

Chapter 1

Manhattan, NY

Tuesday, July 29th, 2070

Michael Hannity silenced the alarm, his head throbbing in time with his pulse. Last night's indulgences - the countless whiskies and packs of cigarettes - left his chest heavy. He murmured, "I can't keep doing this."

His gaze settled on the Doppel tank beside his bed. In the two-meter-tall cylindrical container, his original body floated serenely, nourished by a tube and immersed in a cooling solution. Held upright by supportive straps, its peaceful state reflected the near standstill of its aging and neural processes.

Within this tank, Michael had the option to transfer his current experiences, thoughts, and memories between his Doppel and his original body. In the beginning, he diligently heeded Alter Ego's recommendation for daily memory syncs. That discipline faded within a month of getting his Doppel two decades ago. His adherence waned from monthly to yearly syncs and now he realized he hadn't updated his original body in nearly five years. If an accident befell his Doppel today, this dormant body would awaken, oblivious of the past half-decade.

Michael grew increasingly concerned about his Doppel body's fragility. Given his unabating indulgences, it was a risk he couldn't easily dismiss. In a society obsessed with wellness and longevity, Michael felt like an anachronism. His nightly escapades, aversion to exercise, and penchant for tobacco, all relics from a less health-conscious past. Seeing the chance for rejuvenation, he invested in a Doppel: a youthful, 20-year-old clone, a perfect replica of his younger self. But instead of adopting a new lease on life, Michael dove headfirst into his old habits with renewed fervor. Two decades later, his now 40-year-old Doppel bore the scars of those choices, mirroring the ravages of his original form cocooned in its tank. "I could use a fresh Doppel," Michael mused ruefully, but the reality was less accommodating — he still had a decade of payments pending on the current one.

Michael, lost in thought, rose from bed and lit a cigarette. The first drag, followed by another, seemed to lend a touch of clarity to his chaotic thoughts. He slipped on his neural-assistant headset as he ambled into the living room. "Coffee, Bob," he thought. "Coffee will be ready in three minutes," Bob responded, his voice echoing softly in the earpiece, pulling the command directly from Michael's brain interface chip.

"News, Bob," he mentally directed while wandering towards a window. From a central console, a screen emerged and the morning headlines began to roll. From his fortieth-floor window, fog-enshrouded skyscrapers emerged like islands from a placid sea, framed by a clear blue sky. "Weather update, Bob," he said aloud. "The heat wave persists," Bob intoned, "Currently 110 degrees, with temperatures rising to 125 this afternoon. Humidity is at 90%." Michael grimaced. "Damned climate change," he sighed, recalling the milder climate of his youth.

The TV flashed attention-grabbing graphics: "Breaking: Carson vs. Cohen: Are Term Limits Still Relevant in the Late 21st Century?". "Bob, messages," Michael thought. The screen shifted to his inbox. One message caught his eye: "Opportunity", signed CS. "Cara Smith," Michael mused, recognizing the alias. Behind that name lay Claire Redwood, the formidable chief security officer of Alter Ego, with whom Michael had previous engagements. "Another mole," he thought, a thrill rising within him. Alter Ego was renowned for compensating generously, valuing efficiency and discretion above all—strengths Michael prided himself on possessing. "A new Doppel might just be within reach," he mused, navigating the TV interface to expand the message. The contents were succinct: an address in Queens, likely another one of their established safe houses, and a designated time. Glancing at the clock, he reckoned, "Just enough time for a quick shower before heading out."

Invigorated by the promise of a lucrative deal, Michael entered the shower. "Some things never change," he mused as the water cascaded over him. Drying off and donning his clothes, he exited his apartment, making his way to the elevator to descend.

Michael stepped into the New York morning's sweltering embrace. "Not unbearable yet," he thought. The fog had dissipated under the fierce July sun, but the oppressive humidity lingered. Quickening his steps, he sought refuge in the cool shadows cast by the towering buildings. The once-bustling streets from Michael's memories now stood eerily silent. The blistering heat and suffocating humidity had driven most residents to the sanctuary of air-conditioned interiors. Personal vehicles, now a rarity, had been largely replaced by AI-driven hover taxis. Even those were sparse, as most had embraced the vast network of climate-controlled subterranean passages connecting buildings and metro stations. Michael smirked, "A city of the moles." Yet he, defiantly, still cherished the experience of open-air walks.

Two blocks from his apartment, Michael arrived at his favorite corner deli. He was greeted by the aroma of freshly cooked food. Recognizing Michael instantly, the man behind the counter asked, 'The usual?' With a nod, an omelet sandwich was swiftly in Michael's hands.

After the last bite of his sandwich, Michael mentally signaled, "Bob, arrange transport." "Two minutes. Pod 28223," Bob relayed through the headset. Sure enough, within moments, a sleek electric hover pod pulled up outside the deli. Michael hastened through the sweltering heat, entering the pod and transmitting his destination, courtesy of Bob.

The pod hummed softly, hovering a foot off the ground. As it followed its predetermined route, a screen slid up in front of Michael, broadcasting a news channel. The discussion on the Supreme Court's ruling on term limits persisted, this round featuring a heated debate among pundits.

"With infinite lives available, clinging to outdated term limits is senseless. President Tremaine was such a great President; the nation yearns for his guidance again," an ardent Tremaine supporter opined. Countering swiftly, an opposing pundit shot back, "Rhonda, it's been 30 years since Tremaine's presidency and the country is still working to repair the damage he left behind."

Michael detested politics. Perhaps it originated from his distaste for the political elite or the relentless barrage of political coverage and advertisements. His past run-ins with authority, especially during his NYPD days, only deepened his disdain. "Bob, shut this off," Michael thought tersely.

