

THE  
EDEN SEED

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The Eden Seed was inspired by a love of adventure and religious factoids, and is dedicated, in particular, to my *all...*

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# CHAPTER ONE

## THE MEETING AND THE PARTING

TEN MILES SOUTH of Munich, Matt Malcolm eyed the eleven men and one woman who sat round the polished beech wood table. To his left was the European Chief Justice, the three Chief Executive Officers of the biggest pharmaceutical companies in the world and a very smug-looking economist. On the right hand side of the table sat the Head of Research and Development for Vectan-Brosman Pharmaceuticals, three corporate lawyers, a top statistician and his own Business Head. He was centre stage. Matt Malcolm: Vectan-Brosman's Product Manager for the world's first broad-spectrum cancer vaccine to the marketplace.

He noticed his reflection in the glass door to the rear of the meeting room and slacked his tie. Still convinced he looked like a dishevelled schoolboy, he adjusted his black-rimmed glasses and pressed the F7 key on his laptop. The data projector illuminated the screen, and he read out the following quote: "Lamech had lived a hundred and eighty-two years. He became the father of a son, and called him Noah, saying 'Out of the ground which the LORD has cursed this one shall bring us relief from our work and from the toil of our hands.'" He studied the faces

that stared, incredulously, at the screen. Enjoying every second of their confusion, he smiled and continued, "Lamech lived after the birth of Noah five hundred and ninety five years, and had other sons and daughters. Thus, all the days of Lamech were seven hundred and seventy-seven years, and he died."

He walked down one side of the table and stood behind Jessica Baron, the Chief Justice. He produced a small laser pointer and circled the number seven hundred and seventy-seven. As the murmurs of disgruntlement began to build, he walked down the other side of the table and clicked forward to the next slide. "After Noah was five hundred years old, Noah became the father of Shem, Ham and Japheth..." He turned off the projector and notched the room lights up a little. "Noah went on to live another four hundred and fifty years. We don't need a statistician to tell us that's a lifespan of nine hundred and fifty years. Admittedly, the average lifespan fell two or three hundred years after the flood, but they lived a great deal longer than the eighty-one year average of today."

Ted Burrows, the man from Milwaukee and CEO of Meldan Industries, the number one company in heart management, tapped his fingers on the table. "Genesis, Chapter 5, verses 28 – 32. Probably written around 600 B.C."

Next to him, Shoji Ueshima gave a curt nod and sniffed. "I hope I've not come half way round the world for a bible class, Mr. Malcolm." He ran Gaijin Pacific, by far the biggest producer of antibiotics in the world.

"Thank you for your patience, Mr. Ueshima," said Matt, attempting to bow politely. "As you know the company I represent, Vectan-Brosman, is the world leader in vaccines, so in this room we would have a lot to lose if, for example, death and disease were suddenly not as big a problem as they used to be."

Jessica Baron looked up, her natural blonde hair electric in the dim beam of a solitary halogen. "What's this all about, Mr. Malcolm?"

"Your Honour, this is all about confidence. It's all about balance." Matt smiled at the attractive Chief Justice then turned to address Ueshima and Burrows. "This meeting is all about the very existence of both your companies."

Matt sensed the tension building in the two industry moguls and

checked his own Vectan-Brosman contingent for any reaction. There was none.

In the momentary silence he saw Miss Baron drop some ice into her water. He heard it snap.

Burrows thumped the table, causing the surface of the mineral water to ripple in every glass. He ignored Matt Malcolm and addressed Sir John James, the Head of Vectan-Brosman, "John, are you trying to stage-manage some kind of takeover, or what? You'd better come out with it!"

Sir John tapped the blonde-coloured table with the rubber end of a hotel pencil. His skin was like parchment and he had the cold, marble eyes of an executioner. He gave the American an imperious stare and said, "Let Mr. Malcolm finish, Ted."

Taking his cue, Matt moved round the table until he stood behind a tall, shy looking man who sported a thick, silver moustache. "While my good friend, Dr. Schlesinger, here, was working on his usual variety of material, he found something that had an incredible effect on our laboratory animals. This substance boosted the immune system of the animals tested to such a level that, so far, we have been unable to infect them with bacteria, viruses or cancer cells."

Ted Burrows took a quick sip of water and watched as Dr. Lucius Schlesinger stood up to address the room. The doctor spoke with a thick Swiss-German accent. "So far, we have only been able to measure the lifespan of fruit flies and mice, but both have lived more than ten times longer than the controls." Matt toyed with the bristles on his chin as the old man cleared his throat and removed two folders from his briefcase. "Matt is correct. We cannot make these specimens ill, no matter how we introduce the pathogens; orally, by injection—"

"They will be able to read the data for themselves, Lucius," said Matt, interrupting the doctor after receiving a particularly deadly glare from his business head, Ginger Barclay.

"Yes, of course." Oblivious to the fact that he'd said a little too much, Lucius Schlesinger smiled demurely and sat down.

Matt addressed Burrows and Ueshima. "Rather than launch, let's call it Product X, and take you both out of the industry forever." Matt noticed the company lawyers bristle. "We thought we'd invite you to join us in maintaining the status quo. The consequences of launching

such a product to the general public would be..." Matt stretched out the moment by taking a sip of his water, "...extremely disruptive." The room had become stuffy and constricting; the air was thin. Matt moved over to the small dial that controlled the temperature. He turned it up a notch to twenty-nine degrees.

"What is the product?" Ueshima tensed, his mouth a tight line.

Sir John spoke. "It would be unprofessional to divulge its composition at this point, however, Matt will explain how we intended to advertise."

