

THE CIA on June 26, 2007 declassified secret documents that revealed "the Agency had relations with commercial drug manufacturers, whereby they passed on drugs rejected because of unfavorable side effects." KILLER DRUG is a thriller about one such drug company.

KILLER DRUG

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KILLER DRUG

Also by Peter Rost

THE WHISTLEBLOWER
CONFESSIONS OF A HEALTHCARE HITMAN

KILLER DRUG

PETER ROST

The events and characters in this book are fictitious.
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CHAPTER ONE

GEORGE PAPADIMITRIOU WOUND ALONG Mulholland Drive in his beautiful BMW convertible, nervous but hopeful. In a few minutes he would attend the most important meeting of his life.

If all went as planned, he would become rich beyond his wildest dreams. And to think that the U.S. government would make him wealthy was an amazing story in itself. Papadimitriou wasn't going to get all that money right away, of course, but if the documents tucked away in the trunk were enough to convict Xenal Pharmaceutical Corporation, then the U.S. Justice Department would request a billion dollar fine. Papadimitriou's share of his employer's penalty could exceed two hundred and fifty million dollars. The numbers were mind-boggling, simply too implausible even for the most febrile Hollywood writer. But a scriptwriter wouldn't know the law, wouldn't have heard the magic words that had become a key part of Papadimitriou's vocabulary: the False Claims Act. This was the law that had made a few whistleblowers with the right information wealthy beyond belief. The record prize was held by the sales director of another major pharma company who had cashed in for more than one hundred million dollars. The feds could

afford to pay such awards, given that the total fines for the two corporations the man had blown the whistle on had exceeded one billion dollars. By law the federal government had to pay the whistleblower at least fifteen percent of the recovery; in some cases the government actually paid up to thirty percent.

Papadimitriou had dreamed of those numbers ever since he had heard that story. And after meeting with an Assistant U.S. Attorney at the Justice Department with his primary contact, Special Agent Dyson of the FBI, Papadimitriou's plans had taken shape.

Today he would take his final meeting with Agent Dyson and hand over the goods. There would be no conviction, and most certainly no money for Papadimitriou, unless he delivered the documents that proved Xenal's guilt. It had taken more than a year to gather all the material, and many months to surreptitiously smuggle them out of the company. He probably had close to one thousand pages in his trunk. He'd collected everything from illicit contracts to records of bribes and kickbacks. It was enough, Dyson had guessed, to send half of Xenal's senior management into the slammer.

Papadimitriou wouldn't miss a single one of them. They were all crooks, as far as he was concerned. And they'd left him to rot in his job, without a single promotion. Ten years in one job—that was unbelievable in itself. For the first five years he'd hoped and waited for the big promotion that never came. The following three years had become more and more miserable as each day passed. And the last two years—these were the years when his plans had changed and his spywork had begun. Now he'd make Xenal pay for the slow death of his career.

The hard part hadn't been finding incriminating documents; it was finding ones that would prove that Xenal had cheated the government. That was the key to collecting his big reward. And now, finally, Papadimitriou had discovered what Dyson was looking for. His contracting manager had recently left, and since then Papadimitriou had been able to roam freely in the man's office. There he had struck gold. When he had called Dyson to tell him what

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he'd found, Dyson had interrupted him and told him to deliver the material right away, without delay.

If anyone at Xenal ever found out what he'd done Papadimitriou would be in real trouble. The people at Xenal were tough and no one crossed them without serious consequences. But Papadimitriou had the FBI and the U.S. Justice Department on his side. And the drive along Mulholland felt like an omen: these multi-million-dollar estates that clung to the hillsides, these too could be his.

At that moment his cell phone made a vibrating noise in the briefcase next to him. Papadimitriou kept one hand on the steering wheel and searched through the briefcase with the other one. He managed to find the phone before the caller hung up.

"Papadimitriou here."

"This is Dyson. Is everything OK on your end?" The voice was firm and commanding. Actually, the entire man was firm and commanding. Papadimitriou hadn't known what to expect the first time they met, but if he'd had his hopes up for someone looking like a movie-character FBI agent, he wouldn't have been disappointed. Dyson, was lean, muscular, and acted like a law enforcement officer. He had short black hair and a small, well-trimmed mustache matched by aviator sun glasses. Everything about him screamed law enforcement. He even talked like a cop, and that was fine with Papadimitriou.

He looked at his watch. "I should be there in less than ten minutes."

"You've got all the documents?" Dyson asked.

"Everything we agreed on. My trunk's brimming with 'em." A confident smile touched Papadimitriou's face as he glanced at his rearview mirror. That's when he discovered that some of the cars behind him blinked furiously with their lights, one of them even honked. Talking had caused him to slow down on a road where speed ruled and passing was hazardous at best.

Papadimitriou sped up and tried to focus on driving, but his mind remained on the call.

"OK," Dyson said. "See you then. Drive carefully."

“No problem.” Papadimitriou closed the clam shell phone with one hand and dropped it onto the seat next to him.

From a distance the cars on Ventura Freeway far below looked like polished bugs hooked on a string, like shiny pearls. The freeway disappeared behind another couple of grand mansions and the road widened to two lanes at a red light. Papadimitriou slowed to a stop in the right-hand lane. A sign indicated that he'd reached the Benedict Canyon Drive intersection.

A big, black Ford F350 pickup truck pulled up beside him. The driver stuck his head out of the window, and Papadimitriou sitting with his top down, expected him to start yelling. He was relieved when the man, apparently of Mexican descent, only tried to ask for directions in broken English.

Papadimitriou couldn't understand what the man said; he shook his head and lifted his hands in an apologetic gesture. He didn't notice the tanned, young man without a shirt who sat on the open truck bed behind the driver, smoking a cigarette and leaning back against the cab.

When the light turned green Papadimitriou shrugged and gunned the BMW. The truck roared its engine and cut in behind him. Papadimitriou didn't have any way of seeing that the young man in back had stood up and now leaned forward, steadying his elbows against the cab roof. In his hands he aimed a gleaming, chrome air gun.

