**CHAPTER ONE**

Do you know how does it feel like travelling in air alone? I know how does it sound to you, like a psychopath.

Martini D’ costa had exactly thirty-eight minutes to record her podcast, walk her dog, shower, dress, and get out the door for work. Tight, but doable. She adjusted the boom arm and swung the condenser microphone close to her mouth. There was a tiny hiss of static as she tweaked the gain knob and the sound level dropped in her headphones. The teleprompter app cast a soft blue glow over her tidy workspace. Outside, the sun was just rising over Fishtown, a trendy suburb of Philadelphia wedged into the curve of the Delaware River, northeast of center city. Mia loved the ambience of the area, the arty vibe with bright, modern street murals decorating industrial buildings from the turn of the century. This time of the morning was ideal for recording. Before the delivery trucks lumbered down the street, the cafés opened, and the dreaded parking police were on the prowl. This was the magic time, when the world was wrapped in a cocoon of stillness. She could immerse herself and focus without distraction. But it wouldn’t last long. It never did. She took a deep breath and hit record. “Welcome to The Vortex, where we explore humanity’s darkest fears, haunted places, and mysterious phenomena. Are paranormal experiences real or can they be explained by science? Are ghosts moving among us, or simply denizens of our imagination? My name is Mia Bold, and this is Episode Twenty-three: The Curious Case of Warwick Castle.” Mia’s tone was warm, confident, and tinged with wry humor. Her old communications professor, Doc Lee, used to say her voice had enough honey to trap flies. It was still the best compliment she’d ever received. She scanned the script she’d been perfecting all week, then glanced at the framed quote, by fellow skeptic and radio legend Steve Allen, displayed prominently on her desk. Radio is the Theater of the Mind. Television is the Theater of the Mindless. The sentiment summed up her podcast philosophy perfectly. Reel the audience in with drama, then hit them upside the head with facts. She took a sip of water and continued, “Imagine you’re in a small, dank, lightless pit. You can barely move. Above you, there’s a metal grille. A cage hangs from the ceiling, where prisoners are tortured. This terrible place is called The Oubliette, the deepest hole in the jail, the original dungeon of Warwick Castle. Did the starved, broken souls who died here imprint their essence on the fabric of existence, as so many believers claim? Visitors regularly report hearing moans and the sensation of being clawed as they descend the steps. Few are able to remain in its bowels for long. One man was brave enough to investigate the reports: the infamous ghost hunter, Vic Tandy. What did he find in that horrible place? It was—” At the sound of his namesake, a mutt of questionable heritage appeared. Tandy had floppy ears, an unruly coat, and intelligent brown eyes. He tilted his head and gazed at Mia intently. When she tried to ignore him, he reached up and put a paw on her lap. He was not backing down. She paused the recording. “Come on, Tandy. Give me a break. I was just getting to the good stuff.” She ruffled the fur on his head. “Just a few more minutes and we’ll head out.” Tandy got the message and pattered off toward his water bowl, claws clicking on the hardwood floor as he went. Mia took a deep breath. This was the important part. She wanted to show people that science can be used to debunk most paranormal nonsense. She hit record again. “—What did Vic Tandy find? Something that can be measured—high levels of infrasound. Whales and elephants use this type of sound wave to communicate over distances. An infrasonic tone of nineteen hertz or lower exists at the edge of human hearing and creates visual distortion, whooshing sounds, feelings of dread, uneasiness, revulsion, and chills. So, is Warwick Castle haunted? Or did the combination of infrasound and imagination conjure up the castle’s ghosts?” Mia smiled to herself as she finished the section. If infrasound created a sense of dread, her voice needed to create confidence. She wanted to help people reason through these things. A gust of wind blew into the room, ruffling the papers on the bulletin board above her desk. Pinned there were printouts of articles sent by listeners from around the