

CHAPTER ONE

The Third Week of August

Eleven A.M., Princeton, New Jersey

Donald R. Brockman MD, PhD, finished the half Windsor knot and centered the burgundy tie neatly between the peaks of his shirt collar. Nervousness radiated from every pore. Today was critical for the chief research scientist of Luxow Pharmaceutical oncology division. He'd never been a whistle blower before, but in ten minutes he would drive to Philadelphia where two opposing teams of lawyers waited to take his deposition for what might prove the most horrific international product liability case the world had ever seen.

The original plan for his testimony had changed at the last minute; the only thing of which he was certain was that today would either see him a free man or a marked man. The attorneys suing Luxow had assured him once his testimony was on record he would be safe. They guaranteed there was nothing the huge international conglomerate could do to him, other than try to discredit him.

Even from the world-insulated confines of his laboratory, Dr. Brockman had seen too much of human nature to believe them.

Turning from the mirror, he went to the dresser and looked at the arrangement of photographs. His late wife smiled at him from the frame on the left. *God, how I miss you. Has it really been five years?*

The center picture brought to memory the shower clean scent of strawberry hair; it framed a face that was a mirror of his wife's, only younger. Twenty-three-year-old Kira Brockman had her mother's gentle beauty and inquisitive blue eyes. She also had the iron core that had brought him to choose to testify today.

To the right of Kira, his son, Michael, smiled happily. The picture had been taken six years ago when Michael was a seven-year-old bundle of kinetic energy. A surprise baby ten years younger than Kira, he'd been happy then. Diagnosed at two with Asperger's Syndrome, Michael had depended on his mother to be his link to the world. Irene had worked with him daily, teaching him not only how to communicate, but how to *be* in a world in which he was markedly different. At four, when his IQ had been off the charts, she'd helped him learn how to focus his energies, make use of his intelligence. When she'd died, he'd stopped talking and retreated into a private world that nothing could induce him to leave. The doctors Donald had consulted said Michael suffered from post-traumatic stress. *But how could a seven year old suffer from PTSD?* It was a question Donald had asked himself hundreds of times. He only hoped the day would come when Michael could be happy again.

Brockman pushed off the overwhelming sadness thinking of his son brought on, and retrieved his jacket from the bed. He put it on, readjusted the cell phone on his belt, went

down the carpeted stairs to the living room, and glanced at the clock. *Ten-fifty-nine—time to leave if he was to make his two o'clock appointment.*

The dull metal sound of a car door closing drew his attention to the living room window. He crossed to look between the drawn drapes. Two vehicles were at the curb. The sight shook him hard. Apprehension turned into fear when Bill Thorndyke, head of security for Luxow, got out of the first car.

He'd been found out.

On the heels of realization, fear became a thought-clearing, strangely calming anger. With all the clandestine planning devoted to setting up his testimony, Donald Brockman had known discovery was inevitable. Luxow would have moved heaven and earth to learn his identity. They could not allow him to testify. Exposure was an unacceptable risk for a drug company on the verge of the biggest breakthrough in cancer treatment the world had ever seen.

The doorbell rang. Brockman backed away from the window into the foyer, and looked around. There were only two ways in or out of the house and this one was compromised. He started to turn toward the kitchen, only to pause when a noise came from that door, too. *Trapped.* He took a quick breath. With no way out there was only one thing left to do.

"Be ready," he whispered and took out his cell phone. Pressing speed dial, he raised the phone to his ear. He waited for the prompt, then pressed the pound key, entered three digits, and closed the phone as the front door burst open. Turning, he faced Bill Thorndyke and a second man. The head of security stepped in close, took the phone, and slipped it into his pocket.

"Don't make us use force, Doctor." He nodded at the two men who came through the kitchen. They flanked Brockman on either side. "Let's go," Thorndyke ordered.

"You won't get away with this. They're expecting me at the deposition."

Thorndyke's smile exposed tobacco yellowed teeth. "You won't make the deposition." Turning to the man next to him he said, "Check the house. Get the computer," making Brockman thankful once again he'd decided to hide the files in the manner he had.

Maneuvered outside by the men on either side of him, he took a last, desperate look around, hoping someone, anyone would be there. But, it was almost mid-day in the commuter suburb. The street was deserted.

Behind him, Thorndyke stepped out of the house and closed the door. Brockman swiveled his head to look at the other man. Something in Thorndyke's flat-eyed gaze made his blood run cold. It was now or never.

Facing forward, he took a half step and stumbled, pulled free of the men holding his arms, then shot forward into a run. He made it six steps before one of the security men took his legs out from under him in a rolling football tackle. His head slammed the cement walkway with a loud crack. Onrushing darkness claimed him.

