

MARIANNE JOËLS



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This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

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Author's Note

The world of science is fascinating! Venturing beyond the borders of what is known has helped humankind grasp the meaning of the astonishing world around us.

Understanding materials, life, communication, or society: Isn't that what drives many academics? Discovery, fascination, curiosity—keywords that most researchers will recognize and relate to.

This book does not want to dispute that view at all.

However, there is more to the world of science than that.

It is a miniature society characterized by a strong hierarchy and dependence. Sometimes, the driving forces aren't so agreeable. Don't we face some uncomfortable questions?

Here is one such question: Do the fierce competition and meritocracy of the academic world perhaps promote self-centered behavior and attach too little importance to selfless help to others? Another example: Dedication and time investment are prerequisites to mastering the complex skills of experimental science—but when do the many hours in the lab or writing manuscripts transform from a necessary time investment into an oppressive obligation?

The story of Ken Bird illustrates some of these uncomfortable questions. It is full of references to situations or concepts that require rethinking. The situations are entirely imaginary, but many people working in the academic world will readily recognize them. On purpose, the book doesn't focus on intentional misconduct, abuse, and malpractice, which—unfortunately—happen, too; that would be too simple, too

black-and-white: We all agree that such practices are entirely wrong and that we must fiercely stand up against them. Instead, the book describes the complex reality of today's academic world with many gray tones one may wonder about.

The book doesn't give any concrete answers; it merely highlights different views—sometimes literally—on a range of dilemmas. It is primarily meant to raise awareness: The way we deal with frequently occurring situations in the academic world may not always be the only or even the best option. Too often, we—scientists—accept the situation as a given. “This is how the system works, and if you want to survive, you better adapt.” But we *are* the system and if particular aspects are wrong, we better mend them!

Let the story foster a discussion with the ultimate goal of making the great world of science an even more excellent and enjoyable place to live.

Chapter I

The plane landed twenty minutes late, which was not bad on a more than nineteen-hour journey, not counting the transport to and from the airports.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Beijing Capital International Airport. Local time is Sunday morning, ten past eleven.’

While the purser continued with her standard information, asking everyone to remain seated until the aircraft reached the gate, Ken Bird checked his cell phone to see if he was already connected to the internet. He was unfamiliar with this phone, as he had had to leave his own phone, tablet, and laptop at home and had been provided with devices lent by his university, especially for occasions like the current, when their senior staff traveled to China.

Half a year ago, a group of officers from some federal security bureau had organized a meeting for a small group of senior scientists, including Ken, about safety regulations for those going to countries that might have reasons to spy on their work. It was all very hush-hush, quite comical. They had all needed to leave their phones outside the room, and they just sat there, listening to these people who seemed to come straight from a second-rate spy movie, explaining with solemn faces that as soon as anyone entered certain countries, their electronic devices would be hacked.

‘Come on, guys,’ one of the attending professors exclaimed, ‘if they want to see what we’re doing, they probably already know it!’

The others assented, weary of having to overcome even more hurdles than they were already obliged to, with

double or even triple authentication and all those annoying precautions.

The officers, though, remained dead serious and emphasized that everything—their private phone calls, emails, scientific material, as well as their banking details, whatever—would be hacked if they brought their own devices.

That had somewhat unsettled the assembled group of professors.

The short of it was that they could only travel with electronic devices that were basically empty, except for the bare minimum of information they needed during their trip.

‘But that’s ludicrous,’ a high-profile professor in oncology shouted. ‘How can I keep working if not on my own laptop? I need access to all my documents; my data, presentations... my analyses. When I give presentations abroad, I always use time-lapse movies and animations on my own computer. It’s incredibly impractical to copy it all.’

The other scientists had all nodded in agreement.

Traveling with an empty computer was unthinkable! And why would anyone be interested in spying on their work? Now, if they were nuclear physicists or toxicologists working on poisonous gas, one could still understand it. But medical, or, rather, biomedical researchers? Their work was published anyway, so why all this secretiveness?

They had left the meeting room, shaking their heads in disbelief about the ignorance of these federal officers, who had absolutely no idea what being a scientist entailed—especially not a traveling scientist, who needed full access to all material.

But despite their dismissal of the mere idea, a missive from the dean appeared some weeks later in their email,

stating that employees traveling to any of the countries mentioned in the attached list were prohibited from bringing their own electronic devices. Instead, they had to pick up devices specially prepared for this purpose from the university IT store. It didn't spell out what would happen if one ignored this measure, but Ken had decided not to try and find out.

So, here he was, with an unfamiliar cell phone and an incredibly slow laptop that could hardly handle the few files he had brought on this trip to prepare his lecture and get some work done while traveling. He had used the long haul to Hong Kong to get his keynote lecture in shape, which was scheduled for the day after he arrived. Ken had earlier put a few recent lectures on the borrowed computer and some manuscripts that were under revision; the former to provide the backbone structure for what he was going to present, the latter containing the figures of unpublished work, which he would copy into his presentation, though carefully dosed. If he didn't interleave the earlier presentations with some unpublished work, his competitors might start thinking the Bird Lab was over the hill. Yet, he didn't want to reveal too much, not wanting them to be any the wiser afterward. It had taken him about an hour to finish the presentation, which now contained slightly more slides than he could handle in the forty-five minutes allotted to his keynote lecture. But if he cursorily went over some of the slides, he might just about manage in forty-five minutes.

After having prepared his lecture, he worked for another two hours on the revision of a manuscript that had come back nearly a year ago from the reviewers with six pages of comments, all of which had required many experiments and a lot of work, altogether taking months to perform. In his view, nearly all these comments were superfluous and didn't add much to the message of the original paper, but

if they wanted to get the paper published in this particular top-tier journal, there was no way around it; everything had to be addressed. Well, nearly everything. Ken had drawn the line at one of the comments which was completely off the mark, asking for a sheer impossible experiment to be carried out.

When, during his flight, he read the answer drafted by the postdoc who was the first author of the paper and hence responsible for responding to the questions, Ken felt a surge of annoyance. Not agreeing to do an extra experiment suggested by one of the reviewers was an incredibly delicate matter. The whole process of receiving comments and answering them was a matter of giving and taking, where authors might perhaps get away with not following up on one of the comments, but certainly no more than that. Clearly, refusing point-blank to carry out the experiment suggested by the reviewer, which was more or less what the postdoc had written as an answer, was impossible and a sure way to get the paper turned down despite all the extra work they had done. Instead, as Ken knew from experience, one had to appease the reviewer, agreeing to a large extent with the comment. However, then—rather than carrying out the experiment—one referred to other literature to address the reviewer's concern. This was an art that he, Ken, had learned to perfection and where his role as senior author was indispensable. He had considered several ways to tackle the problem and, in the end, came up with an answer that conveyed sufficient authority to convince the reviewer without being too confrontational.

All in all, addressing the six pages of comments raised by the reviewers had taken over twenty pages of answers, not to mention the countless experiments they had performed, resulting in five extra supplementary figures, each consisting of at least four panels, plus three

supplementary tables. The whole charade was ridiculous, but Ken felt that the paper deserved to be published in one of the best journals, which was the only reason why he and several of the young people in his group had spent so much time on it. Now, at long last, it was ready to be resubmitted. When Ken closed his laptop with a sigh, he was convinced the paper would get accepted.

Now, in Beijing, the plane reached the gate, and people in the front rows started to shuffle toward the exit. Ken took his carry-on luggage from the overhead bin, hoisted the bag with his laptop on top of his small suitcase, and left the plane. He realized he was tired and didn't look forward to the long lines for immigration.

Late Friday night, he had traveled to the airport back home, and now it was already Sunday, around noon. The only good thing about this trip was that he had managed to skip his birthday, which had been yesterday, on Saturday. Well, it was still Saturday in the US. Once he reached his hotel room, he would call his wife Jenny, who was staying with their daughter Brenda in Seattle for the weekend, and there would be congratulations over the phone. But, thank God, no parties at home or, worse, in the lab. He could do very well without celebrating his 59th birthday.

Slowly making his way to immigration, Ken looked to his left, noticing the reflection of his image on the glass wall along which the line was now progressing—a tallish, sinewy man, balding, wearing glasses, with a short-trimmed gray beard. The image was vague, concealing the pouches under his eyes and the deep lines running from his nostrils to where his gray stubbles started.

As expected, the line took forever. This was the one thing he hated about traveling. And the one burden that conference organizers couldn't alleviate. He would have to wait in line like any other citizen. Luckily, he had asked

his secretary just before he left to print out a copy of a dissertation he had to comment on, from one of his colleagues' PhD students. Not his favorite pastime, but they all had to do their chores. At least this was a science-related task and not some silly committee unrelated to their core business, like something on privacy regulations or a building committee, for which the medical school sought the input of scientists who had limited expertise and certainly no interest in such things; at least, he hadn't. Shuffling slowly forward, he immersed himself in the dissertation, which turned out to be well-written, helping to lift his mood somewhat. Here and there, he made some notes, small reminders for the questions he could ask later when discussing the document with the PhD student; barely legible scribbles since writing while waiting in line was awkward.

When he finally reached the front of the row, he was beckoned forward by an officer who asked him endless questions: Why he wanted to go to Beijing, what he would do while there, who had invited him, etcetera. Ken had to show a letter of invitation, which he happened to have brought along, only because it contained the contact details of the person who would pick him up at the airport, just in case he couldn't find this person. The officer also wanted to see the conference program with Ken's name on it, but that was something he couldn't accommodate, not having access to his email and the messages that contained the program. In the end, it turned out not to be crucial, and Ken was allowed to enter the country without this proof of his existence.

He walked to the glass doors that gave entrance to the arrival hall and, after exiting, peered at the assembled crowd, some of whom were holding up a piece of paper or a tablet with one or more names on it. After a few seconds, he recognized his own name, held up by a young

man somewhere in the back, to his left. Ken walked over and introduced himself. The man bowed politely and said that people called him Joe. He pointed at a petite woman—she looked more like a girl, to be honest—who stood beside him and was introduced as Chun. The two of them quickly guided Ken through the hall toward an exit and walked him to a car waiting for him. The young man opened the backseat door, and when Ken sat in the back of the car, Joe deftly took the passenger seat while the girl slipped into the back next to the guest of honor. Ken politely asked whether they were students, which indeed turned out to be the case. The young man studied mathematics and wanted to specialize in artificial intelligence, where a promising future was secured. Ken couldn't quite make out what the girl was studying, having difficulty understanding what she said because of her strong accent and soft voice. Or maybe he was just tired?

On the way to the hotel, he briefly dozed off once or twice for what must have been only seconds. On several occasions, the girl asked him something, which, again, Ken couldn't decipher. The first time he asked her to repeat the question, but when he still couldn't make out what the hell she was talking about, he just nodded, something between an affirmation and acknowledging her question. The girl and the student in the front seat briefly exchanged some information in Chinese.

When the taxi arrived at the huge hotel, which was conveniently located very close to the convention center, the driver took Ken's small suitcase from the trunk and handed it to the young man, who walked away with it through the hotel entrance. Ken started to protest, but the young guy had meanwhile disappeared while the girl started talking to Ken, no doubt explaining what was going on. She led him to the front desk, where an

employee of the hotel started the check-in procedure, searching Ken's name in the system and asking for his passport.

'Welcome to our hotel, Professor Bird,' the man addressed him politely. His English sounded passable.

'Excuse me,' Ken interjected. 'Can you explain where my suitcase went? The person who accompanied me walked away with it into the hotel, and I don't see him around anywhere.'

'Just a precaution, sir. Your suitcase will be delivered to your hotel room within five minutes.'

Ken felt uncomfortable. Why were they checking his personal belongings? His suitcase only contained an official suit and tie for his lecture tomorrow, as well as some underwear, his running gear, and toiletries. After all, he would be leaving again the day after tomorrow.

When he was handed the card key, the girl, who had been waiting behind him, walked him to the elevator, and when it arrived, hopped in. Ken raised his eyebrows.

'I think I can manage from here,' he addressed the girl civilly.

She shook her head and softly answered something, of which he could only make out the word "room".

It suddenly occurred to him that his nodding to one of her questions in the car might have been perceived as him agreeing to something inappropriate. Surely not? He was used to people picking him up at the airport and seeing him to his hotel, but their services always stopped at the front desk. Ken started to feel somewhat uncomfortable and suddenly remembered a conversation he had once had with a colleague who explained that the position held by powerful and brilliant scientists exerted an eroticizing effect.

'You would be amazed how many women are turned on by a scientific superstar,' the man had said.

‘I wouldn’t know,’ Ken had answered in a measured voice. ‘And besides, I’m not interested. I am perfectly happy in my marriage.’

He honestly didn’t know, having no sensor for such signals. Sure, many female scientists approached him after each lecture. They wanted to ask questions about his experiments or were interested in the possibility of working in his lab. But was there any other motive? Frankly, he had no idea.

And was it also true the other way around? Did high-achieving female scientists also turn on men? Well, certainly not him. For one thing, he had yet to meet women who performed in the top league of science; he couldn’t think of a single woman he admired, scientifically speaking. And if they were in the top league of university administration—where indeed one did find such women with power, if only because institutions couldn’t get away with all-male boards these days—he found them distinctly unattractive. Frightening.

When the elevator reached his floor, the girl quickly exited and walked in front of him through the carpeted corridor to his room. She started talking, took the card key from his hand, and opened the room, where she turned on the lights. Immediately, the TV on the dresser flashed on, welcoming him, Ken Bird, to Beijing.

He started to feel quite uncomfortable with the whole situation.

‘Listen,’ he explained to the girl, forcing himself to smile politely. ‘I’m very grateful that you accompanied me to my room. But I cherish my privacy and would like you to leave.’

She looked at him, uncomprehending, unable to grasp what he meant, as she mainly relied on his facial expression.

‘Your room,’ she answered.

‘Yes, yes, I know this is my room. But I would like you to leave. Now!’

She remained standing there, with an uncertain look.

Ken put his hand on her shoulder and started to push her in the direction of the door.

‘Com’on, leave! Now!’

At that moment, someone knocked on the door. Ken quickly walked over and opened the door, only to see the young man from the taxi holding his suitcase. He felt hugely relieved, picked up the suitcase, and pointed over his shoulder to the girl who still waited in the middle of the room.

‘Can you please ask her to leave? I need to be on my own, I’ve got work to do.’

The man said a few words in Chinese, which led the girl to walk over to him and enter the corridor.

‘Sorry, sir. We’ll wait for you in lobby at 4:30 pm to accompany you to opening ceremony and lecture. After that, President of the Local Committee will be honored if you’ll attend small dinner, in honor of all distinguished guests. We’ll bring you back to hotel afterward.’

Ken thanked the guy and closed the door after him. He sank on the sofa that was placed at one end of his luxury suite overlooking the park in front of the hotel. God, he was tired. The prospect of staying up until late tonight after traveling for more than a day, with only a few hours of sleep, was daunting. But at least he had a few hours for himself now. The brief interlude with the girl had somewhat shaken him. What had that been?

He retrieved the cell phone from his bag and called his wife.

‘Hi Jen, it’s me. Just wanted to let you know I arrived safely in Beijing.’

‘Did you have a good flight, darling? Wait a second, I’ll turn on the speaker so Brenda can hear you, too.’

He reassured them that everything had gone very smoothly. No problem in Hong Kong, where he had a rather tight connection, but everything had been on time. And, yes, he had been picked up at the airport and was now, finally, in his hotel room.

He heard his daughter in the background, starting to sing Happy Birthday.

‘Congratulations, Ken,’ Jenny added. ‘I know you managed to skip your birthday, but here it’s still Saturday, so no escape,’ she said in jest.

‘Yeah, yeah, I know. You two have to make up for my absence.’

Now his daughter chimed in.

‘Hi Dad, congratulations! I know you wriggled out this time. But next year you’ll hit the big SIXTY. Mom and I are already planning a big party...’

He listened for a few more minutes to the light banter from his wife and daughter and then ended the conversation, claiming that he was tired and wanted to have a brief nap before he was picked up for the evening program.

It was now 2:30 pm local time. Ken put his small suitcase on the luggage rack next to the entrance door. It was no use unpacking it; he would stay only for two days, leaving Tuesday early in the afternoon. He took his toiletries and shaving tools from the suitcase and placed them in the bathroom.

Only two hours before he would be met downstairs in the lobby. He briefly considered reading the rest of the dissertation but decided against it. He was too drowsy. Instead, he would go for a run in the park, take a shower afterward, and then get ready for the opening event and dinner.

Later that afternoon, Ken was about to leave his room for the opening ceremony of the conference when he saw a message that had come in on his borrowed phone. He had only left this cell phone number for his wife and Sam, a senior postdoc in his lab, so they could reach him. He quickly checked which of the two had sent him a message. It was Sam.

hi ken, congrats! we'll buy you an extra latte macchiato when you return. btw: dex came up to me today and announced he has received an offer from john b's lab to come and work there. just wanted to let you know. sam.

What?! Dexter, a postdoc who had set up a new technique in the Bird Lab, had received an offer from a competing lab? And was seriously considering it?!

He felt a surge of anger flare up. Anger toward John Barridge, a competitor, who was trying to buy one of his—Ken's—postdocs so that he could introduce this new technology in his own group without all the hassle of developing it. And resentment toward Dexter who was open to such an offer. What did the guy think: Was he for sale or what?

The technique had turned out to be crucial for their latest experiments. It afforded them a slight advantage over other groups in the world—at least for the time being because all this technology was developing and changing rapidly. Dexter had received a personal grant to set it up, no doubt helped by the fact that he had proposed to do so in the Bird Lab, a near guarantee for success. Now that the technique was up and running, Dex had started to fill in a few other group members on the details, particularly Mihaela, a bright Romanian PhD student who had started her project some time ago. But still, if Dex left, that would mean a serious setback in their progress.

Ken looked at his watch. It was midnight back home. Even though Sam had sent the message only an hour or so ago, he might have gone to bed by now. He cursed. There was little he could do from here, in Beijing, twenty-four hours' travel away from the lab and hampered by having to use some corporate rather than his own electronic device. Well, it had to wait until he returned. Maybe he could convince Dex to stay...after all, why on earth would he leave? Going from the Bird to the Barridge Lab was not even a lateral movement; it was definitely a step down the ladder! Ken considered it almost an insult to himself that a postdoc would even consider such a move.

It left him grumpy when he closed the door behind him and went down to the lobby. The young man, Joe, who had picked him up from the airport, waited for him beside the counter. The girl was nowhere in sight. Maybe she had been told to stay away now that Ken no longer needed her services? Or was she deemed unfit because her English had fallen short of any intelligible conversation with the distinguished guest? Well, it was none of his concern. Joe greeted him again with a bow and led him to a taxi waiting at the entrance.

'Isn't the Convention Center just across the park,' Ken asked when Joe opened the back door for him.

'Yes, sir,' Joe answered, unperturbed. 'Taxi is convenient for you.'

'Can't we just walk over there,' Ken persisted.

'No, sir. Taxi is convenient for you,' Joe answered stoically. He closed the door when Ken was settled in the back and quickly walked over to the passenger seat.

It turned out they had to make a complex detour to reach the entrance of the Convention Center, which overall took over fifteen minutes because of the traffic, probably longer than when they had crossed the park on foot. Ken

decided to refuse a taxi next time, no matter what this Joe had in mind.

After they left the taxi, Joe took him to the registration desk, where he briefly exchanged some information in Chinese with one of the girls behind the counter. A few minutes later, Joe came back to Ken, carrying a plastic folder with Ken's badge, a notepad and pen, a flyer with the program-at-a-glance and information about the conference app, a key card to enter the VIP lounge, and several tickets allowing Ken to attend official receptions and dinners for free. Joe handed him the folder, bowed again, and said, 'Two floors up with escalators. There is big hall. I'll pick you up there after opening and bring you to dinner.'

Ken nodded to acknowledge that he had understood the instructions, after which Joe bowed again and immediately disappeared into the crowd.

There was little time for Ken to feel disoriented because someone clapped him on the back, which turned out to be a colleague from Madrid he hadn't seen for a long time. They greeted each other and chatted for a while, after which they walked over to the escalators to reach the big lecture hall two floors up.

On entering the enormous hall, which contained at least five thousand chairs and three huge screens at the front, on which slides were projected announcing some of the highlights of the conference, Ken walked to the front, where the leadership of the Society, the head of the Program Committee, the president of the Local Organizing Committee, a few of the keynote speakers, an official representative on behalf of the mayor of the city, and many other officials had assembled. Ken walked around and shook hands, knowing nearly everyone strutting at the front. It was just one of those things one had to do if only to show that one belonged to the

privileged. He was genuinely pleased, though, to meet one of the other keynote speakers, a scientist from Madison, Wisconsin, whom he held in high regard.

‘Jim, so good to see you. I’m looking forward to your lecture. When’s your talk?’

‘Tomorrow end of the day, Ken. I’ll show some exciting new stuff; you’ll like it.’

Excellent. For a brief moment, Ken had feared that this lecture was scheduled for Tuesday afternoon or, worse, for Wednesday morning, which in both cases meant he would have been unable to attend as he would only stay until Tuesday noon.

They talked briefly about a recently published paper which they both distrusted because, independently, they had found very different results, which they had yet to publish. Now that opposing results had been reported, getting their own work accepted in a journal might become a challenge. They agreed to meet after Jim’s lecture on Monday afternoon to compare results and try to understand the cause of the discrepancy. And, of course, to devise a plan to help each other get their results published in the face of these recent, opposing findings.

‘Now, I hope you’ll excuse me, Jim. I have to quickly check a few things before the opening ceremony starts,’ Ken apologized. He wanted to get away from the front and sit somewhere in the back. He always had difficulty staying awake at these official opening events. And although the subject of the keynote lecture directly after the opening ceremony looked quite interesting, he feared that the jet lag might hit him nonetheless, so he was likely to fall asleep. That was not unusual, as it happened to many attendees, especially those who had just arrived from the US or Europe. But doing so in front of the organizers didn’t seem very attentive.

So, Ken sat somewhere in the back of the vast hall and waited for the event to start. After about five minutes, the lights dimmed, and the president of the International Society appeared on stage. One could hardly see him at this distance, but his face was projected on the three enormous screens at the front.

The usual succession of people delivered their speeches. The president of the Society, the president of the Local Organizing Committee, the president of the Chinese Society. At that time, Ken had fallen asleep, missing the rest of the parade. He woke up to the sound of music, at which an entire Chinese ballet group made their entrance on stage, dressed up in fiercely colored outfits and accompanied by loud music and drums. That certainly helped Ken stay awake, although he started to become a trifle bored after the performance had lasted for ten minutes. Just when he considered if he could unobtrusively make his way out of the hall, the music stopped, and people applauded politely.

The dance ensemble left the stage and up came the Chair of the first keynote address, who announced the speaker and highlighted some of her accomplishments. The subject of the lecture was not exactly in the field of the Society, but the fields had started to overlap more and more in recent years, so Ken was actually curious to hear more about it.

At first, he listened attentively and understood the work shown on the slides quite well. However, after about ten minutes, he couldn't quite follow what was said about a particular experiment, and then, while thinking about what it meant, he also lost the gist of the next slide. And after that, he was completely lost, only occasionally understanding some of the graphs that were presented. His mind started to wander to a somewhat related subject, and before he knew it, he was fast asleep again. When he

woke up, the speaker was highlighting the names of the postdocs and PhD students who had contributed to the work and she acknowledged the generous contributions of the various funding agencies, which effectively meant that her lecture had almost come to an end.

Ken was annoyed at himself for falling asleep, blaming not only himself—jet lag, age? —but also the speaker, who should have realized that she was addressing an audience that was not exactly into the subject.

He now rummaged through the papers in his plastic folder. Here it was, the invitation for the dinner tonight. The president of the Local Organizing Committee had the pleasure of inviting him, Ken Bird, to an informal dinner at 7:30 pm. God, how he longed to skip the dinner...he nearly keeled over from sleep. If the dinner started at 7:30 pm, it would likely last until at least 10:30 pm. He was tired, not hungry, and most definitely not looking forward to sitting at a table, conversing with people he was not interested in. But there was no escape.

He sighed, heaved himself out of the chair, and walked to the front of the hall, where he bumped into the plenary speaker who had just given the opening address. He quickly complimented her on her fascinating presentation. Well, she didn't know he had been fast asleep during most of it.

Close to the stage, he noticed Joe, who, reliable like clockwork, had shown up to escort Ken to the dinner. Could he feign a headache, just to escape from this ordeal? Deciding that this was just too impolite, Ken walked over to Joe, who led him to an exit at the side that gave access to escalators other than the ones taken by the throngs of people now leaving the hall. It turned out to be a shortcut to a curb where about ten taxis were lined up, no doubt to bring the guests of honor to the restaurant.

After Joe and Ken took their seats, the taxi sped off toward a district with brightly lit high-rise buildings.

After a restless night with short bouts of sleep, Ken woke up the following morning feeling unrefreshed.

The so-called informal dinner had been rather formal, with over forty people attending. The food had been excellent, with new dishes being brought in all the time, each more beautifully decorated than the previous and all very tasteful. After the third dish, he had been filled up right to the top, which left him unable to eat any of the subsequent courses that were served, so he had to sit out the dinner, watching the others eat. And drink! Ken never touched any alcoholic beverage when traveling, having learned that this amplified his jet lag at least threefold. But this could not be said about the other dinner guests. As the evening progressed, they became very loud and noisy, having stowed away enormous amounts of food and even more alcohol.

The party was seated at tables of ten, and the informal character was expressed mainly by the absence of predetermined seating. Because Ken's taxi had arrived as one of the last, he had very little choice in terms of seating, ending up at a table with eight Chinese men and, apart from himself, only one foreigner, a woman, who happened to sit three seats away from him, which made it impossible to have any conversation with her. At first, his companions on the left and right sides had made a polite effort to address him in English, but while the dinner went on, they skipped this tiring business and happily chatted with each other in Chinese, laughing at regular intervals, after which his companion on the left invariably would start to translate the joke, giving up halfway, saying,

‘Sorry, Ken, can’t translate joke, is Chinese joke’. Well, that much he had already understood.

He had gone to the restroom several times, just to escape from the steamy restaurant, the noise, and the feeling of being isolated. When he returned from one of these visits, his neighbor asked with a look of concern if Ken was feeling OK since he didn’t eat or drink anything and seemed in need of the restroom all the time.

Ken suddenly saw his way out of this dinner and admitted that his stomach was acting up and that it might be better to leave for the hotel. The man immediately jumped up and walked over to the president of the Local Organizing Committee, whispering something into his ear. Now, the president eyed Ken with a concerned expression. He briefly nodded. When Ken’s neighbor returned, he said someone would escort him back to his hotel to allow him a good night’s sleep so that he would be in good shape for his lecture tomorrow.

Sure enough, Joe appeared a few minutes later, having ordered a taxi, and they returned to the hotel around 10 pm. It had been an enormous relief for Ken to be alone again in his spacious, comfortable room.

The following day, Ken first went for a run in the park, taking the same parcourse as the day before. Checking his running app upon his return, he noticed that he had finished the lap faster than yesterday and with a lower average heartbeat. It was trivial, of course, but it still somewhat improved his mood. After a hot shower and a quick breakfast from the buffet downstairs, he felt decidedly refreshed. He took his coffee back to the room and sat down to finish reading the dissertation so that he could take that off his mind.

After an hour, he went down again, this time to get a latte macchiato. Upon returning to his room, he first sent a message to Jenny, who would probably be on her way

back from the short visit to Brenda in Seattle, and then had a final look at his slides. Joe had announced last night that he would pick him up at 10:30 am in the lobby, which left enough time to upload his presentation at the central conference facility and have his headset fitted in the big lecture hall before he would deliver his keynote address, starting at noon.

When he arrived in the lobby, Joe led him, like yesterday, to an arranged taxi, but this time Ken refused and insisted on walking through the park, a sulking Joe in tow.

All went according to plan, and at noon, the chairman of his session appeared on stage and announced Ken's keynote lecture with a brief introductory speech about Ken Bird's groundbreaking work and some of the prestigious awards he had received.

When Ken got up on the stage, he felt the slight anxiety that always took hold of him just before an important lecture. But as soon as the first slide with the title of his presentation appeared, projected simultaneously on the three giant screens behind him, he calmed down immediately, confident that the slides would almost automatically guide him through his talk. He only needed to concentrate on the few slides he had put in with unpublished work since it would be the first time he presented this work, so the words might not come fluently to his mind. And he had to watch the time, knowing in advance that he would need fifty minutes instead of forty-five if he went at his usual pace.

While talking, he alternately addressed different sections of the enormous lecture hall so that everyone felt included. Of course, nobody except people seated in the front rows could see him, but his face was projected next to the slides on each screen, so it would still be wise to turn his face in various directions to make his performance livelier. On stage, he couldn't make out any

of the faces down in the hall, the place being shrouded in darkness; besides, he was blinded by the spotlights on the stage.

Ken actually preferred such dark and large halls because in ballrooms—smaller and usually half-lit—he was invariably distracted by people leaving or entering the hall during the talks, which happened all the time. People entering was OK, though causing noise, but people leaving always made him feel very insecure, wondering if they were bored by what he had to say. He knew it was nothing personal, but still.

Smoothly, he went through the presentation and, after forty-six minutes—one minute late—arrived at the slide with his conclusions. Applause followed, after which the chairman thanked him politely and announced that the setting of the big hall did not allow for plenary questions, but those with questions were invited to come forward and discuss them in person with Ken Bird. The audience rose, and the masses noisily moved toward the various exits; only a few people struggled toward the front of the hall. The chairman walked up to Ken, clapped him on the shoulder, thanked him for a great lecture, and then left the stage.

Had it been a good lecture? Ken wondered. Of course, people thanked him out of politeness, but he seldom received a compliment that he felt was genuine. He now left the stage himself, bracing himself for the line of people that had formed in front of the stage, primarily eager young people who either wanted to know some detail about one of the experiments because they were attempting to do the same or asked about possible job openings in his lab. Ken routinely handled all the questions, referring them to the postdoc who had done the work—"just check the internet for the name, and you can find the email address there." Did they seriously think he

would provide them with the email addresses on the spot?—or told the ones interested in a job to send him a resume and their idea of what they wanted to do, and he would see if there was any chance to fit them in... which, in almost all cases, was pointless, but it was easier to convey that message later, through email, than now.

At a quarter past one, he excused himself to the six or seven people still in line, saying that, unfortunately, he had a next appointment, which was true.

He had arranged a lunch meeting with Ove Sommervall, a colleague from Sweden, at 1:30 pm; it would surely take him fifteen minutes to walk over to the restaurant in the Convention Center, where a table was reserved. The young people who hadn't made it to the front of the row were—understandably—disappointed, so he told them they could always email him if they had an important question. He knew from experience that very few would bother to do so, so it would effectively cost him little time. When he walked through the enormous building, he felt relieved, having delivered the keynote address, which was why he had come here in the first place. For the remainder of his stay, he could relax, listen to others, and attend the few business meetings he was supposed to join—all in the knowledge that he had given insight into the exciting work continuously being performed in his lab. It was a great feeling, it left him invigorated!

Arriving at the restaurant, he noticed that Ove was already waiting for him at a table in the middle of the large restaurant. Ken was shown to the table.

'Ove, wonderful to see you!'

'Hello, Ken. What a great talk you just gave. Amazing work. I particularly liked that new experiment you described somewhere toward the end of the talk, the one with this elegant new technique. That's so smart and holds

great promise. Who knows, one day you can apply your findings to patients.’

Ove sounded genuinely interested and honest in his admiration of all the work, which flattered Ken. He felt a little stab of annoyance when he realized that the breakthrough method that had raised Ove’s interest was precisely the technology developed by Dexter—the same guy who now wanted to move to the competitor’s lab. But he pushed this slight uneasiness aside and enthusiastically filled Ove in on some, but not all, details of the new experimental approach.

They animatedly talked about the various experiments in both labs. Meanwhile, the food they had ordered was served.

‘So, Ove, one of the reasons I asked you over for lunch is to find out if you’re interested in taking on an honorable duty. As it is, I could be instrumental in securing it for you.’

Ove raised his eyebrows and looked quizzically at Ken, who went on to explain. ‘You know that the elections for the Chair of the next Program Committee are coming up, don’t you? I wondered if you’re interested in running for that position?’

Ove carefully wiped his mouth with the paper napkin.

‘The thought has never occurred to me, Ken, to be honest. And I thought Maria Bordelli from Italy was lined up for that position?’

Ken impatiently waved away this suggestion. ‘It’s always good to have more than one candidate. Nothing is set in stone yet.’

‘Well, I’m not sure.’ Ove seemed to contemplate the idea.

‘The two previous Chairs, including yourself, were men, so it seems only fair to now look for a female candidate.’

‘Oh, come on, Ove. This is not about political correctness. We want an *outstanding* scientist as Chair of the Program

Committee... someone who entirely oversees the field. After all, we would like to offer the participants of the next conference the best possible program, don't you agree!'

'But Maria does oversee the field, doesn't she? I think she's up to the job.'

'Well, she is a very good scientist, I'll grant you,' Ken formulated carefully. 'But not *outstanding*, in my opinion. Wouldn't it be much better if someone like yourself were to chair the Program Committee? With all your knowledge of the field? If you're interested, I can certainly put in a good word for you.'

Ken cautiously avoided saying that Ove Sommervall was an outstanding scientist, which, in his view, he was most definitely not. Ove was an excellent and thorough, though somewhat unimaginative, scientist, certainly one step up compared to Maria Bordelli, who was rumored to have published a paper that nobody could reproduce. But outstanding? No.

Still, helping him secure this prestigious position was not a bad idea, considering that Ove was a Karolinska professor and, as such, a member of the committee deciding on the Nobel Prizes. These small things mattered as Ken had found out the hard way.

Four years ago, Ken woke up one morning early in October to learn that the Nobel Prize in Chemistry that year had been awarded to the subject he worked on. But not to him! Instead, it went to three other scientists. He knew he had also been nominated that year; and several times before. There were about five potential winners in his field, and the committee had to choose three out of these five, three being the upper limit to which the Prize could be awarded. For whatever reason, he had not made the cut. Had it been a better lobby, a concerted action, for the other winners? Nobody knew, at least not for the next

fifty years, the period it took for the committee's notes to be made publicly available. One of the winners, Jonas Frederiksson, came from Denmark, so it was a no-brainer why he had been selected. In all honesty, Ken considered Jonas somewhat less competitive than himself, but scientists from a Scandinavian country always stood a better chance, as everyone knew. But the other two? He certainly didn't regard himself as less successful than the two who did receive the Nobel Prize. So, it had been a distressing—painful, even— discovery that he had been denied the prize.

