

CHAPTER 1

Pharmacist Alex Benedict lived with death as a constant companion. It lurked everywhere, whispering foreboding and permanence. But Benedict never relented. His life had become a vigil dedicated to keeping that unwanted guest at bay.

The physical signs of his battle had become gradually more evident each morning when he looked in the mirror. The color of his intelligent caramel eyes had fogged with fatigue. The whites were mapped with broken capillaries. The eyes themselves seemed to have sunk deeper into his skull. He'd lost fifteen pounds in the last few months and the pasty skin beneath those eyes hung from his cheeks.

Today's victim, though, was Augustus Palladine.

Benedict and the rest of the Tidewater Regional Medical Center's Code Blue team had been working on Palladine for almost ten minutes. Benedict manned the crash cart, delivering medications in the correct sequence and at exacting intervals.

He watched the raven-haired nurse Katherine Diehl, perched on a step-stool, pumping her balled hands on the man's chest. Benedict

noticed in that moment that Diehl herself looked haggard. Strain pulled at the corners of her eyes.

A respiratory therapist, stationed at the patient's head, squeezed a green, vinyl ambu bag every eight seconds. Air forced its way into the man's lungs through the endotracheal tube in Palladine's throat with a shrill, caustic hiss.

"Stop compressions, Katherine," John Edward Kyle commanded in his thick Scottish accent. Kyle was Tidewater Regional Medical Center's chief hospitalist. The salt-and-pepper haired man, rail-thin and whose white, pasty skin was blotched with eczema, was the most influential physician in the hospital.

Palladine was a large man and retired shipyard worker who'd been diagnosed with mesothelioma a few months back. The fact that his stage I cancer had been diagnosed early offered a glimmer of hope for the number of years the man had left. That is up until this morning. Palladine's cardiac arrest had been witnessed by one of nurses. He'd shot upright in bed, clutched at his chest as blood dripped from his nose, then immediately collapsed. The nurse had activated the Code team and begun compressions. As the team arrived, the large, black-purple bruising covering the man's torso had begun to materialize. It portended another defeat. The rivulet of blood oozing from his nose had begun creeping down his cheek.

Katherine Diehl stood erect. The team gazed at the green, uncoordinated squiggle traversing the cardiac monitor.

"He's still in V-fib," Kyle announced. "Let's shock him with 120 joules."

The young resident physician assigned to Kyle hit a button on the defibrillator. It whined to a climax. "Clear," the resident announced.

He pressed another button and the charge was transferred to the pads on the patient's blackened chest. His muscles contracted and his torso jerked slightly.

Benedict noticed Kyle's mouth opening to bark out another command. Benedict beat him to it.

"I've got the amiodarone ready, Dr. Kyle," Benedict said, the syringe poised. "Three hundred milligrams."

But the doctor did not respond. His blue eyes darted back and forth absorbing every action and nuance of the team under his leadership.

"Shall I give the amiodarone?" Benedict urged.

"Give it," Kyle replied.

Benedict stepped to the bed and screwed the syringe into the port of the IV line. When the dose was given, Benedict stepped back to the crash cart.

Katherine Diehl, her turn over, was replaced by another nurse. As the new nurse began compressions, Katherine Diehl stepped around the bed and passed by the crash cart.

Benedict nodded to her, raising an eyebrow in a silent question. "*Are you okay?*"

She raised a hand half-heartedly in response. *Not now!*

The Code continued. Benedict administered doses of epinephrine, calcium chloride and atropine. The patient was shocked with a higher dose of current. The electrocardiogram still showed no heart rhythm.

Kyle shot a challenge at his first year resident. "What would you do now?"

The blond-haired youngster's eyes widened. "How about some magnesium for the V-fib?"

"Excuse me?" Kyle shot back insulted. "Did you just say magnesium, really?"

Kyle addressed the whole group as they worked on the dead man. "Anybody want to remind our young resident here what we use magnesium for?"

"That would be Torsades!" Benedict responded.

Kyle smiled begrudgingly and turned back to the young doctor. "That's right."

The team ignored the man's embarrassment and continued their work. Benedict disposed of a spent syringe, placing it in the unit mounted on the wall over a trash can.

Benedict glanced into the trash can. The item resting atop the pile of discarded plastic and paper debris caught Benedict's eye. He bent closer, turned the object over with his gloved hand and inspected it.

