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PROLOGUE

Gregory pounded his fist against the hospital corridor wall. He pulled his phone from his pocket and dialed a number for the third time that day.

Pick up, pick up, you stinking politician.

A male voice cut the ringing short. "Hello?"

Gregory took several steps away from Michael's room. "This is Gregory Brulin."

"Dr. Brulin, I have nothing more to say to—"

"Then listen to me, Chapman. This situation is unacceptable. You have put our entire future in the hands of fanatics!"

"I hardly think they've been given that much power."

"Chapman," Gregory said, "you know who I am, and you know this research is the key to the future of disease treatment!"

"I understand that you—"

"You understand nothing! Unless you move to lift the new restrictions on embryo research, you are sacrificing the future of mankind on the altar of your political popularity!"

"I resent that, Dr. Brulin."

A tap on his shoulder turned Gregory around. Rose, the petite nurse who had lovingly watched over Michael since his newest crisis began, stood behind him.

"He's asking for you," she said.

Gregory nodded and held up one finger. Rose turned toward Michael's room.

"Listen to me, Chapman. My five-year-old son is dying. Dying, do you understand? And every day that research is delayed means more people like my little boy die. We were so close to a cure—before you sold out genetic progress to pacify ignorant extremists like the Hendricks Forum."

"There is nothing I can do, Dr. Brulin."

Gregory swore. "Lift the restrictions! My son may rally. A cure may be found in time!"

"I'm afraid you don't understand the complexities—"

Rose returned. "You'd better come, Dr. Brulin."

Gregory took one look at her face and snapped the phone shut.

The blinds in Michael's room had been closed against the brightness of the afternoon sun, but Gregory hadn't opened them as the day had worn on. He tiptoed into the darkened room as though the sound of his footsteps might

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loosen Michael's weak hold on the thread of life.

In the twilight, Michael's face almost seem to glow against the white sheets, his freckles standing out like splatters from the rainy-day mud puddles he loved to stomp. Gregory's throat constricted.

"Hey, sport. How ya' doing?"

Michael's eyes were closed, but the corners of his mouth twitched upward at the sound of his father's voice.

Rose came from behind and leaned over Michael. She brushed the hair from his damp forehead, resting her hand there for a moment. She whispered to Gregory, "Is there someone else we should call?"

Gregory shook his head. Who was there to call? Michael had called for his mother a few hours before, had pushed his father away when Gregory tried to comfort him. Gregory had almost wished the boy's mother could be found, even if she had to be dragged back from whatever indecent situation she had last fallen into.

"He's having a hard day," Gregory said to the nurse. "He'll be better tomorrow. He always comes around."

Rose guided Gregory toward the far side of the room.

"I'm so sorry, Dr. Brulin." Her voice was low and compassionate. "I know how difficult this is. But don't miss the chance you have to say goodbye."

Gregory shook his head again and pulled away. "No. There's still time. I can make some more phone calls—"

Rose smiled. "Go hold your son, Dr. Brulin."

And he did. He held Michael as though he could keep the precious life from slipping away. He held him as the stars came out and the room chilled and the boy's breath grew shallow. He whispered his name as Michael's breath finally stilled. And even then he held him, rocking him gently and promising him that everything would be all right.

Sometime later Rose returned. She eased Michael's body from his father's embrace and led Gregory to the corridor. "The doctor needs to see him now."

Gregory leaned his head against the wall. It was then that the tears came, silent at first, and then in heaving sobs that doubled him over at the waist, his hands on his knees.

When the storm passed, he slid down to the floor, his back against the wall.

He spoke, and his voice was harsh and cold, as though the tears had washed something away.

"I swear to you, Michael, I won't let them get away with it. I won't let the world be a place where little boys are allowed to die."

Chapter 1

Monday, January 17

Nick Donovan snapped open the plastic case and lifted the syringe from its sculpted felt cushion as though it held water from the Fountain of Youth.

Pulling a man back from death with the plunge of a syringe was an almighty thing. Nick felt the power of it every time he began a new clinical trial. Nick stood beside the hospital bed of a man who seemed shriveled in the one-size-fits-all hospital gown the nurse had forced on him. His left hand twisted the sheets between his fingers like an aging toddler with a security blanket.

