

Infernal stoplight. Could it take any longer to change?

Sweat dripped down Max Duncan's back and dotted his brow. It soaked through his formerly pristine shirt and left stains under his arms and on his collar. Cars swept past, slinging stifling, muggy Houston air into his face. He wanted to slap it away. Instead, he shifted from foot to foot.

"I ain't got time for this freakin' . . ." A string of obscenities slipped out under his breath. He glared at the crowd pressing against him, pushing and nudging him. He bared his teeth as if he were a lion ready to pounce and rip the entire throng to shreds. Then, he thought of all the germs, the stink, and the sweat that would contaminate him, and he pressed his lips together in a solid line, as if they could be a protective barrier from the totally sub-perfect world bumping against him.

The temperature rose, heat bearing down on him with such intensity that he was certain a giant magnifying glass was over his head, concentrating the sun's rays on his scalp. When the signal finally changed, Max pushed through the crowd so that he led the pack as he raced across the scorching pavement.

On the other side of the street, he stopped in front of the bank's wall of windows. His reflection stared back at him from the tinted glass. With a stubby forefinger, he dabbed at a smudge on his forehead. Lately, it was as if the years were melting away, like a river birch's curling bark peeling away to reveal the pristine white trunk beneath. If it weren't for that hideous tag of skin growing under his jaw, he could be on the next cover of *People's* "Sexiest Men Alive" issue - but that tag. It had only appeared recently. It was just a flap of extra skin, ridged like a gill, but with no color. He shrugged. Youth and energy, why they were the two greatest forces in life. They were all that mattered. He had been blessed with a lot of each lately. Although he didn't understand why or how, he didn't care. Max never questioned the generosity of any giver.

He glided through the brass-trimmed doors of the old bank and into the cavernous marble-floored lobby. He sniffed. Despite artificially cooled air, he could smell it- money, old money. It was like slipping into a favorite pair of jeans, comfortable, comforting. Odd, he didn't remember being around it before.

At the teller's window, Max pulled a sheet of paper from his pocket, glanced at it, and then said, "I'm here for Gerald Humminger."

There was a momentary pause as the woman glanced up at Max and narrowed her eyes. After a few seconds, she said very stiffly, "May I tell him who wishes to see him?"

Max patted his tie. "Yeah, you can tell him Max Duncan is here."

Soon, a tall gentleman in the dark, cut-to-perfection uniform of the business world approached and extended his bony hand.

"It's Max now, is it?" Gerald Humminger grinned. "What a pleasant surprise! I certainly didn't expect to see you again, at least not so soon." He gripped Max's elbow and spoke close to his ear. "But, I must say, you're looking better than ever - at least ten years younger. You must tell me about this youth potion you've obviously discovered!"

Max's fat fingers encircled the man's bony ones as they shook hands. His brows knitted into a frown. Who was this guy?

Moments later, seated in a leather chair in Humminger's office, Max studied the man. How could Mr. Humminger be surprised to see him again? He was certain he had never met the lanky banker before.

As the thought traversed the neural pathways in Max's mind, a small chisel started hammering inside his skull. The throbbing was moderate, just enough to make Max grimace. He pushed the heel of his hand against his forehead.

"Are you all right?" Gerald leaned forward and squinted. Max nodded. "Want some ice water, perhaps, something stronger?"

Max shook his head. "No . . . thanks."

"Well then, what brings you here today? Last I heard, you were in some federal prison. It seems something was said about an inmate stabbing you." Humminger giggled. "I believe it was with a fork! Even heard you didn't make it. But, it looks like you not only resurrected yourself, new name and all, but you shaved a few years off while you were at it. If it wasn't some magic youth potion, then it must've been one incredible plastic surgeon!"

Max stared at Gerald, his expression blank. Who was this man that he even cared what Max looked like? It was none of his business, except Max couldn't deny the slight pleasure he got from the envy the other man held toward him.

Gerald's smile faded. "Look, we're old buddies. I've held your hand through the worst of them. This room is safe. You can tell old Gerald what's really going on."

"Going on? Nothing's going on. I'm fine." Max shifted in his seat. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and swiped it across his forehead. Then he glanced at his watch. "Look, I need to make a transfer. I've got to split twenty million between three accounts. One's in the Grand Caymans. The others are in Switzerland."

"Twenty million? You have that much left? I thought our 'I-feel-your-pain' uncle too all your possessions. IRS and all."

All his possessions? He was simply transferring money on behalf of his new employer.

"It's not mine," Max said as he pushed a sealed envelope across the polished desk. "It's my employer's. The authorization's there," he added, pointing to the envelope.

