

Prologue

The wheelchair was his lawyer's idea -- a prop to gain sympathy from the jury -- as if being the oldest man on earth wasn't enough. In the end, neither mattered. Still, the hunched over, sometimes sleeping -- another of his lawyer's ideas -- frail figure they'd come to know during the trial, brought silence to the room when he, clearly recognizable by his foot-long white ponytail, walked unaided through the doorway.

As if cued by a conductor, the thirty or so people, mostly young reporters, the ones required to cover the news on the weekends, erupted in a round of Happy Birthday, followed by applause, whistles, and noisy cheers. The momentary quiet that followed was broken when the crowd followed-up with its second song, obviously the one more appropriate for the occasion.

"How old are you?

How old are you?

How old are you Soma Man?

How old are you?"

The cheers, louder than before, came to an abrupt halt as first one, then over a dozen digital video pens were shoved in front of the old man's face. He looked first at the pens, then slowly gazed across the room at the eyes staring back at him. He carefully considered his answer, just as he did each time he was asked the question over the years, although his motive for doing so certainly changed over time. How old are you? The more he thought about the question, the more ridiculous it sounded. He was certain not only everyone in the room knew exactly how old he was, but billions of other people around the world did too. He let the silence linger.

"By the looks of it, older than any five of you combined," he responded in a voice too clear and boisterous for a man of his purported age.

The crowd erupted in another round of applause and cheers.

"What's your secret to living so long?" The question yelled from someone he could not see, again silenced the room.

It was the second most asked question of him. Life had become so rote he thought. He knew it was a paradigm experienced by anyone who outlived their contemporaries. The older you got, the younger and more predictable those around you became. And they all wanted to know the secret of how you lived to be so old. It was another of those ridiculous questions. No one knows why they are allowed to live out the day they wake-up to, and more strangely they never seem to contemplate, that day once lived, brings them one day closer to their own death. Although it was the response he often wanted to give to the specific question, he never did.

"I've been told it's in my genes. Therefore the secret doesn't do any of you

one damn bit of good, unless your mother is claiming I'm your father."

The applause and cheers grew louder still.

Although his answer appeared spontaneous, it was not. It too was well thought out and rehearsed over the years. And more importantly it was designed to make the question go away. For in fact, he did have a secret. A secret that explained why he lived to be as old as he was. A secret he'd lied for, loved for, lived for, killed for, and even died for, so to speak. He also knew with each sunrise he survived, he might someday unknowingly share the secret hidden in his mind.

"How does it feel to be on the top of the Soma list?"

He cursed to himself. The damn Soma list. It was the only reason why they were all gathered around him here today. Soma, an intoxicating juice from a plant of disputed identity, was once thought to be a drink of immortality in ancient rituals, and therefore an appropriate name for the Web site that constantly searched a multitude of databases from around the world to determine who the oldest living humans were. Without regard to privacy, each person's name, in descending order of age, was then displayed on the site. It was normally of no concern to those a billionth or two on the list, other than knowing if your date for the evening was being honest about their age. But move up toward the top of the list and a once-ignored old person suddenly became a circus freak show, constantly surrounded by curious onlookers. Move to the top of the list, gaining the title Soma Man or Soma Woman, and you became the entire circus. He wanted to choke the geek that came up with the Web site, unfortunately the guy died years ago not even making it into the 'Top Billion Club'.

“To be honest, I didn’t think I’d ever get there. I guess that Soma juice really does work after all.”

“Do you think being at the top of the list had anything to do with the presidential pardon you recently received?”

Although his hearing was not what it used to be, he was certain it was now quiet enough in the room for the others there to have heard a pin drop. He gazed across the room again. Those staring back at him now saw a different face. Years of memories, obviously painful ones, spilled from his eyes.

As he spoke, his voice was different, eerily older sounding if it were possible to describe a voice that way. “If you are asking me if I think the president did what he did because he thought I was innocent . . . my answer is no. That is not why he pardoned me. Like most of the other important events in my life, he did what he did only because I am old.”