Nick cradled Leon Weinman's wrist and raised the arm. It trembled in his grasp. Leon's eyes locked onto Nick's, and he seemed to beg for courage. Nick nodded and smiled. He held the needle to Leon's arm and took a deep breath.

"Wait!" Leon jerked his arm away.

Nick exhaled. "What is it, Leon?" He lowered the syringe.

"Explain it to me one more time." Leon's lower lip trembled as though he thought he were asking for too much.

Nick patted Leon's hand. He glanced over his shoulder at the rest of the research team. They had massed behind him in Room 306 of the Franklin University Hospital, hovering like mother hens over one sickly chick.

Nick's petite, red-headed wife, Kate—a member of the research team that had developed this therapy—gave him a tight smile from the corner.

"Dr. Rogan?" Nick said, raising his chin toward the Director of the Institute. "Would you like to set Leon's mind at ease?"

"You go ahead, Dr. Donovan." Rogan had remained in the background through the morning, forcing Nick to take the lead. Nick turned back to Leon, keeping one hand on the man's shaky arm.

"Leon, we've got a clear outline of the genes involved in your cancer. That's why you qualified for this experimental study, remember?"

"So you're going to give me some virus that's going to cure the cancer? You're going to get me sick to heal me?"

Nick smiled. "Almost. We need a way to get the therapeutic genes into your DNA. We call it a gene carrier, or a 'vector.' The best vectors we've found so far are viruses. Viruses do well delivering their genes and multiplying. So, yes, we'll be using a virus to deliver your treatment. But don't worry: We've removed its disease-causing genes and replaced them with the therapeutic genes you need, the ones that we hope will produce the needed proteins and go to work on the cancer cells to stop them from reproducing. Is

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that a little clearer?”

“How long is this going to take?” Leon twisted the sheet again.

“The injection of the retroviral vector will take only a few moments, like any injection. Then we’ll monitor you for a few days, to make sure everything’s going according to plan. After that, you can go home, and we’ll keep a close eye on the cancer to see what’s happening.”

Leon nodded, and the group behind them seemed to take a collective deep breath. The moment had arrived.

“We’re gonna knock this cancer from here to Sunday, Leon, don’t worry.” Nick squeezed his shoulder and smiled. It seemed to help. He lifted the wrist again.

And plunged the syringe into Leon Weinman’s arm.

Leon leaned back on the raised bed, closing his eyes as though giving the vector permission to speed its course to his damaged colon.

The team exchanged smiles all around the room as Nick replaced the syringe in the case. They talked quietly for a while about the next step, but finally filed out to leave Leon alone to rest.

They crowded into the main waiting area, each of them claiming one of the cherry-red plastic seats that lined the perimeter of the room. A large television hung from the ceiling, but no one bothered to turn it on. In the corner, a small coffee pot sat on a warmer.

From the acrid smell coming from the pot, Nick assumed it was last night’s brew. *Better than nothing*. He filled a Styrofoam cup and flopped onto the molded plastic seat, exhausted even though it was only ten in the morning. Kate sat next to him and held his hand.

Dr. Rogan balanced on the edge of the seat on Nick’s other side. “We should be able to begin with number five soon if this goes well.”

“If?” Nick noted the usual trace of pessimism in Rogan’s voice.

“No reason to think otherwise, I suppose.” Rogan settled back in the chair. “The three before Leon are progressing well.”

Nick leaned his head back against the wall and made his hundredth mental note about what he would do differently when Rogan retired in a few months and Nick was named the new Director of the Gene Therapy Institute. Kate rested her head on his shoulder.

Seven heads turned as a nurse stepped into the waiting room. Professional concern lined her face. “His temperature is spiking,” she said, looking at Nick and Rogan. “They asked me to tell you.”

“What?” Nick crushed his cup and jumped to his feet. The hot liquid splashed onto his hand. He tossed the broken cup in a nearby trash can with a muttered curse and shook the coffee from his hand. The rest of the team was on its feet with him.

