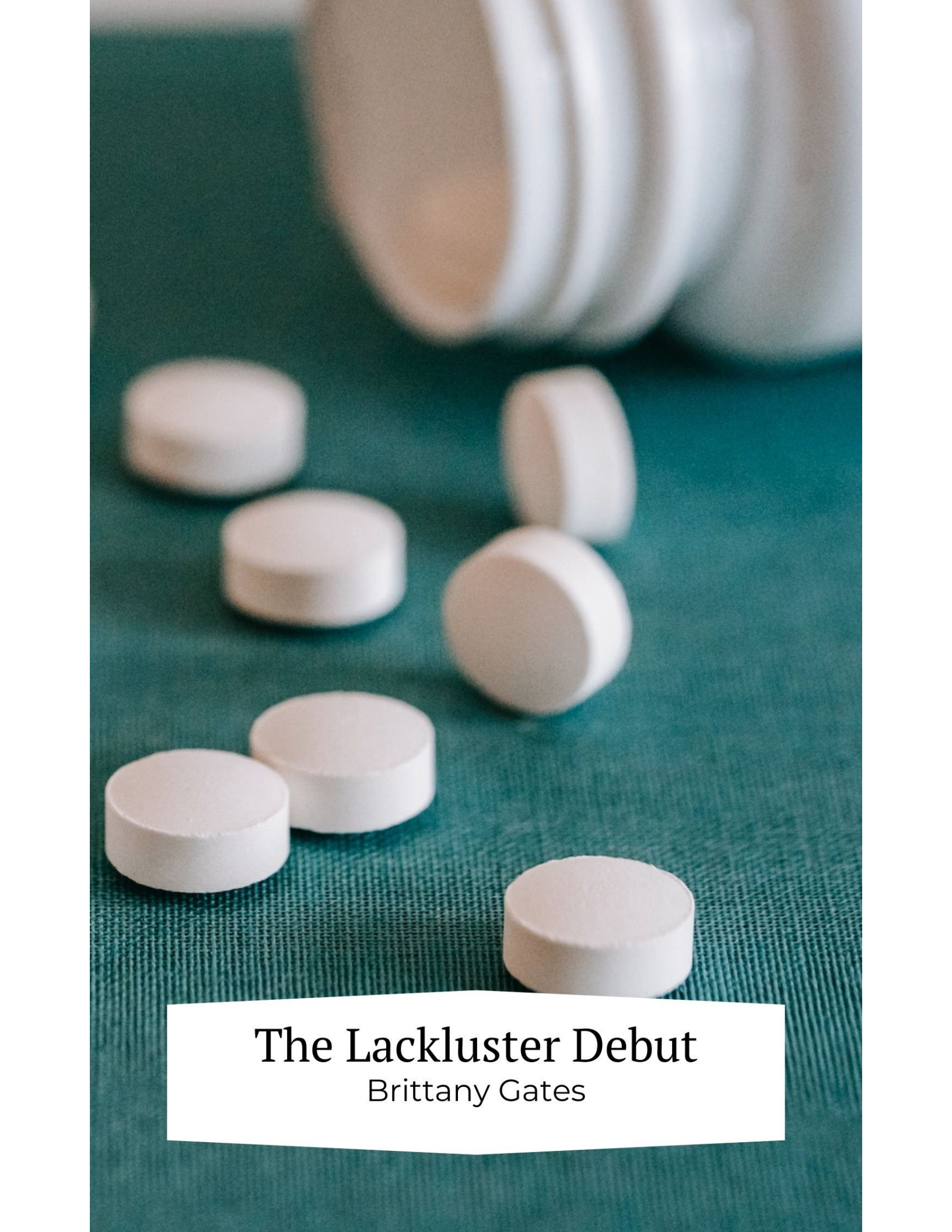




The Lackluster Debut

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The Meeting

The conference room inside the headquarters of Medicamen Pharmaceutical contains a wall of floor-to-ceiling windows currently covered by faux wooden white blinds which could be raised or lowered by the flip of switch or a voice command. A row of circular LED chandeliers illuminate the long modern-style black table with cube supports. A triangle conference phone with a large display screen sits in the middle of the table.