The old man opened his eyes just enough to glance around the room. He smiled when he saw it was empty. It worked every time. It was one of the last respects the young still paid to the old. Close your eyes and lower your head, and even the most curious will let an old man nap, as if they had a choice.

The quiet was suddenly interrupted by the knocking, then opening of the door. Knowing it would all be over soon, he sat up straight and took in a deep breath. As he watched the woman close the door, turn, then walk toward him, he thought about how truly ironic his life had been. How could the same secret that condemned him to prison, now be responsible for setting him free?

Chapter 1

“Damn it.”

His eyes started burning as soon as he wiped the hot beads of sweat away from his face. He placed his fingers under his nose. The sweet, yet pungent odor, rose from his gasoline soaked hands. Why was he rushing, he thought. Hardly anyone ever traveled this upstate New York back road. Especially on a pitch black night like this. And certainly not at three in the morning. You’d have to be a nutcase to do so. Loose gravel, narrow, with a steep hundred-foot drop off on either side, and no guardrails, the place was an accident waiting to happen.

Accident. The word raced through his mind. It was the reason why he was here. At three in the morning. With gasoline all over his hands. He had to make it look like an accident. Anything less and one might conclude murder.

Murder? The word sent a chill down his spine. Maybe he should have left them alone. They looked so peaceful. Their pain was gone. It would have all been over by now, if he had. But he didn’t. He couldn’t. It wouldn’t be right. They deserved better. Even murder was better than that.

Murder? He looked at his hands. They were shaking. Surely no one would think this was murder. How could they? The road was a dangerous one. He remembered stories of others dying here. All of them were accidents.

He rubbed his damp hands along the fabric of the car's convertible top. It was a shame he had to destroy the car. A 1968 Buick LaSabre, it was less than two years old. Less than ten thousand miles on the odometer. But after what happened, who would want it anyway, he thought. He certainly didn't.

He leaned down and took one last look in the car. He was met by the sweet odor again, this time from their gasoline soaked bodies. They were in a better place. He knew it. This is what they would want him to do. He reached in, touched each of their hands, and said one last goodbye.

He stood up, snaked his right leg under the steering wheel and placed his foot on the brake. Without looking he stretched his right arm through the spokes of the steering wheel until his fingers found the keys. He hesitated a second, then started the car, shifted the transmission into drive, and raised himself onto the road as the car crept forward.

The noise, metal screeching against rocks along the embankment far below, filled the quiet night, until seconds later, there was silence again. He stared down into the blackness of the ravine and waited for the explosion. None came. The only sound he heard was his beating chest. As he started his descent down into the black hole, he suddenly realized he didn't have any matches. Why would he, he thought?

"Damn it."

He froze. No one would believe this was an accident. Not without a burnt out wreck. He needed matches. But from where? He was miles from home. Even if

he ran . . . slowly the smile grew on his face. Matches. Of course. They always carried matches, he thought. Why should even today have been any different.

He again started a slow descent into the blackness. Matches. It probably took a million to kill them the first time. Now he would need just one more to kill them again.

Chapter 2

He sat motionless in the long dewy grass, confident whoever it was standing on the edge of the road below wouldn't notice the glowing joint as he inhaled one last long drag. His quiet-time was interrupted minutes ago by the car that appeared out of the darkness on the far side of the gulch and slowly -- almost too slowly -- continued down the steep road then stopped instead of continuing back up the other side. He didn't wonder why a car was traveling down this back road at three in the morning. He didn't wonder why the car stopped in the middle of a three-point turn, perpendicular to the road. And he didn't wonder why the car suddenly disappeared into the ravine and minutes later burst into flames. What he did wonder about was who it was standing on the edge of the road illuminated by the orange glow of the flames.

Chapter 3

The cool morning sea breeze blew over his left shoulder from the open hatch directly above the bunk. He wasn't sure if it was a chill from the breeze, or the shiver traveling down his body that forced him to open his eyes. Or maybe it was the movement of the boat as it slowly rocked back and forth in the water. Whatever it was, he now knew he was awake.

