

The Taste

By Matthew Bin

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Chapter 1

Jack watched Chad wipe the sweat away from his forehead and look down at the laptop, then back up at the large image glowing on the *boardroom* screen.

“I think...” Chad began, but he trailed off.

Head of Research, Jack thought. I’m Head of Research on the body of a gorilla. Chad wasn’t your usual weedy little scientist, shrinking into the folds of a white lab coat; most lab coats wouldn’t even button up around his broad shoulders. He wasn’t a bad researcher, but he was a lower order of primate in most other ways. Jack had sat through dozens of the guy’s presentations, and they were always excruciating.

“So what we were trying to do,” Chad continued, putting the train of thought back on the tracks, “was to develop a new—you know—flavouring component.”

We work at a company that does nothing but develop and produce flavouring components, Jack mentally screamed at the guy. Get on with it.

“And this one was for the—you know—the children’s market.” Chad had found his way back to the presentation, and was now reading bullets off the screen. He added ‘you know’ to almost every sentence, which luckily wasn’t in his bullet points, but it was like a needle poking Jack in the ear every time he said it.

Jack Truscott had worked at Lithiate Chem for the entire seven years of his career since he finished his MBA. The job had outlasted most of his friendships, and it had recently outpaced his marriage, too. He inherited Chad when he took charge of the research department eighteen months ago. The mastodon was

everything Jack hated: the har-har laughter, just above normal adult volume; exhaustingly detailed conversations on fitness, weightlifting, protein shakes, whey isolate, and everything else that came along with being a meathead, including the back-slapping chumminess and invitations to go out for a beer after work. Jack didn't hate Chad, but if he were stranded on a desert island with the guy, he'd walk home.

The other scientist in the room, Lacy Green, looked up sharply, and Jack tried to catch her eye. She'd been at Lithiate for only a few weeks, and hadn't produced anything of note so far. She was one of those quiet, serious women that made up about half the population of women in scientific research with their shapeless bodies and low-maintenance hair. Women like Lacy weren't interesting as women, but they were often the lifeblood of the research industry. Jack had assigned her to work with the hope that she would keep him on track. It clearly hadn't worked so far.

"So, yeah," Chad said, finally picking up a bit of steam. "We needed a new flavour component that hadn't been tried in the children's market. Basically the six to sixteen segment. And we isolated a couple of important flavours that had for some—you know—reason been neglected up to the present day."

Now Lacy snorted, and Jack glared at her. The guy was a terrible presenter, it was true; but there were only the three of them in the room, they all knew each other, and they had to work together. There was no reason to be a—

No, he cautioned himself. Every woman wasn't Emily. Lacy might have been a bit rough around the edges, but she was doing her job.

"So by taking a couple of vanillin compounds, we settled on a lighter, sweeter flavour profile that we think will really give us some recognition in the market."

Chad grabbed at the sweat pooling on his forehead once more, wiped it on his pants, and took a deep breath. It was like

watching a horse in a tuxedo—not comical, just painfully awkward. But Lacy’s scorn gave him some sympathy for Chad. The guy was trying, at least. This next part will be good, Jack told himself. Chad’s an experienced researcher. He won’t put something idiotic up on the next slide.

Please, not something idiotic.

“Coffee,” Chad announced proudly, moving to the next PowerPoint slide. The slide was a clipart image of a steaming cup of coffee, labelled in large block letters underneath.

Chad looked to Jack for the praise he obviously felt he was due.

“Coffee,” Jack repeated. Maybe he’d just had a stroke, and the guy had said something else. Something—you know—intelligent.

“It’s got a lot of great complexity, mostly from compounds that we produce already. And with the vanillins we think it might have breakthrough potential,” Chad went on.

Breakthrough potential. Jack hadn’t been to a research presentation in years where he wasn’t promised a major market breakthrough from whatever product the researcher had dreamed up. But this—

Coffee?

“Have you,” Jack said, trying not to look at Lacy, not wanting to betray his fears, “talked to market research on this?”

“That’s the great thing.” The triumphant grin practically split Chad’s skull in half. “You don’t even need to research it. I go past that Starbucks on King Street every morning when I bike in, right?” Chad, of course, biked the thirty kilometres to work every morning until the snow was a foot deep. “And any time of day there’s like a hundred teenagers and—you know—tweens in line. Just hundreds of them.” He narrowed his eyes and nodded sagely. “Starbucks has made a major market breakthrough, and no one is following it up.”

“So...” Jack felt his chair sinking quickly through the floor. “You’re saying that with all the kids going to Starbucks these days...”

“The market for coffee has expanded significantly,” Chad said confidently, only tripping slightly over the syllables in significant. “That’s the only possible explanation. And when Starbucks makes a step forward, you better believe we’re gonna follow.” He leaned back against the wall and crossed his arms.

“Do you go to Starbucks much yourself, Chad?” Lacy asked. Jack shot her a look; she was asking all innocently but she was just trying to get his goat. Again—mean. Jack intensified his glare, but she was still ignoring him.

“No,” he said. “Caffeine is, like, blood poisoning.”

“But you’re okay with feeding it to kids?”

“There’s no caffeine in the flavouring,” he said. “Not—well, okay, trace amounts, but...”

He looked helplessly at Jack. And although Lacy had been pretty awful to him just then, Jack couldn’t help pointing out the flaw in the argument.

“You should maybe take a closer look at what those kids are buying at Starbucks,” Jack told Chad. “I don’t think many of them are buying coffee.”

“So what are they buying?” Chad tilted his head up and looked down at her through half-closed eyes, in the childish way he always did when he was challenged.

“They have fruit smoothies,” Jack replied. “Frappes, they call them. And frozen iced teas. Although maybe some kids are drinking frappuccinos.”

“Oh, there you go,” Chad said.

“They’re mostly sugar and cream,” Lacy pointed out.

Jack glanced at her briefly. Okay, so they were on the same side now. She had been right, anyway.

“Well, I still think...” Chad said, flipping through the next few slides a bit too quickly, as if looking for some conclusion that was

buried deeper in the presentation. Coffee imports were graphed on one. Logos of food service companies that serve coffee filled another. “There’s strong, uh, evidence...”

Jack gave it a couple of seconds, just in case Chad had an actual point to make. Nothing. Chad stared open-mouthed at him, as if pleading for the mercy stroke.

“So here’s what we’ll do,” Jack said at last. “Package this up, and get some trial samples together. I’ll send it up to marketing and have them take a look at it.”

This was actually the mercy stroke. If it was a good idea, Jack would bring it to the senior management team meeting himself. If it was garbage, Jack sent it along to marketing, who never said anything back.

“That sounds good,” Chad said.

“All right. Good stuff.” Jack looked over at Lacy. “Anything to add, Lacy? Any further thoughts before you guys package this up?”

“No,” she said, looking away pointedly.

You try to reach out to people, Jack thought, and this was what you got. Some employees just didn’t *want* to succeed.

“I’m just thinking that since this was your first project with Lithiate, you might have some insight to offer.”

“I think Chad’s got it under control,” she said, still looking off towards another corner of the room.

Okay, no more tiptoeing around it: Lacy was being a bitch.

“Well, give Chad a hand putting it together for marketing, then.” Jack closed his leather portfolio and stood. “All right? I’ll talk to you guys later.”

“Thanks, Jack,” Chad said. He was doing his very best to sound chipper and positive, but his tone of voice was mournful. “I appreciate the notes.”

“Good job, Chad,” Jack said. “Very creative.”

That's enough, he decided. He turned and made his way around the boardroom table to the door at the far end of the room.

It was hard to tell whether Lacy thought he was out of earshot, or if she was still just being a bitch. "Children's market?" she hissed at Chad, a stage whisper at best. "This was for the *children's market?*"

"Thought I told you," Chad mumbled. He had no volume control; even his mumbles were clearly audible from the other end of the room. Jack hurried past the last of the chairs and turned past the end of the long oak board table.

"You never said it was for kids!" Lacy said, not even bothering to keep her voice down.

Jack glanced once more down the length of the room. Lacy stood with her fists on her hips, her untucked shirt bunched up around her waist. Chad's head was almost parallel to the ground as he unplugged the cords from his laptop.

No help here. Jack swallowed his dismay and departed without another word. Chad was his best hope for a solution to his problems; now his chest was so tight that even breathing was painful. The corridor outside the boardroom was cool and airy, and Jack filled his lungs as he turned toward the comfort of his office.

Chapter 2

“Hey, Jack.”

He knew well enough not to look up right away; that would send the signal that he was looking at something he shouldn't be. “One sec,” he murmured. He paused the video on his screen, minimized the window, and opened the research report he was supposed to be reading again. Then he looked up.

“Hey,” he said.

Aaron stood there, in a powder-blue suit. The colour was enough to send you into a rage. The white shirt was even worse, a check pattern subtly suggested by the weave of the high-twist cotton. No tie, collar open. Aaron had a long row of ties on the back of the closet door in his office; more than once he'd made Jack wait in his office while he selected one and put it on before they went to an important meeting. He only put ties on for people who mattered.

“Jack,” Aaron said. “Got a minute?”

“Course.” Jack closed the laptop lid halfway and rolled back from his desk a bit. “What's up?”

Aaron took a seat. As the Executive Vice President of Finance—Aaron never, ever shortened this title—he didn't need to be invited to sit. But Aaron had never deigned to visit Jack's office before. What was going on?

“Got some budget questions,” he said.

Jack nodded seriously. “Shoot.”

Had he just said ‘shoot’? It had sounded good in his head, before he actually said it.

“There was a significant expense that isn't balancing out,” Aaron said. “Some research costs that are a little weird.”

“Oh, yeah,” Jack said. “I’m sure the budget’s full of ’em.”

Shit shit shit shit shit.

“There’s this charge to miscellaneous research,” Aaron went on. “But we don’t have anything in invoicing, and it’s too big be cash. We’re well into the six figures, here.”

Already. You lose ten million bucks, no one notices for a year; you put ten cents against the wrong expense category and the Fin Veep comes up personally to chew you out.

“You know what it’s like with these compounds,” Jack said. “They come from all over. You can’t get this stuff at Whole Foods, you know.”

They shared a brief, managerial snigger. Was that enough? Would Aaron leave him alone now?

“Well, we should probably have something to back it up,” Aaron said, his voice softening slightly. “Can you get a letter from these guys? Statement of work? Anything?”

“In Korean, maybe,” Jack said. He could sell this kind of thing, he told himself; his whole career had been selling bullshit to upper management. “They typically take wire transfers through escrow, and ship it to a PO box in Vancouver. We get the courier to pick it up. Not sure if there’s—you know.” Stop saying you know, he ordered himself. Leave that to Chad. “They’re not really big on documentation.”

“What about the escrow agent?”

“We go through a broker.”

Aaron rubbed his chin thoughtfully. You practiced that in the mirror for months, Jack silently accused him.

“I’ll see if I can get our contact there to whip something up,” Jack offered. “They can probably do something.”

“Yeah, do that.”

He’ll forget. He’ll think I’ve already done it, he’ll forget, he’ll never think of it again.

“Do we really have to deal with these guys?” Aaron was apparently out for a deep, meaningful conversation here. Was he after something? Did he suspect something?

“Comes with the territory,” Jack said, slipping into a speech he gave at every second or third managers’ meeting. It felt good to be back on familiar territory—the ground was smooth, here. “It’s not the compounds themselves. We’re dealing with unfamiliar plants, the kind of flora whose complexity can’t be synthesized in any meaningful way. They grow in places where export tariffs are cash bribes, and where knowing the local magistrate personally is what puts you on the good side of the law. We’re talking the world’s tiniest tin pots, and the most powerful dictators swimming around in them.” Jack placed his fingertips on the desk, the way he did every time at this point in the spiel. “It’s a competitive advantage if it works out, and it’s a major competitive disadvantage if we’re not at least in the game. That’s just a simple fact.”

Aaron had surely heard many similar rivers of bullshit before, and he was probably letting it flow by without any more concern than usual. “All right,” he said, getting up. “Let me know what you come up with. I’ll clear it with the budget guys if you need me to.”

“Thanks,” Jack said. “I’ll let you know.”

“By the way,” Aaron added, instead of getting up. “Frank told me about Emily. Sorry to hear it.”

How had Jack’s divorce become a topic of discussion among the other executives? And why was Aaron bringing it up? He’d never shown even a modicum of personal interest in Jack before.

“Thanks,” Jack said.

“Things all settled now?”

“I think so.”

“It’s tough,” Aaron said. “I should know. I’ve been through enough of them.”

They shared a brief, brotherly smile. Please get out, Jack willed him.

“Thanks,” Jack said again.

“Right.”

Aaron straightened up and got out of his chair. He had this curt nod he used when he exited a room, different from the one he used when he dismissed underlings from his office. Jack hated this nod, the chin slightly elevated, the nostrils flaring, the eyes half-closed. He always tried to be looking elsewhere when it came, but Aaron caught him this time.

“See ya,” Jack said.

Aaron departed without another word, which was his privilege as part of the executive team. Jack waited till he’d been gone ten seconds before he released the long, deep sigh he’d been holding.

He opened the laptop, closed the employee directory, closed the porn window. He opened a new window. Should he even be doing this here? The IT group was too understaffed to bother with him surfing porn, he was sure. But what if Aaron made them look for some kind of evidence on the company servers? They might keep the internet records for months, for all he knew.

Goddamn Aaron. Goddamn Emily. All this could have been avoided if she’d just—

No. Concentrate.

He pulled out his phone as he opened his last budget report on his laptop. Scrolled down to the line item that had caught Aaron’s eye. He couldn’t even remember what name he’d given the damn company. There: Kwok Song Tak Import/Export.

He opened the browser on the phone and carefully typed in the name, Kwok Song Tak. He hadn’t even bothered translating it. It could mean anything. Pigshit? Iced café mocha? Embezzlement, fraud...

There were over a hundred thousand hits. The top hits were all pages in Korean. Good enough. He scrolled down, looking for anything that might give him away.

Aaron had been satisfied by the explanation, anyway. He hadn't asked the next question—about the brokerage company.

But then he'd mentioned Emily, his fresh, still-raw divorce. That had been coincidence, hadn't it? Lots of his other Lithiate colleagues had extended their sympathy as well.

Jack got up, closed his office door, paced across the floor. His office wasn't big enough; he needed more room, more air.

He'd be in a much smaller room if he wasn't careful.

He sat down again. The chair wasn't right, too loose on the lumbar, too much padding in the seat. Dammit.

His bonus. That would save him.

The quarterly bonus was coming in six weeks. He just needed something to announce at the senior management team meeting in two weeks, get Aaron or some other prick to agree he was onto something saleable, and he'd get a nice fat deposit. Then he'd run that through the numbered company, pay it out to Lithiate as a refund, and the books would balance again. Sure, there was a paper trail, but would anyone care? They'd only care that the charge was off the books.

He rubbed his temples. Was it that easy?

He'd taken two hundred grand. If he got his full bonus this quarter, he'd be able to cover that. He would put his bonus into the company, and claim it was returned from the escrow broker. Problem solved.

The number crunchers would be happy. Aaron wouldn't care. Jack would be in the clear.

All he needed was the bonus.

Chad's presentation earlier in the week—selling coffee-flavoured candy to kids. What the *fuck*. How was he going to get a bonus from that?

No, it was time for the researchers to start earning their pay. About fucking time.

He practically launched himself from his desk and was soon charging down the stairs towards the laboratory wing.

Chapter 3

“Hey, guys,” Jack said, forcing a smile. “What’s happening?”

“Hey, man,” Chad said, looking up from the table of—something, printed in impossibly small text on a stack of paper in front of him. He had his reading glasses on, ridiculous little rectangular frames perched practically on the end of his nose. “What’s up?”

“Just wanted to talk about research priorities a bit,” Jack said. “Getting some pressure from higher up.”

He looked over at Lacy, at her desk only eight feet or so away. She was hunched over some papers as well; hers were graphs, multiple hair-thin lines spidering across some boxes. This is what they do all day. Were they magicians or frauds? How could he possibly know?

“Hey, Lacy,” Jack said, in his friendly manager voice. “Let’s have you sit in on this.”

She looked up, her eyes wide. “Oh,” she said. “Sure.” She scraped her chair back and came over to stand beside Chad.

Jack rested against one of the tall black lab counters nearby. Cool, casual manager.

“As I was telling Chad,” he said, “We’re starting to get some heavy pressure from above to get some new products out the door. I had the executive vice-president of finance in my office just a couple of minutes ago.” He let that sink in; surely even science types would get the importance of that title.

“So we’re going to work on something else,” Chad said sadly.

The less said about his coffee idea the better; Jack was doing him a favour by ignoring the comment. “So I’m looking for something new to bring up to the senior management team

meeting in a couple of weeks,” he went on. “I thought maybe we could get out heads together a little bit, and talk about what you guys are working on. Maybe I can help to focus things that are... more saleable.” He almost added a “you know” in there but avoided it. “So what else have you guys been developing down here?”

“There’s—”

Lacy cut Chad off immediately. “We’re really not close enough to anything right now,” she said. “Maybe by next week, we could collect some ideas together—”

Jack had caught that—he might not have had Aaron’s executive superpowers, but he wasn’t an idiot either. He looked at Chad.

“Do you have something else bubbling, here?” he asked.

The guy would never get far in this, or any career—he couldn’t lie to save his life. You could see the truth rising up with him, expanding as it passed through his chest, filling his throat. The guy would have to say what was on his mind, or his head would literally explode.

“Lacy was working on something interesting,” Chad said. “Really...” He glanced nervously at Lacy, who was looking back at him like a prizefighter at the centre of the ring. “...interesting,” he finished, looking fearfully at Lacy once more before settling his gaze on Jack again.

“Lacy?” Jack asked. “What’s in the pipe?”

She sighed heavily. “It’s some biomechanical stuff I was working on at Suntron,” she said, begrudging every word. “There are some crystals that act as strong carriers for certain compounds. They stimulate the nerve endings in receptor cells at the same time the receptor cells are processing the taste compounds.”

Jack had been to a number of lunch-and-learn sessions about taste buds in his time at Lithiate. They always had the same kinds of diagram: bulbous taste buds, looking like pink teeth, made up

of three or four irregular blobs, the receptor cells, outlined in black. Black threads hanging down from them, nerve endings, up to fifty of them. Something touches the cell, stimulates the nerves, and sends a signal to the brain. That was taste.

That was what he knew about taste, all of it. Nerves, receptors—the rest was just words. Just more science.

“Okay,” Jack said. “So what does it do?”

“We tried it on mice,” Chad said. “They love it. They go nuts for it.”

“Really,” Jack said. He used to get excited when he heard this; he’d learned early on that mice would go nuts for anything: peanuts, corn, wood, mouse meat.