Matt watched as his invited audience loosened their ties and unbuttoned their expensive suits. He felt a particular satisfaction with his positioning of Justice Baron. Bathed in the warmth of the soft halogen, she sighed impatiently and unfastened her tight-fitting jacket. With renewed excitement, he feigned an American accent and slipped into the role of cinematic narrator. "The elixir of life, Manna, Star Fire; a substance thought so precious it was carried inside the Arc of the Covenant, is now available at your local pharmacy. Your grandchildren, your great, great grandchildren; all will see you in the prime of your life. Live for a thousand years, disease free!" Matt bellowed the last part, revelling in the theatrics of the marketeer.

Ueshima feigned indifference. "Not very scientific, Mr. Malcolm."

Sir John interjected. "No, we've always thought Matt more suited to the commodity market, but this new discovery could be sold in such a way if we chose."

Matt saw Sir John glance over at Ginger Barclay, the calculating American he'd just promoted to Business Head of Vaccines. He was Matt's immediate boss but completely different in his approach to the marketplace. Ginger was the ultimate analyst, calculating, overcautious, whereas Matt liked to think he was the archetypal expressive, a flamboyant and refreshing risk-taker who challenged the stiff wheels of the pharmaceutical machine. Ginger and Matt constantly clashed over ethics and advertising, but he knew, in Sir John's eyes, this friction was healthy.

Jessica Baron, looking very uncomfortable, addressed the Vectan-Brosman contingent. "Why haven't you just released the product to the marketplace? If it's as good as you say, you have a moral duty—"

But she was interrupted mid-flow as the projector hummed into life again.

“Sorry, your Honour, but I’d like our economist to say a few words at this point.” Matt invited the smug-looking man with the underdeveloped goatee to comment on the graph that now filled the screen.

“Good-day. Professor Rod Millar. Economics, Harvard.” He spoke with a southern drawl and used the word Harvard as a kind of trump card, expecting immediate respect. “Apart from the demise of the pharmaceutical industry, which accounts for more than eight percent of the global economy, there would be knock-on effects for the medical professions, pension companies, insurance companies... The world’s financial systems, as we know them, would simply collapse.” Next to him, the Statistician, a thin, chinless man with the dented posture of a weasel, joined in. “The global population would rise exponentially and...” he pointed to the graph and continued in his high voice, “with food and fuel soon becoming limiting factors, the only options would be conflict or rationing of the Vectan-Brosman product.” He cleared his throat. “Which, in turn, could also lead to further mass aggression.”

Matt examined Jessica Baron for a reaction. “Nature is self limiting. Miss Baron, it would, in fact, be immoral to release Product X to the marketplace at this point in time; however,” he addressed Burrows and Ueshima. “As the patent holders, we have decided to restrain ourselves for a nominal contribution.”

Burrows shook his head, “I knew it, you son-of-a-bitch...”

The lawyers sensed litigation and opened their briefcases.

Her face flushing, Jessica Barron nervously traced a slender finger over her right eyebrow.

Matt continued. “We will sit on this wonder-product for another ten years until we work out the finer details of roll-out. It will only cost you one billion U.S. per month—each.”

Matt had worked hard on this little part of his presentation, but he still felt a little tinge of fear trace his spine.

There was complete silence for what seemed like hours, but was probably only a few torturous seconds. He knew it was time to keep his mouth shut. The longer the silence, the greater the pressure.

The Vectan-Brosman lawyer handed out the prepared agreements, one to the puce-faced Man from Milwaukee and another to Mr. Ueshima who, by now, had frozen in a state of apoplexy.

Ted Burrows was, predictably, the first to break the silence. “How... How dare you think that we would listen to such a heap of crap! One—there is no proof that you even have such a product and, two—even if you have, this is nothing short of blackmail! And you have the audacity to pull this stunt in front of the European Chief Justice.”

As Ted Burrows stood up to leave, Ueshima spat out his parting volley. “You will be hearing from our lawyers! Good-day!”

Matt, Ginger Barclay, Sir John and their lawyer stayed put, seemingly content with the reaction and Matt’s presentation.

Lucius Schlesinger, on the other hand, was sweating profusely. He tried to stand up, but Matt held his shoulder and gently pushed him back down into his seat.

The Vectan-Brosman lawyer addressed Ueshima and Burrows in the most boring of monotone voices. “We have sent copies of the agreements and the trial data to your respective head offices...”

The glass doors swung shut on their hinges, and the V-B lawyer, suddenly superfluous, fell silent.

Burrows and Ueshima had left.

As he got up, Matt turned to face Jessica Baron. She was flustering in an effort to close her bag and obviously enraged at being set up. She stopped struggling and looked straight into his eyes. “How dare you! How dare you bring me here under false pretences? The European Pharmaceutical Overview, indeed...”

“I think you’ve caught your skirt in the strap,” said Matt, adjusting his glasses.

In the rush to escape her predicament, Jessica had hitched her skirt in the black leather strap of her bag, revealing a good six inches of her nylon-covered thigh.

Matt made to unhitch the material.

“Don’t touch me!” Her full lips quivered.

He’d invaded her space. He’d felt the warmth of her body; tasted her flowery perfume.

She jerked her skirt free, almost ripping the pressed cotton hem be-

fore strutting out through the doors and marching off along the bright corridor. It still rang with the curses of disgruntled executives.

Matt shrugged and turned to face his mentors. "We expected that?"  
"We did," said Sir John.

Three weeks later, two billion U.S. was deposited in the Vectan-Brosman bank account in Zurich.