He smiled to himself as he thought how lucky he was to have never awoken to an alarm clock. Well, maybe not never. He did have one once. Years ago. But that was close enough to never as far as he was concerned. He was convinced there was no better way to start a new day than by waking up when your body tells you it's ready, and not by some mechanical device that couldn't possibly know.

Another breeze blew across his shoulder. He lifted his left arm and tucked it into the warmth of the blanket. Without thinking, he extended his arm around the warm slender body of the woman laying next to him, spooned his body into hers, and cupped her right breast with his hand. He immediately sensed the effect his cool hand was having on the mass of flesh, as the now hardened

nipple pressed against his palm. Another smile crossed his face. Perhaps waking up without an alarm clock was the second best way to start a new day. That thought was confirmed when in response to a gentle squeeze from his hand, the woman arched her body into his. The reaction she felt from him was just what she hoped it would be.

Chapter 4

"You were up early this morning," he said as he stood on the deck of the large sailboat watching the man walking down the dock towards him.

"So were you."

"Not really. I just got out of bed a half hour ago."

"I got out of bed two hours ago." The man tossed the canvas bag of groceries he was carrying onto the deck of the boat, then climbed aboard. "I could have sworn you were up then too."

There was a long pause as the men stared at each other. Seconds later simultaneous smiles appeared on their faces.

"Oh, I get it. You mean UP." He pointed his index finger to the sky. "If you put it like that, I guess you could say I was UP all night."

"I bet you were. So who was she?"

"Just a tourist."

"Used your native island charm on her, did ya?"

"Just like you taught me, Dad."

Every time Neil Scott stood face-to-face with his son Chris, he felt like he was

looking at his twin brother instead of his offspring. Although the forty-three-year-old Scott was twenty years older than his son, the years had been very kind to him. With the same height, five-eleven, the same thin yet muscular build, the same long straight sandy brown hair pulled back in a ponytail, blue eyes, and tanned skin, the two were often mistaken for twins. Those who knew them though could quickly identify the elder Scott by the three-inch scar along his cheek, just above the jaw bone, on the left side of his face, the result of a run-in with a shark some fifteen years earlier. Still their likeness made for some interesting times during their occasional bar hopping episodes, and especially during spring break when Key West was overrun with college-age women. Neil swore it's what kept him so young looking.

Neil Scott moved to Key West in 1969, a little over twenty years ago. Although he just graduated from college, his life was in a shambles. He was a single father with a two-year-old son, Chris, born out of wedlock. When he was old enough to ask, his son was told his mother died shortly after his birth, which was a lie, one of many his father told him over the years. Neil's parents, who cared for his son while he was away at college, were both diagnosed with terminal lung cancer, a byproduct of their two-pack-a-day smoking habit. When they died only months after Neil graduated, he liquidated their estate and moved with his son, his only remaining flesh and blood relative, to Key West, and opened a scuba diving shop.

For the next twenty years he lived a quiet, albeit lonely life, focusing on raising his son and building a successful small business, in that order. After high school it took his son one semester to flunk out of the University of Miami. He returned to Key West to work for his father, "until he matured a little." That was

five years ago.

Recently, a developer made Neil an offer for his business, or at least the land under his business, that he couldn't refuse. Early retirement at forty-three sounded good to him. It also meant he could pursue his dream of cruising the Caribbean for twenty or thirty years while he was still young enough to enjoy it. Chris decided to spend a year cruising with his dad, after which he promised he would try his hand again at college.

"Are you sure you wanna join me on this trip?"

Chris gazed at his dad with a puzzled look. "Why wouldn't I wanna go on an all expense paid one year vacation sailing around the Caribbean on the brand new fifty-foot, twin-masted ketch, the Sand Bar."

"Well . . . first, you won't be getting laid nearly as much as I think you've been getting laid here in Key West. In fact, there will probably be weeks at a time when the only other person you will see is me. And quite frankly, that worries me."

"I'll try to keep my hands off ya, Dad."

"I'm glad we've got that straight because my second point is, although you will be on an all expense paid one year vacation sailing around the Caribbean on the brand new fifty-foot, twin-masted ketch, the Sand Bar, you'll also be a twenty-three-year-old man on vacation with his father."

