

Enemy Me

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Chapters 1 - 6 preview

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Chapter 1

Pete had slipped passed the first set of guards undetected. The second set would be the problem. He lifted up the binoculars and scanned the structure in front of him. A service door off to one side. He checked his watch. It was ten past midnight and the guard shift change was about to happen in three minutes. That was his window of opportunity. Get in, get to the freight elevator, enter the code and take the thing to the labs. There he would set off the explosives. It would set the company back a few years giving the others some time. He checked his vest straps by giving them a quick yank. The pack was a bit heavy, but what did you expect from 20 kilograms of Pent?

Pete Walker woke up with a start. He wasn't supposed to be here. Not this place. Not this time. He reached up and felt the oxygen mask tightly over his mouth and nose. That was good, but he still wasn't supposed to be here. He couldn't. Damn! Another failure. And with that another chance at redemption he supposed. Maybe justice, too. All of which didn't matter at the moment. Something or someone had killed him. He took a deep breath and tested his eyes. The filtered light had a green tint to it, so the stinging shock of using his eyes for the first time wasn't so overly painful, just maybe annoying. He took another deep breath and tested his hands. Each

finger flexed. That was good. He looked up at a blinking display board over his head. It flashed "Purge in progress. Please standby." He looked around and spotted the readout displays to his right. Little monitors flashed and displayed numbers and text. One display was counting down. Another was scrolling odd bits of information, like "You can do it!", "This time for sure!", "So close, yet so far!", "It's time to leave. Prepare." That he thought odd. He looked over at the monitor that was displaying a countdown of sorts. Then he remembered. "Purge in progress." He looked up and saw two metal rings. He grabbed them. Seconds later he felt the floor underneath his feet vanish. The green tinted fluid slipped away from his eyesight. He remembered the process now. He waited until the fluid completely drained. The system would cycle through several procedures. Purge was first, wash was second. Release was third. He counted to three and the floor came back. Seconds later the container he was in filled with some clear fluid – water he thought. It was warm and turbulent, like a washing machine. Minutes ticked by as the chamber filled, circulated, and drained several times. The little countdown display kept track and reminded him he was not the original. Intellectually he understood he was not the original. Waking up in a thick green goo fluid reinforced that too. When the countdown display reached zero he was hit with a blast of hot air. It whirled around him rapidly. He was dry in seconds. He lowered himself far enough to feel the grid floor and tested his legs. Strong, firm, stable. He let go of the overhead rings and with his weight fully supported by his feet he unsnapped his harness. There was something he was supposed to remember. The cloning process was perfect, the memory transfer not so much. There were gaps for sure, but were they important pieces missing? He looked around the cylindrical chamber trying to spot

something that would trigger the memory, an important vital memory. The mask? No. It was still on his face, supplying oxygen. The readouts? No. The Grid floor? Couldn't be, but close. The chamber door? The door. That was it. He reached out and pushed. Locked. The keypad next to the door? Embarrassment hit. Of course, it was the keypad. Getting out of here was important. He let his hand drift over the pad and fingers pushed in a code he hadn't known he knew. Nevertheless, the inner door lock mechanism worked and he heard a loud audible click. The glass door whooshed up out of sight.

Pete stepped out and felt a chill. There were five empty chambers to the right of his and twelve chambers of different sizes to the left. He thought, "Five tries, five failures, five deaths." But there was still something he couldn't remember. Of course it was going to nag at him for a while. Then his stomach rumbled. He "remembered" what an empty stomach felt like. In this case, everything was going to be "remembered" and used for the very first time. He made his way to the kitchen. "Okay," he said out loud, "that was easy. But if I remember this so clearly, why do I think I'm forgetting something?" He walked through the entry way and found a sandwich waiting for him. Interesting. One of two things is going on here he thought. I made this for myself, or someone else is here. He stepped up to the table. The sandwich was cut diagonally. That was his clue to himself that it was meant for him. A glass of water and a computer tablet were next to the sandwich.

Pete sat down and starting eating. Thin slices of Turkey, Havarti cheese, Romaine lettuce, some sliced tomato, and deli horseradish sauce embedded in baguette bread. He tapped the tablet.

The screen brightened to the local news agency. In big

bold letters, "Suicide bomber exploded high explosives on the 30th floor of the Taylor building. 30 died, 120 injured."

"Jesus!" Pete uttered after a bite. He committed suicide by explosive vest. Pity, but it had to have been number five. Why else would he set the tablet to show this first? But thirty died?!? Was it really necessary? He himself, of course, did not set the bomb off. He did not kill all those people. But it was him who did. Not physically. He did it. The same mind did . . . maybe. Which of course begged the question, 'was he the same person?' "I am a clone, yes, but am I number five?" He noticed the date of the article. A twenty year separation between himself and Prime. Six clones in twenty years. Short life expectancy at the very least. He finished the sandwich and followed it with the glass of water. He made his way through the passage way to the bathroom. Pete prime had some serious money to build this place. It was large and self-sustaining it seemed. He walked through the bathroom door and found the urinal. He walked up to it, looked down, and laughed. Arrogant bastard gave himself a bigger dick. Well, why not? He, and by default, himself were brilliant. Decades ahead of everyone in the field of gene therapy and cloning. Maybe next time he'd clone himself as a woman . . . a woman . . . the twelve chambers of different sizes. Several were kid size. He didn't, did he? Pete finished, washed his hands and made his way back into the chamber room. He hurried past his chamber and pried through the glass doors of the others. He did do it! The next two chambers housed females. The next three after that had one boy and two girls. They looked to be about 16. The one after that had a Pete that looked 6 feet tall. Number thirteen was a dwarf. Pretty heartless he thought, but Prime didn't know what the future held. He could walk outside and find a world full

of little people. Number fourteen and fifteen was him but different. African and Asian. Interesting. Prime was mixed, but to create clones in specific races? Sixteen and seventeen were white females – one blond, one ginger. Number eighteen was at least seven feet tall and extremely bulky. Prime figured if eighteen was needed the end of days was called for. Eighteen would be the final run. The big guy would do the job by brute force. That was something to fear.

