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Chapter One

As the helicopter crested the ridge and the compound came into view for the third time in as many weeks, Frank Dunn had the feeling he was on on a wild goose chase yet again. This whole project was idiotic to begin with, and being called out here in the middle of the night because someone thought they'd done the impossible yet again was a pain in the ass. Alchemists from the Dark Ages struggling to turn lead into gold were real level-headed, down-to-Earth people in comparison to this band of dreamers. Sometimes duty called Frank to these situations though, and he realized he had to take the good with the bad.

"We'll be on the pad in 4 minutes, is your seatbelt secure?" the pilot asked Frank over the radio embedded in his helmet.

"Yeah, I know the drill. Just land the damn thing so I can get in and out and home again," Frank said gruffly.

The helicopter dipped and banked shallowly toward one of the taller buildings on the Southern edge of the compound where a white circle shown dimly on the roof. There were no identifiable marks on the gleaming modern buildings which would have seemed perfectly normal in New York, or Los Angeles, or Chicago perhaps. But this was about as far away as you could get from any of those places, in a canyon in Pima County, Arizona. Or as Frank called it, "Shithole Creek, Arizona". The helicopter was equipped with a transponder that was responsible for making sure they weren't blown out of the sky as they approached, which Frank was reminded of when the pilot visibly checked it to make sure it was still operational.

After landing the guards appeared, seemingly from out of nowhere, to check and re-check identification and radio four separate posts for clearance to enter the building. Frank was annoyed at the thought that he was probably spending more time on that roof going through the same security checks he'd already gone through than he would be spending in the goddamned building based on his last couple of visits here. With the security rituals complete the magnetic bolts holding the roof door banged loudly and the door swung open a fraction of an inch. One of the guards pulled it open the rest of the way and in they all went, stepping from the crisp night air and relative dark of the helipad into an obscenely well-lit stairwell that felt oddly stale and sterile at the same time.

At the first landing they came to the elevator, which required two guards to gain access: One stood on either side of the wide door and inserted an odd-looking key, and each turned their key inward at the same time to call the elevator and unlock the security door it stood behind. The elevator appeared within a couple of seconds as

usual, and they got in and began the descent into the bowels of the building. Frank never knew for sure how far down they went, or even if the building extended below the ground. There were a lot of buttons in the elevator but none of them had numbers on them, and the guards always blocked Frank's view with their bodies as they pressed multiple buttons before the thing started moving.

When the doors next opened they stood facing a glass-enclosed lab with a door off to the right side. One of the guards radioed into the lab that they were there, and Dr. Biago came over to open the door and let them in. He looked tired but excited, and also a bit nuts, Frank thought.

As Frank walked through the door Dr. Biago began, "Mr. Dunn, thank you for coming on such short notice. I assure you we..."

Frank cut him off mid-sentence. "Yeah, OK, let's cut the chit-chat, I'd like to get home and back to bed where I belong at this hour. What's going on?"

"You really need to see this. The last two tests did achieve the primary goal but the results were sadly temporary. I think we've solved that problem though. We passed the 24 hour mark and we..."

Frank once again broke in. "24 hours?! Why the fuck did you call me at 1 am if this happened 24 hours ago? Maybe you could have, oh I don't know, called me this afternoon sometime?"

"I was told not to call you until 24 hours had elapsed this time due to the previous problems with the solution not being permanent. I called as soon as we hit that milestone as instructed. Now we're closing in on 26 hours and everything still checks out fine, the specimen is actually still improving."

"Fine, let's see it then" said Frank, a bit more harshly than he really needed to.

Dr. Biago led Frank to the nearly featureless cube in the middle of the lab. He waved a proximity card at a sensor at elbow-height in the middle of one wall of the cube and the entire wall slid down into the floor to reveal a smaller lab within the lab. The two men stepped in and tripped a sensor which caused the wall to slowly slide back up into place behind them.

"Third cage on the left," said Dr. Biagio, pointing toward one of the cages that lined both sides of the room. He had an enormous self-satisfied grin on his face. Frank wasn't buying it yet. He strolled over to the cage and peered in.

"It's a rat," Frank said plainly. "This proves nothing. Is this one going to fall over and die in front of me too?"

"I don't think so," said Biago, the smile still firmly in place across his lips. "Come here and I'll show you." He opened the cage and took out the rat, and led Frank to a small computer-imaging x-ray table further inside the small lab. "Put your hand on the table please."

"I'm not the experiment here, the fucking rat..."

It was Biago's turn to cut off Frank this time. "Just put your hand on the table please. You'll have your proof in a minute." Frank had a visible look of disgust on his face but he laid his right hand on the table as Biago pressed a button on the front of it. Within a couple seconds an x-ray image of Frank's hand showed up on the monitor in front of them, complete with the metal plate Frank had in his wrist courtesy of a motorcycle accident when he was in college. No doubt he was looking at an x-ray image of his own hand.

"Remove your hand now please," said Biago. Frank did and Biago placed the rat on the table and once again hit the button. Within a couple of seconds the monitor was showing another x-ray, this time clearly of a rat. But there was something very wrong with this particular x-ray.

"I'm no doctor," said Frank, "but that doesn't look right. I think something's wrong with your machine."

"Care to put your other hand on it and verify it's working fine?" Biago asked Frank. Frank just looked at him for a few seconds then turned back to the monitor while Biago went to put the rat back in its cage. "The black masses you see are the tumors that killed the specimen approximately 66 hours ago. They're smaller than they were at that time and are still shrinking, and as you can see they don't appear to be causing the specimen any ill effects. Given their size and location, particularly the one at the base of the spine, it should be incapable of walking at all right now, which is clearly not the case. The reversal of the underlying cause of death is the real breakthrough. We didn't achieve this in the first cases, we merely revived the specimens and they once again succumbed to their ailments. In this case the reversal is not only continuing, the improvement is actually increasing in pace based on our hourly examinations."

"This thing was dead three days ago. Really dead. Not near-death, not on it's last legs. It was stone-cold dead?" Frank asked suspiciously.

"We had it in the freezer for the first 6 hours. It was sealed in a plastic bag. I examined it myself. It was dead."

"If what you're saying is true do you know what this means?"

"What do you mean 'If'?" asked Biago, clearly irritated. "The specimen was dead for hours. There is no doubt. We have video records of the entire process. The

specimen was under video surveillance the entire time, even in the freezer. We can prove it. Or we could just do it again."

"You sound pretty confident after a single success, don't you think?" Frank asked.

"There's another trial already underway. It's only been a few hours, but so far the specimen is doing well. A gibbon. Been back for almost 6 hours now. We're seeing reversal of the cause of death in that case as well," replied Biago.

"Can I see it?" asked Frank. "Where is it?"

"Not yet," said Biago. "The specimen is under sedation and recovering from the rather traumatic nature of its demise. It would probably look to you like it's dying, but it's actually regenerating. Come on, let's go talk to Cody. He said he wanted to see you after you saw the specimen." With that Biago turned and waved the proximity card at a sensor and the wall once again slid down into the floor. Frank followed Biago out into the main lab and over to the entry door that led back to the elevator.