"I'm getting an error," Bob responded. "The pod seems unable to turn off the TV or change the channel." That's when it clicked: Michael was in one of the new 'sponsored' pods, offering discounted fares in exchange for enduring nonstop ads. There were no distinguishing marks and no way to opt out. He considered exiting to hail a new pod, but the non-refundable charge deterred him. Fuming, he cursed at the pod, pivoting his focus to the view outside, grateful that at least the taxi company hadn't thought to obscure the windows and force him into undivided ad consumption.

The pod sped onto the Brooklyn Expressway, a landscape that, to Michael, was a frozen portrait of his childhood. Unlike Manhattan's gleaming upgrades, Brooklyn's buildings wore years of stories, marked by a mosaic of hefty air conditioning units and varied window shades – each resident's personal shield against the unforgiving heat. While Manhattan boasted an intricate web of underground passageways, Brooklyn had retained its street vitality. Yet, compared to days gone by, fewer souls braved the scorching outdoors. Those who could, opted for the sanctuary of dim, cool interiors.

As he continued on the Expressway, Brooklyn's low-rise buildings yielded to Queens' standalone residences. Michael noted the changes – or lack thereof. While foliage had taken on a more tropical tint and air conditioning units had swelled in size, much remained untouched. Though even now, in the heart of July, the grass had surrendered its green vibrancy to a parched yellow. The sprawling blinds, designed to ward off the sun, were yet another testament to Queens' enduring essence, virtually unchanged since the century's onset.

The pod halted in front of an unassuming East Flushing home. "We've arrived," Bob's voice murmured in Michael's ear. The news broadcast gave way to a succinct farewell on the screen.

Michael scanned the surroundings, eager to pinpoint his destination. Remaining within the pod's refreshing bubble for as long as possible, he aimed to cut down his exposure to the burning sun. His eyes landed on a sleek black luxury pod parked a few houses down. Vastly more spacious than the modest taxi pod he had just exited, these lavish vessels harkened back to private cars from bygone eras. Now, they were exclusive to the affluent elite and corporate bigwigs. This had to be Claire's.

Shielding his eyes from the midday sun, Michael headed toward the door. Fortunately, he didn't have to wait long. As he approached, the door swung open, only to swiftly shut behind him. The cool, dim interior was a welcome relief from the blazing sun outside. Michael paused to let his eyes adjust.

"Punctual as always," Claire remarked, securing the door behind him.

"Good to see you, Claire," Michael responded with a nod.

He took a moment to observe her. Claire stood tall at 5 foot 9, nearly matching Michael's height. Wearing a neatly pressed white shirt and black trousers, she had her auburn hair pulled back into a sleek bun. She held a slender tablet. While her face maintained its usual stern, all-business demeanor, Michael detected a subtle shift in her expression. He hadn't seen this side of Claire before. Anticipation or unease? He would soon find out.

"We have a unique situation at hand. There's someone I'd like you to meet," Claire intimated, leading Michael further down the corridor before opening a door at its end.

The door opened to reveal a room modestly furnished, clearly once a home office. An office chair, a desk, and a couch occupied the space. A tall man, probably in his early fifties, stood by the window. As he turned to face Michael, Michael was struck by his chiseled jaw and piercing blue eyes. His hair, still abundant and defying his age, was neatly slicked back. The man's charcoal gray three-piece suit spoke of prestige, tailored impeccably to his frame, hinting at an underlying athleticism. His polished leather shoes shone, and a gleaming gold pocket watch subtly peeked from his vest, underscoring his refined taste.

In a heartbeat, Michael recognized him. He found himself exerting every ounce of self-control to keep his surprise concealed. This was Richard Bennett, the CEO and visionary founder of Alter Ego. He was the architect behind the groundbreaking Doppel technology, and arguably, one of the wealthiest, most powerful figures of their age.

The room seemed to shrink under the weight of a brief, yet intense, silence. With unwavering intensity, Richard's eyes locked onto Michael's, as if dissecting his very essence within those few seconds.

"Michael, good to finally meet you," Richard said, extending his hand.

"The feeling is mutual, sir," Michael replied, firmly shaking his hand.

"Make yourself comfortable," Richard gestured to the couch. Turning to Claire, he added, "Thank you, Claire. I'll catch up with you afterward." As Claire exited, Richard took a seat on the edge of the desk.

"Claire mentioned your previous collaborations. She holds you in high regard," Richard began.

Michael nodded, absorbing the moment. "We've collaborated before."

"She's exceptional at what she does, wouldn't you say?" Richard remarked, reaching for a bottle of dark amber liquid from the desk and pouring it into two whisky glasses. "Did you know she's been with me since the Rapid Helix days?" Richard inquired, extending a glass to Michael.

Even though Alter Ego dominated the biotech sector for nearly three decades, before that, Rapid Helix had been the top game. They revolutionized the field with their technology for growing brainless clones, primarily used for organ harvesting.

"Yes, you served as their CFO before founding Alter Ego, if my memory serves me right," Michael commented, taking a moment to appreciate the aroma of the whisky. He considered himself well-versed in whiskies, yet this one eluded his recognition.

"You've done your homework," Richard remarked with an appreciative nod. "It's not exactly a secret, but few recall my tenure before the rise of Alter Ego."

As Michael took a sip, the richness of the whisky overwhelmed him. It was undoubtedly among the finest he had tasted. He indulged in a second sip and observed Richard barely touching the drink to his lips.