He had felt very depressed at the time because the one big goal, the one prize he would have liked to secure, was now out of reach; chances that the Nobel Prize would be awarded to a similar field in the future were infinitesimally small. However, a few weeks later, he realized that if he ever managed to bring his discoveries to the clinic, he might still qualify for the Nobel Prize in Medicine and Physiology. Of course, that would be incredibly difficult because all his lab had achieved so far was to get things to work in a dish or, at best, in small animals. But in his optimistic days, he didn't exclude the possibility that they might succeed in letting the technique work in humans ten years from now. And this time, he would not miss any opportunity to optimize his chances in Sweden.

Ove had not immediately responded to Ken's offer to put in a good word for him in case he wanted to run for the Chairmanship of the next Program Committee. He appeared to be lost in thought.

'I seem to have taken you by surprise, Ove. That wasn't my intention. I just think you would be an excellent candidate.'

Ove smiled. 'You're right, Ken, it does come as a surprise. The thought had never occurred to me. Let me think about

it. I'll let you know tomorrow whether I'm interested or not.'

By now, they had finished their meal, and Ken picked up the bill, saying that, next time, it would be on Ove. They left the restaurant, shook hands, and walked away, each in a different direction, Ove intending to visit one of his PhD students who presented her work on a poster right now; Ken on his way to a board meeting of one of the top-tier journals where he served as an associate editor.

Ove Sommervall stepped into the vast exhibition hall, a sea of a thousand posters stretching before him. Somewhat disoriented, he tried to find his way among the many numbered boards to the poster of his PhD student.

What a strange conversation this had been over lunch! He had never seriously considered running for the position of Chair of the Program Committee. It was not something to which he aspired. Some might consider it a position of prestige, but to him it just meant a lot of work, entailing angry emails from high-profile scientists who felt affronted because they were not selected for one of the keynote lectures. Or from scientists who were disappointed because their symposium proposal had not been selected this time, whereas other—in their view, inferior—proposals had. Ove didn't look forward to such a job at all, no matter how honorable.

Still, it was nice of Ken to think of him and be prepared to support his nomination. But Ove certainly didn't want to thwart Maria Bordelli's nomination; he held her in very high regard. She

was the ideal person to chair the Committee as far as he was concerned.

He felt slightly annoyed at Ken's reaction about political correctness. Maria was an excellent scientist and would certainly put together a varied and exciting program. Ken's reaction had been rather old school and, come to think of it, misogynistic: As if choosing a woman for the job was just a matter of getting the numbers even and not of having a good Chair who incidentally happened to be a woman. Ove distinctly disliked people thinking in such a way.

He shrugged. Well, what was it to him? He would let Ken know tomorrow that he was unavailable, and that would be the end of it.

Later that afternoon, after attending the board meeting of the journal, Ken headed to the big lecture hall again, to listen to the keynote lecture of Jim Felton. He ambled to the front to wish Jim good luck and agreed to meet afterward for a drink before they both went to the Presidential Dinner, which was to be held in the National Art Museum of China.

This time, he sat in one of the front rows, knowing he wouldn't doze off during the lecture. And sure enough, he was fascinated right from the start. More than that, he experienced one of those rare moments when he suddenly saw the potential for a major breakthrough in his own research.

It happened somewhere in the middle of Jim's presentation. Jim showed the results of a new series of experiments where he had applied a technology initially developed in experimental physics, allowing him to

change the shape of proteins at will and only in a limited number of cells. The moment Ken saw the slide, he immediately grasped the full impact of this approach for his research. This was the solution! This was the way to go, to solve the puzzle that had kept him busy for years now: Not only to selectively reach the diseased cells, which Dex's technique had already shown them how to do but also to correct the defective protein. This would allow them to repair misshapen proteins only at those sites where the encoding mistake had occurred. The solution to the conundrum was staring him in the face! In fact, it was so bloody obvious that Ken was amazed he had never thought of it himself. How could he have missed this approach?

And if it was so obvious to him and the rest of the audience, now that Jim presented it, Ken couldn't afford to lose a second to introduce it in his lab. The mere prospect of someone else picking up this idea and applying it made him restless and fidgety. He didn't listen to the rest of Jim's presentation which was now highlighting another aspect of their research. Ken's thoughts jumped through all the possibilities. In his mind, he already started to design a new project that would allow him to overcome the deadlock they had encountered until now: They could be so much more effective and precise in their treatment approaches from now on! The applause at the end of Jim's lecture woke him up, this time not from deep sleep but from being fully immersed in a new set of experiments. Ken couldn't wait to discuss the details of the technology with Jim over drinks. So when they sat down in the bar half an hour later, Ken immediately started asking questions. How was it done? Was it difficult? Did one require any special instruments, what were the caveats?

‘It’s very simple, Ken. The idea of applying this technology originating from physics to biochemistry is the only novel step. Well, perhaps not the *only* step because it requires some adjustments when one works with living cells rather than dead material. But once you know how to approach it, it can be easily implemented. All it takes is hiring a good postdoc with a physics background.’

‘But we have no prior knowledge of that in our lab right now,’ Ken responded. ‘When it comes to biochemistry, we have all the tools and expertise, but in physics, we wouldn’t be able to address any problem we encounter.’

‘Ah, don’t worry. I was assured by the physics guys that it really isn’t rocket science. In fact,’ Jim added after a moment, ‘I could send over Tony, the postdoc who set it up in my lab; send him to your place for a few weeks to help you start. Of course, you would next need to hire someone yourself because setting it up is one thing, but carrying it out is quite another. But if it’s of any help, Tony could support you, just so that you get started and can provide yourself with some preliminary data for a grant application.’

Ken beamed. ‘That’s incredibly generous of you, Jim. Do you think this Tony could be convinced to come over?’

Jim chuckled. ‘Anything to get away from the cold weather in Wisconsin and enjoy sunny California would suffice to convince him.’

They went on to discuss the details of setting up the technology, and Jim promised to ask Tony immediately upon his return to Madison.

Jim looked at his watch and exclaimed, ‘Goodness, it’s already close to 7 pm. We’ll have to hurry, as we’re picked up in the lobby at 7:30 pm for that Presidential Dinner.’

They hurried through the park to their hotel and quickly went to their rooms to change into more formal attire for

dinner. The dinner guests would be transported to the Museum by bus, as Joe had explained to Ken this morning, so there was no need for an escort tonight. Joe had mentioned that the taxi would pick up Ken at 10 am tomorrow to transport him to the airport for his flight back home. He had bowed once more and then taken his leave. Ken was somewhat surprised, but apparently, now he had delivered his lecture, there was no further need to assist him in any particular way. Well, he would manage just fine without Joe.

Now that Ken had suddenly seen his way out of the earlier experimental deadlock, he was incredibly eager to sit down at his desk and design the new experimental series. Unfortunately, that had to wait until after the Presidential Dinner. And so he went down, in a suit and tie, joining a large group of people in the lobby waiting for transportation, most women in smart dresses or jackets, and the men in suits, like him. The majority consisted of people of Chinese or at least Asian origin—he could never tell the difference between representatives of the various Asian countries. Being alert not to make the same mistake as last night, he walked up to a small group of Americans and some Europeans who stood somewhat to the side and who, like himself, stuck together for dear life, careful to avoid ending up in a group of people where they would feel left out because they were unable to understand the language.

Close to midnight, Ken returned to his hotel on the bus from the Presidential Dinner. They had first been offered a tour through the museum, which was interesting but rather lengthy for Ken's taste. Besides, he was getting hungry, not having eaten anything since lunch. By the time they

were seated, he was ravenous but remembering last night's dinner, was careful not to take too large servings from the first three courses. Except that there *were* only three courses this time, so he had left dinner somewhat hungry.

It had been a seated dinner with tables of ten, which seemed to be the popular size here. This time, fortunately, he was seated next to a scientist from South Korea who had spent most of his educational and working years in the US, leaving him fully able to speak English without an accent. Seated at his other side was a young woman from France who had won the Junior Talent Prize of the Society and would deliver a special lecture on Wednesday afternoon. This was the final afternoon of the conference and was generally considered a "death slot" since most people had already left by then. Nevertheless, she was excited by the prospect of presenting her work and very happy to have been awarded the Talent Prize in the first place. She was bright, witty, and very interested in Ken's work, about which she asked intelligent questions, revealing that she had not only listened carefully to Ken's lecture but also read some of his most influential papers. In return, Ken asked a few questions about her own research line, of which she spoke with enthusiasm but also with modesty, overwhelmed as she was by Ken's status as a superstar. All in all, he had enjoyed the discourse during dinner and, despite leaving the table somewhat hungry, didn't regret spending his time coming to this official event.

When he returned to his room, he felt still wide awake, no doubt caused by the jet lag. After all, it was early morning back home, so his body was ready to start a new day. Besides, it had been a successful day: A plenary lecture delivered with, what he thought, some success; a very useful lunch with a member of the Nobel Prize

committee; a pleasant dinner in acceptable company; and above all, a potential breakthrough in his work. This one piece of information that he had picked up during Jim's talk...that in itself had made this entire trip worth his while.

What an incredible stroke of luck that he had been in the audience, mostly because he had nothing else to do and also because he liked Jim and held him in high esteem. He might easily have decided to return to his hotel to work on a paper, and then he would have entirely missed this new technique. It might have taken him months before he was made aware of the new approach, probably only by the time Jim's work was published and picked up by himself or one of the people in his lab. Months of wasted time—months that he could now use to immediately implement things in his lab and go full speed ahead!

Being wide awake, he decided to start and work on designing a new set of experiments that would help to correct miscoded proteins, first in particular tissues and then in a subset of cells within these tissues, and finally in mice. If that worked, he could begin to think about animal models that were closer to human beings.

With ardor, Ken worked for hours, completely enthralled by the mere idea that this was the giant leap forward he had been waiting for. At 3 am, the outline of the first experiment was on paper. He closed the laptop and went to bed, excited and happy.

Chapter II

After his morning run on Wednesday that same week, Ken checked his running app. Well, the jet lag and many hours of traveling were telling. His average speed was lower, and his heartbeat was higher than usual.

At home, he took a quick shower, chose a clean shirt from his closet, dressed for the day, and went down. On entering the kitchen, he greeted Jenny, who had just returned from her night shift and was setting the table for breakfast.

‘Hello, dear,’ he said, giving her a routine kiss.

Jenny turned around to face him. ‘Well, hello there! I didn’t hear you coming down the stairs. It’s good to see you... after how many days? Four, five? How were your travels?’

‘Not too bad, despite the transfer in Taipei; I nearly missed the connecting flight.’ He walked over to the fridge to take out the jar with orange juice. ‘But I worked on the plane on a new grant proposal. When I listened to a presentation by Jim Felton on Monday evening, I got this great idea! It’s so exciting; this could be the breakthrough I’ve been looking for.’ He went on to explain how this new technology, combined with the ones already running in his lab, could help to correct miscoded proteins in specific cells, leaving other cells producing the correct protein unaffected. ‘It’s an entirely novel approach. I can’t believe the idea never occurred to me. So, we’ll have to step up the pace to apply it to our research as soon as possible.’

Jenny sat down at the table where Ken was already seated, absentmindedly scanning the newspaper headlines after he

had filled Jenny in on the exciting scientific developments.

‘And how did your talk go? Were there many people attending?’

Ken was distracted by a headline in the newspaper and slowly focused his eyes on Jenny’s face again.

She looked a bit tired, he thought. Maybe those night shifts weren’t such a good idea anymore? The years were counting, too, in her case. For the past four years, Jenny had been taking night shifts, working as a nurse in a large nearby hospital. She had explained to him that she preferred the relative silence of the nights to the bustle and busy daytime hours. And also that night shifts gave her more independence because she often had to act by herself in cases of emergency as a doctor was not always immediately in sight. Jenny taking night shifts effectively meant they only saw each other in the morning, at breakfast; and, of course, during Jen’s days off.

Ken would usually work late hours, certainly on weekdays, and would find his dinner sitting on the counter and ready to be put in the microwave oven when he finally arrived home. When he left the house in the morning for his run, Jenny would not have returned yet. She usually came home from work at 7:30 in the morning and then started preparing their breakfast so that by the time Ken returned from his daily run they had breakfast together.

‘Did anything happen last night during your shift’ he asked, observing Jenny with some concern.

‘Oh, the usual stuff. It was mostly quiet. Except for this one case of someone reacting adversely to the experimental treatment he has just started. He’s in a bad way. I doubt he’ll make it through the day.’

‘What kind of treatment?’

Jenny shrugged. 'I don't know the details. It's something experimental, replacing his blood cells with genetically engineered cells. Poor guy, he's only twenty-four.' She looked up at Ken, troubled. 'You know, about the same age as Brenda. It always gets under my skin when people that young die. One never gets used to it.' She sighed. 'I guess it comes with the job,' he commented. He knew these were not the right words, but he also didn't know exactly how to react. So he quickly added, 'I'm sorry it makes you feel so low, Jen. I am sure there're plenty of people who are thankful for the good care they received last night.'

Jenny shrugged again, picking up the yogurt she mixed with nuts and fruit for breakfast. 'It'll wane, as it always does.'

She went on to tell how she had spent a pleasurable weekend with Brenda, their daughter. And how they had baked a pie together, something they hadn't done for years.

'She's really happy, Ken. Much more relaxed than last year. More in balance, I would say. It's so good to see that she's found the right direction, at least in her work.'

Ken didn't respond right away. Brenda had majored in biology at the University of Washington. She was very bright and did exceptionally well as a student. He had hoped for her to go on to obtain a PhD degree; she certainly had the brains for it. But about a year ago, Brenda announced that she would not pursue a research career after all and instead start a master's program in genetic counseling. God knows what or who put that idea in her head. It sounded to him like a complete waste of talent. If one was so bright and then settled for a professional master's program, saying goodbye to a scientific career and instead doing work that, after five years, would become rather routine and very boring... But

when he had vented his disappointment about Brenda's choice to Jenny, his wife had fiercely defended her daughter, saying that there were more standards than Ken's view on a career and that it was important for Brenda to make her own choices in life; to choose a career for which she was motivated. Jenny had sounded so determined that he had stopped making objections and given up. Well, what could one expect? If one threw Jenny's and his genes into the gene pool, the result would be a career somewhere between his and hers. And maybe Brenda would come to her senses after a few years as a genetic counselor when she *did* get bored by the job and would decide to go back to school again.

So, now that Jenny inferred that Brenda was happy with her choices, he was wise enough not to utter any objections. 'Excellent, good for her. And so nice you had your mother-and-daughter moments together.'

By now, Ken had finished his breakfast, rose, and put his plate and silverware in the dishwasher.

'Well, I'm off. I am probably home late because we have this "Faculty Hour" at the end of the day. And afterward, I would like to work on my new grant proposal now that I've got the idea for a new set of experiments in my head.' He absentmindedly stroked Jenny's hair and then left for work.

The new building belonging to the Biochemistry Department was a futuristic glass edifice in the shape of a horseshoe, with a patio in the middle in which shrubs had been planted that, now, at the end of January, were not blooming yet but very colorful later in the year. The building was erected two years ago, financed mainly by Harold Lakowski, the owner of a vast corporate group

manufacturing all kinds of aluminum gear for households and industrial purposes. Lakowski, at some point in his career, had taken up the idea of donating huge sums of money to science on the condition that it should be spent on one of the best universities in the world and only on world-class scientists.

In addition to the building, he had signed a twenty-year contract with the university for the Evelyn and Harold Lakowski endowed chair, which was inaugurated by Ken Bird. The endowment guaranteed a generous salary for the chairholder. It also came with an annual sum to cover laboratory expenses, which served as a safety net for Ken to carry him through periods with less grant income, which, so far, had not occurred. Instead, he used the money to pay postdoctoral fellows for the time it took them to secure their junior career grants, which was also a rarity because Ken usually only accepted postdocs in his lab who had already acquired a fellowship or grant to pay for their salary. But the money sometimes came in handy when he wanted to quickly start something new without having to wait for grant money to flow in. The experiments he was now considering, requiring him to hire a physicist without delay, were precisely the type of situation where the endowment could make a difference. A few years ago, when the contract between the university and Harold Lakowski was still pending, Ken had just been offered a prestigious position on the East Coast. It wasn't the salary that had lured him; he wasn't interested in making money for himself, which was why he had stayed in academia—otherwise, he could have gone into business. And anyway, he considered himself to be very comfortably off salary-wise and with affordable housing supplied by the university in an area where one otherwise could hardly live reasonably as a university professor. No, it had been the conglomerate of top universities and the

buzzing environment of exciting new technologies, equipment, and vibe that made him seriously consider going eastward. But then, when the contract with Harold Lakowski had been pulled off, the prospect of a brand-new, well-equipped building combined with a generously endowed chair had kept him where he was. Also, Jenny didn't fancy moving, having to give up her work as well as her set of friends. And so, they stayed.

The building was one of those new designs with a large open space on one side where people could sit anywhere, plug in their laptops at will, and vacate the spot at the end of the day. No desk of your own, just a locker to store anything of value. There were several sound-isolated cubicles where you could work when you had to focus and a few larger glass-walled rooms for groups to convene. Apart from the Bird Lab, four other large groups were housed in the building. At the very end of the limb with offices, a community room was fenced off, housing a small pantry to prepare food and a coffee machine, although most people walked over to the cafeteria across the street where they could order "real" coffee. The labs were on the other side of the horseshoe.

Despite this new office concept everyone had to adhere to, Ken had been adamant about having a room for himself, claiming he had too many confidential conversations and phone calls to allow him to sit in an open space. Adjacent to his glass-walled room was a small space fenced off by bookcases where his secretary, Joyce, reigned.

He now walked up to Joyce's desk.

'Well, hello, Ken! Welcome back. Although we hardly had a chance to miss you these past two days. How was China?'

'China? Have I been in China?' he followed up on her light banter. 'I've seen airplanes, a hotel room that could

be anywhere, and a huge convention center that could be anywhere, too. And...oh, yeah, a lot of Asian people.’ He placed the electronic devices he had borrowed from the university IT service for his trip to China at the corner of her desk.

‘Can you do me a favor and bring this back to the IT guys? I removed everything, taking my manuscripts and notes off the laptop. It’s ready for use by the next poor bugger who has to travel with these incredibly slow, old-fashioned, and inferior devices. I’m so happy to be home, if only for being able to use my own devices again!’

They next went through his appointments for the day and leafed through some of the requests that had come in while he was away.

Joyce showed him the print-outs of some emails he had to decide on. ‘There are two invitations for lectures in May, one in Nebraska and another in Maryland. And a few emails from people who attended your lecture in Beijing and still had some questions. How would you like me to handle these?’

Ken scanned the requests. He received so many invitations for talks that he had already decided years ago to cut it down to up to two trips per month on average; and no more than one lecture per week, even if in places within driving distance. This restriction meant that he could afford to only accept the more prestigious invitations and turn down most of the other requests. He usually tried to cluster things, combining a trip to Europe for a keynote address with several visits to universities in countries over there, saving himself another unnecessary long-haul trip. Usually, he crammed in as many visits as possible in ten days, the maximum period he allowed himself to be away from the lab, including travel time. Together with Joyce, he looked at his agenda for May. The talk in Nebraska was easy; he would simply turn that

down, as he didn't fancy going there. Really, what was going on in Nebraska? Maryland sounded more interesting, and it so happened that he could combine it with a visit to Columbia University in the same week, provided they would shift the talk in Maryland by a day; which they would if he insisted.

Ken moved away from Joyce's computer, which they had jointly perused to decide on his appointments. 'I'll be dealing with my email until ten this morning, so I don't want to be disturbed. I was too wiped out to have a look last night when I returned from China after a trip of nearly thirty hours. After having been cut off because of this silly security issue, I expect there's a huge backlog,' he said, entering his office. Over his shoulder, he added, 'Oh, and ask Sam to come and see me at 10 am.'

At 10 am sharp, Sam ambled into his office, holding two cups of coffee, one for himself and a latte macchiato for Ken.

'I brought you some coffee.'

Sam placed the two cups on the desk and sat down. 'How was your trip, Ken?'

'It was great! Well, not the traveling and other nuisances, of course. But listen, I heard this fantastic talk by Jim. Jim Felton. His lab now applies a technology from physics to living cells, which allows them to correct proteins that are miscoded.'

All excited, Ken explained everything to Sam, telling him about the experiments he had designed in his hotel and while traveling and how this new technology could be implemented in their lab within the next few months or even weeks. On a piece of paper, Ken sketched the plans he had conceived, and he had a stimulating discussion

with Sam, who came up with some ideas that could improve the technology.

‘Jim even offered to send his postdoc over, the one who set everything up in his lab. A Tony something, I forgot his last name. He still had to ask the guy, of course. But I’m sure he’ll come.’ Ken took a sip of coffee. ‘I’ll call Jim today and see if Tony agrees to come. Hopefully soon. We’ll have to wait for him to come over to find out exactly what kind of person we need to hire to run this technology in our lab. According to Jim, it’s not very complicated, and it should be easy to find an able person. I can pay the new guy from my endowment for the time being. And meanwhile, I’ve started writing a grant proposal to raise the money for the longer term. What do you think?’

Sam responded enthusiastically, infected by Ken’s high spirit and excitement. It indeed sounded like the solution to the problems they had experienced when they tried to apply their discoveries in whole animals and, of course, the big goal, in humans in the future, where every intervention had to be highly specific and preferably without any side effects.

But then Sam frowned.

‘We’ll need to combine this with the technology developed by Dex, though. So how are we going to manage now that Dex leaves?’

Ken had not considered this until now because he had dismissed the idea of Dex leaving as unlikely. But Sam made it sound as if it was a done deal.

‘Is he serious about leaving? I mean, we all get offers all the time. But that doesn’t mean you actually go...’

Sam looked doubtful. ‘I think he has already decided, Ken. Maybe he hasn’t exactly signed the contract, but mentally, he seems to have reached a conclusion. It might be difficult to convince him otherwise.’

'I can't believe it,' Ken exclaimed, jumping out of his swivel chair and walking over to the bookcase along one of the walls. He banged his fist on a wooden shelf. 'I mean, what does John's lab offer him besides what he can find here, too? We give him *every* opportunity! If he waits a few more years, he can easily find a tenure-track position at basically any university. Why would he leave in the middle of his project? And *especially* now that we need him, with this new combination of techniques opening up possibilities to really make a difference. I simply don't get it!'

He glared at Sam as if he had an answer to these questions.

Sam remained stoic and shrugged his shoulders almost imperceptibly. 'He claims he's looking for more independence. I don't know, Ken. Why don't you ask Dex?'

'More independence?!' Without noticing it, Ken had raised his voice. He looked incredulously at Sam. 'He's just a *postdoc*, for God's sake! He's not even *close to* a position of independence! Once he has set up his research line... that's when he can have independence for the rest of his life, as far as I'm concerned! But as long as he's here, with me taking care of *all* the burden, raising the money, doing the bloody administration, getting the damned papers published, everything...as long as he's here, he better enjoy his "dependence" and just do as he's told.'

Ken honestly didn't understand Dex's motives. Was the guy out of his mind? It was not only a stupid move for a postdoc to make but also bloody inconvenient for him, Ken, as he now fully realized after Sam's justified remark. Well, he shouldn't take it out on Sam, who was only the messenger after all. So, he walked back to his desk and flopped down into his leather chair with a deep sigh.

‘OK, you better ask him to come over. Maybe I can still talk some sense into him. The guy apparently doesn’t know what’s good for him. Or bad, in this case.’

Sam agreed and quickly left Ken’s office, relieved to no longer be treated as if he were backing up Dex’s plan to go.

Ken was fully resolved to sound reasonable and make Dex see all the reasons why it was so much better to stay than to leave in the middle of his project in the Bird Lab. But somehow, Dex’s answers annoyed him so much that things quickly got out of hand.

It already started when Dex entered Ken’s office, self-assured, almost aggressively, as Ken thought.

‘Knock-knock. Sam said you wanted to see me?’ Dex strolled into Ken’s office.

‘I should think so. Can you please close the door behind you?’ Ken motioned with his chin for Dex to sit in the chair opposite himself, in front of his desk. ‘I heard some rumors I would’ve liked to hear from you first before they spread.’

‘You were away the past few days, Ken. I didn’t have a chance to tell you.’

‘Oh, come on, give me a break!’ Ken was already losing his patience, feeling provoked. ‘This hasn’t come up in the past few days, Dex. You must have been talking to John Barridge already for some time.’

‘Actually, I didn’t. He sent me an email last Wednesday, and I contacted him on Friday, the day you left. I was waiting for you to return and then let you know. I was stupid enough, though, to make a chance remark to Sam on Saturday, which he immediately briefed you on. When Sam let me know on Monday, I wanted to email an explanation to you, but apparently, you were cut off from your email while traveling. Or so I was told.’

Ken waved his hand impatiently. ‘Let’s not get sidetracked. This is *not* about how we communicate. This is about why you took up the idea of moving in the first place. I mean, in all honesty, I don’t get it.’

Ken forced himself to sound reasonable and understanding, although internally, he already seethed because of Dex’s dismissive tone as if it was Ken’s fault that Dex hadn’t been able to come up with the news. ‘Just explain to me: Why is a postdoc leaving in the middle of a successful project? If you just hang on for another year or two, you can publish your work in the best possible journals. And with those publications, it shouldn’t be hard to secure your first career grant. *And* perhaps even a tenure-track position at a good university, with which I would help you as much as I can...as far as helping is necessary at all, coming from the Bird Lab. Why give it all up?’

Dex seemed to hesitate and took his time to answer. ‘Well, Ken, if you’re really interested in knowing...I long for more freedom, more independence. To be valued for my ideas and input rather than being treated as a tiny cog in the big machine.’

To Ken, it sounded priggish as well as accusative. ‘A cog in a big machine?! Who put that idea in your mind? We all work *together*. That’s what the word “teamwork” means. And you take your part in it, just like any other postdoc, PhD student, or technician.’

Instead of ranting further, Ken tried to calm down somewhat, realizing that he wouldn’t win Dex over by shouting at him.

‘Listen, Dex. Let’s be reasonable. John Barridge is just buying you. Buying your expertise. My question to you is: Are you for sale?’

He looked Dexter in the eye and then proceeded. ‘You don’t seriously think you’ll get more independence there,

as a postdoc, any more than you have here? And you'll experience that it will be a lot harder to publish well from that lab than when you stay here. John doesn't have the contacts on the boards of the top-tier journals that I have, from which you, indirectly, can profit.'

He looked at Dex, who impassively stared in Ken's direction.

When Dex didn't answer, Ken added, 'You realize this is not even a lateral step, do you? I would rather consider it a step *down* the ladder. If you're serious about a career in science, it would be so much wiser to stay. This is one of the best places to be,' he added as if that settled it.

For a moment, he thought Dex was reconsidering his idea to leave. But the young man's answer told him otherwise. 'Sorry, Ken. You honestly don't seem to get it. I don't see this as a step down at all. Working in a place where your input is valued and the atmosphere is more relaxed...to me, that's a step up. A friend of mine works in the Barridge lab, and he assured me it's a good environment to work. The fact is,' Dex added hesitatingly, 'I simply don't want to stay working here, even if I didn't have a competing offer. I fear I'll tumble off the ladder completely if I stay here any longer. You know...quit science altogether. I'll leave, no matter what.'

From what Dex said, Ken understood that any effort to try and convince Dex to stay was a waste of time and breath. The guy seemed so convinced he could escape the competition and land in a fairy tale by moving to another lab that he was beyond help.

'Well, in that case, you better leave immediately. At least...as soon as you've instructed Mihaela to carry out the technique you've started setting up here. I see no point in your staying any longer,' Ken retorted gruffly.

At that point, the conversation had completely derailed.

‘I think, Ken, it’s *me* who set up the technology here. I pay myself with my junior career grant. So, *I* can take the technique with me. I might *consider* helping Mihaela because it’s good for *her*. But, for the rest, *I* can determine when and how I’ll leave. In my book, that’s called independence, isn’t it?’

Ken reacted as if stung by a wasp. ‘What do you mean, *your* technology,’ he hissed. ‘*Your* grant? The idea for the approach was entirely *mine*, from *this* lab. And you would never have received the grant if not supported by me; if you didn’t have the reputation of this lab to back you up.’ Ken jumped up, unable to sit down and listen to Dex’s distorted views of the truth. ‘I can’t believe what you just inferred. It’s so selfish, so stupid...not wanting to share your insights with another group member!’

Ken now pointed his finger at Dexter. ‘You’ll better leave here on good terms, mister. At least if you want to have your work acknowledged in any manuscript from this project. If *you* drop your work in the middle, *I* might easily drop your name from the paper.’ And then adding in a restrained voice, ‘Wake up, Dexter, there is no such thing as independence in the world of science. Whatever you do, you’ll always depend on me: Your reference letters, your position among the authors on a paper, reviews of your grants in the future...the lot. Don’t thwart me! Or you’ll find out what that entails...’

Dexter’s face had gone white during this outburst.

With a thin voice, he answered Ken. ‘I got your message, Ken. I’ll instruct Mihaela and make sure the experiments are followed up in good order. And then leave.’ Dex cleared his throat and then went on. ‘I’ve invested two years of my life in getting this to work. So, like you, I also would like to see the project pay off and that it’s published in a good journal, with my name on the author’s list...a

fair reflection of the amount of time and effort I put into it.'

Ken sank back into his chair. He felt his anger slowly subside. The boy had come to his senses, though not to the extent that he would stay. Dex's main concern seemed to be that his name would still appear in the list of authors—if it ever came to a paper.

'I always try to be fair,' Ken answered curtly. 'Once the study is completed, which may take at least another year, we'll see what your contribution has been compared to that of the other authors. I would *never* leave out someone's name if I thought he had been instrumental in getting the results. And, in case someone has been essential, a place among the shared first authors makes sense. It's a matter of honor to me to be fair and just.'

Ken sat up in his chair as if to go back to work. 'I think we're done, Dex. Tell me your exact schedule at a later time. I wish you good luck.' He couldn't resist adding, 'I hope you'll enjoy your independence and not regret it.' When Dexter left his office, Ken turned his swivel chair 180 degrees and stared out the window. Why had he been so annoyed by the guy? Why had he lost his temper and even shouted at him? He guessed that it had been the ill-guided view Dex had shown of his position, thinking he was indispensable and that this gave him a position of power over Ken. Or maybe the defiance rather than thankfulness he had shown towards Ken?

Dex didn't seem to understand that, despite the little expertise he could boast of, he had been so lucky to be admitted to the Bird Lab, where every possible technology was available, where money was never an issue for postdocs. Where junior scientists could easily get their grant proposals awarded; and their papers accepted in excellent journals. In short, where everything was

easy...things that inevitably were a struggle in nearly all other labs in the world.

Well, let him find out the hard way. The guy was too insignificant to disturb Ken seriously. But he, Ken, was certainly not going to help Dex more than strictly necessary in his career, which differed from his attitude towards most other postdocs, whom he always helped find a good place in the university system, pulling all the strings he had access to.

Dex still felt wobbly on his feet from his discussion with Ken half an hour ago. He walked over to the cafeteria with Sean, a postdoc from one of the other labs, whom he knew well and to whom he had turned directly after the conversation with Ken. Sean had taken one look at Dex's face and then proposed to grab a coffee in the cafeteria. They crossed the street in silence.

After receiving their orders, they walked outside and sat down on one of the benches in front of the cafeteria in the shade of a eucalyptus tree.

'So that didn't go down well,' Sean opened the conversation.

Dex shook his head. 'It was every bit as awful as I'd thought beforehand. He was incredibly angry.' 'What's he angry for, man? You do have a right to quit, don't you?'

'Not in his book, I have. I don't know what I said to aggravate things, but he sure was mad at me.'

'Listen, Dex, you didn't do anything wrong. You're very unhappy in the Bird Lab; in fact, you've been unhappy for close to a year now. You even thought of quitting science altogether! You keep telling me you hate the atmosphere, don't you? You say it all

the time. And so, when you have a chance to escape and go to a more relaxed lab, just go for it. What's wrong with that? *You* should be mad, the way you've been treated.'

Dex shook his head again, looking doubtful. 'It's not that simple, Sean. In fact, it's not like that at all. In a way, Ken is right, you see. I do understand his point of view. If you want to make it in science, this is the game. In terms of my career, leaving the Bird Lab is close to scientific suicide. So, in that sense, he's right in not understanding my choice. It's just... It's just that I'm not made for it. I can't stand it.'

'Hey, man, you sound like you have a Stockholm syndrome. You start defending the perpetrators and blaming yourself. Stop it, Dex! Seriously, stop accusing yourself. If you're no longer happy in your job, you have every right to get the hell out of it. Plus, you've got your own grant, so you can work anywhere.'

Dex sighed. 'I'm not so sure about that, I've got to look up the conditions. Maybe the grant is tied to the Bird Lab? Well, anyway, I might not need it. John has got funding himself; he can pay me from his grants, or so he told me.'

'Right. Now stop worrying. It's not like you are still doing a PhD project that cannot be easily transferred. You have the sort of expertise that any lab would like to import, so basically, that makes you entirely independent.'

Dexter took a sip of coffee and thought about Sean's comments. 'That's what I said, too. You know...that I'm independent and all. But somehow, that made him go completely through the roof. And to some extent, he's right, I guess? I do remain dependent on his benevolence for a long

time; even after I've started my own group...if I ever succeed in doing so. Wherever I go, Ken is somehow in charge, or he knows people he could influence in their opinions about me. I can't afford him to be my enemy.'

Sean frowned. 'Did he say that? Insinuate that you'll always depend on him? You know, it being a small world and that you will always come across him, one way or another? He didn't seriously say that, did he? That would be straight-out bullying. Harassment.'

Dexter hesitated. 'No, I guess he didn't literally say it; not in so many words. I mean, not as a real threat to me, personally. More in general. But even if he didn't say it, it's a fact, right?' Dex scratched his forehead. 'So, in the end, I shut up and promised to leave things in good order.'

Sean shrugged. 'Leaving with slamming doors is never a good idea. But just remember, Dex: You don't owe him anything. You've worked your ass off for the past two years and pulled something off that is incredibly important for the Bird Lab. In my view, he owes you!'

