

## SILENT EPIDEMIC

The gurney blasted through the emergency room doors, while Robert Grady, M.D., straddled the lifeless patient, applying CPR. Dr. Danny Evans rushed to the racing gurney and accompanied the crowded rolling table to the trauma room.

"What have you got?" he yelled to the paramedics who had fallen behind so that doctors could take over the life saving process.

"White female, approximately twenty-five, deep lacerations on both wrists, BP is eighty over sixty." The paramedic ran the complete list of the patient's vitals while the staff continued to work on the unconscious woman. Her wrists had been sliced with great precision, with three perfectly executed cuts on her left side, and one on her right. There had been an enormous amount of blood loss.

"Get her typed and bring in five units, now," Evans yelled.

"We're losing her," Grady warned. "Her pressure is dropping."

"V tack," a nurse announced as a high pitch sounded from a monitoring device. The green flat line followed. The woman's shirt was ripped open.

"Give me one fifty," Evans yelled.

"One fifty," the nurse confirmed.

"Clear." Everyone moved from the patient, as the jolt forced the woman's body to jump slightly. The high pitch continued. "Two hundred. Clear." Again, the body jumped. The whining sound of the monitoring device was steady and deafening. "Two fifty. Clear." The body defied the machine. "We're going in," Evans announced, as a nurse handed him a scalpel. The woman's chest was sliced and opened quickly, while Evans forced his will into the lifeless heart. The rest of the hospital staff watched helplessly.

"She's been down too long," Grady said, mostly to himself.

"Adrenaline," Evans ordered, ignoring his colleague's prediction of doom. The doctor continued to massage the woman's heart, as the minutes ticked by.

"She's gone," Grady stated. But Evans couldn't let this woman go quite yet. She was too young to have her life end there in the emergency room.

"Not on my watch," he yelled to the lifeless form, and continued to work on her while the rest of the staff stood back. They were waiting for Dr. Danny Evans to draw his own obvious conclusion.

The woman had been lying on her living room floor bleeding out for an hour before her roommate had found her and dialed 911. Her long brown hair was caked with the blood that had seeped into the carpet. The staff looked down on her sympathetically as her body lay, unmoving, but disposed to the will of her doctor. She appeared to be at peace, as Evans forcefully worked to bring her back.

"She was so beautiful," a nurse sighed. Except for the slices on her wrists and the bloodstains, her body was flawless. There were no other notable markings, except for a small butterfly tattoo on her left shoulder.

"Do you want me to call it?" Dr. Grady asked quietly. Danny Evans ignored the suggestion, and continued his battle with death.

"Not on my watch," he repeated. The staff stood by, sadly resolved.

# SILENT EPIDEMIC

## Chapter 1

Carolyn Freeman was a square-peg person, living in a round-hole world. She viewed the conventional path that most considered to be a safe comfort zone with contempt. The down side was that this had always kept her from being a part of the mainstream. As a means of survival, Carol had always sought out other square pegs to associate with, keeping her from living in the isolated world of the “conformably challenged.”

From the time she could assign words to her thoughts, Carol’s favorite word had always been “why.” Carol questioned everything. If something didn’t make sense, she would beat the problem to death, demanding an explanation or alternative solution. And since the real world often made no sense, nor did it lend itself to alteration, Carol spent much of her time yelling at the rain.

The incongruence of her reality had left her burned out after only five years in the counseling field. The initial motivation – to seek out others like herself and make a difference in a troubled world – had not gone according to plan. The promising world of the helping profession should have provided the best of the square-peg population. A safety net devised of warm and accepting companions, who like herself, would plunge forward in an uncaring world working together to make it a better place. Within a short time, however, she had found them to be crazier than the patients and more apathetic than the checkout staff at Wal-Mart. The kind that asks, “How you are doing?” but never responds to the answer. One finally learns that it is a rhetorical question. Carol was surrounded by these people every day, yet she felt completely alone.

The “troubled world” was a bottomless pit of need. For every person she had managed to help elevate one-step higher, there were a thousand more needing something that was always out of her reach. Her unyielding logic – that each problem had to have a solution – left her exhausted and frustrated at the end of each day. This unfortunate phenomenon had landed Carol more and more inside her own thoughts instead of listening to patients during counseling sessions. She had become numb in a sense, and was finding it difficult to genuinely respond with anything like honest concern for their pain. There was an immense amount of guilt that went along with the realization of her fading commitment.

It was time to leave for the day, but Carol was on a mission. Worn out from the drone of policies, procedures and the paper trail of bureaucracy, she continued to plunge forward in an effort to force a solution to a problem that was drowning her. The small addiction department consisted of herself and one nurse. The rest of her staff was comprised of part time workers who came and left with such frequency that Carol barely felt their presence at all. This proposal would provide the proof she needed to support the blinding logic and cost effectiveness of increasing her staff.

She was punching numbers into a calculator when her phone rang. Carol regarded the ringing beast with contempt and thought for the ten-millionth time about smashing it with the closest heavy object.

"Yes?" she managed, trying to keep the obvious annoyance out her voice.

"There is a family out in the waiting room to see you, and Carol..."

"Yeah?" she sighed.

"You better come see this."