"Claire thought you'd enjoy this," Richard said, setting his glass down. "It's a rare blend from my personal distillery on Skye. Were you aware that some of Alter Ego's initial major supporters hailed from the alcohol and tobacco sectors? After all, what's the point of a spare body if not to truly savor every aspect of life?"

Michael's lips curled into a subtle smile.

"She's always on top of her game," Richard noted, eyes locked on Michael. "So, it should come as no shock to you that we are informed about your medical condition and your impending need for a new Doppel."

Michael stiffened at the abrupt change in topic. It was true, he had inherited a progressing neurological condition that would manifest in his middle years, leaving him incapacitated much sooner than he was prepared to acknowledge. In his initial life, fortune had been on his side - the advent of Doppels came just a few years following his initial diagnosis, granting him a renewed zest for life, which he embraced wholeheartedly. However, since Doppels were just clones of the original body, the malady had persisted. His now more chaotic lifestyle, coupled with increased drinking and smoking habits, precipitated an earlier onset of symptoms compared to his original body.

It was a topic he staunchly avoided, especially with professional acquaintances.

"You possess a Doppel. And we keep samples from every Doppel we produce," Richard addressed Michael's silent query.

Michael adjusted his posture slightly, managing a thin smile. "So where is this going?"

Richard's demeanor became solemn. "You're aware, I assume, that our Doppels aren't mere replicas. They can be enhanced. There's a modification that can eliminate your condition. Another can counteract tendencies towards alcohol dependence. Or, if you're inclined to continue on your current path, we have a mod allowing you to relish all the alcohol and tobacco you desire, and yet live well past a century." Richard trailed, the implication obvious.

While having a Doppel was commonplace for most in this era, albeit acquired through crushing government back debt, the prospect of possessing a genetically customized Doppel, was an extravagance usually reserved for the exceedingly wealthy – an aspiration so distant, Michael

hadn't even dared to contemplate it before. But now, with the offer on the table, he just needed to know the price.

"What do you need?" Michael finally asked, his voice tinged with caution.

"An assignment, exercised with the utmost discretion and, above all, loyalty," Richard delineated, his tone reverberating with gravity.

Michael raised an eyebrow, his lips curving into a wry smile. "One heck of an assignment."

"You're familiar with Frank Stewart?" Richard asked, referring to Alter Ego's lead scientist and the mastermind behind Doppel technology.

"Your co-founder, right?" Michael clarified.

"Exactly. He was the mastermind behind the science, while I handled the business and financial aspects," Richard said.

"His household staff found him dead earlier today. Murdered," Richard continued gravely, "and from what we gather, this was his original body. His Doppel, however, is nowhere to be found. Given the activation logs, our best assumption is that it was abducted while in stasis."

Michael sucked in a breath, "What else?"

"Little as of now," Richard responded with a frown. "It happened earlier this morning, and details are scarce. Keep in mind, Michael, we're dealing with one of the world's wealthiest individuals, the head of all Alter Ego's scientific initiatives. The motives here could range vastly – a potential kidnapping for ransom, industrial espionage gone wrong, or even some religious fanatic." Richard continued seriously.

"I expect he had top-tier security?," Michael asked.

"You'd think," Richard started, pausing for a moment. "But Frank was, well, he was extremely private. While he did have security, they were stationed primarily at the estate's perimeter. They've reported no unauthorized entries or exits since last night, but someone obviously got in."

"Any security footage?" Michael pressed.

"Local access only. Frank maintained an expansive lab at his home and conducted substantial research there. The risk of a breach was too great to have footage transmitted externally. The police are likely reviewing it as we speak. Your connections within the department will prove an asset," Richard alluded to Michael's time as an NYPD detective, a role he'd left behind more than two decades ago as he became a private investigator.

"So, I'm to hunt the Doppel and find the murderer?" Michael clarified.

"Exactly, but there's more," Richard emphasized. "Alter Ego isn't just any company; we're a global powerhouse. News of this magnitude will break soon. We need to control the narrative by

finding answers rapidly. The clock is ticking, and we must locate Frank's Doppel before the situation escalates."

"Do you believe he'd give them Alter Ego confidential information?" Michael questioned.

Richard replied, furrowing his brow. "It's hard to say. I'd like to think not willingly. But if they managed to orchestrate all this, what's stopping them from using drugs or other methods to extract information?"

Michael nodded in agreement.

"There are a couple of other crucial aspects to consider," Richard went on. "Firstly, speed is of the essence. We need to be several steps ahead of the police, giving us time to manage the fallout before the official narrative is released. Secondly, discretion is paramount, Michael. If you uncover any information that isn't already in the public domain, you must relay it exclusively to Claire and myself. Frank was engaged in numerous secret research projects within his home laboratory. It's imperative we safeguard them from ending up in the wrong hands."

"Understood," Michael responded, realizing the full weight of his task.

"We can't back you officially," Richard emphasized. "It's vital that Alter Ego isn't seen as interfering with the police investigation. However, for anything you might require—resources, intel—Claire has given you her direct line. She's made this her top priority," Richard stated, rising from the desk and offering a handshake, signaling the end of their discussion.

"Good luck," he said, shaking Michael's hand.

Chapter 2

Boston, MA

Friday, June 15th, 2035

"Time to get moving." Frank took a contemplative sip from his nearly empty coffee mug, gazing out of his living room window at the awakening world. The first light of day reflected off the Charles River, where a few early risers had already started their morning jogs. At his door, Frank selected his playlist and stepped out, joining the runners by the river.

