" Carol asked.

She watched him walk to the box, swing the little red flag in the up position, and turn to come back to the house. The wheel had been set in motion. Now it was up to them.

Brian and his wife Pam were growing further apart with each passing day. She had been very much in favor of the vitamin doctor, especially after Brian had started feeling better. He had started looking and acting like his old self again. But since this "Carol" person had intervened and convinced him that he had a drug problem, their lives had turned to shit.

"I don't want you talking to that person anymore," Pam yelled. They had been yelling at each other for the past ten minutes, and Brian was now hyperventilating from the additional stress on his withdrawal.

"At least she seems to care about what happens to me," Brian said between short gasps of breaths. He had given up trying to match Pam's volume. He didn't have the strength.

"And what the hell's that supposed to mean?" Pam yelled even louder.

"Pam," Brian said weakly, "figure it out yourself. In case you haven't noticed – or maybe it's just that you don't care – I am about to collapse. This argument is over."

Pam began to shake with anger. "You are such a wimp," she yelled. "You were a wimp before your alleged addiction, and you're a bigger one now." Brian looked up at the woman attacking him. This had been his favorite person in the whole world and now she was his worst enemy.

"Pam," Brian said finally, after catching his breath. "Maybe my real problem is this alleged marriage."

A deer suddenly blinded by headlights. That was the best description of the raging Pam as she looked wide-eyed at her husband. He had never stood up to her before in such a decisive way. "What are you saying?" she asked finally. She was no longer yelling.

"I don't know yet," Brian answered. He had been just as surprised as Pam was when the words had come out of his mouth. It wasn't that he hadn't been thinking it for a long time, but out loud – that made it official.

"Pam," Brian said. "I'm sick. And your lack of ability to understand that fact doesn't change the truth. This is the most horrible and frightening thing that has ever happened to me. I will not defend myself to you one minute longer." Brian closed his eyes and worked on slowing his breathing down while his wife continued to look at him. She knew the debate was over.

How did this drug come into their lives? They had been the perfect couple with great careers, great friends, and all the other material things that made up the perfect marriage. Pam had been clueless about her husband's discontent. Sure they had a few heated discussions about having children, but she had been convinced that he had gotten over that silly fantasy long ago. She wanted her old life back. She had no use for all this talk about addiction and

recovery. They were still young. They were supposed to be out having fun. How would she ever explain this to her friends? She quietly left the room.

It was about three o'clock in the morning, and the house was quiet now. Brian felt as though a giant weight had been removed from his shoulders. His wife had gone to bed without saying a word to him while he had remained in the only place where he could contain his anxiety. He didn't know where they were headed, but he was certain it would not be back to the way things had been before. Brian clicked off the TV with the remote and lay back in the recliner. He doubted he could sleep, but the blurred view of the TV was more than his poor eyes could take any longer. It would be another very long night.

Carol tossed and turned in a fitful sleep. In her dream she voluntarily placed one arm onto a large commercial paper cutter, the blade neatly hacked it off. She placed the other arm onto the cutting device, and lost the second one in the same efficient manner. There was no blood. Just two neatly severed stubs. In the next instant, she was sitting behind the wheel of a car. It was racing off the road, but because Carol didn't have any arms, she was unable to grab the steering wheel and guide the speeding car back to a safe path. She was a prisoner, going ninety miles an hour off a steep embankment into the canyon below. Just as the car flew into the misty void, Carol awoke in terror.

Breathlessly, she rolled over and looked at her sleeping husband. Apparently her final screams had stayed lodged in her throat. She glanced at the clock. It was 3:00 AM, the worst time of the night for a withdrawal victim. Carol knew from experience that for the next two hours, sleep would be impossible. She quietly got up to ride out the rest of the night in front of the TV.

At eight thirty, a hand was gently nudging her. Carol opened her eyes, sore from little sleep, and glanced at Josh. "Thought you'd like a wakeup call," he offered apologetically. He was used to finding her asleep on the couch.

"Guess I actually dozed back off," she said weakly.

Carol desperately wished she could stay home. The anxiety attack of the day before had left her feeling very tentative about the drive to work. She had a creepy sensation every time she got into the car, and was getting tired of the daily battle. But today, it was a little more than just a creepy feeling. The phobias and nightmares that went along with sedative withdrawal were far reaching, and its victim had to work minute by minute to push through it. There was a very thin line between the real world and the perceived reality she was living in. Logic and reason had to prevail, but she had often ventured through each illusion, clearly seeing one image and telling herself that it wasn't there. Each day was an act of faith.

Carol grudgingly got herself up and dressed. She was already exhausted, and it was only nine in the morning. She was in the process of forcing herself to leave the house and get into the dreaded car, but just as she was about to close the front door, the phone began to ring. Carol was happy for any delay, and turned around to answer it.

"Carol," the caller began, "This is Vicky Manson. I used to work at Newberg Mental Health."

"I know who you are," Carol said happily. "How have you been doing?"

"Fine, since I quit working at that place." Carol still worked at that place, and wasn't sure how far she should get into this. But lately she had stopped worrying about her position at work.

"I think what they did to you was despicable," Carol said finally.

"It's okay," Vicky answered. "Things had gotten out of hand long before they transferred me to Central Intake."

"Really?" Carol asked incredulously. "I thought maybe it was just me."

"They have a funny way of making you think that," Vicky agreed. "I couldn't say anything while I was working there, but I wanted to touch base with you now that I am gone." Carol waited for Vicky to continue. "I had reported one of the adolescent counselors there for having an affair with a client's father. I went through the right process, first talking to the counselor, then going to the department supervisor." Carol needed to sit down. These were her lovely co-workers at their best. "Anyway," Vicky continued, "this particular counselor has been at Newberg for about a thousand years, so no one did anything about it and the affair continued. I finally reported it to the Center Director and Tri-County Human Resources."

"Wow," Carol said. "You had guts, lady."

"I had to report it," Vicky argued. "Isn't that what they drum into us from day one? If you are aware of an ethical violation and you do nothing, you are as guilty of the offense as the one committing it."

"In a perfect world," Carol said, "the offender gets punished. In this world, they make the problem quietly go away."

"Well, I don't know if they accomplished the quiet part," Vicky laughed. "I made one hell of stink before I resigned."

"There are way too many of them," Carol said. "I'm sure that by the time they got done with your employee file, you came off as a lunatic."

"No doubt," Vicky agreed. "Anyway, it doesn't matter. I started a private practice, and I wish I'd done it sooner."

"That's great," Carol said. "Now I don't feel so bad about what happened to you."

"Listen," Vicky said, "you are one of the good ones. If you stay there too long, they will suck all the good right out of you."

"I know," Carol laughed. "I'm so glad you called. Good luck with your new venture."

"Good luck to you too," Vicky answered. "As long as you stay in the Buck Spears Empire, you'll need it. Be careful, okay?"

"I will," Carol said. "Bye."

Carol went down to her car and sat for a while, staring at the garage wall. That whole manager's meeting had been orchestrated just as she had thought. The main reason she had been demoted was that she hadn't learned to be like them. Spears needed people like the other managers. The kind who would plan and conspire, neatly working together to pull off whatever plan he needed implemented. *Despicable people*. Carol backed out of the garage and prayed that it would be a very slow and uneventful day.

Josh Freeman gave himself the afternoon off from his landscape adventure. He had a tentative plan and wanted to get home to do some research. The Dominex Company had stock

whose value was going through the roof. Yet, all was not well. From the small insight he had through Carol's personal experience, the study was going quickly to hell.

Josh sat down at the computer and typed in "Valipene withdrawal." After a few seconds, the computer responded with 13,496 web sites. *Quite a lot of activity for a harmless medication.* Josh began pulling up each one and reading the information. Some of the web sites were set up by individuals sharing their personal stories about what had happened to them, as a result of taking the drug. The information was powerful and alarming.

Next, he went to the FDA's web site and attempted to find information or statistics on past complaints about Valipene. The Web sites on Valipene withdrawal were packed with references to former complaints, and there were even a few on line petitions in the process of being completed. But there was very little acknowledgement of potential problems at the FDA site. *Interesting,* Josh thought.

If Dominex's current stock value was any indication, there seemed to be a sense of confidence that things would remain quiet. Josh typed in Dominex Pharmaceuticals and waited to see if there was any public information about them on the Internet. After several seconds, Josh was offered a swirling graphic design, inviting him to click on the "enter" icon for a tour of the facility. *We're going in.*

Dominex, a Georgia based corporation, resides in Atlanta in a downtown high-rise building. Their manufacturing plant is located south of the city, and covers two hundred and fifty acres.

Nice pictures, but let's see if we can find out anything about the real Dominex. Josh clicked on history.

The company had been founded by a Charles Roman Sr. in 1943. There was a picture of a distinguished looking gentleman wearing a hard hat and standing by other workers in an assembly line. The company had focused primarily on anti-convulsive and arthritis medications until recently. Roman Sr. retired in 1993, turning over the business to his son, Charles Roman Jr. There was a picture of a fairly handsome, cocky looking man standing at a new construction site. He was cutting a yellow ribbon, while other official looking people in dresses and business suits were cheering. The caption read, "Moving onward and upward with Suprame. Now people won't have to pay a fortune to feel fortunate." *That's really terrible.* He knew a few people who were currently not feeling very fortunate.

So, the company had moved along modestly, until recently. Now they are pushing into the sedative market, and not by conventional means. As long as Dominex maintained the image of successful growing company, the stock would remain where it was. But if something went wrong – say, an unfortunate letter made its way to a medical board – the dive would happen so fast, no one would have time to react. People could lose millions.

He had seen enough. Josh continued to type and click until he was satisfied with his decision and his position. *I love this game.* He went on to study other charts.

Doctor Donovan had been put on the alert. The fact that the pills he had been handing out were not vitamins had become public knowledge. It was a stupid idea to begin with. He didn't mind discarding the remaining sedatives, or being called upon to deal with Dominex's sick volunteers another way. What he minded very much was the idea that anyone would be

snooping around his practice. He had managed to avoid being in the spotlight a long time, and now his greed for Dominex's business had put an end to all that.

His office staff had been editing all the Dominex patient files. Some pages were discarded completely and new pages were written in their place. It was easy to alter records when no prescriptions were filled and no insurance companies were billed. Those two outside processes would have created their own paper trail that once set in motion, would have been almost impossible to go back and alter. But neither of those had been necessary in this case. Dr. Donovan had supplied the medication and Dominex had covered the cost. The buck stopped at Donovan's office. It was fairly simple disaster control.

The remaining dilemma was how to continue treating Dominex's study victims. There was little that could be done for patients in sedative withdrawal. Their choices were clearly to go back on the medication or to ride out the withdrawal process. This was a process that Donovan was sure many of them would not choose to go through. The only other alternative was now a moot point. If the volunteers had not stopped their medication abruptly, they could have been slowly weaned off the stuff and lessened the intensity of their withdrawal. But by the time they had come to him it was no longer a possibility. Besides, the whole point of this little exercise had been to prove that a patient could easily stop taking Valipene anytime without any problems. They had been blind idiots to attempt such a venture without any real back up plan in place. Donovan could have predicted this outcome long before they had ever started this futile experiment.

The doctor had met with Jeff Edwards and Sam Reynolds to discuss an appropriate plan of action. The plan they had all finally agreed on was to switch the medication in the envelopes and replace it with true vitamins. The patients would quickly return to their prior condition and Donovan would assume the role of perplexed physician. He would explain that for some patients, he had found that the vitamins only had a very short-term effect. Saddened by this conclusion, he would recommend that they resume their medication. If the patient declined to follow his advice they would be doing so with the knowledge that the withdrawal would return.

The men decided that this would result in minimal hysteria and, with a little luck, the disaster would remain contained. No one knew how far the knowledge of Donovan's vitamins may have traveled. As far as Jeff and Sam knew, the word had only spread quietly among some of the volunteers, but they could not promise the doctor that communication had stopped there. Donovan knew that his means of doing business came with some risk, and regardless of whose idea it had been to deceive the volunteers he had ultimately agreed. His office had been cleaned out and, to the best of his knowledge, there were no remaining pieces of evidence. Business would continue as usual.

Chapter 16

Carol had thus far been blessed with an uneventful day at work. She had been back now for too long and nothing had changed. She was just as exhausted and dizzy as she had been when she first returned. Carol continued to tell herself that this was all temporary and that soon her withdrawal symptoms would be gone. Her resolve to continue working through her illness was weakening and she was now beginning to question that decision.

It had been almost three months and she was no longer able to convince herself that this was such a temporary thing. The other addiction counselors were as surprised as she was that it had gone on for this long. The primary doctor at the mental health center told her that sedative withdrawal only lasted for a few weeks. He directed her to go get a complete checkup. "It can't be sedative withdrawal," he had stated. "Something else must be wrong with you."

Carol knew what was wrong with her. The symptoms had started shortly after going off the medication and these same exact symptoms were present today. It was time to do some research. She already knew she wasn't the only one experiencing this.

That thought reminded her of Brian and the strange conversation she had had with his wife the night before. Carol checked the time, and decided to give him a call. Her next appointment was not for another hour. She dialed the number and waited for Brian to answer the phone. A groggy sounding Brian said, "hello."

"Oh crap," Carol said. "Did I wake you up?"

"It's okay," Brian said. "I don't know if you could really call what I was doing sleeping."

"So how are you?" Carol asked tentatively.

"Getting run over by a Mack truck would be an improvement," he answered. "I really don't know how you do it," he added.

"Do what?"

"I don't know how you get yourself to work every day, much less work at all."

"I don't know if you could really call what I am doing here working," she laughed weakly. There was a moment of silence, and Carol waited. She did not want to force Brian to talk about his situation if he didn't want to.

Finally, he said, "This illness makes you do interesting things."

Carol didn't respond, and waited for him to continue.

"My wife and I have disagreed about some very important things for a long time and I have always kept quiet about it. But last night when she laid into me about going off my medication, and how that has ruined her life, I was done."

"So, what did you do?"

"I just told her that I was sick, I was going to be sick, and her lack of understanding would not change that fact. It's the first time I ever actually stood up to her."

"Really?" Carol exclaimed. "Is she against the idea of you getting off the drug?"

"Probably. And I have to wonder about a marriage to someone who would want that."

Carol had a feeling that there was more going on than just Brian's illness, but it sounded like he had taken a big step in the right direction. "Brian," she said finally. "That thing you said

about this illness making you do interesting things. Well, I think this experience is like a wakeup call."

Brian thought about her words for a moment.

"I think you're right. I was willing to live a life that didn't make sense, as long as I could keep moving and stay busy."

"When we stop running, it catches up to us," Carol agreed. "The one thing this monster does is stop you dead in your tracks."

"And grind you into a pulp," Brian added.

"Well," Carol said, "the eagle will rise again."

"Or at least crawl."

"Take some time to think things out," Carol added. "Don't make any important decisions while you are in this condition."

"Sounds like good advice," Brian said. "And also, who has the strength for that?"

"That's probably a blessing," Carol laughed. "Well, for what it's worth, I'm proud of you."

"Thanks," Brian said. "I think I'm proud of me, too."

The call ended with Brian promising to drag himself to a meeting when he was up to it, and Carol promising to take it easier. As she waited for her last appointment to arrive, Carol thought about her promise. It was not only a good plan, but one she had no other choice but to keep. She had expected to be better by now, and it clearly had not been an accurate prediction.

When Carol arrived at home, she found her husband parked in front of the computer.

"I did some interesting research," Josh announced. He didn't know if she would be interested in Dominex's stock issues, but he was sure she would be interested in what little there was from the FDA about prior complaints.

Josh pulled up the FDA website and went to public information. When he found the appropriate page, he pointed to the screen.

"See, all quiet on the eastern front."

"That's incredible," Carol said. "According to this, there are no current complaints about Valipene."

"Pretty interesting," Josh agreed. "Considering all the trouble your little group is having, there should be at least a random report or two. But there's nothing. That's pretty strange."

Josh was about to shut the computer down, when Carol stopped him.

"Wait," she said. "I need to check something."

Josh planted himself back in his seat. Carol was almost computer illiterate and this was his baby.

"Okay," he said. "Where are we going?"

"I want to look up sedative withdrawal," Carol announced. Josh went back into the search he had done that afternoon.

"You aren't going to believe this," he told her, while they waited for the computer to churn out the results. Again, he pointed to the screen. "There are thirteen thousand, five hundred web sites under sedative withdrawal."

"My god," Carol exclaimed. "Where do I start?"

Josh showed her how to select a website by clicking on it. "See?" he said when the web site came up. "And when you're done, you just click on the word 'back,' and it'll bring you back to the menu."

"Thanks," Carol said. "I promise I won't get creative. You don't have to baby-sit." Josh reluctantly left the room.

Carol began to read alarming stories from prior victims. *They are calling themselves accidental addicts. And there are so many of them.* Carol read several more personal stories. They were all describing her exact same experience. She went back to the main menu and looked for clinical information on the drug and the withdrawal process.

Some of it was way over her head, but some of it was right on target. In the course of the next hour, Carol learned that the drug she had become addicted to was never meant to be taken for longer than ten days. She discovered that the worst thing she could have done was to stop taking it abruptly, and that this had most likely caused her to become so ill. Finally, as she read further, she could not contain her emotions. The duration of the illness, she learned, lasted only a short time for some. For others, the illness could last for years. The condition was known as Benzodiazepine Withdrawal Syndrome. Each website emphasized that stopping the drug abruptly was a big factor in the magnitude and duration of the withdrawal process. Her tears began to flow.

Carol couldn't believe her wet, blurry eyes. She couldn't possibly have screwed up more if she had set out to do just that. And now she was in for a long and painful ride. She was an addiction counselor. She worked with a lot of professionals in the mental health field and this was the first she was hearing about this. How could she have missed all the warning signs? How was it possible that no one else had a clue?

Carol remembered the strange little doctor, with all of his questions. She remembered how he had looked at her each time she had come in for a re-fill of the drug. He had decided she was an addict, but had never seen fit to give her any real information about what she was taking. He just assumed that she already knew.

Then there had been all this information on the Internet. She could have accessed it at any time. But who goes looking for information on the medications doctors prescribe? If you trust your doctor and feel better as a result of what he does, why would you go checking up behind him?

Carol knew the answer to that question: you didn't. Not until you found yourself addicted to a drug, sick beyond your comprehension, and alone. She would never be able to trust a doctor ever again. But the knowledge of what can happen when you are too trusting had come too late. Carol put her head down on the desk, and had a good cry.

Angela Porter had been sitting in the waiting room of Dr. Donovan's office for almost an hour. She had lied to Dominex about having any prior psychiatric diagnosis. Her mission had been to get into their study, and ride the free medicine train. Now she was paying the price for her deception. She had been taking her vitamins religiously, and now felt just as sick as before she had started taking them.

Angela had been a nervous person all her life. She had been diagnosed with "Social Anxiety Disorder" at the age of fifteen and had always lived right on the edge. When Angela's symptoms had begun to affect her daily routine, her mother had taken her to see a specialist in behavior disorders. She had always been afraid of being around large groups of people, but in her sophomore year, she had started having trouble being on school buses and in crowded classrooms. This was resulting in a lot of pre-fabricated stomachaches and absentees.

The Doctor that assessed her had said that they needed to rule out the possibility of "social phobia" and prescribed Valipene. Now at the age of twenty-nine, Angela thought about the doctor's words. To "rule out a possibility" was the most vague and lamest reason to put a child on a drug. Granted, her "social phobia" seemed to dissipate shortly after taking the medication. She would have also responded very well to morphine, although she doubted that there would have been the need for it.

As Angela developed a tolerance for the medication, her symptoms would return. Each time she was brought back to see the doctor, he would increase her dosage, and she would return to her happy "normal" state. Her mother would sing the doctor's praises. "That Dr. Jordan," her mother would say. "He is just a genius." Everyone was happy with how well she was doing.

Over the years, Angela learned that "problem, plus pill, equaled solution." So, when Dr. Donovan handed her the vitamins, she went home and happily complied with his instructions. Now her phobia was back, along with a multitude of horrible symptoms. Angela just wanted the pain to go away. She didn't care what she had to do.

When the nurse called her name, she eagerly went inside. "We will get you back on your feet," the nurse assured her, after listening to her problem. The nurse finished taking her temperature, and wrote an additional note down in her chart. Her blood pressure was an alarming 210 over 150. "Dr. Donovan will be right in. And don't worry, he's the best." With that, the nurse left Angela to wait and hope. The doctor would know what to do. She felt sure he would find a solution.

Angela was too dizzy to sit on the examining table and planted herself in a chair with her head leaning on the wall behind it. She felt terrible, and wished the doctor would hurry. As the minutes ticked away, she began to feel a strange sensation. Before she could react or call out for help, Angela went into convulsions and fell hard on the tile floor. Unassisted and unnoticed, she continued to jerk back and forth uncontrollably. Her head had a large gash from the fall and she was losing blood at a rapid pace. Finally, the seizure subsided, but Angela never regained consciousness. The seizure had been her first, and her last.

The Newark office conference room was filled with cheering and chatter, as Sheila announced that they had finally met their goal of a forty percent increase in sales. There were bottles of champagne and platters of food, compliments of Party Time Catering. Everyone was elated.

Sheila held up the envelope she had been holding, and said, "Now if everyone will pipe down, we have a winner."

The room became quiet. Sheila waited for a dramatic moment.

"Stewart Gross," she announced finally. A young man in his twenties stood and began bowing graciously.

"Sit down, you ham," one of the other staff members yelled.

"Yeah, we all know you cheated," another chimed in.

"How can you cheat in a sales contest?" Stewart laughed.

"He probably placed the orders himself," a third member interjected.

"Yeah, let's drug screen him."

"Sorry, folks," Stewart said, with too much humility. "I'd love to be subjected to all this scrutiny, but I have to go home and pack for Hawaii."

The group continued to give the poor man grief as they all went over to hug him and shake his hand. Sheila watched the commotion with a combination of happiness and longing. She was thrilled that they had reached their goal, and that she was free to return home. She also felt another emotion she had never experienced before: she was going to miss these people. They had become her friends. She knew she was only here for one purpose, but now that the time had come, she had to admit that she had become extremely attached to this group.

Quietly, Sheila left the room, and left them to their celebration. When she returned to her office, she sat at her desk and composed an email to Jerry.

Dear Jerry, We did it! I will be leaving for Atlanta by the end of the week. You won't have to hold the fort down much longer. Love, S. Sheila clicked on the send icon, and stared at the computer screen. What was waiting for her at home? She wasn't as driven to return to Atlanta as she had been when she first arrived here. But she still had a mission. She was going.

Sam and Jeff were in their usual disaster control mode. It was getting to be a pretty regular thing lately. Sam had just informed Jeff that Sheila was arriving back in Atlanta on Friday and would be at her desk on Monday morning.

He also informed him of their first fatality.

He had been called immediately when one of the volunteers was found dead in Donovan's office. The police and the medical examiner were called, and the cause of death had been determined to be a stroke. Her age raised a big red flag. Very few twenty-nine-year-old women suffered such a fate; however, her medical history explained the strange phenomenon. Not only had the woman had a long history of drug addiction, the doctor explained to police, but also she had recently increased her drug seeking behavior. The case was closed, but Sam was still a little concerned about its implication.

"I'm getting tired of putting out fires," Jeff groaned.

"Don't talk to me about fires," Sam answered. "Fire fighter is my middle name." The two men sat in silence, pondering what to do about the Sheila situation.

"So, what you're telling me," Jeff began, "is that we have three days before the snoop is back here watching our every move?"

"Well we don't exactly know if it was genuine snooping," Sam offered.

"Oh paleeezz. The woman did everything but break into our files."

"Okay," Sam conceded. "So what could I do? I had to welcome her back with open arms. What could I have said? 'Oh sorry, did I say forty percent? I meant fifty.'"

"Why couldn't we just fire her? "She is high maintenance."

"Because, technically, we don't fire good people, and also, Charles would never let that happen. Look at what she accomplished in the Northeastern division with our same tired products. Imagine what she could do with the Supreme market."

"I know," Jeff said, reluctantly. "And besides, she's probably not the only one we have to worry about. Remember, Jerry Owens is in on this too. I have to wonder who else is keeping tabs on this little venture."

"Hell," Sam concluded. "If we start doing damage control with our staff, we'll end up firing everybody."

Sam continued to ponder Sheila's return. He never expected her to make such a drastic change in the northeast division. "Who ever thought she would pull it off so fast?" he remarked. "In another world, we would be singing her praises. I never expected her to be so good at her job."

"So let's reward her," Jeff added.

Sam looked at him with a perplexed expression.

"We'll reward her for the achievement, with... Say, a trip to somewhere exotic."

Sam thought about it for a moment.

"I don't think we can pull off the same tactic twice."

"You're probably right," Jeff agreed. "I'm too tired to be creative."

"We will have to move the remainder of the study away from here," Sam interjected. "She and the rest of the staff will be far less likely to pick up on anything suspicious if it isn't right under their noses."

"Don't you think that moving the study will raise suspicion?" Jeff inquired.

"Sure, but it is the lesser of the evils. We'll tell everyone that the study was becoming too costly. That certainly is the truth. Especially with the delay it caused us in marketing Suprame."

The more Sam thought about it, the better he liked the idea. Not only was the study a continued expense, but now that they were at the end stage of the study, moving it would be much more cost effective. He wished he had thought of this sooner. Sam remembered the little matter of a bank loan he had to finagle to buy them more time.

"Your doctor friend has been very cooperative so far," Sam ventured, "and lucky."

Jeff just looked at him with tired eyes.

"Lucky the medical examiner didn't do a more thorough investigation of Angela Porter's death," Jeff added.

"Well, we returned the favor," Sam stated. "We managed to intercept a letter our friend, Carol Freeman, wrote to the medical board."

"How'd you manage that?"

"We have had someone there looking out for us for a long time," Sam stated, proudly. "Just another one of my safety nets."

"Very impressive," Jeff agreed.

"So, the doc should be happy about the interception," Sam ventured.

"Yeah, but the letter would never have been sent in the first place if he hadn't been helping us out."

"You think he'll help us out again?"

Jeff looked up at the ceiling, and said, "Well, there's only about five weeks left in the study. Everyone has started the process and we only need for the remaining volunteers to complete Phase Two. Yeah, I think he'd be okay with it."

"Good," Sam concluded. "And while you're at it, take him out for dinner. Dominex owes him big time."

Down the hall from the fire fighters meeting, Jerry Owens read his email. *Thank you, God!* He had been keeping meticulous records of the volunteers' activities. He had contacted every one of them and had them all listed by name. He had documented every conversation, as

well as the volunteers' continued statuses. He knew which ones had completed the study, and which ones had dropped out. He had documented whether or not the volunteer had gone to see Dr. Donovan, whether they had taken the "vitamins," and who had decided to return to the medication. He had no idea what Sheila was going to do with all this information, but it was solid and complete. Jerry placed the information into his briefcase and carried it to the elevator. He had taken the incriminating documentation home with him every night, and now he was removing it permanently. Its next home would be in Sheila Montgomery's apartment. He was glad to be done with it.

Chapter 17

Carol was sitting in Buck Speer's office, trying to control her emotions. This was her least favorite place. His office had once been a place of creativity and inspiration. Now it was a war zone. Spears had begun to look for any opportunity to discredit or embarrass her.

Today, she was accompanied by the entire addiction recovery staff. Carol had originally conducted these weekly manager's meetings with Spears one on one. The purpose had been to resolve any problems and to keep Spears up to date on the department's issues. Now, with Carol out of the manager's seat, there had been no newly appointed honcho. Spears had decided that it was a good way for the center to save money, at least for a while.

So, here sat the entire department, moving through the process with the grace of congress. No one could agree on anything. Today's topic: their means of assessment. Carol had devised the process and the forms they used to assess each patient upon admission. She had developed this based on her years of addiction experience and the guidelines used nationally by the American Society of Addiction Medicine. Known as "ASAM," the structure was becoming the most universal language for diagnosis and determined level of treatment within the addiction recovery community.

It was not a complicated process. There were always a multitude of options when it came to recommended treatment. If a patient presented with heavy substance use, suicidal thoughts, and their entire household revolved around drug use, the patient was in need of in-patient treatment. In English, John Doe needed to be hospitalized, watched carefully, and his return home reconsidered. If baby John Doe smoked marijuana, felt remorseful, and had Ozzie and Harriett for parents, he probably only needed some outpatient groups.

Carol's assessment process had covered all the symptoms of addiction and all the criteria of ASAM. Spears had helped her develop it and had applauded the final package. But since her demotion, the group had been working on a shorter version of the process. Carol was all for simplicity, but she had found the new version to be so incomplete that she had to use the back of each page for the information the process failed to capture.

She had just voiced her concern about the new version and the room had become silent. Carol looked at the other members of the department. Most of the individuals had been completely clueless about assessment and diagnosis when they came to Newberg Mental health and Carol had personally trained each and every one of them. The fact that they had an equal voice in this process now was a joke as far as she was concerned. But she understood the new hierarchy and "lowerarchy," and had been willing to play by the new rules.

Finally Spears looked directly at Carol, and said, "So, why is it that everyone else seems to be able to use the new format and you seem to be the only one having difficulty with it?"

Carol was sick to death of the pissing contest Spears had come to enjoy. Her immediate thought was that the other staff's version of "successful use" was questionable at best.

Instead, she squared off at Spears and said, "I guess I must have a learning disability."

She could hear gasps from the other staff members. No one ever spoke to Spears that way. Carol continued to stare at the Center Director, who now appeared to have smoke coming out of his ears.

"The meeting is over," Spears said finally. "Except for Carol. The rest of you can go."

Everyone quickly left the room. When the door had been closed behind the last person, Spears glared at Carol. She steadied her gaze on him, refusing to back down. "What the hell was that?" he said finally.

"That was a ridiculous response to a ridiculous statement. You know full well that the staff doesn't know squat about assessment."

Spears did not respond.

"You also know," Carol continued, "that I am the most experienced person in our department."

"You are the most careless person in that department," Spears retorted.

"Fine," Carol said, standing to leave. "I may be a lot of things, but my assessment skills are above reproach, and that is what the hell that was all about." Carol was about to walk through the door, when Spears stopped her.

"This is your final warning," he said.

She stopped and turned to look at him.

"What does that mean?"

"It means that your insubordination is going to be documented and placed into your file."

"My insubordination was provoked by an attack," Carol said incredulously.

"Doesn't matter," he retorted. "This is the third and final report. It's all I need."

"All you need for what?"

"To avoid a fourth one," Spears said. "Now you may go."

Carol hesitated at the door and thought about continuing the argument but even an inkling of her current assessment of Spears would assuredly bring on the final reprimand. Instead, she glared at the Director and closed the door behind her.

Carol was so exhausted and ached her teeth hurt. She dragged herself back to her office and sat down heavily on the patient's couch. She didn't want to cry or seek justice. She wanted to lie down and sleep for a solid week. She sat back and rested her dizzy head on the back of the couch, trying to control the spinning.

The light knock on her door came a few minutes later. Carol lifted her head off the back of the couch and said, "Come in."

A tall thin woman peered around the door.

"Is it safe to come in?"

"Linda," Carol said. "Of course it's safe."

"I am so sorry about what Spears said to you in that meeting," Linda said, soothingly.

"Thanks. This has become a regular game with him."

"We know," Linda responded.

Carol sat up and looked at the woman. She had hired Linda herself and had worked with her for only a short time, but knew she was a person of integrity. "Linda," she began. "Would you be willing to document your view of what took place in that meeting?"

"Is it going to come to that?" Linda asked in surprise.

"It could."

"Well, if it does, I guess you can count me in."

Linda Mestry was a nurse. She could pick and choose her places of employment and had always danced to the beat of a different drummer. Carol felt sure she could count on her if necessary. "You are a good friend," Carol said. "And I won't forget this."

"No problem," Linda said. "You look fried. You should go home."

"Don't have to twist my arm," Carol laughed, grabbing her head to convey the painful effort.

"As sick as you have been, I really don't know why you put up with this."

"I have begun to seriously question it myself," Carol answered. She stood and put her arm around Linda. "Let's both get out of here."

Carol walked Linda to her car, both of them laughing about the antics at Newberg Mental Health. Carol told her to go on. She had forgotten something inside. As she watched Linda drive away, Carol slowly turned on her heels, and went back to her office. The building was fairly empty now, except for an evening substance abuse group that was self-contained in the back of the building. Carol began to wander the dark hallway, thinking about everything that had led her to this point in her life.

She had always been driven to succeed. And despite her terminally rebellious attitude, she had some milestones to be proud of. Carol had assumed that the counseling field would be a caring and compassionate place to settle in. But it had not turned out that way. Just like any other place in the world, there were good people and bad. The only thing noteworthy about the mental health setting was that the bad ones were full blown lunatics.

It was time to re-evaluate her life. She knew that there was no perfect situation. No matter where you were, you always had to factor in the human equation. People were capable of such greatness and such destruction, depending on their demons. She just didn't feel she had the life force to absorb anymore. Maybe it was the illness that had drained her, but she thought it was more.

She had remained so driven by the proverbial carrot in front of her nose that she had never stopped to think about the capture of the prize. What would she have, once the target that remained forever-just inches from her grasp was suddenly realized? The approval of one Mr. Buck Spears? Was that the final reward? No. It had to be more than that. Carol's vision of true success was the intangible that could only be evidenced by the people around her. It would have been nice to feel accepted by her co-workers, even respected, but her greatest measure came from her patients.

Recovery within the addiction population is statistically one in ten. That is a generous prediction. Carol's odds had never been in her favor. She knew that. So, what was the biggest issue here? Maybe it was that she couldn't remember a time when she had not been all consumed by her job. There was no time that belonged to her. She had worked so hard for a system that seemed to absorb every waking moment of her time without showing the slightest acknowledgement of her presence.

The mental health system was a crowded entity, fighting to stay afloat among the needy, and justifying its presence by going through the motions of treatment. The hard copy evidence of treatment and "well thought-out" plans of action that were required by licensing entities received more time than the patients. It had to be this way, when annual audits by these bureaus demanded individual documentation for each person, notating their every move, as well as a step-by-step outline of the person's goals. These beautifully executed treatment plans were about as applicable to reality as the grand idea of the unicorn. Realistically, a patient's only goal was to begin putting one foot in front of the other without falling on their face. The stream of paper on each patient was a grand illusion that maintained a facility's license, and most of a mental health worker's time was required to maintain it.

In addition to all the paper, the system lacked the manpower and the talent of its workers to ever provide any real change. Its ineffectiveness not only failed its population, but also blocked them from hope through the tangled mess of their bureaucracy.

So, was the problem Newberg Mental Health, or was it something bigger? This job aside, all jobs had drained her. When engulfed in full-time employment, she eventually lost the ability to discern where the job left off, and she began. It was a never-ending cycle. She got up, went to work, crawled home at the end of the day, drifted off in front of the TV, and then went to bed. The following day, she would get up and do it all over again. The weekend would be a time to recover from the endless cycle of the previous week, catch up on all the responsibilities that had been neglected, and would end early Sunday night, because tomorrow was a workday. And the one question that continued to pop up in her mind was what did she have to show for it? An aging, lifeless face, and an empty heart. Was this due to some character defect in herself, or did everyone secretly feel this way?

Sedative withdrawal had stopped her dead in her tracks. It had captured her. The extent of its grip on her soul went beyond her current physical and mental disability. In her altered mental state, she felt as though it had wiped out her entire existence and her identity. She had experienced a complete loss of self. All the things that had made her who she was were gone. In psychology, this was called de-personalization. She now knew the true meaning of that term. Her sharp wit, her creative energy, even her compassion had been stripped from her. Through this void, she had been forced to search for a new identity. She was still going through the motions and relying on her memory of who Carol used to be, but she was now sure of one thing: this life made no sense. She only had a limited number of active years left and she was wasting them. What was the alternative? She didn't know. She just knew that she didn't want to fight for this anymore.

Carol walked into her office and composed a letter to the Center Director, giving him two weeks' notice. After she had slipped it under his door, she walked back out of the building and got into her car. She didn't put the key into the ignition. Instead, she stared at the building and felt one final emotion. She absorbed the realization of how hard it was to let go.

Sheila arrived at Hartsfield Airport in a thunderous downpour. When the plane finally touched the ground, the entire airplane population applauded the pilot. "Thank you for the vote of confidence," came the overhead announcement. "But our safe landing was always in the hands of a Higher Authority." The people cheered even louder and the pilot waited for them to finish their celebration. "Welcome to the sunny south," the pilot continued. "If your destination is Atlanta, I hope you brought an umbrella. For those of you continuing on to Dallas / Fort Worth, you have one hour to enjoy the weather. I have been informed that the current weather condition in Dallas is blue skies and the current temperature is seventy-two degrees." A few individuals clapped, while others groaned, collecting their belongings. Sheila was standing in the aisle, ready to fly when they finally reached the terminal and opened the door.

Jerry saw her first and waved when she entered the baggage area.

"Thanks for picking me up," Sheila said, as she climbed into the passenger seat of Jerry's Toyota pickup.

"No problem," he said, checking the side view mirror and pulling away from the curb. "Getting you back here in one piece was my personal goal."

Sheila knew that Jerry had been keeping close tabs on Dominex. They had not continued regular communication once they had established the company's pattern and motive. They had just agreed to deal with it once Sheila returned home.

Now that she was here, she wasn't sure if she was ready to hear all the messy details. The past month had been happy and peaceful. Sheila fiddled with the radio, while Jerry navigated out of the airport. The rain had turned an already busy Atlanta Friday rush hour into a disaster area. "If we ever get out of here," Sheila offered, "I will buy you dinner."

"You're on," Jerry said, zipping into the turning lane that would free them from the airport traffic.

Heading up I-85 towards the city, the traffic was much lighter. The two chatted about Dominex in Newark, the great staff, the sales contest, and Jerry's recount of his parents' trip to Florida. The topic of the study did not come up during the drive. There would be time for that later. When they hit Midtown, Sheila directed Jerry to the restaurant. "You'll love this place," she assured him.

It was still fairly early in the evening, and Jerry pulled into a space close to the restaurant's entrance. The rain was still steadily pouring down, but the two made it in without too much water damage.

"So how bad is it?" Sheila finally ventured, after the waiter had taken their orders.

Jerry's face darkened as he looked down to study his beer. Sheila felt a tug at the pit of her stomach and took a swig of her wine.

"That bad?" she prompted, when Jerry did not volunteer any information.

"Well, I was hoping for a few more happy minutes," he said finally.

"Sorry," Sheila said, touching his hand. "We can do that."

Jerry had been carrying this burden around with him for a while without the benefit of being able to share it with another human being. He had had a lot of sleepless nights, pondering the magnitude of what Dominex was doing. The fact that he had not only done nothing to stop it, but that he had actually warned the company when the situation was at risk of going public, did not make him very pleased with himself. His reason had neutralized the immorality of his actions. At least that's what he had told himself at the time. Now he had the opportunity to share the burden with someone else.

Jerry pulled a thick stack of papers out of his wet briefcase. The papers did not show the wear of the weather or their long travel of the past few months. Silently, he handed them to Sheila. While she studied the information, Jerry polished off his beer and ordered them both another round of drinks. By the time she had finished reading the last page, she was ready for the glass the waiter presented. They drank in silence.

Sheila was the first to break their quiet reverie. "I can't believe how many people were rendered completely disabled by that shit." Jerry shrugged and nodded, helpless to find the words to convey his disgust. "What I don't understand," she continued, "is how in the hell can they present this to the FDA? Slightly less than half of the entire study group became so violently sick, that they either dropped out of the study and sought medical attention, or dropped out of the picture all together."

"I know," Jerry said, finally finding his voice. "And when they did see a doctor, they weren't even provided with real treatment. Oh, and one more interesting little tidbit," he added. "That Pharmed address is an abandoned house." Jerry reached into his bag and presented her with several photos.

"This is a fiasco," Sheila marveled, looking at each picture.

"So, what do we do now?"

Sheila didn't respond. She merely gave him a look that said, "You don't want to know," slipping the pages and pictures into her bag.

"Sheila, I can't let you deal with this alone," he said.

"I have been dealing with this alone for a long time," she answered. "Don't worry about me, really. I have been waiting for this moment, and now that it's here, we need to celebrate."

"Then why doesn't this feel like a celebration? I'm very confused."

Sheila studied Jerry's face. He was a few years younger than her, but she felt that he was a kindred spirit. He was also a very handsome guy. She had been so pre-occupied that she hadn't really noticed before.

Sheila took Jerry's hand and said, "If you really want me to fill you in, I will."

He held her grasp, and said, "I do not want you have to deal with this alone."

Sheila wanted to leap over the table and hug him. She had had a taste of what it felt like to be close to other human beings and she was addicted. "Okay," she said, finally. "But you might need a six pack before I'm through."

George Donovan hung up the phone and turned to his significant other, who was standing in the doorway. "Sally, we are having dinner with Jeff Edwards at six-thirty."

"What do they want now?" she grumbled.

"I don't know, but I'm sure it has something to do with their public image." She closed the office door and sat in the chair facing his desk.

"This whole plan has been very reckless on their part," Sally remarked. "How far are you willing to go with this?"

"Let's just see what they want first."

"You know," she continued, "we have done very well so far to avoid public scrutiny. I'm not willing to risk everything because Dominex needs to get their drug on the market."

Donovan began tapping his pen on his desk. They had been having this same discussion for weeks. He knew she was right, but he liked being connected with a big and powerful pharmaceutical company. He could see a brighter future, as long as he could stay in their pocket. They had already agreed to provide him with a lifetime supply of every drug they manufactured. He would fill prescriptions right there on the premises and then charge the patient for the medicine. His income would double over the course of the next few years.

"Sally," he said finally, "we have been all through this. We both know all about the risks involved in staying connected with them, but we also know about the potential money they represent."

Sally just rolled her eyes at him.

"The money won't mean squat in jail."

"You are being very dramatic. At this moment the only thing we are doing is offering these people vitamins or the option of going back on their meds."

"Prior to this moment, they had us handing out sedatives and telling people they were vitamins. And let's not forget the dead woman in exam room number two." Sally's voice began to rise in volume. "We've never had to call a medical examiner to come and pick up a dead

patient before. Our patients do not go into withdrawal, much less die from it. Where is this going to end?"

"Sally, please calm down," Donovan said soothingly.

"No, wait," she continued. "If an employee at Dominex had not intercepted a phone call, we'd still be running that ridiculous scam. And don't forget that the people they are continuing to send us are still at risk of the same outcome as that poor woman they hauled away in a body bag. Seizures are the number one and most likely result of abrupt termination of sedatives. How could they be so reckless?" She waited for Donovan to absorb her words. "Can you guarantee that what they ask us to do tonight won't come back to bite us in the ass?"

Donovan knew she was upset and was smart enough not to disagree with her.

"Sally, let's just find out what they want first, okay?"

Sally didn't answer him. She just gave him a fiery glance.

"We have patients," she said, standing up to leave.

"Sally," Donovan whined, extending the first syllable to convey pleading.

"It's fine George," she said to reassure him, although she did not sound reassuring at all. "We will wait and see. But this conversation is not over." And with that, she briskly walked out of the office.

Donovan watched her close the door and stared at the empty chair she had occupied. Things were different now. In their younger days, they were fearless. Every decision they had made had paid off. Now, there was an added issue. Sally was pregnant. They were both happy about the prospect of a baby, but they also knew that things were about to change. Sally wasn't showing yet, and no one in the office knew anything, other than she had been taking more "personal days," lately. Sally's personal days were more like "camping out in the bathroom days." When she was in the office, she was becoming a little more short-tempered and emotional. Donovan told the staff that it was stress.

In her present condition he would have preferred that she not be involved with Dominex at all. But she had been an integral part of his life and his practice. He couldn't eliminate her from things now. Besides, she would never have allowed it. So, he would have to work through this new plan with Dominex very gracefully. She usually felt better by the evening. She would be more tired, but less queasy. He had suggested to Jeff that they go to her favorite restaurant. Maybe she would be in better spirits later. He hoped so, because he was determined to move forward.

Donovan opened the door for Sally as they entered the busy restaurant. An attractive woman bumped into Donovan, as she and her male friend were leaving through the same door. "Oh, excuse me," Donovan said and tripped over his own feet to grab the door for the woman. Sally just shook her head. "Would you have done a triple summer salt to grab the door for an ugly woman?"

"Sally, there are no ugly women."

"Yeah, right," she retorted.

Sally had nothing to worry about. She was a Lauren Bacall look-alike. Her curly, naturally blond hair was cut to shoulder length. Prior to her pregnancy, Sally could have been an underwear model. Recently, Donovan had picked on her mercilessly when she emerged from the bathroom, and he noticed a small belly forming. "I guess you'll have to give your two week notice to Victoria's Secret," he told her. Sally had just smiled and put her hands on the tiny protrusion.

“Yes, but I’ll be back,” she announced.

Jeff Edwards was nowhere in sight, so the two decided to have a seat at the bar and wait for him. Donovan ordered a martini. Sally settled for a carbonated water. They were in deep discussion about a June wedding, when Donovan felt a tap on his shoulder.

“Sorry I’m late,” Jeff explained. “The traffic...”

No one who lived in Atlanta ever had to finish a sentence that started with the word “traffic.”

“No problem,” Donovan said. They stood from their seats at the bar as another couple swooped down to claim them.

“Hey, Sally,” Jeff greeted. “How are you?”

“Hungry,” she answered.

A waiter showed them to their table after a heated few moments about the smoking section. Donovan had little patience for incompetence. He had made the reservation himself and had specifically mentioned the smoking issue. They were both reformed smokers, which had hurled them into the “anti-smoking Nazi club.” In addition to their policy about second-hand smoke, the smell of it had become one of Sally’s biggest triggers for nausea.

“I can’t believe they allow that barbaric behavior in public places,” Sally began, once they were seated. “It’s one thing if people choose to suck that poison into their lungs. It’s another when they have the right to make that choice for others. If heroin users walked around shooting up strangers, I bet people would have something to say about it.”

Donovan let her ramble until she was finished. Of the two, she had become the worst anti-smoking Nazi. He was used to the speech. He heard it every time they went to a restaurant. Jeff looked at Sally in bewilderment. Donovan gestured to him to just let her vent.

“She’ll be okay in minute,” he assured.

The waiter appeared for their drink orders, and Jeff suggested a bottle of wine for the table.

Sally and Donovan exchanged glances. “Uh, better make that two glasses of wine, and one caffeine-free coke.”

Jeff looked at Sally with one eyebrow extended upward.

“Busted,” she said to Donovan.

The doctor filled Jeff in on Sally’s condition, and their wedding plans. When he had finished, the drinks arrived.

Jeff held up his glass. “To both of you. Congratulations.”

“Thanks,” Sally said. “Believe it or not, you’re the first one we have told.”

“Wow, I’m honored,” Jeff retorted.

“It was inevitable,” Donovan added. “She won’t be able to avoid maternity clothes much longer.”

Sally gave Donovan a light punch on the arm.

“At least I won’t have to wear a maternity wedding dress,” she laughed. “God, don’t you think that is the tackiest thing? Like she didn’t know she was pregnant until she lost sight of her feet.”

“Yeah,” Donovan added. “And it’s always a white dress. Give me a break.” Everyone at the table was still laughing when the waiter returned for their orders.

“Looks like you might need another minute,” the waiter said when he looked down and saw that no one had even opened a menu.

“Well, I know what I want,” Sally said.

"She always gets the same thing," Donovan explained to Jeff.

"Why tamper with perfection?"