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In this situation, fever probably meant only one thing: Leon's immune system was rejecting the vector.

"What's going on?" Rogan shot an accusing look at Nick.

"It's the same dosage, the same vector as the other three!" Nick's mind raced through possible causes for rejection.

Kate squeezed his arm, but Nick pulled away.

"I've got to get in there." He pushed past her and flung open the double doors that led to ICU.

A middle-aged nurse intercepted him. She held up a hand as a barrier, inches from Nick's chest. "I'm sorry, Dr. Donovan. We've been asked to keep your research team in the waiting area. The ICU doctors need unlimited access to Mr. Weinman at this time."

Nick took a step forward, but the nurse blocked his path.

Rogan pulled at him from behind. "Let's go back out, Nick."

Nick glared at the nurse. "Keep us informed."

She nodded with a tight-lipped smile.

The research team swarmed Nick and Rogan as they reentered the waiting area. "What's happening?"

Rogan raised his eyebrows at Nick. "Good question."

"They'll tell us when they know anything." Nick pulled away from the rest and returned to his chair.

Kate sat beside him, bringing her face close to his ear. "Is he going to be okay?"

Nick rubbed his forehead. "I don't know what could have gone wrong! I hate this."

A painful memory rippled at the borders of his consciousness, threatening to overwhelm him. A hospital room. His sister's fingers wrapped around his own. Helplessness. He forced the memory to recede.

Kate draped an arm around him and squeezed till he looked at her. "I love you," she whispered. "We'll get through this."

He leaned his head over till their foreheads touched.

Even though it was more than four years ago, Nick still couldn't believe she'd said yes when he'd proposed. He knew that everyone in grad school had told Kate she would be crazy to marry a workaholic like Nick. When Kate entered a room, even the dust seemed to sparkle. Her curly red hair matched her playful spirit. Every child she met worshipped her, and Nick almost believed his parents favored her over their own son. But she had said yes, and he was more glad about it now than ever.

The day passed in inches. Leon's fever hit 104 degrees before dropping and then climbing again. Most of the team left by late afternoon. Nick, Rogan, and Kate stayed. At four o'clock Kate tried to convince Nick to leave.

Nick shook his head and stretched. "You go home, hon. I'm staying until I know he's stable."

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"You've had a long day already," she said. "What time did you leave this morning? You didn't even say goodbye."

Nick shrugged. "You looked so peaceful, I didn't want to disturb you."

"I woke up early and you were already gone."

Nick heard the annoyance that edged her words. "I had things to do, Kate. Today was a big day."

"I know. But it seems like you always have things to do. You were here last night until eight o'clock. Where does your contract say you have to put in fourteen-hour days?"

"C'mon, Kate," Nick said, stretching an arm around her and tangling his hand in the heaviness of her red hair, "you know what today is."

She pulled away. "It's not about today, Nick. You work like this all the time."

Rogan glanced up from his magazine across the waiting room.

Nick glared at Kate and flicked his eyes in Rogan's direction. "It'll pay off soon, Kate," he said softly. "You know that."

She looked away. "And what happens if Leon doesn't make it?"

"Don't even say that!" He stood and stepped to the coffee maker. The pot shook in his hand as he poured himself his thousandth cup of the day.

The middle-aged nurse reappeared. "We're having some problems. The doctor will be out in a few moments to speak with you." When the ICU doctor emerged from the double doors, Nick, Kate, and Rogan jumped to their feet. The doctor's white coat bore the name "Dr. Orland" stitched in blue above the chest pocket.

Orland removed wire-rimmed glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose before speaking. "His colon is exhibiting some additional damage," he said. "Our options are limited because of the cancer."

"Additional damage?" Nick said. He shook his head. "That shouldn't be. What can I do, doctor?"

Dr. Orland turned a disdainful eye on Nick. "I don't think we need any more of your help right now."

"I've got to at least see him," Nick said, angling around Orland and heading for ICU.

"Hold on there, Dr. Donovan." Orland backed up, grabbing unsuccessfully at Nick's arm.

Nick pushed through the doors once more. This time there was no nurse to stop him. He jogged through ICU, searching curtained cubicles for Leon. Finally he spotted the man's face turned toward the opening as though he were expecting Nick.