world, asking her to investigate possessions, hauntings, and paranormal activity, hoping she could debunk their fears as she always did. Mia desperately wanted to look into new cases, not just talk about old ones. These people were hurting, they needed answers, and it pained her that she didn’t have the time and resources to launch even one investigation. Many of the headlines were chilling and the stories all warranted a closer look. She knew that every time, without fail, she could find a way to prove them wrong. Suddenly, her phone vibrated and a text appeared. It was Angie from O-Date, the “occult” dating app. Big promo next week! Ostara, goddess of fertility! Need ad, ASAP! Darn it, Mia thought. O-Date was her show’s first sponsor and only income source. Their marketing rep, Angie, had made it clear that they were giving her a shot. Now, she only had twenty minutes to record the ad or she would miss their deadline. O-Date wanted her trusted voice talking about how self-proclaimed vampires and witches could hook up through the app—always a challenge. But the promo only needed to be thirty seconds. It wouldn’t take her long to get done. She started to compose a reply, but Tandy had other plans. He trotted back into the room and started to whine. “Hold on a second,” Mia said. Then Tandy did something she could not ignore—he barked, loudly. The sound levels spiked. “Shoot!” Mia took her headphones off. “Okay, okay, let’s go.” She pulled on a hoodie and clipped Tandy’s lead to his collar. Then she grabbed her phone so she could keep track of the time. They hurried down the cement steps and ran over to the gated garden. Mia opened the gate and set Tandy loose. He immediately bounded into the grass. “You’ve got exactly three minutes,” she said and leaned on the fence. The building she lived in actually belonged to her brother-in-law, Jeffrey Milton Eubanks III. He was slowly converting the old candy factory into an urban showcase. The fully furnished luxury apartments were far beyond Mia’s means on her lab salary. But thanks to her sister, Jeff had let her stay in the loft for free the past year, so she could save money for what she and her fiancé, Mark, called “The Next Step.” There was a trade-off, of course. Mia had to let people in to view the property in the evenings, which put a serious damper on her social life. But tonight was different. Mark was going to take off early. They had a big date planned. Mia smiled. The thought of spending the evening with Mark still made her heart flutter, even after all this time. Tandy started kicking up grass, which meant one thing. He’d done his business. The dog always had a way of bringing her back to earth. She hurried over, cleaned up after him, and threw the bag in the trash. “Come on, boy, let’s go,” she said, running back to the stairwell. Her phone read 7:15 a.m. She was cutting it awfully close. She still had to record and send the O-Date ad, shower, get dressed, and catch a train to her lab job in Trenton, New Jersey. A sense of panic started to set in. She didn’t want to risk losing her show’s only sponsor, but if she was late again to her day job, things could get ugly. Just as she was about to take the steps, a familiar white Tesla pulled into the parking lot. The vanity plates read: 1LUVLAW. Now? Are you kidding me? she thought. The car pulled up beside her. “Brynn?” Mia said, surprised. Silently, the driver’s side window slid down to reveal Mia’s half-sister. “Yes, I will. Okay. Call you later, babe.” Brynn plucked a Bluetooth earpiece out of her ear and dropped it in the cup holder. Then she tucked a perfectly trimmed lock of hair behind an ear, adorned with a tasteful diamond stud. When Mia was only ten years old her biological father skipped town. Soon after, her mother remarried Brynn’s father, Daniel Middleton. Lucky for Mia, her new sibling welcomed the opportunity to play big sister. She could have fared a lot worse in the stepsister lottery than Brynn. “What are you doing here? I thought you were picking up Tandy this afternoon.” “Change of plans. The landscape guy is coming this morning.” Brynn parked and slid out of the Tesla. She was dressed in a pair of grungy jeans, a white T-shirt, and an expensive Chanel jacket. Her Gucci tennis shoes were spattered with mud. A pair of pumps lay on the passenger seat, just in case. The outfit was a bit of a metaphor, high fashion mixed with work