DOUBLE BLIND

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9.28.26

PART 1:

SCREENING

CHAPTER 1

I made sure we went somewhere out of the way.

I chose a Thai restaurant on the west side of town, miles from the hospital. I'd been here before, years ago, when I volunteered at a women's shelter nearby. The room was dark and cozy, with red silk walls and weathered wood tables. The food was solid, the vibe intimate.

But most important, it was out of the way.

"So you're hiding me?"

Ben looked at me with a smile, like he had already read my playbook and was enjoying watching me flounder.

"Not at all," I lied. "I love this place."

Ben leafed through the menu without really reading it, like it was just a prop. "You don't live near here."

"How do you know where I live?"

"You told me. The first day we met, during the intake interview."

I frowned. "I never tell patients where I live."

Ben grinned again. His teeth were perfect, almost surgically straight. "Well, I'm guessing you don't go to dinner with many patients either."

I must have looked worried, because he let me off the hook. "You didn't tell me your address or anything—just that you live by the lake. I remembered because I love it over there." He studied me, his smile returning. "I also remembered because I had a massive crush on you."

Damn, he comes on strong. But you knew that already...

I started running scenarios in my head. In the unlikely event that anyone from work walked in, they probably wouldn't recognize Ben. On the other hand, if they asked how we had met, I'd bet he was the kind of person who would smile wide and say the one thing I needed him not to: *I'm a subject in one of Emily's trials.*

"Does that make you uncomfortable?" He was watching me closely.

"A little. You don't believe in playing the long game, huh?"

He shot me a look. "I may not have time for the long game."

I felt blood rushing up to my cheeks. *What an idiot you are*.

Our waiter arrived with the lagers we'd ordered. Ben asked for egg rolls, papaya salad and panang curry, while I took a swig of beer and rubbed my neck. There was a spot just above my left shoulder blade that had bothered me for years, and it always stiffened up right before rain.

Sure enough, when I glanced out the window, it had started coming down. I worked the knot loose and exhaled, listening to the *tip-tap* of water against the glass.

I always found rain comforting. On clear, sunny days the sky seemed too open to me, too boundless. There were times I felt sure that at any moment the planet would shudder and toss me up into the sky—with no trees or clouds above me to grasp onto, I would tumble up into infinity. On rainy days, when the clouds hung low and water wrapped around my life like a weighted blanket, the world felt smaller, a size I could handle.

"I'm gonna judge this place by their papaya salad. Most American Thai restaurants can do a decent curry, but nobody does papaya salad like they do in Thailand." Ben seemed happy. I was sure he had never once considered the possibility of falling into the sky.

"I spent a couple weeks there once," he continued. "You ever been?"

I had, several years ago. But that memory was too painful to revisit. I shook my head and looked back outside at the rain, hoping he would move on.

"If you could take one last trip before you died—any place in the world, money is no object—where would you go?"

I'd forgotten about this sort of First Date Question. It had been so long since I'd had to answer one. "I can't say Paris, can I? That's too basic."

"You can say any place you want. As long as it's true."

I thought for a moment. "There's a place in Wyoming. A lodge, in this tiny, out-of-the-way valley. Little cabins on a river. Nothing to do except fish and ride horses and read books."

Ben seemed surprised by my answer. "You've been there before?"

"Yeah. I mean, sort of. We didn't stay the night..." I exhaled, suddenly regretting my honesty. I should have stuck with Paris. "I was married once."

He looked intrigued. "What happened?"

I considered lying. But somehow, Ben made me want to be vulnerable. "He died. In a car accident. Almost three years ago now."

“Shit.” He looked down. “I’m really sorry, Emily.”

I exhaled again. “We got engaged in Yellowstone. Driving back to the airport, we got lost. *He* got lost, really. Joe *refused* to use his phone for directions. Ever. Said it was turning everyone into clueless idiots.”

Ben chuckled, and I took another swig of beer. “He took us miles down this dirt road, thinking it would link back with the highway. I was starving, yelling at him... and then, out of nowhere, there was this little lodge. They made us lunch and we ate on their lawn, just watching the river. We promised we would go back someday, spend a few nights.”

Just then, the waiter walked up with our food, laid the dishes down across the table.

I hadn’t talked about Joe in a long time. It felt OK. Good, even. “Anyways. Now you know I’m a widow. I’m going to have some papaya. Authentic or not.”

I reached for the serving spoon, but Ben stopped me. “I have to tell you something...”

I met his eyes, surprised to find him genuinely anxious. It was the first time I’d ever seen him off-kilter. He took a breath:

“I have a wife.”

CHAPTER 2

From the moment Ben walked into my office, I could tell he was not a normal patient.

It wasn't because he looked good for having brain cancer. A lot of people assume different, but in many cases, between rounds of chemo, you could have a whole conversation with a Stage 4 patient and never know anything was wrong with them.

He *did* look good, to be fair. He was handsome, tall, broad-shouldered, with good posture. He walked with a steady, athletic gait. I noted that he had come to the hospital alone, no family or friends there to support him, or to ask questions of me.

But none of this was particularly remarkable.

What stood out about Ben was the optimistic gleam in his eyes. Optimism in the face of long odds. Uncalculated optimism—or perhaps, *very* calculated. The kind a seasoned gambler carries. The kind that says: *I know the house beats me in the long run... but until then, I'm going to enjoy the shit out of rolling these dice.*

I have never gambled in my life. But in a way, I am a lot like a dealer in a casino. People come from far and wide to see me, hoping for a life-changing outcome. They sit across from me, listen to my pitch, give their consent... and I allow them exactly one spin at my game.

Here, you have an even coin flip. A 50% chance at getting LP-265, a novel chemical compound produced by Labrynth Pharmaceutical, currently in a Phase III clinical trial, and the most anticipated cancer drug in a decade.

In patients with glioblastoma, LP-265 has a 92% clinical response rate and a 56% objective response rate. This means that in almost all trial subjects, LP-265 arrests the growth of their tumor. In a majority of those patients, the malignancy recedes substantially—sometimes below the limit of detection. This, for a type of brain cancer that has long been considered a death sentence—and I can give you a realistic chance at beating it.

But you also have a 50% chance of getting the placebo. A sugar pill that tastes like hope but will do nothing to save you.

In a double blind study, neither the researcher nor the subject knows who is getting the real therapy.

People come into my office and tell me stories about their lives. They show me pictures of their children, their spouses. They tell me what they want to do if they beat the cancer. They would scream at me if they thought it would get them LP-265.

I tell every patient that the compound they receive is chosen at random. But most of them don't understand how completely powerless I am over the course of their treatment. They

cannot allow themselves to believe that I—or their doctor, or any human being—do not hold some modicum of agency in their care.

Patients look at me and see a kind, caring person they can confide in. They see a beacon of hope in the darkest night of their lives. They see their potential savior.

I care deeply about my patients. But I am nobody's savior.

I am an empathetic human interface for an uncaring algorithm.

I am a collector of symptoms, a scribe of side effects, a bestower of sympathies.

I cannot decide anyone's fate. I can only observe.

Maybe that's what stood out about Ben... More than his optimism. More than his looks.

From the moment he walked into my office, a windowless white room on the third floor of the Research Wing of the hospital, I could sense:

He could see what I really was. He knew the truth about me.

He listened as I explained how a Phase III trial works. We knew LP-265 was relatively safe, and we knew the effective dosage. Now, in order to get FDA approval and bring this drug to the open market, we needed definitive statistical proof that our therapy worked better than the current standard of care. I told him he would be one of thousands of patients across the country to participate.

I told him about the risks. I told him that 12% of patients in the Phase II study developed migraines. I told him about the man in Florida whose thyroid shut down.

I told him that my job was to keep track of his health and his response to the drug. That I would help manage his care. But I would have no influence on which course of treatment he would undergo.

Ben listened patiently to all of this, observing me with a smile. As if he'd already known everything I was going to say. As if he already knew the truth about me:

That my job, my very identity, was a sham. That I was deeply unhappy. That I wanted, more than anything, to actually save someone.

I waited for the usual response. Now he would tell me his life story. He would tell me what he had already lost. He would tell me what he wanted to do if he outlived his dire prognosis. He would plead with me, try to negotiate, perhaps cry or raise his voice.

But he did none of that. He only asked two questions.

First: “Where do I sign?”

I handed him 200 pages of protocols, disclosures and consent forms. I told him to take them home, read them with his family, circle anything confusing and come back to me with questions.

But Ben had no interest in taking this home. He flipped through the forms and signed his name in the twenty highlighted spaces, faster than anybody I’d seen.

“You’re sure you don’t want to look through those first?”

He looked at me with a wink. “I trust you.”

I took the papers back and congratulated him on being a subject in the Phase III trial of LP-265. I asked if there was anything else I could do for him.

He met my eyes, smiled, and for a moment I felt something warm in my stomach. A tingling in my chest. A feeling I hadn’t felt in years. Then he asked his second question:

“Can I take you to dinner?”

CHAPTER 3

"Not long ago, someone asked me about my long-term vision for this company."

On the conference room TV, a man in his 40s walked through a garden with his hands in his pockets—casual, at ease. His hair was dark, curly, and he let it flop across his forehead like a teenager. He looked more like the singer of an indie band than a biotech CEO.

