

# DRUG WAR

A NOVEL

By Dr. Leonard Hofstra & Jeffrey Scott Pearson



**DRUG WAR** – a novel

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## Preface

The entire country is struggling with an astronomical obesity epidemic, and the devastating consequences are evident in the rising prevalence of conditions such as diabetes and heart attacks. A spectacular injectable weight loss drug called Cervelix or ('GLIP' for short) has been introduced to the market by Biotechnica, and it has demonstrated breathtaking weight loss. Unfortunately, due to its exorbitant cost, GLIP remains accessible to only a privileged few.

In a strategic move, generic drugmaker Medication4All has found a loophole in the GLIP patent and brought a new, promising variant to the market at a lower cost. Their goal is to put GLIP within reach of everyone.

As a first step, the new generic is made available for a clinical trial to a small midwestern American town. Word slips out, so most of the townsfolk eagerly await the drug's arrival and are lining up in sleeping bags in front of the pharmacy. Hundreds of citizens fight to obtain as much of the medication as possible from the moment of its arrival.

In the subsequent weeks, many patients start losing weight quickly and are feeling much healthier. However, the local supermarkets, restaurants, and fast-food chains all see a sharp reduction in diners, just as the local hospital sees fewer patient admissions.

Panic breaks out in the food industry because of the drop of processed foods and sugary drink sales. Healthcare investors become restless, anticipating the potential reduction in patient admissions. What will happen if the entire country gains access to this cheap variant of GLIP?

The biggest players in the food and healthcare industry have devised a plan to sabotage the impact of new miracle drug. Biotechnica, the pharmaceutical company producing the original Cervelix, an expensive version of GLIP, takes the generic drugmaker to court to ban the sales of their underpriced competitor. In the courtroom, the patients who used the generic GLIP rally in support of the cheaper alternative.

This story illustrates the perverse balancing act that our society finds itself confronting. It is a story about overconsumption, driven by the food industry, and the dramatic consequences for the health of our citizens. Expensive and brilliant pharmaceutical interventions are created to treat these health issues. This book illustrates the healthcare inequity present in our society and the potential consequences of bridging the gap between the privileged few and the less fortunate.

## Chapter 1: Stars

**Rodriguez and his friends, together with hundreds of citizens from a midwestern American town, have lined up all night in sleeping bags waiting for a new weight loss drug to arrive. The desire to obtain the drug is immense, and the atmosphere is heated.**

The sky was bright, and millions of stars radiated their flickering light into the galaxy. Rodriguez watched the sky above him in astonishment. The streetlights of the small town were off in the middle of the night, and the lack of light pollution brightened the stars in the universe. While watching, Rodriguez suddenly felt extremely small, like a drop in the ocean or a grain of sand in the desert.

But in reality, Rodriguez was quite big, standing six feet tall and weighing more than 260 pounds. He had tried to catch some sleep but could not find enough comfort to put his mind to rest. He was lying on his back and turned to his left side, readjusting his sleeping bag with his big protruding belly, following his rotation with some delay before settling slowly on the ground.

In his college years, Rodriguez used to be a skilled football player and blessed with good looks—tall, a six-pack, black hair, and dark radiant eyes. He was still attractive but not the instant hit he used to be, and his sex appeal seemed toned down by the excess weight.

Rod was now the owner of the most popular sports bar in town, with the rather unoriginal name 'The Home Run.' He had bought the pub 10 years ago when it was a struggling family business, but the business was completely run down. Most sports fans went to a motel bar near the highway and although the atmosphere was far from uplifting, the fact that there were newer and larger TV screens there made the roadhouse attractive enough.

And what else was needed than a bunch of sports fans shouting at a proper TV screen, inspired by the action of the game?

The first thing Rodriguez did was replace the old TV screens in the sports bar with brand new ones, the biggest you could get - equipped with the best possible sound features and the fastest TV receiver technology. Within days, the sports bar was the new hotspot in town, attracting old and new customers.

The next step was to improve the food and drinks. Driven by his commitment to excellence, Rodriguez enhanced the menu choices and the quality of the tavern fare. The sports bar soon evolved into a flourishing business even before reaching the break-even point he had calculated with his accountant. While the financial gains were evident, the downside became apparent as well. He worked long hours, leaving him no choice but to have lunch and dinner in his own pub. Since this was obviously not the healthiest food, his weight exploded as a consequence.

His wife Carlita, a demanding but gorgeous, petite woman with lush black hair from Mexican ancestry, had tried her best to help him lose weight. She believed more in alternative medicine than in regular solutions. Thus, Rodriguez had been given any number of concoctions: warm water with honey & lemon, raw garlic, hibiscus tea, pineapple pieces, green tea, carom seeds, oolong tea, ginger tea, capsaicin capsules, cinnamon powder, aloe vera juice, cold baths and cumin seeds - all in the name of better health.

The fads were never-ending; Carlita always started each new remedy with such determination and energetic persuasion that Rodriguez followed it blindly. However, there were never any good results, and his body weight kept escalating.

His customers and friends also complained during some episodes of natural remedy solutions. For instance, during the raw garlic episode, customers shied away as soon as Rodriguez started to open his mouth. More recently he had observed that Carlita had started flirting with other men. The revelation set off alarm bells in his head and an infuriating jealousy within. However, he felt he could not act; being so obviously obese made him helpless and vulnerable.

Rodriguez observed the long line of people camping outside the storefront. The contours within the sleeping bags were, with some exceptions, all suggestive of large body sizes. He was amazed that such a tiny little town could have so many citizens who were obviously obese. The evening before, when the first citizens started to gather before the pharmacy with their sleeping bags, there was a mixed bag of feelings palpable in the crowd. There was excitement, certainly, but also desperation. There was social belonging, sure, but also competition. Would there be enough for everyone? Here and there, small conflicts between people assembling in the waiting line broke out in an ultimate attempt to get their best spot.

Reflecting on how the crowd had gathered in the street, Rodriguez recalled a clandestine conversation two weeks prior with the drug store owner. The pharmacist, a regular customer of the sports bar and a fanatic fan of the state football team, had taken the barkeep aside in the pharmacy when he came to collect the herbal weight loss pills, as Carlita insisted. “You really have to keep this to yourself,” he said in a whisper. “You have to promise me”.

The conversation happened in a mysterious and soft tone. Rodriguez had nodded slowly, having no anticipation as to what was coming next. “Do you know about these expensive weight loss injectables which have resulted in spectacular weight loss?” asked the pharmacist.

Rodriguez looked the druggist dead in the eye. He had certainly read about these injections, so popular among the affluent, often referred to as the ‘one-percenters’. Rod knew that the drug was very popular in cities such as New York City and, unsurprisingly, in LA. However, he did not know anyone who could afford these miracle injections' exorbitant price, costing up to 10 thousand dollars a year.

“I have read about these injections,” responded Rodriguez curiously. A hint of a smile broke over the serious face of the pharmacist.

“And did you also know that the regular price of these injections is beyond the budget of any normal citizen?” Rodriguez nodded again, with no idea what to expect. The pharmacist took a deep breath and paused for a few seconds. His eyes became watery as his gaze intensified. Rodriguez sensed his rising anxiety - the pharmacist apparently had something extraordinary to say, which was both exciting and frightening.

“I have obtained a large batch of a cheap version of these special injectables,” confessed the pharmacist. Rodriguez had struggled to give an appropriate response. His thoughts drifted left and right. What did ‘a large batch of a cheap version of these special injectables’ mean? And how would that affect him?”

Then he looked down, gazing over his immense and protruding belly. The pharmacist had a conspiratorial look in his eyes and was bent slightly toward Rodriguez. Small pearls of sweat formed on Rodriguez's upper lip.

“If you can keep it to yourself, I’ll put aside a couple of syringes for you,” said the pharmacist in a low voice. At first, Rodriguez didn’t know how to react, but after a few seconds, he felt a growing joy, and as the look on his face changed, he relaxed.

*Finally, an end to the endless fight against obesity, the end of the pitiful glances he received on the street, the end of the daily feelings of shame while watching himself in the mirror, the end of the immense guilt when eating in the presence of others, the end of going to the big size clothing store,*

*the end of clumsy movements in the narrow alley of airplanes, but most of all - the end of that judgmental look in Carlita's eyes, he thought.*

“I promise to keep the news to myself,” he responded.

Rodriguez looked over the pharmacist's shoulder into the store. A half dozen pharmacy assistants, all female, were busy going back and forth between the medication room and the counters to help clients. They were all dressed in immaculate white costumes consisting of pants and a vest. Rodriguez observed that all but one of the assistants suffered from being seriously overweight. Their matching pants fitted very tightly around their buttocks and legs, but they still looked sexy to him.

“You’ll only have to fill out an online prescription for the pharmacy”, the pharmacist stated, “then a special doctor will forward the prescription for the super weight loss drug directly to the firm that makes the generic. They have organized it all online to keep the cost extremely low,” he added.

In his professional role, the pharmacist portrayed a somewhat autistic and restrained persona, a perfect fit for the job. But in what seemed to be a special operation, the druggist started to resemble the passionate football fan that Rodriguez had gotten to know in his sports bar. The eyes of the pharmacist glittered, and his voice was trembling.

When Rodriguez arrived home, he told Carlita about the great news. But she was furious and became almost aggressive, shouting at him for hours. Carlita was a fervent anti-vaxxer and had a religious belief in natural medicine. Lately, she had gotten involved in a local Tree Hugging Society together with several of her closest friends. She told Rodriguez that feeling the stream of natural juices flowing through the massive tree while hugging the huge trunk was very exciting and gave her a feeling of immense power. Based on this description, Rodriguez began to wonder if his own sexual delivery to Carlita was still sufficient.

“Why would you use these drugs?” She shouted. “It is all one big conspiracy, just like this whole COVID nonsense! Why don’t you listen to me?! You never would have taken these Frankenstein injections! It’s a total scam!”

When Carlita's eyes were enraged, her face was red, and her lips were full. She was making wild gestures to accompany her words, but Rodriguez was focused on the contour of her breasts shifting up and down. He found this extremely attractive.

After the fight ended, Rodriguez promised to join her for at least one session at the Tree Hugging Society, and with hand on heart, he would not use the injections.

He eagerly started to call his friends. His pal Bill had promised not to tell anyone about the fantastic opportunity, and so had Nick, Vihaan, and Zhao. They would not tell anyone; their lips were sealed. (Characterizing the message as a deep secret that should not be told to anyone seems like the best strategy to spread the news as quickly as possible).

Bill told his wife, who shared the news with her best friend and sister. Vihaan did not tell his wife, who was also a member of the Tree Hugging Society, but instead called his brother, who told his wife, who, in turn, called their neighbors. Soon after, the rumors swiftly traversed all strata of the society in the close-knit, small community.

The next time Rodriguez visited the pharmacy, he encountered the pharmacist in a different and extremely nervous mood.

“Did you really keep this a secret?” The pharmacist asked with an intense gaze.

“Sure,” Rodriguez responded. “I did exactly what you requested, and I didn’t even tell my wife,” He lied.

“Then it must have been one of the assistants,” the pharmacist sighed in frustration.

“What’s the matter?” asked Rodriguez in a most innocent tone. “Did the news leak out?”

“Half the town used the online prescription option of Medication4all for that new weight loss drug,” said the pharmacist. “Their whole stock will be sold out in no time.”

Rodriguez started to become a little nervous. His enthusiasm to share the news with his friends had now backfired and it turned out to be a reckless action. Would there be enough of the solution for himself? He immediately translated his nervous thoughts into a question:

“Will there be enough for everyone in this little town?”

“That is going to be a gamble,” responded the pharmacist. “If I were you, I would show up way before the pharmacy’s opening hours.”

Rodriguez made a stupid mistake. He called Bill to tell the story about the drug and potential shortfall and Bill told his wife, who informed her best friend, and so on.

\* \* \* \*

Rodriguez looked around in the middle of this exceptionally beautiful night. The fact that half the town was now curled up in sleeping bags was unfortunate – but there was only one person to blame: himself. He had completely underestimated the eagerness and desire of his fellow citizens to get hold of the new medication.

He and his friends were positioned about halfway up the line. The nervous lineup of citizens resembled the release of the first iPhone in June 2007.

Finally, Rodriguez fell asleep on the ground. His dreams took him back to his days as a college football player. He was at a party; it was wild, and he looked gorgeous, tall, slim, and energized. He flirted with women left and right, and suddenly - there was Carlita, shouting at him to come home. But he kept flirting, and one of the female college students slipped her hand in his shirt and whispered in his ear, “Wow, a six-pack!”

In the dream, Rodriguez ignored Carlita and took the beautiful college student outside when suddenly he woke up to the sound of a heavy truck door slamming.

## Chapter 2: The Lab

### *Two Years Earlier*

**Rosa Cavani, working for Medication4All, hears from her research team that their new variant of GLIP has spectacular results. She discovers a loophole in the original patent of the expensive new drug.**

Dr. Rosa Cavani stood in front of a lab table in her new employer's extensive research facilities. She looked out the window, which had a view of a magnificently manicured park. A few squirrels seemed to move at random on the grass field.

It was still early, and only a few lab technicians were in the buildings. The early hours were Rosa's best moments of the day. She had read through a large document, hundreds of printed pages. When it came to the details and the magic of invention, she still preferred to work on paper.

She had scribbled a large number of notes on the sideline, right next to a description of a molecule called GLP-1 analog. She shifted to a large screen, where the same molecule was presented as a large 3D structure. As she rotated the molecule, shifting it a little to the right, she looked intensely into the structure on the screen. She checked her papers and scribbled down a couple more notes.

With a sigh, she stepped away from the lab table and started to walk down the corridor for a cup of coffee. The high-end coffee machine offered numerous attractive variants of coffee: cafe latte, cafe latte macchiato, large double espresso macchiato, single espresso, double espresso, triple espresso, cappuccino with milk, cappuccino with oat milk, cappuccino with soy milk, just to name a few. Every selection could be completed with a number of sweet shots, including chocolate, hazelnut, vanilla, and cream. However, Rosa only really wanted black coffee because of the caffeine and the bitter aftertaste. At least the machine provided coffee made from fresh beans - this particular week from India.

She was greeted by one of her senior team members, Theodore, who had just arrived. He was the typical senior researcher in a large pharmaceutical company - a bit frustrated by the lack of academic success and dressed as if he was going for the outdoors—big shoes, a large beard, a high-tech windbreaker, and a rucksack.

"Good morning, Rosa," he said cautiously.

"Good morning, Theodore," was her reply. She sounded absent-minded. The nickname for Rosa in her previous company was "an autistic piece of concrete in a business suit".

To some extent, this was true. She could be extremely tough on team members who didn't deliver. Also, she was not the warmest communicator. Her reputation had preceded her arrival at Medication4All, so employees who encountered her in her first weeks acted quite cautiously.

"How did the mice fare on the new regimen? Did they lose weight already?" Theodore had performed a new set of experiments on obese mice, with a variation of an injectable drug to help the mice lose weight.

"It's really amazing," he stated, relieved that he could report positive results to "the autistic piece of concrete."

Rosa looked puzzled. "What is so amazing about the results, Theodore?" she asked with an icy tone. She didn't like the word 'amazing' to be linked to scientific observation.



Theodore's shoulders moved downwards a tiny bit, as if he was starting to shrink "The mice with the new variant have lost more than 20% of their body weight, compared to the controls."

Rosa's face started to light up. "What did you say, 20%!? Are you sure?"

"Yes, those were yesterday's results. It could be even better today," he said.

"And how did the new variant compare to the regular formulation?" asked Rosa, her voice showing traces of excitement now.

"I'll have to check my lab notes," stated Theodore, "but the regular formulation showed about 11% body weight reduction." His voice sounded more confident now.

"Terrific," exclaimed Rosa suddenly, clenching her fists in the air as if she had just scored a hole-in-one.

"Please don't share the data with anyone until I tell you," Rosa said as she got a little closer to Theodore and looked him straight in the eyes. "And please present all the data by 10 o'clock in my office."

She walked away, holding her coffee cup between both hands. Halfway down the hall, she turned to Theodore, who was still perplexed, and said: "Repeat this set of experiments in the exact same way as soon as you can, please."

When Rosa arrived back at her lab, she checked through her notes and had a quick look at the screen with the 3D molecule still in place. Her hands began to shake, and she had to place the coffee cup on the table. Her eyes reddened, and she began to tear up as she caught a reflection of herself in the window.

She was dressed in a generic business suit, which she owned in many variations and colors, the Angela Merkel strategy. Her silhouette was slim, a bit flat perhaps. She had a beautiful face, and despite her Spanish ancestry, she was a natural blonde as well. However, the lack of expression and charm did not make her attractive to men.

Her thoughts started to wander back to her youth. Until she was four, she had a happy life and nothing to worry about. However, after her parents divorced, her father had moved from New Jersey to California, so she had to stay with her mentally unstable mother. Life became a struggle, a societal survival of the fittest, and eating became one of the few comforting moments of the day.

What struck her from an early age was her lack of satiety when eating these comforting foods. Rosa could eat endlessly without feeling really full. By the age of 12, she was obese by definition. This meant that she was an easy target for being bullied and was never chosen for important roles in the school play or the cheerleading squad. She envied her classmates, attractive kids who were so self-confident that she felt embarrassed just to speak to them.

Rosa was lucky, with a fantastic set of brain cells and an exceptional IQ. This won her a scholarship in biology at an Ivy League school, where she finished 'cum laude.' When she graduated, she was still suffering from obesity and decided to devote her life to finding a solution not only for herself, but for all who suffered with her.

Therefore, she didn't hesitate when she was offered a key research position in the obesity unit at Biotechnica, a large American pharmaceutical company. Of course, the setting of a corporation lacked the glamour and reputation of a University Research Institute, but the upside was that funding never seemed a problem as long as you worked on a "medical need."

Soon, she started to work on discovering the pathways of satiety, based on her own experience that had made her obese. It took years before she finally discovered an effective strategy to decrease the weight in overweight mice. Against the advice of many, Rosa took the risky path to try and develop an injectable drug to make patients feel full. Her discovery created a variant of the natural satiety hormone GLP-1 that could not be cleaved by the usual enzymes. It was a breakthrough, not only in the development of the potential drug but also for her career. She shot up through the ranks quickly and soon had to report directly to the Biotechnica board.

What no one knew was that she had used the drug herself before it got any approval whatsoever. She had read about Nobel Prize-winning researchers conducting experiments on themselves before disclosing their breakthrough discoveries, so there *was* a precedent.

For instance, Dutch scientist Willem Einthoven was determined to find a way to record the heart's electrical activity with electrodes – radical at the time. His discovery resulted in the development of the electrocardiogram, which millions still use daily.

Then there was Australian researcher Dr. Barry Marshall, who, using gastroscopy, experimented on a *Helicobacter* bacterial infection within himself - since he did not believe that any ethical committee would ever approve his ideas. His research discovered that *Helicobacter* was responsible for gastric ulcers, debunking the belief that stress was the major reason for the condition. Because of his breakthrough findings, millions of people now receive appropriate medical treatment to combat gastric ulcers every day.

These impressive scientific narratives triggered the idea within Rosa to try her own discovery first. She still remembered the exact moment when she first injected the drug. In preparation for the moment, she worked even longer hours than before, step by step, to avoid any suspicion. Eventually, she became the last person to leave Biotechnica's laboratories quite regularly.

On one of these late evenings, she prepared a syringe for subcutaneous injection. Although she was confident in doing experiments in mice and rats, injecting herself made her nervous. What added to the anxiety was that one could never know how a drug that was successful in animal trials would play out in a human being. Moreover, the dosage was also a gamble.

Nonetheless she rolled up the sleeve of her left arm and prepared the needle containing the drug. While looking in a mirror, she started to sweat profusely and her heart began to race. It took her several minutes before she dared to place the needle under her skin, which she hardly felt because of the immense adrenalin surge. She injected the drug.

“Dr. Cavani?” Rosa jerked out of her thoughts. It was Theodore, who was accompanied by one of the other PhDs on the obesity project – a tall blonde woman in her mid-twenties. She looked like an older model of Rosa's self-confident classmates from high school - a ‘model PhD’. Her teeth were perfectly straight and so white it distracted Rosa.

“I just wanted to tell you that the novel variant has resulted in a 23% weight loss,” said Theodore. The model PhD gazed at Rosa in admiration.

“How about the regular formulation?” asked Rosa. Her thoughts had left the past completely, and she returned back to reality.

Theodore deferred to the woman who stated, “The regular formulation group lost 14% on average, compared to controls.”

“Show me all the results in one hour in my office, including the blood cell counts and liver and kidney function data,” said Rosa as walked away. Once back in her office, she again checked her notes on the GLP-1 molecule and looked at the 3-D structure another time.

The presentation of the data by Theodore and the model PhD was extremely professional. Although Rosa was not at ease when colleagues visited her office, her nerves were calmed by the impressive way the data were presented. It was amazing how quickly these young people were able to create such a professional and coherent presentation. The data left nothing to chance. The novel variant resulted in spectacular weight loss, even better than the regular formulation that was already on the market.

“Please show me the liver function data again,” Rosa politely requested. Besides the weight loss, the function of the liver was also a lot better in the group with the novel variant of the drug. Theodore noticed that Rosa seemed to be in control of herself now.

“Why is this so important?” asked the Ph.D. curiously.

Rosa smiled apologetically. “The liver plays a key role in how the body handles the intake of sugar due to the response to insulin. The better the liver function is, the quicker the response to insulin, and the lower the blood sugar spikes,” she explained. “The liver also plays a crucial role in regulating lipids; a fitter liver means lower bad cholesterol particles,” she added.

The Ph.D. smiled, her pouting lips opening just enough to expose her brilliant white teeth. “You mean LDL-C, LPA, and VLDL, for instance?”

Rosa was flabbergasted by the combination of her beauty and an exceptional mind. “That’s exactly what I mean,” she replied.

“Please repeat these experiments in the exact same way, even before we have the final results of the current set,” requested Rosa as she wrapped up the meeting.

After Theodore and the Ph.D. had left, Rosa took one last look at the 3-D structure of the molecule and her notes. She hesitated before picking up the phone to call the CEO of her current employer, Medication4All, Gabriel Jordan. He had invested heavily in the obesity research program, with Rosa as the new director. She felt the weight of responsibility every time he looked at her.

What complicated the picture was that Gabriel was the first ever man for whom she felt *any* affection. What exactly was it that made him so attractive? His raw muscular appearance? His charming grin? Or was it his intellect and wit?

Finally, she picked up the phone. “What’s happening, Rosa?” was his immediate response before she could even say a word. Apparently, her name showed up on his display when she called.

“I think we found the loophole in their GLP-1 patent,” said Rosa.

“That’s what you suggested a couple of weeks ago,” responded Gabriel, “What breakthrough are going to tell me this time?” he added sarcastically.

Rosa took a deep breath and replied, “We’ve developed a variant of the regular drug that circumvents the Biotechnica patent entirely and shows even better results than theirs.”

“Why don’t you come over and explain everything to me,” Gabriel said.

Rosa’s face flushed, and she didn’t know what to say.

## Chapter 3 - The Pharmacist

**Richard De Vries, a small-town pharmacist in the American Midwest, eagerly anticipates a large batch of an experimental cheap new weight-loss drug. When he reaches the pharmacy, he is confronted with the hundreds of citizens waiting in line.**

Richard De Vries always woke up early each morning. He looked out the kitchen window of his ranch-style house into the large backyard. The backyard had a rather simple design and contained only a few plant species. Richard could not bear any mess; therefore, he had opted for bushes and trees that did not lose their leaves every season.

As a child, he hated the storms that plagued his hometown in New Jersey. The weather created a mess in many aspects of his life. His hair got messy, leaves were all over the place, he had to wear an ugly raincoat instead of his regular coat, and he had to walk in dirty boots instead of his neatly kept shoes. Stormy days were his most unhappy days.

His Labrador, Bono, was currently one of the few uncontrolled elements in his life. The dog was still asleep at this early hour, his front paws twitching as he dreamed. But what on earth could a dog dream about? Was it his food or basket? Or was it the anticipation of getting a nice bone to bite on? Richard loved Bono to the extent that it compensated for the disorderly behavior of the dogs. One could never know when a mutt would start to bark or ask for affection, even despite the fact that dogs liked daily routines.

On this special day, Richard woke up an hour earlier than the usual 6.00 am. He did not like the tranquil of the early hours, during which he had to adjust his brain in anticipation of the day. It made him restless.

Richard suffered from the Asperger syndrome, which was a mixed blessing. He was gifted with an exceptional IQ and memory, but his EQ (emotional intelligence) was low, resulting in an endless array of inter-human conflicts in the past.

Richard made an espresso and had a bit of dark chocolate, one of the 90% cacao versions he loved most. His stomach could not bear a substantial breakfast at this early hour, but his brain needed some stimulus to get going and straighten his thoughts. He was happy to see that the leaves on the large evergreen Buxus shrubs were absolutely motionless. He had checked the weather app as soon as he woke up and had noticed, to his relief, that today would be almost without any wind.

Richard was still amazed by how he got involved in this special operation with Medication4All. The project was completely opposite to the stable, regular, and unsurprising life he was used to.

Rosa Cavani had first sent him an e-mail in anticipation of a phone call. She knew him all too well as they were college friends. Nothing special had happened, but they were exceptionally good buddies in the intellectual domain. They were both members of the college chess club—not the most glamorous circle, but a solid source of friends and social events. He had sometimes wondered what would have happened if there had been a romantic connection between them. In his imagination, she would have literally overwhelmed him in bed; her weight must have at least been double that of his in those days.

Richard had replied swiftly to her request, leaving his mobile number in the message. Her phone call came within minutes of his reply.

“Hi Richard,” began her enthusiastic greeting, her voice sounding more mature and a bit lighter in tone than when he last met her. “How are you, and how is Amber doing?”

Richard hesitated a few seconds before he could reply. He was involved in a messy and nasty divorce, not only costing him a fortune but also his nerves. He did not feel strong enough to tell Rosa the news about Amber.

His voice sounded rather thin. “I’m OK, thank you. I’m happy to hear your voice.”

“Thanks. Are you still playing chess?” she asked.

The pharmacist had been the president of the local Chess council, but due to the fact that his home was a permanent conflict zone, he had been forced to give up on the position.

As soon as he stepped into his own house, he was bombarded by criticism and blame for Amber’s bad life. Even when he started preparing for scenarios in his head for potential conflicts, he always lost the battle. Amber was a master at changing the subject or using her rage. And if that wasn’t enough, she would start crying and threaten to leave the house with their lovely daughter, Emma.

“The pharmacy is keeping me busy,” he explained, “and we’re starting to feel the pressure of online providers of medication.”

“Your pharmacy is the exact reason I call,” said Rosa. “Our company is looking for a trustworthy partner to try out the distribution and logistics of a novel injectable weight loss drug”. Her voice sounded very professional and convincing.

Richard had read a lot about these new drugs as a pharmacist looking for new opportunities. He was very enthusiastic about the innovative pharmacological concepts, but the demand for the drug in his midwestern town was negligible due to the outrageous price.

“Sure, these compounds could become real game changers if only the price was not so atrociously high,” he responded.

“My research team has found a solution for the price,” replied Rosa. “Within Medication4All, we aim to make scientific breakthroughs accessible for everyone”.

*Richard was intrigued. Would this mean that Medication4All could offer a similar drug at a lower price?*

“Would you be willing to sign an NDA before we continue to talk about the project?” Rosa asked.

Later, in an online meeting, Rosa explained the outline of the project in detail and the potential exclusive position of his pharmacy in the logistics chain. Richard also appreciated the digital prescription service and the online drug administration tutorials, recognizing their potential to enhance the project’s scalability.

Yet, although it was only remote, Richard was seeing Rosa for the first time in more than 20 years. She had the same determined and intense facial expression, but the shape of her face and body had changed dramatically. She looked delicate instead of robust and had the charisma of a CNN anchor, with a meticulous haircut, a business suit, and high-end fashion glasses. You could tell she was operating high in the ranks of the pharmaceutical company.

Richard felt a bit awkward and hardly knew how to react to her new looks. But Rosa did not seem to be aware that she looked shockingly different. Richard still looked like a somewhat smaller version of Bill Gates, a nerd in every aspect, middle of the road, neatly polished shoes, dreadful slacks, an almost mathematical haircut, and outdated thick glasses. Perhaps it was even more shocking that he had not changed whatsoever within decades.

They were online in Teams meetings for hours, their brains connecting easily, operating at the same intellectual frequency and energy—similar to their college years.

“The revenue per patient will not be spectacular,” she stated cautiously, sensing his nervousness. “But due to the scale of the operation, the pharmacy could still benefit substantially.” Richard immediately thought about the hefty alimony he had to pay for the next couple of years. Any addition to the base revenue could be of great help to continue to live in his current house.

After a pause, Richard replied. “Oh, that’s fine, Rosa, the money is just one thing. Most importantly, the project will help people who couldn’t afford the drug otherwise.” Richard had recently attended a special course in Socially Acceptable Answers, which had helped him escape from awkward situations. He started to relax again.

Richard snapped back to reality and woke the dog for a walk. “Come on, Bono Boy, let’s go for walkies,” he instructed in the childish tone dog owners use to talk to their beloved pets. Although Bono was still in a deep sleep, a dream perhaps, this was the only chance to walk the dog before he left for a long day of work.

Bono was a great dog for fetching, but few tree branches were to be found in Richards’ garden. So, Richard always kept one single ball to play with and made sure to collect the ball after the walk.

“Go, Bono, go!” Richard threw it a couple of times, which were duly fetched by Bono. Any droppings were immediately cleaned from the lawn since Richard could not stand the sight of the dogs’ brown remains on his perfectly monochromatic green grass.

Once inside, he noticed he had missed a call from an unknown number. *It must be the delivery truck driver*, Richard thought. Rosa had planned the project as a military operation.

Richard returned the call immediately. “Good morning, sir,” was the enthusiastic reply by the truck driver. “I’m on my way, traffic is smooth, and the truck’s cooling unit works fine. I estimate an arrival time of 6 am.”

Richard sometimes envied the social flexibility that he often saw in low-paid job workers. He checked his watch. “That’s all fine. I’ll wait for you in the pharmacy.”

The druggist packed up his laptop bag, put on a light beige coat (that somehow managed to make him appear even more faded), and walked to his garage. He turned on his hybrid, a shiny white Lexus SUV, and navigated through increasingly larger roads toward town.

First, he went onto a small private road connecting his house to the local road, then onto a provincial road, and finally to a short stretch of freeway that headed into town. He always drove to the rear of the pharmacy, entering through the backdoor and into the dressing room. He changed into his lab coat, which helped him adopt his role as the chief pharmacist. He put his bleak beige lab coat in his locker and took out a crisp, perfectly ironed one from the locker.

After carefully dressing the part, he checked his haircut in the mirror. One could never know if the change of clothing could mess up his meticulous haircut. He glanced at his watch. It was 5:50,

ten minutes before the little truck delivered the super drug. Richard felt the prospect of the day waiting for him and felt the excitement building up within.

He went to the toilet to ensure he was completely empty and nothing unexpected could happen. Losing air from his lower intestines in the presence of customers was completely unacceptable.

Once inside the pharmacy bay, he checked the result of the daily cleaning, which was always done by a Mexican cleaning lady. His finger moved over the counters and the tables; as usual he could not find a single particle of dust, nor a single grain of sand on the floor.

A *WhatsApp* message from the driver appeared on his phone stating, “ETA 6:02 am”

Just as he absorbed the information, Delilah, his chief assistant pharmacist, arrived from the back entrance. She had black hair and energetic brown eyes but wore little makeup. She was slightly overweight herself.

“Good morning, Richard. How are you today?” she greeted.

Appreciating Delilah's moderate tone and immaculate white attire, Richard responded in kind, setting the tone for the day ahead.

“Good morning, Delilah,” responded Richard after a short pause. “Doing well, a bit excited about the delivery of the new medication this morning.”

“Yes, I’ve heard a lot of enthusiasm for these weight loss injections,” said Delilah.

“Medication4All has reserved quite a large batch for us, but let’s see how many people really show up for the drug,” answered Richard. From experience he knew that customers could be quite indolent in picking up their medications - sometimes they stayed in the pharmacy for weeks.

Richard checked his watch again; it showed 6:01. *There’s no time for a coffee*, he thought; *I should just go meet with the delivery man personally*.

The pharmacist walked to the shutters in the front part of the store to have a short peak outside. With one eye, he looked through a subtle slit he had created with a finger. The most intense darkness was just starting to disappear, and a hint of the warm early morning light provided just enough illumination to recognize a highly unusual scene.

His one eye observed an amazing lineup of people curled up in sleeping bags—there were at least a hundred! From another angle, he saw a small truck approaching the pharmacy a few hundred yards away. Richard closed the shutter and started to gasp. A heavy pressure developed on his chest, a visceral pain. His stomach turned, and his intestines began to lose control.

“What’s the matter Richard?” asked Delilah, concerned. “Is something wrong?”

Evidently, Richard was not a ‘fighter’ type person, but more a ‘flight’ type person. His instinct urged him to escape the situation and retreat to his car in the back. However, this was not an option. A small release of air from his lower intestines caught him off guard, and he sensed that more was building up beyond his control. He tried to control his gasping and curled his finger again to open the shutter and look at the street again. In warm early morning light, he saw the truck had parked in front of the pharmacy.

The driver, a black man, jumped joyously on the pavement, slamming the door. The noise created a wave of movement through the line of sleeping bags. With the exception of a few, the

majority of sleeping bags started to move, and their occupants started to wrestle and fight out of the fabric as fast as they could.

What happened next was beyond imagination. As he closed the shutters, his parasympathetic nervous system was completely on fire now. Richard started to sweat profusely, and again, his intestines lost control - producing the biggest air escape in his pants yet. After a few seconds, he succumbed to the overwhelming sensations and fainted.



## Chapter 4: Real Estate

**Manuel Alvarez, CEO of Biotechnica, was obsessed with owning a dream house to outshine his family-in-law. The purchase of the house will depend on the financial success of the blockbuster weight loss drug, Cervelix. He invited Heather Vogue, his secretary, out for lunch.**

“Why don’t you just shut up Heather!” Manuel’s eyes seemed to be on fire.

He looked into the face of his baffled secretary. She was beautiful, elegant, and intellectual but had one disadvantage - she used too many words to explain simple things. Manuel could not stand this, given that he only needed a few words to understand what was going on.

“I just tried to explain that the company lawyer was looking for you Mr. Alvarez,” explained Heather.

Manuel responded with a cynical smile, “Why don’t you just say *the company lawyer was looking for you, Mr. Alvarez*, instead of the endless babbling you presented me with.”

The secretary looked puzzled. She had been taught to introduce a subject first and only then present the main information.

“I’ve told you many times that I want the most important questions and information in the first sentence, do you understand?”

Manuel sighed and walked away from the secretary’s desk into his immense office, which was decorated to impress. One of the walls showed a sailing yacht in the storm, with Manuel at the helm with the aim to impress visitors and show that he was a man not to be messed with.

Mr. Alvarez was not dressed as the typical Pharma CEO. Instead, he looked like an old-school Wall Street Banker, with a dark grey pinstripe suit, a crisp white shirt with long sleeves, and expensive cuff links. He still looked boyish; his dark hair was a bit long and perfected on a weekly basis by a high-end hair stylist (who understood the importance of matching his haircut to his image).