Dex emptied his cup and rose. He was just confused. Did he owe Ken anything? Or—almost unthinkable—did Ken owe him? Ken's explanation of how everything in Dex's career had been made possible because he worked in the Bird Lab made sense. And, of course, he knew full well the struggles other postdocs had in getting their papers accepted and published in good journals, whereas working in Ken's group had made it seem relatively easy.

Was all he had experienced just part of a "normal" apprenticeship? Was Ken to blame in any way? Or was he, Dex, simply unfit for science?

The discussion had shaken him. Still, when he walked back to the building, he was overcome by an immense feeling of relief that he would soon leave this place and start anew somewhere else.

For most of the day, Ken caught up with his email, emptying his box full of messages after a few days' absence. Usually, he checked his email box at least twice a day, even when traveling overseas, hating to return to this huge backlog of work after a few days' absence. But this time, the silly security issue had prevented him from doing so.

He had a cursory look at all messages, deleting the uninteresting ones and dispatching other requests to one of the junior lab members, such as the ones asking him to review manuscripts for journals. So, he was left with the notes that required some action from him, like invitations, missives from the university administration, or other administrative tasks that he generally loathed but couldn't ignore. For instance, he had received a message about animal welfare that would require yet more forms to be filled out for reasons that entirely escaped him but would involve a lot of time, time that could be so much better spent on experiments. And there was a letter that summoned him to complete a timetable so that his lectures for the fall term could be scheduled. Fall term—that was more than half a year from now! How could he possibly foresee what his agenda would be like at that time? Most of the timeslots were impossible to start with, as he had already accepted several invitations or agreed to attend meetings scheduled for the fall of this year. Well, he would give it a try. The university was not very hard on him regarding teaching obligations, understanding very

well that he was more profitable to them by dedicating his time to research and securing grant money than teaching undergraduates.

At 2 pm, Ken convened with nearly all his group members, who were rustled up by Sam, except for a few who were in the middle of their experiment and couldn't be disturbed. He explained what he had learned from Jim Felton's talk and animatedly drew on the whiteboard how this new approach could help them overcome the problems they had experienced so far regarding cell specificity and side effects in mice.

These were the moments Ken relished. He was so excited about the vistas that opened with this new approach that he could hardly contain his impatience to get started.

Moreover, his plans ignited an animated discussion among all group members, and some, like Sam who had come up this morning with some adaptations that could mean an improvement of the technique as Jim had applied it, had a couple of bright suggestions in that direction, too. Of course, most of their suggestions were farfetched; these may become opportune ten years from now. But the mere fact that all the junior group members were so deeply engaged in making plans left Ken happy. This was what it was all about—science! The big adventure they shared...the joint journey into unknown territory. And all for the benefit of mankind!

Ken had been so immersed in the new developments that he almost forgot to attend the Faculty Hour, which would start at 4 pm in the main assembly room in another building next to the dean's office. Being there was not exactly obligatory, but the dean had made it quite clear that senior staff members were supposed to join the monthly assembly. Every month, one particular subject in university policy was addressed, and the senior staff members were invited to give their opinions. If one didn't

attend these events, chances were considerable that some decision would be reached with which one would generally strongly disagree. When the final decision was conveyed to the staff, the dean would invariably explain that they had had their chance during one of the Faculty Hours to bring up arguments against the decision. And if they chose not to come, they shouldn't complain afterward.

Not that it made the slightest difference if one showed up or not. The dean or other university administrators would always listen politely to all the arguments that were raised against one of the proposed measures and then conclude that the majority was still in favor; or that circumstances beyond their control forced them to nevertheless go forward with the intended policies despite the fact that there were several good arguments against doing so. The newcomers still nursed the idea that they could change any of the decision-making, but the more seasoned faculty members knew quite well that the Faculty Hour only served for them to vent their critical objections but was not meant to change the result in any way. That made attending the Hour a complete waste of time in the view of Ken and most of his colleagues, but staying away didn't go down so well with the dean.

And so, he hurried over to the administration building, arriving only a few minutes late. All the seats were already occupied, which caused Ken to stand in the back with a few other latecomers. The dean, Herbert Wilkinson, was already in the middle of his introduction.

'And therefore, we invited Ms. Sally Evans, head of our university's HR internal promotions unit, to present the latest thoughts on improving the promotion system for faculty members. I should add that this new system has already been tested in two divisions of our university, and with great success. Needless to say, the decision to

introduce the system in the School of Medicine is not in *our* hands but up to the board of the university. Nevertheless, it'll be useful for you to come up with any suggestions you'd like to make.'

Under his breath, Ken said to his neighbor, the Chairman of Genetics, 'So, it's all a done deal, as always. Why are we wasting our time on this travesty of faculty participation?'

The man didn't answer but winked at Ken.

Ms. Sally Evans stepped forward, a woman in her forties with long brown hair, wearing a smart dress and unbelievably high heels. It made her look like a ballerina in pointe shoes, which Ken knew from the days Brenda had attended ballet lessons and they frequently went to ballet performances in the theater.

Sally started by showing them some slides with numbers, mostly about promotions to the various faculty positions across the entire university, and then split per division or even per department: How many people had joined the staff, how many had left, the male-female ratio for all career stages, and the current procedure and criteria for promotion. Most attendees were very familiar with all that, as they had been on promotion committees numerous times.

'We have come to realize,' Sally Evans continued, 'that despite all our efforts, the numbers for promoting minorities don't meet our targets. I am not only talking about gender but also other aspects of diversity. And it is a well-known fact that diverse communities are more versatile and can better adapt to all kinds of challenges from the outside world than what we call "monocultures".'

Ken wondered why nobody asked for any proof of this statement, which was debatable, to say the least. In his experience, less diverse communities could achieve a lot

too, if not more, because it was so much easier to reach an agreement when most people had the same background and thought alike.

Sally went on to explain that, in line with a worldwide movement, the university had realized that, in setting the criteria as they were, one was bound to favor some groups over others and that change was called for now that affirmative action was not reaching its goals and, in fact, might even be discontinued.

‘For instance, by focusing very much on the current metrics, like the number of publications or grant money people bring in, we favor those having ample time to do so, usually men, over those who have to make do with less time, like women raising a young family. We should, therefore, steer away from such quantitative measures and, rather, look at quality.’

There was some murmuring in the assembly room, with several faculty members commenting on this statement to their neighbors.

‘Quality is important; no one will dispute that,’ one of the older professors shouted. ‘But there’s a difference between having one paper published in Science and ten papers in Science!’

‘What Sally means,’ the dean intervened, ‘is that we shouldn’t endorse a system where people publish papers just to raise the number.’

The group quieted down again because nobody could disagree with that.

‘Well, we certainly don’t want any rubbish published,’ the same professor assented gruffly.

The dean nodded to Sally, asking her to continue.

‘Thank you, Dean Wilkinson. Studies have shown that team spirit and soft skills are also very important for success and therefore have to be taken into account,’ she went on. ‘We all know situations where successful

researchers rise to the next level in their career path but lack the social skills to perform successfully at that next level, not being able to inspire or mentor their group members. In short, we should *also* pay more attention to leadership style and mentoring quality: Train our prospective staff members in leadership, give them every opportunity to better themselves in that respect...and be held accountable, of course, when it comes to promotion.’ Several professors shifted uneasily in their chairs. One of them spoke up. ‘It seems to me you start on the premise that we don’t have these qualities yet. However, any successful scientist knows how to lead a research group. Otherwise, one wouldn’t be successful! And it’s inherently teamwork. All of us here,’ he waved his arm to encompass the other faculty in the room, ‘all of us lead a large team of junior scientists, technicians, secretaries, and the like. And with great success!’

‘Yes,’ another acclaimed, ‘I already foresee endless workshops by so-called experts who’ll teach us all sorts of half-baked theories about leadership and what we should or shouldn’t do. While all the time, we *are* already experts because it’s our daily work.’

‘Well, I wouldn’t mind one or two workshops,’ the Chairman of Obstetrics reacted. ‘One can always improve one’s skills, don’t you agree?’

‘Maybe such a workshop could be useful for a starting faculty member,’ the other insisted. ‘But for us, I consider these workshops a complete waste of time. I’ve been to several such events—*made* to go, I should say. And, speaking from experience, I’ve never heard anything that made sense for daily practice in a research lab. All that theoretical gibberish—forget about it! I can do very well without those workshops.’

Dean Wilkinson raised a hand to stop the discussion.

‘Let’s leave the discussion and questions until after Sally

has finished her presentation. I believe she has more to say. And don't forget that these HR issues are in the hands of the university leadership. Complaining won't change anything; the only helpful thing is when we come up with constructive alternatives.'

He only just managed to suppress the discontent that spread across the room.

Sally had waited, unperturbed, during this discourse.

'These are all very understandable comments,' she proceeded. 'And not new points of view, let me assure you. We take them very seriously. The heart of the matter is that we'll need to bring more soft skills criteria into the new promotion system. And since we're not all naturally gifted in that sense, the university thinks it ought to give everyone a fair chance to train such skills and improve them. It wouldn't be fair to judge faculty members along these criteria and not give them a chance to better themselves, just like the gentleman over there—she nodded in the direction of the Chairman of Obstetrics—mentioned. As a university, we stand up for an open, safe, and stimulating environment where every talent can grow and is fostered by his or her supervisor. And for that, we need an open discussion within the university to define exactly what such an environment entails and how we can best prepare people for it. It's all meant to make this a *better* place as a community. And scientifically,' she added, reckoning that this would be the most important argument for the attendees.

She showed a few slides with examples of criteria and how these had been elaborated in detail in the two divisions that had served as guinea pigs.

'Maybe I should allow here for a brief break to take any questions that might have come up,' she suggested to the dean. 'And then continue with the rest of the presentation?'

The discussion that followed was much along the same lines as the earlier remarks. Most, though not all, faculty members considered these extra criteria superfluous and feared obligatory courses, which would take up a lot of their valuable time—time that could be used for a much better purpose.

‘None of it is measurable,’ one of the attendees remarked with a Southern drawl. ‘We are used to solid facts, qualities that can be expressed in objective numbers. How on earth will “success in soft skills” be determined? Instead of *improving* the system, it will only make it more subjective and less transparent.’

There was a murmur of consent.

‘At least there can be no discussion about the number of publications or citations of individual scientists. That is publicly available information,’ one of the senior staff members summarized the general take on the issue.

Sally explained that there were also excellent instruments to sample the performance of employees on soft skills through their colleagues, allowing one to have an impression of which aspects one could improve or, sometimes, should try to stop doing. A few professors confirmed this and shared with the others that they had used these instruments, which yielded surprisingly uniform feedback, whether it came from junior staff or senior colleagues. Of course, these were not “hard numbers”, but they were still useful as a starting point.

‘I don’t see why all this is necessary,’ the Chairman of the Pathology Lab interjected. ‘I mean: For which problem is this a solution? Is there any problem? We’re an extremely high-ranked university by *any* international standard. Our faculty members win prizes left and right. Our undergraduate students are happy—and grateful, I would even like to add, for being admitted to this university. The PhD students, or most of them, finish their dissertations

with good results. And our postdocs—well, the good ones—find excellent junior staff positions elsewhere. So why do we have to change? Why listen to what you call “a new worldwide movement”? Let them listen to us! I challenge all these other universities to become as successful as we are! Well, maybe except Harvard and a few other small places like Princeton,’ he added, which caused some laughter in the room.

Sally Evans remained calm. ‘The problem is that we’ll never become a more inclusive community unless we change. The world around us is changing, requiring us to also change and remain adaptable. And, looking at the rising number of students and staff who approach our counselors or even our confidentiality officers with issues of discomfort, *now* is the right time to seriously address this issue of inclusivity and diversity.’

‘Exactly how many people approached these confidentiality officers last year,’ one of the professors asked. Not waiting for Sally to answer, he immediately added, ‘You don’t have to answer my question, I happen to know this number by heart because I was struck by it. Let me tell you: Not even three hundred across the entire university! Considering there are 35,000 people somehow connected to this place—students, admin, scientific staff, etcetera—we’re talking about less than one percent. I don’t think we can call that a reason for serious action!’ The dean cleared his throat. ‘Going to a confidentiality officer is a big step, something one only considers doing when all other routes have failed. And even a single case is one too many, in my view. I think we should realize that this one percent is probably just the tip of the iceberg. Below the surface, there might be much more discomfort. I sometimes hear of cases of bullying and unsafe environments that seriously raise my concerns. The problem is that, for reasons of privacy, the names of those

behaving...uh, inappropriately...are not always disclosed, leaving me powerless to change anything. So, raising awareness about matters of leadership and *anchoring* such criteria in our promotion system is something I fully approve of.'

That seemed to settle it. If the university leadership as well as the dean wanted to adopt the new criteria, what could they say? It would happen; that was the bottom line. Ken had listened to the exchange of arguments with increasing discomfort. This was exactly the type of discussion he deeply disliked. In his view, it had nothing to do with science or with improving science, for that matter. It was just another administrative conception that would entail forms, tick boxes, and obligatory training, not to mention precious time. This meeting with Sally whatshername was just organized to *inform* them; it was never meant for a serious exchange of standpoints because it had all been decided already. All this was organized so that senior faculty could vent their objections and university administration could say afterward that staff members had been given the opportunity to express their concerns.

He had planned to stay out of the discussion, and besides, most of his arguments had already been raised by others. But he was so irritated by the whole farce that he couldn't resist speaking up.

And therefore, he raised his voice almost at the moment that the dean was ready to wrap up the discussion. 'We'll have to live with whatever the university leadership comes up with, Herbert,' Ken directly addressed the dean, something he thought he could afford as one of the most visible and esteemed scientists of the university's School of Medicine. 'In my view, this is just another hoop we'll have to jump through. We've managed before and we'll manage again, don't you worry. But let

me tell you one thing: If this university wants to do what's good for her, it'll choose to attract *and keep* excellent scientists who perhaps have mediocre soft skills...rather than hire mediocre scientists with excellent soft skills. History has learned that progress in science, and therefore in the wellbeing of mankind, depends on the brilliance of few, no matter how they behave.'

The group broke into modest applause, started by those who agreed with every word Ken had uttered.

Herbert Wilkinson now looked straight at Ken. 'As Sally said, Ken, the world has changed. The outside world no longer accepts abusive behavior and hubris. Mediocre soft skills might be sufficient. But we all know that some of our staff members don't even manage to reach that level. It's those that we try to target with these new criteria. To support them—and support everyone who depends on these individuals.'

Somehow, the atmosphere had turned sour. This no longer seemed to be a regular exchange of standpoints, no matter how superfluous, but a divide in opinions between the administrative staff and most of the scientists, the latter resenting the fact that they implicitly were deemed lacking in their soft skills, the former convinced that something had to change, yet feeling the resistance amongst the professionals.

Herbert Wilkinson looked at his watch. 'Well, given our lengthy discussion, I am afraid we'll have to schedule the second part of Sally's presentation for another time—the part about supporting diverse careers, allowing room for a focus on education or entrepreneurship besides research. I know that universities in some of the other states have a very different take on this issue, but *our* university still strives for diversity in every sense of the word.

So, let's wrap it up: It's clear that we've not yet reached an agreement on our promotion criteria, an outcome I'm

happy to share with the university board. I'm not sure, though, if they'll wait for our School of Medicine to decide. But at the very least, I can summarize your point of view when I next meet them. For now,' he turned toward Sally Evans, 'I would like to thank Ms. Sally Evans for her very informative presentation. And propose to close this meeting and go over to the drinks, which, as always, will be served in the hall outside.'

Chairs scraped over the floor while the assembled staff rose and made for the drinks in the hall, the part of the Faculty Hour they always enjoyed best. They were in an animated discussion about the promotion system, going in small groups over all the arguments to change—or rather, *not* change—the criteria. In some groups, a few staff members were in favor of addressing the issue of inclusivity and diversity, to which the others listened politely, it coming from one of their colleagues rather than an HR officer who had no idea what the world of science was really like. They graciously, sometimes heatedly, disagreed with those in favor of new criteria. Since the opponents by far outnumbered the supporters, the latter gradually fell silent, trusting that the university would change the system no matter what all their colleagues thought.

'Well said, Ken,' Frank Ingleton, the Chairman of the Pathology Lab, mentioned, raising his glass to toast Ken. 'All this bullshit about leadership style and soft skills... We've got to stay competitive. If we suddenly change our criteria and all the competing groups in the world don't, what do you think would happen? The postdocs wouldn't understand why we now suddenly judge how nice they behave rather than how well they carry out their experiments. They need experimental results for their career, to get good papers and secure their next job. Will they get a career grant if they excel in soft skills but have

no papers to vow for their scientific excellence? No, we won't do them any favors by focusing on things other than scientific content; on the contrary!

Anand Patel, a professor in Experimental Pediatrics, looked up. 'Well, hasn't the current system gone a bit too far, Frank? There is a lot of pressure on these young kids. And they work long hours.'

'We all do,' remarked Ken. 'How else can one stay competitive? It takes all your time, at least in experimental research it does.'

Patel chuckled. 'The interesting thing is that working around the clock might not always lead to the highest output. I've always felt I live on half a brain when it's hectic. My best and most creative ideas pop up during my holiday breaks—away from the daily hassles.'

Ken considered that this was not entirely untrue. He usually got the best brainwaves while traveling. Wasn't that exactly what had just happened to him, spending a free hour during a conference, attending someone else's lecture, and getting the best idea in years?

Anand Patel went on. 'But just working long hours is not the main problem. I guess these kids are willing to do that. What I rather meant to say is that these days, every step in their career has to be successful; they can hardly afford any failure. And failures can be very instructive; one can learn a lot from such situations, provided there's a supportive supervisor who takes the time to guide these young people in the right direction. But there seems to be no time for failures; and sometimes not even for guidance.'

'I don't quite agree there,' Ken reacted testily. 'When it comes to the supervision of young scientists, there's no limit to the amount of time I spend on that. That's our role, isn't it? To raise these young and talented people to a position of independence. It takes a lot of time and

commitment on both sides. Some postdocs might think, prematurely, that they are ready for independence, but that's where they are misled,' he added, the exchange with Dexter earlier that day still fresh in his mind.

'But don't you agree that there's much more pressure on them than when we were postdocs,' Patel maintained.

'There has always been pressure, Anand. As a postdoc, I spent every minute of the day and week in the lab. Not because I was pushed by my supervisor to do so but because I had an innate drive to move forward as fast as possible. And that has never changed. The pressure is everywhere, at any time, and for everyone. Don't you think I feel it myself?! And probably a lot more than any postdoc or PhD student in my lab, who, after all, only has to worry about the next experiment and nothing else.'

'I can't say I agree with you on that point, Ken. On the contrary, I think they experience a lot of stress. And uncertainty, too. They're worried about their future in general, and not only in terms of science. For one thing, most of them worry about getting their next position...and with reason. Whereas you can work from the relative comfort of a tenured position, an endowed chair.'

'Well, I worked damned hard for that. Getting an endowed chair is not a free ride.' Ken felt resentment at the stab. Inwardly, he thought that Anand Patel would never qualify for such a chair, not being one of the top researchers in his field, no matter how undisputed his qualities as a clinician.

Patel remained friendly. 'Well, it's simply not a level playing field. And between your days as a postdoc and the young people now, the average age at which they receive their first big career grant has gone up by almost a decade. They hop from one temporary position to the next. How can one build a future on that...how can they *not* feel the pressure? And compared to their age mates who chose a

business or law career, they are much worse off. I'm concerned that we'll increasingly have trouble motivating young people to stay in science...to find postdocs who'll apply to our job offers. So, I guess we must be at least supportive leaders, considering all the competitiveness.'

'Who says I'm not supportive,' Ken retorted, annoyed. 'I go out of my way to support those aspiring to a future in science. The fact of the matter, though, is that our academic world depends on competition. That's just how it is. And if you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen.'

'So, what if people don't agree with your point of view,' Patel asked lightly. 'People who propose to be more inclusive and help each other instead of all this competition? Or to be less exclusively focused on research but, instead, choose to teach undergraduates or reach out to the lay public? Does everyone always agree with you?'

'They do, most of the time. And if not, it usually concerns administrators like this Sally so-and-so, who doesn't know what she's talking about, not being a scientist herself. Scientific research asks for full dedication and focus. And don't you think that the world of business is any nicer! At least, that's what I keep telling my junior people when they waver. Tough luck!'

'But business is certainly better paid,' Frank from Pathology commented. It was a well-known fact that he, as Chairman of the Pathology Lab, was rather frustrated at being paid a much lower salary than the Chairman of Surgery or Cardiology.

Ken shrugged. 'A high salary should never be a motive for any scientist. We're all well-paid for what we do. Our reward is more in terms of scientific progress.'

‘And esteem? Fame?’ Frank asked peevishly, knowing Ken wasn’t averse to all the honors and awards bestowed on him.

“‘Being respected’ is the expression I would rather choose,’ Ken answered in a measured tone. ‘I do think I’m entitled to some respect. And expect that, too.’

Someone else joined the group, and Ken used this moment to take his leave. He drained his glass in one gulp, left the empty glass at the bar, and exited the administration building.

The meeting had been every bit as dreadful as he had feared beforehand. What a waste of time! It was all useless because, firstly, there seemed to be no serious problem that needed to be solved. And secondly, it didn’t make the slightest difference what he or any of his colleagues would bring up.

With big strides, he walked back to the Biochemistry Building. Seeing the glass facade, his thoughts automatically reverted to the exciting new experiments he had discussed earlier this afternoon with his group members. A smile appeared on his face. Now *that* was teamwork—everyone in the lab knew exactly what he or she had to do! He would steer all of them through these challenging techniques, taking care of hiring the right people, raising the money, and acquiring the instruments to carry out the experiments. And eventually, if it all worked out as hoped, they would publish the results in the best possible scientific journals. It felt like belonging to one big family. He never bothered thinking about soft skills, competition, or work pressure. It was an *adventure!* And only the superb quality and excitement of their work counted.

Chapter III

On a Tuesday morning early in March, Joyce, Ken's secretary, opened his door and pointed at the cell phone she held in the air.

'There's someone on the phone for you by the name of Vincenzo. A Dr. Vincenzo. He claims I can't take the message. He says he wants to convey it to you personally. Shall I put him through?'

'Vincenzo? You mean Michele Vincenzo, the Nobel Prize winner from Chicago?'

Joyce shrugged. 'I wouldn't know. He didn't mention any prizes. Just his last name.'

'Put him through. And, please, close the door when you leave.'

'Of course. I always do.'

Ken picked up his phone and leaned back in his swivel chair.

'Michele? That's been a long time...How are you doing?'

'Ken! I'm doing great, thank you. How about yourself?'

'I'm fine, thanks. Couldn't be better.'

Michele Vincenzo started to laugh. 'Well, after you've heard the news I'm about to disclose, you *will* feel better, believe me.'

Ken heard a muffled cough, after which Michele Vincenzo returned to the phone, clearing his throat.

'You may know that I've been chairing the jury of the Lieberman Prize for some years now. And it's my great pleasure, Ken, to let you know, informally, that the jury has unanimously decided to award this year's prize to you for your groundbreaking work in protein chemistry.'

Michele Vincenzo waited a few seconds for the news to

sink in and then added, ‘My sincere congratulations, Ken.’

Ken perked up. The Lieberman Prize?! He hadn’t seen that one coming. Of course, he knew he was one of the contenders and had sometimes wondered if or, to be honest, *when* it would fall his way, but it was certainly not something he thought of all the time. It hadn’t even crossed his mind when Joyce announced that Vincenzo was on the phone.

‘I don’t know what to say, Michele. It comes as a complete surprise.’

‘Well, it can’t be that surprising, Ken. The group of people we have to choose from isn’t that big. But it’s a great honor...you should be happy. You can be proud of yourself.’

‘Of course, I’m happy, Michele! It’s just...well, I’m a bit overwhelmed.’

‘Sure, sure.’ Michele Vincenzo coughed again. ‘Now, one thing. The ceremony will take place in late August, and you’ll have to come over to DC to accept the sculpture that goes with the prize and deliver a brief lecture. I fully understand if you have other commitments, but you’ll have to clean your agenda and show up for this ceremony. It’s conditional to receiving the prize.’

‘No problem, Michele. Whatever other obligations I might have: Canceling because I’ll have to pick up a prize is the best excuse there is. You can count on me, I’ll be there at the end of August.’

‘Fine, then that’s settled. As you know, the prize not only comes with a sculpture, which, by the way, is hideous but also with a nice sum of 250,000 dollars. Not a lot of money, but sufficient to hire a postdoc for some time. Or buy yourself a sports car; there’s no real obligation to spend the prize on science. Anyhow, the lady in charge of

the Lieberman Foundation will contact you soon about all the details.'

'Excellent!'

'And there's one more thing: Keep in mind that, right now, the news is absolutely qualified. The Foundation will announce the winner sometime in June, about two months before the ceremony. Until then, you'll have to keep the news to yourself, Ken. Nobody is to know: No group members, colleagues, nor the dean, well, the whole lot. You may whisper it to your wife as long as she keeps it entirely to herself. The Foundation is quite strict about that.'

'No problem, my lips are sealed.'

'Great. Well, Ken, that was all I had to say. These are the more pleasant phone calls I have to make these days. It's always nice to bring good news. So, once more, my heartfelt congratulations. Well-deserved!'

They exchanged some more greetings and then disconnected.

Ken rose from his swivel chair. He simply couldn't keep himself from pacing through his room. He raised his arms, made a fist, and could barely suppress a cheer.

Just imagine: He had won the Lieberman Prize! Can you believe it...one of the most prestigious prizes in his field?! The prize money was very welcome, of course, although he wasn't exactly short of money, what with his endowment and several large grants running. Still, the 250 grant might come in useful. And the good news was that, since it was prize money, he wouldn't have to hand over any of it to the university administration, something he always resented doing.

But the *prestige* meant more to him than any of the money. The Lieberman Prize was only awarded to those who had not yet received a Nobel Prize but stood a good chance of getting one. The Lieberman Foundation liked to

pride itself on frequently picking winners that, in subsequent years, did acquire the Nobel Prize, showing the Foundation had an excellent nose for the very top league of scientists. Michele Vincenzo himself was an excellent example, having received the Lieberman Prize about fifteen years ago, only to receive the Nobel Prize two years later.

Ken sat down and searched the web for the Lieberman Prize to scan the list of previous winners. He felt a glow of pride spread when he scrolled through the list of names. The Lieberman Prize was always awarded to a single person, and since it already existed for forty years, the list of names was long and extremely impressive. He counted at least seven Nobel Prize winners among them, and of course, that number might only increase when the more recent winners were also successful in receiving the Nobel Prize one day.

Holy cow! It would be difficult to conceal his elation today. Ken smiled from ear to ear right now.

He decided he would stay in his room for the next hour or so and attend to some light work, allowing the news to sink in a bit. He picked up his phone and called Joyce to say so. If she were surprised that he let her know by phone he wanted to be alone while she was at her desk five feet away from him, she managed to hide this successfully.

‘No problem, Ken. You’ve got a meeting half an hour from now, but I’ll reschedule that for tomorrow afternoon; there’s still an open slot then. Oh, and don’t forget your lunch with Dean Wilkinson and Harold Lakowski today. I’m sure you don’t want to skip that?’

Ken sighed. ‘Well, I would if I could get away with it. But there’s no escaping it. Well, anyway, thanks for taking care of the rest.’

When he placed his cell phone on his desk, he briefly mused about the annual lunch with Harold Lakowski. He didn't mind that so much, Harold was actually OK. But he always brought along some of his executives, and Ken found it increasingly hard to stay polite with these guys—or girls; last time, one of them was a woman. Well, he would survive, certainly now that he was in such a good mood, having the Lieberman Prize in his pocket, even though he wasn't allowed yet to tell anyone.

Ken spent the next five minutes leaning back in his chair and just enjoying the feeling of recognition that the news about the Lieberman Prize had left. What an honor... And who knows what would come next?

After some time, he straightened again. Well, there was still a lot to do, even today. The day after tomorrow, he planned to leave for a five-day trip to Europe, first giving a named lecture in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, and then flying on to Vienna, where the European Society held its biennial meeting and where he was invited to deliver one of three special lectures. Jenny would fly to Vienna later this week and join him there for a few days. Of course, the conference organization would not pay for her travels, and he certainly wouldn't ask for it, even though he knew some of his colleagues made that conditional on their acceptance to give a lecture. But there was no need to do so because he had collected so many miles in his frequent flyer program that he could easily order a ticket for Jenny using his mileage. And she always really enjoyed roaming the cities, while all he saw was the interior of the Conference Center. Sometimes Jenny made him join her for part of the day, not because she needed company but rather because she simply couldn't get her head around it that he was in all those beautiful places and didn't take any time to enjoy them.

He remembered how she had walked him to the Colosseum and the Pantheon when they were in Rome, she leading the way and he in tow. He couldn't say he had enjoyed it, Rome being incredibly hot at that particular time of the year and terribly noisy, with traffic swerving all around them. But he agreed with Jenny arguing that visiting all these beautiful cities without seeing any of the highlights was insane. Like going to the moon and not bringing back a rock.

He now turned to his computer. There was still a lot to do today and tomorrow. He shouldn't waste any time. But, my goodness, the Lieberman Prize...he was going to receive the Lieberman Prize!

Lunch was catered by one of the best restaurants in the area and served in the Faculty Boardroom. Apart from Ken, there were five more people: The dean, Herbert Wilkinson; Harold Lakowski, who sometimes brought his wife Evelyn along but not this time; the CFO of the Lakowski Group, a person by the name of Larry Myers; and two women who were somehow connected to the Lakowski Foundation, the charity organization that served as the legal entity supplying all the money for scientific projects donated by Harold and his wife.

They gathered first in one of the corners of the Boardroom, where a waiter stood behind a makeshift bar where one could order drinks. Ken asked for a soda, trying to keep the amount of alcohol he consumed at lunch within limits. He knew from experience that he might become sleepy for the rest of the day if he drank more than one glass of wine at midday. He couldn't afford that, having a full agenda until late tonight.

They all stood in a circle, slightly awkward; six people were just too many for any serious exchange, yet too few to split up into subgroups. They lightly discussed the weather—a bit cool for the time of the year—and the traffic the guests had to fight to reach the university. It was the kind of small talk Ken usually had very little to add to because it was all about matters he never seriously considered. But fortunately, Herbert Wilkinson was a master at keeping up such a conversation, so it flowed easily until the moment that he, the dean, invited everyone to the table. Wilkinson deftly guided all the guests to the oblong table. He first invited Harold to sit in the middle opposite him and then proposed that the two ladies sit down, one to Harold's right and the other next to himself, leaving the two remaining seats to Ken and the CFO. Once everyone was seated, a waiter served the first course.

Dean Wilkinson raised his glass.

'Let me toast to all guests. It's a great pleasure to welcome you all here officially. *Again*, I should add because this little gathering has become a valued tradition by now.' Dean Wilkinson bowed in Harold Lakowski's direction, who raised his glass to the dean.

Wilkinson continued. 'Let me take this opportunity to once again thank the Lakowski Foundation—bowing in the direction of both women—and, of course, the Lakowski Group—raising his glass in the direction of Larry Myers—for their extremely generous gifts to this university, and our Biochemistry Department in particular.' Here, he neighed in Ken's direction. 'Let me assure you,' he said, involving all guests around the table in his glance, 'that your donations are by no means ever taken for granted. They've allowed us to provide our scientists with a state-of-the-art and fully equipped building that can easily compete with any other

biochemistry facility worldwide. *And* it provides Dr. Ken Bird with a very welcome endowment that he puts to excellent use. So let us all toast to the Lakowski Foundation and Group, whom we wish prosperity and the very best for their future!

They all raised their glasses and sipped, with Harold commenting that this was indeed outstanding wine.

‘Now, let’s all enjoy our starter,’ Dean Wilkinson proceeded, ‘and I propose that during the main course, Dr. Ken Bird will shortly explain what his lab’s up to these days. No one can better explain that than the world expert himself,’ he said, smiling in Ken’s direction.

The first time the dean asked Ken to briefly explain his work—two years ago—when he had just been installed on the Evelyn and Harold Lakowski Chair, Ken was taken by surprise. Of course, he had frequently given lectures about his work to the lay public, but he had no idea at which level Harold Lakowski’s knowledge started; or ended. Did he know what a protein was? Or a gene? That could by no means be taken for granted. Ken remembered the Christmas Lecture he had once given in the Physics department decades ago. Already a few minutes after he started the lecture, one of the people in the audience had raised his hand and asked Ken what he meant when he talked about “a gene”. Ken had been shocked!

But Harold had apparently studied Ken’s field somewhat by browsing the internet and seemed genuinely interested; at least, he always nodded encouragingly when Ken explained, in layman’s terms, what the lab was up to. Having gone through the procedure twice now, Ken was better prepared.

So, when the main course had been served, he started his brief exposé.

‘As you know, we’re interested in proteins that are miscoded for some reason and fail to do what they’re

meant to do in a particular cell. This is the basis of many diseases, some of them hereditary, but most just a matter of chance, the process going awry with age.'

Harold Lakowski smiled and remarked, 'That's exactly why we're so interested in your work, Ken. I see it as an investment in my future; my health.'

Everyone laughed politely.

Ken nodded. 'If you're lucky, you might escape your fate, Harold. But for most people, something goes wrong with their protein structures at some point in their lives. And if we become old enough, chances are close to a hundred percent that this will happen.'

'Let's keep this lunch cheerful, Ken,' Herbert Wilkinson jested. 'Better tell us how you, scientists, can help us stay clear of doom.'

Ken ignored this and went on with his explanation. 'We hope to understand which part of our proteins is most vulnerable to being miscoded. Over the past decade, we've discovered that this is, at least in part, the region where chaperones bind to this class of proteins, rendering them less effective in carrying out their original function.' 'Chaperones', the CFO, Larry Myers, asked raising his eyebrows. 'I didn't realize biochemistry was so exciting. Next thing you say there are also escort girls in cells.' He heartily laughed at his joke.

Ken remained impassive. 'Chaperones are molecules that bind to proteins and then, for instance, prevent them from being active or allow them to travel to another part of the cell. Anyhow, as we have established more or less which part of the proteins is affected by particular diseases, we can now try to mend the problem. Which, I'm happy to say, has already been successful in a dish.'

One of the women raised her hand. 'Excuse me for asking, Professor Bird, but what do you mean by "a dish"?'