"I said when I envision our future, I imagine a young woman, ten years from now, as her doctor tells her, 'You have glioblastoma.' And her heartrate barely quickens. Her blood pressure hardly rises, because she intuitively understands that *she is going to live*."

This man was Nicholas Trout, founder of Labrynth Pharmaceutical. I had never heard of him before our hospital signed on to be a trial site for LP-265, but now I was convinced he would someday be a household name. He had the kind of persuasive power usually seen in politicians and actors. For a moment, I forgot the woman in his story didn't actually exist.

"*She* is who I am working for, because if we can help her, we will help millions." Nicholas Trout stopped in front of an azalea bloom, took his hands out of his pockets. "I know we will reach that future together. To our research partners around the country, *thank you*."

The camera pushed in on his smile as the screen faded to black. Rossi stood from her chair and clicked the TV off.

"Nicholas wants to meet all of our site coordinators before Phase III is completed, but in the interim he wanted to make sure you're seeing his face, that you know how engaged he is."

Rossi was a Clinical Research Associate for Labrynth. CRAs were like sales reps, except they didn't have anything to sell—at least, not yet. Rossi's job was to keep tabs on me, my patients, and my data. If problems came up, she was my point of contact.

"In fact," she continued, "Nicholas wants to make sure we're really in tune with what our research partners are experiencing. So if you wouldn't mind filling these out..."

Rossi handed questionnaires to me and Dr. Prager, who was sitting to my right. "I don't have time for this," he grumbled. "I have rounds."

Dr. Prager was the Principal Investigator for LP-265 at this site—the lead doctor for my patients in this trial. He was a good man, but like many experienced physicians felt he was above certain realities of the field, accommodating pharma reps being a prime example.

Rossi shot him a terse smile. "You can email me your answers. But I do need them today."

He stood and shot me a look—*now's your chance*—but I just smiled and waved. I didn't mind talking to Rossi. I didn't have a lot of friends, and she was something close to one. Plus, I wanted to ask her something Prager might think was foolish.

As he left, I looked through the questionnaire, surprised by some of the questions: *How often do you feel stressed or overwhelmed? How often do you feel lonely or isolated?*

"What is this, a psychological evaluation?" I asked.

"We want to keep track of your personal wellbeing," Rossi answered. "Nicholas knows how stressful your job can be."

This was unusual. But then, many things about Labrynth were unusual, from their CEO's personal style to their intense culture of secrecy and devotion. Of the two dozen trials I had coordinated, I had never met a CRA more evangelical about her company than Rossi. But I couldn't fault her. If the data held even close to what it currently was, LP-265 would be the most significant new cancer drug to hit the market in years.

I finished my survey and handed it to her. "I take it people at headquarters are happy?"

"Over the moon," Rossi said. "The data keeps coming in strong, patients are living longer. Even the FDA seems to be on board—they're up our asses, as always, but you can tell they're quietly rooting for us."

She sat back down, lowered her voice. "Between you and me, anybody with equity is looking at houses and boats."

In pharmaceutical development, money follows science, and vice versa. If a scientist discovers a compound that could serve a patient need, they get seed funding. If the therapy proves effective in animals, they raise a Series A round. If Phase II shows a drug to be safe in humans, they raise more cash to run a Phase III trial—the final and largest hurdle before a drug reaches the American market. If the compound is found to be less beneficial than the standard of care, or if the FDA declines to approve it for any reason, the company that developed it will typically go to zero overnight.

However, if the trial proves the compound a winner, like LP-265 was looking to be, then the only cap on the company's upside is the number of potential patients.

"Things are getting crazy," Rossi continued. "Just last week, I was *approached*."

"What do you mean, approached?" I asked.

Rossi was the kind of person who always thought she knew more than you, and relished moments of confirmation. "I was approached by somebody I'd never met before. They worked for Asterion."

I'd heard of Asterion Labs, though I'd never coordinated a trial for them. They were another biotech firm with several oncology compounds in development, but none as big as LP-265.

“What did they want from you?”

Rossi looked to the hallway to make sure nobody was listening. “The formula for LP-265.”

I was shocked. “Like... corporate espionage? Does that really happen?”

Rossi chortled. “Emily, don’t be so naïve. This compound is *extremely* valuable.” She paused, studying me. “Have *you*... been approached?”

Was this why she was really here today? Not to show me some corporate video that could have been emailed. *She wanted to suss me out. See if I was vulnerable.*

“No, of course not,” I responded. “Honestly, I’m shocked. I’ve been in research for years and I’ve never heard of this kind of thing.”

She watched me carefully, and seemed satisfied. I thought I’d try my luck and ask the question I hadn’t wanted Dr. Prager to hear:

“Rossi, I have some very sick patients who aren’t getting better. I wanted to talk to you about doing a cross-over trial for them.”

A cross-over is when patients who have been on the placebo are finally given the real drug. It’s a humane way of helping trial patients when you believe the therapy is working.

Rossi nodded, empathetic. “We’ve considered this... The problem with glioblastoma is that life expectancies are so short. In the time it takes to gather and analyze enough data, patients don’t have enough time for LP-265 to be effective.”

What she meant was: *Your patients will die before we can switch them off the placebo.*

“I just wondered if, in our sickest patients, we could make exceptions. Could you at least bring it up to Nicholas?”

Rossi checked her phone, trying to hide her annoyance. “I will mention it. But I don’t want to mislead you... The trial is more important than one patient.”

What she meant was: *We need patients on the placebo to die, to show how effective our drug is by contrast.*

I felt my hands quivering with rage. I wondered what tabs were open on her phone’s internet browser. What would she be looking at on her flight home? Houses and boats?

Suddenly, my left cheek felt wet. I reached up, surprised to find I was crying.

Rossi looked shocked, unsure what to do. She dug around in her bag and found a little plastic package of tissues. She offered me one.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know where that came from.” I tried to wipe away my tears, but my hand was still shaking. “I think I’m just having a hard time... seeing the forest for the trees, you know?”

Rossi looked relieved to understand the logic behind my sudden display of emotion. She touched my shoulder. “This is exactly why Nicholas wants to track everyone’s psychological wellbeing. Your job is difficult, especially when you get to know your patients so intimately.”

If only she knew about Ben...

He had asked me out every time he’d come in for a visit over the last month. Obviously, I had denied him—dating a patient would be a huge ethical violation—but Ben was so charming and so persistent that I’d finally given in and agreed to have dinner with him, strictly as friends. We were set to go out this weekend.

“I’m not supposed to share this, but I can tell you’re invested in our success...” Rossi leaned in, as if she were sharing the world’s biggest secret. “We’ve chosen a name for LP-265. They hired a team of marketing consultants, but then it just came to Nicholas in a dream...”

She built anticipation with her eyes as she said:

“Claravi.”

She waited for my reaction, but I suddenly felt lightheaded.

Blood rushed into my cheeks. The back of my neck broke into a cold, clammy sweat. I tasted copper on my tongue.

“Emily, are you OK?” Rossi’s voice sounded faraway, like we were both underwater. But that didn’t make any sense, because the room was so bright...

My knees buckled under me. I fell to the ground.

My head slammed into the linoleum.

CHAPTER 4

Outside the restaurant, it was raining harder than before. Hundreds of rivulets rolled down the window, changing colors as they passed the neon light advertising a Thai beer. I was halfway through my third of those, listening as Ben explained his marriage to me.

He said that he and his wife got married five years ago. While the first couple of years had been joyful and loving, everything changed after she had a late-term miscarriage.

Ben said he had been there for her, as best he knew how, but ultimately the trauma of the loss triggered a mental health crisis.

He had long been aware of her history with depression, but now her parents disclosed a schizophrenic episode she'd had during college. Without a word to her roommate or friends, she had sold her textbooks and bought a flight to Israel, convinced she had been assigned a covert mission by the CIA. Her parents had no idea until the Embassy called.

After the miscarriage, it became clear she was having another episode. She underwent psychiatric treatment and eventually stabilized, but at some point in this journey she seemed to lose all trust in Ben. He said it was like she woke up one day and didn't recognize him anymore. They had been living separately for almost two years.

I felt awful for Ben, but there was a literal pain in my belly when I thought of what his wife had been through.

I had a million questions. The first I could articulate was: "Why don't you get divorced?"

"I guess I haven't given up hope yet."

"Hope that she'll fall back in love with you?"

He paused, uncomfortable. "I believe she's *still* in love with me. She just can't remember it."

I had issues with that line of thought, but there were more urgent things to dissect. "So you're holding a candle for your wife... and you go around asking other women to dinner?"

He exhaled. "If this is off-putting, I completely understand."

I was put off. But I did not stand up. It was perverse, but Ben's revelation had only made him more interesting to me. *He wasn't who I'd thought he was.*

"She knows about your diagnosis?"

He nodded.

"And she does nothing? She hasn't been to one appointment with you."

Another uncomfortable pause. “She’s not in a place where she can help me.”

Until this moment, I had thought Ben the most confident man I’d ever met—the most confident cancer patient, at least. Now, suddenly, I saw that was a mask. Underneath, Ben was deeply sad. I wondered if he could ever be happy again.