As they reached the lab door a voice called out from behind them. "Hey, there you are!" said Jonas Cody. Cody was an odd fellow, a commanding presence that was still somehow a bit mysterious and more than a bit uncomfortable to be around. He reminded Frank of a used-car salesman who had much higher aspirations and would do whatever it took to achieve them. Despite his gut feeling about Cody, Frank knew he was one of the main sources of private funding for the lab and needed to be appeased. Frank turned and held out his hand to shake Cody's and opened his mouth to speak. Before he could get a word out Cody reached into his pocket, pulled a .380 caliber Walther pistol from his pocket, and shot Frank directly in the forehead. Frank fell face-first onto the floor, dead before he hit the ground. Cody turned to Biago and said calmly "There's your test subject. You have 48 hours and I suggest not wasting them. If you fail this one we're all going down. Now get to work."

Biago stood motionless, stunned into silence. Cody waved his own proximity card at the sensor and walked out of the lab and to the elevator. It took 10 full minutes for Biago to finally regain his senses enough to pick up the wall phone and call his team together.

Chapter Two

"No, we'll take care of everything he needs. He'll probably only be here a day or two and we'll call you when he's ready to go home. Thanks," Cody said and hung up the phone. It was easy enough to get rid of the helicopter pilot that had brought Frank Dunn to the facility. It was not at all unusual to have people unexpectedly staying on for a few days longer than planned. The real trouble would come if those couple of days went by without another success for The Cure, the first real test of it on a human subject.

Cody picked up the phone again and started dialing. On the third ring a gruff-sounding voice answered with the simple statement "Mark Klasco".

"Mark, it's Jonas Cody. We're proceeding with the last phase. Within 48 hours we'll have at least preliminary results, if not final. What's the status on your end?"

"We're ready to roll as soon as you give the word," Klasco replied. "There will be a coordinated rollout in stages to make sure the information is disseminated carefully, from the top down. The entire process will take some time. I'm sure there will be efforts at the top to keep it quiet for as long as possible. If necessary we can subvert that and proceed with the targeted media leaks."

"OK," said Cody. "And the supply chain? Is that reliable yet?"

"Yes, everything is in place. The supply is time-constrained as we already discussed, and the costs are going to be even higher than we initially thought. It's doable, but it will be delicate. We're looking at probably one full shipment per month at first."

"How much higher than we initially thought?" Cody asked.

"I don't know yet," said Klasco, "but triple isn't out of the question."

Cody sat silent for a few moments digesting this new information. Finally he spoke. "Small matter," he said. "The costs will be irrelevant in the end." He didn't realize this at the time, but Jonas Cody had never said anything more wildly inaccurate in his life.

"So what's happening with the final tests? Where are you at in the trial?" asked Klasco.

"We're just starting as of less than an hour ago. No news yet, and it will probably be 12 to 18 hours before we know anything at all. Biago and his team know what they're doing. He's a weird little prick but he's good, there's no denying that. He picked up what I started and made it real, made it work. If he doesn't pull it off this time though we're all fucked."

"Why's that?" asked Klasco.

"Never mind," replied Cody. "It's not important, everything is going to be fine. You just make sure that supply chain keeps moving. Keep me posted on the incremental cost as soon as you have a hard figure."

"Will do," said Klasco. "Good luck with the trial."

Cody hung up the phone then said "Thanks" to nobody in particular. He decided it was a good time to take a break, maybe have a little breakfast. He dialed dining services on the phone and ordered an egg white omelet with mushrooms and onion, black coffee, orange juice, and the morning paper. It arrived about 15 minutes later and he sat alone at his desk, eating and reading through the paper, thinking to himself what those headlines might look like in the not-too-distant future. Nobody was going to give a shit about the Middle East, or who was President, or which car company was going bankrupt this week. All of that would be small potatoes once this story broke.

After breakfast and a few extra minutes flipping through the paper Cody went to Biago's lab to make sure work was beginning. Biago was a little shaken up when Cody delivered him the test subject, which wasn't at all surprising. Cody had to keep them focused and on track though, now more than ever.

This was it. A new chapter in the evolution of the human race was beginning now. Cody liked to think of it as the chapter HE was writing.

It was T+0, C.E. Cody's Era.

Chapter Three

T+1 Week, C.E.

The light was absolutely blinding. This was it then, it was true. Frank Dunn didn't know exactly what the hell had happened, but he was dead, and here it was just like they said, the bright light above him and everything. But it fucking HURT. This wasn't the warm welcome his upbringing as a Catholic had led him to expect. It fucking HURT. The light was intensely bright and his eyes felt as dry as sandpaper. And there was an odd sensation in his head. It felt almost like something was chewing at it from the inside.

"Frank," Dr. Biago said softly. "Frank, can you hear me?"

"WHAT IN THE FUCK?!" Frank thought. He had meant to actually say these words but discovered he was far too hoarse for anything more than an unintelligible whisper to escape his lips. He tried strenuously to sit up, only to find he couldn't. Something was holding him down.

"You're OK, everything's fine. You need to just lay back and relax. The straps are for your own safety. How do you feel? Can you understand me?"

Frank nodded his head up and down. "Water," he croaked. Biago understood and went over to a pitcher and a stack of cups on a small table, poured a little into a plastic cup, and brought it back to Frank. He held it up to Frank's lips and tipped very slowly. The water was just about the best thing Frank had ever tasted. "More," he said, and Biago repeated the process. "One more," Frank said, still very softly but with his voice sounding a bit less harsh. Biago filled the cup a third time and again helped Frank drink it, then tossed the empty cup in a small wastebasket next to the bed.

Frank laid in the bed, breathing heavily, looking up at Biago. Neither spoke for a solid 30 seconds, then Biago began. "I'm sure you are confused. You have a lot of questions. Let me try to explain what's going on and why you're here." Frank nodded his head slowly up and down, his eyes never breaking contact with Biago's.

"You know what our project is all about," Biago continued. "A cure for death itself. We can reanimate what was once animate if we are able to begin the process before serious decay sets in. The process is fairly easy, but the things that go into The Cure are very precious. We were moving ahead steadily, slowly building up to more and more complex organisms. You saw some of our recent successes a week ago, right before you were shot."

Frank's eyes widened and a look of realization came over his face. He suddenly remembered what had happened. Cody had pulled a fucking gun on him and shot him right in the forehead. There was no warning and Frank had had no time to react. The last thing he remembered was seeing the gun come up and seeing a bright flash. He

didn't remember hearing any "bang", oddly enough. But he had been shot in the head, he had no doubt of that.

"Yes," said Biago. "You remember?"

Frank nodded his head slowly up and down, this time his eyes moving away from their lock on Biago's. "Why?" Frank managed to say.

"Why did Jonas choose you? I don't know. You'll have to ask him that. If I were a betting man I'd say he thought it would add some pressure and incentive on me to make sure we brought you back. It's not like you were some homeless guy who could just disappear without being missed by anyone, you know? I haven't had time to talk to Jonas myself so I can't say that's a fact, but that's my guess."

Frank was staring at the wall on the left side of the room now. He was listening to Dr. Biago but was not looking at him. His mind was reeling, working overtime trying to make sense of what had happened, and what was happening to him now.

"How do you feel?" asked Biago. "Any pain? Any odd sensations? Anything at all unusual?"