“It’s got no odour or colour,” Chad went on, forgetting his fear of Lacy. “It’s really strong. Like, irresistible to the little guys.”

Jack looked at Lacy. “Where does it rate against, say, salt? Or MSG?”

Lacy looked away, as if searching for the answer; she didn’t find anything, and looked back at Jack. “Stronger,” she said.

“*Way* stronger,” Chad cut in. “We stopped giving it to the first test batch, and they starved.”

“It killed them?” Jack exclaimed. This was already worse than the coffee idea.

“No,” Chad said. “They wouldn’t eat anything that wasn’t treated. And when we ran out of the first batch, they starved.”

“It’s nowhere near ready,” Lacy said. “We haven’t made the same batch twice. And the crystals—we can’t even mill them correctly yet. We’re introducing variables that we don’t—”

“Seriously?” Jack said. “What does it taste like?”

“Nothing,” Chad said. “It just tastes... good.”

“Good how? Sweet? Umami?”

“No—just...” Chad raised his hands like a helpless child. “You ever try eating straight MSG?”

“No,” Jack said.

“It tastes *awesome*. You should totally try it. It’s a trip. Anyway, it’s kind of like that. You can’t taste a flavour, just... awesome.”

It sounded promising, despite Chad’s idiotic sales pitch. Jack turned to Lacy. “How soon till you can start turning out consistent batches of the stuff?”

She rolled her eyes and started to count out her excuses on her fingers. “We don’t have any idea what the solvents are. The ball mill we have isn’t fine enough. The powder filter we’ve got in this lab isn’t fine enough either. We have no consistent—”

“If it’s equipment,” Jack said, “get what you need shipped in. I’ll clear it. We’re going to get a testable product in two weeks, I’m going to announce it at the senior managers’ meeting the week after, and we’ll have an announcement out in a month.”

It was bold, it was crazy. It was exactly right. He could feel it, everything from Aaron lifting away, sailing off in the breeze. It was going to be—

“No way,” Lacy said.

“Yes, we just—”

“It’s not ready. It *can’t* be ready.”

Was she being obstinate just to be obstinate? Hadn’t he agreed with her about Chad’s coffee thing?

“Hey, now, Lacy,” Chad rumbled. “We can give it a shot. No harm in trying.”

Jack had never been so thankful for Chad’s platitudes. Lacy was less receptive. “We can try to turn lead into gold, if you want. We’re talking about physics here. Not marketing.”

Jack stood up. He liked leaning on things when he was having these discussions; it meant he could draw himself up to his whole height. What he said next would be definite. It would have weight.

“We’re going to try it,” he said, looking first at Chad for support, then back to Lacy. “It doesn’t have to be perfect. It just has to be convincing.”

“It’s doable,” Chad said.

“It’s *not*.”

“All right,” Jack said. “Do your best, and we’ll see where it goes, okay?”

He nodded—not an Aaron nod, nothing so snotty—and left the room. Let them sit and stew. They’d come around. They had to.

Chapter 4

Jack opened the hatch on the SUV and waited for the hydraulics to open the door. Back when he drove a Hyundai hatchback, everything was on hinges and springs; you opened the hatch, it popped up so fast it would catch you on the chin if you weren't paying attention. These BMWs were all highly engineered for the best possible user experience, but sometimes you just wanted to put your clubs in the damned car.

He placed his bag in the hatch and stood back to let Rohit sling his bag in beside it. "Don't get all pissy just because I beat you," Rohit said, his voice going high, almost a giggle, the way it did when he was trying to kid around. "You've got to be getting used to it by now."

"You ought to be used to me not caring," Jack said, pulling the hatch down, letting it click into place. "I'm not going to apologize for working harder than you, and spending less time here."

Rohit laughed again. It was true, though; Rohit was head of product management, which meant he essentially waited until someone gave him a product, and then he told customers it was ready. He probably did something with his time, but Jack had never quite determined what that was.

They got in, and Jack started the engine. "Wasn't a bad round, anyway."

"You've still got that signature slice in your shot."

"All right," he said. "We've golfed all afternoon. We don't need to talk about golf, too."

Rohit laughed again. The afternoon had gotten a little long for that laugh.

“Want to grab a beer somewhere?” Rohit asked.

“I would,” Jack said, “but I’ve got a meeting tonight.”

“Work? After five?” The laugh once more. “You trying to make me look bad?”

“You don’t need any help from me.”

The guy wouldn’t lay off. Jack had to stop talking before it drove him insane.

“So are you moonlighting or something?”

This was the problem with Rohit: he was too earnest. Now Jack had to come up with an excuse. With anyone else, he could say he had stuff to do. With Rohit—what stuff? What was he doing? Did he need any help?

“Meeting my lawyer,” Jack said at last.

“Ohhhhhh.”

Would that shut him up? He put the car into reverse and pulled out of the parking spot.

“So things are all settled with Emily?” Rohit asked.

Rohit wasn’t actually trying to be rude, Jack was sure, but he had a way of asking questions that other people wouldn’t dare to ask. It was the conversational equivalent of standing too close when you talked to someone: it was too much, too invasive.

“Yep,” Jack answered. No elaboration needed, surely.

“So what, you’re signing some papers tonight or something?”

“Pretty much.” He’d signed everything long ago.

“I don’t know how these guys do it, with three or four ex-wives,” Rohit said. “It’s like, your income is a smaller and smaller pie, and someone else comes along and then you’re giving away another slice.”

“I don’t intend to have more than one ex-wife.”

“Of course, of course.”

There was a merciful rest as Jack pulled out of the parking lot and onto Guelph Line. They would take the toll highway, Jack decided. He hated paying money to drive on a highway, but it

would cut a few precious minutes off the ride, and off the conversation.

“So what happens, then?” Rohit asked, pulling the flesh open yet again. “You pay her, like, every month? Or—”

“We came to a lump sum arrangement,” Jack said, hoping his tone of voice would express his desire to change the subject. “I paid once, covered the legal costs, and there’s no further claims.” Rohit didn’t answer, but nodded repeatedly. Jack followed the road down the valley, around the bend, and then back up the hill on the other side.

“Must have cleaned you out,” Rohit said.

“You have no idea,” Jack answered.

The apartment door stuck slightly, and Jack had to give it a push with his knee to open it. That was happening more often these days. Was it the dampness? The late summer heat? At the rent he was paying for a two-bedroom in this place, he deserved a door that worked. He would send the property manager an e-mail.

He barely fit into the narrow hallway—if that word really applied to the ten square feet of parquet flooring inside the door—with the golf clubs slung over his shoulder. It was a struggle to get himself and the clubs inside the door and get out of the way to let it close. He gave it a firm kick to make sure it latched, then dropped the clubs.

He pulled his windbreaker off and tossed it on the couch, and headed to the kitchen. There was a nice little spot on the counter where he was able to arrange his bottles, and today called for a good-sized splash of something single malt. He’d probably have had one anyway, but the conversation with Rohit had stressed him out enough that he filled the tumbler a little higher than usual.

He stepped back out of the kitchen and surveyed the place. Nothing fit correctly, and nothing matched. Nothing had been purchased with the intention of furnishing a two-bedroom apartment. The couch was too wide, and the overstuffed arm pushed up against the wall on one side. The TV console had come from the spare bedroom, but he had managed to get the living room TV, which loomed over the small console precariously. Emily didn't watch TV, she claimed in one of their more civil meetings at her lawyer's office; Jack didn't watch much TV either, but he didn't want to hear her derisive snort so he just accepted the big TV on his side of the ledger.

The golf bag lay on its side on the floor where he'd dropped it. The clubs hadn't fallen out but they were in disarray, their heads no longer snug against the top of the bag. He pushed them back in with his foot and picked up the bag by its handle.

Where to put it? The front hall closet was the right place, but it was already full—all his winter coats. And beside all of that, the cross-country skis that Emily had kept since university, and hadn't used more than twice since they got married. That might have been the only time there was any of the old friendship between them. She couldn't transport them right away, but couldn't bear to throw them out, so she asked him to hold onto them for a while. He agreed, and he wasn't even sure if he regretted it.

In any case, there was no way he could stuff the clubs in that closet.

He took a long sip of Scotch. Not his best stuff, but fourteen years old; it wasn't the most mature companion on an evening like this, but it could hold up its end of the conversation. He took another sip, letting the smoky peat soak into his tongue and numb his cheeks.

The spare room was the obvious place, but the room was already cramped enough. The closet in the room was stacked with blankets and linens for beds he no longer owned. He could

lay the golf bag behind the bed, he supposed, but that wasn't really a solution. Out of sight, maybe, but not in its right place.

His bedroom? No. He wasn't in a university dorm. He didn't need sports equipment in his bedroom.

The costs of the divorce were still stacking up. He gave everything he had—far more than that, but he didn't want to think about that right now. One four-year-long mistake of a marriage, including months of stress and argument. And now, everywhere he turned, the mistakes compounded.

Lean it against the living room wall? In the corner behind the entertainment console?

Put it in the storage locker down in the basement? God, no. The climate control would be dreadful. Good graphite cares about things like relative humidity.

His tumbler was empty. She'd gotten all the crystal, not that he had anywhere to put that either. Scotch tasted better when it was tipped out of a heavy lead crystal glass. He didn't have the chemistry to back that up, but it was undoubtedly true. Maybe he'd buy himself a few crystal tumblers. He didn't need a whole set.

He poured a second glass of the Scotch, overbalanced, and splashed it everywhere. The golf clubs were still on his shoulder. Dammit. What was he—

He dropped the golf clubs on the floor right there, beside the breakfast bar. He'd figure something out tomorrow. He placed the Scotch down on the coffee table—the glass and metal table looked ridiculous across from the lacquered maple TV console—and flung himself onto the couch. It was still comfortable, still hugged him close, still held him as he finished the second glass of whiskey. He turned on the TV and thought about the third glass.

Chapter 5

A knock at the office door forced Jack to look up. The story he was reading was fascinating; apparently Joe DiMaggio's whole career had been a work of fiction, cooked up by a bunch of newspaper reporters in the 50s, probably to sell papers. Who knew? Jack was annoyed at the interruption. He'd probably forget to finish the story if he stopped reading it now.

He grudgingly looked up, and felt better immediately; it was his assistant, Dora. He had to admit, he liked Dora, although he wasn't sure exactly how much, or in what way. In recent weeks, as his marriage collapsed around him, he became much more attuned to how sharp she was, how carefully she spoke. And she was good-looking—which only added to the confusion. She had medium-short hair that she sort of piled up on her head, and Jack liked that style. She wore tight, high-waisted skirts and fitted blouses. Her appearance at his door was always good news in some way.

"How's things?" he asked.

"Some approvals for you," she said, placing a manila folder on the corner of his desk. When are we going to stop running companies on manila folders and hand-signed approvals, Jack wondered.

"Thanks," he said, looking back to the screen. "I'll get them when I'm done reviewing this."

Dora stood directly across the desk from him, waiting.

He looked up. "Something up?"

"Chad and Lacy are working on something in the lab," she said. "They're running tests today. I thought you might want to go down and observe. I think things are looking good."

Even for her, this was a surprising amount of knowledge. “Really? How do you know?”

“I’ve been keeping an eye on them.” She had a little half-smile on her lips.

“Okay,” Jack said, getting up. “Show me.”

There were two testing rooms in the research wing, sterile-looking, well-lit white rooms, each with eight chairs and a table. There was a side entrance to the building for test subjects, so Jack never had to see them, except from the observation room.

Both testing rooms bordered on the observation room, and two long, high windows looked down on them. From the testing room side, they looked like smoked glass; you didn’t want taste testers to be looking in a mirror while they tried the flavour compounds.

Only one of the rooms was in use that morning, so the observation room was bathed in light from one side. Dora led him straight in.

Jack didn’t observe tests very often, just reviewed the results. He knew some of the tricks of the trade by now, of course; for sweet flavours, you baked them in a cookie if they wouldn’t break down in the cooking process; you put them in smoothies if they were supposed to be consumed cold; you coated little cubes of steamed potato if you were looking for umami compounds. Did they dream this stuff up in Lithiate or was it standard practice for the industry? Lithiate was still in business, so it probably didn’t matter.

But in his infrequent visits to the observation room, it had always been nice and quiet. A muted hum of conversation as the testers answered questions. There was a microphone in each room, of course, and all the test sessions were recorded. There was a speaker in the observation room if you wanted to listen in. Personally, he didn’t care what the test subjects said. People were the victims of the flavour industry, but they all thought their insights were profound. Just write down that you liked it and

move on, Jack always thought when he heard them blathering on about the stuff they were trying.

The speaker wasn't even on, but as soon as Dora opened the door, there were voices. Loud voices.

"I didn't take the last one!" some guy bellowed. "And you took *three*. I said we should—"

"No way in hell I took three," an old woman shot back, her voice soaked with bingo hall smoke. "There were twelve. And you—"

Jack bounded into the observation room to look. There were six people in the room, mostly older, except for one girl in her twenties, decked out in the Canadian tuxedo—jeans and denim jacket. She wasn't shouting with the others; she was sitting at the end of the table, her head buried in her arms, her entire body quaking with sobs.

The bellowing guy had a voice made for the stage; he was a big guy in every direction, and he was standing, pointing an accusing finger at Bingo Hall Mabel. She was exactly as Jack anticipated, wiry, short grey hair, a sweater buttoned around her neck, covering another sweater. And behind the both of them—the sound hadn't even registered with Jack yet, though it was the loudest sound in the room—a woman, maybe fifty years old, with dirty-looking blonde hair, was screeching, her head tossed back and her eyes closed tight.

"What the hell..." Jack breathed.

"It wasn't this bad before," Dora commented. A laptop sat on the counter below the window, and Dora tapped its keyboard to wake it up.

There were two others in the room, at the other end of the table, another man and woman. They were shouting incoherently, or at least Jack couldn't make out any words from behind the glass.

"This is not right," Dora said.

“They gave us twelve!” The big guy was now screaming at the top of his lungs. “*Twelve! And I only had one!*”

There was a crash. Jack looked over: a chair was on its side. Were they throwing furniture?

“Maybe,” Dora said, hunting for something on the laptop screen, “you could go find Lacy and Chad.”

The window vibrated as something struck it. Not a chair, Jack realized quickly; maybe the test food had been on a plate. Did they use plates in the testing rooms? He couldn’t remember.

Right, get to the lab, talk to Dora and Chad. Why the hell weren’t they in the observation room, anyway? Jack darted to the door at the other end of the observation room and descended the short staircase to the lab.

“If you bring that up once more,” a voice was saying as he opened the lab door, “I’m going to slash your fucking throat.”

It was a woman, but not high-pitched and screechy; it was a low, threatening growl, like a wolf. He saw Chad first, his hulking shoulders visible from anywhere in the lab. He was slamming his fist down repeatedly on something—Lacy’s desktop? Her computer? What the hell was happening?

Lacy and Chad occupied a secluded corner of the lab, with their work counters separating their desks from the larger room. There were a total of eight researchers and a bunch of lab assistants, all of whom reported to Jack; he had been neglecting most of them while Chad and Lacy worked on their current project. Not that the scientists needed much attention; they seemed to produce stuff better without Jack’s intervention anyway. A few heads poked up from the other side of the lab like prairie dogs, wondering what was going on.

“Hey!” Jack shouted.

“I’m not the one who tried to sabotage this,” Chad was yelling. “If you’d just made a full batch like I said, we’d both—”

“*Stop it,*” Jack roared. His voice came from deep within him, summoned from a rage that he hadn’t felt since Emily announced she was leaving. “Both of you. Right now.”

They both looked up at him, open-mouthed and glassy-eyed, as if they were just noticing for the first time not only that he was there, but what they were doing themselves. Chad’s fist, raised up to give Lacy’s desk another thump, slowly lowered.

“What the hell is going on?” Jack hissed. He shot an angry look at the other side of the lab; the heads quickly disappeared. He turned back to Lacy and Chad. “Why aren’t you in the observation room? Things are going crazy in there.”

Lacy looked like she was going to cry. “I didn’t...”

“We were just going over there,” Chad said, hanging his head.

“Go up to my office,” Jack ordered. “Wait for me there. I’m going to get rid of the testers. I hope you got them to sign the waivers before the brawl started in there.

Chad’s eyes widened considerably. “Dora was supposed to...”

“Go,” Jack ordered. He didn’t wait for a reaction.

Back in the observation room, Dora was on her phone. “I know. Again. We’ll need two or three,” she said. “Room B this time. Whoever’s around. Be careful when you get in there.”

Jack glanced into the testing room again. The big guy and Bingo Hall Mabel were now sitting across from each other, glowering; the chairs they were in were the only ones still upright. Meanwhile, the crying girl had shrunk into a corner, the straggly-haired woman was standing with her back to the observation window, and the remaining two were close together, talking in hushed tones.

“Where are they?” Dora asked.

“I sent them up to my office,” Jack said. “You’ll clear the room?”

“They’re on their way.”

“I’ll talk to you after I fire those two idiots.”

She turned around in surprise. “Really?”

Jack wasn't about to fire them; it had felt pretty cool to say that, though. "Probably not," he admitted. "I'm going to take a giant shit on them, though." That felt pretty cool too.

Dora turned back to the laptop. "I'll call you if we have any problems."

She was on top of things. He left the room.

Chapter 6

They sat in the two chairs, facing away from each other, arms crossed. Neither of them met Jack's eyes as he rounded his desk, although he didn't look directly at them either. The laptop was still there, open to the Joe DiMaggio article. He closed the laptop, but didn't sit down.

"What the hell happened, there?" he asked, finally turning his gaze on the pair.

A thin stream of blood was running from Chad's right nostril; had that been there before? Jack hadn't noticed it in the lab. "What happened to your face?" he asked, reaching into his desk drawer and pulling out a box of tissues.

He tossed it to Chad as he looked at Lacy to see if she was hurt too. Chad wasn't likely to launch a workplace harassment suit; what would be the point of that? But if he'd punched Lacy back—no, she looked fine, though her hair was a little mussed up, maybe.

"It was nothing," Chad said, dabbing ineffectively at the blood, examining the wadded tissue every once in a while to see what it contained. "I just—it was an accident."

"Walked into a door, yeah." Jack put his hands on his hips. An exec he'd worked for after his first promotion at Lithiate had tried to teach him about power stances, but Jack had always thought that kind of thing was bullshit. He needed it now. "I'll ask you again, and I want an answer. What the hell is going on?"

He looked first at Chad, who immediately lowered his eyes to the floor, then Lacy. She didn't look away.

"It was a professional disagreement," she said.