"You are right about that," Donovan said, putting his arm around her.

"Can this dinner get any cuter, I ask you?" Sally said, enjoying the attention. Jeff motioned for the waiter to return. He was anxious to get down to the real purpose of their meeting.

After they had placed their orders, Donovan said, "Okay, Jeff. If Dominex is picking up the tab, they must want something."

"Very astute," Jeff responded. "I won't keep you in suspense. We just need a place for our remaining volunteers to check in. And to be honest, there aren't a whole lot of them left. Most of them have technically finished their six weeks of abstinence."

"Technically?" Sally repeated.

"Well, half of them never made it to the end of the study," Jeff explained. "The rest completed the cycle with us."

"Doesn't sound that complicated," Donovan interjected hopefully.

"It's not. We will need blood pressures and drug screens. You can bag up the urine samples and we'll continue to have a courier come by every two days."

"I hate to question a perfect plan," Sally interjected, "but why make the change now, so close to the completion of the study?"

"Ah, that's the million dollar question. We have some very interested employees who, shall I say, are not interested in letting well enough alone."

Both Sally and Donovan nodded their understanding.

"We have just under six weeks left," Jeff concluded. "We're almost home and we don't want any last minute complications."

"Well, I'm okay with it," Donovan said, looking at Sally for any objections.

"I don't see a problem with it," Sally conceded.

"Great," Jeff said. "I love it when a plan comes together."

A few minutes later, the food arrived. "Thank God," Sally said under her breath.

"She usually can't eat until dinner time," Donovan explained.

"That is one joy I don't feel deprived of missing," Jeff said sympathetically. The group ate in silence. Donovan was quietly running accounting figures in his head. Jeff was still navigating disaster control, and Sally was thinking about bridesmaid dresses and names for the baby.

Chapter 18

Carol was standing in the kitchen trying to establish the fastest way to throw a meal together. When she arrived at home, Josh had still been out with his crew. She was slightly relieved. She didn't know exactly how he would react to her decision to quit her job at the mental health center.

She was standing on a stool, trying to reach the green beans on the top shelf of her pantry when he came in. Carol turned around and said, "You brought pizza!"

"I guess the large box gave it away."

"You read my mind," Carol said, getting down from the stool. "I really didn't feel like cooking."

Sitting in the living room, they ate pizza and watched a variety of television. Josh was the typical male: a remote control madman. Carol marveled at how he could flip through each channel and assess its content in less than a millisecond. "Do you also dream in millisecond fragments?" Carol said, teasingly. "Just about to fall off a cliff," she elaborated, "and then click, you're walking down the street. But wait," she continued, "another click, and you are in a dog food commercial."

"No," Josh responded. "I see multiple screens."

Carol just shook her head. She knew better than to actually get interested in anything when she was watching TV with him. And besides, she wasn't really watching the TV anyway. She was waiting for the right moment to tell her husband that she had quit her job. The anxiety was unfounded. Josh had wanted her to quit the insanity of her job all along. It was Carol's own personal guilt and sense of failure she was dealing with.

"Check this out," Josh said, interrupting her thoughts.

Carol looked at the screen, and saw the words "live news update." There was a female reporter holding a microphone.

"I'm standing here in front of One Peachtree Plaza, where just moments ago, a young man fired several shots at employees who were leaving the building. He then reportedly turned the gun on himself. We're not sure if the shots were intentionally aimed at any one individual. The gunman was either attempting to make a statement or was a very poor marksman. No one was injured."

The picture on the screen split, and a man at the studio began talking to the reporter. "Sharon, do we have any information about the attacker?"

"The gunman is down, Tom. We are not sure of his condition. Police have forced everyone away from the building and paramedics are at the scene."

"Do we know the reason for the attack?" the newsman inquired.

"Tom, we're waiting for an official statement from the police. We have been informed that this building is owned and occupied by Dominex Pharmaceuticals. Allegedly, the gunman was shouting at the building, just prior to the attack; however, there has been no confirmation of what was said."

"Thank you, Sharon."

The picture centered on the news studio, eliminating the woman reporter. "Eleven Alive News will remain at the scene and we will bring you updates as they happen. This is Tom Deal,

bringing the important news to your front door." The picture changed to America's Funniest Video's, already in progress. Carol just stared at the TV with her mouth open. She had a horrible premonition.

"Carol, are you okay?" Josh said.

"Brian," Carol moaned. "I just have this terrible feeling that the attacker was Brian."

Charles Roman was lounging by his pool watching the sun set when his wife came out to alert him. "You better get in here," she announced flatly.

"Why?" Charles said holding one hand up to block the last few rays of the sun.

"Someone took a shot at some of your employees, and Sam is on the phone." She said this with very little change in her tone. Charles shot to his feet and glared at his wife for being so indifferent.

Charles and Michelle Roman rarely crossed paths these days, much less engaged in conversation. The only real conversation that Charles could remember had been about divorce. His wife didn't like his extracurricular activities. And even when he was with her, he was never really with her. Despite all that, Charles had stated adamantly that she would be in for the fight of her life. He had no intention of dividing up his assets. Especially since those assets had come from a company that had been in his family for a long time. At the end of these arguments, Michelle would always give in. The thought of an ugly battle scared her. Staying with Charles was the lesser of the evils.

Charles grabbed the receiver up off the kitchen counter. "Sam, what the hell is going on?"

"We don't really know yet," Sam answered, "but you better get down here. The police need to make a statement to the press and they want you here before they do that."

"I'm on my way," Charles stated and pressed the switch hook for a new dial tone. He stabbed a few buttons and waited for an answer. "I need a ride back into the city."

When Charles reached the general vicinity of the office, he was stopped by a barricade of flashing lights. The driver got out to speak to the officer that was waving for them to turn around. After a few words, the driver got back into the car and proceeded through the barricade.

"They're expecting you, Mr. Roman," the driver explained, as he maneuvered into the front of the building.

Sam Reynolds spotted him as he walked into the lobby of the building and escorted him into a small conference room. The room was already occupied and active. Charles identified the company attorney, Paul Pratt, and briskly crossed the room for an update with Sam on his heels. "None of this makes any sense," Pratt began. "Apparently this young man was connected to your research study."

"Was?" Charles repeated.

"Yes, we received word that his gunshot wound was fatal and he died shortly after they transported him to the hospital."

"Jesus," Charles said, running a nervous hand through his hair. "Do we know who the man is...? I mean was?"

"They won't release that information until the family has been contacted," Pratt answered.

"Who is Dr. Donovan?" the attorney prodded.

Charles looked at his partners in crime and stepped aside. *Here we go!*

"We have a written statement from a few eye witnesses, who claim that the man was yelling profanities at a Dr. Donovan. Here," the attorney offered, and handed Sam the written statement. He read the recap of the witness's version of what had happened.

A man drove up to the front of the parking lot and sped into a handicapped space. He staggered out of the vehicle, holding a gun, and yelled the following: "You assholes are not going to get away with this. You can't quietly stick us under a rug. You think shuffling us off to Donovan clears you? The world knows what you're doing... the world knows!" Three shots were then fired in the direction of a few employees. He turned the fourth shot on himself. He collapse, repeating words, "The world knows."

Sam stared at the statement with dread, as the homicide investigator entered the room.

"Okay, I need all unauthorized personnel to vacate the premises." A few grateful individuals quickly made their escape. No one wanted to be connected to such a potentially damaging disaster.

"Now, we need to make some sense of this," the detective began. "Who is Donovan?"

Sam cleared his throat and all eyes turned to him. "He is treating our study volunteers. A few were not able to discontinue their medication and they were sent to him for medical attention."

The detective scribbled something in his notes. "And why do you think this man named him specifically before he died?"

"Good question," Sam improvised. "Some of them had a rougher time than others."

The detective nodded and wrote down some additional notes.

"I assume you are keeping medical records on these people?"

Charles Roman, nerves of steel, began to squirm. Fortunately, no one saw him but Sam.

"Yes we have records on all the study volunteers," he said, wishing he could hide Charles in the closet.

"Fine," the homicide detective concluded. "I will need this man's records and a phone number for the good doctor."

"No problem," Sam stated. "I'll have the records sent to your office in the morning." The detective looked up from his notes and raised one eyebrow.

"Don't you have the records here?" he inquired suspiciously.

"No, actually," Sam interjected. "The final check-ins are all being done by Dr. Donovan." The detective looked at Sam inquisitively. "Since a few were having problems, we wanted to provide better medical attention. So, they are all being seen by the doctor. The medical records are in his office."

"And I'm guessing his office is closed for the day," the detective stated.

Sam made a grand gesture of checking his watch.

"It's eight-thirty on a Friday evening," he announced. "That would be my guess as well."

"Okay," the detective said. "But I will need that file first thing in the morning." With that, the detective headed towards the door. "Oh, I almost forgot. Here's the file we need. But please keep it confidential. We still haven't been able to contact the family." The detective handed Sam a slip of paper and went out the door followed by two police officers. Sam looked down and read the name of the deceased gunman. *Who is Terry Sanders?*

Carol was frantically dialing Brian's home number, when she remembered her last encounter with Brian's wife. "Josh," she yelled. "Please take this," indicating the phone receiver, "and ask for Brian." He gave her a confused look. "Just do it," she said in a panic. Josh grabbed the phone just in time to hear a male voice answer the call.

"Is this Brian?" he inquired. Carol stared at him waiting for confirmation. "Here," Josh said. "He's obviously not the one."

Carol let out a long breath and grabbed the phone.

"Brian, thank God."

"My wife would argue that point," Brian countered, "but gee, thanks."

"Save it, funny guy," Carol said, sitting heavily on the chair by the phone.

"Okay, what's wrong?"

"You should watch the news more often."

"I can't," Brian said. "It wreaks havoc on my symptoms."

"Oh... Sorry," Carol said contritely. "Then let me just give you the reader's digest version."

Carol gave Brian a recap of what she had seen on the news. "It isn't much information, I know..."

"And you assumed it was me?" Brian added.

Carol didn't answer him. She was too busy feeling embarrassment and relief.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," Brian offered. "I have some good contacts at the AJC."

"The Atlanta Journal Constitution?" Carol asked. "Wow."

"Well, I used to work there," he explained. "I guess technically, I still do. I took a leave of absence. I'll see if I can find out anything."

"Great," Carol said. "And Brian, promise me that if you get really frustrated with the withdrawal, you'll call me."

"You'll be the first to know."

Brian dialed the direct number to the newsroom. "Jason Sample, please."

"Hey, how are you doing?" Jason inquired.

"You'd have to run me over with a train to get a pulse."

"Well, hurry up and get better. We miss you coming down here and telling us what to write about."

Brian hadn't exactly wanted to be a writer, but he enjoyed being a news critic.

"Well, I can still do that from here," he laughed. "As a matter of fact..." Brian heard a groan at the other end of the phone. He continued anyway. "What do you know about that shooting in front of the Dominex building?"

"Not much," Jason answered. "All we know so far is that a man started yelling something about how they can't hide their victims under a rug and unloading them on a guy named Donovan wouldn't save them"

"Donovan?" Brian repeated incredulously.

"He fired three random shots over the heads of some of the employees that were leaving for the day," Jason continued, "and then turned the last one on himself." Brian was quietly trying to make sense of the whole scenario. "The guy died before they could do anything," Jason added.

"The thing that makes no sense here," the newsman offered, "is that the guy purposely missed the employees. The shots went into the second story – way over their heads. Why go to all that trouble before doing yourself in?"

"That's a good question," Brian agreed. "I can tell you that this illness turns your brain to mush."

"Whoa, wait a minute," Jason cut in. "This guy was suffering from the same thing you are?"

Brian gave his friend a complete rundown of the research study, the problems some of the volunteers were having, and the part Dr. Donovan had played in the whole process.

"So, more than likely," Jason speculated, "the guy was trying to make a public statement."

"Sounds that way to me," Brian agreed, "but he didn't do a very good job of it."

"And then maybe he did," Jason stated. "Hey, thanks for the info." Jason Sample was suddenly in a hurry. "I'll never give you shit about poking your nose in the news room again."

"Can I have that in writing?"

Charles Roman was not very good at dealing with high stress situations. And lately, there had been nothing but high stress to deal with. It was taking its toll. When the business had been self-sufficient, he had been able to maintain a smooth profile. But now the stakes were higher and, along with that, so were the risks. His inability to cope with the added load was beginning to take him down.

He was currently pacing back and forth in the small conference room, with Sam and attorney Paul Pratt watching him as though they were watching a tennis match.

"Can I get you a sedative?" Sam offered.

Charles stopped in his tracks, and looked at the two men.

"Why the hell aren't both of you pacing?"

"Because as near as I can tell," Sam interjected, "It doesn't change anything."

"So, what are we going to do?" he asked again for the fifth time.

"At the moment, I suggest you do nothing," Pratt stated. Charles sat down heavily in one of the chairs, and said,

"We have to do something."

"If you were guilty of any mismanagement," Pratt continued, "the authorities would expect you to be scrambling right now."

"You think they are watching us?" Charles said in alarm.

"I know I would be," Pratt answered.

"Jeezus," Charles said, standing to pace again.

"Oh, for the love of God, will you please sit down," Sam ordered.

The CEO obeyed and looked at Sam for an answer.

"We will wait until later," Pratt directed. Then we will contact this doctor and make sure that the medical records have been 'properly maintained.' I am guessing that they probably have been."

"So, we might not even have to make any last minute alterations?" Charles asked.

"The less we do, the better," Pratt interjected.

"Fine, then," Charles conceded.

"Okay, I guess we are done here," Sam stated. "Let's all go home. I will have Jeff Edwards handle the contact later."

Sam watched Charles leave the room on shaky legs. "That guy is turning out to be our biggest liability," he whispered to Pratt.

"Too bad we can't just fire him," the attorney retorted. "Call me in the morning. I'll make arrangements for a courier to pick up the file and have it delivered to the police station. We don't want any grand standing about that file."

"Fine by me," Sam said in the middle of a yawn. "This has been one very long day."

George Donovan was on his way to bed. Sally had crashed hours ago. He was just turning off the last light when there was a knock at the door. "Who in the hell is here at eleven o'clock at night," she said out loud and proceeded to the door.

A man and a woman were standing on the other side. Both looked to be in their early thirties, and both clean cut and unassuming. The young man was wearing kakis and a golf shirt. He was clean-shaven, and his blond hair was pulled back into a neat ponytail. The woman could have been his twin sister.

Donovan opened the door. "Can I help you?" he asked.

"Are you Doctor Donovan?" the gentleman inquired.

"Yes, and these are not my office hours."

"Sir, we were hoping to have just a few minutes of your time," the woman said.

Donovan eyed the pretty young woman. Her short denim skirt and cotton tee shirt fit her like a glove. Donovan was a sucker for pretty girls, even at eleven at night.

"What is this about?" the doctor asked suspiciously.

"We just wanted to ask you some questions about the shooting," the woman added.

"What shooting?" Donovan said, now getting visibly annoyed.

"Sir, if we could come in for just a moment," the woman ventured again, "we would be happy to fill you in."

Donovan was now more curious than annoyed. Reluctantly, he stepped aside and motioned for them to come in.

"Just keep it down. My wife is asleep."

The two reporters sat in the chairs that Donovan pointed to. They had agreed that the woman would do most of the talking, since the contact was male.

"We're sorry to bother you at such a late hour," she began. "My name is Sandra and this is Jason." The woman reached out her hand, and Donovan shook it. "We are with the Atlanta Journal Constitution," she continued. "We wanted to ask you what you knew about Terry Sanders."

"Why?" Donovan said, not wanting to provide any information until he knew more.

"We understand that Terry was a patient of yours," Jason interjected.

"That's confidential."

"Well, no sir, not anymore," Sandra announced. The doctor just looked at her with a combination of confusion and anger. "Let me explain," she continued.

The two reporters filled the doctor in on the shooting and the statement made by the eyewitnesses. Donovan's eyes grew wider with each new piece of information. He had not watched the news that night. When he and Sally arrived back home from dinner with Jeff, she

had felt amorous for the first time in a month. After some great sex, Sally had crashed, and Donovan had relaxed on the couch with a glass of wine and Chopin. That had been the extent of his evening. He was glad Sally was asleep. He was going to have to do some serious damage control before morning.

"So, can you tell us anything about Terry Sanders?" she tried again.

"I told you," Donovan stated, "that is confidential information."

"But as we just explained," Sandra prodded, "Mr. Sanders's relationship with you is pretty much public information now."

Donovan was beginning to feel himself being pushed into a corner.

"I don't remember him," the doctor answered finally. "I have a very busy practice."

"Well, he certainly remembered you," Jason interjected.

"And what the hell is that supposed to mean?" Donovan said, standing and moving towards the door. "It's late, and I have nothing to tell you."

"We didn't mean to imply anything," Sandra said, attempting to salvage the interview. "We just wanted to know if you could think of any reason why the man was upset enough to shoot in the general direction of some employees, and then fire on himself?"

Donovan returned to his seat and pretended to be deep in thought. "The only thing I can tell you," he offered, "is that Terry Sanders was a study volunteer in last stage research at Dominex Pharmaceuticals."

"That would explain his very public statement," Jason added. His sarcasm was not lost on Sandra, who quickly shifted the attention back to the doctor.

"Do you remember anything else about him?" she interjected.

"He had difficulty getting off his medication," Donovan improvised.

"What do you mean by difficulty?" Sandra prodded.

"Some people have a hard time getting off sedatives," Donovan explained. He was in neutral territory now, and in his teaching mode. He began to relax. "The usual withdrawal symptoms are weakness, fatigue, abdominal problems, anxiety, and depression. Some go through a mild form of withdrawal and the process only lasts a few weeks." Sandra had begun taking notes, while the other reporter watched the doctor's facial expressions. "Others," Donovan continued, "have a much more difficult time of it."

"How so?" Sandra interjected.

"Their symptoms are much more intense and they can remain in withdrawal for several years."

Both reporters stopped what they were doing and exchanged glances.

"Let me see if I understand this correctly," Sandra ventured. "The study at the drug company required these people to go off the medication."

"That's correct," the doctor confirmed.

"Aren't most studies done while the person is taking the medication?"

"That is also correct," Donovan answered, "but in this case the FDA required a study of the effect of drug termination."

Both reporters nodded.

"And Terry Sanders...?" she prodded.

"Was one of the ones having a hard time," Donovan finished.

"What were you doing for these people?" Sandra interjected.

"Anyone needing additional medical attention was sent to my office," the doctor explained.

"And what did you do for them?" she asked, again.

"They were given the option of going through 'monitored withdrawal,' or going back on their meds."

"What is monitored withdrawal?" Jason asked Donovan.

"We monitor their blood pressure," the doctor said flatly.

"That's it?" the reporter ventured.

"Yes," Donovan said, standing again. "Well, I've told you everything I know, so if you will please excuse me, it's very late and I have had a long day."

"Certainly," Sandra said. "And thanks so much for your time." Donovan nodded, as he opened the front door to their escape. "Can we contact you if we have any further questions?" Sandra ventured.

"Sure," Donovan said flatly and closed the door on their heels.

Once they were back inside the car, Sandra said, "That was quite a leap from not remembering the guy to the blow by blow he finally gave us,"

"That was pretty watered down if you ask me," Jason interjected.

Sandra put the key in the ignition.

"A guy is so angry that he shoots at a bunch of strangers, and then he shoots himself," Jason continued, as Sandra backed out the driveway. "Sounds to me like he was having one hell of time."

"Goes without saying," Sandra added.

"I think we should try to find out who the other volunteers were," Jason stated. "I'm guessing there's more going on here than what 'doctor blood pressure' was telling us."

Donovan went to use the phone. He had been ready for sleep until the visit from two reporters, but he was wide-awake now. He went fishing through his wallet, looking for Jeff's home number, when the phone rang. Donovan grabbed it before the ringing could wake Sally. "Yeah," he said, still looking for the number.

"Doc, this is Jeff. We have a situation."

"No shit, we have a situation," Donovan spat into the phone. "I just had a lovely visit from two reporters."

"Really?" Jeff said.

"Really"? Is that all you have to say?" Donovan yelled in a hushed whisper.

"Look," Jeff said, trying to calm Donovan down. "All of this is part of a standard investigation. They don't suspect us of anything. A man shot over some heads, yelled some things at us, and then shot himself. They have to check out all the details."

"I guess that makes sense," Donovan said, calming slightly.

"The only thing they want from us at this point, is the patient's chart. The police already have a signed release from the family. I assume that all the charts are up to 'inspection' quality."

"Have been ever since the vitamin scare."

"Okay then. We're all set. Tomorrow, a courier will come by for the chart."

"Tomorrow's Saturday," Donovan retorted.

"Very good," Jeff said. "I guess that's why you get paid the big bucks. We can have the courier pick the chart up at your office or at the house, which ever you prefer. It just needs to be early. They wanted the chart tonight, but we stalled them."

"I think I'll go get the chart now," Donovan offered. "The less commotion around Sally, the better."

"Fine," Jeff concluded. "We'll pick the chart up at the house in the morning." Donovan thought about using the release of information as a further stalling tactic. Technically, they had to present him with the release before any records could be made public, but he also knew that any protest would be futile.

Donovan hung up the phone and went to put on some cloths. He could still hear Sally's words from this afternoon. *Can you promise me that what they ask us to do today won't come back to bite us in the ass?* He looked at her sleeping peacefully, and thought momentarily about the baby, who must also be sleeping peacefully. He would have to re-think this whole thing. He didn't mind the continued risk for himself, but he couldn't jeopardize them, too. He put on his shoes and quietly slipped out the door.

Brian was still awake when the phone rang at 12:30 AM. He rarely dozed off before three or four in the morning. "Brian, that was an interesting lead," Jason said excitedly.

"What'd you find out?"

"Well, for one thing, your doctor friend is a very bad liar."

"Figures," Brian interjected.

"The other thing," Jason continued, "is that there is definitely more going on here than anyone is willing to talk about."

"I think the reason is that the people who know what's going on are too sick to care."

"Seems to me a lot of other people are counting on just that."

"So, what are you going to do now?"

"Interview you for starters."

"You want to do this over the phone?" Brian asked incredulously.

"No," Jason stated. "This story will hold until tomorrow. Besides, I have one more thing to do tonight. Can you come down to the office in the morning?"

"I'll do you one better," Brian countered. "I'll buy you breakfast. And I may be able to bring you a little bonus."

"Sounds lovely." The Denny's down the street from your house?"

"Ten AM," Brian confirmed. "See ya."

Brian looked at his watch: 12:42 AM. He didn't think he should call Carol at such a late hour. She had most likely been up early to go to work that morning. He would call her tomorrow.

Donovan arrived at his office building at 1:15 AM, pulling up to the handicapped space just outside the front of the complex. This was usually reserved for patient parking. Under the circumstances, he didn't think anyone would mind. There were no security guards at any of the doors, so he fished his mass of keys out of his glove compartment before leaving his car.

Donovan flipped on the lights in the lobby, and decided to take the stairs to his office. The idea of the elevator in the middle of the night gave him the creeps for some strange reason. After turning on the lights in his waiting area, he re-locked the office door. He wasn't doing anything wrong, just retrieving a file. So why did he feel so unnerved? Must be because it

was the middle of the night, and he really didn't want Sally knowing he was here. What if she woke up while he was gone? What was he going to tell her?

Donovan worked on a respectable lie while he unlocked the file cabinet. He quickly found Terry Sanders's file and glanced through it. The patient had come to him a short time ago with common sedative withdrawal. He had been put on "vitamins," with returning symptoms. When counseled on his options, Mr. Sanders had chosen to remain off sedatives. Although he had failed to disclose any prior psychiatric problems, there was a note on the chart that suspected some previous depression. "Damn," the doctor swore under his breath. He had hoped that Sanders had been one of the many patients that had opted to go back on his meds. The patient's chart had some serious holes that, if evaluated by a medical person, would allow for a lot of unanswered questions. *Good thing I decided to get this tonight.*

He hesitated momentarily in front of the remaining Dominex patient charts. They were all in need of some repair. The doctor went into the supply room and found an empty box. *I'd rather deal with this now than under the gun later.* There were about one hundred and twenty five charts. There had been a lot more study dropouts and patient referrals, however not all of them had made it to his office. Some may have gone to their own family doctors. Others probably opted for no doctor intervention at all. Donovan emptied the two drawers that housed the Dominex patient files, and folded the flaps over to seal the box. Satisfied with his decision, he carried the box out to the waiting area and returned inside to lock the file cabinet and turn off the lights.

Down in the lobby, all was empty and quiet. Donovan carried the box to his car, and went back to lock the front door. Secure inside his car, he breathed a sigh of relief and backed out of the parking lot. *What am I going to tell Sally?* he wondered as he pulled on to Peachtree Street. *The truth, I guess.* He had been fortunate to get in and out without being seen. He decided to come clean with her and then they would decide what to do together.

Jason and Sandra watched Donovan drive away. They had been parked down the street from the doctor's office, in the hope of some midnight activity. "Isn't it kind of late to be checking in at the office?" Jason asked innocently.

"Not if you have a large box to retrieve."

"Wonder what was so important that he had to get it tonight?" Jason countered. "Let's see," he continued. "What fills a large cardboard box and comes from a doctor's office?"

"Patients' charts?" Sandra volunteered.

"Ya' think?"

They both looked at each other.

"This is big," Jason said. "I can almost see the Nobel prize hanging on my wall."

"Your wall? I don't think so."

The two reporters drove away arguing about whose name would go first on the article.

Brian did not have to set an alarm clock to make his breakfast meeting. His sleep cycle lasted only a few hours. His daily exhaustion had become so familiar to him, he had gotten used to it. It felt like he was viewing his entire life through a dream. Except the dream was a nightmare. He attempted to wash some of the sickly "washed out" look from his face. During the initial withdrawal, he could barely see the pupils of his eyes. They were tiny dots. His eyes

looked sunken in and his face was a pale white. Brian had never experienced being this sick and wondered if his face was going to remain this way permanently.

He decided it was an appropriate time to call Carol. The phone rang a long time and Brian was beginning to question his decision. Carol answered on the fifth ring. "Did I wake you?" he asked.

"That's a hard question to answer," she said, yawning into the phone. "There's such a fine line between sleep and consciousness."

"I know what you mean. Anyway, this is probably worth getting up for."

"What's up?" Carol asked.

Brian told her about his conversations with Jason Sample and the breakfast interview. "So, can you be there at ten o'clock?" he concluded.

Carol hesitated to obey her knee jerk reaction. In the days before her recovery, she would have been on the bandwagon in a heartbeat. Hell, she would have been leading the bandwagon. Today, she was cautious. It was her rebel with or without a cause personality that had led her down this path to begin with.

Brian noted the silence and understood her resistance. "Carol, I wouldn't ask you to do this, if I didn't think it was really important."

"Its level of importance is not the issue."

"I know," he said. "I guess I will understand if you need to back out."

Carol thought about it another beat. She had never turned her back on any issue where people had become victims. She couldn't do it now.

"Okay, I'll be there," she said finally.

"I knew you would."

"Yeah, I'm a real walking mystery," Carol sighed.

Brian hung up the phone and quietly went into the bedroom. Pam was still asleep as he changed into some clean jeans. They hung on him. He had not been able to eat very much due to the nausea and had lost at least ten pounds. He had already been slightly underweight. He was not happy about the weight loss.

The weight thing was the biggest irony during sedative withdrawal. Whatever had been your lifetime nemesis became even more extreme during the illness. Brian looked for a big baggy shirt to hide his small frame. "Where are you going?" Pam asked, sitting up in the bed.

"I'm meeting Jason for breakfast," he answered, without looking in her direction.

"I hope you are in the process of returning to work," she added.

Brian did not respond. Instead, he grabbed his shoes out of the closet and left the room. *I hope you are in the process of getting a heart, tin man.*

He was glad he only had to drive a few blocks. The phobia about driving a car was one of many strange fears he had experienced after stopping the drug. In the old days, he would have jogged there. Today, he did not feel that his legs would hold him. He chose the lesser of the two evils, and backed the car out of the driveway.

When Brian arrived at the restaurant, Jason was already there, accompanied by a woman he did not recognize. Jason stood when he saw Brian enter, and stepped into the aisle to give him a hug. "Hey man, good to see you still in one piece."

"Being in one piece is about as good as it gets."

"You look good, though," Jason added.

Brian looked at him and said, "You're a lousy liar."

"Okay," the newsman conceded, "you really do look like shit."

"You should see it from my side," Brian said.

"This is Sandra, my assistant." Sandra rolled her eyes, and reached out to shake Brian's hand.

"He wishes he had an assistant."

"So, where is my surprise?" Jason asked.

"She should be here any minute," Brian answered.

The waitress came by for drink orders. Everyone ordered regular coffee, except Brian, who ordered decaf. "The agitation is incredible without the help of stimulants."

"No caffeine?" Sandra remarked, "I'd die."

"You get used to it," Brian explained. "Besides, the alternative is far worse. It's like electro shock therapy."

"Did someone say shock therapy?" Carol interjected.

Brian stood to introduce her.

"Jason, Sandra, this is Carol." Carol shook both their hands and scooted into the seat. "Carol is an addiction counselor and a Dominex study victim. She will be able to give you a lot more information than I could."

"Great," Jason said. "Thanks for coming."

"No problem. I'm a sucker for lost causes."

"She doesn't have a lot of faith in the system," Brian explained.

"Who does?" Sandra agreed.

The waitress brought two coffee carafes. One was dark brown; the other was beige. "This one's the leaded," the waitress said, pointing to the brown carafè. Carol went for the decaf. The gesture was not lost on the reporters.

"Everyone want the breakfast buffet?" Brian asked. Everyone nodded. "Four," Brian said to the waitress.

"Let's get our food first," Sandra directed. "I'm starving." Everyone went to fill their plates.

Once the group was settled in, they resumed the discussion.

"So, when did you first realize there was a problem?" Jason asked between bites of egg.

"Three days after I stopped taking the drug," Carol answered. "But let me clarify that. I was feeling awful on the third day, but I really didn't make the connection until day five."

"What was significant about day five?" Sandra inquired.

"It was no longer a vague illness," Brian interjected.

"Yeah," Carol agreed. "Up to that point we thought we had a virus or the flu. But by the fifth day the symptoms were so unique there was no mistaking it for something else."

"What were the symptoms like?" Jason asked.

"Are," Brian corrected. "We are weak, exhausted, nauseated, and dizzy."

"That sounds a lot like the flu to me," Sandra said.

"Our bodies vibrate from the inside. There is a constant buzzing sensation in our arms, legs, and face," Carol continued. "We have started to experience panic attacks for the first time in our lives."

"Oh, God," Sandra said contritely.

"We have been having graphic nightmares, unrealistic fears, constant agitation, confused thinking and depression."

Jason and Sandra both sat listening to the long list Carol gave them in total amazement.

“And you are both experiencing those symptoms right now?” Sandra asked sympathetically.

“Well, Brian is in an earlier stage of recovery, so his symptoms of weakness and agitation are more intense than mine.” The two reporters digested the breakfast, and the information.

“You said Brian is in an earlier stage. You didn’t start the study at the same time?” Sandra asked.

“That is a whole other can of worms,” Brian said, putting his fork down. “There were people who had so much trouble going off the drug that Dominex had to make arrangements for us to get medical treatment.”

“At least that’s what they called it,” Carol interjected.

“Really,” Brian agreed. “It was such a scam.”

Both reporters leaned forward in their seats.

“Go on,” Jason prodded.

“Well this doctor hands me a small brown envelope, and tells me its vitamins.”

“Really?” Sandra said.

“Yeah, that was my reaction too,” he continued. “But this guy assures me that they work wonders and even warns me that they are so potent I should not exceed one a day. Well, he was right. They were miracle vitamins. I started feeling much better, until I talked to Carol.”

“I have that effect on people,” she said humorlessly. “Brian told me that the vitamins were working and I got very suspicious.”

“No doubt,” Sandra said.

“So, I had him come in for a drug screen.”

Jason sat up in his seat. “What were the results?”

“He tested positive for benzodiazepines,” Carol stated.

The newsman began writing something down. “Okay, how do you spell that word?”

Carol spelled it out for him.

“That is the basic compound of all the sedatives in that group.”

“How many are there?” Sandra asked.

“Too many,” Carol said. “There are probably about twenty different pharmaceutical names for the stuff, but it’s all pretty much the same thing. The only difference between them is their half-life.”

“Okay, now I’m totally lost,” Jason said.

“The half-life determines how long it remains in your system. Valipene has the longest half-life of all the sedatives in that group.”

Jason was writing furiously.

“Is it possible that Brian would have tested positive anyway?” Sandra asked.

“That’s a very good question,” Carol said. “But, no. No way. He had been off the drug long enough for it to be completely out of his system.”

“So, you have documented proof that this doctor was handing out sedatives?” Jason asked excitedly.

“Well, not exactly,” Carol said.

Everyone looked at her in surprise, including Brian. Carol did not want to have to admit her blunder, but she was cornered. “I was exhausted and stupid,” she began. “I just wanted the test result with the least amount of paperwork or hassle.” Everyone continued to look confused. “See, we can’t send out urine specimens unless the patient has an opened chart.”

"Kind of like an active billing account?" Sandra asked.

"Yes, that's a perfect description," Carol agreed. "Anyway, we can't open a chart without a pile of paperwork and an appropriate diagnosis."

"So, that way you can't provide special services for your Aunt Mable," Jason interjected.

"Exactly," Carol said. "I would have had a really hard time justifying an open chart unless Brian was going to start coming in regularly for addiction counseling. Plainly speaking, he didn't qualify for services."

"I'm afraid to ask how you managed to pull this off," Brian interjected.

"You should be," Carol said, holding her head with one hand. Everyone waited for her to continue. "I sent the sample out under an existing patient's name," she blurted out finally. "So, to answer your question, there is documentation of the test result, but it isn't under Brian's name."

Everyone at the table was silent.

"Well, we can't use that," Sandra said, stating the obvious, "but don't beat yourself up over this. Under the circumstances, you did the only thing you could at the time."

"Thanks," Carol said. "I was feeling really stupid about the way I handled it."

"Don't," Jason added. "If this guy was handing out sedatives and telling his patients they were vitamins, there will be other remaining traces."

"Yeah," Sandra agreed. "From what we've seen so far, he isn't very bright, or careful."

"After I got the test result," Carol continued, "I had to tell Brian that, like it or not, he was back on sedatives."

"I was devastated," Brian interjected. "But I had no choice. I had to start the whole withdrawal process over again."

"And the first few weeks are horrendous to go through," Carol added.

"You guys are both very brave," Sandra commented.

"Sort of gets cancelled out by the initial stupidity of going on that poison to begin with," Brian said.

"There is so much anger and remorse that goes along with this nightmare," Carol explained.

Sandra just nodded her understanding.

"Can you remember anything else about your visit with Donovan?" Jason directed, attempting to stay on track.

Brian thought for a moment.

"Well, one thing that grabbed my attention was the locked cabinet in the examination room. It was packed solid with those little brown envelopes. I asked the doctor if he was preparing for an epidemic."

"What'd he say?" Jason asked.

"He said that the vitamin sales people were very generous." Both reporters looked at Brian incredulously. "Yeah, I know," he responded. "I can't believe I just fluffed over that one either. But at the time, I was so sick I would have accepted a magic wand if he had offered one."

"So, where are all the little brown envelopes?" Jason wondered out loud.

"Maybe that was what he had in the box," Sandra ventured.

"How big was that cabinet?" Jason asked.

"About six feet high and about three feet wide," Brian guessed.

"Too big," Sandra concluded.

"So, if he went to his office last night, knowing the heat was on, and didn't try to remove them..."

"They were already gone," Sandra filled in.

"I wonder why he had already gotten rid of the brown envelopes," Jason pondered.

"Someone had already tipped him off," Sandra speculated.

"Oh crap," Carol blurted out. Everyone turned to her for an explanation. "This guy... Jerry, someone. He had called me from the company, checking on my progress in the study. He seemed genuinely concerned when I told him how much trouble I was having. So, after Brian's little fiasco, I called him for some answers."

"Uh huh," Jason said quietly.

"He had a completely different tone, the second time I spoke to him."

"How so?" Sandra asked.

"He sounded nervous," Carol reported. "He suddenly had no connection with the study and wasn't able to offer any immediate answers. I just chalked it up to another case of 'pass the buck,' and forgot about it."

"So, you didn't pursue it again?" Jason prodded.

"Well, I wrote a letter to the state medical board, if that counts for anything," Carol responded.

"How long ago was that?" Sandra asked.

"Probably about a month," Carol guessed.

"And no response from them?" Jason asked.

"It's a government organization," Carol stated. "It could take a long time before they do anything."

"If they do anything," Brian added. "Donovan and his little vitamin caravan could have set up shop in Mexico by now."

"That's what I meant by lost cause," Carol concluded.

"Carol," Jason said. "Can you get me any information on this Jerry guy? I think he is the next link in the chain."

"Sure," Carol answered. "If he contacted me, he must have had access to all the study volunteers."

"Well, this has been very interesting," the reporter announced, getting to his feet. "Come on, Sandra, we have work to do. Oh, and this is on me," he added, picking up the check. "You have been very helpful, and besides, the paper will pay for it."

"Thanks," Brian said.

"Here's my card," Jason said to Carol. "If you think of anything else, please call me."

"I will," Carol assured him.

After the reporters were gone, Carol turned to Brian and asked, "Do you think my call to Jerry tipped off the company?"

"Without a doubt," he said.

"Damn," Carol remarked. Brian nodded in agreement.

Chapter 19

Donovan shut the door behind the courier that had come for Sanders's file, and turned to Sally. She had been quite the trooper. Not once did she resort to an "I told you so," and had been working diligently since early morning to "repair the files." After they had completed the Sanders file, there had been elaborate notes added, documenting the patient's refusal to resume his medication. The records stated that his decision had been explicitly against medical advice, and that the patient had been counseled on the dangers of sedative withdrawal. There was also a note added about an office follow up with the patient by phone and that the patient had refused further treatment. The doctor was pleased with the final version. Every patient that had refused to return to the medication received the same notes added to their chart. Fortunately for Donovan, there hadn't been too many of them. Most patients were terrified of what was happening to them and with a little added encouragement from a doctor, they were happy to resume taking the drug. Donovan had convinced them that they would not be having so many problems going off the medication if they had not needed it in the first place.

Strangely, the man felt no remorse. His compassion was specifically targeted to his immediate family and that was the extent of his ability to feel for others. When it came to medicine, Donovan did not see patients; he saw dollars. He had shown his parents and brothers that he could turn anything into a money-making proposition. He had a bigger house and a much nicer car than any of them. Yeah, he had shown them!

The doctor was glad he had taken the time to bring the charts home. He had found many minor flaws that had been missed by the office staff and was able to take his time slowly reviewing each one. By the end of the weekend, those charts would be ready for a magnifying glass – if it came down to it.

Jerry had taken Sheila home the night before and then had left to go back to his own apartment. There had been a few sexually tense moments, but both opted for baby steps. Neither one of them had been prepared for the intense closeness they felt and both needed time to adjust to the idea.

Sheila was back in her domain. It felt like a mansion compared to the Economy Lodge. She was lounging happily in front of the TV with her coffee when she caught a news update. As the story unfolded, Sheila slowly sat up and turned up the volume.

"So, to recap yesterday's tragedy, it has been confirmed that the gunman was Cobb County resident Terry Sanders. Sanders appeared to be aiming his shots at random employees of Dominex Pharmaceuticals, with a final shot aimed at himself. The words he was heard yelling just prior to the shooting were directed toward the company and a Doctor Donovan, who was seeing some of the volunteers from the drug company's research study. Sanders died shortly after arriving at Grady Hospital, at the age of forty-seven. Turning to international news..."

Sheila hit the mute button and stared at the screen.

What in the hell is going on? She reached for the phone and dialed Jerry's number. "Have you seen the news yet?"

"And good morning to you to," Jerry answered.

"You aren't going to believe this," Sheila continued, not responding to the jab. She filled Jerry in on the news she had just watched.

"The guy actually shot himself and died?" Jerry asked incredulously.

"According to Channel Five," Sheila confirmed.

"Stay there," he directed. "I have had enough phone conversations to last me a lifetime. I'll be right over."

Sheila busied herself running through all the local Atlanta channels hoping to find out more.

"There's not a whole lot of information on the other channels," Sheila announced when she opened the door for Jerry.

"Well you might be interested in this," Jerry said, handing her the paper.

"How'd you get a Sunday edition already?"

"Its two o'clock in the afternoon, sleepy head," Jerry teased.

"I wish I could blame it on the change in time zones," Sheila laughed. "But there wasn't one. I was fried from the trip." Sheila shuffled back to the couch to read the front-page article.

SHOT MEANT FOR RANDOM EMPLOYEES TURNED LETHAL

In a brief moment, the angry commotion of one faceless individual renders him dead, with a lot of unanswered questions. The faceless individual was later identified as 47-year-old Terry Sanders. A fatal shooting that took place Friday night at 6:35 PM in front of One Peachtree Plaza appeared to be aimed at Dominex Pharmaceuticals.

Eyewitness provided police with a statement quoting Sanders as saying, "You beep [the word "assholes" was censored] are not going to get away with this. You can't quietly stick us under a rug. You think shuffling us off to Donovan clears you? The world knows what you're doing... the world knows!"

Three shots were then fired in the direction of a few employees. The shots were fired over the heads of the individuals, and there were no injuries. Sanders then turned the gun on himself and fired one shot to the head. He was pronounced dead within minutes of being transported to Grady Hospital.

Mr. Sanders was separated with two children, ages 9 and 11. The family has been unable to provide the police with any insight into the motive for such a tragic event. His wife told this reporter that Sanders had become very depressed after the marital separation eight months ago. He had been seeing a doctor who had been treating him for depression with medication. Sanders reportedly responded well to treatment; however, shortly after entering a research study for the drug manufacturer, he had quickly de-compensated. The family had received no contact from Sanders prior to his suicide.

Dr. George Donovan told this reporter that the current research study at Dominex Pharmaceuticals involves the observation of medication termination. The doctor stated that, "Some of the volunteers had a more difficult time going off their medication than others," and that they had been referred to him by the drug company for treatment. The doctor indicated that his follow-up treatment for these individuals involved monitoring their blood pressure only.

Dominex Pharmaceuticals declined an interview and refused to comment on the study. It is this reporter's opinion that Sanders was attempting to make some kind of public statement, the

nature of which never reached its target. Therefore, further inquiries will be made into the senseless loss of one life.

Article by Jason Sample and Sandra Jenson.

Sheila put the paper down on the coffee table and looked at Jerry. "This is going to be interesting for Dominex," she ventured.

"I think that's an understatement."

"Further inquiries," she repeated. "You know they will continue to investigate this."

"How long do you think it will take them to follow the trail to us?" Jerry asked nervously.

Sheila just shook her head. She was deep in thought.

"We need to put all that information you compiled in a really safe place," she announced finally.

"Wasn't the whole idea to expose the truth?"

"Yes, but in my time frame, and by my rules, not theirs."

"Sweetie, with all due respect," Jerry interjected, "what's the difference?"

"Dominex plays hard ball. Any information that can be easily covered up or explained away will be washed over. Look at how quickly they eliminated the vitamin scam."

"I see your point," he conceded.

"We don't have much time," she stated. "Let's go."

"Great," Jerry said, getting to his feet. "Where are we going?"

"I know the perfect place," she announced, "I just need to make one quick phone call." Sheila went to her suitcase and pulled out her personal organizer. "Lucky I got everyone's home number before I left Newark."

"I'm beginning to think there is no such thing as luck where you're concerned," he said, admiringly.

Sheila dialed the number and waited.

"Debra, I'm glad I caught you at home. Listen, I have a very important package to send you."

"Sure," Debra said.

"Keep it safe."

"Gotcha," the woman confirmed. Sheila knew that her message was being received loud and clear. This was not a package to keep lying around on someone's coffee table. A wall safe behind a painting was a better place.

"I'll contact you when I need it," Sheila concluded.

"Even a thousand miles away, you're still fun to work with," Debra added.

"I miss you guys too, and thanks."

Josh had a little surprise waiting for him when he fired up his computer. The "sell stop" he had established on the Dominex stock had kicked in when the market opened that Monday morning. He had a feeling the little news item had scared a lot of traders into bailing ship. He had set his activation point at a safe level so that small fluctuations would not have accidentally kicked in the order.

Josh flipped on the calculator and punched in a few numbers. *Twenty five thousand, two hundred and fifty two dollars.* He couldn't wait for Carol to come home. She had been so

worried about her two weeks' notice. He had just made close to her entire salary for one year. She would probably view this as a sign that it was okay to leave her job.

He would have to stay glued to his screen today. News items and rumors only affected stock values momentarily. As soon as everyone realized that the Dominex building was still standing and they were still peddling drugs, the value would most likely recover. He would ride this out, but would probably have to bail very soon. He could switch in mainstream and ride it in the opposite direction, but with all the other floating issues Dominex was having, he was not willing to take the risk. Not with twenty-five grand in his pocket. He had a feeling that this was only the tip of the news story iceberg. There was a much greater opportunity here. He didn't mind the wait.

Josh keyed in a stop loss that would protect his investment. If Dominex's stock value suddenly began to rise, he would be out.

Carol sat in her office maintaining the responsible employee pose. She would not ever be accused of bailing when things got tough. Spears had already passed her in the hall and had made no comment about her resignation. *Probably too busy celebrating*, she thought.

Carol wasn't taking any new patients for obvious reasons. Since there was no one in the manager's chair and Spears was not acknowledging her departure, Carol took it upon herself to begin the transition. She had her entire caseload on a print-out in front of her and was beginning to notate case management assignments when she remembered the AJC reporter. She had promised to contact him with information.

Carol held out the business card she had gotten from the reporter and dialed the number. "He is out right now," a voice explained. "Do you want to leave a message?"

"Sure," Carol said. "Could you please tell him that his contact person at the drug company is Jerry Owens at 555-2729?"

"Got it," the voice said.

"Oh, and also tell him that Sheila Montgomery might be another possible contact there."

"Okay, I'll make sure he gets the message," the kind voice assured.

The newest addition to the newsroom placed the receiver down and smiled. How lucky could they get? Only hours after being hired, they had already gotten some valuable information. The new employee turned and checked to see if anyone had been observing the phone conversation. No one was close by, and Jason Sample was busy typing away in his cubicle. This was one message that was not going to get delivered. The paper with the contact information was folded and tucked away for later. *People are way too trusting*, the new member thought, *and thank god for them*.

Monday morning at Dominex was a little tense for everyone. A few employees even called in sick. The shooting had unnerved them and there was some concern about another attack. The employees that had been brave enough to come in had been told to sign a sheet and go home. "It's a paid holiday," the Human Resources Manager told them. "This will be national police investigation day." A few smiled. Others signed the sheet quickly and went out the door.

Sheila waited outside the building for Jerry. "Let's get some breakfast," she said, linking her arm inside his when he returned from the sign in sheet. They walked the few blocks to the

Waffle House. It was already after nine-thirty but the place was still fairly busy. "Don't these people have jobs?" she complained, while they waited for a table.

"Maybe they are all celebrating national police investigation day."

Finally, a table was cleared and the two grabbed the opportunity. "Let's do something fun today," Jerry suggested.

"Besides eating waffles?"

"Yeah," he continued. "Ever been to the Atlanta Zoo?"

She just wrinkled her nose at him.

"Seriously," he maintained.

"Okay, Jerry, if you want to go to the zoo, what the hell. It's not like we had anything big planned today."