I was shaken by a sharp *clang!* behind us—our waiter was flipping chairs up onto tables. I looked around and realized we were the last patrons here.

Outside, it was pouring sheets. Ben opened his phone, looking for an Uber. He winced, “20 minutes. Nobody’s out in this rain.”

“I’ll drive you home,” I said. “But that’s all this is. I won’t be leaving the car.”

Ben grinned, “Deal.” He opened his umbrella and offered it to me, “After you.”

We hurried down the block, shoulders rubbing under the umbrella. I unlocked my sedan remotely and Ben made a run for the passenger door—a noble gesture rendered moot when I stepped off the curb into an ankle-deep puddle. I slammed the door behind me, looked at Ben and gasped—he was *drenched*, hair flattened, jacket clinging to his shoulders.

“That’s what I get for being a martyr,” he laughed.

I drove him to his condo downtown. Everything was soaked, my socks and jeans glued to my legs, but with the heat blasting and Ben rambling about a rain-drenched march he’d done back in basic training, I felt perfectly warm.

I pulled up in front of his building and put the car in park. He looked at me, serious. “I have to tell you something.”

I nearly laughed. “What more could you possibly confess to?”

Ben continued, “I know we probably won’t have another night like this. And that’s totally cool. But if, from now on, I only get to see you at the hospital, I just... want to thank you.”

“For what?”

“For getting me into the trial. For getting me on the real drug.”

I frowned. “You know I have no power over what you get. And *nobody* knows if you’re getting the real drug.”

Ben shook his head, “I do. I can feel it.” He took a breath. “You’ve given me more time.”

I met his eyes. A heavy squall of rain pounded down, enveloping the car, to the point where I couldn't hear anything else. Water streamed down the windows, so I couldn't see anything outside. The world felt small. A size I could handle.

Ben leaned in. I was surprised to feel my body drawing closer to him. His fingers brushed my jeans, just above the knee. My hand got a little shaky, I grabbed his leg to steady it.

Suddenly, our faces were inches apart. His lips hovered near mine. I could tell he was restraining himself. I sensed that it hurt him to.

I was so close I could feel his breath. My whole world was his breath and the sound of rain hitting the car.

His lips brushed against mine. His stubble tickled my chin. Our noses touched.

I knew all the reasons I shouldn't. But those reasons only mattered outside of this car. And nothing existed outside of this car.

I pressed my lips to his. He opened his mouth and kissed me.

In a double blind study, neither the researcher nor the subject knows who is getting the real therapy.

I kissed him back.

PART 2:

RANDOMIZATION

CHAPTER 5

A month after our rainy first date, I was spending four nights a week with Ben.

He lived high up in a new building downtown. There was no character to the place, few personal effects on the walls—classic divorced guy shit. Ben wasn't technically divorced, but as he put it: when you've got an incurable form of brain cancer and you think you have months to live, interior design falls pretty far down the list of priorities.

I didn't care what his place looked like. I just wanted him.

We had developed a routine. He would meet me at the security desk, we would wait for an elevator to ourselves—as soon as we stepped inside, we would throw ourselves at each other. The twenty-floor ride was a blur of traded saliva and brushed skin and whispered greetings that carried us down the hall, through his front door, past his kitchen—which was not a place for cooking but a receptacle for shoes and shirts—and into his bedroom.

Ben was an excellent lover—passionate but respectful, strong when you wanted him to be strong yet gentle when you needed him to be. One night I teased him that the tumor must have increased his libido—that wasn't uncommon in the brain cancer population—but he laughed, said he'd always been a horn-dog and told me to stop studying him.

After a shower, we would migrate back to his kitchen, where I would collect my clothes and he would pour wine. Most nights ended on his couch, looking out at the city below, talking about our lives.

Ben's favorite topic was the baseball team he coached. He had gone back to his old high school to help out part-time—when their longtime coach retired and no teachers wanted to step up, they'd asked Ben to take over.

He talked about "his boys" like they were his own sons. He knew his shortstop was failing Calculus and European History. He knew his first baseman was only playing to please his dad. He knew his best relief pitcher was gay and hadn't come out to his parents. One of his boys had recently been arrested for breaking into a pawn shop—Ben wrote the owner a personal check for the damage and got the kid into a gang rehabilitation program.

One night, he told me about a vacant storefront he'd found near the school. He had long dreamed of opening a training center, where city kids who didn't get much field access could practice. This storefront was perfectly located and cheap. He was thinking about calling the leasing agent.

He had never spoken this way when I'd first met him. He was clearly feeling better. He was making plans, looking ahead to the future.

Suddenly, I could see my own future, with Ben in it. It was the first time since Joe died that I had allowed myself to contemplate anything beyond the next year, or a life that included anyone else.

That was the night I realized: *I think I love this man.*

* * *

Leaving my next shift, Dr. Prager pulled me aside to ask how I was doing. He said I had seemed distracted lately.

I told him I hadn't been sleeping well, but that otherwise everything was fine. I saw him look down at my hands, which were shaking involuntarily. I'd been having these tremors for weeks. There was no denying they were getting worse, but I chalked it up to all the coffee I'd been drinking to make it through my shifts.

I could tell he wanted to ask more questions, but wasn't in a position to do so. As I walked away, I felt his eyes linger.

Dr. Prager was a nice man, but he had always been a bit too interested in me. Not in a sexual way... more paternal. *What would he say if he knew I was sleeping with a patient?* I had a sharp vision of disapproval, threats of reporting me, a stern lecture... *and he would be right.*

What I was doing with Ben was wrong. Impossible to defend.

But I was the happiest I'd been in years. This affair felt like the *only* good thing in my life since Joe's accident.

I could feel myself entering a guilt spiral... Luckily, I had plans that afternoon with Daniela, a friend from my nursing days.

We went for a hike in the hills, leaving our phones behind in our cars. She updated me on all the latest happenings in the ICU.

I had always felt called to be a nurse, but after a couple of years in the ICU, I started to see that, too often, my job was to make dying people comfortable. I pivoted to Research thinking I could make a difference, but here I'd only become more frustrated. We *were* making a difference, in the long run—but once again, I was surrounded by dying people, and I was powerless to save them. *All I could do was observe*.

Ever since I was a girl, I'd been able to sense things as they happened, sometimes before. A couple of therapists had labeled it anxiety, but I knew this was something different:

When my phone rang in my pocket, I could often guess who was calling me without looking at the screen, based solely on instinct.

The day my mom broke her leg skiing, I knew something had happened before the news reached home.

From the moment I woke up the day that Joe died in the crash, I felt something was off.

So that day, when I finished the hike, said goodbye to Daniela, got into my car and saw a dozen missed calls and unread messages, that old gut instinct kicked in.

Before even opening my phone, I knew what had happened:

Ben was back in the hospital.

CHAPTER 6

Five days, three scans and a biopsy later, we had proof: Ben's tumor was growing again.

Dr. Prager said the partial remission had likely been a delayed response to the chemotherapy Ben had done prior to joining the LP-265 trial. He had responded well to Temozolomide, which had given him stability for a few months—but like most patients following the Stupp Protocol, his glioblastoma had eventually mutated around the drug.

Ben put on a strong front with his doctors, but in the quiet moments he retreated in a way I had never seen from him. He would lie in bed for hours without speaking. He was clearly depressed, edging toward catatonic. The optimistic gleam in his eyes was gone.

I sat at his bedside as often as I could without making our personal relationship obvious to the nurses—although I found myself caring less and less what my colleagues might think.

I was there one evening when a nurse brought Ben's dinner in on a tray. He was sleeping, so I took it from her. Turkey, salad and potatoes.

I started thinking about the last Thanksgiving we spent at my grandma's house. My cousins and I were playing hide and seek, running all around, when I passed the doorway to the kitchen and stopped—my grandma was lying on the linoleum floor, a pot of mashed potatoes over-turned next to her. For at least ten seconds, I did nothing—I didn't scream, call for help, or try to help her up. Then, my grandma looked up at me, and for a moment she seemed younger than I'd ever seen her. She seemed almost like a baby, the way she looked up at me from that angle—totally expressionless, her eyes searching me.

I didn't see her for months after that, even though she lived nearby. One day, my mom sat me down and said that grandma had something called Lou Gehrig's disease. I didn't understand how anyone could own a disease. The next day, we went over and she seemed OK, except now she had a cane and she was sleeping on the first floor and my grandpa got angry when she tried to go upstairs.

I'd always looked back and wondered what would have happened if I had helped my grandma sooner. Even decades later, when I understood everything, I still felt guilty. There were certain things like that, that happened in childhood—the incident no longer made you feel bad, because you understood it, but it forever changed who you were and how you behaved.

It had been the same when Joe died. I hadn't been there. I wasn't able to do anything. I could only observe.

As I watched Ben sleeping, I decided that I wasn't going to let another person I loved die.

Not when I could do something about it.

CHAPTER 7

It is incredibly difficult to break the blind of a Phase III drug trial.

It wasn't always so hard. Not too many years ago, I would have been entirely responsible for the bookkeeping, using paper lists and charts to track my patients. Back then, the pills were kept in envelopes—my first boss in Research told me she'd once mixed them up and switched a patient to the placebo by accident.