“Did you hit Chad?” Jack asked. Shit, he’d have to fire her if she said yes, wouldn’t he? Please lie, he willed her. At least until this project is finished and I get my bonus.

“No,” Chad said. “She didn’t. I just—accidentally hit myself.”

Jack looked at them, from one to the other and back a few times, then dropped into his chair. “You’re going to have to tell me what’s going on,” he said. “I don’t know what else I’m supposed to say.”

“Things got a little out of hand,” Lacy said, her voice suddenly all serious and reasonable. “I know it was unacceptable. We’re sorry. It won’t happen again.”

“It won’t,” Chad added.

Jack breathed in, breathed out. He was suddenly very tired. “What were you testing?”

They looked at each other, exchanging a glance that said something Jack couldn’t interpret. He waited.

“We were testing the—the project we were working on,” Lacy said, slowly, as if choosing her words carefully.

“The taste,” Chad said.

Lacy rolled her eyes but didn’t look at him. “The *substance*,” she said, “is proving effective, as we suspected. We’re having some problems controlling the concentration, which leads to unexpected consequences.”

“I’ll say,” Jack said. “While you were having your professional disagreement, they were throwing chairs in there.”

They exchanged another glance. “We’re finding it hard to collect useful data so far,” Chad said.

“Because people go crazy every time you try testing the stuff,” Jack finished for him. This was how he made his bones as a manager: he could sense what people were going to say, and he said it before they did. He couldn’t remember where he picked that trick up, but it worked pretty well. Emily had hated it.

“The thing is,” Chad said, “they love it. People just—they love it. But then they finish the samples in about two seconds, and...”

“I told you we were having trouble making batches consistently,” Lacy said. Jack looked straight back at her, daring her to try to turn the blame onto him. “We have a steel ball mill, and we need ceramic. And with the ten-inch filter we still can’t produce much more than a dozen samples’ worth—”

“I told you,” Jack cut in, “to order whatever equipment you need.”

“We did order it.” Lacy was sounding bitchy again. “It’ll take another three days to get here. Where do you think we’re going to get a ceramic ball mill? A planetary one? Canadian Tire? I can’t believe you guys don’t already have one here.”

“Hey. If you told me before you needed one, I would have made it happen.”

She opened her mouth to respond, clearly thought better of it, and clammed up. Fine with him.

“So,” Jack said. “Assuming it comes in by Thursday. What are we looking at? What are the results saying so far?”

“We haven’t got any,” Chad said.

Lacy had clearly given up being subtle; she whirled in her chair to face him. “We were—”

Chad spread his hands helplessly. “What? We don’t.”

“And—” Lacy sighed furiously and turned back to Jack. “Every batch so far has been consumed, and as you saw, we’re not collecting a hell of a lot of data from our testing sessions.”

“I don’t get it,” Jack said. “You’ve had multiple sessions?”

“We had—” Chad stopped and looked at Lacy, who shrugged. “We had six. Including today.”

Six testing sessions? That was more than most projects had in a month. “So where’s the data?”

Lacy chuckled slightly, a strange sound coming from her. “Today’s session was the best one yet,” she said. “They stayed in the testing room.”

This was starting to feel scary; he could feel his managerial authority slipping away, but he had nothing prepared for this kind of thing. “Surely you got some data.”

“Nope.” Chad was smiling too. “I mean—unless you want to count null values.”

Har har, funny science man. “What about running the tests on mice, or—whatever. Don’t you have tests other than taste tests? If you can’t even create a consistent batch—don’t you hold a portion of this—this—”

“The taste,” Chad said.

“—this substance,” Jack shot him a look, “held back as a benchmark?”

They both found something fascinating on the floor. Chad mumbled something.

“What was that?” Jack demanded.

“Those samples were inadvertently consumed,” Lacy said, still looking down.

Jack sat and watched the pair of them, a couple of school kids sitting in the principal’s office. There was something going on. Did it matter what it was? Did he need to figure it out right now? They would probably be grateful to be let go.

Not without giving him something, he decided.

“Look,” he said. “I’m serious about providing anything you need. Send a couple of our people out to pick it up in a company van. Airlift it in, if you need to. I don’t care. Use the assistants. Whatever you need. Right?”

“All right,” Chad answered like an automaton.

“Just tell me,” Jack went on, “how long till I have something I can bring upstairs. I need to announce something.”

“One week,” Lacy said, her words short and definite.

Jack and Chad both looked at her.

“You’re sure?”

Lacy seemed to have composed herself now, and she stared back at Jack steadily. “Yes,” she said. “We’re not far off. We’ll get you something next week.”

Jack did the slow management nod. “Okay.”

Lacy took a deep breath and rose from her chair.

“Sorry again about before,” she said, and turned to leave.

“Yeah,” Chad agreed, clearly surprised but getting up to follow her. “Stupid. Won’t—you know.”

Jack knew.

“Keep me posted,” he said, although Lacy was already outside the door, and Chad was right behind her.

Chapter 7

Dora was at his office door again. “Do you have a minute?” she asked.

“Come on in,” Jack said. This time he had actual work on his computer screen. It had only been a research paper, and he hadn’t been reading it that closely—mostly just skimming till he reached a chart or diagram—but it felt good to be doing the right thing for once. “What’s up?”

Dora stepped forward into the office. She was carrying a leather portfolio under one arm, and that usually meant that she was going to whip out something for him to read or sign. She kept it firmly clamped to her side this time, though. “I just wanted to give you an update.”

“Sure. Go ahead and sit down.”

“I just wanted to let you know that I’ve been checking in with Lacy and Chad periodically. They’re making some real progress now.”

“Really?” He hadn’t told her to do anything like that. “That’s good news.”

“They’ve got one of the test subjects from the last round back today,” she said. “Apparently the taste is getting easier to produce now. I’m not sure of the details.”

“You can never be sure with the eggheads,” Jack said with a smile. He held the smile, trying to recover from the fact that he just said “eggheads”. “Are they getting data now?”

“Apparently. Lacy said that they’re starting to synthesize it in larger quantities since the—I forget, the mill or something—came in.”

He had glanced at a supplier's catalogue online; planetary ball mills tended to start in the five-figure range, even for the small ones. He agreed a bit too quickly to give them anything they wanted. At least he'd have an invoice for this line item in the budget.

Dora was still yammering, trying without much success to parrot what Lacy or Chad—probably Lacy—had told her. “The hundred nanometer mark was the best they could achieve in the old mill. Now with the fifty-ohm filter and the new mill, they can use a whole range of new solvents, too.”

“Maybe I'll go down and see them myself,” he said. “Do you know if they've got the test going on right now?”

“I think so,” she answered.

“Want to join me?”

She stood up. “I have to get down to marketing,” she said. “We're getting the test market data back from Mr. Finch.”

He was going to protest—Dan Finch was an asshole, and no one deserved to sit through a meeting he was running—but he thought better of it. “Oh, yeah,” he said, as if he had known all along about this meeting. “You'd better be in on that. Take notes, in case anything useful pops up.”

“I will.”

Jack stood up to go as well, and almost didn't look up in time to see Dora departing the room.

He decided to go straight down to the observation room. If they had a test subject in right now, they would surely be in the observation room this time. Besides, even though the theatrics had been a little unsettling, he'd enjoyed the little slice of crazy that the last test had brought in with it. He didn't want to miss it this time.

He opened the door to the observation room. Empty. Again, one test room was lit, the other was not. He closed the door quietly behind him and stepped up to the window to look.

The test subject was the straggly-haired woman who had been making the weird screeching noise the last time. She was alone in the room. This wasn't usual: they often wouldn't even run a test if fewer than four subjects showed up, because the data was weak and the cost of running the tests was so high.

The woman was standing beside the table, slightly bent over. She was facing Jack, although even if the window hadn't been obscured, she probably wouldn't have noticed him.

She had a plate in her hands, a round plastic plate.

She was licking it, licking with long, slow strokes of her tongue.

"What the fuck," Jack breathed. Where were Lacy and Chad?

The woman had already been licking the plate when he came in; she was still going at it. As he watched, she turned it over and began licking the back of it.

Jack stepped towards the phone, trying to remember Chad's extension. Not only was this all remarkably unusual, he felt distinctly uncomfortable being the only voyeur for this particular show.

The plate dropped from the woman's hands, hitting the floor with a clunk. She was done, finally—

The woman bent over the table, raising one knee to rest on the table, as if she were trying a difficult pool shot.

But she was lowering her head. Her face was—

She was licking the table.

Surely she knew someone could be in the observation room. But she might as well have been a dog for all she seemed to care about what anyone saw or thought. Her tongue extended way too far from her mouth, and it left glistening lines of moisture behind it.

He didn't want to witness this; it was like watching someone masturbating. It felt bizarre and wrong.

She stood up at last, and stood there for a while, staring silently down at the table.

This wasn't right. Time to talk to Lacy and Chad. This just wasn't—

She abruptly straightened and began to walk. She went to the end of the room, turned sharply, and headed back the way she'd come. She might have stopped briefly at the door, but Jack wasn't sure.

On the way back, he saw her face—slack and unexpressive, her eyes, dead and cold.

Jack turned away. Enough of this. Time to talk to the nerds.

Why had he said eggheads to Dora?

He made his way to the lab door, pulled it—

Locked.

He gave the door a quick tug, then a firmer one; no, there was no question. It was locked.

The lab door was *never* locked.

This was just the door that opened up into Lacy and Chad's area. He could go back up the corridor, turn left, go past the basement boardroom, left again, and he'd be at the door for the far side of the lab. The other scientists in the lab wouldn't have locked their door, too, would they? He turned—

Surely, his mind spun, you didn't just watch a grown woman lick a table.

He stopped.

What if the other door was locked? What would he do, call security? Pound on the door until someone let him in?

He looked at the locked door in front of him. Heavy steel doors, fireproof. Panic bars on the other side, of course—you would never flee *into* a laboratory.

If both the doors were locked, he would have to admit he had no idea what was going on in his own laboratory.

If he didn't check the other door, his manager's voice pointed out, he could assume that it was still unlocked. That would mean he was still in control.

He stepped back, stepped forward, gave the handle one more pull. Not a hint of movement from the door.

He would send Lacy and Chad an e-mail asking for an update.

Jack turned around. The shortest way back to his office was through the observation room, but...

He turned again, and set off down the corridor. He'd take the long way back.

Chapter 8

“Now, here’s the project schedule,” Jack said, pulling the six- or eight-page GANTT chart out of his calfskin satchel. “I know we could have gone over this at the office, but I never feel like I’m really able to concentrate on things there.”

Dora nodded, but betrayed no indication of being either pleased or displeased by the idea.

“We really need to get this straight before the senior management team meeting,” she said.

“Yes, exactly.” He flipped it open. “Now, on the development front, we’ve got three projects in play...”

He got a booth table, one of the round booths that this location of the Casket Steakhouse had along one wall. Dora had positioned herself at exactly the opposite side of the circular table, but if at some point she did want to scoot around to his side of the table... say, if they wanted to look closely at something, their faces leaning down, almost—

The image of the straggly-haired woman licking the table floated into his mind.

Shit. He had really seen that, hadn’t he?

“So you want me to talk to the project managers and update the status?” Dora asked.

Jack blinked. “Yeah,” he answered. “I think...”

“You were saying,” she said, a note of impatience creeping into her voice, “that you wanted to look at the development projects.”

“Yes. Yes.” He pointed at the projects on the chart, even though Dora was already staring right at them. “That’s just development, though.”

“You want me to look into all of the projects.”

“Yes.”

He looked up at her, hoping to catch her eye, but she was looking down at the chart in his hand. There was no way she could see anything from all the way on the other side of the table. Why didn't she just move closer?

The waitress glided by, and Jack signalled for her attention, but missed her.

“Now, the marketing projects are a little behind in reporting—they always are, I don't know why.”

“They use the other time tracking system,” Dora said. She seemed to lose interest, fingered the drinks menu sitting beside her.

Yes, drinks, if only the damn waitress would swing by again.

“Nice to get out of the office for this,” Jack commented.

“I hardly ever go to these places any more,” Dora answered with a small smile.

She'd eaten fairly healthily, took a petite filet mignon with double steamed vegetables. She'd refused his offer of asparagus, button mushrooms, béarnaise sauce, but had put away most of her meal—and a gin and tonic, too. Jack had ordered top-shelf gin, too.

“Now, research,” Jack said. “Of course, the main thing is—” He stopped briefly, seeing the waitress across the way.

“Chad and Lacy.” Dora put down the drinks menu. “I talked to them earlier.”

“Really?” Maybe the locked laboratory door was just a one-time thing, a fluke. But the woman licking the table...

“I've been checking in every day, with Lacy at least. They've been working hard.”

“You went down there?”

“No, they've had the lab locked for a couple of days—I'm not sure why.”

Ah. She probably hadn't seen the straggly-haired woman, either.

“They said that it was because the taste was in a critical stage,” Dora went on, “and they couldn’t afford—”

“The taste?”

Dora looked at him, and answered with the patience of a grade school librarian. “Yes,” she said. “The flavour compound they’ve been—”

“I just didn’t realize,” Jack cut in, trying to keep only a little of the annoyance in his voice, “that we were officially calling it that.”

“Chad and Lacy are. I just assumed.”

Funny, how Dora always referred to them as a pair. Apparently the decision to team them up was a good one, from a management point of view. He thought Lacy would strangle Chad at first, but if they were productive...

They had done approximately two minutes’ actual work to justify this dinner, he realized. He returned to the chart. “So for the other research project, let’s—”

The waitress had somehow appeared at his elbow without him realizing it. “Will there be anything else?” she asked, collecting Jack’s empty martini glass.

“Another,” he said, gesturing towards the glass in her hand. “Gin, extra dry, extra olives.” He looked to Dora. “And another...”

“Oh, no,” she said quickly, shaking her head. “I’m fine.”

“Go on,” he pressed. “Your boss’ll never know.”

“Just a little more water,” she said to the waitress.

“Coffee, maybe?” Jack suggested.

“Or an Irish coffee,” the waitress put in.

“I’m fine,” Dora said, a little crease appearing in her brow. “Just water.”

The waitress gave up and departed. Jack stared hard at the GANTT chart, reviewing the development timelines. Rude, he decided. Dora was just being rude.

The timeline on Lacy and Chad's project. It didn't even have a label, just an index code. DD-421. The taste? In a company that did nothing but invent flavours, they were going to call this project "the taste"?

But the timeline stretched two months into the future. They had to go now; the senior management team meeting was drawing nearer, and his bonus depended on that more than on any single factor.

"So you think they'll have something next week?" he said. "Really?"

"I'm sure of it," she said.

The waitress arrived and plunked the martini on the bare tabletop. Did they not have cocktail napkins here?

"I should probably go," Dora said. "Thanks for dinner."

"Wait—" Jack shuffled the sheets a bit. "We haven't finished—"

"I'll follow up with the other teams tomorrow," she said. "I'm just feeling a little under the weather tonight."

"Are you all right?" Show some concern—that would be the right approach.

"I'm all right," she said. "I'll get a cab."

Jack could have driven her, or at least could offer to drive her; she would probably refuse, but he'd be the better person.

He touched the stem of the martini glass. The bowl was full almost to the brim, sweat beading on the underside of the glass, and a small slick of olive brine floating on top of the cloudy liquid.

"I hope you feel better," he said.

"Thanks." There was no way to leave these booths gracefully, and Dora was forced to bounce her body along the bench to free herself.

"Have a good night," Jack added. He wanted a sip of the martini, longed for the cool, fiery drink on his tongue, but the glass refused to move.

“You too,” Dora said.

Jack watched her brief passage through the tables until she disappeared into the dim folds of the restaurant. The martini continued to sit on the table in front of him, one bead after another coalescing, running down, and disappearing.

Chapter 9

Never, Jack had long ago decided, go into the bathroom right before a meeting. Too many people getting the last-minute piss in, too many variables; but the hangover and the water Jack had been drinking all morning defeated him. As if to prove him right, there was Aaron, coming out of the stall just as Jack finished at the urinal.

“So, Jack,” Aaron said, apparently suffering from some strange post-defecation bonhomie. “Haven’t seen you around in a while. You been avoiding me?”

They shared their senior management chuckle at the thought; Jack had been avoiding him, of course, and Aaron must have known it. But they both played the game.

“As usual,” Jack said, placing his hands under the tap, trying to find the sensor. “I’m not about to get in the way of another budget discussion, if I can help it.”

Another chuckle.

“But I was going to come to see you,” Aaron said, “About that thing we were talking about before.”

The sensor took forever to recognize Jack’s hands, and then the soap sensor took forever. “Oh, right,” Jack said. No denying it, was there? “The importers.”

“Right.” Aaron made the sensors work without effort; they must have sensed his salary or something. “My people did a little digging. You said they were registered in Korea, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I’m pretty sure.”

“South Korea?”

The management chuckle yet again.

“Because the thing is,” Aaron went on, “they couldn’t see any sign of it. Nothing on our previous transport lading slips, nothing on our customs records. And nothing online, of course.”

“I told you.” Jack had gotten some soap on his hands and was lathering, probably more than he needed to, making a good show of it. Look, dad, I’m getting my hands so clean. “They stay off the radar. Not much in the way of records. They’re not going to advertise themselves—hey, southeast Asian border cops, stop this guy.”

“Still.” Aaron shook his wet hands repeatedly over the bowl of the sink. “We need to make the numbers meet up. Do we have an invoice from them yet? Even a packing slip?”

“It doesn’t work that way,” Jack said. He imitated Aaron’s thorough hand-shaking over the sink. “They don’t put their name on anything. We’ve got a brokerage firm here in Canada. The money is basically a retainer that sits in escrow; when a shipment arrives, our broker releases the funds. Sometimes it goes through, sometimes it doesn’t.”

“I’ve never seen one sitting like this before.”

“We’ve been lucky lately. That’s why—” Jack looked around the bathroom quickly, conspiratorially. “We’ve got something big cooking,” he finished, lowering his voice dramatically.

“But—they have to be registered somehow. Somewhere.”

“Probably as Granny Kwok’s dumplings. They don’t exactly advertise.”

Aaron stroked his chin with his now immaculate hand.

“It’ll resolve itself soon enough, one way or another,” Jack said. “Either we’ll have the shipment, or we’ll have the money released back to us. This is the way flavour research works.”

“Okay,” Aaron agreed skeptically. “I suppose...”

“I should get into the meeting, there—”

“Oh.” Aaron didn’t care about Jack’s schedule; this was a move to prove that fact. “I just thought. The broker. We could

get something from them, put that on the record. The number-crunchers would be able to relax a bit, then.”

“Right.” Jack’s stomach was already tender after last night’s half bottle of Scotch; whoever said good Scotch didn’t give you a hangover was kidding themselves. And now his intestines were churning anew, crawling into new and tighter knots. “I think it’s some numbered company—I’d have to go look it up.”