Although Frank's glasses and stack of sci-fi novels painted him as more of a scholar than an athlete, he harbored grand ambitions and was determined to live long enough to see them through. Most viewed Frank as a success story, leading his neurotechnology firm and passionately chasing his dreams. But at 40, facing the natural progression of age, his aspirations seemed just as distant as they did a decade ago. So, Frank enlisted the services of a longevity company—specialists in using the latest medical breakthroughs to monitor and enhance overall health, with the potential to significantly decelerate or even halt the aging process. What was the first advice from his longevity coach? Exercise! And that's why, at 5:15 am on a Friday, he found himself jogging beside the winding Charles river.

Fresh from Harvard, Frank capitalized on the budding interest in neurotechnology by establishing his own firm. He dreamt of editing the human brain's data, much like tweaking a computer's content. While some computer-brain interfaces existed, they were 'read-only', merely letting users operate gadgets with their thoughts. To Frank, these were mere party tricks, especially when contrasted against his grander ambitions. In Frank's mind, the future held interfaces that delved deeper than mere superficial commands. He aimed to access genuine thoughts and memories. Taking it a notch higher, he wanted to edit them. Imagine wanting a vacation experience without actually traveling—just plant the memory. Or erasing the haunting memory of a traumatic incident. Perhaps helping soldiers erase the horrors of war from their minds. And if one could indeed access and archive memories and thoughts, coupling them with artificial intelligence might just offer a form of digital immortality. The possibilities seemed limitless.

Fifteen years later, even Frank admitted to having minimal tangible results. Only one experiment had shown promise, its relevance to his grand vision ambiguous. Years spent trying to save the computer-brain interface output to a digital medium for editing and reintegration proved futile. In a fresh approach, Frank shifted to transferring content directly between brains, bypassing intermediate storage. He commenced with mice. After a series of adjustments, such as employing genetically identical clones and using a combined chemical and electrical protocol which, he hypothesized, essentially reset the recipient brain prior to the transfer, Frank believed he had achieved a breakthrough.

This was a step towards his grand vision, proving brains could be manipulated like any other medium. But was it the revolutionary leap he had passionately pitched to his investors while rallying for more funding? Even he was beginning to question its significance. His investors

were unimpressed, especially after supporting him for a decade and a half. During this period of limited success, Frank's resources dwindled. A majority of his backers withdrew, with a handful retaining their stake but withholding any additional investment. Except for Richard Bennett from Rapid Helix.

Rapid Helix stood at the forefront of biotechnological innovation, renowned for its groundbreaking solution to the critical human organ shortage by cultivating brainless clones for organ transplants. Richard, who held the role of CFO at Rapid Helix, boasted a strong scientific pedigree. His own Harvard background, Frank surmised, likely played a significant role in spearheading Rapid Helix's initial investment in Frank's venture. With a crucial meeting looming later that day, Frank pinned his hopes on this shared connection to secure the much-needed next round of funding.

So engrossed in rehearsing his pitch, Frank barely noticed his surroundings. He had unwittingly reached his turnaround point and was already on his way back, with the familiar silhouette of his home already looming ahead.

After showering and breakfast with his family, Frank headed to Cambridge. By 9 a.m., he found himself outside Richard's office. As the ornate wall clock marked the exact moment, Richard's assistant, an elegant woman in her mid-thirties, smoothly moved towards the door.

She opened the door, a hint of a smile on her lips. "Mr. Bennett, Mr. Stewart is here," she announced, stepping aside for Frank.

Inside the expansive office, Richard Bennett stood silhouetted against the vast window, with Kendall Square sprawling beneath. The morning sun filtered through, casting a warm glow that accentuated his authoritative figure. Dressed in a tailored deep-navy suit, Richard exuded an aura of command. His salt-and-pepper hair, impeccably styled, added a distinguished touch to his presence. He turned from the window, his sharp blue eyes instantly finding Frank, a hint of a smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

"Frank, good to see you," Richard said, gesturing to a chair. "How's the funding round shaping up?"

Frank hesitated, searching for the right words, though his expression might've betrayed his sentiments. Or, perhaps Richard already had the information, as he ventured, "Not quite living up to expectations, I gather?"

Frank's shoulders slumped. "All these years of hard work, a breakthrough at last, and it feels like it's slipping away."

Richard leaned back, interlacing his fingers contemplatively. "Indeed, it would be a shame. From what I've gathered, many of your backers struggled to draw a direct line between your recent findings and the ultimate objective. To put it bluntly, even if they did make the connection, it seemed to emphasize the daunting and unpredictable journey that lies ahead."

Frank's hope wavered, sensing the lifeline of potential funding diminishing. He hesitated, then asked, "And your thoughts?"

"I share their perspective, unfortunately," Richard said, a hint of regret in his eyes. "It's a rational assessment, Frank. Over a decade and a half, you've demonstrated our capacity to manipulate the very essence of the mind. That's monumental and could well stand as one of this era's paramount scientific achievements. However, your business strategy – and please don't take this personally – is fundamentally flawed. The initial fervor of startup investment is one thing, but you're a decade and a half deep. And, from the looks of it, you're potentially decades away from realizing a tangible product. The feasibility remains in question. Given these factors, it's challenging to imagine a scenario where further investments make sense," Richard stated candidly.

A stunned "Oh" was all Frank managed in response to the unexpected rebuke. A wave of nausea washed over him; the room seemed to tilt and sway. His life's pursuit, his singular dream that felt so palpably close just moments ago, now appeared to drift farther away. A sense of detachment enveloped him, almost causing him to miss Richard's voice breaking the silence once more.

"Frank, don't be too hard on yourself." Richard's expression softened into a reassuring smile. "There's potential for an agreement here. It may not be what you had in mind or even think you desire, but trust me, it's an excellent proposition. I wouldn't have taken time out of my day simply to chastise you."