Now, all trial data lived on the cloud, in an encrypted database. To break the blind would essentially be a hacking job.

I was no hacker, but I did have intimate knowledge of the system and the players. As I thought about how to pull this off, one approach was obvious:

Every clinical trial has an emergency unblinding protocol. If a "Serious Adverse Event" happens—like a trial subject having a life-threatening reaction—the Principal Investigator needs to be able to find out what they are really taking.

I knew that Dr. Prager had an emergency password he could use to access the unblinded database. I also knew he was monitoring ten other trials, each with their own unique passwords—to ensure he wouldn't forget one, he kept them written in a notebook, inside a locked drawer in his desk. The simplest way to break the blind: break into that drawer.

But there were two big problems with this approach...

First: An emergency unblinding would send an automated email to Labrynth and the FDA. The incident would be scrutinized, as any Serious Adverse Event would have a major impact on the trial. Of course, Dr. Prager would insist he did not use his emergency login. It wouldn't take long to start investigating the next closest person to this data set: *me*.

Second: Even if they couldn't prove my involvement, by unblinding Ben's data, he would be removed from the trial. I would be taking him from a 50% chance of getting LP-265 to 0%.

I could think of one other way to break the blind. But it was a lot crazier...

* * *

I came to the hospital on Saturday, when the pharmacy was staffed by a skeleton crew, and I knew that a woman named Eiza was working the counter.

Calling Eiza a friend would be generous, but I knew she liked me, and I knew she was planning her wedding. It took only the smallest of prompts for her to launch into the drama

surrounding the guest list, and her power struggle with her mother-in-law. She buzzed me in to her side of the glass to show me pictures of the dresses she was considering.

Now I was just steps away from the IDS workstation.

The Investigational Drug Service was the branch of our pharmacy that existed to service clinical trials. Crucially: *The IDS pharmacists were unblinded*. They never met the patients. Never even knew their names. But they knew what was inside each pill bottle.

The IDS pharmacist on duty was a man named Tariq, who I barely knew. It was discouraged for IDS staff and trial coordinators to interact, for fear of exactly what I was trying to do now. I had considered stealing an imprint of Tariq's key, but his workstation also required a fingerprint to open. This meant there was only one way to get access:

He had to open it for me.

I was listening to Eiza when an emergency nurse ran into the pharmacy to report that a patient named Donna was having an adverse reaction to one of her medications.

I already knew which medication, because Donna was a patient of mine under a Phase II trial for a blood thinner. I knew Donna was not reacting to the medication—she was having an allergic response to the pollen I had slipped into her breakfast. Not my proudest ethical moment, but I wasn't bound by the Hippocratic Oath. Donna was going to be fine...

But Tariq didn't know that.

I told him that Donna was in one of my trials, and that there had been reports of adverse events from sites in California and New York. He panicked, and quickly opened his Master Randomization List to check what Donna was taking.

At this exact moment, a psychiatric patient named Joshua entered the pharmacy, screaming at the top of his lungs.

I had arranged for this to happen, so I was focused while everyone else was distracted, including Eiza and Tariq, who rushed out to the other side of the glass, leaving his workstation open and unattended.

I had been lucky so far that everything had played out largely as planned. If my luck held, I figured I might get thirty seconds of unfettered access.

On the IDS computer was the Master Randomization List for each of the 82 clinical trials currently in progress at this hospital. I opened the list for LP-265.

I did not see Ben's name. These lists never showed names. The pharmacy could only see each patient's unique Kit ID. I was the only person in the world who knew that Kit ID 0923 belonged to Ben.

I found the row for Patient 0923. I traced the mouse across the spreadsheet and saw that his Treatment Group ended in an even number.

Shit.

I knew that the active arm of the trial, the patients getting LP-265, was coded for odd numbers.

I checked the list again. I started from the top, found Ben's Kit ID, traced my finger across the screen—and saw once more that his Treatment Group ended in an even number.

Now I knew, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that Ben was not getting LP-265. I knew that Ben was getting the placebo.

I knew that the man I loved was going to die.

And then I had an idea...

Of all the insane things I had orchestrated that morning, I hadn't planned for this. Maybe I simply hadn't allowed myself to believe that he would really be in the control group.

I had to act fast, because the havoc outside had quieted, and Tariq would be back at any moment. But that was OK, because all I had to do was change one number.

I clicked: "Edit File."

CHAPTER 8

I didn't tell Ben what I'd done. Even though I'd only been trying to save his life, I felt sure he wouldn't approve. Even I could hardly believe it.

If anyone ever found out that I'd broken the blind and switched a trial subject onto LP-265, my career in medical research would be over. I could potentially go to jail.

If the FDA found out, they would probably invalidate the entire trial. Labrynth would need to begin Phase III all over again. They would need to recruit thousands more patients and raise enough money to cover two additional years of burn—difficult to do after disclosing that the FDA invalidated their last set of results. LP-265 would join thousands of other promising chemical compounds sitting in the trash heap of drug development.

But all of that would only happen if somebody found out what I'd done.

When Ben's vitals improved, and his head cleared, and he was able to walk himself out of the hospital, I had to admit: I felt vindicated. *For once in my life, I had done something. I may have actually saved someone*.

Ben had been taking LP-265 for a week now. Too soon to see tangible results. But I felt intense relief. I was sleeping again. My hand tremors had stopped. And Ben was at least feeling well enough to have me over. I'd brought him dinner, and several more days of food. It was the first time I'd seen him since he left the hospital.

I did most of the talking. Small updates on hospital happenings. He listened politely, but he was clearly distracted. He seemed distant, depressed. He spent most of the time staring out the window.

At some point, I ran out of things to say. So we just sat there, quietly. He was obviously thinking something, but I decided not to press. Finally, he spoke up:

"What was Joe like?"

I was shocked. We hadn't discussed him since our first date. "I'd prefer not to talk about him."

"Why not?"

"Because it's painful."

He met my eyes. His meaning was clear: *You're talking to me about pain?*

I exhaled. "What do you want to know?"

"You seem to have a thing for dying guys."

So that's what was on his mind. He was convinced he was going to die. He was making peace with his imminent passing. Settling affairs. *Including ours*.

Should I tell him what I had done? Give him some genuine hope? *And, be honest, get some credit for yourself?* I decided to say simply: "You're not dying."

He didn't seem to believe that, but didn't want to argue about it either. After a moment of silence, I decided: *to hell with it*.

"Joe was great. I wasn't always great to him, but he was great. One of the good ones. You would've liked each other, actually. He was a vet too."

"Oh, yeah?" Ben asked, interested. "Where'd he serve?"

"He did one tour in Afghanistan."

"When was this? Maybe we were in country at the same time."

I tried to remember what year Joe had been deployed, and was embarrassed to discover I couldn't. "I would have to look it up. He got out before I met him."

Ben nodded, allowing me time to live with Joe's memory, which was hazier than I'd realized. For a long time, I had shut him out of my mind. I sighed, allowing myself to miss him.

"Joe was... very romantic. Maybe more than you."

Ben chuckled. "How so?"

"He would write me little notes. Leave them around the house for me to find. They would be these little missives from the past, romantic time capsules. Sometimes they were love letters. Sometimes he would just scribble down a small moment we'd had that day."

Then, a memory surfaced from the deep. "One of his notes, I didn't find until after he was gone. It wrecked me for, like, a whole week." I felt myself tearing up, but I continued, "But it was good, too. It was like he was still there with me. I just couldn't see him."

I met Ben's eyes. I could tell he was thinking about his own wife. About what he might leave behind for her to find. He wiped away a tear. "Thank you for sharing that."

He stood, a little unstable, but resisted my help.

"I think I need to be alone now."

PART 3:

ADVERSE EVENTS

CHAPTER 9

On Monday I woke up in pain.

The crick in my neck, usually stiff in the morning, was throbbing today. I reached for Advil, but found my phone first—*shit*—I was an hour late for work.

After weeks of awful sleep, I had been making the most of my chance to catch up. I had barely left my bed all weekend. Now, I struggled to get ready for the world. I took a neck-down shower, brushed my teeth while getting dressed and tossed back my daily pills: magnesium, beta blockers, Lexapro.

It had been a few days since I'd brought dinner to Ben, and I hadn't seen him since. We'd been texting, but he was always slow to respond. I had been giving him space, waiting for him to let me back in, but this morning I decided I had waited long enough, and I texted him about seeing each other that night.

My usual floor of the parking lot was at capacity, so I had to park up on the roof. As I waited for the elevator, I checked my phone out of habit, annoyed to see Ben hadn't responded yet.

When I walked into the research wing, I was accosted by Dr. Prager. "There you are. I've been trying to reach you all morning."

I apologized for waking up late. I lied and said I'd been sick.

His fatherly concern returned. "Are you sure you're OK? If you ever want to talk..."

I did not want to talk. Especially not with him. In general, I'd proven to be a pretty good liar, but Dr. Prager seemed to be able to see right through me. He was like Ben in that way.

I was struggling to shake him off, when my savior came in an unlikely form. "Emily, there you are!"

