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Written by Michael Crichton

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This novel is fiction,
except for the parts that aren't.

PROLOGUE

Vasco Borden, forty-nine, tugged at the lapels of his suit and straightened his tie as he walked down the plush carpeted hallway. He wasn't used to wearing a suit, though he had had this one, in navy, specially tailored to minimize the muscular bulk of his body. Borden was big, six-four, two-forty, an ex-football player who worked as a private investigator and fugitive-recovery specialist. And right now, Vasco was following his man, a thirty-year-old balding postdoc, a fugitive from MicroProteonomics of Cambridge, Mass., as he headed right for the main room of the conference.

The BioChange 2006 Conference, enthusiastically entitled "Make It Happen Now!" was being held at the Venetian hotel in Las Vegas. The two thousand attendees represented all sorts of biotech workers, including investors, HR officers who hired scientists, technology transfer officers, CEOs, and intellectual property attorneys. In one way or another, nearly every biotech company in America was represented here.

It was the perfect place for the fugitive to meet his contact. The fugitive looked like a dink; he had an innocent face and a little soul patch on his chin; he slouched when he walked and gave the impression of timidity and ineptitude. But the

fact was, he'd made off with twelve transgenic embryos in a cryogenic dewar and transported them across country to this conference, where he intended to turn them over to whomever he was working for.

It wouldn't be the first time a postdoc got tired of working on salary. Or the last.

The fugitive went over to the check-in table to get his conference card to drape around his neck. Vasco hung by the entrance, slipping his own card over his head. He'd come prepared for this. He pretended to look at the event roster.

The big speeches were all in the main ballroom. Seminars were scheduled for such topics as "Fine-Tune Your Recruiting Process," and "Winning Strategies to Keep Research Talent," "Executive and Equity Compensation," "Corporate Governance and the SEC," "Patent Office Trends," and "Investor Angels: Boon or Curse?" and, finally, "Trade Secrets Piracy: Protect Yourself Now!"

Much of Vasco's work involved high-tech firms. He had been to these conferences before. Either they were about science or business. This one was business.

The fugitive, whose name was Eddie Tolman, walked past him into the ballroom. Vasco followed. Tolman went down a few rows and dropped into a seat with no one nearby. Vasco slipped into the row behind and sat a little to one side. The Tolman kid checked his cell phone for text messages, then seemed to relax, and looked up to listen to the speech.

Vasco wondered why.

The man at the podium was one of the most famous venture capitalists in California, a legend in high-tech investment, Jack B. Watson. Watson's face was blown up large on the

screen behind him, his trademark suntan and striking good looks magnified to fill the room. Watson was a young-looking fifty-two, and assiduously cultivated his reputation as a capitalist with a conscience. That appellation had carried him through a succession of ruthless business deals: all the media ever showed were his appearances at charter schools, or handing out scholarships for underprivileged kids.

But in this room, Vasco knew, Watson's reputation for tough deal making would be foremost in everyone's mind. He wondered if Watson was ruthless enough to acquire a dozen transgenic embryos by illicit means. He probably was.

However, at the moment, Watson was cheerleading: "Biotechnology is booming. We are poised to see the greatest growth of any industry since computers thirty years ago. The largest biotech company, Amgen, in Los Angeles, employs seven thousand people. Federal grants to universities exceed four billion a year on campuses from New York to San Francisco, Boston to Miami. Venture capitalists invest in biotech companies at a rate of five billion a year. The lure of magnificent cures made possible by stem cells, cytokines, and proteonomics are drawing the brightest talent to the field. And with a global population growing older by the minute, our future is brighter than ever. And that's not all!

"We've reached the point where we can stick it to Big Pharma—and we will. Those massive, bloated companies need us and they know it. They need genes, they need technology. They're the past. We're the future. We're where the money is!"

That drew huge applause. Vasco shifted his bulk in his seat. The audience was applauding, even though they knew that this son of a bitch would cut their company to pieces in a second if it suited his bottom line.

"Of course, we face obstacles to our progress. Some people—however well intentioned they *think* they are—choose to stand in the way of human betterment. They don't want the paralyzed to walk, the cancer patient to thrive, the sick child to live and play. These people have their reasons for objecting. Religious, ethical, or even 'practical.' But whatever their reasons, they are on the side of death. And they will not triumph!"