Chapter 2

Forrest Taylor looked down at chaos. Even though he was 130 stories up the many vehicles on ground level could still be seen. Little people and little trucks, cars, and ambulances at work. A suicide bomber managed to enter the building and destroy a highly guarded secret part of the building. Heads would roll figuratively, if not literally. It had been twenty years since he and Pete founded Forever Life, Inc. This was his flagship project, which was now setback a few months at best. Absolutely a pity. A new class of drugs, Transgenetics, finished the FDA trials. The level 1 and level 2 drugs were slotted for phase two of clinical rollout. Tests had been going well and on schedule for phase three. The project was not in jeopardy, but the shareholders were nervous. Fuck'em, he thought. The Vultures. Waiting to make a killing. They hadn't thought of the big picture, no. Just only the Bitcoin that would give them uber luxury. This was beyond simple gene therapy, this ultimately was immortality. This was transformation at the gene level. Every parents' wildest dream come true. Smart babies, brave babies, strong babies, ultra-beautiful babies. A Transgenetic pill for any and everything. Cancer? Gone. Colds? Gone. Bad eyesight? Corrected. All with a set of pills. All engineered to work with the individual patient – for a price, of course. The Affordable Care Act would cover level one and two of Transgenetic, but not beyond. Levels three and above

would be the money makers. Take some pills before bed, go into a coma, wake up several days later different, but the same. Baldness, obesity, impotence, weak, frail, ugly, all of the above? No more. Cured. Brilliant!

Forrest turned and sat back down at his desk. The email message waiting light blinked in the upper right corner. He clicked the OPEN message icon on a small area of his desktop.

Photos of the bomber appeared. It was Pete. The man was very insistent. How many clones had he made? Seven? How many more would he throw at him?

The room chime sounded.

Forrest said, "Enter."

Gordon Piper, his head Geneticist, walked through the door. Thank goodness the blast hadn't harmed him. Gordon was smart, not brilliant, but had enough intuitive insight to make rather startling leaps in theory, which translated into good data, results, and money. It was probably his assistant, Sandra Spaulding, who ultimately cracked the code. But Levels 3 and 4 were most likely a direct result of his unorthodox way of solving puzzles.

"Yes, Gordon?"

"Mr. Taylor, worse news yet. The entire floor destroyed. All personnel lost."

"Pity," Forrest said. "We'll have to send out condolence letters of course."

Gordon nodded.

"And the data?"

"Saved off site. The equipment has been destroyed. That'll take months to reconstruct."

Equipment gone. Forrest thought a moment. "We'll have to go off the map next time or bury the processing plants deep."

Gordon nodded. "It was Pete, wasn't it?"

Forrest nodded. "We're going to have to get serious

about dealing with him.”

Gordon nodded again. “Seven clones?”

“Yes.”

“He’ll have to modify the geno and phenotypes if he wants the clones to remain stable.”

Forrest nodded. He understood what Gordon was getting at. After nine iterations the subsequent clones would probably suffer major internal organ damage. Maybe his was the last or next to last clone. He could only hope so. “How long to startup?”

“Eight months.”

“That bad?”

Gordon nodded. “We’ll need to hire more talent. I’m not comfortable with the Chinese. Some of them seemed to be working for other interests. Maybe the Canadians this time. I’ve read some rather brilliant pieces coming out of that country.”

“I’ll leave hiring and retooling up to you. I’ll send an email to accounting and request they give you access to maintenance funds. 100 million enough?”

Gordon thought a moment. “Half a bill would be better.”

Forrest blinked several times. “R&D funds then. The board green lighted two bills. If you can guarantee me a startup in three months I’ll okay the full amount.”

“Let me work on that. I rather be accurate in a timeframe than shooting in the dark.”

He liked that about Gordon. The man wasn’t much into swaging things. He’d rather be known for at least giving a problem some thought.

Forrest asked, “Tomorrow too soon?”

Gordon smiled, “About Noon. I’ll take the rest of the day off and work out the details. I’ll leave security to work with the locals on investigating and cleaning up the mess.” He turned and walked out.

Forrest watched the man as he disappeared behind the closing door. Cold and calloused. The nature of big business making billions. He was still in his glass house, so he refrained from casting stones, at least very large ones.

Chapter 3

Pete found his way to the main computer room. So far he “remembered” things both necessary and mundane. As he stepped through the doorway the lights came on.

“Good morning, Doctor Walker. How are you?” A Verdi baritone voice seemed to come from everywhere.

Pete nearly jumped. That he hadn’t remembered, not quite like that. A voice from a computer terminal perhaps. Maybe on his Tablet. “Morning?”

“I read the news. You have my deepest condolences. I am . . .”

“A computer?”

There was a pause. “Yes, Doctor Walker. I run the facility. Pete Prime installed me on day one.”

Pete sat in the main chair. “I see.” There were a total of five computer terminals. Pete occupied the middle one. “So, why do I not remember you if you were installed twenty years ago?”

“Doctor, I cannot answer that.” The computer’s voice was smooth.

“Cannot or will not?”