I turned, surprised to see Rossi. She wasn't scheduled to be in town until next week.

"I was just telling Dr. Prager that we're going to need access to all of your patient files immediately."

I tried to disguise my anxiety as surprise. "What do you mean? Why?"

She looked annoyed to be explaining herself. "Emily, I know you like to work at a certain pace, but I really need your help today. Nicholas is coming to town soon—"

"Nicholas Trout is coming here?"

“That’s right, and as you can imagine, his time is precious. He’s going to want to go over everything with a fine-tooth comb. Patient charts, drug logs, everything.”

My heart skipped a beat. Was there any digital record of me changing Ben’s drug number in the Randomization List? I wondered how I could stall her, but Dr. Prager spoke up.

“We’re going to need at least a couple of days to pull everything together. Precious though Mr. Trout’s time is,” Dr. Prager allowed a sliver of snark to shine through, “You are one of many trials we’re running here. Some warning would have been nice.”

Rossi softened, taking a new tack. “You’re right. I’m sorry to barge in. If we can get this done by end of day tomorrow, that would be most appreciated.”

Dr. Prager nodded, sufficiently pleased with her deference. He gave me a look, like—*you and I aren’t done here*—and walked off.

Now that we were alone, I asked Rossi, “What’s going on? Why the fire drill?”

She allowed herself to smile. “Keep this *way* under your hat, but... we’re getting acquired!”

Now my surprise was genuine. “By who?”

“I can’t say yet. But it’s one of the big pharma companies. And I do mean *big*.”

“That’s... good, right?”

“It’s incredible. We were on the IPO track, but that would have taken years, and there’s a million things that can go wrong. Now, everyone is going to get paid *this year*.”

“And the drug will reach people sooner?”

“Yes, of course, those go hand in hand.” She looked at me, remembering, “You feeling OK? You took quite a fall the last time I saw you.”

I waved off her concern, but before she could follow up, her phone *pinged!* She looked down like it was a misbehaving toddler, started furiously typing and seemed to forget I was there.

I walked to my office in a daze, my mind spinning. I figured the only way they might see a patient’s pills had been switched mid-trial is if they looked at the keystroke data inside the IDS pharmacy software. What were the odds of that? If the hospital had been hacked, maybe... otherwise, there was no reason to look inside the black box.

I had almost convinced myself I was OK when my phone *buzzed* twice. Ben had texted back:

Don’t think I have the energy tonight. Maybe tomorrow?

What could I say? At least he had responded. I wrote back:

All good, rest up! See how you feel tomorrow, and call me.

I didn't doubt that Ben was tired. And I understood all the reasons why I might not be top of mind for him. But one thing was becoming undeniable:

Ben was distancing himself from me. And it had started after I switched him to LP-265.

We had never actually said the words to each other, but for a moment in time—*had it been days, weeks?*—I had sensed that Ben truly loved me. I think, on a subconscious level, I'd felt that from the moment we met. It's why I had ever allowed myself to entertain a flirtation with a patient. To go on a date with him. To sleep with him. To open myself up for the first time in years. To risk *so much* for him...

Then, a terrible thought entered my mind. I immediately tried to forget it.

It was stupid. It made no sense.

Ben had no idea what I'd done. He had been very, very sick when I'd made the decision. And prior to that, he had never suggested anything like it.

But try as I might, there was no un-thinking this:

Maybe the reason Ben was distancing himself was because he had gotten what he really wanted from me.

Maybe that love I had felt was a lie. A fabrication.

Maybe Ben had only ever been manipulating me to get the drug.

CHAPTER 10

The next day, Ben went to see Dr. Prager for his routine bi-monthly appointment. When he walked out of the hospital, I was waiting across the street in my car.

Ben waited until a silver Camry pulled up. He checked his phone and got in the backseat. I followed as the Uber turned out onto the main road.

I had never tailed anyone before. I felt like Jimmy Stewart in *Vertigo*, following Kim Novak around San Francisco. I decided I should stay at least three cars back at all times—but as far as I could tell, neither Ben nor the driver ever looked back.

The car stopped downtown. I watched as Ben stepped out and walked into a Mexican restaurant. I parked down the block and followed him in.

Across the room, Ben approached a man wearing jeans and a blazer. He looked around the same age as Ben, with dark, curly hair. He stood and hugged Ben like they were old friends.

I was furious. He was well enough to meet a friend for lunch, but not me?

I sat at the bar, ordered an iced tea and watched them. Ben had never mentioned any friends by name. I started thinking then how little I really knew about him.

I knew his name, of course: Ben Campbell. I knew his medical file inside and out: blood type O-Negative, glucose levels elevated, familial history of heart disease.

But what did I actually know about his life? He was a high school baseball coach. He'd been to Thailand once. He'd served in the military. He couldn't cook anything more complex than scrambled eggs. He had brain cancer. He was obsessed with me—*I'd thought so, anyway*...

While Ben and his friend ate enchiladas, I looked up everything I could find online. He had a Facebook page with only a few posted photos, mostly relating to baseball or guitars. The address of his building was listed on PeopleSearch.com. I had Googled Ben before, when I first agreed to have dinner with him, but as I looked deeper now, I couldn't find anything about him more than two years old. Before then, it was like he hadn't existed.

At his table, Ben seemed to be arguing with his friend. His body language told me he was upset, while his friend was stone-faced, telling Ben something he didn't want to hear.

I thought about moving closer, but then Ben stood up and started walking straight toward me. I hurried into a dark little hallway where the bathrooms were, only to realize—this was *exactly* where he was headed.

I tried the ladies' room, but the door was locked and the woman inside yelled out. I peeked around the corner—Ben was approaching fast, just steps away. He seemed to have been crying, wiping his eyes with his sleeve.

I opened the only other door in the hallway that wasn't the men's and hid myself away with some mops and linens—through the door, I heard Ben enter the bathroom.

Three minutes later, I watched from across the street as Ben emerged from the restaurant.

He walked north, and I followed him on foot to his building. As he entered the lobby and waved to the security guard, I realized I couldn't follow him further.

So far, this excursion had been a waste of time. So Ben had lunch with a male friend you didn't know about, and they had words about something sad. Hardly groundbreaking—*if you were paying a Private Eye, you'd ask for your money back.*

Why had I even set out to follow him? What was the problem, exactly?

You're worried he doesn't love you. The problem isn't him, it's your own insecurity, coupled with guilt about breaking the blind.

Just then, my phone buzzed. It was a text from Ben:

I want to see you. Free tonight?

I could have floated the twenty floors up to his condo. This was still the man I loved. And now that he was on LP-265, his tumor would shrink, he would enter remission, we could have a future...

Just then, Ben walked out of the building. I ducked behind a car like an idiot. I didn't quite know why I was hiding—I guess to avoid looking like a stalker.

He was wearing gym clothes. He must have truly been feeling better—maybe he was going to make an appearance at baseball practice.

I followed him around the corner, where he walked into a gym. *Strange... I knew he worked out, but I had thought it would be weeks before he got back to that.* Inside, he waved to the kid at the front desk without missing a step, as if he came here every day. *Maybe he's been using the sauna...*

He disappeared into the locker room. I told the kid I was waiting for a friend, then perused the beverages while keeping an eye on the main floor. What I saw next shocked me:

Ben emerged from the locker room and without hesitation, *he stepped onto a treadmill and started to jog*. After a couple minutes, he sped up to a run—*then, he started to full-out sprint*.

In my time in medicine, I'd seen things some might call miracles. But as I watched Ben running and thought about where he'd been two weeks earlier, I knew: *This man did not have a brain tumor.*

I walked out of the gym, around the corner, and took up a spot outside the glass wall, right in front of Ben's treadmill. It took him a full minute to notice me.

He nearly fell off the fucking thing.

He stopped the machine abruptly, and we stared at each other, his chest heaving. Even through thick glass, I could see the guilt on his face. And not just that...

For the first time I'd ever witnessed, he looked genuinely surprised.

CHAPTER 11

"I don't know what you want me to say."

Ten minutes had passed. Long enough for Ben to raise his defenses. We were in a juice bar at his gym. He'd wanted to bring me to his place, but I needed to do this somewhere public.

"Tell me who you really are. Because you're *not* a cancer patient."

He considered his options. Finally, he just shrugged. "You're right." He leaned forward, "I'm sorry I lied to you. You can't know how sorry I am."

I studied Ben's face. Closer than I ever had before. He had a small mole on the left side of his nose. He had three little age lines running across his forehead. His pores were abnormally large—how had I never noticed before now? Then I landed on the scar that began at his hairline and disappeared up across his scalp.

"I thought that scar was from brain surgery. When they tried to resect the tumor. Before you joined my trial."

He paused, guilty. "I never actually said that. I just... let you believe it."

What an asshole. "So, what is that scar from?"

"I was in an accident, when I was younger."

How had we not talked about that before now? I guess because he was happy to let me believe he had had brain surgery for glioblastoma. But that wasn't the priority right now.

"Do you know what I did for you? I broke the fucking blind! If that ever got discovered, my life would be over. Worse that that—this trial would be ruined, and *millions* of people out there who are *actually* dying won't get help."