"The enthusiasm," Jerry remarked. "It's overwhelming."

The waitress came over to fill coffee cups.

"Two waffles?" Jerry inquired in Sheila's direction.

"Definitely," she confirmed. "This is turning out to be a pretty good day," he said, reaching over the table for her hand.

In the booth on other side of the restaurant a young reporter was on the first day of the job. The individual took note of the closeness between the two Dominex employees. At a glance, one would just assume that two people who worked together would easily form a relationship, the reporter thought. But isn't the union between these particular employees interesting. The reporter continued to sip coffee, until the couple left the restaurant. A few dollars were plunked down on the counter, and the couple was followed out the door.

When Carol arrived home from work she headed to the dining room table to the check mail. Instead of mail she found a pile of monopoly money with a note on the top of the pile. *You have struck it rich. You may now quit your job and pass go. No need to collect two hundred dollars, you have plenty of cash. Love, Josh*

"What does this mean?" Carol asked Josh after finding him in the storage shed. He was putting up the last of the tools when he turned around.

"How much do you get paid at the nut house?" Josh questioned.

"Twenty six-five, and don't call it a nut house."

"I meant your co-workers, not the patients," he added.

"Josh," Carol said with an added edge to her voice. "What does this mean?"

"Don't you just love it when a plan comes together?" he joked, knowing he was pushing his luck to the end of her patience.

"J.F.," she announced. The cue of a final warning.

"Okay, okay," Josh laughed. Carol couldn't help but smile herself. There had been so little happiness lately.

Josh took her by the hand and led her back inside the house. Sitting down at his computer he pulled up a screen and pointed. "Okay, we got in here," indicating one place on the screen, "and we got out here," again pointing to a spot on the screen. Carol just looked at him and shrugged her shoulders.

"Again," she said, holding up the note, "What are you telling me?"

"I am telling you that we made over twenty-eight thousand dollars today."

Carol just looked at him with her mouth open.

"Are you serious?"

"Totally!"

Carol got up and, despite her exhaustion, she grabbed Josh's hand and pulled him up to dance with her. "You seem disappointed," he said jokingly.

Carol continued to dance around the room until her energy gave out. She sat back down breathlessly and said, "This is incredible!"

"Yes it is," he agreed, feeling very pleased with himself.

"This makes my decision to leave the nut house so much easier to live with."

"Don't call it a nut house," Josh said.

"I meant my co-workers, not the patients."

"Consider this Dominex Pharmaceutical's settlement fee."

"This was Dominex's stock?" she asked in amazement.

"Yeah, that shooting incident scared a few people," he explained, "and I'm guessing there will be more where this came from."

"You mean the stock could do this again?" she questioned.

"If their precious drug doesn't hit the shelf in six weeks, yeah, I think their stock will dive into the basement."

"How much would we make?" Carol asked excitedly.

"I couldn't even venture a guess," Josh stated. Carol continued to look at him.

"Enough to retire," he said, finally.

"That would be the ultimate irony."

Sheila and Jerry strolled hand-in-hand through the zoo grounds. It was a perfect Georgia spring day. Everything was blooming and the animals were especially active with spring in the air. They had been on stage ever since the couple had arrived. Sheila was surprised at what a good time she was having. She had gotten so caught up in the atmosphere, she had completely forgotten about all the problems waiting for her.

"Want to get an ice cream cone?" Jerry offered.

"That would be perfect," she said. "You know after today's calorie intake, I won't be able to eat for a week."

"I hope you're kidding," Jerry said, handing the man two dollars.

"How else do you think I stay so thin?" she joked, pushing him slightly as they walked away.

"Let's sit," he directed, and found the nearest bench. The two sat in silence watching the passersby.

"This is the most fun I have had in a long time," Sheila conceded.

"See, I told you," he said. "Let's never go back to Dominex again. We can get jobs here at the zoo."

"Doing what?" she laughed. "Cleaning poop out of cages?"

"Well, I had something more glamorous in mind, like maybe lion tamer."

"I think it's safer at Dominex," she retorted, "but only marginally."

They continued to stroll the grounds, joking and laughing, until they had seen everything there was to see. It was getting close to evening and the temperature was beginning to

drop. Jerry suggested they go to a pizza place. "I have a better idea," she announced. "There is a great take out place just down the street from my complex. We can kick off our shoes and curl up with some really stupid sitcoms."

"That sounds perfect."

Since they had taken public transportation to the zoo they had to resort to the same to get home. MARTA was packed solid, due to the time of day. "We might have planned our departure a little better," Jerry said.

"I actually forgot it was a work day," Sheila laughed.

Donovan was seeing the last patient of the day while Sally placed the last of the Dominex patients' files back in their respective places. She had not been happy about the recent spotlight and told Donovan that this was the last time they would help the drug company put the pieces of their study back together. This recent cleanup had not been out the goodness of her heart. They had to clean up their own mess and subsequent connection to the Domine x fiasco, regardless of whether or not they continued doing business with them. But since the only thing required of them now was pretty much straightforward treatment, she did not put the brakes on. It would have been far worse from a perception standpoint to pull out now, anyway.

The back line began to ring and Sally grabbed it. The office staff was already gone and the phone lines had been forwarded to the answering service. Only a few people had the "back door," number.

"Hey, Sally," a familiar voice greeted.

"Hey, Jeff," she said, not hiding her irritation.

"Listen, you guys did a great job," he continued. "The police have been all over this place today and the detective told me that Sanders's chart appeared complete, so there won't be any further investigation."

"Thank God for that," she said letting out a long breath.

"The other thing I'm calling about," Jeff added, "is that we are having one last 'damage control,' meeting in the morning. The police are all finished here, so tomorrow will be business as usual."

"What time?" Sally asked flatly.

"Say, eight."

"The doctor will be there," Sally said, "but I will have to open up the office."

"Great," Jeff concluded. "And Sally... Thanks again for all your hard work. We will make it up to you."

"I'm counting on it," she countered humorlessly, and hung up.

"Who was that on the phone?" Donovan said after ushering the last patient out the door.

"Your partner in crime."

"What do they want us to do now, sprout wings and fly?" Donovan laughed.

"Don't get me started," Sally warned. "I'm tired and cranky."

"Right," he said, losing the smile.

Sally recapped the phone conversation and filled him in on the meeting time in the morning.

"I'll be there," he said.

"Somehow, I knew you would be."

Tuesday morning, Jerry arrived back at work alone. He had returned home late the previous evening. They were taking things slowly, although it was getting more difficult to leave Sheila's apartment at the end of the day.

All the yellow tape had been removed. As he walked through the building on his way to his office, everything appeared normal. There was no indication of any recent drama. Still, he had a strange feeling about the place.

When he opened his office door, he knew why. The entire room had been ransacked. All his drawers and files had been emptied out on the floor. His coat closet had been opened and all its contents were in a pile on the floor. Someone had even removed the loose floorboard in the closet that he had been after maintenance to fix. "Wow," Jerry said, looking around the entire room. They had been very thorough. When Sheila said they didn't have much time, she was right on target. *Shit, Sheila.* Jerry turned quickly and went down the hall to Sheila's office. He wanted to run but realized the need for some discretion.

He found Sheila sitting at her desk, looking at the piles of papers and files thrown everywhere. The condition of her office was identical to his, minus the removed floorboard. She looked up when Jerry opened her door. "This is incredible," she said. "I called Sam, but his secretary said he was in an important meeting. How the hell can they explain this?"

"With proven grace," Jerry answered. He was beginning to feel his anger kick in.

"And if they think I'm cleaning this up, they're nuts!"

Jerry walked in and sat in the chair facing her. "If ours are the only offices that have been torn up, then they know," he speculated.

"It wasn't that hard to figure out," Sheila interjected. "We know for a fact that they were on to me. Why else would they have sent me to Newark?"

"Yeah, and they already knew I had received a call from one of the volunteers," Jerry added.

"The information you got in that phone call was pretty explicit," Sheila said. Jerry chewed on the problem for a minute.

"But this," he said, indicating the mess, "implies that they think we have been aggressively pursuing it."

"Yeah," Sheila, agreed. "This is not good." She began putting things back in her drawer.

"What are you doing?" Jerry asked.

"Cleaning up after a robbery," she said casually. "And you should probably not be camped out in here. We will be shocked and appalled. Anything else implies guilt."

"You're pretty good at this," Jerry said, heading for the door.

"You have no idea."

"Oh, Sheila," he added before opening the door. "I don't want you going home alone tonight."

"Right," she conceded. "I'll meet you at the Wendy's down the street at five-thirty, okay?"

"Good girl," he said and was out the door.

Down the hall from Sheila's office, Sam was deep in debate with attorney Paul Pratt, Jeff Edwards, George Donovan, and a visitor from the Atlanta Journal Constitution. Also present was Charles Roman, by his own insistence.

"There can't be one more moment of investigation. Do you understand me?" Sam directed.

The AJC plant nodded in agreement.

"I can't be everywhere all the time, the reporter stated, "but I'm already pretty connected with the two that are working on your story."

"How did you manage that?" Paul inquired.

"I'm young and eager. They are mentoring me."

"Good," Sam concluded. "This must die quietly. On top of everything else that is going on right now, the FDA has demanded that we submit whatever test results we have so far."

"Can they do that?" Jeff asked.

"They can pretty much do whatever they want," Sam said bitterly.

"Well, almost anything," the attorney chimed in. "We will be insisting on due process when the time comes."

"In English," Charles interjected.

"It means that they can't require anything of us that has not been required of past or current research studies done by other companies."

"Thank God for the legal system," Sam concluded. "Jeff and I will take care of sending off the current data this week. Now, what are we going to do about Sheila and her side kick?" he asked, laying copies of both employees IDs out on the conference table. He then turned and gave Charles a hard stare.

"She is a good Marketing Director," Charles said, defensively.

"She's also a pain in the ass," Jeff interjected.

"How much can they possibly know?" Charles countered.

"They know that a lot of the volunteers had to drop out," Jeff began by holding up one finger. "They know that the really sick ones were shuffled off to the doctor," he added, showing fingers indicating two. "And three, they know that the treatment those people received was a scam. How much more do they need to know before we consider them a huge liability?"

"Jeff, take a breath," Sam directed. "We didn't find anything in their offices."

"That doesn't mean much," Paul interjected. "If someone had wanted to keep close tabs on those people, they could have done a lot of damage." The room became silent.

"If we fire them it will look damn suspicious," Sam stated.

"Well, we know they have been traveling around together," Donovan interjected examining copies of their employee IDs. Everyone turned to look at the doctor.

"How do we know that?" Jeff inquired.

"Because I practically ran over them at the French Onion Friday night."

"I didn't see them there," Jeff said.

"They were leaving as Sally and I were coming in. They were gone before you got there."

"And you had no idea who they were until you saw the IDs," Jeff added.

"I have been tailing them as well," the AJC reporter agreed. "They have been joined at the hip since she got back from Newark."

"Fine," Charles said, noticeably red in the face, "but that still doesn't prove anything."

"Two separate accidents would be a hell of a coincidence," Sam began. "But only one, involving two people..."

"Oh come on," Charles argued. "I can't even think about something like that."

"Listen man," Sam said. "If she were fat, ugly, and not one of your previous girlfriends, you wouldn't think twice about it." The gloves were off. He didn't have time to coddle this man.

Everyone sat staring at the Charles Roman, wondering how he was going to respond to such a direct statement. "Tell you what," Charles said, standing for effect. "I am still the CEO of this company. I sign your paychecks," he stated, pointing to everyone in the room. "Including yours," he added, indicating the AJC plant. "No one is going to be murdered on my watch."

"Fine," Sam conceded, a little taken back by this return to his previous assertiveness. "We're open for suggestions."

Everyone remained quiet, not wanting to get in the middle of the newly developed power struggle.

"Right now," Charles directed, "you will do nothing. As far as further action, you will have my decision by the end of the day. Are we all clear?"

Everyone nodded in agreement.

"Fine," he concluded. "I have work to do."

The group watched him walk out the door.

"I thought you said he was losing his backbone," Jeff said looking towards the door.

"That wasn't exactly backbone," Paul interjected.

"More like a soft spot for a pretty blonde," Sam added.

"Yeah," Jeff agreed, "with a tiger's eye."

"Can you continue tailing them?" Sam said to the AJC plant.

"Already in the works," the reporter assured him.

"We will know a lot more about what we're dealing with after you have watched them for a few days. In the meantime, we just go back to work."

Everyone stood to go.

"Oh, Doc," Sam said. "Thanks for doing such a great job with the Terry Sanders investigation."

"The chart was polished and ready for pick up Saturday morning. And the rest of the charts are cleaned up as well."

"Great," Sam concluded. "From this point on, give the remaining volunteers anything they want. We'll cover the cost."

The meeting was adjourned and only Sam and Jeff remained. "What are you going to do about the two trashed offices?" Jeff inquired.

"Must have been a robbery attempt."

"In only two offices with nothing missing?" Jeff said questioningly.

"We trashed a few others and removed some computers," Sam explained.

"Did you get the list of volunteers from Sheila's office?" Jeff asked.

"Both copies," Sam stated.

"Then you thought of everything."

"Let's hope," Sam added, patting Jeff on the back.

"Now I need to go to Sheila's office and act surprised. We better get them some help with the cleanup," he added. "It was pretty trashed."

Sam walked down the hall to Sheila's office and stopped in the doorway. He found her picking files up off the floor. "Looks like they got you too," he said.

"Who else got hit?" she asked.

"Jerry, Marty and Grace, in accounting," he said.

"What'd they get?" Sheila inquired.

"Just a few computers," Sam answered. "This just hasn't been our week. We'll get you some help with this mess." Sam turned to go.

"Sam?" she interjected. "Why did they hit only four offices?"

Sam just shook his head.

"You got me. Lately, nothing is making any sense."

Sheila continued to pick the rest of the debris up off the floor. *Lately, everything has been making a lot of sense.* She hadn't given Dominex enough credit. They had stayed only one step behind her because she had been too confident. That would end today.

Sheila went through every file thoroughly before laying them on top of the cabinet. Both copies of the volunteer list had been removed from her office. *Yeah, they hadn't been given near enough credit.* She dialed the number to Jerry's office. "Hey, are you alone?" she said.

"Why?" he countered. "Are you planning to say something inappropriate in an office?"

"I'll take that as a yes."

"Do we need to use code?" Jerry said, using his best conspirator's tone.

"Stop playing around," she directed. "Tell me again about the phone conversation you had with the volunteer that knew about the vitamin scam."

Jerry thought for a moment. He hadn't had access to the information since he had turned it over to Sheila. In fact, now that he thought about it, the information was no longer in their possession. They had sent it off to Sheila's friend in Newark.

"We played phone tag that day," Jerry began, trying to jog his memory. "Carol, someone," he said under his breath.

"That won't get us anywhere," Sheila said, beginning to get annoyed at her own clumsiness.

"Why?" Jerry asked innocently. "Don't you still have the files from the study?"

"They got everything," Sheila said. She sat at her desk, tapping a pencil, and feeling very overwhelmed for the first time. "I gave them way too much latitude."

"Okay, let's not get carried away here," Jerry said soothingly. "We sent the information to your friend through Fed Ex. She should have it by now."

"That's right," Sheila conceded. She was usually on top of her game, but this new relationship was a real distraction. Good thing it came with one perk: another person's insight. "Okay," she said. "I'll just give her a call and get the information."

"Don't call her from your office," Jerry warned. "If you do, there's a good chance her office will be trashed next."

"You're right," she said in alarm.

"In fact, this was not the best place to have this conversation," he added.

"Are you sure you want to stay connected with me?" Sheila said in frustration.

"Are you kidding?" Jerry countered. "This is the most interesting my life has ever been."

"Interesting," Sheila repeated. "That's an understatement. We'll finish this later."

"Ten four," Jerry said, hanging up the phone.

He doesn't realize how dangerous this could get, she thought, placing the receiver down. *He is all caught up in 'new love,' flutters, and he thinks this is a game.* She was getting very worried for both of them. Jerry could walk away from this anytime he wanted. In fact, at this point, any other choice would be insane. It was different for her. She had waited years for this opportunity and there was no way she was going to stop here. She would see this through. They would have a very serious talk later. She had to make him understand exactly what it was he was dealing with.

Chapter 20

Charles sat at his desk and stared out the window. Things had gotten totally out of hand ever since they had tried to get Suprame on the market. This study had proven beyond a shadow of a doubt that the medication could not be taken longer than a few weeks without becoming seriously addictive. They could have agreed to put specific warnings and prescription parameters on the labels, but that would substantially cut into future profit.

It had been predicted that once Suprame was available, it would be the sedative of choice because of the price comparison to the name brands. Estimated revenues were staggering. But this estimate was based on current prescribing practices. If doctors and patients were warned about guaranteed addiction, those numbers would drop considerably.

Now he had a study that proved how dangerous sedatives were and they were continuing to navigate its successful completion to the FDA. That did not bother Charles as much as the idea that they could consider permanently putting Sheila away. She was harmless. The only hidden agenda she had ever had was to climb her way to the top, using any means to get there. He had seen it a thousand times before and he had no problem complying with that desire. She had been such a bright spot in his life. He had even entertained thoughts of resuming their relationship once this study was over. He had not liked hearing that she was involved with someone else.

Now, Jerry Owens was another matter. Not only did he have no recollection of ever meeting the man, but also he was sure that, under the circumstances, he probably wouldn't like him. If he was out of the picture, that might solve two problems. Sheila would get the message and Jerry would be history.

We will make an example of Jerry Owens, the CEO decided. A smile came to his face as he envisioned a distraught Sheila, in need of comfort. He would be happy to console her. The details of the plan were something for someone else to work out. He had done the real work: he had made the decision. Charles got up and went down the hall to find Sam.

It was close to the end of the workday. Sam was seated at his desk, patiently listening to his secretary deliver the reader's digest version of "phone war." "Sam, they have all but threatened me personally. You have to figure out a different way of dealing with these people. They want to speak to someone connected with this study, not a secretary. These people are sick and upset, and I can't contain this mess any longer."

"Okay, Margie," he said. "We will do something. Give me until the end of the week to come up with a different plan."

"Thanks," she said and left the room.

Sam could hear her just outside the door. "Oh, Mr. Roman, go right on in."

"Nice girl," Charles said, as he closed the door behind him.

"Over-worked girl. I think she is due for a promotion."

"Great," Charles said. "You can give her Jerry Owens's job."

Sam did not like the direction this conversation was taking already.

"What does that mean?" he asked tentatively.

"I have decided that we should make an example of Jerry Owens."

"And how did we come to that interesting conclusion?" Sam interjected.

"He has had his nose too far into our business, and he's expendable. Simple as that."

"And how is that going to resolve the problem we are having with Sheila?" Sam asked.

Charles was getting tired of all the paranoia surrounding Sheila and was here to put an end to it once and for all.

"What has she done to make us all so worried about her?" Charles demanded. "besides ask a lot of questions? She was practically put in charge of organizing this study, and then got a little curious when you added components to it without telling her anything. Don't you think that would raise a question or two?"

"Not the smoothest plan in the world," Sam conceded.

"No, it wasn't. And since we sent her off to New Jersey, she has stayed completely out of the picture. Now this Owens guy picks up where she leaves off. As far as I can see, he's the current problem."

Sam looked at the CEO and thought, *I have never known anyone in my entire life more hormonally driven than Charles Roman.* He just shook his head and sighed. "You don't see any connection between the fact that Jerry Owens – an employee in her department I might add – did not begin having contact with the volunteers until her immediate departure?"

"I thought the volunteer contacted us, and this Owens guy intercepted the call," Charles interjected.

"The volunteer named both of them as contacts when she called the newspaper," Sam said in exasperation. "And now they go out to breakfast together? Come on, man. Wake up. They have been working together on this since she left for Newark."

Charles hated to admit it, but Sam was right. The truth had been staring him right in the face, and because he had wanted to continue his affair with her, he had been blind to the whole scenario.

"So, what do you think we should do?" Charles asked, defeated.

"I say we watch them very carefully. The newsperson we hired to work at the AJC has been keeping pretty close tabs on them."

Charles nodded in agreement.

"If they got the message from the little office cleaning we gave them and decide to stay the hell out of our way until this research project is over, then there will be no need to turn up the heat. But... if we get even an inkling that they are continuing to sabotage us, they are gone."

"What I don't understand," Charles said, "is why would they do anything to hurt the company that employs them."

"Who knows," Sam said. "But people do it all the time. We just can't afford for anything to go wrong with the Supreme market date. We are too close and we will not tolerate any interference."

"I agree," Charles added. "Keep me informed of everything."

Sam watched him leave. He had no choice about Charles being informed of the plant at the AJC. The CEO himself had been involved in the hire and the placement of that individual. He had decided it would be better not to inform him of the phone taps. Sam did not trust Charles's current judgment. If Sheila knew about the phone taps because a clumsy CEO had inadvertently warned her, they would have no way of knowing what was really going on. He checked his watch. Her home phone had been taken care of while she was at work, and the office phone would be taken care of tonight. Sam felt confident that he had covered all the

bases. He was tired. Making a quick check around the office, he was satisfied that everything was locked and secure. It was time to go home.

Sheila sat waiting for Jerry to show up at the Wendy's. She checked her watch. It was well after five-thirty. *Where the hell was he?* She was beginning to get worried when he finally came through the door at five minutes to six.

"Sorry I'm late," he said.

"Where were you?" she demanded. "I was getting worried."

"Thanks," he said, smiling.

"Jerry, this is serious. I don't think you realize who you are dealing with."

"You mean the kind of people who would be putting phone taps on our office extensions?"

"Why do I get the feeling that you are trying to tell me something?"

"Maybe because the 'handyman' didn't know who I was, especially since I was busy working in another cubicle."

"What?" Sheila exclaimed.

"Yeah, the building cleared out and I decided to hang around for just a little while. Did you know that some really interesting things go on there after five o'clock?"

"You saw them putting a wiretap on your phone?"

"Not just mine," he responded.

"Those guys are such crapheads," she said under her breath.

"Yeah," Jerry agreed, "but so predictable."

"How did you get to be so sharp?" she said suspiciously. "You told me you didn't even know how to lie when all this first started."

"I'm a fast learner," he said.

"Uh huh," she said moving closer to him, "and what else?"

"I am also highly motivated," Jerry said putting his arm around her and kissing her thoroughly. After a moment, he pulled back and said, "Any questions?"

Sheila's head was spinning. She had never experienced a genuine kiss before. When she finally found her voice she said, "No, I think you explained everything pretty well."

"Good," he said. "Then let's go home."

The newsperson watched them leave the Wendy's. *So, we're escalating the friendship. Maybe that will keep them busy and out of trouble.*

The reporter pulled out a cell phone and dialed a number. "They appear to be heading home."

"Everything is ready," said a voice on the other end.

"Good work," the reporter said and pressed a button to end the call.

Sheila and Jerry were coming out of the elevator, so engrossed in conversation that they did not notice the fact that Sheila's front door was unlocked until they were practically inside her apartment.

"My God," Sheila exclaimed, looking around the ruins of a frantic search. It had received the same treatment as her office. There didn't appear to be one surface or drawer that hadn't been completely overturned. "Can't they look for files without turning everything upside down?" she whined.

"This is turning into a pretty regular thing," Jerry said. "I guess I can assume that my apartment looks just like this."

"The only thing left for them to do to us is cavity searches," Sheila said in disgust. "And I'm hoping that they would take us to dinner first."

"And dancing" Jerry added.

Sheila picked up the sofa cushions off the floor and placed them back on the sofa. She sat down and let out a long breath. "I just don't have the energy to clean this up."

"Maybe we should call Sam and invite him over to help," Jerry said sarcastically.

Sheila picked up the phone to call security.

"This is Sheila Montgomery in ten-fifteen. Can you tell me if anyone was given access to my apartment today? Really?" she said, after hearing an explanation. "No, no problem, thanks."

"What did he say?"

"He said that the only one that had access today was a furniture deliveryman and his assistant."

"So, where's the new furniture?" Jerry inquired.

"Must have vaporized between the lobby and the tenth floor," she concluded. "Oh, and another thing I found interesting during my phone conversation. Is my phone supposed to click every five seconds?"

"It is if it's tapped," Jerry said, reaching for the receiver. He unscrewed the mouthpiece and held it up for her to see. "This little clip right here," he said, pointing to the inside of the receiver. "It probably was not there this morning."

"How stupid do they think we are?" Sheila said, getting up to check the rest of the apartment. Jerry followed her from room to room. When she was satisfied that nothing was missing, she turned to look at him.

"I don't think it is their assessment of our intelligence that is in question. I think the problem is the size of their egos," he speculated. "You know," he continued, "we can actually use this to our advantage."

Sheila looked at him for a moment, trying to make sense of what he had just said. Slowly a smile came to her face.

"You *are* a fast learner. First, I have to clean this up. I won't be able to sleep until everything is back where it should be."

"Well, pace yourself," Jerry warned. "After this, I'm guessing we will have one more apartment to deal with."

Sheila groaned.

"Not if you don't know about it until tomorrow."

"That sounds like a proposition," Jerry said.

"It is."

Jason Sample was reaching a dead-end in his investigation. Everything had checked out at the doctor's office. The police had found nothing suspicious and had already closed the file. Terry Sanders was determined to have been a distraught man who would have most likely ended up committing suicide, whether or not he had chosen to do it in front of a drug company's building. Jason had argued with the detective that was in charge of the case. He insisted that

there had been a lot of problems associated with the study those people were doing and a lot of nighttime activity following the shooting. The detective told him that there was no tangible evidence to justify continuing the investigation. If Mr. Sample wished to provide them with some, they would be glad to consider re-opening the case.

Damn. Terry Sanders was not just a suicidal person with a grudge towards Dominex. He wasn't ready to let the story go. He hadn't heard from Carol Freeman and was unable to proceed any further without her input. Jason dialed Brian's number and waited.

"Hello," a woman answered.

"Brian, please."

"This is his wife. Can I help you?"

Jason filled her in on the reason for his call.

"So, I really need to get in touch with him," Jason concluded.

"Hold on," she said flatly.

Jason waited for several minutes before Brian came to the phone. "I just got the third degree," the reporter said.

"Yeah, and I got the fourth and fifth degree before I could pick up the phone."

"I don't think I want to know," Jason speculated.

"I can assure you that you don't."

"Listen," Jason began, "I haven't heard back from Carol yet, and we really need that contact information."

"That's strange," Brian said. "She's usually very reliable."

"Maybe she called and it got lost in the shuffle around here," Jason explained.

"I'm sure she wouldn't mind if you contacted her," Brian said. "I'll give you her number at work, and if you miss her there, I also have the one at home. Her husband won't throw up a road block," Brian added.

Jason took down the information. "Thanks," the reporter said. "I'll let you know what I find out."

Brian hung up the phone and went back in the bedroom to finish arguing with Pam.

Jason checked his watch. He didn't know what hours an addiction counselor kept, so he dialed the office number first. A recorded voice told him that the Mental Health Center was opened Monday through Friday, from 8:30 AM to 5:00 PM. It also instructed him to call an 800 number if he had an emergency. He didn't think his assessment of an emergency would be the same as the afterhours staff's at a mental health center.

He pulled out his notebook again and dialed the home number Brian had given him. "Hello," a female answered.

"Carol?" He inquired.

"Yes?"

"This is Jason Sample. We met you last weekend with Brian."

"Yes," Carol confirmed. "Were you able to get anywhere with the information I gave you?"

"Well, to be honest, I never got the information."

"That's odd," Carol said. "I called yesterday morning. The person said you were out and took down the names of the contact people at Dominex. They said they'd be sure to give you the message."

"Someone said that I was out yesterday morning? What time did you call?"

"I guess it was around nine-thirty in the morning."

"Interesting," Jason said. "I guess they forgot."

"No problem," Carol said. "The one I spoke to directly about Dr. Donovan was Jerry Owens. I also mentioned that Sheila Montgomery might be another contact person, even though I only spoke to her in the beginning when I got signed up. If you can hold on for a second, I'll look for the numbers."

A few minutes later, Carol returned to the phone and provided the reporter with two numbers for Jerry Owens and a work number for Sheila Montgomery. The reporter thanked her and hung up the phone. *This is very interesting*, he thought, getting up to find Sandra. He finally found her leaning up against the counter in the break room, with a steaming cup in her hand.

"I'm hoping this blood transfusion will revive me," she said, when Jason waved his hands in front of her face.

"Another long one last night," he agreed.

"I don't know how you do it. You were there, too, and you look fine."

"You get used to it," he said. "Listen, did you get any phone messages from Carol Freeman yesterday?"

Sandra sipped on her coffee, hoping the caffeine would hit on the brain cells that stimulated memory.

"Not that I can recall," she said finally. "Why?"

"Because I just got off the phone with her, and she said she left a message for me yesterday," Jason explained.

"Well, people forget to forward messages all the time," Sandra said between yawns.

"She was told I was out of the office yesterday morning at nine-thirty," he continued.

"So?"

"I was right here yesterday morning."

"That is strange," she agreed.

"Considering the kind of story we're working on, I find it very interesting."

"Well, the individual in question can only be one person," Sandra said, coming back to life. "We just got a new hire in the newsroom, and that individual was instantly enthralled with the Dominex story..." Both of them came to same conclusion at the same time. "You think this person might be interested in more than learning the ropes?" Sandra asked.

Jason just rolled his eyes at her.

"Let's just say that they are about to get the lesson of their lives," he concluded. "We need to set up shop somewhere else. We can't work from my house. It's too far outside the city, and I have a two year old that is active enough to be twins."

"My place is only a few miles from here," Sandra offered, "and it's empty."

"Okay that's perfect," he concluded. "We can camp out there in the morning. Right now we need to try to locate Jerry Owens or Sheila Montgomery. I'll use my cell phone so there won't be any AJC phone records."

Jason tried both of the numbers he had for Jerry. There was no answer and he did not leave any messages. He tried the only number he had for Sheila and was not surprised when there was no answer there either. He doubted that anyone was still at Dominex this late at night. "Let's see if she's listed in the phone book," Jason ventured. He found only two Sheila Montgomery's. One was a College Park listing and the other was in Midtown. Jason dialed the Midtown number first. When a woman answered the phone, the reporter identified himself and confirmed her place of employment. Sheila told him that she had no knowledge of any problems

with the research study and that everything appeared to be in the last stages and ready for FDA approval.

Jason listened to the politically correct statement, but could not help but notice a slight edge to her voice. When Sheila finished her short monologue, Jason thanked her for her time and told her that if she thought of anything else she could reach him on his cell phone and gave her the number. He pushed the button to end the call and sat down staring at the cell phone.

"What are you doing?" Sandra laughed.

"Waiting for her to call me back from a different phone."

Sheila wrote down a number and hung up. Turning to Jerry she said, "We need to get to a pay phone."

They headed down to the street and Sheila filled Jerry in on the conversation she had just had with the reporter from the AJC.

"Are you sure you want to share information with a newspaper?" Jerry asked. "I thought we were supposed to be incognito."

"Not really," she said. Jerry just looked at her waiting for an explanation. "I'm more interested in finding out what they know. And if they turn out to be trustworthy, I might feed them a few crumbs. A little extra media play wouldn't hurt our cause."

They found a pay phone two blocks away and Sheila pulled out the paper with Jason's number. The call was answered immediately.

"Why do I get the feeling you were expecting my call?" Sheila began.

"I'm a reporter," Jason explained. "I get paid to know these things. Can I meet with you?" he continued. "I have a lot of questions and I have a feeling you have a lot of answers."

"I guess so," Sheila answered tentatively. "Where do you want to meet?"

"It's hard to say whose activities are being monitored at this exact moment, but I think it would be best if I came to you," the reporter said.

"Why?" Sheila asked suspiciously.

"I have a hunch about something, and if I'm right, you and I are both being watched. And don't start looking around," Jason added.

"How did you know...?" Sheila began. "Oh, that's right," she concluded, "the reporter thing."

"Give me your address," Jason said. "I think I can dodge our spy better than you can." Sheila gave him the address.

"I'll see you in about fifteen minutes. Oh, I almost forgot," he added. "Would you have any idea where I might find Jerry Owens?"

"You're the reporter," Sheila laughed. "Just follow your nose."

"Two for price of one," Jason stated. "Good deal."

"Let's temporarily part company," Jerry suggested. "If someone is watching our every move, they won't be able to follow both of us."

"Good thinking," Sheila said. "I'll meet you back at my apartment in fifteen minutes." She kissed him goodnight and went back to her place, via the Publix for a few groceries. Her apartment was stocked with very little in the way of food. She ate one meal a day and that had usually been at some fast food place on her way home from work. Now she had a guest. She felt strange, yet peaceful with the arrangement.

Jerry went on a ten-block marathon. It was the first real exercise he had had in days and it felt good to work up a sweat. If anyone had been following him, they would have had to be in pretty good shape to keep up. Jerry had been in training for this little cat and mouse game whether he realized it at the time or not. After clocking about two miles in less than twenty minutes, he ended up at the service entrance of Sheila's complex. Security was nowhere to be found and he casually made his way back up to Sheila's apartment. When she opened the door he said, "The security in this building is going downhill fast. I just came up through the service entrance without any problem, and that furniture delivery thing today was a fiasco."

"You're sweaty," Sheila said, wrinkling up her nose.

"I ran," he confirmed, still slightly out of breath.

"Well, go run into the shower."

A young reporter had watched Sheila go into her complex carrying groceries. *Looks like an uneventful night*, he thought and began to yawn. This had been a very long day. It was safe to assume it was bedtime for everyone. The individual got into their car and drove away.

Jason and Sandra left the AJC building and drove towards the direction of the address Sheila had given them. After checking his rearview mirror for the tenth time, he was satisfied that no one was following him. "You know," he said glancing at Sandra, "I have worked as a reporter for fifteen years and I have never been this paranoid."

"You've probably never been tangled up with a pharmaceutical company before."

"You're right about that," he said. "These people are ruthless."

"Do you have any idea how much money is on the line for a huge empire like Dominex?" Sandra questioned.

"I assume it's the same as with any large corporation."

"I was doing a little research of my own today," Sandra began. "These people stand to make billions every year once the drug goes on the market. And another interesting thing I discovered. They have been in a little bit of financial trouble."

"No shit," Jason interjected.

"Yeah, and if they don't get this drug on the market soon, they could even go under."

"Well, that certainly puts things into a different perspective," he said. "Fest or famine. No wonder they're hot on my trail."

"I would suggest a bullet proof vest," Sandra added.

Jason hoped it would not come to that.

The two reporters sat in Jason's parked car for several minutes, watching for any street activity. There didn't seem to be anything out of the ordinary. People were returning home or leaving to go somewhere. It was the midtown of a major city. There was a lot of movement, but nothing that appeared to be focused at them. Jason nodded to Sandra and they headed for the apartment complex.

Sheila was still in the process of putting order back to her domain when she heard the knock at the door. Jason identified himself and introduced Sandra. "She is working on the story with me," he explained.

Sheila shook both their hands, and said, "This is Jerry Owens."

After all the mutual greetings, everyone moved inside the apartment.

"What happened here?" Jason asked, acknowledging the overturned mess.

"Oh, this," Sheila said. "Dominex has been doing a little investigation of their own."

"Not too concerned about you knowing about it, are they?"

"That's arrogance," Sandra added.

"They did the same thing to both our offices," Jerry interjected.

Jason took in the whole scene and shook his head.

"For a closed investigation, there is still a lot of interesting activity going on."

Sheila moved over to the living room area and placed chair cushions back on chairs.

"We can all sit over here," she offered.

Sheila and Jerry sized up the two reporters quickly and decided to let them in on Dominex's dark side. They spent the next hour filling Jason and Sandra in on the antics of the entire research study.

"That explains why the good Doctor went to his office in the middle of the night to retrieve all the files," Sandra interjected.

Sheila and Jerry exchanged glances. The process of merging information was turning into an interesting proposition, to say the least.

"What do you know about Terry Sanders?" Jason asked.

"We don't remember too many details about each volunteer," Jerry began. "We have detailed documentation, but as soon as we heard about the shooting, we sent it off to a safe place. That's probably what Dominex was looking for."

"No doubt," Sandra agreed.

"When this whole thing started, there were five hundred of them. Jerry stayed in contact with them while I was being diverted on an assignment a thousand miles away," Sheila explained. "I had started asking too many questions about the follow up phase of the study."

"Tell us about that," Jason directed.

"I was responsible for recruiting all the volunteers for the study," Sheila explained, "so I was involved in all the planning as well."

"And why was that necessary?" Sandra interjected.

"In a situation like this, people are tentative about what will be happening to them. I needed to be able to walk them through the process before they agreed to participate."

"Makes sense," Sandra agreed.

"Well, just before the study began, I was informed of some interesting additions to the process," Sheila continued. "The follow up process was supposed to be done at a satellite location by an independent lab, but at the last minute they set up their own lab for Phase Two inside our facility. The more I questioned the last minute change, the more evasive they got."

"Interesting," Jason said.

"I thought so," Sheila agreed, "so I started doing some serious snooping."

"What did you come up with?" Sandra asked.

"There were memos dated back to the beginning of the planning stages outlining this on site lab."

"It's odd that you were never informed of this," Jason said.

"I was sure that they had set things up this way to control the results," Sheila concluded. "And when they shipped me out of the area I was sure something was up."

"So I picked up where Sheila left off," Jerry interjected. "I stayed in communication with all the volunteers and kept tabs on their progress."

"Or lack of it," Sheila added.

"We knew that a lot of the volunteers were getting very sick from going off the medication," Jerry explained, "but Carol Freeman was the one that tipped us off about the extreme methods they had resorted to."

"That's where this Doctor Donovan comes into play?" Sandra speculated.

"Right," Jerry agreed. "They sent all the really sick patients to Donovan, who basically put them back on the drug without their knowledge or permission. So, the ones that had decided to come to grips with their addiction and ride out the withdrawal process were not only robbed of the time they had already suffered, but were forced to repeat it all over again."

"Sounds to me like Terry Sanders had a very legitimate reason to be irate," Jason concluded.

"Terry, and about two hundred other people," Sheila continued. "Some went happily back on their medication, but others were furious about what the drug had done to them. They blamed their doctors for continually writing prescriptions without any concern for how addictive the medication was."

"Carol Freeman was a good example," Jerry continued. "I remember her because she was one of the few who refused to see Doctor Donovan."

"Did she tell you why?" Sandra asked.

"Explicitly," Jerry laughed. "She told me that it was a doctor that had done this to her in the first place and the last person she ever intended to let near her again was another doctor."

"A lot of them felt that way," Sheila added.

"So, Donovan only saw the ones that were willing to seek additional medical treatment?" Sandra speculated.

"That's right," Jerry confirmed. "The rest of them quietly went off to deal with the tragedy on their own."

"There were five hundred people at the start of this study," Jason began. "How many of them successfully made it through the entire process?"

"As of my last contact with them," Jerry said, "two hundred and fifty of them were supposed to have completed the entire six weeks of abstinence, but only one hundred and twenty three of them remained. The rest had either gotten back on the medication or dropped out of the study completely. The remaining two hundred and fifty volunteers will most likely share the same success rate."

"If these five hundred people are any indication of the effect of sedatives, then there are a lot of very addicted people out there," Sandra said incredulously.

"There are approximately twenty different sedatives that have been on the market for a very long time," Jason added, "and the most terrifying part of this is that most of the people taking them probably don't even know they're addicted."

"Or what is waiting for them if they ever decide to stop taking the drug," Sheila said.

The group became silent, realizing the weight of their discovery.

Sandra was the first to find her voice. "This is a worldwide disaster."

Jason nodded, and turned to the whole group.

"It's a silent epidemic."

David Manning had been patiently awaiting the Dominex study completion. He was anxious to begin putting the test results under a magnifying glass. An unopened envelope lay

sitting on the top of his desk, and he paused momentarily before opening it. This was the first half of the test results. He had contacted the company and directed the submission of what they had so far. He did this for two reasons. First, he wanted to force their hand without giving them any time to prepare for his scrutiny. He also wanted to complete the process as soon as possible.

David was eligible for retirement and was more than ready to go. He already had a cabin on Lake Hartwell. It was paid for and ready to provide him with the peaceful life he dreamed about for the past two decades. The only thing keeping him from beginning his life of leisure was Dominex Pharmaceuticals. He wasn't going anywhere until they were securely under the moving bus. That final push would be his last day.

David opened the envelope and laid the pages out on his desk. According to these results there were two hundred and fifty volunteers who had completed the required process. Only seventeen of them had dropped out of the study for reasons unknown. The remaining two hundred and thirty three volunteers had made it through with flying colors. The only difficulty reported by the drug company was a slight increase in blood pressure during the first few weeks of drug termination. The partial conclusion of the study was that consumers should not terminate the medication abruptly. It would be recommended that patients consult their physicians prior to going off Suprame. In that way, the doctor would be in a position to monitor a patient's progress.

David scanned the data. There were no names mentioned. Each volunteer was represented by a number. This was customary during a research study to keep the names of the individuals confidential, and to avoid any age or gender bias. The first name and last initial could be furnished upon request, but full names were never provided, unless the FDA found the need to randomly contact study participants. In simple terms, David could not justifiably demand the volunteers' names without providing specific concerns about the test results.

He had been monitoring the news when the company's name made headlines, and was hoping there would be something from the shooting he could use to demand the information. But the case appeared to have been dropped as fast as it had begun. He was going to have to find something else. *It's in here somewhere.* The final results were not due to arrive at his office for another four weeks. He would use the time well. He was mentally decorating his dream cabin. The heads of Sam Reynolds and Charles Roman would hang nicely over the fireplace.

The phone had not stopped ringing all day and Margie Barrett had a headache the size of Texas. She had no sooner gotten off the phone with a woman who had been crying uncontrollably, when two more calls followed right behind. She answered each one, asking the second caller if they were willing to hold on. She was told what she could do with her hold button and was then provided with a hard slam in her ear.

Moving back to the first call, Margie sat and attempted to listen patiently while a man graphically described his fear of leaving the house. "I never had any problem walking outside my door until I tried to get off this crap," the man said angrily. "My wife drove me to my doctor's office and I was hyperventilating the whole time. I'm a fifty-four-year-old war vet for Christ's sake, and my wife has to take care of me now." Margie was sitting with her eyes closed, listening to the caller's tirade and feeling helpless.

"What did your doctor tell you?" she asked, helplessly.

“He said that I’ve probably had an anxiety disorder all my life and it is only now beginning to surface. He called it PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder. I’ve been back from combat for thirty years. Never had one bad night’s sleep. Now I’m suddenly having war memories? Can you think of anything more lame?”

Margie had to admit that she could not.

She had been receiving horrible graphic details of the volunteers’ withdrawal symptoms, and in most cases, the doctors that had prescribed the medication to begin with had been surprised and baffled when their patients returned and complained of severe physical and psychiatric problems after stopping the drug. Some doctors had even become outraged when they discovered that their patients had gone off the medication and refused to provide further treatment unless the person resumed taking the drug.

“What can I do for you today?” Margie said, unable to think of any resolution.

“You can tell the asshole in charge of your organization that he will be hearing from my lawyer,” the man yelled into the phone.

“Have you tried seeing Doctor Donovan?” she negotiated.

“Sure. He agreed with my idiot doctor.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Margie said, now at a loss for words.

“Look,” the man concluded, “I know that you have nothing personally to do with this, but I can’t seem to get anyone from your company to talk to me. This is the most devastating thing that has ever happened to me and someone is going to pay for it.” Margie apologized once again and the man was gone.

I can’t do this anymore. She had already exceeded the maximum dosage of Tylenol and began massaging her temples. Most of these people had not even given her their names. They were all so upset by the time they had gotten transferred to the VP’s secretary, they had just wanted to vent their anger and hang up. The caller ID identified them at the source of the call, but she would have had to contact the receptionist after each contact and have her check who the caller was. It was just a matter of time before they started getting hit with lawsuits. Margie decided to take some action.

She forwarded her phone calls back to the receptionist and went to Sam’s office door, giving it a light knock before entering. Sam was not alone. He had been engaged in another of his daily disaster control meetings with the company attorney. Margie knew that Paul Pratt was in the VP’s office and decided this would be the most opportune time to resolve this issue.

“I’m sorry to disturb you both,” Margie began, “but I have a problem that requires your attention.”

“Have a seat,” Sam sighed. “We’re not getting anywhere with all the other problems we’re dealing with. Maybe we’ll have better luck with yours.”

Margie sat down and described in detail all of the calls she was receiving.

“The bottom line,” she concluded, “is that whether they have threatened us with a lawsuit yet or not, they’re coming. You can set your watch by it.”

“How many callers have you had?” Paul inquired.

“That’s hard to say. Many of them never got around to identifying themselves, so all I’ve had to go on is their voices. But if I had to guess, I’d say somewhere in the neighborhood of seventy five solid callers.”

Sam and Paul sat quietly for a moment absorbing the information.

“And Sam,” Margie added. “It’s Thursday.”

“Right,” Sam acknowledged.

"What's so special about Thursday?" Paul asked.

"I promised her she wouldn't have to deal with the volunteers after this week." Sam turned to Margie and said, "Listen, you've done a great job heading this off so far. I will keep my promise. Just hang in there one more day."

Margie just nodded her head sadly and said, "It will be the longest day of my life."

Paul and Sam watched her leave the office.

"She looks pretty rough," Paul observed.

"Sometimes I can hear the screaming through the phone receiver when I walk past her desk," Sam added. "I have been thinking about this all week and I can't come up with a thing."

"The problem extends way beyond this study," Paul reminded him. "Even if by some miracle you get this past the FDA, the problem will not go away. People will be going directly to the FDA after this drug is on the shelf and they will want to know why the research study failed to capture the consumer's reactions to the medication."

"It will be a financial disaster either now or later," Sam predicted. "If we concede to putting stronger warnings on our label, our projected revenue will suffer. If we wait until people start sending complaints to the FDA, they will require stronger warnings at that point or they might even recall the medication entirely."

"Sounds like a no-win situation," Paul interjected.

"As long as Manning is in charge, it's a chess game," Sam stated. "If I had to pick which move to make, it would be the one that would keep us in the game longer. Our financial situation is spiraling downward quickly. We need that first billion just to keep us going."

"That's a risky choice," Paul concluded.

"Chess is a risky game."

"Okay, then," Paul said. "As I see it, the only choice you have with these volunteers is to settle with them."

"Don't you lawyer types know any other words? Where am I going to find the cash to make these people happy?"

Paul thought about it for a moment.

"Let's offer them a settlement, effective after Suprame goes on the market."

Sam began to nod.

"I like that idea. Not only will that keep these people quiet, but it will also provide a very specific message."

"Exactly," Paul agreed. "If you want your money, stay out of the way."

The attorney smiled at Margie on his way past her desk. She returned a weak one in his direction and then focused on Sam. "Okay, Margie," he announced. "We have your solution. Come on in and I'll tell you all about it." She happily forwarded her calls again and sprinted into his office.

Sam explained the solution to his secretary, emphasizing the delay in the settlement process. Margie gave his words considerable thought, and then said, "I think that would work. These people have been wanting some kind of compensation for their hardship. No one expects us to magically make them better, so I guess money is the only other solution."

"So, how does a promotion sound?" Sam said, smiling.

Margie did not smile back.

"Oh no. Sam, you can't possibly be thinking that I am going to keep dealing with those irate people."

"Now, before you jump to the wrong conclusion, let me walk you through this."

Margie rolled her eyes at him, but gave him her attention.

"As a secretary with no authority, you were at the mercy of those people."