Larry Myers immediately reacted by raising a bowl with vegetables in front of him into the air. ‘Hello, Karen: *This* is a dish! Don’t you know that from cooking dinner at home?’

Ken started to develop a strong aversion to this man. Being stupid was one thing, but advertising it so openly was quite another. Why didn’t the guy shut up? He turned to the woman called Karen and explained what he meant by this phrase. ‘See, we can get it to work in a cell line, a tissue consisting of similar cells, hundreds of thousands or even millions of them that are kept alive artificially.’ He addressed the entire group. ‘The challenge is to also correct the affected protein in an *organ*, let’s say in a small animal. We’ve recently developed a technique that allows us to do so; to target specific cells and leave other cells undisturbed.’

Ken hesitated to go on. Should he disclose his recent brainwave to combine this new technology set up by Dexter with that of Jim? Well, these people probably didn’t understand much of it anyway, as opposed to his international colleagues, who understood exactly what Ken was up to, the reason why he was extremely tight-lipped, not disclosing where they were heading. But looking at the people seated around the table, he thought there was little risk in being slightly more specific about his future plans.

‘The next challenge is to *correct* the failing proteins, but only in the few cells where something has gone awry, leaving the remaining healthy cells untouched. To use biochemical forceps, so to say, and alter proteins from a distance. This combination has great potential. Most treatments we’ve developed so far affect all cells equally, which would cause many side effects. We are about to introduce a new approach that will allow us to trace the affected cells in an organ and then—this is entirely

novel—correct proteins only in the affected cells. By combining these two breakthroughs, we could really develop an effective intervention without serious side effects. Of course, we would need to prove that first in cell lines. In a dish,’ he explained to the woman called Karen. ‘And next, in small animals. And if *that* works, we can take this even one step further, toward humans. This could evolve into a new way of treating a whole array of diseases for which, right now, no treatment exists.’ Harold Lakowski briefly applauded. ‘That sounds fascinating, Ken. I hear what you say, and to me, it seems that you’re making excellent use of the endowment. My congratulations.’

These congratulations reminded Ken of the phone call earlier that morning. Unfortunately, he couldn’t share the news he had been awarded the Lieberman Prize. It would have been the icing on the cake to not only tell what great work was carried out in his lab but also reveal the international recognition it had received.

‘How long will it take before this can be applied to humans,’ Larry Myers now asked rather bluntly. Ken looked doubtful. ‘That’s very hard to say. If, and let me repeat, *if* we can pull it off in mice, we would have to go through many steps related to safety regulations, toxicity, etcetera, before we’re allowed to test this experimental treatment in humans. And if all that works, it might still take years and years before it can be routinely applied in the clinic. All in all, at least ten years, I would say.’

Larry whistled through his teeth. ‘Jeez, Ken, if we were that slow in business, we would soon go bust. Can’t you step it up a bit? I’m sure there are ways to cut some corners. I mean...if it is safe for use in humans, why would you withhold it from anybody?’

Now Dean Wilkinson interjected before Ken could answer. 'I am afraid, Larry, we have to adhere to all safety regulations. It may sound like a nuisance, especially to people in business who are used to moving fast, like yourself, but there's no way around it. Not even for Ken here. You have to realize that his lab is at the forefront of the world. If anyone can move it forward, it's Ken.' Harold Lakowski agreed. 'I'm sure Ken and his team members do all they can to turn it into a success. It's so exciting that a new treatment seems to be around the corner, from what I've just heard. Imagine what this could mean for humankind!'

From there, the conversation took a different direction, away from the scientific progress in the Bird Lab and toward some recent cancer treatments that had spectacular results in the clinic.

From that topic, they moved on to a few formalities between the two women from the Foundation and Herbert Wilkinson, including how the annual accounts needed to be handled and whom they were to contact for such financial matters.

Meanwhile, the plates of the main course had been cleared away, and the waiter now entered the room with desserts and, for those who wished, coffee or tea.

Ken's thoughts drifted away. He always felt drained of energy after gatherings like these. For one thing, he had to behave as if he were grateful for the money, which, admittedly, came in useful because the type of work they carried out happened to be incredibly costly. Besides, sitting up and being polite to an ignorant person like Larry Myers left him uncomfortable. What did the guy think? That, just because his company was donating money to science, he knew anything about it? That he could dictate how research should be done? Why would he, Ken, one of the best scientists in the world, as had been confirmed

only this morning by receiving the Lieberman Prize...why would he have to spend his valuable time listening to this CFO who had probably never finished any schooling beyond a bachelor's degree? It left him on edge, thinking that these two hours could have been spent so much better.

At long last, Ken heard Dean Wilkinson say that he would not like to impose on Harold Lakowski's time any longer, meaning, of course, that he—the dean—wanted to leave. So, everyone rose and started to say goodbye.

Herbert Wilkinson buttoned his jacket and stretched out at his full length.

'Harold, we feel honored by your visit and enjoyed your company, as always. If there's anything we can do to accommodate your wishes, please don't hesitate to contact me.' He now looked in the direction of the two women.

'And the same holds for the two ladies from the Foundation, that goes without saying. It was so nice of you to join us today. It's been a pleasure to welcome you here.'

While they were all shaking hands, Wilkinson said sideways to Ken, 'I wonder if you could stay for a few minutes, Ken?'

Ken nodded in response. He wondered what this was about.

When the room had emptied, Dean Wilkinson walked into the corridor toward his office, beckoning Ken to follow him. On entering his office, the dean sat down at the small conference table and gestured to Ken to sit down opposite him. The secretary closed the door.

'Well, I hope you didn't get too upset by this Larry Myers, Ken?' Dean Wilkinson chuckled. 'I guess what he said didn't go down too well. At one point, I thought it was better to take over the conversation from you to prevent it from getting out of hand. I hope you didn't mind?'

Ken shook his head. ‘No, on the contrary, Herbert. Very wise. There’s no way of remaining polite in the face of so much stupidity.’

‘I would have phrased that differently myself, Ken. And I also don’t quite agree with you. This man is probably brilliant in his trade. And I do think there are always ways to remain polite. But I grant you that I’m not an expert in biochemistry, so these remarks don’t quite get under my skin to the degree they affect you. Anyway, we both know which way our bread is buttered, so we better keep the discourse friendly. Speaking of which...this is also why I asked you to step into my office.’

He looked at Ken as if to judge how to proceed.

‘I was gently probed recently about the idea of bestowing an honorary doctorate on Harold Lakowski, in view of all the financial support he has given to improve the quality of science... What do you think?’

Ken blinked his eyes. Had he heard this correctly?

‘An honorary doctorate to Harold Lakowski,’ he echoed incredulously.

‘Yes, that’s what I just said. Because of all the financial support Lakowski has given to improve the quality of science. Including the support for your group,’ the dean added.

‘You’re not serious, are you, Herbert?’

‘I’m dead serious. It was a suggestion from the highest administrative level of this university, I should add.’

‘But honorary doctorates are meant for outstanding *scientists*, for those we want to *honor*, as the word already says. People who made discoveries that have changed the world. To celebrate their invaluable contribution!’

‘Well, in a way, one could reason that people like Harold Lakowski have done so too. Not scientifically, of course. I mean, he didn’t make the discoveries himself. But he fosters the circumstances to let it happen by his

unrelenting, and I should say extremely important and generous, support of science in general. And yours in particular. So, strictly speaking, he wouldn't qualify within your definition, but if we stretch the interpretation of that liberally to the spirit behind it, he could qualify. I, for one, am certainly not averse to the idea. It's important for this university that we keep Harold as a friend.'

'But...but,' Ken started, stammering. 'But honorary doctorates are not for *sale*! No matter how liberal your interpretation is, Herbert. How could one even consider giving an honorary doctorate to someone who only *pays* for doing science but who never in his whole life has done a single experiment?! Who has never even held a pipette in his hands?'

With each question, Ken's voice became louder, so that eventually he shouted, 'How could you, or anyone else, even seriously *consider* such a notion?'

Herbert Wilkinson made a gesture for Ken to calm down. 'I just wanted to hear your opinion, Ken, that's all. From what you say, it's quite clear to me that you're not in favor. We'll see.'

Ken reacted furiously. 'What do you mean: we'll *see*? I don't want to have anything to do with this horse-trading! One qualifies for an honorary degree by doing excellent science...by being a brilliant researcher. *Not* by donating dollars. If this university decides to award an honorary doctorate to Harold Lakowski, I resign from the chair named after him!' Ken jumped from his chair, his face contorted with rage. 'I can't believe we're having this discussion.'

Herbert Wilkinson also rose and walked toward the door to open it.

'One day, Ken, your uncontrolled anger at anyone who's not as brilliant as you will get in your way. Not everyone will remain as patient with you as I've always been. You

would do yourself a favor to be more flexible instead of always sticking to your rigid principles. Not everyone appreciates that.'

'If we don't adhere to our principles of scientific integrity, I don't know what we should stick to! What would become of this university? Being for sale is crossing the line, as far as I am concerned.'

'How interesting. Thank you for your opinion, Ken. And how remarkable to hear you say that. Who paid for the Biochemistry Building? For your endowment?'

'That's a completely different matter, Herbert,' Ken shouted. 'Money spent on my research is worth every penny! In fact, the Lakowskis almost have a free ride. This endowment is only a fraction of what goes into our research, counting all the grants and other income. If this is the way you see it, I resign from the endowed chair right away.'

'Now calm down, Ken,' Dean Wilkinson said soothingly. 'You know exactly how I meant it. Carrying out experimental research is expensive, and we all appreciate these private donations.' He shrugged impatiently before he resumed. 'Just forget what I asked you a minute ago and relax. *You* just concentrate on your work and let me do *my* job.'

The soothing tone of Herbert Wilkinson helped Ken to somewhat calm down. The mere suggestion that he was ready to sell his soul to the devil had carried him away. Anyway, he had made his position quite clear; there was no need to reiterate that. In a sense, Herbert was right—he should drop the subject and get back to work as soon as he could.

Ken apologized to Herbert Wilkinson for the words he had just uttered in anger and made his way out of the office, saying hello to Herbert's secretary in passing.

'My goodness, what was that,' Monica—Herbert's secretary—asked the dean when Ken had stalked out of the office. 'All that shouting?'

With a musing look, Herbert's eyes followed Ken, who now walked through the hall in the distance. 'That,' he said, 'is someone who is increasingly making a nuisance of himself, no matter how brilliant he is.'

He looked at his secretary, sitting at her desk. 'But I haven't said that,' he added.

'I didn't hear you say anything,' she answered with a smile.

When Ken returned to the lab, he immediately made for Sam, Mihaela, and another PhD student—who had recently joined the Bird Lab—to ask about the progress they had made with Jim's technology. Tony, the postdoc from Jim's lab, had visited the Bird Lab a week ago and instructed the others about this new technique. The junior PhD student was to be the one who would start setting things up, in anticipation of the to-be-hired physicist, for whom an ad had been placed. If they were lucky, this new person would be able to start in two months, or perhaps even less.

Talking about the experiments and the practical hurdles they had to overcome was the best way for Ken to calm down again. As soon as they started to discuss some of the details, he completely forgot about the lunch meeting and concentrated on aspects that, collectively, they had to master. He went to a storeroom with Sam to inspect a dusty old instrument sitting on one of the top shelves,

which might be the solution to one of the problems they were encountering. They tried to get it working and were elated when, after several hours of trial and error, they had solved the earlier problem. The four of them walked over to the coffee machine in the pantry and together discussed how they would take the next step.

When Ken returned to his office in the late afternoon, he noticed a PhD student, Barry, loitering near the door. The young man had an appointment with Ken to go over the latest results. Barry was originally from Australia and quite clever but, in Ken's view, a bit laid-back. The guy was an enthusiastic surfer, spending his weekends invariably on the beach.

The results they discussed in Ken's office were interesting, with Barry having completed the analyses of an extensive set of experiments by now.

'Excellent,' Ken declared at the end of their meeting. 'So, now that the entire dataset is complete, I think you can start writing the manuscript. I'll be happy to read the first draft next week.'

Barry looked up and wanted to say something but then thought better of it.

'I'm really busy next week,' Ken said, following his train of thought, 'but when you make sure to send me the first draft before Tuesday, I'll make time to read it right away.' Now, the PhD student interjected, 'I'm sorry, Ken. But it so happens that I have a tournament on the coast this weekend, a few hundred miles south of here. What with driving and all, I don't think I'll have much time to sit down and write a manuscript.'

'Can't you cancel that surfing tournament for once,' Ken suggested. 'This manuscript is really important. Especially for you!'

The guy shook his head. 'I'm the main organizer of the event. I have to be there.'

Ken shrugged. ‘Well, you set your priorities, of course. If you deem a surfing event to be more important than writing a manuscript, that’s your choice. But just so you know, in that case, I won’t be able to take a look at your first draft before Friday next week. Tell you what: Send it to me Friday late afternoon, and I’ll reserve time next weekend to read it.’

For Ken, the matter was settled. But somehow, Barry still seemed reluctant to leave the room.

Ken looked up. ‘What? I guess you *will* manage to write your paper before next Friday? Or do you also have surf tournaments on weekdays?’

The guy shook his head. ‘No. I mean, no, I don’t have any tournaments. I’ll *try* to finish it before next Friday.’ And he left the room.

Ken leaned back in his swivel chair. My God, how different things had been in his young days! Now, *he* would have worked the entire weekend to finish that manuscript if he knew his boss was eager to read and correct it.

Well, he was no longer surprised by situations like this. One had to get used to it. He wondered what Barry would come up with.

Over the years, Ken had learned to lower his expectations. More often than not, the quality of the first drafts he received was so astonishingly poor that every sentence had to be rewritten. What did these kids learn in high school? Not how to write proper English. Occasionally, Ken was so annoyed by the drafts some of his PhD students sent him by email that he would stop correcting the text after one page and simply answered that he wasn’t prepared to waste his time on trash like that. He distinctly remembered one occasion—it must have been some years ago when they still printed out the drafts—that he had picked up the manuscript at one corner and hurled it

through the room toward the postdoc who had dared to submit this rubbish to him. Ken had almost felt physically repulsed by the stack of papers stapled together in the upper-left corner. How could anyone come up with such an ill-conceived story?

Of course, he didn't expect his students to reach the level demanded by the scientific journals; that was too difficult, and understandably so. But they could at least make an effort.

He straightened and started working on the pile of work that had assembled on his desk, partly left there by Joyce, who had already left for home. Paperwork, print-outs of emails that he had to decide on, a sticky note with two phone numbers he was supposed to call, a few things that had to do with his imminent travels, and many other things. Altogether, it took him until 9 pm before he had attended to everything. And then, he started to prepare the manuscripts, slides, and all the other documents he had to take with him on his trip to Europe.

Ken left the building shortly before 10 pm. When he arrived home, he was not in the mood for dinner anymore. He only ate the bowl of soup Jenny had left for him and put the rest of the meal she had prepared in the fridge. He would explain it to Jenny tomorrow, saying that he had had a copious lunch with Harold Lakowski earlier that day and, therefore, had not needed a hot meal at dinnertime.

He briefly sat on the couch in the living room, zapping absentmindedly through some twenty channels on TV. Nothing of interest.

It had been a weird day. First, that amazing phone call from Michele Vicenzo. Wow, the Lieberman Prize! He smiled. Then that unpleasant lunch, topped off by the disastrous exchange with the dean. God, he still couldn't believe how anyone in his right mind could even

contemplate giving an honorary degree to a king of industry—to someone who had made his fortune in aluminum appliances, of all things; no matter that he liked the guy at a personal level. The mere idea! He sincerely hoped he had talked some sense into Herbert, although the way Herbert had introduced the plan, it seemed as if even the university board considered it an excellent idea. Well, he would see what would come of it.

And then later in the afternoon, back in the lab, spending his time doing what he really liked best: Being close to the bench. The frown that had formed when he thought of the lunch and its sequel left his face again and turned into a smile.

Overall, a good day.

On Thursday, Ken embarked on his flight to Amsterdam, arriving early in the morning on Friday. A pre-arranged taxi was waiting for him, smoothly driving him to his hotel room. Since the weather was nice—a sunny day with a touch of spring in it, accentuated by the daffodils that were flowering in some of the green patches of grass at street corners—he put on his running gear and went out for half an hour. He had slept quite well on the plane after preparing his two lectures, the one for Amsterdam and the other in Vienna. In fact, the two talks would be quite similar since it was unlikely many people would attend both meetings.

When, after his run, he returned to the spacious room in the luxurious hotel they had put him in, he took a hot shower, stretched out on the bed for a brief nap, and then went down to the boutique in the lobby to pick up some coffee. They couldn't provide him with a latte macchiato, so he ordered a cappuccino instead, not fancying black

coffee, which in Europe was much too strong for his taste. Carrying the cappuccino and a newspaper, he returned to his room and changed into more official attire.

Subsequently, he walked over to the building of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, which was situated along one of the canals. This was where the meeting was held today.

He arrived just when everyone left the lecture hall for a coffee break. Ken was greeted by the main organizer of the day, who was relieved to see him. Having a speaker from the US arriving on the same day as his lecture was scheduled was always precarious. Any delay might mess up the program. But not today; there was plenty of time. Ken would give the closing address, starting at 4:15 pm, so he could attend most of the program.

He didn't manage to stay awake during all the talks, but most were interesting enough to keep him alert. The organizers had put together an excellent program, primarily with Dutch researchers, most of whom were very good, interspersed with a few colleagues from other countries. Ken was the only American; the other international speakers came from Germany and Sweden, and one from University College London, UK.

When it was Ken's turn to present, he was relaxed. Relatively small audiences like this—about a hundred people, certainly not more—were no challenge to him anymore. He looked forward to addressing them and taking them through the story he had already told many times. It was almost routine, though not to the extent that he was not fully concentrated. There were some critical senior scientists in the audience, so he had to get it just right.

After exactly forty-five minutes, he reached the end of his presentation, and the audience applauded. There was ample time for discussion, as the chairwoman announced,

and, sure enough, many people were eager to ask questions. Ken was pleasantly surprised that not only senior researchers walked to the microphone but also quite some junior people, several of whom introduced themselves as PhD students. He liked the open atmosphere; the kids were bright, and their questions were to the point.

After nearly half an hour of questions from the attentive audience, the official program ended, and everyone left the hall and walked over to a foyer where drinks and small snacks were served. Several people walked up to Ken to congratulate him on his lab's beautiful and exciting work. Some even thanked him profusely for the exciting talk. It was this kind of feedback he always enjoyed because it left him with the feeling that he had truly delivered an excellent lecture. These people meant what they said.

As always, a few young people stepped up to Ken, asking about the possibility of joining his lab in the future. One of them, who had asked a spot-on question during the discussion after Ken's talk, was quite eager, mentioning that he was close to finishing his PhD project and applying for a personal grant, allowing him to work abroad for a few years. Ken took his interest very seriously; this seemed like an extremely able young man, as was indeed later confirmed by the senior scientist in whose lab the guy worked, who stated this was one of his best students ever. With such a positive recommendation, Ken knew it would be a good choice to allow this PhD student to join his lab, provided he acquired the personal grant, of course.

Afterward, the assembled participants walked over to the other side of the canal and entered one of those canal boats where drinks and dinner were served while gliding through the city of Amsterdam. Now that it was dark, the

houses were prettily lit, and although Ken was discussing work-related issues with other scientists most of the time, he found the scenery in the background pleasing. He didn't regret his short stay in Amsterdam.

After a good night's sleep and a thirty-minute run early in the morning, another pre-arranged taxi took Ken to the airport for his flight to Vienna around noon. He made good use of his time in the airline lounge by reviewing a manuscript that had been submitted to the top-tier journal where he served as associate editor. He had to review some ten manuscripts per year, which came with the task of being an editorial board member. Although he stood little to gain from it except the prestige of being on the board of that particular journal, he didn't mind the time he had to spend on it too much because, usually, the papers he had to review were interesting and very good. However, there were always many points that could be improved. These papers, and those for the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences—of which he was a member—were the only ones he would take the time to review personally. All the other requests reaching him daily from a host of other journals, he would either immediately decline or, at best, distribute amongst the junior members of his lab. Letting the young people have a look at the manuscripts served the double goal of Ken not turning down all requests—a sort of community service that helped to keep on friendly terms for the rare occasions that papers from his lab were submitted to one of those journals—and allowing his junior group members to learn how to review a manuscript fairly. Usually, these kids were hypercritical. Ken had made it a habit to always take a look at their first two or three review reports to

remove the most biting comments and mellow the tone a bit, provided the paper was solid enough to start with. If it was bad science, his PhD students and postdocs could go ahead unrestrained and kill the paper.

It was now two days later, a Sunday morning. Once again, it was a bright and sunny day, as Ken noticed, overlooking the park at which his hotel in Vienna was situated. Jenny was still in bed behind him, shattered as she was after her long trip with a stop-over at Heathrow Airport. She had arrived late yesterday evening, around the time that he had returned from the opening event and the walking dinner at the Grand Hall of the Austrian National Library. Dinner had started only at 8 pm, and even though it was an informal buffet, he had to stay until 10:30 pm. By then, he was bored out of his skull, having already taken in within five minutes the high-ceilinged and book-lined venue with its rather blatant ornaments and complex-patterned marble floor. All the time, he had been on his feet, with people walking up to him or Ken being included in various sets of people grouped around a standing table, where one could place one's plate to be able to eat. At 10:30 pm, the first bus was announced to leave and return the guests to their hotel, and Ken immediately walked over to ensure he was on board. Upon entering the hotel, Jenny had just been checking in at the front desk, so once she was done, they walked over to the elevator together and, when in the room, briefly exchanged how their day had been. Jen was so tired that she almost immediately made for bed while he sat at the small desk for another hour, checking his slides for his special lecture on Sunday. Now, it was Sunday, early in the morning. Seeing the nice weather, Ken left a note for Jenny saying that he was out,

running, and then quickly went outside. Vienna was still asleep, apparently, at this early hour. It was quiet and pleasurable to run here. The scenery was so different from the running track he usually went to back home, although that was beautiful, too.

When he returned half an hour later, Jenny was up, lying in the bathtub. He took a shower.

Half an hour later, they went down to have breakfast together. Usually, he didn't take the time for breakfast while traveling unless it was combined with a business meeting. But, somehow, their sitting together at the table gave them a familiar feeling, as if they were at home, breakfast being the only time they would see each other during the weekdays.

Ken felt relaxed today now that he could sit here with Jenny. Tomorrow, he would have an early breakfast—alone—before he left for the airport to catch the flight back home. Jen would stay a few more days in Europe, taking the train to Salzburg on Monday afternoon to visit an old school friend who had married someone from Austria.

The buffet was lavishly filled with various sorts of bread and cakes, all kinds of fruit, cereals, muesli, yogurt, four different fruit juices, eggs cooked or baked, and so on. But since they were both still on a West Coast schedule, meaning it was about midnight, they didn't fancy much food. Instead, they savored the few things they had carried to their table and briefly discussed the programs of their day. Jenny had booked a trip to Schönbrunn, and he, Ken, would attend the conference today, having a few business meetings and, of course, his special lecture, which started at 5 pm. Afterward, they would meet in the hotel for a quick bite; and Jenny had secured tickets for the Opera House later tonight. Ken didn't like opera, as Jenny knew, of course. But when she asked if he had ever visited the

Opera House during any of his previous visits to Vienna, he admitted that he had never been near it, let alone inside.

So, she had decided he could no longer avoid it.

Later in the afternoon of the same day, Ken returned from the Convention Center, finding Jenny in their room, dressing up for the opera.

She looked at him. ‘What’s that you’re carrying?’

Ken looked down. ‘Ah, that. It’s a plaque. With an inscription. They handed it over after my special lecture to commemorate the event.’

He now peered at it more intently. ‘It has my name and the date on it. And some kind of image. Probably the person whom the lecture is named after.’

He put it on the small desk lining the wall. ‘What shall I do with it?’

‘What do you mean: Do with it? Take it home, of course,’ she answered. ‘Did you want to leave it here...sitting on the desk?’

He looked at her with a slightly disoriented expression.

‘But what good is it at home? Or at my work? All it’ll do is take up space.’ He held the plaque in his hand. ‘And the thing weighs a ton. So inconvenient for traveling.’

‘Oh, come on, Ken,’ Jenny exclaimed, exasperated.

‘People took the effort to let this plaque be inscribed, with your name on it and all. You weren’t seriously considering leaving it here in the hotel, were you? If you can carry your laptop, tablet, and the like, I’m sure you can also fit this plaque into your suitcase. And otherwise, I’ll put it in mine to take it home.’

‘Will you?’ He was dead serious, apparently relieved that he wouldn’t have to think about the issue any longer.

She walked over to him, grabbed the plaque, and put it in her suitcase, which was resting on the luggage rack. ‘See, all done. I’ll put it in your study once I’m back home.’ He muttered a bit, venting his dislike for certificates or plaques that people gave him, the main purpose being that the photographer could make a nice picture of the official moment when someone handed it over to Ken, shaking hands and smiling. These things were useless—entirely superfluous.

‘Why don’t you get yourself dressed,’ Jenny interrupted his grumbling.

That remark didn’t help lift his mood. ‘I *am* dressed,’ he answered, pointing at his suit as proof of his statement. ‘For the *opera*, I mean. You’ll have to put on a clean shirt and a tie. People dress up smartly here when they go to the opera.’

It all added to his resentment about going to the opera. He still had loads of work to do. And now, instead of working, he would have to sit there for an entire evening, listening to a group of lamenting people who replayed a romantic melodrama set in the past.

But, well, Jenny seemed to enjoy it, so Ken walked over to the wardrobe with a sigh and dressed for the occasion. They went for a quick bite to the restaurant downstairs, where all the food—as Ken noticed when he glanced at the menu—was grossly overpriced. He had a filet mignon that couldn’t weigh more than two ounces, very mignon indeed, although it tasted good. Jenny took a filet of sea bass, which he considered an odd choice, being in Vienna, which was hundreds of miles removed from any sea.

Jenny proposed that they walk to the Opera House, which was just a short distance from their hotel. And so, they did. She walked him past the Stephansdom and then Hotel Sacher, opposite the Wiener Staatsoper.

‘Three highlights in fifteen minutes, Ken. If that isn’t a good deal, I don’t know what is,’ Jenny remarked in jest when she saw the distracted look on Ken’s face.

He looked up, waking from his train of thoughts about a talk he had heard earlier today, where someone from France had shown some interesting data—at least, if the data were to be trusted, coming from a rather unknown lab. They would have to repeat it themselves, and if they could reproduce these earlier findings, it might turn into a promising starting point for follow-up experiments.

‘The cathedral, the Sacher Hotel, and now the Staatsoper, Ken! Aren’t they amazing?’

He nodded, although he hadn’t taken in any of it. Well, at least for the Staatsoper it wasn’t too late, so he looked around at the gilded foyer, which had paintings on the ceiling and some of the walls. ‘Pretty. Austria must have known days of great wealth, seeing how all these buildings are decorated.’

‘Of course, they did! The great days of the Austrian-Hungarian empire! And this,’ she added, waving around her, ‘this is nothing. The displays in Schönbrunn were just beyond comprehension...incredibly sumptuous. And the space, the number of rooms and halls; the gardens...just amazing.’

Ken looked at Jenny. She seemed to genuinely enjoy her stay. Good. That was at least something he could do for her in return for what might be a rather isolated life, him spending so much time in the lab.

He squeezed her hand, and together, they walked into the big music hall after a loud voice coming from the ceiling—or so it seemed—had invited the guests to take their seats. They inspected the row numbers, sat down, and soon after, the lights dimmed. The conductor appeared, receiving the applause with a deep bow, and

then the first tones of the overture sounded from the orchestra below the stage.

The curtains were drawn and showed a poor man's garret with a tenor rushing into it. That was the first and final scene Ken took in because his head slumped aside soon after, and then he was fast asleep.

Jenny looked to her right at Ken. Of course, asleep, as always on the rare occasions they went out to a concert, opera, or play. It didn't come as a surprise to her; she knew all too well that he was just accompanying her to do her a favor, while he would rather work on a manuscript or be in the lab. It was getting worse with the years.

At some point, they had argued about it; when was it? Maybe four years ago? 'My God, Ken. What has become of you? You've always been focused, almost fixed, on your work. I found that attractive at first—one of your remarkable qualities. But it has slowly transformed into something else, something scary. It has gone from being preoccupied to being completely engrossed; consumed, even. You've become almost obsessed with your work!'

He immediately protested. 'No, I've not. That's ridiculous. Why do you make it all sound so negative? I'm fascinated, yes. Very focused, I grant you that.' Ken hesitated. 'I will even go as far as to say that I've become fully immersed and gripped by my work. But that's it.'

Jenny shrugged. 'Well, to me, it verges on obsession and compulsion—the obsession being that, for whatever reason, you want to be the best, or the first; or whatever you want to be, it's

really beyond me. And the compulsion that you need to work 24/7 in fear of not becoming whatever you have in mind.'

'No, I'm not. I mean, I'm not obsessive and have no compulsion. God, you make it sound like I'm a nutcase. What drives me is a fascination with the subject. All I want to do is understand...truly understand the scientific problems I'm working on.'

She had left it at that, realizing they had two completely different takes on the truth. And what was the use of it: She wouldn't be able to change him; she had already given up trying to do so many years ago.

Her relationship with Ken... Maybe it was the love story that now unfolded on stage, accompanied by the moving music, that started these musings? She felt touched by the beautiful music and scenery.

She had met Ken for the first time almost thirty years ago, in the hospital where they both worked at the time. She was a research nurse back then, and Ken led a team that was planning to do a biochemical and molecular analysis of blood in a particular group of patients with a genetic defect. They had met on several occasions when he had come to her unit to instruct her on exactly how to treat the blood samples once they were collected from the patients.

She was immediately intrigued by his drive...his focus. Drawn to the passion he exuded for his work. She was carried away by his enthusiasm, his almost devoted belief that he could better the world through his research. And at the same time, she sensed he was extremely vulnerable, almost detached from real life. It was this combination

that had made her fall in love: His brilliance and his need for guidance through life.

At every turn in their relationship, she had taken the initiative, first arranging for them to meet during lunch in the personnel's restaurant of the hospital. And then for dinner, outside the premises. She started to take care of practical details in his life, like buying clothes for him, which he never seemed to bother about. Or bringing him a hot meal at his desk when her shift was over, knowing that he usually worked long hours in the lab and didn't take time off for a proper dinner.

She had invited him over one Saturday to her apartment, and there she seduced him—there was no other word to describe it—realizing that Ken was never going to take the first step. His body was fit, he was actually good-looking, though he didn't seem to know it, or rather, didn't give it any thought. She had been surprised by his eagerness to make love and especially to cuddle up, preferring to lay in her arms rather than the other way around.

'Why do you yearn so much for being caressed, for being held,' she had asked one of the first times they were in bed.

To her utter surprise, he had started to cry. And then said that he couldn't talk about it, that it was something very private, too close. Some part of his life that he had shut the door on. It was one of the few times he had allowed such a deep emotion to surface. A sad one. Come to think of it, she had never seen him merry. Perhaps elated when a particularly difficult problem related to his work had been solved...or when he had received a huge grant or prize. But merry, to the point of laughing

with abandon? She couldn't remember ever seeing him like that.

At the time, she had not pressed further to hear more about his early years. It had something to do with his upbringing. Later, when she met Ken's mother, who had raised him as a single parent, his father having left even before Ken's birth, she wondered. Ken's mother was not unkind but seemed primarily preoccupied with playing bridge, in which she excelled and participated in state-wide tournaments. When Jenny had sometimes obliquely asked about Ken's youth, his mother deftly avoided any questions and, once, answered bitterly that one should leave things of the past alone. So, Jenny had never found out.

Meanwhile, Ken's mother had passed away. And Ken still wouldn't—or couldn't?—talk about his younger years.

It might be his genes, or his upbringing, or a combination of both, but Jenny had come to realize over the years that he was a crippled person, almost as if he were walking through life with just one leg. His intelligence in terms of science was unfathomable; very few people reached that level, she supposed. But the other limb, his emotional and social development, had never matured. He just groped in the dark, like the vulnerable child she had seen in him right from the beginning. He didn't realize it himself, of course, because one needed a social brain to reflect on one's own behavior, and that was exactly what he lacked. Everything in that domain he had to master rationally, having to learn how to make conversation, what were nice and friendly things to say to people, and what other people meant when they addressed you in a particular

manner; not just the content but also the messages between the lines. He had mastered just enough to get by, but it would never come naturally to him.

Of course, Jenny didn't realize all this right from the beginning. She was way too much in love for that. She had assumed that some of it might be caused by his uneasiness in the company of a woman he was just starting to court. She had expected that once Ken got more comfortable in her company and felt cherished, he would slowly open up, at least to her, and that his emotional side would unfold.

But it had never happened. It remained a one-sided affair, with Jenny lavishing her love on him and not the other way around, although he did seem to be fond of her in his restricted manner. By the time she realized it would never change, they had already been married for a few years.

She had hoped that maybe starting a family would change him. When she had first talked about having a child, he had been rather dismissive, which should have warned her. He had answered that he was neutral on the matter, which struck her as an odd expression at the time.

'If you want a child, I'm not opposed but don't expect anything from me in terms of the upbringing. I can't, or won't, spare the time to go to soccer games with the child or do father-son things.'

'What if it is a girl,' she asked dryly.

He looked as if the thought had never occurred to him. 'I wouldn't know what to do with a girl. What do little girls do? Play with dolls? Help their mother with cooking?'

'Oh, come on, Ken, we no longer live in the 1950s! Little girls nowadays play soccer as well. Anyway, that's beside the point. It's spending time with your child, talking with it...that's what you do as a father.'

'Don't count on me,' was all he had returned. It hadn't kept her from trying to get pregnant. And a year later, Brenda was born.

In the end, Ken turned out to be less aloof than he had warned beforehand. He did read bedtime stories to Brenda. He did enjoy watching her development, trying to teach her how to read or calculus, and he was astounded at the pace with which she expanded her skills. Luckily, Brenda had been a quick learner, an attentive little girl keen on mastering new things, not so much to earn praise from her dad but just for the fun of it. Ken may not have been a warm father, but he had shown his dedication and even fondness. And Brenda loved him back unconditionally.