Carol hated these invasions. There were too many of them, and not enough of herself left to care. But Newberg Mental Health was the crisis center for Newberg County. This meant that anytime someone landed in an extreme and overwhelming situation, there was no need for an appointment. A counselor would drop what they were doing to rescue them. The policy on walk-ins was clear. If the "invasion" fell under your department's jurisdiction, someone from your group had to comply. She looked at her half-written, long shot of a proposal after returning the beast's head to its base. The party waiting for her in the lobby would most likely be extremely intoxicated and demanding. A small amount of inadvertent insults would usually be in the blend. Carol didn't think she could stand one more drunken tirade. She hadn't been sleeping very well and stopped to rub her eyes with her index fingers before dragging herself away from the safe quiet of her office.

Once again, she was the quarterback. All of the defensive line had left hours before. Carol had approached the issue several times already with no success.

"The problem," she would say to the center director, Buck Spears, "is the size of the population we are supposed to be serving." Spears would nod and appear to be evaluating the dilemma. "We have only two full-time people and the part time staff may as well be invisible." Once again, she would receive the standard managerial dribble about budgets and the cost of benefits for full-time employees. Carol would listen and quietly calculate the monetary losses from time spent training people who seemed to be in a revolving door of job opportunities. These meetings would always end the same way, with Spears providing the great American motivational pep talk and Carol taking the bait. *'I just have to come up with a way to better organize these people,'* she would think, and go back to her office and the drawing board.

Carol pulled herself out of her reverie and walked down the long hallway. The carpet was faded and walls were in need of either fresh paint or a wrecking crew. When Carol opened the door to the waiting room, she had to bite her lip to keep from laughing. Sitting in one corner of the room was the standard two parents and a young man who appeared to be in his late teens or early twenties. He was tall and painfully thin, and the faded jeans and white tee shirt he wore hung on his small frame. The oily, dark brown strands of hair that fell over his eyes were an indication that hygiene had not been on the top of his list of priorities. The scene would have seemed completely normal, except the young man was also wearing a pointed hat made out of tin foil. Carol looked over at the receptionist who had closed her sliding glass deflector shield, but was still visible through the glass. The receptionist just shook her head. Carol thought how nice it would be to have her own sliding glass deflector shield, but that was not an option for a quarterback. Instead, she reluctantly invited the family to come inside.

When the group was seated in her small office, Carol picked up the crisis clipboard and, with pen in hand, began the standard process. This phase of the interview did not require too much thought.

"Okay, I just need some information before we begin," Carol interjected, trying not to convey her sense of monotony. While the father provided all the vital information about the young man sitting between himself and his wife, the mother continued her argument with her son. From the tone of the woman's voice, it appeared as though this discussion had been going on for some time.

"Please, honey," the mother pleaded. "Just take off the hat. You look ridiculous and it's embarrassing."

"No," said the young man in a flat, lifeless tone and continued to stare off into space. That was all Carol needed to hear. In that one syllable, she heard the empty, haunted sound of a schizophrenic.

She completed the mundane form and set the clipboard aside.

"Carl," Carol said in a soothing voice, "can you help me understand what is troubling you today?"

"No," Carl stated in the same monotone he had used with his mother.

Acknowledging the patient's apparent absence, Carol turned to the family with an invitational look. The father responded first.

"Our son does not want 'them' to read his thoughts," the man stated wearily.

"It's more than that, Bob," the mother intervened.

Carol waited for the family to sort out their conflicting versions of Carl Banner's dilemma.

"He's not eating," the mother continued, "and he has loud conversations with no one."

Mr. Banner just nodded his agreement. The man looked exhausted and beaten down as a result of his son's new behaviors.

"Okay," Carol said, regaining control of the interview. "When did you first notice these changes in him?"

"Two, no, maybe three weeks ago," Mrs. Banner stated.

"Was there anything significant happening at that time?" Carol inquired. Normal life stressors that most people consider to be difficult, but manageable, can be viewed as traumatic and life changing to others - especially if that person is already hanging on the edge.

"No," the mother responded. "He has always been a loner and he seems depressed a lot of the time, but he has never been like this." She attempted to put her arm around her son, while he pulled away from her grasp defiantly. Mrs. Banner seemed used to Carl's need for detachment and returned her attention to Carol.

"Is he on any medications, or does he have a prior psychiatric diagnosis?" asked Carol.

"No. Carl has been a typical moody kid - nothing we couldn't handle." Every kid with a psychiatric problem was typical kid, where loving parents were concerned.

She stopped writing to rub her tired eyes again. The end of the day's fatigue was taking over, and she refrained from any further digging. Carl's current presentation went way beyond teenage moodiness, and she had no doubt that an anti-psychotic medication would be in order.

"Has there been any drug or alcohol use?" If Carl had engaged in any street drugs, she doubted that his parents would have known about it. If he had been using a mind-altering substance, the aliens would have had a field day with Carl's brain.

"My goodness, no," Mrs. Banner exclaimed, and tried to put her arm around her resistant son again. Carl sat like a stone with his mother's arm supporting his back and continued to sit in his chair with a vigilant eye out the window, guarding against any possible threat in the parking lot.

Carol excused herself and went off to find someone from the large pool of the psychiatric department. This was clearly not an addiction issue. Tired and extremely annoyed at the continued dumping tactics of her co-workers, she approached the counselor's break room. A group was situated around the table discussing something that was obviously amusing, and Carol interrupted the laughter to ask if someone from "psych" could finish a crisis call on a nineteen-

year-old psychotic male. The group looked up and each one in turn began giving a series of excuses. A few didn't bother with providing a reason and simply left the room. Carol, now feeling her blood pressure rise, squared off on the remaining counselor who had responded by returning to her magazine article.