He changed into the traditional Ralph Lauren look once the work week was over, embodying a preppy and sporty aesthetic depending on whether it was a golf or a sailing weekend.

His first action on the computer screen was to check a luxury real estate site that only showed the prime listings of houses. He was eager to buy a new home—a very spectacular one—to finally impress his affluent in-laws.

He was married to Elisabeth, the perfect woman to stand behind a powerful man. Manuel admired her good looks, charm, social flexibility, liveliness, and intellect—an ideal host for parties at home. She came from a rich real estate family based in New York, loaded with old money. His father-in-law had been smart enough not to let the estate’s money mix with the new family members who joined through marriage.

Initially, this fact had not bothered Manuel much; he already had a trophy wife and the luxury of real wealth—the family yacht, the ski chalet in Vail, and a penthouse apartment overlooking Central Park.

However, he felt frustration creeping up on him, and in time, he started to compete with his family-in-laws. He was fed by the subtle look in their eyes, the hardly perceptible cynicism in their questions, and the cool response to his answers. This was infuriating to him.

He landed on the webpage showing his favorite house—large and impressive, with a spectacular pool, a helipad, a wine cellar, stables, and a spacious garage for his decent collection of classic cars.

The phone rang, and he heard the timid voice of Heather, his secretary, stating, “Chris is here for you with the financial weekly report.”

“Just a minute,” responded Manuel absentmindedly, with his imagination still in the dream house, impressing imaginary guests.

Chris showed him the previous week's sales and revenues, with a special focus on their spectacular new weight loss medicine and number one blockbuster drug, Cervelix.

Without too much marketing, the revenues reached nearly 100 million US dollars weekly. This meant that the profits for Biotechnica were stratospheric. Despite the numbers, Manuel reacted without much enthusiasm. This way he could keep Chris under control.

“Did I tell you that I heard Michael wasn’t satisfied with how you presented the monthly report to the sales team?” he asked Chris. The employee’s face grew red slowly, and you could see anger build up behind his eyes.

Michael D. Croft was the chief operations officer at Biotechnica and pretty much the same age as Chris. He aspired to become the CEO should Manuel leave.

“I had no idea, Manuel,” responded Chris with an undercurrent of rage. “I presented it exactly as he asked.”

“Well don’t tell him you got this from me, Chris. It was just to let you know and keep you on track,” Manuel said. “This kind of feedback may help you to avoid any backlash from the team,” he added.

As soon as Chris had left the office, Manuel started to look at his dream house again. Given his bonus, which was closely linked to the profit of Cervelix, he could certainly afford his dream house next year - perhaps even in the current year. *Imagine, he thought, how my father-in-law would walk through the dream house; it would beat him up, disarm him from the cynical comments and the humiliating look in his eyes.*

Manuel dreamed on. “Let’s have a look at the stables. I just bought a couple of racehorses,” he would say, slapping his father-in-law on the back. He would take him to the climate-controlled stables and then the garage, containing a selection of old Ferraris and classic cars. He was sure it would all turn his father-in-law's stomach and that the rage within Manuel would transfer into the old man’s rage.

The phone rang again and he closed the luxury housing site for a while. *I should concentrate on my work and not jeopardize this fantastic prospect,* he thought.

“Manuel?” It was his secretary again, “Your wife is on the phone - line 2” she announced. This was what Manuel liked—short, direct sentences without extra information.

“Hi Manuel,” Elisabeth greeted warmly. “Guess what kind of math scores Alec came home with today?” she asked, full of excitement.

Although Manuel could easily guess the answer, he replied, “Please tell me, I really have no idea.”

“It’s all A’s!” She replied. “The schoolteacher was extremely satisfied. I believe this will increase his chances of getting into Brookland High.”

Alec was their only child—a boy with good looks and a preppy style so pronounced that Ralph Lauren himself might have chosen him as the poster child for a photoshoot.

“Oh wow,” was the standard reply Manuel gave, although he was certainly proud. To see one’s own offspring succeed, especially a son, made Manuel feel as if his own genes were at play.

“I’m looking for a new home for the three of us,” stated Manuel. “I have found a fantastic place quite close to Brookland High.”

“But I’m happy where we live now – however, if you think we need it, please show me tonight,” she replied excitedly. In contrast to Manuel, Elisabeth wasn’t bothered about how their peers looked at them. She was an intrinsically happy woman.

Manuel suddenly remembered the incident that had catapulted him to the pinnacle of Biotechnica—an unexpected Christmas gift from his father-in-law about four years ago. The family had convened for the holiday, and Manuel unwrapped the ‘surprise’ gift which, from the shape, could only be a book.

After removing the wrapping paper, Manuel looked right into a photo of a group of grinning chimpanzees on the cover. His internal reaction, “*What the hell? Who gave me a book about a bunch of chimps?*” was quickly transformed into a mitigated exclamation of “fantastic” with feigned appreciation.

But the whole family was laughing at him, teasing Manuel with comments about seeing a bit of the chimps in him. Manuel hated being the laughingstock—this was a complete humiliation, and he was stunned.

He looked at the faces of the many chimpanzees on the cover. There were big ones and smaller ones, but the stupidity of the grinning was the same in every animal. His father-in-law laughed hardest, giving away that he was behind the ridiculous present. Intense rage was building up in Manuel, and he had to use all his control skills to not aggressively pull the Christmas tree out of the stand and throw it out of the window with all his force.

He looked again at the cover, and only then did he notice the title: ‘Chimpanzee Politics: Power and Sex Among Apes’, which further confounded him. *What the heck*, he thought again. *What could these stupid apes teach me about politics?*

“It’ll also teach you to have more sex,” quipped Robin, his brother-in-law and a total moron.

Manuel reacted quickly and used this comment to rescue himself from the situation. “Then I had better give the present to my father-in-law instead.” Again, laughter broke out, which deflected the ridicule from Manuel. Only then did he calm down a bit, but his Christmas was already spoiled. On their way back, a worried Elisabeth asked, “Manuel, what’s wrong? Was it the book?”

“Oh no,” replied Manuel a bit too quickly. “I think I ate a bit too much yesterday.”

“I think you drank a bit too much as well,” Elisabeth replied, saving Manuel from more embarrassment.

\* \* \* \*

In the following days, Manuel tried to avoid the thought of Christmas and the laughable ape book. How on earth had his father-in-law managed to almost push him over the edge, an emotional cliff, on Christmas day? He was thinking about a revenge gift for next Christmas. It was only after Elisabeth noticed that the author, Frans de Waal, was one of Time magazine's 'top 100 influential persons of the twentieth century' that Manuel picked up the book and started to read a few pages. Soon, he was hooked by the clever writing and the surprisingly complex political structure within a colony of chimpanzees.

One of the major lessons Manuel took from the book was that the best way to take power from an alpha male ape was to have the B and C males combine forces. Therefore, within the colony, the alpha male was especially busy stoking conflict between the B and C males to avoid being pushed from power. *This was amazing stuff and a killer insight*, Manuel thought.

Another lesson was that you had to have a strong female close by within the group, the Big Mama of the chimpanzee colony. To have the support of all females in the colony was also an essential survival element. What struck him most was the fact that if you added rewards to the colony—extra bananas for instance—big fights could be made to break out between group members.

With this in mind, Manuel looked back at his own career path and suddenly understood why he had not been able to take the CEO position in his two previous jobs. His strategy had been to team up with the CEO, which had already dramatically failed - two times in a row.

Immediately after the Christmas vacation, he started to team up with the CFO of Biotechnica, who was rather amazed by Manuel's change in tone. They started to talk a lot and even went out for dinners.

Meanwhile, Manuel kept looking for chances to attack the sitting CEO. It took until May before Manuel got information that could break the alpha ape's position as head of the tribe.

During one of their dinners, the CFO told him in a conspiratorial tone that he wanted Manuel's advice on a sensible topic.

"Please, tell me what's going on," Manuel responded. "We should support each other to the max."

"It is... how should I tell you....about the boss's ski holiday in February."

Manuel, adopting a fatherly tone, whispered, "What's the matter?" encouraging the CFO to share the information.

"The boss used the company jet to fly to Aspen, and didn't bring his wife along, but instead his female personal assistant."

Manuel's heart had started to pump vigorously, and he had to suppress a triumphant grin. Instead, he adopted a worried look.

"How did you find out?" Manuel asked. "And are you really sure?"

"Absolutely," the CFO responded. "The boss submitted quite a hefty expense bill based on the Aspen trip, and the company jet has a matching flight manifest on the exact same dates."

Manuels' heart skipped a beat. This was explosive—not only had the boss cheated on his wife, but this also involved a serious case of #MeToo, with the abuse of the company jet and company

funds for a pleasure trip. It was a deadly cocktail, and clever use of the information could blow the alpha chimp from his rock. Then Manuel could take the spot!

He waited a few weeks before acting on the delicate information which posed a potential scandal. Finally, he befriended a local journalist, who broke the news on the front page the next week.

Even *The New York Times* had picked up a bit of the news. In a damning interview, the CEO had to admit all his wrongdoing and was ousted the same day. Since Manuel knew what was going to happen, he had carefully prepared his way to the top. The same local newspaper reported on the new CEO, Manuel Alvarez, grinning from ear to ear, closely resembling the way his chimpanzee friends grinned on the book cover.

The telephone rang, and Manuel woke up from his thoughts.

“What would you like for lunch?” asked his secretary.

“A Caesar salad and YOU,” was his response. Having been intimate with her twice, he hungered for a third encounter. Alpha males just seemed to have the right to do so.

## Chapter 5: Storm

**The truck driver delivering the cheap weight loss drug to the pharmacy is threatened by the crowd waiting in line, desperate to obtain the drug. Delilah Mahmood, the pharmacy assistant who fled from the war in Syria, fires a shot to calm the crowd. Rodriguez is taken by the police to report the incident.**

Rodriguez could hardly believe his eyes. Within seconds, the entire line of people erupted into action upon waking to the sound of the slamming door. As one woman started running toward the truck, the entire crowd abandoned their sleeping bags, left their belongings, and surged toward the vehicle. It looked like a mob—a horde of hungry people, desperately fighting for a better life. It was pure savagery.

In the rush of the moment, Rodriguez and his friends ended up somewhere in the middle of it.

“WE WANT THE DRUG!” shouted a short overweight white woman dressed in large trainer pants and a tight t-shirt that showed her mega breasts. She was waving her prescription frantically.

“Yeah!” shouted a tall black man with a handsome face a bit like a young Mohammed Ali “We want the meds!” He was also severely overweight in trainer pants and sneakers and he too was waving his prescription.

Soon there was a stand-off between the truck driver and the huge crowd. The driver was standing in the back of the open truck, but he closed the door again when he saw hundreds of people were rushing at him. He was facing what looked like an angry mob so he took a small knife from his pocket and threatened to use it if needed.

“Not one step closer,” he yelled “or I’ll stick you all!”

His voice was a true baritone, dark, with great depth and determination. His powerful voice in combination with the small knife allowed him to control the crowd somewhat.

The crowd backed off a bit. “We heard there’s not enough for everyone,” shouted a short dark-haired woman of Asian descent with a big belly.

“Listen,” shouted the driver. “There will be enough for everyone, I promise!” (He was not sure about this last statement, but he needed time to get out of the situation). “But if you don’t let me take the box out of the fridge in the truck, *no one* will get the drug today.”

A collective understanding of the situation seemed to dawn on the crowd. While they were once competitors, they now needed to collaborate to have any chance of getting the drug. Rodriguez felt compelled to intervene.

“Please listen,” he cried out. “We all need the instructions and dosage information about this medicine. It won’t help anyone if we take the box ourselves.”

“I don’t care!” yelled a cowboy type in his forties dressed in jeans, a checkered shirt and Texan boots. “I want this stuff now!”

These words triggered the crowd to creep a bit closer to the driver again, who felt panic building up in him. “Don’t come any closer, I’m warning you all!” he shouted.

“I have a plan,” offered Rodriguez. The crowd collectively turned to listen to him, which relieved the driver somewhat.

“Listen,” he continued, “We all have a prescription, don’t we?”

“Yeah, sure, otherwise we wouldn’t be here,” yelled some people from the crowd. Most of the participants waived with their prescriptions in solidarity.

“Exactly. Every prescription has a number,” he continued. “We’ll use these numbers to create a line, to have an order!” The mob was silent for a second. He looked intensely into the eyes of the people. Due to his height, he towered over most of the pack.

“Why should we trust you?” shouted an older cigar chomping man wearing grey flannel pants, a white shirt and braces. “You probably have a low number!”

And in fact, this was true, and Rodriguez knew it. He was one of the first to apply for the online Medication4All prescription, knowing about it first-hand. He thought for a few seconds.

“I’ll give my prescription number to the person with the highest number,” he screamed to the gathering. This seemed to comfort most of the crowd.

“I think this is a fair deal,” shouted the woman with the mega-breasts.

“I don’t like it, it’s not fair,” yelled the black man who looked like Mohammed Ali. “I only heard about it when I came back to town after a two-week job. This is such an injustice!”

The mob turned to the driver again, moving closer to the truck. Suddenly the door of the pharmacy opened and Delilah stepped out with Richard the pharmacist hiding behind her. The entire mob looked all at once at the doorway because she was armed.

“Watch out, she has a gun!” cried Rodriguez. Some others screamed as well.

They all heard the gunshot, very loud and alarming. Within milliseconds half of the crowd went down flat on the ground and the other half started to run away in every possible direction. The only one who did not dare to move was the startled truck driver, who stood like a statue with a knife in his hand.

But none of this was new for Delilah. She was originally from Syria and had seen all this before. During the recent war, when a truck with food would arrive sometimes crowds could act as mobs, driven by hunger and their survival instinct. If a crowd went out of control, the only thing that really could stop the savagery was a weapon - a rifle or a gun. Even a simple shot in the air was enough most of the time.

Likewise, when Delilah saw Richard faint she knew this was a typical collapse triggered by stress. She had also watched through a slit in the shutters and saw the astonishing events unfolding before her eyes. She knew Richard had a gun somewhere in the pharmacy after a run-in with a morphine addict and quickly woke up Richard to ask for the pistol.

“It’s not a real gun,” Richard whispered. “It is just to scare people”.

“Tell me where the gun is. We need to save the driver!” shouted Delilah. Richard noticed he had wet his pants during the melee but tried to focus.

“It’s in the lower drawer, right under the checkout counter.” Miss Mahmood went to fetch the gun, a starter pistol for races. She checked inside the drawer and found it hidden under some towels.

Richard looked terrified: “What are you doing? Please don’t use that thing!”

“We have to stop them. You can hide behind my back,” she said.

Cautiously, Delilah opened the door, the gun in her right hand. Richard was shy, hidden behind her back. Once she saw that the truck driver was seriously under threat, she pointed the gun into the air, and pulled the trigger. The effect of the sound was exactly the same as she had seen in Syria. People either dropped to the ground or ran away.

Sensing that she had the mob under control for the time being, she took a chance.

“Y’all stay down!” She yelled. She took control of the situation.

“You,” she shouted at the truck driver, “take the fridge box, and walk slowly towards us.”

The truck driver carefully opened the back of the truck and took out the heavy fridge box. Cautiously, he kept looking left and right as he carefully walked toward the pharmacy. When some of the mob on the ground started to get on their feet again, Delilah once again pulled the trigger and a loud report from the starter pistol sounded once more. It was hard to distinguish from a real .

The crowd went down to the ground again, their heads covered with their arms. In the distance, they heard the sound of sirens, most likely the local police alarmed by the gun shots. “Now you listen to me,” cried Delilah. “The police are coming! If you don’t behave, there will be no drug for any of you!”

Her words and the threat of the gun seemed to extinguish the ferocious energy within the crowd. Once the truck driver reached the door of the pharmacy he was let through by the confounded pharmacist whose face still looked ghostly white.

“Now you all listen again!” shouted Delilah. The sirens were getting closer. “You get your belongings and just wait here. We’ll take turns, very orderly.” Her nerves had hardened and developed under far worse conditions than were unfolding in this little town, and this skill allowed her to take full control over the situation.

“Only when you hear your name can you step forward!” she instructed. These were her final words while waving the gun and she pushed the truck driver inside, closing the door.

The crowd seemed to have an emotional reset, similar to a crowd at a game getting upset by a foul by the opposing team, but then a relief when their own team still had the upper hand in the game.

With the siren getting louder, everyone saw the police car come hurrying down the street and skid to a stop. A long-time veteran police officer, Albert McGovern, stepped out of the car and into the scene. He looked in amazement at the assembled group of people.

Just then Rodriguez shouted to the mob, “Let’s just do as ordered by the pharmacist.” In reaction most of the people who had waited overnight finally gathered their belongings and formed a line.

“A gun shot was reported from this location,” stated the officer with a low voice he used to gain respect and authority. His real voice was a few pitches higher.

Rodriguez responded after a moment. “This is the kickoff event for a new type of medication we’ve been celebrating using a starting pistol,” he announced. Although Rodriguez only guessed, this was nearly the truth.



Police officer McGovern looked suspiciously at the assembly of people. A few spoke up in agreement with the explanation.

“Yeah, yeah,” mentioned some people. “We were just celebrating.”

“And what type of medication are we talking about?” asked the cop to the crowd.

“It’s a new weight loss drug,” responded the young Mohammed Ali.

McGovern’s gaze went down and he looked at his own belly protruding over his belt. A woman wearing black sweatpants and an oversized black sweater shouted, “If you want, I’ll share my prescription with you, Officer McGovern,”

Laughter broke out in the crowd, finally calming the nerves of most of them. McGovern did not know how to react. It could be perceived as an insult, certainly, but how on earth could he arrest this woman? He tried to save his face and authority.

“Well, one of you has to go with me to the police station to make a case report.” The cowboy with Texan boots teased the busty woman wearing the t-shirt. “Why don’t you go on down and share some more quality time with Officer McGovern - right now,” shouted the redneck.

Again, laughter broke out, and McGovern felt pressure building up. He had been taught to take aim at the biggest guy first if there was any trouble. He looked Rodriguez in the eye.

“You, (Rodriguez seemed shocked) yes YOU. You will join me down at the police station,” he bellowed, “NOW!”

Immense disappointment settled on Rodriguez, who seemed to be losing the chance to obtain the important medication. But Vihaan, standing next to Rodriguez, saved him: “Give your prescription to me bro, I’ll take care of it, no worries.”

Reluctantly, Rodriguez stepped into the back of the police car and waved weakly at his friends as the patrolman took off.

The door of the pharmacy opened and Delilah stepped outside - without a gun this time. “Ms. Temple may come in,” she said, her voice still loud, but her screaming was gone.

Shy - almost feeling guilty about being the privileged first, Ms. Temple stepped forward. She was a nurse, a mother of three and clearly took good care of herself, though she was visibly overweight. She was led in by Delilah with her generic GLIP prescription in hand, approved and signed by the doctor from Medication4All.

Five minutes later, she stepped out of the drugstore again, self-confident. Although nothing had changed, she looked happy and a bit triumphant. She had a small pharmacy bag containing a couple of syringes for the next few weeks in her hand.

“How did it go?” asked the busty fat woman with the leggings and tight shirt.

“It’s a bit scary at first, but you hardly feel it once the needle is in,” Ms. Temple stated, clearly accustomed to such procedures as a nurse. She added, “The crowd looked desperate for the meds in the little bag. Half an hour ago, they probably would’ve grabbed it from my hands but luckily, civility has returned to the people waiting in line.”

“Are you hungry?” was another question from the crowd.

“I’m still hungry but I was told it could take at least an hour before the medication kicks in,” responded Ms. Temple, acting a bit like an expert.

“**Mr. Aggarwal** may come in,” announced someone. Vihaan’s face went from tense to relieved. This meant that he would get the medication today. He stepped forward with his own script and Rodriguez’ prescription in hand. He decided not to discuss his ‘double order’ within hearing distance of the people waiting in line.

In contrast to what happened in the very early hours of the day the entire group, eager to obtain the magic drug, waited patiently in line the rest of the morning. People went in and out every couple of minutes, and at some point the pharmacy started to scale up the process - providing instructions and dosage information to three individuals at once.

\* \* \* \*

Rodriguez was released from the police station. He was standing in the warm morning sun when his phone got the text message from Vihaan informing him that he had obtained his prescription for him. The big man sighed with relief at this, but scrolling further down he saw several other notifications from Carlita containing a four-letter word starting with an F. He prepared a convincing story to explain why he hadn’t slept at home last night.

## Chapter 6: Yellowstain

**Richard, who had fainted during the uproar in front of the pharmacy earlier, reports to Medication4All about the delivery of the drug. Rosa Cavani is worried that one of the users did not get the right instructions about the injections.**

“Are you OK, Richard?” Delilah’s warm and emphatic voice filled the pharmacy office. Richard felt the moisture on his bottom though a diaper had absorbed most of what he had spilled. For someone who was already troubled by a bit of gas, this whole situation was far outside his narrow comfort zone.

Richard decided to be honest about how he felt. For some reason, he revealed his emotions around Delilah. “I feel totally miserable,” he admitted, his eyes cast downward.

Delilah came closer and, to his amazement, put her hand on his shoulder and looked him in the eyes. “Please do not worry. I won’t tell anyone, and given the circumstances, you’ve done extremely well.”

Richard worried that she could smell the faint odor of urine evaporating from his clammy pants. It was a total embarrassment, and yet she still left her hand on his shoulder.

“I think you should go home, Richard, get a shower and relax a bit,” she suggested. “It has all been far too hectic.” Richard looked at Delilah’s hand on his shoulder again. She had beautiful hands, long fingers, well-manicured but no ring. Normally, the gesture of a hand on his shoulder would have made him uncomfortable. A #MeToo incident? Or a #HeToo infraction? But it didn’t feel this way.

“I think you’re right, Delilah,” responded Richard, looking into her eyes. “But I’ll have to wait for the call from Medication4All for the debriefing.”

“I understand,” said Delilah. “I’ll run the pharmacy the rest of the day so you don’t have to worry.” Richard nodded, and she removed her hand.

“Let me bring you a coffee. Maybe you should stay here until you can go home,” she offered. This remark told Richard that the urine that had wet his pants could be perceived once you came close enough.

Richard’s feelings were all over the place, there was no orientation whatsoever. He had never really noticed Delilah before, and the only thing he knew was that she used to be one of the few female doctors in Syria. She had lost her husband during the war and had fled to the United States, bringing her son with her. It was obvious to him now that she had more skills than a lowly pharmacy technician.

After the first patient from the crowd had been instructed how to use the syringes containing the weight loss drug, Delilah took a moment. She took Richard to the aisle with elderly diapers - for those who are unable to control their sphincter muscles.

“Put these on quickly. This will absorb most of it,” she said sympathetically.

He took the diapers reluctantly. On the package he saw a smiling elderly lady, perhaps in her sixties, looking happy. *How on earth could one smile so happily while using one of these?*

Later, Richard was halfway through his coffee when the phone rang. He hesitated to pick it up, not entirely sure to what extent he should disclose the events in the morning. *“Was it a success? Or a total disaster?”*

“Hi Richard!” It was Rosa’s voice. “I am sitting together with Gabriel, our CEO. Can you hear us well? We are using the speaker phone.”

“Yes, sure,” he responded.

“Hi Richard, this is Gabriel here. Perhaps it’s best if we do a short round of introductions.” Richard hated this because most of the time it resulted in endless bragging about one’s achievements.

Rosa began, “I’ve told Gabriel a lot about you, Richard, so I guess the only dark horse on the call is Gabriel,” she sighed. (She also hated these “short rounds of introductions.”)

Gabriel told an impressive story about how he was raised in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Baltimore – Pulaski, and why he started Medication4All. He was from a single-parent home after his father, a carpenter, was accidentally hit by a stray bullet in a gang shooting. The bullet had nicked the aorta, close to his heart, yet despite the experienced medical staff at the famous Johns Hopkins Hospital, he couldn’t be saved - not even by their top surgeons.

After his father died his mother was completely devastated. As he grew older, he helped his mother take care of the house and his younger sister. But by the age of 14, he was already starting to see the inequity between his neighbourhood and the richer parts of town.

At one point, his sister got seriously ill with pneumonia because his mother was too hesitant to go to the hospital. She was afraid of spending money she didn’t have on doctors and medicines, but her daughter barely survived.

“Luckily, my sister is still alive and kicking,” stated Gabriel, “but this was ultimately the reason I started the company.”

Richard responded with admiration. He had completely forgotten about the moist diaper in his pants and hung on Gabe’s every word. He then offered a little respect of his own.

“I feel privileged to be part of this project, to create access to a miracle cure that will affect millions. Our poorest groups are hit the hardest by the obesity crisis and they should have equal chances to treatment if we’re going to defeat this,” responded Richard.

“Exactly,” stated Gabriel. “And now we would love to hear from you how it all went.”

Richard didn’t know how to best start the story. His speech started to falter. “It was weird...there was a long line, some people stayed overnight...they slept in a line just outside the pharmacy...”

Gabriel and Rosa tried to get the picture. “Was it like waiting in line at the Apple store to get the latest iPhone?” Gabriel’s voice sounded excited even as Richard did not respond directly to this suggestion. He was focused on telling his version of the story that was acceptable to the board of Medication4All.

“As soon as the driver arrived, the crowd woke up and hurried to the truck...”

“We can see from the prescription feedback that hundreds of people showed up. That must have been quite a scene!” Rosa said, trying to envision what happened.

“They were...*very* enthusiastic. And they still are... *very* enthusiastic,” Richard kept stammering, pronouncing these last words with a sigh of relief.

There was a pause in the conversation and Richard sensed that the board started to feel that his story was not the *real* story. He quickly switched to the activities inside the pharmacy.

“Providing the instructions, the consultations...went really well.” His voice started to stutter a bit less. “It took a couple of hours to give instructions to all the people line, but it really... really went well,” Richard stated with some conviction in his voice.

Rosa interrupted, “Our prescription system automatically checked the number of completed consultations and the total number of prescriptions, and we are missing one. Could it be a mistake that mister Rodriguez Hernandez did not get his consultation?” Rosa asked.

Richard remembered the chaotic scene, which prompted the police to come out and take Rodriguez with them. Did they arrest him? Was he released already? He felt the weight of the situation upon him, and perspiration started to develop above his upper lip. *He could not screw this up; he needed the business, the money. But he could not lie either!*

“Oh... yes,” he started stammering again.” Rodriguez had to go home for family reasons... but we will make absolutely sure he gets his prescription today,” Richard said.

There was a moment of silence on the other side.

“If we want this to work and to make it scalable, the numbers need to be exactly right,” stated Gabriel. “We will be scrutinized by an army of health officials and institutions. They’ll circle around us to see where we could fail.”

“I... I understand...” responded Richard. Delilah came back to his office again but kept slightly more distance now. She had another Tena Lady package in her hand out of sight

“Was Medication4All satisfied?” she asked innocently.

Richards’ sphincter muscles almost failed again. With maximum effort and without showing Delilah, he was just able to prevent disgusting fluids or malodorous air from escaping from his lower abdomen. He looked uncomfortable.

“The only thing that they mentioned was one patient consultation, the one that we should have provided to Mr. Hernandez, that tall, sports bar guy,” said Richard in a low voice.

“Were they upset about the missing consultation?” Delilah asked.

“They stated that this new drug and the unique system of prescribing the drug will be scrutinized heavily, so missing one consultation is quite a worry for them.”

“Let me call Mr. Hernandez as soon as I have the drug delivered to him,” said Delilah.

“Thank you so much, good idea” he said, “we must make the numbers right. We don’t want to lose the confidence of Medication4all.”

Richard got up from the expensive office chair and noticed a bit of moisture on the delicate fabric beneath him. The diaper moved down a bit, which gave him a weird feeling, and it started to feel a bit cold.

“Please use a new one before you enter the Lexus”, advised Delilah, “you wouldn’t want to have stains on the seats of your new car,” she teased, winking her left eye.

Richard went to the dressing room and locked the door. He took off his fancy church shoes, which were not affected by the events of the day to his relief, and pulled down his pants and boxer shorts - which were full of nasty yellow stains. Then he took off the diaper, which thankfully did not smell that much.

Delilah couldn’t have noticed much urine except for what ended up in his pants. He threw away both the used diaper and his boxer shorts and quickly put on the new Tena Lady, which felt dry and comfortable.

He started to understand why the lady on the package was smiling so happily. Carefully, he put on his pants to avoid touching the wet parts and then put on his shoes again. He looked in the mirror. Though one could see nothing of it from the outside, his face still looked like he hadn’t slept for two weeks in a row.

Deliberately, Richard walked back to his white Lexus and stepped behind the wheel. Normally, his mobile would show the way back to his home like a digital personal assistant, but today he was a couple of hours early, which his cell did not seem to understand.

The Lexus travelled smoothly back to his home, down the short stretch of freeway, and then onto the ever-smaller roads leading to his community — first a provincial road, then a village road into the neighbourhood and finally the narrow driveway to his house.

It was a muggy afternoon—the warmest time of the day—and the light was bright. The garage door opened automatically as soon as the Lexus was within 20 yards, sensing the transmitter inside of the car.

Richard stepped out of the car and opened the door into a large hallway. Suddenly, he felt the vast emptiness of his house, except for the dog. There was no life anymore; no Emma, no one to welcome him with excitement, asking him to play or help her do homework. He missed her sweet face, looking down from the stairs, calling, “Daddy, Daddy, you’re home!”

There were no more stories only a child could tell you, the small innocent conversations while sitting on his lap or the clanging of pots and pans while his ex-wife was cooking. It was silent; it was empty. Amber was gone; that was a relief for sure, but the silence, without Emma, was heartbreaking. Richard realized he had avoided coming home early in the preceding weeks to escape the emptiness. The house was simply too big now.

Bono came to greet him and gave him the unconditional love only dogs could give, which made Richard feel a little better. Falling into a depression should be prevented at all costs, thought Richard. Bono guided him to the back door. Most likely, the pooch had to relieve himself and then wanted playtime with his special ball.

Afterward, Richard took off his clothes in the bathroom, put them in the washing machine, and took a long hot shower. After drying himself with a cheap towel purchased from the local supermarket, he looked at himself in the mirror - naked.

He really needed to sign up for a gym. His body was starting to deflate, his muscles had atrophied, and his belly had grown a bit too big. It made him look older than his biological age.

He put on a sporty outfit—sneakers, sweatpants, and a sweatshirt and made a plan to get groceries. Not that he needed anything mind you, it was just an escape from the emptiness of the house and to be around people.

His phone beeped, indicating a message. It was Delilah texting that “Mr. Hernandez had already received a consultation, although not in the pharmacy, but online. The prescription and instruction numbers are now matching, and Medication4All is happy.”

The message ended with a smile. Richard went to sit on the couch for a minute, Bono at his side.

The next thing it was pitch black outside and the clock on his phone indicated it was 3.00 am. He had fallen asleep and had not even texted Delilah back. But it was too late now; it would be weird to send her a message in the middle of the night. He went upstairs to his bedroom and continued his slumber and when he woke up, the emptiness was gone.

## Chapter 7: Shot

**Rodriguez is released from the police station and arrives home, but not without picking up the desired weight loss drug. While trying to inject the drug, his wife, Carlita, who is against the use of pharmaceutical drugs, arrives and is infuriated.**

Carefully, Rodriguez put the key in the front door lock and turned it slowly clockwise to avoid making any sound. The click of the lock was hardly audible, and he opened the door cautiously while peeking inside the hallway. Fortunately, Carlita was not in sight.

He stepped inside the hallway and sneaked forward without making any sound. The only thing he could hear was his own breathing; it was a nervous, superficial, high in frequency breathing - close to hyperventilation.

The door to the living room was ajar, and he glanced inside. He suddenly heard the mewing of their cat, Rivella, which gave him goosebumps. He stood perfectly still and listened to it purr for a while. It seemed that Carlita was not home.

Once released from the police station he quickly called Vihaan who picked him up and gave him his syringes, which he gratefully accepted. It was THE solution, the gateway to a new life, and the door to heaven for Rodriguez.

They talked briefly on the short ride home, and both wondered what the drug's potential impact on the small town could be. Hundreds of citizens from the town were supplied with the generic GLIP, which meant about half of the population were on the brink of losing a bunch of weight and eating way less.

"I really have no clue what'll happen. For instance, what of Bill Taylor and his supermarket," commented Vihaan while skillfully driving through the towns center.

"I lose focus because nothing happens on these roads," he often said. Vihaan had learned how to drive in New Delhi, one of the most congested cities in the world, so he found driving through the small midwestern town almost too easy.

Vihaan pulled up in the driveway and took a moment to instruct Rodriguez about how to use the syringe. "It is as easy as brushing teeth," he said showing a grin with his brilliantly bleached white teeth. "You just put the needle under the skin and push the stamper down. There's really nothing to it; even a clumsy guy like you can do it!"

Rodriguez loved the camaraderie between the group of friends, which included a fair amount of teasing and good-natured insults back and forth. One had to be resilient, however, especially when laughter broke out and *you* were the one who was insulted. It was a delicate balance based on mutual trust and the strong bond in the group.

While still peeking through the living room door, Rodriguez suddenly heard the engine of a car on the driveway, getting closer quickly. "*Good heavens, that was Carlita; she will be on fire, furious, out of control.*" He did not dare to envision what could happen.

The big man panicked and quickly ran upstairs, rushed to the bathroom, closed the door and locked it. His breathing was heavy and deep now, and sweat had developed in large drops on his forehead. "*Whatever happens, I need to put the needle in before Carlita finds out.*" His brain was racing, and he started looking for the syringe in the surprisingly small pharmacy bag.



”Rodriguezzz! I know you are home...I can see the imprints of your shoes in the hallway,” shouted Carlita, her voice a growling, dark and beastly sound. “Where are you?!”

Rodriguez tried to stop breathing to avoid disclosing his location, but he soon discovered holding his breath under this circumstance could only last for seconds. He started to grasp for the syringe with trembling hands as he took out the package. It was easy to open the little carton box, but inside, the syringe was packaged in a high-quality sort of hard plastic, which was extremely difficult to open without scissors.

“What the fuck? Who on earth had invented this horrific way of putting things you desperately need in such a package?” You simply could not open it without tools!

”Rodriguezzz!!!!...you only are making things worse now...” her voice was going up in frequency, and her growling became howling. She knew how best to scare him.

His brain was cooking; his thoughts were scattered. Frantically searching through the cabinet's top drawer for scissors, he found only socks and stockings. He moved to the middle drawer which was filled with an array of makeup items. Dozens of lipsticks, face primers, creams, blushes, bronzers, serums, eyelash enhancers, concealers, highlighters, eyeliners, mascara, makeup sponges, and cosmetic brushes overwhelmed him.

Rodriguez sifted through the plethora of items, desperate to find scissors, but to no avail. No sharp objects were in sight to pierce through the stubborn plastic.

“Rodriguezzz?” Her voice growled again, even closer. He moved to the lower drawer filled with tweezers, eyeliners, sharpeners, needles—but still no scissors! At least there were some possibilities to break through the hard plastic.

“Rodriguezzz! I know where you are.” Her voice was in the stairwell now.

“Was she coming upstairs?” He would have to let her in at some point, but first he needed to take this shot! He cut through the package with the largest tweezers he could find and still had to use quite a bit of force.

Suddenly, there was a loud bang on the door. His heart skipped a couple of beats, his skin went cold, and he stopped cutting through the package.

“I know you’re here Rodriguezzz...open the door!” She was screaming with rage now. Rodriguez quickly resumed cutting, hands moving frantically, brain in a frenzy. Finally, he managed to create a small opening between the two halves of the package.