Lacking a confidant in Ken about day-to-day matters, Jenny had reverted to a small group of close friends, women her age, whom she first met when their children, including Brenda, had attended the same kindergarten. Since then, they got together every Tuesday in the early evening and shared everything that happened in their lives. Births, marital problems, divorces, things to do with work, even the sudden death of one of the women's spouses; basically, their entire lives. They supported each other, had fun together, and cheered each other up. This little group of women was incredibly important to her. That was why she refused to join Ken when he proposed to move to the East Coast some years ago. She simply couldn't do without her friends, certainly not now

that Brenda lived in Seattle. And for once, he had listened to her.

About ten years ago, when Brenda was about twelve, Jenny had first met Alex. He worked in the finance department of the hospital. They had just met by chance, sharing tables during lunchtime. Immediately, they felt physically attracted to each other. But what had truly drawn Jenny to Alex was that he listened to what she said; that he showed a real interest in her as a person.

Before they knew it, they were having a full-blown affair.

For years, she had indulged in his attention, his kindness, his caring for her. His tender love of her body. And she had poured all her bottled-up feelings and emotional depth over him like lava finding its way after a volcano erupted.

Alex was quite happily married—with two children under ten—when they started their affair. He had insisted on dosing their encounters because he couldn't think of excuses to leave home all the time. Deceiving Ken, on the other hand, had been ridiculously easy. After all, he was often in the lab, working long hours, and besides, he was traveling the globe, being out of town at least every other week. Ken had never noticed anything, as far as she could tell, not only because he wouldn't miss her being away so often but also because he lacked any antenna for her behavior, not noticing when she was happy, somber, or otherwise out of sorts.

The affair had lasted five years, mostly, as she guessed, because Alex and she had only been able to meet infrequently, which kept the fire burning more fiercely than when it had been an all-consuming, intense affair.

In the end, it was Alex who broke up their relationship. He just didn't want to remain secretive toward his wife any longer and keep the affair alive behind her back. And he loved his wife too much to leave her altogether. So, it came to an end.

Jenny had been devastated at first; hadn't seen it coming, although she might have anticipated that this couldn't last forever. Ken, again, had remained entirely oblivious to how low she felt.

It had been Brenda, who found her mother crying in the kitchen one afternoon when she came home from school. Brenda had intuitively understood what had happened, being on the rebound of a broken-up high school affair herself. She immediately understood why her mother was in tears and put her arms around Jenny. It was the world upside down, as Jenny had felt then: She was there to comfort Brenda, not the other way around!

Brenda had reacted maturely beyond her years. 'Whatever it is, Mom, I stand with you. Whether you stay or leave, I won't judge you. Of course, I understand, knowing Dad.'

Which had started a new bout of crying in Jenny. Apart from her little group of friends, there had been no one she could turn to, and it was such a relief that she could show her emotions to her daughter.

'Aren't you worried about Dad, though,' Brenda had asked. 'I mean, he's helpless when he has to manage on his own.'

Jenny sat down, blew her nose, and then slowly nodded. Brenda's words were so true. Ken would be helpless. Maybe she had never seriously considered leaving him?

And the more she thought about it in the following months, the more she realized that she couldn't leave Ken—never.

Jenny had decided quite soon after Alex broke up with her that she would start working night shifts. On the one hand, it helped her avoid meeting Alex, which she still couldn't manage emotionally. Not even now, after five years had passed. And on the other hand, it meant she could settle for a relationship with Ken in which she saw just enough of him to keep an eye on him, to safeguard him, yet was not obliged to spend the nights with him, lying next to each other like two strangers. She explained her night shifts to Ken, saying she liked them because of the quiet wards and independence. But that was bullshit. Anyone knowing her would immediately understand that she preferred the daytime's bustle and lively conversations with her colleagues. Not Ken, though; he had believed her.

Meanwhile, Brenda had left home, carving out a future for herself in Seattle. Her daughter had left home, and she, Jenny, felt comfortable letting her go; letting her fly away to the future she chose. She was fully confident that Brenda could manage in life and fend for herself.

But Ken?

She could never leave him behind, no more than you would leave a disabled child alone. He was unfit for life, and she would stand by him no matter what.

Chapter IV

It was a Wednesday morning, early in April. Ken looked at the screen of his computer. He had just received the comments on his grant proposal, the one he had written directly after his trip to China. Although it was, according to him, an incredibly exciting proposal, top of the bill, and something that could practically only be pulled off in his lab—well, maybe in one or two other labs in the world—one was never sure how it would be received and judged. Of course, he didn't depend on the grant money, but that didn't mean he wasn't eager to get it funded if only to strengthen his position toward the university administration. The more research money he brought in, the fewer chores they would ask him to do. If worse came to worse, he could always pay himself from the grant, buying research time instead of having to instruct undergraduate students or sit on useless committees. He opened the file with the reviewers' comments on his proposal and quickly scrolled through the document. "Groundbreaking...a decisive step forward...coming from one of the best labs in the world...not entirely clear how the two techniques will be combined...potentially high impact on healthcare..." These were some of the comments he picked up. Nearly all of what was written seemed positive, and the few more critical comments, like the one questioning how the two techniques could be combined, could be readily addressed; firstly, because another reviewer stated that the proposal seemed very feasible coming from this lab. Contradicting comments were always the easiest to handle. And secondly, and more importantly, they had meanwhile collected proof-of-

concept data to show that they were indeed able to carry out the combination of techniques.

Overall, the comments looked very promising, and he was confident he would receive the nearly 3 million dollars he had requested. Given the limited amount of time he had needed to put the proposal together, it would be a great return on investment! He chuckled.

Joyce put her head around the corner of his door.

‘Mihaela asked if she could have a minute of your time this morning. I scheduled her for 9:30 am. Is that OK?’

Ken looked up, slightly surprised. Why could Mihaela want to see him? They had discussed the experiments for the coming weeks only a few days ago. Maybe she had encountered some unforeseen technical difficulties? He remembered that they had briefly discussed the pH at which the experiments had to be carried out. It might have something to do with that.

So, when Mihaela entered his office at 9:30 am, he rose from his swivel chair and distractedly asked, ‘Is there any problem with the pH you have used?’

She didn’t answer directly and stood before his desk, fumbling a bit with her sweater.

Ken looked at her quizzically and sat down again. ‘Why don’t you take a seat,’ he said, waving in the direction of the chair on the other side of his desk.

Mihaela carefully sat down.

‘What brings you here?’

She waited momentarily and then blurted out, ‘I just came in to say I’m pregnant.’

Ken slowly bent forward, his elbows on the desk, holding his head in both hands. He groaned.

Oh, no! Just what he was waiting for...first, Dexter leaving the lab, and now Mihaela, who had taken over from Dex, pregnant... He closed his eyes and rubbed his eyebrows with his right hand.

What a nuisance! How could he keep the lab going? How could he make sure the experiments wouldn't be delayed? He felt annoyed at her incredibly bad timing. She would be away for what? Four or six weeks? 'For how long,' he asked, hoping she could manage to be out of the lab only for a month or so. That wouldn't be much worse than an extended holiday.

'Four months,' Mihaela answered.

'What?! Four months? You must be joking! That's so much longer than the official maternity leave,' he exclaimed, appalled.

Mihaela blushed. 'Sorry, Ken, I misunderstood your question. I'm four months into my pregnancy.' She remained silent for a minute while Ken let himself fall back into his chair. 'I waited this long to tell you because I wanted to be sure that...well, you know, everything is OK.' After a brief pause, she added, 'I had an early miscarriage last year, so I kept the news to myself until I had seen my doctor and was assured everything looks fine this time.'

Since Ken didn't answer, she added, 'Sorry about that, Ken. Perhaps I should have told you sooner?'

Ken waved impatiently, ignoring this addition.

He sat upright again. 'Four months on the way, meaning we have five months left to train someone else. You'll work until delivery, of course.'

Mihaela shrugged. 'I guess? If all goes well, that is...' Her voice trailed off.

Ken now approached the situation businesslike. 'If we find someone else who can be trained by you, this person can just manage to take over in time so that nothing will be delayed. And if the experiments run as well as they have been going so far, you may even have collected your first set of data five months from now! That would be the most optimal scenario. It would allow you to do the

analyses and maybe write the first draft of your manuscript when you stay home, directly after delivery. Wouldn't it be great if you could still make good use of the four weeks or so that you'll stay home?'

A look of relief appeared on his face. 'See, Mihaela? If we cleverly arrange all this, it doesn't have to be an obstacle for you or anyone else in the lab. You'll hardly lose any time!'

Mihaela looked at him uncertainly. 'I guess so, Ken. I didn't mean to upset anything...'

Seeing that Mihaela didn't seem very relieved herself, Ken continued, 'At least...I presume you want to stay in science once you've had the baby? We can arrange everything around your pregnancy and support you. But if you plan to quit afterward...well, in that case, we might as well put someone else on the project right away.'

Mihaela hastened to assure Ken that she fully intended to return after delivery. And that she would do everything possible to restrict her absence to the bare minimum.

'OK!' Ken rose and walked over to her, with a smile on his face. 'I'm so glad we could settle this productively! If we all try our best, we can keep the delay within limits.' He now stood in front of Mihaela. 'I'm glad you told me, Mihaela. So that we can solve this all together and well in time.' With that, he walked her to the door.

After Mihaela left his room, Ken walked over to Joyce. 'Ask Sam to stop by later today. I need to discuss a few organizational things with him.'

When Ken returned to his office, he closed the door and sank into his swivel chair. God, this was why he was always extra careful when hiring female PhD students or postdocs. Either they got themselves pregnant, and usually, it didn't stop there; they went on to have more children, which meant an impossible juggling of time for them as much as for the other lab members. In fact, to

him, it seemed an almost impossible task to raise several kids and aspire to a competitive scientific career. Seriously, he wouldn't know how to pull it off himself. In a way, he sympathized with them. Or, if it wasn't a pregnancy, their boyfriend or husband would accept a job somewhere else, and these girls would follow their spouse and leave. Only those who were exceptionally bright would also manage to secure a good job elsewhere. But in most cases, he had seen them settle for a job that was easier to combine with raising a family, like teaching or something to do with business development or the like. Lost for scientific research.

Ken sighed. It all seemed such a waste—just imagine the time they invested in first educating and then training these girls, only to see them leave science when they were in their early thirties. And what a pity; some of them were really bright.

Well, at least he had handled Mihaela's situation decently. He had managed to reassure her that he and other people in the lab would do whatever it took to ease her over this patch. She was worth investing time in. Together, they would ensure that Mihaela didn't lose any time. And neither would *they* get behind schedule.

He made a note to discuss the details with Sam this afternoon.

Tim was in the kitchen, preparing dinner, when he heard the front door open.

'Hello, I'm here, in the kitchen,' he shouted to Mihaela, who had just closed the door.

He heard her enter the kitchen, scraping the chair over the floor to sit at the dining table.

'How was your day, honey?' he asked, folding the vegetables carefully through the strips of chicken. When she didn't answer, he turned around. Mihaela sat at the table, her arms crossed in front of her, her head down, leaning on her wrist. 'What's the matter, Mickey,' he asked gently, turning the electric stove low before walking over to her, the spatula still in his right hand. 'What's the matter? Something wrong with your dad?' Mihaela's parents still lived in Bucharest, and her father was struggling with health issues. Mihaela lived in constant fear that his condition would deteriorate, leaving her helpless to do something right away because of the long distance between her and her parents. Tim now sat down next to her and caressed her hair. 'What's the matter, Mickey,' he repeated softly. After a few seconds, she looked up, tearful. 'Something's the matter with your father?' She just shook her head and bent down again, now sobbing unrestrained. Tim made her turn towards him and held her close, meanwhile stroking her hair and her face, wiping away some of her tears. 'What is it? You can tell me...'

When she kept crying, he quickly stood up to tear off a paper towel from the dispenser next to the sink and handed it to her while he sat down beside her again. She blew her nose and then looked him in the face. 'I went over today to tell Ken I'm pregnant,' she said, overcome by a few deep sobs again. 'So, what happened?'

Mihaela shrugged. 'All he seemed concerned about was how we could prevent a delay in the experiments.' She looked helplessly at Tim.

Tim felt an uncontrollable anger take hold of him, starting in his breast and then making its way to his head.

'What the fuck?!' Tim exploded. 'He didn't congratulate you?! Like any decent person would do...?'

Mihaela shook her head sadly, slightly taken aback by Tim's aggression. 'No, not really. At least it didn't come up, I guess? He just wanted to know when the baby is due and how long I'll be away. So that we can plan the experiments...'

Tim jumped up and slammed his fist on the table.

'Dickhead. That bloody idiot! Always work, work, work!'

He sat down again, facing Mihaela. 'You seriously mean he didn't ask how you were doing?'

Mihaela just shrugged.

'That's the bloody limit,' Tim shouted, giving in to his anger. Then, lowering his voice again, he asked incredulously, 'All he talked about was...experiments?'

'In a way, I do understand, Tim. We're in a crucial phase of our project, and my being away for a few weeks is a nuisance for the other PhD students and postdocs.'

'Stop defending him!' Tim shouted. 'You sound as crazy as he is! There's no excuse, nothing at all, for him behaving this way! Look at you: You shouldn't cry...you should be over the moon, elated to be pregnant, certainly after the miscarriage last time!'

Seeing her scared face, he mellowed his expression and addressed her more gently.

'Mickey, you were a happy person when you left home this morning. How can you defend anyone who manages to reduce you to tears just by how he reacts to the happy news?'

Mihaela started crying again. She was confused and incredibly uncertain of what to think. She could see Ken's point of view; his concern about their progress, especially now that they appeared to be at a crucial moment in their work, even with a solution for human treatment in sight.

But there was also some truth in what Tim said. She had been overjoyed when she found out she was pregnant, especially after the doctor reassured her earlier this week that everything looked fine.

And now she felt trapped, having more or less agreed to work until delivery and to work at home after giving birth to analyze her data and write a manuscript. She wasn't sure she could pull that off; she had no idea how she would feel by that time. Although it might indeed be better for her career. Being away from the lab for some time inevitably meant it would take her longer to complete her PhD project. Didn't Ken determine when she would have completed her experiments and be ready to write her dissertation?

Tim had somewhat calmed down. He had a determined look on his face, though.

'Look, Mickey. I know you go out of your way to defend Ken. And that he's super important for your career, and all that. But I, for one, think you should go to a counselor and ask if this is a normal way to deal with pregnancy. Or perhaps you should even approach a confidentiality officer.'

When Mihaela didn't answer, he continued. 'It's not just you, you know. If this passes unchecked, Ken

will behave in the exact same way when the next girl comes up to his desk to share the wonderful news that she's pregnant. You confessed yourself yesterday evening that you were scared to tell him? In my view, that's a sure signal of an unsafe working climate. If people are scared to approach their boss, that's never a good sign. This man can make or break you. I think he wouldn't hesitate to break people when they stand in his way. He needs to be corrected for the benefit of all those who depend on him.' After some thought, Tim added, 'And for his own benefit.'

But Mihaela didn't agree. 'It's not as simple as that. As I said, I can see his point. And you know, too, that going to a confidentiality officer might kill my career.'

'But that's exactly my point! The fact that you're even too scared to go to the confidentiality officer—isn't that telling? Proving my point?' They sat together for a while, looking at each other, both caught in their private thoughts. After a while, Mihaela blew her nose again. 'Maybe I could go to one of the counselors at the university. That's, uhm.... less confronting. I mean, it's not like filing an official complaint. After all, counselors are there to advise in difficult situations, aren't they?' She looked up, uncertain. 'I only want to take a few weeks off before the planned delivery. Just to get everything ready here at home. The way I'm working now, I can't even properly prepare for the baby's birth. And I'm not sure I can concentrate on science once the baby is born. I would need to feed it, and how can I work on a manuscript when I'm interrupted all the time? Maybe a counselor can advise me on how to break the news to Ken.'

Tim nodded. 'I am sure they can advise you what to do. You're not the first woman at this university getting pregnant, after all.'

He put his arm over Mihaela's shoulder, wanting her to relax. 'Tell you what: Why don't we both take two days off and visit my parents? It would be a wonderful opportunity to take your mind off your work for a few days. Besides, my mother raised three kids while she had a high-profile job. If anyone can tell you how to pull it off, it's her. What do you think?'

Mihaela didn't answer right away. Taking days off at such short notice was very unusual in the Bird Lab. But she had just completed her first experimental series and could only start the next one in a few days as she had to wait for some chemicals to arrive. So, there wasn't any urgent reason for her coming to work the next few days. She could just say she wasn't feeling very well? In a way, that was true, too; today's events had left her drained of energy. She could do with replenishing her resources. And the prospect of the comfortable house of Tim's parents, with its large garden and pool, was attractive.

'OK,' she consented. 'I'll send a message to Sam explaining that I'll be away for a few days.'

Tim squeezed her shoulder. 'That's my girl.' He briefly kissed her.

He stood up and made for the stove, addressing Mihaela over his shoulder. 'Why don't you relax on the couch while I finish preparing our meal?'

On Thursday afternoon, Ken walked over to the part of the biochemistry building that held the labs in search of

Sam to make sure an enzyme they had discussed earlier that day would be ordered right away.

He found Sam in the far corner, looking at a screen with one of the technicians.

‘Anything wrong?’ Ken asked, concerned.

Sam shrugged. ‘We’re not sure yet. It seems this piece of equipment is giving false readings. But it could also be a matter of using the wrong buffer. Or contamination. We’re trying to figure it out.’

He stretched out and walked over to Ken.

They briefly discussed the enzyme that had to be ordered.

Sam agreed to look after it later that afternoon once they had dealt with this apparatus.

Ken looked around. Some junior people were busy with the assorted machines on the bench.

‘Where’s Mihaela,’ he asked, missing her at her usual spot.

‘Ah, I forgot to mention,’ Sam answered. ‘She sent me a message yesterday evening saying that she wasn’t feeling well and wanted to stay home for a few days. But she assured me she’d be back on Monday at the latest.’ He hesitated, having been filled in by Ken earlier that week about Mihaela’s pregnancy. ‘She might drop out sometimes, I guess. But we’ll manage.’

Ken wondered if Mihaela was suffering from morning sickness or lack of energy, as had been the case for Jenny when she was pregnant with Brenda. Well, it would pass.

‘I’ll be off for the rest of the afternoon,’ he mentioned to Sam, making for the lab door. ‘Submerged in the joys of the Faculty Hour,’ he added with a wry smile.

‘Good luck,’ Sam answered and then concentrated again on the failing apparatus he had been working on with the technician.

Ken didn’t walk back to his office but exited the building through the glass sliding doors on his way to the assembly

room in the administration building. The announcement for today's session mentioned the launch of a new university program on interdisciplinary research, introduced by the Head of the Research Office. He wondered what it was all about.

Some sixty people had assembled in the room. Shortly after Ken had taken his seat, Dean Wilkinson walked toward the lectern and tested the microphone.

The dean cleared his throat. 'I'm glad that so many of you have decided to attend today's Faculty Hour.'

Most attendees silently thought they had little choice in the matter.

'Today, we welcome Ali Al-Khoury, Head of the Research Administration of our university, as a guest speaker. Ali will highlight a new program of the university meant to foster interdisciplinary research, which, as you may know, has been identified as one of four priorities in the new university strategy. And, I'm happy to add that the university has not only identified interdisciplinarity as one of its priority areas but also reserved substantial means to support it! Needless to say, this may be of interest to many of you.' Here, Dean Wilkinson briefly looked at all attendees. 'Ali: May I invite you to bring us up to date?'

Ali Al-Khoury, a bright young economist who had quickly understood that securing a tenured position as a faculty member was much harder than rising to a leading administrative position, energetically stepped forward to the lectern.

'Can you hear me in the back,' he asked with a loud voice, not using the microphone. People standing in the back nodded. 'OK, then we can do without a microphone, which I prefer,' he said in the same loud tone.

He took the assembled faculty through a brief presentation, explaining that the university would generously start a new four-year program encompassing

ten million dollars. In the next four years, ten fellowships each year would be made available to gifted junior researchers working in research groups of at least two out of the seven university Schools. This would not only support these talented people in their careers but—as went without saying—also the host labs, who didn't have to contribute anything except their time to supervise and guarantee the embedding of the young talents. The university was still thinking about a suitable name for the fellowships to lend them a more prestigious character, either naming them after a famous person renowned for his or her interdisciplinary work or a benefactor, several of whom had already shown interest in supporting the program. Being one of the goals of the university, it would be extensively featured and broadly advertised to attract gifted young researchers.

'Thank you, Ali, for this extremely informative presentation,' Dean Wilkinson announced after Ali had finished his introduction to the new program. Wilkinson now stood next to Ali at the front of the assembly room, ready to guide the attendees through questions and discussion.

'I'm sure we're all excited by the prospect of what may be considered a substantial and certainly generously supported program by the university board. But maybe there are some questions left?'

Some professors in the room raised their hands and complimented the university for such a visionary course.

'A very interesting program,' Agnetha Sundström-Andersson, one of the senior female professors, commented. 'There certainly will be ample interest among our students to cross the borders of their discipline. I can already think of several potential candidates,' implicitly conveying the message that she and her group members would certainly go for this new pot of money.

Several others reacted in much the same way, predicting that it would yield a new breed of young people who were motivated to dive into multiple aspects of a complex problem.

Then Brendon O'Haley, a senior experimental oncologist, raised his hand, and Dean Wilkinson briefly nodded in his direction to give him the floor.

'I only have one question. May I ask you, Herbert, or Ali, for that matter, what the university aims to accomplish with this interdisciplinary research?'

Ali seemed eager to answer. 'Excellent question, sir,' he complimented O'Haley. 'There are numerous examples in history showing that interdisciplinary research by combining insights from multiple angles can bring solutions where mono-disciplines fail to do so. Much in the same vein as what we just heard some of your colleagues saying. The university deems it important that we use these insights to their full potential, not only to profit from the progress they will facilitate but also to raise a new generation of young researchers trained to think beyond the borders of their discipline.'

'That is all very nice,' another professor intervened, 'but to me, that sounds like the text of a glib brochure meant for politicians. I haven't seen any proof yet that interdisciplinary research "facilitates progress", as you put it, any more so than a thorough knowledge of one's own discipline!'

'Absolutely,' Brendon O'Haley seconded, somewhat annoyed that he had been interrupted. 'To me, it all sounds like a fashion, a whim. Just so the university won't miss out on "interdisciplinarity". But I haven't heard any sound basis for your claim, Ali.'

Dean Wilkinson frowned. 'I'm not sure if I fully understand you, Brendon. Here we are, the university

generously offering us a ten-million-dollar program, and you don't endorse that?'

Brendon grumbled to those around him, 'Because those ten million dollars are skimmed off from other resources.'

'Exactly,' someone else agreed in a voice loud enough for the dean to hear. 'Our grants bring in most of the extramural funds of the university, a substantial part of which goes directly to university administration. So, in a way, we pay for the program ourselves.'

'Worse so,' another shouted, 'because other divisions, in the name of so-called "fairness"—he used his fingers to mimic the quotation marks—will also need to benefit from the program. It all boils down to us pumping *our* money into these other disciplines.'

Brendon now stood up and resumed his earlier argument. 'Why don't we just use the money to start a new program focusing on *excellent* science? Period. No extra conditions, like interdisciplinarity. And *if* the most excellent proposals happen to be interdisciplinary, so much the better. Although I seriously doubt if such interdisciplinary projects would end up at the top,' he added. 'I mean, other disciplines being light-years behind us...'

Herbert Wilkinson tried to quiet down the minor uproar that had started around Brendon O'Haley.

Someone else raised a hand.

'Is that about the same issue, or do you want to ask another question,' Herbert Wilkinson snapped, momentarily forgetting his usual manner to appease those present.

'It's about the same issue, but from a different angle,' the Chairman of Psychiatry brought up. 'I have a somewhat different opinion than the view expressed by Brendon. In my experience, collaborating with other disciplines, such as the social sciences or economy, can be tremendously

enlightening. I, for one, have learned a lot from these other disciplines. For example, their statistical background is so much sounder than ours in life sciences. Therefore, I strongly disagree with Brendon; I see a lot of benefit in such interdisciplinary projects.'

The earlier group of protesters didn't even bother to respond, considering psychiatry a discipline far removed from their hard-core science and not to be taken seriously, really. Weren't psychiatrists notorious for disagreeing among themselves about their diagnoses? Admittedly, the field had improved somewhat by joining forces with solid scientists, such as geneticists; or radiologists, who introduced brain imaging. Still, in their opinion, psychiatry was rooted in philosophy rather than the natural or medical sciences. No wonder psychiatrists wanted to collaborate with the social sciences and humanities!

'I don't need any statistical knowledge,' Brendon commented in a measured voice on the presumed positive influence of other disciplines. 'If one needs a statistical test to prove there *is* an effect, the effect is too minute to waste one's breath on. Effects are either there or they're not!'

Now, Janet Hildon rose from her chair. She was the Chair of Epidemiology and always prided herself on being the most highly cited scientist in the entire School of Medicine. Nobody else made much of that feat because they all knew she had started a population cohort when she was in her twenties, from which she still profited, cranking out at least fifty papers per year with her name on them. No wonder she received so many citations. But it didn't amount to anything substantial, as many thought—which was not an entirely fair point of view.

But Janet was a tough cookie; she always stood her ground. 'I don't agree with you at all, Brendon. Statistical

analysis *is* critical, and biomedical scientists would greatly benefit from a better statistical understanding. I can imagine that in your highly artificial test tube experiments, the effect of any treatment entails a tenfold or twentyfold difference. But in the *real* world, working with people instead of cell lines, effects are much smaller, and one needs excellent statistical theories to determine if one's looking at a real effect or not.'

Brendon didn't answer. He never listened to epidemiologists, to begin with. As far as he was concerned, everything they came up with, including all their statistical mumbo-jumbo, was to be deeply distrusted.

After this rather terse exchange, a few others spoke up, most of whom were in favor of the proposed interdisciplinary program.

'I regard this as a wonderful opportunity to look beyond one's own borders,' an old professor in otorhinolaryngology yelled. He was slightly deaf, hence his loud tone. With his gray beard, he resembled a garden gnome, albeit without garden utensils or a wheelbarrow. 'And I think I heard Ali say that the university is in the process of securing *extra* money from benefactors to support the program? Who could be opposed to that? It doesn't seem to compete with any of the current fellowship programs.' He looked around him for support, and some of the attendees nodded.

Overall, it seemed that about half of those attending were against and half in favor of the new program, with some of the latter group being genuinely enthusiastic about interdisciplinary research and the rest seeing it as just another opportunity to acquire extra funds. They could always bend their research in such a direction that another discipline would be involved, if only on paper.

So far, Ken had stayed out of the discussion. But now he stood up because he had a clear take on the matter. 'I'm not against interdisciplinary research at all,' he said. 'Just to give an example: Very recently, I applied a new technology from physics to our biochemical work, which, in my view, holds enormous promise for the future of science. But in all honesty,' and here he paused briefly to achieve more impact with his statement, 'in all honesty... I don't see any benefit in combining our hard-core biomedical and natural science research with that in, say, the School of Language or the School of Law. I absolutely fail to see how that could address any of the gigantic challenges we face in health and medicine. To me, it seems to be throwing good money after bad. I would propose, like Brendon earlier suggested, to make it an entirely open program, with the only criterion being that it's spent on *excellent* people and *excellent* research. Why not make it entirely transparent and open? And I would be very surprised if not most of the projects ending up at the top of the list are in medicine or the natural sciences.'

Ali Al-Khoury, though, didn't give up that easily. 'Thank you for your suggestion, sir. But may I ask how you would determine these criteria for excellence?'

Ken was still standing and looked around at his colleagues. 'Don't we all know what excellent research is? At least the peers in the field? I mean, we can objectively read the research proposals and judge their novelty. And we can, objectively again, see in which journals the applicants, or the receiving labs, have published their earlier work; how well-regarded their work is in their field... I should think it won't be too difficult to leave that to a committee of senior and well-respected scientists to determine. Rather than make it a political decision, as these things usually tend to be.'

‘With all due respect, sir, but not all disciplines can be judged similarly,’ Ali responded. ‘The journals you refer to aren’t the usual means of disseminating one’s work when it regards, for instance, the humanities, where people would rather publish books.’

Ken raised his hands in despair. ‘Doesn’t that say it all? I rest my case.’ And with that, he sat down again.

Dean Wilkinson commented. ‘I think Ali here has a point. Publication cultures and systems of merit differ per discipline. In my view, we should allow for that.’

He looked around. ‘Well, if there are no more questions, I propose we close this session.’ He turned in Ali’s direction. ‘We’re very much indebted to Ali Al-Khoury for his introduction to the program, which, I should add, is still in a premature phase. We all hope that the university board will secure *extra* funds—here he looked keenly at the audience—which sounds like an exciting new opportunity to foster highly talented young researchers. And I’m sure that we’re all in favor of such a laudable goal!’

He started a brief applause for Ali Al-Khoury and next invited everyone to the foyer, where drinks and snacks were available for those who cared to stay.

It was interesting to see how the assembled crowd split up afterward in the hall into opponents and supporters of the new program. The opponents had no interest in being convinced that working with other disciplines would be in the best interest of progressing research—or the world—because they were convinced this was not the case and were still waiting for solid proof to the contrary. Those in favor gathered around the dean and Ali Al-Khoury to get more information about when the program was likely to start and how one could apply.

Ken had a quick drink and then left his colleagues. He couldn’t get excited about the whole enterprise. He didn’t

need the money, certainly not if he secured that new grant. He had already accepted, many years ago, the inevitable fact that a lot of the money he brought in was used to support administrators or the research of lesser gods in other departments. So be it.

He might have resented the situation if he was short of money. But as it was, he could more or less decide how to spend his time. And that would be on things that truly mattered; in this case, the breakthrough they were on the brink of.

Chapter V

About a month later, Ken saw an email message coming in, asking him to contact the dean as soon as possible. He had just arrived in Seattle where he combined a quick visit to Brenda with giving a lecture at the University of Washington, or the other way around. He was sitting in a taxi on his way to the university when he read the message, so he might as well call right away.

Monica, the dean's secretary, answered the phone.

'Hello Monica, Ken Bird here. I just received a message from Herbert asking if I could contact him as soon as possible. So, I thought: Why not give him a call right away? Is he in?'

'Ah, Ken. No, Herbert is in a meeting with the board of the university, I'm afraid. But he left instructions that he wanted you to come over to his office. He didn't want to deal with this issue over the phone. Face-to-face, rather.'

Ken wondered about her answer. He was rarely asked to come and visit Herbert in his office.

'Well, the thing is, right now, I'm out of town. I'm in Seattle. So, it would have to wait then.'

'Tell you what, Ken. I'll call Joyce and arrange a meeting with Herbert when you return. I assume you won't be out of town for long?'

'No, no. Just a visit to the university here. And to my daughter. Let me see. Today is Monday. I'll be back tomorrow afternoon, Tuesday, around 3 pm.'

'OK, Ken, thanks for letting me know. I'll take care of it with the help of Joyce.' She disconnected.

Ken leaned back in the backseat of the taxi. What was all this about? Not, again, this ludicrous idea of giving an

honorary doctorate to Harold Lakowski? If Herbert still kept his hopes up that he, Ken, would change his stand on the matter, he would be in for a big disappointment because Ken would never agree to the plan. It was a matter of principle: One had to earn one's credits; degrees were not for sale! An honorary doctorate, no matter how much he liked Harold and approved of him so generously supporting science, not to mention his lab...it was just out of the question. The short of it was that "giving away" an honorary degree was just the first step on a slippery slope. Next thing, scientists could be bought by the highest bidder! Like pharmaceutical companies. Ken had always carefully steered away from that. Of course, he knew good examples of companies co-creating inventions with researchers from universities or governmental research institutes, but staying independent was much wiser. He, Ken, was one of the few who could afford to do so, receiving enough grant money from funding agencies to sustain himself and his group. And no mistake: He had worked incredibly hard to reach that status!

So, returning to the honorary degree, if Herbert or the president of the university wanted to go ahead with it, Ken would resign from the endowed chair precisely as he had stated in his earlier conversation with Herbert. He had given it a bit more thought afterward and was sure that he could survive without the endowment. At least in the next couple of years, with new grants flowing in. *And* with the Lieberman Prize in his pocket, which might not entail a lot of money, but would be useful if he had to resign from the endowed chair.

Well, he would see what Herbert had to say. Not for the first time, he thought it was ridiculous that his scientific fate depended on what some dean decided, whereas he, Ken, as a highly respected scientist, knew much better what had to be done. Well, someone had to do the donkey

work and the chores—all the tiresome administration, and the official handshaking. And Herbert was not a bad sort, really; at least, he usually didn't bother the scientists too much.

On Tuesday, at 5 pm, Ken was ushered into Herbert Wilkinson's office by Monica, the dean's secretary. 'Can I bring you any coffee or tea, Ken,' she asked, with her hand on the door handle. 'Or you, Herbert?' Both men declined, and Monica left the room, closing the door behind her.

They sat down at the conference table in the dean's office. Herbert removed a speck of dust from his pants and then straightened.

'I asked you to come over, Ken, for a conversation I would have preferred not to hold with you.'

He paused.

Ken wondered where this was going.

'The thing is,' Herbert continued, 'there have been several complaints about your attitude toward your junior personnel. Not only recently, but also a few from the past. The expressions "unsafe working environment" and "unacceptable work pressure" have been used.'

This took Ken completely by surprise. 'Complaints? Unsafe?!' He looked at Herbert uncomprehendingly.

'Yes, I'm afraid so. Of course, I have to be discrete about the sources. But in at least one case, the university's confidentiality officer was involved.'

'But I don't even *know* her. Or him! So how can this person complain about my attitude?'

'With "being involved" I mean that one of your group members, or someone in this person's close environment, went to one of our confidentiality officers to complain

about your attitude. About your behavior toward the group members.'

Ken was stunned. And also felt a twitch in his stomach, a feeling of looming disaster.

'Now,' Herbert went on, 'as you know very well, one complaint might be an incident. But two or more complaints usually reveal a pattern.'

Ken shook his head in disbelief; he still didn't get it. His attitude, his behavior? Where did this come from?

'And if it's a pattern, potentially,' Herbert expressed himself carefully, 'we'll have to take it seriously. Very seriously, indeed. As one of the top universities and medical schools, we can't afford to not follow up on such signals.'

The sinking feeling in Ken's stomach intensified.