clothes. When they were kids, Brynn was a tomboy. But after college, she’d married an extremely ambitious lawyer. She dressed for status, but her couture pieces were always tossed on her petite frame like an afterthought. “Listen, can we talk later? I’ve got a deadline,” Mia said, trying not to panic. Second by second, her window to record was dissolving. Her sister, on the other hand, tended to operate on spa time, somewhere between tomorrow and never. “So, where are you going tonight?” Brynn leaned over and twirled one of Tandy’s floppy ears. An ostentatious, pear-shaped rock weighed down her ring finger. Mia found wedding rings to be a strange, cumbersome tradition. She was surprised Brynn could even lift her finger. The diamond must be worth 60k. “Mark has tickets to a show,” Mia replied. The thought of her fiancé created a knot in Mia’s stomach. Why was that? She was excited to see him, of course. But ever since he landed a new job and moved to New York, things felt off. Finding time together was becoming more and more challenging. He rarely mentioned the future, much less The Next Step. Darn it! She couldn’t get distracted thinking about this now. She needed to finish her podcast. “—What time will you be back, Mimi?” “I might spend the night. Can I text you?” Mia said, inching toward the stairs. “No worries, we’ll be fine. I’ll take him for a walk later,” Brynn said sweetly and ruffled Tandy’s head. “You’re with me today, boo-boo baby.” “Look, Brynn, can we talk later?” “—Maybe I could drive you to the train?” Brynn shifted her weight and bit her lip. Mia recognized the tick. She was nervous. “Are you all right?” Mia asked, suddenly worried. “Well, something’s come up. It’s kind of important.” Something was clearly bothering her. Even though Brynn was her half-sister, Mia never thought of her with that kind of distance. She was kindhearted and down to earth, never complaining about puppy-sitting or Tandy slobbering on her leather seats. Mia glanced at her phone. The seconds were ticking away and with them, her chance to make that deadline for O-Date. She needed to run up the steps now and record the ad. But Brynn was her sister and Mia could see she was upset. O-Date would just have to wait. Family was more important. “Okay, Brynn. How about you tell me what’s up while I get ready?” Brynn exhaled, clearly relieved, and followed Mia up the stairs and into the loft. Then she walked straight across to the Nespresso machine and made herself coffee. Mia dropped the overnight bag she’d packed with a change of clothes by the door. She’d spent thirty minutes the night before trying on different outfits and had finally decided on a clingy LBD and the tallest heels she could manage to walk in. She hoped the look would come off sexy and confident, rather than confused and insecure. “You’re not still doing that—thingy. Are you?” Brynn said, pointing to the podcast setup. “Thingy? Say the word, Brynn,” Mia teased, zipping the bag shut. “Plod-cast?” “Podcast,” Mia corrected. “Of course I’m still doing my podcast.” “It’s just a little strange, chasing ghosts and ghouls.” “You mean helping people and exposing fraud? It’s not like I believe in those things.” “I’m glad you found a way to express yourself, but—” “—But what?” Mia rummaged through her drawers and tossed a work outfit on the bed. “Well, Jeffy thinks it’s weird too. He calls it your ‘odd hobby.’” Out of all the opinions in the world that Mia might care about, Jeffrey’s was near the bottom of the list. She couldn’t quite place her finger on why. It wasn’t one specific thing. There was just something about him that seemed off. Brynn would describe her husband as confident, high-energy, and ambitious. Those same traits came off as arrogant, hyper, and ruthless to Mia. She ducked into the bathroom, turned the water on, and tugged off her sweats, leaving the door half open as she showered, so they could talk. And this was the perfect time to tell her sister that the audience for her podcast was steadily climbing. “It’s not just a hobby, Brynn. I’ve got over seventy thousand listeners.” She couldn’t help but feel just a little bit proud. “That’s nice. Is that a lot?” “For an indie? Sure! I’ve even got sponsors.” “Uh-huh.” She knew Brynn didn’t mean to be nasty. But her feelings were still a little hurt. The podcast had always been an issue with her family. These were people who still sent out paper notes