



THE KEY TO BELIEVING

THE NOVEL BY JANET KUYPERS

COPYRIGHT © 2002

ISBN# 1-891470-70-1

\$13²³ RETAIL

MATTHEW BAIN PHILOSOPHER

Sloane is a methodically-driven, sorrowful, very real character, who invokes both sympathy and appreciation at the same time. Sloane puts on a masculine mask in her work, but underneath she's all female and subject to all the sentimental, lovey-dovey gestures.

The entire novel - as far as research and believability - was damn-near perfect. This book is very marketable, because it's got a tough female heroine, romance, realism, people vs. the government theme, omnipresent view-point, and it's got a happy ending.

BEN OHMART WRITER

(The) characters are very good, and consistent. (They) don't promise one thing and do another... I also find the scenes engaging and it makes me want to read more.

C RA MCGUIRT PUBLISHER

I find myself inside the story.

I really like how the dialogue carries the narrative... very natural and human.

I thought it was damn cute that Carter's maid tweaked him a bit on picking out the "right" tie. It humanized him for me that he was nervous about seeing this "friend" of his.

I like Carter, and I like the warmth between him & Sloane. I like his inference that good books make for good audiences.

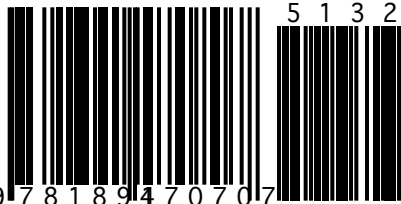
JOHN YOTKO ENGINEER

When Sloane started to researching, she learned that AIDS was a virus — and she wondered if it could be stopped in the human body.

Madison Pharmaceuticals researchers knew they had to do everything in their power to use science to save people from this disease so that people could live safer, healthier lives.

It wasn't enough
that dedicated medical researcher
Sloane Emerson developed new drugs
for HIV and AIDS patients. She needed
to discover a cure. Take this journey
with her as she discovers that the US
government manufactured AIDS, as she
exposes the government, saves her own
life, falls in love and changes the world.

ISBN 1-891470-70-1



THE KEY TO BELIEVING



TO THE KEY
TO BELIEVING

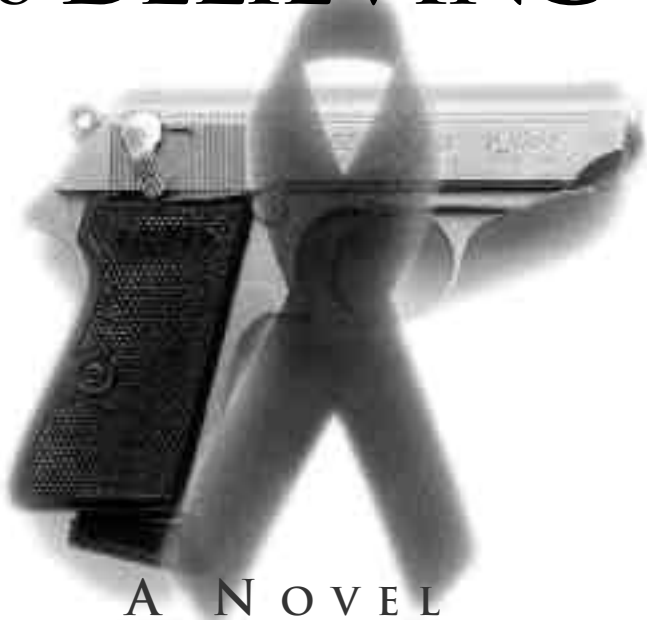
A NOVEL

BY JANET KUYPERS

Janet Fingers

THE KEY TO BELIEVING

TO THE KEY BELIEVING



A NOVEL
BY JANET KUYPERS

SCARS PUBLICATIONS
PENNY DREADFUL PRESS
WITH FREEDOM AND STRENGTH PRESS ASSISTANCE

A M E R I C A

THE KEY
TO BELIEVING

JANET KUYPERS

ISBN #1-891470-70-1

ccandd96@aol.com

<http://scarsdotTV>

scarsuoncedesignanddesign

Henny Dreadful Press

assistance through Freedom and Strength Press

Copyright © 1998-2002 Janet Kuypers

All rights reserved

No part of this book may be reprinted, reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or by any information storage or retrieval system, without the permission in writing from the author.

THIS IS TO STRONG PEOPLE
WHO HAVE BATTLED TOO MUCH

THE CREATION OF THIS NOVEL
IS DEDICATED TO
WILLIAM DOUGLAS WARD

OF THE TABLE CONTENTS

NOTES	xi	BY C RA MCGUIRT
PROLOGUE	xii	BY JOHN YOTKO
CHAPTER ONE	3	THE WOMAN
TWO	33	THE RAIN FOREST EXPERIMENT
THREE	61	THE MAN
FOUR	87	THE DIFFERENT APPROACH
FIVE	133	THE LETTERS
SIX	167	THE CONSPIRACY SEARCH
SEVEN	187	THE DENVER EXPEDITION
EIGHT	219	THE TEMPTATION
NINE	253	THE KEY TO BELIEVING
TEN	277	THE WHITES IN THEIR EYES
ELEVEN	299	THE ESSAY
TWELVE	329	THE LOVE LOST
THIRTEEN	353	THE BATTLE AT HAND
FOURTEEN	373	THE FIGHT AGAINST AIDS
FIFTEEN	411	THE PUBLISHING BATTLE
SIXTEEN	447	THE TRANSFORMATION
SEVENTEEN	473	THE IMPLICATIONS
EIGHTEEN	511	THE JOURNEY TO THE END
NINETEEN	529	THE SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST
TWENTY	561	THE DENOUEMENT
TWENTY-ONE	585	THE ONE-YEAR MARK
A NOVEL PHILOSOPHY	<i>a</i>	BY MATTHEW BAIN
AFTERWARD	<i>g</i>	BY THE AUTHOR
STATS	<i>k</i>	ABOUT THE AUTHOR
PHOTOGRAPHY	<i>m</i>	ARTWORK AND MODELS



BEN OHMART

WRITER

Characters are very good, and consistent. They don't promise one thing and do another. that's very good. The characters are like real people. I also find the scenes engaging and it makes me want to read more.

(The author) also has a good way of making a lot of detail without details. That is, without description. The characters are very strong, you know. Very good. These people are real to me.

NOTES

BY C R A M C G U I R T

In general, I like the style of the novel, and find myself inside the story. I like both Kyle and Sloane and find him a sympathetic character.

With Sloane, it's her life, and her motivations are her own. I find her a sympathetic character. I can see myself being interested in her work, talking to her about it

Again, I really like how the dialogue carries the narrative. I tend in that direction myself when I write prose. The dialogue is very natural and human. The exciting aspect of this to me is that Sloane is involved in what amounts to pure research ... yet she is leaning on herself for immediate results.

I like Carter, and I like the warmth between him & Sloane. And I like his inference that good books make for good audiences.

There is in me a slight exasperation with Sloane that she has all these wonderful good hearted handsome sensitive rich successful more or less perfect tight male buddies with whom she will not be intimate lest it wreck something or another. Yet that inserts some conflict. I thought it was damn cute that Carter's maid tweaked him a bit on picking out the "right" tie. It humanized him for me that he was nervous about seeing this "friend" of his.

I also like the use of e-mail to advance the narrative

There is a high level of sophistication, with only the occasional jarring descent into awkward or inappropriate dialogue

The only other Sloane I know is an attorney in NYC. I see SOME personality traits in common with the two Sloanes... and I have to wonder what "my" Sloane would think of "your" Sloane. Hmmm, maybe she will get a chance to find out when this thing hits the book racks...



The HIV virus

*Luc Montagnier/Institut
Pasteur.CNRI/Science Source/Photo
Researchers, Inc.*

PREFACE

THE HISTORY OF AIDS

WHO IS SLOANE EMERSON?

BY JOHN YOTKO

Unlike all of the girls in her class in Junior High School, Sloane was having fun as a girl in school going around rubbing tape onto doorknobs and other things people may have touched to collect samples. In school they would take the tape back to the lab to see if anything, like any kinds of bacteria, were there.

She meticulously placed the tape in the petri dishes being careful not to touch anything so she would not contaminate the samples she had collected.

It was at about this time that AIDS was only being discovered. Sloane had no idea what the disease was then, and she had no idea that her love of science would draw her toward searching for a cure to the virus that causes AIDS.

###

It first appeared as a warning sent out by the CDC. These types of warnings were and are still common occurrences when an unusual outbreak of a disease or illness is confined to one location or group of people:

U. S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

In the period October 1980-May 1981, 5 young men, all active homosexuals, were treated for biopsy-confirmed *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia at 3 different hospitals in Los Angeles, California. Two of the patients died. All 5 patients had laboratory-confirmed previous or current cytomegalovirus (CMV) infection and candidal mucosal infection. ...

The diagnosis of *Pneumocystis pneumonia* was confirmed for all 5 patients ante-mortem by closed or open lung biopsy. The patients did not know each other and had no known common contacts or knowledge of sexual partners who had had similar illnesses. The 5 did not have comparable histories of sexually transmitted disease. Four had serologic evidence of past hepatitis B infection but had no evidence of current hepatitis B surface antigen. Two of the 5 reported having frequent homosexual contacts with various partners. All 5 reported using inhalant drugs, and 1 reported parenteral drug abuse. Three patients had profoundly depressed in vitro proliferative responses to mitogens and antigens. Lymphocyte studies were not performed on the other 2 patients.

This is an excerpt from the first published report of an illness that one year later would be known as Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS).

This disease that was found predominantly among homosexuals and intravenous drug users was immediately snatched up by the Christian evangelists as the Lord casting His wrath onto the iniquitous and unrighteous. This explanation was left wanting when it was revealed that hemophiliacs also had a high incidence of HIV. It was certain that the children who contracted this disease were not participating in hedonistic behaviors.

It started to surface in the 1970s in this country when rare infections and cancers started to strike down people who were thought to be healthy. These

infections were the opportunistic type, the type that only strike people with suppressed immune systems. When the disease was discovered it was identified as three distinct entities: HIV (human immunodeficiency virus), ARC (AIDS related complex), and AIDS. As the understanding of the disease grew it was recognized that these were three stages of the same disease - an irreversible trend from HIV infection to AIDS.

The Gay Men's Health Crisis was founded in 1982 as a non-profit organization to provide medical, education, and advocacy services for people with AIDS.

One year later the virus was isolated in both the United States at the National Institutes of Health by Robert Gallo and by Luc Montagnier at the Pasteur Institute in France. Later a second strain of the virus was discovered identified as HIV-2. HIV-2 is still very rare outside of Africa. Blood samples from the 1970s indicate that HIV was a problem in the United States as early as 1978.

By 1985 the United States and Canadian governments required that all organ and blood donations be screened for HIV. This has led to a significant decrease in the number of people infected with HIV in the United States. The disease was still assumed to be a problem among homosexuals and drug users only. The nation's leading nonprofit organization dedicated to the support of AIDS research, American Foundation for AIDS Research, was founded in 1985. In addition to promoting research into this health crisis they were a leader in the advocacy of fair and compassionate AIDS-related public policies.

In 1987 approximately two thirds of all new AIDS patients in the United States were Caucasians, with Blacks and Hispanics making up most of the rest. Finally, President Reagan decided to speak up on this 'six year old' crisis. Many feel that this was too little too late having lost the opportunity to attack the problem in its infancy when it was primarily limited to specific social groups. Also, because of misconceptions or downright deceit, stigma and prejudice had taken over for compassion. Houses were set on fire. Families shunned relatives because of the disease. Husbands were beating wives with AIDS - even though the husband may have been the source of the disease in the family.

A disease that was virtually wiped out in the United States got a boost from AIDS in 1990. Doctors discovered that Tuberculosis was again a problem in this country.

Good news came when the ADA began protecting AIDS patients from discrimination in the workplace.

The years 1993 through 1995 gave AIDS a new definition. It was finally recognized as a public health problem by the general population in the United States. This new public awareness stopped the ever-expanding growth of new AIDS cases each year. Since 1995 the number of new AIDS cases has been steadily declining, although not in all groups. The misconception that AIDS is a disease among gays has led to a spread among women from about seven percent of AIDS patients in 1987 to about twenty-five percent of all new AIDS patients today.

Sloane Emerson graduated from undergraduate studies in 1994, and one thing she noticed while in her Chemistry studies was that there were a large number of women's studies groups on her campus, and there was a large push for women's rights because of the threat of sexual assault. This was the first time women were left on their own with men, and acquaintance rape was common for college students when they were able to access liquor easily at parties and at bars that had an entrance age below twenty-one.. She noticed that during her first two years at school she did not hear much talk of sexually transmitted diseases, but by her junior year she heard talk the condom use was important not only to prevent pregnancy for young sexually active students, but also to prevent diseases like AIDS.

This was the first time she heard about AIDS, and when she started to research the disease in her libraries at public computer, she learned that it was a virus — and she wondered if it was a virus that could be stopped in the human body.

The trend that Caucasians make up most of the new AIDS cases has reversed and Blacks and Hispanics now make up the majority of the approximately 44,000 new AIDS cases reported in the United States each year.

Much of the slowing of the growth of AIDS is due to the public's knowledge that anyone can get the disease. New drugs have been successful at slowing the progression from HIV infection to AIDS. Clinical trials conducted in 1997 showed that pregnant women who were HIV positive could reduce the transmission of HIV to their children by two thirds with AZT treatments. Deaths from AIDS dropped by 56% from 1996. Things were beginning to look up for the millions of people suffering with AIDS and HIV infection worldwide.

Even with all of the progress that has been made it is now confirmed that almost one million Americans are infected with HIV and it is estimated that approximately one percent of the U. S. population is infected. There is no cure or no vaccine in sight.

After her schooling, Sloane was offered a job at Madison Pharmaceuticals after working there as an intern while she was in school. She felt that she would be able to work toward her masters or her doctorate while she was working there, and she liked the chance to work there instead of work at the University as a researcher, like her father suggested.

Worldwide the number of AIDS or HIV infections is approaching forty million. This continued growth in the number of new patients didn't look good, and Madison Pharmaceuticals liked her mention of AIDS in her interviews; they were starting to do work to look for medications for AIDS patients, and they like someone with a knowledge of the virus as well as knowledge of how some communities treat AIDS and react to it as a possibility for a promising new employee.

The apparent lack of progress toward finding a cure or a vaccine has led many to speculate that this is a weapon escaped from a government laboratory. These conspiracy theories hold that the United States government created the virus and has the cure.

Search the internet today for information on conspiracies for AIDS. There is a plethora of choices, each being drastically different from most others. It may be hard to believe, but some people actually subscribe to these notions. Others, ignoring the fanaticism of the conspiracy theorists have dedicated much of their life to finding a vaccine or cure for this disease.

Why they would do the work, either for personal satisfaction or humanitarian reasons, was irrelevant. All they knew was that there was a virus that caused a deadly disease. The researchers knew they had to do everything in their power to use science to save people from this disease so that people could live safer, healthier lives.

This was the course taken at Madison Pharmaceuticals that led to promotion after promotion of Sloane so that she was the head of the research department that found the drug with the market title of Emivir™, that helped many people with AIDS stay healthy for a longer period of time, hopefully until a cure could be found.

THE KEY
TO BELIEVING



CHAPTER 1

THE WOMAN

Six a.m. arrived, sounding the alarm clock in his bedroom. The noise crashed through their room, and Kyle Mackenzie rolled over, slammed his palm into the buzzing clock, and rolled back onto his side. He turned his head toward the window. A slight rain tapped against the edge of the roof and dripped over his windowsill.

He didn't want to get up, not today. Every morning he would pull his umbrella from the stand by his front door, run to his Honda in the driveway, and wind his way through the streets of downtown Seattle, to the opposite side of town, to Madison Pharmaceuticals. Every morning he would go into the office, walk back through the long hallways to the lab, and work with his team, usually making no progress.

"Honey, why are you getting up so early?" his wife Elisa moaned from the other side of the bed.

"Getting in at nine means you're only there three hours before lunch," Kyle answered. "You can't get anything done if you're interrupted like that. I figured this way I can work for a good five hours before having to stop."

"Are you going to make a habit of this?" his wife asked.

“We’ll see,” he said as he put his hand on her shoulder. “Don’t worry, I’ll try to make it home early enough tonight for dinner. I’ll call you.”

And with that he got up and walked into the bathroom to shave.

Kyle hadn’t given up hope. Just a few months ago his team, headed by the prominent researcher Sloane Emerson, developed a new drug that drastically improved the T-Cell count by lengthening the time the viral load was down for AIDS patients. In the best-case scenario old protease inhibitors, when coupled into cocktails with the usual drugs like AZT, reduced the viral load of AIDS patients to a nearly negligible amount around a year. With the new inhibitor they worked on, Madison Pharmaceuticals laid claim to the only drug to date that when taken properly reduced the viral load for just over two years. This was an astonishing feat; some theorists claimed that after three years the AIDS virus would die out from within the body, and if cocktails of drugs could extend the time a patient’s viral load was almost gone from one year to two years, hope was in sight for a cocktail that would eliminate the virus after three years, thus eliminating AIDS in the body.

And if researchers couldn’t find a drug that killed the HIV virus, they could at least find a drug cocktail that holds it back in the body until the virus actually dies.

He thought about this during his drive to work. More than the accomplishment itself, Kyle thought about the celebrations after the drug, Emivir, named after Sloane Emerson, was released into the public. The P.R. department handled the release of Emivir perfectly, and Madison Pharmaceuticals seemed to be in all of the newspapers. Madison’s stock split less than one week after the F.D.A. had approved the release of Emivir.

The parties, Kyle kept thinking, seemed to be at times the best part of the release of the drug. For the first few weeks after the release of Emivir he had plans three or four nights a week, to parties in ballrooms of hotels, to parties at the luxurious homes of both the president and vice-president of the company, to parties in Los Angeles hosted by famous actors, even to parties in mansions of government officials in Washington D.C., which were weekend-events where the executives and the laboratory staff flew on the company plane across the country to celebrate. He bought a tuxedo for the parties. He met people he thought he would never be able to rub shoulders with.

He remembered at one party walking over to a group of women having a conversation about dinner parties. He didn’t know who any of the women

were, but he could tell they were professional socialites, that they viewed their position in their life as their job, as a title to uphold.

One woman, wearing a floor-length black dress with gold trim at the neckline, asked, "So if you could invite anyone to a dinner party, who would you invite?"

Another woman, wearing a red beaded dress, answered, "You know I'd invite the Addisons, of course, and the Bronsens as well. And the regulars would be on my list, you know, Daphne Hassan and her interest of the moment, or even the family of Amelia. But then I'd invite some people that would really stir things up, you know, a few others from Congress that would like to talk to people like the Tates."

Everyone started laughing in the small circle of people. Kyle had no idea who these women were talking about.

"Have you forgotten the Madisons?" Kyle turned to see an older woman glancing at him and smiling as she spoke. "You know the Madisons are very important."

At that moment Kyle felt a hand on his shoulder and he turned to see Sloane Emerson.

"Hi, are you enjoying yourself?" Kyle asked. He could feel the cold stares of the women in the group — not glaring at him but at Sloane, the woman of the evening. She never looked like she fit in at these parties; her demeanor suggested, without her consciously trying, that she was above the group.

"I was just wondering how you were doing. What are you discussing here?" She looked around at the group of women.

"Well," the first woman started, "We were just discussing if we were to invite anyone we wanted to a dinner party, who would be on our list."

"Let me think about that." Sloane said, and genuinely thought about the question for a moment. "How many people could be on this list? Are we talking a small party or something larger?"

"Oh, just forty or fifty people," the woman in black answered.

"If it could be anyone," Sloane answered, "I think I'd invite Jesus Christ. Definitely Aristotle would get invited, and some of the Founding Fathers, particularly Jefferson. But Einstein would definitely have to be on the list as well, and maybe a few astronomers, too."

Realizing how the women were looking at her, she stopped.

Grinning at the assumption she made, she tried to save face. "But I don't

suppose you were posing a philosophical question, were you?" She looked around the circle and saw every set of female eyes staring at her with disdain, except for one woman, who was rolling her eyes and looking away.

She turned to Kyle and smiled. "I'll let you continue your conversation," she said to Kyle as she turned back to the group of women. "It was very nice meeting you," and as the last words were trailing out of her mouth she was turning and walking away.

Kyle shrugged his shoulders and smiled at the group, then turned and followed her.

"Sloane?"

She turned around and glanced at him, smiling before she spoke. "I forget that most people don't think the way I do," she said to Kyle, nodding her head to the women she just talked to.

"You know, you didn't technically meet any of those women — they never even told you their names." Kyle grinned at her response of a smile, telling him in her look that she never cared to meet them because they had no resources of value to her.

"I just have one question, Sloane."

"Yes?"

"Why Jesus Christ?"

"So that when he doesn't show up I can have the last laugh." Sloane winked at him. Kyle never liked it when she made such rash comments, especially when she knew he was a practicing Catholic.

"You know he was a real man..."

"Many people believe the Bible is meant to be read as a metaphor and not taken verbatim. And I know there is scientific evidence that a man named Jesus lived, but I also know that as this son of a supposed god, his name was one of many names for gods, and names were adjusted as created so they had the numerical and religious significance of the number 888. But if he was at dinner I'd be able to talk to him and find out if he was actually a prophet, or if anything from the New Testament actually happened."

Kyle then watched her begin to turn away before she turned back to him briefly. "You know," she added, "you should really spend more time with your wife when you bring her to these parties." She smiled, gestured to Elisa, then turned and walked away.

Kyle's favorite part of these parties still seemed to be having the chance

to talk with famous women and meeting wives of famous dignitaries. It wasn't because he liked the attention of other women, he loved his wife dearly and would never think seriously of being with another woman. What he loved were the way these women, who worried about looking good and being famous and adhering to all the necessary social graces, looked up to him because he was a part of a team that accomplished something. The team he was on, his team, set their minds to something, and they did it. And everyone wanted to know how.

When he was at these parties, Kyle felt like an astronaut who just came back from traveling to the moon.

"What exactly does your drug do, Mr. Mackenzie?" asked Katia Turner, a Hollywood actress, at one party in Los Angeles.

Kyle was amazed that the famous Katia Turner actually came up to him to talk — and knew his name. He cleared his throat. "When used in combination with the old drugs, Emivir coincided with a lowering of the viral load to a negligible amount for about two years, versus one year, the best result of the other inhibitors on the market."

"How does it work? You said it's an inhibitor?"

He didn't expect people to want to know. "Well, the first drugs on the market, like AZT, targeted only one of the HIV enzyme components. This was basically attacking only one part of the virus, which proved effective for only a small amount of time. The new wave of inhibitors, called 'protease inhibitors', attacked a different enzyme component of the virus, so HIV was then being attacked at a different level. Using a 'cocktail' of drugs instead of just trying to attack the virus at one part worked well, but the new wave of inhibitors could only reduce the amount of virus in the body for about a year. This new protease inhibitor we've created can continue attacking the virus for nearly two years."

He could tell that although she seemed interested, she was straining to act.

"So Emivir delays the continued spread of AIDS for an additional year?"

Kyle smiled. "Yes, but it's more promising than that. The theory is that the AIDS virus, without causing infection from its birth to death, can live in the human body for three years. The problem is that in that three-year life span it continues to mutate and reproduce itself. If we can stop it from doing that for two years, we're getting closer and closer to stopping it for three years. After that point, the remaining virus may die within the body."

“And thus a cure?”

“Well, a human could live with AIDS in the body until the virus dies.”

He tried to push out of his mind the thought that the HIV-infected cells could seemingly “hide” in pockets in the body, such as the lymph nodes, or in the spine, or in the testes — and that three years might not be enough time. Researchers still didn’t know everything they needed to about the virus. But Kyle needed to think that there was a goal line in sight.

“That’s amazing,” Katia crooned. “So how long do you think it will take to come up with the drugs to destroy the AIDS virus in the body altogether?”

Kyle paused. She asked the question he did not want to have to answer. “That is what we don’t know right now. We’ll have to keep working on it, hope for the best.”

###

It was with that disheartening thought that he came back to today, in his car, driving to his lab.

It was 7:15 a.m. when he pulled into the parking lot. He walked through the main office, through back hallways, towards his lab. It wasn’t the parties he liked, he thought, but the chance to rest on his accomplishments for once. To feel good about something he had done. Whenever he thought about the search for a cure now, disappointment crept into his pores and he felt like he was going nowhere, no matter how many hours he put in at the lab.

He hoped that at least today he should get in before his supervisor because she must like to see that her staff still has the desire to get through this puzzle.

He walked down the last hallway to the lab. He could see through the frosted glass of the door that the lights were on. He opened the door.

Sloane Emerson sat on a stool, one foot on the floor, one foot on the bottom rung of the stool, lab coat open, falling over her hips to the sides of the stool. “She always looks lanky,” Kyle thought, but it seemed to fit in perfectly with the test tubes and pieces of scientific equipment placed in rows on the line of tables along the wall. Her black hair was straight, just above the shoulder in length, cut into a bob and she always tucked it behind her ears. She seldom wore make-up. She was reading some lab reports. She looked up at him.

“Kyle, you’re here early.”

Kyle was frozen for a moment in the doorway. The door hit him as it slowly closed behind him, reminding him to move forward. “You’re here early. I thought I beat everyone else.”

“Some things were on my mind about the tests we did last night and I figured I’d get in early to read the results.”

“And?”

“Nothing. It’s not making any difference what we do with Emivir, we’re not making any improvements at all.” And with that she turned back to the reports, to read on for a more detailed explanation.

That’s what is amazing, Kyle thought. She never gets depressed about making no progress. At least she never shows it.

He thought back to the parties. Once most of the guests had arrived Sloane would enter, never with a date. And although she didn’t attempt to attract attention to herself, everyone always noticed her when she walked into the room. The rest of the researchers noticed her most of all. After seeing her every day in navy slacks and a white blouse, watching Sloane Emerson walk into a ballroom wearing a floor-length taupe satin dress instantly turned heads. She wore the simplest dresses, ones that showed her off, not her clothing. The fabric from her clothes seemed to glide over her skin as she walked through the room. For jewelry she wore just a necklace with a solitary diamond. At these parties, Kyle thought, when all the women wore too much jewelry and dresses that looked a little difficult to walk in, seeing her confidently glide through a room with the same determination she had when she was in her lab, made her look like she was in charge of everything around her.

Kyle knew she didn’t do it intentionally. It was just how she was.

Kyle walked closer to her and glanced over her shoulder at the test results. “These weren’t very important, I mean, we weren’t expecting much from these tests. Is this really why you couldn’t sleep last night?”

Closing the lab notebook, she placed it down on top of the pile in front of her. “I’ve just been getting exasperated,” she said.

“About our lack of progress? You know, you should really take a break, we’ve made great strides, and you’re —”

“It’s not just our laboratory progress, you know. Tyler, from marketing and P.R., said that he’s heard of a few groups lobbying the government to check into our production speed because we’re not getting enough of Emivir

on the market. But they don't realize that Madison holding off on the number of people that get the drug, because we have to be able to keep them on the drug once they're on it. An AIDS patient has to take a series of pills a number of times a day for years. Once a patient gets on Emivir they have to stay on it. If they miss two or three doses the virus can have enough time to mutate in their system so the virus becomes resistant to it. So we have to make sure that the plants are producing enough Emivir so we don't run out for the people already on it, we can't just give this to anyone, because if we do, then all of the patients will be out of the drug if the plants can't keep up with production. If we did that, we'd have more of an epidemic on our hands. We've got a plant of our own going, and we've outsourced three plants in the States, Canada and Japan. What more do they expect of us?"

"Why are you letting production become a problem for you? That's not your department."

"But it's my drug, and these people don't understand what they're suggesting. I think none of these people think that businesses have to plan, that they just make so much money and every decision they make is just to hurt "the public". They don't think about the fact the businesses have to sell to "the public" so they're obviously concerned with their market and they're doing what they can for their market. Businesses, in order to stay profitable, have to do what the market dictates. And this decision — to hold back some people from using Emivir right away — it's for the good of "the people," but no one wants to look at it logically. If we were being a mean business, might we be more interested in selling it to as many people as possible, Kyle?"

A smile came over her when she heard Kyle respond with, "No, not if all of our patients die when we run out of drugs."

"So we're planning to do something that's best for the business and best for the patients and still they complain. I don't see any of those lobbyists making a better drug and selling massive amounts of it. But they complain when we do it for them. It's like these people think they own us because we are talented and do something with ourselves."

"I'm sure Madison is going to out-source production to a few more plants, and they're probably going to complete another plant within the next eight to ten months."

"I know, but it angers me that we provide a great product for people, we do our jobs, we do them well, we even perform a service to "the public," if

that's how they want to refer to it, and these lobbyists still think it's not enough."

"Is this something you haven't realized before?"

"No, I suppose not." Sloane paused and began to smile. "Boy, you don't let me just wallow, do you?"

"What good would you be if we let you do that?"

"Thanks, Kyle."

"No, really, you never usually complain about anything or let those people affect you, so if you need to vent now, feel free to do so. But if you've managed to put those lobbying goons out of your mind before, I'm sure you're capable of doing it again. You know you really shouldn't even waste your time thinking about them."

"I know. But I just keep looking back at the lack of progress we've made in the months since Emivir came out. It makes me think we're on the wrong track."

Kyle looked at her. He saw for a split second what he thought was resignation.

"So I've been thinking about looking at this from a different angle." Kyle looked at her when she spoke and the look of resignation Kyle thought he saw was instantly gone.

Kyle paused. "You know, you really should rest more. It's Thursday, go home tonight and do something social. Take the day off tomorrow."

"Oh, I'm seeing my father for dinner tonight. Not too much fun. You know how family obligations go."

"Your father Bill's a great guy, I love it when he comes to visit. Spending time with him can't be too bad."

"I suppose not."

"He recommended you for the research job at the University, didn't he?"

"Yes, but I didn't want that job. Anyway, I'm sure I'll be in tomorrow; I'll need work as a rest from my dinner tonight."

As the rest of the staff filed in, work resumed as usual. They had managed to create their wonder drug, Emivir, by working with formulas for existing inhibitors and modifying them so that the HIV virus could not become immune to it so easily. Their current effort was to do the same to Emivir — to work with that formula to extend the attack period for an even longer period of time. It managed to work once for them; it made sense to try it again.

But they kept hitting brick walls with this research and she knew she had to do something else. She studied the reports. She supervised the tests.

“Maybe Kyle was right,” Sloane thought, “maybe I need to rest.” Her father was a nice man; she could have a nice dinner and get some rest and come to work on Friday with a clear head.

Calling her father from work at 6:30, she tried to get her mind off work to make plans for dinner. “What restaurant did you want to go to? I’ll just meet you there. You shouldn’t have to pick me up.”

“You’re still at work, sweetheart, aren’t you?”

“Yes, but I’m about to get out of here, so I can meet you anywhere.”

“Okay. How about Dimitri’s for Italian, say, 7:30?”

“Sure. I’ll see you there.”

When she got to Dimitri’s Bill Emerson was waiting at the bar for her. He was leaning over the bar, but looking back, checking for her. He was wearing the same sports coat he owned since she was a child, but now it stayed unbuttoned because it was a bit more snugly around his waist. Still, he looked comfortable. She walked to the bar.

“Hi, sweetheart. They’re setting up a table for us.”

“Oh, I was hoping that was your first drink and you weren’t waiting for me long.” She glanced at the bourbon on the rocks in his hand; it was his drink of choice.

“Yeah, I haven’t been here long at all. Let’s see how our table is doing.”

Bill Emerson was a university researcher, working in the archaeology department, studying relics brought in from digs that the university was able to acquire. He went to work on time every morning, and he made it home in time for mom’s home-cooked dinner every night as Sloane grew up. The university seldom sent him out on digs; they usually made him classify what the archaeologist groups found on their expeditions and brought back to the university.

Bill Emerson had been publishing less, so in recent years he was doing less research and more teaching, per the administration at the university. He seemed fine with that; besides, his retirement was coming up soon and he wanted to slow down his workload.

When finally getting out of school, he talked to some people at the university and placed a recommendation for a job in the medical research department. Sloane knew well that you couldn’t just recommend someone

for a job, that the university research team would have to look at her records... She went through three interviews for a job at the school, but her father seemed to show more excitement about the job than she did. But when they offered the research job to her she turned it down to work in a low-end laboratory position for Madison Pharmaceuticals. Her father thought she was making a mistake. During her seven-year career at Madison, however, she managed to make her way to the head of the research department. As she began to prove herself at the company, the executives gave her whatever she needed. And she produced results.

Her father never understood why she wanted to work for a company and not the university.

“Do you want some company dictating what you do?”

“It’s better than having the government dictate what you do, isn’t it?”

“But you can work for the good of the people if you do university research.”

“And I can do work for my own benefit if I do research at a company.”

“Do you really want the bottom line to be the almighty dollar?”

“Why yes, dad, I do. And what’s wrong with that?”

This would always exasperate her father, but it would also end the conversation.

Eventually the university job was offered to one of her classmates, Toby Graham. Toby was more suited for the university life anyway, Sloane thought. Besides, since they would both be working on improving treatments for HIV-positive and full-blown AIDS patients, they would also be in the same town and could confer on ideas if they were working on similar theories.

Ordering a linguine with tomatoes and mushrooms in a basil pesto, she listened to her father ordered the usual — meat ravioli. He ordered a bottle of red wine.

“What’s the occasion, dad?”

“Well, it would have been our anniversary, your mother’s and mine.”

Sloane sat silent for a moment. “I’m sorry. I didn’t even think about it.”

“I’m just glad that you didn’t back out on me again.”

“Dad, I —”

“I know, I know, dear. You’ve got your work. You shouldn’t have to worry about your old man anyway.”

“Dad, it’s just that —”

“But you know, you should spend some time with your brother and your sister while you still can.”

“Dad, they’re not going anywhere, I can see them —”

“We thought your mom wasn’t going anywhere, either.”

Whenever her father brought up her mother the conversation always became morbid. It had been seven years since she died in a car accident, but the way her father treated her mother’s death made it feel like a cloak of guilt that he could lay over her whenever she had been away from the family for a while.

“You know, you never see your family anymore,” he said. She knew where the conversation was heading. Her mind wandered to the last Christmas they spent together. Her brother, a mailman, and her sister, a housewife and mother, never understood her love of her work. Family gatherings became efforts to make Sloane see that there is more to life than accomplishing the goals at work she set out to accomplish. “When are you going to settle down, get married and have children?” her sister would ask. “Once you have children, you’ll know what I mean. Children change everything.” Her brother would attack in a similar fashion. “You know, high school friends ask me what you’re up to. I never know what to tell them.”

“Tell them I’m a doctor that heads a medical research department at a pharmaceutical company.”

“But it’s not as easy as that.”

“Why not?”

Her brother never seemed to be able to answer that; he merely felt that something was wrong with a woman so obsessed with her work.

“Dad, I know where this conversation is going,” Sloane interrupted. “We’ve had it many times before, but you still keep trying.”

“But sweetheart, they miss you.”

“No they don’t, dad, they miss the chance to judge me against what they think I should be doing — which is very different from what I think I should be doing.”

“They just want what’s best for you.”

“And why do they think they know what’s best for me, more than I do? Dad, they seem to revel in imposing their standards on me, and no offense dad, but so do you.”

“It’s just that we care.”

“I know, dad, but trust me when I say I’m happy with the decisions I’ve

made in my life.”

Her father looked at her. They sat in silence for a moment before they returned to their food.

She never meant to have these arguments with her father. He was always the one that would bring it up. As she drove home from Dimitri’s she tried to understand why her family couldn’t believe her when she said she was doing what she wanted with her life.

Walking into her apartment after dinner, she tossed her trench coat on the chair next to the front door and propped her umbrella against the wall. She walked across the living room; shadows from the city lights from the picture window followed behind her and stretched across the floor and curled along the opposite wall. She made her way into her study and turned on a lamp at her desk. She sat down and looked over the test results she brought back from work. Although there was still no progress, looking at the data made her feel better after talking to her father; at least she could decipher the data, make sense of it, follow its rules and learn something from it.

Possibly even master it.

As it approached midnight, she got up from her desk and walked over to the window. She scanned the skyline and watched the city lights flicker like candles in front of her. These aren’t candles, she thought, these are lights, lights in buildings where people are cleaning from the day’s work, lights in restaurants where people are enjoying the fruits of their labor, headlights of cars moving through the city going home to their families, lights of apartments and homes where people prepared for bed. This is what my data does, she thought. This is what thinking does for the world. It lights the cities. It lights everyone’s way. It moves people. It makes all this possible.

She wondered how other people could not understand this.

She closed the shade and turned around for bed. She wanted to get up early in the morning and get some work done.

###

She didn’t know why she was there, but she had just started a new job. It was her first day in the office, and her supervisor said to her, “Oh, you must have misunderstood from the interview. Research work is only a small fraction of the work you’ll do here. In fact, the laboratory and offices aren’t even set up

now, we're doing some construction and expansion in the building, so your first assignment is to go on a health-mission with a few other staff members."

Standing in front of her supervisor's desk, Sloane blankly managed to get out the words, "Where will I be going?"

"Africa. It's a humanitarian mission. You see, they think we're hoarding our products here in the States and certain villages are going to be wiped out entirely unless we go in there and vaccinate them. So what I need you to do is let our company driver take you home so you can pack a few things, and then he'll take you straight to the airport, where you'll meet up with the rest of the staff. You'll probably be in Africa for about a month vaccinating children."

The next thing she remembered was that she was in her apartment packing, thinking to herself that she can't pick up and quit, she needs the money from this job, and she didn't even know what to pack. She had no time to call anyone and say she was leaving, so she changed the message on her answering machine. "Hello, you've reached Sloane Emerson. I'll be in Africa on business for the month of April, so please leave a message and I will get back to you as soon as possible." After leaving the message she realized how ridiculous it sounded. "I'm in Africa for a month, so leave a message and I'll get back to you as soon as possible?" she thought, but she had no time to change the message on her machine, she would be late for her plane. And then it occurred to her that by listening to her message someone will then know that no one is in her apartment for the entire month, making it a prime target for a break-in; she could see it now, she'll come home from her trip and there will be nothing left in her apartment.

She looked over at her suitcase. "I don't want to do this," she thought, but she had no choice. She needed the money from this job; this job was all she now had. She closed the poorly packed suitcase, grabbed her passport and trench coat, unplugged the answering machine and headed for the door.

"How could I have missed this in the interview?", she thought. "How could they have misled me like this?"

The next thing she remembered was being on the plane, starting the descent. They would be landing within a half hour. Her new coworkers were sitting in the aisle and the window seats; she was crammed between them. The only thought that kept going through her head, during the painfully long flight, was "How did I let this happen?"

"The thing with this company is that they want us to know where their

heart is,” the coworker on the aisle was saying to her. He was slightly overweight, he had a moustache and he talked a little too loudly, especially for being in an airplane. “I mean, they want us to like the company we work for, so periodically they send us out on these humanitarian missions.”

“Yeah,” chimed in the guy in the window seat. “It’s like doing volunteer work on company time. And how many people get paid to go to Africa and get the trip paid for?”

“Don’t dress up too much,” the guy in the aisle said. “The company also brings along a photographer who takes a ton of photos of us vaccinating all the little African children, you know, holding them and caring for them and stuff, for press releases. They want us to look like we’re down in the trenches doing hard work for these little starving children.”

All she could do was look around the plane. She felt trapped between these two loud men. She wanted to get out of the plane.

“Are you afraid of heights?” the man in the aisle asked. “Cause you don’t look so good.”

The next thing she remembered was being escorted into her hut. “This is where you’ll be sleeping,” the native told her. Apparently he guided Americans like her and her coworkers through missions like this, this seemed to be a regular occurrence for him. “Your bathroom is that building over there; you can get a bucket of water to clean yourself off with pretty much daily.”

‘Pretty much *daily*?’ went through her head as she moved her suitcase to the corner before putting on a pair of shorts. “This is not where my talents are best used, I should not be here in Africa doing the work any volunteer could do to make people think that I work for a kind and caring company. I should be producing better drugs for these people, I shouldn’t be going out here and hand-delivering them.” She held her head for a moment. She then walked outside her hut and there were fifteen emaciated children with wide eyes standing in the doorway, looking up at her.

That’s when she sprung up in her bed, panting.

She looked over at her clock. 4:07 a.m. She did a mental check: No, I did not quit my job at Madison. No, I’m still doing AIDS research. No, I don’t have to pack my bags and go to Africa to vaccinate children.

She fell back onto her pillow. Her heart was racing; she was still breathing heavy. This was the point, she thought, that a man beside her would wake up and say, “It’s okay, darling, it was just a dream.” But no one was

there to say it to her, and she was used to that.

She couldn't fall back asleep. This was one more dream for her to analyze. She never had nightmares, not in the traditional sense of the word, but to her they were most definitely nightmares nonetheless. She had deduced that they had all entailed her losing control of some aspect of her life somehow. In one dream she moved into a new apartment, to find out that she didn't read the lease carefully enough, and she had only rented a room in the apartment when she thought he rented the entire apartment and she would have four roommates sharing the common spaces with her. The remainder of that dream was spent trying to do two things, trying figure out which bedroom she wanted, before her other roommates came in and laid claim to their bedrooms, and trying to figure out how she was going to fit all of her furniture into a fraction of the space she needed. All of her dreams were like this, losing control over something, by overlooking one small detail, and then having to frantically work to pick up the pieces.

"Why do I have these dreams?" she thought as she wondered if they had overlooked something to produce a vaccine or an attempt for a cure.

She glanced back at the alarm clock. 4:18. Her alarm would go off in forty minutes anyway. She figured she might as well get up.

She walked over to her window. The city lights were on, but it was quiet. She looked at all the dots of light, dots scattered among the tall buildings. She turned toward the bathroom to shower.

###

Kyle Mackenzie was the third person to get into the laboratory Friday morning. As he opened the door, he saw Sloane hunched over with another laboratory technician, Howard Shindo.

"Look, we were lucky with our protease inhibitor, and you know it," Sloane was saying to Howard. "When the first wave of drugs came out, doctors didn't know how to use them — they were just prescribing them as a single-drug medication, which was as effective as using AZT, or other drugs like it that affected just the reverse transcriptase component of the enzyme alone. Other doctors were prescribing protease inhibitors even after patients became immune to AZT, which was doing the same amount of work as giving it to patients who were not taking AZT at all. I mean, yes, our drug has

proven itself as holding off the reproduction of the virus for a substantially longer period of time, but we don't even know if the other protease inhibitors were being used in the best fashion."

"What are you suggesting then?"

"I'm suggesting one of three things. One is that we have to keep modifying Emivir to improve its ability to attack the protease enzyme. Another idea is that we have to start research into integrase inhibitors, and by attacking a third enzyme we might further help AIDS patients. That's the one that should take the most research."

"And the third idea?" Kyle walked over and asked, pulling up a stool to sit.

"To change the format of these drugs, so we can eliminate two problems with the drugs on a patient-level. One problem with the current cocktails is that they cause so many side effects that some people can't take them at all. You've heard the stories, some side effects include nausea, muscles that feel like they're burning, difficulty in walking, diarrhea, bone-marrow suppression, spontaneous bleeding in hemophiliacs, a sudden upsurge in blood sugar levels, which can in some cases lead to diabetes and possibly ketoacidosis, vomiting, dehydration, weight loss, confusion, even a coma or death. There has to be more research into placing these pills together to streamline these pills, and into time-releasing them, so people don't have to work so diligently at watching the clock — and potentially miss pills. Some patients have also contracted shingles, which is the same virus as chicken pox, or even problems such as excessive flatulence and gastroenteritis. And with nausea being the most common side effect of these drugs, if some people develop nausea daily to these drugs and cannot take them, intestinal upsets may cause the drug to not be fully ingested. If we can eliminate these side effects, we'll see an increase in the number of patients that respond positively to the cocktail of drugs."

Howard finished her thought. "So maybe we could redirect our efforts to making the drugs more ingestible."

"But there's also an emotional problem with taking these cocktails," Sloane answered. "And taking the drugs properly, that's the second part of the problem with these drugs. Patients take usually about 20 pills a day, sometimes more, sometimes up to 60, all at different schedules, some with food, some on an empty stomach. So the continuous clock-watching and changing of their eating schedules because of these drugs is a constant reminder to them that they have a deadly disease. The emotional reminder

of having a fatal disease by taking drugs so often can be a negative reinforcer in taking the drugs properly, and a patient doing well may skip drugs. Tack that on with a possible rejection from their family because of this disease, you have an emotional system wreaking havoc on the patient's body as well. Some patients don't have the money to sustain the drug purchases, because insurance companies usually won't allow for one hundred percent coverage of this treatment. Because the drugs can cost upwards of \$20,000 per year, some patients may then decide to take less of the drugs than they are supposed to take, to lengthen the time they have the drugs and therefore save money, and end up taking the drugs improperly. And skipping just a few doses, for any of these reasons, can cause a strain resistant to these drugs to emerge in their body, making the taking of these drugs useless in the long run, making those patients even more difficult to treat. Think about the fact that fifteen percent of current AIDS patients are initially, keep that in mind, initially unresponsive to AZT. My hypothesis is that it's because of a strain that was developed and transferred to these patients by people who took their medications improperly and developed a strain of the virus that could just chew up AZT and spit it out."

Kyle looked at them. "But how do you attempt to solve that problem?"

"The cost of the drugs decreases in time, as production methods become streamlined and the demand is adequately filled for the drugs. But the emotional strain of taking these drugs on such a rigid schedule could possibly be avoided if we could develop drugs — whether in pill or in liquid format, either as a drink, maybe, or to be taken by needle, like a diabetes patient taking insulin or Humulin™, something that was time-released, so that patients would only have to worry about taking medication one to three times a day instead of 12 times. Couple that with eliminating side effects and you have a drug cocktail in one dose that's easy to use."

"Yeah, but a *needle*?" Howard asked. "A lot of these patients are drug users, and might misuse a prescription for hypodermic needles."

"If they're getting the needles somehow. They might as well pay for clean ones," Kyle answered.

"Besides," Sloane cut in, "if this could be developed in pill form, then we wouldn't even have to worry about the needle option. In fact, it probably would be easier to make it in pill form."

More technicians were arriving into the laboratory to work.

“So where does that leave us?”

“It leaves us with three courses of action. One is to improve Emivir, the protease inhibitor. Two is to work on an integrase inhibitor so that our cocktails attack three enzymes of the virus instead of two. And three is to work on making these drugs easier to take so that people will take them properly. Well, in theory we could work on a class of drugs that targets the infected cells, instead of being absorbed and spread throughout the body, but that’s in the future, like a vaccination and a definite, short-term cure. These three modes of attack are plenty to get started on.”

“And all three strategies could help produce better results,” Howard said.

Kyle asked, “But how do you want to attack these three different plans?”

The door opened. A few more laboratory technicians came in to start working. “Why don’t we see what each technician thinks they can do the best job on, and divide people up accordingly?” she asked.

“I think we’re on to something,” Kyle answered, scribbling in his note pad.

“Kyle, if you could write up goals of each of the three attacks for this virus, and reasons why they would be effective, we could have a meeting this afternoon or Monday and see how we should go about doing this.”

“Understood, chief.”

Smiling, she answered, “We haven’t had much luck improving the length of time Emivir worked, but if people wanted to continue working on it I would be behind them one hundred percent. But if some people wanted to try this from a different angle, it might refresh the staff as well.”

With those words the door swung open with a violent push. The three of them all looked over to the doorway. Tyler Gillian barged into the lab with his usual presumptuousness, assuming he always had an invitation and a right to walk in and claim the space.

Tyler looked like he should have been the high school class president. As the Director of P.R. and Marketing, a title which he wore like a badge, he made a point to dress impeccably, he made sure his hair was always in place, and he wore a smile that was probably used to seduce ladies into one-night stands during his college days at the fraternity house. Tyler was a diplomat. Sloane was sure that the only reason he didn’t run for political office was that he would have to wait until he was 35 before he could run for president.

It amazed her that his position paid enough to warrant the expensive suits; surely her work was more important than his. It wasn’t that she want-

ed the money — this was just another one of the mysteries of life that eluded her, like the mystery of why her family always badgered her.

Tyler always had one of two looks on his face: either he looked perfectly calm and collected, saying what his department needed as if it were a scientific law and that it would be done, and that's when he'd plaster on that charming grin of his to get his way, or else he had a look of panic on his face, one of where he was "in a crisis situation," where he was "in code red," and he needed to "put out fires" and "eliminate the problem A.S.A.P." to save the company from an otherwise inevitable peril. Usually when he looked panicked, he'd end up talking the problem out with someone and throwing look number one, the charming look, on his face, in order to recruit all the help he'd need to solve his crisis of the day.

He barged in to the laboratory, and she assumed he'd have look number two on his face. She was right. Tyler quickly scanned the room until he found her, then he charged over, indifferent to the other laboratory technicians in his way.

"Sloane Emerson, just the woman I desperately needed to see. You're the woman that can save the day, my dear."

"Tyler, the last time I checked you were in the P.R. department and I was in the research department."

"But you know that what I'm marketing is you."

"What I thought you were marketing was Emivir."

"But people want the whole package, you know they want you."

Sloane dropped her head an almost imperceptible level, and only Howard and Kyle noticed. They looked at each other and smiled.

"So, Tyler, what is the crisis of the day?"

"I know this isn't very scientific, but you can help me out of this one." He attempted his award-winning grin; it never worked on her. "Remember that lobby group that said our production speed wasn't good enough because we're not getting enough of Emivir on the market?"

"Yes, Tyler?" She felt she almost needed to bat her eyelashes to mock his fake wooing.

"They just said in a press conference that we should either out-source the production to more plants or we should open up the production of Emivir to competing markets."

Sloane stood up with this stab. "What?" she almost yelled.

“I know, I know, it’s our drug, that would be like revoking our patent from us, and unless they get a law from the government it’s not going to happen. But this is making us look like we’re the bad guys.”

“Tell them that we’re expanding production. We need to not only make sure the drugs meet up to our standards, but we also we need to make sure there is enough product for patients to not only get on the drug, but stay on the drug. What we’re doing is in the patient’s best interests.”

“Well now that same group is also complaining that we should lower our prices because we’re destroying the market, since no one can afford to buy the drugs.”

“Oh, and is that why our production plants are running at capacity and people are still waiting for more? Because no one is willing to pay for Emivir?”

“I know, I know, but these are the masses we’re talking about, they’re not rocket scientists, or medical researchers, for that matter.”

“But Tyler, the cost to produce Emivir is extremely expensive. There are so many man-made elements to this drug that it’s a seven-week process to completely make one batch of the drug.”

“I know, I know —”

“And why do people think that businesses are making so much money that they burn hundred dollar bills to light their cigars? Madison is reinvesting most of the profits from Emivir to work on better drugs for AIDS patients. Why do people not see that?”

“I know, but there are the people —”

“Tyler, if our drugs were so expensive, then wouldn’t they be alarmingly more expensive than other protease inhibitors? And they’re not, are they? They cost just about the same amount, and Emivir is a much better product.”

“I know, but that’s not all of it. This group is also suggesting that Madison should be donating some of our drugs to poor who can’t afford Emivir, you know, on a ‘compassionate use’ basis.”

“If you know all of this, why do you come to me? You’re saying that they think Madison is made of money? That money comes out of his pores?”

“It might be a good public relations investment to —”

When she heard the words “good public relations investment,” she thought about the dream that woke her up early this morning. “So what you’re saying is that most people should pay for our product, but if some people beg enough, no matter how sick they are, we should give them

upwards of twenty thousand dollars a year for free?”

“I don’t know why you —”

“Look, Tyler, you know I find it extremely irritating that these people try to lay claim to our product. That’s why you come in here and tell me, in the hope that I will help you out of this. But I also find it extremely irritating that you can’t keep a lid on this, seeing that you’re the Marketing God, and I’m in the lowly research department.”

“It’s just that —”

“Okay, Tyler, I’ve heard enough. We lowly research people have to go to work now and find the cures to diseases you want to sell to people.”

Tyler stopped trying to interrupt her. He raised his eyebrows slightly, and tried to smile.

“Tyler, why don’t you use that smile of yours when you explain in a press conference why the lobbyists are wrong? You can woo anyone with that smile.”

“Except you, Sloane.”

“Of course. But it’s not me you have to convince.”

They looked at each other for another long moment.

“Now Tyler, I’m sure you have a lot of important work to do, so I wouldn’t want to keep you.”

“Okay, I get it.”

“If you need anything, I’m sure you’ll let me know.”

And with that she turned back to the list Kyle was attempting to write out while this bureaucratic tragi-comedy was unfolding before the entire research department. Tyler walked toward the door.

Kyle was writing notes for what would obviously become the Monday morning meeting, and not the Friday afternoon meeting. He could tell that there was no way they’d be able to meet about their plans before then. During reading Kyle’s notes she looked up at the wall clock above the door as Tyler walked out.

“I told you there’s a lot to do,” Kyle said. “And when I came here this morning I was just thinking about how boring the scenery was in this commute.”

“At least we get something closer to a view of water here, being just off Second Street and closer to Washington. And you know, I’ve never thought about what it looked like around here.”

“Where do you come in from?”

“Closer to the airport, you know, by Kent. Makes the trip in easier for

the office to be on the south side of Seattle. And just think, all this that we have had to deal with, and it's not even nine-thirty yet."

Sloane got up, told Kyle to keep writing notes for the meeting, and went out the door to get a cup of coffee.

"What is it about people?" She thought. "Why do they feel like they can go to the government using all scare tactics, to make companies give them money?" She made it to the coffee machine; everyone in the break room looked at her strangely.

She turned to a receptionist in the break room, one that was sitting down and taking a smoke break. "Are you looking at me like that because the conversation I just had with Tyler is already being gossiped about?"

"You've got to admit it's a strange thing when someone here can get away with giving Mr. Gillian lip like that, Ms. Emerson. But then again, we love to hear the way you talk to people."

Not even registering the receptionist's name she answered, "Why is that?"

"You just have the guts to say it like it is. Seldom do people get the chance to do that."

"Why would you say anything other than saying it 'the way it is?' And why don't people get the chance to do it? I mean, you just say what needs to be said."

"Some people aren't in the position of being punished for voicing an unfavorable opinion."

Leaning over the table the receptionist was sitting at, she had to answer her. "Let me tell you something. If you know you're right, and someone tries to squelch you, get out. You're slowly killing yourself if you don't."

The receptionist smiled at her, understanding. But the girl still felt apprehensive — even Sloane could see that.

Kyle just tried to take a moment to relax. He knew relaxing was never enough, but he tried to do it every once in a while anyway.

He knew it was morning, but he didn't know if his wife would get a phone message before Kyle got home from work. He thought about not calling.

He knew that avoiding the call would be an easy way out, though.

He reached over for a phone and dialed his number. He didn't know what he would say on the answering machine. He listened to his wife's voice on the answering machine on the phone. He listened for the beep.

He still didn't know what he would say.

He waited to hear the beep on the answering machine to finish before he started speaking.

“Hey, I thought I might be able to catch you. I didn’t realize what time it was. I wanted to let you know that I thought of you. And I guess I wanted to say that I really do think about you, even when all this other crap is going on here at work. And I love you. Sometimes I forget to say that. Anyway, be good, be safe, and I’ll be home tonight. Thanks for listening. If You need to, call me at work. I’ll talk to you soon.”

Kyle put the receiver down when he was finished talking. He wondered if his wife would hear the message, or if Kyle would just tell her tonight that he tried to call.

Maybe then he would hold her. That might make things better, if they had a little time together for each other.

Sloane walked out of the break room with her coffee and decided that she needed to voice her opinion a little more. She walked down the hallway, took a left turn, and went up the stairs to the executive branch. She walked to the end of the hallway to the president’s door.

She turned to the owner’s private receptionist. “Is Mr. Madison seeing anyone right now?”

“No, he’s not, Ms. Emerson. Should I tell him you’re here?”

“Why, yes, I would,” She responded. Why else would she be standing here asking if Mr. Madison was seeing anyone, she thought. She slid her sleeve slightly up her arm. Her watch read 9:52.

“Mr. Madison, Sloane Emerson is here to see you.” It amazed her that everyone here knew her name, even though she was sure she’d never met any of them before.

“You can go right in, Ms. Emerson,” She heard from the desk, and with that she moved through the doors to Colin Madison’s office.

The one thing she liked about Colin’s office was that it wasn’t cluttered. She imagined a president’s office being all dark wood with ornate trimmings, and knick-knacks everywhere, elaborate lamps and gold pen-holders collecting dust on the desk. Colin Madison’s office was clean, bright, with one painting and a select few framed certificates on the walls. His table was glass. Everything was clean, organized.

She liked Colin; she liked the fact that they were on a first-name basis and

that she felt comfortable calling him by his first name. He was a businessman more than he was an executive, and she could relate to him on that level.

She thought back to the Madison Pharmaceuticals Emivir party, held at his house. She met his wife, Bethany, then. When she walked through the doors she noticed two things. She noticed that everyone seemed very concerned about what clothes they were wearing and who they were talking to more than what they were talking about. But she also noticed that the Madison home was very rich, that was the only way she could describe it. She was used to the clean lines of Colin's office, what she didn't expect was the antique vases and chandeliers and Persian rugs that were obviously chosen by his wife in their home. Bethany by any standard was a socialite; she concerned herself with shopping, owning just the right help around the house, and being above everyone else. Sloane could never understand this, and she couldn't understand how Colin fit in with this.

But she never asked questions about his private life; she preferred to think of him as a good businessman, as a businessman who trusted her ability and gave her the opportunity to excel at her work.

And it paid off for Colin Madison, so she was in good favor with the owner of the company.

She walked toward the desk. "I'm sorry to come in unannounced, I'm sure you have a lot —"

"You know that if I let you in it's because I want to hear from you. Besides, I always have time for you." Colin Madison was one of the few men, other than her father, who could successfully interrupt her. But it was only Colin Madison's interruptions that Sloane didn't mind. "Now, what can I do for you?"

"I wanted to talk to you about Tyler Gillian."

"Oh, yes, I just got off the phone with him. He seems to be a little upset."

"Colin, is it my job to tell him how to do his job?"

"No, of course it isn't. I know what Tyler's up to; he's just looking for someone to help him, so that if his plan fails he'll have someone to blame."

"Is that what you think, Colin?"

"He is a marketing man, you know. His job is to do marketing for this company, but it's in his blood to market himself."

"I just want to know how you'd like me to deal with him."

"However you want to. If he wants to scream and cry, let him. Although you know it would be helpful if you showed up for a few words at an occa-

sional press conference.”

“You know I don’t like those press conferences, the reporters always ask the most inane questions. Couldn’t Someone like Kyle Mackenzie or Howard Shindo go in my place?”

“Maybe. You can work that out with your men and then talk to Tyler about it. But people know your name, so you can understand why they’d like to hear from you once in a while.”

“I suppose. I’ll try to be better about it... I’m sorry to hear about the flack you’re getting from that lobby group. You know you’re doing the best for your market, which in turn is the best for your company, but no one else seems to think that way. I think they all just think you’re made of money.”

“Well, what if I am?”

Sloane smiled at his question. “It still doesn’t mean they have a right to it. It’s yours, and you earned it.”

Colin smiled at her. “You know, you’re one of the few people I know who would say that to me — and mean it.”

Still smiling, she knew that this is why she liked Colin. “I think that on some levels business is a science. You have to follow certain rules in order to keep your business successfully running. The part I don’t understand is the public opinion factor, you know, the Tyler Gillian factor.”

“And that’s why you’re the head of the research department. I’ll make sure Tyler stops bothering you.”

“I just wanted to know that this wasn’t a part of my job, that I was right to say the things I did to Tyler.”

“Consider the matter closed. Now, there is something I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Yes, Colin? What is it?”

“You know you could be conferring with other scientists more, that’s why I told you that you can use the company plane whenever you needed it.”

“I know, I’ve been starting to use my e-mail account more, too, to communicate with other researchers more.”

“I just wanted to let you know that option was still open. Just check the flight schedule, at the main reception desk, to see if it’s free, and it’s yours.”

“Thank you, sir, I will keep that in mind. Is there anything else you need?”

“Yes. Take a vacation. Hell, fly somewhere this weekend, the plane is free. Just get some rest.”

"I'll do what I can, sir. Thanks. And if I don't talk to you sooner, have a good weekend." She turned and walked to the door.

"You have a good weekend, too," she heard Colin Madison say before his door shut behind her.

As she walked back down the maze of hallways, she attempted to take the first sip of her coffee, which at this point was cold. She threw it into the first garbage can she could find.

By the time she made it back to the main laboratory room, the clock above the doorway read 11:08. She couldn't believe that she didn't even sit down in her own office yet, after being in the office for five hours.

Kyle was the first man to talk to her when she got back into the lab. "Well, do you want the good news?" He asked her.

"What good news?"

"There's another reception dinner," Kyle answered. "Want to go? It's next weekend."

Looking confused, she had to ask. "Why is there another party?"

"It's more of an AIDS party than a research party. But it would look good if we both went to it."

"An AIDS party?" she thought; she still didn't know how to react to this party. A part of her didn't even want to go. "Well..."

"A friend of mine, Steve, he wants to go, you could even talk to him if you got tired of the dinner party."

"I'm bad with names. Who is this Steve guy?"

"A friend of mine. I've known him since college. He's a teacher. But he finds research talk interesting ... unless he just seems interested for my benefit. I don't know - but he wants to go, and he's not coming with anyone, so..." Kyle knew it was pointless for him to suggest that Sloane and Steve should be a date; that would make Sloane want to *not* go.

"...Is he that friend of yours that comes into the office every once in a while, shorter than me, curly brown hair?"

"That's the guy. So... Are you going?"

Pausing for a moment, she finally answered. "I don't want him to think I'm going to say yes so I can have a date with him."

"He'd want to see you because he'd want someone to talk to."

"Fine. Tell him that I'll be doing work while I'm there though."

“Got it,” Kyle answered, noting that She wanted to leave this conversation.

“Give me a copy of the plans, the location, so I can get ready,” she said as she started to walk away.

“Consider it done.” Kyle watched her walk away as he spoke.

Kyle hated being the matchmaker, so he did his best to act like he had no hidden motives when talking to her. He knew that Steve did like a good conversation, but he also knew that Steve liked women and that he always thought She was cute. Kyle remembered telling Steve that She would never be interested in him, and that Steve’s response was that he always loved a good challenge.

Steve relished the thought of putting another notch on his head board with her, but Kyle knew that She wouldn’t want that and that they would just end up bickering instead of talking - and he knew they would never make love. But Kyle knew that he couldn’t argue with Steve; he knew that it was merely his role to set the table - rather, the stage, for Steve and Sloane.

###

Later She walked into the lab and people were waiting for her. “Sloane! We’ve been looking all over for you,” one of the technicians said to her.

“I was in Colin’s office. What’s the matter?”

“A colleague called for you. They didn’t want to leave a message. They said it was urgent that they talk to you. They said they’d call back at 11:15.”

“And did they leave a name?” It amazed her that she had to ask.

“Oh, yes, I’m sorry, it was Tobias Graham, from the university’s medical research department, the viral branch.”

“I’ll be here when he calls. Make sure the call comes straight through.”

She walked into her office. There was a small stack of mail sitting in the center of her desk. A few journals were sitting in a pile on the chair that faced her desk.

“I’ll get to all that later,” Sloane thought.

She walked around her desk to her seat. She almost forgot what her chair felt like. She never worked in her office; when she was at work she wanted to be literally *in the lab*. She could read at home.

She slid her sleeve slightly up her wrist. 11:12. She knew she couldn’t start working on something; she had to just wait out the next three minutes. She didn’t know how to wait.

She took her mail from her desk and the journals from her second chair and placed them in her briefcase, thinking she could get to them during the weekend.

Sitting back down, she thought about the fires she had to put out this morning. “How do they expect me to get any work done,” she thought, “if I’m saving everyone else in the company first?” It seemed to be getting more and more problematic, she thought, it seemed that more and more people from different departments were asking for help to save them from their problems.

She leaned back in her chair. The phone rang.

“Sloane Emerson.”

“Sloane, hey, it’s Toby.”

“Toby, where are you?”

“Brazil. Look, I can’t explain it now, I —”

“Were you doing more rain forest studies?”

“Yes, but I’m on my way back to the U.S. now. I was wondering if there was any way you could meet me in Miami in a few hours.”

“Miami? You mean this can’t wait until you get back into Seattle?”

“I could really use someone to talk to about what’s happened. This research I’ve been doing is a complete mess. Can I bounce some of it off of you?”

Sloane thought about Colin’s plane offer, thinking that this could be a business expense as well as a personal trip. “Sure, Toby, I can make it. Where should I meet you?”

Toby told her his flight number; since his flight wasn’t for hours she told him she’d meet him at the gate when he arrived.

Hanging up the phone, she picked it up immediately, dialing the main receptionist. “This is Sloane Emerson. Is the plane still open this weekend?”

“Yes it is, Ms. Emerson.”

“Please have it ready to go to Miami within the next hour. I’m leaving the office now; I need to meet a colleague.” She felt like she needed to tell the receptionist that this was a business trip.

“No problem, Ms. Emerson. The pilot Jim will be waiting at the airport.”

Sloane got up and grabbed her trench coat, her umbrella and her briefcase. Would this help her with her search for the key to her puzzle? Or would this be just another dead end? She looked at the mail billowing out of the front pocket of her briefcase. “At least I’ll have reading material for the plane,” she thought, and she walked out of the office.



CHAPTER 2

THE RAIN FOREST EXPERIMENT

Turning to the room, Howard asked, “Do you have any idea where she’s going?” to everyone in the room. “She was waiting for a call from Tobias Graham,” a young technician answered.

“Oh, Toby,” Kyle answered. “I’d assume she’s meeting him somewhere.”
“When has she ever left before six in the evening?” Howard asked.

“She did have a strange look on her face,” Kyle said. “I hope she’s taking a break with Toby and spending some time with him as a friend instead of talking about their research.”

“You know her; it’s got to be business,” Howard said. “You know she wouldn’t leave work early to be social. She wouldn’t leave on time to be social. But on the plus side, at least no one will be barging in here looking for her.” Howard turned to Kyle and smiled.

“Yeah, but those confrontations are entertaining to watch,” Kyle smiled back. “Now all we get to do today is work.”

They both smiled as they turned away from each other and went back to what they were working on.

###

Before Sloane got to the plane she checked her messages at home. Normally she did not worry about her phone, but seeing that she was in such a rush she did not even get the chance to change her answering machine. She dialed her number and pressed the code to listen to her machine messages.

"Hi, it's your dad, didn't know how you were doing. We didn't get a chance to talk much when we saw each other last, and I know you are at work, but this was my only time between working here, so when you get the chance, give me a call. Talk to you soon."

"Miss Emerson, hi, it's Kyle's friend, Steve... I know you weren't expecting someone who was almost a stranger to call, but Kyle gave me your number, and I know this will sound silly, but it would be cool to have someone to talk to next weekend. If you need to, my number is three six four ten sixty-three, 'cause I'm always up for a refresher course on the work you guys do. Otherwise I'll see you next weekend."

Those were the only two messages, though she was surprised that there were that many messages there in the first place. Making a point to write down Steve's phone number and to call her dad and Steve back, she smiled, hung up the phone and made her way to the plane.

After sitting down, she thought it was strange to be on this plane. She was used to seats in rows of three with no legroom and a thin aisle. This plane had large, roomy seats, some facing inward, toward the aisle, some facing forward, and there were a few cocktail tables and large counters bolted to the floor.

This was a social airplane. This was a plane for entertaining guests.

“So, Jim, when’s the flight attendant going to get on the plane and show me how to fasten my seat belt?”

The pilot laughed. “Haven’t you been on enough flights to know your safety rules, Ms. Emerson?”

“Please, call me Sloane, and yes, I think I could mimic every move those people do. You know... ‘If there is a change in cabin pressure, your oxygen mask will come down. Place the mask over your head and continue breathing normally; the bag will not fill up, but there will be a continuous stream of oxygen. If you are taking care of a minor, place your mask on first, then assist the child.’” The pilot was laughing at the show she was putting on, using two fingers to point where the oxygen masks and exit rows were. “And those flight attendants mock putting the mask on over their heads, but they never put the elastic around their head, because they can’t mess up their hair.”

“You do know how it’s done then.”

“What I can’t imagine is how infuriating it must be for those flight attendants to have to do this degrading little exercise and as they’re looking around the cabin they can see that no one, I mean, no one, is paying attention to them. And still, they have to stand there, do these silly gestures, pull the loose end of the seat belt, point to the lights along the aisle.”

“I never thought about it, actually.”

“And why do they point with two fingers? When they point at something, they use both their index finger and their middle finger, and it looks so unnatural.”

“You know, they’re actually trained to use two fingers to point those things out. In some cultures, pointing with your index finger is considered very rude, so they are trained to use two fingers so as not to offend anyone.”

Pausing, she answered. “That never occurred to me.”

“If you’ve got a screaming Japanese businessman on your plane because you pointed in his direction when you were showing the safety rules, it occurs to you.”

“I suppose it does.”

“Well, Ms. Emerson —”

“Sloane, please.”

“Okay, *Sloane*, since there is no flight attendant here, let me tell you to keep your seat belt on during take offs and landings. And the other impor-

tant thing you need to know is where the refrigerator is. It's stocked with a few sandwiches, I think there's ham, tuna salad, roast beef and turkey, and there's just about any liquor you could want in there, too. Usually people go for the champagne, and actually, I think the bubbles help with people who feel queasy flying."

"Got it, Jim. Can I ask another question?"

"Of course."

"This plane isn't too big for you to fly by yourself?"

"No. Actually, if this plane were any bigger by law I'd need someone with me. But this plane is fine for me. Besides, they add all these control features on planes like this, like 'auto pilot', so this plane could literally fly itself. Why do you ask — do you not feel safe?"

"I'm just amazed that this much machinery flying in the air can be comfortably controlled by one person."

"Visit the cockpit while we're up and I'll show you how it works."

"Thanks. What time should we get to Miami?"

"Oh, right around seven o'clock their time."

"Thanks, Jim."

"No problem."

Jim walked into the cockpit and closed the door behind him.

After leaning back, she could only close her eyes. She figured she'd wait until after they took off to get her work out. Besides, she thought her briefcase should be stowed away under her seat during take-off, right? She waited for the plane to move. She enjoyed airplanes; she liked knowing that a large, heavy piece of machinery could lift her up into the air and fly her across the country, or around the world. She listened to the engine start up; the plane made its way to the runway. The engine always seemed loudest when it just started up, it always forced her to pay to the motors the attention they deserved. Someone made this engine, She thought. Someone made it, not merely put it together, but someone created this engine. Someone figured out a way to create the power to fly, to move, faster and faster, with this machinery. Someone created this.

"I want to create like that" as all that kept going through her head..

Leaning back in her chair, she felt the plane moving faster and faster down the runway. She could feel the first wheel leave the ground, then the others. She was in the air.

With the nose of the plane pointing so high, it felt like she was almost lying down. She felt the pressure of gravity pulling all of her body into the seat. It felt like her clothes were being pressed to her skin. It reminded her of when she would go to amusement parks when she was a child and go in the spinning room where the floor fell out from underneath her. Once she accidentally swallowed her gum on that ride; it was almost impossible for her not to have swallowed her gum, the force of the ride spinning was strong against her.

Having the chance to lean back in her seat, she got to enjoy the ride, until the plane leveled off. Straightening her hair, she opened her eyes and sat upright. She reached under her seat and looked into her briefcase. She almost pulled out her computer, but she decided that her notepad and pen would do the same job. She saw the messages to call her dad and Steve. A flurry of thoughts went through her head; she didn't entirely understand why her dad was calling her, she thought they had caught up at dinner, and then she thought about what she should make of the phone call from Steve. "Men aren't usually calling me," Sloane first thought, but then she thought that it might be just what she needed, someone to talk to about work that wasn't in the field, someone that might actually want to listen. Then she thought about the work she had to do when she got back to the office, and she wrote down:

1. Improve Emivir
2. Integrase Inhibitor
3. Improve side effects and ease-of-use for drugs

Then she stared at her list; she drew a line under her list and wrote:

-
4. a vaccine
 5. a cure

After putting her pen down, she looked out the window.

"It's not as bad as it seems," she said under her breath, looking at the

clouds the airplane was flying over outside her window.

She had to look over her list.

“There has to be something I’m missing. Just look at this from a different angle,” she thought. She looked at her list. She stopped on point three. She picked up her pen, and drew another line again.

6. psychological treatment

6a. alleviate depression, may help immune system

6b. help memory to take drugs, and keep positive attitude

7. homeopathy

7a. nutrition, diet and herbs to improve general health

7b. herbs to alleviate nausea for patients who experience side effects and to make injections more plausible

7c. vitamins and herbs with effects on immune system

7d. is there a psychologically positive effect of eating things good for you?

Homeopathy stuck in her head as she looked at her list of notes on homeopathy. She was surprised that she knew nothing about this. She never thought of the nutritional aspect of illness and health. She remembered that in order to get her degrees, she needed only three hours — one class — on nutrition. And no one in the medical community in America seems to give anything credence for health benefits other than a drug — at least not on paper.

Tearing the paper off of the note pad, she put it in her briefcase. She pulled out her mail and her journals, placed them all on the table before her and started reading.

A few hours later, while she was still reading, she heard her pilot’s voice

over the speakers in the cabin. "Have you been working all of this time? Have you eaten any food yet? You have to be starving by now."

The door to the cockpit was open; Jim was glancing back at her.

"Okay, okay, I'll get some food."

"Good. You know it will be after dinner by the time you get settled in Miami," she heard over the speakers in the cabin. She knew he was right and slowly walked to the back of the plane and grabbed a turkey sandwich and a can of juice. She looked at the champagne in the refrigerator before closing the door.

Instead of going to her seat, she went to the cockpit. Maybe Jim was right, she thought, she probably needed a break from her work.

Standing in the doorway, she looked at the tiny cockpit. "Mind if I come in here? I've never been in a cockpit before, and yes, I would like to see how you fly this plane all by yourself."

"Sure, come on in. there's an empty seat here."

Sitting down, she opened the wrapping from the sandwich and peeled it down. "Is it okay to eat in here? Oh, wait, will you need some food? I should have asked before."

"No, I'm fine, I ate right before we left Seattle."

With eyes transfixed over all the controls, she then looked up at the sky in front of her. The sky unfolded rows and rows of billowing clouds in the panoramic picture windows before her.

"You know, the sky looks a lot better here than from the passenger seats."

"You know, seeing the world from this high is going to be a lot better when you have a window bigger than a magazine cover."

Sitting for a few minutes in silence, eating her sandwich and drinking her apple juice, she smiled while Jim radioed controllers at the ground to check for weather conditions. A few minutes passed, and then she spoke.

"Jim?"

"Yes?"

"What kind of feeling do you get when you're flying a plane?"

"You mean, while I'm in the air?"

"Yes. You're in this cockpit, dealing with all of these controls, high above the ground. Do you ever get lonely or scared?"

"Lonely? Scared? No, not at all, Ms. Emerson."

"Sloane."

“Sorry. No, Sloane, I don’t get scared at all. I feel, well, I don’t know how to say it, but when I’m up here I feel like I have more control than I do anywhere else in the world. This is my space, this is my domain, and it makes me feel, well, I don’t quite know how to put it...” Jim paused while speaking. “Alive, I guess. I guess I could feel scared, but here I know that if I do something wrong it’s my fault, there’s no one here to tell me how to do my work or to second guess me. I never get tired of flying airplanes. And as for lonely, well, no, I don’t feel lonely, either. I guess I’m alone up here a lot, but there’s a difference between being alone and being lonely. And when I’m up here, flying, I could never feel lonely. I feel like I have everything I need right in this little cockpit, flying in the air.”

“Are you sure you don’t need anything? I think I’m going to put my work away, I could bring you something.”

“No, really, I’m fine. Yeah, you should pack your stuff up, I think we’re going to be landing in about twenty minutes.”

“Really? We’ve been on the plane that long?”

“Yes. Apparently you lose yourself in your work, too.”

Sloane walked to the door of the cockpit. “I suppose I do,” she said as she walked back to her seat to prepare for the descent into Miami International Airport.

The airplane arrived at the airport only about fifteen minutes before Toby’s plane was landing, so She didn’t have to wait long for Toby to arrive. She stood at the security gate, just past the customs agents, pulling out the last journal from her briefcase. She leaned against the railing along the window.

Was he was going to give her any answers, as all she kept asking herself. She knew that she was supposed to be there for him as a friend; that’s why he asked her to meet him in Miami. But she knew she wanted information about his search for a solution to the AIDS mystery. She wanted to get somewhere with her search, and she traveled across the country to try to get it.

Toby walked through the passenger terminal toward the security gates. He spotted her before she saw him, which is the way he preferred it to be: he could then look at her for one long moment before having to collect himself. Something about Sloane Emerson appealed to Toby, but he could never understand why. “But she’s not very feminine looking,” Toby thought, “...her jaw is even sharp and rigid...”

Toby saw her sitting on a ledge along the window at the side of the ter-

minal. Her trench coat was over her right arm, and she was holding her journal in her right hand, and holding the strap of her overnight bag on her shoulder in her left hand. She was wearing beige slacks and a white button-down shirt. He could see that she was wearing a gray tank top underneath her shirt. Her hair kept falling into her eyes; she continually had to let go of her luggage strap to guide her hair back behind her ear with her fingertips. She stared at her journal. For that moment, she saw nothing other than the words she was reading and processing in her brain. And for that moment, Toby could see nothing other than her.

It took him about thirty seconds to be processed by customs. He walked out of the hallway and to the open area where she was waiting and started walking toward her. She looked up at him.

“Toby! I didn’t even see you coming.” Standing up, she crammed her journal into her briefcase and put her arms around him. Toby smiled.

“That was the warmest greeting you’ve ever given me.”

“I forget that my friends need reminders from me that I’m their friend. How was your flight?”

“Fine. I don’t have any luggage, so let me just run into the bathroom and then we can go to the hotel.”

“Oh, a hotel,” she answered. “I completely forgot about where I’d stay.”

“Don’t worry. I made sure I got a room with two beds.”

“I’m sure I could get my own room.”

“What for? Look, don’t bother buying a room, it doesn’t make any sense.”

“you’ve got a point... So, get to the bathroom, will you?”

Toby smiled at her again and walked to the bathroom. It occurred to her then that Toby was smiling all the time. She couldn’t actually imagine that he was that happy all the time, it just couldn’t be possible. She watched him walk to the bathroom; as she watched him she thought that he looked like he belonged on a beach in California and not in a laboratory in the dreariest city in the United States. His blond hair was long on the top and short on the sides and bounced with him whenever he walked. His usual five o’clock shadow looked like little spears of copper and light brown. He almost always wore jeans, faded ones, with a t-shirt and sometimes a sports coat. He looked like he needed a convertible to complete the outfit.

They walked in stride through the airport and found a taxi. “The Pelican Coast Hotel,” Toby said as the taxi sped off toward the expressway.

Toby checked in while Sloane stood by his side. She thought it was strange that she was with a man in a hotel; she usually checked herself in, because she usually traveled alone. They went to their room. Sloane started unpacking her bag.

“Can’t that wait? Let’s get a drink at the bar.”

“I want to hang my clothes so that they don’t get more wrinkled.”

“Okay. How about I meet you down there?”

“Sure.”

Toby bounced his way out of the door. Noticing that he was his usual happy self, she still thought that he seemed much better than he was when he called from South America earlier that day. She walked over to the thermostat. It was 76 degrees in the room. She turned the temperature down and took off the white blouse that was over her tank top before heading downstairs.

Toby was sitting at a corner table in the hotel bar. It was relatively quiet; usually the tourists went to other bars on the weekends. He saw her walk through the lobby and enter the bar. He saw that She had taken off her white shirt in her room and was wearing only the tank top with her slacks. Toby wasn’t expecting this. He knew She thought of her clothes as only functional garments; that they were doing a job for her. It was warm in the hotel; she wouldn’t have a need for her white blouse; it served its function; it could now rest from its duty.

But now he saw her shoulders.

He noticed how she moved around the tables through the room. When she maneuvered around a table or a chair she turned one shoulder to the front, as if it were a guiding force, as if she was steering with her shoulders, as if she were about to shove her way through a crowd in a room. She held her purse in her hand, and even in how her arms held her purse, it seemed as if her limbs consciously knew they served a function and should do it effectively. Toby was transfixed on her shoulders and arms as she made her way to the table.

He stood up and pulled out the chair for her. As he was seating her, She asked, “Okay, I’m here. Care to tell me what’s going on?”

“Is it always business with you?”

“Toby, you called me this morning upset, asking me to fly across the country, and now that I’m here you act like nothing has happened. Can you

explain it to me?"

The waiter walked up and placed a wine glass down in front of her. "I hope a Chardonnay was a good pick. I didn't know what you'd want." The waiter finished pouring and brought a shot of whiskey and a draft beer for Toby.

The waiter walked away. "Shots, already?" She asked.

"Look, I'll get it out, but I just wanted to say," and he raised his shot glass in the gesture of a toast, and She followed his lead, "that I'm really happy that you came here. I mean, I'm glad that you thought this was worth traveling to Miami for. I do need to talk to you, but I just want you to know that I appreciate the effort you've made. Thanks."

Their glasses clinked; Toby threw his head back with the glass and grabbed his beer to chase it down while She watched him and took the first sip of her wine.

"Look, remember the last trip I took to South America, to look into natural materials that may have anti-viral effects on humans?"

"The natural materials, and yes, and Toby, I'm still amazed that you got the funding for it. You didn't even know how to go about looking for material for AIDS drugs."

"You forget that I work for the government, you and your little company probably would never have funded it, but the government did. That's why I like working for the university. All I had to do was make the proposal sound nice."

"You just had to make it sound nice," She replied, almost with a condescending undertone.

"Yes, you know what I mean."

"So getting money doesn't necessarily depend on merit or talent?"

"Oh, don't start, I didn't mean anything by it."

"And you said the government pays for it?"

"Well, yes, to the university."

"Who pays the government?"

"What?"

"Who pays the government?"

"Um, taxes, I guess."

"Yes, they do. And who pays taxes?"

"Okay, you can stop now."

"I'm just trying to gently remind you that your money has to come from somewhere, it's not like the government is giving you free money, it was

taken from somewhere else, taken from all the people who pay taxes.”

“Sloane —”

“That everyone pays money so that you can go to South America searching for plants when you don’t even know exactly what it is you’re looking for.”

“Sloane —”

“Okay, okay, I’m done, I’m getting off my soapbox now.”

“Thanks.”

“So on your last trip...”

“So on my last trip I managed to find something from the sap on the back of some bark there, and we brought it back to the States, and it seemed to do a very good job of fighting the virus.”

“Yes, you told me about it, what was it, two months ago?”

“Yes.”

“In fact, there’s a little write-up about you and your findings in a medical journal I was reading on the flight over here.”

“Really? Did you read it?”

Sloane did her best to put a coy expression on her face. “Maybe...”

Toby laughed. “We did a bunch of laboratory tests on it and it seemed to be doing really well, so we administered it to four test subjects. Half of them showed marked improvements in their condition — their viral load dropped and their T-Cell count shot up. For the other two the substance had no impact.”

“Still, that’s great, with a little engineering you can find out what made the substance not work for the others and alter it to give it a higher success rate.”

“Exactly. In doing all of these tests, we used up all of the drug.”

“Oh, so you were going back now to get more of the bark.”

“To get the sap — not the bark.”

“So you were going back to get more of the sap.”

“Exactly.”

Toby emphasized his last word too much; Sloane was sure he intentionally placed too much emphasis on that word. She looked at him for a moment. “And... how did the trip go?”

“How did my trip go?” Toby almost laughed as he signaled the waiter for another shot. “I go back to the same place where I found that tree, because you know how rain forests go, a tree there might be the only one of its species, or one like it may be very far away from it instead of right next to it, it’s a very

diverse and very rich area.” The waiter brought up the shot; Toby held up his finger while he did the shot and handed the shot glass to the waiter and gestured for another. “I go back to that same place where I found that tree, and you know what I found?” He took a swig of his beer.

“What happened, Toby?”

“What happened is that some American cattle-ranching beef company or something bought a thousand acres of the land my tree was on and they cleared all one hundred acres for cattle ranch. Cleared. I mean, my tree was right smack-dab in the middle of the hundred acres. And it was completely gone. This field looked like it could have been right in the middle of Illinois or Iowa. Not a tree in sight. There was a little fence all the way around and a little sign every hundred yards at the fence line with the company name on it.”

“So you had to come back empty-handed.”

“Yes, I had to come back empty-handed.”

“Is there any way that company could have known that researchers were using the material on that land for disease research? I mean, could you have notified the government or something?”

“I *did* notify the government. But how accurately are they going to keep records in different departments of these things? They make a note of what I’m doing and they seem to just put it in a file cabinet. Hell, they could have put it in the circular file for all the good it did. When someone wanted to buy the land, the government was the first to want to make a penny out of it.”

“Well, of course they want the money for it. And if no one really knew...”

“There’s so much bureaucracy, no one knows what the guy next to them is doing, unless they’re doing something wrong.”

Sloane looked at him for a moment. “Is there anything I can do?”

“Get me that tree back.”

“Toby —”

“I’m sorry.”

It all flashed in her mind that she should learn to be more social, especially in these situations. She did the best she could on such short notice by saying, “I mean, do you need to talk more? What can I do right now to make you feel better?”

Toby was surprised by her concern. He responded by stating, “It’s not like you to make such an offer.”

“I didn’t make an offer.”

The waiter brought another shot to Toby. “Point well taken.”

The waiter walked away. Toby looked at his shot, then at her. “You know what you can do for me?”

“Name it.”

“Just have a drink with me.”

“Isn’t that what I’m doing?”

Toby looked at her, then at her half-full glass of wine.

“Waiter,” She called out, “Two more shots of whiskey and two pints of his draft.”

Toby could hardly believe his eyes. He smiled almost inquisitively at her.

The waiter brought back two shots and beers. Sloane picked up the shot with Toby and they held them in the air. Toby counted to three; She followed his lead and they both drank. Sloane shivered after drinking the shot and followed his lead in going for the beer to wash the whiskey down. Toby thought it was cute that she was doing this for him, knowing that she didn’t drink much, and he watched her as he drank.

###

Sloane took the hotel key from Toby’s pocket and leaned Toby up against the wall. “Now you stay right there young man, don’t move,” Sloane ordered Toby while she reached over and opened the door. She kept her foot in the doorway to hold the door open while she nudged Toby toward the door.

“Okay, I’m not guiding you anymore, get to the bed or bathroom yourself.” Toby lifted his head and looked at her and smiled.

“What, you can’t help a guy in need?” he asked.

“Not when I know he’s perfectly capable of doing the job himself.”

With that Toby burst out laughing. Only then did she realize what it sounded like she meant.

Toby walked to the bathroom, splashed some water on his face and walked toward the bed. Sloane stopped and leaned against the wall and watched Toby slowly walk over to the bed and fall face-first onto the bed. She smiled, grabbed a t-shirt and shorts from her drawer and went to the bathroom to change. A few minutes later she walked out into the room and pulled the covers off of her bed. Toby was in the same position as he was

when she walked into the bathroom.

After she got into bed she heard Toby mutter, “Why did this happen?”

“What, Toby?”

“Why did this have to happen?”

“Toby, just get some rest.”

“But I was so close.”

Considering it for a moment, she thought: on some level it hardly did seem fair. That rain forest was much more valuable than a cattle ranch. But all she could think was: why did this have to happen? It didn’t have to. The company that bought it had a right to buy that land; they just made a bad business decision. Then again, if no one knew this patch of land was being used for research, how would they have known the value of it? The government kept poor track of things — they made a bad mistake by making the sale.

“I know you were so close. But there’s no use in lamenting over that when there’s work to be done. Are you sure there’s no way you can use anything what’s left from the samples and try to replicate synthetically?”

She heard Toby start to snore.

Smiling, she got up and walked over to his bed. She untied his shoes. She tried to push him up the bed, so his head was on a pillow. She slid his jacket off his shoulders. She figured he could sleep in his t-shirt and jeans. She got up and turned off the light next to her bed. She sat upright in the dark for a while. She couldn’t stop thinking.

There would have to be a way to replicate that tree sap, even if he used it all in tests, as long as he kept some of the results. Maybe he could search other rain forests nearby to see if there was any chance a tree like this existed somewhere else.

She thought about Colin Madison, telling her that she has a green light financially to do whatever she needed for research. That she could use the company plane whenever she wanted. But he offered that to her because she proved her talent and created a good product. She made strides and she was being rewarded for it. Toby was given the green light because he worded his guesses appropriately and got lucky.

How could she? She couldn’t blame Toby for using the system? The government allows it, the government has created this system where independent panelists of people unrelated to the field dole out millions of dollars to the people who have a grin like Tyler Gillian, or who have a lobby group that talks the

loudest.

Maybe she should blame Toby, though. She knew she didn't want that university job; she knew she wanted to be rewarded for her merits and nothing else. Toby liked the fact that the university had this "caste" system that gave him security in his job. Now he had a bad break. He has to learn from it.

After trying to think about the rain forest, she wondered: why would it be so hard to find another tree? She realized how little she knew about the planet's rain forests. The tree had to be seeded from another tree, right? Is his search over?

She got up and walked over to her briefcase, by the window. She quietly pulled out her computer and plugged it into the wall. "I can get on line tonight," she thought, "and see what is on the Internet about the rain forests, and possibly about the possible relationship of AIDS and HIV to it."

Looking out the window at the darkness for a minute, she noticed a few boat lights moving along the water. She saw the lights of the Miami were still alive, at two in the morning, even though Toby was out for the night. She saw the lights of a few bars crowded with people. And then, like a page ripped down the center, next to all the lights was the ocean, a void of blackness.

"Anything is conquerable," She said under her breath as she closed the drapes from the ocean versus the city and went to bed. Her Internet research could wait until morning.

###

But she still thought about the Internet research, even when she wasn't on line. This would be something she could stand some help on, she thought. Maybe the team at Madison would be able to use the Internet accounts to get more information on specific parts of the problem for the Madison group.

She knew that if there was a concern for the rain forests on the Internet, then there would probably be concerns — and a number of web sites — about things like "alien abductions" and "government conspiracies" and "AIDS and homeopathy" and more.

And if it was on the Internet, she could find it. And so could anyone at Madison.

###

At ten in the morning Toby rolled over. He thought he heard a slight tapping of rain outside his window. When he opened his eyes, however, he realized he was in Miami and not in Seattle, where he would expect the rain to be falling outside his window. He turned over and looked at the window. The sun beamed in, streaming around her, sitting at the table in front of the window. The light sound of rain was Sloane typing into her computer.

“How long have you been up?” Toby asked.

“Since six.”

He rolled back over to check the clock; he remembered that he was still dressed and checked his watch instead. He picked his head back up to look at her. “You’ve been up for four hours? Why didn’t you wake me?”

“You needed your rest. Besides, I wanted to get some work done.”

“Is that all you think about?”

“Sometimes.”

Toby let his head fall back on to the pillow.

“How are you feeling?” Sloane asked.

“Oh, my head hurts. Surprise. I just need some food. You’ve had breakfast, right?”

“Oh, I forgot. No, I haven’t eaten yet.”

“I can understand letting your mind go into overdrive, but doesn’t your body remind you that you have to maintain it?”

“I’m fine, besides, I’ve been so amazed at the information on the Internet that I haven’t been able to stop working. Now I know why Colin wanted me to get on line so bad.”

“What do you mean?” Toby started to sit up.

“I’ve been using the e-mail they gave us, right? Well, the boss kept telling me to use the Internet, and I don’t even think he’s ever been on it, I don’t think he knows how it works. And I’ve never had a real need to get on line before. But this morning I was thinking, I don’t know much of anything about the rain forests, really, so maybe I can get on line and learn something. Madison Pharmaceuticals has a T-1 line as well as a national dial up number, so I just got on line. I checked my e-mail, and then I got on to the Internet to see what I could find about the rain forests.”

“One question before you go on.”

“Sure.”

“Are you going to let me take you out to breakfast when you’re done?”

“You can take me to breakfast now, as long as I can tell you what I’ve learned.”

Toby got up out of bed. “Okay, I’m ready.”

“For breakfast, or my story?”

“Both. I’m dressed, aren’t I?”

Sloane laughed. Toby walked to the washroom; he turned back and looked at Sloane.

“Maybe you can wait until I have some coffee before you tell me your story.”

“It’s a deal.”

Toby ran some water through his hair while she closed her programs on her computer and shut the laptop off so they could go to a breakfast diner.

The both of them both simultaneously turned their coffee cups over as they sat down in the booth of the diner. The waitress came over and filled them up. Toby curled his left hand around the mug.

“Okay, I’m ready.”

“You know, it’s not that big of a deal...”

“Oh, just spit it out.”

“Okay, so I decided to go on the Internet to find out what I could about rain forests. So I went to a search engine and typed the words ‘rain forest’ in to see what I could get. I got so many entries that I’d never be able to check all of the web sites. So I typed in the words ‘rain forest destruction’ in and got a number of sites to tell me about why and how the rain forests are being destroyed.”

“And?” Toby asked.

“And did you know that the three primary reasons rain forests are being cleared are farming, cattle ranching and logging?”

“It makes sense, I suppose.”

“Did you know that orange juice sold in the United States that is from concentrate has oranges from groves in Brazil, on what used to be rain forest land?”

“Really?”

“Yes, just check the fine print on the package. Usually it will say something like ‘oranges from Florida, Mexico and Brazil.’ Right on the package.”

“Wow, I had no idea.”

The waitress walked over. "Are you ready to order?"

"Sure. I'd like a Spanish omelet and hash browns, white toast."

"Would you like any orange juice with that?"

Sloane glanced at Toby, then looked back at the waitress. "Is it from concentrate?" The waitress answered that it was.

"No, thank you," she answered. The waitress continued, "And for you, sir?"

"Two scrambled eggs, two sausage links, hash browns, and toast?"

"Sure."

"Actually, miss, can I change my order? What he's having sounds good."

"You want exactly what he's having?"

"Yes please."

"Okay. It'll be up in just a few minutes."

"So," Sloane turned back to Toby, "I thought it was interesting to learn this stuff about rain forest destruction. Most of the people that want to save the rain forests are talking about atmospheric changes, but there's no proof in that, and there's not even any proof that there's permanent damage to the ozone. I was surprised to find that people were arguing about saving the rain forests from that angle and not from the medical research angle."

"Good point, I guess."

"So then I went back to the search engine and typed the words 'rain forest AIDS' to see if there was anything. Get this. There was even a site about the monkey theory about how the first human got AIDS —"

"You mean the theory that a monkey transferred the virus to a human by biting his butt? A virus jumped from animals to humans? Do you even believe that theory?"

"Just listen, I never said I believed that. What I'm saying is that this site suggested that it was the destruction of the rain forest that caused the spread of AIDS in humans."

"From monkeys."

"Not from monkeys biting a human butt."

Toby laughed.

"The theory is that a man ate monkey meat that was contaminated with a virus, not that a monkey bit a man in the butt."

"But still —"

"I'm just telling you what was on this one site. The suggestion it was making is that not only do rain forests contain a plethora of rare animals and

plants, so too it could contain rare viruses.”

“A plethora?”

“And records of some viruses that have erupted since the beginning of rain forest destruction in African towns are spread by the air, not just by blood, which could mean the beginning of more drastic epidemics. And you don’t need to make fun of me because I’m coherent enough to use big words like ‘plethora’ in the morning, mister drinker.”

“Mister *drinker*?”

“I’m going to keep telling my story.”

“No one is stopping you.”

She mockingly glared at him. “They posted the theory that if AIDS mutates as much as it has been known to, it may mutate to the point where it can be transmitted by air.”

“That’s not going to happen.”

“Are we sure?”

“If it is possible for it to mutate to that point, it will not be for years and years and years. I’m sure there will be a cure within the next decade or so.”

“Still, it’s something to ponder, something to spur you on a little more, isn’t it?” Sloane paused to eat some of her eggs. “There were a few more sites, and most of them were about herbs and vitamins and things people were selling — products that had origins from the rain forest.”

“Like what?”

The waitress checked on their food. “Could I have some hot sauce?” Sloane asked the waitress. Toby looked at her with just a tinge of disgust. Sloane answered his glance with, “Just because you’re hung over, doesn’t mean I am.”

The waitress brought the hot sauce to the table, and Sloane continued. “The other web sites primarily contained products with health benefits derived from plant extracts and the like from rain forest materials. There was an immune system rejuvenator made from rain forest materials, phytonutrients, colloidal minerals and even a tea to help with energy that was derived from a tree bark.”

“And you think they all work?”

“I have no idea, I haven’t had the drugs, the extracts, or the research facilities to check them all out. I would say probably not. My point is that there are other people out there looking for cures to diseases, utilizing the

rain forest, people that you might be able to communicate with.”

“People making a wonder tonic and selling it on the web do it because it makes them more money than driving from town to town and gathering a crowd for a sales pitch. ‘Rev up your romantic life! Get the energy of your youth! Everything you need is in this handy...’”

“I get it, Toby,” Sloane answered.

“Super-potent...” Toby cut in.

“Toby, enough,” Sloane protested.

“Energy tonic!” Toby continued.

“Are you not interested in finding a way to solve your problem?”

“You think I’ll find it by people selling energy tonics?”

“With ingredients possibly from the same place as your research materials? Look, one of the herbs, or whatever it was, was one that claimed to help with people’s immune systems and had testimonials from AIDS patients. They said the materials were from a Peruvian rain forest. They found that this substance, from the inside of a tree bark, also helped with phagocytosis.”

Toby looked up. She added, “Is this sounding a little more familiar now?”

Toby leaned back in his booth.

“Okay, I’ll let you eat the rest of your breakfast in peace. Just let me know when you want the web site address. I saved it for you.”

“You’re doing my work for me while I sleep off a hangover, because I’m too mad about my lack of success.”

“Don’t think for a minute I’m doing it for you. This is a puzzle, solving this disease. And I’m a sucker for puzzles. You know me, I can’t help but pick up a piece and try to make it fit. Besides, this research makes me think of other avenues I could be taking in helping people with AIDS.” She smiled at him.

They ate for a moment in silence.

“Hey, are you going to use the jelly for your English muffin?”

“No. Here, take some.”

They got back from breakfast and checked out of the hotel. “Hey,” Toby stopped her in the lobby, “What do you say we have the hotel hold our bags for an hour or two and we take a walk on the beach before we go? I haven’t even been able to spend any time in Miami, and I’ve got two hours before my flight takes off for Seattle. By the way, what airline are you on? Maybe we could go back together.”

“I would if I could, but I’ve got the private plane this weekend.”

“Well, well, well, Ms. Emerson, you’re really the big-wig over there, aren’t you?”

She started to give a humorous sneer as he paused before speaking. “That’s what I get for giving up the university job.”

“Well, can you at least go for a walk?”

“Sure, let me phone Jim.” Sloane pulled her cellular phone out of her jacket pocket.

“Jim? It’s Sloane. Yes, I suppose you knew that... Is it possible to take off in maybe around two hours? ... I didn’t know how long I’d have to be here, but I didn’t expect it to be all weekend... Yes, I know I’m supposed to rest. No, I should probably just fly back this afternoon... Okay. It can be ready? Great. Should I just meet you at the airport? Okay, I’ll see you then. Thanks.” She hung up her phone as Toby took her baggage and gave it to the clerk at the registration desk.

“You know, you really should go somewhere for the rest of the weekend,” Toby said once they got to the water’s edge. “They’re letting you take the plane — don’t you have anyone you’d like to visit? I mean, you’ve got the company plane, you could just go for a while.”

“I suppose, but really, who would I go see? And I want to use this for business, and business only. This isn’t supposed to be a personal trip.”

“Is that what your boss said?” He waited for her snide answer as they got to the beach and started walking.

“Well, actually, no, he told me to take a break for the weekend and go somewhere.”

“Well? Go visit someone somewhere.”

“What, just call them and say, ‘Can I see you tonight?’”

“Sure. You know you’ll regret it if you don’t.”

“I doubt that. But I’ll think about it.”

They walked together along the water in silence.

“The water is beautiful,” Toby said, looking out at the ocean. “The ocean is such a powerful force. I mean, it covers two thirds of the planet. Just one strong wave could pull you under and kill you. And yet we humans are fascinated with it. We’re over half water. We want to ride boats over it. We want to swim in it. We want to surf on it, or ski on it, or float around in it. And we just want to stare at it, listen to the waves crash into the shore, and smell the salt air. What a love affair we have with it.”

Sloane thought for a minute about what he said.

“I think you’re right,” she answered to him.

“Yeah?” he asked. “Yeah.” she answered.

“I’m not used to you agreeing with me.”

Putting in a dramatic pause, she then spoke. “I’ve agreed with you on many things, Toby. But for me, the beauty of this scene is more than that, more than the beauty of nature, more than the beauty of the ocean. I like looking at the water because it reminds me of my life, about human life. It shows what nature is like, and it shows what we’ve done with nature. Yes, even though a tide can pull us under and kill us, we are still capable of going scuba diving with sharks and maneuvering boats over it. This water is beautiful because of our involvement with it, our choice to use it to our own ends. But on some levels what I think is most beautiful about this scene,” she said, moving her arm in a circle before her, “is that all of this, the waves crashing, the beauty and peacefulness of nature, is sitting here right up against high-rises.”

“You like the buildings here? It would look so much nicer if there was nothing here other than the water.”

“What I like is the fact that we’ve built these buildings, right at a place where the people in them can really enjoy the water. What I like is looking at the beauty of the buildings — the steel, the glass, the functionality of the products of the human mind — poised right up against the beautiful scene from nature.”

“I don’t know if I agree with you.”

“The best of man and the best of nature, all in one. That’s what makes this scene astonishing for me. I’ve seen sunsets reflecting off of skyscrapers that were more beautiful than any sunrise at this beach.”

Toby looked at her and smiled. “You were always a strange bird...”

“Would you want me any other way?”

“Of course not.”

“That’s my story and I’m sticking with it.” They both smiled and continued walking. They turned around to walk back toward the hotel. During the remainder of their little trip they walked in silence. Sloane thought about all the avenues that going on the Internet had brought to her attention that morning. She thought about that list she had started writing on the airplane. Then she thought about all of the difficulties her staff had been going

through trying to improve Emivir. She was beginning to feel the weight of the world upon her shoulders again. She thought about Tyler, and the lobbyists. She thought about the patients the lobbyists claimed blamed Madison Pharmaceuticals for not giving them drugs for free. "Haven't I done enough?" she thought. "What do they want from me?"

They got back to the hotel and Toby picked up their luggage. They shared a taxi together to the airport.

"Sloane," Toby said, "You look like you're already dreading going back to work."

"It's not the work that I dread."

"What then?"

"I —" Sloane couldn't get the words out. "I don't know what it is. I keep thinking that I do good work, but most people just want more."

"Are you working for them or for you?"

"Thanks for asking that. But for me, of course, and I want more from me too, I mean, I want to accomplish more as well, but when everyone is fighting you..."

"Believe me, I know what you mean," Toby answered. Sloane remembered his failed rain forest experiment and tried to empathize. "But I know you, you love your work. Hell, you were looking into research about the rain forest while I was passed out from drinking myself into a stupor and out of a depression over this whole mess. You love this; it's in your blood. The thing is, you just have to forget about the people that bother you. They'll never truly get in your way."

Starting to smile, she said, "You're right, Toby."

"What? You're agreeing with me again?"

The taxi pulled up to the airport and Toby handed her the baggage from the trunk.

"When I get into town I'll send you the web site address for the rain forest pages I was reading."

"Thanks. And thanks for coming to help me out here. If you need it, I'll fly across the country for you."

"Thanks, Toby," she said, smiling and starting to walk away.

"And that's a big deal, because I'd actually have to pay for my ticket."

She laughed as she turned back toward her terminal and Toby walked toward his.

Sloane met up with Jim at the end of the terminal and he walked her to the plane. “I’m surprised you don’t want to stay here, or go somewhere else. You’ve got me for the weekend, you know.”

She stood outside in front of the plane. She thought for a moment, pulling out her cellular phone. “If I wanted to change our destination, could we do it?”

“Where were you thinking?”

“New York.”

“There shouldn’t be a problem.” He looked at the phone in her hand. “Do you need to call someone first?”

“Can you give me a minute?”

“Sure. Come up when you’re ready — I can confirm where we can land in New York from the plane, so let me know where we’re going, okay?”

“Thanks, Jim,” she said as she watched Jim walk up the stairs and duck his head as he got into the plane. She looked at the phone. She planned to make two calls; the first one was to the phone number that was left on her answering machine. A young man answered the phone, and didn’t seem very alert when he answered the phone.

“Hello?” he answered. “Hello, is Steve there?”

“This is he. Who is this?”

“This is Sloane Emerson, I work with Kyle, I was returning your call, but did I wake you up? I didn’t mean to —”

Steve interrupted her so she didn’t have to explain. “I’m wide awake. I thought you were ignoring me by not calling me back. How are you?”

“I’m about to fly from Miami to New York, I think... I got your message during my trip, but I didn’t have much of a chance to call you until now.”

“Don’t worry about it. And why Miami and New York?”

“Miami for business, and New York for social reasons. I am trying to not think about work all the time.”

“I know you don’t know me very well, but if you are trying to be more social, I can be a good listener.”

“Listener?” she asked.

“Sounding board, conversation friend — I work for the newspaper and do have a good command over the English language...”

Sloane smiled at his remark and noted that this is what she had to learn to do more of. I’m not very good at being social, I am usually doing research

at home or at work, so you'll have to forgive me."

"Should I wait for you to call when you get back in to town then?" Steve asked. Knowing this call would cost her money on the cellular phone, she agreed and said she would talk to him later. Then she dialed New York. She heard a voice answer. "Hello?"

She didn't bother with a formal hello. "Carter?"

"Yes, who is this? I'm having a hard time hearing you."

"Carter, it's Sloane, Sloane Emerson. I'm standing next to an airplane getting ready to go."

"Where are you?" Carter asked.

"Miami. We're about to take off."

"Where are you going?"

"That's why I'm calling. I've got the company plane for the weekend, and everyone has been begging me to take time off, and I was wondering if you —"

"Tell me what time I should pick you up and I'll be waiting for you."

"You don't have any plans? I'm not interrupting anything?"

"Just call when you know where you're going to be and when. No arguing."

"Thanks, Carter. I'll call you in about an hour."

"I'll see you soon."

After they said goodbye, she looked at the phone in her hand for a moment, glancing up at the plane. She pushed the antenna back into the phone and made her way up the stairs.

She walked to the cockpit while men closed the airplane door behind her. She could hear the stairs being rolled away from the side of the plane.

"Where are we going, Ms. Emerson?"

"I have a first name!" she said, laughing at how cordial he was trying to be. She smiled at him. Jim repeated, "Sloane, where are we going?"

"We could go home... but then again, it's Saturday afternoon. We could make it to New York in just a few hours."

"New York it is," Jim proudly said as he turned back toward the controls. "Anything in particular you're going to do while you're there?"

"Visit a friend," she answered. "Someone who can bring my spirit back to me."



CHAPTER 3

THE MAN

Sloane was up in the air again. Shortly after they left, when the plane leveled off, she walked up to the cockpit and knocked on the door. She heard Jim's muffled voice through the door; she assumed he told her to come in.

"Jim, what time do you think we'll arrive at the airport?"

"It's three o'clock. ... I'd say just a little after five, maybe five-thirty."

"Got it. Thanks."

Knowing what gate they would arrive at, she walked back toward her seat and pulled out her phone. She dialed. She pressed the tiny phone to the side of her head.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Carter, it's me."

"Are you in the air now?"

"Yes, and the pilot says that we should arrive between five and five-thirty."

"What terminal should I meet you at?"

"I could just meet you outside, you don't have to park your car, and I don't have luggage to carry."

"Don't be ridiculous. What terminal?"

After giving him the information he needed, they said goodbye.

Getting up from her seat, She slowly made her way to the back of the plane. She opened the refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of champagne. She found a glass in the cabinet next to her head and walked back to her seat.

Sitting down, she unwrapped the metal from the top of the bottle. She realized it might not be a good idea to let the cork blow off the top of the bottle, being in an airplane and all. She placed the bottle between her knees, and closed her legs together, placing both of her hands on top of the bottle. She made sure she had a firm grip on the cork, and started to slowly ease the cork out of the bottle. The cork gave way with a loud pop, and suddenly champagne was starting to overflow onto her legs. She started laughing out loud as she grabbed her glass and frantically poured.

Jim's voice came over the airplane intercom. "That's the spirit," he said. She looked up, to see if the cockpit door was open; it wasn't, and she was relieved that he only heard the pop of the champagne cork and that he didn't see her spill the champagne on her legs. She got up with her glass and walked to the sink at the back of the plane.

"At least I took my pantyhose off when I left for that walk on the beach," she said aloud to herself, and dampened a rag to clean herself off.

Holding things along the aisle to keep her balance, she moved back to her seat. She sat down and looked out the window. And she thought about the man she was about to see in New York.

Carter Donovan was a classmate of hers during her undergraduate studies. They never had a class together; they were friends because her roommate was in a school class with Carter and they studied together. When he first met Sloane, he thought she was stuffy and a bookworm; he usually tried to get her to come out when her roommate was going out.

But after the semester was over, and Carter wasn't in a class with her roommate anymore, he called Sloane once, and asked her if she wanted to grab some coffee. "I like talking to you," Carter told her, "and now I don't have your roommate as an excuse to see you, so I'll have to make up my own excuses. Want to study at the café?" She would walk over to his dorm room, but instead of going out for coffee, they ordered a pizza and drank beer and talked about religion, about what they wanted from life, how they wanted to live life, what they thought was right. From then on they were instant friends.

They didn't spend a lot of time together, but when they did they avoid-

ed the small talk and discussed what interested them in the backs of their minds. She hardly had an interest in new songs or sports teams anyway. Carter usually brought the subjects of their conversations back to philosophy and religion; he always wanted to get her to state whether or not she definitely believed in a God. "I don't believe a God does or does not exist," she would tell him. "I have no proof that a God exists, but it is impossible to prove that something does not exist, given any possible condition."

"So how do you live your *life*?" Carter asked, smiling after hearing her responses.

"According to the rules of the things that can be proven around me. To the things that reason and knowledge dictate to me by my perceptions."

"And since there's no proof of a God, you don't believe in it?"

"I have no reason to consider whether or not it exists. To me it's more of the lack of thought about an unfounded theory, not a decision that no God exists. I don't think about it, really."

As college passed, Carter liked to stump her with questions, knowing how she should answer, hoping she would be up to the challenge.

"So if there's no God, who created the universe?"

"That question assumes that someone did create the universe. You have no proof to make that claim."

"But the universe had to begin somehow."

"Did it have to? There are theories about Adam and Eve, and there are also very plausible theories about the Big Bang, which seem to reject the concept of God altogether. And when it comes down to creating the universe, for that matter, what makes you assume how and when it 'began'?"

And Carter would smile; he found what he was looking for and was satisfied with her answers.

They didn't often agree in their discussions, but she had to admit to herself that she loved the fact that Carter had a sense of values and was willing to argue about them. Even if the arguments were invalid, she thought, she still loved his sense of morals and values, but then again, she was the scientist and had no room for fallacies and faith.

Carter was one of the few people that she drank with. She saw her college school mates drinking excessively every weekend; in her opinion they all seemed to be escaping something. She could have a drink or two with Toby, but only on occasions like this weekend. Carter drank with her to celebrate.

He thought of a drink as a gift to share as much as he would share good conversation when he was with her; she enjoyed relaxing a little and talking to him when they'd have their pizza and beer nights.

Carter Donovan was handsome by most anyone's standards. He was a tall man, nearly six foot six. He had short brown hair, a little wavy, and dark brown eyes. He had good taste in clothes, but more than that, Carter Donovan made clothes look good. Everything he wore looked as if it were tailored expressly for him.

Sometimes when they would be talking together she'd stay in his dorm room all night, falling asleep at four in the morning on the floor next to him. She'd wake up with a pillow under her head, a blanket covering her up, and Carter curled up next to her. It was moments like that where she would allow herself to study his face, when he didn't know she was looking.

It was a face she had grown to love. It was a face that should be loved.

Her eyes would scan along the sharp collar of his shirt to the matching harsh edge of his jawbone, up toward his ear, over to his Roman nose, even to the delicate eyelashes. Sloane didn't know why she loved his face. But every once in a while, when she had the chance, she would take a moment to just stare.

Carter was not a scientist. He majored in finance, with a minor in English. I love reading and writing, but really, where's the money in that?" he'd say. "Maybe one day I'll run a publishing house, and then I'll be in charge of what everyone else reads."

"That sounds a little Orwellian of you," She would answer, and Carter would smile a mischievous smile.

And in time, run a publishing house is exactly what he would do.

After she went on to medical school, Carter Donovan went to work for a book publishing company in New York. He worked his way up in the company, and shortly after he got the famed mystery writer Paul Christensen to sign on for a ten-book contract, he was hoisted up to the executive level at the company. Now at Quentin Publishing company, a business that has books on the top ten best sellers list forty out of fifty-two weeks a year, Carter was the Vice-President in charge of recruiting new clients. And he did all of this by the age of thirty-one.

Every once in a while Carter would write. On behalf of the company he wrote a how-to book about working and succeeding in corporate America. It was on the best sellers list for six weeks. In his spare time, though, he tried his

hand at writing philosophy; his essays weren't something his publishing company wanted to work with, but he'd often convince them to do a short press run, usually as more of a favor or a bonus than as a business proposal. They had created a small branch of Quentin for Carter Donovan's pet projects, and in spite of all the work he had to do as the recruiting Vice-President, he never stopped adding titles to his branch collection list.

Every time Carter told her about a new book of his, usually published once a year, she would go out and buy it.

While drinking her champagne on the airplane, she thought about this. They were never in a relationship; they never thought of each other as more than friends; she never thought about having a relationship with him. She hoped he hadn't changed much. She hoped she wasn't interrupting any of his plans. The last phone conversations they had were shortly after Emivir was discovered by the press; although they had phone conversations together, it had been three years since she had seen him last.

Glancing at her watch, she read 4:15. She looked at her legs. She went to her purse, got her pantyhose and a brush out and turned back toward the bathroom. After two steps she stopped and turned back to her purse. Even though she rarely wore make-up she knew there was eyeliner and lipstick at the bottom of her purse, so she grabbed the purse and slowly made her way to the back of the plane.

Sloane had mentally prepared herself for an explanation of why she needed make-up in her purse.

"Sometimes I have to wear make-up when I'm going to a meeting at work."

Never having to use make-up or have some in her purse, she still thought that just in case, she should be prepared for it.

She fidgeted in the tiny, all-silver bathroom with her eyeliner. "Why am I doing this to myself?" she said out loud as she moved the soft pencil over the bottom of her eyelids. She pulled back to look at herself in the mirror. She leaned forward to add the lipstick. She brushed her hair straight down. She shook her head to try to make her hair look more full. She then shook her head at herself and brushed her hair again and tucked it behind her ears.

Pulled back, she looked at herself again. She pulled the bottom of her suit jacket down to get rid of the wrinkles in it. She glanced over her slate blue suit. "Too formal," she thought, and took off the jacket, so she was only wearing an ivory blouse and the slate blue skirt. There were two small strands

of pearls wrapped around her neck. She pulled back and looked at herself again. She closed up her purse, threw her jacket over her forearm, grabbed her glass of champagne and opened the latch of the bathroom door.

###

When Toby got through the airport he tried to ask for a seat at the front of the plane. He always preferred to be at the front of the plane so he wouldn't have to wait for all the family members who had to slowly collect the bags and their children to get out of the center row while people were trying to get off the plane.

And he knew that once he got on the plane, he still wouldn't be able to explain exactly where he was going. Yes, he knew, Seattle, but a part of him didn't know what was going to be waiting there for him.

Would he always think children were a nuisance? Or would he grow to love them too, would he even love his own kids?

Maybe. He never had the time to think about things like that, though.

But he always noticed when he got the chance to let his mind wander, that Sloane always seemed to find a way to come into his mind. It was like her spirit knew the effect she had on his, and her spirit found a way to creep into his soul.

Even when he wasn't thinking about her, he noticed that she did still find a way into his subconscious.

Then again, maybe he just saw her in Miami for a day. Maybe that was the reason he thought about her, he said to himself.

Maybe that was all the reason he needed.

###

When Carter Donovan got off the phone with Sloane at three, he quickly scanned his apartment. He lived in a penthouse apartment in Manhattan; it was sparsely decorated, according to his taste: "Extra objects just break up the lines of the room," he said to the decorator he hired to buy furniture for his home.

The doorbell rang. He moved to the door and opened it. His weekly maid was standing in the hallway.

"Oh, thank you for coming in on such short notice."

“That’s okay. I usually don’t have clients on the weekends anyway.”

“Can you do the usual, and not bother coming this next Tuesday, and just come the week after that?”

“Sure, no problem.”

“I need to have the place cleaned up in just a few hours, so...”

“I’ll be as quick as I can, but I’ll make sure not to overlook anything.”

“Thanks a lot, Margaret. I really appreciate it. I have to get ready to go out by about four-thirty or five o’clock, so I’ll be here for a while. I’ll do my best to stay out of your way.”

