

# Chapter 1

September 2000

I noticed how tightly I was hanging on to the receiver.

“My piece wasn’t meant to be an investigative story. It was just a short article about advances in how our food is grown.”

“Yes, of course, Nick,” Dr. Elles said, on the other end of the line. “I am not questioning the validity of your story or criticizing it in any way. I’d like to talk about the possibility of taking it further.”

I couldn’t place his accent. Eastern Europe, maybe. He sounded concise, like a scientist. I loosened my grip on the phone.

“Can we continue this discussion in person?” Dr. Elles said. “Would you have time to meet this morning? I will supply you with proof of my credibility.”

I didn’t have a deadline for my work today. Monday was my slowest day. Why not? “Okay, sure.”

We agreed to meet in an hour at a popular coffee shop just off Pioneer Square.

“How will I recognize you?” I asked.

“I know what you look like. I will see you there.”

How did he know? That bothered me. Had we met before?

He’d hung up before I could ask.

It was a typical Pacific Northwest September day; gray with the threat of rain, yet warm.

It was a ten-minute walk from the newsroom, which gave me time to focus. I shouldn’t have had that last scotch the night before.

There was a message from a Dr. Carl Elles on my voice

mail when I had gotten to work. He wanted to talk to me about the potato article I'd written in the Lifestyles section of the weekend's paper.

When I called him back he questioned my quotes from a Naintosa spokeswoman and a farmer who used their seed. Great, the first time in a year I wrote something remotely close to a real article and there was a problem.

He said he worked at Naintosa for a number of years and personally developed many of their patents. He could supply me in-depth research on genetically engineered food. He asked if I was interested in writing more extensively on the subject. He sounded sincere.

The subject of genetically engineered food didn't really excite me but it was worth having a chat.

I arrived at the coffee shop a few minutes early.

A steady stream of people were going in and out. The hardwood floor was well worn from all the traffic. I stood in line and surveyed the baked goods and desserts in the glass display case. The smell of freshly brewed coffee filled the air. The room was done all in dark wood, with a green counter and table tops.

I always got a kick listening to the variety and complexity of ways people ordered their blended drinks. I picked up my plain old cappuccino and found a seat by the window.

At precisely 10:00 a.m. a black Volvo S80 pulled up and parked right across the street. Somehow I knew it was Dr. Elles.

As he entered the restaurant I nearly choked on my coffee.

I'd seen him before. He was older, had short gray hair, and tall and slim with a sincere looking face. That only added to the puzzling fact that he knew what I looked like. There was a definite reason for meeting this man.

He walked up to me. “Good morning Mr. Barnes.” The way he said it, with his strong accent, sounded like we’d known each other for years.

“Good morning.” I managed to smile as goose bumps popped up all over my skin.

“I see you’ve already purchased a beverage.” He removed his raincoat, revealing an expensive navy blue suit. “I will only be a moment.”

He was definitely the man I’d seen in a vision. A few weeks ago I was at a retreat in Taos. I was meditating in the shade of a large tree on a warm morning, when the image of a man appeared. It was Dr. Elles. The only difference was that he was wearing a lab coat, not a suit. The white lab coat turned deep red and then black. He had caring eyes and I sensed he wanted to tell me something. But as soon as he opened his mouth the vision disappeared. I hoped now I was going to find out what it was about.

I looked over at him. The lineup had grown since I’d bought my coffee, so Dr. Elles was only placing his order.

While I waited, I looked out the window. I saw what appeared to be a man in the passenger seat of a car focusing binoculars on the coffee shop. He quickly put them down as if he saw me looking back. The car was a mid-sized gray Chevy, parked four spots behind Dr. Elles’ Volvo.

Dr. Elles sat down with his coffee. “You look concerned, Mr. Barnes.”

“Oh no, um, I was just looking out the window.” Who was the guy watching? Dr. Elles? It couldn’t possibly be me.

“Please, call me Nick.”

“All right, Nick, please call me Carl.”

“Okay, Carl. Can I ask you something?”

“That’s why we’re meeting.” He smiled. The deep wrinkles at the outer edges of his eyes made him look wise.

