



EXTINCTION
By **Michael J. McLaughlin**

Book Excerpts

PROLOGUE

“We are in search of the pivot point that converts thriving to dying and initiates the series of events leading to extinction.”

– Mark Brozine, PhD

TAIMYR PENINSULA, SIBERIA

13,000 BC

The initial approach of the beast was imperceptible.

The Northern Lights twisted eerie purple and green hues across the Arctic sky. Rivers arising from the mouths of glaciers intersected, partitioning the tundra into boggy fragments. The sea bordering the peninsula, now swelling from the melting polar ice cap, swallowed the shoreline.

The first ripple emerged. It released the shore, cut across the liquid onyx, and fused with the night. Another followed. One was accompanied by a vibration along the riverbank, and the next by the dull thunder of flesh against frozen ground.

Fragments of ice and dirt shook loose from the riverbanks and sank through a web of channels until joining the subterranean pockets of chocolate slush that gnawed at the overlying surface.

Grass crunched under massive legs. Icicles rattled in a mesh of entangled hair.

They once dominated this region, spreading out as far west as modern day Ireland and as far east as the United States. Four million years of evolution enabled them to conquer this inhospitable environment. A few thousand years of destruction would leave them extinct.

The mammoth stood at the edge of a thin crust of ground overlying a sinkhole.

Mud lapped at the walls of the cavern just a few feet below, slurping and belching, eager to claim its prey. The next step cracked the frozen crust. The surface splintered. The ground cascaded down into the frosty cauldron. Front legs slid forward. Hind legs buckled beneath five tons of weight. Disoriented and off balance, groaning in pain, the creature crashed through the earth.

The mammoth thrashed through the muddy slush for a nonexistent foothold. Titanic tusks slammed against the slippery walls of the sinkhole. The mud latched onto the beast and began to drag it down. Legs and body submerged. The head followed. Groans dampened into gurgles within the incessant churning of the cauldron. A rush of air bubbled up between the tusks. Majestic ivory spirals corkscrewed into the muddy slush.

Within a few minutes there was no remaining evidence that the mammoth ever existed. The creature would lie there, frozen and preserved, untouched for fifteen thousand years.

TAIMYR PENINSULA, SIBERIA

2002 AD

The pain penetrated Mark Brozine's legs like a chainsaw. His right knee. His left hip. Just about everywhere else in between.

He was trying to walk from his bunk to the shower. That's all. He hoped that the warmth of the water might relieve the agony in his legs, but now he questioned whether he could even reach the shower. The sleeping quarters in the mammoth research station were small. Normally just a few steps would traverse the room, but not now.

Every step seemed to take minutes as he recruited the strength and courage to continue. His body wanted to go back and lie down – anything to ease the suffering. But he was determined not to let the project down. This expedition was a once in a lifetime event for a comparative zoologist. Nothing was going to come between him and this opportunity, no matter how much it hurt.

He looked down at his legs in search of an explanation. There was nothing to see. No bruises. No swelling. He almost wanted to see something. They were still the same muscular legs that had carried him through triathlons back home, at least on the outside. On the inside something was wrong. Horribly wrong.

A jump rope was draped over his bedpost. Cross-country skis and poles were wedged beneath his bed. The photograph of Nancy in her red Christmas sweater was the only color in the windowless room.

What happened? The first three months in Siberia were fine. Then the pain just started without any apparent reason. It felt like something was eating away at his bones. Within just three days the pain crippled him.

The impact of the pain, the metallic taste of fear, and the smell of disinfectant – the Lysol that they used on Solnorov's mattress after the body was removed – all combined in a wave of nausea that rose up within him. He swallowed hard and took a deep breath.

He was going to get better, had to get better. Could he feel any worse? But he did feel worse, day after day. Yesterday was nothing compared to this. Today land mines were detonating frequently, almost simultaneously, in his bones.

What was happening to him? Was there any way to stop this?

He heard the soft crackling noise of someone stepping on corn flakes, or else he felt it inside.

He was frozen in the middle of the room, trembling. Every direction looked like a distant shore to a drowning man. Should he go back toward his bed? Should he push forward? Either way, he might have to crawl. Sweat poured down his face and dripped onto the floor. His right knee started to buckle, about to collapse. The support was completely gone.

Suddenly, the bones in his right lower leg shattered like a vase dropped on a marble floor. He heard a slurp, a crunch, and a rip. Denial that such a noise could actually be coming from a human being's legs, let alone his own legs, registered in his mind a millisecond before the sensation accompanying the sound. The lower portion of the bone tented up the overlying flesh, stabbed through the skin, and tore open his pants. He didn't have to look to know what had happened.

Blood sprayed the wall.

Mark's body twisted instinctively in search of support but found none. His entire weight crashed across the defective remnants of his legs, which jutted out at distorted angles. Something in his back snapped loudly as his limp form plummeted to the floor.

The pain mercifully rendered him unconscious, unaware of the number of fractures that were occurring simultaneously throughout his body.

Mark Brozine would never wake up.

PART 1.
CHANGE IN ENVIRONMENT

“Even a seemingly imperceptible change in the environment can have a profound impact on a species, from the most simple to the most complex. The effects intensify exponentially with greater degrees of change.”

– Aniello Bonacci, PhD

MANHATTAN MEMORIAL HOSPITAL
NEW YORK CITY

“Is he conscious?”

The words passed through the recesses of Drew Chambers’ brain. They slid into the mental storage area between awareness and memory, the place where the last few words of a dream lodged after a sudden awakening from an alarm clock. Just close enough to sense, but too far to grasp, too far to interact.

He was unable to speak. He couldn’t move, couldn’t feel anything. That was it, more than anything. He couldn’t feel. It was as though an acrylic shell was lining his entire body, separating him from the rest of the world.

The smell was so familiar.

“Doctor Chambers?”

“Can you hear me?”

“Are you all right?”

“Doctor Chambers?”

Drew waited for the boy to appear again. The boy with broken arms and legs. No face, just broken arms and legs. It wasn’t for lack of trying that Drew never saw a face.

It was pine needles that he smelled

There he was. This time his arms were wrapped in splints. His left leg was covered in a cast, and his right leg was encircled by an external fixator consisting of metal bars and screws. There was no face, not even a torso. Just four broken limbs crisscrossing in the center.

The boy was about seven years old. There was no way to tell from what was visible, but Drew knew. He stared at the center, looking for a face.