“And I’ll do my best to stay out of yours,” the housemaid said.

Carter walked to his bedroom, past his bed and to the shower. He had to get ready. At four-thirty Margaret walked to Carter’s bedroom and knocked on his door as he was still getting ready. “Mr. Donovan?”

Carter ran over and opened the door. He stood in the doorway to his bedroom wearing a white dress shirt and dark gray slacks.

“I’m pretty much done, I did the bedroom and —”

“That’s fine, Margaret, that’s perfect. I need to ask you something, though. It’s very important.”

Margaret looked a little nervous. “Yes, sir?”

“Come in, please, I need your opinion.”

Margaret walked over to his bed, and three ties were sprawled out on top of a dark gray jacket.

Carter picked up the first tie. “Which do you think is the best tie?” He grabbed the second tie and placed it in front of him, next to the first tie. “The first one I think is a little loud, but the second one is a little too business-like. I don’t need a power tie, I want something that says friendly, you know what I mean? Which do you think is the best?”

Margaret looked at him for a moment. “Mr. Donovan, are you going on a date?”

Carter stopped and stepped back. His voice toned down; he suddenly sounded grave. “No.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Donovan, you just seem very anxious.”

“I’m seeing an old friend of mine. A good friend.”

Margaret looked over the tie choices. “If it’s a friend, I’d wear the first tie.” She pointed at the tie in his left hand. “If it’s a date,” she bent over to pick up the last tie on the bed, “and I’m not saying it is a date, I’m just saying that if it’s

a date," she handed the third tie to Carter, "I would definitely pick this tie."

Margaret stood and looked at him. He stared at her for a moment. "Thanks, Margaret."

"There's nothing else sir?"

"No. Thanks for coming on your day off. I'll see you two Tuesdays from now?"

"Yes." Margaret walked to the doorway. "You have a good night, sir."

"You too, Margaret."

Carter looked over at his closet. He pulled out his black wing tips and slid them on to his feet. He stood in front of the mirror. He held the first tie up against his shirt, then the third. He shook his head, put the first two ties in his closet, closed the closet door, hung the third tie around his neck, grabbed his jacket off his bed and headed out the door.

His driver was standing in front of his limousine waiting for him at the turn around at the front door of his building. Carter never slowed down as he got out the front door; the driver opened the back door just as Carter was at the car and he glided into his seat. He figured he could tie a Windsor knot during the ride on the way to the airport.

He told the driver when they arrived at the airport to wait with the car; he would meet his friend at the terminal. Carter stepped out of the back of the black stretch limousine and walked through the doorway and turned toward the far terminal. He didn't know how long he would have to wait for her plane to land. He thought for a moment about going to the men's room to make sure he looked okay. Then he stopped himself. "What am I doing?" he thought. "I'm acting like this is a date." He shook his head at himself and continued walking down the hallway.

He walked to the gate her plane was to arrive at. He saw a plane outside the window. He turned to an airport attendant. "Excuse me," he said, pointing out the window, "Do you know if that's the Madison Pharmaceuticals private plane?"

Just as Carter asked the question he heard a voice behind him and felt someone tapping his shoulder. "You have no patience, do you?"

Carter spun around to see her standing right in front of him.

The first thing he saw was her face. It seemed like her face was beaming. She was restraining herself from laughing; it looked like she was pleased that she'd surprised him. He couldn't take his eyes off her face.

Seeing his face light up like a child's, she stood there as he placed his hands on her shoulders. "You're always one step ahead of me, aren't you?"

"I'm always trying. Don't I get a hug?"

Carter slid his hands from her shoulders around her back and stepped closer to her. She wrapped her arms around him as she turned her head and leaned into his chest as he held her.

Sloane was used to knowing men that were around her height. She knew she was a tall woman, and she knew that men regularly claimed to be taller than the really were. She always felt tall compared to others, but Carter was... Well, he was tall, and she liked that. She liked the fact that he was physically tall, that he was emotionally tall, and most of all she liked the fact that on some of those levels he was taller than her.

"It's good to see you."

"It's good to see you, too."

They pulled back and locked their hands together. "You know we should really do this more than once every three years," she said.

"You're still beaming, even after these three years... And first things first, give me those bags," and Carter reached over and grabbed the straps of her bags from off her shoulders. Sloane started to resist; she always preferred carrying her own luggage to having a man do it for her. This time, however, she stopped herself and let him ease her load.

She was also sure she wasn't beaming, but once again, she felt there was no need for her to resist.

They turned toward the hallway and started walking toward the baggage claim and the outside doors where Carter's car was waiting. "So why were you in Miami?"

"I met up with a colleague there to discuss some problems with his research."

"You look like you got a little sun."

"Oh, I just walked outside for an hour, no more than that, I couldn't have gotten any sun."

"Well, you're positively glowing nonetheless."

"Since we're doling out compliments, you look fantastic yourself. The corporate life — well, at least the suits — fit you well."

"Okay, okay, no need to butter me up. So what would you like to do tonight?"

Never having even thought of what to do, she tried to think of something. “You know, I never thought about it. I’m not particularly interested in doing anything, really.”

“Oh, come on, let me show you the sights.”

“If you want to, but I didn’t come here to be a tourist, I came here to catch up with you.”

They stepped outside the sliding airport doors; Carter’s limousine was waiting at the doorway. Carter guided her toward the door; his driver held the door open for her. “Carter, a limousine? Is this a company perk or did you decide to splurge?”

“Consider it a company perk. Just like your plane.”

Sloane laughed. “I guess we’ve finally made it, haven’t we?”

“Yes, I suppose we have.”

The driver got into the seat and they started moving. Carter asked the driver to go to the apartment first, so she could settle in.

“Okay, so let’s catch up first. How’s the book publishing business going?”

“It’s going perfectly, actually. We changed our focus a few years ago from romance novels and other housewife-oriented trash novels—”

“You mean, ‘sleazy novels for housewives,’” Sloane responded. Carter looked at her and smiled, responding positively with his expression to what she felt she could not say. “Didn’t mean to interrupt,” she added.

“Not a problem,” Carter said. Then he smiled with her as he continued his story.

“To mystery writers,” he started, “and business writers, you know, how to succeed in business, and we got more self-help books, you know, so-and-so’s sure-fire way to lose weight. We’re doing more biographies, even if they are only of Hollywood actors, but that’s where the market is going. Occasionally they still let me run books solely of my own choice in the Quentin/Donovan Philosophy branch, they’ve even made that separate division label for them. I try to get them into university towns and the like.”

“Have you been doing any more writing lately?”

“No, I’ve been too busy with work. That’s why I’ve been seeking out other good work. Even if they might not go mainstream, I want to get good work out there, work I think truly has merit. And as long as I don’t go overboard, they let me. The most recent one is an economics book; in fact, it’s at press now and I have to go to the plant in Ohio tomorrow and do a press

check.”

“Ooh, so they let you travel, too? All the way to Ohio?”

“I know, I know. But I go for big projects, with a few other production people from the company. But when my own choices are running, which are always small print counts, mind you, I always go to do a press check then. And you know, I always notice that when I see my own choices printing, I get this wonderful sense of pride by watching the presses work.”

“And you don’t get that feeling when you’re watching other projects, the big books that actually make you a success?”

“When it’s one of the trash novels that goes through, when it’s one of the trash novels that makes me rich that’s at press, then I can still look at the massive amount of machinery and admire its speed and skill at executing its job. And then I think about the mind that it took to create these machines. But at the same time it doesn’t fill me with the same sense of pleasure.”

“Any idea why?”

“You know exactly why.”

Carter leaned forward and opened a cabinet against the side of the limousine. “Would you like some champagne?”

“No, thanks, I should wait a little bit. I was drinking champagne on the plane.”

“Well, well, well, maybe that explains the glow on your cheeks.”

“I’m telling you, I don’t have a glow, Carter.”

“And I’m telling you, you’re radiant.”

They smiled at each other. Sloane looked out the window. “Wow, It has been a while since I’ve been here. Maybe I could go out, to see the skyline.”

“Wait until you see the view from my place.” As Carter finished his sentence the limousine turned into the driveway in front of his high-rise apartment building.

Carter held the door open while she made her way through, past his outstretched arm against the door, to his living room. They were on the 55th floor, and her attention was immediately drawn to the window and the breathtaking view of New York.

She walked over to the opposite wall and pressed her hands against the window. “This is an amazing view, Carter,” she finally managed to get out of her mouth. She kept turning her head to look at different buildings.

“I thought you’d like it,” Carter answered.

“I don’t want to leave this room all night,” she said, looking like a child in front of a pet store window. “I want to see all of the lights on in this city from this view. This is absolutely gorgeous.”

“I thought you’d like it. But you know, we could drive around a bit. The limo has a sunroof, so you can still watch the city. And there are a few nice restaurants I was thinking of taking you to. What kind of food are you in the mood for?”

Turning her head away for a moment, she thought about his question. She turned around and leaned her back against the window. “In all honesty?”

“Of course.”

“I want pizza.”

Carter laughed. “Shall we have it delivered?”

“Of course.”

“Would you like to stay here, or would you also like to go for a ride?”

“A ride would be delightful,” she answered and walked across the room toward Carter and her baggage. “Where do you want me to put this stuff?”

“I’ve got it,” Carter said, and picked up her belongings. “I’ll put them in the bedroom. We can go for a ride now, and as it gets past dusk we can come back for food.”

“It’s a deal.”

The next hour was spent in the limousine. Carter was able to convince her that she had waited long enough since her last glass of champagne and that she should have some in the car with him. They drove up and down the streets of Manhattan; at one point Carter dared her to stand in the car with her head out of the sunroof. She agreed only if he’d join her, and for a mile or two they drank champagne and waved back at the people waving in the streets at them.

“Why are they waving at us?” she asked. “I suddenly feel like royalty, giving the Queen’s Wave to the little people.” She laughed. “No, I feel more like someone dressed up as Cinderella at a Disney parade.”

“I don’t know why they’re waving,” Carter answered. “Maybe they think we just got married.”

“But you’re wearing a suit instead of a tux and I’m in a blouse.”

“Good point. Okay, I have no idea... Maybe they’re waving just because we’re here, sticking out of the top of a car.”

“Maybe,” she said, “maybe they’re waving at us because we look happy

and they want to share in that happiness. To have some of that happiness too." She sounded like she was thinking out loud.

"You're not laughing enough to look happy," Carter said as he reached his hand over to her side and started tickling her. She started screaming with laughter and at the first chance she got ducked back into the car.

"Ready to go back?" Carter asked.

"Yeah, I suppose."

"Want to go by the park once more?"

"I'd rather go around by Times Square once more."

And so they drove.

###

The pizza arrived at around ten o'clock. Carter yelled from the kitchen, "I've got water, beer, soda, wine, more champagne... Which would you prefer?"

"I would say beer to be more historically accurate, to continue with the tradition, you know, but I think I'll be sick if I switch from champagne to something else."

"Champagne then?"

"Sure."

They sat on the floor in his living room and ate. Carter started a small fire in the fireplace for light. They ate for a moment in silence.

Then it was Carter's turn to ask the questions. "So I've seen your name in the papers a few times since Emivir came out. Anything new going on with the research?"

"Our main focus since the drug has come out is to work on improving the drug. We got to this drug by altering other drugs until we found a solution that worked. We were hoping that we could mimic that process and find more."

"No luck yet?"

"No. I think it's getting my department down. And I'm not very good at cheering the team up."

"That's not your job."

"No, but if they're not putting in all they can, if they don't have the heart for it anymore —"

"Then the research suffers."

"Exactly."

“So what is the solution?”

“I’ve been trying to look at this from a different angle. I was thinking I’d separate the department into three teams. One would continue with the current vein of research. One would work on coming up with integrase inhibitors — you know how the drug cocktails work?”

“Vaguely.”

“Each of the drugs in the cocktail attack one enzyme of the virus. The first group would be trying to improve one of the existing drugs. The second group would be working on a new drug — the integrase inhibitor — that would attack a third enzyme of the virus.”

“Got it. The more ways you attack it, the better.”

“Exactly.”

“And the third group?”

“This might sound trivial, but beyond vitamins and exercise for patients the third group would work on making these drugs easier to take, eliminating the drastic side effects and making the drugs work on a time-release system, so patients would not have to take twenty to sixty pills a day.”

“You’d have a better success rate with the drugs if people took them properly and if there weren’t any side effects to make them stop taking it, right?”

“Exactly. There’s also a psychological factor to taking so many drugs. Every time you take a pill you’re reminded that you have a fatal disease.”

“Not a bad plan. Are you working on more long-term research? This seems a little short-sighted for you.”

Carter could see her start to look disappointed as she attempted to answer. “Yes, but it’s hard to think of the light at the end of the tunnel when you can’t come up with the first step to solving this problem.”

“Oh, the Sloane I know wouldn’t sound so pessimistic.”

“It’s not pessimism, it’s realism.” She thought through her response like how she thought through all problems. “When I can’t solve the problem with improving what we have, then it’s hard to think about solving the problem altogether... I think that’s why I came here tonight.”

“Why?”

“Because I wanted to hear you tell me that you know I can do it.”

“You know you can. You don’t need me telling you that.”

“I just get tired of telling it to myself over and over again.”

They sat in silence for a moment. Then she started talking. “I know I’m

a realist, and that makes people think that I'm a pessimist. And I've always covered up any emotions I've felt, and I've never shown emotion to anyone."

Carter nodded his head in agreement.

"But with you, well, you make me more real. I feel like I can let out emotions with you, emotions I wouldn't bother to feel or show to anyone else."

"Well I'm glad you've got that with me," Carter answered. He paused with his sentences before continuing. "So back to the subject... It seems you're on the right track by looking for alternative ways to attack the virus. Can you stretch your staff that thin, separating them into three smaller groups?"

"Oh, that shouldn't be a problem at all. Actually, people usually work better that way. And I'll let people decide by their own interests and abilities what they want to work on."

"And that's how you're going to keep their morale up."

"...I guess it is. But I want them to have some control over their work; everyone needs to feel that their talents — as well as their interests — matter."

"I guess you didn't need a cheer for them after all."

"I also thought I'd do a little research on homeopathy and alternative forms of medicine, like nutrition, herbs, massage, hypnosis, or something. Even if it has no merit, it might act as a placebo when people think they're on a drug and maybe it will help their system somehow. If patients feel they're taking positive steps toward recovery, they alleviate depression, and their immune system may respond positively. So it could be worth the effort after all."

"A lot of people say that homeopathy really does have merit, though. Hell, we've published a number of books on the subject. Want me to send some to your office?"

"I'd love it, Carter. Thanks a lot. Anything you have on natural remedies or homeopathy for better health."

"No problem. Actually, we have a few books about AIDS, too. Mostly conspiracy stuff, though."

"Really?" she asked, in a condescending tone. "Boy, you really do pander to the lowest common denominator, don't you?"

"You know the saying that sex sells, more than anything. But now, the people's hatred for the government is coming in a close second."

"What does that say for the people?"

"Really, if you think about it, those are two pretty worthwhile topics. And if the government does something wrong, the question would be: what

do you say about the government?”

Knowing he was right, she laughed, and glanced up at Carter.

Carter continued eating, while she got up and walked to the window.

“So, you’re doing well at the publishing company. Why do you still run that small publishing branch in your spare time if it isn’t a money-maker?”

Carter wiped his face with a paper napkin. “Because those books need to get out. Because I know they’re right.”

“Right? How so?”

“The drivel that gets on the best sellers lists, the garbage that makes us money, the language is at a grade school student’s reading level. The content is poor at best. There are no heroes. There is nothing extraordinary about them, the characters or even the books. I want books that glorify man. People don’t read that anymore.”

“If people don’t read it anymore, why do you print it?”

“I have to hope that I’m not the only person in the world that thinks this way. I have to believe that there are other people out there —” he held his glass up to the skyline out his window — “other people out there like me.”

“Do you think people don’t read the kinds of books you’re talking about because they don’t want to, or because they haven’t found them?”

“I hope it’s the second. If it is, then I know I can’t give it up.”

Walking back to Carter, she sat next to him on the floor in front of the fireplace. “There are people like you, Carter.” she said. She leaned her head on his shoulder.

He liked her answer. “That’s why you’re here, isn’t it?” Carter answered, and leaned his head on top of hers.

“Of course.”

They watched the fire for a moment. Carter liked her leaning on him, but he had to make a motion to get up, so she could move out of the way. “I hate to interrupt, but duty calls...” He walked toward the washroom.

Sloane watched him walk down the hall. She watched the long line of his slacks as he moved away from her. She watched his shoulders sway back and forth. He turned the corner.

He’s not a scientist, like her, she thought, but she admired his sense of freedom, his love of succeeding and the fact that he knows that he’s good at what he does. His pride, she thought, she loved his pride.

She looked back at the open cardboard box of left over mushroom and

sausage pizza and their glasses of empty champagne. She reached over, grabbed the bottle, and filled their glasses.

Carter walked out of the washroom and down the hall. When he reached the entrance to the living room, he stopped for a moment and leaned against the wall. When sitting, her skirt slid up her legs a little, and Carter noticed her long thin legs trailing off to her delicate feet. Her black hair was shining in the light of the fireplace. Although Carter never visited her, he realized how much he missed her.

Sloane looked up and saw him looking at her. "What's the matter?"

"Oh, I'm just not used to seeing someone here. I'm usually alone here."

"Oh, I'm sure you take people out all the time."

"Sure I do, but I don't bring them home with me." He walked over and sat down next to her.

"You know," Carter started, "you're the only friend I've kept in contact with since college. And I've done a poor job at that."

"Carter, you're probably the only friend I had in college," She answered.

"You stuck your nose in the books too much."

"Well, science isn't going to let you guess."

They both leaned their backs against the couch and sipped their champagne. "Thanks for putting up with me," She finally said.

Carter put his arm around her. "You know, I think we're cast from the same mold, you and I. It is nice to talk to you, because when I talk to you, it makes me feel better too... It's just nice knowing you exist."

Sloane whispered, resting her head again, "You know, you are so cool."

"I'm what?" Carter answered.

"You heard me... I'm not trying to sound like I stick my head in the books too much." She paused to smile before she finished her thought. "You make me smile. It's nice knowing you exist, too." She closed her eyes as she kept her head on his shoulder. She almost fell asleep right there, until she relaxed her hand and the glass of champagne she was holding in her lap tipped over and spilled all over her skirt. She let out a light scream at the cold liquid seeping through her skirt and pouring over her legs. She wiped the carpet off with an extra paper napkin until Carter brought in a towel for her.

He held it out to her, looking at the spill strategically located on her skirt. "I think I better let you do the honors," he said. She smiled.

"Here, let me get you a robe." Carter walked into his bedroom and pro-

duced a white terry-cloth bathrobe. She took it from his hand, smiled in embarrassment and walked into the washroom.

He heard her laughing from down the hall.

“What’s so funny?”

“Carter, I know you’re tall, I know you’re a big guy, but I know I am a tall woman and I feel like this robe is consuming me!” As she walked out, the shoulder seam was near her elbows. “I’ve rolled up the sleeves four times and I still can’t see my hands. Are you sure this isn’t a blanket or a sleeping bag instead?”

Carter stood up and started laughing out loud. “Why are you worried? You look perfectly comfortable — and perfectly dry.”

“Yes, and thank you for the robe.”

“You want to go to sleep?”

“What time is it?”

“Three-thirty.”

“Oh my God, we talked that long?”

“Yeah.”

“Let me help you clean up.” She picked up the box of pizza before he could stop her. Carter got the champagne bottle and glasses; she got the napkins. They cleaned up in the kitchen and walked back out into the living room.

Carter put the fire out while she looked out the window. “If I had this view every day, it sure would be easier to get up every morning.” She looked down.

Carter walked over to her, took her hand, and walked her to the bedroom. He placed her in front of his mirror, stood behind her and placed his hands on her shoulders. “When you have this view every day,” he said, pointing over her shoulder to her reflection in the mirror, “you have no reason not to face every day with your drive and enthusiasm.”

Sloane looked at herself smothered in Carter’s bathrobe in the full-length mirror.

“I look ridiculous,” she said, smiling.

“You are amazing,” Carter answered. “And you, my dear, are Sloane Emerson. That’s all you need.”

They stood in front of the mirror together for a moment before Carter let go of her shoulders and walked toward the door. “I’ve got to do my press check tomorrow. Would you like to go with me?”

“I really should get back to work.”

“Oh, have you had your Carter fix already?”

Sloane smiled, thinking she *didn't* have her fix. “Well, you’re going to work, too. Have you had your fill of me?”

“You know I never would,” Carter said as he understood and smiled. “I’ll wake you in the morning.”

“If I don’t wake you first.”

Carter closed the door and walked down the hall.

She slumped down at the foot of the bed. She looked around the room. “So this is where he lives,” she thought. She reached over and crawled toward the pillows at the other side of the bed. She got on her knees and took off his robe and placed it at the foot of the bed. She lifted the covers and crawled into his bed.

“So this is where he sleeps,” she thought. She felt the sheets against her skin and could smell Carter in the pillow she was resting her head against. His scent comforted her as she tossed and turned in his bed, felt the sheets wrap around her legs, until she finally fell asleep.

Carter walked over to his couch. He stretched a blanket over the couch and placed an extra pillow on one end. The apartment was dark. He looked around, and walked over to the window. He saw what she saw as the lights of the skyscrapers flickered before him. It was a fireworks show he took for granted every night when he closed his shades and went to sleep.

He unbuttoned his shirt and placed it on a dining room chair. He walked back toward the couch and saw in the shadows her shoes lined up next to his near the fireplace. He lay down on the couch, stared for a moment, and tried to sleep.

###

At nine in the morning Carter gently knocked on his bedroom door. The light from the window woke him up.

She rolled over, grabbed the sheets and pulled them up to her nose. Since she had that evening showed more to him about her than she was used to, she thought she shouldn’t show off her bare skin in bed as well.

“Come in.”

Carter slowly opened the door. “Hey, sorry to wake you. I have to leave for my flight to Ohio in about an hour. I figured you’d want some time to

get yourself together. Do you want anything for breakfast?”

She thought about the headache behind her right eyebrow. “No. Thanks.”

“Doing that well?”

“Didn’t fall asleep right away. I tossed and turned a lot.”

“Really? How come?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I’m just not used to sleeping in a different place.”

He would never admit it consciously, but in the back of Carter’s mind, a part of him was glad that sleeping didn’t come easy to her last night. “If you need anything,” Carter said, “let me know.”

“Thanks.”

Carter turned and started to close the door.

“Oh, Carter?” she asked.

He stopped and turned back toward her. “Yes?”

“Do you have any orange juice?”

“Sure. I’ll bring some in for you.” He started to close the door again.

“Oh, wait, Carter?”

Carter looked back again. “Yes?”

“Is it from concentrate?”

“What?”

“Is your orange juice from concentrate?”

“No. That stuff tastes awful.”

“Good. Thanks.”

Carter then closed the door; she could hear his footsteps fading away.

She reached over and grabbed the bathrobe from the floor; it must have fallen off the bed while she was moving in her sleep, she thought. She threw it on and walked over to his bathroom and turned on his shower.

Carter knocked and came in with a glass of orange juice, a vitamin pill and two towels. “The vitamin is for the hangover. I heard the water running, so here are some clean towels.” He put everything in her hands, then put his hand on her head and messed up her hair. She squinted her eyes and smiled. He turned around and walked out again.

Gulping down some orange juice, she swallowed the multi-vitamin supplement. She walked into the bathroom, placed the towels on the counter, and let the bathrobe fall to her feet. She stepped into the bathtub.

The heat of the water shocked her when she got under the showerhead; she liked the water piping hot in the morning. She grabbed the soap from the side

of the tub and started running the bar over her shoulders and up and down her arms. She turned toward the water and ran the bar over her stomach. She tilted her head back and felt the water beat down against her chest. Then she leaned against the wall of the shower stall; she liked how the cold of the ceramic tile felt against her back while the hot water was pounding on her.

Sloane needed to focus. She had things to do back in Seattle. A part of her wanted to go on the press check with Carter, but eighteen hours was enough time to spend in one visit. She didn't want to seem overbearing. Besides, she had work to do too. So she walked out into the living room wearing her beige slacks and her gray tank top. She was shaking the wrinkles out of her white blouse while she was walking down the hall. Carter looked up at her; her shoulders had the same effect on him as they did on Toby.

She looked over at him, sitting at the dining room table with the newspaper folded in his hands. "What are you looking at?"

"You."

"Why?"

"I don't think I've ever seen you when your hair is wet."

"Oh, I know, I look like a wet dog. But I didn't see a hair dryer, and I didn't pack one, so I —"

"I wasn't saying it was bad. I was just noticing."

She walked over and picked her shoes up.

Carter waited for a moment after seeing her with wet hair. "Are you done in the bathroom? I desperately need to shower and change."

"Oh, I'm sorry, yes, let me just get my bags and I can pack them out here."

Carter walked into the bathroom and closed the door. He noticed his bathrobe on the hook of his door. He took off his clothes and started the water. Then he walked over to the bathrobe. Just stared at it for a moment. He reached up to it with his left hand and felt the loops of the fabric under his fingers. He turned to the shower and stepped in. He stepped underneath the showerhead and held his head under the running water for a few seconds. Then he shook his head, tried to regain himself, and grabbed the shampoo.

###

Sloane walked around his living room. She picked up his dishes from breakfast and cleaned them in the kitchen sink. Then she got her cellular

phone from out of her purse and called Jim.

“Hello, Sloane.”

“You know, Jim, you can act like you don’t know who’s calling you. It’s strange to hear someone answer like that.”

“I’m sitting in an airport hotel...”

“I know, I know, I’m just being silly. Is it okay if I leave from Manhattan for the airport by eleven?”

“No problem. I’ll meet you at the same gate.”

“Thanks a lot, Jim. By the way, did you do anything last night?”

“Yeah, I went to dinner and met up with a friend of mine. We were out kind of late, actually. And how about you?”

“We didn’t go anywhere, but we had a lot of fun talking.”

“Did you get your spirit back?”

“Huh?”

“You said on the flight in that you were visiting a friend that would hopefully bring your spirit back to you. Did they?”

“Yeah, I think they did.”

“Good then. Mission accomplished. I’ll meet you at the airport.”

“Thanks, Jim.”

“No problem.”

She hung up the phone and walked over to the window. A haze had fallen over the city and cut a few of the taller buildings in half. She looked at all the buildings for one last time. There were times in her life when she would look at a scene, and memorize it, so she could call it up into her mind when she wanted to. She did this at the beach in Miami, and she was doing it here, recording the layer of fog, the few buildings that pierced through the fog out into the sky, the shapes of the buildings, and the motion in the streets. Then she walked over to her bags, made sure everything was in order, and stretched out on the couch and waited for Carter.

Carter walked out ten minutes later and saw Sloane stretched out on the couch. “I thought you would have had your computer out by now, working, since you had to wait for me.”

“I thought I might as well enjoy this time while I’m still capable of it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Most of the time I feel like working. I want to work; it’s what makes me feel good. I get anxious just sitting around doing nothing constructive. But this

morning I actually feel like lounging around for a bit. I did think that I could get my notes out and do a little work. A part of me still wants to. But then I thought: no, I should enjoy this moment of peace while I'm still capable of it."

"I understand your love of your work, but I'm glad you're able to relax here. Consider this your private spa; visit whenever you want. You have an open invitation."

"And you have the same in Seattle," she answered as she got up and straightened her clothes out.

"I'll keep it in mind. Hey, are you sure you don't want to go with me on my press check? I think you'd enjoy it."

"No, I really should work through the rest of the weekend, even if that does just mean tonight. There's too much I want to get done."

"Isn't there always?"

"I suppose there is. I'll take a rain check, though."

"You've got a deal."

Carter picked up her weekend bag and her briefcase and handed her the trench coat as he guided her out of his apartment.

###

A strong gust of wind followed her into the airplane. Jim walked toward the cockpit. She turned toward the cockpit once she tucked away her luggage. "What time should we arrive in Seattle, Jim?"

"We gain three hours, so we should arrive no later than two in the afternoon."

"I like trips like this, I like gaining a few more hours," she thought. "I can get more work done."

The plane made its way to the runway, and she leaned her seat back and listened to the roar of the engines. She closed her eyes, feeling the wheels lift off the ground and the gravitational pull as she was pulled away, farther and farther away from the earth.

As the plane started to level off, she reached under her seat and found her briefcase. Placing it on the table in front of her, she decided to pull out her note pad. She found the list that she had written on her flight this weekend. She read the last lines.

G. Psychological treatments

Ga. alleviate depression, may help immune system

Gb. help memory to take drugs, and keep positive attitude

7. homeopathies

7a. nutrition, diet and herbs to improve general health

7b. herbs to alleviate nausea for patients who experience side effects

7c. vitamins and herbs with effects on immune system

7d. is there a psychologically positive effect of eating things good for you?

She thought about it. She decided to get on the internet when she got home and do some research. She called Kyle at home from her cellular phone.

“Hello?”

“Kyle? Hi, it’s Sloane.”

“Where are you? There’s a lot of static.”

“I’m flying back to Seattle now. Listen, I was wondering if you finished the report of what we’re going over with the staff tomorrow.”

“Yes, it’s finished. Where did you go this weekend?”

“I’ll tell you tomorrow. Can you fax your notes to my apartment?”

“Sure. You sound tired.”

“Yes, I suppose I am.”

“I hope you didn’t work all weekend.”

“Don’t worry about me, Kyle. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Placing the phone on the table next to her list, she closed her eyes for a moment, she thought about all the work she had ahead of her.

She felt a hand against her shoulder in her seat. “Wake up.”

Slowly opening her eyes, she jerked her head up and focused on Jim. “Jim, why aren’t you flying the plane?”

“We landed five minutes ago. You slept through the entire flight.”

Looking around for a moment, she attempted to collect her thoughts before she collected her things. She had work waiting for her at home.



CHAPTER 4

THE DIFFERENT APPROACH

She didn't know what had happened during that flight, but her headache was virtually gone when she got back into Seattle. She pulled her keys from her purse and unlocked her apartment door, made her way in, dropped her umbrella and luggage by the door, and slid her trench coat off. She was famished.

Walking straight to her refrigerator, she grabbed her loaf of white bread, a package of sliced cheese, and her pack of deli ham. She walked to her fax machine and picked up the notes from Kyle.

Setting her food down, she went back to get her briefcase by the front door. Bringing it to her desk, she set her computer down next to her late lunch. After the cables for the power supply and the modem were connected, she turned on the computer to let it start up while she got a glass of water from the sink. She made her sandwich while the modem dialed on to her Internet service provider. The laptop made mechanical clicking and whirring noises as she ate.

Her next task was to get onto the Internet and go to a search engine. She typed "AIDS homeopathy" and hit enter.

One web site was found. "Homeopathy and beauty aids" — which was

the wrong kind of aids. She typed in “HIV Homeopathy” and hit enter.

There she found two sites, and went to them and started reading.

She went back to her search engine, typing “HIV nutrition” and hit enter.

There she found another three sites, and a few message boards. She started reading. She saved copies of the web sites on her computer. And then she started posting messages wherever she could on the Internet.

“Hello. I’m a researcher working on helping AIDS patients and people who are HIV-positive. Is there anyone out there who would be interested in telling me about alternative medicines, homeopathy, or nutrition they use in order to help themselves out? I’d like to learn more about this aspect of treating HIV and AIDS. Your stories will remain completely confidential. Please e-mail me at S_Emerson@Madison-Ph.com. Thank you very much for your time.

“Hello. I saw your posting on the web about using shark oil as a treatment for AIDS. Could you tell me how it works? I am very interested in learning about alternative treatments for AIDS. Please e-mail me at S_Emerson@Madison-Ph.com. Thank you.”

“Hi. Your posting talks about hypnosis used for treating a number of disorders. I was wondering if you have had any experience dealing with people that were HIV-positive or who had AIDS, and how hypnosis helped them. Anything you could e-mail me would be very helpful. E-mail me at S_Emerson@Madison-Ph.com. Thanks for your help.”

“Hello. I saw a few postings, including yours, about chiropractors working on AIDS patients. What benefit does going to a chiropractor have on someone testing HIV-positive? I’m very curious about this; if you have the time, I would like to hear more about it. Please e-mail me at S_Emerson@Madison-Ph.com. Thank you, and I look forward to hearing from you soon.”

“Hi. I’m posting because I’ve seen very little information about this. I have heard both the pros and cons of AIDS patients taking marijuana. I’m curious if anyone has done any studies or if anyone out there has been taking it to help with regaining the appetite, etc., and if it has had any effect on their immune system. All letters sent to me will remain entirely confidential. Any information I could get would be a great help. Please e-mail me at S_Emerson@Madison-Ph.com. Thanks, and good luck.”

“Hello. I’ve been looking for nutrition information for people that are HIV-positive or have full-blown AIDS. It is startlingly hard to find. Can anyone give me any dietary guidelines? Thank you in advance for any information at all. Please e-mail S_Emerson@Madison-Ph.com, and thanks again.”

“I have heard of taking herbs for reducing side effects of AIDS drugs, as well as for improving the general health of AIDS patients. Does anyone have any information that they could send to me, or does anyone know where I could look to find that information? Please e-mail me at S_Emerson@Madison-Ph.com, and thanks a lot for the help. I really appreciate it.”

She laced every posting with thank you notes and graciousness, hoping it would elicit more responses. She didn’t know if there was much of a network there on the Internet for AIDS patients.

She went to a homeopathy web site and started reading.

“The medical community has been focusing its efforts on coming up with ways to attack the AIDS virus. But there is another approach to fighting the disease as well: by bolstering the immune system. If you can improve your immune system, you will be better equipped to fight the virus.

“Natural herbs and homeopathy is a good general way to do this. Herbs have been found to increase memory,

alleviate nausea, increase sexual drive, stimulate brain strength, alleviate headaches, lower cholesterol and improve general health. There are also ways to strengthen the lymph nodes, the nervous system and the immune system with herbs and natural remedies by taking substances topically, as extracts; as supplements, as powders or as a regular part of your diet. These herbs and foods are not drugs and do not have the harmful side effects that many drugs have; in fact, they are wholly good for you; they are a part of nature and are meant to be ingested.

“If these things exist in nature, then why do so many people in America, the richest country in the world, get sick? The choices we make for what we eat and how we take care of ourselves affect our health. As Americans we subject ourselves to more chemicals here than anywhere else in the world, and no one had these man-made chemicals in past generations to contend with. Also, in our modern diets, when we eat fast foods and limit ourselves in the choices of foods we eat, including the herbs, berries and barks that might have helpful remedies in them, we open ourselves up to ailments that were not a problem before.

“Here is an example: Americans in their old age, especially women, are likely to get osteoporosis. However, the incidents of osteoporosis are much lower in other countries. Although in undeveloped countries people may die before getting osteoporosis, people in even more developed countries get osteoporosis less than they do in America. We have plenty of calcium in our diets; we have the opportunity to eat more cheese and dairy products than many people in other countries do. So why is osteoporosis so common? It is because of our diets; it is because of the foods we choose to eat in America. Americans have more protein, in the form of meats and red meats in particular, in their diet than people in other countries do. The excess protein, the protein that is not ingested in our systems, passes through our bodies, but in order to do so effectively,

the protein pulls calcium out of our system in order to help it pass. So by eating more meat products, we pull calcium from our bones and do the harm we try to correct by ingesting more calcium.

“The moral to the story? Two things. One is that our diets can improve, which will make us healthier. The other is that with the choices we have made with our food, we have eliminated some of the things we need from our food. And taking herbs and supplements can help bring them back.”

Looking over what was listed, she knew she had a lot of reading to do. She got up and started a pot of tea in the kitchen. She saved the text from that web site and moved on to the next one.

By ten in the evening she had gone through 140 pages of data from the Internet about homeopathy. She went back to the search engine and looked for AIDS clinical trials. She found reams of information of testing on other drugs, and she found some researchers working on vaccines. She pulled up their web pages and started reading. What she couldn't find, however, were studies that worked with anything other than these two methods of attacking the virus. She knew she had to look for something else; researchers have been going along this one vein for so long that they did not stop to consider that there might be something worthwhile to pursue in another vein altogether.

She also noted that nowhere could she find information on any researchers working on coming up with a direct cure for this disease.

She reached into her briefcase and pulled out her list.

1. Improve Emivir
2. Integrase Inhibitor
3. Improve side effects and ease of use for drugs

4. a vaccine

5. a cure

6. Psychological treatment

6a. alleviate depression, may help immune system

6b. help memory to take drugs, and keep positive attitude

7. homeopathy

7a. nutrition, diet and herbs to improve general health

7b. herbs to alleviate nausea for patients who experience side effects

7c. any vitamins and herbs with effects on immune system?

7d. is there a psychologically positive effect of eating things good for you?

She wondered if she should have added some Internet topics to that list.

alien abductions

government conspiracies

AIIS and homeopathy

Looking over her notes, she thought that she should get through the first seven ideas before she tried to tackle more.

After turned to her computer, she typed her original list and started adding notes. It was one-thirty Monday morning before she realized the time; she knew she couldn't contact Kyle at this hour. She'd have to show everything to him in the morning.

###

For once it was morning and Steve couldn't sleep. Usually it was four in the morning when he went to bed, not when he woke up.

Maybe this was a sign of his aging, he thought in passing. He tried not to think about things like that, he was under thirty, that couldn't be it, he thought.

He reached over and grabbed his driver's license from the counter, next to his alarm clock and his wallet. He looked at his name on the divers license.

"Stephen Errman"

He didn't like his last name, he thought it sounded like an appliance company name. He preferred going by the initial, so his name would be Steve E. It sounded like there was more of a story to his name if people didn't hear his full last name.

He looked at his bedroom walls. They were white, which were that way since he moved in. He didn't want them in another color. There was no art-work on his walls. It looked stark.

He didn't like that. He figured that everyone must think that he didn't care about decorating his apartment.

Well, he didn't care. But still, he occasionally thought about it.

He thought about his plans for the weekend. Kyle told him about the dinner this weekend, and he was looking forward to seeing Sloane. Usually on the weekends he would go to the local bars and find someone to hit on to pass the time.

He never thought of the women he talked to. He never thought about what they thought. He never even really knew what they thought about him. He knew that they paid him the attention he wanted, that they thought he was an important person, and they were honored that he was taking the time to talk to them.

Well, he was passing the time, and he was horny, and he liked their attention. But that was his little secret, something the women didn't need to know.

Kyle probably didn't even know that about Steve.

Going to a benefit dinner, though, that was something he normally didn't normally get the chance to do. And he could talk to her, even if she didn't want to talk to him much. He knew from visiting Kyle at work that she probably didn't even remember what Steve looked like. He knew he was a good-looking guy, he knew he was a good dresser, he knew he had a job that impressed women.

Being a columnist for the city newspaper, having your name in the paper, well, that sounded impressive to a drunk woman.

He thought about it for a moment, thinking that maybe if Kyle was going to have any late nights at work, maybe Steve could stop by to be social. Maybe then she would remember him for their dinner party that weekend.

Maybe she would remember to call him this week, like she said she would when she got back in town. If not, he could visit Kyle, and then, maybe, Steve would be at least she might care to remember.

Maybe.

He knew it wasn't a date. Kyle even made a point of mentioning that. Steve assumed that Kyle knew Steve was a bit of a drinker, and he liked to be social, and that he liked talking to women, and Steve assumed that was why Kyle warned him. Steve thought about how it would be an accomplishment if he could get her to like him.

Steve knew there were many other women, but Sloane was a challenge, making it special. It would be like she was a prize for Steve.

###

Kyle rolled over and looked at his clock. It read 6:11. He set his alarm for 7:00, but decided to get up early again. He got up quietly, so as not to wake up his wife, and went into the bathroom.

After his shower, Kyle started shaving. He noticed something different about himself this morning; he didn't know what it was, but it seemed that he was doing his morning rituals effortlessly today, as if they weren't a chore. He continued shaving and looked over at his sleeping wife in the next room.

Kyle grabbed his umbrella and his coat from next to the front door, like he did every morning. He walked outside and noticed the slight drizzle coming down over his awnings. He didn't check out the window before he left to see if it was raining; he just knew that it would be, as always. For some reason the rain didn't seem to bother him this morning. He got into his car.

The morning talk show Kyle listened to talked about the weather. They put a caller on the air. "When it's raining hard it can be beautiful, but when you get this drizzle it's like God is spitting on you." Kyle decided to turn the radio off and continued his commute to work through the streets of Seattle.

He walked through the hallways of the company. He noticed that the lights were on in the lab. He walked through the door.

Sloane was walking toward the doorway to meet him. "I heard your foot

steps coming down the hall. I've been waiting to talk to you."

Kyle looked at her. She was wearing a gray pants suit; she looked very business-like, as if she were about to hold a press conference. Usually she just wore slacks and a blouse.

"Are you dressed for the meeting?"

"This?" She looked down at her clothes. "I guess I am."

"What for?"

"I have a few ideas, and I thought I'd talk to Tyler at the end of the meeting for implementing them."

"Tyler? What on earth for?"

"Maybe we could use him. Come here, I read your notes, and I had some additions for them. I've printed copies of my outline for the entire staff."

Taking him over to a back laboratory table, she wanted to discuss items in her notes and papers that were scattered across the smooth metal surface.

"You're going to need Howard's help on this, and maybe someone else's, to get all of these parts worked on. Maybe Ellen would be interested in working on this first part, but you guys can decide how to break things up."

"And you're going to be working on this second part?"

"Yes, but by all means I want people to help me. I want people to be a part of one of these teams in part one, and offer help to me if they want or if they come up with ideas in this second part."

"And where on earth did you come up with the third and fourth parts?"

"Come here, let me show you something." She walked Kyle to her office and turned her laptop screen toward him. It was already on and she was on the Internet. She opened her list of unopened e-mails. There were over 100 letters.

"See this? I did a little research last night about homeopathy and alternative medicines and therapies. I posted messages on different bulletin boards asking for people's comments on what has worked for them. These are the first, mind you, the first letters I've received. It hasn't even been a day since I posted my messages. There's something out there, when it comes to homeopathy, and I think we can tap into it, keeping our patients as healthy as they can be, physically and mentally, before they even touch our drugs."

"Maybe, but how do we make money with that?"

"You know, Kyle, I'm glad you asked that. It makes us money if our studies show more positive results, if our patients are healthier. But we also make money with these last two points, here and here." She pointed to the bottom

of her sheet. “And they’ll make Tyler happy, too.”

“A book? You know someone who might want to publish this?”

“Maybe.”

“You don’t think we’ll be laughed right out of the medical community?”

“First of all, I think my name and the credibility it has can help with book sales. Secondly, if the ‘medical community’ is going to judge us on something other than our research, then who cares what they do to us?”

Kyle looked at her; he was amazed that she wanted to do something that seemed like it had nothing to do with medical research. “When did you come up with this? Where did you go this weekend?”

“Miami and New York.”

“Both? You were all over the place. Why?”

“Miami to work with a researcher there and New York...” She paused for an almost undetectable amount of time. “...To talk with a publisher there. Vice-President in charge of new clients at Quentin Publishing.”

Kyle was impressed. “At Quentin? You have someone there to help with it? And aren’t you exhausted? You were supposed to rest this weekend.”

“I did, Kyle, I did.” Sloane smiled and gestured toward the door. They walked out into the main laboratory and most of the staff was there. Howard walked over to both of them, and Sloane spoke. “Kyle, brief Howard on what’s going on around here. I’ll call Tyler right before we start the meeting. Tell everyone we’ll meet at nine o’clock. I’m going to see what my e-mail says.”

And with that she turned back to her office.

Sloane sat at her desk and started going through her e-mail.

From: ASTOAN@msu.dp.edu

Date: Sunday, 11:43 p.m.

Subject: re: Marijuana and AIDS

I saw your posting asking about marijuana use and AIDS patients. What I don’t understand is why people don’t accept the medical benefits of marijuana use. Many people with AIDS I have talked to say that it improves their appetite, which is hard for them to keep when they experience their first real drops in T-Cell counts and their viral loads drastically increase. I’ve been told that marijuana not only increases cravings for food but also helps people hold down food better, which

helps when people taking drugs have bad side effects.

From: Kevin23852@aol.com

Date: Sunday, 11:50 p.m.

Subject: re: Depression and AIDS

I had been diagnosed with depression and am on drugs for it. I saw your posting. Not only is depression a problem for healthy people, it is a bigger problem with AIDS patients, for two reasons. One is that they might not treat themselves as best they can. But the other is that depression is a syndrome, which the body treats in some respects like an illness. I know when I was going through the tough times I thought no one in the world knew what I was going through, and I felt so alone. And I don't know if it was the feelings or my lack of caring about myself, but my health really suffered for it too. When someone has AIDS and is suffering from depression, they are in effect fighting two diseases — two “syndromes” — at once. The key is to alleviate depression so the body can focus on fighting AIDS.

From: AIDS cure7@hotmail.com

Date: Sunday, 11:59 p.m.

Subject: re: immune system versus fighting virus

Most people are trying to fight the viruses in our bodies, like HIV, by attacking the viruses. Vaccines work by making the immune system fight the virus; we should be working on improving the immune system and not by getting drugs to attack the virus. I am on a nutritional system developed by doctors in North Carolina called Immuno-Fix, which is a food regimen as well as supplement system. It has produced dramatic results for me. I can get the address of them if you're interested in starting up on Immuno-Fix. For once I feel like I'm taking my life in my own hands, and not waiting for doctors to probe me all the time. I'd suggest you try it.

Sloane earmarked this response after replying to it, asking for the e-mail addresses for the doctors in North Carolina, because she would like any and

all information they could give her. She then read on.

From: jeremy_s@st.ind.wsn.edu

Date: Monday, 12:11 A.M.

Subject: re: Diet

A friend of mine has AIDS and he has been told that a diet high in proteins and fats are good for him. He used to be a vegetarian on a macrobiotic diet; he had to drastically change his eating habits and eat a lot more meat, just to keep himself alive.

So make sure to look into the amounts of fat and protein you consume. I would think that maybe you could look for books about bodybuilding to see what kind of foods might be good. Gook luck to you.

From: 12364.8900@compuserve.com

Date: Monday, 12:13 A.M.

Subject: re: Shark liver oil

I have read some amazing reports about the rejuvenating effects of shark liver oil on the immune system. I don't have the documentation with me; search the Internet and you might find it. Keep you eyes open for it, or ask around.

From: mikeboy@freemail.org

Date: Monday, 12:20 A.M.

Subject: ginger root - your posting

I have known people to take ginger root to eliminate nausea. It is often used with motion sickness; I don't see why it wouldn't be beneficial for nausea associated with side effects with AIDS drugs, too. Hope this helps.

From: esmith@prodigy.com

Date: Monday, 12:27 A.M.

Subject: re: Oxygen therapy and ozone therapy

Oxygen therapy and ozone therapy is being used in Canada, but it has been prohibited in the United States. They had good results, so why would the U.S. not let them continue to work? Because there's no money

in it; there's no way to make a great profit from oxygen. Look into it. But all I can think is that if companies can sell water for so much money, then oxygen therapy and o-zone therapy could be sold well too... Even though the U.S. drug companies don't want us to know about it, it is still out there somewhere. The government can't stop everyone.

From: alexrand96@aol.com

Date: Monday, 12:39 A.M.

Subject: re: Aloe Vera

Aloe Vera juice (not the topical stuff, 100 percent pure juice) has a lot of good health benefits. Go to a health store; they can special-order it for you and tell you more about it. I don't know if it could help with what you're looking for, but it might.

From: 76538.45245@compuserve.com

Date: Monday, 12:51 A.M.

Subject: re: Essiac Tea

I took Essiac Tea three times a day, and after three weeks my T-Cell count was up over 20 points. In three weeks — that's a great jump without drugs. It's all-natural. There are a few places on the net that sell it. I swear by it.

From: DoctorL@burns_hosp.gov

Date: Monday, 1:01 A.M.

Subject: re: Hypnosis

I am a licensed psychotherapist, and have heard about using hypnosis to alleviate depression and to mentally fight AIDS. Usually I use psychotherapy alone with relatively positive results. In all honesty, if someone says that doing a rain dance every day makes patients feel better, it's going to have a positive result, a positive effect on their immune system, even if there's no scientific reason for it.

That's the hard part of doing studies on things like this — there are so many other factors, and people in a con-

trol group may think that since they're taking a certain supplement (even if it's really a sugar pill placebo) may have positive results. Since we're talking about affecting the mind and not directly the physical body, it's hard to get definitive answers on what works, and things may work for only certain people, too.

Some people can easily be hypnotized, for example, and others can't. But visualization using hypnosis could have some great potential effects.

From: ellen@computer_cafe.com

Date: Monday, 1:19 A.M.

Subject: lymph nodes

I was told that the lymph nodes have a lot to do with the AIDS virus, and I know that there are good lymphatic herbs that can help the immune system.

From: SLAM4Silver@aol.com

Date: Monday, 1:27 A.M.

Subject: soy products, and potential AIDS help

Hi. I'll say this at the beginning, and I know AIDS was not an issue in Tibet all this time, but people have been known to live regularly well over 100 years, and I think they ate so much yogurt and soy. I don't know anything about yogurt, other than they contain bacteria that can help your body's defense system, but soy is supposed to be so good for you, containing isoflavins and other good stuff... and soy can be served as beans for snacking, in tofu for protein, in miso for an excellent soup, and even in soy sauce for main courses. They even make soy milk for those who are lactose intolerant. I know you can take soy supplements, but if soy and yogurt are supposed to be so helpful to the human body, they are bound to be helpful in the body when fighting AIDS as well.

From: GAthens@aol.com

Date: Monday, 1:33 A.M.

Subject: Garlic

I don't know what kinds of applications it might have for AIDS patients, but I know that I have felt healthier and more energetic, as well as gotten sick less, since I've been adding garlic to my diet every day. (I also never get mosquito bites!) They have it in supplement form, but I just add it to my diet; it's good tasting and then you can be sure you're getting the pure stuff and it's being properly digested in your body. They say that you only get like five percent of the vitamins out of supplements, so if you can get the real thing, by all means, take it.

From: benk1847@uiuc.il.edu

Date: Monday, 1:40 A.M.

Subject: re: Oxygen therapy, ozone therapy

I forgot to mention that oxygen as O₃ (in its unstable state) will destroy all viruses and bacteria; that much is true. And it returns to its O₂ state in minutes. Look for places. They don't allow it in the United States.

From: SydneyHelena@aol.com

Date: Monday, 1:38 A.M.

Subject: tomatoes

I've loved tomatoes all of my life (and my parents get really good ones year 'round in Florida, so I am lucky), and lately I've been hearing about how good they can be for you. Definitely for heart disease, but they are also supposed to prevent some types of cancer too. Considering that it's a vegetable (technically, it's a fruit, because it grows seeds inside, like an orange, but you get the idea) that can be used in everything from a stir fry to a pasta sauce or a salad, it would be easy to add it into any meal, used as a garnish or sliced in for a sandwich. Even if you can't have tomatoes in your meal, tomato soup is low-calorie and extremely good for you. Seeing that it is useful in so many ways, it is bound to be helpful for the health for AIDS patients too.

Sloane wrote in her note pad that garlic could be added to tomato soup, or a stir fry with soy sauce. Then she wrote that tofu could be added to all soups and to main courses; then she wrote that nutrition and diet need to be explored very seriously for this potential future book of theirs.

From: Thompson@human.hea.gov

Date: Monday, 2:08 A.M.

Subject: re: Problems with marijuana usage

Your concerns about marijuana usage for AIDS patients are well-founded. Since pot is usually smoked, respiratory problems like bronchitis are common with marijuana and AIDS patients; especially when their immune system is low. Continued usage can also affect memory loss and it can hamper the immune system. Cell metabolism can be impaired and endocrine gland changes can also result. This is why the government does not widely recommend the use of marijuana with AIDS patients.

It was just after nine in the morning; she had only read through a small portion of the letters she received. Howard knocked on her door.

“Come in.”

Howard opened the door. “Is it show time, Doc?”

“Okay, let’s go. Could you call Tyler as I start this and tell him to come to the lab?” She met him in the doorway and walked out to the main room.

Forty laboratory technicians and researchers sat on the metal stools in front of laboratory tables. She walked to the front of the room, where Kyle was standing. All eyes were fixed on her.

She started to speak to the room. “I know that probably most everyone on this team has been a little disappointed with the progress we haven’t been making since Emivir. And that is completely understandable: we made great progress in working on protease inhibitors — and we should be very proud of ourselves — but if you’re like me, you still want to move forward, and our lack of progress may seem daunting.

“But we can’t give up. This is one big puzzle, solving the AIDS crisis, and we added a few pieces to the left corner. But we can make that corner bigger. Or we can work on another area of the puzzle. Or we can be placing the pieces we have fit together into larger groups of pieces.

“There’s still a lot of work to be done, and in many other fields other than in protease inhibitors.” She turned to Kyle and signaled for him to pass out the outline she created. He handed her a copy first.

“I’ve been thinking about short-term ways we could be attacking this puzzle. This is Roman numeral one on the outline Kyle is passing out to you. We can continue working on improving Emivir, which is a very worthwhile cause. I think, however, that some people — maybe a lot of people — need to switch gears to rejuvenate themselves. I know on some levels that I do. That’s why I listed three other possible options. We can work on an integrase inhibitor, so our cocktails attack the virus on three levels instead of two. We can focus our efforts on improving the dosages of these drugs, so they’re easier to take and we don’t have problems with patients misusing medications, and we can work on eliminating the side effects that make a number of people unable to take the drugs. Both of those steps will broaden the number of people who can take the drugs as well as broaden the number of success stories with the drugs. We could also be working on engineering our drugs to focus only on HIV-infected cells, instead of having the drugs travel through the entire system looking for the virus.

“I’d like you to think about these options. If you have other ideas, please let me know. But I would like to work on all four of these plans. If we can agree on how they should be divided up, that would leave us with small groups of about ten people each. Kyle and Howard can help oversee how these groups are separated and what kind of progress you’re making.

“I don’t want to do this if you don’t want to. I’m doing this for two reasons: one, because this is what needs to be done in order to make some progress in this fight, and two, because I think we need to do it for ourselves. If I’m wrong, let me know.

“I’d also like to work on a vaccine and a cure. That’s Roman numeral two on the outline here. I say that I want to do it, and that this is what I personally am going to focus my energy on. It’s not that I don’t need help, or that I want to do it alone, but we need to make strides and advances on a regular basis in order to keep this department going strong in this company. We need to be producing a product in order to stay alive here. When it comes to ideas for a vaccine or for a cure, I’d like anyone’s help in working on these things, but it would have to be in addition to any work we take on for approaching our next step of research.

“Now the third and fourth parts of this outline are another way to fight the virus, one that we in the pharmaceutical community doesn’t pay attention to.” She turned her head and saw Tyler open the door to the lab. Kyle handed him an outline and asked him to take a seat. For once Tyler Gillian had perfect timing.

“I think we have been overlooking the psychological aspects of dealing with this disease. This is one reason why I want us to come up with a way to time-release and condense our cocktails so that the dosages can be bearable. Every time someone takes a pill — and they might have to take a different pill up to sixty times a day — they are reminded that they have a deadly disease, one that has probably cost them their jobs, or some of their friends and family. If we can make these drugs easier to take, it may alleviate depression, which has a negative effect on the ability of the immune system.

“But there are other ways to also alleviate depression, and they may be in things like psychotherapy, discussion groups — even hypnosis.

“But more than depression I’d like to touch on homeopathy, the last point on the outline. We all know that a good diet is important to a healthy body, and that is more apparent and especially vital in a patient with full-blown AIDS. But it’s still something that we tend to overlook. If we can come up with guidelines for nutrition, as well as look into alternative therapies and medicines, we may really be on to something. There are herbs that may have a positive effect on the immune system. There may be herbs that alleviate some of the side effects current AIDS drug users experience. There are people who praise the benefits of acupuncture and acupressure to relieving symptoms of diseases. This information exists; we should utilize it and test it.

“How do we go about utilizing this information? By making every aspect of homeopathy more accessible to AIDS patients. How do we do that? By researching what people recommend and running a clinical study. After the results come in, we publish a book. Not for the journals, although we can publish a report of our findings in the journals, too. But we publish a mainstream book. Each of us can write an essay in it, and the marketing department can clean it up.”

Turning toward Tyler’s direction, she continued. “The book sales will get our names out into the open, it will make us look like we are a kind and caring company, making Madison Pharmaceuticals a good share of money.

“But there’s another way it can make Madison Pharmaceuticals money, and that is to sell vitamins and herbal supplements, in the amounts that we tested our subjects with. They’re not drugs, so we don’t need to wait for approval, and we don’t have to claim a guarantee of positive side effects with taking them. The book will explain what these vitamins and herbs can do. It will be easy to make, and I think people will really want to buy it.

“The key to this book is that we have to get it out quickly. If we get someone, a temp, to collect research, we could each write an essay within a month. During this time we could collect people for a study — run a quick story, and finish the book with the results from a simple study of more immediate responses to vitamins — and herbs in particular. Then we send the book off to press. Within the two months it will take to write and print the book we can produce the supplements — in fact, we don’t even have to be the ones doing it, it can be outsourced. But we have to get this all done quickly. Hopefully we will all be up to the challenge.

“Whether or not the alternative medicines have a direct physiological effect is almost irrelevant, although I think that they may. The psychological effect of taking positive steps to help you may produce a positive effect on the immune system. And focusing on the immune system and not on the virus will be positive for the patient mentally as well as physically. I think a greater effort has to be taken to build up the human immune system to this and stop it before it infects the body, where the immune system seems to just be fighting a losing battle. The susceptibility of the individual infected, their resistance, can possibly determine the development and spread of HIV more than the virus itself.

“Okay, I think I’ve talked too much. But I also think that we could get through the research and have a homeopathic regimen outlined by the end of the week. If we immediately started a study, we could have a book almost finished by the time the study was done, which should be about a month. So in two months we could have a book out on the shelves, affecting people, all while we’re working on other levels of attacking the virus.

“Okay, now I’ve definitely talked too much.” She heard a low laugh throughout the room; when she focused on the people she was talking to, she scanned the room and saw that most everyone was smiling at her. “I want to hear what you have to say, and I’m sure you guys want to talk to me and discuss some of these options. So, instead of making everyone listen, I’ll be in

my office. Please come in and talk to me, give me input, tell me I'm crazy, anything. We're in this together, remember that, and I want to know if we're all on the same page.

"I'm not doing any laboratory work today. I'll be in my office. Please come in and talk to me, or if you already have an idea of how you want to focus your work, talk to Kyle and Howard. And most of all, thank you. You know we can do this. Thanks."

After she started walking through the room, one of the technicians started clapping. By the time she was in the back of the room, all 44 people were applauding her. It was a response she didn't expect. She turned around and smiled at everyone, then turned back toward her office.

She sat down and looked back at her list from the meeting.

I. Staff Jobs: Four Teams for short range progress

1. Improve Efavir for longer period of effectiveness in the body
2. Integrase Inhibitor so there are three HIV enzymes being attacked
3. Improve side-effects and ease-of-use for drugs, so drugs can be easily taken
4. Engineer drugs to attack only HIV-infected cells, instead of going through all of the blood stream

II. Emerson Research: Individual, with input

5. Vaccines

5a. Kill the HIV virus: use dead virus as vaccine

5b. Use SIV virus: vaccine developed from monkey studies

5c. Find key to African women that makes them immune to HIV

5d. Confer via Internet with other researchers working on vaccines

6. ACure

6a. Alternative therapies: radiation; hot and cold therapy, oxygen (or ozone) therapy, other options

6b. Drug therapy: After (I) is complete, can we speed the time to kill HIV?

III. Psychological Treatment

7. Alleviate depression, may help immune system

8. Help memory to take drugs, and keep positive attitude

9. Hypnosis

10. Psychologically positive effect of eating things good for you (see point IV)

IV. Homeopathy

11. Nutrition, diet and herbs to improve general health

12. Herbs to alleviate nausea and other side effects of taking drugs

13. Vitamins and herbs with effects on immune system

14. Use of chiropractors, massage, acupuncture, acupressure

15. Perform AIDS study with control group and group of patients following homeopathic guidelines

16. Package supplements for sale with book on fighting AIIS

16a. Quentin Publishing Company

16b. Researchers can each write sections, have it filled in and edited by
Marketing Department

16c. Winning the War from The inside: Homeopathic Remedies to Give You the
Edge in Fighting AIIS

Tyler was the first to walk into her office.

“Just one thing I want to know.”

“Yes, Tyler?”

“Point 16c.” Looked at her notes, she then looked back at him as he continued. “Is that your catchy-marketing-style subhead for the title of the book?”

“Actually, that was my effort at marketing to the masses. You can change it, but you get the idea.”

“Actually, it’s pretty good,” Tyler said, looking at the page.

“Do you think this book is a good idea? It’ll get the team out into the public, and that’s what you’ve wanted. It’ll make us look like a kind and caring research team, which is apparently something of a problem, at least in your eyes.”

“Yes — it might actually make you look human.” Tyler smiled and walked toward the door.

Smiling at his comment, she said, “Let me know what you need, detail-wise. I know a publisher that might be interested in it. Quentin Publishing. I have a connection there.”

Tyler turned back to Sloane. “You? Use connections? I thought you’d never stoop so low.”

“If I didn’t think it would be a good book, I wouldn’t do my connection the favor.”

Tyler smiled again and walked out the door.

The rest of the day was spent in her office talking to people from the lab. She was surprised and relieved to know that everyone in the laboratory agreed that they needed to redirect their research. People told her they appreciated the fact that she gave them options of what interested them the most and that she wanted to hear their opinions. “We have to make sure we have enough people working on each aspect, but as long as there are enough people working on each part of the plan, things should work out just fine,” she told them. She also decided that after talking to people during the day that she would come up with reports on her progress for people to go over, in case they have any insight to ideas they would like to offer to her.

What pleased her most was that everyone was pleased with the new work, even though it would mean a lot of overtime and very little rest in the next six months.

###

Tyler came in to her office again toward the end of the day.

“I just looked over the rest of your notes. I missed the beginning of your meeting.”

“The beginning of the meeting was about redirecting our laboratory work; it didn’t have anything to do with P.R. or marketing.”

“But my worry is that there is a Hell of a lot of work you’ve got this staff doing.”

“Okay, but they all seem very interested in doing it.”

“Well yes, but will there be time to work on this book project?”

“Maybe, if you can help me out. Is there a receptionist or an office manager that can gather information, you know, get my letters from e-mail about homeopathy, get research about homeopathy, then print everything, sort it all, and make copies for my department? That way my time isn’t taken up doing that sort of thing and people can read information when they’re at home instead of wasting work time doing it.”

“Sure, I can get a girl in here. What exactly would you need her for?”

“To search the Internet and other sources for homeopathy information that would pertain to AIDS, the immune system, side effects like nausea, or even general health. Study anything from herbs to nutrition to supplements to hypnosis and psychotherapy. Get lists of chiropractors, and acupunctur-

ists. To print out my e-mail I've been getting about homeopathy and collect with her data and sort it and reprint it for my staff, so they can decide what they want to write about. So we'll have all the information we need to come up with a study quickly."

"So you need someone with Internet knowledge too?"

"Yes. When could this happen?"

Tyler answered, "Someone will be here tomorrow." Tyler turned to the doorway.

"You're being awfully helpful," he heard her say as he reached the doorway.

"You're scratching my back, so I figure I better scratch yours." Tyler walked out of the room.

She didn't think that she was scratching anyone's back. But for now she'd let him believe what he needed to.

Leaned back, she looked at her watch. It was ten minutes to five o'clock. She couldn't believe she spent the entire day just talking to people. She figured she could get more done once everyone in the office left. Then she thought about what Tyler said as he left. "He probably does think he's doing a favor to me," Sloane said aloud to herself as she leaned toward her laptop.

Her phone rang.

"Hello?"

"It's Colin. How was the weekend?"

"Eventful. Thanks for the use of the plane."

"Not a problem. Listen, Tyler forwarded a copy of your meeting outline to me. You've got a lot of ideas here."

"Tyler's even trying to help me out with the book idea."

"If that's what one weekend with my plane produces, then use the plane whenever you want."

"Thanks, sir."

"Keep up the good work, and I'll talk to you later."

"Have a good night, sir,"

"You too."

Thinking about her New York "connection", she realized she hadn't even bounced the idea off of him. She figured she'd better call him at home.

"Hello?"

"Carter, hi, it's me, Sloane."

"Hey, thanks for calling. I was wondering if you got in okay." "Yeah,

everything was fine,” she answered and remembered his trip to Ohio. “I didn’t even know if I’d get a hold of you or if you would still be at the plant doing your press check.”

“No, I’ve been back for a bit. What’s going on? I can’t believe you’re calling to be social, that’s not like you.”

“Well, no. Am I that transparent?”

“It’s not transparency, not at all. So what’s going on?”

“Late last night, as I was doing research on homeopathy for AIDS patients, I thought it would be a good idea to run a study. Not only publish the results in a journal but to write a book about it. To get the information out to the people.”

Carter sounded pleased. “Tell me this is where I come in.”

“Of course. I was wondering if you — if Quentin Publishing — would be interested in the book.”

“Would your name be on it?” he asked.

“Yes, I’d write some for it, as would a lot of people from my staff. We might all do a chapter or something. But I want to get this out quickly, because the longer we wait the longer people aren’t taking care of themselves. Madison was also thinking of running supplements that coincide with the results of the studies and with what we talk about in the book, you know, over the counter herbal extracts, vitamins and similar things.”

“Sounds like a good idea, and I’m sure it would sell with your name on it. When you say quickly, exactly how quickly do you mean?”

“How about a month?”

“That’s all the time you need?”

“We are expecting some results back in about three weeks. We’re collecting data, and we will be writing while the study is going on. We will write the study results when it is done, and voila. Just over a month.”

“This is like a present. I think my bosses would love me for this.”

“My bosses seem to love me for this too,” she said.

“I’ll bounce it to them tomorrow,” he answered. “Can you have an outline to me by the weekend?”

“Sure. I’ll fax it to you.... Do you think this could happen?”

“I think this will almost certainly happen. This is what has been selling. I’m sure they’ll eat it up with a spoon.”

“Good. I’ll get to work on it then.”

“And thanks for thinking of me.”

“Whom else would I have gone to?”

Carter laughed. “Well, send me info as you get it, and I’ll let you know how the pitch goes. Talk to you soon.”

“Bye.”

Setting the receiver down, all she could think was that he respects her, she knows he does, maybe more than he does any other woman.

“Who else would I think of?” She said to herself as she heard a knock on her door.

“Come in.”

Kyle opened the door. “Everybody’s getting pizza. Want some?”

“Sure. Kyle, how do you think it went today?”

“Great. I mean, really great. Everyone seems alive again. We’ve been working it out all day, and it seems pretty evenly divided. I think people that don’t have a preference on what they’re currently working on are happy that they’re given the choice and therefore go where they’re needed most. Everyone has been talking about ideas with each other all day. They’re all acting like they’re in college again.”

“What does that mean?”

“You know how you were in college? You wanted to conquer everything, and you thought you could, too. And then people get realistic once they’re in the real world. Well, they’re acting like they’re in college again, like they can do anything.”

“Kyle, do people lose that feeling?”

Kyle stopped. “Well, yeah, they do.”

“They lose their enthusiasm?”

Kyle looked at her. He realized that she had never lost that feeling in her life. “Yeah. Some people just need to be reminded of it.”

Suddenly she realized why her staff needed the redirection: not because their track was difficult, but because they forgot about the track. She tried to smile at Kyle. “Let me know when the pizza arrives.”

“Got it.” Kyle walked out the door.

She thought about it. How do people lose their way? When they know something is right, how does the real world — i.e., the facts of reality — turn them away from what they knew was right? Shouldn’t reality reaffirm their views — if their views were right?

She rubbed her face. She knew she would not be able to understand that. Like the demanding lobby groups, or the sweet-talking of Tyler, or the begging of her family to adhere to values that don't make sense to her, this would be another mystery of life that eluded her. She looked at her laptop computer again and started reading more of her e-mail.

From: T_Manlin@nutrit.ala.com

Date: Monday, 2:40 A.M.

Subject: Acupressure and acupuncture

I am a doctor that has been having acupuncture and acupressure therapy for my arthritis for years. I have been talking to the people that do this work and they have noticed that there has been an increase in AIDS patients that have come to them requesting sessions to improve their immune systems and their nervous systems. The acupuncturist I talk to said that they have had relatively good results with their patients; they can't say whether their work directly increases the T-Cell count or reduces the viral load of patients, but it may help with an increase in energy levels, and otherwise may deliver a more positive attitude to the patients. I don't know if there is any place for you to go to look into this, but I would suggest looking into acupuncture and acupressure to see if it helps you.

She noticed that a lot people assumed she had AIDS. She read on.

From: kate3954@electmail.org

Date: Monday, 2:55 A.M.

Subject: chiropractic

There was a chiropractic study done that produced great results. Half of our subjects had above normal improvements in their CD4 count. The continuation was shot down, however, for political reasons. The drug companies who pay off the government would not like to give any credence to our findings. But the results were very promising. Keep in mind that it wasn't a cure; it worked best when used in conjunction with medicine.

Kyle came in with two slices of cheese pizza for her. She went back to reading.

From: stavros@june.com

Date: Monday, 3:02 A.M.

Subject: re: cure for AIDS

I have found a miracle cure that has been used by the Japanese for centuries to cure AIDS. Please visit my web site at <http://www.stavros.com/AIDScure.html> to see how they used colloidal minerals to cure AIDS and how you to can now use this revolutionary combination of all-natural products.

Sloane quickly learned that e-mails touting cures and listing web sites to go to were sales pitches, usually for glorified water. She read on.

From: 10465.6286@compuserve.com

Date: Monday, 3:10 A.M.

Subject: re: homeopathy versus drugs

I heard of a study once where a doctor had 50 AIDS patients, and only four had survived. They were the only ones who refused to take AZT or other AIDS drugs. Have you heard of this? I keep trying to get information about it, but no one can help me out. Maybe you'll have better luck with it. Good luck.

From: tim_t@aol.com

Date: Monday, 3:12 A.M.

Subject: vitamin supplements

I have AIDS. I was in a study where half of the patients (we were all just diagnosed and on the same medications) took a multi-vitamin pill and the other half didn't. Although no one improved, the half that took the multi-vitamin supplement deteriorated at a slower rate than the control group did.

I swear by vitamins now; I have had AIDS for four years and feel great. I think that if supplements work, everyone should take them.

Reading a fraction of the responses, she kept all the files as new documents for the woman coming in tomorrow to process.

Her watch read 7:30. She could continue her work at home, she thought, so she shut her computer down and placed it in her briefcase. She grabbed her trench coat and umbrella, picked up her briefcase and stepped out the door. About 15 people were still working, in the lab, and it caught her off guard. She looked up at the remaining staff. They returned her gaze.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” one of the technicians finally said.

“I thought I was the last one here,” she said.

“Oh, we might be going soon, we were just on a roll.”

“Don’t work too late.”

“We won’t. Good-night.”

Walking out the door, she was content with the hope that everything was right once again, and made her way home.

###

Walking into her apartment, she dropped off her umbrella and trench coat by the front door and went toward her desk. Thinking about the aspect of her plan that she had been avoiding all day, she couldn’t get her mind off a vaccine. She knew that because people still didn’t know enough about how the virus hides in the body, it would be impossible to know if a vaccine was even successful for a long time, but work on a vaccine needed to be started on, immediately.

She also knew that tomorrow night there would have to be reports generated about homeopathic remedies that her and her staff would have to read. So tonight was her night to work on a vaccine.

She walked over to her computer. She turned it on and let it start up while she started the shower. After her shower, she put on a sweat suit and looked through her mail. She noticed a lingerie mail order catalog, and opened it instead of throwing it away, like she usually would have. She browsed through the pages and eventually picked up the phone and called the toll-free number.

“Hi, I’d like to order something from your most recent catalog... Yes, it item number A732-C. The full-length version... Extra-large. No, I’d like it in

white. Oh, I get a monogram on the pocket? Oh, it's S, E, E. Yes, E... Sloane Evelyn Emerson... How long will it take? Oh, it's a Visa card. 8645, xxxx, xxxx, xxxx... February next year... Six to eight weeks? Okay... Yes, send to the address from the catalog... Yes, I guess it is kind of funny, that I bought that when there is so much lingerie in the catalog... Can I return it if it doesn't fit? Okay. Thank you very much." She hung up the phone, dropped the catalog on the cocktail table in front of her couch and walked over to her desk to get on the Internet.

The catalog fell open on the cocktail table, and in the upper-right hand corner of the right page was the over-sized terry-cloth bathrobe she ordered.

There were a number of sites on the Internet about research for AIDS vaccines. She copied the data, from trials and studies as well as from researcher's papers, and took notes in a separate document. She looked over some of her notes as she finished reading, at two in the morning.

-
1. Most vaccines are live, attenuated vaccines, using live viruses that have been weakened (by deleting genes, or using strains that replicate only under certain conditions) so they don't cause illness but can generate immune responses. In other words, the virus is changed to be non-threatening, but can still produce immunity to the unchanged virus.
 2. The level of attenuation will vary because of the number or location of engineered deletions. In other words, the more you change the live virus, the less effective it will be.
 3. From other studies on monkeys, the longer they wait before infecting vaccinated monkeys, the better the chance of protection. In other words, the longer the vaccine is left without being tested in the body, the better it worked.
 4. There is a naturally occurring attenuated HIV strain that lacks HIV's nef gene. Of the few cases where people had this strain, none of them could get AIDS.
 5. A very small fraction of people vaccinated do develop disease. An attenuated AIDS vaccine can still cause the virus to grow in some patients. This is a concern

for administering a potentially deadly disease to a person receiving a vaccine. An attenuated HIV also may mutate and end up reverting to a virulent form. This needs to be researched further.

6. Other viruses are cleared from the body, but HIV inserts itself into genes and stays there forever. This may cause complications in fighting the virus over a sustained period of time.

7. Chronic HIV infection may lead to diseases other than AIDS.

8. A study of monkeys vaccinated showed healthy monkeys, but infected newborns. They passed the virus, in an unchecked form, to their children.

9. In past trials on humans: They showed a stimulated production of antibodies, but levels went down in a short period of time.

10. People who stay alive despite being infected can give us insight as to how to go about creating a vaccine. There are two types of such people: one is the person who maintains relatively normal levels of T-Cells; the other is the person with a low T-Cell count that can still remain healthy.

11. Each subtype of the virus (there are nearly ten in each of both types) within a group is about 30 percent different from any of the others. But other virus vaccines only protected people against one or a limited number of strains.

12. Broad-based immunity may be dependent therefore on a cocktail of vaccines that would address the wide variety of mutation.

13. HIV can be transmitted into the body:

13a. as a free virus,

13b. within infected cells, and

13c. via sexual contact (mucus activity).

Therefore a vaccine might need to be able to defend against all types of infection as well, otherwise a vaccine might work well in protection against sexual encounters, but not in injections, for instance.

14. Adjuvants can help with an AIDS vaccine that may

not have the full virus.

15. There is no good animal model to study HIV vaccines.

16. live recombinant vectors may be another avenue

16a. vaccines of HIV genome combined with non-disease-producing carrier viruses such as vaccinia.

17. Safety concerns, particularly with infants, must be taken into consideration before research can continue.

18. Human immune system tissues have been transplanted into mice to test HIV vaccines.

Looking over her list, she remembered reading a line from one of the sites. The site stated that a vaccine has to be developed and produced to prevent infection not only in the United States, but world-wide. That statement bothered her, not because she wanted to limit the use of a vaccine, but because the vaccine would obviously be used in any country, not just the United States. “Ninety percent of people infected are in undeveloped countries,” she thought. “Why would we limit the usage of the vaccine to just the United States?”

Then it occurred to her why that statement was in the report she read. It was not because it was a statement about the elimination of the virus on a world-wide scale, it was a statement about the United States having to probably pay for the world wide use of the vaccine. If a third world country needed it but couldn't afford it, that statement suggested that it would be the United States' responsibility — not any other country — to pay for it. That we were expected to pay for it somehow, and not the people that would be demanding it for free. She leaned back in her chair. “Who pays for their free vaccines? The taxpayers.” She thought back to her conversation with Toby about getting something for free — that nothing is free, that someone pays for it somewhere.

She thought about the lobbyists who wanted Madison Pharmaceuticals to give drugs to people who couldn't afford it. Someone has to pay for it somewhere, she thought.

Who would end up paying?

Her last dream came to mind again — vaccinating African children

because it would look good in the papers, that they would look like a kind and caring company.

All she could do was look back over her notes. She knew there was more she had to read, but she needed her sleep.

###

At just before 10:00 a.m. Tuesday morning at Quentin Publishing the conference room started to fill with employees. Account managers and Vice-Presidents came to this monthly status meeting, and Carter Donovan was no exception. This time, though, he had an ace up his sleeve.

After everyone took their seats at the long oval mahogany table, the meeting began. Profit margins and schedules were discussed, as were upcoming books. This is when Carter chimed in.

"I think I have a new client who could give us some really good exposure."

"What's the book about?" whined Shelly Stempel, the first to reject an idea, the first to claim someone else's good idea as her own and the first to attempt to charm anyone in the office to get her way. Somehow, Carter thought, she managed to get promoted anyway.

"It's about AIDS and homeopathy, additional steps an individual can take to bolster their immune system and improve their general health. It's about taking charge as an individual, making it through AIDS."

"That sounds like it might have some potential," answered Bryce Farrell, the head of their marketing department. He was a "yes" man, when he thought it would get him somewhere. "You've received offers like this before, but then there is no credence to the author so we don't jump on it. But without a lot of exposure, it might not go anywhere."

"There's no reason this book shouldn't have a lot of exposure. I haven't told you the punch line yet," Carter answered. "It's the client's name that will get this book in all of the papers and put this book on the best sellers lists."

"And?" Shelly asked.

"Dr. Sloane Emerson."

"You got Ms. Emerson?" Bryce asked. "She won't even do press conferences."

"I know, but she wants to do a book. Emerson and her staff will be writ-

ing it, it should be done in a month. Madison Pharmaceuticals wants to advertise with the release of this book too, maybe bring out a line of supplements for AIDS patients that go in conjunction with the study they're doing, the results of which will be uncovered in this book."

"How did you get her?" someone asked at the other end of the room.

"I have my ways," Carter answered. Let them think I wooed her, he thought. Let them think that I managed to convince her with my business sense. "And I'm sure we could convince her to do some publicity stuff, even if it is minimal, like a press conference instead of a book signing."

"The more we could get from her," Bryce said, "the more we could—"

"Look, this is a surprise that we've got her in the first place. Don't look a gift horse in the mouth. This is a gem. Let's not screw this up. I'll take care of it."

Carter looked around the room at the expressions on everyone's faces to make sure they wouldn't try to get in his way. "Now, Dr. Emerson wants to get this book out as soon as possible, you know, so it can help as many people as possible. I couldn't agree with her more. While she's still riding on her Emivir fame and while the AIDS topic is still hot is the best time to jump on this. I think maybe we should send someone out there to proof pages as they're being written, so we can go to press with this ASAP. I'll bounce some numbers around, and get exact figures for print counts and the like before she's got a finished manuscript."

Carter sat down.

"Good work, Carter," Bryce said. Carter knew Bryce was angry that Carter was getting the attention, but he was covering it up well. Besides, Bryce knew that he'd only get on the bosses' bad list if he rejected this book, which seemed as good as gold for them. "Thanks, Bryce," Carter answered.

"Yeah, good work, Carter," Shelly added, as if she was trying to play with the big boys by following their lead. Carter smiled at her without speaking or verbally thanking her, then went back to his papers.

The meeting continued for only a few more minutes. Then everyone left for their offices. Carter walked over to the window, looked at the view from the conference room. He looked over at the thousands of offices and thought that they were filled with people working, like him.

Or were they like Shelly and Bryce?

Carter looked down at his watch. It read 10:30. With the time change, Carter figured Sloane wasn't even in the office yet, so there was no point in

calling to tell her the good news.

Carter was wrong. She arrived in her laboratory before seven.

Looking over the last of her notes, she read about vaccines. She would have the new girl print up her notes for the staff, so they could think about vaccines as well as their new work. She looked over the list of possible types of vaccines in which she found merit.

1. Subunit Vaccine: a piece of the outer surface of HIV, genetically engineered.
2. Recombinant Vector Vaccine a live virus such as vaccinia (smallpox vaccine) modified to transport part of HIV.
3. Vaccine Combination: use recombinant vector vaccine followed by booster shots of subunit vaccine
4. Peptide Vaccine chemically synthesized pieces of HIV proteins (peptides).
5. VirusLike Particle Vaccine: a noninfectious HIV that has one or more but not all, HIV proteins.
6. Plasmid DNA Vaccine (nucleic acid vaccine): direct injection of genes coding for HIV proteins.
7. Whole-Inactivated Virus Vaccine: HIV inactivated by chemicals, irradiation, etc., so it is not infectious.
8. Live-Attenuated Virus Vaccine live HIV where one or more disease-promoting genes have been deleted.

"If we could generate estimates of how HIV usually mutates in the body we might be able to create a drug that can recognize the mutations and attack them all. Or maybe the drug would be an injection of engineered cells that

could actually mutate the way HIV would, to change while the virus is changing, and be able to stop it.” Her eyes widened. “But that would be a cure, not a vaccine,” she thought.

“But that might be almost impossible,” she thought again. She looked at her laptop. She created a new file and typed in her idea.

It was eight o’clock; a good portion of her staff was already in the laboratory working. She saw Howard at the other side of the room. She walked over.

“Howard, good morning.”

“Good morning.”

“Have you made any progress on placing people into teams?”

“They pretty much placed themselves by the end of the work day yesterday. They were coming up with outlines after work, divisions of labor, brainstorming, that kind of thing when you left.”

“What time did everyone leave yesterday?”

“Most everyone stayed late. I left at about eight-thirty. I know Kyle was here late, with some of the staff, until like eleven or twelve.”

“And they’re here this early?”

“You know, they’ve got work to do.” Howard smiled then.

“Can you have a list for me of what everyone is working on, by group?”

“Sure can. Anything else?”

“Let everyone know that sometime today they’ll have reams of information about homeopathy for them to read when they get a chance. Tell them to think about two things: one, which aspect of homeopathy interests them the most for writing about, and two, what exactly should be done in the study.”

“Got it.”

“And one of the first things they’ll get this morning is a few sheets of notes I’ve taken about work done so far on vaccines for HIV, along with a few ideas I had for further research. If they can go over it and bounce around any ideas in their heads, that would be great, too.”

“So you kept working last night, after you got home?”

“Of course. What else was I going to do?”

Howard knew that most people would have said that with an air of hostility toward others, that most people long for more of a social life. He knew that for her, however, it was a proclamation of her love for her work.

Walking back toward her office, she saw Kyle come in the laboratory door. “Good morning, Kyle.”

“Good morning.”

“You know,” she said, leaning closer to him and starting to whisper, “you shouldn’t stay here so late. Some people will think you’re obsessed with your work.” She looked at him and smiled. Kyle smiled back and she turned back toward her office. “Kyle,” she said, as she kept walking, “ask Howard what we were just talking about. He can fill you in.”

“Got it, chief,” Kyle answered as he took off his trench coat.

“Oh, Kyle,” she said before Kyle was out of speaking range, “let me know if there’s anything about this dinner event that I’m supposed to know. I should probably call Steve back, too... And thanks.”

Kyle was pleased that Sloane wanted to call Steve, and he thought about the fact that just four work days earlier he did not want to get up in the morning to come into work. “So this is what it’s supposed to feel like,” he proudly thought, and walked across the laboratory toward Howard.

Going back into her office, she started thinking about the vaccines again when she heard a knock on her door. It was the new girl, Julie, a temp, who would be working for her for the next month.

Julie was handed Sloane’s notes on the vaccines she researched the night before to print and copy. Then she gave Julie access to her e-mail to get the information about natural remedies. “Save any messages for me that aren’t about homeopathy,” she explained. “And tell me: do you know a lot about getting information in the Internet?”

“It’s my specialty.”

“Perfect. If you can find anything along the lines of what’s in the e-mail letters, pull up the information and organize it all. And make sure to keep the e-mail addresses and dates of the mailings, so we know how to contact these people if we need to, and have records of where all of this dated information is from.”

“How quickly do you need this?”

“The end of the day?”

Julie lost her smile. “I’ll do what I can, Ms. Emerson, but if I have until tomorrow I can get a more thorough report out for you.”

“Okay, let me know how it goes.”

The phone rang. She picked up the receiver.

“Sloane Emerson.”

“It’s me, Carter.”

“Hey, Carter, how are you?”

“Oh, I’m fine.”

“When was it I saw you last? I think it was about a year ago.”

“It was just a little under forty-eight hours ago, actually.”

“Wow, it seems like a world away already.” They both laughed. “So what do I owe the honor of this phone call?”

“Well, I heard that you wanted to print a book.”

“Oh, yeah, that. But I can’t imagine why I didn’t think of writing my biography before.” Carter started laughing again before he started speaking. “Listen, we had a meeting this morning, and I mentioned your book in the meeting, and everyone was stunned. You better be serious about this, or I’ll be the laughing stock of this company.”

“Why is that?”

“Because I told them I got you on board.”

“And not that I came to you? For shame, Carter.”

“You can’t back down on me now, or you’ll destroy my illustrious career.”

“Not a problem. We’re still going to do this. Now, I know you’re not one for press releases, so I can imagine you’d hate book signing events.”

“Good guess. But I can handle a press conference or two for this, I understand that these things need to be done. I mean, we’re trying to sell a book here, which you need to market me for; we’re selling a book, not saving lives.”

“You just might be. Saving lives, that is. Either way I’ll speed this along by sending someone to your office to proofread chapters as they’re written.”

“Smashing idea, chap.” Carter started laughing again. She did her best to continue. “Can they be here in two weeks, and stay for a week?”

“That would be perfect. You’ll have work for them by then?”

“Definitely. Carter, the professional side of me would feel safer with this book if you came with the proofreader... And thanks for helping me on this.”

“You’re helping me out on this. Just one favor.”

“Yes?”

“When this goes to press, can I cash in my rain check and get you to go to the press run with me?”

“You know, I’d love to see it. I’ll be there.”

“Great. Call me if there are any changes.”

“And you do the same.”

After hanging up the phone, she walked out into the laboratory and

checked up on the groups.

The next few days were filled with work, except for the visit the office got from Steve on Wednesday. Steve came there to see Kyle, Kyle knew that, everyone else knew that, but in the back of Steve's mind he knew he was visiting in part to make an impression on her.

Steve barely got a chance to talk to her while he was there. He'd try to ask a question periodically, but he knew that this wasn't his field and he didn't know everything they did for these drugs.

Steve managed to get her alone for a bit to talk about her work. "So how do the integrase inhibitors work?" Steve asked her.

"Basically, they attack a certain part of the virus. The more kinds of inhibitors that work, well, that means that the virus is being attacked on different levels. And it's therefore being attacked more efficiently, so to speak."

"So why the work on improving Emivir?"

"Well," Kyle stopped by her office and cut in, "AIDS can last in the body for over three years, and these inhibitors are effective for two years in the human body. The goal is to improve Emivir, making it fight long enough in the human body to work until the virus is dead in the body."

Kyle looked at both Sloane and Steve. "I didn't mean to interrupt," Kyle said, "but this is why we're trying to find more improvements in the drugs."

Both of them looked over at Kyle and smiled. Sloane knew she wasn't good at explaining the technical details quickly to people who didn't work on these drugs, so she appreciated the help. Steve appreciated the information as well, but in the back of his mind he would have preferred to hear Sloane give him the explanation. Before Steve could give a heart-felt thanks, Kyle already started walking toward another room to do more work.

"I hate to sound like I don't understand this all," Steve said.

"That's okay," she answered. Kyle walked out of the room. "I need practice in explaining things like this in more regular terms anyway. I hope that I haven't been too confusing with the details or anything."

"No, not at all. The next thing I want to know about, though, is why you guys are working on the side effects of these drugs."

"If the medicine is easier to take, there is a greater chance of having the medication taken properly. And if people don't want to take these drugs because they might make you throw up, well, then those people will be less

likely to take these drugs properly too.”

“That sounds like reason enough.”

“Consider the fact that these people have a disease that will eventually kill them. They don’t need to be reminded of having to take their medication a number of times a day. Getting rid of having to take these drugs so often and getting rid of some of the side effects, well, that will alleviate the depression that taking these drugs cause.”

“And if the patients aren’t happy...” Steve started and she finished his thought with “Then the medicine won’t be as effective. Your body will physically feel worse if you aren’t mentally prepared for dealing with it all. So that’s what we’re going for.”

“It sounds like you’ve got a lot of work to do, but then again, you’ve done a lot of work so far, too.”

“I suppose. But it never seems like enough work is being done.”

“You’re only human. You’ve got to let yourself rest, too. That’s what charitable dinners are for.” Steve thought that would be a good way to make the conversation turn a little more social, even though he was enjoying hearing about these details and wanted to learn more. They talked for a few minutes before he left for home. “If you need anything,” Steve said as he left, “you have my number, right? I’d welcome the call.”

She thought for a moment about what the average woman would need when they were bogged down with too much on their mind. “I need a dozen roses,” she said as she started to smile. Then she thanked him before getting ready to go home herself. “I’m sorry I haven’t called, but I’ll keep it in mind. Thanks, Steve.”

That gave Steve an idea, and he hoped that it would work. Knowing she would have to leave work soon, he stopped at a store, bought flowers, got her address from the phone book, and went to her apartment to wait for her. She worked for another hour before collecting her things to leave, but when she got home she didn’t expect to see a dozen roses waiting at her front door. Steve walked from the corner coffee shop to see her picking up the flowers to get to her door.

“Just because I got a cup of coffee, I missed you getting the flowers?”

“What on Earth are these for?”

“You might not think you need them, but for the work you have done, well, you have deserved these flowers for a while,” Steve answered.

“...Don’t you have to work in the morning?”

“I handed in my weekly article today. I don’t have a thing to do tomorrow.” Steve stood there, next to her, and did his best to not act like he needed an invitation to come in to her home. She looked at the flowers, tried to figure out how to pick them up with the keys and the books and the briefcase in her hands, and Steve took the ball. “Here, wait,” he said, “you look like you need some help,” he said, reaching down to pick up the roses. She looked at the flowers again and said thanks.

“You’re welcome to come in, but I haven’t cleaned or anything —”

“I’m male and I’m sure your place is cleaner than mine.” Steve followed her in to her home. She told him he was more than welcome to sit on the couch. “Now I just feel bad for not getting you coffee too,” Steve said.

“I don’t need any,” she answered.

“Well,” Steve started as she found some music to play, “it looks like you have a nice place. It is kind of dark in here, but I don’t mind that at all.”

“It hides the fact that I haven’t cleaned,” she answered. “You don’t mind the fact that I haven’t put any art up on the walls?”

“Often I think stuff hanging on the walls just makes a place look more dirty.” She liked that answer. “I don’t keep things on my walls,” Steve continued. “I have enough stuff in my apartment as it is; I don’t need any more in there.”

Smiling, she sat down next to him. “Yeah, Steve, you’ve been letting me talk every time we see each other, but I don’t even know anything about you.”

“But I told you I wanted to be your listening post; I’m sure it’s hard for you to go through all your research when you have no one to talk to about it.”

She thought about that for a moment... Maybe that was part of the problem, maybe she needed someone to talk to, and maybe she didn’t have to be the strong one all the time. She didn’t know how to talk to people; maybe she needed to practice.

“It’s hard when you feel like you’re getting nowhere at your work.”

“And you’ve always been the strong one, haven’t you?” Steve asked. He couldn’t believe how smoothly everything seemed to be going when she kept talking to him, when he was sitting on her couch in a darkened room.

“The problem is that everyone expects that of me now.”

“What do you mean?”

“Everyone sees me as a cold-hearted workaholic, and no one thinks that

I may need something every once in a while.”

“But you do,” Steve said.

“But no one gives me that, Steve. No one mentally gives me an inch of rope. Why have they needed to, I may just hang myself with any rope at all.”

“Will you?” Steve asked.

“Steve! ... I think people would be let down if they saw less than what I have given in the past. I have made my bed and now I have to —”

“Less than perfection?” Steve cut in, still thinking about Sloane laying down in the bed she made. Knowing she had to stop ranting, they shared a moment of silence. “You know I don’t know you like the palm of my hand, but you seem to ask too much of yourself. I even like you...”

“Why?” Sloane cut in and asked.

“You’re captivating,” Steve answered. “You have an answer for everything.”

Sloane was impressed that he thought it was captivating that she had answers. Maybe this was what she needed, she thought, maybe she needed this kind of mindless admiration to satiate herself, to make her feel better. She leaned over toward Steve; he instinctively put his arms around her so she could relax.

“I don’t know what to do here.”

“Do whatever you want,” Steve answered.

She sat up on the couch around his legs and turned to face Steve. She was inches away from his face, and Steve was painfully aware of it. He knew he wanted to kiss her so badly, but he also knew that with a mind like hers she would have to want it first. They stared at each other for a moment. Sloane spoke first. “You know I have to go to work in the morning.”

He knew in that instant that she had turned into the voice of reason again and that the chance was lost for the two of them. He moved one hand to touch her cheek as he spoke, “You know I am here if you need anything.”

Sloane rested her forehead on his and answered, “I know.” For a moment they stayed in this position before she gestured to move; Steve followed her lead as she said her farewell to him at her front door. “I’ll see you this weekend,” he said as Steve left for his car.

The both of them thought of each other, for entirely different reasons. Sloane thought it is probably good to think about something other than work for a while; Steve thought that sexual tension was good, it was refreshing for him, and that in a way it was sometimes better than getting the girl.

The next few days were filled with work. Work on Emivir. Work on the integrase inhibitor. Work on removing side effects of existing drugs, and work on time-release drugs. Work on an outline for a book on homeopathy, and a regimen for a study group.

The outline and regimen was pretty much done on Thursday, thanks to the help of Julie, pooling all the existing research together. Monday they had made a call for HIV-infected people as well as people with full-blown AIDS; since they could be in any condition they had three hundred people applying by Wednesday morning. By Thursday they had decided on two hundred people for the study; one hundred were in the control group, and each person in the control group matched the conditions of someone in the test group. Howard was in charge of directing the regimens of the groups; they had placebo pills for those in the control group. They were to also monitor what people ate by diaries they kept. The study was about to begin, and everything was going ahead of schedule.

Thursday afternoon Sloane was in her office working out vaccine tests and theories on paper. Kyle walked into her office without knocking on the door.

“Kyle?”

Kyle realized he didn't knock; he looked at the doorknob in his hand. “Oh, I'm sorry, but it's just that there seems to be something working in the search for the integrase inhibitor.”

“Already? What is it?”

“Come out here and look.”

Kyle directed her to one of the tables. He gestured to the microscope; she looked in.

“What am I looking at?”

“It looks like we've got the splicing to work. What we've got here is an integrase inhibitor, but one derived from a genetically engineered human cell, and not from a synthetic one.”

Her eyes widened; she slowly lifted her head from the microscope. “So the chances of it lasting are better than the synthetic ones in testing now.” She leaned back into the microscope.

“Possibly.”

“How...” She pulled back from the microscope and looked around before focusing on Kyle. “How on earth did you do this so fast?”

“We don't know how stable it is; we'd have to replicate the process a few

times. These cells existed from a failed experiment that they gave up on a few weeks ago, trying to make a natural versus the synthetic version of Emivir. Actually, it took about seven weeks to get the natural cells engineered to this point. To replicate this again should take a little less than two months.”

“And that was the experiment they were working on?”

“Yes, modifying the protease inhibitor. This time, though, instead of trying to improve on Emivir, they tried to replicate it using natural tissues.”

“But they couldn’t get it to that point, so they put it on hold.”

“Yeah, and now that they looked at it again they realized it might be easier to alter it to become an effective integrase inhibitor instead of a protease inhibitor. And it seems that they were right.”

Her eyes were as wide as saucers.

There were about fifteen people standing around her. She started to open her mouth; she smiled instead.

“If you didn’t mention the idea of the integrase inhibitors, we would have never thought of this,” Ellen, one of the researchers, said to her.

Turning to Ellen, she said, “Yes, but you did this.”

Ellen and Sloane smiled at each other briefly. It was all that they needed.

“Well,” Sloane said, “run tests on this sample, and start working on the next samples. And someone work on an outline and it’s proposed functions, and let’s work on F.D.A. approval for this beast. Who knows how much we’ll have to modify this, but this is...” Sloane shook her head slightly, then looked up. “This is excellent news.”

Standing up, she said, “I’m sure Colin Madison would like to come down here for this news. Leave the sample at the microscope for a bit. I’ll give him a call. And remember, I need you all to look over the notes for the homeopathy, as well as the outlines Howard has made for a regimen for the study, and decide what aspect of this book you’d like to be a part of. In just over a week we’re going to have someone from Quentin Publishing here to proof-read our work; it would be nice to actually have something for them.”

Walking toward her office, she turned around and said, “If we’re doing press conferences, Quentin would like the additional publicity for the book, too.” Most of the staff was just standing in their places, looking at her.

“You know, I’ll be proud to have my name with everyone’s here on that book,” she said as she walked away.

Everyone started to smile; the sound of their breathing and the ticking of

the wall clock was all that could be heard. “Hey, let’s go out Friday night. Drinks or something,” Sloane said. She thought of how Carter treated a drink with her. “To celebrate.” She turned and walked back into her office to call Colin.

Later that day, Colin walked into the lab. They brought the sample to the microscope for him. He seemed very pleased. He turned to Sloane. “How long?”

“It will probably take about two months to replicate this sample; we’ll need to wait that long to conduct more tests. This won’t be ready to test on anyone for a number of months.”

“Well, the FDA will hold us up for at least that long.”

“Probably, even if they rush it, but they already pulled one favor for us with Emivir. It still can’t take less than four months for them to start to look at it, so I think we’ll have time.”

“And the paperwork?”

“I already had it filled it out.”

“Did you come up with this?”

“Actually, no. It was a fluke from working on making a natural, but engineered, version of the synthetic Emivir. Ellen here made the connection to try those cells — which they had frozen and kept dormant — for an integrase inhibitor.”

Ellen Thompson just smiled.

“Well,” Colin said, as he began to raise his voice and speak to the entire room, “are you planning on having some sort of celebration for these people?”

“I suggested getting together tomorrow, but there’s no plan yet.”

“It’s at my house now. Not formal, don’t worry, but at least you’ll have free drinks.” Everyone in the lab started smiling. A few let out a small chuckle.

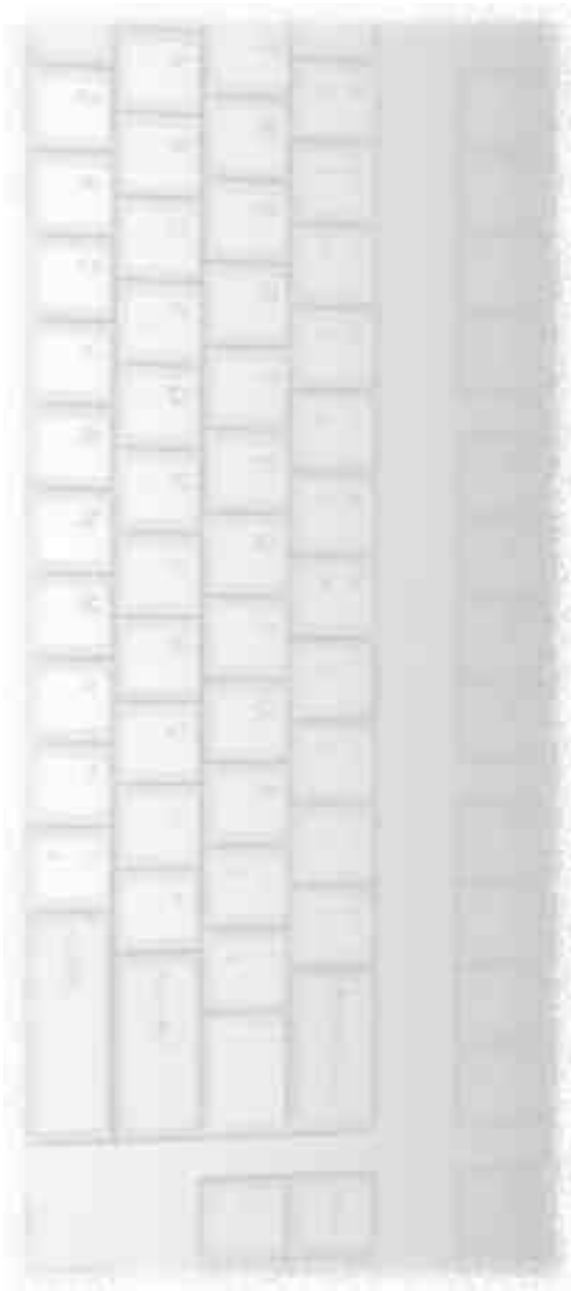
“Colin, that’s very —”

“It’s nothing. I have to make sure I keep you guys happy, don’t I?”

“I think we’re pretty happy, sir.”

Colin smiled, told them to come to his place at seven in the evening tomorrow night, and then he walked out of the lab.

All she could think was that she wanted to call Carter and tell him the good news. She stopped herself, though; she decided it would be better to wait until their next business call to share her news with him.



CHAPTER 5

THE LETTERS

Everyone in the laboratory was buzzing with excitement Friday; Sloane stayed in her office working. The possibility of a new integrase inhibitor was a fantastic development, but the possibility that there would be more side effects was also very probable, and that thought loomed over her head like a heavy weight she could no longer hold. She looked over the homeopathic solutions that people had recommended to her, and found herself wanting to talk to Steve, knowing she would see him at that weekend with everyone. She looked over the comments on alternative medicinal treatments such as hypnosis and acupressure, which supposedly alleviated discomfort from the drugs. But she knew there was something more to learn about dealing with these drugs. There had to be.

She looked over the outline for the book, which now gained the working title “Winning the War”, named because the book was about home remedies to help AIDS patients. She was asked to write the introduction and the last chapter. The remaining staff would fill in the rest, and they were dividing up the chapters during the day Friday. She figured she could start writing the introduction over the weekend.

No one had come to her with any ideas about a vaccine. She asked Kyle what he thought of her notes, and he answered with, “We’ve been working on so much, and with the good news this week about the integrase inhibitor and all of the homeopathy notes to work on, there just hasn’t been any time to work on it. I’m sure in a week or two people can get to it, but probably not until then.”

In the back of her head she knew he was right; she just didn’t want to hear it. She continued to work on her notes in her office.

Someone knocked on her door. “Come in,” she said. Howard opened her door. “How long are you staying here? You’re going to be late for Colin’s party.”

Looking down at her watch, it said it was already 6:15. “I didn’t realize the time,” she answered. “How long does it take to drive there?”

“Twenty minutes. I forgot you drove. My car is in the shop.”

“I’ll give you a ride, if you need it.”

“Thanks. I’d appreciate it. So you’re going to go straight from here?”

“Yeah. Want to leave in a half hour?”

“Sure.”

“Just come bug me when you’re ready.”

“No problem.”

When Howard left her office she watched him smile as he closed the door; she could sense everyone was excited ... everyone except her. Sloane knew she was supposed to be happy. Things were going amazingly well. They had a lead on an integrase inhibitor that might be more effective than the other drugs, because it was generated from a natural versus synthetic base. They were about to work on a book that would get out to the market in two months to help AIDS patients. They were starting a clinical study on homeopathy.

Looking back to her list of notes about a vaccine, she knew she had to come up with something, but she didn’t know where to begin. She kept thinking of when she first wrote her list:

4. a vaccine

5. a cure

These were the parts of the puzzle that needed to be solved. These drug advances, she thought — and knew — were battles. She knew that the vaccine and the cure were what would win the war.

Her watch read 6:40. Howard would be knocking on her door momentarily. Knowing that this was a time for the staff to relax, she knew she should be happy — and congratulate the technicians, particularly Ellen. They needed this moment. They deserved it.

Gathering her belongings, Howard made it into her office. “Does anyone else need a ride?” She asked him.

“Um, no, I don’t think so. Most everyone is gone, and I think everyone remaining here has rides.”

“Let’s get going then.” She turned off her lights and shut her door. She saw the cords from her computer coming out of her briefcase. She stuffed them back in and walked out of the laboratory with Howard.

###

Howard rang the doorbell and she stood by his side. One of Colin’s maids opened the door. “Oh, come in. Everyone is in the main room.”

Walking down the hallway confidently, Howard followed. The marble tiles under her feet clicked when the heels of her shoes touched them. Her eyes remained fixed on the end of the hallway; Howard couldn’t help but be distracted by the chandeliers and oil paintings in the hallway. He followed her to the main room, where another servant was waiting to take their coats.

Sloane handed her coat to the man and waited for Howard to remove his.

A few people from the main room noticed their arrival. There were about 50 people in the room. “Sloane!” Kyle called out as he gestured her over. She walked over to Kyle and his wife.

“You remember Elisa, don’t you?”

“Yes, of course. How are you?”

“Oh, I’m alright. Things are going well with your work?”

“Hence the party, darling,” Kyle answered her before Sloane could.

“It’s taken a lot of work and probably an equal amount of luck,” she answered. “Hope Kyle hasn’t worked too late too often.”

“Well, he loves his work...” Elisa trailed off and turned her head away

from the conversation.

Kyle turned to her. “You know, I wanted to tell you it’s been —”

“Kyle,” she whispered, “tell me later. Your wife needs you now.”

He looked over to his wife and she seemed visibly upset.

“It was good to see you again,” she said to Elisa. “I’m sure I’ll get the chance to catch up with you later.”

“Yes, thank you, you too,” Elisa answered.

Scanning the room, Sloane finally spotted Ellen Thompson talking to a few members of her team. Sloane made her way across the room and put her arm around Ellen’s shoulder.

“So ... What should the working title of our integrase inhibitor be? Thomavan?”

Ellen instantly turned red. “Oh, you wouldn’t suggest —”

“You seem to deserve the credit for this one, Ellen. We’re all thrilled with what you’ve done.”

“Well, it has a lot of testing to go through.”

“I know, I know. But tonight is not about that. It’s about rewarding a job well done.”

A voice outside the conversation added: “Exactly.” Everyone turned their head to see who joined the conversation. Knowing the voice was Colin’s, she turned her head more slowly than the rest of the group.

“Colin, I haven’t had the chance to say hello yet, much less thank you for this,” she turned and said to her boss.

Colin smiled. “Well, rewarding you guys for a job well done is the least I can do. Besides, you guys are satisfied with beer and wine and cheese. Imagine if I had to thank the marketing department for something; I’d have to forget medical school for my first born to throw them a party.” The group laughed.

“Let me know if you need anything,” Colin continued, “I’m going to check on the hors d’oeuvres.”

The rest of the evening consisted of the same pattern: Sloane would walk up to a group of people to listen to their conversation; Sloane would be noticed and the conversation would turn to what accomplishments everyone recently made; Sloane would thank everyone; Sloane would find the first opportunity she could to leave the group; Sloane would walk up to another group; repeat cycle.

###

Eventually, she walked over to a chair by the living room window. She sat down and looked outside. Everyone was thrilled with the chance of excelling further with the drugs they'd created, but all she could think about were the possible side effects or the additional drugs patients would have to take. The current cocktails of drugs were taxing enough on the mental and physical balances of the people taking them; adding more drugs would just make it worse.

It was almost pouring outside. It was a heavy rain, not the usual drizzle she was used to at this time of year. Homeopathy was an option, but she knew she didn't know enough about it, and she knew there was something more than homeopathy that was helping AIDS patients deal with their illnesses.

The solutions to the AIDS puzzle were somewhere else, not in these cocktails. She'd have to let them celebrate, let them continue to work on these short-term solutions. And she would continue to look for that missing piece of the puzzle, the piece that had always eluded her.

A vaccine had to be worked on. She thought the work on a cure would take so long that it would be nearly pointless to start. If they could strengthen the cocktails and eliminate the side effects, maybe they could be the foundation for a long-term cure, one that took three years of pills to achieve, in the near future. But that was for the future. The present called for a vaccine.

And the present called for finding out how people coped.

The present called for anything other than this party.

They needed to celebrate, but all she could think of was the mounds of work ahead of her. She looked at her watch. It was 8:45.

People would probably still be at this party for a few hours, she thought. She wondered when would be a tasteful time to go. She wondered if people would miss her. How long had she been sitting there already, with no one coming up to talk to her?

"Sloane?"

She jerked around in the chair. It was one of the technicians, with his wife. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, I've just been feeling a little under the weather."

"Are you sure? Maybe you should lie down. Or get some sleep."

"Yes, maybe I need some sleep." Sloane got up and thought that it was a

perfect opportunity to leave. "I should say my goodbyes to everyone, though."

She walked with the two to the center of the room to find Colin. Howard and Kyle met up with her while she was explaining she was under the weather and saying goodbye.

"Howard, can you find another way home, will you be alright, or do you need me to give you a ride home?"

"Oh, I'm sure someone here can give me a ride."

"I just wouldn't want you to have to leave early on my account."

"Don't worry about it. Now go home and get some rest."

Picking out her coat at the front hallway, she then opened her umbrella and stepped outside.

When she got out of her car in front of her apartment, the rain was still falling down in sheets. She fumbled with her umbrella while her car door was cracked open. Her arms and her left leg were already wet, as was the inside of her car. She gave up on the umbrella and stepped out of her car as she closed the umbrella. The rain felt like a shower against her. She held her trench coat closed around her waist, kept her briefcase tucked under her arm and walked into her building.

Dropping her umbrella next to her front door, she walked straight to her desk and set her computer up. She took off her trench coat, hung it on the coat rack by the front door and pulled her blouse from under her pants as she walked through her living room. The neckline of her blouse was soaking wet. She looked down at her pants; they were also soaked from the knees down. She kicked off her shoes and changed into a sweat suit. She walked back into her living room.

Sloane got on line and checked her messages. Responses from her homeopathy postings stopped after about two days; she had no more mail about homeopathy. She got on the web and went to the same message boards she went to before, about homeopathy and AIDS. She posted a message on every bulletin board she could find.

"Hello. I'm trying to help AIDS patients and people who are HIV-positive. I know people that are surviving for years with AIDS. In all honestly, I'd like to know how they stay so healthy, how they deal with it, and what works for them. Is there anyone out there who would be

interested in telling me what forms of alternative medicine, homeopathy, or nutrition they use in order to help them out? For instance, what do you do to deal with the number of pills you take every day, or with the side effects you can get from the drugs? I'd like to know what people do to battle this, whether it's support from a network of family and friends, getting back to religion — anything. I'd like to learn more about this aspect of treating and living with HIV and AIDS. I'd like to be able to share your stories with others, but if you want, let me know and your stories will remain completely confidential. Please e-mail me; I'm hoping that you can help me help others. Thank you very much for your time.”

There were groups of peers with HIV and AIDS, and groups that did volunteer work for AIDS patients. There was even a conspiracy bulletin board that mentioned AIDS. She posted her message everywhere she could.

After getting off the Internet, she opened a text document. She looked over the homeopathy notes. She looked at the blank screen. She wanted to start writing. She looked at the clock on the wall; the time was 10:45. She hadn't even started writing and already she had writer's block. She got up and went to bed; she figured she could write an introduction in the morning.

###

It was the middle of the day when she walked out into her kitchen and saw a roach crawling along the floor. She walked over to it and stepped on it, reaching over to the counter for a paper towel to clean the floor off. She walked over to the sink to wash her hands; she reached down to the lower cabinet to get a cleaner for the floor, and she saw another roach in the cabinet. She stopped. “Where are these roaches coming from?” she thought. She reached around the roach and found her roach spray. She took the paper towel still in her hand and smashed the second roach. Standing up again, fully equipped with her roach spray, she closed the cabinet door. She threw the paper towel in the trashcan in the pantry.

“I don't leave food out, where would the roaches come from?” She

thought as she put her hand on the counter and bent over to start spraying along the floor of her kitchen. She felt something on her hand. She looked over at the counter and saw two roaches crawling along the side of her hand. She let out a light scream and jumped.

“Millions of years. They’ve been on this planet millions of years, they’re such simple creatures, and still we humans can’t kill them. A nuclear explosion wouldn’t even kill them,” she mumbled, grabbing another paper towel and smashed the two roaches.

Where are they coming from? And why are they here all of a sudden? How long have they been hiding in my cabinets?

Sloane walked back across the kitchen to the cabinet under her sink to see if she had any roach motels. She rummaged through the bottles of disinfectant and household cleaners. No roach motels. No ant spray. She had just one can of roach spray.

She stood up again and closed the cabinet door. She turned around.

She screamed again.

Fifty roaches, maybe more, crawled around her floor and up and down her cabinets. She didn’t know where to start spraying. She didn’t have the speed to smash all of the bugs by herself.

Her roach spray wasn’t strong enough.

She looked around in a panic. She didn’t know what to do. She tried to remember the last time that her apartment was sprayed for bugs.

“I can’t kill all of these myself. What am I going to do?” she thought. She leaned back on her refrigerator. She felt something on her shoulder.

And with her final scream she sprung up in her bed, sweating and panting.

It was four in the morning. She looked around her bedroom. She knew she needed more sleep.

“One more dream to add to the list,” she thought. “And they’re always about losing control.” She got up and walked over to her window. She thought about her dream. Something miniscule, something less than human, was still something she couldn’t beat.

Her dream was beginning to make sense.

There wasn’t enough roach spray. Her spray wasn’t strong enough. She wasn’t fast enough. There was nothing she could do to get rid of the disease.

“I mean, the roaches.” Sloane corrected herself.

Looking out the window, she watched a few cars driving down the streets

near her house. From her floor the cars looked small; all you could see were two small streaks of headlights. They looked like an insect's antennae. She turned away from the window and crawled back into bed.

###

Toby rolled over on Saturday morning and tried to read the clock next to his bed. In the early hours of day, such as these, his eyes routinely refused to focus clearly. He looked around his room.

Remembering the night before, he checked and confirmed that there was no one in bed with him. Sometimes he had to manually check over his memories to make sure there wasn't something that he had forgotten.

He hated thinking at times like that about things that could have gone wrong. Toby tried to think analytically and started analyzing his actions.

He preferred to think about what Sloane would think at times like this in his life.

He thought about that at times like this. He knew she would think that it didn't make sense to spend time with other women, especially if he knew he didn't love them. He knew she would think that her definitions of love were different from his.

Maybe that's why she had never married. At least that was what he liked to think about, when his roaming thoughts made their way back to thoughts about Sloane.

Toby hadn't talked to her for a few days, and he was curious about her progress with changing the drugs. He knew that was not a good topic to ask about, because if he started her on the subject, she might not be able to get herself off the subject.

Maybe, Toby thought, maybe that was why he liked the company of other women, because they didn't ask him questions about his job, because they thought he was smart. Because they thought he was important.

Granted, they were not organized women, they were not always level-headed women, but they were women who thought he had merit, they were women who thought he was successful. They were women willing to shower him with attention. That was what he needed sometimes.

He knew full well that she wouldn't give him any attention like that. It was not her style.

He sat up in bed long enough to see his excuse for clothes piled on the floor near his bedroom chair. His clothes were wadded into a ball on the chair, hanging down to the floor. He looked at the clothes on the floor and in his chair, and he looked at the poster prints he had framed in his bedroom, and he looked at the spare change and the containers thrown about in his room. He liked seeing his room look like that, he thought. Other people might not have liked the clutter, but it made him look like he had put enough time into decorating his apartment.

This way his place didn't look like a hotel room. It looked like his home.

He always had the same craving in the morning, after the beginnings of a hangover set in. He always wanted hash browns and an omelet with extra sausage links on the side. It was a usual craving for him, and when he got that craving, well, he knew then that he just had to satisfy it. He would usually go to the local diner without a shower on late mornings like this. So he got up and got ready to go out for breakfast.

###

Sloane woke up Saturday morning still thinking about the dream she had that woke her up. She knew they needed to have stronger drugs for AIDS patients, drugs that worked faster to combat the speed of this virus. And she knew that a vaccine was imperative. She went straight into work and worked alone in the office until 6:00 that night. She started narrowing down what kinds of vaccines would probably produce the best results. She started working on preparations for some laboratory work that she would start on Monday.

When she got home she thought about starting the introduction of the book. She turned on her computer and thought she would get on the Internet first. Before her computer got the chance to dial up, She received a phone call.

"Hello?"

"It's Carter."

"Carter? It's awfully late in your neck of the woods."

"I know, but I wanted to know how the book was going."

"I was thinking of starting the introduction. You got the outline I faxed, right?"

"Yes, I did."

"I was thinking of plowing through the introduction this weekend."

“You think it will be that fast?”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Okay, I was just checking.”

“Are you okay, Carter?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Why?”

“Well, it’s late, on your time, and you’re calling me about this book.”

“I just wanted to check. I worked all day, I’m not going out tonight.”

“You too? I’m supposed to go out to a benefit dinner tonight. So in some ways I’m going out, but in some ways I’m not.”

“Yeah. I guess I just have work on my brain as well.”

“You too?”

Carter laughed. “Okay, I’ll let you get to writing. Talk to you later.”

“Oh, wait, Carter, I forgot to tell you the good news.”

Carter stopped. “Yes?”

“It looks like we have a start on a new integrase inhibitor.”

“Isn’t that one of the things you were going to start working on this week?”

“Yes.”