"Dr. Donovan." Leon's voice cracked as he extended a blue-veined arm from under the hospital-issue blanket.

"Leon." Nick swallowed hard. The man's condition had degenerated markedly in only a few hours.

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Orland's fingers tightened around Nick's upper arm. "Look, Dr. Donovan, you can't be in here."

Nick yanked his arm away. "What's the problem?"

"I just thought," Orland said, smiling through clenched teeth, "that maybe you've done enough for Mr. Weinman already."

"I'm not leaving." Nick turned his back on Orland, wedging himself between Leon and the irate doctor.

Orland's steps receded from the cubicle, but Nick heard his lowered voice at the nurse's station.

"Call security."

Chapter 2

Tuesday, January 18

Nick finished the last bite of his bagel and dragged himself up the crumbling steps of the Hawthorne Building. Balancing his half-full Starbucks cup and his briefcase, he swiped his keycard through the box on the door. Upstairs, Nick headed for the private door of the Gene Therapy Institute.

The dropped ceiling and overflowing shelves in the Microscopy Lab drove Kate crazy, but Nick's adrenaline always started pumping the moment he stepped through the door. To him, the chemical odors smelled of life—life that he was preserving, discovering—even inventing—in this room.

Nick stashed his briefcase and coat at the end of the counter-height lab bench. He never used the private office that was technically assigned to him. He'd rather be in the center of the action. This morning, all the action was at the hospital.

Nick pulled a stack of binders from the shelf above the lab bench and lined them up. He'd launch into them as soon as he'd started the coffee.

While coffee percolated in the Institute's tiny break room, Nick came back to the Microscopy Lab and went to his computer. The daily JAMA update, the American Medical Association's journal, was waiting in his inbox. He scrolled through the various topics as he did every morning. By the time he finished, he could smell the coffee.

The sound of the Institute's door opening sometime later roused Nick from the slide under his microscope. He was surprised to find that an hour had disappeared.

Brett Adams slipped onto the rolling stool beside Nick with the familiarity of a family member.

"Morning," Nick said, looking into the eyepiece, once more delving into the secrets of the genome.

"Hey, old man." Brett grabbed a three-ring binder from the shelf above him.

Nick snorted. "You thought I was gray before. This thing's going to make me look ancient."

"Any news yet?"

"Nothing new. Did you notice if Kate's here yet?"

"She's in the tissue culture lab, I think," Brett said. "She doesn't seem too happy with you this morning."

Nick managed a smile. "Nobody's happy with me this morning."

"You'd better not make that girl mad, old man," Brett said. "You know there's about a hundred guys lined up to take your place."

Nick let his smile turn to a scowl.

Brett shrugged. "I'm just saying —"

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“Give it a rest, okay?” Nick threw his pen onto the counter. He turned from Brett and mashed the tense muscles in the back of his neck. He walked over and dropped into the office chair in front of the lab’s main computer. Maybe his daily motivational nugget from the Success Quotes e-mail list would focus his thinking.

Today’s message seemed tailor-made: “You have within you all you need to achieve your dreams. Your success in life is proportional to your acceptance of this truth about yourself.” He took a moment to repeat that first line to himself several times.

Brett appeared behind his shoulder. “What’s with you and those quotes every day?”

“They’re good motivators.”

Brett shook his head. “I don’t think you need those, Nick. You’ve got to be the most motivated guy I know.”

Nick closed his e-mail program and stood. “Doesn’t seem to be helping much today.”

“Yeah, well, most people are content to send off a buck to ‘save the whales.’ It’s a little trickier when you decide to save the whole world.”

Nick shrugged. “I’m going to the hospital.”

Outside the Institute’s wing, he steered his vision away from the glass trophy case in the hall. Where trophies should have been, five brass urns rested behind the glass, each one preserving the ashes of a pioneer in the field of genetics. Nick avoided the trophy case as though death were contagious.