“What’s her name Rodriguezz?” She started sounding more reasonable now, trying to make it easier for him to respond and confess. He didn’t respond and opened the box, finally holding the syringe.

“I can hear you, Rodriguez. I know you’re here - just open the door and we’ll have a little chat about what happened.” Her voice was almost normal; just an undercurrent of rage was left. She used all her vocal and acting tricks to manipulate him. “Now, please just open the door.”

As Rodriguez's eyes scanned the instruction sheet, he saw the words but did not understand their real meaning. He tried to remember what Vihaan had said.

“I want a name, Rodriguez; who did you sleep with?” Her voice started to growl again, and she was losing control. “You’ve been out all night. I just want her name. That’s all. Who were you with?”

Rodriguez took off his sweatshirt and rolled up the left sleeve of his T-shirt. He took the syringe, his hands trembling and sweat drops falling from his forehead and removed the cover from the needle.

“What are you doing, Rodriguez? Why are you hiding?” There seemed to be an abrupt change in the tone of her voice, and she sounded worried now. “Are you using *drugs*?”

Rodriguez moved his right hand, containing the syringe, and studied the lines on the medication. His eyes were wide open, fixated on the verbiage, but he did not really read them—like the instructions, His stressed brain could register words but not interpret them anymore.

“One minute,” he shouted.

“Rodriguezzzz... I knew you were in - you can come out now!!” She shouted back at him, jingling the doorknob and banging on the door. She was small and delicate, but once infuriated she was quite a force. In his mind, he often compared her to a Jack Russel terrier.

Now the time had come to actually do it, to stick the needle into the left side of his upper arm. With trembling hands, he took a deep breath and inserted the needle through the skin, then deeper, and then with one big push injected the entire contents of the syringe into his body. Sure, it did hurt a bit, but not what he had expected.

Once he injected himself, he suddenly found his composure back. He assembled the package, the box, and the syringe and threw them in the bin.

“Rodriguezzzz... open now!!” The banging and yelling returned but it didn’t affect Rodriguez to the same extent. He was relieved and proud that he had injected himself.

“Just a second honey. I’ll open up in...three, two, one...” The door swung open.

Carlita was quick. He got a slap in the face and a kick to his leg. Her eyes were bloodshot with rage. “What’s her name? That whore! That slut! I’ll kill her with my bare hands,” shouted Carlita.

Normally, Rodriguez would shy away and hardly respond. But taking the step to inject himself and use the wonder drug, small as it seemed, meant a giant step for him as a person.

“There is no other woman,” he responded quietly.

He juggled his options as his mind became clear again, all of a sudden. The thought crossed his mind: *Should he confess about the weight loss drug?* But before he could act Carlita saw some remnants of the package and quickly grabbed it.

“What the hell is this?” she shouted while looking him straight in the eye. “Is this...is this...that pharmaceutical weight loss bullshit!”

Rodriguez nodded convincingly. “Yes, it is.” His voice remained quiet.

“But you promised not to use it!” Carlita kept screaming. It seemed to further infuriate her that he did not seem to be affected. “Why didn’t you use the garlic wonder capsules again?”

Disappointment crept into her response.

“The garlic wonder capsules resulted in three pounds of weight loss,” was his response. “But I started to lose customers due to the ridiculous smell.”

“I’m on the board of the Tree Hugging Society. This is a total humiliation. What do you think they will say!”

“It is my body and my health,” he responded, “and I have developed pre-diabetes. “

“You’re trusting the pharmaceutical industry. They are even worse than the devil, and you know it!” She started to shout again, feeling she started losing her grip on reality.

“A large part of the town has started the injections. I’m not alone,” answered Rodriguez.

“That’s beside the point. We’re talking about garlic capsules!” screamed Carlita. “I’ll have to call for an emergency meeting with the Society before we find out the pharmaceutical industry has taken over the whole town.”

Carlita had stopped talking about the other woman, which was fine. However, in her fight against the industry, her conspiracy thinking was starting to become worrisome. Complete families had been ripped apart by the polarization of COVID-19 vaccinations, which now extended to the entire pharmaceutical industry.

Carlita’s face started to change. Instead of intense eye contact, the furrowed brows, and the reddened skin - her chin muscles started to push up her lower lip, her cheeks flushed, and she started to cry.

“What a life,” she started sobbing. “I feel betrayed, always being the last to know.”

Carlita slowly walked away from the bathroom, still sobbing. This was the regular pattern; the crying started if rage did not work. Rodriguez knew she would soon say she would return to Mexico to her hometown—the only place where people care for her.

“This is enough! I have had it... I’ll pack up and fly to Mexico to my family—the only people who really care for me.” she kept sobbing.

Carlita walked down the stairs and started to call her sister in Mexico. He couldn’t understand what was being said, but it was easy to guess - Rodriguez was portrayed as the worst husband one could possibly imagine. The next thing they’d be talking about conspiracies in society versus the real people, and the thoughtless betrayal against mother nature.

They both gained a lot of energy from these conversations and sure, they had a point - humans *had* destroyed both nature and climate, but the rest was utter crap and complete nonsense.

Rodriguez decided to stay out of her way for the rest of the day. He took a shower and put on a new set of clothes - a beige chino and an oversized powder blue shirt with a sports bar logo. Blue looked great on him.

As he put on his sneakers he listened carefully for Carlita’s location in the house. He heard laughter. Apparently, her sister had managed to cheer her up again. And from the direction of this laughter, she seemed to be in the TV room.

Rodriguez seized the opportunity. He rushed down the stairs, grabbed his car keys and went outside to his car. He was relieved to see that Carlita’s SUV huge had not blocked his small sedan.

This was unusual because she loved and needed her big car—at least that’s what she argued, mainly because of her work for the Tree Hugging Society.

“It’s not easy to find trees that have the full potential to heal humans; not just any tree has the power to repair,” was her story. This meant that once a week she went on an expedition with the director of the Society, to find new trees in the countryside, parks and natural areas. For her, it was logical that the SUV should be her vehicle, not his small sedan.

Rodriguez opened this KIA, the smallest KIA one could get in the USA, and started the engine. As he backed the car out of the driveway his phone rang; it was the pharmacist. He decided to call back once he arrived at the sports bar and took off towards the bar.

The sun was still strong, and the temperature was just right—about 90 degrees. May and June were still OK temperature-wise in the American midwest, but July and August were too hot; it was a scorching heat that ravaged the town during the day.

*Why did I take the car in the first place? I could have easily walked.* He parked his car in the empty lot in front of his sports bar.

## Chapter 8: La Maison

**Manuel Alvarez gets a tour of the dream house, which he adores. His thoughts go back to his lunch with Heather, which had taken an unexpected course. He receives a call from the company lawyer telling him about the delivery of the generic weight loss drug to an American town.**

“Voila,” stated the real estate agent as she opened the door of the ‘dream house’ with a ceremonial gesture.

Manuel had yet to learn why she suddenly spoke French. She was good-looking by general standards, and Manuel guessed that she was a fitness fanatic—thin but with muscular arms and legs. She still looked young, but her neck betrayed her age - probably between 45 and 50. But he still looked at her from head to toe and back again.

“Entree,” she said with the flair of the Parisian waitress. To Manuel's irritation, the French continued. Her Parisian floral dress flowed upwards gracefully while making the gesture, showing even more of her muscular legs, but still not enough to see anything spectacular. Still, she noticed Manuel's interest and she was obviously playing with him.

As they entered, Manuel had never seen a hallway as big and spectacular as in the dream house—it had the volume of a small church. He took a couple of pictures using his iPhone to send to his wife. The realtor was very strict in avoiding the regular “house” or “home” words and kept referring to “*La Maison*,” “the property,” or “the estate.”

They continued to the living room—which had a spectacular view from the hilltop down into the valley below.

She was so full of energy, and Manuel wondered how she would perform in bed.

“You see, the view from the estate is not just spectacular, but it has a grandeur like those Italian villas on the hilltops of St. Tropez,” she continued enthusiastically. Manuel gazed into the valley and took a couple more pictures. It was indeed spectacular—the landscape looked infinite.

But his thoughts wandered back to lunch with his secretary. The hotel reception desk knew exactly what the arrangement was when they checked in, they were quickly, quietly provided with a room key and a nod. Sure, it was costly, and an escort girl would be less expensive, but that would never give you the exact same thrill.

To have sex with your secretary meant you could have sex with any member of the Monkey Rock to Manuel. It confirmed that HE, the absolute alpha male, could choose to have sex with just about anyone he wanted.

However, the lunch did not entirely go as he expected.

After both had quickly enjoyed a glass of Veuve Clicquot, he had undressed her aggressively with almost too much passion. About halfway into the act, she slipped herself on top of him and had repeatedly slapped him in the face. But to his amazement he actually enjoyed the humiliation during the act, and the face slapping gave him one of his best orgasms ever. But what did it mean? Did it mean he wasn't an alpha male? Or perhaps not even a ‘B’ or ‘C’ male? It felt as if being dominated by his secretary meant he was just another lower-ranked monkey, according to the Chimpanzee book.

*But what kind of science are we talking about? He was the absolute alpha male in Biotechnica, that was true, and he was about to become the alpha male for his extended family once*

*he purchased the dream house. So why was he being humiliated by his secretary and enjoying it? How on earth had this happened? Was it all fake science, scribbled down by another phony scientist, published in a pseudo-science Chimpanzee book? Did Frans de Waal just make it all up?*

When he and his secretary finally parted, he noticed she radiated a confidence which he had never seen before. It was present in every aspect of her—the way she looked at him, the way she walked, the way she opened the door, the way she glanced at him, the way she elegantly blew him a kiss - even the way she slipped out of the hotel room.

But soon, the humiliation started to enrage him. How could this possibly have happened? He thought of sending this pseudo-scientist Frans de Waal a clear email stating that his ‘chimpanzee science’ book was all rubbish.

“Mr. Alvarez? You OK?” The real estate agent broke the spell of the past. Her facial expression was one of worry as she couldn’t afford to lose this customer - Manuel was the only serious potential buyer of “The Estate.”

Manuel kept staring into the valley and responded after a few more seconds. “I’m sorry, what did you say?”

“Did you know that the property once belonged to John Wayne?” she repeated. She needed every reason she could think of to lure Mr. Alvarez into closing a sale.

“The view is indeed spectacular,” replied Manuel, ignoring the comment. His eyes rested on the distant hillside where he could distinguish a couple of large houses randomly dispatched on the slope. Apparently, these houses had the same spectacular view - but the opposite direction.

It was as if she could read his mind. “You probably see that the area has many impressive properties, but believe me *this* estate, “your” estate, has the most spectacular view of them all.”

Manuel just sighed and nodded, “I want to see the upper floor.” They walked up the stairs, though they could have taken the small in-house elevator.

“Even if you mainly use the stairs, the elevator is instrumental in getting things to the first floor,” she said in an effort to explain away that the elevator was, in fact, redundant.

Manuel took his chance and agreed, “My father-in-law will probably need it in a couple of years. He is starting to age and becoming a bit unsteady.” Talking about his father-in-law in this way brought some confidence back in Manuel.

“You told me about your in-laws on the phone,” replied the broker with a grin. “Since you told me they’ve made quite a name in real estate, I looked them up. But you must believe me, this property can not be compared to any properties in their portfolio.” At this, Manuel responded with an even bigger grin.

They entered the master bedroom, which was a masterpiece in every sense—the large bed, the rich carpet, the way the lighting was done, the ridiculously large walk-in closet, and the adjacent bathroom were all spectacular. And it was all done using the latest interior fashion designs: dark wood, light marble, aged copper, a forest green wall, a Vesuvius-red wall, and a black wall—all enhanced with expensive layers of wallpaper.

The realtor stood next to the bed with the index finger of her right hand between her lips, as if she was inviting him to jump into bed and close the sale between the impeccable sheets. He normally would have responded to this invitation with his usual bravado, but Manuel was not in the best of moods. Besides, this could result in yet another humiliation.

His switched subjects quickly. “The price of the property is way too high; it has the highest price per square foot in the entire region.”

“That's why the price is negotiable,” the broker replied without hesitation. “Talking about in-laws, the previous owner converted a large part of the garage into an in-law's suite, which is ideal. Your in-laws are nearby but not really within *La Maison*,” she explained.

Manuel paused for a while. “But does that mean that the total surface area includes the garage?” he asked with an undercurrent of amazement. His eyebrows frowned at her, and his gaze darkened.

The agent started to blush. The brochure representing the property had been intentionally designed to be unclear about this point. She pivoted.

“You’ll be amazed by the quality of the conversion,” she offered, attempting a bit of misdirection

“What do you mean? Is there “*La Maison*” and then also “*Le Garage*?” he responded sarcastically.

The saleswoman giggled then regained her composure again. “That’s extremely funny, Mr. Alvarez, so let's go have a look at that part of the property.”

They descended to the ground level, walked through the pompous hallway, and opened the main door. The stables and the garage were indeed in separate buildings. Manuel stayed in his sarcastic mode: “Well at least ‘l’odour’ of the horse shit won’t go directly into “le garage.” The atmosphere became awkward.

She laughed. “You have a great sense of humor.” She opened the door of the garage, which revealed a superbly designed space with real class. Italian glass windows and doors, beautiful wooden flooring, modern classic furniture from the likes of Le Corbusier and Eames, and a high-end kitchen (a German design with Gaggenau).

In fact, the styling matched Manuel's taste perfectly, much better than the pompous ‘*La Maison*’. He took a lot of pictures and the look in his eyes was intense with admiration. The real estate agent sensed his rising interest.

Manuel was entirely sure he wanted the house – *La Maison* - the Estate - the property, but he needed time. It would be two more months before his stock options were released, he began to panic.

His armpits became wet, heart rate went up along with his breathing frequency. In response he tried to inhale deeply and slowly through his nose as he was taught. With trembling hands he sent the pictures to Elisabeth, all the while trying to avoid a panic attack.

The real estate agent looked at him intensely. “We could make it into a great deal if you decide today.” She sensed her chances.

“What do you mean?” asked Manuel.

“Let me call the owner and see how we could get the price per square foot down to your comfort zone.” She squeezed his arm gently and walked outside with her mobile.

*My god, she smells way too attractive.* Manuel wondered what fragrance she used.



At a distance, he heard her talking to someone, apparently the owner.

Manuel started to dream again. He imagined how he would invite his in-laws over to the estate.

*Please come over for dinner, and you could stay overnight in Le Garage.* His puzzled father-in-law would not know what to say. He would then show him the elevator in the main property and say, “In a few years, this will come in handy for you, don't you think so?”

Not a single one of his in-laws properties could match the classy interior design of the annex house, and Manuel was thrilled at the prospect of besting them.

“The square foot price will be lowered to 850 dollars,” announced the broker triumphantly. “But for that, you'll have to decide today.”

Manuel did not respond immediately. “What do you think, Mr. Alvarez?” She came one step closer to him, her breasts almost touching his body. They were not large but seemed to start perfectly right below her clavicles and pointed straight forward. She inhaled deeply and then exhaled, her breasts coming even closer.

“Let's do it,” he said cautiously, quietly

“What'd you say?” queried the realtor.

Manuel realized this was not how he should act as CEO of Biotechnica, or as the absolute Alpha male, or even as the buyer of such an impressive estate.

“LET'S DO IT!” he exclaimed, while metaphorically beating his chest.

“I love it, I knew it, I sensed it,” exclaimed the real estate agent. “I've already brought champagne. I knew you'd be the perfect owner of the property!” she said almost shouting.

She ran to her SUV with ecstatic movements and Manuel admired her very muscular and masterfully sculpted *derrière*. Michelangelo would have been proud of having made it. She opened the back of the car and took out a bucket of ice with an expensive bottle of champagne in her right hand and two glasses in her left hand.

They both emptied their first glass quickly while standing next to the garage. She happily poured another one, which was also emptied quickly. Soon the alcohol rush started to take effect and she drew closer to him, her lips parting just the slightest bit.

Abruptly his phone rang, and it caught Manuel by surprise. “Please pick up; it's probably your wife. You should congratulate her on *La Maison*.” teased the saleswoman.

Manuel took his phone from the inner pocket of his striped suit jacket and looked at the screen. It was his company lawyer again. The same screen also showed a series of text messages stating that the company lawyer needed to call him urgently.

He picked up the phone with an apologetic smile, signalling that their act had to wait a bit.

“What's up? What's so damn urgent?” Manuel then lowered his voice. The broker could hear an agitated male voice, not his wife, rattling off a story and apparently distressing the hell out of her client.



“What the fuck?” exclaimed Manuel. “Did those bastards drug an entire town?” The realtor heard an affirmative response, although she could not exactly hear what was being said. Manuel ended the call and looked with despair into the eyes of the baffled real estate agent.

“What’s going on, Mr. Alvarez? You look awful!” she said, concerned.

Manuel went from despair to rage. He took his mobile and smashed it on the ground. The phone stayed in one piece, but the screen broke. In silence, he walked away with large, angry steps to his car. The waiting driver quickly opened the back passenger door and closed it with a bang. She heard him shout, “Go, go!” as the car raced away from the estate.

The broker stood near the garage, deserted, with a second full glass of champagne still in her hand.

## Chapter 9 Intestines

**Rodriguez goes to work and feels intense satiety after injecting the drug. But soon, serious abdominal pain develops, and Rodriguez is rushed to the hospital. There, he finds out that he accidentally took an overdose, and the medical team must report his case to the FDA.**

It was a quiet day in the sports bar. There were no important games planned for this afternoon or the evening in any major sports genre —not hockey, not football, not baseball, not even basketball. Sure, there were sports to watch, as always, but not the sports that attracted the crowds.

A really good tennis tournament was on (via satellite) and displayed on TVs throughout the bar, but hardly anyone watched. Despite the beauty of the game, tennis is sadly underappreciated these days, perhaps caused by the lack of identifiable American heroes in the sport.

Rodriguez started to clean the countertop, the glasses, the plates, the cutlery, and the various beer taps that lined the bar. He loved these quiet days, and he loved that his business followed the rhythm of the various sports franchises —the NHL, the NBA, the MLB, and the NFL. He was currently preparing for an important game scheduled for tomorrow night.

Barmaid Sandy, a thin blonde girl dressed in blue jeans, was sweeping the floor. Even with a nose ring (in her cute nose) and a number of small tattoos on her neck, she was a very good-looking college dropout. Her whole appearance screamed 'vegan!' until proven otherwise, but she was a solid employee.

She kept an eye on her customers and understood that if beer glasses reached the point of being almost empty, she just continuously offered new beers to the packs of fans until told otherwise. This direct approach seriously increased the receipts from the bar, and her tips for the day.

Sandy didn't like any sports in particular but saw game day as a chance to run the show. During playoffs she coordinated a team of other college dropouts with fascinating efficiency, resulting in waves of full beer mugs flowing out from the bar into the energetic crowd then coming back as tides of empty glasses.

Along with the ocean of beer came the waves of snacks: nachos with cheese, hotdogs with onions, big greasy hamburgers, and French fries made with a secret Belgium recipe. It all tasted delicious, but it was also extremely salty and created a never-ending thirst - which required a tsunami of beer to quench it. Rodriguez called the beer, the food, and the game his Golden Triangle.

"I've made a snack for you, boss," she said. Sandy's voice was a bit darker than her physical properties would suggest. "I've put in on the corner of the bar," she added with a smile.

Rodriguez looked at the basket of seasoned nachos and golden fries but felt no urge to eat them. *Could this be the drug starting to kick in?*

His appetite usually was an insatiable and unstoppable obsession with food — it just never went away. He had only been truly satiated by food on a few occasions.

He once went to an all-you-can-eat Argentine Steak **event** with Vihaan and Bill. While the other two had stopped eating after three gigantic steaks, he had managed to finish four in one sitting. The result was a feeling of total satiety for the next twenty-four hours. He still remembered that day, when he could finally enjoy being detached from his usual restlessness, his continuous search for food and his desire to eat.

Rodriguez looked at the nachos again.

“What's up boss? They're really good,” claimed Sandy with a big smile on her face. Her grin lifted her nose ring slightly upwards.

“I had a tough night,” replied Rodriguez. “Together with Vihaan and Bill, we were in line all night waiting for this new weight loss superdrug.”

“You were in that line at the pharmacy?” asked Sandy with surprise. “The videos are all over Twitter and Instagram. That delivery truck was almost attacked by you guys.”

She turned and looked directly at the barkeep, “Why'd you do that? The driver really looked scared.”

“I guess we were all desperate to obtain the first batch of the drug,” stated Rodriguez.

Sandy kept sweeping the floor. Rodriguez decided not to disappoint her and cautiously took a chip from the basket. He chewed slowly and finally swallowed the pieces. Almost instantly, he felt a level of satiety that far surpassed the Argentine Feast — the four-steak dinner. It felt as if he had just eaten ten Argentine steaks!

He looked again at the nachos but could not take another bite. There seemed to be a huge force in his brain opposing eating more.

*“Don't be ridiculous, boss.” They're really good!* Her voice echoed in his mind.

Rodriguez demonstratively touched his belly, indicating that his stomach was full.

A splash of sunlight revealed Pjotr, the chief cook, coming in to prepare for the evening shift. He had the typical Polish physique - not very tall, broad-shouldered, muscular, with a short, thick neck and small but friendly eyes.

“Hey boss, enjoying the nachos?” Pjotr was a pleaser; he always wanted to say nice things. But after hearing the word “nachos,” Rodriguez's stomach started to turn— the word gave him a slight feeling of nausea.

“Hi Pjotr, yes, the nachos are very good - thanks,” he replied. They both looked at the unfinished nacho bowl. Pjotr paused, nodded, and continued his way through the large door to the kitchen.

Just then a regular customer, an elderly man, came to the bar, holding an empty beer glass in his hand. “Could you fill this one up again, Rodriguez,” he requested.

The barman took the glass as the man just kept rattling on about something. Rodriguez knew he lived alone and had not a single family member within the entire county.

“This Russian player is really a hard hitter. His racket strikes like a rocket; I don't think this Croatian fella has a chance,” he said referring to the match on TV. He was licking his lips while talking, like the elderly sometimes do.

Suddenly, the customer looked intently at Rodriguez. “Are you OK, sir? You don't look too well.”

Rodriguez handed him a full glass of beer, “You're right; I hardly slept last night. I have definitely felt better.”

The man nodded and walked away, taking his beer carefully with him. Yet slowly, Rodriguez's intestines began to cramp up, his belly was distending, and he felt pressure building up in his gut. He started to sweat profusely, developing nausea. Rodriguez sensed that he had to act quickly to avoid embarrassment, so he rushed to the men's room, picked the nearest stall, pushed down his beige chinos, and sat down as quickly as he could.

Nothing but a loud and impressive release of gas came out. Followed by another. Inconveniently, his cell phone rang - it was Carlita - he ignored it. More farting continued.

A second call came in from Vihaan and he answered for some reason, as even more air squeaked out of his flapping anus.

"I'm not hungry, man, this is impressive!" Vihaan shouted enthusiastically, "How about for you?"

"I'm not doing too well," replied Rodriguez while trying to avoid the release of another bout of gas. It was quite an effort.

"What I find really amazing is that a single syringe will last for an entire month," Vihaan said, staying in his own excited mood. He didn't seem to notice what his friend had actually said.

Rodriguez paused for a second, suddenly realizing that he had injected the entire syringe, an entire month of the superdrug, into his body - instead of the weekly dose! He started to sweat even more, and the nausea was building up to a breaking point quickly.

"Have to go, call you back," he finished hastily.

He quickly raised from the toilet, made a U-turn, and started throwing up—his pants still lowered to his ankles. The gates were now open at both ends. Not much came out, a bit of nacho and some stomach fluid, but it was still an enormous relief. But soon, his intestines started to build up pressure again, so he decided to remain in position in case another swell of nausea would take him by surprise.

His foggy brain tried to make sense of the situation. *He had injected himself with an entire month's worth of medication, four times the recommended dose. This meant that he had seriously overdosed himself! Should he call Richard? Maybe Carlita could pick him up? Or maybe he should drive to the hospital immediately.* He knew this was serious.

He was hardly able to speak at this point, so calling the pharmacist wasn't a good idea. Calling crazy Carlita was out of the question as well - He thought for a moment.

All at once he pulled up his pants and felt for the car key, which, to his relief, was still in his pocket. He opened the stall door and staggered slowly to the sink, where he washed his hands and drank a sip of water to get rid of the awful acidic taste in his mouth.

Now, he had to cross the bar room to reach his car—which was the big hurdle. He had to wait for the right moment, not too much intestinal pressure and not too much nausea.

After he found enough courage, he quickly opened the door from the men's room, hurried through the bar room, stepped into the bright sunshine of the late afternoon, and rushed to his car.

He was feeling so miserable the simple act of starting the car was quite a struggle. However, he finally managed to get the car onto the main roadway outside town and he carefully steered the vehicle through the busy afternoon traffic. Although it was a short ride—ten minutes at the most—

every minute felt endless. His intestines felt as if a large propeller was rotating inside, and he had to fight back the urge to throw up continuously. He heard drivers honking left and right, which just fuelled his drive to get to the hospital immediately.

The facility was located in a business park and was rather large for the small town, because it functioned as the main hospital for the entire county. He drove the car to the emergency department and left it running in the parking lot without closing the doors. He hurried inside and entered the first men's room he could find, located right next to the reception desk.

He slammed the bathroom door just as the immense pressure that had built up in his gut released and exploded; he barely made it. It took him at least 10 minutes to gather his composure and stumble over to the receptionist. He stood there, pale and sweaty.

“How may I help you, sir?” The emergency department receptionist met him with an awkward look, especially because Rodriguez was balancing from his left to his right foot and backward to help contain the ever-changing intestinal pressure from escaping. She also noticed that he had spent quite some time in the men's room.

Rodriguez could hardly make a sound but managed to say: “I think... have overdosed myself... with a new drug...”

“You *think* you’ve overdosed yourself, or you’re *sure* you have overdosed yourself?” she asked with a dominating voice.

Rodriguez could only nod while he kept shifting his balance from left to right, maximizing his effort to prevent the flatulence building in his intestines. Her gaze changed into a perplexed look and then concern, as she picked up the house phone. “Quickly, please. We have an OD case here, code one” she said with alarm.

Rodriguez didn't understand why the receptionist acted as if it were a true emergency case. But in the blink of an eye, two nurses and a doctor stormed the reception desk, took his arms on both sides, pushed him into a wheelchair, and rolled him into the Emergency Department area. They slid him onto an empty gurney, covered him with a sheath, and started an IV drip in his right arm.

“What drug did you take, sir?” asked an elderly nurse who had seen overdose cases of this nature before. “The sooner you tell us, the better we can help you,” she said hastily in a loud voice. Questions needed to be answered correctly the first time in the ED so as not to waste a single second.

But Rodriguez didn't know what to say or how to react; he was overwhelmed by all the activity and the rush of the medical teams. To his embarrassment, another loud thunder fart was released from under the bed sheet.

The young male ER doctor was a small, thin guy with glasses, curly dark hair, and a pale face. His nostrils flared slightly as he looked first at his obese patient and then at the source of the thunder. Despite the embarrassment, Rodriguez started to feel relieved.

“This argues against a heroin overdose since that results in constipation,” stated the physician. The elderly nurse nodded fiercely while helping another young nurse find an accessible vein to insert an IV needle. Rodriguez felt a sharp pain in his arm but tolerated this rather well, due mainly to his elevated adrenaline levels.

The doctor touched Rodriguez's shoulder. “What drug did you take, sir, and how much – what dose?”

Rodriguez felt even more relief as the IV kicked in. He was happy to be able to speak again: “It’s a new weight loss drug provided by Medication4All, generic GLIP. I got it from the pharmacist this morning, but I injected four times the recommended dose this afternoon - by accident.”

The ER doctor looked puzzled. He had heard about such research, certainly, but he wasn’t aware an experimental weight loss drug had reached his unremarkable midwestern town, where obesity was the norm.

“We’ll still check the blood for heroin, morphine, amphetamine, ketamine, MTC, XTC, GHB, alcohol, cocaine, and benzos,” instructed the doctor while shining a penlight in Rodriguez’s eyes.

“No pinpoint pupils, which further argues against opioid overdosing,” he thought aloud.

The assisting nurse hastily stepped away with a vial containing a dark red blood sample from the IV access from Rodriguez’s right arm.

“What’s the name of the drug, sir?” asked the young doctor again.

“It’s called generic GLIP, doctor,” replied Rodriguez, “from ‘Medication4All.’”

“Let me give a quick call to the FDA,” said the doctor to the elderly nurse as they walked away. Ambitious, he was thinking about reporting the case to some high-ranking medical journal. But to succeed in that, he had to be the first.

## Chapter 10: The Gym

**Rosa Cavani is told that the FDA is investigating the generic GLIP overdose case. Gabriel Johnson, the CEO of Medication4All, is worried that this could spell trouble for their drug launch, and there are fights over the consequences.**

Rosa Cavani did her regular exercises in the gym, not that she liked it. She saw it as the regular maintenance of her body and mind. Three times a week, she had to overcome quite a bit of resistance to take the time and go to and workout. To avoid any reasons not to go, she completely structured the visit in an almost autistic way.

First, she signed up for classes, creating social pressure and social belonging. Second, she prepared her bag the day before the visit to the gym, knowing that the hesitation to go exercise would be less. Third, she had signed up for a gym located between the Medication4All research facility and her apartment, which meant that she literally passed the health club on the way home. And finally, she had purchased expensive aerobics outfits, which created guilt if they were not used.

The whole scheme to get her to the gym in the first place also meant that she didn't like to be distracted once she was working out, doing her body maintenance.

That was the exact reason that when she felt a message came in on her iWatch, she simply tried to ignore it. She followed the instructions of the fitness coach, a muscular (but not overdeveloped) 25-year-old black man with energetic eyes and the voice of a drill sergeant.

"Three more times, and then we'll get back to the abs again." She lifted the weights three more times, stretched her arms above her head, and then sat down for another round of sit-ups.

"We're down to 20 now." The mighty voice of the instructor roared through the moist air in the gym.

While doing her exercises, Rosa couldn't resist checking her watch. She skillfully touched the tiny screen while doing her last round of sit-ups. The message came from Gabriel.

"Good and bad news." This simple message set Rosa on alarm. Gabriel had used this message twice, and both times, this was linked to pivotal moments in her life.

The first was an intense meeting two years ago with a large group of patent lawyers who had studied the massive document she had produced about their variation of GLIP. They fired a bunch of questions at her as if she were the suspect in a serious crime. The cross-examination only ended when an elderly lawyer, who had said nothing so far, stated that "she has answered all the critical questions with sufficient evidence to assume that the variant was indeed different from the original GLIP, and that the variant did not breach the original Cervelix patent.

It was also made clear to her that the generic GLIP seemed to perform even better than the original - although no head-to-head comparison had been performed to date.

The rather icy atmosphere in the board room of Medication4All had suddenly changed, and the entire team applauded her performance and hard work.

"It is really a genius discovery to find a loophole in the original patent for GLIP, it seemed rock solid at first," announced Gabriel.

“Only the founder of the original GLIP could reveal this flaw in the patent and design a viable alternative,” replied the elderly patent lawyer. But for Rosa, she saw nothing but the well-paid patent lawyer’s grinning white teeth and their enthusiastic white faces.

“This is all good news,” Gabriel continued. “But the bad news is that once we release our generic, a drug war will be started by Biotechnica.”

This remark triggered the old fears hiding deep within Rosa - the valid concerns she had for the Biotechnica board and especially Manuel with his aggressive nature. Apparently, her distress had been visible on her face ever since Gabriel had ‘comforted’ her by saying, “We’ll fight the good fight, Rosa, no worries.”

The second time was not very long after the patent meeting, a few weeks later. Rosa had stepped into Gabriel’s office, but after he had put the phone down, his face was in anguish.

“What’s the matter, Gabriel? I haven’t seen you this way before,” she offered.

It turned out that his marriage was in a big crisis, and he didn’t know how to fix it.

“I have no experience whatsoever,” replied Rosa, “but the one thing I know is that you have to concentrate on the well-being of your children first, irrespective of how the marriage will continue.”

This remark comforted Gabriel since that was exactly how he dealt with his family. They spoke for at least an hour about relationships, about life in general, and about the struggle to find the right work-life balance.

Afterwards Gabriel asked about her own state of affairs, and Rosa shyly confessed that she had strong feelings for him emotionally.

Gabriel blushed and responded, “The good news is that I have very strong feelings for you as well, Rosa, but the bad news is that I could never leave my family after the hardships we’ve overcome.”

They never talked about the matter again; it was as if an unspoken love affair existed between them, which was only ever expressed in small gestures - a quick exchange or a glance - and in all the other subtle signs of mutual admiration—yet not visible to any member of the Medication4All team.

Rosa returned to the present and while finishing her sit-ups she wondered what the good news - and more importantly what the bad news - meant this time. Obviously, it had to do with the release of the drug in the American Midwest.

“Please concentrate; the next exercise is burpees,” said the mighty voice directing the group. The trainer stood with his arms folded and his legs wide apart in a total fitness stance.

Rosa hesitated to leave the fitness class, sensitive as she was to social pressure as all eyes would be on her. Burpees were one of the last exercises before the cool down period.

She hastily finished the exercise but felt stressed instead of relaxed during the cool down. Why was time pressure so stressful? The clapping of the hands meant that the gym session ended, so Rosa hurried to her car, picking up her expensive fitness bag on her way out.

“What’s up, Gabriel?” she said into the mobile, still breathing heavily from the exercises.



“You don’t have to be that nervous after my message.” They both laughed. Gabriel sounded relaxed. “What do you want first, the good or the bad?”

Rosa hesitated for a split second. She could still feel the immense stress of the last week’s chaos before the drug launch.

“Best to tell me first about the good news,” she replied.

“Well, the good news is that social media picked up on the GLIP story very quickly; the posts were shared to thousands online and some videos went viral, which also means that the newspapers will soon be covering the story.” His voice was excited now.

“Wow, that sounds very good. This means that your strategy to deliver the first batch to a single town has worked out well.” Rosa followed Gabriel’s excitement with the news.

“This is a total relief,” sighed Gabriel. He looked visibly more relaxed.

“So, what’s the bad news, Gabriel?” asked Rosa gripping the wheel of her car with both hands.

“Let me tell some more ‘good news-bad news’ first,” he continued. “The first group of patients was so crazy for the new drug they camped out the night before the launch in desperation and fear of missing out. Then they threatened the medicine’s delivery truck driver,” he announced.

“What!” exclaimed Rosa. “What happened exactly?”

“It seems our delivery driver was so scared that he felt he had to defend himself, with a little pocketknife,” Gabriel said quietly.

“I don’t understand that there is any *good* in this, Gabriel.” Rosa got slightly agitated.

“I understand,” he responded, not reacting to her agitation. “But this means that the urge of overweight people to lose weight is out of proportion to reality. No matter if they’re young or old, man or woman, poor or rich, black or white – everybody’s desperate to get thinner!”

Rosa’s memory flashed back to the moment when she had injected herself with the first batch of the original GLIP. The exact same desire to lose weight was the reason she had taken the huge risk of using an untested batch of the medicine.

Even worse was that it was completely illegal. She could still feel the first needle going inside and the injection of the compound. Within hours, she almost entirely lost the urge to eat. She lost the desire to constantly look for food, she lost the shame to resist what was being offered, and she lost the constant compulsion to eat. It felt like a liberation.