“And you got something this fast?”

“I tell you, Carter, my people are good.”

“Sloane — that’s great news! Congratulations.”

“Well, thanks. It’ll take some time to work everything out, but...”

“I’m really happy for you.”

“Hey, this should help with the book publicity, too.”

“I should have thought of that. It didn’t occur to me.”

There was a slight pause in their conversation. “I’ll tell you more about it when I talk to you about the book next week.”

“Yeah, we should both get some rest.”

“And I should get to work on that introduction, but if I go to this dinner, I might have to wait until tomorrow to start working on the introduction.”

“Well, remember to sleep...”

“I will. Have a good night, Carter.”

“You too.”

They both slowly hung up their phones.

Sloane turned back to her computer. He was right; she should start on the first chapter before she checked her e-mail. Any letters would still be there tomorrow.

###

After choosing a simple dress for the dinner, she slid it over her shoulders. She didn't even want to wear any make-up; she checked her appearance in the mirror in the hallway to make sure that she looked presentable. Within fifteen minutes her doorbell rang.

What she didn't realize was that nothing looked just 'simple' on her. When Steve talked to her earlier in the week, he insisted that he was going to give her a ride to the dinner. She only insisted once that she could get there on her own, but she stopped herself from insisting again. She was expecting him to pick her up at seven in the evening.

When she opened the door, she saw Steve in a suit. She was used to seeing him in casual clothes. They both stared at each other for a moment.

"You look amazing," Steve finally said.

"Thank you," she responded as she started to grin and said "you look presentable too." After she said that, she knew that Steve would have expected her to say something more complimentary to him about how he looked.

Maybe it was for the best that she didn't say anything too nice.

"Do you want to get to the dinner a little early?"

"We can."

"Unless you want to go somewhere for a drink first, we have the time to do that." Steve thought this was a chance for him to see Sloane drink. Maybe she wouldn't get drunk, like the women he usually saw when he went out, but this could be a chance.

"Your call. I don't have any liquor here, but there's probably a bar we could pass on our way to the dinner."

"I'll see if there's something on the way," he answered. Steve helped her get her jacket on and escorted her to the car.

Steve stopped on the way to dinner to a place he had never been to before. "I don't know how this place is; would you like to stop here?"

"That's fine," she answered. Steve thought she seemed quiet during the ride, but for Sloane this was just like any other occasion, where she didn't have much to say. A part of her was unsettled with interacting with Steve, because she didn't know what to do, so she hoped he would take the lead.

He was thinking the same way, which seemed to lead them nowhere.

They went into the bar together. It occurred to her that if Steve had been here before, then she would look like his date and that she should look like a woman interested in him. It wasn't a dressy bar, and the other people there looked like they had been working at the nearby factory all day. She felt that her and Steve looked out of place, since they were the only ones dressed up.

Steve apologized for the lack of class at the bar. "We could go somewhere else for a drink, but I don't know any other bars around here."

"I'm sure the hotel next to the dinner has a bar too," Sloane answered. "But if we're not looking for the ambiance of the bar, this place is fine. What do you want to drink?" As soon as she asked that question, she knew that she shouldn't take on the role of hostess to this man she barely knew.

The bartender walked up and waited for their order. Steve asked for a Berghoff's beer on tap. She followed his lead and said she would like the same.

They had their drink and tried to make conversation to kill the time before they were supposed to be at the dinner. She tried to keep away from talking about her job, since that was what she would probably talk about with colleagues after dinner. So she asked him about his job.

"Before writing the column, I taught mostly high school business courses."

"What kind of courses?"

"Word processing, database work, career planning, you know," he answered. "The students do work like check writing and account management and things that should be important to kids, but they don't want to learn it."

"That's exactly why they should learn it. Even if they think right now that they don't need to."

"But how do you teach fourteen year-old kids how to balance a check-book?"

"You remind them early on that money has value. And you do not call them 'kids'. You teach them that what you earn has value."

"But kids don't learn it. They don't know it when they reach high school..."

"That's a parent problem more than it is a high school teacher problem. Solve the problem at an early age."

"But what do you do for the kids who never learned that?"

"That's why I'm not a teacher any longer. I don't have the answers to questions like that. That is what counselors and principals and parents and teachers are for. In a way it is still my problem."

Holding her head down as she responded. “Don’t be mad, but yes, in a way a part of it is your problem. Sorry.”

“Then what do I do about it?”

Sloane knew there was no easy answer to that question, so she mentioned that someone should have come up with the answer before tonight. She also knew they had to go to dinner soon.

Before deciding to go to dinner, she had to get it out in the open to them. “Is it just me, or is all of this a problem that we should both deal with?”

“What?”

She attempted to get it out in the open. “Do you like me, Steve?”

That one caught him off guard. He answered. “I like you more than I care to admit, I think.”

“I can gather that you are the womanizing type, that you do the best to make all the right moves —”

“I’m not that way, and I am sure you wouldn’t want those ‘right moves’. I have been avoiding you because of it.” Steve was almost offended that he seemed this shallow to a woman he barely knew.

“Maybe that’s what I needed; maybe you should have taken charge —”

“Maybe you talk too much.”

This caught her off guard. “What?” Steve immediately leaned over, grabbed her neck and started to kiss her passionately. He even grabbed her hair to pull her head away from his when he was done. Steve immediately felt at the moment like the thrill of sex was killed with her, that she killed it when she answered his gesture. “Is that what you wanted?” he asked.

Sloane waited for a half minute before she spoke. “Wipe my lipstick off your face.” Steve grabbed a napkin, saying, “You are cold,” as his wiped his face.

“You made this decision to like me,” she answered. “You made your bed, as they say. Now you have to —”

“I know. Head to the Hilton Hotel,” which they inevitably did, and they found their way to their dining table. That was where she spotted Kyle.

Before the meal was finished, they started playing music. Steve liked the big band music and asked her to dance. She knew full well that he was doing this so he would look good, and so that they would look good together. She knew he was trying to be nice, and she didn’t have any opportunity to tell Steve it was unnecessary, she consented to his request and mentioned, “You’ll have to bear with me. I don’t dance.”

Steve was a gentleman throughout the dances. He had a style and grace when he danced, even with Sloane, even with someone who said they couldn't dance. Sloane saw Kyle and his wife dancing at one point; she thought it was refreshing to see them together dancing. Kyle's wife Elisa seemed happier than she did at a lot of the formal parties Elisa went to.

She opened a text program early Sunday morning so she could do the writing she should have done the night before...

"I'll start with some grizzly facts, facts you might not want to hear, or facts you might know all too well. Twenty-two million people are currently infected with HIV. Five new victims are infected every minute. Ninety-four percent of infections occur in undeveloped countries. AIDS is now the leading cause of death of men and women between the ages of 25 and 44 years in our country.

"Medications and drugs have been difficult to develop for HIV for many reasons. Constant check-ups are necessary, because a change in viral load would necessitate a change in the amount of medication to be taken at any given time. The virus multiplies very rapidly in the body, making it almost too fast to fall when under attack. During HIV's life cycle in a body, it mutates constantly. This increases the chances of cells mutating into a less 'prone' cell by the body. These cells then continue to mutate and multiply, making it harder to fight.

"A cure is difficult because the virus integrates itself into normal cells. And initial waves of success in studies have led to

high expectations — that have often failed.

"Drugs that have been developed have made great progress in lengthening the amount of time the human body can battle the virus. The medical community has developed drugs that each attack a different part of the virus, in effect staging a multiple-level attack.

"But the focus of these drugs is to get rid of the virus in the body. There is another way to destroy the virus.

"All viruses attack the human body's immune system. Drugs to date have worked on removing the virus from the body, but the drugs also weaken healthy cells in the immune system. Strengthening the immune system can also help the body naturally fight the virus.

"Vaccines are a way we strengthen our immune system in order to deal with viruses; small pox, polio and the measles are examples.

"Currently researchers have been unable to develop a vaccine for HIV. But there is another way to strengthen the immune system, and strengthen the human body so it gives it's immune system less to fight, and that is by taking care of the body naturally.

"Once someone has full-blown AIDS, their immune system starts to lose its ability to fight other viruses that attack the body. The current drugs can improve the viral load of a patient, but although a viral load can change, it has not been shown that any drugs can correct a ravaged immune system. If the drugs could eliminate the virus, it wouldn't change

and correct the damaged immune system the virus left behind. In the future, if a cure is found, there may still be a problem with people who have recovered from HIV and AIDS who have a low tolerance for other infections.

"So the key may lie in natural remedies to take care of your body. The logic works like this: in order to battle HIV, you can work on destroying HIV with drugs, and you can also work on improving your own natural defenses, so your own body can better fight HIV. And attacking the virus on two levels is better than only fighting it on one.

"For thousands of years different civilizations have relied on herbs and plants to help solve medical problems. Western medicine has made strides much greater than what could have been done with barks and berries, but during our searches for synthetic cures we may have forgotten the fact that taking precautions can keep your body in better shape.

"Also, our changing lifestyles in developed countries such as America, have given us more synthetic foods, filled with preservatives, additives, sweeteners, and other chemicals — instead of spices, herbs and other things found naturally in certain foods that could help our immune systems and keep us healthier. So not only are we bombarded with chemicals that our bodies need to battle, what we choose to eat — our 'fuel,' so to speak — isn't doing all it can to help us keep in shape. In fact, the choices we make

about what we choose to eat can sometimes hurt us more than help us.

"If you've been diagnosed with HIV or have full-blown AIDS, there is an added urgency to taking care of your body and helping your immune system. A virus has declared a war on your body; now it is up to you to strengthen your defenses and fight a good battle.

"There are many levels that homeopathy and natural therapies work on. What might work for you is a combination of parts of what we suggest here. Whether you feel the benefits of hypnosis over acupuncture, or whether you prefer taking vitamin supplements to eating spinach, starting to take steps to take control of your own health will show great improvements in your emotional as well as physical well-being.

"The following chapters will show you what people have done throughout the ages to help improve their general health. They will show you what sorts of natural remedies may help you to combat some of the painful and difficult side effects some people suffer from taking AIDS/HIV drugs. They will show you what nutritionists have said about diets for people with HIV. This book goes over exercise regimens, supplements, even psychotherapy and support groups.

"We have worked for a long time coming up with drugs that may help people with the battle of HIV and AIDS. But what we can't do, you can. In conjunction with your current

medication plans, this book may give you the edge you've been looking for.

"And for once, we didn't sit in a laboratory and create it. We've collected this information from the knowledge of hundreds of generations of experience, and now it is yours.

"Let us prepare to win the war."

Looking over what she wrote, she knew she'd have to write more. But it was late, and she could stand to sleep. She could check her e-mail Sunday evening.

Later in the day she went to her e-mail. She knew she had to save all of these letters so she could eventually respond to them all to thank people for writing, and she knew she had to have someone archive all of these letters and categorize them for her. Once again she had well over a hundred letters, all personal stories about people with AIDS, people who know people with AIDS, and what they do to get through the days.

From: ardien@quantum.net

Date: Friday, 11:06 p.m.

Subject: my child had AIDS

My son had surgery for a heart defect when he was an infant. He went through three rounds of surgery by the time he was five. Then he seemed to be sick all the time. We took him into the doctor. He was always at the doctor, when anything was wrong, because we worried about him all the time. They took his blood and did a complete work-up on him and found out he had HIV and it was already attacking his immune system. They figured it was from the last blood transfusion he had from surgery. We are suing the hospital now. Because he was just a little boy he was not prepared to fight infections the way an adult might have been able to. HIV might have stayed dormant in an adult body for a few years, but not in my little boy's body. This was three years ago. He is bed-ridden now. He cannot go anywhere. I am crying as I write this. We tried to do everything for him. We gave him foods that were extra-fortified. We made sure he didn't go outside when it was

cold. We never really let him out of the house. We dusted all the time. We had air purifier machines working in most every room of the house. We used disinfectant cleaners to clean everything. We tried to smile to our baby boy, all the time. We were dying inside, with him. The doctors said they're amazed he's lasting as long as he is. We never knew what else to do. We try to do everything. I don't know if this helps you. It helps me, writing it down. We were told to keep the air clean and make sure everything was clean around him. We avoided perfumes in our laundry detergents. We tried to make sure he breathes nothing that could harm him. I don't know if AIDS patients are that careful.

I wish he didn't have to die, but I've seen him in pain for so long a part of me wants to see him rest in peace. I don't know why God would do this to me, or to my son. I think a lot of people wonder that, why does God allow this to happen. I hope this helps you.

From: Cameron447@ala.edu

Date: Friday, 11:15 p.m.

Subject: AIDS story

I have had AIDS for a number of years now. My T-Cell count is 4, when it should be nearly a thousand. I still work. I stopped drinking. I needed to continue my work, because that is what kept me going. Someone told me to take shark liver oil, and when I did, I felt a lot better. I don't know what it did for me. I try to take care of myself. I work out, lift weights, to try to build more muscle mass so I don't get too thin or lose my appetite. My work is what really keeps me going, though. It makes me feel like I have a reason to wake up in the mornings now.

I have a dog. He is wonderful. I have to make sure he's clean. I get him groomed and I pay kids on the block to wash him. He provides constant affection to me. He is great at supporting me without trying. I think about the unconditional love that dog has and it makes me happy. It's like having a whole family to come home to.

I don't live in the same town as my family, I was moved to this town with my job, and I don't have many friends. So I try to think of reasons to keep living. I think when the day comes that I get worse, I might move back. I think I'll need my family then, if they'll have me. It's a choice you have to make every day: Am I going to live or am I going to die? So I have to think every morning of reasons to live, even if it's for something like my dog, or the fact that they need me at the job site. It gives me reason to smile in the morning, knowing someone needs me and I can be there for them. It gives me reason to smile in the evening when I come home from work knowing my dog will be waiting there for me. You have to look for something to live for. I don't know if shark liver oil helped, or if it was my attitude. I just know that you have to decide to make it. If you need anything else, let me know. I hope this helps out, and I hope this was what you were looking for.

From: gratis40242@prodigy.com

Date: Friday, 11:22 p.m.

Subject: mineral water

I have had HIV for a few years, but it has never grown into AIDS. I am not on any drugs. I figured that when it does become AIDS, that's when I'll start fighting. In the meantime I've become a bit of a health freak. I drink about two gallons of mineral water a day. I eat well and work out daily. And I do yoga in the evenings. I am very conscious of what I eat. Only every once in a while do I allow myself to slip and do something less good for me. I think of them as "treats," the way sometimes in a diet you're allowed to have something fattening, as long as you don't go overboard.

I think the exercise has been really good for me, it has given me a lot of energy that I didn't have before. I give a lot of credit to drinking mineral water, too — I think I get a lot of minerals that I wouldn't get in a supplement, and the water cleans out my system and keeps my skin feeling good, too.

I'm not dying. Technically I'm not. AIDS has not affected me. And I'm hoping that if I keep up this regimen my body will continue to stop AIDS from starting. When I work out I have to think that I'm doing something to make me better, not that I have to do this otherwise my body will let this virus kill me. I have to think that I'm taking control. I think that's the key. People feel like they have no control in their lives. You have to take some of that control back, especially when AIDS seems like such an uncontrollable illness.

If you know someone who has AIDS, tell them to start working out more, and to drink a lot of water. It will help them, and it will give them energy. And they will feel like they're doing something positive for themselves. If you have any questions about specific exercises I do, feel free to write back.

From: TForest@med.go.ofd.uk

Date: Friday, 11:29 p.m.

Subject: AIDS and HIV

I am in a study currently. I have AIDS. The only thing I have to do in this study is take their drugs. There is no lifestyle change. I have about twenty pills a day. My lover insists that I take vitamin supplements too. I take about six vitamin pills a day. He has been so helpful to me. He organizes all of my pills every day so I know what time to take what pills. It is almost like he is taking them too, he goes through everything with me. He has given me so much support. I don't know how I could have gone through this without him.

I worry sometimes that he feels like he has to stick by me because I have AIDS. I feel bad that he can't have the love life he wanted. He gets checked regularly. I've had AIDS for a little over a year. So far nothing has turned up on him. That makes me happy. I can't be a lover to him anymore though, and I don't want him to have to wait for me. He keeps telling me that he wants to go through this with me; he wants to be there for me. I have to keep thinking of him in order to pull

through this mentally. I've been doing okay lately. He keeps me from smoking. I used to smoke, and I really miss it. I think all the vitamins help too. Maybe it's the drugs I'm on in the study, but who knows, maybe I'm in the control group and am not even taking any drugs. Either way, I seem to be doing okay. As for the vitamins, I take a multi-vitamin, a B6, a C, an A, an E and another B-complex. I was told the B and C would help me. Maybe they have. Maybe it's the study. Maybe it's Eric. Either way, so far, I'm making it. It could be anything that's helping me through it. I don't want to get rid of any one of those things, in case it is the magic potion that has kept me in okay shape. I just thank Eric, every day. And I take it day by day.

From: Ccandd@shout.net

Date: Friday, 11:41 p.m.

Subject: friend with AIDS

You wanted stories about AIDS. I don't have AIDS, but my friend does. I don't know if this will help you, but I'll write it anyway. My friend told me he had AIDS over the phone. I couldn't believe it. It was one of my best friends. And he sounded like he was fine with it. He was laughing and talking and acting like it was something he could deal with. All I could think was that he was going to die. I had to stop myself every second of that conversation from crying. It was so hard to stay there on the phone and try to be calm. He said he changed his habits, he was on some drugs, he got into a study group in his state, so I'm not sure if they were AZT or not, but he was on some drugs. He said he hadn't been with anyone, and he stopped drinking. I think a part of him thinks he can beat this.

And it was so hard for me to think about one of my best friends dying, at such an early age. It was so unfair. I cried for so long. I wanted to be there for him, but he lived on the other side of the country.

Finally I got a long weekend and made the trip out to visit him. I was so nervous that I was just going to

start bawling my eyes out when I saw him. I didn't know how I'd react, seeing that this would be the first time I saw him since I heard. When I saw him he was happy and so was I. We gave each other a big hug and instantly started cracking jokes with each other, the way we always would. It made me realize that he was still there, he was still alive, he wasn't dead yet. I was mourning him while he was still alive.

He said he had to accept the fact that he might only be around for another ten years, if he takes care of himself. But he has to look at it as a new lease on life. He said that any day he walks outside a car could hit him. He said this is his chance to live, and do what he wants with his life, now that he knows how precious life is.

I thought about the fact that I figured that one day I would visit him with my husband and we'd show pictures of our grandchildren to each other. But that wasn't going to happen anymore. He wouldn't have kids, much less grandchildren. I noticed he lost weight and looked skinny, but other than that, it was my same old friend. And suddenly I had to stop thinking of him as dying. He could never die, not before his heart stopped beating. He was — and is — all about life. He is not dying, he is living, and that is what has kept him so healthy. I'm sure of it. I'm sure that over half of the battle is a battle of the mind. It's a battle to say to yourself that you're not dying, you're living.

And the more I thought about it, the more I thought that if anyone could handle AIDS, it was my friend - he had the strength to deal with it. It still wasn't fair that this had to happen to him, but I knew that if anyone could fight it, he could. It was all in his outlook on life. It is all how you choose to live. He chose to live, and that's exactly what he did. He's still making that choice. And I think that's why he's doing well today. I hope this helps you out. It was nice to actually write it; you don't think of it concretely until you have to put it down on paper. Well, good luck.

From: skinner@lightning.org

Date: Friday, 11:48 p.m.

Subject: <>

I didn't know I was infected with HIV until my daughter was diagnosed with AIDS. I gave it to her, and she died as I was being tested. I had no idea. I used to do heroin. It was stupid. I battle every day with wanting to do drugs again. Sometimes I slip. I don't have my daughter anymore. She died when she was only a few months old. I don't have any suggestions on how to deal with AIDS, only suggestions on how to not get it, but you know those. It's a lot easier to not get AIDS than to deal with it. I guess all I could say is don't make the same mistakes I did.

From: Holly@urban.online.org

Date: Friday, 11:56 p.m.

Subject: AIDS and hypnosis

I have had AIDS for a few years. I am on a cocktail now and my T-Cell count has gone up from eight to 410. The doctors are thrilled with me. Recently I started hypnosis with a doctor in the Santa Monica area. It helps to relax me and keep me thinking about the positive aspects of dealing with my illness. I have to try to look at this as a learning experience – now I have to learn to make decisions that will help me live my life. It taught me to be responsible, something I wasn't before. My doctor says he uses hypnosis to not only relieve any depression I may be feeling, but he also does exercises to try to make my body fight the virus. I don't know how well that works, but I know that I'm getting along a lot better now, with the hypnosis.

You have to believe it, though, in order for it to work. Some people can't be hypnotized, but it's only because they're resistant to the idea of being hypnotized. I don't know if there are any studies done on this or not, but I know it has helped me. And I hope this can help you.

From: Tristen117@interactive.com

Date: Saturday, 12:07 A.M.

Subject: How I Deal With AIDS

I have noticed a lot of muscle stiffness with one of the drugs I have been taking for AIDS. A friend of mine told me about someone they knew who did acupuncture and acupressure. I was afraid of sticking needles in me, you know what I mean, so I talked to the therapist and had one session of acupressure. I noticed that I felt so much more relaxed, that my muscles weren't killing me when I tried to walk across the room. I almost felt after one session like I could go jogging again. I go to regular sessions now, once every two weeks and I feel like a new man. I think a lot of things are out there that can help people deal with the side effects of the cocktails for AIDS. Why are you looking for this information? Your posting said my letter would remain confidential — why wouldn't it? Are you a writer, trying to do an article on this or something? Let me know what you need information like this for. I told you my story, now you can tell me yours. Thanks.

From: girrl@aol.com

Date: Saturday, 12:12 A.M.

Subject: AIDS

I'm on my friend's account. She saw this posting and asked me to write to you. I have AIDS. I hung around with the wrong crowds. My friend is always telling me to get on line and I can learn something from the Internet. But I know everything I want to know. She always checks the computer to see what she can learn about AIDS. I know she is trying to care for me and understand me, but I don't need it. She told me you want my story. It's not much of a story. I made some bad choices. I was a runaway teenager. I slept around and got free drugs. I was never a prostitute, but I slept with men for drugs. I don't know how I got it. It could have been in one of a thousand places. I lived like this for three years. Then I got sick so

I broke into a pharmacy and tried to steal some drugs, to make me better. Instead I was caught. They put me in the hospital and told me I had AIDS. Now I am in prison. I am twenty years old. They put me on drugs. They give me a regimen. I'm supposed to be in prison for another year. I shot someone while I tried to rob the pharmacy, but I barely wounded them. Basically, I do what they tell me here. People don't mess with me since I have AIDS. They all think that if I touch them they'll die. I don't mind that they think that, actually. It helps me be alone. They have a few computers here at the prison and they let us write letters. I typed this up for my friend to e-mail to you.

I wonder how long I will live here. I mean, I might die in prison. I hear it's a slow painful death with AIDS. Sometimes I think I want to kill myself, and end it sooner. No one wants to listen to a prisoner complain that they have AIDS. What would I do when I got out anyway? I have no family and no money. I wouldn't go back to my family; they would reject me I'm sure. I don't know what my friend thinks she'll accomplish by sending this to you. I have too many problems to begin to go into here. But if it makes her happy, I do it. She's the only one that visits me here. I think she cares about people more than I do.

From: 39564.2954@compuserve.com

Date: Saturday, 12:26 A.M.

Subject: AIDS

You posted a request for information about how people deal with AIDS, so I thought I'd write.

I meditate. I have had AIDS for a year and a half, and shortly after I found out I started looking into religions, and liked Buddhism. Whether or not I follow it completely, I don't know if that really matters. I found something that I can think about when times get rough for me. And meditating once a day relaxes me so much that I can't blow a gasket the way I used to. I used to be such a "Type A" person; I'd get stressed at everything. And I know that's not good when your body is already

taxed with a deadly virus. You know, your body has enough to deal with; you don't need to add a little more stress to your system. So I thought: maybe there's something after this life? I didn't really go for the idea that there was a heaven and a hell and a purgatory. I kind of like Buddhism, but more than that I think I liked the way it just let you go along, you know, it let things roll off your back easier. I can clear my head now by focusing on a single word. I think it really has helped my system from going into overload.

I can get information about what I've been doing if it would help you out. Glad someone is out there looking for ways to help out people in my situation. Good luck.

From: Augustus@Physics.dbu.edu

Date: Saturday, 12:37 A.M.

Subject: AIDS and diet

I used to be a vegetarian. I didn't like the idea of eating dead stuff. I was a vegetarian for over five years. I was healthy. A little thin, but healthy. I was excellent at track and field in college. I was the star of the varsity men's team. I messed around in my early twenties, and had a few one-night stands with men I didn't know, and yes, there was unprotected sex involved. I thought when I was feeling run down it was because I was just getting older. I was always used to being able to do anything athletically I wanted to; my cardiovascular system was in great shape. And although I was getting a little thinner, I didn't want to eat anything, so I didn't think of it as a problem.

Then I went to the doctor. They put me on drugs; I had AIDS. I didn't know which partner it was that gave it to me. I tried to find them all. The hardest part was finding people I slept with and telling them I had AIDS and I didn't know where I got it. It broke people's hearts. I was basically telling them they played Russian roulette, and they might be dying from a bullet wound when they didn't know they were hit.

I couldn't even find everyone; some of the people I

slept with I didn't know the last names of, and they didn't know any friends of mine.

Well, I learned I had to get my appetite back. I'm no longer a vegetarian. I don't like eating meat, but I believe that people have the right to eat meat; it was just my choice not to. But I want to now, because it could help keep me alive. AIDS survivors need the extra fat and protein to bulk them up a bit, to put some meat on their bones. Sorry, no pun intended.

I was actually doing more harm than good when I was a vegetarian once I had AIDS. A vegetarian diet may be better for a healthy person, but not for someone with AIDS. I've put on weight now and feel better about myself.

So what can I tell you about AIDS? Don't get it. That's the important part. Don't do anything stupid. But also watch your diet. It's very important to helping you along and not feeling the effects of AIDS on your life.

From: flower8@urgent.link.com

Date: Saturday, 12:42 A.M.

Subject: who gets AIDS

I was in high school and didn't want to have sex before marriage. I thought sex was a scary thing. Everyone talked about doing it, but I tried to just steer clear of the subject when my friends talked about it. I acted like I did it before, but I'd never talk about it. I'd say things like "Talking about it so much just shows that you don't know how to handle it." I implied that I knew so much and I really knew nothing.

I was a junior cheerleader. I was going to the homecoming dance with my boyfriend, from the football team. That's how it was supposed to be, right? A cheerleader and a football player. A match made in heaven.

I think one of the reasons why football players like cheerleaders is because a cheerleader is small enough for them to be able to dominate over. My boyfriend raped me after the dance. He kept saying he wanted to leave the dance. I was having fun. I didn't know why he wanted to go so early.

Apparently he was a steroid user, and did a few other drugs. He wouldn't tell me how he got it. He never even seemed to be affected by having HIV. It was bad enough that he raped me, at least I didn't get pregnant, he didn't even think about the chance of that happening. But he gave me AIDS instead.

I was fine most of my junior year. Senior year I felt sick and didn't make the cheerleading team. I don't think I wanted to be on the team anymore anyway. High school was pointless to me. When you're raped not much seems important anymore. If someone can do that to your life, apparently your life doesn't seem that important anymore. I was really depressed. I told no one. So my parents noticed I seemed sick all the time, so I went to doctor after doctor. Finally someone asked me if I had ever slept with anyone. I was wondering what he gave me. I never thought it could have been AIDS.

I didn't graduate. I saw no point in it. I knew I had to get out of that school. I took courses and got my GED less than a year after I would have graduated.

I keep trying to stay in shape. I keep thinking that I will never have children. I keep thinking that I should have had a big wedding. I should have the big dress and the big wedding and some sort of prince that would take care of me for the rest of my life. But that's not going to happen. He took that away from me.

Since I graduated I got a job working as a crisis hotline operator and a counselor for AIDS patients. I visit people in the hospital. You'd think I'd hate to see it, hate to see people almost dead, the way I'll one day be. But it makes me feel better. If I'm here doing this for them, there might be someone doing this for me in the future. I have to keep thinking that I can fight this and help people so they don't have to feel the pain that I went through. When I tell someone on the hotline that I know what they're going through, I mean it. I tell them I have AIDS and they believe me, they don't think I'm feeding them a line. And they trust me. And they feel better.

If I didn't get AIDS I wonder if I would have worked as a crisis hotline operator for rape victims. The rape still bothers me, but my having AIDS has replaced my hatred for what happened to me with a fear of dying. I don't think I would have done anything like this, like being the crisis hotline operator, if this didn't happen to me. I think of my hotline work as counseling for me. When no one was there to help me out. I felt so alone, and there was no one to help me through it. I don't want others to feel that way. Maybe this helps me, giving something back. I'm twenty now. I don't try to date, but I've met some good friends. I don't talk to anyone from high school anymore. What would I say to them? They have their proms and their homecomings. I have my rape and my AIDS. What gets me through is helping others in my position. If I can help them, I'll know there's less suffering in the world, and it's because of me. That makes me feel good. And that makes me want to keep living. That's what you have to look for, that's what I tell people. And it's true. So tell people that. Get through it emotionally somehow. I know it's hard, but you have to do it if you want to live. I can give you some lists of hotlines around the country, if you'd like. Let me know.

From: slam4silver@aol.com

Date: Saturday, 12:51 A.M.

Subject: herbs and natural remedies dealing with AIDS
My lover and I have AIDS. I do most of the cooking. We live together; we have lived together for seven years now. I started seeing ads on television about Ginkgo and other herbal supplements and I went to the health store to learn more. I went to the library and checked out a ton of books. We seem to do okay with the drugs, but I make a point to add anything to our diet that will make us feel better. We eat a ton of garlic in anything. It's supposed to be good for your heart and

your blood. We eat a lot of fresh herbs. We take ginkgo for memory retention. We take cayenne to help our circulation. We use supplements when we can't get the herbs. We make kombucha tea from the kombucha mushroom, I have heard of people saying that their T-Cell counts rose after drinking kombucha tea regularly. We seem to be doing okay. We have each other. We try to make a difference in our health in our every day lives. Instead of thinking of food as something to pick up through a drive-through window, we think of it as medicine. And we think it's working. I'm blessed to go through this with someone. I just keep looking for other ways we can do something to help ourselves. That's the key.

If you don't mind my asking, why are you asking? It didn't say in your post why you wanted the information. Do you have AIDS, or did you just find out that someone you love does? That's usually when people want to learn more, when they first really have to deal with it. You'll get used to it, I promise. That's not such a great thought, I mean, who wants to get used to a fatal disease, but it will become easier with time. If you need to talk, feel free to write back.

From: skijane@power.network.org

Date: Saturday, 12:59 A.M.

Subject: AIDS and God

Some people say that God hates gay people, and that he punishes them with AIDS. I don't know if that's the case. I used to be very religious. My family brought me up Catholic. But I got away from my beliefs and did some things I am not so proud of. When I found out I had AIDS, I did not know how to deal with it. I wanted to die right away. But then I thought about what could keep me alive forever — Jesus. I couldn't believe I let my faith go like that. I realized that Jesus Christ could help me see the error of my ways and bring me peace before I left this world. I now go to church every week, and I do volunteer work for the church as

well. I feel like my life now has meaning when it didn't before. Why was I living the life I had? It wasn't making me happy. If I can show others where true happiness is, maybe I can help other people too. I feel like now I have a mission with God, and that is to help people from getting AIDS and help people in dealing with AIDS. The church is a good support group of people that I can talk to. I know many people who get AIDS go back to their church for the remainder of their days. It provides great comfort. Maybe getting AIDS was God's way of punishing me for straying from the church. I don't think of it that way, though. I think of this as my calling, that I can serve as an example for those who lose their way. I feel like I have a new lease on life, because now I have something to look forward to.

From: user6@elect.cafe.com

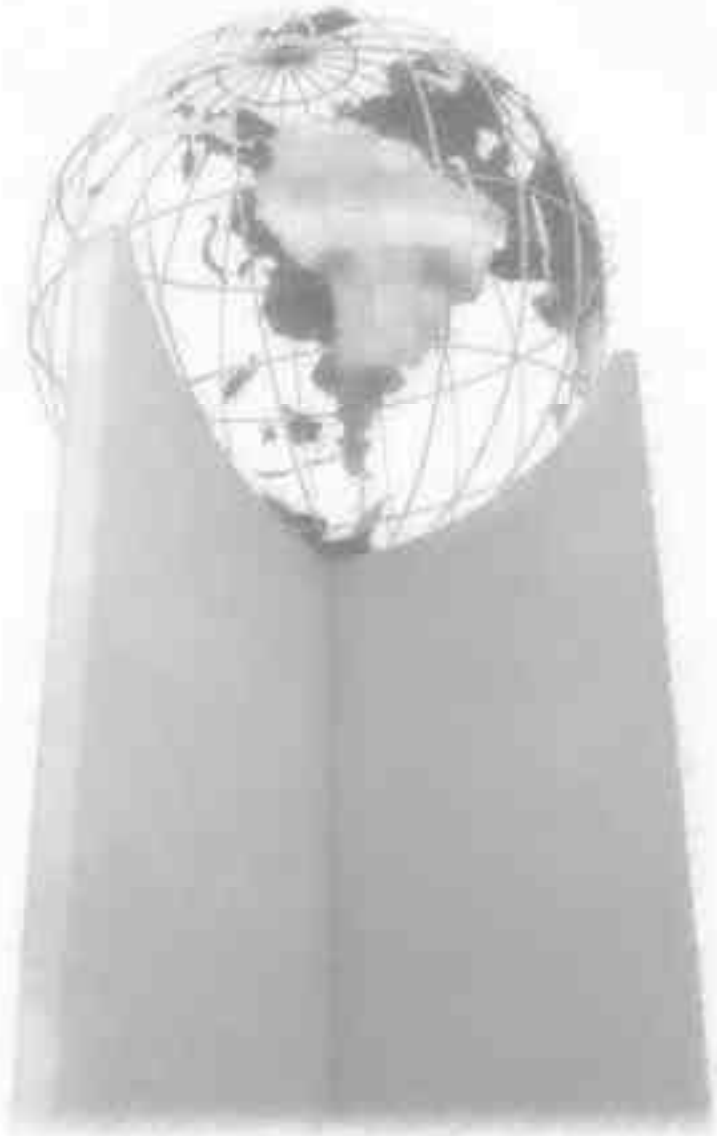
Date: Saturday, 1:22 A.M.

Subject: engineered AIDS

I am a government spy. I got AIDS from an agent from another government while on a mission. U.S. government Agents cured me with one injection and three days of bed rest. AIDS was used for the U.S. government's purposes. The cure was engineered and used. You are looking in all the wrong places to find your answers.

After reading this last e-mail, she leaned back. She didn't expect it, discounted it and continued reading.

She saved all of the e-mail she read, but she kept thinking back to the letter she received on engineered AIDS. She had no evidence that it was right. There was no proof of the claims made in the e-mail. She saved the letters and continued reading for the rest of the night.



CHAPTER 6

THE CONSPIRACY SEARCH

Sloane arrived at the office at 8:45 in the morning. Everyone was already in the office and watched her as she walked through the laboratory door. She went straight to her office.

Julie was the first to enter her office. Without even getting the chance to meet their new assistant, Sloane had a list of things for her to do.

Julie walked up toward Sloane for instruction, with her right hand out to shake hands. “I am the new assistant for your Department. My name is —”

“Your name is Julie, and hi,” Sloane responded, not even realizing that she was in such a rush to get work done that she had cut Julie off as she tried to introduce herself.

“You know who I am already? ... You must be Sloane Emerson,” Julie said, remembering everything she could from her accompanying paperwork that she didn’t even have to glance at. “Where do I go and what would you like me to do?”

“We’re working on finishing a book that we’re all writing part of here, and I’ve got my intro for the book done, and I need you to print it up for the staff. It will give them something to start from. Remind them that they need

to do a two-sentence biography for the end of their chapter. Come back to me when you're done; I'll have more for you to do in a bit."

"Ms. Emerson, are you okay?"

Looking up from her desk, she tucked her hair behind her ears. "Yes. Why?"

"You're late, I can tell it's not like you, because the staff was even worried."

Eyeing the clock on the wall, Sloane spoke. "I'm in fifteen minutes early."

"Yes, on company time, but on... Emerson time, you're late."

Sloane smiled. "I was up late finishing the introduction." Sloane adjusted her position and looked more serious again. "Let me know as soon as you've finished printing the introduction. I've just hooked up my computer to the system, so I'm on the network — so you can just take the file from my computer."

"I'll get right on it. Sorry to pry."

"No problem." Sloane watched the temp walk out of her office. "Wait — one more thing."

Julie turned around, "Yes, what is it?"

"I should have said this before, but it would be very helpful if you could go through past general e-mails about Emivir and drug questions and sort them for me as well. There are a few e-mail addresses to sort from, and we can get you on to mine as well for reading and saving purposes only. It would save me a lot of work, and it will help me sort the data that has been coming in."

"Not a problem," she answered as she left.

Julie didn't need to know that Sloane was up late working on the introduction but also that she couldn't sleep because of the e-mail she had received. Most of the letters amazed her, and to some extent made her sad, because it seemed to her that the people who coped the best with their illness were also the people who never seemed to deserve the hand that was dealt to them.

But the letter that kept her awake was the one she had read suggesting that the United States government used this disease to their advantage — and that bothered her the most. She decided that she needed to get to the bottom of that letter.

But on to a vaccine first, Sloane thought.

Thinking about the vaccine options, it seemed to make the most sense to her to focus on either a Recombinant Vector Vaccine or a Whole-Inactivated Virus Vaccine. Vaccines where part of the virus was deleted had a lesser chance of success than a vaccine where part of the virus is inactivated; that's why she liked the idea of a Whole-Inactivated Virus Vaccine. If that

could not be accomplished, she thought, she could attempt to use a live virus that's not HIV by modifying it to transport part of HIV, hence the Recombinant Vector Vaccine. She started writing out tests for different projects, starting with a Whole-Inactivated Virus Vaccine first, when Julie walked back into the room.

"Everyone has your chapter, Ms. Emerson. What else would you like me to do?"

Sloane thought about the e-mail she had received last night. "I put another posting up this weekend, and I got a ton of e-mails about how people deal with having AIDS, and I would like you to download them to our network. That's the first thing. Secondly, there was a particular e-mail in there, it was very short, and it talked about the government's involvement in using AIDS on spies. Save that e-mail too, but also do some research for me and find out where that e-mail came from. Third, I would like you to go on line and get as much information as possible by the end of the day for me about government conspiracy theories."

Julie looked at her for another moment. "Government conspiracy theories?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, government conspiracy theories about AIDS and the HIV virus."

"But..." Julie looked visibly confused. "But why?"

"Oh, that e-mail I read made me realize that there are ideas out there about this disease that I'm not aware of. I'd like to learn about them."

Julie looked at her for a moment. "Download e-mails to the network, trace the e-mail related to the government, and look for AIDS government conspiracy theories."

"Yes. By the end of the day."

"Do you remember exactly what the e-mail you want me to trace said?"

"Something like, 'I was a spy, the government cured me of AIDS.'"

Julie looked around briefly again. "Okay..." She turned toward the door.

Sloane spoke before Julie could leave. "I don't think he was telling the truth in this e-mail. I don't believe it, but I've been trying to understand how people view HIV and AIDS, how they deal with it, and this is an avenue I could read up on while I'm at home tonight. I might as well. Besides, I haven't read any good fiction lately."

Julie smiled. Sloane knew that she had subdued Julie's fears. Sloane

watched Julie walk out of her office again, and instead of going back to outlining her vaccine tests she'd make a phone call.

It was just after noon in New York when she called Quentin Publishing.

"Carter Donovan, please." Sloane waited to hear his voice.

"This is Carter Donovan."

"Carter, it's Sloane."

"How are you? No glitches with the book?"

"No. I just finished my overview chapter, and it has been distributed to the staff so they know how the book starts. I did it over the weekend, so they should be able to finish up their parts by the end of the week. You're going to have someone in here for us by next Monday?"

"Yes ma'am. Glad to hear everything's going according to your tight schedule."

"That's not what I was calling about, actually."

"Really? I hope it was social."

"Hey, I'm the one that made the effort to be social last, I'm waiting for you to make the next move."

Carter could hear the smile come through in her voice. "I'll keep that in mind then," Carter answered.

"Besides, I don't know why you wouldn't want to come out here to visit me the 'rain capital' of the country anyway." Carter laughed and answered by saying, "I've never had an aversion to a good rain storm. So what were you really calling me about?"

"You offered to send me some books that Quentin has published about homeopathy and about AIDS. Have you—"

"Oh my God, I forgot. I can have a crate of books sent out to your office for tomorrow morning." Sloane answered by saying, "And if anything applies to our book, I'm make sure to add Quentin Books to our references list."

"I'll have those books out to you. Thanks for reminding me."

"Hey Carter, do you have any copies of that book of yours that you did the press check for last week?"

"Yeah, I have a few here. Why?"

"Could you throw one in the box for me?"

"Sure, but it's on economics, not AIDS."

"I know."

"Why is it so nice to talk to you?"

“Carter, I was just about to ask you the same thing.”

“Okay, I am going to visit you soon.”

“You better. You could even use this book as an excuse.”

“Another company perk, perhaps?”

“Is it deserved?”

“I wouldn’t take it if it wasn’t.”

Sloane laughed. “I’m going to go do some work now.”

“Keep me up to date on your progress. You’ll get your books tomorrow.”

Sloane hung up the phone and looked back to her computer. Kyle knocked almost instantly. “Hey, Sloane,” he said, “I didn’t mean to interrupt...”

“Don’t worry. I haven’t even talked to anyone in the laboratory yet, and I’ve been here for hours. How is everything going?”

“Oh, it seems fine, we’re all just working. Got your chapter.”

“Thought I better do it before people started working on theirs, so we were all on the same page.”

“What are you working on?”

“I’ve been trying to figure out how to approach the vaccine.”

“What’s on your mind?”

“HIV mutates at an alarmingly high rate. There are many strains of HIV. And consider that there are also many strains of influenza. But as a new strain develops, we are able to make a vaccine for it.”

“Yes, but you’re comparing the flu to AIDS.”

“That doesn’t change the fact that a vaccine is possible. Now if it’s just the flu we’re talking about, researchers usually use a live virus. That would mean that the two options to focus on are the Whole-Inactivated Virus Vaccine, then the Recombinant Vector Virus.”

“Whole-Inactivated first? Why?”

“I figured there’s a better chance of the body fighting the virus more effectively if it had the whole virus in the vaccine, with just a part of the virus inactivated. If that doesn’t work, I’d go for adding a part of the HIV virus to vaccinia, or some other virus carrier that would be harmless to the human body.”

“So what’s next?”

“I *have* been outlining tests that I want to start on. Have any ideas?”

“Print something up by this afternoon and I’ll sleep on it.”

“Maybe I’ll print up a few copies, for anyone who wants to look it over.”

Sloane spent the rest of the afternoon coming up with tests for HIV,

methods to make crucial parts of the virus inactive, so it would be safe to inject into animals, and later humans. She tried to disregard the spy message, but it still loomed in the back of her mind nonetheless. By the time lunch was over, though, she had to face up to the fact that she had to reply to that last e-mail she read. Getting on line, she sent a reply message to the e-mail recipient that had sent her the message that seemed to haunt her.

From: S_Emerson@Madison-Ph.com

To: user6@elect.cafe.com

Date: Monday, 1:22 P.M.

Subject: re: engineered AIDS

Who are you? Why did you write that? You offer no evidence and expect me to believe you. Please explain yourself.

Sloane signed off and tried to get back to work.

By the end of the day Julie handed over a stack of papers on AIDS government conspiracy theories. Julie told her that one of her e-mails was returned to her; it was the message she sent to the writer of the conspiracy e-mail message.

"It's a user public account that cannot receive messages, only send messages," Julie told her. "The e-mail account is from a coffee shop that has free computers for Internet use. I finally found the coffee house; it's in Denver. I got the phone number and address for you."

"Thanks, Julie. Now I've got another job for you."

Julie looked up at her. "Does it need to be done tonight? It's the end of the day."

"Some time tomorrow is fine. Can you look for all federal government agencies in the state of Colorado, and collect names and e-mail addresses from them? Also, look for e-mail addresses and staff lists for anyone in the FBI, the National Security Agency or the CIA."

"Do you know how hard that information is going to be to find?"

"Let me know what you can do. There have to be government staff lists on the Internet. Do you have any strings you can pull?"

"I don't know. I'll let you know tomorrow. I might have some computer friends that could help me out."

"Thanks a lot, Julie. I really appreciate it. You've been very helpful."

Sloane decided to read her stack of pages at home. After looking at the number of web sites Julie had listed for her, she realized that oddly enough, there were more conspiracy web sites for AIDS than there were homeopathy and nutrition pages for AIDS.

There was a plethora of conspiracies for Sloane to choose from:

1. There were conspiracies that AIDS was manufactured by America and the Russians stole it and infected us, conspiracies that AIDS was manufactured by America to get rid of homosexuals, blacks and other minorities, conspiracies that AIDS was manufactured by America and accidentally escaped into laboratory tests, where researchers hoped nothing would go wrong. All of the germ warfare theories indicated that HIV was manufactured in the United States.

Sloane immediately wanted to argue with the germ warfare theory. Everything she read implied that germ warfare could have happened, but none of the things she read could lend any credence to whether germ warfare actually did happen. The germ warfare conspiracy theorists presupposed that researchers had enough knowledge to create the AIDS virus. So many human experiments with resulting deaths for all subjects would have to have been engaged in, and there was no record of it. And testing would have taken over a decade, considering the length of time HIV stays in the body before damaging the human immune system and thus launching AIDS. This made Sloane sure that it couldn't have been used, because the government would want a disease that killed much faster than HIV did.

2. There was a conspiracy not in the creation but in the severe and deliberate mishandling/mismanagement of the virus after it first spread. These theorists mentioned that researchers regularly have to beg for funding, that they are limited in what they have to work with and don't make waves.

Reading those web pages made her angry. She knew that nationally more money went toward AIDS research than to heart disease and possibly even cancer — both of which had a broader base of people to affect and end up attacking many more people. It made her blood boil to think of a person having to work with their hands tied behind their back, as these theorists suggested. Then she wondered if their work could *somehow* be halted.

From one web site with no address listing on it, she read: "Suppliers who sell drugs or equipment to doctors know that in any field there are only a handful of leaders, and thousands more who follow the prevailing conventional wis-

dom. These followers do not seem to evaluate new treatments on their merits. (...) And in today's science and medicine, the leaders are those able to bring big money into their institutions. They remain leaders only so long as they remain acceptable to the political forces which control that money."

A part of her wanted to entirely agree with that theory, but that did not account for the private institutions that did research, such as Madison Pharmaceuticals. That was precisely the reason why she did not want to work at the University.

3. There was a theory that fundamentalist (religious) groups put pressure on the government to stop funding AIDS research.

That could be possible, Sloane thought, with the number of right-wing lobby groups gaining money from congregations. However, she had to believe that someone would not only be able to fight those lobby groups but expose them and reveal what cruel intentions those religious institutions had. The possibility that this was an option wasn't something she could argue with; again, it was the fact that there was no evidence to support the theory that made her want to argue it. Enough people would've wanted to discount those religious lobbying groups to have been able to expose them.

4. There was a theory that groups looked for a cancer that spread like a virus.

This suggested that researchers were trying to create a virus, which was similar in theory to the first line of conspiracy theories she read about. And the more she read the more she wanted to argue, wanting proof, and knowing full well that these listings were only theories and that there would be no proof at all to be found.

5. Sloane then read an article about someone who attempted hot therapy, heating the blood to 108 degrees to emulate a tropical fever. The government stopped then they had one successful case and wanted to continue on.

What she could not understand was why the government wanted to stop an experiment to help people unless there was evidence that this procedure could be too hazardous to the patient. This may be one of those situations, Sloane thought. Sloane knew it was a grave risk in performing any experiments with hot therapy; she thought that if people knew their bodies were decomposing they would be willing to undergo it, and then read on.

6. There were also reports of Simian Immunodeficiency Virus (SIV), which when injected into humans immunized people against AIDS. There

were examples of some prostitutes in Africa who didn't seem to have the virus, even though they had constant unprotected sex with patrons.

But there was never evidence of said prostitutes coming in contact with SIV.

7. There was a theory that AZT caused AIDS. When a patient is **told** they're going to die, they are put on AZT, and their condition then deteriorates. Drug usage also weakens the immune system, but sex doesn't. Most homosexuals use drugs on some level once they are diagnosed. HIV, according to these theories, is a livable condition that doesn't deteriorate the immune system — it was the strong drugs that attacked all parts of the immune system, which could not focus on just HIV-infected cells destroying the immune system.

Sloane didn't know about the validity of this, because she knew as a researcher what HIV could do. But it disturbed her, primarily because there might be patients out there who decide to reject drug usage for their treatment for AIDS because of what they think the government is doing to them, because they think all of the drugs will do them more harm than good. Sloane didn't want people to decide not to take drugs that might save their lives because they blindly believed what one web page told them.

But still, the more she read, the more it bothered her. It wasn't as if she believed in any of these theories, but the fact that these ideas exist may be an indication of foul play somewhere.

8. There was the theory that the government has a war on drugs but secretly keeps a stream of drugs out there, along with infected needles to spread AIDS, to remove "undesirable people" from the planet.

9. There was a theory that the creation of HIV and AIDS was a government scheme to reduce the planet's population. Declassified documents from meetings where dignitaries and government officials discussed the problem of over population mentioned that there should be research into controlling the possibility.

Noting that even though these documents existed, she knew that anyone could post a web page, and there was never in the documents an agreement for population control, or to create a virus.

10. One theory purported that HIV is not a sexually transmitted disease but just a virus, like getting a cold, and can be transmitted by something as simple as sneezing. The government, however, wanted to change the sexual behavior of the citizens of the United States and so they proclaimed that HIV

was a sexually transmitted disease.

Sloane kept reminding herself that false conspiracy theories actually make people less interested in practicing safe behavior or getting tested. This was one reason why she was irritated. The government may not try to stop the theories because they affect the believers more than they affect the government. People most at risk may use conspiracy theories as a part of their denial. And most conspiracy theories, as she could tell, were scientifically unsound, or homophobic/racist in origin.

Sloane walked over to the kitchen to get another glass of juice. She walked back to her desk in her apartment and reread a paragraph she couldn't get over.

"I know some people will read my letters and think that this could not have happened. You have too much faith in your government. I may not be able to 'prove' my theories in the 'absolute' sense, because in a relative universe absolute proof is impossible. The skeptic will demand absolute proof, knowing full well there is no such thing as absolute proof. This is no place for skeptics and cynics. This is a place where people rely on evidence, not merely unfounded ideas posed forth to them. This is a place where people decide what to believe in, based on what could have been."

This is what scared her, almost more than the idea that her government — the government of the country she lived in — could have created and unleashed this disease on the people — the government by the people, for the people. In that one paragraph someone suggested that she should not rely on proof.

"Proof is impossible, because we live in a relative universe?" Sloane said out loud. "Relative universe? The effects or intensity of gravity may be relative from one planet to another, but the concept of gravity is not relative. Things can be proven, and they are not relative." Sloane started pacing. "They say we have too much faith in our government, but should we have faith in some nobody who had enough spare change to put up a web site? They discount faith, but then they discount logic and reason by saying that no proof is possible." Sloane stopped and looked back at the paragraph. "What is their definition of a skeptic or a cynic?" For the sake of argument, she went to her dictionary on the corner of her desk and opened it to find some answers.

cynic (sin'ik), n. 1. A person inclined to believe the motives for people's actions are insincere and selfish.

skeptic (skep'tik), n. 1. A person who questions the truth of theories or apparent facts; a doubter. 2. A person who questions or doubts the possibility or certainty that humans are capable of knowing anything.

"A cynic would be more inclined to believe in a conspiracy theory than in their government, not doubt those theories!" she said in disgust at the dictionary. "And a skeptic could either question the argument of the conspiracy theory, or they could agree with that paragraph in that people are incapable of knowing anything!" She closed her dictionary, turned off the desk light and leaned back in her chair. "But if you know you're incapable of knowing anything, doesn't that mean that you know something for a fact, if that statement is something you know for a fact, and knowing something therefore negates your theory?" She posed her questions aloud in her darkened corner of the room. She looked over at her clock and realized that she had wrapped herself up in her work and that it was already past midnight. This was another one of those moments when people's behavior and lack of logic escaped her.

Sloane was in the office when Kyle walked in Tuesday morning. Kyle took off his coat and walked straight to her office.

"Did you eat breakfast yet?"

"No, I usually don't eat breakfast. Why?"

"I was going to use it as an excuse for a morning meeting."

Sloane stood up. "No problem. I can grab some coffee."

They walked out of the office and to Kyle's car; he offered to drive to a local donut shop. When they arrived Sloane sat at a booth while Kyle got his food. Kyle slid into his seat and looked at her.

"I just wanted to make sure everything was okay."

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"You seem to be acting a little strange, but I can't put my finger on exactly how. But other people are noticing it in the laboratory too."

"I have eight different projects on my mind, that's all."

Kyle pulled out his notebook and took the cap off his pen. “Let’s start with the first one.” “Kyle, you know most of it,” she answered. “There’s the integrase inhibitor, there’s reducing side effects and making the drugs easier to take, there’s improving Emivir, there’s coming up with drugs to attack only HIV, and not the entire immune system.” Kyle sensed her apprehension.

“What? This is exactly what I’m talking about.”

“Besides those I’ve got this homeopathy book, and I’ve done a lot of reading on how people have been dealing with AIDS, and it has made this a much more personal job. I’ve read the stories of people in prison with no will to live. I’ve read stories of people doing well, with the best attitudes, and I keep thinking, my God, all of these people have to go through so much, and they have to keep their spirits up the whole time. These people have a strength that usually goes without being tested.”

“Your concern is the drugs. You can’t let yourself get that personal. This is exactly the potential problem with doing research like this.”

“Kyle, you’re thinking of this as a laboratory experiment, and I’ve seen the human side of it. It just makes me think that there is so much on the line for these people, and I want to be able to make this work for them as well as for myself. But that’s not even all of it. After the four teams I’ve got the staff on doing four projects as well as working on the Home AIDS book, I’m working in my spare time on ideas for a vaccine and a cure.”

“A cure? You’ve talked to me about a vaccine, but not a cure.”

“Oh, I had an idea on how the cure has to be developed, but it’s just an idea, there’s nothing concrete to it yet.”

Kyle took a bite out of his donut as Sloane sipped her coffee.

“So you’re overworked?”

Sloane paused. “I’ve never been overworked before.”

“Maybe we’re pushing ourselves too far...” Kyle smiled and ate.

Sloane let a moment pass in silence before she spoke. “Kyle, I’ve received some information that has been disturbing to me. I don’t know how else to describe it.”

Kyle looked up. “What’s wrong? DID something happen to someone?”

Sloane looked confused. “Oh, no, everything is fine, it’s about my AIDS research; it’s not personal. So I’m thinking about something else as well, so I guess I’m being pulled in eight directions.”

“What is the new problem?” Kyle asked. “Oh...” Sloane knew she would

sound foolish to Kyle if she told him the truth. “Someone e-mailed me with some information, and I don’t think it’s valid, but I can’t get it out of my mind either way.”

“I don’t know what to tell you,” Kyle said. “I think the laboratory teams can handle the drug concerns, so get those out of your head. Your part of the homeopathy is done with; now just wait until the end of the week for the rest of the book and we’re set. So focus on the vaccines. Let the cure idea stay on the back burner. Keep thinking about it, but work on a vaccine now, because I think that’s your best bet. Maybe working on a vaccine will help you figure out what to do for a cure.”

“I know, you’re probably right.” Sloane looked away, and noticed Kyle’s newspaper folded on the edge of their table. A headline caught her eye. “Mind if I look at your paper?”

“Go right ahead.” Kyle continued eating while Sloane read the front page. She didn’t have any interest in looking for Steve’s column. “This is what gets me,” Sloane muttered. “What’s the matter?” Kyle asked.

“Oh, these groups trying to introduce gun laws, outlawing guns in this country.”

“Why on earth would you want a gun, Sloane?”

“I don’t. But that’s irrelevant. I don’t want pornography, either, but I’m not trying to stop anyone else from getting it.”

“But wouldn’t you feel safer knowing that guns were illegal?”

“I’m not worried about the lawful people buying guns, I’m worried about the unlawful people who would rob me with their guns, who will still be able to get a gun on the black market whether or not guns become illegal.”

“But what reason does a lawful person have to want or demand a gun?”

“That’s not the issue. Whether they want it for protection, or for shooting birds, or skeet shooting, or hunting, that doesn’t matter. The government should not be able to tell everyone that they cannot have a gun.”

“But we are a danger to ourselves with guns. Do you know how many accidental deaths a year occur with handguns?”

Sloane set the paper down. “It’s not the government’s job to protect people from their own stupidity, the government’s job should be only to protect people from the force of others — to protect people’s life, liberty, and their pursuit of happiness. Remember those words?”

“Isn’t the government protecting our lives by outlawing guns?”

“Maybe they should outlaw cars, then, since people get killed in them. Or maybe steak knives. Or scissors. Or ropes, you know, people can hang themselves with ropes.”

“Sloane —”

“No, Kyle, if you let the government control one aspect of your life, they will be fully justified in controlling every other aspect in that spectrum as well. One of the first things Adolph Hitler in his rise to power did was introduce gun laws so he could make sure the people he was about to put into concentration camps and gas chambers weren’t armed.”

“But that’s Hitler. That’s not America.”

“Kyle, the meaning of ‘life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness’ is three things. One, someone has a right to their own life, and no one can take that away. Two, they are free, so that no one can force them to be slaves or do things against their will. Three, they have a right to make the effort to continue their lives, they have a right to what they earn, and no one can take that away from them. They have the right to go out and look for a job, to make their lives better. Nowhere does it say that people have a right to a government that will make decisions about their own safety for them. That’s not the role of government.”

Kyle leaned back in his booth. “You know, you seem angry.”

“Do you not think this is something worth being angry about?”

“Do you actually think about these kind of things on a regular basis?”

“Of course I do. My life and livelihood depend on it. Don’t you?”

Kyle grabbed his coffee and folded his paper. “Don’t you have other things to worry about, say, like finding an AIDS vaccine?”

“Sure. But remember to be grateful that you live where the government doesn’t take away our right to do that.” Sloane smiled. “Should we get back to the lab?”

Kyle shook his head at her and slid out from the booth to head to work.

By the end of the day Julie came up with a list of names and corresponding e-mail addresses for every federal agency in the state of Colorado as well as for the FBI, the National Security Agency and the CIA. Sloane was amazed that Julie was able to pull it off.

“Ms. Emerson, all of the federal agencies in Colorado are for organizations such as water reclamation and energy conservation and resource distribution. Are you sure you want those lists combined with e-mail addresses from the FBI, the NSA and the CIA?”

Sloane thought about the fact that spies wouldn't be working for a water reclamation district, but if her contact was indeed a spy the agency might be a front for their real work. "Yes, please put them all into one list for this mailing," Sloane said. "Keep them separate in our files, so we know what groups the addresses are from."

"Got it."

Throughout the day Sloane thought about her deciding to send this questionnaire to everyone: could any of those agencies in Colorado really be a front for a group of government spies? She had no reason to believe so. She shrugged it off and started writing up a generic questionnaire to be sent to all the names on the list.

From: S_Emerson@Madison-Ph.com

BCC: list@Madison-Ph.com

Date: Tuesday, 4:56 p.m.

Subject: AIDS survey

Thank you in advance for your time. We are doing research about people's awareness of AIDS and HIV. We are interested in finding out what people know about AIDS and how people view AIDS. You have been randomly selected; your participation in this survey will help us with education about AIDS. It should only take a short amount of time, and your answers will remain strictly confidential. Thank you for your participation.

1. Do you know anyone with AIDS or HIV? If so, how many people?
2. How does one contract HIV?
3. Where do you think HIV came from; where did it originate?
4. What preventative measures will stop the spread of HIV and AIDS?
5. What are your views on the spread of AIDS? Do you feel that it may affect you at some point in your life? Once again, thank you once again very much for your time and consideration. This will be the last e-mail you receive. Thank you.

She told Julie to send the letter out to the list of people before she left work. Now it was just a matter of time, Sloane thought. Hopefully, if this person were from a government agency, they would recognize her e-mail address and write her back. She thought that maybe she should post a letter looking for someone who wrote her from that e-mail address.

Asking Julie to contact the coffee shop the next morning to see if they had records of who used accounts at their business, Sloane already knew the answer would be no, that people paid in cash, that there were no video cameras in the café to monitor who sent e-mails. But she asked Julie to do it anyway. She also asked Julie to post messages on all major bulletin boards about AIDS as well as conspiracy theories asking for the person who sent that e-mail to her to write her back. She doubted that would work either. But she had to try.

The next few days Sloane continued to work on her vaccine tests. She started two tests and was waiting for results. Thursday afternoon came and she still hadn't checked her e-mail. Julie was proofreading other chapters of the book as they were completed.

Late Thursday afternoon, her phone rang.

"Sloane Emerson."

"It's Toby."

"Toby, how are you? I haven't heard from you since Miami."

"Yeah, well, that's because I've been in a bit of a fight."

"Really? Who's girlfriend did you sleep with?"

Toby laughed. "I meant political fight." Then he turned serious. "A fight with the University. They cut all the funding for my project."

This shocked her. "All of it? Why?"

"They told me there was nothing there and that I should continue with the protease inhibitor research. It's insane."

"Are they right?"

"You know they're not. You saw the results I had after the first trip."

"But to tell you to go back to work on protease inhibitors? There are enough protease inhibitors on the market to have the government wasting its money on that, your research should focus on something else, something more pressing."

"The University is getting pressure from somewhere else. It's driving me crazy."

"You really think they're getting heat?" "Oh, I'm sure of it." Toby

answered.

“Toby, do you remember the name of the company that purchased the land in the rain forest?”

“I can get it, it’s in my notes. Why?”

“Find out if they’re related to the U.S. government, or if they got a loan from the government, or if they had to get approval or anything.”

“Why?”

“It’s just a hunch. It may help you find out why you’re facing opposition with your research.”

“You think the two relate?”

“I don’t know, but this is one way to find out. Let me know what information you get,” Sloane said. “Okay. Thanks, Sloane.”

“Why? I haven’t done anything.”

“You keep working. You never let me wallow.”

“What was that night in Miami, you know, ‘whiskey night?’”

Toby laughed. “What was the next morning, with you collecting rain forest research while I slept?” Toby paused before speaking. “I’ll call you.”

After hanging up the phone, she thought for a moment about the fact that she never stopped working, and that trying to make something happen with Steve failed miserably. Then her mind went to what she just told Toby to do. The thought wasn’t that someone finally realized how financially irresponsible his research was, but that the same people that pulled the plug on his research bought and cleared the land Toby was working on.

This frightened her. She couldn’t believe that someone was stopping Toby from working because he might be on to something. Reason and logic would dictate that his work was stopped because there was no merit in his expensive ideas.

All this talk about conspiracies was getting to her, she thought.

Looking over at her computer, she got on line to check her e-mail.

There were four responses to her e-mail questionnaire. Sloane was amazed; they sent out hundreds of letters, and after days they received only four responses.

From: T_Benson@fed.md.gov
To: S_Emerson@Madison-Ph.com
Date: Wednesday, 10:16 A.M.

Subject: re: AIDS survey

1. No.
2. Through unprotected sex, through intravenous drug use with a contaminated needle, blood contact between someone with an infected person or through a transfusion of infected blood
3. Africa
4. Stop drugs, use condoms
5. I don't think so. I'm happily married and do not use drugs.

Sloane deleted the first e-mail and read on.

From: 1057358@Water.CO.gov

To: S_Emerson@Madison-Ph.com

Date: Wednesday, 6:47 p.m.

Subject: re: AIDS survey

1. Yes. Two people.
2. Sex and drug use, or sharing of blood.
3. Africa, from a monkey
4. Do not engage in immoral activity.
5. I don't believe it will affect me because I take the appropriate precautions.

Sloane was getting more and more disappointed. She thought there was no reason to look at the next two. She deleted the one message from her e-mail box, then opened the third letter.

From: W_Owens@env.conserve.gov

To: S_Emerson@Madison-Ph.com

Date: Wednesday, 10:20 p.m.

Subject: re: AIDS survey

Was that a thinly veiled cover-up or did you not know you found me? 303.555.1843.



CHAPTER 7

THE DENVER EXPEDITION

Her heart was all she could think of, it felt like it was trying to come up out of her throat.

“Oh my God, this is it,” She mumbled. Or was it? She looked at the e-mail again. There was nothing in the letter that suggested that this was the same person. She picked up the phone anyway; it was almost automatic.

Placing the phone to her ear, she dialed the number. Her hands swiftly moved over the buttons with a speed and urgency she was unaware she possessed.

One ring.

Two rings.

“Hello?”

Listening to the inflection in the singular word, she tried to memorize the husky voice on the other end of the line; it was almost too low to be human. “Hello, you don’t know me. I just received an e-mail from you.”

“I know you. Call me in five minutes. Here is the number.” The deep male voice on the other end waited for a moment to be sure she was ready.

“Three-oh-three, five five five, eight nine six three.”

“What am I calling?”

“A pay phone. We will talk in five minutes.” The man hung up the phone. Sloane looked around the room.

She could think of nothing else but his voice. It was deep, mysterious, sexy. The voice on the other end of the phone was of a man who had something to share, vital information, and he knew it.

After looking around the room, she glanced at her watch. Three minutes left. She couldn't explain to herself why she was calling him. And she couldn't explain to herself why she was giving this theory any credibility in her own mind, when she had no evidence to believe his story that her own government orchestrated a conspiracy.

In her heart she knew that she was calling him to see if he had evidence.

Every story she had read about government conspiracy and AIDS was plausible, but there was never any evidence to prove them. She needed to find evidence.

Two minutes left. She looked around the room again.

Her stomach had been turning for hours. It was in knots.

Walking to her door, she looked at the lab. A few people were still working. Walking back to her desk, she re-read the e-mail message. The e-mail address indicated that the sender worked at an Energy Conservation Agency in Colorado Springs, a little over an hour south of Denver.

“Was that a thinly-veiled cover-up or did you not know you found me?”, she read.

Looking at her watch to make sure enough time had passed, she and picked up the phone receiver, once again dialing a number in Colorado.

“Hello?”

She instantly recognized the deep scratchy voice again.

“Who are you?”

“I'm someone who has answers you want.”

“I don't want answers without proof.”

“Proof?”

“Yes, I like evidence, and proof of things in order to believe in them.”

“I should have expected that out of you, Ms. Emerson.”

“How did you know my name?”

“Did you think I wouldn't see your name in your e-mail address, and do

you think I would send an e-mail out like that to anyone?"

"How did you know my name?"

"You're Sloane Emerson, of Madison Pharmaceuticals. You're e-mail is S. Emerson at Madison P. H. dot com."

"Why did I have to call you at a pay phone?"

"Because I think my phone line is tapped."

"Do you really work for the Energy Conservation Agency in Colorado Springs?"

"I work in the building."

"Do you really work for the Energy Conservation Agency?"

"...You should know that things aren't always as they seem, Ms. Emerson."

Not knowing what to do or ask, her mind raced to think of the next question, which never came,

"You're not asking very direct questions. I would have expected better of you."

"I have no real reason to ask any questions. You've given no reason to."

"You had no reason to call me, either."

Her conscience told her that all she could do was wait for him to continue.

"And if you won't believe my word, then there is nothing in this conversation that will change your mind."

"And what are you going to do about it?"

The man quietly laughed. "Me? You're the one wanting the information."

"And you're the one that offered it to me."

This time it was the man's turn to pause.

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

"Would you like to meet?"

"Where?"

"It would be best if I not travel."

"So you want me to fly out to Colorado Springs."

"Is that what you need to do?"

"Can I call you to confirm my flight arrival time?"

"Just meet me tomorrow at 6:00 p.m. for coffee at the cafe I sent you the first e-mail from. You have the address for the coffee shop, correct?"

Of course he'd know she checked up on him, and the coffee shop. "Yes."

"Leave a message on my machine if there are any problems."

They hung up from the pay phone before she could say another word. The only thing she could think to do was call Carter. She didn't know why

she felt she had to; she never usually talked to him when things were bothering her. But she had never experienced anything like this.

What will he think of my calling him this often?, she thought. She didn't want to overstep her boundaries in their friendship, but she felt like she needed to call him anyway, even if it wasn't expected.

Dialing his office, she looked at her watch and realized that with the time change he would be at home by now. She hung up, picked up the phone again and called his apartment.

"Hello?" It was good to hear his voice; it was soothing. "Carter, it's me."

"Is something wrong? You don't sound well."

Sloane realized she had nothing to say. What could she say to him? That she just talked to someone who claimed to be a government spy and she is planning on going to Colorado Springs to learn more about U.S. involvement in engineering AIDS?

"I'm... I just feel a bit disconnected, that's all."

"And so you thought of me."

"No, I was just wondering when you were getting into town."

"I planned to come up with a Quentin proofreader to go over the stories next week. I don't have to be there until Monday, but I could come in earlier, seeing that it's my turn to make the social visit."

"I might be busy for the next day or so, but other than that you're welcome here any time."

"Is Saturday afternoon too early?"

"Not at all. But if I have to go into the office, do you have any work to do?"

"I always do. And I always bring it with me."

It always sounded to her like Carter was grinning.

"Carter?"

"Yes?"

"Are you smiling?"

"What?"

"Are you smiling right now?"

"Well..." Carter thought about it for a brief moment. "I suppose I am."

"Why is that?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, are you always smiling? And if so, why are you always happy?"

"I don't know if I am always happy."

"You're always happy when you talk to me, and it cheers me up."

"Maybe it's you that's cheering me up; maybe that's why I'm smiling."

"I can't believe that, I have no sense of humor, how do I make you smile?"

"I smile when you remind me that you exist."

Grinning widely, she said, "Once again, your thick spreading of the old Donovan flattery has cheered me up. Thank you."

"I don't know why you were down. Everything is going well over there, right? The book, the integ— the new inhibitor?"

"The integrase inhibitor, Carter."

"I'm not the scientist, I don't have to know what it's called."

"Yes, everything at the laboratory is going well."

"And yet there is apprehension in your voice."

"Maybe you can drag it out of me when you come into town."

Carter laughed.

"Call me when you know your flight number so I can pick you up. But be forewarned — I don't have a limo."

"No, you have a plane, so I don't want to hear that tone of voice from you."

"The plane is not even mine, and I don't have a tone."

Carter's sarcastic tone increased. "Oh, yes, you do have a tone, my dear."

"You haven't heard a tone, but if you keep it up you will."

"Is that a threat or a promise?"

"Don't toy with me..."

They both let out a small laugh under their breaths.

"So call me with the flight information tomorrow."

"Got it ... Bye."

"Bye."

Sloane hung up the phone and couldn't stop smiling, until she looked back at her computer screen and saw the e-mail from the man in Colorado Springs. Then she thought about the plane. She walked out her door, past the lab, through the hallways of Madison Pharmaceuticals to the front desk. It was after six in the evening; most of the staff had been gone for hours. She looked at the papers on the front desk until she found a clipboard with the flight itinerary of the private plane. It was being used by Colin Saturday, but tomorrow it was free. She penciled her name in for a round-trip flight to Colorado Springs, leaving at three in the afternoon. She left a message for the receptionist to call Jim.

Then she said enough was enough and had to leave for home.

###

Friday morning Carter walked into the boardroom for the usual Friday morning meeting. “Do you have your itinerary planned for the Seattle trip?” a colleague asked.

“Yes,” Carter answered. “In fact, I’m going a day early so I can have more time to meet and talk with Ms. Emerson.”

“What for?” Carter heard over his shoulder. He recognized Shelly Stempel’s voice but didn’t realize she was eavesdropping. Carter turned around.

“I want to make sure Ms. Emerson is as pleased as possible with the business we have been conducting. I want to check with her to make sure everything is on schedule and to her satisfaction; she runs everything over there and I want her to know that I know it. And I want to talk to her about some ideas for new books as well.”

“New book ideas?”

“I don’t want to push her, but I want to let her know that she can work with us in the future.”

“When does the editor get there?”

“Monday morning. I’m sure we’ll meet her at the airport and go straight to Madison’s offices.”

Shelly started to look away; she didn’t seem satisfied with his answers. He asked, “Shelly, are you asking so many questions about this? Why does this interest you?”

Shelly tried to look nonchalant. “I’m not interested,” she said, “but I want to make sure you’re doing your job well.”

“That’s funny,” Carter answered, “I thought it was my job to watch over those things. When did you become my supervisor? Did I miss that memo?” A few people in the conference room laughed.

Shelly gave him what was supposed to be a mean look. “I just have the company’s best interests in mind.”

“And I don’t?”

Shelly walked out of the conference room. Carter knew she would overstep her boundaries every chance she got, and that he would have to stay on his toes to avoid problems with her. He knew he did a good job, in fact, he

knew he did a great job. But his performance didn't matter to people like Shelly, whose primary interest was not in getting better at her job, but leveling the playing field and destroying people that were better than her so that she would be the cream that rose to the top. Carter knew that was the only way she could operate; it was the only way she could succeed.

So in the meantime he'd have to contend with the likes of her getting in his way.

Carter then turned to the man he was originally talking to. "I wouldn't be surprised if the company's interests were the last thing on Shelly's mind," Carter whispered.

"If she could profit from them at the company's expense they would be her interests," Carter's colleague replied.

###

Friday afternoon she met Jim at the airport. Silently, she walked up the stairs to the plane. Jim noted that she seemed very quiet. He waited until they were about to take off before he spoke.

"So what's in Colorado Springs?"

"I have to meet someone there to get some information. When I'm done, we can go straight back."

"Where do you have to go?"

"A coffee shop." she answered. Jim knew she didn't want to talk about it; he turned to the cockpit and closed his door.

Feeling the engine start, she closed her eyes and leaned back. The plane started moving toward the runway. When it got into position, the plane started moving, faster and faster, until she could feel the front wheel lift off the ground. It felt like her stomach was being pressed into the back of her seat. She felt the back wheels lift off the ground, and she was in the air again, leaning back, being pressed into her chair. She opened her eyes and looked out the window.

She didn't know when the feeling of being in flight left her and the pit of her stomach returned, but she noticed it was back, that feeling that something was wrong. It suddenly occurred to her that what she was doing could be very dangerous. She had no idea who this person was. The person could just be a thug planning on attacking her while she's outside the coffee shop.

When the plane leveled off, she got up and walked to the cockpit door

and knocked. She opened the door.

“Jim? What are you going to do while I’m in Colorado Springs?”

“I hadn’t thought about it, really.”

“I was wondering if you’d like some coffee.”

“Are you inviting me to your meeting with you?”

“Thank you, but not really... I don’t know what the person I’m meeting with looks like. And in all honesty, I’m a little nervous.”

“You? You’re the strongest woman I know.”

“I normally wouldn’t ask this, but I really don’t know what I’m up against with this meeting.”

“Are you in trouble?”

“No, why?”

“You’re talking like you’re meeting with the mob or something.”

“I don’t know what I’m meeting up with, that’s the problem.”

“So what do you want me to do?”

“I was wondering if you’d want to go to the coffee shop with me, but walk in a few minutes before me and ... well, have some coffee.”

“You want me to stay in the coffee shop while you’re there, so you’re not really alone?”

Answering quietly he heard her say “Yes.”

“That’s not a problem at all.” Jim looked at his controls while Sloane stood in his doorway. “You can sit down if you like,” he said to her.

“Oh, thank you. I’m fine.”

“You know, I never get tired of a view like this.”

She remembered saying that to Carter when she looked out his apartment window, and when Carter told her that her face — her image in the mirror — should be all that she needed. Then she wondered why she needed to call him to make her feel better.

“Ms. Emerson?”

“Please. Sloane.”

“Okay. Sloane?”

“Yes?”

“What are you thinking?”

“On one hand, I feel afraid for my life. I don’t know why I’m on this plane, I don’t know why I’m having this meeting. I don’t think I’m going to learn anything from this meeting. But if I do, then I’ll be more afraid.”

"You're afraid of the truth?"

Sloane felt herself starting to shake. "I'd be afraid if this was the truth."

"Would that stop you from looking for it?"

Sloane looked up. She stopped shaking. "No, it wouldn't. It doesn't matter what the truth is. As long as I keep looking for it."

"I'm sure you'll find it."

"Thank you, Jim."

"Sloane?"

"Yes?"

"What was the other thing?"

"What?"

"You said that on one hand you were thinking about fear and the truth. What else were you thinking about?"

"I ... I don't know if I can put words to it."

"You seem confused."

"For once, I feel like I can't do my work by myself. I've never felt that before."

"People need people to help them work all the time. You have your whole staff helping you. Hell, I help you by flying this plane."

"I don't mean that, Jim. I mean on a more fundamental level, I feel like I need someone to talk to. Sometimes I get frustrated, and instead of getting myself out of it, or continuing to work, like I'd usually do, I need to call a friend of mine to make me feel better. Then I can get back to work."

"Do you think you can do your work without them helping you out emotionally?"

"It's not merely emotionally, it's more philosophically."

"Either way, you haven't answered my question."

"Oh, I can work without them helping me out... But a part of me is beginning to wonder if I'd want to."

"Well that's a bold statement," Jim answered.

"What do you mean?"

"This is just one friend you're talking about, right?"

"What do you mean?"

"You don't just call up anyone to talk to, you're talking about the help of one friend in particular, right?"

"Yes, I am, one friend."

“If your friend is male, then you sound like you’re in love.”

Sloane stood straight; she noticed she was slouching. “Oh, no. Not at all.”

Jim didn’t say a word. Neither did she.

“No, no, I don’t love him. We’re just friends.”

“Okay.”

“No, I mean it.”

“Fine.”

“You don’t believe me.”

“It shouldn’t matter to you what I believe. What matters is what you believe.”

“I believe in things that can be proven.”

“So when I told you I’d meet you at the airport, you didn’t believe it until you were here and saw me? Then why did you come to the airport at all?”

“Okay, I believe in things I have evidence of.”

“Well, check the facts. Do you love this man?”

“I’m not having this conversation.”

“Why not?”

Sloane looked around. “Because I have enough to worry about today,” she said, as she grabbed the door handle and gave him one small smile before she closed the door and walked back to her seat.

###

They both sat in the back of the taxi while they sped toward the coffee shop. She explained to Jim what to do.

She leaned forward and spoke to the taxi cab driver. “Excuse me, when we get to the cafe could you stop and let my friend out and then drive around for another minute or two before dropping me off?” Then she turned to Jim. “Okay, this is what I want you to do. When you get in there, just get a seat at a table in the corner. I’ll try to get a seat in another corner. I don’t want us to be too close to each other, seeing that we’re getting in there at just about the same time. I have no idea what the person I’m meeting with looks like, but I assume they know what I look like. I don’t know how long it will take for our meeting, but when I’m done, I’ll leave without him. I’ll get a taxi and circle around the block. If you can wait a few minutes after I leave to pay up and meet me outside, that would be great.”

“Okay. You know, I kind of feel like a spy.”

“You are not a spy,” she answered. “No one is doing any spying.”

“Didn’t mean to anger you. I just meant that this seems so secretive.”

Opting to ignore him, she turned back and watched the road. “How much longer until we get there?” she asked the driver.

They had ten minutes to go.

The Mountain Ridge Coffee Shop was nestled amongst little antique shops. The streets sloped up and down in between the snow-capped mountains. The taxi dropped Jim off and pulled away.

“Where would you like me to drive, lady?”

“Just drive two or three blocks straight. I can go the rest of the way myself.”

Sloane got out of the taxi three blocks down and looked at the slanted street. She was on the top of a small hill, and the small buildings on each side of the street framed the mountains in the distance. She turned around and saw the sign for the Mountain Ridge Coffee Shop three blocks away. She started walking.

She didn’t know if she let enough time pass between Jim entering the cafe and her estimated time of arrival, so she tried to walk slowly. She looked in the store windows she passed, but she wasn’t interested in the crafts she saw for sale. “Even if I wasn’t worrying about this meeting,” she thought, “I still wouldn’t like this stuff.” She continued walking.

Feeling the coldness of the steel as she pressed her hand against the metal door handle and pulled the door open, she slowly walked into the coffee shop. The bells attached to the door hinge jingled as the door moved. She walked inside, not looking at the people in the shop and went straight to the counter to get a cup of coffee.

“Plain cup of coffee please.”

“Bottomless?”

“Sure.”

The man behind the counter poured her coffee into a plain white mug and she turned around to look at the shop. Other than the desks with computers for Internet access along the back wall, there were about twenty tables in the coffee shop. The place was about half full. She scanned over Jim’s face in the corner without acknowledging him.

She turned back and the man behind the counter was ringing up her coffee. She dropped two dollars down on the counter and leaving her change,

Sloane made her way to a corner table, far enough away from everyone — including Jim.

Sliding her jacket off of her shoulders, she then took a sip of her coffee.

She didn't want to look at anyone in the room, afraid to make eye contact, but she had to look. She had been sitting for over a minute and no one had come over to talk to her. She scanned the room. While looking at the people, her eyes met with a man who looked at her and smiled. She turned away, blushing, knowing he thought she was flirting with him. She looked down at her coffee.

The man she made eye contact with got up and slowly walked over to her. He wore a button-down shirt over a turtleneck and khaki pants. She was instantly embarrassed.

As he got to her table, he asked, "I couldn't help but notice that you were sitting here alone."

Sloane looked up at him. "I'm meeting someone," she answered.

"I know," he said. "May I have a seat?"

She thought she recognized the deep, hoarse voice. "Who are you?"

"Ms. Emerson, may I have a seat?"

He watched her gesture to the chair opposite her. He sat down.

Scanning his face, she studied and memorized him. Black hair. Green eyes. Sharp jaw. He looked large. Not tall, large — he was well built, but she couldn't imagine that he was even six feet tall.

"So this is the man," she thought.

"What is your name?"

"Shane Wilson."

"Shane? I'm supposed to believe that Shane is your real name?"

"And what kind of name is Sloane?"

Sloane threw him a dirty look. "So what does your e-mail address 'Owens' mean?"

"It's the name I use at the Energy Conservation Agency. They know me there as Bill Owens. But Shane Wilson is my real name."

"Who do you work for?"

"Right now? The Department of Defense. I've worked for the CIA before as well."

Every answer he gave prompted her to stare at him cynically. "And?"

"And what?"

“What do you have to tell me? I’m not staying here all night.”

“You believe me.”

“No, I don’t.”

“And that’s why you’re here? Because you don’t believe me?”

“If I believed you, I wouldn’t need to come here.”

“You want to know if the U.S. government engineered HIV.”

“They didn’t have the technology.”

“You want to know about the origin of AIDS.”

“I want to know if the U.S. government has a cure for AIDS, something that kills HIV within the body.”

“I told you they do.”

“But you have given me no evidence.”

“Look, have you heard of any other conspiracy stories for AIDS before?”

“Yes.”

“What most rational people intrinsically assume is obviously wrong. You know we didn’t have the technology to produce this disease. If we did, they probably would have made you make it.”

“You think that little of me?”

“I’ve discovered in my line of duty that everyone can be bought and sold.”

“Not people who live their life as its own end.”

“Like you?” she asked sarcastically, looking at him.

“And you value nothing in your life other than your own? You wouldn’t relinquish your life to your government in order to save someone you love?”

“No. I would kill myself first. And if the people I loved understood me, they would want me to die before giving up my life to someone else for them.”

“Why?”

“Because if I can’t live my life on my own terms, I can’t live my life,” she answered. “And no one who truly loved me would want me to live a life filled with torture, just for them.”

Shane looked at her.

“But if I recall correctly, I didn’t fly to Colorado on a moment’s notice to talk to a stranger about myself.”

“Well, you were right. We didn’t produce this disease — not entirely, at least. It was discovered in Africa; the origins of the disease were found in Africa.”

“What do you mean?”

“A non-fatal disease was found in Africa. It produced fevers, vomiting,

the sweats, the shakes, it was a pretty ugly disease, actually, and it did do some damage to the immune system — but it wasn't fatal. After fighting it for about two weeks, you could live through it and your body would develop a natural immunity to it. That is, if you lived in America and had good treatment and lots of bed rest and were constantly supervised. A starving African with no medical assistance might not be so lucky."

"But what you're talking about is not HIV."

"I know. But the virus I am talking about was brought to a restricted area of the Center for Disease Control so that people could work on a vaccine for it, which is normal procedure. One person, however, through an accident in their laboratory work, mutated the virus in such a drastic way that it could never have happened in nature."

"And they created HIV?"

"Imagine it. One person, trying to save people from an ugly virus, accidentally develops a deadly virus. Oh, the delicious irony."

Sloane sneered at him again. She didn't like the fact that he could joke about this; whether or not it was true. "Then how did it get out?"

"The supervisor of the laboratory technician worked for the Department of Defense as well as the CDC. They place people from the DOD in strategic positions in most every U.S. government organization to keep an eye on them, so to speak. So the DOD man quarantined the whole wing of the lab, so it would be destroyed. Of course, they didn't destroy the virus, you know that. But afterward the destruction started: a week later the person who fell upon this virus strain accidentally died from a hit-and-run crash."

"And you're going to tell me that it wasn't an accident?"

"The only accident was the mutation of the original disease by the laboratory technician."

"So then what happened?"

"I'm sure you've heard theories that the U.S. government engineered this to reduce the starving population."

"Yes, I have."

"They figured that if they were to use this virus as some sort of weapon they'd have to bring the virus back to the same place that the original virus was found, so that it would look like it was a naturally-occurring disease. If it eliminated people that were going to die before they turned eighteen anyway because of a lack of food or water or basic hygiene, then that was just an

added bonus for the Washington people.”

“You say it so kindly.”

“Depopulation wasn’t their primary goal with this virus. The Washington people, for some strange reason, thought that the virus could be contained in Africa, so it wouldn’t become a problem with the people of developed countries, like the United States. They deduced that if it was such a deadly disease it could be used as a weapon in war-time situations.”

“But the length of time someone could be infected before they die could be over a decade — even without any medications.”

“Exactly. And that is how the disease spread. Through the poor calculations of a few high-end government officials carrying out a secret agenda.”

“What was the secret agenda?”

“I can’t tell you all of it; I don’t know all of it. But a part of it involved the elimination of certain key world figures in a way that would leave the U.S. free of any blame.”

“How were they going to infect people?”

“You mean how did they infect people? Certain leaders of the drug cartel were eliminated when we switched needles at parties. Certain military officials in the Soviet Union and Europe were eliminated when we hired prostitutes at parties. You know, it looked like it was all in good fun. They got to these people by sharing their drugs and their women with them.”

“So it was supposed to be used to infect only crucial people?”

“Well, at least it was never meant to affect the general public.”

“And the latency of HIV caused the problem.”

“Yes, especially since it allowed our enemies to isolate the virus as well. At this point the Soviets were using it as a weapon as well. That’s when I came in.”

“What were you supposed to do?”

“I was supposed to get it back.”

“But that would be nearly impossible.”

“This was the first year of the disease, they didn’t know trying to keep it would be impossible. And while I was on a mission, the Soviets kidnapped me. I was drugged so I was unconscious. When I came to I was in Germany. I have no idea why I was in Germany, but I was in a hotel room. I was sweating, my clothes were torn; I was a mess. I found out that I had been unconscious for four days. When the doctors in the States checked me out, they noticed that I had two injection marks. They knew that the Soviets gave me AIDS. To spite the

U.S. government and me. It was their way of saying, ‘you can’t get to us, and to prove it we’ll infect your men with the virus you meant to use against us.’”

“You said the U.S. government had a cure though.”

“Yes. After they got me back into shape, you know, got enough food into me and such, they brought me to a research center at the DOD and they locked me in a room and gave me a bed and an I.V. and a single injection and left me there for three days. I was tired, from the drugs, so I was only awake for a fraction of those three days. But after that, I was clear of AIDS, I was clear of HIV. Hell, I had so much sleep, I wanted to run a marathon. I was fine.”

Assuming he was given glucose in the I.V., she tried to make the rest of the puzzle come together. “But you didn’t know that you were actually infected with the virus in the first place. You didn’t even get tested.”

“Tested?”

“It wouldn’t have shown up on tests for another six months to a year.”

“They found traces of the virus — dead — in my dermis and epidermis, where I was injected. They knew what had happened.”

So they had a cure for someone who was recently infected, she thought. “But how did they come up with a cure?”, she asked.

“They did it when they found the disease in the first place. They knew the procedure performed at the CDC had originally created the virus. They were able to instantly work on a cure for it, while they still had a pure form of the virus isolated. Since it has mutated, not one sample of the original virus has been collected.”

“But then the cure wouldn’t work for the mutations.”

“Yes, it does. They’re still occasionally using it, on a very select basis.”

“On whom?”

“Consider for example, they wouldn’t want any presidents of the United States to have to die of AIDS. That would bring on some bad press.”

Sloane sneered slightly again at his sarcasm. She thought about the insinuation that past presidents had been HIV positive. “Why don’t they release the cure?”

“That would show that they’ve had it all along.”

“If they’ve lied this long, couldn’t they lie about a government doctor finding the cure and release it now?”

“They can still use the cure as a tool. They have something everyone wants. Why would they give up their ace card?”

Stumbling for a question, she didn't know what to ask next. "You were quote-unquote 'cured...'"

"I was restationed at the DOD branch here."

"There isn't one here."

"I don't work for the Energy Conservation Agency. I was stationed there to do work out of the way. Half of these fluff organizations exist to cover up our operations."

"So you're still working."

"Yes."

"And you can just go around and tell people this? Is this your common dinner conversation?"

"You still don't believe me."

They stared at each other. Shane finally spoke. "No, this isn't my normal dinner conversation. Look, you can't tell a soul about this conversation; I could be killed, and so could you, Ms. Emerson, for having this conversation."

"Why would I believe you?"

Shane leaned back. "Because in my bag here I've got the records of my health conditions from the DOD. You can see that they found the HIV virus on me, in my skin, at an injection point, and it lists the procedure they used on me, and that I was cleared of any virus in my body. Nobody even knows these files still exist. You can check with this hotel" — he pulled out a lab notebook and opened it and showed her a piece of paper with a hotel name and address in Germany — "to see if I was found there. The name on the credit card that paid for my hotel was a Soviet name, of a man who died just after I got into the hotel."

"And where's the cure?"

"I don't have it."

"And where's the original virus, the version that hasn't mutated?"

"I don't have it."

"So what good is any of this information to me?"

"It's a starting point."

"A starting point? And what do you expect me to do now?"

"Find the truth."

"You can't get the cure, even though you've worked with the CIA and currently work for the DOD, and by the way, you haven't even shown me any identification yet, and you expect me to be able to get the cure without

any credentials whatsoever?”

Shane reached for his wallet to show her his identification while he continued speaking. “I can’t get to the data, everything about this is classified, especially to me, specifically because it was used on me. They don’t want me going around sharing my secret. I’m not that high up on the information ladder anyway. Since I don’t have proof, just bits of evidence, I could be considered a crackpot if I tried to get this story out, so there’s no point in me going public with it. People would look at me the way they look at every other conspiracy-theory nutcase out there. Look, you know this has got to get out. If I try to do it, they’ll know it’s me. I’ll be dead in no time. You know this is wrong, and it has to be stopped.”

“If this is wrong, why did you get involved with it in the first place?”

“I told you that we didn’t know what we were dealing with. Especially us, we were just the field men. We didn’t have the scientific background to know what was going on. Our scientists didn’t even know what was going on. I can’t correct what was done, but I can attempt to stop it from continuing.”

“Oh, so now you’re the good guy.”

“I thought I was always the good guy. I thought we were defeating an enemy without resorting to a war where hundreds of thousands of young men could be killed.”

“That’s a noble story, Mr. Wilson.”

“Listen, I started working for this country because I believed in what the U.S. was protecting its people from. But now they use their power for cheaper oil prices and for political maneuvers to help out certain candidates. And to settle scores. And to make us look like better people, from a better country. Once they started using it, they kept expanding its use. Originally they didn’t want a single American infected with HIV. Now they don’t seem to care that that poor people, drug users, and gays are dying from it. Infecting good people is the price we have to pay for them being able to ‘utilize such a successful weapon.’ That’s what I can’t stand, but it happens everywhere. Give people a little power, and they’ll take more.” That phrase caught her attention more than anything; she completely agreed with it. Shane continued. “Instill the death penalty for murder, and pretty soon the death penalty will be used for child molesting or rape. Then three felonies, even if they are only three liquor store robberies with no one injured. What’s next? It’s the same thing with the way the U.S. government is viewing the use of HIV.

Unless they're stopped dead in their tracks, they'll keep killing people and covering it up."

Shaking her cold coffee in her cup, she noticed that no one had come over to give her a refill the entire time they had been talking.

"I also knew that if anyone could work with this information," Shane continued, "it would be you."

"Why me?"

"Because you wouldn't want this to happen. Because you want a cure more than anyone I know. Because you need to know that the government can't do this to its people." Shane stopped before dropping his last bomb. "And because your research will be the next thing affected by the government."

"What does *that* mean?"

"The government is going to orchestrate more and more moves to make AIDS research extremely difficult for scientists. It hasn't affected the number of people they want it to now; the government's work is not yet done." Shane slid the folder of his records across the table to her.

"So they're going to try to stop my research next, that's what you're trying to tell me?"

"Of course."

"But there is no incentive that the government could possibly give me to make me stop my work."

"Oh, they won't be offering you incentives. They'll use what they use best — force."

"And the American people won't see through it?"

"Ms. Emerson, it will look like the American people called for it by the time the government is done with you."

Toby popped into her mind, with everything happening to him. Then she thought about Tyler and the lobbyists trying to take from her.

Her mind went back and forth. These documents could be forged. He's telling stories that sound like they could be true. He's talking like one of those tarot card readers, or psychic phone operators — they've learned how to say things so vague that you can adjust your own experiences to fit the fortune you've just been told.

She tried to keep her senses about her.

All she could see was the envelope of papers in front of her. "But what am I supposed to do with this?"

“There’s a contact in there that might help you out. They work with the DOD as well, but they’re in a higher position. They also have CIA contacts.”

Glancing at the envelope for a moment, her eyes then met up with Shane’s. Shane spoke. “We have to part ways now. Try to act natural. Someone is watching us.”

Trying to find someone that was watching her, someone, *anyone*, she looked around the room; she spotted Jim, then she spotted a man looking in the window from outside wearing a dark suit.

As she turned back to her table, Shane was getting up and walking away. He didn’t turn back to look at her as he walked out the front door. She glanced over at Jim. Then she got up and went back to the counter for a refill.

Jim followed her orders precisely. She waited five minutes after the man outside the coffee shop left before getting up. She went outside, hailed a taxi and asked the driver to take her around the block before they picked up Jim.

Jim was silent while the taxi drove through the steep hills in the mountainside. Finally, he spoke, almost afraid to break the silence.

“Did everything go okay?”

“What do you mean?”

“Did you get the information you wanted?”

“Yes and no.”

Jim turned his head back toward the front of the taxi; he knew it was in his best interest to stop asking questions.

Sloane sat in a stupor on the airplane on the ride back to Seattle. She didn’t want to open the file folder Shane had given her. She was afraid to look at it. Staring out the window she looked at the blank void of the night sky as their plane moved northwest.

Finally she got up the nerve to open the folder. She looked at Shane’s medical records. “These could have been forged,” she thought. Impressively forged, but forged nonetheless. She looked through what records he had managed to collect for her about the work he had done as well as information on the CDC. Histories of his work at the DOD and the CIA were in the folder. And so was a piece of paper with a man’s name and phone number scribbled in black ink:

Clint Saunders (703) 555-9002

She closed the folder and looked back out the window.

Sloane was still in a daze by the time she got home. She didn’t know what

to believe; she could discount his story, as well as any rebuttals to his story. He had no reason to lie to her. But she never understood why anyone lied; she knew that no one ever had a reason to lie, not one based in logic, self-respect and reason.

When she opened the door to her apartment there was a message on her answering machine. She pressed the button and listened.

This is Tyler, from marketing. I know you don't want me bothering you, but I wouldn't have unless it was crucial. If you think the things I bothered you about before were trivial, you're right. Compared to this, nothing matters. Please, I'll be in the office Saturday morning. Stop in at marketing if you come in or call me here. I should get into the office by about nine. Sorry to bother you, really, I am, but this is big. Please call. Thanks.

Hearing the clicking of her answering machine rewinding the tape, she thought for an instant about the lobbyists trying to get Madison: was the more serious problem Tyler had to talk to her about? Shane may have been right with Madison being forced to stop next. She walked straight to her bedroom. She felt like she had just been hit with a ton of bricks and knew that she needed to sleep.

###

Sloane was walking inside the grocery store when it happened. She heard someone scream another aisle; then she heard a gun shot. She didn't know where the noise had come from; the shot echoed throughout the entire store. She started running down the aisle, not knowing whether she should look for someone who was hurt or run out of the store to call for help. As she was approaching the end of the aisle she realized that someone might be holding

up the store and would be waiting at the doorway, by the registers. She wondered: would she be able to leave?

She slowed to a stop when she got to the end of the aisle. People were running and screaming. Peeking around the corner of the aisle she saw three men at each doorway. They were all wearing black and had ski masks over their faces. The men at the door had assault rifles; the men at the registers had handguns. She was trapped.

Looking behind her, she tried to see the opposite end of the store, farthest away from the doors. She saw more men running with assault rifles in the back of the store. She stopped in her tracks.

Sloane knew that if she were witnessing a store robbery the men would have no reason to run through the entire store. They'd want to get their cash and leave. There wasn't enough time to take everyone's wallet or purse in the store. Then she knew what was going on.

She quickly walked to the next aisle and saw three people lying dead.

Sloane looked up and down the aisle, scanning over the condiments. There was tomato sauce, salsa, ketchup, and mustard. She grabbed a plastic squeeze bottle of ketchup and frantically opened the top and pulled the plastic seal off. Ketchup squirted onto her hands as she squeezed the bottle. She squirted some onto her stomach and put some in her mouth. She placed the bottle back on the shelf and dropped to the floor. She lay on her stomach and threw her hands to the ground, stretching them over her head. She threw her head around before leaving it on the ground so that her hair covered half of her face. As she rested her head sideways on the ground, she let the ketchup she had been mixing with her saliva spill slowly out of her mouth onto the tile floor.

She listened.

People were still screaming, but no one came into her aisle. After hearing someone run past her, she saw through her hair that they were shoppers, not the men trying to rob the place.

She knew they weren't robbers coming to steal some money. She knew that they were from the government, coming to kill her.

She tried to slow her breathing. She knew she had to look dead, and her stomach and chest couldn't be moving. She heard running steps at the end of the aisle behind her. They sounded swift and smooth, not panicked like the shoppers running away from the gunmen. Sloane held her breath and lay still.

The steps became louder and louder until they stopped. She opened her

eyes just slightly through her hair. She saw two pairs of combat boots facing her body.

Amongst the screams, she could hear them speak.

“Is that her?”

“I think so. That was her description, down to the clothing.”

“Someone else got her already.”

“Should we go through another round on her, to be sure?”

There was a moment of silence. She didn’t know if they were thinking about what the first man said or aiming their guns at her head.

She heard a loud blast, and in the same instant she sprung up from her bed, sweating and trying to catch her breath.

Sloane looked over at the clock. It read 3:47, and she knew she wouldn’t be able to get back to sleep, at least not right away. She got up and walked to her desk.

As light from the desk lamp streamed over the lab notebook, Sloane read over the information Shane gave her again, this time with more intensity. Then she lifted her head to look over at the window.

“I have no reason to believe this,” she said out loud to the emptiness of her living room. Yet she knew that the seed had been planted in her brain, and although she only had circumstantial evidence in her hands and on her desk, which she would have to investigate until she discovered the truth.

Remnants of her dream still lingered in her mind. Whether or not she was in danger was irrelevant; Sloane felt like she *was* still in danger and she couldn’t shake it. She leaned her elbow on her desk, then dropped her head on her hand and started to cry.

Not knowing what she was about to get into, she had no idea where to begin. She felt like she had lost all of her resources for discovering the truth. Was the government she had trusted all her life — the government she argued was the best in the world — systematically killing off underdeveloped nations? Or are they killing gays, or black people, or drug users? Or anyone? She didn’t know where to begin, but she knew she couldn’t sit there and do nothing; she had to start somewhere.

“Come on, stop doing this to yourself,” she thought. “You know that even if this is true, it’s all a part of your fight. It’s a war on this disease. And you have to find the truth, and you will, and you’ll stop this beast from killing any more people. Think of it that way. Think of this as another chal-

lenge. Something I can succeed at. I've got a job to do."

Wiping the tears from her eyes, Sloane continued reading until she fell asleep on her desk.

###

She woke up at six with sunlight streaming in through the window in front of her. She sat up. She was astonished — this was the first time the sun had been out in Seattle for a few weeks. It energized her. Her back was sore from sleeping at her desk, but she felt like she had a mission to accomplish, and nothing was going to stop her.

The first thing in her head was that she had to archive the data in this folder somehow. She knew that computer files could be destroyed, and besides, retyping all this data would take too long. She even thought that someone could dial into her computer at home while she was asleep and remove any files she wrote. She showered, got dressed, collected the papers into a large envelope and left for a breakfast diner.

Sloane pulled up to a small diner on the way to her office. She sat down at a corner table and placed her briefcase on an empty chair next to her table. She opened her briefcase, saw the envelope, pulled out a note pad and pen and wrote notes to herself.

The waitress walked up to her with a coffee pot in her hand.

The hot coffee billowed in the mug and looked to Sloane like smoke from a nuclear bomb as it curled over onto itself and the level rose as the waitress poured.

"Know what you wanna eat?"

"Eggs benedict, please. No, wait. Two scrambled eggs, two sausage links, hash browns and white toast."

"Buttered?"

"Yes."

"No juice?"

"Is your orange juice from concentrate?"

The waitress looked confused. "I think it is."

"Then no, no juice, thank you."

The waitress turned toward the kitchen, ripped off her order from her note pad and placed it on the counter in front of the cook. Sloane looked

back to her note pad and continued writing while sipping her coffee.

1. Photocopy folder data
2. Place copy in safe at work
3. Place copy in safe deposit box at bank
4. Leave copy hidden at home
5. Mail copy to someone else: ask them to hold it and not open it?
6. Call Shane?
7. Call Shane's contact?

Because she couldn't remember his name, she had to open her briefcase again and find the contact's name.

7. Call Shane contact? Clint Saunders?

Knowing the area code in Colorado Springs and knowing a few national area codes, she looked at the phone number. It was a Washington D.C. area code. She flipped the first page over in her note pad and started writing down notes from the conversation she had remembered with Shane the night before. She didn't want to forget a single detail.

It was hard, but she wrote while she ate her meal. By the time she was done with her notes, it was after eight in the morning. She paid her bill and left the diner to go to the office.

By the time she arrived it was ten minutes to nine in the morning. She walked straight to the laboratory and turned on the copier on her way to her office. She opened the safe and walked out to the copier and set it to print and collate multiple copies of all the pages. She stood in front of the copier, darting her eyes around the room as the pages fell into slots on the side of the machine. When it was finished she collected all her copies and went into her

office. She placed the multiple copies into five large envelopes and sealed them. One envelope went in her safe behind her desk. The other sealed envelopes would go to her apartment, her safe deposit box, Carter and Toby. No one knew of her friendship with Carter, so no one would suspect that he had a copy. No, you can't give a copy to Toby, she thought. It has to be someone not working on the virus. Her father. Then she thought no, it could not be someone that obvious in her life. She couldn't think of who to send the data to. After thinking of Steve, she knew she couldn't rely on his help when they had gone through such a falling out, so she decided to hold an extra copy of it in her apartment until she could think of someone to send it to, that no one would suspect. The original would be for her to reference when she needed to.

It was 9:15, and when she looked at her watch she suddenly remembered the phone message from Tyler. She didn't know what he wanted, but suddenly she had an urgent desire to know what the problem was. She tucked the extra envelopes into her desk drawer and left her office for Tyler's.

Seeing a light from under Tyler's doorway stream though on the hallway, she went up to his door and knocked.

"Come in."

Tyler was slumped over some papers at his desk. He had a paper cup of coffee from the nearby coffee bar in his hand. Tyler looked up; when he realized it was Ms. Emerson his eyes widened into saucers.

"It's you! I didn't know where you were Friday afternoon, and I didn't want to disturb you, but —"

"Tyler, what is it?" Sloane asked as she walked into his room and sat down on the chair opposite his desk. The fact that she came in and sat down surprised Tyler; he knew Ms. Emerson usually didn't stay in his company long enough to enter his office, much less sit down.

"It's worse than a lobby group, it's the government."

"What do you mean?" She thought about Shane telling her last night that the government's next step would be to try to stop her from doing her research.

"You're going to hate my asking this, but I have to ask it, I know you didn't do anything wrong, but on the record, I have to ask you."

"What are you talking about?"

"Have you and your staff been coming up with your discoveries on your own?"

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t hate me for asking this. I know you didn’t. But I have to ask.”

“Didn’t what?”

“You haven’t taken any data from government research groups to come up with your drugs, have you?”

“What?” she said, starting to get up from her chair.

“I don’t think you did. I’m sorry.”

Sloane tried to sit back down. “Where on earth is this coming from?”

“The government is questioning our efficiency. They say that they’ve been working on the same things we have been producing, and that since we have been doing such a good job they question whether or not we have done it on our own.”

“What are they suggesting?”

“That there is an information leak from the government research groups and that —”

“That we’ve been stealing information from the government?”

“Well...” Tyler knew he didn’t have to say anything.

Getting up from her chair, she started speaking, almost to herself. “I can’t believe this. You do something well and you get punished for it.”

“You’re not punished here,” Tyler said. “Colin wants to talk to you, but he has complete confidence in you. He knows you didn’t do anything wrong.”

“The government has no reason to believe that Madison Pharmaceuticals did anything wrong. How can they do this?”

“They aren’t pressing charges, they just want to look into it.”

“Pressing charges?”

“I said they aren’t pressing charges.”

“But the threat is there, and that was their point.”

“I don’t think they want to scare us, they just want some information.”

“So the government can investigate us, about stealing research data, because they want to. Because we’re efficient, and talented, and are doing a better job than they have been.

“Ms. Emerson...”

“No, Tyler, I want to get this straight. Because we’re producing something and they’re not we’re under fire for it? Hell, they’re the government, since when are they going to do something with less money and more efficiency than a pri-

vate business? They can take their time, these agencies can get as much money as they want from the government. They get a grant; they can jerk off for the next year until they need to renew the grant. And you know what? They have to jerk off, or they won't be able to get another grant. 'Look, we accomplished our goal.' 'Then you don't need any more money.' When something fails in the government, that's when it gets as much money as possible."

Tyler watched her as she paced through the room. He knew she wasn't talking to him.

"So of course we're going to be more efficient," she said, under her breath. "And now we're getting punished for it."

Trying to get her bearings, she looked around the office. She knew this wasn't about Madison's efficiency, but their power and the information she had in separate sealed envelopes back at her office. She turned to Tyler. "So what does the government want to do?"

"They want to talk to people in the lab, maybe look at the laboratory itself, see the records of the progress you've made while working on the drug."

"Are they going to search the lab?"

"I don't see why they would. But there wouldn't be a problem with that, if they wanted to."

Thinking about the files in her desk drawer and in her safe, she knew that they would have to be buried. "No, there wouldn't be a problem."

Tyler leaned back in his chair. "Look, I'm sorry, I know this is awful, I know you don't want to deal with this, it's not your problem. I'll do everything I can."

"What can I do to help?"

Tyler's eyes widened again. "You're willing to help?"

"Whatever you need from me."

"A few press conferences would help. Get out to the people, show them you're smart, that you care about the disease. That if the government agencies had beaten Madison to the drugs would still be happy, because at least people would be helped. Show them you're a kind and caring person."

"Got it. I can do that."

Tyler seemed stunned by her willingness to comply. "Why the change of heart? You would have never done this normally."

"Normally the government wouldn't be picking fights with the most competent researchers in the industry. And if I have to fight back, I'm going to use the press as a weapon to my advantage."

“Don’t go around talking like that in public. The government is supposed to be our friend. They haven’t done anything to us yet, so we shouldn’t sound like this is a fight.”

“And if you keep letting them walk all over us they will do something to hurt us, you can count on it, with or without evidence. Hell, they can make up evidence. So we should act like we don’t mind that they want to go through our files or claim we stole things from them without any evidence to back up those claims?”

“I know it’s not what you want, but we have to play by their rules for a while.”

“...Write up whatever you want for me and I’ll read over what you want at any press conferences. Just let me know your schedule for them.”

“Can we do it Monday afternoon? Maybe at five for the news shows?”

“Sure ... Should I wear a suit in soft colors, to look friendly and feminine?”

“I’ll call you tomorrow with clothing suggestions.”

“Tyler, I was kidding.”

“But it’s not a bad idea.”

She couldn’t believe that she would she have to play their game and even change her clothes in order to play the game effectively. “If you want, e-mail me with any suggestions. I’ll check my mail tomorrow. And if you have any speeches ready, e-mail them to me tomorrow as well. And can you forward any of their press releases or public statements to me? Especially ones that document their research in the past few years?”

“No problem. And thanks.”

“You do what you have to do,” She said as she opened his door, “And I’ll do the same.” She walked through the door. Tyler looked at his closing door as he listened to her footsteps get more and more quiet in the distance.

She walked back to her office and closed the door. She took the copies of the files from Shane out of her drawer and out of her safe. She knew she’d have to hide them somewhere else.

Reaching for the phone, she left a voice mail message for Julie.

“Julie, it’s Sloane. Could you get all of the e-mails and notes for me about AIDS, particularly about AIDS and conspiracy

theories, and put them on a disk and delete them from the system as soon as possible? Make this your first priority; I don't want any records of them in the office for a while. I'll take them home with me to work on them there. After that, could you look through archives of the past two years of the major scientific journals to see what reports the U.S. government has published on their AIDS research progress? Thanks a lot."

Hanging up the phone, she sat down on her desk. She picked up the files and placed them in her briefcase. She had to go to the bank after work and deposit the extra copies of the Shane file in her safe deposit box until she had another place to put them. Then her phone rang, surprising her; she didn't know who would be calling her office on Saturday morning.

"Sloane Emerson."

"How did I know you were going to be in the office?"

She recognized Carter's voice.

"Carter, I wasn't expecting you to call."

"You should have been. Have you forgotten that you're picking me up from the airport?"

At that point, all she could do was press her hand to her forehead. "Oh, I've been so side-tracked in the past day or two. When are you getting in?"

"Four fifteen. TransContinental Airways. Flight 367."

Carter could hear her scribbling his flight information down over the phone. "Got it. I'll see you there."

"Don't work too hard."

"Why not?"

She hung up the phone, she couldn't believe she had forgotten he was coming. She had to go to the bank and the grocery store, and clean the apartment before going to the airport to pick him up. The finished manuscript had to be around the office too, she thought; she should find it and bring it

home with her, in case Carter wanted to look at it before Monday. Collecting her things, she found three copies of the manuscript on Julie's desk, grabbed one of them, and left for the bank.



CHAPTER 8

THE TEMPTATION

There seemed to be something about this Washington, how it kept everything in a state of upheaval. Toby thought of his options at one side of city, and Steve thought of his options at the other side of the city. And at the same time, while flying to Seattle, Carter considered his options.

It was a Saturday morning and Toby sat with his stack of research papers alongside the newspaper. He sat in the cafe, unable to think, trying to decide which paper stack he should attack first. The waitress came and refilled his coffee.

“I’m not going to let myself lean back in this booth until I decide what to read,” he thought. He hadn’t been able to bring himself to grab something to read or lean back the entire time he had been at diner. The newspaper was folded to his right, and the headline of a hopeful Monday conference with Sloane Emerson was listed near the highlights of the week’s events on the side of the page. He looked at that line and thought about her, thinking that she always seemed to have her mind on something, that she always seemed to be accomplishing something, and a part of him was infuriated by it, partially because his luck was never the same.

He refused to believe that his ethic might not be the same as hers. It just drove him to work harder, and he picked up the stack of research papers he should be reading instead of the newspaper and leaned back in the chair. He wanted to think that somehow she encouraged him, without her consciously trying, to get his work done. He knew that he was more than capable to get this work done; it was just a matter of fitting all of the pieces of the puzzle together, in a way that no one to date had done.

At one side of the city Toby sat at the local coffee shop, slumped over in a chair and working on research for AIDS, while Steve lay in his bed on the other side of the city. He only came back to his apartment after leaving a night of quote-unquote sleep with another woman he met in a bar the night before.

He wondered how many women he had done this with during the course of his life.

He would usually come home after a morning like this to get some rest, seeing that whomever he was with usually kept him occupied the night before, but at this point in the game he was not looking for rest; he knew there was none to be found and he did not know how to look for it. He found himself in the same predicament as Toby that morning, and he couldn't consider his usual sense of accomplishment on a morning like this — he was thinking about her, and he was not driven to work, though he was in part driven to settle things with her. He didn't know how to go about changing, he just knew that something had to change so that he could go back to his life being the way that it used to be.

He rolled over, picked up the phone on the dresser and a scrap piece of paper, and made a phone call, leaving a message.

"Hi, it's me, Steve, and I know you probably don't want to hear from me, but I thought I'd leave a the ball in your court. If you needed to talk to anyone, feel free to call, you should have my number, and hopefully I'll talk to you soon."

Steve hung up the phone and stayed outstretched on his bed for a moment, before calling a friend of his to confirm plans for going out that evening.

Carter found himself thinking about her as well, while he sat in his first-class seat as his flight approached Seattle. He got up and walked to the washroom, grabbed the tiny round handle, opened the door and stepped in. He latched the door shut so the exterior sign door read “occupied” and the lights turned on in the little compartment.

He stood in the washroom and looked at himself in the mirror. He didn’t know why he had walked into the washroom; he used the facilities not half an hour ago. Running his hands over his head, Carter tried to make sure his hair was in place. “Why am I doing this to myself?” he thought as he adjusted the cuffs of his shirt. He leaned forward to check the nick on his chin he got from shaving that morning. He shook his head at his reflection as he leaned back and took one more look. He tried to push the wrinkles out of his shirt by sliding his hands over his torso, and then pulled the lapel of his jacket over to straighten his suit. From the bathroom he heard the flight attendant say they were in their final descent into Seattle; the fasten seat belt sign was lit and everyone’s seat backs should be up and their tray tables in their upright and locked position. He took a deep breath and unlatched the bathroom door so that he could go back to his seat and prepare for landing.

When Carter walked out of the plane, through the jet way and into the terminal, a crowd of people was waiting for their family and friends from the flight. Carter walked through the crowd and saw her leaning on the opposite wall of the terminal.

He walked over to her, where she stood smiling. “Didn’t want to join the herd of people over at my gate?” Carter asked.

“I just thought I’d make you walk a little farther,” she answered. She pushed herself away from the wall and Carter hugged her and asked, “How are you doing?”

“Oh, I’m okay. You look nice; why did you dress up for a flight?”

“It would either get wrinkled in my luggage or on me, so I wore it.”

“What hotel is the company springing for?”

“The Renaissance Hotel.”

“Nice choice.”

“Yes, it’s supposed to have a whirlpool bath and fire place in it, but...”

“What, no live-in masseuse?”

“No, the problem is that the company only made reservations for it for Monday, and I leave Tuesday night. I need a place to stay tonight and Sunday.”

“Why didn’t they reserve a hotel room for the whole time you were here?”

“They said every hotel they checked was full because of a conversation that’s in town.”

“Don’t be silly. My place isn’t huge, but I insist you stay.”

“Thank you. Don’t mind if I do.”

They smiled as they walked together down the terminal; the clicking of their footsteps matched in pace and rhythm as they approached baggage claim.

After they got Carter’s luggage she drove them to her apartment, Sloane jiggled her house key out of the lock as she pushed the door open for Carter. “I haven’t had a chance to clean, so please forgive me.”

“It’s fine.” Carter looked around the room. “It’s a nice place, actually.”

He had never seen her apartment before. “Well,” she said as she walked over to the window, “I know it’s not as nice as New York, but I’ve got a pretty good view here too.” She opened the blinds.

Carter sat his luggage on her couch and walked over to the window. He looked at her as she looked out the window. He glanced up at the buildings that stretched out before him. “It is a nice view, especially when you never get the chance to see it.”

Leaning against the window, she asked, “Any preferences for food? And don’t say pizza, because I’m taking you out for dinner.”

Carter smiled. “I’ll let you decide.”

“There’s this great place on the other side of town, but it’s a bit formal, if you don’t mind keeping your suit on.”

Carter liked the idea, and responded, “Sounds perfect.”

Sloane walked over to his bags and picked them up.

“Let me get those,” Carter said reaching over and extending his hand to her.

“Nonsense. They’re going in my room, since you’ll stay there. I’ll take the couch.”

“I’m not going to take your bed.”

“Yes you are,” she sang as she walked down the hallway to her bedroom. She placed his luggage on her bed. Carter followed her to the bedroom. “There’s a little room in my closet, if you need to hang things up. I’ll let you freshen up,” she said, while opening the closet door and pulling out a dress, “while I get dressed in the bathroom.”