"Like chewing," Frank croaked. "Inside my head. Not pain." He was minimizing his use of words both because his voice was still hoarse and also because he was nearly in shock.

"Good, no pain," Biago repeated. "The sensation is not something I knew would happen but it is not all surprising. Your injuries are still being repaired. You were shot in the head at close range with a .380 caliber bullet. You died, Frank. Instantly in all likelihood. You were dead for almost two hours before we began administering The Cure. Everything went well and you were technically alive again after about 40 hours. We've kept you sedated for the past 5 days in order to give The Cure more time to heal your injuries more, and also to keep you still and calm. As much of a shock as this is I'd imagine it would have been even worse to wake up and find a hole in your forehead and some of your higher brain functions not quite fully operational yet. This seemed safer for everyone, but especially for you. I'm glad you're back, Frank."

Frank rolled his eyes back onto Biago's. He sat there, mouth agape, trying to put this all together. "Where is Cody?" he asked.

"He's here, in the facility. He hasn't left since you were shot. He's been getting hourly updates and has been down to see you multiple times while you were unconscious. I'm not sure where he is right at the moment but I do need to get in touch with him to let him know you're awake. I'm sure he'll want to know..."

"Kill him," Frank interrupted. "I'll fucking kill him. Where is he?" His voice was still soft and raspy, but there was no doubt he was pissed, and was feeling like he really could kill Jonas Cody right then and there.

"Frank," Biago said. "We need Jonas, and we need you. You are now the most unique human to ever have walked the Earth, unless you believe Jesus Christ himself really existed and was raised from the dead. You are in no danger. You are alive. Jonas was an ass for doing what he did, but it's over, and everything is fine. Think about what this means, Frank. You are the first, but there will be many more. This is the dawn of a new era for humankind. You will be the one to lead the world down this path. Think of the advances humanity could make if we were not limited by our own limited lifespans. The Cure won't end death forever Frank, but we think the human body is quite capable of easily reaching 300 years of age with its assistance, maybe 400. You have The Cure inside of you now Frank. You will not die any time soon. And if you do, you will come back. You're immortal Frank, or at least as close to immortal as any human has ever been."

Frank looked up at Biago stone-faced, letting it all sink in. If this is all true then it really was a miracle. A million thoughts raced through Frank's head. He wondered if it was wrong to think of how rich this could make him. Could he write a book? Become a celebrity? Then again, if anybody was going to be able to do this maybe it wouldn't be that big a deal. And then again, why the fuck shouldn't he kill Cody? Biago would probably just bring him back anyway. And what the hell was he going to do for the next 300 years or so? Really? 300 years?

"Listen, Frank," Biago said. "I know this is probably overload right now. I really need to get in touch with Jonas and let him know you're awake. I'm sure he's going to want to see you but I'll do my best to hold him off for a couple of days, OK? You need a little time, that's all."

"Fuck you," Frank croaked. "Get me out of here now you bastard."

"I'm sorry but I can't do that Frank. Just take a breather. You're perfectly safe here and everything is fine. Trust me. Remember, I'm not the one that shot you. I'm the one who brought you back. I didn't intend for you to be the first trial, that was as much of a surprise to me as it was to you."

"I seriously doubt that," Frank replied. He was starting to sound stronger already.

Chapter Four

T+10 Days, C.E.

Cody was surprised how nervous he was at the moment. He knew Frank Dunn well enough to know Frank could probably snap his neck without exerting much in the way of effort, either physical or mental. Eventually he was going to have to go into that room and talk to him though. He needed him. Getting another test subject would be doable, but expensive and risky. And besides, Frank was the first. Frank had a lot to gain from working with Cody rather than killing him, and Cody thought Frank had probably already figured this out. He was still worried as he walked into Frank's room for the first time after his revival though.

"Frank," he said as he walked through the door, his arms wide and a tinge of concern in his voice. "Frank, how are you doing? Are you comfortable? Is there anything you need that I could get for you? Just say the word and I..."

"So you decided to finally show your fucking face after all," Frank cut him off. "How nice of you. Now tell me, what the fuck could you possibly have to say to someone you shot and killed about a week ago? Huh? What? What the hell are you doing here and what the hell do you want?"

"Frank, listen, this is big. You know that of course, but this is big. You know what I, what WE Frank, have on our hands here. You are only the first, but being the first is something special, don't you think? You are the embodiment of salvation. You are the first of a new race, one that will never die prematurely, one that will live a very long time indeed. This will alter the course of human history irrevocably. Art, science, knowledge, culture, all will advance quicker than ever before. Humans won't have to spend half their life studying the work of previous generations before they start to build on it. They'll spend a relative blip learning from the past, and productive centuries building on that work. They'll be able to go further, delve deeper, than any previous generations could have ever hoped to accomplish. You are the harbinger of that Frank. Turning you into that was costly, for you of course, but for us as well. The Cure does not come cheaply, at least not yet. We want you to work with us Frank."

"And why the hell should I?" Frank asked. "What are you going to do, shoot me again? From what Biago tells me I'll just jump up and dance a fucking jig a couple days later anyway, so what could you possibly do to me if I don't cooperate? Huh? What?"

"Frank, you're looking at this the wrong way. It's not what we could do to you. If you want to go there there are options, but what would be the point of us leaving you in a cage at the bottom of the ocean, only to die and be reborn over and over for centuries? That doesn't sound like fun, does it? To be honest it doesn't help us any either. But think of what you could become if you worked with us Frank. You'd be rich beyond your wildest dreams for starters. If you're going to live for centuries why not do

it in style, right? Think of this as an endorsement deal Frank. You help us, we help you, everyone wins."

"And what exactly would I be doing in return for selling my soul? Huh? Killing people so you can sell them your cure and bring them back? What?"

"No Frank," Cody said. "You'd just be helping us spread the message, in a rather convincing fashion."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" asked Frank.

"Frank, The Cure is an amazing thing. But you have to admit, if you hadn't experienced what you did you'd probably have a pretty fucking hard time accepting it was real, don't you think?" asked Cody.

"Sure," said Frank. "But what do I prove? I could be any random guy you hired off the street claiming to be nearly immortal. I see homeless people doing it all the time, big fucking deal."

"Yes, of course," said Cody. "But you can do one thing they can't. You can prove it. You can cut off a finger and it will grow back. You can take a knife in the arm and it will heal itself within a couple of days, no medical intervention necessary. You can prove, in a relatively short time frame, that this is real."

"So why didn't you just give yourself The Cure and prove it yourself you son of a bitch?" asked Frank.

"Quite honestly because I wasn't sure it would work in a human. Biago thought it would, but thinking it would wasn't quite good enough odds for me to offer to be the guinea pig, understand? I'll take The Cure myself once it's been proven safe. I didn't want to go first though. Using you as a subject also put the pressure on Biago to make sure he didn't fuck it up. You might not have family, but you sure as shit have friends who would have come looking for you if you suddenly turned up missing. Friends I wouldn't want tracking your last known position to here if you know what I mean."

Frank chuckled. "So you want me to be your circus act? Watch us chop pieces off and they'll grow back. That doesn't sound like a very fun job, I have to tell you."