SIX MONTHS LATER, on the top floor of the Brosman Building, and in the inner sanctum of the glass-walled office reserved for top management, Matt Malcolm and Ginger Barclay eyed each other for the first time that day. Matt, the younger of the two, positioned himself behind his dark, veneered desk and stared down at the wedge of printed emails clutched in his manager's left hand. Sinking down into his chair, he flashed a nervous smile and swung his computer screen into position between himself and the big American.

Matt nodded towards the emails in his boss's hand. "Shareholders?"

Ginger swung the screen out of his way and moved in closer. "Four hundred and twenty and counting... They want my head on a platter, though a good number of them say I hired the wrong Product Manager."

Matt, unnerved by the early morning coverage they'd received on breakfast TV, had made a special effort to get in early.

Ginger repeated the news flash. "Vectan-Brosman's Leukivec withdrawn over safety concerns."

Matt took his glasses off and began wiping them with a small lens cloth.

Ginger continued, "You may have pulled off your little stunt in Munich, but the shareholders don't know about that. Business must look as if it's going on as normal. I've just been in to see Sir John, and he says the share price is down another fifteen percent!" He formed a sardonic smile as he let the emails spill from his hand onto Matt's desk.

Matt heard him sigh as he strolled over to the large window framing the city below.

Tapping his chubby fingers on the triple glazing, Barclay began mumbling to himself. "Malcolm... Insisted..." He turned to face

Matt. "Sir John had to insist on a marketeer this time."

"Well, you've been through four product managers in two years, each one a highly qualified doctor or pharmacist, but none of them pushy enough," Matt reminded.

"Look, son. I was raised in Sol, Massachusetts. I studied Chemistry in Boston and then worked my way around the world for twenty-four years before getting this job. I've grafted for it. You, on the other hand, have been fast tracked." Matt watched as his boss tried to calm himself. "I hate it when kids are fast tracked."

*He hates it because he wasn't picked,* thought Matt.

"I mean, a Sales Rep for three years, a stint at Marketing then Global Product Manager. Lady luck gave you Leukivec, right in your lap, and now, now you've managed to wangle your way into the biggest find ever."

Matt knew he was referring to the miracle Bacterium, known to Vectan-Brosman's inner sanctum as The Seed Project. He also knew his boss considered him arrogant, unsophisticated, and most of all, rash.

Ginger's cold eyes narrowed as he moved closer. "The Federal Drug Administration pulled Leukivec..."

"Yes, I know but..."

"Oh, you know, do you? And do you think it might just have something to do with the makeup of the board of the FDA these days?"

Matt knew that Ted Burrows had been voted on.

Ginger continued, "I knew it was a mistake to make enemies like Burrows and Ueshima."

"Have they stopped the payments?" Matt hoped they hadn't.

"Not as yet, but Sir John's just informed me that things have become a little more complicated."

Matt couldn't see how anything could be worse than a vaccine recall and a potential suspension of the payments he'd arranged in Munich.

"There's a problem with The Seed Project," said Ginger.

Matt knew they were at a key stage. "The crop?" he broached.

"It's been destroyed, along with the reserves and the gene bank," snapped Ginger.

"You mean you kept all the sources in the one place? But no one knew where the crop was being cultivated." Matt couldn't believe any-

one in Vectan-Brosman would have leaked the information. There was top security on the project, which meant that only four people knew the fine details. “But only four—”

Ginger interrupted. “You, me, Sir John, and Dr. Schlesinger. The farmers at the site didn’t even know they were growing the stuff. They were told it was genetically modified linseed.” He lifted something from his in-tray and walked back over to Matt’s desk. “Listen Matt, I’ve had a long chat with Sir John and we’ve come up with a proposal.”

Sweat caused Matt’s glasses to slip down his nose. He pushed them back into place.

Ginger’s voice deepened, “We need time to investigate the situation and...” pausing, he peered distractedly behind Matt into the marketing department, “...the shareholders need a sacrifice.”

Matt didn’t like the sound of this at all.

Ginger placed a headed sheet of paper on Matt’s desk and spun it round. “We’d like you to sign this.”

“Sign what?” Matt caught the smell of garlic on Ginger’s breath. A hint of cheap vodka and stale cigars infused the stench as his boss moved in closer. His voice rattled deep in his chest, “It’s time to take a trip, Matt, but there can be nothing traceable to Vectan-Brosman. You will be completely on your own.”

“What do you mean, ‘on my own?’”

“You’re suspended on full pay, but as far as the rest of the planet is concerned, you’re fired. Clear?” Ginger pushed on without allowing Matt to rejoin the conversation. “Sacking a high profile executive like you might just salvage five or ten percent of the share price, boost confidence a little while we step up the pressure on the FDA.” Ginger produced a heavy gold pen from the inside pocket of his Armani jacket. “Sign it, Matt.”

Matt’s mouth became dry, but he ignored the company annulment decree and leaned back in his chair in an attempt to appear composed. He squinted past Ginger and gazed out of the smoked-glass window silhouetting the towering figure of the crass American. Matt loved to lose himself in the skyline, daydream his days away in this office, free from his own domestic drudgery and sense of impotence. He flicked a long strand of strawberry-blond hair from his forehead and blinked sweat from his stinging eyes, “I don’t think—”

“No, thinking is not your strong point, is it?” barked Ginger. “Failure to sign this piece of paper is not really an option, and besides, there’s one other piece of information you should consider.”

“What the hell’s that?” asked Matt, his voice gaining pitch.