The rain-slicked cobblestone walkways slowed his walk. He navigated through students and their sharp-spoked umbrellas, winding through the courtyard that would take him to the university hospital. Two hundred years of progress had not changed the courtyards and brick buildings of Philadelphia’s Franklin University campus. From the exterior, no one would imagine that within these walls a biotechnical revolution raged, a revolution in which Nick Donovan had enlisted: technology’s war against disease.

Yesterday, four years of repeated laboratory trials and mind-numbing research had distilled into one syringe. One deadly syringe. Today, the memory that had threatened to surface in Nick’s mind nudged at him again. He quickened his pace and skidded into the hospital lobby before his thoughts got away from him.

Nick’s colleagues, including Kate, wandered into the hospital throughout the morning. They waited and whispered, huddled in conversation circles.

Kate slipped into the seat beside him after talking with Brett for several minutes. “You doing okay?”

Nick shrugged. “I should probably be getting something done.”

She sighed heavily.

He glanced at her and tapped his fingers on the chair. “I know I’ve been

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a little hard to live with. I'm sorry. I'm just stressed out over Leon."

She smiled and patted his arm. "It's hard to concentrate on anything else, I know." She gave him a quick kiss. "Can I get you anything?"

Nick smiled and shook his head. "But thanks for checking up on me."

"That's my job."

Strangers—friends and family of surgical patients, mostly—drifted in and out of the hospital as the morning passed. One person spent most of the morning there, a narrow man with a persistent facial twitch. He held a hunting magazine in front of him, but Nick couldn't shake the feeling that the man was reading him instead.

When the hands on the wall clock crawled around to eleven, a white-coated doctor appeared in the waiting room. The entire team looked up.

"Ms. Martinez?" The doctor motioned to a young woman sitting alone in the corner. She stiffened and stood, following the doctor. The rest of them hunkered back into their uncomfortable positions.

Caffeine overdose and worry rankled Nick's nerves. Leon's condition continued to roller coaster. When Kate brought Nick a late lunch, his stomach churned with drawn-out tension. As he unwrapped the lukewarm Big Mac, he noticed that Kate had gotten herself a Happy Meal, complete with a toy from the latest kid's movie. He sensed that she wanted him to say something about it, that it was a ploy to open the door for another discussion about children. Even today, even in the midst of a crisis, she couldn't let it go. He didn't take the bait.

During the afternoon, the rest of the team returned to their homes and families. Nick convinced Kate to go home at five o'clock.

After she left, Nick stared at the wall, his eyelids drooping with the stress of the day. He focused on a stain creeping down the opposite wall from a water leak in the ceiling. A cleaning woman with a tight hair bun came into the waiting room, her metal cart overflowing with supplies, one wheel resisting the direction of the others with a grating protest. She stopped in front of Nick.

"You need to use the restroom?" she asked.

Nick gave her a half-smile. It had been a long time since any woman had asked him that question. "I think I'm fine, thanks."

"I'm just asking 'cause I'm gonna clean it."

Nick lifted his head and grinned. "I hope your boss knows what a thoughtful employee you are."

She puckered her forehead. "Don't know anything about that."

"Well, you get my vote for employee of the month."

She disappeared into the restroom, shaking her head.

Nick dropped his head into his hands, his thoughts returning to Leon. He surrendered to a moment of anger. The study had been successful until yesterday. The Phase 1 clinical study had gone flawlessly and the other Phase 2 trials were progressing with no indication that this one would be different. But

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unless the outlook brightened, Nick could kiss the promotion to Director goodbye. Not to mention poor Leon.

Nick must've dozed off in his chair, because a quiet cough roused him. He jumped to his feet in front of Orland, the ICU doctor.

"He's holding his own." Orland's chin jutted forward. "We may have managed to avert your disaster. We can handle things here just fine on our own," he said, turning away. "Why don't you check in with the nurse in the morning?"

Nick nodded, letting Orland's arrogance roll off him. He rubbed his hand across the day's growth on his face. It would be good to get home to Kate. He gathered his coat and briefcase and headed for the parking garage.

Nick's black Ford Expedition huddled in the shadows at the edge of the garage, the only space available when he had pulled in this morning. Tonight empty spaces lined the perimeter. A shuffling noise whispered along the concrete walls, and Nick felt a sudden spark of fear dance along his nerves. Someone else was here.