“God damn it!” Thorndyke snapped. He looked around to make sure there were no witnesses. “Get him into the car, fast!” he ordered, staring at the small pool of blackish blood left on the concrete sidewalk. “Shit!”

Eleven A.M., Holy Name Hospital, Atlanta, Georgia

The moment Kira Brockman saw the 9-1-1 on her pager her heart stuttered then banged into overdrive; breathing quickly followed suit. This was the thing that was never supposed to happen, the contingency plan, not the main event. She stared at the prearranged emergency page from her father, trying for deep, calming breaths. For months they’d awaited this day, lived both in fear and anticipation of it, with the threat that it might never arrive.

Today her father, Donald R. Brockman MD, PhD, chief research scientist of Luxow Pharmaceutical’s oncology division, was scheduled to testify against the drug giant.

A glance at the white 9-1-1 on her pager stole Kira’s ability to swallow. *Had been scheduled to testify*, she corrected herself.

‘If they find out what I am doing, they’ll come after you,’ was her father’s most often repeated concern over the months it had taken the lawyers to verify and prepare his testimony. No matter how many times the lawyers suing the drug giant had assured them her father would be safe once his testimony was given, unease had churned in Kira’s gut. Actions—especially right and honorable actions—too often had consequences that could destroy a person more finally than death.

She blinked and the not quite antiseptic smell of the gray green staff doctors’ locker room filtered through her subconscious in a union of sweaty clothing and low mustiness. *Pick up Michael and go.* Even as the thought rose, the terrified paralysis in her lungs gave way and she took a deep breath, expelled it. Just that quickly, her pulse beat normally again, her thoughts were lucid and precise. The five hours she’d just spent working Saturday night triage in the emergency room lent swiftness and economy to thought and action, helped zero her focus onto only what needed to be done this instant to get her and her patient to the next. Swiftly she reset her pager, shrugged off her stained lab coat and tossed it into the hamper, went to her locker and she pulled on the jeans and t-shirt she’d worn to work. Dressed, she reached to the back of the locker’s top shelf, searching blindly until she touched the envelope she’d placed there long ago. Hurriedly, she separated the taped envelope from the metal locker back. A swift press between her fingers assured her the thirty one hundred dollar bills were still there. She put the money into her combination purse and carrier, slung its single leather strap over her shoulder, bent and retrieved the small sports bag containing a spare change of clothing, and left the locker room.

In a boggy funk, she maneuvered the corridor to the hospital’s rear exit and out into the employee parking lot. Managing a normal smile, she nodded to those people who greeted her and headed for her aging Acura.

The hot summer sun pounded down as she fast-footed across the parking lot. The searing moist lava that passed for air in Georgia in August was overwhelming. She was

coated with perspiration by the time she reached her car and pressed the button on her remote to unlock it. Paranoia prickled between her shoulder blades. Hand hovering near the door handle, she checked the parking lot. *No one...not yet anyway.*

Tossing both bags into the back, she slid into the driver's seat. The hot leather scorched through her jeans. She started the car, pulled out her cell and pressed speed dial. On the third ring a voice responded, "Hopkins School, how may I help you?"

"This is Kira Brockman. There's an emergency with my father. I'm on my way to pick up my brother Michael. Please tell Dr. Altman and have Michael ready to leave immediately."

"I'll let him know, Dr. Brockman," the operator assured her.

Swallowing humid air, Kira closed the phone, firmed her jaw, and put the car into gear. Instantly the air conditioner kicked on and blew cool air through the dashboard vents. A glance at the gas gauge reinforced her memory of filling the tank last night. Unexpectedly disturbing Michael's routine wouldn't be fun for either of them, but it had to be done.

"Move!" she ordered both the car and herself, pressed the accelerator and left the parking lot.

Wanting extra clothing and the papers secured in her desk, she headed for the plain three-story square block of forty-year-old red brick and clapboard buildings the hospital owned and maintained for its medical students, residents and their families. An unfamiliar white four-door car parked near the front of her building drew her attention. A man she'd never seen before talked with a first year resident whom Kira knew. Paranoia prickled between her shoulder blades and the hair at the back of her neck went electric. The unease twisting her belly told her he asked about her.

A moment later her disquiet went ballistic when a tall, thin man with the appearance of an albino emerged from her building and shook his head. The first man—squat and broad with short dark hair—nodded.

A sickening sensation of dread crept through her. It hadn't been ten minutes since her father's 9-1-1 page, but they were here. That meant her father was in their hands. The thought sent a chill speeding along her spine. If they were here instead of at the hospital, they knew her rotation schedule. The only reason she wasn't in the apartment was because she'd volunteered to take the ER rotation for another resident before heading into the pediatrics shift she would now miss. With a little luck the men searching for her would go to the hospital next, giving her time.