The biggest advantage of her illegal use of her own creation was that she was certain that the drug would also work in humans, so she could move forward with confidence.

“Aha...I understand, and yes, I have used the drug myself and I can imagine that desire,” she said thinking about the overnights.

“But now there is some real bad news to tell you as well,” Gabriels’ voice became sincere. Rosa’s hands tightened the grip on the wheel of her car, and her teeth clenched. She saw her gym classmates walking by the car. She didn’t dare to wave at them, and she didn’t dare to ask Gabriel what the bad news was.

But after quite a long pause, Gabriel began: “We’ve been called by the FDA because of a serious case of overdosing on the drug.”

“What!” exclaimed Rosa. “I don’t get it. It’s just so simple.”

“I know,” replied Gabriel, “Do you still remember that guy who missed his consultation and never turned in a form?”

“Yes, I think with the name Hernandez, Rodriguez Hernandez.” Her memory was impressive.

“Exactly,” answered Gabriel. “He injected the entire syringe at once, which means the guy injected four times the recommended dose.”

“What happened to him?” Rosa tightened her grip on the wheel once more. “I hope it was not a life-threatening complication?”

“Let me read to you what the FDA officer sent me by mail after his call.”

Gabriel started to read:

*“A 35-year-old male was admitted to a local hospital because of a serious case of overdosing from the generic GLIP variant. His vital functions were good, reflected by a blood pressure of 130/85, a heart rate of 95 bpm, and a saturation rate of 98%. The OD caused serious gastrointestinal discomfort, including vomiting and exceptional intestinal gas formation. The latter even went to the extreme course of having to be admitted to the hospital and kept in isolation.”*

“An FDA officer will call me first thing in the morning,” finished Gabriel.

Rosa’s hands started to release their grip as she placed her hands in her lap. With a sigh, she uttered, “I’m comforted by the fact that his life didn’t seem to be in serious danger.”

“I agree,” returned Gabriel, “but this could seriously jeopardize the successful rollout of the drug in the entire country.”

“What do you mean, Gabriel?” Now it was Gabriel’s turn to get agitated.

“Can’t you imagine?” his voice escalated. “This’ll be fuel for Biotechnica’s fight against us and could kill the entire program!”

Rosa’s blood chilled in her arteries. The realization struck her as well, “And this could mean that years of hard work were all for nothing as well.”

“Did you call Richard to get an explanation as to what went wrong?” asked Rosa cautiously, almost whispering.

“Of course, what do you think? I called him ten times, but he didn’t pick up; this ‘friend’ of yours,” Gabriel was sharp and sarcastic.

Rosa had noticed this a couple of times before. Seconds ago, they had talked intimately, almost like lovers, and the next moment, she was being yelled at as if she were the ultimate expression of stupidity.

One moment Gabe was the charming champion of building connections between people, and in the next moment he could snap and yell angrily at those exact same people. Rosa had observed

these unpredictable mood swings in Gabriel before—charming one moment, yelling the next. It was an irrational rage that scared not only her but his entire staff.

Surprisingly, Rosa found herself yelling back, “What do you think, Gabriel, that you can just yell at me like this? I am the one who devoted my entire life and career to this project, not you!”

Her left fist banged on the wheel, then silence lingered on the other side of the line. Rosa could only hear Gabriel’s quick breathing at first and then, a devastating click.

Silently, she sat in her car for a couple of minutes, her thoughts couldn’t form into actions.

A sudden bang on her passenger window brought her back to reality again. Startled, she glared at the sound’s source and found herself looking straight into the grinning face of the gym coach. His arms went up in the air on both sides as if to say, “Why’d you leave the class so quickly?”

Rosa managed to produce only the faintest of smiles and slowly put a fist in the air as if to say, “Count on me next time.” She got a fist in the air back, and the trainer briskly walked away. Rosa started the engine of her small SUV and cautiously drove off.

## Chapter 11: The Mayor

**The mayor of a midwestern town, who is severely overweight, gets served a Weight Watchers breakfast by his wife. While reading the daily newspapers, he finds out that a cheap weight loss drug has been distributed on a massive scale in his township without his knowledge.**

He didn't like to be naked in front of the mirror. That's why he put on boxer shorts size XXL, the largest he could get. He studied himself in the reflection. His body size was massive. His eyes were hardly visible between the billowing cheeks below his eyes and his bristling, hairy eyebrows. His head stood on a huge neck, which gave the impression that it was directly attached to his shoulders and hardly gave any room for a chin. His arms were as big as a footballer's thigh. His breasts were hanging due to the lack of sufficient muscle fibers. His belly was immense, requiring a slight tilt backward of his entire upper body just to stay mobile.

He saw the small spots where the insulin he needed was injected in a vain attempt to control his rollercoaster blood sugar levels. His legs were relatively thin compared to the rest of him, though his knees were always a bit swollen and red. The wear and tear of the heavy weight on his poor joints was starting to have its effect. For a few minutes, he just studied himself in silence.

His psychologist had advised him to do this exercise every day. The purpose, according to the therapist, was to generate love for his body despite being morbidly obese. The first time he did the exercise, the only feeling he got was disgust, although he repetitively prayed with a soft and low voice a mantra: "Dear body, I love you with all my heart," (exactly how the psychologist had taught him).

Yet despite doing these daily exercises, the love for his body did not improve. On the contrary, the disgust become more intense after a couple of weeks.

He had already talked to his internist about the possibility of undergoing gastric bypass surgery. The specialist warned him about the dangers of the operation and the lifetime of discomfort involved. He explained the necessity for endless nutritional supplements to compensate for the lack of essential vitamins from a substantially reduced gastrointestinal system.

The same doctor had also warned him that his diabetes would slowly destroy thousands of miles of small blood vessels in his body, which could result in kidney failure, cardiac disease, amputation, or even dementia.

"On average, it takes ten years after the discovery of type II Diabetes before any of these severe complications occur," The doctor had said in a comforting tone. But this all sounded extremely scary as a patient.

His diabetes was diagnosed four years ago. Did that mean he could lose a limb six years from now and that he'd have to be moved around in a wheelchair? Would he have to undergo dialysis three times a week to replace the function of the kidneys? And would he start to forget the names of people he had recently met?

What did his internist actually want? Was it the destruction of the blood vessels or a gastric bypass?

"Darlin', your breakfast is ready. It has seven points today." The voice of his wife, Madelaine, came from downstairs. He was on a Weight Watchers regime...again.

"Is it an omelette with ham, darling?" he shouted back.

“How did you guess sweetheart?” Madelaine laughed, and he laughed back. The breakfast was always the same when he was on Weight Watchers

“Once you’ve finished the psychology exercise, you should hurry up a bit. The music class at Mason High School is opening at 10 am.”

Today was Mayor's Day. He had to cut a ribbon here and there, then show up for a couple of Town Hall meeting. For ten years in a row, Todd Lederman was the uncontested part-time mayor of this small, midwestern town. The citizens loved him, and under his reign the economic prospects of the town had substantially improved. It was hard to beat that in an election.

“Have you started to love your body a bit more?” his wife asked, her amused voice was clearly audible from the kitchen, and it seemed as if her words travelled easily upstairs to reach him.

He laughed in response, although he was still disgusted by how his body looked. Both he and Madelaine had developed the skill to laugh away painful comments that could hurt them—to deflect social disapproval. They had not only grown together in excess body size, but their social skills had developed in synchrony as well.

In fact, they had a fantastic and transparent relationship, with a lot of mutual respect. For instance, the added BMI value of almost 80 did not hinder the frequency of their intimate moments. They had found ways around the bodily constraints so they could still enjoy real intimacy.

The mayor put on one of his enormous suits, bought in the local ‘plus size’ clothing store, which was always busy despite the town's small size. He hurried downstairs through the hallway and stepped into the kitchen, where he was greeted with a lot of affectionate kisses on his cheeks.

Madelaine's height was notably shorter, requiring her to stand on her toes to let her lips touch his face on both sides. Yet despite her lesser stature, her body contours almost mirrored his. She wore a pale blue dress with short sleeves, but the dress was rather long.

She had matching sneakers and short socks, which allowed the exposure of the lower end of her pale calves. Todd found this incredibly attractive.

Her green eyes, surrounded by a reddish moon face, looked intently into her husband's, which, although narrowed by his billowing cheeks, still expressed lots of love.

“What did you dream about last night, darling? Only me, I hope?” Madelaine was always fishing for a pat on the back.

“It was certainly you, sweetheart. It was you in the kitchen, preparing lovely food for me,” he replied.

“I know you’re teasing me now,” his wife answered, her voice going up in excitement.

In reality, Lederman’s slumber brought dreams about eating and food to him most of the time. He wondered if all obese people suffered from the same type of nightmares. He could well imagine that hungry people everywhere would dream about food every night, but most likely their dreams were about the healthy foods that were needed for nutrition. They might dream about the flatbread made of flour, a plate of plain rice, or perhaps a bowl of soup.

Conversely, Todd dreamed of muffins, donuts, chocolate chip cookies, pizza, spaghetti, fries, tacos, burritos, and whatnot - but never the healthy food or recipes recommended by Weight Watchers.

“This omelette looks fantastic, darling. Is it really only seven points?” Todd’s mouth started to produce an excess of saliva in anticipation of eating the simmering eggs and cheese.

Madelaine started to smile mysteriously, “You know, darling, I have added a bit of cheese and an extra egg, but that hardly counts as an extra point. What do you think?”

Lederman smiled and chuckled. As he was still laughing, Madelaine fell into his arms and pressed her body firmly against his. He felt her massive breasts and got slightly excited. Then his eyes fell on the clock; it was 20 minutes past nine.

“We have to hurry a bit, sweetheart,” said the big man to his love light.

“What do you mean darling, hurry with what?” she said, teasing him in turn. They both laughed again. “I’m sorry darling, this time the hurry is about getting to work on time and finishing my breakfast”

While Todd sat down at his regular spot at the wooden kitchen table, on his wooden chair, Madelaine took the frying pan containing the seven-point omelette from the stove to the kitchen countertop. She meticulously took out the egg soufflé with a wooden spatula.

Before Todd had the omelette served to him at the table, he looked for the local newspaper which was delivered each morning. His eyes scanned the breakfast table, although his wife usually placed the paper on the left side of his plate.

As mayor, one could not miss any news—you had to be spot-on. Being caught unaware by a journalist during a significant town event was unacceptable for any self-respecting politician and could lead to serious trouble.

“Did they not bring the *Town's Voice* today?” asked the mayor with slight amazement. Madelaine blushed. Her good heartedness was so genuine that it was impossible for her to lie.

“What’s the matter, sweetheart?” she asked, knowing it was all about the newspaper. “There was quite a happening, darling,” she replied softly, “and I imagined it could truly upset you.”

He paused for a couple of seconds and looked troubled. “Let’s read about it together, we’ll get through whatever’s happening.” His voice sounded determined now.

From a wooden drawer under the kitchen counter, Madelaine took out the latest *Town's Voice*. She walked over slowly, seized a wooden chair, and sat close to her husband. She sighed, looked the mayor in the eye, and opened the newspaper with him.

On the front cover was a grainy picture of a long line of people in sleeping bags in front of the local pharmacy.

“What is going on here, sweetheart?” The mayor exclaimed. They exchanged glances, and Madelaine took his hand.

A small photo displayed a large group of people surrounding a delivery van. This picture was even less impressive than the larger one with a headline that screamed: “ARRIVAL OF NEW WEIGHT LOSS DRUG IN TOWN.” A smaller headline read, “One man arrested.”

“What is going on here? Why did they arrest the man? Did you read the entire article, sweetheart?” asked her husband.

“I certainly have, darling,” she replied with her usual conviction. “What happened was that a local pharmacist was lucky enough to obtain a large batch of a new weight loss drug, generic GLIP which is similar to Cervelix, the one all those famous Hollywood stars use, but way cheaper.”

“This looks even more intense than the release of the first iPhone!” exclaimed the mayor about the picture. “But I still don’t understand why one guy was arrested. What did the article say about this, Madelaine?”

His devoted wife always checked the news for the mayor before he arrived in the kitchen for breakfast and often read it aloud if she thought it was relevant.

“That’s still unknown, darling,” she answered, “But apparently there was quite a panic to obtain the drug.”

The mayor looked at Madelaine and then down to his immense belly. His face saddened.

“I know, darling, it’s hard, but eat your omelette first. Then you can call the sheriff on your way to the school opening to find out about the guy they arrested.”

Todd’s wife not only read the newspaper for him, but also provided the most sensible advice one could think of. In fact, she was really the hidden power behind the success of his mayorship. His eyes opened as wide as they could.

“Do you think we could call the pharmacist to provide *us* with this new drug as well?” The mayor stated this as if he had just made the most amazing discovery.

Madelaine gave him a consoling look. “I have already called the pharmacist, but the drug was only delivered to certain early adopters.”

“Early adopters? What foolish talk is this? *We* were never asked. How could we possibly know!” he complained.

“We’ll have to be patient and stick firmly to the Weight Watcher plan for the time being, darling,” she replied.

The mayor looked at the grainy picture again, but very intensely now. He tried to identify one of the people waiting in line. Maybe there was someone working for him in the town hall there.

“Let me first do my duties, sweetheart, and after my return, we’ll make a plan together to see how we can get this medicine!” The mayor sounded resolute and banged a fist on the wooden table. He started to eat his omelette and within seconds he had engulfed the seven-point omelette and it disappeared. Madelaine loved to see him eat like a wolf—it excited her.

“Now, you see, darling, despite all the news, you can still enjoy a lovely breakfast,” she said. “Let me see how I could give you a well-deserved surprise once you return home,” she added, winking her left eye. The mayor knew what was going to happen but tried to stay focused.

“Where did I put my car keys, sweetheart? I definitely need to get going.” The mayor stood up from his seat, the wooden chair legs scraping across the wooden floor.

“Let me get you the keys, darling. I have put them in the kitchen drawer.” They kissed goodbye, their bodies firmly pressed together one last time.

Lederman stepped outside and walked to his twenty-year-old Cadillac, opened the enormous car door and managed to maneuver his body behind the wheel. The Cadillac was the best possible

option for a mayor on a \$16,000 yearly salary. He closed the heavy door with a bang and put the car in reverse gear. Madelaine looked through the kitchen door curtains and air-kissed him goodbye. The mayor drove carefully through the town.

Meanwhile, he wondered how it could be that half of the citizens of his town had gained access to the weight loss drug while he, the city's mayor, did not. It felt like being left behind. It felt like an injustice.



## Chapter 12: Dismissed

**After one night's stay at the hospital, Rodriguez is dismissed and picked up by his enraged wife, Carlita, who is a fan of alternative medicine. She takes him to a Tree Hugging session to inform him of the dangers of the pharmaceutical industry.**

“Your husband is in Room 12, one of the private rooms,” a friendly nurse announced, looking up from her screen into Carlita’s piercing eyes. “He had a rather uncomfortable night. I think he must still be asleep,” she continued.

The nurse showed a subtle conspiratorial smile as if Carlita should know right away what ‘discomfort’ meant in his particular case.

“What do you think about *my* night! My husband admitted to the hospital, and me...at home... all alone? I didn’t sleep for a second!” exclaimed Carlita.

The nurse's smile disappeared, and her face looked puzzled.

“Don't you understand?” continued Carlita. “What do you think it means to be married to a husband who runs his own business, is always late at home, and never really present?”

After a pause, the nurse replied in her most friendly voice, “Why don't you go over to his room and have a look?”

Carlita carried a red rose in one hand and a small Gucci bag in the other. With short steps in high heels, she quickly moved toward the hospital room. (The nurse wondered why people wanted to dress up like this just to visit a sick person).

When she entered room 12, she found that her husband was still sound asleep, lying on his left side and breathing heavily.

“Rodriguez, wake up now!” she screamed in a commanding voice. There was no reaction whatsoever. Carlita noticed that the sheets did not cover the big toe on the right foot. She put the rose in her left hand and pinched the exposed toe with the long nails of her strong right hand.

“Ow! What...what...what’s happening?” groaned the patient. He gazed in amazement into Carlita's eyes through his unruly hair.

“Hi darling, it's you; where am I?” Rodriguez looked around and remembered in an instant.

“Oh my God, what a night!” he muttered.

“Oh, what a night! What a night indeed!” she replied sarcastically. “You selfish son of bitch, what kind of a night do you think *I* had.”

Rodriguez paused and tried to change the subject. “Did you bring a flower for me?” He could hardly conceal his discomfort. He turned his body and felt that immense intestinal pressure started to build up again.

Once Carlita got his attention, her mood could shift quickly. “Yes darling, I couldn’t come and visit you in the hospital without bringing this most beautiful rose.” She suddenly acted very girly, swinging her upper body and smiling shyly. She tended to compliment herself for actions that were absolutely normal for most people.

Rodriguez's wife stepped around the bed, approached her husband, and bent over to give him a quick kiss. When her face moved back from his, she noticed that his face was twisted into a severe grimace. He started to look helpless as an immense release of gas came from under the bed sheets. The sound ripped through the hospital room and down the hallway.

"You bastard!" shouted Carlita, and she slapped him in the face with furious eyes. "You don't even deserve flowers, you shit!" she yelled. Seconds later, the doctor entered the room, followed by a good-looking young nurse. Both were amused and smiling.

"We came to bring you good news, Mr. Hernandez." It was the same doctor as the evening before.

"We've studied your case and contacted some specialists at FDA department," the doctor stated in a deep-toned voice. "Your abdominal discomfort may continue for a while longer, but no permanent harm is expected." The pretty nurse smiled at Rodriguez, which Carlita noted.

"So, you call farting while being kissed by your loving wife 'abdominal discomfort'?" yelled Carlita at the doctor. "It's insulting, an absolute disgrace!"

Both the doctor and the nurse were taken aback by her in amazement.

"Ah, I have some paperwork for you to sign," the doctor said, recovering, "this allows us to use your medical data for publication in a medical journal. It's good for the medical community to know what happens if people are admitted with an overdose of this experimental drug," he continued.

Carlita couldn't help herself. "I told you, Rodriguez. It's all one big conspiracy. You can see it for yourself now; it is one big setup!" she complained. She turned to the doctor and asked, "And what exactly would you like to describe? Precisely how your drug resulted in a fart marathon?!"

The doctor cleared his throat and replied, "We're trying to provide the best possible care for *all* patients, including your husband; and assist the medical community as well. That's all, madam."

Carlita looked infuriated. "I'll meet you in the lobby, Rodriguez, but don't forget, it's your own choice," she said, pointing hard at her long-suffering husband. With little angry steps in tall heels, she hurried out the door - but not before she had thrown the rose on the bed.

The doctor cleared his throat again and redirected his attention towards Mr. Hernandez. The nurse had lost all the color in her shocked face. "We have no intention to interfere in your marital affairs, but would you still be willing to sign the papers?"

"Yes, of course," responded Rodriguez. He was glad to do it quickly before any more embarrassing flatulence could strike again.

After signing the paperwork, the nurse smiled at him sympathetically and gave him a brochure on how to deal with 'abdominal discomfort'. Once the medical team left, Rodriguez went straight to the bathroom and stayed there to be absolutely sure no unpleasant problems emerged.

He took a short shower, packed a few belongings, and waved goodbye to the reception nurse. He hastened to meet Carlita in the lobby, but she had already started walking outside to the car, leaving him to catch up a few steps behind. This type of humiliation was a continuing tactic of hers.

Once in the car, the only thing she said was, "I have arranged a meeting with Timothy for you. We have to fix you right away before you fall into the hands of the criminal pharmaceutical industry."

Once driving, she kept her hands on the wheel and focused on the road ahead. She stopped at a pancake restaurant, which was part of a large fast-food chain.

“I haven’t had any breakfast,” announced Carlita as she stepped out of the car. Without asking what Rodriguez wanted she walked straight into the pancake place in 3-inch heels.

Rodriguez hesitated momentarily but finally decided to follow her to avoid stirring up even more trouble. He could smell the pancakes even before entering the restaurant - the salted butter, the syrup, the strawberries, the powdery sugar, and even the whipped cream topping.

Under usual circumstances this would have created an immediate rumble in his stomach, an immediate increase in bile and saliva production and an immediate order for a huge breakfast. But now, due to the drug injection, the feeling of satiety was so pronounced that none of this happened.

Carlita stood at the counter and made her order with charm and grace while Rodriguez decided to sit down at a window table and wait. After a few minutes, she came over with a large tray with two plates. One contained the morning special - three pancakes, syrup, strawberries, and a cream topping. The other plate contained only one pancake covered with powdery dry sugar.

The order also came with two free diet cokes.

Without saying a word, Carlita took the morning special and gave the one pancake to Rodriguez. She ate in silence and after finishing the plate, she cheered up a bit.

“Why don’t you eat, Rodriguez? Has it been a bit too stressful?” she teased.

He looked at his plate. He still felt the weight of 10 Argentine steaks in his stomach, although he had not eaten since the previous injection. He slowly ate a small piece of the pancake while anxiously looking at Carlita.

“Now listen,” said his wife sounding confident. “I’ve arranged for you to meet with Timothy Landon, the director of the Society.”

“What do you mean?” asked Rodriguez, still chewing on the small piece of the pancake.

“You’ve now seen for yourself how bad this new medication is. It could’ve taken your life,” lectured Carlita. “We’re meeting Timothy at a special tree that is said to have immense healing powers. Tim and I will help you out of this.”

Rodriguez’s face slowly turned into a grimace again, not because of the prospect of tree-hugging with Tim but because of a new build-up of intestinal gases.

“Don’t be afraid, darling,” said Carlita while taking Rodriguez’s hand. It was her first sign of real affection for days. “The three of us will hug it out with the tree together.” She had a look of empathy and support—the same look social workers have when they want their clients to adopt an unpleasant intervention.

“All right,” sighed Rodriguez. “Let me go to the restroom first.”

She looked happy and gently squeezed his hand as Rodriguez hurried off to the bathroom. He had to wait a couple of minutes before the single toilet became vacant. Soon a young, overweight father came out of the stall carrying his obese three-year-old son.

“Do you want that extra pancake, Bobbyboy? Your diaper was still dry, so you deserve an extra present,” said the father.

Bobbyboy nodded, “Yes, Daddy, I’m still hungry.” The two were quite a pair. Both had plump faces and the same jeans, combined with a wide horizontally striped t-shirts which amplified their large body size. Yet they both looked extremely happy at the prospect of eating more pancakes.

After they left, Rodriguez quickly closed the door and spent a good five minutes taking care of business. He had to balance the passing of gas with Carlita’s temper – she was waiting for him, so time was a factor.

He finished, washed his hands swiftly and hastened back to the restaurant where he found her at the cashier paying for her morning special and the rest of their breakfast. When they walked outside to the car, Carlita walked only one step in front of him, as if to say that things between them had substantially improved.

Once they started the drive home, she became more relaxed and even showed a subtle smile. She drove precisely on the meandering roadway through the dry golden hills and sporadic brown trees. As they left the town behind, she began to talk normally again.

“I just adore nature; it makes me so calm and happy – and it’s so much better than people. Look at those hills and trees, my love. Isn’t it a total wonder, Mother Nature? You should restore your relationship with nature, Rodriguez. You’re out of touch; the earth has so much to give you, but it’s always a matter of give and take,” she said.

Rodriguez had a hard time finding an appropriate response. Their most vivid memory about nature was when he fell from the huge oak tree in his parent’s garden and broke his left ankle. He could still feel the pain when he thought of it.

“Is it all a bit too impressive for you?” asked Carlita taking in the landscape. “Wait until you meet Timothy. He’ll guide you through your first session.”

As she spoke, she found her way quite well. She took the hard turns in the road skillfully, knowing exactly what was coming next. Apparently, she had been here before.

After another 10 minutes, she suddenly took a sharp turn right onto a small road without pavement, littered with holes and bumps which made the car dance up and down, left and right.

Rodriguez saw another car about two hundred meters ahead parked next to a large and impressive tree. As they came closer, he saw a thin and rather small grey-haired man inspecting the forest giant with old-fashioned steel-rimmed glasses. He wore beige chinos, brown sandals, and a beige sports jacket over a checkered shirt with a white and red plaid like a tablecloth.

After they stepped out of the car, she embraced the slender man who was just a bit taller than Carlita, who was still in high heels. Although Rodriguez had never met the guy, he and his wife seemed to be quite close.

“You must be Rodriguez. I’m Timothy, very pleased to meet you.” Timothy had brown eyes and an inquisitive gaze, radiating an aura of conceit and arrogance for his fellow citizens.

“Hi,” returned Rodriguez in a shy voice. “Pleased to meet you, Timothy.”

“Let me ask a couple of questions before we start the tree session. Have you been vaccinated for COVID-19?” asked the holistic guru, looking intently into Rodriguez’s eyes.

“Yes, I have” he said, which felt as if he had confessed to murder. Timothy’s face turned to Carlita, and he looked at her with accusatory eyes.

“Then we’ll need the strongest version of Echinacea for him,” Timothy announced sincerely while looking at Carlita. He walked to his car and took out a classic brown doctor's bag containing a large variety of glass vials. He checked a number of bottles, read the labels, and finally took out a bottle labeled: ‘Echinacea Multi Forte’. He then took a large plastic spoon from the doctor's bag, unscrewed the bottle, and poured the medicine carefully into the spoon.

“Please take this; you have to take it all at once,” said Timothy while handing the spoon to Rodriguez.

Cautiously he took the spoon to his mouth and swallowed the contents simultaneously. The taste was awful, a mix of diesel fuel and vinegar. It burned his throat going down and he struggled keep it. A few seconds later, the Multi Forte set his stomach on fire and his face turned in a grimace.

“Luckily, it is on sale this week. One bottle is \$178.50, or just \$350 for two.” Timothy looked triumphantly at Carlita, who sighed and responded with a quick fake smile.

Tim handed the bottle to Rodriguez as if the purchase had already been made. Rodriguez took the bottle with caution, knowing how costly the contents were.

“Let's go,” said Timothy. He first took Carlita's hand, and then Rodriguez's.

The tree whisperer and his disciples slowly walked over to the forest giant and surrounded the huge trunk. The circle was closed when Carlita found Rodriguez's hand around back. As they moved closer to the tree, and both Tim and Carlita started to hum a strange monotonous song. It was like a religious act, a holy ritual and Rodriguez wanted to scream and run away.

But he didn't. Instead, he started to hum too.

## Chapter 13: Breakfast Meeting

**Manuel Alvarez has ordered the Biotechnica Board to develop a master plan to combat the release of the generic GLIP. The breakfast meeting is catered by his secretary, Heather, but Manuel is still confused by his feelings for her.**

Manuel was late, as unusual. Clifford, the company lawyer, Chris and Michael were already in the boardroom. The CEO could hear their laughter from a distance when approaching the room, which was on the same floor as his office.

“How could they be so relaxed? It was a fucking crisis!” He had not slept well, managing only three hours at most. “And what about *Le Maison* if things really went wrong?”

When Manuel entered the boardroom, the ongoing discussion fell silent, and they waited for him to officially start the meeting. He put his expensive briefcase on the table purposefully, with a bit of force, then placed his mobile phone right beside it. The executive wore his usual striped suit, white shirt, and red tie, with his black hair neatly combed back and stylish. But his eyes were slightly bloodshot, he looked tired and perhaps a bit insecure.

He took the seat at the head of the table. Clifford was seated on the right side of him, dressed in a dark blue suit with Italian tailoring, a flawless white shirt, initialled cuff links, black-rimmed glasses and dark wavy hair—all very stylish. Chris and Michael were seated on the left of him.

“We have only one point on the agenda today, which is the infringement on our Cervelex patent and the potential impact of that on our company. I asked the three of you to thoroughly analyze the situation, and I’m ready for some answers.”

There was hesitation in the room. Manuel saw the exchange of glances between Chris and Michael - *Did they sense his temporary weakness, his vulnerability? Would they team up against him now, so soon? What the fuck was going on?*

He banged a fist on the table for effect, turned his face to Clifford, and commanded, “Why don’t you go first? The legal aspects of the case will determine how this goes anyways.”

He pointed to Chris and Michael, who backed off a bit and stopped glancing at each other. His alpha maleness had returned as he had to restore office hierarchy as soon as possible.

“Well...” sighed Clifford, who was a brilliant lawyer with a specialization in patent law. There was a long pause which turned into an aching silence.

“Well?” returned Manuel, “Well, Is that your conclusion? Is that your analysis? – “Well?!” His voice was angry and sarcastic now as he began to rise from his seat.

“No, no, of course not,” responded Clifford hastily, “but it is a rather complex issue.”

“Your team convinced me five years ago we had a rock-solid patent Cliff,” Manuel replied aggressively, “on the basis of which Biotechnica has invested billions. Are you telling me now that our entire business was based on quicksand?” Chris and Michael started to shift nervously in their chairs but kept silent.

“Let me try to explain this,” resumed Clifford. “In the 3-D structure of the molecule, there is a pocket that is not described in the original patent - our patent. Medication4All has filed a patent describing a small twist in this pocket. They claim that this results in an even better resistance of the

molecule against cleaving by the natural enzymes, resulting in higher levels of the molecule in the patients.”

“Why didn't we, or rather YOU, pick this up before? Manuel had sharp analytic skills. “And when was their illegal patent filed?”

“About two years ago,” continued Clifford, “There was a rumor that Rosa Cavani was involved in the filing of the patent.”

Manuel's face started to redden. Ms. Cavani was sacked three years ago because she fiercely opposed the high-end market positioning of the Biotechnica drug, which meant that only the wealthy few could afford it.

“And for some reason, they have managed to fast-track the trials and approval by the FDA,” finished Clifford with some degree of respect.

“You sound as if you're a bigger fan of their drug than our own Cervelix,” answered Manuel aggressively. Clifford fell silent, knowing that any hint of disloyalty could come at a huge cost - being sacked.

“So, what's your plan, Cliff, based on what you just shared with us? Just sit back and relax?” Manuel's sarcasm was back.

“Oh, no... no, of course not!” Clifford hastened to find the right answers. He knew Manuel could explode any time now. “I called McGill and Watson yesterday right after your call - to devote their entire legal team to the case.” This answer comforted Manuel to some extent, and his face became slightly tense. McGill and Watson were the most aggressive lawyers on the east coast, maybe in the entire United States.

“Why didn't you give me that answer right away, Clifford? Such a lengthy run-up, you know I do not like babbling in the boardroom.” Manuel didn't shy away from insulting people in front of the entire board. He turned his face to the left.

“And now, what do you guys have to report? Let's start with you, Chris. What is the potential financial consequence of the patent theft?”

Chris cleared his throat and shifted the paperwork in front of him. He quickly exchanged glances with Croft and muttered, “Well, actually, it could go two ways.”

“What do you mean by that, Chris? We either go bankrupt or become billionaires. What exactly do you mean?” Manuel's voice was loaded with impatience, and small dots of saliva started to build up in the corners of his mouth.

“Well, the upside could be that the release of the cheap weight loss version attracts many more customers for the premium version, Cervelix. I've heard the sale of fake Prada handbags didn't reduce sales of the expensive original but on the contrary, it boosted the sales worldwide.”

“How on earth could you compare our Cervelix to a woman's handbag? What bullshit is this?” Manuel made wide gestures with both his arms.

Chris lost all color on his face and tried to continue, “The downside is that if the cheap version is as good as ours, or even better, we could be knocked out of the market and lose this as a profitable pipeline.” Manuel looked shocked.



“If I understand you correctly - with your smart babbling about designer handbags - this would mean that if a fake Prada handbag would be better than the real one, the demand for the real one would disappear?” Manuel's voice went up at the final part of the question.

Chris didn't know what to say, and the boardroom was silent for a couple of seconds.

Manuel noticed a message on his mobile, it was a message from the real estate agent.

“The contract is ready for you. The seller officially agreed to the price, and we have a verbal agreement. Our deal is now official, congratulations!”

“What?” Manuel's brain was in overdrive now. “A verbal agreement? Was nodding and humming a ‘yes’ a verbal agreement? Did he buy *La Maison* accidentally? Was she out of her mind?”

Looking up from the phone, he saw Michael and Chris whispering in cahoots. Manuel banged a fist on the table to restore order.

“Now,” continued Manuel, “How about *your* analysis, Mr. Croft?” His voice was affected by the real estate news and sounded vulnerable.

“Sure, sure,” answered Croft hastily. “I’ve made a couple of slides to illustrate the potential scenarios.”

He hooked his laptop to a cable, and the first slide was shown on a widescreen opposite the head of the table. Meanwhile, Manuel checked his phone again with annoyance.

“It will all depend on the quality of the cheap version, which is in line with what Chris just stated,” stated Michael. “If Cervelix turns out to be the superior version, our sales will continue to rise, which is the green line here, and the revenues will peak two years from now, which is the red line here, reaching four billion a year. The cheap version will overtake Cervelix in sales volume this year, but due to its ridiculously low price, it will never reach Cervelix sales in terms of dollars. Also, its revenues would be far less, which is the black line here.”

Michael Croft was a master at making complex issues look simple. Manuel sighed. The slide could mean his bonus was safe and *La Maison* could still be his! A victory.

“On the next slide, we see what happens if the cheaper version is equal or even better quality than OUR Cervelix,” continued Croft. He emphasized the word *our*.

The next slide needed no further explanation. The red line, representing the sales of Cervelix, went flat within months and tumbled to almost zero afterward. Michael pointed to the line: “Due to the marketing costs of Cervelix and the falling sales, the revenues would become zero soon.”

Manuel started to sweat and fell silent. His eyes dropped and focused on the table. He could no longer bear to watch the slides.

“For my unit; marketing and sales - this would mean that we should better focus on another product within the Biotechnica pipeline,” Michael finished. Silence lingered for a few seconds.

“Unless we start a price war with Medication4All,” commented Chris.

“Unless we start a price war,” repeated Manuel in a low voice.

There was a quiet knock on the door, and all four heads turned silently in the direction where the sound originated - it was a welcome distraction from the disturbing meeting.



Manuel's secretary Heather Vogue came in, pushing a cart on wheels containing a tray with croissants, butter, jelly, cheese ham, orange juice, and a pot of coffee. "Is this what you ordered?" she looked Manuel straight in the eye, a bold look.

He returned her gaze with a distracted look. "Yes, yes... please put it on the table."

She pushed the cart towards him and placed the tray on the table between Manuel and the rest of the board, leaning down towards him enough to reveal a bit of cleavage. She made a subtle wave with her hand as if she gave him an 'air slap' in the face while she flirtatiously kept his gaze.

"What the fuck was this! Was she hitting on him in the boardroom?!!!" Manuel felt helpless and barely managed to give a weary wink with his eye—the best response he could come up with.

Manuel heard male laughter behind his secretary and saw the conspiratorial smiles from Chris and Michael. *Had she told them something? Were they making a fool of him? What the hell was going on here?*

"Please enjoy your breakfast, gentlemen." She turned to Manuel again. "And Mr. Alvarez, please call me if it needs to be taken away." She pointed at the breakfast items and made the slap-in-the-face gesture again with her right hand, but Manuel didn't dare to look her in the eye.

"I think the price war option is worth considering," Mr. Croft began, taking a bite from a croissant with butter and jelly.

"But not before we have exhausted the option of attacking the Medication4All patent," Clifford said, taking a sip from his coffee.

"I think that is smart indeed," continued Chris. "This also buys us time in which we could still sell Cervelix at a premium price and, as a parallel strategy, start producing a cheaper version ourselves to combat theirs." He took a bite from a croissant with cheese.