What happened next was a complete surprise to Papadimitriou. He felt a horrifyingly painful sting at the nape of his neck. He smacked at whatever had caused the pain and felt something feathery fall down along the back of his spine. Papadimitriou's little Beamer swerved dangerously back and forth as he tried to get rid of the object that had caused such a throbbing twinge. All he could sense with his hand was a small bump below his hairline.

Concerned, he looked at the clock in the middle of the instrument panel. The digital numbers glowed with a reddish hue and showed 6:44 P.M. He had another six minutes until he was expected at the Fryman Canyon overlook. Dyson wouldn't be happy if he was late. The meeting place was ironic, he

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thought, his mind wandering momentarily; they would have a clear view of Xenal's headquarters, next door to Burbank Studios.

A glance back showed that the black Ford pickup remained close behind him. Papadimitriou suddenly felt irritated and itchy and his heart raced as if he'd been running a marathon. His confused mind had already forgotten the sting; all he could focus on now was his neck, which felt sore and stiff. He felt an irresistible urge simply to get things over with. He stomped on the accelerator.

The BMW and the truck were now alone on the road, racing east, Papadimitriou maintaining his high speed, the truck keeping a close tail on him. Papadimitriou discovered an unfamiliar pain shooting out into his shoulder blades and spreading down his spine. He slowed and waved for the truck to pass, but the driver refused. Panic began to enter his brain; then dominated it.

As he entered an area with fewer houses and a steep canyon to his right Papadimitriou felt himself suddenly thrust forward. Metal twisted, and his head banged back against the head restraint. In an instant he realized that the pickup had struck his rear bumper and now lay almost in his back seat. A towering mass of metal and chrome filled his entire rearview mirror. His heart pumped ferociously but his upper body felt stiff; he now had a hard time moving his arms.

He would have accelerated again to get away, but the road narrowed and the edges already rushed by too quickly for comfort. He tried to brake and succeeded; when he looked in the rearview mirror, the truck remained behind him, but no longer touching his vehicle. Probably getting set for another attack . . . The pain grew dramatically worse, now coursing throughout his body. Papadimitriou had no idea how far he remained from the safety of Dyson's badge and gun.

He felt sick to his stomach and breathed with labor. His heart continued to race; it felt like a small ferret pouncing on his chest from the inside. He forced himself to step on the accelerator, and attempted to put a few hundred yards

between him and the vicious driver in the truck, but the truck quickly drew near again. With each turn in the road it came closer. Sweat poured down Papadimitriou's face, tremors shook his hands, and his arms felt like lead rods.

Suddenly he experienced the nasty thrust forward again, accompanied by the sound of twisting metal and crushed glass. His car swerved from side-to-side. This time he was prepared. He held on to the steering wheel with whitening knuckles and pushed the accelerator all the way down. The automatic downshifted and his convertible shot forward like a silver rocket. All that remained in the rear view mirror was dust as Papadimitriou skidded through the next tight curve.

There was no way the truck could reach him or hope to handle Mulholland Drive at this speed. If the truck had intended to run him off the road or cause an accident big enough to make him stop, he had missed his chance. Papadimitriou's eyes twitched, his neck felt so stiff he could hardly move and he had trouble breathing. At that moment, his entire body turned rigid and foam flowed out of his mouth as his stomach twisted itself into a knot, just like his other muscles. His spine involuntarily arched back, and his torso barely remained in the seat. He could no longer control himself or his bodily functions.

But his BMW held the German car maker's promise of being the ultimate driving machine, and handled the curve with aplomb. It came screaming out of the bend, and a man who stood beside the road at the red light only had a second to save his life and throw himself to the side.

Multiple spasms ripped through Papadimitriou's body, and his body didn't obey any of the commands from his brain. As the BMW flew off the roadway, Papadimitriou felt his eyes nearly popping out of his head. The pretty little BMW carried his incapacitated body up into the sky as if it had been thrust into the heavens by a gigantic slingshot.

His eyes fixed on the gush of bright red and purple mixed into the gray sky. A sliver of gold appeared, as the sun's last rays worked their way through

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the edges of the clouds that were layered onto the horizon like soft cotton balls cushioning fragile leaves of gold parchment. The source of this kaleidoscope of colors was no longer visible, only the reflections left behind.

Papadimitriou floated in the air, his vehicle suspended between heaven and earth. He experienced an illusion of weightlessness that was as close as any human could ever come to this exhilarating feeling without leaving the earthly atmosphere. The only constraint that denied his body the right to float freely was his tightly fastened seat belt.

Trillions of sensory neurons in his central nervous system worked at maximum capacity while others released chemicals into the synapses between these nerve cells; endogenous morphines that made his last few seconds before death a peaceful experience, canceling out the cascading pain that ripped through his body and the fear that should have shredded his mind.

As the car reached the peak of its flight, it tumbled in the air elliptically and began its return to earth. By the time sheet metal, glass, engine parts, and flesh exploded on the hillside, the men in the Ford pickup had already pulled their truck up a ramp and into a waiting semi trailer and disappeared.

CHAPTER TWO

MIKE TORRANCE LOWERED HIS night vision binoculars. He turned to the driver of his black Land Rover, a small, anorectic man dressed in jeans and a sweater.

“Take a look.” He turned over the rubberized night binoculars to his companion, who carefully put them to his eyes. The driver jerked, blinded by the strong light. He adjusted the luminosity and watched eagerly. A large plume of fire lit up the valley and black smoke filled the air. Nothing moved around the car. No one could’ve survived.

The driver handed the binoculars back to Torrance without comment or show of emotion. He started the engine and they heard the wailing horns of a caravan of Hollywood fire trucks working their way up the hill.

Mike Torrance, head of security for Xenal Pharmaceutical Corporation, stretched his arms, and yawned as they began their downhill journey.

“Mission accomplished,” he said quietly. “Time for dinner.”