He paused for emphasis before continuing, "As I mentioned, your business strategy is flawed, but your scientific breakthrough is monumental. Why chase an elusive goal that's decades away? Why not pivot to capitalize on your recent discovery and seek ways to commercialize it in the foreseeable future, say within five years?"

"Alright," Frank murmured, feeling the weight of Richard's proposal.

"Imagine combining your research with Rapid Helix's technology. What do you see?" Richard asked.

Letting the implications marinate, Frank replied, a mix of amazement and skepticism evident in his voice. "Memory transfers to human clones? A path to immortality?"

"Yes!" Richard exclaimed, rising from his chair, electrified by the idea. "Exactly that, but more than just an end-of-life choice. I envision it as a routine procedure. Perhaps in a few years, individuals might have an array of clones, selecting which to inhabit much like we decide on our wardrobe each day. Or it could serve as an insurance policy — if something were to befall someone, a backup clone with up-to-date memories would be ready. And this shouldn't be a luxury for the wealthy alone. With the right lobbying, we could persuade the government to offer financing similar to educational loans. Frank, the potential is vast! We could be on the brink of a paradigm shift."

"At this moment," Frank began, inhaling deeply, "we've only potentially achieved memory transfer in mice. Yet, you're envisioning human trials in a mere five years. How do you even start on that path? Besides, isn't human cloning, especially creating fully sentient beings, a legal minefield? We're not discussing the brainless organ donors that Rapid Helix produces."

"Worry not," Richard said, eyes shining with enthusiasm. "What we're discussing here is the birth of a company backed by the entirety of Rapid Helix's arsenal — all our technology and every resource we have. Believe it or not, producing a fully mature, sentient clone is simpler than the organ-specific technology we currently utilize. As for the legality? Naturally, we'll initiate our operations discreetly. But with a five-year horizon and our influence? We can shape the legal landscape to our needs. And with the allure of the product we're proposing? Trust me, politicians will be clamoring for the chance to offer their constituents the prospect of immortality," Richard concluded, a triumphant smile on his face.

'A new venture?' Frank asked, processing the implications.

"Exactly," Richard confirmed with enthusiasm. "This isn't just about securing a bit of funding, Frank. The board has granted me the authority to spearhead a brand-new entity, drawing upon every resource Rapid Helix can offer. I'll lead as CEO, with you as the head of our scientific endeavors."

"Would I hold a stake in it?" Frank asked, searching Richard's eyes.

"Absolutely," Richard affirmed. "something in line with a chief scientist position. Frank, I aim to align our goals. Though it might not solely be your venture, imagine owning a share of what's poised to become one of the world's leading companies in just a few years. You'll not only stand among the world's wealthiest, but also among its most influential."

"That's a tempting offer," Frank responded, a hint of reservation lingering in his tone. "My initial vision was a bit different..."

"Just five years," Richard interjected firmly. "Give me five years on this venture. By then, you'll possess the wealth and resources beyond anything you've imagined. As the leading scientist of the world's foremost biotech firm, imagine the strides you could make. The doors that would open, the progress at a rate you could only dream of now. And remember," Richard added with a sly grin, "you'll then have all the time in the world to pursue your original dream."

"That's a lot to process," Frank admitted with a tentative smile.

"It certainly is," Richard acknowledged, pivoting to face Frank directly and offering a firm hand as a gesture of concluding their intense conversation. As Frank rose to accept the handshake, Richard's grip tightened, compelling Frank to meet his gaze. Richard's eyes, typically cold, now burned with intensity. "Frank, five years. Just five. Together, we can revolutionize the world. I don't need an answer right now. Talk it over with your family and ponder on it this evening. However, remember, time is a luxury. My mandate won't last forever, and neither will my patience."

"Is this your idea?" Frank inquired.

Richard nodded affirmatively, a glint of ambition in his eyes. "I've always had a knack for recognizing potential. And this..." he paused, searching for the right phrasing, "this is poised to be a groundbreaking moment. Together, we'll redefine the very fabric of human existence," he concluded, releasing Frank's hand.

Frank gave a thoughtful smile. As he paused at the door, he looked back, "This is a lot to consider, Richard. I need a moment to process everything. I'll be in touch soon."

"I'll have my assistant give you my direct line. But remember, Frank, time waits for no one." Richard's gaze settled on the panorama of Kendall Square as the door closed.

In a daze, Frank left Rapid Helix and was drawn to the Charles River. Recently, this path had become his sanctuary for reflection. Now, as the weight of the meeting pressed on him, he instinctively sought the river's calming presence, letting its rhythmic flow guide his thoughts.

The decision weighed on him. The prospect of stepping away from his life's ambition, even temporarily, felt akin to abandoning a part of himself. His passion for the brain's intricacies began in high school. It flourished in college and drove him to found his company after Harvard. But nearly two decades had passed since those early days.

He had achieved a monumental breakthrough, albeit with lingering uncertainties. Now at 40, the ticking clock loomed large, making him question whether he would see the fruition of his dream within his lifetime. And even if he did, would the vigor and fervor of his youth still be there to push him forward after another decade or three?

The impending financial crisis added to his worries. The absence of funding threatened to not only hamper the pace of his research but also to undermine the very foundations of his personal life. How would he sustain himself, let alone provide for his family?

Scientifically, myriad questions arose. He'd demonstrated the potential with mice, but humans were an entirely different challenge. How did the labyrinthine complexity of the human brain compare to that of a mouse? And concerning the mice, how thorough had the transfer been, truly? Had he merely transferred memories? Or had he shifted thoughts, emotions, the very essence of consciousness? The brain, after all, was only one component. How much did the rest of the body – the interplay of hormones, the silent signals from cells – contribute to one's sense of self?