It took Chris only a second to think of a response. "And there is nobody else I'd rather spend a year with than my dad."

Chapter 5

"I hate doing this," Cheree mumbled to herself as she stared up at the sixty-two-story, mirror-covered John Hancock Tower in front of her. She then looked down at her watch. 12:55 P.M. Her usual punctual self, she timed her trip for the one o'clock meeting perfectly.

Cheree Lin, a first generation American, was pushed hard all her life by her Chinese born parents. Even her overly promiscuous teenage years, which her parents somehow managed to hide from the rest of the world, didn't stop her from graduating first in her class at her San Francisco high school. Scoring two points shy of perfect on her SATs, she was readily accepted at Harvard. Six years later and on her way to a Ph.D. in biogerontology, or the study of the aging process, she now considered herself a Bostonian. She looked up again. Wasn't this the building that once showered window-sized glass panes onto the ground? Why was she standing here, she thought.

"I hate doing this." She mumbled the words again as she pushed on the glass door and entered the building. Over the past year Cheree learned that being smart, even a good looking smart, did not guarantee support for your research

efforts. Although smarts were certainly needed, funding was just as important. And in the inherently cruel world of funding doctoral students, often times the merits of the research effort alone were not enough. This was especially so when your research was either controversial, or of little benefit to society as a whole. Unfortunately for Cheree, such was the case with her research. Still, she hated the begging.

“Tell me about your research Ms. Lin.”

The man sitting across from her looked nothing like she expected. In fact nothing about J.W. Enterprises was what she expected. Unless the twentieth floor office of J.W. Enterprises was only a satellite location, the entire operation consisted of a staff of two; a receptionist, Ms. Enwright, and Jonathan Wick, whose name she deduced was the source for the “J.W.” The total space for the business looked like it was comprised of two offices and a receptionist area, where Enwright, a smartly dressed woman in her thirties, sat at a richly appointed desk with nothing on it but a telephone. To the left was a door to what Cheree presumed was Wick’s office, although the door was shut the entire time she was there. To the right was the door Ms. Enwright led her through. It turned out to be a large, elaborately appointed conference room with a thirty-foot-long mahogany table surrounded by twenty, high-backed black leather chairs. But instead of sitting at the large table, when Wick entered he led Cheree to the far end of the room where they sat kitty-corner on two leather sofas.

Wick, Cheree guessed, was in his early forties, assuming he exhibited a median aging profile. He was dressed in what appeared to be an expensive suit, white shirt, and a red print silk tie, also expensive looking. Although his hair was meticulously styled, he exhibited the telltale traits of balding, that being a

receding, thinning hairline.

“As you are aware, I am studying to be a gerontologist. Virtually all biomedical research has as its goal to eliminate disease, which hopefully will lead to longer, healthier lives. But I believe we should also be focusing on other areas. For example, if we eliminate heart disease, cancer, and cerebrovascular disease, or stroke, we could expect our average life span to increase from the upper seventies to close to one hundred. Yet this life span increase does little good if you spend those added years confined to a nursing home.

My research focuses on how we might be able to delay the aging process during the time that we are still healthy enough to enjoy it. I am studying various segments of the population, let’s say for example forty-three year olds,” by the look on Wick’s face she was certain she guessed his age correctly, “to determine why people of the same chronological age may not be the same biological age. By looking at these characteristics, I hope to unlock some of the secrets of the aging process.”

“What kind of funding are you looking for?”

“I will need \$40,000 to fully fund my research over the next twelve months.” Cheree knew her estimate was on the high side. If she economized, she could survive on twenty.

Wick sat completely still, staring into Cheree’s eyes. Cheree stared back, but felt as if Wick was somehow peering into her brain.

“Thank you very much Ms. Lin,” Wick said as he stood up.

“I will leave you with a copy of my proposal . . . ”

“That will not be necessary Ms. Lin. If we are interested in sponsoring your work, we will get back to you.”