“At least they actually exist. I hope.”

Har har.

“I’ll look up the name,” Jack assured him. “No problem.”

“Here, I’ll send you a note,” Aaron said, whipping his device out. “Just reminding you to send it. I’ll pass it on to the guys in accounting. Just don’t forget—this has been sitting on my action items list for a few weeks now.”

Why had he given the actual name of the company? Why had he registered the company himself? His own name was on the articles of incorporation. Could Aaron get hold of those? A subpoena could...

“No problem,” Jack said. “Today. Tomorrow latest.”

“Good.” He turned to go, but stopped. “You said you have something good in the works?”

“A flavour component,” Jack said, glad to be able to move to another topic. “It’s preliminary, but the results are looking good.” That sounded pretty weak. “Better than good.”

“Just have something solid by the senior management team meeting,” Aaron said as he turned back towards the door. “You can’t afford to show up with nothing. But you know that—it’s the bonus meeting.”

“You’ll be impressed,” Jack said.

The prick wasn’t going to acknowledge that, Jack thought. No, he gave the Aaron nod, and left. The door swung closed behind him, coming gently to a rest, leaving Jack alone in the shitter.

Chapter 10

Jack sat at the end of the board table, Dora sitting primly at his left. Had she gotten colder since they went out to dinner? Or was she always this cold, and Jack had just been giving her the benefit of the doubt?

She was as angry as he was about Chad and Lacy's tardiness, though. "Twenty minutes," she said. "It would be different if they'd return my calls, but lately—"

"Sorry," Lacy announced briskly, walking into the room. Chad followed, an irregular stack of papers in his hands. "We don't have a presentation, but we can give an update on the Taste."

"Are we seriously calling it that?" Jack complained. "It sounds ridiculous." He wasn't just doing the manager objection thing, there; the name annoyed the hell out of him. On the nose.

"It's already on all the documentation," Lacy told him, and Chad nodded in support. "Okay," she went on. "We'll give you the short strokes on the technical side first. With the new mill, we were able to bring the particle size down to about fifty-five nanometres. This meant that we could suspend it in a number of different solutions..."

Why they had to do this every time, Jack never understood. They were dumbing it down, sure; he knew that. But neither he nor Dora had any hope of understanding what they were talking about. He knew a nanometer was really, really small. And he knew the planetary ball mill—it turned out that didn't mean anything cool, just a bunch of tubes turning in circles in a bunch of different directions at once—cost eighty-four thousand dollars, including rush shipping from Montana. It hurt more to

approve that one, knowing that it was in aid of developing something called ‘the Taste’.

“The good news,” Lacy continued, “is that the different particle sizes have been found to have different effects on the tongue receptors. They seem to stimulate different cells, to different degrees. We hadn’t anticipated that.”

She paused, and Jack realized he needed to put a question in. “I thought it was all chemical,” he said. “Why does the size of the particle matter?”

“You know the salt on peanuts at a bar?” Chad said. “You know how it’s a lot finer? Or kosher salt, how it’s flaky? It all tastes different from salt in a salt shaker, right?”

“Table salt,” Jack corrected him.

“Right.”

“Anyway,” Lacy said, “the point is, that we can now control the effects. And we can have a market-ready product as soon as three months from now.”

She stepped back a half-step, waiting for applause, apparently.

“I have a meeting next week,” Jack said. He was impressed, but he wasn’t going to betray any reaction just yet. “And I want to say there that we’re going to announce the product in two weeks.”

“You said that,” Chad admitted.

“So I’m going to go into my senior management team meeting,” Jack said, feeling annoyed that he had to pace them through this sort of thing, “and tell them that our new ball mill has given us better control over the effects?”

Lacy shrugged like a petulant teenager. “If you want.”

“No,” Jack said, his voice cold but angry. “I don’t want. I want to tell them that we’ve got a product coming. And I want to tell them at least three different markets we can approach.”

“We don’t know,” Lacy answered, looking away.

Chad jumped in, the superhero. “It’s kinda complicated,” he said. “Until we know the solvents and their effects, we can’t even tell what media we’re going to be trying. And if you don’t know

whether it's a—you know—coating, or a suspension, or even an aerosol, you don't know how to use it."

"And we don't know anything at all about concentrations in suspensions or aerosols," Lacy added, still staring at the corporate art hanging on the side wall of the room. "We can't possibly know anything about cost, or production levels—"

"Fine," Jack said. Consensus. Win-win. "Meet me halfway. Find me something. It doesn't have to be precise. Fudge the numbers if you have to. Just give me something."

"You've got the Taste," Chad said serenely.

"Something worthwhile," Dora piped up.

Everyone stopped for a moment to look at her. She shrugged. "Senior management doesn't want baseless speculation," she said. "They want figures. Something they can put on a piece of paper."

Jack looked back at Lacy, who was hunched over weirdly, her hand at her mouth. Then she was sitting up straight, looking back at him, straight as a beam.

"We'll have something," Lacy said. "I don't know if it'll be any use to you."

"It's going to have to be," Jack said. It had gone on long enough; they were scientists, not artists, and he was their manager, not their patron. "Two days," he said. "I need this in two days. We'll take it, we'll tweak it, we'll figure something out. I don't care how much we need to bend the math. We can break the math for all I care. But you have two days."

He stared straight at Lacy. He knew Chad would be nodding vigorously in agreement; Lacy was the one who needed to hear this message loud and clear.

Plus there was the weird convulsion a few seconds ago. Whatever it was, it wasn't natural, and she was trying to hide it. Pressure had a way of pushing things out, finding the weak spots. Well, here was the pressure, then.

"That's Sunday," Dora pointed out.

Now he could fly into full-bore management mode. “That’s too bad,” he said. “We need what we need.”

There was a long, uncomfortable silence. Jack knew this, felt it, enjoyed it. This was him getting his way as a manger.

“Hey, Jack,” Chad said.

He turned around a half-second slower than he would normally do; he didn’t *need* to respond to Chad.

“We have some crackers here, dusted with one of the preliminary batches.” He was holding a glass container out, pulling the plastic lid away. They looked like saltines. “Just in case you wanted to try one. See what the fuss is about.”

The manager move, Jack decided, was to take one, express mild interest, and walk away. But he couldn’t even raise his hand, couldn’t countenance the thought of touching the wretched things.

“I don’t...”

“I’ll try one,” Dora said, and picked out a cracker. She crunched it eagerly.

“You sure?” Chad pushed the container back towards Jack, placing it practically under his chin.

“Sunday,” Jack said, stepping back. “I’ll be in around eleven. Lunch is on me. But have something to talk about.”

He turned abruptly and walked out, without so much as an Aaron nod.

Chapter 11

Dora caught up with him when he was almost inside his office. “Jack, wait” she called, her voice strained. “I need to...”

He stopped and turned around. Her face was flushed, and her lipstick was slightly smeared on the left side. Had she been running? He hadn’t heard her heels on the floor behind him.

“Come on in,” he said, striding into the office.

He leaned against her desk and gestured towards one of the chairs; it was nice and intimate this way, no expanse of rosewood desktop between them. She seemed to pull herself together when she took the seat, as if the familiar action of running her hands down her skirt put her back on solid ground.

“I was thinking,” she said, “I should stay in the lab this weekend with Lacy and Chad. Help out, and make sure they stay on track.”

“We don’t need to spy on them,” Jack assured her. “They’re going to be working. I know they sound like rebellious kids, but they’ll be fine.”

“It’s just—things would be better if someone were there, watching out for management’s interests.” She hesitated before continuing, the decision about whether to say the next thing she wanted to say apparently weighing heavily.

“Your interests,” she finished.

Good lord, she’s coming on to me.

Finally.

But the management impulse, to tell an underling that their idea was wrong, that they needed to think it through, that they didn’t know what they were talking about—that impulse was far too strong. “I’m sure my interests can take care of themselves.”

“It’s just that Aaron was talking to me,” she said.

Aaron. Goddamn Aaron.

“I was picking up the monthly reports in his office and he asked me to come in.” She studied the patch of carpet between them as she spoke. “He wanted to know about this project, this big thing we were working on. And—” She looked up, eyes shining earnestly. “I didn’t tell him anything. I promise. I said I didn’t know what we were working on and that you were watching things closely. Don’t worry.”

“It’s fine,” Jack said, hoping his words conveyed what he really wanted to do—put a hand out and pat her silken shoulder. “You can talk to Aaron. He’s a senior VP.”

“Well—he said it was vital to the company that we get it out soon. And vital to—” Her earnest eyes dropped back to the floor. “To your career.”

Prick.

“He’s right,” Jack said, letting the manager automation take over again. “Research hasn’t been producing lately, and it’s an important project. Plus we’ve put some significant resources into it—well, you have the invoice for that damned ball mill.”

“I know. And he asked me about some of the expenses, too. The ‘Other Research Costs’ things.”

There was no management technique to handle getting nailed with fraud. Jack felt the spike drive further into his chest, robbing him of his breath, collapsing him inside.

“And I told him about how those things work, with the brokers and the shipments.” She was looking up again, sensing that her confession was not going to be as problematic as she had feared. Her face was reanimated. “Remember the time I had to drive to Niagara Falls and get that crate of samples? I told him about that time. So I think he has a better understanding now.”

Jack had forgotten about that—it was last year, when he barely interacted with Dora. He had asked for someone to go meet a broker, didn’t even know who had been sent until Dora

returned. These samples had come from Central America, probably through Mexico, through to California, and then to Buffalo and into someone's trunk and across the border.

He saw the shipment that she picked up, a plain-looking, slightly battered cardboard box. The top layer was cheap glassware wrapped in newspapers, and underneath that were tightly-packed rows of Ziploc bags filled with sample after sample. Each baggie was labelled with a three-digit number, which corresponded to a list that was sent by mail from Brazil.

The lab techs loved when a shipment arrived; come to think of it, that might have been when Dora started to try to move her activities closer to the research department. Jack had watched as she placed the box on the lab counter, all the scientists and lab techs gathered around. She helped remove the glassware—that went straight into the garbage, who knew where that stuff came from. But then all the samples, bright green and dull yellow leaves, some hard pink berries, little bundles of green twigs so fresh they were coiled up to fit in the bags. There was even a bag of large, green-black beetles. Hands reached in past Dora, trying to pick out the most compelling samples, and the testing began right away, probably went all through the night, separating, analyzing, synthesizing.

So what Jack—and Dora, apparently—had told Aaron wasn't false at all. You needed to get samples from nature preserves, bits of endangered trees and shrubs that could be gone before they were truly known. Flavouring components stood on the edge of history, looking forward, fighting against the loss of life to extinction. Maybe Dora saw that; maybe she was as caught up in all of that, just as Lacy and Chad and all the other scientists were. Jack didn't much care either way, as long as the research department made its numbers, but it was sometimes neat to see people so committed.

Dora was waiting for an answer, leaning forward.

“Sure,” he said. “You can stay with them. It makes a lot of sense.”

She smiled and sat back in her seat. “Thank you,” she said. “I’ll let you know how things go.”

“I’m still going to come in around eleven on Sunday,” Jack said. “But don’t remind them of that. Just keep them working. And if you need anything, e-mail me. I’ll have my phone on.”

“All right.” She stood up, smoothed her skirt. “I’m going to go straight back down there. I’ll see you Sunday.”

He smiled and nodded. “Right.”

She turned and left, and Jack waited until she was completely out of view before he went to his chair and sat down.

There wasn’t anything interesting on his laptop; he’d actually been fairly productive that week. But as pleasant as the exchange with Dora had been, something had felt very strange that day.

He put a note in his calendar, in case he woke up on Sunday and forgot he said he would come in. He opened the status report he had to do that day, looked at the clock. Three in the afternoon on a Friday.

No, status report. He was on the hook for that. It was due by end of day Friday.

Why was Dora so interested in being in the lab?

That meant nine on Monday. And he was coming in on the weekend.

What was going on with Lacy? For all her faults, she was a nonsense person, a good worker. But in the boardroom she had been all over the place. And what had she been doing, all hunched over?

But six or eight bullet points, and he’d have the status report done. Just have to copy over all the weekly hours and he could have it in early, for once.

She looked up when he saw her odd hunched-over posture, as if he’d caught her doing something, and she rearranged herself into a normal seated position immediately. It was like he caught

her looking at porn on her work computer. He'd had close calls himself, and he knew how that looked. He'd probably like Lacy more if he caught her doing something like that.

Activities this week. He would have to go into the lab work management system and look at which projects had progressed. Think about a way to describe their progress that sounded like he knew, or cared, about what the eight scientists in the research group did, day to day.

His mouth was dry. He was coming in Sunday.

Fuck it.

He took a seat at the bar. "Martini," he called out to the ruddy buzz-cut bartender. "Gin, extra dry, extra olives."

"Coming up."

The drink arrived, and the bartender walked away; no chit-chat today, apparently. Jack sipped the martini, felt the oiliness of the gin coat the underside of his tongue. He should have specified. There was a bottle of Tanqueray No. 10 behind the bar, but he hadn't said. Still, any martini beat no martini.

"Nother?" asked buzz-cut as he shimmied past, a large plastic bag filled with nuts in his hands.

Jack ate the last olive straight off the pick. He didn't always eat the olives; if you order extra olives and don't eat them, you show that you really care about the brine and aren't looking for a snack. When he was around other company men, he wouldn't touch the olives. But he was the only one in the bar so far.

"Here ya go." Buzz-cut delivered the fresh drink, collected the stale glass, and somehow managed to sneak a bowl of mixed nuts onto the bartop as well. The first sip of the new martini was brilliantly cold, and the edge of the alcohol was softened by the first martini. Nothing beat the first sip of the second martini.

He picked a nut from the top of the bowl and ate it, a pecan half. Not bad when a bar gives you mixed nuts instead of peanuts. He hadn't had a pecan in years.

The second martini emptied itself, but the barman had disappeared. Well, the place would start filling up soon enough, when the five o'clock Friday crowd started to file in. He toyed with the nuts a little, selected a peanut, the red skin still on it, held it up to the light.

He'd never considered the salt on bar nuts before. It really was different from table salt—of course, you knew that was true without even thinking about it, but that was the problem, you didn't think about it. You just ate them, nutty, salty.

The salt was tiny particles, almost too small to see. Would be interesting to see them under a microscope; maybe he'd ask Chad to do that some time. They were flakes, if he wasn't mistaken, but tiny—like pieces of tattered, weathered cloth, maybe, or chunks of wood, broken off of something.

He ate the peanut, felt the hard flesh of the nut break down between his teeth as the salt liquefied and mixed with the gin and filled his mouth with saliva. And his glass remained stubbornly empty. Where was buzz-cut when you needed him?

He picked up another peanut, ate it, and another.

Chapter 12

Another manager trick: you make a big deal of telling your people that you're going to check up on them at a certain time, and then you show up early. He set out to arrive at exactly ten in the morning, and he took his time winding through the silent, dim corridors before he ended up at the door of the lab.

He put his hand on the door handle, wondering if it would be locked. It would be okay if they locked it on a Sunday, especially since they didn't know he was coming so early. He could always call Dora and get her to let him in.

But the door swung open readily, the bright lights of the laboratory almost dazzling after the dull light of the corridors. Lacy and Chad's area of the lab was empty, but there was a loud electric hum coming from elsewhere in the lab.

No, not empty—he didn't even notice Dora at first. She sat at Lacy's desk, amid piles of papers and folders and metal rods clamped together—lab equipment, no doubt. Scientists always did this, surrounded themselves with bits and pieces of sciency stuff, as if they were trying to remind themselves from one minute to the next who they were and what they were supposed to be doing.

Was Dora sleeping? She was out of uniform—she wore her weekend outfit, not a skirt and blouse, but jeans and a light-grey hoodie. She was bent over, not really leaning on the desk, but at an unnatural angle that wasn't seated and wasn't anything else.

She was making some noise. Was she laughing?

Jack stood in the doorway, his hand still on the handle, the door still wide open behind him. No, she wasn't laughing. She was crying.

What had they done to her? Poor girl.

He stepped forward, moving slowly and uncertainly. The door swung closed behind him, and now he was halfway between the door and Dora.

Not—not crying, as such. It was more like... whimpering.

The pang of guilt hit him hard; he had spent most of the evening at the bar on Friday night, and spent Saturday sleeping in, then going for a drive, then hitting a few baskets of balls at the driving range. And he took it easy on Saturday night, Netflix and mid-grade Scotch. He was in bed by midnight and had been only mildly tipsy.

He didn't really even have to come in; he could have even just dropped Dora a line and asked her what was going on. Now he was glad he had made the effort. Things had clearly gone south over the last couple of days, and Chad and Lacy—probably Lacy—had clearly done something to Dora.

He took another step. This was delicate. Did he say something? Put a comforting hand on her shoulder? He needed to know what was going on—no, he needed to do something about Dora. She was clearly in distress.

“Dora,” he said softly.

She didn't seem to hear him, kept her head down, whimpering.

“Dora,” he said, a little louder. “What's—”

She turned around.

Her eyes were wide and pleading, rimmed red from crying, maybe hours of crying. But her mouth—

Blood was smeared around her mouth, on her cheeks, even a stripe on her left temple. Her upper lip and her chin were coated with it, and little bits of something, something Jack wasn't going to identify if he could help it.

Her mouth hung open, and she was continuing to whimper, her eyes pleading, pleading. Her teeth were stained pink as well, and her lips—

She raised her hands, palms turned inward, as if to show him something.

Her fingers.

Each of her fingers—ragged, bloody stumps of flesh, irregular, torn up, bleeding in thin streams down to her slick red hands. The fingernails—oh, god, they were tiny stumps, as if ripped back from the flesh, leaving only tattered skin and gore.

And she lifted her hand, her left hand, her index finger—to her mouth.

Her eyes pleaded still, desperate for something—for him to stop her, maybe. But Jack couldn't move. He watched impotently as she placed the uneven ribbons of flesh between her teeth, and bit down.

Another, louder whimper, and she pulled—he could almost hear, almost *feel* the fragment of flesh separate from the bloody stump of a finger. A narrow rivulet of fresh blood appeared, winding down among the creased, drying blood already coating her finger. She lowered her hands.

Her tongue protruded between her teeth slightly, and Jack could just make out the pale splinter of soft flesh on its tip before it disappeared, and Dora swallowed.

She coughed slightly, her eyes never moving from Jack's.

They weren't pleading.

"I can't—" she croaked.

They were afraid.

Jack stood, watching, and Dora raised her hands again.

He ran.