“Where are you originally from? I can’t pinpoint your accent.”

“I’ve heard that before.” He stirred two packets of sugar into his cup. “I’m originally from Johannesburg, South Africa. I attended Cambridge University in England. I’ve lived and worked in many European countries as well as most recently the United States. So, my accent must be a mix.”

“Wow, okay. How long have you been in America?”

“For the last twelve years I’ve worked for Naintosa at their laboratory in Boston. A few months ago I retired and moved here to be close to my daughter, Morgan.”

“Okay.” It sounded like the guy had led an interesting life.

“How’d you know what I look like?”

“Morgan sent me a series of articles you wrote some time ago on political corruption and how it affected people locally. One of those articles had a picture of you talking to a Senator.”

“Oh, yes.” How could I forget the articles that screwed up my career? “Why were those of interest to you, Dr. Elles? I mean, Carl.”

“Let’s just say corruption is a hobby of mine.” He gave me a small smile. “I also like your writing style. You’re understandable, not egotistical, and you are idealistic. You’re still young and not set in your ways and opinions.”

“Thank you, I guess.” I wasn’t sure about the idealistic part. Not anymore, anyway. And thirty wasn’t so young. He placed his cup on the table and looked me straight in the eyes. “When I read your article on genetically engineered potatoes, I thought you might be the one to help me.”

“What do you mean, help you?” It was hard for me to keep my guard up. He seemed nice but I had to stay objective. I sure wasn’t going to tell him about my vision.

“First, what is your journalism background and where are you originally from?”

“My background’s not all that exciting. I grew up just south of here, in Olympia, and received my degree from Washington State University. I’ve been at the *Seattle News* about four years.”

“On the contrary, it is exactly what I’m looking for.”

“For what?”

“I’m going to write a book. I need someone to shape my research into a form that everyone can understand. I want to tell people what is really happening with genetic engineering and what it really means to the future.”

“Is it good or bad?”

“Bad, I’m afraid.”

“Hmm.” The piece I’d just written portrayed Naintosa as good. Did I not get my facts straight again? Who was telling the truth? I looked closely at Dr. Elles to see if I could gauge his sincerity. He looked honest, but I wasn’t sure if I could trust my own read. “Sounds interesting, but I’d need to know more.”

“Of course. Are you free for dinner tonight? We can discuss the details then.”

I decided I wanted to hear him out. If he was telling the truth the book could make a difference. If at any point I felt he was lying I’d walk away. The fact that I’d seen this guy in a meditation months before I met him couldn’t be ignored. Especially since I’d never had a vision so vivid before. “Okay, fine.”

“Think about your fee. I anticipate it’ll take approximately one year, working part time. I want to compensate you fairly.”

Then he frowned, “And please don’t tell anyone. Let’s keep this between us.”

“I understand.” That wasn’t at all an unusual request in my business.

“Is 7:00 p.m. at Seasons to your liking?”

“That’s the restaurant at the Nuevo, right?”

Leaving the coffee shop, I looked at the gray Chevy I’d noticed earlier. A glint of light came from the driver’s side.

The sun had peeked through the clouds and reflected off what looked like a camera lens. Did he just take my picture?

I kept walking and glanced over when I was directly across the street. The side windows were tinted so I couldn’t get a clear look at the occupants.

As I continued, I looked back a few times, but the car stayed where it was.

## Chapter 2

That evening I’d found a parking spot a block away

and walked to the Hotel Nuevo.

As I approached the entrance I saw the same gray Chevy across the street or at least the same model. I couldn’t see anyone inside, so I walked over to it. I had to look through the front windshield because the side windows had such a deep tint. The interior was clean; nothing on the seats. Only

an empty bottle of water in the centre console cup holder.

I went around back and discovered that it was a Lumina.

Reaching into my black blazer pocket, I pulled out the pad I always had with me and wrote down the Washington State plate number.

Later I'd check with the DMV to find out who owned it.

*Seasons* was accented by large, colorful floral arrangements.

Candlelight flickered against avocado green walls. A pianist with a soft touch played in the background, the music muting the murmur of conversation throughout the room.