The meeting ended as abruptly as it started.

“What a waste of time,” Cheree mumbled to herself as she walked into her eight foot by eight foot office, the same space allocated to all Research Assistants. She looked at her watch. 1:58 P.M. It took her an hour and a half of travel time from the Harvard campus to the John Hancock Tower and back, for the ten minute meeting with J.W. Enterprises. “What a COMPLETE waste of time. And on my special day too. Some birthday this is turning out to be.”

As she sat down in her chair, she noticed the message light on her phone was illuminated. After punching in the access code, she listened.

“You have one new message. Message one received 1:13 P.M. on Tuesday, May 13, 1990.”

“Ms. Lin, this is Ms. Enwright from J.W. Enterprises.”

“A message three minutes after I left the place. It doesn’t take them long to tell you to take a hike. Some birthday present this is. The bastards.”

“Mr. Wick asked me to inform you . . . ”

“Here it comes.”

“ . . . that J.W. Enterprises has agreed to fund your research efforts for one year for a total of \$50,000. Please call me so that we can arrange for you to sign the appropriate papers. Thank you.”

Chapter 6

“Well . . . we’ve been at sea for five months. Are you sick of it yet?”

Chris sat reclined on the front deck of the Sand Bar with his head propped up on a pillow, a cold can of beer in his right hand, staring at the sun already halfway sunk into the aqua blue ocean. He turned and looked at his dad who was sitting beside him.

“You’re kidding, right?” He pointed to the half-moon shaped sun. “How could you ever get sick of that?”

The two men set sail from Conch Harbor in Key West on January 20, 1990. Initially they sailed northeast, island hopping along the eastern edge of the Florida Keys. Although Neil spent half his life living on Key West, the southern most island of the Keys, and Chris spent his entire life there, in fact never venturing beyond the state of Florida, the scuba diving shop had been a seven-day-a-week, fifty-two-week-a-year business, leaving little time for vacationing. Though some would argue that chartering a dive boat day-in and day-out in the sun and surf to some of the most pristine waters in the world sure sounded more like vacation than work, it afforded them little time to explore the rest of the

Keys, or the rest of the Caribbean Island paradise.

But that was no longer the case. They now had all the time in the world to do whatever they wanted. Time and distance gave way to letting their minds and bodies experience the beauty that surrounded them. There were days when they would travel fifty miles over the ocean, with only water in sight, hopping to the next island. There were also days in which they would lift anchor in the morning, drift for a few hundred feet, then drop anchor and spend the rest of the day and night because they wanted to experience the view at the other end of the cove. They anchored in some places for hours, and in others for days.

After exploring the more isolated parts of the Keys, they headed north along the eastern Florida coast spending time in Miami, where Chris's knowledge of the best night spots, like the Rusty Pelican, Beach Comers, and Sandy's Bar gave ample explanation as to why he flunked out of college. From Miami they headed due east out into the Atlantic, first to Bimini, then southeast for four hundred miles island hopping the Bahamas.

For the past few days they lay anchored in an isolated cove on one of the islands of the French Cays, almost at the southern tip of the Bahaman chain of islands. Weather-wise their cruise so far was perfect. Above normal temperatures, moderate winds, calm seas, and an abundance of sun filled days became the norm. But they also knew their luck with the weather could change at any moment. It was mid-June, which was the start of the hurricane season. From now until November it was almost a given the weather would not be the same.

Neither of them spoke over the next few minutes while the sun slowly disappeared into the water. As the last orange speck flickered out, Neil broke the

silence.

“Do you have any preferences as to which way we head?”

They already charted out three different possible routes for the remainder of their trip. The first was to continue their cruise to the southern tip of the Bahamas then island hop back to the Keys along a more westerly route back through the Bahamas. This was obviously the most risky course as it kept them sailing in the hurricane zone.

The second route took them on a cruise six hundred miles southeast to Puerto Rico, then on to the Virgin Islands. Although they would venture farther south and away from the highest probable hurricane paths, it also meant a return trip to Key West of almost two thousand miles. They wouldn't make it back within the approximate one-year time frame they originally planned, and it could jeopardize any plans for Chris to get back to school this year. Neil sensed the latter issue was of no concern to Chris.

