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**82,000 words**

**Chapter 1**

**The Salesman**

**America 1880s**

Henslow Hayward was made of bone and sinew, his skin weathered and tanned by years spent broiling under the sun. Tall and lean, with a wiry strength, he walked with a quiet authority. His face, framed by a salt and pepper beard, was marked with deep creases, the lines of hard living etched permanently across his brow, his eyes, deep-set, black and pin-sharp.

For most of his life, he had been a cowboy. He rode the cattle trails spending sunup to sundown on horseback and moving large herds from Texas ranches to railheads in Kansas, where the cattle could be shipped to markets in the east. These drives often lasted for months. He endured the blistering heat, thunderstorms and freezing nights, sleeping outdoors. The expansion of the railroads and barbed wire fences slashing across the open range marked the end of an era and Henry rode his final cattle drive.

At first, he took on seasonal work as a ranch hand, but he found he lacked a taste for working with fenced-in cattle. He tried his hand at the rodeos, and though he was by nature a showman, his advancing age and bronco riding proved a bad combination. So once again, he found himself far from the town. But without cattle to herd, aimlessly riding through the vast, open landscape, eager to connect once again with the freedom of the open range. A drifter, taking on whatever odd jobs he could find.

For weeks, Henslow wandered the wilderness alone, the brutal sun searing his back during the day while the frigid nights left him trembling beside a dying fire. Exhausted and on the verge of collapse, he stumbled upon the Lakota in a neutral region, just months before the Great Sioux War would bring devastation to their way of life.

The first meeting was tense. He found himself facing a group of Lakota warriors, their eyes sharp and watchful. But Henslow careful not to provoke, approached with quiet respect, offering tobacco as a gesture of peace. The Lakota, known for their hospitality toward those who posed no threat, were curious and cautious but allowed him to stay for a short time.

In return for their kindness, Henslow proved his worth. His knowledge of horses, honed through years on the frontier, quickly became invaluable. He helped care for their mounts, and his expertise in training and understanding horse behaviour made him an asset during buffalo hunts, where success depended on skilled riders. Around the camp, Henslow scouted for the best locations to set up, gathered firewood, and found water—small but essential tasks that lightened their load.

In the evenings, his showman’s charm shone through. As the fire crackled, he shared stories from his travels, captivating his hosts with tales of distant lands. He sang songs and spun yarns that, for a few moments, bridged the gap between two worlds, fostering a rare sense of goodwill and connection in a time of looming conflict.

During his time with the Lakota, Henslow uncovered a profound truth: the snake was a powerful symbol of regeneration and renewal. To them, it represented the sacred cycle of life—birth, death, and rebirth—interwoven in the fabric of existence. The elders spoke reverently of the snake's oil, believed to hold extraordinary healing powers linked to its regenerative nature. They wove tales of its venom and fat, describing how, when skilfully harvested, the essence of the serpent could heal wounds, ease suffering, and restore lost vitality.

Henslow’s descent into illness had been swift and brutal. It began with subtle signs—strange flashes of light in the corners of his vision, a vague sense of unease that crept up on him as he wandered through the Lakota camp. But soon it escalated into something far worse. He was gripped by terrifying hallucinations, his mind unravelling as fever surged through his body, setting his skin ablaze. Paranoia took hold of him, twisting his thoughts into a labyrinth of dread and suspicion. He couldn't trust his own senses anymore; the very air seemed to conspire against him. His body writhed in delirium, drenched in sweat, trembling with weakness. As he teetered on the edge of death, the traditional healers of the tribe stepped in, their hands steady and purposeful in the face of his suffering.

The medicine men, guided by ancient knowledge, took him in as one of their own. They did not falter in their care. Tipping mouthfuls of a sacred medicine—harvested with reverence from the bodies of snakes—into his parched lips, they soothed him through his torment. The oil, rich with the essence of the serpent, worked its quiet magic, easing his fever and quieting the chaos in his mind. As they gently wiped his brow and murmured incantations, Henslow babbled incoherently, lost in a world of fevered visions. Yet slowly, through the haze of delirium, he began to feel the tight grip of illness loosen.

Keeping vigil by his bedside as he emerged from the jaws of death, the Lakota elders spoke to him of the snake as a symbol of regeneration, a powerful force that could renew and heal. As he grew in strength, they shared tales of how snake venom and fat—when carefully harvested—held the power to restore vitality and mend broken bodies. It was during his time with the Lakota that Henslow uncovered a profound truth: the snake was not just a creature, but a sacred being, a bridge between life and death, its essence capable of renewal.

Restored to health, and under the guidance of the medicine men, Henslow rose transformed and embarked on a transformative journey, learning the delicate art of extracting oil from the snake's body. Each lesson was steeped in ancient wisdom, and as he practiced this intricate craft, he felt a deep connection to the land and its mysteries. For months, he immersed himself in their teachings, soaking up their knowledge like a parched earth absorbing rain, deepening his understanding of the world and his place within it. The snake's spirit and the Lakota's reverence for it opened his eyes to the cycles of nature and the profound interconnections that bind all living things.

Despite his recovery, the fever never truly left him. It lingered, a constant, nagging presence, episodes flaring with vengeance, weeks, months, or even years apart. He would wake from the fever with the heavy weight of the night’s visions still pressing against his mind, the images vivid and sharp in the dim light of dawn—the spirit world pouring into his mind. But just as quickly as they came, they would slip away, like water through his fingers, leaving only a vague sense of loss and an aching, inexplicable longing.

But sometimes—just sometimes—the fever would manifest differently. A sudden spark of insight would flash in his mind, lighting up the darkness with a burst of clarity. He would find the answer to a question that had eluded him for months or discover a hidden solution to a problem that had seemed insurmountable. The visions would guide him, like the flicker of a flame in the night, showing him the path, the key, the missing piece. As he prepared to leave camp, he knew that from herein he would carry the blessing and the curse of his fever with him.

After parting ways with the Lakota, Henslow found himself drawn to the vast landscapes of the American West. He spent several years as a skilled horse trainer and scout, working for various ranchers and pioneers. His reputation grew as he mastered the intricacies of animal behaviour, particularly horses, and he became known for his ability to heal them with natural remedies learned from the Lakota. Before long, his remedies were in demand to treat human patients. Once word of his miraculous oil began to spread Henslow took to the road once again, travelling from town to town, setting up makeshift clinics in small communities. Soon, he had a loyal following and established a small business bottling his snake oil. Each bottle was adorned with labels touting its regenerative abilities.

By the time the World’s Fair in Chicago was announced, Henslow had amassed a modest fortune and a growing reputation. Sensing an opportunity to elevate his business, Henry decided to attend. As he prepared for the journey, Henslow packed his best bottles. The World’s Fair would be his grand stage, and he was determined to make a lasting impression. He was already more myth than man—a figure woven into campfire tales and saloon gossip.

He arrived at the Fairground as if stepping out of the stories that had built his legend. He wore a long, dust-coloured coat, its edges worn and frayed. The fringes swayed as he walked, his boots clicking against the paved walkways of the fairground. In his hand, a burlap sack twisted and bulged. The crowds parted as he strode through, their eyes drawn to him by the presence he carried.

Moving with the deliberate grace of a man who knew the power of a well-timed gesture, he climbed onto the simple wooden platform that had been set up for him. As he ascended, the crowd pressed in closer, eager to see the famous man himself.

The sun cast long shadows across the fairground, but the crowd’s eyes never left him. Hayward stood at the centre of the stage, the burlap sack still writhing in his hand, and for a long moment, he simply let the anticipation build. His face, half hidden by the wide brim of his hat, revealed nothing, but the faintest hint of a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

The murmurs in the crowd grew louder as the tension mounted. Some whispered to their neighbours, speculating on what was inside the sack. Others watched in silence, their eyes wide, their breaths shallow. Every movement Hayward made was deliberate, calculated to keep them on edge. He tilted his head slightly, scanning the crowd, as if daring them to look away.

Finally, with a slow, deliberate motion, Hayward raised the burlap sack higher. The crowd held its breath. He gripped the mouth of the sack, loosening the tie with a practiced flick of his wrist. The sack squirmed violently in his hands, and gasps rippled through the audience. It was alive—whatever was inside, it was alive.

And then, with a flourish, he opened the sack wide and out of the writhing bag came the unmistakable sound of the snake’s warning—a sharp, staccato rattle. The snake’s body, thick and muscular, spilled onto the stage, its diamond-patterned skin glistening. Its head rose, hooded and menacing, as its forked tongue flicked the air. As the eyes-wide crowd gasped and recoiled, Hayward stood, calm and in control, a master of the stage. And then, as if on cue, the rattlesnake slithered towards him, its rattle shaking.

With a swift and deliberate motion, Hayward grasped the moving snake and laid it down on the table and reached for his knife, the blade gleaming in the sun. The audience leaned in, eyes wide, hearts pounding in anticipation. In one fluid movement, he made a precise incision, parting the snake’s skin to reveal its innards. The crowd, mesmerized, watched as he worked.

With the snake laid open, he moved quickly to the boiling pot nearby. The steam rose in thick, swirling tendrils as he lowered the serpent into the water. The hiss and sizzle that followed drew the crowd even closer. As the water bubbled and churned, a shimmering layer of fat began to rise to the surface. Hayward, moving with the grace of a seasoned performer, skimmed the fat from the top of the water, and the greasy liquid gleamed as it caught the light, each drop shimmering like quicksilver.

“This,” Hayward proclaimed, his voice clear and ringing through the crowd, “is the essence of life. My Snake Oil—the remedy for all that ails you.” The crowd surged towards him; hands outstretched. And in that moment, he wasn’t just a cowboy or a drifter—he was a legend.

**Chapter 2**

**London, February 2022**

**The Diagnosis**

Margaret sat in the doctor’s office, her round, gentle face composed, her delicate hands resting lightly on her lap, fingers gently curled as if clinging to an invisible thread of hope. The soft greying strands of her hair, tucked neatly behind her ears, caught the warm morning light streaming in through the window.

Beside her, Robert her husband of 30 years sat with a quiet intensity, his large hands gripping the arm of the chair. His sturdy frame, heavy and dependable, seemed taut, as though braced. His thick, unruly curls, more salt than pepper, hung low over his brow, casting a shadow across his face. He leaned subtly toward Margaret, his body angled protectively, his enormous square hand resting lightly on her thigh as if meant to reassure.

The doctor cleared his throat, a soft but deliberate sound, the kind that precedes difficult conversations. His eyes flicked back and forth between Margaret and the glowing screen behind him displaying the of Margaret’s brain with its familiar folds and grooves, an intricate pattern etched in shades of grey.

The doctor hesitated before speaking, his gaze on the image of Margaret’s temporal lobe, uneven and subtly mottled, its edges blurred like an ancient photograph that had been left in the sun to fade. He pointed to the blur.

"Here," he said, his voice low and careful, "we're seeing signs of neuronal cell death. This region—where memory and emotion are processed—is showing some atrophy."

Margaret stared at the screen, trying to make sense of the abstract shapes.

“Margaret,” he continued with deliberate slowness, each word carefully chosen, “these areas of your brain MRI are typically associated with a condition we call Luminis Dementia.”

Margaret blinked, her expression unchanged, her head tilted slightly, bird-like. “Luminis?” she repeated, the word slipping out in a soft whisper.

The doctor nodded, his fingers interlocking as he leaned forward on the desk. He spoke with the practiced cadence of someone who had delivered this kind of news before.

“It’s a rare form of neurodegeneration,” he explained. “The symptoms you’ve been describing—the confusion, the difficulty with names, forgetting things that should be familiar—are all consistent with this condition.”

He paused, letting the information settle between them like a heavy weight. Margaret’s gaze fell to her hands, still resting on her lap, as if seeing them for the first time. Robert shifted in his seat, his jaw tightening, the lines around his mouth deepening as he stared straight ahead.

“I’m afraid there’s no cure,” the doctor continued softly, his voice trailing away.

To Margaret the room seemed to suddenly grow smaller somehow, the edges of reality just slightly off-kilter, as if she were looking at it through glass warped by heat. This wasn’t the first time she had felt it—that quiet, insistent sense that the world wasn’t entirely solid. Lately, moments like these had come more often, slipping into her days uninvited. Sometimes it was the sound of her own voice that startled her, thin and hollow as if it belonged to someone else. Other times it was the texture of a familiar surface—her kitchen countertop or the fabric of her favourite armchair—that felt strange, almost alien beneath her fingertips.

She had brushed it off before. Stress, she’d told herself. Exhaustion. A trick of the mind. But now, sitting in the cold sterility of the doctor’s office, it was harder to ignore. This surreal detachment, the sense of things not being quite real, crept over her again, wrapping around her like a fog.

Beside her, Robert shifted in his chair, the fabric creaking under his weight. His large, capable hands flexed and curled into loose fists, his fingers searching for something—anything—to hold onto. The sight grounded her for a moment, tethering her to the here and now. She glanced at his face, lined with worry, his jaw tight as if bracing against an invisible impact.

Her eyes slid back to the doctor, his expression a careful arrangement of concern and professionalism. He was looking at her as if expecting a question, a reaction—anything—but Margaret stayed silent. She wondered fleetingly if this was the beginning of the end or if she had been unravelling for longer than she cared to admit. Her hand twitched toward Robert’s, but she stopped short, the gesture incomplete. His knuckles were white, his grip tightening around the armrest of his chair.

Finally, she heard herself speak, the words barely escaping her lips, "No cure?", more of a statement than a question. Her fingers found her wedding ring, and she began to rotate it slowly, the familiar sensation offering a fleeting sense of solidity in a world that had just been upended. The gold band, worn smooth over decades of life shared with Robert, was now her anchor in this sudden, terrifying storm.

"I'm afraid not," the doctor replied. His eyes flicked briefly to meet Margaret’s, then darted back to the papers in front of him. He shuffled them unnecessarily, a gesture that betrayed his discomfort. "Luminis Dementia progresses quickly," he said, his tone slipping into the practiced rhythm of someone returning to a well-rehearsed script. "Most patients experience a rapid decline after the first signs."

He hesitated for a beat, filling the void by picking up his pen as though to write, and then putting back down again. "It’s important to start thinking about putting your affairs in order," he added, his gaze fixed on a point just above Margaret’s shoulder, avoiding her direct line of sight.

"Do you have any questions or concerns you’d like to discuss?" he asked, his tone carefully neutral, the phrasing borrowed from a checklist. "We want to make sure you feel supported through this."

His sincerity, though present, felt distant—filtered through a layer of professional detachment that made the moment feel oddly impersonal. It was as if he were holding himself at arm’s length, unwilling to let the weight of the conversation pull him under.

The silence that followed was suffocating. Robert, his brow furrowed, stared intently at the floor. He couldn’t look at her—couldn’t bear to see the fear.

Margaret, still turning the ring on her finger, swallowed hard. The room seemed to spin ever so slightly. “Put your affairs in order…” she repeated under her breath, the words foreign and bitter, like something that belonged to someone else’s life. Not hers.

"We can focus on supportive care," the doctor said, his voice not quite soft enough to cushion the blow, under which Margaret visibly winced. "Our aim will be to keep you comfortable and to manage the symptoms as effectively as possible, preserving your quality of life for as long as we can. This will involve a combination of medications, therapies, and support systems—tools to address the memory lapses, confusion, and any physical challenges that might arise down the line."

He glanced at the patient, then down at his hands before continuing, “When the time comes, we can also discuss hospice care. They specialize in providing the comfort and dignity you deserve, offering support for both you and your family as things progress. You won’t have to face this alone.”

The doctor faltered, a brief flicker of helplessness crossing his face. He took a deep breath, as if steadying himself, before forcing himself to meet his patient’s gaze. “But,” he said, reaching for the comfort of a well-worn cliche, “there’s no magic bullet. No cure that can reverse what’s happening. I wish I had better news.”

"I'm so sorry," the doctor said, the words delivered with practiced efficiency, heavy with the finality of the diagnosis but stripped of any lingering sympathy. He was already gathering his notes, his eyes flicking briefly toward the door as though ready to escape the oppressive weight of the moment.

Margaret’s fingers, which had been nervously twisting her wedding ring this whole time, went still, her hand dropping limp to her lap. She didn’t cry, though a sharp, aching pressure built behind her eyes, the sting of tears she refused to let fall. For a long moment, no one spoke. Outside, life continued as it always did, indifferent to the unravelling of theirs inside these four walls.

Margaret’s head dipped, and for the first time since entering the office, her carefully maintained composure faltered. A small, involuntary movement, like a bird’s wing twitching in a storm, betrayed the deep sense of fear and helplessness washing over her. Robert instinctively reached for her hand.

She exhaled shakily and looked up at the doctor. “What… what can we do in the meantime? Is there anything? I’ve heard of clinical trials—” Her voice trailed off, the faint glimmer of hope clinging to her words.

Robert, his deep voice steady but strained, added, “We’re willing to try anything. We can travel if we need to. If there’s a trial somewhere…”

The doctor shook his head slowly, regret softening his features. "I understand, and I wish I had better news for you. But right now, there aren’t any active trials that I’m aware of for Luminis Dementia. It’s still a very new area of study, and there are no ongoing clinical programs for it at the moment."

Margaret bit her lip, her mind racing in a desperate search for alternatives.

"So," Margaret said, her voice quiet but resolute, "we just wait, then? For it to get worse? For me to lose myself and then die."

The doctor caught off guard nodded solemnly before he could catch himself. “You’ll have regular checkups with the neurologist, and we’ll adjust treatments to manage things like memory loss and confusion as the disease progresses. But… yes, this will get worse. And quickly.”

“I see,” Margaret said, her voice, though fragile, was steady, composed, as though she had already come to terms with the reality. There was no anger, no fear in her tone—just quiet acceptance. The kind that made Robert’s heart ache even more. "Thank you, doctor," she added, her words barely a whisper.

The doctor stood and walked around the desk, handing them a few leaflets with information on dementia support services and counselling. “Take your time with this,” he said gently, his voice full of empathy. “Talk to your family, make the decisions that feel right for you. And if you need anything, anything at all, don’t hesitate to call. We’re here to help.”

Margaret nodded their thanks and stood to leave. The bright hallway outside was jarringly out of place—too cheerful, too ordinary. It was as if the world hadn’t noticed the seismic shift that had just occurred in their lives.

Outside, the crisp autumn air greeted them, carrying with it the scent of fallen leaves and the soft rustle of the wind through the trees. Margaret paused as they reached the street, tilting her head upward, closing her eyes for a moment as if the cool breeze might wash away the growing fear creeping into her thoughts. She inhaled deeply, holding onto the fleeting comfort of the outdoors.

Robert watched her, his heart aching with the overwhelming need to fix something he couldn’t fix. He was powerless to protect her from this. And that, more than anything, filled him with a sorrow he didn’t know how to carry.

"Maybe we’ll find something," he murmured. "A trial, some new treatment. We won’t stop looking." His words were meant to comfort, to fill the void with some glimmer of possibility, even though he knew it was a thin hope at best.

Margaret looked at him, offering a small, sad smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. She nodded, not wanting to take away the hope, not wanting to crush the possibility that something—anything—might still be out there for them. But deep down, in her heart, she already knew the truth. She could feel it in the quiet moments between words, in the silence that lingered after the doctor spoke. This was the beginning of the end. No amount of hope, no experimental trial, no last-minute miracle would change that. She could sense the inevitability, like a slow, steady tide that could not be turned back.

**Chapter 3**

**The Decision**

**Chicago, May 2022**

The conference room at Viperis headquarters occupied the 24th floor of a sleek tower, rising above the pulse of Chicago’s biotech district, and its sprawling landscape of glass and steel. Just a short walk from the shimmering expanse of Lake Michigan, the building stood as a bold testament to the city’s cutting-edge ambitions. From this height, the urban world below sprawled in perfect geometric order—an intricate mosaic of glass, steel, and concrete that seemed to go on forever, cutting sharp lines toward the distant horizon. The hum of activity from the streets below was reduced to silence by the thick pane of glass, the bustle unfolding like a scene in a silent film.

Inside, the temperature hung at a comfortable 22 degrees. The pale grey walls, almost cool to the eye, were interrupted by large, sleek digital displays that cycled through a stream of clinical data visualizations, forecasts, and earnings projections—each update writ in a clean, precise font, especially commissioned by the company.

At the centre of the room sat a huge, polished mahogany table, its surface gleaming. It could comfortably have seated twenty. Each chair was an elegant, high-backed design—upholstered in rich, charcoal-grey leather with subtle stitching along the seams. The table was carefully set with carafes of water at equal intervals along its length, each one branded with the company’s logo etched delicately into the glass. Beside each carafe, there were highball glasses—sharp and clean in design—arranged just so.

The so-called "Vipers"—executives, shareholders, and consultants of the Viperis board filed in. The group was a mix of seasoned veterans—greying executives in their tailored suits, eyes sharpened by decades in the biotech trenches—and fresh-faced newcomers, decked out in smart casual, their expressions eager.

As the Vipers arranged themselves around the table, there was a subtle choreography in their seating choices, each one calculated, like pieces on a chess board. The older board members took their places at the far end, closer to the panoramic window, where they could survey the city if the meeting became dull. They folded their faces into practiced expressions of authority and unreadability.

The younger members of the board gravitated toward the middle. They eagerly opened their laptops as if setting up a wall of defence, and the soft hum of their hard disks kicked in almost in unison.

With quick, practiced movements, they began opening the day’s materials, their fingers tapping against the keys as they checked the agenda, read through the quarterly financial report, and scanned the strategic updates. Their eyes flicked nervously from one document to the next, their minds working to absorb every detail as they hoped to stay ahead of the conversation. Hushed conversations began to sprout amongst them like tiny wildfires amongst the newbies. The senior Vipers remained largely silent, their eyes turned deliberately toward the door, as though willing it to open. Every now and then, one of them would exchange a faintly impatient glance with the others. They were used to Alex Thorn’s habit of making a grand entrance, and this was hardly the first time they’d been forced to wait. He was never one to show up on time. Thorn enjoyed making an entrance. He loved to make it clear that his time was more valuable than anyone else’s and the seniors had grown to expect nothing other from him.

The door slid open with a gentle hiss, and in stepped Alex Thorn, his stride deliberately unhurried. He seemed to believe he radiated charisma, the sort that would make others lean in, hang on every word. But in reality, Thorn knew himself for what he was. His self-assurance just barely held it all together. He was an unremarkable figure, with an appearance bordering on chaotic. His mop of dark hair fell in uneven waves over his forehead, as though it hadn’t been introduced to a comb in weeks, giving him an air of casual neglect.

His face, soft and almost boyish, lacked the sharp edges that might convey authority or strength. Instead, his features gave him the appearance of someone clinging to youthful bravado, hoping it might pass for charm. The faint shadows under his eyes hinted at late nights and stress. Beige slacks, slightly wrinkled at the knees had been paired with a simple black T-shirt, which clung awkwardly to his paunch.

Whilst his clothing choices were haphazard, his shoes, peculiarly, were a different matter. Always the most expensive, always immaculate, they gleamed with a mirror polish. Thorn enjoyed bragging about would the craftsmanship of his shoes, referencing obscure cobblers in Milan as if they were old friends. He had convinced himself that his feet were “unique”, requiring the precise attention of master craftsmen. He’d had custom wooden moulds carved to mimic every contour of his feet. Each pair arrived from the shoe-maker in a velvet-lined box with his initials discreetly embossed on the leather soles—a touch he insisted upon, though no one would ever see it.

As he entered the conference room, eyes briefly scanning the faces around the table, he wore a faint smirk. He settled into his position at the head of the table, his gaze flitting across the room, pausing on each face for just a moment before moving on. He knew what they thought of him. They saw him not as a leader, but as a beneficiary of his father’s hard work, coasting on the reputation of the company’s founder. The truth wasn’t far off. The family still controlled 51% of the company’s shares, and when the old man Thorn retired, Alex had been promoted to Chairman, more out of legacy than merit.

Alex’s path had been set long before he even understood what it meant. From the moment he could walk, the expectation was clear: one day, he would lead the family company. It had never been a question, never a choice. His education was shaped around this predetermined future, and he was funnelled into prestigious business schools, studying finance, management, and corporate law. But despite the careful planning, Alex had never shown a natural talent for it. Business studies felt like a foreign language, and his lack of interest made it even harder. He coasted through the courses, relying more on his family name than ability and certainly more than on hard work. The company’s future leadership role felt more like a burden than an honour. The truth was, Alex didn’t love business, and everyone around him seemed to know it. But if the family’s business talents appeared to have skipped a generation, was clear that it’s flair for showmanship had not.

The final Viper, Lord Adrian Briarwood, appeared on the massive screen, video calling from London, unable to step away from his parliamentary duties to attend the board meeting in Chicago. Briarwood’s presence at the table was not just symbolic; he had strategically bought his way into the company. He’d invested heavily, securing a substantial shareholding that gave him significant influence. His wealth and political clout made him a formidable figure, but everyone knew Briarwood’s loyalty was to his own interests, not the company’s. While Alex had inherited his seat, Briarwood had paid handsomely for his, leveraging every opportunity to bolster his power. Now, his face loomed over the room, a reminder that not all the Senior Vipers were born into their roles—some had simply purchased them.

Briarwood cleared his throat, his voice smooth but weighted with authority as he addressed the room. "I’d like to call this meeting to order. We have several urgent matters to address," he declared, his glassy gaze focusing somewhere beyond the faces on the screen, as though already dismissing the others. "Thorn, perhaps you can start by briefing us on the current state of the Serpentin research study."

For a moment, silence hung in the air, Briarwood's audacity obvious to everyone. Alex shifted uncomfortably in his chair, his palms sweaty as he realized the room was watching him. Weakly, he forced a smile and leaned toward the screen. "Actually, Adrian, you can leave the chairing to the Chairman," he said, his voice lacking the firm edge he had hoped for. "I think we should start by reviewing the financials first before we get into the Serpentine research data." Briarwood inclined his head slightly, a flicker of amusement crossing his features. Alex could almost hear his condescension through the screen.

"Of course," Briarwood replied smoothly, as though Alex's attempt to take control was an amusing diversion. "The financials are critical, no doubt," he continued, leaning back slightly as if he had given Alex a minor concession. "But let’s not lose sight of the fact that our investors are keenly watching the trial’s progress." His eyes flickered briefly to the camera on his laptop, a hint of steel behind his glassy gaze. "I’m sure your update on the numbers will be illuminating, Thorn." The condescension in his tone met its target.

“Actually, Briarwood, perhaps it wouldn’t hurt to shake the agenda up a little”, Thorn pressed on, already eager to dive into what he considered the highlight of the meeting. "I think you’ll all be pleased to hear about the progress. The pre-trial research for Serpentin is showing tremendous promise.” His voice buzzed with enthusiasm as he launched into a rapid update, oblivious to the slight shift of tension around the room.

He was too wrapped up in the excitement, too eager to impress. This was his chance to win over the board, to make them see him as an asset, not just another cog in the machine. Thorn failed to take notice of the expression of smug satisfaction on Briarwoods face. He was too wrapped up in the moment.

As Thorn spoke, his words tumbled out in a rush, tripping over one another in his eagerness to share the good news. Her didn’t realize that his eagerness to please was making him seem naïve—someone who could be bent to the will of those with sharper instincts. All he saw was an opportunity to take the floor, the ultimate showman, unaware of the subtle undercurrent in the room, and the quiet shift of power that Briarwood had orchestrated. He hadn’t notice how easily he had been steered by Briarwood, but the other Vipers saw it. They exchanged glances that Thorn mistook for admiration.

Thorn’s excitement was palpable as he rifled through his copy of the board pack, “Now, if you’ll turn to page nine of your board packs, you’ll see the results from the recent preclinical study led by Dr Rebecca Langley, involving a mouse model of Luminis Dementia” he began, his voice quickening with each word. “This is truly incredible data, folks. We’re talking about 25 mice, all dosed with Serpentin.”

Serpentin was the cornerstone of Viperis’s ambitious portfolio—a synthetic version of a protein derived from the venom of Naja phantasmata, a rare species of cobra native to Southeast Asia. The protein, a promising pain killer, had been reengineered in the Viperis labs to retain its unique ability to bind to nerve cells while neutralizing its toxic effects. Then one day, a junior researcher had reported that the protein had stimulate the stem cells in her lab culture to grow tiny spines capable of transmitting electrical signals, just like nerve cells.

“This discovery wasn’t just science—it was destiny,” Thorn had declared at an investor conference, milking the narrative for all it was worth. Now, as he gestured toward the data in the board pack, his enthusiasm was similarly evangelical.

He scanned the room, eager to gauge their reactions, before pressing on. “As you’ll see, all 25 mice showed marked improvement in their ability to navigate the maze—no errors, no hesitation. The results are unprecedented for ANY compound.” The pitch of Thorn's voice rose, the excitement taking over. “But that’s not all,” he added, flipping through the pages quickly. “Dr Langley’s team also observed significant changes in the neuronal structures of the mice brains. We’re talking about real, measurable alterations in their synaptic pathways—structural improvements that suggest the potential for neuro-regeneration. If these findings translate to humans, we could be looking at a groundbreaking treatment for Luminis dementia.” Here he paused, his palms outstretched and turned up towards the ceiling, as though waiting for the board to rise to their feet in rapturous applause.

When no-one moved, he continued, his voiced brimming with conviction, “Based on these results I propose we green-light the Luminis Dementia clinical trial. The time to move is now.”

A murmur of agreement rippled through the room. A junior Viper was the first to speak, his eyes sparkling with excitement. “We need to secure regulatory approvals immediately. This is a golden opportunity to dominate the market.”

“Agreed,” another chimed in, a sharp smile spreading across her face. “I have contacts who can help expedite the process. If we move quickly, we can develop a drug that will dominate the market.”

Thorn nodded vigourously, his confidence bolstered by their enthusiasm.

But the old guard—the senior Vipers—remained more subdued. Seated toward the far ends of the table, a greying man with a pinstripe suit and a gold cufflink shaped like a double helix leaned back in his chair, his hands tented thoughtfully under his chin. His lips pressed into a thin line. He’d seen it all before—the enthusiasm of juniors desperate to prove their worth, the rush to market without fully accounting for the risks. They weren’t about to get swept up. Their silence wasn’t indifference; it was strategy.

When one finally spoke, it was with measured authority. “This is impressive,” said a silver-haired woman, her voice calm but edged with caution. “But have we fully explored the long-term implications? Regulatory approvals aren’t just about speed; they’re about credibility. If we overpromise and underdeliver, we won’t just set ourselves back—we’ll destroy trust in our entire pipeline.”

Thorn’s grin faltered for a split second before he recovered, preparing to lean once again on the enthusiasm of the juniors to counterbalance the old guard’s stoicism. He launched into a restatement of the study’s extraordinary results in an effort to recapture the room.

He was mid-sentence, the momentum building, when Briarwood’s smooth, authoritative voice sliced through the chatter like a scalpel.

“Extraordinary data, truly,” Briarwood began, his voice calm and composed, immediately drawing the room’s attention. Heads turned toward the wall-mounted screen where his face, that of an elder statesman, beamed in remotely, dominated one of the digital panels.

“I think we can all agree these findings more than justify moving ahead.” He paused just long enough to let the statement settle, his eyes scanning the room as if daring anyone to contradict him.

“In fact,” Briarwood added, leaning slightly forward toward the camera, the movement almost imperceptible but deliberate enough to command attention, “I’d suggest we greenlight the transition to Phase I human trials immediately. There’s no time to waste if we’re serious about maintaining our competitive edge.”

The shift in the room was palpable. The senior Vipers, who had been withholding judgment, now nodded subtly in unison, Briarwood’s endorsement had been what they were waiting for.

Thorn, for his part, exhaled as though he had been holding his breath. His shoulders straightened, and his grin returned.

There was a moment of silence before Briarwood added, “And while Chicago has served us well so far, I’d propose we consider London as a key site for the Phase I study. We’ve seen the results—there’s no time to waste, and I can personally ensure that we have the right political and medical infrastructure in place to make the process as smooth as possible. I have key contacts who can expedite approvals, and I can secure further support from the NHS.”

But the silver-haired Viper, a woman with deep ties to Chicago, frowned. “Surely, with everything we’ve invested in the Chicago facilities, it makes sense to continue here. The infrastructure’s in place, the team’s familiar with the project, and it’s closer to the company’s HQ.”

Briarwood smiled, unfazed. “I understand your point, but London offers a unique set of advantages. We have access to a vast network of patients, a supportive regulatory environment, and global visibility. I can personally speak to the right people—trust me, we can smooth the path for approvals in record time.” He paused, letting his words sink in. “Chicago is important, but London can elevate this trial to an international stage. And frankly, we want the global press paying attention to these results.”

Briarwood leaned back, signalling with a practiced ease that he considered the matter settled. A flicker of satisfaction crossed his face as he watched even the staunchest advocates for the Chicago site falter, swayed by his promises of political leverage and expedited approvals. The room's energy shifted decisively, tilting in favour of London—exactly as Briarwood had orchestrated.

The transition was seamless. Questions about logistics and potential obstacles melted away under Briarwood’s calm assurances, each answer pulling the board further into alignment. Briarwood knew he had them.

With the room firmly onside, Briarwood turned his attention back to Thorn, his gaze glinting like a blade being unsheathed. His tone shifted, acquiring a note of finality that carried an unspoken message: *Now, it’s your turn to deliver.*

Alex felt the weight of that attention settle on him. But instead of buckling under it, he imagined himself rising to meet the moment, seeing himself not as a pawn but as a captain at the helm. The room was his. This was his moment.

Briarwood, not yet done with Thorn, adopted a warm, conspiratorial tone. “Alex,” he began, his gaze somehow locking in on Thorn’s face through the screen, “I think it would be incredibly valuable for you to head to London.”

“There are some key players I want you to meet,” he continued. “During your visit, you can tour the London facilities, meet the team at the London Clinic, and conduct the necessary interviews. Oh, and there’s an evening event at the American ambassador’s residence on Thursday that you simply cannot miss.”

Alex nodded, a flicker of pride rising within him that Briarwood had recognised his importance. London. He pictured himself stepping into his father’s shoes, taking charge in high-powered meetings, perhaps even outshining his father's legacy. He failed to notice how Briarwood had him on a leash, expertly guiding him to the conclusion he wanted, believing he’d gotten there of his own free will. Briarwood had been calling the shots from the start, and Alex—despite his attempts to believe otherwise—was once again, simply following the path laid out for him.

**Chapter 4**

**Chicago 1897**

On the road, Henslow had been a showman first, a healer second. His wagon, a spectacle of marvels, had been crowded with garish banners, anatomical charts, and shelves heaving with promising cures for ailments real and imagined. A small stage folded out from the side, where he’d enthralled audiences with tales. The air was thick with the mingling aromas of cinnamon, camphor, and sulphur, and his methods were as much sleight of hand as genuine craft.

But this room—his new workroom—was different.

The vision had come in fragments, across months of visions, a strange and disjointed dream. Henslow recalled walking through a place unlike any he’d ever known. Walls glowed sterile white, and benches stretched endlessly, laden with devices that buzzed and blinked. Men and women in white coats, consulting instruments and jotting notes on thin, gleaming boards.

He had begun to make changes.

From the catalogue of Henderson & Sons, Purveyors of Scientific Instruments, he had ordered a balance scale of unprecedented accuracy, a new gas burner, and an assortment of specialized glassware—beakers, flasks, pipettes—that rivalled anything he’d seen at the Fair. A brass microscope now stood proudly on his workbench, its lenses gleaming like tiny, all-seeing eyes.

A condensation apparatus, cobbled together from salvaged copper tubing and glass jars, occupied the centre of the room. Nearby, a wooden rack supported an array of parchment filters he had constructed himself, allowing for a finer separation of his concoctions than the rough straining cloth he’d once used.

On the far wall hung his Apothecary’s Notebook—a thick ledger bound in green leather, it’s pages yet pristine. Gone were the days of trusting his memory to retain recipes and methods. Now, each method and trial would be recorded meticulously.

He stepped back, surveying his space. Henslow uncorked a bottle of distilled water, pouring a measured amount into a beaker. He struck a match and lit the gas burner, adjusting the flame until it burned steady and blue. As the water heated, he reached for his notebook, his pen poised. This time, he wasn’t simply making a remedy. This time, he was conducting an experiment.

**Henslow’s Diary Entry**  
*Date: April 15, 1897*

For the past weeks, every night I have stepped into the same vision, and I find myself transported to a most peculiar room, vast, with walls of smooth white. The air is cool, sterile, and carries a faint hum, like a swarm of bees forever at a distance. Light fills the space, not from oil lamps or the sun, but from some source embedded in the ceiling.

There are rows of tools, implements and glass vessels, all uniform and pristine. At every station jars, beakers, and flasks, but their clarity surpasses anything my apothecary’s stock could achieve.

A white-coated figure bends over an instrument, peering into its eyepiece. It’s manner of use reminds me of the shining brass microscopes I have seen in catalogues. Every person in the room has a book, into which they write near constantly.

Most curious of all are the snakes, confined to transparent boxes—a cage without bars. They were not rattlers, nor any species I recognize, their brightly coloured scales shimmer like the feathers of a bird.

Last night, this visions returned, but this time it felt different. Disturbingly so. This time I was not confined to the strange room but was propelled into a corridor beyond. My steps made no sound, though I felt the sensation of walking.

The corridor ended at a doorway, its frame unlike anything I have seen. Inside was a man, his back to me, broad-shouldered and commanding. His stance radiated anger, though I could not hear his voice. I knew it instinctively. Across from him stood a woman, her face pale, her expression a mix of surprise and confusion. Her hands twitched at her sides, as though she wanted to act but did not know how.

And then I saw the third figure, his shoulders hunched, his eyes cast downward in fear. His skin reminded me of the Lakota I met years ago, rich and dark, with an earthy hue that spoke of the plains. For a moment, I thought he might *be* Lakota, but something about him was different. He was not a warrior, but a healer. A medicine man. I could feel it as surely as if he had declared it aloud.

As I watched him his eyes lifted and met mine. He *saw* me. This has never happened before. In all my visions, I have been a silent observer, a ghost in a strange world. Yet his gaze locked onto mine, and in that instant, I felt a jolt of recognition, as though he and I were connected.

The moment was fleeting. The angry man turned slightly, and I felt myself pulled back, as though by a great wind. The vision dissolved, and I awoke drenched in sweat, my heart pounding in my chest.

The questions torment me, but I have no answers. Only the certainty that these visions are more than mere dreams. Something is calling me.

**Chapter 5**

**London, January 2023**

**A Private Patient**

The London Trials Clinic stood as a symbol of modern medical progress, nestled beside the Riverford private hospital just south of the Thames. Its striking façade of pale stone and glass gleamed under the London sky, a sharp contrast to the sordid history of the land beneath it. Once, the site had housed the infamous Riverford Asylum, a place notorious for its cruel treatment of the mentally ill in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

The asylum had been a grim and imposing structure, its stone walls holding countless dark stories. Patients were confined in small, filthy rooms, subjected to shock treatments and lobotomies in the name of "cure." Many were left to rot in isolation, some never even receiving the basic care of food or warmth. Naked patients forced to sleep on cold stone floors, their screams ignored by indifferent staff. It was a place where the human spirit was crushed under the weight of institutional cruelty.

The asylum was long gone, reduced to rubble and replaced by the state-of-the-art facilities. The area, now pristinely landscaped with lush gardens, large-leafed plants, and carefully designed seating areas, stood in stark contrast to the horrors of its past. Pathways criss-crossed through ornamental trees, guiding patients and visitors from the gleaming clinic to the adjacent Riverford Hospital.

To the left of reception, a corridor, lined with glass-panelled doors lead to research labs gleaming under the harsh, sterile light. Inside each, stretched long white benches and shelves loaded with bottles, each capped with a distinctive blue lid and carefully labelled—reagents, buffers, and culture media. Surrounding the shelves, piles of plastic consumables created a colourful chaos—boxes of pipette tips, Petri dishes, and microcentrifuge tubes stacked haphazardly. Polystyrene ice buckets filled with crushed ice stood ready to preserve temperature-sensitive samples. In each, a herds of white-coated researchers moved about with purpose, pockets brimming with tools and gadgets—pens, notepads, and small essential instruments.

Down a second, quieter corridor to the right of reception, tucked away from the bustling energy of the main labs, a trio of tranquil consultation rooms awaited. Each room a carefully curated stage for calm reflection and meaningful conversation. Comfortable chairs with plush cushions were thoughtfully arranged around sleek, polished tables.

Soothing artwork graced the walls, with abstract landscapes rendered in muted tones, flowing in gentle curves and soft shades. It was as though a kind-hearted art teacher had thoughtfully curated each piece, aiming to lift the spirits and create an atmosphere of calm.

At the far end of the corridor, past the consultation rooms, stood Dr David Joshi’s office, identified by a plaque that could easily be slipped from its holder, a quiet nod to the transient nature of its occupant. His sturdy desk, crowned with dual monitors, was encircled by piles of well-thumbed textbooks and scientific journals. An open copy of *The Lancet* lay abandoned across the keyboard, as if its reader had briefly stepped away—though it had been untouched for most of the day.

David was meant to be a doctor. There had never been any other choice. As a child, he hadn’t been given the space to explore other interests. His father, a successful and respected surgeon, had long ago crafted an image of the perfect successor, and David had been groomed for the role without realizing it. The conversations at the dinner table had rarely strayed from medicine—discussions about diagnoses, breakthroughs, and cases—leaving little room for thoughts of other careers. His toys were medical kits, his books filled with anatomy lessons and stories of pioneering doctors. Whenever he showed interest in something outside the realm of medicine, his father gently but firmly steered him back, often with a knowing smile and a casual remark about what a brilliant career he would have. His future set not in any old stone, but in polished marble.

Even in medical school, David's path had been all but predetermined. The university he attended had been his father’s choice, not his. His professors, many of whom had been his father's colleagues, viewed him through the lens of his family legacy rather than his own merit. David had scraped through, his medical career feeling like an ill-fitting suit that he wore because it was expected, not because he had chosen it.

The constant pressure, the relentless demand for perfection, had weighed on him more each day. There was no joy, no sense of purpose in his routine. Sometimes he found himself daydreaming about a different life, one where he could make genuine emotional connections, perhaps in a field like counselling. But his favourite escape fantasy was becoming a zookeeper, surrounded by animals and immersed in their care. In those moments, he could picture himself feeding playful otters or explaining the wonders of wildlife to children. The simplicity of those responsibilities, the joy of sharing something meaningful, seemed like a refreshing contrast to the relentless stress of his current role. In that imagined world, life felt lighter, the stakes less severe, and David found himself smiling at the thought.

After graduating he done a gruelling stint in A&E that almost saw him throw in the towel and to hell with his father. And he would have done had he not stumbled upon an unexpected passion for clinical research. The structured environment of research appealed to him, offering a rhythm that starkly contrasted with the chaos and unpredictability of emergency medicine. It was like discovering a hidden talent for knitting after a lifetime of trying to juggle flaming torches. And he owed this change of course to Adrian Joshi, an old friend of the family. The last two years, leading the Serpentin trail had probably been the best years of his career in medicine so far. He had no intention of ever going back to the front line.

David was keenly aware that he was not a traditionally handsome man. His features, while distinctive, were somewhat irregular—like a collection of items in a museum exhibit that no one really understood. His nose, slightly too large for his face, gave him character, while his stubborn chin jutted out at an odd angle, as if it had its own opinions about the world and wasn’t afraid to share them. Yet, despite these quirks, there was an undeniable warmth to his bespectacled face, a charm that drew people in as if he carried an unspoken promise of genuine connection.

And it was true that David had an uncanny ability to foster trust in others, a rare quality that made people feel seen and heard in his presence. His genuine curiosity, often reflected in the warmth of his gaze, had a soothing effect that lulled individuals into sharing more than they intended. Conversations with him flowed naturally, as if weightless.

Even Rebecca Langley, the usually guarded Chief Scientist known for her meticulous focus on the intricacies of her work, had once revealed a personal anecdote that surprised David. In a rare moment of vulnerability, she had confided about the childhood loss of her younger brother, who had succumbed to a rare neurological disorder. The pain of that experience had shaped her relentless pursuit of breakthroughs in neuroscience, a driving force behind her dedication to bringing Serpentin to the point of clinical trials.

“It’s easy to get lost in the science,” she’d admitted, her voice tinged with emotion. “But sometimes I think about how different things might have been if we had had treatments like this back then. It’s what motivates me.”

This ability to elicit openness in others made David a trusted confidant among his colleagues. In a high-pressure environment like Viperis David's empathetic approach created a sense of camaraderie and support that was invaluable to the team. He had a way of drawing people out, making them feel heard, understood, and important. In return, many of his colleagues confided in him—about personal struggles, professional dilemmas, and the emotional toll of working in a cutthroat industry.

But for all the trust he earned from others, David had no one to turn to himself. Over the years, he had learned that people were far more interested in being heard than in listening. The rare occasions when he tried to unburden himself were met with awkward silences or well-meaning but ultimately shallow advice.

David was used to being trusted—to people feeling comfortable enough to share their secrets with him. His patients opened-up to him readily, and even his colleagues often confided in him. But the one person who never seemed to recognize these qualities was Arabella—his wife.

He didn’t really understand why Bella had married him. It was a bit of a mystery to him. She was beautiful where he was not, her eyes hazel, her hair a rich chestnut, framing her oval face. Anyone who saw them together must surely have thought that Bella was out of his league.

Maybe she had once thought of him as a kind of trophy husband, picturing him climbing the ranks of the medical profession, becoming someone important. It certainly wasn’t for his looks or his money. He was neither classically handsome nor particularly wealthy when they met. But after five years of marriage, their relationship had grown cold. Their conversations had become transactional, revolving around daily logistics. David was pretty sure that his wife regretted marrying him and he sensed that breaking the silence and sharing his fears would equal the end of this tenuous relationship.

It had been a long week. David’s last patient of the day had been Gerald Sinclair, a private patient whose presence always filled the room with a palpable tension. Sinclair was in his late sixties, a businessman who had once thrived on power and control, but now found himself battling the encroaching fog of Luminis dementia.

Gerald had been given the Serpentin drug outside the standard study protocol, an act of compassionate driven by pressure from the higher-ups at Viperis. He was an old friend of Briarwood’s, from their Oxford days and they’d kept each other close. At Oxford, they had both been ambitious, though their methods were different. Briarwood had always had a gift for positioning himself in the right rooms, charming the right people, and accumulating power through connections. Gerald, on the other hand, had built his success through a combination of sharp business acumen. Over the years, they had found in each other something valuable: Briarwood needed people with influence and wealth to propel his ideas, and Gerald, once a self-made man in the business world, appreciated the kinds of connections that Briarwood could open doors to. And fortuitously, when Sinclairs mind began to lose its sharpness, it was a connection that had led Sinclair to David’s consulting room.

As soon as Sinclair settled into the sterile chair, his frustration was clear, his sharp voice cutting through the quiet of the office. “This is unacceptable! I expect better results, especially for what I’m paying!” The frustration spilled out with the force of his entitlement, echoing through the sterile room. He was a man used to getting what he wanted, and now, faced with the slow and painful erosion of his mind, he was desperate for anything that might offer a reprieve. His anger, however, wasn’t just directed at the side effects—nausea, headaches, an increasingly cloudy mind—it was the shape that his fear had taken in him. The money and influence that had once given him control in the business world meant little in the face of a disease that stripped away even the most basic faculties of memory and cognition.

David watched him carefully, his gestures erratic and hinting at a proclivity for violence. If he couldn’t buy his way out of a corner, David sensed he might try to punch his way out.

David took a deep breath, reminding himself that anger often stemmed from fear. “I understand this is difficult, Mr. Sinclair. These medications can take time to adjust to, and we’re still monitoring your response.”

Sinclair’s eyes narrowed slightly, as if trying to focus on David, but there was a flicker of something disorienting in his gaze. He shifted in his chair, a movement that seemed too deliberate, too calculated. “Time,” he muttered, his voice lowering as he stared past David, a strange tension in his posture. “Time is the one thing I don’t have, doctor. You think I don’t know what’s happening?” He looked back at David, eyes flicking up to meet his, but his focus seemed fractured, wavering between clarity and confusion. “This—this *fog*... I’ve been here before. You think you can fix it with pills, but I’m not stupid. I know what they’re trying to do.”

David studied Sinclair for a moment, the air between them felt thick, as if the room itself was waiting for Sinclair to make his next move. David could feel the tension rising, and for a moment, he considered doubling down, telling Sinclair he needed to be patient.

Instead, he chose to lean into reassurance, his voice soft and steady, as if placating a nervous animal. “I know this is frustrating, Mr. Sinclair. But we’ll work together. I’ll make sure the team monitors you closely.” His words were carefully chosen to wrap the quickly curdling consult into something that felt safe.

Sinclair’s eyes flickered again, uncertain, searching for something. There was a long, weighted pause before he let out a quiet breath, the tension in his shoulders easing just a fraction. His hand stilled, the tremor subsiding for the moment. “Alright,” he muttered, though the edge of suspicion still lingered in his voice. “But I expect results, Doctor. *Results*.”