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When he turned on the television, Alan Finkelstein didn't know that he'd lost his sales director in a cloud of burning rubber and gasoline off Mulholland Drive. Nor did he know that Mike Torrance had been watching the murder in person. It was late, Finkelstein was troubled, and the only thing that concerned him right now was that he still hadn't found a new vice president of marketing for one of his units: Xenal's Neurology Division.

But Finkelstein's worries were about to become worse. A news chopper sent a live feed from the accident in the mountains. The evening news replayed pictures of billowing smoke, red fire trucks, and the twisted wreck over and over again. It was then that Finkelstein heard Papadimitriou's name. The realization that he'd just lost one of his most valuable co-workers took a few seconds to sink in; then hit him like a sledgehammer. He sat completely still for a moment, took a deep breath, leaned his head back and went to his Sub-Zero fridge, and absentmindedly opened a beer can. The ice cold liquid in his mouth cleared his brain for a few seconds, and Finkelstein made up his mind.

He had to stop wavering about his choice of new hires and just do it. He couldn't afford to have two vacancies in key positions. He went to his briefcase and pulled up a CV he'd received earlier in the day and read it again, carefully. In truth, this guy would be perfect for the marketing vice president job.

His name was Alex McGraw.

On paper Alex looked very good; MBA from UCLA, a few years in sales and then onward and upward in marketing. He'd worked overseas for BioPharma as country manager in Germany at the young age of thirty-five and then he had returned to corporate headquarters in San Francisco.

Finkelstein called Alex before leaving his office that day. His talk with Alex had been good; the guy definitely qualified as a prospect for the job. The evening news made Finkelstein realize that he should simply get the whole thing over with. He decided to talk to his assistant first thing in the morning, have her call some of Alex's references, and ask her to set up a formal

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interview with Alex McGraw. Xenal's president and CEO would both have to attend. No one on a vice presidential level could be hired without their approval.

CHAPTER THREE

ALEX MCGRAW SAT IN HIS OFFICE behind a closed door, for the first time truly worried about his professional survival. He stared into his computer screen, without really seeing what was there. The realization was stark: everything was ruined, his career, his life, his future. Everything, that is, except his relationship with Sophie. But he knew he couldn't give Sophie the relationship she deserved with his professional life in such shambles.

Alex had always believed he could make anything happen at any time. He had no problem accepting responsibility for his choices, for his work. He was used to taking risks, assessing opportunities and jumping on chances that others might have avoided. That's what made him succeed, made him a country manager for BioPharma at the very young age of thirty-five.

But in that elevated position, he'd been initiated into a parallel world of business practices that he'd always known existed in some companies but not expected at BioPharma. He had discovered manufactured invoices, tax scams, and cooked books. And Alex had thought that he could clean it all up, do the right thing, and be rewarded. Or at least not punished. Boy, had he been wrong. In spite of his fabled performance that had fueled unprecedented

growth at his affiliate, they had kicked him out, bringing him back to headquarters in San Francisco and putting him in this godforsaken office. The only good development had been Sophie Marceau, a lawyer at the company, of all things. He'd met her after coming back to San Francisco. Worked with her during long hours on some of the same issues that he'd brought up against the company. They'd fallen in love, and she'd been there for him the entire time. But now she was done with the company as well; they'd fired her with vengeance when they discovered she was dating Alex McGraw. Her superior, the CEO himself, acted as if Sophie should have known better than to get involved with him. After all she was one of BioPharma's best and most trusted lawyers—sharp as a hunter's knife, but with the wrong taste in men, at least according to her boss.

Alex, however, they had not been able to touch. Not at first—he'd made too much noise and had certain whistleblower laws (pointed out privately to him by Sophie) on his side.

In response he'd done what any red-blooded American would do; he'd filed a lawsuit against the company. But that wasn't the end of things. Alex used the lawsuit as a vehicle to get access to more documents, a legally valid reason to dig even deeper. Eventually the scandal got so big that it landed in the trade journals and newspaper business sections. Using the law as a cloak, Alex (again with Sophie's help) had been able to keep his name out of the papers, but anyone with a good investigator could probably have tracked him down as the supposedly unnamed whistleblower behind the sordid affair. After all, people talk.

Eventually BioPharma had quietly settled with him, scared by the public reaction. Part of that settlement was that he kept his job for another six months, after which he had to leave. The settlement was a good one, considering how close he'd come to true personal financial disaster, but he wouldn't be able to survive on it. He still needed to work; he had to get a new job.

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Five months and three weeks had already passed, and he'd sent out innumerable résumés, spoken to headhunter after headhunter; all with no result. Now Alex had one week to go until he was officially out of a job, and his situation was clear: no company had given him an offer. He would soon be unemployed. The pharmaceutical industry was a small business; everyone knew everyone. Alex didn't know if BioPharma had leaked his name, warning others in the incestuous pharma business that he had broken the code of silence, or if the job market was simply slow. Not even Alex's business acumen and trademark chutzpah seemed enough to save him this time. Not a single job offer in sight. People called now and then, but they never seemed to call back. It was frustrating not knowing what BioPharma might be doing behind his back—badmouthing him, or worse. He still had his pride intact, and he'd always have his high moral ground. And he had Sophie, or so he hoped. But that was all they could count on. And, truth be told, it was hard to say that it had all been worth it.

He turned off the computer, stood up, and took his jacket. He wasn't going to remain in this building any longer than he had to. It was a building that he'd come to despise. The place gave him the creeps. Not surprising when you'd become persona non grata, avoided like the plague by fellow employees who may not have known what you'd done. He looked around, still not quite seeing his surroundings, not knowing whether he would even bother returning to his office the following week. Ah, well . . . At least he'd come to realize something important: he'd gambled and lost. It had been a good fight, but in the end, he'd been beaten.

Alex opened the door and stepped outside into the corridor, then let the door close behind him. As he took his first step toward the elevators, he heard the telephone on his desk ring. That didn't happen often nowadays. He stopped in his tracks, considering the possibilities. Could it be a reprieve? More abuse? An eager new employer? He almost laughed at that. Still, he was nothing if not curious. He stepped back into his office, closed the door, and lifted the receiver.