The third route took them on a circumnavigation around Cuba, staying well away from the island. They would venture to Haiti, Jamaica, the Cayman Islands, Cozumel, Cancun, and then back to Key West. This route would entail more time on the open ocean and therefore less time anchored in uninhabited island coves, although any coves they did find would likely be spectacular. It was also the best path to stay clear of hurricanes.

“I say we go for it.”

“Head back north into hurricane country?”

“Nope.”

“Head east to the Caymans?”

“Nope.”

Neil looked at Chris as he took another sip from his beer. His twenty-three-year-old son looked like he didn't have a care in the world. He thought back to when he was that age. He just finished college. He was a single parent with a two-year-old son. His parents, and for all intents and purposes his son's surrogate parents, had just died. It was a wonder he hadn't suffered a nervous breakdown, although subconsciously he probably did.

Several minutes passed before Neil finally spoke up. "I agree. Let's go for it."

Chris turned and glanced at his dad with a look of disbelief, until he saw his father was dead serious. "Really?" It was the only response he could come up with.

"Why not." We're out and about. We might as well stay out."

"You don't mind me delaying college another year?"

"What's one more year in the big scheme of things. When you're ready to go, you'll go. Anyway, I'd rather spend a year with you now, while I can enjoy it, than in the last years of my life when you've come to visit me in a nursing home."

"But what about your reunion?"

While at Crooked Island the week before, they arranged for one of their monthly mail deliveries. Neil received an invitation to his twenty-fifth high school reunion in upstate New York scheduled for later in the year over Thanksgiving weekend. He only went to one other reunion, his tenth, and in hindsight he never should have gone. He knew she would be there, the only woman he ever loved, but he went anyway. Although she was still married to the same man who stole her away from him, the ring on her finger could not stop them from giving each to the other, like they did so many years before. The lusty weekend ended

bitterly when, in the end, Neil lost her for a second time to the same man.

“To be honest, there is no one I’m interested in seeing.”

Somehow, Chris sensed his father’s lie.

Chapter 7

Cheree sat on the leather sofa in the conference room of J.W. Enterprises. Including her initial meeting with Wick, it was only her fifth time in the room, each of the other meetings taking place once a quarter over the past year.

During these quarterly meetings she provided Wick with a status report of her research findings. The meetings were always scheduled for two hours, and even though each of the presentations she made was interrupted by a barrage of questions from Wick, they still somehow ended at the appointed time. Within a day following each of the meetings Cheree would receive a letter from Wick, hand delivered by Ms. Enwright, in which he would outline the items he wanted covered at the next meeting, three months away.

The information Wick asked for usually took no more than a month for her to research and formulate into a document for him, which left her free to work on her own research during the remaining time. Although she hadn't yet unlocked the mechanisms controlling the aging process, she made enough progress on her thesis that she anticipated having her Ph.D. confirmed within six months. In addition to the information scheduled to be presented today, she was also going

to ask Wick for a six-month continuation of funding.

Cheree spent a total of six hours and ten minutes with Wick over the past year. Today would extend that to eight. Even though she saw him face-to-face less than one average workday, from the issues he wanted her to research, to the probing questions he asked in their few hours of meetings, she concluded he was obsessed about growing old. She correctly concluded at their first meeting that he was forty-three years old, and now a year later forty-four. Biologically he looked to be aging normally. If placed in a population of like-aged males, he would not be in the thirty percent of the group who obviously looked older than their chronological ages, yet neither would he be in the ten percent of the group that obviously looked biologically younger than their chronological age. He would fall in the middle sixty percent, or average.

She explained this aging classification scheme to Wick, one she developed as part of her research, during their first quarterly meeting. Although Wick was intrigued, he was more interested in the other conclusions of her research. Of the thirty percent of the people who appeared to be aging biologically faster than their chronological age, ten percent of that population, or three out of a hundred people, looked significantly older. And more interestingly, of the ten percent that looked biologically younger than their chronological age, ten percent of that population, or one out of a hundred people, looked significantly younger. It was this last fact that Wick was most intrigued with.