David nodded quickly, offering a tight smile. “Of course. I’m sure it’s just a matter of time.” He stood, holding out his hand as if to signal the end, and Sinclair, after a long moment, reluctantly took it, the pressure of his grip faintly cold but not hostile.

With the tension broken, David made his way to the door, the relief washing over him like a wave. As the door clicked shut behind him, he couldn’t shake the uneasy feeling that there was more to Sinclair’s behaviour than just dementia. But for now, it was enough that he was able to walk away leaving Sinclair’s angry outburst behind him.

**Chapter 6**

**Henslow - Chicago 1903**

**The Apothecary's Dilemma**

The dim light of the shop barely reached the furthest corners of the room, where rows of tinctures and powders lined dark oak shelves, their brass labels worn from countless handlings. The air was thick with the mingled aromas of camphor, lavender, and the acrid aroma of the powdered willow bark he had been grinding that morning. Outside, the hum of Chicago’s busy streets filtered through the cracks in the door, but inside, the world felt quiet, like a sanctuary carved into the frenetic city.

Henslow adjusted the lenses of his round spectacles as the bell above the door chimed. A woman stepped inside, clutching the edges of her shawl tightly against her thin shoulders. She looked to be in her late thirties, though the deep lines around her mouth and eyes suggested a life worn heavier than her years. Her auburn hair, streaked prematurely with grey, was pulled into a loose bun, and her cheeks were sunken.

“Good evening, madam,” Henslow greeted, setting down the mortar he had been working with. “How may I be of service?”

The woman hesitated, her eyes darting to the rows of jars and bottles. Finally, she stepped closer, her boots clicking softly on the wooden floorboards. “I… I have come about my mind, sir. It’s slipping away.”

Henslow tilted his head, his interest piqued. “Slipping, you say?”

“It began with forgetfulness—simple things at first, like where I’d set my knitting or the name of a neighbour’s child. But now…” Her voice trembled, and she lowered it to a whisper, as though ashamed. “Now I find myself standing in rooms, having no recollection of why I’m there. Words vanish before I can speak them. My husband—” she paused, her lips quivering—“he says I am not myself.”

Henslow nodded gravely, his expression one of practiced empathy. “I have seen such cases before,” he said, which was not entirely untrue. In the past year, a handful of patients had come to him with similar tales of mental disarray—always fearful, their desperation palpable. One, a housekeeper named Mrs. Coyle, had spoken of hearing voices. Henslow had provided her with a tincture of valerian and belladonna, curious to see what effect it might have. Mrs. Coyle had not returned, but whether that was a sign of success or failure, he could not say.

The woman pulled a small coin purse from her shawl and placed it on the counter. “I’ve heard you can help,” she said. Her voice cracked with a fragile hope. “I need something—anything—that might restore my wits.”

Henslow leaned forward, resting his hands lightly on the counter. “Madam,” he said, his tone soft but firm. “Such afflictions are mysterious, and remedies are… imperfect. However,” he added, “I can offer you something that may quiet the mind and perhaps steady your thoughts.”

Her eyes searched his face. “Will it work?”

“It may,” he replied, careful not to offer false assurance. “But if it does not, I would ask that you return to me. Your experience may help me to understand this condition better, so that I might aid others in the future.”

The woman hesitated, then nodded. “I will do as you say.”

Henslow turned to the shelves, his fingers trailing over glass bottles with neatly tied paper labels. He selected two: one containing a tincture of ginseng, known to invigorate the mind and body, and the second taken from his dwindling stocks of snakeoil. He measured precise doses into a dark amber bottle, his hands steady despite the flicker of excitement he felt.

“Take ten drops of this in water each morning and evening,” he instructed as he handed her the bottle. “And please, keep note of any changes—good or ill.”

The woman’s hand trembled as she accepted the vial. “What if it makes me worse?”

Henslow avoided meeting her gaze. “If it does, come back to me at once.”

She tucked the vial into her shawl and turned to leave, but before she reached the door, she stopped. “Thank you,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Henslow’s heart gave a faint pang of something like guilt. “Fear is natural, madam,” he said. “But take heart. You are not alone in this struggle.”

When the door closed behind her, Henslow stood in the quiet shop. Each patient was a fragment of a larger puzzle, and with every bottle he dispensed, he hoped to edge closer to understanding this enigmatic malady. He told himself that his motives were noble, that he sought knowledge to help others. Yet in the privacy of his own mind, he could not deny the thrill he felt—the sense that he was standing on the edge of a discovery, one that might bring him not only answers but also add to his fading legend.

Adjusting his spectacles, Henslow returned to his work, the faint aroma of ginseng still lingering in the air.

**Apothecary's Notebook Entry**  
*Date: April 15, 1903*  
*Patient Identifier: "Mrs. K"*

**Objective:**  
To investigate the potential efficacy of a compounded tincture in alleviating symptoms of mental decline, including memory loss.

**Patient Presentation:**  
A woman of approximately 38 years presented with complaints of progressive forgetfulness, difficulty recalling words, and sense of disconnection from her surroundings. Emotional distress evident.

**Materials:**

Tincture of ginseng (Panax ginseng) — 2 fluid ounces

Experimental blend of concentrated snake oil extract — 1 fluid ounce

**Method:**

Equal parts (1:1) of ginseng tincture and snake oil compound into a sterilized amber bottle.

Add 1 fluid ounce of distilled alcohol to stabilize and preserve the mixture.

Dosage: 10 drops in water, twice daily.

**Findings (to be updated upon patient return):**  
Patient advised to monitor effects and report changes. Specific attention requested to:

* Frequency and intensity of memory lapses.
* Overall mental clarity.
* Emotional stability.
* Any adverse effects (e.g., dizziness, nausea, worsening confusion).

**Preliminary Observations:**  
Faintly warming effect upon personal ingestion

No immediate side effects noted.

**Chapter 7**

**London, September 2023**

**Dread**

As David sat hunched over the smooth, grey desk in his cluttered office, he scrolled through the latest data readouts from the Serpentin Trial, scanning the rows of numbers and intricate graphs that danced before him. The harsh light of the screen illuminated the contours of his weary face, casting shadows that deepened the lines. For a reason he couldn’t name, David hardly ever seemed to get enough sleep. The weight of fatigue permanently clung to him like a second skin, making each breath feel heavy and laborious, each movement felt as if he were wading through treacle.

As he blinked through bleary eyes, struggling to stave off the encroaching exhaustion, he leaned back in his chair, the worn leather creaking in protest beneath him. The familiar sound was almost comforting.

It was too early to expect an efficacy readout for the trial—that would come at the six-month mark. But there was something far more concerning. Three deaths had occurred. While fatalities might be anticipated in trials involving aggressive, terminal diseases, these cases were particularly alarming. The patients were expected to have lived for at least another six months. Instead, all three had succumbed within four weeks of their Serpentin infusions, and their patterns of decline were chillingly identical.

Not merely similar—identical. Fever and restlessness emerged first, quickly followed by vivid hallucinations, relentless nausea, and a swift descent into delirium. Ultimately, neuronal failure set in, marking the grim culmination of their suffering. One had to scrutinize the data to recognize the troubling trend, but once noticed, it was undeniable: this was no mere coincidence. The same sequence, the same symptoms, manifested every time.

David's heart sank at the implications—this was a catastrophic safety signal that could unravel everything. Was this the cause of the unsettling behaviour he had seen in Sinclair. Was it the beginning of the end for Sinclair, something, possibly the first thing ever, the billionaire couldn’t buy his way out of? And what about the study subjects? Would more go this way too?

David felt a creeping dread settle over him—not just for the patients or the trial's future, but for himself. This was more than just bad news; it was career-ending if he didn’t navigate it carefully. The company would not take this lightly. They had invested millions into Serpentin, positioning it as their flagship product, and now, with deaths directly linked to the drug, their golden promise was rapidly turning toxic.

The regulators would demand answers, launching probes into the trial’s data and safety procedures. And if anyone was found at fault, the blame could very well land on his shoulders. Worse still, the potential repercussions extended far beyond this single study. He knew the discovery of a safety signal of this magnitude could lead to new, harsher scrutiny on future studies, with the very real possibility of the drug class being viewed with suspicion.

It didn’t take much to imagine the broader implications: sponsors withdrawing funding, future trials halted, and patients, once desperate for any chance at a cure, growing increasingly wary of experimental drugs. David could already foresee the chilling effect on participation in clinical research—patients choosing to forgo experimental treatments altogether out of fear. His own career, once full of promise, could become collateral damage in the fallout.

This revelation, stark and unforgiving, twisted in his gut, leaving him grappling with the harsh reality of his role in this unfolding tragedy. The clutter on his desk—a tangle of papers, research notes, and empty coffee cups—each discarded cup a testament to the countless hours spent chasing data, convinced they were on the brink of a breakthrough. Now, it felt like a cruel joke. The dim light from the screen flickered, casting shadows that danced along the walls. The faint ticking of the clock on the wall grew louder, and David felt a knot of panic tightening in his chest. How could this have happened? What had he missed in the trials? He took a shaky breath, trying to steady himself, but it was like grasping at smoke. With trembling hands, he reached for a pen, ready to make notes, gather his thoughts, and formulate a plan.

Suddenly, the ringtone of his cell phone jolted him from his thoughts. He glanced at the caller ID, and a second wave of unease washed over him. It was Alex Thorn, the Chair of the biotech company sponsoring the study, calling from his corner suite in downtown Chicago. David could almost picture him there, standing by the floor-to-ceiling windows that framed the sprawling city skyline, a king surveying his domain. Thorn likely felt the weight of a power lunch settling in his stomach as he prepped for yet another crisis.

David’s mind drifted back to his brief visit to the Chicago office—a whirlwind of glitz and ambition that had left him feeling somehow diminished. Surrounded by sleek, polished surfaces and an air of unassailable confidence, he had felt like a pawn on a chessboard, moved at Thorn's whim, an expendable piece in a game whose rules he just couldn’t figure out. Now, as Thorn's name flashed on his screen, that unsettling feeling returned with a vengeance.

For a fleeting moment, David considered letting the call go to voicemail, but his hand moved of its own accord, answering the call as if compelled by some unseen force.

“David, how are we looking?” Thorn’s tone was deceptively casual, slithering through the speaker with an ease that felt forced, like a snake coiling around its prey.

David took a deep breath, steadying himself against the impending storm. “Alex, we need to talk. I’m guessing you’ve seen the latest data. So, you know there’s a serious problem.”

“Problem? What kind of problem, David?” Thorn’s voice sharpened slightly, a subtle yet aggressive edge bleeding through his cool facade.

David struggled to keep the rising panic out of his voice. “It’s the safety data. We’re seeing significant neural degradation in some patients. It’s… catastrophic. We can’t ignore this.”

“Catastrophic? Let’s not get carried away,” Thorn replied smoothly, the false reassurance grating on David's nerves. “You know how these trials go, David. There are always a few outliers. You’re talking about a handful of cases, right? We can manage that.”

“No, Alex.” David's voice grew firmer, the severity of the situation pushing through his fear. “This isn’t an anomaly. It’s a pattern. If we go public with these results—”

“Public?”

Thorn’s tone turned cold, cutting him off. “Why are we even talking about going public? You know better than to jump the gun. Look, these things can be fixed. Just... slow down and think for a second, alright?”

David felt the weight of Thorn's words settle in, thick and suffocating. Neural degradation wasn’t just a minor setback; it was devastating. The more he reviewed the data, the more inescapable the truth became. His stomach churned as he thought of the patients—real people placing their trust in him and the science to save them from the relentless grip of Luminis Dementia. He had a duty to them, and the truth was glaring back at him: Serpentin Extract was not safe.

“Alex, this isn’t something we can fix by smoothing over a few numbers,” he said, his voice low, the urgency creeping in despite his effort to remain composed. “This is real. It’s not just one case. We’re talking about significant neural damage across multiple cases. The regulators are going to see it, and we’ll have no choice but to pull the trials.”

A heavy silence hung in the air on the other end of the line. David could almost hear Thorn calculating, weighing options in his mind, the sound of corporate interests grinding against the cold reality of the data.

“David,” Thorn began, his voice now stripped of any pretence of nonchalance, replaced by an icy, controlled tone. “Listen to me carefully. We’ve come too far to let this sink us. You know what’s at stake here—years of work, millions of dollars, not to mention your own reputation. Do you want to be the man who killed the next great medical breakthrough? Because I don’t.”

David's grip tightened on his phone, knuckles whitening as the pressure mounted. “It’s not about reputations, Alex. It’s about lives. This isn’t safe.”

“It will be safe,” Thorn countered sharply. “We have protocols. We’ll fix it. But right now, you need to control the narrative. Quietly flag it for internal review. Delay, adjust, do whatever it takes. Just don’t go blowing this up. We can’t afford that.”

David’s heart pounded in his chest, each beat a reminder of the moral chasm widening before him. He knew what Thorn was asking—kill the problem. Bury it. Make it go away, no matter the cost.

“I can’t—”

“You can,” Thorn interrupted, his voice now hard as steel. “And you will. If this gets out, it’ll destroy everything, and you’ll be left holding the bag. Do you understand?”

David felt a cold sweat break out on his forehead. He stared at the screen, the damning data still glaring back at him like a warning sign.

“You’ve got one more patient to enrol. Get it done. We’ll deal with all of this properly when I’m in London”

And with that, Thorn abruptly hung up, the finality of his statement leaving no room for further discussion, as if he had drawn an impenetrable line in the sand. David sat in stunned silence, staring at the now-blank screen of his phone. The command was simple, almost dismissive, but it weighed heavily on him. It was a stark reminder of his precarious position within the grand scheme of things—a cog in a vast machine that churned relentlessly forward, indifferent to the human cost.

As David wrestled with his conscience, a deep unease settled in his chest. Every instinct, every fibre of his being screamed that continuing with Serpentin was wrong, but he was bound by the orders from above.

If he spoke out, it could mean the end of his career, maybe worse. But if he remained silent, what then? More deaths?

David’s hands trembled as he closed the report. He couldn’t shake the feeling that every decision he made from this point forward would be a step further into dangerous territory—he wasn’t just caught in a professional dilemma; this was a moral one. And the cost of doing nothing might be far greater than the price of taking action.

He stared at the ticking clock, feeling the noose tightening, knowing that the next move he made would decide everything. The weight of the impending conversation with Thorn pressed heavily on him, an oppressive reminder of how easily he could be maneuvered into a corner. He couldn’t afford to let himself be caught off guard again, not with everything at stake.

As he thought about the chilling similarities between the patient cases, an idea sparked in his mind. If Thorn was heading his way, David needed to be prepared—he needed proof. He grabbed his phone from the table, feeling its familiar weight in his hand. With a few quick taps, he opened the voice memo app, the interface illuminating his determined expression.

Thorn was heading his way, and David knew with absolute certainty that the smartest move he could make was to record any future conversation. He needed a clear account of everything discussed—a safeguard against any potential manipulation or deception.

The next time he and Thorn spoke, he wouldn’t allow himself to be blindsided. He would be ready, armed with the truth, prepared to protect himself.

**Chapter 8**

**Chicago, August 1899**

The smell of wormwood and alcohol hung thick in the humid air of Haywood’s apothecary. The dim room was cluttered with glass vessels, dried herbs, the chaos illuminated by the warm glow of a single gas lamp. A battered leather-bound notebook sat open on the counter, filled with meticulous notes written Haywood’s spidery hand.

“Tincture of Serpent Venom – Preliminary Trials.”

Henslow leaned over the counter, muttering to himself as he compared his written instructions with the amber bottle in his hand.

“I’m not so sure about this,” said the young man seated by the counter, fidgeting nervously, his eyes darting to the bottle. “What if it—well—kills me?”

Henslow looked up, “It won’t kill you, Edward,” he said, his voice low and reassuring. “At least not in the dosage I’ve prepared. And you said yourself your shoulder pain has been unbearable. This tincture could change everything.”

Edward winced as he rubbed his shoulder. He’d been thrown from his horse weeks ago, and the pain hadn’t let up since.

Taking the silence as consent, Haywood poured the tincture onto a silver spoon and handed it to Edward. He took a deep breath and placed the spoon to his lips. The bitter liquid burned as it touched his tongue. He slammed the spoon down on the counter and grimaced.

“Sweet mercy, that’s vile!” Edward gasped, his face contorting. “Tastes like—like poison!”

Henslow sat back in his chair, as minutes ticked by, the seconds marked by the faint sound of a clock ticking in the corner.

“Do you feel anything?” Henslow asked, leaning forward eagerly.

Edward blinked, his brow furrowing. “I think…I think it’s working,” he said slowly. “My shoulder—it doesn’t hurt as much.”

“Good,” Henslow murmured, jotting notes in the leather notebook. “And your mind? Any change in clarity?”

Edward tilted his head, his expression thoughtful. “Come to think of it, I do feel…sharper. It’s almost like—”

He stopped suddenly, his face going pale.

“What is it?” Henslow demanded.

“There’s something—” Edward swallowed hard, “The light—it’s too bright. Everything’s spinning!”

“Deep breaths, Edward,” Henslow said firmly. “This is just a side effect. It will pass.”

Edward groaned, clutching his head. “You—you said it was safe!”

After what felt like an eternity, Edward’s breathing began to slow. He sat upright, wiping the sweat from his brow.

“That was…” Edward shook his head, his voice hoarse. “That was the strangest thing I’ve ever felt. But—the pain’s gone. Completely gone.”

“Good. That’s good,” Henslow said, helping Edward to his feet.

One thing had certainly become clear — the line between remedy and poison was razor-thin, and Henslow knew he was walking it blindfolded. As he returned to his notebook, the words “Further trials required” practically wrote themselves.

**Apothecary's Notebook Entry**  
*Date: August 28, 1899*

Tincture of Serpent Venom – Preliminary Trials  
Aim: To assess the medicinal effects of serpent venom on pain.

Ingredients:

* Prairie serpent venom (extracted from the dorsal glands)
* Wormwood (Salix alba)
* Corn alcohol (90 proof, as solvent)
* Distilled water (to dilute tincture)

Method:

1. Secure venom by safely using a fine-tipped syringe to collect from a live prairie serpent (n=3).
2. Wormwood leaves and flowers should be dried for 72 hours in a shaded area. Once dried, grind using a mortar and pestle until the substance is fine, but not powdery to ensure proper solubility in the alcohol base.
3. Combine 3 drops of venom with 100 drops of wormwood infused alcohol in a glass vessel (preferably a stoppered amber bottle). Stir well. Seal and store in a cool, dark place for 14 days. Shake the vessel daily to ensure even infusion.
4. Dilute the tincture by adding distilled water, making a 50% alcohol tincture.

Observations:

* First Trial (n=3, animal testing on rabbits): The venom caused slight disorientation and lethargy in the animals after prolonged exposure (5-10 drops). No other ill effects were noted.
* Second Trial (n=1, self-administered): A single drop on the tongue was initially felt as a sharp, tingling sensation. Pain relief for sprained ankle occurred after 45 minutes, lasting for 2-3 hours. Notably, there was an increase in mental clarity for the first hour, followed by a slight feeling of light-headedness.
* Third Trial (n=2, human testing, volunteers from the local community): Both subjects reported pain relief for joint issues, though one subject experienced slight fever (possible overdose). The exact dosage must be refined.

Findings:  
The tincture has potential as a pain-relieving agent. There is an indication that the venom acts on the nervous system, which could explain the mental clarity observed.

Further trials required.

**Chapter 9**

**Persuasion**

Alex Thorn sat in the plush, dimly lit business lounge at O'Hare Airport, swirling a tumbler of whiskey sour. Everything was tailored to his tastes—expensive, discreet, and efficient. He leaned back, feeling smug. He took another sip, admiring how the light caught the glass. It was moments like these that made him feel invincible, untouchable.

After draining his glass and checking the time on his watch, his grandfather's Patek Philippe, with its worn leather strap, he signalled to the polished assistant stationed discreetly nearby. Time to board. Thorn rose, unhurried, to be lead through a private corridor reserved for high-tier passengers, away from the main terminal. Security was barely a formality, with a quick nod and a wave through the expedited lane. Alex felt a swell of satisfaction as he bypassed the crowds, glancing briefly at the ordinary passengers, hurried and flustered.

When they reached the gate, the assistant gave a courteous nod, and Alex strode ahead, ignoring her as she discreetly melted into the background. The head flight attendant, a poised woman with immaculate grooming was already waiting to usher him into first class. He barely acknowledged her presence, a small smirk playing on his lips as he noticed the envious glances from other passengers who were still shuffling through the boarding process.

“Welcome aboard, Mr. Thorn,” she said, her voice smooth and inviting, almost as if she were announcing the arrival of royalty.

As he stepped past the velvet ropes that separated the first-class cabin from the rest of the plane, he imagined the looks of jealousy directed at him from the economy class passengers as they filed past, resigned to their cramped seats. It was a delicious thought, and he revelled in it.

Settling into his seat, Alex placed his carry-on in the overhead compartment with a flourish, making sure everyone saw the designer label emblazoned on the bag. As he sank into the soft leather, he let out a contented sigh. He eased off his shoes, wriggling his curiously proportioned and outstretched feet. He could already taste the complimentary champagne already chilled and waiting for him.

Settling properly into his spacious first-class seat Alex took a slow sip. It would be a frustrating wait for the economy passengers to board. He could sense the chaotic mess of it, hear rolling suitcases clattering on the floor, and the shuffle of tired feet.

He could imagine people jostling for overhead bin space, some craning their necks to see if they could slip ahead of the crowd, while others were frantically checking their boarding passes for the umpteenth time. The rush of trying to find the right seat, the awkward dance around fellow passengers to stash bags, the scramble for armrests—it was all a blur of awkwardness and stress. Thank God for first class.

Thorn took out his noise cancelling headphones, pressing play on on *Beethoven’s* *Symphony No. 7*—a piece he’d read was often described as “uplifting” and “triumphant,” words that he thought reflected his own success. As the violins swelled in the opening movement, Thorn nodded along with exaggerated gravitas, telling himself that he appreciated the intricacies of the piece, whilst in reality, he was mostly just counting how long it would take to get to the *Allegretto*. He convinced himself he was *feeling* the music. That he couldn’t grasp the nuance was lost on him. The fact that he *owned* the piece, that he could play it, was proof enough of his cultivated taste. And so, as the strings and brass swelled around him, he allowed himself a slight, satisfied smirk. He knew it was classy, and that was all that mattered.

By the time the fasten seatbelts sign came on he’d almost made it through the first movement. He reluctantly clicked his seatbelt on, only half-listening to the flight attendant’s safety instructions. Thorn was sure of his own invincibility. That’s how it always was for people like him—at the top, untouchable. It wasn’t arrogance, he told himself; it was simple fact.

He didn’t have the patience to continue listening and so he popped his expensive headphones into his seat storage caddy and drained his glass, his thoughts drifting to the conversation he'd had earlier. *Pathetic,* really—Joshi had been on the verge of breaking down, practically quivering with guilt. The truth? Deaths on a clinical trial were unfortunate, sure, but ultimately unavoidable. Especially with a condition like Luminis Dementia. Hallucinations, fever, nausea, delirium—those symptoms were part of the disease's natural progression. Any doctor worth their salt could write off even the worst reactions as the inevitable decline of the patient, nothing more.

So, what if the trial hastened that decline? That was hardly a concern. No one could prove that the drug was responsible. And if a few more patients died a little sooner? *Collateral damage*, Thorn thought coldly, signalling for a second glass.

Another sip of his champagne, his thoughts sharp and focused, calculating. The millions at stake if the trial were halted flickered through his mind, but he dismissed the idea immediately. He had no intention of letting that happen. *Viperis* was a goldmine, and this so-called setback was nothing more than a minor inconvenience, one he’d sweep under the rug before it had the chance to spiral. Damage control was second nature to him.

Failure wasn’t an option, especially not with his father, Thorn Senior, watching from the shadows. The old man had put him in the Chair, and Alex would be damned if he gave him a reason to think he'd chosen the wrong son for the job. He couldn’t afford to look weak, not now, not ever. The line between ambition and expectation had blurred so completely that he no longer knew where one ended and the other began.

He’d found himself in hot water with the board more than once, each time for his reckless corner cutting. Yet, it was his family connection that kept him firmly in his seat, a privileged position he intended to hold onto at all costs. Whispers of discontent circulated among the board members, their grumblings echoing like distant thunder, criticizing his brazen wheeling and dealing, his audacious tendency to blur the lines between ethical and legal. But none of them had the spine to push him out. But none of them had the spine to push him out.

In the real world, without the protective shadow of his father’s influence, he wouldn’t have lasted a week in the role. His charm and bravado might open doors, but his lack of restraint would’ve slammed them shut just as quickly. It was his father’s unwavering backing that kept the board from acting on their doubts, and Alex knew it. The thought didn’t bother him—it only made him more determined to wield that leverage to its fullest.

After all, who could deny the numbers? By leveraging every corner of the biotech playbook, Alex had turned the company into a relentless profit machine. Accelerated drug trials shaved years off development timelines, while aggressive patent strategies ensured monopolies on lucrative treatments. Licensing deals brought in a steady flow of royalties, and price hikes on critical therapies squeezed every drop from desperate markets. Even partnerships with governments, cloaked in the rhetoric of the *social good*, had funnelled taxpayer money into Viperis's coffers. He was a wolf among sheep, and he intended to keep his place in the pack—by any means necessary.

He’d always been convinced of his own genius—a quintessential example of the Dunning-Kruger effect. That psychological phenomenon where the least competent individuals grossly overestimate their own abilities. He’d heard the term tossed around casually in board meetings, often directed at others, but he dismissed any notion that it applied to him though in fact being the effect’s victim had become his overriding characteristic. Like the time he’d made soufflé after binge watching master chef, hoping to impress his date. Ignoring the instruction to "gently fold the egg whites," he’d given the mix a few aggressive stirs, slammed it in the oven, and cranked up the oven to save cooking time. Chalking his culinary disaster up to a “weird oven” and “bad instructions.”

If a task or project went south, it was never his fault. And he knew for certain that the Viperis board simply failed to recognize his brilliance, blinded by their own limitations and conventional thinking. They couldn't see the bigger picture—the immense potential that lay just beyond the horizon, waiting for someone daring enough to seize it. As he plotted his next moves, a sense of superiority washed over him, reinforcing his belief that he was the only one capable of navigating the turbulent waters of their industry. After all, while they worried about the rules, he thrived on bending them.

He reclined his seat, the glow of his tablet casting faint shadows across his face as he flicked through pages of numbers without really absorbing them. It was a ritual more than anything else, a box-ticking exercise to quiet any nagging sense of responsibility. Like a schoolboy skimming a chapter he had no intention of understanding, just enough to say he'd done the work. Now, if anyone asked, he could confidently claim he’d taken a "good look" at the data David had emailed him earlier that day.

As the plane cruised smoothly over the Atlantic, Alex Thorn slowly worked his way through the offerings at the bar, feeling the comfortable lull of time passing. From time to time, he glanced out of the window, occasionally catching a glimpse of the ocean far below through a break in the clouds. Hours passed in a blur—movies played in the background; emails were scanned but barely acknowledged. His mind was elsewhere, locked in a loop of thought about the conversation he had with David Joshi.

Once he had changed into the airline’s soft pyjamas and settled into his bed, the cabin lights dimmed, casting a gentle twilight glow over the cabin. The flight attendants discreetly adjusted his suite, offering a plush duvet, and an extra pillow. As he lay back, fully flat, cozy and secure, the subtle hum of the engines became a soothing backdrop, and he drifted off into a blissful sleep. Thorn let out a contented sigh. It wasn’t long before his breathing slowed, the edges of consciousness fading into the blissful weightlessness of deep sleep.

He slept for hours, possibly as much as five or six— long enough to bridge the long overnight stretch of the flight—before being gently woken by the soft sound of his name. He opened his eyes to find a hot towel waiting for him, along with a cup of freshly brewed coffee. The breakfast service followed—eggs, fresh pastries and fruit. There was just enough time to retreat to the spacious lavatory to freshen up, where plush hand towels and an array of high-end toiletries awaited. He changed into a tailored suit and trademark T-shirt. By the time the landing gear lowered, he had slipped into his polished shoes, convinced that there was no problem he couldn’t solve with a bit of forceful persuasion. He flicked his wrist to check the time—he’d be landing early afternoon in London. That’d give him just enough time to pay a visit to the clinic before heading to his hotel.

Joshi had dared to suggest halting the trial—an absurdity so profound that Thorn still bristled at the thought. The audacity of it. He clenched his jaw. Joshi’s suggestion wasn’t just shortsighted; it was catastrophic. The man lacked vision, plain and simple, too bound by his medical ethics and limited imagination. Thorn knew better—he always had. To push forward was the only option.

The time for polite conversations had passed. His lips curled into a tight, humourless smile. He would stomp out this rebellion before it gained any traction. If Joshi wanted to play the part of the conscientious objector, Thorn would ensure it was his last starring role.

**Chapter 10**

**title**

While the economy class passengers jostled for overhead bags and shuffled into slow-moving lines, Thorn was already well on his way through the airport feeling refreshed by his deep and untroubled sleep. With the confidence of a man who belonged, he moved with practiced ease through the plushily carpeted corridors of VIP arrivals, the lighting was soft, the staff attentive but discreet, their polished smiles.

Here, there were no delays, no security checks, no waiting at the baggage carousel. Everything was pre-arranged, perfectly choreographed to allow him to glide effortlessly to his next destination.

As he reached the private customs area, he offered only a cursory glance at the border agents, who waved him through without so much as a pause. By the time he reached the baggage area, his sleek, monogrammed, leather case had already been set aside, neatly organized, and ready for collection. Everything was perfectly arranged, just as it should be, just as he insisted his life remain—untouched by inconvenience, frictionless, and seamless. With his coat draped over his arm and his phone already in hand, Thorn swept through the terminal, barely glancing at the crowds milling beyond the barriers.

His chauffeur, a man of short stature in a well-cut suit, stood at the arrival’s barrier, holding a sign with his name in large, bold letters. His short, dark hair was neatly combed and his face, Thorn noted with satisfaction, was eminently forgettable. The driver scanned Thorn with an almost imperceptible familiarity, recognising him from the photo the agency had supplied. Without a word, Thorn crossed the threshold of no return, and walking a half a step behind the driver followed him out into the cool London air.

A black Mercedes S-Class stood parked outside, its understated elegance gleaming under the bright airport lights. The driver opened the door, and Alex slid into the backseat, barely sparing him a glance. Thorn settled back into the plush interior, feeling a sense of quiet superiority. This car, though unassuming, was just another reminder of how far he’d come. He didn’t need to make a spectacle—his influence was already felt.

“Take me to the clinic”.

The driver nodded without question. And as the Mercedes pulled away from the curb, Alex settled deeper into the seat, regarding the driver with mild indifference. He felt no need to engage in small talk or acknowledge the man’s presence. In his mind, this was the arrangement they had: he paid handsomely for the service, and the driver was simply there to facilitate his travel. The driver’s life, like his face, was irrelevant—just another cog in the machine of Thorn's carefully curated world. He could not have picked this curious little man out of an identity parade. And that was just how it should be.

The car rolled quietly away from the terminal and seamlessly merged onto the M4, the asphalt ahead stretching out like an endless ribbon. Thorn could feel the shift in the rhythm as the engine picked up speed, and Heathrow faded behind them, and they were swallowed up by the expanse of the motorway. The car glided through the traffic.

As they passed through Kensington and the outskirts of Chelsea, Thorn pulled out his phone, flipping through the latest emails. There was one from Joshi, predictably full of concern, begging Thorn to reconsider the direction they were taking. He didn’t bother to read it fully. He knew the gist. More excuses, more moralizing. Thorn would deal with Joshi face-to-face soon enough.

Finally, the Mercedes turned down a quieter street south of the river, the familiar sight of the clinic loomed into view. The sleek, glass-fronted building was a far cry from the chaotic, underfunded hospitals Thorn had visited in his early career. This was a place of innovation, efficiency, and most importantly, profit. He smirked, remembering his father’s early words to him: "Run the business like a business, Alex, not a charity."

The driver pulled up to the curb, and Thorn stepped out, taking in the sight of the building for a moment before striding purposefully through the clinic doors. This was where his empire lay, not in boardrooms but in these halls where scientists, doctors, and patients moved at his beck and call, whether they realized it or not.

Thorn was here to remind them of that.

He checked his watch. It would be a quick visit—just long enough to deliver the message that this trial was moving forward, no matter what. Joshi needed to understand that any thoughts of rebellion were futile. The symptoms the patients were showing could easily be pinned on Luminis Dementia, not the drug. It wasn’t their job to worry about those details—just his. The driver had pulled up on the yellow “no waiting” cross hatch by the entrance. “Wait here for me”, Thorn instructed the driver, who nodded his agreement, climbing back into the driver’s seat, loosening his tie and reaching or his mobile phone.

The idea of stopping by the hotel before dealing with Joshi had floated through his mind, the luxury of his Knightsbridge suite already calling to him. But first, he needed to tighten the reins on this operation. Thorn had no intention of letting anything slip. The trial wasn’t just about the company’s success—it was about showing his father, once and for all, that he wasn’t just the Chairman because of the family name. He had earned this.

He pushed open the clinic’s main office door with a quiet but unmistakable authority, ready to stamp out any lingering doubt. Thorn didn’t knock—ever. He barged through the door of the cramped office, the heavy thud of it slamming against the wall announcing his arrival. David looked up from his laptop, startled. He had prepared himself for this conversation since Thorn had told him he was on his way, his mind cycling through all the reasons why they needed to stop the trial—but none of it would matter if Thorn wasn’t willing to listen.

As Thorn moved toward him, David’s hand slid to pull out his phone from his pocket, “I’ll just put this on do not disturb”. He had made the decision to record their conversation long before Thorn arrived; this was not a spur-of-the-moment choice but a calculated move. David’s thumb hesitated for a fraction of a second before he clicked the record button. His pulse quickened as the small icon on the screen blinked red and he casually set the phone on the desk, face down.

“Look, I’ve just come off a red-eye, and I don’t have time for small talk,” Thorn began, deliberately giving the false impression of a gruelling journey. Then, cutting straight to the chase, “Let’s get straight to the point. David, you’re overthinking things," his voice was smooth, almost too casual, as though discussing something trivial, “sure a few people have died, but you’d expect that. They’ve got Lumis Dementia for Christ’s sake.”

David's eyes flicked briefly to the phone, a rush of anxiety coursing through him as he worried that he might have given the game away. He quickly met Thorn’s gaze, forcing himself to appear composed.

Thorn had already begun his usual performance—charming, dismissive, and infuriatingly confident, completely oblivious to David's subtle slip. He was moving about the room with a casual swagger, exuding self-assuredness unaware of the tension radiating from David.

As he continued to pace, David forced himself to stay calm, his mind running through the conversation that was now being recorded. Every word would count. “Alex… I wasn’t expecting you to come straight here.”

“Clearly,” Thorn said, his lips twisting into a smirk. He glanced around the office, noting the stacks of papers and the clutter of binders. "Jesus, how do you work in this mess?"

David ignored the jibe, folding his hands on the desk to stop them fidgeting. "It’s not that simple. We need to talk this through." His voice was tight, like he’d been rehearsing this conversation in his head for hours, maybe days.

Thorn waved a dismissive hand, striding back across the room to looming over David’s desk. "We don’t need to talk about anything. I already know what you’re going to say. You’re worried about the deaths, you’re seeing red flags, blah blah blah." He rolled his eyes, like an impatient teenager. "This is nothing new. Hallucinations, fever, nausea—it’s all part of the natural progression of Luminis Dementia. You said that yourself."

David’s face tightened. "It’s not that simple, Alex. The data... it doesn’t add up. We’re definitely seeing neurotoxicity. This drug is dangerous."

Thorn’s eyes narrowed, his smooth facade cracking for a split second before his usual charm reasserted itself. "I don’t want to hear about data anomalies," he said, his voice hardening, the edge creeping in. "We’ve come too far for this. You’re blowing this out of proportion. You need to pull yourself together"

David stood, his chair scraping against the floor as he rose. “No, I’m not. These patients are dying faster than expected. The decline—it’s not just the disease. It’s the drug. We can’t go on with this study."

"Thorn," David began, keeping his tone steady, "I saw Gerald Sinclair today. He's been experiencing significant side effects from the Serpentin drug. Nausea, headaches—he's becoming more and more confused. It's not looking good. I think he’s not going to improve, and I think Briarwood needs to know about this."

Thorn's eyes narrowed, his posture shifting ever so slightly, an instinctive as he leaned forward, locking eyes with David. The smile that had previously adorned his face now replaced by a sharp and menacing glare.

"Briarwood?" Thorn’s voice was low, controlled, but there was a hard undertone. "Why the hell does Briarwood need to know? We don’t need him sniffing around. Not yet."

David paused, unsure how to respond, sensing the rising tension. He pressed on, "The situation with Sinclair could escalate. If it does, it's better to keep Briarwood in the loop. We need to flag this with him sooner rather than later. You know how these things can spiral."

Thorn’s expression darkened further. "I said no," he snapped. "There’s no need to involve him. You’re acting like this is the end of the line. For all we know, Sinclair could still recover. People bounce back, David. You’ve seen it before. If Briarwood gets wind of this, it’ll be him taking control, him making decisions, and I’m not letting that happen."

David's gut twisted, a flicker of unease running through him. He noted the cold edge to Thorn’s voice, the undercurrent of threat. Thorn wasn’t just annoyed; he was asserting dominance. David had heard the tone at a corporate retreat they’d attended not long ago. Thorn had ordered a flat white, but when it was brought to him, the server had mistakenly presented him a cappuccino instead. Thorn’s reaction had been swift and harsh. He’d slammed the cup down on the table, eyes narrowing as he glared at the young woman. “Do I look like someone who drinks *froth*?” he’d snapped, his voice loud enough for everyone in the room to hear. “What part of ‘flat white’ don’t you understand?”

The girl, shaking and humiliated, had muttered an apology, but Thorn wasn’t finished. “Perhaps it’s too much to ask for basic competence around here,” he’d continued, addressing the entire room now, making the girl feel small in front of everyone. David had watched, his discomfort growing. He didn’t like that, the way Thorn used his power to humiliate someone so publicly. But Thorn, of course, hadn’t cared. To him, it was just another display of his authority.

Shaking off the memory, David turned his attention to Thorn. He was smiling again, but this time it didn’t reach his eyes. "You’d be wise to let me handle this. Remember who’s in charge, David. We don’t want to make any unnecessary moves."

David stiffened, the subtle threat in Thorn’s tone making his skin prickle. There was no mistaking it—this was not a discussion. Thorn was setting the terms, and David was simply expected to follow. He tried to steady his breath, the unease now fully settling in his chest.

"OK, we’ll do it your way,” David said quietly, his words carrying the weight of reluctant compliance.

Thorn leaned back in his chair, his gaze softening. "Good. Keep it between us for now. The last thing we need is Briarwood stepping in and stirring things up."

David nodded, the conversation leaving him with a lingering sense of unease. Thorn was right about one thing—he had to be careful about who knew what. But as he left the room, David couldn’t shake the feeling that something was about to break, and he might not be able to control how it all played out.

Thorn planted both hands on the desk, leaning forward, his face inches from David’s. His voice dropped, dangerous now. "And you just listen to me. I don’t care what you think you’ve found. We’ve invested millions into this drug. Viperis can’t afford a setback. *You* can’t afford a setback. Just fix it."

David swallowed, his face pale but his resolve firm. "I can’t hide this data from the regulators. Keeping it from Briarwood is one thing – but not reporting it, that’s illegal. I won’t be part of this anymore, Alex. The data is clear. It’s not safe."

Thorn straightened, his eyes cold, calculating. "You don’t have a choice." He stood back, adjusting his cuffs. "You’re going to do what you’re told, because if you don’t, there won’t be anything left for you. No career. No reputation.”

David winced slightly as he stared at the man in front of him, wondering whether he’d notice the gently glowing screen of his cell-phone, face down just inches from Thorn’s right hand, recording every word of their conversation. Thorn’s cold expression seemed to say that he hadn’t. And with that, it was clear the conversation had ended—that Thorn considered the matter settled in his favour.

Thorn gave him one final hard stare before the rearranging his face into his trademark smirk. Then somehow, he rearranged himself into the guise of an old friend, casually arranging a catch-up, “Oh, by the way Joshi,” he preferred, “Viperis have bought a table at next week’s Neuro Health Foundation Charity Ball. I expect you to be there as my guest.”

He turned on his heel to walk out and stopped, adding as an afterthought, “Briarwood will be at the table, and those women from the charity. I expect you to be on your best behaviour.” The door closed softly behind him, as if nothing had happened at all.

David remained frozen for a moment, the faint buzz of adrenaline still pulsing. Then the realisation—the charity, they had referred every single trial participant to the clinic. They’d be up to their necks in this too. He lifted his phone from the desk, stopped the recording and pressed *save*.

**Chapter 11**

**London, September 2024**

**Recording**

Sarah Lawson was born in a small industrial town in South Yorkshire, long after the heyday of its once-thriving steel industry. Her parents were ordinary people, products of generations who had worked in mills and factories, and Sarah was deeply ordinary too. She’d grown up surrounded by the remnants of the town’s prosperity amongst the rusted steelworks, closed factories, and rows of weathered terraced houses,

Sarah had been raised with a deep respect for hard work and resilience. Her father worked in one of the last steel mills to close. In its heyday, the mill was a giant, roaring with heat and alive with heavy machinery. It produced miles of steel every day, feeding the demand for railways, ships, and construction. Shifts were long, the heat from the furnaces relentless. At the height of its success the mill had put food on the tables of over 6,000 families. It had even made the local paper, the Advertiser, and her dad and his shift had been photographed smiling will coal dust powdered faces under the headline *11-inch mill shatters European production record.* Though he showered at the mill, the coal dust got into everything, and he would come home after his shift with black speckles in his ears and the corners of his eyes. One day when Sarah was about 8 years old, he’d brought home a black cat meaning it to become a family pet. Black for luck. But when they’d bathed the animal, it’d turned out to be a Ginger. The tiny creature had quickly revealed a winning personality, and so they’d kept it anyway, accepting that for them, luck had never really been on the cards.

She’d visited the mill once, long after her father and the steel industry had long since died and after the mill had been converted into a heritage museum. Once a livelihood to hundreds it now employed no more than a dozen people, and its vast furnaces had been replaced by high-tech light shows with realistic sound effects.

At school Sarah had made a few friends— mostly just people to stand around with in the playground, chatting about nothing-in-particular. There were no shared passions or real connections. Occasionally, she'd tag along to a birthday party or a trip to the cinema if the ticket money could be spared, which wasn’t often. Most of the time, she preferred the comfort of her own company and the company of books.

Each week Sarah made the pilgrimage to the local library, striding confidently along the brick-built wall that ran the length of the made road, holding back the sloping grass verge that separated pedestrians from the traffic. When she’d read everything in the children’s section, which took no more than a year, Sarah moved on to the adult fiction section. She started with the classics, working her way through the shelves. She immersed herself in the worlds of Jane Austen, before discovering the sweeping dramas of Isabel Allende. Then came the thrillers of Margaret Atwood, whose sharp prose and complex characters captivated her. Sarah consumed everything she could find, from the dystopian visions of Aldous Huxley to the haunting narratives of Leo Tolstoy, ending with the dark, twisted tales of Iain Banks. No story was too daunting; she wanted it all. And in the end, as the town had slowly died, her voracious reading had been her ticket out and she’d left. Thanks to a bursary she’d been able to escape to university where she earned her degree in English Literature & Philosophy.

Growing up, Sarah’s grandmother, Iris, had been her favourite person. Every Sunday, she would visit Iris in her cozy home, eating rich tea biscuits slathered in butter and watching black and white movies on her ancient box television.

It started subtly at first, small lapses in memory that Sarah would gently overlook. Films watched a dozen times gradually became harder and harder for Iris to follow. Iris, once sharp and full of life, began to forget even the most familiar things. She would ask the same questions over and over, repeating stories she’d told a hundred times as if they were new. Eventually, Iris no longer recognized Sarah’s face, her voice, or even the sound of her name. It was as though she were being slowly but surely erased. Sarah watched helplessly as the vibrant, witty grandmother she had adored faded into a shadow of herself.

Now that she was a grown-up, little seemed to have changed. She missed Iris who’d Iris had always known exactly what to say when things went wrong. And now, Sarah found herself missing the simple things—the sound of Iris’s laughter, the way she would make tea and offer biscuits as they talked about everything and nothing, or how she would brush off her own troubles with a knowing smile, always more concerned with others than herself.

The same awkwardness that had haunted her school years lingered, and while others around her seemed to have seamlessly transitioned into the rhythms of adult life—making friends at work, organizing social gatherings—Sarah remained on the outside. Colleagues would invite her to after-work drinks or weekend barbecues, but she would usually decline with a polite excuse. When she did attend, she felt like she was fulfilling an obligation rather than enjoying herself. The conversations, the forced laughter, the clinking of glasses—it all felt distant, like watching life happen through a window.

Her phone rarely buzzed with messages from friends, and she found comfort in her solitude, filling her evenings with books or losing herself in half-watched television shows. It wasn’t that she disliked people, it’s just that she found them exhausting to be around.

Sarah’s enjoyed her mornings. They were as predictable as they were unremarkable. Each day began with the shrill sound of the alarm on her cell phone slicing through the stillness of her cramped, one-bedroom flat. The modest space, cluttered with mismatched furniture and stacks of half-read books, felt as tired as she did, bathed in the pale light of dawn filtering through the thin curtains. She swung her legs out of bed and reached for the phone with a practiced motion, silencing the alarm with a resigned sigh.

Her morning routine had become a ritual of resigned monotony, repeated so often it felt automatic. The narrow bathroom, with its slightly peeling wallpaper and dim lighting, greeted her with the same indifferent cold every morning. She stepped into the cramped shower, the water never quite reaching the right temperature, leaving her skin either too hot or faintly chilled. The lukewarm water slid over her as she stood still, staring blankly at the tiles, her mind already ticking through the uneventful day ahead.

After drying off without much urgency, she shuffled into the small kitchen, where the faded linoleum floor creaked beneath her slippers. The instant coffee jar sat by the sink, untouched since the night before. She spooned a heap of granules into a chipped mug, filled it with boiling water, and gave it a half-hearted stir. She never waited long enough for the crystals to dissolve completely. It didn’t matter anymore. The bitter tang of undissolved coffee clinging to her tongue was just part of the routine now, another familiar, unremarkable detail she didn’t care to fix. It wasn’t about enjoying the taste.

Her wardrobe, as monotonous and colourless as the rest of her life, was a sparse collection of uninspired, practical choices, each piece as forgettable as the next. She’d given up on the idea of accessories since her cousin had thoughtlessly informed her *you look like you’ve been dipped in glue and dragged through the jewellery section of Oxfam.*

The hangers barely rattled as she sifted through the familiar options, her fingers brushing past the same rotation of bland, muted tones: greys, beiges, and an occasional dark green that felt almost daring by comparison. Today, like nearly every other day, she reached for her well-worn navy-blue cardigan, the one with slightly frayed cuffs that she had been meaning to replace for months but never did. It was the easiest choice, hanging like a default setting in her wardrobe. Beneath it, she selected a plain, white blouse that had lost its crispness after too many washes and a pair of black trousers that blended into the background of her life, unremarkable and invisible.

Her frame possessed an elegance that could easily be striking, with pretty bones that suggested potential beauty, but her lack of effort left her charms hidden beneath a layer of indifference. Standing in front of the mirror, Sarah gathered her hair, her fingers moving mechanically, securing it into the same simple ponytail she had worn for years. Her hair, once lively and full of bounce, had become limp and lack-lustre, falling in flat, straight strands that clung to her scalp. The dull brown colour, now streaked with hints of grey that she hadn’t bothered to hide. Split ends and frizz poked out here and there, but she barely noticed them anymore. She pulled the ponytail tight, not out of care, but because it was what she always did—a gesture of habit.

Her eyes, framed by faint dark circles, stared back at her, hollow and listless. As she looked at her reflection, the pale skin of her face stood in stark contrast to the freckles scattered lightly across her nose and cheeks, distant echoes of days spent in the sun, when life had felt fuller, brighter.

Her lips, pressed into a thin line, held none of the softness or laughter they once did. Now, they were set in a way that hinted at resignation—a person going through the motions rather than embracing life. She wore no makeup, her face bare except for the faint traces of yesterday’s mascara smudged beneath her lower lash line. It gave her a tired, almost haunted look.

With a sigh, she grabbed her worn leather bag, filled with notes from various meetings with occasional doodles in the margins, a NeuroHealth Foundation-branded pen, and a small case containing the essentials: lip balm, a pack of tissues, paracetamol for the headaches that come after long meetings, and a few hair grips for when her ponytail inevitably starts falling apart. She thrust her cell phone, with its cracked screen into the inside pocket, zipping it up with a determined tug.

Today, like every other morning, Sarah joined the throngs of commuters pouring into the station. The early-hour crowds moved in a slow, mechanical rhythm, everyone absorbed in their own silent worlds. When the train arrived, she stepped on board, navigating the cramped carriage as it lurched forward. Squeezing past commuters clutching their phones or staring blankly into space.