Carter looked at her and smiled while she got a few pairs of shoes and

her dress and left her bedroom, closing the door behind her.

Carter looked around her bedroom. Everything was ivory in color, even the bedspread. Her curtains were a rough fabric on a wrought iron curtain rod, tied back with a tan cord. Her furniture was an unfinished white pine.

He walked over to the nightstand next to her bed to turn on the light. Noticing a small stack of books next to the lamp, he picked them up. They were most of the books his private label had printed in the past three years. He knew he had sent her his most recent book on economics, but the rest of the books he had only mentioned to her. He picked up one of the books, one written by him, about the American educational system. A gold bookmark with the initials S.E.E. was at the last page of the book.

His heart skipped a beat when he realized that she had purchased all the books that he had printed, without telling him. For a moment he couldn't stop staring at the books on the nightstand. He respected the way she thought, and was honored that she thought his ideas were worth study. He placed his book back on the stack and started unpacking his clothes.

Sloane slid a navy blue satin dress over her shoulders in the bathroom. It was a simple dress: a square neckline, straight, floor-length, sleeveless. She reached around to the back of her neck and clasped a silver chain around her neck. She looked at herself in the mirror. She added a little make-up: she added a touch of gray to her eyelids and some mascara; and a touch of sheer lipstick. She brushed her hair down and looked at the different shoes she had brought into the bathroom with her. She put a different shoe on each foot and walked out of the bathroom, knocked on her bedroom door, and then stepped in. Carter looked over at her while he was adjusting his tie; all he could see was Sloane, every item she wore only drew more attention to her beauty. Carter thought that she needed nothing more than that simple silver chain around her neck, and that no one else could match the simplicity of that navy blue dress with such elegance and grace.

"Carter, I'm so bad at these things," she started. "I have no idea which shoe to wear. What do you think?" She lifted her dress slightly to show her left foot, which wore a plain black pump with a two-inch heel. She turned her ankle, looking to Carter.

"Next?" Carter asked, and she gently lifted the other side of her dress to show a black sandal with a three-inch heel. A thin strap of black leather wrapped up her foot and twisted around her ankle and tied at her leg.

“Definitely the second one,” Carter said.

Smiling, she let go of her dress, letting it slide around her legs and down to her feet. “Thank you,” she quietly said and walked back toward the bathroom.

She had hoped he’d pick the second shoe.

Carter walked out of the bedroom toward the bathroom and stood in the doorway watching her bend over and tie up the second shoe.

“Do you need help with that?”

“No, I think I’ve got it. Thanks.” She stood up and faced him.

“I didn’t know it was that formal of a restaurant.”

“It’s not too formal, don’t worry — why, I hope I’m not overdressed.”

“No, don’t worry. You look beautiful.”

“You know I just want to show off my new accessory.”

“What is that, your necklace?” he asked.

“No, silly,” she said as she walked toward the bathroom door and put her arm in his. “It’s you!” She giggled as she walked him out of the bathroom. “Who will notice what I look like when I’ve got you on my arm?”

“You’re too much.”

“You know, I could say the same about you.” She smiled as she walked over to her chair for her wrap and her purse. “Ready to go?”

Carter held the door open for her as they left for dinner, and did the same when they entered the restaurant. They walked up six stairs to the main entrance of the Metropolitan, where the hostess stood behind the large mahogany podium. Carter took Sloane’s coat to the coat check while she checked on their reservation.

The Metropolitan was a restaurant in a converted warehouse; exposed red brick walls peered out from behind the occasional large gold-framed paintings and twenty-foot tall white curtains hanging from the ceiling. The chairs were black and the tablecloths were white. Chandeliers hung around the room, and everything seemed to sparkle. In the center of the restaurant there was a stage for a band and room for dancing. The stage was empty, but a piano, an upright base and a few drums were in position for a later performance.

Carter came back from the coat check and the hostess walked them to their table. When they were seated Carter finally spoke.

“This place is beautiful.”

“I thought you’d like it. I think it’s clean. You wouldn’t have preferred

something more... gaudy?" Carter laughed. A man came to their table and filled their water glasses.

"Everything sparkles here. I think that's why I like it so much. What makes it seem beautiful is that everything has glass accents and catches the light."

Carter took a moment to look around the room while his date opened the menu. "Everything they make here is excellent. I've never been served a bad meal the few times I've been here." Carter looked at the wine list as the waitress walked over to the table. He ordered a bottle of champagne and the waitress walked away. "I thought about the wine," Carter explained, "but champagne would match the ambience so much better." Carter ordered the prime rib and Sloane ordered veal Marsala. Carter looked at her with surprise as the waitress walked away with their order. "You like veal?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Oh, I'm used to people claiming it's cruel to eat a baby cow."

"Oh, and it's better to raise it for a few years, and then kill it?"

"You're starting to sound like a vegetarian."

"No, I'm not. My point is that if someone is willing to eat something that has been killed, does it really matter whether or not it was an adult or a baby?"

"I never thought so."

"Well, you probably eat veal."

"Why, yes I do. I just never thought about whether or not you ate veal."

"There's no reason I wouldn't. For that matter, if you're willing to eat the muscle and fat of an animal, why not the tongue? Or the stomach lining?"

"Don't tell me you eat tripe."

"The casing for sausage is pig intestine. Why not the stomach, or the tongue?"

"I think people make a connection when they see a tongue, they think, 'hey, they have a tongue. I have a tongue.' But when it's a patty of red stuff you don't think about the fact that the pile came from a muscle."

"It's pretty sad if they hadn't thought about what they were eating."

"I suppose it is." Carter just watched Sloane as she got more and more animated in her conversation. "I mean, the thing that really gets to me is when I hear someone, and I hate to say this, but it's usually some flighty woman, and I hate to stereotype some women like that, but it's usually the flighty women that say they won't eat veal. Or they couldn't eat rabbit, because it's a cute animal. Oh, and since chickens are ugly they have no prob-

lem with eating their flesh and muscles?”

“Maybe they should call all meats ‘muscle and fat.’ To bring us back to what we’re eating.” Carter refilled her champagne.

“People eat fish, but have fish tanks. Is it because people don’t keep bass and trout in fish tanks that it’s okay to kill them and eat them, but not their angel fish and gold fish?”

“People don’t want to be associated with the death of something, they just want their meat on their table, no questions asked.”

“And those are the same people who have a problem with eating certain animals, or certain parts of animals, or hunting, for that matter. I have a greater respect for a hunter, who knows and accepts the whole process of killing an animal and preparing it for food, than I do for the person that says it’s cruel to kill a baby cow but it’s perfectly acceptable to kill an adult cow.”

“You respect hunters?”

“I respect them in the same sense that I respect vegetarians — because they have a set of beliefs and they are consistent within their set of beliefs. Even if I don’t respect the stance they take, I appreciate the fact that they completely accept their stance, and completely adhere to it, and they don’t kid themselves about it. A hunter knows what he or she is eating, they understand and accept the whole process. A vegetarian doesn’t accept the process, on a fundamental level, and they face that and decide not to eat meat as a result of it, because they don’t want anyone killing something for them, even if they don’t have to do the actual killing. It’s better than the half-wits who shut off their minds so they can have their cows and eat them, too.”

“Have their cows and eat them, too?”

“You know what I mean. These are the people who want to save the dolphins and the whales, but they’ll eat anything else out of the ocean. These are the people who won’t eat ducks or quail but will eat chickens and turkeys. These are the people who wouldn’t think of eating horses, but don’t have a problem with cows. On what grounds do they draw their lines of distinction? It can’t be in logic.”

“But you’re asking people to think.”

Looking up at him, she had to stare for a moment. Her eyes widened slightly when he said that. “I would expect them to think, but no one seems to want to.”

“That’s the first choice people make in their lives — and their most

important choice. To think or not to think.”

“That’s what makes us uniquely human.”

They both took a sip of their champagne.

“Carter, why would anyone want to not think?”

“You’re asking the wrong person,” he answered, then she smiled. Their portabella mushroom appetizer was placed on their table and they started to eat.

“Carter? Every time I have a discussion like this with someone, they usually cut me off and tell me I’m thinking too much.”

“Did I do that to you? I didn’t mean to.”

“No, you didn’t. That’s my point.”

“I didn’t want to.”

“And most anyone else would have wanted to.”

“And that’s why you still talk to me.” She leaned her head down and smiled; it almost looked like she was blushing. Carter continued. “It’s the fact that you think, and that you’re always searching for the truth and accepting no less, that’s what makes me keep in touch with you.”

Those words made her think about her new search for the truth. The smile from her face slowly fell away, and she stared off into the distance.

“Did I say something wrong?”

“No, I’m sorry. I was just thinking about that problem I’ve been running into at work recently.” She thought about telling him right then and there. “Really, it’s too long of a story. Besides, I have other things to think about.”

“Like what?”

“Like the book.”

Carter started to lose his friendly smile when she said that and regained his business-like demeanor.

“Or the great company I’ve got here at this table with me,” she added. Carter smiled again. She looked up into the aisle. “Or the veal, for that matter,” and as she finished those words the waitress came with their dinners. As they finished their meal, three musicians walked to the stage and started getting ready to play.

“You know, I like having you around,” Carter heard her say. “I could get used to seeing you more often.”

“I know exactly how you feel.”

“I think you’re the one person that makes me not think about work all the time. And it’s okay, I mean, when I’m talking with you I’m not wishing

I was working instead.”

Carter smiled at her.

“Can’t you get your office to move to Seattle or something?”

Carter laughed. “That’s as easy as asking Madison to move to New York.”

“I bet they’d do it if I asked,” she said mockingly. “I’m their golden girl; they’ll do anything to make me happy. Maybe I should put a word in about it.”

They continued smiling at each other as they finished their bottle of champagne and the band started to play ‘A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square.’

“I love this song,” Carter said.

“What is it?”

“‘A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square.’ You’ve never heard it?”

“I don’t know.”

“It’s a very ... I don’t know ... it’s a sweet song.” He wanted to say romantic, but something told him not to. “It’s a shame that they’ve got no one to sing the words”. Carter looked over at the dance floor. “Hey, let’s dance.”

“Dance?”

“I’m not bad,” he said, standing up and stretching his hand out to her.

“I wasn’t suggesting you were the one that was bad at dancing.”

“I won’t take no for an answer.”

They walked over to the center of the restaurant and started dancing. Suddenly Sloane felt aware of the fabric of her dress moving over her back and legs. She felt Carter’s hand on her back through her dress as Carter looked at the band while they danced and he said, “It’s the words that make this so beautiful.”

“How do they go?”

Carter waited for a music cue and sang the lines quietly under his breath.

*‘How could he know we two were so in love,
The whole wide world seemed upside down.’*

Carter looked at her and smiled until his cue for the next line.

*‘The streets of town were paved with stars,
It was such a romantic affair,
And as we kissed and said good-bye
A nightingale sang in Berkeley Square.’*

Carter looked at her again before she spoke. "You have a beautiful singing voice."

"Oh, you know me, I just like to get all the attention I can." Carter smiled and looked around, like he had something up his sleeve. "Okay... We're at the end of the song."

She seemed confused and asked, "Yes?"

"You know what that means I have to do."

Her mouth opened slightly and she took a breath. "What?"

"Dip you." And just as the words came out of his mouth he tightened his grip on her and moved his shoulder forward to guide her down. She had no time to react, just to comply, just to trust him and arch her back and shoulders and let her head fall back. She could feel her hair hanging toward the floor. For that instant, when her back was arched and Carter was holding her, she thought of him leaning in and kissing her stomach, and breasts, and neck. And as soon as the thought entered her mind, he picked her back up and she opened her eyes. She only then noticed that the song ended.

Feeling his hand on her back as they went back to the table, she couldn't believe what was going through her mind. She knew she had to slow her heartbeat down somehow; her chest was heaving in her dress. She thought that what she was feeling was noticeable to the rest of the room. As they got to the table, she picked up her purse and excused herself so she could go to the ladies' room.

Walking straight to the counter, she dropped her purse next to the sink, pressed her hands on the counter and leaned forward with her head hanging down. She checked around the room once to make sure that she was alone.

"Why am I doing this to myself?" She said under her breath as she lifted her head and then leaned back and looked up at the ceiling. "This is wrong, this is wrong," she repeated quietly as she tried to regain herself. She told herself to inhale slowly, then exhale. She straightened her head and looked at her reflection in the mirror. She took another breath, methodically opened her purse and reached around for the lipstick.

She took another deep breath as she opened the door to walk back into the restaurant and saw Carter waiting for her. The entire ride home she had to concentrate on anything she could, anything other than Carter. "Think about your work," she thought as she drove him back to her apartment. "Think about the

Shane files. Remember to give a copy of them to Carter, so they're safe. No, don't think of him for these files and let your thoughts go back to Carter again. No, don't think about that. Think about the book. Think about getting the book published. Think about the manuscript, you have to give Carter a copy. Oh, wait, don't think about that. Think about the road. Just get home, keep your eyes on the road, don't look at him, don't think about him, and get him to your apartment. No, please don't think about that..."

"Are you okay? You seem preoccupied."

"Oh, it's just late. I'm fine."

By the time they got home it was almost eleven at night. Carter walked in and took off his jacket. As she closed the door to her apartment she watched Carter slip his jacket off his shoulders; she was momentarily fixed on his wide shoulders. She had to keep telling herself to stop. She walked into the kitchen.

"Okay, I have orange juice, V-8, diet Pepsi, a bottle of Merlot and a bottle of champagne. Do you want anything?"

"Are you up for champagne?" Carter called from the living room. Sloane acted calm: "You're the guest," she called back as she pulled the champagne from the kitchen.

Carter stood in her living room and looked at the magazines on her cocktail table. He picked up *Discovery* and *Scientific American* to see the most recent catalog of Angelique's Lingerie. He was holding the catalog in his hand as she walked into the living room with two glasses and the champagne.

"I didn't know you shopped for lingerie," Carter said, stopping her in her tracks. "You don't seem the type to wear frivolous things," he continued.

Thinking about what to say, she almost told him that she was buying a white terry cloth bath robe, but thought that would seem like she was thinking of him too much. She could say that she was buying lingerie, but it wouldn't be believable. "I don't know how I got on that list," she finally got out of her mouth, "I didn't buy anything from it."

Carter immediately answered with, "But you kept it."

"I didn't think about it" she answered. "Where did you find it? I must have missed it when I was throwing out my mail."

Carter smiled. "I didn't know you had it in you."

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

Carter started to walk around the couch. Sloane put down the bottle and glasses on the cocktail table and tried to follow him.

“I don’t know, maybe you’d look good in this,” he said, pointing out a teddy, and Sloane tried to reach around him to grab the magazine. “Give me that!” she yelled.

“I didn’t know you wanted the catalog that badly...” Carter continued smiling.

“I didn’t know you wanted the catalog that badly, Carter,” she answered. “I didn’t know you looked at women as objects like that.”

Carter pushed the catalog gently into her stomach and waited for her to grab it before he let go. “You know I can’t do that. This is just a side of you I haven’t seen.”

Needing to turn the tables quickly, she did her best to come up with a retort. “I didn’t know you wanted to see me in lingerie that badly.”

Carter smiled. “I don’t think lingerie suits you. That’s why I give you grief for it.”

She felt just slightly disappointed. “And why doesn’t it suit me?”

“I think you’d want someone to love you for you, not because you were wearing something frilly.”

“Check your premises. I never said I bought anything frilly.”

“Okay, I won’t tease you anymore.” Carter leaned back. “Where’s the champagne?”

“Carter,” she said, as she picked up the other glass and he poured both glasses full. “Do you drink this much all the time? Or is it just me that brings out the drunk in you?”

Carter smiled. “Really, I don’t drink much at all. I just like drinking with you. You know, I don’t know if I learned this when I was in Stockholm or Helsinki, but a friend there told me that amongst friends there it is almost a sin to not have food, and candles, and something to drink when you engage in conversation. It makes things more comfortable.”

Sloane nodded her head in agreement. “It’s a good idea, I suppose. I’ve supplied plenty of food and plenty of drink.”

“So we’re just missing candles. Do you have any?”

“Yes, I do, in a drawer over here.” Walking over to a cabinet next to her dining room table, she couldn’t believe how romantic he was making things, without even trying. “It won’t be as impressive as your fireplace, but I hope it’s good enough.” She walked over and lit two ivory taper candles in small crystal star-shaped candleholders and placed them on the cocktail table. “It’s perfect,”

Carter answered and waited for her to sit down before taking his seat next to her.

“So, are you going to tell me now what’s bothering you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Something has been on your mind all night. You start feeling better, then you get tense. We’ve got a full bottle of champagne, and a bottle of Merlot if we get desperate. I’ve got all night here, remember? I’m captive here.”

“I didn’t know you thought of it as prison.”

“If it is, then I’ve shackled myself. Now tell me.”

Carter’s comment made her think for a fraction of a second about tying him to her bed and unbuttoning her shirt. She closed her eyes and tried to think about something else. “I just keep reminding myself that I have a copy of the manuscript for you, I brought it home with me in case you wanted to look at it before Monday. And I have something I’d like for you to hold on to for me.”

At this point Carter was interested. “What is it?”

“Oh, it’s just some files someone gave me. I don’t want something to happen to the copy I have. So I wondered if you’d hold on to a copy of the files for me.”

“Sure. What are they, your will or something?”

“No. It relates to work, it’s some information I’ve received about AIDS transmission. I have copies for myself, but I just want to make sure that the files don’t get destroyed. It’s just a sealed envelope, so it’s not very big or anything.”

“Sure. I can hold on to it for you.” Carter thought her request was a bit strange, but he was more than willing to comply. “Are these files what has gotten you so tense in the past few days? When I talked to you on the phone this morning you said that you had been disconnected for the past day or two.”

All she could see when she looked at Carter was real concern in his eyes. “Don’t worry about it, Carter. It’s just some material I have to do some research on. And I don’t know how sensitive the material is, so I want to make sure it’s safe.”

“No problem. I’ll put it in my safe deposit box when I get back to New York. Is that all the business we have for the day?”

“Who is coming in on Monday to edit and proofread the manuscript?”

“Her name is Ellen Bailey. Her flight comes in at 8:45 Monday morning. Is someone picking her up or should she rent a car?”

“I can have Julie pick her up. She usually comes in before eight in the morning. I’ll call her tomorrow to ask her if she can pick her up and get her

breakfast on their way in.” Sloane leaned back in to the pillows of the couch.

“So that’s all the business we have for the day?” Carter asked again.

“Yes, I promise, no more business.”

“What would you like to talk about then?”

“I was thinking about what we were talking about at dinner. About how most people choose to not think. Why do they do it?”

“They see everyone else not using their minds, I suppose, and when the rest of the world bullies you enough, the average person caves in to the peer pressure.”

“That’s a funny way of putting it.”

“But think about it, think about what they taught you in philosophy classes in undergraduate college. Most philosophers hypothesized that the world was unknowable, that the human mind was impotent. Our minds create our reality. Our opinions don’t matter, but the ‘collective good’ does. What does that do for a person? If they don’t reject it, they feel guilty for thinking.”

“You know, it would make me so angry, the things I had to read for my philosophy classes. I remember having to write a ten page paper once about whether or not we could tell if we were dreaming all the time or not, if we could prove that our life was not one big dream, or if we could tell our conscious state from our dreams. It was exasperating. Why do people perpetuate these myths?”

“Because that’s the way people have always been.”

“For thousands of years we lived without electricity, should we then reject that too?”

“You’re preaching to the converted. I’m just trying to explain why it happens. I didn’t say I agreed with them.”

Carter changed the subject and continued. “I noticed you had my book, ‘The Philosophy of Science.’”

This surprised her, realizing she had left his books on her nightstand. “Oh, you noticed? I put those there just to make you feel better.” She smiled, hoping her joke would cover up her embarrassment. “Yes, I read it.”

“I’m surprised you found the time.”

“You mention the two most important things in my life in the title alone. Did you think I wouldn’t read it?”

“What did you think of it?”

“You know what I thought of it. You know I like the idea of using the

Scientific Method for determining everything in your life. It makes sense. But what I thought was most interesting was your analysis of scientists who relied on faith and lack of reason when it came to philosophy, even when they were so dependent on reason in every other aspect of their lives.”

Her comments intrigued Carter. “Why did you like that part?”

“Oh, I just remember going to Kyle’s wedding, he’s one of my assistants at the lab. He’s a really good guy, and his wife is a very sweet woman, but this marriage, it was a full Catholic wedding, with a full mass and lots of prayers, the whole nine yards. And it just made me think: Does Kyle believe all of this? All day he lives by a code of logic and reason, proof and evidence. Does he let go of that reasoning when it comes to his life philosophy?”

“That was exactly my point. Scientists love science because it helps explain things to them. But they were never taught to use it in the most crucial aspect of their lives — in their philosophy of life. And they never thought to apply it to themselves.”

“I hope you don’t think I’m like that.”

“Of course I don’t. You’re the most consistent person I know.”

“Other than yourself?”

Carter smiled back. “I don’t gauge myself against other people.”

“I would hope not.”

They both sat in silence for a moment and sipped their champagne.

“It’s nice to read a few pages of your book at night.”

Carter looked up from his glass. “Why is that?”

“It helps me to read it, so I don’t think I’m crazy at the end of the day.”

Carter laughed. “What does *that* mean?”

“Oh, you know. Reading a few pages of ‘The Philosophy of Science’ at the end of the day, it reaffirms what I know. I deal with a bunch of irrational people in a day, like people in marketing, or people in lobbying groups that tell us to give away our drugs for free. People tell us we’re being cruel by limiting the number of people that can start taking Emivir, when they don’t know enough to know that we do it because it would be more detrimental if people would have to stop taking the drug because plants can’t produce enough. When I deal with people like that, it’s nice to come home and slip into bed and remind myself that I’m right before I go to sleep. Does that make any sense?”

“Yes, it does. But you don’t need anything to remind you, other than you, other than your mind. Remember, you’re one of the few that made the

decision to think.”

“And you think that’s a good thing.”

“Of course I do, what would make you think otherwise?”

“Oh, I didn’t mean it to imply that you shouldn’t. I meant that most people wouldn’t think it’s a good thing, and that’s the insulting part.”

“Oh, come on, don’t you think your talents could be better utilized if you were a cheerleader, or—”

They started bantering. “Oh, stop it, Carter.” “Or a housewife, or —”

“Oh, you’re kidding, right?” “Or maybe an exotic dancer?”

Acting on impulse, she grabbed a pillow and threw it at Carter on the other side of the couch. “Them’s fightin’ words!” She yelled as she set her champagne glass on the cocktail table.

Carter dodged the pillow, then set his glass down next to hers and picked up the pillow she threw at him. “I challenge you to a duel,” He said, throwing the pillow back at her.

Grabbing the pillow in mid air, she turned and kneeled on the couch, facing Carter. “You don’t think I could actually be a housewife, do you?”

“I think either one of us could be a housewife if we found someone we loved enough.”

She held the pillow instead of immediately throwing it. “But do you think either one of us could love someone that would want us as a housewife? I mean, a house person?”

“No, but the person that would love us, the person we would love that much, we’d want to do things for them. Not because they expect it of us, but because we’d want to. You love someone because you respect them, because they share the values you do. And you want them to be happy, because that would make you happy. So you want to do things for them. And they would want to do the same.”

“You’re talking about sharing the household duties.”

“I’m talking about sharing two lives. The rest will fall into place... When do you have the time to think about these things?”

“I read and I write for a living. What else would I be doing?”

Seeing the ivory taper candles, she noted they were burning on the cocktail table. She rolled her head along the back of the couch until she was looking at Carter. “Have any idea what time it is?” Carter looked down at his watch. “It’s one-thirty in the morning. I think I need my sleep.” Sloane trailed

off as she realized she had something else to say. "I forgot that you might be tired from the traveling. Oh, God, it's four-thirty your time, isn't it?"

"Yes, but I'll be fine. Just let me sleep in tomorrow a bit."

"Not a problem. You can't hear a thing from my bedroom."

"I'm not going to take your bed. I'm not making you sleep on the couch."

"Why not? You offered the same to me when I was in New York."

"I'm not going to make you sleep on the couch, and that's final."

Trying to sell him on her offer, she pleaded. "I'm not going to let you sleep on the couch, Carter. Come on, it's a nice, comfy, king-sized bed... You need to rest. Take it."

"No ... not unless you sleep with me."

"Excuse me?"

"There's room, it's a king-sized bed, right?"

Getting bashful, she looked down for a moment. "I suppose so."

"Sorry you won't be able to sleep naked tonight," Carter said, and she finally threw her pillow at him. "Unless of course you wear lingerie from that catalog to bed..." Screaming, she reached for another pillow when Carter grabbed her arm. "Is this okay with you? I wasn't trying to make you uncomfortable."

"No, it's fine. Let me get some clothes from the bedroom and I'll change in the bathroom."

As she walked into the bathroom Carter blew out the candles and walked to her bedroom. "Oh, one thing, Carter. I get the left side of the bed."

Carter smiled and walked into her bedroom, closing the door behind him.

When she closed the door to her bathroom and turned on the light, she rolled her head back and closed her eyes. She repeated the same phrase in her head over and over again: "Why is this happening to me... Why is this happening to me... Why is this happening to me..." This time it wasn't a question; she didn't ask it of herself; for this one moment she actually did want to suspend her thought. She was afraid of what answers she would find if she looked for them.

She slid off her dark blue satin dress; she felt it sliding over her skin with such ease and thought again of his touch as they were dancing. She closed her eyes and tried to put him out of her mind. She picked up her silk pajama pants and stepped into them. This was her Christmas present from her sister

last year. Her sister had told her that she wanted to get her something that she could pamper herself with, but she knew her sister wouldn't like something romantic or frilly. She looked at herself in the mirror in her dark green button-down pajama shirt and pants. The fabric was soft against her skin. She had owned these pajamas for four months but had yet to wear them.

Mentally she rolled her eyes when she noted she picked this to sleep in when Carter was here.

Knocking on her bedroom door, she then came in, holding her dress in her hand. Carter was sitting under the covers on the right side of the bed. She instantly noticed he wasn't wearing a shirt. She assumed he was wearing pants. "You didn't have to knock," Carter said. "It is your bedroom, you know."

"I wanted to make sure you were dressed."

"Oh." Carter let the space between them be silent while she walked to her closet, hung up her dress, and walked around to the other side of the bed. She wondered if he had done this intentionally, to torment her. She lifted the sheets and slid into her bed. After watching her turned out the light on the nightstand, Carter could hear her slide into the bed.

"Let me know if I kick you in my sleep, Carter," she said.

"Can I hit you if you do?" Carter answered.

"Oh, don't talk dirty to me," she replied, and she could hear Carter laugh softly in the dark. "Good night, Carter." "Good night," she heard from the other side of the bed, and with that she tried to close her eyes.

Sloane was sitting in her office with an interviewer from the Seattle Daily Herald. Tyler was standing at the other side of the room. She agreed to do an interview about how the staff came up with Emivir. She agreed to do it primarily because she knew Tyler would keep bothering her until she did it. But then she thought: now that she agreed to one interview, would Tyler break open a floodgate of demands on her?

When you give them a little control, they'll take more, she thought.

The young reporter put a tape recorder on the edge of her desk and sat. She tried not to fidget; she wanted to be doing anything else but this interview; she felt her time was better spent in the lab. And the process of the reporter asking questions and writing notes took longer than she had expected it to. Tyler stood in the back, gesturing for her to uncross her arms, to

smile more. She hated every minute of it.

“The process of modifying other drugs to get Emivir came about how?”

“We modified the part of the drug that affected its ability to attach to healthy cells so it could fight the virus for a longer period of time in the body. This knocked the virus back quite a bit, but more importantly, it also affected the length of time the human body would accept and work with the drug.”

She watched the reporter scribble down some notes.

“You’re a female researcher.”

“You noticed.”

“I was wondering if you’ve encountered any flack from male researchers.”

“What?”

“Has the struggle been harder because you’re a woman, Ms. Emerson?”

“Why would it be any different, if I’m qualified and capable of doing the work?”

“Women are a minority in the science fields, so I was wondering —”

“And what does this have to do with the drugs we’ve been working on?”

The reporter was surprised that she seemed angry. “Most people doing work in your field are male. I think the public is interested in you in particular because you’re a female.”

“Is that what you think?”

“You have to admit —”

“And they might not be interested because I produced the best results?”

“All I was asking was —”

“You were asking something entirely irrelevant.” She then caught Tyler’s waving arms out of the corner of her eye; she looked up and saw him crossing his arms back and forth in front of him and shaking his head and mouthing the word “no” over and over again. She looked back toward the reporter.

“I wasn’t saying anything about you personally, but the feminine aspect of this story is its draw. That’s what people want to hear about.”

“They don’t want to hear about the research?”

“They’ve already heard about the research.”

“Not when you report it, they don’t.” She glanced at Tyler again, who was almost dancing in an effort to silently stop her. “Is there something you need, Tyler?”

“Maybe we should take a break,” Tyler panted as he walked up to the table and sat on the edge. “Does anyone want coffee?”

“Oh yes, please, thank you,” the reporter answered.

“No, thank you, Tyler,” she said. “We’ll stay here while you get coffee.”

Tyler was angry that she managed to get him to leave her office without them. He slowly walked out of the room.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Emerson, I didn’t mean to offend you. Let’s go on another track. How many hours a day do you work on the research?”

“Between ten and twelve. But usually I take reading home with me, or do Internet work and the like while I’m at home, so I can at least see what my place looks like.”

“So do you get the chance to be very social?”

“I usually — wait. What does that have to do with research?”

“I’m writing a story about you, Ms. Emerson. People want to know how you tick.”

“How do they *expect* me to ‘tick’?”

“What do you mean?”

“You haven’t written stories like this about other researchers. How do they *tick*? They work, because they love their work, because that’s what keeps them alive. They use their brains. Why do you need to hear me say that?”

“That’s not what I’m asking, I’m asking who you are.”

“I’m a researcher. Ask me about my work.”

“But what do you do to relax at the end of the day? Do you have a place in your apartment where you like to unwind, say, take a bath or read a book? Do you have hobbies?”

“What? Have you ever asked a researcher before whether they took baths to unwind at the end of the day? This is ludicrous. I want to stop this dream.”

And just as the words came out of her mouth she sprung up in her bed.

She let out a light sigh as she woke up and exhaled in the middle of the night from her dream.

What she didn’t expect was for someone next to her to spring up after her.

“Are you okay?”

She forgot that he was with her and she jumped again. Then everything instantly came back to her and she let go of her breath and started panting.

“I, I had a bad dream.”

“Oh, come here.” She felt the sheets moving and suddenly he was sitting up next to her; she could feel his legs against her silk pajamas. He put his arms around her shoulders. “Here, lean on me. It’s okay. Relax.”

“I don’t know how,” she whispered and she tried to control her breathing.

Carter put his right hand against her right temple and guided her head to his shoulder. She adjusted her head and felt her forehead against the bottom of his neck.

“It was just a dream, it’s okay.” He ran his fingers through her hair at her temples. “What was it about?”

All she could think was that it would sound trivial if she told him; it wasn’t a nightmare about her teeth falling out or people trying to kill her. “I don’t remember,” was all she could say.

“It’s over. Just relax.”

“You know, I’m not used to this,” Sloane whispered.

“Not used to what?”

“Having someone comfort me from my dreams.”

“You have bad dreams a lot?”

“I think once or twice a week now I wake up like this.”

“What’s the matter? Are your dreams an effort to resolve work problems?”

“No. Usually they’re about losing control of some aspect of my life.”

“You’re fine. You just need some rest.”

He held her in silence in the dark.

Sloane let herself be held there, in the dark, in her bed, something she had never done. She never let herself lose control, and here she was showing weakness and letting someone hold her like a child. She closed her eyes and felt his hand against her temple, then his fingers running softly and slowly through her hair. She felt the skin of his shoulder on her cheek and his neck against her forehead. Instinctively she moved her right hand up and placed it on his chest. Instantly she realized she shouldn’t have done it; to cover it up she made a motion to pick her head up from his shoulder.

“You must be tired,” she finally whispered. “I’m sure you are about to go to sleep again. I’m sorry I woke you.”

“Are you okay now? You’re still tense, and you’re still breathing heavy.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“I didn’t ask how you’d be, I asked how you are.”

“Don’t worry about me, Carter.”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t do that.” Carter looked at her in the light from the window, all he could see was the silhouette of her face and a spot of light reflecting from her eyes. “Here, come here,” he said, and moved back under

the covers and lay down.

Sloane couldn't see in the dark. "What — where am I going?"

Carter found her right hand in the dark and moved it with his left hand to his shoulder. She could tell he was lying on his back and wanted her to lean on him. She complied.

"You just lay here and relax," Carter told her as she slid her left arm under his pillow and leaned her head back down on his chest near his shoulder. She felt his right hand gently gliding up and down her back against the silk of her shirt.

Sloane let the rhythm of his hand against her back eventually lull her to sleep.

Picking her head up Sunday morning, she tried not to disturb Carter as she sat up. The clock read 9:10 a.m., so she got up and walked out into her living room. She heard her laptop computer boot while she brewed some coffee. She checked her e-mail and found a number of documents from Tyler.

The first ones she started to read were the press releases issued by the U.S. Scientific Research Advancement Department.

From: T_Gillian@Madison-Ph.com

To: S_Emerson@Madison-Ph.com

Date: Saturday, 4:42 p.m.

Subject: Fdw: PR_GOV1.TXT

Here's the first one. There have been three in the past few days about us. Hope this fills you in. — Tyler

Thursday, 10:00 A.M.

from the Office of the United States
Scientific Research Advancement Department
Washington, D.C.

Acknowledgment of initial steps of Madison
Pharmaceuticals' integrase inhibitor

The United States Scientific Research
Advancement Department has received knowl-
edge about the recent achievements Madison

Pharmaceuticals have had in working with integrase inhibitors. The United States Scientific Research Advancement Department is looking forward to checking up on their progress. Any work to further the development of knowledge about HIV and AIDS is always taken under consideration.

Sloane skimmed over the rest of the press release. There wasn't much content to it.

From: T_Gillian@Madison-Ph.com

To: S_Emerson@Madison-Ph.com

Date: Saturday, 4:44 p.m.

Subject: Fdw: PR_GOV2.TXT

Here's the second one. There have been three. Hope this fills you in. - Tyler

Thursday, 2:00 p.m.

from the Office of the United States

Scientific Research Advancement

Department

Washington, D.C.

U.S. Scientific Research Advancement Department has been working on integrase inhibitor. They have been working on an integrase inhibitor for the past three months. It would be used in a drug cocktail with transcriptase and protease inhibitors in a joined battle against the AIDS virus. A Spokesperson from the Scientific Research Advancement Department stated that they too are very close to coming up

with a genetically engineered inhibitor, one that is projected that in conjunction with other drugs would exceed the length of time the viral load is down in a subject's body for almost two and a half years.

Mr. Jacob Morton, Director of the Department, stated that they were in discussions with Madison Pharmaceuticals about differences in their research, in order to pool their efforts and come up with a better product faster. Madison has recently released information about progress they have also made with integrase inhibitors.

"We here feel that working with Madison would be best for the public," Morton said.

Sloane looked over this press release. She sent a reply to Tyler.

From: S_Emerson@Madison-Ph.com

To: T_Gillian@Madison-Ph.com

Date: Sunday, 9:36 A.M.

Subject: re: Fdw: PR_GOV2.TXT

Tyler, we weren't talking to anyone from the government on Thursday, were we? No one from my department was, but it says in their second press release (Thursday at 2 p.m.) that "they were in discussions with Madison Pharmaceuticals about differences in their research." You weren't talking to them, were you? Either way, you don't know any of the details about the drug, so you couldn't have told them anything about it. Please issue a statement immediately Monday morning saying that the research department from Madison Pharmaceuticals has not spoken with anyone from the U.S. government, much less the Scientific Research Advancement Department, about our drug. And we never

discussed working with anyone on our drug. Thanks.
– Sloane

She went on to the third press release.

From: T_Gillian@Madison-Ph.com

To: S_Emerson@Madison-Ph.com

Date: Saturday, 4:47 p.m.

Subject: Fdw: PR_GOV3.TXT

Here's the third one. There have been three. Hope this fills you in. – Tyler

Friday, 9:00 A.M.

from the Office of the United States
Scientific Research Advancement Department
Washington, D.C.

United States Scientific Research
Advancement Department is looking into the
research and the work done by Madison
Pharmaceuticals on their level of inte-
grase inhibitors. The research released by
the laboratory at Madison is "alarmingly
similar" to research about to be released
by the United States Scientific Research
Advancement Department, according to a
spokesperson at the department.

"We are not assuming any wrong-doing has
been committed," said Mr. Jacob Morton,
Director of the Scientific Research
Advancement Department. "We just want to
look over the history of how Madison's drug
was created, as well as look into any pos-
sibilities that information could have
been given to Madison about the research we

were doing at the Scientific Research Advancement Department.”

Madison Pharmaceuticals has been contacted and will be meeting with representatives from the Scientific Research Advancement Department Monday.

Sloane leaned back in her chair. Then she wrote an e-mail to Tyler.

From: S_Emerson@Madison-Ph.com

To: T_Gillian@Madison-Ph.com

Date: Sunday, 9:55 A.M.

Subject: re: Fdw: PR_GOV3.TXT

Tyler: You have to know what is going on here. They heard about our reports, so they had to issue a press release. Then they realized what a fluff P.R. piece they sent out when word spread about the success we had been having. So to save their own heads from being thrown onto the butcher block, they sent out another press release saying that they were working with Madison, which they weren't. They knew they'd get caught in that lie, though, so they created a bigger lie: that we stole from them.

And they managed to write their press release so vaguely that you can't even say they're accusing us of stealing from them. They said it so discreetly that when we say we didn't steal from them, we'll sound like the first people that suggested stealing was an option. They're trying to corner us, because they want to stop us.

Why do they want to stop us, you ask? It's simple. They get constant funding from the federal government to do work, and they're not producing results. If they didn't have any competition to produce any results (if we weren't there making progress with the integrase inhibitors) they could just go back to the representatives in the subcommittees that gave them the money in the first place and tell them that they just need more money because the work is more difficult than they

expected. And their constituents, their representatives — what do they know enough of science to judge whether or not their scientists are lying to get more money. So they trust them and give more money to the Scientific Research Advancement Department.

The problem is, now we've come in and done it faster and with less money. In fact, we did it with money we made, not money we had to beg for, not money we extorted from the people via more taxes.

If any smart American citizens looked at Madison Pharmaceuticals and then looked at the Scientific Research Advancement Department, they would get angry about their tax money being wasted.

And that's just what the Scientific Research Advancement Department wants to avoid.

So they make this horrendous claim that we've stolen from them, but manage to say it in such a way that they can deny suggesting it. But we all know what it means, and we have to act like we want to comply or else we look like criminals.

Tyler, they haven't made any indication of showing "the people" any of their own data. Julie will scour past records of journals and magazines to verify it. I would suggest that the Scientific Research Advancement Department wasn't even working on an integrase inhibitor at the time. I bet they have no research on it whatsoever. Yet they're going to attempt to take our records from us, in the name of "cooperation," and duplicate them and doctor them so it looks like they had all of our information before we did.

We're in trouble here, Tyler. This is potentially a very dangerous situation. They could have us up against the wall. They could destroy Madison and put some of us in jail if they wanted to. Why would they do it? To save their own program. To save face. To save the way things have always been done in the U.S. government. If you think I'm overreacting, don't. If you think I'm kidding, don't. This is war. They want us under their thumb, and we have to fight tooth and nail every step

of the way to make sure it doesn't happen. If you get this e-mail Sunday, call me at home – I'll be working there. I'm also waiting on any speeches you might have worked on for me. I'll write up some notes and work on my own speeches while you're doing the same. I'll talk to you soon.
– Sloane

She pressed the send button and watched her e-mail to Tyler disappear into cyberspace. Once again she leaned back in her chair. Then she heard a noise behind her.

Carter was standing behind her with two cups of coffee. "I noticed you started the coffee, but never got your own cup," Carter said. He held forward one mug to her.

"So, what fires are you putting out on Sunday morning?" Carter asked.

"What do you mean?"

"You were e-mailing someone. What's the crisis today?"

"The government, a scientific agency within the government, is claiming that we somehow got information from them about their research, and that's why we came up with the integrase inhibitor so fast."

"Do you think they're saying it because they haven't produced research or any results?"

"That's exactly why they're saying it. No one on my staff would do that. We don't have enough respect for the Scientific Research Advancement Department to think they might have something we want, much less actually steal from. It's ludicrous."

"You sound like you got your work cut out for you. The government is quite a monster to become entangled with."

"Well, David beat Goliath, right?"

"What was that? Did I just hear you making a biblical reference?"

"I suppose I should stop saying 'God bless you', too."

"Or screaming out 'Oh, God' during sex."

Sloane laughed. "That's assuming I've had the opportunity to have sex recently, Carter."

"I'm sure you've had opportunities."

"I suppose... I just haven't found anyone worth having sex with."

Carter let out a loud laugh. "I'm sure with that attitude, the men are knocking down your door." Sloane snapped back, "The men that would be knocking down my door are not the men I want to sleep with."

Carter smiled and paused before speaking. "Want breakfast?"

"Do *you* want breakfast? We could go to a diner, or I could make something here."

"You'd make food for me? As long as you wore an apron..."

Sloane stood up and put her hands on her hips. "This is what I get for being nice," Carter smiled. "Let me make you breakfast," Carter answered.

"I can make breakfast for you if you'd like, really."

"Maybe you could burn the toast for me."

Sloane gave him another dirty look and turned back toward the living room. "Do you want the manuscript to look over today?"

"Yes, that would be perfect. I don't even know what title you came up with."

"We came up with 'Winning the War from the Inside,' how homeopathy can change the lives of AIDS patients."

"Not bad." Carter rummaged through her refrigerator while she set the table and got the newspaper.

The rest of the day was spent in her apartment. Sloane stayed at her computer and worked on speeches and did Internet research about the government's involvement in research on integrase inhibitors; Carter sat on the couch and read the manuscript, made comments and notes on it on his computer, and read other manuscripts he had brought along with him. She occasionally fielded calls from Tyler during the day.

At two forty-five Carter looked up at Sloane.

"Hey, I know this is strange, but I'm used to working alone, and —"

"What, am I bothering you?"

"No, not at all. I was going to say that it was nice working in the same room as you."

listening to what he said made her smile.

"I mean, we're both working on separate things, we don't need each other's input in doing our work," Carter continued, "but it's nice to have you sitting here in the room with me. Does that make sense?"

"Yes, it does. I know what you mean." She slowly turned back to her computer and continued working. At five o'clock Carter got up to make another pot of coffee. "Hey," Carter yelled from her kitchen, "did you know

it was approaching dinner time?”

“No. I had no idea.”

“Want to order out? Chinese or something?”

“Sure. There’s a drawer to the left of my oven, and it has a bunch of delivery brochures in it.” She got up and walked to the kitchen. Carter went through the menus.

“Pick out what you want, unless...”

“What?” Carter looked up from the menus at her.

“Did you want to go out for dinner? I’ve been sitting here working all day and I didn’t even stop to think that you might want to see more of the town.”

“I’ve got a lot of work to do, too. It’s fine if we order in. As long as you light your candles again.”

“How does Merlot sound with Chinese food? All I’ve got is the Merlot; maybe we could go for Italian instead...”

“Chinese food is good, but we could have tea with it instead for dinner.”

When dinner arrived she got silverware and plates from the kitchen while Carter lit the ivory candles and put the pillows from her couch on the floor.

Coming out with silverware, a teapot and wine with glasses, she was surprised to find everything on the floor. “We’re eating on the floor?”

“Why not?” Carter answered, as he grabbed the wine and glasses out of her full hands. “And what do we need forks for? They gave us chopsticks.”

“You can show off your ability to eat with two sticks, but I’d prefer to use a fork.”

They sat down and Carter opened the wine while Sloane opened the little white cartons of food and poured rice on their plates. They ate in silence and then Carter tried to teach her how to eat with chopsticks. He leaned next to her and put his hand next to hers so she could mimic it. After repeated failures, Carter curled his right hand around hers and held her fingers in place as he tried to help her pick up a piece of chicken. Once they successfully picked up the piece of food, Carter’s hand moved with hers as she moved the wooden sticks to her mouth.

“This is useless, Carter. I’m working up an appetite just by trying to eat.” She didn’t want to tell him that every time he touched her she felt more and more nervous, more and more anxious. She became hypersensitive to every move he made near her; she could even feel the hair on the back of her neck rise when he happened to brush against her.

Carter just smiled and said, “You’ll get the hang of it, if you want to.”

They both turned and continued eating.

Carter asked her what she was working on, and she explained the problems Madison was having with the government in more detail. “I don’t want to have to fight to do my work. That’s why I work in the United States instead of in a more controlling country. That’s why I work for a private company instead of a State University. Is there any place that lets you be free?”

“If I find it, I’ll let you know,” Carter answered.

They needed to sleep in order to finish all their work the next day. Sloane called Julie to make sure she could pick up Ellen from the airport, cleaned up her belongings and found her extra copies of the Shane files.

“Carter, this is the folder I need you to keep a copy of for me,” she said as she handed the sealed envelope to him.

“You know, it’s killing me that you’re not telling me what is in this folder.”

“Carter, I think it might be dangerous information.” She saw a look of genuine concern in Carter’s eyes. “I think everything’s fine if I don’t tell you what is in that folder; I don’t think anyone will suspect that you have it. But I’m concerned about telling you what might be in that folder and what it might mean.”

Carter sat down and held her hand; Sloane sat down next to him. “You’re going to tell me what’s going on.” He looked at her closely; he could tell that she was scared.

“Let me just say that another reason I think the government is giving Madison a hard time is because of these files I have. I think they want to get rid of them, or shut me up.”

“What are they?” he asked.

“I don’t know, and I might just be jumping to conclusions. This is what has been bothering me. I should just throw away these files, I have no reason to believe that there is anything truthful in them at all. But a part of me still does think that the information in these files might be true, and that scares me — it scares me because the truth would be really hard to believe, it would be that bad, but more than that, it scares me because it means that I’m believing in things without reason.”

“Do you have any evidence at all that anything in these files might be true?”

“Very little.”

“But you have some.”

“Yes. But it could be doctored evidence, it’s weak at best, but yes, there

is some.”

“If it bothers you, you owe it to yourself to go out and find the truth. You’re not doing this on a whim, you have some evidence. So do some research and come up with the proof you need. But don’t think you’re relying on anything other than your mind. I know that’s your main concern. That’s what I love about you, your rational mind and your unnerving determinism. You think that if you’re thinking illogically now, what will stop you from being illogical for the rest of your life, and becoming one of the mindless out there? But you’re not thinking illogically. The conflict of the evidence you have is bothering you. You haven’t made a decision either way, have you? Then go out there and find the truth.”

When most of what she heard was that he loved something about her, she liked his message and looked up at him as he stood up. “Thanks, Carter.”

Carter leaned over and kissed her on the forehead. “Not a problem.” He walked toward the bedroom. “I’m going to get ready to sleep. I just wish you felt like you could tell me what it was. You can tell me anything, you know.”

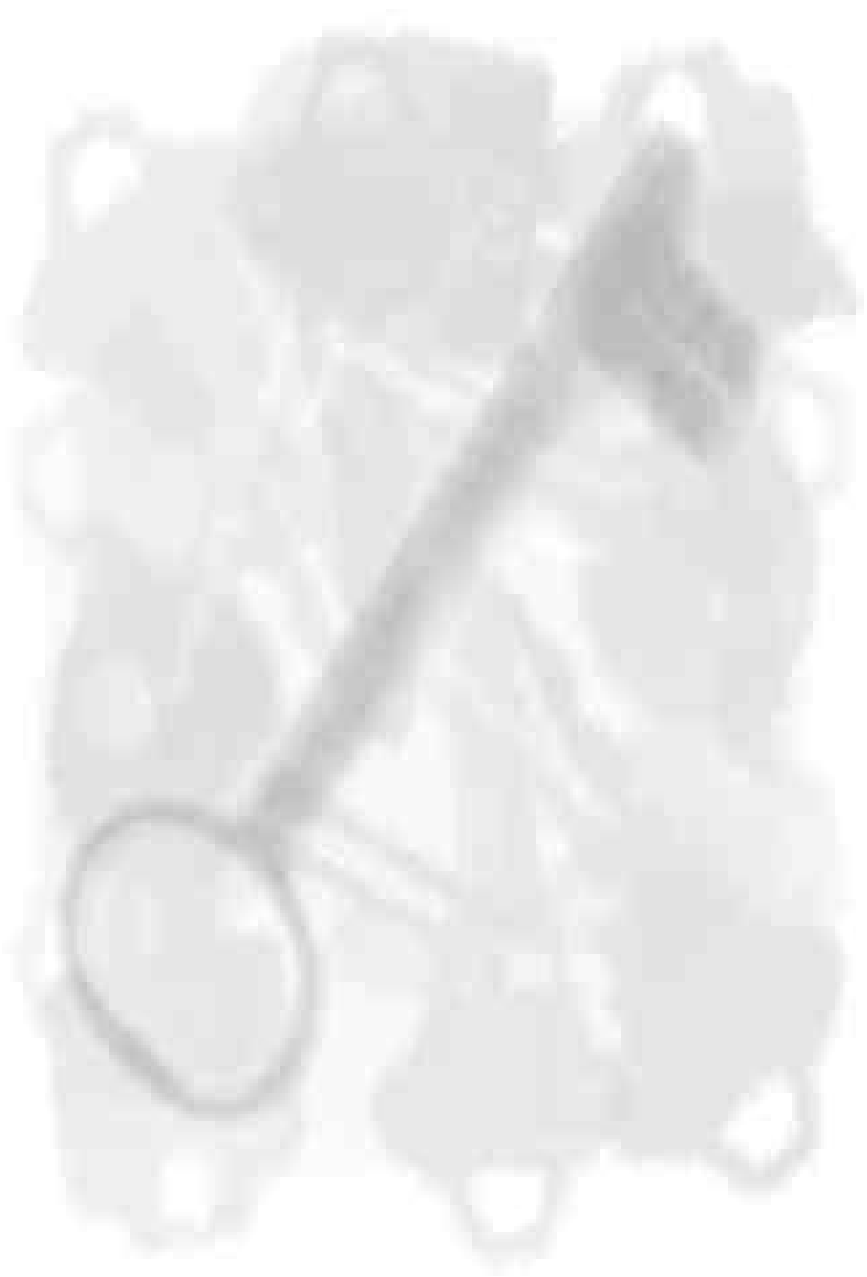
“You’ll probably be the first person I tell. I just need to get facts first.”

Carter walked into her bedroom and closed the door.

Walking to her bathroom, she grabbed her pajamas from the door hook and changed. She couldn’t even think about the fact that she was about to sleep in the same bed as him again tonight. She didn’t know whether she’d have another bad dream, or whether Carter would hold her through the night anyway. She knew she had a war to wage, and that was all she could stand to worry about. Tomorrow would be her battle against the Scientific Research Advancement Department. After that, she would have to continue to battle against the virus. She may even have to battle against her government and their lies.

Or maybe even Carter, in the back of her mind.

She turned off the lights in her apartment, made sure her front door was locked and walked to the bedroom.



CHAPTER 9

THE KEY TO BELIEVING

Sloane arrived in the office with Carter at seven on Monday. She wanted to make sure she got there before everyone else. She set Carter up at a desk outside her office; then she started to work.

She had some business to take care of.

The first voice mail had to go to Tyler, asking him when they were to expect the people from the U.S. Scientific Research Advancement Department. She also asked him to bring her a systems administrator from marketing to take care of some files on the computer system before anyone showed up. Then she went to her file cabinets, found all the hard copies of data she could from the research they had done in the past four months, and placed them all in locked cabinets.

Other technicians came in to work as she got things ready. As more people showed up, she pulled them together and gave them the same speech.

“I don’t want to sound like I’m overreacting, but I want you all to listen to me very closely. A few people from the U.S. Scientific Research Advancement Department are coming to talk to me. They’re going to be in the lab. I have no reason to expect them to snoop around the lab. But if they

do, I want everyone to be as cordial as you can, all without letting them know a single thing. If you have heard what they're implying, which I'm sure you have, then you understand that they're implying that they were working on this research before us, and their effort to see our research is a thinly-veiled cover-up to get the information for themselves so they can doctor the dates and make it look like we in fact stole the information from them. The thing is, they haven't shown anyone that they have had this research. I think they're going to try to get some knowledge from us, and if they're ever asked about their own work is, they want to use *our* work to show as *theirs*."

A chemist was with the first people that heard her speech. "Ms. Emerson, the servers have dated the time our research was done, so our dates on our work should be fine now." "Either way" she responded, "I've locked away pretty much all of our current non-recorded notes and paperwork in cabinets, and I'm going to get a systems administrator to help Julie work on eliminating our additional computer files and putting them into a storable portable medium this morning before anyone arrives."

"Ms. Emerson," Kyle added, "you know that we can't delete those files from our system. We need it dated. If we delete it, the research data is just as lost as if it had never been done."

At this point there was nothing they could do. All of their records were recorded properly for the F.D.A. "What this leaves us to conceal is our unrecorded notes and the samples of work we have done. Now, keep your computers off when any visitors come in, in case they want to see your work on screen. As for the samples, some of the freezers and refrigerators can be locked, but some of them can be easily opened. Some of the containers could have labels turned, possibly, and some of them could be moved to less obvious places. If there is anything you can think of to keep our heads above water, it would be very helpful..."

Each group asked a few more questions and the same information came up. "Yes, I think they're really capable of this ... Think about it this way: we know we did no wrong, and they're coming after us. None of us stole anything, and I'm not going to let them insinuate that we have. Now, there could be a few reasons for this attack. One is that the U.S. Scientific Research Advancement Department doesn't really want any advances done in HIV and AIDS research, and I don't even want to think about that possibility. Two is that they need to save face because this is the second time in a year that a pri-

vate institution has come up with something before they have, and the same private institution beat them twice. Three is that they really have done very well, they happened to be doing nearly the exact same research as us, and they just want to make sure there was no wrong doing. Which do you think is the most plausible answer? ... Well, if it's the third choice, then there should probably be a series of press releases about their progress and what a great job they had been doing on the integrase inhibitors. But there wasn't a single press release out there to that effect, we've checked their Internet site and we're on their mailing list and have no record of it. And if it is the third choice, then they won't have to snoop around, and they won't have any problem with releasing their research to any journal this afternoon to show they aren't lying. They would have published their progress with their integrase inhibitor research at some point in the past few months. But if they get to see our data somehow before they are asked to show their records, they'll have a chance to doctor up their data to make it look like they've been working on this for the past year... If it's the second choice, and they're going to have to do something to get themselves out of this before they lose all of their funding... No, I don't think they were working on this beforehand. Otherwise they would have made an effort to back up their claims in their press releases, with articles from journals, something, anything ... No, I don't think the first choice is a real option. Why would they not want us to be doing research for AIDS? They're the U.S. Scientific Research Advancement Department. They are supposed to have the same goals we do." She wondered if it was possible that not only did the U.S. Scientific Research Advancement Department not have any research on integrase inhibitors, they also were making attempts to stop research from being done. If the U.S. government had an agenda that included keeping the AIDS epidemic alive, then they could put government in place to make sure research advances could be stopped, by any means possible.

Tyler came into her office as soon as he found a systems administrator that could help her out. "What do you need a systems administrator for?" he asked.

She turned to the woman next to Tyler. "Thank you in advance for the help. I need certain files backed up onto archive tape and deleted from the system. All files from the research department under the subheads 'integrase', 'vaccine' and 'cure', as well as outlines of general memos about the research department's time line for research for the next few months. Could you please make back-ups of these files immediately and remove them from the system? When

Julie comes into the office she can help you if you need it, but right now she's picking up someone from Quentin Publishing. I can hold onto the tape until our visit with the U.S. Scientific Research Advancement Department is over."

Tyler asked, "Do you think this is really necessary?"

"Tyler, I told you yesterday what I think."

"But if they ask to look at our files and we have none, then they can say that we have no record of research, which points to us stealing it instead of us actually conducting the research." "Tyler," she answered, "they know we did the research. What they want is all the details so they can doctor their own records. When they ask to do a search, we tell them no. If they do it by force, we'll tell them we don't have immediate access files. We'll tell them our proof is that we reported on our findings in the major journals before they did. Then we'll ask to see their records."

"What good will *that* do?"

"A lot, when they don't have any." Sloane turned away from Tyler and back to the woman. "Did you get my instructions? How long do you think it will take you?"

"About an hour."

"Tyler, when are our friends at the U.S. Scientific Research Advancement Department showing up here?"

"In a little over an hour."

"Finish as quickly as you can. And thank you."

"Yes, ma'am," the woman said, as she left the laboratory and headed for the branch computer server office.

Kyle walked over and said, "Ellen Bailey is here, from Quentin Publishing. Julie is showing her to Mr. Donovan now. Is there anything we should do?"

"Please tell Julie to see me immediately, we need her here, and take over as acting host for Ms. Bailey and Mr. Donovan. Show Ellen around, don't get them see the chaos going on here, and give her anything she needs."

"Got it, chief."

She had to stop for a moment, because she always liked it when Kyle called her chief. It wasn't because she liked being the boss, but that she knew he meant it as a term of friendly respect for her. Kyle knew how she thought and worked, and felt comfortable around her. "And Kyle, thanks for the nickname. It's friendly, and I like it."

Julie came running up to her. “Kyle said you needed me?”

Kyle interjected with a smile and a thank you as she said, “Yes, please go through my e-mails and archive them on disk — not server — any e-mails or text files you can find about the conspiracy notes or any current research on the integrase inhibitors, or even on vaccines or cures. Any work on homeopathy you can leave up. But destroy any files from the servers about the topics I just mentioned. Keep the disks in your purse. And Julie, we need to do this as quickly as possible. Got it?”

“Understood.” Julie turned around and ran to her desk.

Sloane scanned around the lab; everyone was frantically moving. It seemed like everyone was fulfilling their mission. She decided she should meet Ellen Bailey. On her way toward the office and space for Carter and Ellen, she saw Howard and stopped him.

“Howard, can you check with Kyle and make sure with him that everything is getting done?” He answered with, “Consider it done.”

“You don’t think I’m overreacting, do you, Howard?”

“You’re being cautious. We don’t want our work destroyed. I think everyone appreciates your efforts to make sure we keep our work, well, our work.”

“What incentive would we have to continue our work if it wasn’t our work, Howard? ... And make sure they wrap things up within a half hour, the U.S. Scientific Research Advancement Department is due here at ten and will probably be early. Could you also page Tyler and tell him to make sure that the reps are delayed at the front of the office if they do arrive early?”

“Consider it done.” Howard turned to the phone at the desk next to him. Sloane walked back toward her office.

Carter and a woman were standing outside her office door talking to each other. She walked straight to them and extended her hand to the woman.

“You must be Ellen Bailey,” Sloane said as she shook her hand. “I’m Sloane Emerson. Sorry I’ve been running around and haven’t had the chance to talk to you sooner.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Emerson,” Ellen answered. “I was just commenting to Mr. Donovan that he must have done a fantastic job of persuading you in order to get you on board with this project.”

Looking at Carter, she gave him a sneer that was almost imperceptible to Ellen. “It’s a book I thought needed to be done, and Mr. Donovan is a smooth talker.”

###

Sloane made sure everyone made progress with cleaning up the laboratory until five minutes to ten in the morning. She kept looking over her shoulders to see if someone that she didn't know was walking into her office; there was no sign of representatives from the U.S. Scientific Research Advancement Department. Then Mr. Madison's personal secretary walked into the laboratory and went up to her. "Ms. Emerson?"

"Yes?"

"Mr. Madison would like to see you."

"Now? Does he know we're expecting people from the U.S. Scientific Research Advancement Department?"

"Yes. He said he wanted to see you immediately. That's why he sent me down here."

Sloane looked around the room. Everyone who heard the secretary knew that Colin Madison was intentionally pulling her out of the laboratory when the government representatives were supposed to be visiting. Sloane suddenly felt like she was expected to fight a battle with her hands tied behind her back. She looked at Howard, who was standing fifteen feet away and had stopped what he was doing when he realized what was going on. They held their gaze for a moment.

"Howard, I want you and Kyle to be in charge while I'm gone."

"Consider it done." Howard knew what she meant.

"If you need any help, pull Kyle from the people at Quentin. Actually, you'll probably need him. They should just be editing and going over the manuscript anyway. Tell Kyle to get them to one of the small conference rooms to work in while our friends are visiting and have him help you out."

"Got it, chief," She heard Kyle say from the end of the room. He walked to the laboratory when he noticed it was almost ten and heard the end of their conversation.

She smiled and turned past the secretary to walk out the laboratory door, and Colin's secretary followed.

Without knocking, Sloane swung open Colin's door and walked straight to his desk.

"Tell me you're at least not going to tap dance around what you're

doing,” she said, leaning her hands on his desk.

“Tyler told me what you’re up to,” Colin answered.

She crossed her arms in front of her chest. “And?”

“You know it’s going to make us look bad.”

“It’s going to protect your property.”

“They haven’t said they wanted a fight.”

“They implied it, and you know it.”

“We just don’t want problems from the government.”

“Do you think I’m doing something wrong by protecting your property?”

“No. If I did, I would have stopped you sooner.”

Sloane sat down at the chair in front of his desk. “I thought so.”

“But I did think you’d blow up and say something you shouldn’t say, and then we’d have a real problem on our hands with the government.”

“So you had me clean up for you, and then you tuck me out of the way.”

“If you got angry, or accused them of anything while they were here, they’d have plenty of time to cover their tracks before you attempted to expose them publicly. Then you would have lost.”

“You think they won’t want to talk to me?”

“Do you think they won’t want to talk to *me*?”

“Yes, but you have the luxury of a private secretary to tell them you’re in meetings.”

“And who am I in meetings with?”

“You’re going to keep me in your office until they’re gone?” Colin smiled before she continued. “You’re kidding, right? They could be here all day.”

“Why would they be? No one plans to show them anything.”

Sloane leaned back in her chair. She was disgusted. “Is there anything we need to discuss while I’m here?”

“What sort of research are you personally working on now?”

“Kyle is starting some tests to deactivate crucial parts of the HIV virus for possible use as a vaccine. I can’t help but think that this would produce the most effective vaccine.”

“I see. How far are we away from testing a finished vaccine?”

“I’d say still months until we could be doing animal testing. But there should be a vaccine ready for human testing in less than a year depending on how well things go.”

“Interesting. Anything else?”

“I have a theory about how to produce a cure, but I haven’t worked on it yet.”

Colin leaned forward. “Really?”

“Yes. I’ll write something up on it for you. There has just been so many things going on recently that I haven’t had the time. The book is being edited in the conference room now by people at Quentin.”

“Did your trip to Denver have something to do with the book?”

This caught her by surprise. “Pardon me, sir?” She was stunned that he even noticed the plane records of her trip.

“You were in Denver Friday. What was your trip about?”

“I have a contact there that had some information for me about drugs for HIV. I don’t know how helpful the information is yet; I’ve have to see.”

“Good, I’m glad to see you’re using your resources. Don’t spread yourself thin, now.”

“No problem. It also might make you happy to know I’m trying to work with Tyler on this problem we’re having with the U.S. Scientific Research Advancement Department. I’m doing a press conference this afternoon, and I’ve been writing up press releases too.”

“Isn’t the ‘press release writing’ Tyler’s job?”

“If you don’t mind my saying, sometimes Tyler doesn’t write what should be written.”

“Sometimes Tyler knows when to not step on toes.”

“Sometimes Tyler doesn’t know when to stand up for Madison.”

Colin leaned back. “And you think now is one of those times.”

“If we don’t stand up for ourselves this time, nothing is going to stop them from trying to get us another time. We have to set a precedent.”

Colin leaned forward and pressed his buzzer for his receptionist. “Are our friends here from the U.S. Scientific Research Advancement Department?”

“Yes they are, sir, they’ve been here for a half hour now. They asked to meet with you, but I told them you were in meetings all day and could not be disturbed.”

“Thank you. Could you keep me informed of their whereabouts?”

Sloane heard the intercom click off; her tie to the rest of the world was again gone. All she could think was that she was being held prisoner.

###

Howard and Kyle got everyone's attention as Sloane left.

"How is everything? Are we pretty much done?" Howard called out to everyone. Everyone pretty much nodded in agreement that everything was put away.

"Okay, we should probably prepare ourselves mentally for this," Howard continued. "I know how everyone feels about their work here, no one wants someone else to claim responsibility for it. So we have to stay here, and be cordial when we are expected to. We're not going to accuse them of anything. We're going to keep our heads."

"Most importantly, we're going to keep our mouths shut," Kyle chimed in. "They can't say we said anything wrong if we don't say anything at all. And they can't take any information from us and claim it as their own if we don't give it to them."

"I think they expect us to give them everything they ask for. Let's act like we'd like to, but that everything is locked up and we just can't get to it."

"And we've got security in numbers," Kyle said. "We're all here to support each other and our work." Everyone stood around the room in silence.

"Are we ready?" Howard asked them.

No one spoke, but Howard could see some of his staff starting to smile.

"Then let's get to work until they show up," Kyle said.

"What are we supposed to do?" Ellen Thompson asked. "We've hidden everything we were working on." Kyle started to laugh. "I suppose you're right. Get into your groups and go over — discuss — ideas for future work, I guess."

As people started to walk around the room, Tyler came in with three representatives from the U.S. Scientific Research Advancement Department.

Jacob Morton walked in the room with Tyler first, then two assistants of his followed through the doorway. Jacob Morton was a short, stocky man with a receding hairline and small round glasses. He seemed at home with Tyler, who was doing everything he could to make sure Mr. Morton was happy.

"So where is this Sloane Emerson? I'm very interested in meeting with her." Jacob Morton's voice scratched past his vocal chords and out of his mouth. Everything he spoke sounded like a complaint.

Everything about Jacob Morton complained. His glasses seemed to complain that their arms were stretched around his head, over his ears. His clothes seemed to complain that they were being stretched tightly around his

plump stomach. His shoes seemed to stretch around his feet and complain about the weight they had to bear.

And Jacob Morton seemed to complain about everything else as well, even if it only came through in the look on his face or in the tone of his voice.

“She’s not in the office right now,” Tyler answered. “She wanted me to apologize to you for her not being here, but she had some business to tend to outside of the city.”

Kyle walked up to the group of men. “My name is Kyle Mackenzie,” Kyle said, while extending his hand to Jacob. “I’m the Associate Director of Research here at Madison.”

Jacob shook his hand, but showed little interest in what Kyle had to say. “It’s nice to meet you,” Jacob answered. “Are you available to answer any questions if my associates here — “ he pointed to the two men behind him — “need some answers?”

“That’s what we’re here for,” Kyle answered. Howard walked up along side of Kyle. “Oh, this is Howard Shindo. He is the Manager of the Research Department. If you need anything, he can also help you out.”

The two nameless government associates didn’t speak; they walked into the laboratory and looked around the room.

Tyler looked at Howard and Kyle. “Call my office when these gentlemen are finished. Mr. Morton will be in my office with me.”

Kyle and Howard looked at each other. Howard listened to Tyler and Jacob as they walked out the door.

“We just want to make sure that the public good is best served by the medical advances that have been exploding on the market in recent months.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” Tyler answered as he held the door open for Jacob. “That’s what we’re concerned with here — the public good. That’s our business.”

Howard looked down in shame and walked back into the lab.

She paced in silence as Colin talked on the phone with assorted businessmen. She wanted to leave, but Colin wouldn’t let her.

Lifting up her sleeve, she looked at her watch. Ten minutes after eleven. She had no idea what was going on. She felt like a rat in a cage.

Colin watched her pace back and forth in front of his desk.

“Do you have to do that?”

“Oh, am I bothering you?”

“You should take up smoking or something. You’ve got too much pent up tension.”

“I should *smoke*? The president of a pharmaceuticals company wants me to *smoke*? And making me pace... Who do you think is doing this to me?”

“You know you’d overreact. You shouldn’t have to worry about these guys. Besides, Tyler is taking care of Jacob Morton, so it’s just some assistants in the lab. Your men can take care of them.”

“Colin, you’re letting Tyler take care of Morton? Do you know how much damage we’ll have to undo after this?”

“This is Tyler’s job.”

“Colin, Tyler thinks I can do my job with a bunch of goons breathing down my neck, under the rule of a bunch of whim-worshipping irrational monsters that want to take what I earn. And you think I can do my work with my hands tied behind my back.”

Colin’s phone rang. “Yes? ... Oh, thank you.”

Colin set the phone on the receiver and looked up at her. “They’re gone. You can go back to the laboratory now.”

Sloane looked stunned. “Was this all necessary?”

Colin smiled. “Go to your lab.”

All he could hear was the moving of her clothes as she turned around, without another word, and left the room.

When she walked into her lab, both Kyle and Howard ran toward her, and half of the staff looked up and got up from their seats.

She looked at each of them, to make sure she was reading the expressions on their faces correctly. She managed to stammer out, “You two are positively beaming.”

“It was perfect,” Kyle said. “They snooped around, they wouldn’t say a word, then they’d walk over to a cabinet, try to open it, then look up at us because it was locked and say, ‘What’s in this?’ and we’d just be nice and short and say, ‘Files.’ They didn’t even ask us about the key for anything, because I think they knew we weren’t going to give it to them.”

“Yeah, and they were pretty unhappy that they didn’t catch us off guard,” Howard continued, “but what did they expect? We knew about this since Friday.”

“What they didn’t expect was that we wouldn’t be so willing to give up

our work.” Kyle said, laughing, “Maybe the government breeds the sense of pride out of their employees.”

“Oh, you could tell they were mad. Wish you could have been here to see it,” Howard said. “We guessed the executives here kept you away from them, but it was beautiful to watch.”

“... Has anyone checked on our Quentin people? Is everything okay with them?”

Kyle answered quickly. “They haven’t left that small conference room since I put them in there at ten. Want me to check on them?”

“Yes, and I’ll go with you.” She left with him, wanting a chance to walk alone with Kyle for a bit.

“Kyle, how are the tests going with the vaccine?”

“We should get some results done today. You were right in what parts to deactivate, I think, but we’ll have to see if it worked. Should find out tonight, but we might want to run it a few times.”

“Got it. I want to speed up work on this, Kyle. But let’s keep it to ourselves.”

“Sure, but why?”

“I don’t want to let any government people know what we’re up to, lest they try to take that away from us, too.”

“Got it, chief.”

“I figured we’d be taking Mr. Donovan and Ms. Bailey to lunch on their first day here. Hopefully Tyler won’t want to go, so it might not be bad. Would you like to go?”

“Oh, I’d like to get back to work. Anything I should tell the staff?”

“We should work on a new system for filing, now that we’ve had to move stuff around. We should’ve been more protective in the first place.”

“Sure. But isn’t that sad? Sad that we have to protect ourselves from someone stealing from us? I think it’s worse to think that the people stealing from us could be our government.”

“That’s not sad, that’s frightening.”

“A government by the people, for the people,” she said aloud as she turned and continued walking toward the conference room. “You know, I can get them myself if you want to get back to work, unless you want to go in there and check on them. It’s your call.”

“I should just get back to the lab, there’s a ton of stuff to do.”

“I’ll take care of the Quentin people. Thanks, Kyle.”

“Thank you.” Kyle turned and walked back toward the lab.

After gently knocking on the conference room door, she slowly opened it. Both Carter and Ellen were intently reading manuscripts.

“Didn’t mean to disturb you. Just making sure everything was okay. Need anything?”

“No, we don’t need anything at all,” Ellen responded. “We’re fine. Thanks.”

“Lunch is coming up soon,” she said, “And I know a few nice places we can go if you’d like.”

Carter looked up. “A social lunch doesn’t seem your style, Ms. Emerson.”

“And you think this would be a social lunch?” she asked back.

Ellen smiled at them. “I could work for a bit, if you want to lunch in a half hour?”

“Perfect,” Sloane said, and started to close the door.

“Oh, Ms. Emerson?” Carter asked. “I was wondering” he said, as he rose from his seat, “if you would have a few minutes before lunch to answer some questions I have.”

“Yes, do you want to go to my office?”

“Sure. Thank you.” Carter walked to the door and turned back to Ellen. “We’ll get you for lunch?” Ellen responded with, “Great. Thanks.”

Carter closed the door behind him and started walking along side of her.

Listening to Carter’s footsteps next to hers, she could tell from the rhythm of his steps that he was walking in stride with her. “What did you have to ask me?”

“Oh, well, I wanted to get out of that conference room more than anything else...”, which made her smile. “But I was really wondering how it went with you and the government people. I know it was driving you crazy this weekend.”

“Oh, you weren’t around to see the fiasco?”

“It went that badly?”

“Oh, no, I hear it went very well.”

“What do you mean, you *hear* it went well?” Carter asked.

“I was in the boss’ office while they were here, so I couldn’t say anything.”

“You’re kidding.” Carter couldn’t help but laugh.

“No. I stood in Colin’s office and paced for over an hour while he hid like a little kid, having his secretary say he was in a meeting and could not be disturbed. It was insane.”

“And they thought you’d blow your lid?” Carter asked as he tried to stop laughing.

“They made a mockery of me in front of my staff. And the worst part of it was that Tyler was there, and he knew about it. Hell, he probably suggested that they do it. And Colin had his personal secretary escort me to his office.”

“I’m sorry to hear you had to go through that. But at least it went okay without you.”

“But why do they want to silence me? Why do they want to get along with that government department? They were making an enemy out of me by doing that to me. Do you think that stunt was good for my morale? I feel like they know I do good work, but they won’t tell anyone who makes a difference, and they won’t let me defend myself. What kind of respect is that?”

“I don’t know what to tell you, except welcome to corporate America.”

“Do you have to go through this, Carter?”

“This is all I go through. My job is to deal with ignorant people that try to actively stop me from doing an effective job, from making a good product. All they want to do is fight, or else latch on to your coat tails when you’re in the spotlight, if they couldn’t take away your ideas from you before you proved yourself.”

“Then why do you put up with it?”

“Remember when you asked me in New York why I do the small branch of my own label at Quentin? I told you it was because I knew it was right. The thing is, if I didn’t do it, I would go insane. Because everywhere else everyone fights me, for no reason. There’s no sense in it. But they want to fight me because I’m good. Because I’m a threat to them.”

“I still shudder to think that there are people out there that hate the good precisely because it’s good.”

“Believe it. Welcome to corporate America. I live it at Quentin.”

“Is Ellen like that?”

“Well, no, not to me, I’m her supervisor. It’s the other people that are at your level that you have to worry about. Other departments, they try to control your job, or take credit for your work, or try to say your work is under their supervision and they control what you do, even when they don’t. It’s a big power struggle. People search for power because they don’t have talent.”

“Are you talking about power or pull?”

Carter stopped to look at her when he heard that question. “I suppose

pull is a better word. You have power. I have power. Those fools have pull.”

“Then if it’s just pull, why do they keep getting by, Carter?”

“Because they feed off the fallen,” Carter answered.

As they turned the corner, Tyler walked into them. “Oh, I’m sorry,” Tyler said, straightening his jacket. “You know, that Morton guy, he’s not so bad. I talked to him the whole time. I’m sure all of this will blow over. Talk to you later —” Tyler’s voice trailed off as the last words came out of his mouth and he walked down the hallway.

“Now *he* has pull and I hate it.”

“And because of it, you have to deal with him. But does he hate asking for your help?”

“Oh definitely. I give him Hell about it all the time.”

“I’m sure that’s not why he hates it, though. He hates it because he knows you’re the one with the real power. You’re the one that uses your brain to create, not manipulate. And there’s a part of him, a little part, a part he doesn’t want to acknowledge, but a part of him nonetheless, that is aware of that. That is why he hates having to ask for your help.”

“Because I’m the only one that can give him the help he needs?”

“You know it.” As Carter said those words she opened the door to her office and walked to her closet, opening the door. “Carter, could I just keep you here in my closet? I could pay you, I’m sure we could beat whatever Quentin is giving you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your job would be to stay here in the closet, and when I open the door, you would come out and say something that would make me feel better about all of my problems.”

Carter started to laugh before she continued. “Then I’d say, ‘Thank you, Mr. Donovan,’ and then you’d go back into the closet until I needed you again.” She closed the door of her office. “...Which would probably be five minutes later.”

“You don’t need me to remind you of the answers you already know.”

Dropping to her chair in her office, Sloane put her elbows on her desk and rubbed her head with her hands. “What are you thinking?” Carter finally asked.

Looking up through her fingers, she answered, “I’m thinking that I’ve got a press conference at five o’clock today. And Tyler is giving me my speech after lunch.”

“You’re not reading the drivel he wants you to spoon-feed to the public, are you?”

“Of course not. I wrote a statement yesterday. I’ll just have to splice it into his speech somewhere. Should make for an interesting afternoon.”

They sat in silence before she spoke again. “Did you call for your hotel?”

“Yes, I’ll get a cab from your place after work. I was hoping you would come visit, tell me how the press conference went. I figured you’d be dealing with work late, and you have the press conference when I should be at the hotel, so I could borrow your keys to get my things. If you want, you could visit straight after the press conference to get your keys, visit for a bit, eat or something, and then go home.”

“Fine.” Sloane opened her purse and found her keys. She handed them to Carter.

“Oh, and where do you keep your swimsuits?”

“What?” she yelped.

“You forgot about my Jacuzzi tub in the hotel room?”

“I’m not getting in some chemical-laced bacteria haven.”

“It’s my private bath.”

“... I don’t care.”

“Hey, it’s lunch time.”

“You can’t change the subject.”

“Yes I can. We need Ellen.”

After lunch Sloane got back to the office and worked in the laboratory with Kyle on the vaccine while everyone else worked on other tests for the integrase inhibitor as well as modifying Emivir and reducing side effects of the existing drugs. She enjoyed spending the afternoon in the lab, knowing there was a scientific way to test a theory to prove its validity. She enjoyed the accuracy and the ability to learn by testing.

Julie came up to her at two-thirty. “Your speech is here. Would you like it?”

“Yes, please.” Sloane took a break to see what parts of the speech she was willing to read and what parts would have to be cut. She printed out her notes and her statement she had written the day before and asked Julie to piece them together. She then went back to the lab.

Tyler told her they would leave the office for the press conference at around four-thirty. At four twenty-five she went to her office to collect her

things. She saw a few sealed manila envelopes in her briefcase, and it made her think again of Shane.

Responding to the message he left over the weekend, she first called Steve.

"Steve, it's Sloane. I hate to ask this, but I was wondering if you could do me a favor, if you have a safety deposit box to store some papers of mine. It's not related to work, but I could really use the help. I'll call you later, if that's okay, and thanks."

After she hung up the phone, she found a number written on top of her copy of the files. She dialed his home in Denver.

Only hearing "Hello?" made her hang up the phone without saying a word. She figured she must have dialed the wrong number; a strange man's voice answered the phone. This stunned her.

As she let go of the receiver, Tyler came into her office. "Ready to go?"

Looking at her modified speech, she thought about the battle at hand. She took a deep breath. "Yes. Yes I am."

The room was filled with chairs and reporters with tape recorders and note pads. Photographers stood along the walls. Television cameras lined the back of the room. She saw this from the side door, just as she was about to walk on stage. She had no idea the press conference would warrant this much coverage. She looked at the podium, which had over ten microphones attached.

Tyler was holding her shoulders. "Ready to go, tiger?"

Tyler was latching on to her, she thought. She hated him calling her 'tiger', or latching on to her, and she consciously chose not to think of him.

Sloane stayed fixed on the podium. If the media wanted her, she thought, then she should be prepared to use them to her advantage. She needed them to help her get the government off her back. She kept saying to herself: this is going to work.

Tyler walked on stage and made a few opening remarks about his meeting with Jacob Morton. He stressed how everything is going well, how it is

everyone's goal to produce drugs that will help people, and that "we are all working toward this crucial goal together."

Sloane tried to tune him out. "Stay fixed on the podium..."

Tyler mentioned to the audience that Sloane doesn't usually make speeches. Oh, so now he's buttering them up, she thought. Then she saw him walk off the stage as they applauded.

She walked up to the podium. She looked around the room. Everyone became silent, waiting for her to speak.

"Hello. I come to you here today to tell you two things.

"First, I come here today as a scientist to tell you about the work my staff has done. Since the release of Emivir we have worked on not only trying to improve the effectiveness of Emivir but to also come up with an integrase inhibitor — a third drug to be used in AIDS cocktails to deal yet a more severe blow to the HIV virus in the human body. Because we had been working on ways to alter natural cells with Emivir, we are using previous tests and samples to come up with an effective integrase inhibitor — possibly something more effective, because it is not entirely synthetic, like its predecessors.

In other words, we used old research in new ways. This is why we came up with these new possibilities so quickly.

"But I think that has already been reported on in the general media. If not, medical journals have printed our findings this week. The information is out there.

"We have also been looking into additional methods of helping the body fight AIDS — more natural ways. That may sound like something a drug company wouldn't promote, if it is something they can't directly make *money* from, but coupling *good habits* with a *good drug cocktail* would help patients even more than taking the drugs alone. We have researched everything from exercise and weight lifting to yoga and meditation, along with vitamin supplements and diet changes. We have been compiling this data for a book, which should be printed in the next few months to help people fight this battle from every aspect they can, because half of the battle for a patient is showing people that they can do something about what is happening to them, to take control of their life. Combining these things can improve their chances of a healthier, longer life.

"But more than all of that, I come here today to talk to you as a citizen. A citizen of the United States of America. You see, that is something I'm

proud to say, because this is currently the greatest country in the world. I've believed that all of my life. It was this country that laid the groundwork for property rights. It was the idea of owning what you earn that gave people the incentive to produce and excel, and vastly improve our standard of living — for *all* people, all over the world, not just for the creators and producers. It was our Founding Fathers that said that they wanted a fair and just government, ruled by the people, for the people.

“And these are the things I believe in. I'm sure you all do too.

“That is why this is my favorite country in the whole world. Because I love my work. I love doing the research I do. I like using my mind, making something that people need and want. This is the country that lets me work, knowing that it is mine, and that I earned it.

“My staff has worked insanely long hours to accomplish what we have, and they are to be commended for it. We'll all continue to work like this, because this is what drives us. And we didn't do it for money, we didn't even do it for the idea of the ‘public good,’ although I have to admit, the work is that much more rewarding because people see that it is so needed. But the reason why we put in the long hours, the reason why we do this very difficult work, day in and day out, is because it's who we are. It's because we love the idea of doing something, making something, and having it be ours. Every reporter here in this room, every photographer, every cameraman, has to admit that they like the work, but they like *their* work, they like seeing their byline, not just because it gives them money or fame but because it is their name on their work. You deserve credit for the work you do. Every person out there, from the man at the car assembly line who checks the bolt for the left door hinge of the sedan model on the line to the real estate woman who sees her name on the sign in front of the house that she had just sold. To everyone out there. To everyone out there who loves their work. We like to see a job well done, and we like to know we did it.

“This is why plagiarism is illegal. This is why theft is illegal. Because in this country, you have a right to what you produce.

“Recently press releases from the U.S. Scientific Research Advancement Department have noted that Madison Pharmaceuticals, and my staff, have been working on our integrase inhibitors at the same time as they had been working on theirs. This is very possible, though I have noted from reading journals in the past months that nothing of their findings has even been

acknowledged by any book, magazine, or public means.

“The recent government press releases, however, have implied that their work had been too similar to ours to be a coincidence. And to this I ask them to show me proof.

“The press releases from the U.S. Scientific Research Advancement Department state that they had been working on an integrase inhibitor for nearly a year, yet they have published no research reports in any medical or scientific journal. It may be possible that they did not publish anything about their research in the journals; but there was never even a mention of it in their almost daily press releases to the media in the past year as well.

“This concerns me, because they seem to imply that they have a problem with our research without showing us that they have even *done* any research in the same field in the first place.

“Neither I nor Madison Pharmaceuticals have spoken with anyone from the U.S. Scientific Research Advancement Department, even though they claimed to have talked to people at Madison in one of their recent press releases. Apparently they visited my laboratory today, attempting to open cabinets and ask questions about our research with no reason.

“This type of behavior from our government, *our* government, is not something that should be tolerated. This is supposed to be a government for the people, by the people.

“If the government has concern about whether or not someone’s work coincided with theirs, I believe they have to first prove that they were *doing* the work in question. If not, then there is an unacceptable amount of government intervention in the private market.

“Madison Pharmaceuticals has repeatedly done an excellent job at creating a good, reliable product for people — the fact that our product sells proves it. We want to continue to do our work. We want to continue to create better and better medicines for patients who need them. We want to continue to fill an urgent medical need. And we want to continue to work, knowing that no one will stop us from doing our best.

“That is supposed to be the American Way. This is *my* way. This is *your* way. This is the way of everyone who has pride in their work. This is the way of every person in this room who likes to see their name next to their story.

“Because our love of knowing that *we* did the work is one of the things that makes us want to continue working. It is our love of having the right to

what we produce and what we earn.

“A number of private companies have been working on integrase inhibitors over the past year and a half. And unlike the U.S. Scientific Research Advancement Department, the progress of private institutions is documented in press releases, news articles, medical journals and press conferences like this one. And no one from any private organization has complained that our work was too similar to theirs; not one private organization has asked to see our offices and expected us to comply. Only the government has the power to do this, if we choose to give it to them.

“Our government exists to protect us from the force of others. But who protects us from the force of a government gone out of control?

“There is no one to stop them but us. If we care about keeping what we produce and what we earn, then we are the ones that have to stand up for our rights.

“I choose to not give our government that much power. The more power you give someone who doesn’t deserve it, the more they will try to take.

“I choose to continue doing my work, because it is mine. I speak for my staff when I say that this is our work, and we will not give it away to someone who hasn’t earned it, simply because they make a claim with no evidence to back it up.

“I choose to let the government be accountable for what it does. I choose to not take orders from a government agency unless there is a reason I should. Without evidence that their claims are true, there is no reason why we should answer to the U.S. Scientific Research Advancement Department.” Not believing she read without interjection, Sloane stepped away from the microphone; she then leaned forward again. “Thank you.”

Leaning back one last time, she realized that she could’ve hear a pin drop. The room was silent. Usually reporters jumped up asking questions immediately after a speech, she knew this. She stood in silence and looked at the crowd.

She didn’t know what to do, so she turned and started to walk off the stage. Then she heard a reporter clapping. Then more joined in. She stopped before leaving, because the entire room was applauding her speech. She bowed her head and smiled, then turned for the side door. She didn’t look at Tyler as she passed him at the side of the stage.

Carter sat on the edge of his bed in his hotel room watching the evening

news. He had a bottle of champagne chilling in an ice bucket on the dresser with two glasses. He intently watched the news; listening to highlights from her press conference.

“Our government exists to protect us from the force of others. But who protects us from the force of a government gone out of control? There is no one to stop them but us. If we care about keeping what we produce and what we earn, then we are the ones that have to stand up for our rights.”

He changed the channel and listened to the next news station.

“I choose to let the government be accountable for what it does. I choose to not take orders from a government agency unless there is a reason I should. Without evidence that their claims are true, there is no reason why we should answer to the U.S. Scientific Research Advancement Department.”

Carter laid down on the edge of his bed and started openly laughing with delight at the news coverage until he heard a knock on his door. He sprung up from his bed and ran to the door and opened it. Sloane stood in his doorway.

“Well?” She said as Carter looked at her.

Carter stepped out into the hallway, wrapped his arms around her waist, picked her up and started spinning in the hallway. Sloane laughed and screamed. “What are you doing? Put me down!” Carter laughed with Sloane and carried her into his hotel room. “What was that for?” Sloane asked as she got down and closed the hotel door.

“You know I just want to give you a big kiss right now...”

“Carter?”

“You know, to congratulate you. Because my darling, it was fantastic! The news is all over it, showing highlights on all the news stations.”

“They didn’t even ask me a single question, Carter. You know how they usually badger you with questions after your statement?”

“Yeah.”

“The reporters just waited for a moment, then applauded. So I just smiled and left.”

“They applauded? News reporters?”

“You’d think it was a speech to a graduating class, not a press conference.”

“Well, angel, you deserve a celebration. Hungry? Either way, want to go out or stay in?”

“Oh, I don’t want to move.”

“I’ll order something then.”

“I didn’t even speak to Tyler. I just walked right out. He’ll be furious.”

Three thoughts were racing through her mind: one was that she had finished a fantastic speech, and another was that the government will hate her now because of it, and that Carter just said he wanted to kiss her. She blocked Carter out of her head because he said it was to celebrate, and she let any thoughts go back to the speech.

Carter spoke as he poured champagne, “He’s going to have to love you. Everyone is raving about what you said, and everyone that hears the sound bites they’re playing tonight will be on your side. It was perfect.”

Her next step was to pull her speech out of her briefcase and threw it in the bed. “If you want to read the whole thing, there it is.”

“I’ll save it for the plane ride home tomorrow. Now,” Carter reached over to the top drawer of his dresser and pulled out a bright blue one-piece women’s swim suit, “would you like to go into the hot tub now, or would you like to wait until after dinner?”

“Carter, you went through my bedroom drawers?”

“I told you I was going to get a swim suit of yours. I was hoping for a two-piece suit.”

Sloane threw him a dirty look and took the second glass of champagne from his hand.

“Here’s to standing up for what you believe in,” Carter said.

“Here’s to getting the vaccine to work. Here’s to getting the proof I need.”

“That’s the key to believing, isn’t it?” Carter said, and they touched glasses before they drank together.



CHAPTER 10

THE WHITES IN THEIR EYES

There were two reasons Sloane got into her office at seven Tuesday morning early. First, she printed two copies of the full essay that became a part of her speech. She wanted to give it to Carter, to get the opinion of an editor that she respected. Secondly, she wanted to work on the tests Kyle hadn't finished her vaccine. When she arrived, she had to call Shane at home again.

"We're sorry, but the number you have reached, three-zero-three, five-five-five, one-eight-four-three, has been disconnected."

When Julie arrived to work, Sloane asked her to look up the address and phone number for the Energy Conservation Agency in Colorado Springs. Fifteen minutes later Julie produced a phone number.

"You know, Julie, you really have been a life saver."

"What do you mean, Ms. Emerson?"

"I mean you're more than just filling in with odd jobs. You're a part of this team."

"It's been a pleasure to see you work," Julie answered.

"Do you want to continue working here?"

“You mean after my contracted month is up? Well, I’d really enjoy it.”

“I’ll talk to some people here. We could really use it, and I’d hate to see you go.”

Julie smiled, knowing there was nothing she could say. She walked out of her office and closed the door behind her.

Going back to her desk with her speeches for Carter in her hand, she dialed the number for the Energy Conservation Agency.

“ECA, this is Maureen.”

“William Owens, please.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Mr. Owens isn’t here.”

“Do you know when he will be back? I need to speak to him right away.”

“Who may I say is calling?”

All she could do was try to think of something to say. The pause in the conversation was almost imperceptible. “I’m a good friend of Mr. Owens.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Haven’t you heard?”

“No. What?”

“I hate to be the one to tell you this. Are you sitting down?” The receptionist paused.

“Mr. Owens died in a car accident Friday night. I’m terribly sorry.”

Sloane held the phone away from her ear for a brief moment. “I’m — I’m calling from out of town. I didn’t know.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to have to tell you this news. Were you close to him?”

“Um, yes...” she said, still trying to think about what to say next. “Has any of his family been out there, you know, to take care of his things?”

“No, ma’am, no one has been out here. I don’t know if he had any family around here, actually.”

“Would it be okay if I came out there?”

“I don’t see why not, ma’am.”

“I can straighten up his things, make sure nothing happens to them... I can be there within a day.”

“Okay, as far as I know no one is planning on going in there. Again, I’m sorry.”

“Thank you for telling me. Tell whomever needs to know that they don’t have to worry about cleaning out his office.”

“I will. I don’t know what else to say. I hope you are going to be okay.”

Good-bye.”

She knew that his dying was no ‘accident’.

Acting on her first impulse, she found Julie and asked her to pull every news article on the accidental death of William Owens in Colorado Springs.

“When you get that, could you check to see if the plane is being used at all in the next day or two?”

“No problem, Ms. Emerson.”

###

Kyle got to Sloane immediately when she walked out into the lab with reports on the status of the vaccine tests.

“Kyle, you have a brother in the police force, don’t you?”

He was surprised that she asked him this before discussing work. “Yes, why?”

“If I needed it done, is there any chance they could get their police artist to draw someone with a description I can give them?”

“I suppose, if they weren’t busy.”

“Would they be busy on a Tuesday morning? I suspect foul play in the death of a friend of mine. I saw someone following him and I want to get a police sketch of the person I saw. Could you give your brother a call and see if he could get their police artist to do this for me this morning?”

“Sure. I’ll call him now. You want to do it this morning? ... And I’m sorry to hear about your friend.”

“If it’s not hard for them to help, that would be great. And I just want to know what happened to my friend.”

“I’ll check.” Kyle handed her the reports. “By the way, I loved the news coverage of your press conference last night.” He walked to his desk.

Kyle was the seventh person to congratulate her on the press conference. Tyler Gillian was one of the seven.

They were attempting different methods to inactivate the virus, with only nominal success. When one test failed, they at least had an idea of which direction to go in afterward. Sloane looked over the results in her office. Then her phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Ms. Emerson, it’s Julie. Tyler is here to see you.”

It comforted her that Julie knew that Sloane would not want to see him. “Tell him I’m in an important meeting and I will talk to him later.”

“I will, Ms. Emerson.” Julie hung up the phone before she had the chance to say thank you.

Sloane continued reading the reports. Although their last round of testing failed, early results made her think that they were on the right track. She started writing notes.

Kyle came in a few minutes later. “I talked to my brother, and he said it would be fine if you wanted to do that police sketch, there’s not much going on at the station.”

“Thank you so much, Kyle.” He handed her the address of the precinct his brother was working at. “I was looking over the test results, and noting how the virus reacted when they deactivated the protease enzyme, I think it would make more sense to work on deactivating the integrase enzyme. This way the virus would be able to spread in the body, but not destroy cells. Deactivating the *transcriptase* enzyme never allows the virus to get into the body in the first place — and that’s exactly what we *don’t* want for a vaccine. Run these same tests while attacking the *integrase* enzyme.”

“Sounds good, chief.”

“And thank you so much for this, Kyle. I appreciate it.”

They walked out of the office together and Julie was standing at her door with a stack of paper in her hand. She looked at Sloane holding her coat and briefcase.

“I printed up everything I could get off the Internet about William Owens, Ms. Emerson.”

“Julie, you are an angel.”

Julie smiled.

“I have to go out for a meeting this morning. Did you find out about the plane?”

“Mr. Madison went to Los Angeles today and will be back from Los Angeles late tonight; then the plane is not slated for use until a week from Friday.”

Having to come up with a back-up plan, she asked, “Could you get me on it for a day trip to Denver tomorrow?”

“Consider it done.”

“And Julie — Thanks for saving me from Tyler.”

“He doesn’t deserve to talk to you, Ms. Emerson. I saw the speech he

wanted you to read, remember?”

Having to smile, she thought that she liked it when she met people who thought rationally. They were few and far between. “Well, thank you very much.”

They smiled and she continued to walk out to the laboratory with Kyle.

“I’ll be back later this afternoon, Kyle.”

“Your tests should be under way by then. And was Owens the friend?”

Realizing that he caught her mentioning his name a moment ago., she responded “Yes, but please, not another word about Owens.” She paused before asking, “And do you think we’re on the right track with the integrase enzyme?”

“Actually, your idea about deactivating the integrase enzyme makes complete sense. We’ll see how it works.”

They said their good-byes to each other and she left the office.

The first place she went to was a gun shop. Since there was a waiting period of seven days, she placed her request for a handgun and filled out the appropriate paperwork. Then she left for the police station.

Detective Mackenzie showed her to Larry, their police artist. After explaining that her request was on more of a hunch, she described the man she saw outside the coffee shop in Colorado Springs in detail, then continued to work with Larry for two hours until he had a pretty good drawing of the man. She asked them to run off a few copies of the drawing for her to keep.

“Is it possible to do a computer search for similarities on this drawing in your databases?” she asked Detective Larry Scheinlin.

“You know, if you asked me that six months ago, I would have said no, but we got this new computer system in that hooks us up to national criminal databases as well as local ones. It’s been a pain to learn a new computer system in this precinct, though.”

Larry searched in every database to attempt to find a match for her drawing, but it turned up nothing. Then she asked if it would be possible to cross-check this image with a database of government employees.

“We can’t do that here,” Detective Scheinlin told her. “Besides, you’re looking for a criminal, right? Why would you want to look at a government employee database?”

“Oh, I was just curious,” she answered.

One copy of the drawing was placed in her safe deposit box with her Shane files. Then she stopped by the University and asked both her father

and Toby Graham to keep copies of her sealed files in a safe place. Toby said he had a safe deposit box he could put them in. Steven Emerson said he had a safe in his office that he could keep the file in for her. She didn't know who else to ask; all she could think was that she needed to give copies of the files to someone.

Both her father and Toby wanted to know what they were holding on to for her. She wouldn't tell them; she asked them to trust her.

Each of them shrugged their shoulders and agreed to comply.

Sloane made it back to the office just before one in the afternoon. Julie approached her first.

"Ms. Emerson, Mr. Donovan wanted to take you out to lunch before his flight left."

The fact that Carter was still working at her office building completely escaped her for the moment. He was in the conference room with Ellen Bailey right then and there, so she turned around and walked to the conference room and knocked on the door before entering the room.

Her hands were full then with a sealed envelope and her essay in her hand as she got to the conference room. "I'm sorry my meetings took so long," she said as Carter looked up from his papers at her. "What time does your plane leave?"

"Four-thirty." Carter stood up and walked to the door before turning around to look at Ellen. "Are you sure you don't want anything for lunch?"

"I had a huge breakfast. I'm fine. Thanks."

"I'll be back in a while, then."

Carter closed the door and walked down the hallways with her.

"It's a shame you had to leave so early last night," Carter said as they walked out of the office building. "I was still hoping to get the chance to get you in the hot tub."

"Why on earth would you want to do that?"

"You need to relax. Maybe a hot tub was what you needed."

"Carter, you know me, I can't relax. I get antsy. I fidget. Besides, I had work to do. I did want to give you this before you left, though —" as she handed him the sealed envelope — "so you had something to read on your own on the other side of the country." Carter looked confused, so she continued. "I gave you my speech before, but I wrote more extensively on it that same night, and I thought —"

“You wanted me to proofread it?”

“Carter, I know you’re a better writer than me, and I respect your opinion. So I thought you’d like to read it.” She handed him the envelope.

“If it is as good as your speech, it could be a good closing for the book.”

“I doubt that, Carter, but I guess that’s why you are in your business, thinking that way.”

During lunch they discussed the release dates of their book, ‘Winning the War From the Inside,’ and Carter estimated the printing schedule for her so that she would know when to get to Ohio to watch the press check before her books printed. Carter assured that Quentin Publishing could get her a flight and she could meet him in Ohio.

When they returned from lunch she said her good-bye to him as a friend before they got to the rest of the office staff.

“It’s been nice having you around, Carter.”

“It’s been nice seeing where you work. Hope I wasn’t too much of an inconvenience.”

“Of course not.”

They looked at each other in the hallway. Carter reached over and gave her a hug. Wanting to with him, she also wanted to avoid him so she could be safe, she wondered and didn’t know why they looked at each other for that moment. Almost relieved to say good-bye to him, she asked Howard make sure that Mr. Donovan and Ms. Bailey got out to the airport on time. It allowed her to focus on her work, even if it would only be for a brief period of time before she went back to Colorado Springs.

She checked with Julie about the time she was to leave the next morning for her flight. Afterward, she went into the lab and met up with Kyle to work on lab tests for the vaccine the rest of the afternoon.

At eight o’clock she stepped outside the office and walked to her car. Her car was parked in the middle of the vast parking lot, where only a small fraction of the cars remained parked there. She walked alone outside, listening to the sound of her heels clicking on the concrete below her, and she started walking faster. She had no reason to believe anyone was around her, but while she was alone there in the dark outside she gained an immense fear of being killed there. She imagined someone walking right up along her side, pointing a gun to her ribs while walking with her. But she knew that someone would have killed her immediately, the way they may have killed Shane.

She knew that if anyone from the government came for her that they would not kill her; her pain and torture would be much slower than a bullet in the head or the chest.

###

Leaving her apartment for the airport at six in the morning, she looked at her apartment for one brief moment before she closed the door behind her. She wanted to look at her home, wondering whether or not it would be the last time she saw it. She knew she had no reason to worry, but still she took one good look around her living room before she left.

At seven-thirty in the morning she stood outside Madison's plane while Jim made sure everything was in order. When she got on the plane she didn't wait for take-off to get her notes out on the vaccine and continue working on her ideas. When Jim announced over the intercom that they were landing in twenty minutes, she pulled out her copy of the Shane file and started going over the paperwork. She glanced again at the police rendering of the man she had seen outside the Mountain Ridge Coffee Shop.

The taxi pulled up to the Energy Conservation Agency in Colorado Springs at 10:30 in the morning. She walked through the main doors and found a woman sitting behind a large, circular desk.

"Hello. May I help you?" the woman asked.

"Is your name Maureen?"

"Yes, it is. And you are?"

"I'm a friend of Bill Owens. I spoke with you on the phone yesterday."

Maureen stood up. She was a short blonde; she was barely five feet tall. "Oh, yes, I'm sorry, and your name was?"

Sloane tried to think of a name quickly. "Evelyn." She couldn't believe she was using her middle name.

"Evelyn, if you'd like to sit over there —" she pointed to the row of chairs along the wall at the left side of the room.

"You can call me Eve, though," she said, "that's what everyone calls me."

"Like Adam and Eve?"

"Yes, like sin-free until she took a bite of the apple. I've heard them all."

"Okay. I'll get someone here right away to show you to his office. Again, I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad tidings."

“Don’t worry about that. I’m just glad I called when I did, or I might not have found out about this until weeks from now.” Sloane tried to look distraught, but consoled by Maureen’s condolences.

She thought it was fitting that she had stated on the fly that she had eaten from the Tree of Knowledge. Then she sat down in a chair and looked over at the newspapers. She decided it would be best not to look at them, but to just sit and try to look despondent until someone arrived to show her to Shane’s office.

After ten minutes a tall thin gentleman in his mid-forties walked out into the lobby and Maureen pointed her out to him. The man walked over and extended his hand, trying to smile.

“How do you do, I’m Eric,” the man said to her as she stood up to meet him. “I can get you anything you need... would you like to go back now, or would you like some coffee or something?”

“Oh, no, I’m fine. I’d just like to get this over with. It’s strange, being here, having to do this.”

“I know, this was such a tragic accident.”

“Do you know how it happened? I only heard about it through the receptionist; I’m not from around here.”

“Oh well, he was out driving late Friday night, or I guess it was early Saturday morning, and a driver just hit him and drove off. Even though the roads here are really hilly, the police assume the driver of the other car was drunk. No one witnessed the accident.”

They walked through the long thin corridors together toward Shane’s office.

“I know, everyone around here wishes they knew who did it, so that justice could be served.”

“Were you good friends with Bill?” Sloane asked.

“Well, not really, I guess, Bill kind of kept to himself. He was actually stationed here for years, but he was doing special projects work that wasn’t in my department... It seems that no one here really knew him too well, but you know, you still hate to see something like that happen.”

“I know what you mean.”

“We’re just glad you happened to call. Some government officials came here Monday morning and taped the door shut to his office, so it made me wonder if there was something wrong. But at least someone can go in there

and clean up his personal belongings, make sure everything is on order.”

“You said some officials were here?”

“Yes.”

“Were they policemen?”

“No, they looked like — well, businessmen, really. They were government officials, I figured they were working on the same projects he was working on with water reclamation, and they just wanted to keep people out of there until they could go through his work records.”

“Have they looked through his office?”

“No, not yet. I don’t know when they plan to.” As Eric said those last words they stopped in front of a closed door with tape from frame edge to edge near the doorknob. A small metal sign was at eye-level on the door; it said ‘W. Owens.’

Eric pulled the tape off the doorframe and opened the door for her. She walked inside his office and then turned back to Eric.

“Would you like me to leave you in peace while you collect his things, Miss —?”

Unable to think of a last name, she came up with a response as quickly as she could. “Eve, please call me Eve. And, um, I can do this on my own if you have work to do.”

“Okay, but I’ll be right down the hall if you need anything.”

“Thank you very much, Eric. You’ve been very helpful.”

Eric smiled and closed the door behind him.

Sloane looked around the room. She noticed plaques framed along the walls, a few books on the shelves, and two computers on his large desk. He had six four-drawer filing cabinets along one wall of his office.

All she had to do was walk over and sit at his desk. She couldn’t believe it was this easy to get into Shane’s office. She wondered if agents had already rifled through his things and took any information that she might have found useful.

Then again, if no one had cleared out his office by this time, maybe he really was some harmless Energy Conservation Agency cog, making up the entire story he had told her.

She turned on his computer and it immediately asked for a password. She tried to run on instinct and typed in

SHANE

And hit Enter. Nothing.

WILSON

Nothing.

Straining at other variations of his name, nothing she typed in worked out. Then she looked around the room for icons, tried them. Nothing. Then she typed in

AIDS

Nothing. Then she hesitated, and then typed in

CURE

And “Access Granted” appeared on her screen. Seconds later a main page for the CIA appeared on her screen. She had no idea she was logging into the CIA’s network. She attempted to access the database of government employees, but it wanted a referent image, so she opened the lid of the small flatbed scanner next to the computer and scanned the drawing she had come up with yesterday. She watched the light of the scanner move slowly across the image. She waited. After typing in possible locations, it generated no names from the CIA database. It then asked her if she wanted to do an “Advanced Search.”

One single click led to “Yes.”

The computer was processing, so she decided to pick up one of the boxes that Eric placed on the floor for her and started taking his plaques off the walls. She figured that she better actually clean the place of his belongings, or else she would look suspicious.

The computer was still processing her request.

The snow globe off of his desk went it in the box. She noticed that he had no photographs on his desk or in his office.

When she checked the screen it had changed again. She sat down. The computer found three officials in the Department of Defense that may have been matches for the scanned image. Sloane looked at the first one, then the second. She was sure the second person was a match for whom she saw at the coffee shop.

Any information she could collect on this mystery man was instantly printed, then she got off line and continued putting his belongings in boxes, starting to put his files into boxes as well, trying to look through them as she did.

Eric saw her out of the office three hours after she had arrived. She told him she could bring Bill Owen’s personal effects back to his apartment,

though she didn't even have his home address, or if he'd prefer, she could leave them here for family to pick up. Eric thought that she shouldn't have to carry the boxes with her to Bill's apartment if she didn't have to. So she took her briefcase, stuffed with file folders from the office of William Owens.

###

Once she was away from the pressure of being inconspicuous and not getting caught in his office, she leaned back in her seat, listening to the roar of the engine. After she felt the now familiar speed and lift of the plane she rolled her head toward the window of the Madison Pharmaceuticals private plane. She watched the trees blend into one another along the still snow-capped mountains. The details on the ground became smaller and smaller as the plane rose up toward a layer of clouds that looked like a sheet of cotton balls in the sky.

The plane entered the cloud layer and her seat was slightly jostled with the turbulence. She took a slight gasp for air and held her breath until the plane flew out over the sheet of cotton.

It amazed her to see the sky from her cabin window, and see a layer of clouds that looked like a floor. She stared for a moment, then finally turned to the files she had taken from Shane's office and started reading, trying to find any information that could help her out in her search.

When she got into the airport she started walking down the terminal when she noticed all the security in the hallways. She knew it had always been there before; she took for granted there were people who searched you at every chance possible. Checking for metal on your body. Putting your belongings through an x-ray. Asking you if you have been in possession of your luggage at the airport at all times.

For the first time in an airport, she looked around at the security guards who watched over the terminals and suddenly felt a wave of fear, like the panic she felt when she left her office the night before and walked to her car by herself, alone in the dark at night. This time, any guard could take her into custody, by request from any federal government agency, and no one in the terminal would question it. She could be taken away in broad daylight and no one would stop to help her.

She quickened her pace.

At this point anyone from the CIA or the DOD would know that Shane

Wilson's password had been used after his death in Colorado Springs. With a brief description from Maureen or Eric from the Energy Conservation Agency — along with her middle name as an alias — she could be easily tracked down.

No one stopped her, though. Did they didn't notice, or could they somehow see that nothing confidential was tracked? Maybe, she thought, it was another agency in the government that had stopped at the office and they did not even know that he wasn't alive. She didn't know what to think, and she knew she had nothing to go on. She didn't think she had enough information, so she couldn't try to go public with what little knowledge she had and expose the government before they tried to stop her. All she could do was wait until she saw the whites in their eyes before making her move.

She decided she had to call her contact, Clint Saunders.

Going home, she tried to sleep off her fear. She had no memory of her nightmares she was having when she woke up Wednesday morning.

Wednesday morning she called Washington D.C. as soon as she arrived in her office. She listened to the phone ring and waited.

"Department of Defense, biochemicals."

"Clint Saunders please."

"One moment."

Sloane was put on hold. She waited.

"He's not taking phone calls right now, would you like his voice mail?"

"Yes, please."

"Please hold."

"You have reached the voice mail box of Mister Clint Saunders. After the tone please leave a message, or press pound for more options."

"Hello. You don't know who I am, but Shane Wilson — Bill Owens — gave me your number to call if I needed anything from you. I don't know if you heard about Shane's death, but I need to talk to you right away, if possible. Please call me at two oh six, five five five, one five one nine. Ask for Ms. Emerson. Again, it's urgent, and thank you."

Sloane slowly hung up the phone.

She walked out of her office and turned to Julie. "Julie, if a man calls for me by the name of Clint Saunders, could you please let me know? I'm waiting for a call from him."

"No problem."

Remembering that Julie should be kept on full-time, she left a message with Colin about keeping her, and then walked out to the lab.

The next week at the lab she worked on her vaccine, with the help of Kyle and Howard. They were making good progress, faster than they expected, and the mid point results from their clinical trial for AIDS and homeopathy had returned and people in the study were doing remarkably well. Things seemed to be going without a hitch.

All she could do was try to work in the lab; she hadn't had the chance to work in the lab lately and needed to be surrounded by her work. Clint didn't call her. She thought mentioning Shane's name should have been enough.

The next Monday she picked up the gun she ordered the week before. She found a range to practice at and went Monday night. They gave her glasses and headphones and an instructor told her to stand with her feet apart and brace herself. They told her to brace her shooting arm with her other hand under the gun. She stared at the paper silhouette of a man with concentric rings around his heart.

She held her breath when she fired her first shot. She thought the kick of the gun would be stronger than it was, and she was surprised — she had never used a gun before and had no idea of how it would feel. The shock of the crack of the gun firing made her jump more than the actual force of the handgun being fired.

The instructor left her after she fired her first round and was reloading her gun. She pressed the button so the target would move up to her for inspection. She fired terribly. She purchased a few boxes of bullets and a small stack of targets, and practiced for almost two hours.

By the end of the evening her aim had improved - she had practiced firing with one hand and then the other. She also practiced her speed at lifting the gun and firing, so see how much time she needed to aim before firing.

By the time she got home it was after ten in the evening.

Her apartment looked too dark. She immediately turned on all of the lights.

Everything seemed like a potential threat to her. She got nervous when she was walking alone or driving her car, or when she first entered her apartment. Sometimes she'd check all the rooms before deciding to settle down for the evening.

After practicing at the range she was too wired, so she sat down at her

computer.

* If we could generate estimates of how HIV usually mutates in the body based on past records, we might be able to create a drug that can recognize the mutations and attack them all. Or maybe the drug would be an injection of engineered cells that could actually mutate the way HIV would, to change while the virus changes, and then be able to stop it.

* A better idea would be to find the base structure of the virus, the base all of the mutations had in common, and create a drug that could beat it at its base level, at the core. That may be the only way we can get this taken care of for good.

After she thought of this, Shane told her that a cure was created, before it had mutated, by using a pure form of the virus. She brainstormed for ways to estimate what the original virus looked like; the only possibility she could think of was generating a computer model of the behaviors of the HIV virus. If a computer program could generate the average ways the virus currently mutates, given a general sample of the virus, the reverse engineering may be able to reverse the process to generate possibilities of how the virus mutated into this original form. She pondered this idea while she wrote notes on how a single injection could attack the virus in the body. "It would have to be a virus as well," she noted on her computer, "but one that attacked only HIV infected cells in the body. One that attacked powerfully but had a short life-span." She looked back at her notes before she turned off her lights and went to bed.

Tuesday morning Carter got back from a meeting with Ellen Bailey to check on the progress of the editing. She had given the design department a rough version of the text last Friday so they could flow it into pages and see

the approximate length of the book. If anyone was interested in theories on artwork for any of the sections, they could have the rough manuscript for a springboard for ideas. This morning she had finished the editing of the book and had given the design department the entire manuscript on the computer for them to work on. They had been working on cover art and typeface choices for the past week, now it was just a matter of scrolling in the type and getting rid of widows and bad hyphenation. Both a hard cover and a paperback version were scheduled to be sent to the printer a week from Friday; after generating film for the pages the press would be ready to start printing two weeks from today. Carter had his secretary reserve a flight for her from Tuesday morning, returning Wednesday night, and called her to confirm that traveling on those dates would be okay.

He picked up the phone and dialed her number at work; at this point he had her phone number memorized.

“This is Sloane.”

“HI, it’s Carter.”

“Well, hello, Carter, how are you?”

“Just fine, and yourself?”

“Oh, I’m handling everything.”

“I didn’t ask if you were handling everything.”

“Everything appears to be under control. How is the book?”

“Ellen finished editing it and it is in production now. You sure you don’t need to see a copy of the manuscript before it goes to press?”

“You talked with Ellen — did she change the style of the text?”

“No, just a few typos and run on sentences, grammatical things.”

“Then it should be fine. Let’s just get it done.”

Carter was amazed that she didn’t need to see the book before it went off to print. He was used to people demanding to make multiple changes once the book was designed and edited and ready to print, costing time and money. He wasn’t used to trust or efficiency.

“The schedule is to send the book to the printer a week from Friday, which means it will be printing in a few weeks. I set up a flight for you from this Tuesday morning, returning Wednesday night before it prints, so there’s only a one-night hotel stay. Is that okay with you?”

Checking with her desk calendar, she answered, “That’s fine with me.”

He told her he’d fax the details of her flight itinerary and her hotel reser-

ventions to her and they said their goodbye to each other.

She knew she was trying to repress what she felt for him; she knew in the back of her mind that she was falling in love with Carter Donovan. But they were only friends, Carter had never expressed any interest in her; besides, they lived too far away to attempt a relationship. She knew she was avoiding thinking about Carter, but she felt that she had too much other work to focus on and couldn't let herself be distracted.

She wanted to tell him everything that was going on with her. She wanted to tell him about Shane and what was in those files.

If all of that information was true, she would be putting Carter at risk by telling him as well. And she didn't even know if any of the data she was given meant anything.

It had been over a week since she had called for Clint Saunders and he never called her back. She looked up his number in her file and called Washington again.

"Department of Defense, biochemicals."

"Clint Saunders please."

"One moment."

Sloane was put on hold. She waited.

"He's not available right now, would you like his voice mail?"

"I have an urgent message for him. Is he checking his messages?"

"I believe he is."

"Then yes, his voice mail, please."

"Please hold."

"You have reached the voice mail box of Mister Clint Saunders. After the tone please leave a message, or press pound for more options."

"Hello. I called you last week with an urgent matter and I have been waiting for you to return my call. Shane Wilson referred me to you, and now he is dead. Plainly put, I need your help. I would hate to have the information I possess fall into the wrong hands. Please call two oh six, five five five, one five one nine, and ask for Ms. Emerson. If you need to contact me in the evening, call two oh six, five five five nine nine oh two. I'll expect to hear from you some time today. Thank you."

She hung up the phone, wondering if she had been too strict on the phone. She wondered if she sounded like she was blackmailing him by saying the data may "fall into the wrong hands," but she didn't know what other

tactic to use to get this man to call her back.

For the next three days she waited for a return call and never received one. She continued to work on the vaccine test with Kyle, and at one point asked them what they thought about her computer-generated HIV simulation idea.

“Sounds like it might work, but you don’t know for sure, and it would cost a ton of money and a ton of time to get someone in the industry to help you with the computer technology to make it happen.”

“Yeah, I don’t think you’ll get the financial support for a project that big, when you have no idea if it works, even if it went off without a hitch.”

Maybe she should approach software companies independently. If they’d like the exposure to helping a good cause they may be willing too offset the costs. It was an option to keep on the back burner.

At the same time she didn’t know if she was grasping at straws to keep herself immersed too deep in her work to avoid thinking about all of the other problems she could be facing.

Not knowing where to go next with her theory on how to go about looking for a cure, she decided to concentrate her efforts on the vaccine.

By the end of the week she was exhausted from the hours she was putting in, but she felt relieved that she was at least able to get her mind off of the things she could not control and on to a track that might result in a vaccine within a year.

When she got home from work Friday night, she dropped her keys on the cocktail table and saw a light flashing on her answering machine. She pressed the button in the darkness of her apartment while she took her coat off.

“HI, it’s Steve. You said you needed something, and because I’m an idiot, I thought I’d be nice and say that I can hold what you need in my safety deposit box. I’ll be going out tonight, so I’ll stop by at about nine if you’re there to pick up what you need held. Thanks.”