'So, I'm afraid, Ken, we'll have to install a committee to investigate these complaints thoroughly. It might all be traced back to some conflict caused by a person who feels treated unjustly for whatever reason. And perhaps we will be able to explain that justice has not been jeopardized in any way. Well, at any rate, it has to be sorted out as soon as possible. Before anyone else gets the wind of it.'

Ken looked stunned. What was happening here?

The dean cleared his throat. 'For now, we can restrict it to an internal investigation committee. I've already discussed it with the university board, and they, too, prefer it to be carried out that way. Keep it sub rosa, if you know what I mean. After all, we don't want to harm the university's reputation any more than we can help. Nor yours.'

'What do you mean, a committee?' Ken asked hoarsely. 'I don't even know what you're talking about! What's there to investigate?'

'Well, that's now for others to determine.' Dean Wilkinson leaned over the table in Ken's direction, speaking in a

lower voice. 'Listen, Ken. I'm doing my utmost to deal with this decently. Official regulations have it that we should install an *external* committee. Hopefully, that won't be necessary. We might just get away with it.' He sat up straight again. 'Provided this small internal committee finds no serious signs of an unsafe environment. No signals of work bullying, hubris, etcetera. We'll have to wait for their judgment on the matter.'

Ken was still bewildered. What was Herbert talking about, bullying...? Did he hear that correctly? While he, Ken, always went out of his way to help his junior staff?!

Herbert continued in his normal voice. 'In the meantime, I urge you to lie low. Don't meddle in it; don't say a word to anyone.' He remained silent for a moment and then added, 'We all know that you can be quite outspoken in your opinions, Ken, as I have witnessed on various occasions. This is simply *not* the moment to vent your thoughts. Nowhere! Not during our faculty meetings and certainly not outside the department. Just keep quiet while this committee is doing its work. Stay out of trouble. That is not meant as a threat but, rather, as the well-meant advice of a friend.'

Herbert Wilkinson rose and walked toward the door. 'I'm sorry, Ken. You're a faculty member we all hold in high esteem, being an outstanding and celebrated scientist. But these days, you know, with public opinion and all, we can't take any chances. Not even in your case.' He let Ken pass to leave the office and then walked back to his desk, pondering and shaking his head. What an unpleasant situation.

When Ken entered the now near-empty biochemistry building at 5:35 pm, he went directly to his office, closed the door, and sank into his swivel chair.

He was shocked. How had Herbert phrased it? Unsafe working conditions—that was one. And unsuitable behavior? No, unacceptable work pressure—that was it. He didn't get it. Unsafe? Everyone could always approach him! Or approach Sam if he, Ken, was out of town. They could always ask Joyce to schedule an appointment or even walk into his office unannounced to discuss any experiment or anything at all that had to do with work. He seldom lost his temper, unlike some of his colleagues, who were known to end discussions by slamming the door in someone's face. He really couldn't remember the last time he felt vexed or infuriated, except, of course, when people were completely unreasonable. Or plain stupid, like this CFO of the Lakowski Group. But other than that, he always took ample time to guide his junior group members and to point out any flaws in their reasoning. Correcting their manuscripts. Improving their grant applications to ensure they got the money. And, in the case of more senior postdocs, to write positive reference letters so that they could enter the university system at a good place.

What was unsafe about that?! They could count on him all the way. He had never let anyone down. Well, maybe a few people...who had chosen to leave his lab before their project ended. But, hey, he wasn't a saint. If people were unwise enough to leave prematurely, they were on their own. That's where his support stopped. One had to draw the line somewhere.

And work pressure...? What did Herbert mean by that, for God's sake?

True, he expected people to work long hours. But wasn't that exactly what he did, too? And had done so for as long

as he could remember. Besides, he wasn't one of those assholes who organized a nice barbecue party in their backyard expecting their junior staff to stay in the lab. He, Ken, worked round the clock, 24/7. He had always believed in leading by example. If you didn't have that kind of drive, that sort of...dedication to science, then the world of science was not the place for you to be. It *required* complete dedication; slacking was just out of the question. Not only to not lose any moment and promote scientific progress but also to stay ahead of the competing labs.

And wasn't it precisely *because* of this working ethos that all his PhD students and postdocs did so well in their careers? He was, in fact, doing them a huge favor by being demanding, thus preparing them for the tough world outside his lab...at least the ones that intended to stay in science and build a career. Now, if they weren't serious about that, well, in that case, the sooner they left, the better. But he rarely needed to discuss that with anyone in his group because he always selected his postdocs and PhD students based on how seriously they intended to pursue a research career. After all, scientific research *was* a serious matter, so if you were flippant about it, there was no place for you in the Bird Lab.

But again, he was convinced he was doing young people a big favor by using this approach: It was so much better to find out at the start of your career that you weren't fit for the job and do better to look for another occupation than when you had already progressed to a more senior position, only to realize you didn't like it. A career in science inevitably meant work pressure, competition, and dealing with frustration and disappointment. That's just how it is.

Ken sighed. He couldn't get his head around it. For a fleeting moment, he thought his exchange with Mihaela

might have been one of the igniting factors. But, surely, that couldn't be true? He had gone out of his way to *help* her...to make sure she would stay in the loop during her pregnancy so that when she came back after giving birth, she could immediately reintegrate and reclaim her position in the experiments and, therefore, in the list of authors—if it ever came to a paper.

The fact of the matter, though, was that he was now in deep water. Some kind of committee would dig into the case, and he would have no say over the composition of that committee. For all he knew, this could be people from other departments, even from entirely different disciplines! And that wouldn't be to his advantage, as they had little idea how competitive things were in his field. God, what a mess! Whatever came of it...it would, at the very least, distract him from the current experiments. And all that right now, when they were so close to a breakthrough.

Well, it might all blow over soon—although Herbert's words made him fear the worst.

When Ken entered the lab on Wednesday after a fitful night's sleep, followed by his morning run and breakfast with Jenny, who happened to be late due to a traffic jam somewhere on the road, he still felt ill at ease.

Having no idea who had uttered the allegations, he constantly wondered about their source. Who was to be trusted? And who was antagonistic to the extent that he or she would go and visit a confidentiality officer or anyone else to complain about him?

He was left with so many questions. Would these committee members interrogate his group members? If so, the news would be hard to contain. Did he, Ken, have to

prepare his group members for the fact that somebody might approach them with questions? But Herbert had clearly instructed Ken not to meddle in any way and that he shouldn't say a word to anyone. So, that probably included his lab members, although he wasn't exactly sure. Should he call Herbert Wilkinson and ask? Better not. Herbert had been so emphatic in telling him to stay out of the way.

Time passed, and when Sam walked into Ken's office at 10 am for their usual Wednesday morning meeting, Ken realized that he hadn't done anything useful yet. He was just wasting his time by chewing on the situation.

With great effort, he took his mind off the issue and focused on what Sam wanted to discuss. Talking about the latest results actually helped Ken detach himself somewhat from the investigation committee and focus on research again.

Before Ken knew it, all unpleasantness faded into the background, and he regained his usual spirit and enthusiasm for the ongoing experiments. The new, combined techniques they had just implemented ran like a charm, and the postdoc they had hired to carry out most of the work was expected to start two weeks from now. Most of the problems they had encountered so far had been solved, and, in fact, they were already collecting their first results. All that was left to do was order the chemicals and animals for the postdoc to work with, and the new person would have a flying start.

Ken felt hugely relieved by the time his meeting with Sam was nearly over. It was wonderful to just concentrate on important matters rather than on some incomprehensible development he had no control over.

Just before Sam left his office, Ken made an offhand remark to see if Sam suspected anything.

‘Oh, Sam, quite something different. During one of our recent Faculty Hours, I was alerted that the university has appointed so-called confidentiality officers. I had never heard of it. Does it ring a bell to you?’

Ken carefully watched Sam to look for any sign of uneasiness. But Sam didn’t seem particularly interested; if anything, he was merely surprised that his boss brought up something like that. Ken usually kept himself away from any such administrative issues.

‘Sure. I guess every company and institution needs to have such officers, don’t they,’ Sam remarked, walking to the door. ‘But I can’t say I’m really into that—haven’t ever thought about it,’ Sam ended, shrugging his shoulders. And then, he went on to summarize the final details of the mice he had to order.

Ken was relieved that Sam wasn’t involved in the matter. Well, he wouldn’t, would he? He could thoroughly trust Sam. Still, it was good to see that Sam hadn’t been approached—or at least, not yet.

He sat down and resolved not to give the matter further thought. It was out of his hands. Plus, he was hopeful that it would all blow over. After all, the allegations were neither here nor there.

He walked over to Joyce, and together, they went over his appointments scheduled for the day.

On Friday morning, Joyce knocked on his glass door. Ken looked up from his computer, slightly annoyed that she was interrupting him in the middle of revising a manuscript.

‘What is it?’ He was a bit curt, trying to quickly get back to work.

‘You better read this week’s IOU, Ken. You seem to be their latest victim. Check it out...’

And she walked back to her desk.

The Internal Observer of the University, IOU in short, was a weekly online magazine loosely connected to the university. It had been established ten years ago by two alums as a sponsored outlet of the university administration. But, as first these alums and later other contributors in their wake had been systematically negative on whatever they wrote about the university, it had come to a clean break a few years ago, with the university retracting all its financial support and completely distancing itself from the content.

The IOU was notorious for covering everything that went wrong in the academic world and invariably portrayed these issues in the least favorable manner, usually being entirely off the mark. However, occasionally, they turned out to be correct. Because of the extremely negative tone, most faculty members simply ignored the IOU. For some reason, they would still receive it in their email box unless they made an explicit effort to unsubscribe. Ken had never bothered to do so and just deleted the email at the end of the day when he routinely cleaned up his email box to prevent it from overflowing.

He now quickly opened his email box.

There it was.

He clicked on the message and right away looked at his portrait.

“Harassment in Biochemistry”, the title screamed. He couldn’t believe his eyes—was this about him?

He clicked on the link and saw the complete text of the article. It was accompanied by a picture of himself, dating back some years, where he furtively looked over his shoulder, his eyes half-closed when the picture was taken.

HARASSMENT IN BIOCHEMISTRY

By Emily Steimovitch

**We all know they exist in our university—
labs where students and postdocs work
sixteen hours per day, seven days per week.
But when it concerns a pregnant woman,
it's time to shout: No More!**

Twenty-six-year-old PhD student Mihaela is four months pregnant when she informs her boss, famous biochemist Ken Bird, of the happy news. He doesn't react like any normal citizen would by congratulating her. Instead, he is only concerned that her pregnancy will interrupt the experiments. He expects her to keep working until delivery and, immediately thereafter, write her manuscript at home.

'She is devastated,' a colleague who took pity on the young PhD student told us. 'She has a *right* to stay at home for six weeks to care for her baby. And for herself! But Ken Bird only accepts full dedication, which left this PhD student no other option than accepting the scheme he proposed. It sounds medieval to me.'

Requesting full dedication and following up on the boss's commands is something another junior group member can testify to. This postdoc, who doesn't want to be mentioned by name—how telling!—had to make so many hours that he resigned. Not because he doesn't like the work. But only to escape from the

murderous regime in the Bird Lab. Fortunately, he will stay in science; he accepted an even better job elsewhere. A colleague from one of the other biochemistry labs explained how Ken Bird responded to this news. ‘Instead of reflecting on why the postdoc left, he simply dropped him like dirt. Ken Bird ranted, treating the guy as a traitor. Even threatened that if he [the postdoc; *ES*] would stay in science, he would always depend on him, Ken Bird, so the guy better be nice to him. My jaw dropped when I heard of such abuse.’

This all sounds like harassment of the worst kind. Repressing vulnerable young PhD students and postdocs may happen more often than we like, but this university should be a place where this is not allowed: Under no condition!

We asked the School of Medicine and our University leadership for their responses, but the dean’s office only commented that the matter is under investigation. By an internal committee! Considering that Ken Bird is a world-famous scientist who brings in a lot of money (not to mention prestige) to this university, we wouldn’t be surprised if these bad practices are hushed up and nothing will ever change.

But rest assured: The IOU will keep you informed!

Ken couldn’t believe what he had just read—how the IOU distorted all the facts to make him seem like a raving

madman. Seriously, he had gone out of his way to help Mihaela stay in science, which, as she had confirmed herself, was her wish. He had asked other people in the lab to help her until she gave birth; and especially thereafter. His concern that she would drop out if she got too distracted by caring for the baby all day was now portrayed as if he had forced her to work round the clock directly after delivery.

And Dexter....! The cheek to talk about this—what he considered to be—*private* conversation... It was just unbelievable! And this shitty online pulp magazine claiming that Dexter had *bettered* himself by leaving the Bird Lab and going to John Barridge's Lab... Well, that just showed how misinformed they always were. Imagine comparing him, Ken Bird, with John Barridge, a second-rate scientist by any standard! Dexter had committed scientific suicide by leaving in the middle of his project; it was as simple as that. Anyone with any knowledge of how the system worked could tell you so. And it had all been entirely Dexter's doing, his own choice. If anything, Ken had tried to save him by convincing the guy to stay! He leaned back in his swivel chair and again wondered what was happening to him. Where did all this come from? Did he have enemies in the university system? Frustrated colleagues, perhaps?

He didn't have long to contemplate the matter because his cell phone rang, and when he picked it up, he saw it was Herbert Wilkinson.

'Ken Bird speaking.'

Dean Wilkinson didn't even bother to start with the usual polite introductory sentences; he jumped right into the conversation.

'What did I tell you, Ken? Remember? I told you to lie low! And what do I read in the IOU?! The whole despicable story.'

‘I didn’t say anything to anyone, Herbert. Honest to God! What do you think? That I spread all those lies, making myself look like a complete villain? I wish they would’ve given me half a chance to explain everything! To set them straight!’

‘Don’t you *dare*, Ken! The mess is big enough as it is. Now we not only have complaints but also coverage in the IOU. Let’s hope it won’t spread any further! I’m not even sure we can keep the investigation internal any longer. The committee hasn’t even started its work, but I wouldn’t be surprised if we need to discharge it already and replace it with an external committee.’

Ken froze. He knew of one case in the university where an external committee had been installed, and the faculty member concerned had resigned and left the university to spare himself the disgrace of being fired.

‘Well,’ Herbert resumed in a slightly less agitated tone, ‘let’s keep our fingers crossed. But be extremely careful, Ken, not to talk about this to anyone.’ And then he disconnected.

Ken slumped back. The chances that this would simply blow over had diminished considerably over the past hour, as he understood very well even without the dean spelling it out.

What could he do? It seemed as if nobody cared to hear his take on the matter.

At that moment, Joyce entered his office, putting a latte macchiato on his desk.

‘I thought you could perhaps do with something warm and comforting,’ she said in her usual matter-of-fact voice. ‘Feeding the monster.’ And seeing Ken’s face, quickly added, ‘Sorry for the bad joke, Ken. It was just an attempt to cheer you up a bit.’

With a look of concern on Ken, she left his office, leaving the door ajar.

Ken resumed his earlier thoughts. So, it had been Mihaela. And Dexter, of course. And God knows who else? How could they? Stab him in the back like that! Instead of discussing this with him face-to-face, they had gone to confidentiality officers and counselors...confided in other postdocs, friends... In short, approached a bunch of people who were perhaps well-trained in social work but not in how things went in the scientific arena. They could, no, *should* have gone to him, or if not to him, to one of the other biochemistry professors in the building, who would have brought forward all the arguments against their point of view and talked some sense into them. They could have gone to Sam...

Come to think of it, what was Sam's view on all this? Surely, he couldn't agree with the sewer journalism of the IOU?

Ken got up and peered through the glass door into the space full of desks. Somewhere in the middle, Sam was working behind his computer. He called and gestured for Sam to come over.

Sam stood up and walked over, stopping at the door.

'Anything you wanted to ask, Ken?'

'Anything I wanted to ask?! Come in and shut the door.'

Sam walked in, somewhat reluctantly.

'Sit down.'

And when Sam was seated opposite him, Ken continued,

'Did you read that article in the IOU?'

Sam briefly shrugged. 'Of course. We all did.'

'And? What do you think?'

Sam remained silent.

'The way everything is distorted? Making me look like a slave driver?'

Sam just made a dismissive gesture.

‘Did you know about this? Did Mihaela or Dexter...did any of them complain to you? Did they tell you they would file a complaint?’

Sam shrugged again and looked at Ken. ‘Listen, Ken, I prefer to stay out of it. You know...like, not get involved.’ ‘But how can you?! You *are* involved! From now on, anyone who works in this lab is involved. You’ll be asked by some internal committee what you think. You *will* have to take a position: Either in favor of the ones who make the allegations or in favor of me. From now on, there is no gray zone.’

Sam stood up and pushed the chair carefully under Ken’s desk.

‘I don’t see it that way, Ken. There are good arguments both ways. And I simply want to keep doing my work and not get involved. Unless you force me to make a choice...’

With great difficulty, Ken managed to keep himself from saying what he had in mind: That he expected Sam to defend him, Ken; that he expected undivided loyalty. But he realized that he couldn’t afford to alienate Sam. This is how far it had come already, with him realizing that he depended on people like Sam.

So, instead, he thanked Sam for stopping by and said he understood his position. Which, in all honesty, he didn’t. Not at all.

On Saturday, Ken decided to work from home most of the day. He needed to literally distance himself from the lab. The local newspaper had picked up the article from the IOU but covered it only in a very brief entry, not mentioning Ken’s name. It merely said that the university was investigating an alleged harassment case in its School of Medicine. And then went on to remind the readership

of other similar and recent cases in the world of media, music, law, and business. The gist of the entry was that employees all around no longer hesitated to be whistleblowers and that now the local academic world had been added to the long list of unsafe working environments.

It still hurt to see himself, although not mentioned by name, related to other recent cases of abuse. At least, the newspaper had not bothered to accompany the small entry with a picture of the “culprit”.

He sighed and put the newspaper aside when they had breakfast Saturday morning. He hadn't discussed what had happened with Jenny, nor did he want to bring it up. It was bad enough that this now overshadowed all other issues at work. His home environment had to remain a safe place.

‘Is anything bothering you, Ken,’ Jenny asked nonetheless. ‘You’re sighing all the time.’

‘No, nothing, really. The news doesn’t leave one happy these days,’ he answered, pointing at the front page.

He rose from the table. ‘I’ll work from home today. See you later this afternoon?’ It was one of Jenny’s days off, so after a good sleep, now that she had returned from her night shift, she would stay home today, only to leave again tomorrow in the late afternoon. ‘Sleep well,’ he added, briefly stroking her hair on his way out of the kitchen.

Jenny cleared the breakfast table and yawned. She was tired. What was eating Ken, she wondered. Something was bothering him; that much was clear.

Ken worked the entire weekend on a new grant proposal. He still wasn't entirely sure the grant he submitted earlier

this year would be funded. And with all this mess going on, it seemed wise to try obtaining money from another funding agency as well, just to be on the safe side. It took all his concentration to write things in an intelligible way, one paragraph leading to another, with clear objectives and a work plan that followed logically from the objectives. He wrote an extensive contingency plan in case the preferred route didn't lead to any results. Rereading the introductory section, he realized he had not fully acknowledged some of the competing groups, which could be a reason for them to get annoyed if they were to review his proposal. And as only a few groups worldwide worked in this technically demanding field, there was a considerable chance that his proposal would be sent to one of the competitors for review. It may sound obvious that competitors didn't want him to get money to avoid themselves from being out-competed; and, therefore, might come up with unreasonable arguments, basically killing the proposal. But Ken knew that the system kept itself in check because next time, he would have to judge a proposal from one of the competitors, and if he had been treated unfairly, the same could—or would—happen to this competitor. So, they were all very critical of each other but restrained themselves from being totally unfair. But, of course, one shouldn't challenge competitors by not citing their work; that was one of the unwritten rules of the game.

On Sunday, early morning, he took an unusually long break from work, driving thirty miles to a beautiful spot near the ocean for his usual morning run. It was a crisp, sunny morning, too early in the year for the fog that made the place chilly and overcast in the summer. Today, the pine trees were sharply etched against the blue sky, the grass was incredibly green, with flower beds here and there, and many seabirds swerving in the air. He so much

enjoyed the scenery that he extended his morning run by fifteen minutes.

When he was back, he prepared scrambled eggs for himself and Jenny, who potted around after her day off and went to bed at a somewhat later hour than normal.

When he returned to his study, he felt relaxed. All this hassle at the university somehow seemed very far away.

Around noon, his cell phone rang.

‘Ken Bird speaking.’

‘Good morning, Professor Bird,’ the male voice on the other side answered politely. ‘This is Ben Jefferson from the News Show at Eight.’ He paused for a few seconds. ‘I suppose you’re familiar with our TV show?’

Ken seldom watched TV, so this particular show didn’t ring a bell.

‘Can’t say I am. I’m sorry, what was your name again?’

‘No problem, sir. No problem at all. My name is Ben Jefferson.’

Ken started wondering why this Ben was calling him.

‘We provide our viewers every night with an informal show, where experts discuss subjects that attract attention during the day or the week. Between eight and nine,’ Ben added, ‘hence the name.’

Ken made a polite noise, affirming that he understood.

Ben resumed. ‘We had planned a guest for tonight, someone who would fill the audience in on his latest fashion show, which happened to be scheduled for this afternoon. But it now turns out that the fashion show has been canceled last minute, so this particular subject will have to wait until the show is on, so to speak. And therefore, we just discussed at our editorial meeting what to do with the now-open slot.’

Ben Jefferson waited for a moment and then proceeded.

‘Someone mentioned that there are some issues at your university about work pressure, etcetera. And your name

came up as an expert who knows the details. So, we wondered if you'd be willing to join our show tonight and explain more about the culture of the scientific world. You know, your view on the matter?'

Ken was taken by surprise. Only a few minutes ago, he had never even heard of this TV program. And now they were inviting him over as an expert!

But he wasn't quite sure if this was a good idea, with Herbert having been quite explicit that Ken should lie low. Ken had only cursory experience with media like radio, TV, or newspapers. When he had been inaugurated as the first Evelyn and Harold Lakowski Chairholder—on the day that the new Biochemistry Building was officially opened—he had been invited to a local radio program, only to be called two hours before the agreed time that his item was canceled as something more pressing had occurred which urgently required coverage.

He only remembered having featured on TV a long time ago when a crew visited his lab and interviewed him about the work in his lab for some scientific series on TV, which shortly thereafter had been discontinued due to its lack of success because too few people watched the program.

'Listen, Ben, you take me by surprise. Can I think about it?'

'Of course, Professor Bird,' Ben answered in the same understanding and polite way. 'We fully understand that. But we do need to know before 2 pm because otherwise, we can't prepare the item properly. Shall I call you back by then?'

'Excellent, sounds like a good plan, Ben. I'll let you know by then.'

When Ken put his cell phone on his desk again, he thought about the question. What a pleasant young man,

this Ben whatever-his-last-name-was. Politely treating him as *the* expert. Which he was, after all.

What should he do? Now, if he altogether avoided speaking about the fact that he had been brought in connection with a case of abuse—well, *alleged* abuse, of course. And just talked about the scientific climate in general...how one had to always give one's best ...and how it was like a discovery journey that asked for all your time? How, in a way, it could be compared with Olympic sports' achievements, reaching for the highest level... Everyone *did* understand that athletes had to set aside everything in their lives to win the gold medal... That was something the lay public would surely understand? Except that, of course, the world of science was nothing like the world of sports because the former, as opposed to the latter, needed the best brains. And science aims to further mankind and to improve the quality of life rather than win a game or set a new record. Still, as a figure of speech, it might help to make people understand the enormous effort and dedication necessary to push the boundaries of our knowledge.

Wasn't this exactly *the* opportunity he had hoped for, where he could give *his* take on the matter without having to defend himself? What if he just expressed himself in general terms, how could that possibly harm the situation? He feared he might not get such a chance within the university, seeing the way the dean had reacted. Whereas this TV program would give him a stage, guaranteeing a much wider audience than he might ever reach at the university.

He mused about how he could explain his fascination with science—the magic of discovering something that nobody else knew. He might even get a chance to hint at the recent experiments they were conducting and the breakthrough they were so close to establishing. Although that might be

too premature... Talking about results that still needed to be obtained was too tricky, in his view. Before you knew it, you were broadcasting fairy tales instead of waiting for solid evidence.

And so, considering the pros and cons of a TV presence, he increasingly gave more weight to the pros, making it quite easy to assent when Ben called him again just before 2 pm.

‘Wonderful, Professor Bird. We’re very excited that you’re on board.’

‘Call me Ken,’ he answered jovially. ‘We’re all on a first-name basis in science. That’s already one insight into the world of science,’ he half-joked.

‘Great, uh, Ken. I appreciate that. We would like you to be in the studio by 7 pm at the latest so that the makeup people and the audio guys still have time to prepare you for the show. We’ve scheduled you for 8:30 pm, which leaves ample time for an interview.’

After this conversation, Ken leaned back. An interview. It was good to hear in advance that they wouldn’t rush over the item in just five minutes but would reserve ample time, as Ben had just assured him.

He looked at his watch. They would have an early dinner today, at 5 pm, with Jenny having to leave for her night shift at 5:45 pm. He didn’t have to share this news with her, did he? After all, she wouldn’t notice his absence when he left home shortly after her. He could make an off-hand remark tomorrow at breakfast when the interview was over. She could always watch the replay tomorrow morning.

Ken resumed his work on the grant application, somehow relieved that he was allowed to explain something about the wondrous world of science. It felt almost like a godsend.

Ken arrived in the studio at 7 pm sharp. He was first seated on a sofa in the lobby and picked up after five minutes by a trainee who walked him over to makeup. The elderly lady in charge put him in a swivel chair in front of a mirror. Ken noticed all kinds of makeup utensils at the table in front of him, in which the lady unfailingly found her way.

‘OK, sweetie, let’s start patching you up a bit.’ She stood behind him, addressing his image in the mirror while chewing her gum constantly. ‘I’ll put some rouge and powder on your cheeks and a bit of eyeliner around your eyes. Maybe a touch of lipstick?’

Ken listened to her with growing distaste. Eyeliner, lipstick? What did she take him for, some transvestite?

‘Rather not,’ he protested. ‘I never use any makeup.’

‘It’s just the lights in the studio, sweetie. The lights are brutal. If you don’t put something on, you’ll look like a ghost.’

‘Well, the tiniest bit, then,’ he agreed, seeing that she was already starting to put some foundation on his face.

‘Your choice,’ she answered airily, and she eyed him via the mirror, holding the pot of foundation up in the air.

‘But don’t start complaining afterward if you don’t like what you see. I warned you!’

She resumed her work, putting a little bit of rouge on his cheeks and the tiniest black line around his eyes. She refrained from applying powder and lipstick because Ken vehemently protested when she uncapped the lipstick.

Just before he entered the studio, the trainee asked him to turn off his cell phone, because they couldn’t allow any ringtones once he was on air.

On an impulse, Ken quickly sent a short message to Herbert Wilkinson, announcing that he would feature on

the News Show at Eight. He didn't want Herbert to discover by chance that he was on TV; that might cause trouble. At any rate, he had now let Herbert know in advance so that nobody could blame him, Ken, afterward that he hadn't taken the effort to inform the dean. After sending the message, he turned off his cell phone as instructed.

While the audio guy applied his microphone, Ken peered into the studio. A female presenter, whom he couldn't recollect ever having seen before, was interviewing someone who had just published a cookbook, something to do with different colors for each day. He briefly wondered about the audience: If they were interested in cookbooks, would they also care to hear the latest scientific discoveries? Well, that was none of his concern. He would grab every chance to interest the lay public in what science could bring them.

After a few minutes, the interview with the lady of the cookbook came to an end. The presenter pre-announced the next item, "The World of Science", receiving a signal from a person behind a large panel with knobs and said she would be right back after the commercials. She next stood up, removed an earbud, and walked over to Ken. 'Ken Bird? Welcome,' she addressed him businesslike. 'If you can take a seat over there? We'll be on air again in two minutes.'

A cameraman zoomed in on him and waved his hand, saying that Ken had to look in that direction.

The presenter walked back to her chair and seated herself opposite Ken. She listened to something in her earbud and then looked at Ken.

'Ready?' she asked.

He nodded. The cameraman now raised three fingers, two, one.

And they were on air.

‘And we’re back again in the studio, folks. Tonight, we’ve invited Ken Bird, a world-famous prize-winning scientist who works at the biochemistry department of one of the top universities, which happens to be right here in town. Welcome, Ken!’

He nodded to acknowledge her welcoming message.

‘Ken, we’ve been told that your name was linked earlier this week to a matter of scientific harassment. Several people have filed complaints about the working climate in your group. What’s your comment on this?’

Ken blinked. Harassment, complaints, working climate? How did this relate to him explaining the latest scientific discoveries?

‘There was indeed a brief article in a dubious magazine,’ he answered awkwardly. ‘That is not a magazine to be taken seriously. I...I,’ he started to stutter somewhat and then resumed in a more steady voice, ‘I’m actually happy to straighten this out for your viewers. Now, the fact of the matter is...’

‘Do you mean to deny,’ the presenter interrupted him with a sharp voice, ‘that you forced a student who is pregnant to work up until the delivery of her baby? And even more so, to keep working while she’s recovering from giving birth and needs all her time to care for her newborn?’

‘It’s nothing like that,’ Ken tried to remain polite. ‘It is really in her best interest to keep working and not get sidetracked by her pregnancy.’

‘How so,’ the presenter asked with a cynical look. ‘Isn’t it in the best interest of a woman to look after her health and that of her child? How can the most important event in your life be seen as being “sidetracked”, as you choose to phrase it? Wouldn’t she need her maternity leave to recover from this major event in her life? Not to mention allowing her some time to *enjoy* being a young mother?!’

When Ken didn't answer, at a loss for how to respond to this aggressive bombardment of questions, she added, 'But maybe this is too difficult for a man to answer. After all, you wouldn't know how it feels to be pregnant and nurse an infant.'

She paused briefly and then went on. 'Are there any facilities to pump, in private, in your building, as a decent employer should supply these days?'

When Ken looked at her, uncomprehending, she explained, 'Pumping breast milk, as many young mothers do these days when they return to work?'

'I don't know, really,' Ken answered falteringly when the presenter gave him the floor.

'Another case that was mentioned in this article—that is "not taken seriously by you", as you just disclosed—is that of a young scientist who resigned, allowing him to move to a better institute, and who was told by you that his entire future depended on your favorable judgment. To me, that sounds like a serious case of intimidation, just as we know it from the world of movies, music, and business. Wouldn't you agree?'

By now, it had sunk in with Ken that he wouldn't have the slightest chance to say anything about the world of science, let alone the beauty of scientific discoveries. This was going to be a matter of survival. He started to sweat.

'I would never intimidate anyone! The situation is...'

The presenter started interrupting him again, just as she had done after her first allegation.

'Let me finish,' he snapped at her, annoyed. She immediately shut her mouth.

'This postdoc didn't just leave at the *end* of his project like normal people do. No...he left in the *middle* of his project, knowing full well that other people would have to finish *his* work. And he didn't leave to *better* his position, as you say, which might be somewhat

understandable...although still stupid. But he went, for dubious reasons, to a lab that isn't exactly known for carrying out top-notch research. I mean, all of this was entirely *his* choice. I absolutely had no say in the matter. And any negative consequence is entirely caused by his own doing, certainly not mine. I focus on those that stay, not the ones that leave. I always help my postdocs find good positions afterward.'

Ken felt agitated, knowing that in his anger, he hadn't said what he had in mind beforehand. But there it was—if people wanted to hear the truth, he wouldn't shy away from it.

'Do I hear you say you immediately dump people who have worked many hours and for several years in your group when they decide to accept another job for whatever *private* and probably fully understandable reasons?'

'That is not what I meant,' he answered hotly. 'Everyone in the world of science knows that it takes enormous effort and years of work to reap the benefits of the project you started. I just wanted to prevent him from leaving before those benefits fell to him. Of course, I would never thwart anyone on purpose!'

'Does it bother you that at least two people in your group went as far as filing a complaint about the working climate? Didn't it remind you of recent, similar cases in society?'

Ken tried to loosen the collar of his shirt. 'It certainly bothers me. It distracts everyone, including myself, from what we are meant to do: Research. For the benefit of mankind!'

There, he had been able to throw that in, if only obliquely. All the wealth and current achievements in well-being had been accomplished through hard work in the lab by researchers like himself, who didn't hesitate to dedicate

their lives to it. Quite different from presenting a news show from a swivel chair!

‘Well, thank you, Ken, for your candid answers. Folks, this was Ken Bird, the prize-winning biochemist who has just given us a glimpse of the world behind all the glitter and glamour.’

The cameraman signaled her. ‘And with this, we thank Ken Bird for joining us today. We will take a brief break and be right back after the commercials. Stay tuned!’

She got up from her chair and walked over to Ken.

He rose simultaneously, a bit dazed, still not quite understanding what had happened to him.

‘Sorry, Ken, I had to grill you a bit. Our audience expects that we entertain them, and you talking about your latest discoveries wouldn’t interest anyone. They would just see it as a suitable moment to grab a soda or take a leak.

Besides, I seriously think you should change the way you deal with people. I mean, not just you, but science in general. Anyway, that’s your world, not mine.’

She put out her hand for Ken to shake, which he did in a haze, utterly confused by the interview and her comments afterward.

He walked out of the studio, forgetting to take off his microphone, and was therefore called back by the audio guy, who swiftly removed it from his shirt.

The trainee walked him back to the makeup room, where his rouge and eyeliner were removed.

The elderly lady looked at his image again via the mirror, chewing on her gum like an hour ago.

‘That didn’t go too well for you, sweetie. First time on TV?’

He nodded.

She just grinned. ‘She ripped you to shreds’.

He was too battered to answer.

‘Didn’t I warn you! If you don’t powder your face and wear lipstick, you’ll look like a ghost—a sweating ghost.’ When he still didn’t answer, she took pity on him and briefly squeezed his shoulder.

‘Don’t you worry too much, sweetie. Tomorrow, the vultures have another subject and victim, and you’ll be old news. People forget.’

She brushed his shoulders to remove the remnants of makeup that had fallen on them and indicated that he was ready to go.

Ken walked back to the parking lot and sat behind the wheel, waiting to start his car.

He desperately tried to grasp what had happened just now. Had he been set up? Had it been a trap? How could he have been deceived into presuming that this was a decent program where he could give his take on the matter? Or on science in general, at leisure, having ample time to dive into the details...