Rattled, she drove along the parking lot's back row, grateful the car's tinted glass obscured her features. The desire to see if they'd spotted her nearly choked her, but she forced herself not to look back when she reached the exit and turned onto Decatur.

Her gaze constantly on the rear-view mirror, she drove a meandering path for six blocks before she was certain the white car was not behind her. Only then did she head to the Hopkins School for the Gifted. Goose flesh scuttled across her skin when she realized that if someone had been at her apartment, they might also be at Michael's school.

Pushing the Acura as fast as she dared, she cut the thirty-minute trip to twenty. No other cars were in the drive ahead of her when she arrived at the school.

Parking in the circular drive's no parking zone she climbed out and raced up the front steps into the historically accurate Ante Bellum mansion. After identifying herself, she was taken to the school administrator's office. He came from behind his desk to greet her.

"Dr. Brockman, I'm so sorry to hear about your father," Hugh Altman said. Bald and impeccably dressed, he was the image of authority. Face serious, he extended his hand.

Gratefully Kira allowed his firm grip to ground her. She had to be calm because she knew Michael would read and responded to agitation the way prey animals responded to encroaching predators: by either shutting down completely or by running. For both their sakes and regardless of the circumstances she needed to be calm and matter of fact.

"Thank you," she said, not bothering to keep the anxiety out of her voice. The story she'd given them might be a fabrication, but the accompanying emotions were all too real. "My father is in CCU. The doctor said it doesn't look good. I've booked a flight and we must get to the airport."

"Of course. Michael is packing now." Dr. Altman released her hand but held her gaze. "I'm very sorry," he repeated. "Your father is a great man. He's accomplished wonderful things."

Wanting out and away, Kira nodded. "I should help Michael."

"Not too worry, Mrs. Dante is with him. They'll be down momentarily." He returned to his desk and picked up a paper and pen. "I need you to sign the release form."

"Release form?"

"It's standard school procedure. When anyone takes a student from the school, a release is required. A legal formality—I'm sure you understand."

Nodding, she took the pen. The inlaid silver and black Mont Blanc was heavy in her fingers. She gave up the attempt to read the form when the words ran together and signed it.

When she set the pen on the desk, he asked, "Is there anything I can help with?"

Kira shook her head, brushing back her bangs with a nervous flick of her fingers. "It's happened so fast. Without knowing all the details..."

"I understand," Dr. Altman said sympathetically as the door opened and Michael entered.

Six feet tall, with dark hair and the same deep blue sapphire eyes as Kira, thirteen year old Michael Brockman appeared seventeen—until you looked at his face.

"Daddy's sick," she told him. "We have to go home."

Michael stared at her, his eyes distant but not quite vacant. He glanced down at the leather duffle he carried and hugged it to his chest. Kira looked from her brother to Dr. Altman, the unvoiced question plain on her face.

"He'll do fine," Altman said. "Won't you Michael?"

Michael looked at Dr. Altman, nodded and returned his stare to the bag.

"We have to go," Kira said. "Again, thank you, Dr. Altman."

"He'll do fine," the administrator repeated. "Don't worry." He turned to Michael and said gently, "Michael, remember our talks."

Michael nodded without looking up.

Taking her brother's arm, Kira led him to the front door, where she paused to make certain they weren't being watched. When they reached the car, she put his bag with hers while he got into the front.

Settling herself behind the steering wheel, she started the car. "Michael, I got the call. They took Daddy."

Michael looked at her through veiled, unreadable eyes. He turned and stared out the windshield. With a soft exhale, Kira put the car in gear. Pulling into the street, she turned right, and almost ran into the white Ford Fusion.

The driver turned to look at her. It took a millisecond to recognize the albino-like man who'd stood in front of her apartment even as the driver's dark ovoid eyes went wide in recognition.

Adrenaline surged through her and Kira jerked the wheel sharply, narrowly missing the oncoming car. She floored the accelerator, making the Acura's front tires scream in protest as they fought for traction on the hot asphalt. Turning right at the first corner, she went a block and turned left.

She took the next right, saw the white car making the turn behind her. She floored the pedal and was at the next corner before the white car finished its turn. She sped forward and, two blocks later, turned again. She took three more turns in rapid succession, not caring what direction she went.

Breath chugging in her lungs, she watched her brother hug himself out of the corner of her eye. "Hold on Michael, we'll be okay." The promise sounded hollow in her ears.

After ten minutes of twists and turns without the white Ford in the rearview, Kira headed for the expressway. There she slipped into the heavy flow of Atlanta's midday traffic.

With traffic moving at a good pace, Kira pushed the car as fast as she dared. She weaved between lanes and varied her speed while her gaze flicked often and rapidly between the rear and side view mirrors, checking every car behind her.