The acrylic shell was coming from inside his head. The boy was inside his head. They were nothing more than products of his imagination. But he wasn’t going crazy. If he were crazy he wouldn’t be able to tell the difference between reality and his imagination. There was no question that this was not reality. He knew that, so he wasn’t going crazy.

Someone held his arm.

“He seems like he can hear us now,” a voice said from somewhere between where he was and where he was going.

He wanted to speak to the boy, but time was running out. The broken limbs were dissolving.

Drew smelled the faint burning scent of the electrocautery. The bright lights and blue drapes of the operating room were coming into focus. He was standing at the operating room table near the lower thigh incision. The broken femur was visible at the base of the leg wound. The orthopedic resident was holding the metal rod, standing at attention and waiting for direction.

“Daddy,” The boy’s voice was somewhere on the other side, somewhere out of reach. “Stay with me, Daddy.”

Drew looked across the patient at the scrub nurse. One eyebrow was raised in shock, and the other was twisted with a pained expression. She had pulled the instrument tray back from the operating table and was resting her arms across it as though she would fight anyone who tried to resume the operation.

A hand came around Drew’s face and wiped the sweat from his forehead with a gauze pad. The air felt cool on his skin. The shell was gone.

“Are you all right?” one of the nurses whispered in his ear.

Drew wasn’t sure if he could speak, so he gave several rapid but abbreviated nods. He stretched his fingers and then made a fist a few times, as though restoring the circulation after being in the cold.

He looked up at the clock. How much time had passed?

GLOBAL INVESTORS HEADQUARTERS NEW YORK CITY

Thorton Grovely was sorting through his mental catalogue of lies.

He checked his Rolex, not for the time, which was only a minute later than the last time he looked, but for something to do while he waited. The pill in his stomach was bouncing like a pinball. He ran a soft fingertip along his forehead, intercepting a bead of sweat dangling below his razor-precise blonde Caesaresque locks. Gaines still had his back to him.

Troy Gaines, CEO of Global Investors, stood before a full-length window, his hands cinched down against his hips. The sun seemed to radiate from the periphery of his chiseled features like the outlines of a saint in a Venetian painting. Even the occasional speckle of gray

hair that heralded the end of his thirties was the result of artistic strokes, rather than a flaw of the aging process.

These were only a few of the reasons why Grovely hated his boss more every day. But today he was going to play Gaines like a violin.

The view of Central Park was always impressive from Gaines' office on the top floor of the Steinway, but the morning sun played off the fall foliage today in a way that was particularly stunning. Both men faced the autumn spectacular, but neither focused on the view. Gaines was listening patiently to his wire-thin phone headset, and Grovely was imagining digging a curved, jewel emblazoned dagger into Gaines' back.

Grovely's crisis was about to take center stage. There was no other reason why Wonderboy would have called him into his office. He must have heard about Siberia.

Grovely tried to pace the room without looking like he was pacing, without revealing his anxiety over the matter at hand and his frustration over having to wait. He stopped momentarily in front of Gaines' diploma wall, the framed crimson and white wallpaper that made up the "shrine to me." The undergraduate diploma was from Harvard. The MBA was from Harvard. Even a plaque recognizing "Ecologically Sound Business Practices" was emblazoned with the Veritas shield and laurels. It must be nice getting handed the business world on a crimson platter.

Play him like a violin, Grovely told himself.

Grovely enjoyed any opportunity to get the best of Gaines. Global wouldn't be anywhere without Grovely's management of the scientific technology sector, and that was just the information that appeared in the stockholders' annual reports. If Gaines knew even a fraction of what Grovely had going on, he'd fall over backwards. It was so easy if you knew what you were doing. All it took was some street smarts, something you couldn't read in an Ivy League textbook. Mr. Clean would never have a clue.

Gaines was still silent on the phone. Typical. He would listen as though your comments were born of divine inspiration, but then when it was his turn to speak, the conversation would last less than a minute. Almost every sentence would begin with the word "I." Didn't anyone else notice that? Why didn't he get under everyone else's skin? All the PR people, all the business journalists, all the idiots voting for the awards. Apparently not. Gaines would be succinct and convincing, and he would close the deal. Every time.

There was a squawk from the corner of the room. It was Gaines' African Grey Parrot – one of the most intelligent species in the world, capable of learning 1,000 vocabulary words. Gaines wouldn't settle for anything less. A genius bird. But you only speak 250 words, don't you? Stupid bird. Grovely walked toward the cage; maybe he would have some amusement today after all.

The bird cocked its head. It had to hate Grovely as much as he hated it, as much as he hated almost everything.

Grovely made soft kissing noises as he pulled a rubber band from his pocket. Here birdie birdie birdie. His lip curled at the corner. He reached to the edge of the cage and grabbed a seed. The bird squawked again and took a stab at Grovely with its beak, causing him to lurch back.

A glance at Gaines. Still on the phone. He hadn't heard.

"I think you raise excellent points, Karl," Gaines said, "but I see the situation a little differently."

Grovely moved in closer to the bird while listening to Gaines begin his minute-long acquisition. He spread the rubber band with a thumb and index finger and drew it back with the seed inside. He aimed the seed at the bird. Then he transferred some of the tension he was experiencing into the rubber band. The bird tilted its head again as the rubber band twanged free and the seed propelled forward.

The seed struck the bird so hard in the head that it reeled back off its perch. Grovely's satisfaction was tempered initially by the fear that he had actually killed his boss' prize possession. The bird stood up, still dazed. Grovely leaned his face in close enough to line up each eye between pairs of cage bars and smiled his only genuine smile of the day.

Grovely thought through his explanation of the last days' events in preparation for his impending conversation with Gaines. He would go with the "We have a problem" approach – brief, to the point. If he caught Gaines off-guard he could steer the conversation. He had learned from past mistakes. If Gaines could steal the glory of Global's financial victories, he would also have to take the fall for the disaster developing in Siberia.

Play him like a violin.

Grovely sank into one of the leather chairs beside a jade and ivory inlaid coffee table. As always, a platter of pastries from Giordano's Bakery sat in the center. Gaines never ate pastries. He had never been seen eating anything. The pastries were for visiting clients and were replaced by a fresh platter every few hours.

There was a jelly thumbprint on the pastry platter.

He looked away, across the office, which seemed even smaller from a seated position. A fifteenth century Italian armored helmet called for battle from within its glass case. A Samurai sword hung on the wall over the entrance to the room. Each represented an acquisition abroad.