More thunderous applause. Vasco glanced at the fugitive, Tolman. The kid was checking his phone again. Evidently waiting for a message. And waiting impatiently.

Did that mean the contact was late?

That was sure to make Tolman nervous. Because somewhere, Vasco knew, this kid had stashed a stainless steel thermos of liquid nitrogen that held the embryos. It wasn't in the kid's room. Vasco had already searched it. And five days had passed since Tolman left Cambridge. The coolant wouldn't last forever. And if the embryos thawed, they would be worthless. So unless Tolman had a way to top up his LN2, by now he must be anxious to retrieve his container, and hand it over to his buyer.

It had to happen soon.

Within an hour, Vasco was sure of it.

"Of course, people will try to obstruct progress," Watson said, from the podium. "Even our best companies find themselves embroiled in pointless, unproductive litigation. One of my startups, BioGen, in Los Angeles, is in court right now because some guy named Burnet thinks he doesn't need to honor the contracts he himself signed. Because now he's changed his mind. Burnet is trying to block medical progress

unless we pay him. An extortionist whose daughter is the lawyer handling the case for him. Keeping it in the family." Watson smiled.

"But we will win the Burnet case. Because progress cannot be stopped!"

At that, Watson threw both hands up in the air, waving to the audience as applause filled the room. He almost acts like a candidate, Vasco thought. Is that what Watson was aiming for? The guy certainly had enough money to get elected. Being rich was essential in American politics these days. Pretty soon—

He looked over, and saw that the Tolman kid was gone.

The seat was empty.

Shit!

"Progress is our mission, our sacred calling," Watson cried. "Progress to vanquish disease! Progress to halt aging, banish dementia, extend life! A life free of disease, decay, pain, and fear! The great dream of humanity—made real at last!"

Vasco Borden wasn't listening. He was heading down the row toward the side aisle, scanning the exit doors. A couple of people leaving, nobody looking like Tolman. The guy couldn't have gotten away, there was—

He looked back just in time to see Tolman moving slowly up the center aisle. The kid was looking at his cell phone again.

"Sixty billion this year. Two hundred billion next year. Five hundred billion in five years! That is the future of our industry, and that is the prospect we bring to all mankind!"

The crowd suddenly rose to its feet, giving Watson a

standing ovation, and for a moment Vasco could no longer see Tolman at all.

But only for a moment—now Tolman was making for the center exit. Vasco turned away, slipping through the side door and out into the lobby, just as Tolman came blinking into the bright lobby light.

Tolman glanced at his watch and headed down the far corridor, past big glass windows that looked out on the red brick campanile of San Marco, re-created by the Venetian hotel and lit brilliantly at night. He was going toward the swimming pool area, or perhaps the courtyard. This time of night those spaces would be crowded.

Vasco stayed close.

This was it, he thought.

In the ballroom, Jack Watson paced back and forth, smiling and waving to the cheering crowd. "Thank you, that's very kind, thank you . . ." ducking his head a little each time he said it. Just the right amount of modesty.

Rick Diehl snorted in disgust as he watched. Diehl was backstage, taking it all in on a little black-and-white monitor. Diehl was the thirty-four-year-old CEO of BioGen Research, a struggling startup in Los Angeles, and this performance by his most important outside investor filled him with unease. Because Diehl knew that despite the cheerleading, and the press releases with smiling black kids, at the end of the day, Jack Watson was a true bastard. As someone put it, "The best I can say about Watson is, he's not a sadist. He's just a first-class son of a bitch."

Diehl had accepted funding from Watson with the greatest reluctance. He wished he didn't need it. Diehl's wife was

wealthy, and he had started BioGen with her money. His first venture as CEO had been to bid on a cell line being licensed by UCLA. It was the so-called Burnet cell line, developed from a man named Frank Burnet, whose body produced powerful cancer-fighting chemicals called cytokines.

Diehl hadn't really expected to land the license, but he did, and suddenly he faced the prospect of gearing up for FDA approval for clinical trials. The cost of clinical trials started at a million dollars, and went rapidly to ten million a pop, not counting downstream costs and after-marketing expenses. He could no longer rely solely on his wife's money. He needed outside financing.