"New employer, huh? You not only flirted with death, cheated and won; you're also not wasting any time getting new work, are you?" Gerald tore open the envelope and quickly read the single sheet inside.

"Says here this is your money, and you want it split between three accounts opened nearly five years ago." Gerald dropped the sheet and stared at Max. "Want to tell me the real truth? What's going on, Milo?"

"Milo?" Max frowned. "I tell you, nothing's going on. Never in my life have I had money like that!" The chisel in his skull morphed into a jackhammer.

"Milo, Max, whatever. You've never had that little money in your life. You're used to handling many times more than a paltry sum of twenty million. You controlled accounts the world over. The Grand Caymans was just play money. That why you can't remember!" Gerald grinned as he patted Max's shaking hand. "Sure, it must be hard giving up what you had. Looks like you're on your way back, though. Pull a few wise investments, and in no time, you'll have all you had before plus some."

Max tried to swallow but couldn't. So much saliva had accumulated it threatened to overflow and dribble down his chin. Without warning, a wave of nausea slammed into him, sending a fresh sweat river down his cheeks. Yet, he managed a smile as he nodded at Gerald.

"Very well." Gerald stood. "You must sign the proper forms and all that. You know the routine." He rounded the desk and started for the door. "Just sit back and relax. I'll get my secretary on it right away." The door shut behind him.

Max started shaking. He felt like a leaf whipping around in a storm, and he couldn't stop himself. Ringing echoed in his ears. A frantic urgency pushed and pulled at his insides. He got up and started pacing in front of the wall of windows. He felt like he would die if he stopped moving. On the street below, traffic and pedestrians flowed. Heat shimmered off the pavement. Max stared at them and wondered why he envied them.

Gerald returned, breezing through the door with a small stack of documents in hand.

Max spun around and hurried back to his seat in front of Gerald's desk. He pointed at the papers. "Where do I sign?"

"Just like every time before, wherever you see yellow highlighting." Gerald pointed at the various blanks. "These forms authorize this bank to move the money you requested to the accounts you specified, and so on and so on. Soon as they're signed, we'll enter the instructions and wait for confirmation. It shouldn't take more than a few minutes."

The signing completed, Max shoved the papers back over to Gerald who then took them to someone waiting outside the door. As suddenly as it had come over him, Max's urgent energy vanished. His muscles, no longer tight and hard, crumpled into a limp mass. Yet, the pounding in his head jumped to double-time. He had to get out of there. He didn't know why; he just had to do it. Right then. Aiming for the door, Max staggered as the room tilted and then straightened.

Gerald gripped his elbow. "What's your hurry?" He bent over so that he could peer into Max's eyes. "Are you all right? You're looking a little pale. Sure I can't get you something?"

Max focused on Gerald for a moment, and he realized suddenly he didn't know why he was there. Max shook his head, unable to answer.

A young woman in a form-fitting suit pushed through the door and smiled. "Mr. Humminger, the confirmation just came back. I'll have the hard copy in just a moment."

“Thanks, Bonnie, dear,” Gerald said. His eyes lingered on her shapely form, and she glared at him as she backed from the room and slammed the door.

The pounding, the ringing, the nausea, all of it closed in on Max. He lunged for the door and reeled through it.

“Wait! You don’t have your papers!”

“I’ll . . . get them later.” Max rubbed his temple furiously. Without warning, he gagged, but only saliva streamed from his mouth. He managed to push through the door and half ran, half staggered toward the elevator.

Once inside, he leaned against the wall and panted. Swirling images crept across his vision, distorting the light and the area around him. When the doors opened, he nearly fell into the arms of a waiting woman. Instead, he caught himself and stumbled past her, aiming erratically for the outer doors and the bright light beyond. If only he could make it to the light.

The pounding and ringing intensified, shutting out all sound. Desperate to stop the pain, he pushed his palm against his ear and then pulled it away and stared at it. It was warm and stickily, dripping with bright-red blood. Max stumbled forward. He didn’t hear the shouts behind him or car horns blaring before him. He just searched for the light. He pushed his feet faster, desperate to find it.

When Max finally found his light, he didn’t see the car to his left. He couldn’t feel the crunching and cracking of his bones, the scraping and tearing of his flesh. His world wobbled and spun, dragging him with it. By the time he hit the pavement, it was black. The ringing stopped, and the pounding slowed. Thump . . . thump . . . thump . . . thump . . .

The newscaster’s professionally bleached teeth filled the television screen.