He pulled his keys out of his pocket as he walked behind the car. On the driver's side the keys slipped from his fingers and clanged to the concrete floor. Nick bent to retrieve them. When he stood, a figure stepped out of the darkness in front of him. Nick jerked his briefcase out in front of his body.

A lean man, still half-hidden in shadows, faced him without expression.

"What do you want?" Nick asked.

The man watched him. The muscles below his left eye twitched, bringing his face to Nick's memory.

"You were here this morning," Nick said. "In the waiting room."

"My name is Chernoff, Dr. Donovan."

The name meant nothing to Nick. The man's eye twitched again. Nick lowered his briefcase and waited.

"I've been anxious to speak with you." Again Chernoff let silence drift like a dead thing between them. "I've been waiting for a good time."

"What do you want?"

"I have a message for you," Chernoff said, "from my employer."

"Who are you?" Nick jingled his keys, locating the remote alarm.

"A messenger." Except for the twitch, Chernoff's facial muscles remained slack when he spoke. "I bring you a job offer, Dr. Donovan. My employer is interested in having someone of your—expertise—on his team."

"What team? What employer?" Nick tried to push past him, to edge toward his car, but the man didn't move.

"Are you interested in a change, Dr. Donovan?" Chernoff asked. "Something with more financial potential than you could find in an *educational institution*?"

Nick's curiosity needled him. "What kind of a position are we talking about?"

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“The particulars are not important now, Dr. Donovan. All you need to know is that my employer is prepared to multiply your income and offer you a position on the cutting edge of technology and business. May I tell him that you are interested?”

Nick’s mind dashed through possibilities. He would soon hit the professional ceiling at the university—or the basement, if Leon had a relapse—but dozens of corporations were jumping into the genome research business, anxious to be among the first to use the lucrative genetic discoveries. The private sector would value his talents and knowledge.

But Nick wasn’t really interested in money. He wanted to cure disease. If things improved for Leon Weinman and the rest of Phase 2 succeeded, he would have Rogan’s desk in a few months and he could begin to carry out his own vision for the Institute. Did it make sense to give up what seemed like a sure thing to start again somewhere else?

“No, thanks.” Nick pushed past Chernoff. “Tell your employer I’m satisfied where I am, but thanks for the interest.”

Chernoff’s eye twitched again and he scowled. “Perhaps you will change your mind.” He reached into his coat pocket.

Nick glanced around the empty garage. Where was everyone tonight? Was he alone with this walking cadaver?

“No, I don’t think so,” Nick said, his eyes on the hand inside the coat.

Chernoff’s gaze bore into him. “Things change. Sometimes unexpectedly.” He pulled his hand out and slid it across the empty space between them. “Take my card, Dr. Donovan. Call me if you reconsider.”

Nick took the card from the raw-boned hand and shoved it into the pocket of his jacket.

“Thanks.” He unlocked the car and jumped in. Chernoff stared at him from beside the car. Nick closed the car door and started the engine. When he turned to look for Chernoff, the man was gone.

Chapter 3

Gregory Brulin tapped his cigar over the gold-plated ashtray on the corner of his desk. He puffed on it again, savoring the taste. He stood at the wall of windows in his office at the corporate and research facility of SynTech Labs, watching the sun lose its battle with the gray haze over the artificial lake. A row of cars wound slowly around the lake, the five o'clock mass exodus. They moved toward home and family. Gregory felt a twinge of envy.

He leaned his head against the window and peered down to the ground level. The patterned-brick executive parking lot was half-full. He watched as a black Lincoln Town Car swung into the lot and slid to an entrance below him. Gregory took a moment to appreciate the sleek lines of his new car.

The phone on his mahogany desk buzzed. "Yes, Sonya?"

"Your car is ready."

"Thank you."

Gregory snuffed out the cigar, leaving it in the ashtray for the cleaning staff, and strode to the coat tree beside his office door, taking his wool overcoat from the hook. He slipped the coat on, ran a hand over the dark hair his coat had rearranged, and opened the door.

