

Weasels Abound

The sun was all but obscured by a mass of dark clouds hovering overhead. The glass-laden sides of the Neurology building stood in grayness like an empty void of solitude and tiny streaks of water painted the lifeless windows as a light drizzle began.

Inside, Wright paced from one corner of the elevator to the next. An eternity seemed to be passing as the lift slowly ascended and he watched the floor numbers change with agonizing anticipation. Two—he took a deep breath, carefully considering his next words for Bradford. Three—he clasped his hands together tightly, causing blood to rush through his fingers in an attempt to contain his anger. Four—he stood anxiously waiting for the elevator doors to open. They finally slide apart and Wright bolted out of the compartment. He rushed down the hallway and paused for a moment as he reached the door to Bradford’s office. Taking a deep, controlled breath, he entered.

The receptionist greeted him with unusual enthusiasm. “Hey Jack, it’s great to see you again!”

“Hi Andrea. I hate to be rude, but I need to see Bradford immediately!”

“I’m sorry Jack, but Dr. Bradford’s not in his office right now,” she said innocently.

“What do mean he’s not in his office? Where the hell is he?”

“I—I don’t know. He left about ten minutes ago and didn’t say where he was going,” she answered in a rather meek tone.

Wright lowered his tone in response and gave her a consoling smile. “Look. I’m sorry for snapping at you, but I’ve got a major problem right now and I need to speak with him.”

Andrea regained her composure and made an earnest attempt to calm him. “Jack—I don’t know why you’re upset, but I’d really like to help.”

Wright pondered for a few moments, finally accepting her offer. “Alright,” he said nodding. “Do you know what happened to my office in the ER today?”

Andrea seemed perplexed by the question, and responded apprehensively. “Dr. Bradford said that he spoke with you this morning. At your request, he had everything transferred over not more than an hour ago.”

“Where, might I ask, did he have it transferred to?” He pressed further.

Andrea smiled, as would a child who knew the answer to a difficult question. “Your new office of course! I helped to arrange it. I was so excited when I heard that you’d...” She stopped and corrected herself. “I mean your research would be conducted up here.”

“I see,” Wright uttered deliberately. “You wouldn’t mind showing me to my new office? Would you?”

“Not at all. It’s right across the hall. Just give me a minute,” she said cheerfully, tapping several buttons on her telephone.

Andrea led the way to a well-proportioned office adjacent to Bradford’s. The smell of fresh paint still lingered in the air and the plush carpet bore signs of a recent cleaning. Several new pieces of furniture had been introduced and Wright’s old

tattered desk had been replaced with a larger, more ornate one. Aside from this, everything else looked the same. The papers were neatly stacked as they had been before and all the other items were in their respective places. Nevertheless, Wright's immediate concern was focused on the little black box.

"Andrea, what happened to the contents of my old desk?" he inquired anxiously.

"Don't worry," she said with a reassuring smile. "We transferred everything from your old desk into your new desk. You have my personal assurance that it's all there."

Wright walked over to the desk and began sifting through the drawers. Andrea just stood there watching him with an impassioned yearning. She had had very few opportunities to really interact with this mysterious figure, and was hoping that this would be her chance to open up to him.

Andrea was an attractive young woman with few eccentricities. She wore little makeup, and rightfully so. Her fair complexion was smooth and young, and her dark green eyes gleamed with the optimism of a naïve young woman. Her small, feminine mouth was outlined by naturally blushed lips and her nose was slender. The hairstyle she wore was short and conservative and complemented her straight brown hair. And the short suit skirt and white blouse she wore only slightly obscured her firm, youthful body.

Andrea stood at the entrance in somewhat of a pose with one hand perched against the doorway and the other hand straddling her side. She continued to watch as Wright meticulously examined the contents of every drawer. She shifted her expression several times, hoping to capture his attention with a warm sensual smile.

After several frantic minutes he raised his eyes to her and spoke in a calm tone. “Well, it looks like everything’s in its place—with one exception.” He paused for a reaction.

She wore a look of genuine concern. “What is it Jack?”

“Something’s missing. Something that has a dramatic impact on my research. In fact, without that something I can’t complete my—research.” Wright gasped for breath as he choked on his own words.

“I don’t understand. Nothing was removed. Are you sure it was in your desk?”