"You got that right," she stated adamantly.

"But as liaison to the legal department... You'd be the solution Genie."

She looked at him through squinty-eyed scrutiny.

"Go on."

"Think about it," Sam continued, now on a roll. "You would no longer be a secretary. You would have your own office and – here's the best part – a bigger salary."

"Continue," she said, warming up to the idea.

"You would be responsible for the volunteers and the volunteers only. You would contact each one that has dropped out, and – let's say – feel them out, so to speak. If any of them are looking for compensation, you will be able to offer it to them."

"Not bad, Sam," she conceded. "But what happens to my position after the study is over?"

"I have a feeling that this issue is not going to end with the study," Sam said.

Margie nodded her head in agreement.

"Okay," she announced. "You've got yourself a legal liaison."

"Great."

"After my three day weekend," she added.

Sam stood and shook her hand.

"Spoken like a true legal liaison."

Chapter 21

Carol was looking forward to her temporary retirement. She had been so sick and exhausted since her return to work that all she planned to do the first week was lay around the house. She had insisted that Josh take the twenty-eight thousand dollars out of the trading account and put it into a savings account. "It won't grow there," Josh argued. "It won't shrink there either," she countered. She had felt as though that money was truly her ticket out of the work force, at least for a while, and didn't want anything to happen to it. In the end, Josh conceded. Her sanity had been hanging by a thread these days, and if the savings account was going to give her some measure of happiness, it was worth the price.

Friday's at Newberg Mental Health were always casual. It was the one day each week they were allowed to wear jeans. Carol had declined. Her clothes no longer fit, and blue jeans were the most unforgiving of the clothing chain. She had gone shopping to find baggier and more suitable clothing. As a size eight, she had been small compared to the average size American female. Clothes had been designed for her and she had never had any problem finding suitable attire. As a size twelve, she was now average by comparison. Current fashion, however, was a mockery to the average woman.

She had wandered through major department stores and wondered what had happened to everyone's sanity. The person who had decided they would all wear clothing so tight that you could count ribs must be off somewhere having a big laugh. If some self-appointed fashion guru from London had determined that women should start wearing their underwear on their heads, it would now be chic to have panties as a hat. There had been rack after rack of the worst clothes from the sixties, and a miscellaneous decade that was simply referred to as, "What were they thinking?" Carol remembered the sixties very well and argued that at least women had been allowed to have butts and thighs back then.

She wondered where all the average size woman went shopping. It certainly couldn't have been any place she had gone. Nothing fit. Clothes were either way too small or way too big. The petite and "full figure" ladies were set. The average were being punished and sent to clothing purgatory for being average.

Carol finally resorted to her local Goodwill Store. She could find clothes in her size that had been made before the fashion designer criminals had come along to torture American women. One day, she resolved, her body would return to its pre-withdrawal condition. Until then, she would be wearing her larger "rental" clothing. She was currently walking through the hallway in her three-dollar baggy dress. This wasn't the person she could ever remember being, but at least her blood circulation wasn't being cut off by a waistband.

The receptionist saw her in the hallway and signaled to her that she had a call. Carol went to the closest phone. Walking all the way back to her office would have required movement. Carol picked up the receiver and pressed the appropriate line.

"Carol, it's Sandra," the caller announced.

"Hey, Sandra. What's new?"

"We're hitting a brick wall with this story. We have so much great information and no proof. These people have covered their tracks well."

"Makes sense."

"Yeah, it does," Sandra agreed, "but we need to find a crack in the structure somewhere. Do you know of any other volunteers besides you and Brian?"

Carol thought for a moment. She couldn't provide any information about Clair because she had come in as a patient.

"Wasn't Brian's interaction with the doctor any help at all?"

"Not really," Sandra said reluctantly. "The drug screen would have provided solid evidence to substantiate his story, but as we discussed, it can't be used."

"I'm so sorry about that."

"Forget it. I'd have done the same thing in your situation."

"Tell you what I can do," Carol said. "I can't give the name of this person, but I can contact them myself and ask them to call you."

"Was this person a Donovan patient?" Sandra asked.

Carol confirmed that they were. Sandra gave Carol a cell phone number and instructed her not to use any of the direct lines to the newspaper. Carol was tempted to ask her more about that but decided to refrain. Sandra thanked her and was gone.

Carol went to the chart room and found Clair's file. Carrying it to her office, she wondered what sort of condition she would find the woman in. Last time they spoke, Clair was pretty intoxicated and didn't seem very motivated to deal with her problem. She dialed the number and waited. A man answered the phone and Carol asked to speak to Clair. "Who's calling?" the voice demanded. Carol was not supposed to provide any information. Even though this person had answered Clair's phone, the rules of confidentiality were very clear. If a person had sought out mental health services, it wasn't necessarily known by their immediate family. She did not have permission to tell this person anything. Carol was only allowed to give her name and leave a generic message, nothing more.

"She won't be able to return your call," the unidentified voice informed her.

Carol didn't answer him. She didn't know what to say. After a very awkward pause, the man introduced himself as Clair's brother and informed her that Clair had committed suicide.

"Oh no," Carol whispered. "I'm so sorry."

"So are we," the brother agreed.

Carol had a pretty good idea what the motive had been, but she had to find out for sure. She identified herself and gave the man a short version of their common history.

"I guess you would have had no way of knowing," the man conceded.

"Clair had only come in to see me one time," Carol began, "but do you mind sharing with me what happened?"

"I guess not," the man agreed.

Carol listened while Clair's brother described the terrible tragedy. Clair had overdosed several times on the doctor's "vitamins." After the vitamins "lost their effect," she elected to go back on the medication, but began abusing the substance. Something she had not done prior to the drug company's study. Clair had been brought in to Piedmont hospital on two separate occasions for overdoses. The last overdose had landed her in intensive care, where they had made arrangements to send her to Ridgeview for a long-term recovery program once she was discharged. The morning that Clair was scheduled to leave Piedmont, she was found in the bathroom with her wrists cut. She had probably been in there just prior to the end of the night shift, and it was hours into the day shift before anyone had gone in to check on her.

"She couldn't have picked a better time of the day," her brother commented. "The period of time between the nurses shifts can get pretty disorganized when the hospital is full." He told

Carol that he knew this because he was a nurse and had worked at Piedmont himself in the past. "Anyway," he continued, "she had bled out and had been dead for at least an hour before she had been found."

Carol felt her heart sink and grabbed a tissue off her desk. She had seen this coming and had been helpless to do anything. "I can't tell you how sorry I am," Carol said, dabbing her eyes.

"I appreciate that," the brother sighed, "but the one who should be the most sorry wasn't even held responsible."

"Didn't the hospital want to know where she had gotten such a large supply of the pills?"

"Have you ever been inside a busy hospital before?" the brother interjected. Carol admitted that she had not. "They see this every day," he explained. "If hospitals started taking patients by the hand and tracking down their dealers, they'd have no time to treat them."

"But her dealer was a doctor," Carol said incredulously.

"I know, but the hospital didn't have the time or man power to chase him down."

Carol knew exactly what Clair's brother was talking about. She dealt with the same overcrowded and apathetic system every day. "There's nothing I can do for Clair," Carol said sadly, "but if the family needs anything at all please call me and I will get them connected with the right person." Carol gave out both phone numbers and was ready to hang up when she remembered the original reason for her call.

"Listen," she began, "I know this is a lot to ask, but there may actually be someone who can provide Clair with some justice." Carol explained what was going on at the newspaper and why she would be unable to share any information about Clair's tragedy.

"You bet I'll call them," the brother concluded. "This is a respectable profession, and guys like Donovan turn it into a meat market. If they can do anything about that guy, they can have one of my kidneys."

Carol gave the man Sandra's cell number and thanked him for being so caring.

The world was turning into a hellhole all around her and she was powerless to do anything. Her strongest attempts to make the world a better place had been her demise at her job. At the end of her crusade she hadn't even been able to save herself. She would not miss this. It was too early to leave work, but she had no appointments. What were they going to do, fire her?

Sandra Jenson was enjoying her first evening off in over two weeks. The story she had been working on with Jason had consumed all of their time. She was a little disappointed when they hit a dead end, but her aching feet and back were rejoicing. She had just propped her feet up on the couch when her cell phone rang. "Oh no," she groaned. She had to answer it. Only a select few had that number and they all required her immediate attention.

Sandra punched a button and answered the call.

"This is Steve Warner," the man began. "My sister, Clair, was a patient of Carol Freeman's."

Sandra sat straight up and picked up the remote control to mute the TV.

"Yes," she responded, "I know Carol. Did you say your sister *was* a patient?"

"I did," Steve confirmed. "My sister committed suicide a few weeks ago."

"Oh God," Sandra said quietly. "Did her suicide have anything to do with the drug study?"

"Indirectly, I guess you could say that. My sister had been on Valipene for five years until she volunteered to stop taking it for that research project they were doing."

Sandra grabbed her notebook and started scribbling as the man told his story.

"I told her numerous times that the stuff was addictive, but she just brushed me off, saying that her doctor wouldn't keep prescribing it if it wasn't good for her."

"I'm guessing she found out otherwise when she tried to stop," Sandra interjected.

"She was devastated," he continued. "She got so sick and scared. I think that was when she went to the mental health center. She thought she was losing her mind until she saw a counselor there."

"Carol?"

"Yes. We didn't know who she had seen at the time, but we knew that whoever it was had firsthand knowledge of the medication and the drug study."

"So, Carol was the one who helped her come to terms with her addiction?" Sandra prodded.

"I wouldn't say she came to terms with it, but she realized what was happening to her. We tried to get her to go back and see the same counselor, but she refused."

"So, what did she do?" Sandra asked.

"The pharmaceutical company contacted her and told her see that Donovan guy. He told her he was putting her on 'vitamins' and she started feeling much better. My sister trusted everyone," the man laughed humorlessly. "She believed this guy. Even after the counselor had contacted her and told her she had been put back on the medication, she refused to really believe it."

"So, she kept taking the so called vitamins?"

"She began abusing the so called vitamins," Steve stated. "She started going back for refills long before she was due, and no matter how many times she returned, that asshole gave her more."

Sandra continued writing while Steve gave Sandra the same information he had just given to Carol. "Did the hospital drug screen your sister any of the times she had been admitted?" Sandra asked.

"Well, I didn't see any test results," Steve began, "but I'm sure they did. That's pretty much standard procedure when someone comes in for a drug overdose."

"We got him," Sandra announced, elated. "If Doctor Donovan notated that your sister was on vitamins in her chart, and the hospital shows that she tested positive for the drug, then we have something to work with."

"But Donovan could say that she was an addict and had found her drug of choice somewhere else." Sandra thought about his words for a moment, and her spirits dropped.

"I hadn't thought of that," she conceded. "But at least we have two people now with identical stories. It's a start. Would you be willing to testify to the information you just gave me?"

"If I thought it would help, I would assist in a hysterectomy on this Donovan guy".

"I'll take that as a yes," Sandra laughed. "Give me your address and phone number." Sandra ended the call and immediately dialed Jason's cell number.

"We're back on the story," she announced happily.

Sam and Jeff sat listening to a recording of Sheila's voice saying she had no knowledge of any problems with the research study and that everything appeared to be in the last stages and ready for FDA approval. They heard the reporter provide her with an alternate phone number, if she thought of anything else.

"Go forward and see if she called him back," Jeff instructed.

Sam hit the forward button and went to the next call.

"She's ordering pizza," Sam announced.

They continued to move through each call, until they arrived at the end of its contents. "That brings us to the present," Sam said.

"Maybe our interior decorating sent her the appropriate message," Jeff ventured.

"Let's hope so," Sam agreed. "Jerry was with her the entire weekend. In fact I don't think he's been home since he spent that first night with her."

"I'm happy for them," Jeff said sarcastically. "Maybe they will be too pre-occupied to worry about what we're doing."

With only three weeks left in the study, the management team at Dominex Pharmaceuticals was taking no chances. They had a physical trail on Sheila and Jerry. Office and home phones were being monitored, and all the volunteers that had dropped out of the study were being called and "compensated" to avoid any contacts with outside entities.

"We might just pull this off," Sam said, feeling very relieved for the moment.

Jason Sample was going out on a limb with the drug company story. He had two sources with collaborative information, but no real hard evidence. He and Sandra had been eyewitnesses to the doctor's midnight office visit, but again, what they saw proved nothing. He had Carol Freeman's account of her experiences with the study. Everything was hearsay. Despite all that, he felt in his heart that his facts were solid and that a real human tragedy was continuing to unfold under everyone's noses without their awareness. He had to print what he knew to be the truth.

The editor insisted that they run Jason and Sandra's story by the legal department, and Jason was working on his pencil toss trick, awaiting their decision. "Are you just going to sit there and juggle?" Sandra interjected.

"This is not juggling," Jason said indignantly. "This is an exquisitely executed triple twirl with a dip."

"Very impressive."

"Gotta stay busy," Jason added.

"Yes, that seems to be a very important task you are undertaking," Sandra agreed.

"I might need another profession to fall back on," he said, "'cause if they don't approve this story, I'm getting it printed somewhere."

Sandra nodded her understanding. They had met with Steve Warner in person, and had met once again with Brian to confirm their willingness to provide affidavits if need be. Both agreed to go to any lengths if the situation turned hostile. Carol Freeman had been a little reluctant to come forward about the drug screen she had done, due to the unethical manner that had been used to obtain it. In the end, she decided that the exposure of the drug company's

abuse was far more important than a slap on the wrist. She doubted that the action would result in the loss of her license, but she decided to take that chance.

Sheila adamantly refused to come forward. They had important cards they were not ready to show. Sheila explained to them that her "ace in the hole" had to be reserved for the eleventh hour. Also, once they came forward, they would no longer be able to provide any insight from inside the organization. Sandra was still deep in thought, watching Jason's pencil continually flipping through the air when the editor walked in and announced that legal had made their decision.

"Since your sources are willing to come forward, they decided to let you run with it," the editor announced. Sandra and Jason stood up and hugged each other. "But, I personally think this is nuts," he added. "We have witnesses, but no hard evidence to support your allegations. This is a large corporation. I don't think they are going to die quietly when this comes out."

"Thank you for reminding me," Jason interjected. "I had forgotten that little tidbit."

"It's going to be your name on the story, funny guy," the editor said. "I hope I'm wrong, but I think we're in for the fight of our lives."

Jason checked his watch. "Did we make tomorrow's deadline?"

"It's in," the editor confirmed. He left the room, muttering something about buying a large pit bull. The article would appear in the Sunday paper and would capture the best audience of the entire week.

"They won't know what hit 'em," Sandra said, grabbing Jason's pencil and attempting the triple twirl. The pencil flew across the room and crashed into a computer.

"You will have to practice that maneuver."

"It'll be my top priority," she assured him.

Michelle Roman was an early riser and Sundays were no exception. Her greatest joy was quietly sitting with her coffee and the morning paper. The Atlanta weather had been quickly turning to spring, so she carried both outside to her private back deck. Michelle opened the Sunday paper and spread it out on the patio table. The story on the front page grabbed her immediate attention.

SILENT EPIDEMIC

By Jason Sample and Sandra Jenkins

Dominex Pharmaceuticals, a company whose name has been making headlines lately, is back in the spot light again. You may remember the recent tragedy when a local Cobb County resident fired several gunshots over the heads of random employees and then turned a final fatal shot on himself. The man was Terry Sanders and this is his story.

Terry Sanders sought help nine months ago for depression after his marriage ended. He was prescribed Valipene, a popular sedative that is currently being taken by millions of people. Sanders continued taking his medication as prescribed until he heard about a research study being done by the Dominex Pharmaceutical Company.

The company is in its last testing stage of the drug Suprame, a generic form of the popularly prescribed Valipene. Market date for the affordable substitute is being delayed by the

FDA until final research can be submitted proving that consumers will be able to safely terminate the drug after various lengths of use.

Sanders, like a large number of the study volunteers found that they were unable to discontinue the medication without experiencing debilitating withdrawal symptoms. Many of the volunteers immediately returned to the medication when the illness rendered them unable to take care of their daily responsibilities. Others, like Sanders, were appalled by the new knowledge that they had become profoundly addicted to the drug, and attempted to recover through abstinence.

The company responded to the volunteers by providing them with medical treatment, or at least the illusion of treatment. The volunteers were seen by Dr. George Donovan, where they were given "prescription vitamins." The unknown miracle cure was handed out to patients in small brown envelopes. The patients reported immediate improvement and returned to their previously healthy state.

These vitamins would have been the cure of the century, except they weren't vitamins. The small brown envelopes reportedly contained medication with the same compound found in Valipene. The apparent plan to contain the volunteers was halted abruptly when some of the study patients reportedly discovered that they had resumed taking the drug. Volunteers became ill once again when the "vitamins" were eliminated.

Upon returning to Donovan's office, they were told that, for some, the vitamins became ineffective over time and were given the option of going back on the sedative medication or returning to their previous withdrawal condition.

It was during this time that Sanders's rage made its way to the Dominex building and he tragically ended his life. Reporters have since then interviewed other Dominex volunteers who collaborate Sanders's brief statement before he died.

The medication, Valipene, has been on the market for over forty years, and there are over twenty different medications with the same compound. There are currently millions of people taking some form of these sedative drugs. They are prescribed for everything from depression and anxiety to PMS, and they are apparently quite addictive, as evidenced by the research study.

The current Sanders tragedy provides only one example of the destruction caused by these sedatives. The greater tragedy is that millions of others are likely addicted to these medications but have no knowledge of their condition because they have never tried to stop taking them. If Dominex Pharmaceuticals is able to market their sedative without specific warnings, there will be one more drug added to the family that is currently responsible for the most wide-spread and deadly silent epidemic.

Michelle Roman was practically celebrating as she re-read the article. Charles will have a cow when he sees this. She had quietly stood by for the past several years and watched him dig himself into this hole. His wild spending and rampant affairs were finally going to come back and bite him. Michelle was going to enjoy watching those sharp teeth tear into his flesh. When the media and FDA were through with him, he wouldn't be worth a dime.

Her own frugal lifestyle and careful planning had set the stage for a comfortable life and a hassle-free divorce. Now that things were turning sour for Dominex, Charles would be more receptive to granting her what she wanted. In the past, the subject had always been dismissed. There was too much on the line for the successful CEO and he had no intention of splitting his future fortune. Well, as far as she could tell, that future fortune was the toilet.

Michelle carried the paper back inside and lay it out by the coffee maker so that it would be the first thing Charles would see when he woke up on this glorious Sunday.

Sally rolled over and stared at Donovan, who was snoring loudly beside her. She thought about trying to get him to roll on his side, but decided to get up instead when she looked at the clock. She had been asleep for over ten hours.

After her customary pit stop to the bathroom, she headed for the kitchen. She had stopped drinking leaded coffee, but she still needed her placebo. She was about to pour water into the coffee maker, when she glanced outside the kitchen window. "What in the hell...?" she exclaimed. Outside on the lawn, several TV cameras were setting up with reporters standing by.

Sally darted back to the bedroom and grabbed Donovan by the arm. "George," she said in alarm, "you have to get up."

Donovan rolled over and groaned, "What's wrong?"

"The media is camped out on our front lawn."

Donovan sat straight up and looked at her.

"What?"

"You heard me," she yelled, pulling him by the arm towards the closest window. Donovan looked out the window.

"Shit! What are they doing out there?" Donovan asked rhetorically.

Sally was busy flipping channels on the TV, trying to find some news-breaking story to explain the sudden interest in their front lawn.

"Nothing," she announced, after going through each local Atlanta station several times. "Maybe there's an explanation in the Sunday paper," she ventured, "but I'm not going out there to get it."

"Something tells me we won't have to wait too much longer to find out what's going," he interjected. "They aren't setting up all that equipment for nature shots."

No sooner did the words leave his mouth than the sound of a door bell resonated through the house. They just looked at each other, dumbfounded. "Maybe we could just ignore them," he said.

"Oh, yeah," Sally retorted. "That'll look real good. Both cars are parked in the driveway. They know we're here."

"Just keep calm," Donovan said, pulling on his pants and missing the right leg several times.

Sally just shook her head at him.

"Okay, Mr. Calm. This is your little press conference. I'm staying in here."

Donovan went to the door and opened it. Several microphones were shoved in his face as three reporters began talking to him simultaneously. Donovan blinked into the bright sunlight and put up one hand up to shield the glare. Stepping out onto the front stoop, he forced the reporters to move back from his door. One reporter finally took center stage.

"Doctor George Donovan?" the reporter questioned. Donovan confirmed his identity. "Are you aware of the allegations made against you by the Atlanta Journal Constitution?" Donovan just continued to blink into the camera, as if he were a deer stunned by headlights.

The story was being broadcast live and Sally sat in the bedroom watching Channel Five. "Say something," she said to the TV screen. Donovan finally found his voice and told the reporter that he had no idea what she was talking about, but that he would like for everyone to leave. They were all trespassing. Sally put her hand over her eyes and groaned. Donovan had never been good under pressure. She never had to worry about another woman because the man was transparent. A second reporter picked up where the first left off.

"Dr. Donovan, you have been identified as the doctor involved in the Dominex Pharmaceutical study, is that correct?"

"You know it is," Donovan answered defensively.

"Do you have any response to the charge that you helped sabotage the study to hide the real problems with the medication, Valipene?"

"You want a response?" Donovan yelled at the camera.

"Oh God," Sally groaned. "Somebody, please shoot him." She looked at the face staring at her from the TV. He was turning red.

"My response is that is a bold-faced lie, and someone better be looking for a good attorney."

"So, you deny the allegation that you gave the study volunteers sedatives, telling them it was a prescription vitamin?" a third reporter inquired.

Donovan took one step back and announced that he had nothing more to say without his own attorney and slammed the door in the cameraman's face. Sally watched as the reporter for Channel Five news continued the live update from their front step.

The reporter gave a recap of the story that had appeared in the Sunday paper. Sally continued to shake her head as the information unfolded, outlining every illegal move they and Dominex had made since the beginning of the study. "How did they find all this out?" she whispered, and turned to find Donovan standing behind her. "Did you catch the whole story?" she asked. He just nodded his head in confirmation. "We're in deep shit," Sally announced. Donovan did not respond. He was too busy envisioning his remaining years in prison.

David Manning happily toasted the air and downed the rest of his orange juice. He turned off the TV after watching Channel Five's live report from in front of the doctor's residence. The newspaper lay in front of him on the kitchen table. He would sit on this new information until the final test results were submitted. He would do nothing about the partially submitted data. In fact, he would send off a letter stating that the results submitted looked good so far. Lull them into a false sense of security. Then, whammo! After the final submission, he would hit them hard and demand the full names of every one of the volunteers.

"Random checks, my ass," he sneered. He would personally contact every name on that list. "You're going down, boys." David couldn't remember seeing a brighter sunnier day. "Let's go on a picnic," he yelled to his wife in next room.

Sam Reynolds unplugged his phone and re-read the article in the paper. His young and eager newsperson had no knowledge that the paper had continued to investigate the Terry

Sanders story. Sheila and company had appeared to no longer be on the prowl for blood. *Where did this come from?*

He stood, running a nervous hand through his hair.

His wife came into the living room and handed him a cup a coffee. He just looked up at her as she placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Sam, newspapers can make all the allegations they want. They still have to prove it." Sam reached up and patted her hand.

"I know," he sighed, "but perception is powerful."

"You'll find a way through this. You always do."

Sam sat quietly sipping on his cup of motivation and tried looking at the problem from every angle. There was no way that these two reporters could have any hard evidence. He could force their hand. Slap a big fat lawsuit on them for slander and make them squirm to produce proof. But what if they actually had some?

The most important thing in a legal battle is to know the answers to all the questions before they are asked. There could be no surprises. *What hard evidence could they possibly have?* Sam had to think this through completely before deciding what to do. He knew that Charles would be bouncing off the walls trying to get him on the phone. He just didn't have the energy to baby sit right now. He would come up with a game plan before calling him.

"They really have opened up a serious can of worms," Jerry said. Sheila lay beside him with the paper spread all over the top of the bed. He had just gotten up and retrieved the paper from outside her door. When he found the story on the front page, he had to wake her. "Dominex will bury them in so much legal bullshit, they won't know which end is up," he continued.

"I think they're prepared for that," Sheila said, yawning.

"I hope so," he agreed. "If not, you and I can start looking for jobs with Joe Blow Drugs, Inc. I know," he exclaimed, now on a roll. "On this next career move, let's cut out the middle man." Sheila just rolled her eyes at him. "No really," he insisted. "Do you have any idea how much drug dealers make? And it's all tax fee!"

Sheila grabbed a pillow, and tossed it at him.

"I'm glad you're enjoying this," she said, trying not to laugh. "They have opened fire on Dominex. These people are very resourceful and they will probably figure a way out of this. By the time the data is turned into the FDA, they will be as guarded as Fort Knox."

"All they had to do was make certain concessions on the label," Jerry said, shaking his head. "If they warned everyone up front that the medication was only intended for short term use they never would have had to manipulate the study in the first place. Why do you think they went to such lengths to avoid the obvious?"

"Greed," Sheila stated, simply. "Drug companies have never been satisfied with reasonable profits. Look at all the other sedatives that got past the FDA already. There are no specific warnings. You think they don't know what's been happening to all the people who have been taking that stuff for years?" Jerry just shrugged his ambivalence. "They know," she said, answering her own question. "The only difference now is that they have a different gate keeper at the FDA. All this hoopla will do nothing about them. People probably won't even make the connection between Valipene and the other sedatives with the same compound."

“Yeah,” he added, “not unless Barbara Walters spells out the name of each one for them.”

“And all this media play is local,” Sheila said. “We may think a lot of Atlanta, but we are still a dot on the map.”

“So, remind me again why we’re beating our heads against the Dominex wall.”

“It’s a start.”

Josh and Carol were sitting at the breakfast table finishing eggs and pouring over the article in the paper. “You should be proud of yourself,” Josh said. “You are largely responsible for this story going public.”

“I can’t believe they thought they could pass vitamins off as a miracle cure for sedative withdrawal,” Carol added. “There are a lot of very uninformed and scared people in the world. Most of them never question what a doctor tells them.”

“Well, nothing may come from this,” Josh predicted, “but maybe people will be a little more cautious now.”

“Speaking of caution,” Carol began, “how do you think this story will affect Dominex’s stock?”

Josh nodded his head at her in approval.

“You’re learning.”

Josh got up and went over to his computer, with Carol following at his heels.

“But it’s Sunday,” she reminded him.

“It certainly is,” he confirmed. “Welcome to the electronic age.” Josh pulled up the appropriate screen and keyed in an order. “They have begun to recover nicely from the last dive,” he said pointing to the screen. “They have a lot of room to do it again.” Josh clicked on the send order icon. “This will be processed the minute the exchange opens tomorrow.”

The newspaper was left abandoned on the kitchen table. Carol had been so engrossed in the article on page one that she missed the story on page four. A psychotic male had fired several shots from his bedroom window at a group of unsuspecting Jehovah’s Witnesses after they rang his doorbell. The shooting was labeled a hate crime, accusing the perpetrator of being a religious fanatic who had strongly opposed the presence of his visitors. All three of the victims were killed and the man was immediately arrested for first-degree murder. Carl Banner had finally decided to fight back.

It was Monday morning and Sam had no choice but to plug the phone back into the wall. As soon as it was reconnected, it began to ring. Sam just looked at it and began to laugh. He would not have been surprised if it had been ringing the entire time it was unplugged. His wife got it on the fourth ring.

“Sam, it’s Paul Pratt,” she yelled from the bedroom. Paul was just about the only person he was willing to talk to. Sam picked up the phone and greeted the attorney.

“Sam, I’ve been trying to get you on the phone since yesterday.”

“You and a whole lot of other people,” Sam sighed.

"Listen, we have no choice. We have to hit them hard, and we have to do it immediately."

Sam just held on to the receiver and listened. He had no intelligent input to offer.

"If we hesitate," Paul instructed, "even for one day, it will be an admission of guilt."

"What if they have evidence to back up the story?"

"I can't imagine what that would be. Drug screens are not valid unless they have been done through a chain of custody."

"Paul, don't use meaningless terms on me this early in the morning," Sam commanded.

"It's a drug screen process where they watch you pee and the lab monitors each step to assure that the substance they first received is the same substance they end with. No one would have done that," he concluded.

"Why not?"

"Because it's expensive and only necessary if you are documenting your case for court. No one would have been thinking about court back then."

"Good point," Sam conceded.

"Also," Paul continued, "there is no way they can link those brown envelopes to the company. Even if any of the volunteers still have the evidence, they won't be able to prove it came from us."

A smile slowly came to Sam's face.

"Damn," he exclaimed, "I should have called you yesterday. I might have actually slept last night."

"I guess I don't have to remind you that someone will have to take the fall for this," the attorney added.

"Yeah, I know," Sam sighed. "Too bad, though. He was a hell of a nice guy for helping us out the way he did."

"Everyone makes their own choices. The doctor knew all the risks involved when he agreed to see those patients."

"No other way around this?" Sam asked rhetorically.

"I can't think of one," Paul answered. "The testimony of those volunteers will count for something and it has to land on someone's shoulders."

"Make the arrangements," Sam said decisively.

"That's what you pay me the big bucks for," Paul said. "See you at the office."

Sam decided to call Charles at home and get the contact over with. No doubt the CEO would give him hell for not being available yesterday. Michelle Roman answered the phone and told him that Charles was already on his way to the office. Sam thanked her and hung up. She sounded very cheerful, he thought, dialing the cell phone number.

Charles answered on the first ring. "Where the hell have you been?" he demanded.

"Charles, I spoke to Paul Pratt already," Sam began, ignoring the verbal attack. "I think we're going to come through this without a scratch."

"I don't see how that's possible," Charles countered, "but I want everyone in my office at nine sharp."

"That would be everyone except Donovan," Sam interjected. "He doesn't know about this meeting, does he?"

"I doubt it," Charles said. "You're the first one I've talked to."

"Good," Sam said, letting out a long breath. "I'll take care of notifying everyone, Charles. See you there."

Charles Roman sat at the conference table with Sam, Jeff, Margie and Paul Pratt. The CEO looked as though he had not slept in a week. The attorney had the floor and was reiterating their position. "I've already filed the suit," he continued. "The newspaper will receive notification within the next seventy two hours."

"In the meantime," Sam interjected, "we have to make this place squeaky clean."

"Again?" Jeff asked. He also looked very sleep deprived.

"We shouldn't have to do more than a spot check," Sam said. "The last cleaning was pretty thorough."

"The main thing we have to look for," Paul interjected, "is any link between the doctor's activities and this company."

"Right," Sam continued. "Our position on this is that we sent the volunteers to Dr. Donovan for check-in purposes only. What the doctor chose to do with those patients after they reached his office was beyond our knowledge or control."

"So, the vitamin scam and the sick volunteers will all be attributed to what happened to them as a result of seeing this doctor?" Charles asked.

"That's the plan," Paul confirmed. The CEO began nodding his head as he processed the information. "I gotta admit it," Charles said. "This does sound pretty solid."

"So, what happens when we submit the final data to the FDA?" Jeff asked.

"We stick with the original Phase Two plan," Sam said.

"And once we drag the newspaper through this lawsuit," Paul added, "we will be free and clear of any scrutiny."

"We will also have our friend at the medical board release and expedite Carol Freeman's letter," Sam instructed. He noticed the sea of confused faces. "One of the volunteers wrote a letter of complaint about Donovan to the medical board which was intercepted upon its arrival." Everyone nodded their understanding.

"It would be advantageous to let that letter run its course now," Charles said, stating the obvious.

"After that newspaper blast, the board will be all over him," Paul predicted.

"We will have to re-route the last group of volunteers back to our facility," Sam concluded. "We can't allow them to continue seeing Donovan after what we just discovered. And, Margie," Sam added, "Paul will contact the volunteers that might be asked to provide depositions for this pending suit. They are receiving, shall we say, extra incentive."

"And be extra cautious when you begin contacting the rest of the volunteers," Paul interjected. "They will all be even more fired up after seeing that article in the paper, but we're only prepared to offer them small settlements after Supreme has passed FDA requirements."

"I want both of you working very closely on this," Charles said. "I'm sure you'll do a good job, Margie," he said with a winning smile, "but this is a very delicate process and I want Paul to oversee everything."

Margie gave him a thumb's up. Her new office was strategically placed right next to the attorney's. She already understood the message from the floor plan, but she was the new kid; and after the current escalation of events, Pratt's legal expertise was welcome.

"So, let's get on it," Sam concluded.

Margie went off to her new office and new position. She had never aspired to anything beyond phones and coffee retrieval. Strange how other people's crises had turned in to a golden

opportunity. She opened the door and walked in. The walls were bare and the room was empty except for a small desk, a chair, a file cabinet, and a phone. The furniture did not fit the room. It looked like secretary furniture had been removed from in front of someone's office and shoved into a room that was too big for the modest lay out. She didn't mind. This was such a big step up from where she had been.

Margie pushed the desk into the center of the room and placed the phone to one side. There was a short print-out sitting on the desk with a yellow note attached to it. It read, "Before you start disaster control, we'll need you to contact the remaining volunteers to alert them of the change in their final check in location." *I already feel one with this phone.*

She sat at the desk and laid the thick print-out she had been carrying on top of the one that had been left on her desk. Of the original five hundred volunteers, there were two hundred and forty three requiring disaster control contact. She was sure she had already spoken to many of them, but now she would be contacting them. The maximum figure she was authorized to offer any one person was ten thousand dollars and that was only after a lot of negotiating. Some of the volunteers would not be expecting any compensation at all, but of the ones who did, she was instructed to begin at twenty-five hundred dollars.

Margie shook her head at the absurdity of offering a man twenty-five hundred dollars who had developed agoraphobia and was now afraid to leave his house. She had to admit that over the past few weeks she had become very sympathetic to the volunteers. Many of them had described horrendous symptoms that had reduced them from strong, high-functioning individuals to weak invalids.

She picked up the phone and dialed the first number. In most cases, these people would be easy to reach. The majority of them were probably too sick to go anywhere. Margie listened through a series of rings before a groggy, weak voice answered the call. "I'm looking for Melissa Adams," she began. The woman verified her identity and Margie began the long process of search and rescue.

Carol entered the mental health center to report to work and found Buck Spears, along with several other members of upper management, waiting for her. The "big guns" had made the journey from their corporate office to begin the investigation into Carl Banner's homicide. It was standard procedure to scrutinize the chart of any Newberg Mental Health patient that had either committed suicide or murder. Among the investigation group were Doctors Abernathy and Morganstern.

Carol was ushered into a conference room, where she was now being subjected to a word-by-word dissection of the patient's chart. She had been blind-sided. She'd missed hearing about Carl's shooting expedition, and was caught completely off guard. "The notation here indicates that you failed to report the severity of Mr. Banner's condition to Dr. Morganstern." The statement was made by Spears.

Carol looked at him with daggers of hatred and resentment. The guy was truly a master of ass-covering and was acting as if this was the first time he had been made aware the situation. "I did report his condition," she answered, coldly.

Carol knew that this lynch mob was after a scapegoat. She had no problem making the determination as to whom that was going to be. She was at the bottom of the food chain.

"Your entry doesn't say anything here about homicidal ideation," another manager interjected.

"That's because I received the information from a second party, who only reported that Carl might have a gun. Carl's mother did not report homicidal statements, and it was the only report we had to work with."

"Nevertheless," the faceless manager continued, "there is no direct statement here about the patient's intent."

Carol couldn't believe the direct and purposeful framing tactics of this little meeting. She had almost gotten fired in the process of trying to alert upper management of Carl's untreated condition and Dr. Morganstern's incompetence. "I reported the gun," she said, feeling tired and beaten.

"Many people keep guns in their home," Morganstern interjected. "It doesn't mean they are homicidal."

Carol looked over at the pompous doctor.

"This particular home was housing a paranoid schizophrenic wearing a foil hat to shield alien thoughts and had nailed his bedroom door shut so that no one could attack him."

"I see no specific diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia," the medical director chimed in.

"He was never seen by a doctor," Carol stated wearily. "But that was my provisional diagnosis." Health care providers holding Masters Degrees can only make provisional diagnoses as part of the initial assessment. The diagnosis becomes official after it has been confirmed by a doctor. In this case, Carl never came back for a formal diagnosis. They only had Carol's assessment.

"Well, we can go around in circles all day," Spears concluded. "However, for the record, I view your handling of the patient's crisis call to have been questionable at best."

Carol wanted to tell each and every one of them that their handling of everything everyday was questionable at best, but she knew her words would be wasted and would only serve to impact her own character.

"This employee has already given us notice, is that correct?" This was stated by one of the faceless managers.

"Yes," Spears confirmed. "She won't be with us too much longer." They were now discussing her as if she wasn't in the room.

"Good," the manager agreed. "Then I think it is safe to say that Carol Freeman will not handle another crisis call for the duration of her employment."

"I think that goes without saying," Spears agreed. He sneered at Carol and added, "You may go now."

Carol stood and gave them a look that said, "You may all go to hell," and left the room. On the other side of the door, she could hear Spears saying, "How do we propose to clean up this mess?"

Donovan and Sally were pulling into the doctor's reserved parking space, still deep in conversation. The newspaper article and live broadcast from their front lawn had left them both shell-shocked. They agreed that they would stop seeing Dominex's patients. The liability attached with those people had been a train wreck from the beginning.

"I would be surprised if any of them continue to come in after seeing that article," Sally said.

"In any case," Donovan added, "I'll be referring them to another doctor."

"Don't you think that might make matters worse?" Sally countered. "Another doctor will just reinforce the fact that we had kept them on sedatives without their consent."

"First they have to prove it," Donovan said, getting furious all over again. "All this talk about unidentified pills in brown envelopes is a bunch of horseshit. Do you know of any drug addicts that don't lie?"

"George, calm down," Sally coaxed. "It isn't the one lie. It's the collaborative lie."

"And I'm saying that since those people had no hope of nailing a huge drug company, they organized together to dump this on me."

Those would be very impressive organization skills, she thought. She didn't think it would be a good idea to point that out to Donovan. He was already a wreck. "Okay," she offered instead, "I agree with the burden of proof theory. The likelihood that anyone has any of the medication left is slim. It's a long stretch that anyone can prove what was in those envelopes, much less who put it in there."

Donovan sat staring at the steering wheel. After a few moments, he said, "I should have listened to you. You haven't once said, 'I told you so.'"

"Come on," Sally said, placing a comforting hand on his. "We can't sit in the car all day."

Wendy Cox hung up the phone, confirming what she already knew. She turned to the group assembled in her office. "I just got the unofficial word that Dominex's attorney filed a lawsuit first thing this morning. The group groaned in unison. "What'd you think?" Cox asked. "Did you think they would just attribute the story to a slow news day? I told you on Saturday to expect this."

"I said the same thing," the editor announced. "But we were all so eager to get this story out." Everyone turned to Henry Summers. He had been the editor for the paper for over twenty years. He had been accused in the past of being homeless, because he never left the building. Henry *was* the Atlanta Journal Constitution and took his paper and his job very seriously. "What are the chances that we can beat this lawsuit?"

Wendy Cox did not hesitate in her response. "I told you guys on Saturday that if we presented this story subjectively, we'd be okay. We were supposed to report what we had been told without adding any additional opinions. I don't think we succeeded in doing that."

"We had to draw some conclusion from all that information," Jason said defensively.

"And our conclusions were blatantly obvious," Sandra added.

"They might be," Wendy agreed, "but now you have to prove it."

Everyone sat pondering the decision they had made. "We'll need to get your sources to come in and sign affidavits," Wendy interjected. "After that, we wait."

"Wait for what?" Henry asked.

"We haven't even been formally served yet," the attorney explained. "The only reason we even know about the suit is because I knew who to contact."

"What happens after they notify us?" Jason inquired.

"Then I get with Dominex's attorney and find out what they want. If they'll be happy with a simple re-write of the accusations, I will suggest that we comply."

"No way," Jason objected.

"Then we begin getting depositions from all sides," Wendy continued. "And based on the outcome of those statements, we decide if they really have a case."

"But we have identical stories from these people," Sandra argued. "How can you even debate whether or not they have a case?"

"Because the burden of proof is on us." We have to be able to prove in court that Dominex collaborated with the doctor and knew what the doctor was doing."

"This Donovan guy had no motive to scam those patients," Jason argued. "The only one who stood to benefit from all that was the drug company."

"Tell it to the judge," Wendy said. "You certainly don't have to convince me. But let's take this one step at a time, shall we?"

Everyone nodded. No one was looking forward to a battle in court, but no one was ready to back down either.

Paul Pratt was given the difficult task of monetary persuasion. He had a short list of people who had the power to discredit the company and the research study. The names had been furnished, compliments of their young and eager newsperson. They hadn't been warned of the pending story, but they now knew who all the sources were. The first name on his list was Steve Warner. He was going to be the toughest nut to crack because of his sister's suicide. Most grieving people do not consider money as compensation until much later, after the shock has worn off.

Paul did not want to use phone contact as a substitute for the real thing. His strategy was to make individual house calls. Paul was driving down a residential road, looking for Steve Warner's house number. A half-mile down the road he found it and pulled into the driveway behind two other vehicles. *Someone should be home.* He made his way to the front door and rang the bell. After several minutes, a woman came to the door. Paul introduced himself and asked to see Mr. Warner. She eyed him skeptically, but agreed to let him in.

Paul was led into a small den and told to wait. The house was modest in size and décor. *That always works to one's advantage,* Paul thought, *when attempting to find a financial solution.* He was still working on his presentation when Steve Warner entered the room. He was wearing a threadbare tee shirt and equally worn out blue jeans. One slipper had a hole in front, exposing a toe.

"You have two minutes," Steve announced, sitting opposite the attorney. Paul had been prepared for the hostility.

"I appreciate that," he began, "but I think if you hear me through you might see things a little differently."

"I doubt that, but go ahead. I'm listening."

Paul began his performance. "First, I want to tell you how sorry we are about your sister." Steve folded his arms in front of his chest and stared at the attorney to proceed. "Second, I want to explain how the research study procedure got derailed."

"Derailed?" Steve mimicked sarcastically.

"I know what you must be thinking," Paul continued with a winning smile, "but the newspaper missed an important part of this story."

"Really?" Steve said.

"We had no idea what the effect would be when we began this study," the attorney continued. "No one had ever been required to conduct this sort of testing before. We were appalled when we discovered how sick some of them had gotten after stopping the medication. Dr. Donovan had a good reputation and we felt confident sending our volunteers to him."

"He's a butcher," Steve chimed in.

"Well, we know that now," Paul conceded. "We didn't know that at the time your sister went to see him." The man looked at the attorney through squinty skepticism. *At least he was no longer openly hostile*, Paul thought, and moved on with confidence. "Anyway, the first time we became aware of what was really going on was when the article came out in the Sunday paper."

"Oh, come on," Steve interjected. "You can't tell me that people weren't calling your company and complaining about the lack of treatment they were getting."

Paul had been expecting this objection and had been prepared for it.

"Sure, we knew people were having a hard time," he said, "but the primary calls we received were from the volunteers that had refused any treatment at all. We had no idea that the doctor had put your sister back on the medication and then took her off of it again."

"And what about that?" Steve said. "Why would he go to such lengths to get her back on that poison, only to take it away from her again?"

Paul nodded his agreement with the fact that the doctor's actions made no sense.

"We're pretty sure that one of the volunteers wrote a letter to the state medical board and that the doctor had been informed of a pending investigation."

"And when did you find that out?"

"We have been very busy since that article appeared in the paper," the attorney explained. "We admit that the investigation we have done in the past twenty-four hours should have been done months ago, but we honestly believed that everything was being done to our specifications."

"That won't bring Clair back," Steve said sadly. The hostility had disappeared and a sad, grieving brother was all that was left.

"We know that and we are sorry for your family's loss," Paul said, winding up for the climax. "We are therefore prepared to offer you and your family some compensation for your pain and suffering."

Steve looked at the attorney once again with skepticism.

"And how much do you think Clair was worth?"

"Mr. Warner, we don't think that such a price exists," Paul said soothingly. "But it is all we have to offer." The man thought about it for a moment, and said, "One-hundred thousand." Paul nodded at the man. He had been prepared to offer at least that much. He was ready to close.

"We would be willing to agree to that amount," he said, "but there are a few conditions first. Dominex is in the red right now, but after the new medication is made available we will be able to meet your request."

"When will that be?"

"If there are no more problems or delays with the research study, we're looking at about four weeks."

Paul let that statement slowly sink in. What he had just told the man was that if he refrained from coming forward in the newspaper suit, he stood to make one hundred thousand dollars.

"Can I think about it for a few hours?"

"Take the rest of the day," Paul said with a smile and stood to shake the man's hand.

"I guess we don't always know the whole story even when we think we do," Steve said contritely.

"I would have thought the exact same thing if I had been in your position," Paul added, and patted the man on the shoulder. "I'll contact you in the morning. If you decide to accept our compensation, I'll have my assistant come by with some papers for you to sign."

"Thanks," Steve said, shaking the attorney's hand again. "I'll walk you to the door."

After pulling out of the driveway and down the street, Paul pulled out his cell phone and dialed. "Sam," he announced. "Steve Warner's off the witness list."

"You're on a roll. Stay in touch."

"Later," the attorney said and ended the call.

The newspaper informant had received Carol Freeman's name from Carol herself, although she already had access to that information through the two reporters. They had both been so nice and so eager to share what they were working on that she had been right in the middle of the story. That is, until Jason Sample finally figured out what she was doing. She had supplied Dominex with both Carol's and Brian's names. She didn't know specifically about Steve Warner's connection until after the story had been printed. At that point everyone in the newsroom knew about the people who had made the story credible. How had Jason and Sandra figured out her true motive so quickly? One minute she had been in their pocket; the next, out in the street.

Now she was being "let go." Her compensation for her presence there would not cover her beyond this week. *Too bad.* As long as she had been useful to Dominex, she had been paid well and she hadn't even been required to remove her clothes. But ever since the newspaper article, Dominex's confidence in her ability to keep them informed had died. They had been outwardly angry and informed her that her services were no longer required. In fact, based on her recent track record, they informed her that they would not be contacting her for her services again.

The informant wrote her letter of resignation, stating that she was deeply disappointed in her untimely departure, but that she had a sick family member requiring her immediate attention and long term care. She would continue to look for another way back into Dominex's world. If she could find any more useful information maybe they would give her another chance.

Paul Pratt was feeling very pleased with himself after meeting with Steve Warner. He was happily searching for Brian's house and ready for a repeat performance. The scenery was

quickly changing from a residential area into a commercial jungle. He picked the paper up off his seat and re-read the street number. *Okay, genius, time to turn around.* Paul slowed down so that he could read the street numbers. Brian Carter's house was at least a mile back. He was so busy congratulating himself, he had driven right passed it the first time.

Pam answered the door. When Paul identified who he was, she invited him in. "Brian," she yelled out, causing Paul to jump. "You have company. Excuse me one minute," she said to Paul. "I'll get him." Paul looked around the expansive living room, noting the expensive décor. He already knew that Brian had taken a leave of absence from the paper, compliments of Ann Boniture's snooping. *If they want to maintain this lifestyle, they'll need some kind of backup plan.*

Brian came into the room looking as though his wife had dragged him out of bed. Pam was on his heels. He ran his hand through his hair, attempting some last minute grooming. "I'm Brian," he announced. "How can I help you?"

"Why don't we all sit down," Paul began. Pam took the seat next to her husband. "I've been sent by Dominex Pharmaceuticals to explain our position and to offer you some compensation for your pain and suffering."