They turned their heads toward Manuel, their leader, to obtain the usual guidance. The only answer they got was a blank look while their CEO took a minuscule sip of orange juice. He hesitated to answer because he, in fact, did not know what to say. The sudden confidence of the rest of the board seemed to have sucked all confidence out of him.

Finally, he tried to restore his impact. "We'll have to be very aggressive; I want this McGill and Watson team in the building this afternoon." His voice had nearly lost the power to command.

Manuel stayed in the boardroom for a while when the rest of the team left. The coffee didn't taste right, the orange juice was sour, and the croissants didn't appeal to him. He checked the message from the realtor again, as if he could not believe what she had written.

He gathered his things and walked out of the boardroom. He wanted to leave the building but needed to pass by his secretary to do so. He walked slowly. Her eyes caught him.

"Did you enjoy your breakfast, Manuel?" she asked politely.

"Yes...yes... it was perfect," Manuel didn't want to disappoint her, even though he had hardly eaten anything.

"And what would you like to have for lunch, Mr. Alvarez?" Her eyes had a seductive look. "Your agenda is empty," she added.

His brain almost exploded. *This was an upside-down world, with his secretary inviting him, the alpha male, to lunch!*

He finally answered, “No, not today. I have to go out for some appointments.”

Heather looked at him in amazement as Manuel walked out of the building to his Porsche 911. He started the powerful engine, which normally gave him a boost, but today he just felt tired. His brain was tired, his eyes were tired, his arms and legs were tired—all the cells in his body seemed to be exhausted. He backed up the 911 and slowly drove off with no apparent destination.

## Chapter 14: Measure

**One month after the release of the miracle drug, Delilah and Richard see most of the users losing weight, but 20% are ‘non-responsive’. A few patients who didn’t get the weight loss meds initially have gathered in front of the local pharmacy, protesting and demanding access to the drug.**

“Are they protesting again?” Delilah walked slowly over to Richard, who was peeking through the blinds of the pharmacy.

Richard, sporting a fresh look with a fashionable new haircut and modern, stylish attire, replied, “Yep, they’re here again, but luckily there is no aggression whatsoever.”

Together, they peaked through the blinds and saw a dozen participants in a protest. The protesters, all severely overweight, were holding signs with various statements, including ‘THIS IS AN INJUSTICE’ and ‘HAVE AND HAVE NOTS.’

One massively overweight man, about sixty, came neatly dressed in grey flannel trousers, a light blue shirt and expensive shoes - yet was holding up a sign demanding: “GLIP 4 ALL!”

“The protest seems to be growing by the day,” noticed Delilah, peeking through the blinds, “Maybe we should go and talk to them and find out exactly what they want from us.”

Richard sighed. He did NOT look forward to another confrontation in front of his store. Delilah spontaneously stepped outside without waiting for his response and bravely approached the man with the ‘GLIP 4 ALL’ sign

“Hello, sir,” she said in a friendly voice, “Could you explain to me what this is all about?”

The man looked back at her in amazement. “Didn’t you hear about the massive distribution of this ‘wonder drug’ for weight loss? This pharmacy has given it to half of the town! What about the other half – WE are the other half!”

Delilah listened and then paused for a couple of seconds.

“Yes, sure, of course we know about it,” she said. “We’re distributing the drug from here,” she explained, pointing with her thumb at the pharmacy building over her shoulder.

“Exactly,” said the man with exasperation, “And that’s exactly why we’re here! AND... we heard that another dose of the drug will be handed out tomorrow – so now it’s our turn!”

“Yeah, yeah,” confirmed the rest of the crowd, “Damn right” and “We want it too!” could be heard as they started to close in on her.

“Listen,” returned Delilah quickly. “We’re working hard to obtain this drug for everyone in town who needs it. But this is an experiment and needs to be evaluated first before we can scale it up for everyone – including you. But you have to believe me and be patient, because in a couple of months you will *all* get it, I promise!” Her voice went up and became louder to counteract any form of backtalk.

“How do we know this for sure? How can you give us a guarantee?” The man was too quick to respond as if he had rehearsed the conversation before.

“Look, we have a call scheduled with the pharmaceutical company to discuss the first month's results in 15 minutes.” Delilah continued, “We'll bring this up and the next steps for all this in that meeting.”

“I hope we can believe you, ma'am,” stated the man. The crowd murmured in agreement.

The stylish older obese protester stepped up, complaining, “How can we believe you when you're part of the system yourself? We are the *have-nots* in this town now, and this isn't fair to us!” This was ironic coming from such a well-dressed gentleman, but the crowd chimed in with growing support, “Yeah, YEAH!”

“I see,” responded Delilah understandingly, “No one wants this drug dividing the town in this way, and we all want equal rights as citizens, I get it.”

“Yeah, yeah, right on!” responded the crowd. Delilah felt a shift in the sentiments of the protesters and ran with it.

“Alright then, feel free to keep protesting, but know we're on your side too,” said Delilah sympathetically as she stepped backward a few steps.

“Thank you, ma'am. We hope to hear some good news soon.” acknowledged the man holding the ‘GLIP 4ALL’ sign. He seemed to speak for the rest of the protesters, who all nodded.

Delilah turned to go back and met Richard's nervous eyes as she stepped inside. “They weren't too aggressive, were they?” he asked thoughtfully.

“Oh no, Richard, they were OK. The only thing is that they're desperate to obtain that new drug for themselves. And you could see why,” she answered.

Richard looked puzzled. “What struck me the most is that the protesters all seem well-mannered and well-dressed, not the usual left-wing hippie protesters fighting against inequity.”

“That's indeed remarkable,” said Delilah. “Fighting for injustice when one is financially in good shape sounds rather weird.”

She looked Richard straight in the eye. “We should send you to a self-defence class Rich; you get so insecure once a confrontation starts. I have a boxing class scheduled at 7 pm tonight; why don't you join me later?” she offered.

“Um...sure...yes, maybe let's meet - I'll think about it.” It was clear that Richard had to convince himself.

“Great! Now let's get our numbers straight before the Medication4All team calls.” Delilah said and hurried to the office to collect the spreadsheets.

Moments later, they were looking into the expectant eyes of Rosa and Gabriel in a Team's meeting online.

“Hi, Delilah and Richard; thanks for taking the time to analyze the first data set for this call. We can't wait to hear the results,” started Gabriel anxiously.

Richard noticed that Rosa and Gabriel sat far apart and didn't really look at each other.

“Overall, the results are really spectacular,” stated Richard. “We've called on everyone using the drug from our pharmacy to get regular weight and blood pressure measurements.”

“Great,” responded Gabriel. “We’d like to hear the weight loss numbers first.”

“Sure. Out of the 832 people using the drug, 828 came by for the measurements. Delilah will give you the results now,” Richard nodded toward Delilah.

“Before we continue,” said Rosa, “Let me first compliment you, Richard. You seem to have undergone a complete style makeover! You look so well!”

Richard felt his face become warm and start to redden. He hoped the laptop cameras didn’t detect his embarrassment. Gabriel quickly took over again and said impatiently, “First, tell us about the people who didn’t show up.”

“That’s easy,” replied Delilah, “two were out of town, and the other two were ‘on-call’ at the hospital. We checked all this thoroughly so we could present as complete a document as possible.”

After a moment, she continued, “On average, the 728 participants lost 8.2 pounds in a 4-week episode, which looks like a fantastic result.”

But Gabriel looked disappointed: “That’s significantly less than the 10.5 pounds we have seen in the randomized trial.” He looked intensely at Ms. Cavani, “How do YOU explain this?” It was said as if she were personally to blame for the disappointing results.

“This is real-world data, and that’s always a bit different from the trials,” Rosa replied.

“This data could indicate that our drug, your drug, your invention, is *less* effective than Cervelix. And that could mean that the whole program is in jeopardy!” Gabriel’s tone was harsh and aggressive now. Both Delilah and Richard felt embarrassed to see this dispute developing right before their eyes.

“I was also called a number of times by the FDA,” Gabriel continued, “by the Center for Independent Drug Evaluation and Research (or ‘CIDER’) whose main job is to monitor drug safety, adverse events, potential issues and public health risks. They took great interest in that one participant had to be admitted with an overdose of the drug, and then kept overnight in the hospital.

This reality could substantially weaken our case in court.” Gabriel remained aggressive even as Rosa was shifting in her chair.

“What exactly *were* the side effects, Gabriel,” asked Delilah in a calm voice. Gabriel turned his head and met her eyes online.

“The main side effect was termed as *an extensive and long-lasting abdominal discomfort*,” stated Gabriel, a bit milder now.

Delilah lifted her eyebrows. “What does that mean, Gabriel?”

“Well, that could mean many things, but the one thing that stood out was that the release of abdominal gas was so extensive that the poor guy had to be isolated from the rest of the patients and had an entire wing for his own,” Gabriel sighed.

“That sounds quite uncomfortable,” returned Delilah, “but I hear nothing life-threatening so far. We apologize for the lack of compliance from this specific participant. Still, the reason for not providing him with the appropriate instructions was his arrest by the police, as we have already explained to you.”

“The fact that such an overdose did not result in a life-threatening outcome may even work to our advantage,” stated Richard.

“How is the town reacting to the fact that nearly 800 of its citizens have received the drug?” continued Gabriel inquisitively.

“That is a very good question,” responded Delilah. “We just spoke to several protesters outside the pharmacy. They feel being left out of the study without access to the drug was an injustice.”

“What? They’re protesting because they WANT the drug?” responded Gabriel with amazement.

“Yes, indeed,” continued Richard, “and the strange thing is that they didn’t look like the usual left-wing protesters. They were all well dressed and didn’t exactly look poor.”

Rosa looked mystified, then changed gears. “Did you find the time to have a closer look at the clinical trial statistics, Delilah? Did you, for instance, detect any patterns?”

“Well, I can’t be entirely sure in this early stage, but about 20% didn’t lose any weight, and another 20% lost only about five pounds in a month. The other 60% lost more than 12 pounds on average.”

Gabriel looked baffled, and Rosa didn’t seem to know just how to react.

“That means 20% are non-responders!” Gabriel exclaimed; his face had a disgruntled look, and suddenly, he looked ten years older as his hand rubbed his eyes.

Suddenly, he turned to Rosa again, “How on earth is this possible? I’ve never heard about ‘non-responders’ before in *any* of the other clinical trials - you’re just telling me now!” He was yelling at her at this point.

“Now, now!” said Delilah in a decisive voice, “This scapegoating won’t help us to find the right answers for this phenomenon. Let’s keep it together and continue to think calmly”.

The meeting fell silent for a couple of seconds.

“One explanation could be that the non-responders didn’t use the drug correctly,” suggested Richard. “That could mean that we didn’t explain how to use it well enough.” By saying this, he was deflecting the blame away from Ms. Cavani while still acknowledging the problem.

“That is indeed an explanation,” answered Delilah. “But not a very likely one, since nearly all the other drug patients did it right. We also had very high engagement for our webinars about the medication and it’s use,” she continued.

“Another reason could be that the quality of the drug is not yet stable in the from the production setup,” added Rosa, “but that’s also not very likely, since we did such extensive testing.”

“Could the driver have been inconsistent about cooling the drug during transport?” offered Richard, who was now exhausting all the possibilities.”

“It’s a fragile formula” Rosa acknowledged, “but I couldn’t say for sure.”

“I need to apologize for my behavior,” Gabriel stated with his hands still on his eyes. “I’m extremely nervous about this whole project, so let me explain why.”

Everyone noticed the drops of sweat on his forehead. He continued, “Do you remember when the high price for AIDS anti-retroviral therapy was seen as an injustice to poor countries - the underprivileged?”

The team was thrown by the abrupt change in the course of the discussion.

“Yes, yes, I remember,” chimed in Rosa. “The injustice to poor countries was framed in such a way that the pharmaceutical industry came under immense pressure to act - to the extent that they could not escape from providing the entire world with affordable AIDS therapy,” Rosa recalled. She remembered this difficult time all too well.

“Well,” said Gabriel. “It is *my* mission to do the same for our weight loss solution, especially for low to middle-income countries, where the problem of obesity is accelerating astronomically. People can’t afford these expensive solutions, let alone the treatment for the complications of obesity. That’s why I’m convinced we should do the same for obesity as was done for HIV.”

Gabriel appeared a bit relieved now and looked apologetically to Rosa.

“Let me finish the numbers on blood pressure for you, and then we’ll come up with a plan to find out what is going on with the non-responders,” continued Delilah, trying to get back on track.

“We saw a drop of 7 mmHg in the systolic pressure and a drop of 4 mmHg in the diastolic blood pressure on average. Also here, and we’ve clustered the data, notice that all the non-responders hardly showed *any* change in blood pressure, whereas the most responsive patients showed an impressive drop of almost ten mmHg of the systolic blood pressure and 6 of the diastolic blood pressure.”

Gabriel’s face started to lighten up. “All together, an exceptionally good result, and congratulations for how you have executed the program's first stage. This is beginning to show the potential of the drug to lower blood pressure through weight loss.”

“Yes, we are quite happy to do it,” continued Richard. “And we look forward to the arrival of the next shipment tomorrow.”

“And this time,” interrupted Delilah, “we’ve thought to schedule the participants through the day - to avoid another riot in front of the pharmacy.”

“Well, thank you so much for that,” acknowledged Gabriel. “And we hope to hear from you soon.”

After the meeting was closed, Richard turned to Delilah and announced: “You know, I WILL join your boxing class tonight. I’m worried about those non-responders.”

But Delilah did not respond to his announcement, she was lost in her own thoughts about the future of the enterprise. She was worried too.



## Chapter 15: Walk

**In his desire to lose weight, the mayor finds a way to buy the new drug on the black market. His wife, who continues to support him on Weight Watchers, feels betrayed.**

It was almost 4:30 pm when people working in the Town Hall got an extra boost of energy, with everybody very interested in leaving work not one second later than exactly 5 pm. Their duties were over at that precise hour, and they felt no urge whatsoever to spend a moment longer in the building.

Restlessly, the mayor was shifting through a pile of papers to get the last thing done for the day. His office was dark and in the northern corner of the building only a few dim sunbeams entered the room through the half-closed blinds, with the dust particles sparkling in the sunlight.

The mayor was looking for a specific piece of paper, a license application, which he had seen just 15 minutes ago. A fast-food chain had applied for the license to open a new franchise near the highway exit, right next to the other fast-food joints. He had no doubt about granting the license, as he was quite pro-business and wanted to keep the small town prosperous. From his political experience, he was certain that this exact strategy was the best way to keep the citizens happy and, more importantly, to get re-elected. As with all politicians, staying in office was the major driver of every decision.

After a few minutes, Todd found the paper, and his eyes quickly scanned it. It looked like the standard application, so in his mind, he would not just be in favor of the license, but a fierce proponent of it – especially if it became a topic of debate in the town hall meeting tomorrow.

With a sigh, the Todd grabbed his bag and checked his phone. Madelaine had sent him a message containing a small grocery list ending with an excessive number of hearts. He was supposed to pick these groceries up on his way back home. Looking at his phone, he suddenly noticed the date and realized he had to talk to the city's IT guy about something special.

Lederman quickly headed out to the town hall wearing his usual mayor outfit—brown slacks, a light blue shirt, no tie, and oversized walking shoes to carry his weight. He turned to the left and into the main hall, bustling with people crisscrossing through the building, preparing to rush out. Finally, he went down a short hall and entered the computer offices on the south side of the building.

In contrast to most IT workplaces, Harry had confiscated a nice office full of light and with a good view of the Town Square proper. He was the only IT person they had been able to recruit to this midwestern small town, so the town paid him well.

He was still on the phone when Todd arrived. “But why didn't you buy the BBQ gear at the Target?” The mayor heard an excited and high-pitched voice answering but could not hear what was said.

“I told you so often not to buy BBQ gear at Target. Walmart is far superior.” Harry continued looking agitated. He looked up for a split second, and their eyes met, but there was no sign of giving up the conversation.

The mayor got irritated and nervously started to shift on his legs, left to right and back. “No, I told you we needed new charcoal as well,” Harry just continued. Apparently, the organization of a BBQ was of more importance than talking to the mayor standing in front of you.



The politician cleared his throat, and Harry looked up briefly, put his hand on the receiver, and said, “One more minute, this is important.”

“You could have taken the kids to my sister and *then* go to Walmart - but you never listen,” He complained. Todd then heard a small voice yelling and crying over the handset. Harry sighed, dropped the receiver back on the phone hook, and switched gears.

“The price has increased to \$150,” Harry looked at Todd straight in the eyes with a bold look.

The mayor was startled: “Come on man, you almost got it for free!”

“Look at the prices online; \$150 is still cheap,” he argued.

Harry started to pack his bag to leave the IT office. He wore old jeans, a t-shirt, and a well-worn pair of white sneakers. When he stooped to take his bag, he exposed enormous love handles that protruded above his jeans.

Lederman felt his heart pounding in his chest, a mix of irritation and panic. He *needed* to get it. “Listen, Harry, you just used a Town Hall phone call to have a private conversation with your wife. What's up with that?” He used his ‘mayor's voice’ to sound convincing, but it fell flat in practice.

Harry moved back on his chair and looked at the man, his gaze first going down and then up, finally resting to meet the mayor's eyes again.

“What'd you say? Are you serious?” Harry's face looked grim. “Do you intend to report that call just to get your stuff cheaper? Are you out of your mind?”

Caught, the mayor did not know what to say nor what to do and froze.

“Well,” said Harry provocatively, “why don't we just report this here illegal exchange to the Town Hall or to the police? Or even better, the newspapers?”

The politician felt trapped: “Alright, let's be reasonable here - \$150 - but not a cent more!”

“Now we're talking!” responded Harry, exposing an enormous grin. He stood up from his chair, walked over to the mayor, and slapped him on the shoulder. “It's a good price for a good friend!”

They walked towards the central lobby together, which was in its busiest moment as city employees began fleeing from the building in a rush.

“Let's not do the transaction here in this building. We shouldn't put you at risk,” suggested Harry in a soft voice while they walked towards the exit. “As soon as I have it, I'll meet you in the sports bar. While we have a coffee, we'll do the transaction.”

The mayor nodded to confirm the deal and got another slap on his back – which he hated.

Once outside, the big man was struck by direct sunlight after spending a long day in his dark office. His eyes were blinking, despite his head being down, but soon his system adjusted to the bright world outside Town Hall and he began to think of his wife.

The only exercise he got as mayor was to go from his car to an event, cut a ribbon, give a speech, accept the applause, and walk back to his car. Recently, he decided to walk to work instead of using his car, and after a couple of days he rather enjoyed it. But he remembered the first time all too well, as it was quite an expedition.

The very first time he walked to work, he arrived panting and sweating; to the extent that his secretary suggested a lie down and a call for medical aid. It took about half an hour before his heart rate slowed down enough, and his panting diminished to the point that he could make phone calls. But Todd was impressed with how quickly his body adapted to the new exercise and how quickly he picked up the capacity to walk more.

He also began walking from the Town Hall to the supermarket, which was about 400 yards. Being on foot instead of driving allowed him to have a better connection with the town—its stores and restaurants, its roads and sidewalks, the shopkeepers and their clients, men and women, young and old - it was often an adventure.

Sometimes, he was greeted by a person he did not recognize, who started talking to him as if they were good acquaintances. They gave him the 'best regards' from people he had never heard of, which he politely returned in kind. It was the awkwardness associated with a well-known public figure. Artists, musicians, actors, celebrities, politicians, royals, and even doctors had to know how to keep up this kind of small talk without insulting the unnamed masses.

He entered the supermarket, where he was quickly greeted by the owner while he had another look at the grocery list on his phone. Madelaine had requested the usual ingredients for some 10-point Weight Watchers dinners and 7-point breakfasts - plus some small items to snack on in between—all low in diet points.

He quickly found what he needed, then chatted briefly with a sympathetic elderly lady who promised to vote for him next time. The mayor responded by smiling and nodding in the usual affirmative way.

“One suggestion I have to make our town a bit better,” she whispered with a soft, croaked voice, “is to flatten the surface of the sidewalks. Right now, it's hip-breaking.” She looked with fierce eyes and a faint smile, which revealed a powerful will and a dynamic brain in a vulnerable shell, all covered with spotty, wrinkled skin.

The mayor just smiled and nodded yet again.

After more small talk with the cashier, the mayor stepped out and took a right - straight towards his modest home near the town's outskirts. He indeed noticed that the sidewalks were of miserable quality, and he promised himself to turn this into one of his top political points in the next campaign. While looking upwards, strolling in the burning sun, he came up with the idea to shade the sidewalks to promote walking. After greeting a few more people left and right, Todd eventually reached his home.

Madelaine embraced him at the door, but it was not the same warm, intimate, and passionate hug he was used to. Instinctively, Lederman knew what was coming. He took his wooden chair, sat at his usual place at the wooden table, and picked up the evening newspaper to scan the news.

“I'll make you a 2-point snack as an appetizer,” her voice sounding slightly tense and a bit too high in frequency. The mayor looked her in the eye, and suddenly, she burst into tears. It was the inevitable outburst of sadness after days of repression. Large teardrops pooled in her eyes and started rolling down her chubby cheeks. “I found these in the bin of the bathroom,” Madelaine wept; she kept sobbing while she showed him the discarded syringes from the weight loss drug.

Madelaine's discovery took Todd by surprise. Suddenly, tears started streaming down from his eyes as well. He simply could not bear to see his beloved Madelaine in such a state of grief. “I can explain, I can explain,” he said in a low voice.

They both kept sobbing for a couple of seconds, looking each other in the eye before Madelaine's grief turned into rage. "You betrayed me, you deceived me, YOU FOOLED ME!!" she screamed at him, throwing the empty syringes into the kitchen.

The big man did not know what to say and bent over the table, putting his head between his hands; after a minute, he stood up and walked over to Madelaine, who stood leaning on the wooden kitchen countertop with her hands covering her face. When she looked up at him, he saw her face was dark and streaked with tears.

She was barely able to catch her breath from crying. "Now I understand... why you only ate 12 points a day... it's all because of this nasty stuff..." Her voice was stuttering. "And you said nothing... and I kept cooking... I thought we were in this together...you've been so unfair to me."

Todd regained his composure and finally was able to respond. "I felt so desperate, dear and I was offered these syringes." He paused for a second. "I just couldn't resist buying a few."

His wife looked at him in amazement. "Did you use our shared funds to buy these shots?" her voice was full of disappointment. "I *thought* they were handed out for free!"

The mayor searched frantically for a way out of the crisis. "I found out that almost all the citizens receiving the syringes were Democrats."

The *first* thing that triggered her outrage breaking the bond of togetherness between them, as had just happened. The *second* was Democrats.

"Democrats?" She responded with astonishment.

She pushed him away, but the effort was small. He instinctively knew that this was meant as an invitation to take her back in his arms. He bounced back and firmly embraced her, which she accepted without resistance. They sobbed together for a couple of minutes, the tears mingling together where their faces touched. For him, this was the best way to restore the strong bond of trust between them.

"How could this happen? That Democrats got most of the drug?" She finally asked.

Although he was a Republican, the mayor always had to balance his interests between the two parties since basically half of the voters were Democrats. However, the thought that most of the weight loss drugs had been secured by liberals was just unbearable to his wife.

"They teamed up, as they always do, and spread the word about the opportunity between them," answered the mayor.

"How unfair! This would have never happened if the secret had been obtained by Republicans," she said firmly. His wife's plump face started to return to normal, and her eyes regained their usual energy.

"Now tell me, you naughty man," she continued in a teasing way, pointing to the syringes, "How much did you pay for these?"

The index finger of her right hand poked at the heavy chest of the mayor, her gaze looked upwards to meet his. "How much?" Her eyes were still wet, although they had started to dry.

The mayor started to giggle nervously and was hesitant to mention the true amount.

“It was \$50, sweetest of sweets, not that much to harm the interest of a Democrat.” (To keep talking about Democrats seemed to be the safest bet).

“Fifty dollars?” she repeated thoughtfully. “It sounds like a lot, but I agree that's a modest price to harm a Democrat,” she replied. “But now let me tell you - I knew before I found the syringes in the bin upstairs that something was going on!” she exclaimed.

“How is that?” her husband responded sullenly.

“Look at your belt, darling,” she mused.

They both looked down and noticed the shift of the pin in the belt, three holes upward. Their heads came up simultaneously. “I noticed a two-hole shift already two weeks ago, you scoundrel!”

“I started four weeks ago when the drug was initially offered to me by the IT guy working in the Town Hall. He needed money to buy something nice for his wife,” he explained.

“And how many pounds did *this* Republican shed in a month's time?” she asked while poking her index finger in his chest again.

“When I checked this morning, it was 25 pounds, sweetheart.” The usual bravado had returned to the mayor's voice.

“My great goodness, that means that it's only \$2 per pound,” she deducted. “And it saves us almost half on the grocery bill.”

“Have you ever heard of inflicting harm to Democrats in a 'budget neutral' way?” asked the mayor in a conspiratorial dark voice while looking her intently in the eyes.

“This is an incredible act of genius!” his wife proclaimed. They both started to laugh, which lasted for minutes. This was always an essential stage in ending a fight between them.

“Now let me inspect your belt one more time, naughty boy,” she said with a flirtatious undertone in her voice. They both looked down, and the mayor knew what would happen. This was always the last and best stage of ending their fights.

## Chapter 16: The Game

**Manuel takes Heather to an NFL game and meets with his fraternity friends in the Biotechnia skybox. His friends are worried that the food and healthcare industries may suffer severe losses if a cheap weight loss drug is released on a mass scale. They team up to sabotage the new medication.**

The engine revved, roared, and blasted - pushing the car through the curves in the road, going left and right, evading the desert hills and brown rock formations. The acceleration and breaking created explosions of might and power. This was what he liked.

Manuel quickly glanced at his secretary, who looked scared but seemed to enjoy it at the same time. She was pushed against her seat whenever the car accelerated, the same feeling people get riding a big roller coaster.

When a traffic light came up, Manuel had to slow down. He glanced to his right again.

She looked absolutely spectacular: a fashionable dress, dark blue, rather short, extremely sexy, and white high-heeled sneakers: what an invention *that* was! Manuel's right hand moved to her left knee, touched it, and drifted upwards in a playful manner. He kept looking at the road, but his hand knew exactly where to go.

Playfully, he got a mock slap in his face, but they both laughed. It was their new game, a balanced game which they both knew how to play. Manuel growled. He was taking his 'alpha male' role to its full potential, and he hit the gas once more.

They arrived at the BioArena, one of the largest, most modern NFL stadiums in the States, which meant that it was one of the best venues in the world. Even after witnessing great football matches in Old World Europe and South America for him, nothing could compare to the excitement of an American Football game.

Manuel left his car in the VIP lane, tipped the guy a \$100 bill and took his secretary by the arm to the VIP elevator. She smiled and he grinned as they walked in together.

In the mirror of the lift, he saw how subcutaneous skin treatments with hyaluronic acid, combined with a touch of Botox, had reversed his biological age by a decade or more. He looked at himself with a self-congratulatory smile and then caught Heather's adoring gaze. They stared at each other. What did that mean? Was it love?

Biotechnica had the most expensive business seats in the BioArena — the best stadium in the world — which meant the company had the best seats one could ever wish for to watch the most exciting sports game in the world. As they entered the VIP sponsor area, they were promptly served a glass of champagne accompanied by a small tray of oysters. The bubbles, combined with the alcohol, instantly rushed to their brains.

They finally found their seats to watch the game, which was just about to begin. The crowd roared, supporting their home team. This was the fourth game of seven, and his team was 2-1 behind. They had to win this time.

The colosseum was absolutely packed; not a single seat was left empty. Manuel looked up and down, watching the crowd. *Did they look back at him? Did they see the CEO of Biotechnica in the best, most expensive seats in the stadium?*

Manuel felt on top of the world; it was as if the BioArena and the team belonged to him. He felt like a Roman emperor, directing the spectacle unfolding before the eyes of the crowd.

Best yet, the entire stadium was packed with clients—clients of the most powerful weight loss drug on the market. At least seven out of ten, or perhaps even eight out of ten spectators were severely overweight. And it wouldn't get any better today since all they did was drink beer and eat sausages!

All this while shouting in support of the home team, of course.

Manuel looked at Heather, who glanced back seductively. This made him absolutely wild - but he had to keep his guard now. Cameras were everywhere and his business clients could show up at any time. His hand could not go to that heavenly place here in the stadium.

“What happened to the shares of Biotechnica?” A powerful hand squeezed his neck. Manuel turned to look into the face of Steve MacGuire, one of his closest fraternity friends and a lifelong ally.

“Ahhh, how nice of you to join us - please meet my secretary, Heather Vogue. She insisted on coming just to meet you guys.”

Steven had a completely different look than Manuel. His hair was a vague mix of red and blonde, he had a pale face, green eyes, and he was a bit taller than Manuel, but one could see that they were the same breed. They both dressed for success, Wall Street banker style, in stylish, expensive clothing. Anytime they met there was this energy that originated from their shared past and their strong bonds formed at an Ivy League school.

Steve enthusiastically shook hands with Heather. He was all charm and grins and knew how to do this social act very well.

“With the share prices, it's the same as the game we're just about to see,” shouted Manuel to have his voice heard. “We'll have setbacks, of course, but we always bounce back!”

They both laughed—the same 'fraternity laugh' that bonded them during their college days.

“I understand Manuel,” Steve replied, “but let me drink a glass of champagne and catch my breath first, and then we'll talk.”

Manuel felt the dark shadows of the past few weeks closing in on him again—*La Maison*, the hot realtor, his father-in-law, but most of all - the abhorrent cheap knockoff that threatened to wipe his drug off the market. He had to fend off the attack, and he tapped into the surge of adrenalin and endorphins triggered by the heated atmosphere of the game and the collective energy of the crowd.

“Don't you like the champagne?” asked Heather, taking Manuel by the arm. His face had darkened after Steve's remark about the Biotechnica shares.

Manuel recomposed himself and took a gulp, “Sure, I love it; let's have another one and with Steve.” The three of them toasted enthusiastically as the player introductions began on the field.

“What exactly do you do?” Heather asked Steve inquisitively. She was extremely curious in nature, but the noise in the stadium forced her to bend forward and speak directly into Steve's left ear, almost touching it.

“Not much, just like your boss,” which was followed by a burst of laughter by all three of them. Steve continued over the din, “I'm the CEO of Vigour Incorporated - you must have seen our products in the supermarket.” He had to scream in her left ear at this point, and still, Manuel could hardly understand what was being said.

“Oh yes!” cried Heather. “My kitchen is packed with your products, especially the Pulpa line. What can I say? I have fabulous taste!”

Steve chuckled, “Oh wow, fantastic to hear that you’re such a fan of Pulpa!” After shouting the sentence in her ear, he tilted his head back and looked her straight in the eyes sweetly. Manuel started becoming irritated and a bit jealous. As fraternity brothers they shared everything, but Heather was absolutely HIS tonight.

Steve continued, “Our scientists discovered a special form of ultra-processed nutritional food supplement which can easily be manipulated to the taste of our target customers. Let me guess - you probably use Pulpa Green?” Steve looked expectantly at Heather.

“What? Yes! How’d you know that?” Heather shouted back in Steve's left ear.

“That's exactly Pulpa's secret,” shouted Steve teasingly.

The national anthem ended, and the game was about to begin. The arena exploded with excitement and the big roar of the crowd prohibited any sensible conversation..

Manuel nervously checked his watch. His third guest, Miles Kremer, had yet to arrive. Heather shouted in his ear: “Relax, darling, it'll be alright tonight.” She gave a big wink while she squeezed his arm.

He felt his watch vibrate. It was a message from his wife wishing him a good time and letting him know that Alec was sad that he was not allowed to join his father to watch the game. Manuel looked up from his watch. *Yes, it was true; he betrayed his wife and his son, but...Wasn't this just business - watching the game? And wasn't it true that in this exact same stadium, he had laid the groundwork for most of his successful Biotechnica deals?*

Suddenly, there was a touchdown from the guest team, followed by a successful field goal. This provoked intense booing and unrest in the crowd.

Without warning, Manuel got an elbow in the back and immediately heard a burst of laughter from Miles Kremer, who had finally arrived.

“I thought you could use one of these!” Miles smiled as he appeared, carrying three glasses of champagne. His face was one big grin and he seemed ready to party.

Miles had dark, curly hair, classic thin-rimmed glasses, a tailored navy-blue blazer, designer jeans, and branded sneakers—a sporty but classy outfit.

“This is Heather,” Manuel shouted to his new guest over the crowd, “Heather Vogue.”

The newcomer looked appreciatively at Heather and his eyes flashed. “Let me go and get another drink while you take these.” In a moment, he was gone.

Miles knew exactly what was needed to keep a party going. He moved swiftly and was back in a moment with the extra glass of champagne, and they toasted, cheered, and laughed together.

There was a touchdown by the home team, followed by another field goal. The BioArena erupted again with a volcano of triumphant emotions. Heather popped up, throwing her arms around Manuel's neck and kissing him. Miles and Steve also jumped up and down excitedly while trying to preserve whatever was left of their champagne.



“We need to talk during the break,” Miles shouted in Manuel's ear. Alvarez was puzzled. *Why was it that both Steve and Miles wanted to talk to him?*

Miles talked with a cupped hand into Heather's ear, “Steve told me you're Manuel's secretary. Is that right?” The crowd roared again.

“He's the best boss you can imagine!” Heather shouted back. Conversations under these circumstances lacked any substance or coherence, similar to conversations in a bar or club. (But perhaps the lack of coherence was what made these conversations so attractive).

Steve returned with yet another round of champagne, and the home team scored again. More than half of the champagne was gone before the four of them could cheer again.

During the half time show, the group withdrew to the interior of the luxury box, and the faces of the group turned serious.

“What's the story about some cheap generic of your weight loss drug showing up in some lousy midwestern town?” asked Steve, frowning. “What are you gonna to do about that, Manuel?”

“We'll fight the patent infringement with McGill and Watson on our side,” boasted Manuel. Steve hesitated before he responded, “Let me know if you need any help.”

“What do you mean?” Manuel looked puzzled.

“Well, listen,” replied Steve, his voice conspiratorial. “If this new drug is successfully mass marketed, it would not only blow up your Cervelix drug pipeline but also hurt the sales of *our* food products. People will eat less Pulpa, despite its good taste,” Steve admitted, glancing at Ms. Vogue.

“But I'll always love Pulpa Green,” exclaimed Heather, not reading the room.

The three fraternity friends simultaneously looked at her in amazement, their looks telling her that the remark was ill-fitted, ill-timed, and ill-suited. But Manuel's gaze was so ferocious that Heather decided to withdraw from the conversation completely and go get more champagne.

“The same is true for *our* business model,” stated Miles. “We will be seriously exposed to less patient flow if these types of drugs are mass marketed.”

Miles Kremer was the CEO of Kremer and Schwartz, one of the biggest investors in the US healthcare industry. “Your own Cervelix trials showed that patients using the drug showed a 40% reduction in cardiovascular disease, and as we all know, the treatment of heart disease is one of the biggest money makers in any hospital.”

Manuel was astonished, and thoughts flashed through his brain. *Not only would his pharmaceutical company be hurt tremendously, but an entire supply chain for the food industry and healthcare would suffer. As a consequence, the entire US economy could be at risk.*

Heather came back with three glasses of champagne, which were accepted without attention.