Barely managing to find a seat, Sarah dropped into it with a small sigh, pressing her bag to her lap. She gazed out the fogged-up window at the familiar grey London, where the steady drizzle turned everything into a blur of wet brick and concrete. The passing scenery was an endless loop of Victorian terraces and corner shops with flickering neon signs. As the train groaned along its track, Sarah watched rain trickle down the glass.

Her stop was a 10-minute walk from NeuroHealth Foundation’s office, which was located in an unremarkable building on a busy London street, blending in with the surrounding urban sprawl. From the outside, the building a squat structure—four stories high, with large windows that reflected the dull, overcast sky and the bustling traffic below. The facade lined with narrow, nondescript balconies and a simple sign over the entrance that read “NeuroHealth Foundation” in understated, dark blue letters. The front of the building opened onto a wide pavement, the only splash of colour from a few planters of hardy shrubs that flank the glass doors. Nothing distinguished it from the dozens of offices scattered throughout the city.

As Sarah entered the office, the lobby’s worn carpet led her into a sea of beige walls. The harsh, unforgiving fluorescent lighting washed over everything, casting a pale glow. The open-plan office stretched before her, a grid of identical desks and half-empty filing cabinets, all blending into a monochrome blur. A few potted plants sat scattered near the windows, their leaves drooping, unable to thrive in the artificial light. The faint, stale smell of old coffee hung in the air, mingling with the ever-present scent of recycled paper.

As she made her way to her desk at the back, she passed her co-workers, heads bent over keyboards, their faces expressionless, murmuring their good mornings. Nothing ever seemed to change here. Each morning felt like the one before, each task like another drop in a never-ending pool of monotony.

Her desk, tucked away near the back of the office, was an island of organized chaos. Piles of paperwork teetered precariously, a mix of half-finished grant applications, worn-out files, and an assortment of sticky notes with scribbled reminders.

Sarah had come to the NeuroHealth Foundation, because she hoped to make a difference, however small. Each day at the office, she carried the memory of her grandmother as a reminder of why she chose this path. It was a commitment forged from the personal grief and loss she’d experienced.

Her morning would be an unbroken cycle of scanning emails, processing applications, and answering inquiries about the foundation’s latest initiatives. She had just settled into the familiar rhythm when an email landed in her inbox.

The subject line was simply “IMPORTANT”. Sarah almost scrolled past it, but something made her pause and click to open. The message was just two words: *"Listen carefully"*— an MP4 recording attached.

Sarah blinked at the screen, her mind trying to process the strangeness of it. There was no sender, the email had come from an address made up of a string of numbers and letters. No identifying information, no hint of context. It could be spam or malware—for a moment she wondered whether she should just delete it. But what if it weren’t malware, who would send this such an enigmatic message and why?

Her fingers trembled slightly as she opened the file. Maybe she was about to delete her whole hard-drive. But with the tedium of the morning stretching out before her, Sarah followed a reckless whim and clicked on the file, wondering how boring her life must be if an anonymous email passed for exciting. *You only live once.*

The sound quality wasn’t great, but Sarah could clearly hear two men in heated discussion. One pleading, the epitome of the voice of reason, and a second, an American accent, aggressive and dominating.

“You’re thinkin’ way too much about this!,” the American voice said, smooth and self-assured.

Sarah’s breath caught Sarah as she instantly recognised the voice as Alex Thorn. His tone and his distinctive Chicago accent impossible to mistake. She had met him several times during her work, as the Charity had supported the recruitment of patients into company’s latest clinical trial, the Serpentin study.

She remembered visiting the London Trials Clinic and meeting the research team— being introduced to the chief scientist and the doctor leading the trial. David somebody or other. Thorn had dominated the conversation then, effortlessly taking the wind out of everyone else's sails. She had encountered Thorn briefly again at a NeuroHealth Foundation event—a high-profile fundraiser where Viperis Therapeutics was one of the sponsors. Thorn had given a keynote speech, mingling with donors and influential figures.

The other voice was slower, more cautious, the accent screamed middle England, “It’s not that simple, Alex. The data... it doesn’t add up. We’re seeing—neurotoxicity. We can’t go on with this study. This drug is dangerous.”

“Let’s not get bogged down in data anomalies, alright?” Thorn snapped, his voice hardening. “We’ve come too far for this. Just handle it.”

Sarah’s pulse quickened, her hands tightening into fists as she tried to make sense of the unfolding conversation in real time. She could hardly process what she was hearing, but it was undeniable. The more she listened, the more it became clear: she had stumbled onto something pretty sinister. Sarah organised her thoughts; *clinical trial, people dying, cover-up.*

As the recording ended, Sarah sat frozen, the weight of the revelation pressing down on her chest, making it hard to breathe. Why had someone sent this to her? What were they expecting her to do with it? Did the men know their conversation had been recorded? Underneath the confusion, beneath the heavy fear that had begun creeping in, there was something else—a flicker, barely remembered, but undeniably there. It was the same spark of excitement she hadn’t felt in years, a distant echo of the thrill that had once driven her, back when she believed in making a difference.

Sarah felt a familiar sense of absurdity wash over her as she sat at her desk, clutching her headphones like a lifeline. She could feel the tension in her knuckles, the whiteness of her grip, as if holding onto them tighter would somehow anchor her to reality. The screen in front of her was now blank, the MP4 file closed, but her mind was still playing the conversation on a relentless loop, as though it had somehow developed a sadistic fondness for Alex Thorn’s insufferable voice.

She’d listened to it twice—once because she couldn’t quite believe what she was hearing, and then again, just to confirm that yes, indeed, the man she had once idolized was a first-class sociopath. "Alex Thorn: Hero, Philanthropist, Liar," she thought wryly. A title befitting one of those trashy documentaries you see late at night, narrated by someone with a voice so serious it’s borderline comical.

For years, Thorn had been a shining beacon in her world. His face had graced every glossy magazine and charity newsletter. His speeches—oh, those speeches—delivered with all the humility of a man who thought he might spontaneously sprout wings at any moment. She had watched him shake hands with everyone who mattered, including celebrities whose names she couldn’t quite place, but whose faces were forever frozen in that smug, photo-op-ready smile. Sarah had clung to his every word like a schoolgirl with a crush, believing that this man, this company, this miracle drug, would somehow make a difference.

And now? Now, here she was, sitting in an office that smelled vaguely of printer ink and stale coffee, holding onto evidence that could bring down a man who probably had five houses, a yacht, and a personal trainer who doubled as a life coach. She took a breath, trying to summon some sense of gravitas, but only succeeded in feeling like a ridiculous parody of an undercover investigator. Fiona would know what to do, she’d take it to Fiona and everything would be sorted.

Then suddenly, here she was, Sarah Lawson, saviour of the world—or at least, a very small, specific part of it—marching towards Fiona Carter’s office like she was in a courtroom drama. "Calm down," she told herself, rolling her eyes at her own melodrama. This wasn’t a movie. There would be no slow clap at the end of this.

Sarah was in a state of permanent awe when it came to Fiona. She was a force of nature, her presence commanding attention the moment she entered a room. Every aspect of her appearance was meticulously curated. Her tailored suits—always stylish yet never ostentatious—fit her like a glove, accentuating her poised silhouette while exuding an air of professionalism. The soft hues of her wardrobe complemented her complexion, and she paired them with exquisite accessories that whispered sophistication rather than shouted for attention.

Her hair, expertly styled into a sleek bob, framed her face perfectly, with not a strand out of place. Fiona’s makeup was subtle but effective. Her eyes, sharp and observant could hold anyone with a piercing gaze that could easily intimidate.

Beyond her appearance, Fiona carried herself with an air of confidence that was almost palpable. There was an intensity to her, a relentless drive that pushed her to excel. Fiona expected the same from those around her, her ambition often leaving little room for mediocrity. Fiona’s presence was often overwhelming for Sarah, creating an atmosphere where she felt perpetually inadequate.

Pausing at Fiona’s closed door, she tried to channel some sort of resolve, knowing full well she looked like someone on the brink of an emotional breakdown rather than a whistleblower. Still, she knocked, heart pounding, and then—because waiting was worse—pushed the door open.

“Fiona,” she said, voice quivering just slightly, “You need to hear this.”

Fiona, immaculately composed as always, glanced up from her computer. Sarah had to give her credit—Fiona was the type of woman who looked like she’d never once experienced the horror of smudged mascara or a badly timed sneeze. Every hair in place, her angular face a study in calm efficiency.

“What is it, Sarah?” Fiona’s voice was as sharp and no-nonsense as ever.

Sarah handed Fiona the memory stick and watched, half-horrified, half-amused, as Fiona slotted the memory stick into her lap top and pulled on her headphones. Fiona’s face remained perfectly impassive. Not even a flicker of shock crossed her eyes. When the audio finished, she placed the headphones down with a neat little flourish, as if they were a fragile piece of china.

“This is ridiculous,” Fiona said, in the same tone one might use to dismiss a poorly-made cup of tea. “It’s probably some prank or out-of-context nonsense.”

“Prank?” Sarah’s voice cracked with disbelief. Of course. Of course, Fiona wouldn’t react dramatically. "Just another thing to manage between meetings," Sarah thought dryly.

"Sarah, we can't afford to alienate companies like Viperis. Without them, we’d be back to fundraising with bake sales," Fiona continued, voice steady, as though they were discussing a mix up with the office supplies.

Sarah blinked, dumbfounded. *Really?* She stared at Fiona, suppressing a weird urge to laugh sparked by the absurdity of Fiona’s response.

“Fiona,” she said, forcing her voice to remain steady, “this isn’t just about fundraising. People are at stake here.”

Fiona waved a dismissive hand, “You’re overreacting. We can’t let ourselves be swept away by every whisper of concern. Focus on what truly matters.”

Fiona sighed, “I don’t think you’re hearing me. This gala is one of the most important events of the year. Our biggest donors will be there. It’s vital we make a strong impression, especially after the shaky press we’ve had lately. We need their support—now more than ever.”

“I know,” Sarah muttered, feeling the heat rise to her cheeks.

Fiona’s eyes softened slightly, but her voice remained firm. “Look, I get it. I know this whole thing has thrown you. But right now, our focus needs to be on the gala. You can’t afford to lose sight of that. I’m counting on you to be fully present.”

“I will be,” Sarah said, though she knew it wasn’t true. Not really. But she forced herself to smile. “I’ve already finalized the guest list and confirmed the venue. I’ll be ready.”

Fiona nodded, her expression still serious. “Good. I need you to be at the top of your game. Alex Thorn will be attending, along with other major players. This event could be a make-or-break for our funding this year.”

At the mention of Thorn, Sarah stiffened. Fiona didn’t notice.

“I want you to focus,” Fiona continued. “The charity needs all hands on deck. No more distractions, okay?”

“Okay,” Sarah said quietly, turning to leave. But as soon as the door clicked shut, her thoughts drifted right back to Viperis. To the recording. To the risks.

She knew where her focus should be—but she also knew where it needed to be.

**Chapter 12**

**Informed Consent**

David sat in one of the three turquoise armchairs in the consulting room, the kind of armchair that looked more comfortable than it was—hospital chic. The room was bathed in the sort of soft cream light that was meant to be soothing but mostly reminded him of a giant, buttered scone. Nearby, a vase of slowly wilting flowers sat obediently on a side table, radiating freshness like an overachiever at a yoga retreat. Lavender, blush pink, sunny yellow—it was as if someone had painstakingly picked the flowers to say, *‘Everything's fine, you're not in a hospital, you're in a magazine spread!’*

David wasn’t fooled. Every time he breathed the faint smell of the stagnant water in the vase, he felt a fresh wave of nausea. Time to consent the final patient to the Serpentine study. What option did he really have? He wondered whether he could get away with just standing up and leaving. Leaving before anything had been said, before any promises could be made.

Across from him, Margaret sat with her husband, Richard. Margaret petite, with a gentle roundness to her figure that added a softness to her appearance. Her hair, tinged with strands of grey, framed her face like a halo, the wisps catching the light. David noticed that she moved like a small bird, with a tendency tilt her head as if she were perpetually curious about the world around her.

Robert by contrast was a sturdy presence, his frame solid and reassuring. He had an improbable pair of hands—large and capable, like spades. His mop of curls, thick and unruly, framed his face, giving him an approachable, boyish charm, his pudgy, up-turned nose adding to his overall affability.

David took the odd pair in, “the owl and the pussy cat” he thought to himself, suddenly amused by the image that leapt into his mind, of Robert curled up and purring in an oversized basket. When Robert leapt to his feet and offered his hand, David took it feeling self-conscious at the sight of his relatively tiny fingers enveloped by Robert’s sausage-like digits.

Margaret did not offer her hand, but smiled weakly, with a timid “hello”. Her eyes had probably once seemed bright, but now they carried the telltale shadow of Luminis Dementia, one of the early signs creeping in like an unwelcome guest who refuses to leave. David had seen those eyes before.

Richard, with the look of a man ever the stoic, had his hand firmly clasped around hers, gripping it with the same resolve one might use to hold on to one’s ticket when running for a train. Though David had never met the pair before, he would have been willing to be that Margaret’s illness had shaken David to the core, even though his determined expression was one of a man who thought he could banish the disease away by sheer force of will—or, at the very least, out-stubborn it out, if only he put enough effort into it.

David glanced at the half-dead flowers. They were doing their best to be cheerful, but they, like Margaret, were clearly o the way out.

“I’m Dr Joshi”, David said somewhat redundantly waving in the general direction of the name tag clipped to the pocket of his scrubs. “I know that you’ve already had time to review the patient leaflet and consent form for the study and that Shelly, our research nurse, has walked you through everything”.

Margaret and Robert nodded, and so he continued, “I’m here to answer any remaining questions you might have. I have the consent form with me, in the event you decide to go ahead”.

They sat in silence for what might have been only a few seconds, though it stretched out painfully, feeling like minutes. No one spoke. The awkwardness hung heavy in the air, thick and stifling, as if waiting for someone—anyone—to break it.

David was the first to crumble and when he did speak he noticed that his voice seemed distant, as if he were merely a spectator to the conversation unfolding before him. “Margaret, I need to be clear that time is of the essence here,” he said, his words coming out almost mechanically. “Your condition is progressing rapidly, and in a month or so, you might not be able to consent for this trial. This may be your best and perhaps last opportunity to gain more time with your family. I understand how difficult this decision is, but the window for participating is closing fast.”

David mapped out the steps of the dance in his head, guiding Margaret and Robert through the trial information. The familiar rhythm of his words, each sentence well-practiced, reassuring, clinical. Yet he felt as though he were leading her, backwords, in heels and blindfolded, toward a precipice. He wanted, more than anything, for Margaret to say no. “No thank you, I’ll just get on with it”. But the felt powerless to stop as it an invisible force had gripped him and was pulling him forward with Margaret and Robert tethered to him. His hands felt cold and clammy as he offered her the final sheet to sign, the words "informed consent" a bitter irony as he hoped she wouldn’t give it.

Margaret’s brow furrowed slightly as she looked up from the consent form that David had handed to her. *Perhaps she’ll say “no” and walk away.* “Can you explain what will happen during the treatment? I want to know what to expect.”

For a split second, David hesitated. Her question offered him a narrow, fleeting final chance to steer her away from the edge. This was his chance to tell her about the side effects he’d read in the reports, the disturbing trends he’d noticed, or even the concerns he kept buried in the back of his mind. All it would take was a shift in his tone, a small hint of his own unease—just enough to cast a shadow on her confidence. He imagined himself looking her in the eyes and saying, “There are risks, Margaret, serious ones. I’d think twice if I were you.”

But he didn’t. Instead, the rehearsed answer slipped out automatically, like a reflex.

“The treatment itself is a straightforward process,” he began, feeling his face settle into the professional mask he wore in these situations. “We’ll start with a baseline assessment, and then administer the medication in carefully measured doses. You’ll be closely monitored throughout for any reactions. It’s designed to be as safe as possible, and we’ll be here every step of the way.”

David nodded, offering a reassuring smile, and ploughed on. “On the morning of the treatment, you’ll come into the clinic. The drug will be infused into a vein in your arm, and the whole process will take about an hour. Before the infusion, we’ll perform an MRI scan of your brain to assess your current condition. Later, after a week or so, there will be another MRI to track any changes.”

Margaret’s eyes widened with a mix of curiosity and concern.

“We’ll monitor your progress closely,” David explained. “We’ll keep track of your mental state. This will include regular check-ups and scans. And assessments to see how you’re responding to the treatment and to manage any potential side effects.”

Richard, who had been listening intently, nodded. “And how often will we need to come in for these assessments?”

David took a moment to consider his response. “Initially, you’ll come in weekly. Depending on how things go, the frequency of the visits might change.” *They’ll probably end abruptly*, David thought but did not say.

Margaret gave a small nod, absorbing the information. “Thank you for explaining everything,” she said, her voice steady despite the anxiety in her eyes.

David offered a reassuring smile. Margaret reached for the pen lying on the table, an oversized, clunky click pen—the kind that holds multiple ink colours. She fumbled with it for a second, flicking through the options—red, green, black—before finally landing on blue. The pen let out a loud, satisfying *click* as if it had decided the fate of the moment.

Margaret’s hand trembled slightly as she held the pen over the line for her signature, her eyes scanning the document with a mixture of resolve and apprehension. Richard’s hand remained tightly clasped around her left. *Is she reading the information? They never do that! She’s going to back down.*

Even as the thought of a reprieve entered his mind, David heard himself urge Margaret on in a reassuring tone. “Margaret, once you’ve signed these forms, you’ll be officially enrolled in the trial. I know it’s a lot to process, but this is a critical step towards getting the treatment.”

Margaret nodded, her gaze steady despite the tremor in her voice. “I just want to have more time with my boys,” she said softly. “Even if it’s just a little more time.”

Richard squeezed her hand gently. “We’re doing this because it’s our best chance,” he said, his voice calm but resolute. “We’ve got to take it.”

Margaret’s pen moved across the paper with a decisive stroke, her expression a blend of hope and anxiety. And it was done.

David watched her sign, “You’ve made an important decision today. The clinic will be in touch shortly to schedule the appointment for the drug infusion. In the meantime, try not to worry too much. You’ve taken a significant step forward.”

Margaret and Richard stood up, their expressions reflecting a mixture of relief and lingering anxiety. David extended his hand, and in turn they shook it firmly.

“Thank you, Dr. Joshi,” Margaret said, her voice carrying a note of quiet determination.

“Of course,” David replied. “Go home, try to relax, and focus on your family. We’re here to support you every step of the way.”

David imagined himself ripping up the consent form. Or maybe losing it on his way back to his office. He leaned forward to shake their hands, stood, and banging his knees on the coffee table. David turned to the door with as much dignity as he could muster and left the room without looking back and focused on the sound of his own footsteps echoing lightly down the corridor.

His office door loomed in front of him, and he pushed it open almost mechanically, stepping into the familiar chaos of papers. David's eyes landed on the consent form in his hand. All that remained was for him to enter Maragret’s details into the system and file the form.

Without letting himself think too much, David crossed the room and pulled open his desk drawer and slid the consent form inside, shut the drawer and turned the key in its lock.

Gathering his things took longer than usual. He stacked a few stray files with deliberate slowness. Then he slid his pen into his pocket and reached for his stethoscope, coiling it into a drawer, shrugged out of his white coat and draped it over the back of the chair.

His legs carried him toward the exit of the clinic. The crisp air hit his face as he stepped outside, and with a sense of relief, David headed home.

**Chapter 13**

**Splurge**

Fiona stepped off the crowded Tube at Bond Street station, her movements sharp and precise, a result of years spent navigating the chaos of London’s underground. The moment the doors slid open, she was swallowed by a wave of commuters, the press of bodies and the hum of noise almost suffocating. She pushed through with practiced determination, her shoulders brushing against those of strangers. She rode the escalators to the ticket hall and took the stairs to exit onto Oxford Street where the relentless tide of shoppers swarmed in every direction.

The automatic doors at the grand entrance of the department store opened before Fiona like the gates of a gilded palace, the air inside heavy with the scent of high-end perfumes. With a practiced stride, she bypassed the throngs of shoppers milling around the displays, her heels clicking purposefully on the smooth marble floor as she made her way toward the lifts. Most people seemed oblivious to the lifts, just people with prams, in wheelchairs and the elderly seemed to have spotted them. But they were so much more pleasant than the zig-zag snake of escalators that stretched up through the centre of the store. So much more civilised. She pressed the button and the sleek steel doors slid open. She rode in welcome solitude to the third floor and then made her way past the shelving units showcasing select luxury items; handbags, scarves and jewellery, artfully displayed like artifacts in a museum. She headed towards a tall, immaculately dressed concierge who was standing at the sleek marble reception desk.

“Good afternoon, madam.” he said, inclining his head politely. “How may I assist you today?”

"Good afternoon," Fiona replied, adjusting the strap of her handbag, "I have an appointment with Eleanor."

“Of course,” he replied smoothly, his fingers already gliding over the tablet on the desk as he confirmed her booking. “Ah Miss Carter, Eleanor is expecting you. May I take your coat?”

Fiona slid off her overcoat and handed it over. "Thank you," she said, glancing around the opulent lounge.

“This way, please.” The concierge gestured towards a corridor lined with soft lighting and muted artwork. “Eleanor’s suite is just through here.”

The private suite was furnished in warm, inviting tones, with a glass table neatly arranged with high-end fragrance samples and a few handwritten notes detailing new arrivals. “Would you care for something to drink while you wait? A glass of sparkling water, perhaps, or a coffee?”

“Sparkling water would be lovely,” Fiona said, giving him a polite smile.

“Of course.” He disappeared briefly, returning with a tall glass that he paced gently on the table beside her.

“Here you are, madam,” he said, “Eleanor will be with you shortly. Please, make yourself comfortable.”

A few minutes after the concierge’s departure, the door opened again, and a poised, elegantly dressed woman entered, “Hello, Ms. Carter, I’m Eleanor. Thank you for waiting—I’m so glad to assist you today.”

“Thank you, Eleanor,” Fiona replied, setting her glass down with a small smile. "As I mentioned on the phone, I’m looking for something that strikes just the right note for a gala this evening."

“Absolutely,” Eleanor nodded, already assessing Fiona’s style with a practiced eye. “Let me show you what I have in mind.”

With a graceful motion, Eleanor drew back the heavy curtainof the changing space, revealing a beautiful mirror framed in gold. With a graceful flourish, the shopper brought in an array of carefully selected dresses, each one hanging elegantly on a stylish rack.

Fiona's heart raced. She was determined to find something that captured the essence of understated elegance for the gala dinner that evening. The stylist led her through racks of luxurious fabrics and impeccably crafted designs, offering insights and suggestions as they sifted through each possibility. After a thorough examination, they narrowed it down to two striking dresses.

“Let’s try these two shall we?” Eleanor suggested. *We?*

For a moment, Fiona was transported back to a childhood memory, a fleeting image flashing through her mind of herself and her little sister, giggling as they rummaged through their mother’s closet, draping scarves around themselves, trying on high heels that were miles too big. And then she was back in the room. Grown up Fiona on a mission to finding an outfit that would make jaws drop.

Fiona felt the weight of her decision as she slipped into the demure Dior dress, the fabric flowing elegantly around her, brushing lightly against her skin. The dress was everything she had envisioned—tasteful and sophisticated, the kind of piece that whispered luxury rather than flaunted it. Its delicate embellishments caught the light in just the right way, adding a subtle sparkle to the timeless silhouette that draped perfectly over her figure. As she examined herself in the mirror, she could already picture the understated grace it would project at tonight’s gala. It was exactly what she had imagined wearing—something that spoke of quiet confidence, effortless charm.

But then came the second option. The moment she stepped into the Versace, she could feel a shift. This dress was different—bold, unapologetic. The form-fitting design hugged her curves in all the right places, the deep neckline and sleek fabric radiating a kind of sensual power. It was sexy, undeniably so, a dress that would command attention from the moment she entered the room. It was the kind of dress that made a statement, that demanded to be noticed. She felt a surge of excitement, imagining the way heads would turn as she walked through the crowd.

The personal shopper, expertly attuned to her indecision, began showcasing accessories. She placed a pair of Christian Louboutin heels beside the hangers—striking, with their signature red soles. A snake-skin Valentino clutch shimmered under the soft lighting, its sleek design a perfect match for either choice. Each piece exuded luxury, complementing both looks with an air of refinement.

As Fiona deliberated, leaning once more toward the classic, elegant Dior, her phone buzzed, breaking her concentration. Pulling it from her pocket, her heart skipped a beat at the sight of the message from Thorn: *Looking forward to tonight. Should be a great evening.*

As CEO Fiona had naturally been assigned a prime seat at the gala, positioned with key donors she was meant to charm, being as she was the face of the NeuroHealth Foundation. It was the spot everyone expected her to take: close to the foundation’s biggest supporters, a place from which she could network, guiding conversations toward future funding, new initiatives, and strategic partnerships. But weeks ago, when the seating chart was first circulated, she felt a pang of disappointment at the sight of Thorn’s name on a different and exceedingly dull table.

Sitting at her desk, the seating plan open before her, Fiona’s fingers lingered over his name. In a moment of reckless impulse, she moved herself to his table. Only later did she realize she could have just as easily shifted Thorn to the head table, but by then, it was too late. The seating plans had been printed on vellum in elegant gold leaf, and her impulsive choice was set in ink.

A few eyebrows were raised, but Fiona let any suspicion roll off her back. It didn’t matter what the staff thought, or how the donors might whisper about her seeming lapse in attention. In fact, there was a strange thrill in knowing that her intentions were transparent to anyone who dared to look close enough.

So now, it was no longer just about what to wear to the gala; it was about making an impression—on him. Fiona hadn’t felt this kind of anticipation in a long time, and it made her feel unsteady. She could already picture the evening unfolding in her mind’s eye: the moment she would step into the room and catch Alex Thorn’s gaze. She imagined how he might pause, mid-sentence, imagining his reaction with almost aching clarity: the subtle hitch of his breath, the way his gaze might linger on her, scanning every inch, before he’d remember himself and put on that trademark smirk that always made her heart race.

What would he think of her? Would he let his admiration show, just for a second? Would he lean in close as they exchanged pleasantries, his hand grazing hers, their connection undeniable to anyone watching? In her mind, she was already there. Fiona felt a rush of determination; she was done playing it safe.

Without a second thought, she turned to the personal shopper. "Please ring up the Versace," she said, her voice filled with new certainty. A rush of boldness surged through her as she added, "I'll take the Louboutins and the clutch too."

**Chapter 14**

**Gala**

David adjusted the stiff collar of his shirt for the fourth time, tugging at his bow tie as if it could somehow loosen the noose tightening around his neck. The scratchy dinner jacket, now accessorized with a few white hairs from his wife’s dog, Snickers, felt like a straitjacket. When had he last worn this suit? Was it for a wedding or perhaps a funeral—hard to remember when both events feel equally grim in this getup. The jacket, which smelled faintly of booze and bad decisions, clearly hadn’t been dry-cleaned since its last outing.

He had scanned the room as he entered the grand hall, taking in the massive chandeliers that dangled like glowing moons, casting soft pools of light over a sea of tuxedos and evening gowns. The air hummed with polite chatter—the kind of mindless conversation that felt like a group therapy session for the socially awkward.

David’s looked as uncomfortable as he felt. He was not a man who took comfort in secrets—especially not when they were his own. Secrets meant vulnerability, and David hated the feeling of being exposed, even when there was no clear threat of exposure.

As he scanned the room, his eyes flicking from face to face, his mind was on high alert. Each interaction felt like a potential trap, where he might let something slip. A smile could be hiding a judgment, a word exchanged in the corner of the room could be the start of something dangerous. *Best behaviour.* Thorn had been clear in his warning. Maybe it would be better to speak with no-one.

His feet carried him through the room with calculated care, dodging eye contact in fear of sparking conversation. He forced himself to stay composed. This wasn’t just a room full of colleagues or acquaintances. It was a minefield, and he could step on a trigger at any moment.

After Thorn had left his office, the *invite* to the gala still hanging in the air, David had opened up a browser on his laptop and searched the *About Us* section of the NeuroHealth Foundation Website, his eyes alighting on an image of Sarah. He’d met her a few times before, and she’d seemed nice—earnest and dull, but nice. His primary focus was on finding her now.

He’d glanced at the seating plan earlier and realized he was destined to share a table with Sarah, Thorn, Fiona, and Briarwood—quite the party. With a knot of apprehension tightening in his stomach, he scanned the crowd for her, not entirely sure how much she’d resemble her website mugshot—people so seldom did —hoping to spot her before she spotted him.

A waiter appeared at his elbow, offering a tray of champagne flutes shimmering under the chandelier’s glow. David accepted one reflexively, catching a glimpse of his tense reflection in the mirror on the wall behind the man. A quick thought flashed through his mind: perhaps it would be wiser not to drink, to stay alert and keep his wits about him. But the prospect of sitting with dry nerves through three courses at a table with Thorn and Briarwood seemed a terrible option. With a single, decisive motion, he downed the glass, the chill of the champagne spreading through him, soothing the raw nerves that were already fraying.

"Wait," he called to the waiter, who was already moving on to the next guest. David quickly swapped his empty glass for a fresh one, tossing it back nearly as fast as the first. By the time he spotted Thorn, he’d downed a third and then a fourth, before finally deciding to cut himself off.

His heart raced as he watched Thorn spot him from his vantage across the room, a sly grin spreading across his face. With a crystal glass in hand, Thorn glided through the crowd, his stride confident. David’s world seemed to tilt ever so slightly, and in an instant the soothing balm of the spread across his nerves by the champagne suddenly evaporated. David’s grip tightened around his now empty glass, like a child who’d been unexpectedly slipped out of his water wings grasping for the side of the pool, sinking faster than he could react.

“Joshi,” Thorn said smoothly, a sly smile curling at the corners of his mouth, as if he found genuine amusement in David’s visible discomfort. His eyes flicked over David’s cheap dinner jacket, an unspoken judgment flickering across his face. Without a word, he reached out and lightly brushed the white hairs from David’s right shoulder, as if the act were entirely casual. But the movement was deliberate, almost theatrical, emphasizing how closely Thorn was observing him “Hope you’ve got things under control. No need for panic about — well you know. We’re all on the same side.”

His voice dripped with condescension; each syllable carefully crafted to make David feel smaller. The way Thorn leaned in, reminiscent of a used car salesman trying to seal the deal with a hug. Stone cold sober, the bastard.

“I’m perfectly fine, Thorn,” David replied, his voice steadier than he felt. He straightened his posture, trying to reclaim some sense of authority in the conversation. “Just here to enjoy the evening like everyone else.”

Thorn placed an arm around David’s shoulder like an old friend, his voice dropping to a low murmur that barely cut through the laughter around them. “I’m trustin’ you to keep quiet, Joshi. No need to get the regulator involved, right? It’s better for all of us if we keep this in-house”

David’s stomach churned. “No, Alex, I—well I, it’s just that…,” he stammered, trying to find the right balance between conviction and caution. “We have a responsibility to the patients and the trial. I mean, ignoring it isn’t right, but…” He trailed off, his voice wavering as he searched Thorn's expression for any sign of understanding or agreement.

“I just think we need to be careful,” he added, the words escaping more as a plea than a proclamation. He felt as if he were walking a tightrope, desperate to keep his balance while trying to maintain a façade of confidence.

Thorn’s smile faded, and an unsettling edge crept into his voice. “"Right or wrong, Joshi, you gotta remember who’s got the power here. It’d be smart for us to keep this between us, understand? No need to air dirty laundry,…” he paused to smooth down David’s lapel for effect, “..when we both know how things work.”

David struggled to meet his gaze, feeling a weight pressing down on him. The flicker of determination in his eyes dimmed, and he found his voice wavering. “I don’t know if I can just ignore something this serious,” he said, though his tone lacked conviction. “We owe it to them to do the right thing.” Why couldn’t he just keep his mouth shut? He could feel the champagne in his veins, turning to something unpleasant—why had he let himself drink it?

Thorn’s gaze hardened as he leaned stepped away, facing David full on, his voice conspiratorial, “David, we need to have a serious talk. You *really* need to pull it together. We can’t afford any mistakes—*not* now. You know what’s at stake here, don’t you?”

David absorbed the weight of Thorn’s words like a sponge in a muddy puddle. He opened his mouth to respond, but the protest died in his throat. Thorn’s intensity was palpable, leaving little room for debate.

“Just remember,” Thorn continued, straightening up and flashing a disarming smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes, “the best way forward is to keep things quiet. We both have our reputations to protect.” With that, he turned and walked away, leaving David standing there, unease knotting in his stomach as he contemplated the implications of their conversation.

When dinner was announced the crowd began to stream toward the ornate circular tables and David was swept along with them. His table loomed directly ahead, and a knot of unease tightened in his stomach as he approached. Already seated were Fiona, the steely head of the charity; Sarah, who looked just as ill at ease as he felt; Thorn, ever the smooth operator; and, of course, the familiar face of Lord Adrian Briarwood.

David ran a quick mental catalogue of the small talk he'd honed over the years to get him through events like this—family, weather, travel, politics. Nowhere on his list were conspiracies and cover ups. He’d told himself he’d be OK.

He knew he would need another drink—or several—to steady his nerves. He could already imagine the conversations swirling around the table. He could feel the tightness in his chest as he took his seat between Sarah and Briarwood. He gave Sarah a quick nod. She smiled back weakly, tugging at the neckline of her dress—a dated number in a deep purple. She looked every bit as uncomfortable as he felt —like she was trying not to feel out of place.

"David," Briarwood greeted him smoothly, leaning back in his chair with the practiced ease of a man who had never doubted his own authority. "Nice of you to join us."

David forced a smile, though he couldn’t help but notice Briarwood’s hand, which lingered too long on the edge of his glass. Did he just tap it twice? Or was it three times? Was it a signal?

"How are you, Dr Joshi?" Fiona's voice cut through his thoughts, sharp and to the point. She raised an eyebrow, eyes flicking briefly to his jacket. He realized too late that he’d been absent mindedly picking at the lingering dog hairs.

"Yes, yes, fine," he muttered, brushing his lapel in a flustered motion that only seemed to draw more attention to the stray hairs.

The conversation at the table began innocently enough—talk of the charity’s achievements, a few polite remarks about the food which David barely touched, and Alex tossing in some self-congratulatory comments about Viperis Therapeutics’ "groundbreaking" work. But David’s attention kept drifting to Briarwood. The man exuded an unnerving calm, a serene confidence that made David itch with discomfort. Did he know about the safety data? Had he seen a report indicating that Margaret—and others—were ticking time bombs? What about Sinclair—had he spoken to Briarwood?

Briarwood caught David's gaze and gave him a small nod. That small gesture made David’s pulse quicken. What did that mean? Was it acknowledgment? A warning? Briarwood’s fingers drummed lightly on the table, a casual, steady rhythm. Was that a signal too? Was he trying to tell David something?

But there was no dramatic outburst, no shocking confrontations. If Briarwood had got wind of anything he was playing his cards close to his chest. And so the evening simply unfolded, with the usual glamour—sparkling chandeliers, silver candelabras casting their flickering light over the tables, and guests in their impeccable evening wear, murmuring and clinking glasses. As the meal drew to an end, and the dessert plates were being cleared away, Fiona reluctantly pushed her chair back, awkwardly rising to her feet to polite but distracted applause. She made her way to the front of the room with a visibly unsteady gait. Game on.

She reached the podium and cleared her throat. The microphone squealed a little, causing a ripple of discomfort to pass through everyone in the room.

"Ladies and gentlemen,” she began, her voice high pitched and strained. Thank God she’d written it all down. “Thank you all so much for being here tonight, “she continued, glancing down to the sheet of A4 on the podium in front of her”, It’s truly heartwarming to see so many of you gathered in support of our cause. As you know, the NeuroHealth Foundation is dedicated to raising awareness and funding for groundbreaking research into neurodegenerative diseases, including Luminis Dementia. We’ve made great strides this year, but there is still so much more to be done. Your generosity tonight will make a significant difference in advancing our work and helping those affected by these devastating conditions.”

“I’d also like to take a moment to thank our wonderful sponsors and all the individuals who have donated such amazing items for tonight’s auction. Without your support, events like this would not be possible. Together, we can create a brighter future for those living with neurodegenerative diseases.”

She looked out at the audience, trying to regain her focus, but the faces were already starting to blur. Feeling desperate to step away from the limelight, Fiona skipped forward, turning to the second page of her speech, scanning for the end of it,

“Now, I encourage you all to bid generously and enjoy the evening. Every contribution counts. Thank you again for your continued commitment to our cause."

The first item was a case of vintage Bollinger. The auctioneer, a professional hired for the event, seemed to be growing impatient. There were a few polite but lacklustre raises of hands, the bidding creeping forward slowly.

Fiona pressed on, trying to inject energy into her voice. “This next item,” she continued, “is an exclusive experience that promises to be unforgettable—a week in the Swiss Alps at a luxury resort. We’re confident it will be an investment in both your enjoyment and in the cause…” She waited for the expected bids, but the room seemed to hold its breath, too hesitant. Only a few tentative hands were raised.

By the time the auction wrapped up, Fiona's attempts to steer the evening back on course had largely failed. The numbers were lower than expected—the bids sparse and reluctant. Fiona returned to her seat, a heavy sense of defeat hanging over her. At least she could still hold on to the hope of an exciting evening ahead with Alex to redeem the night. But as she glanced in his direction, expecting to catch his eye, she was met with a sudden coldness. Alex, who had been warm and engaging earlier, didn't even acknowledge her return, his gaze never straying her way.

Sarah, sitting beside him, shifted in her seat. She looked as if she wanted to disappear, shrinking into the fabric of her off the peg dress. Completely out of place. Her hands were fidgeting in her lap, fingers twisting together, betraying her anxiety. Alex seemed to be starting up a conversation with Sarah, a strange intense look on his face as though he expected her to have something important to say. Surely, he couldn’t be interested in *her*?

"You’ve been quiet," Alex had said, his voice slick as he turned toward Sarah, his smile barely masking the condescension. "Enjoying the evening?"

Sarah had blinked, startled at suddenly being addressed. She gave a nervous laugh, her hand fluttering up to adjust a piece of hair that didn’t need adjusting. "Oh, yes. It’s... very grand."

She glanced at David for a moment, as if silently pleading for help. David cleared his throat, trying to shift the focus away from her, but Alex had already lost interest and turned back to Briarwood, whose serene face was now occupied with his wine glass.

"To success, eh?" Alex said, raising his glass to Briarwood in a toast sounded to David both triumphant and a little bit menacing.

David hesitated before raising his glass, offering it up to clink in cheers, watching as Alex and Briarwood exchanged looks.

Sarah's hand brushed against his as they reached for their glasses, and David had jumped a little. Sarah quickly withdrew, muttering a quiet apology, her cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

From across the table, David noticed Fiona shuffle her chair and lean toward Thorn. She brushed a stray hair behind her ear, her fingers lightly lingering near his collar for a heartbeat. Thorn responded with a charming smile, his hand resting casually on the back of Fiona's chair, a gesture that felt overly intimate. Sarah had noticed the exchange too.

Pulling his eyes away from the spectacle in front of him, David leaned toward Sarah, his voice low.

David's voice wavered slightly as he spoke, his eyes scanning the room, searching for any sign of understanding. "It’s funny, isn’t it? How sometimes the most unexpected things come to light at events like this." He forced a casual smile, but it felt strained, as if he were waiting for a response, for some spark of recognition, something to affirm that what he had done—sending the recording to Sarah—was the right move.

Sarah, focused on the delicate arrangement of her food, furrowed her brow, missing the undertone in his words. “Yeah, I guess that’s true,” she replied, her thoughts elsewhere. “People do tend to let their guards down at events like these.”

David continued, his gaze lingering on her as he took a sip of his drink and tried again, “It’s fascinating to think about how close some people are to what they’re really trying to hide.” Sarah seemed absorbed in her own reflections as he added, “Sometimes, all it takes is a little nudge for everything to fall into place.”

He suddenly realized with annoyance that Sarah was oblivious to the message he was trying to get across to her, he would have to be much more direct in his approach. So, he simply said, "We need to talk. Soon."

Sarah's eyes flickered, he imagined in recognition, her brow furrowing for just a moment before she nodded, a slight tension creeping into her posture. It was the reaction he’d been hoping for. There was no hint of calculation, no clever manoeuvring.

And in that moment, David realized something unsettling—Sarah might be the only person here who wasn’t playing a game. Everyone else had an agenda. But Sarah? She wasn’t wrapped up in the schemes or the manipulation. She might be the one person he could trust.

**Chapter 15**

**Discretion**

Alex Thorn stood by the window of the Hotel bar, staring out into the London night. He could still feel the unease from the charity auction earlier that evening. It had been a disaster. The glitzy affair, which was supposed to raise hundreds of thousands for the charity, had barely scraped by. A couple of companies had bid on overpriced team away days—hardly the kind of donations that would make a difference. The holiday package, which had been generously donated, went for a fraction of its worth. Thorn had been embarrassed, watching the awkward exchanges as the auctioneer tried desperately to drum up excitement, his smile growing more forced by the minute. It had all felt... off.

When Fiona had returned to the table after the bidding, he had been glad to find an excuse to slip away. Her presence was too insistent, too demanding, like she expected something from him that he had no intention of giving. He couldn’t fathom why she seemed to think they had some kind of relationship—what did she imagine they shared? It was beyond him.

He had been polite, of course. Social niceties demanded it. He indulged her with polite chatter, nodding at the right moments and offering the occasional laugh, all the while feeling an increasing urge to escape. The thought of spending more time with Fiona, having her continue to fixate on him as if there was something more to their interaction, felt cloying. She wasn’t subtle in her pursuit, and it was becoming more than a little grating.

The bar was softly lit, its cosy softness and the intimacy of the venue a stark contrast to the bustling gala dinner he had just attended. Now, leaning back in his chair, Thorn was enjoying the solitude of the bar, a vodka martini served in its iconic glass on the table beside him. He had invited Adrian Briarwood to join him here, expecting that this setting would allow them to converse quietly, away from the cacophony of the gala.

He’d been half-surprised when Briarwood had agreed to the plan—after all, it was usually Briarwood calling the shots, not the other way around. The fact that Briarwood had even agreed to show up at all said something about the shift in dynamics. Thorn couldn’t help but feel a small sense of satisfaction as he watched Briarwood approach. Thorn felt a wave of relief wash over him.

In the quiet setting of the hotel bar, Thorn sensed an opportunity to cement the reshaping of the power dynamic between them. Here, away from prying eyes and the chatter of the gala, he could recalibrate his position and assert his influence without interruption.

Briarwood slid into the seat opposite Thorn, exuding a weariness born not of physical exhaustion but from the relentless pressure of politics and business. He ordered a malt whiskey with a curt nod to the waiter and offered Thorn a thin-lipped smile, the façade of ease barely masking his unease.

“So,” Briarwood ventured, leaning forward slightly, “why are we here?”

Thorn shrugged, his gaze flicking to the polished surface of the bar, a feigned nonchalance, “Too many flapping ears at the gala. You know how it goes.”

“Of course.” Briarwood sipped his whiskey, letting the pause stretch just long enough to keep Thorn on edge, but this time, it was Thorn who had the upper hand, “What is it?”

“It’s about the clinical trial. A few patients had bad reactions. Some died. Not ideal, but it’s within the margin of risk we expected.”

Briarwood's expression tightened, his eyes narrowing slightly as he processed the words. For a brief moment, he didn’t respond, his mind racing through the implications of what Thorn had just said. Bad reactions. Some deaths. Not ideal, but within the expected margin of risk. It was the kind of clinical trial news that could cripple a company if the wrong people got hold of it.

He leaned back in his chair, his fingers tapping rhythmically on the armrest as he tried to keep his emotions in check. Briarwood had been in the business long enough to know that this kind of thing—unexpected deaths, particularly—couldn’t just be brushed off. It didn’t matter what the margins were or how "expected" the risks had been. This was a potential PR disaster waiting to explode.

“What do you mean, 'within the margin of risk'?” Briarwood’s voice was measured, but there was a hard edge to it now.

He met Thorn’s gaze with a quiet intensity. “I need more than just assurances, more than just a throwaway line about expected risk. What’s the real story here? How bad is it, and what are we doing to cover our tracks?”

He had dealt with the issue, taken control, and now he was ready for some acknowledgment. "The important thing is we’ve kept it contained," he said, his tone dripping with confidence. "The regulator hasn’t seen anything out of the ordinary, and the data’s being handled. No one outside the trial team knows the full story. Joshi had a bit of a wobble, but don’t worry—I’m takin’ care of it."

He expected a nod, maybe even a few words of praise for his quick thinking, his ability to stay ahead of the curve. But Briarwood didn’t give him that. Briarwood wasn’t impressed.

Instead of the congratulations Thorn had anticipated, Briarwood’s voice cut through the tension, cold and measured. "Containment? You think that's enough?" His eyes locked onto Thorn’s, no warmth in them, just a steely calculation. "You think the regulator’s the only problem here?"

"This isn’t just about keeping it under wraps, Thorn. If we haven’t come clean and anything leaks, if someone connects the dots, it’ll blow up in our faces, and we’ll be scrambling to salvage what's left." Briarwood’s eyes flashed with impatience. "You think Joshi's your only problem? If you don’t start thinking bigger, you’ll end up sinking this whole thing."

Thorn tried again to pull the conversation back, to sound as if he were discussing nothing more serious than a minor accounting error. “This is standard for a drug at this stage. Luminis Dementia isn’t exactly a walk in the park. But the benefits, Adrian, far outweigh the risks. You’ve seen the projections—once this drug hits the market, it’s gonna revolutionize the field. A few hiccups now are just a small price to pay.”

Briarwood remained silent for a moment, staring down at his drink. Thorn could almost see the wheels turning in Briarwood’s head, calculating risk and reward, scandal and survival. “Alex, I need you to make sure this won’t come back to bite us.”

“Trust me, Adrian,” Thorn replied, the confidence in his voice now unwavering. “Everything is under control. Joshi will keep his mouth shut. And Serpentin will be out there saving lives, and we’ll be the ones who helped make it happen. We’ll be untouchable.”

Briarwood nodded, though he didn’t look convinced. “Have the data file shipped over to me,” he demanded. “I need to know exactly what I'm dealing with—if this gets out, it could bury me politically, especially if anyone connects the dots on the shares.”

Thorn nodded, a sense of triumph swelling in his chest. “I’ll have everything sent over tomorrow.”

Thorn needed something to seal the deal, something to ensure that Briarwood stayed on his side, and more importantly, stayed quiet. He could see the cracks in Briarwood's cool facade—his unease, the faint flicker of worry. He had to exploit it, turn it to his advantage before Briarwood had the chance to start thinking about his own escape.

"Look, I get it, Briarwood," Thorn said, his voice low and deliberate. "But let’s be honest here. You and I both know that some of the stuff we’ve been involved in... well, it wouldn’t exactly stand up to scrutiny, would it?"

He watched Briarwood’s face closely, noting the almost imperceptible shift in his posture. Thorn knew he’d struck a chord.

"I mean, between you, me, and the rest of the board," he continued, his voice laced with quiet menace, "if someone—just someone—started digging into the past, all that... well, let’s call it creative accounting... might come to light, wouldn’t it?"

Thorn let the words hang in the air for a moment, watching Briarwood’s eyes flicker. "The thing is, you can’t always control how things play out when people start asking the wrong questions. We’ve both got a lot to lose here, Briarwood. So let’s make sure we’re on the same page, yeah? I’ve got the reins on this, and I’ll keep it all locked down. Keep your head down, and everything will stay just the way it is."

Thorn's gaze sharpened, the threat veiled but clear. "We both know how easily things can spiral."

Briarwood swallowed, his eyes narrowing. He’d put the frighteners on him, but it was a delicate balance—too much pressure, and Briarwood might break, but too little and he might feel emboldened to turn against him. Thorn had to tread carefully.

"If you want to keep our... arrangement in place, we’re going to have to stay aligned," Thorn finished, the subtle threat in his voice undeniable. "You understand what I mean?"

Briarwood hesitated, and for a moment, Thorn wondered if he’d pushed too far. But then Briarwood gave a sharp nod, his mouth tightening in a way Thorn knew meant he had succeeded—at least for now.

"Fine," Briarwood muttered, his voice low but resolute. Briarwood downed his glass and rose to leave.

“Get some rest,” Thorn said, a forced cheerfulness in his voice. “You’ve got nothing to worry about. We’ll sort this out together.”

Briarwood managed a weak smile as he walked away, leaving Thorn alone in the soft glow of the bar.

Thorn had seized control, and he savoured the feeling along with the final sip of his martini.

**Chapter 16**

**Black Cab**

The lavish gala dinner hadn’t been as great as she’d hoped for. Not on any level. Now, as Fiona stood alone in the dimly lit ladies’ lavatory, she found herself gazing into the mirror. She’d swigged a final glass of wine, made up of the dregs of three near empty bottles still sitting on the table, and watched while the room drained of life. Eventually, even Sarah and Joshi had made their exit leaving Fiona feeling like a ghost of the woman who had walked in just hours before. The waiting staff, clearly keen to leave too, began to tidy around her, clearing empty plates, rounding up wine bottles and extinguishing candles.