That was when he discovered just how risky venture capitalists considered cytokines to be. Many cytokines, such as interleukins, had taken years to come to market. And many others were known to be dangerous, even deadly, to patients. And then Frank Burnet had brought a lawsuit, casting doubt on BioGen's ownership of the cell line. Diehl had trouble getting investors to even meet with him. In the end, he had to accept smiling, suntanned Jack Watson.

But Watson, Diehl knew, wanted nothing less than to take over BioGen and throw Rick Diehl out on his ass.

"Jack! Fantastic speech! Fantastic!" Rick extended his hand, as Watson came backstage at last.

"Yeah. Glad you liked it." Watson didn't shake his hand. Instead, he unclipped his wireless transmitter and dropped it in Diehl's palm. "Take care of this, Rick."

"Sure, Jack."

"Your wife here?"

"No, Karen couldn't make it." Diehl shrugged. "Thing with the kids."

"I'm sorry she missed this speech," Watson said.

"I'll see she gets the DVD," Diehl said.

"But we got the bad news out there," Watson said. "That's the point. Everybody now knows there's a lawsuit, they know Burnet is a bad guy, and they know we're on top of it. That's the important thing. The company's now perfectly positioned."

Diehl said, "Is *that* why you agreed to give the speech?"

Watson stared at him. "You think I *want* to come to Vegas? Christ." He unclipped the microphone, handed it to Diehl. "Take care of this, too."

"Sure, Jack."

And Jack Watson turned and walked away from him without another word. Rick Diehl shivered. Thank God for Karen's money, he thought. Because without it, he'd be doomed.

Passing through the arches of the Doge's Palace, Vasco Borden moved into the courtyard, following his fugitive, Eddie Tolman, through the nighttime crowd. He heard his earpiece crackle. That would be his assistant, Dolly, in another part of the hotel. He touched his ear. "Go," he said.

"Baldy boy Tolman has reserved some entertainment."

"Is that right?"

"That's right, he—"

"Hold on," Vasco said. "Just hold that thought."

Up ahead, he was seeing something he could not believe. From the right side of the courtyard, he saw Jack B. Watson,

accompanied by a beautiful, slinky, dark-haired woman, merging with the crowd. Watson was famous for always being accompanied by gorgeous women. They all worked for him, they were all smart, and they were all stunning.

The woman didn't surprise Vasco. What surprised him was that Jack Watson was heading directly toward Eddie Tolman, the fugitive. That made no sense at all. Even if Tolman were doing a deal with Watson, the famous investor would never meet him face-to-face. And certainly never in public. But there they were, on a collision course in the crowded Venetian courtyard, right before his eyes.

What the hell? He couldn't believe it was going to happen.

But then the slinky woman stumbled a bit, and stopped. She was wearing a short, skintight dress and heels. She leaned on Watson's shoulder, bent her knee, showing plenty of leg, and inspected her shoe. She adjusted her heel strap, stood up again, and smiled at Watson. And Vasco glanced away from them and saw that Tolman was gone.

But now Watson and the woman crossed Vasco's own path, passing so close to him that he could smell her perfume, and he heard Watson murmur something to her, and she squeezed his arm and put her head on his shoulder as they walked. The romantic couple.

Was all that an accident? Had it happened on purpose? Had they made him? He pressed his earpiece.

"Dolly. I lost him."

"No prob. I got him." He glanced up. She was on the second floor, watching everything below. "Was that Jack Watson that just walked by?"

"Yeah. I thought maybe . . ."

"No, no," Dolly said. "I can't imagine Watson's involved in this. Not his style. I mean, Baldy boy is heading for his

room because he has an appointment. That's what I was telling you. He got some entertainment."

"Namely?"

"Russian girl. Apparently he only likes Russians. Tall ones."

"Anybody we know?"

"No, but I have a little information. And I got cameras in his suite."

"How'd you do that?" He was smiling.

"Let's just say Venetian security isn't what it used to be. Cheaper, too."

Irina Katayeva, twenty-two, knocked on the door. In her left hand she held a bottle of wine, encased in a velvet gift bag with drawstrings at the top. A guy of about thirty answered the door, smiled. He wasn't attractive.

"Are you Eddie?"