on envelopes embossed with the Middleton coat of arms, which resembled a winged beast grasping a shield with a unicorn. Every year at Christmas, she received a stack of creamy, linen stationery with the emblem. There was a box on the top shelf of her closet filled with the stuff. Mia rinsed off and wrapped herself in a towel. Better change the subject before things went south. “You seem a little stressed. Are things okay with Jeff?” Mia might not care for her brother-in-law, but she cared about Brynn and her happiness. “Oh, he’s fine. That’s what I need to talk to you about actually.” “What?” Mia wiped the steam off the mirror and raked a wide-toothed comb through her dark, tangled curls. A memory of her birth father flashed into her mind. They were on the boardwalk at Ocean City, on a bright summer day. Frank Bold had just bought her a strawberry and chocolate swirl ice cream cone. Her father brushed a lock of hair away from her cheek. “Have you ever been on the Ferris Wheel, sport? You can see the whole world from up there.” Mia clasped her eyes shut and gripped the sink until the memory dissolved. Thinking about her real dad was always bittersweet. Funny how the past could remain so vivid. She could practically feel the sunlight and taste the salt air. Suddenly, she was back in the present moment and her dad was only a memory. “Mimi? Did you hear what I just said?” “Sorry, tell me again?” “Something’s come up. An unexpected turn.” “What kind of turn?” “You know, the unexpected kind of turn.” Mia toweled off and dressed without any fuss, just clean jeans and a crisp white shirt.“Why don’t we have dinner tomorrow and you can tell me all about it?” Mia suggested, tucking in a shirt tail. “—I really think I should tell you now,” Brynn said, turning her wedding ring nervously. “Fine, Brynn, you win. Spit it out.” “Jeffy sold the building. You have to move out.” The words landed with a thud. Mia stopped getting dressed and stared at Brynn. She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “But you said I could stay until the end of the year.” “Brynn looked down at the floor. The color had drained from her cheeks. Despite the Botox, a tiny crease appeared between her brows as she attempted to frown. “How long have you known?” Mia asked, trying to contain her anger. She was bewildered by the sudden news. “Jeffrey must have been planning this for a while.” “I just—I thought it was just some pie in the sky thing. I should have told you it might happen. I’m sorry, Mimi.” Mia sighed deeply. The digital clock on her computer ticked over: 7:45 a.m. That was it—game over. Her recording window had officially evaporated. She wasn’t sure what was more upsetting, missing her deadline or the news that she was being kicked out. She’d be lucky if she even caught the train to work on time at this point. She texted Angie at O-Date: Technical SNAFU. File ready tomorrow. She knew the chances of her lame excuse working were pretty slim. She resigned herself to the fact that she’d probably just lost her only sponsor. Then she turned to her sister. “What happened to renting the places out, creating an income stream?” Mia asked gently. “It’s a multimillion-dollar deal with an overseas client. Part of the deal is in cash, Mia. Cash.” “When did this happen?” “I only found out it was final last night. You know how secretive Jeffy can be.” That was certainly true, Mia thought. Jeffrey’s tendency to hide things and her own insatiable curiosity were a textbook case of bad chemistry. Whenever she was around her brother-in-law, she felt an overwhelming urge to search his phone and computer. She wondered who he had found to drop a pile of cash in his lap. She worried about Brynn sometimes. “I feel awful,” Brynn said, biting her lip again. “I know I said you could stay here—”Mia looked at her sister. She was putting on a brave face. But she could see the tension in Brynn’s jaw and the embarrassment in her eyes. “How long have I got?” “Jeffy says two weeks—I tried to get you more time.” “It’s okay. It’s not your fault. You’ve been really good to me, Brynn. I appreciate it,” Mia said, and she meant it. After all, she’d been living rent free for a year. She was lucky and grateful, and she didn’t want Brynn to feel any worse. But inside she felt a sinking sensation. Apparently, letting things ride was no longer an option. The time had come to talk to her fiancé about the future.