Ginger tried to reassure the Marketeer. He slipped into a lower register. “We need someone within the four, who knows all the players, the product, and the consequences of some other interested party acquiring any remaining information on The Seed Project. In short, we need you to investigate this whole fuckin’ fiasco.”

Matt knew Ginger would love to see the back of him. “What’s the other piece of information, Ginger?”

His boss checked his watch. “Schlesinger’s missing.”

“I want to see Sir John,” said Matt, dreading to think what Ginger might have meant by the word missing.

Ginger ignored the request. “Yeah, that’s right Matt; your buddy, Dr. Lucius Schlesinger, PhD, has done a runner, no doubt with a few samples of the Seed and all the paperwork that goes with it. Who’d have thought the doctor would have been the first to get greedy?”

Matt knew Lucius Schlesinger would never knowingly betray them. “Lucius would never do that; besides, some of the crop must have survived.”

“The people who destroyed the crop used sulphuric acid. There’s no trace of it. Nothing,” said Ginger, his voice growing more ominous by the second.

A vein above Matt’s temple started to flick and pulse randomly. “What do you expect me to do? I’m not an investigator. Besides, there must be other Seeds we can cultivate?”

“We’d like to think so, but by the looks of things, our invisible man, Schlesinger, has been extremely thorough.”

Ginger’s mobile vibrated and he glanced at a text message before turning it off.

“Look Matt, you can always walk away from the whole situation, regard this fifty-thousand pounds in cash as your final payment.” Ginger slipped a manila envelope across the desk. Take the lot and retire. We won’t emphasize your lack of attention to detail too much. And we know you would never spill on The Seed Project, as your pension would definitely suffer.” Ginger smiled, enjoying the threat.

“Quite,” said Matt, a black wave of paranoia pressing down on him. *I should have prepared for this. I should have been ready for Ginger but the trap was already set.*

“The cash is to cover any initial expenses. As I’ve said already, there can be no transactions traceable to the company.” Ginger slid the envelope to the side, once more revealing the company annulment decree.

“I’m sorry, but there’s no way on Earth I’m signing that.” Matt slipped back into a stronger version of Glaswegian, normally reserved for close friends and family back home.

“You called the meeting in Munich, Matt,” said Ginger, impatiently.

“Only after we’d discussed it thoroughly and, as you may remember, I was congratulated for handling it so well!” Matt was still annoyed by his boss’s previous threats.

Ginger lowered his voice to a whisper. “You discovered the original sample of the Seed.”

“But it was a mistake and...” Matt hesitated.

“And you jeopardised six years of analysis with your schoolboy prank. Look Matt...!” Ginger glanced at the heads turning through the glass wall of the office. He lightened his tone. “Either you take the money and sign this annulment, which, incidentally, is way too generous, or you leave in disgrace.” Ginger tapped the manila envelope containing the money. “Take it and disappear.” *The money only represented a third of Matt’s annual salary.*

“But what am I supposed to do?”

“Look, the old man doesn’t want to lose you. He knows you and Schlesinger spent a lot of time together in Zurich, became good friends, so just find him. More importantly, you need to get another sample of the original Seed before Burrows and Ueshima find out we’ve nothing to threaten them with. For all we know they might be behind this whole fuckin’ thing. They might already have the Seed for themselves. They might even have Lucius. You didn’t tell Lucius where you got the original sample from, did you?”

“No but...”

“You never really told us either Matt, did you?” And again, without waiting for him to reply, Ginger turned away. “We’ll sort out the vaccine problem with the FDA,” he said, distractedly.

Matt felt the weight of Ginger's gold pen and, still in a daze, scribbled his signature on the company annulment decree. He said no more; instead he picked up the picture of his wife and son and handed over his security pass. He'd suddenly lost the will to fight.

"Leave your corporate card on your desk and pick up your e-tickets from Linda." Ginger pointed to their secretary who continuously tapped on her keypad outside the inner sanctum of the office.

"Tickets to where?" asked Matt, slipping the silver credit card from his wallet.

Turning away, Ginger began to gaze out at the snow-laden sky. "Go dig. Call me when you think you're onto something," said Ginger. "Why don't you start with your friends in Zurich?"

Evidently mesmerised by the sudden flurry of snow outside, Matt saw Ginger tap the mobile bulging in his pocket. He suddenly thought of some weathered cowboy testing his six-gun and, as he stood facing the broad expanse of checked Armani jacket covering Ginger's back, he clenched his fists. He imagined plunging something sharp and jagged between Ginger's shoulder blades. In his mind's eye he saw the American's thick neck tense, his legs buckle, and then a dark stain merge the checks of the Armani jacket into one solid patch of crimson.

A printer clicked into life. It snapped Matt back to reality and, suppressing the urge to say any more, he made for the glass door he'd come through earlier. Forcing a smile, he paused at Linda's desk, reveling in her familiar pollen-dusted scent. Probably in her late fifties by now, she gave him that look; the one that told him she was very tasty but not on the menu. She always smelt so beautiful, like some virginal aunt who burned with inner lust and, in his daydreams, he had imagined, many times, what she might be like. His eyes drifted over her heavy breasts then down to the garnished rings adorning her fingers. The huge, tacky lumps of gold and ruby dazzled him. He'd convinced himself that each one was a reward from her lucky husband, a little thank you for years of unblemished loyalty and unrivalled sexual satisfaction. The rings acted as a force field, rebuffing the weak-willed and draining licentious desire from pathetic men like him.

Multitasking, Linda continued to type with one hand while she opened a small metal drawer with the other. "Remember and bring me

back some of that nice Swiss chocolate.” Her voice was husky and conspiratorial.