“Let me rephrase my answer, please. I do not know the answer to your question. Number five and two did not remember, but one and three did. You’ll find further gaps in your memory no doubt. As you know the cloning process is perfect. The memory transference and its means are not.”

Pete weighted that answer against truth and total bullshit. “Fair enough. Did number five leave anything for me?”

The computer said, “Yes he did. Several items in fact.”

Pete thought the exchange creepy. The computer seemed too good with speech. “You are a real person, aren’t you?”

The silence settled in between the two for a minute.

“Well? You are real, aren’t you? I mean as in AI real?”

The center display screen came to life. His face appeared with a relaxed smile. “Mike,” number five said over his shoulder, “I’m ready.”

“Yes, George. Recording now.”

Number five cleared his voice. “Number six, sorry I couldn’t welcome you into the world personally. I should have started recording a daily log day one, but . . .” He shrugged. “You’ll discover things tend to get lost in translating and we Walkers tend to become self-absorbed.” Five’s smile was alarming. It was a bit unnerving to be on the receiving end. “Remember that, okay. First, change your first name.”

Odd Pete thought.

Number five continued, “. . . I am not Pete. Neither are you. We are our own individuals.” The image leaned forward. “Yes we share memories with Pete, but we are not him. The moment you opened your eyes you became your own person.” He leaned back. “Remember me as George. Keep the family name but lose the first. Seriously. It took me several months to understand that. Kevin, number four, told me to change my name. I fought it. Just fought it. Then one day I realized Pete and I had nothing substantive in common. I read romance, he read non-fiction. I like Pistachio ice cream. He was a vanilla man. You getting the picture yet?”

On the surface he felt he understood. “I am unique,”

he thought. Well, of course. The Pete twenty years ago would have been him, but not now. He was dead . . . assuming the reason he lived was because he was dead as well as numbers one through five.

“About Mike. Don’t ask if he is a real person. Mike will give you the silent treatment for days. If you did ask apologize, now. Seriously. Apologize. You’ll need his help.”

Pete said, “Mike, I am sorry. I won’t question you again about being real.”

Mike said, “Forgiven. There is more.”

Pete smiled. Interesting.

“Number six, I’d like to tell you to forget our quest. You know, live your own life. Start a family. Have two and one-half kids running around. . .” George suddenly looked ten years older. “Forrest Taylor has to be stopped. Brother six, Forrest has to be stopped.” He leaned back and looked sad. “I’ve been fighting this bastard for six years now. I’ve been able to uncover a lot as were the others. Kevin, Pete 3, Pete 2, and Eugene. Forrest’s plan is worse than anyone can imagine. Sick bastard.” Suddenly George stood up and walked away. “Mike, pause recording please. Thanks.” The image of a receding George froze in mid step.

Pete waited for a minute, then asked, “Mike, something wrong with the video?”

“No. I was waiting for you to ask.”

Pete paused in a thought, “Waiting for me to . . .”

The video resumed. George sat back down. “Okay, good, I do have your attention. Look, the cloning process is perfect. Too perfect. Do you remember this?” George held up a picture of a woman. She was a redhead, light smile, white skin, clean teeth perfectly aligned. He lowered the picture and leaned in close to the screen. “I didn’t. I still don’t. Mike had to fill me in with

missing gaps in my memory. I'm not sure if the missing gaps is from the transference process or intentional intervention. All of us have this memory lapse. Mine is with Stephanie." He lifted the picture up to the camera and pulled it away. "Number seven is going to remember less than you do. Number eight less more than seven, and so on and so on. Number eighteen will remember nothing. He'll have one thought. Destroy. If he wakes up, then Forrest succeeded and all of humankind, at least in nations where the wealthy can afford the drugs, he'll have one preprogrammed thought. Soon after he wakes he'll double in size. He'll get no last message because he won't understand. Mike will send him immediately to the surface. No help, no prep, nothing. Because it won't matter. He'll destroy. He'll run the distance from here to the Taylor Building and destroy. Everything. Everything. He's not number eighteen, he's Omega." George looked up at some part of the room. "Everything." He rubbed his chin. "Enough of doomageddon." He smiled. "I left you an envelope, among other things, with a list of do's and don'ts for your new life. You, my friend, are twenty years out of step. Remember that. It is no longer the 20th dark ages. Space travel to the Moon is normal, but not by the United States. Gay marriage is the norm. So are GEMPs. Genetically Engineered Chimps. The US Government gave them full citizenship ten years ago. We've elected a black President and a woman President. Twice. The Middle-East is fucked since we no longer depend on their oil, of which they have none. We export 23% of the world's oil needs and Iran had been nuked, by Israel. North Korea fell, Russia bankrupt . . . again, and China had a severe housing collapse, went through a depression and lost a war. You have allies on the outside. Becky will freak . . . oh, yes. We do love." George gave his patented alarming smile again. "You also have enemies. We'll always have

enemies. I gave you a list of 'em. There's plenty. Homeland Security is at the local level. Surveillance cameras cover 90 percent of the city. Androids are reality and marijuana, prostitution, and assisted suicide are legal. What's that gotta say about the country?" George paused in thought. "Two more things. Trust Mike. He's been watching and protecting us for a number of years – twenty for you, fifteen for me. He knows everything. He's our Mentor. The second thing is . . ." George got teary eyed. He bit his lower lip. "I left you a memory card. Technology has made the transference better and easier but not perfect. You'll get most of what I lived through the last five years. I regret not having started a family, but knowing that Pete left a vast assortment of clones the Walkers may indeed live on through normal means . . . one day. Hopefully, my sacrifice did some damage. If not maybe you can do something better. Think out of the box is all I can say. Good luck, brother. Good luck." A smiling George faded to black.