"Sort of at the eleventh hour, isn't it?"

"That's true," the attorney agreed, "but the fact is that we didn't really know the extent of the damage until the paper printed that article yesterday." Brian shook his head and began to smile. Paul ignored the man's reaction and continued to explain the company's position in the same way he had done with Steve Warner. When he finished, he looked to Brian for a response.

Brian was still shaking his head and said, "So, this timely visit is because you just found out about the doctor's actions?"

"That's right," Paul confirmed.

Brian nodded.

"And it has nothing to do with the fact that I was instrumental in getting that story printed?"

"Were you?" the attorney asked in surprise.

Brian just laughed at him.

"Brian!" Pam exclaimed, "You're being rude to our guest. Let's hear what he has to say." Turning to Paul, she said, "You said something about compensation."

"That's correct," Paul said, trying to regain his footage. "After our company learned of your need to take a leave of absence, we felt you were entitled to some compensation. So, I'm prepared to offer you one hundred thousand dollars."

"That's great," Pam said.

Brian held up his hand, indicating that she postpone her celebration.

"And how would that work exactly?"

"We would have you sign a settlement agreement and the funds would be available after Supreme is approved by the FDA."

"I see," Brian said. "So, by agreeing to accept this compensation, I am also agreeing to keep quiet."

"Brian," Pam gasped. "They're offering us one hundred thousand dollars, I think they have a right to expect something in return."

"This isn't a convenient little trade-off," Brian said. "They're buying my silence."

"And I think that people who can't hold down a job should be willing to swallow a little humble pie," she yelled back.

Paul didn't anticipate the yelling match. The house call had turned into a family feud. "I know that this a lot to consider," the attorney interjected. "You should both take some time to think about our proposal."

"I don't need to think about it," Brian countered. "My integrity is worth more than one hundred thousand dollars."

"We *will* think about it," Pam stated. "How can we get in touch with you?"

"I'll contact you in the morning," Paul said, getting to his feet. "Thanks for seeing me," he added humbly and let himself out the door.

Heading for his car he could still hear Pam's shrill voice. "You're integrity is worth more than one hundred thousand dollars? That's really funny," Paul got to his car and closed the door. The sound of the yelling stopped abruptly. *Thank God for solid steel.*

Brian was going to be trouble. Paul dialed the office number and waited, but there was no answer. Sam was "in between secretaries," and there was no one to grab his personal line when he was away from his desk. *Bad news can wait.*

He considered his next visit very carefully. They already knew a little bit about Carol Freeman. She had written a letter to the Georgia Medical Board, which was now making a beeline for the investigation committee. She had contacted Jerry Owens with very specific and damaging information. She was an addictions counselor and apparently had access to a lab for drug screening purposes. Carol Freeman was not the typically uninformed. Had they known about her background, they wouldn't have accepted her into the study. Too bad they had not thought to include occupation as a one of the screening tools. Paul had deliberately saved her for his last visit of the day.

Carol was standing by Josh at the computer. She usually wasn't home by this time, but she had been skipping out after her last appointment. And after today's Tri-County Mental Health lynching she was determined to tend to her patients, but would refuse to jump in and help with any other tasks. It wasn't so much her anger and resentment. It was a question of liability. The less she touched on her way out the door, the less they could pin on her.

The market had already closed for the day and Dominex Pharmaceuticals had taken a dramatic dive. Josh punched a few numbers and held up the calculator for Carol to see. "Is this right?" she asked incredulously. Josh just nodded. "Thirty-three thousand, six hundred and fifty two dollars?" she exclaimed.

"And thirty-two cents," he added.

"Oh my God," Carol shouted. "That's a current total of..." she paused to add the numbers in her head, but Josh was way ahead of her.

"Sixty-two thousand, one hundred and fourteen dollars, and forty nine cents," he announced. She just looked at him, unable to find the words to convey her excitement. "And it doesn't end here," he continued. "That's only today's total. We're still in this."

"Shouldn't we quit while we're ahead?"

Josh just patted her on the top of the head. "You be the counselor... I mean retired counselor, and I'll be the genius trader." Carol just looked at him with a worried face. "Look" he said, pointing to the screen. "I already have an automatic stop loss in place."

"You have a what?"

"I put in an order to automatically take us out of the trade if the value starts going back up."

"Oh, well in that case, I guess it's okay."

"It's totally okay. We should go out and celebrate."

Carol, who was normally wiped out by this time every day, suddenly found her second wind. "I'm game," she agreed. The last thing she expected to do after a day like this was celebrate. But the money far outweighed the scapegoat prize they had awarded her at work. The happy couple went out the door and got into the car. Heading down the road they passed a slow moving vehicle. The man was obviously lost.

Paul found Carol Freeman's house and went to knock on the door. There was no answer. Without realizing it, he had just passed her coming down the road. Just as well, he thought. After the last encounter with Brian Carter and his wife, he needed to catch his breath. Carol Freeman was going to be adamant about her position. They were aware that she had given notice at her job and that a lot of her reason for leaving was due to her illness, but they also knew that she had been unhappy throughout her employment. For a place that was supposed to be built on confidentiality, the mental health center had been a loose cannon of information. One alleged new patient asking the right questions was able to tap into quite a lot of apparently meaningless information.

So, a big sum of money might not be so easily disregarded. He still had hopes that Brian Carter would come to the same conclusion. Paul decided to call it a day. He would tackle Carol Freeman tomorrow.

Chapter 22

Michelle Roman entered the office of Randall and Moore, Attorneys at Law. She had arrived a few minutes early for her four-thirty appointment. She was ready for her fifteen-year marriage to Charles Roman Jr. to become a faded memory and move on with her life. A friend had told her that Randall was the best. She doubted that Charles would contest the divorce, but she wanted to be prepared. After her first taste of hope yesterday, she had decided to move forward, regardless of Dominex's fate.

The secretary glanced up as she walked in. Michelle introduced herself, and informed the woman that she was early for her appointment. "Just have a seat," the woman stated. "Mr. Randall will be with you in a moment." Michelle found a seat and began glancing through the magazines on the coffee table. She couldn't help but notice that there was a lot of focus on "Today's Woman" and "Single Parent" type publications. *Makes sense.*

The single parent problem was a non-issue. She and Charles had never had any children. Charles was never home; and even when he was, he never seemed to have the desire to do anything that would result in a pregnancy. His lack of interest in her had been the source of a lot of sleepless nights in the early years. Michelle was not drop-dead gorgeous by any means, but she was attractive in her own right. At five foot four, and one hundred and twenty-five pounds, she had always maintained her trim waistline. She had recently cut her long, strawberry blonde hair, which had run in corkscrew curls down her back, to a more mature shoulder length. She allowed it to assume a wild and untamed appearance that complemented her young face and crystal-blue eyes. Charles had not noticed the drastic change until he overheard someone else complimenting her on the new look.

Michelle had long since given up any need or concern for his approval. Even still, with each passing day of apathy she had grown to hate and resent him. She didn't need any of these magazines to tell her what she already knew. A person who robs you of your right to be significant is not a husband; he is excess baggage. She had long since learned the art of self-validation. Now she was ready for the liberties that Charles had already taken all through their marriage.

"Mrs. Roman," a voice called out. She looked up to see a strikingly handsome man. She stood and met him in the doorway. The man was in his forties, with piercing brown eyes that seemed to look right through her. "I'm Mark Randall," he said, reaching out his hand. Michelle took it and introduced herself unnecessarily. She looked down to notice that he had a gold band on his left ring finger. Her friend had given her the referral, with one comment. She could still hear the words, "You will begin to notice how many wonderful guys there are and that they are all married."

She didn't care. She knew this was the right path. Michelle followed the dangerously good-looking, married attorney into his office. "So, tell me how I can help you today?" he began, giving her a million dollar smile.

"Well, as I mentioned on the phone," she began, "I want to file for divorce."

She couldn't help but notice how the attorney was staring at her. *Men. They are all scum.* Still, she found herself strangely drawn to him. "I haven't told my husband," she continued, trying to stay focused. "He will be informed when the papers are served."

"Oh, ouch," Mark said, smiling at her once again.

"Don't feel too sorry for him," she responded, warming up to the encounter. "Without the formality of a divorce it would take him a month to notice I was gone. He's too busy with his extracurricular activities."

"The man's an idiot," he confirmed. Michelle decided that she liked Mark Randall, whether or not he stared at her, and whether or not he was married.

"So, what do I do?" she said, returning his smile.

The attorney pulled out a legal size pad and said, "You just answer a few questions and I do the rest."

Michelle gave him all the pertinent information about herself and Charles, emphasizing that she wanted nothing in the settlement except the house and the clothes on her back. The attorney gave her an occasional nod as he continued to take it all down until she mentioned her husband's line of work. Mark stopped writing and looked at her. "Your husband is the CEO of Dominex Pharmaceuticals"

"That's right," she laughed, "but don't hold that against me. I have nothing to do with that company."

"But I thought you said you weren't asking for anything but the house and your personal possessions."

"Right again."

"Michelle," he said thoughtfully, "you might want to rethink this."

"If I ask for any part of his precious company, he'll fight this," she warned.

"Your husband has had numerous affairs, is that right?" the attorney asked, jotting something down on the pad.

"Numerous affairs would be an understatement."

"Do we have any proof?"

"You mean besides the credit card bills listing hotel charges ten miles from our house and friends going out of their way to keep me updated on his activities?"

"That's a good start."

"So, the occasional phone call from one of his girlfriends would be a good addition?"

"He had women calling him at the house?"

"No, he had women calling me at the house," she continued, "and then they would get upset when I confirmed that he was married."

The attorney continued writing and looked up at Michelle. "Why don't you leave the gory details to me," he concluded. "I'll get you that divorce, but I'm guessing that you'd be okay with an extra few million dollars to start out with." Michelle thought about it for a moment. She had never considered a scenario that included one extra penny beyond her acquired savings.

"Okay," she said finally. "Why not?"

"Then I'll be in touch," Mark said, extending his hand once again. "He'll be served with divorce papers tomorrow. I'll have the process server present them at his office."

"That'll be a nice touch," she said, accepting his hand. "Thanks."

"My pleasure," he said, holding her hand a moment too long before releasing it.

Michelle's head was swimming on the way home. She felt certain her friend had set her up. Someone without a ring on his finger might've been a better choice. She was going to have to contact the woman and give her hell. Aside from the strange flirtation, she felt good about the meeting. Her freedom from that repulsive little toad of man was in sight.

It had only been two days since the article had hit the paper and Dr. George Donovan was already in a deep hole. It was an early Tuesday morning, and Sally was home worshipping the porcelain god. The added stress of the past two days had not helped to improve her condition.

He read the letter from the Georgia State Medical Board for the third time. It was basically informing him that he was currently being investigated as a result of a patient's complaint against him. He was being required to submit a copy of Brian Carter's file and to be prepared to submit other files if needed. He knew full well that this investigation had nothing to do with one patient. The newspaper article had opened up the floodgates of hell. There was no tangible proof, only people's perception and the validity of their word.

Donovan didn't even remember who Brian Carter was. He got up to retrieve the file and brought it back to his desk. Carter had been in to see him only once. He had been given Suprane under the guise of "the vitamin" scam and had not returned. His revised chart stated that he had been given the option to resume or withdraw off the sedative and chose to terminate the drug. The chart documented one follow-up contact by his staff and stated that the patient had refused further treatment.

Brian Carter's version of the story would be very different from his. This in turn would open up a whole new investigation. What had he been thinking when he'd agreed to the stupid idea of treating addicts with vitamins? He had no choice now but to comply with the Medical Board's request. They usually leaned in favor of the doctor, but in this case he was pushing his luck. It was still too early for his staff's arrival. Donovan carried the file to his receptionist's desk and left her a note instructing her to have a copy of it ready for the courier. He couldn't revise the chart any further. It would have to go as is.

There were only a little over three weeks left before Dominex could turn in their research study results. The data had been prepared months in advance, but the final product could not be released until the appropriate amount of time had passed. Charles Roman sat at his desk reading the letter he received from David Manning at the FDA, confirming the good standing of the interim data. *We're home free.* He hadn't felt this good in weeks.

Charles walked out of his office and down the hall to find Sheila. He had been under a lot of stress lately and he was ready for a little tension breaker. He found her in her office giving some final instructions to an employee. The CEO stood at the doorway propping himself against the wall. The employee spotted him first and quickly greeted him. Sheila cursed under her breath.

"Just wanted to check on some of my favorite staff people," he said charmingly.

"Oh, Mr. Roman, thanks," the employee stuttered. Sheila did not respond to the empty compliment.

"I guess were done here," she said finally. She had wanted to retain the poor girl as a bodyguard, but she couldn't come up with a good reason. The girl hurried out the door.

"Bye, Mr. Roman," she giggled, as she trotted past him.

"Bye, bye," he said, closing the door.

"So, what can I do for you?" Sheila asked with no enthusiasm.

"Charlie," he stated. "You used to call me Charlie, remember?"

Sheila just gave him a sick smile.

"Yeah, seems like a long time ago."

Charles closed the distance between them and was now inches from her.

"I think about you all the time," he whispered.

Sheila could feel her breakfast trying to escape and backed away a few feet.

"Listen, I have been meaning to talk to you."

"Great," he said, "but I was thinking about more than conversation."

Sheila moved around to the left, putting her desk between the two of them before continuing. "The thing is," she began awkwardly, "is that I'm involved with someone else now."

Charles just looked at her questioningly.

"So?" he asked finally. "I'm not proposing to you. I'm just asking for your companionship."

"That's a nice metaphor," Sheila said, feeling herself getting angry. "Do you ever think about your wife?"

"She doesn't seem to mind."

"You can't be serious," Sheila stated. "Unless she's in a coma, she minds."

"So, what are you saying?" Charles asked innocently.

Sheila let out a long exasperated flow of air.

"I'm saying that I'm involved with someone. I'm saying that it means something to me and I'm saying that when you care about someone you don't go around screwing other people." Sheila was now livid. She had spent her whole life using whatever means she had to in order to get whatever she wanted, and for the first time she could see how that lifestyle had impacted others. Charles just continued to stare at her as if she were speaking in Chinese. "Charles," she said more calmly. "Go home to your wife. I saw the picture of her in your office. She's beautiful and she must really love you if she's put up with you all these years."

"I guess she does," he admitted.

"She'd have to," Sheila continued, "and bring her some flowers."

Charles thought about courting his wife for a change. It wasn't a half bad idea.

"Can I get a goodbye kiss?"

"How about a goodbye hug instead," she countered.

"I'll take what I can get," he said, and moved around the desk to her. The hug was one of those sleazy hugs that men give women when the woman is small enough for the man to wrap his arms all the way around and still reach breasts. Sheila put up with the short molestation, knowing it would be the last time he could touch her.

"Be good, Charlie," she said backing away from the embrace.

"Okay. If I have to."

"You have to!"

Charles left the office of the woman he had been lusting after for months. Maybe he should start paying more attention to his wife. The truth was that he was getting worn out from the chase. It required more energy than he had these days. He headed back down the hall and was intercepted by a man he did not recognize.

"Are you Charles Roman?" the man inquired.

Charles nodded.

"Consider yourself served," the man said, handing him a large envelope.

Sheila felt more connected with Jerry than ever before. Her own revulsion at being touched by anyone else had surprised her. She knew she had fallen for the man, but she hadn't realized how hard until Charles tried to hit on her again. She would never again be able to use her physical appearance to get what she wanted. She had experienced something deeper. She could never go back.

Sheila went down the hall to Jerry's office and closed the door. "Hey," he said cheerfully, "what's up?"

"This," she said, moving to him and kissing him thoroughly.

"Wow," he said, after a few moments. "What'd I do to deserve that?"

"I love you," she said running her hand through his hair, "and I just wanted to tell you that."

Jerry looked at Sheila. All the silliness and clowning around was replaced with admiration.

"I love you, too," he said solemnly and kissed her again.

Sheila would tell Jerry about the encounter she had with Charles that afternoon. Just not right now. She absorbed the warmth and closeness. It was her rebirth.

Michelle Roman hung up the phone with her attorney. He'd called to confirm and forewarn her that the papers had been served. "What do I do now?" she asked him nervously.

"Don't answer any questions," he instructed. "If your husband insists on asking you about any details, tell him to contact me."

"This should be interesting."

"Don't worry, you'll be fine," he assured. "When this is all behind you, we'll go out and celebrate." Michelle was speechless. "I'll call you tomorrow," he concluded.

"Bye," she said, and hung up. Her two eyebrows had merged together in complete confusion. "This is nuts," she said, and picked up the phone to contact her friend. Peggy Anderson had been her best friend and confidant since high school. She'd already been through her own divorce and was now coaching Michelle on hers.

When Peggy answered the phone, Michelle jumped to the heart of the call. "Do I have moron tattooed on my forehead?"

"No, what's wrong?"

Michelle told her about the meeting with attorney Mark Randall the previous day and about all the flirtatious behavior.

"Michelle," her friend began, "I'm not sure that a man flirting with you constitutes a major drop in your I.Q."

"He was also wearing a wedding ring."

"Oh." Peggy responded.

"Oh? Sorry, you're going to have to do a lot better than that."

"Oh, shit?" Peggy added, questioningly.

"Yeah, that's much better," Michelle laughed. "So, what do I do?"

"Right now you do nothing."

"Are you implying that I do something about him later?" she asked in alarm.

"Well, not exactly," her friend countered. "I don't know what I'm saying."

"Thanks," Michelle said. "You've been helpful."

"Sorry," her friend offered. "Maybe he's just like this with everyone."

Michelle just sighed into the phone. "It's just that it's been such a long time since a man has noticed me."

"I know sweetie," her friend said. "That's because it's the first time you have allowed yourself to be noticed. It's also the first day in a long life of encounters. Wait and see how this plays out."

"Guess I'll have to," Michelle conceded.

"Wanna stay at my house tonight?"

"No, thanks," Michelle said. "I'm going to wait for His Majesty, face the issue, and then the man can go stay with one of his girlfriends."

"Sounds like a good plan to me," her friend said, "but if that plan goes south..."

"I know, thanks."

Michelle hung up the phone and busied herself by dusting areas of the house that had no dust. She was scrubbing a clean pot when Charles walked through the front door. *Its show time*. Charles wasted no time. He walked to where his wife was standing and held the crumpled papers up in front of her face. "What the hell is this?" he asked angrily.

Michelle looked at him somberly and said, "Those are the papers informing you of my decision to divorce you."

Charles did not relax his death grip on the papers and began shaking them in front of her nose.

"If you think you can just decide this on your own you're nuts."

Michelle wanted to hit him with the pot she was holding, and decided to put it down and leave the room instead.

Charles followed her into the living room. "This is not going to happen," he announced, slamming the papers down on an end table.

Michelle turned and looked at him. He was shaking and his face was an alarming shade of red.

"Charles," she said calmly. "It's over and, quite frankly, I don't understand why you're so upset about it."

"Why would you say that?" he countered.

Michelle looked at him in amazement and decided to cut to the chase.

"Because you don't love me and I doubt you ever did."

The words were out and she waited for him to disagree with her. Instead, there was silence. His lack of a denial hit her harder than she thought it would. Michelle waited for several painful minutes, but no argument to the contrary was offered. "You bastard," she heard herself say. "You can't even put out a good lie to defend your position. Why the hell would you want to stay chained to someone you don't even love?"

"I never said I didn't love you," Charles said weakly.

"Ha," she spat back at him. "You can't say that you do. Isn't that right?"

"You have to give me some time to think about this," he interjected.

"You've had fifteen years," she yelled. "If you don't know how you feel by now, then tell me, when will the magic moment arrive? Maybe by our fiftieth wedding anniversary you'll have this difficult issue worked out in your head."

"Michelle," Charles said, "I do love you."

"Bullshit," she yelled back. "Your behavior is the only thing I need to see. And if you had loved me you wouldn't have had all those affairs." Charles began to shake his head and Michelle cut him off before he could speak. "Don't," she stated. "Do not insult me with a denial. Those women called me on the phone. My friends saw you with a different one every other month and our credit card bills are itemized."

Charles was wide-eyed and speechless.

"You're such an asshole," she continued, "You never stopped to think about who paid those bills."

"Oh shit," Charles whispered.

"Yeah, oh shit. And, you aren't just an asshole, Charles," she continued, "you're a stupid asshole if you are just now realizing how blatantly obvious your affairs were."

"I never meant to hurt you," he offered.

"Save it. You went after anything in a skirt and ignored me since the day I married you."

"So, how can I make this up to you?" he asked lamely.

"You can make it up to me by packing yourself up and moving out tonight."

Charles went to the sofa and sat down, making himself comfortable.

"I'm not going anywhere," he laughed. "You want the divorce, you get out."

Michelle just looked at the man she had once loved. She never thought she could hate a human being as much as she hated this man right now.

"Fine Charles," she countered. "If that's how you want to play this, we can go at it. But trust me on this, you're in for one hell of a fight."

"I'm the CEO of a major pharmaceutical company," he announced. "You don't know who you're dealing with." Michelle couldn't help herself and started to laugh uncontrollably. Maybe it was a needed tension release. After fifteen years of torment, she was certainly entitled to it.

"Charles," she said, after catching her breath, "I've seen the results of your managerial skills. Do me a big favor, and stay on the opposing side."

And with that, Michelle Roman went off to find a suitcase and a happier existence.

The CEO of Dominex Pharmaceuticals sunk into the couch. His company was in trouble and in debt up to its eyeballs. They were making arrangements to pay people thousands of dollars to stay quiet during the last stages of the research study, and now this! *That bitch, she couldn't have picked a worse time.* He knew his active lifestyle had been flagrant and obvious. He really didn't have a good reason for his past behavior. He had always thought that money plus power equaled entitlement. He still did.

Now he was facing another potential drain on his financial security. He knew how attorneys operated, and if his wife had found herself a good one, he was going to have a field day with Charles's rampant love life. *That bitch.* Charles Roman went to the bar to fix himself a stiff drink.

Carol was ready to go home for the day. She only had seventy-two hours left before her last day on Friday and she was tempted to just blow it off. Her withdrawal was unrelenting. It had been almost four months since she'd stopped taking the drug and she was still weak and

constantly dizzy. The warm weather had made it even worse. The air conditioning in the dilapidated building hadn't worked right since the 1960's. In past summers, she had bitched and complained along with the rest of the staff. But the only real problem she'd ever had with it was the excessive sweating. Now, the lack of AC was intensifying every symptom. She'd even had to escape to her car occasionally and run the air conditioner full force to keep from throwing up. This, combined with the sixty thousand plus dollars they had made on the Dominex stock, had left her ready to bolt out the door. The patients were the only motivation keeping her there. They all knew that Friday was her last day and she didn't want to abandon them.

She looked up at the clock. One more hour and she could escape. Carol logged into her computer and went in to access the Internet. She wasn't supposed to play on the computer during work hours, but she'd been drawn to a support group she had found while researching sedative withdrawal. There were currently thousands of people from all over the world communicating on this one yahoo website. Each one of them was in a different stage of the withdrawal process. These were the lucky ones. They'd found the heartbeat of sedative awareness and most of them had been able to avoid making the ultimate mistake. Stopping this drug abruptly was the ticket to withdrawal hell.

This group had made an art of the tapering process. They had the power of each other's knowledge and support every step of the way. Carol wished she had found this group before the desperate need to search for answers had led her to them inadvertently. But even with all the information and support on the Internet, there were many of them in Carol's position. People who had innocently walked into an addiction that now had a choke-hold on their souls were frantically writing messages to each other. They called themselves "accidental addicts."

The messaging had a regular pattern to it. People would describe their horrible symptoms and beg for confirmation that the illness was normal sedative withdrawal. Numerous people would respond, telling the writer that it was. Then the writer would return, begging for a time frame. "How long will this last?" the writer would plead, unrelentingly. Carol wondered the same thing. The whole experience would be so much easier to live with if she knew that in X amount of time she would feel normal again.

She was trapped in an unknown world with thousands of strangers. All of them crying out for answers. Carol began reading one of the postings. It was entitled, "Please Help."

I have been off the medication for four months and I'm not getting any better. Could this be something else and not withdrawal at all? I feel like I'm dying. Should I see a specialist? My family doctor said this is all in my head and that sedative withdrawal doesn't last this long. I'm really scared - someone please help!

Carol was about to respond when her phone rang. She groaned as she dragged herself from the message board to answer it. "You have a call on line three," the receptionist announced. Carol reluctantly retrieved the call.

"This is Carol Freeman."

"Carol, it's Brian. Have you had a visit from the grim reaper yet?"

"I'm waiting for the punch line," she laughed.

"The attorney for Dominex," Brian clarified.

The smile left her face as she answered, "No, why?"

"Because they are on a cleaning rampage," he continued. "The guy came to see me yesterday. Offered me one hundred thousand dollars to stay out of any further investigations."

"No shit! These people have no conscience."

"Well, it would have been a simple process. They would have tried to bribe me and I would have sent them away," he explained, "except Pam was there."

"Uh oh. So, now what are you going to do?"

"I don't know," Brian said sadly. "It's a simple problem. If someone offers you a wad of money to bury the truth, you tell them to go to hell."

"I would agree with that."

"Yeah, any idiot can figure that out. The problem is that I have no idea when I'll be able to go back to work."

"That's an important factor," she agreed.

"It's the only factor as far as my wife is concerned."

"In a way," Carol reasoned, "they do owe you some kind of compensation."

"Yeah, they do," Brian agreed, "but by their terms I would also have to keep quiet about what happened to me. And not only that, if I don't come forward for the AJC I can probably kiss my future job goodbye."

"What a mess," she concluded.

"You will probably find yourself in a similar mess," Brian warned her. "You're into this as deep as I am and they must know that." Carol began to see the bigger picture. They were paying off all of the volunteers who could provide damaging information and she was probably on the top of that list. "So, what will you do?" Brian interjected.

"One hundred thousand dollars," Carol repeated incredulously.

"Suddenly gets real confusing, doesn't it?"

"You got that right," she agreed. "Thanks for the heads up, though."

"Let me know what you decide," Brian said. Carol told him to hang in there and ended the call.

She continued to ponder the problem. They would probably have to decide what to do together. It would make no sense for only one of them to come forward while the other claimed temporary insanity. The issue had a simple moral solution. The fact that the drug had caused an indefinite disability made the issue much more complicated. They had been damaged as a result of what Dominex had done to them. Now they were being offered reasonable compensation. The fact that they were expected to drop the fight after accepting the money was not an unusual request. Weren't most court settlements conducted in the same way? She could accept what she had coming to her, or she could hold out for a higher purpose. She would have to think long and hard about what to do.

Michelle pulled into Peggy's driveway. She was halfway up the walkway with her suitcase in hand when her friend met her at the door. "I didn't think the worm would quietly go away," she said, reaching to help Michelle with her bag.

"I guess I always assumed that he'd have another place he'd rather be."

"You can stay here as long as you like," Peggy offered. "This big empty house swallows me up. It'll be fun having a housemate."

Peggy had been divorced for five years. Her two children were both off to college and the house had been her biggest prize in the settlement. The terms of the agreement stated that if for any reason she ever decided to move, her ex-husband would have the option of buying it at the original purchase price. She wasn't about to give it to him.

The two women finished unloading Michelle's car and put everything into one of the spare bedrooms. "It's funny," Michelle said, "after all these years, the only stuff I have that is really mine fits into this one room."

"Enjoy the moment," Peggy laughed. "Your life is simple. You don't appreciate the beauty of that until you have to hire three moving men with a sixty foot truck to get you from one place to another." Michelle just sighed and sat down on the bed.

Finally, she looked up at her friend. "I'm going after him," she announced.

"Wasn't that always the plan?"

"No," Michelle said quietly. "I never planned to get into a heated divorce. I had a fair chunk of money in a savings account and I was going to just live modestly off the interest... Maybe go back to school."

"That's a start," her friend chimed in, "but it's not enough. You put up with him for fifteen years."

Michelle nodded her head in agreement. "All the more reason to get away from him and his precious company."

"So what has changed?" Peggy inquired. Michelle thought for a moment.

"His behavior tonight," she stated finally. "In the space of twenty minutes, he let me know just how little I meant to him." Michelle wiped a few tears off her cheek. "He took away fifteen years of my life. Now I'm going to take the one thing he values most away from him."

"His male appendage?" Peggy asked, trying to cheer her friend.

Michelle began to laugh through the crying. "Wouldn't that be fun?" she said, regaining her composure. "No, he can keep his tiny little appendage. That's punishment all by itself."

"You're terrible," Peggy laughed.

"I can be. And he's about to find out just how much."

"Come on," Peggy said, grabbing her arm. "I have been saving some very expensive wine for a suitable occasion. This is it."

When Carol pulled into her driveway, she noted the strange car parked on the street. *Enter the grim reaper.* She walked up the few steps to the front door, wishing she had worked out a better plan with Brian. She still didn't know what he was going to do, and without his testimony, hers would have little point. She entered the house to rescue Josh.

The two men were seated in the living room and Josh looked relieved to see her. "This is Paul Pratt," Josh announced. "He's here to see you about the research study."

Josh stood to leave, but Paul said, "Actually, Mr. Freeman, you might want to stick around for this. It involves you, too."

Josh reluctantly sat back down.

Paul began his presentation, outlining Dominex's position of innocence and their genuine concern for the individuals who had been harmed by the terrible doctor. "And although you had elected not to see Dr. Donovan," the attorney continued, "we were made aware of the difficulty you have had as a result of volunteering to help us with the study."

"Difficulty?" Carol mimicked sarcastically. "This so called difficulty has been the most devastating thing that has ever happened to me."

Josh closed his eyes, and began shaking his head. The attorney was about to experience the wrath of the counselor, AKA the Savior of Mankind.

Carol didn't care about the purpose of the man's visit. She already knew why he was here and that she wasn't going to make a decision. She did, however, care a great deal about the man's mission. "First of all," she began, "this drug has been on the market in some form or other for over forty years. The fact that it cannot be taken longer than a few weeks without becoming severely addictive is common knowledge by the drug companies. So, can you please explain to me why there are no warnings or guidelines?"

Paul looked to Josh for help. Josh did not jump to the man's aid. He was on his own with this one.

"Well," the attorney stumbled, "the drug companies don't do the prescribing. The doctors are responsible for that."

"That's very convenient," Carol stated. "And do you warn the doctors about the risk of addiction?"

Paul squirmed around in his seat and said, "Doctors are expected to know about all the risks of sedatives."

"They don't," Carol announced, "and that's a whole other issue. The problem today is that forty-nine percent of the people who are on your medication will never be able to stop taking it without becoming severely ill for an indefinite period of time, possibly for years. How do you justify that?"

Paul was sinking in this debate quickly and decided to give it one last-ditch effort.

"We didn't really know that until we conducted this study," he offered.

"Bullshit," Carol said. "That information is all over the internet. It's documented by doctors and thousands of sedative victims, many of which have submitted formal complaints. So, how is it that everyone else knew about it and the company that makes the drug had no idea?"

"Well, I can see that you are very upset," Paul said, getting to his feet.

"Upset is the wrong word, counselor," Carol said, standing as well. "Outraged is more accurate. The only question I have for you is this. Your company is poisoning millions of people every year and paving the path for their destruction. How is it that you are not outraged?"

The attorney for Dominex Pharmaceuticals did not answer Carol's question. Instead, he attempted to divert the focus of their conversation. "Carol, I understand your outrage, but unfortunately I can't resolve that issue today." Carol was getting ready to argue that point when Paul raised a hand and said, "What I can do is offer compensation for your pain and suffering, past and future."

Carol knew she was hitting a brick wall and decided to end the senseless debate. The immediate problem at hand was how to get compensation for both Brian and herself without selling out. She suddenly had the answer.

"Two hundred thousand dollars," she stated.

Josh removed his focus from the ceiling and stared at Carol in astonishment.

The attorney thought for a moment and then nodded in agreement.

"Okay," he concluded. "I think we can arrange that as long as we can agree on a few stipulations."

"Go on," Carol directed.

"First," Paul began, "you won't discuss the amount of the settlement with anyone." Carol nodded her agreement. "Next," he continued, "the money will be paid after the new medication is approved by the FDA."

"No," Carol stated adamantly. "Your study was a fiasco. I have serious concerns about where all that is going, but my disability will continue regardless of the outcome of your study."

Paul could tell that he had hit an impasse in the negotiating process.

"I'll have to get back to you on that," he conceded. "The truth is that I don't really know if those funds are available right now. Once Suprame is on the market, we will have no problem complying with that amount, but right now... Well, I will have to get back to you."

"Fine," Carol agreed. "Thanks for coming."

She stood and shook his hand. This was Paul's cue that the meeting was over.

Josh walked him to the door.

"Your wife is a tough woman," Paul commented on his way out.

"You have no idea."

Josh returned to the living room to find his wife sitting back on the couch with eyes closed.

"That was quite a performance."

"It was the only way out," Carol sighed. She got up and went to the phone. "I'll explain it all to you after I make this call," she said, dialing Brian's number.

Chapter 23

Donovan's office was a ghost town. His regular patients had seen the article and didn't want to be anywhere near an ongoing investigation. All the Dominex patients had stopped coming as well. The doctor had attempted to contact the drug company and had left numerous messages. No one was taking or returning his calls. He should have known that at the first sign of real trouble they would hang him out to dry. There was no such thing as loyalty with that much money on the line.

Donovan attempted to contact Jeff one last time.

"Look," he yelled into the phone at Jeff's secretary, "the man has been in a meeting for three solid days. I want to know what is going on!"

The secretary offered the standard options, stating that she would be sure he got the message. Donovan doubted he would. And after three days of no contact and no patients, he was pretty sure he had already gotten their message. He was now on his own. What had started out as a great money-making proposition had resulted in not only the loss of that opportunity, but his own practice was now suffering as well.

He had no patients waiting and saw no reason not to close the office early. He went out to where his staff was assembled and announced that they could all go home. "I guess it's just a slow week," he offered lamely as he walked off to his office. The staff waited for him to close his door before asking each other if they still had jobs.

"I don't know about you," the nursing assistant said, "but I think I'll update my resume."

"I guess we all should," the receptionist agreed.

Wednesday morning the newspaper was served with notification of the lawsuit filed by Dominex Pharmaceuticals. Attorney Wendy Cox sat impatiently drumming her fingers on her desk top while waiting for Paul Pratt to come to the phone. *Typical attorney tactic.* Make the guy wait on the phone for an unreasonably long time, thereby creating the illusion of busy, powerful lawyer.

Pratt finally graced the AJC attorney after ten minutes. "Wendy," he began cordially. "It's been a long time." Wendy Cox had had the pleasure of a prior head-to-head with Pratt on a previous case when Pratt had represented a sleazy brokerage firm. The paper had printed a story about their unfortunate tendency towards insider trading practices and subsequent client rip-off scams. Wendy did not like Pratt, if for no other reason than his choice of clients. Cox still preferred the old fashioned idea of doing the job in a manner that would lend itself to being able to sleep at night. She also believed that Pratt had probably not lost a minute's sleep since he had passed the bar. That made him a two-time loser in her book.

Wendy did not feel like doing the traditional attorney small talk routine and went straight to the purpose of her call. "Paul, we got your summons to appear in court next week. What does Dominex want to make this go away?"

Paul could not help but smile to himself. Most people hated the whole idea of lawsuits, and would do anything to avoid them. He personally loved the chase. It was an adrenaline rush like no other.

"We want a full retraction of that bogus story," Pratt began, "and a formal apology from the AJC."

"Anything else?" Wendy threw in sarcastically.

"Front page would be a nice touch," Pratt added. "It would convey your sincerity."

Wendy just shook her head at the attorney's arrogance. "Not only is that not going to happen," Cox countered, "but I think the paper has enough evidence to write a follow-up story."

"Then I guess I'll see you in court," Pratt said happily.

Wendy wanted to tell the guy to drop dead, but remembered how much Pratt liked adversity. "I'm looking forward to it," she said instead and hung up.

This was not going well. None of the three solid sources that had come forward had actually signed the affidavits. She had been assured prior to approving the story that it was a done deal. Now, she couldn't even get the first one to answer her calls. She could only imagine that Pratt had gotten to them first.

In her prior dealing with the attorney, numerous victims of the brokerage firm had suddenly found themselves rich and had also developed similar cases of amnesia. In this case, there were only three people to support the story they'd printed. They needed at least two to come forward.

Cox attempted to contact Steve Warner one more time. His wife had been acting as goalie each time she'd tried to get through. This time she got lucky. The call was answered by a male. "Mr. Warner?" she questioned. She could hear the guy trying to come up with a denial.

"Yes?" the man answered finally.

"This is Wendy Cox from the AJC. I wanted to come by with that affidavit for you to sign. What would be a good time?" There was too long of a pause and Wendy began to shake her head in disgust.

"Well, I've been thinking about that," Steve said. "And the truth is, that we aren't really sure what happened to my sister. She had always been a loner and a moody person. We were all so distraught when she killed herself we may have overreacted. You know how that is," the man stammered awkwardly, "we had to blame it on someone."

"You don't think the abundant amount of drugs that Donovan gave her had anything to do with her suicide?" Cox asked incredulously.

"Well, it didn't help," the man laughed nervously, "but we think there was probably more to the whole story."

"And what about the drug company?" the attorney continued. "Your sister didn't start abusing her medication until they had her stop taking it abruptly."

"That was an unfortunate catalyst," the man reasoned, "but her addiction was probably inevitable." The attorney knew a pay-off when she heard one and this was a textbook performance.

"Mr. Warner," she began carefully, "did Dominex Pharmaceuticals offer you any compensation to change your story?"

"No," the man denied loudly, "and I resent the implication."

"You were certain of your facts prior to coming to us," the attorney prodded, "and now you are telling me that you may have overreacted?"

"That's exactly what I am saying."

"Are you aware of the laws governing individuals who provide false information to newspapers?" the attorney asked, threateningly.

"It wasn't intentional fraud," the man stated too eloquently. "I gave you an honest view of the situation at that time. Time has passed and my view has changed."

"I see," Cox said. "Well, if time should clarify your story any further, you be sure to give us a call."

"I'll do that," the man said angrily, and hung up with a bang.

Cox was furious. They should have gotten those stupid affidavits signed before they printed the story. Reporters and editors are not logical creatures. They'd been too emotional and too excited to listen to reason. They had printed that story based on verbal agreements. *That and a dime get you nothing*, she thought. Steve Warner had been a solid cornerstone of that story. Now she only had Carol Freeman and Brian Carter's testimonies. That was, unless Pratt had gotten to them, too.

She picked up the phone to contact Brian Carter. She was going to get to the bottom of this right now. The phone rang ten times before Wendy gave up. *The guy is on a leave of absence for an illness and isn't even at home. Where the hell is he?*

Brian and Pam Carter sat in a Denny's booth opposite Carol and Josh Freeman. This was getting to be a regular meeting place. The group had decided to meet after Carol's encounter with Dominex's attorney and subsequent decision. Brian and Carol would receive compensation and Brian would maintain his standing with the AJC.

"So, this is what I propose," Carol began after the waitress had taken their orders. "I will collect two hundred thousand dollars in exchange for my silence. Brian will continue to back up his story and, hopefully, that will be enough to support the paper's position. Then once this whole mess blows over, Brian and I will split the money."

"Not bad," Brian agreed. Pam eyed Carol suspiciously.

"How can we be sure that you'll give half to Brian?" she asked finally.

"Because she said she will," Brian shot back. Pam became silent, but continued to look at Carol for signs of dishonesty.

"The settlement money isn't the only issue," Josh threw in. "We couldn't continue to trade in Dominex's stock and also be involved in an investigation against them."

"That was a nice trade off," Carol agreed, "but when I came up with this plan I wasn't thinking about any trading rules violations."

"I would have told you about it later," Josh added. "At the time though, I couldn't believe you would sell out your fellow victims for two hundred thousand dollars."

"Not without an alternate plan," Carol interjected.

"I have to come forward," Brian added. "The paper won't understand if I don't. Beside the fact that I work for them, I also played a big part in getting the story off the ground."

"Yeah," Carol agreed, "that's what I thought, too. This way, you get the compensation you deserve and the paper gets their story."

"It's a perfect plan," Brian said, "as long as I can carry enough weight for both of us."

"Let's hope so," Carol added, "because under the circumstances it's the best we can do."

The waitress returned with their food and everyone toasted the plan with their water glasses. "Here's to the truth and a whole lot of money," Josh stated.

"Here, here," Brian agreed. Pam ate in silence. Carol wondered what she was thinking. She didn't inspire a whole lot of trust.

Michelle Roman dialed the number to her attorney's office. He needed to be informed of a new contact number. He would also probably want an update. And despite all the good reasons she had to admit that she mostly just wanted to talk to him again.

She waited while the receptionist transferred the call. "Did you survive the first encounter?" he began.

"Barely," she laughed. "The plan didn't exactly go accordingly." Mark Randall waited for an explanation. "He refused to leave," she explained, finally.

"Did that surprise you?" the attorney laughed.

"Actually, it did," she admitted. "I'd always thought that he would rather be somewhere else."

"Yes, but only when it's his idea. You're dealing with the male ego."

"Ah," Michelle said. "I forgot about that."

"So, did you camp out with the enemy?"

"No," she sighed. "I really didn't want to leave my house, but staying there with him..." Michelle just shuddered instead of finishing the distasteful thought.

"Good," Mark said, happily. "So, where can I reach you?"

Michelle gave him Peggy's phone number. She could not help but notice that he had sounded positively joyous at the idea that she had moved out.

"Remember yesterday, when I told you I didn't want anything from this divorce except the house?" she added.

"Sure."

"Well, forget it."

"I pretty much did that right after you said it," the attorney informed her.

"I guess you've done a few of these before," Michelle laughed.

"Most people are still wrapped up in the past when they first come to see me," he explained. "But once the process begins, people show their true colors and they usually aren't very pretty."

"Boy, you got that right."

"I knew that once your husband had been informed of your intentions the gloves would come off."

"They did," she said. "So, is there anything you need in the way of evidence?"

"Do you still have the credit card bills with the local hotel charges?"

"Yeah, a few."

"Why don't we meet for lunch, and you can give them to me?" he offered.

"Okay," she agreed feeling herself turning red.

"Great."

Michelle heard him identify a place and time, and then she heard herself agree to meet him. When she hung up the phone her heart was racing. *This is not normal. I am thirty-six years old and I am acting like a teenager.* She had not forgotten the small issue of a wedding ring, but for some unknown reason she'd elected to file it into the archives.

Wendy Cox did not have to hunt Brian down. At 10:30 AM, he was standing in the attorney's doorway. "How's it going?" Brian greeted.

"We've been completely abandoned," Wendy said grimly. Brian nodded and sat down across from the attorney.

"Steve Warner is refusing to sign the affidavit or do anything else for that matter."

"Doesn't surprise me," Brian said. "Dominex is offering too much money for any of us to continue being crusaders."

"That's what I thought," the attorney confirmed. "We could get them on attempting to bribe witnesses but under the guise of 'settlements,' they are free to conduct negotiations."

"Warner probably needed the money more than he needed to seek justice," Brian stated.

"And what about you?" Wendy asked tentatively,

"I'm still on board, but I'm afraid it's all you have." The attorney let out a long frustrated stream of air.

"Are you telling me that Carol Freeman got bought out too?"

"I wouldn't exactly call it that," Brian said. "It's more like taking the fall for both of us." The attorney looked at him with a confused expression.

Brian spent the next few minutes explaining the solution they had come up with. "So this way," he concluded, "we both get compensated without leaving the paper high and dry."

"We may be that anyway," the attorney said sadly. "Without at least two witnesses, we are standing on thin ice."

Brian thought for a moment.

"What about Terry Sanders?"

"What are you planning to do?" Cox laughed. "Conduct a séance?"

"Very funny," Brian said. "I thought maybe we could get the family involved."

"Well, from what I remember," Wendy interjected, "the man was divorced and the family wasn't really around him enough to know what was going on."

"At least that's what they told the police."

"What are you thinking?" the attorney asked skeptically.

"The family might be more comfortable talking to a fellow victim," Brian offered.

Wendy began to nod in agreement.

"You might be right about that," she said. "Give it a shot."

Brian stood and walked to the doorway before the attorney added, "And as long as you're working for me, you're on the payroll."

"What a deal. Truth, justice, and a paycheck."

Wendy Cox, Attorney at Law, returned to the mess on her desk. She had been practicing law for the past fifteen years. And after all this time, she joked that she was still only practicing. You never master this art. There are too many variables and too many twists and turns to ever consider yourself a master at this game. She had been so committed to mastering the game that she remained single. The law was her soul mate.

Wendy was an attractive forty-two year old woman. She had long brown hair and a flawless face. Her attractive appearance had been an obstacle in the courtroom. No one took a beautiful woman seriously. Wendy had resorted to wearing her hair in a bun and opted for heavy, black-rimmed glasses instead of contacts. The combination had the desired effect and she looked like a librarian. This worked to her advantage. No one ever expected a librarian to be a shark. And Wendy Cox was the deadliest shark in the sea.

Brian was still very shaky and weak, but his assignment was a welcome diversion. The drive to Sanders's ex-wife's house was not so far outside his comfort zone to evoke the usual pangs of driving phobia. Brian had contacted the woman earlier and, although she did not sound thrilled about the idea of seeing him, she had agreed to nevertheless. Brian found the house and pulled into the driveway. Marlene Sanders was waiting for him in the doorway.

"Thanks for seeing me," he offered breathlessly as he climbed the final few steps to meet her. The woman was a short redhead with straight, flat hair cut short. Marlene sported a zigzag part in her hair, tucking the lifeless strands behind her ears. This was the look of the twenty-first century. Brian did not understand it. The workout shorts and sport bra indicated that he had postponed her trip to the gym. She looked as though she spent a lot of time there.

Marlene introduced herself and led Brian into the kitchen. "Can I get you anything?" she offered.

"Just some water," Brian said, still out of breath from his short climb. She filled a glass with ice and water, and placed it at the kitchen table.

"Have a seat," she said.

Brian happily complied. He felt as though his legs were ready to give out on him. This trip had required more exertion than he had anticipated. After downing half of the glass's contents he was able to slow down his breathing.

"I just wanted to tell you first how sorry I am about Terry," Brian offered. Marlene just nodded. "I never met him personally, but I have a pretty good idea of what he went through."

"I don't know about that," she countered. "Terry was pretty unique."

Brian was hoping that the conversation would reveal just how unique he had been.

"Well, as I told you on the phone, I was also one of the study victims. In fact, I'm still reaping the consequences."

Marlene finally made solid eye contact with him and could see how ragged he appeared.

"Terry tried to tell me what he was going through," she admitted sadly. "But I was so tired of his whining and complaining, I'm afraid I really didn't believe him." She stood suddenly to get water for herself. Brian could tell that he had hit a nerve.

Marlene returned with the water and sipped it with a shaky hand. "I'm sorry," she said. "I guess seeing you in person finally forced me to believe that Terry was telling the truth." Brian waited while she brushed a few tears off her face. "The marriage was over a long time ago, but I still cared about him."

Brian didn't know what to say at this point. He wished Carol had been able to come with him, but that would have been a breach of her agreement with Dominex. *What would the counselor have said now?*

"You can't blame yourself for what happened to him," he said finally. That was a good start.

"Everyone has been telling me that," Marlene interjected, "but the truth is that if I had listened to him, he might still be here today." A whole new stream of tears appeared. Brian waited, feeling helpless. Marlene wiped away the fresh tears and took a few deep breaths. "Anyway," she sighed, "what can I do for you now? You said something on the phone about the newspaper needing my help."

