

PROLOGUE

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John Church strode vigorously down the hospital corridor, a cardboard file containing documents under his arm. He was heading for the office of Dr. Heimann, the oncologist. Church's energetic steps were attempting to camouflage the shiver coursing through his body. He was worried—a lot more worried than he was willing to admit to himself. When he reached the doctor's office, he faced a brown door displaying a sign with a white background and blue lettering:

DR. MANNY HEIMANN
Oncologist

Church filled his lungs with air and raised his hand to knock on the door.



Dr. Heimann sat in his room and waited for the next patient, scheduled for 5:00 p.m. He glanced at the clock on the wall. It was already 5:10. Dr. Heimann did not like tardiness. He himself was naturally punctual—truly pedantic, as people like

him were usually described. "You must have inherited that trait from your father," Gertrude would always tell him with a smile.

Suddenly he heard a faint knock on the door.

"Come in," the doctor thundered.

A man of 60 or so, with a striking appearance, walked into the room with tentative steps. He was tall, very handsome, elegantly and meticulously dressed, and enveloped in the fresh scent of cologne.

"Good evening, Dr. Heimann. Sorry I'm late. I apologize," the man said, his voice somewhat hoarse.

"Your apology is accepted, Mr. Church," the doctor said, unable to refrain from glancing at the watch on his left wrist with a somewhat demonstrative gesture. "Come, sit down please."

Church approached the chair pointed to by the doctor and sat down heavily. "I was referred to you by my physician, Dr. Rogers," he said, with no further delay. "He told me that you're the only one who could help me, since you're the best in your field."

"That's very nice to hear," Dr. Heimann replied, "but first of all, of course, I have to understand what we're dealing with."

"Dr. Heimann," Church began to explain, "some time ago, while I was washing my hair, I found an irregular sort of lump behind my right ear. I panicked. That lump hadn't been there previously, or at least I hadn't felt anything until that moment. Since I'd been suffering from frequent headaches, and some nausea as well, I began to suspect that the lump might be related to the pain. The following day, I rushed to see Dr. Rogers and he sent me for all kinds of tests. I've brought all the results with me." Church opened the cardboard folder and extracted a large manila envelope from which he carefully produced some pages secured with a paper clip. "There you are, doctor, please," he said.

Dr. Heimann stared at Church with a look of assessment and then turned to the paperwork before him. He leafed through page after page, his eyes picking up on every detail, until he reached the last one; then he stacked them again, straightened them by vigorously tapping them against the desk, and reattached the paper clip. He placed the tidy pile at the corner of the desk. "Mr. Church," he turned to the patient, "please undress and lie down on the examining table behind the partition. I'd like to examine you, and then we'll discuss your condition."

Church obeyed the doctor, and once he was reclining in his underwear, signaled that he was ready.

Dr. Heimann approached the examining table, shifted the partition behind him, and began the examination. Church's brawny body was full of old scars alongside stiff muscles and prominent veins marking his ankles. The doctor's fingers probed the regions of his body one by one before arriving at his head and then asked the patient to sit up. He moved Church's head, with its golden-silver hair, from side to side, probing for the suspicious lump.

Suddenly, Dr. Heimann spotted a birthmark in the shape of a distorted heart on the nape of the patient's neck, its edges stretching to its left side. His eyes were fixated on the mark and didn't leave it for some time. He continued to probe the lump itself while also examining Church's face from up close.

Dr. Heimann's gaze pierced his patient's eyes, which possessed a distinct, metallic blue-gray hue, and he carefully examined his lips, his prominent cheekbones, the dimple in his chin, and the fine lines marking his face. There was something familiar about that face, and about the man's form as a whole as he sat in his underwear on the pristine examination table. The name John Church meant nothing to Dr. Heimann. He didn't remember ever having known a John Church, unless that wasn't the man's original name. John... Church... John Church...