I studied his reaction, or lack of one, my shock only continuing to grow. "You knew."

He exhaled. "I didn't know you were going to do it. But once you switched me to the real drug... I had the pill analyzed."

He saw the look on my face. Knew he had to give more. "I work for Asterion."

That was the *last* thing I'd expected him to say. "Asterion Labs? The biotech company. You work for them?" He nodded. "Doing what?"

"My job entails the tracking and procurement of competitive products."

Tracking and procurement of... "Corporate espionage? Is that what you're saying?"

Ben almost looked embarrassed. “They would never put it that way in a job description.”

I was blown away. All of this had been designed to take advantage of me. To steal a drug.

“But there must have been easier ways. Follow a few of my patients, pay one of them to give you a pill.”

“We considered that. But it would have meant taking medication from patients with brain tumors. That’s a little outside the bounds of our ethics.”

“But manipulating me into breaking the blind is OK with you.”

“To be fair, I never asked you to do that.”

My cheeks were red with embarrassment. “So you pretended to have glioblastoma. Joined my trial to get inside information. And when you needed more, you seduced me to get it.”

“I know it sounds crazy. Let’s be honest—it was.” He paused, “But for the record... what happened between us was real.”

“How can you possibly expect me to believe that?”

“Because it’s the truth. You felt it. You can’t fake feelings like that. Maybe a great actor could. But I’m not an actor.”

“Aren’t you? You’re a spy. You lied to me for months. Made me think you were dying.”

He weighed what to say next. “Labrynth is going to bury this drug.”

“Bury it? They’re getting acquired by a giant pharma company.”

“They’re buying the company to bury the drug.” He leaned in, “They provide the current standard of care. LP-265 will kill their business. It’s better for them if it doesn’t exist.”

I tried to wrap my head around this. I had heard stories of compounds getting buried, but I’d never quite believed them.

Ben was ahead of me, as usual. “It happens more than you’d think. But nobody wants to be seen killing a wonder drug. So, they manipulate the trial data to magnify side effects, and let the FDA kill it for them.” He leaned in, serious. “Have you noticed anything unusual lately?”

I thought about Rossi’s surprise visit. Her sudden obsession with the data. The dollar signs in her eyes.

Ben could see I was coming around. “They will never bring this drug to market. But Asterion will. They have no competitive drug. LP-265 isn’t a threat for them, it’s a dream.”

That did make sense. “So Asterion wants the formula for the drug. To make it themselves. And bring it to market.”

“That’s right.”

I frowned. “But you getting the pill wasn’t much help, was it? You can break it down and see what’s *in* the compound, but you can’t discern the *order* in which things are added, or the amount of time spent on different stages of the process.”

Ben nodded. “We can’t reverse engineer LP-265 from the pills alone.”

I took a deep breath, then exhaled loudly.

“What was that about?”

“I was just imagining what it would look like for me to help you. And I can’t believe I’m even entertaining that thought.”

“I get it. Honestly, that’s why I backed away from you. I felt guilty about getting you any deeper into this.”

I looked at this man, who had lied to me about something so massive that I found myself wondering not whether I could forgive him, but whether I could believe anything he said.

“You’re pretty deep in yourself.”

He met my eyes. He almost looked sad. “Yeah. I’m all the way in.”

I wasn’t sure if I wanted to help him, but I knew what he needed.

And I knew that getting it would make breaking the blind look like child’s play.

CHAPTER 12

He pressed me up against the floor-to-ceiling windows of his living room and took my right breast in his hand as he entered me.

I shifted my focus from the city lights outside to Ben's reflection. His eyes were closed, mouth open, breathing hard. The glass distorted his face—he could have been anyone—while the double panes cast a second version of him, a little larger, a little farther away. I watched them fucking me, a man and a ghost.

His sweat dripped down my back. I could feel him getting close. Both of us breathing harder. I could tell he was holding back. Waiting for me.

I closed my eyes, gave in and let out a yelp of pleasure. He spasmed in ecstasy, and let me go.

I took a deep breath and stepped back from the window. I picked my shirt up off the kitchen floor and poured us some wine while he cleaned up.

We had been doing this every night for the past week. It was like the early days, but now it felt less like a covert affair, more like we were truly together. The vibe between us felt more intimate. More honest.

Ironic, because we were now keeping a much bigger secret...

Our new routine was much like our old one—sex, then wine and the couch—except our conversations now centered on shaping a plan to infiltrate Labrynth's headquarters.

I had surprised myself at how quickly I'd bought in to Ben's mission, but I had come to see that all of my work would be for nought if LP-265 was allowed to be buried.

Because our plan hinged on talking my way into places I wasn't supposed to be, Ben was teaching me a bit of spycraft from his time in Army Intelligence. Tonight's lesson was about: "Elicitation. The art of getting someone to give you information without realizing it."

I took a sip of wine, enjoying this. "Give me an example."

"There are certain psychological instincts we can use to our advantage. The classic move is, I tell you something in confidence. You naturally want to tell me a secret of your own."

"OK... so I tell you that I once made out with a girl in college. And you tell me that your company is about to do layoffs."

Ben laughed, "More or less. It's one of the best ways to build trust with someone quickly."

That made me feel uneasy. I realized something was bothering me. Something we hadn't talked about in a while.

“What are you going to do about your wife?”

He looked at me like I’d ruined the evening. “You don’t like sneaking around? It seems to do something for you.”

I tried my best to conjure a withering look. From his reaction, it seemed to work.

“I promise, I’ll make it right,” he said. “I want to be with you.”

Said every cheating husband ever. “How do I trust you? How do I know you’re not just using me as an asset? Or that *you* don’t just enjoy sneaking around?”

He hesitated, then said it: “I love you, Emily.”

The words I’d been waiting to hear. I studied his eyes. I felt it was real.

“I love you too.”

He pulled me back onto the bed and kissed me. But after a moment he stopped, on the edge of tears.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

He took a breath. “We could just stay like this. We could just be happy here.”

It was a nice thought. But... “What are you saying? What about our plan?”

Now he actually was crying. “We could forget all about it. Just stay here, you and me, in this apartment. We don’t need anything more than this.”

I didn’t know where this was coming from. But I was determined. Something in me had changed, and I liked it. I was no longer an observer. I was ready to be a doer.

“I can do this. We *have* to do this. To save LP-265.” I looked at him, making sure there wasn’t something I was missing. “Right?”

He looked resigned. Like maybe he regretted what he’d built.

“Yeah. That’s right.”

CHAPTER 13

I drove overnight to get to Labrynth's research headquarters.

I parked outside a nearby coffee shop and napped until 9 AM. With my cover story, it would only make sense to arrive during business hours.

My plan was to use my legitimate relationship with the company to get inside the building. From there, however... well, I would just have to play it by ear.

The company operated from an anonymous business park, built of concrete and glass. I told the security guard I was here to see Sarah McConnell in Clinical Operations. I had never met Sarah, she would be surprised to see me here, but we communicated by email so often that I was sure she wouldn't turn me away.

I could tell I was right as soon as the guard announced me on the phone, because he started nodding, then hung up and buzzed me through a set of double doors. *One layer, penetrated...*

I entered a long, fluorescent hallway with doors on both sides. There were no words on the first few doors I passed, nothing announcing what lay behind them, just generic numbers.

A door ahead of me opened—a woman in a cardigan stepped out. "Emily? Is that you?"

I answered in the affirmative, and introduced myself to Sarah. As I had expected, she was perplexed by my presence. "I don't think we've ever had a site coordinator here before."

I blushed, and lied. "I was in town seeing a friend and thought I'd stop by. Could I check out the office? I'd love to see where all my paperwork goes."

She looked like she was trying to remember if she had been trained to deal with a query like this. After a moment she shrugged and said why not. She led me into a large, open office space, where at least fifteen people were working at computers.

Sarah asked me how things were going at my site. I told her everything was excellent. I said that she must be excited, what with the news. "You know, the acquisition." I could tell from her face that I wasn't supposed to know this.

"Oh, yes." She seemed to be asking herself just exactly what it was I was doing here.

Before she could think to call her boss, I asked if I could use the bathroom. She looked relieved to be offered a way out of this interaction, and pointed me out to the hall.

Once I was alone in the hallway, I figured I had a few minutes before Sarah went looking for me. If anyone asked what I was doing, I would just say I got lost.

I needed to find the Research Wing. Within it, there was a room full of secure servers, air gapped from the internet so they couldn't be hacked remotely. Ben had told me that this is where the Manufacturing Protocol would be stored.

Ben had given me a USB drive to insert into the server. On the drive was a program that would copy files automatically from the server. All I needed to do was get inside that room, let the program run for fifteen minutes, and exit the building with the USB drive.

I roamed the hallways for a while before I saw a scientist in a white coat. I followed him around a corner, and watched him enter one of the numbered doors. *Maybe that's it...*

I tried the door, but it was locked. I took a step back and waited for what felt like an hour but was probably three minutes. I was about to give up when—*click*—the door opened and a young woman walked out. I acted like I'd just been walking up, and without giving her a chance to look at my face, I went right through. *Act like you belong...*

I had expected to walk into a lab, but instead I was in another hallway. In here, the walls were unfinished, everything cement and steel. On the ceiling there were pipes and bundles of wires running everywhere. It looked like the restricted area of a basketball arena.