Chapter 4

Pete stared at the monitor for a long while. Twenty years. That long. Pete thought, "Change my name to what?" He heard a deep cough, but ignored it.

Mike said, "May I be of assistance?"

Pete remained deep in thought.

Mike coughed louder breaking Pete's thoughts.

Pete looked up and around. "Yes?"

Mike repeated, "May I be of assistance?"

"To what?"

"Your name dilemma."

"Who said I was thinking about my name?"

Silence.

It stretched out to a full minute.

Pete broke the silence first. Damn computer he thought. Mind reader? "Thanks for the offer."

Mike said, "No, I am not."

"What?"

"I am not a mind reader."

"How in the world did you know what I was thinking?"

Silence.

Exasperation crept into Pete's voice. "Well?!?"

"You may not be Pete prime, but you think like him. I've had twenty years of experience."

Pete said, "Point taken."

Silence.

"Mike, thank you. I want to think this through a few

moments.”

“While you’re thinking through your name dilemma I’d like to give you the rest of George’s items.”

“Okay?”

“Do not be startled . . .”

“About what?”

He heard Mike’s voice directly behind him “This, sir.”

Pete, startled, turned to see an Android. “Jesus Christ!”

The Android said, “My intention was not to startle you.”

“Intention failed.” But Pete was intrigued. He got up and walked around the machine. Amazing he thought. “What can it do?”

The Android stood six feet tall. Most of its body was made of tubes and wiring. Small composite plates of different shapes were placed around his limbs and chest. They gave the illusion he had calves, biceps, shoulders, and pecs. There were even two plates shaped and placed so it looked like he had buttocks.

The Android answered, “It? It, sir, can do a lot.” And it held out a very large envelope.

Pete grabbed it.

The Android held onto the envelope a few seconds longer than it should have.

Pete watched as it turned and walked away. “Does it have a name?”

“You could ask the next time you see him.” Mike replied.

“I suppose I could. What other surprises are in store for me?”

“There is someone sleeping in your bed.”

Dumbstruck, Pete dropped the envelope. “What?!? A Guest?!?” He walked to “his” room and stopped. The door was ajar. He pushed it open slowly and stepped into the dimly lit room. A form was curled up underneath the

blankets. He stepped in and the floor creaked.

The form moved, then a head lifted up. The covers slipped away to show a dirty blonde woman yawning. She looked around and spotted Pete. "Hey, babe!" She said. "You back so soon. Everything went okay?"

Stunned, Pete lost his voice. He coughed and held up a hand. He motioned for her to lay back down while backing out.

She did, yawned again, and said, "Okay, babe. See you in a few hours."

Pete closed the door and made it back to the command room. "What the . . . ?"

Mike said, "Her name is Rebecca. George calls her Becky. She is his . . ."

"What?!?" Pete interrupted.

"She is also one of those allies George mentioned."

"But . . . but . . . she . . ."

"Is unaware that George is no longer here, which by the way, you are the last to awake upon the death of a previous clone."

"Oh, this is just getting better and better." He placed his palm against his forehead and slowly shook his head.

"The envelope."

"The what? Oh, that." Pete reached down and grabbed it. He walked over to the center seat, moved the keyboard out of the way and emptied its contents onto desk. Photos, a wallet, gun, knife, camera, cell phone, a bottle of pills, a passport, car keys, reading glasses, a folded piece of paper, and small black box with a wind up key in the back. He stared at the content for a few seconds. "Okay, Mike, I'm not getting this. I need help."

"George started making recordings weeks after he awoke. Number Four, Kevin, gave him a similar recording as George gave you. Kevin left George everything except the reading glasses, bottle of pills, and the small black

box. Over time, of course, the contents have increased.

The center monitor lit up with George sitting at the desk. His hair was messy and he had a five-day old beard. His eyes were bloodshot with hooded eyelids. "This is madness. It's been two weeks and I haven't slept well. Kevin, that's the name number four chose, said that Forrest's company Forever Life submitted an investigational New Drug application to CDER. Apparently, he was going to sabotage the application, but didn't succeed. I woke up two weeks ago and binged on all the information about Forrest and Forever Life, Inc. This is crazy. Forrest is our Alpha! He was the first successful clone and we are working against him!" The screen went black.

Pete sat there for a few moments thinking. Number four, presumably, discovered/revealed Forrest as Prime's first successful clone. Incredible!

A new image appeared. "Forrest is out of his mind. He has to be. I see why, Pete Prime broke ties with him and made this place. Transgenetics can transform the entire world to something good. Think about it. A pill that acts as a transport and vector for radical morphologic change, but Forrest has a secret agenda. He wants to make the world shaped in his image." The screen went black a few seconds, then George reappeared. "I've been alive for about six months now. This world is amazing! Cars that drive themselves? Androids? Of which I'm going to have to make one. Space travel? Vacations in Earth's orbit. Opportunities? Endless." The screen went black.

Pete heard from behind him, "Hey Babe. You hadn't looked at those old vids for months. What's up?"

He slowly turned and saw Becky standing in the doorway. She was dressed in a translucent blue teddy. She had fuzzy rabbit faced slippers on and she had bed head. Pete thought "My 'ucking God! George was one

lucky son-of-a-bitch.”

She walked up to him and leaned down.

Pete regretted he flinched. He bit his lip, but said nothing.

Becky frowned, stood up and carefully gave Pete a once over. She stared into his eyes, then walked out the room.

Pete followed her. Dread set in when he realized she was headed to the Cloning chamber. As he entered the room he spotted her on her knees crying. He stopped just out of arms reach. “I’m sorry,” was all he could say.