"Ten million dollars a year. For as long as we're in business, Frank. Which should be a very long time. There are nearly seven billion people in the world, but The Cure is very expensive and time-consuming to make. Not very many people will be able to get it in any given year. Certainly less than a thousand, maybe as few as five hundred. This will be a gravy train for you for the rest of your life Frank, and after the first year, at most, you won't have to do a goddamned thing except cash those checks and sit on the beach in Mexico. We won't kill you again Frank. I don't think there's any need for it to go that far. Except..." Cody trailed off.

"Except what?" asked Frank.

"Except quite possibly for the first demonstration. That might need to be a little more... dramatic. That might also need to be the only demonstration, Frank. It should be pretty damn convincing," said Cody.

"And who exactly will you be convincing?" asked Frank.

"Why The President of the United States, of course Frank. You know. Your boss."

Chapter Five

T+4 Weeks, C.E.

Jonas Cody stood in the entryway of what had been for most of the past century the most powerful room on the planet. These days it was an open question as to how much longer that might remain the case, but for now at least very few questioned that it still held that title. Behind that door was the Oval Office of the White House, and inside sat the President of the United States of America and a team of close advisors. On the outside of the door stood Jonas Cody, Frank Dunn, and three others from the project. They were joined by four Secret Service Agents. The Agents could well have just been regular men in suits if it weren't for the fact that not a single one of them stood less than 6'4" and, Cody knew, carried at least three sidearms hidden under those suits. They all had blank expressions on their faces, Cody and his team included, waiting for permission to enter the room.

After a few minutes passed one of the agents turned his head slightly, listening to the coded instructions being relayed to him through his earpiece. "OK," he said. "You're on. We've been instructed to wait out here." With that the agent opened the door to the room and stepped to one side, gesturing with his hand into the room ahead of them. Jonas Cody and two of the men stepped in, while Frank and the other member of the team stayed in the hallway with the agents. The agent looked at Frank and said "Well?"

"We'll wait here for a few minutes if it's OK with you," Frank Dunn told the agent. "They're going to do the intro and will call us in if they need us. OK?"

The agent nodded and closed the door into the Oval Office. Cody and his men suddenly became animated, walking over to the desk behind which stood the President with enormous smiles on their faces. Cody extended his hand as he crossed The Great Seal on the floor and said "Mr, President, sir, it is a privilege and an honor as always. Thank you again for taking the time to meet with us today."

"You're welcome, Jonas," said the President, extending his hand and shaking Cody's. He repeated the handshake with Cody's men and pointed to the chairs slightly to their right. "Please, sit down. Can I offer you anything?"

"No, thanks, we're fine," Cody answered for all of them. It still irked Jonas a bit that he had to stand on tradition and call him "Mr. President" and "sir" while the President got away with calling him "Jonas". It just didn't seem very... professional, Cody thought. They sat in the chairs and the introductions began.

"Mr, President," said Cody, "allow me to introduce my colleagues. This is Dr. Adam Biago. Dr. Biago was the lead scientist on this project and has been working tirelessly to see this concept through to fruition. And on the end is Mr. Craig Thomason. Mr. Thomason is one of the main financial backers of this project and has been a great

supporter of our goals. I'm sure you've already received the dossiers on them and know the details of their backgrounds so I'll spare you, unless of course you have questions Mr. President."

"No, thank you Jonas, I have been briefed on the project and who everyone is. I believe you know everyone else in the room?" the President asked. Cody knew well enough who they all were but smiled and looked at them one by one, nodding. The Chief Science Advisor. The Secretary of State. The Secretary of Health & Human Services. Cody was a little surprised that was all, but on the other hand, that was quite a powerful little group.

"Indeed I do Mr. President. Thank you all again for taking the time to meet with us today. We've come here to discuss the results of our project. This project has been going on for 7 years officially, and many years prior to that in various unofficial capacities. We have at this time achieved success. We have changed the course of human evolution and human history, gentlemen. And you are the first people on planet Earth, outside of the project team, to know about it."

"I've read the report you submitted. It was very interesting," said Dr. Thomas Benning, the Chief Science Advisor. "You'll of course excuse me if I remain unconvinced of your findings however."

"Our findings are quite real, I assure you," said Dr. Biago, looking at Benning. "We've documented everything and the results are 100% reproducible."

"Yes, of course," replied Benning. "So I've read. Have you seen the report that was submitted, Dr. Biago?"

"Yes, of course," replied Biago.

"Then you realize this document proves nothing," said Benning. "It makes a lot of grand claims but backs very little of it up with hard science. It's basically marketing-speak. We need facts, Doctor. I don't know how you managed to get this meeting set up with this... document," said Benning, the sneer audible in his voice, "but it's not at all enough to convince me of anything. I assume you've published scientific papers before, Dr. Biago? You are aware of the standards for scientific evidence, are you not?"

"Yes, of course," said Biago. "Might I point out, in fact, that I've earned far more degrees than you've received honorary ones, in fact. The fact is..."

"Might I point out, gentlemen," interrupted the President, "that this is not a dick-waving contest. Cody. Go."

"We submitted intentionally vague documentation at the request of both our investors and The President himself," said Cody. Dr. Benning, assume for a moment that what we're saying here is true. You surely can see the implications of these

findings are game-changing. We were not willing to put everything on a document that was intended to leave our lab, even one that was to come into this very Oval Office. The President agreed that this was also in everyone's best interest as a possible matter of National Security. That is the protocol that we followed."

"Fine," said Benning. "So what are we to discuss if you can't give us evidence?"

"We are prepared to give you evidence today, in person," Cody said. "Dr. Biago, please proceed."

Dr. Biago pulled a laptop computer and small battery-powered digital projector from his bag. He spoke as he set these up on the conference table along the side of the room that had been placed there in anticipation of their arrival. "This laptop," explained Biago, "is equipped with a thermal fingerprint sensor. If it is accessed without the proper fingerprint input beforehand it will self-destruct."

"Is that a threat?" asked Dr. Benning.

"No sir, Dr. Benning," replied Biago calmly. "Just a fact. I'm going to show you time-lapse footage of some of the successful experiments that we have conducted. The footage is set to play at 192 times real time, so what you'll be seeing are about 48 hours for each experiment condensed into about 15 minutes. We have the full footage and more, and are happy to show it to you, along with our research protocols and notes, back at our lab, Dr. Benning."

With that Biago flipped on the projector and began beaming images onto the wall. "This first subject was a rat. It had died of induced metastatic liver cancer." As the footage rolled Biago explained the process and how they overcame frustration after frustration, with the final roadblock seeming to be keeping the reanimated subjects alive for longer than 48 hours. He also explained how this particular rat they were viewing was the first to successfully break through that barrier, and that it was still alive today.

When the rat footage was over Biago went on to the decidedly more gruesome footage of a chimpanzee. Biago explained that there were many steps between the rat and chimp, and that he had some reservations about performing this test, but in the end it was a total success. The chimp had died of a gunshot wound to the head. The President and his team of advisors watched in fascination as the small hole in the chimp's forehead sealed over and the chimp awoke over the course of 16 minutes and 12 seconds of tape time.

"How do we know this isn't a tape run backwards? A special effect? Whatever?" asked Dr. Benning.

"I suppose you don't, until we give you more evidence," replied Biago. "But I assure you it's quite real. We have one more video to show you but it is rather

sensitive." Biago looked at Cody and shrugged his shoulders as if to signal he had one last chance to back out of this.