A cold dagger sliced through his belly.

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"I can't do this anymore," Michael Watson declared softly later that morning. "I'm getting out."

Katherine Diehl shook her head at the aging pharmacist. "How are you going to get out of it? We're both in too deep. You can't leave. It will put everything in jeopardy. What about me? I'll be implicated. You can't do this! I have two small children."

"I can exit all this without implicating you. But we have to stop, Kathy. The consequences of continuing are too devastating."

"What are you talking about?"

"Patients are dying, remember? We've had a hand in their deaths."

"You don't need to remind me. We killed another one this morning."

"I know," Watson shot back. "Do you know how many it's been so far?"

They were sitting in Watson's rusting Ford Taurus. Their anxiety-filled conversation had fogged the windows. Diehl wiped a curved arc along the window, clearing a view. She concentrated on the gray skies of the approaching storm for a moment then lowered her head into her hands.

"Yeah, I do. It's six. Six damned patients. And I'll never be able to forgive myself no matter how much money I'm being

paid." Her words were muffled through the sweaty hands covering her face.

"We won't be killing anymore patients," Watson declared. Diehl could sense his forced smile even though she wasn't looking at him.

She raised her head to look at Watson. The skin on his face coated with a two-day beard hung from his cheek bones. "That doesn't change the past. We're still murderers."

"Let's not think about that right now. Listen to me for a second. There's another reason all this needs to stop...."

Diehl peered at him, waiting for that reason.

"I've found the answer. It works."

Diehl blinked hard.

"Did you hear me?"

"If it works, why did my patient die this morning?"

"I prepared that mixture three days ago. I prepared a newer formulation just forty hours ago. I've discovered the right ratio of ingredients along with an overlooked procedure, one that's not in any of the literature. It's more of a ... non-scientific step. This newer formula is the right one."

"Non-scientific?"

Watson shook his head, embarrassed by what he was about to reveal. "Do you believe in incantations?"

"No."

"Well believe it."

Diehl pushed out a sigh. "How do you know this one works?"

"I tested it on the one of the monkeys. Her name is Cupid. She was covered in tumors. If the formula isn't exactly right, death ensues within hours and the recipient exhibits massive bruising. I gave her the dose two days ago. The cancer is gone and Cupid is still alive."

"I don't know. It sounds all too incredible."

"Trust me, Katherine. It works. Unfortunately, there are other, more dire consequences that have to be taken into account."

CHAPTER 2

The answers to the questions created by what Benedict had found in Augustus Palladine's hospital room trash can resided in the anteroom to the pharmacy I.V. room.

Four chest-high ivory-colored filing cabinets in the anteroom housed the documents Benedict needed to find. Benedict leafed through the files, walking his fingers over the hanging folders trying to decipher Michael Watson's filing system.

Michael Watson, the pharmacist assigned to the IV room today at Tidewater, was not at his station. Watson had departed the pharmacy two minutes earlier. His absences had been increasing. This had become expected behavior for the man and it irritated Benedict. Watson's performance had steadily declined over the last months and Benedict meant to discuss it with him, again, very soon. For the moment, Benedict was glad he had some privacy.

It was in the anteroom that technicians and pharmacists collected vials, diluents and intravenous solutions which would be prepared under the three sterile laminar flow hoods housed in the

clean room proper. The anteroom housed the voluminous paper trail for all intravenous products prepared by the pharmacy and distributed throughout the institution.

Benedict pushed back his fatigue. He was fighting his own personal struggle that denied him sleep. But he willed himself on, refusing to succumb. He was not going to let his issues affect his work.

The object he'd found in the trash can was a spent IV minibag. When full, it held one hundred milliliters of normal saline. To this particular minibag, a dose of the drug Nonarc had been added. At least, that's what the computer-generated label on the bag read. Benedict had his doubts.

Nonarc, whose generic name was cycloabiazepam acetate, was a potent derivative of the benzodiazepine family. The benzodiazepine class of drugs included Valium and Xanax. Nonarc's molecular structure had been modified and tweaked by its manufacturer, Cardwell-Wolfe Pharmaceuticals, in such a way that the drug could relax muscles and relieve pain. It had become a mainstay of pain therapy management for oncologists in the last three years and named Nonarc because of its non-addictive, non-narcotic properties.