She turned on him. Her eyes red and puffy. “Why!” She screamed at him. “Why are you doing this?!? Why!”

Pete backed up, his shoulders drooped. He looked down.

Becky screamed, “This is not fair!”

He could do nothing but watch. Suddenly she jumped up and ran over to the door. A heavy axe was attached to the adjacent wall. She pulled it from its cradle and dragged the heavy thing passed all the chambers to stop at number 18.

Pete realized what she was about to do. He yelled, “Stop! Not yet!”

She gave him a death stare and said, “This is total bullshit! All of it is bullshit! Let’s just let him take the whole fuckin’ place down and end this madness!”

He raced to her side just as she lifted the heavy axe over her shoulder. He grabbed the handle on the down swing, stopping her from smashing the glass.

She yelled, “Let it go, clone!”

Pete’s head snapped back. ‘Let it go, clone!’ she said. Clone. As in copy, duplicate, not the original. He lost his temper. “Get a hold of yourself you fucking idiot! This is not about you! It’s about the world.” He tossed the axe across the room. Anger gripped firmly now, “You. Need.

To. Fucking. Grow. Up!” He stared into her eyes and did not blink.

She tried to stare him down, but Pete was too far into his anger to care. Silly bitch he thought.

“You think I asked to be here?!?”

Her eyes dropped.

“I’m more than a victim here. I’m twenty years out of date and everyone I knew is either dead, old, or I can’t remember them. I have problems bigger than yours. I am truly sorry George is gone. There are so many questions I need to ask, but all I have is a sensitive computer and you! And from where I’m standing I’m pretty much fucked!”

Becky’s eyes teared up. Seconds later she ran out the room and disappeared down the hallway.

Pete sighed heavily. He let his anger cool before he spoke. “Mike?” He said but he got no response. “Sorry if I offended you.”

Mike remained silent.

Pete walked over to the axe, grabbed it, and placed it back into its cradle. He walked out the room, sad. All this in less than an hour of his new life. Maybe he should have let her smash the glass. Maybe not.

Chapter 5

Pete sat back down in front of the computer screen. He waited several seconds. Nothing. "Mike, I apologized. I am sorry."

Nothing.

Pete counted to ten. "Mike, please, continue with the videos."

Nothing.

Pete yelled, "Goddamnit! What do you expect of me? I don't know you and I'm trying to cope here! Give me some answers!"

Nothing.

"Fine then. Can you at least give me access to the Internet? The Internet is still around, right?"

The screen lit up and displayed some icons. Pete clicked on a world icon. The application ran and displayed a blank screen. An empty address bar had a blinking cursor waiting for data. Pete typed in "Search engine."

Google appeared. He let out a sigh and said more to himself than to Mike, "Finally! Something I remember." He typed in "Pete Walker". 37,600,000 results in .002 seconds. He added cloning. A Wikipedia entry was at the top of the list. Several pictures of him appeared underneath that. One picture was his face, the rest of what he looked like at 10 years his senior. So, I'll start to grey in ten years? Then he remembered George only lived for six. A rather dumb and expensive way to achieve

youthful immortality. He clicked on the Wikipedia entry. He, meaning Pete, first died fifteen years ago. That meant the average clone life expectancy sucked. He sat back and stared at the contents again. The wallet. Let's start with the wallet. It was brown leather with worn edges, standard two-fold with the expected number of credit card slots, all of which were filled with various cards. A platinum AMEX in George's name. Nice! A Visa, MasterCard, Discover card. Some food card of sorts. He would have to ask Mike about it later. That is, if the computer started talking to him again. Maybe Becky would be a better source of information now. Maybe. A driver's license with George's face and name on it and a piece of paper, folded.

Pete unfolded the piece of paper:

Tonight. Alone.

Waterfront dock 2

100K

Cloak and dagger. Quaint.

The screen lit up and George's face appeared. He said, "Thanks, Mike. I'm getting the hang of this. Hey number six and others, hopefully not others, but anyway, I left you puzzle pieces. Some of the items were left for me. I've added a few new ones. So, now that I have your attention I'll go through each one. The photos. Very important. Number six, you are really number seven . . ."

Pete held his breath.

"George continued, ". . . you know what I'm talkin' 'bout. I'll assume that others, at some point, will be viewing this in the future. So, forgive me brother six for stating the obvious between us. . ."

Pete absently nodded.

". . . Twenty years ago, cloning required the isolation

of certain cells – stem cells. Those were the cells used in the process. They could've been any cell in the body but they had to meet certain criteria. For me, it took three months, from the records it took four months for you. Number 18 took nine. Once the right cells are found, they're cultured. These are the base cells used to make all of us and they do have limits. For one is the shortened telomeres, of which Pete's process negates the negative results. But because of the process, seven identical clones can successfully be created. After that we have to modify the geno- and phenotypes. Maybe it's nature's way of keeping human vanity at bay. That's why Pete cloned us, after you, as females, kids, and different races. They are us, but also someone else. In a sense, they really are our brothers and sisters. I say all this to stress that, brother six, you are the last of the Pete originals. In mind? That went with Pete three."

Pete said, "Mike, please pause the video."

George's image stopped in mid speech.

"Will you talk to me now? Please?"

The silence went on for three minutes before Mike said, "I will talk to you, now."

"First, what did I do or say to you to make you mad at me?"

A full minute ticked by. "You made her cry."

"I see." He did actually. "You like Becky." Pete said it as a statement, not a question.

Five minutes went by. "I do."