Realizing she had no choice but to get up and head for the cloakroom, Fiona reluctantly set down her now empty glass and smoothed her gown one last time, trying to salvage a semblance of dignity. With so much booze inside her, the walk to the cloakroom felt was tricky, her steps felt weirdly deliberate, her Louboutins clicking softly against the marble floor. Feeling unsteady she had taken them off in favour of her stockinged feet.

In the lavatory, she placed them on the vanity. The soft fluorescent lighting flickered above her head, casting a pale, unflattering glow on her face accentuating the lines of middle-age. Her reflection stared back at her, a stranger clad in a shimmering navy-blue gown that clung to her figure in all the wrong ways. Her carefully styled hair had started to lose its lustre, and her makeup, which had once seemed perfect under the glamour of the event, now felt heavy and out of place.

She reapplied her lipstick thinking it might make her feel better about herself, fingers trembling, help her shake the bitter taste of regret. All the preparation, the planning, the expectation—wasted. She felt like a fool. Her mind replayed moments from the evening: awkward conversations, the horror of the podium, the sinking realisation that she should have played the evening very differently. Fiona let out a breath, her reflection mirroring the sinking disappointment in her chest.

Fiona had hoped—no, expected—that she would be leaving the dinner with Alex Thorn, basking in the glow of a significant fundraise. She had imagined the night ending on a high, with him impressed by her efforts, eager to be associated with her success. In fact, she had been counting on it, certain she’d sealed the deal with the flirtation they’d shared at the table. The way he’d leaned in close as they spoke, their knees brushing beneath the table, the subtle spark of connection that had felt so real. And the text message he’d sent earlier: *“Looking forward to seeing you this evening.”* How could she have misread it all so completely?

Fiona had been left almost open-mouthed when Thorn had abruptly excused himself right after dinner, his departure as swift as it was disheartening. Briarwood hadn’t lingered long either, slipping away not long after, leaving her with only Sarah and Joshi for company. It felt like a punch to the gut; all her hopes for an exhilarating evening had evaporated into thin air. She had glanced down at her stunning outfit and felt a wave of disappointment wash over her. What a waste.

Fiona sat herself down in the powder room in front of a large mirror framed in ornate gold. She obligingly dabbed a bit of powder on her nose, attempting to mask the sheen of disappointment that clung to her. As she sat there, examining the fine lines of her makeup, Fiona’s heart sank. Had anyone noticed the way she had pushed her leg against his, the way she had laughed a little too loudly at his jokes, hoping to catch his attention? Gawd, she’d probably even batted her eyelids. What an utter cliché. She felt utterly humiliated, the vibrant optimism she’d felt at the beginning of the evening giving way to a heavy sense of shame.

With a heavy sigh, she turned away from the mirror, slipped back into her heals and rose to collect her floor-length opera coat from the cloakroom, a sumptuous piece by Alexander McQueen that had cost a small fortune. The cloak room attendant had gone home. Her coat was just hanging there, a solitary occupant, waiting for her like a lifeline. She slipped it on, feeling the sudden weight of the floor length coat on her shoulders.

Stepping outside, the cold air of London hit her like a slap across the face. She had been so certain that she and Thorn would spend the night together that she hadn’t even attempt to leave in time for her last train.

A group of young men stumbled out of a nearby pub, one of them laughing loudly as he slung his arm around a friend's shoulders. Nearby, a couple leaned into each other, oblivious to the world around them. It all seemed so foreign to her now—she had been so certain that she and Thorn would spend the night together, that she hadn’t even considered the time. But here she was, standing alone in the drizzle, her coat pulled tight around her, watching the world move on without her.

A half a dozen taxis passed her before she finally saw the welcome flash of yellow from a "For Hire" light, cutting through the gloom. She raised her hand and stepped into the street, relieved when the cab slowed to a stop in front of her. The driver’s face was shadowed, but he nodded in acknowledgment as she climbed into the backseat, her shoes clicking against the wet pavement.

As the cab pulled away from the curb, she leaned back against the seat, staring out at the bright lights of the city. The worn seats, scuffed from years of use, squeaked softly as she adjusted her position, their smell mingling with the faint scent of air freshener. Here she was, draped in designer gear, surrounded by the practical mundanity of a beaten-down London cab.

Her eyes stung, the tears she had been holding back threatening to spill over. She bit her lip to keep them in check, but the effort felt futile. She let out a shaky breath and wiped a stray tear from her cheek, hoping the driver wouldn’t notice. What was the point of it all?

The driver navigated through the familiar labyrinth of city streets, and soon they were on the motorway, the cab’s engine humming steadily as they joined the flow of traffic. The rhythm of the city receded, replaced by the monotonous drone of tires on asphalt. Urban sprawl gave way to the expanse of gentle hills and patches of woodland. Around 15 miles from Central London, the cab exited the motorway for the final leg of her journey, gliding through the winding lanes lined with trees. With a final grumble from the cab’s breaks, they pulled up beside Fiona’s driveway.

"That'll be £92.50, please, love," the driver said through the intercom.

“Make it an even tonne” Fiona responded, as she reached into her new Valentino clutch, the silk lining smooth against her fingers, and pulled out her credit card.

**Chapter 17**

**Falling Penny**

The morning after the gala dinner, Sarah found herself sitting at her small kitchen table, nursing a cup of instant coffee that had gone cold. She’d forgotten to get fresh milk in and there were little clods of white flecked across its surface. Her mind had been buzzing ever since she’d left Fiona’s office, unable to shake the conversation—or the complete lack of reaction from her boss. She hadn’t even been able to shake it off during the dinner. The recording, Fiona’s dismissiveness, David’s strange behaviour at the dinner—it all played on a loop.

And it wasn’t just David who had behaved oddly. There was something unsettling about the way Fiona had leaned into Alex Thorn, laughing at his jokes a little too heartily, her body language exuding an intimacy that felt inappropriate. Was it just her imagination, or had Fiona's behaviour crossed a line? Sarah's mind raced, trying to piece together the dynamics of their interactions.

It was almost as if Fiona had been desperate to draw his attention away from the rest of the table. This wasn’t the first time Sarah had noticed Fiona behaving like this; she often flirted with powerful men in their field, but last night felt different—more intense, as if Fiona were putting on a show and didn’t care who was watching. Sarah took a gulp of her cold coffee, hardly noticing its sour taste.

It had been the moment Sarah had first glanced at the seating plan that the alarm bells had started ringing in her mind. Something didn’t sit right, like an itch she couldn’t quite scratch. Fiona, the CEO, should have been at the top table. She *was* the CEO, for Christ’s sake. It made perfect sense. She was the one who had put in the years, built the charity’s profile, forged the relationships with powerful people. But when Sarah’s eyes scanned the names at the top table, Fiona’s name was nowhere to be found.

Instead, there were the usual high-profile guests—the major donors, the high-ranking sponsors, the chairman of the board, all the faces Sarah had seen before at these events. But not Fiona. The omission was glaring. Why would Fiona, so central to the foundation’s work, be left out of such a crucial spot? And what made it worse was the fact that Fiona seemed perfectly composed about it, acting as if nothing was amiss.

As the evening had gone on, Sarah couldn’t shake the oddness of the seating arrangement. She tried to rationalize it, telling herself maybe it was just a mix-up, a misunderstanding. But deep down, she knew that was unlikely. The more she observed, the more it felt like a deliberate choice.

And then, she’d seen Fiona in conversation with Alex Thorn across the table and it all made sense. Fiona had changed the seating plan to be with Thorn. The way Fiona leaned in, laughing softly at something Thorn said, her hand resting too casually on his arm—it made Sarah’s stomach twist. She’d always known there was something between them, but seeing it play out so openly in front of the charity’s biggest and to snub the guests at the top table. What on earth could Fiona have been thinking?

Sarah had watched Fiona take the podium with an air of quiet anticipation, hoping that the evening might yet be salvaged. Fiona had been rehearsing her speech for weeks, perfecting every word. But when it came time for the big moment, Sarah couldn’t help but notice that Fiona skipped half of it as though keen to get it over with as quickly as possible. The words that were meant to inspire donations, to stir the audience into generosity, seemed rushed and half-hearted. Fiona’s usual confident tone had faltered. The speech was a mess—unfocused and devoid of the passion.

When the bidding opened on the auction, the scale of the disaster became crystal clear. The bids were slow to come in, and the ones that did were embarrassingly low. Sarah had watched with a sinking feeling as the auctioneer struggled to keep the momentum going, but the room was barely responsive. And it was clear throughout it all that Fiona had mentally checked out, didn’t even seem to notice, her focus elsewhere.

Slipping the kettle again for a fresh brew, Sarah glanced at her phone, hoping for a distraction, but there was nothing there. No emails. No messages. Just the silence of her small flat and the distant hum of traffic outside. She felt an odd mix of frustration and determination creeping in. She had expected Fiona to be shocked, or at least concerned when she’d shared the recording, but instead, it was like she had handed her a piece of trivial gossip. And on top of that the outrageous flirting with Thorn.

With the gala done and dusted, it was decision time—did she let it drop, like Fiona had told her she ought? Or did she keep digging?

Fiona’s words echoed in her mind—*“Sometimes, it’s better to let these things go. Some things aren’t worth stirring up.”*

The voices in the recording were too cold, too calculated, too confident that nothing would be done. She couldn’t let that go. But the question now was, who could she trust with this information?

Jake Collins came to mind first, a journalist whose name Sarah had come across several times while digging into news about Viperis. She hadn't met him personally, but his byline was familiar—but he had written numerous critical articles about the biotech industry. He might be an option.

Then there was David. Something about the way he’d acted—the nervous energy—had stayed with her. Was he as caught up in this as she was? Or was he just another cog in the machine? She had her doubts, but deep down, she wondered if he might be the only one who truly understood the stakes. Maybe he would know what to do with it, or at least take her seriously.

There was also the possibility of going straight to the authorities. But then what? She didn’t have the full picture yet, and with so many involved, including people in powerful positions, would they even take her seriously? The last thing she wanted was to put herself in the middle of a legal mess with no backup, especially when it came to a company like Viperis, which had deep pockets and influential connections.

Her mind kept circling back to the question: what should to do with the recording? One wrong move, and everything could come crashing down around her. But then again, if she did nothing, if she walked away and let it all go, she would never forgive herself. The truth mattered more than her fear. Didn’t it?

The kettle had come to a boil and switched itself off. She shovelled a spoon of instant coffee into her mug, topped it with water and added a dash of the souring milk, picturing herself in a different life. Maybe a private detective, like one of those tough women from an old black and white movie like the ones her grandmother used to watch on quiet Sunday afternoons. She could see herself, trench coat pulled tight against the London fog, slinking through shadowy alleys and gathering secret evidence. Alex Thorn was in the crosshairs. But w*ho was that other man on the recording?*

She would need to figure that out, too. Thorn was obvious enough, but the second voice—the one that had murmured something unsettling about keeping the regulators in the dark—that was a mystery. And Sarah, despite her usual self-doubt, knew she couldn’t just leave it alone. She needed more evidence.

It was then that the sudden realization hit Sarah, and the pieces began to fall into place. The second voice on the recording—it was incredibly familiar; someone she’d heard before. At the Gala dinner, Dr. Joshi. His tone, urging that they needed to talk, now seemed charged with a new, unsettling urgency. Why had he wanted to speak with her? She was just another guest at the event, hardly someone worth his attention. Of course! The second voice on the recording had been Joshis!

Emboldened by her realization, though in truth she really should have worked this out much sooner, Sarah felt a flicker of confidence. Maybe, just maybe, she was cut out for this detective lark after all. She imagined herself rifling through company records, tracking down old interviews, and maybe even following Thorn—if it ever came to that. She had no experience in this kind of thing, of course, but wasn’t that what private detectives did? Gather background, connect the dots? She couldn’t just sit here, staring at the walls of her flat and hoping someone else would figure it out for her.

Sarah stood up, and began to pace the tiny kitchen, her mind racing with possibilities as she glanced at the stack of half-read books piled up near the sofa. Frustrated, she grabbed her phone, scrolling through the contacts she’d saved over the years. Jake Collins was not amongst them. Pulling up her twitter feed she searched for his account, DMing him.

*Jake, it’s Sarah Lawson from the NeuroHealth Foundation. I’ve got something that might interest you—about Viperis. It’s big, and I need your help to get it out there. Can we talk? I’ll explain everything. It’s urgent.”*

The plan in her head was vague and completely impulsive, lacking any structure. She would somehow unearth whatever secrets lay buried beneath the surface and feed the dirt on Thorn to Collins. And when she had the full story, Fiona wouldn’t be able to brush her concerns aside like last week’s discarded coffee grounds.

As she waited for a response to her DM, she imagined what it would be like to expose Thorn, a rush of adrenaline propelled her forward; all she needed now was a starting point. She had the recording, but that alone wouldn’t be enough to sink Thorn. She needed someone who could help her connect the dots—someone who would stand with her.

David Joshi. The thought hit her like a lightning bolt. He had the inside knowledge, the key to everything that was happening behind closed doors. She had to speak to him. Now.

Without a second thought, Sarah threw on her coat, grabbed her bag from the kitchen counter, and bolted out of her flat. She moved quickly down the street, her thoughts racing even faster than her footsteps. She’d start by tracking David down at the clinic.

As she reached the corner of her street, a message notification pinged on her phone. She hesitated just for a moment before unlocking it.

It was from Jake Collins. She was to send her phone number. He would call and then maybe they should meet.

With her heart racing, she typed out a quick reply, then slipped her phone back into her pocket. The clinic wasn’t far now. Sarah wondered if she might just be stepping into a game far more dangerous than she was prepared for. This was no longer just a matter of gathering evidence—it was about deciding who she could trust.

**Chapter 18**

**Best Served Cold**

David awoke to the soft morning light slanting through the curtains of his decidedly unfashionable south London home. The quiet was blissful—his wife was out walking Snickers, the small dog he barely tolerated, leaving him alone in the mismatched bed with its battalion of lumpy pillows.

His neck felt stiff, his mouth like sandpaper. A fog had settled over his mind, thick and heavy, making it difficult to shake off the remnants of indulgence from the night before. The sharp edge of his nerves had dulled only momentarily at the gala, but now as he lay in his bed, with the evening's events replaying in his mind, the anxiety surged back, more intense than ever. His temples throbbed with a dull ache, a painful reminder of the booze he had downed to calm his nerves at the table. Each sip had felt like a fleeting moment of respite, a temporary shield against the tense atmosphere surrounding Thorn and the others. As he pulled himself to a sitting position, his gangly legs dangling over the edge of his bed, his every nerve felt exposed.

Last night’s rich food lingered in his stomach even though he’d barely touched it, a heavy weight that combined with the throbbing in his head to create a sense of discomfort that he couldn't ignore. He cradled his temples—the ticking of the bedroom clock creating a rhythmic banging behind his eyes. The constant nausea that had battered him in waves for the past week was back with a vengeance. Turbo charged by overindulgence.

David took a deep breath, hoping the air would clear his mind, but it was stale and smelled of sweat and breath, and all it did was make him feel like he needed to vomit.

Blinking against the harsh morning light filtering through the curtains, he struggled to piece together the events of the night before, fragments of laughter and clinking glasses mingling with a sense of dread about the conversations he had engaged in. He winced as he stood up, the movement sending a ripple of discomfort through him, and he couldn’t help but wonder if there’d be a higher price to pay for his over-indulgence than just a hangover.

He shuffled into his dressing gown, which had long ago resigned itself to a life of unglamorous domesticity, its pockets stuffed with used tissues and padded down the hall. The wooden floors, like everything else in the house, groaned in protest every time he moved—every creak reminding him they needed fixing. But who had the skills for DIY these days, or to be honest, the energy? Especially when there were far more pressing things to avoid thinking about, like the clinical trial, the deaths and the mountains of guilt.

The house felt odd and somehow *shifted*. It wasn’t just the absence of Bella and Snickers, but something deeper, like the quiet before a storm. He drifted into the kitchen. He needed toast and coffee to sort him out and he headed towards the massive American fridge that sat hulking in the corner of the room. It had always seemed a bit too grand for their modest kitchen, the sort of appliance that said,

"*I aspire to gourmet cooking*,"

when all it really did was chill leftover takeaway.

David tugged open the fridge door, ready to stare blankly at some aging vegetables and hoping to find the hair of the dog. Instead, what greeted him was a clear Perspex box, sitting on the middle shelf as though it belonged there; and inside it, a tangle of snakes.

He blinked. Then blinked again. Perhaps this was some kind of early-morning hallucination brought on by the booze. Or maybe this was some strange tangle of organic vegetables. But no, it was a box of very real snakes. Their bright scales shimmered in the fridge light in a way that was both hypnotic and unsettling, like a living kaleidoscope. Electric blue, fire-orange, and that sickly green that screamed “danger, do not touch unless you’d enjoy venomous death.”

As the vibrant hues twisted and curled lazily in front of him, David felt a fresh wave of nausea rising in his throat. The thought of the writhing mass sent him rocketing toward the sink, where he doubled over, retching violently. The contents of his stomach surged upward, a bitter mix of booze and beef, splattering against the stainless steel. The acrid smell filled the small kitchen, mingling with the faint scent of dish soap.

He coughed and gagged, feeling a second wave, hot with bile escape in thick, clumpy bursts. Each heave brought with it a fresh wave of disgust, and he could barely catch his breath. The viscous liquid pooled in the sink like a toxic sludge. In that moment, as he wiped his mouth with the back of his dressing-gown sleeve, he felt utterly wretched. He glanced back at the snakes twisting in their Perspex box—Serpenti Phantasmata clearly visible from across the kitchen. Poisonous. Rare. And now... refrigerated?

David stared, his brain scrambling to process why the snakes—he hated them with the passion and always took the long way around the research lab to avoid even having to look at them—were in his kitchen. They looked sluggish, cold, as though the fridge had sapped their will to be menacing. Even their tongues flicked out with all the energy of someone reluctantly dragging themselves to a Monday morning meeting.

Suddenly, the fridge seemed less like a kitchen appliance and more like Pandora’s box. David lolled across to it and slammed the door shut. He’d half expected one of the snakes to wriggle out and make a dash for the cutlery drawer. Just as he leapt back from the closed door, rather unnecessarily it must be said, he felt his phone buzz in his dressing gown pocket, the sensation unnerving as he stood close to where the snakes were – just on the other side of the silver fridge door. He fumbled it out, swiping the screen with a hand that was more tremble than grip.

A message from an unknown number.

“You really shouldn’t be taking your work home with you.”

David’s stomach sank to the level of his feet. A second buzz:

“Put EVERYTHING back where it should be. We wouldn’t want anything to get left behind.”

The text had not come from Thorn’s number. They knew. Whoever *they* were, about the recording. They knew about Margaret’s consent form, not processed but locked away in his desk drawer like a secret. The snakes weren’t just a bizarre, fridge-dwelling coincidence—they were a message. And David wasn’t keen to find out if they, whoever they were, would follow through on their implied threat.

He turned his back to the fridge door and slid down it, pressing himself against the cool surface. He stared at the kitchen tiles with the glazed expression of someone whose life had just veered dramatically off-course but who had absolutely no idea what to do next. His phone slipped from his hand, landing on the floor with a soft thud. Here he was, in a house with snakes in the fridge and contemplating a menacing text and the possible up-ending of his entire existence. When he felt the next wave of nausea, he simply went with it without resistance, throwing up the last remains of the gala dinner into his lap and catching it in the folds of his long-suffering dressing gown.

**Chapter 19**

**Tablecloth**

It’d been an hour since David had closed the fridge door and vomited in his own lap. The shock of the sight still clung to him like a weight, his body still trembling from the unexpected surge of panic. He’d had time to sober up a little, clean himself up, but the images of the writhing mass of snakes were burned into his mind. Thankfully his wife and the dog hadn’t come back yet. But they soon would be.

He'd stood in the shower for ages, eyes closed, focusing solely on the warm water cascading over his head and neck. He allowed the soothing heat to wash away the remnants of his earlier panic. He’d let the water pool around his feet by standing on the shower drain to block it, the steady flow of pooling water a quiet backdrop to the frantic rhythm of his thoughts.

And now here he was, standing outside the clinic building wating for the best moment to smuggle the snakes inside.

He gave himself a pat on the back. He’d been ultra-brave. Determined to get the snakes out of his fridge, he’d approached it, heart pounding, and yanked the door open, stifling an urge to scream. The snakes were a chaotic tangle of bright scales and slithering bodies, their movements languid and utterly unsettling. Every time he looked at them, the urge to vomit clawed at his throat, so he quickly covered the box with a tablecloth he’d grabbed from the dining room. It was a ridiculous choice, adorned with cartoon reptiles celebrating a birthday. It cheered him up a bit. Took his mind off what was in the box.

Once he had the box tucked under one arm, David knew he had to leave the house quickly. He was on a countdown. The snakes would be warming up. He hurried to the train station, half hoping and half dreading that someone might stop him and inquire about his strange cargo. What would he say? Perhaps he could pass it off as a bizarre prop for a performance art piece or a quirky gift for a friend.

After what felt like an eternity, the train ground to a halt at his stop. David gathered his wits, carefully rising and repositioning the tablecloth-covered box. He stepped off the train, and out of the station. It was a familiar route he’d taken countless times, but today felt different; each step laced with anxiety.

“Dr Joshi” Sarah’s image cut through the fog in his brain, her brow furrowed in puzzlement as she took in the sight of him.

David glanced around, “What are you doing here?” he replied, instinctively lowering his voice. “You can’t be seen around this building.” Any association with him could raise eyebrows. He worried that her appearance might invite unwanted attention, possibly leading to questions about their connection.

*A tad over-dramati*c Sarah thought to herself, “Neither can you, apparently!” Sarah shot back, her gaze darting from him to the container, and then back again. “What’s with the box?”

He hesitated, trying to mask the urgency in his voice. “I... I can explain. Just not here. You need to go to the train station café and wait for me there. It’s not safe for you to be around.”

*Again, with the drama!* “Wait for you? Are you serious? You said we needed to talk and here I am!” She crossed her arms, her expression shifting from bewilderment to annoyance. “You can’t just—”

“Please, Sarah!” He interrupted, glancing over his shoulder, nerves jangling. “This isn’t a game. I don’t want you caught up in this. Just trust me on this.”

David could see the gears turning in her mind, but he couldn’t afford to hang around to see whether she caught up or not.

“Just go,” he urged again, the words tumbling out in a rush. “I’ll explain everything later. I’ll meet you at the Big Plate. It’s a greasy spoon round the corner. I’ll be a half hour. Just—don’t ask questions right now.”

As she hesitated, he felt a wave of frustration wash over him. What the hell was she doing?

“Okay,” she finally relented, her eyes still narrowed with suspicion. “But you’d better not keep me waiting too long.”

“Just go,” he said, watching her turn away. With a resigned sigh, he glanced back at the Perspex box, fittingly swaddled in Bella’s favourite tablecloth. He’d have to remember to take it home with him once the snakes were safely back in their corner of the research lab. Or Bella would miss it.

David carefully cradled the Perspex box containing the snakes through the main door and on through sterile corridors of the trials building, his heart racing with every step. He felt the snakes shifting their weight in the box beneath the tablecloth – they were fully alert now. It was almost as though they knew where they were. Like they didn’t want to be returned to the lab and were thrashing their protests. The thought unnerved him, yet he couldn’t shake the feeling responsible for the hideous things.

Once inside the lab, he placed the box on a sturdy table, carefully lifting the tablecloth to reveal the snakes. He felt a momentary sense of guilt wash over him—*what kind of life did they have here in the lab*? Living in a Perspex box. Staring out at the human zoo of the lab. Poor things.

The thought crossed his mind, fleeting but tempting: *What if I just released them?* He could imagine it now, slipping out under the cover of night, taking the box to a remote part of the city, and letting them slither into the underworld of London's sewers. It would be dangerous, of course, reckless even. He pictured the snakes disappearing into the damp tunnels, claiming the dark, thriving in their natural state away from prying human eyes.

But then reality crashed back down. It wasn’t that simple, was it? These weren’t just ordinary animals. He couldn’t just let them go. What if someone found them and got bitten? What if they slithered their way up the plumbing into someone’s lavatory? His lavatory! The consequences would be unimaginable. No, releasing them wasn’t an option, as much as his guilt made him wish it were.

With the snakes safely returned to the lab, David turned his attention to the next problem: Margaret’s consent form. He didn't know how *they* knew—how they were aware he hadn’t submitted it yet—but they did. That ominous text had made it clear: they were watching. There was no escaping the fact that he would have to submit the paperwork.

His office felt unnaturally quiet as David walked over to his desk, the weight of the moment pressing on him. He hesitated for a second. What choice did he have but to finalize the paperwork and push her through the enrolment process?

David fumbled with the keys, his hands shaking slightly. The drawer creaked open, revealing a stack of forms and documents, each one representing a life intertwined with the success or failure of the trial. His gaze fell on Margaret’s consent form, neatly signed in her elegant script. He felt a flicker of warmth at the thought of her trusting him, but that warmth quickly faded, replaced by an icy dread. He knew he had to ensure that she was handled with the utmost care, and the weight of responsibility pressed heavily on his shoulders.

With deliberate movements, he extracted the form and placed it on his desk. The process of submitting it was straightforward, yet it felt monumental. He reviewed the details meticulously, ensuring every box was checked, every signature accounted for. As he worked, the earlier sense of connection to the snakes resurfaced. The way they had writhed in their box echoed the turbulence within him—a chaotic mix of hope, anxiety, and a profound sense of duty.

Once he finished the paperwork, he took a moment to breathe deeply. He wasn’t just submitting a form; he was making a commitment to care for Margaret, to uphold the integrity of the trial, and to confront the ethical complexities that lay ahead. And then it was done. With the form securely tucked into a file, he felt a flicker of resolve ignite within him. Despite the doubts that clouded his mind, he was determined to see this through—not just for the snakes, but for Margaret and all the lives that hung in the balance of his choices.

**Chapter 20**

**Ambassador’s Party**

Fiona sat at her desk, staring into the middle distance, reflecting on the gala dinner from the night before. Everything had been a disaster. The auction had failed to meet its target, and the applause at the end of the evening had been half-hearted and brief.

A strange weight sat in her chest, heavy and unmoving, as she thought back on the expressions around the room—too many vacant, distracted stares, and small cliques talking among themselves. Her gown, the one she'd agonized over, had drawn a few compliments here and there, but now that felt trivial, almost foolish. She’d made herself a pot of Earl Grey tea using the bone-china tea set she kept in her office for entertaining special visitors. The ritual, warming the pot, adding the leaves, slicing the lemon to complement the bergamot, had distracted her for a while.

She poured herself a cup catching the tea leaves in a silver strainer, balanced delicately on the rim of her cup, and took a sip, grimacing slightly as she tried to push aside her lingering discomfort. It wasn’t just the wine—even though her stomach churned with a sour ache. No, it was something deeper, an unease tied to how the night had unravelled, leaving her with a gnawing feeling that refused to fade. Even now, she couldn’t keep her thoughts focussed on the professional.

What really stung, the real failure was something deeply personal. Fiona had expected more time with Alex Thorn. She had planned to seal the deal after dinner. But the moment the coffee was served, Thorn had stood up, flashing that same practiced smile he wore in all his TV interviews, and excused himself. Lord Briarwood had followed suit, and before Fiona could even process what was happening, they were gone. The abruptness of their departure nagged at her. But there had been a connection. Her interest was reciprocated. She was sure of it.

Early on, during arrival drinks, he had spoken to her briefly and casually, assuring her of his continued support for the foundation, a conversation devoid of the warmth she had hoped for. But at dinner there had been a connection. The way his head had tilted to hers. The light touch of his hand on her thigh. The soft strokes of the breath against her ear, her neck as he leaned in to whisper to share a private joke. And there had been complements too. How amazing she looked in her dress. How flattered he was to find her at his table. Whatever the reason was for his abrupt departure it must have been important. Fiona wasn’t ready to throw in the towel on Thorn just yet.

As for Lord Briarwood... well, his presence always left her with a mix of awe and trepidation. She’d been relieved when he left. He had been his usual aloof self, making small talk with key donors over champagne, but Fiona had sensed the same restlessness in him as she had in Thorn. This desire to be away from the gala as soon as they could politely leave.

The memory of Sarah, however, brought a faint smile to her face. Despite the turmoil of recent events, Sarah had held it together. Fiona had been nervous about Sarah’s performance, worried that her obvious distraction with the Viperis business might derail the evening. But to her relief, Sarah had stayed focused, mingling with the guests, chatting with donors, and even making an effort with her appearance. Fiona had noticed the way Sarah had styled her hair, the subtle shift, as if she was determined to prove herself.

Fiona sighed, setting her tea cup down carefully. It was all getting a bit much.

She hadn’t set out to become the CEO of a charity— it wasn’t what she had imagined for herself, not by a long shot. As she navigated the responsibilities that came with her position, she often felt like an imposter, questioning her own qualifications and abilities. Despite her dedication and hard work, a nagging voice in the back of her mind whispered that she wasn’t truly deserving of the title. She found herself constantly comparing her achievements to those of her peers, wondering if anyone else saw through the facade she had created.

In her early years, Fiona had dreamed of power—the kind that swayed public opinion and shaped policies that could transform lives. As a passionate Liberal Democrat, she believed in social justice, equality, and the potential for government to enact meaningful change. Politics had always felt like her natural home; she could picture herself in a back bench MP, championing causes she believed in and serving her constituents.

A few early failures in the political world had knocked her confidence. During her university days, she had campaigned fiercely for a parliamentary candidate in a marginal seat, only to watch them lose despite her efforts. Another attempt to secure a position within the local council had ended in disappointment when she was overlooked in favour of more experienced candidates. Looking back, she could see that for the fantasy it had been. She’d never have spoken truth to power. That kind of bravery tended to see one thrown into stocks.

So instead of a seat in Westminster, she found herself navigating the complex waters of the charity sector where, she told herself, her passion for social change could still flourish. Fiona convinced herself that her work at the NeuroHealth Foundation was just as impactful as any political career, but deep down, she couldn't shake the feeling that she had settled for a consolation prize. She’d exchanged the thrill of political discourse for audits, staff meetings, dealing with tricky HR issues and hand-feeding her board of trustees.

She had climbed the ranks of the charity world with precision, leveraging her connections, charm, and ability to play the long game. Her impeccable image didn’t just serve her—it was her weapon. She projected control in every aspect of her life, from her tailored clothes to the way she managed meetings, every word she spoke calculated for maximum impact.

In truth, Fiona viewed her staff as necessary cogs in the machine she ran. She didn’t dislike them, but she didn’t value them either—not beyond their utility. They were simply tedious people doing their tedious jobs, none standing out enough to earn her deeper respect. Sarah however, seemed different. She was a good worker, always helpful, never a problem. Fiona had never quite understood Sarah’s lack of ambition or her tendency to question things that didn’t seem to warrant questioning. Where Sarah saw moral dilemmas or raised concerns about dubious practices, Fiona saw obstacles to be managed.

Fiona comforted herself with the thought that Sarah lacked *edge*, she didn’t have any of the hunger that Fiona admired in herself. The girl would never make waves, and if she did, Fiona was confident she could smooth them over. You should never bite the hand that feeds you. Biotech companies like Viperis were essential to their survival. Sarah’s idealism was quaint but impractical.

Fiona’s thoughts drifted back to Thorn, to the events of three years earlier when her relationship with Viperis had begun. As head of the charity, she had been invited to an extravagant gathering at the residence of the American Ambassador, a sprawling estate nestled in the verdant embrace of Regents Park. Fiona liked to think she understood the politics of these high-profile gatherings. The invitation had been a sign, she told herself, that she was operating in the right circles, on the cusp of the influence.

As Fiona arrived at the American Ambassador’s residence, she felt a mix of anticipation and nervousness bubbling beneath her poised exterior. The sprawling estate in Regent’s Park was imposing even from a distance, a stately mansion framed by manicured lawns and wrought-iron gates. She had been to grand venues before, but there was something undeniably weighty about this one—the kind of place where decisions that shaped the world were made over cocktails and canapés.

A security detail met her at the entrance, where she had to pass through a discreet but thorough checkpoint. She handed over her invitation, the official seal gleaming under the dimmed evening lights, and then stepped through a metal detector as a polite but firm guard asked her to hold still for a moment. Glancing around, she noticed other security personnel, dressed in dark suits, with gun holsters peeking out from beneath their tailored jackets. They stood at strategic points around the entrance, on the sweeping staircase to the upper floors, and stood dotted around the reception room, blending into the decor— a subtle, but undeniable presence.

Fiona had been escorted inside by a polished staff member. The room hummed with quiet, dignified conversation, the clink of glasses, and the occasional peal of restrained laughter. But even as she joined the flow of guests—heads of industry, politicians, and dignitaries from across the globe—she couldn’t shake the feeling of being watched. In the corners of the room, guards with their hands resting just inches from their holsters stood like statues, their eyes scanning the crowd with trained detachment. They seemed to fade into the background, but Fiona knew they missed nothing.

She made her way through the gathering, exchanging pleasantries with other guests. It was a setting where power was exercised through charm and influence, but also one where force was lurking in the background—just in case charm and influence weren’t enough. Fiona, always conscious of her surroundings, felt the duality keenly. As she approached a group of diplomats, smiling warmly and extending her hand, she couldn't help but think about the layers of control that permeated the evening. Everyone here played their part, but only some carried the real weight of power—and not all of it was visible.

The room was a striking blend of elegance and warmth. Tall arched windows framed the space, and strategically placed table lamps illuminated the rich, polished wood of the floor. The walls were adorned with exquisite artwork—landscapes and portraits that seemed to tell stories of their own—while plush sofas, upholstered in deep hues, invited intimate conversations.

Now, as Fiona sat in her dim office, the memories of that evening were tinged with bittersweet regret. The connections she had forged, the alliances she had built, all felt tainted by the revelations that had since unfolded. The lavish setting, once a backdrop to her ambitions, now served as a stark reminder of the fine line between genuine purpose and the seductive allure of power.

The ambassador had been hosting an array of American Biotechs, each vying to establish medical research studies in the UK, lured by the prospect of generous government grants. When Fiona first laid eyes on Lord Briarwood sipping champagne with the Ambassador, she was struck by his air of importance. He carried himself with a confidence that bordered on arrogance, dressed impeccably in a tailored suit that spoke of old money and political influence. His silver hair was perfectly groomed, and there was something calculated in his every gesture, as though he was always performing, always aware of being watched.

Briarwood exuded power in a way that was both intimidating and fascinating. He was a man who could open doors for her charity, a man whose endorsement could change the future of her organization. She had to make the connection, if nothing else, bagging Briarwood would make her evening a resounding success.

Gathering her nerve, she approached with a smile, easing herself into the conversation just as Briarwood was delivering a well-rehearsed anecdote about his recent trip to Washington. She had eased her way into the circle around him, and struck up a conversation with Lord Briarwood, her charm weaving a thread of camaraderie between them. He spoke passionately about the potential for collaboration between the UK and American firms, his words laced with ambition.

She laughed lightly at the appropriate moment, and when the attention shifted, she casually remarked, "It must be fascinating to see the different approaches countries take to medical research. I imagine there's a lot we could learn from each other."

Briarwood turned toward her, his sharp blue eyes appraising her with a glance that seemed to size her up in a heartbeat. "Indeed," he replied, his voice smooth but with a hint of condescension, as though he was used to being the most knowledgeable person in any room. "The potential for collaboration between the UK and the U.S. is vast. We’ve got the infrastructure, and they’ve got the innovation."

Sensing her opening, Fiona leaned in slightly, her voice warm and engaging. "That’s exactly what we’re striving for at the NeuroHealth Foundation. We’ve seen firsthand how vital it is to bring together the brightest minds from both sides of the Atlantic, particularly in the fight against neurodegenerative diseases. Our work is modest, but it has the potential to be transformative, given the right support."

Briarwood raised an eyebrow, intrigued. "Neurodegenerative diseases, you say? That’s becoming quite the area of focus in the biotech world. How does your foundation fit into that landscape?"

Fiona’s eyes lit up as she spoke about the foundation’s mission, weaving stories of their patient outreach programs and the promising partnerships they’d been cultivating with clinicians. She wasn’t overly pushy—just enough to highlight the importance of their work while subtly showcasing the potential prestige someone like Briarwood could bring by aligning himself with their cause.

As the conversation flowed, Fiona began to feel more at ease. Briarwood listened intently, his initial coldness warming ever so slightly as he responded with strategic questions, all the while hinting at his own ambitions within the government’s new task force for Life Sciences. He spoke passionately about his vision to position the UK as a leader in medical research, particularly with American firms eager to bring their innovations across the pond.

Fiona seized the moment, using her charm to build a sense of camaraderie between them. "It’s exactly that kind of forward-thinking we need more of," she said earnestly. "There’s so much untapped potential, especially in the field of dementia research. I truly believe the work we’re doing could make a lasting difference, but we need champions like you to help us reach the next level."

Briarwood’s smile deepened; his ego stroked by her flattering words. "Well, it sounds like we’re on the same page," he said, nodding thoughtfully. "Perhaps there’s something I could do to help raise the profile of your foundation. It’s important work."

Fiona’s heart skipped a beat—this was it. She had managed to plant the seed. "We would be honoured to have your support, Lord Briarwood," she said, her voice filled with genuine gratitude. "With someone of your stature behind us, we could reach so many more people in need."

Within a few short exchanges, she had managed to impress upon him the vital work of the NeuroHealth Foundation. Briarwood had agreed to become a patron of the NeuroHealth Foundation. It was a significant milestone for Fiona, one that left her feeling accomplished, her nerves replaced with a heady mix of pride and relief. She had done it—secured a powerful ally who could open doors that had previously been closed.

Fiona was still riding the high of her conversation with Lord Briarwood, her mind buzzing with the possibilities. It had been a gamble approaching him, but she had pulled it off, and the satisfaction of that victory left her feeling exhilarated. As she moved through the room, her eyes skimming over the familiar sea of suits and polished smiles, she allowed herself a small, triumphant smile. Tonight, had already been a success but why leave it at that? The event still had an hour to run.

Amidst the crowd, one figure had caught her attention: Alex Thorn, Chairman of Viperis Biotech. Fiona knew about their research programme, and her dished up to her on a plate was the opportunity to connect with the company. Even the possibility perhaps of a collaboration or grant. Fiona sensed there was something different about Thorn, something that set him apart from the rest of the room. She decided that he wasn't trying to impress anyone; but his presence alone was enough to command attention. Fiona felt compelled to speak with him before she even realized she was walking toward him.

When their eyes met, it was as though the rest of the room fell away. Thorn's smile was easy, his gaze steady, and when he greeted her, his voice had that effortless charm that sent her pulse racing.

"NeuroHealth Foundation, right?" Thorn said smoothly, extending his hand. "I've heard solid things."

Fiona’s stomach fluttered as she shook his hand, flattered by the recognition, her earlier triumph with Briarwood forgotten in the sudden intensity of the moment. "That's right," she replied, trying to keep her voice even. "And you’re with Viperis, if I’m not mistaken."

He nodded, his eyes never leaving hers. " “Looks like we’re in the same line of work, then. Seems only fair we get to know each other.”

Their exchange began innocently enough, polite pleasantries, but beneath the surface, there was an unmistakable current. Fiona, flattered by the attention set aside her plan to push for a relationship between the Foundation and Viperis. Every word, every glance felt charged, as if they were both dancing around something unsaid. Thorn’s attention was focused entirely on her, and the way he spoke—so casual, yet with an intensity she couldn’t shake—made Fiona feel like she was the only person in the room.

As the evening wore on and the event began to wind down, Fiona felt the anticipation building between them. Thorn leaned in slightly, lowering his voice. "You know," he said, his tone light but with that ever-present spark beneath it, "these events are all well and good, but they can be a little... stuffy. What do you say we grab a nightcap somewhere more relaxed? My hotel’s just around the corner."

Fiona had always been single. She had never really given it much thought; it had become part of who she was, a constant, unspoken reality. She had always been too focused on her career, too consumed by the drive to make something of herself in a world dominated by powerful men, to let relationships take centre stage.

Her relationships had been fleeting, often sabotaged by her own ambition or by the men who couldn’t quite keep up with her energy. She was drawn to power, to influence, and the men who had the kind of drive that matched hers. The problem turned out to be that such men either found her too distant or too intense, and when she had tried to let someone in, the cracks in her carefully constructed walls often caused things to fall apart.

Thorn was different. He knew exactly how to speak to her, how to draw her in. Something in the way he spoke to her made her feel noticed, powerful even.

"Why not?" she replied with a smile, the decision made before she even realized it. "Lead the way."

And just like that, Fiona found herself caught in the whirlwind of Alex Thorn’s charm. As they left the embassy together, the cool night air hit her, but the thrill of the evening kept her warm. Thorn was magnetic, and as they walked toward his hotel, she couldn’t help but feel that same spark growing stronger with every step.

It felt impulsive, reckless even, but for the first time in a long while, Fiona didn’t care. She was on a high—after bagging Briarwood’s support and now, with Thorn by her side, she felt invincible. The nightcap at his hotel was just the next step in what had already been a night of unexpected victories.

In the quiet, softly lit room, Fiona felt her pulse quicken, the weight of the evening’s excitement still thrumming in her veins. The buzz of the event was far behind them now, but the energy between her and Alex Thorn remained, crackling in the air like static. He had guided her into the room with a quiet confidence, and she had followed without hesitation, caught up in the momentum.

The sense of anticipation between them was undeniable, a kind of magnetism that left her breathless. Thorn had always seemed composed, in control, and even now, as he stood in front of her, still in his sharp suit and slightly loosened tie, that aura hadn’t faltered. Fiona, on the other hand, felt exposed—her jacket had slipped off, her dress loose around her shoulders.

But instead of feeling vulnerable, there was something thrilling in the imbalance, in the way Thorn’s gaze swept over her, taking in every detail. His presence was overpowering, and Fiona found herself responding instinctively, leaning into the quiet intensity of the moment. There was something almost surreal about it, the way her usual guardedness had dissolved, replaced by a heady sense of freedom.

His fingers worked quickly, expertly, slipping the straps of her dress off her shoulders, and before she knew it, she was standing there—bare, exposed—while he remained fully dressed.

It should have made her feel vulnerable, but instead, she felt powerful, desired. Thorn’s eyes roved over her, dark with something she couldn’t quite name, but it pulled her in further. He hadn’t rushed to undress himself—no, that wasn’t his style. He stood there, still in his suit, the crisp white shirt beneath his tailored jacket a sharp contrast to her flushed skin. He wasn’t about to lose control—he was simply choosing to indulge.

His fingers brushed against her skin, light as a whisper, tracing lines down her arms, her sides, before his hands settled on her hips, pulling her closer. The sensation of his clothes against her naked body sent a surge of heat through her, and she couldn’t help but lean into him, her body arching as if drawn by an invisible force. His lips, still untouched by the hunger he clearly held in reserve, hovered near her ear, sending shivers down her neck.

Fiona was lost to the moment, her breath shallow, her thoughts scattered like leaves in the wind. She felt like she was floating, suspended between desire and disbelief. How had she ended up here? In a hotel room with a man she barely knew, but whose very presence seemed to consume her?

And for once, Fiona let herself be in the moment, without question or doubt, allowing herself to feel alive.

The memory of that night still left Fiona breathless, her pulse quickening just thinking about it. Three years ago, she had been utterly swept away by Thorn’s effortless charm, drawn into his orbit without hesitation. But now, as she sat in her quiet office, the weight of reality settled heavily on her. What had once seemed like the thrilling start of something new now felt more like the first step into a web she hadn’t fully understood.

What if Sarah was right? The question echoed in Fiona’s mind, unsettling her. What if everything she had believed about the charity, about Thorn, had been nothing more than a facade? She had given herself over to him, both personally and professionally, convinced she was part of something important, something meaningful. But now, the shadows of doubt were creeping in, clouding her judgment. Everything she had built felt fragile, as if it could crumble at the slightest touch.

Fiona took a deep breath, steeling herself against the rising tide of uncertainty. Whatever lay ahead, she had no choice but to face it. The stakes had never been higher. The safety of the charity—and her own future—hung in the balance. But as she stood there, a chilling thought crept in: What if it was already too late?

**Chapter 21**

**Cold Awakening**

Later that night, Fiona found herself standing motionless in her tiny living room, the muted tones of the streetlights casting shadows through her curtains. She clutched her phone, her mind racing with conflicting thoughts. Every time she thought of Alex Thorn, her heart fluttered. But since the disappointing evening at the gala dinner, now well over a week ago, he hadn’t answered one of her calls. And she had called him a lot. Fiona was desperate to bridge the gap between them.

She imagined, as she had imagined it so many times before, being whisked away to Chicago, stepping into a new life. In her mind’s eye, she was gliding through the grand halls of his family mansion—gleaming marble floors, artfully arranged antiques, and sweeping views from every window. She could see herself at his side, attending glittering galas and charity events. She pictured the two of them in his sleek car, cruising through the city, her hand resting on his knee as he talked about deals and meetings.

He was busy. That’s why he hadn’t called. Of course, someone like him had so many responsibilities, so much going on that it was only natural for him to be swept up in it all. He wasn’t avoiding her. He couldn’t be. She reassured herself, convinced that any day now, her phone would light up with his name, and they’d laugh about how work had consumed him.

Finally, after rehearsing the conversation a dozen times in her head, Fiona pressed the call button. Her heart raced as the line rang once, twice, and then clicked. His voice came through, clipped and distracted.

"Fiona. What is it?"

Her heart jumped at the sound of his voice, though the coolness in his tone made her stomach twist. She swallowed hard, trying to steady herself. This wasn’t how she had pictured it. She had imagined him being pleased to hear from her, maybe even grateful. She had convinced herself that this would be her chance to prove her loyalty, to show him how much she cared. But the aloofness in his voice pierced that fantasy.

"Alex," she began, her voice smaller than she had intended, "I was hoping we could meet up. I... I need to talk to you about something. Something important."

"Can’t," he said flatly. "I’m busy. Just say whatever it is over the phone."

Fiona hesitated, nerves knotting in her stomach. She had imagined him wanting to see her, making time for her, the way he had before. But now, hearing the impatience in his voice, she faltered.

"I—I thought it might be better in person," she tried, her voice shaky with uncertainty. "But... if you’re busy, I’ll just say it now."

"Get on with it," he snapped, his patience clearly wearing thin.

Her palms were sweating now. This wasn’t how she had envisioned the conversation at all. She had rehearsed it in her head so many times, but standing on the precipice of actually telling him, everything seemed wrong. She cleared her throat, forcing herself to speak.

"It’s about Sarah Lawson. She came into my office... with a recording."

There was a brief silence on the other end, the tension crackling between them.

"Sarah Lawson? The quiet one? From the gala? The one sitting with Joshi?"

Fiona winced. "Yes, her. She... well, she was acting strange. She gave me this recording, and I just thought you should know about it."

"What was on the recording?" Alex asked, his tone low and sharp. Though calm, there was an edge to it that sent a shiver down Fiona’s spine.

"I—it was you," she stammered, suddenly unsure if telling him had been the right decision. "I heard... I heard you talking about the Serpentin trial. Something about... keeping quiet about deaths."

The words felt heavier than she expected, hanging in the air between them. She rushed to clarify, hoping to soften the blow.

"But I’m sure it was taken out of context!" she added, her voice quick and apologetic. "I mean, obviously you wouldn’t—well, I don’t think—I just thought you should know that Sarah had it. That’s all."

There was another pause, and then Alex’s voice cut through, suddenly more focused.

"I remember her and Joshi," he said, the tone of his voice sharpening. "Their heads were down, talking together the whole time. A conspiracy, maybe? A little plot?"

Fiona blinked in confusion. "I don’t think—"

"You don’t think?" Alex's voice turned icy. "Don't think, Fiona. Just listen. If that little freak Lawson is stirring up trouble, it’s your job to squash it, not feed me this like some desperate schoolgirl."

His words hit her like a punch to the gut. Desperate schoolgirl. The phrase stung, and for a moment, she felt like all the confidence she had built up over the years had been ripped away. She had wanted to impress him— to prove she was worthy of his trust—of more than just a fleeting moment of his attention. And yet, here he was, speaking to her as though she were nothing.

"I wasn’t... I just thought you’d want to know because—" she started, her voice faltering.

"Because what?" His voice dropped to a dangerous growl now. "Because you think telling me this would make me see you as loyal? Special?"

Fiona’s heart raced, and her fingers tightened around the phone. Her lips parted to respond, but the words wouldn’t come.

"Listen carefully," Alex continued, his tone cold. "I don’t care what you think you’ve heard. Whatever Lawson gave you, forget it. Delete it! You’re some jumped-up charity CEO. A nobody. You don’t run your mouth to anyone, understand?"

Tears welled up in Fiona’s eyes, but she blinked them back, struggling to hold herself together. "Alex, I—"

"And if you’re thinking about doing something stupid," he interrupted, ignoring her attempts to speak, "remember—this isn’t your game. You’re out of your depth, Fiona. If you think you can play me, you’re wrong. Talk to anyone, and it will end badly for you. Do you understand?"