The smell of pastry fillings nauseated Grovely. The jellies and cinnamon weren't so bad, but the creams and cheeses were intolerable. How many hands had already touched them? How long had they been sitting out? He could see the bacteria oozing out in a stream of blueberry filling. He could smell it spoiling the vanilla cream. His saliva evaporated. The sides

of his throat stuck together. He tapped the manicured nails of his left index finger and thumb together ten times, and then did the same with his right hand. The feeling in his throat improved.

Grovely tried not to focus on the pastries. Instead, he looked at a New York Magazine cover framed on the wall. Gaines was on the cover holding a globe in one hand and a red apple in the other. His tie knot should have been more symmetrical, and his black prep school hair should have been parted more evenly. Wasn't he embarrassed to be photographed like that?

Gaines turned momentarily, covered the telephone mouthpiece with one hand, and gestured for Grovely to have a pastry. Grovely's eyes followed the hand motion. Mold was growing as thick as a moss on the surface of an éclair. He mustered a "no thanks" wave to Gaines, who shrugged and turned back toward the window. He tapped the index finger and thumb nails together ten times with both hands simultaneously, but he didn't feel any better.

Grovely struggled to his feet and backed up toward the doorway. The giant silver Samurai sword hung menacingly over his head. Curvilinear etchings along the handle depicted dragons among diminutive but threatening images of warriors. The etchings were worn from use, and the blade was tainted with a crimson hue that matched the diplomas on the adjacent wall.

Gaines removed the telephone headpiece. His back was still toward Grovely.

Grovely swallowed repeatedly, even audibly once or twice, against the feeling of cement hardening in his throat. He opened his mouth to deliver the "We have a problem" speech.

Like a violin.

Gaines spoke without turning around from the window. "Grovely, we have a problem."

MANHATTAN MEMORIAL HOSPITAL NEW YORK CITY

"It happened in the O.R. this time."

Drew Chambers sat in the office of his department chairman and longtime friend, Doctor Reed Watley, like a confessed killer waiting for sentencing.

Drew had bags under his eyes and a fresh indentation left by the surgical cap on his forehead. Rubbing the indentation, he remembered that his hair must still be sticking out in several directions like black patches of crab grass. He patted the top – worse than he thought. It was hard to convince yourself, let alone those around you, that you really weren't going crazy when you so perfectly looked the part.

“I heard,” Watley said. He looked at Drew from head to foot, squinting a few times. “What happened?”

“Same as before,” Drew said. “I saw him. I saw Matty.”

Watley winced. He was the same age as Drew, but his hairline was receded. His chest expanded with a deep breath as he searched for something to say. He avoided making eye contact with his friend. He fumbled with the items on his desk instead.

“It wasn’t exactly like him,” Drew said. “It was more like a Picasso painting of his arms and legs.”

Watley fidgeted in his chair while running a finger along the top of a picture frame on his desk. When the two of them gazed simultaneously toward the frame, Watley pulled his hand back as though he had received a shock.

Drew looked around, as though expecting to see the boy right there. “It’s almost impossible to describe the experience to you. It’s like I’m in two places at once. One is real. The other isn’t. But I keep choosing to look at the one that’s not real.”

Drew was still looking at the back of the picture frame. All of the photographs on the desk were turned away from him. He was pretty sure that they were usually turned the other way, and that a few of them were missing. Watley must have known that he was on his way over and didn’t want to provide any reminders.

“I lose the feeling in my body when it happens,” Drew said.

“Maybe you should be reevaluated by the neurologist if you’re experiencing numbness,” Watley said.

“It’s not numbness like that,” Drew said. “The sensation is there. It’s just turned off somewhere in my head. It’s as though my brain is choosing not to feel anything.”

Watley frowned. He was trying to understand.

“I heard his voice this time,” Drew said. He wondered what he would think if he was on the other side of the desk, hearing a friend talk about hearing voices.

“What...” Watley started. He seemed as though he was about to ask what Matty said, but he stopped short. He lowered his eyes and swallowed.

“Anyway, I think we both know what this means,” Drew said. “It’s not safe for me to be in the operating room any more. I’m withdrawing from my surgery privileges at the hospital. I’ve been spending about 80% of my time in the laboratory anyway. Now I’ll just do my research fulltime, and maybe put more effort into launching the foundation.”

“There must be other options,” Watley said. “What about going back to the psychiatrist?”

Drew shook his head. “Been there done that. What are they going to say this time, Reed? They can label it whatever they want, but they’re not going to get him out of my head.”

“You shouldn’t get him out of your head,” Watley said. “But you need to get rid of this...Picasso painting, as you called it.”

“I can’t,” Drew said. “I’ve tried, believe me, but I can’t. I have to stop operating. I’m not safe like this.”

Watley leaned back, folded his hands together as though praying, and tapped his index fingers against his lips. He shook his head, then nodded, as though losing an argument to himself.

“Listen Drew,” he said, leaning forward again, resting his forearms on the desk. “We went to medical school together. We did our residencies together.” He paused but seemed obligated to proceed. “Our families were like one family, for Chrissakes.”

“Then say what you need to say, Reed,” Drew said.

Watley delivered the blow with a pained expression. “I’ve been through this with the administration a thousand times. I know what they’re going to say. They don’t care that you were once the department’s rising star. They don’t get the potential of your work. The bottom line is your research isn’t bringing in enough funding on its own to support your position in the department. If you lose even the few surgical cases that you’ve been doing recently, there’s no way they’re going to let you stay on board.”

“I understand,” Drew said. “I know this isn’t your decision. I’ve been a lead weight in the department ever since Linda left.”

Drew tried to think back to Linda, their lives together with Matty, their dreams for the future, but he never made it back that far; there was just too much in the way. Instead, his memory veered off course, following his downward spiral, flashing snapshots of his subconscious escape into the laboratory, his inability to invest energy in any form of social interaction, and his resolution to pay penance for experiencing life beyond that point. All of the psychobabble that proved correct the more he thought about it. The guilt of outliving his son pulsed through his bloodstream and ate away at his world, eventually driving his wife away and dismantling his career.

“Actually it is my decision,” Watley said. “That’s what’s killing me. In the end it has to be my decision. But my hands are tied here. Between the board of directors and the dean’s office...”

“What if I could get more research funding?” Drew asked.

“I don’t think I could stall the administration long enough,” Watley said. “We played that card when you were getting started on the surface protein receptor project.”

“And it paid dividends to the hospital,” Drew said.

“Of course it did,” Watley said. “They got great PR from your surface protein and genetic engineering work. And someday the research might pave the way to curing otherwise

untreatable bone diseases. But the administration has a ‘what have you done for me lately’ attitude. There’s no way around that.”