Matt tried to maintain his smile, but his head was still pounding and he sensed Linda’s concern. Distractedly, he broached, “With or without nuts?”

“With, of course.” Linda drew the words out as she tried to interpret the situation. She waved him to the side and peered at Ginger Barclay’s silhouette against the weather outside. “Matt, you’re not in the bad books again, are you?”

He winked, bit his bottom lip and gave a small nod.

She handed him his flight reference numbers and issued two small tut-tuts.



IN THE SAFETY of his car, Matt’s mind raced with thoughts of anger and regret, but it was confusion that reigned supreme. What friends in Zurich could Ginger mean? Then he remembered the lie. It wasn’t always easy to remember lies. In fact, that was the main problem with them; they always seemed incredibly ingenious at the time but were usually just a random train of thought that fitted best in that one given situation. It was usually a situation needing elaboration or an injection of excitement, but in that particular case, the one involving the Museum, the situation had called for a serious amount of untangling. The facts were just too embarrassing. More to the point, they’d have got him sacked, there and then. So he’d untangled the facts from the truth and tailor-made some new ones instead. As he drove along the M25, he relived the lie as best he could. He remembered how he’d told Ginger that a friend of his, at Zurich University, had been on a North African dig, and how, after a few drinks, the friend had shown him some artefacts: pots, urns; jars and other bits and pieces he’d collected. All Matt had done was simply borrow a few samples of dried grass from the inside of one of his friend’s pots and then drop these into the Vectan-Brosman lab examination trays the next day. It had just been meant as a joke. Thankfully, he’d never named the friend, mainly because he couldn’t think of a plausible name at the time, and now Ginger was

sending him back to the Zurich to make contact with someone who had never existed in the first place. Still, the real truth wasn't that far removed from the lie, so he would take the flight to Zurich and do some digging of his own. After the destruction of the crop site in Almeria, he was probably Vectan-Brosman's only hope. He would need to examine his Munich presentation notes one more time. He'd have to check all the names of the lawyers and experts who'd attended and, now that the office was closed to him, he would have to find the file on his home computer or, perhaps, in the one other place he kept any kind of records.

On the way home from London he made the detour, a twenty-mile detour, which took him to the village of Alescorth and to the one woman who knew the real Matt Malcolm. That is to say, she knew the vibrant, optimistic, sexy Matt, not the dull, tired, moody one. As he drove, he decided that his personality probably split into three: the adventurer, the husband, and the businessman. He had a schizophrenic, chameleon-like trait he just couldn't control. He acted differently depending on the situation and whom he was with. He changed the way he spoke and, if he had the time, even the way he dressed. If someone spoke gruffly or loudly, he would match his or her tone accordingly. If someone were more laid back and softly spoken, he would lower his voice to match. He did this without the person involved having the slightest clue they were being copied. The transition was flawless.

Only Jenny, his wife, saw how he slipped under other peoples' skin, and she mistrusted him because of it. Sometimes Matt didn't even realise he was doing it himself. It just happened. It was probably the one biggest factor in his success. People had felt comfortable when he spoke to them because he reacted in exactly the way they would have done themselves. It was only Jenny who hated this facet of his personality. She suspected a deeper kind of deceit. But there was none. That is to say, there was no dishonesty in this particular chameleon-like trait. It just happened naturally. The affair, on the other hand, was a more difficult matter.

As he pulled into the quartz-chipped drive of Brin Cottage, it was the survival of his career rather than deceit that plagued his thoughts. His files were in the living room, but more importantly, there was the comfortable sanctuary of Sylvie's easy embrace to look forward to. He

often wondered if all men were as pathetic as him. Most men he'd ever known had strayed at some time or other. Long ago, he'd decided that only a saintly few could stifle their instincts and train themselves to stay monogamous. He used these kinds of statistics as an excuse for his own behaviour and often thought back to the words of his father. "Always remember the eleventh commandment, Son. Thou shalt not get caught!" His father was in fact referring to company embezzlement at the time, which had, unfortunately, resulted in Matt Malcolm Senior serving a three-year prison sentence in Belmarsh.

He clicked off the ignition and stretched out in his seat. Sylvie was so different from Jenny. She was undemanding and uncomplicated. She knew about his various affairs through the years, every nuance, every fantasy. She was his confessor and he needed her now more than ever.

Closing the door of his BMW, he clicked on the central locking system and crunched up the drive. A cold February evening, the stars already blinked through a deep cobalt sky. Sylvie had always yearned for immortality in the stars. She wanted Matt to name one after her. He'd looked into it, but it was not in the cosmos that Sylvie found everlasting fame; it was in the microcosm. Matt had found the perfect opportunity to grant her wish. It had turned out that, in amongst the material he'd acquired, there were a few strangely shaped seeds. Thought to be an ancient species of linseed, they contained a small amount of bacteria in their husks. This bacterium, a type of *Lanthobacter*, had been completely new to modern science and Matt, due to his close friendship with Lucius Schlesinger, had possessed the necessary clout to name this new species at the very point of its discovery. He had suggested the name *Lanthobacter Sylvie Imunitass*. Lucius Schlesinger had asked him what the Sylvie part had referred to, so Matt had, as usual, lied exquisitely. "Sylvie was the Sumerian god of healing," he'd said. "She could bestow immortality on her followers, and as no other species of bacteria on the planet has been, or probably ever will be, as miraculous at preventing disease and death as this one, it's only fitting that it should contain the goddess's name."