“Yes!” he responded emphatically.

Andrea was momentarily speechless. “I—I don’t know what to say,” she stammered.

Wright seemed uninterested in her response as he began to formulate his next statement. “Now that I think about it. It was in a locked drawer. And I’m the only one with a key. Maybe you’d like to explain to me how you got it open.” His suspicions were growing.

Andrea was visibly upset. It was becoming apparent that she was not part of Bradford’s insidious scheme. She took a breath and responded. “You’ve got to believe me when I tell you I really don’t know what’s going on. I was given a job to do and I thought I was doing the right thing. All I can tell you is that if something’s missing, it was missing before it came up here.” She paused to catch a quick breath. “And none of the drawers were locked. I know that for a fact.”

Wright was suspicious of her motives, but decided to extend her some trust. He moved towards her and placed his hand gently on her shoulder.

“Look Andrea. You have to understand my paranoia here. I’ve been going toe to toe with Bradford for months now and

at this point he may have just won. I respect the fact that he's your boss, but in all honesty the man's a total creep."

Andrea looked Wright square in the eyes and spoke solemnly. "Jack—I'm not totally oblivious to what's been going on. I know that Dr. Bradford's been opposed to your research from day one. I also know that he's had someone spying on you. I only wish I could tell you who."

"That's all right. I kind of suspected as much."

Andrea sighed. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you before, but I didn't want to get involved. I figured that it was none of my business. I had no idea Dr. Bradford was going to take it this far."

"I appreciate your honesty Andrea. Anything else you'd like to share?"

She thought for a moment and responded. "Well, I can tell you that Dr. Bradford and Nurse Hardcourt have been meeting for, shall we say, unofficial business. Maybe she can shed some light on the situation. I'm sure she would be more than willing to cooperate in exchange for your silence."

Wright raised a brow in interest. "Good point, but I don't think she knows anything about the theft. Although, it does explain why she was so upset when she heard that Bradford was involved with the rumor."

Andrea wore a look of confusion. "What rumor?"

"I'll tell you later. Right now we need to find the missing monitor. It's about eight inches long and black with a numerical keypad and display," he explained, measuring with his hands.

"I bet Dr. Bradford had one of his wormy little assistants steal it. Lord knows he wouldn't have done it himself," she said sarcastically.

Wright's eyes lit up. The realization struck him like a bolt of lightning. "Wait a minute. That's it! Bradford's assistants. He mentioned something about them in an earlier conversation. Any idea who he might've been talking about?"

"If I were to guess I'd say one of them has to be Chad Collins. He's probably Dr. Bradford's most loyal minion. He's also a brown-nosing little weasel. I can't think of anyone else who'd be involved, but I think I know where Chad might be."

"Well then perhaps we should pay him a visit," Wright said, extending his arm towards the door.

She acknowledged him with a sharp nod and exclaimed, "Follow me!"

Bradford had met with Hardcourt in their usual hiding place. At her request the two converged and were currently discussing the situation that had spawned the notorious rumor.

"Everett—I really wish you'd give me a straight answer about this whole Wright situation. I think that my loyalty and intimacy with you entitles me to an honest answer!"

"Just calm down Gayle," he said, with a condescending smile. "We all have to play our part in order to maintain the prestige and respectability of this institution. Sometimes we must sacrifice our own interests. Our first and foremost responsibility is to the clinic and the patients that depend on our professionalism. Isn't that what you've always said?"

"Cut the crap Evy," she snapped harshly. "That line of B.S. may work on your impressionable young interns, but you're not squirming your way out of this one. You better give me a straight answer or so help me I'll beat it out of you."

Bradford, amused by her threat, continued to divert her efforts. "I'm tempted by your offer," he quipped and began

searching through one of the supply racks. He located a length of rubber tubing and offered it to her. “Here. You can tie me up and lash me with this. Perhaps we can even take turns,” he said with a perverse smile.

Hardcourt was becoming enraged and snapped at Bradford again. “I’m going to ask you one last time. Did you have anything to do with that rumor?”

Bradford was no longer amused. He barked back angrily. “Of course I did you stupid twit! I needed a diversion to allow my men time to clear out his office. And you played it so well my dear. He’s probably still roaming around trying to figure out what happened. And soon I’ll know what it is that he’s really been working on. Nobody pulls the wool over my eyes and gets away with it.”