"That's right. Come on in."

"I brought this for you, from the hotel safe." She handed him the wine.

Watching all this on his little handheld video monitor, Vasco said, "She gave it to him in the hallway. Where it would be seen on the security monitor. Why didn't she wait until she was in the room?"

"Maybe she was told to do it that way," Dolly said.

"She must be six feet. What do we know about her?"

"Good English. Four years in this country. Studying at the university."

"Works at the hotel?"

"No."

"So, non-pro?" Vasco said.

"This is Nevada," Dolly said.

On the monitor, the Russian girl went into the room and the door closed. Vasco turned the tuning dial on his video monitor, picked up one of the inside cameras. The kid had a big suite, close to two thousand square feet, done in the Venetian style. The girl nodded and smiled.

"Nice. Nice room."

"Yeah. So, you want a drink?"

She shook her head. "I don't really have time." She reached behind her back and unzipped the dress, left it hanging from her shoulders. She turned around, pretending to be puzzled, allowing him to see her bare back all the way down to her buttocks. "Which way is the bedroom?"

"This way, baby."

As they went into the bedroom, Vasco again turned the dials. He saw the bedroom just as she was saying, "I don't know anything about your business, and I don't want to know. Business is *so* boring." She let the dress fall. She stepped out of it and lay down on the bed, naked now except for high heels. She kicked them off. "I don't think you need a drink," she said. "And I know I don't."

Tolman threw himself on her, landing with a kind of thud. She grunted and tried to smile. "Easy, boy." He was panting, gasping. He reached for her hair, to caress her. "Leave the hair alone," she said. She twisted away. "Just lie down," she said, "and let me make you happy."

"Aw, hell," Vasco said, staring at the tiny screen. "Do you believe that? He ain't even a minuteman. When a woman looks like that, you'd think—"

"Never mind," Dolly said, over the headset. "She's getting dressed now."

"So she is," he said. "And rather hurriedly, too."

"She's supposed to give him half an hour. And if he paid her, I didn't see it."

"Me neither. But he's getting dressed, too."

"Something's up," Dolly said. "She's walking out the door."

Vasco thumbed the tuner, trying to change to a different camera. All he got was static. "I can't see shit."

"She's leaving. He's still there. No, wait . . . he's leaving, too."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. And he's taking the wine bottle with him."

"Okay," Vasco said. "And where's he going with it?"

Frozen embryos in liquid nitrogen were transported in a special stainless steel thermos lined with borosilicate glass called a dewar. Dewars were mostly big affairs, shaped like milk jugs, but you could get them as small as a liter. A dewar didn't have the shape of a wine bottle, because they had a wide-mouth cap, but it would be about the same size. And would fit in a wine sack for sure.

"He must be carrying it," Vasco said. "It must be in the sack."

"I figure," Dolly said. "You see 'em yet?"

"Yeah, I do."

Vasco picked up the couple on the ground floor, near the gondola stand. They walked arm in arm, the guy carrying the wine bottle in the crook of his arm, keeping it upright. It was an awkward way to carry it, and they made an odd-looking pair—the beautiful girl and the diffident, slouchy guy. They walked along the canal, hardly glancing at the shops as they passed them.

"On their way to a meeting," Vasco said.

"I see 'em," Dolly said. Vasco looked down the crowded street and saw Dolly at the far end. Dolly was twenty-eight, and completely ordinary-looking. Dolly could be anybody: an accountant, girlfriend, secretary, assistant. She could always pass. Tonight she was dressed Vegas-style, teased blond hair and a sparkly dress with cleavage. She was a little overweight, which made the impression perfect. Vasco had been with her for four years now, and they worked well as a team. In private life, they got along only okay. She hated that he smoked cigars in bed.

"Heading for the hall," Dolly said. "No, they're doubling back."

The main hall was a huge oval passageway, high gilded ceiling, soft lights, marble pillars. It dwarfed the crowds that moved through it. Vasco hung back. "Change their mind? Or they made us?"

"I think they're being careful."

"Well, this is the big moment." Because even more than catching the fugitive, they had to know whom he was turning the embryos over to. Obviously someone at the conference.

"Won't be long now," Dolly said.