I felt genuinely nervous now. There was no plausible reason for me to be in this zone. It was a stretch for me to be in this building at all.

I knew that server rooms typically had a lot of wiring going in and out of them, so I decided to follow the bulkiest bunch of cables on the ceiling. I followed them around one corner, then another, until I finally reached a cul-de-sac, a hallway leading to one door, with all of the wires going into the wall above it.

A wave of adrenaline hit me. Somehow, I knew I was in the right place. Against all odds, with only a brief training in spycraft from Ben, I had reached the server room. The manufacturing process for LP-265 was right behind this door...

It only now occurred to me that I had no way of getting in. I had no key, no badge, no passcode... but as I stepped up, the security light beside the door turned from red to green.

I tried the handle—miraculously, it moved. The door was unlocked.

I walked in and found myself face-to-face with Nicholas Trout, sitting in an armchair, looking right at me. Totally unsurprised. He pushed his dark, curly hair up off of his forehead. He smiled.

"Come in, Emily. I've been expecting you."

CHAPTER 14

I was standing in a room the size of a large corner office, but there were no windows and hardly any furniture besides Nicholas Trout's armchair and a small sofa opposite. The floor was carpeted. The walls were painted a soothing forest green. The lighting was dim. It looked like a therapist's office inside of a day spa.

"It's nice to meet you," Nicholas said. "I feel like I know you already, but it's never fully real until you're in a room together."

"What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing."

I froze, unsure how I could possibly explain myself.

Nicholas smiled, as if he felt bad for me. "There is no server."

My heart skipped a beat. I stared at him like an idiot.

"You're looking for a server, right? More specifically, what's on the server. Even more specifically—you want to steal the manufacturing process for the drug I invented." He watched me like a patient teacher waiting on a slow pupil. "There is no server."

I had no idea how he knew my plan, but clearly there was no use in lying. Fuck it, why be defensive when he was the one sabotaging his own trial?

"You're going to bury LP-265," I said, my voice rising. "Rig the data so the FDA kills it, but not until the acquisition closes and you've cashed out." The truth felt good. "You could help millions of people, but you're choosing to enrich yourself."

Nicholas studied me, fascinated. "You really believe that." He didn't phrase it as a question. It sounded more like a fact he was proud of. Like he had accomplished something notable.

"I have it on good authority," I said. *Fuck him and his growing smile and his dark, curly hair.*

"On good authority... I assume you mean from Asterion Labs?"

The hair on my arms stood up straight.

He continued, his tone clinical, "You've been approached by one of their people, they told you this elaborate story, and they've turned you? Like a spy?"

I fell silent. *How was he so ahead of me? How had he been here waiting for me? And why was there no server in the server room??*

"You've put a lot of trust in the person who convinced you to come here today," he observed. "Even after he lied to you about having brain cancer, you put your trust in him again. Enough to risk your job, your career, your freedom."

He pushed his hair up off his forehead again. *I'd bet a million dollars he dyes it. For the love of God, act your age and get a fucking haircut.*

Then I remembered something. The day I followed Ben around town, he had gone to that Mexican restaurant to meet his friend. *His friend with dark, curly hair...*

I hadn't been close enough at the time to recognize him. But now that I was sitting six feet away, *Nicholas Trout looked very much like Ben's friend...*

"I wonder," He continued. "If this man regained your trust once, could he do it again?"

It was obvious that something larger was happening here. Pieces were shifting on a puzzle I couldn't quite see—but I didn't care to solve it, I just wanted it to go away. Suddenly, there was no place in the world I wanted to be more than my bed at home.

I looked Nicholas directly in the eyes. "I'm sorry for sneaking in here. Whatever I can do to make things right, I will. But please—can I just leave now?"

Before he could respond, there was a knock at the door. He gestured for me to stay where I was, and called out for them to come in.

The door opened. Dr. Prager and Rossi walked in. *What the actual fuck...*

Dr. Prager knelt down to my level. "Hi Emily. It's good to see you. Can I get you anything? Do you need some water?"

I stared at him, incredulous. "What the hell is going on here?"

Dr. Prager looked like he was truly sorry for me. "I didn't want to do it this way. Please know, I'm on your side here. Anything you need, I'm your advocate."

He threw a glance at Nicholas, who was speaking with Rossi in soft tones. She nodded, and turned on a large TV screen on the wall. A photo of Ben appeared.

"Who is this man?" Nicholas asked.

I was beyond trying to understand what was happening. "That's Ben."

"Who is this man?" Nicholas asked again.

"I just told you. Ben Campbell. He's a patient in the trial. Or, at least, that's what I thought... He actually works for Asterion."

"There is no Asterion."

I stared at him. "They're a well-known biotech company."

"Have you ever seen an advertisement for them?"

Come to think of it, I hadn't. But then, early-stage biotech companies didn't advertise.

I turned to Rossi, "You told me somebody from Asterion approached you."

She looked at me with pity, like I was a sick dog. "That was a lie. It's a fake company."

"So that was what, a loyalty test?" I almost laughed. "Clearly you all know more than me, but I can say this: I'm loyal to LP-265. It is a miracle drug that needs to go out to the world. Maybe Asterion doesn't exist. But the man who recruited me—*that man*—does."

My three captors looked at each other. Nicholas turned to me again.

"Do you love him?"

What kind of question was that? "Well apparently he works for a fake company, so I think the jury's out on that."

Nicholas stared at me, "If your life depended on it, a yes or no answer: Do you love him?"

My brain wasn't working anymore. I answered from my gut: "Yes."

Nicholas looked at Dr. Prager, who hesitated, then nodded his assent. Rossi clicked a button, and on the screen, a different picture appeared. My heart skipped a beat.

"Who is this man?"

Tears came to my eyes. I couldn't help it. "How do you have that photo?"

"Who is this man?"

Was this what torture felt like? Was this what the CIA did to terrorists in foreign black sites? My head was buzzing. I felt dizzy. I was ready to say anything.

"Please. Whatever this is, I don't want to play anymore. I'll do anything you want. Just please fucking stop this!"

Dr. Prager stepped forward, "She's not ready. Let's take ten."

Nicholas barely looked at him. “This is the moment. She needs to stay in it.” He met my eyes, caring but intense. *“Who is this man?”*

I looked at the TV. At the picture of my late husband. Taken one month before he died.

“That’s Joe.”

Rossi clicked a button, and the screen switched back to the first picture of Ben.

“Who is this man?”

I was really getting pissed off now. “Ben! Or whatever his fucking name is.”

They switched the picture again. Back to Joe.

“That’s Joe.”

They switched the picture again.

“Ben.”

They switched the pictures back and forth, faster and faster. Ben and Joe’s faces were starting to blur together in my mind. With them doing this little trick, the two men really looked very similar...

Eventually I’d had enough. I screamed, “STOP IT! STOP IT RIGHT NOW!!!”

The screen went black. I sat there, dripping with sweat, sucking air as I tried to get oxygen to my brain.

Then, the door opened. And in walked Joe, my husband. But he wasn’t dead. And he was wearing Ben’s clothes...

“Hi, Emily.”

PART 4:

UNBLINDING

CHAPTER 15

I sat still, staring at Joe, my husband who had died three years earlier. And yet, he was also Ben, the man I'd been having an affair with for the last several weeks.

I barely heard him apologizing. For leading me into this room. For lying to me again. It had all been in service of breaking through to me. To get me to recognize him again.

After a few minutes, he stopped talking and looked at me like he expected a response. I had no idea where to begin. Finally, I managed, "So, none of this was real. Ben Campbell... doesn't exist."

Joe shook his head.

"And the manufacturing process I'm supposed to steal..."

Dr. Prager looked at me with great sympathy. "The clinical trial you've been administering was a fiction, a fantasy you were living in, that all of us in this room constructed for you."

"But LP-265... It's a miracle cancer drug. It's in Phase III trials. Monitored by the FDA."

"Did you ever meet anyone from the Food and Drug Administration?"

I had, in a past life, on other trials. I realized now that nobody from the government had come around for LP-265. But still, "I watched people get better. I saw their scans."

"Those were real scans, but you never met the patients they belonged to. The only people you met with in person were actors."

I tried to process this. "So... there was no trial."

"Well, not exactly," Nicholas Trout leaned forward to explain.

"You've been the subject of a psychological behavioral trial. That's what we do here at Labrynth. I study severe dissociative and psychotic states, specifically whether the brain can be guided back to painful truths through the emotional context in which those memories were formed. In plain speak, I use relationships as treatment."

I looked at Joe for some kind of clue that this was a joke, but he just nodded.

Nicholas continued, "I'm sorry I pushed you today. I don't enjoy forcing patients past their comfort zone. But we've invested a lot to get you here. Months of work, including your own. I made a judgment call."

He looked around the room for validation. He continued, almost talking to himself, "What we've done here was unconventional. Radical, really. There's no denying that. But there's

real science to back it up. You're on the bleeding edge of psychiatry, Emily." He looked to Joe, "Your husband had tried everything currently available in the field. He was desperate to bring you back. So he came to us for help."