Also on the conference table is a collection of water bottles labeled with the company's name and logo: A ray of sunshine falling onto a medicine capsule. Each bottle sits on a cork coaster containing the same name and logo as on the water bottles. Additional water bottles sit on a black metal console table pressed against the wall opposite the wall of windows and next to the door.

Sitting at the conference table are four individuals: Two men and one woman on the side closet to the wall of windows and one man sitting on the side near the console table. The three individuals stare at the lone man with a mixture of intensity and contempt. The lone man replies with an air of repentance emanating primarily through his uneasy smile and slumped shoulders.

The lone man readjusts himself in the plush office chair, resting his elbows and forearms on the arms of the chair as he folds his hands together in his lap. His lightly-tanned skin makes his cropped salt-and-pepper hair pop but muddles his brown eyes. No, the deep bags around each socket does that.

The lone man licks his pale, thin lips too often, sometimes grabbing one of the salt-and-pepper hairs from his mustache or his beard into his mouth. Upon feeling the foreign object on his tongue, the lone man removes a white handkerchief from the inside of his black blazer and covers his mouth so he can dart out his tongue and wipe it against the cloth. Afterwards he shakes the handkerchief off to the side before replacing it back into one of the inside breast pockets.

"Director Johnson, thank you for coming to this meeting today. We know your time is short so shall we begin," asks one of the two men sitting across from the lone man.

"I can explain, Mr. Robertson," starts Director Johnson.

"No," the man exclaims as he pounds the table with his right fist. His white skin pulls tight all over his face as it contorts in anger. His green eyes stare at the Director without blinking.

"Director Johnson, we didn't bring you here to explain anything. We've heard plenty of explanations from the U.S. government for months and we're tired of it."

"Then why am I here? Just to be yelled at?"

"No, we didn't bring you here for that as I could've called you on the phone to do that. Instead, we invited you to listen to our plan to improve the sales of our drug. The drug your department and the U.S. government contracted with us to make. Well, we were forced to make it."

"Um, well, I wouldn't say 'forced' as that isn't exactly true."

"Are you sure about that," the second man of Asian descent asks. His black hair sweeps over his head from the part down the middle. His brown eyes are the only facial feature showing

concern, as his forehead and mouth are slack. "The President was very pushy about us finding a cure for the disease quickly."

"Well, yes, that's true, Mr. Chen. However, my department and the government didn't force you into a contract. Yes, we came to Medicamen first because of their reputation. And we implored you to create a drug to cure the disease, but we didn't force you into an unbalanced contract. We guaranteed financial incentives and tax credits for your assistance."

"Although we're getting the latter," Mr. Robertson speaks, "we're not getting much money from the former. The public isn't taking our drug as you projected they would. Thus, we're not making much revenue from it because per the contract we only get the government's 'assistance' if the public takes our drug."

"Yes, that's true," concedes Director Johnson. His air of repentance dissolves into uneasiness with a dash of fear.

"Don't you see how big of a problem that is for us? We dedicated our scientists and researchers on this task, spending nearly a billion dollars in research and development costs. We paid for overtime, hiring additional personnel, and retrofitting our hardware and manufacturing processes to meet your demands. You know that we're a publicly-traded company, Director Johnson, and our investors and stakeholders are quite upset about the lackluster debut of our drug. This has caused our stock to slip slightly before becoming flat."

"Well, that's better than sinking stock prices, right?"

Mr. Robertson moans in response as Mr. Chen shakes his head slowly. The lone woman fires a sharp look with a furrowed brow.

"Sorry. That sounded better in my head."

"I'm beginning to think that's how all of the government official operates," Mr. Chen says. "And that's why the American public dislikes them and their policies."

"Speaking of policies," the lone woman finally speaks, "my team has developed several that could persuade the American public to take our drug." Her blonde hair is in a loose ponytail as a few strands hang down both sides of her face. Her blue eyes exude strength as her pink lipstick lips smile confidence.

"I'm sorry, I don't remember your name. Can you tell me again," Director Johnson asks.

"It's Mrs. Lucy Monahan. I'm the Chief Marketing Officer."

"Oh, nice to meet you!"

Mrs. Monahan smiles quickly before connecting her laptop to the audio/visual ports near to her. Then picks up the remote to turn on the large flat screen TV mounted on the wall to their left. The title card of the presentation appears on screen.