Rick Diehl was walking back and forth along the shops by the gondola canal, holding his cell phone in his hand. He ignored the stores, which were filled with expensive stuff of the sort he never wanted. Diehl had grown up as the third son of a Baltimore physician. All the other boys went to medical school and became obstetricians, like their father. Diehl refused, and went into medical research. Family pressure eventually drove him to move West. He did genetic

research at UCSF for a while, but he was more intrigued by the entrepreneurial culture among the universities in San Francisco. It seemed like every professor worth his salt had either started his own company or was sitting on the boards of several biotech firms. At lunch, the conversation was all about tech transfer, cross-licensing, milestone payments, buyouts and payouts, foreground and background IPRs.

By then Karen, Rick's wife, had come into a substantial inheritance, and he realized he had enough capital to get started. The Bay Area was crowded with firms; there was intense competition for space and hiring. He decided to go to the area north of Los Angeles, where Amgen had set up their huge facility. Diehl built a terrific modern plant, put bright research teams in place, and was on his way. His father and brothers came to visit. They were duly impressed.

But . . . why wasn't she calling him back? He looked at his watch. It was nine o'clock. The kids should be in bed by now. And Karen should be home. The maid said she had gone out an hour before, she didn't know where. But Karen never left without her cell phone. She must have it with her. Why wasn't she calling him back?

He didn't understand it, and it just made him nervous as hell. Here he was, alone in this damn city, with more beautiful women per square foot than he had ever seen in his life. True, they were plastic, lots of surgery, but they were also sexy as hell.

Up ahead, he saw a schlumpy guy walking with a tall chick who was striding along on spike heels, and she was just a knockout: black hair, smooth skin, and a hot, lean body. The schlumpy guy must have paid for her, but even so, he clearly didn't appreciate her. He was clutching his wine bottle like it was a baby, and appeared so nervous he was almost sweating.

But that girl . . . Jesus, she was hot. Hot, hot . . .

Why the hell, he thought, wasn't Karen calling him back?

"Hey," Vasco said. "Looky look. It's that BioGen guy. Walking around like he has nothing to do."

"I see him," Dolly said. She was about a block ahead of him.

"Nope, never mind."

Tolman and the Russian girl walked right past the BioGen guy, who did nothing but flip open his phone and dial. What was his name? Diehl. Vasco had heard something about him. Started a company on his wife's dough, and now maybe she was in control of their marriage. Something like that. Rich broad, old Eastern family, lots of money. Those broads could wear the pants.

"Restaurant," Dolly said. "They're going in that Terrazo place."

Il Terrazzo Antico was a two-story restaurant with glassed-in balconies. The décor was whorehouse modern, gilded everything. Pillars, ceiling, walls: every surface covered with decoration. Made Vasco jumpy just to look at it.

The couple walked in, right past the reservation desk, heading for a side table. And at the table, Vasco saw a heavyset guy who looked like a thug, dark-skinned and heavy-browed, and the thug was looking at the Russian girl and practically licking his lips.

Tolman marched right up to the table and spoke to the dark-skinned man. The guy looked puzzled. He didn't invite them to sit. Vasco thought, *Something's wrong*. The Russian girl had stepped back a pace.

At that moment a flash went off. Dolly had snapped a picture. The Tolman kid looked, took it all in, and bolted.

"Shit, Dolly!"

Vasco started running after Tolman, who was heading deeper into the restaurant. A waiter held up his hands. "Sir, excuse me—"

Vasco knocked him flat, kept right on going. Tolman was ahead, moving slower than he might, because he was trying not to shake his precious wine bottle. But he didn't know where he was going anymore. He didn't know the restaurant; he was just running. *Whang* through swinging doors, into the kitchen, Vasco right after him. Everybody was yelling at them, and some of the cooks were waving knives, but Tolman pushed on, apparently convinced there was some sort of rear entrance to the kitchen.

There wasn't. He was trapped. He looked around wildly. Vasco slowed. He flashed one of his badges, in an official-looking wallet. "Citizen's arrest," he said. Tolman cowered back by two walk-in freezers and a narrow door with a slim vertical window. Tolman went through the narrow door and it closed behind him.

A light blinked by the door.

It was a service elevator.

Shit. "Where does this go?"

"Second floor."

"Anywhere else?"

"No, just second floor."