"Do you think you could tear yourself away from your end of the day break long enough to complete your department's crisis call?" Carol inquired while attempting to control her frustration.

"I've already been here eight hours," the woman stated defensively, and left the room.

Carol's blood was now boiling as she looked at the clock on the wall, and calculated her own ten-hour day. Angry, she backtracked down the hall to her own office. People's pain and suffering often failed to conform to state workers schedules, and Carol had no choice but to complete what she had started. There was no one to throw the ball to, and this was going to be a little more complicated than a raging drunk in need of detox.

"Carl, do you want to tell me anything?" Carol asked hopefully.

"No," the young man stated again. Carol wanted to throw some cold water in Carl's face and ask him if he knew any other word besides no. She mentally slapped her own wrist for taking her frustration out on a patient. She knew that she did not do well with schizophrenics. There was nothing there to work with. At least in her own chosen specialty, one could dig down and find a fighting spirit underneath the fog. Here, there was no one home. She forced herself to plunge ahead.

"Has Carl said anything to cause you concern about his safety, or anyone else's?"

Both of Carl's parents just looked at each other blankly.

"Has he threatened to hurt himself, or anyone else?" Carol clarified.

"Oh no, of course not," the mother said. "Carl is a good boy." Carol's most effective tool for hospitalization had just been removed. She knew that he needed to be in a facility where he could be placed back on medication and monitored until his personal "demons" went away. She was determined to get him there.

"Okay, I need to ask about insurance," Carol concluded. The father wordlessly handed her a beaten looking card that had seen a lot of mileage.

"Excuse me for just one more minute," Carol said, as she left the bewildered family once again and went off to the copy machine and a private phone.

While Carol watched the copy machine swing back and forth, she worked to steady her emotions and dialed the number to Newberg Hospital. "Intake, please," Carol said to the hospital operator.

"One moment," the voice answered, and Carol listened to a terrible digital version of 'Hey Jude,' by the Beatles. It sounded like an electronic music box. Carol cringed as she inspected the copy of Carl's insurance card. *God, Medicaid!*

"Intake," a voice said, interrupting the Beatles unintended performance.

"Hi, this is Carol Freeman from Newberg Mental Health," she began. "I have a nineteen-year-old male with a possible history of depression. He is currently presenting with paranoid ideation, audio hallucinations, and is unresponsive to questioning." Carol could hear the intake worker writing and waited.

"Is he a danger to himself or anyone else?" the intake worker inquired. Carol had anticipated this, but could not see a way around the question.

"Not as far as is reported by his family," Carol answered.

"It appears that Carl is not a threat to himself or anyone else. He does not meet the criteria for admission." The intake worker stated this as if reading the words from her policy and procedure manual. During the familiar speech, Carol nodded her head back and forth in time with the words as she had done too many times before. Carol gave the woman an empty "Thank you," and hung up the phone. *I guess the only way Carl will be a danger to anyone is if he stops dodging the aliens, or whatever they are, and decides to start fighting back.* She shook her head in frustration. The truth about hospitalization criteria was that it was a crock. Anyone psychotic enough to believe that they were being stalked or monitored by outside forces was capable of doing a multitude of interesting things, none of which would be considered rational choices, but all of which had the potential for very dangerous outcomes.

In the good old days, Carol would have forced the issue a lot harder and probably would have gotten Carl the help he needed, but that required energy and motivation. These were two elements now missing from the equation today.

The next step in the crisis process was to set an appointment for the person so that they could begin receiving outpatient treatment. *What a lame alternative for Carl Banner.* But Carol was out of options. She made her way to the front desk where the schedule book was located. The area had been evacuated. *Must be after five o'clock, or else a fire broke out while I was on the phone,* she thought cynically. Thumbing through the schedule book, Carol grimaced at the full and unyielding pages, noting the next available appointment and filling in Carl's name.

"Four weeks?" Mrs. Banner shrieked, when Carol returned with the appointment card. "My son cannot go around with that thing on his head for four weeks. He needs to see a doctor today."

"I apologize," Carol offered, knowing that her words were a poor consolation, "but that is the first available appointment." The reality of the situation was that Carl would have to wait four weeks just to see a counselor and have his mountain of paper work filled out before he could even think about seeing a doctor. Carol had learned this lesson the hard way. In the past when she had taken it upon herself to slide patients who were "desperately in need" into doctor appointment slots before the mountain of paper was completed, she had received the wrath of both the doctor and the administration department. Carol had gotten into some knock-down, drag-out arguments with the doctors. The only thing she had accomplished was to cultivate a continued reputation with the entire staff, and raise her own blood pressure. The patient had never won out, and had always gotten the short end of the stick. She promised herself after the last fiasco that she would never attempt another rescue mission again.

"We'll get our own doctor," Mrs. Banner squawked, and slapped the appointment card down on the desk.

"Okay," Carol offered, "but if you have any trouble, I'll keep his appointment open."

"Thanks," the mother said sarcastically, and stormed out of the office.

"My wife is upset," Mr. Banner said sheepishly and walked out behind Carl, who was now using his index finger to test the direction of something in the air.