She felt relieved that she would have someone else to hold the file information for her. She will stress the secrecy to him when she saw him. Looking

at her watch, she noted that it was almost nine, so she listened to the last message on her machine.

“Ms. Emerson. This is Clint Saunders. I don’t know what information you have. In the future I will contact you. Yes, I know about Shane’s death. It was a terrible tragedy. I think I know what is going on, and if I can help you, I will let you know. Do not try to contact me again. I will get a hold of you when the time is right.”

Turning on the light in her living room, she rewound the tape to listen to Mr. Saunders’ message again. She had no idea what it meant, or what was going to happen. She still had no idea what she was getting into, and it disturbed her more and more. All she knew was that these men were making her play a waiting game.

Then her doorbell rang. She went to the door and asked who it was. Hearing Steve’s voice, she opened the door and let him in.

“This better be good,” he said. “You tried to make me feel like shit before.”

“I just needed you to hold some paperwork, if you don’t mind doing it, it doesn’t take up that much space in a safety deposit box, and I don’t want anyone to know about you holding this for me, if that is okay, especially Kyle, because it’s not related to the work we’re doing, and — did I really make you feel like shit?”

“Give me a break, I was getting to like you, not in the way I usually get, and I didn’t need you giving me that kind of treatment, making me feel like this meant nothing to you.”

“Did you want your affection to mean something to me? I mean, I can’t imagine you think that way with every woman you pick up.”

“Hey, I don’t pick up a ton of women,” he said, knowing in the back of his head that he was lying, “and I like the fact that you’re so damn smart, and I would have liked it if you would get to know me and like me, but you are

thinking of me as a piece of meat.”

“Oh, that doesn’t sound sexist, Steve. Are you a man-hating feminist?”

“No ... but at this point I wanted to just be able to forget about all of this, and then you call me and ask a favor, and I have to accept.”

“Well, you don’t have to.”

“You know that line has to be incentive for me to help you now. Just give me the envelope. I can leave it in my trunk and bring it to my security deposit box tomorrow.”

Giving him the envelope, she thanked him and said, “I didn’t hate you, Steve. You’re a good guy. I mean Hell, I wouldn’t have kissed someone I didn’t like in the first place.”

Steve just looked at her, and it was almost as if her words were softening him to her again. “Steve, I don’t like having enemies,” she continued, “and I know I’m not a social creature, but I’d like to be able to think you’re there for me — and that I am there for you.”

Steve looked down after hearing her words, then looked back to answer, “So I get to be your sounding board if you want to talk to me about problems?”

“The point was that I could be there for you as well, Steve.”

“You don’t play fair, but you know that I will always be there for you. And do you mean it when you say you’d be there for me?”

“Steve, I flew across the country to talk to a friend in Miami for a night because he was having troubles. You don’t think I’d make the effort to be there for you?”

“You flew across the country to see a guy, you’re making this offer to me... How many men do you do this to?”

“Steve, I’m just trying to let you know that I’d be there for you if you needed it. And thank you for being there for me.”

She leaned over to Steve and lightly kissed him on the cheek as they stood at his door. He wanted to kiss her then and there so badly, but knew he’d only cause another fiasco if he did. He wrapped his arms around her to give her a hug.

“Good luck tonight,” she said.

Steve started to pull away as he responded, “Good luck with *what?* ... It’s not like I could possibly meet anyone anyway.”

“Isn’t that what you’re going *out* for?” she asked.

“Nothing will compare to you,” Steve said under his breath before he

spoke up again, "I don't know. Maybe I'll just go home tonight."

"I didn't mean to get you out of going out."

"I know, but you're a dangerous woman—"

"What does that mean? I don't do anything."

"I know you don't. You don't do it intentionally. That's what makes you so dangerous." Steve didn't explain it any further as he started to walk out the open door. "I'll be at home if you want to call to talk," he said as he walked away.

"Well, if you need to talk, you know my number," she answered smiling as he walked toward his car.

Working through the night, she even thought of calling Steve just to hear the sound of his voice. But she worked through the entire weekend, trying to focus on her vaccine research. They thought they might be able to have a working vaccine to test, but no one was sure.

Besides, who would want to inject a form of HIV into their bodies, even if they were assured it was harmless? Who knew what effects it might have on them? In some tests on monkeys, the females were immune but their children had HIV and it immediately turned into full-blown AIDS. No one would know what effect this vaccine might have on people.

And who would be willing to take that risk?

The researchers at Madison couldn't stop to think of these things as they were working on the tests, though. They had to work, strive toward their goal, and do their best to come up with the answers.

###

Sloane left her gun in the safe behind her desk at the office when she went home Monday night; she knew she wouldn't be able to take it on the plane with her to Ohio. She typed a letter to Colin about keeping Julie on full-time and put it in his mailbox before she left the office. After working for so long on the vaccine, trying to keep her mind off of everything else, she realized she had to pack to see Carter again.

CHAPTER 11

THE ESSAY

Saturday night in New York: everyone else would speculate that by staying home he was waiting for a woman. In a way he was, but he did not expect her to come through the door right then and there. He had to take what little tidbits of her he could.

It had been hard, all this time, waiting for her to call him, the way she had done in the past years since college, waiting for every chance he had to see her. He knew he had to wait until she was ready for him; he had to know that she wanted to be with him as much as he had wanted to be with her all of this time with her.

In the meantime, all he had was her essay to read before she would see him in Ohio.

Carter sat on his couch in his living room, trying to find a comfortable place to read. He knew that trying to be comfortable would be pointless, because even if he hated her essay, he would be reading her words, and they would give him a key to unlocking her mystery. Carter got up and walked toward the dining room table. There was nothing on it, so there would be nothing there to distract him from reading. He turned on the light over the

table and sat in the closest dining room chair; he even noted that the iron back of the chairs would make it more rigid and more difficult for him to lean back to relax.

He actually thought for a moment that if he had people over for dinner, they probably wouldn't like sitting on his chairs, because the chairs may make them always feel tense.

"It's a good thing I don't have people over all the time," Carter thought, realizing that he wouldn't want people over to his place anyway.

He sat down with a red pen for changes and started reading her work, though he had to stop after reading the first page, with a hand-written note from her.

###

C -

I hope you don't mind my sending you this. I know I should have more detail in these, but I don't think I have enough personal stories to tell. I am sure my grammar is poor in this and I'm sure I overlooked details in these essays.

All the first essays were just old essays I had written, but I thought they might somehow relate (The gas bill story was even a true story from when I first moved away and had a roommate!)

But I respect your opinion and I really appreciate the read.
Thanks. - S

P.S.: I will save the big THANK YOU for when I see you in Ohio!

###

“This isn’t fair,” was all Carter could think. He tried to concentrate somehow. He’d keep this letter near his bed that night, the way she kept his books near her bed.

“Would she would ever get to the same point I have been,” he wondered, “and would she have the patience that he has had in waiting?”

“What kind of signal is she giving me?” he thought as he wondered what kind of “thank you” he would receive in Ohio. “And why she had to use all capital letters when she said ‘thank you?’” he wondered. Though he couldn’t imagine it, a part of him thought that maybe she did buy some lingerie from the catalog he teased her about.

Then he stopped himself immediately. “There you go again, Carter, stop thinking that way. She didn’t mean anything by it, and she couldn’t even buy lingerie for herself. Even from a catalog... Just read.”

He knew he would still bring the note to his room when he went to sleep that night, but he turned the paper over and read her essay.

a collection of essays

Government Inefficiency

Our gas was shut off today. The gas company had a problem with our bill and shut off our gas without letting us know, while my roommate and I were out. We were not notified that there was a problem with our bill or that anyone was considering shutting off our gas.

So my roommate straightened everything out with the gas company, and they told us that they would be at the apartment sometime between two in the afternoon and eight in the evening.

Now, I won't go into the fact that when someone you are paying for a service gives you a time estimate for a house visit, they are late over ninety-nine percent of the time.

I won't complain about that because it didn't actually happen this time — someone arrived at around three thirty in the afternoon. (Besides, everyone already knows how awful it is to be held hostage in your own house waiting for people who never show up.) The man came by and turned on the gas, and asked to check the burners on the stove. So he did, and then he asked if the water heater was electric. It was in the basement behind a locked door, and the super was out of town for the weekend. So the guy said he'd have to turn off the gas until I could get the door unlocked to the water heater, to make sure. He said they had people working until midnight and all day tomorrow, so I should call back so someone else could get out here to turn on the gas again.

I waited for my roommate to come home, and we unscrewed a panel from the basement so we could get to the water cooler before the super got back. When I called the gas company back, I was only on hold for a few minutes (another pleasant surprise). Then when I explained the problem, the man told me that I had the wrong number, that this was an emergency line. Apparently not having gas is not an emergency for the gas company, so he gave me the other number.

I was on hold for at least another ten minutes (no, make it more like fifteen), before a lady got on the line and asked me my problem. I explained what had happened, and she said she couldn't get anyone out there for another week. They were booked tomorrow and couldn't schedule me in. So, from

what I had gathered from the situation thus far, our gas was shut off due to a misunderstanding, the person who came to turn on our gas wanted to check something we'd never had to have checked before and wouldn't keep our gas on, and then they couldn't get someone out there to turn on the gas for another week.

Did I mention that it was Fourth of July weekend and we needed to cook?

Oh yes, and bathe. I suppose we could bathe in cold water.

So then my roommate called back and tried to see if there was anything else he could do. When that didn't work, we asked if there was any competition, or if we had to get our gas from them and we had no choice but to wait a week for gas. I already knew the answer, but I hoped it wasn't true, for one brief moment.

When my roommate got off the phone, I started thinking about some of the problems we have because of monopolies. Yeah, it's not something I'd have a problem with, normally I wouldn't be complaining about monopolies, but the only place in this country where monopolies exist are in businesses where the government runs or subsidizes the business.

The Post Office. Utility companies. The commuter rail system.

Great.

People complain about monopolies all the time — in our phone companies, with computer giants like Bill Gates — even though there is nothing close to a monopoly in these industries today. Of course there isn't. The government steps in before competition gets a chance to provide a better product.

But that's a different rant. Back to the gas company.

The government doesn't let private businesses get too close to a monopoly. But when it comes to the government stepping in and running businesses, the last thing the government would want is something competing with them.

Especially when any other private business would probably run any operation more effectively than the government. They'd have to; they'd have to make a profit and wouldn't have the chance to get as much money as they wanted by taking it from people.

Oh, the government calls it a tax. My mistake.

How many times have you heard people complain — for that matter, how many times have you complained — about the long lines and the slow service at your local Post Office?

How many times have you tried to take a train across the country rather

than fly? Why are the costs of taking a train comparable to flying when airplanes are faster and more expensive to build and maintain, especially when rail companies get government subsidies in order to stay afloat and take at least four times as long?

What do you do when your electricity goes out and they say they'll come out between ten in the morning and two in the afternoon, so they make you stay home from work, and then, of course, they don't even show up... What do you do — call another electric company for immediate service?

What do you do when the gas company cuts off your gas and says they can't turn it back on for another week?

Am I making my point here?

I was working one day, waiting for these city employees to come to our job site and do their job. When I still thought they were going to show up and just be late, I thought of asking them if they liked paying more taxes. When they'd answer no, I'd have to ask them then why they are so inefficient — because it's their inefficiency that causes taxes to go up, so we can pay more than we should for these services.

I imagine they can't put two thoughts like that together, though.

Sorry. Now I'm just getting bitter.

But there would not only be increased efficiency in work and therefore better products and services and more choices if the government got out of these businesses, but there would also be less money in taxes to pay, since we wouldn't be subsidizing the inefficiency of the existing government agencies with money we worked hard for.

My point? Well, I guess you get my point. Nobody likes to have to deal with inefficiency, but no one stops to think of where it comes from or what to do about it.

So what do we do about it? Well, I suppose you could complain as much as I do, but then everyone would think that Americans were just a bunch of complainers. We could stop voting for government officials who think we want them spending our money on inefficiency.

Or we could tell our officials that they're right, we don't like monopolies... And the first ones we want to get rid of are the ones run by the government.

The government doesn't have to be running companies for us — we've proven that we can do that ourselves — in fact, we can run them better. It's the government's hold on companies and industries that's strangling us.

Balancing the Budget

If we are going to try to balance the budget, the key isn't in doing it by taxing everyone until the debt is gone. The key is accepting more responsibilities as citizens, and not expecting the government to make things easier on us.

The reason why the government costs so much money is because we continually expect it to do more and more for us. The capitalist base that this country was founded on suggests that the government is there to protect our basic rights — “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” This means that as individuals we reign supreme, and no one has the right to take our life, our property or our ability to accomplish what we are willing and capable of achieving.

However, as time has progressed, our political leaders tell us that we need to be taken care of, and to appease us they have offered, as a government, to do more and more for us. We have agreed, these things would be better if the government took care of them for us. But that was where we went wrong.

The government is bogged down with a quagmire of laws protecting ourselves from ourselves. Seat belt laws. Motorcycle helmet laws. Speed limits. Laws to tell you when a rapist moves into your neighborhood, or laws to tell you when you're mature enough to drive a car, or drink. It seems to make sense that we shouldn't do these things and can abide by these laws, that we should make responsible choices. But the government is going beyond its basic role of protecting us from the force of others by mandating to us as individuals what we are allowed to do that is legally “safe”. This is what is infringing on our rights.

We haven't offended the rights of others by speeding on a highway. By telling us we cannot speed, the government is infringing on our rights to do what we want with our property, when it doesn't infringe on the rights of others. If, because of our speeding, we hit another car and injure another person and/or their property, then we have infringed on another person's rights and we should be punished. But not until then. By fitting another car or being in an accident, we have infringed on additional laws. The government's job is to protect us from others, not from the possibility of accidents caused by others.

We haven't offended the rights of others, for instance, if we choose not to wear our seat belts while driving or riding in a car. The government's job is not to protect us from ourselves, but from others. Even if we get injured in our cars because we weren't wearing our seat belts, we cannot and should not blame the government for not intervening — their job is to protect our right

to decide whether or not we want to use these safety measures.

I won't argue that wearing your seat belt is not a good idea, but I'm not going to tell anyone that they should relinquish the responsibility of making these decisions to their government. When you let the government make some choices for you, what's to stop them from making all your choices for you? Capitalism is a clearly defined set of rules, all surrounded around the notion that the individual human being's rights are most important. However, when you give rights away you start to slip into socialism and let the government take control of some aspects of your life for you. Then they can take more and more — because you've let them — until you're faced with a dictatorship, with communism, and no rights as an individual at all.

The government is also bogged down with providing for those who originally can't — and now won't — provide for themselves. The productivity generated by a free economy has produced a great many things, for all of the people in this country and others. It has raised the standard of living for all. Considering the standards people had two hundred years ago, considering the number of religious wars that killed so many over the millennia in human history, considering the thousands of years the world lived in moral and economic darkness with other political systems, it is evident what people owning their own work can do for productivity, creativity and progress.

From workfare, the Welfare State has risen. The creation of the welfare state has given people a reason to be unproductive. The creation of the welfare state has made people believe they deserve something for nothing. The government never said that every individual in the country was granted "life, liberty and a block of government-subsidized cheese," but this attitude, the attitude that people deserve something for nothing from their government, can be seen in our homeless on the streets, with their cups in their hands, marking a post to beg from daily in front of people going to work. They ask for money, bless you when you pass (invoking the notion of a god and the altruistic notion to give to others, even and especially if they don't deserve it), and occasionally, when they don't get the money they want from you, they scream in protest, as if the money in your pocket isn't yours but theirs, and they think they have every right to expect a handout from you. America created this mentality when they created the welfare state, and we're paying for it in many ways. The lack of a balanced budget is only one way we're paying.

When the government and the people thought it was good to help oth-

ers, they didn't know that helping themselves by being productive raised the standard of living, created new products and services, and did end up helping others. They also didn't consciously think that the productive earnings given to those who didn't earn it had to come from somewhere — from productive people's pockets. Our productivity, as well as our budget, suffered for it.

The government is even bogged down with controlling and subsidizing many aspects of our lives. National defense is a job for the national government, because part of its job is to protect us from outside threats (that's the "life" part of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness"). But supporting the arts, education — the government is not responsible for any of these things.

The arts have come under great scrutiny because people don't want their tax dollars funding certain kinds of artwork. America's health care is more expensive and rated worse than eleven other countries in the world. That also applies to the education system. We need metal detectors at the gates of our city schools and kids graduate from high school without being able to read.

A business couldn't run without producing a good service or product — in fact, it would have to produce a better product, since it would be in competition with other companies. And a business couldn't run at a deficit — it has to be able to run efficiently in order to run well. In what has been the most capitalistic society to date, we have proven that companies can run efficiently and well, and for it they always produce a better product. This could also happen in the areas that the government still has control over.

Privatizing education, for example, may be at first more expensive for parents, but it may also make the standards of schooling better, because suddenly there would be open competition. It would also allow for ideas that have merit (but have been suppressed) to be taught, because when goods and services are in demand, the demand will be met in a free economy (versus state schools, where boards of education have to impress the higher-ups in order to get more funding, and alter their curriculum accordingly). It may cost more at first, but if Americans weren't paying taxes for schools, they may have more money in their pockets to be able to meet these expenses. Parochial schools do this already. And in this example, we wouldn't have concerns about whether or not prayer is allowed in a school, because it is not state sponsored. And there would be no debate over whether uniforms are allowable — you could pick the school of your choice to send your children to, and base your decisions on prayer, uniforms, and *even* ability to teach.

A Letter to our Political Leaders

After watching a few of our elections, I noticed that politicians were trying to warm up to the twenty-something crowd. It's a wise decision: we're a strong group of intelligent new voters. And, as a rule, we're dissatisfied with the United States' current political system. It's a chance for either party to take a hold of a growing and promising voter group and insure additional votes in future elections.

It would help to know what this group is looking for, though, if there's a dissatisfaction with our current parties. To understand this, it may help to learn a little more about this group. Although I'm not a spokesperson for all people aged 20-29, I can give you some insight into how I think, as a member of this "age group."

I'm a twenty-something. But classifying us "twenty-somethings" or "generation x-ers" by our age is something I as an individual finds insulting. I know that we're Americans, but I also know that we as a group have differing opinions, and we have a right to those opinions. We can have different views on our careers, or families, or music from each other. And that's something I value — but I feel like it's constantly being taken away from us.

Other pressure groups may want you to pass laws telling them when a rapist moves into their neighborhood, but I know that just causes more red tape, and we financially pay for it through tax revenue and more dollars, when that information is made public. Besides, it's not the government's responsibility to inform, it'd the individual's. Other pressure groups may want you to pass laws telling them that they need to wear their seat belts, but I know that in a Capitalistic society it's not the government's role to protect people from themselves, but from the force of others, and that is all. Other pressure groups may want you to pass all sorts of laws, but they are by and large laws that go beyond the jurisdiction of the American government. Other groups may want the government telling them what to do all the time, but I don't.

Part of the twenty-something dissatisfaction (if I may speak for the group) with our current parties may be because neither party embodies a consistent set of values. Consider that our government-sponsored school systems teach students in general that philosophy is too difficult a subject for a single person to understand. And religion may not offer a practical solution

for anyone that believes on the individual rights this country was founded on (I mean, Christianity telling people that the meek shall inherit the earth and that self-sacrifice for the benefit of others as good directly clashes with the idea that the individual has a brain and the right to use it, the right to claim what they have earned and even become successful). But young people, especially ones who still have a glimmer of hope that there is something out there that makes sense, when all their lives their schools and leaders have kept from them that their mind is the answer, young people at least still want their political parties to make sense to them. Currently, neither platform, whether Democratic or Republican — is consistent or cohesive.

If a person believes that government intervention beyond the necessities — police protection from the force of others, for example — is wrong, neither political party supports them. Republicans believe in less government when it comes to leaving businesses alone — economically the government should let businesses prosper — but when it comes to personal parts of people's lives — choosing to have an abortion, whether consenting adults want to engage in sexual activities that are not what they consider "the norm," the kinds of art work people make and see — then Republicans know what's best for us, and want to tell us what to do.

Democrats believe in less government intervention when it comes to these personal issues, but when it comes to businesses and the economy, Democrats want to be able to regulate industries because they'll do business that can somehow be bad for people. They want to be able to tax businesses because big business is bad (Ask them why? No answer from them.), and they want to be able to take money away from people, via business regulations and taxation, in order to give it away to people who haven't earned it (there's no more realistic explanation of the welfare system, other than robbery from the people who produce in this country).

Republicans and Democrats both believe the government should stay out of their business, whatever their business may happen to be. What about other people's business? They think: feel free to meddle.

Even on more specific subjects both parties split their decisions moralistically. The religious right, a Christian group of Republicans, as well as Republicans in general, will tell you that it's horrible to kill an unborn child, but it's okay to kill someone that's already alive that has committed a crime like murder (what happened to "turn the other cheek"?). If life is so sacred,

why do Republicans push capital punishment? With our current appeals system, some estimates say that it takes six times more money to kill someone as it does to keep them in jail for life. And who pays for it? We do, the individuals. The taxpayers. The producers.

But the one thing both parties have in common is that they want to take away at least some of our rights. That's why we're so disenchanted with the political parties we have today. Republicans want to take away our personal rights, Democrats want to take away our economic rights. Taxation, the Democrats' answer (so that people on Welfare can still have goods and services while not working for them), is essentially taxation for anything other than the essentials, which is forcibly taking away what individuals have earned. It's forcibly taking away people's money. That's the definition of robbery. And laws instilled by Republicans to protect our private lives, so that we are just like them — but they are not only forcibly telling us how to live, but enacting laws causing paperwork, with costs to enforce them. How does the government pay for these things? By taxation, again, which means we, the individuals, pay for the government telling us what to do.

Every election, I'm sure a good number of people with intelligence, people using reason and logic to the best of their ability in making a decision, go to the polls subconsciously wondering, "Which rights am I willing to lose?"

Well, we shouldn't be losing any of those rights. We should have less government intervention in all respects of our lives.

I'm a twenty-something. I'm a woman, but I don't try to tell the government I need quotas to get a job, because I know that "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" means just that — it means I can pursue whatever I want. But it doesn't mean the government should be handing it to me on a platter.

I'm a twenty-something. I'm intelligent, and I don't need the government protecting me from myself. That's not what I'm paying for it to do.

I'm a twenty-something. I'm looking for a political party that embodies not my beliefs, but the belief that people can have their own beliefs (whether or not people choose to live by logic and reason or not is not for the government to control). I'm looking for a political party that knows that individuals can have their lives (that's the "life" part of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness"), they can have rights, like that no one has the right to take something that belongs to you, like taxation for the welfare state, like that no one has the right to try to take away your life, unlike what the government does to death-

row prisoners, for instance). I'm looking for a political party that knows that individuals have the right to pursue their own goals, without intervention from the government and without help from the government (that you can't expect handouts, but you also can start a business to sustain your life without being burdened by over taxation and regulation).

I'm a twenty-something. I'm looking for a political party that embodies not my beliefs, but the belief that people can have their own beliefs. I'm looking for a political party that knows that individuals can own their lives, they can have the right to keep their lives. I'm looking for a political party that knows that individuals have the right to pursue their own goals, without intervention from the government and without help from the government.

I'm a twenty-something, and I'm looking for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Can anyone give it to me?

The Illness of Volunteerism

When I opened up my copy of USA Today this morning, I saw a chart as the illustration for the lead story. The chart stated, “Volunteerism: How Strong is the Drive?” and then asked the question, “If your place of work gave its employees the chance to take paid time off of work to do community volunteer work, how likely are you to take the time off?” The results showed that 51 percent of people surveyed would in fact take the time off to volunteer.

The question asked: would you volunteer if someone still paid you. By definition, that’s not volunteering. Ask the same group of people if they’d be willing to put in the same amount of time and they were not being paid for it. I’m sure the results would be much, much lower.

People work for a living. They go to work in the morning, come home at night, and live off of what they’ve earned — that’s Capitalism, and for the most part, that’s America (at least that’s what this country was founded on). I would guess that people, for the most part, don’t want to give away their labor — or their money — to people who haven’t earned it.

A summit to encourage people to come together to volunteer is another. Asking individuals to volunteer to help out the “less fortunate” is one thing. People have the right to choose what to do with their own time. But making it sound like volunteerism is the responsibility of individual companies is another, which is what authorities make individuals feel.

Businesses, by producing better goods and services, increase the standard of living for everyone in this country (consider that poor people can purchase televisions, have entertainment and “luxuries” that they couldn’t have afforded fifty years ago). Businesses are doing a service to the *world* as well as to themselves when they produce. They produce a product; competition brings better products; everyone wins. It is not the responsibility of businesses to lose their workers to regular volunteer times, because they don’t owe anything to “the community,” when their work produces “good” for the community in the first place.

“The community” consists of a group of individuals. This country was founded on individual rights. Expecting business owners to shell out money to employees for not working — for volunteering — is just another way of extracting money from the producers. Won’t that hurt the economy in the end, which affects the standard of living for all?

The article went on, stating that there were philosophical questions with

wide-scale, imposed volunteerism: “How should the role of the government be balanced with the roles of companies, individuals and non-profit groups?”

It shouldn't be balanced; the government shouldn't be involved. Government intervention would mean more taxes and less freedom for individuals. Companies should not feel the need to volunteer themselves or their employees, as imposed by a government; if they want to help, they can, but should not be expected or forced to. They do enough by producing better goods and services for the individuals that purchase them.

“Is volunteerism a politically popular but lightweight response to the intractable social problems government leaders can't, or won't manage?” ... Now we're getting somewhere. Volunteerism won't solve a problem. If the individual you are helping doesn't want to help themselves, or if they expect to be helped instead of working on finding their own solution, then nothing is solved. The government, when involved with other aspects of our lives, has made a very expensive tangled mess of red tape. Consider education, for example. Pressure groups have pulled funding back and forth for education, providing not the best education, but what the right people wanted. The result? a poor educational system that the government thinks more money will solve. When more money doesn't help, add more money, and tax the people some more.

“Volunteerism is one of the great glories in America,” states Will Marshall of the Progressive Party Institute. No it isn't. It's a great glory to communism, where people are supposed to make sure everyone is equal and not be able to advance with their achievements, therefore giving them no incentive to achieve. It's even a great glory to Christianity, because you're not supposed to rise above everybody else. “The meek shall inherit the earth,” they say. No, it's individual rights, and the right to own your accomplishments and achievements – that is one of the great glories of America, and that directly opposes volunteerism. The right to produce and create and succeed is the American way, and it turned us into the greatest country in the world. But for years now, we've been told that we need to help others. Since we've heard that cry, our country has been slipping. General Colin Powell is working on the volunteerism summit, and he added that it is in individual's best interests to look beyond their neighborhoods when volunteering. Why? How is it in any individual's best interest to do work for free that doesn't affect their lives? No answer.

Companies may be interested in participating in volunteering programs because it bolsters their image in their community, providing business; or it

may give their employees a feeling that their company cares about others, which may reduce their turnover rate; or it may be a tax write-off. Either way, the only reasons a business should, in order to be an efficient business, explore volunteerism, is in order to help their own business out somehow. The CEO of Home Depot, Bernie Marcus, said, “We don’t do it (volunteerism) because it increases our business.” Well, then, your business isn’t running as efficiently as it should be. If a company wants its employees to volunteer, how do they make a profit? Probably by increasing the prices of the goods and services that company sells. When you don’t see a return on an investment, you lose.

In 1993 Maryland Lt. Governor Kathleen Kennedy Townsend “pushed through a controversial requirement that all her state’s public high school students must do 75 hours of community service before they graduate,” the article goes on to say. What does that teach students? That the government has the right to tell people how to spend their time, that the government can tell people what to do, that the government can force people to do things, whether or not they want to do it? It teaches students that volunteerism isn’t actually volunteer work, but a required activity. Does it teach them their achievements don’t matter, that other people matter more than they do? The problem is that a “requirement” to do “community service” is not volunteering.

At the end of the article, there was another chart with the results of a survey. It asked people, “Who should take the lead role in meeting the following goals (providing medical care for the poor, caring for the elderly, reducing homelessness, reducing hunger, helping illiterate adults learn to read, providing job training for the youths): the government, through programs and funding, or individuals and businesses, or through donations and volunteer work?”

Answers varied, but people thought that the government should help out in all of these areas. But how is the government going to do that? With your tax money, deciding how to spend it without conferring with you. If it were the responsibility of individuals and businesses, on a volunteer basis, at least you would know where your money was going.

But then it occurred to me: it’s not the government’s responsibility, and it’s not a business person’s or producing individual’s responsibility — it’s the responsibility for those in need to do something with their lives, to satisfy that need and accomplish their own goals. “Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” means that people have a right to their lives, and the right to do what they want with their lives. They can’t infringe on other’s rights to help them.

final "Rights and Ownership" essay

We are so lucky that we have access to so much information. The Internet alone allows you to get information from reliable as well as a range of sources about topics that might not be covered in depth in the daily news. Look how powerful new news can be now, how there are a few cable channels and web sites that show only the news, all to make the world a more informed place.

In my own work, we have been able to use the power of the media on a number of topics related to AIDS and HIV research. I personally have been able to find information on the Internet alone about the relationships between different topics and combating AIDS, such as:

- * shark liver oil
- * mineral water
- * meditation
- * herbal treatments
- * vitamin supplements
- * exercise
- * appetite changes
- * therapy
- * acupressure
- * acupuncture
- * oxygen therapy
- * Tai Chi
- * hypnosis
- * yoga
- * Chinese herbs
- * diet additions
- * building muscle mass in your body
- * increasing protein
- * keeping a positive outlook
- * keeping working
- * reaffirming religious connections

Since the release of Emivir™, we have worked on not only trying to improve the effectiveness of Emivir™ but to also come up with an integrase inhibitor — a third drug to be used in AIDS cocktails to deal a more severe blow to the HIV virus in the human body. Because we had worked on ways to alter natural cells with Emivir™, we used previous tests and samples to come up with an effective integrase inhibitor — more effective because it is not entirely synthetic, like its predecessors.

In other words, we used old research in new ways. This is why we are coming up with these new possibilities so quickly.

But I think that has already been reported in the general media. If not, medical journals have printed our findings. The information is out there.

More than that, I write this as a citizen. A citizen of the United States of America. You see, that is something I'm proud to say, because this is currently the greatest country in the world. It was this country that laid the groundwork for property rights. It was the idea of owning what you earn that gave people the incentive to produce and excel. It is because of these ideas that we

have vastly improved our standard of living — for all people, all over the world. It was our Founding Fathers that said that they wanted a fair and just government, ruled by the people, for the people. And these are the things I believe in.

That is why this is my favorite country in the whole world. Because I love my work. I love being one of those ‘producers’. I love doing the research I do. I like using my mind, making something that people need and want. This country lets me work, knowing that it is mine, knowing that I earned it.

We have worked insanely long hours to accomplish what we have, and everyone that works with me should be commended for all of the accomplishments. But we didn’t do it for money, fame, or the recognition of our accomplishments by *anyone*. We didn’t even do it for the idea of the ‘public good,’ although I have to admit, the work is that much more rewarding when it is so needed, making it such a demanded product. No, the reason why we put in the long hours, the reason why we do this very difficult work day in and day out, is because it’s who we *are*. It’s because we love the idea of doing something, making something, and having it be ours. Everyone has to admit that they like their work, but they like *their* work, they like seeing *their* name on the product, not because it gives them money or fame but because it is *theirs*. You deserve credit for the work you do. Every person out there deserves their credit, from the man at the car assembly line who checks the bolt for the left door of the sedan model on the line to the woman who sees her name on the sign in front of the house that has just been sold. Everyone out there who earns their work and their rewards loves their work. We like to see a job well done, and we like to know that *we* did it.

This is why plagiarism is illegal. This is why theft is illegal. Because in this country, you have a right to own what you produce.

I remember reading a few years ago about the national government’s intervention in the broadcasting industry. After pressure from the government as well as various organizations, major networks uniformly adopted a television rating system, like the current system the movie industry uses to regulate content and inform viewers of movies. However, since the enactment of this new system, groups have been complaining that the new rating system does not tell viewers enough about why the shows received the rating they have. Is there a rating because there is bad language? Is there sexual content? Is there violence? Groups have been pushing for an adoption of a plan

similar to a system that lists more of a program's content.

Then the government agreed that this change would be a good idea. So they asked the networks to come together and come up with a plan. But one network chose not to adopt the plan – they immediately stated that they can tell people what the content of a given show is, but that they don't want the government *telling* them to adopt a system. They also stated in press releases that they will be working on their own plan for a system that will help people understand what exactly is on the shows.

This network didn't appease the first group loud enough to be heard. But I applaud the fact that they were willing to distance themselves from government regulation, and that they were willing to state this so explicitly.

When citizens find something they don't like about the goods and services they receive, they should not make it the government's job to try to remedy the situation. The government is there to protect individual citizens from the force of others — not from television programming that one group of people or another might not like.

This network concisely pointed out that it is not that they don't want to inform people about programming if that is what the public wants — they do not want that authority to be placed in the hands of an already-too-powerful government. The press release stated that it has “— consistently stated that, as a matter of principle, there is no place for government involvement in what people watch on television. Viewers, not politicians or special interest groups, should regulate the remote control”.

There is a song on the radio, one with lyrics that repeatedly mockingly comment on the average person's willingness to conform to the media influences and the television, assuming it is how one should lead their life. One of the lines, in fact, uses the reference of having television help the viewers help themselves.

I embrace your legacy, the models and the apathy

I know the late-night network commonwealth is there to help me help myself

The media gives people an image of violence, waif-like models contribute to how the sexes should be viewed, and people seem to embrace it with open arms. This, however, is the decision of the people of the country – it is not the decision of the government to impose or force standards on the people on how to view life or how to live their lives. As that one network noted, the government has a powerful hold on the people as it is, and it should not have a stronger stranglehold on how this country thinks.

###

Recently press releases from the U.S. Scientific Research Advancement Department note that Madison Pharmaceuticals and my staff have been working on integrase inhibitors at the same time as them.

This is very possible. The government press releases, however, have implied that their work had been too similar to be a coincidence.

And to this I ask them to show me proof.

The press releases from the U.S. Scientific Research Advancement Department state that they had been working on an integrase inhibitor for nearly a year, yet no research reports are published on it in any medical or scientific journal. It is possible that they might not have published anything about their research in the journals; but there was never even a mention of it in their almost daily press releases to the media in the past year as well.

This concerns me, because they seem to be having problems with our research without showing us (or proving to us) that they have even *done* any research in the same field in the first place.

Not a soul from Madison Pharmaceuticals has spoken with anyone from the U.S. Scientific Research Advancement Department, even though they claimed to have talked to people at Madison in one of their press releases. Apparently they visited my laboratory today, attempting to open cabinets and ask questions about our research for no reason.

This type of behavior from our government, *our government*, is not something that should be tolerated. This is supposed to be a government for the people, by the people. This is supposed to be *your* government. *My* government.

If the government has concerns about whether or not someone's work coincided with theirs, they have to first prove that they were *doing* the work. If not, then there is an unacceptable amount of government intervention in the private market.

Madison Pharmaceuticals has repeatedly done an excellent job at creating a good, reliable product for people — the fact that our product sells proves this. We want to continue to do our work. We want to continue to create better and better medicines for patients who need it. We want to continue to fill an urgent medical need. And we want to continue to work, knowing that no one will stop us from doing our best.

Madison and other research and drug corporations have all kept their

computer clocks synchronized with the National Institute of Standards and Technologies, so that they could “time stamp” their work and have a verifiable record of their progress. The U.S. Scientific Research Advancement Department has not shown any “time stamped” proof or evidence, though I hate to consider or post the theory that as a branch of the government they have the power to “doctor” their evidence.

This is supposed to be an organization that we can count on, and it is leading us to doubt. This is what happens when the government gets too much control over people.

Having pride in your work and what you own, this is the American way, the way it is supposed to be. This is *my* way. This is *your* way. This is the way of every person in this country who has pride in their work. We continue working because we love our work. It is our love of having the right to what we produce and what we earn.

Give a government some power, and they will eventually take more — see any dictatorship or any form of communism or socialism as an example (even see the history of our own government — we have been slowly losing more and more of our rights here in America). In a way, we should thank that network for understanding that the rights of individuals also include the rights of business people — and those rights should not be given away so quickly.

A female friend of mine has fears — a fear of flying is a perfect example of this. I tried to make it better for her when we went on a business trip together once, where she ended up meeting her husband for the weekend. During the flight, I cracked jokes, I made her laugh, and I tried to keep talking to her so she wouldn't think about the fact that we were in the air. I even told her to order a beer on the airplane, that her husband wasn't there to stop her. She had a great time flying, she loved the flight, and after we landed I had to tell her that everything went just fine and that she made it.

My friend didn't like the idea of spending the weekend with her husband. He was another thing that she feared. She was afraid of him; he would threaten her and occasionally he hit her. This weekend was no exception. She called me in my hotel room crying telling me she intentionally left his wallet in another part of the hotel after they had started arguing. He had hit her a few times, she had broken his glasses in self-defense, and she was afraid to stay in the hotel room while he was getting his wallet and she was wonder-

ing if she could come to my hotel room.

Looking back, all I could think is that her rights were being taken away from her from someone she gave power to. I told her I would wait in the hall, so that when I saw her I would personally make sure he did not come near her. I didn't want her to feel like she was powerless, how we can often feel if we let someone or something take too much power from us or take our rights away, so I wanted to do anything I could to help.

When she saw me in the hall she came running to me and I held her before I told her to come into my room. I saw that as she came into my room her husband turned the corner in the hallway looking for her.

I turned away and went into my room. I knew at that point where he was going next.

He knocked repeatedly at my room for the next hour before leaving. We had called the front desk of the hotel to have him removed from the hallway in front of my hotel room. She knew she would eventually have to go back to that room, though, and she knew that she would have to deal with him. I hope it was helpful to her that I was there for her, but I could not be there every time she was in trouble with her husband. She was later able to get a well-deserved divorce from him, so that she would be able to start her life over again.

In this case, I know that someone got married, and did not know that they would have to lose so many of their rights. Sometimes people don't know their spouse will act that way after they are married, but sometimes they do, and in those cases they know that they are losing rights by stepping into marriage, because that is their choice. But the government shouldn't take rights away from people, when they have no choice in the matter at all (you can't just divorce the country you live in and leave when you'd leave your home, your job your family and friends).

I have also heard reports that a few counties in this country are interested in putting waiting periods on obtaining marriage licenses unless the couples go through premarital counseling. Divorce rates are high, these people claim, and it is our responsibility as the people who allow marriages to make sure couples know what they're getting into. These defenders claim that divorces cause social stress as well as economic stress, and it is their responsibility to try to correct the problem.

Allow me to repeat a part of this. "it is our responsibility as the people who allow marriages..."

Who allows marriages? The government. And “divorces cause social stress?” Did they stop to think about the woman who has been beaten by her husband regularly, or raped by his family friend, when she was too afraid to press charges?

I will be the first to admit that I am not a counselor, and I do not work for any women’s rights groups, but I do know a woman who was in a marriage where the husband occasionally beat her, and made her feel like she was worth nothing. He kept money from her, and took her paychecks when she had a job, which allowed her to be away from their home.

Please allow me to point out that no studies have been conducted to test the effectiveness of putting waiting periods on marriages or marriage licenses. If a couple wants to get married, the decision in one county to wait on giving out a marriage license doesn’t stop an anxious couple from going to the next county to get a marriage license. This merely makes people not want to marry in that particular county. The couples can still hold out through the waiting period to get their marriage license, all without marriage counseling. Then the waiting period accomplishes nothing except irritating the couple and putting off what the couple wanted in the first place. And who decides what kinds of things need to be covered in these small counseling sessions? Is it the people running the sessions? Counselors? Therapists? Psychologists? The government? If not the government, then who pays for the counselors? The individuals who cannot afford the hundred-dollar-an-hour visits, or the government, oops, I mean, the general public, through taxes?

I know that personally I don’t want the government to have enough intervention in my life as to tell me how to be a good wife.

Some religions offer counseling to people who plan to get married. Catholicism, for instance, requires people to go through daylong seminars with their priest before that priest will marry them. Religious institutions have the right to do this, because people decide to be a part of an institution that imposes these restrictions. The United States government was designed with the rights of the individual in mind, and the idea of government-imposed counseling for couples that want to marry violates individual rights in two respects. One is that a couple should be able to get married without the government forcing them to wait (the government is not supposed to apply force except to protect its citizens from force). The other is that the government is forcing people to give up more of their money (in the form of additional taxes or direct

pre-approved counseling, probably with a counselor pre—approved by the government).

The government is not our moral regulator, nor should it ever be. And economic problems, in a capitalistic society, should be the concern of the individuals within the society and not the government. This is why these defenders are wrong when they claim that it is their responsibility to try to correct the problems of social and economic stress from divorce. The government has no reason and no *right* to intervene in people's private lives. This includes intervening with marriage *and* divorce. There may be a problem with divorce in America, but the government is not the group to solve it. We are.

This is a perfect example of why it is not a good idea that the government should be so involved with the actions of members of society, especially when they are acting in a way that can help other people and not hurt them. There are a number of examples of this. Giving preferential treatment to certain groups of people before who have gone through past hardships (which have no bearing on their abilities to work in present-day situations) is an example. Enforcing rigid speed limits in some areas of the country is another. These examples of broadcast intervention or marriage counseling are also good examples. This all relates to how the government should not be allowed to intervene with the work of companies on achieving the goals of people in the country — and around the world.

A number of private companies have been working on integrase inhibitors over the past year and a half. And unlike the U.S. Scientific Research Advancement Department, the progress of private institutions is documented in press releases, news articles, medical journals and press conferences. And no one from any private organization has complained that our work was similar to theirs, not one private organization has asked to see our offices and expected us to comply. Only the government has the power to do this, if we choose to give it to them.

Our government exists to protect us from the force of others. But who protects us from the force of a government gone out of control?

There is no one to stop them but us. If we care about keeping what we produce and what we earn, then we are the ones that have to stand up for our rights.

I choose to not give our government that much power. The more power you give someone who doesn't deserve it, the more power they will try to take.

I choose to continue doing my work, because it is mine. I speak for my staff when I say that this is our work, and we will not give it away to someone who hasn't earned it, simply because they make a claim with no evidence to back it up.

I choose to let the government be accountable for what it does. Without evidence that their claims are true, there is no reason why we should answer to the U.S. Scientific Research Advancement Department.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sloane Emerson". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

###

He couldn't believe what he was reading. He could see spots for changes and additions that could have been made, but otherwise parts of this could be used for an essay for the end of the book. Before he could be distracted by sentiment, Carter started writing on a scratch piece of paper,

A final note from the author
Or: finding the answers

Oh, wait, he thought, try a few more:

The key to the puzzle
The key to the mystery

Carter liked the idea of using the phrase "the key" in the letterhead, but he also thought he would have to bounce these ideas off Ellen.

Carter leaned back in his chair. He felt the cold of the metal of his chair along his back. He liked that feeling, making sure he wouldn't move to disturb the sensation. Most everyone else would have thought it was more like pain, but at this point in the game Carter was used to the feeling, and it was something he was coming to expect.

He wanted pain to feel good again.

Carter knew for a fact that he had been in pain waiting for her, and he also knew that he needed to talk to Ellen as soon as possible about excerpts of these edited essays possibly being added to the end of the book. He looked up her home number from his Rolodex at the counter next to the table and dialed her number, expecting to get her answering machine. He didn't expect an answer.

"Hello?" he heard from a tired female voice.

"Hello, is Ellen there?"

"This is she. May I ask who is calling?"

"Ellen, I am sorry to call you so late, it's Carter, from Quentin."

"Carter Donovan?" Ellen answered, as she was stunned by the call.

"Ellen, I am sorry to call —"

"Don't worry. Did you need something? I can't imagine this being a social call."

“I was calling for business reasons first of all... There is potentially a new essay for the end of the book, and that might be hard to add when we are just about to send it off to the press. I don’t know how the pages are set up with the printer right now, and I know this essay will need some major editing and splicing from other pieces so it can all fit together somehow, but I was wondering if it could be done, so —”

“We have it set up so that there are blank pages for notes after every chapter so that the reader can add notes. And pages for printing have to be in sections of eight, so depending on how long the last ‘essay’ or ‘letter’ would be, we could just tack a few additional pages for notes after the letter, you know, for notes about the book and notes for their own experiences.”

“That’s fine. I don’t even know yet if it going to definitely be in the book, but I wanted to see if we could be able to add it as late as the end of next week.”

“It shouldn’t be a problem to add it, but we can check on it as soon as we get the chance to talk to the printers in Ohio, but for that we would have to wait until after they open tomorrow.”

“Ellen, do you have the number with you at home by any chance?”

“I have it in my files, so I can call them tomorrow morning.”

“Ellen, I’m sorry to call, but this is immensely helpful. You have no idea how good this is for me.”

“Mr. Donovan, it’s no problem. But was there anything else you needed?”

“Well...” Carter thought for a split second before he continued, “Well, I would appreciate it if you called me Carter and not Mr. Donovan.”

“Saying your first name still even sounds, well, formal...”

“But it’s my *name*, and it makes me feel more comfortable if you’d call me by it.”

Carter waited for a moment before Ellen responded.

“Carter it is,” Ellen said. “Was there anything else?”

Ellen waited for a moment before Carter responded.

“You know, Ellen,” Carter started, “I think we could be more social together, maybe. You know, we could go to a club, or even a coffee shop to hang out and talk to each other.”

Ellen sounded confused and Carter could tell. “Excuse me?” she said.

“Well, just to do something together.”

“I’m sure you’re too busy to go out with the likes —”

“As a rule, I try to not be too social or go out with just anyone.”

“But I’m beginning to think you’re inviting me out as more than a friend.”

“Ellen, I was just trying to be nice. Sometimes I think I am not supposed to ever be with a woman, so... I don’t know what to say, but I wasn’t trying to make a move on you.”

“Mr. Donovan, you don’t say the ‘right’ words to make a woman feel good.”

“I think you’re pretty, and I was just saying that I wasn’t hitting on you, and I thought it would be good to talk to you, and you can keep calling me Carter, not Mr. Donovan.”

Carter finished their conversation so they could say goodbye to each other. When he hung up the phone, he took the essay, along with the letter that was written to him, to his room. He thought for a moment about bringing the phone with him to the bedroom, to call her once he was in bed, to tell her about his reading the essay, but he thought that would be too much for him to do. He left the phone at the counter, turned off the lights, and took his paperwork into his bedroom.

Carter went to his bed, dropped the paperwork on the dresser next to it, took off his t-shirt, unbuttoned his pants and let them drop to the floor at his feet. He figured he would put them away when he woke up in the morning. He fell into the bed face down; he then looked at the letter from her as he rolled over and tried to go to sleep.



CHAPTER 12

THE LOVE LOST

Carter made sure that an eight-page addition to the book could be inserted last minute without a problem. He did everything he could to make sure that his editing and splicing on her essays was completed, so that he would be able to talk to her about using it as a possible epilogue.

Carter also made sure to talk to Ellen, because he wanted to have the chance to talk to someone else, so that he didn't feel so alone. He liked Ellen, because he liked her intelligence, he liked the fact that he always saw her when she was working and thinking, and he wanted to make sure that she didn't think he was trying to abuse his power as her potential superior.

He was just trying to be a friend.

###

Sloane wasn't used to having to wait in lines at the airport. By 6:00 in the morning she was already inside the airport, and had managed to bypass the baggage check-in by only bringing a carry-on bag. But at the gate she stood in a long line and waited for her seat assignment to be confirmed.

She finally got to the front of the line.

“Are there any seats left with extra leg room, like at the exit rows?”

The woman checked from behind the counter. “I’m sorry, ma’am, those seats have already been assigned.”

“Can I get an aisle seat toward the front?”

“Are you flying alone ma’am?”

“Yes.”

The woman behind the counter typed for ten seconds. “The best I can do is seat 13D, which is an aisle seat.”

“That’s fine,” pulling out her diver’s license for the woman to check for security purposes. She was then asked if she had any additional forms of identification, so she pulled out her passport and waited to see if they wanted to see a credit card with her name on it as well. She knew that in light of serious terrorist activities there was so much more security, but she didn’t know what else she had to prove so that she could go to another location to do her job.

Finding a seat at the terminal close to her gate, she read over her notes until her block of rows was called to board the plane. She noticed that people were so anxious to get on to the plane that they’d stand and wait so they could pounce on the woman taking the tickets as soon as their rows were called. She knew that people wanted to get on the plane quickly so they might have overhead baggage room, since so many people wanted to use it for all of their belongings that didn’t fit under the seat in front of them, but if that wasn’t the issue did they not realize that they’d have to wait for everyone else to get on the plane anyway?

When she managed to get onto the plane she found herself next to an older couple talking about their grandchildren. She tried to tune them out and listened to the hum of the engines starting up. She found it was much more difficult to enjoy the experience of flight in a cramped seat with people talking all around her and a child sitting in the seat behind her, kicking the back of her seat.

By the time her plane landed it was past eleven in the morning. As she walked out into the terminal she saw Carter standing with two other casually dressed gentlemen.

Confused to see the additional men but pleased to see Carter, she continued to walk toward them

All Carter could think was that he wanted his first words to her to be “I

love you” — and then he knew that he would then have to explain that he meant that he loved her essay — but he knew that he wouldn’t have the chance to say anything like that to her when he had coworkers with him to catch her at the airport. He had to think of something more appropriate to say.

“My flight got in fifteen minutes before yours did,” Carter said as he reached out to shake her hand, “So Mark and Todd decided we should just wait for you so that we could come in together.”

Introduced to their tour guides from the printing plant, they then walked out of the airport in Columbus and approached the car.

The printing plant was clean and very large. They got a tour of the entire plant; Todd showed them where pages go for plating before final color checks were made, and then they finally walked toward the printers.

Before they entered the warehouse-sized room that housed the printing presses, they were each handed headphones to protect their ears from the loud noise of the running presses. Carter accidentally hit Sloane in the temple with his elbow as he was trying to put the headphones on his head.

“Ouch!”

Carter turned around instantly. “Oh, I’m sorry. Are you okay?” He reached his hand to her head and curled his fingers under her ear and touched her temple with his thumb. He wanted so badly to keep his hands there and tell her he would never want to hurt her, but he knew this was not the time or place and she would not be interested in him coming on to her. Carter finally asked, “I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

Feeling his hand around the back of her neck, she instantly tensed up. “No, I’m fine really.” She tried not to think about Carter, but it was impossible for her. What she didn’t know is that they were both playing this game with each other; they were both playing this game with themselves, and they were both torturing themselves for the benefit of no one. She wasn’t used to being so cold around someone, and she didn’t know how else to act in situations like this. And she didn’t know how she was going to be able to handle the rest of the stay in Ohio.

And he didn’t know either.

They were guided into the large room where twenty sheet-fed presses and fifteen web printers were running. Giant rolls of paper were spinning at the top of each machine twenty feet in the air, and as they approached one press they could see the paper running first through a cyan blue printing, then up and

around and down to where yellow was shot onto the pages, then over and through to a magenta printing, then down and around to where black ink was finally pressed on to the pages. She could see that for some papers, only certain colors were used; those papers wound around the top of the press until it reached back down for the ink color it needed.

A few men in jeans wearing headphones and goggles checked pages. Todd and Mark walked them over to the table the men were inspecting pages on.

“You see, the customer supplies a color proof for their pages, but if they can’t we print one for the customer to check and approve the color on before we continue. These gentlemen here are checking that the color is okay off the test page. If it’s not, they can stop the press and lighten or darken any of the inks we have. They also make sure that the plates once again are in good registration, so that if we need green and use it by mixing the cyan and yellow inks on our press, that the edges perfectly match up so that you don’t get a yellow highlight or a cyan shadow.” He showed the two of them a sample of a page with bad registration before they turned back toward the presses.

“Let me show you the bindery before we go to how your book will run, okay?” She nodded her head in agreement and they proceeded through the warehouse to a large door into another room.

Stacks of papers lined the hallways of the next room, and there were more large machines all around her. Some of the bundled stacks of papers were twenty feet tall and ten feet wide. “These bundled stacks of paper you see here,” Mark said, “these go to the recycling plant. We recycle everything here we can. That’s why such a small fraction of recycled goods is post-consumer waste — industries produce a lot more waste than consumers do, and companies like us produce a ton of paper we would otherwise throw away as well. An industry’s recycled goods are cleaner and easier to use at recycling plants, too. Here we recycle our papers, our excess inks, the silver from our film making processes and our excess film.”

Mark and Todd walked them over to a machine that was guiding stapled magazines through a massive stapler. The magazines were split open on the slanted, v-shaped belt while a staple machine held the pages together and stapled the center of the belt. “Saddle-stitched books are easy to print,” Todd said. “After they get bound the edges are trimmed in this machine over here, and then they’re ready to go. Perfect-binding a book, like a hard cover or a paperback book, is harder. We’ll show you that after you check on how your

upcoming book will run, okay?”

They agreed as they walked back through the large door to the main printing room. She was amazed at the huge machinery that was producing such large quantities of printed materials. Machines cut the reams of paper down, collated the pages, then bound them and trimmed them. It was fascinating to her that these gigantic machines guided reams of paper through, and combined cyan, magenta, yellow and black inks to produce a full-color page.

Walking through the press, she began to understand what Carter meant when he talked about how he loved to do a press check on his books. She continued to gaze, and Carter occasionally glanced over to her to see her eyes widen to view the machinery around her. He loved the fact that she found this fascinating, and he loved the fact that in a way he was able to give this to her.

They walked through the warehouse and she watched the workmen walking back and forth. They wore large gloves and periodically checked the output of one of the machines to make sure everything was in working order.

When they finally arrived at a press in the corner, she noticed that the large roll of paper at the end of the machine was bypassing all of the inks except black. She looked over at Carter.

“That is how your book will print too,” Todd said to them. “This is how most books of this size run through us. We’re printing the inside pages, which are all just black. The paperback cover and the hard cover jacket will be done another morning. Care to have some lunch before you look over sample inside pages and see what it is like?”

“Sure,” Carter answered. All she could do was gaze at the press move the rolls of paper through the large web of machinery until Todd touched her shoulder and gestured that they were leaving.

After lunch they spent the rest of the afternoon checking over pages and samples of one of Quentin’s books without the covers, as it was a normal policy to make sure the type was printing evenly on the pages and pages weren’t being printed on an angle, because it was easy enough to check when you had a rule at the header and footer of each page, which was common. When they had a break Sloane would just go over to the machines and watch the presses run.

Carter followed her to one of the machines once during the afternoon. He had to yell in order to be heard through the headphones over the other noises. “It’s amazing, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is,” she yelled back. “Now I know why you like this.”

As he started to walk away, Sloane had to yell to him, “I hate to ask this, but what did you think of my essays?”

Carter turned around and yelled back over the press noises. “Oh, you’ll get an earful from me when we get to talk after the press today. Couldn’t you pick a more quiet place to ask?”

She smiled at him and Carter smiled back before he walked over to the press check counter he was working from while she looked at the turning gears and the rolling paper.

Todd took them out to dinner at the end of the day and they discussed how they started on the book project.

“What else do you print, just books and magazines?”, she asked.

“Pretty much. Smaller projects like brochures and fleers are pointless to do here.”

In this small town three hours from Columbus, people didn’t worry about going to college, for if they wanted to live in their hometown they could just get an education for a job at the printing plant after they graduated from high school. If it wasn’t for the size of the plant and the jobs it provided, Todd explained, the town could have become a ghost town decades ago.

After dinner Todd drove them back to the hotel they were staying at and told them he would pick them up at nine o’clock tomorrow morning.

As she walked with Carter down the halls to their rooms next door to each other she had to ask him again about her writing. “I had to send a few essays to see if anything could be mixed together. But was the essay idea that bad?”

“I...” Carter said as he did what he was afraid to do earlier today at the airport and at the press. He put his hand at her neck and curled his thumb up along her cheek in front of her ear. “I wanted to tell you after I read your essay that I loved you.”

He instantly saw in her eyes a look of confusion. Her eyes turned to saucers, and Carter saw this as a sign that he made a huge mistake. “What I mean is that I loved your essay. I thought the essays were really strong. And I love the fact that it was you that wrote them. There were small details that could be changed, but I was really impressed with the way you were able to incorporate personal stories about government intervention into our lives and into the AIDS story; it made the story very personable.”

He had to pause at that point, he didn’t know if she was hearing him.

She finally spoke. “You thought my essays were personable?”

“Yes, I thought that last one was *really* personable. I also thought that it was very analytical at the same time, in a way that the rest of the book is, in a way that the subject material has to be.”

“Analytical?”

Carter had to quickly respond to her bewildered comments. “Now I don’t go around ascribing to any organizations, but I would say that was a very Objectivist essay of yours.”

“What is that?”

“Have you ever read *Atlas Shrugged*?”

“No.”

Carter thought for a moment, remembering that it was probably just his profession that allowed him to know so much about other writers. “How about *The Fountainhead*? That’s a better-known book.”

“Yes, I read that years ago.”

“Do you remember how the lead character in that book was an architect, and he wouldn’t give up his goals, or standards, which are his morals and values, and in the end he ended up building the tallest skyscraper?”

“Yes, but you have to admit that the book was a bit outdated.”

“Yes, but the idea wasn’t — the idea was that someone driven by these standards, someone who had such high, direct, concrete standards, someone who had standards that were synonymous with their values as well as their morals — those are ideas that do not fade in time.”

“That’s fine, but I don’t see — wait, are you suggesting that I write like the author of that book?”

“Ayn Rand was her name, and I wouldn’t say that you are a dead ringer for her, I —”

“Why did you remember her name was Ayn Rand?”

“That is my job. To know these things.”

“Sorry...”

“I was just trying to say that it was very analytical, very logical, and very reasonable, like her writing was, but with your personal stories in there as well, it made it much more like a letter to someone, and not an essay that you would have to ‘decree’ at a formal meeting in front of a group of people. Ayn Rand’s writing was very logical, but it gave you more reason to want to immerse yourself in her stories. Your personal stories in your essays — you

know, like the gas being turned off or your friend afraid of flying who was abused by her husband — I thought it was a personal note that would make everything else that was said in the book seem that much more real. I think it would make a fitting ending for the book, even.”

Her eyes turned to round discs when she heard him say this. “What? We can’t do that! The book is about to start printing!”

Carter couldn’t help but think that he loved to see her eyes when they were that big and open, even if she was only having that reaction because of anger or fear. “Magazines print every month and they are usually late for some reason, so it could be made to fit at the end of the book. I checked with Ellen, and we could add another eight-page form to the back of the book, and the extra pages from after the essay could be additional notes space for the writer for information they need to keep,” Carter said. “I think it would make the book really helpful for people —”

“What, and make this seem like a more ‘kind and caring book?’”

Carter didn’t know her adverse reaction of anything generally referred to as ‘kind and caring’, because he did not see the struggles she had to go through with her work sometimes. Carter continued, “Well, that’s what we’re going for by producing the book in the first place. Moves like your press conferences and this book are going to help you continue to do your work.”

“Do you think I really need this much help to do my work?”

“Right now it seems like we all do. And if this helps, it can help Madison get more money as well, get more customer appreciation, and probably even get your department more funding to do more work that you need to do.”

They were standing in the hallway together, right by the elevator, and their rooms were at the other side of the building. They stood there in silence for a moment before she finally spoke again. “You’re spearheading the production of this book, even managing the editing, so I suppose you know best on this one. I’ll trust your judgment.”

Knowing that sometimes silence spoke louder than words, he put out his hand for hers. She took his hand and they turned to walk toward their rooms.

Carter finally spoke again. “I saw the look on your face when you were watching the presses running.”

“Yes?”

“I think you really are beginning to see what I see.”

This comment agitated her. She thought that she didn’t want to know

the world through his eyes, because it would hurt her too much. She wanted to be a part of his life, but the pain of being near him and knowing she could not be with him was torturing her.

“It’s not as if it was *your* vision. People can look at a press and think it is an amazing piece of machinery without taking the idea from you.”

Carter seemed confused. “I know, I was just saying that it’s nice to have been able to show you how the presses made me feel.”

Sloane continued walking with him in silence. Carter decided not to say something else, lest it further aggravate her.

When they arrived at their doors, Carter spoke up again.

“Would you like to go somewhere? I don’t know where we could go to be social, but we could continue talking somewhere.”

“No, thank you,” she answered tersely. “I’m feeling tired. I should just get some sleep.”

Before Carter could ask her if something was wrong, she closed the door to her hotel room behind her.

Carter walked into his hotel room and paced the floor in front of the foot of his bed. He took his jacket off and hung it up in the closet, then removed his tie and hung it on the same hanger. He could just tell that something was wrong with her, but he did not know why she wouldn’t talk to him. Carter knew that she always talked to him, and she always seemed happy near him, and he didn’t know what to do. All he could keep thinking about the fact that Sloane was just on the other side of the wall, and that it seemed like she was miles away and that there was nothing that he could do.

For almost an hour he tried to work in his hotel room when he decided he had to give her a call.

“Hello?”

“It’s me.”

“Yes?”

He could tell she was being short with him.

“What is the matter?”

“Nothing.”

“Did I wake you?”

“No.”

“I thought you said you were tired.”

“I’m fine. Really, is that why you called?”

“Well, yes, I wanted to know if you were okay.”

“And I told you I’m fine.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Carter could hear her sharp inhale before her pause, as if his strength caught her off guard.

After gaining her composure and after him waiting for her to speak, she finally answered. “I guess that’s your problem, not mine.”

Carter didn’t know how to respond.

“Have I done something to upset you?”

“No, Carter, I just need some rest. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

Before Carter had a chance to protest, She hung up the phone.

For a moment he felt like he was on a television show, where people were on the phone and people hung up on each other and people did not say good-bye to each other. He couldn’t believe he was going through all of this, and he knew he could not bring himself to call her back to try to talk to her, when it could just mean that he would make a fool of himself. For another hour he tried to get work done, but it was no use. All he could think of was Sloane, in the room right next to his, just beyond that wall. He wanted to be able to put his arms around her and make her problems disappear. He wanted to be able to feel her next to him. He wanted to hear her admit to him that she loved him as much as he loved her. He couldn’t concentrate on anything else.

At just before ten in the evening he heard a knock on his door. He sprung up from his chair and opened the door. Sloane was standing before him, wearing her blouse and skirt from earlier in the day; she was no longer wearing her jacket.

Looking up at Carter when he opened the door, she noticed the sleeves of his shirt rolled up and saw the light on over the small table in the corner.

“Have I interrupted your work? I can go.”

“Nonsense. Come in.”

Carter held the door open for her and she walked into his room. He sat down on the foot of his bed and she immediately proceeded to start pacing across the room, where he had paced just an hour ago himself.

Carter could see that she was still angry. She barely looked at him and barely spoke.

“Did you come in here to pace my floor?”

“Do you have to be so sarcastic all the time?”, she nearly snapped back.

“Look, I’ve been pacing here myself because I have had no idea what is wrong.” Sloane continued to pace and she didn’t speak. He continued. “So you have come here now, and I assume it is because you want to tell me. Will you tell me what you’re so angry about?”

“You want to know?” She raised her voice. “You want to know?” She was now shouting at him.

Carter looked up at her. He wasn’t used to her yelling. “I assumed you came here to tell me.” She stopped pacing and faced Carter, who was still sitting at the foot of his bed. He could see she was infuriated, but he didn’t know why.

“Are you angry with me?”

Her shoulders fell and she started to pace again, this time more slowly. “There’s no point in my not telling you, I feel like I’m destroying our friendship either way.”

“What? You know you’re not going to destroy our friendship. There’s nothing you could say that could. So... what’s the matter?”

“What’s the matter?” She took a breath before she said the rest of her thought. “I’ve had this little problem...”

She dropped her head. “I’m becoming one of them.”

Carter leaned back; he was confused by what she said. “What do you mean, you’re becoming one of them?”

“Remember talking about people choosing to think or not to think?”

“Yes.”

“Well, in one aspect of my life, I chose for the longest time to not think.”

“What do you mean?”

“There was something weighing on my mind, but it was something that frightened me, something I wanted that I knew wasn’t possible, and so I tried to repress my thoughts. I tried to avoid thinking... I tried to not think.”

Carter sat there, looking at her. He was slightly astonished. “So you’re trying to say that you know that you aren’t thinking. That requires thought, you know. Like if a person thinks they are crazy, then they are probably not, because they thought about it enough to think that something was wrong, which is proving that they weren’t crazy in the first place. And I’m not trying to say that you are or are not crazy, it just proves that you are thinking, and —”

“No, it’s not that I’m not thinking now. I just know that I wasn’t thinking before.”

“So you’ve thought about it now.” Carter was again confused.

“Yes, but I let myself down. I let myself down by trying to avoid it. And I let you down.”

“Why do you think you let me down?”

“Because you’re the only mind I know that wouldn’t tolerate not thinking.” She almost started crying after she said that, and did not know how to stop herself.

“Momentary lapses are completely understandable. We’re human. You were smart enough to realize what you were doing, that you were trying to repress something and you decided to face it, you decided to think about it. If you didn’t, we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

Stopping her pacing, she looked at him. Her voice suddenly sounded quiet. “So you don’t think I let you down?”

Carter listened to the sound of her voice as it changed, and thought she almost sounded like a little girl that needed someone to guide her and hold her hand, but then and there he didn’t know what he could actually do, because he didn’t want to make her angry again. He didn’t even know what she stopped herself from thinking about. “You didn’t let me down. You never do. But it’s not *me* you have to worry about. It’s *you*. Do you feel you let yourself down?”

Sloane looked at her shoes and started pacing again. “Yes.”

Carter waited a brief moment before answering. “But you’re facing up to it now.”

“Yes.”

“And how does that feel?”

After looking up at the ceiling, she answered, “Terrible.”

“But why?”

“Because I’m a woman of science, I figure out what I need and I do it.”

“And you’re on the right track now. You’ll find whatever you’re looking for.”

“No I won’t; that’s the problem.” She sped up her pacing.

Carter watched her walk back and forth. “Why won’t you find it?”

“Because I can’t control what people think.”

“Do you want to control what people think?”

“No.”

Carter stood up and walked right in front of her. Only looking straight forward, she stared into his neck; she couldn’t bear to look up and see his eyes.

“Tell me what you want.”

Other problems she was having with her research came rushing to her

mind. She thought about the fact that AIDS may have been intentionally engineered to kill people. She thought about the fact that the government she is supposed to trust is keeping this killing virus alive and possibly potentially stopping her from working in the future. “I want this research to come along easier, I do not want any government agencies stopping me from doing my work, I don’t want to think that the government engineered this virus as some sort of population control, I want — wait, why am I even telling you what I want?”

Carter noticed that she wasn’t looking at him and did not answer her question. He placed his hands on her shoulders. “You’re going to eventually tell me what you mean by the government engineering AIDS. But you didn’t tell me everything, young lady, and I know for a fact that you are the only woman I know who can get whatever she wants.”

“Carter, why do you think that?”

“You’re the only woman I know who wants only what she deserves.”

Sloane then slowly raised her head and looked up at him. She thought that she didn’t deserve him, but she wouldn’t dare say it. She started to slowly cry. Carter instinctively moved her close to him, just holding her and letting her cry. He leaned her head against his shirt and stroked her hair. “You know, I wanted to go over to your hotel room and just hold you when I thought you were so angry. But I didn’t because you didn’t want to talk to me.”

“There’s no point in my coming to you. There *still* isn’t. What I haven’t said to you, what I still have to face, it will destroy any friendship we have.”

Carter leaned back and looked at her. “But why?”

“Because what I’ve chosen not to face actually *relates* to you. And I’ve wanted to talk to you about problems in my life, and things that I’m facing right now, but I’ve felt like I can’t talk to you. And I want to. But I can’t.”

Carter knew it could not be about her feelings for him, as much as he wanted it to be. If it *was*, she could have come to him sooner. Maybe their being together wasn’t meant to be, he thought for a moment, before he spoke. “You must really hate what you had to come to terms with.”

Sloane tried to raise her head again, but gave up the effort and let it rest on his chest. “I don’t hate it. I just don’t know if I can live with it.”

“Maybe if you tell someone you’ll feel better. What is it?”

She jerked her head up, because she knew he still had no idea she was in love with him; she knew he had no idea that he was the only person in the

entire world that could make her laugh, that could make her feel better. She knew she loved him wholly, she knew she loved him because of who he was, at the core, and that no one in the universe could exist like him. She knew she loved how he thought; that she loved the fact that he *actually thought*. She loved the fact that he demanded the same ideals of the people he cared about. And she knew for some reason that it was wrong that she loved him, that they were meant to live on opposite sides of the country, that they were only allowed to work together like this on occasions that came maybe once every decade or two, that they were meant to be friends and nothing else. They were too far away from each other. And he could find someone else, anyone else, and that she couldn't be right for him.

And all this time she had been thinking these things and he had no idea.

It almost looked to her as if Carter wanted to cry with her, even though she was sure he seemed to have no idea why she was even crying. Infuriated again, she broke away from his arms and walked away, pacing. "Of course you don't know, you could never figure it out!"

What Sloane didn't know was that Carter wanted to hear those words come from her mouth, he wanted to hear her finally say that she loved him. He was just waiting for her to say those words; he wanted nothing else.

"Then why don't you tell me," Carter flatly said as he sat back down at the foot of the bed.

Unable to look at him, she continued pacing as she raised her voice. "Of course you would never know what I was going through! I haven't even been able to tell you about my fears for my life because agents have told me secrets and given me information that I could not decipher, I could not even tell you because you mean that much to me. Every time you see me you think I'm some unsocial clod, someone who doesn't know how to dress, or be feminine. You look at me, and you think, 'Oh, that poor fool, she'll never find a husband, no one will be able to tolerate her.' And you know what? You're right! I can't be all of the things that men would want from me. But the thing is, I wouldn't *want* to be those things, not for someone who expected them from me. It's like you said, I *could* be a housewife, I think, for someone I loved. But for someone who *wanted* me to be a housewife? I'd hate them for it. I don't *want* anyone, no, I don't want anyone. I had to go fall in love with you, someone who would never notice me, save having to study with my roommate our junior year in college. And I could never be all the things you need me to be,

which are all the things every other man in the world would not want me to be, but I still can't do it, I love my work too much, and now I've destroyed my relationship with my best friend because of it. And you probably didn't even know I thought of you as my best friend, so there you have it, I have once again revealed too much about myself, and I still can't do what I need to do, and I couldn't hold it in anymore, and now look what I've done."

Carter didn't know how much time had passed before she had stopped speaking, or even if he had cut her off in her speaking, when he stood up. "What did you say?"

He watched her walk past him over and over again as she replied, "Oh, you heard me. What difference does it make if I say it now? I've had to back away from you for so long now I may as well not even be your friend. Why do you think I wouldn't go into the Jacuzzi tub with you when you were in Seattle? And now I've gone and ruined our friendship because of this, but I'm sure I was ruining it *anyway*. Why do you think I tense up when you touch me? Why do you think I felt awkward when you tried to teach me how to use chopsticks? Why do you think I try to —"

"You love me?"

Sloane stopped pacing and looked at him. She walked up to him, to face him square on, and took a breath before she continued rambling again. "You know I do. You know I couldn't help but love you, you know that there could be no one else I could ever love. You know that I admire your beliefs. You know that I admire not *only* the fact that you think, but also the *way* you think. You know that you are the only person that can make me happy. What you don't know is that outside my work I can't seem to be happy anymore unless I'm talking to you. You know that you embody to me what a man should be." She started crying again. "And the more I see you, the more I'm sure of it, and the more it depresses me because —"

"Because why?"

Sloane looked at him squarely and stopped crying. She knew that this was the beginning of the end of their friendship. "Because you don't love me."

Carter waited for a moment before speaking. "Is that what you think?"

Surprised by his question, she asked, "Wouldn't you have told me if you were in love with me?"

"No."

"Why not?"

“Because you wouldn’t have been ready to hear it.”

“What do you mean?”

“If you didn’t want to think about your feelings for me, how would you have reacted if I told you I loved you?”

Standing before him, she was confused and slightly stunned. “Well, it doesn’t matter.”

“Why doesn’t it?”

“... Because you don’t love me.”

After she said those words she turned around to leave the hotel room.

Carter grabbed her by the shoulders and turned her around before she could get away. He pulled her up to him and rushed his head down toward her; his lips met hers in an almost violent push. Her lips parted as he kissed her harder and harder; Carter slid his hands across her back to her neck and pulled her head back by her hair to kiss her cheeks and neck. Sloane threw her arms around his neck and held on to him with a fierce intensity and she pressed her mouth against his face. They kissed each other with an insurmountable urgency; all they felt was that they needed to be together that very moment.

Carter stopped kissing her long enough to put his head over her shoulder and hug her. She responded by doing the same.

“I’ve always loved you, Sloane,” Carter whispered.

She started laughing, almost uncontrollably, almost as a reaction to what had just happened. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Didn’t we just go over this? What would I have said? ‘Hey, buddy, I want to spend my life with you.’ How would you have taken that?”

“So you were willing to risk never having me?”

“First of all, knowing you exist, knowing someone in the world existed that I could wholly love, that would be better for me than never finding you. If we weren’t meant to be, then I would face that — but I also knew that at least I had the pleasure of knowing this remarkable woman that I could truly admire. Secondly, I couldn’t have you, unless you wanted to have me as well. I had to wait for you, to see if you loved me. When you visited me in New York, I knew by the way you acted and the way we were when we were together that you loved me, but you had to come to terms with it.”

“And you knew that, and you let me struggle?”

“I couldn’t tell you to think about it. You had to face it on your own.”

Sloane pulled back from their embrace to look at Carter. She realized

that he was waiting for her to learn the things he had known. She thought she knew everything; this time someone was waiting for her to learn. The things she had been struggling with for the past months he had been struggling with as well. She reached her hands around and ran her fingers over the hair on the back of his head.

“Mr. Carter Donovan, I love you,” she said, as a declaration to the entire world, although she wondered if anyone in the world could possibly understand what love meant.

Carter leaned over and kissed the tear left on her cheek. He smiled and moved his arms to her waist. “Ms. Sloane Emerson, I love you.”

She started to laugh as Carter reached down and kissed her again, first slowly, then with more and more intensity. Responding like a dancer, she followed his lead. They stood kissing at the foot of Carter’s bed until Carter took a step and leaned forward, kneeling onto the foot of the bed, guiding Sloane to follow him. She stopped kissing him long enough to sit on the bed, and Carter leaned over her and guided her down to the pillows below them as he started to unbutton her blouse.

Sloane reached up for Carter and pulled him toward her.

At two-thirty in the morning Carter rolled over and saw Sloane in bed next to him, staring at the ceiling.

She didn’t notice that Carter woke up. Eventually she turned her head to look at him. She saw his eyes wide open in the darkness, and he was staring at her.

“How long have you been looking at me?”

“How long have you been awake, Sloane?”

Sloane turned her head back to the ceiling.

“Sloane?”

“Yes?”

“Do you regret what we did?”

She turned her head back to him. “God, no. Do you?”

Carter rolled over, touching her waist. “No. Never. But are you unhappy?”

Sloane leaned over and kissed him. “It’s not you. You’ve made me feel sane through all of this.”

“You never told me about the government and AIDS, like I asked. Is it work that is bothering you?”

She turned around and leaned against him in bed. "It's more than that."

"Well, let me see." Carter kissed her head in between every sentence. "Your book about to print. Your integrase inhibitor is going through more tests and waiting for F.D.A. approval. You at least *temporarily* got the government off your back with that press conference; for the past few weeks they have left you alone. You now have time to work on vaccines for AIDS."

He waited for her to speak. She said nothing. He leaned over and added, "And you've got me."

She leaned her head back to see Carter's eyes. "You know, you do make life make sense."

"As do you for me, Sloane."

"I love you."

"I love you too."

Carter started kissing her neck. "If I kiss you more, will your problems go away then?"

"They may. But you'd further satiate me if you did other things to me some more —" she said as she started laughing and Carter started kissing her neck and chest.

Sloane woke up before the wake up call. She turned to look at Carter. He was already awake and looking at her.

"What are you staring at?"

Carter smiled. "Good morning."

"What time is it?"

"Just after six."

They were to receive a wake up call at 7:30 in the morning. They were being picked up to go back to the printing plant at nine in the morning.

Knowing she had some time, she decided to talk.

"Carter?"

"Yes?"

"I have reason to believe that the U.S. government engineered AIDS and is using it for its own purposes. I have reason to believe that they also have a cure for it and are holding it from the public."

Carter asked her about this before and didn't get an answer, but hearing it still stunned him, and then he began to understand all that she had been going through in the past month. He propped himself up on one elbow and looked

at her. "I'll assume that this is what you were referring to before, when you were angry and pacing last night. So where did you get this information from?"

"A lot of things were making me angry and making me pace like that last night, but... but someone contacted me by e-mail and told me. They worked for the Department of Defense; previously they worked for the CIA. I met with them in Colorado Springs — that was right before you came into Seattle to check on the book's progress."

"That was when you were disconnected..."

Confused with his remark, she responded, "What?"

"You said you were under a lot of stress. I didn't know what it was. What exactly happened there?"

"I met with him, he gave me a long story and a few files with some information that might be able to help me in looking for the truth."

"Files?"

"Yes. That's what I gave you a copy of."

"And that's why you didn't want to tell me about them."

"Well, yes, because people who know too much could be hurt or killed, and now I want you to destroy them, because I don't want any link with you and this. I don't want to get you in any trouble."

"Don't worry about me."

"Carter, you don't understand. I've been working on this, and I haven't had much regard for my own safety. But you — I don't want anything to happen to you. For once I feel like I have something on this planet worth fighting for, other than my work. And I don't want to jeopardize that."

"Well, maybe I have regard for *your* safety, and I will not let you do this to yourself —"

"What? You don't understand — you're not going to stop me."

"Then I'm not going to let you do this to yourself alone. And I don't think you will be in any trouble because a man gave you files. Do you even know if they're authentic? I mean, can you believe this guy?"

"After he was followed to our meeting he was hit by a car later that night and was killed. Police thought it was a hit and run accident, but I'm sure it was the man who works for the CIA that was following him while he met with me."

Carter was stunned by every answer she gave him to every question of his. "You know a guy from the CIA was following him? How do you know *that*?"

"I went to the Seattle police, Kyle's brother is a policeman, and I asked their

sketch artist to come up with a drawing of the man who was watching us. That's what I told them ... I found the match for the sketch in the CIA database."

"How did you find a match for your sketch?"

"Well, this is the sort of illegal part."

Carter sat up in bed. "*Sort of the illegal part? What happened?*"

"I went to my contact's office after he died, posing as a friend that would clean up his personal belongings. I got onto his computer, guessed his password and was in the Department of Defense's main system. This is why I knew he was legit, that he wasn't feeding me a line. Then I was able to access the CIA employee databases from there, hence the match to my sketch I had of the follower. The only problem there is that my contact was dead already, so they have to know that someone hacked into their system. They just haven't come to get me yet. And I don't know why."

Carter was beginning to feel like he was on a television show again, and that none of this could be real. He rubbed his head. It looked like he was making a physical effort to make sense of everything that was just told to him.

"And you think the U.S. government has a cure for AIDS."

"My contact told me he had had AIDS and they cured him of it. There's a vague paper trail of it in the files you have a copy of."

"So... What are you going to try to do?"

"There was a contact name in the files, and I've left messages for him. And by the way, I like the fact that you just asked me what I was going to try to do, and not that you would be the type of guy that would want to quote-unquote take care of everything for me. But anyway, this contact, he left me one message on my machine after I repeatedly called him, telling me that he would get a hold of me when he needed me."

"When *he* needed *you*?"

"I don't know what it means, so don't even ask me. But now I don't know what to do. But as soon as this all happened I started feeling the additional pressure from the U.S. Scientific Research Advancement Department."

"Are you jumping the gun with any assumptions on that one, or do you think those two things are related?"

Realizing she forgot to fill Carter in on all of the pieces to the puzzle, she continued. "I was also informed by my contact, before he died, that this would be the next step in stopping the success of AIDS drugs — government intervention. Toby, my friend doing similar work at the University, has been

having similar problems with government funding. Carter, I can't help but think that it's all related." She sat up in the bed, holding the blankets up to her chest, and looked back at him.

All Carter could think was that she had been worrying about a book, an AIDS drug, work on a cure, vaccine research, and this. He was at a loss. He knew that her feelings for him fell short of her research problems, and all he could think about was the fact that she might be in danger.

"Don't make things more difficult for yourself."

"How? With making me work so hard for you?"

Carter smiled, but that was not what he was thinking. "That too..."

"All of this — and you? It was worth it."

Carter reached over and put his hands on her shoulders. "What can I do?"

She turned around and leaned up against him. "Could you either make love to me, or just hold me for a while?"

Carter wrapped his arms around her.

"I'm not used to leaning on someone. And I'm not used to asking for it," Sloane whispered.

Carter gently tightened his grip. "When I get better at this, you won't have to ask. And if you are not dumping this many problems on me all at once, I may be more inclined to turn around and make love to you without you having to ask. Hell, when I get better at this, hopefully I won't be causing you any more grief."

"You're not causing me grief, Carter," she said. "You're my salvation."

Carter smiled. "That sounds a little religious of you..." He jokingly said as he pushed the blankets out of the way so he could be next to her as he started kissing her again. They ignored the phone when it rang with their wake-up call a half hour later.

###

Sloane stayed in bed as Carter got up and walked to the washroom. She watched his figure move through the hotel room as he turned the corner and switched on the bathroom light. She heard the water start running out of the showerhead.

After sitting on the bed for a moment, she realized he wouldn't be able to hear her under the pounding water of the showerhead. Suddenly she start-

ed laughing. For once she felt like she didn't have to hide anything from someone. For this moment, alone in his hotel room bed, she couldn't think about her work, or the government, or the fact that Carter lived on the other side of the country. All she could think was that he was there, that very moment, taking a shower, and that he loved her.

Instinctively, she got up and walked over to the washroom.

Not asking, she walked into the washroom and over to the shower curtain that separated her from Carter. She started to open the shower curtain and stood right outside of the bathtub to watch Carter for a brief moment, until he turned around to wash his hair under the showerhead. Then he saw her.

Carter smiled. "Are you going to stand there? Or are you coming in?"

Sloane bowed her head. "I'm shy." She followed his lead and smiled. "I just wanted to look at you for a moment like this," she said, "to see your shoulders. You really *are* gorgeous."

Carter reached his hand out toward her. She took his hand and moved the shower curtain out of her way.

Carter pivoted so she could get under the water. She dropped her head back and leaned under the showerhead to get her hair wet. She could once again feel Carter staring at her. She pulled her head back and looked at him. He took a step closer and placed his wet lips on hers.

For a moment Carter even forgot that he was even in the shower to bathe in the first place. He told her that it would be fine if they were late. She agreed with him that they could be late; neither one of them had much interest in going to the press in the first place. She knew that the majority of her work there would entail looking over colors, and inks on pages.

Knowing her mind would be somewhere else, she didn't know how much work she would be able to get done that day.

Their ride understood them being late for the press check. The second day of the press check was much more sedentary than the first, she thought. She checked the colors of sample book jacket sleeves, but otherwise didn't do much as Carter checked individual pages of other books. Pressmen gave the Carter and Sloane seats at empty desks in an office to work. Carter checked pages while Sloane read. They each tried not to think about the fact that they would soon leave each other and go back to their lives on other sides of the country.



CHAPTER 13

THE BATTLE AT HAND

Carter's flight arrived late Wednesday night. He took a taxi home and did his best to not call her when he assumed she would be getting into her apartment. He remembered thinking that in past relationships he would make a point to not call back right away because he didn't want to look like he was too interested in the woman he went on a date with, but he made a point to call back eventually, so that the woman would not think he forgot about her.

He knew this was different with Sloane, though, and he felt suddenly as if he was at a loss for ideas.

When he got into his home he dropped his baggage on to the floor and made his way to the liquor cabinet. He was fully aware that he wanted to do something to feel better, well, something, anything, now that she had gone back to Seattle for work. But he knew that liquor wouldn't help him. He looked up at the glass cabinets on each side of his bar in the corner of his home, and thought for a moment of how he had a different wine for each kind of date he had been on in the past.

He had become quite the connoisseur of these things in his single days.

He thought temporarily about taking a random bottle of wine and throwing it at the wall. Not because he was angry, not because he wanted to show his revulsion for the life he had created, but because he *could* do it. Moments like that, where he felt flighty, he wanted some sort of physical evidence of the fact that he had played a role all of his life. And he did not even know how easy it had become for him to play that role. He knew that there was no use in breaking a wine bottle against the wall that would have to be cleaned up to remove stains on the carpeting or eliminate damage to the floor. He walked over to the refrigerator and pulled out a Paulaner Weiss beer from the door of the fridge. He turned to the drawer where he kept a bottle opener, decided to forgo a beer glass (which he would never normally do because he lifted the beer with a slice of lemon in the glass and its juice along the rim), and started drinking from the bottle. After the first sip, he decided that he needed the glass, because he really *did* prefer the taste of a better weiss beer with fresh lemon. Cutting a lemon from the fridge; he then managed to loosen his tie and unbutton the top button of his dress shirt while he kicked off his shoes. He dropped himself down in a chair that allowed him to lean back and look out his window and see the view from out his window of New York City.

While he drank his beer he thought about the fact that his place would look extremely clean, that it had not looked lived-in to the average person

Then he thought that he had ignored the average person's standards all of his life, and he wouldn't adhere to their standards now. He preferred to look at the view out his window instead of looking at trinkets he could have collected in his apartment. He leaned his head back in his chair, thought for a moment again about Sloane watching the fire in his fireplace at home, then thought about her running to the window when she saw the view. She thought it was just as beautiful as he thought it was. He thought about whether or not he should call her, and then tried to think about anything else.

###

When Sloane got home that evening, she pulled a note that had been taped to her door keyhole. She noted the stationery that her landlord used before she read as she read the note, pushing the key into the lock, turning it and opening her door.

Miss Emerson -

Someone asked us if they could get into your apartment to look for something they left there. Seeing that you were out of town for only a few days, I told them to come back for their belongings when you got back. They did not give a name - they said they would get a hold of you later.

- Beth

After she read that note she had no time to worry about Carter; she mentally and visually scoured her apartment to see if anything was changed since she left for Ohio. Everything was locked and everything seemed to be in the same place and she knew that she had distributed her only copies of the paperwork she had received from Shane in any place other than her apartment, but a part of her could not shake the fear.

Would she have to live like this forever now, worrying about her own safety?

And she also wondered what these visitors would do, knowing that her apartment was uninhabited since she was out of town. She immediately turned her computer and printer on to write a note to her neighbors and her landlord. She started with a note to the neighbors first.

"Hello"

no, wait, she thought... *make it sound more personal.* She scratched the idea of using 'hello' and started typing again.

Hi, it is your neighbor in 122... I hope you don't mind the typed letter, but I was wondering if you noticed anyone coming around my apartment, because I have been gone for a few days and I am wonder-

ing if anyone came by... If you could think of anything, please let me know. If you need to, you could call me at home at 555-9283, or call my work at 555-1918, extension 323, and thanks a lot -
- Sloane

Trying to put it out of her mind, she then typed a note to her landlord.

Beth -

Hi, It's Sloane Emerson in 122, and I am really curious about this person who wanted something out of my apartment. You said in your note they did not leave a name, but could you possibly give a description, or tell me exactly when they came by my apartment? I ask because I don't think I have anyone's belongings here. Thanks for letting me know, and I look forward to hearing from you soon. If you want to write it in a note, that is fine, or you could call me at home at 555-9283, or call my work at 555-1918. Thank you again, and I look forward to hearing from you soon -
- Sloane

She printed the appropriate number of copies of the note for her neighbors and for her landlord so that she could slide them under doors as she left for work. She knew that she did not want to touch the clothes that she would have to eventually unpack that were still in her briefcase, so she went back to her computer, going over notes she hadn't thought about that may be relevant for altering existing medications to help AIDS patients.

By the next morning she had slid notes under the doors of all of her

neighbors, left the note for her landlord in through the slot at the office door, printed copies of her notes from the previous night for Kyle and Howard to go over with her, set up a schedule of who to leave messages for while she was at work (she also noted that she should call her father, Toby and Steve to make sure everything was okay with them), she added in her notes that she should contact Carter about any progress with the book to see if there was anything Quentin Publishing needed from her and ... and really, she was probably using her book as a cover to talk to Carter, but she would use any plausible excuse she could.

But there would be other things to tend to when she got into the office, like checking on any progress with Ellen's medication; as she stepped into her office she looked around and noted again that she was the earliest person there.

Crossing the lab to her office, she carried her mail and her notes from office members in her hand with her briefcase. The first thing she noted was the flashing light on her answering machine next to her phone. She had been checking her messages while she was away, so she knew this had to be a recent message. She put her belongings down long enough to start the player, so she could organize her things again to get back to work. She had only one message.

Hello, it's Mr. Donovan here, and I wanted to make sure you got in from your flight safely. I had some changes to the suffix you had added to the end of the book, so let us know when you could receive the fax and we could send it to you. Hope you enjoyed learning how a press works, and if you need anything, please let us know.

She thought it was adorable that Carter referred to himself as "Mr. Donovan." A very small part of her was angry that he called before she came in early that morning for work, but she couldn't help but like hearing his voice. She made a point to save the message and she played it once more and left a brief message at his office before getting to work in her office. Knowing that everyone she needed to call had answering machines at their desks, she figured

it would be smartest to call them at this hour, so she would not get trapped in a long conversation.

She dialed the first number.

Hi, dad, it's Sloane. I was out of town for a few days, but I thought I'd check to see how you're doing... and just to let you know that I'm here, I guess, and that everything is okay with me. If you need anything, let me know. Bye.

Steve, hi, it's Sloane, and I just got in from out of town and wanted to make sure that everything was okay with you. I know I gave you those papers last week, but I'm sure you put them in your safety deposit box... I was just checking with you to make sure everything was okay. If you need anything, let me know, and thanks.

Sloane realized at this point that she was calling the people who possessed a copy of her paperwork. She continued with leaving messages.

Hi, Toby, It's Sloane, I knew you would not be in at this hour, but I wanted to see if you had made any progress with your research and solving any of the problems with samples being pulled... if you're up for coffee or a chance to talk when we are not at the office, let me know, and thanks.

Intentionally deciding to wait until all of her other calls were made, she

then called Carter. He picked up his phone, which she was not expecting.

“Carter Donovan.”

Sloane thought for a brief moment about the speed and efficiency he had in answering his phone that way. “Mr. Donovan, this is Ms. Emerson.” She then waited and noted the amount of time it took for Carter to respond to her greeting on the phone.

“I’m glad you’re on a private line.”

“And I like the fact that you left a message for me where you called yourself Mister Donovan, because it makes you sound so much more formal ... And I only have one line to take calls from, you know.”

“I’m sorry I’m used to private lines in this business, and I planned to leave you a message that way, darling. And I miss you desperately.”

“So you must realize that I am keeping that message so I can hear your voice at a moment’s notice. And I will guess from your last line that I am not the only one doing the missing?”

“I didn’t know you had a monopoly on missing. Do I have to pay royalties?”

“You make more money than *I* do, so maybe you should.”

“But you don’t do anything with your money, so you probably have more money saved than I do.”

“Probably. Keep in mind that I saw the place you lived in.”

“What, you don’t like it?”

“Actually, I love it, but you get to pay through the nose for it, and there’s no great view here in Seattle to gaze at... And just so it doesn’t look like we are spending too long on the phone together, I thought I’d call you back to tell you what time I could receive a fax of the corrections. You realize that I’ll probably accept your changes, but thank you for bouncing them off of me first.”

“I figured you would think the changes were fine, but I was just using this brazen excuse to hear your voice.”

“You’ll have to let me call you again at your private line Carter, and let me get your voice mail so you can have a recording of my voice if you want it, because right now that is about all I have of you.”

“Give it time, angel. You already possess more of me than my voice in one recording.”

“I know. And you the same.”

Sloane let a moment pass in silence before she spoke again. “I like the

fact that we can just sit in silence like just now and not feel as if we have to fill the space with mindless chatter. And I also like the fact that you have given me a few nicknames in this phone conversation alone.”

“Like ‘angel?’”

“You’ve used angel and darling, Carter.”

“You’re my darling angel, and yes, it *is* nice to not have to fill the phone lines with inane chatter. And I will send the changes off to you in a fax.”

“Then feel free to call me in a half hour so I can confirm the changes with you.”

Carter smiled as they said good-bye to each other. She walked toward the fax machine and waited for the fax coming through so she could look over the changes.

The rest of the week and the following week had operated in the same fashion as past weeks with Madison — slow-moving progress, research on attempts to change the existing inhibitors, efforts to keep all data tracked so they could have proven records of all of their work, and the occasional argument session with Tyler about letting out the right images of Madison and not making any waves with people about the progress (or lack thereof) that Madison has. Minutes before an advised press conference the next Tuesday, Sloane, Kyle and Howard grouped together and met with Tyler. Sloane was the one doing the majority of the talking with Tyler, but Howard and Kyle occasionally interjected to calm her down and offer an air of calmness to their argument.

“So, Tyler, you think the press conference I did before was a complete failure because I did not listen to you and read your speech verbatim?”

“I —”

Without waiting for him to finish his sentence, she cut him off. “No one seemed to have a problem with what I said, and no one disagreed with Madison, and now everyone thinks that the U.S. government is trying to steal from us — and withhold information from the people.”

“What, you want everyone to run around thinking that our government is after us?”

“They can start feeling the way I have been feeling.”

“I don’t even want to know why you have been feeling that way, but what you’re going to end up getting are a bunch of people with aluminum foil wrapped around their heads trying to get transmissions from aliens at night

while everyone else is trying to sleep.”

“Aliens and AIDS research?” she asked.

“These people may be on to something,” Kyle interjected. “I mean, what if they have seen things and have had them suppressed by forces beyond their control? It might lead to more of what we deem as irrational behavior, but when you have no one else on your side —”

“Kyle,” Tyler started, “You’re starting to sound like that Mulder guy on that show ‘The X Files’. Do you really have the time to watch television that much to know that show? And have you ever noticed the far-fetched ideas that he comes up with on that show?”

“And have you ever, in all of the time you obviously have to watch the show, have you ever seen his ideas disproved? He always has that girl there scientifically proving his theories as correct. So I suppose we’ve got Sloane as our girl providing science and reason and logic to our theories as we work... and why did you have to bring that show up in the first place?”

“Why are we even having this discussion?” she asked in an effort to stop their bickering. “We are going out there to speak today, we have your speeches and notes, and we will change them some — and do not tell me that we can’t do that, because it has worked to our advantage in the past.”

“We won’t get rid of your notes altogether,” Howard stated. “You have very valid points in here, points that are well articulated that we had never thought of.”

“And we’re not even planning to change it much at all, so rest easy, Tyler,” she added.

Sloane turned to go to the conference room after she spoke, then stopped to wait for the rest of the gentlemen to catch up to her. She turned around hastily and asked Tyler, “Does my suit look okay?” She waited a moment before continuing, “Do I look like I represent a ‘kind and caring company?’”

“I —”

“Do I look feminine enough?” She said, knowing how angry it would make him. Howard put his hand on her shoulder as he was about to walk around them to see the front of the conference area through the curtains, leaned his head toward hers, and said, “You look beautiful, Ms. Emerson.” She looked at Howard, smiled, and followed him toward the doorway to start their press conference.

At a point during the following week she was able to call Carter on business to ask him about changes to her essay. “I understand all of the changes that you had marked, and I hate to say this, but I was confused by the circle around the ‘x’ and the capital p with two vertical lines at it. What are they?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, the ‘p’ symbol is for where a paragraph should start or end, and the x and the circle are to signify a period. They are proofreading marks, and they are easier to see when other people are checking for changes.”

“I’m sorry I did not know that,” Sloane answered.

“There is no reason why you should have known it,” Carter answered. “Sorry I didn’t explain it before. The changes should take place to finalize the design and editing of the book by the end of this week, if not by next Monday. I can send you a finished copy of the last essay for you to check over as well. So with the ‘okay’ from Madison, the book can start to print at the end of next week.”

“Wonderful. We have been finishing changes to the vitamin supplements that will be released as a jar at the same time as the book. The production for it should coincide with the book beautifully.”

“Then everything is apparently taken care of,” Carter stated.

“You haven’t moved your plant to Seattle, so everything is not finished yet.”

“You think I can move Quentin to Seattle? What about your company?”

“You think I can move a pharmaceuticals company across the country?”

“Ms. Emerson, has there been a problem with working over the phone this way?”

“Definitely. ...Are you on a speaker phone?”

“No.”

“If you want to satiate your big clients, then you should be here holding my frail little hand through this whole messy printing process...”

“I didn’t know you were the type of woman that needed hand holding, Angel.”

“Are they your hands that would hold me, Carter?”

Kyle walked into her room just as she finished that last sentence, so she had to say her farewells to Carter and tell him to contact her next Monday to let Madison know about the future production of the book. By the end of the day Carter called Sloane again, using the guise of details for the book as his cover.

“Ms. Emerson, I wanted to inform you in advance, if there were any problems with proof production in the future, that I will be attending a conference in New Orleans in a few months. I could give you the dates now, if you needed them for your records.”

“Mr. Donovan, are you on speaker phone?”

“No, why do you ask? And are you?”

“Carter, I never use speaker phone here, so you do not have to cover up for my deficit.”

“I wouldn’t share your voice with another soul, so I’m not ever putting you on a speaker phone.”

“So was New Orleans your excuse for calling me?”

“Basically...”

“I stayed there once, at a small apartment at Dumaine and Royal. Couldn’t leave my car there, though.”

“The company is covering the hotel for us on Peter Street, right by the convention center.” Carter changed his tone and said, “And you’ve been to New Orleans?”

“A friend of a friend was going to college there, and they offered a place for us to stay during Mardi Gras.”

“*You went to Mardi Gras?*”

“I think the walk to and from Bourbon Street on the Saturday before Fat Tuesday was a chore in and of itself. But I have to admit, we knew people who had an apartment with a balcony on Bourbon Street, and being up there made it really entertaining, Carter... And I might even consider going to meet you in New Orleans for the Hell of it. But you know, if I was out by you, I would prefer going to Montreal.”

“The next time you’re out here, consider it done.” Carter reached over to his map of New York, eyeing the two feasible routes reaching up into Montreal as he continued. “It would only be about 5 or 6 hours by car; we’d just take 15 up to 10, then over the St. Lawrence to Sherbrooke. North on that for less than a mile and you’re in their China Town. And you’ve never been?”

“It is easier to visit when you are driving distance, so no.”

“We’ll keep it in mind. And we will get you there.”

“Let’s settle for getting the book started first...”

###

time: 11:47, E.S.T. Friday evening

location: New York City, just off Broadway, near 57th Street at Madison Square

premise: Carter walking home after socializing on 42nd Street

“Why did I even bother trying to go out?” Carter said as he crossed Broadway, just along 57th street, along the edge of Madison Square. Every third light hanging over into the parkway was out; there was a peculiar feel to the surroundings as he tried to find an available taxi. He guessed that at this hour he would have to be at the other side of the Square in order to be able to get a taxi. The ocean breeze happened to catch him as he was walking down the street. The wind almost drew a scream to him he heard just inside the Square.

The noise concerned him. He yelled toward the greens and sidewalks. “Hello?”

Nothing.

“Is anyone there?” He stepped away from the street, trying to look at the pathways when the lights were out. No response.

Carter looked at both sides of the street to see if there was anyone there that could help him while he looked to see if someone was hurt. Carter knew that a woman could potentially be attacked, even raped, and left in the bushes in New York. He also knew that strangers wouldn't be willing to help only because Carter 'thought' he heard a noise and needed assistance. He saw no one on the street for the mile stretch along 57th. No one responded to his call from inside the Square either. He wondered if no one was there at all, and made a few calls while he walked into a darkened part of the Square.

He heard a woman there scream, that was why he searched, he was looking for that someone in need, but once he started to look for them he realized he heard nothing at all, not even the sounds of birds or cars in the streets. Then all he felt was the large crack on the back of his head as he dropped to the ground.

Then everything went black to him.

###

The police responded to an anonymous call that a man had been attacked in the southwest corner of Madison Square. And ambulance came at about the same time as the police did. The man was wavering in and out of consciousness as the paramedics worked on him in the park.

“No broken bones, just strap him on the stretcher and get him to the ambulance.”

“Looks like there was just the one blow to the head,” the second paramedic said.

The two cops on the scene noted that he was fully clothed and had one of the paramedics pull his wallet from his pocket.

“Hey, this looks like a rich kid, Dave,” the first cop said. “And they didn’t even snag the wallet.”

“I’d guess the rich kid had drug problems, John,” Dave said, as he made sure he had a bag and his gloves on to pick up the needle laying next to the victim.

“Why?”

Dave held up the hypodermic needle for John to see. “The victim or assailant used this needle.”

John walked over to the paramedics before they left, gave them his card, and asked to be contacted when this guy got in — and that a drug toxicology screen should be done on him.

The phone line to Madison Pharmaceuticals patched the call in to Sloane. Seattle time, it was just before eleven in the evening, and she happened to be in the office.

“Sloane Emerson.”

“Hello, Ms. Emerson, do you know a Mr. Carter Donovan?”

“Yes I do, may I ask who is calling?”

“This is John Will, from the New York Police Department, and I received your phone number from a business card in Mr. Donovan’s wallet.”

“Why do you have his wallet?”

“What is your relation to Mr. Donovan?”

Sloane was startled by this question. “Did something happen to him?”

“Ms. Emerson, Mr. Donovan was mugged today, and according to our records he was calling your name, and we got your number from his wallet.”

Immediately standing up, she demanded, “Where is he? Can I talk to him?”

“I’m afraid that wouldn’t be possible right now —”

“Where is he?” she repeated, almost yelling into the phone. After the

police officer told her the hospital Carter was at, she gave her home phone number, begging him to call back at this number if there were any changes.

When she got off the phone with the New York Police, she ran to the front desk. There was no one left in the office, so no one questioned her frantic search as she rummaged through the files at the front desk to see if the plane was in use this weekend. She found the papers, found it was busy next weekend, but not this weekend.

Jim's number was also on the sheet for her to take.

She frantically wrote a note of her using the plane Saturday morning, and left it with the front desk and ran back to her office.

She glanced at her watch as she ran back to her office and thought about calling Jim. She looked at her phone.

With no blinking lights on the phone for a message, she knew she received no calls while she was at the front of the building getting flight records and Jim's phone number.

She looked at her phone again.

It wasn't ringing.

Not knowing if she was waiting there for ten seconds or a half hour, she only knew that she had to see Carter, she had to know if he was okay. The police couldn't even tell her Carter's condition because she wasn't related to him. She looked at Jim's number on the paper on her desk. She picked up the phone and started dialing.

It was 11:03. A woman answered the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hello, I'm sorry for calling so late, I was wondering if Jim was available.

"It's not too late, I'll get him, but may I ask who is calling?"

"I'm sorry... This is Sloane Emerson from Madison Pharmaceuticals.

"Thank you. Hold on a moment please —"

The woman yelled out for Jim before he answered the phone. "Hello?"

"Jim, I'm sorry to call, this is Sloane from Madison.

"Hi."

"Hi... I noticed the plane was open this weekend, and is there any chance we could go in the plane could go to New York as soon as possible? There's a problem with our book production..."

"Not a problem — I can check schedules at airports and make sure there's enough gas to make it so we could take off early. I'm guessing you

would like to get to New York as early as possible?”

“Our main contact there has just been injured, and may be severely injured, and he was calling my name. I need to know if he is okay.”

“I’ll do everything I can.”

“You need to sleep, too, though —”

“We’ll have people at the airport in Seattle check out the plane so I can get some sleep. Need a ride to the airport?”

“Only if I’m on the way, Jim.”

She gave Jim her address and they decided when he would pick her up. She had to interject that this could affect the production of Madison’s book, and this was why she had to get to the hospital.

She hoped that explanation was good enough.

###

When the plane took off she explained to Jim that she had contacted the police department and the hospital to tell them that she would be arriving in New York in the middle of the day and she would be looking for Mr. Donovan. The nurse at the hospital desk told her the room he was in, but that he could not take calls.

They also would not tell her his condition.

Begging and imploring the police department for help, she just wanted to know if he was okay. She was getting nothing.

“I have no idea how he’s going to be, Jim, and I don’t know if you know anyone in New York, but you are more than welcome to come with me while I find out.”

“If you don’t mind the company.”

“I’d appreciate it, Jim. And — how much sleep did you get last night?”

“Almost six hours.”

“Oh, God, I hope that you are okay for flying.”

“I’ve been fine on three hours, so don’t worry. Now, do you need anything to rest? You seem really edgy.”

“I’m just insanely worried about Carter. I’ll be fine.”

“Carter?”

“Mr. Donovan; sorry, his first name is Carter. I just need to find out how he is.”

“Well, try to sit down and have some rest.”

The sitting down part of his advice was all she could take. She worked on her computer, starting on e-mails with Tyler, and informational memos to Kyle, Howard and Ellen. Then she remembered she would have to write something up for Colin, to explain her flight. So on she wrote. When she was exhausted with ideas on the news to Colin, she turned to her research papers, because she couldn't bear looking at her computer monitor any longer. The remainder of the flight was spent trying to figure out the pieces she may have missed to solving any of her crises with her AIDS research.

After calling the police and the hospital from her new cellular phone she arrived at the hospital with Jim. The police told her that they would be there to talk to her when she arrived. Hospital attendants directed her to Carter's room. She stopped before going into the room, turned to face Jim and said, “I need a breath before I find out.”

“People at the front desk can tell you before you go to the room.”

“Yeah ... I need to know what I should be ready for.”

Asking about Carter Donovan, they told her that he was hit while walking outside at night. He was drifting in and out of consciousness when the paramedics got to him last night, but he seems to be doing better now. They also told her that the police were here, if she needed to talk to them. As she turned around, there were two cops standing right in front of her.

“Ms. Emerson?” The first officer asked.

“Yes, I—”

“We're here to let you know what happened” and the rest of the sentence was lost to her. She didn't even catch their names. She asked to see Carter immediately, alone. They all walked to the doors and Jim pulled the door open for her.

She stepped inside.

Carter sat there, eyes wide open, as she walked across the room to his side. She had no emotion on her face at all; she looked as if she were an investigator trying to solve a case and that she had no personal relationship with the subject matter. She sat down and took his hand. “What happened to you.” She made a point to state her question as if it were a command, and that she would get and answer for it. Both Carter and Sloane knew there was no other way she could find any information out.

“The police can tell you, angel.”

“I want you to tell me. And don’t forget any details.”

“Okay... I was walking along 57th, just along the park edge, and I heard a scream, and —”

“What kind of scream.”

“Uh... A woman’s scream. So I called out for anyone, and I got no response. I called a few more times, and heard nothing. Then I thought I heard another scream, but I’m not sure. There weren’t even any cars on the street, and ... I don’t know if this matters, but I remember thinking that I didn’t even hear birds, or cars, or wind. It was totally silent.”

“Then...”

“I thought that a woman could have been attacked in the park, and I thought that so many lights were out along the walkway there, but I went in. And —”

“How far did you walk in.”

“Oh, God, probably 50 feet. Then I just felt something hit my head.”

“What was the ‘something’.”

“Um... It was a blunt object, someone swung it, I guess.”

“Was it like a stick, or a rock.”

“Like a big piece of wood, I guess.”

“You didn’t hear anyone come up.”

“No. But that is all that happened. And you’re spooking me by asking all these questions like an FBI agent.”

“I’m looking for the truth, Carter. And I won’t ask in that tone again.” Sloane waited briefly, but had to speak again. “How do you feel?”

Carter started to smile. “My head hurts, but I’m okay. How did you find out about this?”

“The police found my number in your wallet and called me. They even said you called my name.”

“I did *that*?”

“Do you remember being in the ambulance?”

Sloane waited for his response. “It’s hard, but I remember the guys around me. I don’t remember much of what they were saying... I think it was medical talk.”

“Probably... But I’m glad they got to you and that you’re okay, Carter.”

“I can’t believe you came out here so quickly to see me...”

“They wouldn’t even tell me your condition, so I had to be here to find out — or wait until Monday and call Quentin. Hey — do they even *know* at Quentin?”

Carter groaned when he was forced to think about it. “No one there knows”, he said, “but hopefully they won’t bother trying to have a work party or give me a fruit basket or anything stupid like that...” making her laugh. They talked about other details when she eventually said she had to go talk to the policemen in the hall, and that she would be back. She walked out the door and Jim was standing there with the two policemen. She looked up at Jim and could tell from his face that the policemen told him nothing about Carter, so Sloane immediately asked, “So give me details. What happened to him?”

The policemen pretty much told her the same story from their perspective about what happened to Carter the night before. “The one thing that was strange, though,” the policeman John said, “is that there was a needle right by his body. The hospital is doing a drug toxicology screen on him, and he wasn’t diabetic, so we’re guessing it was the assailant’s.”

“You’re sure it was from Carter’s attack?” She asked.

The John nodded yes to answer her question.

Her eyes turned to saucers again and she stopped before coming up with the next sentence to speak. She was probably jumping to conclusions with no merit in her head, but she had to regain herself emotionally before she could ask. “We need to have him tested for HIV, even the dermis and epidermis where the puncture mark on his body is, because AIDS may not show up on blood immediately after he’s infected. We also need to test if there was any of the virus in that needle. Who still has the needle — the police or the doctors?”

“The hospital does, Ms. Emerson, but —”

Sloane walked away and went straight to the nurse’s station so that tests could immediately be done on both Carter and the needle.

At this point, all she could do was stay in Carter’s room with him until a lab technician found her. They told her that her suspicions were confirmed on Mr. Donovan’s blood and on the needle found at the scene. She knew this was their way of telling Sloane the news without bluntly telling Carter.

Sloane leaned back in her chair, while still holding on to Carter’s hand. She knew what they did to her, and the police had already found that there were no prints on the needle before handing it over to the hospital for testing that morning.

“Was this my punishment?” she thought as she tried to remain happy-looking for Carter. “Are they punishing him for my crimes?” she thought again. She thought she would wait for a bit until it was necessary to tell Carter, so that he could have these moments where he felt like he was getting better.



CHAPTER 14

THE FIGHT AGAINST AIDS

Like a commander of a military fleet, Sloane acted as if everyone there were working solely for her. When she was able to tear herself away from Carter, she made her way to the front nurse's desk on the same floor, ready to strike.

Working out exactly what she would say on the way, she walked straight up to the front desk and said to the attendant, "Get me the head nurse," and she used a conviction she did not even know she possessed.

The nurse came up and attempted to introduce herself, but Sloane had no time for introductions and started immediately.

"There is a gentleman here in room 2628, Mr. Carter Donovan, and I am watching over his medical records and doing everything possible to save him. He is about to be given a high dosage of AZT, because we *need* to make sure that his condition does not develop into full-blown AIDS. I need you to set a full equivalent dosage of Emivir™ ready so that he can take it home, and I need you to overload his bloodstream with it right now in the hopes that it can kill more of the virus in an initial injection."

"But ma'am, Emivir is a prescription drug, and we can't give it without

a doctor's —”

Sloane stopped her. “My name is Sloane Emerson, I am a doctor and I am the head of Research and development at Madison Pharmaceuticals.” She pulled her identification card from her wallet as she spoke. “I created this drug, and Carter is going to take it *right now*.”

The nurse looked at her I.D. for just a moment and was a bit awe-struck.

“Look, we don't have time for you guessing, Carter's health is in question because of it and I know this drug better than anyone in the country. Get him started on this right away. Like Dilantin for seizure patients, or like needles saved for cops and EMTs that are hit with a needle, taking an overdose of it immediately may help him battle this disease as it attempts to enter his system.”

The nurse attempted to speak, “But a dosage for him—”

“Knowing the amount of AZT you're about to inject in him,” she began, “and knowing that there would be no adverse reactions to giving Emivir at the same time, I know that you can inject him with both medications at the same time. And knowing that Emivir is usually given to patients at 600 milligrams a day, there would be no problem to start him with a 3-week drip.”

All she could think was that sometimes dosages are sharply increased for potentially pregnant women to force their bodies to abort, but without knowing fully about any potential side-effects of overloading Carter's body frightened her into not telling the nurse to give him a six-week dosage to potentially stop it from living in his body. There was no way that researchers could literally test these effects on humans, because no one would be willing to be a test subject. And all she could think of was the potential of a serious problem from giving him too high a dosage. Picking up her cell phone, she dialed Kyle at the office and realized he would be at home, but before pressing the speed dial for Kyle to ask him about any existing research that would explain potential threats.

The nurse learned quickly to not ask questions when Sloane was speaking, so when she was done giving orders the nurse went looking for lab technicians immediately and had other nurses there page people to call up technicians to start Carter on an initial dosage. “I can go with the Technician for the dosage amounts that would be best,” she said.

“Write the prescription amounts you've requested and I'll have them take care of it if you need to be in the patient's room.”

Suddenly Sloane heard the words “the patient's room” echo in her mind.

Carter was now a patient, and she was only thinking like a critical time-constrained chemist needing to accomplish a goal quickly. When she heard “the patient’s room”, she suddenly remembered that *Carter* was in there, waiting to hear when he could get out of the hospital. Sloane stopped for a split second and said, “Yes, I’ll be in Mr. Donovan’s room, and I can explain to him what is going on so he is ready when the drugs come in. Oh, and I *am* assuming that the drugs will be administered by an IV drip.”

“Yes, Miss,” the nurse said as she took the hand-written dosages from Sloane. She watched the nurse turn to rush medications for Carter and she could only stand there for a moment to think about all that had happened before she could try to see if she could get a hold of Kyle, before mustering the energy to walk to Carter’s room and tell him the worst.

Walking down the hall, Sloane pressed the speed dial number for Kyle. Elisa answered. “Hello?”

“Elisa, Hi, it’s Sloane, is Kyle there?”

Elisa’s voice changed when she heard that it was her. “Yes, hold on for just a moment.”

Listening to Elisa cover the end of the phone, she heard Kyle’s wife call for him. He finally made it to the phone.

“How are you?”

“Kyle, Hi, this is important, I—”

“Are you in the office?”

“No, I’m in New York, and I need to know something *right now* about Emivir, and I hope you can help me out from the research records.”

“Sure, chief, what do you need?”

“Well, someone has just contracted AIDS probably...” Sloane checked her watch, “eight or nine hours ago from a needle, and I have the nurses placing him on an initial shock of both Emivir and AZT.”

Kyle interrupted her. “Someone *here*?”

“Yes, and —”

“You’re in *New York*?”

She knew when he asked there would be more questions, but she just needed information quickly so she could work to save Carter. “Yes, New York.”

“It’s no one I know, is it?”

“Kyle, let me answer that after you help me, okay?”

Kyle’s stomach turned when he thought someone he knew was infected.

“Okay, shoot.”

“Okay, I’ve just told them a three-week dosage of both Emivir and AZT, but I know that in pregnancy cases they can give a huge dosage of birth control sometimes to abort a pregnancy. I can’t think of any studies being done on this for AIDS, but if Emivir could have any chance to kill the virus off if it is immediately implanted in the body, I was wondering what would be the safest maximum dosage we could give a patient.” At this point Sloane stopped her walking and was standing in front of Carter’s door.

Kyle tried to think it through while he answered. “Well, there are no cases of that working, but —”

“But no one has ever tried it before,” Sloane said, finishing the sentence.

“Okay, okay, so we can’t prove it, I know you want it proven Sloane, but I think a dosage up to about twice what you’ve got Carter slated for would be safe for him.”

“Is it safe? ... And you said *Carter*, Kyle?”

“I’m trying to guess here. Am I wrong?”

All she was thinking about was getting the answer from him before she could respond to his assumption. “So you think I could double the dosage? I mean, is it *safe*?”

“Yeah, anything over eight week dosages would cause damage, but six weeks should be safe, especially if it is within twelve hours of infection.”

“Thanks.”

“Who is it?”

Having to answer now, she also knew she had to tell Carter that he had AIDS and could not stay on the phone. “Kyle, it *is* Carter, but I *have* to go into his room for treatment right now, so I promise I will call you in an hour with more information.”

“Oh my God...”

“I know Kyle —”

“Is he okay?”

“He seems fine. I’ll call you back. And Kyle...”

“Yes?”

“Thanks, Chief.”

Kyle smiled when he heard her call him ‘chief’. “No problem. Give him my best.”

Turning the button off, she shoved the phone into her pocket as she

opened his door.

Carter heard the door open and looked up eagerly. Spotting her, he asked, "So when are they letting me out of here?" She tried force a smile while considering the possibility that she may have somehow had an effect on this happening to him. "You're going to be in here for a little bit," she said, as she walked over to his bed and took his hand before she continued speaking, "because they've got to take care of some work here and..."

"And?"

"And I've got to tell you some news. You're not going to like it, and —"

"Tell me anyway. What's the matter?"

Mentally preparing herself for the hardest speech she could make, she said, "Do you remember the mugging, or police saying anything in your presence?"

"Well, someone hit me over the head. I would have given money, but I was just hit. I know the police were talking about possible drug connections, because —"

"Because why?"

"They were probably talking about wanting drug money, but I thought I heard them saying something about a hypodermic needle at the scene, but I never saw one, and, well, no one talked about drugs when they mugged me."