"Roll it," Cody said.

As Biago started up the final video a face appeared on the screen. A human face. It was Frank Dunn. Like the chimp in the video before him there was a small round hole in his forehead and he appeared to be dead. Over the following 18 minutes and 6 seconds the room sat silent, watching as the wound closed, scabbed, and sealed over. They kept watching as Frank's eyelids began to flutter, seeming to strain to open. And they watched as those eyes did indeed finally open.

"The subjects, once introduced to The Cure, are forever altered," began Dr. Biago. "The Cure continues to live and thrive within their bodies, granting them the ability to resurrect again and again. Their natural lifespan is expected to increase by a factor of 5. In other words, about 375 years for your typical human, during which time they really can't be killed barring very extreme measures."

"Horse-shit. Plain and simple," said Benning. "A biological process cannot reverse death. A biological AGENT cannot reverse death. There is absolutely no way what you're claiming can be in any way true."

"I never said it was a purely biological process," said Biago.

"What, then?" asked Benning. "Nanotech? Then what's with the time limit? A nanotech solution, if it were possible to create such a thing in the first place, should theoretically have no upper limits on extending the lifespan of the organism. But you just said 375 years. So what gives?"

"The approach we've devised is a hybrid," replied Biago. "Neither purely biological nor purely nanotech. Nor purely chemical, as you've no doubt guessed by now. It is complicated to develop and manufacture, and that's one of the biggest problems we face. This doesn't come easily, and it isn't cheap. We project production of 1,000 doses annually would stretch our resources to the absolute limit."

"One thousand doses annually," repeated the President, looking at Biago. "Something like that would have the potential to create a version of class warfare like nothing we've ever seen before. Is the bottleneck due to a lack of funding or manpower?"

"Neither, really," replied Biago. Cody winced slightly when he didn't follow his statement with "Mr. President," but Biago was a typical scientist and not prone to stand on formalities. "The problem is a lack of supplies to create The Cure. Theoretically given enough money I suppose we could increase production, but the process is so time-intensive that I don't ever see it scaling to mass production levels."

"This all smells of bullshit," said Benning. "I still don't see what you had hoped to accomplish by coming in here with a few videos on a computer and a wild story that you've cured death. What are you planning? What happens when you finally admit this is all a fabrication? What are you hoping to gain in the end from all of this?"

"Mr. President," Cody began, "I'd like to introduce you to someone. I believe this will greatly help Dr. Benning see that we are dead serious about this. If I may, sir," Cody said, pointing back towards the door through which he had entered the Oval Office just 90 minutes previously.

The President pushed a button on the phone on his desk which apparently led to a speaker outside the door. He asked the agents positioned outside if they had a guest of Mr. Cody's out there and if he had been cleared, and they indicated that they did, and he had. "Send him in," said the President, and clicked the speaker off.

The door opened with a click and in walked Frank Dunn, followed by Marcus Webb, another member of The Cure team. Frank strolled into the room rather casually given the importance of the place and approached the desk behind which sat The President. "Mr. President," Frank said, nodding his head and holding out his hand to shake the President's own hand.

"Frank," said the President, ignoring Dunn's outstretched right hand. "Frank Dunn. Jesus... you were the guy we just saw in the video!"

"Yes sir," replied Frank. "That was me. I was dead, sir. Just about 4 weeks ago I was brought back. I realize this sounds insane sir, but it's not. It really happened. I was dead, and now I'm not. I don't understand the details of what happened although this guy," Frank said, pointing at Biago, "has tried to explain it to me roughly two dozen times. All I know is I was gone, and now I'm back. It's a miracle, sir."

"What's going on here?" asked Benning. "You know this guy, Mr. President?"

"Yes, yes I do," replied the President. "Frank was one of my personal bodyguards back when I was running for this very office. We've stayed in touch since and he's helped me with some matters from time to time. Frank... what is this? Is this true?"

"I swear to you, Mr. President, I am not making any of this up. It is true. What they're saying is real," Dunn said. And I can prove it, sir." With that Frank reached under the back of his jacket, poked his hand up under his shirt, and searched for the handle of the carbon-fiber knife that was taped between his shoulderblades. Frank had the knife out and in his hand before anyone knew what was happening.

"HE'S GOT A WEAPON!" yelled Dr. Benning. "MR. PRESIDENT, GET UNDER THE DESK!"

"Relax, will you, shit," said Frank, squinting his eyes slightly as if the yelling and sudden commotion was painful. "There's no need to yell. Nobody's in danger here, and I mean The President no harm. Unfortunately this is going to hurt me much more than it's going to hurt anyone in this room. But I think in the long run it should speed things up a bit," Frank said. With that he gave a small grin and jammed the knife into his neck, severing the carotid artery neatly with the razor-sharp edge. Frank's head lolled and he slumped to his knees. His eyes rolled up in his head and he fell the rest of the way, onto his left side, legs tucked under him and arms splayed out at his sides. The amount of blood that escaped the wound seemed impossible, and the rug under the President's desk was soon heavy with it.

"Jesus," said the President. "Frank, what the fuck have you done?"

"He will come back, Mr. President," said Jonas Cody. "Frank Dunn will be awake in 48 hours. He'll be back on his feet in 72. He will, Mr. President. You'll see."

"You're all insane," said the President. "Benning, please escort these gentlemen back to their facility. Bring Mr. Dunn's body with you. The entire facility is to remain on lockdown until further notice. No one is to enter once you are there, and no one is to leave. Close off all outside communication. No phones, no computers, no fucking cell phones, nothing. Got it? Use whatever resources you need, just make sure nobody leaves that goddamned building."

"Yes sir, Mr. President. I will have the situation under control," replied Benning.

"Good," said the President. "Because if you don't, you're going to be in deep shit. And Benning?"

"Yes, Mr. President?"

"Keep me apprised of Mr. Dunn's condition. Notify me the moment there should be any changes, if any changes should happen."

"Yes sir, Mr. President. I will, sir."

Almost exactly 48 hours later, The President of the United States of America received an extremely urgent phone call.

Chapter Six

T+6 Months, C.E.

It became clear at some point that the protesters easily outnumbered the police. Looking out the window of the hotel room Frank Dunn currently occupied reminded him of looking into the world's biggest ant farm. So many people filled the streets it seemed as if the streets themselves were a living, moving serpent. They carried signs, they yelled slogans, they sang songs of solidarity, and they all wanted the same thing: The Cure.

The initial media blitz after word leaked out about exactly what the government had been hiding was breathtaking. In the early days it was also very jubilant, breaking the news to a waiting world about the realization of the breakthrough that humanity had been searching for ever since people were able to comprehend their own mortality. Finally here it was, and everyone would be saved. Until, of course, it became clear not everyone would be saved. Only a chosen few. The elites, as it turned out. It was the ultimate class warfare as far as nearly the entire population of the world was concerned. Hand-waving about costs and manufacturing difficulties were dismissed as irrelevant. After all, who were the elites to say any price was too much for a single human life? It was the ultimate insult, and the ultimate injustice. Frank was amazed things hadn't turned more violent yet, but he had no doubt they would get there soon enough.