The word “ample time” brought back to memory the earlier conversation he had had with Ben what’s-his-name. He had been deceived by Ben’s politeness, his reference to “Professor Bird”.

God, he had made a mess of it.

He didn’t remember all he had said, but surely some of it had been very unwise. Which reminded him of Herbert Wilkinson’s warning him to lie low. And this, in turn, reminded him of how he, Ken, had switched off his phone before entering the studio...after—of all things—*alerting* Herbert that he was about to enter a studio for an appearance on the News Show at Eight.

Ken groaned. Oh God, what a pompous, presumptuous fool he had been! With no prior experience on TV!

He switched on his cell phone and saw that no less than fifteen messages had come in over the past few minutes. While he was watching, another three came in.

He decided not to look at them. The harm had been done already; what good did it do to read all those nasty reminders of his stupidity?

While he was thinking about this, his phone rang. Herbert Wilkinson.

Ken froze. He couldn't ignore this one.

'Ken Bird,' he said in a low voice.

In the background, he heard muffled voices and the sound of clinking glasses.

'Wait a second, Ken. I'm walking over to my study.' The muffled voices disappeared into the background.

'OK, I'm sitting behind my desk. And just as well I sit! I can't believe what I just saw, Ken,' Herbert said in a loud voice. 'God dammit, man, what did I tell you?! To LIE LOW. To keep the hell out of it. To leave it entirely to *me* instead of messing things up yourself.'

'I'm sorry, Herbert, I was out of bounds.'

'Out of *bounds*?! Out of bounds, that's what you call it?! I don't believe it! You don't get it, Ken, do you? You still don't get it! You're done. You're *finished*! It will be completely impossible to keep the investigation internal now. The university president was already extremely displeased last Friday when that piece came out in the IOU. But with this on top of it... It's over!'

And when Ken didn't answer, Herbert Wilkinson went on.

'Tomorrow morning, first thing, you come to my office, and I'll hand you, in the presence of our legal officer, a letter of suspension. You can't keep working here during the investigation, not until we know the result of the external investigation committee. You're not to stay in contact with anyone from the university. Only with me, or, rather, our legal officer. Oh, and get yourself a good lawyer soon. See you tomorrow morning!'

Ken looked at the phone, now transmitting a busy tone. Suspended? Legal officer? Lawyer...

What had he done?

Dean Wilkinson slowly walked back to the sitting room, where a small group of friends had gathered to celebrate his wife's birthday.

His wife, Maud, looked up when he entered the room and saw his distraught face.

'Was that Ken Bird you were talking to?'

Herbert Wilkinson nodded and sat down next to her on the couch. The group had fallen silent upon his entry.

He looked up and addressed no one in particular.

'Can you believe it? Someone so brilliant, such a great scientist. Nobel Prize material.'

He sighed and then concluded, 'With a social brain the size of a shrimp!'

Chapter VI

It was the end of May. Ken sat at the desk in his study, overlooking a small tiled terrace and backyard where some flowers and shrubs withered, evidence of his and Jenny's lack of interest in gardening.

It was now almost three weeks since his disastrous TV performance, and these weeks had been the worst of his life.

On the Monday morning after his appearance on TV, he reported himself to the dean at 9 am, as summoned the night before. Herbert Wilkinson and a legal officer of the university handed Ken a letter stating that he was suspended for the period necessary for the external committee to reach a conclusion; an external committee that had yet to be installed, meaning it might take a few months for them to come up with a written report. But they certainly—as Dean Wilkinson had pointed out because the university couldn't afford things remaining uncertain over the summer—wanted to close the case before the end of August so they could start the next academic year with a clean slate. What the latter meant for Ken wasn't explained.

The letter also stipulated what he, Ken, was and particularly wasn't allowed to do in the meantime. Dean Wilkinson read it out loud to Ken; apparently, that was the usual legal procedure to which they had to adhere. The short of it was that Ken wasn't allowed to stay on campus, let alone enter the Biochemistry Building; that he was not to seek contact with anyone from the university and, if contacted by someone, had to forward the messages directly to the dean's office. His postdocs and PhD

students, for the moment, would be supervised by other senior faculty of the biochemistry department because their best interests were critical to the dean and the university, of course; they were harmed enough as it was. Ken wasn't expected to take on any duties remotely related to his work at the university or elsewhere.

'There's no beginning to spell out what we exactly mean with that, but I advise you to be very conservative in your choices, Ken. Better safe than sorry,' Dean Wilkinson added while looking in Ken's direction over the rim of his reading glasses.

Examples of prohibited occupations mentioned by the dean included tutoring, giving lectures—no matter where—attending conferences, participating in scientific committees, etcetera.

'And absolutely *no* grant applications! The university administration is instructed not to sign for the future embedding of any personnel in your group. Right now, we can't even guarantee the *existence* of your group in the future.'

That was more or less the list of the don'ts.

Ken was particularly shocked by the rationale for a ban on grant applications. Did they seriously consider expelling him? This was the first time the possibility came up, the first time anyone said it out loud. And for what? He was still completely in the dark about the reasons behind it all, apart from what was written in that shitty article in the IOU. And, admittedly, the rather stupid way in which he had discredited himself during his TV appearance.

It all sounded too surreal.

The list of what was still allowed was considerably shorter. Ken was allowed to work from home, still having access to the library and the scientific journals in his field. 'Perhaps you could spend your time writing manuscripts, Ken?' Dean Wilkinson said it absentmindedly while

putting the letter he had read to Ken in an envelope on the table and pushing it toward Ken.

Ken shrugged as if to dismiss this suggestion. To him, it only illustrated how little Dean Wilkinson understood biochemical work. How on earth could he write manuscripts if he wasn't allowed access to the experimental data of his junior group members? If he couldn't contact any of the people in the lab who had done the actual experiments and could explain the details?

'Oh, one more thing, Ken,' Herbert Wilkinson said, straightening to indicate that the meeting was nearly over.

'A representative from the Lakowski Group already contacted the president of our university earlier this morning. Obviously, the Lakowski Group is extremely displeased with the bad publicity. They're currently seeking legal advice on how to distance themselves from all this upheaval. The president was very concerned they may not only distance themselves from *you* but could even go as far as to stop their endowment altogether. Or worse, and God forbid, file a *claim* against us regarding their investment in the new Biochemistry Building, on account of malperformance from the university's side. I don't have to explain what a devastating blow that would be to our university. And particularly to our School of Medicine! I, for one, wouldn't know how to face such a financial disaster.'

Dean Wilkinson rose and walked over to the door. 'Now, I don't think it'll get quite that far. But clearly, the president and I will have to do our utmost to contain the damage and secure the future support of the Lakowski Group. Fortunately, Harold himself is very reasonable. But I'm less convinced that his associates will react in the same reasonable manner.'

And opening the door, he addressed Ken, who was passing him on his way out: 'I just wanted to let you know

about the Lakowski Group, Ken, so that you understand the full impact of your extremely unwise actions. This isn't only about you; it's about the *entire* school and university!'

Directly after this conversation, Ken headed home, holding the letter he had received moments ago in his hand.

Earlier that morning, before leaving for his appointment with the dean, he had had a brief exchange with Jenny, who was one of those who had sent him messages last night and who had tried several times, in vain, to talk to him over the phone from her work after she had seen Ken's TV appearance, just by chance, on the TV set of one of her patients. But he hadn't noticed her messages because he had switched off his cell phone altogether. As soon as he had reached his house after the studio performance, he had just searched their bathroom cabinet for sleeping pills, swallowed two of them, and crashed on his bed, falling into a dark abyss of dreamless sleep.

The following morning, he woke from Jenny's car and briefly after that heard her entering the house through the backdoor. He hadn't set the alarm on his phone the night before and hence overslept, too late for his usual run. Ken rolled himself out of bed and came down the stairs, just as Jenny reached the kitchen.

She looked up at his crumpled face and saw that he hadn't dressed for the day yet. Jenny walked over to the stairs and silently put her arms around Ken. He remained standing upright and then slowly freed himself from her embrace.

'Oh, Ken, what have you done? What have you brought onto yourself?'

He just shrugged and walked to the kitchen, taking the jar of orange juice out of the fridge.

Jenny followed him into the kitchen. ‘What on earth made you think of featuring on that show? That horrible show!’ And when he still didn’t answer, ‘How could you be so incredibly, so astonishingly...*naive*?’

He now sat down and just grimaced.

‘What did they say to make you go there? Ken? How couldn’t you see the trap they laid for you?’

Ken cleared his throat and then hoarsely croaked, ‘They promised an interview. I thought I could explain something about our work. About...’ He broke off, unable to go on.

‘Oh, come on! Nobody in the TV world is interested in *science*! Why would they want you to talk about scientific experiments on a Sunday evening, prime time?’

Jenny scrutinized Ken’s face, incredulous about such naivety.

‘How would I know,’ Ken pleaded. ‘I’d never even heard of that stupid program. For all I know, people *do* watch TV programs on Sunday nights to better themselves; to *learn* something!’

Jenny shook her head. She was at a loss for words in the face of such unworldliness. ‘All they’re interested in, Ken, is how many people watch their show. And the more uproar, the better for them. No matter all the casualties they cause.’

Ken gazed at the table. ‘So, I’m a casualty now?’

‘You damn sure are, Ken. Wake up! How do you think the university will like this?’

Ken sighed. ‘I’m to meet Dean Wilkinson at nine this morning.’ He looked up at Jenny. ‘He called me last night, saying I’m suspended. After that, I couldn’t face anything else and switched off my phone.’

‘Which I noticed,’ Jenny answered dryly.

She sat down next to Ken and took his hands.

‘What *did* you think, Ken, going there? What did you want to say on TV that couldn’t be left unsaid?’

Ken tried to think of the day before, the day this Ben so-and-so had called him. What, again, was it that made him decide to appear on the news show?

‘It was just that they approached me so nicely. Like...as if they were really interested in me. Interested in my take on this matter of alleged abuse. And in science. Yes, particularly in science. They asked my expert’s opinion about how scientific discoveries are made. Or at least, that’s how I interpreted it.’

Ken looked in Jenny’s direction, almost beseeching her for approval. ‘I guess I let myself be carried away. The way I interpreted it, I thought they wanted to hear how exciting science can be and how fascinating it is. How much our discoveries can *mean* for mankind. For ordinary people, you know. Ordinary people who now all take it for granted when their infections are cured...when they’re successfully treated for cancer. Who find it a no-brainer we can develop new and effective vaccines almost overnight. But all those major advances are based on sound scientific work! Years and years of work! I ... I just wanted to convey that message. I think that was it...?’ His voice trailed off.

Jenny just slowly shook her head and seemed lost in thought.

In the end, she squeezed Ken’s hands, saying, ‘Of course, that’s all perfectly true, Ken. You just chose the wrong program to try and say that.’

They had eaten their breakfast in silence, each musing about what had happened—and what was still to happen. After shaving and dressing, Ken walked over to the dean’s office to hear the verdict.

Now, on his way back home he knew it. Or, at least, he was told to stay out of everybody’s way and wait until

some external committee reached a conclusion about his case.

When he got home again, Jenny was still awake, having stayed up just this once to hear how Ken had fared. They shared a hot drink—coffee for Ken and just boiled water for Jenny—and then Jenny went off to sleep.

That had been three weeks ago. Ever since he had received that uppercut in the dean's office, he just spent his days at home.

Initially, some local newspapers and a few TV and radio programs followed up on the commotion, indignant at how universities' professors treated their personnel; and their unacceptable abuse. They had either used that earlier picture of him, the one with the creepy half-shut eyes' look, as if someone had just caught him while burgling, or printed a still of the TV show, with him looking like a rabbit caught in the headlights, eyes wide open. A sweating rabbit with shiny patches on its forehead.

They had quoted all kinds of representatives from student and postdoc organizations who claimed that his attitude and hubris were the rule rather than the exception in the world of scientific superstars. And there were some quotes from junior scientists—not from his department; all of them people he had never even met, from entirely different disciplines—who confirmed that they fully recognized these practices. And that change was urgently needed, that we needed to rid ourselves of these “dinosaurs”, of these “old-school professors”, who all still believed in the system as it had been a hundred years ago when authority came automatically with one's position, but that this was no longer acceptable in the 21st century. And so on.

He had only glanced at a few of these articles in his local newspaper and, of course, couldn't miss the headlines of the IOU, screaming about the outrage of it all for several

weeks and how they had been the first to uncover these terrible practices.

Now, three weeks later, it had died down, helped fortunately—well, unfortunately for those involved—by a disastrous forest fire that had destroyed over two thousand acres of land and required the evacuation of hundreds of people. And on the caravan moved; on to the next disaster. What had astounded Ken was the complete silence from his colleagues—his fellow professors. It had seemed as if most of them had always agreed with him when he spoke up during Faculty Hours or other meetings related to science or science policy. Of course, there were always those who held a different opinion, to which they were completely entitled as far as Ken was concerned. He didn't agree, of course, but in scientific discourse, it was allowed—no, even helpful—to have different opinions in the room: That only sharpened the mind.

But none of the more outspoken senior staff members who had always thought along the same lines as Ken, such as Brendon O'Haley, had said anything to Ken's defense. At best, they had featured in articles, for instance, in the IOU, as refusing to comment on the matter, which might be interpreted in the sense that they did agree with Ken but chose not to say so in fear of becoming the next victim. This inevitably allowed the ones who opposed his view to ventilate their opinion in the IOU freely—the ones who now pleaded for a more egalitarian, less hierarchical, and more appreciative culture. All this resulted in an entirely biased view, as far as Ken was concerned. The fact that none of these advocates of “science becoming a more enjoyable profession” internationally held a high profile was proof of his view that it took all one's energy and dedication to make a difference.

So, three weeks after the start of his suspension, Ken was still in limbo, not knowing when he would be approached

by this external investigation committee or whom they had interviewed.

How could he spend his days in a somewhat useful way? For a start, he had decided—already that first day, when he was sent home by Dean Wilkinson—to write a comprehensive literature review summarizing the advancements of the past decade in his field. That was, at least, something he could do from home. He had been invited for such a literature review some months ago by a prestigious journal, but so far, he had neither declined nor accepted it. Normally, he declined such invitations right away because he considered it a waste of his time to summarize what had been done in the past rather than contribute to what still needed to be discovered. But in this case, confined to his desk at home with only access to the international literature rather than experimental data, he would accept and work on the review. He emailed the Editor-in-Chief of the journal, someone in the UK, who answered immediately that he was overjoyed that Ken had decided to accept the invitation. Apparently, the news about his alleged abuse had not reached the UK yet. Already during the first week, he realized that he needed some information that was sitting on his desk at work—some notes he had made during one of the conferences he had recently visited and relevant to the subject of the review.

Could he call Joyce and ask her to send him the information?

He decided to take the chance. After all, these were *his* notes! Wasn't it downright ridiculous that he couldn't even retrieve them?

'Ken?!' Joyce exclaimed his name when she noticed it on her cell phone.

‘I’m sorry, Joyce.’ He had almost automatically lowered his voice, befitting the illicit action. ‘I know I’m not supposed to call you.’

‘And I am not supposed to answer you,’ she said, laughing airily.

Ken was relieved she took it so lightly.

‘It’s just that there are some notes on my desk...I need them here, at home. I believe they are on top of the pile on the left side of my desk. And if not, it shouldn’t be hard to find them. They’re jotted on a yellow notepad, just three or four pages of scribbles.’ He explained a few more details to make it easy for Joyce to find what he was trying to retrieve.

‘Tell you what, Ken. I’ll put everything on your desk in a box and have it sent over to your home. You might need a few more things in the coming weeks?’

‘That would be great, Joyce. Thanks.’ He hesitated and continued, ‘What happened to all my appointments?’

‘All canceled, Ken. I sent everyone a brief note that, due to personal matters, you won’t be able to attend business meetings, lectures, the lot—for the next four weeks, at least. We’ll see what’s going to happen after that.’

Ken sighed. His lectures were canceled; there were no business meetings. This was serious, he had seldom canceled any meeting or talk.

‘And how about the people in the lab? Are they taken care of?’

‘Sorry, Ken. That’s where I need to draw the line. I’m not allowed to discuss any of that with you.’ She waited for a few seconds and then said once more, ‘I am sorry. About everything.’ And then disconnected.

Writing the review had been a challenge. Ken had to force himself to stay focused. He doggedly went to his study every morning at eight o’clock, looking at his laptop to read the literature and compile an outline for the review. It

didn't go nearly as fast as he was used to, his mind wandering all the time to what had happened. Where had it gone wrong? How could he have acted differently?

At first, he was furious, shouting in the confinement of his study—and for nobody to hear—that they didn't understand how the system worked. All he had aspired to was to run a world-class lab where everyone—including himself—had to give their all: their brightness, eagerness; their dedication, and their time. Basically, their life! That was how he had worked himself for his entire life. It was how *all* the leading groups worked.

He had always explained to his students and postdocs that if they only gave 99% of what they could deliver and then failed, they would be left with a gnawing conscience that they could have done better. Whereas if you went for it completely, a full 100%, or rather, more than that, and failed, well, in that case, there was no one to blame; the challenge had simply been unsurmountable. It was exactly this attitude that had made the difference between their lab succeeding and others failing. Ken was convinced of it. This was the reason why they invariably were ahead of the others; submitted more complete manuscripts that were generally accepted with only a few comments. The reason why people coming from this lab were respected and automatically at an advantage when they applied for their next job.

And now, for some reason and to his utter astonishment and incomprehension, all this was questioned. People claimed they wanted to work fewer hours. Being able to leave for home at 5 pm was something he had always linked to the position of a technician or someone with an administrative job but not to the life of a scientist! Suddenly, PhD students and postdocs wanted the freedom to follow up on their own ideas at a stage where they

couldn't possibly oversee the caveats. They wanted to consider their work fun rather than something they were paid for and expected to deliver the best possible product. How on earth could one be competitive with such an attitude?

He maintained that he had done his junior group members a favor by being so demanding and expectant. It had prepared them for a future where they faced a lot more pressure.

Ken himself had been extremely successful in the past few years but he vividly remembered earlier days when he had to struggle to supply his lab with money for whatever experimental work they wanted to carry out—when he still had to fight to get his papers published, going from the top-tier journals to the second-best level, and if that failed even a step lower, all the time knowing very well that the journals in which one published were important for obtaining the next grant; for getting a tenured position, or to afford oneself time for research rather than giving tiresome classes to undergraduate students. He remembered every detail of that hard journey and therefore valued the comparative luxury of not having to continuously worry about all these issues, a luxury in the slipstream of which his junior staff also fared well.

It was precisely because he knew the system so well that he couldn't get his head around the complaints that had been filed. Why would all this be considered an unsafe working environment? And why had none of his employees warned him that they didn't like the way they worked in the lab?

He kept turning the matter around and around, not discerning any situation where he had failed, not seeing how he could have treated people differently.

It was hopeless. And useless, of course. He would have to sit and wait. Hopefully, this external committee that was

now installed would be prepared to take his view into account. The chairwoman had already contacted him, announcing that they would organize a hearing in a month, allowing Ken to explain his arguments. After this conversation over the phone, Ken even considered putting it all on paper. Since his experience in the studio, where the interviewer didn't allow him to follow his own line of reasoning, interrupting him all the time, he had learned his lesson. Such an uninviting atmosphere only highlighted some aspects, not giving due attention to all aspects of *his* point of view.

His outrage had died down somewhat, leaving him...drained? Deflated? Perhaps that was the best word to express his mood. There was no rage, no solution, no insight. Just a big void and a complete loss of energy where, in former days, he kept his confidence based on all his experience in how to play the system.

Every morning at 8 am he sat at his computer and worked as much as he could on his literature review until 10:30 am when he went for his daily run. These days, he ran at a later moment of the day, not choosing his usual track.

Right after the news of his suspension hit the community like a bombshell, he had inevitably met many colleagues during his regular run who all seemed uneasy about how to address him. Some didn't greet him at all, while others just waved and then quickly ran in another direction. He also didn't quite know how to respond. He couldn't stop and talk about university matters, as that was considered off-limits in the letter he had been handed by the dean. So that reduced one to talking about the weather or whatever trivial matter that neither interested him nor his colleagues.

It was hard enough living in this neighborhood with all the university-sponsored houses. His neighbor on the left worked in the School of Law; the one on the right was

somewhere high up in the university administration. The place was infested by university employees, who all knew about his downfall.

So, he just took his car to a distant running track, choosing a time of day when most people he knew were at work.

And it was not just him! Jenny also suffered in her own way. Only the other day, she had returned from doing the weekly shopping to say, exasperated, that people she met in the supermarket—people she didn't even know—either approached her with pity, asking how she was holding up or cut her dead entirely, quickly moving to another aisle when they noticed her from a distance.

'I even considered ordering our groceries online,' she exclaimed to Ken. 'But I'll be damned if these stupid people chase me from the supermarket I like to visit! No way!'

Ken felt backed up by her pride and fighting spirit. But at the same time, he was depressed that it had come to a point that even Jenny was condemned and that he had completely failed her. In his darkest moments, he even wondered if she would stand by him, particularly if the report from the committee would condemn him—if he was fired... After all, why would she stay? Didn't she choose him all those years back because he was a winner and not a loser? They had never discussed it, but this is how *he* would feel in her place.

They were almost treated as lepers. But even lepers, in the old days, had each other to talk to, while he was left to himself and not allowed to talk to anyone from the university. Or colleagues from abroad, for that matter. He was excommunicated, at least from science.

How do people recover from such a situation, he wondered. *Was* there any recovery possible?

It suddenly brought back the memory of this colleague, Reginald Sutherland, who some three years ago had been accused of sexual harassment and had unobtrusively left the university. The investigation into Reg's case had come up with an undecided verdict about his alleged harassment, not finding explicit evidence of him sexually harassing women yet concluding at the same time that he should have known better and at least behaved in a more appropriate, wiser manner on several occasions. Reg had not waited for the verdict and his possible dismissal but left the university on his own account. As Ken recalled, Reg had accepted a professorship at a university with much lower esteem in another state, which was happy to recruit him, no questions asked.

Ken had not bothered to think about this grubby situation at the time. Well, to be honest, he hadn't taken any position in the matter. He had preferred to stay on the sidelines, greeting Reg when he ran into him on campus but carefully avoiding the discussion with colleagues. He now wondered what Reg had gone through, what it had meant to him personally.

After some consideration, he decided to give him a call and find out more details, somewhat belatedly.

It was 2:15 pm here, so it would be 5:15 pm where Reg dwelled. That sounded about the right time of the day—too late to be tied up in any teaching obligation or staff meeting and too early to have left for the day.

He searched the internet for Reg's contact details and found phone numbers for what seemed to be his work address and his cell phone. He chose the latter, reasoning that Reg was more likely to pick up his cell phone, even if he was at work. He briefly considered whether calling Reginald would be allowed according to the dean's stipulations, but, really, this was more of a private call than anything related to work, wasn't it?

Ken tapped the number into his phone.

‘Hello?’ Reg answered almost immediately.

Ken hesitated for a moment, not knowing exactly how to start. ‘Is this Reg? Reginald Sutherfield?’

‘The same. Who’s this?’

‘Ken. Kenneth Bird.’ And then adding, after some thought, ‘From the old days.’

‘Ken! Man! What a surprise! How are *you* doing?’ Reg chuckled. ‘Reading from the newspapers, not too well, I suppose?’

Ken assented. ‘Not great.’ Good Lord, another person who had seen all the news coverage.

‘Oh, don’t you worry too much about it, Ken. It’ll blow over, you know,’ Reg said, sounding rather dismissive.

‘Maybe,’ Ken answered carefully. ‘Right now, I’m working from home. They suspended me during the external investigation. So...,’ his voice trailed off.

‘So, you thought: Now that I’m suspended, how about this other poor bugger that was chased away years ago?’

‘Not really. Well...maybe a bit. Although our cases are different,’ Ken hastened to say.

‘I bet you. Can’t see *you* being accused of sexual harassment. Although one is sometimes surprised to find out...’

‘That’s not the issue,’ Ken interrupted him quickly. And then followed up, after a brief pause, ‘But the result is the same: I’m sent home. And treated like the pariah of the campus.’

‘Jeez, Ken. I’m sorry to hear that. No, in all honesty, it must feel terrible. Especially since you were the shining example of success—a superstar! That makes the situation more poignant.’

Ken made a noncommittal noise, not wanting to discuss which kind of harassment was considered to be worse. ‘I

was just wondering how you're doing right now. It was all...how many years... three years ago?’

‘It was almost five years ago, to be precise. Time flies. But in answer to your question: I'm doing great!’ Reginal chuckled. ‘Right now, I'm sitting on my deck, drinking a glass of wine. And in an hour or so, my wife—my *second* wife—will serve a delicious meal because, quite apart from everything else, she's a wonderful cook too. But seriously, I'm doing just fine.’

Ken was taken aback somewhat by someone sipping wine on his deck at 5:15 pm. Did that mean the working day was over already?

Reg continued. ‘I wasn't so great all the time, of course. In fact, at first, I was rather depressed. Starting at this state university was not exactly by choice. But, as it turned out, it was a blessing in disguise. Life's so much more relaxed over here. I definitely stepped out of the rat race, Ken. And as I can now wholeheartedly profess: Without any regret! Mind you, I'm still adamant that our scientific work is thorough and adheres to the highest quality standards. But we just produce it at a slower pace and publish in less picky journals than the top-tier ones.’

‘Is that so?’ Ken asked with some wonder in his voice. ‘Absolutely! And you know what? I found out that not only does the world keep turning, but it adds tremendously to my quality of life. My life *and* that of the youngsters in the lab.’

Ken heard some muffled sounds in the background.

‘Sorry, Ken, that's Jacky, my wife, announcing she'll be at our pool in case I need her.’

‘So, what happened when you were accused at the time? Weren't you...weren't you outraged?’

‘Of course! I've known my moments of rage, plenty of them. I remember when I heard that this journalist who had covered my “case” and made a documentary about it

won a prize... God damn, can you *believe* it? I was just part of a scheme to further his career.'

Reg laughed. 'Well, *now* I can laugh about it, but back then... Fortunately, that happened a year after hell broke loose, so it didn't bother me as much as it would've when I was kicked out. But when that guy won a prize...that was one of the darkest moments in my life. That, and being shunned and cut off by most of my colleagues. That was also something I can't say I enjoyed.'

'And all very unfairly, I suppose?'

'Mmm. I had a good deal of time to think about that question. To be honest, Ken, I had it waiting for me. I'd sometimes made some pretty stupid remarks; even I couldn't deny that. It's like always driving a hundred miles on a road with a 65-mile speed limit—one day you'll get caught by the cops, knowing that you could, no, should have been caught numerous times before. Many of the accusations at the time were incorrect. But some were right, of course. I simply should've been more careful in the way I behaved. Well, careful is not the correct word; that sounds like I should've done it more secretly. Perhaps it's better to say I should have been more considerate about how other people, mostly women in my case, experienced what I said...that some of my jokes weren't so funny for them. Inappropriate. I must confess that this is the one thing the entire affair taught me: To be more aware of how my behavior affects others. And I don't mean that romantically; I'm not kidding. In the professional world, I mean.'

Reg waited a few moments before proceeding. 'Anyhow, in my case, it wasn't just work-related behavior. I wasn't exactly the picture of marital faith, too. Although I never deceived my first wife with anyone she knew. I just played around a bit during conferences, you know?'

Ken didn't answer. He abhorred men who had extramarital sex during conferences just because there was an opportunity. His way of dealing with that sort of knowledge about some of his colleagues was just to ignore it.

Reg went on, unaware of Ken's feelings on the matter. 'My first wife divorced me shortly after I got this new job. She was appalled by the mere idea of moving over here and frankly couldn't stand all the negativity surrounding my case. Or, more precisely, I guess she just couldn't stand *me* any longer. It was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. But really, the camel's back had been broken for years already. I philandered copiously. Jill and I were just living two different lives. Anyhow, when I moved over to this place, I was rather depressed in the beginning. But then, I slowly started to truly enjoy the work in the lab. All these eager young folks around me who enjoy being tutored by me. You know, just regular, young students who are not so uptight about being at the top of their class or straining to be a future MIT or Harvard professor.

And what really made the difference was when I met Jacky, an incredibly nice and beautiful postdoc in a neighboring lab. We started dating, and the end of it is that we got married half a year ago.'

It sounded like Reg was indeed a happy person. But perhaps he was right—his downfall hadn't been as deep as Ken's, although probably more disgraceful.

'Does it still make a difference in your life, you know...that case from five years ago? Do people still hold it against you?'

'Perhaps they do, perhaps they don't. But I move in different circles now, Ken. I deliberately choose people I like to collaborate with—people whose company I truly enjoy. I don't care at all what their *position* is because I

don't need anyone's services anymore to rise to fame. I'm perfectly fine where I am.'

Reg hesitated for a brief moment. 'Don't forget what I said at the beginning, Ken: It'll blow over. Right now, you may think you'll never get on your feet again and that life will never smile at you as before. But it will. These journalists...their span of attention is a matter of days. It's not like us scientists, who spend years and years on the same subject. Forget it. Once they've covered your case, they rush to the next; although there are some good exceptions. And once the case is no longer dredged up all the time in the newspapers, people start to forget. It may take a year, maybe two years...and then there will be a layer of dust on whatever they accuse you of, and people will start wondering what all the fuss was about. Just sit it out and wait for things to normalize. Well, that...and seek help to adjust your behavior.'

Ken wasn't so sure that his reputation would ever be restored. But then, Reg was the expert; he had experienced it all himself.

Ken sighed. 'Thanks, Reg. I could do with some words of hope. It's good to hear you're a happy man. You sound like it. Good for you.'

'I am! Well, Ken, just give me a call any time you want. There's not much I can do for you, not from where I'm employed right now. Unless you would like to come here too...?' Reg laughed. 'But if it's of any help, I can attest that it won't last forever. And that one can change. So, if you need cheering up, call me.'

They exchanged a few more words and then disconnected. Did he feel relieved by this call? Did Reg's story truly cheer him up?

Somehow, the prospect of ending up at a third-rate university made his future look grim, no matter the

possibility of having a beautiful young wife and a glass of wine on the deck in the late afternoon.

For a long time, Ken sat at his desk, his elbows on the tabletop and his head resting in both hands. How the tables had turned compared to only a few months ago...

Three days later, on Thursday morning, Ken sat in front of his laptop. It was quiet in the house. Jenny had just returned from her night shift and gone to bed right after breakfast.

He opened his email box. These days, the number of messages was very low compared to what he had been used to. No more invitations for lectures; the number of requests to review a manuscript or a grant proposal had also decreased drastically. He figured that Joyce dealt with most of these messages and deleted them as soon as she had answered them so that he, Ken, didn't even notice any emails when he opened his email box once per day, early in the morning.

This morning, though, a message from the Lieberman Foundation had just come in. He opened the message.

Dear Dr. Bird, we are approaching you on a delicate matter.

Some months ago, you were unofficially informed that the jury of the Lieberman Prize had advised the Foundation to bestow this year's Lieberman Prize on you.

We sincerely regret to inform you that, after careful consideration, the Lieberman Foundation has decided not to follow the advice of the jury.

We are convinced that, given the very uncertain circumstances regarding your position, you will understand our decision.

Once again, we regret to inform you of this disappointing news.

The message was signed by the director of the Lieberman Foundation.

Somehow, this one email drove home to Ken the message that he was now officially a *persona non grata*, more so than anything else that had happened to him over the past few weeks.

He had won the Lieberman Prize for his work! Not for how he treated people, damn it! He had *deserved* the prize, as Michele Vincenzo had assured him. His *work* deserved to be celebrated; this was not about him as a *person*!

He slumped back in his chair. He felt utterly defeated. No, he felt naked. Stripped from his exterior, the surface that, so far, held him together.

How could they withhold him this prize, for God's sake? Next, he would be robbed of his membership of the National Academy of Sciences! His grants could be discontinued, his honorary memberships in societies taken away... Where did it end? How could people completely forget what he had contributed to science? All this solid knowledge that others built their work on. The basis for future treatments, from which thousands, hundreds of thousands, worldwide could benefit?

Of course, nobody knew that he had won the Lieberman Prize. So, he was spared the public disgrace of first announcing his accolade and then confessing that, after all, the Foundation no longer considered him a suitable winner. Basically, no harm was done. Except that he

wouldn't receive the prize! This stepping stone to the Nobel Prize...

It dawned on him that maybe he would never again be acknowledged for his scientific contributions just because something unforgivable was attached to his name. He knew exactly how such things worked because he had been a member of many juries himself. All it took was for one of the jury members to raise an eyebrow when a candidate was discussed; just a sigh was sufficient to kill the candidacy. Hadn't he done so himself occasionally when a candidate was discussed whose work he didn't trust? Just remarking offhandedly that not everyone could reproduce his or her work was sufficient to remove the candidate from the shortlist. And with reason, he was prepared to defend his action in every single case he could remember.

And now *he* was the victim, or at least, that was how it felt.

Ken struggled on for several more weeks in anticipation of the hearing with the committee that was planned at the end of June, something he wasn't looking forward to. Increasingly, he spent his time on his written defense rather than working on the planned literature review. He simply couldn't focus on the latter, with the looming prospect of this hearing.

What drove him over the edge, though, was something that seemed quite innocent from the outside.

A few days before the hearing, he checked his emails early in the morning. It was completely quiet in the house, as Jenny had just left for a few days to visit Brenda, taking some relief from the situation around Ken that also affected her.

One of the few messages that Joyce hadn't removed was a newsletter from the society that had organized the

conference in Beijing earlier this year. God, that seemed ages ago, Ken reminisced. At the time, he was completely unaware of the disaster waiting for him. He was still a superstar, with people waiting at the airport to pick him up and attend to his every wish. The main theater of the convention center was packed when he delivered his keynote address. He had taken it all for granted, unaware that it could evaporate overnight.

Unsuspecting, he now opened the newsletter and was almost immediately drawn to a brief entry titled “Lieberman Prize”. Although the item encompassed only a few lines, its content left him as if he were struck by lightning.

The Lieberman Foundation has just announced that this year’s prize will be awarded to Professor Maria Bordelli, our newly appointed Chair of the Program Committee. Maria Bordelli is the 40th winner of the Liebermann Prize, one of the highest distinctions in our field. She is the first woman ever to be awarded this highly prestigious award. We all congratulate Maria Bordelli on this well-deserved recognition of her outstanding work!