Sonya stood on the other side, waiting to lock it behind him. "Goodnight, Dr. Brulin." She smiled.

He grunted.

Downstairs, Gregory stepped to the curb as the man opened the back door of the car. "Take me to the Center."

The car circled around the artificial lake. Gregory pulled out his phone and dialed the Gene Therapy Center's number, his heavy gold rings glowing red in the dim light. "Get me Edwin Helmsley."

The call transferred and Helmsley picked up. "Yes, Dr. Brulin?"

"I'm headed over there. I want to meet with you."

"Is there something I can help you with?"

"You know I wasn't happy with the last reports I saw. The numbers weren't good enough. I want to go over the new reports. I plan to make my presence felt by the staff there tonight."

"I'll have the report ready for you, sir."

Forty-five minutes later, the car edged to the curb in front of the Gene Therapy Center. His driver opened the curbside door.

"Wait for me," Gregory said.

A spacious waiting room welcomed patients to the SynTech Gene Therapy Center like the lobby of a five-star hotel. Live plants, upholstered couches, and classic end tables clustered in intimate groups inviting patients to relax while they waited for an appointment. A symphony by Mozart played in the background tonight, and staff members spoke in near-whispers as visitors approached the front desk.

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Gregory stopped inside the door to take in the atmosphere, noting with satisfaction the faint scent of flowers that infused the air. In the center of the lobby, a large, white statue of Aesculapius, the Greek god of healing, beckoned visitors like the gracious host of an ancient party. Gregory walked toward the statue and smiled. *Aesculapius, who restored the dead to life.* He patted the base. "We'll do great things here," he said.

A young woman, her hair forced into a tight knot behind her head, smiled at Gregory from her station at the front desk. "Good evening, Dr. Brulin. Mr. Helmsley is waiting for you in the conference room."

Gregory nodded and pushed open the double doors that led to the inner recesses of the Center. The long hallway before him branched into several others, but he opened the first heavy door on his right and stepped in. The door sealed behind him.

Helmsley sat at the end of a polished black table, his elbows on its surface, fingertips pressed together. His face seemed more pinched than usual tonight and his lips even more taut. He acknowledged Gregory's entrance with a stiff nod.

Gregory dropped into the chair at the far end of the long conference table. He unbuttoned his coat, but didn't remove it.

Helmsley slid a bound report across the table toward Gregory's end. It slowed to a stop a few feet short. Neither man moved to retrieve it. It lay there abandoned for several moments. Gregory lifted his eyes to glare at Helmsley. The man finally rose to his feet, stretched across the table, and gave the report the nudge it needed.

Gregory picked it up and glanced through it. The first few pages were worthless. He moved through to the columns of numbers and percentages. "Numbers are down again this month."

Helmsley pressed his fingertips together. "I have observed a recent waning of media attention. Insurance complications have increased. Perhaps you should be giving more attention to marketing."

Gregory dropped the open report onto the table and leaned over it. "I'll decide where my attention goes, Helmsley."

Helmsley studied the ceiling.

Gregory placed his elbows on the desk, pressing his eyelids shut with two fingers of each hand. Then he studied the report again. "It's more than marketing. The percentage of people returning for treatment after they've been here for counseling has dropped, as well."

"Yes, I noticed that."

Gregory flicked the report closed. "I want to talk to every counselor in the building. In this room. In ten minutes."

Helmsley nodded, his lips forming a tight seal.

Gregory returned to the lobby and looked through the windowed front wall into the darkness. In the orange glow of the parking lot lights he could

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see spindly trees, planted like sentinels along the perimeter, bent and swaying. The lobby felt like a haven from the biting January wind.

The idea of installing gas fireplaces in the Center drifted into his mind. The evenings were the Center's busiest times because people who couldn't miss work for an appointment could come at night. A warm fire in the lobby as they escaped the night air might be welcomed.

At first, patients had poured in to avail themselves of the new technology streaming out of SynTech Labs. But, as Helmsley had said, interest was waning. Gregory could not allow that. The fulfillment of Phase 1 of his plan—no, his destiny—depended on large numbers of people coming for treatment. Not just any people. Certain people.