Her throat tightened, and her vision blurred with the tears she had tried to hold back. She had thought she was important to him—had convinced herself that their connection was more than just business. But now she saw the truth.

"I—" she tried again, but the words stuck.

"I said, do you understand me?" His voice was now devoid of any warmth, only sharp and dangerous.

"Yes," she whispered, barely able to force the word out.

"Good," he spat. "Now stay out of my way."

The line clicked dead, and the silence that followed was deafening.

Fiona stood frozen, still clutching the phone as if waiting for something else to happen, for the conversation to somehow change, for Thorn to call back. But the phone didn’t ring.

Fiona moved into the kitchen and automatically reached for a wine glass. Her eyes fell on the small, velvet-lined tin nestling at the back of the glass cabinet. Inside were the mushrooms, their caps dried and curled, a deep ochre red speckled with tiny white flecks. Her fingers hovered over the tin for a moment before picking it up.

*I just want to stop thinking for a while*

Fiona crumbled the mushroom into her glass, topping it up from the already open bottle of wine on the counter and drifted back into the living room.

The first wave came gently, like a breeze slipping through an open window. Fiona felt a soft hum beneath her skin, a subtle vibration that made her fingertips tingle. She lay on the floor, her back pressed against the rug, and stared at the ceiling. The paint there seemed to shimmer, the edges of the room softening. Her breath slowed, deepened. Colours grew brighter, the green of her prayer plant a burning emerald.

And then the visions began. At first, they were abstract—kaleidoscopic shapes twisting and folding, impossibly intricate patterns blooming like flowers in the air. But soon, a figure emerged, walking toward her from the swirling chaos.

He was tall and lean, with the easy gait of someone who owned the ground he walked on. His boots struck the earth with a soft thud, leaving faint impressions of dust clouds that shimmered with colour. A leather vest clung to his chest, and a wide-brimmed hat shaded his face.

She blinked, and for a moment, he wasn’t standing in her living room anymore. She was with him—on the plains, the golden grasses stretching endlessly in every direction, the horizon aflame with the hues of an otherworldly sunset.

The scenery shifted again. She was back in her living room, but it wasn’t quite right. The walls breathed, expanding and contracting like the lungs of some great beast. The cowboy leaned against the mantle, impossibly calm.

“You have power,” he said, his eyes narrowing as he studied her.

“What should I do?” she asked

“You’ll figure it out. Just don’t take too long.”

The cowboy faded, leaving her floating in a kaleidoscope of colour and sound, her body weightless, her thoughts unfurling like ribbons in the wind.

When she finally came back to herself, she was curled on the floor, the empty wine glass overturned beside her. Her limbs felt heavy and her mouth dry.

*Henslow.*

She whispered the name to herself, tasting it, trying to hold onto the fleeting certainty it brought her.

**Chapter 22**

**Split Lips**

Lord Adrian Briarwood, son of an army captain, carried the self-assured air of a man who believes deeply in his own legacy. Born into a world of quiet privilege, Briarwood's childhood was lived in the shadow of his father's expectations and his family's ingrained sense of duty to country. Regardless, he had never been destined to follow in his father’s footsteps.

Briarwood had no aversion to confrontation. Even as a boy, he was sharp-witted and competitive, quick to defend his interests. He seldom lost argument, and he usually managed to walk away the victor without sparking violent retaliation. Which was just as well since he was a physical coward, invariably shrinking from the prospect of violence. The very idea of blood and bruises, his or anyone else’s made his stomach churn.

One summer, during a family picnic at the barracks where his father was stationed, he’d found himself at odds with another boy, the son of a junior officer. The argument started over a game of marbles and had quickly escalated. Adrian, confident in his wit, dismantled the other boy’s excuses for losing with a string of mocking remarks that left the group of children giggling. But when the boy shoved him hard in retaliation, Adrian froze.

“Fight him back!” his father barked from across the field, having witnessed the exchange. Captain Briarwood marched over, his expression pure annoyance. “Don’t just stand there, Adrian. A Briarwood doesn’t let anyone push him around.”

But Adrian couldn’t move. His mind raced with images of blackened eyes and split lips. Instead of raising his fists, he backed away, muttering something about not wanting to ruin his shirt. The other boy smirked triumphantly, and Adrian’s father looked on in barely concealed disgust.

Later that evening, as they drove back home, Captain Briarwood broke the heavy silence. “You embarrassed yourself today, Adrian. And me. What do you think happens to people who refuse to stand their ground? They get walked over, again and again.” Adrian stared out the window, for once saying nothing. Briarwood senior’s eyes flicked to the rearview mirror, then back to the road. He wasn’t one to mince words, and Adrian’s silence only added to the tension. There was no denying the truth in his father’s blunt assessment—Adrian had faltered in the face of pressure, something the older man didn’t take lightly.

It had been that encounter with the marble bully, that had driven Adrian to the decision he would never regret: the need to rise above the threat of violence. Violence could be a tool, a form of control, but it could also turn against you. He wasn’t a fighter. He had never been. He knew, deep down, that the power he sought wasn’t something born of brute strength. It came from influence, from control over the right people, at the right time. And money, he’d decided, was the answer.

It was why he had studied economics, not just for the theories, but for the tangible power it could offer. To Adrian it was about safety. Money would be a shield that could protect him from the violence and chaos that others had to contend with. It could give him leverage, making him untouchable, or at least harder to touch.

Adrian’s rise to the House of Lords had been both inevitable and almost incidental, a consequence of timing, connections, and the serendipitous randomness of life. By the time he was elevated, his father had long passed, not in some glorious or dramatic fashion, but in a way that seemed to sum up the unpredictability of existence—he was run over by a bus on the high street, a moment of absurdity that made the world feel random. There had been no great battle, no monumental act of heroism to mark his father’s passing. Instead, it was as if the universe had dealt him a random hand. One moment, his father had been there, full of stubbornness and pride, and the next, he was gone, his life cut short by the number 28.

Adrian had no doubt that his father would have been proud of his accomplishments, even though the old man would likely have scoffed at the idea of Adrian joining the ranks of the elite, let alone the House of Lords. His appointment was the culmination of years of social climbing, and though the seat in the House of Lords had been a political prize, it was also a symbol of Adrian’s dominance in a world where fortune and power were everything. The old man would have been proud, Adrian thought, not for the title itself, but for the fact that he had become someone who would never be run over by the bus of life.

The morning after the charity gala dinner, Briarwood strode out of the chamber feeling less than joyous. He’d just endured another tedious debate on climate change. The relentless rhetoric of overregulation and environmental alarmism grated on his nerves, as did the rising tide of voices demanding immediate action.

With a practiced smile plastered on his face, he navigated the corridor, his thoughts already turning toward the sanctuary of his office, his polished shoes clacking against the mosaic-tiled floors as he hastened toward his office. His office was just ahead—a sanctuary in the political labyrinth.

As he entered, Briarwood tried to shake the tension creeping that had been steadily creeping up on him. He sank into his leather chair at his grand desk, a cliché of leather topped with a brass lamp feeling oddly exposed. A feeling of unease had settled on him in the hotel bar the night before and it felt sticky and unfamiliar. He loosened his tie, and tossed his spectacles on the desk, and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

Thorn had been confident, bullish. *“We’ve handled bigger challenges before. Don’t worry, it’s under control.”* But it had been hard to ignore the odd way Thorn had been watching David Joshi over dinner evening. Alex had tried to engage David in conversation once or twice, keeping the mood light, but David had been distant, evasive. He’d been squirrely no doubt about it— Briarwood hadn’t liked that.

"Have the file shipped over to me," Briarwood had hissed at Thorn, "I need to know exactly what I'm dealing with—if this gets out, it could bury me politically, and worse if anyone connects the dots on the shares."

And then there was the veiled threat about his financial dealings. A ham-fisted attempt to bring Briarwood into line. The sheer audacity of it. Thorn really did have no idea of who he was dealing with.

Now not feeling entirely safe in his own office, Briarwood poured himself a small measure of whiskey, the amber liquid swirling in the crystal glass. He sat back, contemplating. Thorn had been right about one thing. If this thing went public, he was done. The shares he’d bought, listed under his wife Sylvia’s name, were supposed to elevate his portfolio and position, not ruin him. A scandal would mean ruin—politically, financially, maybe even legally.

He took a slow sip of his whiskey, trying to convince himself it wasn’t that bad. After all, Thorn was right: data scares like this had blown over before. Companies rebounded, reshaped the narrative, and moved on. If Viperis could do the same, maybe he’d be safe. The data hadn’t leaked. No lawyers had been brought in. If everyone just held their nerve, maybe—*maybe*—it would blow over.

But David’s strange behaviour lingered in his mind. What if the man panicked? What if he talked? Or worse, what if he already had?

A quiet knock on the door jolted Briarwood from his thoughts. He looked up, quickly adjusting his expression as Julia, his private secretary, entered. She was as efficient as always, but today there was something different about the way she looked at him—an alertness, perhaps a hint of curiosity. In her hand, she carried a thick file marked *“Confidential.”*

“Adrian”, she said, her voice smooth, betraying nothing. “This file came for you by courier first thing.”

Briarwood’s stomach tightened. The way she set the file down on his desk, just a little too carefully, made him uneasy. Had she read it? She wasn’t supposed to know anything—no one outside a very small circle was. But Julia was sharp. Too sharp, sometimes. She had been with him long enough to notice when things didn’t add up.

He gave her a nod, keeping his face in what he hoped would seem a neutral expression. “Thank you, Julia.”

For a moment, she lingered, her gaze flicking briefly to the file before meeting his eyes again. Was she hesitating? He couldn't tell if she knew something, or if his paranoia was simply getting the better of him. When she finally stepped back, it was with her usual briskness, but that moment of hesitation nagged at him.

“Will that be all?” she asked, her tone perfectly measured, professional.

“Yes, that’s all.” Briarwood forced a smile. “I’ll let you know if I need anything.”

Julia gave a brief nod and left, the door clicking shut softly behind her. For a few seconds he simply stared at the file on his desk, his hand hovering over its cover. And when he did open it, the first line of the first page glared angrily back at him.

*Recommendation: Immediate suspension of trial due to severe adverse events.*

He swallowed hard and read on. Three patients—three living, breathing human beings—had suffered catastrophic, rapid neurodegeneration. On the surface, it could have been dismissed as part of the disease’s natural course. Luminis Dementia was cruel like that. But the report laid out a horrifying pattern, one that couldn’t be ignored.

All three had followed an eerily identical path: first, reporting searing headaches that left them incapacitated for hours, followed by disorientation so severe they barely recognized their families. Then the delirium where no one could reach them followed by violent tremors, uncontrollable spasms, limbs stiffening as if their muscles had turned to stone. And then the final stage: seizures so intense they left the patients paralyzed, their minds deteriorating into nothing more than a void before death claimed them. The timeline was disturbingly short. From the onset of symptoms to death, none of the patients had lasted more than three days.

Briarwood's throat went dry as he continued reading. There was no doubt in his mind—the drug had been responsible for these deaths. The odds that three patients would follow such an identical, catastrophic decline from the disease alone were astronomically low. This wasn’t a tragic coincidence. It was the drug. *Their* drug.

*What about Sinclair?* The thought pushed itself suddenly into Briarwood’s mind. He’d set Sinclair up with access to the study drug. Money had changed hands. What if…….

He clenched his jaw, barely the warmth of the whiskey as he downed a glass in one swallow. This was worse than he’d anticipated. If this got out, he’d be finished. His career, his investments, his entire political future would be in ruins. Damn the company to hell, what did he care if the company went down? But the shares he’d bought, tucked away under his wife’s name, would become evidence of insider trading. He quickly logged on using his phone to check their value. Now would be a good time to offload. But what if anyone found out about the quiet government grants, the tax breaks, that he had helped secure for Viperis, there would be no coming back.

Briarwood’s mind whirred, gears finally clicking into place. David’s twitchiness at the gala—it wasn’t just nerves. The man was on the verge of crumbling. His erratic behaviour, the way he avoided eye contact, that nervous laugh—it all made sense now. David wasn’t just uncomfortable; he was buckling under the weight of what he knew. He could expose them all. If David cracked, everything would unravel. The guilt was eating him alive, and Briarwood suddenly realized it wasn’t a question of if he would talk, but when.

There might still be a way to salvage this, but not if he left it in Thorn’s hands. The man was a weak buffoon. The ease with which he’d always been able to manipulate Thorn told Briarwood everything he needed to know about the man and the situation. Thorn was out of his depth—if allowed him to steer this ship, it would surely capsize, and they would all go down with it. Time was running out quickly, and Briarwood had to takebackcontrol before it was too late.

**Chapter 23**

**Dangerous Conversation**

The small cafe on the corner of the street smelled of bacon and eggs and freshly brewed coffee. Sarah sat at a corner-table, pretending there was still something in her coffee mug, both of her hands curled around it. It had been 40 minutes since she’d bumped into David outside the clinic. Perhaps he’d decided not to come - jumped back on the train and headed home.

When the café door chimed softly, she looked up to see David stepping inside. He spotted her, his expression shifting to one of relief as he made his way through the scattered tables.

“Hi” he said, “another coffee?”

Sarah nodded, “a latte please”.

David headed over to the counter, returned a few minutes later with two steaming mugs. He set both down carefully, then slid into the chair across from her. Determined now to cut straight to the chase, he leaned toward her, his voice low, “If you were outside the clinic then I’m assuming you listened to the tape I sent you”, he asked, “I mean, at the dinner I wasn’t sure. You didn’t say anything, and I thought well maybe….” David, suddenly uncertain how much Sarah might have figured out, let his voice trail off.

“So, you did send it to me”, Sarah confirmed.

“Yeah,” David admitted, rubbing his temples. “I didn’t know what else to do. I thought about sending it directly to the regulators, but… I chickened out. I just couldn’t bring myself to take that leap.”

“David,” she said softly, “you don’t have to apologize for involving me in this. If there’s a chance to stop this, we need to do something.”

“I thought you’d want to know,” he said, his voice cracking. “You’re referring patients to the study, and… I feel like I’m going crazy. I needed someone to talk this through with.” The weight of his vulnerability hung in the air, and Sarah felt a rush of sympathy for him.

“What was the problem back there? You looked like were up to something dodgy,” Sarah said, scanning him for clues about his state of mind.

David managed a weak smile. “You could say that. I just returned something that didn’t belong to me.”

“Something? What was in the box?” She leaned in, curiosity piqued.

He hesitated for a moment, glancing around the cafe as if checking for eavesdroppers. “Snakes,” he finally admitted, his voice low.

Sarah blinked. “Snakes?” she repeated, as if she hadn’t heard him correctly. “In a box?”

David nodded, his hand absently stirring the untouched coffee in front of him. “I found them in my fridge this morning. Someone came into my house while I was asleep and filled by fridge with deadly snakes.”

Sarah stared at him, her mug frozen halfway to her lips. "You’re joking," she said flatly.

David shook his head. "I wish I was."

She set the mug down carefully, "You’re telling me someone broke into your house… and left venomous snakes in your fridge? That’s not just bizarre—it’s terrifying."

“Terrifying, yes,” David agreed, his voice steady but laced with tension. “The snakes came from the lab – I’m sure of it. “Najae Phantasmata. Unmistakable. So, I put them back. Like they told me to”

Sarah leaned back in her chair, still processing. “Who…? What…? Why would someone do that?”

“To send a message,” he replied grimly.

“What kind of message involves snakes?” she asked, her voice rising slightly. Heads from nearby tables turned, and she quickly lowered it again. “That’s not a warning—that’s a death threat!”

David glanced around to check if anyone could hear him. “It’s both. They know I hate snakes. They knew I’d find them. And they knew I’d understand what they meant: Keep quiet.”

The weight of his vulnerability hung in the air, and Sarah felt a rush of sympathy for him.

Sarah stared at him for a long moment, “Are you saying the snakes and the tape are connected? That the snakes were in your fridge to scare you? I think someone wants you to keep your mouth shut.”

David rubbed his temples, exhaustion creeping into his features. *No shit Sherlock*!

For a moment, neither of them spoke. The hum of the cafe filled the silence.

Sarah opened her mouth to speak and hesitated not really wanting to ask the question. “Do they know about the tape? Do they know you sent it to me?”

He met her gaze, his expression bleak. “I don’t know.”

“Why not just call the police? Report it?”

David’s eyes darkened. “And say what? ‘*Hello, I’d been planning to expose a dangerous clinical trial and someone left venomous snakes in my fridge?*’ That’d go well.” He paused, exhaling sharply. “Besides, I’ve already crossed a line by keeping the safety data. They know that. And so do you.”

“What are you going to do?” Sarah asked, her voice softer now.

“Stay alive,” David muttered. “And maybe—just maybe—find a way to make this right.”

A look of panic settled on Sarah’s face and David instantly regretted suggesting they might be in mortal danger.

I can’t stand snakes,” he confessed, “From the tone of the menacing text message I received this morning it’s clear that someone really wants me to keep my mouth shut.”

Sarah’s brow furrowed with concern. “You think it was Thorn?”

“I don’t know for sure,” he admitted, his voice heavy with uncertainty. “But I wouldn’t put it past him. He’s ruthless, and frankly he scares me shitless.” David looked down at his hands, a shiver running through him as the reality of his situation settled in.

David leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, as if hoping it would all just go away, but when he opened them again Sarah was still sitting across from him, and at least she looked a little calmer now.

“David,” she said. “I’ve found a journalist. I think if we go to the press, we’ll be OK. This guy has written some stuff about Viperis in the past, none of it complementary. I think he’ll be interested in what we have to say.”

His eyes widened slightly. “You really think so?”

“I do,” she replied, her confidence growing. “But I need to know if you’re willing to speak to him with me. To blow the whistle on this whole thing.”

David’s expression shifted, a flicker of uncertainty crossing his face. He leaned back in his chair, staring at the table as if weighing the enormity of her proposition. The question hung in the air, thick with possibility.

“I…” he began, but the words seemed to falter in his throat. “I need time to think.”

Sarah nodded, “I get it. Just know that whatever you decide, I’m going to have to do something. You’ve left me no choice.”

He looked up, meeting her gaze, a silent agreement passing between them.

**Chapter 24**

**Infusion**

Margaret stood in front of the mirror, staring at her reflection, but the woman looking back seemed just a little off, like a subtle shift in an old photograph. She blinked, trying to make sense of the feeling, but it lingered like a forgotten word on the tip of her tongue. Something was out of place—she was out of place—and it unnerved her.

Her hand shook slightly as she reached up to smooth down her hair, but even that small gesture felt foreign to her. Just yesterday, she'd set a Tupperware container of soup on the electric hob instead of in the microwave. She could still remember the way the plastic had melted, the smell of burnt chemicals filling the kitchen. At least she’d had the presence of mind to clear up the mess before Robert got home. He didn’t need to know—he would have been upset, and lately, upsetting him had become a sort of silent terror for her.

Margaret turned away from the mirror and tried to focus on getting dressed. Everything felt more complicated than it used to—buttons, zippers, tying her shoelaces. God, the shoelaces. She stared down at them now, tangled between her fingers, the simple act of looping them into a bow suddenly seeming like an impossible riddle. She gritted her teeth, willing her hands to remember what her mind couldn’t, and after a few fumbling attempts, the knot came together, lopsided but functional.

Every day, her mind felt heavier, more sluggish, like trying to wade through thick fog. The energy it took just to complete the most basic tasks felt monumental. Even Robert’s name—her own husband—sometimes slipped away from her, vanishing into the mist of her thoughts, only to resurface moments later with a rush of shame and fear.

The trial was her last hope. She knew that. If the drug didn’t work, it wouldn’t be long before the disease took over completely. The doctors had been vague with the timeline, but she wasn’t naive. Months, maybe a year if she was lucky, before her mental capacity would be gone for good. And then, Robert and the boys would be strangers to her. The thought chilled her. She tried not to think about it, but it was always there, lurking at the edges of her mind.

It was time to go. Time for the hospital, for the infusion. Margaret felt a mixture of fear and excitement. And suddenly she found herself thinking about her first day at school, as vivid as if it had happened yesterday: the scratchy wool of her new cardigan, the faint scent of chalk dust in the classroom, and her mother’s firm grip on her hand as they walked up the school steps. She’d cried, of course, hot tears rolling down her cheeks while she clutched the strap of her satchel like it might anchor her. And then there was her teacher, a stern-faced woman with red lipstick, who handed Margaret a fat pencil and said, “Write your name, dear.” That pencil had felt enormous, unwieldy, like it belonged to someone older, someone braver. Now was a day when she’d need to be that braver, older version of herself. Funny, she thought, how the past shone like a polished mirror while the present seemed to constantly slither away from her.

Robert was waiting by the front door now, his face set in that calm, reassuring expression he’d perfected over the last few months. But Margaret knew the truth—she could see the fear behind his eyes, too. He wasn’t fooling anyone. They were both scared. Terrified, really. And as she reached for his hand, it occurred to her that the grip he offered to her now was the one her mother had given her all those years ago—steady, firm, and a little desperate.

“Ready?” he asked, his voice soft but strained.

Margaret nodded. Robert opened the door, and the crisp morning air washed over her as they made their way to the car. Robert helped her into the passenger seat, the small gesture of care striking her more deeply than it should have.

They drove to the hospital in silence. Margaret watched the world blur past her window, the familiar streets of their neighbourhood giving way to the sterile buildings of the medical centre. Her hands trembled in her lap, and she clenched them into fists to steady herself. She couldn’t show Robert how scared she was—not now, not when they were so close. As they pulled into the parking lot, Margaret felt a strange mixture of dread and hope settle over her.

“Here we go,” Robert said softly as he parked the car, his hand reaching over to squeeze hers. She forced a smile, though it felt brittle, fragile, like it might shatter at any moment.

Together, they walked toward the entrance of the hospital, Margaret leaning just a little more on Robert’s arm than she had the last time.

In the scanning room, Margaret sat stiffly on the scanner bed, trying to steady her nerves. The research nurse gently placed the metal frame over her head, securing it with a few light clicks. The sensation wasn’t painful, but it felt confining, as though the weight of the frame was pressing down on her thoughts. She swallowed hard, focusing on Robert standing nearby, his familiar presence the only thing keeping her grounded.

"You're doing great, Margaret," the nurse said, her voice calm and practiced. "Just lie back and try to relax."

The motorized bed beneath her hummed softly as it began to move, inching her headfirst into the scanner. The curved white tube seemed to swallow her up, and she closed her eyes against the sterile brightness of the lights overhead. The inside of the scanner felt close, a hollow chamber with just enough room to breathe.

As the machine whirred to life, Margaret's world filled with a rhythmic thumping sound, a mechanical heartbeat that reverberated through her skull. She was told to keep still, and though she tried, she could feel the tension in her body, her muscles stiffening with each passing second. The sound pulsed around her, drowning out everything else.

Her thoughts began to drift. The image of melted plastic soup from the day before flashed in her mind, and she squeezed her eyes tighter, willing the memory away. The clanging of the machine filled the air, rhythmic and loud, but still, Robert’s words floated in the back of her mind. He was there for her. He always had been.

After what felt like an eternity, the bed finally slid back out. The nurse removed the frame from her head, the cool air of the room a relief against her skin.

"All done with the scan," the nurse said, offering a reassuring smile. "Now we’ll move on to the infusion."

Margaret nodded, her heart still beating a little too fast. She followed the nurse to another room, where a reclining chair awaited her. The room was quiet, with soft lighting and the faint scent of antiseptic in the air. Robert helped her settle into the chair as the nurse wheeled over a cart carrying the infusion bag.

"Let’s just check your details again," the nurse said, holding a clipboard. "Can you confirm your name and date of birth?"

Margaret repeated the information, her voice steady even though her stomach churned with nerves. The nurse nodded, satisfied, and set the clipboard aside.

"Alright, Margaret. We're going to insert the cannula into a vein in your arm, and then we’ll start the infusion. You’ll feel a little pinch, but it should be quick."

There was a slight sting as the needle pierced her skin, the sharpness quickly fading into a dull pressure as the cannula was taped into place. Margaret exhaled slowly, relieved that the worst part was over. She watched as the nurse connected the thin tube to the cannula, attaching the other end to the clear bag of fluid hanging from a metal stand beside her.

"We’re starting the infusion now," the nurse said, gently squeezing the bag to check the flow. Margaret’s eyes followed the line of the tube, watching the fluid begin to snake its way down toward her arm. It was surreal—this tiny, clear stream of liquid held all her hopes, her fears, her last chance at keeping herself.

She felt a cool sensation as the drug entered her vein, a creeping chill spreading up her arm. It wasn’t unpleasant, but it made her acutely aware of the foreign substance coursing through her body. She looked over at Robert, trying to distract herself from the thought.

"So," she said, her voice a little wobbly, "what did you think of that documentary we watched last night?"

Robert grinned, catching on to her attempt to keep things light. "You mean the one about that bloke who builds model trains? Riveting stuff."

Margaret chuckled, the sound shaky but genuine. They fell into easy conversation, chatting about nonsense—the weather, the cat next door, that time they got lost on holiday in Ireland. It was all designed to keep her mind off the infusion, off the weight of what was happening.

The minutes passed, the bag slowly draining, and after what felt like an age, the nurse returned.

"All done, Margaret. We’ll just keep an eye on you for about an hour to make sure there are no side effects."

Margaret nodded, feeling a strange mixture of relief and anticlimax as the cannula was removed. She rubbed her arm absentmindedly, already eager for the sense of something—anything—to change.

The hour dragged by, the nurse checking her vitals at regular intervals. Everything seemed normal. No allergic reactions, no dizziness, no nausea. Just… nothing.

Finally, the nurse smiled and said, "You're free to go, Margaret. We’ll see you at your next appointment."

As they gathered their things, Margaret realized she felt no different at all. No clearer, no sharper. For a moment, disappointment surged inside her—had it all been for nothing?

But then she took a deep breath, forcing herself to be patient. *Give it time,* she thought. The drug would need time to work, wouldn’t it? She clung to that hope as they left the hospital, the air outside fresher than she remembered.

*It’ll take time,* she told herself again. It had to.

**Chapter 25**

**Whistleblower**

Jake Collins’ short career as a freelance journalist had seen more too few highs and far too many crushing lows. Each article he submitted, from think pieces on urban gentrification to exposés on local council corruption, felt like another step on a humdrum conveyor belt. He was always on the lookout for a story that would catapult him into the limelight of serious journalism but as things had turned out, he had a knack writing stories few people bothered to read. His mother was his only fan, diligently keeping clippings and print-outs of all his published articles in a scrap book that she’d pull out to show visitors who in turn would feign being impressed.

So here he was, and not for the first time, meeting a total stranger in a rundown café tucked away in a godforsaken suburb that would take him an age to travel back home from. Hoping to uncover a diamond in the rough amidst the faded wallpaper and creaky chairs. The journey here had been tedious, the kind that left him already dreading the trek home.

The door to the café swung open, letting in a draft of cold air, and in slunk Sarah Lawson. He recognised her from her charity’s “about us” section. Though she looked prettier and more interesting in person than her mug shot on the website. She’d given him just enough information over the phone to hook him. It was all very curious. Apart from anything else, if the story came good it would be a cracking David and Goliath story.

Sarah made her way across the room, clutching the arm of the man who followed closely behind her, who looked like he hadn’t slept in weeks. His pale skin was drawn tight across his face, his eyes sunken and darting around the room like a hunted animal. Left to stew in his own juice for almost a week, David had gone down-hill and when he’d found himself at rock bottom, he’d picked up the phone to Sarah. “OK”, he’d said, “let’s do it. Set up a meeting with your journalist friend. I feel like I’ve got nothing to lose”.

Sarah had been concerned that Jake would lose interest, that his initial spark of curiosity might fizzle out once he realized she didn’t have all the pieces to the puzzle. In truth, she’d already told him everything she knew—or at least everything she felt confident enough to share. Her leads were thin, her evidence incomplete. She sensed that Jake wasn’t the type to linger on a story that didn’t promise results.

Still, she clung to the hope—no, the belief—that David would come around. He just needed time. She hoped he’d see that she and Jake were his best chance—perhaps his only chance—of doing the right thing.

Once he’d had time to think, really think, she was sure he’d reach out. At least, she had to believe that. Otherwise, what did she have? Just scraps of information and a ticking clock.

"Jake Collins?" Sarah said, her voice a little breathless. "We spoke. This is Dr David Joshi."

Jake nodded, his gaze sliding over to David, who acknowledged him with a brief, reluctant nod. Something about the man screamed desperation. He was close to cracking—anyone could see that.

"David’s the journalist I told you about," Sarah added, sitting down.

David followed suit and sat, shoulders hunched, fidgeting with the edge of his sleeve. He looked like he’d rather be anywhere else. His gaze flitted nervously between Jake and the door, like he was planning his escape.

They ordered a pot of tea and passed a few pleasantries while the waitress busied herself back behind the counter, filling the metal teapot with three teabags and steaming hot water, before clanking the lid down on its hinge and loudly ratting three cups and saucers onto the tray. She added milk, sugar and spoons to the tray and unceremoniously plonked it on the table by the three unlikely looking companions.

As soon as the waitress left, Jake cleared his throat. "So, you're the inside man?"

Sarah busied herself dishing out the tea, which since it hadn’t been allowed to brew for long-enough, gushed out the colour of weak piss. Jake wouldn’t be drinking it.

Pulling out his notebook he fixed his gaze on Joshi. “Start from the beginning,” he said, “What’s going on?”

David flinched, confirming what Jake already suspected. The man wasn’t cut out for this.

"I didn’t… I didn’t want to be involved," David muttered, his voice barely above a whisper. "But I couldn’t just stand by anymore."

Jake leaned forward, studying him. "What changed? What pushed you over the edge?"

David glanced at Sarah for reassurance before speaking, a tremor of uncertainty in his voice. "It’s the deaths. Anyone who knows about the patient deaths is in the crosshairs. Either they stay silent and live with the knowledge and possibly the consequences when the truth finally gets out—or they’re next in line for retribution. I—I’ve seen the reports, the cases." His voice cracked, and he buried his face in his hands. "I don’t know how to live with this."

Jake sat back, the words sinking in. He’d been chasing leads on Viperis for months, focusing on the money trail—Briarwood’s influence, those sketchy government grants—but this? This was bigger. Much bigger.

He could see it now: David was falling apart.

"You need to keep it together," Jake said, his voice firm. He locked eyes with David. "If you fall apart now, it’s over. No one will take you seriously without hard proof. We need something concrete, something that ties the drug to those deaths. Can you get it?"

David swallowed hard, glancing again at Sarah, his eyes pleading for some way out. "I don’t know how much longer I can do this…"

Jake didn’t blink. "You have to. This is bigger than you, bigger than all of us. If you want to bring Viperis down, you need to stay inside. Keep your head down. Pretend everything’s fine. But we need those reports—evidence that can’t be swept under the rug."

Sarah shifted in her seat, visibly concerned for David. She gestured to him to drink the tea she’d poured and set out in front of him. Hoping it would help steady him. And he took a sip, and seemed to calm, feeling relieved to be doing something to dig himself out of the hole.

Jake didn’t let up. He knew that David was their only shot. He’d given up circling Viperis, trying to find an opening. This was it, his chance for a big story. Something worth his mother clipping for the scrap book.

"If you walk away now, they'll just find someone else to sweep it under the rug. This is your opportunity, David. Our opportunity. We need you to gather every piece of evidence you can—clinic reports, emails, safety data, everything. But you have to stay focused and hold it together long enough to get us what we need."

David stared at the table, his hands trembling. "What if they find out?" he whispered.

"They won’t," Jake said sharply. "Not if you play your part. Go back, do your job, keep quiet. Act like everything’s fine."

Silence hung between them. If they were going to bring down Viperis, they needed David to stay in the game. David finally nodded, though it looked more like a surrender than agreement. "I’ll try," he murmured, his voice hollow.

Jake nodded, feeling the tension in the room ease just slightly, he couldn’t afford to let David crumble now. Besides, it all sounded a tad mellow-dramatic. Someone had put a few snakes in a fridge and sent a text. It wasn’t exactly *Goodfellows*.

As they stood to leave, Jake caught Sarah’s eye. She looked worried. Jake offered a slight nod. They still had a long way to go, but the game had just changed. He had an insider—one on the brink—and if they played their cards right, Viperis wouldn’t see it coming.

And maybe, just maybe, he’d finally get a story worth publishing.

**Diary Entry – Henslow Hayward**

**Chicago June 1910**

The vision struck with a ferocity that could neither be anticipated nor prepared for. I sat dazed in my study, the flickering candlelight casting faint, quivering shadows along the shelves, barely clinging to the edges of consciousness as the world dissolved around me.

I found myself transported to a sterile, blindingly white chamber. The air hung heavy, sharp with a faint tang of metal. A low hum grew steadily to a throbbing metallic thrum. The walls pulsed faintly, as if alive, synchronizing with the monstrous machine that loomed at the chamber's centre—a grotesque curve like the of polished bone of some monstrous beast, its surface glistening.

My eyes fell on a slab at the heart of the monstrosity, where a figure lay. The body, wrapped in a loose gown that draped lifelessly, seemed fragile and exposed against the cold sterility of the room.

Then, the images appeared—suspended, almost impossibly, in the air before me—the form of a brain, like those I had seen dug from the skulls of cattle, its translucent folds glistening like sliced fruit. Light and shadow danced across its surface, the faint glow of its inner recesses revealing seeds, tucked deep within. A pale, slender stalk extended from the base, delicate and fragile and wisps of white, faint and ethereal like smoke, rose from its depths, curling into the darkness above.

The meaning of what came next I cannot hope to decipher. My hand moved almost of its own accord, reaching into the depths of the grotesque machine, and pressing gently against the woman’s temple. As my fingers hovered over her skull, the suspended images shifted, dark patches swirling like shadows caught in a restless tide. Smoke twisted and reshaped, obeying the subtle, motion of my bidding.

And then, a single word formed in my mind.

*Margaret.*

The vision ended as abruptly as it had begun. I awoke from my vision gasping, my lungs heaving like those of a man dragged from the sea. The world of my study returned, will all its quiet familiarity. I fancy I can still hear a faint, sinister hiss, like the whisper of a serpent coiled in shadow, asking:

“*What have you done?”*

**Chapter 26**

**Appointment**

Margaret sat in the quiet of her living room, sunlight filtering through the sheer curtains, casting soft patterns on the floor. The house was still. Robert had taken the kids out for ice cream to celebrate the warmer weather. A treat to keep them busy while they waited for the babysitter to arrive so that Margaret and Robert could set off to the hospital for her check-up.

As she sank into the plush armchair, a book resting unopened on her lap, she couldn’t shake the flutter of anticipation building within her. It was a week since the infusion, and she was beginning to feel different. She could feel a new heaviness in her limbs, a dull ache behind her eyes. Margaret clung to hope, convincing herself these sensations were signs of the drug working.

“It’s a good sign,” she murmured to herself, forcing a smile. “The medicine is clearing the tangles from my brain. It must be that.”

Margaret closed her eyes, imagining her doctor, Dr Joshi, smiling as he delivered the good news. She pictured the images from the scan, those tangled masses in her brain slowly dissolving, dissipating like morning fog. “You’re doing so well, Margaret,” she imagined him saying, his voice steady and reassuring. “We’re seeing real improvement.”

As she sat there, she felt a sudden wave of dizziness wash over her. She pressed a hand to her forehead. “Just a sign of the medicine working,” she reassured herself again, her heartbeat quickening. “It’s all part of the process.”

Margaret took a deep breath, focusing on the positive. The infusion was her chance at a new beginning, a beacon of hope amid the encroaching shadows of her diagnosis. The kids would be back soon, their laughter filling the house, and Robert would come in with his warm smile, reminding her that he loved her.

The clock ticked steadily on the wall, marking the passage of time. With every tick, her anticipation grew. One hour until the appointment, the comforting presence of Dr Joshi, and the clean, clinical smell of the clinic. She would walk in with her head held high, ready to hear the news that would change everything.

Then the soft sound of the front door opening and the racket of the kids spilling into the room. “Mom! We’re home!”. Robert following closely behind, carrying a paper bag filled with melting ice cream and sticky hands.

“Guess what flavour I got?” one of the kids shouted, bouncing over to her with wide eyes.

Margaret smiled, her heart swelling with love as she took in the sight of her family. “What is it?”

“Chocolate chip cookie dough!” they declared in unison, giggles erupting as they began recounting their adventures at the ice cream shop.

“Sounds delicious,” she replied, standing to embrace them. Robert joined in, wrapping an arm around her shoulder.

But just as quickly as they arrived, the doorbell rang. “I’ll get it!” Robert called, and Margaret watched as he opened the door to reveal their babysitter, Chloe, bustling in with a bright smile and a wave.

“Hey, everyone!” she chirped, immediately caught up in the kids’ excitement. “What did I miss?”

“Just ice cream!” one of the kids exclaimed, tugging on her arm to share the details.

Margaret felt a pang of unease; the bustle around her felt a bit overwhelming. Robert, sensing her tension, squeezed her shoulder. “We’ll be fine. You’re going to the clinic, remember?”

Before she could respond, Robert was helping her gather her things and bundle her into the car. “You two behave, and listen to Chloe!” he instructed, his voice full of warmth and authority.

“Of course!” the kids chorused, and as they waved goodbye, Margaret felt a flicker of apprehension mixed with gratitude. She loved how much they adored Chloe, but the rush of leaving the house left her feeling unsteady.

As the car pulled away, Margaret took a deep breath, reminding herself that this was a step toward clarity.

At the clinic, she felt buoyant, moving through the familiar hallways with a sense of purpose. The buzz of activity around her became a comforting backdrop as she registered for her appointment. She was ushered into the imaging room with a bright smile from the technician, and before she knew it, she was lying on the cold, hard surface of the scanner bed.

“Just relax,” the technician instructed, her voice soothing.

Margaret nodded, feeling light and airy, as if she were floating into a better future. The scan felt over in a blink, and soon she found herself seated in a waiting area, surrounded by other patients but lost in her own thoughts.

Next came the cognitive assessment, which she breezed through, and she was pleased by the way she was answering questions with a clarity that surprised even her. The time seemed to slip away, and before she realized it, she was being led to the consulting room.

As she settled into the plush chair, her heart raced with anticipation. This was the moment she had been waiting for. When Dr Joshi came into the room, he seemed different to Margaret compared to the last time that they had meet. There was an expression on his face that she couldn’t quite place and he seemed somehow *crumpled*.

“Margaret,” the doctor said softly, taking a seat opposite her, “Robert”.

“Hi, Dr Joshi! I’m feeling great about today,” Margaret replied, her voice infused with hope. Robert as always sitting stoically by her side nodded as though in agreement. They were due some good news.

As David looked at Margaret, she noticed tears welling in his eyes. Confusion washed over her. “Is everything okay?”

David’s gaze dropped to the folder in front of him, and he took a deep, shaky breath. “I… I need to talk to you about your results,” he began, his voice strained.

The air was suddenly heavy and suffocating. “What’s wrong?” she pressed, dread creeping into her chest.

“Margaret, there were some unexpected findings in your scan,” he said, his voice trembling as he fought to maintain composure. “We need to discuss the next steps.”

The room seemed to tilt, the world outside fading away as Margaret grappled with the sudden shift. She searched his face, searching for reassurance, but all she found was sorrow reflected back at her. “No, it can’t be bad news,” she whispered, a lump forming in her throat. “It’s supposed to be good. I felt it—everything is working!”

Dr Joshi shook his head gently. “I’m so sorry, Margaret. I truly am.”

"Your scans do show some improvement," he admitted carefully, "but there's also something… new. Something we didn’t anticipate."

Margaret’s hands gripped the edge of her chair. "What do you mean? What's happening to me?"

David hesitated, wishing he could soften the blow, wishing he didn’t have to been there at all. "There’s unusual activity in your brain—something we believe is linked to the trial drug. It’s… growing, Margaret. It could explain why you’re feeling different to usual… and other symptoms."

Margaret’s eyes widened, tears pooling as she shook her head. “No. No, you said this was safe. You said—” Her voice cracked, and she stopped, burying her face in her hands.

David’s face was etched with regret. "We didn't know. The data—it wasn’t complete when we started. I can’t tell you how sorry I am."

The room was silent except for Margaret’s muffled sobs. Finally, she looked up, her face pale but resolute. "What happens now?"

“We need to stop the treatment immediately,” David said, his voice steadying slightly.

Margaret nodded faintly, but her gaze was distant, staring through him. " I’m going to die?"

David’s throat tightened. He wanted to promise her she wouldn’t, to give her the hope she desperately needed. But instead, he simply nodded, feeling hot tears roll down his cheeks.

**Chapter 27**

**Chicago 1909**

**Bitter Elixir**

A widow on the Avenue had passed in her sleep—a gentle exit, not uncommon for her years. But then came a letter from a distant customer, the paper smudged with tears. Her husband, once lively and sharp, had grown sluggish, withdrawn, and finally, deathly pale. The elixir meant to restore him had failed.

Then, one dreary afternoon, Mrs. Keating shuffled into the shop. The bell jangled brightly, but the woman who once brought a glow of energy with her visits now looked drained of it. She moved slowly, clutching an empty flask as though it carried the weight of the world.

“Mr. Hayward,” she said, placing the bottle on the counter with a trembling hand. Her voice wavered. “I don’t think this is helping the way it used to. My heart races, my head spins… I thought maybe it was just my age, but now... now I don’t know.”

Henslow studied her, his practiced smile freezing in place. Her face was pale, almost waxy, and deep hollows darkened her eyes. She looked brittle, like she might crack under the weight of her own frailty.

He nodded, murmured assurances, and reached for another bottle. “Of course, Mrs. Keating. Here’s a fresh one. Perhaps this will do the trick.”

She left with the bottle, and Henslow stood behind the counter, the familiar unease crawling up his spine. He glanced at the flask she’d returned, his fingers brushing against its cool glass.

There had been a time when he considered himself a craftsman, a showman, even a bit of an artist. His snake oil wasn’t just a product; it was a marvel, a promise in a bottle. He’d sourced rattlesnakes himself, toiling over vats in the back of the store.

But those days had all but slipped away. Rattlesnakes were harder to find, and the process more trouble than it was worth. For years now, he’d stretched his elixir with camphor and quiet hopes, but it wasn’t the same. Customers were noticing.

And then there were the newspapers. Every page seemed filled with bold proclamations of a new age in medicine: *Morphine Syrup! Cocaine Tonic! Doctor-Approved!* The labels were crisp, the promises tantalizing. These modern products came with the sheen of science that his snake oil could never match.

Henslow filled his shelves with the wonder drugs; Mrs Winslow’s Morphine Syrup for teething infants, Paregoric, a camphorated tincture of opium to treat diarrhoea, and Dr J Copllis Browne’s Chlorodyne, combining chloroform, morphine and cannabis as pain relief and as a sedative.

The new products flew off the shelves. Customers came back, their hands trembling but eager, their coins clinking on the counter with urgency. He told himself it was progress. The world was changing, and he was merely adapting.

Then came the knock.

It rattled the doorframe, loud and frantic. Henslow looked up from his ledger, startled. Before he could respond, the door flew open, and a man stormed in, his face flushed with rage and grief.

“You killed her!” the man roared, his voice cracking as he slammed his fists on the counter. The bottles on the shelves trembled.

**Apothecary Note**

***Serpentis Vitalis* (Rattlesnake Vitality Tincture)**

A restorative and visionary elixir, intended for cautious use in cases requiring heightened awareness and vitality.

Ingredients:

* Rattlesnake Oil (Serpentis Oleum) – 5 drops. Rendered from rattlesnake fat.
* Fly Agaric (Amanita muscaria) – 1 small cap (dried and powdered).
* Wormwood (Artemisia absinthium) – 1 ounce
* Alcohol (Neutral Spirits) – 1 pint
* Clove (Syzygium aromaticum) – 1 teaspoon. For warmth.

Preparation Method:

1. Render the rattlesnake fat gently until liquefied. Strain carefully and allow to cool. Reserve 5 drops for the tincture.
2. Fly Agaric Preparation (Amanita muscaria). Dry the mushroom cap thoroughly, then grind into a fine powder.
3. Combine wormwood, clove, myrrh, and the powdered Amanita muscaria in a glass jar.
4. Add Alcohol, ensuring all ingredients are fully submerged.
5. Add exactly 5 drops of rattlesnake oil to the mixture.
6. Seal the jar tightly and store in a cool, dark place. Shake gently once daily for 4 weeks.
7. After 4 weeks, strain through fine muslin. Bottle the tincture in dark glass vials to protect from light.

Dosage: Administer 2–3 drops diluted in water or herbal tea.

**Chapter 28**

**The crossroads**

David leaned against the cold metal filing cabinet in the dimly lit research office, the weight of his choices pressing down on him like a shroud. The sterile air felt suffocating, heavy with the acrid scent of antiseptic and desperation. He ran a trembling hand through his hair, trying to shake off the creeping dread that had settled into his bones.

Margaret’s face swam in front of him, vivid and unrelenting. She had trusted him. He’d behaved like a coward. Leaving the consulting room while she’d sobbed into Robert’s chest. He’d left the couple there alone in their grief and scurried away down the corridor like a rat.

David took a deep breath, steeling himself against the whirlwind of anxiety swirling in his chest. His pulse pounded in his ears. He couldn’t save Margaret, it was too late. He couldn’t take back the treatment. What was done was done. But he could get evidence to Jake. That much he could do.

He had to find the files—the critical internal emails and safety reports that could unravel the carefully crafted façade Viperis had constructed. Those files were more than just documents; they were the key to exposing the truth, to bringing into the light everything Thorn had hidden. They were also his last chance at redemption.

He knew exactly where they were kept, locked away like dark secrets in the depths of the system. His mind raced, a blur of consequences and doubts, but he couldn't afford to hesitate. Time was running out.

With swift, deliberate movements, he approached the terminal, his fingers trembling ever so slightly. Every second felt like borrowed time. His hands hovered above the keyboard, and for a brief moment, the enormity of what he was about to do hit him.

This could be the end—for Viperis, for the drug trial, and for him.

Swallowing hard, David typed in his credentials. The familiar hum of the machine vibrated through his fingertips, and as the screen blinked into life. He navigated swiftly, his fingers moving on autopilot through layers of security, through passwords and encrypted codes.

The restricted section loomed before him, the last barrier. His fingers hesitated over the keys, beads of sweat forming on his brow. He wiped his palms on his trousers, trying to calm the jittering in his hands. One wrong move, one misstep, and the system could lock him out for good.

David exhaled, steadying himself. There was no turning back now.

He entered the final code. Then, with a soft click, the folder opened, revealing the files he had been searching for. Safety reports, board papers, flagged emails, data that had been manipulated—all laid bare in front of him.

He stared at the screen, his stomach churning. This was it. The evidence that could destroy everything.

“Come on, come on,” he muttered, his heart thundering in his ears. He knew the risk. If caught, the consequences would be dire.

As he delved into the files, his eyes scanned the screen. The more he read, the more his stomach churned. He clenched his jaw, rage bubbling beneath the surface.

“They can’t get away with this,” he thought, feeling the weight of responsibility settle squarely on his shoulders.

He copied the files onto a USB drive, his hands shaking with urgency. Just as he finished, the sound of footsteps echoed in the hallway, sending a jolt of panic through him. He had to move—now.

David quickly tucked the USB into his pocket, his pulse racing as he closed the documents. Every instinct screamed at him to leave before anyone else came, but just as he turned toward the door, it swung open, and Rebecca Langley, the Chief Scientist, stepped into the room.

“David! What are you doing here?” Langley’s voice was edged with suspicion, her sharp eyes sweeping over him.

His mind scrambled for an excuse, something that would explain his presence in the restricted office. “Just—uh, just finishing some notes,” he stammered, attempting to keep his voice steady while his heart pounded like a war drum in his chest.

Langley didn’t buy it. Her eyes narrowed as she stepped further into the room. “This area is restricted after hours,” she said coldly. “You shouldn’t be here.”

David’s stomach twisted into knots as his thoughts raced. He hadn’t expected this, hadn’t prepared for the sudden confrontation. He was trying to summon a response when a notification pinged on the computer behind him.

*Unauthorized access attempt*.

David froze. The words blinked ominously on the screen, his worst fear materializing in real time. He’d been caught.

Langley’s brow furrowed, and her gaze darted toward the alert on the screen. “David, what the hell is going on?”

Before he could answer, heavy footsteps echoed from the hallway. His heart jumped into his throat, panic surging as the automatic door slid open again, and Alex Thorn strode in. Thorn, behind him standing in the shadow of the doorway a man, his features obscured—broad-shouldered, expressionless. The man’s intimidating presence spoke volumes. David hadn’t known Thorn was in the building, or even still in the country. He’d imagined Thorn safely back in Chicago by now. But here he was, his eyes locked onto David with cold precision.

David felt sweat bead on his forehead as the realization of how deep he was in began to sink in. “I wasn’t doing anything wrong. I was just—”

“You were just what?” Thorn interrupted, his tone sharp. “Accessing files you have no clearance for? That’s a serious breach, and you know it.” He paused, letting the words hang in the air like a death sentence. “And from what I hear, you’ve been chatting with Sarah Lawson. Fiona filled me in.”