Moreover, there was a deep ethical dilemma. The many experiments necessary to perfect the protocol would undoubtedly have ramifications for these clones. These wouldn't be the mere organic vessels that Rapid Helix typically cultivated; these would be fully sentient beings. And all of this cloaked in secrecy. Who would willingly submit to such a procedure, knowing the risks? A chilling realization dawned on Frank: the ideal test subject would be himself. Only he could fully comprehend the gravity of the situation, and only he could maintain the utmost secrecy. The harrowing thought of seeing multiple versions of himself, each possibly scarred by experimental

failures, haunted him. On the flip side, the allure of boundless time and ample resources to pursue his deepest aspirations was undeniably tempting.

Lost in thought by the Charles, he lost track of time. Whether it was mere minutes or several hours, he couldn't discern. He had walked past Harvard Square at some point, but now, glancing around, he struggled to pinpoint his exact location. But it didn't matter, he knew what he had to do. He pulled out his phone, scrolling to the number provided by Richard's assistant, and dialed.

"Are we moving forward?" Richard's voice came through crisply on the line.

"Yes, we are," Frank said, determination evident in his voice.

"Fantastic! Let's hit the ground running. Tomorrow, 9 AM, my office. Be there," Richard said with palpable enthusiasm before ending the call.

Chapter 3

Manhattan, NY

Tuesday, July 29th, 2070

Michael's pod sped north, heading for Frank's upscale estate in Greenwich. Even though Claire had insisted on offering him a lift, he had declined. In part, he craved the solitude the journey would afford him. Thankfully, he had boarded a standard pod, devoid of intrusive ads, which offered him the quiet he needed to process the day's chaotic events. The staggering reward dangled before him and the monumental task that lay ahead were a lot to grapple with. But what gnawed at him more urgently was a simmering resentment, a sense that his personal boundaries had been overstepped. As much as he disliked admitting it though, he also felt a begrudging respect for Claire's uncanny insight into his life. Despite his guarded demeanor around her, she had peered through his façade with an astuteness he envied. In his lengthy career, first with the NYPD and then in his subsequent 25 years as a private investigator, he had frequently crossed boundaries, some far more than today. "So this is how it feels to be on the receiving end," he mused.

Then it dawned on him. His anger wasn't rooted in the perceived breach of his privacy. Yes, his health was a deeply personal matter, but the revelation of it wasn't what truly upset him. In fact, Claire's discovery might end up proving to be a blessing in disguise. The real sting lay in the realization that he had been outmaneuvered. He had been bested in a contest he didn't even know he was a part of. Being a pawn in someone else's game irked him. If he didn't sharpen his senses, he'd continue to be outpaced. As he saw it, the game had barely begun, and both Claire and Richard were already several moves ahead.

What was truly at play here? Was it genuinely about locating Frank's Doppel and deciphering the mystery? Given time, law enforcement would inevitably unveil the truth. Considering the vast resources and leverage that Alter Ego commanded, they would leave no stone unturned. But this wasn't merely a search for truth. It was a reconnaissance mission. Richard aimed to gauge what Michael could uncover, ensuring any detrimental information was snuffed out before making its way into any official reports. Their earlier meeting had all but confirmed this. In return, he'd secure his coveted Doppel. Michael was at ease with this arrangement. It was a game familiar to him, one he'd engaged in countless times during his days as a PI. Just as he was about to retrieve his tablet and dive into his research, a sight outside the window abruptly captured his focus.

As the pod sped further north along the thruway, leaving behind the bustling heart of New York City, the skyline morphed to showcase the wealthier suburbs. There, immense transparent domes began to dominate the horizon. These domed havens were emblematic of the latter half of the 21st century, representing the wealthy society's solution to the increasingly tumultuous climate. Encompassing vast expanses, often several hectares, these structures encapsulated entire communities under their protective embrace, boasting state-of-the-art climate control.

Depending on the need, they could adjust their transparency, shielding residents from the sun's relentless intensity. With adjustable apertures, they controlled rainfall and even mimicked clouds or produced breezes for those inside. Michael recalled seeing a few of these domes in previous years, but the proliferation of such structures in recent times left him in awe.

Entranced by the scenery, Michael imagined life inside one of those domes. He envisioned days bathed in the temperate warmth of 70-degree weather, a stark contrast to the recent, relentless hurricanes that had besieged New York. He saw himself on a verdant lawn, perhaps even with a backyard where an apple tree stood tall, its branches heavy with ripe fruit. That dream seemed closer, especially if he could balance his current Doppel's costs and earn his next one from this mission.

But then a realization dawned on him: it wasn't just about the money. He had spent all of his 75 years in New York. For all its changes and challenges, he deeply cherished his life in Manhattan. Even with the streets being quieter than before, he relished his walks through them, soaking in the city's spirit. On those rare days in late fall or early spring, when a glimpse of favorable weather drew everyone outdoors, the city would pulse with life, mirroring the New York of his younger days. He couldn't imagine abandoning his beloved bar or forsaking his go-to deli. And if he ever yearned for a change, he found a peculiar joy in navigating the labyrinthine tunnels below, a contemporary echo of the city streets he knew so well. Michael chuckled to himself, recognizing that, over the years, he had truly become a creature of habit.