Carol stood in the quiet office, wondering what was going to happen to Carl before he could see a doctor. Psychotic episodes rarely healed themselves, and more than likely, he would continue to de-compensate. She doubted that his two sweet and unassuming parents would be equipped to deal with the escalation of his symptoms. Shutting off the light, she headed outside. As usual, Carol's day ended as it had begun. So much had been needed, with no solution available. Nothing had changed.

# Chapter 2

Business would soon be booming, and Charles Roman was one happy guy. Now seated in his expansive office, Charles looked out the large bay window and took in the view of Atlanta. From this sixteenth story view, he could see the entire city with its slowly emerging lightshow that began every evening around this time. This was his city. He owned Atlanta.

Charles was not a big man and this characteristic extended further than just his physical size. At five foot eight, Charles wore custom tailored suits and a power hairstyle that exuded the image he liked people to see. His year-round tan, courtesy of the company's frequent flyer perks, supplied the finishing touch and made him a handsome guy.

Sitting at the helm, Charles began organizing the papers that covered the shiny oak surface of his desk. His usual evening activities would begin with a late departure from work, followed by a few drinks at the Victory Hotel. With any luck, he'd meet up with that hot little tasty morsel from Marketing and avoid having to see his wife all together.

But that plan would be delayed on this day. There was a light knock on the door, followed by the entry of his two in command. Sam Reynolds, his VP, and Jeff Edwards, Marketing director, entered with dread.

"This can't be good," Charles announced.

The two silently took seats facing the great man.

"We have a situation," Sam began.

Charles looked at both, waiting for the sky to open and rain on his evening. "Just tell me," he directed.

"The approval for Suprame got delayed," Jeff stated. "We just got the package back from them today."

"Why?" Charles demanded. "Haven't we paid them enough?"

The two looked at each other, not knowing which turd to drop on the man first.

Sam took the lead. "There's a new sheriff in town. This guy, David Manning, he's not a team player."

"The FDA has been getting some complaints about sedatives," Jeff added. "They want us to conduct one more study on the effects of termination."

Charles got to his feet and began to pace.

"We were promised an approval by the end of this month. We have spent some serious bucks to guarantee it. It's the drug that will ultimately save this company, and now this Manning guy wants us to waste more time worrying about what happens after the drug is no longer being used? How is that our problem?"

"The problems aren't happening while people are taking the medication. The problem begins when they stop."

"That's not a pharmaceutical problem," Charles yelled. "It's a prescription problem."

"Well, now it's Dominex's problem," Sam conceded.

Charles sat back down and raked a frustrated hand through his hair. "Look, guys, I really don't care what you do with this asshole at the FDA. Just figure something out. This drug is going on the market. I don't care if you have hold a gun to his head."

"Don't worry," Jeff said. "We'll think of something."

The two men watched Charles Roman grab his coat and storm out of the building.

“Well,” Sam said, “he handled that well.”

They had been here before, not sure how they were going to pull another rabbit out of their asses, but certain it would happen.

Charles sat smoldering for a few moments before speeding out of the parking lot. The radio was always tuned to Z93, and Charles felt some of the tension drift away. They’d handle the problem and he had a date. He began tapping to the time of “*Taking Care of Business*” on the steering wheel with one hand while loosening his tie with the other. Taking care of business had been a sweet deal. Dominex Pharmaceuticals had been in his family for decades before he was able to slide into the driver’s seat. In the old days, his father had run a respectable operation, focusing primarily on anti-inflammatory and arthritis medications. The company had done marginally well, driven by its long-term reputation of being a company of integrity. But in the past ten years, there had been so many companies manufacturing virtually the same medications. For the past decade, profits and subsequently the company’s stock value had been slowly spiraling downward.

When Charles’s father approached retirement, he had no other offspring, and despite the warning of several board members and friends, Charles’s father decided to take a chance on his son. It wasn’t so much the wasted college years. He told himself that his son was a “late bloomer.” It was the lying and deceit that made Charles a high risk. Never the less, Charles Roman Sr. had only one son. So Charles Jr. was in.

When Charles first took over as CEO, he didn’t know an aspirin from an anti-depressant. But when the reward was big money, Charles was a fast learner. He quickly learned that there were so many drugs designed to do one thing, and then ultimately used for a wide range of other disorders. By simply changing a small fraction of an already existing compound, a completely new drug could be marketed. Working with another company’s product, an anti-convulsive, Charles followed the parade into the wide world of sedatives.

Charles quickly realized that sedatives were the pot of gold at the end of the pharmaceutical rainbow. At no other time in history had there ever been the rash of depression and anxiety disorders we see today. With the two-paycheck economy, overcrowding and loss of the extended family, everyday stress, anxiety, and depression were at an all-time high. In the ‘50s and ‘60s, people would see their family doctors and, after all the standard tests, they would be told to go take a vacation, slow down, or get more sleep. In today’s fast pace, the world did not lend itself to these solutions and a quick fix had not just become a luxury, it had become a necessity.

Under the new regime, Dominex pharmaceuticals had the potential to become a multi-billion dollar proposition. Doctors would be provided with an ample supply of samples, cookies, and the promise of more to come. It was a win-win situation. The patient would provide the problem, the drug company would happily provide the solution and the doctor would be the hero. Everyone would be happy.

“No one happier than me,” Charles sang, substituting the words, “and working over time.” He pulled the Beemer in an empty parking space at the Victory Hotel.