That was where Nicholas Donovan came in. A gene therapy for cancer had not been perfected yet, but Nick's research was as close as anyone had gotten. And a cancer therapy was the one thing that could draw people to the Gene Therapy Centers like mice to a well-baited trap. Gregory needed Nick—and his research—working for SynTech. It would probably take more than money to lure Nick away from the university. Gregory was prepared to do whatever it might take.

The glass double doors beside him swung open and a gust of cold air propelled a young woman and a small boy into the lobby like dry leaves blown off the street. The woman stopped inside the door to rake strands of brown hair away from her face and straighten her jacket. The boy at her side was four or five years old. Gregory's stomach twisted when he looked into the boy's adorable face, but he ground his teeth together and kept his expression impassive as the boy looked up at him. One small hand lifted in a small wave. Gregory nodded in response.

"Okay, Ryan," the woman said, "Mommy has to talk to the lady at the desk. Then we'll sit on one of those pretty couches and read your book while we wait for my appointment." She pointed to the side of the lobby. "Why don't you sit on that couch right there? I'll be over in a minute."

The woman hurried over to the front desk, but the boy stood rooted to his spot, his eyes returning to Gregory. "Hi." The boy's open smile revealed one missing front tooth.

"Hello."

"I'm Ryan."

Gregory's heart tightened, and he tried to look away.

"What's your name?" the boy asked.

"Gregory."

The boy nodded, a serious frown furrowing his forehead. "That starts with a 'G.'"

"Yes. Yes, it does." Gregory swallowed. The boy's wind-blown hair needed smoothing. He almost reached his hand out.

The mother was back a moment later, an apologetic smile on her face.

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“Ryan, I told you to sit down, honey.” She looked up at Gregory. “I’m sorry. He chats with everyone, I’m afraid.”

Gregory forced a smile. “He’s a—a beautiful boy.”

“Thank you.”

Gregory noticed a gold cross on a delicate chain hanging just below the neckline of the woman’s sweater. His mood grew cold.

The woman’s smile faded. She herded Ryan toward a group of couches and sat down beside him, their backs to the front door.

Gregory felt a moment of remorse over what the future held for the little boy. He shook his head, annoyed with his guilt. It was a mistake to come here, to let it get personal. Better to see simple numbers on reports than the faces of those who must be sacrificed to the greater cause. There had certainly been no remorse for another fair-haired little boy four years ago. He could not allow it to get in the way now.

He stalked across the lobby and shoved open the doors to the conference room, leaving regrets behind.

The meeting with the counselors lasted fifteen minutes. He berated and threatened them like a tyrant until they cowered out of the room, promising to increase their percentages. When people came for genetic counseling, he said, he expected them to make an appointment for treatment on their way out.

It was seven o’clock when Gregory stepped out to the curb where his car idled. The frosty air burrowed under his coat. His driver hopped out and opened the back door. Gregory ducked in, pulling the door closed behind him.

A tiny orange glow inside the car startled him. A dark figure slouched in the back seat, a cigarette smoldering between his lips. Gregory’s hand jumped to the door handle.

“I’m sorry to startle you, Dr. Brulin.” The monotone voice seemed to drop at his feet with an audible thud.

“What is it, Chernoff?” Gregory motioned to his driver to wait outside. “Don’t smoke in my new car,” he said. He lowered the window, snatched the cigarette from Chernoff’s mouth, and tossed it out the window.

“I’ve come from the university.” Chernoff’s vacant eyes rested on Gregory.

“And?”

“Donovan said no.”

Gregory twisted the custom-made gold ring on his left hand, studying the SynTech logo. “Anything else?”

Chernoff shook his head. “He’s not interested. I watched him. He is too invested in his work at the university to walk away.”

Gregory leaned back against the cold upholstery of the car and closed his eyes. At length he spoke. “Then we must destroy his investment.”

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Chernoff waited.

Gregory sighed. "Do whatever it takes."

Chernoff disappeared into the night, the door slamming behind him.

The interior light blinked out a moment later, leaving Gregory in darkness to contemplate how far he'd come, and yet how far he had to go.