The smell of burned popcorn came from outside in the hall. Watley’s nose twitched. Normally one of them would have made a joke about the smell. But Drew was out of jokes and small talk, and Watley knew better.

“I appreciate your efforts,” Drew said. “I can only imagine what you’ve gone through on my behalf.” He shook his head with conviction. “But there’s no way I’m going back into the operating room. I’m just not going to place my patients at risk.”

Drew stood up and shook Watley’s hand.

“But what are you going to do?” Watley asked, not releasing his grip.

“Find a way to survive,” Drew said.

EMPIRE STATE BUILDING NEW YORK CITY

From this spot he could see all of Manhattan. From this spot he owned Manhattan.

Thorton Grovely stood just inside the observation deck of the Empire State Building. The vantage point from the eighty-sixth floor left the surrounding buildings dwarfed. The filthy vagrants and honking cars and urine stench were somewhere far below, out of sight, sound, and smell.

He waved his hand out across the top of the city and then curled his fingers closed, one after another, into a tight fist. He imagined grasping everything before him in his hand.

He took his cellular phone out; it was time to make his call.

He stopped short when he spotted his reflection in the glass boundary that kept suicidal and homicidal lunatics from succeeding. Rising up above the city, floating in the sky before him was a well-tailored refined display of perfection. The suit was crisp. The tie was held securely into a perfectly centered position with a gold chain. A slight turn of the chain eliminated a kink and made for a smoother arc. The blonde ringlets curving down along his forehead were of equal thickness and evenly aligned.

The wind rushed against the observation window. Grovely closed his eyes and absorbed the power of everything around him. It was the Grovely equivalent of skiing down a vertical slope, or bungee jumping from a bridge. He was surging, filled with power, but power balanced with control. He had come up here to restore the control in his life. This was the perfect escape from his torments below.

“Beautiful, isn’t it.” The voice came from somewhere behind him.

Grovely turned toward the direction of the intrusion and saw an old woman. She was smiling at him and squinting from the sun.

“I love the view of New York from up here,” she said. Crevasses recessed into the shadows under the pull of her facial expression. Meaty fingers clutched the tan shawl wrapped around her neck.

At first Grovely ignored her. Then, when it was obvious that she would not leave without an answer from him, he cleared his throat. “Please get away from me,” he said.

Disappointed, she made her way through the doorway out onto the observatory.

Grovely looked out the window again, but the view was lacking something that was there just a few moments earlier. He pressed the redial button on his phone.

The same idiot woman answered. “Manhattan Memorial Hospital, Department of Orthopedics.”

“Hello,” Grovely said with strained civility. “Is Doctor Chambers in?”

“No he’s not. Is this Mister Grovel-lee again?” She rhymed the first part of his name with the word ‘novel.’ Her mispronunciation might have been intentional, and annoyed the hell out of him. “I left your other messages for him.”

He patted down the area at the back of his head where his hair was thinning ever so slightly, unknown to everyone but him. “It’s pronounced Grovely, as in orange grove,” he said. He turned slightly to view his hair in the reflecting glass. It was perfect.

“I’ll leave him another message,” she said. She obviously didn’t care about the pronunciation of his name, and she probably didn’t care much for him. “He may be in the operating room, but I can page him if you like.”

“Just leave a message and let him know it’s important,” he said. He took pleasure in the audible click that killed her voice, mid-sentence, as he ended the call.

The city was gray. Traffic slithered through the streets below like a thousand hungry snakes. Grovely sensed his troubles rising up along the drab stone buildings and mingling with the foul stench in the air as the gusts of wind died down.

MANHATTAN MEMORIAL HOSPITAL NEW YORK CITY

Why were they so interested in him all of a sudden?

Drew Chambers was tilted back in his chair with five pink telephone message slips fanned out in his hand like playing cards. Thornton Grovely’s name was on each one. Five of a kind.

His feet rested on a mountain of paperwork – the trails of bills, the marble laboratory notebooks, and partially completed grant applications – concealing a desk somewhere below. The landslide reached the floor, covering years of root beer stains and embedded pretzel crumbs.

A data sheet on the computer screen flashed before transforming into a screensaver image. Old Faithful shot steam one hundred feet into a blue sky. Snow rested on the branches of pine trees in the background.

Outside the crusted windows of the orthopedics laboratory, fifteen stories down, a siren overrode the white noise of traffic and car horns surrounding Manhattan Memorial Hospital.

A knock on the door nearly sent Drew toppling backwards. He grasped the bookcase behind him and righted his chair.

He crumbled the pink slips and threw them on top of an overstuffed trashcan, where they dangled precariously. He was in no mood to speak to Mr. Grovelly today.

Cathy Patterson, the director of the “Matty’s Hope” foundation, stuck her head in. A strand of sunlight found the edges of her jack-o-lantern broach and reflected against one of her red curls. She smiled and held her hand up in a stationary wave.

Cathy’s eyes slid down the paper cascade and then scanned the room. She gradually turned 360 degrees, looking from floor to ceiling, taking in the surroundings – the chipped black countertops, the blood stained rat dissection mats, and the rows of incubators. Her nose twitched. Her eyes widened. She wrapped herself in her arms as though suppressing a shudder. She could just as easily have stumbled into the lair of the Phantom of the Opera. So this is where he lives. This is where he hides from the daylight.

“If there was good news from Empire State Bank, I bet you would have yelled it all the way down the hall,” he asked.

She bit on the corner of her lip. “Well, yes,” she started. “That news came first thing this morning. They seem to be interested in the foundation, they really do, but they’re not ready to make a commitment, at least not through next year.”

The loss of a financial commitment from Empire State Bank eliminated any possible future for Matty’s Hope, but Cathy was still thinking a year ahead.

“Five years of working together and your optimism still never ceases to amaze me,” he said.

Cathy didn’t answer. Her gaze was transfixed on the photograph of Drew and Matty on the desk.

The frame was shining silver, the only object in the room that wasn’t embedded in dust. The photograph captured all of the color of spring. The Drew Chambers in the photograph was a little chubby. There were no gray hairs sticking out from beneath his Yankees cap, no frown lines.

The boy in the photograph was laughing hard enough that you could hear it. He sat on the steps of a brownstone building. Lump-laden attenuated legs connected the dots from his shorts to his sneakers. White plastic splints contributed most of the substance to his arms. He pointed at his Mets hat while Drew feigned an attempt to conceal the emblem with his hand.

Cathy dragged her stare away from the photograph. She seemed to be breathing a little faster.

