

CHAPTER 1

When I pulled my aging Audi into the parking lot of Drexall Cosmetics, a familiar knot tightened in my chest. Most people would feel excited, albeit somewhat nervous, about a new job interview.

Not me.

My palms were already slick with sweat. What will they ask? What would they find if they dug beneath the surface? What secrets can I keep buried?

Beyond the visitor parking lot, the Ashley River drifted silently toward the harbor, indifferent to everything around it. The morning fog had burned away, leaving only a haze of heavy humidity. I swallowed. Great. Water. Just what I needed to feed my already spiraling anxiety.

So, I did what I'd done since my first therapy session more than twenty years ago. I closed my eyes and took ten deep breaths — in for four seconds, hold for six, out for eight. After each breath, I repeated the same words.

There's nothing to fear.

You are not in danger.

My therapist had long ago convinced me there was no conquering my aquaphobia. It wasn't an enemy to defeat. It was simply a part of who I was. Some fears don't go away. You just learn to live around them.

When I opened my eyes, my pulse had settled. I turned away from the river and focused on the interview. My fourth in three months. I suspected it would end like the other three. Employers no longer took resumes at face value. They dug. They verified. They uncovered the failures applicants hoped would stay buried.

I'd done my best to bury mine.

So far, none has survived the scrutiny of today's HR sleuths. Anyone willing to spend a few minutes online could uncover everything I wanted forgotten. After the last rejection, I'd given up trying to stay in pharmaceuticals. I'd become radioactive in the industry. Maybe a different field would offer me a second chance.

Before climbing out, I checked myself in the visor mirror. My wavy, sandy-brown hair had fallen across my left eye again. I brushed it back, straightened my tie, and studied the reflection. Two steel-blue eyes stared back, daring me to tell the truth.

I stepped from the car and immediately winced as pain shot through my left ankle.

Natalie.

The name surfaced the way it always did whenever the old injury flared. The ankle and the memory had become inseparable. Like smoke and fire. Thunder and lightning.

Death and destruction.

Pain had a way of remembering what I tried to forget.

Shaking away the haunting recollections, I entered the glass and steel reception area and signed into the visitor log. A perky receptionist named Becky greeted me.

“I’m Steve Baker, here to see Mr. Thompson for an interview.” I managed a weak smile as Becky told me to have a seat in the waiting area. Sitting in a comfortable, padded leather chair, unconscious of my bouncing knee, I pondered my predicament and tried to form a strategy.

My resume was deceptively vague. I tried to emphasize the positive. It traced my twelve years at Trinity Labs. From my beginnings as a new biochemical engineer, fresh out of Georgia Tech, I rose to Project Manager and eventually Corporate Manager of New Products. I oversaw the creation and approval of three blockbuster drugs. The last one didn’t pan out as expected, and I agreed to a mutual parting of ways with the company.

I’ve practiced this line repeatedly until even I believed it. But it didn’t work. In each of the previous three interviews, it didn’t take much digging to reveal the ugly truth. And when it did, it left the taste of bile in me so bitter, my stomach wrenched.

So, I’m now forced to switch industries. Cosmetics — Ugh. No more pouring my efforts into drugs that improved and saved people’s lives. If I land this job, I’d be helping women’s lips glisten more than they already do, or other such nonsense. That’s if I’m lucky, and if I’m not —

Becky’s voice interrupted my musing. “Mr. Thompson will see you now. Please follow me.”

I gave her the same weak smile and thanked her, then followed her down a long corridor. She knocked on the door, and a gruff “Come in,” echoed from within. I gulped and reminded myself to express positivity and exude optimism, the exact opposite of how I felt.

“Mr. Baker, come in and have a seat.” Thompson came from around his desk and greeted me with a warm smile and a firm handshake. Behind his desk was a panoramic view of the river. Great. I forced the impending tightness in my chest down. It’s just a river, Steve — but it still unnerved me.

After a few pleasantries about the weather (mighty hot for early May, but it is Charleston, you know) and my family (my wife Tracy, no kids) I forced myself to express what a happy marriage I was in (another lie). Then Thompson got down to business.

“I’m curious, Mr. Baker, why you’re looking to switch industries. Big Pharma is booming these days. Quite frankly, with your credentials, I’d consider you overqualified for the position we have open.”

Now it gets tricky. “Yes, sir. I understand that. I had a falling out with top management at Trinity Labs.” I felt my toes tapping uncontrollably inside my shoe. “There was some contentious discussion about the treatment of the Phase 2 data for a drug that was eventually pulled. It soured me on any future in the industry.”

I stared Thompson directly in the eye. Would he push it or move on?

“I’d like to hear more specifically about this trial. What drug was involved?”

And that was it. The interview would go downhill from there. I looked past Thompson out the window to the river, then regretted it. I couldn’t look him in the eye any longer, so I focused on a spot on the window frame. My lips had suddenly gone dry as kindling. When I tried to swallow it felt like there were cotton balls in my throat. “It was Rexaltac, Trinity Labs’ latest Alzheimer’s drug. The Phase 1 trial had incredibly promising results, but in Phase 2 there were some discouraging side effects in a few patients.” I had Thompson’s undivided attention.

“What kind of side effects?”

A mistaken glance back at the river tightened my stomach into a knot. I took a deep breath.

“People died,” I answered, my voice deadpan.

For a moment, the room went silent.

“So then, the drug was pulled?”

“No, sir. It wasn’t. Therein lay the conflict I had with Trinity Labs.”

“I’m not following you, Mr. Baker. I know cosmetics aren’t the same as pharmaceuticals, but we still have phased trials for new products, and no trial would continue if there were fatal side effects.”