"They do," he began. "Terry wasn't the only one who got sick as a result of the research study. A lot of people began going through horrendous withdrawal when they stopped taking Valipene."

"I knew that stuff was poison," Marlene agreed. "Terry's doctor prescribed it for his depression. I told him it was a sedative, not an antidepressant. But Terry said he was finally sleeping at night, so I left him alone."

"None of us suspected that we had become addicted," Brian continued, "until we volunteered to stop taking it."

"That's when they funneled everyone off to that doctor...what was his name?"

"Donovan," Brian interjected.

"Yeah, Dr. Donovan. Anyway, that's when Terry started having really bizarre thoughts."

"Really?" Brian asked. "Like what?"

"He started having obsessive thoughts about demons. He couldn't get it out of his mind. No matter who tried to reason with him, he couldn't let go of the idea that demons were trying to possess him."

"Did he go back to see the doctor?"

"After he was taken off the 'vitamins,'" Marlene said, with air quotes, "he believed that Donovan was the head demon." She began to laugh to herself. "He might have been right about that one. Anyway, to answer your question: no. He never went back there again."

Brian sat there trying to absorb the information. He had not personally experienced such a bizarre withdrawal symptom, but in light of all the anxiety and unfounded fear he was feeling, he could certainly understand how someone could go that far.

"That must have been hell," he said.

"He was in constant torment. The only way he could deal with it, I imagine, was to end his life."

Brian just sat there shaking his head. Valipene was such a common and available drug, yet it was destructive enough to destroy people's lives. How had the pharmaceutical companies gotten away with this for so long?

"The Atlanta Journal Constitution printed an explicit article about the research study Dominex is conducting," Brian said.

"I saw it," Marlene confirmed. "It cut right to the heart of the whole sedative issue."

"Yes, it did. And for that they are currently being sued by Dominex for slander."

"And that's where I come in?" she ventured.

"We hope so. They have so far managed to pay off two of the strongest witnesses." Brian did not think it wise to expand on the point of witness payoffs. "Anyway, if the paper doesn't have at least one more person who was close enough to the study to give accurate details, they may have to retract the whole thing."

"And the truth about what happened to Terry and everyone else quietly goes away," Marlene concluded.

Brian just nodded.

Marlene had a complete grasp of the situation. "Sure," she said finally. "I know a lot of others who are on that drug. Have been for years. I shudder to think about what will happen to them if they ever decide to stop taking it."

"Most of them will never be able to stop," Brian ventured. "This has been the hardest thing I have ever had to deal with in my life."

"Well, you're one of the strong ones. People like Terry... He just couldn't get past the fear."

Brian stood to go and extended his hand to her. She followed Brian to the door.

"I think it would be a good idea to keep your testimony a secret for right now," he said when they reached the doorway.

"Don't worry. In light of the divorce, I don't think Dominex can legitimately offer me a settlement."

"The operative word is legitimate. Oh, and for what it's worth," he added, "Terry was a very brave man in my book. No one should ever have to experience this." Marlene nodded her head in agreement.

"Thanks," she said, "from both of us."

The management team at Dominex was closing in for their final victory. Daily meetings were conducted to ascertain current issues and problems. The research study results would be turned in to the FDA in two and a half weeks, and everyone was on alert. Today's meeting centered on the attorney's progress with the newspaper lawsuit.

"Two and a half of the witnesses are on board," he announced, "but there is a big stipulation attached to one of them."

"I gotta ask," Sam laughed. "What do you mean when you say a half of a witness?"

Paul shook his head in frustration.

"I'll get to that little tidbit in a second, but right now our biggest problem is Carol Freeman."

"What does she want?" Charles asked.

"She wants two hundred thousand dollars and she wants it now," Paul announced.

"Did you explain our financial dilemma to her?" Sam asked, becoming annoyed at the situation.

"Sure, but she told me she didn't have a lot of faith in the outcome of this study and regardless of whether or not we get Suprame on the market she will still be disabled."

"Smart girl," Margie whispered to herself. No one heard her.

"That's not an option," Charles stated angrily.

"She could cost us a lot more than two hundred thousand dollars in damages," Paul reminded him.

"Then we may as well give her the company," Charles yelled, "because that's about all we have left in reserve." Everyone looked at the CEO in surprise. He had been looking rough lately, but this was extreme, even for him.

Sam had been made aware of Charles's pending divorce and was also tuned in to the financial implication. The CEO feared that his wife was going to walk away with everything that wasn't nailed down. He made a mental note to have the CEO meet with Pratt after the morning meeting. At the moment, he needed to resolve the Carol Freeman issue. "Charles," he began, "we can pay off this witness with plenty left in reserve."

Charles looked around the room and noticed the way everyone was looking at him.

"Bad night," he explained sheepishly.

"What if the rest of the payees demand the same thing?" Jeff threw in.

"We will make it a point in the agreement," Paul interjected. "Acceptance of the settlement will imply complete confidentiality."

"Sounds like you already planned to recommend this," Sam said.

"We really have no choice," the attorney explained.

"Then if we are all agreed," Sam said, pausing for feedback. Everyone nodded, including a very reluctant CEO. "Make the deal," he concluded to Paul.

"Now, please define a half witness?" Sam asked.

"It seems we have a split decision at the Brian Carter residence. The primary witness works for the AJC and he isn't budging."

"So that's it then, isn't it?" Jeff asked.

Paul began to laugh at the absurdity of the situation.

"Seems that Mrs. Carter is willing to come forward as a witness to the witness."

"Huh?" Sam said.

"She contacted me this morning," the attorney continued. "She said she could verify Carter's story but would refrain from doing so if we made the same agreement with her... confidentially."

"She wants the same settlement - not to collaborate her husband's story?" Sam asked incredulously. "Next thing we know we'll be paying off the neighbors to keep quiet."

"Yes, I found the whole thing quite humorous," Pratt agreed, "except this clever woman came up with an additional offer."

"I can't wait to hear this," Jeff interjected.

"She's willing to testify that her husband is a hypochondriac, and that he had complained of similar issues before he ever got involved with us."

"Similar issues?" Sam repeated. "How could there have been passed similar issues?"

"Oh, the standard aches and pains," Paul explained. "Doctors repeatedly screwing him up... That sort of thing."

"How can her testimony be confidential?" Margie questioned.

"It's part of her demand," Paul said. "She will only come forward if we promise to conduct her deposition - and testimony, if it comes to that - in complete secrecy."

"But isn't the list of witnesses public record?" Sam questioned.

"Judge's discretion. We might only be able to use her affidavit as leverage. Once it goes further than that, we might not be able to protect her anonymity."

"What kind of person testifies that her husband is nuts?" Margie blurted out, no longer able to contain her thoughts.

"This one would," Paul stated. "If you had been there to see how her eyes lit up when I mentioned the money, you'd understand the motive."

"Okay," Sam said, trying to regain some focus. "We are not going to pay one hundred thousand dollars for this, but see if she'll go for a smaller settlement in increments... Say, ten thousand for her affidavit, and fifteen thousand each for her deposition and testimony."

"That would make sense," Paul agreed. "We won't know how the judge will rule on her anonymity until we reach those points in the process."

"How's the phone contact going with the volunteers?" Sam directed to Margie.

"It took most of the past few days to channel all of them back to Pharmlab," she stated, "but of the ones I've contacted so far, we have been able to get by with minimal payoffs."

"Good," Sam agreed. "Let's try to keep it that way. We obviously have some very expensive witnesses. Anyone else have a fire?" he questioned, looking around the room. No one spoke up. "Okay then, were adjourned."

Michelle Roman was a nervous wreck. She hadn't been on a date in over fifteen years and besides, this wasn't a date. She had to keep reminding herself of this on the drive to LaSalle's. She'd only been to the restaurant one other time and remembered it being warm and full of charming atmosphere. A little less warmth and charm might have been a better choice. She pulled into the parking lot and found a space close to the entrance.

Mark Randall was already seated and waved to her as she walked through the door. He'd nailed down a quiet table off to one side of the room. As Michelle approached, he stood to give her a hug.

"You're looking lovely as usual," he said, as he held out her chair.

"And you look lovely, too," Michelle laughed. She could feel the color quickly rising to her face.

The two sat exchanging small talk until the waiter came to take their drink order. "How about a bottle of wine?" Mark suggested.

"How about a glass?" she countered. "I still have to drive."

"Two glasses of your best white," he told the waiter. Turning back to his client, he said, "So, how's the new residence working out for you?"

"Peaceful," she answered. "Peggy is my best friend and a divorce survivor so it has been a good 'safe house' to camp out in."

"Good," Mark agreed. "Most people stay in the house out of spite, or stubbornness, but they end up making themselves miserable just to prove a point."

"And what's that?"

"I guess it's that no one is going to make them leave their own house, especially the enemy."

"Too bad it has to come to that," she said reflectively.

"There is too much emotion tied to a divorce for it not to come to that," the attorney interjected.

"I suppose you're right," Michelle said, reaching for the wine glass that had just arrived.

"Wait," Mark said, picking up his glass. "Here's to a speedy and painless solution." They both drank to the toast.

"Oh, and speaking of speedy," Michelle said. "Here are the copies of the credit card bills."

Mark looked them over and whistled.

"Our friend was a very busy guy."

Michelle took a few more sips of her wine.

"This is just a sample of how busy he was."

"How did you manage to hang in there for this long?"

"Stupidity," she began. "You tell yourself that the person really does love you and that these affairs are meaningless, blah blah blah... In the end, you wake up and wonder what happened to your self-esteem and half your life. We tell ourselves a lot of things to get through the day that aren't true. I guess I have a new policy about that."

“What’s that?”

“No more rationalizing,” Michelle stated.

“Good luck,” the attorney laughed. “I don’t know anyone who doesn’t need a good rationalization now and then.”

“It’s a worthy goal anyway,” Michelle countered.

The waiter returned for their lunch order, and Michelle could still hear her own words echoing in her head. She really had spent most of her life as a dreamer. She’d wanted to live in a fairy tale so badly that she had created a fantasy world. The self-deceit required to survive in such a world had cost her too many years of her life. No matter how badly she wanted a happy ending, bad situations would always result in bad outcomes. Michelle made a decision. She ordered a seafood salad and a new attitude. She was no longer going to follow her emotions to their obvious destructive conclusion. The man was married. What the hell was she thinking? She watched the attorney complete his order to the waiter. He was strikingly handsome and totally unavailable. She would conduct the rest of this luncheon as a business meeting. She had met with her attorney, nothing more.

Carol sat at the kitchen table with attorney Paul Pratt. He had brought over a settlement agreement for Carol to sign and an implied check for two hundred thousand dollars. Josh stood behind her as she read the fine print of the contract. She had a hard time staying focused on the paper. Inwardly, she was celebrating hers and Brian’s victory. This money would allow her to recover, and maybe give something back to the community. She hadn’t even approached Josh yet about her new ambition. She was so far away from physically being able to meet the challenge that it did not even merit a discussion.

Carol reached for her reading glasses. Her vision had rapidly deteriorated in the past six months, a possible side effect of taking the medication. Carol didn’t know for sure, but there had been a strong correlation between the time she had started taking the drug and the steady decrease in her vision. She began to go over each line methodically. The stipulations came as no surprise to her. She was expected to drop all current and future charges against Dominex Pharmaceuticals. The agreed sum was to be kept strictly confidential and at no time was she free to discuss the study with any outside source. Dominex was shutting her down.

The contract went on to outline the consequences of any breach of the above stipulations. If Carol violated the agreement, she was bound to refund all monies paid with interest. Carol turned to Josh and said, “What’s twenty-one percent of two hundred thousand dollars?”

Josh had been right behind her reading the same paragraph.

“More than you want to pay Dominex,” he countered.

Carol continued reading until she hit the last paragraph.

“What’s this about endorsements?” Carol asked skeptically.

Pratt was expecting an argument about the last point in the contract. He had warned Sam that she would never go for this and might actually throw the contract in his face at this point in the negotiation.

“We would like to count on your support, should we require it in the future.”

Carol just looked at him in disbelief.

"The company feels," Paul continued, "that that is a small request in light of the sum they are paying you."

Carol just shook her head.

"There is no way I am going to provide any endorsements," Carol stated adamantly. "And trust me, if we don't strike some sort of agreement with the same figures I will have no problem telling the world about what you are doing in graphic detail."

Paul knew she meant what she said.

"Okay," he conceded, "we'll strike through that last point." The attorney drew an X through the last paragraph and initialed it. Carol signed her entire name by it and looked up at Josh. He gave her a subtle nod. She went to the bottom of the page and signed the agreement and then handed the paper to Josh to sign as a witness.

"Fine," the attorney said, folding the contract and placing it in his brief case. He then removed a thick envelope and handed it to Carol. She gasped when she opened it. They had paid her two hundred thousand dollars in cash. Confused, she looked at the attorney for an explanation. "We just thought you might not want to pay tax on this." Pratt smiled at her and went out the door.

"What the hell is this?" Carol said to Josh.

"Tax, my ass," he interjected. "They don't want any record of having paid you off."

"What slime bags," she said incredulously. Josh just nodded in agreement.

Next on Paul's agenda was a meeting with Pam Carter at an agreed location. He expected her to be wearing a wig and dark sunglasses by the way she'd sounded on the phone. Apparently, her husband had left to go on an errand – something he rarely did – giving her the opportunity to complete their transaction.

Paul found the bar and grill that Pam designated as a meeting place and pulled into the parking lot. This was obviously more of a nighttime hang out. There were very few cars parked in front of the place. When the attorney entered the establishment, he understood why Pam had chosen it. It was so dark inside that he had a hard time even finding the party he was looking for. If one were having an affair, this would be the classic meeting place. Paul had to literally walk from table to table to find the person he was looking for. Several of the patrons stared back at him, showing their disapproval at having the unspoken space rule violated.

Pam finally looked up from her hiding place and waved at him.

"Nice place," Paul said sarcastically.

"It has its purpose," she countered.

Paul could imagine what that purpose might have been. He neither liked nor respected this individual, but she was a means to an end. In some respect, she reminded him of himself. Pam was a real cutie with a heart of steel. She was a perfect five foot eight and weighed about one-oh-five. Her curly black hair was cut short and softly framed her large brown eyes. If Paul hadn't already had the pleasure of interacting with her, he would have considered her to be a knock out. But after his initial encounter he could only see a sellout.

"Here is the affidavit," he announced, taking the sheets out of his briefcase. "Go ahead and read it over before signing." Paul sat in the dingy bar, hoping that Pam was a fast reader. It was just a matter of time before a large roach or rodent would find his corner of the room.

Pam pulled out a flashlight and began reading. The woman had come prepared. The affidavit was a direct reflection of the words she'd dictated to Paul's secretary, with minor adjustments to meet the language requirements of the document. It stated that Brian Carter was

her husband and that she believed him to be a hypochondriac. It further stated that Brian Carter had a long history of dissatisfaction with doctors when they refused to provide him with the medications he wanted. The document outlined prior doctor visits and dates that had been supplied by Pam. The information was all hearsay and more than likely would not hold up in a court of law without a credible witness. Paul wasn't sure what kind of a witness she would make, but the affidavit might be a strong enough tool for some initial leverage. If the AJC believed that the witness had the potential to discredit them, they might be willing to print the retraction and pay a respectable fine. The retraction was all Dominex wanted.

Pam reached the end of the document and said she was fine with the wording. Paul handed her a pen and began looking around the room to find a witness. "Not so fast," Pam interjected. "Where's the money?"

Paul smiled at her, and thought, *For an extra few dollars, I bet you'd put him away for good.* Of course he did not verbalize that thought. Instead, he pulled the envelope out of his briefcase and removed its contents.

"See? It's all here." Pam happily picked up the pen and signed the document. Paul was still looking for a witness. No one but the bar staff was even approachable and Paul settled for the waitress. When he held up Pam's empty glass, she came over to the table. "Would you like a refill?" the waitress asked. Paul looked to Pam for a response. She shook her head, anxious to get her money and escape.

"Nothing, I guess," Paul responded, "but you could do one thing for me." He explained what he wanted while the waitress looked at him skeptically, but agreed to sign as witness.

Paul tucked the document away and handed the envelope to Pam. "We'll contact you if the next step is required."

"If?" Pam questioned.

"Yes, we're hoping that this affidavit will persuade the paper to retract their story. But if not, then we'll file a motion with the judge to suppress your identity."

"I won't attend the deposition without that," Pam reminded him. Paul assured her that he was clear on her terms. "Well," she said, holding up the envelope, "nice doing business with you so far."

Paul nodded to her as she stood and went swiftly out the door.

"The pleasure was all yours," he said under his breath.

The waitress handed him the bill for Pam's drink and he pulled out a five-dollar bill. "Keep it," he told her. He hoped this would be the last time he had to visit the "roach bar and grill." Paul pulled out his cell phone and dialed Sam's direct number. "We have the bait."

Sheila had been keeping a low profile. She didn't know what the company was up to or how they planned to submit the data for the research study. They certainly couldn't get by with the data they had. It was disastrous. She just knew that, once removed from her position, she would be powerless to go in for the final kill.

It was strange, after all this time, that Jerry was still worried about keeping his position. She'd never had any intention of remaining there once her job was done. But Jerry had signed on for the entire adventure and, as far as she was concerned, would be better off without this company. If successful in this new endeavor, Dominex would become the ultimate parasites, living off the addiction they would create.

Jerry had begged her to stay out of Dominex's way unless he was there to protect her. But she had been a one-man band for so long, she could not relinquish that control. Sheila logged into her computer and wondered where the study data might be hiding. Everything she had seen had been on hard copy, and if computer files had been created, she had no knowledge of them. Sheila clicked on "Research and Development," and then typed in her password. The list of files was staggering and each one was labeled with abbreviated words that made no sense to her. *This is long shot*, she thought, and accessed a file called KEP/TECH.EXE. The data outlined the research completion date and the upgrade to a time-release formula for a drug called Keplex. The scientific explanation of the drug's prescribing information was way over her head, but she was able to surmise that the drug was primarily used as an anti-inflammatory. She went back to the menu and attempted to find a similar file for Suprame. She assumed she would be looking for something labeled SUP/TECH.EXE. The files were listed in order alphabetically. Scrolling down to the "S's," she could find nothing even remotely resembling a file for Suprame.

The previous file might not have been created until after the market date, and even then, did not provide any details about the research itself. *This isn't it*. Sheila went into the search mode and asked for all the files on the hard drive. She was no more able to decipher the computer babble on this screen than she had been on the previous one. Sheila decided to try a search with the key words "research data." The computer told her that no files had been found.

Figures, she thought. You pretty much had to know the exact label of the file before the computer would recognize the search. The process defeated the whole idea of a search. Sheila knew just enough about computers to get by. This wasn't working. Frustrated, she attempted one last-ditch effort and went into the company's financial records. She was grasping at straws at this point, but any information could be useful. The computer asked for her password. She typed in her password and waited. The computer told her that she was not authorized to access this file, meaning she could not use her own password. The only people authorized to access this kind of information would be the head honchos. But Sheila had the password to end all passwords: she had the CEO's entrance key. She knew this information might come in handy when she had been sitting on Charles's lap, driving him into a heated frenzy. Sheila typed the word "money" into the computer and was granted access into the file.

Spending the next two hours deciphering the information, Sheila learned more than she had bargained for. She knew that the marketing of Suprame had been a crime scene in the making, but she had no idea how strapped the company had become. This drug was their only hope of keeping the company going. The amount of debt they had gotten themselves into was staggering. Sheila assumed that they had done whatever they had to do to buy themselves the extra time. Suprame was supposed to have been on the shelves months ago. But with the added research requirement, Dominex had hocked themselves up to their proverbial eyeballs.

There was something else. A two-point-five million dollar expense was listed dating to a time just after the research study had begun. Sheila was not an expert about the company's expenses, and certainly there would be no red flags raised at this kind of money changing hands. Large corporations always had large expenditures. Still, she felt that this was unusual timing especially since the company had already been strapped for money by that point.

Wait until Jerry sees this. Sheila clicked on "File," and then clicked on "Print." The computer indicated that the report was thirty-five pages long. After checking to see that she had enough paper to support this, she clicked on "OK." The printer began to hum as it churned out the report and Sheila began to sing, "Money, it's a gas." Pink Floyd would have been proud.

Paul Pratt returned to Dominex and told his secretary to get Wendy Cox from the AJC on the phone. There was only one thing Pratt loved more than the fight itself and that was going into battle with the right weapon. "She's on line three," Pratt's secretary called out. Pratt sat at his desk and picked up the phone.

"How's it going?" Paul said happily.

"Peachy," Cox replied. "What can I do for you?"

"Well, actually, the question is what can I do for you?"

Wendy did not ask for an explanation. She knew one was forthcoming, so she simply clutched the receiver tighter and waited.

"I think I can save the paper a whole lot of time and frustration."

"Really?" Wendy said sarcastically, "I didn't realize that was a major concern of yours."

Paul Pratt ignored the jab and continued.

"I have an affidavit from someone who knows your boy, Brian Carter, very well.

Cox sat up in her chair and said, "Go on."

"Seems Mr. Carter has a long history of imaginary illness and doctor grievances."

"That's crap," Cox said angrily. "I know the man personally and your source is feeding you a pile of crap."

"Well, the pile of crap is signed and witnessed," Paul said cheerfully. "We're willing to burn this document if we can come to some kind of agreement."

"You're kidding," Cox laughed. "I could get someone to say that the sun is green, but then I'd have to return them to the nut house before curfew."

"Oh this witness is quite sane," Pratt retorted. "We're looking at a full retraction and, oh, I'd say ten thousand in damages."

"And tell me," Cox said. "Who should the judge charge with perjury?"

"At the moment, that's confidential."

"Very convenient," Cox remarked. "And this whole conversation is very encouraging." Pratt remained silent. "This confidential and bogus affidavit of yours is the act of a very desperate company."

"Or," Pratt offered, "it's completely legitimate and your story has no basis. That's slander, isn't it?"

"See you in court next week," Cox announced and hung up the phone.

Wendy Cox was used to mudslinging and every other kind of dirty lawyer tactic, but dealing with Pratt made her want to take a shower. Brian had been with the paper for years. He had come in with the flu and numerous other illnesses that would have laid down the best of them. He'd never complained and often times even tried to mask the fact that he was sick. "Imaginary illness," she spat under her breath, "that's such crap." She was going to have to tell everyone involved about this new development, including Brian. She wasn't looking forward to informing him that someone who was close enough to be credible had turned against him.

She picked the phone up and dialed Brian's home number. Brian answered after the first ring. "Hey, good news," he said, when he realized who was calling. "Terry Sanders's wife is willing to come on board."

"That's great news," Cox said, attempting to sound cheerful. "But listen, I think we have another problem."

"It's always something."

Wendy gave him the details of her call with Dominex's attorney.

"Who would make a statement like that?" Brian asked in alarm.

"So far, that's confidential," Cox sighed. "But you can bet whoever it was got paid well for their signature."

"Pam," Brian said with contempt.

"You're wife?" the attorney asked incredulously. "Would she really do that?"

"You don't know Pam. If it had a large enough price tag attached to it, she'd sell out her own mother."

Wendy did not want to comment on his choice of soul mate, and didn't really know what to say at this point.

"I'm sorry," Cox offered.

"It's okay," Brian sighed. "Sometimes it takes a crisis before people show their true colors. I think I knew it all along, but it was easier to work sixteen hours a day. Amazing how well that works."

Cox just shook her head. That explained why he would come into work with a temperature of one hundred and three. Brian had been a man driven by his need for distraction.

"Listen," Wendy offered, "that bogus document will not hold up in court and I doubt seriously that the judge will allow her to remain anonymous. When that happens, she will have to face you directly. And if she thinks she can just disappear at that point, she is sadly misinformed."

Brian did not respond. He was too busy absorbing the reality of his marriage.

"More than likely Pam has been promised anonymity," the attorney continued. "Paul Pratt would have promised her the ability to fly for some damaging evidence. He knew he couldn't promise her anything, and if the judge demands that they reveal her identity it will be her ass on the line, not Dominex. They will simply say they were proceeding with what they were told was the truth."

"She never did think too clearly when she saw dollar signs," Brian said.

"This time, she could have gotten more than she bargained for," Wendy stated. "Perjury is a very serious charge."

Brian did not feel sorry for her. The harder he had wished for Pam's sense of humanity to overtake her dark side, the faster she had spiraled downward. He could no longer justify his loyalty to a marriage that was so self-destructive that he had turned to sedatives to survive. "Let's force the issue," Brian announced.

"Maybe you should take some time to calm down."

"I'm calm," Brian told her. "But for once she needs to feel the consequences of her own actions."

Wendy sat doodling on a scrap piece of paper. She had drawn a noose hanging a stick figure.

"She could fry for this," she interjected.

Brian did not offer any protest.

"Okay," the attorney sighed. "I'll press the issue with the judge when the time comes. In the meantime, we will need to conduct our own psych eval."

"Just give me the time and place and I'll be there," Brian stated adamantly.

"Hang in there kid," Wendy said consolingly, and drew a dark red X over the stick figure.

Brian was sitting on the front porch of the Freeman house. The house was modest in size, but it rested on five wooded acres at the end of a cul-de-sac. There were several oversized rocking chairs overlooking blooming azalea bushes and Bradford pear trees. The scene was beautiful and peaceful. But Brian was having a hard time making peace with the world.

Carol returned with glasses of ice tea and took the seat next to Brian. She'd been informed about Pam's recent stunt over the phone and told him to come right over. She did not say anything. She wanted to give him time to sort things out. Brian rocked back and forth, staring into space.

Finally, he looked at Carol and said, "I keep on trying to do the right thing." Carol nodded her understanding. "I mean, that's all I have ever done. Be the responsible employee, be the loving husband, be a standup guy against a greedy drug company, and where has it gotten me?" Carol did not offer an answer. It was a rhetorical question. "Addicted to a sedative and defending my sanity in court."

Carol reached out and patted him on his shoulder.

"I have something for you," she offered, and got up to go back inside. Brian continued to rock and stare off into the woods.

Carol returned with a thick business size envelope. "This won't fix your problem with Pam," she said, handing him the envelope, "but it might help with some of the other issues."

Brian opened it and stared back at her in disbelief.

"Is this what I think it is?"

Carol nodded and said, "They paid me in cash. Can you believe that?"

Brian started counting the one-thousand-dollar bills.

"I have never held so much money in my hand before."

"It's a little frightening," Carol agreed, "but I have no reason to hold on to your half until after the paper resolves the lawsuit now. There's no record of the payoff."

Brian finished counting the money and sighed loudly.

"You're right," he said. "It doesn't help with the Pam issue." Brian turned and looked Carol in the eye. "Why is she doing this?"

Carol did not have a ready-made answer. She had not liked the woman from the moment she'd met her. Carol did not understand people who were driven by self-centeredness. They remained forever hidden behind a wall that no one could penetrate. Reason and human kindness could never reach them.

"I don't know," she said. "People are the way they are for a lifetime of reasons. The only way to understand them is to share their thoughts and memories. Some people will reveal enough of themselves to allow that kind of connection. I think the ones who won't are too wounded."

"So you're saying that Pam feels wounded?"

"It's a possibility," Carol said. "Counselors are not psychics. Without confirmation from her, it's only a theory."

"Not exactly a science, is it?"

"If psychology were an exact science," Carol said, "all of the broken people in world would have been healed a long time ago."

Brian held up the envelope containing the payoff money from Dominex. "I don't know if this makes up for the constant buzzing inside my head, but at least I can keep my house from going into foreclosure."

"That's the whole idea I guess."

Brian stared down at the ground. He didn't want her to see the tears that were beginning to form in his eyes.

"How long is this going to last?" he asked. It was not a casual question. It was the most primary thought of a sedative victim. They were people who were literally walking through a desert in need of water and the only thing on the horizon was more desert.

Carol did not want to give him a stock answer. He deserved something more. "I've been trying to find out the same thing. There is so little information available out there. I'm amazed at how little the medical community knows about the effect of long-term sedative use, considering how long this poison has been on the market." Brian continued to look at the ground, trying to regain his composure. "The only source I have found," Carol continued, "is a group of websites created by recovering sedative victims. From what I have been able to gather from them, the average recovery time is six months to two years."

"Two years?" Brian repeated incredulously. "I can't even imagine being this sick for two years."

"Well, supposedly the intensity begins to lift gradually and we get 'windows' of normalcy."

"That's a very long time to be incapacitated," Brian interjected.

"It's unthinkable," she agreed, "but it is our reality." Carol looked at Brian. He seemed to be hanging on to the arms of the chair to keep from fading away.

This whole experience had shown her a side of life she had never known existed. For all of its victims, sedative withdrawal had not just been a horrendous illness. It had also robbed them of their dignity and their identity. It was not only the loss of one's ability to think and function, it was also the loss of that which had made them who they were. Carol did not fully understand the void she felt. It was her spirit, or perhaps her soul that felt empty. The spark that had made her who she was was missing. She continued each day to be Carol from memory only.

People who did not understand – or worse, believe – that sedative withdrawal could cause such devastation were quick to abandon ship. She had been fortunate. She had worked with other counselors and had an understanding companion. But she had read so many stories from those who had not been as fortunate. Some of the victims were even in the throes of divorce because the illness had forced them to need more than an unsuspecting spouse was willing give. She could not imagine her own current experience combined with the ridicule and abandonment of the outside world. Brian was carrying that burden.

"You can stay with us if you like," Carol offered.

Brian shook his head, and said, "Thanks, I appreciate that. But I don't want her to know that I'm on to her."

"Really? What are you planning to do?"

Brian thought for a moment.

"Trap her in her own manipulative little world. She thinks she will be able to pull this off. I plan to let her try."

"Whoa," was all Carol could say. Brian nodded in agreement.

Jerry stood with his arms folded and said, "I thought we agreed that you would stay out of the spy business."

"I didn't do anything dangerous," Sheila said defensively.

"What if someone had walked in while you were stealing company files?"

"No one did," she argued, "and besides, before you decided to be my body guard I was in this alone, remember?"

"Unfortunately, I do," Jerry said, feeling his foothold in the argument fading away. "So what did you find out?"

Sheila laid the pages out on the kitchen table, and said, "Check this out."

Jerry sat down and began reading Dominex's financial report. Sheila went off to the refrigerator to negotiate dinner. "This is incredible," Jerry called out.

"Isn't it though?" Coming back to the table, Sheila said, "They are in debt up to their eyeballs. If this drug doesn't hit the market soon, they are going to have to file bankruptcy."

"What an arrogant way to do business."

"That's Charles Roman," Sheila said. "The most arrogant person alive."

"It appears as though arrogance will be his demise," he interjected.

"I still don't know how they plan to pull this off," Sheila said. "They certainly seem confident about the outcome."

"We just have to wait and see."

Sheila looked off into the distance and said, "I don't play the waiting game very well."

"Sheila," Jerry stated adamantly, "whatever you're planning, the answer is no."

Sheila looked at Jerry with a confused expression. She had never had anyone tell her no before.

"You knew that I was committed to this from the beginning. Meeting you hasn't changed that."

Jerry cleared his throat and said, "I meant whatever you're planning better include me."

"That's better," she said and put her arms around him. "Besides, you said this was the most interesting your life has ever been."

Jerry rolled his eyes at her.

"Did I say that?"

Sheila nodded. "I have a feeling it's about to get less interesting and a little more terrifying."

Sheila did not want to share her plan with Jerry, but she really had no choice in the matter. The alternative would have required lying to him. She sat down next to him at the table and looked him square in the eye. "Tomorrow's Friday," she announced.

"See, this is why I love you," Jerry interjected. "You keep such good track of time."

Sheila hit him lightly on the top of his head.

"Come on," she coaxed, "try to stay with me. Everyone leaves early on Fridays."

"I feel a nightmare coming on."

"They think we have abandoned our mission, so we might just get lucky and stumble on something."

"What is it we're looking for?" he asked.

"Anything about this study that we don't already know."

“They are getting ready to turn something into the FDA. There has to be documentation of that somewhere.”

“And just how do you plan to get into all these locked offices?”

“I have the CEO’s key, remember?”

“And what about the filing cabinets,” he ventured.

Sheila reached in her pocket and pulled out a nail file. Smiling, she held it out for him to see. Jerry groaned and placed his head in his hands.

“I can do this alone,” she reminded him.

“Over my anxiety-ridden body.”

“Then it’s a date. And stop looking so worried. We are close enough now to taste victory.”

Jerry knew the real underlying reason for Sheila’s obsessive and unrelenting mission to destroy Dominex. He just wondered if her final victory would be enough.

Chapter 24

Brian sat nervously in the waiting room of the office of Dr. Bradford, Forensic Psychology. Brian had never heard of forensic psychology before. When the AJC attorney handed him his appointment card, he'd thought they had stepped the evaluation up a notch to see if he was also a murderer. Cox laughed at him and assured him that the doctor conducted evaluations for all psychological profiles that would be used to either present or contest proceedings in court. He knew he was sane, but even still, he did not trust the process of something so intangible. He had seen plenty of movies where two psychologists would present opposite findings of the same individual. That kind of outcome would never happen in DNA testing. Psych results were subjective, not scientific, and yet still maintained so much power in the final outcome.

Brian heard his name called and followed the doctor inside. "Have a seat," Dr. Bradford offered. Brian sat tentatively. "Try to relax," the doctor said, noticing Brian's nervousness. "This is a meeting to confirm your healthy state, not disprove it." Brian liked him already. He was not in the mood for idle chat and appreciated him cutting to the chase.

"This kind of thing goes on all the time," the doctor continued. "Anyone can claim anything in court, and they usually do. I'm here to make sure your rights and your sanity are defended."

Brian let out a long sigh of relief, and said, "Thanks." He wondered if he should share the fact that his wife was at the bottom of this whole mess. But as angry as he was at her, he couldn't outwardly discredit her to others. He doubted that he ever would.

"So, tell me about yourself," the doctor began. Open-ended questions were the best way to learn about a person. The monologue also provided a road map for the sensitive ear.

Brian took a deep breath and began his story. He told the doctor about his job, his house, and current illness brought about by his sedative addiction. He spoke for a solid ten minutes without mentioning his marriage or lack of children. The doctor now had his first road sign.

"I noticed that you haven't mentioned anything about your marital status," Bradford interjected. "Can you tell me about that?"

Brian began to squirm in his chair. This did not go unnoticed.

"I'm married to a woman named Pam, and we have no children." The doctor waited through the awkward silence. "It's her job, mostly."

"What about her job?" Bradford interjected.

Brian sighed, and said, "She *is* her job."

"And what does that mean to you?" the doc prodded.

"I want children, she wants money and status." There, it was out, and Brian knew he couldn't go back to being the perfect patient. Bradford was busy writing something while Brian attempted to regain his bland appearance.

"And how do you feel about that?" Bradford asked.

Brian was trapped. He had no choice now but to bear his soul.

"I resent it."

"Understandable," the doctor said, while continuing to write. "And how has this effected your relationship with your wife?"

Brian thought carefully before choosing his words.

"We are very distant," he said finally.

"And how has that affected you?" Bradford added.

This guy was good. Brian was quietly amazed at how quickly the man had gotten to the heart of the matter.

Brian told the doctor about his unhappiness, his workaholic way of dealing with it in the past, and about his subsequent turn to sedatives. "Looking back on it now," Brian concluded, "those pills did one thing, and one thing only. They dulled out the part of my brain that kept a running tab on my unhappiness."

"That's a pretty good assessment," the doctor agreed.

"It also came with a big price," Brian added. "Not only am I sick from going off that drug, but I am more keenly aware of my unfulfilled needs now than I was before I started taking sedatives."

"That must be very difficult for you," Bradford prodded.

"It is. Our marriage is virtually over. I used to run off to work anytime I needed the distraction. But now there is nowhere to run, and I have had to take an honest look at everything."

"And what have you come up with?"

"That she is who she is," Brian concluded. "She will never be loving or caring. Pam is interested in Pam, end of story." Brian sat back in the chair while the doctor finished writing.

"What do you plan to do about your illness?" Bradford questioned.

"Ride it out. I have to believe that the withdrawal will pass. I can't be addicted to a drug. I have to do this."

"Good for you," the doctor agreed. "Is there anything else you want to tell me?" Brian thought for a moment and then shook his head. "Great," Bradford concluded and stood to shake Brian's hand. Out in the lobby Brian nodded to the receptionist. *That wasn't too bad.*

Dr. Bradford picked up the phone and dialed the number for the AJC. "Wendy," he began. "If Brian Carter is a hypochondriac, I'm the Pope."

"No kidding," Cox said.

"He never even mentioned the horrible thing his wife is planning to do to him in court."

"He's a good man," Cox agreed.

"Hell," Bradford said, "he's a better man than me."

Sam Reynolds and company were ready to call it a day. The study was scheduled for completion in just one week. They had been working hard to put out fires and keep other fires from starting. Each member of the study team looked as though they had not slept in a month. In Sam's case, that was almost true. In the process of concluding the meeting, Sam was checking in with each staff member for damage control. "We have our court date set for this Monday," he reminded everyone. He turned to Paul Pratt and nodded for him to continue.

"The so called 'witnesses for the defense' are all taken care of. The only remaining witness is going to appear questionable at best."

"How'd we pull that off?" Charles asked, always one beat behind his front line workers.

"We have an affidavit from someone who wishes to remain anonymous, but with enough credibility to make the witness look like a nut case," Pratt explained.

"Can we guarantee her anonymity?" Sam questioned.

"We won't know that until Monday afternoon," Pratt continued. "I filed the motion with the Judge yesterday, but as of three this afternoon, he still hadn't made a decision."

"What happens if he denies the motion?" Jeff inquired.

"She will still have to come forward," Pratt stated. Everyone looked at the attorney questioningly. "That was the beauty of this whole thing," he explained. "Once someone comes forward and makes an official statement, we get our testimony whether it's voluntary or not. In fact, she will have no choice about testifying if it comes down to that."

"Good work," Sam agreed. "How about the other volunteers?"

Margie picked her head up from the printout she was studying and cleared her throat. "I have contacted everyone," she concluded. "Each of the disgruntled volunteers is receiving a small settlement, which, by the way, they were thrilled to get."

"How many of the volunteers are receiving settlements?" Sam asked. Margie looked back down at her printout and did a quick calculation. "Two hundred and thirty eight," she announced.

"That's almost half of them," Sam sighed with exhaustion.

"And the numbers don't include the three volunteers that Mr. Pratt dealt with, plus the three deaths resulting from the study."

Everyone busied themselves with the papers and notes before them. No one wanted to discuss the fact that there had been three deaths out of a seemingly random sample of five hundred people. The volunteers had been handpicked for their probability to succeed. In a true random sample, the results would have been far worse. This carefully planned study group was an overly optimistic micro sample that would multiply in the millions when translated to the public at large. "Let's move on," Sam directed.

"We have the data prepared for the FDA," Jeff interjected, "and it's air tight."

"Good," Sam agreed. "We've done all we can do. Let's go home."

Everyone stood, grateful for the coming weekend. Jeff lingered behind, waiting for the room to clear.

"Sam, we've been keeping that data locked in my office. Do you want to take it home over the weekend?" Sam thought for a moment. There hadn't been a peep out of the Sheila team since their offices and apartments had been searched. He couldn't think of any reason to rock a boat that had been sailing smoothly to this point.

"Nah," he said. "I really can't think of a safer place, can you?"

Jeff shook his head.

"Just checking. I need some rest from this whole mess and I'm not sure I could do that with the data hiding in my house."

"Fine," Sam agreed. "Let's get out of here." Sam followed Jeff out of the office, locking the door behind him.

Sheila and Jerry sat in the Wendy's across the street and watched the remaining management team drive out of Dominex's vacant parking lot. "Don't you just love Fridays?" Sheila remarked, picking up a French fry.

"I don't know how you can eat fries at a time like this," Jerry said. He hadn't touched his salad, and the ice had all but melted away in his diet Pepsi.

"You aren't a seasoned criminal," Sheila said, accusingly. "It's a skill, like anything else. You develop the stomach for it over time."

"I don't want to develop a stomach for it," Jerry said, pushing the food aside. "After this is over, it's over."

Sheila looked at him and knew he was adamant on the subject.

"Yes, I promise," she said soothingly. She took hold of his hand. It was damp with sweat. "Try to relax," she offered. "I'm a pro."

Jerry just shook his head at her.

"My girlfriend, the pro."

"It's show time," Sheila said, popping one more fry for the road.

The two walked past the night shift doorman and nodded. "Good evening, Ms. Montgomery," the doorman said, touching the visor on his cap.

"Hey, Bob," Sheila sang. "Forgot my laptop."

"Yes ma'am," the doorman answered. "I'll have to ask you to sign in."

"Oh, I'm not staying," she reasoned. "I just need to grab the computer and I'm outta here." The doorman looked a little uneasy, but didn't press the issue as the two walked briskly past him.

"She can't work without her laptop," Jerry called back from down the hall.

When they were out of earshot, Sheila said, "Why don't you just throw up on his shoes while you're at it?"

"Sorry," Jerry said sheepishly. "When I'm nervous, I talk."

"So does everyone else," she whispered loudly, "so stop it."

Jerry followed her through the hallway, working to control his anxiety. When they reached Sam's office, Sheila hesitated.

"What is it?" Jerry whispered.

"If you were going to hunt for incriminating data, where would you look?" she asked. Jerry thought for moment, and then pointed to Sam's door. "Exactly," Sheila agreed. "And since we already know how paranoid these people are, I'm guessing they thought of that, too. Follow me." Sheila flew down the corridor and Jerry had to jog to keep up with her. When she reached Research and Development, she pulled out a key.

"Jeff's office?" Jerry whispered questioningly.

"We don't have a lot of time," Sheila said. "If I only get one shot, I'm willing to gamble on Jeff Edwards."

"It's an extra door."

"This key unlocks every door," she announced, holding it up as though it were a prize. With two swift movements they were both standing inside Jeff's office. "Now, you keep watch," Sheila directed, "while I unlock the file cabinet."

Jerry stood in the doorway and watched his accomplice open a file cabinet with a nail file. The whole process took under five seconds. "I'm glad I'm on your side," he remarked.

"You have no idea how lucky you are," Sheila added.

Jerry stared down the deserted hall while Sheila began thumbing through Jeff's files. "Anything?" Jerry whispered nervously.

"Shush," was all she said, moving into the next drawer.

Jerry nervously shifted his weight from one foot to the other while Sheila went through all four file drawers. "Damn," she said, closing the last drawer.

"What do we do now?" Jerry asked.

"Closet," Sheila stated, moving to the door and grabbing the knob. "Locked?" she said questioningly.

"Shouldn't it be?"

"It wasn't locked last time." Sheila remembered how she had had to dive into Jeff's closet when she heard footsteps during her last search. The closet had been easily assessable. If it had been locked she would have been busted. "I think this is a good sign," she whispered. Now feeling more encouraged, she tried the CEO's key. It went into the hole, but would not turn. "Double damn," she hissed under her breath. She had not been prepared for the fact that individual closets might not be accessible to the CEO's universal key. Sheila reached inside her pocket and pulled out her own closet key. It was a last ditch effort. She slid the key into the slot while Jerry held his breath. When the key turned and opened the closet door they both let out a long stream of air. "The same contractor must have installed all the closet doors," Sheila announced from inside the closet.

"Let's hear it for bulk discounts," Jerry added.

The file containing the research results was sitting in plain sight on the back shelf. Sheila pulled out her tiny camera and began clicking on each page. There were fifteen pages of data. Jerry watched her in disbelief. When she had photographed the entire contents of the file she neatly placed the pages back inside and returned it to the shelf. "We're out of here," she announced, locking the closet door. After stepping into the hall, Sheila locked Jeff's office. "Piece of cake," she said, smiling at Jerry.

"We'll party later," he stated, escorting her quickly out of the building.

"Wait," she said, stopping in midflight. "We better get the laptop out of my office."

"Good thinking, as usual," Jerry interjected.

Sheila stopped at her own office and retrieved the computer. At the main entrance, the doorman looked up and nodded.

"Have a nice weekend," he called out.

"We definitely will," Sheila said, "and you have great weekend, too."

The doorman thought momentarily about signing in for the two visitors. They weren't visitors, he reasoned to himself. They work here. He turned back to his tiny television and the Atlanta Braves. This was turning out to be a pretty good game.

Sheila and Jerry walked quickly to the car. They had parked Sheila's car just outside the employees' entrance. This was a critical and final move, and they did not want anyone to place them in the area after hours. "Do you think the doorman suspected anything?" Jerry asked.

"Not so long as he was staring at my chest," Sheila said. "I hate that. I always want to tell people not to talk to 'them.' 'They' can't answer you."

"Sometimes it's actually beneficial," Jerry interjected.

"Yeah, but it's always annoying."

They drove through the city at a snail's crawl. It was Friday and rush hour in Atlanta. They had been sitting still at a traffic light, watching it turn from green to red for the third time. "We're never going to get through this light," he announced. "Do you think we should put through a change of address with the post office?" When he got no response, he looked over to find Sheila staring at a display case filled with wedding dresses in a store window. Jerry forgot all about the traffic and reached out to hold her hand. Neither one of them said anything. Jerry was surprised that his outrageously independent career girl was even

remotely interested in the whole idea. "You would be a beautiful bride," Jerry ventured. Sheila released her hand from his and slid closer to him, placing her head against his.

"Not yet."

"When?" he asked, pulling her closer.

Sheila stayed in the comfortable embrace for a few moments before meeting his gaze.

"I can't think about anything until I take Dominex out," she said, staring at him solemnly.

Jerry had been wondering how both their lives would be affected by the rise or fall of Dominex Pharmaceuticals.

"Sheila," he said carefully. "What if everything goes exactly the way you want it to?"

"That would be lovely," she said with a confused expression. "Why do you ask?"

"Because it might not be enough. Sometimes the wanting is far more powerful than the reality of having."

"You're getting very philosophical on me," she said teasingly. Jerry did not respond. The light finally changed, and they became the chosen few, while a mile of cars behind them were left in traffic purgatory. "Jerry," she said more seriously, "it will be enough."

He glanced at her, momentarily taking his eyes off the road, and studied her face.

"I hope so," he said simply.

Jerry drove while Sheila fiddled with the radio. It was her favorite passenger activity. While Jagger sang, "You Can't Always Get What You Want," he decided that the whole thing would play itself out and all the discussion along the way was pointless. The irony of the song was not lost on either one of them. Jerry pulled into the underground parking area and Sheila anxiously bolted from the car to evaluate the prize from Jeff Edwards's office.

The tiny camera was plugged into her computer and it downloaded fifteen shots. Zooming in on each page, she was able to make out the words. "Check this out," she called to Jerry.

Jerry came over and sat down next to her.

"What the hell is this?" he asked, after reading the material on several pictures.

"This is the final data for the FDA," Sheila explained with a smile.

"How can they get away with this?"

"That's a very good question," she agreed, moving towards the phone.

"Who are you calling?" Jerry asked.

"It's time to give my friend in New Jersey a heads up." Jerry turned back to the screen and continued scanning the pages in disbelief. "This is going to get very interesting"

"Yeah, for everyone," Sheila added, while she waited for her friend to pick up the phone.