**CHAPTER TWO**

Despite all her efforts, Mia had missed her usual commuter train. By the time she burst through the glass doors of Center Pharmaceuticals, she was ten minutes late. She bee-lined to the security check, swiped her badge, and sprinted up the steps to the coed changing room. Most of the project team had already arrived and picked up their assignments, except Nigel Ruiz, from toxicology. “Hi, Nigel,” Mia said, stashing her backpack in a locker. She carefully hung up her LBD and slipped on a lab coat. “Hey, did you hear?” Nigel said, tying back his dyed fire-engine-red hair with an elastic band. “There’s a meeting at ten about Phoxy.” “Today?” Mia said, surprised. “Why? I thought the phase one trial went well.” Phoxy was the nickname for a synthesized compound called NJ-101, 422, which blocked a specific phosphatase enzyme, virtually removing sugar from the body. Mia’s department had done most of the preclinical work. The oral pill had the potential to reverse diabetes. “Don’t ask me,” Nigel said. “Ever since that guy bought the company things have been weird.” Nigel was referring to Center Pharmaceuticals’ new CEO, Miles Cameron, an ex–hedge fund manager who was popular in the tabloids. “I’ve got a bad feeling,” Nigel mumbled and disappeared down the hallway. Mia followed, her thoughts racing. Maybe the meeting was good news? She often thought of Phoxy as her compound. After all, she’d helped design the small molecule inhibitor.  Mia stopped in front of a door with a slide card that read Protein Technologies: Dr. Timothy Bagley. She knocked on the wooden frame. “Come!” Bagley barked in his booming voice. The man had zero social skills and he loved being the boss. Mia opened the door a crack. “Hey, Tim, just popping in to get my assignment,” she said brightly. “Finally! Where have you been?” Bagley said, sweeping a hand over his receding hairline. Behind his desk was a display shelf loaded with his prized collectible Japanese Anime figurines. Above his computer was a signed photo of Wonder Woman Gal Gadot. He’d waited in line for six hours at San Diego Comic Con to get that signature. “Sorry. I got a late start and—” “Mandatory meeting at ten,” Bagley interrupted. He stood up and picked her assignment clipboard off the wall, tugging his shirt down over his round belly. “I need you to do a data review on Phoxy for me.” “No problem.” Once upon a time Bagley had been a technician, but from what she’d heard, not a very good one. She wondered if he even remembered how to do a data review. “Well, what are you waiting for? Now!” In the quiet of her lab, she reviewed the sequence of steps that led to the creation of compound NJ-101, 422, making concise notes. A blipping sound interrupted her work. It was a text from Mark. Eyeball symbol—U 2 —Moon symbol She stared at the series of pictures, trying to ferret out the meaning. I you too moon? I you to night? Oh! See you tonight. She scrolled through his previous texts. Kissy face. Thumbs up. Eyeball. Heart. Exploding head. And his all-time favorite, the running-man emoji for “on the go, too busy to talk.” She cringed. When was the last time she’d received a text in the English language from Mark? She should feel flattered her handsome fiancé was texting, but instead she was slightly annoyed. She didn’t need Shakespeare, but the level of emojis was getting ridiculous. She tucked her phone away. She would text him back after the meeting. Exactly forty minutes later, with her notes in good order, Mia grabbed her iPad and headed to the conference room. Inside, there was an electric atmosphere. A large HD screen glowed in the center of the room. Stats meetings were usually a “back to the drawing board” kind of thing. Critical failures were discussed, and suggestions made about how to improve the compound. But NJ-101, 422 had passed the first trial with flying colors. And why was the video screen set up? Bagley sat next to Dr. Anjou, the lab head for Toxicology. Mia spotted an open chair next to Nigel, walked over, and sat down. “Any news?” she whispered. “Nada,” Nigel said. “Everybody’s talking. But nobody’s saying anything,” he added conspiratorially. Suddenly, Dr. Pinchot, who oversaw production for the New Jersey location, stood up. The room quieted down. “As you all know, the phase one clinical trial stats for NJ-101, 422 have been stellar. Now, I have a surprise. Please welcome the CEO of Center Pharmaceuticals, Miles Cameron.” The atmosphere in the room suddenly shifted, like an airplane dropping down from the sky. Everyone was equally stunned. The camera above the giant screen whirred and turned, scanning the room. Then the screen lit up. A man with a rugged face, a shaggy head of hair, and a