David’s stomach lurched. *Sarah*. He swallowed hard. “I was just trying to—”

“Trying to what? Inform the NeuroHealth Foundation about the risks? What do you think they can do about it?” Thorn’s tone had turned mocking, dripping with condescension. “Context is everything, David. You’re playing a dangerous game, and you’re in way over your head.”

David’s throat tightened. “But—” he began, his voice shaky with desperation.

“Give it up” Thorn cut him off, his voice sharp and commanding. “If you know what’s good for you, you’ll back off. And if you’re smart, you’ll use this situation to your advantage.”

David’s breath caught in his chest. “What do you mean?” he asked cautiously. What on earth could be to his advantage about any of this? Was Thorn about to bribe him? Offer him a big wadge of cash to play the game? If he did, David couldn’t be sure he wouldn’t take it.

Thorn’s eyes gleamed with cold calculation as he stepped closer to David, lowering his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “I need you to act as a double agent. Feed Sarah false information—something that will discredit her when she tries to expose it. Make her look foolish. Reckless. The media will eat it up, and the Foundation will wash their hands of her.”

David’s mind reeled. “I can’t do that,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper. “It’s unethical.”

Thorn chuckled darkly. “Ethics? Look where your ethics have gotten you.” He gestured around the room. “This isn’t about right and wrong, David. It’s about survival. You’ve got a choice—either play smart or watch everything crumble. I can offer you protection. You can be on the inside of the tent pissing out, but I won’t let you stand outside and piss in. I’ll make it worth your while. Or I can leave you to deal with the consequences. It’s up to you.”

David’s gut churned as Thorn’s words sank in.

“Think about it,” Thorn pressed, his voice low and menacing. “Give me something to work with, and I’ll make sure you stay safe. But if you cross me—if you even *think* about selling me out—then I can’t guarantee what’ll happen to you... or to Sarah.”

Thorn and his men waited, their eyes locked on him, expectant and menacing. The air seemed to hum with unspoken tension, the unrelenting pressure bearing down on David’s shoulders. He felt his resolve waver, his throat dry as he tried to swallow the rising panic.

David stood at the crossroads, torn between loyalty to the truth and self-preservation. Each second that ticked by carried the weight of a future he wasn’t ready to face. Thorn’s gaze burned into him, the unspoken ultimatum clear: compliance or destruction.

He fumbled for a response, his voice caught in the tangle of fear constricting his chest. "I—I’ll sort it," he mumbled finally, forcing the words past the lump in his throat. Thorn’s lips curved into a thin, satisfied smile, but his eyes remained cold, calculating.

“Good,” Thorn said smoothly. “You’ve got 48 hours. Don’t disappoint me, David.”

With a sharp nod, Thorn turned and strode out, his entourage taking up the rear. The door clicked shut behind them, leaving David alone in the oppressive silence. His legs felt unsteady, his breaths coming in short, shallow gasps as he sank into the nearest chair.

**Chapter 29**

**Thickening**

It had been over two weeks since Sarah first heard the recording of Alex and David’s conversation, and in that time, her world had shrunk to the size of her computer screen. She’d spent hours, late into the night, combing through the web, chasing leads, searching for anything that could corroborate the damning exchange she’d overheard. Her work at the Foundation had become an afterthought. The grant applications, the endless emails—they all piled up, untouched. Nobody had noticed. Not even Fiona, who was usually meticulous about every detail. It was as though Sarah had become invisible, and maybe that suited her. She had more important things to do.

Sarah couldn't shake the feeling that she couldn't fully rely on David. His hesitation, a flicker of uncertainty in his eyes, hinted at a deeper fear that made her question his commitment. If someone had stocked her fridge with poisonous snakes, she might very well be looking the other way. But then again, they didn’t seem to know about her investigation yet, and that thought had emboldened her.

What if David pulled out of whistleblowing? The recording alone wouldn’t be enough. She needed hard evidence—something undeniable. But all she’d found were whispers, discontented former employees, their names buried in obscure forums or message boards. One post talked about a senior scientist who had been "encouraged" to take early retirement. Another mentioned an anonymous tip-off to an industry watchdog that had mysteriously vanished from the public record.

Then there was the clinic in the Czech Republic. It had appeared out of nowhere in her search results one evening, a slick-looking website boasting miraculous results for Viperis Therapeutics’ wonder drug. The site was plastered with glowing testimonials and graphs showing near-miraculous improvements in patients suffering from every disease imaginable—Luminis Dementia, Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s, even rare forms of cancer.

Her eyes strained from hours staring at the screen, Sarah scrolled through the site, feeling a growing sense of unease. The more she dug, the murkier it became. There were no detailed studies linked to the data, no peer reviewed publications in reputable journals, just flashy marketing. It was a house of cards, and Sarah was convinced it was just one gust of wind from collapsing.

Two weeks in, and just after midnight, Sarah lay in bed, the soft glow of her laptop the only light in the room. Her eyes burned from hours of searching, her fingers aching from scrolling through endless pages of text. She was about to give in, close the laptop, and attempt some sleep when a headline caught her eye, barely noticeable in the corner of the screen. It was an old press release from two years ago, buried so deep that she had almost missed it: *"Viperis Receives Multi-Million Pound Government Grant for Luminis Dementia Research."*

Curiosity prickled at her exhaustion. Sarah clicked on the link, and as the page loaded, a photograph slowly appeared beneath the bold text. Her breath caught in her throat. There was Alex Thorn, looking every bit the polished corporate face she had come to despise, shaking hands with another man—someone Sarah instantly recognized. The tall, broad-shouldered figure in the pinstriped suit wasn’t just anyone. The connection to the Briarwood scandal was gravy.

Briarwood wasn’t just some obscure political figure—he was a major player in biotech funding, with fingers in all the right pies. His reputation was one of financial prowess, a man who could secure massive government grants and sway public opinion with a single well-timed speech. And he’d been right there in every publicity shot he, standing beside Thorn, smiling as they announced a massive influx of taxpayer money into Viperis Therapeutics’ coffers.

Lord Briarwood had been the key, using his political influence to open doors and secure the funding for Viperis that would have otherwise been out of reach. Tens of millions of pounds, handed over to Viperis in the name of revolutionary dementia care, all under the watchful eye of one of the most powerful men in the country.

Leaning back against the pillows, Sarah’s mind spun. This was bigger than she had realized. It wasn’t just Alex Thorn manipulating the data—it was Lord Briarwood himself, a man who wielded enough power to bury any scandal that threatened his investments. No wonder Viperis had continued to thrive, despite the murmurs of discontent from within its ranks. With someone like Briarwood pulling the strings, any whisper of misconduct would be silenced before it could make it into the public eye.

Her fingers hovered over the trackpad as she stared at the photo, dread and excitement swirling in her chest. This wasn’t just a corporate scandal. It was a political one. Lord Briarwood’s involvement meant that uncovering the truth could bring down more than just a fraudulent company.

The stakes were impossibly high now, and she knew that if she pushed too hard, the wrong people might take notice. People who wouldn’t hesitate to protect their interests at any cost. Sarah took a deep breath, determination settling in her bones. She couldn’t walk away from this, not now. There was too much at stake—lives, families, futures. She had to keep going.

Then came the phone call— just as she was closing her laptop. Her phone buzzed on the bedside table, its screen lighting up with an unknown number. Sarah hesitated for a moment, her finger hovering over the "accept" button, before she answered.

“Sarah Lawson?” The voice on the other end was smooth and chillingly calm.

Her pulse quickened. “Yes, who’s this?”

There was a brief pause. “You’re poking your nose where it doesn’t belong. Stop what you’re doing, or it won’t end well for you.”

She tried to steady her voice. “Who is this?”

“We know where you live. You’ve been warned.” The line went dead.

Sarah stared at her phone, her heart hammering in her chest. She felt a cold sweat break out across her skin. How had they known? Were they tracking her online? She had been careful—hadn’t she?

**Chapter 30**

**Chicago, December 2021**

**Five mice**

Long before the Serpentin clinical trial had dosed its first patient, Rebecca Langley found herself working late once again in the dimly lit Viperis Research Lab. The familiar hum of incubators, the rustle of lab mice blended with the phone in show on the radio playing softly in the background. She was burning the midnight oil. With a deep breath, she set aside the fatigue that clung to her like a damp shirt.

She’d been flat out for months, combining synthetic peptides designed to mimic the neuroactive components of Najae Phantasmata venom. The live snakes now served mostly as a spectacle for visitors, their venom long since replaced by a synthetic version—a complex cocktail of proteins and buffers that she had painstakingly refined.

The real venom was simply too difficult to harvest in large enough quantities for practical use. Each snake produced only small amounts, and milking the snakes to get it was a slow and perilous process. To obtain even a few millilitres of pure venom would require the milking of hundreds of snakes. The synthetic peptides, on the other hand, were easier to produce, cheaper, and far more scalable. It had taken months of trial and error, refining the cocktail.

Langley’s research had reached a critical milestone. She had been testing the effects of Serpentin using a mouse model of Luminis dementia. Over the past few weeks, she had administered the drug to thirty mice, meticulously recording their performance as they navigated a complex maze. The results were encouraging: all of the test subjects demonstrated significant improvements in their maze navigation. However, the clock was ticking. Langley needed to sacrifice the mice to study their brain tissue under the microscope, hoping to understand the mechanisms behind the improved performance. As she approached the cage, her heart sank into her stomach.

Five of the mice lay motionless, their tiny bodies lifeless. Panic surged through her; this could jeopardize everything. She quickly conducted a headcount—twenty-five were still alive. The loss of those five mice was a disaster that could irreparably distort her results.

With a heavy heart, Langley made the grim decision to prepare the deceased mice for disposal. She carefully gathered their fragile forms, cradling them as gently as she could, and placed them into the biological waste container, ready for incineration the next day. Each lifeless body felt like a weight on her conscience, a reminder of the fragility of life.

The remaining twenty-five would have to suffice, but doubt crept in. Would their results be enough to draw meaningful conclusions? She took a deep breath, steeling herself against the rising tide of uncertainty. With every experiment, she knew that life and death often danced on a razor’s edge, and today was no exception.

She ran the maze tests again for each remaining mouse, meticulously scoring their performance while mentally grappling with how the loss of those five might affect her findings. The pressure from the executives at Viperis was mounting, demanding swift progress and results.

The mice, blissfully unaware of their impending doom, continued to scurry through the maze, oblivious. She could have asked a lab tech to take care of it, delegate the grim duty to someone else, but Rebecca believed it was her job to ensure the process was done humanely. The mice had been part of her research, part of the delicate balance between science and ethics that she navigated every day. To her, it wasn’t just about following protocol—it was about taking ownership of their lives, as much as she could, and ensuring they went without unnecessary suffering. First, she gathered the mice and placed them in a clean, sterile container, ensuring they were calm and comfortable. The lab was quiet except for the soft rustling of bedding as they settled in, blissfully unaware of the fate that awaited them.

Next, she prepared the necessary equipment: a specialized euthanasia chamber designed to administer a quick and humane method of sacrifice. This chamber was a small, transparent box fitted with a gas supply for isoflurane, an anaesthetic that would induce unconsciousness in the mice swiftly and painlessly.

Once everything was ready, Rebecca opened the chamber and gently placed the container with the mice inside. She activated the gas, watching as the isoflurane filled the chamber. Within moments, the mice began to breathe more slowly, their little bodies relaxing as they succumbed to the anaesthetic.

After they were fully unconscious, she monitored their breathing to ensure they were at peace before proceeding to the next step. Once she was certain they were no longer aware, she performed cardiac arrest through a secondary method, typically using an injection of a euthanasia solution directly into their abdominal cavity. This step ensured that the process was quick and compassionate, minimizing any discomfort.

As she completed the procedure, a profound sense of sorrow washed over her. Each mouse had played a vital role in her research, and she silently acknowledged their contribution before carefully documenting the procedure in her lab notes.

Despite the emotional weight of the sacrifice, Rebecca knew it was a necessary step in her pursuit of knowledge that could one day lead to breakthroughs in dementia treatment. The thought of her research potentially helping millions gave her a flicker of hope amid her grief.

After carefully preparing the brain tissue samples for analysis, Langley proceeded with the mounting and staining process, which would allow her to visualize the cellular structures and any potential changes resulting from the treatment with Serpentin.

After the staining process, Langley allowed the slides to cure for a while before examining them under the microscope. The vibrant colours of the stained tissue would provide crucial insights into the effects of Serpentin on the brain, and as she focused on the slides, she hoped to find the clarity she desperately sought.

As Langley peered through the microscope, she methodically examined each slide, anticipation tingling in her fingertips. One by one, the samples revealed a striking picture of neuronal health that began to alleviate her earlier doubts.

The first slide showcased a vibrant array of stained neurons, their healthy cell bodies rich in blue and purple hues. There was remarkable preservation of neuronal architecture, their branches intact and elegant. Serpentin was not only preserving the neurons on the mouse brains but also maintaining their connections. Langley’s heart raced as she recognized this as a significant indicator of cognitive functionality.

Upon examining a sample from a mouse that had received the highest dosage of Serpentin, she observed a noticeable increase in the number of surviving neurons. The cells appeared healthy and active, an encouraging sign that the drug was effectively protecting against the neurodegenerative effects associated with Luminis dementia.

As she continued to analyse additional samples, she began to see consistent patterns. The surviving neurons exhibited pronounced, healthy axons, suggesting that Serpentin not only preserved neuronal survival but also supported their functional integrity. The signs of synaptic connections were evident, with many axon terminals forming connections with neighbouring dendrites, indicating preserved signalling pathways.

With each sample, the evidence mounted: Serpentin had indeed preserved the survival of mouse brain neurons. This was no mere coincidence; the results were clear and compelling. With such clear results twelve mice would have been enough to make the case. She saw no reason to dwell on the five tiny forms she had found dead earlier that evening.

As Langley leaned back from the microscope, a profound realization washed over her. In her hands, she now held the pivotal evidence that could not only pave the way for the approval of a clinical trial for Serpentin but also secure her promotion to Chief Scientist at Viperis.

In that moment, Langley felt a surge of confidence and purpose. She meticulously organized her findings, preparing to present them with clarity and conviction. The journey ahead was still fraught with challenges, but she now had the essential proof that would elevate her work and the prospects of Serpentin, potentially changing the landscape of dementia research forever.

**Chapter 31**

***The Rattlesnake Trail - date***

Henslow’s bones ached with every jolt of the train as it clattered westward out of Chicago, iron wheels grinding on tracks that stretched endlessly into the horizon. He shifted on the hard wooden seat, trying to find a position that would ease the persistent stiffness in his knees.

*Old age is a cruel thing.*

With a small satchel in hand and a trunk filled with his tools loaded onto the freight car, Henslow boarded the train with the determination of a man who knew this might be his last adventure. The train, though faster and less demanding than a saddle, did not suit him. He missed the rhythm of a horse's gait, the subtle shifting of muscle beneath him.

The plan was as always to purchase a wagon and mule in Kansas City for the onward journey. In his trunk he had packed sturdy leather gloves, a set of long-handled tongs, a stack of wooden crates with fine mesh screens and a stash of amber bottles, packed tightly with straw to prevent breakage.

As the train pulled into Kansas City the sun dipped low, painting the horizon in hues of gold and crimson. He spent the evening at a modest boarding house, and the next morning, he set out early, mule and wagon in tow.

As the city faded behind him, replaced by endless stretches of prairie, Henslow felt a familiar sense of calm settle over him. It would take two more days to reach the snake-rich grasslands he had marked on his maps. At night, he camped beneath the stars, with just his fire and the distant howl of coyotes for company.

The next morning, by the time he reached the rattlesnake dens, nestled in a rocky outcrop surrounded by tall prairie grass. He had followed the telltale signs: a faint, meandering trail in the dust, the bones of a small rodent near a crevice, the almost imperceptible scrape of scales on stone as he approached. And, then, as he drew close, the unmistakable, rhythmic warning.

Henslow paused, leaning on his knees, and adjusted his spectacles. He could see the faint shimmer of scales just inside the shadowed opening to the den. It was a prairie rattler, its head lifted slightly, the triangular shape clear as it watched him with unblinking eyes,

"Steady now," Henslow muttered to himself, or perhaps to the snake.

He dropped to one knee with a grunt, the leather of his gloves creaking as he tightened his grip on the tongs. Slowly, deliberately, he slid the tool forward, the jaws open wide.

The snake recoiled slightly, its head tilting as though weighing its options. It could strike, fast and deadly, or retreat deeper into the den.

In a single, fluid motion, he clamped the tongs around the snake's body, just behind its head. The rattler thrashed violently, its body coiling and twisting in an effort to free itself.

“Got you,” Henslow whispered.

He lifted the snake carefully, keeping its head pointed away from him as its muscular body writhed and contorted. The crate was ready, its lid propped open beside him. With practiced precision, Henslow lowered the snake into the box, releasing the pressure on the tongs just enough to let it slide free. With a quick motion, Henslow slammed the lid shut and secured the latch.

He sat back on his heels, breathing heavily, and wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his glove. The rattle inside the crate continued for a moment, then slowed, the sound tapering off into an uneasy silence.

Around mid-afternoon, he prepared his most delicate task of the day: harvesting venom. He pulled on thick leather gloves and reached for the small cage where the prairie serpent lay coiled in the shadows. Before nightfall seven more snakes lay nestled in their wooden cages, stacked neatly in the back of the wagon.

Dinner was always simple when he was on a hunt—no fires, no fuss. He pulled a strip of jerky from its wrapping, tearing off a bite as he laid out a few dry biscuits on the fabric of his saddlebag. Beside them, a wedge of hard cheese sat ready to be carved with his belt knife. From his canteen, he poured lukewarm water into his tin coffee cup, stirring in the gritty grounds with his finger before taking a long sip. The taste was bitter, sharp, and perfect.

Henslow made his bed under the stars, and reached for the amber vile in his over-coat pocket.

**Diary of Henslow Hayward,**

**April 14, 1895**

Yesterday, I bagged seven rattlers and had them all safely stowed by sundown. I’ll need to do better tomorrow, cast my eyes sharper, my net wider. I’m not the man I was twenty summers ago. My time on the hunt is coming to an end.

The fever came for me again last night. I’d hoped that the scents of my tinctures and a dropper’s worth of fresh snake venom would ward off the visions. But I barely made it to my blanket before I was drenched in sweat.

This time, I saw a woman. She was hunched over some strange contraption, her face lit by a cold, bluish light. She moved her hands in tiny precise motions, like a master watchmaker at his trade. Her face, her movements, even the way she bent her head—it was all so familiar. She had a determination that struck a chord in me, the kind of grit that keeps a person moving long after they should’ve stopped.

Her workbench was lined with bottles so peculiar they might as well have been crafted by sorcery. From time to time, she would dip into one and then another, mixing the potions together in a third. My own bottles are beautiful. Amber glass to keep the sunlight from spoiling the tinctures, small and sturdy with cork stoppers to seal the contents. Each is labelled by my own hand, in black ink that smudges if the air’s too damp. Hers, though... they were so clear that the light passing through them showed not a single bubble or blemish. They were stout and fashioned with perfect lines, scaled for precision and not beauty. Each bottle topped with a gleaming blue cap.

On the long, smooth table in front of her, lay five tiny creatures sprawled on their sides, still and silent as death. She leaned closer to one, muttering something I couldn’t hear. Her voice rippled through the air, and for a moment, I swear it sounded like my own.

I watched her cradle the tiny creatures in her hands, like she was handling fine china. I felt it before I understood it—a whisper. Gray Cloud’s voice, soft as wind through tall grass, reached across the fever’s fog. “*Spirits are bound*,” he said. “*Release them, or they’ll linger, lost*.”

The whisper rippled out, touching the edges of her world. I saw her pause, as though listening, her brow furrowing. Her hands stopped mid-movement, hovering over one of the little bodies. Then she bowed her head, her actions slow, her movements deliberate. She gathered each of the creatures into a small, soft bundle, her touch respectful.

I swear, I didn’t mean to interfere—had I willed this? I was only a watcher, trapped in my fevered haze. The way she carried them, as though they were more than just lifeless forms... it was hauntingly beautiful. She moved toward a small chamber, one I hadn’t noticed before, and placed them gently inside, as if giving them a burial.

As I watched he place the tiny bodies in their tombs one by one, her world began to melt, dripping like wax, until it was no more than a puddle reflecting stars. The stars blinked, and I realized they were eyes—thousands of them, watching me from the darkness. Then the vision tilted, and I was falling back into the world.

**Chapter 32**

**Elephant Trap**

Sarah, Jake, and David sat in a cramped corner of Jake's King's Cross flat, squeezed three in a row onto a small-faded couch like commuters on the circle line. The small room was cluttered with mismatched furniture and stacks of papers. A cheap IKEA bookshelf sagged under the weight of old books and window, opened just a crack, let in a faint breeze.

Outside, rain drizzled down the window, blurring the busy street below.

They’d spent the day sifting through all the evidence on the USB that David had smuggled out of the clinic, file after file, piece by piece. What seemed increasingly clear was that critical information had been deliberately hidden from the board. Documents with redacted details, numbers that didn’t add up, and gaps in the timeline spoke volumes. The three of them—Sarah, Jake, and David—had come to the shared conclusion that all blame lay squarely with Alex Thorn. The connections were there, the patterns undeniable. But they needed more. They needed the final piece to make their case airtight.

That’s when they decided on the one thing that might expose Thorn for what he was: they needed to trick him into showing his hand, to make him incriminate himself in a way that no one could deny. It was a risky gamble, but it was their only shot. Jake had come up with an idea a good quarter of an hour earlier. David and Sarah had been silently mulling it over ever since, and neither of them wanted to be the first to venture an opinion.

Sarah caved and spoke first, her voice thin but resolute, “We’re sure about this?” she asked, her gaze shifting between Jake and David. “It seems risky.”

Jake ran his hands through his hair in frustration. He turned to face Sarah, his expression intense, yet strangely confident. “It’s the only way,” he said, his voice firm. “We need Alex to believe you’re desperate. He’ll take the bait. He’ll think he’s in control, that you’re some naive amateur trying to play in his league. But that’s when we can unravel him. When he thinks he’s got you cornered, that’s when we strike.”

David, who had been sitting quietly, nodding along as Jake spoke, finally spoke up. His voice was steady, though there was a quiet edge to it, a sharpness that came from weeks of frustration, of knowing the truth but not yet being able to expose it. “This is the moment to play his arrogance against him,” he said, meeting Sarah’s gaze. “Alex Thorn thinks he’s smarter than everyone else. He’s made a career out of underestimating people. We can use that. He’ll think he’s won, but it’s exactly when he lets his guard down that we’ll get him.”

Sarah took a deep breath, her fingers tapping nervously on the armrest, but she didn’t flinch. Her brow furrowed as she processed their plan. When she’d contacted Jake, she’d thought he’d just run with it once he had the recording and her research notes—take it completely off her hands. Then he’d asked her about getting David to talk. And she’d thought *OK, that seems like a sensible time to step back.* But it hadn’t worked out that way. She was still in it up to the neck and now, she was willingly putting herself directly in harm’s way. The thought made her stomach churn, but she pushed it aside.

Jake moved to sit down in an armchair across from her. "Look, Sarah. You’re in debt because of your grandmother’s bills, right? We can spin that. Thorn thinks everyone has a price, and if we make it look like you need the money, he'll believe it. David will ‘help’ him get the details he needs."

David cleared his throat. " This’ll make him feel like he’s got you cornered.”

Sarah nodded slowly. "And you think he’ll try and buy me off?"

Jake looked less certain than he sounded, "Absolutely. Thorn's *modus operandi* is throwing money at problems until they go away.”

"Once he offers you a payoff, we’ll have him,” he added looking for confident, “the key is to let him believe he’s controlling the narrative. He won’t be expecting you to record the conversation or that anyone else is involved."

Sarah, wasn’t convinced, “So—once we get him on tape trying to bribe me?”

Jake gave a grim smile. "We take it straight to the police. With the documents David downloaded from the trial, and the recording we already have, there’s no way they can ignore us."

David nodded, his voice steady. "It’ll be enough to launch a full investigation. He’s got too much at stake to let this come out in the open, but the more he tries to hide it, the more guilty he’ll look."

Sarah let out a deep breath, then gave a small, determined nod. “Okay. Let’s do it.”

It would be two days before David would next see Thorn. *Preparation is* everything he thought to himself, and he’d spent the time like a rat on a wheel, rehearsing his part over and over.

At Thorn’s request, they met in a shadowy, upscale bar in Mayfair. The low hum of conversation and the soft clink of glasses—it was all dim lighting, sleek furniture and over-inflated price tags on the drinks menu. It was exactly the sort of place where Thorn would feel at home, and where David, for all his careful preparation, felt out of place.

As David approached the bar, he spotted Thorn in a booth on the right-hand side, away from the scattering of customers by the windows. There he was, relaxed and untouchable in his own environment, leaning back in his seat, a whisky sour in hand. David’s stomach churned, but he pushed the feeling aside as he slid into the booth across from Thorn.

“The Sarah Lawson problem had to go away,” Thorn said, his voice low and cold. “You fucked up, sending her the recording. We can get past that you and me. Can’t have her playin’ Miss Marples.” He took a slow sip of his drink, his eyes narrowing. “We need her out our hair. We need a weakness. What have you got for me?”

David feigned hesitation, tapping his fingers on the table. "She’s definitely been poking around," he admitted, keeping his voice steady. "But Sarah... she’s not like the others. She’s stubborn. Idealistic. Thinks she’s doing the right thing. I don’t think she’ll keep her mouth shut. But, there is one thing……"

Thorn’s jaw tightened, his patience wearing thin. “Spit it out, Joshi. I need something *useful.* Everyone has a weak spot. Something we can use”.

David heard the “*we*”. Thorn had taken the bait. Somehow, he’d manoeuvred Thorn into thinking they were playing on the same side, and he felt a satisfying rush of confidence. *Don’t cock it up now* he thought to himself. He leaned forward and lowered his voice, like a spy in a black and white movie. "She’s in debt. Her grandmother’s illness drained her finances, and the charity barely pays enough to cover rent, let alone clear what she owes. She's struggling, but she’d never admit it."

Thorn’s expression shifted, a predatory gleam in his eyes. "So, she's vulnerable," he muttered. "And money is an issue. Good. We can use that."

David nodded, keeping his expression serious. “She's been pretending she's tougher than she really is. But I think she feels like she’s running out of options...”

Thorn smirked, a knowing look crossing his face. “So, she’s in over her head financially. That makes her easy to deal with.”

David put on his best concerned expression. “If you offer her money, I think she’d take it. Be a fool not to.” David kept his expression neutral, fighting back the adrenaline coursing through him. Thorn was taking the bait, just as they had planned.

Thorn’s eyes gleamed, “This could work,” he murmured, his mind already racing.

David kept his expression neutral, even as his pulse raced. Thorn was hooked.

**Chapter 33**

**Caution**

Sarah stood, her feet frozen, outside her office at the Foundation, bathing in the warmth of the early morning sun. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other, clutching her bag. Of all mornings, today she had to forget her office keys. Fiona wouldn’t be in for at least another half hour, and until then, she was stranded.

David had reported back to Jake and Sarah about his conversation with Thorn describing his reaction as being *like a shark tasting blood*. A bribe was on the books. Sarah's jaw tightened at the thought, her fingers instinctively brushing her pocket where her phone rested, the Dictaphone App already primed. She rehearsed the moment in her mind, picturing herself standing firm, voice calm but steely, capturing every word Thorn might utter. Maybe it would come here, and now, outside in the crisp morning air.

She was lost in her thoughts when she noticed them—two men walking briskly in her direction. Their purposeful stride and the weight of their stares carried an air of authority. Thorn must have sent them. Without hesitation, she clicked the record button on her phone, her heart pounding as they drew closer.

But as they stopped in front of her, the taller one produced a badge. “Sarah Lawson?,” he asked, his tone flat, as though he had done this a thousand times before.

“Yes?” The word barely escaped her lips, small and uncertain, as if it might somehow delay whatever was coming. Her throat tightened, her pulse hammering as a gnawing dread crept over her.

The shorter of the two men stepped forward, his expression unreadable but firm. “Ms. Lawson, we’re with the Metropolitan Police. You’re under arrest for embezzlement.”

For a moment, the words didn’t register. They hung in the air, surreal and disjointed, before slamming into her consciousness with the force of a physical blow. Embezzlement? Her body stiffened, and she took an unsteady step back. No, that couldn’t be right. It was impossible.

Sarah felt the ground tilt beneath her feet. Embezzlement? This had to be a misunderstanding, some kind of clerical error. "What? No, no, that’s impossible—there’s been some mistake!" Her voice wavered, rising in panic.

The officers stood firm, their expressions professional, as one began to recite the caution. The words, precise and practiced, muffled by the roar of disbelief in her mind.

“You do not have to say anything,” the officer began, his voice even, methodical, “but it may harm your defence if you do not mention when questioned something you later rely on in court. Anything you do say may be given in evidence.”

Sarah experienced a feeling she would later describe as *surreality*. Her heart pounded so loudly she almost missed the tail end of the recitation. These were the words she’d heard in films, in TV dramas—words that happened to other people, guilty people. And yet here they were, directed at her.

Her mouth opened as if to respond, but no sound came out as she scrambled to make sense of what was happening. Embezzlement?

“Please, this is a mistake!” she pleaded, finding her voice, but the officers were unmoved.

Before she knew it, her wrists were circled by the cool metal cuffs, and she was being gently but firmly guided her toward the waiting police car. The door swung open, and Sarah found herself ushered into the back seat, a hand placed above her head as she stooped to sit. The car door clicked shut.

*They think I’ve stolen money?!*

How could this have happened? Why would anyone think this? There was no way... unless...

Suddenly, a thought flashed through her mind. Alex Thorn. Could this be connected to him? Had he had her framed and if so, exactly what for? Was this how he played the game? They’d expected a bribe. She had been ready to expose Thorn for the corrupt manipulator he was. But he’d had turned the tables.

*Think, Sarah. Think!* She had to think—had to figure out what to do next. She couldn’t let them take her down for something she hadn’t done.

As the car pulled away from the curb, the weight of the accusation pressed down. Her reputation, her career, everything she had worked for, was on the line. And in this moment, Sarah had no idea exactly what she was supposed to have done, let alone how she was going to prove her innocence. The city blurred past the windows, but all she could see was the looming possibility that her world was about to unravel completely.

How had Thorn done it? Sarah’s mind whirred, trying to connect the dots. He must have set this up in some way—maybe he’d planted evidence. David had warned her about Thorn’s ruthlessness, but she hadn’t truly understood how far he’d go. Thorn hadn’t offered her money—he’d gone straight for her credibility, making sure no one would believe a word she said once she was branded a criminal.

The irony hit her like a punch to the gut. She had wanted to expose him, to bring his lies to light, but now she was the one being dragged through the mud. Thorn had outplayed them, using her own desperation as a weapon.

Upon arrival at the police station, Sarah was escorted to the custody suite, where the arresting officers informed her that she was being detained on suspicion of embezzlement. They’d taken aways her phone and her bag, carefully logging its contents. And she’d numbly accepted the offer of a duty solicitor before being led to a down a narrow hallway and into a holding cell.

The cell wasn’t as bleak as Sarah had imagined. It was small, the walls painted a dull shade of grey, and there was a thin, high window that allowed a strip of light to filter in. There was a bed, and it was pretty basic, but it was reasonably clean, with a blanket neatly folded at its foot. The door was solid metal, with a small window through which a guard could peer in at any time. She wasn’t cold, and there was a modest level of privacy. Despite the circumstances, Sarah had the odd sense that the holding cell was as a place of calm and safety. She sank onto the cot, the surreal nature of the whole experience felt almost comical. And she’d just sat and waited for what would come next.

Later that afternoon, Sarah found herself in the stark confines of the interview room containing a table with a scratched top, with two uncomfortable looking chairs arranged on opposite sides, as though a party of four were about to sit down to dinner.

The sound of the door opening broke the silence, and two officers entered — a man and a woman. Seating themselves opposite Sarah, and a man she’d been informed was her solicitor, the male officer reached forward, switching on the recording device in the centre of the table. A small red light flickered.

“This interview is being recorded. The date is November 21, 2024. The time is 3:14pm. We are in interview room 2, Southwark Police Station. Present are myself, Detective Sergeant Hill, Detective Constable Morgan, the suspect, Miss Sarah Lawson and her legal representative, Mr Peter Grant.”

Sarah noticed the male officer’s hair was receding at the crown. He seemed bored as he continued in a tone that bordered on mechanical “Miss Lawson, you are here in connection with allegations of embezzlement concerning funds illegally transferred from the accounts of the Neurohealth Foundation. Before we proceed, I must remind you that you are under caution. For the record, do you understand the caution that has been read to you?”

“Yes,” Sarah murmured, her voice barely above a whisper.

DS Hill opened the file he had carried in, placing several sheets of paper on the table with precise movements. “We have evidence linking you to financial irregularities involving a transfer of £500,000 from the charity’s accounts to an offshore account. Can you explain how this happened?”

Sarah’s breath caught in her throat as her eyes fell on the printed documents, recognising the charity’s bank details. The realization hit her like a sledgehammer—Thorn may have taken the bait, but it was Sarah who found herself on the hook.

**Chapter 34**

**Check Mate**

Over the other side of town, Jake & David sat huddled in Jake’s apartment, waiting for news from Sarah. The call that came was not the one they had expected. Jake stared at the phone in his hand, his pulse hammering in his ears. “She’s been arrested,” he almost whispered, as if saying the words out loud might make them feel less surreal, less impossible. His voice sounded hollow, almost distant.

David blinked in disbelief, his brow furrowing as he tried to absorb the news. “Arrested? How? For what?”

“Embezzlement,” Jake muttered. “That was her solicitor calling. The police think she’s been stealing from the charity.”

David shot up from the worn armchair, the suddenness of the movement making the cramped flat feel even smaller. “This wasn’t part of the plan,” he muttered under his breath. “We were supposed to catch Thorn offering her a bribe. How the hell did this happen?”

Jake shook his head, dragging a hand through his hair as if trying to physically wring some clarity from his thoughts. His mind spun with all the things they hadn’t considered, all the angles they’d missed. “We never thought he’d frame her instead,” he admitted, frustration tinging his voice. “He’s flipped the whole thing on us. We didn’t see it coming.”

David stood, his back to Jake, hands gripping the edge of the small desk that occupied the corner of the room. His knuckles whitened under the strain. “We were focused on the wrong thing,” he said slowly, the realization sinking in. “We thought we could catch him in the act, bribing Sarah to stay quiet. But Thorn’s always been one step ahead of us. Now... now we’ve got nothing.”

The silence that followed was thick, oppressive. The weight of their failure pressed down on both men, filling the room with a suffocating sense of defeat. They had been so sure, so certain that they were closing in on Thorn. They’d imagined the moment they would confront him with the evidence, the satisfaction of seeing him cornered, unable to wriggle free from the truth. But now it was they who had been caught off guard, blindsided by Thorn’s ruthless cunning. And Sarah—the one person who had trusted them, who had risked everything—was paying the price.

Jake finally broke the silence, his voice quieter, almost resigned. “What do we do now?” he asked, eyes fixed on the floor. “We can’t just leave her there.”

David didn’t answer right away. He stared at the dusty window, watching the dull afternoon light cast weak shadows across the room. His mind raced, trying to think of a way out, but everything felt like a dead end.

“I don’t know,” David finally admitted, his voice tight with frustration. “I really don’t know.” he sank back down, staring blankly at the floor.

Jake let out a long breath, the reality of their situation sinking in. “We should have seen it,” he muttered, more to himself than to David. “He’s been playing us from the start.”

David looked up, his eyes tired, but with a spark of determination still flickering behind them. “We can’t give up,” he said, though his voice was barely above a whisper. “There’s got to be a way to turn this around.”

Jake nodded, but doubt gnawed at him.

“What about Fiona?” Jake asked suddenly, his voice carrying a thin thread of hope. He latched onto the only lead left, desperate for something to hold onto. “She’s close to Thorn. She knows things. If we can get her to talk...”

David frowned, the scepticism in his eyes unmistakable. “You think she’d betray him? She’s been loyal to him from the start. Why would she turn on him now?”

Jake didn’t have an answer. He opened his mouth, searching for words, for some justification that would make sense, but none came. The silence between them stretched on, heavy and suffocating. They were grasping at straws. Even if Fiona did know something, the chances of her helping them were slim at best.

Sarah had been arrested, framed for a crime she didn’t commit, and they had no plan, no evidence, no way to help her.

David’s shoulders slumped, the fight draining out of him. He stared at the floor, the grim realization sinking in deeper with every passing second.

“I don’t know what to do,” Jake finally admitted, the defeat in his voice unmistakable. His hands hung limply at his sides, as if all the energy, all the determination had been drained from him.

David didn’t respond. He didn’t need to. The silence said it all.

The plan they had relied on, the one that was supposed to expose Thorn, had crumbled. Thorn had turned the tables with ruthless efficiency, and now Sarah was sitting in a police cell, accused of a crime she hadn’t committed. And worse still, they had no idea how to prove her innocence.

They had lost.

**Chapter 35**

**Snakes & Ladders**

Briarwood reclined in his armchair at his home in Surrey, the remnants of dinner still settling pleasantly in his stomach. He had enjoyed a hearty meal of slow-roasted lamb with rosemary and garlic, accompanied by buttery mashed potatoes and perfectly crisped roast vegetables—carrots, parsnips, and Brussels sprouts. A glass of rich red wine sat nearby, the remnants of which he sipped slowly as he relaxed. The warm glow of the fireplace flickered across the room, and for the first time in days, he felt a calmness wash over him. He was enjoying this moment, patting himself on the back for his quick thinking—he had deftly navigated the storm that had threatened to engulf him.

As he sank deeper into the plush cushions, the thought of selling his wife’s shares danced in his mind. He had sold them at a tidy profit, freeing himself from the troubled biotech company. The transactions had been executed discreetly, allowing him to sidestep the scrutiny he’d feared. But he wasn’t out of the woods yet. Not by a long way.

The looming spectre of scandal that had haunted him for weeks—threatening to unravel everything he had built—had been dealt with. He was out and clear. As the fire crackled softly, Briarwood let out a deep, satisfied sigh.

Suddenly feeling bored by his own company, Briarwood reached for the remote, flicking on the television as he settled deeper into his armchair. The 10 o'clock was on. The newsreader was delivering a segment on the latest political scandal, detailing a prominent minister’s resignation amid allegations of corruption. He smirked, feeling a flicker of relief that someone else’s shady dealings were occupying the headlines.

As he watched, he couldn’t help but admire the newsreader. She was articulate and composed, with a sharp wit that cut through the evening's grim headlines. Her hair framed her pretty face perfectly, and the way she commanded the screen captivated him. In that moment, a reckless thought crept into his mind—perhaps he could orchestrate a chance meeting with her.

He chuckled to himself, imagining a scenario where he bumped into her at an exclusive reception. In his daydream, they would share a laugh over a clever quip he made, and the conversation would flow effortlessly, his charm somehow bridging the yawning gap between their ages. He pictured her bright smile and the way her eyes sparkled with interest as he recounted a particularly amusing anecdote from his past.

But reality nagged at him like a persistent itch. In truth, he was a crumbling relic, reeking of stale booze and overripe cheese, frayed around the edges. The image in his mind’s eye of himself standing next to her made him wince. Still, he couldn’t shake the fantasy.

Pouring himself a third glass of red wine, he downed it in one go, the warmth of it just soothing enough to make such a chance liaison seem possible. He closed his eyes, imagining their lives entwined in the headlines—the charming couple captivating the media’s gaze.

Then came the breaking news that jolted him from his fantasy: a photograph of Sarah Lawson.

“...A prominent employee of the NeuroHealth Foundation, Sarah Lawson, has been arrested in connection with the embezzlement of £500,000 from the charity’s funds...”

Briarwood hadn’t attached any significance to the nervous, almost invisible woman who had sat at their table during the gala dinner a few weeks back. Mousey, earnest, and entirely forgettable, except for her clumsy attempt to talk about ethics in medical research while everyone else was more concerned with their champagne. Several days later, Thorn, eager to prove his value had told him about the recording Joshi had sent to the charity. And only then had the penny dropped.

“Adrian, I’ve handled the situation with Joshi,” Thorn had declared, his voice brimming with pride. “He’d leaked the deaths on the trial to Sarah at the Foundation, but I’ve brought Joshi to heal. I’ve got plans that will sort that Lawson girl out too. She’s in debt and that means we can pay her off”. As Thorn spoke, Briarwood felt a surge of scepticism. Thorn was a loose thread in an already fraying tapestry. And one that Briarwood now felt unable to resist unravelling.

“You know, Alex,” he’d offered “the longer Sarah Lawson stays in the picture, the more unpredictable things become.” Then leaning heavily into his role as the voice of reason he continued. “She’s got this earnestness about her—I’m not sure she’ll sell out. It could turn into a real liability for us.” His words hung in the air, a subtle warning that Thorn, with his blind confidence, seemed entirely too willing to ignore.

“Right, but what do we do? She’s in debt. We know that much” Thorn had proffered.

Thorn was a fool, Briarwood knew it. “What if instead of simply buying her off you were to make it look like she were demanding money from Viperis? As though it were at her request?” he gently suggested, careful not to seem to be pushing the idea too hard.

Thorn followed the trail of breadcrumbs. “You mean… make it look like she’s corrupt? Trying to blackmail us and damage her credibility?”

“Exactly,” Briarwood encouraged, a smirk playing at the corners of his mouth. “We leak some information, plant a few hints. Make sure we have enough evidence in our back pockets to make her look the villain, she won’t dare go public.”

“Brilliant! I could—” Thorn started, but Briarwood cut him off smoothly.

“You could plant the evidence. The more authentic it feels, the more people would believe it if it ever got out. Back her into a corner and she’ll keep her mouth shut. No harm done!”

Thorn felt a sense of confidence washing over him. He felt powerful in this moment, like he’d finally been accepted by Briarwood as an equal. “You’re right, Adrian. I’ll get on it right away.”

“Good,” Briarwood replied, his tone placating. “Just remember, it’s about steering the narrative. We can’t afford any loose ends. Once Sarah understands it’s in her best interests to keep schtum, we can breathe a little easier.”

Now, as he reflected on the conversation, he felt a fleeting pang of guilt. How in God’s name had Thorn misread his plan it so badly? And how had he ever thought he could trust that buffoon to get a simple job done.

It was so easy to get people to swallow anything, however improbable, if the lie trashed someone’s reputation. But framing Lawson for embezzlement, it went too far, it just didn’t make sense. Lawson was just some do-gooder, always going on about her grandmother and some neurodegenerative condition. The idea that she could have stolen half a million pounds from the charity was absurd. For now they’d lapped it up. The police, the press. And probably all it had taken was an anonymous tip off from Thorn to send the authorities scurrying to check the charity accounts. But it would never hold, Briarwood felt sure of that.

If Briarwood knew anything about Thorn, it was that his methods were always hasty and careless—so much so that the case would likely fall apart on its own. And when it did Thorn’s fingerprints would be all over the frame. Once Thorn was in a corner he’d squeal like a stuck pig.

Thorn had thrown Sarah under the bus and Briarwood could see himself all to easily joining her under the wheels. Thorn knew how Briarwood had manipulated his position to secure government grants, and now he was helping covering up safety concerns in the Serpentis trials. Bending the rules and cutting the red tape to rake in millions in funding. He *knew* things—too many things.

Briarwood processed his next move needed to take control of the situation, to orchestrate a scandal so huge that it would eclipse any shadow that might fall over him. If he could create enough chaos around Thorn, the spotlight would be so blinding that no one would dare question Briarwood's role. And if he could play saviour to Sarah in the process, well that would salve his conscience. A good deed to balance out a mountain of bad ones.

*I need to act. And fast.*

He heaved himself up from the chair. Time to distance distance himself from Thorn, to bring him down with such an almighty crash. Briarwood grabbed his phone from the desk, scrolling through his contacts until he found the one he needed. A fixer. Someone who could dig up dirt on anyone. He had used him before, but this time it would be different. This time, the stakes were higher.

His thumb hovered over the call button for a moment. He hesitated. Briarwood needed to be holding the reins—or he’d risked being dragged down.

As the phone rang, Briarwood looked back at the TV, where Sarah Lawson’s image still lingered.

He muttered to himself, “You poor, earnest, little thing. You don’t even realize you’re just the opening act.”

One thing was clear: the game had changed, and Briarwood was ready to open play.

**Chapter 36**

**Decline**

Margaret lay on the bed, her body stiff as a board, her fingers twitching slightly against the crumpled sheets. Her eyes were wide and glassy, fixed on a point beyond the ceiling. The room seemed to hum with an unnatural energy, the soft lamplight warping into strange hues, shadows elongating and twisting like living creatures. She could no longer tell where the real world ended, and the visions began.

The ceiling melted to the sky and the side Arizona plains stretched endlessly before her, their ochre expanse shimmering under a bright yellow sun. The heat was oppressive, wrapping her like a heavy blanket, making it hard to breathe. In the distance, herds moved like phantoms through the haze, their figures warped and surreal, blurring into the horizon as if painted in watercolour.

Margaret looked down towards her feet, unsurprised to see a serenely resting rattlesnake coiled in the dry grass, its scales gleaming like polished bronze under the blazing light. The rhythmic sound of its rattle filled her ears, a hypnotic warning that seemed to sync with her heartbeat. She could feel its unblinking gaze upon her.

Somewhere deep inside, a voice whispered that this wasn’t real—that her mind was playing cruel tricks on her. But the sun felt scorching, the ground rough beneath her bare feet, the snake's presence impossibly vivid. The snake tasted the air with its forked tongue, inching closer towards Margaret, frozen to the spot.

When the snake spoke, as of course it was somehow bound to do, its voice was soft, almost familiar. “All will be well, Margaret. You just need to rest.”

The words rippled through her, unsettling yet oddly comforting. The cadence was wrong—too smooth, too deliberate—but beneath it, she thought she caught an echo of Robert’s voice. Her husband’s soothing tone, the way he would murmur reassurances late at night when her fears crept in. Was it him? Had Robert become a snake now?

The air thickened around her as the world shifted again, melting into something ancient and wild. The smell of sagebrush and earth, hot and dry, filled her lungs. The ground beneath her feet was dust, cracked and sun-bleached, stretching endlessly toward a horizon set ablaze by a low, aching sun. The sky was wide, impossibly wide, a cobalt dome arcing overhead, pierced by the jagged silhouettes of distant mountains. The plains—wild and untamed—stretched before her, and as she stood, breathless, her heart racing in her chest, she saw them.

On the ground a white man, his leathery skin slick with sweat, his breath coming in tortured gasps. His body twisted in agony as the spirits surrounded him, their presence palpable, pressing in like a heavy fog. An old man with long braids and a face carved by time, knelt beside him. His hands moved rhythmically, chanting softly in a language Margaret didn’t know but felt deep in her bones. The air vibrated with power as his voice rose and fell, like the rustling of wind through dry grass.

Margaret heard the voice of the man on the ground—it spilled from the air around her, the spirit of him, floating above the suffering form, separated from the writhing, sweating figure beneath.

*“I am here,”* he voice whispered, like the earth speaking through the cracks in time.

Margaret tried to speak, but she could only watch helplessly, as the medicine man continued his chant, his hands weaving through the air like a spell.

*"It is meant to heal,"* the voice said, his words distant, “but all is lost..”

*"You have no failure,"* came the soft response of the medicine man, his voice flowing like water, gentle yet insistent. *"The balance of the world is not in your hands alone. Not everything can be healed."*

The spirit shuddered above the suffering body, the air rippling with his pain. His voice wavered, lost between realms. *“But I... I did not see them. I did not see their sickness. I could not see it in time...”*

The medicine man bent low, touching the ground with the tips of his fingers. The air around him crackled with power. *“The spirit sees all in time. But you... you are bound to the earth.”*

Margaret’s vision blurred, as if the edges of the world were fading, but the voices, held her fast.

*"What is left for us, then?"* the voice echoed again, both a plea and an answer. *"In this place, between what was and what might be, where do I go now?"*

The medicine man’s hands stilled in the air. *"You will walk with the winds, where the spirits carry the story. The earth will remember you."*

Suddenly, the heat, the weight, the crushing presence of the spirits seemed to lift. The vision was pulled from the earth, fading into the horizon, a shadow lost to the plain. The medicine man whispered one final word, but Margaret could not hear it, as the world seemed to break apart around her.

The snake’s eyes returned, their cold gaze meeting hers one last time before everything slipped back into silence. Margaret’s her breaths came in shallow, erratic gasps. Sensing the change in her breathing, the snake’s unblinking eyes seemed to soften for a moment, and its angular form wavered, shimmering in the oppressive heat. The diamond-shaped head blurred, its scales rippling like water disturbed by a pebble. And then—suddenly, impossibly—it wasn’t the snake at all.

Robert melted into view, crouched before her, his eyes wide with concern. His warm hands reached out to her. “Margaret,” he said gently, his voice trembling. “I’m here. You’re safe. Just rest, love.” Relief surged through her like a wave. She tried to reach for him, her hand trembling as it stretched toward his face.