The Code Blue had ended shortly after Benedict had found the bag. The patient, Augustus Palladine, never stood a chance. Nonetheless, the team had worked faithfully attempting to reverse the irreversible. When it was over, Palladine lay dead and exposed, his chest covered in the deep, ugly bruise and the curved endotracheal tube protruding from his mouth like a giant fish hook.

During the commotion of the chest compressions and barked orders, Benedict had lifted the bag out of the can and pressed it against his clipboard, hiding it. The label and the dregs of the contents immediately clued him into the fact there was a problem.

After nearly fifteen minutes of searching, Benedict found the file he was looking for.

The files were organized by date. For every intravenous solution, hyperalimentation or pre-filled syringe that had to be prepared under a laminar flow hood, a hard copy record was kept and signed by the preparing technician and the pharmacist who checked it. He removed a manila folder and opened it on the counter beside the computer terminal, reading the information quickly.

He cursed and found the other files for which he was searching. They all held the same message.

Tidewater had a big problem on its hands.

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“What other considerations?” Katherine Diehl asked.

“This formula,” Watson continued, “cannot ever see the light of day without a careful analysis of its effects. A strategy must be developed to prevent its abuse and misuse. I don’t know what that strategy should be. I am an old and tired man. If I turn this over and it is put out there, there will be chaos.”

“Michael, you’re not making any sense. This whole project has been a fantasy. It’s a sham. I’d blow the whistle on the whole thing except I’d end up as dead as the people we’ve killed and the nurse that disappeared before me. You know that as well as I do.”

“We all made our choices.”

“I needed the money. I had no idea it would involve patients dying. I was lied to. I was told it was a simple post-marketing drug study. But I’m as guilty as are you.”

“Katherine, we were both deceived and manipulated.”

“Now you tell me that all this risk we’ve taken has been for nothing! You say you’ve found the answer and we can’t use it?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

“But the benefits of the formula are so profound, so dramatic. How could society not see its benefit?”

“The benefits are far greater than imagined. Society will do just that. It will be sought after by all mankind. Our professions will no longer be needed. Don’t you see? Man will turn upon man to possess its power. Countries will go to war over it. Societies and economies will collapse. There will be anarchy. This formula is the best and the worst thing to ever happen to mankind. Trust me; you’ll see when the next dose is delivered.”

“You have no right to do this to me! For the past year, I’ve lived my life looking over my shoulder. I want this to end. I want my life back!”

“Katherine, this is much larger than both of our lives. We’re pawns. No matter what happens both of our lives are over. I have found a way out that works for me. And I will take it.”

“What is it? Maybe it will work for me?”

“That, my dear, is a truly personal choice, one you will have to make for yourself. You’ll know soon enough what my choice is.”

“Just destroy the formula! It can’t be misused if they don’t have it.”

“Unfortunately, they already know it has worked on Cupid. The monkey’s turnaround was discovered just yesterday. If I don’t produce the first dose and its formulation today, I will not live to see tomorrow. I have some things to attend to before that happens. You will be asked to give the dose tonight. Don’t worry, it will work.”

“What if I never give the next dose? No one will ever know.”

Watson smirked at the naive question. “Then they’ll find someone else to do it. And you’ll end up like Penny Lewis.”

“What should I do?”

“Give the next dose just like all the others. You will not be mourning another death. By that time, I will have finished taking the necessary precautions.”

“What precautions?”

“The formula has twelve distinct steps. I have separated it into three parts of four steps each. Two of which are already hidden.

I'll place the third one tomorrow. The person who brings all three sections of the recipe together will possess its benefits and curses. I have identified the person who will find and guard the formula. His name is written on the case."

Watson removed a CD case from the console between the front seats. A name was scribbled across the front. He handed it to her. "I have to get back before I'm missed. Katherine, for your own benefit, do *not* listen to this recording."

"Why don't you give it to him yourself?"

"I'm sure we are being watched right now. I cannot be seen giving him anything. They have eyes everywhere. Right now, they probably just assume that we are talking about the next dose to be delivered. Put that disc in your purse before you leave the car."

"When should I give it to him?"

"When you see the formula's power, it will be time. You will know when."

"He won't believe any of this."

"That man has a very big stake in the formula's power. You must make him believe."