broad smile appeared. He wore a Hawaiian shirt and was seated on a veranda somewhere in the tropics. To his right was a technician on a laptop. Behind him was a McMansion with a lagoon-sized pool. A gaggle of attractive women moved in and out of the camera frame. “Hey there, techies,” Cameron said, leaning forward with a grin. “So, this is the team that pulled it off?” Mia glanced quizzically at Nigel, who shrugged. “I’m afraid no one in the room has been briefed yet, sir.” “Well, by all means, let’s brief them.” Cameron laughed. “Concerning NJ-101, 422—” Pinchot began. “—You mean Phoxy?” Miles Cameron said. “Yes, of course, Phoxy,” Pinchot said. “The participants in the clinical trial experienced an unanticipated, but welcome side effect.” The screen lit up with before-and-after shots of the trial volunteers. Every man and woman had lost a substantial amount of weight. There was a collective gasp from the scientists. “On average, every subject shed one hundred pounds over six months,” Pinchot continued. “No side effects. No lapses. No cravings.” A murmur swept across the room. “We are looking at a gold mine,” Cameron said. “Goodbye, Jenny Craig. Sayonara Weight Watchers. Phoxy will be the diet pill of the century. You techie geniuses created a freaking miracle drug. Who came up with this thing?” “Dr. Tim Bagley headed up the team,” Pinchot said. “Well, stand up and take a bow, Bagley,” Miles Cameron said. The scientists in the room began to clap half-heartedly. Bagley struggled from his seat, tugging his shirt to cover his belly. Mia could not believe what was happening. Tim Bagley, the man who could barely find his way around a lab, was getting all the credit?  “Er, thank you,” Bagley said, looking around nervously. “How does Phoxy work exactly?” Cameron said. “Well, I, uh… It’s quite complicated.” “I didn’t get rich being stupid, Doc. Try me.” Bagley looked at Mia helplessly. He was lost. “Well, I—um, Miss Bold, could you hand me that report?” Mia had to admit there was something satisfying about watching Bagley squirm. Sweat trickled down his forehead and his glasses slipped down the bridge of his nose. She handed him the iPad. But he just stared at her notes like a condemned man. “Well?” Cameron said. “Er, um, it seems we designed a small molecule inhibitor,” Bagley said, nearly choking. “Yes? How did we do that?” Mia could not wait to hear Bagley’s answer, since every time she tried to explain project milestones, he was too busy playing Dragon Age or Minecraft on his computer to focus. “Um, well, I would say, we bounced a lot of ideas—” He took a deep, rattling breath. “And then we, um, thought about down regulating the insulin, and—”Mia knew that tone. Bagley was attempting to fumble his way through the situation. Cameron nodded as if Bagley was actually saying something. The last two years of overtime flashed before her eyes. Was he really going to get away with it? She just couldn’t take it anymore. Impulsively, she stood up. Everyone turned to look at her. The room was so quiet you could hear the tiniest sound. Mia cleared her throat while Nigel sank down in his seat, sensing what was coming. “Phoxy targets the protein tyrosine phosphatase PTP1B, specifically an enzyme,” Mia said in a clear voice. The camera swiveled in her direction. “—Who’s this?” “Mia Bold, sir. I’m a lab tech on the NJ-101, 422 team.” “Are you the one who named it Phoxy?” he said and grinned. “That’s just a nickname, short for the type of phosphatase enzyme we inhibited,” Mia said, suddenly embarrassed. She really hadn’t expected the moniker to stick. “Yeah? Well, I love that name. Short, to the point, and easy to remember. You’re a branding genius. This substance takes ordinary people and turns them into foxy hotties. You really moved the needle for the company.” He signaled the computer tech. “Now, put me back on with Bagley.” The camera swiveled back to Tim Bagley, his face glistening with perspiration. He looked like he was about to faint. “Sir?” he said, tugging at his shirt. “You led the team. You get the prize! I’m gonna fly you to Hawaii, Doc!” Cameron said. He waved one of the girls over. “See this guy? That’s the scientist who made Phoxy! We’re throwing him a party.” “Oooh. He’s cute, Cammy,” she cooed and leaned toward the camera, revealing a canyon of cleavage. “It’s hot here, Doc, you’ll love it.” Tim Bagley stood frozen in the glowing light of the screen, like a mouse hypnotized by a snake. “Excuse me, Mr. Cameron?” Mia said. “Isn’t it a little early to celebrate? The phase two trial will take years.” “What was your name again?” “Mia Bold.” “You think I donated to the president’s campaign for my health? The FDA has already fast-tracked Phoxy as a diet