Lacy and Chad were at the far end of the lab, where the ball mill, the fucking ball mill, had been installed. Jack was speaking before he was anywhere near them, pieces of sentences and words tumbling out of him amid the bile rising in his throat.

“Dora—there’s something—she’s hurt—”

Lacy turned, a clipboard in her hand. A pen was behind her ear, and her face was calm and serious. “Yes,” she said. “We know.”

“What—what did you—”

“Hey, Jack,” Chad said. “You’re early.”

They couldn’t know what was happening. They couldn’t be this calm. “She’s over there,” he said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. “She’s—her fingers. They’re—”

Lacy peered at the screen on the side of the ball mill, and reached out to touch the control pad with a hand tightly wrapped in a blue rubber glove. “It’s fine,” she said absently.

“It’s not fine!” Jack roared.

“Hey, man,” Chad said, stretching out his hands, as if he were Mark Antony addressing the forum, calling for calm, except that his hands were in blue rubber gloves as well. “It’s cool. Lacy—you know—already called an ambulance.”

“But—you left her there? Like that?”

Lacy took one more look at the screen, then turned to Jack, like she was doing him a big favour by giving him her full attention. “She was helping with the sample preparation. She was supposed to wear vinyl gloves.” She lifted her free hand and waggled her blue-covered fingers. “We told her repeatedly.”

“Seriously,” Chad said. “You can’t just handle stuff in a lab like this without some kind of protection.”

“But—she’s right there!” Jack pointed in frustration, back to the corner where Dora still sat. “What are we going to do?”

“The Taste got under her—you know—fingernails, we figure.”

“It’s pretty strong,” Lacy added. “You might remember me telling you that we were having some trouble controlling it.”

Jack’s head was starting to hurt. “Go cover her up,” he said. “Put a blanket on her or something. And when the ambulance comes, help get her out of here. When that’s taken care of, come

up to my office.” That sounded like a weak place to end, so he went for a bit of emphasis. “Immediately.”

Chad nodded dumbly, but Lacy just stood staring at him.

“All right,” Jack said, and left. He took the other lab door, figuring that Dora probably didn’t need to be disturbed more than she’d been already.

Chapter 13

It was a half hour before they arrived. Jack had washed his hands and face a couple of times, and he had dipped into his emergency Scotch reserve in the bottom drawer of his desk. He thought he wouldn't need that any more. If the project—the Taste, he reminded himself ruefully—was a success and he got his bonus, all of his problems would be solved. Now he was sorry that there were only a couple of ounces left at the bottom of the bottle. His hands were still shaking after it was empty.

Lacy barged in first. "I warned you," she said, pointing an accusing finger in Jack's face. "It's too dangerous. Now you've gotten that poor girl hurt. I don't know how you're going to live with that."

"I got her hurt?" Jack's voice had jumped up an octave or two above where it was supposed to be. He was more focused on being pissed off with Lacy, though. "I wasn't here all weekend, and I show up and find out she's mutilated—"

"We told her to wear gloves, like, a hundred times," Chad said. "We told her the stuff was dangerous, and not to touch it."

"You sent that poor girl into a lab to help," Lacy piled on. "No experience. No idea what she was dealing with. And for what? To get a product to market a bit faster. To get yourself a nice fat bonus this quarter."

The bonus. Yes, the bonus. If anyone on the executive team found out about this, his bonus would be gone for sure.

"All right," he said. "Let's not concentrate on who's to blame, here."

"*You're* to blame," Lacy said. "Fudge the numbers, give me something to announce—"

“You let her chew her fucking fingers off!” Jack roared. “And you’re acting like it’s not a big deal. That’s psychotic. It’s perverse.”

“And that’s exactly why we can’t put this product on the market.”

Jack looked at her, trying to decide whether to be angry about Dora, or scared about being arrested for fraud and embezzlement above and beyond the negligence and endangerment he was on the hook for now. If the product is on the market, everything else will take care of itself, he decided. If he didn’t have something to show at the senior management team meeting, he was sunk.

“So it’s because the stuff is so concentrated?” he asked.

“The stuff Dora was working with was full strength, yeah,” Chad said. “She was supposed to be scooping five grams of the Taste into sample vials, and then we were going to try some solutions with them.”

Lacy had placed her hands on her hips. “There are some solvents that have already shown promise,” she said. “We’ve had some issues with the precipitates, but—”

“So if you dilute this stuff,” Jack said, “will it be safe enough to put on the market?”

Lacy and Chad exchanged a look. She shook her head slightly.

“Yeah,” Chad said. He glanced at Lacy. “Probably.”

“It will be safe if we dilute it,” Lacy said. “But I doubt we’re going to find a way to dilute it without leaving ourselves open to re-concentrating it. People will still be able to overdose on it—no, don’t shake your head. Dora had an overdose. And we still don’t know if the effects can be controlled after overdosing.”

“It’s all in the taste buds,” Chad said, his eyes on Lacy. “Or rather, the nerves connecting to the taste buds. We think that the nerves might be affected by the Taste. We don’t really know how, or how much.”

“You’re asking us to do a year’s testing in a weekend,” Lacy said. “It’s just not reasonable.”

“But this stuff works,” Jack said.

“Yes,” Chad confirmed without hesitating. “It works. Just—”

“So you’re telling me that we have maybe the most powerful flavouring enhancement since MSG—okay, I know what you’re saying, way more than MSG. Fine. And in the next breath, you’re telling me that you want to keep it in the lab for a year instead of making it a success.”

“Before making it a worldwide health crisis,” Lacy said.

“No.” Jack turned to her. “We have one problem to solve here, today: make this diluted enough that it has an effect, but it’s safe to eat. That’s it.” He stood up; they hadn’t taken their seats, and he needed leverage, even if it was only symbolic. “So that’s what you need to do. Get me a sample by tomorrow. On crackers or cookies or something. I don’t care. Something I wouldn’t be afraid to eat.”

They looked at each other again, for long enough that Jack started to feel uncomfortable. “All right,” Lacy said slowly. “We’ll do what we can.”

“Yeah.” Chad broke off their silent communication first. “I’m sure we can get you something by tomorrow noon.”

“Ten o’clock,” he said. “The meeting is at eleven.”

Lacy threw up her hands. “Fine.”

“Believe me,” Jack said. “If they pick this up, you’re going to be heroes around here.”

Lacy mumbled something, but Jack didn’t catch it and didn’t care anyway. Lacy and Chad turned for the door. “Call my cell if you need me,” Jack said, but they didn’t even look back, just filed out into the hallway.

Jack gave them a couple of minutes to get down the hall before he left himself. No way was he going to wait around here all day, thinking about Dora’s bloodstained teeth, tearing at her ragged finger—

His stomach lurched at the thought, threatening to release the Scotch. Nope. No way. He looked at his phone; not even eleven o'clock.

Well, it would be past eleven when he got to a bar. And he wasn't planning to do much else that day. He threaded through the corridors to the glass front doors, where sunlight beckoned cheerfully.

His car was parked only a few feet from the doors, but he unlocked it before he was even outside the building, not wanting to spend a second longer than he needed to. There were no other cars in the lot; security didn't staff the building outside of working hours, and the lab workers usually parked around the side of the building. The ambulance was nowhere in sight—not that it would be, but Jack felt an irrational pang of fear that it would still be hanging around, accusing him.

He was in his car when something irregular caught his eye. He looked into the rear-view mirror, then the wing mirror—there. At the edge of the parking lot. Someone was standing there.

He squinted at the mirror. There was a person standing there, just standing. Maybe watching him, he couldn't tell. A woman.

Dora?

He shook his head. No, Dora wasn't haunting him. Anyway, she was taller, and her hair was lighter.

The straggly-haired woman.

That was it. The woman who had been licking the table—she was now standing at the edge of the company parking lot. Surely they wouldn't have had her come in for more tests, would they? Lacy and Chad may have been acting strangely, but they couldn't be that irresponsible.

Should he go back and tell them, he wondered?

He glanced once more at her, standing there.

Forget it, he decided, and drove off.

Chapter 14

Dennis was one of the few sales guys Jack could actually stand. He opted for silver jewellery, not gold, and his suits were always made of what looked like natural fibres, wool, not the shiny poly-wool blends. He had class, something that most sales guys didn't know or care about.

Like almost everyone at the company, Dennis knew about the whole sorry affair with Dora, too, and he didn't seem to hold it against Jack. It had all gone away in a week or so, but a lot of the sales guys seemed leery of selling the Taste. That would change when they saw the kinds of commissions Dennis was getting.

The senior management team had eaten the crackers and the effect was so revelatory, so complete, that Aaron himself had come up to Jack after the meeting to congratulate him, and to tell him that he could count on a healthy bonus this quarter. He had been so completely successful, when one of the executives asked him the product name, and he'd said that the lab jockeys called it the Taste, the name caught on immediately. It was almost too easy.

Now, three weeks later, with the entire laboratory team working to refine and improve the delivery mechanisms for the Taste, Jack had been sent out with Dennis on sales calls. They were looking for small, local clients at this point—the clients were going to collect market data for them. The testing rooms at Lithiate were, for the moment, closed.

“You guys were very high on our list of potential partners on this particular venture,” Dennis was telling the two guys on the other couch. Zeem Brands didn't have boardrooms or tables, just meeting areas—dotted around at unstrategic locations in the

midst of their cubicle farm—made up of three couches arranged in a triangle, with a circular coffee table in the middle. The couches were all different colours, which apparently had some significance that Jack had never figured out. The ones they sat on right now were a striking violet hue.

“We are going national with this very soon—international, almost as soon,” Dennis went on. Jack could only marvel at the intense friendliness Dennis managed to convey with his voice, his tone, his tiny hand gestures. The guy was a samurai. “And we know that Zeem Brands has a strong local presence backed up with a national distributorship. I know that when you’ve tried what we have in store, you’ll thank us for picking you first.”

The Zeem folks were a couple of middle-aged men. Jack had met Art, the balding one, a couple of times before, but the other one, Burt, was a stranger to him. Neither looked like development types for a high-end liquor manufacturer; they should have been working as carpet salesmen or something. Short-sleeved sport shirts, pudgy fingers, shoes from PayLess, watches by Seiko. Who even owned a watch now?

“All right, I’ll tell you what I’m going to do,” Dennis said. “Pick me a product of yours that doesn’t sell well. I don’t care what it is. Just pull a bottle out. Sure, go grab it.” After a brief discussion, Burt waddled off. “Don’t worry,” Dennis said to Art. “You’re going to be impressed.”

Art was the really racist one, Dennis had warned Jack on the way over. “Burt is too scared of his own shadow to be really dangerous,” he said as they drove up to the visitors parking. “But Art would be singing the hymns as they strung my ass up in a tree.”

“I’m not going to say anything one way or another,” Jack responded, which made Dennis laugh even harder.

“All right, all right,” he intoned as Burt handed him the bottle. “What have we got? Oh, sweet Jesus. Strawberry cream. You’re telling me this didn’t sell?”

“Couldn’t get the fruit right,” Art said. “Too bland.”

“Perfect.” Dennis moved forward, almost squatting on the floor to reach the coffee table, and placed four glass tumblers in a row. “Now first, we’ll try the regular stuff. How many units were you selling?” He poured a dollop of the pale pink stuff into each glass. No wonder it didn’t sell; it looked like medicine.

“Bottles or cases?” Art asked.

Dennis shook his head with a low laugh.

“If you gotta ask...” He slid the glasses around the table.

The one that landed closest to Jack had a large, ugly bubble floating in it, with what looked like a pink grease slick shimmering on top of it. He sat back on the couch. “None for me,” he said.

“More for the rest of us. Right guys?” Dennis had a conspiratorial way of laughing that forced you to join in; you wanted to be part of it, lest you get left out.

The other two chuckled. “You mean we gotta drink this crap?” Art asked, tilting the glass and peering into it with one eye.

“Just a taste,” Dennis said, raising the glass up to take in the bouquet, if a low-grade pink liqueur could be said to have anything like a bouquet. “Remind yourselves what it was like.”

“Yeah,” Art said, and slugged his whole shot back. “Still pretty awful,” he commented.

“You guys use any special kind of cardboard for this?” Dennis asked. When the chuckles had died down again, he moved his glass to the middle of the table. “Okay. Now what I have here is an enhancer.” He drew a small glass sample bottle from his inside jacket pocket. “You’re going to say, you’ve heard this before. Everyone’s got an enhancer. And you know that with anything fruity it’s going to be glucose or citric, right?”

They exchanged a glance, and Burt nodded.

“Pretty much.”

“All right. Here you go. Watch.” He took the stopper out of the bottle and poured a tiny stream of the stuff, maybe a millilitre

or two, into the bottle of strawberry liqueur. "What do you call this, anyway?" he asked absently, looking at the label with his eyebrows raised. "Boutique. Wow."

"Talk to the marketing jackasses," Art said.

"Let's give it a shake." He gently swirled the bottle around. "I think you'll be impressed."

"You want us to get fresh glasses?" Art asked.

"Nah. Doesn't matter."

Dennis held the bottle out, and they both held their glasses forward. He poured a fresh measure in each.

"Now before you taste it," he said, "I want you to close your eyes and think of what you just drank, the Boutique or whatever it's called. Think of the taste, the texture, everything. Right?"

"Sure," Burt said, raising his glass.

"I'm serious, fellas." Dennis held a hand out in front of his chest, palm down. "Trust me. Close your eyes."

Jack watched in amazement. These two old socks were not the kind to be impressed with sales talk, but here was Dennis, playing them like chumps.

"All right," he said. "Taste."

They raised their glasses together, the three of them, in perfect sync, even though their eyes were closed. Dennis was smiling before the liquor touched his lips.

"Holy—"

Burt and Art both gazed at each other, then looked at Dennis, even at Jack, slack-jawed and dazed. "That's not the same stuff," Art said.

"It's not, I agree," Dennis said. "That's your unsuccessful strawberry liqueur with the Taste."

"Gimme s'more of that," Burt said, leaning forward with his hand out, grasping for the bottle like a toddler reaching for a teething toy. Dennis handed the bottle over, and Burt filled his glass, not noticing or caring that he splashed big droplets in all

directions. He swung the glass back and emptied it, then gasped and looked around the room aimlessly.

“Here,” Art said, grabbing the bottle out of his hand and filling his own glass.

“Now you can see, fellas,” Dennis said, “how you could use this to your advantage. Underperforming brands could get a boost. And even production costs—well, I’m sure Zeem Brands strives for only the highest quality ingredients, but your competitors could conceivably...”

Burt swallowed and smacked his lips. Pink had collected at the corners of his mouth, but he didn’t seem to notice. “Fuck ’em,” he said. You know how much fruit’s in this shit?” He shook the bottle for emphasis. “It’s mostly Berry Twelve.”

“And that used to be our biggest seller for a number of markets,” Dennis said agreeably. “But we’re probably going to discontinue it once the Taste is on the market.”

“Give it here,” Art said, a whine in his voice, and he pulled the bottle out of Burt’s hand.

“Now here’s what we’re thinking at Lithiate,” Dennis continued, as Art poured himself another glass, followed by Burt. “We can offer a four month exclusive contract on the Taste over all our other adult beverage clients. That means when we go to market, you’ll have a head start on literally ever other liquor producer on the planet. You won’t have competitors any more.”

“What taste?” Art said. There was a stream of pink sitting in the deep furrow beside his mouth. “I don’t even taste anything.”

“It’s like the strawberry—got—” Burt’s head was back and his eyelids were fluttering. “All juicy or somethin’.”

“The Taste is our name for this particular enhancer,” Dennis said. He pulled a folder from somewhere—he was slick; Jack hadn’t even seen him open his briefcase. He placed it on the table as the pair refilled their glasses; Art made a sour face as he discovered the last drops of liqueur were gone while his glass was only three-quarters full. “I’ve got a data sheet here, and a price

sheet. And if you sign on, we'll have the usual production instructions, and we'll be providing bulletins periodically as we continue to research the Taste."

The glasses were empty again. "You got more of them samplers?" Art asked.

"I'm sorry, but I can't provide those yet. I've got exactly this much—" He held up the little glass bottle before putting it back inside his suit jacket—"for all the clients I'm seeing this week. And believe me when I say, not many of them have waited very long to sign a contract on this."

Burt sat back on his purple couch, his eyes closed, his belly protruding from his body. "It's good," he said. "I'll give ya that."

Was he slurring his words? Jack picked up the discarded bottle and examined it. Thirty percent alcohol, and these two jokers had killed almost a full bottle in about five minutes. They didn't look like the kind of guys who would be fazed by a little bit of liqueur. You never knew, though.

"Well, I can leave this with you," Dennis said, straightening up, pulling his briefcase up and placing it on the couch beside him. "But I have to warn you, if we don't get a signature from you soon, you're going to be on the outside of an exclusive commitment, not the inside."

"Gimme the contract," Art said. He had been lolling around beside Burt on the couch, but the threat of leaving animated him again. "We'll sign. Just lemme..." He grabbed at the pen on the table; it fell through his fingers, but he picked it up again.

"That's great, fellas," Dennis said. "You won't regret it." He turned towards Jack and dropped a subtle wink.

"Child's play," Dennis said, sliding into the passenger seat.

"They didn't even know I was there," Jack said. "I just had to sit back and watch the master at work."

“You added a certain...” He made small circles with his hand. “Gravitas. Je ne sais whatever.”

Jack pulled the car back.

“So I’m window dressing.”

“We all are. Nothing’s ever worked this well. Ever. I say that with thirteen years of sales experience under my belt. No one’s said no to this stuff yet.” He patted his chest where the sample vial was pocketed. “No one even says maybe. I could sell this to a Styrofoam company, I bet.”

“Who’s up next?” Jack asked.

“I told Tremblay Foods we’d stop by,” Dennis said. “Over on Harvester. They’ll make us wait, though. Let’s get a coffee first.”

“Life on the road.”

Dennis shook his head.

“You don’t know, man. You don’t know.”

Jack laughed and headed up towards Appleby Line. There was a coffee place he liked up there. They’d signed Prentice this morning, and Zackly Supply as well. Zeem this afternoon. Tremblay made an ungodly number of cakes and cookies; somewhere he’d read that every morning, thirty percent of the population carried a Tremblay snack out of the house. You didn’t want to count your bonus too early, but... Jack could see the edge of the woods now. He wasn’t out, but he would be soon.

Chapter 15

They kept it to a pair of celebratory beers, but it was past eight. “The green one?” Jack asked. “The Hyundai?”

“Yeah. Not for long at this rate. I feel a Beemer in my future, don’t you?”

Jack pulled up beside Dennis’s car. “Feels like anything’s possible, today.”

“All right, man,” Dennis said, his hand stretched out. “Get a good night’s sleep. You’ve earned it.”