Hardcourt sneered at him as she spoke. “Evy—I never thought I’d say this to you, but you’re nothing but a self-centered, egotistical bastard. I used to look up to you and respect you, but now I just pity you. Your pathetic attempts to squelch Wright have all but failed and now you resort to theft? Even I didn’t think you’d stoop so low. I honestly think you’re jealous of Wright because he has something you don’t.”

Bradford blurted out a few forced laughs. “And what could that possibly be?” His face contorted grotesquely.

“Honesty,” she said and began counting off with her fingers. “Integrity, compassion, vision...”

Bradford broke in harshly, “Shut up! Just shut the hell up! What do you know you insignificant whore. If it weren’t for me you would’ve lost your job a long time ago. Don’t think that I’ve forgotten about that patient you killed. I think you need to consider...”

“At this point, I really don’t care what you think anymore. Yet again you illustrate how pathetic you really are. That man

died because I allowed my personal prejudices to interfere with my job, and that's a mistake I'll have to live with for the rest of my life. I told you about that incident because I thought you were my friend—my confidant. But now I know what you really are. You're just a tired jealous little old man with a major inferiority complex," she exclaimed in a cruel callous tone. With that, Hardcourt turned abruptly and walked towards the exit. Bradford stood there dumbfounded. He tried to respond, but ultimately remained speechless.

Wright and Andrea arrived at the door to the Neuroelectrical Instrumentation Lab located on the second floor of the Neurology building. A low whirring sound could be heard on the other side of the door. Wright clasped the knob tightly, took a deep breath and entered.

Inside, two men dressed in long white coats were sitting around a large countertop with several electronic instruments within their reach. At first the object they were working on was obscured by one of the men, but as Wright approached he gawked in horror. The small black device was now in several pieces. The back cover had been removed and several boards were strewn about the tabletop surface. One of the men was attempting some type of measurement with a computerized device. On the device, several waveforms flickered and the pitch of the whirring sound changed with each new measurement.

"What the hell do you think you're doing," Wright barked angrily.

"Excuse me, but do you belong here?" one of the men queried sarcastically.

Andrea chimed in quickly, trying to calm Wright. “Please Jack. Try and relax. I’m sure these men are just following orders.”

“Maybe so, but that’s my property and they have no right to it. Besides, I doubt they know what they’re doing anyway,” Wright retorted derisively.

“Let me guess. You must be Jackson Wright. Ah yes, Dr. Bradford’s told me so much about you.” The man addressing Wright was indeed Chad Collins—a weasel of a man with red hair, hazel eyes and a pair of thick rimmed spectacles that only further detracted from his meager appearance. “He also told me that you’d be working with us. Let me be the first to say that it will be an honor...”

Wright cut in abruptly. “Excuse me? Working with you? I don’t care what Dr. Bradford said. This is my project and I never agreed to share my research with anyone. Especially with some lab assistants!”

Collins responded calmly. “There’s no need for insults. I’m just following Dr. Bradford’s orders. Seeing that this project is now under the jurisdiction of the Neurology Department, I think you need to reevaluate your position.”

Andrea quickly intervened. “Excuse us for a moment,” she said and motioned Wright off to the side. “Listen Jack. I think you need to cooperate a little. Fighting’s not going to get you anywhere. You seem to forget that Collins is loyal to Dr. Bradford. Since you can’t reason with him, you’re going to have to outsmart him.”

Wright nodded apprehensively and walked over to Collins again. “Perhaps I am being a little uncooperative, but you have to understand that I’ve spent over two years developing this technology. It’s not easy for me to just hand it over.”

“Of course I understand. We’re not trying to steal your research. We’re just trying to get up to speed with what you’ve already accomplished. That’s all.”

“What a rotten liar,” Wright thought to himself.

Collins retrieved a notepad and spoke again. “Look. We’ll be happy to give back the monitor, but I’d really appreciate it if you could answer some questions first.”

Wright was taken aback by the absurd request, but was resigned to indulge the overzealous assistant. “Alright then. What would you like to know?”

Collins glanced at his notepad. “Okay. I noticed that you’re using a high gain telescopic induction coil to pick up the bioelectrical signals. Why not use transdermal pads? I mean this a unique approach, but aren’t you worried about RF noise and signal degradation?”