"My team has been hard at work not only reviewing the various reasons why the general public will not take our drug, but developing incentives on how to win convince them to take our drug."

Mrs. Monahan presses a key on the keyboard to advance the presentation to the next slide.

"As you can see a majority of the American public believes our drug is not important to take because it's not mandatory at the local, state, or federal levels. While the U.S. government

implores the public to take our drug to prevent getting and transmitting the disease, it's not mandatory. So we suggest your department work with the President to make a mandate for all Americans to take our drug."

"Ah, no, that's not possible."

"How can you say that now without discussing it with the President?"

Director Johnson clears his throat before saying: "That mandate is against the law."

"Not even if the President declares the disease a national emergency?"

"He can't do that. I mean, the President could, but that's not going to win the general public's trust. Frankly, it may start civil unrest. May I remind you all that our populace owns guns, and a good number of them."

Mrs. Monahan exchanges a quick glance with Mr. Chen and Mr. Robertson before continuing.

"The next slide shows Americans will not take our drug even though it's free because they don't see a reason to. Again, this is related to it not being mandatory, but another reason causing them to feel this way is that many states have reopened and released the restrictions formally in place. Thus, many Americans think the disease's dangers are no more."

"What would you like my department to do?"

"Can you release guidance that supersedes the states' rules? That could compel the public to take our drug so they could 'get back to normal' as the news loves to say."

"Well, we can give out guidance but we can't overrule the states' decision. That would lead to lawsuits and the states would most likely get an injunction against us while we wait for the case to be decided on so it would be moot anyway."

"You are making things very difficult for us, Director Johnson," Mr. Robertson says.

"Mr. Robertson, I'm not doing this on purpose. My department has to follow the Bill of Rights. If we dare to infringe on any of those then we will definitely lose the public's trust."

"Fine, fine," Mrs. Monahan says as she skips ahead in her presentation. "Let's discuss the incentives we developed to get the American public to take our drug. As you know the public loves free stuff, be it money, food, vacations, or random trinkets. Why don't we offer them something if they take our drug?"

Director Johnson rubs his hairy chin with his right hand as he ponders the proposal.

"We can't give out direct cash payments because that will be viewed as financial coercion but states could hold a lottery if they wanted to. Or they could hold raffles for those who take the drug such as free college tuition or the ability to win a free gun after passing a background check."

"And," Mrs. Monahan adds, "we suggest getting various private companies to assist in this manner. We give everyone who takes our drug a card showing they took it. The companies could give our free food or provide discounts for their products or services when the person shows completed their card."

Director Johnson smiles as he nods vigorously.

"So we can assume that your department will work with our marketing department to implement these incentives, Director," Mr. Robertson asks.

"Oh yes! I'll provide the needed personnel and any influence needed. Getting the private businesses on board won't be difficult. We'll pay for the free items and discounts from the disease relief funds. That fund has millions of unspent dollars."

"May I ask why we had to develop this plan," Mr. Chen asks. "My scientists and researchers labored for over a year to create our drug. We did our part and the government promised to do theirs but that didn't happen."

"Well, ah, um, well, my department was, ah, um, busy – yes, busy – with other issues. And I had to do daily televised briefings which took up a great deal of my time – well, our time. Collecting facts and figures from all the states and commonwealths was tedious and time-consuming."

The Director stops talking, looking at the three faces before him for a response or a look but gets only straight faces teetering on disgust.

"Fine! Yes, we – I mean my department – didn't do a good job of persuading the American public to take your drug. We thought incorrectly that they would need no persuading. We thought they would line up to take it because of their fear of the disease, but we thought wrong. Now, now we know better. And we will work tirelessly to correct our mistake and get Americans to take your drug so you will be compensated."

"I am glad to hear about the government's cooperation in this endeavor, Director," says Mr. Robertson. "I'll inform the Board of Directors today, which should alleviate their concerns. Do you have anything else to add Mr. Chen or Mrs. Monahan?"

"I do," Mrs. Monahan says. "I have a final part of the presentation that deals with the fear Director Johnson discussed earlier."

The slide progresses forward and she begins:

"Another avenue my team suggest the government helps us with is to exploit the fear still within the populace."

"Exploit," the Director interrupts in a lower volume. "Isn't that...manipulative?"