Jack shook warmly. “I’m going to grab my laptop before I go. Maybe I can look up a few things, be more than your spokesmodel.”

Dennis’s laugh got richer and deeper after the second beer. “You keep making this Taste stuff, you can phone in from your island.”

He got out and closed the door. Jack pulled up to the front door. It wasn’t technically a parking space there, but who would bother him? He’d sold Tremblay. He’d assured himself an insane bonus.

But he had no idea what his schedule was the next day, and apparently his phone had forgotten how to access his calendar. Find a replacement for Dora, he reminded himself. That had to be higher on his list of priorities.

Poor Dora—

No. Forget it.

He couldn’t forget it, her terrified stare as she attempted to grind one more measure of the Taste from beneath her fingernails, despite the fact that they were long, long gone. But

she was a ghost now, fading into the gloom. Lithiate had taken care of her, of everything.

“Just focus on the Taste,” Aaron had told him. “That’s the only thing I want from you right now.”

Jack considered leaving the motor running, but it was actually a long walk from the front door to his office; he didn’t want to be that guy. He shut the car off and got out.

His pass against the pad, the light turned green—

It was on him.

An animal, with claws and teeth and panting, horrible breath. The paws pulled at him, pulled him away from the door, talons raking across his chest.

He screamed.

The animal gibbered and pushed him down, and his back landed against the cement apron with a jarring thump. It loomed above him—

The face, the thin strands of hair, wild—

The straggly-haired woman.

Her face was level with his for only a moment, twisted with something, hatred, or pleasure, or pain, or triumph.

Jack reached up, his arms touching sinew and bony flesh, and her legs thumped against him, driving him back to the ground, and she was away.

It was only a second, maybe two, before Jack was able to move again. He was winded, but the pain was minor, and the ringing in his ears and the emptiness in his lungs were fading. He struggled upwards, his legs finding purchase, his body rising.

“Help,” he called out.

No security. He felt for his phone, inside his jacket—

His legs were frozen, his hands were rubber. The phone slipped out and through his fingers, bounced lightly against his knee, disappeared in the dim light and met the ground with a fatal crack.

Jack felt for it, and found it with a spiderweb across its surface. He felt for the power button, and the irregular display flickered between the network of seams in the glass.

Shit.

He dropped the phone to the ground again; it was no use to him now. He peered into the gloom beyond the building's foyer, the corridors dimly illuminated with the night lights. He hadn't seen her, had only an impression—

To the right. She had bounded through the foyer and headed to the right.

To the lab.

Jack set off, felt the pain in his ankle, and ignored it. To the lab.

Please, lock the door. Be gone. Anything.

His leather soles slapped against the floor of the corridor, every step threatening to send him flying as the shoes failed again and again to find traction against the smooth granite. Aaron had pointed out the quality of the granite when he took the management team on the welcome tour. Holds a polish, he said.

His left foot flew out behind him, and Jack went down, twisting awkwardly and landing heavily on his opposite knee. The thudding pain pulsed as he raised himself back to his feet and continued.

It was after eight. Lacy and Chad—they wouldn't stay this late.

Yes, they would.

He rounded the last corner, and suppressed the limp as best he could as he finally approached the laboratory door. It wasn't locked. It wasn't even quite closed. A crease of light outlined the frame.

His tongue had swelled to fill his throat by the time he pulled the door open.

The animal snarls and the heat of pursuit filled the wide space. There, right in front of him—the woman, on the floor.

And Lacy.

Lacy's head moved like a loose spring, the woman on top of her, straddling her. Her hands had gathered up the lab coat, and she was pulling, dropping Lacy to the ground, and pulling her up again. A long stream of drool fell from the woman's mouth, illuminated by the bright lights of the laboratory.

The violent crump of Lacy's body being driven to the floor dissolved any doubt, washed any pain; Jack ran into the room, grabbed the woman, and tore her away.

He had his arms around her thin body, but her arms and legs churned in all directions as a howl split the air around them. The woman's body convulsed, stretched, compressed again.

Jack held on.

The storm had just begun. Her howl coalesced into a filthy, spitting stream of half-words, ugly syllables. Buried beneath the torrent of sound were threats and vitriol. And her body continued to twist and writhe.

But Jack had his arms fully encircling her, and he managed to grasp one hand with the other. The fierce, taut force of the woman would have broken free if she had known how, but her movements were insensible, animal. He held on.

Slowly, he saw Lacy rise, and the woman screamed. Jack held on.

He watched as best he could, as Lacy backed away. Go, Jack wanted to tell her, get help, call, anything, get away. But his lungs were long burnt with heavy, desperate breaths, and he added only a hoarse roar to the woman's keening howl.

Lacy advanced.

She reached the woman, and suddenly the woman fell limp, like a cripple at the hands of a healer. Instead of fighting her, Jack

was suddenly supporting her as she breathed a ragged, satisfied breath and sank away with a whimper.

He looked up to find Lacy, holding another cracker out to the woman, and she took it between her teeth and relaxed, her body now cold and loose and limp.

Jack moved back, released her, and she sank to the floor. She was not quite asleep—not quite alive, maybe undead, as her jaw managed to work and the Taste calmed her.

Jack pulled himself free of the woman's body and grabbed the edge of something—Chad's desk. He pulled himself up. The phone.

He looked back. The woman was curled up now, compressed, her arms and legs folded inward. And past her, Lacy was crouching, no, half-kneeling. As Jack watched, her arm stretched out, feeling for something that wasn't there, and her eyes rolled back in her head.

The last of Jack's energy surged in him, and he was up and reaching for the phone, his finger already searching for the nine on the touchpad, as Lacy fell to the side, her head meeting the ground hard.

Chapter 16

It felt good, leaving work a little early, getting out into the sunlight for a late afternoon round of golf. Jack's bonus had come in, and he'd quietly settled that account. The books balanced now, and Aaron would have no reason to make his managerial inquiries any more. Jack finally felt that he was in the clear. There had been all that unfortunate stuff, of course—first Dora, then that crazy woman attacking Lacy—but he was divorced, he was no longer an embezzler, and he was able to really enjoy a relaxing late afternoon distraction.

Jack followed Rohit out through the doors and into the clean, warm summer air. "Two forty-five," he said, looking at his phone. "I hope we don't have to wait for a tee time."

"It'll be fine—shit."

Rohit stopped so suddenly that Jack almost ran into him. "Hey—"

Too late. They were already outside the door, and a woman with a microphone was descending on them, shouting out something about news and her name, Kate something. Why was she accosting them? Because they were playing a round of golf?

"What can you comment about the recent deaths—"

Jack felt a bit of relief at that; neither Dora nor Lacy had died, though Lacy had been in the hospital for some time with her injuries. There had been surgeries at first, and then they had her in a bed, but the complications—there were always complications. Jack didn't know for sure what was going on, but he hadn't wanted to inquire too closely. He just waited for Chad to tell him, every two or three days, how she was doing.

“We have no comment,” Rohit said. “We’re just a couple of lowly janitors.”

There was a cameraman, too. How had he missed the cameraman? “I don’t think you’re allowed to film in the parking lot,” Jack said.

“We’re following up on a rash of deaths in the local area,” the reporter said, as much to the microphone as to him or Rohit. “If there is an issue with the flavour enhancers that Lithiate Chem has put on the market lately—”

“Seriously no comment,” Rohit insisted. He turned around. “Back,” he said quietly to Jack.

When they were in the lobby and beyond the reach of journalists, Jack held a hand up to Rohit. “What the hell,” he said.

“We’re not going to play golf today,” Rohit said. “Too many jackals on the course.”

“What was she talking about?”

“It’s such bullshit.” Rohit leaned on the receptionist’s counter. “Tremblay put the Taste on these peanut butter cookies, and they somehow got into the hands of some doofus kids with peanut allergies. They ate ’em, and boom. Dead kids.”

“How did they even know we were in business with Tremblay?”

“Their PR guy threw us under the bus. Anyway, it’s probably just a statistical blip. It’s not like suddenly a bunch of kids are going to eat stuff they weren’t supposed to eat, just because a new flavouring component was added.”

“It sounds like something that should have come to me,” Jack said. “Why am I only hearing about this now?”

Rohit shrugged. “Upper management wanted to keep a lid on it, I guess. We’ve got our crash team on it already.”

“It just seems...”

“Nah, man.” Rohit punched him lightly in the shoulder. “Don’t go there. You did an amazing thing with the Taste.”

“How did it even get out that fast?” Jack was still trying to get his head around it: four dead kids. “We only talked to them in July.”

“People are excited. You should see Dennis. And look at you—your bonus, right? You should sell that shitbox and get a real car.”

The shitbox was a BMW X3, which Rohit somehow had decided was less vehicle than Jack was allowed to drive. “I’m still shopping,” Jack said, hoping that would turn Rohit’s attention to something else. “Anyway, to get a product to market usually takes a few months, not a few days.”

“It’s going like fire. Everyone’s testing locally. You know that Zeem company? The one with the liqueur?”

“They’re on the market too?”

“Test market, test market. The strawberry stuff. You try that?”

Jack shook his head. “No.”

“It’s the big thing now in the clubs around here. Boutique and vodka. They don’t even have a name for the cocktail, but the girls are mad about it.” He winked. “I know some place that keeps a bottle behind the bar if you ask for it. They call it the ultimate panty loosener.”

An uncomfortable heat had begun making its way up Jack’s spine, leaving behind it a trail of slick cold moisture.

“Things are moving,” he said, the words just slightly catching in his throat.

“They’re moving, all right.” Rohit leaned over and peered through the door. “Think they’ll leave us alone if we try to get out again? I don’t think they bought my janitor story.”

Jack’s head started to fill with an irritating fuzz now whenever Rohit spoke. “I should go down to—” He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment. He wanted to stop it, to stop it all. Where did he need to go? “The lab,” he answered himself. “I should—”

“Don’t forget to get my clubs out of your trunk before you leave tonight,” Rohit called after him as Jack hurried down the corridor.

Chapter 17

Ellen was no substitute for Dora.

She had been both the best-looking and the most qualified of the applicants Jack interviewed, although that wasn't saying much on either score. She had straight blonde hair, pulled back like a soccer player's; she dressed well but without the class that Dora had.

Even Ellen's makeup was too subtle; her pale face remained pale and one-dimensional. Dora knew how to make her features sing. In the reduced light of the steakhouse, Ellen looked like a ghost.

"You have to understand," Jack told her, "that safety is absolutely paramount. You'll be entering a laboratory environment, and you might come into contact with substances that are toxic."

Dora's fingers—

"Or worse," he added. He automatically did this with new hires, assumed this world-weary tone; his eyes seemed to half-close automatically and a strained note entered his voice without his meaning it. He used to hate it when senior managers pulled this move on him, now he was doing it with her.

Her eyes widened.

"What's worse than toxic?" she asked.

The waitress appeared at his elbow. "Hi there," she chirped. "How are you guys today?"

It was after two in the afternoon, but although the place was almost empty, the server had taken her time coming up to them. "Just water, please," Ellen said.

To hell with it; he wasn't going to do much at work after this anyway. "Dry gin martini, extra olives," he said. Ellen looked up from the menu at him then quickly dipped her eyes again.

"I'll give you a few minutes," the waitress said, and departed.

Jack hadn't been back to this place since his dinner with Dora, weeks ago. He wasn't even sure why he'd taken Ellen here; it was almost automatic, the place he went for working lunches and dinners. He wouldn't even have taken Ellen here, but she had been waiting for two hours for him to finish his monthly meeting with the other executives—"Executive Forum", they called it—and he needed to get away from the office. He was hungry and it was a nice little perk for Ellen to have lunch at a decent restaurant.

"You can have a real drink," he said. "I won't tell."

"Oh, no," she said, rolling her eyes and laughing.

"Go on," he said. The waitress placed a glass of water on the table in front of Ellen, and a cocktail glass in front of Jack; the glass hadn't been chilled, and there was a sliver of ice floating in the martini. "The young lady will have something from the bar as well," Jack said.

"Maybe..." She looked at Jack briefly, as if asking permission. "A cosmo?"

"You got it," the waitress said, jotting on a pad of paper.

"No, wait," Ellen said. "I'll have one of those—Boutique martinis. With vodka."

"You got it, honey," the waitress said. "Now, our specials today..."

Jack tuned her out. Did Ellen know that Boutique was one of the products with the Taste? Was she trying to impress him or something?

The waitress departed, and Ellen stared down at the heavy, leather-bound menu in front of her. "I've never tried one of those before," she said. "But my friend told me it's great."

“One of our clients, you know,” Jack said. “The makers of Boutique, I mean.”

“Really? That’s awesome.” She smiled.

Jack let her look at the menu again. He wasn’t trying to seduce her, was he? He knew what it looked like, a senior manager taking young female co-workers out to dinner, letting them drink on his expense account. He had never acted inappropriately, though. He would have gladly slept with Dora—no, dated her. She was a nice young woman, smart and...

“It sounds so funny,” Ellen commented, not looking up, as if just thinking aloud. “Steak salad. Who puts steak on a salad?”

“It’s pretty good, I think.”

“I don’t like avocado, though.” She kept reading the menu, as if there were some secret code she was puzzling out.

“Just tell them to take it off.”

“Yeah...”

The waitress returned and placed her drink and a basket of bread on the table. “So what are we having today?”

Jack took a sip of his martini while Ellen negotiated her steak salad order. “Striploin, medium rare, baked potato, no butter,” he said when it was his turn.

The waitress left them alone again. “So how do you like Lithiate so far?” Jack asked. It was a lame question, he knew, but it was the sort of thing you had to ask to make sure everything was above board. You couldn’t jump straight into personal stuff.

“Oh, it’s really great,” she said. “It’s such an amazing opportunity.”

She was a couple of years younger than Dora, had none of the poise, none of the personality. Ellen had been an undergraduate until a few weeks ago, of course.

“So you went to McMaster?” Jack prodded. “You studied commerce, didn’t you?”

That sent her prattling on about her program and how well it prepared her for this amazing opportunity. Jack sipped his martini, only half-listening.

He hadn't been that awful with Dora, had he? He had liked her more than he should have, probably; she was attractive, and he was only human. He had never propositioned her, nothing like that. She seemed to like him, too; she was probably just a little more professional than he had been. But he wasn't a monster.

So what was he doing here, with Ellen?

It was a working lunch. And he was treating her to a nice meal. That was all.

"Did you ever have Dr. Aziz?" he asked, when she ran out of steam and stopped talking. "He was in grad school when I was in my senior year. We hung out a few times."

Oh yes, she had known Dr. Aziz, he was awesome and amazing—

No, he was going to stop being like that with women at the company. He hadn't done anything *wrong*, but he could be a lot better.

Starting with Ellen. He wasn't going to say or do anything suggestive, just act like a professional. Help her out. Be a good manager.

"So there are going to be a lot of marketing initiatives coming up soon," Jack said, when Ellen's conversation petered out again. "We're going to need you to do a lot of liaising between research and marketing. I hope you're ready to work hard." This was sort of a gift to her; these kids always loved an opportunity to assert how hard-working they were.

But Ellen was in mid-sip, her first taste of her Boutique martini. Her eyes were alight.

"It's good?" Jack asked.

She placed the glass back on the table, then immediately picked it up again and took another sip. “It’s amazing,” she breathed.

Was there only one adjective in the English language for these kids?

“That’s good,” he said. “They’re still just test marketing, but they plan to go national with it soon.”

“It’s...”

She looked off into the distance as she took another gulp. The drink was half gone. Did she think she was at some frat party or something?

Jack pulled a piece of bread free from the basket. They covered the bread with a cloth napkin here, but it wasn’t warm. Why did he come to this place, anyway?

“All my friends told me it was amazing,” Ellen said, having composed herself again. “They were totally right.”

“That’s good. More work for us.”

“Do we make the fruit flavour or something?” She took another sip.

“We make a general flavouring component. It’s being used mostly in sweet applications, but it seems to be a good enhancer for almost any profile.”

She nodded, draining the glass, leaving only the thick pink coating, which ran down the sides and pooled in the bottom. Jack had barely touched his martini yet.

“I heard high schoolers are into it, even,” she said.

“The Taste?”

“No—” She laughed, a little too loudly. “Boutique. What taste?”

“That’s the name of our product.”

She tipped the glass again, drained the little bit of liquid that had collected in the bottom of her cocktail glass. “That’s kind of dumb-sounding,” she said. Then her eyes widened. “I mean—not dumb, just—”

“It’s okay,” he said. “I didn’t name it. I didn’t like the name either, but it kind of stuck and I wasn’t able to stop it.”

“Cool.” She nodded. “Is it in anything else?”

“We’ve only just started to produce it in quantity,” he said. “But we have a few clients. There’s a baked goods manufacturer, and Fazza—they’re a spice company.” They had closed a lot of deals lately, he reflected as he took a sip of his drink. The Taste was already making this quarter into a contender for their strongest, sales-wise, in company history. Everyone knew that Jack was responsible for this, too. They had made a few references during the meeting that morning.

Ellen toyed with the stem of her glass. “I never knew how many things had flavour enhancers in them, before I came to Lithiate,” she said. “It’s like, they’re everywhere.”

“The problem is that the natural world has too much variation,” he said. “If you have, say, a piece of fruit, its flavour is affected by the amount of rain, amount of sun, average temperature over the year it’s produced. If you’re processing the fruit in any quantity, your customers are going to get something sweeter, or more tart, or even too bland, one year to another.”

“Right, right.” She was nodding, desperate to show her enthusiasm. Jack had given versions of this lecture many times in the past; it was nice to have someone who actually listened to it.

“It’s true of everything that’s not synthesized—herbs and spices, meats, canned vegetables. Almost everything but salt. And even salt has its variations, from one producer to another.”

The waitress appeared suddenly, placing plates in front of them. “Steak salad, no avocado,” she announced, “and striploin steak. Can I get youse anything else?”

Jack cringed at the *youse*. “I think we’re fine, thanks.”

“I’ll take another of these,” Ellen said, lifting her glass to hand it to the waitress. This time she didn’t even look at Jack for permission.

When the waitress left, Ellen dug straight into her salad. Jack picked up his knife and fork and sawed into his steak. Ruby-red juices had pooled under it; even if the quality of the meat was poor here, they knew how to cook a steak.

“This is really good,” Ellen commented, even though her mouth was full. “I take back what I said about steak on salad.”

Jack looked at the surface of his striploin. There were nice, even grill marks on it, an attractive diamond pattern. But they put some kind of spice mix on their steaks here, too; little granules studded the seared meat. Dehydrated garlic and onion, no doubt; maybe some pepper flakes. He might not finish it—it was only lunch time, after all—but he was glad he ordered it.