“We could work from different angles,” continued Steve. “I can pull some strings in Washington, and Miles has the best connections in the media.” He turned his head to Kremer as if they had prepared this conversation together.

“Sure, sure,” continued Miles promptly, “But to make this effective, we would need a couple of storylines that could hurt that cheap generic they've developed.” He looked inquisitively at Manuel.



“There are two major stories,” responded Manuel after a pause. “One patient was admitted to the hospital because of an overdose.”

“That could make a fantastic story,” replied Miles. “Let's find out who this guy is and hire some hyena journalists to create a scandal for Medication4All.”

Everybody nodded. “And what is the second one?” Kremer queried.

“The other one came from one of our liaisons who works in the local pharmacy. We've heard there are about 20% who are 'non-responders' to the cheaper version of the drug,” said Manuel. “But we've never seen this effect in the Cervelix trials.”

“That could make an even better story, because this suggests the inferiority of the knockoff,” noted Miles enthusiastically.

Steve added, “And patients receiving the drug want to be sure they get the best possible medication. They wouldn't want the risk of having an inferior product injected into their precious bodies. Perhaps we could exploit these doubts, like when people had to get the COVID-19 vaccinations.”

They returned to the luxury box outside and watched their hometown heroes crushing the other team with ferocious energy and clever tactics. It was simply the best and most energetic game they had ever watched, and with every touchdown, they looked at each other in joy and solidarity.

What they saw on the pitch would be the same exact strategy they would employ to crush the malevolent Medication4All worldwide.

As Manuel turned his Porsche towards the hotel entrance, Heather remained silent. Manuel was exhausted, but his nerves had calmed. For the first time in weeks, he was able to relax. The support of his fraternity brothers to save his Cervelix from its demise could turn out to be crucial.

Back in the elevator, Heather started to kiss him quite aggressively. He felt she was looking for revenge somehow, and he wondered if being slapped in the face would make him look any younger.

## Chapter 17: Chase

**Delilah follows one of the ‘non-responders’ through town and finds out he sold his dosage to another citizen. Rodriguez is suspicious about Carlita cheating on him and has a nervous breakdown. A journalist from a national newspaper spies on Rodriguez and interviews his wife.**

Delilah was not dressed in her regular pharmacy clothing. She was not even dressed in her normal sporty gear. Today, she was dressed in the most middle-of-the-road outfit she could find—an outfit that would best fit a hard-working young woman in a regular midwestern town with hardly any make-up or prospects. She took a seat in the pharmacy’s back-office with Richard.

“Could I bring you another cappuccino, Delilah?” Richard offered; he had turned out to be a true gentleman.

“Oh no, thank you so much Richard, you’ve already served me three coffees and it’s starting to add up,” replied Delilah smiling, “No good candidates yet?” Richard shook his head.

In a relatively short time, they had developed a sincere friendship with mutual respect and understanding. He had his autism issues and was just divorced. She was a single mother traumatized by a foreign war. They hadn’t slept together yet, although she didn’t understand why, but Richard was holding back when it came to this. *Was he traumatized with respect to intimacy? Or just scared?* she wondered.

“So far they’ve all arrived by car, so no good candidates for you to follow yet,” responded Richard. “We’ll have to be patient.”

“How many came to collect their dosage syringes for the second month?” she asked.

“I’m not exactly sure, but at least 200,” answered Richard. He had no doubt that a good candidate would show up soon, so he went back to work in the drugstore.

Ten minutes later he came back in a slight rush. “There’s a tall blonde guy, overweight, in white t-shirt with a Budweiser logo, you can’t miss him, his name is Harry Gates.”

Delilah hurried out the back door of the shop and walked through the parking lot, quickly rounding the corner to the front of the pharmacy. She was just in time to see a large human shape with a white Budweiser t-shirt disappear around the corner, going quickly in the direction of Main Street with a small pharmacy bag in hand.

Her heart pounded, not so much because of any significant danger, but more the excitement in uncovering what was truly going on in this little town. The guy wore jeans that seemed to slide off his hips with every step. For some miraculous reason, they just stayed on, giving his whole persona an extremely sloppy appearance.

She followed the tall blonde at a distance, at least 50 steps behind, all while holding her phone. If the guy turned around to check, she could quickly act as if she was engaged in messaging on her mobile.

After a minute or so, the guy stopped to check his cellphone. He looked at the screen intently and started to type a message. Even from the distance, Delilah noticed that his thick fingers had trouble operating the touch screen; he looked very clumsy. He paused, most likely to wait for an

answer, then put his cell back in one of his jean pockets (pulling even more downward pressure on his miracle trousers) and then continued on his way.

Delilah acted as if she had finished messaging someone - but kept following him. It was easy because the big guy just wasn't that bright or that fast.

On Main Street, they were quite a few people on the sidewalks and cars in the street - but the suspect didn't seem to notice - his steps seemed determined to find the shortest way to their destination. She followed from the opposite side of the street to avoid detection.

About halfway up Main Street he checked his mobile once more, paused for a second, and entered the Home Run Sports bar. The amateur sleuth studied him carefully from the sidewalk, but she decided to wait a bit before going in, and instead stopped in front of a nearby clothing store.

She had learned to use the large store window glass as a mirror from several detective movies. From here, she could clearly see the entrance to the sports bar, all while still pretending to be interested in the newest styles for fatties.

"These clothes are not your size, ma'am." volunteered the store owner, leaning against this door post, "These are extra-large and super-sized clothes," he explained.

The question threatened to distract Delilah's focus, so she prepared an answer while continuing to eyeball the sports bar entrance reflection.

"Ah...yes... now I see...indeed, this is not for me," she responded with a faint smile. In the meantime, she noticed a big man with brown chinos and a powder blue shirt enter the pub as well.

"You could go out camping in these sizes," laughed the store owner, who was dressed in the signature style of the store.

Delilah just nodded and decided to follow her mark, carefully looking both ways before crossing the street as her heart pounding with excitement. She entered the dive-bar a bit overwhelmed by the darkness, but after her eyes had adjusted she noticed that the pub looked more like a hip coffee place rather than a sports bar - at least at this time of the day.

\* \* \* \*

Rodriguez cleaned a number of coffee cups behind the bar. It was the sixth day after his last GLIP injection and his level of satiety had dropped a little. Instead of feeling as if he had ingested ten well-proportioned Argentine steaks, he now felt as if he had consumed only five well-proportioned Argentine steaks. This meant that he still had a tendency not to eat or even get hungry.

The result was genuinely spectacular, he had lost about 30 pounds. He found himself lucky to have kept quite a bit of his clothing from a couple of years ago. He still dressed in sand-colored chinos and a powder blue shirt. The fashion pressure in the Midwest was low, which also meant he could easily switch back in time—perhaps four to five years ago, without looking outdated.

One major change was that his brain fog had disappeared. It was the same foggy feeling one could have in the morning just after waking up sometimes. In the last few years, this morning fog had persisted throughout the day—it just never went away. It made just 'thinking' into an energy consuming exercise—his brain was sluggish and unfocused.

This was even reflected in his face, which started having a lethargic and somewhat dull expression. Now that he could feel and see the difference he understood why Carlita had started to flirt with other men. She was probably looking for more masculine energy, which he simply lacked.

He looked around and saw a lot of unfamiliar faces, though the café was busy. Sandy's idea to turn the sports bar into an upmarket coffee place during the day had an immediate effect. They bought an espresso machine (a fancy Italian brand on eBay) and a large set of nice coffee cups. They watched a variety of YouTube tutorials to master the making of the perfect espresso, doppio, cortado cappuccino, latte, latte macchiatos, mocha, café au lait, and Americano. While experimenting with the machine, they argued about offering sweet shots of caramel, vanilla, chocolate or mocha - which Sandy wanted, but Rodriguez fiercely opposed. He did not want to subject his clientele to the pressure of overconsuming and the risk of obesity. He himself had been the perfect example of this effect.

The same fierce battle had taken place about the cookies, donuts, brownies, muffins, pies, and pieces of chocolate one could also serve with the coffee. After days of intense discussion, while fine-tuning their skills at the machine, they struck a deal.

They decided to make the side items - cookies, donuts, brownies, muffins, and pies themselves - without processed sugar and only using whole grains as a basis for the recipes. What could be better than home-baked cookies, pies, muffins, and brownies? And what could beat the smell of freshly baked cookies in a hip coffee place with great wi-fi?

"Could you make two cappuccinos for table 10?" asked Sandy. "They also want the pure chocolate muffins." Rodriguez noticed the two men seated at table 10 seemed to be engaged in an intense discussion.

Hernandez recognized the tall blond guy as a crowd member who had waited in line during the memorable night before the GLIP drug launch. He recalled the man was close to the front of the line and had behaved quite aggressively towards the driver. To his amazement, he saw that his companion was now the town's mayor! It was the first time he had seen them together in the sports bar, or anywhere for that matter.

"Sure, two cappuccinos, table 10," answered Rodriguez. "But first, could I show you a text message which I don't understand?"

Sandy looked puzzled. "What do you mean?"

Rodriguez lowered his voice, "This is a message I captured from Carlita's phone. I have no clue what it means." He had seen Carlita's phone flash with a message from Timothy and had quickly taken a photo of her screen using his iPhone. He showed Sandy the picture of the message.

"Thank you for hugging my tree; that was really sensational. Let's go on another expedition soon."

Sandy looked up, her face reddened and she started to smile faintly. In response, Rodriguez's face flushed, sensing that the message could only hint at an embarrassing conclusion. "To be honest... I can only imagine...that it means that...she helped him...to get an orgasm..." stammered Sandy.

Rodriguez was dumbfounded by Sandy's explanation. "But how? How could this happen? And why? I don't understand."

"Let's not go into any details now...let's help the customers first," consoled Sandy.

As if struck by lightning, Rodriguez tried to prepare the two cappuccinos. *How the fuck could he have been so naive!!!* His brain started to boil with rage. "This whole tree hugging stuff was just a metaphor for having sex! What a fool he had been!"

With brisk, automatic movements, Rodriguez started preparing the cappuccinos. He forced himself to concentrate. *“No wonder Carlita had been so cheerful after joining this ridiculous Tree Hugging Society,”* he thought.

He spilled quite a bit of oat milk while pouring it from the carton in the small can, and almost missed the steam pipe to froth the milk. He screwed a portafilter under the machine but in his frantic state, forgot to replace the old java with freshly ground coffee.

Just then, a man dressed in an out-of-town outfit entered the place and walked up to the bar. He looked around, paused a few seconds, and took a seat. “Could you make me a Quad?” he ordered.

The barkeep looked up from the espresso machine and saw a short, skinny guy in white shirt, dark trousers, black shoes, and rimless glasses with dark curly hair and a stern pointed face seated at the bar. His gaze was self-assured, which was quite a contrast with the confused look Rodriguez had.

“A what?!” exclaimed Rodriguez, bending a bit towards the visitor. His confusion was a mix of having never heard of this coffee variant before, the noise of the espresso machine and his elevated state of mind, which invalidated his auditory capacities.

“A quad, sir,” repeated the guy in a loud voice, “which is two doppios combined.”

He managed to come up with an escape and waved his hands to his ears as if signaling that it was just too noisy to have heard the order correctly - “I heard squad!” he yelled back, smiling faintly. “Give me a minute.”

Rodriguez tried to make two decent cappuccinos but struggled as he felt the eyes of the visitor upon him. He was very self-conscious from the looks of this guy, and his hands started to tremble. He poured the steamed milk in the large capuchin cups but failed to make the barista signature. Sandy came back to pick up the cappuccinos and saw his sad, imperfect coffees.

“Please take the cappuccinos to table ten and I’ll handle the bar in the meantime.” said Sandy as she took his position behind the espresso machine in a definitive manner. This was a relief to Rodriguez as he automatically took the tray and walked slowly to table ten, still in a daze. The message captured on Carlita’s phone came back to him.

*What had happened? How could Carlita do this to him - if she had? Had she used her hands to hug Timothy’s tree or...ooh my god...could she have used her lips?? Her mouth? Was that also called tree hugging?? Rodriguez had kissed Carlita just this morning, before he left. Then she was off for another “Tree Finding Mission. Lord Almighty.”*

His hands started to shake again, and he just managed to keep the cappuccinos in the cups. “Here you go gentlemen, two of the best cappuccinos in town,” he offered.

The two men glanced up at him but were so deep in a discussion they hardly noticed what he had said. Even the mayor, who was known for his sociability, responded in a flat way. “Thank you so much,” the mayor said dryly in a low voice.

Rodriguez saw the mayor’s moving lips and could only think of Carlita’s lips hugging Timothy’s tree. His hands started to tremble again and he lost control, dropping the tray on the floor.

Across the bar, Delilah had just noticed her coffee was taking somewhat longer than anticipated. The pub seemed chaotic and unorganized — very different from the almost military vibe in the pharmacy. She looked around and noticed the CCTV cameras everywhere—most likely this was required by law. But Mr. Harry Gates was seated at a table not far from her—easily recognizable by his swath of blonde hair and his **impressive body shape**. *(Earlier he’s described differently)*

Gates had been joined by another man whom she had seen entering the bar minutes later whom she now recognized as the mayor of the town. The two gave off the feeling of being engaged in an intense debate. Gates put a small pharmacy bag on the table, which the mayor wanted to grab, but Harry was quick to pull it back with his left hand making some sort of stop sign.

Rodriguez came over with their two coffees, but they did not seem to be interested. To her surprise the barkeep dropped the tray without any reason except his face in a state of anguish. She then recognized Rodriguez as the GLIP customer who accidentally had taken an overdose.

A blond, tattooed girl hurried over to clean up the mess, chatting in a friendly way to odd couple. She did all she could to rescue the situation, acting quickly and professionally.

Moments later she returned to Harry and the mayor with two new coffees and muffins on the side. The two men nodded politely to her and resumed their intimate discussion. Harry put the small pharmacy bag on the table as the mayor took a small envelope from his right pocket and placed it on the table. Harry checked out a couple of the bank notes inside and nodded to the buyer - who in turn quietly took the small pharmacy bag under the table.

Delilah was thrilled. She had found out why twenty percent of the town was classified as 'non-responders'. "They just sold their doses for cash!"

Harry and the mayor stayed for a while longer and conversed. Delilah noticed the blonde's face eagerly engulfed his muffin, almost in a one single enormous bite, with an expression totally focused on the act of eating. In contrast, the mayor hardly looked at his muffin and took only the slightest nibble from it.

After a few minutes, Harry stood up and walked to the bar while the mayor remained seated. Delilah's eyes followed Mr. Gates, who talked to Rodriguez for a moment and to the unfamiliar new guy, who was also seated at the bar. Harry paid his bill using his mobile, and slowly walked to the exit.

Delilah acted quickly, hurried to the bar, and asked for the check. She paid using her card and ran out the front door. Now her eyes had to adjust to the bright sunlight, which gave her pause. She squinted, looking left and right just in time to see Gates round the corner. She followed his steps and within moments she was just yards behind him.

"Hey Harry, could I have a word with you?" Her voice sounded determined.

He turned to face her with a brazen look, and he slowed his pace, eventually coming to a full stop like a tanker ship requiring a bit of extra distance.

"Are you talking to me?" the blonde asked with suspicion.

"Yes, exactly, I'm talking to YOU!" her voice louder than one would expect from the petite and elegant stature. Harry looked puzzled, and then recognized her as the pharmacy assistant who fired a gun shot in the air during the first GLIP delivery. This memory also served as a reminder to be careful with this one.

"What do you want?" he asked, looking skeptical.

"I saw what you just did, and that's illegal," she replied, a bit sure of herself.

"Illegal? What do you mean?" Harry started acting as though he was innocent, while knowing what he had done wasn't right.

“You signed a form that stated you wouldn’t sell the drug to third parties, yet I saw you selling it to the mayor in the sports bar,” she said while stepping a few yards closer to him.

“What are you gonna do, arrest me?” Gates smiled cynically at her, trying to bluff his way out of the situation but Delilah was unmoved.

“You signed the form, which means we could take you to court and collect a \$5000 fine,” she answered with a cold voice. Harry thought for a moment. A \$5000 dollar fine was a lot more than he could possibly afford. His eyes started to drift, and he needed time to think.

“Let me propose a deal,” continued Delilah. “I will report nothing, but in return I’ll be allowed to call you as a witness in court to tell exactly what happened when the time comes.”

The opportunist was thrown but her suggestion, but quickly recovered, “And why would I do that?” Harry regained part of his confidence. “You have no proof whatsoever.” But Delilah beamed.

“Your last statement is a confession in itself, which I have now recorded,” she announced producing her smartphone. “On top of that,” she added, “I filmed the transaction in the bar as well.”

Harry became agitated, “Are you out of your mind?! You’re just a simple pharmacy assistant, not a detective!” he exclaimed. He thought of grabbing her phone for a moment, but that would only make matters worse. As if Delilah could read his mind, she quickly put her phone away and said, “The entire bar is filled with CCTV cameras anyways, so I would be really careful if I were you.”

Harry felt cornered and didn’t know what to say. “No panic,” said Delilah, who had the situation under control now, “we’ll only call you if the drug case goes to trial but be careful, we know where to find you.” She turned her back at him and walked away with steady steps.

\* \* \* \*

Rodriguez had been in the men’s room and had locked himself in the toilet for about ten minutes. A couple of weeks ago, Sandy had taught him how to use breathing techniques to calm down. For moments such as these, it was a blessing. He put both hands on his pot belly and slowly breathed in – then held his breath for four seconds and slowly let it out again. He repeated the exercise a few more times.

The door of the men’s room opened with a noise and he felt the urge to get back to the bar. He flushed the empty toilet, opened the stall door and started to wash his hands. He was soon joined by a visitor who met his eyes via the mirror while washing his hands and had a quizzical look.

“Could I ask you some questions when we get back in the bar?” said the man with rimless glasses, dark curly hair and a stern, pointed face.

“Sure, sure,” responded Rodriguez, just a bit too hastily.

“Are you ok now?” asked the visitor. Apparently, the stranger had observed how Rodriguez reacted to the message he had captured on Carlita’s phone.

When Hernandez returned to the bar he stayed out of the area where the espresso machine was positioned, as if to signal to Sandy that she was in charge of making coffee for now. As if it were a ritual, the bar owner started to clean up again, but was soon joined by the mysterious stranger.

“I heard that this is the famous town where half of the citizens have received some experimental weight loss drug, is that right?” The barkeep looked into the beady eyes of the visitor. He looked like a rat.

“Yes, it is indeed. We’re the lucky ones,” responded Rodriguez, who was suddenly happy to be distracted from the Tree Hugging obsession in his head.

“You said *we*. Does that mean that *you* are one of the lucky ones too?” asked the visitor.

“Yes indeed,” responded Rodriguez enthusiastically. “I’ve lost about 30 pounds in four weeks.” His mood started to lift again. “But I’m sorry, who are you? And why are you asking?”

The visitor smiled apologetically. “I’m sorry, I didn’t introduce myself. I’m Donald Price, a science writer for the *Washington Times* doing a piece on the devastating impact of obesity on our society.”

“That’s terrific,” replied Rodriguez. “The whole world should learn what is happening here. It’s magic!”

“I’ve heard that,” said the visitor, mimicking the big man’s enthusiasm. “Could you tell me how it affected you, and the clientele of this bar?”

Rodriguez then talked about how he got the drug, and how the injections resulted in a level of satiety that was unheard of. In the heat of the story, he also confessed that he had accidentally taken an overdose and was admitted to the hospital.

“What happened when you were admitted to the ward?” asked the visitor with a smile.

“Well, the doctors diagnosed it as abdominal discomfort, but I thought I was going to die!” He continued. “In reality, I produced such incredible farts that they had to isolate me in a closed section of the hospital, no shit!” They both laughed at the description of the problem.

“And isn’t there also a rumor that the drug doesn’t work for everyone?” queried the reporter.

Rodriguez was impressed with how much the journalist already knew about the situation. No wonder he had been promoted to ‘science writer’ for such a prestigious newspaper. He also became more accustomed to the ratty face of the journalist.

“You remember that tall guy who just left the bar? He was also using the drug, but he didn’t lose any weight,” answered Rodriguez.

“You mean the tall blonde fellow?” Donald recalled, “Yes indeed, I remember him. He looked very heavy. Do you by any chance happen to know his name?” asked the journalist with anticipation.

Rodriguez felt a bit hesitant. *Could he give a name of one of his customers to a journalist?* The visitor sensed his hesitation and offered, “We could have your name in the article if you want, but not his of course.” His name in a national newspaper, who could say that? Rodriguez’s face then produced a wide grin.

“His name is Harry Gates. He works at the county offices,” the barkeep added.

“Thank you so much Rodriguez, you’ve been a great help. And let me tell you something else. This was the best ‘squad’ coffee I ever had.”



## Chapter 18: Supermarket

**Bill Taylor, a local supermarket owner and one of Rodriguez's best friends, is visited by lawyers representing the supermarket chain and food industry because he's seen a 20% drop in the sales of his processed foods. The lawyers threaten him with the loss of his distribution licenses if he does not succeed in promoting more sales of their processed foods.**

Bill, real name William, had never even thought of owning a supermarket. Young kids played 'shop' but when they grew older they wanted to become policemen and firefighters, especially the boys. Later on these same boys wanted to become doctors or vets, but 'supermarket owner' was never on anyone's career agenda.

The storeowner drove through the town in his classic Mustang, which he loved. His left arm was leaning on the upper edge of the door frame as he finger-waved at neighbors around town. What he especially enjoyed was to have the side windows open and feel the hot, dry air whirling through the car. It gave him a special feeling of being totally carefree - the *Easy Rider* experience.

He had a muscular frame but was not very tall, perhaps five feet six or seven at most, yet he was squarely built. Although he had no Eastern European ancestry—at least not that he knew of—he had an extremely short neck like those Slavic wrestlers who won the Olympics. His face was broad and round with small, green-grey eyes and ears that stood off slightly from his head. Bill's mouth curled slightly upwards on both sides, giving his face the odd impression he was forever smiling.

But his wasn't a particularly handsome face, nor his a particularly attractive body - yet he compensated with perfectly straight, white teeth, meticulously manicured hands, and an expensive vintage Jaeger LeCoultre wristwatch. He was elegantly dressed in light grey wool trousers, black Italian shoes and a light blue shirt - matching the color of his eyes. Though he had no tie, the whole ensemble was that of a successful business owner.

Mr. Taylor hung his suit jacket neatly on a clothing hanger in the right side of the car, out of the reach of the blazing sun light. It rocked slowly in the wind that came in through the open windows, all by plan. It was this same perfectionism that had also made his supermarket a success.

Bill had lost about 20 pounds after he started using GLIP, which didn't sound like a lot compared to his friend, Rodriguez. However, given the fact that Hernandez was so much taller, he was still impressed.

But it was only after *he* started using the drug that he became aware of the monstrous impact of obesity on the small town.

If one looked left down main street one saw a mother and her teenage daughter, both severely overweight with a similar body shape. If one looked right, there was a fat middle aged man walking his obese dachshund. While waiting for the town traffic light one could easily witness a huge elderly lady slowly crossing the street, hardly able to make it on time before the lights turned green. On the sidewalks, it was common to see a father and son looking into the sports shop window, both dressed in identical oversized t-shirts and shorts with a famous football team logo. In the parking lots, one could observe a severely overweight man in a checkered shirt slowly getting out of his pick-up truck, only to unload a geriatric scooter with a headlight and a bell.

Moreover, the neighborhood policeman were so overweight one wondered if they could *ever* catch a criminal, not least by chasing a suspect by foot. Even the town's firefighters were so fat that citizens didn't believe the local fire crew was fit enough to extinguish any significant fire. It seemed

as if obesity had the quality of being contagious, and it showed every sign of a dangerous, infectious disease. It had spread like a smoldering fire, and slowly developed into a devastating pandemic.

But now there was GLIP, the weight loss drug.

“Man, you lost weight,” said Carl, the company man.

Bill sat opposite three well-dressed gentlemen in the back office of his own supermarket. He knew one of them, Carl Davis, quite well since he visited every month to discuss the purchase portfolio of the QuikMarket.

Carl was a veteran African American businessman, close to 60 years of age. He had grey hair, sympathetic brown eyes, and dressed in a navy-blue suit with a crisp white shirt, which looked always good on him. He was a devoted company man, with over 30 years working for Vigour Inc.

“You really look great man!” continued Carl.

“I was one of the lucky ones,” replied Bill in an optimistic tone, his face showing an enthusiastic expression while slapping his hands on both sides of his belly.

In reality, Bill was on guard, but was clever enough to not show it. The other two men, whom he had never met, had introduced themselves as lawyers. One was working for Vigour and the other for the QuikMarket franchiser SquareFour—the largest supermarket chain in the country.

The Vigour lawyer was a tall bony man with a stern gaze, dark combed back hair, and an ash grey suit. His whole look was sinister, and one felt immediately threaten just by the expression of his face.

The other lawyer from SquareFour was a bit shorter and a bit heavier, but still in a normal weight zone. He was had dark brown locks and was fairly handsome, and also dressed in a nice grey suit, just a tone darker than the Vigour lawyer.

“I don’t understand why people overeat in the first place,” barked the Vigour lawyer, shifting on his bony frame with his cadaverous face. Some people, and he was one of them, could just eat what they wanted, and not gain any weight. These same people also had difficulty understanding why others, while eating similar quantities, gained weight and were unable to control it.

“We’re all just surrounded by food the entire day, which makes it hard to resist,” explained Bill. “And we now feel a real solution is on its way,” hinting at the weight loss drug without actually mentioning it.

Carl took over the conversation again, “Listen, Bill, we came here, the three of us, to have a serious discussion with you.” His voice was soft, sympathetic—the ‘good cop’ strategy.

Bill nodded politely saying, “We’ve always worked well together, Carl.”

The Vigour lawyer took over with a different tone. “You have a major problem Bill, let me explain it to you.” His tone was so icy that the grocer felt a shiver through his spine, but he said nothing and simply presented his ever-smiling face to the ominous faces of the lawyers. The only expression of anxiety Bill felt was from the trio sitting across from him in church clothes.

“The sales of the Pulpa line have dropped 20% in YOUR supermarket, while every other store in the ENTIRE state showed a 20% increase.” Vigour’s lawyer clearly emphasized the words “your” and “entire” with a thick and louder voice. He paused to let the message sink in.

“I’m here to explain to you why this trend is an undesirable for Vigour Inc, and why this may be dangerous for you and your business,” continued the corporate sock puppet.

Bill took in his words and swallowed hard once before he answered, “The trend is due to the use of an experimental weight loss drug in town. It was a clinical trial distributed by Medication4All and apparently it’s a cheaper generic version of Cervelix, the miracle drug. It affects your appetite, so people just don’t buy the processed foods that much anymore.”

The three suits exchanged glances. It became clear to Bill that the meeting was already fully planned and orchestrated by his visitors.

“Listen, Bill,” began the SquareFour lawyer. “you know the license which gives you the right to operate this supermarket is linked to our strategic food partners - of which Vigour is the most important. Do you understand this?”

The manager’s brain started looking for ways to escape, but every sentence spoken by the guests caused more trouble. It became clear to him that Vigour and SquareFour had teamed up to maximize the pressure on him.

“It’s just a matter of loyalty,” continued Carl with a smile painted on his face. “We have always been very loyal to you. We gave you a good head start when you opened the place a few years ago. Do you remember?”

Bill nodded, “Yes, sure I remember. You gave extra discounts in the first year to get me going.” His voice was thin and he felt cornered.

The Vigour lawyer took over once more, “Businesses like the QuikMarket HAVE to grow, they MUST grow. If not, they lose every reason for their existence.” His dark gaze seemed to penetrate directly to the brain area where fear was created.

This was good cop, bad cop and the devil himself.

The SquareFour lawyer sighed, “We’ve looked into your contract, Bill, and it really doesn’t look good for you if this ‘unfavorable trend’ continues like this.”

Bill swallowed once more and decided to fight back. “The total sales for the last month were good! The only difference is customers bought more fresh foods, fruits and vegetables from the local sources. We even found a county farm which has started supplying us with organic meat.”

The lawyers looked amused. “Yeah, right, so next time we meet you, we expect you to wear Birkenstocks and have a ‘Save the Planet’ tattoo,” stated the SquareFour lawyer in jest. The three intruders looked at each other and a short burst of sarcastic laughter exploded. It became even more evident that the whole meeting was meticulously organized shakedown.

Store manager Bill Taylor stuck to his arguments, “Personally, I’m happy that my customers have started eating healthier, and that my QuikMarket played a role in making people feel better.”

Carl had a flat look, but the lawyers looked at Bill in dismay as one said, “If you wanna to help people, why don’t you go and work for Amnesty International.” The Vigour attorney spoke with vitriol when he mentioned Amnesty, and the same disgust was shared by the other, who started shaking his head in disbelief.

“Mr. Taylor we have a BUSINESS to run here, which means MAKING MONEY instead of WASTING MONEY.” The corporate attorney used a dark undercurrent of energy in his words to express himself.

Yet Bill had one argument left to try and convince the SquareFour snakes to back off.

“The profit margins on fresh foods are much higher than the products delivered by SquareFour, which has resulted in my best month ever in terms of profit. Since 80% of my QuikMarket belongs to SquareFour, wouldn’t this ultimately help the chain as a whole?” he explained, looking in a sympathetic way at the suited vipers before him.

“This only shows what a terrible egomaniac you are,” the Vigour lawyer hissed. He started to lean forward and sway like a cobra, his devilish eyes focused directly on the store owner.

“As long as YOUR profits are OK, you don’t really care about US?” His thin, bony fingers pointed at his chest. After a second or two, he retracted and leaned back in his chair. But Bill noticed the SquareFour lawyer had not reacted to his concept of more profitability with organics.

Carl shook his head, “For a long time I thought that you were the smartest QuikMarket owner in the state, and also the most loyal guy. But now I’m really starting to have doubts, Bill.”

His look had a disappointed expression as he continued: “We won’t let you go right away, but we need your 100% commitment to our new product line. Let me explain,” said Carl.

“Our researchers have developed a new Pulpa product called Pulpa Pink. The whole idea is to market Pulpa Pink to mothers and daughters. And why? Well, women are often the food shoppers within families and mothers determine 70% of what is being consumed in these households.”

Carl paused for a few seconds. “And now comes the best part,” he continued. “Our very clever researchers have done experiments in animals models showing Pulpa Pink results in the activation of brain regions that reflect both pleasure and addiction - at the same time!

Carl was on a roll. “They explained it how they did it to me using advanced MRI scans of the brain - I believe it is called functional MRI. I swear, Bill, these guys were so enthusiastic and they’ve never seen a more convincing result with any other food product. It’s like a drug, really, a food drug.”

“Does that mean mothers and daughters kept buying the test product, Pulpa Pink?” asked the SquareFour lawyer, acting like this was the first he’d heard of this. His interest was clearly fake.

“Of course,” replied Carl. “They tested the concept in healthy volunteers and scans showed their brain nuclei lit up like Venus with dopamine! It’s the new crack – but perfectly legal!”

Bill tried to ask how this new product would fit in the larger picture, “Does this mean that families consuming those Pulpa products will keep eating, become addicted, and then keep coming back for more until they become dangerously overweight as well?”

The three visitors acted as if they had not heard a word of what Bill had just said.

“Due to the addictive effects you noted, we feel the new product will sell itself and create its own market,” continued Carl with enthusiasm.

The Vigour viper looked intently at Bill, expanding its hood. “We want to make you an offer for the next month,” his forked tongue revealing the faintest smile, “that will make US a fortune.”

The storeowner mentally prepared for a deal with the serpent.

“You’ll get Pulpa Pink at a 90% discount from us if you’ll offer the product as a ‘two for the price of one’ sale. You’ll have to really push it, using all possible tactics, but we could make a bundle,” he said enticingly.

Bill hesitated to respond, but before he could, Carl added, “We will help you, Bill. We have all the marketing materials to boost your sales, and support you in making up for the 20% loss.”

On autopilot, Bill nodded yes - but he felt a big ‘no’. Intense disgust was building up in him. He was nauseated, and his stomach felt as if he had just eaten a rotten deal.

## Chapter 19: Newspaper

**Excited, Manuel reads a feature article in a national newspaper stating that the new generic drug competing with Cervelix may result in dangerous side effects, including neurologic complaints. However, the fraternity brother who arranged the article requires a big favor in return, a night with Heather Vogue. The news story also reaches Rodriguez, who sees himself described in the article and feels betrayed.**

Manuel was back in great shape again. He parked in front of the large Biotechnica facilities, walked from his car to the entrance and stepped into the air-conditioned lobby. He went up using the private elevator, glad to be the only passenger. The CEO checked himself in the lift mirror, and pumped up his chest muscles a bit, which bulged impressively under his shirt.

Alvarez had started doing a rigorous regime in the gym, with almost immediate results. He knew his muscles produced testosterone and he imagined a rush of the hormone pulsing through his arteries, sculpting his physique and building his core strength. Sooner than he wanted, he had reached his 34th floor and went directly to the A-wing where his office was.

“Greetings Ms. Vogue, and how are you this fine morning?” he asked with mock formality. She was smiling in response. They had slept together the night before, but Heather had left the hotel 20 minutes before him to avoid discovery.

“I’m very well, Mr. Alvarez, thank you very much,” she flirted . “Do you want your regular oat milk cappuccino today?”

“That would be absolutely wonderful, Heather,” he responded.

“Great, I’ll bring it directly. I’ve also put a present on your desk. You’ll absolutely love it,” Heather exclaimed enthusiastically.

“Is it... what I think it is?” Manuel’s eyes looked expectantly. Heather looked around stealthily to make sure there was no one at hearing distance.

“No, no... it’s not lingerie. It’s much better,” replied Heather in a soft voice.

“Are you sure that anything could be better than that?” he teased.

“Please go now. You’ll see how much better it is. Let me go and get the cappuccino for you,” responded Heather decidedly as she saw Chris approaching her office.

Manuel continued his way to his desk, where he found the *Washington Times* displayed. On the front page he saw a headline which produced the biggest grin he had worn in a month. He immediately picked up the phone and dialed Miles Kremer’s number.

“I expected your call a bit earlier,” was the first thing he heard coming from the other side of the line. They both laughed.

“I had some *business* this morning Miles,” replied Manuel with a twist in his tone.

“You bloody bastard,” teased Kremer “And I’m sure your secretary was involved.” More chuckles from the frat boys erupted, like they were still juniors in college.

“What do you think about the article?” asked Miles once the laughter had fully subsided.

“It is the most vicious piece of genius journalism I have ever seen,” replied the CEO. “This will shake up these fools and put them on the defensive. I couldn’t be happier.”

“They’ll only be able to eat your dust from now on,” replied Miles.

“You really pulled the right strings, my man,” continued Manuel.

“I told you I’d send some hyena journalists to the scene. They know how to handle this stuff,” answered Miles. “And they have more, which can be released whenever we think is necessary.” There was a slight pause. “Could I ask you for a favor in return, brother, or even two?”

“Sure,” responded Manuel reassuringly. “Whatever you like, friend.”

“Well, could you spare me some Cervelix for my beloved wife? She also became a bit overweight because of all the stress I told you about.” Miles’s voice became a bit flat.

“Of course! And what’s the second favor, Miles?”

Miles coughed. It was a short nervous cough before he continued. “Could you spare this Heather of yours for a one night with me? She’s really dynamite...”

There was no laughter this time. Manuel hesitated and swallowed hard. He knew that he needed Kremer’s network to help him out of this immense trouble but...Heather?