“That’s not the only reason you’re here, is it?” Drew asked.

She shook her head, avoiding eye contact.

“You want to know if the rumors are true,” he said.

She looked up at him. “I heard what happened in the operating room.” If a facial expression could wipe away pain and erase loss, this one had a chance.

“I can’t believe I did that to a patient,” he said.

“The patient is fine,” she said.

“That’s not the point,” he said. He reached up and grabbed a handful of his hair, suspending his arm by it. “This patient ended up being all right. But what about the next, or the one after that?”

She took a step closer. She stopped. Her mouth opened and then closed again.

“I can’t operate anymore,” he said. He looked up at the ceiling, exhaling slowly through pursed lips.

“For now,” she said.

Forever, he thought. Instead he said, “The rumors you’ve probably heard about the laboratory are true.” He recounted his conversation with Watley.

“How could they do that to you?” she asked.

He shrugged and said, “They are. Listen, I want to speak with you about the foundation. I have to admit that I don’t see how we will ever get the project off the ground. The Empire State Bank partnership was our last shot. We barely have enough left to pay you a salary for the next few months, and then there won’t be anything left. Now that I’m losing my hospital privileges and laboratory, our office is soon to follow.”

“I can take a temporary pay cut,” she said. “I’ve got the rent and the tuition covered for a while.”

“You can’t do that again,” he said. “You’ve taken care of my family. And all those other families. Now you have your own daughter to think about. I know this comes as a huge blow for you. In a lot of ways the foundation is a part of you.”

She was one of Matty’s ICU nurses at the end. She stayed with him, stayed with Drew and Linda, long after others in the ICU drifted away, after they began averting their gaze from the dehumanized collection of tubes and machinery while passing by.

It was Cathy who had convinced Drew to start Matty's Hope, a foundation devoted to bone research and funding for families of children with incurable bone diseases. Cathy then convinced the hospital administration to provide the initial financial support. She resigned from her ICU position to manage the foundation's PR and fundraising efforts full time.

"I appreciate all the effort you've put into the foundation," he said. "I know how much you love this project, and how much you believe in it. It's hard to give up something you love so much." He paused. He hadn't meant to put it that way.

"It's your passion," she said. "Don't give up on it."

"Sometimes I wonder if the wrong passion is guiding me. Maybe it's just all revenge. Like it's not a love for the foundation, but a need to avenge Matty's death." He paused, waiting for her to disagree with him, to set him straight. She was silent. "A project born out of hatred, no matter how lofty the goal, is doomed to fail."

He watched the acceptance of defeat appear in her eyes. The expression was unmistakable to him. He saw it in the mirror every morning when he shaved. It was captured in the photograph on his hospital ID badge.

"I can go back to nursing," she said. "They can take me back into the ICU. They've been calling me for a while. Believe me, if there was a way..."

"I know," he said. "I know," he repeated more softly.

Cathy was on the verge of speaking several times, but struggled to find the right words. She opened her eyes widely and tilted her head back to prevent the tears along her lower lids from running down. She swallowed hard, nodded a goodbye, and left.

The door shut. Light from the window faded as a cloud eased in front of the sun. Drew felt the emptiness seal him in.

He stood, side-stepped the framed diplomas and certificates stacked behind the desk, and leaned against a bookshelf that sagged in the center under the weight of medical journals. Post-its protruded from unread articles in the Journal of Bone and Joint Disease and the Journal of Orthopedic Research, which leaned hard against a plastic knee joint bookend.

One of the crumbled pink pieces of paper was lying on the floor next to the garbage can. He grabbed the paper, intending to return it to the top of the garbage pile. Instead, he unfolded the message slip and flattened it against the desk surface.

He read the message, "Call from Thorton Grovely. Global Investors. Urgent."

He hadn't spoken to anyone from Global in three years. He had never spoken to Grovely directly. Now the man behind the scenes was calling him.

The computer screensaver clicked to another colorful image of Yellowstone National Park – Emerald Pool. A radiant stone casing shone below the water, which looked inviting. A puff of steam was the only indication of the two hundred degree temperatures waiting beyond the tranquil surface.

“Urgent,” he read again from the message slip, and reached for the telephone.

DERRINGER’S CHOPHOUSE NEW YORK CITY

Orchestrating the perfect dinner meeting could be so time-consuming.

Thorton Grovely arrived at Derringer’s half an hour before his meeting time with Doctor Chambers in order to make sure that everything was arranged properly. He wouldn’t be eating anything, not at his current level of affliction, but appearances would be important. They always were.

The waiter smiled cordially. “Mr. Grovely, it’s wonderful to have you dining with us tonight.” He wiped what appeared to be a spotless menu with a fresh white napkin and handed it to Grovely. “I hope everything is to your liking.”

Grovely took the menu and leafed through it as a formality. As he turned each page, he saw broken bones – in the appetizers – in the entrees – in the desserts. Yesterday was not a good day. This was not a good week. And it was only Tuesday.

The chocolate velvet cake on the menu caught his attention and lured his mind back from Acapulco. Velvet cake. Cake like velvet. He locked onto the splendid image. Smoothness and richness were qualities as appealing in food as they were enviable in life.

The waiter returned with an unopened bottle of Perrier and three glasses on a tray. He placed the bottle on the table, handed Grovely the first glass, and stood at attention with the tray pressed against his chest.

Grovely inspected the glass. Light played off the crystal as he rotated it between the tips of his thumb and index finger. He reached a finger over the brim and scratched at the inside with the back of his nail. Disappointing. Before he could comment to the waiter, a new glass appeared in his hand. After a similar inspection, Grovely nodded and thanked him.

Grovely hated beef. Trichinosis lurked in pork. Salmonella ran rampant through chicken. But beef? Ugh. Beef was a bacterial and parasitic playground. A Trojan Horse loaded with *E. coli* exuding deadly toxin. *E. coli* toxin could withstand freezing. It could give you everything from diarrhea to kidney failure. It could kill you by rotting a hole through your heart.

Whenever the visions of *E. coli* danced through Grovely’s head, Mad Cow Disease invariably cut in. Bovine spongiform encephalopathy. BSE for short. Swiss cheese holes in your brain. All from a prion, a small protein, not even a living organism. Nothing you could see. Nothing you could kill. No way to fight back. Swiss cheese.