The steady expressway pace calmed her. It was always that way when she got into the flow of a situation, whether she was driving or doing triage during a heavy day of ER rotation. Twenty minutes passed without a sign of the white Fusion and she allowed herself to relax a little. When downtown Atlanta fell behind and traffic thinned, she touched Michael's shoulder. "You okay?"

He nodded and then said, "Yes," speaking to her for the first time as though reminding himself of something Dr. Altman had told him to do.

"Okay... okay," she repeated and went back to driving and watching.

Three miles before Marietta, Kira spotted a white sedan working through traffic. There were two people in the front seat. The vehicle was a dozen cars behind them and moving up fast. Her instincts screamed in warning. "How did they...?" she bit off and concentrated on the road. Michael turned to look behind them then stared silently forward again.

She pushed the Acura to seventy-five, weaving faster between the cars. An exit sign came up quickly. She swerved into the right lane when she recognized the full cloverleaf exit. An idea of how to lose her pursuers formed.

She reached the crest of the overpass and noted the white Ford had gained on them and was in the center lane. The exit came quickly. She braked hard when she entered the ramp to avoid hitting a slow moving Jeep, swerved to get around it and hopped the curbing. The steering wheel tried to jerk itself from her hands, but she held tight, sped past the Jeep and lurched back into the center of the ramp.

Without stopping, she turned right at the bottom of the ramp, manhandling the steering wheel and hitting the gas. Her tires groaned. A car on her left squealed its brakes and swerved, narrowly missing them. Kira kept her focus and floored the accelerator as she went under the expressway, reached the on-ramp and turned the wheel hard. The tires protested: the car's rear broke loose. She turned the wheel into the skid, correcting before it worsened. The tires grabbed and she shot forward on the ramp. Willing her timing to be right, she reached the top of the ramp and entered the expressway again. It was perfect!

Across from her, the white Ford was on the exit. The man in the passenger seat stared across the highway at her. The instant the white car disappeared, Kira hit the brakes.

Instead of blending into the traffic, she held the car on the inside lane and cut off a car about to exit. She took the exit ramp slower this time to make sure the men didn't spot her. At the bottom she turned right, went slowly under the overpass and turned into the on-ramp. Five seconds after traversing all four curving ramps of the cloverleaf she was back on the expressway, heading in her original direction and praying the men after them were on their way back to Atlanta.

The next twenty miles were spent driving and watching the mirrors until she was fairly certain she'd lost them. "I think we're okay," Kira said to Michael, speaking for the first time since the second half of their crazy ride started. She glanced at him, hoping the last forty minutes had not reversed two years of work.

He looked at her. "Will Daddy be okay?"

"As long as we're free, Daddy will be okay," Kira said as matter-of-factly as she could while ignoring a sinking feeling, but Michael was staring vacantly ahead once again. He'd been through a lot in the last six years; today wasn't helping.

She let silence fill the car for a while before saying, "Michael, we have to trust Daddy knows what he's doing. It's his only chance." She bit her lip. Michael blamed their father for their mother's death and, however unjust, to a then seven year old with Asperger's suffering from post-traumatic stress and unipolar depression, it had been perfect logic.

When he came home for last summer's month long school break, Michael appeared to have made progress and seemed to accept that nothing could have prevented their mother's death. Before he returned to school, she and her father had explained there might come a day when one of them would take him out of school because of the bad men plotting against their father. Michael listened, but Kira couldn't be sure he'd fully understood what they told him.

"It's not fair. I liked it at school," Michael said a few minutes later.

"No, it's not," she agreed, relieved to hear him speak.

"Where are we going?"

"Virginia then Montreal." Their aunt's farm was in Virginia. If it was safe, they would hide there for a few days before going to Canada. "Hungry, Mike?"

He shook his head and curled against the door. Fear filled Kira. It had taken him a year to recover from the almost catatonic depression brought on by their mother's death. By then her father had found Hopkins, which catered year round to emotionally distressed genius level children. The school created an unusually safe psychological barrier to the outside world that enabled their students to grow intellectually while undergoing treatment for emotional problems. She'd selected the Atlanta hospital for her residency to be near Michael.

Concern ate at her. Though there had been no other choice, bringing him suddenly into the real world might undo the growth and healing of the last four years.

A little while later in the sun's burning heat and still hunched into himself, Michael fell asleep.

Time passed and when the white Fusion did not reappear in her rearview, Kira allowed herself to believe they had truly escaped their pursuers. The sense of hope soothed.

She looked at the gas gauge. There was a little more than half a tank left. She decided to get gas and food when the gauge hit the quarter mark. If everything went smoothly, they should be at her aunt's late tomorrow evening.

Her hands began to tremble. She gripped the wheel tighter. Had it really been only two hours since she'd gotten her father's page?