“Alex McGraw, here.”

“Alex? This is Alan Finkelstein from Xenal. We spoke briefly yesterday? I love your résumé. You’ve got exactly the kind of profile we’ve been looking for.”

“I’m happy to hear that.” *And now comes the standard turn-down that everyone’s learned to use. ‘We have, however, found a more appropriate internal candidate.’*

“Is that OK with you?” the voice on the other end asked.

Alex sat up in his chair. He had missed something the man had just said. “Excuse me, could you say that again?”

“Oh, I said that we’d like you to come down to Los Angeles for an interview right away.”

“How soon?”

“Tomorrow couldn’t be soon enough. Can you make it?”

“Can I make it? Let me take a look.” Alex pulled out his day planner. The entire day was blank, and so was every following day. “I’m fine. I’ll be there. What time?”

“In the afternoon would be good. Three P.M.?”

“I’ll see you then.”

Hope is the last thing that leaves the human heart, and Alex was no different. Against all odds, he had one last glimmer of hope. It was a very small and very fickle flame, but it had given him something other than Sophie to look forward to.

When he arrived home, Sophie greeted him with a long embrace. She knew how tough this penultimate week had been for him. He kissed her softly, savoring her black, shiny hair that always smelled like fresh-cut flowers. Her face softened and her dark eyes searched his.

Despite anyone’s preconceptions about female vulnerability, Alex had to admit that Sophie had handled the BioPharma situation better than he had.

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Especially considering that the company had fired her outright. And at least she hadn't been pulled into the scandal; she'd get another job eventually. Or so they both hoped.

"How are you doing, *mon amour*?" Sophie, a native of France, spoke fluent English with the most charming accent, when she chose to.

"Guess what?"

"What?" She asked it casually, not expecting anything of the magnitude that he was prepared to spring on her.

"I think I just got one, last chance."

"That sounds . . . dramatic."

"It's an interview. Don't worry," he assured her. "I'm not getting my hopes up. The company's in L.A. For some reason they're interested in me, and they're in a rush. They want to see me tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? Wow. They *are* in a hurry."

"Not that I have any basis to be choosy, though, right?"

"I'm sure they'll love you as much as I do," she said. "But L.A.?"

"I know." He came into the house with her and they sat down together. "I know you love it here in the Bay Area. I do too. But would you come with me if I got it?"

"For you? I'd consider it," she said playfully. "We'll see. I'm looking for work too, you know. Let's discuss it after you get the offer."

"It's hard to believe I'm finally getting a real interview after all this time. And they didn't even ask why I want to leave BioPharma."

"But they'll ask around, right?"

"That's what I'm afraid of. It would take more than a casual Google search. Unless they talk to someone at BioPharma who's willing to breach the confidentiality agreement, I should be safe. And they do seem in a rush to hire me...."

"I really hope so, for you and for *us*."

"And what if they say no? Will you be all-right?" she asked.

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Alex stood, trying not to let her see just how incisive that question was. His answer didn't sound convincing though, even to himself.
“If they say no, I just have to keep going. Right?”

CHAPTER FOUR

A YOUNG SECRETARY LED ALEX to an imposing oak door. He had two minutes left until the agreed time for a meeting that could save his career. Alex was focused like never before; nothing slipped by him. Not the polite manners of the assistant who helped him, not the pleasant atmosphere in the office, or the well-dressed people he met. Everything about Los Angeles felt different from San Francisco. It was showier and more glitzy than he was used to; even the people in Xenal's corporate headquarters appeared more glamorous. Or maybe that was just his wide-eyed excitement showing—his delight in being given another chance. He wanted this job so badly it hurt inside him. He tried to shush away the feelings of fear deeper inside; still, he lived with the very real apprehension that suddenly the spell would be broken and someone would expose his past.

The assistant knocked on the door and Alex stepped back as they waited. After a few seconds he heard footsteps and the door swung open and revealed a small, fit man with shaved head.

“Alex! We're all waiting. Glad you could make it, I'm Alan Finkelstein,” the man said with a welcoming smile and stretched-out hand to greet him.

“Good to meet you.” Alex had a brawny Spalding briefcase in one hand and his dark, gray coat in the other. He put down the briefcase and shook Finkelstein’s hand. A second man in the room stood, and Alex realized this must be Fred Tyler, Xenal’s president. He was tall and slender and walked around the table to greet Alex as well. Tyler appeared confident and sure of himself, but something told Alex that he was a bit of an actor. Only one other person remained at the conference table—Judith Metcalf, CEO of the company. She remained seated and waited for Alex to approach her, and he knew at once that her poise was for real. Metcalf leaned forward in anticipation, her softly layered honey-blond hair falling around perfectly arched eyebrows. She used her pen to push the hair back. She was beautiful in a classical way, reminding Alex of the late Grace Kelly.

Alex stepped inside and looked around the room. This was the first time he would be interviewed by three people at the same time, and the location was slightly intimidating, no doubt a careful consideration in the hiring process. After Alex had shaken everyone’s hand, Metcalf made a point of turning to a silver tray behind her with a crested coffee pot, matching sugar bowl, and a plate with assorted cookies. She offered Alex a cup of coffee with a gracious smile and he immediately felt her warmth.

He accepted coffee but declined the cookies, something Metcalf appeared to appreciate. Based on the athletic looking people he’d met on his way to the conference room and on California’s health cult generally, something told Alex that Metcalf wouldn’t like people with bad habits, heavy people especially, and he hoped that he’d passed her first little test. Alex sank into one of the plush leather swivel chairs that surrounded the conference table.

Metcalf moved her lips into the position of a formal smile and looked at Tyler and Finkelstein. “So, shall we begin?” she asked and leaned her head ever so slightly to the side.