In researching the subject, Grovely once came up with a list of bacteria and parasites that lived in cattle. The list far exceeded what he ever wanted to imagine – actinomyces, anthrax, brucella, campylobacter, cowpox, cryptosporidia, foot and mouth disease, giardia, leptosporidia, mycolosteria, pseudocowpox, Q fever, rabies, salmonella, streptococcus, Taenia, Yersinia – just to name a few.

So beef was out.

Grovely's intellect told him that Derringer's was a safe place to eat, probably more so than the vast majority of restaurants in the city. But the affliction told him that all of that didn't matter. He generally only ate food that he opened and prepared himself. This way he didn't have to worry about E. coli and BSE and the other goodies.

A steak was a prop with which to do business, rather than something to eat. Big deals didn't happen in health food restaurants in Grovely's world. They were conceived with cigars and nourished with steak sauce, the same as always. As long as he didn't have to eat any food, everything was dandy.

Grovely tightened the tablecloth down against the edges of the table like a cadet working on the sheets of a military bunk. A particular fold in the tablecloth disturbed him, mainly because it wasn't centered along the table. He readjusted the tablecloth position several times, but couldn't set the crease in the center without leaving an edge of the table bare. The irregularity annoyed him immensely. He checked his watch. Only ten minutes until Chambers was scheduled to arrive, and he had wasted four minutes obsessing over a tablecloth crease.

Grovely stood up, pretending to be looking for someone. He tried to stop hyperventilating, and searched for anything to divert his attention from the tablecloth.

There was a ring of empty tables around him, by request. Just beyond this comfort zone, a man sat with two young children. The boy was chewing loudly on a wad of purple bubble gum, stretching the spit-covered wad out in front of his face periodically and then sticking it back in his mouth. The girl was idly chewing on her necklace. She ran the beads along her teeth, making a series of clicking sounds.

Grovely closed his eyes and turned back to his table. The stereo effect of gum chewing and bead-clicking became deafening. He needed some release – to reach down inside of himself and exorcise a few of the demons with a blood-curdling howl.

The waiter returned carrying a tray with several plates of food. Grovely sat and poured himself a few ounces of his Perrier, enough to wet his throat, but not so much that he would have to use the men's room at the restaurant. He turned away as the waiter placed the food on the table.

The largest plate contained a one-ounce sliver of filet. E. coli was probably dancing across the top of the cow muscle. The second plate contained a single spoonful of creamed spinach, which Grovely scooped up and smeared across the steak plate, wondering how much

Staphylococcus it contained. He added the contents of the third plate, a single spoonful of mushrooms, one of Derringer's specials – big blobs of fungus. Now he had what appeared to be a mostly-eaten plate of food.

He checked his watch again – five minutes before the scheduled meeting. He strategically placed an envelope displaying Chambers' name over the crease in the tablecloth, concealing the imperfection.

He was ready for the meeting with the doctor. Hopefully his time in this white-collar slaughterhouse would be brief.

DERRINGER'S CHOPHOUSE NEW YORK CITY

It would be hard to resist sinking his teeth into a big fat juicy Porterhouse.

"I'm meeting someone for dinner. A Mr. Grovely. He may be here already." Drew looked around the restaurant.

"Of course, Dr. Chambers," The maître de said. "He's at his usual table." He motioned with an elongated bony finger for Drew to follow.

It had been five years of cholesterol-conscious dining since Drew had been to a steakhouse. Linda had imposed strict dietary changes. Despite his divorce two years ago, Drew continued to watch his cholesterol consumption, mainly as proof to himself that it was his decision all along to alter his diet, rather than pressure from an ex-wife.

His senses were now overwhelmed by the dense aroma of beef. Filet mignon. Rib eye. NY strip. Porterhouse. He sliced through the air with his nose to reach the tables. An instinctive carnivorous appetite ignored years of forced abstinence. He wiped his mouth to check for saliva as caveman portions of beef floated by on platters and swept by on carts. He momentarily lost track of the maître de gliding deftly through tables of investment bankers and lawyers. Jackets were still on and ties were still tightened to the collar; the Manhattan dinner crowd was just getting started.

They walked up the stairs and back toward the corner of the restaurant. The lighting and the décor darkened as they ascended. A thirty-something year-old man was sitting alone at a table for six. His blonde hair looked as though it had just been removed from a mold. A ring of empty tables surrounded him in the otherwise crowded restaurant. On the wall behind him was a painting, a darkly colored series of brownish red swirls.

Drew knew about Grovely's affinity for making business deals in Derringer's. He wasn't sure what Grovely actually did, or what Global Investors Corporation did, for that matter. They seemed to have their hands in everything, at least from what he read in the

Journal and the Times. They made money from money. Troy Gaines, the CEO, was a relatively young but nonetheless established star in the New York business scene. Grovely apparently shared in some of the wealth that trickled down from his younger mentor, but not in any of the accolades of the press.

Grovely had business interests in biotechnology, although he lacked any formal scientific training. He was the one that led Global to Manhattan Memorial Hospital several years earlier to discuss investing in ReStructure, Drew's cartilage-producing cells produced through genetic engineering. Global eventually lost interest in the project, but kept an eye on his subsequent research progress. About two years ago they inquired about the genetic sequencing work that Drew was doing on bone cell surface proteins. They went as far as to sign a confidentiality agreement and review his laboratory records.

Drew was never really sure why Grovely backed out, since all of their communication was through "his people." He had wanted the opportunity to discuss the research with Grovely directly. Perhaps he was about to get the chance.

Grovely looked up from his Fortune Magazine, spotted Drew, and waved him over to the table with a bottle of steak sauce.

"Ah, the good doctor. What a pleasure. Finally we meet." He reached out and shook Drew's hand.

Drew grasped Grovely's hand, aware of the soft texture and well-manicured nails – not the hands he would picture jamming a fork into a 16-ounce Porterhouse in Derringer's.

"Well, our telephone conversation left me intrigued," Drew said. They sat down. "Though I'm still in the dark on the details."

"In the dark," Grovely repeated. He seemed amused by the word choice. "Yes. The details. And to think I often pride myself on being a true details man." Grovely smiled with whitened teeth. His tie was pinned perfectly into position. His shirt collar was starched into submission. Symmetry defined.

Drew smiled politely. He wanted to hear the details of Global's offer right away. But he would have to wait a little longer.

The painting behind Grovely was in better view. The brown swirls around the periphery were dogs – hunting hounds. They were in a frenzy, their teeth and gums showing, the hair on their backs jutting out. They were attacking a fox, which made up the brown and red swirl at the center of the painting. One dog was twisting its neck, and another was ripping into its thigh. The fox's eyes were thrust wide open, threatening to fall from their sockets.