“In downtown Houston today, a tragic accident took the life of billionaire, former federal prison inmate, and allied Mafia kingpin, Milo Dolnia. Eyewitness accounts vary, some saying Dolnia was holding his head, with blood running through his fingers prior to staggering into the path of a speeding car in the one-hundred block of Louisiana Street. Others could not confirm his injury but saw him moving erratically prior to running in front of the oncoming vehicle. Dolnia did not respond to shouts or car horns. No charges have been filed at this time; however, an

investigation continues. Dolnia was the focus of a recent controversy after being released from Bastrop Federal Prison after serving only a small fraction of his sentence for tax evasion and fraud. He ...”

The petite, flame-haired woman hit the “off” button on the remote and threw it on her desk. Hands on her hips as if she were the steel-plated superhero, she whirled about to face the towering, almost superhuman-looking man entering her office. Despite the white lab jacket covering a starched shirt and silk tie, he looked more like a professional wrestling star than the genius he was as tested on the Wechsler Scale.

“Did you see that? Did you?” The woman’s voice rose. “They just won’t leave it alone, will they? They’ll do their investigations, prodding and poking until their brains freeze over. Why can’t they believe it was an accident and leave it at that?”

“Whatever are you worried about, Cherie?” The tone of his voice was mostly neutral, except for when he pronounced her name. It was drawn out like a long, soft caress. She might have wondered about him, his heritage, if indeed there was some French ancestry there, but she was too preoccupied to consider his bloodline. More important issues related to blood kept her focused.

“Even with an autopsy, all they’ll find, beside broken bones and contusions, is a subdural hematoma, a small intracranial hemorrhage. They’ll assume that’s what caused him to run blindly into the street. Believe me; they will never know the truth.”

“I hope you’re right, Charles. For all of our sakes, I hope you’re right.”

“Why do you doubt, Cherie? Do you not believe me when I tell you of our progress, of our achievements? We have attained the unthinkable, things so unbelievable that if one did not witness them personally, one would never believe them possible. Yet, you have see it all firsthand.”

Cherie’s lips curled into a self-satisfied grin as she rubbed her hand along his thick arm. “Oh, I know, Charles! It’s just I get scared sometimes. We’ve worked for so long on this, put so much into it, that to consider any setback now when we’re so close ... well, it just curdles my stomach! You’re right; we’re almost there. I mean, Milo authorized that transfer of twenty

million, not even a question asked! Think of the implications!” A low, guttural laugh rose from her throat.

“Implications?” Charles shook his head. “What it means is we still have not solved our problem. We still cannot determine why they succumb at exactly the same point.”

“So who cares if they fall over? At least we can get them to do our bidding first.” She licked her lips. “Charles, consider the potential. We’ve stumbled onto something that could be even more productive than your silly little cures. Why not use it?”

“Silly little cures?” His voice clipped the air with a cold, steel edge. “I thought what mattered most was not to make them our puppets but to perfect the miracles, to give them hope. Is that not the goal, what we are all waiting for, hope?”

Cherie rubbed her chin. “I suppose you can have your hope. Pity, though. We’ve proven the potential. It would be a shame to waste it.”

“Waste it?” He backed away from her. The air between them had become charged. “No, it would never be wasted, but we desperately need fresh blood. Somewhere, there is a person holding the right DNA key, the right genetic blueprint to give us what we lack. When we find that, then we have success. We can give them our miracles and keep them alive.”

Cherie rubbed a red-painted fingernail slowly across her plump lips. Her eyes narrowed as she studied him. In a low, seductive tone, she said softly, “Charles, you will find your success. I know you will. In the meantime, though, we can have some fun, can’t we?” She moved behind him and began to knead his shoulder muscles through the cloth of his lab jacket. As her fingers poked and prodded the tight muscles, she smiled her trademark Cheshire grin.

“Yes, Charles, we’ll have our fun, and you’ll solve your problems. You’ll get what you need, and you’ll be happy. I will be too, for you will have given me what I’ve searched for—no, longed for—all these years. I’m banking the reputation of our entire project on your promises, and you know to whom I answer.”

Charles spun around so that his gaze met hers. The heat seemed to shimmer like pavement on a hot summer day. He nodded and said quietly, “I am well aware of the power behind you. But I cannot produce your miracles, or your puppets, without help.” Not waiting for

a response, he spun sharply on his heel and hurried from the office. The door slammed behind him.

Cherie crossed her arms and stared blankly at the door. Slowly, a smile spread across her face. “Good,” she said, though there was no one to hear her. “Glad you understand.” Plopping into her swivel chair, she kicked her feet out, and with a soft “Whee!” she spun it once before pulling it up to her desk. She picked up the phone and punched in a few numbers as she muttered to herself, “Now for that little matter of genetic variety.”