Finkelstein appeared intense and eager to start the questioning. He opened a gray folder with Alex’s name on it, a sheaf of papers inside. Alex could guess which documents probably resided in that folder. He’d been required to

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send copies of his two most recent pay stubs and stock option information. His current base salary was \$250,000 and most recent bonus had been \$149,000. Finkelstein should also have been able to figure out that his prior year stock-option allocation was valued at \$220,000. Not bad for a man who had just reached thirty-nine. They were lucky if they could get him.

And he would be luckier if they didn't discover his secret.

Finkelstein's fingers moved quickly and played the papers in front of him like a piano. He rapidly started questioning, while the other two listened. The three of them spent the next half hour examining every aspect of Alex's past performance and future desires.

"You must be tired of interviewing," Metcalf finally said and looked Alex in the eyes. She drummed with her fingers on the finely polished mahogany desk. It was so glossy that it shot back a perfect reflection of her nicely manicured hand, covered by rings and bracelets.

Alex eyed her, thinking of how unlikely this interview was. Clearly, Metcalf didn't have a clue as to what had stopped other pharma companies from considering him.

"Not really," he said. "It's quite refreshing, actually. Nice to talk about myself, I must admit. I haven't been in the market for a new job for many years, but this was a unique opportunity." Under his circumstances this was an obvious fib, but he had no problem pulling it off.

"Oh, I am so glad to hear that," she responded without losing a beat. "And what is it that you find unique?" Her manicured hands absentmindedly played with a black Mont Blanc pen. She didn't wear a wedding band, making her one of many women Alex had encountered in senior management who hadn't managed to combine a successful career with marriage.

"I've been following the success of Xenal. You've gone from an upstart to a major corporation with twenty thousand employees in less than fifteen years. Your pacemakers are used around the world and you have positioned yourself as the first company to successfully introduce electronic pain control devices. I'd be honored to be part of your team."

Tyler and Metcalf looked at each other with satisfaction. Before coming to the interview Alex had learned that the two of them had taken control of the company ten years ago. They clearly knew they had done a fabulous job and Alex tried to make sure they realized he felt the same way. He'd given them nothing to complain about his reply.

Finkelstein looked pleased with Tyler's and Metcalf's reaction to his candidate. No surprise, Alex thought. If they were happy, he'd be happy.

"You realize that our neurology business doesn't include just pain control devices?" Finkelstein asked.

"Actually, no," Alex said, "I didn't know that."

"We're also doing research into pharmacological agents for anti-terror use. We have a new drug called Convulsor."

"Military research?" Alex couldn't have been more surprised.

"Incapacitating agents, specifically," Metcalf cut in.

"Hmm. I see." Alex knew that he didn't look pleased. He couldn't help it, and he wondered how it was already affecting his chances of getting the job.

"The CIA and the Defense Department will in all likelihood become primary customers of Xenal," she continued. "This was a direction we took quite deliberately. We realized that we could use our skills to save human lives in the defense of our country and not limit ourselves to traditional pharmaceuticals. Not surprisingly, it may become one of our most profitable areas. You can't hope for a more reliable customer than the leading government in the free world."

"That's something I haven't been involved in before."

"Don't worry," she said. "Few have, which is really surprising, I think. Convulsor is cheap to manufacture and could be sold at immense profits. Exactly what any drug company would be looking for."

Still astonished, Alex had nothing to add. Tyler saved him by interjecting, "Could I ask you a completely different question?"

Alex felt a surge of fear-based adrenalin. Was this the moment they'd saved to tell him that they knew the rest of his story?

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“Sure.” Alex nodded.

“How well do you get along with your current management?” Tyler focused his eyes squarely on Alex.

Alex felt sweat in his palms. “Quite well; I work closely with many of them, we have regular presentations, and I’ve generated some of the best results in the company.”

“Would they object to us hiring you?”

The guy truly doesn't know. Alex took a deep breath; then realized it was harder to answer that question than it seemed at first. If he said no, it would appear as if he wasn’t valued by BioPharma; on the other hand, if he said yes, they may think there was a problem. It was a trick question, more tailored to find out his ability to think than to find any useful information.

“I hope they would miss me and my performance. For obvious reasons I haven’t told them that I’m interviewing with you. I haven’t discussed leaving the company with anyone.”

Metcalf nodded as if she agreed. Alex knew from his own experience interviewing prospective employees that they often fell into the trap of trying to speculate about what other people thought. Alex made sure he stayed with the facts.

“So why do you want to leave?” she asked.

“This is a unique opportunity. And . . .” he hesitated, “. . . my fiancé used to work at BioPharma but was terminated.”

“Why?”

“They didn’t like the fact that we were dating.”

“But you didn’t report to each other . . .?”

“No we didn’t. So I don’t think that was really fair.”

“Was there something else wrong?”

“Nothing.”

Metcalf continued to keep her eyes focused on Alex and leaned her head back, scrutinizing him under her lowered eyelids during her next question.

“Tell us about yourself and your family.”

“You’re only hiring me,” Alex said more quickly than he meant. “Why do you want to know about my family?”

Metcalf noted his reaction and smiled disarmingly. “We care about those things. This is a special place to work. We actually consider ourselves a second family to our employees. So we want to know about the first family as well.”

“There isn’t much to tell. I’m not married and I have no children, but I’m in a stable and committed relationship.”

Metcalf carefully stretched out her hand in front of her and examined her fingernails. “Committed relationship,” she repeated to herself and paused. “With a man or a woman?”

Finkelstein suddenly busied himself intently with his gray folder.

Alex didn’t know where to look, but he felt his cheeks flush and knew it must have been obvious to everyone that he felt uncomfortable. He had never encountered this line of questioning in the past; never *considered* it. Not only was the topic inappropriate, but also Metcalf had just asked two illegal questions, about his marital status and his sexual preferences. But Alex knew full well that referring to the law or avoiding the question would be a safe way to put a rapid end to the interview and any job offer. And he really needed this job.

“A woman whom I respect and adore.” Alex lifted his cup and tasted the coffee, giving himself time to think.

Metcalf stayed silent for a few seconds, lifted an eyebrow ever so slightly, and looked as if she enjoyed the situation. “I hope you don’t mind us asking. We’re just getting to know you.” Her accent at that point became more pronounced and hinted at a vaguely discernable southern drawl.