The waitress reappeared and placed Ellen’s martini beside her. “Everything okay, honey?” she asked, looming slightly over Jack. “Cooked all right?”

It was cooked perfectly, bright pink and moist all through. “It’s fine,” he said.

“Let me know if you need anything.”

Ellen was almost shovelling the salad into her mouth now. She stopped to pick up her cocktail, drained half the glass in a single gulp.

The vegetables, too; they had some kind of herb mix on them, maybe just dehydrated parsley. Did Fazza make a steak spice? He couldn’t remember.

“How’s your steak?” Ellen asked.

“I don’t...” Jack looked closer at the piece of meat on the end of his fork. They had shipped a batch of crystallized Taste to Fazza a week ago, a test batch. Surely it wasn’t on the market already.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

He laid the fork down. No, he couldn’t do it. There could be anything on the steak. It didn’t have to be a Fazza product—everyone added flavourings. Even the gin and vermouth in his

glass, the olives and their brine: everything was adjusted, enhanced. Tainted.

“I’m not really hungry,” he said.

She was still working through her salad, unconcerned about Jack’s lack of appetite. Her glass was empty already—when had she finished that?

Jack poked at the potato with the end of his knife. Surely the potato was okay, but a plain baked potato wasn’t exactly appetizing.

He sipped the martini out of habit, and tried to pick out the botanicals in it. Juniper, of course... orange... cardamom, maybe?

Ellen signalled to the waitress, pointed to her glass, and went back to her salad. Jack finished his martini and waited for the waitress to arrive. He would have another drink, if nothing else.

Chapter 18

Jack's face was burning—no, just warm. Warmed by the sun.

He lifted his face to try to look around, identify his surroundings. His face stuck to the leather of his couch.

He was on his couch.

Why was he on his couch?

He wiped away the drool on his cheek. His head thundered; opening his eyes made his eyelids ache; his mouth was full of dead rodents, as far as he could tell.

Right. He had slept on the couch, because—

Ellen.

He hoisted himself to his feet, and regretted it immediately. His stomach lurched and a spike of pain drove through his left temple.

His fingers gripped the soft leather of the couch back, and he stayed upright. Had his fingernails scratched the leather at all? His vision refused to focus.

After a few seconds, the extra fluid in his eyeballs drained away, although it did nothing to relieve the pressure in his head. The room settled down, too.

It's just a hangover, he told himself. What had he drunk last night?

One step after the other. Bathroom first—and he'd have do something about this putrid breath of his there, too.

Jack felt better after that—at least his bladder was no longer angry, and he'd peeled the coating of sewage off his tongue and cheeks with a couple of shots of mouthwash. He stopped in the kitchen to survey the damage; two empty glasses and two empty

bottles on the counter. One scotch, his, clearly. The other Boutique. Where had he gotten hold of a bottle of Boutique?

Flashes of the night before began to reintroduce themselves to his memory. Ellen, trying to tell him a secret, clutching his arm tightly in her hands and she slurred and sprayed spittle in his ear. Standing at the bar, holding himself together as best he could, explaining to the bartender that he wanted—right. A fresh bottle of Boutique. Tucking it under his arm as they hailed a cab, because he couldn't get Uber to work. Helping Ellen get the cap off, watching her take a big slug, refusing one himself.

Then in his apartment—he had been ranting about something, hadn't he?

He picked up the Boutique bottle. The liqueur had left a dull film on the inside of the clear glass, an ugly, grainy smudge. What was in that stuff, anyway? Other than the obvious.

He had poured a glass for Ellen, who had found something really funny. She downed it.

She had been drinking right from the bottle.

He picked it up from the floor at one point—it had been empty, hadn't it?

And then...

Jack placed the bottle back on the counter, his hand shaking. She had been completely drunk. So had he. But still—he hadn't, had he?

He was still wearing his suit pants. They were probably creased and disgusting now, but they were still on. His shirt, too, although it was untucked.

No, he hadn't gotten undressed.

He sighed heavily and picked up the tumbler he had been drinking from, rinsed it under the tap, half-filled it with water. No need to go all the way over to the fridge to get the filtered stuff. He swirled it around in his mouth, swallowed it.

Ellen was, presumably, sleeping in his bed. He hadn't done anything—he was sure of it. Just letting a drunk co-worker stay at his place. He'd slept on the couch.

He'd gotten her pretty drunk.

He placed the tumbler back on the counter. He'd tidy up later. He should see how she was doing.

Knocking at the door of his own room felt strange. It wasn't even totally closed, and he could see the small lump of Ellen under his covers. Her blonde hair, still pulled back into a pony tail. Her bare shoulders.

He walked carefully into the room. Her breath was deep and heavy. Was she a drinker, usually? She'd put away an entire bottle of that Boutique stuff, after three or four martinis at the restaurant. She'd been going like an undergrad, there.

He reached out a hand to shake her shoulder, then thought better of it, and pulled the duvet up over her shoulder first to cover it. Her arm remained limp and her breathing continued uninterrupted.

Now that it was safe, he gave her a gentle shake. "Ellen?"

Two or three more breaths. He shook harder. "Ellen."

Her eyes half-opened, and she licked her lips, seemingly with some difficulty. "Hi," she said, her voice a croak.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Good, good." She closed her eyes. "Thirsty."

"I'll get you some water."

Her eyes flew open, and her hand shot out from under the covers and took his.

"Hey," she said.

Still drunk. They hadn't left the restaurant that late, had they? It was still light out, but once they got back to Jack's place...

"Is there any left?"

This wasn't helping his head. "Any what?"

"The—the—" Her voice was gaining a bit of strength, at least. "The Boutique."

“I think you had enough of that,” he said. She was still gripping his hand, and he wanted that to stop.

“No, no.” She tried to smile, but appeared to forget what she was doing halfway through, and her jaw went slack. “I just wanted—let’s have one together.”

“You need water.” Jack moved back a bit, but she still held fast.

“No,” she said. “Go get the—the—” She licked her lips, and smiled a crooked smile. “Get me a drink.”

“No. Water.” Jack broke free.

She sat up, and the duvet fell away; yes, she was definitely naked, or at least topless, under there. Jack whirled around, her bare skin only a blur before he was able to avert his eyes.

“Come on...” she whined behind him.

“Get dressed,” he ordered, in his manager voice, before he left the room.

In the kitchen, he found a highball glass in the cupboard and began to fill it from the water filter on the fridge, nice and pure and cold. He’d get a glass for himself, now that he thought of it.

Sound behind him; he turned to look automatically—

Ellen was dressed, thank god. Her blouse was untucked under her sweater, her skirt uneven on her hips; her hair was pulled back still, but clearly she hadn’t even looked at it, because blonde wisps were flying off in all directions. She already had her shoes on.

“I’m gonna go out and get something,” she said.

Jack held out the glass of water. “You really should—”

She ignored him, walked over to the counter to pick up the empty bottle of Boutique. She lifted it up high, peered at the bottom of the bottle; then lifted it to her lips and waited as a lone drop of liquid made its way down the neck of the bottle.

“I think you can give up on that one,” Jack commented. What was he trying to do, be funny? This girl needed someone to give her a shake. Maybe she needed professional help.

In another context, it would have been almost pornographic, the way she wrapped her lips around the end of the bottle and probed into the neck with her tongue. As it was, Jack was slightly disgusted; he longed to pull the bottle out of her hands and send her back to bed. But he felt that she would resist him if he did that. She was fixated on the Boutique, and probably hadn't even heard him talking.

She finally put the bottle back on the counter, with a careless air, letting it wobble and shake precariously as it tried to decide whether to stand up or fall over. Jack darted forward to catch it.

"So you don't have any more," she said, not looking at him.

"No."

"I'm going to the liquor store," she announced, and turned on her heel.

"They don't carry it," Jack said, hurrying to catch up with her as she approached the door. "It's just at a few places. I bought that one from the bar last night, remember?"

They'd charged him a hundred bucks, he suddenly recalled. The final tally for dinner last night—good god, he didn't want to look at his credit card statement.

"Okay," she said, reaching for the door handle.

She was still drunk.

"You should get home," he said. "Or stay here. Sleep it off a bit."

She pulled the door open. "I'm fine. I'm going out."

The way she said it, Jack wondered if she was telling him, or telling herself. "Let me call you a cab, at least."

Ellen strode away down the hall. Jack stepped out behind her, realized his door would lock behind him, ran back, secured it, and rushed after her. The elevator dinged as he rounded the corner.

"Wait," he said.

Ellen didn't even look up, just walked into the elevator and pressed a button. Jack considered leaping forward and stopping

her, but what could he do? Was he going to lock her in his place or something?

The door closed, and she was gone.

Jack stood there, looking at the elevator for a moment; then he walked slowly back to his apartment. He stank, and it was probably late. He hadn't even looked at the time. He had to shower, dress, and get to work.

Chapter 19

The lab always seemed serenely worklike, with only the hum and buzz of machinery and instruments. No wasted movement, no chatter, even, except if Chad was holding forth on something to do with his workout routine. Was it losing Lacy that led to the change in tone that permeated the room lately?

Jack had hired a bunch of new lab staff; they had something to do with it, probably. Lithiate wanted so many new applications for the taste: new suspensions to add it to, new coatings to test it with, all the aerosols they were trying out—in fact, he hadn't even done the hiring himself, he'd delegated that to the scientists, Chad and the others. He didn't really care who they hired, or what they paid them; it wasn't like anyone was looking too closely at Jack's budgets any more.

Emily and her lawyer. They had started this ball rolling. None of this would have happened if they hadn't been so aggressive with the divorce, and tried to clean him out. But it was all over now, he reminded himself, not for the first time. It all worked out fine in the end.

"Hey, chief," Chad said. Jack had entered by the other door; he was avoiding the end of the lab where Chad and Lacy sat. Too many bad vibes there. But Chad was striding through the lab towards him, a tablet in his hand.

"Anything going on lately?" This was Jack's default head-of-research question. Did Chad ever notice he asked it almost every time he came down, and every member of staff he interacted with? Did Chad care?

As the senior scientist on the Taste, Chad seemed to have risen high in the pecking order in the lab. You could see it in the

way everything parted for him as he walked through the room—not surprising, given his massive bulk, but the young kids they hired lately were in awe of him. Why hadn't they hired anyone old? Why hadn't they found another Lacy?

"Brent and Liz have been working on the aerosolized version," Chad said, gesturing towards a couple of white-coated youngsters working at a nearby counter.

"Hey, Chad, can I talk to you?"

"Sure, boss. Your office?"

His office was a long way away, too far to walk—he was tired just thinking about it. "Over in—I don't know." He started to gesture towards the usual area out of habit, pulled his hand back. "I guess I just need somewhere quiet for a bit."

"Well, uh..." Chad cast around, turning his bulky shoulders back and forth as if in an effort to discover some new cubbyhole or something in the lab. "We could go—I guess—"

"Hey." Jack was thinking ahead of himself, even, the idea spilling out before he was even sure it was there. "Why don't we go visit Lacy in the hospital? Seems like something we should have done already."

His eyes scanned the room for a moment. "Sure," he said. "Great plan."

Jack read it in his face. "You've already been?"

Chad unlocked the tablet in his hands, glanced at the screen, blanked it again, then looked up. "Not today," he said.

"You can drive," Jack told him. He wasn't going out the front door again until he knew for sure the coast was clear.

The ride to the hospital got longer and longer, the destination seeming to recede even as they approached it. They parked in the lot right in front of the main entrance; Jack handed over the corporate credit card to pay the exorbitant parking fee. His feet were leaden as they crossed the lobby. Chad, he noted with some embarrassment, knew the route without having to look.

“It’s a good idea to come see her today,” Chad said in a hushed voice as they went into the elevator. “Her last surgery was a couple of days ago. She’ll almost be back to normal.” He hit the button for the third floor. “I think.”

Jack followed Chad off the elevator, and watched as he waved to the nurses as they passed the station. They waved back. Chad barely broke stride as he led the way to one of the rooms.

“Hey, Lacy,” he said, his voice soft and tentative, nothing like his normal bellow. “You awake?”

“Yeah.”

That didn’t sound like Lacy; but just like no one looked like themselves in a hospital bed, no one sounded normal either. Jack leaned around the doorframe, feeling distinctly as though he were invading a highly personal moment between them. It was Lacy, for sure; her short, messy, dirty-blonde hair wasn’t any the worse for wear despite from her long hospital stay.

“Hey,” she said, catching sight of Jack, “look.”

No choice now; he stepped into the room. “How are you?” he asked.

“Thirsty, I think,” she answered, and looked at Chad. “They said they probably caught it,” she told him.

“Caught what?” Jack asked. Briefly, he thought they were talking about the woman who attacked her. No, they wouldn’t call her an ‘it’, despite how it had felt when he was holding her down.

“There have been a couple of internal bleeds they needed to lock down,” Chad explained. “Took a while. There was a lung puncture because of the broken rib, too. But Lacy’s a fighter, eh?” He punched her blue-gowned shoulder lightly, where it protruded from the bedspread.

A nurse wandered in, nodded at Chad but otherwise ignored them. Lacy, meanwhile, was straining to lift her head.

“Did you bring any?” she asked; she was addressing Chad, seemingly having forgotten Jack was in the room.

“No,” he said quietly, glancing towards the nurse. “It’s cool.”

“The Taste.” Talking seemed to take a surprising amount of Lacy’s energy.

“There she goes again.” The nurse had a piercingly loud Jamaican accent and a no-nonsense attitude. “What is she talking about, now? That’s the tenth time she’s said it today.”

“It’s a lab thing,” Chad said. “Nothing to worry about.”

“The doctor’s been keeping her under sedation this week,” the nurse said, frowning at Lacy as though she was an errant schoolchild. Her hands were working under the bedspread. “Today’s probably not her best day.”

“Sure thing,” Chad said. “I’ll stop by tomorrow, maybe.”

“Any time, big boy,” she replied with a light laugh, and left the room.

Chad stepped towards where Lacy lay. “Hang in there, girl. I’m working on it.”

Her eyes flew open, but Chad had already turned away. Jack was about to leave too, but the look on her face was completely focused, completely cogent. He wanted to speak up, let Chad know, but her eyes were fixed on him.

“She’s all right,” Chad said, looking back to Jack. Lacy’s eyes fell shut as Chad’s frame swung around. “She’s pretty doped today, I guess.”

“Right,” Jack said. Was he crazy? Or was Lacy just that far gone right now?

“Okay, better go,” Chad said. “C’mon.”

Jack stood there, staring down at Lacy. Probably a trick of the meds—a bit of stimulation from visitors, and she was up; she’d probably collapse before—

She opened her eyes again, and they burned into Jack. Pleading.

He knew pleading eyes.

“Coming,” he said to Chad, who was already moving out the door. Jack waved a tiny wave to Lacy, just a couple of fingers.

Her eyes shut, opened wide again, shut again.

Lacy wasn't doped up. The question was, what was Jack supposed to do about it?

Chapter 20

Jack stared out the window and watched. Chad took the scenic route back to the building, which was fine: it was nice to see the leafy trees shrouding the big, expensive houses, watch their wrought-iron gates and elaborate stoneworks slip by. Maybe one day Jack would be back in a position to possess one of those homes again. But—why?

Lacy's eyes, Lacy's eyes stuck with him. They were serious. Not like Dora's eyes; Lacy was in control.

She wanted something.

They passed Sioux Lookout, the sliver of park that sat directly on the shore. A quick glimpse of the sun dancing on the lake, deep blue dotted with dazzling white gold, too bright to take in at a glance—

A slight crackling sound drew his attention. He turned towards Chad, wondering about the source of it, and he stiffened.

Lacy's eyes shut again.

He was trying to hide it, but Jack was patient. Eventually Chad's large square jaw moved, revealing itself.

"What're you eating?" Jack asked. Not accusingly—knowingly.

Chad swallowed before he answered; if he was still trying to hide anything, he'd just given the game away. "Just a snack," he mumbled.

"You're eating it," Jack said. "The Taste. Right?"

A plastic bag, one of the poly-bags used to protect samples in the lab, was rolled open in his hand; a collection of white balls rested in the bottom, mints or something. Chad picked one out

with his thumb and forefinger and tossed it nonchalantly into his mouth. “G’head,” he said, turning the opening towards Jack. “Have a couple, if you want.”

Jack recoiled, and his stomach churned at the thought of eating whatever was in Chad’s bag. “Is that safe?”

“This is a sugar and cornstarch medium,” he said, pulling out another powder-covered ball. “We’ve been able to keep the dilution good and high this way, and we know the dose we’re taking in. It’s a lot safer this way.”

“So that’s what Lacy wanted?”

Chad shook his head, chewing; he had eaten the ball he was showing to Jack. “I’m not sure how much she consumed. I haven’t been bringing her any in the hospital, though, so if she’s getting it from someone, I don’t know who.”

“Okay.”

“This is better, trust me. If we can control the dosage reliably, we can be clearer about the effect on people. It’s going to really help us in the long run.”

He crunched another one while he turned up Walkers Line, back towards their building. “It’s not even a big deal, really. We’re just beginning research and—you know—” Another of the chalky-looking balls disappeared into his mouth.

“I’m a little worried about the speed we’re going,” Jack admitted, without actually meaning to say it. “It’s not just research. Marketing, sales, product development—everyone’s getting in on it.”

Two more balls crunched away.

“So we don’t know if it’s a problem, either,” Chad said. “Gotta look at both sides.” He wasn’t finished the two in his mouth when he ate the next one.

“You sure you’re not eating too many of those?”

“Told you,” Chad replied. The balls were gone, and he sucked briefly at the inside-out plastic bag to retrieve the last dregs of the powder. “It’s dosage controlled.”

Jack wasn't even listening now. Lacy was trying to tell him something, for sure; he'd have to go back later to find out what that was.

Chapter 21

The hospital was still brightly lit but was far quieter at night. Jack didn't want to arrive during working hours, when there would be a maximum number of security guards present; he also didn't want to show up in the dead of night, when anyone skulking around would have been too noticeable.

He'd never snuck into a hospital ward before; it turned out to be easier than he expected. There weren't any nurses at the duty desk, and Lacy's room was two doors into the ward. He walked straight in.

The light from the hallway illuminated only a parallelogram of the floor, but it provided enough ambient light to let him find his way in and stand over the bed. Her eyes were closed, her mouth open.

"Lacy," he said quietly.

No response. He cast about the room. There were no flowers, no cards, no personal effects, even. Just a blank room and Lacy's blank face.

This was idiotic.

Was she really that heavily sedated? Her eyes had been open—surely he hadn't imagined that. And she had been communicating—

"Finally," she murmured, and he jumped about a foot.

"Goddammit," he hissed.

"Shhh." She smiled slightly. "Help me sit up."