He circled back to Richard's offer. How exactly would this new Doppel work? Despite its ailing health, he already possessed a Doppel, and the law was clear: each individual was allowed only one Doppel. Would he have to follow in the footsteps of David Harrison, the actor who, in the form of his Doppel, took his own life to acquire a fresh Doppel more suitable for an impending role? Michael doubted he had that kind of resolve. While some argued there were legitimate avenues to switch out a Doppel and that Harrison's act was merely a publicity ploy, Michael had never been interested enough to delve into the topic. Regardless, understanding this would become a priority. But first, he needed to secure that new Doppel.

Michael snapped back to reality. Observing his surroundings, he noted he was nearing the address Claire had provided. One dome in particular stood out among the rest. Significantly larger than its neighbors, this dome appeared to shelter only a dense forest. "Of course," Michael mused, "if I were among the world's wealthiest, I'd probably have my very own private dome too, wouldn't I?"

The pod veered onto a secluded drive, leading straight to the entrance of the private dome. Michael noticed guards with the Alter Ego insignia, weapons poised. As he neared, a guard signaled for the pod to stop.

"Sir, this road is restricted."

"I have an appointment at Frank Stewart's residence," Michael said, offering up the card Claire had given him assuring him it would grant access.

The trooper pressed the card to an integrated reader on his forearm armor. Instantly, his helmet's eyepiece illuminated with cascading data.

"Alright, sir. You're clear to proceed. But be advised, Greenwich PD has the place on lockdown, and there are also NYPD detectives currently on-site," the trooper said, handing the card back to Michael.

NYPD detectives this far north? That piqued Michael's curiosity—unusual, to say the least. No doubt a result of Alter Ego leveraging their clout. Exiting the pod, he asked, "Were any of you stationed here last night?"

"We're fresh on the scene, sir. Got deployed this morning to bolster security," the trooper said, indicating a pathway leading into the forested dome. "The estate's half a mile in. Might want to stick with the pod."

"I think I'll walk," Michael responded, keen on maintaining discretion and avoiding any encounters with the police on scene. With a nod, the trooper cleared the way, allowing Michael to venture inside.

A gust greeted Michael as he stepped through the dome's entrance, but it dissipated once the towering doors sealed behind him. Immediately, he understood the allure of these domed sanctuaries. The ambient temperature hovered around a pleasant 70s, a stark contrast to the sweltering heat outside. Soft, filtered sunlight bathed the surroundings without the searing intensity he was accustomed to. Most astonishingly, the harmonious chorus of birds and insects reached his ears, a symphony he hadn't experienced in years. Heeding the trooper's directions, he took the path, always alert, ready to take cover in the foliage at the faintest hum of an approaching pod.

Michael saw no pods, and before long, the dense trees began to thin, revealing a tall brick wall that likely surrounded the estate. The road culminated at a guarded gate, flanked by Connecticut State Troopers. "Should've known Major Crimes would stake their claim," Michael mused silently. The main entrance was out of the question; he wanted to maintain discretion, at least for now. Surveying his surroundings, he noticed no other point of access. Making a decision, he veered left, skirting the edge of the forest and the wall, in search of an alternate entry.

Ten minutes later, Michael stumbled upon a service road to a side gate. The vicinity was eerily quiet, seemingly abandoned. Cautiously, he neared the gate and gave it a tug – locked. Straining to peer between the bars, all he could make out was the continuation of the service path, with towering shrubs hindering any further visibility.

A sudden shout pulled Michael from his reverie. "Stop! Pervert!" boomed a voice, followed swiftly by hearty laughter. Michael turned to see two familiar faces: his former NYPD comrades. Sean Kelly stood tall, his fiery red hair had mellowed to auburn, with hints of silver threading through. Those once wild and daring blue eyes now looked contemplative. Lines of age marked his face, yet his build remained robust. In a crisp button-down shirt and jeans, he radiated mature elegance.

Next to Sean, Patrick Donovan struggled to contain his mirth, a mischievous grin tugging at his lips. Once jet-black, his hair now bore streaks of gray, tousled perhaps by the wind or his laughter. Wearing a casual tee and jeans, his posture mirrored his unceasing jovial spirit.

As the initial shock faded, Michael found himself laughing along with Patrick.

"Sean, Pat, never thought I'd see you with Greenwich Police. Did the NYPD finally ditch you?" Michael teased.

Sean smirked, though his tone remained serious. "Nah, we're still with Major Cases. Got a call from someone up high courtesy of Alter Ego, and here we are. Greenwich PD's all over this, and now with State involved and sending us in... Let's just say the local guys aren't thrilled."

Patrick, ever quick, chimed in, "And you? What brings you here?"

"I'm with Alter Ego, but we've got to stay hands-off," Michael whispered, tapping his nose with a grin.

"Too many cooks," Sean sighed.

Patrick chuckled, "Look on the bright side. We lounge under this dome, the locals do the work, and we still get overtime."

Michael shook his head, chuckling. "Ever the optimist, huh?"

"It's the Doppel effect, Michael," Sean said, feigning annoyance. "Ever since Pat got one for his wife, he's been insufferably upbeat."

"It's in the sheets, Mikey," Patrick winked. "It's incredible, just imagine, I'm going home to a 20 year old wife. Best decision we ever made"

"How do you even keep up?" Michael raised an eyebrow.

"He kept his own Doppel pristine, Michael. He never used it a day in all these years just so it would be as fresh as the day he got it" Sean offered.

"So what? We saved all our lives for these new bodies, Dana and I. The NYPD didn't contribute a thing so they can go and be happy with my old lazy bones. My new premium body I'll keep for my wife, thank you very much" Patrick retorted smiling.

Sean rolled his eyes playfully, "Every day's a challenge with him now."

"How about you Sean? You and the old lady ever got Doppels?" Michael enquired.

"He's married to a hag" Patrick jibed.