Frank sat in the leather armchair next to the bed in his hotel room, flipped on the television, and tuned it to CNN. The footage they showed was the same around the world. Chicago, San Francisco, Dallas, New York, Paris, London, Cairo, Mumbai, Beijing, the list went on and on and the images paraded across the screen, nearly identical except for the language the signs were written in. The newspaper on the hotel bed didn't even attempt to cover any other stories these days. It was all about The Cure and the fallout it had caused.

It was both amusing and horrifying to Frank that he was the one who had started it all. His identity as the first beneficiary of The Cure had eventually slipped out, and he was relieved that he had not been cast as one of the elites. In fact Frank had become something of a folk hero in the past few months, seen as a pawn in the larger game that he was lucky enough to have gotten something out of, but not as a real insider. Which was partially the truth at least, and in any case Frank wasn't about to let slip that he had been somewhat involved in the project since the beginning.

Frank's cell phone rang and he answered before the second ring began. It was Jonas Cody. "Frank," Cody began, "you should come back to the lab. Things are heating up out there and D.C. is probably one of the worst places to be right now. Which I'm sure you already know, unless you've got your head further up your ass than I thought."

"I know what's going on, Jonas," Frank answered. "What makes you think you're any safer in that lab of yours anyway? It's only a matter of time before that little secret location leaks out and then what? You're stuck in a dead-end hole in the ground. At least there are places to run up here. Besides, what the fuck are they going to do to me?"

"You've got a point I suppose. If you want to stay up there for now I guess that's your problem. If you should change your mind just give me a ring and I'll have you brought down. And Frank?"

"Yes?" Frank answered.

"I'm hoping that whole thing about secret locations leaking out wasn't a threat. Because if it was, you know there are plenty of measures we could take. Very unpleasant ones for somebody with your, uh, condition."

"I don't give a shit what happens to you one way or another, Jonas. Thanks for the check, by the way. I hope you're still there in a year to give me the next one."

Jonas understood Frank's implication that he didn't care what happened to Jonas, but he did care about getting his next paycheck. "All right then," he finally said after an uncomfortably long pause. "I'll be seeing you sooner or later I expect."

Frank half-grunted into the phone and clicked it shut, ending the call. As he put the phone back in his shirt pocket he un-muted the television set, where a hapless looking reporter seemed to be in the middle of some unexpected chaos. The reporter was broadcasting from Los Angeles and it looked like all hell was about to break out there. The National Guard had been called in to try to put down an uprising that had been threatening to turn violent for the past two days.

Frank sat in the leather armchair, watching the television and wondering how long it would be until martial law were declared right here, in the good old United States of America. It was interesting as hell to Frank, having a front-row seat to all this madness. Ultimately it didn't matter much to him one way or the other how it turned out. He was going to be just fine no matter what happened. He was sure of it.

Chapter Seven

T+18 Months, C.E.

"Are you sure?" Dan Ostiguy smiled into his satellite phone handset. These days cellular service was pretty unreliable but the satellites were still flying. After nearly a year of searching they'd finally captured someone who really was a part of The Cure project and had carried a wealth of information about it with him. He had refused to tell them his name but it was all over the papers in the briefcase the man carried as well as on his driver's license: Adam Biago. Apparently this guy was somebody important to The Cure project, and even if he wasn't going to talk, the contents of his briefcase gave them all the information they needed.

"Yes, I'm positive. Pima County, Arizona. There's even blueprints of the facilities in here."

"Nice work, Dennis," Ostiguy said into the phone. "How soon will you be here?"

"We should be there by 5pm, assuming no major holdups along the way." Over the past year the world had gone to hell in a handbasket. There remained a semblance of normalcy in some pockets where you might expect it: Washington, D.C., London, Berlin, and San Francisco most notably. Other formerly civilized places, New York City, Los Angeles, and Paris among them, had devolved into total chaos.

"We'll be ready. Make sure no matter what happens you do not lose this guy along the way. Or if you do at least don't lose the fucking briefcase. You know how important this is, Dennis, right? This is the break we've been waiting for."

"I know, don't worry," Dennis replied. "We'll be there before you know it."

Dan Ostiguy pressed the disconnect button on his phone and smiled. He strolled outside to light up a cigar. He knew it was probably a jinx, but he didn't see this one going any way but his at this point. He was going to put things right once and for all.

By the time the car carrying Biago finally showed up at 8:15 that evening Ostiguy had begun to think maybe he had been premature lighting that cigar up after all. Dennis and his men were held up due to a minor riot just a few miles away but had managed to elude getting into any major trouble themselves. In the back seat of the car sat Biago, a bag over his head. As the car rumbled to a stop in front of Dan Ostiguy he put his hands on his hips and smiled. Dennis killed the engine and got out holding a briefcase, which he held out to Ostiguy as he approached. "The Big Enchilada," Dennis said. "For you."

"Thanks, man, you're a pal," Ostiguy said with a smirk, taking the briefcase. "Bring the guy inside. Take him to the cell in the basement and lock it up. I doubt we'll

really need him but I want to make sure we have all the information we need from our friend here before we go and do anything rash."

"You got it," said Dennis, turning back to the car to retrieve Biago. The two men in the car began to get out as Dennis turned and they talked amongst themselves. Dan Ostiguy brought the briefcase over to the picnic table in the side yard to have a look.

Ostiguy sat at the wooden table and fired up the camping lantern that sat in the middle of it. It threw an enormous amount of light that made him squint momentarily while his eyes adjusted to the sudden shock. It was a nice night and sitting out here was better than sitting in the house. The electricity had gone off months ago making it even darker inside, and the place just kind of stank to boot. As he opened the briefcase Dan Ostiguy smiled, wondering how long it would be before the tide of this war turned.

The documents inside the briefcase were nothing if not thorough. There was some information on The Cure itself, but Dan couldn't even begin to fathom most of that, not that it really mattered one way or the other. What he was really interested in was the location of the facility where it was produced, and that was indeed here, along with detailed plans of some of the buildings and labs. Dan Ostiguy was going to make sure nobody ever received The Cure again, plain and simple. If there wasn't enough to go around it only seemed fair to take it away entirely. That was his plan, and now he was armed with exactly the information he needed to make it a reality.

The next morning Dan awoke feeling fresh and rested. He'd slept better than he had in months, and was ready for the task ahead of him. He gathered up Dennis and the others and the four of them piled into the car with the briefcase, leaving Biago locked in the basement cell to rot. He found it odd that Biago didn't protest much, but didn't really give a flying fuck about him one way or the other. Biago was not his problem.

The drive to Arizona was going to be a long one, but that was good. It gave them time to talk through the plan again and again, to look for weaknesses in it and try to cover any contingencies that might come up. They suspected security would have been weakened after all that had happened in the past year but that there would still be some pretty heavy-duty protection in place, and they were going to need some heavy artillery to get this job done. The first stop would be Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where Dan had a few connections that were willing to help with the supplies they needed. From there it would be straight to Arizona to finish the job.

A week later Dan Ostiguy and his team arrived in the Arizona Desert. They set up a makeshift camp with some of the supplies borrowed from Fort Bragg and set to work. As hard as it was to wait any longer patience was called for as they rehearsed their plan, refining it further with each dry run. They'd only have once chance to get it right, and Dan was not going to have any fuck-ups take down that one chance. Months passed in the desert as they continued to refine the plan and rehearse their every move. Dan never stopped grinning the entire time.