As his thoughts drifted back to Lucius's puzzled expression, he could suddenly smell the freshness of the frost-glazed snow. There was also a faint hint of hickory, wood-smoke filtering through the woods

behind the cottage. However, as he turned to look up at Sylvie's bedroom window, he was overcome by a real sense of foreboding. He was puzzled by the lack of movement in the house. Billie-boy, her crazy Red Setter, would normally have heard his car by now and gone berserk.

Perhaps she's gone out, he thought.

Matt stepped back and peered round the side of the cottage, but the nose of Sylvie's red mini coupe still poked out from the carport. She must have taken Billie-boy for a walk, he decided. It was a beautiful evening and she'd probably gone down to the river to throw some sticks for the daft mutt. Matt walked up to the front door and fingered the ornate brass dragonhead. His fingers stuck to the cold metal as he tapped twice. He jerked back. The door swung open.

Cautiously, he called into the stillness of the house. "Sylvie?" Stepping into the hall, he noticed a small pile of unopened mail but, as he lifted his head, he saw Billie-boy's auburn tail twitching at the end of the hallway. "Bill...Billie?" Twice, the feathered tail brushed against the kitchen floor before it stopped. Matt knew this was all wrong. Rushing up the narrow hall, he turned into the kitchen. "What's wrong, son? Where's your mum?" Matt slipped on something sticky and black. A dark pool had spread out round Billie-boy. It covered the granite-tiled floor. Matt knelt down in the mess and patted the dog's smooth head. The Setter whined and tried to turn. He panted uncontrollably. "Steady, boy. Steady." Frantically, he scanned the rest of the kitchen for any clue as to what might have happened. Blood continued to spread round his feet. Breathing heavily, he moved out of the gore and edged towards the living-room door. It was slightly ajar and a small table lamp threw some light onto the goatskin rug that lay at the fireplace. Matt pushed the door open another few inches and stepped inside. There, on the coffee table, he saw Sylvie's keys and Billie-boy's lead. An unfamiliar musty smell filled the house, a mixture of old books, singed hair and something else that smelt like herbs or perhaps perfume. He couldn't decide. He racked his brains for a logical explanation—an accident, a mistake of some kind. Sylvie was probably out looking for help. But then why had she left her house keys?

Something creaked upstairs.

Matt froze. He looked up at the old oak beams above his head and

tried to remember if the cottage had creaked like this before.

He moved back towards the kitchen and saw that Billie-boy now lay very still. Panic flooded over him and snuffed out any trace of rational thought. Again, he heard the same creaking noise as before. Someone was definitely upstairs. His own breathing sounded like an express train; every step he took sounded like some crazed giant snapping trees.

It could, of course, be Sylvie moving round upstairs; and there he was, too petrified to rush up and comfort her. Reaching the bottom of the stairs, he imagined all kinds of terrors as his fingers clawed at the cold handrail. Her bedroom door was shut, but lamplight winked through the crack between the bottom of the door and the floor. It definitely winked, off then on, as if someone had moved between the light and the door.

It flickered again.

He hesitated for an instant then, glancing about for something he might use as a weapon, he spied the old metal-tipped walking stick. It lay in its usual place, against the wall of the top landing. He snatched it up and tested its weight; pretty useless against a gun or more than one assailant, he wasn't really sure what he would do if he had to confront anyone. The light under the door seemed more constant. It was now or never.

His walking stick raised, Matt pushed against the bedroom door and fell inside. A heap of clothes lay strewn across the candlewick cover. There were bloodstains and muddy footprints on the carpet. A delicate lace bra, a solitary shoe and a pair of Sylvie's jeans, turned inside out, all lay in a pile on the bed, still glistening and wet.

"SYLVIA!"

Recklessly, he searched the room for any sign of her, all thoughts of an intruder or his own personal safety gone. Deep red droplets had sprayed up the wall behind the pink headrest of the bed, and more gore lay in lumpy pools on the floor. He felt his stomach tighten before, involuntary, he retched up a trail of yellow bile that added to the mess on the pink Wilton carpet. Shaking uncontrollably, Matt dropped the walking stick and steadied himself on the wall. He'd just glimpsed one of her ankles. Crimson splashes laced her shins and the neighbour of the cream-coloured shoe that he'd seen on the bed hung inelegantly from her left foot, dappled with blood, the heel snapped off.

There was no sign of life, and as he moved closer to the door of the en-suite his heart quickened.

As more of her body came into view, he noticed that her hands had been tied and that a towel had been thrown over her naked body in a pathetic attempt to make her decent.

Under the blood drenched towel there was deformity and stiffness. An eerie stillness ebbed over him and, increasingly, a darkening void filled his thoughts and pulled him towards her. No movement, no signs, Matt eased the towel from her legs. Her soft thighs were cut and bruised, and the stench of faeces and urine was overpowering. He threw the towel back down and drew back.

“Sylv...”

He knew she was past saving, and as his thoughts drifted back to the sight of the bloody towel, he heaved a second time. Staggering out of the bedroom he half slipped, half fell down the stairs until he stumbled against the front door. Stunned, he ran out into the driveway, his breath freezing instantly in the icy air.

Matt looked round, suddenly alert to the fact that the murderer could still be close by. His heart rate quickened as he remembered the flickering light in Sylvie’s bedroom. He tried, in vain, to convince himself that he’d imagined it. His forearm ached from his collision with the front door and, as he rummaged in his pockets for his car keys, he felt another unwelcome wave of nausea. He searched again, each pocket of his coat and trousers, at least twice, but they weren’t there. He must have left them in the house. Tears began to trace down his face as he banged his fist on the car door in frustration. His breath hung in the cold air.