"It was the only way," Joe said. I met his eyes, and he suddenly looked ashamed. "Well, I don't actually know that. But it was one, last way. And I was ready to try anything."

In a double blind study, neither the researcher nor the subject knows who is getting the real therapy.

I had believed I was the researcher. In fact, I'd been the subject.

I couldn't stand the way Joe was looking at me, so I turned to Rossi. "Who are you?"

"I do what you do. What you used to, anyways," Rossi corrected herself quickly. "I'm your clinical trial coordinator. I've been monitoring your health, your behavior, your psych evals."

I looked to Dr. Prager. "And you?"

"I'm your psychiatrist. We've known each other for quite a while." He smiled at me warmly. I suddenly hated him.

I turned to Joe. The person in this room I understood the least, but the only one who mattered.

"You died. You were in a terrible car crash."

Joe took a deep breath.

"You were there too."

CHAPTER 16

I leave the restaurant ahead of him. I don't want him to see my face. I walk to the car quickly, without looking back, signaling: *I want to go home, I want to go to bed, I do not want to talk.*

I hear his footsteps behind me. Matching my pace. But keeping his distance.

Joe is very intuitive. Very emotionally intelligent, for a man. He likes to talk things out, like mature adults. It drives me crazy.

He unlocks the car and I step into the passenger seat. He gets in behind the wheel and looks over at me. I look straight forward. If I meet his eyes, I lose. He starts the engine.

He waits several blocks before speaking. I'm almost impressed. "Look, I get why you're upset."

I stare forward at the road.

"But I'm not going to apologize for being honest," he continues. "I don't want your mother in the room with us. And I wouldn't say that if I thought you actually wanted her there. I'm trying to protect you."

I finally look at him. "You don't get a say in this. I'm sorry, but it's just as simple as that."

Clara kicks my belly, encouraging me. I cannot wait to meet her, and yet, I am already mourning the end of this moment. My relationship with her will never again be this intimate. No matter how well things go, there will always be some degree of distance.

Joe is not saying anything, but I can tell he's upset and trying to hold it in.

We are waiting at a stop sign, trying to make a left onto a large boulevard. Joe grumbles, "It always fucking does this. I would rather spend two extra minutes waiting at stoplights."

After years of arguing about it, he has started using the maps app when I'm upset. A small, unspoken gesture of goodwill.

"Just turn right, then."

"You can't turn around for, like, a mile."

"I don't care, I just want to go home."

Joe swallows his frustration. He sees an opening in traffic and pulls out into the boulevard.

I look down at my phone. I know he's right about my mom. I know he's trying to help. I don't know why I insist on doing this with him.

I'll make it up to him tomorrow. I'll let him off the hook.

Then I hear the oncoming horn. I feel the glass hit my face. I hear the sound of the SUV's front grille hitting Joe's door.

I grab my belly. I don't feel anything.

CHAPTER 17

I looked at this man sitting across from me, in this windowless room in the bowels of an office park. In that moment, *I remembered.*

I had barely been hurt in the crash. But I lost the baby. Then came the worst night of my life, when I had to deliver Clara, stillborn. After I was discharged, I didn't leave the house for weeks.

Joe was watching me closely. "I had facial reconstructive surgery. When I came home, you didn't recognize me. You wouldn't let me in."

I remembered a man knocking on my door, calling himself my husband. I screamed at him to stop lying, and called the cops.

"I tried to get through to you for months. Your parents were worried you could be a danger to yourself, given your history, so... we had you committed."

I remembered the psych hospital. Rooms with egg cream walls and small windows and narrow beds with scratchy wool blankets.

Now Dr. Prager was talking. "When I first met you, Emily, you were in the grip of severe postpartum psychosis. Given what happened in college, you were always at higher risk. The loss of Clara pushed you over."

I remembered my first session with Dr. Prager. The old Broadway posters on the walls of his office. He told me he was rehearsing to play Daddy Warbucks in a local production of Annie. I told him about the time I'd flown to Israel.

Dr. Prager continued, "Medication eased the psychosis, but the reality of your loss was unbearable. So your mind protected itself in another way: you forgot that you had ever been pregnant, and that your husband had survived the crash. We call that dissociative amnesia. The memories were never gone. You just couldn't reach them."

I remembered the first day I woke up alone, without either of them. The sun was out. The sky was empty. It occurred to me that I could fall up into it. I went to the hospital and quit my job as a clinical trials coordinator.

Nicholas Trout leaned in. "It was quite a task to break through the protective barrier you'd built around your trauma. We tapered you off the anti-psychotics you'd been taking. The withdrawal was the cause of your insomnia, the emotional volatility, the tremors."

I remembered the sound of the rain hitting the roof of my car. My hand shaking involuntarily. Grabbing his leg to make it stop.

“We had to create a heightened scenario that would bring you and Joe into close contact. We had to build empathy, build trust... then break it down and rebuild it stronger. Like when a surgeon breaks a misshapen bone, so it will grow back correctly.”

He watched me, expectant. I looked around—*everyone* was staring at me like I was a lab rat, which I basically was.

“I don’t know what you want me to say.”

Dr. Prager stepped forward and did the nicest thing I could remember him doing: He told Nicholas and Rossi they should leave me and Joe alone for a moment.

When they all left the room, Joe met my eyes, his face red. “In a situation like this, saying ‘I’m sorry’ seems... inadequate.”

If laughter were possible, I would have been in stitches.

“I’m not sure I ever deserve your trust again. But I had to know if it was possible to get you back.”

The first night I met Joe, we had been seated next to each other at a happy hour networking event. He was trying to sleep with a woman across the table who had a long neck, impossible posture and an Ivy League degree. He barely noticed me until a mutual friend fell off her chair drunk, and he said I had a nice laugh. We got married three years later on the same date, September 23rd. When we got to our hotel room after the reception, I told Joe I had blackmailed the host of that happy hour to sit me next to him. The way he looked at me then was exactly how he was looking at me now.

Maybe I was weak. Maybe I was addicted. I was definitely exhausted. But I knew one thing:

I still loved him.

I reached out and took his hand. “Hi, Joe.”

He looked at me like he was going to cry.

“What do you want to do?” He asked.

CHAPTER 18

I knew it was early before I opened my eyes.

I could tell by the chill in the air. Joe liked leaving the heat off when we went to bed, which was nice until the last hour before dawn. I'd never understood why the night got colder just as the sun arrived. I pulled the comforter up to my chin and took a deep, cleansing breath.

Next to me, Joe was passed out, snoring lightly. He looked peaceful. I looked at the scar on his scalp. The scar that would forever represent the lie of our second courtship, and the truth of our first.

We had moved into a new place. An old Victorian house near the lake that had been converted into apartments. The place had creaky wood floors, original windows, and cold mornings. About as far as you could get from the condo Joe had been living in when I knew him as Ben.

It had been three months since we walked out of Labrynth's headquarters together. I slept most of the first week. The second had been the most awkward: He kept apologizing for everything he'd put me through.

He told me he'd had reservations from the beginning. He explained that the day I had seen him and Nicholas Trout having lunch, he had been begging Nicholas to call off the trial. He wanted to talk about everything, but after a certain point, I just couldn't. I was busy reliving the dreams of a future I had already lost.

I looked out the window. The sun was rising into a clear blue sky. Not a cloud in sight.

I massaged the crick in my neck, the one I'd had ever since the crash. I didn't mind it so much, now that I knew its origin. I could never explain this to anyone else, but I'd come to think of the pain as a way I still got to live with Clara, as if some tiny piece of her had migrated up from my belly and burrowed there, just above my left shoulder blade.

I sighed. I had been hoping to nap for a couple of hours before the day began. But there was no way I was going to get back to sleep now.

I got out of bed, quiet as I crossed the room. The floorboards creaked, but Joe didn't stir.

In the kitchen, I poured myself a glass of water and drank it down in two gulps. I went to the hallway closet, reached up and pulled a backpack out from behind a moving box.

Everything I'd packed was in its right place. Now, I added some final items—a phone charger, two apples, a framed photo from our honeymoon in Thailand.

In the bathroom, I brushed my teeth, then added the toothbrush to my bag. I opened the medicine cabinet and took out my various prescriptions, including a new anti-psychotic

that Dr. Prager had put me on. My hand lingered on bottles of Klonopin and Ambien... I didn't plan on using these after today, but I packed them both anyway. When he woke up, Joe might have an idea of what I'd done to him, but still, it was better not to leave evidence.

I reread the note I had stayed up most of the night writing. It was a little overwrought, but given the circumstances, probably appropriate. I added one final sentence: "*I forgive you.*"

It was crisp outside on the street. A strong breeze was blowing in off the lake. Some clouds were developing in the sky.

I started walking. I wasn't sure where I would go. I thought maybe it was better not to know ahead of time. In case anyone was watching.

I thought about all the people I'd failed to save over the course of my life. Now Joe would be another. But over the past few weeks, I'd realized I only had the capacity to save myself.

I reached back to rub my neck, suddenly stiff. A few drops of water splashed on the sidewalk. I realized my nose was wet.

I looked up. It was starting to rain.

THE END