Finkelstein, seemingly overcoming his mortification, rejoined the conversation. “It’s just that we’ve learned over time the value of people with a steady family situation. We believe this makes them much more productive. Will your loved one come with you to Los Angeles?”

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“I don’t know yet. She likes San Francisco. We’ll have a commuting relationship at first, I expect. The flight’s only an hour.” Alex paused; then added, “And I want to be able to focus completely on my new job.”

Tyler had been very quiet for a while, carefully observing Alex. He clearly knew better than to interrupt Metcalf. But now it was his turn. Tyler dropped his bifocal glasses on the pad in front of him. His short, gray hair, standard Marine crew issue, and manners indicated a background in the military service, but somehow Alex couldn’t believe that he’d ever served a day. Tyler actually kept his back *too* straight and his shoulders bowed an inch farther back than what even a drill instructor might demand. Alex briefly wondered whether Tyler maintained that posture when Metcalf wasn’t around.

“If you decide to join us,” Tyler said, “you’ll learn that this is a special organization. We don’t look at what we do as work. We consider it a passion, fulfilling a dream, in a way. This is a company that strives to develop technology that could make the heart beat, the blind see, and the pain go away. And make some money on the way. We’ve succeeded with the heart and pain applications. Now we just have to make the blind see, and defend our country against terrorism. These are lofty goals. If you decide to join us, Mr. McGraw, you will become immersed in a corporate culture unlike any other you have encountered. You’ll work on helping patients around the world, as well as our nation’s soldiers. And we all like the money, but that’s not the reason we do this—we do this to make a difference.”

As Tyler leaned back in his chair Metcalf put her hand approvingly on his shoulder. “What more can we tell this gentleman? Does he know about the team he’d work with?”

“You’ll have three direct reports in charge of separate departments,” Finkelstein said. “One person is responsible for your U.S. market, another one for international marketing, a third for U.S. sales.” Finkelstein held up his hand and counted down the jobs on his fingers. “A total of two-hundred and fifty individuals will be working for you. This is truly a business within a

business. So you can understand why we need your experience running an autonomous affiliate.”

Metcalf casually flipped through the papers in front of her, all of them probably brimming with background information on Alex. “I can see that Alan has gone through your background very thoroughly,” she said after a long pause.

Alex held his breath.

“Is there anything more we can tell you about the job?” she asked.

Alex exhaled, smiled, and managed to nod. There was one thing left to discuss—money. But he couldn’t ask this quite yet, perhaps not at all, with three people gathered in front of him. It would simply not be appropriate. The recruiter who had initially called him about this job had noted his current salary and told him the new compensation would be ‘competitive.’ All recruiters said the same thing.

Alex tucked away his curiosity about money and began to ask a harmless, generic question, but before he could finish Metcalf interrupted. “I’ll cut to the chase,” she said. “What you really want to know is how much we’re going to pay you, fair enough?” She pointed at some papers in front of Tyler. “Fred, would you assist?”

Tyler looked back at Metcalf with a slightly raised eyebrow. Metcalf gave him a short nod. “Give him the numbers we discussed.”

Tyler pulled out a yellow notepad and started writing a few lines, in the shape of a pyramid, then turned the notepad facing Alex and pushed it in his direction.

Alex tried to stay calm as he read the numbers.

Salary \$400,000

Annual bonus up to 75% of base

Sign-on bonus, paid after 12 months \$200,000

*Stock options and restricted stock, value around \$500,000
annually*

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Alex added up the numbers. He could make more than a million dollars the first year with Xenal. Any doubt he may have had about Metcalf's inappropriate questions or their development of this "Convulsor" drug, or anything else vanished without a trace. This was better than anything he'd expected; far better. It left no question about whether they wanted him. This offer gave new meaning to the word generous.

Suddenly he had a strong desire to leave San Francisco as soon as physically possible.

After an appropriate pause to consider the offer he looked at the three executives in front of him. He tried to maintain his composure and project a professional and calm façade, but didn't quite succeed.

"When can I start?" he said with a broad smile.

They watched him carefully and shot a few glances at each other. Alex realized that the balance of power in the room had just shifted again.

He was theirs. There was no turning back. He would become part of their "special family," for better or worse. Tyler slowly stood. His black Brioni suit with needle-thin white stripes flattered his gracile frame. As he offered Alex his hand, he said, "Thank you for coming, Alex." Tyler gave a firm handshake.

"I'm the one who should thank you." Alex stood, and so did Metcalf. She walked over to Alex, her bronze herringbone jacket with suede trim moving gracefully over the mockneck paisley shell she wore underneath.

She held out her hand and smiled. "Alan will take care of you from here on. We'll do everything we can to make you feel welcome."

"Thanks, Ms. Metcalf." Alex met her gaze with appropriate respect and nodded slightly.

Tyler then closed the conference room door behind Metcalf and him, leaving Alex with Finkelstein.

"You made a great impression. We never give people an offer at a sitting table," Finkelstein said. "Have you met Ms. Metcalf in the past?"

It seemed an odd question. “No, I hadn’t even heard of her until you told me I’d be meeting her.”

“We’ll get you up to speed in a very short amount of time. And you have an experienced team to work with. None of them is quite ready to take on your role, of course. But I should warn you, quite a few would have liked to, so they may not give you an easy time.”

“I’m sure I can handle that.” Alex remembered his experience in Europe. Half of his direct reports at BioPharma had felt that they deserved his position more than he did. An American in charge of a European operation could only mean one thing—nepotism. Or so they had concluded among themselves. In the end, when Alex doubled sales in only a couple of years, they’d grudgingly admitted that perhaps he knew what he was doing.

Finkelstein opened the gray folder in front of him and pulled out a pile of papers. Alex had been wondering what it contained. Now he would find out. He could see a new vigor in Finkelstein’s movements. Clearly the absence of his superiors had enlivened him. His bald head bobbed as he searched for the appropriate documents. Finkelstein had a nicely shaped cranium and probably looked best without hair. Though younger, his face was reminiscent of a certain lollipop-sucking actor in an old TV series.