"It is and I'm not going to hide our our objective in this case. If we get the fearful public who has taken our drug already to go after the others then we calculate a good percentage of the latter would take our drug."

"How would that work?"

"If you wear a person down long enough through yelling or nagging or intimidation people will break and do whatever you want them to do."

"Good God! You want a part of the public to bully the others?"

"Yes," Mrs. Monahan says simply without emotion.

"In what way?"

"We will use the local and national news outlets and TV channels. Run commercials discussing the disease's dangers and number of deaths. Next, run similar ads on social media platforms but we can push the fear-based narrative better there by utilizing popular

influencers and celebrities. The public trusts those people and will feel that they made the right decision to take our drug. So they would use that information against those who choose not to take it.”

“Let me think about this.”

“Do you dislike this technique,” Mr. Chen asks.

Director Johnson nods.

“Why?”

“This just feel dirty. I don’t like it at all. Why don’t we have our scientists talk to the public?”

“No,” Mrs. Monahan exclaims. “Americans have turned on scientists and science in general. And your department is at fault for that.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Do you really,” asks Mr. Chen. “You and your department hurt the science community by your confusing messages all last year. The public seeks confidence, especially in times of stress, and they got nothing from you. In those daily briefings all they received was uncertainty. You made science appear not only inefficient but flawed. As if scientists and researchers just make it up as they go. You can’t win their trust back. Now we have to fix what you basically destroyed.”

The Director drops his head, shaking it slowly.

“I think we should go ahead and call this meeting,” Mr. Robertson says. “We have a plan in place so let’s focus on that. Sounds good?”

Director Johnson rises from his seat and mutters “yes.”

“Good. We’ll be in touch.”

Husband And Wife

Director Johnson enters his home appearing haggard, his head hanging low, with his shoulders slumped. He sighs heavily as he closes the door behind him and drops his hard-sided briefcase onto the navy blue runner covering the dark hardwood floor. The Director walks further into the foyer until he stops suddenly, spins around, and rushes back to the door to lock it.

"Alan, you're home finally."

"Yes, dear, I am."

He turns around and finally remembers his wife. The revelation causes him to close his eyes and rub his face with one of his hands.

Let's get this over with. The quicker I can the faster I can just sit down and relax.

Director Johnson moves through his large home quickly, going to where his wife would be at this hour: In her study.

He enters the room, viewing his wife reading a hardcover book in wide navy blue chaise lounge. The circular modern chandelier featuring faux candles is off but the glow from the recessed ceiling lights illuminates the room well enough.

"Good evening, Alan."

"Good evening, Linda."

"You look tired, honey. Was the meeting that difficult?"

Director Johnson averts his eyes and stares at the filled bookcases lining the wall.

"No, honey, don't run away. Look at me."

He inhales deeply before returning his attention back to his wife's slim figure. Linda wears a navy blue blouse with pleats stemming from the collar and stark white trousers with a navy blue belt fastened around her waist. Her slender bare feet flex back and forth with her crossed legs at the end of the lounge.

"You're hair looks lovely today, dear."

She smiles, shaking her light brown hair cut into a bob.

"And, and your makeup is lovely too."

"I'm not wearing any makeup, honey."

"That's even better! You, you don't need it to look young and vibrant!"

"Stop stammering, Alan. Just sit down at the foot of the chair and tell me about the meeting."

He follows her command, sitting down after Linda uncrosses her legs and places her feet onto the other end of the lounge. Director Johnson leans forward, resting his arms onto his knees, and stares at the floor.

"I didn't want to attend the meeting, Linda. Mostly because I knew it wasn't a pleasant one. Well, none of the meetings have been pleasant since the disease started. Anyway, I went and

I was yelled at because Medicamen is mad at not only my department but the government for the poor sales of their drug."

"What did you do, Alan," Linda asks, staring directly at her defeated husband.

"I took it. Well, I told them how hectic things were for me and my department with all of daily briefings and everything but they didn't care. Medicamen is focused on the amount of money they're missing out on because the public isn't taking the drug."

"As they should be."

"But they got a plan now, dear," Director Johnson says as he straightens up and turns his head to look at his wife. "They showed me a presentation on how we can get the public to take their drug."