Chapter 25

It was nine in the morning on a rainy Monday, and the Honorable Judge Grover was presiding over the AJC/ Dominex arbitration. Both parties had agreed to an informal hearing, confident that it would result in a speedy conclusion for their own side. Both were satisfied in Judge Grover for the proceedings. Wendell Grover was known to be a fair judge, but a stickler for details. The Judge was a bench veteran. He had sat on this very bench for the past thirty years. This was his courtroom and no one ever questioned his authority. At seventy-two years old, he was a trim and muscular six foot two inches. His steel blue eyes were clear and focused. The gray at his temples was mirrored by the gray streaks in his thick brown hair. He was as spry as his forty year old tennis partners, and no one ever tried to put one over on the old man.

Paul Pratt had already had numerous dealings with him in the past, which had resulted in tense confrontation. This had been primarily due to his propensity for illusion. The judge had not been impressed with his “rabbit out of the hat” tricks. Wendy Cox was counting on the reputation of Judge Grover. As far as she was concerned, this whole case was just one more hat trick.

Both attorneys sat in the Judge’s chambers while Pratt argued for his motion to suppress a witness’s identity. The judge looked at him with an amused expression. “And the purpose for this person’s anonymity still alludes me counselor.”

Pratt had to think fast. The reason was as good as an announcement of Pam Carter’s identity.

“Your Honor, this person is related to the witness. Forcing them to come forward publicly could potentially destroy a family.”

“That would be unfortunate,” Grover agreed, “but this case is the result of some very deliberate acts. I have no choice but to deny your motion.”

“But your Honor,” Pratt interjected.

“The family issue should have been considered long before this case was brought to me and the tax payers,” the judge said with finality. “If this witness has pertinent information, we will hear it publicly.” Pratt knew the discussion was over. Cox gave herself an imaginary high five.

“Now are there any other motions before we begin?” Both attorneys mumbled,

“No, your Honor”

“Good. Then I will hear from the plaintiff.”

Paul Pratt reluctantly began his initial presentation.

“Your Honor, we intend to show that the article appearing in the Atlanta Journal Constitution on Sunday, May the fourth, was without basis and therefore libelous.” The Judge nodded for Pratt to proceed. “The article made very specific statements regarding the research that’s being conducted by Dominex Pharmaceuticals.”

“I have read the article,” Grover stated. “What statements are you contesting?”

“The paper stated that Dominex purposefully altered the study by re-introducing the medication to its volunteers under the guise of vitamins.”

“Are you telling me that it didn’t happen that way?”

"No, your Honor," Pratt said humbly. "Dominex Pharmaceuticals sent some of the volunteers for medical treatment, but were unaware of the specific methods used by Dr. Donovan. He apparently used the re-introduction of the sedative as a way of curing the volunteer's withdrawal symptoms. However, this was done without the company's knowledge."

"I see," the Judge stated skeptically. "Anything else?"

"Yes, your Honor," Pratt continued. "We are also contesting the statement made by the paper regarding the level of addictiveness of this particular medication. The allegations were made towards a wide range of sedatives, concluding that Suprame was as addictive as the other twenty medications. The study on this specific medication has not yet been concluded. How could a newspaper draw conclusions to a study that our medical experts were not yet able to conclude?"

"Good point," the Judge stated. "Does the paper have a response?"

"We do," Cox said, rising to the occasion. "The conclusion was made on the basis that the compound used in Valipene is almost identical to Suprame and every other sedative on the market. They all contain the substance, Benzodiazepine. There is so little difference between the drugs that the FDA allowed Dominex to conduct the study with the substitute drug Valipene, just to allow the company to save time in their research study."

The Judge considered this statement for a moment and made a few notes before continuing.

"Is there any more from the plaintiff?"

"No, your Honor."

"Fine," the Judge concluded. "Does the defense have anything to add?"

Cox cleared her throat.

"Your Honor, the information printed by the paper was substantiated by several witnesses, specifically by the wife of Terry Sanders."

"Objection," Pratt interjected. "This witness was not disclosed to me."

"This is an informal hearing," the Judge reminded him. "No one has been required to disclose any witnesses and may I remind you of your motion to suppress the identity of your own witness. Over ruled."

Pratt sat back down and Wendy Cox smiled to herself before continuing.

"The testimony of Mrs. Sanders will show that Terry Sanders attempted to contact the company several times, informing them of the doctors actions, and was continually ignored. It is highly unlikely that Dominex was unaware of the re-introduction of the drug, if not controlling the whole process."

"Your honor," Pratt said, coming to his feet. "That statement is unsubstantiated. Incompetent secretaries lose phone messages all the time."

"Is that your position counselor? All of the phone messages were lost by incompetent secretaries?"

"No, your Honor," Pratt said carefully. "We are not aware of any messages from Terry Sanders. We therefore can only conclude that either Mrs. Sanders is incorrect in her statement or that the messages were lost."

"Very good," the Judge said sarcastically, "but I will allow the witness's testimony along with any reasonable conclusion."

"Thank you, your Honor. The defense has nothing further," Cox concluded.

"Alright," Judge Grover announced. "I will hear from all witnesses this afternoon in my chambers and I want the paper to provide an expert witness on the chemical breakdown of Suprame as it compares to all other sedatives."

Cox nodded her agreement. She had already made those arrangements.

Wendy Cox was working diligently through lunch to prepare for the afternoon. This was still an informal hearing and she anticipated that the Judge would direct things to move swiftly through the process. The goal was always to draw a reasonable conclusion, advise both parties, and expedite a settlement. No one wanted to spend the time selecting a jury and painstakingly going over each detail if the whole situation could be resolved through arbitration. At least Cox felt that way. She couldn't really guess what Pratt wanted. There was no telling what he may have had up his sleeve when he had agreed to an informal hearing. But if they wanted a fight, she was prepared to comply.

Cox looked over the list of witnesses and felt satisfied. In each case, they all had information that would make the drug company wish they had stayed in the baby aspirin business. There was Brian Carter, the psychologist for Carter, Terry Sanders's wife, and one big fat surprise that would knock Pratt out of his chair. The guy had bit off just a little bit more than he could chew. The AJC attorney was ready for him.

Glancing at the clock, she realized that it was just about time to go. Cox jotted down a few more notes and headed out the door. All of the witnesses were due to arrive at the courthouse shortly after one o'clock. This way she could bring them in at her own discretion.

She was not surprised to see Pratt accompanied by a small army of assistants when she walked back into the Judge's chambers. The guy was such a weasel.

"I see that everyone is here," the Judge announced. "I had preferred an informal hearing," he stated, annoyed at the size of the group, "but since Dominex feels the need for so much back up, we will have to conduct the rest of this hearing in the courtroom." Everyone followed the Judge into the large room and waited for the court reporter to set up the equipment.

"Are there any motions at this time?" Grover began. Both attorneys stated that there were none. "Fine," he concluded, "then I will hear from the plaintiff. Mr. Pratt and company, do you have any additional testimony?"

"Not at this time, your Honor," Pratt said, getting to his feet. "We request the right to re-open plaintiff's argument at a later date."

Very clever, Cox thought. Why open up any cans of worms if the defense doesn't make them an issue.

"I'll allow a rebuttal," the Judge ruled. "Ms. Cox, you seem to be outnumbered. Do you have any testimony?"

"We do," Cox said, ready to get this show on the road. "I'd like to call Brian Carter to the stand."

"Bailiff, please show Mr. Carter into the courtroom."

Brian entered from the back of the room and made his way to the witness stand. While he was being sworn in, Cox could see Pratt smiling. Brian stepped up into the box and took his seat.

"Mr. Carter, could you state your name for the record?"

"Brian Carter," he announced confidently.

"And could you please tell the court in your own words, what your connection is with Dominex Pharmaceuticals?"

"I had been prescribed Valipene for anxiety and difficulty sleeping four years ago. The medication was very expensive, so when I heard about the study that Dominex was doing, I decided to participate."

"What made you do that?" Cox prompted.

"They were offering a lifetime of free medication for anyone who participated in the study."

"I see," Cox confirmed. "Go on."

"Well, the study required us to stop taking our medication for six weeks. But after the first five days, I became extremely sick from the withdrawal."

"Objection," Pratt yelled. "Mr. Carter is not a doctor."

"Sustained."

"Mr. Carter," Cox redirected, "could you describe your symptoms that began on the fifth day of abstinence?"

"Yes. I became very weak and dizzy. My hands and feet had a tingling sensation, I had severe abdominal cramping, and I began to have panic attacks."

"And had you ever experienced any of these symptoms before?"

"No, never," Brian confirmed.

"Your honor, at this time, I'd like to have this publication of the American Journal of Medicine placed into evidence," Cox said, handing the thick documentation to the bench. There was no objection from Pratt and Cox continued. "I would like to direct your attention to an article on sedative withdrawal, written by Doctor Sara Bentley, a renowned addictionologist."

"Proceed," the Judge directed.

Cox pulled a sheet of paper out of her stack on the table and began reading.

"According to this expert, the following is a description of sedative withdrawal symptoms: weakness, dizziness, body tremors, anxiety, depression, confused thinking, abdominal cramping, high blood pressure, unfound fears..."

"Thank you," the Judge interrupted. "I think we get the gist."

"Your Honor," Pratt said, coming to his feet once again. "This article discusses symptoms related to existing sedative termination. We have yet to establish its relevance to a drug that has not been completely evaluated."

"I'm allowing the article into evidence," Grover stated. "Mr. Carter, please continue."

Brian had to shake himself to remember where he was in his story. He had been so impressed with Cox's fancy footwork.

"I had no idea what was wrong with me at the time," he continued. "I thought I had the flu and remained at home until I received a phone call from Sam Reynolds."

"For the record," Cox interjected, "Mr. Reynolds is the Vice President of Dominex Pharmaceuticals." Cox nodded for Brian to continue.

"He asked me how I was doing and directed me to see a Doctor Donovan. He said that the company would cover my expenses."

"And did you find it odd that the company's vice president would be making the contact himself?"

"Objection," Pratt stated, "this witness is not in a position to determine company protocol."

"Sustained."

"What did you do then?" Cox continued.

"I went to the doctor's office that afternoon and was given a small brown envelope. The doctor told me it was vitamins."

"Did you notice anything unusual about your visit with the doctor?"

"Yes," Brian answered. "When he went into a locked cabinet for the vitamins, I noticed that the entire cabinet was overloaded with the same brown envelopes. I asked him if he was preparing for an epidemic and he said he had a very generous sales rep." Cox nodded and waited for an objection. Pratt remained quiet.

"How did you respond to the vitamins?" the attorney continued.

"I was almost symptom-free within three days," Brian confirmed.

"You must have been relieved."

"Sure," Brian agreed, "until I spoke to another volunteer."

"What happened then?"

"She told me that she really didn't think that vitamins were a cure for sedative withdrawal."

"Objection," Pratt interjected.

"I mean for my symptoms," Brian restated, before the Judge could rule.

"Go on," Cox prodded.

"I went to the Newberg Mental Health Center where I received a drug screen."

"And what were the results?"

"I was positive for benzodiazepines."

"I have nothing further," Cox concluded.

"Your witness," the Judge directed.

Pratt had no intention of contesting the drug screen result. He was sure it had been done and that it was positive. His only way around this piece of evidence was to discredit the addict.

"Mr. Carter," Pratt began, "how long had you been off your medication before you had this drug screen?"

"Three to four weeks," Brian answered.

"Was it three or four?" Pratt demanded.

Brian thought for a few moments, adding up the time in his head.

"It was four."

"And did you obtain drugs from any other source during that time?"

"I did not," Brian answered calmly.

"But you indicated that you had become addicted to your medication," Pratt reasoned.

"Is the attorney asking a question?" Cox interjected.

"Yes, Mr. Pratt," the Judge agreed. "Get on with it."

"Your Honor, we are trying to establish this witness's condition at the time of his so called abstinence," Pratt explained.

"Then ask a question," the Judge directed.

"Mr. Carter, are you addicted to Valipene?"

"Yes," Brian answered carefully.

"And were you compelled to continue taking it, even though you had planned to stop only long enough to get your drugs for free?"

Brian began to squirm in his chair. This guy was trying to make him look like a street addict. He thought quickly, trying to remember everything he had learned from Carol. *Don't get defensive*, he thought to himself. *This is not about character; it's a physiological condition.*

"Once I became aware of my addiction," Brian stated calmly, "I was no longer willing to take it."

"I see," Pratt added skeptically.

"So, you wouldn't have obtained the drug from some other source?"

"No," Brian answered.

"Even though you were too sick to leave your house?"

"That's correct."

"Well then," Pratt concluded, "you'd be the first addict I ever met who didn't want to keep using."

"Objection," Cox said angrily.

"Sustained," the Judge said, giving Pratt a look of warning.

"Your Honor," Pratt interjected. "I'm simply pointing out that addicts do relapse. We have no way of knowing where this man got those drugs before testing positive for the substance."

"The witness stated that he did not obtain drugs from an outside source," Cox stated. "The question was asked and answered."

"And addicts never lie," Pratt sneered.

"Mr. Pratt," the Judge said, pointing a finger in his direction, "I'm warning you. One more outburst like that and I'll hold you in contempt."

"Yes, your Honor," Pratt said calmly. The point had been made, and he was sure the judge had understood his message.

"Mr. Carter," the attorney continued, "did you say you had been taking this medication for four years?"

"I did."

"And can you tell the court what you were taking this medication for?"

"As I already stated," Brian said, feeling his patience melting away, "I was taking it for anxiety and difficulty sleeping."

"And what was your diagnosis?" Pratt interjected.

"I believe it was Generalized Anxiety Disorder."

"Well, that's a very serious condition, isn't it?"

"Objection," Cox interjected. "The witness is not a doctor."

"Sustained."

"How long have you had this condition?" Pratt continued.

"A little over four years."

"And in four years, how many doctors have you seen?"

Brian looked over at Cox, who nodded at him to answer the question.

"Three," Brian stated.

"Three doctors," Pratt repeated incredulously. "Why so many?"

"Because the first two wanted to send me to a psychiatrist."

"And you didn't want to do that?"

"No, I didn't," he confirmed.

"What made the third doctor acceptable?"

"He provided me with a medication," Brian said, feeling defeated.

"And if you hadn't gotten what you wanted from the third doctor, you would have moved on to number four. Isn't that true?"

"I'm not sure what I would have done," Brian answered quietly.

“Nothing further,” Pratt announced, happily. Brian looked down at his hands in despair. How could he explain the emotional process that had led him to his addiction, when he was only now coming to grips with it himself?

“Your Honor,” Brian said, “Can I make a statement?”

“This is an informal hearing,” the Judge explained. “Make your statement.”

“No one willingly walks into an addiction or even sees it coming,” he began. “You believe that doctors know what they are doing, and if you feel some relief as a result of what they prescribe, you aren’t likely to question the solution. I think that sedatives are the deadliest of all the addictive substances because as they are slowly and systematically altering your brain, you feel nothing. I didn’t feel one moment of discomfort or dependence. Alcoholics and cocaine addicts can see the effect the substance is having on them. Sedative addicts see and feel no change, except the ability to sleep at night. The reality of what has happened to us doesn’t hit us until after the damage is done. We are outraged at the doctors that kept prescribing the poison to us month after month. We are furious at a government organization that has failed to warn or protect us. We are baffled at how the drug companies have managed to get away with this for so long. But we are most of all humbled by the whole experience. My ability to function and be the person I was has been taken away from me, and the only one I really have to blame for that is myself. There can be no medication solution to a life problem. I should have known that. I do now.”

“Thank you, Mr. Carter,” the Judge concluded, giving Brian a sympathetic nod. “You may step down.”

“Your Honor,” Pratt said, coming to his feet, “at this time, we would like to introduce a witness in response to Mr. Carter’s testimony.”

“Proceed,” the judge directed.

Pratt nodded to one of his assistants, who walked to the back of the room and through the door. The courtroom was silent as the argument in the hallway outside began to increase in volume. A woman was very clearly upset and unwilling to enter the courtroom. After several minutes of unsuccessful debate, the young attorney entered the room with a very bewildered look on his face.

“Bailiff, please accompany plaintiff’s attorney and retrieve the witness,” Grover directed.

After several more minutes of angry yelling in the hallway, the door swung open, and a hand cuffed Pam Carter angrily entered the room. Her hands were secured behind her back, while the bailiff held her firmly by one arm, leading her to the front of the room. Brian sat on the sidelines watching his wife fighting to pull her arm away from the bailiff. If the scene weren’t so tragic, it would have been funny.

Pam Carter fought all the way to the front of the room and stood before the judge red-faced and out of breath. The clerk attempted to swear her in; however, instead of agreeing to tell the whole truth, etcetera, the clerk received a “Bite me” instead.

“Mrs. Carter,” the judge said calmly. “You will either cooperate with these proceedings or spend the night in jail.”

“Fine,” Pam said angrily.

“Does that mean that you will agree to be sworn in?”

“Whatever,” she responded.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Grover said with a slight smile.

A few people in the courtroom laughed, causing Pam to spin around. She suddenly found herself face to face with her husband, who was looking at her in disbelief. Shrugging him off, she turned back around to face the judge. Again the clerk attempted to swear her in. This time she responded with a weak acceptance and took the stand.

"Mrs. Carter," Pratt began, "can you please tell the court what your relationship is to Brian Carter?"

"He's my husband," she mumbled.

"And how long have you been married?"

"Twelve years," Pam announced flatly.

"During that time, have you ever observed your husband over reacting to an illness?"

"It's possible," she mumbled.

Pratt had expected her to down-play her testimony as much as possible and was prepared for her vague responses.

"Possible?" he repeated. "Then tell me, Mrs. Carter, have you ever thought that your husband complained of an illness, when indeed nothing was actually wrong with him?"

Pam looked out over the courtroom and made eye contact with Brian. Her gaze was cold and foreign to him. Who was this woman, deliberately tearing down his integrity?

"It appeared that way to me," she answered vaguely.

"Can you give us an example?"

"Not really," she said, folding her arms over her chest.

"And why is that?" Pratt asked.

"Can't remember," she said cryptically. The attorney had been waiting for the opportune moment.

"Well, perhaps this will jog your memory," he said happily, and accepted the paper an assistant was holding out for him. "Mrs. Carter," he began. "Can you identify this document?" Pam just nodded.

"Mrs. Carter," the Judge advised, "you must verbalize your answers."

"Yeah," she stated flatly.

"Is this an affidavit signed by you?"

Another "Yeah" was offered.

"Then will you please read the highlighted area for the court?" Pratt instructed.

Pam stared at the paper as though it was going to explode in her hands.

"On several occasions, and especially in the last few months, I have observed Brian Carter complaining of extreme and unusual symptoms. The alleged illnesses, however, have not affected his ability to function in any way. It is this contradiction in his behavior that has brought me to the conclusion that the symptoms must not have been real, but rather imagined by a hypochondriac."

"Objection," Cox shouted. "This woman is not a psychiatrist, and therefore in no position to diagnose Mr. Carter."

"Your Honor," Pratt interjected. "We are not attempting to establish a diagnosis. This affidavit is merely providing a wife's observations."

"I'll allow it as an observation only," Grover ruled.

"Mrs. Carter," Pratt continued, "will you now read the second highlighted area?"

Pam scanned the dreaded material before proceeding.

“Brian Carter has seen numerous doctors over the past four years. In each case, he would refuse to return if a doctor suggested psychiatric treatment. This repeated occurrence by numerous physicians confirmed to me that his issue was psychological and not physical.”

“Same objection,” Cox said, tiredly.

“Overruled, under the same premise,” the Judge stated, “but you are walking a thin line, Mr. Pratt.”

“Sorry, your Honor,” Pratt said sincerely. “We are simply trying to shed some light on the questionable and subjective testimony of Mr. Carter.”

“Fine,” the judge concluded. “I believe that you have taken the subjective train as far as it will go. Is there anything else for this witness?”

“No,” Pratt stated.

“Your witness,” Grover directed.

“Mrs. Carter,” Cox said, staying seated. “How much have you been paid for this testimony?”

Pam pretended to calculate the amount in her head.

“It will be a total of forty thousand dollars,” she stated.

“And what do you mean when you say ‘it will be’?”

“I received ten thousand for my sworn affidavit, and I will receive an additional thirty thousand for the combined waive of deposition and testimony today.”

“Sounds like good incentive to say anything,” Cox observed.

“Objection,” Pratt interjected.

“Withdrawn,” Cox said, waving her hand at the witness dismissively as she would an annoying fly. “I have no further questions for this woman.” The word “woman” was said with disdain.

Pam left the courtroom and Brian knew he would not see her again. Oddly, he was okay with that. She had ended their marriage for forty thousand dollars.

“We have time for one more witness today,” the judge announced. “Ms. Cox, you may proceed.”

“I would like to call Dr. Bradford to the stand.”

Quietly, the bailiff opened the back door and repeated the request to the corridor. The doctor walked calmly up to the front of the room to be sworn in. “Dr. Bradford,” Wendy began, “can you please tell us about your specialty as a psychologist?”

“I am a forensic psychologist.”

“And what is a forensic psychologist?”

“I evaluate the emotional state of an individual as it pertains to a court proceeding,” the doctor explained. The attorney nodded.

“And did you evaluate Brian Carter for presentation in this court case?”

“Yes, I did.”

“What were your findings?”

“I found Brian Carter to be completely oriented and rational.”

“And what brought you to this conclusion?” Cox asked.

“He did not offer anything that could be interpreted as imaginary or unfounded.”

Cox was satisfied with this statement. It was precise and left little to the imagination.

“No further questions,” she concluded.

“Your witness,” Grover directed.

"Dr. Bradford," Pratt began, getting to his feet. "How much time did you spend with Brian Carter?"

"About an hour," Bradford offered.

"And in that short space of time you were able to come to that conclusion?" Pratt questioned, suspiciously.

"Yes," the doctor confirmed. "That is what doctors do."

There were a few chuckles from the courtroom. Pratt was not detoured.

"What specifically took place during your evaluation to lead you to this amazing conclusion?"

"I asked Mr. Carter what he planned to do about his addiction. He didn't complain about his illness or blame anyone for his situation. He simply stated that he was going to have to deal with it."

When no additional information was given, Pratt made a grand gesture of waiting in silence. After an awkward void in the proceedings, he said, "And that's it?"

"Yes," Bradford agreed. "Hypochondriacs do not report their symptoms accurately. They exaggerate or fabricate their illness. Further, there is usually someone to blame for their predicament. In the hour I spent with Brian Carter, he presented factually and objectively. True hypochondriacs are not capable of interacting in this way."

Pratt was backed into a corner. He had not succeeded in discrediting the evaluation, nor did he have a psychiatrist of his own to disagree with Bradford's testimony. He had assumed that Pam Carter's input would create enough of a question in the Judge's mind. But she had been unconvincing, to say the least. He only had one last bullet. "Dr. Bradford," Pratt continued. "Are you a psychiatrist?"

"No, as stated originally, I am a psychologist."

"I see," Pratt said, nodding slowly. "Then you are not a medical doctor and therefore unable to prescribe medication. Is that true?"

"It is."

"Then is it also true that you are not qualified to evaluate the effect of medications on a patient?"

"Technically, that is also true, but..."

"Thank you, Doctor," Pratt said, cutting off his explanation. He had gotten what he had gone after. "Nothing further."

Wendy Cox was standing. "Dr. Bradford," she stated, "what medical conditions are psychologists legally able to evaluate?"

"We are able to assess the psychological effects of a medication on a patient."

"Thank you, Doctor."

"You may step down," Grover directed. "We'll continue with this at nine AM. And on that, ladies and gentlemen, we're adjourned."

Wendy patted Brian on the back. He looked up at her sadly. "What is that long face for?" she asked.

"This was a lovely experience," he sighed.

"Yes," she agreed, "but you did great. Stop worrying."

Everyone shuffled out of the courtroom. Pratt and his cronies were laughing loudly about some funny remark. "Asshole," Wendy said quietly, and escaped through the back door.

The following morning, Pratt was accompanied by the same entourage. He knew the judge didn't approve, but he liked using intimidation. He looked over at the defense attorney. Wendy Cox sat by herself, looking very outnumbered. He was pleased with the image.

"Is the defense ready to proceed?" Grover directed. Wendy had thought about bringing on Terry Sanders' wife. Her testimony would restate much of what Brian Carter had already said. The most obvious cross would consist of the fact that not only was her testimony hearsay, but that she wasn't even living with Terry at the time of his drug use. Wendy would save that card. She needed to cut to the chase.

"Your Honor, the defense calls Dr. George Donovan to the stand."

Cox looked over at Pratt and could actually see the veins sticking out of his neck. He couldn't object to a surprise witness. It was only arbitration. Donovan emerged from the back of the room and walked confidently up to the stand. While being sworn in, he could feel Pratt's cold hard stare. He did not make eye contact.

"Dr. Donovan," Cox began. "You are a medical doctor, is that correct?"

"I am."

"And as a medical doctor, are you able to prescribe medications and evaluate their effect on patients?"

"Of course," Donovan said.

"Well, that should please my colleague," the attorney announced. Pratt sat glaring at the good doctor. "We are all aware that you provided Dominex's research volunteers with some follow up medical treatment," Cox continued. "Can you please describe to the court the nature of that treatment?"

Donovan cleared his throat and sat up in the seat. He had been waiting for this moment, ever since Dominex had all but ruined his practice and then abandoned him.

"The patients referred to me by Dominex were in sedative withdrawal," the doctor began.

"Can you describe what you mean by sedative withdrawal?"

"Yes. In each case the patient had been taking Valipene longer than the safe period of a few weeks. Over an extended period of time the drug will over-stimulate the part of the brain that provides natural sedation. As a result, the brain's function becomes damaged. When the patient stops taking the drug, they no longer have the balance that that part of the brain provides, and the person experiences a state of anxiety or over stimulation."

Cox nodded. They had worked on a layman's description and Donovan had done a good job of simplifying a very complex answer.

"And what are the symptoms of sedative withdrawal?"

"Weakness, dizziness, extreme fatigue, cognitive impairment, anxiety, panic attacks, insomnia, and exaggerated fears, to name just a few."

"All of that, just from stopping the drug?" the attorney asked incredulously.

"Yes," the doctor confirmed. "You see, in any addiction there is what we call the 'rebound effect.' The withdrawal symptoms will mirror the opposite effect that the drug provided. Unfortunately, the symptoms are not only opposing, but greatly exaggerated."

"Thank you," Cox said. "Now, can you tell us how you treated these unfortunate victims?"

"Objection," Pratt bellowed, "counselor is dramatizing. There has been no indication of a crime here."

"Sustained," the Judge said.

"For these patients," Cox said sarcastically.

"I was instructed to provide the volunteers with the new sedative, Suprame, to stabilize them."

"And were you given a reason for this tactic," Cox interjected.

"Dominex wanted to minimize the difficulty these patients were having so that the outcome of the study would be beneficial."

"So, we may gather from this that the company was well aware of the damage these sedatives had caused their volunteers, isn't that correct?"

"I think they were somewhat surprised at the magnitude of the problem, but yes, they were entirely aware of the situation by the time these patients were referred to me."

"Thank you, Doctor, I have nothing further."

Pratt made the distance to the witness in three long strides. "Dr. Donovan, can you please explain the nature of your practice?"

"I provide a family practice," the doctor stated.

"Really?" Pratt asked incredulously. "And if the court were to subpoena your records, I guess they would find that your patients are all nice normal family people."

"Objection," Cox interjected.

"Withdrawn," Pratt said. He knew full-well that Donovan's patients were all street addicts, but had no way of proving that today. This man's appearance had been a surprise. "And what proof can you offer this court that Dominex instructed you to treat these patients with sedatives?" the attorney added.

"My word," the doctor said indignantly. Pratt wanted to tear this drug dealers head off, but could not think of how to do that with any credibility.

"Your Honor," Pratt said, "request side bar?"

"Approach," the Judge ordered. Cox and Pratt both came forward.

"Your Honor," Pratt continued, "this witness's testimony is unfounded, but I need a day to provide proof of that."

"I'll do you one better," Grover offered. "This witness may step down, and I'd like to see both attorneys in my chambers. Mr. Pratt, you will leave your entourage outside."

Donovan stepped down and walked through the courtroom, crossing paths with Pratt. "You screwed with the wrong guy," the doctor said in passing, but only loudly enough to be heard by Pratt.

"It's not over yet, asshole," Pratt returned, as he marched past the doctor.

All three went quietly into a smaller room. "Be seated," the judge directed. Grover had heard enough. There was no doubt in his mind that Dominex had done everything the newspaper had reported, and probably more that had not yet been revealed. "Mr. Pratt," he began, "I strongly recommend that you stop wasting the court's time. From the testimony provided so far, I find the newspaper to have been responsible and fully within its rights under the first amendment."

"I can provide additional information that will show Doctor Donovan to be an unreliable witness," Pratt said defensively.

"If you do that," Grover warned, "I will be ordering a complete investigation of the Doctor's practice as well as the antics of your company for the past thirty years."

Pratt quietly weighed the benefit of pursuing a trial versus the consequences of moving forward. The company needed to show an active objection to the article, and a retraction by the

paper would have cleared any real suspicion about their current activities. But he really didn't think that Dominex would want the publicity of the next damaging phase of this process.

"I will advise my client of your recommendation," Pratt said tactfully.

"You do that," Grover agreed. "I'll expect their decision by ten in the morning."

Both attorneys left the judge's chambers quietly.

"Have a nice day," Wendy offered in passing. She couldn't help throwing in one last shot. The guy was such a conceited weasel.

Chapter 26

"That son of a bitch," Sam said, getting up to pace. "Who the hell does he think he is? By implicating us, he implicated himself."

"Yes," Pratt agreed, "but the hearing was for the purpose of determining the validity of the newspaper article only. The doctor's actions were not an issue."

"It should have been the issue," Charles piped in.

"Well, actually," Pratt continued, "it probably will come back to bite him. He's currently under investigation, and the Judge's recommendation will be additional support for the allegations made by Carol Freeman."

"So, he'll hang eventually," Sam added, "but how does that help us now? We can't have an internal investigation. That's out!"

"How sure are we of getting FDA approval?" Pratt questioned.

"The data is pretty tight," Jeff interjected.

"We might have to drop this suit and wait for the FDA report. Once we have it, we can schedule a press release and that should sufficiently squash the article. Remember, reality is subjective. People trust the FDA. An approval from them is the universal stamp of reality."

"Worst case scenario," Jeff added, "is that we will have to provide warnings about taking the medication longer than ten days."

"Our profit projections rely on long term use," Sam countered. "That would be a bloody last ditch effort."

"Fine," Pratt concluded. "Then if we are in agreement, the Judge gave us until ten o'clock to respond. It's almost that now."

Everyone looked around the room in silence. They had been walking on thin ice for a long time now, and the whole drama was about to come to its final conclusion.

"We really have no choice," Sam said finally. "If this judge is planning to order an investigation if we proceed, it's over."

Everyone nodded in agreement.

"I'll go make the call," Pratt concluded and walked out of the conference room.

"So, what should we do about Donovan?" Jeff inquired.

"I say we do nothing," Sam stated. "Sounds to me like his payoff is coming, without our help."

"Good," Jeff agreed. "I will deliver the data myself on Friday."

"Nice touch," Sam said. "Maybe we should bring Manning some flowers, too."

"Couldn't hurt," Jeff added. "Apparently money and hookers have no effect on the man. Maybe he's the nature type."

"Can we get back to work now?" Charles asked tiredly.

"Absolutely," Jeff answered, getting to his feet. "I have medication bottles and labels to order. The production line is almost ready, too."

"Can't believe it's finally happening," the CEO said, as he followed the other two out the door.

There was a small party going on at the Atlanta Journal Constitution. Jason Sample and Sandra Jenkins were toasting their victory with sparkling apple cider. They had a full workday ahead of them. Wendy Cox had a shot of the good stuff. It was a very old and expensive brandy that she had received as a gift when she had passed the bar exam. Her tradition had always been to toast every victory with a small shot glass of the stuff she called "liquid gold." Wendy held up her shot glass and announced, "To the AJC, may it wreak havoc forever." Everyone held up their glasses. This had been a battle of wits from the beginning and the AJC had been lucky to have Wendy on their side. The victory was combined with just a little humility. They had run off, halfcocked, without anything signed, and had come very close to having to print a retraction as a result of their arrogance. That was the worst kind of defeat for a newspaper.

"Here's to the follow up story," Sandra toasted.

"Yeah," Jason agreed. "We'll call it, 'FDA Approves World Wide Addiction.'"

"Over my dead and buried body," the attorney said. "The next story about Dominex will be titled, 'Reporters Run Amuck Just Before the Fatal Stabbing.'"

Brian Carter quietly sat off to the side, smiling at the antics of the two reporters. "You guys did a great job," he said.

"Hey, you did a great job too," Jason added.

"I don't know," Brian said reflectively. "This whole thing was hard enough to believe as the victim. I wonder how seriously the rest of the world will take it."

"Seriously enough for the Chicago Sun Times to consider picking up the story," Sandra interjected.

"Yeah, it's pretty intriguing stuff," Brian agreed. "But will people remember this six months, or a year from now? What about the poor soul who didn't read the article that day? Will they know enough to throw the sedative prescription in their doctor's face when he tries to put them on Suprame for a bad back, or a stressful family issue?"

"One day at a time," Jason said, patting Brian on the back. Sandra handed him a glass of apple cider.

"Come on," she added. "Today was a victory. Hang on to that for a while."

Sheila walked into the conference room doorway and looked up and down the hall before closing the door. It was only lunchtime and she was taking a big chance that no one would see her. Sliding under the conference room table, she removed a small tape recorder that had been secured there. The tape had long since ended and the machine had automatically clicked itself off. Thank God the meeting hadn't gone on long enough for the tape to end and announce its presence to the group. Pocketing the tiny box, she entered the hallway. Still no one around. Dominex's management loved their long lunches.

She quickly walked back to her own office and closed the door. "So what's the plan?" she said out loud, as she rewound the tape. After the box clicked, she pushed the play button and listened to the entire conversation of that morning. They were proceeding with their plan. Clearly, they had no concern about her. That was good.

Chapter 27

Finally, Friday had arrived and the study team went over the final data. "Everything is in place," Jeff stated.

Sam nodded in agreement. "Go ahead and take this over to Manning."

Jeff stood up to leave.

"And Jeff," Sam added, "try and act humble."

"Sure. I'll be Miss Congeniality."

Charles had eagerly provided his car and driver for this great mission. All of Jeff's hard work had come down to an hour of luxury. He allowed the driver to open the door for him, as he slid into the spacious back seat of the CEO's car. The driver did not have to ask where they were going. He had already been given complete instructions. As they pulled away from the curb, Jeff began to take in the interior of the car. The plush leather and sound system alone must have been an expensive add-on. There was a small portable bar that extended down from the back of the driver's seat. Jeff helped himself to a tiny glass of brandy. He was a little nervous about this encounter.

From what he had been told, Manning was not going to be user-friendly. The brandy burned his throat on the way down, but he could feel himself starting to relax. Traffic was pretty light for mid-day Atlanta and the car made the trip in less than twenty minutes. "Would you like a breath mint?" the driver offered.

"As a matter of fact, that's not a bad idea."

On his way into the building, he thought, *Breath mints must be standard gear.* He rode the elevator up to the top floor and found his way to David Manning's office. After announcing who he was, Jeff was instructed to take a seat while the secretary announced his arrival. "I have a Jeff Edwards from Dominex Pharmaceuticals to see you." The woman listened for a moment and then hung up. "He'll be with you shortly."

Jeff occupied the time by reading some literature about the FDA that was sitting on the table beside him. The brandy had done its job and he only really grasped about five percent of what he was reading. Thirty minutes later he had gotten all the way through the boring document and set it back on the table. This was pay back from Manning. *Oh well, if this is as bad as it gets, I can give him the whole day.*

Forty-five minutes after Jeff had arrived he was told that Mr. Manning would see him. Jeff picked up the heavy brief case and walked into the office. "Mr. Edwards," David said, not looking up from his desk. "Have a seat." Jeff sat down and set the brief case on the chair next to him. "I believe you have something for me," Manning said, still not looking up.

Jeff couldn't believe this guy. He had rudeness elevated to a whole new level. He opened the briefcase and handed Manning the larger of two packages. David looked up to see a thick envelope being slid across his desk.

"Let's have a look, shall we?" he said cheerfully. Jeff was already feeling uneasy. The guy was too happy. David Manning spent the next twenty minutes silently going over each page while Jeff continued to shift uncomfortably in his chair. Finally, David looked up from the data and set his reading glasses down. "All of these volunteers are identified with numbers," he

announced.

"That's correct," Jeff agreed.

"In light of the reports we have received from other sources, and especially the Atlanta Journal Constitution, I will have to have the names of each individual before I can review this data."

Jeff and company had already assumed that Manning would demand this information. Reaching into the briefcase, Jeff handed him the second package. David Manning was presented with five hundred names and phone numbers. "Well, that was very efficient," Manning said. "I will have a decision for you sometime next week."

"Great," Jeff said, standing to shake his hand. David Manning did not respond and Jeff awkwardly put his hand in his coat pocket. He left the office wondering what was going on in the man's head.

David Manning looked at the data in disbelief. Despite all the trouble Dominex reportedly had had with this study, the results were glowing. A minor two percent were reported to have had difficulty with the termination; however, symptoms were not conclusively connected to the stopping of their medication. David picked up his phone and waited. "Winston," he began, "I have the Dominex data. Tell your group to meet me in the conference room. It's going to be a long weekend." He hung up the phone feeling charged and ready for the kill. They were not going to do spot checks. He intended to contact all five hundred volunteers, and there was no better time to reach people at home than after five and on the weekends. If there was one piece of information reported incorrectly, they would be required to re-do the entire study. Manning couldn't wait to see them fry.

He picked up the two envelopes and headed out the door. He told his secretary to call his wife and let her know that the Dominex data had arrived. "She'll know what that means," he explained to her. They had been discussing Dominex for months. She wasn't going to see much of him this weekend. When he arrived at the conference room doorway, all of the five designated personnel were waiting for him.

Winston Barber had been assigned to head the review of the final data, along with four other department members. Manning had chosen him due to his past eagerness to work overtime. Winston was a hungry, twenty three year old up-start addition to the FDA. He was never opposed to working long hours or weekends, unlike the standard company issued federal workers that put in their thirty-five hours and disappeared. Manning couldn't even fathom what the reaction would have been from most of the FDA employees, had he approached them with this weekend plan.

"Thank you all for volunteering for this project," David began. The truth was that the overtime money was only part of the incentive. David had promised each one of them a week off with pay for working through the weekend. All five people nodded acceptance of his praise. "We have five hundred phone calls to make," he continued. "I will be here to monitor our progress." Handing the second package to Winston, he said, "We will need five copies of this list. You can divide the list alphabetically or by hundreds, it doesn't matter, as long as each person is contacted."

Winston handed the package to one of his team, and said, "Five, please." The young man sprinted up out of the chair to get to a copy machine. "We will need very specific information. I want to know exactly how they responded to the drug termination. Words like 'okay,' will not be acceptable. People have a tendency to define themselves in vague terms. It will be your

responsibility to facilitate specific language. Asking them to assign their symptoms to a number on a scale from one to ten is the best way to get a sense of each person's response. It's still very subjective, but it's a better tool than descriptive words. Any questions?"

A young female employee raised a tentative hand.

"What do you want us to do if we are unable to reach someone on our list?"

"Make a note of it," David instructed. "Some of these people may be away for the weekend, et cetera. We can continue to contact those people on Monday. Anything else?" He looked around the room. "In that case, I'll turn this over to Winston."

David headed back to his domain. The conference room had been equipped with five phones that were made accessible to David's office for monitoring purposes. Not only could he scrutinize the volunteers' responses, he could also supervise the way the contacts were being handled. He sat down and put his feet up on his desk. The group would need some time to get organized. He decided to spend the down time looking at pictures of his retirement cabin. The future was painted with vivid colors of David, fishing every day, and Dominex in the shitter. Life was good.

Jason and Sandra sat quietly in a cubicle, doing damage control. "We know they intend to submit the data with total confidence," Jason said.

"I just don't know how they will be able to pull this off," Sandra countered. "The study was a total failure. More than half of the volunteers got so sick they had to get back on their meds or suffer horrible withdrawal symptoms. An additional thirty percent weren't as bad off, but they still felt so uncomfortable they dropped out, too."

"That left under twenty percent of the volunteers," Jason interjected.

Sandra started doodling on a scratch pad.

"Well, they can't just submit twenty percent," she said, scratching out her handiwork.

"Let me see that," Jason said, grabbing the pad. "Create five identities for each of the remaining volunteers?"

"It's all I can come up with."

"That's ridiculous," Jason laughed. "Don't you think the FDA would pick up on that?"

"Depends," Sandra said reflectively.

Jason looked at her for a moment.

"Oh, Sandra, wait a minute. You are not suggesting that we actually investigate the FDA for corruption? Remember what Cox said?"

"Yes, and I don't think Wendy would actually stab us."

"We already had the paper's ass on the line once. I don't think I want to go that route again."

"Fine," she said unconvincingly. "No stories. But we can at least keep an eye on what's going on."

"You are a dangerous person," Jason observed.

"The Sun Times declined to run our story because of the lack of evidence and that bogus lawsuit," she added. "Maybe we can at least provide them with some added credibility. If they ran the story, I bet other cities would too."

Jason nodded his understanding. They had hit on something big, and even though it was considered to be a dangerous topic, their only hope of blowing the whistle on Dominex and the

whole sedative issue was to go nationwide with the information. Some national publicity wouldn't hurt either one of their careers either.

This was a nightmare. David listened to call after call of individuals confirming the ease at which they had sailed through the research study. *This can't be right*. It was Saturday evening and they were half-way through the list. Everything he'd heard about the study indicated that it had been a rough ride for most of the volunteers. Yet they were all confirming what Dominex had reported. He decided his presence in this process was now imperative.

David walked down to the conference room. He was going to visit some of these people. Taking Winston's master list, he circled three random names and jotted down the phone numbers. Handing the list back to Winston, he said, "I'll make these contacts myself."

First, he had to call the volunteers and find out where they lived. The first name he had chosen was Dan Copeland. He dialed the number and waited. No response. He went to number two, a Cynthia Harris. She answered on the third ring. David identified himself and the reason for his call. "Well, normally I'd love to meet with you," she offered, "but I have a sick child. Can we do this over the phone?" David needed to see some of these people face to face, but didn't want to be rude about it.

"Sure," he agreed. "Can you describe your experience with the research study?"

"Oh, I almost forgot I was in the bloody thing," she laughed. "You know, not only did I not feel any discomfort from going off my medication, I found out that I really didn't need it anymore."

"That's good," David said flatly.

"Really," she agreed, oblivious to his strange reaction. "All along, I was trying to get my meds for free. Instead, I'm free from my meds." She laughed and David attempted an understanding chuckle, but it caught in his throat.

"I appreciate your time," he concluded.

"No problem," she said, cheerfully and hung up.

Shaking his head in disbelief, he dialed the third number. Sara Morgan answered the call out of breath. "Hold on," she said. David waited. "Sorry, I ran all the way up the steps when the phone rang. I had to catch my breath." David felt hopeful. Maybe the poor girl was so sick from withdrawal that she was out of breath all the time. He told her who he was, and why he was calling.

"Oh yeah," Sara began. "Is the study over all ready?" David confirmed that it was. "You know," she continued, "I thought six weeks without my medication would be an eternity." David could feel himself sink into the chair. "I was taking it for panic attacks," she told him, "and I was a little worried about the outcome. Don't tell anyone at Dominex, but I told them I had been on the drug for PMS. That's how I got into the study. But my whole family said it was a good idea, so I said whatever I had to for the lifetime of free meds they were offering. I did really well," she concluded.

"Did you have any discomfort during the study?" David asked, hopefully.

"No, none. My family wants me to stay off the medication, but a lifetime of free stuff, well, I don't think I can pass that up." David asked her if she would be willing to meet with him for a face-to-face confirmation. "Oh, sorry," she offered. "I'm in school, and finals are next week. I need every moment." David said he understood and wished her luck on her exams.

Both people he'd contacted had been unable to meet with him. Was that strange? He didn't know, but he was determined to contact a few more. He picked up the phone and dialed Winston's extension. He was on the phone, but would be able to see his intercom button light up. David would wait. Thirty seconds later, Winston ended his call and grabbed the second one. "Give me three people that you have already spoken to. Preferably ones that you have spoken to recently, so that I have a good chance of reaching them." David could hear papers being shuffled.

"Here you go," Winston said finally, and gave him the information.

David made three more contacts. In each case, the person was friendly and helpful, but for a number of reasons, unable to see him. All gave him glowing descriptions of their experience in the study. *I give up*, he thought. *Something is very wrong here, but I can't figure out what it is.* He continued to monitor the calls with half an ear. His hopes of destroying Dominex were fading. How did those criminals pull this off?

George Donovan had had his day in court and was pretty happy about the outcome. They'd used him and they had paid for it. His own personal issue, however, was far from resolved. The medical board was breathing down his neck. They had made themselves at home in his office for the past several days. He'd painstakingly gone through every chart and destroyed a few that were impossible to "repair." His office was squeaky clean, but his anxiety level was been going through the roof.

Finally, on Friday, Sally sent him home. "You don't understand, George," she told him. "I'm not requesting that you go home, I'm threatening your life if you don't. You're driving me and everyone else crazy."

Donovan quietly obeyed her. Now, while everyone else in the free world was having a weekend, he was obsessing about Monday.

"George, stop pacing," Sally demanded.

"The Medical Board will be back in droves tomorrow," he informed her.

Sally looked up from her June bride magazine and gave him a hard stare. "George, two people are not a drove. Actually," she reflected, "I'm not sure how many are in a drove. Must be at least ten, though."

"Are you enjoying yourself?"

"Come on," she coaxed, "sit down. You've already done at least a mile. Besides, the investigator said that they would probably be done by the end of the day on Monday. So far, they have found nothing."

Donovan sat down and let out a long stream of air. "Sally, I've been thinking."

"I feel a nightmare coming on," she groaned.

"No, seriously," he said, taking her hand. "My practice has been a travesty. I've made a fortune off of desperate addicts. And what have I done for them?" Sally did not offer an answer. "I've helped them stay addicted," he said, answering his own question.

"Well, we always told ourselves that they would find their drugs somewhere, so it might as well be from us."

"Yeah," Donovan agreed. "That was very convenient. It's possible that some of them might have actually considered not using if it hadn't been so easy to get what they wanted."

"I doubt that," Sally said.

“Well, regardless,” Donovan continued, “what does it say about our life’s work when we have to change all our records and hide from the medical board?” Sally nodded her understanding. “What will we tell our son or daughter? Mommy and Daddy are licensed drug dealers?”

“I see your point. So, what do you want to do about it?”

“Let’s shift sides,” he announced.

“Become addicts?” she interjected.

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that. We could treat addicts,” he stated. “No one else in the field understands addiction the way I do. People can’t stop taking pain pills and sedatives cold turkey without becoming dangerously ill and most doctors do not understand that. Hell, they send people to detox for a few days, wait for them to stop throwing up, stabilize their blood pressure, and tell them to go to AA. Meanwhile, the person feels like Mr. Death has become a permanent roommate. You have to slowly wean patients off of pills, and since there’s no protocol for doing that, doctors won’t touch it.”

“Addicts don’t wean well,” Sally interjected.

“That’s why they need to be in a locked facility.”

“Okay, you’ve lost me,” Sally said. “We pay rent for a small medical office. Where are you going to put these people?”

“We stop paying rent,” he explained. “The cost of that place is exorbitant. We can pay for an entire building somewhere else, preferably outside the city.”