“Found it. These documents will give you our relocation policy.” Finkelstein handed a rather thick sheaf of papers to Alex. “We’ll pay for all costs of moving and buy your old home at market value if you can’t sell it yourself. You’ll be assigned a realtor and can start looking for a house down here right away. Just remember, our realtors give us a referral fee, so don’t switch without talking to us first. We’ll pay two points for your mortgage and all closing costs, but you lose that if you don’t use the assigned realtor. There are a few other important things like that, so please make sure you go over these documents carefully.”

Alex nodded. This all sounded like standard procedure.

“Most of this you’re used to,” Finkelstein said, looking directly into his eyes. “There are a few things that are different, however, from what you

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might expect. We only pay points and reimburse your closing costs if you locate in certain areas within a reasonable commuting distance. Metcalf has a personal opinion on where her executives should live.”

Alex kept his mouth closed. Metcalf certainly did take a personal interest in the life of her executives. This was unusual, but probably only a matter of getting the most out of her team.

“Finally, we’ll pay you a one-time relocation subsidy of \$200,000. We know that Los Angeles is an expensive place to live and you’ll also get a negotiated mortgage rate if you go with our recommended lender. That should shave a full percentage point off your rate.”

“Thanks for telling me all of this,” Alex said. “In my old company HR handled these issues much later.”

“We do things differently. We may work our employees harder than anyone else on the West Coast, but we make it worth their while. You’re my responsibility and I’ll make your personal success my number one priority. I expect that you’ll treat your team the same way.”

These were the kind of words Alex had tried to preach to his own management at BioPharma but never received any back-up. He felt more and more excited about what his new life would be like.

“And we have one more nice disclosure for you.” Finkelstein gave him a coy smile.

“You do?”

“Yep—those corporate jets that top executives usually keep to themselves, well here we get to actually use them. We have one brand-new Gulfstream V for intercontinental travel and one Learjet 60 for trips within the country. The Gulfstream is always on standby for Ms. Metcalf and Mr. Tyler and you need permission to use that one. The other plane you can use any time. You may get bumped now and then, but you’ll get your fair share.”

“Anything else I should know?”

“We have a few more surprises for you, but those can wait until you start.”

PETER ROST

Finkelstein's smile seemed a bit guarded, but Alex decided not to press him. Instead he thrust his hand forward and shook Finkelstein's hand. "This is all I need to know. I'm very excited—very, very excited."

"Great. Just one more stop for you. If you could please see our security people on the way out. They'll take your photo and handle a few other things."

CHAPTER FIVE

LIGHT RAIN CAUSED THE TRAFFIC from the airport into San Francisco to move slowly, but Alex didn't mind. He had a lot to think about. What a day . . . he'd finally received the million dollar opportunity any corporate executive would dream about and it had come only moments before his career was about to well and truly end. Xenal had made the proverbial offer that he simply couldn't and wouldn't refuse.

The security check had been unusual and very intrusive, though. He'd never before undergone so many personal questions. And they had scanned his finger and thumbprints. The strangest part was the legal releases that they had asked him to sign. It felt almost as if he were joining the secret service. He had even been introduced to the head of security, Mike Torrance. Torrance had seemed nice and welcoming enough, but under the surface Alex thought he detected something else, a combination of mean-spiritedness and smugness that Torrance couldn't quite hide. Perhaps that went with the territory, but it gave Alex an eerie feeling. Alex couldn't quite put his finger on it: it wasn't just what Torrance had said, but how he'd said it and looked at Alex.

“Welcome on board,” Torrance had said harmlessly enough. “We’ve been waiting for you.” Torrance had even given him a big grin.

“I’m happy to be here, can’t wait to start.”

“You’ll find yourself right at home. And so will your fiancé.”

“Yeah, I hope she’ll come with me.”

“Of course she will. This is L.A.—paradise on earth. We’ll take good care of the two of you.”

Now it hit Alex: How had Torrance known about Sophie? He hadn’t told anyone until the meeting with the other three, and Torrance certainly hadn’t been there. Had they called him that quickly, with that particular piece of news? Had he been listening in? It was weird. And somehow Torrance’s appearance—big guy, commanding posture, piercing eyes, strong jaw, meticulously pressed slacks, white shirt—just didn’t give that warm and fuzzy feeling, yet he’d tried to act so personal. Torrance reminded Alex of a boa constrictor eyeing its victim before devouring it. Well, he wouldn’t have much to do with him so there was no point in worrying. Torrance was probably just some ex-cop who’d been smart enough to cash in with a cushy security job rather than retire early on a reduced pension. He must’ve been around fifty-five, but it was hard to tell; Torrance had the kind of ageless, masculine looks that Alex imagined women of all ages found hard to resist. Alex shrugged and looked out the rain-soaked window. The raindrops were falling hard now, streaking down the glass in little streams and making everything gray and muddled.

Alex had been nervous about what Torrance would come up with during his interview, but was somewhat calmed by the fact that they’d told him that the security appointment was routine for all employees. The most important part was that they were hungry to get him and he was starving to start the job. As long as they didn’t discover his lawsuit against his current employer, he’d be fine. Since he still worked at BioPharma, they couldn’t call them and ask for references. So if no one in L.A. did an expansive media search, he might actually be fine. Better than fine, he reminded himself. Xenal had made him a

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million dollar offer. Even though he had a hard time believing it, he was free, finally free to move on. He was not only saved; he was going to be successful again.

After almost an hour crawling into soggy San Francisco, the cab arrived in the Marina District. The illumination of the Golden Gate Bridge threw glimmering pink serpents into the dark bay water. It had stopped raining and fresh, moist air welcomed him as he stepped out of the cab. The lights were on in his house; Sophie must be home. Before he could find his key, the door flung open.