"We? You mean the company wants to work with your department?"

"Yes, dear. And I feel horrible about it? Frankly, I don't like the plan at all."

"What's their plan?"

Director Johnson swallows hard before answering: "To use the public's fear about the disease against them. To manipulate them, essentially."

"How so," Linda asks, her stoic nature unwavering.

"By, by getting the people who already took the drug to go after those who didn't. The plan is to rile them up by playing on their fear. Medicamen wants us to run ads on TV and social media to scare people about the disease. Pay celebrities to advertise the drug and convince the public to take it. Because, because, because -"

"Because they know the best way to drive sales is to get someone else to do the selling. Don't you see, Alan?"

Director Johnson looks at his wife with this tired face, blinking slowly.

"The drug company can't come out and tell the public to take their drug because the public will think the company just wants money, which is true. And they can't have you or your department try to convince the public to take the drug because the public distrusts you and the government. It would be nice if some popular doctors could join the plan but the public doesn't like doctors much right now either. Especially pushy doctors. So that leaves only the public to sell the drug. And they aren't good at the job, unless you instill fear within them."

"Dear, this is all so, so...messed up. I don't want any part of this."

"I know you don't, honey, but you must. It is your job."

"I don't want this job anymore," Director Johnson mutters as he turns his face away.

"Then why don't we make a deal?"

"What type of deal," he says as he returns his glance back to his wife.

"You can retire after handling this disease only after you implement Medicamen's plan. What do you have to do to get this started?"

"My department is going to work with Medicamen's Marketing Team to enact their plan. I have access of millions of unspent dollars in the disease relief fund which I'll use to pay for free

products or discounted services from private companies. Those companies will give the public who shows their drug card free products or discounted services. Some of that money will be used to run ads on TV and social media to convince the public to take the drug. And we'll hire celebrities and influencers to help out too. Finally, we'll have to figure out a way to exploit the public's fear against their fellow neighbor."

"How long do you think it will take to do all of this, Alan?"

Director Johnson shrugs his shoulders. "Probably a couple of months. Finding companies willing to give out free products won't be difficult. The item that may take the most time is getting the ads filmed."

"You already spent the last year and a half doing this. What's another few more months?"

"I just feel bad about pitting the public against each other, dear. It's, it's not right."

"It's not right the public turned on you when you only tried to help. I know now the reason they did so because you didn't speak their language, honey."

"What do you mean?"

"You're a very smart man, Alan, which is one of the reasons I fell in love with you. While I understand your genius other people don't. Actually, many people don't. You are not an orator so you used the wrong words when speaking to the public. You used hope and cheer when you should've used doom and fear. The latter is what the public understands and what they expect."

"So this is the right move?"

Linda nods several times slowly.

Director Johnson picks up his wife's left hand and leans over to kiss it. Then he looks up at her, locking eyes with her.

"You always know how to make me feel better, dear."

Linda smiles and her eyes soften. "You're welcome, honey. Now let's go eat dinner."

After dinner husband and wife retire to their bedroom. Director Johnson proceeds to undress as Linda removes her jewelry, placing it into a wooden countertop jewelry organizer sitting upon a console table pressed against the wall.

"Are you going to take a shower, honey," Linda asks as she removes her earrings.

"I am."

"Good. Then we can have sex afterwards."

Director Johnson sighs. "I don't feel like it."

"Alan, you always say that. Yet, you always enjoy it when we finally do it."

"Yeah, that's true."

He enters the en suite bathroom and takes a long shower. Upon exiting the bathroom rubbing himself with a bath towel, he sees his wife laying on top of the covers fully nude.

“Oh.”

Linda pats the empty spot on the bed next to her and smiles seductively. Director Johnson drops the towel and scrambles across the king side bed toward his wife. A giggle escapes Linda's lips as he envelopes her in his arms and peppers her body with kisses.

Shuddering afterwards, Director Johnson flips off his wife onto his back, breathing deeply as he stares up at the ceiling. Linda snuggles up against him, rubbing his gray chest hairs with her left hand.

“I told you would enjoy it,” she whispers.

“Yeah...I did.”

“I'm going to take a shower.”

Linda slips out of bed and saunters into the en suite bathroom. Director Johnson closes his eyes as he listens to his heartbeat decrease.