"The needle is the bad news, Carter."

Carter could tell at this point that there was really something wrong, so he straightened up and thought more seriously and more clearly. "What is it?"

Sloane spoke almost under her breath. "Carter, I think my research might have done this to you."

"Don't say that, you don't know —" Carter froze when he thought of what she'd just said, and he thought of the needle; this was when the pieces started to fall together.

"Carter, I love you more than life."

"Well angel, I love you too —"

"That love didn't change when we found out that the needle was contaminated with the HIV virus, and after I told them to look, they found a puncture wound in you from it." Carter's face started to sink and grow longer, looking more gaunt in the realization. "I am sorry," was all that she could say as they both made the effort to hold each other. "I've got half the nursing staff on this floor starting you on a flood of Emivir, along with AZT, hoping that jolting your

system with that much of it this early in your contamination could hold the virus off for longer. I know that they even give policemen a pack of an IV of cocktails like this in case a needle from an assailant hit them, so I'm hoping this will work. They will be coming in here to inject you with a big dose, and I know that it can itch or burn getting this much into your system at once, but it is good for you to get it all at once like this, you have to keep that in mind. And I'll be working so hard to help you on this one, damnit, because if they thought they would do this to stop AIDS cure from working, well, they didn't know it would only make me work harder, because it comes down to —"

The door swung open, and medical staff came in to get Carter ready for the Emivir and AZT, so she had to stop and pull away from him while they did their work.

Knowing she had to see the head nurse to get another Emivir dosage ready for him, she had to go to the nurse's desk while the lab technicians started him on an injection.

"Carter, I'm sorry..."

It seemed that Carter couldn't even speak. "Sloane?" he finally asked.

"Yes? I love you, and —"

"I love *you*."

"Carter, I have to make sure they have the right dosage for you, so I have to go to the nurse's office for a second."

"I... I kind of want you to stay."

That one tore her up inside when she heard it. "I don't want to leave you, but I want to make sure you are well, too."

One of the lab nurses with the lab technician interrupted. "Did you need to talk to someone, Miss Emerson?"

Her head whipped around to see where the voice was coming from. Her commanding, military voice resumed again. "Yes, please tell the head nurse she has approval to set up another three-week dosage of Emivir, we can start it within an hour after this is in his system so we don't shock his body with it all at once."

Carter looked up in amazement. "Will I —"

"Yes, ma'am," the nurse said, turning around to walk to the nurse's desk.

Sloane whipped her head back to Carter and answered him. "We think that there's a chance that putting more into your system at once to make you better, so we'll get this supply in you to see how you take it."

They sat in silence while a few people set up needles and an I.V. for him.

“I don’t want to overshock your body by giving you too much at once, that’s why we’ll wait before putting more in you to see how you take it.”

Carter looked up at her, keeping his head down, looking more mournful than he had before.

She finally spoke. “I’ve got to get out of the way while they do this, you know. I’ll stay right here though.”

And it was hard for her to let go of his hand as she had to leave.

Slowly stepping backwards from his bed, people circled around him and checked his arms for injection points. It occurred to her that she had to call Kyle back and that she had to go outside to make sure Jim was okay. As she turned around, she slowly raised her hand up to gesture that she would be back in one moment.

When she pushed the door open she spotted Jim down the hall as she pulled her phone from her pocket to call Kyle back. Before dialing, Jim came up to her.

“Ms. Emerson, is everything okay?”

“... I don’t know.”

They stood in the hall in silence for a moment. “Is your friend okay?”

“They’re drugging him up right now, but hopefully he’ll be okay.”

“I’m sorry to hear about it.”

“Thanks.”

“Is this the guy you were visiting before?”

“Yes, he’s working on a book for us too.”

“And this is really getting to you...”

“I...”

“Are you okay?”

“I, um, I have to call a coworker about the drugs.”

“Okay. Do you want me to get you some coffee or something?”

“Oh, gosh no, but thank you. Just have a seat.”

“You sit down, too,” Jim said.

She smiled in appreciation of his consideration before she could look at her phone to call Kyle.

This time Kyle answered the phone. “Hello?”

“Hi, it’s me.”

“What’s going on?”

“Carter Donovan was attacked last night and an infected needle was shoved in him. He had my business card in his wallet, so they called me close to Midnight last night.”

“Wow.. Is he okay?”

“All things considered, I hope... Since I said I was his doctor and that I *created* Emivir, I got him the regular dosage. We’ll see if he’s okay with that much in him, so after maybe about an hour of the drugs, we’ll get him another dose.”

“That’s why you asked about possibly stopping AIDS in the body... But is this gonna hurt the book?”

“Kyle, What do you mean?”

“Is he supposed to be watching over it?”

“Quentin won’t even find out about this until tomorrow, and I can’t imagine someone stopping the book because of this. I think we’ll be fine with *the Battle from the Inside*.”

“You’re gonna be at work tomorrow then?”

“I’ll have to, I’ve got the company plane.”

“You flew there on Madison’s tab?”

“It was a company expense, I mean, this is about the health of someone orchestrating our book.”

“Okay, chief.”

“And I’ve got to get back to his room, kid, so let me go. I’ll tell you about it when I get the chance.”

“Got it. Just get some rest.”

###

For the next few hours Carter had Sloane at his side while he the I.V. stayed in his arm. Periodically he’d be checked on to make sure he was feeling okay, and besides the itching and slight burning from all of the medication in him, he was pulling through. Jim was even able to sit in the room for a short while.

Knowing she couldn’t say a word to argue with him, she listened to Carter as he talked about not understanding why he was mugged in the first place when barely anything was even taken from him. Because of the death of Shane Wilson and because of the existence of Adam Saunders, she was convinced that these allegations were true. The threats that would come to

stop her from her work were becoming more and more apparent, and she did not know when they were going to stop.

She knew for a fact that this was no accident. Pieces started to fall together in her head. Shane's hit-and-run car crash was no accident. The destruction of acres of Toby's rain forest land was no accident, when it was a U.S. government-sponsored company that tore the trees down. The U.S. Scientific Research Advancement Department making false claims about stolen research accomplishments without any proof, attempting to look through Madison's files and records, was no accident.

This attack on the publisher of Madison's book was no accident either. She was sure of it.

###

She studied her car by sight before she even got into her home. Internally, she wanted to make sure that no one had tampered with her car and that it was still in one piece.

After entering her apartment, she searched every corner to make sure that nothing had been touched since she had left. Her almost anal-retentive ritual began. Turn on all lights. Check all closets. Looked behind the couch. Open the shower curtain. Push her desk chair further under her desk. Remember that her robe wasn't moved since she left. Neither was the dirty glass or plate in the kitchen. One cabinet door was slightly open, the way it was before she ran out of her home. She opened and shut all doors, checking behind them and looking in all dark corners. And lastly, she crawled on her hands and knees to check under the bed.

All seemed clear.

Living in fear now was not something that she could even think about, all she knew was that she had to do everything in her power to keep herself and her loved ones alive. Knowing that it would be too late to call everyone to make sure they were okay, she walked back toward the front of her home, scratching her head and trying to push her hair back. She threw her coat over a chair so she could take it to work in the morning.

She looked around.

No messages were on her machine.

There was no reason that she would be missed.

“Am I really that valueless to people?” she thought, as she wondered why she ever had an answering machine in the past.

“Mental note: call people tomorrow,” she thought before she turned off all the lights and walked straight to her bed. She knew she had to sleep.

But all Sloane could do was cry.

Everything suddenly seemed to fall apart for her, right then and there. She had found out there is a good chance the U.S. government is holding the cure to a virus that they created and spread. A friend and colleague lost opportunities to work because of government land destruction. A gentleman who gave her scraps of information about the government’s intervention with AIDS was killed. Her work was being taken away from Madison by the U.S. Scientific Research Advancement Department. She finally, *finally* admitted her love to her soul mate and he was almost immediately afterward given a prolonged death sentence.

She didn’t want to fall apart. She didn’t *let* herself fall apart. This couldn’t all be true, this couldn’t be happening to her, she couldn’t make sense out of anything in her life any longer, and she couldn’t stop herself from crying for over an hour and a half.

Forgetting about setting her alarm clock, Sloane woke up late for work, but wasn’t too concerned about it. She didn’t even bother to shower, she had worn the same clothes she wore the day before and grabbed her keys, briefcase, purse and coat as she opened her apartment door. Before it closed, she looked around her home once again, mentally memorizing where all her belongings were placed, so she could check them again to remember where everything exactly was when she came home that night.

Double-checking everything that was in her path was her only real option. She checked how the car sounded. She checked to make sure none of the mirrors in her car were moved. She made sure that the radio was set the same way as when she left it. She even looked at how everything was left *in* her car before she was able to leave and watch traffic.

The lab staff seemed a bit surprised when she arrived in the office at 9:45 Monday morning. Kyle did his best to push people out of the way so she wouldn’t have to answer to anyone. Julie walked over and opened her door, as she could tell that Sloane just wanted to go into her office to be alone.

Kyle told Julie that Sloane was on the other side of the country all day

yesterday because of a potential health problem, so Julie should give Sloane some space and try to help her out. Julie didn't know if the health problem was Sloane's or someone else's, but watched Sloane make a beeline for her office and then started to close her door for her, saying, "If you need anything at all, let me know."

Kyle watched her walk into her office and Julie saw him as he slowly approached her door. He finally turned to look at Julie, noting that she didn't know what to think or what to do.

"I figure I have to wait another minute before I go in there," He finally said.

"Do you know what it is?" she finally asked.

"I think we'll all knew in a few."

Julie's private line rang and assumed it was Ms. Emerson, so she held up her finger to answer her phone. Thirty seconds later she hung up the phone.

"Kyle, she just asked for me to find you. I think she wants to see you."

Kyle nodded his head and thanked her before he turned to go knock on her door and enter her room.

"Are you okay? What happened?" Kyle asked as he walked to a chair to have a seat.

"Carter was mugged at about 10:00 or 10:30 our time, was brought to the hospital at 11:00 our time, and they found that nothing was really stolen from him. There was just a foreign hypodermic needle by his side. They called me in because he had my business card in his wallet, and I told them to look and they found a puncture mark, along with traces of HIV all over the needle. So I got him first on a three-week shock of Emivir and AZT, about an hour later he got another three-week load of Emivir. It was a little tough for Carter to take all the drugs, he kept saying his arm was itching like Hell. He even said he could feel it going up his arm in his blood, which was strange to hear ... um, he held up pretty well through it all, though. I think they're going to hold him there in the hospital for another day or two. And I can't think of anything else, really." Sloane looked over at her phone and saw it beeping for voice mail. "and I even have voice mail, maybe it's from the hospital or Carter." She turned the speaker of her phone on to check her messages.

"I can go if you want to hear you —"

"No, stay, you'll probably hear it from me if you don't hear it now, so listen." She turned the voice mail on to hear the one message left for her.

Ms. Emerson, this is Shelly Stempel from Quentin Publishing. We heard about Mr. Donovan, and we heard you were there as well. We hope your being there for medication really helps him right now. But Quentin wanted to let Madison know that Mr. Donovan will be on a temporary leave of absence and that I will be taking over his work on your book. We will give you a call at 10:00 a.m. your time to work out changes that will need to be done to help get your book printed through us, and I look forward to talking to you soon.

Kyle noticed that there was still a flash for one permanent message on her machine, but that was the only new message. Keeping her elbow on the arm of her chair, she placed her hand over her mouth as she rested her head in her hand.

“Wow,” was all Kyle could say as he watched her and listened to the message. Looking at his watch, he saw that it was 9:52 in the morning and said “I guess she will be calling in the next ten minutes.”

She didn't even look up at him to respond.

Kyle moved forward in his seat. “Really, are you okay?”

Sloane looked up at him without even moving her hands. She started to nod her head to let him know that she was okay.

“Is there anything at all I can get you?” he asked.

Letting some silence pass, she finally answered quietly, “Some Whiskey.”

Kyle smiled at her. “What?”

Sloane rolled her eyes. “Something to drink, I said.”

At this point Kyle had a wide grin on his face at her. “But why?”

“Oh, a colleague had trouble with work in Miami a month or two ago, and by wanting to escape he wanted to drink...”

Kyle started to stand, “Ah, Whiskey, the escape of choice...” he said as he walked toward the door.

“Well, I have to make some phone calls first. Then maybe after dealing

with another contact for the book I'll *need* that Whiskey." She smiled at him as he made his way to the door.

Getting a hold of people was difficult at the time for her, everyone was away from their office desks. All she did was leave messages for everyone before a call from Shelly Stempel came to Madison..

Hey, dad, it's Sloane, I just wanted to know how you were doing. I haven't talked to anyone else in the family either, maybe we could get together for dinner some time this week. I hope all is well, and I love you guys, and call me when you get the chance.

Hi Toby, it's Sloane. I hope all is going well for you. I just thought I'd touch base with you and see what you were up to. I hope the research is going well with you, but I also wanted to make sure you were doing well yourself, so please give me a call and maybe we could hang out or something. You've got my number, so give me a call, and I'll talk to you soon.

At this point in the day she hoped it would be safe to call the New York hospital to check on Carter's progress. The nurses there said he was shaky throughout the morning from the drugs, but the sweats had gone down for him and they could run blood work at the end of the day.

She didn't even get to talk to Carter.

As her phone rang, so she glanced at the clock and saw that it was 10:05 in the morning.

"Ms. Emerson."

"Ms. Emerson, hello, this is Shelly Stempel from Quentin Publishing.

Did you get my message from this morning?"

"Yes I did, I was expecting your call, hello."

"Hi, I wanted you to know in light of what has happened to Mr. Donovan there will be some slight restructuring of your book production."

"What do you mean?"

"Mr. Donovan, after his hospital stay, is going to be on a short leave-of-absence from his position at Quentin, so I'm in charge of taking over current projects he had."

"*The Battle from the Inside* should be ready to go to press in a week or so. All should be finished with our book, so —"

"Ms. Emerson, with the reorganization of this branch now, we'll have to have a staff go over the book separately from what Mr. Donovan did before we can let it go to press. So I'm sure it will take a little longer than that. But we'll have a meeting here on it and we'll have a few proofreaders and editors go over your copy this week before making changes to *the Battle from the Inside* before it does off to press."

"It was ready to go to press before though, so there shouldn't be any changes."

"We can take care of all of that, but I just wanted to get the chance to meet you over the phone like this and let you know of changes. We can talk to you in the next day or two." Ms. Stempel then hung up the phone without hearing an answer.

Leaning back in her chair after dealing with that call, she didn't know what to do. Her phone rang again. Expecting it to be Ms. Stempel, she tried to prepare herself for asking more questions.

"Ms. Emerson."

"It's Toby, how are you?"

"You want to know the truth, awful."

"Awwful? Come on."

"Absolutely awful."

"You're exaggerating..."

"No, no I'm not."

"Why did you call? Did you want to talk?"

"Maybe, but you might just have to listen to me wallow."

"You've done it for me, so let's go out for lunch."

"Okay ... can you stop by my office and we'll go to a place around here?"

“It’s a deal. I’ll be later for lunch, like coming by at one or one-thirty though, if that’s cool with you.”

“Sure, I’ll see you then —”

When Sloane hung up the phone, she *still* didn’t know what to do.

Wait, she remembered the new book’s staff assignment. She picked up the phone and called Carter’s office. She got through to a receptionist.

“Hi. My name is Sloane Emerson, Mr. Donovan was working on a book for Madison Pharmaceuticals. I know about Mr. Donovan not being there right now, but I was wondering if someone there could do me a favor.”

“Yes, what can we help you with?”

“I was wondering if I could have a hard copy of the book *the Battle from the Inside* sent to us now. I know it’s not ready to go to press yet, but I would like a copy of the layout as well as a hard copy of our written materials.”

“I think we could have a package of that material put together and mailed to your office, unless you need it overnighted.”

“No, just mailing it would be great, and I really appreciate it.”

When she hung up the phone again, she thought she had to continue to make calls.

Feeling like the phone was going to be attached to her ear this morning, she dialed Steve’s number at his work.

Steve, Hi, it’s Sloane. This will sound really stupid, but I could use someone to talk to. I know it might be out of line for me to want to know how you’re doing, but I hope all is well with you. If you don’t mind, maybe we could talk. Give me a call, and thanks.

Thinking that people were probably wondering about how she was doing, she figured she should probably go for a walk to clear her head. As she opened her door to walk into the lab, almost half of the heads turned to see her. Howard and Kyle were on opposite sides of the room watching her, and she did not know what to do or how to respond.

Raising her voice, she asked, “Hey, do you want to get together for a lit-

tle info on what's going on?"

People nodded and she pointed toward an empty table where they should meet together to hear from her. When people got together, she walked toward the table, making sure to never tell a soul about what happened between her and Carter, found a stepladder to stand on and started to speak.

"Hi. I know everybody is wondering what is going on that could make me come in late, so I'll try to make all of the stuff that has been going on as 'normal' as possible... I received a call late Saturday night from New York because my business card was in Mr. Donovan's wallet... Now wait, he is okay, but he was mugged, and so they called me and I went to the hospital he was at to get his condition. They ran some blood work and we got some absolutely awful news, and that was that... the news was that Mr. Donovan has HIV, infected from a needle from the attacker that night. And ... and that is terrible news, but I suppose it was a good thing I was there, because I was able to spearhead a very aggressive drug treatment probably about Eleven hours after he was infected."

Everyone there seemed shocked by this news, so she paused to let everyone get it through their system for a minute.

"So... I got a call this morning from a Ms. Shelly Stempel, saying that in light of this weekend Mr. Donovan is on a temporary leave-of-absence, and that there will be a new staff, headed by Ms. Stempel going over the book in case any changes have to be made."

Sloane stopped in what seemed like a dramatic pause before she finished. "So you know, there may be changes in the book that was originally supposed to go out to press at the end of this week. I don't know what the changes will be, but I just called and asked them to send me the first-version copies of *The Battle from the Inside* ASAP, so we can see how much change this book will end up going through."

Not being able to lean back while standing on the rung of a stepladder, she finished by saying, "Does anyone have any questions? Because I'll tell you, I'm exhausted from flying to and from New York yesterday, and if I had the answers for anything, I'd let you know." She looked around for one brief moment, and no one said a word.

Kyle walked toward her as she stepped down from the stepladder and she said to him, "Kyle, can I just look over what is going on with the vaccine testing? Because I don't think I can handle doing too much new work right now."

“Not a problem at all.” He then guided her over to a chair and they started to go over lab and test results.

At around 12:45, Julie let Ms. Emerson know that she had a call. After she got into her office, she picked up the phone.

“Ms. Emerson.”

“Sloane?”

“Yes, hello?”

“It’s Steve.”

“Oh, hi.”

“You called?”

“Yes, hi, how are you doing?”

“Well, I’m fine, how are *you*? You sounded sad on the phone.”

She almost smiled when she heard him say that. “Hmm... I guess I’m, I guess I’m lonely.”

“*You*? I can’t believe it.”

“I don’t know ... but I was wondering what you were doing tonight, Steve.”

“I had plans tonight, I —”

“Oh, I’m sorry, what are you doing?”

“I was planning on seeing you, girl.”

She started to smile at him.

“The only problem is that you didn’t tell me what time I was seeing you.”

“Steve, did you want to come over to my place, or did you want to go out somewhere?”

“How about I come to your place after dinner, say seven, and we can figure out what we want to do from there.”

“Great. And thanks, Steve.”

“It’s the least I can do. I’ll see you tonight.”

After getting off the phone with Steve, it was almost 1:00. She talked a few minutes with Kyle before Toby found her at the lab table. Toby tapped her shoulder while she was leaning over to rescan test results. She turned her head and saw Toby waiting for her.

“Hi Toby.”

“Hey, ready to go?”

“Sure. Let me get my coat.”

Toby walked toward her office as she turned to Kyle and said, “Okay, all

I keep thinking is that we're on the right track here, but the results seem to be not promising enough *still*. We've been attacking one part of the virus in the vaccine with these tests, but maybe there's a way to get to it on more than one level, because I think that's going to be the only way this vaccine can actually work on a wider basis like we'd need. We've got some archived records of earlier stages of discovering HIV, and I think that would be the direction that would get us a vaccine that would work for a larger number of possible mutations that HIV could go through... Now, I'm going to be out for a bit because I'm actually really starved, but we'll talk more about what to do on this tomorrow, okay?"

###

Toby drove Sloane to a bar/restaurant that was right on the water's edge, so that they could just sit and eat and talk to each other about what was going on in their lives.

They decided to eat at the bar because there was next to nobody there, and she asked the bartender for a Cookie Dough Martini.

"What's *that*?" Toby asked as the bartender started to walk away.

"The sign says it has cookie dough liqueur and vodka and coffee liqueur, so I thought I'd try it."

"Liquor while you're at work? What's *up*?"

"I'm not saying a word until you talk to me about what is going on with you." Knowing that her talking would probably just shut Toby up if he wanted to talk, she begged Toby to go first.

Trying to think of the appropriate questions, she asked about progress in replicating the materials in the tree sap so that Toby could continue doing his work. "If nothing else," Toby continued, "maybe we would know how to replicate *parts* of the original materials so that we could continue to do our research."

"The best way to go about doing it," trying to interject, "would be to see if there was any way you could replicate it with natural materials instead of more chemical ones, so that it would be easier to inject in the body."

"Yeah, I know," Toby said in agreement. "We've been trying to look at existing plants for any of the components of this material — you know how they use different seeds and leaves from different plants herbs and stuff, we're

trying to see if we can use a ton of different plant sources to try to emulate this original plant material.”

“But you’ll want to be sure there are no side effects or allergic reactions to this new material you get together once you’ve made it. I know that some people have reactions to herbs like St. John’s wort or Kava Kava or stuff like that.”

“Yeah, we have to make sure we make something that people can actually *take*,” Toby said.

“It would be a real shame if you created a drug to help people, but no one could take it because most were allergic to it, Toby...”

“Yeah, but considering the effects that the existing drugs have on some people, they still take them, because it will help them out, so we have to make sure the effects at least won’t be too severe. And how do you know about herbs like that in the body in the first place? ... Is this stuff that’s going into your company’s new book I’ve read about?”

Sloane was just starting to get comfortable talking about a type of AIDS research that wasn’t something her team was working on, but this question threw a little jolt back into her and sent her back to reality.

“Yes, we’re doing a book for patients, called *The Battle from the Inside*.”

“So you’re trying to pull that off in addition to your research and test work?”

Unable to immediately answer him, she had to try to think of the right way to tell him about that had been going on. She was also feeling the first martini she ordered and was gesturing to the bartender to make her another one. “It has been a lot of work, but we’re trying...”

Toby leaned back after ordering a club sandwich; Sloane ordered another drink. “You want anything to eat?”

“Could I just eat some of your fries?”

“You could have them all if you want, I usually don’t like fries.”

As the bartender walked away with their order of a drink and a sandwich, Toby turned back to Sloane. “You amaze me.”

“Why?”

“You’ve got so much going on, and you always seem to be ahead of the game. How on earth do you *do* it?”

Grabbing her drink, she threw the last of it down her throat and pushed the glass forward. “I don’t know, Toby, I don’t know.”

Toby saw her getting sad as she answered him, and watched the bar-

tender take her glass away and give her another martini. Knowing she doesn't drink, and especially not during the day like this, he got more and more concerned. "You've always done it so well in the past... How do you keep so ahead of the game?"

"For the most part, I don't sleep much and I'm not social. Is that the answer you wanted?"

"And you don't *drink* much either. So what's happening?"

Not knowing how to answer, she took a slight pause. "Toby, sometimes the cards seem to stack up against you, and after a while you think..."

"What?"

"You think you've got a losing hand."

"Oh, don't talk like that."

"But you have to keep playing, because it's the only hand you've got... And you keep thinking, 'did I choose the wrong cards?' or 'how do you fight when your opponent's got such a good hand?', or —"

"This is *so* not sounding like you. Really, what's going *on*?"

At this point in the game she had to come clean and try to tell him about the run of problems that Madison has had to face in the past two weeks. The first on her list was discovering his problem, but then she went into the U.S. government trying to go through Madison's files. Then she mentioned someone dying in a car accident that wanted to give her information about AIDS. The last thing on her list was that after they were ready to send the book to press, her contact at the press, one of her dearest friends from college, was attacked and hit with an HIV-infected needle.

Toby thought she was being too paranoid when she listed all of the problems, but when he heard the last item, he stopped in his tracks, because he had no idea of what to say to her at that point.

"Yes, Toby, that last one happened just before Midnight Saturday our time on the other side of the country, and I was called in due to my relationship with drugs and the book, so I was in New York all day yesterday trying to help my friend so that HIV might possibly be *stopped*. You know, before it turns into full-blown AIDS."

They sat in silence while Sloane took a gulp of her drink.

"So yes, this is what I've been going through, Toby, and yes, if I ever needed to escape with alcohol, now would be the time."

Before Toby could even have the chance to attempt to answer all of this,

the bartender walked over to them and handed Toby a plate with his sandwich. The kitchen even put the fries on a separate plate, and since the bartender heard Toby tell her that she could have his fries, he put the plate of fries toward her. "Would you like catsup with your fries?" The bartender asked them, leaning slightly towards her.

Looking up, she answered, "Yes, please, thank you."

The bartender turned and walked toward the back of the place to bring catsup and condiments to them.

Toby finally spoke after he had a bit of his food. "So this is a friend of yours from college ... was this when I went to school with you?"

Realizing that Toby might have thought he knew Carter, she had to jump in, "No, Toby, this was a friend that I met through my roommate in undergraduate. We'd been friends ever since, and he runs a new-clients branch of a New York book publishing company, and we struck a deal together for Madison's book."

"Holy shit," was all Toby could get out. "So you drink now. I get it. And hey, they're on me, too."

Sloane was drinking as he said those words, so she tried to protest. "You're buying? Why?"

"You went to Miami, so I figure I can do *something* for you with news like this."

Smiling, she thanked him. "Cheaper than a flight across the country?"

"Shut up. But you know, if you need someone to bitch to about it at all, feel free to bug me. I really don't mind being there for you if you need it." He watched her drink more as he tried to continue. "I like you, and ... I don't know, I can learn to shut up about my own problems sometimes..."

Once again, she laughed, as they then tried to get through their food.

The rest of the afternoon for her at Madison was a bit more of a blur than she was used to. Kyle bounced some ideas off her, but this time he became more of the instigator in ideas and conversation than Sloane. For once she felt like one of the followers, this time by *choice*, and she just soaked up information as ideas were handed to her.

By the end of the day she was anxious to get out of the office and get back to her place, another feeling that she seldom had when she worked. After checking with Julie and knowing there were no calls from Quentin and

Ms. Stempel, she knew there was nothing more she could do. She ran through the list in her head:

Not about to work on the book,
not able to get a hold of Carter,
not able to **work**.

Beginning to wonder if all of her decisions now only caused harm to others or her work, she packed her belongings to go home.

“Wait,” she thought, “my dad never called back.” So she called him at home to see if he was there.

“Hello?”

“Dad, hi, it’s Sloane, did you get my —”

“Hi buttercup, I completely forgot to call you back. How are you?”

“Oh, I’m tired, a bit frazzled...”

“Are you okay? Are you not feeling well?”

“I feel fine, dad, it’s just that a bad things have been happening, so I am feeling a bit down.”

“Is that why you asked about seeing everyone?”

“Well, yes, I thought it would be a good idea to see how everyone was doing...”

“I’ll give the kids a call so we can plan a time to have dinner together. Can you make it in the next week or two?”

“I think so ... though I might have to go out of town on business this weekend. But let me know, and I’ll find a way to see you all. And things are okay with you?”

“Yep, still doing the same rock collection work for the University ... not much changes with my work, you know that.”

“I didn’t know if anything has been going on *outside* of work, dad.”

“Well, no one has given me a winning lottery ticket, and I’m not dating anyone — you should know me by now.”

“I just like to check up on you, you know. Make sure you’re not doing anything your daughter wouldn’t approve of.”

“I can’t believe you!”

Sloane giggled as he continued.

“Let me check with the other kids and we’ll get back to you with dinner plans, okay?”

They agreed and said good-bye to each other

As she walked out of her office with her coat and her bags, Howard walked up to her before Kyle had the chance to check up on her.

“You know, I haven’t had the chance to see how you were doing, Sloane. You look really tired.”

Thinking for a moment that she might use this as an excuse to actually use a sick day, she answered, “I didn’t get much sleep yesterday, and I don’t know if it’s that or if I’m just not feeling well.”

“Well, take a sick day tomorrow if you need it,” Howard answered.

She managed to look up at him before she dropped her head. “Thanks. I’ll keep it in mind, and you guys have a good evening, too...” she said as she walked toward the exit doors.

Getting hungry on her way home, thinking of Toby’s lunch, she pulled over to a deli to get herself a sandwich to go. She even made a point to stop next door at the liquor store first to see if there was anything she would need at home, in case Steve wanted to just stay at her place.

After looking at the choices, she decided it would be best to go to the store with him to figure out what they needed to drink.

Her car reeked of the roast beef in her sandwich by the time she pulled up to her apartment complex, making her want to eat more. She eyed people as she got out of her car and crept toward her mailbox before unlocking her door to go inside. She made a scan of her home again, the way she did when she left in the morning, to see if anything had changed. She turned on all lights to check all rooms, and swung all doors wide open to make sure.

All seemed clear.

Remembering that she would have company coming over in less than two hours, she made a point to put her coat in the closet and move her briefcase to the floor under her desk. Cleaning up the apartment would come after she ate dinner. The refrigerator had a six-pack of beer in it, so she pulled out a can to have with her sandwich. She used her bag for a plate and she moved to the dining room table to try to shove food down her throat.

After she finished her roast beef sandwich she began cleaning. Having to create a checklist in her mind, she worked on her home like it was a ritual:

- Kitchen first. clean any dishes, put away garbage, put and clean dishes back into the cabinets, check the refrigerator to make sure it looks more organized, take out the glass cleaner and the scrubbing cleaners to clean off the counters, the stove, and the front of the refrigerator. She even checked the

floor to make sure it didn't need to be mopped. The final step was sweeping the floor.

- The bathroom next. Bring the cleaners into the bathroom, clean off the mirror, put the hairbrush away. Wipe down the sink, make sure the shower door is cleaned off, put the floor rugs in the right place and refold the towels.

- On to the living room. Put away the glass cleaners and bring out a rag for polishing. Stack what magazines that were out, place them in the magazine rack next to the couch. Stack any journals or medical books in a pile on the left-hand side of her desk. Fluff the two existing pillows and place them on the sides of the couch. Move the two candles and separate holders to the coffee table in front of the couch so she could clean the shelf off.

She forgot to move the candles and holders back, and without thinking about it, Steve would probably see them and think that Sloane was trying to be romantic, but didn't have the time or energy to finish the look.

- Back to the bedroom. Make the bed. Why did she ever have to make the bed, she thought, because nobody ever came over that she had to impress her home with anyway. There was a second pair of shoes on the floor near the closet. After opening the closet door, she threw her shoes to an empty spot. When she closed the doors and checked to make sure everything was cleaned up in her last room, she noticed that her suitcase from her trip to New York was still closed, on the floor in the corner. Then it hit her again. She was trying not to think about it, she knew that there was nothing she could do about it, and all it took to remind her was this suitcase, still packed.

All she had the energy to do was sit on the floor in her bedroom, almost next to her suitcase. She had nothing other than her memories to remind her of what had just happened this weekend. Carter's books sat on her nightstand, and all she had of photographs of him were small author photos on the backs of the books he had written. Sitting next to her bed, she turned her body so that she could lean on the side of it. She looked over at her suitcase on the floor, then she leaned her head back and craned her head to see Carter's books on her nightstand.

Then she rolled her head to the side and closed her eyes.

Less than a minute later the doorbell rang, making her jerk up. She then jumped up and rushed to move the suitcase to the wall, standing it upright. She glanced at the room to make sure it was clean. The clock read 6:57; Steve was just early, and she ran out to the front door.

Leaning her head against the door she called, "Who is it?"

"It's Steve."

He sounded a little surprised to her when he responded, so she turned around and unlatched the door.

Steve heard the door creak open; he saw her head down. He could only see her black hair draping down, arching around her face, almost buried in shadow. These were moments he wanted to memorize an image, because this image was beautiful to him, and he wanted to be able to keep it forever.

He couldn't talk; he wanted to wait for her to make the first move. Sloane slowly lifted her head. "Hi, Steve, come in."

Steve walked in without saying a word.

"Thanks for coming by," she said as he moved forward and turned around to watch her close the door.

"Not a problem at all," Steve answered. "I'm a good listener, you know."

"But I don't want to be covered in your next column Steve..."

"You've got a deal." Steve took his coat off as he was ready to put it on her coat rack by the door. "I know you've asked me about stuff like that before, and I wouldn't say a word about it."

"Would you like to stay here for something to drink, or would you like to go out for something?"

"Well, maybe we could go out for a bit and then come back..."

"Okay," she said as she reached to the closet to get her own overcoat. "Have any places in mind, or should I pick something out?"

"I don't know much around here, so I'll go with your choice."

Sloane decided they could go to the same bar/restaurant she was at for lunch with Toby. They got into the car, and she started to explain the place. "It's just a place to hang out in, they serve sandwiches and French fries and stuff like that for meals, and they have appetizers, but they have a lot of drink choices too. I went there for a drink at lunch, and they had a really good martini."

Steve was convinced with whatever she recommended and they arrived at the bar twenty minutes later.

As they walked in Steve had a good look at the place: there was a bar at the center and tables and booths all around the sides. Sloane asked, "Where would you like to sit?"

Steve saw that it was relatively empty because it was closer to the business district, so he said, "I think we'll have no problems with service at a table."

Someone asked if they would like a table, and Steve suggested to the maitre d' to get them a booth, before they were escorted to a booth. Sloane looked up and asked if a waitress could come by right away.

Steve didn't realize she wanted something to consume so quickly.

The waitress walked up right away. "Hi, my name is Janine, would you like to start off with a drink?"

"I'd like a cookies and cream martini."

Steve stared at her as she spoke so quickly and efficiently until he realized that Janine was looking at him. "Um... I'd like a vodka and tonic, and we may only get appetizers tonight."

"Gotcha," they heard Janine say as she walked toward the bar.

Steve turned to Sloane immediately when the waitress left. "A cookies and cream martini?"

"Yeah, I tried that at lunch and it was really good."

Steve looked down at the drinks portion of the menu. "Good mix of stuff in here ... and you drank this for lunch?"

"Steve, I'm at this point right now where I don't feel like immersing myself in my work too much."

"That doesn't sound like what little I know of you."

"Oh, wait, I forgot to tell you," she said as she did her best to change the subject. "I didn't get anything to drink for my place because I thought that if you wanted something, we could go to the store together and pick out stuff. If that's okay with you."

"That's fine. We can get whatever you need too."

"But that's the thing, I don't buy liquor, I don't even know what I'd want."

Steve looked over to the menu. "so you like this drink?"

"Yes..."

"Well, we could make sure we get these things and work on making it at home if you'd like."

"You think you could make it up at my place? We don't know how much of each liquor..."

"Well, we can keep fudging with it until we get it to your liking, then we'll have your own recipe for it."

"... Okay..."

"So why are you wanting to drink so much all of a sudden?" Steve asked.

Sloane took a deep breath before she began. "When a friend of mine who

was doing research work for AIDS came into a huge spell of trouble, all he wanted to do was drink, to escape and wallow in misery. I thought he was making a wrong choice by escaping, but now that's all I want to do."

"You want to *escape*?"

"Steve, I swear, I can't think of anything else that I can do to solve any of the problems that we've got right now."

"And drinking will make it better?"

"... No, it won't make it better, but it may allow me to stop thinking about it all for a little while."

Steve knew he couldn't really argue with that, but he also knew he could never argue with her opinions. "Looking for a little escapism tonight?"

Thinking about not understanding why people seem to want to drink so much in the past, and thinking about what she had to deal with now, she then answered, "Yes. I think that's exactly what I want."

"Okay, girl, so it's my job to let you drink tonight."

"Isn't that what *every* man wants on a date?"

"I didn't think you thought of this as a *date*, and all it means for me is that I get to be a baby-sitter for you in part..."

"Oh. Does that ... bother you?"

Steve hated it when she asked him questions that he couldn't help but be painfully honest to. "Nothing you do can bother me."

They let a few moments pass. Steve ordered chips and salsa, and imagined that he'd need her to have a vitamin, a painkiller, and a glass of water before she went to sleep tonight. Sloane ordered another drink, and Steve was stunned at how quickly she could go through one of their martinis.

"Hey girl, let me have a taste of your martini so I know what we'll try to make for you later tonight."

She slid her martini over to him so he could drink out of her glass. "Damn that's sweet — you only get a hint of the liquor in there."

"Yeah, it's good."

"No wonder you're going through them so fast."

"Hmm. It's a good thing that right now I don't really care."

"Okay, I can't take it any more. Are you going to tell me what the problem is? Or is my job to just watch you drink?"

"You have to swear that none of this comes out, Steve, not in writing or talking."

“Well ... sure... okay ... you’ve got my word.”

She didn’t know where to begin or what parts of the story would necessary to omit. “It seems that bit by bit, parts of my ability to work on AIDS research are being taken away.”

“Oh, come on —”

“No, really. I have just noticed it, piece by piece. The first thing was that a colleague of mine had rain forest land destroyed that he needed for research. Now, that is not my personal news, it’s just something I noticed as a problem with trying to get somewhere in getting good medication.”

Steve continued to listen to her speak. “Then I was told by someone that more things like this would happen to researchers, he couldn’t give me any more information about it, and the next thing I knew he was killed in a hit-and-run car accident. Then after that Madison was blamed for stealing materials from the U.S. government, and I had to run a press conference to make my own stand.”

The waitress came over with the chips and salsa and Steve responded. “But I saw your press conference. It was phenomenal! You seemed to do really well with that one.”

“Yes, I have to start playing with the media to get the government off our backs, instead of continue to do my job.”

“I think everyone is on your side though, after that first press conference.”

“The government isn’t, though. They went to our offices to look through files of ours and try to go into our computers. We knew they were coming, so we hid everything, and we made sure that we had all of our information documented, but then the CEO of Madison kept me in his office while the government people came in to look through all of our stuff.”

“He did that?”

“Yeah, he told them he was in a meeting and couldn’t be reached, and he had Madison tell the government people that I was not in the office. Can you believe that?”

“Oh my God. Did it end up working out for you guys though?”

“I really have no idea, because I wasn’t *there*, but we probably pissed off the U.S. Scientific Research Advancement Department people who were trying to check us out.”

“Did they have any reason to be checking you out in the first place?”

“No. They never showed any evidence that we did anything to them, and

they never even had any reports or findings in the past year that they had even done similar research in the first place.”

They continued to talk about these topics while they ate chips. She washed down her food with more martinis. After they were there for almost two hours, Steve had to ask, “But I saw how you were working in those press conferences, and I know how people are reacting to your comments — they love you and Madison. What do you have to worry about *now*?”

That’s when she shook her head. “Two things ... one is that I was told that the pressure on myself and researchers is only going to get worse, and —”

“This is the guy that died after he told you that?”

“Yeah, but worse *has* happened since these last things.”

“Like what? ... Wait, do you want to continue this talking at your place? We’ve been here long enough...”

“Sure, you’re probably right.”

Steve dropped cash down over the check and carried it all over to the front of the bar.

“What are you doing? What do I owe?”

“Look, girl, I don’t get the chance to hang out with you too much, so let me do this for you tonight.”

Steve left out his arm for Sloane to hold on to while he walked her to his car. He could tell that she needed a little help with walking as he unlocked her door and opened it for her.

When they arrived at a liquor store, Steve held the door open for her to walk in. “It’s very white in here,” she said.

“What?”

“It’s really bright in here.”

“It’s not a bar.”

“Why do bars have such low light?”

“I think it’s because everyone is trying to find a mate, and low light covers up people’s imperfections...”

“So low light is like beer-bottle glasses?”

“Oh, you make everything sound so *beautiful*...”

“It’s still bright in here, Steve.”

“You’ve got to see what you’re buying, and I think you were just getting too used to the low light of that bar.”

They walked around the store a few times, looking for Kahlua, cookies-and-

cream liqueur and vodka. Sloane asked Steve if he wanted tonic water to have drinks with the vodka, so they picked up a few extra things so they could drink at her place. Steve even picked out a bottle of vodka that came in a box with martini glasses as a part of a set so that she could have a glass to drink from.

Steve still tried to play the role of the gentleman by trying to open the car door for her or carry what he had purchased into her place for her. Before he could even worry about getting his coat off, Steve brought the bag to the kitchen and asked, "I'm sure you don't have a shaker for your drink, so have you got a good metal spoon?"

She found everything he needed for making drinks after she put her hands on his shoulders and gestured to take his coat for him so she could hang it up.

"I know you don't need a blender," she said.

"No, just ice to mix this all together with," Steve answered.

"I've got this refrigerator that dispenses whole or crushed ice cubes, so you can have your choice."

Steve made what he thought might work and brought it to her on the other side of the kitchen. "Let me know what you think."

Taking a sip, she immediately responded, "too vodka-ish." She handed the glass back to Steve and he tasted it. "Okay," he said as he went back to work. The second round of testing worked out almost perfectly. Sloane had her drink and Steve mixed his vodka and tonic together to join her in the living room.

"You haven't even sat down yet," Steve said as he walked to meet up with her, standing in front of the couch. "Or would you like to toast before we sit?"

Looking at her glass, she then looked over to Steve. "I can't image what to toast to."

"If you've been having problems, then here is to the light at the end of the tunnel."

Steve watched her smile as they clinked their glasses and drank.

"Wow, this *is* good," She said after she drank.

"Well, I do what I can," he said as he sat down with her.

Steve set his glass on the table and noticed the candles and holders she left there while cleaning on the cocktail table. "Hey, why don't we light the candles?"

"Let me get the matches from the kitchen," she said as Steve started to put the candles in the holders.

This was starting to kill Steve. He was standing in a darkened room put-

ting candles in holders, alone with her after he made her a potent drink to have after the four she had drank at the bar. He still couldn't believe he was here, with her, right at this moment, in this way. He knew he had to ask what else was going on with her, and he wanted to be there to listen to her, but...

Actually, he was surprised, because he wasn't thinking about making love to her, but he was thinking about being able to hold her to make her feel better.

Steve didn't want to believe she was actually getting to him. He even looked down at himself, checked himself out, and tried to make sure that he *was* Steve Errman, that this was the real world.

He reminded himself that this was real as soon as he heard her walk in with matches. Reaching out his hand, he said, "Let me do the honors..." and she handed the matches to him when she approached. Hearing her sit down on the couch, he lit a match to light the candles. They had a napkin on the table, so he placed the match he then blew out on the napkin and sat down next to her.

Noting that her glass was still on the table, he reached over and picked it up to give to her.

"So, what did you think of that toast?"

"I thought it was..."

"What?"

"I thought it was unreal, Steve."

"What do you mean by that?"

"It means I'm afraid things are just going to be getting harder and harder until I can't take it any longer."

"You don't believe in the light at the end of the tunnel?"

"I believe I'm in a tunnel with a fork, and I don't know *where* that light is going to be coming from."

"I have no idea what that means."

"It means that I am afraid about continuing my research, for everything I value and for my own safety."

Steve waited a moment before asking his next question. "You say this because this was the rest of what you had to tell me, isn't it?"

"Okay... Have you heard about us working on a book?"

"Yes. Things aren't going well with that?"

"That's just a small part of the problem. Remember how I told you that I was informed that things will get more and more difficult for researchers to

work on AIDS medications?”

“Yes...”

“Okay, I have to tell you how we got this book going in the first place for this to make sense. I had a long-time friend, a good friend, who worked at a high position at a New York publishing company. I talked things over with him — Mr. Donovan — and this is why we got this book on the road. The book seemed to be doing well, it’s supposed to go to the printer by the end of this week —”

“And? That sounds good...”

“Well, last weekend, Mr. Donovan was attacked at night, next to nothing was stolen from him, but he was injected with an HIV-infected needle.”

“He *what?*”

“He’s been given HIV.”

“And you —”

“And I happened to be called because my business card was in his wallet, so I went to New York for the day to see how he was doing ... it was a good thing that he had my number, because I noticed the needle and had the right toxicology screen done, which they wouldn’t have done, and I was then able to overload him with a ton of AZT and Emivir within twelve hours of him being infected. I can only hope that will make a difference for him.”

Steve was silent for a moment before he spoke. “I’m really sorry about your friend.”

She almost cried when she heard him say those words aloud to her. He’s not just a friend, but she couldn’t tell the world this, and she *knew* she couldn’t tell Steve. “I haven’t told this to anyone else, but he is one of my best friends in the world. I cried for hours last night, and I was not able to do anything at work today. I called family and friends, because all I can think is that *this* was done to stop research, I don’t know when it’s going to stop or what measures will be taken. I mean, I even went out for drinks at lunch on a workday with a colleague doing research on AIDS at the University.

“I haven’t even opened my suitcase to put away my clothes from yesterday. I haven’t even wanted to work. I haven’t even —” she almost started to cry.

“What?” Steve asked as he moved closer to her and put his arm around the back of the couch so he could hold her if she needed it.

“I ... I’ve just been wanting to ... I’ve...”

This was when she started crying, and Steve immediately moved his glass

to the table and took her glass to place on the table. Steve moved toward her and instinctively put his arms around her. Placing his hand on her head to guide her to his chest to cry if she needed it.

“It’s okay, Sloane ... I’m here ... It’s okay ...”

“I’ve just been wanting to stop thinking, Steve. I’m so tired of thinking about all of this.”

“Shhh... Just relax...”

“It’s just... You know, I *want* to escape now.”

“Well, that’s what the drinking is for, honey...”

She knew it had started working, so she started giggling.

“What are you laughing for?”

“Steve, you called me *honey*.”

“Did that bother you?”

She still giggled. “Actually, no. It was cute.”

Steve began thinking through what she had said before. “You said before that there’s a fork in your tunnel, right, and you don’t know where the light is?”

“Yeah, I don’t know which way to go.”

“Well, you could dump your research. Do you want to do that?”

“No. Not at all. But I don’t want to lose anyone to my work.”

Steve waited a moment, then asked more. “What did you want to do when you were little?”

“I don’t know, actually. I thought for a while about being a computer science engineer. Wait, for a little while I even thought about being a singer in a band, but there was no chance for that —”

“Oh my gosh, let me go through this. Think about if you took another path in your life. Because I can see you now, business suit on, hair pulled back in a bun, people asking you computer-networking questions. How do you like *that* image?”

“Well...”

“Did you ever watch the show ‘Cheers’? I’m totally seeing you as Lillith now, you know, barking like a dog, this frail little bossy thing,—”

Sloane started laughing.

“And she always *had* to be right, didn’t she?”

“Oh my God no!” he kept laughing.

“I like the path of being a singer. I’m confused now, would you be a grunge singer, looking like Curt Cobain from Nirvana, or would you come

off as something more like Whitney Houston or Mariah Carey, belting out one word with eighteen different chord changes?”

She couldn't stop laughing at all the remarks.

“I like the look of ‘Sloane the Nirvana Queen’, actually, torn up jeans and a flannel shirt... very sexy...”

“Oh stop it!”

“Don't tell me you'd be a Bette Midler wannabe?”

He then felt Sloane roll over to the side of the couch away from him when she heard that one.

Steve reached over and grabbed both of their glasses, handing her the martini glass as he said, “You don't actually sing, do you?”

Taking the glass, she said, “I did, I mean, I can.”

“I don't believe you. Sing something.”

“Like what?”

“I don't know, just think of something.”

Taking a swig of her martini, she tried to think of something. After a moment she threw her head back to get her hair out of her eyes

“Um ... this one was written at the end of World War One, I think it's a good song.

*Once in khaki suits, gee, we looked swell,
Full of that Yankee Doodle de Dum,
Half a million boots went slogging through Hell,
I was the kid with the drums.*

Sloane let in a slight pause as she finished the chorus, noting that Steve was impressed with her singing. She started to feel more confident as she let out the last verse of the song, with more soul and energy.

*Say, don't you remember, they called me 'Al',
It was 'Al' all the time,
Say, don't you remember, I'm your pal,
Brother, can you spare a dime.*

“You have a beautiful voice.”

“Thanks, but really, what kind of money does a woman who likes to sing

and has no training make?”

“You’ve never taken a class or anything?”

“No, I just like to sing and I can remember songs well.”

“Wow. But you’ve got to stop showing me all of these talents of yours, because I was envious enough of you already,” Steve said as he stood up to take her empty glass, since she just finished the glass after singing. “Want more?” he asked.

“Sure, thanks.”

“Are you going to be okay tomorrow?”

“Oh, I already decided I’m taking a sick day tomorrow. Someone even said I looked sick and suggested it to me today, so... Wait, so you have to work tomorrow?”

“I got ahead on my writing this week, so I won’t have to even go into the paper until Wednesday. Why do you ask?”

“You could just stay here if you needed to, that’s all.”

“I’ll see how I’m doing later, but thanks...” he said as he walked toward the kitchen to make her a drink.

Steve thought about it for a moment, about whether or not he should be strong, or if he would just hurt her. He knew that he didn’t want to destroy any sort of friendship they might now have; he thought about it until he placed their glasses on the counter. He then decided that he would have to try, so he left the glasses on the kitchen counter and walked back to the couch.

He saw Sloane looking up at him as he walked until he was standing right in front of her. He looked straight into her eyes and asked, “I’m about to do something, and I want to do it because I really care about you, but I don’t want to offend you.” His voice became stern as he asked her a question, without sounding like he was asking.

“So I’m going to do something, and I want you to be okay with it.”

She looked a bit confused, but answered. “Okay.”

He reached down and put his hand on the back of her neck and started to kiss her. He couldn’t believe this, she wasn’t fighting him, dear God, he didn’t want to stop, but he didn’t want to take too long and get her angry.

He felt her hand reach around and touch his cheek. When he felt her touch his face he knew he just had to stop, only because he didn’t want to take it too far. About one second later he started to pull away from her lips, and he slowly moved his head up to kiss her forehead. Then he turned

around to go back to the kitchen to make their drinks.

As she watched him walk away, her mind raced, what did she just let him do, damn he felt good, what is going to happen to Carter, would Steve want more, what should she say.

Carter would have to understand that sometimes, well, sometimes a kiss is just a kiss, and sometimes she needs something there to make her feel human again, and it doesn't change how she feels about him.

Maybe she was just trying to find a way to justify what happened, but in her mind she knew that the action was justified.

Once Steve got to the counter in front of her glasses, he rested his weight on both hands, leaning on her counter. After two seconds he moved one hand over his mouth; he still couldn't believe what had just happened, he didn't want to push her too hard, but damn, she felt so good, and she hadn't stopped him. Was she drinking too much, and what if she ended up hating him for what he just did.

Oh God. Oh God, was all he could think. Just make her a drink and don't take too long and try to make sure that everything works out okay. Knowing the right amount of each liqueur, he was able to make her martini easily, and he made a point to add extra crushed ice to it so it would be a bit more watered down. He threw his drink together with ease, put both glasses in his hands, then took a deep breath before walking back into the living room.

As he approached her and handed her the glass, Sloane turned around to look at him. She took it without saying a word. Steve walked around and sat next to her before he spoke. "Are you okay?"

She waited a second, then shook her head up and down. "Yes."

"I hope I didn't —"

"No, you didn't."

"You don't even know what I was going to say to you."

"Steve, I have the feeling that whatever you were going to say, my answer would have been the same." She looked at him for a moment before she spoke again. "But I have to ask you something ... why did you just kiss me?"

"... Because you deserved it."

She hadn't expected that answer; it was a pleasant surprise. "Oh," she answered. "Now I have one more question."

“Shoot. What is it?”

“Well, can I lean on you for a bit?”

He didn't expect that question, and all he could do was move a little so she could lean on him and still be sitting on the couch. After she leaned on him and took a drink, he said, “I guess if I stay here tonight you don't want me to sleep in your bed with you...”

“I suppose there's no reason why you shouldn't,” she answered. “You think you'll need to crash here?”

“It might be easier, whenever we decide to call it a night.”

Steve's mind was still thinking about everything that had happened so far. All he could think to say was, “What else would you like to talk about?”

“You know, I think I've heard enough out of my mouth tonight, and I think I need to hear about someone else's stories.” Sloane took a sip from her glass and continued. “What has been going on with *you*?”

They talked on the couch for another hour and a half. Then Steve finally made her drink a glass of water with a multi-vitamin and an aspirin.

“Why are you making me take this?”

“A friend of mine said whenever he partied too much, he'd take this before he went to bed. And he never had a hangover. Seeing that we've drunk a ton, it seems a smart idea...”

So Sloane brushed her teeth, drank her water and took Steve's hangover cure before putting on her silk pajamas and getting into bed. Steve wore a pair of her sweat pants to bed, kept a water glass on her nightstand, and reached over to give her a small kiss good night on the forehead.



CHAPTER 15

THE PUBLISHING BATTLE

Steve rolled over in bed, kissing Sloane for a minute straight, before he looked at the clock. “You’re late for work, Angel,” he said.

“Isn’t it the weekend?” she asked.

“No, honey, it’s Thursday. I got my story in yesterday.”

“I’ll call in and tell them I’ll be late.”

“You know, I still feel bad that you’re not making it to Mr. Donovan’s funeral today.”

“It’s on the other side of the country, and I couldn’t afford the airfare to go over there for 45 minutes. I don’t even know, if we could afford the ticket for me, if I’d have time to see him before he’s buried.”

And as she heard herself say these words to Steve in bed, Sloane sprung up from her dream, panting.

Still having bad dreams, she held the blankets up to her chest. Steve felt her move in bed and sat up to see if something was wrong. “Sloane?” she heard Steve call out as he put his hands on her shoulders.

His springing up after her forced her to remember that she wasn’t alone.

“I’m sorry, Steve, I had a bad dream.” She tried to run her hands through her hair to tuck hair behind her ears.

“Are you okay? What was it about?”

“Oh, it was...” She didn’t want to say a word about it to Steve, because she had no idea what she could say. “I ... I don’t really remember...” was all she could get out of her mouth, but Steve felt Sloane still shaking the bed as she tried to calm down.

“You’ve only been asleep for less than an hour, you must have dropped right into dream sleep. Are you feeling okay?”

“I suppose, I —”

“Come here,” Steve said as he guided her head to his chest to try to make her relax. “What do you need from me?”

“I ... I really have no idea...”

“Do you want some space, because I’m here for you if you want me here.”

Sloane had to decide in seconds what she wanted from him and what she needed right then and there. Her mind started running through thoughts:

- She knew it wasn’t a Thursday,
- She knew, or at least **hoped**, that Carter wasn’t dead,
- She dreamt Steve called her ‘angel’ just like how Carter did,
- She needed to be held,
- She needed to know if Carter was okay,
- She needed Steve to start kissing her,
- She needed to try to calm down,
- She needed to work on a cure for AIDS,
- She needed sleep,

She knew there was more, but all she could do was lean on Steve’s shoulder and let him hold her. His hands almost fiercely grabbed her, as if he wanted to be sure he would never have to let her go. She finally looked up at him and he saw her eyes in the low light from her windows.

He reached his head down and started to kiss her. And she kissed back.

###

When she woke up hours later, she grabbed her head. She had to make another mental checklist of what had happened that night. She started by clawing at her pajamas to verify that she was not naked; she remembered kiss-

ing Steve for a while after her dream, but she thought she just fell asleep in his arms. Looking over, she noted that Steve was not in bed, so she suddenly had a minor panic attack: where did he go? Did he leave without saying good-bye? Is he in the washroom? She got out of bed, saw her sweat pants folded up on her nightstand, and saw his clothes missing.

She walked outside.

Hearing Steve in the kitchen cooking, she walked in and saw that he had cleaned too. "What are you doing?"

"Good morning."

"Well, good morning to you, Steve. Did I make too much of a fool of myself last night?"

"Do you ever?"

"What time is it?" she asked, trying not to react to his question.

"Ten after nine. Why?"

"I have to call to tell them that I'm sick and not going to work today..." Sloane turned and walked toward the phone so she could make a call.

Kyle called her over the phone an hour after she called in sick. She told Julie to tell Kyle that she'd be able to get back on base with him when she returned on Wednesday, but Kyle wanted to make sure she was feeling okay, and was tempted to bounce ideas off of her that he was thinking about Monday night. She talked things over with Kyle a little; Kyle told her that a call from Shelly Stempel was forwarded to him because she was not in today. According to Ms. Stempel, it seemed *The Battle from the Inside* would have to go through a round of Quentin editorial scans again, now that Mr. Donovan's team was no longer working on the book.

For the next month she would only have the deal with Shelly Stempel trying to change the book around, but all she could think about right now was checking on Carter's progress. Managing to get a flight to New York for the weekend, she took half of the next Monday off before she left to visit him.

Only some people could manage to juggle more problems. Not knowing how they would have to say good-bye to each other that Tuesday, they seemed to slide into a long hug. Two days later, the day before she would have the chance to leave to check on Carter's progress, Steve and Sloane met again, and she did her best to make it clear that she couldn't let their relationship go any farther than where it had already gone.

Steve tried to think of the right response. "Do you hate me because of

what had happened?”

“No, Steve, it’s not that at all. With some of the things I told you about before, I seem to be having problems now with the production of *The Battle from the Inside*. And I couldn’t throw you into that mix right now, it just wouldn’t be right.”

“Why, you don’t think I could handle it?”

“Steve, you know it’s not that. Really, though, I’m even flattered that you’re pressing me this much on it... Shouldn’t you be more content with no strings attached from a girl?”

“I think that would only happen if we made love.”

This one took her aback; she had to think of the right response. “Sure, but this way you don’t deal with a girl that complains that she wants a more serious relationship with you, that she wants more of you around now that you’ve actually *slept* with her.”

“You’re not the average girl, though, are you?”

Having to smile, she finally said, “You keep catching me, don’t you... You’re getting to know me too well.”

“And I thought I didn’t know you *enough*.”

Hearing Steve say those words to her reminded her of Carter, and she thought, no, Steve *didn’t* know her enough. Even though Carter barely saw her, she felt like they lived with each other and they knew what the other one was always thinking.

They said good-bye to each other the last time this week, and as they were hugging, Steve couldn’t stop himself from saying, “You know, how I feel about you is different.” His kissed her forehead and continued, “When I kiss you like this, I don’t mean it as some sort of ‘lust’ thing, I just want to do it as some sort of sign of ... I don’t know ... admiration, I guess.”

They pulled away from each other as they were about to leave. “You’re such a smart cookie, girl,” he said, watching her smile.

“Why do you even tolerate me?”

“It’s not that and you *know* it...” were the last words out of his mouth as they left.

Having other things on her mind, she couldn’t worry about Steve, or even *The Battle from the Inside*. Now she head to get ready to fly to New York.

###

Walking into his home was one of the hardest things for her to do, when she finally made it in from the airport and the taxi to see Carter. Things had changed now; he wasn't a friend that she'd see every once in a while, he wasn't a friend who gave her a book contract for AIDS research, he wasn't someone she fell in love with and couldn't tell, he wasn't her soul mate that loved her as much as she loved him. All she could think was that he was the man that she made sick, because of her research.

No, *she* didn't do this to him, it was the U.S. government. She had to keep telling herself that, to make herself sane, to give herself something she could fight.

How could she fight the U.S. government?

There had to be a way, she had to find a way ... that was all she could think.

Carter thought what happened to him was a random act. Sloane didn't. Suddenly everything was somehow coming back to haunt her; she thought her wires had been tapped. "This was their way of threatening me to leave the government alone," was all she thought. But that wouldn't stop her. "If they thought doing this would stop me from looking, then they don't know me at all," she continued thinking during the flight to see Carter. She needed them to give her the cure, for him, because she didn't think she could do it in enough time to save him.

Ever since this attack on Carter following her hacking onto the CIA database and her press statement about not letting the government get in anyone's way, Sloane kept thinking about the government's ability to tap into her phones, watch her via cameras in her home, even photograph or videotape her voice or image to track everything she is doing. She started to keep windows closed all the time. She seldom talked on the phone already, but she made a conscious effort to not make calls at home, and to only make extremely short and vague calls while she was at work.

Her own privacy in jeopardy raced through her head as she walked into his building. When she got to his door, she imagined what Carter might now be like. She imagined him thinner, gaunt, sad and sallow. After reading over so many test cases of AIDS patients, she had only seen poorly dressed men with extremely short hair, all in blank rooms.

This couldn't be the case with Carter. She was sure of it. She knew his clothes. She knew his home. It would be impossible for him to lose that

much weight in less than a week. “All he had to do was keep was a positive attitude,” she thought as she rang his doorbell.

Expecting to see a nurse, Carter opened the door for her. He looked fantastic. He had just been released from the hospital the morning before, and he was dressed in khaki pants with a button-down white shirt, looking relaxed and comfortable. Her first impulse was to say ‘you look phenomenal’, but she stopped herself long enough to first say, “I love you, Carter Donovan.”

Carter smiled. As he opened the door wider to let her in, he said, “And I love you, angel.”

“The hospital wouldn’t tell me how you were doing. And you look *phenomenal*. How are you doing?”

“I feel awake, I went through your book to tell me how to eat and what supplements to take, and —”

“But what are your stats?”

“Oh... Well, I guess it was a really good thing that you were called, because my T-cell count was still at normal levels. Right now my T-cell count is just over four hundred.”

“Just over *four hundred*? That’s completely normal! Usually AIDS patients in good health have a count of between two hundred and three hundred! This is amazing! So,” she asked the bottom line question she really needed the answer to, “have they been able to detect any HIV in your body?”

“Well, they can still see it in my bloodstream, but,”

Her face immediately started to fall; she was hoping the overdose of drugs would be enough for him.

“But the doctors and nurses are amazed at my condition, and I think it is entirely due to what you did.”

“Don’t give me that much credit. You were in great shape to begin with. And besides, do they know if it has blown from HIV to AIDS yet, I mean, is your immune system down?”

“Well, they had to medicate me from something I got in the hospital, but I suppose that—”

“That you have AIDS and not just HIV.” Her face dropped again. She did her best to remember all of the good news in all of this, holding her spirits up she listened to the bad news she kept hearing.

She finally spoke again. “So what do you need from me?”

"I need to have my arms around you, if that's okay," he said as he walked toward her. "I don't know if that is safe enough..."

"You know that you can only transmit this through blood or sex, so as long as you don't *bleed* all over me, we should be just fine," she said, starting to laugh, as she threw her arms up to hug him. In his arms, she mustered the energy to say, "And you know, as long as your gums aren't bleeding, you could kiss me."

"But we'd be exchanging body fluids..."

"Research states that individuals would have to exchange six gallons of saliva before AIDS could be transmitted, so the only way you could hurt me is to *drool* for a few weeks and force me to drink it all..." she said as she pulled back long enough to look at him.

"Wait, though," Carter said as he pulled away. "Are you sure you'd want to do that?"

Sloane thought for a flash about spending the rest of her life with a man who had AIDS, then she corrected herself; she should be thinking about spending the rest of her life with Carter. "I'm sure. Why?"

"Because," he said, "because I'd like to make this like a special occasion," he finished as he pulled candles from the bookshelf and lit them both while they were still in his hands. He walked over to her and gave her one of them to hold.

"Are we the candleholders today, Carter?"

"Right now we are, yes." He looked at her. "I love you."

Smiling, she responded by saying she loved him too as they kissed.

###

The rest of her weekend was spent in his high-rise, working out possible solutions for helping him be physically strong through whatever AIDS might do to him. Taking all the right steps would also help the drugs work more effectively, she thought. She asked him to get records of chapters from *The Battle from the Inside* for her to go over, and she made a point to ask for two copies of the book as it stood to be overnighted to his home for her to go over them while she was there.

Sloane also thought this would be a good way for Carter to keep records of all of the changes Shelly Stempel was making to *The Battle from the Inside*, but she wouldn't tell Carter that yet.

Knowing some of the avenues, she looked into clinics for acupuncture and acupressure for Carter to go to for sessions for AIDS patients. She also had a vague memory of reading e-mails about garlic, tomatoes and soy, so she made sure Carter had protein-filled meals while she was there, one of Italian food where garlic and tomatoes would prevail, and one of Asian food, where Soy and garlic could both be used.

“You’re going to make me reek of garlic!” Carter said on the second day.

“It’s good for you, and it tastes good too, doesn’t it? And what, you’re worried about offending people when you have to go out to deal with them all? You’re not even working right now.”

“Hopefully I can work some of the garlic smell out of me when I shower after working out,” Carter answered, knowing that working out to build muscle mass was also a good idea.

She also thought that if giving Carter that much medication helped his condition remain so good at this point, could taking more of the medications that quickly killed the virus altogether? They didn’t know that it might have actually killed the virus and been a cure if he were immediately injected. But this idea was too late to help Carter.

When Sloane was about to leave she reminded him that she would look for a master in his area that could help them with information on meditation and yoga.

She also tried to make her temporary leaving sound trivial. “I finally get my own *bed* to sleep in...”

“What, I’m sorry I don’t have an extra bed in my home!”

“I’m just teasing you and you know it. If I had to sleep on nails I’d be here.”

They saved one last good-bye kiss for her leaving to go back to her impending book troubles at her office in Seattle.

###

The next few weeks were filled with her attempts to keep *The Battle from the Inside* going to print on schedule, when the schedule kept being pushed farther and farther back. Getting a swami or a Chinese master to instruct Carter on forms of meditation, yoga or possibly Tai Chi, was bound to be an excellent idea for helping keep his condition strong. Sloane searched for a

swami in New York that could help her find an instructor for Carter while she was visiting on a weekend to help his condition.

Someone would meet with her three weekends after she visited Carter the first time. She scribbled down in her note pad for their meeting:

Qigong/chi kong (pronounced chee goong)

All she was otherwise able to do was visit on the weekends, giving him instructions like a drill sergeant, about having to eat more yogurt, or stretch more when he wakes up in the mornings, but not to overextend himself and make him more susceptible to illness.

At the third weekend visit, the week before she was meeting with the Swami, she *still* couldn't see a change in Carter's physical external condition. "You know Carter, they really shouldn't be holding you here."

"I know, and I am getting half salary pay for just sitting here ... but it's driving me crazy, sitting around here and seeing how they are destroying *The Battle from the Inside*."

"At least you have a copy of the original in your files here."

"It's a good thing you had an extra copy overnighted to me when you were first here."

"You know, I even asked them to send a copy to myself when this all started, so I have a copy of your files too."

"Why?"

"Because I didn't trust Stempel from the start..."

"You know I want to be back working. I think I would have the great-est joy if my first assignment when I got back was to finish *The Battle from the Inside*."

"Hmm..."

"What does that mean?"

"Well..."

"You want to try to get me back somehow?"

"Who knows what I can come up with?"

"You've got gears spinning in your brain right now ... I don't know if I should trust you then, or love you more..."

"Do I have to guess the answer to that *myself*?"

“You know I love you, angel, and thanks for the effort. Maybe we can get the book out together after all.”

When she was about to visit with Carter and the Swami three weeks later, all she could think of was all of the work she had to do to try to keep *The Battle from the Inside* alive. The amount of work and the number of memos alone was baffling. Dealing with inaccuracies and things that were inadequate, she shrugged her shoulders with disbelief. Quentin assumed everything would run smoothly with the transition of the book to Shelly Stempel, but after finding herself trying to put out fires that never should have been started, Sloane wondered if writing everything down in triplicate made any difference at all. All she could guess was that she was starting to sound like a wind bag trying to let off steam at every opportunity, but all she knew was that the book had been ready to go to press when Madison was working on the book when it was spearheaded by Carter. Now Shelly seemed to be dragging her feet.

It almost seemed to her like Shelly was making sure this book did *not* print.

Organized into piles, she didn't bother sorting memos, but was still stunned by the amount of fruitless work she had to go through to defend her work and the book. She had memos to Tyler, Carter, Colin, Howard and Kyle. And she wondered what more she could be doing - other than producing the book herself - to get this book out on to the market.

Starting at the top of the first stack, she got the general idea of what he had written to Tyler.

To: Mr. Tyler Gillian, Public Relations Manager, Madison Pharmaceuticals

From: Ms. Sloane Emerson, Research Manager, Madison Pharmaceuticals

cc: Mr. Colin Madison, CEO, Madison Pharmaceuticals, Mr. Kyle Mackenzie, Research Associate Manager, Madison Pharmaceuticals, Mr. Howard Shindo, Research Associate Manager, Madison Pharmaceuticals, Ms. Ellen Thomas, Research Associate, Madison Pharmaceuticals, Mr. Carter Donovan, New Client Recruitment Vice President, Quentin Publishing, Ms. Shelly Stempel, New Client Editorial Department Chairperson, Quentin Publishing, Mr. Bryce Farrell, Marketing Chairman, Quentin Publishing

Mr. Gillian:

re: book flow of information

The book will go out for another round of changes Thursday evening, on schedule, after a series of late nights on the part of myself as well as Kyle, Ellen, Howard and other members of our staff (Kyle also worked both Friday and Saturday of our four-day holiday weekend). Despite this, about 25 pages of this month's issue had to be redesigned on very short notice, for a number of reasons.

I believe we can work together with Quentin to make sure that some of these problems won't happen again.

Problems included:

* A lack of communication between the editorial staff and the design staff. Disagreements would cause sections to be revamped. Often no suggestions were made, and stories would be returned from editorial to production with comments like "this is not what I had in mind." One suggestion because of the tight schedule was to mail part of the book to the printer with a delay-hole; that is not economically feasible.

* As the Director and Research Manager, I hope that as our new staff gets accustomed to their positions I will be able to take more of a Director's role and not have to play such an integral part of the actual production and correction of pages.

* Once again we were waiting on sections. Quentin extends

their own deadlines, and as a result we have to catch up by working inexcusably long hours. We shouldn't be expected to do so much extra work because everyone else is late.

* The day before the book is supposed to go out we receive large segments of the book to change. This created many hours of work for us, and many hours later of redesigning for Quentin.

We also need to set a cap on the number of rounds of editorial revisions the book gets before it is sent to press. I'm sure that there are other measures we could also take to make the production of this book run smoothly - if anyone has any ideas, questions or comments, please let me know. Also contact me if there is anything else I can do to help in that respect.

- Ms. S. Emerson

Glancing through the remainder of the memos to Tyler alone. At each memo she would scan it over to see what the problems were that afternoon.

* Time has been consumed by doing arbitrary editorial design changes, which are unnecessary. Quentin's editorial is going beyond their jurisdiction in demanding these changes; they have been working inefficiently.

* been consumed by doing arbitrary editorial design changes, which are unnecessary. Copies should come in clean to production; it is drastically rewritten after it is designed. Stress & friction has continually escalated because of this conflict.

* There have been a larger number of corrections per page in the book since Mr. Donovan left this project.

* The book is late because of being needlessly reworked. It affects our mailing date and our image as a company.

This also didn't happen in the first period of my working on the book, while Mr. Donovan was heading the project. Since he left, my hands have been tied behind my back. If I don't do Shelly's changes, which are demands from her and not suggestions or requests, the end result is repeated demands, yelling and badmouthing about me behind my back. If I do them, the book, honestly, turns out worse. And usually it has to change again, because even she notices that the result is bad with her suggestions.

The changes, which she improperly labeled as "corrections," were another full round of changes that were not editorial in nature. She wanted a regular list changed to a bulleted line of items (which is what she originally asked for and it had changed once already, meaning she changed her mind back to what it originally was at Quentin). None of her changes had editorial concerns. She even said once to eliminate white space at the top of the page because "she doesn't like it."

The book is suffering because of all of these problems Shelly Stempel has caused.

Shelly is repeatedly rude, demanding and unprofessional at best. Please let me know what steps will be taken to correct this costly, long-running problem.

Each note she read, while still skipping a few each time, made her more and more angry.

Moving over to the stack of memos to Carter, she wondered if her only reason for writing these memos to him was to keep him aware of the fiasco their book had become.

To: Mr. Carter Donovan, Quentin Publishing
From: Ms. Sloane Emerson, Madison Pharmaceuticals

Note: please keep on file and forward to all who are necessary for record keeping at Quentin

Mr. Donovan:

I know we've gone over this before, but I just want to let you know when problems come up. Today Shelly Stempel, in front of myself, Kyle and Howard, badgered me with questions focusing on two minor problems.

Stempel insisted on work being done that jeopardized the integrity of the book. Her tone was more than condescending, it was flat out rude. If I were her secretary I would have been offended by the remarks that she "professionally" made to virtual strangers.

The demands she posed were trivial and out of her jurisdiction, and they were made to not a low-ranking member of the staff, but to her only connection to getting this book completed through Quentin, in front of the staff. Behavior like that is unprofessional and intolerable.

We have discussed and agreed that her behavior and attitude is a problem at Madison.

- S. Emerson

To: Mr. Carter Donovan, Quentin Publishing
From: Ms. Sloane Emerson, Madison Pharmaceuticals

Note: please keep on file and forward to all who are necessary for record keeping at Quentin

Mr. Donovan:

I have written repeated memos, had regular meetings and expressed an urgent concern about not only the meddling, but also the incompetence of Shelly Stempel that has proven to be detrimental to this book and to the production work of Madison Pharmaceuticals. I have demonstrated over and over again that I am a good, quick worker, even when regularly faced with late, incomplete and inconsistent work from her. I have documented repeatedly that her interference in our work has hurt our morale, has cost hours upon hours of time and additional money to both you and us, and has ultimately sacrificed the integrity of the book. I have outlined what a problem this is.

Her changes are entirely subjective, and they are exactly the kinds of remarks she is supposed to be refraining from.

I've had to replace one staff member from working on this book that quit because of her; I've had to remove one staff member from working on this book because they cannot stand working with her. The challenge of working well under difficult circumstances is not the problem; the challenge of "working well when inexperienced people are actively trying to stop you from doing a good job" is the problem. I can't tell people they should work on this when it is getting to the point where I can't even think of any reasons why I should continue to.

Something, apparently something drastic, must be done immediately. I genuinely do not know how much longer I can work with the current circumstances. Please let me know as soon as possible if we can implement these changes and if you have any other ideas on how to solve this problem.

- Ms. S. Emerson

To: Mr. Carter Donovan, Quentin Publishing
From: Ms. Sloane Emerson, Madison Pharmaceuticals

Please keep; forward to all necessary for record-keeping at Quentin

Mr. Donovan:

I would appreciate it if you would do your best to keep Shelly Stempel informed of all the notes I have had to forward to you. I am in no way trying to report problems to someone else; I have repeatedly communicated with her about these difficulties, and they have gotten us nowhere. I greatly appreciate your help in this, and if you need anything at all from me, please let me know.

- Ms. S. Emerson

To: Mr. Carter Donovan, Quentin Publishing
From: Ms. Sloane Emerson, Madison Pharmaceuticals

Please keep; forward to all necessary for record-keeping at Quentin

Mr. Donovan:

Personally, I would not recommend using the suggestions Stempel had for the book. I see a number of problems with it:

1. The image she chose for the cover will look weak, and "bitmapped", as you noted
2. This will hold back the correction time of the book
3. She is making it less readable to the average reader
4. These seem to be attempts to make the book her creation, which is inappropriate

You said you'd look for other options, which is a good idea. I understand that you are looking for time to relax, but you seem to be the only one at Quentin I feel comfortable talking to about our concerns. Let me know if you come up with anything, and thanks.

- Ms. S. Emerson

To: Mr. Carter Donovan, Quentin Publishing

From: Ms. Sloane Emerson, Madison Pharmaceuticals

Note: please keep on file and forward to all who are necessary for record keeping at Quentin

Mr. Donovan:

I came across the drafts since Stempel took over this book in a pile at Kyle's desk. I thumbed through them, and there were a lot of drafts and corrections I never saw - and a lot of the pages included unapproved changes made by Shelly Stempel. I won't go into whether the changes were valid. The point is, there were a large number of changes made by Stempel. The changes were quite detailed, and she stepped over her bounds regularly in making these changes.

To Kyle, they weren't comments to be considered, they were edicts; he was to follow Stempel's commands begrudgingly, but he did follow them. If I had seen these rounds of changes, I would have treated the comments differently.

I have attached copies of some of the pages I am referring to. This problem is widespread. Just thought I'd keep you informed of what is going on. What are we going to do about this?

- Ms. S. Emerson

To: Mr. Colin Madison, CEO, Madison Pharmaceuticals
From: Ms. Sloane Emerson, Research Manager

Mr. Madison:

Since some recent changes at Quentin Publishing and our inability to work directly with Mr. Donovan, Madison has been working with Shelly Stempel, along with some of the editors that started working on our book with us before Mr. Donovan took some time off from his work. In light of all of this, our situations have changed drastically - and with that comes an adjustment period until things flow smoothly again. However, we have been working for a long time on a project that should have already been completed, and I still see a great number of problems that I have only been partially successful at solving. Most stem from Quentin proofreading problems, such as: Shelly Stempel has consistently delayed our copy getting to press. We had a deadline for the book. We did not receive the majority of edited work until two weeks after it was due to the printer, knowing that it had to go through us again first. I received material late and worked all night on a few occasions for this book so Quentin would have more time; Shelly would not look at any text until the entire chapter was edited again, which also held up production of the book. She sends biweekly memos stating the editorial is on schedule and we will get changes on time, but in actuality we get changes for only a small fraction of the book on time.

I have informed Mr. Donovan and two other reps from Quentin Publishing of these problems, and they have all said that they were not aware that the copy was coming to me so late and that I should not be receiving it so late. I have no physical verification of whether anyone at Quentin is doing anything about this; the problem still hasn't changed.

Also, not only do we need material earlier, but we also need all of the material. For example, the day the chapters were supposed to be completed, I received additional changes for more than one chapter. This created many hours of work for us.

* Ms. Stempel and the current workflow as it is now set up at Quentin without Mr. Donovan supervising, makes sure that the copy goes through many rounds of corrections, further holding up production. When Mr. Donovan ran the book, the book got

one round of corrections - one editor writes it, and two editors correct it once. When changes are corrected the book would then be finished. With this new hierarchy of workflow at Quentin, a number of editors see copy more than once before it goes to us for approval. Even after their preliminary editing, after we look it over, it goes through another round of corrections.

* Ms. Stempel continually oversteps her boundaries by attempting to redefine the book. She tries to direct it differently than how Mr. Donovan and myself personally agreed on, yet often communicates her ideas poorly. Disagreements over the end product will cause sections to be revamped.

Ms. Stempel usually tries to go around me and have Kyle or Howard do work when I am the one who has final say and I am the one she should be talking to. Although she acknowledges that I am the contact person for this book, she regularly attempts to go around me or undermine my decisions.

Ms. Stempel's implying that I am not doing my job is an insult. I have made great improvements on the book in addition to doing other work at this company. Yet she is out and out rude to us. It is one thing to be concerned about how the book turns out; it is another to do everything to get your way, and then be obnoxious if you don't get it.

I have tried being diplomatic with her; I have bent over backwards to accommodate her since she started with our book.

I wanted to keep you informed of the situation. Hopefully they can work something out internally; we haven't so far. Other people at Quentin, including Mr. Donovan, have noted to me that Ms. Stempel is difficult to work with and that it stems from her personality.

- Ms. S. Emerson

p.s.: I am attaching memos I have written to Mr. Carter Donovan about matters with Ms. Shelly Stempel, and I have repeatedly made an effort to communicate with her about these issues. I am trying to cover all bases at our end with resolving any potential problems with the book production. If you need anything, please let us know.

She knew at this point that her staff was putting in too many hours for the book, but she also knew that she would have to be making regular weekly flights to New York to see Carter. "There had to be a way to get more money in to her staff," she thought. Being stretched too thin while working, she knew that now she had to cash in on all of her hard work and overtime so she could afford seeing Carter across the country. She had to do everything she could to help save his life, and if nothing else, she wanted to be by his side.

To: Mr. Colin Madison, CEO, Madison Pharmaceuticals
From: Ms. Sloane Emerson, Research Manager

note: Overtime Memo

Mr. Madison:

Over a three-month period, including regular hours and overtime, I have worked approximately 925 hours. At the very reasonable and often considered low freelance wage of \$50/hour, I would make \$41,250, which is closer to my salary for the year and not for the past few months of work.

In some industries and some professions, overtime is supposed to be compensated for by being able to take time off. Usually, however, we only take time off at a ratio of 1:4 or 1:3; If I work 60 hours of overtime in a given month, seldom do I have the opportunity, much less the permission, to take nearly four days off, which would be a 1:2 ratio, much less a week and a half off at a 1:1 ratio. Yet this is supposed to be my compensation for losing half of my spare time. I have had to repeatedly relinquish social and family obligations, as well as eliminate basic money-saving and necessary household chores in my life like grocery shopping because I have simply had no time to do the things that I should be doing. The sheer amount of time I have worked has also made me physically sick, and with more work always piling on, I do not have the chance to take the time off I need to get some rest and recover from illness. We have not been able to take any comp time for our hours worked (other than a day or two around the Christmas holiday).

I propose a method of compensation that can be used when it is not possible to take time off because of scheduling con-

cerns. Considering how much money a designer could be making with their spare time, when there is no benefit to putting in all this extra work, it will continue to become more and more difficult to keep a production staff without valuing the extra work they put in.

Knowing how much I have given to this company, I feel I have not taken comp time off or been paid adequately for hours worked. Consider that during holidays, when most take vacation days and have paid holidays, our department still had to put in an average of 70 hours of overtime.

For additional projects I have taken on in the past, I have had to argue about even being paid for them. I have had to fight for these additional payments to be settled in advance so that I wasn't paid unfairly after the fact. And for all other payments suggested for work done, they have been consistently about half of what national standards would suggest.

- Ms. S. Emerson

To: Mr. Colin Madison, CEO, Madison Pharmaceuticals
From: Ms. Sloane Emerson, Research Manager

note: Market Value and Hiring Memo

Mr. Madison:

Market Value of Current and New Employees

Attached Surveys Price Our Company Far Below Market Averages for Pay. The attached form outlines salary averages, and they list them at being between \$10,000 and \$20,000 higher than our own. The average bonus for work annually was nearly \$6,000, and salary increases came at an average of over 11 percent. The surveys attached outline that the average salary for work in our field is for doing a portion of the work that we in fact do. Kyle, Howard, or other staff members here, have been aware of these figures.

A potential New Hire: Our first interview was an excellent candidate for the job, but seemed disappointed when we offered the available salary for work. Our most recent interview was less qualified and asked for a starting salary currently above my salary. Laura, another good candidate for the job, verified with us that we'd have to give her a larger dollar amount to pull her away from her current job. So far, all of them are looking for a consistently higher salary.

The market is calling for higher salaries in general. Also, all of the people that are now applying already have good-paying jobs, so we have to be able to lure them away with a competitive salary. Currently we're not doing that.

Bonuses: Industry magazine estimates that people with the background and stature, as well as the ability, of Kyle, Howard and myself, receive bonuses on average of over \$8,000 for the work. For a staff that has been overworked and is looking for some sign of gratitude, no bonus and a lunch instead of a party is insulting.

- Ms. S. Emerson

To: Mr. Colin Madison, CEO, Madison Pharmaceuticals
From: Ms. Sloane Emerson, Research Manager
cc: Howard S., Kyle M.

Mr. Madison:

I have had a number of concerns about payment for work done, additional work done, overtime work and salary increases. Some of these concerns are outlined below.

Payment for doing the work of people who recently left

If you hired someone to do the job of people who recently left at the same price as her salary, Madison would still save money because there would be no benefits to pay the freelancer. You know the numbers, Kyle, and any additional payments we are getting for compensation for lack-of-researchers to produce results at this end, well, any additional numbers are abysmal. They do not keep in consideration the benefits that would be paid out to new employees, and the way that any additional payments were being distributed to us is unfair at best. Letting you know, so you can know I am working on coming up with a solution to this as soon as I can.

Payment for production

If one person were to do the work of getting that book together, about \$36,000 in salary would be dedicated to the production of that book. If the current staff is supposed to be doing this in addition to their regular jobs, then \$36,000 should be split between the people working on it. Currently our estimates are below that figure. I have documentation of these salary estimates and am forwarding them throughout the hierarchy of people that need to analyze this data. If we hired a temp to do this work, our bills would easily climb above \$40,000.

Prompt payment and agreements in advance for work done

For additional projects I have taken on in the past, I have had to argue about even being paid for them. I have had to fight for these additional payments to be settled in advance so that I wasn't paid unfairly after the fact. And other than the hourly rate for projects that we have taken on, all other payments suggested have been consistently about half of what they should have been.

We have consistently worked far more overtime than one should, and consistently we have produced quality work. I have wondered when we'd get paid for the work we have done. I look around and see the sales staff making three to four times my salary, all while working a normal workweek (when not traveling around the globe). In short, I feel we don't receive adequate compensation in most every front at this company.

Please let me know when we can discuss what we can do about this.

- Ms. S. Emerson

To: Howard Shindo
From: Sloane Emerson
cc: Kyle M., Colin M.

Howard -

I wanted to send you these notes, because I wanted you to know that you are entitled to benefits that other people get. According to national averages, averages for companies that produce at a slower rate and less efficiently, well, national averages give financial compensation for work given by the average employee, in the form of time off, bonuses or incentives, or pay raises.

I have been talking to Kyle about so many things as of late, and I want you to know that I personally value you both for the amount of work that you do here at Madison. I wrote memos to Kyle and cc'd you in them, but they could have been written directly to you as well. My point? I really want your opinions on these issues, I feel we deserve more, and I feel that we have every reason to ask for more. I have been researching these standards and looking into the returns and the profits that Madison has been getting as a direct result of our work. I feel that we are entitled to more adequate pay cycles for the work we do, and I wanted your opinions on this. I plan to talk to Colin more extensively about this in upcoming dates, because I believe Colin and I have a respect for each other and are very willing to hear each other out. So please, if you would like to be hands-on in any of this interaction with Colin, or if you have anything to add, please let me know. And thanks.

The Human Resources Department has a record of my taking two vacation days off in February and two vacation days off in March. I would like to be compensated for pay for the overtime I have put in, considering that I have not been able to take any vacation days off this year.

- Ms. S. Emerson

To: Howard Shindo
From: Sloane Emerson
cc: Kyle M., Colin M.

Howard -

This current project has not in the past been in the hands of our staff, but in the hands of Quentin.

And overall the book has struggled because of it. Consider, for example, the overwhelming success of our research recently. There is no editorial/corporate intervention in this. We are able to do their job, and the results speak for themselves.

It is my understanding that Colin is not pleased with the production of this project (although he has not told me, the Director at Madison).

Apparently, however, Colin has decided to change his mind on the views of this project, without telling me. It would be helpful to find out exactly what he is currently looking for, so that we may be able to actually enact some of the changes he now wants.

I have a concern that his changes may only be temporary and following them may make us look inconsistent.

This may be an option if we have support from Colin on it and he is prepared to make sure Quentin does not interfere with our work here. Currently we do not have this.

Let me know if there is a time when we should meet to discuss what should be done about this.

- Ms. S. Emerson

To: Howard Shindo
From: Sloane Emerson
cc: Kyle M., Colin M.

Howard -

I will forward this to Mr. Donovan at Quentin, but I do not know whom else to confer with about this. just so you know. And thank you.

I was talking to Ellen from Quentin today, and she said the reason that there are often so many changes to editorial after production has designed pages is because Shelly doesn't even read copy before handing it over to production at Quentin. For example, Shelly said certain stories were done and ready for production Friday, but I was told that Shelly didn't even edit them and didn't plan to.

Ellen said she has had chapters edited and done for weeks that Shelly hasn't looked at, so it's not because of time constraints. She's having Beth edit her stuff today, because she doesn't want to give me chapters that no one else has looked at.

Are you aware that Shelly is doing this? It would probably save both editorial and production at Quentin a lot of re-work time if Shelly edited stories before they got to us to check over. I can talk to Shelly on the matter, because she has taken over this as if it were her own book, which it is not. Can you say something to Bryce or another person at Quentin about it?

- Ms. S. Emerson

To: Howard Shindo
From: Sloane Emerson
cc: Kyle M., Colin M.

re: forwarded file from computer department memos

Howard -

Okay, this is the third time I have had to ask in written form for you to get files for me ... Thank you in advance. Did I mention that I'm still waiting on the other files, which I asked for a while ago? Thanks a lot -

P.S. Do I really have to ask this many times?

- Ms. S. Emerson

To: Howard Shindo
From: Sloane Emerson
cc: Kyle M., Colin M.
re: inaccuracies

Howard -

Because of the high number of inaccuracies and falsehoods in the most recent memo, I feel I have to make a few corrections in some of the fallacies they made.

* According to the memo, "The book is late because there seemed to be an overwhelming amount of work for one production person." Correct. However, that is Quentin's problem; unless a new production team is going to be added to their staff, the only other solution I can see is giving their own staff an appropriate amount of time to get the work done.

* According to the memo, "According to Howard and Kyle, Ms. Emerson's role on this is merely as an advisor." False. I am the Director; I am Ellen's supervisor in this book, as I also am of Howard and Kyle and the rest of the staff at Madison, and I have the final say in the end product of this book, in the same way that Shelly and Bryce are supervisors. They are referring to me as merely an advisor? To downplay my role in this book is offensive to myself and to this book as a whole.

* According to the memo, "Ms. Emerson did not meet with anyone on the editorial staff to discuss design, production or status of production after our initial planning meeting." False. We actually had four meetings about the process of this book, two with members of Quentin. If you have had questions, you have all been more than free to ask me, but seldom do. If you'd like mid-meeting meetings, let me know; we can arrange them.

* According to the memo, "Time and time again, Quentin has addressed concern over Ms. Emerson's role on the book, yet nothing has been done." No one has addressed concern to me - about **my** book, that I alone have spearheaded and managed. How can Quentin call for more communication when they don't even talk to me about these issues in the first place?

* According to the memo, "We worry that splitting staff results in Ellen not getting help when she needs it." Ellen, Howard, Kyle and myself put in over 120 hours overtime in the

past ten days to make sure things were done.

Three people in one department worked 120 hours overtime each to get as much done as possible. What does Quentin want us to do, work more overtime? Our overtime compensation is paltry and seldom used; simply put, there is too much work to be done. Overtime compensation is no incentive to work an extra 6-8 hours a day and full days on both days of the weekends for half of your career. I find it offensive that Quentin seems to think that our jobs are easy, or we're not doing our jobs. What they don't realize is that it's not easy to do the job of a staff nearly twice our size.

I could continue through the rest of the memo, outlining inaccuracies and personal jabs. In our previous memo we tried to outline what went wrong - on all fronts - in getting the book out. And I worked on integrase inhibitors, vaccines for AIDS, strain theories for a cure, vitamin supplements to accompany the book as well as the actual book. There were additional projects for everyone on staff, including Internet work and press conferences and meetings with other dignitaries so that we could continue our work in these aspects. Quentin never questioned the status of the book. And too many editorial changes were made to physically be able to do with the time allowed.

I have been very professional on this project and at this company. I have had to revamp the book because of Ms. Stempel, and have worked on it longer than half the staff - and suddenly I'm to blame for all of the problems. In all honesty, the problems only started after the staff changes and Mr. Donovan's leaving. I have felt as if I have had to defend my job here to Ms. Stempel, when I have bent over backwards to make sure this book was written well, looked good, saved money, and was on time. I think my track record here shows what we could be capable of. It is insulting that I have to defend myself for doing a good job.

Yes, if Quentin has a question or a concern, please ask. That is what I'm here for. However, I lose patience when I have to field repeated, documented cut-downs and jabs of whether or not I should be working here, when I am only excelling at my work. If anyone has any additional ideas on how we need to interact more, please get back to me with them.

- Ms. S. Emerson

To: Kyle Mackenzie
From: Sloane Emerson
cc: Howard S., Colin M.

Kyle -

On my desk, I saw work that is supposed to be done by Tuesday night. I can say with certainty that I will not be able to get to it today; the book is supposed to go out today, and my computer seems to be the only one fast enough to do these changes - both you and Howard have repeatedly complained of problems and have had to give work to me that your computers couldn't do).

I'm having Howard work on some of the inhibitor research, but because of problems with him doing the corrections last month, I need you to check before they even get to me.

I plan on staying late today to get the book done, but problems usually occur with that book: I'm anticipating needing all day today for the book.

I'm telling you this because I want you to know that this book takes up about 80 percent of my time here, even if it shouldn't. I have tried repeatedly to remedy this problem, but nothing has worked. Until a solution is reached, I'm going to have to devote this amount of time to the book. Hopefully you guys can pick up the slack. Thank you so much.

- Ms. S. Emerson

To: Kyle Mackenzie
From: Sloane Emerson
cc: Howard S., Colin M.

Kyle -

* Howard has asked repeatedly for bookwork.

* Howard has attempted repeatedly to get archived work, due to computer problems.

* I can remember a number of other times when both myself and Howard have asked for archived materials, and would have to ask repeatedly until it made us late.

* I have asked repeatedly about getting bonus checks, and about having meetings concerning those bonuses.

* I have repeatedly asked to have someone fix the matter concerning losing three vacation days, I have made written notices with requested deadlines; no one has met them.

* Often when people ask for assistance, people here can be not only terse, but also flat-out rude.

Some people have expressed concern about being under-represented in the company. I have tried to be a lifeline to Colin; people need to feel comfortable coming to any of us with complaints and concerns, because I feel that you and Howard are both vital to the production and research of this team. People wonder if we are more interested in saving Madison a few dollars than saving the sanity of the staff. Yes, Colin understands numbers, but he also understands that he needed three people to replace the last employee that left, for example, and is probably spending much more money than before to do the same job.

No one is good at spreading themselves as thin as the three of us. The only way Tyler got an assistant was after a colleague of his threatened Colin. He knows we will keep trying to do it all, but it's costing not only the three of us, but also the entire department.

- Ms. S. Emerson

To: Kyle Mackenzie
From: Sloane Emerson
cc: Howard S., Colin M.

Kyle -

Wanted to give you a copy of this, because I am going into meetings with Colin about these issues. Any input you have on them would be extremely helpful. Thanks.

There are a number of things that I have asked for assistance on, and people have claimed to work on in recent months that have not been completed. Some of them include:

Calibrating equipment with our calibration hardware. We have discussed this for over two months, and we are prepared to either outsource getting this done ourselves, or learning how to do it ourselves.

Moving memory from one of the computers to my computer (you said the other machine doesn't need that memory, and we agreed). We have discussed doing this for over a month and a half.

Colin had an idea for an incentive program for our department with trade dollars in the form of travel. This was discussed in the past, but I don't think anyone has had a single conversation with him concerning it. I would like to know if the possibility for this program still exists, or if we could be reimbursed for our additional work in different ways.

I have pushed for a decision in hiring a new person for research; interviewing has been slow, Colin has waited on calling people and then scheduled additional and possibly unnecessary interviews when no one from our department have even seen any of the interviews. We have gone months now short-handed.

Please let me know the status of all of these things by the end of the week. I've brought up all of these things repeatedly and have been put off by assorted people in person because everyone is busy, but these things need to be taken care of. I'd like an update from you on all of these things by the end of the week. Thank you.

- Ms. S. Emerson

Looking around her, she noted the piles of what had rapidly become wastes of paper. She then got to her Internet connection so that she could get phone numbers of other publishing companies to harbor quotes and interests.

There was a lot of interest.

This was the beginning of a new Sloane Emerson. She saw how much she would have to fight to battle the AIDS virus. This was a battle where she was *not* going to let anyone step on her again. When she wanted something, she would use whatever resources she had to get it.

She started with a written and rewritten memo to all concerned.

To: Mr. Colin Madison, CEO, Madison Pharmaceuticals
From: Ms. Sloane Emerson, Research Manager,
Madison Pharmaceuticals

cc: from Quentin: Mr. David French, CEO, Quentin Publishing Company, Mr. Carter Donovan, Ms. Shelly Stempel, Mr. Bryce Farrell. From Madison: Mr. Kyle Mackenzie, Mr. Howard Shindo, Ms. Ellen Thomas, Research Associate

Mr. Madison:

Because you are so aware of production problems with The Battle from the Inside, and because you have expressed concern to me about getting the book to press efficiently, I have tried to work with the new editorial department to solve their problems with the production of an otherwise completed book before Ms. Shelly Stempel got on board for this book at Quentin Publishing.

My attempts with Quentin Publishing have been to no avail; it seems that the more I try to speed things along with them, the more heels apparently are dragged there, stopping us from creating an otherwise successful product.

There is only so much we can take, especially when our vitamin supplement line is already in production and we cannot wait for months with a product we have created and needs to sell in conjunction with the book. Attached please find quotes from ten other national book-publishing agencies. Each of these companies attached have expressed interest in producing and

marketing this book for us. There is a good chance that the book can succeed in printing without difficulty if we make the decision to move to another publishing company.

The staff at Quentin knows our opinion of the book production both before and after Mr. Carter Donovan worked with The Battle from the Inside (which Ms. Stempel even suggested changing the name of, after going through three rounds of editorial corrections and changing the design twice).

Both Madison and Mr. Donovan possess copies of the book, as it was, before the new staff made all of their changes to The Battle from the Inside. I believe we could go to press still with the book, as it was ready to go to press before, if Mr. Donovan was working on the book again.

I honestly believe we could work with Quentin Publishing Company if they allowed Mr. Donovan to return to his post with our book and complete the project. From what I can tell, Mr. Donovan has produced alarmingly successful books without the assistance of the replacement editorial department, and I know the abilities Quentin Publishing Company has in marketing our book so more people can have access to it.

I look forward to hearing your opinion on this, because we could send the manuscript to a new publishing company in a week's time if you would like to move ahead with an altered plan. Also, if Quentin Publishing Company would like to reinstate Mr. Carter Donovan on The Battle from the Inside, we could move forward immediately with this book and soon have it on the shelves, helping people everywhere. Thank you very much.

- Ms. S. Emerson

enclosed:

quotes from ten additional publishing companies

Sloane loved the fact that she was beginning to take charge of something again, but she hoped that this note would be enough - at least for *this* battle.



CHAPTER 16

THE TRANSFORMATION

A meticulously crafted and carefully maintained business suit hung on a padded hanger just outside her closet door when she woke up that Monday morning, ready to close the debate on the book.

Walking into the lab with the confidence of the leader of a pack of wild animals, Sloane only dropped off her coat and briefcase in her office before she turned around and left to confer with people about the upcoming book choices. She didn't even listen to the one voice mail message waiting for her.

Both Kyle and Howard saw her walking into the lab and started walking in the same direction. Neither one of them said a word before they both simultaneously reached her.

Howard spoke first. "Have you talked to Mr. Madison?"

"Are we going to actually change publishers?" Kyle followed.

"Hello, boys," Sloane said in response.

"What *is* the word?" Howard asked, as Ellen caught them talking and stood up to walk over.

"There is a message on my voice mail, and I'm sure it's from Colin. I feel like making him wait for a few minutes before I respond, you know, give him

a little more time on his own to think about our options.”

“You’re pushing him — but are you going to push him too far?” Kyle asked.

“I think I’ve learned how far I can push him, and I’m hell-bent on getting Carter back on with Quentin for publishing our book, and I am going to convince them that I’m serious today.”

She walked over to where Kyle was working, leaving them all behind. She finally turned around and said for half the room to hear, “Is anyone getting to work? Kyle should be telling me about the new lab test results.”

The three of them stood there with their eyes wide open, before Kyle almost ran to where she was standing.

“I’m sorry, chief... The tests were okay, but I think there’s going to be too much of an issue with allergic reactions to this —” Kyle pointed to a particular spot at a diagram of the base compound, “part of the drug.”

“What was the word on Ellen’s drug?”

“It was sent to the F.D.A. for approval a while ago, but we haven’t heard anything from them either way. I know they can drag their feet, but I don’t know how long they’ll take.”

Kyle could see the slight look of disappointment in her face, but he also sensed that she wasn’t going to let anything stop her. “Okay, then back to the allergic reaction possibility in the drug. What sort of possible reactions are we talking about here?”

“Depending on the base we pulled this from, it will either be moodiness or a slight non-itchy rash on the hands.”

“That’s not too severe, considering what people have to go through if they contract AIDS. The rash or mood swings wouldn’t be permanent, would they?”

“I don’t think so. I think it would last until the body acclimated itself to the drug, which would be less than a week.”

“That’s a relief, because I don’t think people would want to live with a rash for a vaccine they may never need...”

“Good point...”

After Kyle agreed with her, she looked at the clock on the wall, which read 9:26. “This seems like a good time to check my voice mail and start something with Colin, don’t you think?”

“Are you just looking for a fight?”

No,” she responded as she walked toward her office. “A solution.”

“She’s pushing for it,” Kyle said under his breath as he collected his notes

from the vaccine results.

After clicking on her voice mail to receive her messages, she heard only one:

This is Colin. I just read your message after I got a voice mail from David French at Quentin. I have talked to Mr. French and I'd like to discuss some changes, meet me in my office at 10:00 a.m.

Colin was fully prepared to have his secretary go to her lab and get her if she didn't report to him, but Sloane thought she'd call to confirm the meeting.

"Colin Madison's office."

"Yes, hello, this is Sloane Emerson."

"Hello, you have a scheduled —"

"I have a meeting scheduled with Colin, and I am calling to confirm it."

"You will be here then?"

"Yes. I'll see you then."

"Thank you, Ms. Emerson."

After hanging up the phone, she saw that she'd have to be there in less than twenty minutes.

Still feeling like she was a warrior on a conquest, she walked to Kyle's seat at the lab table and started talking. "Kyle, check to see which herb that extra part to the compound came from, and see what effects this herb currently has on other people. If these effects are not as strong as what you're suggesting, see if there are any additional features in the herb that negate the side effect you're afraid of. We could be using a larger part of the herb in question if that will make the compound better. Also, we need to do some testing for effects if you think the result may be a rash, because that is something we could do more animal tests on to verify the human reaction."

Starting to walk away, she continued, almost as if she didn't need to breathe to keep speaking. "I have to meet with Colin about the book now, but right now you need to look for additional aspects of what could be deactivated with the virus in order to make it usable for humans. I've been doing research on how flu vaccines are created as off-shoots of the virus in question, and I think you could get that same information off the Internet and come up

with ideas of what we should be doing for the HIV vaccine.”

Kyle was stunned and attempted to take notes as she left the room for Colin’s office. Julie was also ten feet behind him, guessing that she would be doing some of the Internet collecting for Kyle.

By the time she walked up to Colin’s front entranceway with his secretary sitting at a desk before his door, it was 9:56 in the morning. She was once again early and was ready to either (1) take her punishment, or (2) tell him how everything is going to done. She was hoping she wouldn’t hear option (3) that nothing can be done and that Madison Pharmaceuticals would either delay this book or throw it away altogether.

“Excuse me, I’m here to see Mr. Madison.”

“Just one moment please,” the receptionist said, as she pressed a button one her phone to call Colin.

Sloane walked away as she heard him speaking in the background. When she heard the receptionist press more buttons, she turned around to hear whether or not she would have to wait.

“You may go in,” the receptionist told her.

Running her hand down the front of her fitted jacket to make sure it was straight and knowing her hair was in place, she turned the handle of his door with her free hand. Knowing the door would start to close on its own once she opened it, she confidently strode into his office, right up to his desk. She remained silent until she was at his desk with her right hand stretched out to shake his hand. “Mr. Madison,” she confidently said.

“Sloane,” Colin said, shaking her hand, “please sit down.”

As She sat at the chair in front of his desk, Colin began to confront her. He picked up the memo and threw it down at the front edge of his desk so she could see it and said, “Care to explain this to me?”

“I wrote this memo to make something change so Madison wouldn’t continue to stagnate in this project. So, you called me here to either reprimand me,” and Sloane started to smirk as she finished her sentence, “or you brought me here to tell me what will change. Which is it?”

She leaned back when she finished her statement and prepared herself to hold the same expression on her face if he would fire her for what she had done.

“You know I was irate when I read your last memo,” Colin started. “But before I jumped to conclusions, I had to agree with the fact that this book needs to get out if we are producing the vitamin supplements right now. So I looked

through recent memos from you, ones from the past three weeks, and then I started to see the disgusting number of problems you have had with Quentin.”

“Quentin is not the problem, sir.”

“I wouldn’t have looked into that topic if you hadn’t put it in your memo to me today. I scanned back and noticed that there were no memos to Mr. Donovan about problems with getting the book done, and after I called you for a 10:00 meeting, I looked through the memos, I saw that the problems that you discovered seemed to stem from Shelly Stempel. Now, I can’t say Ms. Stempel is the problem entirely, but I can see that the book *was* ready to go with Mr. Donovan, and I trust your statements that the books he has spearheaded in the past have been successful. So...”

Turning her head down slightly, she almost coyly asked, “Yes?”

“So there was a voice mail waiting for me when I got into the office. Along with your memo I had a message from Mr. French at Quentin, and he seemed more interested in keeping *us* than he did in seeing what the problem was with Ms. Stempel. He stressed to me that placing Ms. Stempel in Mr. Donovan’s position was only temporary, but he hoped he could explain to me why Mr. Donovan was put on leave in the first place.”

“I could understand his compassion, sir, but was he aware that I personally went to New York to help Mr. Donovan remain in almost perfect condition despite the attack?”

“Yes, I let him know. Now, do you really think Mr. Donovan can do this in his present condition?”

“Seeing that I have made a personal and professional decision to check on his activities since he has been given initial injections, and yes, I have even flown there weekly on my strapped budget to make sure he was doing everything he could to make himself remain well, I am certain of it.”

Sloane stopped to adjust her position in the chair and lean forward before she finished her thought. “I think working would even put him in better health by keeping his mind off of personal matters.” She leaned back. “And we can’t say this publicly, but he is a perfect case of what following the book’s guideline can do for a person.”

Closing her hands over her lap, she waited for Colin’s last words.

“Do you know what I hate about you?”

“Hmm ... let me think ... there are so many choices...”

“I hate the fact that you’re usually right in your arguments. You don’t

make rash decisions, and everything you do is planned. It's almost like arguing with a computer..."

"Is that a compliment, or should I be offended at coming off as inhuman?"

"Oh, it's just that you remind me of what I should be looking for."

"You know Colin, you sounded like you were coming to a conclusion about this book before."

Colin leaned back to finish his speech. "What I was going to tell you is this: it may only be for this one book, but Mr. French is getting Mr. Donovan back to complete it for us."

She didn't move, but only smirked, without parting her lips. "Fantastic. Has the staff in the offices at Quentin been told?"

"They should have been told this morning."

"Has Mr. Donovan been informed?"

"I think Mr. French was going to have someone contact him at home, leave a message if he wasn't there, but he should have been informed."

"Splendid." Sloane couldn't think of any other words to show her joy, making it look more like relief. "I'll have to contact Mr. Donovan this afternoon to see what steps need to be taken to send the completed book to press." She rose to leave. "Is there anything else you need?"

"No, just send me a report of the printing of the book."

"I will sir, and thank you."

She then turned around and walked toward his door. Just as she was about to turn the handle to open the door to leave, she heard,

"Oh, Sloane?"

Turning around, she answered, "Yes?"

"Stop looking so cocky."

Grinning, she turned around in silence and left his office. She had to keep herself from grinning until then, because she wanted to hear his answer and leave his office before she reacted. She almost sprinted back to her lab through the hallways, attempting to unbutton the blazer she had been wearing tightly all morning. As she got to the lab, she first had to check her office desk to see if she could contact Carter. Spotting and then closing her list of Carter's weekly condition list and reminding herself that his T-Cell count was increasing again since the first week, she also spotted one message on her voice mail, and so she listened to it.

I don't know what you did, angel, but if you don't know it yet, I am back on force with your book. And I'll make sure the thing can go to press this Sunday, so we don't waste another minute. And oh, if you're interested, I'll print up a copy of all the stuff Shelly tried to pull over on you with the book, you know, for some hysterical keepsake. Well, it'll be great to work with you again, so call me when you get this message.

Laughing while she listened to the message, she decided to call him back from within the lab, after she told everyone the news. Storming out into the lab, she grabbed a cordless phone and ran to an empty table, telling everyone to get together. Using a stool to step up onto the table, she got on the table and waited for everyone to gather around her.

"I know, I know, I'm standing on a table, but I had one question for you all: what are you doing this evening? Because I *just* found out that Mr. Donovan is back on for completing *The Battle from the Inside*, so the book will actually get done quickly!"

Most of the technicians started clapping when they heard the news. Kyle and Howard — and even Ellen and Julie — were grinning with joy at the news.

"So... I can't afford to pull off a party like our boss, but would everyone like to stop for a drink after work and I could buy a round?"

About half of the people said they could make it, and everyone was extremely pleased with the news. Kyle's phone started to ring, and he ran over to take the call. Sloane could only hear the tail end of him talking.

"Steve, hi! ... You won't believe the news ... we're going out tonight because the book is going to get done ... yeah, Sloane over here sent a raging memo and it apparently worked—"

At this point Sloane ran up to the phone and took it out of Kyle's hands.

"Hey, it's Sloane. Is it you, Steve?"

"Yeah, hi, is the news true?"

Kyle only heard the end of their conversation.

“You know my friend who was working on the book but got pulled because of the attack? ... And then all of the delays we have had with the new **freak** on the job? ... Yeah, you heard me, she was a freak ... Well, I just sent a ‘raging memo’, as Kyle put it, and the head of Quentin saw it too, and he said that for at least this book Mr. Donovan could complete it! ... Yeah, I haven’t even called him to check out information, but hey, we’re going to go to that place we went to for drinks and that cookies-and-cream martini, so show up there and celebrate with us! ... Okay, call later, or show up here, I’ll give you back to Kyle...”

She handed Kyle the phone back, giggling.

Sloane went to the cordless phone in her hand and immediately dialed Carter’s house, knowing the number by heart.

“Hello?”

“Mister Cater Donovan you may want to start answering your phone like it’s your business line, seeing that this is the second business call you’ve received at home today...”

“Hello, Ms. Sloane Emerson, are you on speaker phone, because I can hear a lot of noise in the background.”

“No, I’m on a cordless phone in the lab because I just found out and I just told everyone that you’re back on with the book. ...And how do you feel about this?”

“It’s phenomenal and you know it... How did you pull it off?”

“I threatened to move our book to another printing company unless you came back. I even got quotes from ten other companies.”

“You’re kidding me...”

“You know I’m a woman who gets her way, Carter.”

“Well, girl, I don’t know what to say.”

Say you’ll call me back with a schedule of when the book will print and when we’ll see the book — is it going to be off of the original version we had with you?”

“Of course it will be, and I’ll guess we’ll have it to press by next Sunday or Monday.”

She was walking back to her office so she could finish the conversation without anyone hearing. “Since I am meeting with the swami about martial arts for AIDS patients, we could even swing having Quentin carting me to you, and then we’ll go together to Ohio ... Please tell me we can do that...”

“I’ll do what I can to make it happen, and *thank you.*”

“Thank you, Carter. And wait, one more thing.”

“Yes?”

“I love you.”

“Did you just say that in front of everyone in the lab?”

“I walked back into my office, silly. Now get some rest before you work on our book. I’ll talk to you soon —”

This is how they hurriedly said good-bye to each other as they planned for the rest of the day.

Through the afternoon, Kyle and Sloane worked on solutions of the potential vaccine problem Kyle had pointed out. Carter called her office at the end of the New York business day and told her that the press printing would start this Sunday if they would have a finished book by that date. She said that they should get copies of materials over to us for a final check, and his people should look over the original manuscript to see if any changes needed to be made.

“You know Carter, maybe changes Stempel made should be checked against original copy, to see which is better.”

“You’re not suggesting that we should change our minds on how the book is written — or worse yet, how it looks?”

“I was just saying it was a way to check to see if anything else was better...”

“Got it then, girl. You should have our completed copy by Wednesday morning. I’ll send a package if the layout has changed from what we had by then, and you’ll get a copy then too. Can you go over it and return it to us with changes Friday by the end of our day here?”

“We can make it happen. I was planning on getting a flight to New York to see the rep for martial arts education this Saturday. How can we pull this off?”

“I think your company can pull off you coming to check pages at our offices this weekend before Quentin flies you to the press check Sunday, okay? I’ll make sure of it, and I’ll even see if we can get you to come to New York a day early to check colors on pages.”

Knowing she could be checking page colors in Ohio at the press, she said, “Don’t tell them I could check colors in Ohio when I show up, so we can pull it off.”

“Of course, angel. I’ll call you or leave a voice mail to let you know in

the next day. Otherwise, check Madison's flight schedule in case Quentin can't pull it off for you."

Spending the remaining day working with Kyle, she was surprised that she was suddenly so open to new ideas and was suddenly so strong in assisting in getting this vaccine done. The end of the day approached, and Sloane told people to just bug her at the bar for a drink and she'd make sure a drink would be put on her tab.

Half of the staff arrived at the bar/restaurant by 5:30 and Sloane instantly ordered her drink of choice, the cookies-and-cream martini. Before she was even ready to take the glass from the bar to have a drink, Kyle watched as Steve walked up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist, saying to the bartender, "This martini of hers is on me."

Turning around to see Steve was unnecessary when she recognized his voice. "That wasn't necessary, you know..."

"But I know that you wanted to get this book done, and I'm hoping the news has something to do with the condition of your friend."

"Mr. Donovan, you mean?" Kyle said, and then remained silent, as he was still stunned that Steve was holding Sloane and she was not protesting. She whipped around, breaking from Steve, to look him in the eye and tell him, "That's the good news, Steve. Mr. Donovan is doing so well that I pretty much forced my president's hand and sent info to the head of Quentin, and they're letting Mr. Donovan finish our book."

"Really?"

"Yeah, and I've been checking on his condition, *I think it was because he was paying attention of our book we were publishing*, and he is in such great shape that work would be good for him and we could finally get the book out."

"I heard you were there though to help him that first day..."

"My business card was in his wallet, so they called me. I even called Kyle here," she glanced at Kyle while she was finishing her statement, "to see about shocking Mr. Donovan's system with an overload of the drugs. Though it didn't kill the virus in his system, it seems to have had a great effect and he is doing remarkably well now because of it."

"That's remarkable, I'm thrilled for you," Steve said as he hugged her, then kissing her cheek and forehead. Kyle *still* couldn't believe what he was seeing, and with every moment it got more shocking to him.

Catching his look of disbelief, she looked over and tried to glance at him to let him know that everything was okay. A Few minutes later Kyle was able to approach her separately and drill her.

“What was that all about?”

“We get along now. I’ve been able to talk to him, and that’s really cool.”

“But you’re acting like a little *tramp* when you’re around him.”

“Kyle, I would have to be sleeping with him if I was a tramp...”

Kyle’s face went blank. “You’re not sleeping with him, are you?”

“I look like a *tramp*, huh? ... Remember that it *might* be possible to get along with Steve without having to sleep with him,” she said, smiling, as someone else approached and started talking to her. Her remark still didn’t tell him that she hadn’t had sex with Steve, so Kyle was still both curious and confused.

She even turned toward him and added. “This good news today has let me focus on my work, and I think we’ve been doing well because of it. Maybe I’m looking flirty because something is going right for us ... And I *can* be this way.”

The next few days were laced with confirmations of Quentin paying for Sloane to come into New York on Saturday to look over pages before the book was printed. Her flight arrived in New York Saturday mid-morning, but they wouldn’t cover her hotel, so she chose to sleep on Carter’s couch the night she was in town.

They seemed to be making great progress with the vaccine that week, but Sloane had to leave that weekend for New York before heading to Ohio. She even checked with Carter to see if they should have another staff member for Madison show up at the press run, and Carter was trying to swing it if Kyle could come for a day. He would only hear Saturday about Kyle, so they checked with Kyle if he would be free, in case they were only able to get him to come that late.

Once she was in the airport early Saturday morning, she realized she still felt waves of panic and being watched, but she noticed it especially when she was either entirely alone in the dark or in an airport when there were security guards checking people at every hallway. She felt this panic again, but tried to keep herself in check, keep her head high, and walk with confidence when she walked through all gates and checkpoints. On the plane she felt a bit more relaxed, because she knew there was no reason for anyone to stop her, and she knew she would see Carter in just a few hours. Checking herself in the bath-

room mirror twice for misplaced hairs, and trying to adjust what little make-up she had on, she still couldn't help but fidget through the entire flight. All she could do was go through her notes for things to help Carter:

Diet changes

Addition of soy, garlic, tomatoes

Additional protein

Red meats, cut the fat from them

No alcohol

Vitamin pills

Multi, additional B complex, C, D, E

Exercise

Weights

Small repetitions of slight calisthenics

Relaxation

Focus on single point to relax

Talk to swami about martial arts and yoga

Work - get back in workplace)

6 hours a day max for being able to work (do not overextend)

All she could do to keep herself from trying to tuck her hair behind her ears was to concentrate solely on her work, so that she wouldn't have to check her looks again before she got off the airplane.

Walking down the jet way with the other passengers, Sloane felt a rush of emotions: she didn't know whether she should feel confidence of performing a job well and accomplishing a goal, or concern and desire to make Carter feel better. For a split second it didn't even cross her mind that she wanted to see the man she loved, all that consumed for was making him feel better.

Carter stood in the back of a crowd at LaGuardia National Airport. He knew he couldn't wait by the terminal she was being released from; without a ticket himself he could only stand before the security point. He felt like Hell,

standing there by himself, sheepishly waiting for a girl to come into town, but he couldn't stand the wait for his chance to see her again, even if only for business and even if he could only hold her hand and kiss her in passing.