Sheila had been watching the time tick away for thirty minutes and was not happy about being kept waiting.

“Would you like another round?” the bartender asked. Sheila checked her watch again.

“Why not?” she sighed. *It’ll make it that much easier to deal with him.*



Sheila Montgomery was there for one reason and one reason only. To move up into a position of power, no matter what she had to do to get there. Currently working for Dominex Pharmaceuticals in marketing, Sheila made good money, and the freedom of being out in the field gave her that added element of independence she always demanded. But the power to change things, and to be on the cutting edge, was not only Sheila's goal, it was her mission.

Sheila's thoughts were interrupted, when she felt a hand on her shoulder.

"Hi Charlie," Sheila said, as she looked up and smiled sweetly.

"Hi yourself." Charles took the bar stool beside Sheila and ordered a martini. While he waited for his drink to arrive, he checked the bar for any familiar faces. No one stood out, Charles noticed with a degree of relief. *It wouldn't take much to be noticed*, he thought. Sitting here next to this beautiful blond knockout, the regular bar crowd that frequented this establishment were already well aware of his presence by association. And the order of the day was to remain incognito.

Sheila was a knockout. That had always been something she had been able to use to her advantage. Now, at the age of thirty-five, nothing had changed. Her long blond hair, courtesy of Clairol, and long thin frame commanded the stage. Her large green eyes and flawless face were the finishing ticket. Women distrusted her and sometimes outwardly disliked her, but men were always ready, willing, and able to lend her a helping hand. And Sheila was always ready and willing to accept it. In fact, her whole world had revolved around the easy task of manipulation for so long, she really was no longer consciously aware of how much every waking moment of her life was not just based, but reliant on it. The fact that she had never had a close female friend was inconsequential. She told herself that she preferred the company of men, and for the most part, her needs were always met.

Charles's drink arrived and after the bartender was out of hearing range, he leaned over and whispered, "I missed you today."

Sheila wanted to gag, but instead kissed him on the tip of his nose and said, "I bet you did."

Charles wanted this woman in the worst way and reached into his coat pocket to feel for the room key.

"Would you like another drink before we retire?" he said, pleased with his clever metaphor.

Sheila was already feeling the effects of the two she had downed and told Charles she was fine.

"You certainly are," he agreed playfully, as he escorted his new friend out of the bar.

Charles seemed to be getting antsy and Sheila had early appointments in the morning. After the holding and the small talk, it was time to go. Fishing around on the floor for her belongings, Sheila eyed the powerful CEO. For all the talk and impressive "courtship," the whole thing had really been a pitiful few moments. The extent of their foreplay could have been measured with an egg timer. Sheila hoped not to have to repeat this performance too many more times.

"So," Charles began. "When would you like to get together and discuss your new marketing ideas?" He did not care about her ideas; he had better plans for their next meeting.

"I can come to your office anytime, Charlie," Sheila purred.

"My office was not exactly the place I had in mind," he replied provocatively.

"Come on," Sheila toyed. "I might start to think you're not taking me seriously."

"I'll take you anyway I can get you," Charles continued to play.

Working hard not to roll her eyes, Sheila just smiled.

"Okay, okay" he said with exaggerated exasperation. "Come to the office tomorrow at five."

"Five it is." *And next time, let's lose the egg timer.* Sheila winked and said, "Bye Charlie." She was out the door before Charles could reply.

## Chapter 3

Carol Freeman sat in the waiting room of her doctor's office trying to be patient. She wondered to herself why doctors even bothered to make appointments. The appointment time had very little bearing on how long you sat and how long you had to wait to be seen. She felt compelled to just leave. She had made the proper arrangements at work, but her fear of getting busted gravitated her to the seat.

Carol could not get a decent night sleep and had resorted to some creative problem solving. She was sick of spending her days in a sleepy fog, often forgetting to do the simplest things, followed by night, when her head would hit the pillow and the mental hurricane would begin. Ruminating the day's problems, Carol would evaluate, analyze, resolve and re-invent. By morning, she was exhausted and the world's problems were still unresolved. Carol had recently found someone with a small and unofficial stash and suddenly, her whole perspective on medications changed.

But now the state of Georgia required all workers to take random drug screens. Without an official prescription, a positive test for benzodiazepines would be grounds for immediate termination. And Carol knew better than to take other people's medications. Had it not been for the desperation of being so sleep deprived, she wouldn't have crossed that line. Now, that line was getting ready to bite her in the ass.

Carol heard her name being called, and stood to follow the nurse into the appointed waiting room. After being weighed and providing her arm for the nurse to cuff, Carol sat in the flimsy paper dress. She looked down at her small body. Her best current attribute was her tiny waist and thin frame. It was a battle she had fought all her life, cycling between a size eight and a size twelve. Her life's mission was to stay thin, although there had been numerous times in the past when she had been on the losing side of that battle. Currently, she was a small person with a very large attitude. Carol could see her reflection in the waiting room mirror and gazed at her shoulder-length, curly brown hair framing tired blue eyes. Her youthful face was slowly fading and she could feel the weight of the world on her five foot two inch frame. Was the change in her appearance due to age or stress? She didn't know the answer to that question, but hoped it was the latter. The alternative meant that her youth was coming to an end.

The opening of the examining room door startled Carol and she looked up to see a face she did not recognize.