Chapter Eight

T+24 Months, C.E.

What was left of the world's major media sources were filled with the same story in the weeks following the explosion. The lab, the source of The Cure, which had held so much hope for humanity while simultaneously threatening to destroy it, had been obliterated. Whomever had carried out the attack had apparently known what they were doing. Explosive charges had been placed at strategic power generation points and transfer stations throughout the facility. To say that there was nothing left wouldn't be entirely accurate. There was a nice big hole where it had been, for one thing. That, and a hell of a lot of blackened and charred pieces of things that may once have been office equipment.

Immediately following the explosion the masses had celebrated, dancing in the streets and partying like it was the best thing that had ever happened. The entire world pulled together in celebration in those initial days. As time went on, new opinions began to be heard though. Perhaps this wasn't the best thing to have ever happened. Yes, the elites and their miracle Cure were destroyed, but what did it mean for humanity? What if The Cure was just waiting for the next breakthrough before it would have become available to everyone, fundamentally changing the course of human history? None of the self-proclaimed experts really knew any better than anyone else what might have or should have happened, rendering their opinions meaningless to most of the general public.

Slowly, life regained some semblance of normalcy. Groups of people began to calm down and organize. Within a few months some of the larger companies that had existed prior to the unveiling of The Cure began to reassemble and reorganize, providing more stability and some promising signs that things were indeed finally returning to normal. Governments began to reassert power, not necessarily because they had it, but because the populations saw a need for it again and allowed it to happen. In its way The Cure had already had an effect on humankind that nobody could have foreseen: Governments of the world were united in trying to make the world a better place, and the people of the world had a say in how things were being put back together. Cooperation ruled the day, simply because it was the only way any progress could be made.

As the months stretched on people wondered how things had gotten as far as they did. Had the human race really come as close to the brink as it now seemed? How many people had died? How many hundreds of millions, worldwide, had died in the struggles over something that no longer even existed? How many more would have died had it gone on? The past slowly faded as time eased tensions and erased memories, but the changes persisted. Some of them persisted just below the surface, and it seemed that many had already forgotten that among them still walked some of the elites, those who had received The Cure and were nearly immortal. It was easy enough for them to blend in since they looked no different than anyone else. They aged

much more slowly than expected, sure, but as long as they kept on the move that wasn't a big problem. And so things went for a time, with the population slowly rebuilding the civilization and culture that the Earth had once known, and The Cured walking amongst them, undetected but largely known to each other. A secret society within the larger one survived, and thrived.

The Cured kept in touch through discreet means, with a known network that numbered just over 1,400. It was suspected there were at least a couple hundred more, although nobody really knew for certain how many of them existed. They were spread around the globe but the vast majority, nearly 1,000, were in North America. Some of The Cured were forced to lay low due to their own fame. The President of the United States for example; Nobody knew where exactly he had wound up, if indeed he was even still alive. But mostly they were just average people who nobody would have ever suspected of anything. People like Frank Dunn, who despite having had a brief flash of fame when he had been paraded about as the first recipient of The Cure was somehow lucky enough to have had his 15 minutes of fame pass him by.

Frank was grateful for his lack of notoriety. He had settled into a pleasant routine by this time along the Texas Gulf Coast. It wasn't such a bad place to lay low as it turned out. Frank spent his days in a small bungalow a couple of miles from the beach. He wasn't interested in the constant power struggles that took place for actual beachfront property, and besides, why should he mind a couple of miles of walking to get to the beach whenever he wanted? There was no need to rush anything. He had all the time in the world.

Chapter Nine

T+48 Months, C.E.

The knock on the door was a mild shock in its own right, but Frank was in no way prepared for who he saw standing on the other side of that door through the peephole. "Holy shit!" exclaimed Frank, his eyes wide as he pulled the door open. "Doc! How did you get here! How are you still alive? How... how the hell are you?"

Adam Biagio stood on Frank's doorstep, gaunt and disheveled but there was no doubt who it was. "I'm OK Frank," Biagio said. "Can I come in?"

"Of course! Please. Can I get you anything? Something to drink perhaps?"

"Something strong," Biagio replied. "Bourbon perhaps?"

"You got it. Neat?" asked Frank as he motioned Biagio into his house and closed the door behind him.

"Yes, please," replied Biagio. Frank walked over to the freestanding bar in the corner of the living room as Biagio began to talk. "It's been a while, Frank. How have you been?"

"I've been getting by," said Frank as he poured some Bourbon into a glass for Biagio and another for himself. "I'm grateful that people seem to have pretty much forgotten who I am. I'm sure there were quite a few in my situation who weren't so lucky. There are plenty of us who have managed to get by though. Things are quiet and I'm just going on with my life as best I can. But I suppose you can see that pretty well from where I'm living. What about you? How the hell have you been?"

"Dead," said Biagio, stone-faced. "I died in a basement in Virginia somewhere, oh, I guess it was over two years ago now. I died of thirst, I think. Pretty painful way to go, actually. Luckily I got better."

Frank started at Biagio for a few seconds, silent. "I guess I should have known," Frank began, "but somehow it never occurred to me. Of course you received The Cure. Why the hell wouldn't you? They needed you. You developed the fucking thing in the first place after all. Jesus. Why did you die? Killed, I assume?"

"Oh yes," said Biagio. "I was locked in a basement and left to die. The people who did it were involved in the explosion that blew up my lab, or at least I have very strong reason to believe they were involved. I was hustled into a car one afternoon as I walked along a side street in Quantico, minding my own business as best I could with four plainclothes guards surrounding me. I don't know how they knew, but somehow they must have known I was involved with The Cure Project. They killed the guards quickly but seemed very careful not to hurt me. They took my briefcase and searched

it, made a few phone calls, and next thing I knew I was locked in a basement and left there to rot. They had built this little, well, sort of a holding cell I guess you'd call it, out of chain-link fence down there. Nothing to do, nothing to eat, nothing to drink, no way out. They just left me there. I heard them drive away, and after a couple of days I got the idea they weren't coming back. Another week or so and it was the end of the line for me I'm afraid. I came back of course, but that first round-trip out of the world was painful enough that I was pretty motivated not to go through that again any time soon. Eventually I figured out I could use my belt to snag some tools that had been left sitting on a workbench just out of my reach. I couldn't reach much, but eventually I got some tin snips. It was hard even with those, and it took me another 2 or 3 days to cut my way out of there. But I did it."

"Jesus," said Frank. "Too bad you never managed to make The Cure take away the pain when you go. That would have been a bit, well, nicer. But hey, who I am I to comment, you're the fucking scientist here."

"Yes, well, near-immortality does come with it's price. If you can manage to keep from dying a painful death it's not so bad really."

"Yeah, I guess. It still feels weird. Anyway, what happened after that? Where have you been hiding out since then? Why haven't I heard about you? You know about the others, right? The Cured. There's about 1,600 of us that we know of. You know this, right? You must."