He held out his arm, let her take hold. Her grip was weak, but she was soon seated upright.

“Chad’s getting caught by it, isn’t he.” She wasn’t asking, she was telling. “I was kind of lucky to get hurt so bad. He smuggled some in, but not enough to keep me hooked.”

“Is it just an addiction?” For the first time, he realized he should be asking these questions. “Why is it so dangerous?”

“Your taste buds are a ridiculously inefficient system,” she said, keeping her voice low. “Go in the drawer there, get me something to wear. Just a t-shirt, yoga pants, whatever.”

“Am I supposed to be busting you out?”

She stopped and turned her face to him, her eyes cold and serious. “Why else did you come back?”

“I don’t know,” he replied.

She searched his face for a moment. “Your taste buds make all kinds of nerve endings available, but they send very limited signals to the brain. The Taste takes advantage of those pathways and sends signals, strong signals. Way more information than the taste buds are meant to send.”

Jack went and pulled some clothing out of the drawer while she was talking. “So it’s telling someone to eat more and more? That’s what happened to Dora, right?”

“The way we’re currently wired, our brains get messages like, this is calorie dense. Eat this while it’s available. The Taste is telling them that eating more is the greatest thing in the history of the planet. Here, undo my strings.” She turned her back to him.

He pulled the gown strings, and her back was bare. “I’ll turn—”

“I’ll need your help to get dressed,” she said. “Don’t pussy out on me, here. We need to move.”

He held up the dark blue hoodie as she slipped her bare arms into it, and her torso was covered. It was only barely light, he told himself. He could hardly see anything. She didn’t seem to care anyway.

“When you taste it full strength,” she said, kicking her legs out from under the covers, “it’s like having an orgasm while watching your first child being born, or something. It’s mind-blowing. Your brain doesn’t have the resources to deal with it. For some people, there’s no coming back from that.”

“Will Dora be okay?”

“No idea. Shoes are in the closet.”

He pulled the closet open; the shoes were the only thing in it, other than a windbreaker hanging on a hanger. He pulled them out and returned to Lacy. “Here.”

She took them but didn’t put them on. “Why did you do it?” she asked.

“What?”

“Push this. I told you we weren’t ready. I knew we were going to see trouble. You ignored me until I was already hooked. And that poor girl.” Even in the dim light, he could see tears shining in her eyes. “I had no way to stop it. I couldn’t stop making more. The batches were so small, and we needed to make so much just to eat, we didn’t have enough to run all the tests you needed us to as well.”

Lacy had been so sternly disinterested when the ambulance was coming for Dora; she had been under the spell, if that was the right way to describe it. Her brain had been hijacked. He had pushed them all down the hole—Chad, Lacy, Dora, and now who knew how many thousands more.

“You ever taste it?”

He shook his head. “I felt like it was... wrong, somehow. I didn’t want it, right from the start.”

“Then why?” She held the shoes in her lap. “Why were you doing it? You could have stopped it. You were the only one who could have. And you let us...” She raised a hand helplessly, let it fall beside her on the bed.

Jack drew a breath. "I stole some money from the company," he said. "I needed the bonus. They had discovered something was wrong, but... with the bonus, I was safe."

Her eyes narrowed, and her hands tightened around the shoes. "You—"

"Shhh," he warned her. Her voice had, for the first time, crossed the threshold of safety.

"Put these shoes on me," she said, her voice soaked in contempt. "You're going to see this through with me. I can't do it without your help, and you can't—you owe us. You owe everyone."

"I didn't know it was going to happen. Any of it."

"You've released something on the world," she said. "If we can destroy the records I made, we might be able to stop it before it goes any further." She held her hands out, and he helped her out of bed. "That doesn't put you square," she added. "It just makes you less of a villain when all this is over."

Villain. She called him a villain.

She took a quick, tight breath and sank back to the bed. He darted forward, offering his hands in support again. "What do you need?"

"There aren't any copies of the original documentation," she said. "If we destroy those, they might not be able to replicate it."

"Chad knows it all, doesn't he?"

"Chad." She shook her head. "He's pretty far gone."

The image of the big guy sucking the bottom of the poly bag, getting the dust from the Taste that clung there. "Is it really that bad?"

"Trust me. Don't find out." She grabbed hold of his arm again. "They've stitched me up pretty good. I can walk, but not that fast. But I need you to get me back to the lab, and help me destroy some things."

He hoisted her slowly and firmly to her feet. "Whatever you need."

“Come on,” she said. “Let’s move.”

Chapter 22

Lacy would wait, she promised, not show herself till he came out and got her. With everything else that was in play—with Chad—he didn't want her getting into anything that would force her to exert herself. Jack had let her lean on him as they made their way across the parking lot; the sky was low, with heavy clouds looming over them. Although it wasn't that late, the dark clouds made for an oppressive night.

Again he pulled the handle on the laboratory door, and again he found it unlocked. He had anticipated them having locked the lab, and knew he could jog back to the security station if he had to and retrieve the key. Why did the laboratory doors work on deadbolts with physical keys, instead of pass cards?

He was entering the door in the big end of the lab. It was after ten o'clock, though it felt later. The lab should have been deserted.

Most of the lights were off, but there were still a handful of people inside. Chad was one—unmistakable—and the others looked like they were among the new assistants, though Jack vaguely recognized one or two of them as other scientists. In the half-light it was hard to be sure.

There was motion, though, too much motion. Chad sat cross-legged on a counter, above them all, a bag in his hand—another poly bag, but a much bigger one, about the size of a five-pound sack of flour. It was filled with something; not those balls he was eating earlier, but a half-solid substance, a powder. It glittered in the air when it caught one of the few lights burning in the room.

Chad was throwing it, handfuls of the stuff, scattering it first to one side, then to the other. And wherever the powder spread,

the lab-coated figures followed, like demonic minions. They scabbled all over whatever surface the powder fell on, countertops, desktops, floors, sinks, pushing each other out of the way. And while they fought for position, consuming the substance as Chad scattered it, he sat above them, pouring streams of the powder into his mouth. His cheeks, lips, and chin were coated with the stuff.

At first, Chad seemed to be toying with them, playing them along like kids, throwing them candy just for the fun of watching them chase it. But no—there was no bemused smile on his face. He wasn't playing. And neither were they.

He was distracting them—keeping them at bay. He was throwing the powder further, and they were edging closer, closer.

Chad's head whipped around suddenly. It was like a searchlight; Jack was frozen in his glare.

"Jack," Chad announced, paused to toss a handful of the Taste across the lab, watching for a moment as the assistants scurried after it. There were four of them, as far as Jack could tell. They never stopped moving, making it difficult to be sure.

"Jack who doesn't like the Taste," Chad lisped. Now that he was turned around, Jack could see the effect of the powder: Chad's lips were chapped, his mouth and probably tongue as well swollen hideously. "Eat," he said, waving the bag at him.

"Just let me through," Jack ordered. "You can do what you want. I just need to get—"

"EAT," Chad thundered.

The assistants had cleansed the last handful from the floor, and were moving back towards Chad. He seethed, and a streamer of drool fell from his nearly motionless lips. He turned to look at the assistants, then back at Jack.

"Eat," he said again, the word a wet, sloppy mess.

His hand moved into the bag, and before Jack realized what he was doing, a handful of the Taste rained down on him; as he tried to brush it off, a second landed on him as well.

“Eat,” Chad hissed, and they advanced on him.

Jack darted for the door, but it was too late; how would he lock it from the outside, anyway? The assistants approached from all directions at once, around and behind him, their hands, sticky and coated with the crystalline substance, felt for him.

He danced backward, felt for the door behind him, hoping to get hold of the handle; the wall was a blank. And as he looked over his right shoulder to locate it, a hand grasped him on his left. He whirled, and another snagged him from behind. More of the Taste flew around through the air, down on him, around him.

The hands descended, the groping fingers, the open, slavering mouths.

The stuff was sticky, probably some kind of crystal sugar. They had been experimenting with different media for the Taste for weeks; maybe this was a new development, or maybe Chad had eaten the rest of the supply.

Jack tried standing still, letting them take the crystals off him, plucking them with their fingers, tugging at them with their teeth. They weren't attacking him, he realised; they were after the Taste.

Still, as they consumed the larger crystals, they began to hunt for smaller crystals. He still wore the golf shirt he'd had on that afternoon so the tiny, needle-like crystals adhered to his bare arms, and he felt the sickening sensation of strange, moist tongues running over his skin. And to their hyper-sensitive mouths, his clothing, too, was now infused with the Taste; soon there were teeth tugging at him, pulling the fabric.

He yelped when the teeth met his neck, tried to break forward, but there were too many hands, too many.

If only Chad would throw more of the Taste, they might lose their focus, at least momentarily; then he could free himself. Why had Chad stopped?

He strained to see beyond the bodies that blocked his escape. Chad still crouched on the counter, bag in hand, watching them closely. Behind him, Jack could see movement—

Chad didn't see Lacy.

Chapter 23

Lacy had already climbed up on the countertop when Jack caught sight of her; neither Chad nor the assistants paid her any mind, being too fixated on the Taste to care.

Until she grabbed the bag.

Jack shouted—tried to shout for her to stop, but he wasn't sure what the series of sounds coming from his lungs meant. But they had an effect; Chad and the assistants all stopped, as if his voice had woken them up a little.

A howl came from Chad.

Jack saw Lacy wince as she made the last move towards Chad; the way she reached forward, he could see the pain in her side. Once she had the bag of the Taste, they would be after her. She wouldn't be able to outrun any of them.

No, she wasn't trying to outrun anyone; she was trying to get to Chad. What was her plan? Was she expecting him to do as Chad had been doing, and distract them all while she got hold of whatever she needed to get from the lab?

Good plan, poor execution. Chad was already lunging for her—

He howled again as he overbalanced, and he came crashing down onto the floor with a crunching thud. The counters were four feet high, and a sympathetic shiver ran up Jack's spine as Chad moaned and attempted to roll over.

Now the bag of the Taste was in Lacy's hands. She clambered down from the counter herself, holding the bag out to Jack. "Here," she called. "Take it—"

Her voice suddenly rose to a scream. Jack leapt forward, finally freeing himself of the grasp of the distracted lab assistants and plunging forward.

Chad was hurt, and maybe numbed from the Taste; but he was still a large, muscular man. One of his thick arms had slung out and grabbed Lacy by the ankle, and now she was trapped with the bag in her hands and no way of moving.

She did, however, still have the bag. And as Jack moved towards her, he saw her look down. Chad pulled hard on her leg, but she maintained her fixation on the bag, on the Taste inside.

Jack was racing with the four lab assistants to reach her; only his slight head start gave him the advantage. A split second before they made their descent on Lacy, Jack snatched the bag from her hands.

Her arms reached out, trying to stop him, and a high-pitched whine escaped from her mouth. But she was still trapped, snared by Chad's meaty hand. Jack didn't have time to do anything about that.

Instead, he upended the poly bag, and the Taste, a hideous crystalline stream of it, poured out, and onto Chad.

There was still plenty in the bag when Jack got it from Lacy—pounds of it. The torrent of sticky crystals covered his torso and his head easily, spilled off him and onto the floor.

The lab assistants forgot about Lacy and Jack. Jack grabbed Lacy by the waist and pulled her out of the way, trying to ignore her shrill screech of pain.

Chad began by forcing the crystals on his hands into his cracked and swollen mouth; he could barely fit any more into his slack, wet gob, but kept pushing, his jaw working, trying to pack the stuff down his already packed gullet.

Then they were on him.

Chad had been doing his best to remove the crystals from his skin before putting them in his mouth. But the other four had no

patience for that. They hadn't consumed any of the taste in some time—only seconds, but it must have felt much longer than that.

Jack fell to the floor with Lacy on top of him, and he kicked to propel himself back. He still faced Chad, and saw all too clearly how the lab assistants fell upon him.

The woman—the one who he'd thought was sort of good-looking—struck flesh first; Jack tried to close his eyes as he saw her take hold of Chad's ear in her teeth, saw her stretch the skin and cartilage as far as it would go; heard the animal shriek of shock and pain as it began to tear away from Chad's head.

The other three were emboldened by the first woman's attack; another one managed to grip the fleshy part of Chad's upper arm between his teeth. Chad struggled mightily, but the man's teeth had purchase, and dark blood soon soaked the mass of crystals still piled on Chad's chest.

Chad's shriek had long ago turned to a wail of agony; then to a sputtering, choking gurgle. Still unable to look away, Jack watched as one of them tore a ragged, bloody goblet of flesh from his throat, and the sound died, replaced by the slurping, seething work of the four lab workers.

"Lacy," Jack said, shaking her to make sure she understood he was there. "We have to move."

She turned to look at him, her eyes glassy, her lips parted; then she transformed, pulled everything together. Her brow furrowed in concentration.

"Right," she said, and a fierce look of determination set into her face. "Let's go."

Chapter 24

“What do we need?” Jack asked. “Servers? Computers? Notebooks?”

“No—there.” She took a step, fell to one knee, and gasped in pain. “Oh—no.”

Jack knelt beside her, put his arms out in support. “Let me—”

“No.” She whirled around, despite the pain it must have caused her. “Go. Over there—the liquid hydrogen tank, in the white cabinet.”

She pointed a bit unsteadily, but he saw exactly where she meant. “What do I do?” he asked.

“There’s a lighter in this drawer.” She expended significant effort raising her hand and tapping the cabinet above her head. “Set a fire. Make it go.”

Jack pulled the drawer open; it was filled with metal lab equipment. He risked a glance over at the assistants, and what was left of Chad. They still crouched over him, lowered their heads to drink from him, his blood infused, no doubt, with the Taste.

He rifled through the drawer as quickly as he could, but it was impossible to see anything in the low light. He began tossing pieces out. Finally—a cheap plastic lighter from a variety store.

He looked over again; one of the assistants was looking at him. He had been covered in the Taste crystals earlier; they soon would be done with Chad, and would be coming for him.

He grabbed some paper, crumpled it, and stuffed it in the cabinet. The lighter was one of those safety lighters. Annoyingly difficult to turn the little wheel at the best of times—but with sticky sugar crystals on his fingers—

He rubbed his fingers with the crumpled paper; printer paper was not the surface he needed. But it was enough; the flame licked out on the next try.

“Come on,” Lacy pleaded, somewhere far away.

He lost his grip on the button and the flame disappeared. He lit it again, and this time managed to touch the flickering light to the edge of a piece of paper.

The edge glowed, curled, browned; then flames took hold. They curled up, gave off a bright orange light that reflected in the white sheets he began to pile in under the tank.

“Let’s go,” Lacy called.

He shoved one more handful of paper into the now growing furnace, and turned to Lacy. She had picked herself up with the aid of a counter, and was holding herself upright, in obvious pain.

The shadows rose from Chad’s prostrate body, shadows stretching in all directions from them amid the dim yellow lights.

Jack bolted forward, and grabbed Lacy as gently as he could. Holding her tightly to his body, he lifted her, and began to run.

He skidded through the desks to Lacy and Chad’s corner—what was once Lacy and Chad’s corner.

His shoulder hit the door outside the lab just as the flames met the concentrated hydrogen.

An immense pop rang out behind them, and a shockwave drove through his body, jarring him. He stumbled and fell, rolling away to avoid landing on Lacy; to his dismay, she fell limply to the ground.

She remained conscious, fighting through the pain. “The liquid oxygen, natural gas,” she said simply, her lips barely moving as she forced the words out.

She meant the tanks, the tall tanks arrayed on the outside wall of the lab. Huge, half-ton gas storage cylinders. She was right—they were going to explode when the fire got to them.

That was it—Lacy hadn't just been getting him to destroy the evidence of what they'd discovered. She was planning to bury the entire facility, destroy Lithiate forever.

No time left to ask. Jack scooped her up one more time, and almost stumbled himself. But he caught his balance again after a second and he was off, pressing forward towards the foyer, then through the front door, just as the roar of gas and flame split the air and threw them forward.

Chapter 25

Jack regained consciousness while debris was still falling to the ground. He wondered how much of Chad was flying through the air, how far the corpse would be scattered.

He was lying on top of Lacy. He had been trying to shield her fragile body from the blast, he remembered; when the force of the explosion struck them, he'd tumbled on top of her.

He tested his arm; yes, he could still move. He reached out and found her shoulder, shook her as if she were only napping.

Her eyes opened, squeezed shut, opened again.

"Can you move?" he asked.

With an obvious effort, she drew a breath. "I'm just as bad," she said. "I've tasted it. I'll never..."

"You're fine," Jack said. "We'll get you back to the hospital—"

"No," she said, attempting to yell but only able to force a hoarse whisper. "I know how to make it," she said. "I can do it. And because I've tasted it... I will."

Earlier that same day, Chad had seemed normal, in control. In a few hours the Taste had gotten hold of him.

"I can't," she said, tried to draw another breath to say more, failed.

She was dying.

One of Jack's arms was under her, and he used it to draw her to him, wrapped it around her neck. Her body was already heavy and motionless, but he held her.

He was dimly aware of the wind and crackling behind him as the building burned, and the creaks and pops as beams and supports gave way. Somewhere, far away in time and space, sirens wailed.

Lacy stirred, only slightly, her head moving towards him; she was still.

Jack lay back, and felt the first drops of rain fall upon him. Too exhausted, too hurt to move, he let the rain pelt his eyes, his mouth; soon it fell harder, wet slaps on the pavement around him turning to a rush of cool water.

He relaxed, let his mouth open, felt the raindrops fall inside, tasted their richness, their sweetness. His mouth was suddenly electric, an electrical fire, arcing and snapping with blue and white light.

Rain had never tasted this way before, and he knew—he knew—it would never taste this way again.

Acknowledgements

This book was written in the [Toronto Novel Marathon](#), July 31 to August 3, 2015. In this gruelling event, writers complete a novel—yes, a short novel—while working on-site in Toronto. The 2015 ToNoMa was in support of Renascent, a well-established and respected addictions charity.

I received sponsorships from a number of people for the 2015 ToNoMa, and I would like to thank each of them here. They are:

Eileen Bin

Michael Bin

Genie Lyon

Allison Munro

Isabel White

Felicia Seto

Andrew Cunsolo

Philip Quick

Jonathan Lambert

Michelle Boone

Melissa Martz

Mony Shohayeb

(and a number of sponsors who chose to remain anonymous, but whose support is also deeply appreciated)

Thank you also to the ToNoMa organizers, particularly Cynthia Langill and Kimberly Rivet.

I would also like to thank Kaarina Stiff of [OnPoint Writing and Editing](#) for her editing prowess; she was indispensable in making this a readable book.

And of course, I could not have gotten here without my wife Mei's unending support.

The Taste –