Lifting his head to see people coming through the gateway in a wave, he didn't see her. "That must be from a different flight," he thought, as he dropped his head again. He didn't see Sloane coming through behind the tall group of men walking in front of her, but she spotted him and went right up to him before he had the chance to lift his head.

"I don't want to kiss you, because then I'd have to close my eyes. And I don't want to stop looking at you."

Smiling at his comments, she said, "How do you come up with the things you say?"

"I don't know ... I just say what I feel. But either way, we have to worry about going to meet the swami today."

"What time are we supposed to meet?"

"In about an hour, but he's on the other side of town, and it will take forever to get there." They started walking together toward the baggage claim. "I've also got materials to collect for the Ohio printing, but I can take care of that later. And you're already packed for it, so you're beating me on this one."

"We just have to figure out what questions we should be asking and what information we could get that might help you out today."

They waited at the baggage claim waiting for her one bag, and he asked, "What is this guy's name anyway?"

"I wrote it in my notes, it was 'Nuan' or something. I'll get it out of my briefcase when we get into the car."

They were about to arrive at the offices. Upon going to the front desk, they asked for Mr. Xiao and were given a paper he wanted them to have.

Looking at the paper, they hoped there would be some information to help them out.

SWAMI NUANCHAN JOKO XIAO

PAGE ONE

QIGONG (ALSO KNOWN AS CHI KONG)

This is an Asian martial art dealing with the healing of the body through maintaining the proper balance of qi. There are two types of qi - fire and water. Water qi is what everyone is born with while we get fire qi from what we take into our body.

Reducing stress is one of the key benefits realized by practicing qigong. Stress is reduced through meditation and exercise. Meditation is performed in the conventional understanding of what meditation is - sitting or lying while trying to clear one's mind. The physical exercise is an extension of the stationary meditation and is comprised of performing various breathing exercises. Additionally, forms (prearranged movements designed to use all parts of the body) are performed to energize the body and help maintain clear qi channels.

One of the most basic teachings is breathing properly. Most Americans do not take deep breaths while breathing and are therefore not using their entire lung capacity. This shallow breathing is also thought to diminish the body's ability to cleanse itself of excessive fire qi. This imbalance is believed to be the root of many stress related illnesses and also contributes to inhibiting the body's immune system.

MEDITATION

The human qi must also be maintained in harmony with the earth's magnetic fields. This requires that while meditating in the sitting or standing position it is important that one be facing north. While lying and meditating, or while sleeping, it is important that ones head be at the north end in the northern hemisphere. In the southern hemisphere all directions are reversed. Also, as prescribed by a doctor, meditating facing a particular direction may be necessary to address a specific physical or mental ailment. In all cases meditation is best performed in a sitting position with ones back erect, legs folded either under the body or cross-legged, chin up and pulled in, mouth slightly open and eyes closed. A humming noise can be made to stimulate a relaxation response. Also, meditation should be performed in a quiet room, if noise is desired do not select loud or rhythmic music. Light music with a soft syncopated sound is better as it does not distract the mind from its journey but helps to guide it along its course to understanding what is to be done or to allow it to perform the work it must.

When starting out with meditation, it is a difficult concept to understand, you are attempting to “do” nothing. Doing nothing is not to be confused with idly watching television or sleeping. In sleeping and television viewing you are an inactive participant in the former and a passive spectator in the latter. In meditating you are actively “doing nothing.” That is to say you have chosen to perform this specific activity for a given period of time to achieve a specific result.

In more advanced meditation one can begin to control physiological functions of the body including but not limited to, controlling ones body temperature, controlling ones heartbeat, controlling ones rate of healing.

When one is cleansing the body of that which is causing it problems: this is termed bone and marrow washing. It does not mean that the bone and marrow is the target of the meditation but that the body has something in it the must be eliminated. It is intriguing to note that the term “bone and marrow washing” was in use thousands of years before humans knew through western scientific methods that the bones and more specifically the marrow is where our white blood cells come from and that the white blood cells are the main line of defense against illness and disease.

“Hello,” the swami said, seeing the two people waiting at the front.

They both stood. Sloane was closer, so she extended her hand to shake hands. “Hello, it is nice to meet you.”

“I hear you have some questions, so maybe we could go into my office and talk about what might be most helpful.”

The swami, Nuanchan Joko Xiao, turned around and guided them toward the back of the building to an empty conference room with shelves of books and a large table.

“We haven’t met before. My name is Nuanchan, it is very nice to meet you.”

“Hello. My name is Carter Donovan, and this is Sloane Emerson.”

“Yes, I believe I spoke to a woman before.”

“That was me,” Sloane said.

“I believe you wanted to learn about meditation for work you are doing for people with diseases.”

“Actually, it was for AIDS patients specifically, and yes.”

“Have you read the sheet I saved for you?”

“Yes,” Carter answered.

“If you noted, we do use methods to cleanse the body, but we do not necessarily have therapies for all illnesses.” Nuanchan said. “Using the practice of ‘bone and marrow washing’ may possibly help if the patient is truly understanding of the practices and truly believes in the philosophies that this world stems from.”

Sloane started saying, “The patients we are interested in supporting want to learn about any method at all to help them. They are doing remarkably well right now, but they would like to learn about anything possible they can do to help themselves.”

“Many people look at our practices, however, and think they can sit in a corner and not pay attention to anything, and call that meditation. These people have no idea what it involves, and you don’t know if your patients would be *that* interested in these studies”

“I can check right now about their opinion,” she said.

“I am sure they would like to learn anything that would help them,” Carter said immediately after she spoke, answering her question about whether or not Carter would really want to go through this.

Carter turned back toward Nuanchan and spoke directly to him. “I personally would be very interested in learning everything I can about what to

do for a patient. I would be willing to go through all of the necessary training for any techniques that can help a patient.”

“It is easier to teach these things to the patient directly, though.”

Carter looked at her, and then back to Nuanchan. “I am the patient.”

Nuanchan looked at her, then to Carter, then finally spoke. “This lady was correct in stating that her patient looks remarkably well.”

“I was just diagnosed four weeks ago, ten hours after I was infected by a mugging where an attacker injected a needle into my arm. I have been extremely lucky with western medications that I have received, I have been able to work again, and I have altered my diet and exercise accordingly. But I would like to work on any and all methods to help my body to physically get through this virus, and I truly believe that this may be an effective method.”

Sloane interjected, “So we were interested in knowing about how Yoga and meditation would help a patient.”

“Alright,” Nuanchan stated. “Yoga is a difficult practice to understand. It is an art of positioning and holding your body in various ways, ways that may possibly be physically difficult for you, but it is an art of having your mind convince your body that it can do these things. It is like exercise, but not cardiovascular, it is basically a repeated seminar on how to train your body to behave the way your mind tells it to.”

“That sounds like it relates to the way meditation is your mind controlling your body, according to this sheet you gave us,” she said.

“Okay then ... What do you know about meditation already?”

She sat back and fell silent, only quietly taking notes, while the rest of the discussion followed between Carter and Nuanchan.

“Actually, I am afraid that I do not know much at all about it,” Carter started. “I knew before I walked in here that meditation should be done when sitting, with your back straight, your surroundings should be silent, your legs crossed, lotus position being better than merely cross-legged, and resting your hands with you palm facing-up on your legs. I have heard about having your fingers in a certain position, but I don’t know what it is, and it looks a bit silly, especially when I don’t know why it should be that way.”

“... And?”

“And ... and you close your eyes, and somehow do everything in your power to think about nothing. I don’t know how to do that, because my mind

always darts from one thing to the next, even if I have no reason to think about these things, but that is what it does. And that lasts about twenty minutes.”

“Oh.”

“That’s pretty much all I know. Am I wrong?”

“You seem to have a pretty good idea of how to meditate. But I can instruct you on what measures you can take to clear your head so you can properly meditate.”

“Oh, I forgot to mention, I *do* believe the human mind has power over its own body, and I can attest to it with one experience I’ve had. I know that when I want to relax, I create this story, it will sound strange, and”

Carter completely forgot that Sloane was in the room as he started talking.

“This is something I would do that would relax me when I wanted to fall asleep. I imagined that I was in a bed the size of an elevator, and I had no idea what the surroundings looked like, that was never the point, but the elevator would go down ten floors, and each floor would be an instruction to let another part of my body relax. It would start from the feet, then calves, then thighs, and then the pelvis. Then it would move to stomach, chest, arms, shoulders, neck, then head. Those were the ten floors the elevator would move down, and basically I could stay as long as I needed to achieve the relaxation on that part of my body before I would move on.”

“That’s very interesting,” Nuanchan said.

Sloane scribbled violently.

“I would invariably fall asleep by the time I reached my calves, so I know it was effectively relaxing me. The thing I remember most though is that when I would start with my feet, they would become so relaxed that, well, I don’t know how to explain it, but the blood would tingle.”

“You moved your blood to that part of your body.”

“And that somehow *relaxed* me?”

“That is one way your mind can focus energy on a certain part of the body - by drawing heat to it, which often comes as blood.”

“And the thing was, when I moved from one part of my body to the next, like up to my calves, the tingling feeling would stay on my feet and then it would just more or less *grow* to the next part of my body. I’ve only made it up so far as my neck or head maybe twice in my life, but I know that while doing this, I would check to see if the rest of me was relaxed, and it seemed to need me to check by thinking about that part of my body again for the

tingling to become stronger.”

“The human mind can’t focus energy on all parts of your body at once by giving more blood to all parts of your body when all of your body *needs* blood, but deciding to check on another part of your body, made your mind force your energies to move there, making blood levels change.”

Sloane loved hearing these conversations, but had to interject to help them stay on track. “Excuse me, but I don’t understand how this works in attempting to help the body overcome illnesses.”

“Part of the understanding,” Nuanchan answered, “is being able to understand that your mind *does* have control over your physical body. If you are unable to do that, then you may be unable to let you body work on healing your injuries.”

Nuanchan continued talking to both Carter and Sloane. “If you would like, we could go try to see is we can effectively meditate now.”

“That would be wonderful,” Carter said. All she could think was that she had never been able to clear her mind, so she didn’t think she could do it.

A half hour later, both Sloane and Carter were sitting on the floor lotus style, both had their hands open, and both were breathing deeply. Carter had his eyes closed and was able to meditate, while Sloane could not stop thinking about things — anything at all, anything from the book production to helping Carter feel better to stopping the government from hurting people with this virus to coming up with medication, a vaccine, or a cure for AIDS.

She couldn’t clear her mind and Nuanchan knew this as well.

Just as Carter sat there on the floor in the room, Nuanchan quietly stood. Sloane heard him and opened her eyes. He made a gesture to leave and she quietly followed on his lead. He quietly walked her into the next room and then started to speak. “I know you were having a difficult time working to consciously not think about anything, so I had an idea of a step that may help you get to that point. Read this sheet and tell me what you think.”

Nuanchan handed her a sheet with information on how she should imagine a perfect scene; it would be a scene that only she would be in, and she would be able to relax in her surroundings with no one to disturb her. She thought about what that scene would be for her, but she didn’t know why she needed to imagine this. It told her in the reading that while she is at that scene, there is a *possibility* that she could imagine someone else coming up to her; but if they appeared they would be there to tell her something.

At this point she was fascinated, and she wanted to know who this potential mystery person would be. Nuanchan knew it was her soul, and it would be appearing before her to tell her what she needed to know. But she had to be able to get to that, where she could talk to her soul until her soul told her what she needed.

“Okay,” she said to Nuanchan, “what do I do?”

“Alright, imagine your place. It could be your dream house, or a boat, or a beach, or even the top of a skyscraper. Now get comfortable in your place, image yourself in a bathtub at your house, or at your desk in the high rise, and just get comfortable there. Relax and feel all of your surroundings. Feel the water from the wind in the boat, or the wood grain on the railing in your home, and just feel everything about it. Get used to the feeling and just relax in the place you want to be.”

“And a person may come along?”

“In the future, there may be a chance someone will come along. But you have to envision that person, you don’t know who it is, and it won’t be someone you know. Don’t worry about that until you have come to this place a few times, because there’s a good chance they may not come around right away.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know, maybe they’re shy, but when they get comfortable with you in this place, they may come to visit you.”

Nuanchan stood up and motioned to her to leave the room with him. “Now, I’ll turn the lights off so you can imagine your scene better. You don’t need to tell anyone about your place, because it’s yours, and just relax. If it’s not working for you, just open the door and I’ll be in this next room, otherwise I’ll open the door after a half hour.”

With those words Nuanchan turned the lights off and left the room.

Alone in the dark, she felt for a place to lie down. She thought it would be best to lie down if she wanted to relax. She had to work on a scene that she wanted to go to, and all she could think of was a beach. She started to get the picture in her mind: the sand was not white, but beige, there were occasional remains of coral and shells from long dead creatures at the side of the beach where the waves had thrown them toward the land. The one side of land was covered in tall bushes and foliage, so no one could see in or out of her area. The ground was otherwise clear of debris, and the water was making a beautiful crashing noise, though the tide was not coming too close to her. The sun

was setting over the water. All she felt was the warmth of the sun setting and a slight breeze coming from off the ocean. Her skin was touching the sand, and it felt rough, but beautifully tiny and smooth as each grain of sand ran along her skin when she moved. The gentle breeze carried the humidity of the water to her; all she had to do was lay there and enjoy the beach, enjoy the water, the sun, the air and the sand. It felt exquisite to her.

Deciding to lift her head up in her imagination, she looked down the beach and saw that the beach never ended. In the distance was a pier, but there were no boats and no people at the pier. After thinking about it, she only occasionally heard the call and circle of a bird, but none that ever got too close to her for her to even notice. Looking behind her, she only saw more beach, with one set of large rocks imbedded into the shape of a pier in the distance. Otherwise everything was clear, and this was *her* space.

And she liked it.

She lay there and enjoyed the scene. All she thought about was having this space to herself, and not having to answer to anyone here. There were no phone calls, no computers, no tables, and no people.

She decided this was a good place to go.

Sloane stood up at her scene and walked slowly toward the water. She got as far as the water's edge; she wasn't wearing shoes so she stepped into the wet sand, felt the wet sand getting between her toes, and stepped into the lapping water at the shoreline. It felt a little cold, but it felt good, like it was a new sensation for her to enjoy. Kicking the inch of water with her foot, she stepped out of the water and sat back down to look out at the ocean.

I needed this, she thought.

Forgetting how long she was at the beach, the door opened. Nuanchan said, "Hello?"

Sloane jerked up from her reclined position. "Yes?"

"Carter is finished meditating and you have been in here a half hour."

She immediately got up and straightening her clothes. She had no idea she had been in the room so long.

###

Nuanchan explained to Carter methods of yoga that would induce relaxation and mind/body harmony. After they finished these techniques, and

after they had gone through a stack of brochures that Nuanchan copied and explained to them, they thought that they were ready to move on. They thanked him profusely, and went back to Carter's home.

In the car, Sloane started scribbling notes again.

"You think you might forget something?" Carter asked.

"I just want to make sure I've got everything down that could possibly be needed or remembered. What did you think of the meditation and yoga?"

"I thought it was remarkable, actually. The exercises for bone and marrow washing, if I can do them properly, might actually do me some good."

"I'm really think it will, darling," she answered, because if *thinking* it will help is half the battle, then he *is* on the right track.

###

Sunday morning Carter and Sloane left together for the airport for Ohio. On the afternoon flight, Sloane was able to sit next to Carter, and for most of the flight he held her hand.

"You know, she whispered, "this feels wonderful, not even speaking to each other, but just holding each other's hands while we're on this plane."

"It's almost like we need to be holding hands..."

"What, like we're aliens, sucking on each other's life blood?"

Carter started laughing under his breath. "Yeah, well, I was just thinking it was nice to sit here, feeling your hand, like it makes everything better."

She smiled and leaned her head on his shoulder in response.

Though the presses aren't usually open on a Sunday, they did open long enough to check cover colors while Sloane was there. "All of the pages are set up like your books usually run," one of the tech reps said to Carter, "so it should be no problem at all to have it run." Carter figured they could get sample pages of the entire book printed while Sloane was there for her to look over. He knew they wouldn't be able to trim or bind any samples on the first day, but she would be able to see all of the forms and how they fit together, including her final essay on keeping your rights when you as a patient fight for your health.

Sunday night she had to ask, "I know that the book is about to print, but do you think, if there are notes pages at the end of every chapter, that we could

scribble in a page at the end of the ‘meditation, yoga and Asian cultures’ chapter that mentions anything about what we’ve learned this weekend?”

“You’re trying to kill me on this one, aren’t you?” Carter asked.

“If it’s not possible, fine, I was just curious.”

“The thing of it is that I know it’s a good idea. Let me see how many pages are at the end of that chapter tomorrow and we’ll see if we can add an addendum page to it, about bone and marrow washing. I mean, you could possibly use any of the notes from the sheets Nuanchan gave us to help you come up with the page for it.”

They agreed that if there was more than one page at the end of that chapter for notes, they could pull one of those notes pages to use it for practices such as the general practice of qigong or chi kong, potential healing practices such as bone and marrow washing, or using relaxation as a form of meditation to be able to remove stress from your life.

Monday and Tuesday were both spent at the press for both of them, and Sloane would leave Tuesday night to return to Seattle. She was able to send a fax to Kyle from the press during that time, telling him that there was no urgent need for him to have been there, but that they were also going to try to add a page by removing one of the notes pages after the chapter on meditation/yoga/Asian Cultures on new information that may be helpful to the reader. All of the pages and the general look of the book were approved, and her looking over work was seamless and simple.

It got to the point where they had to count their days together. Saturday, then Sunday. Monday would be the last night. And though she slept on the couch when she was at Carter’s, they made a point to sleep in their separate hotel rooms in Ohio the first night. They didn’t know who they were kidding by the last night, and they stayed in bed together. Even though they were fully clothed, they made spoons out of their bodies and held each other half the night together as they slept.

The one thing Carter dreaded, though, was saying good-bye to Sloane again. “This isn’t fair,” he said to her as he dropped her off at the airport. “You shouldn’t show up so many times making me say good-bye to you so often.”

“You shouldn’t live so far away, young man...”

“I need to keep the job right now, so don’t ask me—”

“I wouldn’t.”

They actually cried when they held each other, saying good-bye, as she had to get to the airport to leave him again.

The plane ride wasn't so bad, airlines were having a hard time getting people to fly as often as they did before the 2001 terrorist airplane crashes, and Sloane had a row with one lady, and they talked about anything from Pearl Harbor to hair styles to playing card games. It was a good way to distract her from leaving Carter, even though she felt she had gone through a transformation after being about to get *The Battle from the Inside* to press, and was strong enough again to be able to battle her work stagnation, or the government intervention, which seemed to subside since the representatives from the U.S. Scientific Research Advancement Department snooped around their offices.

The 6:15 p.m. EST flight from Ohio left late and arrived in Seattle at almost 8:00 Pacific Time. Having to take a taxi in from the airport to her apartment, it was approaching 9:30 when she got home. Opting to not bother going to work with her computer notes that evening, she unpacked and slept before heading into work again.

A fresh start was a good idea.

Arriving at work early to log in her computer notes and forward messages to Kyle and the rest of the staff on the book progress, she saw a few papers on the floor in the hallway before she turned the corner to her lab. Seeing that it was right around 7:00 in the morning, she knew she was probably the first person arriving in her lab that morning, so she didn't know why there were papers on the ground when a cleaning staff would have removed the loose pages. Turning a corner to see her lab door she saw the window at the front door cracked open, with a hole large enough to unlock the door.

Running to the entranceway and being careful to not slip on glass, she did her best to look through the destroyed window, which only showed a black void. Knowing this had to have occurred late last night, she turned around and ran to the next available workstation where she could call the emergency access number for Madison's security department.

Knowing she couldn't go into the lab until security investigated the scene, she paced the hallway around the corner from the lab and waited eight minutes until security guards showed up. Sloane immediately started yelling at the representatives, though no one could give her a single answer.

"How did this happen? Why didn't anyone notice this was going on? ...

Did you check for fingerprints? ... I know there are a lot of lab technicians that work here, but you can test us against existing ones ... What do you mean too many prints on the scene? ... You people have video cameras around here, right? Then can't you check for any activity last night so we can see who did this?"

All she could do was yell and get no answers as lab technicians started filtering in during the next hour and a half. Seeing that trying to get answers from the security guards was doing no good, Sloane decided to run to Colin's office herself to at least tell him or his receptionist in person that their lab had been destroyed, by someone, she doesn't know who, she doesn't know how, but it was trashed.

And also that the staff would do everything in their power to find out not only if any data was missing, but also how long it would take to clean up and how much it would cost to replace any of the destroyed equipment.

Right now she couldn't implicate anyone and she had no proof that there was any wrongdoing by the government, even though she had a sinking feeling that this was the next step the government would take to stop Madison from succeeding at their work.

Knowing the transformation she had gone through, and knowing full well of what she could be capable of, she would fight to the death, to make sure that justice was somehow served.

But she has no evidence. So ... what would she do?



CHAPTER 17

THE IMPLICATIONS

Warrior Sloane Emerson. *That* should be the title on her business cards, she thought; but then again, if she were at war with someone they wouldn't get the chance to see her card. Ms. Emerson had to now be on a mission, because she needed to use every resource she could to fight back at her unseen, almost omnipotent enemy, if she had any chance of coming out alive.

The rest of the day would consist of cleaning the mess left behind by the 'vandals', as some members of the staff assumed they were. "Well-paid vandals," she thought. "We pay them with our tax dollars." She could only say this to herself, still knowing that she had no proof to explain her beliefs. It seemed at this point that she didn't even *need* any more evidence.

The staff worked for most of the week to clean up lab; when cleaning they kept records of which files and folders were missing. The office at the front lab with the nameplate "S. Emerson" was in complete chaos and many files had been opened and sorted through, if not stolen altogether. It infuriated her that on the first full day she was back from New York and Ohio, all she could do was attempt to sort through the mess left in her office from

attackers. She wanted to be able to tell the staff that the book was printing wonderfully and fill Kyle in on the details about how the press runs work — so that he could work with her or work in her place with any books in the future — but she never had the chance.

When she was able to get to her phone, she noticed that she had voice mails waiting for her, and there was one from Tuesday afternoon, during the day before the attack, where she heard the voice of Clint Saunders.

You know who this is. My advice to you is that you should clean your work belongings immediately, Trust me, because things are going to get worse, Keep your work files at home tonight.

Being out of town meant that she was not working on anything new at the times and that she cleaned her office out before she left, but she didn't know what *general* files were available in her office for the taking. She knew at this point that he knew something, but he didn't say what and he wouldn't speak his name on her voice mail.

Clint would not condone her contacting him again, so she couldn't ask him anything about what is going on. These 'vandals' were not just petty thieves or robbers, she knew this even more now because of the Saunders phone message, but were after destroying information. "These may have been government plans to clear the lab out of information," she thought, so she searched for ideas on how she could work to solve this.

The security center of the office would have videotapes of that night; they *had* to, because there were monitors planted around the lab and around hallways in the building. Telling people in the lab she just needed to take a break from cleaning up the office, she pushed her way through the office hallways until she got to the security center offices. Storming in, she demanded that they play the tapes from that evening of the lab areas for her in her presence.

"We've already gone through the tapes, Ms. There's nothing to see," the head security officer told her.

She looked at his uniform and read his badge. "Jack, right?"

“Yeah, that’s me.”

“Well, *Jack*, please appease the head of the lab by playing me those tapes.”

“Those tapes will take a long time to play, and there’s nothing to see.”

“I said appease me, and ... there should be something on those tapes, though. Did the tapes not catch anyone in the lab?”

“Well, they did, ma’am, but the cameras were covered up.”

“Covered *up*? By whom?”

“Well, we’re handing the tapes over to the police so they can find that out.”

“So you can see people in the tapes?”

“Briefly, but—”

“I’d like to see if I recognize any of these people in the tape, if you’ll let me look at them.”

Jack seemed to hem and haw over having to do this additional work, but he pulled out the files for her. As they started to play, in timed footage that was before the perpetrators entered the area, she had to ask, “Why is there no sound?”

“Oh, these monitors don’t detect sound, they’re just for images.”

She nodded in understanding, looking back at the monitor.

“Now you see, ma’am,” Jack said as he tried to fast forward the footage, “we have the time displayed on these video clips so we always know exactly what time the events occurred. We figure that the time it happened was at about 2:43 in the morning,” he said, trying to advance it to just the right point. “Now you see, it’s coming up right here.”

Staring intently at the screen, she watched as a blur of motion came over the viewing range of the screen from the right-hand side. The monitor images were a bit dark, but she could still make out the room. The images were black and white. But she could see that there were two Caucasian men at first. They were wearing all black and both had short dark hair, moving confidently through her lab.

“Wait — there’s a third man,” she finally said aloud. She watched the third man walk swiftly across the viewing screen, then straight to the camera. The third man leaned up toward the camera and started using a can of black spray paint over the lens of the monitor.”

As soon as she learned this, she turned around. “There’s a second monitor, right?”

“Yes, but they did the same thing to it.”

Turning back to the monitor, she asked, "Could you play this again?"

Jack rewound the digital tape and played the recording for her again.

"How good is the resolution on these cameras?" she asked.

"Well, the images we can pull off this camera are about 2400 dots per inch.

"Wow, that's impressive."

"It's designed for enlarging frames for police footage. That's why Madison hired us."

"So you think you could blow up any of these frames so I could have a copy of them?"

"Sure, but it will take a little time, and what do you need them for? This is all going to the police department?"

The only thing racing through her mind was that these frames were at a 2400 dpi image, so they could be blown up a lot without losing quality. She asked for the largest clearest prints of each of the men. She was sure they would do this for the police anyway.

"I want to have these images to show the staff to see if anyone saw these people here," she answered.

Placing an immediate order for which frames she would need, they told her they would drop them in her work mailbox in two days. She honestly *didn't* know what she would use them for, because her only chance to match these images up with any federal employee databases disappeared when her contact in Colorado Springs was killed. But she had to keep these images, just in case, for some reason, for *any* reason.

She didn't know what she'd need them for, but she would want to look in government databases to see if these assailants were in them, and in what department. She broke into the CIA databases once, but she didn't have opportunity or access to the databases again, so she didn't know what her next step would be.

All of this new information was further evidence to her that this attack was well planned, because average people wouldn't have known the lab, and wouldn't have known to cover the lenses with paint the way they did.

So she made a decision. She decided consciously to become the warrior. Madison had a small gym in it, so she would take a break from work (which couldn't be a problem because she was there 6 hours a day overtime anyway, and if people could take cigarette smoke breaks she could take workout

breaks) every day to use some of the equipment there. There was a bag there, hanging from the ceiling, so she would practice her boxing and even her kicking, then she would go to the treadmill instead of the stair stepping machine, because she wanted to be able to run and move quickly.

She would do this during the day, but in the evenings she would leave work by 7:30 so she could get to the gun range to practice shooting. She was able to improve her reaction time using just one hand. She practiced not only from laying on the floor, but also with barely opening here eyes so she could be able to approximate a sight while barely seeing it.

She remembered the way that Clint told her to stop attempting to contact him, but at this point she couldn't stop herself. Because Clint Saunders gave her that message the week before, she left him a message stating that one person's land was destroyed from a company owned by the government, and after working on a book with a publishing company the main contact was attacked and given AIDS. She felt she had no choice in giving him a voice mail message.

Clint, this is Sloane Emerson. I was out of town when you attempted to communicate with me over a week ago. I'll try to make this short, but I wanted to let you know that since I have been in contact with someone, I have had a colleague's equipment destroyed for their work, I've had the U.S. Scientific Research Department claim we were stealing from them and lie in print about even talking with us. I've had the same department attempt to go through our files in our presence to obtain information, and most importantly, a very close friend who is in charge of our researcher's book has been attacked and injected with an AIDS-infected hypo-

dermic needle. I was out of town and did not get your message, which led to the destruction of our offices. If nothing else can be done, please, please tell me how I can help my friend who has been intentionally given AIDS. Please contact me as soon as possible.

Sloane could only state that she did not know if she could single-handedly stop the government from the rampant and illegal actions they did with the virus, but she needed to at least save Carter.

Sloane heard this message Wednesday afternoon and left a message for Clint in response. It surprised her, as she cleaned up her files that same afternoon, to receive a call in response from Clint's office.

"Ms. Emerson," she answered.

"Hello, Ms. Emerson." She recognized the voice as Clint's.

"Hello, I'm sorry to have called you, I know that —"

"I have some idea of what you have gone through."

"And?"

"You said you had problems with many aspects of your work — did you mention that there were problems with your printing?"

"No, I didn't, but —"

"Did you have problems with your printing of the book?"

"Not with the printing, but through the publishing company I did, after the one gentleman was attacked they changed the staff around and stopped the book from going to press. Why? That wasn't government related."

"No, but connections from the government got through to one of the staff members."

She wondered about the slowness of Shelly Stempel. "You think Ms. Stempel had government connections that held the book back?"

"Whether or not this was the 'one person' or not I couldn't tell you, but I can tell you that somewhere along the line there was some sort of interference holding the book back."

She couldn't believe that even Quentin Publishing could have people that were swayed by the government. Then her mind flashed to Carter telling her

that he lived in an office filled with people who didn't want to work and who would sap off of anyone. Knowing this appeared to be how the government worked, she mustered up the ability to ask more questions. "So you think the delaying of the book had something to do with the government too?"

"Nothing can be guaranteed," Mr. Saunders told her, "but nothing certain people here would do surprises me."

The thought was going through her head that she wouldn't put anything past the government any longer.

Clint Saunders continued. "Did anything else happen that is worthy of mention? ... The only thing that surprises me is that they made a *colleague* contract AIDS and not a loved one."

Hearing a slight gasp in her voice, he asked, "Or was it a loved one?"

Having no idea of how to answer, because she was *sure* they made no references to a relationship outside of that hotel room, she then wondered if they had mentioned anything about it over the phone and their phone lines were tapped and recorded. She started to panic. "No..." refusing to believe that they could have been found out, "but what I haven't even told coworkers here is that Mr. Carter Donovan, who contracted the virus, has been a very good friend of mine for years ... Is that enough of a connection?"

"It may have been..." Clint answered. "But I returned your call because it seems they have stepped up their thwarting of you, and it will probably only get worse."

"You know what will happen *next* to us?"

"I have an idea of what will happen."

"Look, I want to be able to stop this, and I'm pretty damn sure that I'm not going to be able to do it single-handedly. I don't want to be one of these rebels that gets nowhere when battling the government, I'm sorry, but the one thing I am interested in doing more than anything right now is saving Carter's life."

"Is 'Carter the —'"

"Yes, Mr. Donovan, the gentleman that was attacked."

"Ms. Emerson, I don't know if I —"

She did the honors for once in cutting *him* off. "Look, you contacted *me* when I told you about this problem, so I would think that you could *help* me."

There was a slight change in his breath. Three seconds passed before he answered. "Well ... The only thing I could tell you is that if you're going to

be coming to Washington D.C., the best thing to do is eat at this little diner, great sandwiches and pretty good soups, just north of Constitution on Seventh.”

“There’s a diner worth going to in D.C.?” Sloane was confused, but was trying to figure out if he was trying to tell her some sort of clue.

“Yes, there’s the best food at Leona’s Diner, it’s between Constitution and Pennsylvania, it’s on the East side of the street. It is the best place to go for lunch on Sunday mornings, because the place is emptier there than it is during the week. You *did* say you’d be around there then, right? That’s why I brought it up.”

Finally, she understood that he could only talk to her if they met somewhere, and this was his way of telling her when and where. She did her damndest to remember the information and started writing down the name and location of the diner to meet him at Sunday. “Yes, I was thinking of being somewhere around there, so I think I’ll have to try the food. Thanks for letting me know.”

In order to get any more information from her contact again, she would have to meet him in Washington, DC; she would see him while visiting Carter to check his progress, because she had no money for these additional traveling visits. This way she could justify the flight on Madison’s plane even, as long as it was available.

Clint replied, “The best I can tell you is good luck in your search, and I hope the cleanup of your offices doesn’t stop your staff from doing its work.”

“Thank you. Good-bye,” she said, and after hanging up the phone she realized she never told him about her office being attacked, that he must have just known that they would do this to her office without having to ask.

Looking at the clock on her wall, she knew it would be late in New York, but she would have to call Carter to tell him she would be visiting him this weekend with a mid-trip excursion to Washington, DC.

“Hello?” She heard his voice and started to feel a bit better already, considering what had happened since she had been home.

“Mr. Donovan, hello, it’s Ms. Emerson.”

Carter was a bit taken by her referring to them both by their last names only. “Well, hello, angel, I didn’t expect to hear from you this quickly after the press visit.”

“Yes, well, I wanted to let you know that I planned a visit, as long as the Madison plane isn’t taken, to check on your condition this weekend. I have

some additional business to do in that part of the country this Sunday, so I thought this would be a good chance to check on your health.”

“I’m doing fine, but I guess...”

“I guess it would be in Madison’s best interests to check on how you are doing when you are a perfect example of what following the steps our book outlines along with taking the medication can do for a patient. So I wanted to confirm with you that it would be alright to see you and check on your progress.”

“Yes, that would be fine, I should be working and exercising here all weekend, so just let me know when you’re coming in to town, so I can pick you up from the airport.”

“I’ll check on the plane schedule and I’ll get back to you. Thank you, and I’ll talk to you soon.”

With that they placed the receivers on the telephones and Sloane decided she had to make her way to the front office to check on the schedule for the plane.

With seeing Carter in a few days on her mind, she felt more comfort-

departure	return	name	location	purpose of trip
Friday evening	Sunday evening	S. Emerson	New York	check on book production progress check status of patient using book

able and more confident. As soon as she walked out of her office, she saw the mess the lab was still in, and all of her fears *and* angers came rushing back to her. She saw Kyle and said from ten feet away, “Is everything going okay today? Is the clean-up okay? How bad is it for you?”

“Actually, most of it is just rearranging piles of paper. Most of our stuff was in locked cabinets, and no cabinets were crow-barred open, so it’s just a paperwork mess.”

“Not a lot of broken glass or anything?”

“Not really,” Ellen chimed in as she walked by. “It just looks a lot messier than it is...”

“Good then,” she answered. “Just make sure everyone keeps a record of exactly what was taken, even if it was one page out of many in a notes or test page. And I’ll get back to you in a bit...” she said as she started to walk out the door to go to the front desk for plane information.

“You know, Sloane’s office was the worst in all of this,” Howard said to

anyone around him, including both Kyle and Ellen.

“Yeah, she’ll probably be cleaning up at least into next week,” Kyle answered.

Almost jogging, she got to the front office in nearly record time. Walking right up to the receptionist at the front desk, she didn’t want another minute to get what she wanted. “May I see the schedule for the airplane?”

“Yes, ma’am,” the woman said before she got the file folder from under the desk for Sloane to look over.

Staring over the sheet, she saw an opening and filled in her name for that weekend for the plane.

Thursday morning, while she was at work, still cleaning up her office and checking to see how everyone was doing with cleaning their spaces and collecting lists of what materials were missing and needed to be replaced, she received yet another phone call.

“Sloane Emerson.”

“Hi, it’s Steve. How are you?”

She always wondered in the back of her mind if he thought there was something more to their relationship because they had kissed, or if he felt she would be at his beck and call whenever he wanted. So even though she liked being around him, she tried to figure out the appropriate way to act and the right thing to say when she spoke with him. “Hi, Steve, it’s been a while, a lot has been going on.”

“I didn’t get a chance to talk to Kyle, but I saw everyone from your work just over a week ago and you were going for the press check. How did that go?”

“The press run was great, Steve.”

“And your friend?”

“Carter’s fine too,” she answered. “But we ran into a new problem when I got back from the press check.”

“What’s going on?”

“Our offices ... hey, don’t be a reporter and write about this, please.”

“Sure, but I’d guess if it was newsworthy it would have already been reported. What happened?”

“Our offices were broken into and our lab was sort of trashed.”

“Oh my God! Is everyone okay?”

“Yes, it appears that it happened at two or three in the morning last Tuesday night. No one was here.”

“Wow ... So, you’re cleaning up stuff now? Or was a lot taken?”

“We have to finish tabulating how much was destroyed or taken, so we don’t have dollar amounts. But we’ll get it done — it should be done by the end of this week.”

“Do you *always* have something filling up your time like this?”

“No, I just seem to be special this month...”

Steve laughed. “Do you need to take a break from your work tonight? I’ve tried to prove before that I’m a good listening post.”

“Maybe, if you want to meet at nine o’clock.”

“That late?”

“I have to work out and go out for a practice session tonight, so I’ll look like a mess, but that’s when I’ll be back.”

“You don’t want to go anywhere?”

“No, I’ve sworn off drinking right now.”

“Why? Did you drink too much when you were with me?”

“It’s not that, I’m just trying to get in shape, so I’m not going to drink.”

“Got it. So you want me to come by at 9:30 tonight so you have time when you get home?”

“Okay. I’ll see you then.”

She knew she had to take care of her office and the lab, work out, and eventually go to the gun range to practice. She even had to make sure that she kept everything locked away so that if anything like this ever happened again, the information wouldn’t be stolen as well. During lunch the new-found routine was completed, to the gym for an hour-long work out. Boxing first, then kicking the heavy bag, and then running on the treadmill. Quick shower; hose head off, then back to the office.

Still cleaning and organizing, Sloane made sure to keep everything of hers locked whenever she was not there — even if it was only for lunch. The staff even received a memo and an e-mail note from her about this.

To: Madison Lab Staff

From: Ms. Sloane Emerson
Security in the Lab

To Everyone:

Hi. I just wanted to send a note asking that we take heightened security measures with our lab work. We don't know who did this to us, but we can try our best so that it never happens again. I'd strongly recommend that all of our lab work, notes, test results, memos, everything, be placed in storage whenever we leave the office. We have locks for the main lockers in the lab; they should be filled and locked at the end of every day.

I'm going to make sure I do the same within my office every day, and I may even lock everything up when I leave the office for lunch. I can make sure that things are locked when I leave late, but I need everyone's help so we can make sure that our work remains just that - our work.

- Ms. S. Emerson

She even made a point to make the similar message sound strong in voice mail that was forwarded to everyone that worked in the lab.

At 4:00 in the evening, shortly before she left for the day Thursday, she received yet another personal phone call.

"Ms. Emerson."

"Hi, it's your dad."

"Hi dad, how are you doing?" She noticed that she was once again more pleased than usual to hear from family and friends because she knew then that they were okay.

"I'm fine. How's my little buttercup?" It was cute how her father still called her that.

"I've got a lot going on, but I always seem to."

"You're not *used* to that by now, dear?"

"I think I'm starting to get used to it, but ... why did you call? I know Eric canceled when we had dinner plans before because he had work to do at the post office, but is someone canceling again?"

“No, I was just calling to make sure that you still had next Monday open for meeting with everyone for dinner.”

“I’ve got it, and I’ll be there.”

###

Leaving the safety of the holstered gun on in her purse, she had no problem carrying it around with her. Her hands were getting a bit rougher, either from boxing and working out in the day or from holding the gun and regularly practicing in the evenings. By the time she came home it was 8:45, and Steve was bound to be coming by soon.

Looking at his eyes in the rear-view mirror of his car in the middle of his ride to her house, Steve still wanted to make sure he looked just right. He knew that there was technically nothing between them, but he still made a point to wear the jacket over to her home, even though he didn’t even need to wear it for work that day. All that he knew was that he had been able to kiss her, and all he could think about right then and there was kissing her over and over again.

“She said she didn’t want to drink,” Steve thought, “but maybe she’ll change her mind.” Or maybe she didn’t want liquor clouding her judgment when she was near him, so she could choose to be with him without blaming the alcohol. There was a world of excuses she could have had, but he thought that there was still a chance he could be with her.

“I have done everything right,” he thought, “I haven’t been too forward, and I haven’t done anything to get her angry. She kissed me back, and she asked me to stay in bed with her the night I was over. I have been a perfect gentleman; I even got her water and painkillers and vitamins so she would feel better. I could have so taken advantage of her, but there is no way I would have spoiled my chances and done that to her...”

“I have to keep his head and he had to pay attention to the road,” he thought. The streets had frequent curves in this part of town, and there were quite a few hills. There were even people straggling around through the perimeter of the Fish Market.

He had a lot on his mind.

Steve pulled into a florist shop before he came home, not knowing of anything else he could bring her. Not knowing if red roses would be too pre-

tentious to assume he could give to her, he thought of white roses for friendship, but thought that message would never be enough. “Sprinkle the whites and the reds, six of each ... Yeah, mix them together so it doesn’t look like you shoved six whites in front of six reds ... no, I don’t want any pink ones...”

Not knowing if he was going to spend the night or not, Steve parked close to the front doors for her apartment complex. Steve ran his hand over his jacket again just after knocking; he even ran his hand through his hair to make sure it looked good.

“Who is it?” he heard from behind the door.

“It’s me, Steve,” he answered.

The door opened; all he could see was her hair, still a little wet from being outside.

“I didn’t know if I should present the flowers in front of me to come in or not,” Steve said as he started to come in and she closed the door.

“What are the flowers for?”

Steve looked down and started to smile. “I don’t know ... I just figured you deserve them.” He handed her the flowers wrapped in paper and continued. “Besides, you never give yourself any credit for all you do and all you put up with, so I figure *someone* should...”

Sloane opened the flowers and saw the roses. “Roses? Well, thank you so much. You really didn’t have to.”

“I know,” was all Steve answered.

“Have a seat while I put these in a vase,” she said. “Do you need anything to drink?”

“What do you have ... and what are you having?”

“I just thought I’d make myself some tea, but you can raid the fridge for something.”

Steve wasn’t expecting her to have tea, and he didn’t want to have anything more than what she had. “Tea is good with me,” he said as he sat down on the couch.

She walked into the kitchen with a vase from the shelf to put the flowers in. She already had a pot on the stove with enough water for a few cups of tea. After she put the flowers in a vase with water, she set up the two mugs with bags for steeping; she tried to analyze the flowers, she couldn’t help but do anything else, it was in her nature. “Roses, a *dozen* roses ... I know they’re not all red roses, but *some* of them are ... And he came here again this late at

night to see me ... and he's wearing a suit jacket, this late at night, why ... and I'm sure he doesn't drink tea regularly..."

Walking out of the kitchen, Sloane tried to speak to fill the space. "The flowers are beautiful. Why the different colors?" As soon as she said it, she couldn't believe she was so tactless to ask that.

"I don't know, I thought red was really pretty, but I thought I should add some white ones, you know, for you being my friend." Would she believe that, Steve worried.

"I'll grab the tea for us too ... did you need any honey or sweeteners to go with it?"

"I hear honey in tea is good if you're getting a cold, so maybe I should have a little honey."

"Okay, I'll be back in a minute..." she said, walking back into the kitchen, impressed that Steve even knew that honey in hot tea was good for your throat.

"Want to talk about what's been going on at work?" Steve asked as she walked back into the living room and gave Steve his tea before sitting down next to him.

"What do you want to know? We're still cleaning up a little, checking our lists of destroyed and missing paperwork and merchandise —"

"Did these guys break a lot of stuff, or was it all just stolen?"

"It looks like there was very little stolen, it just seems like a few papers are missing."

"Are they important ones?"

"They look mostly like lab test results, but we have more intricate copies of them on our computers. Why do you ask?"

"Just wondering if someone was trying to steal your secrets in your research..."

"You make it sound like we're at war here..."

"You do keep that kind of data secret, though, don't you? You keep the formulas for your drugs secret, right?"

"As we're making them, yes, because if we are successful with our test work those compounds will be trademarked, but it looks like what was stolen was not enough to be able to create anything from."

"Why was stuff stolen then?"

"I don't know..."

Not being able to say a word about this to Steve, she wondered if it *was* government people filtering through their work, and they just tried to steal enough so that the formulas would not exist in their entire form there again.

“Well...” Steve struggled to think of what to say to get her mind off of her work. “What have you been doing other than work?”

“Not much, really... I was at the press run and met with a swami who is a master of yoga and meditation —”

“Are you thinking of taking them up?”

“No, it was to learn about ways to help AIDS patients, which I guess was related to work.”

Steve knew at this point she was still stuck on a work track. “And your friend from the book is doing well over there?” He didn’t realize that this could have been the most wrong thing he could have said if he wanted to have any chance with her.

“He’s doing really well,” she answered. “We were really lucky that he had my business card in his wallet, because I even called Kyle from New York to verify the amount of Emivir we could safely shock his system with, and he seems to be in near-perfect health now. I am starting to go there semi-regularly now to check on his progress and make sure he is following everything that the book he’s publishing for us outlines.”

“That kind of makes it like he’s a post-book-publishing case study of how these things work...”

“We ran month-long test studies to see how people reacted to doing these things when they had AIDS to begin with, that’s why we felt more confident about writing the book, but I think there are two things to learn from this. One is that patients making positive choices for themselves give them a sense of control over their condition, which helps them toward feeling better. The other is that we caught Carter right when he was diagnosed, just less than twelve hours since he was infected from a needle. So it is good, but it’s also a different case study, I guess.”

“But how are you holding up through all of this?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you’re talking about healing all the sick, little miss Mother Teresa, but you never look into how *you* are doing. That’s why I got you the roses.”

“I’m fine.”

She waited a minute before saying anything else.

“I’m always fine.”

“You’re lying.”

“What?”

“Don’t make me repeat myself.”

“What did that mean?”

“I saw you fall apart when your friend was first infected. Is it just that time has passed, making it okay for you? Things seem to keep hitting you, though. You’ve had all those other problems you talked to me about before, and then your lab was ransacked by someone.”

“And?”

“And ... And I don’t know, but I just think that there’s only so much that anyone can take of all the stuff that you’re going through.”

“I don’t have a choice.”

“Well you could let it out once in a while.”

“What good will that do me?”

Steve was stunned by all of her responses, like it was natural to just go through this. “Do you *not* have any emotions?”

“What?”

“You’re asking ‘what’ a lot.”

“Your questions don’t make sense a lot.”

This one got Steve. He thought he was getting better at countering her remarks.

The entire night the two of them just talked, and although this bothered Steve immensely, they didn’t even bother kissing. Steve knew that it just had to be because she had too much on her mind. Steve wanted to be the journalist and get the scoop with her; she told him that she had been trying to work so that everything might be able to fall into place and they might get the answers to their problems.

“I don’t want you to have to go home too late, Steve.”

“I can stay here as long as you need me to.”

“Well, I...”

“Do you want me to go? I’ve crashed here before.” Steve was really enjoying being close to her and sometimes holding her as they talked and he was searching for any opportunity to stay with her.

Steve wasn’t the only one that enjoyed it, but she had work to do and she

needed to rest before working, then flying to New York. “Steve, I *do* like being with you, but I do have to pack for a flight after work tomorrow, and ... well ... I have to go to work early in the morning.”

Steve curled his hand around her cheek and jawbone. “I know I should learn my lesson and take a hint...”

She liked feeling his hand on her skin, but she knew she had work to do and she couldn't fall into a trap that he was probably too capable of setting. “You don't make this easy, Steve, but maybe I shouldn't bother making it a hint.”

“What do you mean?”

“Maybe it's not a hint, but maybe I should flat out state that it is getting late and you should go.”

Steve battled with whether or not he should ask to kiss her, but he knew that would be the most obnoxious thing to do. He ran his hand along her jawbone until his fingertips passed over her chin. He got up first, saying, “Why do I have to like you so much?”

She followed him to get his coat at the front door. “I don't know ... to remind you that you have a soul, maybe...”

“Do you make cracks like that to keep me in line or piss me off?”

“Which does it do?” Sloane asked.

Hearing her say those words made it sound like an open invitation to Steve so he couldn't help but hold her head with his two hands and slowly kiss her forehead. “I think you say it to keep me in line,” he said, as he moved his head over to her left cheek, “but I don't know if it works,” he said as he kissed her left cheek and moved to her right cheek to kiss her face again before he left for the evening.

That night Sloane lay in bed, thinking of what she could do to attempt to relax. Nothing could calm her down; her mind was still reeling. “Wait, I talked today about Nuanchan,” she thought. “I haven't even been able to think about going to that place and looking for that person.” With that she lay in bed and tried to imagine the place she had seen before.

The image came to her easily. She was half sitting, half laying down on the beach, with no one around her. It was sunset and there was a slight breeze that drifted over the sand and her body; she could feel the sea air and smell the salt in the water moving gently 10 feet away. Every once in a while she heard a sea

gull crying as it flew overhead. She looked over at the water, then suddenly remembered that someone should be meeting her there, she remembered that she had been told someone should come up to her here.

“Where is this person?” she then thought. She was beginning to get antsy sitting there on the beach; she kept thinking that something was supposed to happen. There was supposed to be someone here, that is what she’d been told, someone should be here that she could talk to, and all she wanted to know was: who is taking over my space? “This is supposed to be *my* space”, she thought, “and I thought no one was supposed to be here.” Thinking about this got her more and more angry.

“I’ll just wait here, then.” She stormed to the water, got her feet wet, realized it was really warm water, and sat down right at the edge of the ocean, pushing her feet into the water. It felt like a bath to her, and she just thought that she would enjoy the warmth of the water while she waited for this person to show up and try to take over her space.

She waited for a long time.

Sloane fell asleep while sitting at the beach, waiting for her answers.

###

Luggage was sitting at her front door in the early morning, packed and ready to go with her to work so she would be ready to go to New York via the Madison plane immediately at 2:45 in the afternoon, getting her to New York at almost eleven in the evening Eastern Standard Time. And deciding to work out and not drink, and even go to the gun range to practice and make the conscious decision to do something to save her life, maybe all of these things helped her work with a greater speed and efficiency than she imagined. Her office was cleaned out and entirely reorganized by Friday at noon, where she had all of her work locked in padlocked and key-locked cabinets, a safe and a fire proof filing cabinet safe. Her reports of all missing data, files and equipment were prepared and given to Julie before most everyone else’s was later in the same afternoon. She then was able to work out for a full hour over her early lunch, practicing intensely on boxing punches, then violent kicking, then nearly running on the treadmill.

Taking a shower afterward, she had to scrub her skin down with gels and loofah sponges and brushes for minutes and attack her hair with two differ-

ent types of shampoo and a conditioner to try to clean herself of everything that was around her, so she could be ready for her journey to see Carter again. She even had to just stand under the shower head for a minute, letting the water beat her flesh; she wanted to cleanse her body the way she wanted to clear her mind of the problems she continually faced.

Throughout the afternoon Kyle worked almost exclusively with her on theories about changes for potential vaccines. They stayed in the lab so she would be available if anyone needed to ask anything, but she had to leave for the airport for her business trip to check on the status of one of their book publishing contacts.

Being on the private plane was something she had almost gotten used to, which gate would she have to go to, what security checkpoints she would have to go through, what doorway would she have to step through so she would walk out on the runway to get to the Madison plane, where she usually ran into Jim. He saw her this time and thought things looked different.

“Ms. Emerson, something seems different about you, if you don’t mind my saying...”

“I mind you calling me Ms. Emerson, but I don’t know what you’re talking about with things being different.”

“We’ll talk on the plane,” Jim said as he pointed to his ears; it was so loud on the runway because motors were already started all around them.

After the plane took off, Sloane heard the intercom make a noise telling her to come to the cockpit. She moved to the door and went in.

“I forget how amazing it looks up here,” she said. “There are so many different lighted controls and switches here, and the window view is just phenomenal. This is really a beautiful sight.”

“It’s funny to hear someone say that all of these controls are beautiful. I see them all the time.”

“But all these lights mean something you have to watch so that we can be in the air like we are now. It’s really amazing.”

Jim had forgotten about how other people were amazed at the view. “I didn’t ask you here to look at the view, I wanted to ask you a question.”

“What?”

“I don’t know how to put it without sounding strange, but what has changed?”

“What do you mean?”

“You look really different than you ever had. You seem more energized, maybe. Or more ... more determined.”

Sloane smiled.

“I would even guess that you look more alive. Does that make sense? So, what has changed?”

“Jim, so much has changed, but none of it is good...”

“Tell it to me in fifty words or less and I’ll be pleased.”

“Okay... A colleague’s research was destroyed. We completed a Madison book. I fell in love with a wonderful man that was later attacked and infected with AIDS. The book was then held back. Um, a contact about AIDS research was killed by a car. Our lab was trashed and files were stolen... Was that enough?”

“That’s impressive.”

“What?”

“It’s impressive that if you remove the ‘Um’, you have fifty words exactly.”

“Did you even hear what I said?”

“Yes. And it sounds you like needed more than fifty words.”

“And all that ‘stuff’ makes me look more alive?”

“Hmm, I don’t know if everything that has happened to you makes you more alive, or if it is the way you deal with everything.”

“What?” She was still confused and a bit irritated by his comments.

“You fell in love with a man who got AIDS.”

“...Yes.”

“How does that make you feel?”

Sloane slunk back when he asked her that. “How ... do you *think* it makes me feel?”

“So what are you doing now?”

“Trying to keep him alive. And why did you ask about that and not about my contact being killed or research being lost or my lab being raided?”

“Because I thought you were in love when I saw you before. Is it the same man I thought it was then?”

“Well, yes, actually, but I don’t understand where you’re going with this.”

“His problem is part of all of the other problems, all related to your work on AIDS, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Are you *doing* anything about all of this?”

She hesitated before answering. "Yes."

"Are you being lazy or nonchalant about doing anything about this?"

Sloane almost yelled, "No."

"Why not?"

"Because I care too much about this, and I want to save Carter, and I —" and when she said these words she understood that he was witnessing a vigor in her he had not seen before.

"And you could see that in me? Did I need to be pushed this hard before?"

"I don't think so. You just look ... a bit more obvious about your determination now."

"Well ... I suppose I am. Why? Should I *not* be this way to help save his life?"

"No, I think this is exactly how you should be." Jim said, smiling, almost laughing, as he flew them to New York.

Carter was waiting at the airport, as he had before, the way he was used to waiting. He *enjoyed* this wait though, because he knew that by the end of his wait the woman he loved would come walking out of the terminal to be there for him. He knew when she should be arriving, and it wasn't in conjunction with a commercial jet arrival schedule, so there would not be a flock of people rushing toward him at once. He would just see her.

Walking past the entrance gate all alone, she saw him at the end of the hallway, and didn't now how to act. But she came up with a plan on the fly, and walked right up to him, looking very determined, and started poking on his chest.

"Mister Carter Donovan..."

"Yes?"

"I have something very important to tell you..."

"Yes?" he responded, not knowing whether he should laugh at her hitting his chest or be genuinely concerned.

"I love you more than life." She kept hitting his chest until he wrapped his arms around her in the middle of the airport and held her tightly.

"You're carrying your luggage on you?"

"Of course," she answered.

"You're lucky, angel," he said as he wrapped his arm around her. "Now that I'm back with Quentin I've got the car."

“It’s better than paying the insanely high fees for a taxi...”

“And we can actually be near each other in the car,” he responded as they made their way out of the airport to get to the company car for Carter.

When they got back to his place, he asked the now normal question, “What would you like to do this evening?”

“I usually feel like staying here, so that is fine with me again. I need to save money too, seeing that I have had to get so many weekend flights here to see you before I could use the Madison plane.”

“It can’t be that bad for you...”

“Well, I’m seeing about getting a raise from Colin at Madison now, because of all of the additional work I have been doing and all of the revenue it will get him, so we’ll see if that works out.”

“Do you have any food in the fridge?” Sloane asked him once she got her belongings out of her carry-on case.

“Sure, but what are you looking for?”

“Oh, I just thought I could make you some meals tomorrow. Why? Are you hungry now?”

“No, angel, it’s late — but you’re three hours ahead of me right now. Do you need any food?”

“Do you have a piece of fruit? I’d be fine with that.”

“I think I’ve only got strawberries now, I hope that’s enough for you.”

“Only if you feed them to me,” she responded.

“Oh, you’re so cruel... Let me get the food for you.”

“Let’s just get to a couch, I’ll get the food and drink. Do you need any juice or water to drink?”

“The water would probably be best for me,” Carter answered. “You sure you want to get it yourself?”

“Sit down and warm up a space for me.”

She turned around and filled two glasses with water, then rinsed the strawberries he had left and brought them in a bowl out to his living room. It seemed natural for her to just drop everything on the table and place herself in the crook of his arm. She started to eat with the bowl of berries right next to them on the couch, and they could reach their water at the table right next to where they were sitting.

Before she could eat too much, she decided to talk. “Carter, I wanted to tell you something, and I don’t know if you’re going to like it, but I’m going

to tell you anyway.”

This confused Carter. “Okay... tell me.”

“I’ve made friends with someone who is a friend of a coworker, remember Kyle?”

“Yes...”

“Well, this friend of his, I met him before we said anything to each other, and I got the really strong impression that he liked me, but you know, nothing happened between us.”

“Okay...”

“Actually, he kissed me then once, and it was atrocious...”

“So where is this going, angel?”

“Well, I can talk to him as a friend, and after I came back from taking care of you after you were attacked and I was helping them treat you ... well ... I was in a bad way that day. I tried to go to work that Monday and I couldn’t sleep that night, and I started calling anyone I could to make sure everyone was okay, because if my work did this to you —”

“You have no reason to believe this was because of you.”

“Yes, I do. But right now that doesn’t matter. I wanted to contact my family, and I talked to my friend Toby, the guy I saw the day before I visited you the first time this year.”

“The one that drank like a sieve in Miami?”

“You remember well. Yes, that was him. We met up for lunch at a bar, and I just drank through the meal.”

“You?”

“Yeah. Cookies and Cream Martinis. I had three or four.”

“Oh my God. So okay, you drank a lot at work. Is that what you needed to tell me?”

“No, this friend of Kyle’s called me back and said he’s take me out when I said I had some awful news. So he came to my place and I suggested that same bar to go to and we went there and he bought me those martinis again, and he even tasted one so he could figure out the right proportions to make it at home. We then went to a liquor store and bought liquor, then we went back to my place and we made drinks.”

They both sat in silence after she said that. “There is more to the story, though,” Carter said, starting to think that she had sex with this guy.

“Yeah, and don’t think this was because I drank too much, because I

know I did, but I think I was just so sad and lonely because of everything that had just happened.”

Carter couldn't help but tense up, but he wanted to hear the words come out of her mouth. “So what happened.”

“Well, he ended up kissing me because I had gone through so much. And ... and I kissed him back.”

“Then what happened.” He found himself asking questions like he was from the military, almost the same way Sloane asked questions of him when she first knew he had AIDS in the hospital.

“I think I just passed out...”

“That was *all*?”

“Well, he was in bed with me because he helped me to bed, and I woke up from a bad dream again, and he held me to make me feel better. And we kissed each other again.”

“That's what happened?”

“Yes, but I —”

“You didn't have sex with him?”

“... No ... what would make ... Oh, you thought I was going to say *that*.”

“That was what I thought you were going to tell me.”

“I thought it was bad enough that I kissed him.”

That made Carter think for a minute before he responded. “Then why did you kiss him?”

“Because ... because I wanted to feel that love and attention I feel when I am with you, I suppose.”

“Did it work?”

“For the time, yes.”

“Have you wanted to kiss him again?”

“Well...” she had to think of her real answer. “No, no I didn't. I liked the idea of a man that cares about me being close to me, but I didn't want to kiss him. Actually, he came over to talk to me last night if I needed it, and he brought me a dozen white and red roses, and he wanted to stay the night. But I told him no, that he needed to leave so I could pack and go to work early in the morning, and then he kissed my forehead and cheeks when he said goodbye. It was strange. Should I have not even kissed him in the first place?”

“Does he know about me?”

“I can't tell anyone about you, because you're someone that got us the

book. But I told Steve that you're my best friend, and this kills me that you've contracted AIDS in this attack."

"His name is Steve?"

"... Oh, yes. That's his name."

"...And he thinks I'm a friend."

"The problem is, you are, you're my best friend."

More silence fell before Sloane broke the silence. "I just wanted to tell you that, and I don't know how you're taking it..."

Carter sat there for a moment. It took him a while before he could answer. "I don't like the thought of you in another man's arms, you know that. I ... I suppose I can try to understand you needing someone to be there after leaving me here ... You have no one else to talk to in Seattle, do you?"

"Not really, no. I'm not good at making friends, I guess."

"Just don't let anyone take advantage of that."

"Of my having no friends?"

"Of needing someone and being all alone."

"I don't want to be alone, Carter. I don't want either one of us to be alone."

Carter waited a minute before speaking again. "Do you love me?"

Quickly turning around, she got on her knees on the couch as soon as she heard him say that. "Oh my God, yes, I love you. I love you more than anything, you have to know that. I love you so much." She didn't know if she should hold him at this point, because she didn't know how angry he was.

"I love you too. If you need someone to hold you, I will be here. Hell, I'll fly out to see *you* every weekend so I'll be around to hold you."

"No Carter, I think I should be doing the holding," she said as she tried to gesture him to move around so she could hold him. Carter started to accommodate her gesture and she continued. "It's my fault that I was falling apart when this happened to you. I had to be strong the entire time I was around you when I heard. I even had to *break the news* to you, I had to prescribe the proper dosages, and then I had to fly across the country by myself and take over my stagnant job. I lost it, and that is my fault. I —"

"It's not your *fault* that you had to do so much. You were amazing."

"But I'm sorry that I needed someone there to comfort me after all of that. The thing is, *you're* the one who needs it, not me. I've been a selfish pig in —"

"A selfish *pig*?"

"Okay, you get the idea, though... My point is that you need that com-

forting too, a lot more than I do. So if you forgive me, please, let me somehow make it up to you.”

Putting his head to her chest as she held him for at least ten minutes, he finally said, “You didn’t even have to tell me about it, you know. Why did you bother?”

“I didn’t want to keep anything from you,” she answered.

“Well,” Carter then asked, “was he a better kisser?”

Laughing, she replied, “No, no, definitely not...”

She leaned her head down toward his when she answered him and he then leaned his head up so she could kiss him.

###

After they both worked out Saturday morning, they went back to Carter’s home and she demanded to cook something for his dinner. She had researched what she thought would be the healthiest ingredients for him, to make him soup, a salad, and a stir-fry main course. She subconsciously examined his eating habits and available foods. “He’s doing pretty well,” she thought, as she noticed him moving her purse and her holstered, safety-latched handgun after dinner.

“What’s this?” Carter said as he picked up her purse and was holding the gun to slide it back into her purse.

“You know what it is.”

“How did you even get through the airport security with it?”

“I didn’t have to go through the public terminals to go on the private plane; if I flew on a commercial jet I couldn’t take it with me, but no one stopped me.”

“Why do you have it?”

“Because ... because I don’t feel safe.”

“Why not?”

She knew at this point she would have to explain everything she had heard and what she knew about the possible conspiracy and AIDS to Carter.

“Carter, come here, sit down,” she said she guided him to the couch.

“Why, is this going to explain the gun to me?”

“Yeah, let me start telling you things, and let me know when you understand my desire for security.”

Carter looked at her, at first cynically, then more credulously as she spoke.

“Now remember when I first saw my friend Toby, whose rain forest land was destroyed?”

“Yes...”

“Now, I looked into who bought the land, and it was a cover company owned by the government to use the land for something else, and I know that records can be overlooked sometimes with the government, but think of the rest of the story and then see how it ties in.”

“Okay...”

“Shortly afterward a government agent contacted me, telling me some information about the government’s involvement with the HIV virus.”

“But they don’t have any contact with the virus ... other than the agency that you were battling with...”

“That what I have believed too, but this guy gave me some paperwork that said he was a spy using the virus.”

“Using the virus? How? I don’t get it.”

“I don’t know if this guy was entirely right or not, but there were three things I remember from meeting with him in Colorado. One was that the government was going to start putting a stranglehold on companies like mine to stop us from succeeding at coming up with medicines for AIDS patients. Another was that he said we were being watched, and I looked out the window from where we were and saw a man in a suit watching us.”

“This is a little far-fetched, angel. And that was only two things.”

“The third was that he actually was given AIDS from a hooker given to him for the night from another country when he was in a meeting.”

“Sure. Did he *look* like he had AIDS?”

“No, the U.S. government gave him a medication which actually cured him.”

“Oh God, are you serious?” Carter started laughing.

“I didn’t believe any of this until I saw his medical reports from before and after that said period of time when he was given the cure. He also gave me records that he was unconscious for a few days, as he said the cure medication would do to him, in a hotel in another country.”

Carter still didn’t believe her. “You have this evidence?”

“I do, and ... so do you.”

“Where? I...” Carter then remembered that she gave him a sealed file

folder to keep in a safety deposit box and not open. “Is it in the sealed envelope you gave me to hold for you and not open?”

“I gave copies to a number of people to hold, in case something gets worse.”

Carter was beginning to see that there may be truth in any of this. “But what else has happened?” still not believing that she should be reacting this way.

“He said worse would happen, and a day or two later unjustified claims were made from the U.S. Scientific Research Advancement Department saying that Madison stole from the government, when they had no proof that they were even *working* on the same thing ... That and they later wanted to go through our offices, we made sure in the lab that everything was locked away and everyone said they couldn’t open up any locked cabinets and we had no computers on to the network, but when they came by they tried to open cabinets and look into our computers. You know, all claiming to do this and be ‘friendly’.”

“Really...” Carter was only beginning to see the picture, but he was beginning to understand why Sloane was being so argumentative with the government in her essays he read to splice into the back of the book.

“Wait, there’s more. The agent who told me the information, gave me another contact name, then was killed in what they reported as a ‘hit and run accident’. But I knew for a fact that it wasn’t an accident.”

“This is something you were telling me about before. You said someone gave you information and you illegally went into his computer after he was dead ... This is all coming back to me now, you told me about this when we got together the first time, you were all shaken up, I’ve had so much going on, I didn’t even remember.”

“Yeah, well that’s what those files I gave you were. And I talked to his ‘connection’ who works in DC, and he said that the mess with the rain forest and Toby was part of their plan. He even said he wouldn’t be surprised if I had trouble getting my book out.”

“Well, the book is at press, and —”

“And as soon as you were diagnosed they kicked you out of your department and sent a bunch of lackeys who only *stopped the book from printing*. Are you not seeing more pieces fitting together?”

“So he’s saying there are patsies in my company for the government?”

“He didn’t say that, he implied that they could easily convince people in your company to hold the book back because it’s not a good idea to publish it.”

Carter tried to think of how easily it would be to sway some of the people in his company. He tried to let all of this register in his head before he could answer. Finally, he spoke. “This contact you’re talking to now... Wait, I remember that he said he’d contact you when he needed *you*, right?”

“Yes, he did, but I called him and begged for help after you were diagnosed. And he said that was one of their tactics, but they must be speeding up their plan to use something so drastic to stop us.”

Carter leaned back on the couch, let his jaw hang open and couldn’t speak right away.

“And if you don’t believe me, think of this: the contact only contacted me this Tuesday, leaving a short message on my voice mail, telling me to clean up all of my belongings right away, and that evening the lab was attacked and we’re missing files and papers. I called him back the next day and begged for his help because of what they did to you, and only then did he call me back right away. He even told me to meet him tomorrow in DC so he could tell me more.”

“So... that’s why you’re going to DC tomorrow. And if this is all right, then I’m going to *die* because they want to stop your work?”

When she heard his words, this one hit Sloane as well. She leaned back and started to shake, like she was about to cry, as she continued to try to speak. “He knew about the attack before it happened to the lab, he knew of the existence of what happened to Toby, and even the slowness of the book production... I think I surprised him with the information about you, and that is why he told me to meet him.”

Carter still tried to think of everything he was just told, and tried to think of his original question. “And so you got a gun...”

“I got the gun after I found out my contact in Colorado Springs was killed. I didn’t use it much, but now I have been going to a range daily with it so I feel comfortable with it and can use it quickly, or single-handedly, or without much time to spend narrowing my shot.”

“You’ve been doing that and cleaning up the lab?”

“That and working out ferociously. I have been taking an hour a day to box, then practice my kicking, then run on the treadmill so I can make sure I am in good shape in case I need to be.”

“You’ve been doing all of this ... and you haven’t even told me.”

“Why did you need to know? You have enough on your mind.”

“You wouldn’t have told me if I didn’t see your gun, even.”

“I said, it didn’t seem right to get more people in danger by telling them.”

“You gave me the files, doesn’t *that* put me in danger?”

“Not if you don’t know you have them and you don’t know what they are.”

“Jesus Christ,” she heard him say under his breath while he was still leaning back. He kept repeating the phrase, and that almost made her laugh. “Have you even had any time to work? I mean, you’re doing all of this, you’re juggling all of this...”

“Once I decided to take back my work, *really* take it back, I threatened and successfully got you back at Quentin, and then I decided to exercise and practice at the range with my shooting, I have felt stronger and more in control than I have in a while... When I did all of that, I was even able to focus on my work more and come up with ideas for a vaccine better.”

...“It’s just amazing.”

“What is, Carter?”

“I don’t know, you’ve had all this going on and you haven’t told me, and it seems you’ve become stronger because of it...”

“I don’t know what the government was thinking when they pulled all of this,” she said. “Either they wanted to make me give up —”

“or they thought all of this happening would weaken your spirit to make you unable to do your job well.”

“You think that was one of their options?”

“A more believable one,” Carter said. “I’m just surprised it had the opposite effect from what they intended.”

And so it did, as she was ready to fight harder than she ever thought she could to keep Carter alive, and to keep her dream alive about what America was still supposed to be.

Early Sunday morning, before dawn, she was ready to leave at the airport to fly to Washington, DC. Jim flew her there, and she asked him in this puddle jumper if he would go to the cafe to get something to eat at lunch, but not necessarily be there with her, so he would know when she was ready to leave.

“Like we did in Colorado Springs?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“You wanted me to be at the coffee shop with you then, too. I can eat at this diner as well...”

“Thanks a lot.”

Otherwise she remained silent during their flight, trying to figure out exactly what she’ll need to say to make their visit more believable at Leona’s Diner.

Trying to find this place by walking around in the heart of Washington DC’s political district, she arrived just after noon. Jim stayed behind her and looked at the sights, making a point to arrive about fifteen minutes later so they didn’t look like they were together. Sloane walked in and looked around the room, noticing that there were only two tables filled, and they each had two people in them. “Couldn’t be Clint,” she thought, as she tried to look across the room at the menu behind the counter written in chalk on the wall. After standing there about two minutes looking at food choices, she heard the bell on the door ring as it swung open. She intentionally made a point to not look at whomever came in behind her. After a few moments, the older gentleman walked up behind her and said, “It’s not Philadelphia, but their Cheese Steak here is pretty good.”

“Is it?” she responded.

“Whatever you do, don’t get the gazpacho soup”, he answered, as he looked directly at her while standing behind her and almost resting his head on her shoulder.

“I’ve never been here before,” she answered, wondering if this was Clint, “I just heard very little information about this place.”

“Well, it sounds like you need more information,” the man left in a very slight pause before he continued, “about this place.”

“Yes, I probably do.”

“Let me tell you what, I’ll pick something out for you, just pick a seat and I’ll bring it to you. You look like you’re from the other side of this country, like Seattle. It’s a good thing you came here for the food, but I’ll pick out something good for you to eat.”

Sloane nodded in agreement, knowing at this point it had to be Clint, and moved over to a corner table.

Clint showed up five minutes later to her corner table with food for the both of them.

“Is this just minestrone soup?” she asked.

“I figured this would make you full.”

“What if I want everything I can get here,” she asked, trying to use this food as an apparent metaphor for her getting information for her AIDS searches.

“Having too much food might make you sick.”

“What if I’ll take my chances.”

Clint paused. “If you can’t take some for carry out, maybe some could even be delivered to your door.”

She had no idea of what that phrase meant to her, so she thought she’d leave it alone and let him sit to eat.

“You look like you’re here from work. You usually carry your paperwork around with you?”

“I usually carry a copy of my work with me, in case I need it.”

“Do you need it now?”

“I don’t know, Clint, I might.” She thought she was pressing her luck by saying his name, but this would clear up any doubt in her mind.

“Well, what are you working on?” he asked.

Knowing then that she was with the right person, she pulled the images from the single frames of the looters that broke into her lab. “I was looking for evidence of who these men were, or more importantly, where they came from. I am sure they are with *some* agency, I just don’t know which one.”

“These people are just goons, you realize that.”

“But that doesn’t tell me where they are from. Their names may mean nothing, but knowing what agency they are from might let me know where this all started.”

When she said this he then knew that she was not fooling around. “Just flashing around these pictures to strangers is going to get you nowhere, though.”

“Do you know if I can find out who they work for?”

Clint waited a moment before answering, as he put his hand out to take the images. “Of course.”

She handed the image copies over to him.

“Is this what you came here looking for?”

“No.”

“Then what? You couldn’t be looking for who these goons were.”

“I was looking for —”

“Knowing where they came from couldn’t be it wither, because really, what are you going to do with that information?”

“Then why am I here?”

“I know these agencies, and I know you are one person. You’re not going to have any luck changing the world.”

Sloane saw Jim walk into the diner, He spotted her and walked up to the counter to order a sandwich for himself.

“Actually,” she said, “I was looking for a vial.”

“A what? Of what?”

“Medicine.” She watched the change in his face when she said that word.

“I am a researcher, and I need to save a life.”

“Just one?”

Clint’s question caught her. “I’ll settle for one if I can’t save the world.”

“How noble of you.”

“What?”

“Wanting to save the world.”

“Well I don’t want people sick and dying. But if I had to, I’ll settle for one vial, for one person.”

“It means that much to you?”

“It’s my life.”

“Your research?”

“That’s my job. Someone tried to mix the two, so now it is much more than my work.”

They sat in silence and Sloane had finished her soup. Clint still had some of his chili in his bowl. Sloane reached over with her spoon, without asking, and said, “I’m taking some of yours.”

Clint saw that she had gone through all of her food and was looking for more. He didn’t stop her, because he knew that she wanted help too desperately. “You can have it — I’m done eating.”

Clint got up to leave. “Do you need my business card to send me the image data?”

“No, I have the information, and you won’t need to contact me. I have your information,” he said as he walked out of the diner.

Hearing those words made her know that she should not call him or try to e-mail or write him. but she did not know what additional information she got from meeting with him. She glanced up at Jim, who was looking at her. She leaned back, trying to figure out what the next step was, or what she could possibly do.

After a few minutes to collect her thoughts, she leaned over to make sure everything in her briefcase was neatly put away. Jim saw this and stood up to put the rest of his sandwich in the bag it came in; he still had his coat on, so

when Sloane was putting her coat on Jim started to walk toward the front door. He beat her to the front door, so he was a gentleman and offered to hold the door open for a stranger. They walked out, their separate ways, the way they did when they came to the diner, knowing where to meet minutes later so he could fly her across the country again, back to Seattle and her home.

###

Back home that evening, she couldn't do much to focus on any work, but she had nothing to focus on with her search for AIDS cure information. She tried to get a full night's sleep so she could get to work in the morning.

Monday morning she arrived early at work to work out, and got into the office right after Kyle came in. He threw his newspaper down on the table next to Sloane to start working with her, and she saw half of a headline.

"Kyle, can I see your paper?"

"Don't you get a paper yourself?" he jokingly said as he reached over to grab the paper to toss it over to her. She read the story headline that caught her eye.

Department of Defense Agent Clint Saunders Killed in Terrorist Activity

(WASHINGTON, DC) Special Agent Clint Saunders, a member of the Department of Defense for 26 years, was shot late last night by an Al Qaeda sympathizer because of actions the U.S. government is taking against terrorist activity, sources say.

She didn't read more of the article; she knew that was not why he died.

Dropping Kyle's paper back at his desk after asking for the article, she walked straight to Julie's desk. "Julie, I know I ask favors of you all the time, but it would really help if you could find any information anywhere about the death of Clint Saunders late last night. If there's anything about causes of death, when he was found, who did the autopsy, anything, I'd appreciate it."

Surprised and slightly confused by the request, Julie looked at her a little blankly, but said, "Sure. I can get that for you this morning."

By ten in the morning, packages were dropped off; there was an overnight

package that was sent to Sloane. Julie saw the name on the package was Clint Saunders, so she walked it over to Sloane and handed her the envelope.

“Ms. Emerson? I thought you could use this, since you asked for information on him.” She handed her the envelope.

“Thank you.” she said as Julie walked away. She saw the package was from Clint himself. Turning pale as a ghost as she read the label, she asked Kyle to excuse her, so she went into her office to open the package and read its contents.

to: Ms. Sloane Emerson
Research Manager, Madison Pharmaceuticals

Ms. Emerson:

I couldn't tell you anything in person, and I saw your resolve. I hope this can help your friend.

There are a military bases on the East side of Pennsylvania, and what you are looking for it at a building at the Stenford Military base, north of Philadelphia, past Bethlehem.

In the base there are a series of buildings there that look like warehouses. All are under strict military supervision. The vials you are looking for would be only there. There should be more than one sample there, as this is the storage place for the reproduction of the materials.

I cannot get you into the site or to the buildings. All I can say is that it is made to appear as a low-security area because the military does not want it to look like there is anything secretive going on there. They do not have motion sensors to detect criminals, but they have regular circulating lights and men as guards every thirty feet, unless there is a tower nearby, where there will be more guards.

Late night would be the best time to see the site. Knowing that weekly guard changes occur every Thursday, where Thursday night guards will be new to the terrain, the best I can tell you is that guard changes occur at 8:00 p.m. and 4:00 a.m.

I hope this information meets you well, And God's speed.

Mr. Saunders

The moment of truth had come for her here. She knew she had to go

there and try to get to the warehouse in the middle of the night that Thursday. Since an airplane would be too traceable for her to go there with she opted to drive. Immediately turning to a road atlas at a shelf behind her, she started pinpointing her routes to get there on time. She started thinking and taking notes at the same time. "I'll rent a car, leave at dawn Tuesday morning, take I90 through Montana because there is no speed limit, cut down through Wyoming to I80 at Cheyenne. If I need to I can sleep in Nebraska, but otherwise take I80 through all the way ... I'll have to sleep in Illinois or Indiana, but I'll be able to make it to Pennsylvania from there by Thursday. The military site I've got to go is south of I80 near the edge of Pennsylvania, but I think that would be the best way to go..."

She looked over at her calendar before calling the front desk to tell them she'll be taking an emergency vacation week off, noting that she had to go to dinner with her family tonight. "Oh, shit," she thought, though she wouldn't back out, because before dinner she had to get the rental car and after dinner she had to pack to go on a trip where she might even be able to do something to save someone's life.



CHAPTER 18

THE JOURNEY TO THE END

First thing on the list: make a car reservation. Finding a car rental agency walking distance to her home, she called and they said they have a few compact cars available. Figuring this would be good for better gas mileage on her trip, she took what she thought was the most fuel-efficient car.

“We’re open until nine tonight,” the woman at the rental agency said. Sloane was hoping she could get the car after dinner, but she figured her sister would want to keep her for longer than she should stay, so she planned to get the car before she left for dinner. She even called to confirm with her dad that they were meeting for dinner at Dimitri’s at six in the evening.

Second on the list: get food you’ll need to bring on the trip. This one seemed a little easier to handle before dinner, because before she got the rental car she could go to the grocery store to purchase protein bars and juice meals, so that she would be able to eat well and continue driving, saving time.

Next on the list: when she gets home she has to pack for a few days and make sure the cooler is clean. Get the cooler from the back of the pantry closet, she thought. Get the suitcase from under the bed in the bedroom. She began writing a physical list of what she needed would help:

bras, underwear and socks	black pants
black sport bra and tank top	black t shirt
dark green long-sleeved shirt	khaki sweater
brown overcoat and rain jacket	running shoes

food packed in cooler	handgun
map for directions in car	small flashlight
sunglasses and visor	phone numbers

Calling the front desk was the first thing she had to take care of at Madison before she could go out in the lab and tell people she would be out of town.

The receptionist answered at the front desk, "Madison Pharmaceuticals."

"Hi, this is Sloane Emerson in research, I needed to log in a last-minute need for taking the rest of this week off as vacation time."

"Alright, just one moment please..."

She listened to the woman file paperwork; the woman finally got back to the phone, "You don't usually take time off, do you?"

"No, why?"

"I'd remember your name for vacation time requests, that's all. I'm sure you have the time, so feel free, and thanks for letting me know."

Seeing things starting to come into place, Sloane was ready to step out into the lab and tell people she would be gone for the rest of the week.

"What's the occasion?" Howard asked. Sloane told Kyle and Howard. Julie walked over to find out what was going on.

"I need to get some work done, I don't know if it will help our research or not, so I am just taking it off as vacation time."

"You need that much time for it?" Kyle asked.

"I'll be stopping at a few places, so I'll probably need all that time. I know I have to be somewhere far from here both Thursday and Friday, so we'll see how I can get to all of these places."

"Well, good luck," Julie said from behind her.

“Thanks. I was just coming out to tell people I’d be going.”

“When did you plan this?” one of them asked.

“Just now, so don’t think I don’t tell you what is going on when, I just found this out myself.”

“Does this have anything to do with the paperwork you asked me to find on the man that just died?” Julie asked.

She had completely forgotten asking her about it. “Not really, but a little, I guess. Were you able to come up with anything?”

“It will take a little time to get all of that information...”

“Just lock it up in one of my lockers when you get it, and leave me a voice mail about where it is so I can go through it when I get back, and thank you so much.”

“No problem, Ms. Emerson,” she answered as Sloane turned to go to her office, then realized that she had nothing to do there and turned back toward Kyle. “I, I think I have everything as in order as I can while I’m here, so if you need me for vaccine work, I can help.”

Kyle saw how disconnected she appeared to be “Are you sure you’re okay for work right now?”

“...Maybe if there is more mindless work I can help with, like filling out forms for duplicates or something, I can be doing that...”

“Sure, chief, just go to that table and I’ll get stuff together for you.” After she started to walk to the table, Kyle turned toward Howard and they both gave each other looks like they had never seen her act so lost before.

Working like a colloquial monkey-at-a-typewriter, Sloane didn’t have anything of substance to offer to help with vaccine research and worked on plugging numbers and filling out forms for half of the afternoon. Everyone at the lab found out she would be gone for the week, and she told everyone that if they had anything to ask, bug her while she was working in the lab before she left for the day.

When the clock read 3:00 p.m., Sloane turned to Kyle and said, “Am I doing okay?”

“You got a lot more done than I thought would even get done today, so thanks. Why?”

“I was just thinking that since I came in two hours early today, that maybe I would leave early today, so I can get ready for my trip.”

“Oh ... okay ... are you taking the Madison plane to wherever you’re going for work?”

Knowing that she didn’t want anyone to know where she was going and that she had pulled more than \$1,000 out of her checking account to pay for the car, hotels, food and gas, she said “No, I don’t need it. But I’ll call you if I need anything.”

“You bringing your computer with you so you can get on to the net?”

“Yeah, so I could e-mail you as well, so don’t worry...” She got up to start cleaning up her belongings and was able to pack everything away in her office and say good-bye to everyone by 3:30, so she could start on one of the longest journeys of her life.

###

Before leaving the office, her hands slammed on her keyboard in her office to go to any web site that would give for information about what the uniform colors would be of the men guarding the warehouse site. Finding a few pages with sample outfits for possible uniforms guards could be wearing, she analyzed her closet and clothing choices in her mind to see if she had clothes that would be good camouflage as well as help her blend in with other people there.

First thing on the list that evening, after she got home from work: go to the grocery store. Investigate choices for protein drinks and diet shakes that contain protein, vitamins and minerals. Pick up some vitamin tablets. Look for protein bars, and try to find filler foods to make the stomach full if the diet shakes aren’t enough.

Next thing to do: get out the suitcase and cooler for the foods. Clean the cooler out. Pack. Remember what you’ll wear in the car; make sure you have bandages and a small first aid kit in case it is needed. Pack the flashlight in a carry-on. Pack the bullets in the case, and remember to bring the make-up paint. Remember hairbrush, toothbrush and toothpaste, soap, rubber band for hair. Get sunglasses and sun visor in car as well. Leave the computer and phone lists in briefcase next to front door to take along.

Counting the cash in her wallet, she tried to remember if there was anything else she had forgotten if she had everything. The dried food was packed in the cooler. Check. The maps were in the car, behind the driver’s seat. Check. The

luggage had everything she needed, and her coat with her suitcase. Check.

All seemed to be in order.

Time to look at the watch, 5:35. Might as well leave to get to the restaurant a little early, she thought. She knew she should see her family, but she knew she couldn't tell them anything about what she was about to do. Sloane always felt an eerie silence when she met up with her siblings, now she knew she had a specific reason to feel that way.

She tried to shake it off, and made her way to her car.

Checking her watch as she drove into a parking space at Dimitri's. She read 5:52 on her watch. Her father's car was already there. Trying to think of what she could say about her life to fill up the time, she got out and locked her car before walking into the restaurant.

Dad was sitting at the bar, waiting for others to show up. "Dad?" she called as she walked toward him into the bar.

Her father turned around. "Sloane!" he reached around to hug her. "How's my little buttercup?"

Sloane smiled at the nickname. "I've had a lot going on, but I'm okay. How is your work?" She tried to come up with a reason to not talk about her life and to get others to talk about theirs to fill the space.

"Why don't we wait until Dan and Andrea come in to talk about that?"

"Are their families coming?" she asked, wondering if she would have to deal with children as well this evening.

"I think Andrea has a baby sitter for the night, but Bob can't make it because he will be late from work."

Sloane liked talking to Andrea's husband and thought it was a shame that he wasn't coming. "Well, that's okay," Sloane said as Dan came in straight from work to the bar they were sitting at.

"Hi dad!" Dan said. "And Sloane! I didn't think I'd ever see you again!"

"Hi, Dan," she responded. "Yes, I'm still on the face of the earth, I just work too much."

"Busy saving the world from diseases, I think..." her father answered.

She turned around to gesture that they should get a table. "Should we tell them we'd like to be seated? Andrea can meet us."

They started to go toward the hostess' table when Sloane finally said, "I'm not trying to save the world, I'm just trying to help..."

Dan looked at her, knowing that she was trying hard to do her job right.

Just as they were seated Andrea walked in and found them at their table. “Hi everyone!” Andrea called out. She even turned to Sloane and said afterward, “And how are you? I haven’t seen you for a while.”

“I know, I’ve been so trapped in my work that I just haven’t been able to get away...”

“You know, you should really take some time off, relax.”

“I’m going out of town this week,” she answered, realizing as soon as she said it that she would get a barrage of questions about where she was going and for how long.

“Where are you going?” her dad asked.

“Just to visit a friend, we don’t know how long I’ll be...” She saw that they wanted to know more and she was just trying to think of something to distract them enough from the story. “A friend of mine agreed that I spend too much time at the office, so we just decided to take a little break.”

“That’s nice to hear,” Dan said.

“Yeah, I get to go with Bob and the little one.”

“How’s little Bob doing?”

“Oh, he’s just great. He’s going to go to preschool next year.”

“That will give you a little more time to yourselves...”

“But you know, I am going to miss my little tiger.”

Sloane tried to smile more at people talking, so she would fit in more with their conversation. “So what has been going on with your work, dad?”

“We’ve just been doing more research on the rock samples that came from the rain forests up north.”

“I’d really like to take some time to go through some of the forest up there,” she said. “I hear it’s beautiful.”

“There are certain patches of land that hadn’t been really explored, but we knew that only certain plants would grow around there, so we were able to get more land samples to see what naturally exists there.”

Thinking that extraction studies would be good to learn about, she did her best to pay attention to the stories as the meal at Dimitri’s trailed on. After almost an hour and a half, Sloane had to announce that she had to call it a night. “Hey everyone, I’ve really liked hanging out with you all again, but to go on this trip, we planned to leave early tomorrow morning, and I still have to pack, so I should probably go so I can get a full night’s sleep.” She realized then that slipping that she was going out of town was a good excuse

to have her leave early for her journey.

“We’ll miss you,” Andrea said.

“We always do, buttercup,” her dad said, as he got up to say good-bye. He hugged her and said in her ear, “I’ve got your dinner, too, so don’t worry about it.”

“Are you sure?” she whispered back.

“Just have a good trip.”

Sloane leaned away from her dad to say to all three of them, “I love you all.”

“Have a safe trip” Dan said.

“And we’ll talk to you soon,” Andrea said.

With that she turned around with her coat and purse to leave Dimitri’s and start her quest. When she got home, she packed her belongings in her rental car and tried to get as much sleep as she could so she could leave before dawn.

###

Sitting in her rental at 4:45 on Tuesday morning, Sloane looked over her map again, guessing the length of time it would take before she would get to a destination where she could rest for the night.

“It’s over four hundred miles before I get to I15, but Montana has no speed limit, so I should get a break there. Then I’ll take I15 for almost the same amount of time before I get to I80. Take that east and see how far I can go on it before I ... collapse,” she thought as she closed the map. “One quick check before I go: clothes, food, numbers, map and directions to the Pennsylvania military site, flashlight, make-up cover, gun, ammo, computer, cash. I think I’m fine,” she said as she remembered that she had locked and cleaned out her apartment and started the car to drive away.

Thinking briefly about Saunders mailing her information, she wondered in a flash as she drove toward the exits for the expressways and highways what happened to him when he died. Was he shot? Who shot him? Did anyone say anything to him before they shot him to death? Did he live long once shot?

Was he shot because he had talked to her?

Suddenly her fear of being a reason why people were getting killed from the military was getting to her. She began to think that if she had to shoot someone when she was at the site in self-defense, she wouldn’t feel as bad about it, if they were able to kill people with impunity for telling the truth.

“Sloane *had* been acting strange lately,” Howard said to Kyle as they were having lunch Tuesday.

“I don’t know if she’s been having too much going on in her life, or what,” Kyle said as he tried to eat. No one knew why Sloane Emerson took off on the spur of the moment, and no one could explain why she wanted to leave when she never wanted to take vacation days because she loved her work so much.

It was all a mystery to them, and they wondered if they would ever get the answers from her.

Making a point to stop every two hours to stretch her legs at a rest stop, Sloane was making excellent time on her first day of the trip. She was even impressed at how far she was able to get into Nebraska before she had to get a place to stay for the night, because she was able to go far enough into the state that the Nebraska hotels were incredibly cheap for only a bed for the night. Even though she brought a portable alarm clock, she asked for a wake-up call at four in the morning. Before she went to bed, she checked her belongings again; she was impressed by how little food she actually went though and was still feeling fine. She stretched a little and practiced high kicks and punches to move her body some before stretching more right in front of her twin-sized bed. She got to sleep a few hours before midnight.

Early Wednesday morning she left to work her way across the country, and seeing that it would only take eight hours to get from Omaha to I80 just south of Chicago, she thought it would be a good idea to stay in Chicago and see what the city was like. She got through Nebraska, then Iowa, then worked her way into Illinois. Guessing that gas prices would be higher the closer she got to Chicago, she filled her gas tank again so that she would have no problem getting in and out of the city Thursday morning before dawn to go to Pennsylvania.

She took I55, the first main highway, north to the city. Having a city map in her atlas, she saw that she should go to somewhere in the north side of the city to see what the town was like. And looking at a price hotel map, she actually found a place for less money. “They’ve got Holiday Inns, but they’re so much ... There’s actually a place, it says off of ‘Southport’ north of ‘Belmont’ ... It’s a good thing this town is set up like a grid, or I’d never find the place.”

Getting a room for just over sixty dollars for the night, she left her rental in their small lot for the night. Although the parking spots were small, they at least weren't on hills, like in other western states. She walked up the street and passed a few bars and a grocery store, stopping briefly to get some celery and fresh fruit before she left again to sit in a place and meet some people. Seeing that there was nothing north of the street just under a mile north of her hotel, she stopped in a corner bar at around eight o'clock. She sat at the bar and a tall gentleman with black hair asked her what she'd like.

"Um, just a ... what kinds of soda do you have?"

"Coke, Sprite and Ginger Ale."

"I'll have the Ginger Ale please."

An overweight woman came up to her. "Is that all you're getting?"

Sloane didn't understand. "Why, what are you having?"

"Budweiser, in a bottle."

Checking to see and noting that they have Budweiser on tap, Sloane asked, "Does it taste better in a bottle, because they have it on tap?"

"Nah, I get it for running the show here. You're here for it, right?"

"No, what is it?"

"It's an open mike that I've run here for years. I thought you'd have something to read. You could at least stop back there with the mike and listen, cutie."

Sloane thought it was strange that she was called 'cutie'; then she understood that this lady was probably being hit on her. "Well, maybe, I can't stay here all night, though."

"Why, you gotta be somewhere else tonight?"

"No, I —"

"Don't even tell me you have to work early. I have to work in a far West suburb tomorrow morning."

"Actually, I do. I leave to get out of town by four in the morning."

"Well, cutie, try to stop back there, okay?"

Sloane smiled. "Okay, I'll try..."

Over the course of her evening there she got hit on by a man who told her that he had a novel published, until she found out from someone else that he published it himself. "Interesting break," she thought, as she left after being there for an hour and going to a bar for some water where the old men hung out, that was right next to a closed comic book store.

The clock next to her bed in her hotel room read 10:46 when she decid-

ed to close her eyes and try to get five hours of sleep before the hotel gave her a wake-up call at four in the morning.

That night Sloane lay in bed, trying to remember what Nuanchan told her about going to her place to try to relax. She needed to unwind after meeting the strange crowd at two bars in Chicago.

The beach appeared to her as plain as day; she was alone; it was sunset; there was a slight breeze along her body; she smelled the salt in the water and she felt the sand under her toes. The ocean waves crashed a few yards away. She looked over at the water, thinking about how calm it was, to finally have a space for herself where no one bothered her.

She started to relax.

After a few minutes, she heard some more water splashing in the distance. Not thinking of it at first, she knew it had to be some birds or some people playing in the water.

“Wait, there’s no one here”, she thought.

She sat up and opened her eyes, trying to guess where the noise came from.

She realized it was the sound of feet splashing in water, about fifty feet away. The sun was setting, but she tried to make out the image. There was one person there, she could tell that much; she saw a long-sleeved shirt, maybe beige, with rolled up white pants and bare feet kicking the water right at the edge of the shore. Black hair, she could spot that. Beyond that she couldn’t make out a thing about the person.

And the person was staying over there, not bothering her at all.

She figured that if the person stayed over there and minded their own business, she wouldn’t mind. She would still be here and it would still be like her own ‘turf’, with no one bothering her.

Sloane fell asleep while sitting at the beach, waiting for her nothing.

After she received the wake-up call, she hopped in the shower at 4:03. Quickly dressing herself, she had everything packed. She was out the door by 4:17 in the morning, hoping that she would miss any morning traffic by leaving so early to go through the city.

This was the first time she saw what they called the ‘loop’, and she was awe-struck by the architecture. She watched the high-rise buildings and skyscrapers, when she wasn’t looking at the ornate work on the sides of the churches.

Forty-five minutes after she left her hotel she was getting on I80 again, and at this point she just had a lot of straight driving to do. “Oh, shit, there are tolls past Chicago on I80,” she said under her breath as she pulled up to the first station in Indiana to take a card that would define how much she owed at the end of the state, as she would have to do all the way until she got to Pennsylvania. “The maps say it should take me about thirteen hours from here,” she said under her breath as she started on another long stretch of road, before her journey reached its end.

Seven hours had passed when she saw that it was noon, so she hoped she could get to a hotel near the military site by dinnertime.

She exited I80 by going south on 33, and she knew she was close to the site. When she passed military site signs, she then knew that she needed to find a hotel north of the military site, so that she would be able to get to I80 easily again, which would lead her close to New York if she was able to get enough medication for Carter.

Getting there early enough, she had time to get a hotel and pay with cash. Considering her choices for the evening, she started her list of things to do: First, call Carter to possibly say good-bye to him, then stretch, then try to rest for a few hours, then stretch and work out to make muscles flexible again, then stretch again to end the workout.

All this time in organizing she had been delaying her phone call. Looking at the rates of a call in the hotel, she thought she'd try to make a collect call. Carter's phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Will you accept a collect call from...” the operator let a small amount of time pass before she said what she was told to say, “your soul mate?”

Carter thought for a split second. “Yes.”

“Thank you,” and they both heard the click of the operator getting off the line. Sloane started first. “Carter?”

“Why didn't you use your name?”

“It's a long story, but I don't want people to know where I am.”

“Why not?”

“Because I've driven across the country by myself, and —”

“You've *what*?”

“I had to do this, and I'm not going to tell you what I'm doing, but —”

“But *what*?”

“But what I’m doing is illegal. I don’t know if I’ll be okay through it.”

“Where *are* you?”

“If I come out okay from this, I’ll be coming to your place.”

“Why?”

“I’ll hopefully have something for you if I’m successful.”

“What would you have for me that’s ... wait a minute...”

“I wanted to just tell you something before I go, though.”

“Are you doing what I think you might be doing?”

“Carter, I wanted to tell you that I love you more than life.” She had to stop because she started to cry. “And... And if anything happens to me, just know that I died trying to make you live, because ... because there is no point to my living in a world without you, because ... well, because your existence has given my life meaning. It didn’t really have any before, and you gave me that.”

Carter knew she didn’t want him to say her name, and he had to collect his thoughts and stop himself from crying after hearing her words. “You know that you are the only meaning in my life, angel. Really, you *are* my angel. But... I have to ask. Are you going to try to —” Carter remembered that Sloane didn’t want anyone to know where she was, so he tried to speak using crucial words to try to still get his point across. “Try to get me medication?”

“Carter, I gave this to you, so if this —”

“You didn’t do anything to hurt me, you’ve been saving me through all of this. You know that.”

Fearing that this would be too much information to say over the phone, she knew she had no choice and said it anyway. “Carter, someone else that gave me information was killed.”

“I ... I don’t think that —”

“Carter, if they’re not out to get everyone, they then sure the Hell seem to be out to get ME.”

“Don’t say that.” Carter wondered with everything that had happened to her that maybe she was correct.

“Look at everything that has happened to me! The book, my colleague, the two people with information being killed, *you*, they had to go do this to *you*, and how much more are they going to do to me?”

“This is the work you do. What choice do you have?”

“I have the choice in what I am doing now.”

“The choice you won’t tell me about?”

“Carter, I’m not telling you any more. I think I should go now, just to make sure. Please, Carter, just know that I am doing this for you, and that I love you.”

“Angel, I love you too. More than life.” Carter knew he had to say something that would make her stronger for whatever she had to do. “Hey, I know you, and I know that you are pretty much capable of moving mountains and tall buildings, and maybe even parting the sea ... so all I can say is don’t hurt anyone when you get what you want.”

“Parting the sea, eh?”

Carter laughed when she said that. “You have always been capable of everything, so I know you can accomplish anything now.”

Sloane smiled as they sat there for a moment in silence. Carter finally spoke. “I will see you tomorrow.”

“Yes, you will.”

“I love you more than life, angel.”

“I love you, Carter.”

After listening to his receiver click as he hung up the phone, she then hung the phone up, then started crying.

At this point all she could do was stay on her mission, because, like he said, she always accomplished her goals. She had to keep on schedule, so she walked over to start stretching on the floor. She asked the hotel clerk if they could give her a wake-up call in a few hours.

Needing to fall asleep quickly but not knowing how, Sloane decided she would imagine her place to relax. Almost immediately, the beach appeared to her. There was nothing around her to disturb her, it was sunset, and she felt a slight breeze along her body. Smelling the seawater, she felt the sand under her feet. Listening to the ocean waves crashing nearby, she looked over at the calm water. This was a space to herself where no one bothered her.

Staying away from the water, she remained seated and looked at the pier in the distance. Suddenly she heard a noise behind her; she turned her head and saw the person she had seen before, this time a little closer. Doing her best to turn her body around, she sprung up as quickly as she could and shouted to the other person, “Who are you?” and received no reply. “Wait — I want to talk to you —” came out of her mouth and she started to move closer to the person. The person started to move away, but then the black-haired person suddenly turned around, and she could only see that it was a man, and

the person moved his hands down, as a signal for her to sit. She stood there, not knowing if that was his command or if she should do what he suggested. She took a step forward and he turned around to leave, so she stopped. When this person turned around to see she stopped, he signaled again for her to sit in the sand — so she did, to wait for his next move.

Sloane fell asleep while sitting at the beach, waiting.

Dreaming about the same place a few hours later, she was at the water again and this person came up to her. He was two feet away, though she could not even describe what he looked like. When this man in her dream finally approached her, she asked, “Who are you?”

Never hearing this man’s voice before, he answered, “You’re asking the wrong questions.” When he said those words he started to walk into the water.

This infuriated her, she did not know what that meant, so she decided to go after him. Getting up from sitting in the sand, she started to run into the water after him, but the water was ice cold and it woke her up from her dream immediately.

After she woke and the alarm clock later rang, she was surprised by the alarm clock and it made her determined, so she stretched and worked out just enough to make her muscles flexible again. She finished by stretching again to end her workout.

She knew she was about to do the most frightening thing she had ever done, so she didn’t know if how she felt was due to excitement, nervousness, getting in shape the past few weeks — or all three. But checking how she felt, she knew she was right, because she still had a ton of energy to achieve her goal.

For this confrontation and escape, she pulled the right clothes out, dressing in dark army greens, layered with a few light beige colors and browns for camouflage, with stretch slacks in dark browns and blacks so she could try to infiltrate the military site. In pockets she also packed a small flashlight; she kept her gun in a holster at her hip. One pocket was stocked up with a small set of bullets. She kept her clothing and belonging well packed, and she made a point to not bring more cash than what she would need for one meal, or any ID, because she didn’t want anyone to be able to identify her quickly. After putting make-up paint on her face and arms to smudge on her skin, she hoped she wouldn’t be as noticeable in the dark. All that was then left for her to do was throw away the make-up paint because she wouldn’t need it again.

“Mental note,” she thought, “drop the make-up colors in assorted places so they wouldn’t all be together for her to be caught with.”

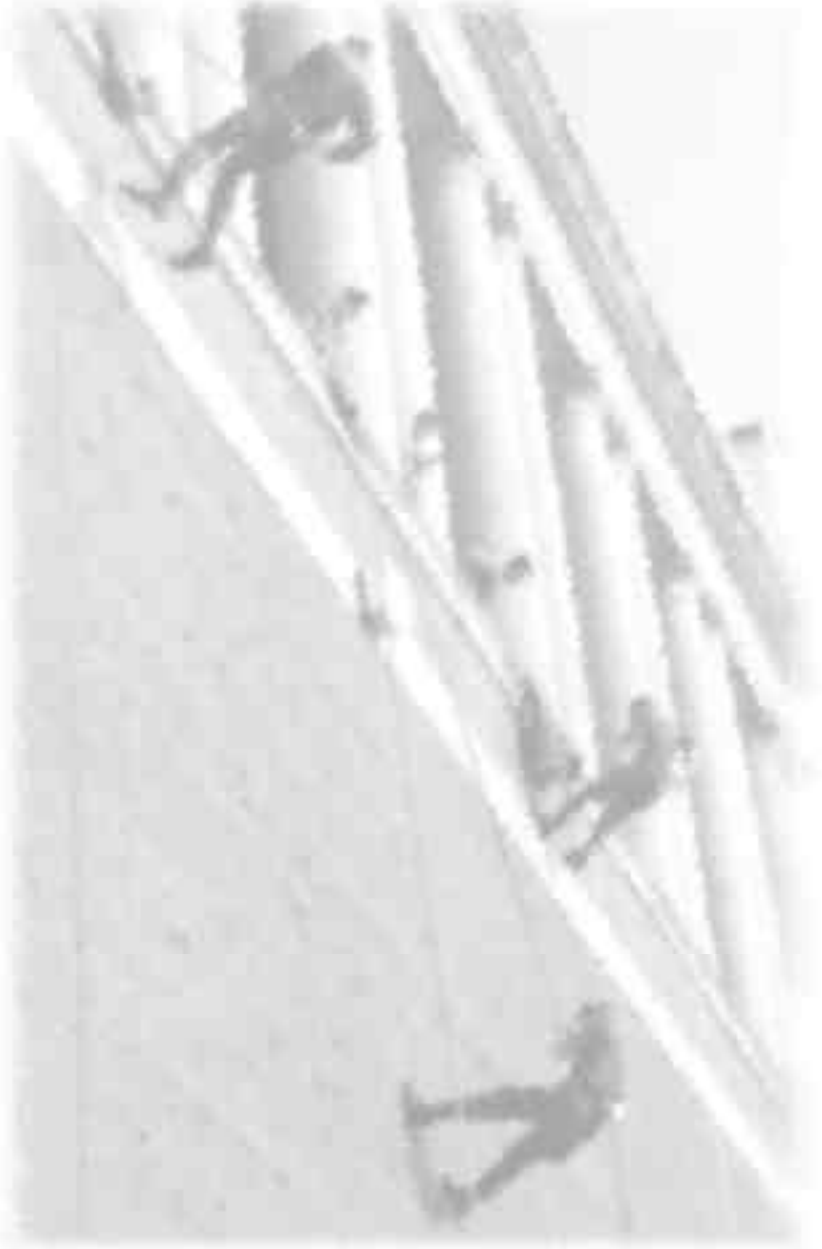
Working only from a small copy of the map that she could get of the area, she arrived at an available check-point at 3:32, knowing that the new guard switches and a new guard for the week will come in at 4:00 a.m. their time. Intentionally getting there early because she assumed it would be best to investigate the surroundings for escape routes, she looked at the foliage, trees, bush and tree lines, the military works all around her, and even the amount of dew on the surroundings so she would know whether or not it would be easy to slip as she was running. “Can’t climb the Pines,” she thought as she looked at the assortment of trees around her. Some of them had good foliage for cover, so she would be able to hide easily in the dark with them. There were empty barracks, but there were fences everywhere with barbed wire along the tops. The only saving grace to her was a hole in the bottom of one of the fences at one point near a guardhouse. It was a small hole, she thought, but she would be able to fit through it if she needed to, and it would be more difficult for soldiers when covered in uniforms and body armor, with weapons, a canteen and radios to manage through with. Trying to canvas the site from the map, she also saw the tower, and saw that there were fewer guards around the tower, trying to consider that it might be a good idea to go near the tower to move because their lights flash *far away* from itself and there are fewer guards there, but then she realized that they could see her directly below and radio to anyone to come over to stop her. After looking at her surrounding so that she would know where, when and how it was safe to travel, she also tried to watch the pattern of the light motion from the tower, so that she knew when to run to escape the light in the dead of night.

Trying to eye everything up, she saw some well-lit warehouses with no guards; she knew these couldn’t be the ones with the cure because they wouldn’t leave it so well exposed. Seeing many signs for land mine zones, she still eyed the ton of barbed wire, making it impossible to cross at the top of the fence. The ground was her only chance, and the one hole she spotted was her only chance, and it was relatively close to what she thought was the building she had to go to. Finally spotting a building where there were many guards patrolling and it was dark, she wondered if she was looking at just the right area in the right direction. There were a few signs around it and on the doors for one warehouse; they were too far away for her to read, but she

thought this had to be the place.

Reading her watch, it said 3:58 a.m., she patted her flashlight and her gun, then patted the ammo she stored in a third pocket. Four minutes later, guards were changing at 4:02 a.m., and then she saw an opportunity to move in because everyone was facing only one direction, opposite her.

“This is the end of the line,” she thought. She had worked out and practiced aerobics, motion, and yoga exercises for only a few weeks, but she hoped it was enough to help her through this.



CHAPTER 19

THE SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

Going over her drilled moves in her head and knowing to only move when the tower light was pointed farthest away from her location so that it was as dark as possible when she moved, Sloane started to bolt to her next hiding place; she quietly but swiftly darted to the next set of bushes by ducking and rolling to the bushes. She performed a similar move when the lights were low to get behind a set of barrels that were near the building; she successfully got in through a side door of the warehouse when the guards were changing.

She had no idea if she was in the right place. But now that she was inside, she knew she had to stay quiet in the darkened halls so as not to be found. She tried to look around her in the dark. Because she had not been in the light for so long and her vision was adjusting to the darkness, she saw rows of aisles in the main center of the warehouse. The halls had tall walls and she couldn't see past them well enough to see what was in the next space. Most of the aisles were filled with shelves, mostly with glass containers; she had no idea what was in any of the containers or what she was sneaking past. And she still had no idea if she was in the right building.

She tried to remember to control her breathing to get more air but didn't make too much noise by breathing heavily. Also, as a result of her yoga and exercise program, she could easily crouch down so she was not in other people's line of sight.

Only once she was well inside aisles with shelves did she feel safe enough to flash her light on and off on the ground in front of her very quickly so she could get any bearings to see where she might have to go. Thinking she spotted something from a small light source at the end of one hallway, she approached it in the dark, trying to not make any noise or alarm anyone outside the warehouse. Spotting test tubes along the shelves as she walked toward the small light source, she knew she had to be at a medical storage site, though she didn't know why these materials were here or why they did not need to be refrigerated. Trying to read any of the signs and labels as she walked through the hall, she was able to scan tags enough to read records from patient's names, though she could not tell what they were records from. Numbers followed the names, and she gathered that all of the last four digits out of eight on the first line of numbers were years. She began to wonder if the first row of numbers were birth and death years and the second row of numbers would be for their social security numbers. If so, most of the people she saw had death dates in the early 1980s.

Fear filled her, because if her guesses were true, these records filed and listed deaths, and she didn't know why these files set up in this one warehouse. If they were medical records, then what for? What happened to all of these people?

Still having no answers to her hypothetical questions, Sloane got to the end of the hall and was three feet from sliding glass doors with faint light emanating from under them. She looked through the doors. The cabinets housed a lit interior of rows of vials, cased and labeled. Scanning the containers, each case had vials filled with a solution, but there was a vast array of containers of vials, each labeled with something different. Trying to read any of the labels of the vials or the cases before she opened the sliding glass door, she scratched her head in amazement at everything there. The bottom shelf had containers filled with vials, but she read that each container of vials was labeled with the flu and what year it apparently was a vaccine for. She glanced over the set of vials.

“FLU 1988”, “FLU 1989”, “FLU 1990”, “FLU 1991”

And so on.

She was stunned when she deduced that these were records of vaccines for past illnesses, they were vaccines that needed to be kept and refrigerated, probably for future research. She jerked her head up higher. She saw cases with listings for anything from small pox to hepatitis to herpes.

She didn't know whether she should be amazed or stunned by these vials sitting there, full of vaccines and cures.

To the back and in the corner of the center shelf, she saw one rack of vials, with the label

“HIV ANTIDOTE 1982.
Mastered from original virus”

She couldn't believe what she was seeing. She had *found* it. Tucked away amongst a slew of other medications and cures, almost hidden away so you wouldn't see it unless you were looking.

She was stunned.

Her heart raced.

Her breathing changed.

Standing there for she didn't know how long, and after the shock wore off that she had found the cure, she opened the glass door so she would have access to the set of sealed vials in the container.

Somehow, when she was about to grab the HIV antidote, she realized that she apparently tripped an alarm. She heard two or three sets of footsteps echoing around her in the warehouse getting closer to where she was.

“Was it when I opened the door to this case?” she wondered.

But she had no time to wonder.

This was her only chance to grab the cure, if she'd even be able to take it with her.

Making a violent rush to grab at the case of sealed vials labeled “HIV ANTIDOTE”, she heard gunshots fired in her direction. She grabbed what she could from the container and started to run.

Thinking she saw feet at the end of a hall when she crouched down to

look and not knowing if people saw her leaving the case, she realized that the shelf by the glass doors she was at was lit, so she started running. There was an occasional gunshot, but in the dark no one seemed to be able to find her, much less hit her. She tried to listen to the footsteps or guess where people were, because when a gun was fired the sound echoing throughout the warehouse made it impossible to know where it came from.

Trying to remember the way she got in and trying to take her steps in reverse order, she took a turn and someone was in the aisle she was about to go down. Guessing that it was a Marine or a member of the Army, she tried to move out of the aisle instantly.

The man drew a weapon.

She did the same in record time.

“This is what I trained for,” she thought. Since she practiced firing one-handed, and without being able to take time or focus quickly, she fired back in the dark, but she didn’t know if she hit anyone. All she thought was not to fire too much because the sound of her gun would let them know where she was. She took off again after firing two shots.

Then she remembered how gun shot noises echoed, so she thought that maybe other people *didn’t* know where she was located.

When she got to the end of the aisle, another set of boots walked in front of her and a man knocked her over. When she fell, she had to make sure that the vial in her hand didn’t hit the ground, because all that was on her mind was saving the one vial she had been able to get from the container on the glass shelf. She lay on the ground, not knowing what other move she could make. The men thought she was unconscious, so they slowly walked to her. Thinking quickly about how to get away, she started to roll. In the dark it surprised the man in the boots. As she twisted she turned her gun toward the dark object and fired once more. The body went down, but he was not dead; he grabbed at her arm and started to twist. She could hear him yell as he tried to ram her arm along the metal at the side of the aisle, but she kept trying to get away. She believed at that moment that nothing could stop her.

Breaking free and moving around the corner of the aisle, she knew that nothing would stop her.

She didn’t have time to think, and she couldn’t believe everything she had just gone through. Her arms were killing her from fighting people, and

she was using them with her legs to hold herself up while she ran.

Now all she was able to think of was getting free, as quickly and as easily as she possibly could.

“Everything is right now, girl,” she said to herself. “You can do anything.” She took another deep breath. The word “Go!” raced through her mind.

Looking around, she searched for any chance to escape. Spotting an opened window, she shoved the vial along her waist under her clothes, because it could fall out of a loose pocket. She hoped the vial wouldn’t break while she tried to escape.

Her heart was beating a mile a minute; she couldn’t believe how loud her beating heart was.

She spotted the open window; she scanned hallways, looking under the bottoms of shelves by crouching low to see if anyone was around so she could make her move.

She hoped.

Remembering how Carter told her that she could do anything, she decided to quickly make a run for the window. Avoiding rays of light from inside the warehouse, she ran, attempting then to dive through the window.

After cutting her left arm on the glass she broke in getting through the half-open window, she actually dove through the window, rolled on the ground, straightened herself up as quickly as she could in her dive-roll to save her life, and then ran to the closest bush so she would be hidden. She was about twenty yards from that window.

Sloane didn’t know if they had seen her leave. Shaking her clothes once she was behind the bushes, she saw scraps of glass fall to the ground around her, either from when she dove or when she rolled on the broken glass to escape.

Unsure if she would be able to get to the perimeter, she had to decide on the spot if it was safe for her to move out of that area. Making the decision to try to run in safely covered areas, she darted to and then along the perimeter, still looking for any sign that she’d been spotted. Then she tried to see if she could somehow get free. About two miles from where she started running at the perimeter, she finally saw a mailbox at the other side of a street.

This was her first sign of freedom in her struggle. Quickly, she darted across the street, hoping at this point everything was safe.

Walking down that road for about two miles, Sloane, exhausted, scraped and bloody, found a gas station in her attempts to get cleaned up before she got back to her hotel. They had a bathroom at the side of the building, so she went into the washroom first, removed some of her clothes so she wasn't covered in dark colors. Also, she worked to smudge as much of the make-up off as she could. Effectively getting it off at the sink with the white liquid soap in the dispenser attached to the wall, she knew that she was a filthy mess, but tried to make herself look better.

Moving her pants to see that the vial was still there, she was able to grab it from the seam, still sealed. She was still angry with herself that she was only able to get just one vial, when she thought that she could've somehow gotten more. Assuming the alarm that alerted the men to her was in the glass door that sealed the vials, she thought that if she knew about the alarm she would she would have grabbed more vials instantly, stuffed them inside leg pockets, then grabbed her gun and ran like Hell.

Reminding herself that she did the best she could, she went into the gas station to grab a cup of coffee and a plain muffin so she could try to remain in one piece before she got to the hotel — if there was no one waiting there to arrest her and take what she had just taken from the government.

Trudging three miles past the gas station, she got to the hotel. Wondering if she actually got away with everything, she threw her clothes into a garbage bag to bring along to wash, because she didn't feel safe leaving a clothing trail that might lead back to her if the military found it.

Showering first, she then looked at her packed bags and comfortable clothes for the drive to New York, if she was not stopped for what she did. Looking at the single vial, she thought about the choice she would have to make: save the drug to possibly replicate it or save Carter. She thought that she didn't know for sure if it could be replicated, and if anyone tried to take it from her in transport back to Seattle, no one would get this cure at all.

She knew what her choice would be. When she thought of the options, her choice then seemed obvious to her. Give it to Carter, but hope the trace amounts from the vial could be used to duplicate the cure for the rest of the world.

She had survived; now it was Carter's turn. Maybe in the process she could help the rest of the world survive too.

###

While showering she did her best to gingerly clean out the scrapes on her arms and hands. She was surprised that she had scraped knees and was bloody at her thighs under her clothes from when she was so violently trying to get away from military agents. When she got out of the shower she pulled out the hydrogen peroxide to clean cuts on her body: all bubbled repeatedly, but none hurt except when she attempted to put it on the cuts in her arm. Her next step was to attempt to put the Mycetracin on the cuts and scrapes to help them heal faster without infection; once again it hurt like Hell to try to help her arm, but she knew she had to do this to make herself better without going to a hospital for stitches.

With her other clothes already packed, she got dressed with a tank top so she could leave her bloodied arm open, because she wanted to be able to bandage it. Using paper towels from the front desk, she covered the cut with bandages from her first aid kit to cover the bleeding.

Then she had to brush her hair and try to make herself look presentable for her drive to New York. It had occurred to her that she had not contacted Carter since she left the night before for her mission, she figured that she better call him to have him look for a nurse to be able to watch him and get a needle for the injection. She knew she had some money left, so she dialed from her room and would pay the amount when she checked out a few minutes later.