"Carol Freeman?" the heavily accented Mediterranean doctor said. "What can I do for you today?"

"Is Doctor Wesley on vacation?" Carol inquired.

"No. Dr. Wesley left this facility and I am taking on his patients. I am Doctor Rami."

"Well," Carol began hesitantly. "I have been having a hard time sleeping and tried this medication, Valipene. It really helped and I was hoping to get some of my own today." Carol could not help but notice the doctor's demeanor change.

After a long hesitation, the doctor said, "Alright, but only enough for a few days."

Carol was now becoming annoyed and told the doctor that her sleep problem had been going on for some time, and most surely would not go away in a few days.

After some additional infuriating conversation and unspoken suspicion on the part of Dr. Rami, Carol walked away with her prescription. Confused by the whole encounter, she wondered if the doctor had thought she was a drug addict. Knowing full well that she had no history of addiction herself or at any time had there been any in her family, Carol just shook her head. *Jerk*, she thought and left the building. She was going to sleep soundly tonight, and right now that was the only thing on Carol's mind.

By the time she arrived at work, she had forgotten about the strange doctor. In fact, all of the morning's events had disappeared. She happily walked to her office and thought for the first time in a while, *Today is going to be a good day.*

Carol picked up the messages left on her desk. When she saw the one from Buck Spears, she quickly turned and headed for the Center Director's office. Heading down the long corridor, Carol's thoughts creatively evaluated the possibilities. She had turned in the futile proposal, but who knows? This place never followed a logical course of action. When she reached Spear's partially closed door, Carol knocked tentatively.

"Come," the voice commanded. Carol entered the room and knew immediately from his face that all was not well.

"Did you tell one of my counselors that they could not leave at the end of the day?" Spears demanded.

"No," Carol said emphatically. "I merely inquired if she could interrupt her end of the day break to see a walk in."

Spears did not reply at first and glared at her. These encounters were happening more and more as Carol's patience with what she perceived as lazy state workers was wearing thin.

"Carol," Spears sighed. "You have to use better tact. After all, you are a manager."

*An overworked one.*

"But," Carol began.

"No buts," Spears interrupted. "I'm busy and there's nothing more to say."

Carol looked at the Center Director. This had once been a reasonable individual. Now reason seemed to be replaced by hostility at every turn. Carol left Spear's office fighting back the tears. When she made it to the privacy of her own, she let the tears flow. Never had she been so frustrated and felt so alone. It was as if the logical order of the world had been replaced with a new one that supported apathy and self-indulgence. She just couldn't live in that world and was being beaten weekly for it.

Sam Reynolds had been working for Dominex Pharmaceuticals for the past five years in accounting. His recent promotion to Vice President of Operations had come two years ago when he had creatively saved the CEO's proverbial ass. Mr. Charles Roman had an expensive lifestyle and this might have been his undoing. When the company's upcoming audit would have revealed an unexplainable deficit, Sam's ingenuity and the shifting of funds quietly made the indiscretion go away. The CEO recognized good work and employee potential. Now Sam was his right hand man.

Sam sat in a slightly smaller version of the office of the CEO. He had always been a stocky guy. His height of five foot ten did little to carry his extra weight. Furthermore, he had inherited his father's early balding trait, and his receding black hairline continued to age the man. At the age of thirty-seven, he looked more like fifty. Sam knew he would never exude the

corporate image and felt damn lucky to be where he was. With his own private secretary and big fat salary, Sam would go to the ends of the earth to protect his new status if need be. Today, the immediate problem did not require such travel, but it did require some quick maneuvers.

Several people had reported becoming ill after stopping use of the drug Valipene. These reports had made their way to the FDA and Dominex Pharmaceuticals was now being required to do some additional research on the effects of drug termination. Sam knew that a delay in marketing of the generic drug Suprame would create a financial burden the company might not survive. He shaped and re-shaped a paper clip in his hands as he worked the problem through in his head. He had to make this FDA requirement somehow go away.

In previous dealings with the FDA, Dominex had primarily worked with a very "receptive" officer. Bob Whitford had been the guy in charge of final approvals in Atlanta and had always been open to monetary gain. He had retired just prior to the final testing phase of Suprame. Everything that had been submitted up to that point had literally flown by the approval process.

When David Manning took over, he had become Dominex's worst nightmare. He was a man of integrity. The man could not be moved by money, however he seemed to value the stability of his marriage. So, when Manning became the new figurehead in Atlanta, Sam took out an insurance policy, just in case. Well, the prior footwork was about to pay off. Sam reached for the phone and dialed a number he knew well.

"Rico," Sam said. "You remember those pictures you took of that guy from the FDA?"

"Sure," the man replied. "I didn't know you could do that with Jell-O. He crumbled like a house of cards when he saw those pictures."

"Sure he did" Sam agreed. They had only used the photos as a warning. But the guy was either too stupid or too much of a hero to take the bait. They had not been bluffing. Now it time to turn up the heat.

"So, what's on the agenda for today?" the man inquired.

"Do you think you can find our Jell-O girl?"

"I think I can," the man stated.

"Good. And Rico," Sam added, "a lot is riding on this."

"Can I just rearrange his face?"

