

THE INNOVATION
PROTOCOL

AN ERIN PARK NOVEL

THE PATENT WARS

BOOK TWO

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PROLOGUE

HE HAD STOPPED THINKING of the lab as a workplace months ago. Now it felt more like an apparatus; an instrument that measured and recorded him even when no one else was around.

The air recyclers hummed their slow mechanical breath. The walls vibrated faintly with the deep infrastructure beneath the complex. Even the polished floors seemed to reflect back the shape of his discontent.

He scanned his badge at the after-hours checkpoint and waited for the familiar hesitation. The lock always stalled, long enough to make him wonder if someone on the other side was deciding whether to let him in. Tonight, the delay felt longer. Or maybe he just felt more exposed.

The door opened, washing him in the cold, antiseptic brightness of the materials wing. He dimmed the overheads immediately, leaving only the soft illumination of the emergency strips and the low glow from a cluster of idle monitors.

He preferred it this way. Darkness simplified things. It stripped the lab of authority and made it easier to believe he was no longer working *for* the institution, but *against* it.

He reached his workstation and sat, letting his fingertips rest on the keyboard. They tingled; an involuntary, anticipatory tremor he recog-

nized from the worst nights of his graduate work. Long before this job, long before the disappointment had calcified into something colder.

He logged in. The process was ritual: password, key sequence, rotating token, biometric scan. A succession of verifications meant to keep the wrong people out. Or the wrong ideas in. He passed each without effort.

The secure environment bloomed on screen, the interface segmented by gray boxes that hid classified variables unless the system deemed the user's clearance and timing appropriate. Tonight, the system accepted him without protest. It always had. That was the part that stung the most, how easy obedience had once been.

He opened the parameters file.

The numbers appeared first: long columns of thermal coefficients, tolerances, structural constants. Innocent at a glance. Meaningless without context. Transformative only when arranged correctly.

He copied a block of values and pasted them into a blank text file. Then he began removing context piece by piece. It was almost meditative: erasing units, deleting headings, collapsing formatting. With each keystroke, the text became less recognizable to someone who only knew what the numbers were *supposed* to mean.

What mattered was not what they described, but how they could be made to sit: their order, their cadence, the spaces they created for meaning to flow through.

What mattered was what they meant now.

He typed a few lines beneath the stripped data, soft reminders to himself: adjust sequence numbers, redirect figure groupings, blend the coefficients into the phrasing patterns of the draft. That last part made him pause. A memory surfaced of someone's voice, steady, precise, maddeningly diligent, pointing out a misplaced comma in a draft or a nonstandard hyphenation in a claim.

She always followed the rules.

He counted on that.

He deleted the reminders, leaving nothing but the altered data.

A noise from the corridor made him stiffen. Footsteps? No, just the HVAC cycling. The building shifting in its endless mechanical rhythm. He forced his breath out through his nose, slow and controlled.

He ran a final consistency check instead. Not for accuracy. For inevitability. The system responded without resistance.

He opened the internal messaging system, saved the stripped fragment in a draft, and closed everything down. He wiped the keyboard with a deliberate, almost tender sweep of his sleeve.

Before leaving, he lingered, just long enough for unease to creep up his spine. Not guilt. Not doubt. Something quieter and more insidious. The realization that once he stepped through the door, there was no turning back into the person he had been. Only forward, into whatever this act would make of him.

He walked to the exit and paused with his hand on the door. The lab, in the half-light, looked like a hollowed-out version of itself, stripped of purpose, stripped of trust. No different from him.

He left without looking back.

The workstation remained dark. Everything necessary was already in motion.