

The Cure

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Chapter One

In his peripheral vision, the visitor noticed one of the large men standing in the corner pick up a small table and set it down next to his chair. He could see a leather strap nailed to the badly damaged surface. Sweat began to trickle down from his temple.

“You know why you’re here?” The source of the voice was silhouetted by the sunlight streaming through the windows behind the desk. Smoke rose from the cigar clenched in the man’s mouth and danced in the air currents.

“I know you weren’t happy with my last assignment. I let you down.” The visitor to the office tried to keep the terror out of his voice, but it was impossible.

“My clients come to me because they know I will deliver the information they require, quickly and quietly. They pay me top dollar for a professional service. I pay you a lot of money to get that information. The last job you did for me was messy and late. You’re becoming careless. That disappoints me, and makes me angry. And I don’t like being angry. My doctor says its bad for my blood pressure.” Another cloud of smoke billowed from the man’s mouth and blended into the haze above his head.

“I, I can explain. There were unusual circumstances.”

“I’m not one for excuses.”

“Please give me another chance. I’ve delivered before. Give me a chance to redeem myself.” The visitor was pleading now. He knew how powerful this man had become, and how impatient he was with failure.

The man sat motionless, silently puffing out more smoke. Then he spoke. “Taking into consideration our long term relationship, I’m prepared to give you one more chance. There is some new technology that a very good client is desperate to have. I need you to acquire it for me.”

“Of course, I’m your man. I won’t let you down this time.”

“Oh, I know you won’t. You know what the consequences will be. In fact, I have a little incentive program for you.”

“I assure you, I don’t need an incentive. I won’t fail you this time.” He began to shake uncontrollably. Instinctively he placed his hands under his legs.

“I like to provide people with an incentive. I find it keeps them focused on the task ahead.”

Without hesitation the man who had brought over the table grabbed the visitor’s right arm with authority, and pressed it to the table surface. With deftness brought on by practise, he quickly brought the strap across the wrist and secured it, rendering the arm immobile.

“Please,” said the visitor, pleading to the man with the cigar. “This is not necessary. I will do what you ask.”

“That’s right, you will,” he replied. Because you know that if you fail me this time, it will be more than your finger.”

The visitor saw the man standing next to him spring into action. A glint of steel caught the sunlight as it flashed silently towards the table – before stopping with a hideous thud. The visitor felt a searing pain and screamed, his eyes clamped shut. For a split second he dared not open his eyes, terrified of what he would see. He held his breath. When he did look, he saw the meat cleaver firmly wedged into the tabletop, precisely between his index finger and thumb. A small pool of blood gathered where the blade had cut into the webbing between the digits.

“Hanson here has a very good aim. Next time I will instruct him to inflict some more permanent damage. I suggest you think about that whilst on your next assignment.”

Chapter Two

On the outskirts of Cambridge, England, in one of the newer industrial estates, Roger Northwood was finishing up in his office, completing some notes from the day's experiments. His desk was dominated by the large computer screen, which was surrounded by mounds of research papers and books of experimental data. A small lamp illuminated an area off to his left where he kept the most relevant information at hand. The remainder of his office was similarly messy. Half the walls were covered in bookshelves, filled to overflowing with textbooks, journals, and stacks of papers. The remaining walls were covered in framed degrees and diplomas, certificates and awards from various world scientific organizations.

It was not unusual for Roger to lose track of time when reviewing his work. His wife, Michelle, was used to him being late home from work, and had long ago stopped

worrying about his whereabouts and trying to keep his evening meal warm and edible. He was unaware that it had been snowing outside or even that it was dark. He certainly did not realise that people were out there, enjoying the wintry conditions and meeting friends in pubs. When he focused on his work, it was all consuming. Colleagues often complained that he didn't answer his phone, but the truth was he just didn't hear it when he became engrossed in his work.

Roger worked at Visionary Labs, a "boutique" research facility that specialised in looking at ways to manage viral infections. In fact Roger was its leading scientist. A jovial character, he was typical of an accomplished scientist in that he was truly passionate about his work. He was always willing to discuss problems and opportunities with his lab colleagues, who often had to excuse themselves to return to their lab benches after an offhand question directed at Roger turned into an hour-long brainstorming session. Not that they disliked the opportunity to talk with him. He was one of the smartest guys in England when it came to viral biotechnology.

Roger saved the file he was working on, and shut down his computer. He glanced at his watch and showed no surprise when the simple black hands contrasting against the plain white face indicated it was 8:30, a full five hours since he had walked back to his office with a cup of coffee. As he did every night, he locked his filing cabinets in his office, and placed the key under the third book on the second shelf behind his desk. He gathered from the stacks of papers surrounding his computer the documents he wanted for the evening, and loaded up his two brief cases. Picking up the bags, he walked to the door, turned the lock on the handle, and switched off the light. Just before pulling the door closed he remembered the car keys, and marched back to his desk to retrieve them

from the top drawer. Keys in hand, he pulled the door closed, checking that the lock had taken hold.

As expected, the rest of the lab was empty as he proceeded down the darkened corridor, illuminated only by the green exit lights. Rounding the corner his body suddenly bounced backwards, having been struck by something hard that wasn't normally there. For that instant before logic kicked in and his eyes took focus, his mind tried to grapple with the options that would have sent him reeling backwards in a normally empty corridor. When reality did take hold, he was aware there was a shadow in front of him, an equally startled human form that was outlined against the foyer lights in the distance.

“Good God, you scared the life out of me!” Roger said. “Who is that? Is that you Jim?” The shadow offered no response. It was motionless, seemingly stuck to the floor, calculating what its next move should be. Clearly it was not expecting this altercation either.

“Who the hell is it?” Roger asked again, now feeling a touch of anger. “Look here, I don't know what you're playing at, but - ” He was unable to finish his sentence. The shadow had finished thinking and had moved into action. An arm was raised, and the shadow lifted itself up, then forward and down towards Roger. A heavy blunt object at the end of the arm connected with Roger's head. There was a muffled crunching sound as his skull gave in to the pressure of the blow. Roger stumbled immediately, the force pushing him backwards, and the weight of the briefcases dragging his body to the floor. Even before his head crashed against the floor tiles he had lost consciousness, and death was not far away. A pool of black sticky liquid began to take shape around Roger's head. The shadow was still once more, back in thinking mode. After what felt like an eternity,

it stepped to the side of the slumped, still shape and proceeded to the main filing room.

With the assuredness of a well-rehearsed plan, it quickly punched numbers into the keypad to unlock the door, and in less than two minutes re-emerged with an armful of files. Upon passing the inert shape once more, the shadow stopped and stared as if waiting for the body to do something. It glanced at the nearest briefcase, and with a gloved hand reached down, opened it and removed its contents, and replaced them with the stolen files. It then proceeded towards the side entrance, walked outside, and was enveloped by the night.

If Roger had been able to sit up, he could have reached an alarm button on the wall beside him. The alarm would have notified the security company who would have sent a car to the premises and called the police. But Roger could not sit up. The slumped shape was not Roger anymore. The thoughts, the dreams, the science were gone.