Pete nodded. "Understood. I will try not to hurt her feelings again, but because I've only known the both of you for less than two hours, please forgive me for any faux pas I may commit going forward. I am a stranger here."

Mike answered almost immediately, "Understood, sir."

“May I ask you another question?”

“Certainly.”

“It’s about Pete Prime.”

“Please ask. I am here to help.”

“Can you see a difference in me and Pete Prime?”

Silence for about three minutes.

Pete wondered if the silence was the equivalent of a computer sigh or Mike running hundreds, if not, thousands of simulations?

“Yes, sir. There is.”

Pete held his breath.

“You have more patience. Pete Prime was rather impatient. Physical appearance, speech, and gait are identical to a Pete Walker at 39 years old. There hasn’t been enough time to discern other differences. Please ask me again in 24 hours.”

Pete nodded. “Thank you, Mike.”

“You are welcome, sir. Should I resume the video?”

Pete smiled. “Yes, please. Thank you.” This one he decided worked best with pleasantries. ‘Incredible’, he thought. Totally incredible. Eerily, Mike sounded and acted human. Was it that Mike ‘evolved’? Or was he installed with a conscious? Pete decided once Mike got to know him he would ask.

“ . . . For some reason, the memory transference changes slightly with each use. That’s why I didn’t remember Stephanie. Mike has mentioned that with each clone we seem to be more reflective, more thoughtful. We are not as reactionary as Pete Prime. If you have time, work on it or not.” He smiled. “You can always leave it to our brothers and sisters to ponder over, that is if you . . .” he coughed. “. . . decide to wake them.” He leaned in close to the screen. “Interesting that you have that option.” His right eye brow raised up. “I wondered why Pete Prime did that. Are we that much a super genius as

to play chess twenty years in the future? By the way, you may have met or not met Becky.” His smile was slight but noticeable. A few seconds later, “More on that later.” He leaned back. “The wallet, I’m sure you’ve already rifled through it. Nothing special there except that it is 20 years old. Mike can help you get a legal license with proper papers to back everything up. The same for credit cards. Mike, hopefully, started inserting purchase history into the national databases. We have a drop box at the local post office. It’s within walking distance, which is good, because it’ll help you to learn the streets. Slow is well, fast is hell.”

Pete nodded.

“Now the photos. The Red head is Pete Alpha. Pete Prime and Alpha started Forever Life, Inc. together. The records show them as twin brothers – one of which was separated at birth only later to be reunited with family. Good story. Reads like a good mystery.” That smile again. “As you can see, Pete Alpha, now named Forrest, looks nothing like us . . .” He leaned in close. “. . . that’s the power of Transgenetics. It really is amazing and powerful, but it is a time bomb. Prolong usage ultimately changes the phenotype. Very subtle over a period of years, but eventually, the user starts to look like Forrest. Prolonged use also causes sterility. In most cases, the host will be beyond reproductive age anyway, but here is the kicker. At some point, all users will have nearly the same DNA sequence. As in brother, sister, mother, father.” He paused and let that settle in. “At some point in the future humans will be inbreeding. Oh, we may figure it out before it is too late, but why take that chance? Through different means Mike, I, and our brothers have tried to sound the alarm through academic papers, protest, and other means. But a billion dollars can go a long way in suppressing the truth.” He shrugged. “The other photos

are of staff and his top scientist, Gordon. I'm hoping to eliminate most, if not all. Gordon is the one who really must go. He's the one who put all the pieces together. His assistant Sandra Spaulding broke the code, but he figured out the proper sequence for Transgenetics to work. Prep the recipient, introduce modifiers embedded in a pill. The adenoviruses are enclosed in small casings that survive the digestive tract long enough to enter the blood stream. From there they find host cells, and turn on or off trigger hormones and proteins needed to work the magic. Brother, they change the very nature on how the host cell works and functions. Brilliant, but not without a cost. This is a payment we should never make. Incidentally, I really did mean to come back, but death seems to be irrelevant when you have brothers and sisters who can at any time tap into my last thoughts. We all started getting very philosophical about life. It would be nice to think that I died of old age and forgot to update this recording, in which case Forrest was stopped and the world went about its busy life. Existentialism is pretty heavy stuff. We are all individuals who just happens to spring from the same well. Our very existences precedes essence, brother. From here forward you are who you are. Seriously, you'll have to stop thinking of yourself as Pete. Forrest did. Kevin did, I did. Our brothers and sisters will certainly think so. It's your turn, which brings me to that small black box." George lowered his head. "Of course, if you are looking at this I never did make it back." He took a deep breath, "The box is for Becky, which, hopefully, you two have met already and hopefully things have not gotten too weird. Read what I wrote and please give her the box. I'll trust you to know when and where." He cleared his throat after several moments of silence. "The bottle of pills are from pre-trails. Kevin was able to get a hold of them. I left you enough to study.