Vasco pressed his earpiece. "Dolly?"

"I'm on it," she said. He heard her panting, as she ran up stairs.

Vasco positioned himself in front of the elevator door and waited. He pressed the button to bring the elevator down.

"I'm at the elevator now," Dolly said. "I saw him; he went back down."

"That's a tiny elevator," Vasco said.

"I know."

"If he's really got liquid nitrogen with him, he shouldn't be in there." A couple of years back, Vasco had chased a fugitive into a laboratory-supply warehouse. The guy had nearly suffocated after he locked himself in a closet.

The elevator came down. As soon as it stopped, Vasco yanked the handle to open it, but Tolman must have pushed an emergency switch, because the door wouldn't open. Vasco could see the wine sack on the floor. The velvet had been pushed down to reveal the stainless steel rim of the dewar.

And the top was off. White steam around the opening.

Through the glass, Tolman stared at him, wild-eyed. "Come out, son," Vasco said. "Don't be foolish."

Tolman shook his head.

"It's dangerous," Vasco said. "You know it's dangerous."

But the kid pushed a button, and the elevator started back up.

Vasco had a bad feeling.

The kid knew, all right. He knew exactly what he was doing.

"He's up here," Dolly said, standing on the second floor. "But the door won't open. No, he's going down again."

"Go back to the table," Vasco said to her. "Let him go."

She realized at once what he was talking about. She hurried back down the plush red velvet staircase to the ground floor. She was not surprised to see that the table where the thuggish man had sat was now empty. No thug. No beautiful

Russian girl. Just a hundred-dollar bill tucked under a glass. He'd paid in cash, of course.

And vanished.

Vasco was now surrounded by three hotel security guys, all talking at once. Standing half a head above them he yelled for quiet. "One thing," he said. "How do we get the elevator open?"

"He must have hit the override."

"How do we get it *open*?"

"We have to kill the power to it."

"Will that open it?"

"No, but then we can wedge it open, once it's stopped."

"How long will that take?"

"Maybe ten, fifteen minutes. Doesn't matter, this guy isn't going anyplace."

"Yes, he is," Vasco said.

The security guy laughed. "Where the hell can he go?"

The elevator came down again. Tolman was on his knees, holding the glass door shut.

"Get up," Vasco said. "Get up, get up. Come on, son, it's not worth it, stand up!"

Suddenly, Tolman's eyes rolled up into his head and he fell onto his back. The elevator started to rise.

"What the hell?" one of the security men said. "Who is he, anyway?"

Ah shit, Vasco thought.

The kid had pushed some override that had jammed the elevator circuits. It took them forty minutes to get the doors

open and haul him out. He was long since dead, of course. The instant he fell, he was immersed in 100 percent nitrogen atmosphere, from the liquid nitrogen that was streaming from the dewar. Because nitrogen was heavier than air, it progressively filled the elevator from the bottom up. Once the kid flopped on his back, he was already unconscious, and he would have died within a minute.

The security guys wanted to know what was in the dewar, which was no longer smoking. Vasco got some gloves and pulled out the long metal stick. There was nothing there, just a series of empty clips where the embryos should have been. The embryos had been removed.

"You mean to say he killed himself?" one of the security men said.

"That's right," Vasco said. "He worked in an embryology lab. He knew about the danger of liquid nitrogen in a confined space." Nitrogen caused more laboratory fatalities than any other chemical. Half the people who died were trying to rescue co-workers who had collapsed in confined spaces.

"It was his way out of a bad situation," Vasco said.

Later, driving home with him, Dolly said, "So what happened to the embryos?"

Vasco shook his head. "No idea. The kid never got them."

"You think the girl took them? Before she went to his room?"

"Somebody took them." Vasco sighed. "The hotel doesn't know her?"

"They reviewed security cameras. They don't know her."

"And her student status?"

"University had her as a student last year. She didn't enroll this year."

"So she's vanished."

"Yeah," Dolly said. "Her, the dark-skinned guy, the embryos. Everything vanished."

"I'd like to know how all this goes together," Vasco said.

"Maybe it doesn't," Dolly said.

"Wouldn't be the first time," Vasco said. Up ahead, he saw the neon of a roadhouse in the desert. He pulled over. He needed a drink.