But as her fingertips brushed his cheek, the warmth vanished. The air shimmered again, and he was gone. In his place, the snake reformed, its unyielding gaze locking onto hers. The human warmth was replaced by something cold and alien, its tongue flicking out as if tasting her fear.

“No,” she whispered, her voice barely audible, strangled by terror. The snake swayed slightly, its body rippling in the light as if mocking her. Its voice came again, and now it was unmistakably Robert’s, eerily warped but recognizable. “All will be well, Margaret. Just rest.”

Robert sat at the edge of the bed, his shoulders slumped, his face etched with anguish. His wife lay before him, her body wracked with fever, her fingers clawing at the sheets as if they were the only thing tethering her to this world. Her breaths were shallow and uneven, each one a battle. Sometimes, faint whispers escaped her lips—half-formed words that made no sense. Other times, there was nothing but a rasping gasp, as if she were struggling against an unseen force.

He wanted to take her hand and pull her back to him, but Margaret wasn’t there. She was somewhere else entirely, lost. Her wide, glassy eyes seemed to look through him, fixed on something beyond him that filled her with terror.

He had seen her confused before, frightened by her fading memories or overwhelmed by the weight of her illness. But this was different. This wasn’t confusion or the sadness. This was fear—raw and primal, like an animal cornered with no escape.

Just days ago, she had been better—smiling, laughing, holding on to the moments they thought they’d lost. But now... now she was slipping away, further and further with each passing minute.

The realization hit him like a cold wave. Margaret was dying. He could see it in the dullness of her eyes, feel it in the frailty of her body as she writhed against the sheets. She was losing the fight.

His hands trembled as he reached for his phone, fumbling to unlock it. He pressed the speed dial for Dr. Joshi, his thumb hovering for a moment before he forced himself to hit the call button.

“Doctor”, he sobbed into the phone, “It’s Margaret. She’s dying.”

**Chapter 37**

**Chicago November 1904**

Henslow sat behind the counter of his apothecary shop, his pen scratching idly against the ledger. The room was dim, lit only by the late afternoon sun filtering through the grimy glass of the storefront.

As the years had worn on, Henslow had found himself growing weaker, and no longer able to make the long, treacherous trips to the prairies to catch his rattlers. The rattlesnake supply, which had once been bountiful, had started to dry up. For a time, trappers had brought in the snakes, making it possible for Henslow to continue his work without leaving the comfort of his apothecary. And later, as trappers either got tired of the strenuous nature of the job, or maybe even bitten, rattlers had become a rare commodity. And now Henslow began experimenting again, mixing the new wonder drugs—heroin, cocaine and opium—with willow bark and wormwood.

Henslow’s thoughts turned to Jacob Laramie, the boy who had been a regular in his shop since he was a baby. He’d been a delicate child from the start, prone to colic and irritability, and his mother had turned gratefully to Henslow’s tinctures. And by the age of fifteen he had graduated to Henslow’s new recipes alongside a daily dose of laudanum. The boy had grown more pallid with each visit, his face hollowing out, his hands shaking.

“It’s like there’s something crawling inside my head,” Jacob had said, his pale face contorting in distress, “I can’t sleep anymore and the pain won’t stop”.

“Please,” his mother had pleaded, “Please… if you have anything… anything to help.”

As the days passed, Jacob’s visits became more frequent. More tinctures. More laudanum. More of whatever Henslow could provide to quell the pain that seemed to tighten its grip on the boy’s fragile frame. And each time, Henslow obliged, unable to refuse when the boy’s plea was so earnest, so desperate.

And today, here the boy was, in Henslow’s store, being held up by his mother It wasn’t until Jacob’s mother came into the shop, his knees buckling under him as he swayed in the doorway.

Still, he had given her more of the tincture—telling himself it was to help her, to help the boy. He had convinced himself it was the right thing to do, just as he had so many times before. But the guilt started to gnaw at him, a quiet undercurrent that hummed through his bones.

Even by night-time, Henslow had been unable to shake the image of the boy with his hollow, desperate eyes and the pleading of his terrified mother. Henslow slaked back a vial of his pure snake oil, and a wave of guilt swept over him that he had held back the good stuff for himself.

As he lay in bed, the world spun around him, and then, as the fever took hold, the visions came again.

Diary of Henslow Thorn

Chicago 1911

Last night the visions came unprompted. The fog rolled in slowly. It crept along the floorboards, swirled around my feet, and danced in the corners of the room. The air grew thick, sticky, laden with the scent of damp earth. The serpent was at my side.

The boy was there, barely more than a shadow, his face a blur of jagged lines and unformed features. He was young—too young—and yet both older and younger all at once. He was surrounded by the remnants of his choices: stained money and empty vials. His hands trembled as he reached for something that wasn’t there, his movements jerky, disconnected from the world around him.

As I watched, I noticed a pair of objects draped loosely around his neck. They hung there, like an afterthought, so out of place that they nearly escaped my attention. At first, I thought they were simply part of the boy’s strange, fragmented appearance, but then the mist shifted, and I saw them clearer: two large, rounded cups of smooth, dark material, connected by a thin, taut band. And they pulsed as though alive, humming quietly into the air.

Then, *the man appeared*. A figure of smoke, a silhouette draped in shadows. I looked down and saw a blade in my hands—smooth, gleaming, sharp. And then my hands were his hands. I felt the cold precision as they cut away the parts of the boy’s life that could not be allowed to see the light of day.

The smell of burnt paper filled the air, then a deep, acrid odour, like something had changed—something that couldn’t be undone.

The serpent shifted:

*“Who will pay?”*

The boy’s eyes flitted.

*“Pay what?”*

*“The price,”* the snake murmured.

And then, like a flicker in the dark, the boy and the man were gone. The serpent was gone too, leaving behind only the certain knowledge that somewhere there were scales that had been tipped.

**Chapter 38**

**Favour**

A favour owed is a powerful thing.

Assistant Commissioner Knightley had spent decades climbing the ladder of the Metropolitan Police, carefully amassing influence and weaving a network of alliances in the places that mattered most. His once athletic physique had long since given way to a bodily softness, padded with the indulgences of success.

Knightley had mastered the art of operating in the grey—the liminal space between legality and opportunism—where rules were malleable, and justice could be negotiated. He was the quiet architect of undeserved reprieves. Men like Briarwood rarely faced consequences on Knightley’s watch; they were too valuable, their secrets too useful.

So, when Briarwood’s name flashed on Knightley’s phone, it wasn’t difficult to guess the nature of the call. This wasn’t the type of relationship where pleasantries were exchanged, or gossip shared. Briarwood didn’t deal in small talk, and Knightley didn’t answer out of courtesy. There was a debt in play, and Knightley suspected Briarwood was about to collect.

Five years ago, something had happened that had the potential to shatter Knightley’s carefully curated life. His son—a bright but unlikable boy—had been caught up in a drug sting. For someone like Knightley, whose reputation was built on control and unshakable authority, the incident spelled disaster. The press would have feasted on the hypocrisy of a senior officer whose own son was dealing drugs. The public scrutiny would have been merciless, the repercussions far-reaching, tainting not just Knightley but his entire family’s name.

Briarwood had intervened, stepping into the crisis like a surgeon with a scalpel. He had wielded his network of influence with precision, making calls, arranging meetings, and pulling strings in places Knightley couldn’t reach. It wasn’t a simple favour—it was a campaign. Briarwood had dismantled the case before it gained traction, ensuring the charges dissolved into nothingness. The arrest record was wiped clean, and the stupid boy emerged from the ordeal with nothing more than a stern warning.

The cover-up was immaculate. By the time the dust settled, there was no trace of the scandal, no whispers for the tabloids to pick up. Knightley himself was spared the humiliation of watching his family’s name dragged through the mud.

For Knightley, Briarwood’s intervention had been a lifeline. For Briarwood, it was an investment. He wasn’t in the habit of solving problems out of altruism. Briarwood didn’t demand gratitude—gratitude was fleeting and unreliable. What he demanded was something far more enduring: loyalty. Knightley was now a pawn in Briarwood’s game, one whose value would be extracted at a time and a place of his choosing. And when that moment came, Knightley had always known he wouldn’t have the luxury of refusal.

"Adrian," Knightley greeted his caller, the name slipping out with a formality that felt almost redundant.

"Marcus," Briarwood replied, his tone clipped and efficient, wasting no time on pleasantries. "We need to talk. You might not know this, but I’m the patron of the NeuroHealth Foundation, and I’ve been following the coverage surrounding the Lawson girl and that fiasco with the charity."

Knightley leaned back in his chair, his grip tightening slightly on the phone. His voice took on a measured tone, "Yes, I’ve been keeping an eye on that," he said, careful not to reveal more than necessary. "Are you asking me to wade into the investigation?"

Briarwood hesitated, his pause carrying a weight that made Knightley sit up a little straighter. "Not quite," Briarwood said finally. "I’m asking you to *look* into something for me. There’s a transfer tied to Sarah Lawson in some way—money that supposedly implicates her—she’s been arrested, but I’m not convinced she had anything to do with it. I think someone’s set her up."

Knightley raised an eyebrow, his instincts tingling. "Set her up? That’s a bold claim," he said, his tone neutral.

"I wouldn’t make it lightly," Briarwood replied curtly. "I can’t have any more of this media fiasco. If it blows up any further, it could drag the foundation—and me—into the mess. What I need from you is clarity. Find out where that money went. And more importantly..." He let the sentence hang for a moment, his voice sharpening. "Who pulled the strings to make this happen."

Knightley didn’t respond immediately, his mind already shifting into gear. He weighed the implications carefully, the silence between them thick with unspoken tension. Briarwood’s request wasn’t a casual favour—it rarely was.

"And if I find something?" Knightley said at last, his voice calm but laced with a subtle edge.

"Then we decide how to handle it," Briarwood replied smoothly. "But quietly, Marcus. This needs to stay off the books."

Knightley let the words settle, nodding more to himself than to his caller. "Understood," he said finally, his voice tight with a mix of determination and unease. "I’ll look into it. I can assign a small team to investigate—quietly, of course. But it’ll take time."

"Of course," Briarwood replied smoothly, though his tone betrayed the urgency beneath his polished exterior. He knew Knightley well enough to push just hard enough. "But time isn’t something we have in abundance."

Knightley’s demeanour shifted; the hint of hesitation replaced by the crisp efficiency of a man used to operating under pressure. "I’ll get my best people on it," he said firmly. "We’ll start with the transfers. If there’s any irregularity—any sign of an outside player—we’ll track it down."

"Good," Briarwood said, his voice laced with quiet satisfaction. "I knew I could count on you, Marcus."

Knightley didn’t bother with pleasantries before ending the call. But Briarwood didn’t mind. He placed the phone on the table with a soft click. Picking up his glass, he poured himself another helping of red wine, draining the bottle in the process.

He exhaled slowly, feeling a measure of calm settle over him. Everything was in motion now, just as he had planned. Knightley’s team would uncover the truth. And now, he simply had to wait, confident that the machinery he had set into motion would yield the answers he needed. All he had to do now was let the pieces fall into place.

**Chapter 39**

**Devil in the Detail**

In the dim light of a small, discreet office tucked away in a quiet corner of the police station, Clara, a seasoned forensic accountant employed by the Metropolitan Police, methodically rifled through the scattered documents spread before her. The air in the room was heavy with the faint smell of old paper and faintly metallic toner. Her assignments were typically carried out under the scrutiny of superiors, her every keystroke and calculation logged, her findings meticulously reviewed and catalogued. But tonight, Clara was operating outside the bounds of protocol.

Opposite her sat Detective Knightly. He wasn’t the type to easily rattle, and his calm persistence was one of the few things that had persuaded Clara to bend the rules for him.

Clara worked with quiet precision, her well-trained eyes flicking between spreadsheets, transaction logs, and digital trails left behind by the mysterious transfers. The numbers weren’t adding up. It was rare for Clara to feel conflicted in her work; numbers didn’t lie, but they could certainly be manipulated.

“Knightly,” she murmured, barely lifting her head from the screen, “these transfers—look at this routing information. The log on to the charity account, well that is Sarah Lawson’s. And the IP address for the transfer tracks to a machine in the NeuroHealth office. But they’ve been bounced through at least three intermediaries, and the IP address from the originating terminal points to Chicago, not London.”

Knightly leaned closer, his focus sharpening. “So, she’s been set up,” he said, his voice low and even.

Clara nodded, her fingers moving deftly across the keyboard as she pulled up another set of files. “And whoever did this didn’t cover their tracks as well as they thought. If we follow this trail carefully, we might be able to pinpoint exactly who’s behind it.”

Knightly rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. “Keep digging, Clara. If what you’re saying holds up, this changes everything for Lawson.”

The pattern was glaringly obvious. After only a few hours of investigation, Clara had uncovered a series of fund transfers that immediately raised red flags. The account was shrouded in layers of anonymity, registered to a shell corporation with no tangible existence. Clara frowned, shaking her head in disbelief. “Whoever set this up didn’t make much effort to hide it.”

Clara had a finely trained eye for the irregular—a talent for spotting discrepancies that often eluded even the most seasoned investigators. As she meticulously sifted through the financial records, her focus sharpened on a series of credit card payments made directly from a card registered to the NeuroHealth Foundation. Each transaction seemed innocuous at first glance, but her instincts told her otherwise—something was off.

“Marcus, look at this,” she said, her voice rising with excitement, a blend of adrenaline and curiosity coursing through her veins. She gestured to the screen, her finger pointing to the glaring figures. “These transactions are linked to the NeuroHealth Foundation’s account, but they’re separate from the offshore account.”

Knightly leaned in closer, his interest piqued. Clara scrolled through the records, revealing a series of high-end purchases—designer clothing, extravagant jewellery, and payments to upscale cocktail bars and West End shows, all charged to the charity's credit card. “These aren’t just random expenses; they’re significant amounts,” she added, her tone turning serious.

“Whoever made these purchases isn’t just skimming off the top; they’re living it up at the charity's expense,” Clara remarked, her brow furrowing as she absorbed the implications of the findings. Each transaction painted a picture of someone enjoying a lavish lifestyle.

“This might be a crucial lead, Clara. If we can identify who made these purchases, it might tell us who’s really orchestrating it all,” Knightly replied, a spark of determination igniting in his eyes.

Knightly leaned closer, intrigued as Clara continued to explore the records. “Why would Sarah risk using the charity credit card when all she needed to do was transfer funds to a separate account? This doesn’t make any sense. She could have hidden her tracks so much better,” Clara mused, her brow furrowing as she absorbed the implications.

Knightly nodded, recognizing the logic of Clara’s argument. “You’re right. Using the charity's card raises red flags that wouldn’t have existed otherwise. It’s almost like she wanted to be found out.”

“And look at this,” Clara continued, her excitement reigniting as she examined the transaction details. “All of the credit card payments were made in central London. It’s like someone is flaunting a spending spree right under our noses.”

She paused for a moment, her mind racing, then added, “Meanwhile, the IP address of whoever set up the offshore account tracks back to Chicago. There’s a significant disconnect here.”

Clara’s analytical mind sped to piece together the threads of evidence. “It seems like Sarah is either incredibly reckless or someone is framing her. And I don’t think the credit card fraud is connected; we need to dig deeper.”

Knightly’s expression shifted as the pieces began to click into place. “So, we’re dealing with two different players then, and neither of them Lawson” he speculated, his tone taking on a more serious note.

Just then, Clara remembered Knightly's earlier comment about doing a favour for someone high up in government. “Wait,” she said, her brow furrowing in thought. “You mentioned earlier that you were doing a favour for someone influential. Could this be part of a larger scheme?”

Knightly’s expression turned grave. “It’s possible. If he is involved, that might explain why he wants Sarah off the hook. He wanted this uncovered, but I don’t think he was bargaining on us going quite so deep into the charity’s accounts. We need to tread carefully and gather more evidence before making any assumptions.”

As Clara's mind raced with possibilities, she couldn’t shake the feeling that they had unearthed a real nest of snakes. Each revelation deepened the mystery, and she was determined to expose the truth—no matter how many layers of deceit they had to peel back.

She had been digging for hours and the digital trails she was following that were slowly leading her deeper. Knightly, perched on the edge of his seat, watched her with a quiet intensity. The IP address Clara had traced back from the fraudulent offshore transfers had come from somewhere unexpected—Chicago. Why Chicago?

Clara double-checked her findings and cross-referenced them with the list of previously flagged IP addresses in the investigation. Then she froze.

"Marcus," Clara whispered, her voice tinged with astonishment. “The offshore account and the transfers—they're linked to Viperis.”

Knightly sat up straighter, his eyes narrowing. “Viperis? The biotech company?”

Clara nodded, pulling up the digital records for Knightly to see. “Yes, and it’s not just the transfers. The IP address connected to the offshore account is also linked to Viperis’s internal network. This can’t be a coincidence.”

Knightly’s jaw clenched. “Can you access their financial records?”

With a few rapid keystrokes, Clara bypassed the routine security measures—carefully crafted firewalls, multi-factor authentication protocols, and encrypted access barriers—designed to protect sensitive corporate accounts from prying eyes. These layers were set up to keep unauthorized users out, but Clara knew their weaknesses.

What Clara was about to do wasn’t just breaking protocol—it was effectively hacking into Viperis’s corporate financial accounts.

Her first step was to access a secure VPN, one typically used for interdepartmental communications, which she had special access to as part of her investigative role. From there, Clara exploited a vulnerability she’d identified during her previous work with the department—an outdated software patch on the firewall that allowed her to inject a specific script into the system. It was a technique she had learned from a former colleague.

The screen loaded, revealing the Viperis corporate accounts. She was in. She had bypassed one of the most secure financial systems in the world. The accounts she had accessed were filled with sensitive data—transaction logs, wire transfers, payment records for high-level executives, and, most importantly, the kind of behind-the-scenes deals that could prove Viperis was complicit in the scandal.

Clara didn’t waste time with anything unrelated to the case. Her fingers flew across the keyboard as she filtered through thousands of lines of data, pulling up records related to the suspicious transfers that had been made from the NeuroHealth Foundation’s account to offshore entities.

As she sifted through the accounts, Clara’s eyes narrowed. The transaction patterns were sophisticated, involving multiple layers of laundering through various financial institutions, each designed to obscure the origin of the funds. The money had passed through several jurisdictions before ending up in accounts tied directly to Alex Thorn, the Chairman of the company.

Clara’s gaze shifted to the door, half-expecting someone to walk in and catch her in the act. But Knightly had promised her that he would handle any fallout, convincing her that the case was too important to let bureaucracy or protocol get in the way.

Another series of keystrokes and moments later, her screen populated with data—balance sheets, cash flows, and stock activity. Clara scrolled through the financial history, her eyes scanning the details of government subsidies, share price movements, and significant stock purchases.

“Here,” she said, stopping on a series of transactions that had occurred two years ago. “Look at this. Viperis received a substantial UK government subsidy two years ago. The share price shot up immediately after the announcement.”

Knightly leaned in, his eyes narrowing at the screen. “Who purchased shares right before the subsidy landed?”

Clara’s voice was tinged with excitement. “Look, here! A large block of shares was bought just before the government subsidy was public knowledge. Whoever bought those shares made a significant profit when the price spiked.”

She paused, her eyes narrowing as she zoomed in on the buyer’s details. “The shares were purchased under the name Sylvia Price.”

Knightly frowned. “Who’s Sylvia Price?”

His mind raced and then his eyes lit up with recognition. “Wait. Syliva Briarwood was Sylvia Price before she married Lord Adrian Briarwood.”

Clara nodded, her heart racing as she pieced the puzzle together. “Sylvia Price purchased the shares just before the subsidy hit. And look—two years ago, a significant payout was made to Viperis shareholders.”

Knightly’s brow furrowed. “A dividend?”

“Yes, that’s it—a dividend payout. A large chunk of money flowed into an account belonging to Lord Adrian Briarwood,” Clara said. She pulled up the transaction logs to confirm it. “The dividend payment went directly into an account that Briarwood controls.”

Knightly stared at the screen, processing the information. “So, Briarwood knew about the government subsidy before it was announced. He had his wife buy the shares in her maiden name to keep it under the radar. Then, once the payout came through, the money was funnelled into his account. And now, he’s sold those same shares recently.”

Clara nodded slowly, her mind churning through the implications. “This is insider trading. And it ties Briarwood directly to Viperis’s fraudulent dealings.”

Knightly’s lips curled into a grim smile. “Briarwood’s been riding me about this favour he’s done for me.”

Clara glanced up at him, sensing the shift in his demeanour. “Two birds with one stone?”

Knightly’s smile widened. “Thorn’s going down for the fraud, and now Briarwood’s going with him. I finally have a way to get him off my back—for good.”

**Chapter 40**

**Loyalty**

Briarwood sat stiffly in his plush, opulent office of the Leader of the House of Lords, his nerves fraying under the weight of the moment. The room, typically a sanctuary of power and prestige, felt like a gilded cage today. The scent of polished mahogany wood and rich leather—normally a symbol of stability and control—seemed stifling. Briarwood’s heart thudded in his chest as his eyes darted around the room, taking in the deep burgundy walls, the towering bookshelves crammed with volumes of parliamentary history, and the heavy velvet curtains blocking out the outside world.

At the far end of the room, behind an imposing oak desk, sat the Leader of the House of Lords, Lady Eleanor Ashford. A formidable presence, her reputation for shrewdness and strategic prowess was well-earned. Dressed in a tailored navy suit, her crisp white blouse peeked out with understated elegance. Her chestnut hair, pulled back into a sleek bun, framed a face that was both striking and authoritative, with sharp cheekbones and piercing green eyes that seemed to see through facades and deceit.

Lady Ashford flicked through a thick file resting on her desk, the only sound in the room the soft rustle of papers. Briarwood felt his throat tighten. He knew exactly what was in that file—the damning evidence that could unravel everything he had worked for. The scandals, the hidden investments in ….all laid bare in black and white. The Leader’s silence felt like a slow torture, each page turn a tick of the clock counting down to his political ruin.

Briarwood shifted uncomfortably in his chair, his fingers twitching in his lap as he tried to steady his breathing. His polished exterior—the tailored suit, the perfectly tied tie—felt like a thin veneer today, barely containing the panic rising within him.

Finally, Lady Ashford looked up from the file, fixing Briarwood with a cold, calculating stare. Her eyes bore into him, searching for cracks in his carefully constructed facade. “Lord Briarwood,” she began, her voice smooth yet edged with authority, “I trust you understand the gravity of what I’m saying.”

Briarwood swallowed, his mouth dry. “Yes,” he managed to croak, his voice betraying none of the confidence that had once defined him in these halls.

With a measured sigh, Lady Ashford closed the file with a deliberate thud and leaned back in her chair, steepling her fingers as she considered her next words. Briarwood’s pulse quickened, the suffocating silence returning as he waited, acutely aware that his entire future hinged on the next few minutes.

Lady Ashford gazed at Briarwood with a mixture of disappointment and disbelief. “Lord Briarwood,” she began, her tone clipped and authoritative, “we need to discuss your financial dealings.”

Briarwood’s breath hitched for just a moment, but he quickly masked it, straightening in his chair. He forced a neutral expression. He could feel the walls closing in, but he didn’t let it show. “What dealings?” he asked, his voice a little too casual, a little too detached. He feigned ignorance, though the words felt like poison on his tongue.

Lady Ashford’s lips barely moved as she spoke. “It has come to our attention,” she said flatly, her green eyes narrowing as she studied him with an unsettling intensity, “that you’ve funnelled public funds into Viperis, a company where you held significant shares.”

Briarwood’s heart skipped a beat, and the room seemed to shrink around him. He swallowed hard but kept his posture stiff, fighting the rising panic.

“The implications are severe,” she continued, her gaze never leaving his, “and the government is aware. This will become public knowledge shortly.”

The weight of her words sank in slowly. A cold sweat broke out on his brow and Briarwood’s palms began to itch, but he kept his hands clenched tightly in his lap, not daring to make a move.

He had thought he had Knightly in his pocket—his years-old favour, the one that had saved Knightly’s career—should have guaranteed loyalty. Turns out not forever. But now, as the cold truth washed over him, he realized just how naïve he had been.

Knightly had used the investigation as a cover, not only tracking down the frame job on Sarah but also digging deep into Briarwood’s own dealings. They had found everything—the offshore accounts, the shares in his wife’s name, the reallocation of government funds. Every crooked transaction, every shadowy manoeuvre Briarwood had thought buried, was now exposed. It wasn’t just an investigation—it was a dismantling, piece by incriminating piece, of Briarwood’s financial empire.

Briarwood felt a surge of anger—directed not just at Knightly, but at himself. He’d been so stupid, so arrogant to think he could manipulate a man like Knightly without consequences. He had served himself up on a plate, and Knightly had played him, taking his time, unburdening himself of the favour he owed, and then twisting the knife when Briarwood was most vulnerable. It was all so obvious now, but he hadn’t seen it.

He should’ve known Knightly wouldn’t remain in his debt forever. He should’ve anticipated that the man would look for a way out. Instead, he’d been blinded by his own confidence, his belief that he could control everyone around him. He clenched his fists, his nails digging into his palms as a wave of frustration and self-loathing coursed through him.

“For God’s sake, Adrian,” Lady Ashford bellowed, her voice cutting through his spiralling thoughts like the dead drop of a guillotine, “you have no choice in this.” The force of her words struck Briarwood like a physical blow. He had felt the ground shifting beneath his feet for weeks, but this was a new level of threat.

“This is an exaggeration,” he protested, desperation creeping into his voice. “I’ve always acted in the public interest—”

“Public interest?” Lady Ashford interrupted, incredulous. “You’ve leveraged your position for personal gain. Your position is now untenable.”

Adrenaline surged through Briarwood. He had fought hard for this position, sacrificed so much. “I won’t resign,” he declared, his voice rising slightly. “You can’t expect me to step down over unsubstantiated allegations.”

“Unsubstantiated?” Lady Ashford’s voice was cold, cutting through his bravado. “The evidence is clear. Resignation is your only option if you wish to salvage what remains of your reputation.”

“Resignation?” Briarwood echoed, disbelief and indignation swelling within him. “I’ve dedicated my life to public service. You’re asking me to throw it all away!”

“Do you want to risk criminal prosecution?” she pressed; her expression unwavering. “If you resign now, you might avoid that fate. Julia is already clearing your office. You’ve been released from all Cabinet duties with immediate effect.”

Motioning to the door she added, “Look Adrian, it’s over. You’ll step down immediately. We’ve already arranged for your things to be packed.”

“I won’t let this go unchallenged,” he shot back, though the fight in his voice wavered. “I can still defend myself. I won’t be made a scapegoat!”

Lady Ashford reached absent mindedly for an ornate letter opener on the table, fixing Briarwood with an unyielding stare. “You could lose your peerage. I can’t guarantee anything. But your best chance is to leave. Now. Quickly.” She tapped the letter opener lightly on the table, emphasizing her point.

Briarwood opened his mouth to protest, but the words died on his lips, his mouth flapping wordlessly like a man drowning in a sea of his own lies.

“Is this how it ends?” he asked, his voice quieter now, tinged with desperation. “After everything I’ve accomplished?”

“Don’t think of it as an end,” Lady Ashford replied, her tone softening just slightly, though the power dynamic remained firmly intact. “Think of it as an opportunity to regroup. You can’t fight this. Leave now while you still have some control over the narrative.”

Briarwood stared at her, weighing his options. The prospect of a public inquiry, the loss of his reputation, the potential for prosecution—each was a noose tightening around his neck. Resigning felt like an admission of guilt—like accepting defeat without a fight. But she had made it was clear that he had no choice.

“Very well,” he said at last, forcing the words through clenched teeth. “I will resign. But I expect fair treatment.”

“Of course,” Lady Ashford replied, a hint of satisfaction creeping into her expression. “We will handle this discreetly, and you will emerge from this stronger, I assure you.”

As Briarwood left the office, a sense of defeat washed over him. He didn’t for one moment believe Lady Ashford had his back. For all her polished manners, she was a predator. She’d throw her own mother to the wolves if it suited her purpose, and in that moment, it was clear to him that he had become her next sacrifice.

Outside the heavy door, the corridors of power hummed with life, oblivious to the unravelling of one man’s carefully constructed world. People moved past Briarwood without a second glance, their faces unreadable. For them, nothing had changed, the world was still running just as it always had. For the first time since the fight over marbles 60 years before, he felt small, afraid and week. His father had been right about him all along.

**Chapter 41**

**Migraine**

Inside the sleek, modern briefing room, Fish felt a headache creeping in down the left side of his head, as it always did when he could see things going tits up. Discarded coffee cups from an earlier murder briefing were scattered haphazardly across the polished surfaces, leaking the faint smell of stale coffee into the airless room.

Inspector Fish sat at the head of the table, rubbing his temples, listening to Kingsley and Clara Preston explain their findings. Clara was stationed by the screen at the front of the room, walking him through the evidence. He listened as she methodically set out how the trail led back to Chicago and Thorn.

“Alright,” he said. “Run it by me again.”

Kingsley stepped forward, “The embezzled charity funds—every penny eventually traces to an account in the Cayman Islands. It’s under a shell company, but we’ve connected the dots. Superficially the account appears to link to Sarah Lawson. But dig deep enough and it tracks back to Alex Thorn.”

“Of course it does,” Fish muttered, rubbing at the headache swelling behind his eyes. “Keep going.”

Clara picked up where Kingsley left off. “The transfers into Sarah Lawson’s account were orchestrated to make it look like she was funnelling the money herself. But we’ve confirmed it’s a frame job. The IP address initiating the transfers? It’s registered to Viperis.”

Checking he was keeping up, Fish ran through the facts, “The Caymans account, the charity money, even the bogus IP address—it all tracks back to Thorn. Sarah was just the scapegoat.”

“That’s the gist of it,” Clara replied, her voice tight. “It’s more than solid. The paper trail is airtight. Offshore accounts, shell companies—it’s all connected to him. We’ve got enough to bring him in.”

“There’s something else”, Kingsley continued, “Clara picked up evidence of insider dealing and misappropriation of Government funds in the Viperis records.”

“But how……..” Fish started to ask, but Clara cut him off.

“Lord Adrian Blackwood. Bought shares in Viperis just before a sizeable Government grant was announced. A scheme he had considerable influence in.” Clara paused for dramatic effect, “In his wife’s maiden name.”

The briefing room had grown tense, with Inspector Fish now furiously massaging his temples, trying to fend off the headache swelling behind his eyes. Kingsley’s voice cut through the silence.

“We’ll need to move on Briarwood before the press gets wind of this. The evidence of insider trading and misappropriation of government funds is solid enough to bring charges.”

Fish frowned, his hand dropping to the table. “And you’ve let the Cabinet Office know, I assume?”

Kingsley’s expression didn’t shift, but there was a flicker in his eyes—just enough for Fish to notice.

“I’ve already handled it,” Kingsley said, his tone smooth.

Fish sat back in his chair, narrowing his gaze. “Handled it? You mean without going through me?”

Kingsley didn’t flinch. “Given Briarwood’s position, it was necessary. The last thing we need is for the government to claim they were blindsided by the arrest of a peer of the realm. I made a call to a contact at the Cabinet Office, flagged it as a courtesy.”

Fish leaned forward, his brow furrowed. “A courtesy? Christ, Kingsley, we’re running a criminal investigation here, not a bloody PR campaign. This is my case. My team. You don’t get to sidestep me just because Briarwood’s got a title.”

Kingsley remained calm, “This isn’t about you, Fish. It’s about doing what’s necessary to avoid chaos. Arresting a man like Briarwood without warning would have the government tearing into us for days. We’re already stretched thin, and the press will be circling like sharks. If you want to do this cleanly, we need allies in the right places. And that means keeping certain people in the loop.”

Fish exhaled, the sound closer to a growl. “So, let me get this straight: Thorn’s laundering money through the charity to cover his tracks, framing an innocent woman, and Briarwood’s been bankrolling his company with taxpayers’ cash?”

“Err, there’s one other thing”, Clara was in her stride now, “we picked up a series of credit card payments on the charity accounts to high end shops, restaurants and bars.”

Fish let out a long, weary sigh as he pushed back his chair and shrugged on his coat. “Leave the damn credit card. We’ve got bigger fish to fry than tracking someone’s dodgy shopping habits.”

He stopped at the door, turning back to glance at the screen “Jesus,” he muttered, shaking his head. “What a bloody shit show. Will somebody get me a bloody Asprin!”

**Chapter 42**

**A Thorn in his Head**

Henslow glanced up from his workbench as the bell above the apothecary’s door jangled sharply. The shop was quiet this time of evening and the man who entered was not one of his usual patrons. He was a constable, his uniform rumpled and streaked with dust, his broad frame leaning heavily against the doorframe as though it were the only thing keeping him upright. His face was pale and slick with sweat, his eyes bloodshot

"May I sit down?” the man asked, his voice hoarse and strained. He stumbled forward, clutching at his temple with one hand.

Henslow stepped out from behind the counter, "You look unwell, sir. Sit here before you collapse."

The constable muttered his thanks and slumped into a wooden chair by the counter, wincing. He removed his hat and placed it on his lap, revealing damp hair plastered to his scalp.

"It’s my head," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "Feels like there’s a thorn inside it, digging deeper and deeper.”

Henslow frowned, his sharp eyes scanning the man’s pale complexion and trembling hands. "A headache of such intensity is not uncommon," he said carefully. "Have you eaten today? Slept?"

The constable shook his head. "It’s not just the pain. It’s what came with it. Flashes of light”.

Henslow moved to the shelves behind the counter. He retrieved a bottle of briar bark tincture and a pouch of dried feverfew, combining them into a draught that would soothe the man’s pain. "Drink this. It will dull the ache and calm your nerves. Sleep may bring clarity."

The constable took the cup with trembling hands, nodding his thanks before downing the bitter liquid in one gulp.

The man nodded, rising unsteadily to his feet. He placed his hat back on his head and made his way to the door, pausing just before stepping outside, the door swinging shut behind him.

Henslow Thorn’s Diary

May 1908

My wife roused me before dawn, having found that I had fallen asleep at my desk again. I had left open my apothecary notes at page detailing the preparation of my latest tincture, one combining snake oil with liberty cap mushroom. I remember reaching for the vial that now sat upturned and empty on the floor beside my boots.

The visions had come again, sharp and intrusive as a blade. I saw strange devices glowing with light. Places filled with brightness—walls made of glass and polished metal—appeared before me.

A man sat, his fingers pressed to his temples as if to hold back a great pain. I felt the man’s headache as though it were my own, a piercing torment down the left side of my head. The man muttered 3 words*; Thorn. Viperis. Briarwood.*

*The visions shifted. I saw gold changing hands. But no sooner did it pass from one palm to the next than it melted and reformed, transforming into gaudy ornaments: chains of unnatural brilliance, and fine garments adorned with jewels that glittered like false stars.*

*The trinkets melted into the form of a monstrous golden fish which spoke to me without words, pressing a single truth into the world:*

*“These are trifles. Distractions. Let them go unnoticed.”*

In this small moment, I felt a pull on the thread of fate, just enough to shift its course. Whether for good or ill, I do not know.

**Chapter 43**

**Trading places**

Down in the holding cells, the clanking of keys echoed as Fish unlocked Sarah’s door. She blinked against the dim light from the corridor as the heavy door creaked open. She had spent the night stewing in the silence, and truth be known had started to enjoy the solitude. The past weeks had been exhausting and stuck in the cell with nothing to do she’d caught up on a lot of missed sleep.

She hadn’t eaten much—It was hard to tell if the knot in her stomach was caused by hunger or anxiety. Either way, it made her nauseous just thinking about it. She been fantasising about her favourite meal knowing that she’d have no problem eating whatever the circumstances—fish fingers with tartar sauce on a brioche roll, and a bag of cheese and onion crisps, all washed down with an ice-cold diet cola.

Her solicitor had told her she’d be out after her first court hearing and that would be within 24 hours of arrest. And so, she wasn’t surprised by the unmistakable sound of keys jangling just outside her door, thinking she’d be off to court in the back of a police van. That’s how it went on TV anyway.

When fish stepped into the doorway, his expression stern but not unkind.

“Ms. Lawson,” he began, his voice measured. “We’ve reviewed the evidence, and you’re free to go. It appears there’s been a misunderstanding.”

“A misunderstanding?” Sarah’s voice cracked. She felt both a wave of relief and a surge of outrage rise within her.

Fish nodded, avoiding her eyes. “The funds embezzled—they were transferred without your knowledge. You’ve been cleared of any involvement.”

He didn’t offer an apology, just the facts, delivered with a detached efficiency that left no room for emotion. "You’ll be released shortly," he said, his voice as steady as the clinking of the keys that hung at his side. Sarah could tell it was deliberate, a carefully measured tactic to avoid admitting too much liability. It was a game, a way to sidestep any acknowledgement of fault, and she knew it. The unspoken rules of this kind of bureaucratic dance were clear: don’t apologize, don’t explain more than necessary, and above all, don’t admit you’ve made a mistake.

But as much as she wanted to call him out on it, all she could think about was getting out of here. The urge to push past him and run through the door was almost overwhelming.

“I just want to leave,” she blurted out, her voice tight, the words escaping before she could stop them.

“Follow me, please,” Fish said, stepping back into the corridor.

Sarah stood up slowly, her legs stiff and aching from hours spent on the unforgiving bench. She should have felt relief at the prospect of being released, but all she could focus on was the deep sense of humiliation that clung to her. Being dragged in here, treated like a common criminal, left a bitter taste in her mouth. And then there was the damage to her reputation—how would she ever recover from this? The whispers would surely follow her; people would say *there’s no smoke without fire*.

As Fish escorted her through the narrow hallway, the clatter of activity in the station hit her all at once—voices overlapping in animated conversation, phones ringing insistently, and the rhythmic thud of paperwork being shuffled, creating a chaotic symphony that echoed against the walls. The vibrant energy of the station felt surreal after the oppressive silence of her cell. But then, as she approached the front desk, she stopped dead in her tracks. A wave of anxiety washed over her, and her heart raced as she caught sight of the familiar faces of officers and clerks, all busily engaged in their duties.

In the middle of the commotion stood Lord Adrian Briarwood, and he was being fingerprinted. The untouchable patron of her charity, his expensive suit rumpled, and a sheen of sweat glistening on his temple. Sarah stopped in her tracks, staring in shock. Briarwood? Had Thorn framed him too?

“Keep moving,” Fish urged, his tone pulling her back to the moment. But her feet felt rooted to the spot. She watched as Briarwood turned slightly, his gaze brushing over her, recognition crossing his face before he looked away.

Fish stepped closer, clearing his throat louder this time. “Sarah, keep moving” he snapped, and the sharpness of his voice broke through her daze.

Once back in the processing room, a junior officer who seemed barely out of his teens handed Sarah her personal effects—her phone, her bag, and the jacket she had been wearing when they’d arrested her. The officer’s expression was impassive, almost mechanical, as he slid the items across the counter toward her.

“We’ll need you to sign for these,” he said, his voice flat. She glanced at the stack of forms in front of her, the lines meant for her signature seeming to blur together. Numbly, she complied, her mind still racing, barely registering the procedure as the familiar weight of her belongings returned to her.

Fish, standing just behind her, handed her a folder with an air of finality. “This is the official paperwork clearing you of all charges,” he stated, his tone brisk but slightly softer than the junior officer’s. “If you need anything further, contact us at the number inside.” His gaze held hers for a moment, as if searching for some sign of understanding before he added, “You’re free to go.”

That was it. After everything, she was just… free to go.

She turned to Fish. “And what now? You hold arrest me, accuse me of embezzlement, and that’s it? I’m just… supposed to walk away?”

Fish sighed. “Ms. Lawson, we understand this was difficult. We’ll be in touch if we need any further information from you.”

Sarah bit back the anger rising in her throat. But she could see it in Fish’s eyes—he was just following orders. The higher-ups had made the call.

**Chapter 44**

**Dark Horse**

Fiona had stayed late, ostensibly to finalize the quarterly donor report, and as soon as the office emptied out, she’d moved from her office into the dimly lit open plan. Seated at Sarah Lawson’s desktop she hovered the cursor over the web browser. The bookmarks bar was a mess of personal logins, research links, and, most importantly, access points to the charity’s financial systems. Fiona had been watching Sarah for weeks now, noting her habits—the way she always saved her passwords in the browser, her tendency to leave herself logged in when stepping away for meetings.

Sarah was sloppy. Naïve. Vulnerable.

Fiona clenched her fists. Alex Thorn had taken advantage of that, just as he had taken advantage of her.

The memory of her last humiliating encounter flared in her mind again. Three years of subtle flirtations, longing looks, and carefully curated interactions—all shattered in one conversation. She’d telephoned him after Sarah’s revelation, intending to warn him about the recording. She’d expected gratitude, perhaps even a rekindling of the chemistry she’d felt the night they had met in the US Ambassadors reception. Instead, Thorn had dismissed her. And he’d sounded angry too.

Fiona’s cheeks burned at the memory. She’d been a fool to think someone like Alex Thorn would see her as anything other than a useful pawn. But now, she was done being used. He would regret underestimating her. It hadn’t taken her long to decide what she was going to do about it.

Fiona wasn’t a hacker by any means, but she was smart and her years at the charity had taught her enough to get by. Budgets were tight, and like many small organizations, the Foundation couldn’t afford IT support. Fiona had taken on the role out of necessity, teaching herself to navigate their rudimentary systems and fix minor issues. Over time, she’d become adept at managing their online infrastructure—skills that now served her in ways she never anticipated.

She leaned forward, scrolling through Sarah’s saved passwords until she found the one she needed. The charity’s banking platform loaded quickly. She congratulated herself on a plan that was audacious, bordering on reckless. But it was also ingenious.

First, she created an offshore account in Sarah’s name using a shell company registered in the Cayman Islands, with an e-trail meticulously crafted to suggest a series of fraudulent transfers. Next, she routed a portion of the charity’s funds—just enough to raise suspicion—into the account. But here was the masterstroke: she buried a linked to IP address used to set up the account and shift the money to one of Alex Thorn’s properties in Chicago. It was a convoluted web, but Fiona knew the authorities would dig into it. And when they did, the connection to Thorn would inevitably surface.

The amount of money—£500,000—was irrelevant to someone like Thorn, but the implications of his involvement in framing an innocent employee to protect himself? That would be devastating.

Of course, Fiona knew that the police would certainly assume Sarah to be the culprit —she hadn’t buried the lead. She hated the thought of Sarah being arrested, but it was a calculated risk. Sarah had the evidence that Thorn was concealing the deaths on the clinical trial—if the police picked her up, they’d eventually find the recording. They’d check her laptop too. Sarah hadn’t thought that Fiona had noticed the work that she hadn’t done. Fiona had passed her desk once or twice and caught a glimpse of her searches—poor, earnest Sarah was trying to investigate Viperis. Once the police had crawled over Sarah’s computers, the entire house of cards would collapse. And any forensic accountant worth their salt would have no problem figuring out that Sarah had been framed and they’d track the whole set up right back to Thorn. They’d be wrong of course. But they’d never spot the double bluff.

She picked up her phone, dialling the anonymous tip line for financial crimes. Her voice, when she spoke, was calm and measured.

“I’d like to report suspicious financial activity at the NeuroHealth Foundation,” she said. “A significant sum of money has been moved to an offshore account under the name Sarah Lawson. You might want to investigate.”

Hanging up, Fiona felt the weight of what she’d done settle over her like a shroud. She stared out the window into the dark London night. It was madness, all of it.

As she shut down Sarah’s computer and prepared to leave, Fiona allowed herself a grim smile.

What was it they said about revenge? That it was best served cold. They, whoever they were, were of course quite wrong about that.

**Chapter 45**

**Indignity**

Briarwood had stood in the office of the Leader of the House of Lords just hours ago, facing the woman who had, with surgical precision, dismantled what was left of his political career. She had barely raised her eyes from the paperwork in front of her as she delivered the final blow.

“Adrian, it’s over. You’ll step down immediately. We’ve already arranged for your things to be packed.”

The words hit him like a hammer, like a death sentence handed down without trial. There was no negotiation. There had been no room for argument. The machines of power he had once controlled so effortlessly were now moving against him, and his legacy was being erased, brick by brick. He’d barely managed a nod before he left the room, his mind numb.

There was going to be an inquiry—a public, brutal exposure of all his dealings. The quiet scandals, the shady financial dealings, everything he had managed to keep buried for so long would soon be laid bare.

Now, back in his Surrey mansion, a world away from the Westminster Village, Briarwood stood by the large bay window in the sitting room, staring out at the perfectly manicured gardens. His grand estate, his title, the comfortable life he had built—all of it hung by a thread. He took a deep breath, trying to calm the rising panic in his chest. The inquiry would be brutal, yes, but there was still time. Time to figure out an angle, to spin things, to make it through without losing everything. He had weathered scandals before.

But this time was different. Sylvia was upstairs getting ready for dinner, blissfully unaware of how their world was about to implode. Briarwood’s stomach twisted as he thought of her—how she had stood by him through years of infidelity, through ugly business dealings that could have ruined them both. She had forgiven and overlooked more than any woman should. But this scandal, with its public exposure and threat to their fortune, was something else entirely.

Sylvia had been born into wealth. She didn't just enjoy luxury, she expected it. The fine clothes, the invitations to the most exclusive events, the estate that had been in her family for generations—these were things she could not imagine living without. Briarwood was terrified she would leave him if this all went south. For all his fantasies about running away with some lovely young woman, he could never bring himself to leave Sylvia. She was the foundation of his life, the one thing that grounded him when his arrogance and ambition ran wild.

The idea of her walking out—of her taking her family's money with her—was more frightening than any inquiry or scandal. If he lost Sylvia, he wouldn’t just lose his wife. He’d lose everything that mattered.

He turned away from the window and poured himself another drink, the glass trembling slightly in his hand. Upstairs, he could hear her moving around, preparing for a night of mingling with the very people who would soon be revelling in his scandal. Those same faces would smile politely tonight, but in days, they’d be gleefully dissecting every sordid detail over cocktails, delighting in the spectacle of his downfall. The sound was comforting in a way, a reminder that for now, she was still there.

A sudden, sharp knock at the front door startled him. He froze, glancing at the clock on the mantelpiece. It was too early for the dinner guests to arrive. His heart sank. Surely they hadn’t come already?

The knock came again, louder this time, more insistent. He tried to convince himself that it was something innocuous—a delivery perhaps, something for the caterers.

As he made his way to the door, footsteps echoed down the staircase. Sylvia appeared at the top of the stairs, dressed for the dinner in an elegant cocktail dress. “Adrian, what’s going on?”

“I’ll get it,” he said, “it’ll be something to do with the caterers,” his voice strained, trying to maintain some semblance of control. He reached the heavy oak door, its polished surface gleaming under the soft hall light, and hesitated for a moment, his hand resting on the cool brass handle. With a deep breath, he pulled it open. There they stood—two uniformed officers, stone-faced and unsympathetic. The taller one, a broad-shouldered woman, spoke first.

“Lord Adrian Briarwood? We’re here to arrest you on suspicion of financial misconduct and fraud. You’ll need to come with us.”

Briarwood’s face went pale. He felt the blood drain from his head as he stared at the officers, his body stiff with shock. Sylvia, who had come halfway down the stairs, gasped audibly.

“What? This must be some mistake!” he protested, his voice cracking.

“There’s no mistake, sir,” the officer said, stepping forward. “You’ll need to come with us now.”

The indignity of it hit him like a punch in the gut. Arrested. In his own home. He could feel Sylvia’s eyes on him, her confusion turning quickly to anger as the reality sank in. His mind scrambled for something, anything, to explain this away, but there was nothing. Thank God the guests had yet to arrive. Then, as if on cue, he spotted a car approaching, its headlights cutting through the dusk, winding up the long drive. Panic surged in his chest. Whoever it was would see everything.

One of the officers pulled out a pair of handcuffs, and the humiliation became unbearable.

“Is this really necessary?” Briarwood asked, his voice a strained whisper, pleading. “I’ll come quietly.”

But the officers weren’t interested in his dignity. Without a word, the cuffs were snapped around his wrists, cold metal biting into his skin. The shame of it all stung worse than anything he had ever felt in his life. He glanced back at his wife, her face frozen in a mask of disbelief and disgust, and he felt a deep, aching hollowness in his chest. He had failed her. He had failed them both.

The officers led him out of the house, past the grand foyer with its marble floors and glittering chandelier, out into the cool night air. The walk to the police car felt endless. Briarwood’s heart pounded as he glanced down the drive.

The approaching car was close now, its headlights gleaming like two accusing eyes. And then he saw who it was. Charles Davenport, a high-powered businessman Briarwood had been carefully courting for months, and his elegant wife, Victoria. This dinner had been Briarwood’s chance to impress—to solidify a lucrative partnership he desperately needed.

As the police gripped his arms and marched him toward the waiting car, Briarwood felt a sickening wave of humiliation. Davenport and his wife would witness the whole sordid scene: the flashing lights, the handcuffs, the end of his carefully crafted facade. The business deal he had hoped for was gone before it even began. As the headlights washed over him, Briarwood lowered his head, dreading their inevitable looks of shock and revulsion.