Finally, he replied, “Yeah, sure my friend, she can be yours for one night.”

“Good, very good,” finished Miles. “I knew I could count on you, my brother.”

After a moment of awkward silence there were no goodbyes and the only audible clicks were generated by the earpieces being put back on the respective chargers.

Manuel had not noticed that Heather had entered his office and stood right next to his desk with a cup of cappuccino in her hands. She placed it carefully on his desk, reading his expression.

“What’s the matter, Manuel? You look as if you have spoken to the devil himself,” observed Heather with a concerned tone.

After a couple seconds Manuel looked at her, his face was white. “Thank you, Ms. Vogue, that is all.” He excused her dispassionately.

His eyes moistened while he spoke these last words.

\* \* \* \*

“I told you, Rodriguez!” Carlita was shouting from downstairs, while her husband was still in the bathroom. Looking in the mirror he had not seen a better version of himself in years. Not that he had a six pack, at least not yet, but his body shape and face had improved dramatically.

“We’re BOTH in the newspaper. You should really see this!” Carlita kept yelling from below.

Rodriguez was in no hurry. He knew from experience that this type of conversation was, most of the time, meant to put pressure on him. He slowly put on a t-shirt, combed his hair, and started to brush his teeth.

“This journal article really nailed it on the head!” Carlita kept shouting. The toothbrush was too noisy for him to understand all the words being said, but he understood the gist of what she meant to say.

While brushing, Rodriguez thought more about the message he captured from Carlita’s phone. He had not mentioned it to her yet, of course, but he kept a close eye on her cellphone ever since. Earlier, when she was outside getting groceries from her car, she had left her cell on the table, and Rodriguez saw a message from Timothy. The message didn’t suggest any special interaction between them, and just stated that the ‘society’ meeting was slightly delayed. Perhaps there was nothing to worry about after all.

Rodriguez turned off his toothbrush and flushed the remains of the toothpaste from his mouth.

The shrew continued, “Can you imagine that we are both in the same article of a national newspaper, Rodriguez?” Her voice was very excited now.

The world’s most patient husband took one last look in the mirror, and slowly walked to the stairs, descended leisurely, and saw Carlita sitting at the kitchen table with the *Washington Times* in front of her. Rodriguez couldn’t remember the last time he had seen Carlita with a newspaper, let alone reading one.

“Where’d you get the paper?” asked Rodriguez with curiosity.

“Timothy delivered it early in the morning,” answered Carlita. “He has a subscription,” she said looking expectantly at Rodriguez.

“I told you those drugs you’re using are dangerous,” she said triumphantly, “see here!”

Rodriguez’s gaze went from her face to the newspapers’ headlines. His eyes rested on the major headline, which was about the president’s dog: “WHITE HOUSE DOG IN HOSPITAL.” His eyes kept looking for the weight loss headline. As soon as he found it, his heart stopped beating.

‘GENERIC WEIGHT LOSS DRUG DANGEROUS!’ screamed the headline.

“What is this?” he stammered. “Don’t be nervous, Rodriguez, this is exactly how I told you it would turn out. These drugs you are using aren’t safe,” said Carlita smugly.

“Does this have to do with the interview I gave to that journalist weeks ago?” mumbled Rodriguez. “YES, it does. Don’s a great guy and a fantastic science journalist,” replied Carlita.

“But, how do you know Carlita?” asked Rodriguez hesitantly but with suspicion.

“After he spoke to you at your sports bar, he came to visit our house and asked me politely if we could talk. Timothy was with me and together we had a good conversation with him about losing weight, Tree Hugging and these awful injections you’ve started using,” explained Carlita.

He looked confused and felt a swirl of different emotions. His eyes went back to the headline, and he tried to read the first part of the article.

*‘One of the users of the new weight loss drug had to be admitted to the hospital because of abdominal discomfort. It seems that the study participant did not get proper instructions on either dosage nor administration of the compound.’*

“What could be wrong with the truth?” he asked himself. That’s how it actually happened, wasn’t it?” Rhetorical questions comforted Rodriguez.



His eyes continued to read:

*One month after his admission to the hospital, that same patient still suffers from word-finding problems and has difficulty controlling all his muscles. Our science reporter witnessed the patient's hands had started to tremble spontaneously, resulting in an accident where a complete tray with cups containing hot coffee was dropped during service. As seen by our reporter, the patient behaved strangely, which could possibly hint at undiagnosed neurologic problems as well."*

The barkeep was astonished. The description of what had happened was correct, but the interpretations were complete bullshit! Should he bring up WHY he had behaved this way to Carlita? Should he reveal he'd seen Timothy's message about "hugging his tree?"

"It's true, Rodriguez. You're not the same person you were before the start of these injections," lamented Carlita.

His eyes tried to find where he had stopped reading.

*The findings of the journalist were confirmed by the wife of the patient, Carlita R., living in the town where the weight loss drug has been released on a huge scale. She stated that her husband had started behaving strangely in the last couple of weeks, and also started dropping things out of his hands without any good reason.*

Rodriguez took his eyes from the newspaper and looked at Carlita - his eyes infuriated. He started to tremble and wanted to say something but couldn't find words right away.

After a couple of seconds, he said, "Why?...Why Carlita?"

"You see, there it is again! You are trembling and you cannot find words. The article is right, the journalist is right, Timothy is right and I am right - but You, you Rodriguez have trouble accepting the truth," she said.

Her eyes started producing tears. "And you know, Rodriguez, what is most disappointing in your reaction? You are not one bit proud of us, nor proud of me, and not one bit excited to be in the newspaper together! Who could imagine you and me would be in a national newspaper together."

Her husband had stopped trembling. Carlita looked at him with her eyes still wet. "I should have known, Rodriguez. I tried to help you but now...now I am so disappointed! You just can't imagine..." she drifted off, putting her head between her hands and sobbing continuously.

Rodriguez felt helpless. The only thing he could think to do was to finish reading the article:

*Another witness, Timothy Robbins, confirmed the observations and stated that the patient, who became a member of the Tree Hugging Society, lost his mind faster than he lost his weight. Our science reporter spoke to several other...  
(Article continues on page 9)*

Rodriguez looked down at Carlita with her black hair styled in the latest fashion, moving her head in rhythm with her sobbing cries. The couple was silent for a few seconds, letting the echo of betrayal fade away. She looked up at him, her make-up smeared desperately around her swollen eyes.

"I need a man who really admires me for who I am, who listens to what I'm saying, who loves the things I do, who shares my passions, who feels the same intense experience when hugging a

tree, who loves my friends and my family,” she pleaded. “You really need to change, Rodriguez...you need therapy...” The last words were spoken with a sigh of desperation.

The doorbell rang, breaking the tension in the room and a welcome relief from fight.

“Could you get the door, Rodriguez? I have to make myself decent again,” Carlita pointed the fingers of both hands to her eyes and face.

Her beleaguered husband still could not produce an adequate response, so he just nodded. He walked slowly to the front entrance; his zombie mind completely blank. Upon opening the door, he looked straight into the laughing face of Timothy Robbins – who pushed his way inside.

“Did you read it, Rodriguez,” exclaimed Timothy. “Did you READ it?! What a nice piece of journalism that was, right? You can now understand why we were so against you using the drug.”

His face had a self-confident expression, like the look of a religious leader who felt pity for his poor followers, the profile of someone who felt superior, and knew that others needed his unsolicited advice. It was a charismatic expression, the same charisma business leaders used to convince investors into mind-blowing business opportunities—that in the end turned out to be mind-blowing scams.

He studied Rodriguez’s countenance. “Poor guy, this must have come as a shock to you, the hope, the expectation to lose weight, and now finding out that this dangerous drug was made by the devils in the pharmaceutical industry.”

The big man was flooded with emotions all mixed together, anger and disappointment, rage and despair, bitterness and exasperation. But his main impulse was to hit or strangle Timothy. He was only just able to control himself but his suppressed rage made him shake and tremble again.

“You see,” continued Timothy. “The science reporter is right. This is devilish and dangerous stuff. And you’ve started trembling again, my friend. Luckily I’ve brought you a magical elixir from Peru. You can combine it with the Echinacea Multi-Forte for a powerful cocktail and as an early adopter, I’ll give you a 30% discount.”

The suburban guru took a bottle from his sports jacket and put it gingerly into Rodriguez’s shaking hands. He then silently invited himself in for a visit, walking past the defeated cuckold with confident steps into the dining room where the matriarch was now suddenly without tears.

In fact, Carlita looked extremely happy when she saw her hippie friend Tim and her husband noticed that she wasn’t too surprised to see him either.

“Hi Master Robbins,” said Carlita and after a pause, she added. “Great to see you again, my tree loving compass and guide!” They both laughed, ignoring Rodriguez completely.

“Well,” responded the Sensei, “I have recently noticed that you’re a pretty impressive tree hugger yourself miss thang!”

They laughed again and Rodriguez thought he caught his wife winking at the beatnik interloper- but given his elevated state of mind he didn’t trust himself or his senses.

“I think we should celebrate the unique moment that we all three appeared in one news article together,” stated the tree hugger.

“What a great idea! I’ve got a bottle of champagne in the fridge. Let me go and get the glasses.” The Amazon strolled to one of the cupboards in the kitchen, stretching herself to take the glasses. In doing so, she exposed her lower back and the upper curve of her naturally beautiful body.

Old Timothy started to smack his lips, but Rodriguez couldn’t help but think that a glass of bubbles was exactly what he needed.

## Chapter 20: Undercover

**Rodriguez asks his best friend to spy on his wife using a drone and Vihaan records a shocking encounter between Carlita and Timothy. Meanwhile, Rosa and Gabriel secretly visit an American midwestern town to obtain evidence from Delilah that will help their case in court.**

Vihaan Asthana had always loved technology. When he was a kid, he wanted one of those remote-control cars to race in his parents' garden. The best were the off-road types for the desert, which were robust and could handle more than a bit of rough driving.

After a year of pestering his parents for the toy, he finally got one as a Christmas present. His parents couldn't have predicted that this was only the first of an impressive collection of remote-controlled vehicles.

Once Vihaan went off to college, he was forced to drop his passion because he didn't want to look childish in front of his fellow classmates, especially female students - but he always kept his collection.

Recently, he had bought himself a high-end drone online, a purchase he could justify for use with his second passion, photography. He had defended buying the quadcopter to his wife by restating the advertising tagline, "The use of this drone creates exciting opportunities to expand the horizon of photographers to shoot unique and valuable pictures."

His wife decided that he had simply learned that sentence from the sales brochure by heart, but that "he should do what he wants in his free time, as long as the family didn't suffer."

Vihaan's marriage was in good shape. Rodriguez's not so much.

The morning call from his best mate had unnerved him. Rodriguez was extremely upset and told an incoherent story on the phone about Carlita, trees, hugging, a guy named Timothy, the weight loss drug and a newspaper article. He was stammering through his words, mumbling all his sentences, and complicating his story line – it was like a puppet show in Chinese.

Finally, he calmed down and asked his friend for a huge favor. He needed Vihaan to follow his wife Carlita, and spy on her using his drone.

"There are rumors that she and this Timothy guy are in some kind of relationship," he said to his trusted companion, "I just need to know that this is NOT true."

"But Why?" Vihaan asked. "Hasn't she always been such a loving wife for you?"

Carlita knew how to do her 'loving wife act' at parties and gatherings. The shrew usually held back until they were alone to explode, although she had publicly embarrassed him many times.

Rodriguez explained, "There was this weird message on her phone sent by this Timothy guy."

"And what did it say?" his friend asked, his voice full of curiosity and concern.

"Well," Rod admitted, "a guy wrote her that he was happy she had started hugging his tree."

Vihaan's face flushed with embarrassment for his friend, though he didn't feel compelled to tell his truthful opinion about the text right away (given his friend's current mental instability).

Instead, he responded that he saw no harm in the message, but that he was happy to help his best friend in any way and sort out the issue together.

\* \* \* \*

Vihaan waited about 100 yards from Rodriguez's home down a side street. It took nearly an hour before he saw her get into her car. He started following Carlita's vehicle, trying to keep a distance of about 200 yards between them. And Rodriguez was right; Carlita would never be suspicious of Vihaan's car; a white Kia, one of the most non-descript cars on the planet.

After all the anticipation, Vihaan suddenly felt the thrill of being a private detective, even if it was an amateur project. He was dressed in his favorite blue trainer pants, white sneakers, and a crisp white polo shirt—an outfit which suggested he was about to play tennis (which he had never done in his life). The colors matched well with his dark skin, dark hair and brown eyes.

They left the neighborhood and she took the byway into the backcountry. Soon after they left town it was clear at some point Carlita began following another car at some distance, exactly as Rodriguez predicted.

Together the trio drove for about 20 minutes on winding roads into the badlands - she wasn't difficult to follow, but he still kept his distance. More trees appeared as the backcountry was left behind. Eventually Carlita's car took an exit onto a gravel roadway and the trailing dust cloud made it easy to spot not only her, but also the car in front. As the trail wound down to a single bumpy lane, both cars turned into a dirt driveway marked with a postbox.

Vihaan decided to drop back as to not attract their attention. Soon he found a natural parking place behind a large bolder, well beyond their line of sight. It was a guess how far Carlita and this Timothy guy would continue to drive from the main road, but he gambled his drone could make it.

The novice PI parked, cut his engine, quickly opened the trunk of the Kia and took out the quadcopter. It was a showpiece, equipped with one of the best Hasselblad cameras you could get on a drone and the top of the line for this brand.

He switched on the control unit and brought the machine to life, aware that the battery lasted about 45 minutes for regular flight. He felt his heart skip a few beats when it leapt in the air.

As an experienced drone pilot, he knew to survey the area first so he quickly went up to 300 meters, a considerable height which would avoid any chance of discovery. The controller's high-definition screen showed it all - the beautiful landscape, the sandstone rocks, the red clay earth, and the nearby woodlands. The drone's height gave the natural world a wonderful and unique perspective, but he had to stay focused on the task at hand.

He used the camera to try and find the driveway used by the suspects, and soon found the gravel road by following the faint cloud of dust that was still visible. His 'eye in the sky' slowly followed the pathway and after about two miles he saw Carlita's car, parked just behind another vehicle – the one she had followed for the last 30 minutes.

He zoomed in and saw Carlita standing close to a man, which he assumed to be Timothy. From what Vihaan could see, the guy looked unremarkable; an old hippie with grey hair in a sports jacket and brown chinos - target acquired. Vihaan's heart raced as he had never done such a thing, trying to unmask a secret relationship - let alone film it. Now he was on a mission for the truth.

On his HD monitor the couple embraced and then walked under an immense tree and disappeared. He realized that he must come in from a horizontal angle to film the pair, but not so low as to be heard and discovered. Flying directly above it, the huge branches and leaves obscured the

base of the tree where he assumed the tree hugging would take place, so he needed the right perspective.

His face had a concentrated expression—the expression musicians have when performing an intense solo on stage. With precision, he carefully guided the drone into position so that he had an almost perfect horizontal view of the scene, with the couple now in clear sight.

He saw Carlita push Timothy closer to the tree—it was a gentle push—playful, as if to get him motivated. The guru stepped slowly over to the forest giant and started to embrace the trunk, stretching out his arms. But due to its impressive diameter, his arms didn't even make a quarter of the way round. Meanwhile Carlita was looking at the sky with her arms up in the air, her lips moving as if she was saying a prayer. Vihaan's heart skipped a beat again, relieved that the drone wasn't directly above the scene anymore.

After a minute, he saw that Timothy suddenly turned his back to the tree, repositioning his arms such that he kept hugging the tree, but now backwards. Vihaan chuckled at this and zoomed the camera to nearly maximum magnification, which made stable filming a challenge.

Carlita stopped praying and lowered her arms. She went over to the old hippie and kneeled before him. Suddenly, Vihaan lost the scene with a flash of static due to a great gust of wind. With an intense gaze on the screen and nimble fingers on the flight controls, he was able to reposition the drone quickly and re-establish the shot.

When he returned to the scene, Carlita was still kneeling before Timothy, who still had his arms in a backward hug. But now his pants were halfway down his legs. Vihaan couldn't exactly see what was happening but he saw Timothy's face with a certain grin and Carlita's head with a certain motion.

There could be no doubt regarding the meaning of the 'tree hugging' message now and Vihaan had seen enough. His heart went cold, his blood chilled, his skin crawled and he felt rage and grief on behalf of his poor friend Rodriguez.

The amateur PI was in a completely different frame of mind as he hastened to fly the drone back and put it away. (He noticed being thinner allowed him to enter his Kia a lot easier than before as he slowly drove off).

On the trip back his hands gripped the wheel, his knuckles were white and his heavy breathing caused his nostrils to flair. He drove hard, sweeping around corners with his eyes concentrated on the road but his thoughts elsewhere. After a few minutes behind the wheel, he came back to his senses and calmed down a bit, but it was clear to him now that he could never show that video to Rodriguez.

Going back, the landscape became drier again, leaving the lush, green parts of the state to become the low granite hills and red rocks of the badlands. As the terrain gradually softened, it transformed the once jagged peaks of the hills into gentler, rounded contours - going from a forest, back to a desert, and finally home.

\* \* \* \*

Rosa Cavani did not particularly like to drive, but she and Gabriel had decided to make the 10-hour journey to the small midwestern town by car. Every two hours, they had switched turns behind the wheel and now Rosa was driving with less than 20 minutes to go. She felt a surge of both eagerness and nervousness, conflicting emotions that rose together.

Sure, she was excited to see the town where the drug, *her* drug, was released on a larger scale, and she was excited to talk to the users and hear their stories. She was also excited to meet Delilah and Richard in person after all this time.

Yet, there was also anxiety - anxiety about the horrific newspaper article, anxiety about the non-responders, anxiety about what else Biotechnica could come up, and most of all anxiety about the patient who was admitted to the hospital, who had possibly developed neurological symptoms.

“Should we advise this Hernandez guy to see a neurologist?” said Gabriel, sitting next to her.

He was still slumped in the passenger seat after an attempt to catch some sleep. They had made up after their fight. Gabriel had made apologies, and they both had concluded that a disagreement between them was the worst possible thing if their mission was to succeed.

“I don’t know,” replied Rosa. “Let’s first talk to him. He may have an explanation himself for the symptoms described in the newspaper.”

“I think you’re right,” responded Gabriel. “Do you think Biotechnica paid for the article?”

Ms. Cavani paused for a second, “Not directly, I think. That would be a disaster for Biotechnica if any payments could be traced back to them. And Manuel Alvarez is not stupid, he certainly is not.” she said, thinking. “I’m sure he paid for it indirectly, doing a favor for someone in his network in return for the hatchet job. That’s how these people function.”

“The only good thing about the awful article in the *Washington Times* is that journalists with opposing views are going to be looking for evidence to prove them wrong - which supports our mission,” Gabriel continued. “I’ve been called by a journalist from the National Post who wants to do a positive story about our drug, and our mission to help the underprivileged.”

“But in that sense, aren’t we doing exactly the same thing then Gabriel?” Rosa teased.

Gabriel waited to give his reply, watching the landscape passing by and enjoying the contrast between the dry areas and the green parts with grasses and trees. “I agree that to a certain extent there is a transactional aspect in such an article,” he admitted, “but the essential difference is that we won’t offer something in return other than newsworthy facts.”

Rosa smiled. She appreciated his wit, his intelligence, and his streetwise approach combined with his highly developed people skills.

“I’m curious to see what evidence Delilah has collected for us,” she continued.

“She must be quite a character, controlling a crowd of hundreds with a fake gun,” replied Gabriel, his voice showing admiration. “What exactly did she say to you about it?”

“She told me she had convincing evidence that would explain the non-responders, but she didn’t want to tell me on the phone and didn’t want to send it via the internet,” replied Rosa.

“She’s from Syria, isn’t that what you told me?” replied Gabriel as if this fact alone was enough to explain the shrewd way she handled the information.

Ms. Cavani thought for a moment and offered, “I think life has taught her not to trust just anyone, but to play the game with strict rules.”

It was about an hour before sunset when the light slowly turned into the warm shades of yellow and orange, creating long shadows and a warm brown glow from the sandstone. Driving west became more challenging every minute, and the low angled sunset forced Rosa to put on her sunglasses.

“Those glasses look great on you,” said Gabriel, suddenly changing the subject. Rosa’s face reddened even though she took pride in her sense of style and appearance. Today she had designer jeans and new trainers, with a tight black silk shirt and short sleeves that showed her muscular arms.

“Thank you, Gabriel,” she replied, “but let me concentrate on the road. The sun is really starting to bother me.”

“I’m curious about the hotel she has for us. She insisted that we shouldn’t book it ourselves for security,” continued Gabriel.

After a pause Rosa explained, “It seems like part of the same strategy—to maintain the secrecy of our visit and avoid unwanted attention.” Gabriel considered this a worthy precaution.

The landscape kept changing, the light became warmer, the earth drier, the trees smaller and the hills flatter. Here and there they started seeing houses, mostly wooden ranch-style homes that soon became a common sight as they entered the small town.

When they arrived at the duplex, Delilah opened the door of her small flat to greet them outside. In real life, she looked better than online - with her sophisticated style, radiant eyes, friendly smile and the effortless charm of her loosely coiled black hair—it was all meticulously curated.

“Happy to see you guys, welcome to my place, please come in. You must be tired after the trip.” She waved her visitors inside the humble apartment, offering them a seat at the kitchen table.

“Would you care for tea? Or are you hungry enough for a small dinner first?” she asked. Gabriel and Rosa looked at each other, not immediately knowing what to say. She had that warm, Middle Eastern hospitality that Gabriel loved, and it came very naturally to her.

“I’ve made it already,” laughed Delilah, “It’s a wonderful Syrian dish I’m sure you’ll enjoy after such a long drive.”

The exhausted duo looked up simultaneously at her, and both nodded a yes. Delilah took two large plates and served an exquisite meal with a mouthwatering aroma.

“I’ll let you guys eat first and then I’ll show you what we uncovered,” she decided.

For the first time, Rosa detected a slight darkening in Delilah’s face as she walked to one of the bedrooms, apparently to speak with her son.

“He still has homework to do so he’s got his headphones on. He won’t hear anything,” said the mother in a low voice. “While you eat, I’ll set up my phone and the laptop to show you some of the more interesting new insights.”

“Just to be clear,” asked Gabriel with phone in hand, “Which hotel did you booked for us?”

“You’ll sleep here,” she said decidedly. “Your visit here shouldn’t be known by anyone. Even Richard the pharmacist doesn’t know about this.” Her tone was such that protesting seemed pointless.

When she returned to join Rosa and Gabriel at the table, she began earnestly, “The situation is very grim. I’ve heard from the neighborhood supermarket owner that he’s been threatened by his own



clients. Due to reduced local demand, his store receipts for frozen and processed foods have taken a hit. He's being blackmailed into increasing the sales of an ultra-processed food product called Pulpa, or he'll lose vital distribution agreements."

"What!" exclaimed Gabriel. "How can the food industry even be involved in this?"

"I was confused too, but Bill, the store owner, told me that he sold 20% less Pulpa in the last month – he credits the weight loss medicine." Her gaze was intense and dark.

After a pause, she continued, "Now he's been forced to advertise Pulpa heavily to increase the sales of the product, if not, he will lose his license."

"This almost sounds like the mafia," uttered Rosa, her eyes wide.

"Richard and I talked about it and we reached the same conclusion: large-scale distribution of this drug could pose significant risks to the food industry and supermarket chains," she warned.

Gabriel considered this and asked, "How did they find out so quickly? I mean, the project has only been going on for a month."

"I have no idea, but it wouldn't surprise me that certain parties fear that they will lose quite a bit of market share as soon as people start to eat less on a massive scale," observed Delilah.

Gabriel's eyes widened. He hadn't realized before that the drug could have such consequences on the food industry and supermarkets.

"My only goal was to help the underprivileged find their way to better health," said Gabriel.

"Do you think that the store owner is willing to testify in court and explain what happened to him?" asked Ms. Cavani, taking notes now.

"I'm not sure," responded the pharm tech thoughtfully. "He was quite upset this afternoon when he told me."

"And why did he come to you?" asked Gabriel, his voice expressing curiosity.

"I don't know exactly, but he's a user of the drug himself, and since I'm the one who hands out the medicine, he may have trusted me with his story through association," replied Delilah.

She shifted gears, "Let me show you this first, I think it's an important piece of evidence," she smiled, noticing the confusion on Rosa and Gabriel's faces. She half-turned the laptop screen in their direction and searched for a file.

"Please watch this. I recorded this yesterday," she said, starting the video.

They all looked intently at the screen and saw an overweight African American woman facing the camera nervously. "My name is Elisia Shriver. I've used the weight loss drug for one month now and lost 23 pounds - I couldn't be happier. There have been no side effects for me, and I would be willing to testify to that in court."

"She's so positive! That's great!" exclaimed Rosa. "How smart of you to record this!"

"Wait," said Delilah smiling. "I have more."

She showed a second video of a smiling Pakistani or Indian man wearing a white polo shirt.

“My name is Vihaan Kumar and I have used the generic GLIP for about a month now. I have lost more than 20 pounds and I feel so relieved to have finally found a solution to my obesity. There are no side effects whatsoever and I am willing to say that in open court if requested.”

“Again, a positive statement, that makes two. I love it,” said Rosa enthusiastically.

Delilah looked at Gabriel and Rosa, “What I’ve done is make a short recording of everyone who got the GLIP generic from the pharmacy.” Two pairs of eyes stared back at her, wide and alert. “Out of the 832 users, 798 willingly agreed to the video recording and are willing to testify. They’re all quite grateful.”

“How incredibly clever!” shouted Gabriel at the lab tech. “This’ll be so helpful for our case.”

Suddenly Rosa spoke up, her voice turning furious, “Yeah, I think we’re gonna need every piece of evidence we can get to have a chance against these bastards in court!” she ranted. The tension in the room was now palpable.

“I completely agree,” said Delilah, her voice calm and level. “The biggest mistake would be to enter this battle without every weapon you can get.” She tapped on the laptop keys once again.

“I have two more things I need to show to you. I’ll save the most shocking one for last,” she said, flipping the computer around to them. “Please have a look and tell me what you think,” she said.

They looked in anticipation at the screen and saw a handheld video zooming in towards two men in a bar having a heated discussion. After a moment, a thin blonde guy with a Budweiser t-shirt put a small paper bag on the table. His face was clearly visible and they could easily distinguish a pharmacy logo on the bag - Richard’s pharmacy.

Gabriel and Rosa looked at each other but didn’t want to interrupt and restrained themselves from asking questions.

The other man, a big man they saw only from the back, wanted to grab the bag, but the Budweiser guy was quick to take it off the table with an indignant look. Seconds later, they saw the larger man take out an envelope and put it on the table. The blonde checked the cash in the envelope and took out a couple of notes. He nodded and quietly handed the pharmacy bag over.

“What do you think?” asked Delilah once the file stopped playing.

“This explains the ‘non-responders’! Of course!” exclaimed Rosa. “No wonder the numbers were off, They’re just selling their dose on the black market!”

Gabriel looked dazzled, “How did you get this video?” His voice sounded concerned.

“I know where you are heading,” said the tech. “I filmed the video, so it could never be taken seriously in court, but listen...” she leaned in, “the bar has CCTV cameras all over, and they recorded it as well. Since the CCTV warning signs are prominently displayed all over the bar we’re covered. We could totally take this into court for judicial purposes. On top of that, I’ve convinced the ‘Budweiser guy’ as well as the buyer to testify in court,” she confessed, “and please don’t ask me how I convinced them.”

Delilah was one of those rare characters who didn’t have any motivation other than doing what felt right to her. She could put aside her own desires to assist others and frequently did.

“Are the bar owners willing to share the CCTV footage?” inquired Gabriel.

“100% yes,” responded Delilah, her voice definitive, her eyes focused, “because the bar-owner is Rodriguez Hernandez, the guy depicted in the *Washington Times* as having potential neurological side effects because of the generic GLIP.”

“Did he deny the reported side effects of the drug?” asked Rosa. Gabriel followed up on her question adding, “Yes, how do we know it’s *not* the drug, as was suggested by the newspaper. Was there another reason for the sweating, the nervousness?”

Delilah inhaled sharply, “I found out that poor Rodriguez suspects his wife is cheating on him. That’s why he asked one of his friends to follow his wife secretly and to record her moves on video, using a drone. Let me show you.” She started another movie on her laptop.

“Wow!” said Rosa, admiring the birds-eye view, “That nature is stunning.”

“Wait,” said Delilah with a look, “You’ll soon see another important clue in the story.”

Rosa and Gabriel saw the two cars, and a man and a woman seconds later. Delilah explained briefly, “The woman is Rodriguez’s wife; the man is the director of the local Tree Hugging Society. Both were mentioned in the newspaper article.”

During the next minutes of the footage, their eyes kept widening. Both looked shocked in disbelief when the video ended.

“Can we use this footage in court?” asked Gabriel recovering, his face pale.

“That’s still in question,” replied Delilah. “But the best way to make this legal evidence is have the shooter report it to police. This is misconduct at least, and I believe adultery is still a crime in this state.”

“Should we ask him?” asked Rosa cautiously, “It’s a pretty sketchy request.”

Delilah suddenly turned more confident, “He’s already submitted a copy to the police.”

## Chapter 21: Court Day 1

**Medication4All and Biotechnica face each other in court. The court building is crowded with users of the cheap weight loss variant. The plaintiffs and defendants aggressively argue in the opening remarks to defend their case. Rosa Cavani shares that her personal experience with obesity drove her to research the condition. The audience rallies her support and calls to keep access to the drug are made. The judge has difficulty to restore order.**

“All rise!”

The bailiff, a short man in a brown suit with a round red face and a baritone voice, was perfectly cut out for his job. The “all rise” command rolled like a wave through the courtroom, and it contained such an authoritative tone that no one dared to remain seated.

Judge Jessica Jackson entered the courtroom and took her place at the bench. She was one of only a few female Federal judges in the country and one of only two African American judges in the district.

Sure, she had handled quite a few high-profile cases in court. Two years ago, she handled a case involving the unjust killing of a black teenager by police officers. The media frenzy that ensued was overwhelming, but Judge Jackson recognized its importance in shaping public opinion and preventing similar tragedies.

The court building, a massive structure with almost a hundred steps in front, was hard to enter, but even harder to exit. Departing litigants had to negotiate a maze of cameras, journalists, microphones and supporters – of both of the victims and the defendants. Judge Jackson didn’t like all the media attention but still, she also knew that media attention was needed, especially in tragic cases like these to help shape public opinion. Perhaps all the attention could help prevent another innocent black young man from being killed. If history was any gauge, perhaps not.

Entering the court building today was also challenging, with numerous TV stations, national newspaper journalists, and protesters outside shouting, “WE WANT GLIP.” The atmosphere was tense, and the sticky summer weather wasn’t helping.

She looked down from her bench into the courtroom. It was crowded, and every seat was taken. She scanned the room, everyone was there: the defendants, the plaintiff, the jury, the public. She sensed a heated energy in the room.

“You may all sit down.” The voice of the bailiff rolled through the room. All eyes were on the judge now.

She hammered once, the sound echoing through the courtroom. The first hammer in a courtroom session always made her a bit nervous.

She began. “Case 2856-3, herein the case of ‘Biotechnica versus Medication4All.’ I am told Mr. Allan Cooper will represent Biotechnica?”

“Yes, Your Honor.” The voice came from an exceptionally handsome man who could have easily been a famous actor, if he could act. He looked like a mix between Brad Pitt, Ben Affleck, and George Clooney in a grey Armani suit, silk tie, and impeccable white shirt. He had the level of attraction one could hardly take eyes off.

Cooper was flanked by two shrewd-looking men, both with dark hair combed back to reveal angular faces with angry expressions - almost the opposite of Mr. Allan Cooper in terms of attractiveness. Apparently, this was the Biotechnica legal team – Beauty and the Beasts.

“And Mr. Benjamin Williams will represent Medication4all?”

“Yes, Your Honor,” responded a small African American man with a polite smiling face, handsome in his own way, also dressed in dark grey attire but with a red power tie and a powder blue dress shirt. He was flanked by a Hispanic-looking man with dark eyes and a lanky blonde, white man in an ill-fitting suit.

Judge Jackson hammered again, “We’ll start with the opening remarks from the plaintiffs, followed by the opening remarks of the defendants, Mr. Cooper?”

Allan Cooper stepped out away from the bar and approached the bench. He turned and looked at the courtroom from left to right and back again to the jury before he spoke a word. He inhaled deeply and started.

“Your Honor, Biotechnica, the firm I represent in this court, was DEEPLY affected by what has happened in the past few months.” He paused to maximize the effect of the words. “We will provide evidence that Medication4All is guilty of one of the biggest intellectual property thefts in US history.”

He paused again. The audience started to become restless. “We will also provide evidence that Medication4All weight loss drug generic GLIP is a DANGEROUS drug, sometimes resulting in severe neurological and physical side effects.” Movement in the audience increased, and someone shouted: “This is all a lie; we want GLIP!”

“ORDER!” exclaimed Judge Jackson while hammering twice. She knew from experience that any uproar among the gallery should be handled immediately and with great effect. A small fire could easily erupt into a firestorm in open court. The audience wasn’t completely silenced but the disruption was sufficiently reduced to allow Mr. Cooper to continue.

“Thank you, Your Honor,” he said theatrically. “We will also prove during this trial that the Medication4All drug is not only a DANGEROUS drug but also an INEFFECTIVE drug.”

“Objection, Your Honor!” exclaimed Mr. Williams. “This statement suggests that the dangers of the drug are already proven, but this is NOT the case.”

“Sustained,” stated Judge Jackson, using an authoritative tone. The audience started to roar with approval. “Could you rephrase, please, Mr. Cooper?”

“Of course, Your Honor,” answered Mr. Cooper. “WE will also show that the Medication4All drug is not only a POTENTIALLY dangerous drug that could lead to severe neurologic symptoms but also an ineffective drug for all practical purposes.” Mr Cooper projected a sly look at Mr. Williams.

“And finally,” he continued, “we’ll provide convincing evidence that the American economy, OUR economy, will suffer tremendously if we allow the Medication4All drug to sweep through the marketplace. The food industry will suffer, the fast-food industry will suffer, and hospitals will suffer.” He paused for effect.

“No more remarks, Your Honor,” Mr. Cooper looked into the audience, trying to distinguish where the uproar had originated.

“The opening remarks for the defendants, please, Mr. Williams.” The judge hammered once more.

Ben Williams stood up from his bench and walked forward, but without the theatrical gestures of his colleague, Mr. Cooper.

“Your Honor, members of the jury, members of the public - the case presented here today, Biotechnica vs. Medication4All, is first and foremost a case of the rich versus the underprivileged, the famous versus the underprivileged, the drug industry versus the underprivileged, the food industry versus the underprivileged and the fast-food industry versus the underprivileged.” His eyes were energetic, his gaze convincing. The audience started to stir again.

“Objection,” shouted Mr. Cooper, but it was hardly audible over the boos of the gallery, “OBJECTION!” he tried again screaming at the judge.

“ORDER!” shouted the judge while hammering three times. It took a few seconds before the audience was silenced again. Judge Jackson hammered once more and looked at the jury, then the spectator’s gallery.

“Order, please. I must ask you to behave during these proceedings. If not, we must postpone the hearing for the next couple of hours and clear the gallery for the rest of the trial. Please allow justice to follow its course in an orderly fashion.” She kept looking out into the courtroom.