I didn't want to go to the dinner that night, but I had to because I was Director Alan Johnson. And if Director Johnson from the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases didn't attend the dinner many important people would've been upset. So I brought my formal suit into the office and changed after work. My assistant ordered a driver to take me to the dinner and wait for me there. The seat was comfortable and the driver actually could drive so my ride was good. So good I wanted to take a nap.

The dinner was at a posh restaurant. Inside, I had to mingle which I detest because I was never good with small talk or faking interest. As I made my way around the room I saw a few men around a beautiful woman, and I instantly knew why. She wore a strapless cream dress with short sleeves which hugged her slender figure perfectly. Her long light brown hair swept across her shoulders as she turned to talk to each man.

I directed my focus from the party to the beautiful woman and I wanted to go talk to her. But I was scared. I thought she wouldn't speak to me. I was average in height and looks and some of the men trying to court the beautiful woman were taller than me or better looking. Then I finally realized even if the beautiful woman would talk to me she probably wouldn't be interested.

My attention was eventually stolen by another guest who dragged me to talk to some researchers from a fancy research institution. I kept darting my eyes over to look at the beautiful woman whenever I could but those glances made me feel worse. Eventually I tore away to go over to the bar to order a drink. As I sipped my Old Fashioned the beautiful woman walked over to me.

“Hello,” she said.

“Hello.”

She waved over the bartender who rushed over to serve her.

“A glass of champagne, please. You can pick the brand.”

I continued to sip my drink as I watched the bartender fix the order. He was quick yet elegant in his presentation and the beautiful woman nodded once upon take the flute.

"I didn't introduce myself," the beautiful woman said after tasting her drink. "I'm Linda McMullen."

"I'm Alan Johnson."

Linda laughs which heightens her beauty. I wanted her all to myself. I wanted her more than anything I wanted in my whole life.

"What's so funny?"

"You introduced yourself without your title. Every other man in this room introduced himself with their title to impress me. But you, Alan, oh you...you're trying to be humble. Or you are humble. Are you?"

"I know how to read the room. When I need to impress the 'right' people I use my title. But when I want to just be a 'regular' person then I'm Alan."

"I'm not the 'right' people?"

"I don't want to impress you, Linda. I rather get to know you. Well, that is, if you're available?"

"I am single. Are you, Alan?"

"I am."

"Then it looks like you're going to get to know me."

Linda exits from the bathroom with a bath towel wrapped around her body. She walks into the walk-in closet and dresses in a white satin nightgown that drapes to her mid-thighs. She reenters the bedroom, walks to the other side of the bed, and pulls back the covers. Director Johnson turns his head to look at her.

"I was thinking about the first time we met."

Linda smiles as she settles into the covers.

"Why did you choose me out of all the others, dear?"

"Because I could help you, honey. Those other men I couldn't. I would only be a trophy to them. Not you, Alan. You would let me help you."

The Plan Works Too Well

"Isn't this great new, Director Johnson? Don't you see how well our plan worked? Frankly, I'm surprised the public went so far to beg the government to mandate our drug be taken by everyone to keep the spread of the disease at bay."

Director Johnson sits in the same conference room in Medicamen Pharmaceuticals as he did before, appearing a mixture of fatigue and sadness as he looks at the man and woman sitting across from him. He clears his throat and speaks.

"I am surprised too, Mr. Robertson. I never thought things would go this far."

"I didn't either," chimes in Mrs. Monahan. "Even though I wanted the President to make a mandate I thought the public wouldn't go for it. Yet, now they have. Our plan worked."

"It worked too well," Director Johnson says.

"Is that a bad thing," Mr. Robertson asks, slightly offended.

The Director nods. The two Medicamen executives exchange looks with a quick turn of their heads before returning their gaze to the government official.

"I had reservations about your plan since the beginning," Director Johnson adds. "And now six months later we are seeing the consequences of that plan."

"Not this again," Mr. Robertson mutters.

"I accepted the commercials even though I disagreed with their menacing tone. They offered good information and reasons to take the drug. After a few weeks reports showed the public that hadn't taken the drug were now taking it. Yes, the increase was small, about twelve percent, but it was a start.