"I got mine a few years ago. But my wife, she's gotten more religious with the years. It's a huge argument if I even want to use mine, let alone convince her to get one." Sean looked sad.

Patrick smirked, "One of these days she's gonna pull the plug on your tank, and all that cash will be down the drain."

"The Church would consider that murder, so she never would. They are against them being created and everything the Doppels stand for but once they exist they consider them human" Sean continued.

"Fascinating," Patrick remarked, his smile wry.

Michael gestured toward the estate, "Any intel for me?"

"Not much. The local boys don't want us here" Sean replied.

"They called jurisdiction on us and didn't even let us in the house. Damn if I care, the higher ups can squabble all they want and let me know. My old lady's waiting for me at home" Patrick added with a smirk.

"Your... young lady?" Michael couldn't resist.

"You know it!" Patrick laughed heartily. "But seriously, I think we're spinning our wheels here. Ready to roll, Sean?"

"Just a few minutes more with Michael," Sean responded.

"All right, I'll warm up the pod. Michael, let's grab a drink sometime," Patrick suggested, retracing Michael's earlier path towards the main gate.

"Truly, you got nothing to share?" Michael whispered, glancing around.

Sean sighed, "Honestly, we're in the dark. The locals really don't want us here. And I'll be honest, I don't even know what we are doing here so far from the city."

"Is there any other way into the estate that way?" Michael asked, looking in the direction Sean and Patrick had come from.

"Nothing, it's just the main gate and this service gate. We went all around the other way" Sean confirmed.

Sean hesitated then suddenly decided to continue. "But even if it were, what do you expect to find? This is one of the most powerful men today with some of the tightest security in the world. Whatever it was, this was a professional hit. You're not going to find fingerprints or bloody boot prints on the carpet. This one requires a different kind of approach and I wouldn't mind if I don't have a part in it"

Michael tilted his head. "What do you mean?"

Sean hesitated, his gaze drifting. "You remember my wife, Kathleen?"

Michael nodded.

Sean exhaled deeply "You know, we are Irish. Woodlawn born and raised. Catholic. We go to church, say our prayers, go to confession. It just is the way of things. Has been and will be. But for Kathleen this never was enough. She always was looking for more. And the last few years she found an outlet. Do you know the AFL? Americans for Life?"

Michael raised an eyebrow. "The religious nutters?"

"Terrorists, Michael. Their failed attempts don't make them any less dangerous." Sean shook his head.

'Don't tell me Kathleen joined up" Michael joked trying to lighten the mood.

"If not in body, at least in spirit" Sean lowered his gaze. "I don't understand how a terrorist organization, I mean they are actually on the State Department's list of designated terrorist organizations" Sean emphasized "Can have TV channels and preachers spouting their poison in public"

Michael hesitated, searching for the right words.

"Kathleen's engrossed in those TV preachers. I've caught snippets, and she never hesitates to fill me in. Michael, these guys are calling for hits against Alter Ego and it's top brass. Wasn't too long ago a preacher was promising life eternal to whomever kills the devil Frank Stewart. That's where I would look if I had the case. And if I weren't married to Kathleen"

"So, even if it falls into your lap?" Michael probed.

Sean snorted. "You must be out of your mind." He paused, sizing up Michael. "But you? You don't have the... 'divine intervention' at home. And this is as much your case as it ever will be mine."

Michael tilted his head, "So, where would you start? And don't even suggest binge-watching those sermons," he added with a wink.

Sean chuckled, "I wouldn't do that to you. Start with Father Kieran O'Reilly, our parish priest. Everyone knows the Church supports the AFL but not Father O'Reilly. If there's a lead worth chasing, he'll point you in the right direction. I'll give him a heads-up if you're in."

Michael asked with a smirk, "Not worried he'll spill to Kathleen?"

Sean's chuckle carried a hint of bitterness. "Oh, she'd never believe him. In her eyes, he's a soft-hearted moderate, hardly worth her energy."

"I'll pay him a visit," Michael nodded.

"Visit him at 9 a.m., right after the Mass; it's quiet then," Sean advised.

"Thanks, Sean! I think I'll head back now. Want me to walk you to the pod?" Michael offered.

“Sure thing,” Sean replied, falling into step with Michael as they made their way toward the main entrance.

“Will you keep me in the loop if you hear what the locals find?” Michael asked as they walked.

“You got it! I’m sure their report will land on my desk soon—I’m not getting off that easy,” Sean said with a grin. “I’ll give you a call when it does.”

They walked in silence until they reached the edge of the woods near the estate main entrance. Michael paused, taking in the scene: at least five reporters stood clustered with their television vans and crews, all likely broadcasting live for their respective news channels.

“This is where I leave you,” Michael said quietly, extending his hand to Sean. “It wouldn’t do for my assignment to show on camera.”

Sean clasped his hand firmly. “Of course. I’ll let you know as soon as that report hits my desk. Just be careful out there.”

With that, he strode off toward Patrick, who stood waiting by their police pod, now hemmed in by the news vans.

As Michael exited the dome, he let out a sigh of relief—his rented pod was still parked where he’d left it. “Figures,” he mused. “This isn’t the kind of neighborhood where people rent pods.”

Climbing inside, he switched on the news. The screen lit up with a broadcast from a familiar scene: the main gate of Frank Steward’s estate, the very place he had just left. His attention was immediately drawn to the flashing red text at the bottom of the screen: “Breaking News! AFL Claims Responsibility for Alter Ego Chief Scientist Assassination. Police Treating Investigation as Terrorist Attack.”

“Well, I’ll be, Sean,” Michael murmured under his breath.