As usual, Wick entered the room at precisely one o'clock, exchanged pleasantries with Cheree, taking no more than ten seconds doing so, then sat on the sofa adjacent to her, which was her cue to start the presentation. "There is absolutely no way to determine when a person was born and therefore how old

they are chronologically, even in a sophisticated laboratory setting. In fact it is impossible to determine either the biological or chronological age of most living organisms. As you no doubt are aware, however, this is certainly not the case with all living organisms. The most familiar example in the plant kingdom is the growth rings in trees. Time dependent growth rings can also be found in some animals. The horns of goats contain growth rings that can be used to determine their age. Growth rings also exist in the bones of snakes and on clam shells. In fact we recently discovered what is believed to be the oldest living animal, a 405-year-old clam, its age determined by its growth rings.

We know humans have no such age markings, but a number of qualitative measures have been developed to approximate a human's age. For example, one method is to measure the characteristics of the skin. If you would place your hand, palm down, on the table, I can demonstrate it." Wick hesitantly leaned forward and placed his right hand on the small table in front of him. "We know as skin ages it exhibits reduced suppleness and a loss of elasticity." Cheree reached forward and placed the tips of her thumb and index finger on the back of Wick's hand. "After pinching the skin on the back of your hand for several seconds, measure how long it takes the skin to return to its original smoothness." Cheree squeezed her fingers together then released them. They both stared at the skin on the back of Wick's hand as it returned to its pre-pinched state about five seconds later. "It takes less than a second for the skin to return to its original state up until you reach the chronological age of thirty. For someone in their forties it takes from two to five seconds. Beyond that the time increases rapidly to about twenty seconds at age sixty-five, and fifty seconds at age seventy."

"Do you mind?" Wick motioned for Cheree to place her hand on the table. He pinched her much harder than she did him and after releasing his fingers they both watched the skin on the back of her hand immediately return to its original state.

"It is not a very accurate measure and is significantly impacted by environmental factors like exposure to chemicals and the sun.

Another method developed to determine a persons age is to measure their reaction time, which like skin elasticity, falls off sharply as we grow older." Cheree reached into her black leather briefcase and pulled out a very old looking eighteen-inch wooden ruler, one obviously cut from what was once a yardstick. "Place your hand out in front of you with your thumb and forefinger about three and one half inches apart." Cheree then held the ruler at the eighteen-inch mark, directly above Wick's hand, placing the other end between his fingers. "I am going to drop the ruler without warning and I want you to grab it as quickly as you can with your fingers."

Cheree counted ten full seconds before she released the ruler. Wick caught the ruler in his fingers then showed it to Cheree.

"Eight inches," she said as she saw where Wick's fingers were on the ruler. "Someone in their twenties should be able to grab the ruler at about the four-inch mark. For someone in their forties the average is about eight inches. For someone in their sixties, it's about thirteen inches or more. Of course practice would impact the results significantly.

A third method is to measure your nearsightedness." She reached for the ruler that Wick still held tightly in his fingers. She then reached into her briefcase, removed the mornings newspaper and held it up to Wick's face. "Tell

me when the letters start to blur." She then moved the newspaper closer to Wick's face.

"There."

With her other hand she measured the distance from the paper to his head. "Twelve inches. Someone in their twenties should be able to read the print at about four inches. For someone in their forties the average is twelve inches. For someone in their fifties, it's about three feet.

There are several other methods that have been developed and they are documented in my report." She reached into her briefcase, pulled out a bound document, and handed it to Wick. "However, all of the methods I have researched are too inaccurate to be used as the much sought after biomarker for aging. Therefore humans must rely on other methods to determine our chronological age such as birth certificates, or as is the case many times, people's memories."