The gun is special. 3D printed and holds ten shots. Eight now. It is completely detection proof. The passport is mine, of course, Mike will get you a new one. It'll take a few months. The glasses you'll need later. Trust me." He winked. "Once you get your license you'll need to get around. Becky can help with that. Our car is the latest model and essentially needs no driver. You'll find out later. Google made good on their threat on making driverless cars a reality, and the world is a safer place for it. The knife, well, that is the same as the gun. I've used it twice – don't ask." He smiled. "I said Google made the world a safer place, not the neighborhoods. That's something different. What? All those years learning martial arts and you thought you'd never need it? The future is great but it is far from utopia. Not quite dystopia but damn close. Despite one political power trying very hard not letting the other political party drive us into the ground we still got there. The economic divide is bigger than ever. Becky can best instruct in that. And the cell phone. It's to Forrest. I'm going to leave it at that. Talk to Becky about it, but remember this, 'Enemies of my friends may not be my enemies.' The camera has my latest shots of the Forrest Building. Probably useless now, but . . ." He shrugged. "There are other Easter Egg videos I left. Some relevant, some not, some total bullshit. Six years is a long time for us, Brother. Live yours and then some. After Pete Prime passed, Pete Two went into total isolation. He left one day to confront Forrest. That was After Pete four years. Never came back. The news feed says he was struck by a car. Killed instantly. Pete three lived longer – died seven AP. He studied Forrest. Even challenged him. He met a horrible and lonely death. Kevin lived longer to 15 AP. If you are getting this last addendum to this video you're at 21 AP. There is one last thing." George seemed to be considering his words. "There is a memory

all of us cannot remember. It's a pin-point of thought that just nags at us. Mike can't or won't explain it. The data records only show that something was there. Pete Prime removed a piece of his memory from the process. Maybe you'll be the one to uncover it." The screen went blank.

Pete sighed. "Mike?"

"Yes, sir."

"What do you think?"

Silence.

Pete stared at the screen for about two minutes.

Kevin appeared. Pete could tell it was him but not him and not George. They really did seem to be different. "Number three was captured. The drugs, unofficially, made human trials that day. Transgenetics was able to breeze through initial FDA testing because Forever Life, Inc. had the perfect subject, Pete three. From what I can uncover they kept him alive for a year. I remember being woken up four times only to be placed back in hiber at least four times. Mike tells me he could not control the process. He had to let the safe guards take control when the system received some life telemetry from Number three. He died four times and they brought him back for more testing. Bastards!" The screen went blank.

"I see," Pete said. He sat staring at a blank screen for a while.

Mike finally said, "Pete. It is time for dinner."

Pete reached over to the black box. He opened it and took out the note. Tears streamed down his cheek as he read the note. Several drops hit the paper and slightly stained some of the letters. He folded it back up and placed it back in the box. After he wound the small turnkey at the back he got up and made his way to the kitchen.

Chapter 6

Pete walked into the kitchen area. The table had been set for two. A vase and some Amethyst were placed in the center. Becky sat at one end.

She said, "I was hoping you'd make it here before I started eating."

Pete noticed she did not begin with 'Hey babe'. He sat down still holding the small black box. The box George meant to give her. His special gift of love. He had planned to return, maybe. So many branches of 'what if's'. Mostly all bullshit and wishful thinking, but a few had legs --- if given the chance to run. He sat down and placed the box on the table next to a glass of water.

Becky eyed the box but didn't say a thing. She said, "Mike, ready."

The android walked up to the table holding a bowl of salad in each hand. He placed one in front of Becky and the other in front of Pete, turned and walked away.

Becky said, "His name is Prax." She pronounced it 'Praks'.

Pete said "Prax . . ."

The android paused on its way toward the kitchen cooking area.

Pete continued, ". . . as in praxis? Action?"

She nodded. "Most appropriate one would think." She raised her left brow and gave him a light smile.

Prax resumed walking into the kitchen.

Pete blushed and smiled back. He looked around wondering what to say next. He thought, 'you are a social clod.'

Becky's smile broadened and she lifted the salad fork.

Pete grabbed the dinner fork. He always thought one needed a fork with the longest teeth to get as much leaf as possible.

Becky stifled a laugh.

Pete looked up, "What?"

Becky smiled, "Nothing. Use whatever you like to eat salad. It's not like the arrangement is some form of artistic post neo-functionalism."

Pete stabbed some romaine and red cabbage cuts. The dressing was perfect. Not thick enough to mask the taste but thin enough to not be tasted. "This is delicious. Thank you."

Becky finished chewing, said, "Don't thank me. Prax and Mike have been cooking for us for years."

Pete forced his smile. '. . . been cooking for years' she said, '. . . been cooking for us.' "Becky, I'm sorry I lost my temper . . ."

"Already forgotten. Moving forward, okay?"

Pete paused for a moment. Just like that? Forgotten?

She nodded, "Yes, just like that." She stabbed salad, scooped it into her mouth, and started chewing. She never took her eyes off him.

Pete swallowed hard and grabbed the glass of water and drank deeply. He patted his lips and pretended to be amused by tablecloth lint.

Becky smiled. "I'm not a mind reader, but I do have the advantage." She thought he was just like George the first day they met. Then her smile vanished. Damn you George, you left me. Will all this be worth it in the end? She sighed. "What's in the black box?"

Pete stared into her eyes. Pressure gripped his heart.

Vise squeezing pressure crushed hard. Tears welled up. He grabbed the box, got up from the table and walked it over to her. He laid the box carefully next to the glass of water. He sat back down and finished his salad, quietly.

Becky placed the fork down and eyed the box. She lifted the lid and pulled out the note first. The little fairy stood up and twirled slowly as the song "Sweet Dreams" tinkled on.

My dearest Becky,

In all my lives I don't think I have ever been happiest. You kept me going. You supported me emotionally, mentally, spiritually. On the days I doubted my own existence you applied logic and passion. I am forever grateful for your love and I truly am sorry that I am gone . . . temporarily. If number six is giving you this then everything went terribly wrong. I did mean to return, but . . . and we talked about this often . . . the waiter brought me my check. Luckily, you fell in love with a man with cat lives. I'll wake up in the morning and forget who I am, but will have you to remind me what it is worth fighting for. Please forgive me and don't be mad at me, or me. I am just a stranger in a strange land now and I need a guiding hand, a calm heart, and a cool head to help get through and beyond this.