"No, leave the man's face alone for the time being. Just set up a meeting place outside of here," Sam said and hung up the phone. The last thing they needed right now was a suspicious looking woman coming into the building. Sam allowed himself a moment of cocky reverie. With his feet up on his desk, he leaned back and thought to himself how wonderful it was that pictures and negatives could be shredded, but Jell-O girls never seemed to go away. Sam got to his feet and went to give Charles an update. But as he walked past the sixteenth floor elevator, the door opened. A beautiful woman emerged that Sam did not recognize. He watched her glide up to the office of the CEO, knock and enter as though she owned the company. This was clearly not a good time.

"Sheila," Charles said, almost as a song. "How was your day?"

"Long, Charlie," Sheila said flatly. She sat down in the chair facing Charles's desk and removed her pumps. As she lifted each foot to give them a quick massage, Charles could not avoid noticing how her already short skirt rode to the top of her thigh. Charles got up and went to her, massaging her shoulders.

"What can I do to make you feel better?" Charles asked sweetly. This was exactly the question Sheila had hoped to hear.

"Sit down, Charlie," Sheila said. "I think I have the answer to that and maybe a whole lot more." During the next fifteen minutes, Sheila gave an impressive marketing proposal using charts, graphs and occasional cleavage. All but the cleavage was wasted on Charles, who only had one agenda. Sheila continued, despite the awareness that he really was not paying attention. "And in order to accomplish this," she concluded, "I would have to be in a better position to oversee the daily workings of our department."

"You want to be the head of marketing?" Charles asked in an amused tone. Sheila got up and put her arms around him.

"Don't you think I can handle it?" Sheila purred, as she playfully kissed Charles on his ear. Charles was getting dizzy from the contact.

Never able to make a rational decision in the heat of battle, Charles said, "Okay, kid, but give me a few days. There's a small matter of someone else currently occupying that spot."

While a happy Sheila led a willing Charles to the couch, he thought, *I'll let Sam figure out how to pull that one off*, and locked the door.

At the other end of the hall, Sam was just returning to his office when his phone rang. "Sam Reynolds," he answered.

"Jell-O girl's name is Ann Boniture," the voice replied.

"Good Work, Rico," Sam said. "So where is she?"

"Still in town. At least she was last night."

"Well, let's get a little bit better acquainted, shall we?"

Rico hung up the phone and tapped his index finger on the receiver a few beats. He was used to turning up the heat. The original blackmail had been used in the preliminary trials. At that point, Manning seemed to be on board. When the animal trials were approved, he had received the pictures and the negatives. Then he suddenly got a conscience.

Well, they were gone now. It would be almost impossible to lure Manning back into the same situation a second time. He had sworn off strip clubs. But the stripper still remained. He felt certain he could find a way to make this guy squirm at just the mention of her name. People conceded to threats when the implied consequences were ones that a person desperately wished to avoid. And he knew David Manning would die before he'd let his wife find out about what he'd done.

Rico locked the door of his dingy smoke-saturated first floor apartment. If things went well with Ann Boniture, his price would include a residential upgrade. In Atlanta, it was way past rush hour, a term that was becoming more and more redundant as the city had become a sprawling life force. People from all over the country were attracted here every year due to its mild weather and booming economy. Atlanta marched forward year after year, oblivious to recessions and unemployment rates. The result was a city that now stretched out for a one hundred mile radius and was continuing to expand every day.

Rico knew exactly where to find Ann Boniture. He had set the bait and taken the pictures that had subsequently been destroyed. He returned to the scene of the crime.

Ann Boniture was a career girl. Her current employment at the Blue Stallion as a dancer was only a short-term venture. Her lifelong dream was to get out of Georgia altogether and make it in Hollywood. She had saved an impressive amount of money, avoiding the drug trap. Ann lived a clean simple life, deviating only slightly when the proposition allowed her to add substantially to her bank account.

It was now 2:00 AM, and the few people remaining in the smoke-filled club were being asked nicely to adhere to last call. Ann gathered up her few belongings and began making her way to the door. It was late, and her level of fatigue made her the most extreme version of her anti-social self. So, when a vaguely familiar face asked for a moment of her time, she was more than a little resistant. When the man offered her a twenty-dollar bill, she slowed her pace and then finally said, "Okay, but please just a moment. I'm fried."

The man ushered her to a table and pulled a chair out for her. When they were both seated, Ann listened with partial patience.

"Do you remember a guy named David Manning?" Rico prompted.

"David Manning," Ann recited several times to herself. She couldn't really place the name, and besides, at 2:00 AM, her brain was not functioning at its best.

"Pictures at the hotel," the man offered. "FDA."

"Oh yeah, now I remember," Ann said, cringing at the memory. "Not one of my finer moments."

"Well, it was a very productive moment," the man added. "And now my employer would like to offer you another, uh, business opportunity."

Ann was now wide-awake and continued to listen.

"We want to know if you would be willing to go to his wife and, shall we say, share the details of that memorable night."

"I thought the pictures were enough and that this was over," Ann said.

"They were at the time. Now we need to engage this dude's help again, and we think he probably won't just offer it out the goodness of his heart."

"Fair assessment," Ann offered. "How much?" she added, always the accountant.

"My employer hadn't actually gotten that far. How much do you need?"

"Twenty five hundred," Ann ventured. She knew that this "employer," whoever he was, could easily fork out that much without a thought.