"With that said, I can now move on to the next issue you wanted me to address today, that being how long we can expect a human being to live. Let me first preface my answer by saying the life span of a human, as well as most animals, is not precisely fixed. Yet all my research indicates the maximum human life span does have an upper limit and there is no credible evidence to suggest that upper limit has changed in thousands of years. In fact we can find one of the very first references to a lifetime limit for humans in the bible, from the book of Genesis, chapter six, verse three." She handed Wick a small card with the quote printed in bold, white letters on a black background.

Then the Lord said, "My Spirit will not contend with

man forever, for he is mortal; his days will be a hundred and twenty years.”

Genesis 6:3

“I believe that age limit, documented thousands of years ago, is not much different from what today’s modern-day scientists would also conclude is the limit. In fact my research indicates, as of today, it is impossible for a human being to live much beyond about one hundred and fifteen years.”

After hearing that statement, Wick’s eyebrows dropped as he stared back at Cheree. It was the first time she ever saw any kind of emotion show on his face in the more than six hours of meetings with him. Unfortunately, the frown was one of complete skepticism, obviously over what she just said.

“Surely, Ms. Lin, you have heard of the superlongeuvous people of the Vilcabamba village in Ecuador. Or those who live in Hunza in the Pakistan region of Kashmir. Or those in the Caucasus region, as well as many other parts of the former Soviet Union. Each of these regions, as well as others throughout the world, has many individuals already exceeding one hundred and twenty years of age, and others significantly older than that. Even the Social Security Administration has documented evidence of a man, Charles Smith, who was receiving benefits when he was one hundred and twenty-one years old.”

Cheree was impressed. Wick obviously knew a lot more about the subject than his innocent request of her implied. Rather than replying immediately, she sat in silence staring into his eyes. She was sure the look on her face was one of not knowing how to respond. It was one rarely seen on her.

When she finally spoke up, she did so in the same calm, professional, and

confident tone she always used. "There has been a considerable amount of research conducted on each of the dozen or so areas around the world that claim to have superlongevous people. In the village of Vilcabamba, a church fire long ago destroyed all the baptismal records, which was the only documentation of the inhabitants birth dates. Although several residents claimed they were beyond one hundred and twenty years old, one even claimed to be one hundred and forty, researchers could in fact find no one in the village who had even reached one hundred years of age. A man who a researcher spoke with five years before now claimed he was ten years older. Another man, who's death certificate recorded he was one hundred and thirty-six when he died, a year earlier claimed he was one hundred and three. A third man, who claimed he was one hundred and eleven, had a mother who was still living and she claimed she was one hundred and eight.

The people of Hanza do not even have a written language. No documents exist to substantiate any of their claims of superlongevous. I might add that in almost every instance of a geographic region claiming to have very old living people, the region also has very low literacy and never any infrastructure in place to support the age claims, other than people's memories.

The Soviet Union's previous claims of superlongevous people appear to be no more than a fabrication of the former Communist propaganda machine. In one case a village had more than one centenarian for every one hundred inhabitants, which would be a rate one hundred times higher than the United States. Yet when questioned, not one of the thousand alleged supercentenarians could produce a valid document to support their claim. With most of the churches having been destroyed in the early years of Communist rule, and the churches

having been the places where birth records were kept, there is no way to prove these age claims.

Several other studies have concluded there is no proof to substantiate one geographic region of the world is a breeding ground for superlongeuous people.

Finally, as far as Mr. Charlie Smith is concerned, it appears the files that the Social Security Administration used to document his age have been lost. However a marriage certificate for Mr. Smith has been found which shows his age at the time, and if correct, would mean when he died in 1979 he would have been one hundred and four years old. Smith, once thought to be the oldest American was replaced by a woman who died in 1928 at the age of one hundred and thirteen. Even in the past sixty years, during which our records and abilities to document age have improved significantly, no one in the United States has been able to claim they lived longer."

Following her lecture, Cheree hesitated only for a moment before continuing on with the rest of her presentation, addressing each of the issues Wick previously requested she cover. However, she sensed Wick was not listening to what she was saying. In fact he wasn't. He was instead thinking about the same thing he obsessed over every day -- how, like the 405-year-old clam, he was going to prove the bible, and God, wrong and live longer than any human ever had before.