“Hello?”

She loved to hear Carter’s voice on the phone. “Carter, it’s me.”

“Are you *alright?*”

“Barely...”

“I love you.”

“I love you too. I’m coming to see you.”

“You are? Where are you?” He was hoping he could get her to tell him where she was located, because he was dying of curiosity.

“I’m not too far ... but I need you to do me a favor.”

“What do you need?”

“Remember that nurse that helped you when you first got out of the hospital and you were diagnosed?”

“Yeah, she was a nice lady ... why?”

“I need to have someone be there for you when I come to your place, and they need to have a regular hypodermic needle with them.”

“Why?”

“For the medication I have for you, I need it, and I don’t have one. Can you get someone, we can pay them, to be able to come to your place?”

“I suppose.”

“You don’t sound pleased.”

“I’m getting concerned.”

“Don’t worry about it, Carter.”

“I worry, angel, that’s my job.”

“Well, you shouldn’t.”

“You don’t know how worried I was after I got that call from you yesterday.”

“Well, okay, on that one you should have been. But I don’t think you should worry now.”

“You scare me sometimes girl, that’s all.”

“I think we’re at the end of having to worry, so just call for a nurse to be there within the next few hours.”

“With a hypodermic needle?”

“Yes.”

“They can’t just carry that around.”

“What if they’re doing it for your doctor that traveled across the country to give you the medication? See if the nurse can somehow pick it up for me, please, please, please...”

“...I’ll somehow get it done. And angel?”

“Yes?”

“Please be safe.”

“I try to. I love you, and I’ll talk to you soon.”

“I love you too.”

Sloane hung up the phone, and got ready to pay for the phone call and check out of the hotel, to make her way to the next state to try to save Carter.

Not sleeping before she left because of her adrenaline rush but still exhausted from not getting a full night's sleep, she was able to make her way to Carter's place in her rental by the afternoon. The attendants for the building took her car to park it in the basement garage and she took the elevator with the vial and laundry to get to Carter's front door.

Knowing she should be excited when she got there, Sloane was still too exhausted and barely let out a knock on his front door. She didn't realize blood loss from the gash in her arm would affect her, but it may have been the exhaustion of running for her life and living on a liquid diet for days. Carter opened the door because he thought he heard her and was too excited to see her.

"How are —" he then saw the bruises and scratches and the impromptu bandage on her arm and changed his question to "what happened to you?" He started to try to hug her but was afraid he was going to hurt her.

"I'm ... alive," she said, "and as long as you don't hit my arm" she said as he started to pull away "nothing really hurts on me."

"What did you do? Get in here! Wait..." He then reached down and picked her up to carry her into the living room so she could rest on the couch.

"I'm trying to outdo you with the injuries and afflictions, I think..." she responded.

"Don't say that."

"I can laugh anything off now."

"Seriously though, what happened?"

Seeing the nurse there out of the corner of her eye, she couldn't explain the story to him. "It's a long story, I wouldn't want to bother you all..."

When Carter heard her say 'you all', he knew she didn't want to tell him and anyone else, so Carter relented.

"Does anyone need anything?" Sloane asked.

The nurse got up. "It looks like *you* need something," she said, walking over to Sloane. "Let me see what happened to you. What is this bandage for?"

"I was cut and I didn't have anything for the bleeding while driving here."

"Let me check the cut ... When did you cut yourself?"

"I think it was four or five this morning."

"Oh," the nurse said as she peeled the paper off to look at the injury. "It has been too long, but it should have had stitches."

"What should be done for it then?" she asked.

The nurse looked over to Carter. "Where did you put my nursing bag?"

“It’s over in the washroom.”

“Let me get some creams for it and I’ll try to clean it out for you,” the nurse said as she got up to leave for the washroom.

Carter walked over to Sloane as the nurse left the room. Crouching down, Carter talked quietly and quickly. “Okay, what happened?”

“I broke into a military warehouse to get this vial of medication to cure AIDS patients.”

“Just the one?” Carter asked as the nurse started walking down the hall back to the living room, so she and Carter would have to cloud their conversation so the nurse wouldn’t know what they were talking about.

“Yes, just one.”

“What are you doing with it?”

“Giving it to you, Carter. That’s what I needed the needle for.”

“You can’t just give the *one* away.”

“I’m hoping for trace amounts from the vial to be enough to replicate it.”

“But —”

“Carter, I could be stopped anywhere and it could be taken from me, so I am going to do this so that at least someone benefits from my work.”

“I just feel strange that you’ll —”

“Ouch!” Sloane exclaimed when the nurse probed too deeply into the cut on her arm

“Miss, I’m sorry if this hurts you. Hold a pillow if it hurts you too much, but we’ve got to clean this thing out.”

Carter walked over to the couch to be on her other side. “Here, hold my hand.”

“I’m not going to hold your hand for the pain.”

“You’re not going to hurt me, so just do it.”

She looked at him and realized that she didn’t have to fight him, the way she had been fighting everyone to do what she knew was right. The nurse watched her take Carter’s forearm with her right hand and she then was able to continue cleaning her gash.

“Whatever you did, you should be more careful,” the nurse finally said aloud. Carter looked away while she watched the nine-inch long metal tweezers the nurse used. The tweezers looked more like forceps as she tried to remove the dirt and scraps out of her arm. “You’ve even got a lot of glass in her, miss.”

“I know.” Carter stared at her while she explained this one to the nurse.

“I fell and my hand went through a glass window, and a piece of the glass must have gone into my arm.”

She hoped she didn’t need to explain any more.

“Any small pieces of glass would be shards from the glass first breaking, wouldn’t it?”

“Probably,” the nurse answered. “You should just be more careful.”

“I’ll try,” she said, as she had to grab Carter’s arm again to hold back her reaction to the pain. Carter was even surprised at how much she was hurting him when she grabbed his arm. Even though he was in pain and wanted to pull away, he knew he couldn’t do that to her right now.

After about twenty-five minutes of her arm being cleaned and bandaged, the nurse finally spoke. “Remember to get the bandaging changed every few days, you can probably do it at home if you have the right bandaging. Now, on to why I was called here ... I’m sure I wasn’t called here for this, especially when I was asked to bring a syringe for a doctor.”

“No,” she said as she got up from the couch, checking to see if she could still move comfortably with her arm. “I’m the doctor and researcher of medicines for Carter, I was just injured on my way here.”

“What did you need me for?”

“Well, we needed your help for the next few days, and don’t worry, you’ll be paid generously for this. We really appreciate your assistance.”

The nurse was starting to get confused, not knowing what she needed to do. “Well, *what* do you need me for?”

Sloane took a deep breath to try to explain what they would need, because Carter didn’t even know. “I brought a medication that needs to be given to Mr. Donovan here, but it is a single injection. That’s why we needed the syringe to give him the medicine, because I couldn’t get it from where I got the medication.”

“Is this for his condition?”

“Yes, hopefully it will really help him. But it is a strong drug, and he will need more than this single injection.”

The nurse waited and checked herself before she spoke again. “...What more will he need?”

“This drug is an extremely powerful drug, it goes through every blood cell in his body, and it will probably be a slow process. But it has to do that so it can attack the virus-infected cells throughout the body. So ... because it

is so strong and so long-lasting in his body ... it will probably make him unconscious for a few days.”

“It *what?*” Carter butted in.

“It has worked in a case study before in this same way, I am sure I already told you. You even have a copy of the case files, but I’m sure you haven’t gone over the case file too intently.” Sloane hoped this would be enough of an explanation to remind Carter that Shane, the first Agent, was given this medication and was unconscious for a few days because of it.

The nurse also looked confused. “Don’t worry, Nurse Miles,” she said, trying to appease her. “This has been used before and these are expected results. This is why I needed you here, and Carter will need a glucose I.V. if he is going to be out for more than a day.” She again glanced over to the nurse and to Carter to see if they were feeling any better with this idea, and then she continued. “I know a glucose I.V. can stay in a person for up to four days, and I think he’ll be okay before then. We just need someone to give the injection and the I.V. when he slips out of consciousness.”

“I’m not going to give him an injection when I don’t know what it is.”

“Fine, I can do that,” she answered. “But he’ll probably slip out within an hour. He’ll need something in him for the remaining time he’s out.”

“...What happens if he is unconscious longer than that? I’m afraid to watch an unconscious man when I don’t know what’s in him.”

“I can understand that. If day four comes and he is still under,” she pulled a business card out of her wallet then continued, “I’d suggest putting a food supplement into his I.V. to make sure he’s okay, then you can call me at my office and I can fly into town to see him immediately. I’ll take over anything from there.” The nurse seemed to be calming down with this idea, but Sloane could tell that she still seemed uneasy, she added, “And none of this is anything you have to worry about. I’m sure nothing will go wrong, but on the off-chance that something does, it won’t be your fault, it is just a request to give him the I.V. and make sure every once in a while that he is okay.”

“That’s all you need from me?”

“Yes.” she answered. She looked over to Carter to see if this was okay with him.

“And cash,” Carter finally said. “We’d pay you in cash up front.”

Since Carter paid her before Sloane arrived, the nurse accepted the offer. “You’re doing the injection though, right?”

“Yes.”

Nurse Miles went to get the syringe and Sloane turned to Carter. “I’m afraid as Hell I’m going to hurt you, Carter. And I’m sure I won’t be able to hit a vein.” She held and opened his arm to have a vein be more visible for plunging a needle in. “If I do this wrong, I could be working for a half — wait — how do I know if I even hit a vein? Or do I even *need* to hit a vein?”

“Here you go, Doctor,” the nurse said as she started to walk back in the room. Taking the syringe, Sloane tried to think of how to ask additional favors of her.

“I have two more favors to ask of you, nurse.”

“Yes?”

“The first is that I need this case overnighted to a coworker of mine, Mr. Kyle Mackenzie, because I think I’ll have trouble with getting the object on the plane. I was wondering if you could put your name on the package as the sender. We’ll pay for it, but I just want to make sure that it gets to him without it being taken away.”

“Sure I can do that, I guess. What was the other thing?”

“Well, I have been a bit shaky since I cut my arm open, and that is the arm I would use for getting the needle in Mr. Donovan. I know you don’t want to inject him, I could press the drug plunger once the needle is in, but it would be really helpful if you could get the needle into his vein so I can get the drug in him easily.”

“Yes, doctor, I know what your arm has been through, so I can understand why you’re shaky. I can take care of that. Let me set everything up with Mr. Donovan, and then you can get the drug into him.”

“Thank you so much. As soon as it’s in him, I can go with you once Carter’s unconscious to have the bottle overnighted to Mr. Mackenzie.”

“Sure,” Nurse Miles said as she turned around to start setting the syringe.

Carter immediately wanted to talk to Sloane, but he knew he didn’t have the time right at that moment, because she picked up her phone and speed dialed Kyle at Madison.

“This is Kyle at Madison. Who is this?”

“Kyle, it’s Sloane.”

“Hi! How are you? We’ve been wondering —”

“Kyle, I’m sorry, I don’t have the time to talk, but I have a huge request. Can you get to work tomorrow?”

“Sure, why?”

“I’ll meet you there, but there should be an overnight package coming to you tomorrow from a nurse in New York. It’s Mr. Donovan’s nurse, and there will be an empty drug container in it, and any trace amounts from what is in this container will help us in looking for a cure for AIDS.”

“You’re serious,” Kyle said jokingly to her.

“Kyle, I’m serious. And please don’t tell anyone I’ve called. We need to be able to pull anything from the container to work. There is medicine in the container that may help our research on AIDS. I had it sent in the nurse’s name to you from New York so someone tracking my name wouldn’t stop it. I’m in New York now, but I am going to try to get an immediate flight back to Seattle.”

“You think that hiding your name is necessary?”

“Don’t ask why, but yes.”

“Okay. But if you’re in New York you should check, because I think Mr. Madison is supposed to be in New York tonight for something, maybe you could get a flight back with him if you can get a hold of him.”

Sloane couldn’t believe this was a possibility. “Thank you for the news. Do you have my phone number at home and my cell number?”

“Sure do.”

“Then you have to call me tomorrow and we’ll meet up to work on this. And thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I mean thank you thank you thank you.”

Kyle laughed. “And you’re welcome ... cubed.”

“Is everyone locking things up?”

“Yep...”

“Okay ... Can you get the front desk so I can check the plane schedule?”

“Got it chief. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

Sloane listened to the phone line patch her over to the front desk. “Madison Pharmaceuticals. How may I direct your call?”

“Hi, this is Sloane Emerson, from Research.”

“Hello, Ms. Emerson.”

“I’m in New York returning some business materials, and I heard that Mr. Madison may be here with the plane, and I was wondering —”

“Mr. Madison should have arrived in New York right about now, and he

should be there for a reception and returning this evening. Why do you ask?”

“I was wondering if there was any way I could get a hold of Mr. Madison or the pilot.”

“The pilot has a cellular phone when he flies with Mr. Madison, I could give you that.”

“Thank you very much. I’ve got a pen and paper.”

Carter watched Sloane as she jotted down Jim’s cell phone number and hung up the phone. She then furiously dialed Jim’s number to try to contact either one of them.

“Jim Anderson, Madison Pharmaceuticals.”

“Jim, it’s Sloane Emerson, hi.”

“Ms. Emerson, how are you?”

“I’m okay, but I need to know where you are and if Mr. Madison is still with you.”

“We just got off the plane, but we’re in New York. Did you need to talk to Mr. Madison?”

“Yes, if possible, and thank you so much.”

She heard the phone change hands. “Colin Madison.”

“Colin, hi, it’s Sloane.”

“Sloane darling, how is your week off?”

Sloane had to be frank. “I looked for AIDS research this week, and I almost died early this morning.”

“...Are you okay?”

“Yes, thank you, but now I’m stuck in New York because I was going to check on Mr. Donovan before I bought a ticket to go back to Seattle.”

“Don’t be silly, come with us — as long as you’re willing to wait until the end of the night for me. I just got here.”

“Mr. Madison, that’s not a problem at all to wait, and thank you very much,” she said, and for the first time she was grinning widely. “Should I find a place and time to meet you?”

They decided to meet at the terminal Sloane and Jim usually left from in LaGuardia at eleven o’clock that evening, and they got off the phone. Knowing it was 4:00 in Seattle, she looked at the wall clock to verify that it was just before 8:00 in the evening. She had three hours left in New York before she had to go back home.

“I know there’s my car rental place across the street as well, but I have to

catch a taxi to the airport after all of this happens, and we've got to get this vial to the carrier for overnighting it to Seattle."

"But Doctor Emerson," the nurse started, "Why don't you take it on the plane with you?"

"I'm concerned they'll take it from me at the airport," she responded, looking to Carter for support. "This is why I was asking you to send it out."

"I can send it as soon as the drug is in Mr. Donovan," the nurse finally said.

She thought for a moment that although she didn't like not being there to make sure the drug container went in the package to Kyle, she also thought it would be a smart idea if she was nowhere in sight when the nurse sent the package.

"Alright," she said. "And thank you." She walked over to the container and drained it into the syringe that could be pressed down once the needle was put in Carter's arm.

"Carter, while she's getting everything, I'm going to return the rental and bring my things back up here. I'm sure it'll be tough to bring everything on the plane —"

"You can leave anything here, because I *will* visit you in Seattle in a week or two and I can bring it along..."

Sloane smiled and thanked him as she left his home and raced to return the rental across the street. She then came back with her suitcase, bag of dirty clothes and cooler that Carter said he was going to keep. "I'll repack this so that I just have the cooler to bring with me," she said as the nurse turned to her and said she was about to put the needle in his arm, leaving her enough time to send the container to Kyle in Seattle. Giving her a business card with Kyle's name on it, she asked her to not write Carter's name or Sloane's on the package.

Then she waited for the nurse and sat next to Carter.

"This is what I need, right?" Carter said to her. She could only hope that it was what he needed; all she knew she could say was, "Yes." She then put her arm out for Carter to squeeze her if the needle hurt when it was inserted into one of his veins.

Carter moved slightly and his breathing changed when the needle went in. "It's in, Doctor Emerson," the nurse said as she went over and grabbed the container and the business card.

"Ask for a written verification from the person that you give this to that the bottle is in the container, please, and keep the receipt. They can bill the

company.”

“I will, and I’ll be back,” Nurse Miles said as she left Carter’s home.

“This is the time,” she said.

“Yes it is,” he responded.

“I’d stay with you if I never got this vial.”

“... I know,” he answered.

“I love you, Mister Carter Donovan.”

“I love *you*, miss Sloane Emerson.”

And as she heard those words she slid the plunger down slowly so all of the medicine went into his bloodstream.

###

She worked to make sure everything was out of the tube and into his arm while he asked, “Was that how much I was supposed to have?”

“Thanks for asking now, but the amount measured in the vial was the same amount that was listed in Shane’s records when they injected him.”

“So ... now I just wait to pass out?”

“Carter, I’m sorry, I don’t know —”

“How long does it take me?”

“I don’t know.”

“And we can only guess how long I’ll be out.”

“Depending on the strain you had, it may take longer, even though you were battling it well. So I couldn’t guess.”

“And ... this is the right thing to do.”

She could hear the hesitation in his voice. “It was the only thing we could do.”

“I didn’t really feel sick.”

“Did you have to change your diet?”

“Yes,”

“Did you have to stop drinking?”

“Yes.”

“Did you lose your ability to work unless I threatened leaving Quentin?”

“Yes...”

“Do you want to make love to me?”

“You’re being cruel, I get it.”

“Carter, I want you to live, and I don’t want you to have to settle.”

“I didn’t want you to take all of the cure to save just me.”

“I might not have been able to replicate the serum. And it probably would have been taken away from me if I kept it. This way I know at least *someone* can be saved.”

She could tell Carter was getting groggy already, and she said, “I want to see you as soon as you get out of this.”

“I know what I’m doing as soon as I get out of this.”

“You’re going to the doctor to be tested.”

“I know that...”

“Repeatedly.”

“I know, angel...”

“It doesn’t matter what you’re doing after that.”

“I’m seeing you.”

“Don’t worry about then. Think about right now.”

“I’m ... really ... tired...”

Sensing his drowsy numbness, she could only think of one thing he should do before he went under. “I love you, Carter,” she said as she reached down to give him a kiss. She held this kiss with him for about twenty seconds, until she could feel his lips no longer responding to hers.

###

Leaving her work phone and cellular number in Seattle for the nurse, Sloane got the written verification and the receipt for the package. In packing a few of her necessary belongings into the cooler instead of bringing the suitcase, she even found a way to wrap the syringe well, throwing the needle away from Carter’s injection. “Maybe there would be enough to run tests off of it,” she thought as she finished her packing, before glancing over to Carter and saying good-bye to the nurse.

###

Ahead of the game by saving money on a trip back. Sloane felt a bit better that the private plane was in New York for the evening. All she had to

carry on was a cooler, her briefcase and her purse.

Things were starting to look good.

Walking toward the carry-on x-ray checkpoint, she thought that this was the checkpoint she had to go through before she would be in the clear, but at least she had gotten Carter the medication that would hopefully save his life. She made a point to not bring the needle from the syringe to the airport, so she should be set. Walking up to drop her belonging off on the revolving belt, a uniformed man walked up from the side of the room to watch the people checking the merchandise. As soon as her material got under the x-ray, the security agent in charge of the x-ray machine asked, "Is this your merchandise?"

Sloane could feel the weight of a rock drop in her stomach when she heard them ask. "Um, yes."

"Come over here, miss," she responded as they walked to a corner table and she was expected to follow.

'Oh God, oh God, oh God' was all that raced through her mind as they pulled her to the side with all of her belongings. She knew she didn't have any metal on her, because she even left her gun at Carter's because she couldn't carry it in the airport if they were checking. Her mind raced to remember what she brought: her ammunition was at Carter's place with the gun, so was the flashlight, all blades were left at her home in Seattle, her computer was emptied out of any data anyone might need, and there were no weapons in any of her cases.

"Come here, ma'am," the uniformed male officer said to her.

"Yes?" she answered, still having no idea of what they called her for and having no idea of what they were looking for.

"We found a container in this box," the uniformed man said to her, pointing to the cooler. "Could you open it for us?"

Sloane opened the cooler.

"Toward your corner there was a container. Could you pull it out for us?"

She started to reach in her cooler and realized they must have seen the cure container, she hoped that couldn't have been it, so she responded as she was reaching, "What was it, sir?"

"It was a circular container. It looked like a medicine container or something that would hold a needle. Could you pull it out for us?"

At this point she would have to start coming up with any reason as to

why she needed the container. “Sir, I am a doctor, a researcher of medical products for a prominent pharmaceutical company, and I —”

“Ma’am, we need to look over the product you’re carrying. We believe it will be a security risk. Please remove it and hand it to us.”

“Sir,” she attempted to say as she was still fishing through her clothing to delay removing the syringe to give away, “my company needs the materials in this case for work at our laboratories.” She pulled out the syringe as she completed her sentence.

“If your company needed these materials, you would have paperwork to safely transport them on an airplane,” the uniformed officer said to her, reaching for the container. “And if this container had medical purposes, it would have to have been refrigerated. A cooler wouldn’t keep it cold enough.” He then tugged at the syringe and ripped it from her hands. The gentleman then said as he was turning around to walk away, “And if you wanted the container, I am sure they sell them at all medical supply stores.”

The uniformed officer then walked to the trashcan to throw it away, throwing an old coffee cup filled with coffee on top of it in the trash.

Sloane just stood there, staring at what he had done. The female security checkpoint guard then said to her, “Thank you. You can go now.”

Wanting to cry, she then tried to get her remaining belongings back into the cooler so she could go to the Madison plane. Sloane knew this had been planned. So she decided that even though she lost the syringe, there’s a chance the container is okay because it was shipped. It was a good thing she decided to use the drug on Carter, because it would have been taken away from her anyway. When she finally walked down to the right door to get to the Madison plane, she thought enough about what had happened and realized that if they wanted proof that the cure was in that sample, they would have kept the syringe container to test the remaining contents.

“But if they wanted to remove any evidence of their proof, they would take the syringe container,” she thought, while she waited for Jim and Colin to appear at the plane that was just moved there. Her mind kept going from one cover-up to another. “I can’t implicate anyone and I have no proof that there was any wrongdoing by the government here. Both of the agents died with cause, because of a car crash and in the line of fire, the government made explanations for these deaths and covered the truth up. Claiming that it was a mugging was the legal way they could try to kill the man I love. The

security officer at the airport even claimed the ‘security risk’ excuse to pull my proof from me.”

Then she tried to remember as she stood in front of the plane that even though there were all these excuses and cover ups the government used to conceal their lies, for once she was able to exploit them just for one moment, with information and skill to get something back from them.

It almost cost her life, but she was able to do it.

If what she injected into Carter was actually the cure.

Now she started to worry again. What if she gave him sugar water? What if she gave him a toxin? Why would the government place these cures together in a bin in the middle of a warehouse in Pennsylvania?

“Sloane!” she heard from behind her. She recognized Colin Madison’s voice as he continued. “I’m in such a good mood, we can celebrate on the flight back to —”

Colin Madison just then walked around her and saw her bruises and her bandaged arm.

“What happened to you?”

“Mr. Madison, it’s — hi Jim,” she said as she saw the pilot walking up behind Colin.

Colin asked again. “Were you in an accident? What happened to you?”

She never once even thought about what to tell anyone about her injuries. “I ... I ... It’s just been a long week.”

“Well, my dear, I thought having you on this plane would be a good excuse to have a bottle of champagne, so maybe I’ll break it open for your *recovery*.”

“Thanks ... I think I could use it tonight,” she answered.

Jim glanced at her as Colin walked toward the plane first. “Are you okay, Ms. Emerson?”

All she did was wink to Jim to get him to lead the way so they could go back to their homes.

Colin gave Sloane a ride to her apartment complex in his limo after drinking champagne with her the entire flight back home. Hearing him laugh made her laugh too, and after holding back on drinking for such a short amount of time, the drinking helped too. Drinking with her boss on the flight, she felt like she was giggling like a schoolgirl, and she completely

forgot about the pain in her arm or the scratches on her arms, legs and cheek.

She arrived at her home close to midnight when Colin's limo brought her home. She stumbled into her apartment and tried to look to see if anything had changed. Everything seemed in order, she thought, but then again, she didn't much care anymore if anything was changed. Emptying her cooler's collection of clothes, she just started stripping for sleep, being cautious of the bandages on her arm.

She intentionally dropped herself back first onto her bed. Not knowing how to quickly fall asleep, she decided to think about the place Nuanchan told her about. Immediately the beach came to her mind, and this time she was laying entirely in the water, and she had only a piece of light gauze covering her body. She felt perfectly relaxed. The water felt beautiful and the breeze hit her so softly that she felt perfect. Lifting her head from touching the water over the sand, she looked over to the ocean where the sun had almost completely set.

No birds were flying overhead, but she did hear sand being kicked a short distance from her. She turned her head to see what the noise was from, and she saw the same person walking by the water. It was a man, she could tell from his hair and his pants were rolled up and he was just standing in the middle of the sand kicking it around.

After watching him for a minute, she finally thought she should find out why he was there.

"Hey!" she yelled toward him. He looked up. "Come here." she half-shouted to make sure he could hear her over the tide coming up the shore.

The person started walking over to her, and just then she realized she didn't know what she was wearing. Feeling like she was wearing nothing, she looking down to see that she was covered in a light fabric and that nothing was exposed. Looking back at this person, he came up to about 5 feet from her; he then stopped, not speaking.

"Why are you here?" she asked.

"Just felt like walking," he answered.

"But ... you weren't invited," she said to him.

"Yes I was," he said.

This confused her. She turned her head to think about what he could have meant by that, and after less than ten seconds she turned her head again to ask him another question. He decided to start walking away.

And that didn't bother her, and she sat there, in the water, until she fell asleep in the real world, so she could go to work the next morning.

###

When she was ready to leave for work at 8:00 in the morning Saturday, she knew that the package wouldn't arrive at Madison before 10:00, so she thought she'd try to drive by Kyle's house to see if she saw lights on or if he was home. Driving by his house at around 8:30, she saw his car and lights on downstairs, so she walked to the front door and gently tapped on it. Kyle opened the door.

"Hi Kyle, it's me."

"What are you doing here? And what happened to you?"

"I almost died this week, and I figured it would be too early for a package to come, so I thought I'd see if you wanted breakfast."

"It's nice to see you're flippant about almost dying. I want to know what really happened, and you're having breakfast here. Come in."

As she walked in, she whispered to Kyle that she didn't really want to talk about her injuries to his family, if he wanted to tell them that would be fine, but she was not up for telling strangers. He understood. The kids were at sports practices and Elisa was about to leave for her mall job, so they would be alone in a few minutes. Elisa was going to help clean up breakfast when she saw Sloane.

"Hi, how are —" then Elisa saw her when she turned around, "what happened to you?"

"Ran my hand through some glass and cut it. Otherwise I'll live. How are you? Are you going to work now?"

"I figured that if Kyle can work so much, I should start working too," She said, grinning.

"Let me help with dishes then."

"No, I'm just about done." She turned to Kyle to finish her conversation. "You'll have to clean your mess yourselves," she said, grinning as she wiped her hands on a towel before walking away.

Kyle demanded that Sloane sit, then poured some coffee for the both of them. "So what the Hell happened to you?"

"I fell into a window, the glass broke and sliced my arm."

“You’re a dog. Did the glass scrape your jawbone, hands and arms too?”

“Don’t forget my knees.”

“I can’t see your knees, I’m *sorry* I forgot *that* part.”

They both smiled as Sloane drank her coffee.

“So really, that’s tricky glass there, managing to get you all scraped like that.”

“If I told you, you wouldn’t believe me.”

“Yes I would.”

“What if I said aliens attacked me?”

“Then I’d know you were lying ... and a dog.”

“What if I said the government did this to me?”

“Then you’d sound more realistic, but I’d still think you were nuts.”

“So why would I tell you anything; you wouldn’t even believe my alien story...”

“Seriously, do you want to tell me about this package I’m supposed to be getting this morning?”

“Yeah ... but give me your phone.”

“Why?”

“Because I want their delivery people to know that we are waiting there for this package, so they better deliver it.” She started dialing the number. She even pulled out the receipt so she could verify the tracking number for the package they were supposed to receive.

Kyle wanted to know why she was injured, but he also wanted to know what the package contained. After she got off the phone to confirm the package delivery he asked, “So you gonna tell me?”

“So you going to give me breakfast?”

“What, you want me to cook for you?”

“I suggested going out to eat and you made me stay here.”

Grumbling, Kyle got up and said, “What do you want?”

“I’ll settle for some toast, mister ‘Kyle I-don’t-want-to-cook Mackenzie.”

“I’ve got glazed biscuits and a doughnut or two too if you’d like.”

“Ah, you have kids, Kyle.”

“What does *that* mean?”

“That means you’d only have that in your house if you had kids.”

“Don’t give me Hell...”

“Yeah, I hear giving kids things with a ton of sugar makes them tired and puts them to sleep at night...”

“They burn the energy at that age, and I don’t want to hear it from you.” Kyle said before he brought the breads to the table. “So are you going to tell me what the story is about the past week?”

“I went a bit of a distance because I heard of a place with medication for AIDS patients.”

“Like the billion places you saw on the net?”

“Well, this one was unconventional, and I think it was more effective. I see you looking at me, don’t ask me why I know this about this source, just trust me. So, I had to get a sample of it so I could learn from it.”

“So did you just buy a sample?”

“The makers there said they wouldn’t give it to me, and when I tried to take it, they got angry.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean they didn’t want me to take it, so they tried to hurt me to stop me.”

“... You’re kidding me, right?”

“No. This is why I look bad. I got scraped up.”

“So you got some of this medicine? That’s the package coming to me?”

“It’s the container inside the package, actually.”

“What?”

“There’s next to nothing in there, but I’m hoping there’s enough there so we can run tests from it to figure out a solution to any of the AIDS problems.”

“I hope you think it’ll help us, ‘cause I’m thinking...”

“I’m thinking that I was attacked for what I got here, so I’m really hoping we can get something out of this too. And more importantly —”

“More importantly what?”

“More importantly I think I’m going to have such a sugar buzz from all these glazed Danish rolls that I’ll never get to sleep tonight...” she said, trying to change the subject so she wouldn’t have to explain her uncertainty or the potential possibilities.

After picking up the package at 10:30 in the morning from the front of their office complex, the two of them headed straight back to the lab to start working on it. She tried to keep the container away from Kyle to confirm that it was just in a plain steel container and that there was no U.S. government label on it to give anything away to him. She first started calling New York to see if there were any changes to Carter’s condition, but was only able

to get a hold of nurse Miles an hour after she called and she only verified that his health condition was very stable, for whatever drug she gave him.

They extracted as much as they could and tried to run tests on the medication, and she tried to gear Kyle in any direction possible toward looking for traces that this medication could be a cure, or at least a vaccine.

“I hate to break this to you...”

“What, Kyle?”

“I think it was supposed to remain refrigerated or something, because it seems that some of the parts of the compounds that even *still exist* here are entirely dead.”

“Oh. ...Well, there has to be something different in this, or usable.”

“I don’t even know what I’m looking at,” he answered. “None of this makes much sense to look at.”

She wondered if it not being refrigerated destroyed the cure, and if too much time had passed from when she pulled it from the refrigerated bin after getting it to Carter, and the drug needed to be kept cool to remain active. A side of her internally became hysterical, because she didn’t want to force Carter to slip into a coma that wouldn’t cure him and he would never get out of. “Wait, Kyle, let me see this,” she said, fuming internally as she tried to make sense of the news she’d just received.

It then occurred to her: it would stand to reason that he wouldn’t have been knocked unconscious if the medication didn’t work effectively, so it must have still been okay. Only when she realized this was she able to look in the microscope to investigate what she was able to view. “What is this?”

“I don’t know. It looks like this, but it doesn’t make sense...”

Hearing Kyle scribbling, she turned around to see that he was writing diagrams on a piece of paper to show her what he saw. “You see,” he told her, “these atoms were locked together, and I guess they could work to counteract the one part of the virus, but I don’t understand why this part is apparently dead over here.” He pointed over to the lame part of the sample he had attempted to draw.

“But wait... Kyle...” she looked back into the microscope to check out what she was seeing, “there’s another part to it that you’re not drawing. That’s a part ... come here and look at this...”

Kyle reached over and leaned in front of her so he could see through the microscope again. “Wait, that’s a part of the virus. What’s the point...”

She could see that there was not enough information there to be able to generate a cure again, because it was probably destroyed by it not being refrigerated and shipped across the country. But maybe there was another part of this drug that she could use for their AIDS research.

Kyle thought the same thing and he came to a similar conclusion and said it aloud first. "If that's a part of the virus, the way these atoms are attached to it knocked out the possibility of it becoming viable and something that can spread in the body, maybe this is something that we could somehow adapt for vaccine research."

"The way this point is attached here —" Sloane said as she pointed at Kyle's drawings, "that's something we never thought of before."

"I don't think we ever *would* have thought of it."

"Maybe we could..."

"Maybe we could generate a spectrum of samples based on this compound hierarchy; maybe then we could have a workable test group for a vaccine."

"Wow."

"What?"

"It just seems..."

"It just seems that we're on to something." Kyle turned around and started making rough drawings to see what other elements could work with their old research.

"And Kyle, the part of the virus they have inactivated, it's a part —"

"A part we've never tried before?"

"Right, but it's a part that all of the mutations of the virus have in common, and it's something we never picked up on."

"Considering that HIV was an original strain and has developed into so many mutations, there would have to be a base."

"But Kyle, why did we never look into this part of the virus to come up with a solution?"

"I don't know ... I guess we just weren't looking in the right places."

"Well, I almost died getting this information, but maybe this is the only way we'd be able to open those doors."

###

Sunday morning she rested. But Monday she came into work, with her

arm in a sling and new bandages on it. Everyone had questions about how she had been hurt, and she split her story. To the men she told that her love affair with a man got abusive, and when they got concerned she'd told them to be her alias if anyone she dated is reported dead, because then they'd know she was just pulling their leg. To the women she said she got drunk at a party at a bar in Chicago and fell through a glass window, and that was why her arm was cut.

She figured that with the women she would put *some* truth, *somehow*, into the story.

But once everyone was in, Kyle and Sloane had generated test runs for a few more verifiable compounds for animal testing for a possible vaccine. People were amazed with their results, and right after lunch they had workable samples that they could have generated in three days to test on assorted animals for how much they would react to the virus after the fact.

With this news, people wanted to celebrate.

Amidst all of this good news, Sloane gave a call and left a message at Carter's answering machine for the nurse to call her back if there were any problems with Carter's condition, because she hadn't heard anything and she would come to his home Tuesday if there was still a problem.

Nurse Miles and Carter sat there, listening to her message when she called. Carter had already gotten dressed and just got back from a doctor's appointment, where his health appeared close to perfect and there were no traces of HIV in his system. He made the deal with Nurse Miles to not tell Sloane that he was conscious yet, because he had already scheduled a visit to Seattle to surprise her on his recovery and celebrate with her.

Having his luggage already packed and a plane ticket to leave for Seattle in about three hours, Carter made the deal with the nurse to have her call Sloane from his place and tell her that his vitals appear to be strong and he was starting to move at this stage, so she felt he would be regaining consciousness shortly so Sloane doesn't need to come by. "Stress to Ms. Emerson that you will call her when I come to," Carter implored of her, and she readily agreed, because she liked the idea of her patient romantically surprising Sloane.

What Sloane didn't know was that Carter copied her key when he visited her as a friend, so he could surprise her now when she came home from work.

As soon as she hung up from calling Carter and his line was free, he called Madison's front office.

“Madison Pharmaceuticals. How may I direct your call?”

“Hello, I am a friend of Sloane Emerson’s, and I know she just took some time off, but I didn’t know how much vacation time she had left.”

“Three weeks sir, but she was injured when she came to work today.”

Carter then realized that she might just be able to take a sick day instead of vacation time. “Okay, I was just checking. Thank you very much.”

“Did you want to leave a —” the receptionist stopped herself when she realized that the caller had hung up the phone.

Carter hoped that if she couldn’t take a sick day she could take another vacation day, if she wanted to spend any more time with him, now that he was back.

###

Colin got a phone call in the morning from Sloane once she was hopeful about the drug finds.

“Colin, I can’t say it’s a guarantee, but there seems to be a really good chance with this.”

“You developed this today?”

“Well, it wasn’t all me —”

“You did this on your week off?”

“I never said that...”

“You talk a lot when you’re drinking...”

“I didn’t say I found this, Colin.”

“Then what *did* you say?”

“I was saying that Kyle and I looked into a compound with a new aspect of the virus to detach for use with a virus, so we’re going to run tests almost immediately on possible vaccines.”

“So you didn’t create this?”

“Colin, with the vaccines, Kyle and I were both working on this, And for the original plans, a lot of the staff helped come up with phenomenal ideas.”

“That sounds great. Now how is your arm doing? I know you were pampering that thing on the flight back.”

“It’s hard, attempting to shower when your arm can’t be near water, but I’ll see how it goes. Thanks for asking.”

“I just hope you’re feeling better, and the vaccine possibilities is good

news. Don't make me have to have another party at my house for you guys..."

"Don't make us work so hard to be pampered by you..."

They both felt better by the phone call and Colin immediately asked his receptionist to have deli sandwiches sent to the lab for their accomplishments.

In the middle of their delivered impromptu lunch from Colin, and after Carter had left for his surprise visit to Sloane, Ms. Emerson received a phone call from Nurse Miles.

"Sloane Emerson."

"Ms. Emerson, it's Nurse Miles, I'm returning your call."

"Hello, I was wondering if there was any report on Mr. Donovan."

"I know you'd be growing concerned because tomorrow evening would be four days, but I wanted to let you know that although Mr. Donovan has not regained total consciousness yet, I have noticed his motion though."

"What do you mean?"

"Usually when someone is unconscious they are also motionless. I have detected in the past few hours when I have come to check on him, that his arms are moving and I see his legs move under the blankets sometimes. This is a very positive sign, Ms. Emerson, because it will probably mean he'll be up within the next twenty-four hours."

"That's a good sign..."

"Yes it is. And I wanted to let you know that as soon as Mr. Donovan gets out of it and I remove the I.V. from him, I'll call you to let you know."

"Thank you, Nurse Miles."

"No problem, Ms. Emerson. And I'll call you soon."

They both hung up their phones, and Nurse Miles smiled after she let the receiver hang up, proud of herself at how convincing she must have sounded.



CHAPTER 20

THE DENOUEMENT

Kyle received a phone call from the medical laboratories on the other side of the complex and he was able to report the news to Sloane in person.

“I wanted to tell you, I just got a call from the medical engineering lab at the other side of the complex, and they said they’d be able to generate the list of compounds in less than a day.”

“Really? That’s great. Do we have test subjects?”

“Yeah, they finished research on some for other drugs the company still had to test for weeks and the subjects are still fine, so we could use them. And I hope I didn’t overstep my boundaries, but I told the engineers to start generating samples of all of the compounds we handed off to them before.”

“Wow, that’s great, Kyle, and *no*, I’m not mad. You know how I think and sometimes you know more about what we should be doing around here. Thanks a lot.”

“No problem...”

“You know, I’ve got to let Mr. Madison know that you do so much more around here, so maybe we’ll give you more credit for our work...”

“I learn half the stuff from *you*...”

“You know the stuff *now*, though, and you take charge of a lot of this too. I think you were saying things about this potential virus just as I was starting to only think them, so you’re taking a lot of this in your own hands too.”

Kyle smiled. “I just don’t want you saying anything that’s not true to anyone.”

“Do you think I’d do that to *anyone*?”

“No, I know...”

“Then if you know what to do about this, take the next steps to start tests for the samples. I’ll get to work on ... whatever I can do with a bum arm...” She turned around to work on cleaning up files and meeting with people while Kyle started to hear the testing process for the potential vaccines.

In her office after an hour, Julie rang her.

“Ms. Emerson, Tyler Gillian is here to see you.”

Thinking that she really didn’t have a reason to *not* see him, she thanked Julie and told her to let Tyler in.

“Hey tiger, how are — what did you do to you arm?”

“I fell on my week off, and hi.”

“Yeah, I hear you took time off, where did you go?”

“I went out with a friend to get away. What did you stop in for?”

“... I just figured that I hadn’t see you in a few weeks and I should just stop by and say hello, I know you had to be missing me by now...”

“You’re a funny man, Tyler. No, I’m fine, and it’s nice to know that the lobby groups haven’t shred you in the week I haven’t seen you... And wait — I just thought of something — the book should be back from the printer this week, I think it will be on the shelves around the country this Friday. Is that something you want to hype?”

“You know tiger, I was actually going to mention it to you. Think we can run a press conference about it this Thursday, the day before it’s released?”

“Sure. Let me know what you want said, and I’ll be able to do it”

“Thanks, kid...” Tyler said as he was turning around to leave. Before he left her room, he said, “Are you doing okay?”

“I guess, but why?”

“You’re looking a little beat from your time off. Wasn’t your vacation supposed to be *relaxing* for you?”

“It must have been except for my arm, but thanks for asking.”

With that Tyler left the room and Julie knocked shortly afterward, and Sloane told her to come in.

“You actually took a visit from Tyler?”

“Hard to believe but yes, I did.”

“Did he have any fires for ‘Ms. Emerson the Fireman’ to put out?”

“No ... he mentioned the book release this week and asked if I’d do a press release about it Thursday, the day before it’s release.”

“Are you doing it?”

“Of course. It needs press coverage for it to sell. I even told Tyler to send what I should say at it.”

“Are you going to say what P.R. wrote?”

“I don’t see why not ... this is his ball game, so I can be the right ‘puppet’ for him...”

Julie laughed and as she was leaving to close the door, and she told her to leave the door open in case anyone wanted to come by to talk to her.

But very shortly after Tyler came by at 3:00, she received a call from someone at The Renaissance Hotel.

“Sloane Emerson.”

“Ms. Emerson, this is Edward Rogers from The Renaissance Hotel. We needed to give you a message to come to the Hotel here, because we have some news and something to give you.”

“What is it?”

“We can’t disclose the information to you over the phone, we were just told to tell you to come here.”

Sloane was once again visibly upset. “I’ll be there as soon as I can get off of work, thank you very much.”

“Thank you, Ms. Emerson.”

Looking at her watch, she saw that it was only 3:45, and she usually stayed until after dinner. She was afraid to find out what was at the hotel, but she needed to know immediately, so she started working on a plan to get her out of work a few minutes early. She packed everything up in her office so she would be ready to move as soon as she cleared her way with the rest of the lab.

Walking out of her office and feeling distraught, she made a point to look more disheveled. Julie was the first to see her.

“Are you okay, Ms. Emerson?”

“I ... I think so.”

“Maybe you’re hurt more than you think, you still have all these cuts and scrapes and a bandaged arm.” Howard walked toward them as Julie was trying to help her.

“Yeah, I guess I was just trying to work through everything...”

“Like you always do,” Howard chimed in.

Kyle walked over when he saw the gathering. “You came in here all day Saturday, just get out of here now and get some rest.”

“...Maybe I will. Thank you. And Kyle, if you need anything for the vaccine, just go ahead and do it, because I’m sure you’d do the same things I would.” When she finished her words she curled her arm more tightly into her torso and turned to get her belongings from her office so she could leave.

Carter sat in a room at The Renaissance Hotel, after paying someone from the hotel to call him to tell him that Sloane Emerson had arrived at the hotel. He gave them instructions that when Sloane came in and gave her name they were to give her a key to the room he had reserved for the evening. Figuring that she never used the bathtub with jets when she stayed there before, this would be a good place to surprise her so she could know that he was fine. “A week ago, I couldn’t drink this,” he thought as he leaned back on the couch with the bottle of champagne he bought in a bucket with ice from the community ice machine. He held the champagne glasses he brought from New York, waiting for her to come to him.

Sloane sped to The Renaissance Hotel in record time; her anxiety was taking over and she was getting more nervous and more scared with every passing light she had to go through to get there. Parking in the edge of the visitor parking, she almost ran into the hotel and went straight to the main lobby desk.

“Hello, excuse me my name is Sloane Emerson, I was told there was something for me here and I had to come here.”

The gentleman behind the counter said, “Yes, ma’am, just one moment please.” He then went to the back wall to get a hotel card for her. Walking back, he handed her the card.

“What ... what is this for?”

“It’s for room 323 here. You need to go there.”

She stared at him blankly for a minute. The man behind the counter

finally said, "If there is a problem, you can call from your room."

Stepping backwards for a moment, she had no idea what was supposed to be in this room. All she was able to think was that someone had died, but she didn't know why she had to meet in a hotel room to hear it. She went to the nearest elevator, hit the button for the third floor, and waited until the elevator stopped moving up and the doors opened to her floor. Walking out, she found a gold sign on the wall that told her which direction to go to find her room.

Carter received a phone call from the front desk, per his request, when Sloane Emerson took the key. He tried to decide what he should do, remain seated or stand there waiting for her. After two minutes he made sure he had the ice bucket of champagne on the table alone, he placed the glasses down around it, and almost held one of the glasses until he heard the plastic key slide through the lock.

Not seeing anything in the front hall, she walked forward until she saw Carter standing on the opposite site of the room with the champagne.

Carter could see her eyes turn to saucers, but for once in the past few months it was for a good reason. She stood silently and her mouth started to open, amazed that he was standing right there, in the same room as her.

Carter finally quietly said, "Hi."

He could see her, eyes still wide open, starting to smile and almost laugh. "Hi...?" she answered.

"I told you the first thing I'd do is come and see you," he said as he made one step forward, leaving the glass he was holding on the table.

Sloane almost ran toward him and threw her good arm around him. He grabbed her to hold her.

"Ouch," she said silently until Carter leaned back and saw he had to be careful of her cut arm, still bandaged. He pulled away far enough to grab her shoulders, then leaned in to kiss her.

Trying to get words in while they were kissing, she managed to ask, "When did you wake up?"

"About dawn."

"I called the nurse..."

"Nurse Miles tested me; I was tested again at the hospital. *Nothing* is in me. And Nurse Miles knew I was coming so she said that I was still out, so that I could surprise you. We were even there listening to your call today when you left the message."

Laughing harder now and overwhelmed that he had come through with a clean bill of health and surprised her, Carter kept kissing her, working his way around each side of her neck, trying to unbutton her blouse.

“Why didn’t you just come to my place?”

“I figured that you needed a little honeymoon too...”

“Carter, we’re not married.”

“But in spirit ... aren’t we already?”

Sloane could only laugh when she heard every answer he had for her.

“Besides, I wanted you to be able to take a bath when I was here before, but you refused, so now you have all the space in the world.”

“It’s a deal...”

“Now you said you hurt your knees to get the antidote. Let me see.”

“What, you want me to take —”

“Yes...”

“Carter,” she started to answer, “You’re supposed to be removing my pants *yourself*.”

Carter unbuttoned her pants and started to slide them off of her as he pushed her to the bed. “Now, I have one question for you,” he asked.

“What’s that?”

“What should we do first, have champagne or make love?”

“What? Um ... I —”

“We’ll do both,” he said as he got up to uncork the champagne. She heard a loud pop and some of the champagne started coming out of the top, and Carter moved the bottle over her stomach, so it started spilling on her waist.

“Ah, that’s cold! What are you —”

She had to stop herself when Carter got on his knees on the bed and started licking the champagne off of her. “I have one request for you.”

“What?”

“Would you keep talking to me when we’re making love?”

“What?”

“I know —”

“That’s strange, *why*?”

“Because I want to hear your voice. It’s beautiful.”

“...What should I talk about? Michael Jordan and our basketball team”

“I don’t care, I just love your voice... Michael Jordan? You don’t know anything about sports, how did you know about *that*?”

“It’s everywhere in the news, Carter, I couldn’t *not* know it. But what are *you* going to be saying?” she asked, trying to get Carter to talk as well.

“I don’t know if I’ll be able to, I’ll be too busy kissing you and biting you.”

“*Biting* me?”

“You are very edible, you know...”

Carter started kissing her lips and she locked onto him.

###

An hour later, Carter had to ask. “Should I start a bath now?”

“You’re killing me.”

“You know, clean us off, make us presentable.”

“Why, are we going somewhere?”

“You’re not leaving until I check out of here near noon tomorrow.”

“Carter, I’ve got to go to work.”

“You can take a sick day.”

She thought for a moment about how she left early because she didn’t look well, and people were worried about her arm. “Well, I...”

“Do you *ever* take a sick day?”

“I hate you, Carter.”

“No you don’t.”

“I know. And yes, I’ll probably call in sick tomorrow; I can get away with it. But I can’t get my arm wet in the tub.”

“No problem. I’ll get a pulley from the front desk to hold your arm up.”

Starting to laugh again, she had to answer, “But really, I also need to replace the bandages.”

“Do we do that tomorrow or today?”

“I can do it tomorrow...”

“Then you’ll do it on your way home at lunch,” he said as he got up to start the bath water.

They spent the evening together drinking champagne and sitting in the bathtub, and after they both slept the night through Carter woke up first and had a chance to watch her sleep. She started to open her eyes and suddenly got nervous and looked over to Carter.

“What’s wrong, angel?”

“It’s seven-thirty — so I can call work to tell Madison I’m going to be sick today.”

“Yes, and you might want to tell them you turned the ringer off in your home so you haven’t heard any calls coming and you don’t plan to take calls.”

“Good idea. But I’ll call a little later, when people might actually be there to take my call...”

“Okay. How are you feeling this morning?”

“Great. It was wonderful to sleep. What do you want to do today?”

“I thought we’d look for homes.”

“What? What for?”

“You probably need to look for a place where your monthly rent actually goes toward you *owning* something.”

“But I don’t know if I can afford...”

“It doesn’t hurt to look around, does it?”

“...I suppose not.”

They spent the afternoon looking at homes from real estate guides. The best place they found was a large condo by the water on the tenth floor. “I really like the place, Carter, but —”

“But it’s really close for a commute for you to work. You wouldn’t even need to drive half the year because you could walk along the water.”

“Yeah, I’m not arguing the place, I really like it, the view is great too, and I love the water here. I can’t afford it though.”

“It’s just something to look at though, so you have an idea of what you’re looking for whenever you can afford a place.”

Carter still had more devious plans in mind, because he had meetings planned with supervisors a few days this week for him to take over the philosophical books section and possibly be their west coast connection for their corporation. Because he had been paying a hefty mortgage on his flat in New York, he would have about a hundred thousand dollars when the place was sold that he could dump into a home for the two of them

He didn’t know if it would all work out at Quentin, and he didn’t know if she would like the idea of them living together. He knew he had plans to marry the woman, but he had to make sure everything would work out for him first.

###

That Tuesday afternoon, Carter had to say good-bye to her yet again. They stood at the drop-off area at the airport, and Although Sloane felt miserable, all Carter could say to her was, "Don't worry angel. The worst is over, and the government hasn't bugged you, so I'm sure they don't even know it was you there. The book is done and out this week, and I'm sure Quentin will want me to come out this way for other business."

"Carter, I hear that my boss wants to have a little party this Saturday for the lab and the chemical engineering department to celebrate the book. Is there any chance Quentin could use this excuse for you to come out to Madison for it?"

"Have your boss send me a memo and a phone call about it, and we'll see if I can 'extract' the trip from Quentin."

"...Why is it that you always make me happy? I can't be with you and not be in a good mood."

"I don't know angel, but you do the same to me ... I love you." Carter started to walk away with his bag. "Tell your boss to contact us about it if the party is going to take place."

"Got it ... I love you..." she said as Carter walked in the gate for his flight back to New York.

Knowing that leaving her arm bent as it healed would cause the skin to be tight there, she tried to use her left arm more over the week when she was back at work. The lab also got verification about the press conference Thursday Sloane, Howard and Kyle would speak at, and they found out about the Saturday night party. Making sure Colin set phone and e-mail requests for Carter to attend the book and vaccine party Saturday was enough for Quentin to get Carter a flight to Seattle for the weekend.

What she didn't know was that Carter had been meeting with supervisors and bosses all week to find out if they would be pleased if he was to reposition in Seattle and represent the Northern West coast for the company and specialize in education and philosophical book releases, while stepping back from the lead position in new writers. Carter thought that for the slight pay difference he would receive, he would still be able to live extremely well, seeing that mortgage payments for his home would be so much lower than it was in New York. He also deduced that if he was with Sloane they could share one car for a while. Carter would work out of his home and not need

to commute, because he could rely on a private T1 line for his Internet and Quentin network connections.

Now all he had to do was get the okay from Sloane.

He spent the latter half of the week setting up his flight and getting a hotel room that Quentin would pay for at The Renaissance Hotel, as well as covering taxi fares with a receipt. He even called to make sure Sloane would be there.

"I'm going to Seattle for the party this Saturday," he told her. "And I'm bashful at this..."

"At what?"

"I was wondering if you would be my date for the party."

"Are you asking me on a date?"

"I'll even bring a boutonniere."

Laughing, she said, "I'd love a date. And I'd prefer the wrist corsage ... I'll see you Friday night at the airport, okay?"

"Great. I'd like to take you out to dinner when I get into town. To celebrate."

"What are we celebrating?"

"A lot, I hope. So is it a deal?"

"Wow, two dates in one weekend, I'm overwhelmed."

Carter started laughing before her and she finished her thought.

"I'll pick you up from your flight at 6:30 Friday evening."

Everything began falling into place that week for them. The book samples were mailed to Madison Pharmaceuticals, and everyone in the lab was thrilled with the results. They even received a box of one hundred books as a gift to the lab staff, so everyone in the lab got a copy or two for their records, and everyone at the press conference had a copy of the book to use to illustrate while they were at the stand talking. Sloane even went home to look at the book before she went to bed, and for the night she kept a copy of *The Battle from the Inside* with all of the books Carter had published on her nightstand.

Wednesday, when Toby called Sloane with a concern about the drug he was searching for from the rain forest trees, she didn't even seem phased.

"Toby, I don't know if there's much more you can get from your samples."

"Yeah, but check this out. You're always checking into these things, so I did some searching into the company that bought the land in South America. It said it was an orange grove company, but I did a little more web

searching and the only web data I could find was that it was owned by our government.”

“Toby, I thought we found that out.”

“Yeah, but this is the deal, Sloane — the company was started by someone who works for the DOD, I even got the records on the owner and they have nothing to do with growing oranges. Their web site had nothing, and when I checked tax records from a three-year-old company I found out they made nothing and had no product to sell.”

“And they’re still in business...”

“Yeah, that’s the deal — no company can exist without a profit for more than three years, and they have no real base of plans for growth. This is a total shell company they’ve got here.”

“So what are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking that they did know I was looking for data and they intentionally *stopped* me.”

“So ... Do you think there is anything at all you can get from your samples still?”

“I don’t know. I just want to let people know that this is what the government is doing to people who try to help.”

Sloane thought for a moment about trying to get the word out to people. “I don’t know if I can help out on this one, but my friend Steve works at the paper and might be able to get an investigative reporter to snoop around to find anything out, and I’d think they’d want to run lots of news coverage on it too.”

“Wow, if you think you can help, that would be great.”

“Toby, you did all the work here. I just have a friend that might help.”

They said goodbye to each other before she called and left a message at Steve’s work to ask him if he could start a ball rolling, hoping that there would be enough of an interest in AIDS medications to make them want to push to get this news out there to people.

Thursday morning Carter made his final decision on a wedding ring and engagement ring set. Knowing she wouldn’t want a large, clunky ring to get in her way, he still wanted to give her an extraordinary set, so for the engagement ring there was a single large emerald-cut diamond set in a round gold band, and the wedding ring was a round gold band with three horizontally-

placed low emerald-cut diamonds running along the band, at the same width of the band. He picked up the set Thursday afternoon and hoped this would be what she wanted if she decided to spend the rest of her life with him.

Thursday afternoon Kyle told Sloane about the luck with the vaccine tests right before they were about to leave for the press conference an hour later that day. The two of them were thrilled that two of the compounds seemed to work perfectly with some of the animals, so they opted to test them on a few different kinds of animals before they would think of testing them on any humans.

“We have to celebrate, Kyle,” she said.

“That’s what Saturday is for at Mr. Madison’s,” Kyle responded.

They walked together to Tyler’s office so they could all go to the press conference and discuss their book.

The three of them performed Tyler’s script perfectly at the speech, and Tyler even took them all out for a drink.

Friday they worked seamlessly throughout the day and found a new set of different animals for additional testing. Sloane left work and headed straight to the airport to pick Carter up.

Standing in the back of the group waiting past the gates for passengers coming off of Carter’s flight, she spotted him in an instant, because she just thought he stood out in her mind and she could see him in a flash. Leaning on the back wall, she had to remain there just so she could watch him living on his own, acting the way he was the way because she was in love with him. Carter finally saw her and held onto his bag over his shoulder and quickened his pace to get to her quicker. Carter walked right up to her, picked her up and twirled her around before he put her down to kiss her.

Getting his luggage from the baggage claim, she brought him to her car where she drove him to The Renaissance Hotel again for his stay.

“We’re eating here, so go home and get ready and come back here, okay?”

“Sure. It will probably take me about an hour with traffic, but maybe less. I’ll see you soon.”

He didn’t tell her how nicely to dress, but she decided to go all out anyways because she never got the chance to see him regularly. She slid on a twenties-style dress with spaghetti-straps that stopped above the knees with satiny fringe at the bottom. Adding pearls for a necklace and post earrings, she brushed her hair through again before working on her make-up, making sure she looked perfect before she put on a pair of high heels to show off her calves.

“With this stole I’m ready,” Sloane thought.

Carter made sure they had a private corner in their dining room, with curtains separating them from the rest of the room. He stood in the lobby, dressed in a full black suit, looking out the front door window to see when she arrived. When she drove up, Carter moved toward the back of the front lobby, with his single red rose in hand for her.

He watched her come in from outside and he had to stop himself for a moment because he thought she looked so beautiful. She walked in slowly, starting to approach the elevators, and he then turned a corner to meet her. She felt just about as stunned as he did when she saw him come out to meet her.

“You ... you look amazing,” she told him.

“Words can’t do you justice,” he responded.

“I hoped the stole would cover my bandage.”

“The bandage looks smaller,” Carter answered.

“I can wear a smaller one now. It has been long enough, so it is okay.”

After waiting a moment to speak again, he said, “This is for you,” and handed her the rose.

“You didn’t have to,” she said.

“You’re right ... I should have given you more.”

“Carter...”

“But I didn’t think you’d want a hundred roses filling up your apartment,” Carter said, as he smiled at her smiling at his remark. “There’s a table waiting for us,” Carter added and offered his arm to Sloane to escort her into dinner.

They had an incredible dinner together; she loved the location of their table and they both loved the food and wine. At the end of the meal the waiter brought a bottle of champagne and poured two glasses for them. Sloane watched the waiter walk away, and there was enough time for Carter to drop her engagement ring in her glass.

“A wonderful wine with the food, and now champagne? I thought you’d be trying to take me to your place and have your way with me.”

“Is that the way dates normally go for you?”

“Honestly, they usually stay away because they’re too frightened of me...”

“You can scare people, angel.”

“If people don’t like strength, then —”

“Then they shouldn’t tread on the water.”

“And you come stomping in.”

“Does it bother you?”

Drinking another sip of her champagne, she answered, “No; you’re the only person who could do it to me.”

Carter knew this was the moment to start with his speech he had rehearsed in his head a thousand times, but he still had trouble saying it because he was so nervous. “Do you know what it’s like to feel alone?”

“Yes, I suppose.”

“To feel like nothing or no one in the world understood you and you’d have to forge through life alone? Even if you had friends you could talk to, you’d never tell them everything because they wouldn’t understand.”

“Oh yes, I know that. That’s how I live.”

“Do you still?”

She smiled when he asked that. “If you lived here I’d answer no.”

They sat in silence for a moment and she took another sip of her champagne. She was just over half through with her glass and she still hadn’t seen the ring in her glass.

“It doesn’t help, even if I am far away?”

“...I don’t feel alone, but I don’t feel whole.”

This one got to Carter. “I thought about that, and I thought that knowing you, even if I could never be with you, made me feel like I was starting to live again. But you know what I wanted to feel?”

“What?”

Carter lifted up his glass to make Sloane follow his lead. “I wanted to feel alive.” He then drank, and she took a sip of hers as well. As she was drinking she saw something in her glass. She tried to get a better look at it as Carter then said, “I wanted to feel alive with you.”

It looked to him like her eyes popped out of her head when she saw there was a ring in her glass, so she drank the last of her champagne and tilted the glass to get the ring out. She stared at the ring, amazed and speechless. There was an extra dish of water on the table, so Carter took her hand to put the ring in the water to clean it off. He then took the ring, got out of his chair and went down on one knee and asked, “Will you marry me?”

Sloane put her hand on her chest to try to stop her breathing from becoming a pant. “Yes...”

Carter then got up to walk to her side, got on one knee, and placed the ring on her hand. He then stood up and kissed her.

When he stood to go back to his seat, the waiter was already approaching to refill their glasses, because they knew to refill if it looked like she accepted and took the ring. As they were finishing pouring the champagne and about to leave, she asked, "So we're going to be married across the country?"

"No."

"What does that mean?"

"Well, you said you couldn't move Madison, so I tried to move Quentin."

"I'm sure your *huge* company isn't moving..."

"True, but they thought they needed a rep in charge of their educational and philosophical books on the Northwest coast."

She started to lean back, listening to him, knowing there was more.

"So they said they'd set me up with a T1 line for a network and Internet connection, so I figured I had to come here to start looking for a place. I really liked one on the tenth floor at the water, and after I sell the place I'm paying a mortgage on I'll probably have about a hundred grand, which will cover a down payment, but I didn't know how much spending money I'd have after I pay the monthly mortgage on it."

"You made me go looking for a place for *myself* under false pretenses?"

"Do you forgive me?"

"... I suppose..."

"I hope you like the engagement ring, I knew you didn't want something sticking out on your hand, but I wanted to give you something big and gaudy anyway... I hope this is a fair mix of the two."

"Carter, I love it!"

"The wedding ring in the set is excellent too, that's why I picked it out."

"I can't believe you."

"So, getting back to that place. You said before that you liked it but you couldn't afford it."

"I did."

"It was close to your work, had a great view and was on the water."

"Yeah, I can't believe you."

"Why not?"

"What, did you go buy the place without telling me too?"

"No, I figured I'd get your approval on that one first..."

Sloane started laughing again.

"It's hard for me to find a place to live if I'm going to be living with my

wife over here,” Carter finally said. “I’ve tried to do things here, and I’m going to be taking another trip out on Quentin’s dollar to make final plans, but that is the other reason they let me out here this weekend. So in another month or two, depending on terms for getting a home, I’ll relocate here.”

At this point Sloane was just grinning widely.

“What?”

“I’m just...” She turned her ring to look at it, and then turned her hand to show it off to Carter. “Look at this ring!” she said as she started giggling again.

“What, too small?” He kept going as she kept laughing at every question he asked. “Too gaudy? What, you wanted a round stone? Don’t like diamonds?”

“I don’t want a big wedding.”

“You’re thinking about the wedding already?”

“You’re right.”

“Think about the book.”

“Oh yeah...”

“Think about your work progress.”

“The cure couldn’t be developed from the samples left from your medicine bottle because it wasn’t kept cool in transport, but I think we’ve got a vaccine from it, which is excellent.”

“Think about your party tomorrow at your boss’ house.”

“Oh my God, I’m going to have to tell them about your illness tomorrow.”

“And our engagement.”

“I’ll have to tell everyone we’ve been friends for years, that’s how I got the contract so fast through Quentin.”

“We’ll find a way to tell them”

“We have to let people enjoy the vaccine news for a while, Carter.”

“We’ll celebrate our own news tonight.”

They looked at each other and raised their glasses to toast their news, and celebrate together while they were alone tonight.

Saturday during the day the two of them looked at homes together, but still liked the loft on the tenth floor on the water closer to her work. By the time the evening came, they had to get ready for their drive to Colin’s house.

“I hope this is okay, Carter. I didn’t want to get too dressy.”

“That looks great,” Carter said as he watched her walk in the room, wearing a white turtleneck with black pants and a black stole. “Did you do

okay getting the turtleneck over your bandage?”

“Yes. I figured that it wasn’t bleeding any more, and the white turtleneck goes with the white bandage underneath...”

“No one should see it, and you look great.”

“Do you think we’re ready for this?” she asked Carter.

“Do we have much of a choice?” Carter said as he started laughing.

“Oh, Carter, one thing.”

“Yes?”

“Just don’t kiss me until we say the news.”

“Can I escort you in the house or get your drink?”

“You know what I mean with the kiss.”

“We came together, we just shouldn’t be showy.”

“That’s all I was thinking.”

“Got it.”

“Carter, they don’t even know you don’t have AIDS.”

“Well, there’s an announcement right there.”

“But we can’t just tell them you’re cured, ‘hi, I stole the cure from the government, and no, there wasn’t enough to make for everyone, and yes, I was selfish and gave it to this acquaintance of yours, but with scraps of the cure we generated a vaccine this quickly...’ we *can’t* do that.”

“Do we tell them anything?”

“We can’t *not* tell them. I’ll come up with something. An original bad reading and you don’t have AIDS, or something.”

“That sounds good...”

“No, wait, I can’t tell them that, Carter... I’ll be roasted for traveling to see you so often if you weren’t sick.”

“Then what do we tell them?”

Um ... We could ... There are a bunch of options here. We could tell them that it *could* have been because the injection in you wasn’t potent enough to actually infect you because the hospital detected the HIV in your dermis from an injection but it may not have gotten into your system.”

“Okay...”

“Or there is a chance that flooding your system with an overdose of the cocktail may have eventually helped you, but we can’t guarantee that...”

“That’s true as well. That’s a good one, too.”

“The thing is, we made sure you did anything possible to keep you in

good health at the same time, so that may have been a contributing factor...”

“You’re saying a bunch of good points.”

“Well Carter, maybe that’s what I’ll have to tell.”

“Tell them all of it?”

“I’ll tell them that we can’t be sure of why you’re better precisely *because* there are so many factors in play.”

“I can tell that we’re engaged.”

“Carter, I have to tell them first that I knew you as a friend before the book, that’s how I got the contract so quickly.”

“If we’re telling them we’re engaged, I’ll be telling them I’m moving to Seattle. But I have to tell them that I’ll still be their rep for book publishing if Madison ever wants to do more.”

“Are you trying to sell more books to us?” she asked, smiling, as she kept driving to Colin’s house. They made a point to be dressed for the party, and they did everything in their power to arrive in style.

“I can’t believe we’re going to do this,” she said to Carter as she held his arm and they walked to the front door together.

Colin found them after Carter and Sloane walked into his front hallway. “Colin, did you ever meet Mr. Carter Donovan?”

“No, I don’t believe I did. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Donovan.”

“Likewise, Mr. Madison. The honor is mine.”

“Who else is here, Colin?” she asked.

“Most everyone, dear. Everyone’s been wondering how you were when you took a sick day this week.”

“I’ll introduce him to those who don’t remember. Thanks for everything.”

Colin led the way into the main room and both of them followed, while Carter still held her arm. Half of the group that knew her was stunned to see her with a man, and people who knew Carter were a bit surprised to see him holding her arm. She leaned over and whispered to Carter, “Wow, I didn’t imagine the looks I’d get by you holding my arm...”

Carter smiled; it was the only way he could respond when twenty people were looking at them.

“Nice look everyone is giving us, no?” he whispered to her. She chuckled with him before she had to make her presentation of him to people who didn’t know him. Sloane raised her voice to everyone looking at them and said, “If anyone hasn’t met him, I’d like to introduce you to Mr. Carter Donovan,”

she said as she then moved her hands away from him to present him to people. "This is the man who spearheaded the production of *The Battle from the Inside* and the printing. He came into town for our celebration party."

People started to mingle toward Carter and say hello, both Kyle and Howard came to him to give him a more proper greeting.

"Carter Donovan, remember me? I'm Kyle Mackenzie, I helped you with the editing of the book."

"Hi. I heard Sloane say you two worked on a possible vaccine this week."

"When did she tell you that?"

"I have been in town this weekend, and she was giving me the tour and prepping me on things around here. While she was checking on me in New York she got to see a little of New York, so now I'm seeing a little of Seattle."

"Really?"

"Yes, and I really like it here ... There are flowers everywhere, it's great."

"We've got the rainfall for it," Kyle said, and they both laughed.

"While touring I think I heard more about her work than the town."

Kyle said, continuing laughing, "That sounds like Sloane."

Howard butted in. "Have you seen how she has been doing? She has been under the weather, and we've been worried."

"Actually, it looks like she she's doing pretty well..." Carter said as he pointed to Sloane talking to a few other coworkers from the lab, cracking jokes and putting her good arm on someone else while they were laughing. "And speaking of, I should get her something to drink. Where is —"

"The bar is in that corner," Howard said. "Do you know what she wants?"

"I think she's in such a good mood," Carter said, "that she'll tolerate whatever I get her." He then turned to Kyle and started to smile before he went to get drinks. Kyle then turned to Howard and raised his eyebrows at Carter's actions, and then they both laughed at whatever was happening.

Carter walked over to Sloane with two glasses of wine. "I hope this is good for you."

"This is fine. Thanks. But Carter," she said as she leaned her head back and lowered her voice, "over there" she said, nodding her head over to Tyler, "is Tyler Gillian. The yellow patterned tie."

"Oh, lovely fellow, I like his fake tan. That and the blonde hair really hides the fact that he's losing a bit of his hair."

She started openly laughing in response to Carter's cracks and Tyler saw

Sloane and decided to come by. “Hey, tiger!” he exclaimed as he smacked her back and she almost spilled her wine.

“Where did the ‘tiger’ come from?” Carter said under his breath as Sloane responded with “Thanks for almost spilling my red wine on my white shirt. You’re the *best*.”

“I think the speech for the book went really well...”

“I think you should meet Mr. Donovan, Tyler, this is the man who —”

“Printed the book, I heard! Mr. Donovan, I’m Tyler Gillian, the head of P.R. and Marketing here at Madison.”

“What an ornate title. Nice to meet you.”

“Ornate?”

“Ornate, intricate, elaborative, exhaustive, you know what I mean.”

Sloane started laughing and turned around to head to other people because Carter seemed to be doing a phenomenal job of cutting Tyler down right to his face without even trying.

The evening at Colin’s was working out perfectly. Carter and Sloane would meet up occasionally, Carter seemed to always see when Sloane was running low on a drink and he would bring her a refill. Occasionally people would ask why they came in together, and they would both respond that Carter didn’t have a car when he was in town and Sloane was showing him the town, so she gave him a ride to the party.

When it was just around 10:00, Carter leaned toward Sloane and whispered, asking if they should see if they could announce anything here. She said she’d check with Colin to see if it was possible.

“Colin, I know this is a get-together for the book, but I’d like to mention new news that both Mr. Donovan and I had to share — I could even bring up our vaccine findings. I was just wondering if it would be okay.”

“Sure ... to get people to listen, would you like me to get their attention and ‘introduce’ you?”

She thought that was very generous of him, and Colin made a call out and everyone stopped talked to hear what he had to say.

“Everyone, thanks for coming tonight. This evening is to celebrate the printing of our book, *The Battle from the Inside*. Let’s give a round of applause for everyone who contributed to the book - from P.R. to the writers.”

They waited while the applause to end; Carter applauded Sloane because she was one of the writers. Colin then continued.

“We should also be thankful for the speediness in producing the book at the printers, and we’re lucky enough to have the head of new clients from Quentin Publishing here, Mr. Carter Donovan.” Everyone started applauding him without Colin even having to ask for it. Now it was her turn to clap. “But the two people who were probably most instrumental in getting this book out. Sloane Emerson here and Mr. Donovan, wanted to tell you some news...”

Colin stepped away from where he was speaking; Sloane and Carter walked to the empty space together, and Sloane started talking first.

“Hi. We’ve got a lot of news to tell, but I first wanted to mention to everyone that Kyle and I were working this weekend and we think we’ve found compounds that could eventually be used for ... for a vaccine.” Everyone seemed to catch their breath in unison. “We don’t know for sure, but please, Kyle needs some applause too...”

They listened to the applause for the both of them for this potential vaccine, and when the applause settled, Sloane started on their news.

“Now here comes the string of news. Some of you know that there was a hold-up in the production of the book because Carter Donovan here was mugged and blood test results stated that he tested positive for HIV.” Some of the group didn’t know and started looking at him to see if he looked sick. “A hypodermic needle was found at the attack scene, and there were traces of the virus in the needle and in Carter’s dermis, near a puncture mark. Some of you knew, but I wanted to tell you that Carter just went in for a string of blood tests again, and I don’t know why, but Carter Donovan is clear of AIDS or HIV in his body. He’s actually perfectly healthy.” With that statement there was a huge round of applause. “We don’t know exactly why this has happened. There may have been a glitch in the old blood tests. The tests on Carter’s skin may have shown it at only his skin and it never entered his body. Kyle knows that I was called in hours after he was found and attacked because my card was on him, and we overdosed him with Emivir and AZT. Maybe it was all of these things, but he was also following everything in the book to a ‘t’, which may have helped, but that might be why he’s in such good health now. We can’t prove anything, but we can see that something worked, and Carter here is living proof of it.” She said this in celebration of his successes until the applause quieted down.

She then tried to take a deep breath for the remaining part of her speech. “But what none of you know is that we got this contract so easily because I

have known Carter for years, we went to undergraduate school together, and we have been friends for nearly a decade. We've been the best of friends, even when we were on opposite side of the country."

Carter leaned over to Sloane and whispered that he'll take over, because in his mind he was sure he'd say their news with ease and grace. "But what Sloane wanted to say," Carter said, "was two things. One was that I'll be your rep for any future books, *if you ever want to do any...*" and everyone started to laugh, "but it will be easier to do because I am moving to Seattle to work as a Northwest publishing agent for Quentin."

People started to clap when they heard the news. "But that wasn't all," he said, to make sure they would calm down so he could finish the story. "In this time in working together, and with me moving to Seattle, we've decided to see each other, and we've fallen in love, and we're engaged."

This one caught people off guard, Kyle was right near them and he stared at Sloane. She suddenly got extremely embarrassed and ducked her head down, sticking her hand out to show the ring. Suddenly everyone was fascinated with the news.

Sloane had to say aloud, "When we thought Carter was injected with the virus, I was working on helping him get better, I wasn't trying to escape to just be with him. We only found out about his condition being normal at the beginning of this week."

"So did you become more militant?" Howard asked.

"Maybe more scatterbrained," she said, turned toward Kyle, "but also more militant," he said to the group.

"Were you in love all this time?" Ellen asked.

"I think so," Carter answered to Ellen on behalf of both of them.

"When did you get engaged?" someone asked.

"Yesterday," she answered, and more people came to her to look at her ring and give them a hug to congratulate them.

Carter leaned over to Sloane and asked before kissing her cheek, "How do you think we're doing?"

"...I think we're doing pretty well..."



CHAPTER 21

THE ONE-YEAR MARK

They moved into their new loft on the water a month and a half after they announced their engagement; Carter moved his furniture to their home. They hosted a small housewarming party, but they promised everyone they would have a better gathering after their honeymoon. They planned to get married ten months after they moved in together, with time to prepare for their wedding, reception and honeymoon.

Her entire family was also thrilled that Sloane was finally moving into a home and found someone to be with, because they wondered if she would ever have the time to find someone she could love. “People usually get married at a younger age,” her brother Bob said to his sister, who married when she graduated high school and she had just turned eighteen.

Her sister Andrea wondered when she studied for so long and worked so hard on her own for so many years, “Does she even date anyone?”

“Can she even *find* a boyfriend?” Andrea’s husband asked.

“I don’t even know if she looks for one,” she answered.

They didn’t know that for her it would take someone truly singular and unique to her for her to be happy, and she found that in Carter.

Things ended up working phenomenally well with their vaccine test results; both Mr. Mackenzie and Ms. Emerson were able to produce a vaccine in record time for Madison Pharmaceuticals. The vaccine was slated for release to the market just under a year after it was first conceived. Both of the creators received hefty bonuses and a pay raise for their work on the vaccine.

With the raise and hefty bonus she received from the vaccine, along with the salary Carter made through Quentin when he was still working at home, they were doing quite comfortably. Carter got a T1 line from Quentin so he was able to work with speed electronically in their network, and being at home instead of in their offices allowed him to have more control over what jobs he would take on and how quickly books would be produced. She was able to work online while she was at home as well, so she was able to do some of her work at home, allowing her to spend more time near her husband.

“You know, I like the fact that we can work together this way,” Carter said to her. “Even if we’re not talking, it’s —”

“It’s nice to know that you’re in the same room, isn’t it, Carter?” she said, finishing his sentence for him, because she knew just what he was thinking; sometimes they didn’t even need to talk to understand each other.

The week before their wedding, Julie approached Sloane with directories on their network for assorted e-mails.

“I know you wanted me to go through e-mails responding to your AIDS questions, I am almost done with going through them all for responses —”

“I have been going through some of them already, and thank you.”

“Good ... But I thought you’d like to see the letters we got from a few patients who are currently on Emivir. They’re something I get the feeling you’d like to read,” she said as she handed her a piece of paper with directions on where the e-mails were saved. She went to her office to go over the original AIDS testimony files, she wondered if there could possibly be a connection between Emivir and helping people with other diseases.

After Sloane read the e-mails, still leaving the last e-mail on her screen, she got up and went to the front of her office again to talk to Julie.

From: 1013.0843@univ.il.edu

Date: Friday, 5:15 p.m.

Subject: medication and Diabetes

I've been on Emivir for the past four years. My health has been great, and I've been taking the medication religiously. But when I wanted to say was that I have been a Diabetic for ten years, and I have needed less insulin in injections since I have been taking Emivir. I also know you'll kick my ass for this, but since I had my insurance covering some of the cost of the drugs, I gave a few samples to Emivir to another friend of mine, who doesn't have AIDS but has been Diabetic since he was five. This friend of mine, after taking the Emivir for a few days, still had to take insulin a few times a day like he did before, but he said he gave himself less in his injections. He also carried a roll of Life Savers around with him all the time if he needed a sugar fix around the time of his insulin hits because of sugar in his diet, but he told me he didn't need to take any sugar to help him out when he was taking the Emivir samples.

I don't know if there is any correlation with these things, and I know you probably angry that I gave the samples to my friend, but I think it helped us out for our Diabetes some. Oh, I should also tell you that my friend never tested his blood-sugar levels, the way we regularly have to for keeping us in line, he just seemed so used to knowing when he needed sugar or insulin that he didn't bother. But he noticed a difference in how he felt and when he needed insulin, so maybe he knew something. His e-mail address is 0515.0301@univ.mi.edu if you need to ask him anything. Is there a relationship between Emivir and Diabetes? Let me know, and thanks a lot.

She stormed out of her office, on what seemed like she was on her usual quest again. "Julie, I need you."

"I do what I can, Ms. Emerson. What is it?"

"Have we received anything else like these three Diabetes-related e-mails?"

"Madison has received a few e-mails over the months about Emivir patients having less of a need for their usual quantities of insulin when they

had Diabetes while being on Emivir. Why ... do you ask?" Julie could see that something was brewing in her head.

"Julie, I want you to collect anything you can for me on Diabetes, and anything on any types of medications that have ever been shown to help patients with the release of insulin in their body."

"Ms. Emerson, you're getting married next weekend."

"I know, I know ... Just see if you can get that together while I'm gone, see if Howard can help out because Kyle is strapped with vaccine work."

Scott, another lab agent, came by and heard scraps of their conversation. "Hi, can I help with something?" he asked.

"Um, I don't know," Julie said when he tried to explain why he asked.

"I'm sorry, but I heard Diabetes mentioned, and my brother has Diabetes, so I just automatically tuned in. Is there something you need?"

Sloane picked up her head more confidently when she heard that someone in the lab knew something of Diabetes personally. "Hi," she said as she extended her hand to shake his. "I asked Julie here to get some information for me about Diabetes, because I'm thinking that there is a slim chance that there might be something in Emivir that helps Diabetic people with the amount of Insulin they have to go through. If you could work with Julie at all on collecting anything, that would be great," she said as she kept moving her head between both Scott and Julie.

"There's someone else in the lab that had a Diabetic family member die from a heart attack when he was young, probably because of his illness, maybe he can help you out too."

"Yeah, get him in on this as well; we're going to need all the help we can get on learning about this. And thanks."

Carter and Sloane planned everything for their wedding in record time, and did everything they could to make it a wedding that was one of the most wonderful experiences they could imagine. Their wedding was held in the Art Museum when it was closed on a Sunday, and they had a string quartet playing music during their ceremony. The wedding reception was in a hall that had a large balcony right on the water, so anyone who wanted to hear the music to dance and also be at the water could. They even both agreed that their song would be the one song they danced to together before, "A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square."

Right before their marriage, they asked Kyle to take the compact disc the Disc Jockeys were producing of slow songs from their wedding, including the song they danced to together.

“My friend Steve even had the music from the ceremony recorded for a CD for you,” he told Carter, “so I could get that as well.”

“Thanks a lot, man. And if possible, I’ve got one more favor to ask, but I think you and your wife might like it...” Carter then proposed this deal with Kyle. Carter would give Kyle and his wife Elisa keys to their flat, asking them to hold the keys on one condition: Carter turned the power and water off for their honeymoon, but Kyle and Elisa could have Friday in their home together, the day before they come back from their honeymoon, to themselves in their place, as long as they would please turn heat back up for their return. Carter would like to come back to a home that was already heated and have running water from their honeymoon.

Kyle offered to pick them up at the airport on their way home to save the cab fare, and he also liked this chance to have some time with his wife. Kyle willingly complied, telling his wife that the kids could stay either at Elisa’s parent’s house, or her parents could stay with the kids in their house for the evening. Kyle offered to decorate somehow for their return, so Carter gave him strands of white Italian lights and a number of long tab curtains. Carter told Kyle that there are high beams that the curtains and lights could hang from, and there were extension cords with it all, if Kyle cared to do anything.

She was already gone to her father’s house to get ready for their wedding, but Carter looked back in their home together before he would get ready and leave for their wedding. There was an empty large silver frame, mostly chrome with space in the center for a small picture hanging for their wedding photo on the wall in their living room. He looked at the empty frame on the wall and smiled before he got ready to get married, as Sloane was getting ready for her wedding at her father’s house, where she grew up.

A week after their wedding and while they were still on their honeymoon, Ellen brought photos she took from the wedding to the office and showed them to everyone at the lab and at Madison. When Howard asked her about giving photos to the married couple, she said, adding “I got doubles so the ‘happily married couple’ could have the other set.”

They even laughed that her friend Toby caught the garter belt and a friend of her dad's got the bouquet. "Did you see the look on Toby's face when he had to take pictures with this middle-aged woman?" Kyle asked.

"And doesn't that 'eligible women catching the bouquet' thing really only work for young women who *want* to get married?" Howard asked again, laughing with a few other people in the lab.

"Hey, Ellen, you were there, did you try to catch the bouquet?"

"What was I supposed to do, attack this older woman for it? Besides, I don't need a bouquet to prove that I'll get married ... And you know, that bouquet was gorgeous."

"The ball of roses?" Howard asked.

"It was just this tight-knit ball of roses, it didn't even mess with a ton of greenery, and the bouquet was all white, like the dress. It was just so neat and perfect-looking."

"You have to admit," Kyle interjected, "that was just about the perfect bouquet for her. There was nothing in the way in it, it was just a tight ball of roses and nothing else, and really, it did just what she probably wanted it to do —"

"Not be in her way?" Howard asked.

"But be beautiful at the same time," another worker there said.

"There were also a bunch of lily of the valley in there, couldn't you smell them?" Ellen said. "They didn't stick out, but the bouquet even smelled more beautiful, with just roses and lily of the valley."

"Getting married in the art museum was a really cool thing too," Howard said aloud. "But why was Tyler invited?"

"Sloane told me before that she was inviting him because he would spend money on a nice gift for her," Kyle said laughing.

"Is that why she invited the boss?"

"Nah, that's like a rule if you're getting married, she invited coworkers, the boss had to be invited..."

"No, I think she actually likes him as her employer," Kyle said. "She can manage to test him and he takes it, it is like they're buddies and know how to deal with each other..."

"Yeah, but it was cool they had their reception at a hall that also had an outdoor area right on the water for people to go to if they liked," Howard said.

"So if you wanted some air —" Julie said,

"Or didn't want anyone to see how you danced," Howard interrupted.

Julie finished by saying, “you could enjoy the air on the water on the deck, too. Or if you didn’t like the slow song, the music sounded more muted and calm when you were out there. It was really nice.”

They all started talking about it during lunch to each other.

“Speaking of music, did you guys watch them dance?”

“I think everybody was watching them dance, I swear, I didn’t know that Sloane even *knew* how to dance!”

“I think one of them didn’t ... Did you see how much they talked while they were dancing?”

“Yeah...”

“I think one was telling the other what to do.”

“But they were doing all sorts of stuff, sliding along each other’s arms, him curling her up to him in two different ways —”

“I can’t imagine Sloane knowing how to do any of that!”

The newlyweds got married on a Sunday and stayed the night at the honeymoon suite at The Renaissance Hotel. The next day they flew to Miami and stayed there the night. The next day they flew to Paradise Island, staying at Atlantis for part of their honeymoon, then choosing to stay in a small hotel so they could get away from people and enjoy their time together without worrying about others around them. They ended up doing nothing for ten days, and actually being able to relax.

But after they flew and spent a day in Miami and they took a puddle jumper to one of the islands in the Bahamas, Carter had to ask Sloane about the strange behavior he saw in the airports both times. “Angel, did you see how they pulled us off to the side both times we had to fly for this trip?”

“Yes...”

“They didn’t do that to anyone else.”

“I know.”

“Was there anything on us to make them stop us?”

“No, Carter there wasn’t. I even made sure to not carry any metal on us.”

“We didn’t have anything at all, did we?”

“No, Neither of us even brought medications, so we had nothing on us.”

“Does this happen to you all the time when you’re on a plane?”

“It’s starting to, Carter.”

“Why is the security doing it?”

“I think ... I think they’ve just been taught to search for me more now.”

“How do they know where you —”

“My name is on an airline ticket...”

“Hadn’t it been long enough, I mean, if they are going to watch you —”

“Honey, I didn’t trust them, and because of it they don’t trust me.”

“Well that’s not fair of them...”

“It’s not fair to have your own government allow people to die,” she said, as he finally stopped asking questions. They were taking a ride to their hotel through all of their arguing, and she finally told him once they were inside the hotel, “You know, if they want to fight, I’ll use their means to fight back.”

“Like you were doing when you did that first press conference?”

“I’ll use whatever pathetic means *they* use to fight.”

“I have no idea what you have planned, angel.”

“Hmm ... Just work with me if it comes up again, okay?”

“Okay, but you don’t think they’ll do anything on our way back home though, do you?”

“Coming into the United States they could have more reason to search me over than they did when we left, so I almost expect it. Just be ready for me if I strike back somehow...”

“You frighten me when you talk like that, you know...”

“Don’t get on my bad side and you’ll be fine,” she said as she walked over to the bed where he was opening the suitcase so she could knock his shoulder to turn him around so she could start kissing him.

While they were away for their honeymoon they listened to bands that were playing on one side of their island off of the Bahamas, but they enjoyed themselves by staying away from others and having space to themselves on a more deserted side of the island. The two of them went snorkeling and scuba diving a lot, but by the end of their honeymoon they flew back to Fort Myers for the night before flying home.

They were stopped at the airport again going to Fort Myers, but this time not as they left, but as they arrived in the continental United States for their one night stay. Two guards waited to stop them at the entrance door to the airport that they had to go through in order to get their luggage.

“Are you Ms. Sloane Emerson?” they heard one of the gentlemen say.

“Yes I am,” she answered.

“Come with us please,” they said as they walked through the doors, expecting Sloane and Carter to follow.

She started to speak as they walked inside the terminal. “What do you need to detain me for?” making a point to say the word ‘detain’ loudly enough for everyone else to hear in the airport.

“We plan to ask you a few questions and —”

“I have answered questions asked in the airport before I left, so there is no reason to ask anything of me now.”

“We also wanted to check some of your belongings to make sure you didn’t bring anything back into the country illegally.”

“That would have been done before we left, and that would have been seen from the x-ray machine.”

“Still, Ms. Emerson, we’d like to —”

“Look, my husband and myself have done nothing wrong,” she said, started to get louder. “Your people have been detaining me for no reason at all; we have done nothing to anyone.” She glanced over at Carter and gave him a quick look to let him know that this was going to be something she would do to fight the security agents whenever she traveled.

“Look, we have every right,” one of the guards said she he grabbed her arm to make her go with him. Sloane immediately made an exaggerated and violent gesture to swing her arm to get it out of his grasp. While doing it the guard then tried to grab her again to detain her and she fell to the ground.

Carter saw that this is exactly what she wanted, so he did his best to play the part to help her with her case. He jumped down and almost started yelling as he touched her cheek and saw her very carefully open her eyes to let him know that she was okay, as she then immediately closed her eyes again. “What have you done to my wife?” Carter said, getting louder and sounding angrier. “We’ve done nothing wrong at all and you knock my wife unconscious?”

“Sir, we —” the one guard said, hoping there wasn’t a serious problem.

“No no no, she’ll be fine,” he said as Sloane started opening and closing her eyes as if she was just waking up from being passed out. “The last thing we need is help from the people that hurt us. Now let us out of here right now, before you try to injure us for being innocent again!”

Carter immediately turned to his wife. “Angel, are you okay?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Are you hurt anywhere?”

“No, My head hurts a little, but I think I’m okay.”

“Let me help you...”

“Why did they hurt me?” She asked, now letting her voice get louder.

“Angel, I don’t know, but we’re getting out of here before they try to hurt you again. Do you want to press charges?”

The guards heard this and didn’t know if they did something wrong or if they were just made to *look* like they did.

“Um ... no ... or should we get the names of those men to be on the safe side?” she asked.

Carter turned around while still holding onto Sloane to look like he was supporting her, walked one step forward to be right up to one of the guards and put his finger under his nameplate on his badge. “Remember this name, angel,” he said as he read the full name off of the badge.

“I won’t forget *that* name,” she answered as Carter then turned back to look like he was helping his wife walk toward the baggage claim.

“I can’t believe you did all of that,” she said to Carter once they got their luggage and were in the taxi to their hotel for the night.

“I can’t believe I tapped that guy’s name tag like that ... Was it too much?”

“Oh, God no, it was perfect. I think you actually scared the guards, too.”

“And they didn’t hurt you, right?”

“Of course not, but at least it looked to everyone there like they *were* hurting me, which was all I needed...”

Do you think that will actually stop them?”

“I have no idea. But if it doesn’t, they’ll at least know that I’m not going to take it without a fight...”

After spending the night in Fort Myers and enjoying the Gulf of Mexico and the different sands and waters, they flew back to Seattle by Saturday after dinner, when Kyle was there to give them a ride back to their home.

Kyle wasn’t the only one liking their setup for the weekend Carter and Sloane returned ... Elisa also liked the idea of having a place for the two of them for a Friday night, so she was more than willing to pitch in and help. She had the afternoon off from work, and the kids were going to stay in their home after school with her parents, so she was able to go to Kyle’s coworker’s house before Kyle got off of work to turn the thermostat back on and turn the water back up so they could wash their hands at the sink and pre-

pare dinner there together. Elisa even saw the curtains and the Italian lights but knowing she couldn't put them up on her own, she eyed up places where everything could hang and moved all of the parts to the right places so she could put them up with her husband when he came to their flat after work.

When Kyle came to their house after work, Elisa had set everything up, including a dinner place setting for a meal that was already in the oven. They decided to put up the lights and curtains before dinner so they could use the lighting while they ate. He even brought the compact discs from their wedding from the ceremony and from the slow songs if Elisa wanted to dance.

Knowing when they were coming home that Saturday afternoon, Kyle made sure the place was spotless, and he even turned the Italian lights on in their home before he left to pick them up. They returned to their home and their place was spotless and the thermostat and water were back to regular settings. Kyle left their Wedding compact discs on top of their stereo, so they would have music to listen to together that night if they wanted. There were tab curtains in white with white Italian lights turned on between layers of fabric all over their house hanging from the pipes near the ceiling of exposed ductwork in their loft. They both thought that it was so beautiful that they decided to keep the decorations there until they had people over in the next month or so for a small get-together.

Opting for Middle-Eastern food for dinner that night, they liked the idea that they could eat their meal with their fingers. They included a fork for the basmati dill rice and the risotto, but they set up dinner with couscous, babaganouch, hummus, Dolmadakia stuffed grape leaves, falafels, taboule, and even a package of pita bread they purchased just after they got home.

Sloane set up a mock dining room table on their floor while Carter started heating up the couscous, babaganouch and the dill rice was warm as well as warming and cutting the pita bread. She spread out a tablecloth in the middle of the floor of the room, and placed fabric place mats and napkins on the table, along with spaces for plates and coasters.

"What would you like to drink, honey?" she called to him.

"Hot tea would be good, but —"

"But tea is hot. We can have that as well as..."

"We can have some water, unless you'd like wine."

"You decide and I'll take care of it, Carter. And let me make the tea too."

"...Let's hold up on the tea, because I was wondering if you'd like to end

up taking a bath together tonight.”

“Ooh, that would be nice ... and hot tea and a bath don’t mix. Got it.”

They made Miso soup first with tofu and baby corn, but Carter made her use her chopsticks and told her they weren’t allowed to use a spoon. So they ate the soup from the bowl with chopsticks and picked up the bowl to drink it from the side of the bowl.

During their dinner, Carter saw the empty chrome photo frame hanging in the wall toward the edge of their living room. “Hey, do you know when we’re getting out wedding photos back?”

“Six weeks probably. Why?”

“I just remember taking those photos with the water right behind us...”

“Yeah, we did a few shots there, ones that looked like we were dancing even. Why do you ask?”

“We’ve got that picture frame over there, I was wondering what we’d end up putting in it.”

“I’m beginning to like it blank there, just a splash of metal on the wall...”

“It might be nice to have a picture of us in there, you know, so we can prove we were actually married...”

She laughed at his crack as they started eating dinner. Once they were eating, she had to mention, “It’s nice to not have so many dishes to worry about when we have a meal here...”

“It’s nice that we can feed each other,” Carter answered. She instantly got embarrassed, and he started by scooping some food onto pita bread and feeding her. She then reciprocated, but she first used her finger to smudge some hummus on Carter’s nose so she could lick it off.

After they ate, eating more food off of each other than off the pita bread, she asked Carter if they would want to take a bath now. “I’d like to get you a little more dirty first, angel...” he said as he started to crawl over her to start kissing her again. By the end of the evening they bathed together by candlelight, then curled up in bed together for the night.

They spent Sunday trying to get acclimated to being back, though they still acted like teenagers when they had a chance to be near each other alone, having a hard time keeping their clothes on.

“Do you think we’ll ever get bored with each other?” she asked him.

“I don’t know, it seems like we feed off of each other for more energy...”

“But does that make us pay less attention to our work, when we think

about each other so much?” she asked again.

“I don’t know ... Do you care?”

She giggled at his question as he kissed her again.

Before returning to work Monday, Sloane looked at her calendar Sunday night and saw that Tyler mentioned to the lab that they could go to one of the first vaccination sessions for children to avoid getting AIDS. She said she’d go; Carter wanted to go with her, so she said she’d pick him up at home on her way, after spending the morning in the office.

People seemed pleasantly surprised to have her back when she came to work Monday morning, and they liked the rosy complexion she gained when she was in the sun for close to two weeks. They had a morning meeting while she was there, and they were talking about how they wanted to reprioritize the staff and what they should all be working on. They knew they still had to work on medications for those who have AIDS now, so some wanted to continue in that vein. Some were willing to also consider cure options, since that idea didn’t get as much attention as it could have in the past year.

At the morning meeting, Sloane kept thinking in the back of her mind about what would be the next battle she would fight. She considered Diabetes because of the few e-mails she read before her wedding. She waited then until she had a chance to talk to Julie.

“Diabetes isn’t a virus, but there may be a way to hold it back some while taking less or no insulin, all while still being able to lead a more normal or even more decadent lifestyle that Diabetes doesn’t allow you to have,” she thought throughout the meeting while everyone decided on what groups to go into while continuing their work.

After the meeting, she went straight to Julie. “Hey, kiddo, did you collect anything for me to cover on Diabetes and our medications?”

“Hi Ms. Emerson, and I didn’t get too much on any relationships with Emivir and Diabetes, but I wonder if anything can be gathered on how Emivir or the AIDS vaccine may help Diabetic patients. But I did collect a few notes on Diabetes for you,” she said as Scott walked by.

“Sorry, but my ears ring when someone talks about Diabetes,” Scott said. “And hi. Ms. Emerson, you look nicely tanned from your honeymoon.”

“I just enjoyed the water, I didn’t lay out or anything,” she responded.

“Well, I wanted to let you know that I talked to my brother and he said he would be willing to play the human guinea pig if you needed him for any tests. I’m sure he’d want to get paid *something*, but maybe he can help you out.”

“Thanks Scott. I’ll get Howard to help me out on setting up analysis tests for any of our medications. We might even go over the test medications to see if any of them can help out. But I’m sure we could use the help, and thanks a lot.”

Scott walked away, but Julie asked Sloane as Howard walked over to them, “Do you think this could actually work with the medication helping Diabetic patients?”

“I don’t know for sure, Julie, but I know of one drug out now that is for helping your heart that is also really good for migraines, because migraine medication constricts blood vessels, as do some hyper-activity heart medications. And hi, Howard.”

“Hello, little miss tan woman, how are you?”

She started to laugh under her breath. “I’m fine ... but yes, I think we might be on to something about part of our medications helping people with Diabetes, but I don’t know if it will only help with noninsulin dependent sufferers or if it may help with insulin dependent Diabetic patients. Scott’s brother is Diabetic, and maybe they could help us out. We’ve got to work on tests for our assorted samples we’ve gone through over the past year or year and a half.”

“Sloane, do you rest?” Howard asked.

“Do I know how?” she answered, as she went to her office to attempt to read any of the material Julie collected for her.

Diabetes Mellitus

Insulin dependent Diabetes

(Diabetic patients from youth)

NonInsulin dependent Diabetes

(Adult onset Diabetic patients)

It is characterized by widespread disturbances in the metabolism that adversely affect the ability to supply and/or utilize insulin.

Symptoms

Increased thirst

Feelings of fatigue or depression

Emotional instability
Prolonged wound healing
Visual disturbances

Treatment

Diet

Insulin

Oral hypoglycemic agents

The patient needs a functional pancreas for this to work, as it regulates the release of insulin from the pancreas to the body

“So this becomes her new goal?” Howard asked Scott in front of Julie.

“If she is trying to look for medications that may help people to utilize the insulin their body produces, then that is quite a chore,” Scott replied.

“So was AIDS,” Julie said as she walked toward her boss’ door to make sure she had the files Julie had for her to go over.

“This may be why Emivir and the vaccine only works on some patients,” Sloane thought as she started writing notes on finding out if the body produces any insulin if patients are Diabetic, or if their metabolism just stops then from properly distributing it throughout the body.

Maybe this *was* her new challenge, but she still had some business left to tend to. Looking at the clock while reading in her office, she then realized the time; she had to pick up Carter so they can go to a school for witnessing vaccinations. After she picked Carter up, they then went to an elementary school. While there they heard people from the school talking to Tyler about how it is a good idea to do this at a young age because so many kids are in sports now, which leads to an increase in injuries and blood loss. With this, she heard them discuss and that there may be an increased risk of transferring diseases.

Carter stood off to the side, holding his wife around the waist. She stopped herself from listening to the people talking about how this is for the good of all the people, and just focused on watching some children going to the station for their vaccination.

This was *her* drug, he thought, and she helped these people from getting the illness. Sloane then thought for a moment about the dream she had months ago about her having to go do missionary work in Africa for a drug she didn’t know to people who didn’t earn it.

And she thought that this was different.



A NOVEL PHILOSOPHY

BY MATTHEW BAIN

Sloane Emerson overcomes major obstacles through personal initiative, perseverance, and unalloyed will power. She has a vastly improbable goal, yet forges ahead, drags through, and manages to achieve her goal. The basis of her philosophy is (subconsciously) Objectivism, but she works through her life in a sort of quasi-Objectivism, not applying all of the ridiculous sophism that Ayn Rand's philosophy entails.

Although there are instances where Sloane propagates unrealistic ideas to others, to wit, believing that the majority of people could do what she does if they only wanted to. On page 25, subsequent to having an argument with Tyler (the company's marketing executive), Sloane sees a secretary staring at her and asks her, "Are you looking at me like that because the conversation I just had with Tyler is already being gossiped about?"

To which the secretary replies, "You've got to admit it's a strange thing when someone here can get away with giving Mr. Gilliam lip like that, Ms. Emerson. But then again, we love to hear the way you talk to people."

Not even registering this receptionist's name she answered, "And why is

that?”

“You just have the guts to say it like it is. Seldom do people get the chance to do that.”

“Why would you say anything other than saying it ‘the way it is? And why don’t people get the chance to do it? I mean, you just say what needs to be said.”

“Some people aren’t in the position of being punished for voicing an unfavorable opinion.”

“Let me tell you something. If you know you’re right, and someone tries to squelch you, get out. You’re slowly killing yourself if you don’t”

Less than 1% of the population “self-actualize” as Abraham Maslow coined the term, meaning that they manage to achieve their maximum potential through creativity, spontaneity, independence, and a grasp of the real world. And Sloane is obviously included in that less than 1%. Sure her advice sounds good, but it isn’t applicable to this secretary’s, or the majority of all workers’ lives. Not everyone can be a Sloane Emerson - it’s a question of ethnic background, mentality, personal initiative, impetus, genetics, and so forth. And for the most part, people just don’t care and are far too slothful to fulfill any type of goal aside from working 9 - 5, five days a week. It’s a sad fact, but if everyone was as analytically talented as Sloane Emerson, who do you think would deliver your pizza? Who would serve you? Drones, workers, and queens do exist outside the class Insecta.

Sloane has a capacity for abstract thought. Take for instance her thoughts aboard a plane on page 36, “She enjoyed airplanes; she liked knowing that a large, heavy piece of machinery could lift her up into the air and fly her across the country, or around the world.” ... “Someone made this engine, she thought. Someone made it, not merely put it together, but someone created this engine. Someone figured out a way to create the power to fly, to move, faster and faster, with this machinery. Someone created this.” Only that precious less than 1% would be able to think in those terms; only those abstract thinkers, like Sloane, could find a cure for AIDS. In the same scenario, the aforementioned secretary would probably be thinking about when she would get a little bag of peanuts, how her nails looked, or even what the strange smell was coming from the large man sitting next to her...or is it the small child behind her...hmmm?

Sloane’s philosophy - I’m guessing because it’s based on Objectivism’s con-

traditions - is continually contradictory. On page 112 Sloane thinks, "How do people lose their way? When they know something is right, how does the real world - i.e., the facts of reality - turn them away from what they knew was right? Shouldn't reality reaffirm their views - if their views were right?" If you don't subscribe to this philosophy, then unfortunately no, as Friderich (II) the Great wrote some 230 years ago, "Superstition will always triumph over reason." Then on page 234, Sloane says to Carter, regarding the philosophical texts he publishes, "It's nice to read a few pages of your book every night." Carter looked up from his glass. "Why is that?" "It helps me to read it, so I don't think I'm crazy at the end of the day." Further on in the conversations she says, "It's nice to come home and slip into bed and remind myself that I'm right before I go to sleep." Well, if the facts of reality say Sloane's right, then why would she need anything to remind her? She wouldn't. Sloane reads the philosophical texts each night just like a Christian reads her bible. It's simply a case of autosuggestion and belief; tell yourself there's a God every night and have other people reaffirm it for you and there is, at least in your own mind. But an empiricist shouldn't have any doubts because she only deals with objective reality, i.e. there is no God because there's no objective proof of any such being; I can't sense it, etc. Grass is green because it is.

On page 207, Sloane thinks, "He had no reason to lie to her. But she never understood why anyone lied; she knew that no one ever had a reason to lie, not one based on logic, self-respect and reason." But through the first half of the book she knows that she loves Carter but can't confront it. She continually lies to him or steers clear of the subject because she has a reason based on logic. This reason is stated in namely her own thoughts on Page 342, "And she knew for some reason it was wrong that she loved him, that they were meant to live on opposite sides of the country, that they were only allowed to work together like this on occasions that came maybe once every decade or two, that they were meant to be friends and nothing else. They were too far away from each other. And he could find someone else, anyone else, and that she couldn't be right for him."

And then on page 215 we read, "She couldn't believe that she would she have to play their game and even change her clothes in order to play the game effectively." - "You do what you have to do", she said as she opened his door, 'And I'll do the same.'" So, to reach her goal, she is willing to lie - if she has to - or fight fire with fire, and there is a reason based on logic: to find the

cure for AIDS.

Again, toward the end of the novel, we catch Sloane in a myriad of lies; she lies repeatedly to just about everyone but Carter about why she is covered in bruises and her arm is bandaged. She makes up some believable excuses, but all in all, she lies about it. Once more, her lies are based on reason and logic. And while we're on the subject of lying, let me just say that there's always a reason to lie. We, as human beings, probably lie about 20 times a day. We lie to protect our own self-interests, to protect the feelings of others, and sometimes to purposefully deceive; lying almost always has a basis of reason and/or logic. Lying is egoistic, and so is the human race.

Another more minor contradiction in the novel comes on page 279. After much talk of using the Scientific method in every aspect of one's life and of being objective and empirical, we read that William Owens - Sloane's first contact - has died in an auto accident: We learn this as a receptionist calls to inform Sloane, after which Sloane, "knew that his dying was no 'accident'." But there was no empirical or objective proof given over the phone, no evidence, and not the slightest hint of any foul play. Therefore, she really "knew" nothing in the scientific sense, but rather made a paranoid conjecture. Sure, we can make guesses all day about anything, based on tidbits of information, but we most surely don't know anything for certain. It's roughly at this point of the novel that Sloane subconsciously sloughs the role of empiricist and starts, at least to some degree, to rely on instinct. She begins to realize that to get the job done almost every rule must be broken. They lie, so she must; they kill, so she steels herself to as well; they commit theft (break into the lab/search and destroy), so she must (stealing the AIDS vaccine). Of course these breaches of morality are only counterstrikes to the government's peremptory strikes; they fire and she fires back. The application of force does fall under Objectivism's purview in the sense that force can only be used in retaliation of force ("Men have the right to use force only in self-defense and only against those who initiate its use" Rand). That's what it takes to win. Nonresistance only results, in its most extreme cases, in martyrdom, which never really solves anything.

Sloane Emerson breaks through the paper walls of philosophical texts written by didacts who speak but never act, and she triumphs! And this ultimate triumph comes through the initiative, perseverance, and will power she's always maintained, with adjustments to the hypothetical principles she

once held as rigid truths.

There have been many great philosophers, but the biggest problem with philosophy in general is that it's thought out and committed to paper by solitary persons who have never applied it to real life. If a philosophy's tenets fail when applied to reality, then the philosophy is worthless; albeit, there may certainly be inherent truths at its base that we as a people may utilize in the interest of posterity. There has never to this day been a philosophy that is infallible or complete in what it encompasses. Rather, there's been a mass of transient systems that have failed one way or another, usually bearing one precious kernel of truth. So we pick up these fragments, use what works, discard the chaff, and forge on. That's what Sloane Emerson does - either subconsciously or consciously - and it works.



AFTER WARD



BY THE AUTHOR

At a 1997 performance, I was featured and read a portion of chapter three of *The Key To Believing*. People talked to me about my work after the reading, but one person asked if I was Sloane Emerson. As a designer and a publisher, I thought at the time I would be more like Carter Donovan, in disliking corporate America and excelling in publishing. I could guess that the idea of Sloane having nightmares about losing control is like me, and the fact that she likes to sleep on the left side of the bed is another similarity. But I believe the main character would be fiction, but someone I would truly admire in the real world. There are so few people who are strong and consistent in their beliefs, and I wonder why people do not always live this way.

What I read was a part of the book that talked more about Carter than Sloane, but the bouncer standing at the doorway as I was leaving said to me, “I’m in love with Sloane Emerson!” We talked about my book, and I was thrilled that he said he loved her. I didn’t portray Sloane as a quote-unquote “feminine” woman — Sloane is a woman who is obsessed with her work, and who doesn’t care about the clothes she wear and doesn’t wear make-up. She’s not the feminine blonde stereotype. And this bouncer — a man possibly stereotyped as a brainless brawn who looks for petite blondes who think lit-

tle — this bouncer said he was in love with Sloane. He may not have known why he liked that character. He may not have decided what it was about Sloane that he liked, that she was strong, that she cared so intensely about her work, or that she claimed ownership of what was rightfully hers. But these traits might actually be attractive, in a man or a woman.

My husband noticed that the first part of this novel was written before I was in an extremely serious car accident. After recovering from the accident, I told him the main character would go through a transformation of sorts, that she would decide to use any means — legal or not, even testing her physical strength and her mental powers — to achieve her goal. My husband said it was interesting that there will be a change in the main character's personality, and he wondered if it coincided with the change in my life.

The main character had to change dramatically in order to do things she would never think she could normally do. I know as I started to write this that I felt that I was more like Carter, but as the book has progressed, I feel like my personality has moved to Sloane, because when I want something I will do anything to achieve a goal. In the past I have never thought I would not get work done, I just *did*. With Sloane, her work became a personal matter, and it became something she had to fight for with all her life. And it was something she would easily do, because she couldn't change her morals or values to let these things slip away from her.

I asked a friend of mine what he thought of the idea of a book about AIDS and the government conspiracy. He asked me if I believed in a conspiracy. I don't. "That's why it's called a novel," I answered. Then he told me that he would be concerned that some people might read this book and see the government conspiracy theories and think that, for example, AZT is what actually gives people AIDS, and that even if their immune system is suffering they should not get on medications — that these drugs have been released on the market precisely because the government wants them there to seal the coffin shut for AIDS victims.

FROM CHAPTER SIX:

"But it disturbed her, primarily because there might be patients out there who decide to reject drug usage for their treatment for AIDS because of what they think the government is doing to them, because they think all of the drugs will do them more harm than good. Sloane didn't want people to decide to not take drugs that

might save their lives because they blindly believed what one web page told them.

“Sloane kept reminding herself that false conspiracy theories actually make people less interested in practicing safe behavior or getting tested. ... People most at risk may use conspiracy theories as a part of their denial. And most conspiracy theories, as she could tell, were scientifically unsound, or homophobic/racist in origin.”

The conspiracy theories that Sloane researched were from actual theories existing on the Internet — I didn’t make up the conspiracy theories that she read through in the book. But I do want to make clear that I created the conspiracy about the U.S. government in this story, and that this book *is* fiction.

Matthew Bain, after reading this novel, said that he was dissatisfied that there was a happy ending for everything in this book, including the government. I believed that it wouldn’t be possible for one person to foil the government altogether, so in a way the government won in the battle Sloane had for a cure for AIDS. In this vague way, the researchers lost - because the government was holding back the truth from millions, and there was nothing more the researchers could do to fight this all-too-powerful government.

I decided to work on the idea of a conspiracy because it would provide a conflict that the protagonist would be able to battle. The main characters in this book love their work with an intensity that rivals no other, and the constant motion toward their goal keeps them not only alive but also truly living. For Carter, his battles rested with the incompetent people he has to work with at Quentin Publishing. For Sloane, the battle with getting Food and Drug Administration approval and abiding by the ever-increasing number of restrictions the government imposed on her profession is what she had to face. The conspiracy is the way her battles become an extreme, so that she could fight them to make her world sane again.

The goal in science is to use logic and reason to not only make sense of the world but also master it and make it better, but many people do not use logic and reason when they live their day-to-day lives. If only people used logic and reason in the rest of their lives — think of how much better the world would be. If someone decides to dedicate their life to work in the field of science, they make a decision to embrace the standards that so few do — to look at the world realistically and logically, for one.

AIDS has been in the spotlight, and I want to give this virus exposure it deserves to help people gain knowledge about it. There is still so much to

learn about the HIV virus that people don't know. This book was a good opportunity for me to learn about it and pass the knowledge on to others.

I previously read that in writing a novel it is good to derive stories from real life experiences when explaining how people act. Over exaggerating characteristics will make the story sound less believable, but realism can sound frightening when actually told in a story like this one. I decided that conflicts that would happen between Sloane and Shelly, for instance, could be generated from furious memos I had kept in the past with working in intolerable situations with ignorant people. The essays Sloane wrote in Chapter eleven were edited from past essays and journals of mine, letters and conflicts that she had in the workplace stemmed from past letters and memos in past situations of my own. Real life can often paint a vulgar picture; it made more sense to derive the some of the facts in *The Key To Believing* from the harsh truths in real life.

Fiction only becomes more believable when some of it is based on truth.

Sometimes "the middle" we see everywhere in the real world can be more horrific than people imagine; it becomes tolerant of change and growth, and that "middle" translates to being inconsistent and illogical. The main characters of this novel are true and faithful to their beliefs. They are true to themselves, and the strength of these characters allows great things to happen for them.

Some characters in *The Key To Believing* are flighty, some change their mind at what appears to be whim, and some lie and stab people in the back. This behavior has become the middle of the road, and this is what people do in real life almost regularly. People don't think about the choices they make with their lives, and they act differently at work versus socially because they seem to think that their philosophy doesn't extends to all parts of their life. This is what people don't realize, and this may be why so many people now seem to be content with not achieving more with their lives.

These characters are consistent with their beliefs, and it allows them strength and power that most do not see. It is possible to have that power, but you have to have the strength to know how to make these things happen.

Janet Kuypers



HISTORY

Janet Kuypers (June 22, 1970), graduated from the University of Illinois in Champaign/Urbana with a degree in News/Editorial Communications Journalism (with a minor in photography and while studying computer science engineering). She specialized in creative writing. During college she was an acquaintance rape workshop facilitator, and edited to two literary magazines. Since then she has released six CDs (three music, three reading performances), and has also had seven books published:

Hope Chest in the Attic
The Window
Close Cover Before
Striking
(woman.)
Autumn Reason
the Average Guy's Guide to
Feminism
Contents Under Pressure
and *Changing Gears*



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

STATS

Fed up with her job as the art director of a few magazines for a publishing company, Kuypers, to relieve the stress:

- vented her angst musically with acoustic bands like “Mom’s Favorite Vase”, “Weeds and Flowers” or “the Second Axing”, made performance art with Pointless Orchestra, 5D/5D, or Order from Chaos, and learned how to play the guitar,

- wrote so much that she irritated editors enough to get published in books, magazines and on the internet over 6,300 times for writing or over 200 times for art work,

- wanted to read other people’s depressing stories, so she ran her own literary magazine, or
- all of the above.



WRITING & PHOTOGRAPHY CHRONOLOGY

1998 — *some photograph of Sloane completed*
1990 — *photographs of Sloane and Carter completed*
1993 — *photographs of Toby completed in Champaign*
1996 — *by the author photographstaken in Chicago*
2001 — *photograph of author with camera taken in Washington rainforest*
2001 — *additional photographs of author completed*
2002 — *photographs of book completed in Naples, January*
2002 — *"Journey to the End" chapter image of 194 north of Chicago, March*
2002 — *"The Key To Believing" chapter image photographed 4/13/02 above a church in Omaha*

early 1996 — most essays from chapter eleven written for appearing in book
first half of 1997 — most of the memos for chapterfifteen written for the book
end of 1997 — book researched, primarily in Naples
first half of 1998 — approximately first half written in Naples and in Denver
end of 2001 — first half of book edited and designed for publishing
January 2202 — remainder of book completes and designed for publishing
remainder 2002 — novel completed, edited and designed for publications



All images throughout book are by Kuypers except:
the aids ribbon, the gun, the individual key and the keyboard were stock images
the fragmented brain image (altered in house)

images of Sloane Emerson originated from photographs of Jocelyn Hirschman
images of Toby Graham originated from photographs of Eugene Peppers
images of Carter Donovan originated from photographs of Brad Woodard
additional photograph of members included David Audley, Blaine Ballard and Joseph Zlab
the images of the computer screen and the drawing of the globe were designed in house
the globe statue image is photographed from a church in Omaha, Nebraska
the book photograph was taken in Naples; the stack of books was photographed in house

The dictionary definitions for cynic and skeptic were adapted from the Websters Collegiate Dictionary

Diabetes information was from The Complete Medicine Book © 1980

BOOKS

Hope Chest in the Attic
the Window
Close Cover before Striking
(woman.)
Autumn Reason
Contents under Pressure

private printings

the Average Guy's Guide (to Feminism)
Changing Gears

COMPACT DISCS

music

The Demo Tapes *MFV (Mom's Favorite Vase)*
The Final (MFV Inclusive) *Kuypers*
The Beauty & The Destruction *Weeds and Flowers*
Overstating *Kuypers voice sampling*
Something is Sweating *The Second Axing*
Live concerts in Alaska *Two "Free Parking" shows from The Second Axing*

performance art/spoken word

Live at Cafe Aloha *Pettus/Kuypers*
Rough Mixes *with Pointless Orchestra*
Seeing Things Differently *Kuypers*
Change Rearrange *Kuypers*
Tick Tock *with 5D/5D*
Stop Look Listen *Kuypers*
The Entropy Project *with Order from Chaos*
Six One One *Kuypers*