"And I accepted the celebrities and influencers urging the public to take the drug. Some were too pushy, however. I didn't like that but what can you do? Yet, I didn't know the plan was to convince kids to take the drug too. Why are we pushing for toddlers to take it?"

"Because the trials were going on at the time," Mrs. Monahan explains. "We wanted to inform the public our drug isn't only for adults."

"I wasn't, I mean my department wasn't informed the commercials and messaging would take on a dark tone regarding the public's children. Was that necessary? The disease isn't killing children although they do get sick."

"That plan was developed after the fact, Director Johnson. I apologize if my team did not make your department aware of that change. We created that part of the plan because the public will make decision quicker if they believe their children's safety is being threatened."

The Director closes his eyes and brings his hands to his face, cradling his nose into his palms.

"Do you have a problem with that strategy, Director?"

He cuts his eyes toward Mrs. Monahan but doesn't respond.

"By that death glare you do. I'm surprised you're acting like this, Director. You've been in this industry for decades. None of these tactics are new."

Director Johnson removes his hands from his face and recomposes himself in his chair.

"Do you have young children, Mrs. Monahan?"

"I have two. One is ten and the other is five."

"And have they taken the drug?"

She doesn't respond and grows stern.

"Don't you fear for their safety?"

She continues to stay silent.

"What about you, Mr. Robertson? Don't you fear for your children's safety?"

"That's too far, Director."

"Oh, I see. Going after *your* children is too far but not the public's? It's fine to protect your legacy but destroy others, right? I don't have any children so I have no dog in this fight but I do have nieces and nephews so I understand somewhat that it isn't right to twist up parents like this. It's bad enough we inject adults with fear everyday with news reports and advertising but not kids. Why do we have to go after the kids?"

"To make money," Mr. Robertson says.

Director Johnson's mouth drops open and he collapses into the back of his chair, staring at the two Medicamen executives who stare back with perfect posture and easy dispositions.

"We, Medicamen Pharmaceuticals, are like every for-profit company in the world: We want to make money. Yes, our industry is one critical to human life but we cannot save life by working for free. We need money to research new drugs and treatments along with paying our employees. To make money we have to take certain steps at times. This unfortunate disease requires us to take abnormal certain steps, which can be seen as 'cruel' or 'dirty.' Since I'm the CEO I sign off on these measures to keep Medicamen going."

"And you're OK with this? You feel this is the right path to take," Director Johnson asks with a tinge of despair.

"What I feel about our plan, Director, is irrelevant. My actions is what matters."

"Your action, Mr. Robertson, your actions allowing this plan to commence has caused more harm than good. The public is severely divided. You've seen the reports of fights across the country. People are scared of those who haven't taken the drug and some are taking extreme measures to stay 'safe.' There have been deaths. And now there's even more trouble brewing over the mandate. There are workers threatening to quit over the mandate. If enough do in critical industries this country will come to a halt. I, I don't want to see that happen. I want to speak to the President to get him to stop the mandate but I can't. The will of the public overrules me. All because your plan to make more money worked too well."

"Most of that talk is just that: Talk," Mrs. Monahan says as she waves her hand. "When the mandate deadline arrives the public will fall in line."

"And how can you be so sure?"

"Because they fear the consequences. If they stop working they will lose their jobs. No job means no money. And most Americans don't have enough savings to live on."

"You are willing to push the public into a corner?"

"We won't box them in, Director Johnson. They have a choice to not take the drug, yes, but the consequences doing just that will be swift and strict."

Director Johnson cracks a smile but scrambles to hide it with his hand. Then a laugh escapes him.

"I don't see what's funny about this," Mr. Robertson says.

"I don't find this funny either, but I had a sick thought: I do believe the consequences will be swift and strict but for us."

The Medicamen executives exchange a look again before returning their gaze to the government official.

"America has a well-armed populace. If we push them hard enough, if we push their backs against the wall, they will fight back. Because they will have nothing to lose."

"What are you saying, Director?"

He thinks for several seconds before shaking his head and rises from his seat.

"It doesn't matter now. Your plan worked too well."

Director Johnson walks across the conference room and exits through the door, leaving the Medicamen executives stunned.

Director Johnson enters his home, the waning light of the mid-evening pouring through the opening, and closes the door behind him. He places his hard-sided briefcase onto the floor gently and walks away. He stops mid-stride, doubles back to lock the door, then restarts his journey to the staircase.