Ken uttered a yelp, which he hardly recognized as coming from himself.

Maria Bordelli! No one in his right mind could consider her work outstanding! He even felt insulted that *his* work had ever been considered to be in the same league as that of the Bordelli group and had been judged by the same

jury members who first thought that Ken was the deserving winner and, when the Foundation vetoed that, apparently just moved to number two on the list, Maria Bordelli. The same Bordelli whose work had been challenged by others and was seriously doubted by some, including himself.

When his thoughts reached this point, he stood up suddenly, causing his chair to tumble on the floor.

Ken's face was white with rage—a blind rage he could no longer contain.

It was just unbelievable!

He walked to the kitchen, and upon arriving there, he didn't remember why he had gone there in the first place. He turned and stalked back to his study.

Suddenly, he stopped in the middle of his pacing through the house.

He had to get away!

He had to get away from this stifling home, this place so close to the university—away from his useless work on a literature review that he couldn't concentrate on anyway, from the defense he had written. A defense for what?

Would anyone listen?!

He needed to be far away from it all to regain some order in his head and sort things out.

Why wait for the report of this external investigation committee? Wasn't he doomed already? What difference did it make whatever he had to say to them?

He ran up the stairs, took a bag from his closet, and threw in some clothes. He marched into the bathroom, picked up his shaving set, a toothbrush, and toothpaste, returned to the bedroom, and crammed everything in the bag.

With the bag slung over his shoulder, he ran down the stairs, two steps at a time, and walked into the kitchen. He grabbed a large bottle of water and some food from the fridge and jammed them on top of his clothes.

He was already on his way out to the carport when he retraced his steps, scanning the kitchen for a piece of paper and a pen. He found them on the counter, next to the fridge, and scribbled:

“I have gone off”.

He couldn't leave without informing Jenny. She would return the day after tomorrow. After thinking for a moment, he added, “I'll be fine!”

He didn't want her to start a search for him. He just wanted to be left alone for a while. Far away. And think.

Chapter VII

Ken headed northeast with a vague idea to drive to the small mountain cabin they owned near Lake Tahoe. It was a tiny place devoid of any comfort or facilities, with only one solar panel to generate some electricity during the day. The internet was abysmal, so he never came near the place because he couldn't get any work done there. Jenny and Brenda usually spent a week there during the summer or, at least, did so when Brenda was still in high school and had long summer breaks. It was too uncomfortable for the winter, so the cabin had remained unused since last September when Jenny went over during a spell of beautiful weather and left the place ready for its winter slumber.

But when Ken passed Sacramento, he decided otherwise. Wouldn't their cabin be the first place Jenny would go to look for him? He simply couldn't face seeing her right now. He wanted to be away, somewhere where people didn't bother to read newspapers about what happened on the West Coast. He wanted to hide in the remotest place in the world, where he would be left to himself.

Just silence so that he could look back and rethink his life. And, only when he felt up to it, look forward again. Perhaps.

Where would he go? Wyoming? The Dakotas? These were places he had seldom visited. He couldn't even recall ever having been in South Dakota. What was in South Dakota apart from the Indian Reservations? Maybe that was a good place to go.

Well, for the moment, he would just head east—eventually, perhaps northeast.

He passed the exit to Lake Tahoe and crossed the border with Nevada. After some time, he stopped at a gas station some forty miles past Reno, in the middle of nowhere, with a ridge of dry hills in the background. Next to the station was a small market where he bought more bottles of water, some sodas, and food—enough to last him the day and, if necessary, the night.

The landscape he drove through was barren, interrupted only here and there by billboards, a few dismal business enterprises, and ranches. The stormy thoughts that had driven him from home slowly subsided to be replaced by a dull sort of nothingness. He couldn't concentrate on anything while driving, let alone interpret anything that had happened to him recently. It all blended into a soup of rage and uneasiness that, these days, never left him. All he knew was that he was "finished", as Dean Wilkinson had said loud and clearly to him that night, directly after the TV show.

At some point in the afternoon, he pulled up in a car park because he almost fell asleep after driving for hours through this uneventful landscape. He lay down in the backseat, secured the doors of his car, and closed his eyes. When he woke again, it was almost dark. He relieved himself in the toilet at the far end of the car park, walked back, and drained a soda. He ate some of the snacks he had bought, realizing he hadn't eaten much today.

It was still too early to stop for the night, so after throwing the empty soda can into the garbage bin at the parking lot, he started the engine and continued his journey.

Around 9:30 pm, he decided to stop in a small city next to the highway, which for miles had been pre-announced on billboards, boasting its casinos. He drove to a motel that looked reasonable, or at least clean, and checked in. The lady at the desk mentioned that if he cared for dinner, he

could go to a casino only a few hundred yards from the motel; their restaurant was open until midnight.

Ken first went to his room, not very hungry after the earlier snacks in the car. He slumped on the queen-sized bed and switched on the TV, zapping through the channels. Nothing, only the usual shit. Just commercials. When, on one of the channels, he landed in the middle of a news show very similar to the one where his “case” had been featured, he immediately turned off the TV. It was too painful a reminder of his clumsy appearance.

Now what? He realized he hadn’t packed anything to read in his bag. Well, he couldn’t focus on any book or journal anyway. He did bring his laptop with him, so he might browse the internet. But he didn’t feel up to it. A laptop meant work, and work meant misery. If he hadn’t been able to work productively at home, how would he be able to do so here?

He rested on his bed for half an hour, many thoughts drifting through his head.

What did ordinary people do in the evening? He guessed very few people would spend their time working in the evening, as he had done most of his life. So, if they didn’t watch TV, either the regular channels or one of the pay channels, what did they do? Sit on the couch and talk to each other? Party? Go to a bar? He had no clue, really. Thinking of a bar, though, reminded him of the casino close by, where they still served food until midnight. Ken heaved himself from the bed and took his car keys. He didn’t know where exactly the casino was, so he would go by car, as it was pitch dark outside. He started the engine and drove around, looking for a casino. It so happened that one of them was indeed only a few hundred yards away from the motel. He parked his car again in the same parking lot where it had been, walked over to the casino, and entered the place.

It was only the second time in his life Ken visited a casino; the first time had been when he attended a conference in Vegas, and the evening party was organized in one of the large casinos on the Strip.

Inside, he slowly walked past the slot machines, with people seated in front of them who kept trying to win the jackpot. It was amazing to see the number of people still up at this hour of the night and in this far-off place...

The noise and flickering lights made him feel dizzy. Now and then, a loud bell rang when someone had been successful in winning something.

Ken walked over to someone belonging to the place and asked for the restaurant.

After the incredibly noisy hall he had walked through upon entering the casino, the restaurant was comparatively quiet. Its darkness was somehow soothing: He couldn't see much, and nobody could see him. At the counter, he ordered a steak and a beer.

After his meal, he strolled through the casino again, now in a quieter part where people seated at tables played poker or blackjack. He stood watching one of the tables, wondering if there was any pattern in how the cards were dealt. He had read somewhere that this was one of the few games where mathematics could help one win, provided one played for quite a while. It was a matter of strategy—keeping track of the cards. And some luck, of course.

When he had been watching the players for about fifteen minutes, a hefty man approached him, first looking at him from a few feet away and then walking over to him.

'Anything of your interest, mister,' the man asked, eyeing Ken from head to toe.

Ken looked up in surprise.

'Nothing in particular,' he answered politely, somewhat intimidated by the man's size.

‘In that case, you better move on,’ the man suggested, closing in on Ken.

Since the man didn’t exactly exude an amiable vibe, Ken thought it wise to follow up on this suggestion.

He walked over to another table and watched the players there for a minute, just to show the man that he wouldn’t let himself be chased away that easily. Then, he slowly made for the exit of the casino.

What a horrible place. He simply wasn’t fit for such entertainment. He quickly crossed the parking lot in the dark, looking several times over his shoulder to see if anyone was trailing him from the casino. Apart from some regular guests leaving the place, the car park remained silent, though.

When Ken reached his room, it was already past midnight. He felt exhausted. He had been up since seven in the morning, driving for many hours.

He felt so lost. Literally, being hundreds of miles removed from home. But, also, more generally, in his life.

Early the following day, Ken woke with a splitting headache. Maybe it was the rather stuffy room and the lack of oxygen? He realized he hadn’t brought any painkillers with him, so he first drove to a drugstore to buy some. On the way back, he bought a sandwich and coffee from a takeaway.

‘Latte macchiato, please?’

The guy behind the counter laughed at his question. ‘We don’t sell fancy stuff like that. Coffee or coffee!’

And so, it was a 12-ounce cup filled to the rim with black coffee.

In his room, Ken swallowed two pills from the strip and ate his breakfast, looking distractedly at the weather

channel on the TV set, which he had switched on with the volume turned down to have something to watch. The channel constantly repeated the same images projected on a map of the district, first globally and then zooming in on various parts. A man standing at the side of the map was explaining how pressure systems were moving across the country, pointing with his hands at different parts of the map. As far as Ken could make out, he would have fair weather conditions today on his way eastward.

When he left the motel, resuming his journey toward an unknown destiny, it was still comparatively early.

Somewhere around Salt Lake City, he made a brief stop to refuel and buy himself some food. And then he drove on, still trying to figure out where he would eventually go, but for now, just following the same highway eastward.

Late in the afternoon, he stopped again, this time to try and find on his cell phone where he could stop for dinner.

He saw some entries about a good diner somewhere around Cheyenne—less than an hour from where he was now—people enthusiastically describing the friendly personnel and excellent food. OK, that's where he would head.

When he entered the place around 5:30 pm, it was overcrowded, with people all talking at the top of their voices, plates and silverware clattering in the background, and country music playing loudly.

He waited at the entrance to be seated.

'Don't you wait there, honey,' a waitress shouted at him in passing, carrying four large plates piled high with food.

'We're full. If you can find yourself an empty seat, be my guest.' And away she ran, receiving cheers from four heavysset men when she reached their table and placed the plates on it.

Ken noticed a small table occupied by a single woman at the very end of the room next to the restrooms. It had an empty seat.

He walked over to her table.

‘Excuse me,’ he addressed the woman, who was reading something on her cell phone while absentmindedly eating her meal. ‘Do you mind if I join you? This seems to be the only available seat in the entire place.’

She looked up and smiled. ‘Sure, sit down,’ she answered, invitingly pushing the chair from the table toward him.

Ken sat down and immediately felt awkward sharing a table with someone he didn’t know.

But the woman spontaneously put out her hand, saying, ‘Hi, I am Vivien. It’s so nice to meet you...?’

‘Ken,’ he answered, and they shook hands.

She was somewhere around fifty years old, he guessed, and slightly out of place in this diner full of what seemed to be truck drivers and noisy families with kids swarming around. She had a pleasant face, her blond hair with streaks of gray in it in a loose bun, some strands that had come loose gently dangling near her jaw.

The waitress arrived at their table, poured iced water into Ken’s glass, and took his order—ribs with BBQ sauce, the same as the woman was eating; it looked very tasty.

‘On your way east?’ he asked Vivien, trying to make light conversation while waiting for the ribs.

She looked at him and then smiled. ‘No, I’m on my way south. From Portland to Santa Fe in New Mexico. I’m doing the scenic tour,’ she added. ‘I’m between jobs, so I take my time.’

He looked at her quizzically, struck by their crossing paths, both not bound by their jobs. ‘Between jobs? You mean, you’re looking for a job right now?’

‘No. I mean literally what I said: I just finished one job and am about to start the next one a week from now. I

decided to drive my car over instead of selling it and buying a new one.'

'Oh. I see.' Nothing like his situation, then.

The waitress arrived, carrying several plates and placing one in front of him.

'Enjoy your meal, honey.' And off she went.

He took his knife and fork and asked politely what kind of job Vivien would start a week from now.

'I'm a librarian,' she answered. 'Nothing like the librarian you might think of—you know, lending books in the village library to local kids, etcetera. I'm a mix between a librarian and a computer wizard.'

He was surprised by the combination. 'How so?'

She waited a moment to answer his question while a hefty man puffed past Ken's chair on his way to the restrooms.

'I document special collections. Mostly very old books and manuscripts. Sometimes, they're owned by private collectors, but usually, they belong to some kind of knowledge institution or public body.

I describe the entire collection and try to make it publicly available to anyone who would like to browse the books.'

Ken looked up, interested. 'How old? I mean, these books?'

'Some go back to the Middle Ages. Mostly church books.'

'Aren't those books extremely fragile?' Ken remembered seeing the Book of Kells in Dublin as part of an organized treat for the conference keynote speakers. All kinds of precautions had been taken to protect the book from the elements.

'Sure. And that's where I come in. These days, we can digitalize all the information and put everything online. People can virtually leaf through the pages without ever touching the actual manuscript.' She clearly seemed enthusiastic about her work. 'And my work is to put it all on a website.'

Ken nodded to affirm that he understood and also to convey a sign of admiration.

Vivien continued, 'Each collection takes about a year, two at most, to be digitalized. I take on projects, and people can hire me. Once the project is completed, I move on to the next. See, I'm a bit of a roamer. I've never really cared to stay anywhere for more than a few years.'

She looked at Ken eating his meal and was briefly lost in thought. After a while, she resumed, 'The thing is, I'm not only between jobs but also between relationships.'

Ken immediately froze, alarmed. Good God, what did she think, him traveling alone? He felt a slight sweat break out under his shirt.

'My partner of ten years is not so adventurous, unlike myself. Doesn't like moving to another state every year...leaving all our friends behind, and renting yet another house. So, we broke up three months ago.' She mused, staring at the table for a moment, and then added, with a smile, 'Actually, it's so much better now. We'd been bickering about this for years, with me feeling guilty because we had to leave again while she was unhappy because she wanted to stay.'

She? Had he heard this correctly?

'And then, about five months ago, she met this other woman—someone who loves to stay at home! Who has lived her entire life in Oregon and wouldn't dream of ever leaving it. So, this is a much better solution. I'm truly relieved to see her happy again...happy in a way I could never achieve, even if I tried very hard.'

So, she had lived with a *woman*? Ken, of course, knew this happened, and some faculty members were known to have a same-sex relationship. But somehow, he had never freely discussed it with someone practicing it. Imagine, here he was, in Cheyenne, of all places, sharing tables

with a lesbian woman. Oddly though, it made him feel more relaxed in her company. Less guarded.

‘I’m sure I’ll find someone else,’ Vivien continued, oblivious to Ken’s thoughts. ‘There are many women out there, even in Santa Fe...although that’s not exactly the most obvious place to go and look for a partner. Well, we’ll see.’

She shrugged, smiled, and looked at Ken. ‘So, what brings you here, Ken?’

He had just finished his ribs and pushed his plate with the gnawed bones to the center of the table for the waitress to pick it up.

How would he answer? Truthfully—I’m on the run? Because that was what he was. How on earth could he explain it? Where to begin his story? It entailed his entire life!

And then, suddenly, and entirely to his surprise, he decided to tell Vivien. To confide in someone he had never seen before and would never see again. Wouldn’t that make it much easier than telling the whole sordid story to someone he knew and would have to face again? And so Ken started talking. At first, hesitantly, later more fluently, he told the entire story—what had brought him here. Not just the past months but all of it. His entire life. *His* version of it.

He talked for over an hour, occasionally interrupted by questions from Vivien, who asked him to explain some of the words he used as she was unfamiliar with the world of science.

It felt like a catharsis, a cleansing. Was he looking for absolution, like Catholics do?

He shared experiences he had never told anyone before—fears so private that he hadn’t even allowed himself to face them, but which were somehow no longer impossible to part with in this noisy and impersonal environment,

sitting opposite someone whom he had ended up with just by chance.

‘It all started before I was born, I suppose. My mother was dating a man. And got pregnant. He disappeared while she was in the middle of her pregnancy, leaving her to fend for herself. But that wasn’t the only reason she always ranted about him,’ Ken hastened to add. ‘It wasn’t just that he left her while she was four months’ pregnant. She loathed his character, or so I concluded much later. She resented the man and everything he personified.’

The waitress briefly interrupted him, clearing the plates. ‘Anything else for you two,’ she asked.

‘Not for the moment, thank you,’ Vivien answered. When the waitress had left, she gestured for Ken to continue.

‘From the moment I was born,’ Ken resumed, ‘my mother transferred this resentment onto me. My earliest memories are of her saying that I didn’t behave like a normal child. And that I was just like my father. I simply didn’t know any other world; *she* was my only reference.

And by the time I went to school, I had been deeply imprinted, I guess. Maybe beyond repair?

All I know is that I always kept myself to myself at school, convinced that I was an abnormal child, someone almost despicable. And the other children treated me like that, too. I suppose they were just reacting to my own insecurity and aloofness.

I never belonged to the group of popular kids and was not good at sports, apart perhaps from things that required endurance. And so, I ended up with the other kids who were equally unpopular, clumsy, stupid, socially inept, or whatever—the garbage bin of the class.’

Ken looked up. ‘I don’t say all this to sound pitiful. I didn’t feel sorry for myself at all in those days. It was just my life—the only life I knew. The popular kids in class

were simply out of reach; that's how it was. I didn't give it another thought.'

He waited for a few moments, absentmindedly following with his eyes people who went to or left the restrooms and passed his chair.

'And then my life changed. It must have been in seventh grade, not much later. The teacher one day told us about a science project, and because I was really interested, she gave me this book about the Wonders of Life. It was a rudimentary introduction to physics, chemistry, and biology, explaining the wonders of life, just like the title suggested.'

Ken smiled, remembering the book cover, which showed a roaring dinosaur and a couple of geodes.

'The book had a few formulas...and some background on how life on Earth had started, microorganisms, you know. Nothing special. And yet, that one book changed my life. It was as if I had lived in an alien world until then and had finally returned to where I belonged. I can't explain it in any other way. I started reading more books about biology and chemistry. Devoured them. The more abstract the content, the better I understood what it meant. It all made sense to me—not to anyone else around me, of course.'

Ken made a brief dismissive gesture with his hand. 'The fact that nobody else in my class had the slightest inkling of what it was all about only confirmed my feeling of coming home to a family—these books and formulas: *They* understood me, and I understood them, whereas everyone else spoke a different language and belonged to a world that wasn't mine.

This is what helped me survive in high school...be successful in my own modest way. I won a scholarship to one of the best universities, went there, and thrived. Well, scientifically speaking. For the rest, I was still a loner and didn't belong to my class. But finding solace in science

made up for everything else. I didn't mind spending all my time studying because science was the only thing I could relate to.'

He paused a moment, thinking of the boy, or rather, the young man he had been back then. He had felt hopeful, convinced that he could change the world; that he could solve some of the challenges in his world of science.

'At some point, I thought it might be a way to gain approval from my mother. But that was a mistake. She didn't seem to care. If anything, it strengthened her earlier conviction that I was just like my father, who had also been a scientist, or so I understood from what she disclosed. By then, she had started to become seriously interested in playing bridge, and she seemed to be far more excited by what happened in that community than anything I was up to.

Ken absentmindedly played with the plasticized menu on the table before he continued.

'I remember the moment—it almost came as a revelation—when I thought, for the first time, that maybe it was not just *me* failing my mother but that she was actually and objectively failing me, too. At least, the disappointment in each other was mutual. It relieved me of that continuously nagging belief of falling short I had always held for as long as I could remember. She was just...she wasn't a very nice person. It had been bad luck for me to be born into that single-parent family. Ah, well. These things happen...'

He sighed and stopped briefly when the waitress returned, asking if they had any other orders, no doubt hoping they would leave and no longer occupy the table. But Vivien sent her away in a friendly but determined manner.

'Go on, Ken. I keep wondering what brought you here.'

He looked up to see if she was making fun of him.

‘I’m getting there,’ he answered seriously. ‘It’s just a long story.’

Vivien nodded, encouraging him to continue.

‘I met Jenny, my wife, when I was in my early thirties. I was a junior staff member at Biochemistry at the time. I guess, no, I’m *convinced* that Jenny made me connect to what other people regard as a “normal” life. She took care of all those things I didn’t know how to deal with. In short, she took care of me.

I realized I was so lucky to have her. Which, of course, made me frantic about losing her again—about her dumping me.

But she didn’t. So, I slowly relaxed and settled into our relationship—into our marriage.

Only once was I scared of losing her. That was when she insisted on having a child. My earlier fears returned. I feared losing her attention and her taking care of me; that, from now on, she would lavish her attention exclusively on this baby, the child she was so keen on having.

But, you know...that never happened. As it turned out, Jenny could take care of both me and our daughter. And, even though I had no idea how to approach an infant, I became very fond of our child, our daughter Brenda. Who now returns her love and attention to me. So, in the end, I stood only to gain by it, having two lifelong companions rather than just one.’

Ken took a sip of water, the ice having melted by now.

‘I worked long hours and was very successful in my job. You have no idea how successful,’ he added, looking intently at Vivien to see if she paid attention. ‘Rising to the position of full professor. Getting an endowed chair, something considered to be honourous in our world, certainly when it’s at one of the most prestigious universities worldwide. I won numerous prizes and was asked for all kinds of honorary positions. The money kept

flowing in. I went all the way...up to finally receiving a prize that is only one step short of winning the Nobel Prize. In short, a scientific star...Except that I *didn't* receive that prize.

Out of the blue, my life fell apart.'

Ken went on to explain how several complaints had been filed against him about an unsafe working environment and applying too much work pressure. How he had been taken entirely by surprise, having thought all the time that he was helping people reach the next stage of their careers. He explained many details to Vivien about how the world of science worked. And how he had, perhaps naively, thought he could set things right by explaining his motives on a TV show. How that had blown up in his face, leading to his suspension—and, eventually, to him being cut off from everything that had determined his life so far. Ending up almost as a pariah. His colleagues seemed scared to interact with him for fear of being drawn into a case they wanted to stay out of. Or was it fear of being the next person to be scrutinized?

He told her a host of details to justify his behavior. To explain his well-meant intentions and how that was all misunderstood. And then revealed the final blow: The email he had opened yesterday morning—was it only yesterday?—announcing that the prestigious prize initially bestowed on him was now awarded to a woman from Milan, whom he didn't hold in high regard. The degrading feeling that he and she were considered to be in the same league, whereas he suspected the only reason she had been selected was that the Foundation wanted to see a *woman* win, after thirty-nine male awardees...

He didn't make it a secret that this had been the last straw, explaining why he had left home. Away from it all—from the world in which he had felt safe and celebrated, with

esteem that he had always considered well-deserved; things he had worked for his entire life!

‘And that’s why I’m here,’ he concluded, looking up at Vivien, uncertain how she would respond to his story.

‘Right now, I don’t know where to go. Just to a place where nobody pesters me with questions about work bullying. Where I can find relief and sort out all those questions that keep swarming in my head all the time: Where did I go wrong? Why didn’t the people who filed a complaint against me share my drive and eagerness for science, why is that suddenly called bullying? I don’t get it: What went wrong in my life?’

It had become dark outside. The diner was now less crowded than it had been an hour ago. The waitress left them alone, not eager anymore for others to take their seats.

When Ken remained silent, Vivien eventually commented.

‘Wow, Ken, that’s one hell of a story. I can understand you must feel upset. But that probably also holds for those who filed a complaint, don’t you think...?’

Ken ignored her comment. ‘You know, it just beats me where it went wrong. What did I do? All I wanted to achieve was to further my field and develop a new treatment for people who suffer from a devastating disease. And I’ve always strived to help young people in their careers... How can that be wrong?’

He looked at her, his eyes wide open, expressing his bewilderment.

Vivien observed Ken intently for some time.

Eventually, she sighed. ‘It’s not my world, Ken, so don’t expect any concrete answers from me. All I can do is reflect on what you’ve just told me...on what I’ve heard you say, which is only one side of the story, isn’t it?’

He nodded. ‘Of course. And I don’t expect any answers from you. Fair enough. These are just the sorts of

questions I keep asking myself. And to which I don't have any answers.'

Vivien put her elbows on the table and leaned slightly forward.

'You know, Ken...one thing that strikes me when listening to your account is that you didn't mention at any time what *other* people might have thought; as if you never took into account how your decisions might affect other people's lives. And then not according to *you* but to them. Did you ever consider inviting people around you to share *their* views?'

He looked up, blinking his eyes. 'What do you mean? We all know how the system works! In fact, I know this a lot better than they do. They've just *started* their careers. They need me to guide them through it. For example, my suggestion to this young PhD student to keep working during and after her pregnancy was only meant to *help* her. Help her stay in science! I *didn't* say "End of career", as some of my colleagues would have. Or let her sort things out for herself...No, I just pointed out that if she took, say, a four-month leave, she would probably not end up as one of the shared first authors on the paper. And because of that, she would never stand a chance of getting her first grant application funded.'

'Really? Or was it just inconvenient for you if she stayed home for a couple of months? And did it ever occur to you to ask her if she wanted this kind of help...did you leave her any other option? Did you invite her to share her thoughts—and would you have listened to any of her ideas?'

'Well, I don't think I specifically *asked* her. But she would lose so much valuable time, and in the current system, this means....'

Vivien held up her hand. ‘There you go again, Ken. It’s *her* career...her life, isn’t it?’ She looked at him musingly. ‘And what’s a few months in a lifetime?’

He remained silent.

Vivien continued. ‘And why do you assume everyone wants to work twelve hours per day or even more—fourteen, sixteen? Not just weekdays but weekends as well, all year long? Year after year. Just because that’s what you’ve been doing your entire life?’

He impatiently waved his hand. ‘What I’ve been doing is irrelevant. It’s just that the competition is so fierce... If you don’t give it your all...if you don’t put in so many hours, you don’t stand a chance... You know, other scientists do the same, so if you take it easy, you would be quickly outcompeted.’

‘Are you sure it isn’t a matter of social pressure; of living up to the implicit expectations? Besides, it sounds mind-numbing to me if you spend all your time at work. Why does the system ask for working round the clock? Doesn’t that kill all the creativity? At the very least, it kills the fun, I would think. If you always keep working, I would guess that nearly everyone eventually reaches a point where they no longer look forward to any work, at least not with enthusiasm. Eventually, most will want to get a clean break from it all; maybe leave the academic world altogether. If one doesn’t get a chance to escape sometimes, some will end up being burnout. But, hey,’ she shrugged, ‘I’m not the expert.’

Both remained silent for a few minutes. Then Vivien frowned. ‘Didn’t you say people left your lab?’

‘A few. More recently only this one guy. He couldn’t stand the heat, apparently.’

‘Who knows how many could only barely stand the heat but were afraid to say so? Did you ever ask them how many hours they would like to put in?’

‘Of course not. This is just the way it is. How can you ever become an expert if you’re not prepared to work long hours?’

‘I won’t deny that. But there might be a difference between doing so out of an innate drive because you *like* it or being *expected* to do so, the unuttered pressure; not just once but invariably, having little choice.’

Ken considered that. Maybe there was some truth in the fact that he had projected his drive onto other people. Did they have any choice except to live up to his expectations...or leave?

‘Perhaps we’ve been overdoing it a bit,’ he conceded, with a trace of doubt in his voice. It reminded him of a conversation with Jenny quite some time ago about his complete focus on work. How had she phrased it? Obsessive—wasn’t that the word she had used? He remembered that he had immediately dismissed the notion.

Ken sighed. ‘The problem is: If you want to stay successful in the current system, you can’t afford to slack off. Never!’

Vivien reacted impatiently. ‘This is about the fifth time over the past hours that I’ve heard you say the system asks for this or that. Listen, Ken, I’m a complete outsider, but in my view, the system is *not* an autonomous thing. It is the *people* who make a system. In your case, people like you, the leading scientists. If you define the rules differently, your world might lose some of its unpleasant aspects. And in the long run, that might even be more productive—it seems you’re losing quite some talented juniors; and for the wrong reasons. Scientists like you can change the system so that people are heard, listened to, and guided. Of course, it’ll never be a level playing field: You have so much more experience than the young folks around you. But they might have valuable insights,

especially when it concerns their own lives. You better start listening to them if you don't want to end up as the only one left in the arena.'

Ken thought about what she said and then shook his head.

'I don't think we would be very successful, quite apart from what the administrators might think. Wouldn't scientists worldwide who *are* prepared to work 24/7 take over?'

'Maybe, maybe not. Perhaps the others will change, too...If I were you, I would stop accepting what the system is like and start asking myself and those around me some questions: Is this the only way it can be done? Are there other ways? I would stop the implicit demands and instead ask others for advice: What works best for *you*? And can we accommodate that...'

Vivien smiled to soften her critical words. 'Listen, Ken, I base my opinion on what I've just heard you say, so bear with me if I'm wrong. But all I've heard you say is how things are or should be, as if it's a given; set in stone. Why don't you ask people for their views and listen to them? You would be surprised to hear the ideas they come up with. Pleasantly surprised, I bet!'

Ken was still far from convinced.

But Vivien wasn't done yet. 'You know, Ken, I think it's more than that. Not just the long hours, the drudgery, the competitive atmosphere. I also heard you talk all the time about what's right and what's wrong. About how research should be done. In other words, the way you and your buddies do it. Well, some of them...because I picked up a lot of disdain for others from what you told me; particularly a lot of negativity toward women. You are rather opinionated and judgmental...prejudiced, aren't you? Whatever, you seem to use your set of rules as an excuse to drop anyone who doesn't adhere to them like dirt, including some people in your own environment

choosing another direction. Didn't you tell me yourself that you "don't waste any energy on them"; the ones that go to a less competitive group or quit science altogether? Isn't that ironic? Do you recognize how that feels—being dropped like dirt?"

She patted his knee, seeing how uncomfortable he felt. "Sorry, Ken, I didn't mean to hurt you or rub it in. Just to wake you up." Vivien looked at him appreciatively. "You know, you seem nice enough. But you're...somehow so unobservant of how other people feel. You only seem to broadcast; you don't *receive* any signals from others. Couldn't you try and change that?"

Ken rubbed his brow. He had never allowed himself to look at his life from this perspective. What if there was some truth in it? He *had* lived by one set of rules, the generally accepted rules, and had never been open to any other approach or standard.

When he now considered how he had lived the past five years, it had been one continuous trip on a roller coaster. And not one of those fun attractions in an amusement park where people screamed from sheer joy. It had felt like a rather oppressive adventure, with—for sure—moments of joy and contentment but also a relentless feeling of pressure. Faster and faster, higher and higher. Pressure to raise money, to publish well...And yes, even *he* had noticed the "casualties"; young people—or even more senior ones—falling out of the carriage. But he had always reasoned that such events were inevitable. Through the years, he had maintained that they hadn't fastened their seatbelts tightly enough and were unfit for a ride on the roller coaster.

And now he had fallen out of the carriage himself, from a great height and at high speed. He had come to a complete standstill. Did that make him unfit as well?

Vivien looked intently at Ken. ‘Don’t give up, Ken. From what I hear, you’re a brilliant person. Someone who has a lot to offer. But maybe a lot to learn as well?’

He didn’t answer for a long time. Finally, he responded in a low voice, ‘I’ve heard what you said.’ And then added with a wry smile, ‘No, better...I’ve *listened*.’

Vivien picked up her purse from the table and rose, saying briskly, ‘Well, I’ve got to leave. I need to be in Denver tonight.’

When they left the diner a few minutes later, Vivien turned toward Ken on the sidewalk.

‘Go back to your wife and daughter, Ken. They seem to be the best that has happened to you in your life. What’s the point of running away? Go back and seek help to change yourself into an open-minded person...someone who invites others to share their thoughts. You have so much to offer. All you need to do is to accept that you have a lot to learn too.’

She walked away and waved over her shoulder.

Ken saw her enter her car, exit the car park, and drive in a southern direction.

He walked slowly to his car and sat behind the wheel. He didn’t move for at least ten minutes. He just sat there and replayed fragments of what they had just discussed.

What would he do? Go back, as she had suggested?

Earlier today, while driving, he had reasoned that the easiest way out was to resign. After all, his downfall seemed inevitable; his reputation was damaged. To hell with that investigation committee—he wouldn’t submit himself to their questions, to being grilled. He might as well hand in his resignation and look for another place to start anew. Whatever course he took...even if he was allowed to stay, it would mean a clean break from his scientific life as it had been. It was questionable if he

would remain in the limelight. In short, none of the frills and privileges he had become used to.

Could he start all over again? Where? And, more importantly, *how*?

Telling his story to an outsider had helped to bring order to all those chaotic snapshots haunting him for weeks. It had helped to make him realize how he had chased himself—and others—on and on, to the point that nobody seemed to truly enjoy what they were doing any longer. He had been unable to take one step back. Was that what Jenny meant when she used the word “obsessed”? His inability to let go?

It was true that he had unconditionally accepted all the rules and principles of the current scientific climate. The irony of it only struck him now: He, the scientist who never trusted anything at face value, who challenged every notion and idea in his work until he let himself be convinced by solid proof. And, yet, he had accepted all those unwritten laws and guidelines about how science should be carried out. All of it...without giving it a single thought. Just done it because this was how it had always been done; finding justification in the fact that others behaved like that, too. Hadn't he automatically referred to “the system” as soon as someone brought up the merest doubt? “This is how we do it, and if you don't like it, get lost!”

Why? Why hadn't he listened to any of the arguments others, like Anand Patel, had brought up? Was it because he'd been so successful in the system that there was no reason to challenge any of it? Was it because he didn't know how to change the situation? Or change himself? Apparently, it wasn't sufficient any longer to point out how they had always done it. He had behaved as if that were the final word. But didn't the complaints show otherwise? He was forced to rethink his way of living, if

only because the world around him had changed. It wouldn't suffice to live by the rules of twenty or thirty years ago if only because the rest of the world had moved on and defined a new set of rules.

Ken sighed.

The problem was that he had no clue *how* to adjust. Maybe this Vivien had been right; perhaps he should start listening to what others had to say about it...

This is where his thoughts started going in circles. Could he pull that off? Would he be able to act differently toward the people around him? Was he prepared to question the rules he had lived by, his world of science—the way journals worked or jobs were secured; prizes were bestowed, grants awarded? The relentless competition, the focus on one's own achievements? It was everything he had believed in, the fundament of his scientific existence. He simply didn't know. He didn't know where to begin. Didn't even know if he *wanted* to reinvent himself or just leave the scene and accept that his years were over.

No, he didn't feel ready to return home, not yet.

Ken started the engine, took the nearest exit, and resumed his trip toward the Dakotas. He needed more time to think it over and to understand what made him and others tick.