## Prologue:

Your 15-mile drive into the Cascade foothills from downtown Vancouver, Washington has been de-stressing. Office buildings and charming Victorian houses have given way to boxy WW2 era homes and miniature strip malls, which have given way to megastores and suburban developments, which give way to stretches of farmland and forest. You drive up a road which until some years ago had been off limits to the public—a former military training camp. Now, miles into the woods, you find yourself in a quiet, but surprisingly civilized, little valley. You park your car in the expansive, paved lot and look around.

You see dozens of attractive cottages and what appears to be a handsome auditorium. Walkways are filled with busy people and an occasional electric cart. But for some reason your interest is diverted to the fence on the opposite side of the lot, where you spot an unobtrusive rolling gate. Curious, you walk toward it. Although the gate is equipped with a cardkey lock, it has been left ajar. At first you see nothing special on the other side, yet on closer inspection a paved walkway disappears into the bushes and around a large rocky outcrop. You slip through the gate, and after only a few steps you're on a well-maintained trail—wide enough for service vehicles. Still curious, you continue your hike. After a half-mile or so, you are in an increasingly narrow canyon lined with rugged walls of ancient igneous basalt. You encounter another cardkey gate, this one of heavy wrought iron, also left ajar. Security is lax here, you think. Past that, after another quarter mile or so, you arrive in a box canyon, with a waterfall cascading down the far end. Up ahead, you see that the trail ends at the entrance to something like an ancient mine, framed by heavy wooden beams. You

approach the entrance, but just inside you encounter a massive camo-green steel door punctuated with large rivets, looking to be of early Cold War vintage. The steel frame sports a cardkey receptacle, obviously a later addition. But again, you don't need to use it, because the door is ajar just enough to get your fingers in. You pull, expecting resistance, but to your surprise the door quietly swings open with hardly any effort, as if its weight has somehow been counterbalanced.

Once inside, you are surprised to find yourself in a clean, brightly lit office environment, at the head of a long central corridor. Men and women in white lab coats cross the corridor on the way from one room to another, sometimes carrying clipboards or laptops, sometimes carrying racks of test tubes or Petri dishes. No one seems to notice you. Is this a dream? Are you invisible? Curious, you walk a little way down the corridor and enter one of the rooms. Two men and a woman, scientists or researchers of some kind, sit at a conference table. At this point you had better be invisible, or security will be on you like bran on whole wheat. Actually, your invisibility probably started back in the parking lot—otherwise security cameras would have tracked you all the way. You sit down in a corner and listen. Then you move in closer because the people are talking barely above a whisper.

"I just don't like it. It's too risky," says the woman.

"I understand your concern," answers the older, gray-haired man, "and believe me I've had the same anxieties over the years. But we've never, ever, had a problem. And if we came close it isn't as though anyone would notice. These are naturally occurring compounds found in a variety of plants sold in supermarkets every day."

"Yes, but not in these concentrations."

"Of course, and that's the question we're trying to answer here."

"Maybe we should hold off, pending more preliminary tests. What I see here is not really definitive," comments the second, younger man, rummaging through a clipboard of papers.

"Well, as always, we would like to see these things to be more definitive, but this is definitive enough, in my judgment. At this point we are talking about subtleties—differences that show up only in test results—five points here or there—at the most, ten or fifteen."

"But still, wouldn't it be better to err on the side of caution?" the woman insists.

"Okay, okay, look," says the older man, leaning back in his chair. "My problem—our problem—is that he wants to test-market this in late fall, and do a roll-out by early spring. That's really pushing our work here. And that's pushing our indoor growing facilities, to say nothing of our farms. That means we need to get our part done by the end of the summer."

"I still don't feel right about it," says the lady, shaking her head and looking down at the table.

"Just remember what we're doing here, Lisa. Think of the big picture. Longevity. We're giving people longer life. And even if we're not quite there yet, we're improving what life they have—or at least helping them believe it's better. I for one feel good about that. And I for one feel it's worth a small risk. And I do mean small."

"So we proceed?" asks the younger man.

"We proceed."

As the meeting breaks up and the researchers—if that's what they are—go their separate ways, you follow the woman down the corridor. She turns into a room with a large glass window in the opposite wall. Through the windows you see long tables holding trays filled with soil and

small plants—it looks like they might be some type of fern. Scores of fluorescent UV grow-lights hang from the ceiling. The woman sits down in front of a computer screen.

You wander out of the room and further down the corridor. Another door is open and you hear voices from within. You step inside. While there seems to be plenty of ventilation, the air in this room carries the distinctive odor of rodent urine and wood shavings. Sure enough, the room is lined with cages containing two or three white rats in each—sleeping, eating, and sniffing around. The center of the room holds what appear to be testing devices—a rather large maze, cages with tunnels, doors and switches. Four researchers are gathered around one cage.

"I don't know when this happened," one says. "They seemed fine earlier today. I've checked the records and the dosages were right on the money."

"Maybe this batch was tainted," comments another researcher.

"I'm having that checked, and I've drawn blood on all three. We'll have numbers within the hour."

You draw closer and peek over the researchers' shoulders. In the cage are three white rats—except two appear to be dead—no—they're breathing—perhaps comatose. The third one is waddling frantically around the cage in aimless circles. It's time for you to go. You know these kinds of tests are conducted every day for perhaps hundreds of products that you eat, wear and put on your skin. You know it's necessary and it's better the rats than you, but you just don't like to think about defenseless little creatures suffering so you can use deodorant safely.

So you leave—back up the corridor, out through the heavy steel door, down the trail, through the gates and back to the parking lot. All the time wondering exactly what they were testing on those poor, miserable rats.