The maitre d' escorted me over to Dr. Elles. The table was next to the window, with a beautiful view of Elliott Bay.

"Good evening, Nick." He stood and shook my hand.

"Nice place." I looked down at the silver place settings atop a pressed white linen tablecloth. "I've never been here before."

"The food is exceptional." He motioned for me to sit.

"Would you like some wine?"

He poured me a glass from the bottle of cabernet sauvignon already at the table. I didn't recognize the name but it looked expensive.

Our waiter arrived. I chose the dill salmon featured that evening and Dr. Elles went with the tenderloin in a chanterelle sauce.

While we waited for our meals, we chatted about our pasts.

His life had been a collage of interesting people and extraordinary places. My life was just the opposite; the most exotic places I'd been were the Dominican Republic and Mexico.

I'd always wanted to visit Europe but so far hadn't had the time or money. That didn't seem to bother him as he listened intently when I spoke.

“Has Mrs. Elles moved to Seattle with you?” I asked.

“Unfortunately, Morgan’s mother passed away three years ago.” For a brief moment his eyes focused on the distant wall.

“In a car accident.”

“Sorry to hear that.” I took a sip of the rich and peppery wine, regretting I’d asked the question.

Dr. Elles was quiet for a moment, then cleared his throat.

“She was also a scientist at Naintosa.”

“Oh.” I felt I should change the subject. “Tell me more about why you want to publish your experiments?”

His accent had softened. “I have created some very good things with my work. However, unintentionally, I have discovered some very bad things as well. Now, I must warn people about those bad things.”

“Were they failed experiments?”

“Yes. However, Naintosa thinks they are successes. That’s why I have to publish this book. I’m sixty-three years old and at a point in my life where I want to place everything in order.”

Was this merely a personal axe to grind? I wondered if I was being gullible.

“Have you decided on your compensation?” Dr. Elles asked.

“No. I have to see your notes before I can totally wrap my head around the amount of work needed.” And decide if I even wanted to take it on, I didn’t say out loud. The vision wasn’t enough, even though I’d had a few before and they had steered me in the right direction. I needed facts.

“You want to be sure that what I tell you is genuine?” His right eyebrow rose and he looked amused.

“No offense, sir, but I have to feel comfortable that what you’re telling me is true.”

“Of course.”



I sank my fork into the salad that the waiter had set down in front of me. “Do you know what information laundering is?”

“No.” Dr. Elles leaned forward in his chair.

“It’s similar to money laundering. Someone feeds false information to the media, it’s reported on, and people believe it to be true. Then the person or group can quote the media, making their information appear to be valid when it’s not.”

Dr. Elles’ eyes opened wide. “Interesting. I’ve never heard it articulated that way before. It makes total sense. Naintosa employs that strategy on a regular basis.”

Shit. Was he referring to my potato article? I let it go. “It happened to me when I wrote the political corruption articles last year. The ones your daughter gave you.” I wanted to squirm in my seat. I hadn’t talked about it with anyone but my old editor and my best friend Sue until now.

“I didn’t know.” Dr. Elles nodded. “I understand why you are cautious.”

“That’s why I need to see your research before I agree to work with you. I can’t let that happen again.”

“Yes, of course.”

His open reaction to my obvious doubts and willingness to show me his research made it easier to trust him. The notes would be the deciding factor.

After dinner, he wrote down the address of the office he said he had just leased. We agreed to meet there the following evening.

## Chapter 3

Something wasn't right.

I stepped into the dimly lit office. It took me a moment to realize what I was looking at. A pair of legs stretched out from behind the desk.

"Dr. Elles?"

I rushed over and knelt to feel his neck for a pulse. Nothing. His skin felt cool. "Shit!"

I looked him over. No blood, no marks. Did he have a heart attack...a massive stroke?

Holy fuck. Holy fuck. Holy fuck! I pushed back against the desk to stabilize myself.

At that moment I looked into his open blank eyes. My knees buckled and I slid to the floor, my right leg only inches from his head.

I'd never seen a dead person in real life before.

Now what?