Sally thought for a few minutes.

“It could work,” she agreed.

“We owe it to the baby,” Donovan said, squeezing her hand. “Hell, we owe it to society.”

Sally couldn’t believe the turnaround she was watching. The whole experience with Dominex Pharmaceuticals must have really taken its toll on him. That and the baby had been his wake up call. She would help make this happen.

On Sunday afternoon, David Manning couldn’t stand another moment of “Pleasantville.” He dialed information and, with the phone number in hand, had accessed one of the volunteer’s addresses. If the person was home, they would see him, because he had just driven into their driveway, unannounced. It was two-thirty in the afternoon, not an inappropriate time to drop in on someone.

Leonard Sampson answered the door. He was wearing sweat pants and a tee shirt, and was holding a can of Bud light. David could hear a baseball game playing loudly in the background. He gave the man his standard introduction and asked if he could have a moment of his time. “You’re from the FDA?” Leonard asked, incredulously. David nodded. “I didn’t think you guys made house calls,” he said, backing up a few steps.

“This is an important evaluation,” David explained.

“I wish you had called,” Leonard said, nervously. “I was on my out the door.” David looked at the man’s shoeless attire. He had obviously not brushed his hair and had missed his morning shave.

“I don’t want to inconvenience you,” David said politely, “but as I said, this is an important evaluation. I only need a moment of your time.”

"I don't know what I can tell you," the man said, moving to the door. He was holding the doorknob as if he were ushering his visitor back outside. David did not budge.

"Could we sit somewhere for a minute?" Manning pressed.

"My wife is taking a nap," he stuttered. "We can sit on the front porch." David realized he was not going to gain access into this man's house and followed him outside.

The man began rocking nervously in his chair.

"Can you tell me about your experience in the research study?" David prompted.

"Well, it was very uneventful," Leonard began.

"Could you describe what you mean?"

"I stopped taking my medication. Had a few bad night's sleep." There was a long pause, and David waited but the cryptic monologue had ended.

"Anything else?" David said with an edge of annoyance.

"No," Leonard answered, "Not that I can remember." The rocking had accelerated to double time. David thought he might see Leonard launch himself into outer space.

"Well, if that's it," the man said, getting to his feet, "I really have to leave. I'm late as it is."

"Sure," David said, standing as well. "Thank you for your time."

David went to his car and drove back down the street about twenty yards. He pulled off to the side of the road in front of another vehicle and parked. After a half hour of waiting, he was convinced that Leonard was not going anywhere, but back in front of his TV. *What is up with these people?* Maybe a side effect of going off their medication was paranoia, because this group appeared to be eaten up with it. He could order psychiatric evaluations on every volunteer, but on what basis? He couldn't very well base it on the fact that none of them wanted to see him. He would sound like the one in need of some psychiatric care. "This is nuts," he said, pulling away from the curb.

On Monday morning, Carol received a visit from a tall, lanky man claiming to be from the Georgia State Medical Board. "You're actually following up on my complaint?" Carol said, leading the man into the living room.

"We follow up on all complaints," the man informed her.

"Uh huh," Carol said skeptically. "Can I get you anything to drink?"

"No, thank you. This will only take a few minutes. Now, Mrs. Freeman," the man began, "can you tell me more about this drug screen you referred to in your letter?"

Carol forgot all about the protest that was on the tip of her tongue. She hated being called Mrs. anybody. The man was asking for more information about the drug screen she had done for Brian Carter, alias Lorenzo White.

"I no longer have access to that information," Carol improvised.

"And why is that?"

"Because I no longer work for the mental health center. The records are their domain."

"I see," the man said suspiciously.

"You would need a release of information from Brian Carter," Carol offered helpfully. "In fact, you would have needed a release from him anyway."

"Do you have a phone number for Brian Carter?" the man said, tiredly. Carol went off to find Brian's phone number and scribbled it down on a piece of paper for him. The man left,

armed with the information, and got back into his car. The guy did not look happy about all the extra running around that Carol had caused him. *Thank God for bureaucracy*, she thought. It had never worked in her favor before.

Brian would never sign a release of information because there was no information under Brian Carter's name to release. She wondered how the tall, lanky man would react to Brian's refusal. *Not my problem*. She had spent her short life's work trying to force the system to give the little guy a break. Up until now the system had been an inflexible and uncaring force. She owed them nothing.

Sally brought a cup of coffee into Donovan's office and set it down in front of him. "Are they still here?" he asked.

"One is," Sally responded. "The other one hasn't made it in as yet."

"What is he doing?" the doctor inquired, tiredly.

"Going through charts, what else?"

Donovan just let out a tired sigh.

"They were all over Brian Carter's chart three times on Friday," she reported, "and once more today."

"What's so special about Carter?" he wondered out loud.

"I don't know," Sally said. "But whatever it is, they can't seem to find it."

Just then there was a knock on the door, and the second Medical Board Examiner appeared in the doorway.

"Just wanted to let you know that we're done here."

"Is there any problem?" Sally asked innocently.

"No, everything seems to be in order. The complaint remains on your record, but our findings show nothing and that will be in the record as well."

Donovan wanted to grab the guy and dance around the room with him.

"Well, thanks so much for coming," he said instead. Sally just looked at him in disbelief. It was a good thing he had decided to move onto a safer track. What little nerve he had once had was gone, and he was now a stuttering moron in the face of diversity.

The two men left the doctor's office. When they got into the elevator, the Medical Board Examiner hit the button for the ground floor. "That whole operation might be a total scam," he said to the other examiner. "But without any hard evidence..."

"Couldn't get anything from Carter, huh?" the first asked.

"Not only did Carter refuse to sign a release, he practically kicked me out of his house."

"Weird," the first man said, stepping out into the lobby.

David Manning was not prepared to sign off on the research study. Over the weekend, they had contacted about ninety percent of the volunteers. All of them confirmed the information supplied by Dominex. There'd been little to no adverse reaction to the drug termination. Some of them reported feeling better as a result and praised the drug for curing them of their previous ailment. *Give me a break*, David thought. He wasn't a doctor, but a sedative curing an anxiety disorder? It was too much for his simple mind to absorb.

There had to be an explanation for all this, but he hadn't found it. If something substantial didn't come out of the remaining ten percent, he was going to have to sign on the dotted line. He would have rather stuck needles in his eyes, but he wouldn't be able to reasonably justify another delay.

David picked up his phone and dialed in the code to access the call activity in the conference room. He listened to the steady drone of conversation that was identical to the calls he'd heard over the weekend. His head was splitting from the tension. Placing the current call on his speaker, he reached with his free hand for the aspirin in his drawer. He swallowed three of them with his cold morning coffee. Dealing with Dominex had taken him to whole new level. He was now washing down pain medication with caffeine.

There was a light tap on his door, and his secretary popped her head in a five-inch opening. "Mr. Manning," she whispered, "there's someone here to see you." David ended the call he was listening to and looked at her for more information. "Sorry to interrupt, but the phone line has been busy for a long time."

"That's okay," David told her. "I was only monitoring the calls."

"I figured that," his secretary said, opening the door wider. "There's a Sheila Montgomery here to see you."

David repeated the name and gave her an absent look.

"I give up," he said finally, "who is she?"

"She said she is with Dominex."

David just groaned and put his head in his hands.

"Those vultures won't be happy until I have a stroke. Please tell her that I'm not done with the analysis and won't be seeing anyone from Dominex until I'm finished."

"You got it," she said cheerfully, and closed the door.

David punched the code into his phone, and continued listening to the depressing dialogue. He was in the process of fishing out one more aspirin, when his secretary reappeared. David disconnected the call and looked up. "What?" he prompted.

"Mr. Manning, she said she really has to see you and that you'll be glad you met with her."

"What the hell, it can't possibly get any worse."

"Mr. Manning will see you now," the girl announced from the doorway, and went back to her desk, leaving the door open for Sheila.

"Thanks for seeing me," Sheila said, as she made her way into his office.

David just nodded.

"What can I do for you?" he said flatly.

"Mr. Manning, the question today is, what can I do for you?"

David sat up and looked at the woman seated in front of him. She was beautiful and energetic. And something else caught his attention. She was holding a thick business size envelope.

Without another word, Sheila happily presented David Manning with the only thing that was going to allow him to retire in peace. "What's this?" he asked, opening the envelope. Sheila didn't answer him. One packet of information was worth a thousand words. "This is a list of five hundred research volunteers," he stated.

"And there's something more about this list that you should know," Sheila offered. David looked up at her hopefully.

"I don't recognize a single name," he said.

Sheila nodded.

"That's because this is the real list of volunteers. And it documents each individual's true responses throughout the study."

"They gave me a list of five hundred people who weren't in the study?" he asked incredulously.

"Bingo."

Suddenly everything made sense. The glowing reports from every person they contacted had been that way for good reason. It had all been staged. The fact that no one had wanted to see him face-to-face was not due to paranoia. No one had wanted to lie to him in person. "Where did you get this?" he asked, as if she had just handed him a life raft in the middle of a raging sea.

"I compiled the original data," she said simply. "And then after the study was under way, they apparently got very creative."

"Looks that way," David said, still in shock from the realization.

"We continued to keep our own records," she announced proudly.

Dominex Pharmaceuticals had substituted a whole new set of supposed volunteers in place of the real ones. The devastation of sedative withdrawal had been replaced with five hundred happy, healthy people.

"Miss Montgomery," David began, "I don't know why you're doing this, but I can't thank you enough."

"It's Sheila," she corrected him, "and believe me, the pleasure is all mine."

David got up to shake her hand, and in all the excitement, ended up hugging her instead.

"Have a great retirement," she said on her way out the door.

"How did you know about that?" he yelled after her. Sheila stopped and turned around to face him.

"I pretty much know everything." David watched her leave with a huge smile on his face. This woman had turned out to be his guardian angel.

Sheila thanked David's secretary, as she walked by.

"You're welcome," she said, reaching for the stack the mailroom clerk was handing her.

Funny, Sheila thought. *That guy looks familiar*. She was too elated to ponder the issue and went to the elevator. The mail handler watched her leave.

Coming out of his stupor, David quickly grabbed his phone and dialed Winston's extension. He was obviously on a call and David didn't want to wait. Instead, he scooped the packet off his desk and ran out the door.

"Mr. Manning," his secretary yelled after him. "Are you okay?"

"Never better," he yelled back, and did a double heel click on his way down the hall.

Chapter 28

Everything at Dominex Pharmaceuticals was back to normal. The management team was having a pre-celebratory breakfast at the downtown Hilton Hotel in honor of the end of their study. The insanity was over and the newspaper lawsuit was fading into a bad memory. "The great thing about the public," Pratt said, setting down his coffee mug, "is that people don't seem to have much in the way of long term memory. Once we get our final approval from the FDA, no one will remember that story in the paper."

"Let's hope so," Sam agreed.

"We should be hearing something from Manning sometime this week," Jeff interjected, "and we'll have Supreme on the shelf within a month."

"I'll drink to that," Charles said, holding up his bloody Mary. No one else at the table was interested in alcohol at ten o'clock in the morning, but the CEO had developed some interesting new habits since his pending divorce. Besides his alcohol consumption, he had also started openly discussing his private life. Maybe the added alcohol contributed to his new open door policy.

"I got another letter from the bitch's lawyer," he announced, slurring the word "bitch." Everyone looked at Charles for the continuing saga. "They want half of my assets, including half of my Dominex holdings." No one knew exactly what to say to him. He held up his glass for the waitress to see. "One more, honey."

Pratt caught the glass as Charles attempted to set it down, missing the table entirely.

"No more for him," he told her. "Come with me, Charles," the attorney said, helping Charles to his feet. "It's time we took care of your little problem."

Charles allowed himself to be led out of the banquet room.

"Good thing he's got a chauffeur," Jeff remarked.

Paul Pratt led the CEO to his car and got in after him. "Dominex Building," he instructed. As the car pulled away, Paul leaned over and said, "Now listen to me. In a few days, this company is going to be worth a lot more than it is right now."

"But she has no right..." Charles began.

"Right has got nothing to do with the law," Pratt said, interrupting him. He was tired of hearing the same tirade. With all the fires out, he was going to make it his personal business to end this today.

"I'm telling you man, settle right now, before the FDA approval comes through."

Charles opened the mini bar and got himself a shot of brandy. Pratt didn't stop him. Maybe he'd be a little easier to deal with this way. "When we get back to the office," Paul continued, "I'm going to contact her lawyer."

"Good" Charles said. "Tell him to give her a little message for me."

"No," Pratt said firmly. "I am going to tell him that we agree to their terms, but that the final figures will be based on the numbers before us today and that the offer is only good until five PM. Charles began to protest and the attorney grabbed him by the arm. "Look at me," he instructed. Charles turned and stared at him with blood shot eyes. "I'm saving you a bundle. If you wait any longer, you stand to lose a whole lot more than you will today. This company is so far in the red right now, she'll end up owing you money."

“Owing me money,” he repeated. He slammed down his shot of brandy decisively, and said, “Let’s do it.”

David Manning was seated in the FDA conference room, listening to five simultaneous conversations. They had abandoned the goose chase and were calling from the real list of volunteers. The calls were going somewhat differently today. The two-minute conversations of generic babble had turned into twenty minute long tirades. Some of them were still so irate at the way Dominex had casually turned them into walking vegetables that they were demanding to know what the FDA planned to do about it. A few of the FDA team had gotten so flustered with heated calls that they had handed the phone over to Manning. He assured each one of them that their report was being taken very seriously and that the FDA was going to take action.

By lunchtime, they had contacted a third of the people on the list. The number of volunteers that had not had a bad experience could be counted on one hand. David could see a pattern forming. The only ones that did not experience extreme discomfort were the ones that had only been on the medication for a very short time. Six months or more seemed to be the kiss of death. “We’ll continue this after lunch,” he announced to the weary staff. “Continue to keep tabs on the length of time these people were on the drug before termination.” Everyone began to shuffle out the door. “Oh, and you are all doing a great job,” he added. A few of them gave him a tired smile as they walked out the door.

Michelle Roman had been trying to find a job. She really didn’t need the money. She had a very respectable savings account that had grown from years and years of living with an oblivious and unavailable husband. She had wanted a job so that she could stay busy. So when the phone rang, she hoped it was a response from one of her interviews. “Michelle,” the caller began. Her shoulders slumped a little. No job related caller would have addressed her in such a familiar way. “This is Mark Randall.” Her disappointment immediately changed to embarrassment. She hadn’t seen her attorney since their lunch date. He had attempted to meet with her a few times and she had always found a convenient excuse. She hoped she wasn’t going to have to lie to him again today.

“I just got a very interesting call,” he continued. “Your husband’s attorney has agreed to all of our terms.”

“That’s great,” Michelle said excitedly.

“But there’s a catch,” he continued.

Michelle listened while her attorney explained the conditions of the agreement.

“That doesn’t really sound like much of a catch to me,” she reasoned.

“I’m sure they were hoping you’d see it that way. But what they are asking you to do is to settle based on the companies worth today, rather than after their new wonder drug goes on the market. And I’m guessing that they expect it to happen very soon. That’s why the offer is only good today. They’re in a hurry to get this done.”

“Oh, I see,” Michelle said thoughtfully. She knew the company was in serious financial debt. She also knew that, weighed against its other long-standing assets, the numbers would still come out in her favor. “It’s a gamble,” she speculated.

"In what way?" Randall inquired.

"Charles is sure that this drug is going on the market. I am not so sure."

"Well, I did read that article in the paper," the attorney agreed, "but do you really think the company could be in that much trouble?"

Michelle thought for a few moments. The fate of the company was largely in the hands of a very weak minded individual with an over inflated sense of self-importance. "Tell them we'll take their generous offer," she instructed.

"You know something, don't you?"

"Let's just say, I know the person behind the wheel intimately. And if I had to place a bet on him..."

"I'll take care of it," the attorney concluded. "Maybe we could have a drink to celebrate."

"Let's wait and see if there is anything to celebrate first." She knew her resistance was obvious. She would eventually have to see him and set him straight about her dating rules. Married men were not on her approved list.

"I'll be in touch," he said and was gone.

Sheila entered the Dominex building two hours late and quietly made her way to the tenth floor. People were used to her odd hours. Since she had been promoted, no one had ever questioned her late arrivals or early departures. Sheila walked into Jerry's open office and announced, "Mission accomplished."

Jerry told her to close the door.

"You're going to have to give me a little more information than that."

"There's not much to tell. He was not happy with the current outcome. After I gave him the real data, he was so elated, he hugged me."

"No shit," Jerry interjected. "The FDA guy actually hugged you?"

"Yeah, and I think I saw his feet lift up off the ground a few inches."

"So now what?"

"We wait," Sheila instructed. "After the FDA completes their evaluation, Dominex is in for a serious wake up call."

"Guess I better start looking for another job," Jerry said.

"Depends on whether or not the FDA goes after any legal action against us."

"Manning," Jerry stated, "are you kidding? After what they tried to pull on him..."

"He'll be after blood," Sheila agreed.

"Maybe we'll try a new city," Jerry said, as Sheila came around the desk and placed her arm around his neck.

"Hawaii," she said invitingly.

Jerry pulled her around and placed her on his lap.

"How about a honeymoon in Hawaii?" he said as he nuzzled her ear.

"It's possible," she said, and gave him a long passionate kiss. They were still locked in the embrace when the door opened abruptly.

"I thought I'd find you here," Charles said, swaying back and forth in the doorway.

Sheila quickly stood up, and said, "You found me Charles. What can I do for you?"

"Well, for starters," Charles said, placing his hands on his hips, missing one hip entirely, "you can get off this guy's lap and get back to work."

"Sure, Charles," she said, and breezed by him in the doorway.

Jerry remained stuck inside his office with an intoxicated and jealous CEO. It was a very bad combination. "So how are you?" Jerry said, awkwardly.

"Notsogood," Charles said, running all the words together into one slur. "You should have left that one alone," he continued, indicating the hallway where Sheila had been. "She'll break your heart." Jerry didn't have a clue how to respond to this guy without insulting him, and for Charles, insults were redundant. "It's not too late," he continued. "Take it from me. You can't trust a woman."

"Thanks for the warning," Jerry improvised. Charles nodded as if he had just completed an important mission and turned to stagger back down the hall. *They really need to do something about him*, Jerry thought.

Charles continued down the hall and found his way back to his own office. "Nap time," he announced to no one and lied down on his couch. Thirty seconds later, he was out cold.

Down the hall, Paul Pratt was on the phone with Michelle Roman's attorney. He had the call on his speakerphone and his feet propped up on his desk.

"We will expect the final papers in my office by five PM," Mark Randall said, his voice carrying throughout Pratt's office. Paul looked at his watch. It was already one thirty, but the agreement was a simple fifty-fifty split and did not require any itemization.

"You'll have it," he concluded, and disconnected the call.

Pratt did not usually handle divorce cases. His entire practice was devoted to corporate law, but in this case he had made an exception. He hit the intercom button and asked his secretary to come into his office. He knew she would not be pleased about having to type up a divorce agreement, but also knew that she would not argue the point with him. With Charles's divorce finalized, perhaps they would get their CEO back. Pratt hoped so, because the alternative was to begin the process of removing him from his position. They couldn't continue to have the man stumbling around the building in a drunken stupor. The door to his office swung open and the plan that would restore Charles Roman to his former self was dictated.

David Manning's crew had made enough contacts for his final conclusion. Ordinarily, he would have simply required the drug company to adhere to stricter prescribing guidelines and print the appropriate warnings about long-term use. But in this case, the drug company in question had lied about their study results. They had provided false documentation and they had made David's life a living hell.

So, Manning intended to press their asses to the wall. The drug would be denied FDA approval and David intended to shut them down as a result of their little indiscretions. The FDA supervisor looked at the forms spread over his desk. Six of the forms were required to either recommend Washington approval or to deny approval of a specific drug. Denials did not have to be submitted to Washington. An additional form was going to be used to begin the process of new FDA requirements for all sedatives containing benzodiazepines. Every drug company that manufactured sedatives was going to be required to provide very specific warnings about long-term use. David had seen and heard enough in the past twelve hours to convince him that all of the drug companies in question had been literally getting away with murder and was sure Washington would agree with his findings.

The final paperwork would begin the process of prosecuting Dominex Pharmaceuticals for legal and ethical violations. Since the denial was a shorter process, it would be received by Dominex within five working days. The new FDA requirement and the notice of disciplinary action would take longer. David didn't care. The denial was good enough for now.

Finishing the paperwork, David carried the packet to his secretary. "This goes to the U.S. Attorney General's office," he said, handing her the last two forms. "I'll take care of this part myself." Dominex's refusal and the recommendation for the new FDA requirement would be handled internally.

Manning trotted down the hall to the elevator, and punched the button for the second floor. The denial papers had to be stamped with an official FDA seal, and then processed by the Food and Drug approval department. A letter would then be generated to the company that had submitted the request for approval. In this case, it would be a letter of refutation. There would be no extended research option and no stipulation on the existing product for the company to comply with. No adjustments, no contingencies. A flat denial.

David was elated. He spent the rest of the day walking his papers through the process. At the end of this long paper trail David would fill out one last form. He would finally be able to give his two-week notice and begin the happy road to his retirement. He was ready. This had been a very difficult last year.

Michelle Roman signed the last page of the mini novel that made up the thick divorce packet. She had never read so many "wherefore"s and "here in"s. The whole thing was gibberish to her, but she knew what the bottom line was. She was free of her biggest past mistake.

Sitting across the desk from her was the future mistake she fully intended to avoid. His presence filled the entire room, along with an intoxicating aftershave that was making her crazy. "Are we done?" she asked nervously, handing the papers back to her attorney.

"As far as the business part of this visit. Now we really do have something to celebrate."

Michelle shifted in her chair and wondered how in the hell to get out of Mark Randall's office without getting into an in-depth conversation about his apparent tendency towards infidelity.

"I really do have to go," she said awkwardly and stood to leave.

"Michelle, what is bothering you?" Mark said, as he grabbed her hand to stop her in midflight. She was trapped. She sat back down reluctantly, avoiding eye contact. "You have been avoiding me for weeks," he continued.

"What gave you that idea?" she said, cringing at her lame response.

"I don't know," he answered humorously. "Maybe it has something to do with the fact that every time I mention getting together, you practically hang up on me."

"I don't..."

"Michelle," he interrupted. "Tell me what is bothering you."

She met his glance and took a deep breath.

"Okay, here it is," she announced. "I have been through hell."

"No doubt," he interjected.

Michelle held up her hand to stop him.

"No, let me finish. I have made stupid choices because I'm such a romantic idiot." She paused, waiting to find the courage to finish her thought while he continued to stare at her. "And even though I am definitely attracted to you, I can't make another stupid choice."

"I'm confused," Mark said. "How would going out with me be a stupid choice?"

Michelle looked at him as though he had just slapped her.

"What?" he responded defensively.

"Hold out your left hand," she commanded.

Mark obeyed, and held out his left hand.

"What's that?" she asked, pointing to his ring finger.

All at once, his expression changed from total confusion to one of relief. "Oh this," he said, and started laughing. Michelle looked at him, trying not to smile as he continued to laugh at her. After he composed himself he announced, "This is my protection."

"Your what?" she asked incredulously.

"My protection. You can't even begin to imagine what it's like to be a divorce lawyer. I have newly divorced and desperate women coming at me every day."

"Sounds painful," she said sarcastically.

"No, I mean it." He was no longer laughing. "It's absolutely terrifying to find yourself suddenly alone." Michelle nodded her understanding. "I am the first single male person these women come in contact with. I am their first hope for salvation and they are not rational people, believe me."

"Did you say that you are the first single male they come in contact with?"

"That's what I said."

"And it's true?" she asked in amazement.

"Cross my heart," he said, making the gesture with his right hand.

"So, what you're telling me, Mark Randall, is that I have spent weeks obsessing about a problem that didn't even exist?"

"Does this mean that you'll go out with me?" he asked evasively.

"I guess so," she said, feeling her indignant stature melting away.

"Now?" He came around the desk to meet her.

"You're pushing your luck," she said, trying to remain annoyed at the situation.

"Great, I'm done here today and I know a great place to have dinner," he said taking her arm. Just before they made it to the door, she reached over with her free hand and punched his arm. "Ouch! What was that for?"

"That's for making me think you were married," she said, hitting him one last time. "And don't be a baby. You got off light."

It was almost dark outside when Charles Roman awoke from his drunken stupor. He peered through the open blinds to see the last sliver of sun behind the treetops. The hot afternoon had given way to a cooler and beautiful southern dusk. All was quiet around him. Atlanta commuters had long since completed their evening battle with the brutal traffic and were home in front of their TVs eating dinner.

The building had been cleared out for some time. No one had wanted to disturb the sleeping CEO and, in fact, things were calmer these days when he was "unavailable." He sat up and ran his hands through his ruffled hair. His suit was a mess and he looked as though he had

been asleep in it for a week. Groaning, he got up to find a river to drink. He was totally dehydrated and a little queasy from the afternoon's binge. He finished two large glasses of water before he noticed the envelope with the note attached to it sitting on his desk.

Here is a copy of the final papers. Your wife agreed to everything. The original copy went to her attorney's office this afternoon. Congratulations - you're a free man.

Charles read the note twice, trying to merge both sets of words into one. Sitting down heavily, he let out a long breath. It was really over. He felt terrible, although he really wasn't sure why. He had never actually loved her. Hell, he really didn't have a clue as to what the word even meant. She had provided him with an attractive finished product, sort of like a nice accessory. *I guess what bothers me the most is that she was the one who ended it.*

It hadn't been his idea. He had not been in control. For the first time, he had to admit that someone else had been the stronger and more confident one in the encounter. "Hell," he announced to no one. "She's not the only thing that's been beating my ass into the ground lately." Charles knew that his drinking had gotten way out of hand. He didn't feel too much remorse about having an "emotional drop off." But doing it in front of his colleagues and subordinates was another matter. Charles picked up the bottle of scotch he had been drinking that afternoon and carried it to the sink. *He was going to be fine*, he thought, as he poured out the remaining fluid down the drain. He had never been without female companionship. Now he wouldn't have to sneak around in motel rooms. Women would still be attracted to his position and his power. Charles straightened out his tie and his posture. With aching head held high he left the building, a new man.

Tuesday morning, bright and early, the mailroom clerk punched in for his workday. Everyone had to start at the bottom, he was told at his interview two weeks earlier. But James Douglas was not a mailroom flunky. He was a Dominex Pharmaceuticals employee that was temporarily on assignment at the FDA's office. He was there to screen the mail and any other occurrence that might be related to the company's interest.

He had not been expected to do anything for the past two weeks except get oriented to the building and become a familiar face. Technically, today was his second day on alert. The study data had been turned in on the previous Friday. He had reported the unexpected visit by Dominex's beloved Sheila Montgomery. They had not seemed happy about this information and told him to continue monitoring any other interesting traffic.

James began sorting through the outgoing mail as he had done every morning. There were two envelopes that caught his attention. One was addressed to Dominex Pharmaceuticals, the other to the United States General Attorney's office. He normally wouldn't have flagged the second piece of mail, except that it was being sent directly from David Manning, and on the same day as the other related matter. He pocketed both envelopes and trotted off to deliver the in-coming mail from the previous evening. His stack was light. He would be free to deliver his findings by mid-morning.

After completing his deliveries to the first two floors, James decided to take a short bathroom break. In the privacy of the stall, he opened the first envelope that was addressed to Dominex. After reading through the first paragraph, he let out a soft whistle. His job here was pretty much done. He needed to get this delivered to Sam Reynolds immediately. Taking a

gander at the second letter, he became more alarmed. "Holy shit," he said out loud, as he exited the stall and raced out of the building. The remaining mail did not get delivered.

Paul Pratt was reviewing the signed divorce documents when his intercom buzzed. He glanced over at the phone with a few choice words. He hadn't even finished his morning coffee. "Yes?" he answered, conveying his annoyance.

"Paul, it's Sam. You better get up here."

Pratt picked up the remains of his morning motivation and headed to Sam's office.

The room was buzzing with the entire study team when he arrived. Sam motioned for everyone to settle down. *This can't be good*, Pratt thought, taking the couch.

"We have a situation," Sam announced.

"We have defeat," the CEO corrected him.

"This letter was intended for delivery," Sam continued, holding up the battered piece of paper. "It was brought in by our staff member this morning." He hesitated while everyone found a place to sit. "It's from the FDA and it is our official denial for Suprame." No one said a word. Everyone just stared at him in disbelief. "It gets worse," Sam said. "The denial is final. There is no contingency."

"Can they do that?" Jeff asked incredulously.

"They just did it," Charles stated. The room became alive with a thousand conversations. Sam went to his desk and sat down.

He knew that things were pretty much over. He had not shared the contents of the other letter, because being reprimanded or even shut down by the US Attorney General's office would have been redundant. That is, if it had actually made it to its destination. Dominex Pharmaceuticals, as they knew it, was officially at an end and it was due to one person. He should have fired Sheila the moment she had stepped out of line, no matter how much Charles had defended her.

He waited for the noise to die down. All he wanted now was for everyone to finish up this pointless meeting and leave him to pack up his office. His wife had nagged him for years about his insane work schedule combined with his high blood pressure. Well, this was her lucky day.

"There's no point in damage control," Pratt said loudly over the multiple conversations. Everyone stopped in mid-sentence. "What we need right now is a new plan, and I'd like to discuss this with Charles alone."

Everyone slowly shuffled out of the room. Clearly, there was nothing left to discuss. Charles, Sam, and Paul remained.

"It's over," Charles repeated and sat heavily in the nearest chair. He looked like hell. He was sweating profusely and his stomach was in one giant knot.

"What is wrong with you?" Pratt interjected, noticing his condition for the first time.

"I obviously picked the wrong day to stop drinking," Charles said, as he raised a shaky hand to bring his coffee cup to his mouth.

"You should get yourself into detox," Sam said, placing a hand on his shoulder, "and by the way - I'm really proud of you." Charles gave him a weak smile.

“Right now, I think death would be an improvement,” he retorted. Sam did not have the heart to confront Charles about bringing in the Trojan horse. His infatuation with Sheila had been the kiss of death.

“Hang in there,” Pratt said, patting the other shoulder. “If you want, we can deal with this whole issue later. Believe me, there’s no rush, and this problem isn’t going anywhere.”

“No,” Charles said, “anything besides the pounding in my head is a welcome diversion.”

“Here,” Sam offered, fishing a handful of Tylenol out of his desk. He handed them to Charles with a glass of water. Charles downed them both.

“This is the drop-dead emergency plan,” Pratt said, pulling up a seat next to the CEO. “The company will have to basically start over.”

“This time, I think we should sell real estate,” Sam interjected, humorlessly.

“No, we’re still in the drug business,” Pratt continued. “With our current products and income, we can stay alive, but with only about a tenth of the corporation.” Both men looked at Pratt, exhausted. “Hey, it’s do-able, but it will require some sacrifice. That means one-tenth the manpower and one-tenth the overhead. This building is a giant liability, but we can rent out most of the space and use the income to rebuild.”

“The construction on the new building...?” Charles interjected.

“We write it off as a loss,” Pratt explained.

“What about my personal assets?” Charles inquired reluctantly.

“That’s up to you,” Pratt said, “but keep in mind that you will have a considerably smaller paycheck for a while.”

Charles did the math in his head and groaned.

“I guess a smaller house wouldn’t be so bad,” he sighed.

“Maybe your wife would like the house,” Pratt offered. “I’ll tell her attorney you had a change of heart, as long as she continues paying for it.”

“She’d never go for it,” Charles said. “We were killing ourselves just trying to make the payments as it was.”

“We should just sell off what we can,” Sam added, including himself in that plan.

“Now, as I understand it,” Pratt continued, “all sedatives are pretty much the same.”

“That’s right,” Sam agreed. “The difference is too miniscule to measure. The primary difference is how long they take to activate and how long they remain in your system.”

“Fine,” Pratt said, “then we simply change the structure of Suprame and it becomes something else. We won’t have to spend years developing it. We simply change the ingredients slightly, along with the name, and resubmit it for approval.”

“There’s just one problem with that,” Charles interjected. “Manning. As long as he reigns, he’ll make sure we’re out of the sedative race.”

“And if my sources are right,” Sam said, coming alive, “his reign lasts for two more weeks.”

“Is this true?” Charles asked.

“It is,” Pratt agreed. “Manning only remained on board this long to take us down. I’m guessing his replacement will be as easy to deal with as his predecessor was. And once we get the new drug approved, we’re back in the saddle.”

“In the meantime,” Sam added, holding up the second letter, “this somehow got lost in the mail.”

“You don’t think Manning will follow up on his complaint?” Charles asked.

“He’ll be too busy packing,” Pratt said, “but we’ll keep an eye on him until he’s gone.”

"This is all good," Charles announced, getting to his feet. "You guys can handle things for the next few days, can't you?"

"Take a week," Sam offered. "And don't fire your driver until you get home."

"Good idea," Charles said, negotiating his way out of the office. "I have some keys and other stuff you might need in my absence," he said from the doorway. "I'll bring them in before I leave."

"Now, we have to fire a whole lot of people," Paul said, turning back to the matter at hand.

"The first one is on me," Sam said angrily, and picked up the phone.

"Sheila stepped out of her office for a minute," the voice informed him. "She'll be back in a moment. Can I give her a message?"

"Yeah," Sam growled. "Tell her to get her ass in my office now"

"That was diplomatic," Pratt commented, after Sam slammed down the receiver.

"I should have taken my own advice."

"You mean the idea about Sheila having an 'accident,'" Paul asked.

"Couldn't have been bloody enough for me."

Ten minutes later, while Sam and Paul were working off an employee list, a light knock came at the door. "Here's the key to my office and some files you might need," Charles said, placing the stack on Sam's desk. "Strange though, some of my keys are missing."

"Which ones?" Sam asked.

"The master keys to the rest of the building. I kept them in my desk drawer, but I haven't had the need to look for them lately. They're not there."

"Not so strange," Paul stated.

"I think I have a pretty good idea of where we could look. And here she is," Sam announced.

"You wanted to see me?" Sheila asked.

"Yeah, I do," Sam sneered.

Charles hung in the background, not wanting to get caught in the mess that was surely about to develop.

"Have a seat," Paul ordered.

Sheila complied.

"Did you provide the FDA with any incriminating information?" Sam demanded.

"Yes, I did," she said proudly.

"Then I hope you are independently wealthy, because I want you out of here today."

"Okay," Sheila said calmly. "I just need to pack my office."

"Security will accompany you," Sam said, picking up the phone.

Sheila began to leave the room, until Charles stopped her.

"Sheila, why?"

She turned and stared at the CEO with a haunted expression.

"Charles, have you ever been so scared and desperate that you wanted to be dead?"

He shook his head in confusion. "What are you trying to say?"

"Those study volunteers," Sheila continued. "I know exactly what you put them through."

"Come on, man," Sam interrupted. "Haven't we had enough of her stupid dramatics?"

Charles looked at both of them helplessly. He felt officially beaten. Sam was about to grab Sheila's arm and personally escort her out of the building when a security guard tapped on the open door. "She's ready to go," Sam announced. The guard went over to the woman and tentatively placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Ms. Montgomery," he said shyly, "you have to leave."

Sheila shook herself free of the security guard and squared off on Sam.

"See this?" she said with contempt and showed him her wrists. There were three long vertical scars on her left side and one on her right. The group stared at Sheila's war wounds in disbelief. "Do you have any idea what it feels like to keep popping a pill in your mouth every night, thinking it's safe because a doctor assured you it was, and then finding out that you can't live without them?"

The men were speechless.

Sheila stared off into space as though she was seeing something that no one else could visualize. "At first you just think you have the flu," she began. "But after a few days, you realize that you're in hell. Your body vibrates all the time, your nerves are on fire, and you're terrified every waking moment for no reason. You become so weak that you can't move, and when you do, you think you might be taking your last breath." Sheila glared at the enemy. "There are no warnings on those useless pamphlets the pharmacy gives you. I read them over a hundred times. I thought maybe I missed something. The warning reads, and I quote, 'Do not take this medication longer than is prescribed by your doctor *or* it may become habit forming.' What the hell is that? Habit forming!" she repeated through clenched teeth. "Television is habit forming. But you don't feel your sanity slipping away if you miss Oprah. This shit alters your brain after only a few months of daily use. I think that goes a little beyond a pill popping habit, don't you think?"

Charles's mouth was moving, but nothing resembling the English language was audible. Sam stepped forward in an attempt to gain control of this unforeseen drama. "We do not do the prescribing," he announced firmly. "We only manufacture it. It's up to the doctors to decide how long someone should be on the medication."

"And that convenient little tactic has left no one accountable for this vicious and unending cycle of finger pointing," Sheila said calmly. "The drug companies are just making their product, and the doctors are innocent because they have never been warned, while everyone continues to make a pile of money. But you know what?" she added, "Your little secret is finally out. It took me over a decade, but I finally got someone's attention."

"It's not over," Paul announced defiantly. "You may have won this battle, but the war is far from over."

Sheila turned and stared down the angry attorney.

"You might be right," she said, smiling to herself. "But people aren't stupid, just ignorant. How long do you think you can go on deceiving them before you have an angry mob on your hands?"

"People may not be stupid," Pratt retorted. "They're afraid."

"We'll see," Sheila challenged. And with that she turned to go, with the security guard sheepishly at her heels. She was so beautiful in her hour of triumph. Charles stared at her longingly one last time as she breezed by. It was a warm summer Georgia day, and Sheila was wearing a sleeveless top that revealed her firm biceps and a butterfly tattoo on her left shoulder.

EPILOGUE

One year later

Waking up in the ICU over a decade earlier had been Sheila's true moment of reckoning. After four long days in critical condition, she slowly came to consciousness and realized to her dismay that she hadn't succeeded in ending her life. Her awakening had given her the resolve to fight back.

When the battle with Dominex was over, she had agreed to marry Jerry, under one condition. Jerry conceded and agreed to move to the only place where Sheila felt at home. Sheila's gang found Jerry a job as an advocate for consumer complaints. He only complained about the cold Newark winters during winter.

When the struggle with Dominex ended, Jerry sat her down and asked the big question: Had taking Dominex down made up for all of her pain and suffering? Sheila just looked at him with sadness, and never answered the question. Jerry had been right about revenge. It was never enough.

David Manning never looked back. He had rushed to greet his retirement with open arms and was now on the lake almost every day doing what he loved the most. The stress of being an honest man in the midst of a political hurricane was now a fading memory.

Manning's replacement, Fred Fielding, was enjoying his new position with all the perks that went with it – off the record of course. The letter that had been sent to the US Attorney General's office never arrived, and no inquiries followed its path to determine what had become of Dominex's disciplinary process. Fielding also profited nicely when each pharmaceutical company had been given the opportunity to make David Manning's new sedative warning requirements fade away.

When the FDA received a request for approval of the new sedative, Klonex, it had been processed and approved in record time. Dominex Pharmaceuticals had taken good care of Mr. Fielding and he had responded in kind. The sedative market as a whole continued on, unscathed.

Dominex was now in the re-building stage. When the generic drug for Valipene was finally approved, they had begun the process of bringing back available staff. They were surprised to see how many of the employees they had laid off were still available for re-hire, a full year later. The start of the twenty first century had not been an easy time for the highly skilled or experienced applicant. They had been joined by too many others in the massive sea of downsizing and corporate bankruptcies. The positions that remained were being filled with lower-cost, entry-level workers. The thriving economy of the Nineties was gone and good jobs were hard to come by in the "O's."

Charles Roman had begun to lose some his hair and was developing a wider mid-section as a result of his stressful life. To his dismay, he was losing his boyish charm and was no longer the "chick magnet" he used to be. He spent most of his nights alone.

Sam Reynolds could no longer ignore his doctor or his symptoms, and had to retire due to a Peptic Ulcer that refused to heal as long as he continued to work for Dominex. Jeff Edwards took his place as Vice President. Charles had require that he lose the pony tail.

George Donovan married Sally and they had a beautiful baby girl. They named her Dawn. His recovery program was thriving, due to the fact that it was the only place where sedative victims could receive real treatment. He had finally succeeded and his daughter would be proud of him.

Michelle Roman had been rescued by her prince charming, Mark Randall, who had turned out to be everything that Charles Roman was not. Michelle maintained her own residence and her independence. She had learned the hard way not to rely on anyone else for her peace of mind.

Brian Carter was recovering slowly and had gone back to work part-time. It would be another year before he would consider himself healed; however, the boredom of staying at home was more than he could stand. He was currently dating Sandra Jenkins and had no idea where the resourceful Pam had gone. All he knew was that he was relatively happy and his life now made sense. He was finally able to sleep at night.

When the FDA approved Dominex's new sedative, Sandra Jenkins had gone on a crusade with Carol Freeman. Jason Sample was no longer available to assist in the investigation. He had accepted a job at the New York Times and was busy pursuing a story about business accounting fraud within billion dollar corporations. During Carol's temporary retirement, she had begun to take it upon herself to contact anyone in the media who might have access to public persuasion. Both Sandra and Carol had contacted every major television station and newspaper, as well as 20/20, Sixty Minutes, and Oprah. They were shocked at the lack of response they received. No one wanted to touch a subject that was so radically against such solid American cornerstones as the FDA and the pharmaceutical empire. No doubt they had been perceived as two obsessive women with a grudge.

Carol had even attempted to organize the Internet group and had contacted attorneys for a class action lawsuit against the giant drug companies. Most members of the group were too sick or too afraid to participate, and the ones who had been willing to come forward were rejected repeatedly. The lawyers that reviewed their case had all concluded that there was no hard evidence linking the use of the drug with the illness that had resulted when they stopped taking it.

Eventually, both Sandra and Carol had to give up the fight. Sandra knew a dead horse when she saw one and Carol was only marginally able to handle the stress of the battle. With great sadness they were forced to give up the idea of ever bringing the sedative issue to light through conventional means.

Carol attempted to move on with her life, but could not let go of her sense of betrayal. Her daily fatigue and newfound limitations were a constant reminder of how she and so many others had been innocently led down a devastating path of self-destruction. In a last ditch effort, Carol did the only thing left to warn others like herself: she wrote a book.

Carol believed that if she were able to warn a sleeping population of consumers and generate some initial awareness, perhaps she could plant the seed for tomorrow's public outrage. She sincerely hoped this plan would work, and that people would listen.

The experience of Benzodiazepine withdrawal had taught Carol and Brian the most important lesson of their lives: the fabric that holds us together is fragile. All of its elements can be torn away in a moment, and the pieces of what make us who we are can disappear in a flash. Each day is a gift, and the path we walk is a reflection of who we are. You should not give this time away in the hope that tomorrow will be better. The drone of outrageous compromise will overtake tomorrow and leave you with dreams... never lived.

*We are victims by our own uninformed consent,
Resulting in a Silent Epidemic.*

Silent Epidemic is the first of three Carol Freeman Novels. In *Grave Perception*, Carol begins to rebuild her life and joins forces with Dr. George Donovan. But their great ideals are challenged by a very dark force and a murder investigation that focuses on the wrong man. Join the continued adventure with your favorite characters,.

Grave Perception:

Mitchell Becker's wild and destructive lifestyle had cost him a marriage, a family, and a home. He had two choices, pull himself out of the ashes of his miserable existence – or die.

One year later, still shaky and vulnerable, he makes two important trips, the first to his beloved and reluctant ex-wife, Jodi, and the second to his mother's gravesite. While begging for forgiveness for the second time that day, he notices a strange woman lurking the grounds. She appears lost and so out of place in the twenty-first century. Becker writes her off as just another freak encounter and returns home.

Had Becker remained with Jodi on that day, he may have been able to prevent her murder. Instead, he becomes the prime suspect. A corrupt district attorney becomes Becker's worst nightmare, and a guilty verdict is all but a sure thing, as a creative DA spins a web of deceit for the jury.

Becker's freak encounter becomes his only alibi, but there's a serious problem with her testimony. She is considered to be psychotic and delusional, destroying any hope of being a credible witness.

Although she is unable to help in the conventional sense, and all seems lost for Becker, she offers him a solution no one ever thought possible.

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A Cycle of Greed is the final piece of the Carol Freeman Trilogy:

Cait Milner is a brave and vibrant woman struck down by a common and incurable illness. Her need for a lifetime of treatment triggers the loss of her insurance. Cait, while in her distorted mania, decides to fight back. The CEO of America's largest insurance company, Medwin Insurance, becomes the target. In the ultimate irony, she decides the best revenge for an insurance giant is a taste of his own medicine.

As Cait single-handedly goes after retribution, the powers of the healthcare empire and political community have their own agendas. Faced with a potentially damaging presidential candidate, they seek the aid of a very private, elite organization to find anything scandalous that will guarantee a win for the incumbent. They are not about to see their massive profits invaded by an over-zealous boy scout. But with their opposition so close to victory, it is a race against time.

This seemingly unrelated whirlwind of agendas comes together with astonishing clarity and shines a blinding light on the domino effect that has become a multi-billion dollar empire. Left in the hands of those who profit most, it truly is a Cycle of Greed.

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Independent author's need all the help and support they can get. Please take a moment and post your review. I read them all and derive great perspective from your feedback. Thanks for reading.

Illusion is coming in November 2014. Here is a preview:

Illusion

The explosion consumed the night sky, momentarily illuminating deserted streets. The Ford pick-up, now engulfed in flames, echoed the explosion as the gas tank quickly erupted. Distant windows became illuminated as people arose from their three AM slumber to explore the source of the sudden outburst. With barely a beat, sirens could already be heard in the distance.

The man watched from the safety of a dark corner of dense brush. It was vital that the truck devour all evidence of his absence. There would be no body, no dental remains. Just a pile of rubble marginally linked to his license plate. He would be, for all intents and purposes, dead and gone. It was vital that his former employers believed this without a shadow of doubt.

The man buried himself further into the foliage as firefighters and police made the final, dramatic entrance to the bonfire. Timing here was everything. The blaze needed enough passage to destroy the truck and all evidence of his remains. But this man was not an arsonist. He didn't get off on the excitement of the destruction, and he certainly didn't want any other property to be claimed as hostage to his one and only crime against humanity. There was a greater good to be honored here.

People were standing in doorways wrapped in blankets and barefoot, causing them to dance slightly back and forth to keep from freezing. The blaze offered enough warmth and

intrigue to sustain them. Police held back the more brazen onlookers while firefighters quickly put out the last of the angry outburst. The remains sat smoldering, forcing thick black clouds into the night sky.

Media vans from channel six and twelve forced themselves into the mix. Although the best of the drama was over, a greater story was just under the surface waiting for discovery. Trucks rarely lit themselves on fire. This was now a crime scene. As police waited for the smoldering pile to reach approachable temperatures, yellow tape was used to section off and barricade the area. Reporters pushed that line to the limit, thrusting microphones into faces of anyone wearing a uniform. Questions, such as, "Do we know if anyone was killed in the fire," reached mostly dead ears. No statement would be available to the press for some time. Certainly not until the rubble could be examined for remains. They knew this. Premature questioning was a required part of the job. Even at three AM.

Firefighters left the scene first, with their forensic man remaining behind to begin the long process of reenactment. The man watched the police deal with the media and contain the area. He watched as curious onlookers terminated their vigil, determining that it was too cold to remain outside on a frigid January night. The excitement of the blazing truck was slowly overtaken by the need for warmth and sleep.

Exhausted and empty, he crept quietly to a second vehicle he had stashed in a nearby garage. A small, un-identifiable black Toyota Camry anonymously drove off into the night.