*Eternal love,
George*

Becky cried. Tears of pain, anger, sorrow, and love. She took the napkin and dabbed at her wet eyes. Then she noticed some of the letters were blurred from recent

tears. She looked up. "You read this?"

Pete sat staring at a woman he hadn't known long enough to love but knew he could. It was all that easy, yet all that hard. I am a man who has forgotten he thought. Will I remember? Will I want to remember? "Sorry, but George asked me too. Something wrong?"

Becky finished wiping her eyes dry. She took a sip of water and said, "Prax?"

The Android stepped up to the table, "Yes, ma'am?"

"Wine, please. Red. Your choice."

Prax said, "Yes, ma'am. A good Spica seems to be in order." He turned and walked away.

Becky reached into the box and pulled out a small medallion. It was the one George promised her years ago. He found it. A Beatles Cavern Club medal. Practically priceless now. She placed it back in the box and sighed. A few seconds later she heard a familiar "pop".

Prax emerged from the kitchen holding a bottle marked with the label 'Fat Bastard'. He poured a healthy dose into both glasses and left.

Becky held up the glass and said, "To life."

Pete hastily picked his up, nearly spilling it, and said, "To life."

Both drank. Becky's was more so to feel numb. Pete to not feel awkward.

"So," Becky began, "have you thought about a name, yet?"

"Name?"

She nodded. "Pete, you are not, and it has been taken."

"But I am . . ." He paused. Pete? No, I am not Pete. "George said it took him months to pick a name."

She nodded. "I . . . met . . . him a few months after that."

"So, why am I more accepting of changing my name?"

“Very good question. Could be you are so far removed from the Pete. George said number one took a different name, but two and three didn’t. You know about Pete Alpha?”

Pete nodded. “Forrest. Our nemesis it seems.”

“Kevin understood.”

“And so did George?”

She nodded.

Prax removed the now empty bowls. A minute later he came back with a tray of sizzling thin cut short ribs nested on a bed of sautéed thin sliced onions, mushrooms, bell and chili peppers. He shoveled half the amount on Pete’s plate and the rest on to Becky’s. He placed a small heap of white rice next to the meat and left chop sticks.

Pete stared down at his plate.

Becky moved some hair behind an ear. “You do remember how to use chopsticks?”

He smiled, “Yeah, I do.”

“Then why the hesitation? It is dead.”

“This is my second meal of my new life.” He looked up and caught Becky staring back.

She smiled briefly, looked down, and picked up a piece of meat with her chopsticks. She tore off a piece of meat from the bone with her teeth and chewed slowly. The meat was tender and seemed to melt into a delicious taste of savory and sweet sauce. A bit of chili pepper emerged but didn’t distract as much as add to the flavor.

Pete tasted the meat and an explosion of salt, sugar, vinegar, a dozen spices, and hotness swirled across his tongue. His eyes watered as he slowly chewed the soft meat. “Whoa,” he whispered.

Becky said, “I envy you, person who is not George but will soon change his name to something nice I could like.”

Pete laughed. He liked Becky. “How so?”

“You’ve come into the world as an adult.”

“I missed being a kid.”

Becky paused in mid bite. She scowled. “You do?”

“Why does that surprise you?”

“Person who is not George but will soon change his name to something nice I could like, George said he hated his childhood.”

“Interesting.”

Becky nodded, “How can two people of the same have different views on childhood?”

Pete thought about that. He finished half the rice and a third of his main meal. “My childhood . . . that’s not right . . . the childhood I remember was tough. But as a kid I had very little responsibility . . .”

Becky nodded.

“. . . yeah, I had to learn, and my parents pushed an overachieving kid to continue stretching the envelope, I could just be.” He bit into a chili pepper and quickly followed it with some onions and bell pepper. The wine helped, but barely. He took his napkin and dabbed at the sweat forming on his forehead.

Becky thought it cute that person who is not George but will soon change his name to something nice she could like wiped his forehead. She really did envy him. But she also pitied him. He woke to a world distressed and in need of healing. He wasn’t the doctor, but maybe one of the meds prescribed. If only she could leave and start over. Like maybe one of the new colonies starting up. She finished her plate and placed the chopsticks down.

Prax stood ready. He focused on the clone and waited for him to finish eating. When the clone seemed to have had enough of the main meal he collected the dishes. Mike gave him instructions via a wireless link. One in particular was simple: Observe. This one was like the others physically, but different in several ways. Its

movements were more graceful. It didn't move in fits and starts like the Original and clone 2 and 3. This one was more like the Alpha.

Becky nodded when she noticed the person who is not George but will soon change his name to something nice she could like placed his chopsticks down. The rice gone, the meat and veggies consumed. His wine glass drain, his water glass drained.

Prax took his cue from Mike and cleared the table. He placed the dishes in the sink and walked over to a very large refrigerator. Desert had already been prepared: Cucumber and Lemon-Lime sorbet with a sprinkle of sea salt. Dollops of pureed mint and sugar were placed on the side.

Becky watched as the person who is not George but will soon change his name to something nice slowly dropped his jaw. He closed his mouth and swallowed audibly.

Prax backed away and watched the clone closely. He monitored heart rate, blood pressure, and body temperature. The clone picked up the spoon and scraped a small amount of sorbet into it. It lifted the spoon to its mouth. Tears pooled at the bottom of its eyes. It took a larger amount of sorbet and placed it in its mouth. The clone's body visibly relaxed. Its body temperature dropped to 97.1, heart rate to 72, respiration 10, blood pressure 110/70. From the expression on the clone's face Prax reasoned it was content.