A sudden rustle of paper startled him.

A bitter breeze flicked a few unopened letters against the bottom of the stairs. The random movement in the doorway was mirrored by the flapping of Redwings and Fieldfares as they danced above the cottage. Like leaves caught in the wind, they fluttered and sailed erratically in the winter sky.

A car roared past the driveway and shocked him into action.

He had to find his keys and get away from this place, now.

With renewed determination, he marched in through the front door and quickly glanced over the hall for his keys. With no sign of them in

the hallway, he looked past the still body of Billie-boy and, to his relief, saw the familiar yellow loop of his plastic key ring beside the goatskin rug in the living room.

As he knelt down to pick them up, his gaze fell on the desk beside the window. There was no sign of his laptop, and there was a space where his two black company folders had once been, but there was one other folder he'd kept safe, even from Sylvie, blue-tacked to the underside of the desk. He groped around until he felt its cold smooth cover touch his fingers. Unopened, he tucked it under his arm. He stumbled back through the living room and hall. Out in the cold, he clicked his car open and jumped inside. He felt pathetic, hiding like a coward in his car, but it was too late. Sylvie was dead.

Still fumbling with the ignition he thought he saw someone move upstairs.

"Shit, c'mon, come ON!" Adrenalin flooded into his veins as he struggled with his keys.

"There." Matt revved the engine and slammed into reverse. Skidding recklessly out of the driveway, he spun round on the empty road and put his foot down. He felt the acceleration force him further back into the cold leather seat. Sweat ran down his neck, soaking his shirt and making him shiver. He had to call the office. He had to report this somehow. But there was Jenny, his wife, to consider.

Maybe it was best to leave it.

Someone else could call the police.

"Shit!" He was so damn feckless. He held down the number two on his mobile and waited for the ring-tone.

"Hello. It's Matt. Can you put me through to Linda?"

"Sorry, who?" The voice was unfamiliar.

He repeated the question.

"Sorry sir, I think you have the wrong number." This time the girl's voice sounded more abrupt, as if she was trying to get him off the line.

Matt glanced down at the number two on his mobile, "This is Vectan-Brosman Pharmaceuticals?" Matt spoke clearer this time, affecting his best Southeast accent. "This is Matt Malcolm. Could you please find some...?"

The phone went dead.



## CHAPTER TWO

### SELF-DELUSION

JENNY MALCOLM STIRRED her homemade spaghetti bolognese, cursing when the mixture bubbled red spots up her new white tiles and splattered her hob.

“Peter. Your dinner’s ready!” She could see him across the hall, staring at the TV, stuffing his face with chicken tikka crisps.

“I’m not hungry, Mum.”

She tapped the wooden spoon on the edge of the pot as she eyed her son. He’d found his mouth and forced in another fistful of spicy fragments. His eyes were glazed and his shirt was littered with crumbs and debris. Peter was twelve and already thirteen stone. She’d let it happen. For the last eleven years, TV had been his babysitter and his only true friend. It was more than addiction. By now, it was complete and utter dependency. He rarely strayed far from his comfortable leather chair and as a result, he was very easy to manage.

Jenny stepped through into the living room with his yellow cushion tray and placed it on his lap. She slotted a fresh can of fizzy orange into the clip that Matt had fixed to the chair and backed off.

Peter smelt the bolognaise sauce. “Thanks Mum, but I’m not hungry and...”

“Look!” Jenny interrupted. “Don’t make my life any harder than it is already. Just leave it there until you’re ready for it.”

“Okay Mum,” said Peter, not once taking his eyes off the screen.

As the spaghetti bolognaise congealed on his knee, Jenny Malcolm pulled a green Tupperware bowl from the top shelf of a tall kitchen unit and began preparing Matt’s favourite salad. Olive oil, limejuice and Soya sauce were drizzled over thinly sliced carrot, cucumber squares and a small pile of cos lettuce. But as she kneaded the mixture in a trance-like state, a tear dripped from her eye into the bowl. She knew everything now; Matt’s other life had revealed itself to her. As if by magic, the affair had suddenly appeared in front of her very eyes.

Jenny knew that the morning news and call from his boss had unnerved Matt. He’d disappeared, without saying goodbye, around 7:30 that morning.

There was no love in the marriage. She’d thought as much for years, and now she had inadvertently stumbled upon the evidence that confirmed it.

Not long after lunch, she’d picked up the polish and worked her way round the living room, along the hall and finally into Matt’s office. She’d hardly noticed the computer in the corner, but as she polished his desk, the movement of the cloth caused his mouse to shift a few inches. It was then that the screen had come alive. Jenny had flinched but then she’d been drawn, like a moth to a flame, closer to the words that now burned brightly before her eyes: *See you as soon as I possibly can. Love Matt xx*

It was addressed to someone called Sylvie. This was no office email; it was written in a completely different style and the content was certainly not the usual Vectan-Brosman crap. It was light-hearted and sensual. Matt was telling this girl, Sylvie, how much he wanted her and, worse than that, how much he’d enjoyed her.

“God!” Jenny sniffed and banged her hand on the worktop. The pain brought her a few moments of relief from the waking nightmare, but as she wallowed in self-pity, she began to remember something from her childhood. Seven or eight at the time, she’d met a little boy

who'd lost his sight. She recalled the sadness she'd felt when he'd told her about his dreams. He could still see in his dreams, the colours, the people, the trees, everything was just as it had been before. But then, every morning, as he opened his eyes, he had to deal with the reality of perpetual darkness.