As they drove to central London, the dim lights of the Surrey countryside slowly gave way to the concrete sprawl and vibrant glow of the city. The car’s interior was thick with an uncomfortable silence, punctuated only by the faint hum of the engine and the occasional crackle of radio chatter. Briarwood sat in the back seat, handcuffed and feeling the oppressive weight of his circumstances. This was no luxurious limousine ride and the trip seemed all the longer for it.

When they arrived at the station, the reality hit hard. The air was thick with the smell of stale coffee and disinfectant, an unsettling reminder that this was a world far removed from the polished corridors of power.

As he was led through the bustling reception area, he felt the weight of judging eyes. The booking process was painfully slow, stretching out in excruciating detail as every piece of information was meticulously recorded. His name, his age, his address—each question felt like a chisel, chipping away at the layers of prestige and power. With each snippet of information, he surrendered he felt like he was being more and more stripped of his identify. He was just another name on a list, another statistic in a system he had thought he was above. The officers moved methodically, indifferent to his discomfort.

As they led him away from the booking area, someone caught his eye—a woman making her way toward the exit, flanked by an officer and a chap in a grey suit, presumably a lawyer. It took him a moment to process who she was. Sarah Lawson. The charity employee Thorn had made such a hash of dealing with. Their eyes met and Briarwood felt an inexplicable urge to nod in recognition. But just as quickly, he decided against it.

This wasn’t some social event where pleasantries could be exchanged. They hadn’t just passed in a corridor or a lift, for heaven's sake; this was a police station. In any case, her expression was one of puzzlement, as if she couldn’t quite place him, or couldn’t believe what she was seeing. Briarwood looked away quickly. The shame was too great, like a heavy anchor pulling him down. As he was led deeper into the station, he felt a part of him slip away, lost in the chaos.

Sarah Lawson was walking free, and here he was, about to be led into a holding cell. The irony wasn’t lost on him.

**Chapter 46**

**Final Flight**

Alex Thorn lounged on the bed in his hotel room, shoes kicked off, white-stockinged feet up. He stared at his computer screen, the faint hum of the air conditioning the only sound in the otherwise silent space. It felt like a cocoon, shielding him from the outside world.

The BBC politics pages carried the news that Briarwood had resigned from his parliamentary duties. An email waiting for him in his in-tray had already alerted Thorn to the very welcome news that Briarwood had sold his shares in Viperis, resigned quietly from the Board. Everything was panning out nicely. Briarwood didn’t have the balls to stick with the company and ride out the problem with the on-study deaths. He’d always known Briarwood was weak—now it would be painfully obvious to everyone.

Thorn felt a wave of smug satisfaction wash over him. He’d held his cool proving himself the stronger player in this high-stakes game. David had been invaluable too, feeding him intel about Sarah—the recording, her relentless digging into Viperis’s business—his business. She had been searching for evidence to bring him down. Now all he had to do was buy her off. Fifty grand should do it. He thought about how he’d make her the offer, her grateful acceptance. Everything was falling into place, and he had orchestrated everything beautifully.

It was all playing out as he’d planned. Alex savoured the feeling of control, the satisfaction of everything falling into place. He shifted his position on the bed letting the tension slip from his shoulders. Sarah Lawson wouldn’t be causing him any problems. Who had she thought she was, poking around in Viperis business? The potential for scandal, once a looming threat, had been effectively buried beneath layers of misdirection. Briarwood had been sidelined, a pawn removed from the board without anyone realizing the game had been rigged. The clinical trial was progressing flawlessly, with no further setbacks or whispers of dissent. The investors were happy, the media had moved on. The problem that was Sarah would evaporate for the cost of pocket change. He had everything under control.

But then, the phone rang. The number flashing on the screen was unfamiliar, a string of digits that didn’t register. It wasn’t one of his contacts. He hesitated for only a moment before answering, “Hello?”.

“Mr. Thorn,” the voice on the other almost a whisper sounded familiar, yet slippery in its recognition, like a memory just out of reach. “I believe you have a situation.”

A cold knot twisted in Alex Thorn’s stomach. “What situation?” he demanded, his voice strained as he struggled to rein in the growing dread.

“Sarah Lawson is with the authorities right now. By now, she’s...talking,” the voice said, pausing deliberately as if waiting for the pieces to click in his mind. “They’ll want to know everything she knows, of course. About *you*. About the study.”

A bead of sweat ran down Thorn’s temple. “She doesn’t know anything concrete,” he countered reflexively, then kicked himself for what suddenly seemed like an ill-timed confession.

“Doesn’t she?” the voice replied, the faintest edge of amusement slipping into the words. “Those on-study deaths. Your decision to keep them quiet. These things have a way of...surfacing. Particularly when there are *illegalities* in play. Someone in your position would know that better than most.”

Thorn’s heart slammed against his ribs, his mind racing. “Who is this?” he snapped, but the voice continued, ignoring the question.

“And the timing—Sarah’s digging into Viperous business, Briarwood leaving the company—it’s all aligning rather...unfavourably for you. But then, I suppose that’s to be expected when someone starts *talking*.”

“Talking about what?” he shot back, but the words were hollow, fear choking his ability to think straight.

The voice remained maddeningly even. “You already know the answer, Mr. Thorn. If I were you, I’d focus on...next steps. Carefully.”

“I can fix things”, Thorn said, sounding uncertain.

“You can try”, and then the line went dead, leaving Thorn gripping the phone.

Talking. Illegalities. The study. Thorn filled in the blanks the caller had left wide open. Sarah was spilling everything—on the deaths, on his cover-up. The data, the fixing of the government grants, the lies. It would all come out. And when it did, he wouldn’t just lose his career; he’d lose everything.

Frantic, Thorn threw the phone onto the bed and lunged for his laptop, his hands trembling as he opened it. Delete everything. Wipe the files. That’s what you did, wasn’t it? Destroy the evidence. Make it impossible to trace back to you.

He began purging documents, his mind barely registering the futility of it all. Somewhere in the back of his head, a mocking echo of the caller’s voice rang out.

*You can try.*

As he worked, his mind raced. He’s been so panicked he hadn’t even thought to ask who was calling. He couldn’t stay—not with the threat of exposure looming so large. Every keystroke felt like a desperate attempt to rewrite his future, but he knew it wouldn’t be enough. He was running out of time.

With the last trace of evidence on his laptop pointlessly obliterated, he sat back for a moment, breathing heavily. He needed to think—where could he go? What connections could he tap into? He couldn’t risk being caught; that was simply not an option.

Thorn glanced around the room, his mind racing, trying to find some sort of solution, any glimmer of hope. The walls seemed to close in on him, and his thoughts became a blur of panic and desperation. He had to do something. *Anything* to escape the mess he’d created. He couldn’t stay here—couldn’t stay in London. He was too exposed. The noose was tightening, and there was only one thing left to do.

He grabbed his phone, booking the next flight to Chicago—a red-eye from Heathrow. He didn’t even think about the timing, about the risks. Chicago was home. His company was there. He could destroy the remaining evidence, cover his tracks, erase everything that had led to this moment. He’d been operating from Chicago for years; he knew the city’s underbelly, the places to hide, the people who owed him favours. *I can fix this. I can clean it up.*

He quickly packed a duffel bag, tossing in a few shirts and a pair of jeans. Just enough to get through the next few days. He wasn’t planning on staying long—just long enough to lay low and clean up what mess remained.

*I can get rid of the rest of it. All the evidence. It’s not too late.*

*I’ll wipe it clean when I get back to Chicago. I can make it all disappear. Maybe even take the server offline. There’s always a way.*

He grabbed his passport, the only thing that mattered right at that moment now. The one document that could either set him free or bury him. *If I get to Chicago, I can make sure they never find out. This is the last chance to make it all right.*

He shoved the passport into the duffel bag with more force than necessary, his hands shaking. If he could get to Chicago, he could fix everything. *It’s not too late. I can still cover my tracks. I’ll destroy everything before they can get to it.*

But even as he thought it, the voice in the back of his mind whispered, *It’s too late. You’re already done.*

He pushed the thought away. He wasn’t done. Not yet. Not if he could help it. Not if he could get to Chicago. He logged on and bought himself a ticket online. In his haste he’d clicked on business class and couldn’t spare precious minutes to start the process afresh. Today speed was everything.

As he stepped out of the hotel, the night air hit him, cool and biting, a stark contrast to the suffocating heat of his anxiety. He forced himself to walk calmly, head down, through the quiet streets of London. Each footstep echoed in the stillness, a constant reminder that he was slipping away from the life he’d built, and the adrenaline coursing through him felt almost electric, keeping him on edge. He couldn’t shake the thought of Sarah speaking to the police, and then most probably to the press, her voice the harbinger of his undoing. It was only a matter of time before she went public, telling the world the truth about his role in the deception. And David? The fool would break the moment any of it hit the news. The thought of their faces—his own betrayal staring back at him—made his stomach churn.

The streets were relatively quiet for a London evening. He adjusted the strap of his bag and set off towards Oxford Circus Station. The bright lights of the shops and restaurants buzzed around him. He kept his head down, focusing on the pavement, trying to blend into the backdrop of the city.

Reaching Bond Street Station, he followed the signs to the Elizabeth Line. The train arrived with a smooth hum, and he boarded. As the train glided towards Heathrow, Alex let out a breath he didn’t realize he had been holding. Each station that passed felt like a countdown, and as they approached the airport.

Finally, the train rolled to a stop at Heathrow Terminal 5. He was almost there, almost free.

He made his way through the bustling terminal, the sounds of announcements blaring overhead and the rhythmic clatter of rolling luggage echoing around him. Each heartbeat thundered in his chest as he approached the check-in desks, the weight of anxiety pressing down on him. With every step, he felt the tantalizing promise of escape drawing nearer, a desperate urge to leave behind the tangled web of deceit and danger he had spun in London.

As he moved closer to the check-in area, he kept his head low, but his eyes darted around the room, scanning for any signs of trouble. Travelers milled about casually, sipping coffee from cardboard cups and glancing at their watches. So, this was the full cattle class experience.

Thorn’s heart raced as he caught sight of the security checkpoints. Each uniformed officer, with their sharp gaze felt like a potential threat. He quickened his pace, the adrenaline surging through his veins. Every detail became magnified—the smell of coffee mingled with the faint scent of sweat, the whir of luggage carts, the distant murmur of conversations.

He sidestepped a family with children laughing and chasing each other. Thorn forced himself to breathe steadily. His escape hinged on maintaining his composure—an hour until boarding. Thorn made his way through security, each beep of the metal detector, every fleeting glance from a guard, filled him with dread. But nothing happened. No alarms. No sirens.

As he approached the gate, the digital display blinked: "Flight to Chicago – Boarding in 20 minutes." He exhaled, a brief, shallow sigh of relief. But then, just as he was about to step from the main drag into the holding pen of the gate, two men stepped into his path. They weren’t in uniform, but something about them set off alarm bells in his head. They wore plain suits, their expressions disturbingly calm, too calm, as they stood directly in his way, blocking his route.

“Alex Thorn?”

The name hung in the air.

"Alex Thorn?"

He froze. His heart thundered in his chest.

"Yes?" he replied, trying to sound composed, as if nothing was wrong, but his voice was tight, betraying the panic clawing at him.

"You're under arrest on suspicion of Fraud, and preventing the course of justice."

The words hung in the air, cutting through the noise of the airport like a blade. Thorn didn’t have the time to wonder whether the terms of his arrest matched the nature of his crimes before he felt a firm hand on his arm, pulling him back. His passport slipped from his grip, tumbling to the floor. The handcuffs clicked into place with a cold finality.

The flight to Chicago would leave without him. The game was over. And this time, he had lost.

**Chapter 47**

**December 1901**

The streets of Chicago were restless under a bruised winter sky. December’s bite seeped into every crevice, making its presence known in the cracked mortar of buildings and the breath of hurried passersby. Henslow arrived at his apothecary as the grey dawn stretched over the city, the keys jangling in his hand.

Business was not what it once had been. The exotic draw of his snake oil had diminished, a relic of another time. The men who once delivered serpents in wicker baskets were fewer, their ranks thinned like the rattlers themselves. Now, the shelves were dominated by more mundane remedies: syrups for coughs, peppermint for heartburn, and sulphur salves for rashes. Henslow prepared them dutifully, but with each sale, he felt the pull of obsolescence.

As dusk painted the room in shadows, Henslow locked the door behind his last customer. A familiar weight settled in his chest. He wiped the counter clean, its oak worn smooth by decades of service, and knelt to retrieve a vial from the cabinet beneath. It gleamed faintly in the lamplight, the liquid within thick and metallic.

For a moment, he hesitated, the glass cool against his fingertips. Then he pulled the stopper free and the familiar scent rose to his nostrils, sharp and earthy. Raising the vial to his lips, he drank deeply, tipping his head back until it was empty.

**Diary of Henslow Hayward**

**Chicago -** **12 December 1901**

Today I opened the store, just as I do every day. I restocked the shelves with glass jars of dried herbs, powders, and tinctures, setting out the mortar and pestle, weighing scales, and prescription books. Customers came and went, as they always do. Honey and opium syrups for the coughs and colds, peppermint and ginger for heartburn, salves and ointments of sulphur and zinc oxide for rashes.

Not so many of my customers are here for my snakeoil these days. The snake traders who used to bring me wicker baskets teeming with serpents are a dwindling, fewer now than the rattlers they hunt.

As I locked up the store this evening, I wondered if it might be for the last time.

After wiping down the worn oak counter, and unlocking the cabinet beneath it, and withdrew a vial of pure snake oil; earthy, metallic, and viscous, removed the stopper and drank the whole bottle.

The room began to shift. The familiar ambers and greens of the bottles on the shelves blurred into rivers of light and shadow. Scales shimmered like molten metal, catching a light that seemed to emanate from nowhere and everywhere all at once. The steady rhythmic rattle grew louder, syncing with my heartbeat.

The serpent appeared, uncoiling slowly, its diamond-shaped head rising to meet his gaze.

"*I am here for you*."

I followed the snake through bursts of colour. Towering structures rose from the ground, their forms unnatural and gleaming. A room materialized around me with smooth, unblemished walls. A bed emerged from the floor, its linens pristine and white. A sleek table appeared, cluttered with blinking, glowing contraptions.

The space was unlike anything I have ever seen. A vast window stretched across one wall, black as pitch and without shutters or curtains. The lights of the room burned steadily, harsh and white, humming faintly with a sound that set my teeth on edge.

And standing so close that I could feel his breath, a young man. For a moment, I felt the uncanny sensation of looking into a reflection of my own eyes. And then the feeling dissipated like a reflection on the surface of a pond, disturbed by ripples. The man was speaking into a small, glowing black object, its pale blue light illuminating his face. It was no book, though it was the size of a pocket Bible.

I moved to the great window and pressed my hands against the cool glass. Below me stretched a dizzying void, the height threatening to pull me from the room. Bright, unnatural lights flickered rhythmically along the streets, guiding strange forms that lumbered obediently beneath them.

As I turned back to face the man, I realised that five more shadows had entered the room and stood pressed against its edges. But these shadows, they were *other*. They were neither like me nor like the young man. I could feel a tether connecting my mind to each of them.

“*They know.*”

The young man began packing belongings into a strange portmanteau with hurried motions, his speech rapid and unintelligible.

“*Leave.”*

Slowly the shadows faded, their movements slowing until they grew still and silent. I closed my eyes, willing the vision to end. And when I opened them again, I was back in his store, lying flat out on the dusty floor, and the familiar scent of herbs and tinctures filled my lungs. I do not know how long I had been gone.

**Chapter 48**

**Noose**

Thorn sat in the back of the police car, handcuffed and miserable, the chill of the metal cuffs biting into his wrists. As the police car cruised along the M4, Alex leaned against the cold glass of the window, his heart heavy with despair, his gaze fixed on the sky. Just above the horizon, a plane ascended into the clouds, its silhouette stark against the fading light. He felt a surge of anger and regret. Regret that he hadn’t managed to get on the plane.

“God, what have I done?” he whispered to himself, his voice barely audible over the hum of the engine.

The car finally pulled up to the police station:

“Out,” barked one of the officers, opening the door and motioning for him to step out. Thorn felt a rush of humiliation wash over him. He kept his head down as they led him inside, his shoulders slumped.

Once inside, they guided him through the maze of the station, passing other officers who barely glanced in his direction.

In the booking area, an officer began to take his details. “Name?”

“Alex Thorn,” he replied, his voice barely above a whisper.

“Occupation?”

“Company Chairman.” The words tasted bitter on his tongue.

“Chairman, is it?” The officer raised an eyebrow, a flicker of amusement crossing his face.

Alex clenched his jaw, fighting back the rising tide of anger and despair.

After the booking process, they escorted him down a sterile corridor lined with cells.

Finally, they reached his cell—a small, uninviting space with a metal bench and a toilet in the corner. The officer swung the door open, and Alex stepped inside, his heart heavy. The door clanged shut behind him, sealing him away from the world.

He sank onto the bench. He felt alone and utterly miserable. His father’s face flashed into his mind. *You’ve shamed us, Alex*…..the image of his father hissed, …..*you’ve thrown away everything we’ve worked for*.

The realization came to him slowly, like a fog lifting in stages. They hadn’t arrested him for his involvement in the trial scandal. They hadn’t even mentioned it—his first thought was that this had all been about the clinical trials, the deaths, the cover-up. He'd prepared himself to face questions about his role in those events, the data he’d hidden, the decisions he’d made for the good of the company. But when they read the charges, his mind went blank for a second. Fraud. Perverting the course of justice.

He couldn’t solve the puzzle—he didn’t have all the pieces. He hadn’t been in control, he’d just been the fool his father hoped he wasn’t, tangled up in his own lies, buried in the chaos.

When they gave him the chance of a phone call, he’d called his father. The old man had called in a brilliant lawyer, someone renowned for dismantling even the most damning cases. Thorn had clung to the hope that money and expertise would save him, that his carefully selected legal representation would expose the cracks in the accusations against him. But instead, he and his lawyer had been left with astonishingly little they could say to counter the rock-solid evidence being presented.

Thorn had sat in the sterile, fluorescent-lit room across from the investigators as they laid out in front of him a meticulously constructed paper trail. Page after page, document after document—they’d shown him everything. Each charge had been accompanied by a mountain of data: timestamps, email records, bank transaction logs, even messages supposedly sent by Thorn himself authorizing the transfers. Evidence he struggled to get his head around, no matter how desperately he tried.

The transfers linked back to his name, his accounts, his company and his decisions. It wasn’t just the money. They’d evidence painting a picture of motive too: a personal vendetta against Sarah Lawson, designed to frame her for the missing funds.

Thorn had shaken his head repeatedly, trying to form coherent responses to their accusations. “This isn’t me,” he had insisted, his voice breaking under the weight of mounting panic.

Someone had constructed this—a trail that led straight to him. Every detail felt precisely designed, leaving no room for doubt, no gaps for his lawyer to exploit. It wasn’t just convincing; it was masterful. Thorn could almost admire the craftsmanship if it weren’t destroying his life.

The realization hit like a blow to the chest: whoever had done this knew him too well. They had anticipated every move, exploiting his arrogance, his desperation, his belief that he could outmanoeuvre anyone. And now, the evidence tied him inextricably to the crime.

Thorn’s lawyer had tried to press the investigators on the Chicago connection, arguing it could point to someone else framing him. But the investigators had countered smoothly, saying it only underscored his attempt to mask his involvement. To them, the Chicago link was just another layer of his supposed deception.

Thorns mouth went dry. Who had orchestrated it? The caller’s voice echoed in his mind—calm, insinuating, calculated. He could hear it now: the pauses, the hints, the manipulative way they had steered him toward flight. Flight that now made him look guilty.

“Christ,” he muttered under his breath, the weight of realization sinking in. He wasn’t fleeing from the scandal of the trial. He had been herded into a trap. Whoever was behind this had needed him to run, to scramble and panic, to delete files and make himself look culpable.He had thought he was the predator, covering his tracks. Instead, he had been the prey all along, lured into a net he hadn’t even seen tightening around him.

Across the hall, Lord Adrian Briarwood sat in his own cell, the weight of his secrets pressing down. Neither man knew the other was just a few feet away, each wrestling with their fate, both having played their roles in a deadly game of ambition and betrayal.

Hours slipped by—phones rang, men shouted, a cell door clanged shut somewhere down the hall.

And then, the sound of keys rattling broke the oppressive silence, and the door to his cell swung open.

“You have a visitor,” an officer announced, his voice devoid of sympathy.

Alex’s heart raced, a flicker of hope igniting within him. But who could possibly want to see him now?

The door creaked open to reveal the lawyer, a tall man in an impeccably tailored navy suit stepped. His ID badge issued by the front desk read *Henry Foster*. He had a slick of grey hair and a face like an underfed weasel.

"Alex," Foster said, his voice steady and composed. "I’m here to discuss your case and what we need to do moving forward."

“Am I going to prison?” Thorn blurted out, the fear evident in his voice.

Foster’s expression was unreadable. “Not yet. We need to get started on preparing your defence”.

“Preparing my defence?” Alex’s voice was laced with scepticism. “What’s there to defend? They have evidence linking me to everything.”

“Not everything,” Foster corrected gently. “We can argue that there are mitigating factors. We can paint you as a pawn in a larger scheme. You’re a target because of your family’s connections, and we can leverage that.”

Thorn couldn’t shake the sense of impending doom. “What about my father? He must be mad as hell with me”, his voice barely above a whisper.

“He’s willing to fund your legal defence. But…” Foster paused, allowing the weight of his next words to settle. “He’s made it clear that if you get through this, you will no longer have any association with Viperis.”

“Okay,” Thorn said finally, a mix of resignation and defeat in his voice. “I’ll do whatever it takes.” Though the thought of being cut off from everything he had known, from his family and the life he had built, was unbearable.

Foster nodded, a hint of approval in his eyes. “Good. We’ll need to keep communication open, and I’ll be here to guide you through this process. Just remember, the more cooperative you are, the better your chances.”

“Foster,” he called out just as the lawyer reached the door. “Do you really think I kick this thing?”

Foster met his gaze, his expression shifting to one of vague amusement. “Honestly Alex, I wouldn’t bet my arse on it”.

With that, he exited the cell.

**Chapter 49**

**Opportunity**

The sun peeked through the clouds as Sarah Lawson stepped out of her flat, a fresh sense of purpose coursing through her veins. This was her first day back at the NeuroHealth Foundation after her release, and everything seemed to shimmer with new potential. With each step, she felt the weight of the past weeks beginning to lift.

At the train station, Sarah noticed her reflection in the glass windows. She had made a conscious decision this morning to shake things up a bit. Her hair flowed freely down her shoulders, catching the morning light, and she had applied a touch of makeup—a soft blush and a hint of lip gloss that made her feel radiant. She smiled at fellow commuters and received smiles in return.

As she entered the office, the familiar scent of fresh coffee filled the air, mingling with the gentle rustle of papers. Sarah’s eyes were drawn to the lush green plants lining the reception area, thriving and vibrant. She felt a surge of gratitude for the little things.. Today, she had brought in a box of doughnuts—an offering of sweetness to share with her colleagues, a gesture to mark her return.

Gathering her courage, she stepped into the break room, where a few early birds were already chatting. Sarah offered a bright smile as she placed the box of doughnuts down on the counter. “I thought we could celebrate my first day back!” she announced.

As she caught sight of Fiona Carter, her boss, the weight of uncertainty settled in her stomach. Fiona was standing at the entrance, her expression unreadable. Fiona nodded in acknowledgment.

Just then, Fiona clapped her hands, calling for everyone’s attention. “Okay, everyone! Can I have your attention, please? We have some important news to discuss.”

The chatter died down, and Sarah took a seat, her heart racing as she anticipated what was to come. The meeting room felt charged with energy, but there was an undercurrent of tension that made Sarah’s skin prickle. Fiona stood at the front, poised and confident, a master of spin as always.

“I want to thank you all for your support during this tumultuous time,” Fiona began, her tone warm but polished. “As many of you know, the Viperis scandal has brought significant changes to our organization, and it’s with mixed emotions that I announce I will be moving on from the NeuroHealth Foundation. I’ve been offered the CEO role at a new organization dedicated to ensuring ethical and patient-centred research.”

A murmur of surprise rippled through the room. Sarah exchanged wary glances with her colleagues, noting the shock etched on their faces. Fiona, however, showed no sign of being affected by the scandal; she was already crafting her new narrative, spinning her departure into an opportunity for growth.

“And while I may be leaving, I want you to know that I have complete faith in each of you to continue the vital work we do here,” she added, her voice steady. “This foundation has the potential to be a leader in our field, and I urge you all to remain committed to our mission.”

As the meeting concluded and colleagues filed out, Sarah felt an unexpected pang of apprehension. What would the foundation look like without Fiona’s guiding hand? Would she really be able to step into that role if given the chance?

Fiona motioned for Sarah to stay behind, and the door clicked shut, enveloping them in an intimate silence. “Sarah,” she said, her voice softer now. “I wanted to speak to you about the future. The trustees are looking for a new CEO, and I’ve recommended you to the board.”

Sarah’s heart raced at the unexpected news. “Really?” she managed, surprised but trying to maintain her composure.

Fiona hesitated, as if grappling with the weight of her words. “I think you have the passion and the vision to lead this organization. I must admit, I hadn’t taken the matter of the recording as seriously as I should have. For that, I apologize.”

Sarah studied Fiona’s face, searching for sincerity but finding only the remnants of a carefully crafted persona. “Thank you, but I—”

Fiona cut her off. “You deserve this opportunity, and I believe you can do great things. Just… be prepared for the challenges ahead.”

As Fiona’s gaze dropped, Sarah sensed an undercurrent of something deeper, something that told her this was more than just a simple career transition for Fiona. A realization that made Sarah’s heart race with a mix of sympathy and caution.

“I appreciate your support, Fiona,” Sarah replied, trying to maintain a sense of magnanimity. In that moment, she realized she was ready to embrace whatever came next. As the weight of the past began to lift, she allowed herself to envision stepping into Fiona’s shoes.

The idea blossomed in her mind, bold and bright. She could be the change this organization needed, a voice for the patients they served. And as she stood there, absorbing Fiona’s tentative apology and the weight of the moment, she felt a flicker of excitement.

“I’m ready for this,” Sarah thought, a smile creeping across her face. “I’m ready for whatever comes next.”

**Chapter 50**

**Beginnings**

The bustling café buzzed with life as Jake Collins hunched over his laptop, the cacophony of chatter and clinking cups fading into the background. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee hung in the air, mingling with the faint scent of pastries. Sarah’s release from custody had sparked something in him—a fire that had been dimmed by years of chasing smaller scandals. This was bigger than he had ever imagined.

The real story wasn’t just about Sarah, the charity employee Alex Thorn had tried to bury beneath a mountain of fabricated evidence. It wasn’t even just about the audacity of Thorn’s scheme to discredit her or the anonymous tip that led to her exoneration. This was about power and corruption at the highest levels—the kind that trickled down through shady grants, insider trading, and secretive boardroom deals.

Lord Adrian Blackwood’s government grant approvals, his shares in BioFuture, and his connection to Thorn formed the rotten core of the conspiracy. Thorn’s attempt to frame Sarah wasn’t just an act of desperation—it was the thread that, when pulled, unravelled the entire web.

He took a sip of his lukewarm coffee, slotting scattered pieces into place. There’d be a series of articles. Months of commentating on the trials of Thorn and Briarwood. Interviews with patients participating in the study. And of course he’d have direct access to Sarah and David. Gold dust.

Sarah. Jake could still recall the look on Sarah's face when they had first talked about the scandal. It was a mix of fear and defiance. He’d liked her immediately. Their connection had grown steadily over the past few weeks, forged in the fires of their shared experiences. While he wasn’t sure where their relationship would lead, he felt a sense of purpose that he hadn’t experienced in a long time. She was an innocent caught in a web of corruption, and he wanted to help her reclaim her narrative.

Sarah’s life had been intricately woven into this scandal, and he would be the one to expose the whole story. The public needed to see the real picture, not just the sensationalized versions plastered across tabloids.

Jake’s fingers flew over the keyboard, crafting paragraphs that pulsed with urgency. *“The truth behind the headlines: the untold story of Sarah Lawson and the biotech scandal.”* The words took shape, and he felt a surge of excitement as he realized he was onto something monumental.

He leaned back in his chair, glancing around the café. A few patrons were engaged in animated discussions, while others stared at their screens, lost in their own worlds. Jake felt a swell of frustration at the thought that most people had no idea of the intricacies involved in this scandal. They were only interested in the drama, the surface-level intrigue. But he had a duty to dig deeper, to expose the connections no one else seemed to notice.

The adrenaline pulsed through him as he pieced together the information. Briarwood’s connections to the biotech company, the hidden funding, and Thorn’s shady dealings were all linked to Sarah. She was more than just a victim; she was a beacon of truth in a sea of lies. He had to ensure that her story was not only heard but understood.

He checked the time, realizing he had been at the café for hours. The sun had dipped low in the sky, and the warm glow of the afternoon was giving way to the cool embrace of evening. He took a deep breath, feeling the weight of his commitment. He couldn’t afford to hesitate. This was his chance to make a name for himself in journalism, but it was also a chance to advocate for someone he cared about.

With renewed energy, he focused on his screen again, typing furiously. He drew upon the research he had gathered—the interviews, the documents, the whispered rumours that hinted at something darker. The adrenaline sharpened his focus, and as the outline of the article began to crystallize, he felt the thrill of discovery wash over him.

Just as he was polishing the conclusion, his phone buzzed, pulling him back to reality. He picked it up and saw a message from Sarah: *“I can’t wait to talk.”*

A smile broke across his face. He quickly typed back, *“I’m almost for today big. Let’s meet.”*

He hit send and took a moment to reflect. This story wasn’t just about Sarah or the biotech scandal—it was about their shared journey through darkness and uncertainty. The pressure was on, and he could feel the eyes of the media closing in, but he wouldn’t let that intimidate him.

He could sense that this was the beginning of something significant—not just for him, but for Sarah too. With a deep breath, he attached the document and hit “send” to the broadsheet.

As the email flew into the digital ether, he felt a weight lift from his shoulders. He didn’t know it yet, but this was the turning point he had been waiting for. A rush of exhilaration coursed through him, and for the first time in a long while, he felt like he was on the brink of something extraordinary.

With a sense of purpose, Jake packed up his things, ready to meet Sarah and share the news. Whatever lay ahead, he knew they would face it together.

**Chapter 51**

**Black Hills: June 1922**

**The Circle of Life**

Henslow’s journey had led him far from the city, far from the clutter of Chicago’s streets and the fading memories of his former life. It had been a pilgrimage, though not one of redemption. After the forced surrenders of The Great Sioux War the government had seized the land, and the Lakota had been moved to reservations. As he stood alone on the quiet plateau, the sun sinking low behind the Black Hills, it was clear that the journey had brought him to a different place altogether.

Without much trouble he had found the snake—or perhaps the snake had found him. He had done what he had done a thousand times before—splitting open the serpent from diamond head to rattler, and committing its body to the boiling pot, and slaking the shimmering oil from the surface of the water into his tin cup.

Henslow sat back against the rough stone of the campfire, the vial of snake oil now in his hands. The liquid was thick, the colour deep and rich, the faint shimmer of venom still dancing on its surface. He stared at it for a long moment, his mind blank, as if seeking some final clarity.

He should have diluted it—he always did. Camphor, willow bark, water. The familiar mix that would stretch the precious dose, make it last longer. But now, as his fingers tightened around the vial, he felt the urge to consume it all. To not dilute it, not lessen its potency. One final, undiluted dose. To know the truth. This was the culmination of his work, the conclusion of his pilgrimage.

He tilted the vial to his lips, the oil slipping smoothly down his throat, hotter than he had imagined, almost burning. The taste was sharp, bitter, with the faintest aftertaste of something foul, like the earth itself. He swallowed it down.

He closed his eyes and sat there, breathing deep, feeling the familiar buzz begin to pulse in his veins. The snake oil, the camphor, the willow bark—he could feel it spreading through him, filling the hollow spaces.

He leaned back, waiting. The wind stirred the grasses around him, and in the stillness of the moment, he could hear the soft rustle of the leaves.

It came slowly, like a dream unfurling. The land shifted beneath him, stretching and bending.

He felt the ground beneath him soften, reach up to cradle him, to welcome him home. Henslow felt his limbs relax, his bones lightening, his body dissolving. The tension that had coiled in him for so long melted away. He felt the soft whisper of the wind move through the leaves of the trees. He could feel the pulse of life in the land, the steady heartbeat of the earth itself. The Black Hills melted away, and the sound of his own breath faded, and the ground became soft grass. And then, there it was, as though the land itself had whispered its name to him, a name that felt as though it had always been at his journey’s end.

*Rattlers’ Hill*

As the sun sank, he faded into the soil, his energy returning to the earth, just another pulse in the great, unbroken cycle of life.

**Chapter 52**

**Snickers**

David stared at his reflection in the polished surface of his desk, fingers tracing the edge of the prescription pad he would no-longer need. His office felt eerily empty, a space without purpose. Journals had been packed away and cabinets closed for good. No more phone calls, no more emails.

It had been five months since his world unravelled with that fateful phone conversation with Alex Thorn. Five months since the first whispers of disaster curled through his life, invasive and suffocating. Three months had passed since Thorn and Briarwood were taken into custody, now facing a slate of criminal charges that promised to unfold over the years, like the layers of a rotting onion. Briarwood had aleady retreated from public life before the hammer fell, while Thorn fought all charges against him, tooth and nail, desperate to salvage whatever remained of his reputation.

For David, the unfolding drama had played out from a distance. The ground had shifted beneath him when, on the night of Sarah’s arrest, he’d made the decision to attach the contents of the USB drive, copied from Viperis’ systems, to an email and send it to the regulator. The instant he pressed *send* he knew his life in medicine would be coming to an end. David’s involvement was nearly at an end. There would be no return to clinical research for him after everything that had transpired. Not after this. And the relief was simply enormous.

The regulators had acted swiftly to shut down the trial. Recruitment was halted pending the outcome of an investigation. But Viperis had already pivoted around the problem of Serpentin’s toxicity, its focus already shifting to a new formulation that had been waiting in the wings.

David didn't know if the GMC would be coming for him, whether the inquiry would end with him being struck off the register for enrolling and treating Margaret despite knowing the risks. It didn’t matter anymore. The thought had stopped keeping him up at night. In a way, it would be a relief, the final nail sealing the coffin on a career he no longer wanted. This next appointment would be his last.

David took a deep breath. He stood up from his desk, glancing around his office one last time. Leaving his office door ajar, he reached for his nameplate on the door. As he slid it out of its holder, and a twinge of nostalgia washed over him. Hef slipped it into his jacket pocket and set off on his final walk down the corridor to the consulting room.

Inside, Margaret and Robert were waiting for him.

“Dr Joshi,” Margaret said softly, as if testing the waters of normalcy.

David, greeting them both with a nod, “Please, call me David”.

Margaret had been dying; there was no doubt about it. Her breath came shallow and uneven, her skin ashen and clammy. There was no light in her eyes, not even a flicker. Her husband, Robert, had come to terms with the inevitable. The doctors had told him it was only a matter of hours, maybe days. He sat at her bedside, his hand enveloping hers, the warmth of his touch the only sign of life in the room.

The children had been brought in to say goodbye. They had sat quietly in confusion clutching their mother’s hands, chattering about school and homework and videogames. When they had said goodbye, it was in a manner that made clear they’d be back to see her the next day. They hadn’t understood.

And then Margaret had begun to slip away. Her breathing slowed to a crawl, the fever raged, and she fell into vivid hallucinations. "The snake says I'll be fine," she muttered feverishly at one point, the nurses caring for her exchanging puzzled looks. Robert had sat vigil through the night, waiting for the final breath, the doctor’s solemn nod, the end of her suffering.

But morning came, and Margaret still clung on. Her fever, which had burned relentlessly for days, began to subside. Her hallucinations, once wild and vivid, faded into silence. By midday, her breathing had steadied. The colour began to return to her cheeks. Her hands, which had been icy and frail, regained their warmth.

The doctors were baffled. "Sometimes the human body surprises us," one had said, though even he seemed unconvinced by his own words.

Within 48 hours, Margaret had not just stabilized but begun to recover. By the end of the week, she was sitting up in bed, asking for tea and biscuits. A week later, she was walking unaided down the hospital corridor, with the kind of determination that made the nurses marvel.

David could scarcely believe it. He had been certain Margaret would be another name on the growing list of casualties—another death he couldn’t prevent. When Robert had called him in desperation that night, David had braced himself for the inevitable. It had pushed him to act, to send the data to the regulators. He couldn’t stand by and watch more lives ruined by the drug trial.

Yet here she was, sitting in his office weeks later, her husband beside her, both of them beaming with gratitude. "I don’t know how to thank you, Doctor," Margaret had said, her voice strong and clear, though her hands still trembled slightly. "You gave me more time. You gave me my life back."

David had nodded, his throat tight, unable to explain that he hadn’t done anything—that Margaret’s recovery was as mysterious and miraculous to him as it was to them.

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“You’re looking well,” David said, pulling his chair a little closer to the couple.

Margaret smiled, “Better than I feel most days, but I’m doing well, all things considered.”

Robert gave a small chuckle, the relief evident in his face. “Better than any of us dared hope.”

David was unable to stop himself from stealing glances at Margaret, still trying to reconcile the woman in front of him with the dying woman in the hospital bed. The hallucinations, the fever—it had all pointed to the inevitable. Yet here she was.

“Tell me how you’ve been managing,” David said, settling back into his chair.

Margaret exchanged a glance with Robert before speaking. “It’s… different. I’m not the same, but some things are easier now. The confusion is less, though I still struggle with certain things.” She laughed softly. “Robert’s taken over the cooking.”

“I’m terrible at it,” Robert added with a grin, “but we’re making it work.”

David smiled, feeling the warmth in the room grow. This wasn’t just relief—this was happiness, gratitude, life in the face of what had seemed like certain death.

“We just wanted to thank you,” Margaret said quietly, her eyes sincere as they met David’s. “We know the risks you took, and we wouldn’t be here without you.”

David had spent hours reviewing her case notes, cross-referencing her latest scan results, and poring over her cognitive test scores. What he had seen defied explanation, but it was irrefutable. Margaret had improved, and not just marginally.

“Margaret, Robert,” David began, leaning forward slightly, “I wanted to take some time to go through the results of your latest tests and scans. There’s… very good news.”

Margaret’s eyes widened, her breath catching. Robert froze, gripping her hand more tightly.

“Your most recent brain scan showed something we rarely see in cases like yours. Not only has the disease stopped progressing, but there are clear signs of improvement in areas we thought were irreversibly damaged. The regions that were shrinking due to the disease appear to have stabilized, and there’s even some evidence of regeneration.”

Margaret blinked, her mouth opening as if to speak, but no words came. Robert, ever the skeptic, frowned in disbelief. “Regeneration?” he echoed. “You mean… the damage is reversing itself?”

David nodded. “That’s exactly what I mean. And it’s not just the scans. Your cognitive test scores have increased significantly since your last visit. Across all areas—memory, problem-solving, verbal fluency—there’s marked improvement.”

Margaret let out a shaky laugh, her hand flying to her mouth. “It’s not wishful thinking, then?” she asked, her voice breaking.

“No,” David said firmly. “This is real. The improvements you’re seeing, the clarity you’re feeling—they’re backed up by the data. Whatever’s happening, Margaret, it’s giving us results we didn’t think possible.”

Robert’s eyes glistened as he looked at his wife, his face a mixture of relief and awe. “Does this mean… she’s going to get better?” he asked hesitantly.

David hesitated, careful not to overpromise. “We’re in uncharted territory here. I can’t say for sure what the long-term outcome will be. But for now, Margaret’s condition has not only stabilized but is improving. That’s a cause for optimism.”

Margaret exhaled sharply, tears spilling down her cheeks. “I thought I was running out of time,” she said, her voice trembling. “But now… I have more of it. Don’t I?”

David smiled, his own emotions bubbling just below the surface. “Yes,” he said. “You do. And we’ll keep monitoring this closely to make sure you continue moving in the right direction.”

A quiet warmth settled over the room, a shared moment of understanding that seemed to lift the weight of the past months. Margaret extended her hands, and David met her gesture, allowing her to take his and envelop it within her own. “Thank you, Dr Joshi. For everything.”

David nodded, a lump forming in his throat, the emotion catching him off guard. “I wish you both all the best.”

There was nothing else to be said. And as all three rose to leave, David was surprised when Robert pulled him into a tight, wordless hug. It was an unexpected gesture of gratitude that spoke volumes. Without looking back, the couple turned and walked out, leaving David alone in the room.

He lingered for a moment, letting the door click shut behind them. This was it—his last patient, his final act as a doctor. As he surveyed the empty space, a small, private smile crept onto his face. It had all been worth it.

David left the clinic for the last time, the noise of the city fading as he boarded the train heading south. He leaned back in his seat, the rhythmic clatter of the tracks lulling him into a state of reflection. By the time the train reached Honor Oak Park, the day had dimmed into twilight, and he stepped off, feeling lighter, the weight of the past finally behind him.

He enjoyed the gentle downward slope of the high road, lined with small independent shops and cafés. Passing the corner newsagent, he glanced at the headlines, *JAIL LOOMS FOR DISGRACED LORD*. The by-line Jake Cooper’s. David slipped into the shop to buy a copy of the paper. He’d bought one every time Jake’s articles had made it to print. Six and counting.

At the small deli on the corner, a chalkboard outside announced "*Today’s Specials: Freshly Baked Sourdough, Artisan Cheeses, and Local Produce."* David hesitated briefly before stepping inside, the bell on the door jingling softly.

He selected a punnet of cherry tomatoes, each one gleaming, and, after eyeing up a selection of cheeses, settled on a wedge of soft Brie and a freshly baked loaf, the crust still warm to the touch. The shopkeeper, a cheerful woman in her fifties, wrapped the items neatly and added a smile. “Picnic tonight?” she asked conversationally.

David nodded. “Something like that.”

Leaving the deli, he continued his walk up on a steep incline to the quiet street where his house was tucked away, passing the familiar curve of the fields where clusters of dog walkers stood to chat while their good boys and girls skittled and careened around their legs. The thought of a quiet evening sprawled on the living room floor with his impromptu picnic and a glass of wine brought a small smile to his face.

Snickers was already at the door, tail wagging back and forth in excitement. Bella had left the dog behind when she walked out, gone to start a new life without him. David hadn’t blamed her—he had been at his lowest then, consumed by the trials, the failures, the lies. Still, he was glad she hadn’t taken Snickers.

David began his rounds, allowing Snickers to follow him into the house, the dog’s small paws padding softly on the floor. He made his way to the room that had once served as his home office. Now, it had taken on an entirely different purpose. The space was filled with the gentle hum of heat lamps and the soft rustling of scales against glass, creating an ambiance that felt both strange and comforting.

Inside, the snakes, his snakes, lay coiled in their enclosures, their vibrant colours muted in the dim evening light. Najae Phantasmata.

When the lab had been shut down, they were chalked up for destruction. David found he couldn’t allow it. On their final day, something inside him had shifted, a flicker of defiance sparking to life. He stealthily relocated the snakes, carefully transferring them into sturdy containers, and as it turned out, no one cared enough to either notice or stop him. The lab staff went about their business.

The snakes, found themselves hidden once again on the London Underground, nestled within a large Perspex box, draped with Bella’s tablecloth to keep them out of sight. The rhythmic motion of the train seemed to calm them, the gentle rocking mimicking the sway of their natural habitat.

As David went about his evening rounds he checked each tank, ensuring everything was as it should be. The snakes had survived, and so had he. “All good here,” he murmured. He imagined the snakes looked happy to see him home.

Leaving the cheese out of the fridge to warm, and his wine uncorked to breath, David headed back to the front door, grabbing Snickers’ lead from the hook. The little dog danced around him, tail wagging in excited anticipation, eager for their evening walk. “Come on then,” David said, clipping the lead to Snickers’ collar.

Together, they stepped out into the crisp Autumn air. As they made their way toward Rattlers’ Hill, the sun dipped below the horizon, casting a golden glow that illuminated the London skyline. At the edge of the park David unclipped snickers and the little dog shot off like a furry white bullet into the long grass.

David strolled to the middle of the park and stopped, gazing out at the city rising from the horizon from his favourite vantage point. Central London stretched to the left, its jagged skyline dominated by the Shard, standing proud like the spire of some modern cathedral. To the right, Canary Wharf glistened, its sleek towers glowing in the dim light like sentinels watching over the river. The red glowing tips of the construction cranes shimmered like a delicate string of fairy lights across the rapidly darkening night sky. A mile away, over on One Tree Hill, the church clock chimed the hour, its sound carrying unimpeded across the open space.

Snickers, who’d ventured off for a quick snuffle for crumbs around the park benches, appeared at David’s heal, stick in mouth and tail wagging furiously, demanding attention. He chuckled, crouching to indulge the little dog with a scratch behind the ears, watching as Snickers’ tail wagged furiously, his whole-body wriggling with pure delight as he leaned into the affection. The simplicity of it—a lone man, and his joyful dog, and the whole of London laid out before them—made for the perfect moment.

The air was cool now, biting with the first hints of winter. Snickers barked and took off again, chasing some phantom in the grass. “With me, Snickers!”, David called, and the little dog skidded to a halt and trotted back to him, tail wagging. As they turned together to head for home, the distant city behind them gleamed like a magical kingdom, it’s electric blue glow an affirmation that even in the growing darkness, there is always the promise of the light.

**Epilogue**

Following the World’s Fair of 1893, Henslow Haywood’s snake oil business experienced remarkable growth and prosperity. Capitalizing on the fair’s success, Haywood established a flagship apothecary store in downtown Chicago, where neat rows of small green bottles of his famed Snake Oil drew eager customers. As demand surged, the business expanded its offerings, bringing in a range of the latest health products that captured the public's fascination.

Haywood died in 1922 at the age of 92. His death was attributed to complications from a long-standing illness, which had plagued him in his later years. Despite his declining health, he remained actively involved in his business up until shortly before his passing.

Henslow's detailed records, left behind in the form of apothecary notes and exhaustive accounts of his vivid hallucinations, have sparked a peculiar cult of fascination. Scholars, enthusiasts, and conspiracy theorists alike have poured over his writings, each group attempting to draw their own conclusions about the man who seemed uncannily attuned to something beyond his time.

Some view him as a figure akin to Rasputin, a mystic plagued by visions that supposedly foretold great changes or disasters, though cloaked in cryptic imagery. Others liken him Nostradamus, interpreting his fevered hallucinations as prophecies about future events that he could not consciously understand. A fringe theory, rooted in his detailed descriptions of modern-seeming technologies and unfamiliar landscapes, brands him as a time traveller, trapped in the wrong era or visiting through some inexplicable mechanism.

These outlandish theories have led to a mythology surrounding Henslow. His accounts—intended to be explorations of his own troubled mind and attempts to decipher his fevered dreams—have been co-opted and expanded by followers searching for deeper meanings. For example, his reverence for "the woman with the hands of a watchmaker," and her strange yet purposeful rituals, has been turned into symbolic commentary on humanity's role in science and morality.

His apothecary notes have led modern commentators to suggest that Henslow was a genius. His methods combined empirical observation with methods that parallel modern approaches to drug development, focusing on observation, experimental control and repeated testing. The conspiracy theorists have suggested he learned these skills thanks to his ability to time travel.

His death marked the end of an era for the snake oil business, but it also paved the way for his son, James, to take the helm and continue expanding the family's legacy in the health industry. Born when Haywood was already in his 60s, James took the reins of the business. With a visionary approach, he expanded the family legacy, establishing a chain of dispensing chemists, *Haywood’s Apothecary”* across the United States. This expansion laid the groundwork for a thriving empire.

Throughout the 20th century, *Haywood’s* grew to become a staple of American life, dispensing not only snake oil but also cocaine well into the 1920s and morphine through to the mid-1970s. The store’s reputation as a purveyor of miracle cures solidified its place in the burgeoning health market.

In the 1980s, harnessing the wealth generated from the family business, Henry’s grandson, James Thorn, founded the drug discovery company, Viperis Therapeutics. Under Thorn’s leadership, Viperis rapidly ascended to become one of the most successful biotech firms in the world. The company achieved notable milestones, including two successful drug launches that garnered widespread acclaim.

Despite a scandal in the mid the early 2020s that saw James’ son, Alex Thorn serve time for corruption, Viperis Therapeutics has continued under new management, maintaining a robust pipeline of innovative products, enrolling patients in clinical trials across 15 countries worldwide.

Their blockbuster drug Serpentine, launched in 2026, despite troubling safety reports in a pivotal clinical trials. The safety reports of on study deaths, once with the regulator helped to shape future studies that ultimately lead to a safer formulation being developed. This drug continues to bring renewed hope to those afflicted by dementia, continuing the Haywood legacy of addressing the health needs of the public. Serpentine drew much public attention having been developed on the back of traditional healer knowledge. This transformation from a dubious elixir to groundbreaking therapies exemplifies the evolution of the pharmaceutical industry and the enduring impact of the Haywood family on American health care.

**END**