“Perfect timing, I just arrived.” Sophie hugged him hard, and Alex couldn’t help noticing that she wore a pair of new ankle-strap pumps in black. Gucci or Manolo Blahnik, he guessed. They’d been dating for about a year and he’d promised to marry her; it hadn’t taken him long to realize that she would be an expensive woman to keep up with. *Bring it on*, he thought. Money would be no object with his new job. He held her tight, then let go of her. Every time he met her she looked more dazzling than he could recall, as if his memory couldn’t do her justice. He knew that’s what other men also saw—and other women. But her life as a pretty girl hadn’t been an easy one. She had the kind of good looks that made many women hate her. And when she let her hair down, quite literally, it only made matters worse, especially in an office environment. Women instinctively perceived her as an imminent threat, as a vulture, hovering around, ready to tempt husbands or bosses. And the men, of course, liked her, until they realized they couldn’t get her, and then they turned hostile as well. So Sophie had learned largely to keep to herself and try to ignore the jealous eyes around her.

Usually she slipped into a pair of jeans at home but tonight she was dressed to kill. She wore a black wool sateen suit with velvet inserts – also brand new. She had started to look less and less like a lawyer after she’d been forced to leave BioPharma; in that job a conservative style was everything, and Sophie had been busy shedding those remnants of her past life and was now the image of French high style rather than corporate professionalism.

After all, she didn't have to care what others thought anymore and could do whatever pleased her. As hard as it was, she tried to take the angry looks from other women as a compliment; and she never assumed that she would hold undue sway over their men.

Sophie was thirty-six, but no one could have guessed that. Her skin was baby smooth and her face soft, as if it had never been exposed to the elements. Her features were dominated by her full lips. If she hadn't been a French national, one could have concluded that she had Native American blood in her veins. Her shiny black hair touched her shoulders and two unusually straight eyebrows framed her eyes, giving her face a sophisticated touch. Those were the features that drove men to do mad things and pushed women into a jealous rage.

"Okay, now, tell me everything: How did it go?" She placed a soft kiss on his lips and led him inside.

He smiled and didn't say anything, just drew close to her and smelled her skin, tickling her neck. She responded, but only for a short moment.

"You're killing me! Tell me what happened."

"I got the job." Alex tried to hold back a grin.

Sophie shrieked and tore herself loose.

"I'm so happy for you. This is the best. You did it, *mon chérie!*" She pulled him onto a couch and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Let's celebrate, let's do something! Let's be wild!"

His hands followed her curved body under her silk top. She leaned her head back, exposing her neck and pulled him tighter.

"Mmm, exactly," she mumbled.

They kissed again and enjoyed a long, warm embrace. Alex felt like a teenager in love and Sophie behaved like one, groping, fondling and touching. Not for the first time, Alex could scarcely believe he'd become the lucky one, the one she had chosen.

KILLER DRUG

“Are you happy?” Sophie suddenly asked, her hair tousled and her lipstick consumed by his eager mouth. “This is what you were looking for, right?”

He considered her question. “They’re paying me a fortune. I’m as excited as I could be.”

“But you’ll never have someone to work with who loves you this much again,” she teased him, giving him a classic Parisian faux-pout. Then she frowned. “At least I hope you won’t.”

“You know, that’s the funny thing. I think the guy I will report to is actually attracted to me.” Alex teased Sophie. “His name’s Finkelstein. He’s got no hair at all, you know, shaves his head. He’s pretty good looking, with lean, nice features. He dresses well, too. They all do, in fact. Anyway, I got some serious vibes from him. I think he likes me a lot.” He grinned and observed her.

“Of course he likes you, stupid. They all did. Otherwise they wouldn’t have offered you the big bucks.”

“Wait till you meet the CEO. Metcalf. Judith Metcalf. She’s very well preserved, gorgeous for someone her age, and tough as nails.”

“You bad boy,” Sophie scolded. “Should I be concerned?”

“No one’s as pretty as you, Ms. Marceau.”

“*Oh, la, la*, turning on the charm; are we? So,” Sophie said. “Judith the CEO. That’s interesting. Did she ask any good questions?” Sophie clearly had no intention of letting him get away with just a summary of the meeting. She wanted every detail, even if she had to use all her charm to drag it out of him.

“I think they’d almost made up their mind about hiring me before I arrived; almost none of the usual questions. They asked about you, though.” Alex played absentmindedly with her hair.

“They did? What did they want to know?” Her French accent became thicker. It always did when she got excited or nervous.

“They just wanted to make sure that I was in a stable relationship. They seemed really focused on that, for some reason.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“I know. Talk about inappropriate. Metcalf didn’t ask too many business-related questions at all, in fact. Probably heard everything about my fantastic career from Finkelstein. And my wonderful references, such as you.”

“Well you better pay me back.”

“Don’t I do that—as often as you ask?”

She laughed. “And nothing about the problems at BioPharma?”

“Nope. Not yet at least.” He held up crossed fingers.

“So this is it?”

“I think it is. This is what we’ve been waiting for. Unless . . .”

“Unless what?”

“Unless you won’t come to L.A.”

“I would,” Sophie said. “But maybe I shouldn’t come down until we know this company—Xenal, is it?—works out.”

“It’s your call. I’d be very lonely without you, though.”

“*C’est vrai?*” She glanced up at him.

“Of course I would; stop saying stupid things.”

She dug her head into him again and mumbled, “OK, I’m going with you. Let’s make the most of this. It’s a fresh start for both of us.”

Alex stroked her chin. “Hey, you didn’t even ask what ‘big bucks’ they offered me.”

She kissed him. “Don’t worry, great provider. I will. But not now. I have other things on my mind.”

“Like?”

Another lingering kiss. “Like celebrating.”

“So,” Alex said between kisses, “where do you want to celebrate tonight?”

“Let’s stay right here,” she said. “And then let’s start packing tonight. I’m ready for a new life.”

THE CIA on June 26, 2007 declassified secret documents that revealed "the Agency had relations with commercial drug manufacturers, whereby they passed on drugs rejected because of unfavorable side effects." KILLER DRUG is a thriller about one such drug company.

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