"I've heard rumors, Frank, but I haven't been inclined to reach out to anyone to be honest. I'm not a very popular person as I'm sure you can imagine, and I suspect that holds true even amongst some of The Cured. So I went it alone for a while. I settled in rural Georgia actually. Had myself a nice little farm out of the way, took care of it, kept myself busy and fed. It's hard work you know, keeping a farm like that. Being self-sufficient isn't easy. But the work kept me going in some ways. I kept busy, that's for sure. I did eventually overhear a few things, spoke with a few people I thought seemed friendly. They were, it turns out, and eventually they told me about you. You're quite a celebrity amongst The Cured, even if you are pretty well forgotten outside that group. So here I am, Frank. That's my story."

"Well, it is nice to see you Doc. Despite the fact that all this shit is theoretically your fault."

"Yes, well, things did get a little off track. This wasn't exactly what I had intended, Frank. Don't blame me, or at least not just me, Frank. Those cretins that blew up the lab had a lot to do with things, because Phase 2 was going to undo a lot of the damage, or at least so I'd hoped at the time. Not now though, it's all gone. Gone with the lab. Not quite as poetic as 'Gone with the Wind' I admit, but there you have it."

"What was Phase 2?" asked Frank.

"Phase 2 was going to be what I had hoped Phase 1 would have been, before reality set in. Phase 2 was going to make The Cure available to everyone in the world, Frank. We'd found a new way of synthesizing the TetraHy... uh, the expensive part, in plain English. The Cure could have gone into mass production and been available to anyone in the developed world quite easily at the corner drugstore. In developing countries The Cure could have been quite easily subsidized. We're talking something like \$15 a dose, Frank. \$15 of cost went into it anyway, I'm sure it could have sold for considerably more. But even so Frank, we're talking a pittance compared to the costs of the Phase 1 doses."

Frank stood, eyes wide, lips parted, trying to speak but nothing came out. "You're serious," he finally managed. "You're fucking serious. But you can't be. You did it once, just fucking do it again. You can't just keep this to yourself, Doc. You can undo the damage. Hell, you can reverse the fucking damage. You can do what you set out to do and change the course of the human race. Why in the fuck wouldn't you do that now?"

"Frank, listen," Biagio began. "It's not that simple for a lot of reasons. Technical reasons, sure. A lot of work was lost in the lab. It's not like I have the formula for The Cure floating around in my head, never mind the new improved version. Decades of development work went into this Frank, and I didn't do it all myself. It grew and was built over time on the work of many people, myself included of course, but I was just a part of it. None of that data ever left the lab, Frank. It was simply not allowed, even before the proverbial shit hit the fan. But even if I could recreate it Frank, I'm not sure that's such a good idea. Look around you, Frank. Look at the state of the world. Do you really think humanity would be ready for a universal version of The Cure? Do you, Frank? Because I'm not so sure. Things didn't exactly go smoothly with the dress rehearsal, did they?"

"Things didn't go smoothly because it was an elitist fucking game," Frank snapped back. "That was the whole point, don't you see? If everyone had been able to get The Cure in the first place we wouldn't be here today."

"And where would we be, Frank? Please tell me. Where would we be, when those starving in the Third World kept right on starving, just for a much longer time. Where criminals could go on torturing, maiming, doing whatever they wanted for a much longer time with no fear of serious repercussions. The death sentence wouldn't carry a lot of weight any more, would it? And jail? What would you have to do to be sentenced to 400 years in prison when killers and rapists are out in 5 years as it is? Where would humanity be when people decided life wasn't worth quite as much as it was before, since really, you can't kill anybody anyway. And even if you do manage to, well, they were probably 200 years old anyway, what do you want? People can't handle this, Frank. They just can't. But you're not listening to me, Frank. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't recreate the work. I'm not sure I want to, but I don't really have that decision to make at all if I can't recreate it in the first place, now do I? I think not."

"Jesus," said Frank, sitting down on the sofa. He looked shell shocked. "You've got a hell of a lot of faith in humanity there, Doc."

"Well, humanity hasn't really done much to make me think very highly of it in the past few years, Frank. Do you really think we're ready, Frank? I mean, you and I have no choice. What's done is done. I know that's not right either, but I can't change that, Frank. So here we are. Yes, if the lab hadn't been sabotaged Phase 2 probably would have happened, and I would have happily done my part to make it happen. Today I don't know that I would do the same thing. But damn it, Frank, this is all just mental masturbation. I can't recreate The Cure even if I wanted to. Certainly not today. Probably not ever. It's out of my hands, Frank."

"So it is," said Frank, still looking pretty disconnected. "So it is."

Chapter Ten

T+100 Years, C.E.

Frank Dunn stood on the balcony watching the sun rise. He and his wife had been living in the little villa in Tuscany for the past 80-something years, and for most of that time their daughter Amanda had been with them. Frank's wife had received The Cure back when she had been the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Rome. The fact that both of Amanda's parents had been recipients of The Cure had conferred certain genetic advantages on her that nobody, not even Adam Biago, had foreseen. In the 100 years since Frank had received the cure he had appeared to age 10 or 12 years, quite a bit less than Biago had originally predicted. But Amanda Dunn, at 78 years old, appeared to the world as no more than a normal 5-year-old girl. She appeared that way at least until she opened her mouth to speak, at which point it became apparent the person who was speaking was far too worldly to be 5 years old. At the rate she was aging her lifespan was likely to be in the neighborhood of 1,200 years.

As Frank stood staring out over the sublime landscape he felt an arm reach tenderly around his waist, and soft lips kiss the back of his neck. He turned to face his wife Bella and smiled. "Good morning, beautiful," he said to her.

"Good morning, my love," replied Bella. "Lovely day, is it not?"

"Indeed," said Frank, "and it's even lovelier now that you're here." He pulled her close to him and kissed her deeply, passionately, with a spark of love that was amazing even to him sometimes after all these years.

Frank turned back to look out over the countryside, and Bella snuggled up next to him, their arms around each other's waist. "Do you think she'll ever have this, Frank? Do you think she'll ever grow up, become a woman, know love?"

"I don't see why not," said Frank. "Doc says she's aging, just at a very slow rate. Even he didn't see that one coming, which is kind of interesting. But there have been others, and they've grown older."

"I know about them, Frank, but I want to know about our baby. I just want to know she'll be all right."

"Look," said Frank, turning himself and her so that they could look into each other's eyes, "I'm no scientist. But I do know there have been others. Kids born with one Cured parent have grown older and some of them have even had kids. And those kids are still pretty young, but they seem to be aging even slower, like Amanda. I don't see why we shouldn't expect the same for her, and Doc agrees."

"What happens later, Frank?" asked Bella. "Maybe she will grow up, but what sort of world will it be by the time she's an adult? How many people will there be, Frank? Everything's changing so fast."

"I don't know, baby," said Frank, his eyes serious. "Things are going to have to change, there's no doubt. But people will find a way. We've always found a way, Bella. And these kids are going to have such an advantage, just think of the knowledge they can accumulate over the lifetimes they'll have. People will learn and adapt, and they'll solve the problems and find a way to make it work. What other choice do they have?"

Bella nodded her head slowly and finally rested her head against Frank's shoulder. They stayed like that for a long time, sometimes talking, sometimes just holding each other and being in the moment. After a time they went inside to their bedroom, and although they didn't know it at the time, they made their second child that day. A child who would live longer and do more things than anyone in human history could have ever expected.