Drew noticed a nearly finished plate in front of Grovely, with just a sliver of filet and some other remnants remaining.

"Oh," Grovely said. "Forgive me for having eaten already. I've had three meetings in a row here. The food is excellent, so enjoy your meal. I'll need to do most of the talking this time

anyway.” Another white smile. “I can highly recommend the filet or the Porterhouse, depending on your appetite.” He rested his hand on a manila envelope.

A man a couple of tables away was trying to get two young children to eat their onion loaf appetizers. The kids seemed out of place in the Manhattan steakhouse. They looked as though they were spending their Tuesday night with their weekend dad.

Drew was struck by a memory – a snapshot of surf-fishing with Matty on Long Island. That was before Linda divorced him. Back when Matty wasn’t very sick.

A woman in a business suit joined the nearby table and hugged her children. Her greeting to her husband made it obvious that they were still very much together.

“Doctor Chambers,” Grovely said. “I’ve been impressed by your work since the ReStructure project. It’s rare to find someone with such dedication and potential, but when they do appear, there’s no mistaking them. It was disappointing when the decision was made not to pursue that project.” He sighed and shook his head, suggesting that he had done everything he could do, but to no avail.

“Your current work on osteoblast and osteoclast surface proteins is very exciting,” Grovely continued. He said the words “osteoclast” and “osteoblast” slowly and deliberately as though speaking them for the first time. “The impact this work can have on future treatments for bone disorders is significant. As we informed you two years ago, however, the FDA backlog in this country extends the time required to complete such a project beyond the patience of a company like Global Investors.”

Why did this man ask him to come here? Grovely became distracted by a fold in the tablecloth, repeatedly pressing down on it lightly with his hand, and then letting it spring back up in a straight line. Drew waited for him to refocus on the matter at hand.

“Under normal circumstances, that is,” Grovely said, still looking down at the tablecloth.

Under normal circumstances?

Grovely looked up with a slanted grin. “Every now and then, we find ourselves in...less than normal circumstances. And every now and then, one has to trade a favor for a favor.”

The waiter wheeled a cart with two trays up against their table. The first tray was covered with a stack of cellophane-wrapped meats and a lobster the size of a small dog. The other tray contained oversized vegetables resembling a state fair awards display. The waiter used the display as a three-dimensional menu, describing how each item could be prepared.

Drew cleared his throat, leaned in close to the waiter and softly said, “I’d like the swordfish.”

“The swordfish with the Béarnaise sauce?” the waiter asked in a tone that asked why he just wasted his time going through the entire selection of steaks.

“On the side,” Drew said.

Grovely writhed in his chair and looked about, as though wondering if anyone had heard his dining guest order fish at a steakhouse. “No steak? At Derringer’s?” He gave an incredulous look to the waiter, who shrugged.

Drew shook his head. He was committing a business dinner faux pas. The waiter hadn’t left; he was hovering over Drew, certain that he would change his mind.

“Oh, yes,” Drew said, deciding to make a compromise. “And I would like the beefsteak tomato with the purple onion and blue cheese dressing.”

The waiter nodded and rolled his cart away. They watched him disappear into the kitchen.

“Blue cheese,” Grovely said with a peculiar expression that Drew couldn’t decipher. “That’s made with some type of bacteria, isn’t it?”

“It’s mold, actually,” Drew said. “The best tasting mold on the planet.”

Grovely nodded silently. The left corner of his mouth curled upward. He strayed ever so slightly from his usual perfect posture, leaning about an inch to his left. From Drew’s angle, Grovely was centered directly under the painting on the wall. Droplets of fox blood dangled over his impeccable hair.

“You were saying something about abnormal circumstances,” Drew said.

Grovely was symmetrically realigned in an instant. “Well, as you know, we’re involved in projects around the world, including some pretty remote places. I’ve taken a personal interest in pursuing these types of projects. Projects that other companies wouldn’t dare touch, wouldn’t even know what to do with.” Grovely paused as though momentarily overwhelmed by his self-worth. “This has allowed us to expand our business exponentially, especially over the last decade or so while I’ve been with the company. Unfortunately, we’ve also found that a small problem over a great distance can mushroom into a huge headache.” He tapped a fork against one of the mushrooms in front of him, and then let the fork drop onto the plate. “That’s basically what we’re dealing with now: a small problem that’s a big headache.”

“What’s the problem?” Drew asked.

“Fractures,” Grovely said in a reassuring tone. “Right up your alley,”

“How many fractures?” Drew asked. “There are three people injured. What we need is someone to go there and treat them,” Grovely said.

“Why not just fly them out for treatment?” Drew asked.

“I wish it were that easy, believe me,” Grovely said. “Unfortunately the red tape involved is unbelievable, and we’d lose three people crucial to the project. Not to mention the negative PR we’d get. I’m sure that you understand that Global isn’t about negative PR. We would go to almost any length to avoid that. Like I said, I have a vested interest in these projects. What we need is to have these people treated on site.”

The waiter returned with the tomatoes. They were nearly half a foot in diameter, covered with an equally gargantuan onion slice, and smothered in blue cheese chunks and dressing. The dish could have served as an entree.

Drew cut a portion of the appetizer and raised it to his mouth. Before eating it, he rotated his fork to look at the pale blue speckles peeking out from the cut edges of the cheese. He plunged the wedge into his mouth as a small drop of dressing fell to the table. The taste of cholesterol was worth the five-year wait.

Drew's dining partner was atypically silent for a moment.

"Where are they?" Drew asked.

"In Siberia," Grovely said.

"Siberia? What are they doing in Siberia?" Drew asked.

"In due time, doctor." Grovely said.

"I can't go to Siberia." Drew said.

Grovely slid the manila envelope across the table, patted it twice, and smiled. "Take this home," he said. "Have a look at our offer. Then call me so that we can get started."

5TH AVENUE NEW YORK CITY

Smooth as velvet.

Grovely was itching as they left Derringer's. At first it was just his arms.

He ditched Chambers by saying that he was running late, although he really had nowhere to go. He sent the doctor off in a limousine, and then scurried through the fallen leaves along the sidewalk.

Where to go? Where to go? Slipping into the comforting anonymity of midtown Manhattan seemed ideal at times like this. He needed the mental distraction of an open space.

A typical day found him hard at work or secluded in his condominium on the Upper East Side. Neither place seemed appropriate right now. Neither place suited his current state of mind. Right now all Grovely wanted was to get his mind off of Taimyr.

Red blotches were forming on his forearms, and now the itching seemed to be all over.