pill. We’ll hit the market in five years, tops. Tell them the best part, Pinchey.” Mr. Pinchot faced the group of scientists. “We are following the Viagra financial model for Phoxy. We estimate the market will bear twenty dollars per tablet, maybe more. In light of the estimated long-term profit, Mr. Cameron has approved a generous bonus for everyone on the team.” “But that price is ridiculous. It’s unfair,” Mia argued. “Without proper clinical trials, insurance won’t cover that cost for diabetics. People who could be helped by the drug but can’t afford it will die.” Miles Cameron looked directly at Mia, his patience wearing thin. “Anyone ever tell you that you are kind of a buzzkill? Center Pharmaceuticals is going to be number one. No more discussion about diabetes, understood?” Mia felt blood rush to her cheeks as Cameron sipped his champagne cocktail. The sensible thing to do was sit down, pick up her bonus, swallow her sense of injustice, and play nice. That’s what Mark would want her to do. But another part of her was absolutely furious.“…And I don’t want to hear the D word ever again.” Cameron held up his glass as if to make a toast, gave her a smug smile, and winked. That was it. She lost her temper. “Really, Cammy? Which D word is that?” “Shut up, Bold!” Bagley hissed. “I can think of a few D words to describe you, Mr. Cameron, starting with debauched and ending with just plain dumb!” “I told you I had a bad feeling.” Nigel sighed and buried his face in his hands. A hush fell across the room. “What did you just say to me?” Miles Cameron said, cheeks blazing bright red. “I said you’re dumb,” Mia said without flinching. “And by that I mean, slow-witted and unable to comprehend a simple idea, like why we designed this drug in the first place.” Nigel lifted his head from his hands and looked at Mia with newfound respect, but also terror. On the screen, Miles Cameron stared into the camera, fuming. Behind him, his entourage was frozen. Apparently, upsetting “Cammy” was to be avoided at all costs. The computer tech recoiled behind his laptop, as if it was a shield that could protect him. “Gigi, go see how lunch is coming along,” Miles Cameron snapped at the girl in the bikini. “Sure thing, Cammy…” “How did you make it onto my medical team? You’re loud, rude, and incredibly insubordinate. Bagley? What were you thinking?” Bagley stood up at attention, almost poking himself in the eye as he fumbled to straighten his glasses. “Um… She’s only a minor member of the team, sir. Just a lab monkey. Totally replaceable.” “Really, Tim?” Mia glared at Bagley. She couldn’t believe he was going to go there. She took a deep breath and tried to speak calmly. “Listen, Mr. Cameron. The fact is, I created the mechanism that makes Phoxy work. I’m a critical part of the team. They’ll need me moving forward, no matter how you market the drug.” “Not true!” Bagley said. “Absolutely not true.” Mia turned to Tim Bagley, who shrank from her gaze. “Do you remember how we inhibited PTP1B, Tim?” “I’d have to look at my notes.” “I don’t. We used a small peptide, F2PMP.”“Of course—”“—And how did we increase the potency?” “Um, I don’t recall,” Bagley said, brow beading with sweat. “A phenyl ring system?” “Actually, it was a naphthalene ring system.” “Okay, okay,” Miles Cameron said. “I can see you’re good at your job, Bold. You want a better position, is that what this is about? A little outburst? Get the boss’s attention? Show your worth? Fine. You’re clearly a valuable asset to Center Pharmaceuticals. What do you want?” She didn’t know how to answer that. She’d already told him what she wanted. “You want Bagley’s job? No problem.” “But I’m the boss,” Bagley said, trying to convince himself of the fact. Camron ignored him and focused on Mia. “I can move you up in the company, fast-track you. You’ll be making two hundred K by spring. But there’s one condition. You need to get on board with Phoxy being a diet pill. Otherwise, you can clear out your locker and go home.” Mia took a deep breath and closed her eyes to control her anger. So this was how this guy operated. When he wanted something, he just bought it or made a threat. She thought for a second. Was she willing to stand by her words? Wasn’t that what the word integrity meant? “If you turn Phoxy into a diet pill and abandon the diabetes trials entirely,” Mia said, “I’ll be forced to quit.” Nigel shook his head and made a shushing motion. Miles Cameron’s toothy smile evaporated, and his eyes became two black pits of indignation. “That’s it, I’ve had it with you, Bold!” he said, shaking his fists like a frustrated toddler as spittle flew from his lips. “I’ll save you the trouble of quitting. Everyone is replaceable. You’re fired!”