“Mr. Williams, please,” she conceded.

“OBJECTION!” shouted Mr. Cooper. The judge paused and looked inquisitively at Mr. Cooper. “There cannot be an objection against my permission to give the word to Mr. Williams.”

“I agree, Your Honor, the objection is against the statement made by Mr. Williams involving the food industry in his previous statement.”

“Didn’t you involve the food industry in your opening statements, Mr. Cooper?” asked the judge in a quiet, almost motherly tone.

“That is correct, Your Honor; we will provide evidence to support the need to protect the food industry from the harmful, nationwide rollout of the Medication4All weight loss drug generic GLIP.”

“Overruled!” exclaimed the judge while she hammered once more. “Sit down, Mr. Cooper.”

Mr. Cooper looked astonished, and the crowd reacted again, but in a more controlled way, sensing the consequences of letting things get out of hand again.

“Mr. Williams, you may continue,” she Judge Jackson with a sigh.

“In addition to the statements just made, we will provide convincing proof before the court that the Medication4All variant of the GLP-1 medication is sufficiently different from the Biotechnica product Cervelix as to deny any patent infringement.” Mr. Williams was confident in his statements and received approving reaction and light applause from the crowd.

“Furthermore,” continued Mr. Williams. “We will provide strong evidence AGAINST the allegation that the Medication4All drug is a dangerous medication.” Mr Williams smiled, feeling the support of the audience.

“Finally, we will provide convincing evidence that the non-responders problem stems from a misinterpretation of the drug’s application, nothing more. After a short pause, he added, “No more remarks, Your Honor.”

“Thank you, Mr. Williams, we will now call the first witness to the stand, Ms. Rosa Cavani,” instructed the magistrate.

Rosa stood up from her seat and walked to the witness stand. She was dressed in her favorite Burgundy red pant suit, her black hair in an elegant bun and a touch of subtle jewellery. The strategy was not to impress, but to communicate correctness, modesty, and humility. Mr. Williams had meticulously briefed the entire team.

The bailiff took her oath. “Do you swear, Ms. Cavani, that the testimony you are about to give in this court is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth – so help you God?”

Rosa hesitated. She looked into the audience. She saw many familiar faces, including Richard, Delilah, and Gabriel. She also saw Manuel for the first time in many years. Their eyes met, and she got an ice-cold look from him.

“Yes, I will,” she finally responded.

“Mr. Cooper, it's your turn for questioning.” This time, the judge did not hammer.

Mr. Cooper left his seat and approached Rosa on the stand, looking her straight in the eyes.

“Ms. Cavani, in which year did you start working for Biotechnica?” he began.

“I started in 2012,” responded Rosa, her voice showing a slight tremble of emotion.

“And when did you leave the company, Ms. Cavani?” continued Mr. Cooper.

“It was in 2017,” returned Rosa. She had been instructed to give plain and factual answers.

“And in which year did you discover the GLP-1 molecule, Ms. Cavani?” Cooper's voice darkened a bit and he shifted his weight.

“That was in 2013,” replied Rosa.

“Which means that you worked from 2013 to 2017 on the GLP-1 medication, Cervelix, the exact same drug that is now produced and brought to market by Medication4All?”

“It is true that I worked on Cervelix, the Biotechnica drug variant of GLP-1, but the Medication4All form of the drug is essentially different from the original,” answered Rosa.

Allan Cooper walked back to his desk and was handed an impressive report by one of his team members,

“How can we explain then,” continued Cooper, “that the best patent lawyers and researchers in the state have found no evidence whatsoever that the Medication4All generic GLIP isn't exactly the same as the branded Cervelix Biotechnica drug? He paused.

“IS IT EXACTLY THE SAME, MS. CAVANI? Cooper smashed the report on bar near the witness stand before Rosa's eyes. He was furious. Rosa felt her heart freeze and was unable to respond right away.

“Does your silence mean that you agree with the statement I just made, Ms. Cavani, that the drugs ARE EXACTLY THE SAME?”

Rosa inhaled deeply, “They are not the same, Mr. Cooper.”

“Alright then, so you say, he replied, “And after you left Biotechnica in 2017, when was it that you joined Medication4All?”

“That was in 2019,” replied Rosa, returning to her senses.

“Isn't it miraculous that in 2020, Medication4All filed a GLP-1 based drug which exactly mimicked the original variant, as is extensively described in the report in front of you?” Cooper half turned to Rosa and then back to the audience.

“They’re not the same,” repeated Rosa.

“Well, that’s for the judge to decide. but it’s your small sentence against the large and impressive report in front of you.” The attorney put his right hand's thumb and index finger close together when he said ‘small’ and pulled his arms wide apart when he said ‘large’ and ‘impressive’.

“No more questions, Your Honor.” Allan looked triumphantly at the jury and the gallery. Spectators in the crowd were collectively holding their breath.

“Mr. Williams, please take your turn for the cross-examination,” stated the justice.

Benjamin stepped away from the bar, stopping in front of the judge while still looking at Rosa. “My first question to you, Ms. Cavani, is why did you start doing research in the obesity field in the first place?”

Rosa nodded, “I was intrigued by the fact so many fellow citizens had become obese, and I wanted to know why - ultimately to find molecular pathway that could be targeted to develop a pharmacological solution.”

As Mr. Williams studied her expression, he discerned a nervous undertone. “Did you choose this field solely because of intellectual challenges and societal needs, Ms. Cavani?”

Rosa cleared her throat, and her voice became softer. “No, those weren’t the only reasons.” After a pause, she continued, “As a child, I was obese, and I was teased by my classmates day in and day out. My entire childhood I felt very isolated and ashamed.”

Tears started to develop in Rosa's eyes. “My entire childhood was a nightmare because being overweight, I had no friends, no social connections.” Rosa put her head in her hands momentarily.

The entire courtroom became silent; it was as if all the hearts of the people in the room were broken at once upon hearing this devastating admission. Rosa collected herself with a tissue. Judge Jackson knew from experience it was best to let this play out and not to act too quickly. After half a minute later, she asked, “Can we continue with the cross-examination, Ms. Cavani?”

“Yes, sure, said Rosa, her voice still vulnerable. “My only intention was to help people who struggle with obesity, ensuring they don’t experience the same emotions I once did.”

She received applause from the audience, starting with clapping her hands a few and ending with a standing ovation and a lot of cheering. Although the justice appreciated the warm response of the audience, she had to bring order back into the courtroom.



She hammered a few times and half-shouted, “Order, ORDER!”

“Ms. Cavani,” continued Mr. Williams, “I heard you say that the two drugs, Biotechnia's Cervelix, and the Medication4All generic GLIP are not the same. Could you explain to us why?”

“It is, in fact, quite simple. The original description of the GLP-1 molecule did not include the existing loop that was positioned right next where the natural enzymes in the human body are cutting the natural GLP-1. During my work at Medication4All, we discovered this loop, extracted it, and developed a variant of Cervelix. The new drug, the Medication4All generic GLIP, has been granted as a distinctive variant by the US patent office. Studies show it's also more effective.”

Rosa sighed after the explanation and continued, “It is all described in original US patent documentation, and we have prepared a concise report for the court.”

“Thank you, Ms. Cavani. No more questions, Your Honor.” Mr. Williams walked back to the bar and quietly took a seat. He did not show any direction in his emotions, but inside, he knew the strategy had worked out well.

“Mr. Cooper, please go on with the cross-examination,” Judge Jackson hammered once more.

The two lawyers beside Mr. Cooper whispered their advice to him, covering their mouths. Allan rose from his seat, his face confused. He walked to the space in front of the bench and sighed.

“To the neutral observer, by which I also mean this court, it must seem odd to say the least, that Ms. Cavani left Biotechnica where she worked on the GLP-1 molecule, and suddenly discovered that the EXACT same molecule had a loop that was ‘unknown’ in all those years she worked for Biotechnica. For a neutral observer, which the court is, it should be obvious that the generic is just a case of intellectual property theft; a brutal theft indeed.” Mr. Cooper looked at the judge and not at Rosa.

“What is your question to the witness, Mr. Cooper? We are beyond the opening remarks,” reprimanded the judge.

“Was it revenge Ms. Cavani? Because Biotechnica didn't do what you wanted with your discovery? That's my question, Your Honor, that's everyone's question.” Mr. Cooper's eyes had narrowed to a slit.

Rosa took a moment to decide the best possible answer. “True, I was disappointed by the course Biotechnica took to market the medicine as a very expensive drug - only affordable for the privileged in our society, instead of the people who need it most.”

“Were you mad, Ms. Cavani?” Cooper needled as he tried to provoke her. Rosa thought for a few seconds but was interrupted by the prosecution before she could answer.

“Your Honor, please allow me to show states evidence labelled ‘J-peg5’, a picture of Ms. Cavani when she was still in high school.”

“OBJECTION, Your Honor, this has nothing to do with the differences in the molecules!” exclaimed Mr. Williams leaping to his feet.

“Overruled, Mr. Williams. Let Mr. Cooper show what he wants to us,” responded the magistrate, “but it better be good.”

A photo of a high school class was projected on a large screen in a corner of the courtroom. There was a red circle in the photo, drawn around an obese teenager, which one could still recognize as being Rosa Cavani.

“Is that YOU, Ms. Cavani?” Allan Cooper had a dark, unforgiving voice.

“Yes, that is me, indeed; that is correct,” replied Rosa, her face struck by the sudden confrontation, her anxiety palpable.

“Is this all REVENGE for the terrible youth you had, Ms. Cavani?” Allan Cooper had stepped over to the bench, his face uncomfortably close to hers.

“OBJECTION, Your Honor, the prosecution is using fat-shaming to break the witness,” Ben pointed out with an alarming voice. Cooper’s eyes reddened and the veins in his temples distended. The shadow of his rage changed his energy and reduced his credibility.

“Yeah, this is an injustice,” shouted someone from the audience. “We want GLIP,” shouted another, and all of a sudden, the entire audience started to join: “WE WANT GLIP, WE WANT GLIP!” It was a chant like from high school.

Alan’s face was in anguish, while Rosa started to show a faint smile. Judge Jackson could do nothing else but hammer and shout ORDER as many times as needed to finally silence the audience. Ultimately the bailiff moved forward to restore order, but it was too late.

“That’s it!” screamed the justice, “I’m done! The hearing will be suspended until 10 am tomorrow morning,” concluded Judge Jackson with a sigh as she left the chamber in a huff.

## Chapter 22: Court Day 2

**A local fast-food franchise owner testifies that he has seen a substantial drop in hamburger sales. A second witness, distinguished scientist Dr. Lindsey Johnson, explains how obesity results in a shorter life span and a higher chance of heart disease. She discusses how health inequality disproportionately impacts those with lower socioeconomic status, leading to increased obesity rates. She argues that an affordable weight loss medication could help address this inequity. The plaintiffs argue that the drug is affecting the free will of Americans, and is therefore, anti-American.**

“Is it true that you had to fire two loyal employees in the last month, Mr. Binsky?”

Allan Cooper had regained his usual confidence, perhaps even overconfidence. Due to the uproar in the courtroom on the first day, the judge had decided to block half of the public seats. It felt like a victory for the Biotechnica legal team. As his confidence resurfaced, so did his attractiveness.

In contrast Nigel Binsky was a short man, broad shouldered, thick neck, an ill-fitting moss green suit over a pale-yellow shirt. He looked like a butcher in a suit, but at least he was willing to appear on the witness stand, for a fee.

“Yes, that’s correct. I have had to let go two employees last month,” he responded.

“And what’s the reason for having to let these two employees go, were they not productive?” continued attorney Cooper.

“Not at all, they were very productive,” answered Binsky with a touch of pride in his voice. “They were hardworking young Americans, trying to make a living in this town.”

“Then what was the reason, Mr. Binsky?” It was clear the prosecution was building up to a point in the witness testimony.

“Well, instead of selling the usual 4000 burgers a month in our current location, it went down to 3200 last month.” said Mr. Binsky, his voice becoming indignant. “Our mission is to serve as many high-quality hamburgers to as many happy customers as possible, but at this rate, the business is just not sustainable anymore.”

“Are you proud of your business, Mr. Binsky?” asked Mr. Cooper.

“Oh yes, very proud,” responded Mr. Binsky, his eyes glittering. “And I’m very honored to be part of a company that sells 2.6 billion hamburgers worldwide.”

The huge number caused mumbling in the gallery.

“My store is part of an organization that raises and butchers two million cows and thirty million chickens.” Nigel seemed to impress himself with the surprising statistics.

“Then it must have been a shock for you to see the sales of hamburgers actually go down,” reacted Mr. Cooper in a concerned tone.

“Absolutely,” said the store owner, “As an entrepreneur one likes to see the business grow to serve even more happy customers, which helps the local economy and creates jobs.” His eyes looked sad, it was clear that he was earnest with his concerns.

Mr. Cooper sighed and continued, “And what did you see in the sales of French Fries, for example, Mr. Binsky?”

“Oh I don’t want talk about it. We’ve seen a dramatic drop there as well. Our freezers are overflowing with the famous French Fries now, it’s a shame,” Nigel sighed.

Allan’s eyes started to twinkle and the attorney turned on his heel. “And have you been able to verify if any of these employees have found another job, Mr. Binsky?”

“I called them both the other day and they still haven’t found other jobs. It’s a small town,” answered Mr. Binsky. “They’re both reporting difficulty making ends meet.”

Cooper beamed, “Thank you Mr. Binsky, no further questions Your Honor.”

Judge Jackson changed gears. The Justice was happy that the spectators had been quiet today. When a judge can’t maintain order in the courtroom, word gets around. These stories could become public and pose a serious threat to the proceedings. Her reputation was at stake, especially in a high-profile case like this one with the world’s hungry press salivating on the steps of the courthouse. But so far, so good.

“Mr. Williams, your cross examination?” asked the magistrate.

“Thank you Your Honor.” Ben Williams was at ease. The first day in court felt like a victory for the Medication4All legal team, although one could never be sure. Winning the battle didn’t automatically mean winning the war.

“Mr. Binsky, we heard you say that you are proud to be part of a larger vision, that of the parent company, is that correct?” started Mr. Williams.

“Yes sir that is correct,” replied the store owner.

“Does that also mean that you feel proud to be an integral part of delivering some of those 2.6 billion hamburgers to customers every year? As a partner with the parent company?”

Mr. Binsky looked puzzled; this second question was fairly similar to the first one. He looked with a quick glance at Mr. Cooper, who had knitted his eyebrows in confusion.

“Yes,” started Binsky with caution. “I feel that my business is an important part of the parent organization, and I am actually proud to be an integral part of the entire system.”

“Since you are so fond of large numbers, Mr. Binsky, I would like to present you a large number. Is that OK with you?” Mr. William’s voice was relatively soft.

Mr. Binsky nodded suspiciously, his eyes blinking twice in anticipation.

“Did you know that robust research has shown that 11 million people die prematurely EVERY YEAR because of a poor diet and malnutrition?” asked Mr. Williams.

Mr. Binsky was struck and hesitated to answer. “No, I didn’t know that, I was unaware.”

Judge Jackson moved forward in her chair, sensing the tension building up.

“Well since you’re so proud to be an integral part of the parent company, do you then also feel some responsibility for the killing these 11 million customers?” asked Bill Williams.

“OBJECTION, Your Honor!” exclaimed Allan Cooper, jumping from his seat. His eyes expressed fury and were bulging from their sockets. “The witness is being badgered here, and portrayed as a killer when he’s just an honest businessman!”

“Overruled,” hammered the judge. “Let’s give Mr. Binsky a chance to answer”

But Nigel didn’t know to the answer to give. *Given that he confessed pride at being an ‘integral part of the system’, how could he possibly state now that he’s not a part of the system?*

People in the gallery were holding their breath as the question hung in the air for too long.

“We also... serve some healthy products,” stammered Mr. Binsky finally, his face reddening.

Williams attacked - “Does this mean those *unhealthy* products you sell contribute to the premature deaths of more than 11 million patrons world-wide, Mr. Binsky?”

“OBJECTION, Your Honor!” Allan Cooper was screaming now. He looked as if he wanted to strangle Mr. Williams with his bare hands.

“Sustained,” hammered Judge Jackson, “Approach.” For a moment everyone froze.

“You two,” she barked, pointing with her hammer at Williams and Cooper, “I want to speak to you both in my chambers, NOW!” She rose from the bench.

“Hearing suspended for one hour,” She hammered three times, violently.

\* \* \* \*

“Do you swear Professor Johnson that the testimony you are about to give in this court is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?”

“Yes, I will,” she responded dryly.

Doctor Lindsey A. Johnson entered the witness box. She was a gifted lecturer and researcher, working at Harvard for 20 years. The academic was of average height with blonde hair and dark rimmed glasses, Not conventionally handsome, yet undeniably sharp and intelligent - her quick thinking, energy, and wit were the most attractive things about her.

“Mr. Willams, you may proceed,” said the Justice in a quiet voice. She wasn’t expecting much turmoil during the testimony of a distinguished Harvard Professor.

Ben stood up and approached the bar, “Dr. Johnson, is it correct that you have worked as a bariatrician in the obesity field for 20 years?”

“It’s even a bit longer.” responded Dr. Johnson smiling apologetically. “During my PhD at the Johns Hopkins, I already worked on the topic of obesity, so that makes it 24 years in total.”

“I see,” responded Mr. Williams. “Could I ask what percentage of Americans are currently obese, doctor?”

The academic shifted her glasses with a quick move. “Unfortunately, as reported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, over 40% of Americans are currently obese, which is up from about 30% two decades ago.”

A collective sigh of agony was audible in the gallery.

“Is the prevalence of obesity evenly distributed within our society?” inquired Mr. Williams.

“No, it is not. The highest percentage, nearly 50%, is seen in black adults, followed by 45% in the Hispanic population, 41% of Caucasian adults are overweight, and finally 16% of adult Asians.” Dr. Johnson knew these exact numbers by heart, without having to consult any notes.

“How is it that obesity is so unevenly distributed in our society?” asked the defense attorney.

Dr. Johnson didn’t hesitate to answer. “From recent research, we know more and more about the so-called ‘social determinants’ of health, and their influence on obesity. Researchers are finding out that institutional racism and discrimination are creating chronic stress, generational poverty, food insecurity, housing problems, and lack health care access. These issues drive the differences in obesity rates between different ethnic groups in the US, and elsewhere,” she lectured.

“Does that mean that a non-Hispanic negro like myself has a higher chance of developing obesity compared to other ethnic groups in America?” Mr. Williams pointed his fingers at his belly while asking the question. He was slightly overweight, but in good shape.

The African American justice shifted on the bench, becoming slightly uncomfortable herself.

“Yes, that’s correct - based the latest epidemiological reports and statistical analysis,” responded Dr. Johnson. Ben paused for a few seconds after this answer, his eyes scanning the jury.

“How does obesity result in health problems, Dr. Johnson? “Could you explain this to us?”

Dr. Johnson quickly readjusted her glasses before responding.

“One of the main mechanisms is well understood. Once fat cells accumulate, at a certain point the excess tissues start to build up and the blood vessels between these bloated fat cells get squeezed. This hampers the blood supply to other cells, resulting in dead cells within the healthy fatty tissue.”

As Dr. Johnson explained more, she talked vividly with her hands, waving left and right, her eyes glistening with energy. It became instantly obvious why she was a distinguished professor in the field of obesity.

“These dying fat cells trigger an immune response, and they’re eventually removed by the immune system, which results in inflammation. This persistent inflammation is the reason why obese people have a much higher chance of developing chronic conditions like heart disease, diabetes and cancer - just to name a few.”

Judge Jackson sympathetically felt pain in her stomach, thinking of the dying fat cells, and she guessed that many people in the courtroom felt the same.

Mr. Williams inquired further, “Is it true then, Dr. Johnson, that obese individuals face an increased risk of premature death?”

“That’s quite a distressing statistic,” the doctor warned. “Let me give you the real numbers. If one is severely obese, which means a BMI of 40 or higher at age 40, the chance of still being alive at age 70 is only 50%. This is the grim reality for 9% of the American population. By contrast, citizens with a normal BMI still have 80% chance of being alive for 70 years.”

Mr. Williams paused for a moment to let the number sink in.

“And what is the main cause of this decrease in life expectancy of the severely obese?” continued the defense attorney.

The expert explained, “For people with severe obesity, the chances of having a heart attack or a stroke are four times higher compared to normal people. So, the *main* reason is cardiovascular disease,” answered Dr. Johnson. “But the increased risk starts with being overweight.”

She continued, “The chances of having ‘high blood pressure’ for overweight patients are at least twice as high as people with normal weight.”

The judge unconsciously placed her right hand on her heart. There was a weird moment of silence in the courtroom.

“Thank you, Dr. Johnson,” Mr. Williams nodded at the doctor, and turned his face to the judge. “No further questions, Your Honor.”

“Mr. Cooper, it’s your turn for the cross examination,” stated the magistrate.

Allan Cooper had a sinister look on his face, while stepping out of his bench. He walked to the area just in front of the witness stand, without looking at the doctor, his head bend down, as if he were in deep thoughts.

“Dr. Johnson, you have spoken about the statistics, and all this epidemiological data.” He waived his hands theatrically into the air. “But we all know that the act of eating, putting food in one’s mouth, is a very individual act, unless you are a baby?” Allan Cooper looked with a triumphant gaze into the audience. It felt like giving a heavy blow to his opponents. He heard laughter in the audience left and right.

“That is correct, the act of eating is an individual act,” responded Dr. Johnson in a flat voice, not moving her hands.

“If that is the case, Dr. Johnson, aren’t you creating just a myth, A DECEIVING MYTH, by presenting all these blah blah statistics to us, that non-Hispanic Black Americans have no chances to make better food choices?” Allan Cooper’s voice started to sound violent and sarcastic.

Dr. Johnson stood in the witness stand; she was unshaken by the words of the plaintiff. “We all know, from extensive research, AGAIN, that individual choices are being shaped by the way we are brought up, the level of education, the housing conditions, the access to care. These conditions are all NOT in favor of the disadvantaged communities we were just talking about.” By emphasizing certain words she signaled that she was not afraid whatsoever.

“Since you agree that the intake of food is an individual responsibility and act, why shouldn’t the disadvantaged minority groups be able to make better choices? They also must know that making unhealthy choices will also jeopardize their health?” Allan Cooper’s voice had the sinister undercurrent again.

Dr. Johnson knew that the discussion was being pulled into a dangerous ground, and feverishly thought how to stay out of it. She hesitated for a moment, and then started to talk with her hands again. “Let me turn it upside down for you, Mr. Cooper. If you want to emphasize food intake as an individual act, why is it then that the company you represent is marketing the expensive weight loss drug to the privileged, the haves instead of the have nots? The company you represent markets the drug the people who can afford the best education, who can afford the best personal trainers, who can afford the best dieticians, and can afford world class gyms. Don’t you think the privilege shouldn’t be able to think what they put into their mouths, Mr. Cooper?” She pointed her index finger decisively at him.

Allan Cooper did not respond right away. And before he could open his mouth, someone from the audience, a black woman of about forty years of age, started to shout: “YES WE ALL WANT GLIP, IT IS INJUSTICE. Within a second, the entire audience supported the woman, and started to shout: “WE WANT GLIP, WE WANT GLIP”

Judge Jackson waited at least half a minute before she started hammering to restore order.

## Chapter 23: Weekend

**Over the weekend after a week of court, Manuel loses his mind since Heather broke up with him. He feels an immense emptiness. Rodriguez and Carlita make up during an intense night of love. This comforts Rodriguez, and he becomes less suspicious about her potential infidelity.**

“Come on Alec, come on!” Manuel shouted with an almost hysterical voice. “NOW...take the ball...shoot!”

Alec was tackled hard from behind at exactly the same moment he wanted to take a shot at the opponents’ goal. After the hit, Alec screamed loudly and tumbled onto the pitch, grabbing his right ankle and rolling left and right in agony.

This was how professional soccer players acted when they felt the slightest touch. The opponent, a boy who was much taller than Alec, had also apparently hurt himself by performing the tackle. He also rolled left and right, his face in anguish.

“WHAT THE FUCK!” Manuel ran onto the field with Elisabeth scrambling to hold him back.

“No Manuel, please!” she pleaded. Manuel rushed to the scene, bent over, in the opponent’s face, and started to shout: “Are you out of your mind!” He grabbed the boy’s shoulder. “Are you crazy, this is *my* son!”

Other parents, including the boy’s father also rushed onto the field and the scene turned chaotic. Manuel Alvarez had lost it completely.

“Stop dude, are you out of your mind?” screamed the other father. The group grabbed the madman by his shoulders, pulled him back, and looked into his infuriated eyes. He was about to start a fight, but too many people were holding him in check.

The distinguished chairman of the soccer club soon joined and took Manuel by the arm. “Please, Mr. Alvarez, calm down, this is just part of the game. It can be a little rough, but the tackle was on the ball – there’s no penalty here.”

He walked Manuel back to his wife on the sidelines. Elisabeth stared in astonishment at her husband. “Manuel, please, the entire school is watching!”

Meanwhile Alec was back on his feet again. He shook hands with his opponent, and was involved in the game within seconds, having all but forgotten the turmoil from moments ago.

“What on earth is wrong with you, Manuel, are you insane??” Elisabeth was enraged, which she hardly ever was. “The scouts of Brookland High are *here*, watching Alec. This is a bloody catastrophe you psycho!”



Elisabeth hardly ever used such words, and they brought Manuel came back to his senses. His body deflated; his head was bent in shame. “I’m sorry; it must be this horrible trial. I’m really sorry, Elisabeth,” he said earnestly.

On the way back to their house, Alec didn’t even mention the uproar on the field. “Did you see, Daddy, how I passed the defender and gave the assist for the winning goal?”

Manuel had seen it, sure, but didn’t *feel* it. “YES, that was really great son. I am extremely proud of you.”

Elisabeth was relieved Manuel was acting like a proud father again instead of a maniac. After a pause she announced, “We need to go to the store and fetch some stuff for the barbecue. As you know, my parents are coming over this afternoon to celebrate the win.”

Internally, Manuel cursed, but outwardly he beamed, “Sure, that’s gonna to be fun.”

Manuel drove the big SUV through their wealthy suburb a little slower than usual.

“I still don’t understand what’s wrong with you, baby, you said the trial was going OK, but then I see you do nothing but check your phone all the time, with such nervous gestures. There must be more to this than just the trial.” Elisabeth decided, she knew him all too well.

“For the sake of logistics, I’ll drop you off at home and you can send me a shopping list via WhatsApp while I drive to the Superstore for the BBQ stuff,” announced Manuel, trying to divert the discussion.

“Why the Superstore? That is such a big store, you’ll get lost,” returned Elisabeth.

“That’s where they have the best fish and beef,” responded Manuel. He knew Elisabeth wanted the best for her parents.

“Could you get the special Superstore Chips, and this new Pulpa stuff?” added Alec.

“Well, there you go, we’ll all do as YOU suggest,” sighed Elisabeth annoyed.

Manuel dropped off his family and drove slowly to the Superstore. He received various WhatsApp messages—a completely fragmented shopping list filled his inbox.

Once inside the immense store, the agonizing emptiness came to him again. His chest felt like a vacuum, and he did not feel his heart.

The day before the trial began, he had seen Heather’s desk empty and the few sparse personal items taken away. He found an envelope containing a piece of paper taken from the printer. In her beautiful handwriting she had written, “Manuel, this was totally unacceptable and you’ll never see me again.”

There was no “greetings” or “farewell” which made it all the more definitive. Manuel immediately imagined what had happened. His long-term friend, Miles Kremer, must have given Heather a call, to make the indecent proposal. He must have mentioned that Manuel gave him permission and that was the end of it, Heather’s decision was completely understandable.

But it was only after seeing the letter that Manuel realized how extremely fond he had been of her, perhaps he had even fallen in love. And now she was gone, gone forever.

Manuel snapped back to reality and walked into the Superstore. An impressive array of products were on display in an endless variety of styles and a rainbow of popular colors. Faced with an aisle of choices, he tried hard to remember which specific variety of potato chips Alec wanted.

He checked his phone again, desperate to receive a message from Heather, which would probably would never come. Where had she gone? He had gone to her apartment, but no one answered the door.

Manuel took a picture of the potato chip aisle and sent it to Elisabeth, asking for guidance as to which precise brand he should buy. Moments later, he received the instructions, and a sweet message ending with three hearts. But it meant nothing to Manuel, he could only think of one thing.

He walked his cart to the fish department, which looked more like a fish market. It was cold and wet, with fish in large quantities displayed in large blue containers filled with ice.

“What can we do for you today, Mr. Alvarez?” asked a man wearing a large white apron with an intense smell of fish. (It was amazing the staff remembered his name, given the size and number of people working in the Superstore).

Manuel didn’t like fish. He hated the smell and the taste. But his father-in-law and Elisabeth loved it and always complained if there was no seafood served at the BBQ. *Must be genetic*, thought Manuel - this obsession with fish.

“What is a good choice for the BBQ, Sir?” inquired Manuel.

The fishmonger was puzzled, gave him a strange look and said, “Mr. Alvarez, before you’ve always taken 2 salmon, 2 swordfish, 2 tuna and a bit of snapper on order. Is there something else? Something different this time?”

“Yeah, uh that’s...that’s true, yes, the regular stuff is fine,” responded Manuel in a thin voice.

While the man prepared the order, Manuel started to look around, waiting. Patience was not his strongest character trait.

Suddenly he noticed a blonde woman from the back, about 50 yards away, walking down the pasta aisle. She was wearing black jeans, coral colored polo and a scarf.

*Was it? ... could it be... Heather?*

Manuel’s brain started to race. Her silhouette was exactly the same. He looked at his empty cart, then at the man preparing the salmon. The fishmonger smiled with a confident look and said, “I’ll cut the order into nice size pieces so you can put in on the BBQ without any hassle.”

Manuel grabbed his cart and walked quickly to the pasta aisle. Behind him a man shouted, “Sir, you forget your fish!”

Manuel kept walking; his eyes focused on the woman with the black jeans. “Yes...it was...Heather!” The closer he went, the more convinced he became.

“Heather...HEATHER?!” The woman turned to look, alarmed by the screaming. It wasn’t Heather. She was a lot older, closer to sixty but still in good shape, wearing expensive jewelry and a puzzled expression.

“Excuse me sir?” she asked questioningly, smiling at him.

Manuel looked confused, then embarrassed. His heart sank and the vacuum, the emptiness was back in his chest.

“I... I’m sorry...ma’am...I thought you were Heather, my girlfriend,” he stammered.

“I’m sorry,” replied the woman sympathetically. But she kept looking at him.

“You must be Mr. Alvarez,” She continued, her voice expressing surprise. “I know your face from the newspapers. I hope you win the trial. I just love your weight loss drug.” She moved her hands down both sides from her ribs to her hips proudly showing where she had the lost weight.

“Yes...yes...we’ll win...no worries,” nodded Manuel.

\* \* \* \*

“That was very nice” cooed Carlita, her head nestled on her husband’s shoulder. She felt very close now, her black hair cascading across his chest like a silken waterfall. They had made love a couple of times during the night, the first time in months. To him, this was the best sign that his concerns about a potential affair were entirely unfounded.

“Tuesday is going to be your day, Rodriguez,” whispered Carlita.

“I know honey,” responded Rodriguez. “I rehearse what I should say in court all the time.”

“Don’t let that Ben Williams lawyer trip you up, darling,” insisted Carlita. “The first two days all he did was play on the emotions of the jury. Maybe it was successful, but maybe it was unfair as well. Hardworking Americans who’ve earned their way up can afford this expensive drug, so be it. But the rest of the people should be guided towards natural ways of losing weight.”

“I know, honey,” whispered Rodriguez. He interrupted before she could mention the entire list of natural remedies he had tried, all without significant success. But getting into a fight after such a lovely night was not what he wanted.

“You’ve become a fantastic tree hugger, Carlita,” whispered Rodriguez. Carlita’s face blushed and tightened but she kept her head down on his shoulder to hide it.

“What do you mean, Rodriguez?” She asked with a worried undertone,

“Well,” responded her spouse, “the way you hugged my tree was very impressive.”

Carlita hesitated, then exploded. “You naughty boy!” she exclaimed teasingly. “You’re a cheeky bastard,” she quipped while playfully grabbing a pillow to hit him. They fought with the cushions for a while, before Carlita fell into his arms again.

“At least the generic GLIP hasn’t tempered my appetite for you,” he said with confidence.

“That’s true,” giggled Carlita. “But you still shouldn’t have used it darling. It’s dangerous stuff. Did you forget about the trembling, the stammering, and the word finding difficulty?”

Rodriguez sighed and closed his eyes feeling a bit exhausted.

“What time is it, love?” asked Carlita innocently.

“Let me check,” responded Rodriguez, taking out his phone. “It’s fifteen past ten.”

Abruptly, Carlita escaped from his arms and quickly stood up, putting on her night gown, and frantically grabbing her phone from the cabinet.

“Why don’t you take a shower, while I prepare a proper breakfast for us?” Her face showed a dark shadow, and she looked stressed all of a sudden.

Rodriguez was baffled by her sudden change in mood. After a minute he rose from his bed and went into the bathroom. There, he looked in the mirror and noticed his body was so much better than it was two months ago.

He had lost 40 pounds now, still above his lean and mean weight during his college years, but the V-shape in his upper body was back. Perhaps best was his energy level, with a light in his eyes and thinking was crisp and clear again instead of the foggy and vague. He studied his face, which, due to the fat loss, had also lost quite a bit of volume. *Did his face start to look a bit cadaverous?*

He remembered an old saying – “At some age you have to choose between your face and your ass. He smiled at himself in the mirror having made the right choice.

But he was still confused by Carlita’s sudden change in mood, and decided to turn on the shower, but not use it just yet. Instead, he crept silently out of the bathroom, and waited at the top of the stairs.

He heard the rattle of pans and bowls coming from the kitchen downstairs, evidence Carlita had started to prepare their breakfast. After a minute, she found a moment and started to make a call – her husband only caught part of the conversation.

“I am sorry to be late today,” her voice expressing regret. Rodriguez could only guess what was being said on the other side of the line.

“No, no please, sweetie, you’re exaggerating now,” responded Carlita. More imagined responses and then a bomb dropped.

“That’s not true, sweet Timothy, we’re not sleeping together anymore. I promise you,” she continued.

*What did she mean by that? Rodriguez’s face flushed. Did she mean she didn’t want to sleep with Timothy anymore, implying that they had slept together? Or that she didn’t sleep with her husband anymore – a big lie. They just had a perfect night which convinced him the whole Timothy affair was just idle worry on his part - so what the fuck?*

Silently, he kept listening, afraid of starting a fight with Carlita. He felt slightly nauseous.

“Let’s meet this afternoon and I’ll explain everything. Rodriguez has the afternoon shift at his sports bar, so we’ll have plenty of time together.” she promised.

Rodriguez quickly stepped into the bathroom and got under the showerhead. *He had to see Vihaan today and find out what he actually recorded on his drone.* Vihaan had told him nothing suspicious had happened, but after overhearing this conversation, doubts began to emerge.

“Rodriguez! RODRIGUEZZZ... Breakfast is ready!” said his pretty, devoted wife.

Her commanding voice chilled his skin, even under the warm shower. He quickly dried off with a large towel, threw on a t-shirt and shorts, then hastened downstairs to the smell of bacon, eggs and deception.

End