She sniffed back a tear, suddenly longing for blissful ignorance. She couldn't bear the thought of waking up every morning knowing Matt's affair was real.

She tried to put her predicament into perspective but it proved impossible. "Shit!"

She heard Peter's voice filter through into the kitchen. "Mum, are you okay?"

"Fine son. Fine." Jenny stabbed the knife into the wooden chopping board and emptied the salad into the bin. Her mind was cluttered with his sensual phrases and warm, tender promises. The kind she dreamed of getting from him all her dreary life, but never did.

She shook as resentment grew inside her, gripping the worktop until her knuckles turned white, she cursed, "Bastard!"

"Mum?" Jenny thought she'd heard Peter's voice, but a strange darkness was closing round her. It bit into her and spread outwards from her heart. The sensation made her feel weak and confused, but she was determined. Determined to push on with normality as long as she could.

One of the lines from the last email she'd read rattled round in her head: *Only when I'm with you, Sylv, do I feel totally complete, totally true and fulfilled...*

He called her Sylv. How could he be so passionate and romantic with her? This one line annoyed her more than any other.

She'd become the drudge; the steady, boring constant that let Matt experiment elsewhere. Only her own hunger for pain had made her read every single word. Two years of emails all saved in cyberspace forever. Distracted by his bloody 'Leukivec' yet again, the selfish bastard had rushed out of the house without realising he'd left his other life there for all to see.

The lid of the stainless steel bin clattered against the old kitchen tiles as she picked several chunks of cucumber and carrot off the plastic bin-liner and, once more, arranged them neatly on a green-edged china

plate. Jenny did this, not out of revenge or any kind of malice; she'd simply switched over to automatic pilot. She placed the plate on the pine kitchen table and set the knife and fork neatly on either side. She opened the fridge, lifted out a bottle of Premier Cru Chablis and found the chorizo sausage she'd especially went out of her way to find for Matt the day before. But as she turned back towards the kitchen table, her legs gave way and she flopped down onto the floor, sobbing uncontrollably. The light thrown from the fridge washed over her as a fresh well of tears splashed onto the linoleum floor. She felt completely empty and helpless.

"Mum?" Peter's voice drifted in from the TV lounge, but almost immediately became lost in the gunfire and yells that issued forth from his flickering friend.

The phone rang.

"Mum, it's the phone!"

She hoped it would stop.

"Mum, I said the phone..."

"I know it's the bloody phone." Jenny felt drained.

"Mum?" Peter was standing in the kitchen doorway.

Sighing heavily, she looked up at him.

"Mum, what's wrong?"

The phone continued to ring.

Sniffing, Peter pointed over to the phone on the wall. "Are you sure you don't want me to answer it?"

"I don't bloody care," snapped Jenny, now wiping her eyes with the hem of her skirt.

Peter stopped halfway across the kitchen and doubled back towards her. She saw the hurt on his face and reached for his hand. "I'm sorry, Son. It's just that..." She hesitated then sniffed again. "It's just that it's not been a good day. Not the best day I've ever had." She tried to pull herself together; get back into the role of mother and protector.

"I'll stop watching so much TV. I'm sorry for not helping you and..." Peter babbled.

"It's not that. Well, not just that." Jenny sniffed. "It's..."

She didn't know if she should tell him about Matt. It would be selfish but...

Still, the phone burred loudly.

Jenny let go of her son's hand and the moment passed. They had never been so close. Nervously, she itched at her scalp and lifted the receiver, "Yes."

She hoped it wasn't him; not Matt, not just yet. She wasn't prepared for his voice.

"Inspector Wills speaking, madam."

Jenny felt like a little child as she listened. It was almost surreal. She felt detached, as if she was watching someone else in a movie.

"Is Mr. Malcolm there at the moment, madam?"

"N... No." Jenny's voice wavered.

"I take it you're Mrs. Malcolm?" The voice was serious and yet sympathetic.

"That's correct." Involuntarily, Jenny fixed her hair.

"Well, Mr. Malcolm's car has been found abandoned on the verge of the A547. Near to the village of Alescorth. It's hit a tree but there's no sign of your husband. I don't suppose he's contacted you?"

"Hit a tree, you said?" A sudden feeling of exhilaration made her feel ashamed. Jenny's head reeled as she tried to put two and two together. *He'd been with Sylvie again*, she thought. *Why else would he have taken that particular road?* The sordid accounts of Matt's philandering in Alescorth and Brin Cottage had been etched into her mind forever.

Inspector Wills continued. "We assume he's unhurt but if he's left the scene of an accident, it's quite a serious offence you know. And there is the matter of the car..." Inspector Wills changed tack. "Has he been acting strangely or...?"

"Very!" Jenny was transfixed. Her gaze had settled on a little holiday snap she'd pinned to the fridge. It showed Peter as a baby, his face covered in ice cream, and there was Matt, beaming out of the picture at her. The snap had been taken in Spain almost ten years ago and, as she moved closer, she screwed up her face in an attempt to look into Matt's dark eyes. *Had he been with Sylvie back then too? Was every family memory just a succession of self-delusions?*

"He has?" the inspector's voice made her jump and a new flush of tears blurred the seaside snap into a series of Monet-like splashes. Pent-up anger boiled somewhere deep in her chest. "Look, why don't you try Brin Cottage? He seems to prefer it there!" Jenny slammed the

phone down and slumped back onto the floor.

She could see that Peter was struggling to make sense of the situation; his chubby, freckled arms gathered her in once more. She shuddered with grief, oblivious to the little crunching noises caused by the countless fragments of chicken tikka crisps littering the folds of his shirt.