"Honey, you're home early. Is something wrong?"

He doesn't answer his wife as he ascends the stairs slowly, stripping off his suit jacket. He carries it folded over his right arm.

Linda emerges from one of the rooms downstairs just in time to see her husband reach the top step. She turns stoic and ascends the staircase.

In their bedroom Director Johnson undresses, throwing his clothes into the hamper. As he moves toward the en suite bathroom Linda enters the bedroom.

"What happened, honey? Did the meeting not go well?"

"Let me take a shower first, Linda."

"I think we should talk first."

"No! I want to take a shower and have some time alone!"

Linda winces and step back.

"I'll come talk to you downstairs when I'm done."

Director Johnson enters the bathroom and closes the door behind him. He walks over to the large shower stall with a built-in seat with a glass sliding door and turns on the faucet. When the water is hot enough he enters the stall, slides the door closed, and sits down.

The Director leans forward, resting his arms on his knees, his head pointing down, the hot water running down his body. A deep sigh escapes him as his eyes stay closed.

Everything has gone so wrong and I allowed it. I can't blame the drug companies anymore because they only do what they can get away with. If people like me or the government stepped in years ago when the companies switched their focus from healing to profits maybe we wouldn't be in this position now.

Thinking about woulda, coulda, shoulda isn't going to fix the problems now, Alan. It's time to try to fix the problems facing us all. Yet, I don't think I can. I need power and I don't know if I have enough.

Director Johnson sighs again before standing up to lather up with body wash.

After the shower, he towels dry and dresses in a solid blue t-shirt and gray sweatpants. He exits the bedroom and descends the stairs.

"Dear, where are you?"

"In the living room."

He walks into the living room, finding his wife standing before the bay window, looking out at the neighborhood. Linda turns to face her husband as he nears.

"You were right, dear: The meeting went poorly."

"Tell me about it," she says and then motions for them to sit down on a nearby sofa.

"Medicamen is ecstatic about their plan working so well. They are happy the American public is full of fear, ready to fight back physically about the mandate to take the drug, all because they are making money now."

"And you're not happy, honey?"

"No. I'm pretty disgusted with it all. With everything."

Linda doesn't respond verbally but narrows her eyes as she looks at her husband.

"I became a doctor and a researcher to help people. When I accepted the Director role all those years ago I did so because I saw that was a way I could help people on a larger scale. At first I did help, but over the years I became a lackey for the drug companies seeking higher profits than helping the public. I lost my way and I want to get it back but I think I can't."

"Do you have a plan?"

Director Johnson nods slowly.

"I have to give a briefing soon. It will be live. I, I want to tell the public the truth. The truth about Medicamen's plan and how they used various tactics to manipulate them into taking their drug. That the division in our society right now and the fear infecting so many is partly the drug company's fault."

"Who else is to blame?"

He turns his head to face his wife. "Me."

"Alan, no."

"I can't ignore my role in this, Linda. I'm the Director of The National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. I was put out front to take charge by the government and I accepted the role. And I let Medicamen run rampant."

"What about the CDC? What about the FDA? They share some responsibility in this too."

"Of course they do. We all do. Yet, I can only fix my mistakes, not theirs."

"Do you think talking tot he public will calm them down? Really?"

"Why wouldn't it? The public wants the truth and I will give it to them."

"Alan, honey, the public wants to go back to 'normal.' They want to go back living without many cares. That means going out to the bar, concerts, to restaurants, and one to two vacations a year. If they can return to 'normal' through a drug mandate and giving up their rights and freedoms then they will. But if you tell them the truth about Medicamen, about your department, and the government's response then you will destroy their return to normalcy. The public will turn on you, on the drug companies, and on the government because now they have to deal with the truth. A truth they probably knew before but ignored because if they just waited long enough normal life would return."

"The public will care about what I have to say."

"No they won't, honey. Please believe me that I take no pleasure in destroying your plan but I know it won't turn out well. Not well at all."

Director Johnson looks at his wife stunned. She rubs the side of his face gently.

"What can I do then, dear?"

"Say nothing and let everything play out."

"What if it all goes wrong?"

"It's already gone wrong, honey. All we can do now is stand by and watch."