"I'll check it out," Rico confirmed. Getting to his feet, he offered his hand in an informal agreement. Ann stood as well, and accepted the handshake. The man was quickly out the door, and Ann stood momentarily wondering how she could ruin someone's marriage for twenty five hundred dollars.

## Chapter 4

Carol left her office early, informing the receptionist that she wasn't feeling well. That was not really too much of a stretch from the truth. Every confusing encounter at work was leaving her more and more sick at heart. She had spent the afternoon in a managers' massacre meeting. The organization was getting ready to open a central crisis unit. The primary function of this department was to accept all incoming crisis and new patient calls, determine the appropriate pathway, and input the information into their new computer system. Each center was required to provide one volunteer to run the new unit. No one who was qualified was crazy enough to do that, and so now came the crucial moment when the center would "help" volunteer someone.

Carol sat and watched, mesmerized, as the entire management group quickly came to the same conclusion simultaneously. Vicky Manson was to be the sacrificial lamb. Carol couldn't believe what she was hearing. Vicky was one of their best counselors. She was caring and hard working. It was as if this was not the first meeting on this subject. Their conclusion was too rapid and too decisive. Carol was sure she had missed something.

She began to raise an objection, questioning the process of this decision.

Spears immediately cut her off by saying,

"Okay, sounds like we have a winner," and with that, the meeting was over. Carol wandered back to her office in a daze. They had just guaranteed Vicky's resignation. No one that good would quietly go sit in front of a phone and a computer screen every day. Carol had always prided herself on her intuitiveness, but lately, nothing was making any sense. It was as if a force beyond her control was at the wheel and despite all her efforts to reclaim it, the momentum continued to pull her and everyone else further off the road.

Carol pulled into the drug store parking lot and made her way inside. Handing her prescription to the pharmacist, she began to feel some semblance of calm returning. The man took Carol's note from the doctor and told her it would be about ten minutes. Carol simply nodded.

Sitting in the small waiting area, she ran over the past few weeks' events in her mind. Had she been out of line with the lazy co-worker who refused to complete the crisis call the other day? Was there some logic to Vicky's job transfer that Carol could not see? Carol was no longer able to be objective. It was a world gone mad. When the rights of lazy staff were strenuously defended and hard workers were sent into exile, then the laws of physics had ceased to exist, and this was becoming a group effort.

Carol didn't think she was being paranoid, but her words were continually being twisted and motivation misconstrued. And the one constant in the equation was an on-going deterioration of her credibility. Who was benefiting from this the most? Carol was pondering this question, when she heard her name called.

"Ninety five dollars," the pharmacist stated. Carol just looked at the man in amazement. "Your insurance doesn't pay for name brands and there is no current generic for Valipene. One is supposed to be released soon, though," the man offered. Carol reluctantly fished out her debit card and handed it to the pharmacist.



"Well, I hope it comes out soon," she said, feeling a little victimized, but desperate for the medication. Carol took the card and the small bag and left the store, heading home.

When she entered the house, her husband looked up from his computer screen and said, "Another great day, huh, Carol?" Carol had one of those faces that eliminated her from ever being a successful poker player. She just looked at him and sighed. "Carol," he said emphatically. "It's not worth it. You go there day after day, and every time you come home, you look like death warmed over."

"Josh, I'm not quitting." The debate over Carol's job had become a daily tennis match. Where else would she go? Who would look out for her patients? How would the world continue to turn without her? The truth was that she hated to admit defeat, and this was turning into the biggest defeat of her life. She had always thought that there was no problem that did not have a solution. She just hadn't yet figured out what that would be in this case.

"Just let me see how things go after a few decent nights' sleep," Carol offered. Her husband of fifteen years knew better than to argue with her. She was often too obsessive and stubborn to abandon a mission until she was officially defeated. Josh just sighed loudly and returned to his computer screen.

Josh Freeman was dealing with his own dilemma. At the age of forty-five, he was still basically a ditch digger. It wasn't that his new irrigation business was not doing well; it was just that digging in the dirt was his least favorite job. Josh had been in the dirt in some form or fashion all his life, and the substance was now his biggest nemesis. He quietly wished he had never tried to dive into self-employment, and now felt stuck in the proverbial mud.

Josh had one of those kind faces with compassionate green eyes that always seemed to be smiling. While wearing a baseball cap to hide his slightly thinning brown hair, he could pass for much younger than he was. His clean-shaven face completed the youthful appearance. Josh went back to his computer and alternative career plan.

The screen before him showed an array of charts and graphs that if evaluated accurately, had the potential to equate into mega bucks. Enough for both of them to retire from the pseudo American dream they were living. Carol's current dilemma did not ease the pressures of this mission. Josh returned his thoughts to the stock market and tried to screen out every distraction, of which there were many.

"There is an answer in here somewhere," Josh said quietly to himself. And there was. He just hadn't stumbled on to it yet.

Sam paced back and forth in Charles's office and ran an annoyed hand through what little hair he had left.

"Sam, just get her into that management position," Charles stated. "She's no dummy. She can handle the marketing department."

"And just what am I supposed to do about the small matter of Jeff Edwards already doing that job?" Sam asked with more than a little sarcasm in his voice. Charles was not used to being questioned and just looked at Sam in amazement. Sam stopped pacing and took a deep breath. "These fires are coming faster than I can put them out," he said more calmly. Charles knew the request was unreasonable and loaded with his own hidden agenda. He decided to lend fate a helping hand.

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