"Velvet," he thought.

His waking nightmare replayed in his head in scrambled fragments. What went wrong up in Siberia? Was it what he thought? Maybe there was some other explanation, but right now he couldn't think of any. Was there anything he could do? And, with Gaines now watching the company accounting through a microscope, how could Grovely come up with the finances he'd need to find a solution?

Grovely's neatly filed and precisely orchestrated world was tainted and twisted, a world of uncertainty, of endless questions.

What about Chambers? The doctor was going to say yes. But then what? Why send him there? Would he be able to figure out what was happening? Could he do anything about it? There was no way Chambers would ever make it out of Siberia alive. No way. But what other choice did he have? It was Chambers or else.

He could see the red areas on his arms rising into welts. His eyes and throat were burning.

"Like velvet." Grovely said it out loud this time. He had been smooth as velvet in the face of disaster. If he repeated it to himself enough he would start to believe it. He forced a smile. When the left corner of his upper lip rolled awkwardly and stuck along the arid surface of his canine, he had to free it with his tongue.

"Like velvet." He was skillfully managing an extremely messed up situation. And he hadn't started the problem. It wasn't his idea to send them up there. They had Gaines to thank for that. And Grovely had no control over the events that followed. Their blood wouldn't be on his hands.

11

CHAMBERS' APARTMENT, NEW YORK CITY

Have a look at our offer. Then call so we can get started.

Drew dragged a box out from under his bed, causing a snow-plowing effect on the advancing line of dust along the floor. The words "medical school" were scribbled in black magic marker across the top. He straddled the box while dragging it into the center of the living room. The dry brittle tape cracked open with a rap of his knuckle. He yanked open the cardboard lids and stared into a time capsule of his life.

An assortment of papers wedged into a large envelope was lying on the top. This wasn't what he was searching for, but he couldn't resist leafing through the papers. He spotted his acceptance letter from medical school. The gold crown of the Columbia College of Physicians and Surgeons crest was shining as though the letter had been sent yesterday.

He found a reprint from his first medical journal publication entitled "Porcine Joint Transplantation into Humans." He presented the research results at a student symposium in the Bronstein Research Building auditorium. The night before the presentation he practiced it at least thirty times with Linda as the audience. He could still see her sitting there, attentively listening to each practice run and nodding as though she was hearing the presentation for the first time, as though there was nothing of greater interest to her than pig joints.

During their last year together, Linda would listen to him only through her lawyer at a cost of \$400 an hour.

Drew sorted through the other contents of the box, finding the object of his search: his doctor's bag. Dust lined the black leather seams. The monogrammed buckle was tarnished. Sitting on the floor, he rested the bag on his lap and wiped it with his sleeve.

The doctor's bag was a medical school graduation gift from his parents. He never used the bag as it was intended. He never did a house call. The bag once decorated the center of his bookshelf and served as supply storage during his residency. Now it was pressed down under the weight of paraphernalia in a box. His parents were still living in New York then. A lot had happened since they retired and moved to Arizona. A lot had changed. They were better off so far away.

He dumped the contents of the bag on the floor. The otoscope and ophthalmoscope skidded out first. Ears and eyes. Not exactly the tools of the orthopedic trade. The bone doctor. The stethoscope and the reflex hammer followed. He smiled. He hadn't used a hammer to elicit reflexes since medical school; in residency he used the knuckle of his middle finger. A knuckle worked just as well as a hammer and weighed less. A steady flow of gauze packages, tongue depressors, culture swabs, suture removal kits, and antibiotic packets tumbled out of the bag. Drew sifted through the items, threw the majority of them into the garbage, and then replaced the rest.

He brought the bag into the kitchen. The manila envelope from Global beckoned again from the kitchen table. He sat down and looked at the clock. It had been less than thirty minutes since he last looked at the paperwork. He had spent the last two hours reviewing the contents of the envelope and rereading the check.

He lifted up the airline ticket to Oslo, Norway. The information hadn't changed; the flight left in just eight hours. The new passport with his photograph was tucked into the back of the ticket jacket. The check was now visible on the table. He couldn't resist looking at it again. It was as though he needed to keep reassuring himself that the check was really there, and that he was reading it correctly. Was one of the zeroes a mistake? Was the comma in the wrong place? He wondered whether there was a limit on the dollar amount that you could put on a check.

The check rested almost imperceptibly in his palm. Lowering his hand quickly, he watched the paper float back into his grasp. So much money, and a light breeze could carry it away.

When he first opened the envelope, which was about ten seconds after returning from Derringer's, he considered ripping the check into pieces. The whole deal made him nervous. Hell, he was terrified. Grovely was less than trustworthy, and the Siberia project remained a mystery. A confidentiality agreement in the paperwork claimed that the benefits of the "research" in Siberia would be in jeopardy if unauthorized information were disseminated. In

Oslo, the nature of the research and the information about the injuries would be revealed to him.

If Drew didn't respond by 8AM, just six hours from now, the offer would be rescinded. If he decided to back out after his briefing in Oslo, the check was still his to keep. The rest of the promised sums, however, would be lost.

The rest of the sums.

The check was for \$250,000. But that was just a fraction of the total sum. The financial agreement in the package promised another \$250,000 to him at the end of his three months in Siberia. But most importantly, it also promised \$1,000,000 to the Matty's Hope Foundation to support the continuation of his research. One million dollars. That kind of money would cover the project launch and support an additional five years of research.

Global had thought of everything. They provided an itemized list of arrangements that would be made in his absence, everything from paying his bills to maintaining his medical association memberships and journal subscriptions. Drew tried to think of things that they had forgotten, only to find them somewhere on the list. They had also made arrangements for everything that he would need for the trip. His only responsibility was the paperwork from the envelope and the clothing on his back. They had made it difficult to say "no."

The offer seemed ludicrous in many ways, but he had nothing to lose. His days at Manhattan Memorial were numbered. Matty's Hope was stalled on the launching pad. The money from Global would help get his life back on track. He was certain of one thing; if he turned them down now, the opportunity would never come his way again.

He found that there was something about a check for \$250,000 that made it tear-resistant, perhaps some indestructible power embedded in all the zeroes. He signed his name on the back. Then he added "for deposit only" beneath the signature, as though there was a snowball's chance in hell that he might lose the check on the way to the bank. He tucked the thin blue piece of paper into his wallet.

Doctor Chambers wondered about the long-distance house call that he was about to make. And then he worried. And then he picked up the phone and dialed Thornton Grovely's number.

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