Wright smiled and responded coyly. “Well, it’s very simple. I’m measuring over thirty different signals. In an emergency situation it would be too intrusive and time consuming to try and attach all the appropriate contact pads. Additionally, some of the measurements I’m taking can’t be made through transdermal connections. This is the only way to accurately measure everything. And that board you removed?” Wright pointed to one of the gutted boards lying on the table. “That board enhances the signal input with dynamic noise suppression.”

Collins, realizing that he was clearly out of his league, hesitated with the next question. “Okay—okay. On the main board you have a series of microprocessors working in a multiplexing array. Why was this necessary? We’re only talking about low frequency real-time measurements. What’s with the high powered processing?” This time he felt more confident that he had Wright cornered.

Again Wright smiled. “I’ll admit, it seems like overkill, but when you’re trying to sample, process, cross-reference and store thousands of pieces of data all in a matter of milliseconds, you need a fast processor. You see, the device not only measures, but also interprets the information and literally anticipates biological changes before they happen, thus optimizing the quality of the measurements.”

Collins stared blankly for a moment. He was completely dumbfounded. Wright had finally broken through the calm, cool demeanor. Unable to outwit Wright, he decided to resort to petty accusations. “You’re hiding something!”

Wright was becoming impatient again. “I think I’ve answered enough questions. I’m tired of playing games and I suggest that you give me the monitor back now!”

Collins ignored his request and continued to recite his adolescent drivel. “If you’re not going to cooperate then I have no choice but to hold it for further testing. If you’ve got a problem with that, you can take it up with Dr. Bradford!”

Just as he completed his sentence, Bradford entered the room. He had a ridiculous grin on his face. “Hello everyone. Jack—I see you’ve met my assistants—or should I say, your assistants now.”

At first glance Wright wanted to unleash his fury upon the man, but quickly realized that any actions against Bradford would jeopardize his chances of completing his research. Wisely, he pushed the past events out of his mind, took a deep breath and responded sagaciously. “Yes. I was just educating them on the finer nuances of my work. They have a lot to learn.” Wright glanced over to Collins who was now leering at him.

“Excellent. I’m glad to see that you’re getting along,” Bradford said as he too found Collins.

Collins interjected politely. “Dr. Bradford—I was just explaining to our colleague here, that we need a little more time for our initial evaluation. He wanted to remove the device before we had a chance to finish.”

Wright could feel his heart sinking deeper into his chest. He needed to get the monitor back. Yet, it was Bradford’s next statement that nearly dropped him to his knees.

“Chad, just give the man back his device. You’re working under his authority now and there will be plenty of time for studying it later. I’m sure that Jack has a lot of work to do.” Bradford was literally scolding Collins like an insolent school-boy. “I’m sorry Jack. These young lads can be a little too enthusiastic sometimes. I’m sure you understand.”

Wright was astonished by the exchange, and just stood there in silence. Andrea eventually nudged him, prompting him to walk over to the tabletop where the device lay. He sighed at the current state of the monitor, but made quick work of reassembling it. After installing all the loose boards he finally replaced the back cover.

Wright turned to Bradford and spoke solemnly. “As you said, I have a lot of work to do.” He was still stunned by Bradford’s actions as he exited the room. Andrea followed close behind, but was stopped by Bradford.

“Andrea—don’t you think you better return to the office now?” Bradford made more of a request than an inquiry.

“Yes. That’s where I was headed,” she responded meekly.

Upon her exit, Bradford turned to Collins with a seething expression on his face. “So help me God, you better tell me that you got the information I requested,” he shouted in a harsh, gravely tone.

Collins stumbled on his words in response. “Well—you see—I didn’t exactly get what you requested, but I did discover

a few things that would indicate that he might be doing something more than what he's telling us." He offered the notepad as evidence.

Bradford was infuriated. "Damn it to hell! I told you I needed proof you stupid imbecile! This man has been evading me, and taunting me, and making a fool of me! I have to have conclusive evidence that the man's trying to capture a human soul! Do you understand? Can you get that through your underdeveloped cranium!?"

Collins crumbled in his wake, responding with a feeble, murmured acknowledgment. Bradford slammed the notepad into the young man's chest, nearly knocking the wind from him, and stormed out of the lab.