I sat there with a blank look on my face, tried to swallow again, then said without emotion, “You would think so, sir.”

I might as well have just gotten up and left, but I took a calculated risk agreeing to this interview, so I stuck it out. I watched Thompson go through a series of facial expressions I could only describe as bewilderment.

“Mr. Baker, if you’d excuse me for one minute.”

“Absolutely.” Now, what the hell was he doing? Thompson typed on his computer. Was he Googling something or sending an email? After a few seconds, he resumed the interview.

“My apologies. Let’s change the subject. We did a background check on you, and it showed a conviction in 2018 on a vehicular manslaughter charge, as well as a DUI. You served time but remained with the company. I’d like to hear more about that.”

Now, I stared my interviewer directly in the eye. I knew it would come up, as it had in my previous interviews. The answer came out polished. Practice does that. I even made my face redden with embarrassment on cue.

“Yes, sir. It was the greatest mistake of my life.” Well, up to the Trinity debacle. “I was young and foolish. I made a terrible decision to drive under the influence. I paid my debt to society and continue to pay my debt owed to the victim’s family and will for many years to come. I was grateful to Trinity Labs at the time for maintaining my employment. I’ve learned from my mistakes.” There, a little grimace at the end to show remorse. There was so much more to the story that Thompson would never hear.

“I see,” he said. “I appreciate your honesty, Mr. Baker.”

The interview continued along predictable lines. How my experience would benefit Drexall. My leadership skills. My team building skills. It all played into what should have been a successful interview, leading to a job offer. Then I heard an alert from Thompson’s computer.

“Excuse me for one minute, Steve.”

It appeared he was reading something. My guess was a reply to the email he sent earlier. A frown broke out on his face. When he looked back up at me, I knew I was toast.

“Mr. Baker,” he said with that ominous tone which precedes bad news. “I’m afraid you haven’t been upfront with me today. I thought I had heard about the issue with Rexaltac. It was in the news after the drug was pulled last October. It involved a scandal the company tried to keep under wraps, but the Post & Courier did an investigative report, and your name seemed to be at the heart of the controversy. You mentioned people died during the Phase 2 trials. Yet

somehow the FDA approved the drug for the expanded Phase 3 trial, which ended in disaster. Now I know why. Do I need to continue?"

I sat there, stone-faced, all the blood now drained from my head. I had hoped the change of industry would hide what happened. Obviously not. I had hoped the past would stay buried; it never does. I slowly shook my head. "No, sir. That's not necessary. I'm sorry to have wasted your time." I stood up, hoping for one last glimmer of hope that the interview wasn't over, but Thompson showed no sign of wanting to continue.

I turned to leave when Thompson said, "Mr. Baker."

I stopped and turned to face him. "Yes, sir."

"I understand we all make mistakes. It seems you've made more than your share. You need to find a new direction. Somewhere your past won't continue to haunt you. I wish you the best of luck. I'm sorry."

Sorry. It had to be the saddest word in the English language. My body trembled as the mental numbness set in. I had to get out of there. "Thank you, sir," was all I could muster and then turned and left his office. I walked down the hall and straight out the door. Becky said something about needing to sign out, but I ignored her.

When I arrived back at the Audi, I had to force myself not to look out over the river. Once inside, I started the engine and made my way out of the parking lot as fast as possible. It was a ten-mile drive back to my home in Mt. Pleasant. I put Thompson and Drexall out of my mind; there were bigger problems ahead. Namely Tracy.

She had stood by me for the past six months as I reeled from my termination at Trinity Labs. But I knew her patience was wearing thin. We couldn't continue to pay the mortgage and the bills with no income from me. Not to mention the \$500 monthly check to my victim's family.

The fact was that our five-year marriage was on the rocks. What began with Tracy's heartfelt empathy following my release from prison, eventually wore off. It was all my fault, of course. I couldn't shake the guilt from the accident, or the grief of losing Natalie, the latter of whom Tracy never knew about.

Now she wanted more; more money that wouldn't come, more love and support from me, which, try as I might, never seemed to meet her expectations. Our future looked as cloudy as ever. First, she hinted about moving on. Then, as the weight and implication of my termination set in, her hints became threats. Her once strong empathy toward me had vanished.

Our house, one of the earlier built in Mt. Pleasant, needed repairs. Last month, the septic tank started acting up. I had no way to pay for a replacement. The exterior hadn't been painted since we bought it and desperately needed a fresh coat. The AC was on its last legs.

I told her three weeks ago, I'd start painting during my unemployment, but I'd yet to buy even a gallon of paint. The list of to-do projects kept growing, and they weren't getting done. Every day she'd come home and harped on me for not doing anything constructive.

Now, with Drexall down the toilet, my career as a professional project manager in the bio-chem industry was essentially over. I didn't know what to do next.

I drove over the Ravenel Bridge, taking care as I always did not to look down over the Wando River, instead focusing on the road ahead. Minutes later, I turned off Highway 17 and braced myself to face Tracy with even more bad news. I tried to keep from running down that rabbit hole of depression. The mistakes I'd made, the poor decisions I had to live with, and the unmerciful consequences of them played in my head on auto-repeat. I switched to the mantra my therapist had given me long ago. You are in control of your own decisions. Your own happiness. Your destiny. It seemed all so impossible to grasp.

I turned left onto my home road. The house came into view, and when it did, my heart sank. Tracy was waiting for me, sitting on the front steps. She had a frown on her face and a suitcase by her side. I took a deep breath and muttered, "Oh, shit."