

## CHAPTER 28

He cracked the ampule carefully, removing its upper portion, and admired the clarity of the solution it contained. Peering intently at the delicate, tapered top to make certain that not a single drop of the elixir had been trapped within, he tossed it aside. He swirled the tiny glass vessel, watching the clear solution cling briefly to its sides, the meniscus of the liquid lurching to and fro. Satisfied, he held the translucent container up to the light and was startled to find that he was salivating. Within, there were two milliliters of liquid, less than half a teaspoon, scarcely enough to cover the bottom of a drinking glass or fill a thimble. One of these he would generously provide to the patient before him, an elderly man who was undergoing cataract extraction. He would administer this with a milliliter of normal saline with which it had been mixed, while crediting both units of the opioid drug to the case—who would know the difference? The second milliliter he would carry from the room secretly, take it back to his desk, and he would align it with several other ampules that he had requisitioned. They awaited him there, in a row, like a platoon of tiny soldiers arrayed carefully in the top desk drawer for his inspection at the end of the day. Then, with a pipette, he would pool the contents in a single test tube, place a stopper in it, and carry it home for his and Lauren's enjoyment.

Responsiveness to opioids medications varied widely from person to person, as everyone knew. And since the effect that a single dose of fentanyl would have on a patient was pretty unpredictable, Kurt need merely note that there was some justification—any justification—for the

patient to receive an extra dose of the pain-killer. This would be a perfect cover for his surreptitious sequestration of the drug. He knew that he could easily find his way to the bedside in multiple operating rooms, providing breaks and lunches each day, improving his opportunities to steal away with more of the fentanyl. Kurt suddenly became the champion for weary bedside providers, offering to provide as many breaks and lunches as he could squeeze in, given his other duties.

All of this, he thought to himself in a moment of heady self-satisfaction, was a delightful scheme, if somewhat nefarious. Patients were not deprived of their analgesic drug—since they'd get all the opioids that they required—even as he exaggerated their need. And he could readily acquire five or ten milliliters of the fentanyl per day, which was certainly enough to fuel the euphoric, rapturous romps that filled his evenings with bliss. Of course, the cost of the anesthetic care that was billed to the insurance company was increased by a tiny margin, but this would not come from the patient's pockets, so he did not trouble himself in the least about the ethics of the arrangement.

A drink or two of wine in the evening, along with some oxycodone tablets, had recently brought him a blissful plane of existence he'd never experienced, perhaps had not even imagined. But Lauren had been right, maybe even understated the case concerning the fentanyl. This was a whole new playing field. In the three decades of his life, there had been no adventure, no victory, no achievement, no adulation, no monetary reward—not even a throbbing explosion of an orgasm—that had ever been able to bring him the instant joy he experienced with an injection of fentanyl. Even the name of the drug seemed magical, as though specifically created to enhance his life.

“Thanks, doc. I'm back.”

He hadn't expected the nurse anesthetist to return from his break so soon. He fumbled with the ampule he'd opened, put his hand behind his back. To his surprise and relief, the anesthetist didn't seem to notice.

“He's doing fine, Ron,” Kurt reported. “He was moving a bit after they made the incision, even though they'd put an extra round of topical drops in his eye. So I gave him a bit more fentanyl—he's had the two of midazolam and four of fentanyl.”

“Well . . . he looks pretty tranquil now.”

“Yeah, I think he’s finally comfortable,” the anesthesiologist agreed.

He marched out of the room, having placed the extra fentanyl in his back pocket, hoping the tiny ampule didn’t tumble over and spill its precious contents.

“So, what were you saying about the breakdown in defense in the last period of that Bruins game?” he heard Ron say as the door closed, conversing with the surgeon, who simply lived and breathed Penguin hockey.

Kurt’s nights had become extraordinarily pleasurable. The woman, the wine, the high . . . he couldn’t wait to get free from work to do it all again. But, as he walked down the hall, glancing into the busy ORs, he wondered if he couldn’t enhance his dreary, day-to-day life as well. He knew full well that he became more mentally acute, more aware, more . . . decisive when he felt the fentanyl coursing through his brain. That he’d come this far, through medical school, residency, and nearly ten years as an attending physician—without discovering this key to superior existence—puzzled him. It was all so much better; HE was so much better. But no one else really got it, and he could not afford to be revealed. So, he would have to keep his enhanced existence carefully hidden, to be enjoyed strictly on evenings and weekends.

A few months had passed since he had begun dating Lauren, and his life was now inextricably entwined with hers. Almost daily, he sought her out after work, no matter how late, so they could eat and drink, talk and laugh together. Along with her beauty and incomparable eyes, she had a bright, sparkling verve and enthusiasm of which he wanted to be a part. Intelligent and articulate, she seemed to lead the conversation at every dinner party, charming whoever it was that had come over. His friends, her friends, perfect strangers at hockey games—everyone seemed to admire her, to crave her attention. Which made him all the prouder to be dating her. She’d elevated his existence to a lofty height that he had not previously imagined was possible; the alcohol and opioids were but a small part of it, he assured himself.

It thrilled him, just a bit, to be involved in this illicit, secretive endeavor. The label of the pill container he’d seen at Lauren’s apartment

occasionally flashed before his eyes: the information that was printed on it was also maintained somewhere in a digital databank, accessible to inquiring eyes. Lauren had recently made a show of complaining of ongoing pain when she visited her surgeon, and he'd supplemented Kurt's prescriptions with the ones he was writing. Still, using different drug stores and different providers could only mask the issue for so long—computerized databases would bring the anomaly to someone's attention sooner or later, probably sooner. Fortunately, fentanyl provided an elegant solution to this quandary. Nobody would miss the tiny volumes he was secreting away each day, and there was no need for a prescription, no documentation, no electronic trail to follow.